Rajesh Pradhan, *When the Saints Go Marching In: The Curious Ambivalence of Religious Sadhus in Recent Politics in India,* New Delhi, Orient BlackSwan, 2014, 324 pp., ₹626, ISBN: 978-8125052692.

10.1177/0049085716654833

One of the most contentious debates to hit the ground, quite literally, since the partition of India and Pakistan, is that of state policy on religion and religious communities. Amongst others, there have been several instances of large scale communal violence following the Emergency in 1975, demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 and the burning of a train at Godhra in 2002. The visibility of the religious right wing has also been much greater since the 1980s, adding a high-pitched communal tone to political debate in the country. While there has been a long drawn agitation against practices of cow slaughter or religious conversion of Hindus, the intensity of convergence of the Hindu right wing forces had reached a zenith during the Ram Janmabhoomi campaign. The reaction to these occurrences from various sections of academia and political machinery has been so varied that, but for the general consensus that there does exist a crisis of 'communalism' and 'secularism', the question of how to address the predicament at hand always appears to be indeterminate. In this litigious context, Pradhan's work brings to perspective, the nature and views of certain Hindu religious actors in India, their socio-political resonance, certain inherent contradictions that they are fraught with, and what all of these may imply for the Indian democracy.

The book is the culmination of a corpus of ethnographic research that extended from the early 1990s to cover the first decade of the twenty-first century. It aspires to comprehend the political significance of the role, impact and the inert potential of religious actors in Indian democracy. Pradhan's work specifically analyses the activism of the Hindu *sadhus* in the late 1980s and early 1990s that corresponded with the incredibly powerful rising of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), after four decades of Congress monopoly. It is based on extensive interviews conducted with prominent *sadhus* affiliated to various political parties and organisations, and associated with diverse political ideologies (and sometimes, varying nuances of the same ideology). Thirty *sadhus* were interviewed during the years 1993 and 1996, soon after the Babri Masjid was dismantled. Of these, 10 were re-interviewed in 2008. The author examines through the first set of interviews the self-concept of the *sadhus* and the rationale for their social/political activism. In the second phase of dialoguing with the *sadhus*, the author attempts

to untangle the abrupt and unanticipated disinterest in Hindutva politicking among them.

The introduction to the book opens with certain important debates contemplating the religion–politics liaison. While discussing existing perspectives on the role of religion in politics, the author brings to attention, certain important questions. Current approaches simply explain religion as an instrument used to generate political fracas, as an identity marker used to engender 'otherness' or as symbolism of a larger cultural imagination. None of these, however, adequately account for the dynamism and inconsistency in the relationship of religion and politics. Why do political actors utilise religion only at particular times? Why does religion generate varying intensities of passion in different periods? Then there are also explanations that posit the resurgence of religion as a repercussion of the failure of modern secular governance, or as the foundational identity of nationalism or, for that matter, religious nationalist identity as providing a larger than life sense of purpose and pride for people. While all these justify religious action in some measure, they do not explicate why religion and religious leaders become entwined with nationalism at some junctures and not at others. Even the identity-based Us-*vs*-Them framework fails to vindicate the long multiple periods where the Us and Them have peacefully co-existed. Pradhan illustrates throughout the book, how these perspectives overlook the agency and role of social movement actors in creating the troughs and peaks of collective action. In this sense, he argues that religious nationalism is a structural phenomenon, the individual agents of which may be examined for their intrinsic worth in shaping the movement.

The book provides significant theoretical insight towards the sociology of collective action, by illustrating how the specific identity of social movement actors can be an influential autonomous variable in shaping the nexus of religion and politics. A considerable amount of emphasis is placed on grasping the essential identities of the *sadhus,* who are most definitely not to be overlooked as a monolithic block of protagonists. These identities include both the multiple social images that people hold of *sadhus* and the self-image that the *sadhus* clasp. A brief background on *sadhus* and the institution of sadhus is illustrated, depicting how the specific historicity of the institution renders *sadhus* different from leaders of other religious traditions. In outlining the various philosophical traditions that pervaded the institutionalisation of *sadhus*; however, Pradhan erroneously describes the thirteenth century Madhavacharya influence of Vaishnava Sampradaya as being non-dualistic, when in fact the tradition is based on dualism or *Dwaitasiddhantha* as it is known. In the same vein, the tradition of qualified non-dualism or qualified monism, of the eleventh century philosopher Ramanuja, known as Vishishtadvaita, has been inaccurately asserted as qualified dualism (p. 49).

Moving ahead, Pradhan illustrates how much of the social function and legitimacy of *sadhu*-like characters that constitute anything from five to seven million of the country's population, arises from the imagery of 'sadhuness' that grasps the collective imagination. Moreover, the existence of several and often contrasting images of *sadhus,* provides the license to assume a certain identity over others, depending upon the circumstance in question. So while in a certain context, the

notion of transcendentalism may mean not disturbing the *status quo*, because a *sadhu* simply accepts what is, in another context, the historical image of a *sadhu* as a warrior ascetic or a political advisor to the rulers of a kingdom may be evoked to justify their involvement in social change and state politics. The elements that stand fundamental to the concept of '*sadhu*' therefore are an overarching ambiguity and individualism.

Using this baseline, the book explores the association of *sadhus* and religious nationalism beginning with four *sadhus* of the nineteenth century, representing the predecessors of *sadhu* activism. A biographic account of each, elaborating personal, religious and socio-political experiences that became a context to their 'nationalisms' has been examined. While the ideas of Swami Dayanand Saraswati (1824–1883), Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950), Swami Vivekanand (1863–1902) and Guru Golwalkar (1906–1973) were varied on wide-ranging issues, a factor that was mutual to all was that their ideologies were based on elite theories of nationalism that found no takers among the common people. Yet these were the very views that later came to constitute the legacy that fed the Hindutva imagination and aspiration. By Golwalkar's time, the elitist theories propagated by the previous *sadhus,* became a part of commonsensical imagination. Unlike his precursors, Golwalkar had a more practical edge that emphasised the rational–legal dimension and organising Hindu society from below. Golwalkar's views were deeply influenced by V.D. Savarkar, who had moulded the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (founded in 1925 by K.B. Hedgewar) in its initial years, and the Italian fascist Giuseppe Mazzini. The emphasis had moved from Hindu religion to 'Hindutva', which comprised a patent political agenda to sustain the 'purity' of the race and culture of the land. His effort ultimately resulted in the consolidation of the RSS, with a militant ideology that endorsed a corporate identity premised on ethnic nationalism.

Yet, the germ of religious nationalism sowed in the nineteenth century found its deepest echo in the Ram Janmabhoomi campaign, after decades of relative lull. It was for the first time in post-independent India that Hindu *sadhus* were unified as such a powerful political force. This cohesiveness also paved way for an alternate nationalist party that cracked the uninterrupted predominance of Congress rule. How did Ayodhya come to constitute the fulcrum of religious nationalism in post-independent India? Pradhan examines the sequence of the political buildup that led to the Ayodhya incident. While claims of the Babri Masjid being built after the destruction of a temple marking the birth place of Ram were afloat even in the nineteenth century, political competition post-1949, between the prevailing Congress government and its ideological opponents, comprising various groups buttressed by the RSS, ensued in arbitrary appeasement tactics that eventually added to the momentum of 'Ayodhya'.

Pradhan outlines the progression of events that eventually gathered an impulsion of *sadhu* participation and leadership in the religious nationalism of the Hindu right. At this juncture, neither the Muslim clerics nor the Hindu right leadership wanted to let go of the opportunity cast by the contingency of political events in the country. Any attempt by arbitrating parties at finding a middle ground was resolutely spurned. Muslim leaders urged fellow Muslims to march to Ayodhya and coerce the government into giving them the legal rights over the disputed

mosque. On the side of the Hindus, an entire masculinist discourse on reclaiming Hindu pride, replete with powerful symbolism was produced, popularised and enacted with complete theatrics. The RSS sponged off the popularity and social credibility of *sadhus* to overcome the caste factor that the Hindutva ideology had never managed to encompass on its own. Suddenly, a huge contingent of *sadhus* had taken up the responsibility of protecting the interests and culture Hindu society. Several *sadhus* began demanding that their *ashrams* and institutions receive the same degree of autonomy as Islamic institutions and mosques. Moreover, the visibility and legitimacy of the BJP as a national party was propelled to a large extent by the aggressive activism of *sadhvis* like Uma Bharati and Rithambara.

Ayodhya became the site through which Hindutva produced its discourse of nationalism and Hindu identity, the character of Lord Ram, being the axle of its symbolism. Hindu *sadhus* became the medium through which this rhetoric was catapulted into the public imagination, creating and drawing off an anti-Muslim fervor that eventually led to the events of 6 December 1992, the afternoon of which, witnessed the frenzied destruction of the Babri Masjid. Pradhan examines through narratives of *sadhus*, drawn from interviews held in the aftermath of the mosque's demolition, the reasons and nature of their political awakening. The accounts of the *sadhus* reveal their self-concept as the inheritors and vanguards of Hindu culture, their duty to undo the historical wrongs done to Hindus, reliance on the symbolism of Ayodhya and Ram for bolstering the Hindu identity, a deep-seated anger against the appeasement policy of the Congress and its projected secularism, and the desire to awaken tolerant Hindus and motivate them against the intolerant and growing enemy. Most opportunely, these factors were given expression through the organisational effort of the VHP.

All this notwithstanding, in the years following the Babri Masjid demolition, and despite the thriving presence of BJP as an alternate, national-level party to the Congress, the enthusiasm of the Hindu *sadhus* seemed to have withered away. While there were several external factors that contributed to this sudden apathy, Pradhan asserts that the very notion of what it means to be a *sadhu* was central to this development. At the forefront, the BJP, having come into power at the centre, appeared to focus on issues other than temple building in Ayodhya. Due to internal party complications, *sadhus* such as Uma Bharti eventually resigned from the BJP. Also, the *sadhus* began to perceive the VHP and RSS as too domineering for their independent temperament. They felt that the Ram Janmabhoomi campaign was commercialised and used for political gain by Hindu organisations, none of which were genuinely concerned about questions of god. Whilst the *sadhus* blamed the main political parties and their corresponding organisations and temple trusts, for a lack of solidarity and focus, they themselves did not constitute a unified block. While unanimous on the subject of building a Ram temple, the *sadhus* differed over who should build the temple and who should own it. They were also deeply divided in their views on secularism and what the state's policy on religion must be. Some of them maintained that the government guidelines should be based on the common essence of all religions and some lobbied for a policy of equidistance. Some believed that special privileges must be granted to different religious communities, whilst others, adhering to a more

commonly held view, were clear that a Hindu ethos must constitute the underlying framework for all governance issues. Amidst all these obstacles, the commitment and passion of the *sadhus* began to dissipate. Suddenly their visibility seemed to take a dip. During the time of the Gujarat carnage in 2002, for instance, *sadhus* maintained a careful and evident distance from the VHP and BJP.

Here Pradhan makes an important inference. It is not only the divergence among the *sadhus* that explains the discrepancy in the strength and intensity of their political involvement, but also the commonality within them. Moving away from the simplism of the rational agent theory, he illustrates how the individualistic notions of inner calling, detachment from worldly aspirations and love for freedom that typically characterise a *sadhu,* contributed to both—the amalgamation, and the subsequent scatter of Hindutva energy around the issue of Ram Janmabhoomi. This individualism of *sadhus* is 'fluid' but also 'dense and intense'. Pradhan compares this political stirring of the *sadhu* force to the 'rise of the serpents in Kundalini yoga', that ascend, strike and then recoil. What is distinct about this is the abrupt bipolarity, illustrated by the viciousness with which they escalate and the calm impassiveness with which they retreat. While the *sadhus* were the main protagonists in the mobilisation of demolition of the Babri Masjid, astonishingly, there was not much festivity and celebration, even at a symbolic level, after the pro-Hindutva judgment in 2010. Interviews of *sadhus* taken in 2008, as opposed to 1993, reflect a deep apathy and disillusionment towards group action, as also a deep contentment about being centred solely in their individual religious/spiritual pursuits.

Pradhan's work posits serious theoretical implications for scholarship in the area of collective action and social movements. It indicates the necessity to examine the intrinsic identities and independent positioning of movement actors, types of social movements notwithstanding. The rise and splintering of Hindu nationalism in the current case, has been significantly influenced by the 'multiple and essential' identities of religious actors rather than only external structural forces. The very idiosyncrasies associated with 'sadhuness' are responsible for the passionate yet fleeting nature of their collective action. For this very same reason, the author argues, the diversity within the *sadhu* block and their individualistic orientation causes their fundamentalism to vary from other religious fundamentalist movements, like that in Iran for example.

These insights broaden the scope of the sociology of collective action, the growing impetus of which is focusing on developing nuanced theories that take into account micro-level variables in addition to broad structural contexts. In addition, it reflects on the theoretical problem of secularism and how various religious actors perceive and react to the notions of religion and identity of a nation. While Pradhan's research focuses on a small group of religious actors, who constituted, albeit temporarily, the pivot of a significant political stirring in Independent India, his analysis is highly valuable in understanding the temperament, and potential of religious fundamentalist movements.

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