The BJP and the War on History

by Shalini Sharma

In 2019 the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party), led by Narendra Modi, won a huge victory in the Indian general election, increasing their tally of seats from 2014, reducing their nearest rivals to an ineffectual rump. Commentators and political scientists can’t agree on the reasons for Modi’s success. Was it a result of effective campaigning and unchecked amounts of money thrown into the coffers of the BJP machine? Was it, as in 2014, the strength of Modi’s individual appeal – the common man taking on entrenched elites? Or was it a peculiarly Indian form of authoritarian populism fuelled by Modi’s aspiration to boost the country’s status as a global power.[[1]](#endnote-1) Populism and the personal appeal of Modi notwithstanding, this chapter argues that the 2019 general election revealed the ability of the BJP to claim that it was the truly national party of India. In other words, the BJP presented itself as the authentic custodian of Indian culture and history, a history that the BJP’s main rivals, the Congress party, had silenced since independence in 1947. The BJP had championed this ‘Hindutva’ agenda in the 2014 election, but in 2019 it became much more emphatic. As Modi claimed at the official launch of the election campaign in March 2019, ‘Our vision is of a new India that will be in tune with its glorious past ... India's 1.3 billion people have already made up their minds.’[[2]](#endnote-2) Narratives of an imagined past were effectively mobilised to anchor the passions that permeated politics leading upto and during the 2019 elections.

This chapter surveys how and why the Hindutva version of Indian history became so prominent in the 2019 election. I focus on four main developments. First, the recent recovery by the BJP and its allies of the reputation of the early 20th century historian and ideologue of Hindu nationalism, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883-1966). Secondly, I look at the continuing fall-out from the 1992 destruction of the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya (Uttar Pradesh). Then, thirdly, I examine some key recent BJP appointments in national history organisations, and also some of the ‘history wars’ that have surrounded school text-books. Finally, I discuss how influential Hindutva commentators have cultivated the idea of Hindu victimhood as a problem in India’s long history, namely ‘Hinduphobia’. History is a powerful political tool which provides rationalities into which emotions are embedded. Narendra Modi’s party has learnt this lesson with tremendous effect.

1. Sanitising Savarkar

An early signal of how history would feature in the forthcoming election came in early 2019, with the resurrection of the campaign to give the Bharat Ratna (India’s highest civilian award) to Vinayak Damodar Savarkar. This was a controversial move. Savarkar has always been vaunted for producing in 1907 the first Indian account of the 1857 rising against the British. By the 1920s he was making the case for an independent ‘Hindu nation’ free of Christians and Muslims. He later flirted with fascism and Nazism, and was implicated in the assassination of Gandhi in 1948.[[3]](#endnote-3) For decades Savarkar occupied a relatively ambiguous position within the pantheon of Indian national heroes. All that changed rapidly during the election campaign. Giving its support to a posthumous honour for Savarkar – recognition that his own family descendants did not desire – the BJP asserted that Indians would have been unware of the 1857 war of independence against the British, but for his 1907 book. By December 2018, Modi, already a fan of Savarkar, was openly declaring his own support, paying a visit of homage to the notorious Cellular Jail in the Andaman Islands, in which the British had incarcerated Savarkar in the early 1920s. Two months later, Dr Mohan Bhagwat, leader of the RSS, added his own endorsement: ‘If we come together leaving aside the traditional differences and divide, the dream of Swatantrya Veer Savarkar of Hindu Rashtra could be realised. He projected a strong nation with Hindu culture which has a strong scientific base’.[[4]](#endnote-4) Five days after the election result was announced in May 2019, the BJP leadership joined in unison to mark Savarkar’s birthday. He was an inspiration towards ‘nation-building’ noted Modi.[[5]](#endnote-5)

2. Appropriating Ayodhya

As well as controversial historians such as Savarkar, contested historical sites featured in the 2019 election. At the beginning of the year, Modi promised that the construction of a Hindu temple would go ahead on the site of the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya, which had been razed to the ground in 1992. The RSS seized on this. RSS leader Mohan Bhagwat declared that a Ram temple would go up in Ayodhya within four months of the election. Then, at the end of February, a group of Hindutva activists, marched to Ayodhya to press the message home. In this way, a subject of communal tension and outrage that had simmered away for almost three decades, was turned into political capital during the election. Hindutva ideologues had prepared the ground. After the destruction of the mosque in 1992, a study showed how popular, mass-produced tracts had perpetuated the myth that Rama, the Hindu deity, was born in Ayodha.[[6]](#endnote-6) This same ‘truth’ about Rama’s birthplace flourished in literature produced by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (the Universal Hindu Council) and was also taught in RSS Shakas (schools) across the country, as well as in its sister organisations in the UK and USA.[[7]](#endnote-7) These tracts claimed that the mosque was a symbol of Muslim oppression of Hindus, aligning with claims that secular Congress party politicians were ‘appeasing’ the Muslim minority ‘voting bloc’ in contemporary India. Commentators have been slow to note the wide chasm that has opened up between on the one side the sort of history practiced in universities, which broadly endorses India’s post-1947 secular pluralism, and on the other, the explosion of communal propaganda reinterpreting in particular the Mughal and colonial periods of the Indian past.

3. The Saffronisation of history

The insertion of Savarkar as well as the Babri Masjid mosque dispute into the 2019 election campaign points to a wider trend evident in contemporary Indian culture: the overt politicisation of some of the country’s national history organisations. The BJP has previous form here. For example, in 2000 Murli Manohar Joshi, the Human Resource Development Minister in Atal Bihari Vajpayee’s government, began to weaken the autonomy of national cultural institutions, such as the National Council of Educational Research and Training and the Central Board of Secondary Education which advised over textbook production, national heritage and historical research. The directors of these institutions were filled with BJP sympathisers who pursued Joshi’s strategy of rewriting history to present a more Hindu-centric version of the past. References to the Hindu caste system were deleted.[[8]](#endnote-8) *Towards Independence*, two volumes of a collection of primary materials documenting the run up to 1947, one edited by Sumit Sarkar and one by K. N. Pannikar, were blocked because of the so-called Marxism of the editors.[[9]](#endnote-9) Prominent commentators complained about the ‘saffronisation’ of education.[[10]](#endnote-10)

Since 2014, Modi’s government has been uncompromising in changing the composition of those all-India bodies charged with overseeing history education. As soon as Modi entered office in 2014 several university vice-chancellorships went to BJP sympathisers: at Ahmedabad, the Banaras Hindu University and at the Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi. So too did national directorships of all-India bodies charged with overseeing education. For example, a relatively unknown scholar, Yellapragada Sudarshan Rao, who claimed that the epics Ramayana and Mahabharathya were true accounts of ancient India and not mythology was appointed to lead the prestigious Indian Council of Historical Research.[[11]](#endnote-11) Under the leadership of Mahesh Sharma, the Minister of Culture and Tourism, a committee was set up to prove that the first Indians were indigenous ‘Hindus’, not migrants as previously demonstrated by archaeological evidence. The same committee was also directed to prove that Hindu scriptures are based on fact and not myth, in an effort to subsequently revise school text books.[[12]](#endnote-12)

4. Hinduphobia and history

It is not only within India that Hindutva ideology has tightened its control over the past since 2014. The rhetorical strategy of depicting the majority population of India as victims – ‘Hinduphobia’ – has emerged in the writings of a number of commentators outside India, for example through the publishing house, Voice of India. These external commentators are important interlocutors in any understanding of the BJP election victory in 2019, not least because they interpret ‘Hindutva’ ideology for overseas Indians who are minorities in their adopted home countries, such as the UK, the EU, USA, Middle-East, SE Asia and Australasia. They serve as loudspeakers for Modi, helping to deflect the common criticism (especially in the world media in 2014) that he is a crude nationalist who has never escaped his inconvenient Gujarat past.

For some time writers connected to the Voice of India publishing house, such as the US-based Rajeev Malhotra and David Frawley (aka Vamadeva Shastri) have been producing texts that question the legitimacy of Indian secularism, rejecting the ‘unity in diversity’ model that has been the dominant paradigm of Indian history since 1947. So too has the philosopher S. N. Balagangadhara, based, until recently, in Belgium.[[13]](#endnote-13) Difficult aspects of Hinduism such as the caste system or bodily pollution were written off by these revisionist authors as mere constructions of colonial knowledge, that is to say, simple ideas foisted upon authentic Indians by outsiders whose main intention was, and still is, to Christianise or ‘break up’ India. For example, in his *Breaking India* (2011) Rajeev Malhotra claimed that a nexus of international Christian funding organisations was intent on destroying the tolerant Indian nation.

A tangible shift in the influence of these Hindutva commentators occurred after the BJP gained power in 2014. One of the first acts of Yellapragada Sudarshan Rao as the new director of the Indian Council of Historical Research in 2014, was to invite Balagangadhara to deliver the annual Maulana Azad Memorial lecture.[[14]](#endnote-14) A few days later Mohan Bhagwat was quoted as saying, ‘[i]n the past 1,200 years our mindset has been polluted and influenced by the values of people and forces that attacked Bharat and ruled over her. We need to wipe out this influence completely by decolonising our mindsets with sustained and consistent efforts…. And that once this prerequisite was achieved [decolonising mindsets], only then we would be in a position to proceed to the second stage of introducing and establishing an education system based on our culture, life values and ethos.’[[15]](#endnote-15) The use of the phrase ‘decolonising our mindsets’ has a particular meaning to a western audience, not least because of the recent Black Lives Matter campaigns in the UK and USA, yet here its inference points towards, not away from, a racist nationalism.

Similarly, the stock of Rajeev Malhotra has risen in India since 2014. He was appointed an honorary visiting professor in the Centre for Media Studies at JNU (traditionally the epicentre of anti-BJP sentiment). Malhotra’s prolific publishing, social media presence and regular speaking engagements at academic conferences since 2014 mean that the charges of plagiarism levelled at him earlier have been easily forgotten. He has led the assault on ’academic Hinduphobia’, most notably in his critique of Wendy Doniger, the eminent American Indologist. Malhotra was joined at JNU by another erstwhile ‘luminary’ of the Hindu-nationalist diaspora: Subash Kak, who was appointed Honorary Professor of Engineering. Kak, a computer scientist who had published on the Aryan invasion theory and regularly defended Vedantic myths as science long before the BJP were in power, also joined Modi’s Science, Technology and Innovation Advisory Council.[[16]](#endnote-16) For his part, Frawley was presented with the Padma Bushan (the third-highest civilian award in the Republic of India), for services to literature and education in 2015. Since then his *Arise Arjuna. Hinduism Resurgent in a New Century* has been published in a new edition, and he has taken to social media, denouncing jihadis, the radical left and even Wikipedia for their alleged Hinduphobia.

Although at the extreme end of Hindutva ideology, Malhotra et al are the tail wagging the nationalist dog, providing a scholarly legitimacy to the alternative versions of Indian history propagated by the BJP and RSS. This plays well amongst the Indian diaspora, the some 28 million NRIs (non-resident Indians) and PIOs (Persons of Indian Origin). It has been well-documented in studies of diasporas that dominant groups within immigrant communities latch on to the most conservative elements of the country they leave behind, mythologising their home country as an idyll to which they long to return.[[17]](#endnote-17) The BJP has successfully marketed itself in such communities as a link to India, a conduit through which immigrant children can learn Indian languages, a network through which businesses, friendships and temple development can grow side by side.[[18]](#endnote-18) Modi has developed a celebrity style rapport with these expatriates.18,000 filled Times Square in New York to hear him speak when he came over to address the UN in 2014; 60,000 filled Wembley Stadium when he came to London in 2015. Modi’s political success in India is an affirmation of Hindus’ status in their own host countries.

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The Hindutva makeover of Indian history has continued apace since Modi’s victory in 2019. ‘Freedom fighter’ Savarkar remains in line for a national award; in the meantime urban flyovers named after him have gone up in Bengaluru and Mangaluru. In November 2019 India’s Supreme Court finally approved the plan to erect a new Hindu temple on the site of the Babri Masjid mosque. The objectivity and independence of the Indian Council of Historical Research becomes more circumscribed by the day. In September 2019 at the launch of a new Hindutva manifesto, *The RSS: Roadmaps for the 21st Century*, Mohan Bhagwatcalled on the ICHR to ‘shed light on Indian methodologies, to give currency to the works of genuine historians who have plodded through the facts. It should re-examine history writing that has been based on prejudices, distortions and manipulations’.[[19]](#endnote-19) More recently, the ICHR has been pressed into service by the Ministry of Defence to help write a history of India’s borders.[[20]](#endnote-20) Most significantly of all, Modi has turned up the volume on using history to demonise Indian Muslims, stressing that it is Hindus who need rescuing from the distortions pedalled by liberal and secular versions of the nation’s past. Just ahead of visiting the USA in September 2019, Modi laid into Hinduphobia, telling an audience in Mathura that [i]t is this country’s misfortune that when some people hear the words “Om” and “Cow”, they get triggered. They think the country has gone back to the 16th century’.[[21]](#endnote-21) For a self-styled ‘common man’ without much formal education beyond high school, Modi has a subtle grasp on India’s itchy history trigger and how it can anchor emotions. [[22]](#endnote-22)So, in January 2020 when he defended the controversial Citizenship Amendment Act, claiming to offer protection to all Indian minorities except Muslims, he claimed that ‘historical injustices’ were being corrected.[[23]](#endnote-23) He may well have been referring to Pakistan’s treatment of minority Hindus, but to an Indian national audience impassioned by the relentless Hinduisation of history of the last few years, it was the enemy within to whom his words seemed directed.

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