

Exiled from the Narrative: The Weaponization of Public History by the Bharatiya Janata Party

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Exile does not always begin at the border. Insidious campaigns of propaganda and misinformation can work to dehumanize individuals to the point of exile, consuming them from the inside. A vital organ of any propaganda machine is public history, the ability to rewrite the narrative that patrons see in museums, that children learn in school and that people see each day in public. One such campaign is unravelling before our very eyes, with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its campaign to remove aspects of history that contradict the BJP's image of Indian history. This works to alienate communities that do not fit within the dominant culture of India, namely, higher caste male Hindi-speaking Hindus.

The first victim of this rhetoric is the Indian Muslim, a deeply ingrained religious identity that has existed within the Indian subcontinent for over a millennium. Under the guise of decolonizing the history of India, the BJP is working to remove Muslim contributions to Indian history and culture. This is part of the broader Hindutva narrative of denying the indigeneity of Muslim South Asians and tying the definition of India to that of the Hindutva identity. In recent years, a major piece of Indo-Islamic history that has come under fire is that of the Mughal Empire. The Mughal Empire serves as the longest period of Islamic rule in India, contributing not only to Indo-Islamic history but South Asian society as a whole. The Mughals held independent power in South Asia from 1556 to 1719 but would maintain cultural and political relevance until 1858.¹ This encompasses the near entirety of Early Modern South Asian history and holds incredible relevance to the understanding of modern India through the lenses of the humanities and social sciences. To remove the Mughal Empire from the historical narrative of India works to alienate Indian Muslims from the cultural identity of India.

Hindutva and the Bharatiya Janata Party

The Hindutva identity is central to the ideology of the BJP; it serves not only as a religious doctrine but as a comprehensive nationalist agenda that seeks to reframe South Asian identity through the lens of Hindu supremacy. The term was coined by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar in his book *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* The work was published in 1923, written at a time in which South Asia was under British rule and both nationalism and independence movements were on the rise. Hindutva is inherently an

¹ John F. Richards, C. A. Bayly, and Gordon Johnson, *New Cambridge History of India*, vol. 1 (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1; Douglas Peers, "The Indian Uprisings of 1857 and 1858 – Histories and Legacies," (lecture, HIST 422, University of Waterloo, Waterloo, ON, 2024).

ethnonationalist ideology that defines India as inherently Hindu, relegating other religious and cultural identities to a subordinate status.² Savarkar's philosophy concerns itself not only with the matters of India's faith but also with the construction of a unified cultural identity for all Indians with emphasis on the primacy of Hinduism. This view was not the holistic view of a liberated India accepted by the Indian National Congress, the major faction in Indian Independence, but a Hindu state where citizenship, culture, and the very essence of belonging are all tied to Hinduism.

The BJP and its parent organization, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), operate under this ideology through a network which includes youth groups, women's groups, labour unions, and educational bodies.³ Through this structure, the BJP is able to advance its goal of turning India into a Hindutva state by embedding Hindu nationalist narratives throughout the very social and cultural institutions of the country. The RSS, for example, maintains training camps and ideological sessions which aim to instill a strict vision of discipline, hierarchy, and devotion to India's Hindutva's future.⁴ The most effective facet of this ideological project is the construction of what Venkatesh and Ahmad term the 'Hindutva citizen.' This supposed model citizen is defined by an alignment to upper caste Hindu cultural norms, a reverence for a glorified view of Indian history, and an active disdain for 'foreign' identities, with an emphasis on disdain for Islam as one of these foreign identities.⁵

While the Indian Constitution is a formal guarantee of secularism within India's governance, the BJP has worked towards eroding this foundational principle by reshaping India's legal and administrative norms. This is exemplified by changes to India's treatment of migrants, under laws like the Citizenship Amendment Act, which selectively offers citizenship to non-Muslim migrants, and proposals like that of the National Register of Citizens, which demands documentation from long-settled residents.⁶ This exclusionary attitude is used as a tool to delegitimize Muslims as Indians. Under government actions like these, Muslims are not only a religious minority, but they become 'outsiders,' the ones intruding on the Hindu homeland. This vision of India feeds into the myth of a pure India, where a pure Vedic civilization was disturbed by Islamic invasion and later colonial rule. This narrative works to distort history and legitimizes the state-sponsored exclusion of Muslims from Indian society. As Vasanthi Venkatesh and Fahad Ahmad argue, the BJP's strategy involves a "perverse use of human rights frames" to present Muslims as aggressors

² Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, *Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu?* (Hindi Sahitya Sadan, 2009).

³ Titas Biswas, "Pedagogical Curricula and Educational Media: The Malignancy of Saffronised Otherisation in India," *Zoon Politikon* 11 (2020), 146–99.

⁴ Biswas, "Pedagogical Curricula and Educational Media," 147.

⁵ Fahad Ahmad and Vasanthi Venkatesh, "Rewriting India: The Construction of the 'Hindutva' Citizen in the Indian State," *Third World Approaches to International Law Review*, June 25, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.32920/25403839>, 1-10.

⁶ Ahmad and Venkatesh, "Rewriting India," 3–5.

and Hindus as victims, while at the same time invoking constitutionalism to justify discriminatory legal reforms.⁷

Beyond Hindutva, another underpinning philosophical concept is 'Sanskritization.' Originally defined by Indian anthropologist M.N. Srinivas as the adoption of upper-case Hindu norms by lower caste-groups in the pursuit of social mobility.⁸ In the hands of the BJP, Sanskritization became a mechanism of forced cultural assimilation, homogenizing the diverse Hindu identity. Binesh Balan expands this framework through the notion of "comfortable exile," describing how the state displaces marginalized communities not through outright expulsion, but through internal alienation and cultural absorption.⁹ Under Hindutva, India is not uplifting the concept of Hindu identity but dominating the mainstream narrative with ideological conformity that erases the pluralized identity of India.

Rewriting the History

The abuse of public history institutions is crucial for the BJP's attempts to rewrite the historical narrative of South Asia. This campaign has most obviously manifested in education and cultural institutions, where the BJP Government has undertaken systemic revisions to align the historical narrative with Hindutva ideology. This process is defined as the 'saffronization' of history, the infusion of Hindu nationalist symbolism into textbooks, museums, and monuments.¹⁰ The removal of Muslim figures, with emphasis on the Mughals, from history textbooks is central to this effort. In 2022, this became a global scandal when the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) made headlines for omitting references to influential Mughals like Akbar and Aurangzeb from curricula, under the rationale of reducing student workloads.¹¹ In reality, these omissions are a strategic silencing of Indo-Islamic contributions to Indian civilization.

Historians warn that these revisions serve a deep ideological purpose for the BJP. Romila Thapar and Mushirul Hasan, among others, argue that the removal of the Mughals serves not only as curricular adjustments but the symbolic eviction of Muslims from the National

⁷ Ahmad and Venkatesh, "Rewriting India," 4.

⁸ Mysore Narasimhachar Srinivas, *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India* (Oxford University Press, 2003), 29.

⁹ Binesh Balan, "Making of Comfortable Exile through Sanskritization: Reflections on Imagination of Identity Notions in India," *Contemporary Voice of Dalit* 11, no. 2 (2019), 89–93.

¹⁰ This term is in reference to the colour saffron which has been historically sacred within Dharmic Faiths and has become increasingly used as a political symbol by Hindutva movements.

¹¹ Hamaad Habibullah, "Erasing the Past," *AHA*, February 4, 2025, historians.org/perspectives-article/erasing-the-past-the-indian-governments-dishonest-history-january-2024/.

memory.¹² This removal of the Mughals from the textbooks constructs an educational narrative in which Muslims appear suddenly, and only in periods of conflict. This diminishes the existence of Indian Muslims as invaders, the disruptors of the fictional Hindu golden past. This is central to the BJP's historical narrative, which depicts Islam as foreign to Indian soil, entrenching the idea that Muslims are illegitimate participants in Indian nationhood.¹³ As Hasan contends, the rewriting of textbooks has become an ideological battleground, where "public history is weaponized to reshape the consciousness of future generations."¹⁴ The effort to rewrite the historical narrative of India goes beyond textbooks towards cultural monuments and commemorative spaces. The most prominent example of this is the Mughal Museum project in Agra. Initially announced to honour the artistic and cultural legacy of the Mughal Empire, the project was repurposed in 2020 by BJP politician Yogi Adityanath to become the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Museum with a new curatorial vision under Hindutva themes.¹⁵ Adityanath defended the decision by claiming that "symbols of slavery mentality" like the Mughals had no place in the new India.¹⁶ This rhetorical framing not only distorts historical reality but also recasts Muslims as perpetual outsiders and oppressors, even though the Mughals were deeply embedded in South Asian polity, culture, and society for centuries.

Museums are a critical site for public history, their transformation under BJP rule illustrates how Hindutva ideology is permeating through supposedly educational public spaces. The redirection of museum content follows a broader pattern of renaming streets, cities, and public institutions. Historian Faisal Devji notes that these acts of historical revision are less about recovering a past and more about promoting a future, a future that is a Hindu-centric national identity purified of Islamic and pluralistic roots.¹⁷ This transition happens starkly in the renaming of the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library to the Pradhanmantri Sangrahalaya, which is a symbolic break from the secular and anti-colonial legacy of Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, and replacing him with a new mythologized version of Hindu leadership.¹⁸ This strategy of erasure is not limited to content but also affects method. The saffronized narrative

¹² Mushirul Hasan, "The BJP's Intellectual Agenda: Textbooks and Imagined History," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 25, no. 3 (2002), 187–209.

¹³ Janaki Nair, "Textbook Controversies and the Demand for a Past: Public Lives of Indian History," *History Workshop Journal* 82, no. 1 (2016), 235–54.

¹⁴ Mushirul Hasan, "The BJP's Intellectual Agenda: Textbooks and Imagined History," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 25, no. 3 (2002), 187–209.

¹⁵ Ariana Heffner, "Indian Museum Focus Flipped from Mughal Art to Hindu Culture," *Artasiapacific*, September 22, 2020, www.artasiapacific.com/news/indian-museum-focus-flipped-from-mughal-art-to-hindu-culture/.

¹⁶ Heffner, "Indian Museum Focus Flipped."

¹⁷ Faisal Devji, *Muslim Zion: Pakistan as a Political Idea* (Harvard University Press, 2013), 188.

¹⁸ Aditi Singh, "The Great Transition in Indian Museums: From NMML to PMML," *The Journal of Indian and Asian Studies* 5, no. 02 (2024), 1–23.

prioritizes myth over evidence, glorification over complexity. Titas Biswas observes that saffronization entails not only a distortion of facts but also a complete restructuring of how knowledge is produced, favouring emotion, symbolism, and religious sentiment over secular academic rigour.¹⁹ It constructs a binary world: Hindu heroes versus Muslim invaders, cultural purity versus foreign contamination. In this framework, the Mughals, who contributed profoundly to architecture, language, art, and governance in the subcontinent, are reduced to footnotes in their own land, displaced by Hindu kings reimagined as civilizational saviours. The result of this campaign is a hollowed-out version of Indian history, stripped of its pluralism and reduced to a nationalist morality play. This version of the past is designed not to educate but to indoctrinate, to produce the ideal Hindutva citizen who sees India as a land under siege from foreign cultures and who must reclaim it in the image of a mythic, homogenized Hindu past.²⁰ In doing so, the BJP is not only rewriting history but reconfiguring the relationship between history, identity, and citizenship itself.

The Reaction

The BJP campaign to rewrite Indian history has provoked widespread resistance from historians, educators, students, and activists, both within India and abroad. Foremost among these critics have been India's academic historians, many of whom have long defended pluralistic, evidence-based understandings of Indian history. Scholars like Romila Thapar and Janaki Nair have publicly opposed the rewriting of textbooks and the marginalization of Indo-Islamic contributions to the subcontinent.²¹ They argue that historical narratives should be grounded in rigorous academic study and not mythology or religious dogma. Thapar warns that history in India is being reduced to Mythology under the rule of the BJP, and that the public history narrative risks turning the plural culture of India into a monolith.²² These objections are not mere academic disagreements; they are a principled stand against the erosion of historical truths and academic freedoms.

This academic resistance is also found outside of India. The American Historical Association (AHA), for example, has condemned the removal of the Mughals from Indian textbooks, declaring that such actions are not only pedagogically irresponsible but also politically dangerous, as they encourage sectarianism and historical amnesia.²³ The organization emphasized that historical erasure distorts democratic discourse and undermines the possibility of coexistence in multiethnic societies. Their

¹⁹ Biswas, "Pedagogical Curricula and Educational Media," 146–99.

²⁰ Biswas, "Pedagogical Curricula and Educational Media," 151.

²¹ Nair, "Textbook Controversies and the Demand for a Past," 240–245.

²² Romila Thapar, "They Peddle Myths and Call It History," *New York Times*, May 17, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/17/opinion/india-elections-modi-history.html>.

²³ Habibullah, "Erasing the Past."

statement called attention to the alarming global trend of governments using public education to entrench nationalism, noting that India is rapidly becoming a case study in how states weaponize historical memory to marginalize minorities.²⁴

The opposition to changes in public history is not only felt by the intelligentsia: youth movements and protests within India, which nominally started against unfair immigration law, often share deeper anxieties about their identity, flooded with questions about their belonging in their own country, and criticisms of the state-controlled historical narrative. These protests were often led by young people, including many Muslims, women and Dalit activists, who recognized that the erasure of their communities from history was part of a broader effort to delegitimize their presence in the nation.²⁵ Protestors carried placards that quoted historical figures like Maulana Azad, B.R. Ambedkar, and even Mughal Emperor Akbar, a symbolic reclamation of the pluralist past the BJP sought to suppress.²⁶ Moreover, university campuses have become battlegrounds for historical truth. Groups like the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), the student wing of the RSS, have clashed with leftist and secular student unions over syllabus content and commemorative practices.²⁷ Saffronized student groups routinely attempt to ban books, disrupt academic seminars, and attack faculty members who challenge the Hindutva worldview. This climate of intimidation has led to increased self-censorship among teachers and a chilling effect on critical scholarship.²⁸ In many ways, the BJP's cultural project is not just about rewriting the past, but also about silencing the present, ensuring that dissenting voices are labelled as "anti-national" and purged from the public sphere. Despite the repression, grassroots resistance has proven resilient. The Shaheen Bagh protests, led predominantly by Muslim women in Delhi, offered a powerful counter-narrative to the government's divisive policies.

Protestors used art, music, historical quotes, and public readings of the Constitution to affirm their place in India's national story.²⁹ These events illustrated that public history does not only live in textbooks and museums but also in the symbolic acts of everyday people who refuse to be erased. The reclaiming of historical space through protest represents not just a challenge to state power, but a reassertion of pluralism, memory, and democratic belonging.

Conclusion

The implication of the BJP's campaign to rewrite the history of India

²⁴ Habibullah, "Erasing the Past."

²⁵ Ahmad and Venkatesh, "Rewriting India," 6.

²⁶ Ahmad and Venkatesh, "Rewriting India," 7.

²⁷ Biswas, "Pedagogical Curricula and Educational Media," 151.

²⁸ Biswas, "Pedagogical Curricula and Educational Media."

²⁹ Ahmad and Venkatesh, "Rewriting India," 8–9.

extends far beyond the classroom and the museum. At its core, this project seeks to redefine the boundaries of national identity, to determine who is allowed to belong in India and on what terms they can participate in Indian society. By erasing and minimizing the contributions of Indian Muslims, particularly through the erasure of the Mughal Empire, the BJP is not only altering the historical content but reconfiguring the very idea of India. This is an ideological form of exile, communities not being forcibly removed from their land, but expelled from the narrative that legitimizes their presence in the nation.³⁰ Muslims in this narrative become historical interlopers and political outsiders, denied the right to see themselves in the cultural memories of the nation. This is what Binesh Balan describes as comfortable exile, a form of internal displacement in which minority communities are allowed to live within the nation but only in the margins.³¹ Through processes like Sanskritization, the state redefines what it means to be Indian, aligning it closely with upper-caste Hindu norms. Non-Hindu identities are tolerated only to the extent that they can be assimilated, sanitized, or rendered invisible. As Balan argues, this creates a triadic system of identity: caste, religion, and nationality become entangled, and those who do not fit the Brahminical Hindu mold are relegated to the status of internal others.³²

This silent exile is not enforced through violence alone, but through curriculum, museum exhibits, naming practices, and laws: in short, through public history. The BJP is displacing constitutional secularism with a religiously inflected nationalism, where dissent is treated as betrayal, and cultural plurality is cast as a threat. Public history becomes an instrument of surveillance and control as much as any legal mechanism. It tells people who they are allowed to be and what their place in the national hierarchy is. This has far-reaching effects on democratic life, transforming history from a tool of inquiry into a weapon of identity policing. Yet even as the BJP seeks to narrow the boundaries of Indian identity, acts of resistance continue to challenge that project. From the streets of Shaheen Bagh to the classrooms of public universities, students, scholars, artists, and everyday citizens are refusing to be exiled from the narrative. They assert that Indian history is not a pure, linear story of Hindu glory, but a complex and entangled tapestry of cultures, religions, and peoples. They understand that to defend history is to defend democracy itself because a society that controls its past can too easily control its future.

³⁰ Ahmad and Venkatesh, "Rewriting India," 4–5.

³¹ Balan, "Making of Comfortable Exile through Sanskritization," 84–86.

³² Balan, "Making of Comfortable Exile through Sanskritization," 88–89.

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