



Academic Essays

Hindutva Civilizationism in India: Unravelling the Human-Ecological Conditions

Alexandra McFadden^a

Abstract

India's Hindutva movement, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party, has risen to power in the world's largest democracy and second-most populous country. Various scholars have examined how Hindu nationalism is rooted in civilizational themes; others have examined how ancient Hindu elements are employed in BJP environmental politics. Yet a comprehensive and interdisciplinary conceptualization of civilizationism that places it, firstly, at the heart of Hindutva and, secondly, confronts it as not solely a discursive or thematic tool but as the manifesting of physical control over citizens' relationships to their material environment is lacking. This means approaching 'civilization' in the far right as a human-ecological structure and not only a historical bedrock of ethno-territorial and theocratic power. In order to conceptualize Hindutva civilizationism, I re-examine two well-known cases of Sangh Parivar environmental politics: (1) Hindutva geography and spatial violence; and (2) anti-meat and cow vigilante politics. Beyond serving as a discourse that ignites violence and far-right extremism, I showcase how the sounding board of 'civilization' encapsulates the relationship between sociopolitical and environmental far-right objectives, highlighting the ways that far-right civilizationism seeks to define human relationships with natural and built environments. Conceptualizing civilizationism in this way strengthens understandings of how the racial, ethno-national, and religious features of far-right politics are rooted in ecological doctrine that is often based on the social-material features of past 'civilization'. This supports the primordial significance of civilizationism in far-right ideology beyond only the white supremacist far-right and 'Western Civilization'.

Keywords: *bio-ecological power, geography, religion, Sangh Parivar, environmental politics, ethnonationalism, cow vigilantism, anti-livestock politics*

^a Lund University, Department of Human Geography, Sweden, mcfaddenak6@icloud.com



Introduction: Civilizationism, Hindutva, and Environmental Politics

Far-right movements, like the Hindutva movement in India, are broadly defined as the political manifestations of nationalism, authoritarianism, populism, xenophobia, racism, and anti-democracy (Mudde 2019; Davey & Ebner 2019). Yet, though various far-right ideological camps around the world share multiple or all of these ‘isms’, their histories, geographies, and/or sociopolitical strategies can vary. However, they share a common ideological thread in their making of the old new through objectives to order national landscapes and populations in a capital-compatible image of a civilized character, place, and time. In the United States and Australia, white supremacists obsess over their settler colonial feats, for instance the introduction of British livestock herding and fencing to the landscape, cited as embodiments of civilized social and natural order that justifies white settler presence. In Europe, far-right parties like Vox in Spain and the AfD in Germany mull over concepts of land, heritage, and blood that they locate in, for example, the Spartans, Prussians, and the Crusades. Hence, despite their differences, their narratives contain the same bones. These narratives seek not only to strengthen a ‘civilizing’ discourse among a populace but also to maintain and control the relation of that populace to their local environment through, for instance, cultural sites and agriculture. These strategies comprise the ideology of civilizationism.

Civilizationism is an overlooked yet fundamental touchstone of far-right ideology that can highlight the relationship between the social and environmental features of far-right politics. Moreover, looking at the far-right more broadly, investigations of far-right civilizationism have been limited to the aforementioned “white supremacist” far-right and their appeals to “Western Civilization” (Brubaker 2017; Stewart 2020; McFadden 2022). Compared to Western far-right movements, despite its ferocity, Hindutva has received limited attention (Leidig 2020: 2), especially in contrast to more infamous examples of far-right extremism like white supremacy and neo-Nazism. Consequently, an initial motivation for this paper was to recast ‘civilization’ in far-right ideology as a more fundamental philosophical driver that also underpins the non-Western far-right.

For India’s Hindutva movement, far-right ideology is strongly linked with the civilizational discourse of evolving sects of Hindu nationalism. Scholars have examined the evolution of Hindu nationalism during British colonialism (Zavos 2000; Joshi 2001), including how decolonial movements drew on ‘Indian civilization’ (Bhattacharya 2011), its violent rise (Baber 2000; Melachthon 2002; Anand, 2007), and its political formation and power as a non-Western brand of right-wing extremism harboring an obsession with civilized nature and culture (Leidig 2020; Saleem *et al.* 2022). The underlying civilizational discourse and ancient Hindu themes of the movement have been pointed out to varying degrees (Baber 2000; Bhatt 2001; Jaffrelot 2019; Submaraniam 2019). Civilization has also been a focus in recent investigations of Hindutva’s employment of civilizational populism as a rhetorical tool for national-cultural nostalgia and the characterization of ‘uncivilized’ marginalized groups (Saleem *et al.* 2020; Bhattacharya 2011; Yilmaz and Morieson 2023). These civilizational tendencies are often defined as a precursor to nationalism and a rhetorical tool for populism; therefore, civilization is not the core conceptual focus, and the conceptualization of civilizationism as an encompassing and fundamental ideology of the Hindutva far-right has not been advanced.

Subsequently, such explorations have not addressed Hindutva civilizationism’s implications for shaping human relations with their physical environment(s). More

generally, far-right civilizationism has been approached as a discourse that promotes the cultural and political dominance of a movement, culminating in racism, religious hate, and xenophobia, often towards Muslim groups (Kaya & Tecmen 2019; Amarasingam *et al.* 2022). While this approach is insightful, it omits various considerations of how far-right discourses, visions, and rhetoric have tangible ecological ends. Consequently, I argue that the movement's obsession with Hindu civilization results in more than the generation of civilizational discourse to maintain hierarchies and marginalization in a modern context; it constitutes an ideological method of shaping citizens' social and physical relationships with their geographical, ecological, and biological world.

Additionally, researchers have recently explored the civilizational nature of Hindu nationalism on the world stage and its rising power vis-à-vis other 'civilizational states' (Sullivan de Estrada 2023; Mawdsley 2023; Chatterjee & Das 2023; Singh & Winter 2023). The bedrock of civilization here is shared language, ethnicity, and religion, and how the power of a shared civilizational history is being leveraged in domestic and foreign policy. In this paper, I focus largely on the domestic consequences for Indian land and citizens and argue for an expanded understanding of 'civilization' in far-right ideology as not only aiming to dominate socio-political discourse but also as a system of environmental conditions. This addition is critical since civilizations are intrinsically intertwined with their environmental contexts and are thus human-environmental structures. 'Civilization', from the Latin words 'civiz' (citizen) and 'civitas' (city), refers simultaneously to the human condition of subjugation under the law of a sovereign body (society and politics) and the environmental context of sedentary city-building, agriculture, and so on (a systematized relationship with the environment). Hence, civilization is a human structure that is as much built on law, ethnicity, politics, religion, and trade as it is on an environmental structure that shapes and mitigates people's relationship with their environment. Particularly where interdisciplinary inquiry is the objective, this perspective can enhance our understanding of the contemporary implications of 'civilization' by shedding light on the relationship between ideology and the environment. This goes too for investigating the far right.

Hindutva's 'Hindu civilization' is based on real historical cities and empires, specifically those from the Indus and Vedic eras, contemporaneously reinvented as unique and continuous in light of the ideals and morals of 'civilized' modern Hindus today. This discourse supports the synthesizing of an ethnic, religious, and nationalist identity that reinvents ancient Hindu characteristics to suit the modern globalized agenda of the BJP. However, it also supports a set of environmental rules, systems, and structures affecting the bodies and ecologies of Indian citizens. The contemporary environmental politics of the BJP clearly exemplify these physical-ecological manifestations of Hindutva civilizationism. Notably, 'environmental politics' is a term that, due to its vast frame of reference, can convolute interdisciplinary explorations such as this one. In this essay, I refer to 'environmental politics' broadly as the various ways in which the environment is controlled, utilized, managed, interacted with, cared for, exploited, or regulated by social groups. This involves an understanding of how the physical environment, both natural and built, is shaped and managed by a political movement or moment drawing on insights from both social and natural sciences (Doyle & McEachern 2015: 11). I do not intend to enter the debate on where nature ends and the artificial begins, except to say that 'environment' is used here to inquire about our relationships with the biological and ecological landscape, which is entangled in both nature and our own constructions and manipulations of it. I do not mean then to specifically refer to environmentalism: how groups are implicated in sustainability and care for nature, but rather to more

generally refer to the ways that groups seek to order their environment as per their ecological and geographical, for example, conceptions of the world around them.

In this essay, I explore far-right civilizationism as more than a source of imaginative and linguistic inspiration for Hindutva power, but as an ideology that systematically shapes, controls, and manages human-ecological relationships and realities. I examine two cases of Hindutva environmental politics: (1) the spatial politics of Hindutva and its civilizational geography in India; and (2) the BJP's anti-meat and cattle farming biopolitics. These cases serve as examples of how Hindutva civilizationism not only brandishes its ancient Hindu civilizational emblems discursively, but employs this strategy to seek to manage and control human ecology, imposing the physical parameters of a modern 'Hindu civilization'. Through conceptualizing 'civilizationism' as a core feature of Hindutva, this paper demonstrates the ways in which civilizationism works to insert itself into human-environmental systems and relations. Such conceptual focus views far-right ideology as more than radical expressions of capitalist accumulation and ethno-nationalism, but as movements aimed at the co-opting of geography, bodies, and ecology by reinventing and perpetuating 'civilized' environmental conditions and contexts. Consequently, the paper supports interdisciplinary inquiry into the far-right, providing a conceptual basis for research that examines the relationship between far-right narrative and the implications for human relationships to land.

Background: Ancient Themes in Modern Ethnonationalism

Hindutva, the primary form of Hindu nationalism, gained prominence during India's independence movement in the late 19th century and has since become increasingly influential, particularly with the election of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 2014. The core agents of Hindutva in India are known as the Sangh Parivar, a group of organizations that includes the BJP but also two 'non-political' faces: the Rashtriya

Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a paramilitary organization that aims to train and unite the Hindu community on the ground and spread Hindutva ideology, and the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), founded by the RSS as a 'World Hindu Council' (Mawdsley 2006: 381). From the 1990s, Hindutva actors began seeking formal institutional power, and Hindutva started to assert itself in the mainstream (Leidig 2020: 14). The RSS groomed several politicians that later became BJP members, most notably Modi, with the election of whom Hindutva truly was mainstreamed (Leidig 2020: 1).

Fekete (2018) highlights differences between the 'extreme right', often involved in street violence and direct activism, and the 'radical right', a political wing that legitimizes itself in formal institutions. In India, these two far-right factions have come together under the RSS, a civil grassroots movement that has a web of networks that promote Hindutva in civil, religious, and political society, and the BJP, the political wing supported and mentored by the RSS (Leidig 2020:14). Together, they have advanced a neoliberal chauvinist agenda conjoined with intense Hindu fundamentalism, now comprising the nation's core political character. On modern terms, they call for India to restore itself to the "grand Hindu" socio-economic and technological force that it was before 16th-century "Muslim invaders" purportedly brought ruin (Saleem *et al.* 2022: 20– 21). This marriage of global economic expansionism and ethno-nationalism draws heavily on a narrative that situates the Indian nation as a product of a distinguished

Hindu civilization. However, as we will see, ‘Hindu civilization’ in Hindutva not only inspires their political agenda but also shapes the management and control of citizens’ relationships to their geographical and biological landscapes.

Undoubtedly, the RSS is the thought leader and incubator of Hindutva ideology in the BJP. It has remained devoted to particular threads of ancient Hindu culture, including ancient texts such as the Manusmriti, known to be highly ethnocentric and supportive of the caste system, the subordination of women, and xenophobia towards non-Hindus (Saleem *et al.* 2022: 12). Golwalkar, who remains an ideological touchstone for the RSS, saw Muslims, Christians, and Communists as a threat to Hinduism, a threat that disrupted the “‘natural’ unity and harmony of the Hindu race and Hindu civilization, which stretches back to time immemorial.” (Moore & Roberts 2022: 61). A combination of modern fascist paranoia and the glorification of ancient Hindu society has led the RSS to pronounce Hindu India a “civilization in crisis.” (Saleem *et al.* 2022: 11–12). Corbridge argued that Hindutva ideology developed the concept of India as a country that made sense and attained its unity “only in terms of the cosmology and civilization of Hinduism” (Corbridge 1999: 237).

Crucially, some scholars have taken care to distinguish Hindutva as strictly distinct from Hinduism. However, this can obscure the theological underpinnings of Hindutva, for example, by arguing that Hindutva is not a brand of religious extremism but rather the politicization of religion (Leidig 2020: 21). This begs the question of how politicization makes an ideology less attached to a religion and whether this exercise is mostly semantic. It is clear that Hindutva draws heavily, albeit selectively, on real Hindu scripture, history, and spiritual practice. In some cases, these threads are extremified, but many facets of ancient Hinduism are extreme on modern terms in their own right—something not unique to Hinduism. Significantly, others are not, and Hinduism functions for millions as distinct from Hindutva and compatible with non-extremist practice. However, I would argue that Hindutva remains a form of religious extremism while agreeing that it has politicized Hinduism; arguably all religious extremists are political by nature. Yet, I would take this a step further and argue that not only is ancient Hinduism politicized in Hindutva but also essentialized in the environmental fabric of India through far-right civilizationism.

Moreover, just as Hinduism is not Hindutva (and nationalistic pride does not equate far-right nationalism), civilizational beliefs do not always eventuate in right-wing extremist ends. India’s civilizational past is a source of spiritual and historical exploration for many Hindus. Additionally, spiritualized ideals embedded in an ‘ecological’ Hindu civilization defined as having a harmonious and nature-based essence are demonstrated in left-wing ecofeminist tradition and new-age yogic culture. This includes the celebration of ancient Hindu ‘local sciences’ “grounded in the civilizational ethos of India[n] civilizational knowledge”, where ‘India’ is surprisingly often code for ‘Hindu’ (Nanda 2005: 222; Mawdsley 2006: 385). The alignments between these postmodernists’ envisioning of an alternative science of ancient Indian civilization being evocative of Hindutva’s civilizational conception of ‘superior’ and ‘holistic’ Hindu science led Nanda (2005: 233) to proclaim: “It is time to draw clear boundaries between science and myth, and between the Left and the Right.”

In Hindutva, the spiritual, scientific, and ethno-religious glory of Hindu civilization is inextricably linked to its geographical, biological, and ecological fabric. It was Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, the father of twentieth-century Hindu nationalism and the ideological author of the RSS, who first connected Hinduism to civilization and defined civilization as the material manifestation of a people (Bhattacharya 2011: 124), as

“the expression of the mind of man. Civilization is the account of what man has made of matter[...]. Wherever and to the extent to which man has succeeded in molding matter to the delight of his soul, civilization begins.” (Savarkar 1922: 33).

For Savarkar, the material state of Hindu civilization relies on the spiritual:

“[civilization] triumphs when [man] has tapped all the sources of Supreme Delight satisfying the spiritual aspirations of his being towards strength and beauty and love, realizing Life in all its fullness and richness.” (Savarkar 1922: 33).

Thus, he encouraged Hindus to pursue and support science, technology, and industrialization as the physical manifestations of their spiritual achievements (Corbridge 1999: 227).

Since Savarkar, Hindutva has evolved; however, this definition of Hindu civilization has passed down through various leaders of the Sangh Parivar to Modi. Modi generally codes ‘Hindu civilization’ as ‘Indian civilization’ in his long speeches on Indian civilizational history, where he refers to the immortal nature of India as the most ‘refined human civilization’ (Dominique 2022). Modi’s globalization and industrialization of India’s economy have been sold to Hindu India as compatible with traditional Hindu lifeways and as part of a continuum of Hindu civilizational excellence. Bhattacharya (2011: 119) has dubbed this the ‘continuity theory’; great separations in time between Indus and Vedic period cultures and extensive ethnic and religious diversity are ignored to project one singular, naturalized physical and spiritual lineage of Hindu civilization. In terms of Western far-right civilizationism, Stewart identified how the ideology does not seek a break away from a capitalist world order but rather promotes an alternative vision (Stewart 2020: 1213). This is certainly true of the BJP, which seeks to renegotiate the terms of modern capital accumulation along the lines of ‘traditional’ Hindu civilization. In this way, India is both ancient and new, modern and traditional. Though he was not the first, this is evident in Modi’s election campaign, which sought to draw ancient Hindu themes into India’s modern context by spiritualizing science and subsequent technological progress (Subramanian 2019: 6). As alluded to, Modi continues to add credence to what has been dubbed ‘Vedic science’, for example, claiming that genetic scientists existed during the Vedic Era and that the chariot of the Hindu god Rama was the world’s first airplane, while one of his ministers, Biplab Deb, claimed that Hindus created an ancient form of the internet (Saleem *et al.* 2022: 23). However, referencing ancient Hindu civilization goes beyond Modi’s enrapturing the public under an ancient-modern national persona of holistic corporatism. It also works to assert a set of material conditions that dictate citizens’ geographical, biological, and ecological relations and dispositions.

Geographies of Hindutva Civilizationism

Given that the supreme cultural qualities of ‘civilization’ are commonly rooted in its material advancements, which include city building, religious monuments, and ‘advanced’ and ‘pure’ agricultural systems, this is an unsurprising yet little-mentioned function of civilizationism. In other words, ‘civilized’ progress is founded upon the ways that the

physical environment is understood, treated, and managed by the governing society, and consequently citizens' ecological relations. The conceptualization of civilizationism in far-right ideology illuminates this, widening the focus on discursive civilizational power, politics, and othering.

The Sangh Parivar is known for invoking Hindu civilization in the national imagination in order to claim sacred and cultural monuments, sites, and buildings as solely Hindu spaces, leading to ongoing geographical violence between Hindus and Muslims (Leidig 2020: 13; Oza 2007). However, Hindutva employs civilizationism not only to develop sacred and historical spatial imaginary but also to reinforce and enact a set of spatial relationships between people and their land and environment that conform to historical borders drawn to represent 'civilized' territory and spiritual-architectural features.

Sangh Parivar leaders regularly employ the concept of 'Akhand Bharat' (an undivided nation), which states that Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Tibet, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Nepal, and Myanmar are an inherent part of the Indian nation. These territorial proclamations are reliant not on the idea of 'India the nation-state', but on the physical features of 'India the site of Hindu civilization.' The Indian nation is positioned as a modern continuation of this ancient project that is defined by an expansive South Asian landmass. The vastness of the landscape that held ancient Hindu civilization is cited as a testament to its cultural strength and is invoked through nostalgia for the Vedic era (the Hindu 'Golden Age') and the depiction of Muslims as "tyrant invaders" (Leidig 2016), who breakdown the boundaries of civilized peoples. Consequently, not only does Hindutva civilizationism help to elucidate far-right ideals that look beyond nation-state borders (Saleem *et al.* 2022: 6), but it also temporally surpasses nationalism, without excluding it, in Hindutva ontology, by examining the relationship to a time that vastly precedes the nation-state of India.

As part of their civilizationist mission, the Sangh Parivar has redefined the meaning and relevance of domestic sites based on their significance to 'Hindu civilization'. Leading to violent clashes between Hindus and Muslims, the Sangh Parivar's claim to sacred sites rests on the idea that such buildings and monuments have a uniquely Hindu architectural and technological style, which reflects their superior spiritual character. This infamously includes claims on Muslim cultural and religious sites, such as the pilgrimage center of Ayodhya, which was a focus of violent BJP-VHP mobilization in the 1980s and 1990s, and more recently, the Taj Mahal and various mosques alleged to have been built on top of Hindu temples (Corbridge 1999: 233–234; Malhotra 2022).

Given that Hindutva references the borders of ancient Indian civilizations and the physical characteristics of their structures as evidence of a 'superior' ethno-environmental Hindu society, the ethnic, religious, and national aspects of civilization provoked in the Indian imaginary and featured in populist rhetoric are inseparable from the 'civilizing' of environmental conditions. Sites of worship and public infrastructure are cited as proof of having surpassed the material achievements of 'uncivilized' cultures, which also validates the spiritual superiority of Hindus. Hindutva civilizational discourse is not only enforcing ideals that 'other' non-Hindu Indians but is simultaneously mitigating their access to sacred and public spaces. Evidently, civilizationism functions as an ideology that depends on the replicating and actualizing of a geographical landscape indicative of the relevant 'civilized' character. Its attempt to shape discourse, rhetoric, and narrative is inseparable from the environmental conditions it pursues. Hindutva ideology seeks not only to convince followers of their civilizing vision but also to manage the relationship between Indians and their environment, habitats, and sacred

places. The exercise of control over human-geographical relations constitutes control over fundamental principles of social and ecological life, encompassing national and populist far-right visions under a civilizationist ideology with material consequences.

Approaching civilizationism as more central to far-right ontology and with a human-ecological lens helps to pinpoint the movements material-environmental ends. Hindutva civilizationism does not only exemplify a civilizational Hindu-national vision and identity but also the constructing of a spatial relationship between people and their lands and cultural sites. This shows how far-right ideology goes beyond territorial nationalism and the consolidation of Hindu nationalist identity for political ends. While Hindutva rhetoric fights to embolden Hindu Indians to unite as one ethnic ‘civilization’, this vision relies on the tangible, in this case spatial, realization of this in India. Hindutva civilizationism sets terms for religious worship, habitat, and boundaries, therefore shaping interactions with the environment.

Food Fascism: Anti-beef and Cow Vigilante Civilizationism

Evidently, Hindutva employs civilizationism not only to promote a ‘civilized’ national imaginary but also to maintain and manage people’s relationships with their natural and built environments. This includes their own biology. The human-environmental dynamics of Hindutva civilizationism are evident in the BJP’s policing of livestock agriculture and access to meat through anti-beef regulations and cow vigilantism. In India, civilizational rhetoric has been employed in the sanctification of cows, whereby their slaughtering and consumption are viewed as a direct attack on civilized Hindu values. The economic implications for Muslim and lower-caste livestock farmers are significant, as are the violent attacks that they and consumers have experienced. Yet, this has also resulted in another manner of violence; the exercise of control over citizens’ biological and ecological sovereignty through restricting and repressing diet and subsistence choices. This section exemplifies Hindutva civilizationism as a project that seeks to achieve the physical manifestation of ‘civilized’ ecology and biology in India through controlling access to meat and livestock farming activities. I also contradict some alternate claims by suggesting that Hindutva civilizationist ‘food fascism’ is compatible with India’s BJP-sanctioned agrochemical industry and its success in the global market.

Since the colonial era, the cow in India has been a symbol of division between Muslims (who eat beef) and Hindus (who do not). Cow protection societies formed in the 1880s, leading to deadly clashes. By the end of the 19th century, cow protection movements had helped define modern Hindu nationalism in India (Corbridge 1999: 232). Cow vigilantism has continued into the 21st century, with attacks on Muslims and lower-caste Hindus involved in the cattle industry. One Muslim man was accused of eating a cow 30 years earlier and beaten to death. These kinds of cases have earned cow vigilantism the description of “Islamophobic gastronomy” (Patel 2018); however, lower-caste Dalits are also targeted. Seven Dalits in Modi’s hometown of Gujarat were beaten and urinated on for their occupation as tanners (Manor 2019: 123). In 2022, Hindutva anti-meat politics and cow vigilantism peaked, with demands for meat bans sweeping the country, including a boycott of halal meat in Karnataka. BJP mayors in Delhi demanded that meat shops be shut for nine days during the Hindu Navratri

festival and threatened to bulldoze non-compliant shops. In July 2022, armed mobs in Uttar Pradesh led violent attacks based on suspicions about the sale of beef (Jaiswal 2022). Notably the majority of higher-caste Hindu Indians are not cow vigilantes or activists and personify a more lax and nondiscriminatory vegetarianism (Staples 2020: 8).

Sharma (2023a) aptly interpreted the visualization of environmental themes in Hindutva politics and highlighted that, under Modi's leadership, it has evolved in its use of spiritual and environmental optics to project itself as an ecological Hindu nation, particularly through protecting cows. However, Hindutva cow protectionist politics does not only entail representational objectives. Based on the spiritual designations of cows and diet as it were in 'Hindu civilization', the BJP not only seeks to purify Hindu vegetarianism in the national imaginary but also to shape and control the biological sovereignty of Indians and the country's agro-ecological landscape by abhorring beef. Through civilizationism, the BJP asserts physical control over their citizens' bodily choices by defining and restricting their relationships to food and agricultural practices. This culminates in biological violence against non-Hindu Indians and lower caste Hindus by controlling food sovereignty, access to nutrition, and subsistence livelihoods.

The intensely violent attacks on beef farmers and consumers led human rights groups, activists, lawyers, and researchers to sign an open letter accusing the BJP of "bringing the Muslim community to economic destitution," arguing that this constitutes "food fascism" with real nutritional consequences for poor Indians (WP 2022). Food does not innocently land in people's diets; it is intertwined with political, economic, ethical, and environmental systems, patterns, and consequences. 'Correct' food and agriculture for the BJP entails a 'pure', 'moral', and 'clean' way of living that is compatible with the spiritual-biological virtues that have been assigned to Hindu civilization. Divergence from this, by farming or eating beef, exemplifies an 'unclean' and 'uncivilized' relationship with ecology and one's own body. Notably, this attitude has leaked into Western countries via new age yogic culture, casting vegetarianism as ethically and somatically purer. The consequence is both an economic attack on small-scale and subsistence livestock farmers and on the biological sovereignty of Indians, based on ideals about what makes a 'civilized' relationship with agroecology and diet. This is reminiscent of Malthus' 'civilized' and 'savage' lives (Malthus 1826). The former is a clean and sustainable way of being worthy of freedom, while the latter is wildly uncontrollable in its consumption and must be regulated (Moore & Roberts 2022: 18). For Malthus, 'savage' existence was indigenous, non-white, and colonized (Malthus 1798); however, the Sangh Parivar recruits this distinction in their own civilizationist food fascism by punishing and regulating 'savage' members of society who do not conform to 'civilized' eco-biological norms.

Such ideals have led to the Sangh Parivar increasingly demanding a bodily investment in meat abstinence. This has even extended to other animal foods. In opposition to a school meal program that planned to introduce eggs to combat malnutrition, BJP leader Gopal said that children may become man-eaters if given non-vegetarian food (Sharma 2019). This is problematic not only for its impacts on livestock smallholders and the fueling of religious hate, but also because animal foods, particularly beef, are among the most bioavailable, nutrient-dense human foods, and India is a country wracked by malnutrition (Beal & Ortenzi 2022). Consequently, blocking access to animal foods for a large portion of a population in a state of nutrient deficiency dictates and deprives the bodies of poor Indians, exerting a violent and life-altering form of biopower. Since the malnourished in India do not have access to a diverse and supplemented vegetarian

diet, they are left to rely almost exclusively on grains. This is particularly problematic for women and children, with over half of women and children in India suffering from anemia, a condition that increases morbidity (Varghese & Stein 2019). Notably, journalists, farmers, and nutritionists have alerted to the consequences of sweeping criticisms of animal farming for the poor, particularly in the Global South (Mugerwa & Iannotti 2021).

Bhattacharya (2011: 119) highlights how the “notion that there is an immanent personality of [Hindu] civilization, a ‘unique’ personality that was formed in the moment of [its] foundation,” is enshrined in the Hindu nationalist imaginary. For the Sangh Parivar, vegetarianism is the spiritual lynchpin of this civilized personality. However, this character is drawn from, and has consequences for, direct relationships with India’s food environment. Sanctifying the cow reflects a way of being that is closer to the divine, which in Hinduism represents a closeness to nature. This rewrites Indian history by ignoring the ritual killing, eating, and sacrifice of cows and wild game evidenced throughout Hindu history, including during the Indus and Vedic eras (Jha 2002; Bhattacharya 2015). Meat has been a part of the local diet since humans first occupied the Indian subcontinent about 70,000 BC (Bhattacharya 2015). Southern Indian Brahmins ate meat up until the 16th century, and in the North, they only gave it up in the late 19th century (Bhattacharya 2015). The politics of access to meat has been a significant source of colonial power. Colonialism had a significant impact on land use, agriculture, and trade and provoked famines, which resulted in the shaping of the modern Indian diet into one dominated by rice, wheat, and dals (Bhattacharya 2015). The British indirectly pushed vegetarianism onto the masses by raising taxes on meat and fish and taking over control of forests. The latter forced tribal hunting communities to seek work, and the British paid them in grains, not previously a staple in their diet (Bhattacharya 2015).

With prohibitions and changing cultural values on meat, grains became increasingly dominant in Indian agroecology. Today, the country’s agricultural landscape is heavily dominated by multinational agrochemicals and industrial crops. This has led to vast environmental destruction of Indian lands and soils and the social and economic destitution of Indian farmers, causing droves of farmer suicides (Siddiqui 2021: 10). As a leader of the extensive critique of India’s multinational agrochemical industry, Vandana Shiva (2021) has described this process as the destruction of the “infrastructure of life.” Significant to this paper is how the aggressive industrial crop sector that swallowed up Indian land and soil is conveniently compatible with attacks on livestock farming, which is largely decentralized and dominated by smallholders and subsistence farmers that are non-reliant upon agrochemical processes and products (FAO 2022). Compared to the factory farming system endemic in countries like the US and Brazil, Indian livestock farms are largely non-intensive, and feeding only in stalls is rare (Dorin & Landy 2009: 134).

Furthermore, livestock have been an essential part of the mixed farming system in India and contribute to saving natural resources through their “synergistic relationship with cropping activities,” including providing organic fertilizer and replacing fossil-fueled machinery with their labor (Dikshit & Birthal 2013: 21). These are services that multinational companies vie to replace. Evidently, the local, regenerative, and subsistence nature of livestock farming in India stands in contrast with Modi’s allegiance to multinational industrialists. Moreover, the food it produces challenges the BJP’s vision of ‘pure’ Hindu-vegetarian civilization. However, Jakobson and Nielsen (2022: 121) have argued that there is a tension between BJP’s anti-beef politics and the integration

and proliferation of Indian meat exports in global value chains, which is said to further “the opening of the Indian agrarian economy, spurring capitalist accumulation by integration with growing transnational markets.” Yet, meat exports have been declining in India over the last decade, particularly in the last few years (Statista 2021; ATLAS 2022). In any case, exports do not interrupt the BJP’s food fascist policy or its civilizing of Indian citizens since the export of meat removes it from the local market. Moreover, nothing prohibits Modi from inflicting food fascism on his own citizens while increasing foreign meat exports. Alternatively, in its current smallholder subsistence state, the cattle industry appears to offer opportunities to interrupt the agrochemical crop sector by providing organic services and replacing grains and vegetables in Indian households. As mentioned, livestock can and do replace industrial and chemical services in India, posing a clear threat to agrochemical businesses, their government beneficiaries, and elite farmers.

Cited as evidence of the tension he manages between Hindu-vegetarian ideals and promoting a free-market economy, Modi was accused of taking funding from the meat industry during his 2014 election run (Jakobsen & Nielsen 2022). However, the companies implicated were: Frigorifico Allana Ltd. and Frigerio Conserva Allana Ltd., both industrial packaged food companies of plant products; and Indagro Foods Ltd., a chemical company. They were said to be subsidiaries of Allanasons Ltd., the largest buffalo meat producer in India, when in fact all these companies fall under the Allana Group, a manufacturer and exporter of food and chemical products (Dhawan 2015). While this proves an association with buffalo meat production, the funding comes directly from companies that are exclusively processing industrial crop products and chemicals. Moreover, given the “cereal-centric” state of Indian agriculture (FAO 2022), the BJP need not rely on the livestock sector. While India is an up-and-coming player in meat exports, the export of crops like rice and sugarcane envelopes animal products, and the production of cereals, fruits, vegetables, and crops like sugarcane greatly surpasses that of meat and are, as discussed, more industrialized operations (ATLAS 2022; FAO 2022). Consequently, the BJP’s mission to civilize the Indian agricultural landscape and citizens’ diets through anti-beef policy and cow vigilantism appears compatible with their multinational economic agenda, which infamously favors crop-centric agrochemical corporations (Jakobsen 2018; Siddiqui 2021).

In summary, the Hindutva government’s conjoint attempt to perpetuate multinational agriculture and maintain a vegetarian population should be understood not just as the envisioning of a corporate ‘civilized’ Hindu national identity and vision exemplifying BJP populism but also as the dictating of India’s agricultural landscape and diet that imposes a set of fundamental ecological and biological structures and relations on people in India.

Conclusion

Hindutva civilizationism, an ideology that is fundamental to far-right thought, politics, and action, supports more than the discursive and visionary goals of the movement. This essay employed and developed the concept to highlight its consequences for human-environmental relations, with tangible consequences for how those living in India interact with national borders and places, local agro-ecology, and their own biology.

The BJP's territorial and spatial rhetoric, which seeks to expand India's borders and claim monumental and religious sites, is an attempt to (re)produce a specific geographical reality; 'civilized' Hindu ideals are not only projected within the national imaginary but rely on the structural features and a landscape of 'Hindu Civilization' taking shape. Similarly, BJP cow vigilantism and food fascism exert control over India's agricultural landscape and the food sovereignty of Indians by shaping citizens' ecological and biological relations. Both entail the physical, nutritional, and economic subjugation of Muslims and lower-caste Hindus.

These cases exemplify that civilizationism is both an ideological and environmental project and support an understanding of far-right politics as not only seeking discursive power through racial, ethno-national, and religious appeals to 'civilization', but also entrenching control over human ecology in order to produce a 'civilized' landscape and populace in India. Additionally, the Hindutva movement in India serves as a reminder that Euro-centric and white supremacist beliefs do not solely define far-right ideology and underlines the adaptability of the far-right to different cultural, historical, and environmental moments and contexts. I propose a conceptualization of far-right civilizationism that encapsulates its historical, dynamic, and evolving environmental features and foci. Recognizing how far-right strategies not only shape politicized identities but also dominate our relationships to ecology, geography, and our own biology provides a clearer picture of the kind of human-ecological reality that is being pursued and makes one better equipped to critically approach it.

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