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The Violence of Historical Revisionism in Hindutva

Radhika Gupta

A few months after India won its independence from British colonial rule in 1947, the leader of its anti-colonial movement, also known as the ‘father of the nation’, Mahatma Gandhi was shot dead. His assassin was a Brahmin (upper caste) man called Nathuram Vinayak Godse. In Godse’s perception, ‘every action of Gandhiji was pro-Muslim and anti-Hindu’ allegedly for supporting the partition of India and the creation of the Muslim-majority Pakistan.¹ Horrified by the violence that accompanied the displacements of partition, Gandhi had subsequently gone on a hunger-strike, calling for peace and tolerance in keeping with his philosophy of *ahimsa* (non-violence), further angering Godse. Following Gandhi’s assassination, Godse was hung in 1949. Nathuram Godse was a member of the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS) (or National self-help organisation). Founded in 1925, the RSS is a right-wing Hindu nationalist organisation with decentralised branches in India and abroad among the Hindu-right diaspora. Godse is said to have been close to one of the foremost ideologues of Hindutva, V.D Savarkar. In a 1923 pamphlet, ‘Hindutva: Who is a Hindu’, Savarkar defined a Hindu as a person who regards Hindustan as his fatherland (*pitrabhumi*) and holy land (*punyabhumi*). In this conceptualisation, Hinduism is seen as a derivative of Hindutva. Historian Romila Thapar contends that this definition of a Hindu is not given in any ancient text.² By collapsing the distinction between Hinduism and Hindutva, all those who do not subscribe to this ideology are deemed to be traitors of the imagined Hindu nation. The second RSS chief, M.S Golwalkar further laid out the idea of a Hindu nation in the 1939 pamphlet ‘We or our nationhood defined’.³ Known to be a Nazi sympathizer, Golwalkar defined a nation as being composed of a fusion of ‘five unities’ – of geography, race, religion, culture, and language – resembling Hitler’s ‘five

¹ N. Godse, *Why I assassinated Mahatma Gandhi: Nathuram Godse* (India 2020) 11.

² R. Thapar, ‘Hindutva is not the same as Hinduism’, Interview with Jipson John and Jitheesh P.M, (Frontline Magazine, 7 May, 2021). <https://frontline.thehindu.com/the-nation/interview-romila-thapar-historian-hindutva-not-the-same-as-hinduism/article34360442.ece>, accessed on 13 November 2022.

³ M.S Golwalkar, *We or our nationhood defined* (Nagpur 1939) 60.

unity theory'. He clearly articulated the idea of India as a Hindu *rashtra* (state) and deemed those of a different race, religion, or culture as foreign to the nation. To put it simply, Hindutva is an *ideology* that constructs a history of India as an eternal and primordial Hindu nation. It is an ideology 'that advocates Hindu supremacy, especially over Muslims'.⁴ The writings of Savarkar and Golwalkar — even though the latter's text was later disavowed by the RSS — have become a template for the fulfilment of India's destiny to be a Hindu state as envisioned by the Hindu nationalist party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), that has been in power since 2014. During its reign everyday violence against minorities, and against Muslims in particular, has escalated.

Even though the RSS was banned for a brief while in the aftermath of Gandhi's assassination, it continued to strengthen its presence in India through a network of branches (*shakhas*) at the grassroots level. As Lalit Vachani's film, 'The Boy in the Branch' shows, these local *shakhas* were spaces for young boys to simply have fun under the guise of which they were physically trained to be men for a strong and militant Hindu nation and indoctrinated with RSS ideology.⁵ For many decades, the RSS posed as 'an *apolitical* civic organisation'.⁶ However, between the 1960s and 1980s, 'a cluster of openly violent cadre-based organisations' were formed that are affiliated to the RSS but operate semi-autonomously.⁷ Together known as the *Sangh Parivar* (the Sangh family), these include the *Vishva Hindu Parishad* (VHP; World Hindu Council) that works among the Hindu diaspora and its youth wing, the *Bajrang Dal*. The often invisible sprawl of Hindutva organisations both within India and abroad attests to the mobilizational work that has gone into making Hindutva the dominant ideology of contemporary India. The production and dissemination of revisionist histories through a variety of media ranging from audio and video cassettes in the 1980s to

⁴ A. Truschke, 'Hindutva's dangerous rewriting of history', *Samaj: South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* 24/25 (2020) 1-15: 1. <https://journals.openedition.org/samaj/6636>.

⁵ L. Vachani, 'The Boy and the Branch'. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H777tU7-uvk>.

⁶ S. Banaji, 'Vigilante Publics: Orientalism, modernity and Hindutva fascism in India', *Javost – The Public* 25:4 (2018) 333-350: 335.

⁷ *Ibidem*, 336.

WhatsApp forwards in the current age as well as quasi-academic work addressing the more intellectually minded has been crucial in this mobilization with ‘deep implications for both the popular and academic understandings of Indian history’.⁸ This essay focuses on how the discursive violence of Hindutva revisionist history manifests in socio-political violence against Muslims in everyday life in contemporary India.

As the leading historian of ancient India, Romila Thapar, has pointed out, Hindu nationalists have peddled myths and called them history in order to legitimise their ideology.⁹ Or as Janaki Bakhle writes of Savarkar, in her close reading of his text, ‘Essentials of Hindutva’: ‘He recognized that nationalism did not need history; myths could provide an easy substitute for history’.¹⁰ Hindutva proponents claim that Hindu texts such as the Puranas, Mahabharata and Ramayana are ‘true historical records’ that do not require further interpretation. This is an oxymoronic proposition given the existence of multiple versions of these mythical texts and debates on the period of composition of some of the earliest versions. As Thapar writes:

Each century produced different versions of the epic stories, some with significant variations. However, to write the history of India through a literal reading of the epics and the Puranas has so many inherent tendencies that, if it is to be pursued true to the original, it will undermine historical and social science research in India.¹¹

Hindu nationalist constructions of history are thus disengaged from global historiographical consensus that there is no singular truth about the past. To quote Thapar again, it is ‘politics masquerading as history’.¹² In the next sections, I will outline some examples of this historical revisionism and relate

⁸ Truschke, ‘Hindutva’s dangerous rewriting of history’, 2.

⁹ R. Thapar, ‘They peddle myths and call it history’, 17 May 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/17/opinion/india-elections-modi-history.html>, accessed 30 October 2022.

¹⁰ J. Bakhle, ‘Country First?: Vinayak Damodar Savarkar and the writing of *Essentials of Hindutva*’, *Public Culture* 22 (2010) 149-186: 166.

¹¹ R. Thapar, ‘Fallacies of Hindutva Historiography’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 3 January (2015).

¹² R. Thapar, ‘Politics: politics and the re-writing of history in India’, *Critical Quarterly*, 1-2 (2005) 195-203: 198.

them to the visible and invisible forms of violence that are not only condoned but have acquired widespread legitimacy among the Hindu right in India and abroad.

A Golden Age of Vedic India

Hindutva invention of a 'deeper Indian past' denies historical change.¹³ It attempts to construct a primordial Hindu identity. It contends that Hindus are descended from the Aryans and claim that the Aryans were indigenous to the territory of the Indian subcontinent. This notion of Hindu indigeneity is constructed by re-writing the history of Aryan migration.¹⁴ It inverts the well-established Aryan Migration Theory which posits that Central Asian pastoralist groups who called themselves Aryan and revered the ancient Vedic texts migrated to the Indian subcontinent around 3,500 years ago.¹⁵ Hindu nationalist 'historians' argue that 'Sanskrit-speaking Aryans originated in India and from there travelled to the rest of the world'.¹⁶ Hindu culture is made synonymous with Vedic culture and claims superiority over all others grounded in ideas of racial and ethnic purity. Accredited mainstream historians have contested these claims and argue that 'To equate Hindu with Aryan and make Aryan the definition of Indian culture deliberately excludes the non-Aryan elements that were historically substantial' and are also reflected in the Vedic corpus.¹⁷ This pure ancient Hindu past or the Vedic Age for Hindu nationalists was a Hindu golden age. The kernels of all modern scientific progress can be found, they argue, in the Vedas. To give one example, the nuclear tests commissioned under the BJP-led coalition government in 1998 were 'celebrated by Hindu nationalist activists as a return to a golden age of Vedic missile power'.¹⁸ Claims of scientific progress in this Vedic golden age have become mainstream enough to find a space in

¹³ Truschke, 'Hindutva's dangerous rewriting of history', 3.

¹⁴ Thapar, 'They Peddle Myth and call it history'. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/17/opinion/india-elections-modi-history.html>, accessed on 30 October, 2022.

¹⁵ Truschke, 'Hindutva's dangerous rewriting of history', 4-5.

¹⁶ Ibidem, 5.

¹⁷ Thapar, 'Politics: politics and the re-writing of history in India', 200.

¹⁸ A. Rajagopal, *Politics after Television: Hindu Nationalism and the reshaping of the public in India* (Cambridge University Press, 2001) 280.

scientific conferences such as the Indian Science Congress, where a story of a woman giving birth to a hundred children ‘was cited as evidence that India's ancient Hindu civilization had developed advanced reproductive technologies.’¹⁹ While such pseudo-scientific assertions have been ridiculed by scientists in the country, the promotion of a so-called ‘indigenous science’ by the state and Hindu-right organisations can have dangerous consequences. The circulation of the promotion of cow urine and cow dung as a preventive therapy during the COVID-19 pandemic or as a cure for cancer, for instance, was deemed to pose significant health risks by medical professionals.²⁰ This is but one example of a form of invisible political violence. It is not easily apprehensible to a general public as it does not involve immediate and visible physical harm. The production and popularization of pseudo-knowledge systems is also a form of epistemic violence beyond the grasp of a lay public that is constantly bombarded with propaganda through multiple media.

The propagation of a Hindu golden age has also manifested in visible violence against minority communities, especially Muslims. The Hindu golden age is made to coincide with the pre-Islamic period of Indian history from 1000 B.C to 1200 A.D. For the Hindu-right, contemporary India is seen as having degenerated from the Hindu golden age. A large part of the blame for this decline is placed on Muslim invasions of the Indian subcontinent, which are said to have crushed Hindu civilization and culture and halted scientific progress. The denigration of the lands of Hindus by Savarkar is dated to Mahmud of Ghazni’s invasion in 1001 A.D. with which he depicts ‘Islam as a world historical force colliding with nations’ to subsequent specific attacks on India by ‘a multitude of Muslim ethnic groups’.²¹ A narrative is thus spun in Hindutva discourse of Hindu victimisation at the hands of

¹⁹ S. Kumar, ‘Hindu nationalists claim that ancient Indians had airplanes, stem cell technology, and the internet’. <https://www.science.org/content/article/hindu-nationalists-claim-ancient-indians-had-airplanes-stem-cell-technology-and-article/hindu-nationalists-claim-ancient-indians-had-airplanes-stem-cell-technology-and>, accessed on 30 October, 2022.

²⁰ S. Daria and M. R. Islam, ‘The Use of Cow Dung and Cow Urine to Cure Covid 19 in India: A Public Health concern.’ *Int J Health Plann Manage* 2021 Sep; 36(5): 1950–1952. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8239506/>, accessed 30 October, 2022. For an example of this “medical” peddling, see for example: <https://www.cowurine.com/en/science/>, accessed on 14 January 2023.

²¹ Bakhle, ‘Country First?’, 168.

Muslim oppressors to assert that the demand for a Hindu state is to avenge this perceived victimisation.²² In the popular Hindu right consciousness in contemporary India, the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb (1658-1707) has become a synecdoche of the Muslim depredation of India. His alleged bigotry and destruction of Hindu temples has moulded a factually unsubstantiated and generalised argument that Muslim dynasties not only crushed Hindu political power and other predecessors who, in contrast to them, ‘embraced Hindu sects’²³ but also tried to destroy Hindu religion. Historians have contested this narrative and argue that the second millennium A.D. was in fact an era of ‘considerable inter-mixing of people, religious beliefs and forms of worship’.²⁴ At a time when the ‘populist anti-intellectualism’ inaugurated by Savarkar²⁵ is soon to reach its zenith, such scholarly debates are dismissed as the work of anti-national ‘communists’. Not only is India witnessing the destruction of any intellectual space that does not conform to majoritarian views, Hindutva narratives are also being inscribed on cityscapes: thus, Muslim names of cities such as Allahabad have been changed to Prayagraj, etymologically traced to Prayag, a settlement of the Aryans, buttressed by references to Hindu mythology.²⁶

²² Thapar, ‘They Peddle Myth and call it history’. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/17/opinion/india-elections-modi-history.html>, accessed 28 October 2022.

²³ T. Sarkar, ‘History as Patriotism: Lessons from India’, *Journal of Genocide Research* 24 2 (2022) 171-181: 173.

²⁴ J. Jipson and P.M. Jitheesh, ‘Interview: Romila Thapar. Hindutva is not the same as Hinduism’. <https://frontline.thehindu.com/the-nation/interview-romila-thapar-historian-hindutva-not-the-same-as-hinduism/article3436044> 2.ece, accessed on 28 October, 2022.

²⁵ Bakhle, ‘Country First?’, 176.

²⁶ ‘History’. <https://prayagraj.nic.in/history/#:~:text=The%20Chinese%20traveler%20Huan%20Tsang,strategic%20importance%20of%20the%20SANGAM>, accessed on 30 October, 2022.

Cow vigilante violence

The continual harkening to a mythic golden Hindu age has also translated into everyday violence against Muslims in India. One of the starkest examples of this is cow protection vigilante violence. Although coercion and violence against minorities has historical precedents, incidents of lynching Muslims and Dalits (previously known as ‘untouchables’) suspected of slaughtering cows and carrying or consuming cow meat (beef) have surged since the BJP came into power in 2014. Indian Muslims in particular have for long been treated as enemies of the cow and by extension of the nation. Many Hindus believe the cow is sacred for she is considered to be a symbol of universal nourishment. The history of cow protection can be traced back to the late nineteenth century to the ideas of Swami Dayanand Saraswati, the founder of the Hindu reformist organisation, the Arya Samaj. During the anti-colonial period, the cow ‘became a charged sectarian emblem of the Hindu nation’, a symbol of the ‘proto nation’ among Hindu religious nationalists.²⁷ Despite the proclamation of India as a secular state after independence, the cow as a symbol of ‘Mother India’ became an ubiquitous allegory. In popular culture, this became visible, for instance, in the genre of calendar art that sought to visualize the nation through the epithet ‘unity in diversity’ to celebrate India as a multi-religious country. In one such image, that is meant to bring together ‘persons of all religions in the constitution of the nation’, the milk from the udders of *Gau mata* (Mother cow) or *Jagat mata* (universal mother) is depicted as nourishing men from different religious communities distinguished by sartorial symbols and their respective places of worship.²⁸ Historically, the proponents of cow protection overwhelmingly came from the higher castes who are now the backbone of Hindutva. Petitions for a legislative ban on cow slaughter in colonial North India at the turn of the twentieth century were motivated by economic arguments in a pragmatic language of religion.²⁹

²⁷ H. Insaf, ‘Indian calendar art: the popular picture story’ (2012), accessed on 14 January 2023.

²⁸ P. Uberoi. “‘Unity in Diversity’? Dilemmas of nationhood in Indian calendar art”, *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (n.s), 36:1-2 (2002) 192-232: 211.

²⁹ C. Adcock, ‘Sacred cows and secular history: Cow protection debates in colonial north India’, *Comparative Studies in South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 30:2 (2010) 297-311.

Under the reign of Hindutva, however, economic motivations have been eclipsed by a narrative of offense to Hindu sentiments. So much so that upper-caste vegetarian practices in some parts of India have come to stand in for Hinduism in popular western imagination. Since the BJP came to power in 2014, several provinces in India have passed legislation banning cattle slaughter and the possession or consumption of beef. This has emboldened self-styled ‘cow protectors’ from the majority Hindu community to attack Muslims and Dalits with a degree of impunity.³⁰ Although not directly referenced as such, it is worth noting that systems of justice enshrined in Hindu texts, such as the *Manusmriti*, that sanctioned flogging and caning of the bodies of those perceived to commit offensive acts were endorsed by Hindu revivalists such as Dayananda Sarawati.³¹

Even though framing ‘the politics of cow protection in exclusively religious terms [...] can also rebound on religious minorities in detrimental terms’³², cow vigilante violence is one manifestation of a broader patronage of a ‘vigilante public’³³ by the ruling regime, allowing it to evade moral culpability. In recent times, right wing Hindu mobs have also taken out processions in Muslim neighbourhoods during Hindu festivals armed with sticks and swords, making hate speeches to the chants of ‘Jai Sri Ram’ (Hail Lord Ram), attacking their properties, and threatening genocide.³⁴ Such practices of aggressive harassment to remind Muslims that they do not belong to India are indelibly reflected in the destruction of Muslim places of worship. The destruction of the Babri *masjid* (mosque) has become iconic of this majoritarian violence.

³⁰ C. Adcock, ‘Cow protection and minority rights in India: Reassessing religious freedom’, *Asian Affairs* 49:2 (2018) 340-354.

³¹ J. Sharma. *Hindutva: Exploring the Idea of Hindu Nationalism* (New Delhi 2011) 46.

³² Adcock, ‘Cow protection and minority rights in India’, 342.

³³ Banaji, ‘Vigilante Publics’.

³⁴ ‘Muslims see wave of attacks, hate speech on Hindu festival’.

<https://www.genocidewatch.com/single-post/muslims-see-wave-of-attacks-hate-speech-on-hindu-festival>, accessed on 5 November, 2022.

Mythic time and mosque destruction

Until the 1980s, the BJP was not a prominent political party at the national level; in 1984 it had only two seats in the national parliament. So how did it grow to become such a formidable force in politics in two decades? The party embarked on a massive campaign of ethno-religious mobilization. In 1990, a stalwart of the party, Lal Krishna Advani, embarked on a politico-religious rally called the *Rath Yatra* (chariot festival) in a vehicle styled as the chariot of the mythical king Lord Ram, a heroic figure in popular renditions of the Hindu epic, Ramayana. Starting from Somnath – that has been made iconic of temple destruction wrought by ‘Muslim invaders’ – it wound its way through central and northern India (also popularly referred to as the ‘cow belt’) to end at another symbolic site, the city of Ayodhya. It is considered to be a holy place by Hindus for many believe it is the birthplace of Ram. This mobilization culminated in the *Ram Janambhoomi* movement to reclaim the alleged site of Lord Ram’s birth from Muslim encroachment. Some right-wing Hindu groups, with the backing of the Sangh Parivar, claimed that the sixteenth-century Babri masjid (mosque) was built by the Mughal emperor Babar by razing a temple that marked the birth-site of Ram.³⁵ Even prior to this rally *kar sevaks* (volunteers) had started transporting bricks to Ayodhya, demanding the construction of a new temple on the site of the Babri mosque. The dispute around the Babri masjid dates back to 1949 after the partition of India when radical Hindus had broken into the mosque and placed an idol inside it, staking claim to the site. However, to forestall communal violence, the ruling Congress party that had been at the helm of the anti-colonial movement closed the mosque. Decades of litigation followed between Hindu petitioners and the Sunni Muslim *waqf* board.³⁶ Two years after the *Rath Yatra*, on 6 December 1992, an organised mob of thousands of militant Hindus destroyed the mosque. In the wake of this, many parts of the country became engulfed in some of the worst communal (Hindu-Muslim) riots that

³⁵ S. Gurusurthy, ‘The Ram Temple Movement, a mass initiative for reinstatement of Hindutva in Secular India’.

<https://library.bjp.org/jspui/bitstream/123456789/268/1/Culture%20-%20The%20Ram%20Temple%20Movement.pdf>, accessed 7 November, 2022.

³⁶ Waqf are endowments in perpetuity offered by individual Muslims or families. All endowments come under the regulations of the Waqf Board.

Independent India had witnessed. In the words of a Hindutva proponent, the Ayodhya movement helped to ‘recapture and reinstate the Indian identity in Indian polity’, echoing the ideas of Savarkar and Golwalkar. Yet as the testimonies of several Hindu residents of Ayodhya in Anand Patwardhan’s powerful 1991 film, *Ram ke Naam* (In the name of God) show, not all Hindus living in the city wanted a temple to be constructed on the land on which the Babri masjid stood.³⁷

The mobilisation of Hindu sentiments around Babri masjid again deployed Hindutva revisionist history. This is a ‘mode of history writing’ that negates academic standards of history writing. Gyanendra Pandey points to five salient points that enable this history to appear as a fact and thereby convincing to a general public³⁸: 1) A shift from metaphor to literalism. Ayodhya and Ram are treated as literal fact rather than mythical metaphor. 2) Positivist methodology that produces facts using numbers, dates, and geographical locations that cannot be verified. The destruction of the Babri masjid is slotted into a constructed chronology of ‘foreign’ aggression and native valour, detailing some 79 unverifiable battles for the liberation of Ram’s birthplace. 3) There is a complete absence of tentativeness and uncertainty that marks any reliable history writing. 4) It reproduces ahistorical colonial representations of the Indian subcontinent as marked by perennial Hindu-Muslim conflict based on Hindus and Muslims as fully constituted entities from time immemorial. 5) The revisionist history constructs a circular narrative beginning and ending with the destruction of the Ram temple with mythic time leaking into historical time. It is devoid of context where the residents of Ayodhya and regional history are rendered mute and invisible. The monument itself becomes history. This historical narrative adopts the trappings of modernism and science that are not supported by historiographical consensus.

Despite this problematic historical production, in 2019 the Supreme Court of India closed the decades long legal dispute surrounding the Babri masjid by ruling that a temple would be made on the site. The Ayodhya

³⁷ The film, *In the Name of God*, by Anand Patwardhan can be watched at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GMT18TMNQbY>.

³⁸ G. Pandey, ‘Modes of History Writing: New Hindu History of Ayodhya’, *Economic and Political Weekly* 29:25 (1994) 1523-1528.

Judgment permitted the construction of a grandiose Ram temple on the site of the mosque, fulfilling a promise of the BJP's electoral campaign in the 2019 general elections. Critics of the judgement have argued that the case was 'adjudicated solely on the basis of Hindu tradition, belief and faith'.³⁹ This 'courting [of] Hindu nationalism' by the apex court of the country signaled the spread of the cancer of Hindu right-wing fundamentalism in the body politic of the nation. Yet there were historical precedents to the court perhaps inadvertently legitimising jingoistic and intolerant political strategies.⁴⁰ In a set of cases in the 1990s the court not only accorded legal recognition to the term Hindutva but also '...held the term Hindutva to be synonymous with "Indianess" or patriotism and thereby allowed it to "expand beyond religion altogether"'.⁴¹ The Hindu right regularly uses the judicial system to stake claim to sites on which mosques stand. Another recent dispute has arisen around the Gyanvapi mosque in the city of Benares. Some Hindus have claimed that an object inside the mosque is a *Shivlinga*, an aniconic representation of the Hindu god, Shiva. In August 2021, five Hindus filed a case seeking the right to worship before this idol in the mosque compound. This case follows a 1991 petition which claimed that the Gyanvapi mosque had been built on a Kashi Vishwanath temple. Even though this petition was dismissed, the overriding of previous judicial pronouncements in the Ayodhya judgment likely do not bode well for the Gyanvapi mosque in the future. The mythic and unverifiable Hindutva 'histories' are now entering the history curriculum of state-run schools, dismantling decades of professional historical research to raise a generation of young people with a Hindutva consciousness.

Dismantling Knowledge

History learning in state-run schools in India has for long being identified as a medium for the cultivation of 'patriotic pride'. Under the Hindu right-wing

³⁹ A. Gupta, 'Dissecting the Ayodhya Judgement', *Economic & Political Weekly* 45 50 (2010). <https://www.epw.in/journal/2010/50/verdict-ayodhya-special-issues/dissecting-ayodhya-judgment.html>.

⁴⁰ S. Saumya, 'Court'ing Hindu Nationalism: Law and the Rise of Modern Hindutva' *Contemporary South Asia* 26:4 (2018) 378-399.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, 379.

regime, patriotism to the country requires upholding the idea of India as an exclusively Hindu nation. This translates into equating 'history with heritage, knowledge with national pride, the Indian past with Hindu achievements.'⁴² National pride is predicated upon "ethnic hatred", and is directed against Muslims. With the BJP's rise to power in 2014, a new space opened up to the RSS to shape state educational policies. A committee called the *Bharatiya Shiksha Niti Ayog* was set up to 'Indianize' the education system. It meant to rectify the tarnished image of Hinduism, portrayed in their eyes, by western scholars even though on other occasions the Hindu right selectively appropriated colonial and orientalist tropes, such as the presentation of Hinduism as a monolithic religion. A ban was placed on Wendy Doniger's book *The Hindus* on grounds that it 'gave Hinduism a bad name'.⁴³ A.K. Ramanujan's classic essay "Three Hundred Ramayanas", which argued that there is no single version of this epic, was also removed from syllabi in Delhi University. Other committees constituted by the state worked to produce revisionist histories. Changes were stealthily made without any public debate in the curriculum of school textbooks. These directly reflect the 'ideological categories inherited from the RSS'.⁴⁴ For instance, Hindu nationalists felt that the 'fight against Muslim invaders' had not been highlighted in the curricula written by those they pejoratively deemed left-liberal secularist intelligentsia (colloquially referred to as 'lib-turds').⁴⁵ As Christophe Jaffrelot writes, "These changes once again enhanced ancient Indian history (in terms of medicine, astronomy, yoga, etc.) and major Hindu figures from the past (Maharana Pratap, Shivaji, Aurobindo, Vivekananda, etc.) at the expense of 'the Muslim era'.⁴⁶ Science textbooks in turn extol 'ancient Indian knowledge systems over contemporary science'.⁴⁷ Ideological propaganda is passed off as cutting-edge knowledge. College teachers, including historians, have been obliged to attend 'orientation courses' which are 'meant to familiarise [them] with new developments in their fields'.⁴⁸ Lectured mostly by non-academics they are

⁴² T. Sarkar, 'History as Patriotism: Lessons from India', *Journal of Genocide Research* 24 (2022) 171-181: 172.

⁴³ C. Jaffrelot, *Modi's India: Hindu nationalism and the rise of ethnic democracy* (Princeton & Oxford 2019) 169.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, 19

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, 19

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, 172.

⁴⁷ Jaffrelot, *Modi's India*, 174.

⁴⁸ Sarkar, *History as Patriotism*, 177.

treated to falsities such as ‘Sanskrit is the perfect computer science language’ and ‘Democracy is an irrelevant western concept whereas Hindu monarchy provided an absolutely just form of governance’. The space for critique and debate in universities is rapidly disappearing and means risking punitive action. Such changes in educational curricula are a form of epistemological violence, the effects of which will be manifest in younger generations of Hindu Indians believing in the cause of Hindu majoritarian violence.

Conclusion

A 2021 Hindi issue of *Hindu Vishwa*, a magazine published by the VHP, carried an image of the Ram temple under construction in Ayodhya with the caption ‘The Construction of the Ram temple will restore India’s self-respect’.⁴⁹ It echoes the sentiment of affront that Hindus are being indoctrinated with, through a variety of popular media, changes in school and university curricula, and infiltration of major institutions of democratic accountability such as the judiciary by individuals affiliated to the Hindu right. This position of feeling continually offended then becomes a moral justification for perpetrating violence against Muslims and other religious and ethnic minorities. Critical events of spectacular violence have descended into the everyday acts of violence that attack and trample over the most intimate spheres of minorities, in particular Muslims. These range from prescribing what to eat, how to dress, where to live, and where to worship. India is a small step away from transitioning from a putatively secular state to a Hindu state. These everyday acts are situated within a deeper erasure of plural living histories and a complex past. Instead, a memorial library and ‘knowledge center’ called the *Godse Gyan Shala* dedicated to Nathuram Godse was inaugurated by the Hindu Mahasabha with much fanfare in the north Indian city of Gwalior in 2021.⁵⁰

⁴⁹<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=470581771741015&set=a.470581731741019>. Accessed 14 January 2023.

⁵⁰H. Ellis-Peterson, ‘Mathatma Gandhi’s killer venerated as Hindu nationalism resurgence in India’ 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jan/17/mahatma-gandhis-killer-venerated-as-hindu-nationalism-resurges-in-india>., accessed on 7 January 2023.

In this essay, I have sought to lend brief insights into the many levels on which Hindutva violence plays out: from visible violence against minorities, especially Muslims to invisible epistemic violence that is changing what counts as legitimate knowledge, particularly knowledge of India's past. Visible violence is enacted on the bodies of Muslims (e.g., lynching on suspicion of carrying beef) to the erasure of their places of worship (the destruction of the Babri masjid as an index of a multi-pronged attack on other Muslim sites). Invisible violence is enacted on the minds of people, through daily indoctrination, changes in history curricula and the hollowing out of institutions. Ways of living that do not subscribe to Hindutva ideology are under attack and voices that critique it are being muzzled. A country that does not allow a fundamental freedom of thought and enquiry is only a country for charlatans and godmen.