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Misuse of History: Assault on Democracy in India

India is today witnessing the cynical use of ‘history’ to destroy the very basis on which the Indian nation state was imagined by the nearly hundred year long Indian National Liberation Movement and the basis on which the democratic Indian republic was formed after winning independence from British colonial rule in 1947. The very survival of the Indian nation state, not only its character is at stake today.

How has ‘history’ been put to such destructive use? How has the discipline of history, the *master discipline*, ‘in which’, as E. P. Thompson put it, ‘all other human disciplines meet’, ‘the Queen of humanities’,¹ been weaponised in recent years? This paper will try to outline the political use and abuse of ‘history’ in India’s recent history, which is critically linked to the current misuse of history.²

The discipline of history is and must remain open to ideological influences and multiple interpretations. It is an ideographic rather than nomothetic discipline, a distinction highlighted by the Gulbenkian Commission Report on the Restructuring of the Social Sciences.³ Again, as E. P. Thompson put it, ‘ ‘History’ ... the most unitary and general of all human disciplines, must always be *least* precise. Her knowledge will never be, in however thousand years, anything more than proximate’, though it is knowledge ‘attained through its own rigorous procedures of historical logic, its own discourse of proof,’⁴ which we commonly call the scientific method.

Given this tentative, proximate nature of the discipline, ‘history’ has been put to the service of diverse social forces. On the one hand, interpretations of history have been used by ruling regimes to legitimize their rule and their policies, as it has been used by social movements both progressive and reactionary, to defend positions taken by them. On the other hand, doing complete violence to the majesty of the discipline of history, its ‘procedures’ and ‘discourse of proof’, total falsification or ‘invention’ of facts and the substituting of facts with faith, beliefs and mythology have been resorted to by political forces, as we are witnessing in India today.

When the various disciplines of the human and social sciences, such as history, economics, psychology, social anthropology and political science evolved in the 19th and early 20th century, much of the present developing world was under colonial rule and European/Western (including the USA) ideological hegemony held sway in most of the world. The colonial and the Eurocentric often, though not always, tended to overlap and reinforce each other. As the colonial intervention had occurred simultaneously with the emergence of the modern discipline of history, the colonial perspective

¹ E. P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, Merlin Press, London, 1979, p. 262.

² Sections of this paper draw on my lecture, ‘In Defence of History’, delivered on 12 August 2021 to felicitate one of India’s foremost historians, Prof. Irfan Habib, on his turning 90. It was published in *Social Scientist*, Vol. 49, No. 9-10, September-October 2021.

³ See Immanuel Wallerstein, *Open the Social Sciences, Report of the Gulbenkian Commission on the Restructuring of the Social Sciences*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1996

⁴ E. P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory*, p.262.

dominated the writing of Indian history till the end of colonial rule in the mid 20th century.⁵

A colonial interpretation of Indian history played a critical role in creating and promoting divisions in Indian society and in legitimizing colonial rule. *It is the colonial interpretation, which is being used in India today rampantly by divisive fascist forces who masquerade as the true nationalists!* The colonial interpretation of history is being used to deny the democratic principle to religious minorities in their millions. A brief overview of the colonial interpretation of Indian history is therefore in order here.

At the initial point of contact in the 18th century, during the First Stage or the Merchant Capital stage of colonialism, when the Indian economy produced about eight times the British share in the global GDP,⁶ the early British chroniclers, the Orientalists, were all praises about Indian history and civilization, some putting it even superior to their own. The attitude was one of learning. As traders there was little need to change Indian society.

By the early 19th century, when Britain had emerged as the first industrialized nation in the world and the Second Stage or the Industrial Capital stage of colonialism had set in, the Indian situation was described as 'barbaric' and needed to be altered, so that it could become a subservient adjunct to the rapidly industrializing British economy. The 'utilitarian', 'liberal-imperialist' or 'Whig' school of thought now emerged. The talk now was of 'trusteeship', 'civilizing mission', 'development', 'modernization', taking on 'the white man's burden', gradually training through education etc., the colonial 'child' people, who were stuck at a 'barbaric' stage, *towards even 'self government'*, provided of course as the British East India Company official Macaulay put it, the Indians were 'civilised' and 'educated' enough to allow 'free trade' and not resort to protectionism. This was also the period when the completely 'communal'⁷ and erroneous periodization of Indian history of 'Hindu rule' followed by 'Muslim rule' was evolved by British historians. They also showed how *British* (note not Christian) rule was delivering India from the tyranny of 'Muslim rule' in the medieval period. This perspective dominated till about the late 19th century.

With the emergence, in the late 19th century, of the Third, Finance Capital Stage of colonialism, and the deepening and spread of the industrialization process to several countries in the world, mainly the West, there occurred a fierce scramble for acquiring new colonies and establishing firm control over existing ones. This was necessary not only to secure exclusively for each metropolitan country markets and sources of raw material but also to protect the large investments that were being made in the colonies. V.I. Lenin had aptly summed up the situation in one line, characterizing the shift in attitude from the second to the third stage because of the introduction of the new element of foreign capital

⁵ See Aditya Mukherjee, 'Challenges to the Social Sciences in the 21st Century', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.XLVIII, No. 37, 14 September 2013.

⁶ See Angus Maddison, *The World Economy: Vol. I, A Millennial Perspective, Vol.II, Historical Statistics*, OECD, 2006, Indian Edition, New Delhi, 2007, Table 8b quoted in Aditya Mukherjee, 'Empire: How Colonial India Made Modern Britain,' in *Economic and Political Weekly* (EPW), Vol.XLV, No. 50, 11 December 2010.

⁷ The word 'communal' is used in the Indian context in a manner that 'racist' is used in the West. All one needs to do is substitute colour of skin with religion. The ideological underpinnings of both the phenomena are very similar. Anti-Semitism is another comparable phenomenon. Communalists assume that people belonging to a particular religion (despite their class, linguistic, regional and many other differences) are *homogenous units* with common political, social, economic and cultural interests which are different and antagonistic to people belonging to another religion. It is significant that 'communalism' is supposed to be so 'peculiar' to the Indian context that even the meaning of the word as applied to India is not understood in the West except among those familiar with India. We do not use the phrase 'Hindu nationalist' for the Hindu communalists as has become fashionable in some circles now, as the phrase is an oxymoron. In a multi-religious nation, nationalism based on any one denominational religion, Hindu, Muslim or Sikh, would actually destroy the nation itself. Leaders of India's independence movement or national movement never used this self description by communal groups as nationalists. They correctly described them as communalist and *anti-nationalist*. See Bipan Chandra, *Communalism in Modern India*, New Delhi, 1987, for till date the most comprehensive discussion on communalism.

investments: ‘the creditor is more firmly attached to the debtor, than the seller is to the buyer’.⁸ The ideology of training the colonial people for self-governance was replaced with the colonial people being *permanently* unfit for self rule. Talk of leaving was now abandoned, as Sir Richard Temple, Governor of Bombay wrote in 1880; England ‘must keep India... because a vast amount of British capital has been sunk in the country, on the assurance of British rule being *humanly speaking, perpetual*.’⁹

The legitimation for *permanent* colonial rule came not only from the notion of Indians being unfit to govern themselves because of their supposedly flawed history, geography, culture, religious practices, climate, family structure, social institutions, demographic constitution, etc., but increasingly from the key notion that colonial rule was necessary to keep peace among a people deeply divided on the basis of religion and caste. Self government based on a *democratic* elective principle, (as demanded by the Indian National Movement) could not be granted as then the religious majority, the Hindus, would oppress the religious minorities, the Muslims and others. Since this legitimation for continuance of colonial rule was based on the notion of a divided people, the colonial state made every conceivable effort to create, consolidate and provoke this divide. For various historical reasons, the British found the religious divide as the most effective one though many other divisions based on language, caste, occupation, etc., were also promoted assiduously. Indian history was now seen as one where the Indian people were *always deeply divided* on the basis of ‘primordial identities’ of religion and caste and these identities were seen as subsuming all other identities or interests, economic, political, social or cultural. The religious communal ideology and a *communal interpretation of history* was thus born and propagated widely. As India has learnt to its grave cost, the longest lasting legacy of colonialism has not been the economic or political destruction but that, wherever it has gone globally, beginning with Ireland, the first colony, it has left behind a *divided people*.¹⁰

The first resistance to a colonial and communal (*the close umbilical cord tie between the two can never be over-emphasized*) interpretation of Indian history and society was done by the Indian intelligentsia closely linked with the national liberation struggle. The early nationalists led by Dadabhai Naoroji spearheaded the economic critique of colonialism from about the mid 19th century, decades before Lenin, Hobson or Rosa Luxemburg, and almost simultaneously with Marx. Through intense intellectual effort, they destroyed the imperialist ideological hegemony based on the notion of colonialism leading to development. Subsequently, other ideologues of the Indian national movement like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhas Bose, Bhagat Singh, Maulana Azad critiqued other aspects of the colonial worldview, including the communal interpretation of history.

The colonial/communal interpretation repeatedly emphasized the ‘trauma’ of Hindu–Muslim conflict. It was said, for example, by K M Munshi (a major Hindu communal ideologue) in 1951, about the destruction of the Somanatha temple by a Muslim invader, Mahmud, the Sultan of Ghazni (now in Afghanistan) more than a thousand years ago in 1026: ‘... for a thousand years Mahmud’s destruction of the shrine has been burnt into the collective sub-conscious of the [Hindu] Race as an unforgettable national disaster.’ Munshi was reflecting the colonial perspective created in the 19th century. The earliest mention of ‘Hindu Trauma’ caused by this ‘Muslim’ invasion in 1026, which had to be avenged, is in 1843 when the issue is brought up in the British House of Commons. Colonial historiography since the 19th century has used the event to evolve a notion of permanent confrontation between the Hindus and Muslims laying the basis of the ‘two nation’ theory, which argued that Hindus and Muslims constituted two distinct nations. The eminent historian Romila Thapar, using a multiplicity of sources, has convincingly demonstrated that nothing of the kind happened. Destruction of religious places was routinely done *across religions and sects* often to loot the wealth of these institutions in ancient and medieval times and was perhaps treated as such. 150 years after its destruction a Hindu king rebuilt the Somanatha temple without

⁸ V. I. Lenin, *Imperialism, The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, London, 1948 (first published 1916).

⁹ Bipan Chandra, et.al., *Freedom Struggle*, New Delhi, 1972, p.14, emphasis mine.

¹⁰ See Chapter 10, Colonialism and Communalism: A legacy Haunting India Today in Aditya Mukherjee, *The Political Economy of Colonial and Post Colonial India*, Primus, New Delhi, forthcoming 2022.

even a mention of Mahmud having destroyed it. 250 years later land is given to a Muslim trader to build a mosque in land belonging to the same temple's estates with the approval of the local Hindu ruler, local merchants and priests! No signs of a 'trauma' in the 'collective memory' of Hindus is visible until it was a 'memory' constructed much later under colonial patronage by their allies, the religious communal forces.¹¹

The nationalist intelligentsia in the colonial period put forward a totally different interpretation of Indian history where they were not trying to create memories of historical 'trauma' in order to create differences in the present. On the contrary they drew on the reality of Indian society and how it organically dealt with religious, caste and other difference through birth of new religions like Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism or movements spanning many centuries like the Sufi and Bhakti movements. They focus on a critical aspect of India's civilizational history, of the ability to live with difference, accommodate, adjust, resolve and transform rather than crush difference. They focus on the shared traditions in, language, music, poetry, painting, architecture, philosophy and everyday practice cutting across religion and caste and talk of Buddha, Guru Nanak, Kabir, Akbar, Mirabai, Dara Shikoh, Ramanuja, Amir Khusrau, etc., contributing to the creation of a composite culture. (Songs composed by Amir Khusrau 700 years ago in a dialect of Hindi are sung till today in the same language by millions across religions.) This strand was perhaps best represented by Jawaharlal Nehru who in his brilliant magnum opus, *The Discovery of India*, written from prison in the 1940s, talked of the emergence of the Indian civilization that occurred over the centuries through the 'absorption', 'assimilation' and 'synthesis' of all the influences India was exposed to through trade, invasions, migration and inter mixing. From the Indus Valley civilization five thousand years ago to the Dravidian, Aryan-Central Asian, Iranian, Greek, Parthian, Bactrian, Scythian, Hun, Arab, Turk, early Christian, Jewish, Zoroastrian, Afghan, Mughal, etc., all leaving their mark 'like some ancient palimpsest on which layer upon layer of thought and reverie had been inscribed, and yet no succeeding layer had completely hidden or erased what had been written previously.'¹² It is to this organic process through which the Indian people had learnt to negotiate differences of multiple religions, languages, caste etc., that colonialism came as a shock. It is as if Indian history 'ceased', to use a phrase used by the African revolutionary, Amilcar Cabral, for the period of colonial rule lasting nearly 200 years. Colonialism not only stopped the dynamic process of negotiating differences but actually froze or even accentuated these differences.

The challenges to the colonial perspective outlined above however remained largely in the political domain and did not succeed in substantially altering the academic disciplinary order as the academic sphere was largely controlled by the colonial state. The break in the academic sphere in the discipline of history comes *after* independence. The output of a very high level of scholarship in premier universities of the country began to emerge by the 1960s and 1970s, seriously questioning Eurocentric/colonial and communal perspectives in not only the understanding of history from the ancient past to the modern and contemporary period but of Indian social structure, polity and economy.

In the 1960s an effort was made through the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) to bring the results of this new scholarship that had emerged to school children of the country. And many of the globally recognised academic stalwarts, like Romila Thapar, Bipan Chandra, R S Sharma and Satish Chandra, took time off to write school texts for children, covering from Ancient to Modern History, as part of their social duty. Romila Thapar for example, wrote a textbook for eleven year old children of Class VI. Such an experiment on such a grand scale I do not think was replicated anywhere else in the world. The result was outstanding texts, which received global recognition and have survived till today more than 50 years later. They are still popular among students and teachers even though they were removed by the NCERT from their list of publications under right wing communal political pressure in the early 2000s.

The struggle for the survival of a scientific, secular and non-colonial history had begun virtually as it was being

¹¹ The discussion on the Somanatha and the quotation from K M Munshi is from Romila Thapar, 'Perspectives of the History of Somanatha', Umashankar Joshi Memorial Lecture, 29 December 2012 and *Somanatha: The Many Voices of a History*, Penguin, New Delhi, 2003.

¹² Jawaharlal Nehru, *Discovery of India*, (first published in 1946), Penguin, 2010, p. 51.

written as it came under attack from neo-colonial and communal forces. The colonial attack came from the so-called Cambridge School, from the 1960s itself, making a mockery of our national liberation struggle and the values it stood for. In economic history, Morris D Morris in the 1960s, the Cambridge Economic History in the 1980s and a cruder version of both in the new millennium by Tirthankar Roy¹³ and Meghnad Desai¹⁴ put up a defence of the colonial paradigm. The last two also launched an attack on the 'Nehruvian consensus' which tried to undo the inherited colonial structure and build an independent self-reliant complex economy after independence. For them the two great phases were the colonial period and the neo-liberal turn in recent years, the decades that followed the Nehruvian consensus were 'wasted years.' The pro-colonial Nehru bashing was supported at a much more crass level by the communal Nehru bashing. (An early bonding of the neo-colonial, neo-liberal and the communal fascist forces, which has acquired such dangerous proportions today.)

The *communal* attack on secular scientific history was sustained from the beginning by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), an organisation that Jawaharlal Nehru had described soon after Independence as 'an organization which is in the nature of a private army and which is definitely proceeding on the *strictest Nazi lines*, even following the technique of organization.'¹⁵ He said, 'the whole *mentality of the R.S.S. is a fascist mentality*'¹⁶ Following Mahatma Gandhi's assassination, the RSS was banned and around 25,000 RSS activists were put in jail with Sardar Patel as home minister. However, once the ban was lifted and prisoners released, the RSS resumed its ideological offensive, the dangerous implications of which Jawaharlal Nehru repeatedly warned against. In his letters to the Chief Ministers of provinces, he said, 'the whole *mentality of the R.S.S. is a fascist mentality*. Therefore, their activities have to be closely watched.'¹⁷ In fact, the Italian scholar Marzia Casolari has very effectively demonstrated through extensive research into primary sources that the Hindu communal ideologues including those of the RSS were deeply influenced by and eulogized the fascist model of Italy and Germany and at least one of their major leaders, B S Moonje, travelled to Italy to study the fascist method and sought and got a meeting with Mussolini whom he greatly admired.¹⁸

However, claiming now only to be a 'cultural' organisation (as keeping out of politics was a condition of lifting the ban on the RSS), the RSS focused on spreading their divisive hate ideology through a network of educational institutions called the Saraswati Shishu Mandirs, the first of which was started in 1952 in the presence of the RSS Chief M.S. Golwalkar. (Howlers about the RSS chief's lack of knowledge of history and geography are legion, as he argued that the Aryans may have come from the North Pole but the North Pole was originally in India, in the region of today's Bihar and Orissa, and while the Aryans remained in India, the North Pole later zigzagged its way up to its current location!)¹⁹ The network multiplied exponentially over the years. By 1977 there were 500 RSS schools, 6,000 by 1993-4, and 14,000 by

¹³ Tirthankar Roy, *The Economic History of India: 1857–1947*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2000; 2nd edn, 2006.

¹⁴ Meghnad Desai, *Rediscovery of India*, New Delhi, 2011.

¹⁵ G. Parthasarathy, ed., *Jawaharlal Nehru, Letters to Chief Ministers, 1947–64*, (hereafter *LCM*), New Delhi, 1985, 7 December 1947, Vol.1, p.10, emphasis mine.

¹⁶ *LCM*, 1 August 1949, Vol.1, p.428, emphasis mine.

¹⁷ *LCM*, 1 August 1949, Vol.1, p.428, emphasis mine. See Mridula Mukherjee, 'Jawaharlal Nehru's Finest Hour? The Struggle for a Secular India', *Studies in People's History*, vol. 1, no. 2, December 2014 and Aditya Mukherjee, 'Inclusive Democracy and People's Empowerment: The Legacy of Jawaharlal Nehru', *EPW*, vol. 50, no. 16, 18 April 2015

¹⁸ Marzia Casolari, 'Hindutva's Foreign Tie-up in the 1930s', *EPW*, vol. 35, no. 4, 22 January 2000, and *In the Shadow of the Swastika: The Relationships Between Indian Radical Nationalism, Italian Fascism and Nazism*, Routledge, 2020.

¹⁹ M S Golwalkar, *We or Our Nationhood Defined*, Nagpur, 1947, first published in 1939, pp.11-13.

1999.²⁰ State power in several provinces such as in UP, Gujarat, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh as well as occasionally at the Centre was utilized to the hilt to spread this ideology beyond the RSS schools, to Government run institutions.

RSS school texts would teach 9 and 10 year old class IV and V children, about the rise of Islam:

the invaders came with a *sword in one hand and the Quran in the other*.

Wherever they went, ... their army went like a storm in all the four directions. Any country that came their way was destroyed. Houses of prayers and universities were destroyed. Libraries were burnt, religious books were destroyed. *Mothers and sisters were humiliated*. Mercy and justice were unknown to them.

(Never mind the fact that it was Hindu communalists who demolished the Babri Masjid, vandalized the Bhandarkar Library in Pune, and humiliated mothers and sisters in 2002 Gujarat.)

Other RSS publications would portray Christians as anti-national and a threat to the integrity of India:

It is because of the conspiratorial policies of the followers of this religion that India was *partitioned*. *Even today Christian missionaries are engaged in fostering anti-national tendencies* in Nagaland, Meghalaya, Arunachal, Bihar, Kerala, and other regions of our country because of which there is a grave danger to the integrity of present day India.

Hitler was eulogized in a Gujarat school textbook while in another the Kaaba in Mecca was described as a Shivalinga (a symbol of the Hindu God Shiva), the Qutab Minar, a prominent monument in Delhi built by Qutab-ud-din Aibak, Delhi's first Muslim ruler, in the thirteenth century, and his successors, as Vishnu Stambha built by Samudragupta, a Hindu emperor, in the fourth century CE, and so on.²¹ The spread of communal and factually wrong historical understanding was not limited to RSS schools.

In the RSS/ 'Hindutva' (Hindutva is the self-description by Hindu communalists of their ideology) lexicon, Muslims and Christians are foreigners in India with questionable loyalty to the country as, unlike the Hindus, their 'Holy Land' (*punya bhoomi*) lie outside India in Mecca or Palestine. Only the Hindus, according to them, truly constitute the Indian nation.²² (The ridiculousness of this definition of nationhood used rampantly to 'other' the Muslims and Christians in India and attempt to deny them full citizenship is obvious. By this definition, Christians in Europe, America or South Korea cannot claim to be full citizens of their respective nation states as their Holy Land is in Palestine!) More dangerously, parallels were drawn between the Hindus in India and the 'pure' Germans in Germany and the Muslim minority in India and the Jewish minority in Germany.²³

As the communal forces led by the RSS began to get close to state power, they followed in a textbook manner their colonial masters in trying to communalize society, including by launching an attack on secular scientific history. The first major attack came when the Janata Party was in power from 1977-79, as the Jana Sangh, the political/electoral wing of the RSS, had merged with the Janata Party that came to power in 1977. The NCERT textbooks written by the tallest of our scholars were sought to be banned. But at that time the institutions in India were still functioning with considerable

²⁰ See Pralay Kanungo, *RSS's Tryst with Politics: From Hedgewar to Sudarshan*, New Delhi, 2002 and Des Raj Goyal, *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*, New Delhi, 2000.

²¹ All information and quotations here are from a comprehensive report produced by the NCERT (before it was 'sanitised') and presented in 1993-94 to the National Steering Committee on Textbook Evaluation consisting of widely respected eminent scholars from all over the country. For a detailed discussion see Aditya Mukherjee, Mridula Mukherjee and Sucheta Mahajan, *RSS, School Texts and The Murder of Mahatma Gandhi: The Hindu Communal Project*, New Delhi, 2008.

²² Ibid.

²³ See for example RSS chief Golwalkar's views in M. S. Golwalkar, *We or Our Nationhood Defined*, Bharat Publications, Nagpur, 1947, 4th edition, pp. 43, 55-56 or V. D. Savarkar, Presidential Address, All India Hindu Mahasabha session, Nagpur, 1938, p.64.

independence and the effort was resisted strongly, from within the NCERT itself, in the media and universities across the country. The books survived.

Next time round, when the NDA came to power at the Centre in 1999, the communal BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party, the political arm of the RSS) was in the driving seat, unlike in 1977. Learning from the past experience, they removed key people from the syllabus committees, appointed pliant people to top administrative positions in the NCERT, UGC (University Grants Commission), ICSSR (Indian Council of Social Science Research) and the ICHR (Indian Council of Historical Research), before launching a frontal attack on secular scientific historians. On grounds of religious and community feelings being hurt, passages were sought to be deleted from NCERT textbooks written by R.S. Sharma, Romila Thapar, Bipan Chandra, Satish Chandra, etc. Notably, 41 passages which were sought to be removed had already been identified in a RSS publication, *The Enemies of Indianisation: The Children of Marx, Macaulay and Madarsa*, in which the newly appointed NCERT director J.S. Rajput himself had contributed an article. The secular scholars and those who defended them (which included the Indian History Congress, the most representative body of professional historians in the country, Nobel laureate Amartya Sen, President of India, K R Narayanan, editors of major newspapers, etc.)²⁴ were described as ‘anti-national’. The RSS chief, K. S. Sudershan, branded them as ‘anti-Hindu Euro-Indians’.²⁵ The alarming tendency of intimidating those who did not agree with the Hindutva (Hindu communal) version of history was evident when a group of self-appointed protectors of Indian nationalism collected at the house of Education Minister Murli Manohar Joshi and demanded the arrest of historians like Romila Thapar, R.S. Sharma and Arjun Dev. The Minister added fuel to this fascist tendency, branding the history written by these scholars as ‘*intellectual terrorism*’, which was ‘*more dangerous than cross border terrorism*’ that needed to be countered effectively!²⁶

The decade beginning 2004, when the Hindu communal forces were ousted from state power at the Centre, provided some reprieve from the communal onslaught. An opportunity the secular forces unfortunately failed to utilize fully to challenge on a war footing the rapid communalization of society done through the spread of a virulent, communal interpretation of history.

In 2014, the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party, the political arm of the RSS) came to power at the national level in a coalition government and the process of communalizing educational institutions got a boost. In 2019, the BJP got a majority on its own, and thus could function without any restraining influence of coalition partners. What was witnessed now was a concerted attack on secular, scientific history books. Once again a Report was brought out (June 2021) critiquing history textbooks by an organisation launched by top leaders of the RSS and BJP, the Public Policy Research Centre (PPRC). The report was ‘guided’ by Dr. Sumeet Bhasin, the Director of PPRC, who was also National Convenor of e-training cell of the BJP. A Rajya Sabha (Upper House) committee chaired by a major Hindutva ideologue began looking into allegations similar to the ones made in the above Report. Acting in tandem, the University Grants Commission (UGC), which oversees higher education in India, dutifully produced a curriculum framework for the BA in History (from Ancient to Contemporary) without any reference to the large body of very distinguished specialists in the subject available in the country and merely pushed the communal ‘ideological offensive’ favoured by the ruling regime. Prof. Irfan Habib, one of the tallest historians India has produced since independence, has written a detailed critique showing how the curriculum is ‘not only intended to present a false, patently communalized caricature of Indian history but is qualitatively

²⁴ See Mridula Mukherjee and Aditya Mukherjee, ed., *Communalisation of Education: The History Textbooks Controversy*, Delhi Historians’ Group, New Delhi, 2002, which compiled the views of large number eminent citizens, see also Aditya Mukherjee, et.al., *RSS School Texts...*

²⁵ RSS mouthpiece *Organiser*, 4 November 2001.

²⁶ *Hindustan Times*, 8 December 2001 and *Indian Express*, 20 December 2001.

also a patently incompetent, unacademic exercise.²⁷ A history is now being promoted where they forget to even mention the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of the Nation, by a Hindu communalist, leave alone analyse who did it and why,²⁸ where Jawaharlal Nehru does not even find a mention among the leaders of the Indian National Movement in a text on the freedom struggle,²⁹ his 30 years of struggle against British colonialism with 9 years in British jails goes in vain. When Nehru does find a mention he is demonised, held responsible for every conceivable ill that has befallen this country, and at the popular level it is explained as being due to his (imagined) hidden Muslim ancestry! A BJP leader, as reported in a RSS journal, even rued the fact that Godse, the assassin who killed Gandhi, did not shoot Nehru.³⁰

The ideological offensive has now gone way beyond a distorted interpretation of history in the academic sphere. It is now aimed at creating in the public mind, through relentless propaganda, a totally false notion of pride in a mythic past with which only the majority community is identified, simultaneously with the promotion of victimhood and fear among the same majority community which is shown to be threatened by the minority community. A classical recipe used by fascist regimes globally, as shown brilliantly by the Jason Stanley, a philosopher from Yale university.³¹

Some examples may be in order. The current Prime Minister, a few months after he assumed office, in October 2014, while inaugurating a new modern hospital in Mumbai (earlier Bombay), mixing up mythology about Gods and Goddesses with history told an audience which included India's top doctors, actors and business leaders, how in Ancient India we knew plastic surgery. He reportedly said, 'We worship Lord Ganesha. There must have been some plastic surgeon at that time who got an elephant's body on the head of a human being and began the practice of plastic surgery'.³² The Governor of Bengal, while inaugurating a Science and Engineering fair, doing violence to both science and history, informs you that Arjuna, a major figure in the epic Mahabharat, had Nuclear powered arrows.³³ The RSS chief (*sarsangchalak*) K S Sudershan, an engineer by training, tells us about how Sage Bharadwaja and Raja Bhoj in times gone by not only 'described the construction of aeroplanes' but discussed 'details like what types of aeroplanes would fly at what height, what kind of problems they might encounter, how to overcome those problems, etc.'³⁴

Despite such 'great achievements' in the past, the 'Hindus' today are said to face a great threat. They are regularly reminded of what atrocities 'Muslims' allegedly committed in the past. A very popular story doing the rounds of villages

²⁷ <https://www.newsclick.in/UGC-Framework-Communalised-Caricature-Indian-History-Irfan-Habib>, accessed on 19 August 2021. See also *Social Scientist*, March 2021.

²⁸ See Irfan Habib, Suvira Jaiswal and Aditya Mukherjee, *History in the New NCERT Textbooks: A Report and an Index of Errors*, Approved and Published by the Executive Committee, Indian History Congress, Kolkata, 2003

²⁹ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/jawaharlal-nehru-name-removed-from-class-viii-and-xi-textbooks-in-rajasthan/articleshow/52178862.cms> and https://www.business-standard.com/article/politics/jawaharlal-nehru-s-name-removed-from-rajasthan-textbook-state-minister-denies-deliberate-omission-116050800521_1.html Accessed on 17 August 2021.,

³⁰ <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/godse-should-have-targeted-nehru-says-rss-mouthpiece/> Accessed on 17 August 2021

³¹ Jason Stanley, *How Fascism Works: the Politics of Us and Them*, Random House, New York, 2018.

³² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/28/indian-prime-minister-genetic-science-existed-ancient-times> accessed on 19 August 2021.

³³ <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/arjuna-s-arrows-had-nuclear-power-chariots-flew-says-bengal-governor-dhankhar-draws-flak/story-M185xVdJlP8JbzTsSDRkOJ.html> accessed on 19 August 2021.

³⁴ See the RSS mouthpiece *Organiser*, 4 November 2001.

in Haryana, a few kilometers from the national capital, which I have been personally told many times the moment I revealed that I teach history, was that the Moghul emperor, Aurangzeb could not sleep every night until a huge mound of the 'sacred thread' worn by upper caste Hindus was shown to him, implying that so many Hindus were killed or converted. The BJP dutifully showed its great valour in removing his name from a road in New Delhi that was named after him with much fanfare. The Home Minister, warns you of the Bangladeshi Muslim infiltrators, the *Ghospethias*, who like termites have spread out all over, and are threatening the integrity of the country.³⁵ The fear of a pan-Islamic threat is stoked, i.e., Muslims of the world will join hands against the Hindus, rendering their preponderant majority useless. On top of all this, totally contrary to every study on the subject, it is said that the Muslims in India, through a deliberate strategy, using the legal acceptance of polygamy in their community, are rapidly increasing their numbers and shall soon catch up with the majority.³⁶ To combat this, a law is being proposed in Uttar Pradesh, the largest Indian province, titled the UP Population Control Bill, to punish those with large families, who are generally the poor. Using another common practice of fascist regimes, the stoking of sexual anxiety, fear is created among the majority community that their unsuspecting innocent women are being lured away by Muslims in order to convert them and much worse. This is called 'Love Jihad', to protect against which BJP-ruled provinces have actually enacted stringent laws. And the laws, like the anti-sedition law or the UAPA (Unlawful Activities Prevention Act) are implemented in a manner that the minority community appear to be the chief culprits!

Public attacks and even lynchings of members of the minority community have increased rapidly in recent years, with the state machinery looking away if not encouraging it. The US State Department in its annual report for 2021 to the Congress on international religious freedom noted that in India 'attacks on members of religious minority communities, including killings, assaults, and intimidation, occurred throughout the year.'³⁷

A 16th century mosque, the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya was destroyed in 1992 by the storm troopers of the religious communal right wing based on the claim that the Hindu god Rama (the ancient epic Ramayana was written based on him) was born exactly where the mosque was built after demolishing a temple there and a historical wrong was thus avenged.³⁸ A grand Ram temple is being built there now, inaugurated by Prime Minister Modi in 2021. Disregarding the Places of Worship Act passed by the Indian parliament in 1991 which prohibits conversion of any place of worship and provides for the maintenance of the religious character of any place of worship as it existed on 15 August 1947, claims similar to Ayodhya are being made about Lord Krishna's birthplace (the Ancient epic Mahabharata tells the story of Krishna) being next to where the Shahi Idgah Mosque is built in Mathura. The latest is the claim that the Gyanvapi Mosque in Benaras was built by demolishing part of the Kashi Vishwanath temple, that it houses Hindu deities and that a fountain outside the mosque used for ablutions is actually a *Shiva Linga* (a sign of the God Shiva) worshipped by many Hindus.³⁹ Demands are appearing that these historical wrongs must be corrected. It is claimed that this correction of historical wrongs involves thousands of mosques built by demolishing temples, and that it is necessary for Hindu pride and to heal the deep wounds

³⁵ <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/amit-shahs-termite-remark-we-dont-give-importance-to-him-says-bangladesh-minister/317063> Accessed on 19 August 2021.

³⁶ A timely book on the subject is by former election commissioner S Y Quraishi, *The Population Myth: Islam, family Planning and Politics in India*, New Delhi, 2021.

³⁷ <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/india/> Accessed on 4 June 2022

³⁸ For a comprehensive discussion of the subject, see Sarvepalli Gopal, ed., *Anatomy of a Confrontation, The Babri Masjid-Ram Janmabhumi Issue*, New Delhi, 1991

³⁹ See 'Understanding the Gyanvapi Mosque case: What does the places of worship Act say' *The Wire*, 18 May 2022, <https://thewire.in/law/understanding-the-gyanvapi-mosque-dispute-what-does-the-places-of-worship-act-say> and *India Today*, 15 May 2022 <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/controversy-gyanvapi-mosque-all-you-need-to-know-1949692-2022-05-15> accessed on 4 June 2022.

caused to the Hindu psyche. Ignored is the fact that for many, many generations Hindus and Muslims have remained amicably and peacefully in Ayodhya, Mathura and Kashi, offering prayers, often in each other's religious places, which in some cases existed cheek by jowl, sharing common boundaries.

Imagined hurt and memories of trauma are drummed up, as they were in the case of the Somanatha temple under colonial prompting as discussed above, in an attempt to polarize society so that a majoritarian political order can be created. Prominent BJP leaders now talk in the language of 80 versus 20 (referring to the percentage of the Hindu and Muslim population) in order to mobilise the 'Hindu' vote.

History is distorted and even falsified in order to deny the common heritage and create an anti-Muslim sentiment. Some of the greatest achievements that occurred under Moghul Rule, for example the building of the Taj Mahal by emperor Shahjahan, on which an enormous body of source material and scholarly work exists, are made into controversial issues. It is being claimed that a temple existed under the Taj or that it was not the Taj Mahal at all but a Tejo Mahal built by a Hindu king. The origins of the Taj Mahal controversy go back at least to the 1960s when a maverick named Purshotam Nagesh Oak made this claim; he also argued Hindu greatness by saying Christianity was actually Krishna Niti (Principle of Lord Krishna) and the Vatican was a Vatika (Hindu hermitage) and the Kaaba was a Shiva Linga, etc. For decades, these claims were treated as the handiwork of the lunatic fringe. However, this fringe now occupies mainstream space and critics are brushed off and ridiculed as anti-nationals creating a 'Left-Secular' mythology which supposedly does not respect Hindu sentiment and appeases the Muslim and other minorities.

The reputed journal, *The Economist* reported that 'Hindu-nationalist (read communalist) ... speakers at public rallies across northern India in recent years have launched bidding wars of threats against Muslims, from mass rape to mass expulsion. On May 7th, Haribhushan Thakur Bachaul, a BJP politician in Bihar, in eastern India, declared that Muslims should be burned alive just like effigies of the Hindu demon Ravana.'⁴⁰ Hindu religious leaders linked with the 'Hindutva' movement without any fear of state intervention have been repeatedly talking of arming the Hindus and committing genocide of the Muslims.⁴¹ As the *Economist* reported, 'Following a mini-riot in Delhi on April 16th (2022), provoked once again by sword waving youths (ostensibly leading a Hindu religious procession) menacing a mosque, Kapil Mishra, a local BJP leader, quickly spun the events as a Muslim conspiracy. 'They should be identified and their homes should be bulldozed,' he declared. A few hours later bulldozers duly rolled in, smashing Muslim property for alleged building-code violations.'⁴² The bulldozer appears to have become the frightening imagery as well as the reality of punishing the minorities.

The relentless process of using traumatic events, real or imagined, from history in order to weaponise history to create a polarization between the overwhelming religious majority and one of the world's largest minorities for political advantage is playing with fire. (The Muslims in India number approximately 200 million, Christians 35 million and Sikhs 25 million). It has the potential of leading to a civil war like situation. It not only threatens to destroy the democratic structure but threatens the very survival of the nation. It must be remembered that nation-making is a historical process: it is not a pre-ordained fixed, given event. A process can always be reversed. One does not have to go back too much in history to see such reversals, the dismemberment of Yugoslavia in the 1990s and closer home that of Pakistan in 1971 are two good examples. As has been pointed out very well recently, the weaponising of the 'memory' of a 14th century battle where Muslim Turks defeated Christian Serbs to create the 'memory' of humiliation led to the terrible massacre of 8000 Bosniak Muslims in 1995, in Srebrenica, a part of Yugoslavia where the Christians and the Muslims had been living

⁴⁰ *The Economist*, 14 May 2022.

⁴¹ See for example 'In India, calls for Muslim Genocide Grow louder. Modi's silence is an endorsement', *Washington Post*, 29 December 2021, CNN 14 January 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/01/14/asia/india-hindu-extremist-groups-intlhnkdst/index.html> accessed on 4 June 2022, *The New York Times*, 8 February 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/08/world/asia/india-hate-speech-muslims.html> accessed on 4 June 2022.

⁴² *The Economist*, 14 May 2022.

together peacefully.⁴³ Weaponising the memory of so called ‘Muslim Tyranny’ will lead India towards the same denouement as Yugoslavia.

The Italian scholar, *Michelguglielmo Torri*, has brilliantly outlined the rapid growth in recent years of the forces trying to transform India’s secular democracy into a Hindu State (*Rashtra*) and the repressive authoritarian manner in which it is being done, leading to a situation where he says India can no longer be called a full democracy.⁴⁴ In fact, international bodies such as the V-Dem Institute of Sweden, the US-based Freedom House, or *The Economist*’s EIU (Economist Intelligence Unit) Democracy Index are no longer accepting India as a full democracy. ‘A democratic backsliding’ is said to be occurring and India is being variously described as ‘a partially free democracy’, ‘a flawed democracy’ or even ‘an electoral autocracy’. The downgrading was based on the current regime promoting anti-minority feeling and legislation, the violation of human rights with ‘the diminishing of freedom of expression, the media and civil society hav(ing) gone the furthest’.⁴⁵

Though the distortion of history and the rapid manufacturing of untruths in the name of history for purposes totally destructive of the survival of India as a constitutional democracy are occurring today at a menacing pace, the resistance to these efforts appears to have got progressively more and more muted rather than becoming stronger! In 1999-2005 it was stronger and in 1977-79 even stronger. This is worrisome. Perhaps it is a reflection of the gradual erosion of institutions, which were supposed to be independent, that we have all permitted to happen. The judiciary, the police, the media, bodies controlling the education system are increasingly standing by if not actually collaborating in the process of the withering away of our democracy. The universities have been silenced, often brutally. A culture of fear and opportunism pervades where people hesitate to voice any dissent. This kind of assault on history cannot be met only by writing better history but requires a massive political intervention at a societal level. Our political opposition, for fear of losing the vote of the already communalized majority by and large, treads softly in protesting against the fundamental rights guaranteed by our constitution being brazenly snatched away from the minorities, including the right to citizenship, right not to being lynched or being killed in police custody.

Gone are the days of Gandhi and Nehru who staked their life to protect the minorities in India. It no longer looks like the country our freedom fighters fought for and created. The values of the national movement enshrined in our Constitution are being violated wantonly.

Yet all is not lost. Our youth and our women all over the country demonstrated their capacity to resist during the countrywide agitation against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in 2019 which clearly targeted the citizenship rights of the minorities. The protestors significantly, used the democratic Constitution of India as their Bible and held aloft portraits of Gandhi, Bhagat Singh, Nehru and Ambedkar! It was brutally put down using the COVID situation and instigating communal riots. Our farmers and peasants again demonstrated, as they did during our national liberation struggle, their capacity to resist the farm laws brought in by the government in 2020, for months on end despite untold suffering being inflicted on them and efforts to give a communal colour to their protests, till victory was achieved in the repealing of the laws. Numerous civil society initiatives all over the country, like the Constitutional Conduct Group consisting of a large number of very senior and respected former civil servants, diplomats and former heads of the different wings of the armed forces continue to strongly critique the government for straying from the democratic path guaranteed by the Constitution. Independent media portals, some newspapers, individual journalists, bodies of intellectuals, writers, actors, stand-up comedians, musicians, historians, human rights activists, continue to resist despite facing severe repression by the state machinery.

⁴³ Asim Ali, ‘Weaponising Memory: Will India go Yugoslavia Way’, *The Telegraph*, 28 May 2022.

⁴⁴ *Michelguglielmo Torri*, ‘India 2020: The deepening crisis of democracy,’ *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXXI, 2020.

⁴⁵ All the citations in this para are from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-56393944> and <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/toi-edit-page/a-more-nuanced-democracy-there-is-no-need-for-it-to-be-only-what-the-west-says-it-must-be/> accessed on 28 October 2021 at 10.08 pm.

