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# Hindutva's Dangerous Rewriting of History

Audrey Truschke

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*I thank Supriya Gandhi, Taymiya Zaman, and the two anonymous reviewers for their comments on earlier drafts of this essay.*

- 1 In January 2019, the Indian Science Congress convened for its 106<sup>th</sup> annual meeting, which turned out to feature not science so much as science fiction. Presenters told attendees that ancient Indians were proficient in stem cell technology and built aircrafts, among other fantasies (Kumar 2019; Thiagarajan 2019). This was hardly the first time this forum had suffered from such antics. The 2015 Indian Science Congress meeting included a presentation on how ancient Indians had planes capable of interplanetary travel (Shrivastav 2015). Claims abound more broadly among Hindutva supporters about ancient India boasting everything from the internet to modern medicine. The idea that modern science and aeronautics flourished in India thousands of years ago is anachronistic and ridiculous to degrees so absurd it seems odd to even bother to contradict such nonsense. After all, no sane person could actually think that ancient Indians surfed the web while they waited to board a flight to Mars, right? Certainly, no historically-minded person could endorse such lunacy, but Hindu nationalists, who are often willing to sacrifice reason in pursuit of political objectives, are another matter.
- 2 Hindu nationalism or Hindutva—a fascist ideology that advocates Hindu supremacy, especially over Muslims—champions an outlandish vision of how scientific modernity flourished in early India; this is part of a larger agenda to rewrite the Indian past to serve present-day political interests. The overarching aim of Hindutva is to transform India from a secular into an ethno-nationalist state, dubbed the Hindu Rashtra (Hindu nation). As I explore in further detail below, Hindutva ideologues chart their path to this fascist future, in part, by making a series of wrong assertions, to varying degrees of unbelievability, about the past. Hindutva has a fact problem in that the vast majority of their claims about premodern India are incorrect. But their falsehoods about history—many of which center around an imagined Hindu golden age of scientific progress

interrupted by Muslim invaders who sought to crush Hindu culture and peoples—serve clear political goals of projecting a modern Hindutva identity as an ancient bulwark of Indian culture and maligning Muslims as the ultimate Other. In short, making outrageous claims about the Indian past makes no sense historically, but it makes good sense politically.

- 3 Hindutva ahistoricity has accelerated since the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—which embraces Hindutva as part of its platform—took over India's central government in 2014. The championing of Hindutva myths about the past has also expanded out from social media and political environments, two contexts hardly known for their devotion to accuracy, into academic circles. Hindu nationalists have become more brazen in introducing ahistorical claims into school textbooks, as discussed at the end of this article. They have also targeted traditionally academic spaces, a prime example being the Indian Science Congress, discussed above. The Indian Science Congress was founded in 1914 and today boasts a robust membership of tens of thousands of scientists. But the group's mission to "advance and promote the cause of science in India" is being undermined by the introduction of Hindu nationalist ideas at its meetings.<sup>1</sup> As Hindutva ideology exerts increasing influence within both popular and academic spheres, it becomes more pressing for academics to describe, document, and analyze harmful Hindutva approaches to remolding Indian history and distinguish these political uses of the past from academic approaches to history. In this article, I outline some of the patterns in how Hindutva ideologues construct a fanciful past and, now that they enjoy broad political power in India, how they disseminate their mythology, which often supplants scholarly inquiry. I argue that outlandish Hindutva claims regarding the past are most fruitfully understood to be, in the end, about present-day goals and anxieties. Nonetheless, Hindutva interventions have deep implications for both popular and academic understandings of Indian history.

## Denying Change over Time

- 4 There is more than a touch of irony in the investment of many modern-day Hindu nationalists in the past, given that they often deny their own movement's unsavory history. Early Hindutva ideologues were inspired by fascist movements in early twentieth-century Europe. A key early Hindutva thinker, V.D. Savarkar, spoke of India as the Fatherland and also shared with Nazis a concern with the purity of bloodlines (Savarkar 1923). Savarkar and others found Hitler's treatment of the Jews a useful model for how to deal with India's Muslim minority. For instance, M.S. Golwalkar, second leader of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS, the largest Hindu nationalist organization), wrote that Germany's "purging the country of the Semitic Race—the Jews" was "a good lesson for us in Hindusthan to learn and profit by."<sup>2</sup> It chills one's blood to read such vitriol, especially given that men (among other vices, Hindutva is deeply invested in male dominance) who follow such teachings govern India today. The RSS, which serves as the chief organizer for a range of Hindu nationalist groups and shapes BJP policy, was founded as and remains today a paramilitary organization (Jaffrelot 1996). The RSS's most well-known contribution to Indian history is that one of its members, Nathuram Godse, assassinated Mahatma Gandhi.<sup>3</sup> The list of lowlights in Hindutva's own history goes on. Perhaps part of what motivates Hindutva thinkers to

invent a deeper Indian past is longing for what they themselves do not have as a political movement: a history they might be proud of.

- 5 Hindutva ideologues also care about the past because they think it can provide them with a rich heritage that informs what it means to be Hindu today. Many historians, myself included, agree with the general impulse to understand where we came from in order to think about who we are in the present and who we might become in the future. But we part ways with Hindutva ideologues on several scores. First, whereas historians strive for accuracy and to understand the past on its own terms, followers of Hindutva forefront their modern identity and seek to invent a past that justifies it. In terms of specifics, Hindutva followers conceive of Hindu identity as having little to do with faith (Savarkar was an atheist). Rather, in Hindutva thought, Hindu-ness (the literal meaning of Hindutva) is a sort of martial machismo rooted in a shared cultural background that stretches back to time immemorial. Historians assess this Hindutva vision of what it has meant, historically, to be Hindu, to be factually problematic in multiple regards, but we also part ways on a broader methodological point.
- 6 Historians study change over time, whereas Hindutva ideologues deny that such change exists, vis-à-vis Hindu identity in particular. For historians, then, there is nothing surprising or challenging in the bland truism that Hindu identity did not exist in the same way in the Indian past as it does in India's present. But Hindutva thinkers reject cultural change as a desirable process, and so they find political value in the originally Orientalist proposition that India and Indians (for them, Hindus) possess a timeless, changeless essence (e.g., MacDonell 1900:11; Mill [1817] 1967; Hegel [1837] 1900).<sup>4</sup> This embrace of sameness over time and space has widespread implications for Hindutva followers. It leads them to make exceptional claims and act in ways that otherwise seem inexplicable. I explore further some of these ideas and actions in the next section. This commitment to a flat history without change, really a non-history, also means that Hindutva ideologues perceive anything that contradicts their worldview, even things buried deep in the ancient past, as a visceral contemporary threat.

## The Oxymoron of Hindutva History

- 7 For Hindutva followers, one critical aspect of what it means to be "Hindu," in the peculiar way that they define that term, is to be indigenous to India. Immediately, then, we have a historical problem, since, if one goes back far enough, no group is originally from India. The first humans likely migrated, at the earliest, around 120,000 years ago as homo sapiens spread beyond Africa (the first humans to leave a surviving lineage probably arrived on the Indian subcontinent about 65,000 years ago). Both material and genetic evidence supports the dates of these migrations (Joseph 2018:17). A later migration to the subcontinent—which Hindutva followers judge as especially damning to their ideology—occurred about 4,000 to 3,500 years ago, when a pastoralist group arrived in the northwestern part of the subcontinent. These people probably came from Central Asia, called themselves Aryans, and revered the Vedas, the oldest Sanskrit texts. This event, known today as the Aryan migration, is backed by nearly ironclad linguistic evidence and further buttressed by recent genetic research (Joseph 2018:161–202). But, for Hindutva thinkers, the Aryan Migration Theory threatens to overthrow their entire worldview because it means, to them, that Hindus are not indigenous to

India. It is worth underscoring that few people, beyond Hindu nationalists, think that the Aryan migration invalidates Hindu claims to be Indian. After all, 3,500 years is a long time. Also, Hinduism has changed rather radically over the millennia, and so, as scholars have pointed out, it is arguably inaccurate to identify the migrating Aryans, a small band of pastoralists, with modern-day Hindus, a diverse group of people (Hawley 1991). But Hindutva ideologues do not embrace historical change, as discussed above. And so, in pursuit of an unchallengeable claim to indigeneity within a (they imagine) static, unalterable India, they attempt to deny any history of Aryan migration to the subcontinent.

- 8 In an attempt to navigate around the formidable roadblocks of linguistic, genetic, and material evidence for early migrations to India, especially by the Aryans, Hindu nationalists resort to specious arguments and even fraud. Hindutva thinkers propagate an Out of India theory, which stipulates that Sanskrit-speaking Aryans originated in India and from there traveled to the rest of the world. As Tony Joseph has pointed out, the Out of India theory lacks support from even “a single, peer-reviewed scientific paper” and is best considered nothing “more than a kind of clever and angry retort.”<sup>5</sup> Hindu nationalists also often claim that the Indus Valley Civilization, an ancient civilization in the northwestern subcontinent that declined a few hundred years before the Aryans arrived, was continuous with Vedic culture. Followers of Hindutva have gone to astonishing lengths of dishonesty—including fabricating evidence entirely, such as a horse seal—to attempt to show that the Indus Valley Civilization and Vedic culture are one in the same (Witzel and Farmer 2000). Similar to the Out of India theory, there is no academic substance to this hollow claim.
- 9 Hindutva ideologues want Hindus alone to be indigenous to India so that this one social group can define what it means to be Indian and can exclude others from this category. They exclude as non-Indian many groups who have long been part of life and society on the subcontinent, above all Muslims. In Hindutva history—oxymoron though that phrase is—premodern India had two major phases: a glorious Hindu golden age followed by an era of Muslim oppression of Hindus. When describing the latter, Hindu nationalists like Narendra Modi speak of “1,200 years of slavery” (Suroor 2014). Propaganda websites, such as IndiaFacts, are full of bad-faith allegations of a Muslim-led “Hindu Holocaust” in premodernity. As with the Out of India theory, I am not aware of a single scholarly work that argues for either proposition. Indo-Muslim rulers were no more or less violent, as a broad group, than Hindu rulers, and they generally targeted political enemies, not broad religious groups.<sup>6</sup> But, as Supriya Gandhi (2020) explains in a recent article about Hindutva’s iconoclastic activities vis-à-vis Muslim monuments, “Hindu nationalism centers around grievance and the desire to correct—or avenge—past wrongs.” These largely imagined grievances have a history of their own, which is important for understanding how they have come to exert power over the imaginations of some members of India’s dominant religious group (Hindus comprise nearly eighty percent of modern India’s population).
- 10 In historical terms, the list of grievances brandished by Hindu nationalists dates back primarily to the British colonial period (1757–1947). Hindutva advocates have little to say about British colonialism, a brutal period of Indian history, because doing so does not serve their political purposes today. Hindutva’s early ideologues were sometimes British sympathizers, and overall, Hindu nationalists sat out India’s struggle for independence. Today, the tools that once served India’s British masters now serve their

Hindu nationalist ones. For instance, Narendra Modi, India's BJP leader and a lifelong RSS man, has not hesitated to make use of draconian British-era laws—such as laws against sedition—in pursuit of his own dark ends (Guha 2019). Hindutva followers have a similarly symbiotic relationship with their once colonial masters regarding history. The two centerpieces of the Hindu nationalist view of the Indian past—the demonization of Muslim-led rule and idolization of Hindu-led rule—both stem from the colonial period, during which modern Hindu-Muslim communal conflict was born (Thapar 2016).<sup>8</sup> For the British, these ideas assisted their strategy of divide-and-rule. Also, demonizing India's Muslim kings, the direct predecessors of the British in ruling over significant portions of the subcontinent, furthered the argument that British rule was needed in India. Hindu nationalists decline to recognize the imperialist intellectual lineage of their ideas presumably to avert exposing their historical fictions as such. They also perhaps wish to avoid confronting the broader implications of the reality that Hindutva thought has inherited British colonial tactics and attitudes.

- 11 While giving the British a pass, Hindu nationalists blame seemingly all wrongs in Indian history on Muslims. In addition to that being hateful and incorrect, it is notable that Hindu nationalists rarely distinguish between groups of Muslims, whether past versus present, or those with political power versus those without, and so forth. Since Hindutva ideology seeks Hindu supremacy, the enemy that serves as their foil must be constructed as equally flat and politically homogenous in its identity. Hindu nationalists avenge their imagined grievances through very real oppression of present-day Indian Muslims, who have been the victims of increasing government-led and extrajudicial violence since 2014 (Ayyub 2019; Bajoria 2019; Filkins 2019). In other words, Hindutva followers remake the past in a futile attempt to justify their own bigoted hate and violence in the present.
- 12 According to Hindutva ideologues, before Muslim baddies showed up on the subcontinent, India was a paradise of scientific progress. Above I detail some aspects of this vision to project modern Western advances into the Indian past. Comments made by a leader in the Vijnana Bharati (VIBHA), the RSS's science wing, indicate that this exercise in absurdity is fuelled, in part, by anxiety and shame. Speaking about the 106<sup>th</sup> Indian Science Congress debacle, Shekhar Mande, vice-president of VIBHA, said, "We are a race which is not inferior to any other race in the world" and "Great things have happened in this part of the world." These statements strike me as generally true,<sup>9</sup> but they are only pertinent as a defense of projecting modern science into ancient India if lacking modern science means that one's culture is weak and inferior. This logic and its underlying "simmering science envy" (Nanda 2016) do not jibe with the reality that premodern India was neither modern nor Western. The view of many scholars on this point is put aptly by Sheldon Pollock (2007) who wrote in a discussion of historical writing in premodern India, "There is no shame in premodernity" (p. 381). But Hindu nationalists seem to feel deep anxiety about the truism that ancient India was not the modern West. They inherited this embarrassment about the Indian past, again, from the British colonial period when Orientalist scholarship demeaned much about premodern India. Historians escape the clutches of such inappropriate views by naming, analyzing, and ultimately replacing them. But that avenue of critical thought is not open to Hindu nationalists, who are invested in both denying historical change and avoiding their own ideology's history. One result is that Hindu nationalists are still shackled by Orientalist shame, which lurks just beneath the surface when they seek to

co-opt scientific discoveries made in the modern West—such as airplanes and genetic therapy—as the work of their own ancestors.

- 13 Hindu nationalists also sometimes claim that premodern Indian practices (or what they imagine were premodern Indian practices anyways) are superior to anything in the West, either in the past or the present. This trend cuts against the tendency to project modern scientific advances onto ancient India, and such contradictions are part of Hindutva, which “seeks its own coherence” while “in it dwell numerous contradictions” (Gandhi 2019). Positioning ancient Indian practices as superlative to all others in the world has some eye-catching outcomes. For instance, in March of 2020, days after the World Health Organization declared the novel coronavirus outbreak to be a pandemic, the Akhil Bharat Hindu Mahasabha organized a party at which attendees consumed cow urine as preventative medicine against the virus.<sup>10</sup> Cow urine (*gaumutra*) is a recurrent cure in Hindu nationalist lore for all manner of health problems—including cancer, thyroid issues, and infections—and its champions often emphasize its roots in premodern Indian medicine (Penkar 2020). Modern people in many cultures are interested in homeopathy these days, and urine therapy also has white Western followers (Nagesh 2018). But the patronage of the Indian government and broader Hindutva mythology render such practices more than mere curiosities in Modi's India. The coronavirus *gaumutra* party was part of a larger recent push towards “traditional” medicine, endorsed by the BJP, that predates the coronavirus pandemic. Notably, since coming to power in 2014, the Modi government has devoted significant resources to AYUSH (Ministry of Ayurveda, Yoga & Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homoeopathy), a government ministry of homeopathy with a troubling history of undercutting scientifically-backed cures.<sup>11</sup> In this course of action, then, there is clear harm on a systemic level to medical care in modern India, which Hindu nationalists accept in pursuit of political power.
- 14 Hindutva thinkers mine the past for symbols at times, with a prime example being their curious attachment to Sanskrit as an affective cultural marker coupled with disinterest in reading premodern Sanskrit texts. Sanskrit is the premier literary and intellectual language of premodern India; it also serves ritual functions in Hinduism. Savarkar (1923) viewed Sanskrit as part of the cultural glue that could bind together all Hindus (even the atheist ones), dubbing it “a common inheritance” and “a common treasure” (p. 35). It did not appear to bother Savarkar that very few modern people know Sanskrit, aside from ritual specialists and scholars (a number of the latter are not even of South Asian descent). For Savarkar, Sanskrit was not valuable as a language in which premodern Indians wrote philosophy, poetry, and more, but rather as a cultural symbol for unifying Hindus around Hindutva. More recently, the BJP has devoted state resources to Sanskrit education in primary and secondary schools in India, but even then, their goal does not appear to be actually teaching students Sanskrit (Gohain 2017). In fact, Hindutva ideologues frequently become irate when people try to read premodern Sanskrit works, especially if they translate them so a wider audience can appreciate ancient India's literary masterpieces.<sup>12</sup> Rejecting Sanskrit as a medium for a wide range of premodern texts, Hindu nationalists instead seek to instill an emotion-soaked reverence for Sanskrit as a focal point of modern Hindutva.
- 15 One example of how positioning Sanskrit as a Hindutva symbol reaches absurdity, from a scholarly perspective, is in the appointment of Rajiv Malhotra as honorary professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University in 2018. Malhotra is a plagiarist and ideologue with no



academic credentials, and so his appointment ruffled some feathers (Scroll Staff 2018). It came several years into a sustained project to undercut humanities education at JNU, which, for decades, has been a world-class university in Delhi. Malhotra was appointed because of his work on Sanskrit, a language in which he has no formal training and over which he appears to have a rather weak grasp (this being perhaps part of why he plagiarized a Sanskrit scholar). In a move so brazen it appears almost self-trolling, Malhotra delivered his first lecture as an honorary professor at JNU on “Sanskrit Non-Translatables.” It strikes me as unsurprising that Sanskrit appears untranslatable from Malhotra’s perspective, similar to how Polish—a language I do not know although it constitutes part of my cultural and ethnic heritage—appears to me. But, for the Hindu Right, Malhotra’s shaky knowledge of Sanskrit is not disqualifying because they value other credentials, specifically that Malhotra has the right heritage (Indian), the right religion (Hindu), and, above all, that he toes the Hindu nationalist line. In Malhotra’s JNU lecture, more than irony died. That Malhotra was able to infiltrate a well-respected academic space, such as the humanities at JNU, signals the rapid expansion of the Hindutva agenda to have propagandists occupy and thereby undermine spaces of academic inquiry.

- 16 Despite Hindutva’s non-religious background, its twenty-first century development has leaned decisively towards a divine figure: Ram. Ram (also spelled Rama) is a character in the ancient Indian epic Ramayana, where he is depicted as a just king and an incarnation of Vishnu. Many Hindus around the world consider themselves devotees of Lord Ram today. But, the Hindutva Ram is different; he is a rallying cry for right-wing Hindus to express an identity as a strong, martial race. The Hindutva Ram who is featured on posters even looks markedly different, notably far more aggressive as compared to standard religious depictions of Ram. Over time, the martial Hindutva Ram threatens to supplant the devotional Hindu one. Already, the once religious-sounding phrase “Jai Shri Ram” is often heard as a cry of hate that has filled the ears of many Muslims in their final moments before being murdered by Hindu mobs (Scroll Staff 2019). More broadly, Pradeep Chhibber (2019) has argued that “the BJP has been successful in its campaign in delinking religious ideas and moral principles from what it means to be a Hindu.”<sup>13</sup>



#### Hindutva Ram vs. Devotional Ram

Images found online

- 17 In August 2020, the BJP and other Hindu nationalist groups celebrated breaking ground for a new temple to the Hindutva Ram, known popularly as Ram Mandir, in Ayodhya. Ayodhya already has many Ram temples, but this new one is special because it sits on



what has been claimed to be Ram's birthplace since the mid-nineteenth century, a period of time when British colonial policies and attitudes were stoking Hindu-Muslim conflict. As Gyan Pandey (1994) has pointed out, the Hindu Right has, over time, embraced an increasingly narrow and exclusive positivism in the identification of Ram's birthplace. Additionally, and crucially, the temple is being built atop the remains of a premodern Indian mosque that was torn down—illegally—by a Hindu mob in 1992. That event sparked violence across northern India in which a few thousand people were killed, mainly Muslims. The new Ram Mandir in Ayodhya celebrates this violent exercise of Hindu supremacy, in which a modern myth about the past can justify the mass slaughter of Muslims. Appropriately, if horrifyingly, Narendra Modi showed up for the Ram Mandir groundbreaking ceremony appearing as an incarnation of a martial Ram, complete with a crown (Express Web Desk 2020).

- 18 In the kaleidoscope of ways in which Hindu nationalists imagine the past, they rarely glimpse actual Indian history. As noted above, they consider Indian history and, by extension, historians, to be threats that might unravel their elaborate tapestry of propaganda. Hindutva ideology is also rife with internal contradictions and therefore constantly at risk of collapsing on itself. The culminative effect is to render Hindutva as something like a house of cards, unsteady in its own construction and at risk of falling apart due to the slightest breeze of historical criticism. At the moment, however, Hindutva does not appear to be crumbling, but rather flourishing, in part due to their harsh tactics against dissenters. In the next section, I explore some Hindutva tactics, especially those used against scholars, and consider some of the implications for academic discourse.

## Hindutva Tactics

- 19 What Hindutva ideologues lack in historical grounding, they compensate for in hateful and sometimes inchoate screaming, both literal and metaphorical. Hindutva followers often self-identify as an “army” or, to use other martial terms, are ruthless against those they perceive as enemies. They disseminate bad-faith ideas and perpetrate odious attacks in many venues, including WhatsApp, propaganda websites, email chains, and so forth. The most visible arena that Hindu nationalists treat as a battleground is social media, where they smear, dox, and threaten people with great regularity. Christophe Jaffrelot has pointed out that social media has empowered Hindutva advocates to “disseminate this ideology anonymously, and therefore more aggressively” (Anderson and Jaffrelot 2018:473). Others have reconstructed how the BJP maintains and gives targeted orders to its troll army (Chaturvedi 2016). As someone who has been the target of a coordinated Hindu Right attack, it is both unmistakable and distressing. For many scholars, the fear that this might one day happen to them provides enough incentive to keep their historical arguments squarely within academic publications, which few people read, rather than trying to speak to broader popular audiences.
- 20 Targeting scholars on social media and other forums works to dissuade academics from discussing history in popular contexts and even in academic publications to some degree for several reasons. One, it is difficult, even traumatic, to be maligned with *ad hominem* attacks. Such assaults also shape one's reputation among other academics, often not for the better. Elsewhere I have written about both of these aspects drawing from my own experiences (Truschke 2020). In addition to reputation, tangible costs are

often at play. In India, ad hominem attacks are coupled with threats to personal safety from both the police and Hindu Right mobs, two groups that increasingly work together in Modi's India. For scholars abroad, the Indian state holds the ability to bar travel to India using a variety of mechanisms. For both, the threat of lawsuits in India encourages self-censorship of published work.<sup>14</sup> Some scholars speak out despite all of these risks, but more seem to stay mute, moderate themselves, or limit their comments to academic circles, which saves them from the wrath of the Hindu Right, at least for a while.

- 21 Hindu nationalists seek to displace scholarly knowledge and scholars by undermining academic institutions. JNU in Delhi has been a notable target. For example, in 2017 the Modi government slashed funding for JNU students pursuing PhDs, cutting down the number of seats by more than eighty percent (Maanvi 2017). Since then, BJP allies have taken further aggressive steps at JNU, including decimating the library budget (Benu 2019), attempting to prevent archival research (Sarfaraz 2019), and, in January 2020, facilitating a violent attack on students led by a right-wing mob (Schultz and Raj 2020). Cumulatively, these actions have made places like JNU unsafe at times and not conducive to scholarly research.
- 22 Hindu nationalists have also turned their attention to broader perceptions of history in primary and secondary school textbooks, in India and in the United States. In discrete textbook controversies, Hindutva ideologues have sought to hide or eliminate altogether aspects of Hindu traditions over time that they find distasteful, most notably the caste system and practices of untouchability (Visveswaran et al. 2009). In India especially, they have sought to erase Muslim figures (like Akbar) and leaders of secular independent India (like Nehru) from textbooks, replacing them with historical individuals they imagine (falsely) to have been seeking to establish a Hindu Rashtra in premodernity, like Shivaji (HT Correspondent 2017; The Wire Staff 2017). In an embrace of Hindutva's own roots, some Indian textbooks openly praise Hitler and Mussolini (Traub 2018). In a truly Orwellian exercise, Hindu nationalists have already rewritten textbooks in Kashmir to omit any mention of the internet shutdown, detentions, and more that marked the Modi government's decision to abrogate Article 370 of the Indian Constitution in August 2019 (Maqbool 2020). Hindutva attempts to change textbooks have been more effective in India than the United States thus far, but they have successfully subordinated academic viewpoints to political ones in both nations (Chowdhury 2018; Jain and Lasseter 2018; Sharma 2019; Thaker 2018).
- 23 Hindutva ideologues cannot change what actually happened in the Indian past, but they can control what people know about it, especially within India. They have a fear-driven need to control a narrative that could fracture their entire ideology. That coupled with a toxic cocktail of harsh methods—including displacement, violence, and lies—has resulted in a notable degree of influence over the narrative of Indian history. Currently, the price of doing historical work is far too high for many academics. In short, Hindu nationalists have succeeded in constricting discourse about the Indian past.

## Conclusion

- 24 Historians have limited options about how to proceed given the current Indian political environment where Hindutva dominates, none of which are appealing. We can stay the

course and do our jobs, trying to reconstruct and understand the past on its own terms, but then some of us will be publicly smeared, have our safety threatened, be unable to travel to India, face punitive lawsuits, and potentially far worse. In terms of influencing public opinion about history, it is not clear that we have the right tool set to succeed against the Hindu Right. Any debate with Hindutva ideologues features sophistry more than substance, and the ethics of historians prevent us from copying their dishonesty and bellicose demeanor. But, if we bow to political pressure and do not continue the pursuit of history or do so only within the ivory tower, then we cede entirely the realm of public-facing historical work and fail to help people understand the perverse nature of Hindutva approaches to the past. That, too, is too high of a price to pay for some of us. As a result, despite the danger, I remain engaged in attempts at “bridging the gap between academic and popular history,” as Chitrlekha Zutshi called for in a 2009 article. My goal is not to talk to Hindu nationalists, who have rejected the very foundation of historical thought, but rather to talk about them and around them in pursuit of promoting knowledge about Indian history. So long as there are still people listening to both Hindutva ideologues and historians, a middle ground as it were, some academics must continue to speak on behalf of historical approaches to studying and understanding the Indian past.

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## NOTES

1. See the introduction on the Indian Science Congress Association website, available at <http://sciencecongress.nic.in/introduction.php>.
2. Cited in Egorova (2008:42).
3. Godse's links with the RSS during his early life are well-documented; whether he had formally left the organization by the time he assassinated Gandhi is a matter of some debate (see, e.g., Jha 2020; Lal 2020; Nussbaum 2009:165).
4. Others have also noted the Hindutva denial of historical change (e.g., Pandey 1994:1525).
5. Quoted in Das (2019).
6. The most recent, best scholarly take on the entirety of Indo-Muslim rule is Eaton (2019); also see Asher and Talbot (2006).
7. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/india/2020-07-13/when-toppling-monuments-serves-authoritarian-ends>
8. These twinned storylines were not the only narratives about South Asian history at play in British India. A classic read on the British preference for multiplicity in their ruling ideologies is Thomas Metcalf's *Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
9. Describing Indians (or Hindus) as a race is an indication that Mande is steeped in Hindutva ideology and Savarkar's adaptation of early-twentieth-century European fascist ideas about race.
10. The *gaumutra* party is described in Siddiqui (2020) and Radha-Udayakumar (2020); it also inspired at least one copycat event (PTI 2020).
11. <https://www.ayush.gov.in>.
12. A notable example is the politically-motivated attempt to have Sheldon Pollock removed as chief editor of the Murty Classical Library of India (<http://murtylibrary.com>), which translates classical Indian texts (Puri 2016).
13. <https://theprint.in/opinion/modi-shah-bjp-reduced-hindu-to-ethnic-identity-without-moral-compass/335760/>
14. The case of Wendy Doniger's *The Hindu: An Alternative History* is the most well-known case of such a lawsuit (Doniger 2014).

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## ABSTRACTS

Hindu nationalists are heavily invested in rewriting Indian history to advance their modern and unrepentantly hateful political agenda. Hindu nationalism or Hindutva is a political ideology that advocates Hindu supremacy, specifically over Muslims who comprise around fourteen percent of modern India's population. The similarity in name notwithstanding, Hindutva is distinct from Hinduism, a broad-based religious tradition, although Hindutva ideologues seek to constrict and flatten Hindu traditions. In this article, I describe some of the contours of the Hindutva investment in remaking the past as a means of advancing a modern political project. I also offer some thoughts on why Hindu nationalists care so much about history and explore some of the implications of Hindutva's growing political influence for the field of South Asian history and academics who work therein.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** Hindutva, Hindu nationalism, history, Sanskrit, Muslims, India, violence, politics

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