The Politics of Internet Hinduism

Hinduism’s adherents, particularly in the United States, have displayed in recent years a marked tendency to turn towards various forms of digital media, and in particular the internet, to forge new forms of Hindu identity, furnish Hinduism with a purportedly more coherent and monotheistic form, engage in debates on American multiculturalism, and partake of the protocols of citizenship in the digital age. The aspiration to create linkages across Hindu groups worldwide, embrace Hindus in remoter diasporic settings who are viewed as having been ‘left behind’, and create something of global Hindu consciousness, has a fundamental relationship to India’s ascendancy as an ‘emerging economy’ and the confidence with which its Hindu elites increasingly view the world and their prospects for prosperity and political gain. In this lecture, I shall focus on some contemporary phenomena, among them the deployment of the internet in battles over the content of history textbooks in California and attempts to secure ‘the dignity of Hinduism’ by groups such as American Hindus Against Defamation (AHAD). As I shall argue, a revolutionary internet Hinduism is being forged which transforms an old faith into a worldwide religion, and brings pliant Hindus, both in India and in the older Indian diasporas of the nineteenth century, to an awareness of the global strengths of a ‘modern’ Hindu community.

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