

## Indic Colloquium

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[This essay was compiled by piecing together several chapters of my PhD dissertation, which concerns the politics of historiography in the Indian Subcontinent. I have excerpted passages from several sections in order to give an overview of the various arguments and provide an edited version to present at the Indic Colloquium, 2002. These excerpts only describe a few of the issues that I have researched, many of which are considered in subsequent or previous chapters, such as the politization of archaeology and the critiques of NCERT textbooks. This essay represents only part of what I have written about historiography battles in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, therefore there may be references to other issues that are not included here.]

India: Rewriting History in the Headlines

*Introduction: Are the Roots of “The Beautiful Tree” Regenerating?*

Early Indian nationalist leaders expressed a pan-Indian ethos that stressed the plurality of India’s many ethnic and linguistic groups. “Unity in Diversity” has long been India’s national slogan. Though many of these Indian nationalists such as Ram Mohan Roy, Mahatma Gandhi, and Aurobindo Ghose were situated within their Hindu cultural traditions, the very nature of that tradition allowed them to view the diversity of religious expressions in India as threads of a great inclusive civilization; with saints and narratives strung like gems along the centuries, creating a civilizational *maalaa*<sup>1</sup> of interrelated and overlapping cultural experiences. Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore proposed pedagogical models that were situated within the Indian milieu, however, they were not widely implemented and after 1947, schooling remained based primarily on colonial curriculum paradigms.

For most of the first fifty years in post independence India, the state sponsored academic discourse was guided by a secular socialist “Nehruvian” doctrine that sought to delink progress and nationalism from culture and religion. In an attempt to be sensitive to the feelings of religious minority groups and to help them feel integrated into the nation, the official historical

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<sup>1</sup> *Mala* is the Sanskrit word for rosary.

narrative sometimes obscured certain less palatable facts, such as the gory details of the Islamic conquests in northern India, or the Inquisition by Portuguese Christians in Goa.<sup>2</sup> Theoretically driven trajectories were promoted in textbooks published by the National Center for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) and in courses in history departments at India's flagship universities, such as Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) and Delhi University, and Aligarh Muslim University.<sup>3</sup> The assumptions that guided the narratives were based on a noble objective—to minimize prejudice towards Moslems and Christians that such historical details may inadvertently encourage in the majority Hindu community.<sup>4</sup>

Since its inception, JNU has provided the intellectual bedrock for the production of history in modern India, as Professor Harbans Mukhia told me, percolating down to the masses. JNU has been dominated by scholars professing leftist inclinations, characterized by a liberal interpretation of socialism and interpreting India's particular and some would say peculiar application of secularism. Through the years JNU produced many excellent historians, though some of their analyses have recently come under serious scrutiny and have been criticized for projecting an agenda instead of exploring history dispassionately. These critics claim that there has long been a bias operative at JNU that works to dilute or discredit the history and traditions of Hindu India. This claim is, of course, strongly denied by JNU professors.

However, it is ironic to note, that though JNU offers advanced degrees in Indian history it does not offer classes in Sanskrit, even though there have all along been degrees available in both classical and modern Arabic and classical and modern Persian at JNU. It has been proposed several times in the past, certainly prior to the BJP's ascent to power, that Sanskrit be added to the available classical languages students can take at JNU, thereby facilitating the analysis of ancient texts in the study of Indian history.

Since 1998, and the ascent of the BJP to power at the central government, this suggestion to include Sanskrit in the JNU course offerings was rejected several times by scholars of a more leftist persuasion who wanted to protect JNU from what they considered to be a Saffron/Hindu

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Crasta, an Indian author of Goan ancestry who currently lives in New York City, described conversion strategies of the Portuguese in Goa during the sixteenth century, "[The Portuguese were on a] Divine Mission of spreading Christianity and syphilis. [They sought to win] souls for the mother country [by tactics such as] throwing beef or pork into the vegetarian Brahmins' sacred family wells, [thus] polluting them forever." Crasta, Richard. *The Revised Kama Sutra: A Novel of Colonialism and Desire*, Viking Penguin India, 1993.

<sup>3</sup> Examples from NCERT textbooks are discussed later in this study.

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Nationalist agenda. When I questioned Romila Thapar<sup>5</sup>, a well know historian from JNU, about this issue during July 2000, she explained that if students want to learn Sanskrit, “there are so many Maths and Piths around where they can go”.<sup>6</sup> She added that most of the regional colleges have some kind of Sanskrit program.

However, the fact remains that the primary tool to study ancient India, namely the Sanskrit language, has not, in all these years, been available to students attending JNU. At India’s premier academic institution--famous for its cutting edge Social Science excellence--students are not offered courses in Sanskrit, the root language of Indian culture. And significantly, implementing the study of this quintessential part of Hindu tradition was time and again vehemently opposed by the faculty. They would prefer that Sanskrit education remain in the domain of religious institutions, so as not to sully JNU’s leftist/secular reputation with anything too closely associated with Hindu traditions. It should be pointed out, that not all Indian universities share this aversion.

An article that appeared in *The Indian Express* in June 2001, expressed concern that Indian students who wanted to study Sanskrit were better served by going to American graduate programs such as at the University of Chicago,

While we battle each other on the streets on whether Sanskrit should be revived in the school curricula or not, top notch western universities have been busy churning one esoteric dissertation after another on Panini's Ashtadhyay and comparing Bhartihari's and Patanjali's grammatical logic.<sup>7</sup>

The author states that at American universities the children of Indians who immigrated to the U.S. in the sixties and seventies are “alienated kids, desperate to discover their historical roots and cultural heritage, who are studying Sanskrit with a passion”. Some scholars, including myself, object to this depiction of Hindu-American students as culturally alienated. I have

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<sup>5</sup> Romila Thapar, who for decades has been an outspoken critic of the Hindu Nationalist Movement, is the bête-noir of the Sangh Parivar. They toss her name around when offering critiques of Indian Leftist historiography in much the same way that the name Thomas B. McCauley’s name is invoked with derision. She has attained the status of an anti-Hindu cult figure among Indo-centric scholars. Her crusade against the Ram Janma Bhumi movement and her very public and vocal criticism of the rewriting of history have given Prof. Thapar a high profile both at home and abroad.

<sup>6</sup> However, many Sanskrit scholars in western universities hold critical views of the work produced at Sanskrit institutions in India. In Volume 7 of the Electronic Journal of Vedic Studies (EJVS), March, 2000, Michael Witzel, from Harvard University wrote a critique in which he questioned the quality of work done at schools such as the Rasthriya Sanskrit Sansthan in Delhi. Professor Witzel stated ironically, "One would like to know what other cutting edge, innovative, thought provoking, seminal and trend setting research is carried out [at such] Government financed institutions?" <http://www.asiatica.org/publications/ejvs/>

<sup>7</sup> Ajit Kumar Jha, “Why Is The West Crazy About A 'Dead' Language?” *The Indian Express*, June 10, 2001.

interviewed many students who are attending American universities and taking courses to learn about their heritage. There is very little desperation, except the same pressures that all students may feel during finals week.

Indians who self-identify themselves as “leftist” otherwise known as “progressives” often without hesitation condemn Hindus from India who are trying to preserve or reclaim their traditions. One professor of Indian origin at The University of Texas, who is an outspoken critic of the Hindu Revivalist phenomenon, told me

It is sad when these young Hindus come to America and try to recapture their Hindu culture. They are trapped between two worlds. It is pathetic to see them trying to be Hindu while struggling to adapt to living in the West. They don't even know Sanskrit, but they are clinging to outdated traditions they selectively interpret. They are narrow-minded bastard hybrids, caught between two cultures.<sup>8</sup>

Unfortunately, this depiction of Indians who have a developed sense of cultural pride is a prevalent perspective, particularly among the Western/Westernized academic community. Though these recent Indian immigrants are able to excel in graduate programs at American universities or succeed in business, they are called obscurantist because they have not discarded or distanced themselves from their cultural heritage or religious beliefs. These diasporic Indians who have maintained a sense of cultural pride and nurture respectful feelings of their ancestral religion have been pejoratively reclassified as “Hindu-fascists,” “Neo-Hindu Nazis,” and “Saffronites” or simply, “pathetic hybrids” by the Western academic community and Indian leftist scholars.<sup>9</sup>

I would argue that they are not at all pathetic but rather inspiring--a marvelous hybridity between the pressures of modernity and a personal spiritual tradition based on ageless wisdom. How can that be pathetic in this mindless world? There is duplicity in the criticism that chides the young Hindus for not knowing Sanskrit, when very few practicing Christians know Latin or Aramaic. It is very doubtful that these same leftist Indians would criticize a young practicing American-Muslim for not being fluent in Medieval Arabic. In any other context, it is offensive, not to mention politically incorrect, to glibly deride another person's religious experience, except, it seems, when it comes to Hinduism.

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<sup>8</sup> This was said to me by a physics professor from India who teaches at The University of Texas at Austin in November 2000, after a lecture by K.N. Panikkar.

<sup>9</sup> These are labels that were repeated to me again and again.

The obstacles and ironies regarding the teaching of Sanskrit at Indian academic institutions have caused delays and distractions but, with the new imperatives to Indianize the curriculum, Sanskrit programs are now being developed at several prominent universities. In the near future, university students in India will “have the option of studying Sanskrit texts and the precise science of Sanskrit grammar”. New Sanskrit studies programs are currently being created in response to a proposal circulated by the Ministry for Human Resources and Development (HRD) that encouraged the establishment of Sanskrit at the university level. Responding to the call from the highly controversial HRD minister, Mr. M.M. Joshi, the Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi, one of India’s top universities has developed an “inter-disciplinary programme in Sanskrit”. News has it that students at IIT Delhi are signing up for the elective program.<sup>10</sup>

Leftists scholars who have worked for thirty years to impact future generations of Indians, have expressed horror at the possibility that today’s educated youths, who learned Indian history under the tutelage of a decidedly socialist/secular NCERT generated narrative, would re-embrace a spiritual identity which had been downplayed and depicted as superstitious in most textbook treatments of Hinduism. This feeling of having lost a generation, that the current batch of teens are hyper-nationalists, is a general complaint among leftist educators whom I interviewed in New Delhi during several visits between 1999 and 2001. Hindu Nationalists also lament a lost generation of post-colonial “Indian Macaulayites” (AKA “self-loathing Hindus”) whom they say were indoctrinated by anti-National Marxist analyses.

Ironically, within India, popular grass-roots perceptions are still very grounded in religious and traditional identities, even after five decades of official academic bodies promoting dialectic materialism as the basis for the understanding of Indian culture and history. Today there is a backlash within the majority Hindu community that alleges that Indic traditions have been denigrated and downgraded in academic institutions, including NCERT textbooks. They claim, as they do, that since independence, in an effort to elevate or support sub-national religious groups, the secular socialist<sup>11</sup> historical narrative has subtly disempowered Hinduism and the

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<sup>10</sup> From an article circulated by India Abroad News Service, “At IIT Delhi, S in Sanskrit stands for Science,” by Nirmala Gganapathy. <<http://www.expressindia.com/ie/daily/20010111/ina11029.html>>

<sup>11</sup> Since labeling your opponent in this historiography battle is one of the essential methods for discrediting them, these eminent historians who have guided the “official” Indian historical narrative for over three decades are called “pseudo-secular communists” by the nationalist camp, these “leftist” oriented scholars call themselves “progressives”.

faiths associated with what is called Sanatana Dharma, which include Jains, Sikhs, Buddhists, and other religions that share a distinctly Indian source.

This strategy of historiography was pursued in order to hopefully prevent what Nehru warned democracy could become in India, “the tyranny of the majority”. It was also the result of Indira Gandhi’s efforts to consolidate her power by awarding key positions to leftist scholars in academic institutions such as JNU, and the ICHR (Indian Institute of Historical Research). In this way, she sought to placate the left and keep their support within the Congress fold, thereby co-opting the Communist Party supporters with employment perks and grants.<sup>12</sup> Now, with the BJP in power, there is a changing of the academic guard.

### *Aryans and Ancestral Angst: The Obligation of Identity Construction*

The volatile nature of national identity formation implicates the politics of historiography and impacts the writing and rewriting of historical narratives. Certainly the “rewriting of history” is not unique to India, “history battles” are being waged from Israel and Palestine to the Balkans and the countries of the former Soviet Block. In the USA, during the “History Wars” in the late 1980s and 90s, educators and intellectuals from the liberal left and conservative right fought tit for tat battles in the op-ed pages of major newspapers. As Sam Wineburg, colorfully describes in his recent book, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts*,

The choice between the two seemed absurd but this was exactly what the debate about national history standards had become, ‘George Washington or Bart Simpson,’ asked Senator Slade Gorton (R-Wash.) during the 1995 Congressional debates on this subject: Which figure represents a ‘more important part of our Nation’s history for our children to study?’<sup>13</sup> To Gordon, the proposed national standards represented a frontal attack on American civilization, an ‘ideologically driven anti-Western monument to politically correct caricature.’ The Senate, in apparent agreement, rejected the standards 99-1.<sup>14</sup>

Which history we will teach our children becomes more important than why or how history is taught

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<sup>12</sup> Shankar, Ravi. *More Equal than Others*, Vision Books, New Delhi: 1999.

<sup>13</sup> Cited in Wineburg from: Gary B. Nash, Charlotte Crabtree, and Ross E. Dunn, *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past* (New York: Knopf, 1997), p. 232.

<sup>14</sup> Wineburg, (2001) p. 3.

The rancor that was exchanged during this debate over the U.S. National History Standards<sup>15</sup> is indicative of the seriousness with which proponents of each school of thought view their mandates, as if their very survival was at stake. As Sam Wineburg describes, “In the barroom terms befitting such a brawl, those who wrote the standards were traitors, those who opposed them, racists”. Senator Bob Dole, the 1996 Republican presidential candidate stated that the “national standards were the ‘handiwork of people worse than external enemies’.” Those supportive of the new National History Standards pointed out that these kinds of paranoid comments were “driven by latent fears over a diverse America in which the ‘new faces [that] crowd[ed] onto the stage of history ruin the symmetry and security of older versions of the past’.”<sup>16</sup>

In Indian historiography a similarly contemptuous *mêlée* has erupted around what would otherwise seem like a rather dry intellectual debate among antiquarians discussing the distant past regarding questions about the origin, or geographical homeland of the Vedic Aryans. Were they nomadic tribes originating in the Russian Steppes who came into the Subcontinent over the Khyber Pass in successive waves, beginning around 1700 BCE, where they encountered and possibly displaced a sedentary Indus Valley, perhaps Dravidian culture? Or were the Aryan family groups indigenous to India, as many archeologists and other scholars of Vedic literature now propose?

European philologists “discovered” the rich literary Sanskrit tradition at the end of the eighteenth century; and during the nineteenth century constructed the theory of the Aryan Invasion based on their study of the etymology of common roots of words, which they claim came from a Proto-Indo-European parent language. Indologists mined Vedic literature looking for clues that could prove the Aryans originally came from outside of the Subcontinent. It was reasoned that such a sophisticated language, related to but more refined than Latin, must have come into India from a common Proto-Indo-European source. According to this line of thinking, from its pristine Vedic form, Sanskrit culture gradually degenerated into Hindu idolatry and ritual. Conveniently, the Aryan Invasion provided a pattern of conquests by outsiders, which helped to justify colonial rule over a land that had always been subjugated by foreigners--first the Central Asian Aryans, followed Huns and other groups most notably Turks and Afghans, and

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<sup>15</sup> It is important to keep in mind that these standards were only recommendations, not required.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p. 4.

finally the Europeans. In this way, India was seen as a derivative civilization, always in need of stimulation from outsiders to progress.

The Aryan Invasion Theory has been widely disseminated for over two centuries and still features prominently in most high school and college level World History textbooks in the USA and, notably, in India. It also figures prominently in countries such as Pakistan where the textbooks describe the Aryans as fair skinned invaders who brought the evil caste system to the area that is now Pakistan and enslaved the indigenous dark-skinned Dravidians, who were the original residents of the Indus Valley sites. Almost all Pakistani textbooks add a warning that the descendants of the Aryans [Hindu dominated India] would, if given a chance, also enslave the Muslims of Pakistan. Many contemporary scholars, both in the West and in India, also embrace the invasion narrative, though in a more politically correct, and less overtly nationalistic tone than in Pakistan.

There are, however, many mainstream scholars who refute the Aryan Invasion Theory and have called into question the methodologies of the Western philologists and their modern and post-modern counterparts, the Indologists. Lining up in opposing positions, the “inside India” proponents claim that the theories of Indologists were constructed with a political agenda from an unequal relationship of power--from a position of cultural and economic hegemony. It is argued that scholars who are strongly opposed to considering an indigenous origin for the Sanskrit language employ Euro-centric colonial era paradigms in their analyses, which overlook not only the archeological record, but misread and ignore important references from Vedic literature.

Employing alternative research methodologies and reevaluating passages from the Vedas, scholars who are questioning the Aryan Invasion/Migration<sup>17</sup> Theory have found considerable flaws in the early Indological interpretations. By computing ancient astronomical correlations based on the procession of the equinoxes with seasonal astrological references in the Rg Veda, and bringing into consideration the vast data that has emerged in the past few decades from archeological discoveries at sites along the bed of the dried up Saraswati River and across large

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<sup>17</sup> Over the past twenty years many scholars, such as the well-known Indian historian Romila Thapar, have revised the invasion theory and now advocate the Aryan Migration Theory--that the Aryan tribes came as nomadic pastoralists in waves over the course of several centuries.



areas of Northern India and the Gujarati coastal area, scholars have seriously challenged the Aryan Invasion/Migration Theory.<sup>18</sup>

These proponents of an inside India origin for the Aryans have suggested that the civilization that created the cities, trading routes, and seaports of the Indus/Saraswati culture were in fact, the same cultural group whose predecessors produced the Vedas and are thus the ancestors of the “Harappans” and by extension, ancestors of the contemporary inhabitants of the Indian Subcontinent. This of course could only have occurred if the writing of the Vedas was associated with the urban development of the Indus Valley/Saraswati Civilization. Such a theory pushes the date of the Vedas back several thousand years from what was assumed by traditional Indologists, who dated them from around 1200 B.C.E.<sup>19</sup>

Reinterpreting dated data, and applying new theories and technologies to old historical problems is the usual and accepted methodology of the history profession and serves to further research. The same rethinking of chronology is going on among Egyptologists as they apply new laboratory tests to mortar samples from pyramids and other techniques that can help date the structures more exactly. Even in the field of Egyptology there are wide discrepancies among competing theories. The great difference between Indology and Egyptology is that the vast majority of Egyptians do not have spiritual connections and extant ritual practices that tie them to the ancient religions of the Pharaohs, whereas contemporary Hindu-Indians trace their religious traditions directly to the Vedas.

When it comes to the Aryan Invasion Theory, well established tenured Indologists have little patience for challenges to their claim of an outside of India origin for Vedic Sanskrit. Quite often, in this debate, rather than calling methodologies and textual references into question, a common response against arguments supporting an inside India origin of the Aryans, as strange as it may seem, is to politically discredit the research by accusing the scholars of fascism and or hyper Hindu-centric nationalism. If Hindus themselves were not concerned about this issue

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<sup>18</sup> “Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, famous for his work on the Indian Constitution, as well as his campaign in support of the nation's dalit community noticed the racial overtones underlying the theory and described the British espousal of the Aryan Invasion theory in the following words: ‘The theory of invasion is an invention. This invention is necessary because of a gratuitous assumption that the Indo-Germanic people are the purest of the modern representation of the original Aryan race. The theory is a perversion of scientific investigation. It is not allowed to evolve out of facts. On the contrary, the theory is preconceived and facts are selected to prove it. It falls to the ground at every point.’”  
From: [http://members.tripod.com/~INDIA\\_RESOURCE/sahistory.html](http://members.tripod.com/~INDIA_RESOURCE/sahistory.html)

<sup>19</sup> It is well known that the scholars of that era assumed that the earth was created in 4000 BCE, based on Biblical dating. They extrapolated backwards to date the Vedas. Obviously the earth is billions of years older.

perhaps the opposing debate would be far more dispassionate without the personal attacks based on the perceived need to deconstruct identity politics.

It is widely assumed by many Indologists that the vast majority of scholars who question the invasion paradigm are Hindu nationalists, whom they derisively refer to as “Hindu Nazis”. This seemingly automatic response--unquestioningly labeling scholars as “fascist” sympathizers--simply for asking penetrating questions and posing alternative solutions to an old historical problem--is a common tact within the hotly contested political debate over the content and meaning of ancient history in India. However, there are numerous Western, non-Hindu scholars who are also rethinking the plausibility of the invasion theory, and even they are accused of supporting the political agenda of ultra-right-wing Hindu super nationalist politically motivated scholars. What makes this particular debate so remarkable, besides the vivid and hot hyperbole, is the sheer remoteness of the historical narrative in question.

A simplistic polarized understanding--racist/humanist, patriot/traitor-- emerges from dogmatic attachment to a particular historical perspective. This attitude of “you’re either with us or against us” that has been popularized by President George W. Bush after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, was also expressed by Senator Bob Dole on the floor of the U.S. Senate in 1995 during his very vocal and hyper patriotic condemnation of the multicultural stance he perceived in the U.S. History Standards. This either/or compartmentalization completely ignores the dynamic role of contesting historiographies.

The debate over the Aryan Invasion Theory plays out in India in an almost identical pattern, where many scholars, including Euro-Americans and Indian leftists, have labeled those who question the Aryan Invasion Theory as Hindu Fundamentalists, also referred to by the pejorative term Saffronites, in reference to the ochre color of a saint’s robes and the flag used by the RSS. Scholars who are personally committed or professionally attached to the Aryan Invasion/Migration Theory are quick to accuse proponents of the Indigenous Aryan Theory of promoting racism, rabid nationalism, xenophobia, and other social ills. They claim that if the Saffronites succeed in proving that the Aryans were not outsiders, it will make it easier to vilify Indian Muslims as foreigners.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ironically, many caste conscious (read: color conscious) Hindu elites in India also support the Aryan Invasion theory because they prefer to see themselves as racially distinct from indigenous groups, therefore an Indo-European homeland makes them feel more Caucasian, which they consider to be racially superior to a darker hue of

An article that appeared in an Indian magazine *Frontline*<sup>21</sup> reporting about the 61st session of the Indian History Congress (IHC), held in Kolkata from January 2 to 4, 2001, expressed “concern over attempts to distort history in school textbooks and thus subvert secular education”. The well-known leftist historian, and eminent scholar from Aligarh University, Professor Irfan Habib is quoted in the article where, in mocking tones, he evaluates the historical debate,

According to the Sangh Parivar<sup>22</sup>, the Aryans did not come to India, they were from North India, in fact, more specifically, from Punjab, Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh. This is ridiculous, and it has reached such a point that whoever says that the Aryans came to India are labeled racists and those who say that they were from India are hailed as patriots.

Those who support the Aryan Invasion Theory, such as Professor Habib, are conversely labeled neo-colonial and anti-Indian, and as he mentioned, “racists” by scholars “hailed as patriots” who support the indigenous Aryan model. According to those so-call patriots, historians like Professor Habib are still clinging to old theories, refusing to take note of new discoveries, blinded by a legacy of “pseudo-secular vote bank politics”. Scholars who share Professor Habib’s view that an inside origin of the Aryans is “ridiculous” call advocates of that theory racists, anti-national and against the basic secular, socialist, pluralistic ethos of India. In this discourse there is often very little discussion of evidence based on research, and the rhetoric is diverted to personal attacks and slander. Both camps inevitably label the other anti-national.

Racists and patriots are fighting a contemporary academic battle over an interesting, but remote historical question. Professor Irfan Habib finds the idea of indigenous Aryans to be ridiculous and could have continued his list of dyads to include other pairs of ideologically opposing positions--obscurantist/scientific, traditional/modern, revivalist/progressive. The politically charged nature of this debate has provoked normally sophisticated and erudite Sanskrit scholars, even at institutions such as Harvard, to insinuate that supporters of the “Autochthonous Aryan” theory are fascists or at best New Age adherents to neo-Hindu

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skin tone which they associate with South Indians and tribal peoples. This type of skin tone based racism can be found in all societies and even within families.

<sup>21</sup> “Concern over distortions”, by Suhrid Sankar Chattopadhyay, Volume 18 - Issue 02, Jan. 20 - Feb. 02, 2001. *Frontline* is well known for its staunch opposition to the Sangh Parivar. The editor, N. Ram is quite left leaning, as can easily be seen from his editorials.

<sup>22</sup> The group of organizations that promote a Hindu-centric perspective of Indian history and culture.

obscurantism.<sup>23</sup> However as the following quote from a scholar of Sanskrit from Athens, Greece points out, not all who question the Aryan Invasion theory are Hindu nationalists and there is, more importantly, room for doubt and scholarly discourse.

The situation whereby the Aryans are indigenous and compose the bulk of the [Rg Veda] in the 4th millennium in Saptasindhu is a very simple one and in harmony with the archaeological data in the region. Scholars who think that this simple situation is at odds with their linguistic theories need do no more than reexamine these theories, which necessitate the further theory of the Aryan immigration, which theory generates complexities and problems and is in conflict with the data of archaeology. After all it is not as though these linguistic theories are without problems of their own or that in their present form they harmonize with archaeological data anywhere else in the Eurasian belt involved.<sup>24</sup>

The philologists are ready to defend the Indo-European forts and fight it out with the archeologists, whom they have dubbed Hindu nationalists. These are not just non-Hindu Indians or “secular or pseudo-secular” Hindus who are passionately opposed to reopening the verdict on this antiquarian question, Euro-American scholars are equally threatened and have drawn their ideological battle lines. Kazanas continues,

Instead of emitting such strident emotional cries and witch-hunt slogans, Prof Witzel and his followers had better re-examine their unfounded linguistic assumptions and recall the words of Edmund Leach [published in 1990],<sup>25</sup> who was neither an Indian nationalist technocrat, nor a New-Age writer, but a solid, mainstream pillar of the academic establishment. He wrote: “Because of their commitment to a unilineal segmentary history of language development that needed to be mapped onto the ground, the philologists took it for granted that proto-Indo-Iranian was a language that had originated outside either India or Iran. From this we derived the myth of the Aryan invasions.” Then that provost of King’s College, Cambridge, added that to shift the Aryan invasion theory, which he dismissed contemptuously, “is like trying to cut down a 300-year-old oak tree with a pen-knife. But the job will have to be done one day”.

It is amazing that a vignette from the ancient past can arouse such passion among what are often stereotyped as a rather dull lot: social scientists and humanities scholars. Though a

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<sup>23</sup> See *Frontline*, Dec. 2000.

<sup>24</sup> From internet correspondence of Nicholas Kazanas, a Sanskritist from Athens, Greece, “The RV Date = a Postscript” an answer to Michael Witzel’s comments about the Aryan Invasion and the Indus Valley Civilization. (Used with permission--“Nicholas Kazanas” <aroik@comvos.net>)

<sup>25</sup> Leach, Edmund ‘Aryan Invasions over four millennia’ in *Culture through Time*, (ed) E. Ohnuki-Tierney, Stanford Univ Press, Stanford 1990, pg 227-45.

historical study of evidence about a people who lived five or seven thousand years ago would not seem a likely source of such heated polemics, when it comes to identity formation and laying claims to a biological biography tied to a sacred geography, no other discipline seems to elicit such acrimonious and passionate debates as does historiography.

With due acknowledgment of the virulence with which many Marxist/Westernized/anti-Hindu Revivalist scholars argue their perspective and the importance that they place on maintaining a certain point of view, it is also a given that debate is the source of discovery in the field of historiography. It is this dynamic nature of the discipline that is at the heart of true historical research--an ultimately very democratic process that is constantly pushing the envelope of knowledge by illuminating little known facts and presenting alternative interpretations. Very often scholars outside the field make breakthrough discoveries that create a framework or timetable upon which historical hypotheses can be re-explored and articulated. Except in the case of top-down force-fed historical distortions, such as those imposed on the German people by the Nazis and the Russian people by the Soviets, most alternative historiographies arising from the scholarly population are an expression of changing identities or contesting perceptions of the past.

Changing historical perspectives are not unique to India. For years French history textbooks ignored "France's collaboration with its Nazi occupiers" but since "the mid-1970's, spurred by scholarly histories, the spread of new historical methods and the rise of a less tainted and more curious generation" French textbooks "began to deal more honestly with World War II".<sup>26</sup> Sometimes some historical interpretations may swing too far to the left and seek to validate a vulgar unfolding of society according to Karl Marx. Other times history may be skewed as it is adjusted to accommodate more nationalist interpretations--history can be used to validate almost anything depending on how you use it. Does our historical training teach us humility or hubris? Self-pride or self-importance?

Whether or not you think that William Bennett's and Bob Dole's observations about values education in the USA are based on a neutral reading of the past or politicized polemic hyperbole is determined by your perspective of American history and culture. The same impulses guide members of certain communities in India, many of whom have raised objections about the textbook treatment of particular events in the medieval period. Members of the Hindu, Jain, and

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<sup>26</sup> "Teaching Myths and History", *The New York Times* Editorial, February 17, 1998, pg. A22.

Sikh communities complained to the education ministry that their traditions are given short shrift in government sponsored textbooks, where sporadic violence or negative attributes about their particular faiths are highlighted. Many critics claim that in contrast, Islam is often protected from scrutiny, and the violent deeds of Islamic invaders are “white-washed”.

### *Hindu Revivalism and the Rewriting of History in India*

For several decades after independence, Hindu nationalism lay dormant, yet latent in Indian politics. The RSS, created in 1924 to promote *Hindutva*, the inherent “Hinduness” of Indian nationalism was banned from politics after an ex-RSS member assassinated Mahatma Gandhi in 1948, though the RSS was later cleared by the courts from involvement with his murder. Given the prominence of the socialist agenda in the decades framed by the Nehruvian political culture, the Hindu Mahasabha and other Hindu-centric organizations such as the RSS, were not considered secular much less socialist and especially were castigated for being anti-Muslim, and therefore against the pluralistic ethos of the Indian nation.

During the past two decades, the Hindu Nationalist political agenda has gradually gained popularity among Indian voters. Initially, the BJP was propelled to a wider national prominence as a strong voice protesting the autocratic excesses of Indira Gandhi's Emergency in the mid seventies. The political wing of the Hindu Revivalist movement, the BJP, was looked upon hopefully, if hesitantly, by a broad selection of Indian voters who were tired of the corruption and shortsighted policies of the Congress (I) dominated government. The BJP seemed to possess a more disciplined and less corrupt core of politicians. This shining image was tarnished in the eyes of many progressive voters when the BJP joined the nation-wide campaign of the VHP and the RSS to build a temple on the site of the Babri Masjid.

The assassination of Indira Gandhi<sup>27</sup> in 1984 brought her son, Rajiv to power, with what many consider to have been a sympathy vote, and served to arrest the BJP's political maneuvers. However, many of Rajiv Gandhi's policies, and the corruption that characterized his government

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<sup>27</sup> After Indira Gandhi's assassination, there were terrible anti-Sikh riots in Delhi where three thousand men, women, and children from the Sikh community were murdered. These riots were led by Congress party zealots to avenge the death of Mrs. Gandhi. Though an investigation was conducted that implicated several high-ranking members of the Congress Party, very few perpetrators were ever brought to justice. The anti-Sikh frenzy that followed the murder of Mrs. Gandhi was repeated in gory detail in Gujarat in March of 2002, when angry mobs took revenge on innocent men, women, and children of the Muslim community in retaliation for the murder of 58 Hindu pilgrims who had been burned to death by a Muslim mob. This time the anti-Muslim riots and the violence were blamed, in part, on Gujarat's BJP led government, much like the anti-Sikh riots were blamed on the Congress party.

was fodder for BJP politics in the eighties. One issue in particular not only gained international attention, but vocal condemnation from a diverse collection of groups, feminists and nationalists and other strange bedfellows. The case involved a Muslim woman, Shah Banu, whose husband divorced her after four decades of marriage, and under Muslim civil law was only obliged to provide for her maintenance for three months. She sued to be allowed rights to property and maintenance enjoyed by non-Muslim women in India, bringing to national attention the problems of people living under separate civil codes within one nation.

This case was very high profile because it brought into question the not only the rights of women, minority women in particular, but highlighted one of the BJP's manifestos, the enactment of article 144, the Uniform Civil Code. The Supreme Court ruled in favor of the divorced Muslim woman, granting her the right to live under the general civil code of the nation. They upheld the constitutional right of the woman, as a citizen of India to use the law to avoid the gender biased discriminated she would suffer by being divorced under the more restrictive Muslim Civil law.

In response to protests from conservative Muslim groups to the Shah Banu judicial ruling, Rajiv Gandhi orchestrated legislation that overturned the court order allowing a divorced Muslim woman the same rights as non-Muslim or Hindu women. The secular Congress along with the leftists supported this legislation. Though Congress could be accused of playing "vote bank politics", it is not really typical of "the Left", as we know it in the USA--courting fundamentalists. The Muslim Women's Act of 1986 was a democratic disaster for Muslim women. It was one of the big media events in the late eighties that led to the loosening of the Congress party's hold on power at the center, provided grist for the BJP mill, brought media attention to the BJP claim that the Congress Party played vote-bank politics, and discredited the leftist/secular camp in the eyes of many voters. Rajiv Gandhi's assassination extended the Congress party's hold on power in Delhi thorough the early nineties.

On December 6, 1992, thousands of Hindus, politicized by ten years of efforts by the Sangh Parivar, descended on the north Indian town of Ayodhya, on the peaceful banks of the Saryu River, and demolished the Babri Masjid, a mosque that had been built in 1528 on a site that Hindus consider to be the birthplace of Lord Rama (Ram Janma Bhumi). During and after the Sangh Parivar's agitations, the BJP lost some of the support it may have enjoyed among segments of the intelligentsia, though dramatically capturing the imagination of the Hindu masses.

After the destruction of the Babri Masjid and the subsequent riots in which several thousand people were killed across the country, the Congress dismissed the BJP led government in the state of Uttar Pradesh.

The Indian government, in the control of a rapidly weakening Congress party, and the majority of the English media called the destruction of the Babri Masjid the "end of Indian civilization" . . . "The end of freedom and pluralism and universalism". Large numbers of Indian academicians and journalists vehemently condemned the demolition of the mosque as an insult to Hindu ideals, an affront to the Hindu time-honored tradition of tolerance, and a violent challenge to the fourteen percent Islamic minority population. The December 31, 1992, issue of *India Today*, began its lead article, written by Dilip Awasthi, with these words, "The scenes will return, like deranged ghosts, to haunt those of us who were at the graveside to witness the burial of a secular dream".

The conflict that arose among scholars over this issue was a watershed in Indian intellectual parlance and cleaved an intractable divide among colleagues. This debate still stigmatizes those who suggested there might have been a temple at the site as "Saffron" and continues to serve as the signifier of a scholar's intellectual camp: the Saffronites versus the Secular/Socialists. Depending on who is describing the debate it is either nationalism vs. neo-colonialism, obscurantist vs. rational, archeological data vs. political correctness, anti-Islamic vs. secular, patriotic vs. anti-national, fascist vs. progressive, pluralistic Hindus vs. pseudo-secular Macaulayites, etc. There was and is very little middle ground and no space for discussion.

In all fairness it must be said that during the controversy and even after the mosque's demolition, the scholars who supported the pre-existence of an 11<sup>th</sup> century temple at the site came forward with data and tried to meet with the committee formed to protect the Babri Masjid. The supporters of the Babri Masjid Action Committee ultimately refused to examine the data and kept the debate on the politicized polemical level. It has been almost ten years since the destruction of the Mosque, but to date, the inscriptions and other archeological evidence recovered from within the walls of the Babri Masjid have not been examined by scholars representing the "secular/socialist" camp. There has been a complete lack of engagement not only with scholars from the opposing camps but even with the available evidence presented by various scholars such as B.B. Lal and B.R. Grover. Any research that supports the pre-existence of a temple on the site of the mosque is labeled communal and dismissed without consideration.



Even though most of the reports about the BJP published in the West, either in newspapers or scholarly articles, are critical, and tend to parrot clichés coined by Indian leftists, such as Saffronization, many of the social issues and political policies promoted by the Hindu-centric groups, or Sangh Parivar, gained popularity in the eighties. Ultimately, these issues, several of which are discussed below, brought the BJP to power at the center in 1998.

The BJP's mentors and associates, the RSS (Rashtriya Swyamsevak Sangh) and the VHP (Hindu Vishwa Parishad) look critically at what is perceived as the "decline of Indian civilization". They have a burning desire to promote and defend Indic cultural traditions, which, according to them, have been subjected to anti-Hindu intellectual agendas and exploitative economic forces that caused Indian society to constrict and lose sight of Hinduism's greatness. This perspective has been the fuel in the current reassessment of historical narratives.

NCERT textbooks have been roundly criticized by BJP officials and appointees who claim that they are based on social science models situated within the discourse of colonially tainted interpretations driven by Marxist teleology. This discourse necessarily condemns Brahmans as selling unnecessary services at exorbitant rates; it implicates Tantricism as superstition; it relegates indigenous spiritual expressions to "dying traditions". It seeks, according to its distracters, to create divisions among the indigenous Indic traditions in order to disconnect the various paths and sects within Hinduism. These critics complain that the Congress supported leftist intellectuals have represented Sikhism, Buddhism, and Jainism, much less Shaivism, Bhakti, and other Indic traditions as creeds at odds with one another, thereby creating divisions that separate the indigenous faiths and make them in to fragmented minority groups within their own nation.<sup>28</sup>

This fear of fragmentation is not only a figment of Hindu-centric paranoia. There have been several law cases and official pronouncements that can substantiate some of these arguments. In 1992, the National Commission for Minorities Act listed Muslims, Christians,

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<sup>28</sup> In an article in *The Hindustan Times*, which will be discussed again in the section "Saffron Archeology", Harbans Mukhia, a well-known "Progressive" historian from JNU wrote, "The tradition of looking at history in India in terms of conflict of religions and sects goes back to hoary days: within the fold of the Hindu religion, between the Vaishnavites and the Saivites; between the Hindus and the Jainas and the Buddhists; between Brahminical Hinduism and ethnic groups, derisively referred to as the *dasyus*, and so forth" (original emphasis).. (Sunday march 19, 2000, page 15). Indo-centric scholars would emphasize that these sects within the Hindu fold have co-existed for millennia with minimal conflict, and that there are more similarities between Vaishnavites and the Saivites and Hindus and Jains than there are differences.

Sikhs, Buddhists and Parsis as minority groups.<sup>29</sup> In 1997, the Minorities Commission was considering designating Jains as a minority group. The leaders of the Jain community organized several meetings and issued statements and a notification to the government, stating,

Amongst the main religions followed by the Hindus of this country are the Vedic religion, the Jain religion, the Baudha religion and the Sikh religion. Thus the correct, clear and unambiguous position is that people of this country should correctly be described as Hindus, following various religions and one section of Hindus follows the Jain religion.<sup>30</sup>

Another issue that has been raised by the Sangh Parivar is that policies created by previous governments, which they feel favor minority establishments such as schools and hospitals, have put Hindu educational and religious institutions at a disadvantage. They are critical of Article 30 of the constitution, which through judicial interpretation has given special treatment to minority institutions.<sup>31</sup> The government exercises considerable influence in Hindu institutions, such as schools and temples, so much so that twenty years ago, the Rama Krishna Mission in West Bengal petitioned the court to be declared non-Hindu so that they would have minority privileges in matters of “establishing and managing their educational institutions, [since those run by minorities] are immune from government directives, rules or laws”.<sup>32</sup> The Sangh Parivar feels that the constitution should give equal treatment to all religions whether minority or majority.<sup>33</sup>

They are also critical, as mentioned regarding the Shah Banu case, of the fact that different religious groups in India live under different legal codes. They would like to see the enactment of Article 144, the Uniform Civil Code. They claim that if all Indians lived under the same laws, it would help to bring the citizens together. The policies of the BJP are designed to counter what they call “pseudo-secularism” and “vote bank politics” that have, according to their

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<sup>29</sup> Article 30 of the Indian Constitution gives designated minority groups special privileges in establishing religious and educational institutions--many benefits can be had from obtaining “minority” status.

<sup>30</sup> from a letter by Jain Acharya Ramsurishwarji, quoted in the *Organiser*, August 31, 1997

<sup>31</sup> Article 30 states: (1) All minorities, whether based on religion or language, shall have the right to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice. (2) The State shall not, in granting aid to educational institutions, discriminate against any educational institution on the ground that it is under the management of a minority, whether based on religion or language.

<sup>32</sup> *The Hindustan Times*, Editorial, March 11, 2002.

<sup>33</sup> They would prefer that Article 30 stated: (1) Every section of citizen, whether based on religion or language, shall have the right to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice. (2) The state shall not, in granting aid to educational institution, discriminate against any educational institution on the ground that it is under the management of any section or citizens based on religion or language.

perspective, unfairly discriminated against the majority population. Obviously, enough Indians agreed with the BJP to bring them to power in 1998.

*Conflicts and Controversies: No Middle Ground in Indian Historiography*

At the core of the conflicts and controversies in the meaning of the past, lie systemic differences in orientations towards historiography between competing paradigms. In the “Western model”, from which Marxism and other Weberian-type “development” and “modernizing”<sup>34</sup> theories have arisen, the ancient past is something alien to be studied as “isolated projects”<sup>35</sup> Enlightenment and Post-Enlightenment scholars saw the past as primitive and irrational, “as something from which to escape, in Collingwood's words, [as] ‘sheer terror [and] devoid of all positive value whatever’. [W]hen gauged against the standards of the present, it failed to measure up”.<sup>36</sup>

The ancient Mediterranean and European cultures are represented as the remote roots of Western artistic and political traditions, while at the same time they are trivialized as superstitious and primitive, particularly because of their polytheism in a modern world where monotheism is represented as the pinnacle, or the final unfolding of religious thought. The ancient Greek, Roman, and even Celtic and Egyptian societies, though considered the seminal sources of western civilization and to have possessed philosophies and produced artifacts indicating remarkable levels of cultural and scientific sophistication--“our ancestors”, are often represented as socially cruel and barbaric. Accordingly, these early societies are attributed with having little value for “human rights”, “universal franchise” and other attributes of enlightened post Renaissance Euro-American societies.

In the West, “when the past is presented in chronological order, it is prioritized [and] only the post-Renaissance past appears relevant to the present; the earlier past is presented . . . as an

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<sup>34</sup> According to categories enumerated by Gerald Larson, in *India's Agony Over Religion*, (Albany: State University of New York, 1995), the “Modernizing-Secularization Theory” is represented by the work of liberal social scientists such as Durkheim and Weber and a long list of scholars including Habermas, neo-Hegelian historians and the Frankfurt School--a diverse group, who all share the perspective that modernization leads to the secular “disenchantment of the world”. These development idealists envisioned a process of progress, culminating in a rational, just society. Modernization is predicated by a certain liberal, scientific orientation centered on capitalism and/or democratic socialism that can lead less developed, more traditional societies, on a “trajectory of future-oriented development”.

<sup>35</sup> Kumar, Krishna. “Children and History,” *Learning from Conflict*, Tracts for Our Times Series # 10: Hyderabad: Orient Longman Limited, 1996, p. 25.

<sup>36</sup> Gilderhus, Mark T. *History and the Historians*, New Jersey: Printice Hall, 1992, p.34.

object of curiosity". The Indian perception towards history is diametrically different. "The ancient and medieval periods are presented in a manner which ensures that they carry the same aura of relevance to the present as the modern period does.<sup>37</sup> [...] The message of an underlying continuity is explicit . . . and imparts to the nation-state a civilizational heritage which is historically continuous".<sup>38</sup>

This inherent difference in orientations and assumptions is illuminated when we take into consideration that in the West, the compass assumes the viewer is oriented towards the North Pole.<sup>39</sup> In Sanskrit, the terms for the points of the compass assume that the viewer is facing east. *Puurva* means not only east, but, forward, preceding, initial, and can even mean ancient and is used to refer to that which is at the front or ahead. Obviously, when facing east, the South is on the right, so *Dakshina* means both south and right and can also mean honest and sincere, righteous. Similarly the word used for the direction north, *Uttara*, assumes that the North is on the left. *Uttara* is used to mean both left and north and can also mean the other, the answer, the final conclusion. In the Indian context, if facing East, the Himalayas are ofcourse on the left, so *Uttara* can also mean high and lofty, such as the mountainous state in northern India, *Uttara Anchal*, literally the high region or zone. *Pashchima* is the word for west and is related to the Sanskrit word *Pashchaat* which means afterwards, behind, subsequent. The directional orientation on the points of this reoriented compass suggest that we must see things differently, adopt a different world-view, face east so to speak, if we wish to enter sympathetically into an understanding of indigenous historical perspectives of ancient, medieval, or modern Indian History.

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<sup>37</sup> Hindu-centric historians would argue that in many treatments, the "Medieval" or "Muslim Period" is stressed at the expense of the "Ancient" or "Hindu Period". They point out that the majority of India remained Hindu, even during the "Medieval Period" and thus calling it the "Muslim Period" is elitist and discounts the majority population. Others, such as Prof. Krishna Kumar, tend to use a more "progressive" analysis, and equate the ancient and medieval periods, stressing the composite culture created by a thousand years of Islamic military and political supremacy. Hindu oriented scholars would emphasize the "Ancient Period", describing the Indus/Sarasvati Civilization and the Aryan/Vedic Period as early expressions of a continuous civilization--temporarily stymied by the imposition of Islamic rule. They would add that Islam had little impact on Hindus in India other than in fashion and food and that the faiths remained distinctly defined and at their core little syncretism occurred except superficially, such as Hindus worshipping at Sufi shrines and Muslims celebrating seasonal festivals such as Vasant and Holi.

<sup>38</sup> Kumar, Krishna (1999) p.25-26.

<sup>39</sup> Symbolically, like the trajectory of the sun's travels, the West implies the direction of the future and by extension the direction of death and the unknown.

### *Labels in Academia: Hyping History in English Language Dailies*

Throughout this discussion about the rewriting of history in India and the resulting political controversies, I have tried to fairly present the perspectives of Indo-centric scholars and the views of officials and spokespersons associated in some way with the Hindu Revivalist phenomenon. I have taken this tact because most political and academic discussions of this topic in the West use a predetermined negative slant. Many scholars who specialize in “South Asian Studies” have a very negative preconceived notion of the “Hindu revivalist movement” in particular, and strangely enough, also towards Hinduism in general, especially as “Hindu India” interfaces with modernity in the socio-political realm.

This stance of predetermined negativity is a phenomenon that can be seen among many Western scholars studying Hindu socio-cultural movements in contemporary India. Many Western scholarly institutions have organized conferences, respected professors have written books and edited volumes about the rise of Hindu Nationalism.<sup>40</sup>

For well over a decade Western scholars of South Asian Studies have written about the motivations, the activities, and the effects of Hindu Revivalism on various groups such as women or diasporic Hindus, and its impact on traditions and institutions, such as secularism, pluralism, and education. However, these anthologies and conferences very rarely if ever include articles and/or presentations by members of the group under study, even though these Hindu nationalist “subjects” are educated, articulate members of a modern, literate society. There are certainly many brilliant scholars in India who could represent the non-Marxist, “indigenous” point of view regarding the history and study of India. As a rule, however, their arguments and analyses are completely ignored-- except when short excerpts are quoted out of context.

This absence of Hindu voices in the academic treatment of Hindu Revivalism among colleagues in Departments of South Asian Studies is one of the reasons that in my studies I have given the topic a broader consideration, allowing agency to the subject, without the usual automatic condemnation. The issues in this debate, what should school children learn and why and how history textbooks change, are left out in most critiques. In the popular media and in Western academia there are very few dispassionate analyses of major issues supported by the

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<sup>40</sup> In an email communication, Vishal Agarwal wrote: “Any act of self-assertion of Hinduism, or even a questioning of some paradigms of Indology is enough to draw labels like ‘RSS supporter’, ‘Hindu Nationalist’, ‘Hindu Fascist’ etc. One can browse through the RISA-L or the Indology lists to see how so many Indian scholars have had to clarify that ‘I have never been a supporter of RSS and VHP’. Why should Indians and Hindus have to undergo Agnipariksha again and again?” (Agnipariksha means test by fire.)

BJP, such as empowering the *Panchayat* system and giving local governing bodies more autonomy, examining basic democratic problems like the uneven application of the Uniform Civil Code (Article 144), or even their efforts to combat terrorism before and after September 11, 2001. The motives and methods of the BJP are inevitably referred to as hard-line or right-wing, when in fact, as will be discussed below in the brief section titled “Left Versus Right May Be Wrong”, many of the policies and positions of the current government are more democratic, conciliatory, environmentally friendly, and amazingly, in some important ways, less communal than those of previous Congress led governments.

The BJP proposed changes in the social studies curriculum have generated vociferous and at times hysterical and libelous condemnations. Amid unqualified accusations of “Saffronization” and “Talibanization”, indiscriminate and unbridled charges of Fascism are made time and again, but in each critique that I have read, both in the popular media and internet scholarly discussion groups such as H-ASIA, specific objections to actual content are very rarely discussed. Just the fact that the BJP is in power and appointing scholars more sympathetic to their view of Indian history is enough to draw accusations of Fascism and predictions of the death of Indian democracy and the murder of India’s historic pluralism--the destruction of the well-documented diversity in India’s often contested unity. The actual policies of the BJP led NDA (National Democratic Alliance<sup>41</sup>) government are rarely investigated; few concrete reasons are brought forth as to why their proposed changes in history textbooks are objectionable. Just the fact that changes were proposed by the BJP is enough to make them suspect, regardless of their merit.<sup>42</sup>

In most writings about the topic in newspapers such as *The Hindu*, or in lectures delivered abroad by Marxist historians invited to speak at US universities<sup>43</sup>, or at protests organized by the opposition, sensationalized politics are stressed rather than the details of the documents or the research under dispute. Similarly, in most treatments found in Western academia and in newspapers in both the USA and in India, broad assumptions are made based on

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<sup>41</sup> a coalition of two dozen parties

<sup>42</sup> One vivid example of this is the refusal on the part of the Judge to read the newly written Class XI NCERT textbook before he issued the order that it should be withheld from publication. This court case will be discussed in detail below.

<sup>43</sup> K.N. Panikkar, a Marxist historian who’s volume of the *Towards Freedom* project was recalled, was invited to The University of Texas at Austin in November 2000 to deliver a lecture about the negative impact of the BJP’s policies on historiography in India. His speech is discussed below.

conjecture without a thorough examination of the curriculum documents, without ever reading the new, “indigenized” textbooks. This overarching criticism, with an anti-Hindu Revivalism prejudice, is also used to dismiss archaeological evidence, wherein the critics will not even refer to the data.<sup>44</sup> Because of this predominance of predetermined negative discourse about the issues, I have made an effort to show that there are two sides to this debate and the arguments put forth by officials and scholars involved with “alternative historiography”<sup>45</sup> in India have been highlighted without the usual lack of objectivity or provocative pejoratives such as “Saffron Brigade”.

This “Hindu Revivalist Movement”, as less antagonistic commentators might call it, is invariably criticized by the academic community in the West and represented in the popular media as if it were synonymous with Nazism or the flipside of Islamic fundamentalism. Scholars who study the contemporary “Hindu Revivalist”, movement--that has a broad base of support in India--and its manifestations in the Indian ex-pat community<sup>46</sup> may, if they do not write negative critiques with allusions to fascism, find themselves accused of cavorting with “Hindu-Nazis”. I experienced this during my own travels and travails through academia.<sup>47</sup>

Most Western scholars have followed the lead of the Indian Marxist historians who have predominately guided Indian historical institutions since the 1960s. The internationally esteemed members of this school of left-leaning Indian scholars consider themselves to be in direct opposition, in fact the last hope to hold back the rising tide of indigenous, regional models (read: non-Marxist/Hindu-centric) that are currently impacting the writing of history in India. Many of these leftist scholars, since the fall of the USSR, as mentioned in the introduction, prefer not be

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<sup>44</sup> The politicization of archaeology will be discussed below.

<sup>45</sup> Alternative to the dominate, prevailing historical paradigms, such as the Aryan Invasion/Migration, no Ram temple under the Babri Masjid, Hindus desecration of temples in the medieval period, etc. This discourse emanating from the well-known scholars from JNU, Delhi University, Aligarh University has come under serious scrutiny by scholars with alternative points of view.

<sup>46</sup> known as non-resident Indians (NRI)

<sup>47</sup> Two examples: Several years ago, I was told by a leading professor of "South Asian Studies" at a major University that I “should never report anything positive about the BJP” (Sangh Parivar combine) or I “would never find a job in American academia”. A colleague of mine submitted a manuscript for publication to Oxford University Press, Delhi and they informed her that it was a good manuscript but since it had passages that reflected positively on the Sangh Parivar they could not publish it. However, if she would remove the passages that spoke positively of the activities of the Hindu Mahasabha and the BJP, then OUP would consider publishing her book--otherwise it was against their policy. Graduate students and other scholars are told not to report their findings unless they are negative... publishers will not bring out research that does not jive with the anti-Hindu-Revivalist discourse required in academia. I found this to be more of a challenge to bring out those voices and see what they advocate instead of rejecting their positions without examination as is often the case

to called Marxists, and have begun to use the term “progressive”<sup>48</sup> to define their ideological and historical orientations. They can, as a group, be very antagonistic towards scholars who use a non-Marxist analysis or an Indian-nationalist stance, such as archaeologists who do not share their theoretical constructs.<sup>49</sup>

They have used their hegemony in intellectual institutions in India to exclude scholars of different schools of thought. This is well documented. I saw plenty of proof of this institutional hegemony; it is discussed at length in the longer version of this study . However, though many would deny their Marxist affiliations, such as Romila Thapar, ironically, she admitted that she “privileged the Marxist paradigm for the good of the nation”. SAHMAT a vocal leftist trust in Delhi, often publishes her works along with pamphlets and books by K.N. Panikkar and others.

For decades this small core of historians held the fiduciary reigns on historical research and managed to ostracize those who did not embrace their particular interpretation of Indian history or share their philosophical construct about the purpose of historical interpretation in the Indian context. It is this group of scholars who authored the NCERT textbooks that were in circulation for almost three decades. It is also these very same scholars who have raised the most vocal objections to the changes made in the NCERT curriculum and to the publication of new textbooks, much less their continued critiques of the Archaeological Survey of India and other historical research that does not meet their approval.

The very bitter and on-going historiography debates between the leftist intellectuals and their intellectual “others”, an amorphous group composed of a broad range of non-Marxist social scientists, became one of the most fascinating focal points in the examination of the politics of historiography in India. The vocal core of the leftist intellectuals are represented by a distinguished group of eminent scholars working at several prestigious institutions such as Aligarh Muslim University, JNU (Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi), and also Delhi University, as well as academic institutions in other states, particularly in West Bengal and Kerala, whose governments have long been dominated by political parties associated with

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<sup>48</sup> Through the years in many countries, the word “progressive” has been appropriated as a political term by groups on the left and the right.

<sup>49</sup> For instance, famous and prolific historians such as R.C. Majumdar have been discredited by this Marxist school of historians because they are too nationalistic. As Dr. Tanika Sarkar told me, “Indians have not been taught the evils of nationalism’. The NCERT textbooks that were in use for thirty years did not promote Indian nationalism, and there are many patriotic Indians who would like for the textbooks to offer a more sympathetic perspective of Indian, and especially of Hindu history to the nation’s school children.



Marxist/Communist philosophies. Members of this group of elite leftist intellectuals have traditionally peopled key institutions, councils, and committees devoted to the writing and study of Indian history such as the National Council for Education Research and Training (NCERT), where they publish the government sponsored textbooks and the Indian Council for Historical Research (ICHR) an autonomous scholarly body.

Often the intellectuals who have come under criticism from the leftist camp have very little in common with each other except that they were, at some point in their careers, labeled politically incorrect for being in disagreement with “JNU style” socio-historical methodology. In India, this well-known and internationally respected cadre of left-leaning social scientists have positioned themselves as the ideological opposite of the Hindu-centric or “Indian Nationalist/Hindu Nationalist”<sup>50</sup> historians. Many of these non-Marxist “others” have recently found an unprecedented level of support in official institutions that had previously been to a great extent, dominated by historians with a leftist, if not clearly Marxist slant to their work. This is seen as a serious threat to the socialist/secularists who have guided official Indian scholarship since the sixties.

Vijai Kumar Malhotra, a BJP member of the legislature, wrote in an article in *The Hindustan Times* that, the rewriting of history by the “National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) needs to be understood in the context of the desperate struggle for self-preservation by a group of scholars.” Malhotra, explains,

For more than 30 years, historians Romila Thapar, Satish Chandra, R.S. Sharma, Bipan Chandra and others enjoyed such great political backing from the Congress establishment that they convinced themselves that they, and they alone, possessed god’s gift of the ability to interpret India’s past. They operated as a cartel and prevented others from articulating alternative points of view.<sup>51</sup>

Obviously, the above mentioned scholars hold the opposite viewpoint. They have certainly been the most vocal critics of the changes in the social studies curriculum and deletions in the NCERT textbooks, and numerous other historical controversies, several of which are addressed below..

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<sup>50</sup> Many leftist scholars equate Indian Nationalism with Hindu Nationalism, since both glorify the achievements of Ancient India and write history from a perspective that puts Indic traditions in a positive light. In any case, Indian Nationalism, much less Hindu Nationalism, has been discouraged by Marxist historians to the extent that they tend to focus on negative characteristics of ancient India more than on its “glories”.

<sup>51</sup> “Cardinal Principles” by Vijai Kumar Malhotra, December 14, 2001, *The Hindustan Times*;  
<http://www.hvk.org/articles/1201/118.html>

The modern Hindu cultural-social-political revivalist movement is referenced by its detractors as “Hindu Nationalism”, “Hindu Chauvinism”, “Hindu Fundamentalism”, “Right-wing Hinduism”, “Hindu Fanaticism”, “Obscurantist Hinduism”, “Hindu Fascists”, and other pejorative terms. The term “Saffron”, the traditional ochre color of a Hindu holy man’s robes, is used as a retrogressive, pilloried classification, a blanket term inferring all of the above named negative characteristics. I have found one thing to be consistent in the study of Hindutva<sup>52</sup>, anyone who dares to look at the Hindu Revivalist movement with anything but a negative summation is considered Fascist or Saffron. As I write this, the words of a well-known, but for reasons of privacy, unnamed, professor of South Asian Studies return to me “never report anything positive about the Sangh Parivar, or you will never get a university job”. Saffron-balling seems to extend across the planet.

When I interviewed Dr. Ashis Nandy, the well respected and prolific psychologist,<sup>53</sup> in his office in Delhi during the summer of 2000, he laughed and laughed when I told him that one famous scholar, a history professor at JNU, had told me that “Ashis Nandy has become ‘Saffronized’ since he had written that the Indian form of secularism should be reevaluated”. Ashis just laughed and said he thought “it was wonderful...that the Marxists are throwing insults at anyone who dares to contradict their view of Indian society”. He really seemed to enjoy the humor. Giggling behind an unwieldy pile of papers and letters on his desk, he stated that the “Leftists think that theirs is the only correct view and all others are fascists”. It tickled Ashis that, after decades of dominance of the intellectual sphere, now the “politically correct views of the ‘Marxists’ were being challenged and all they can do in response is cry ‘Fascism’ or ‘Saffronization’!”

It amused Ashis that he, a Christian was being placed in the Hindu Nationalist camp!<sup>54</sup> He is of course, not "saffron", whatever that is, but he is enough of an iconoclast and freethinker

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<sup>52</sup> *Hindutva*, or *Hinduness* is usually cited as the philosophical basis for the Hindu Revivalist movement. However Hindutva is not the only source of inspiration for the resurgence of Hinduism and the on-going reassessment of Indian’s role in the world, and India’s past greatness. I hesitate to use the word Hindutva because many Indians who are proud to be Hindu and very patriotic, sharing many of the views of the Sangh Parivar, do not subscribe to Hindutva and are not in any way associated with the RSS or VHP.)

<sup>53</sup> Ashis Nandy was born a Christian in West Bengal.

<sup>54</sup> In June 2002, when the BJP nominated the famous missile scientist, and very patriotic and secular Indian, Abdul Kalam to be the new President of India, the left parties opposed his candidacy, claiming that he would become saffronized and could turn into “another Hitler”. They argued “making the missile scientist President at a time of tension on the borders would send a wrong message to the international community”. (From an article by Shahid K Abbas, “Left fears Kalam may lack political savvy”, cited from <http://www.rediff.com/news/2002/jun/13prez.htm>).

to find amusement in the demise of an intellectual dynasty... and he appreciates Indian culture... that is the key. Academicians who chastise him and call him saffron are what those "dreaded Hindu Nationalists" call "Self-hating Macaulayites--an insult that may reverberate among the Oxford Cambridge educated school of elite Indian Leftist historians.

Not all scholars take the negative labeling as lightly as does Dr. Nandy. In an article, "A Faith Besieged"<sup>55</sup>, the sociologist,

T.N. Madan, emeritus professor at the Institute of Economic Growth, Delhi, says he feels the 'burden of Hindu identity'. How? 'I feel burdened by the calls to glory of the Hindu right and equally oppressed when secularists become suspicious of you if you are interested in Hindu culture,' he says.

The same article, quotes anthropologist Shail Mayaram,

The media's politics of labeling ... have a bad effect. The papers keep talking about the saffron brigade. Historically, saffron is the colour of renunciation. Now you have taken away the colour from the believing Hindu and given it a pejorative ring'.

Over the past two decades the term "Saffronization" has been in use, coined to refer to ideas and programs supported by groups associated with the Hindu Revivalist Movement. This word, and variations such as "Saffronized" or "Saffron Brigade", has gained popular usage among leftist scholars and is employed constantly in the Indian English newspaper media as a code for majoritarian religious intolerance or Indo-centric cultural chauvinism. The term has been disconnected from its source and has been over used. It seemed to have mainly found use as

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Obviously, it is because Abdul Kalam is involved in India's defense and is well-known for his patriotism, that the BJP nominated him. In another article, E. Jayakrishnan quotes "CPM Politburo member Sitaram Yechury" who said that "Kalam represents the shrill militant nationalism of the BJP [...] when asked about the Left's refusal to back the man half the nation considers 'an Indian hero' [Yechury responded] 'As far as we are concerned he is the candidate of the ruling coalition'." From this debate it becomes clear that politicians on the left are against all BJP policies and appointments based not on merit but on a simple political criteria that anyone who will accept a nomination from the BJP must be in collusion with Fascists. Yechury continued, "Politically, whatever may be Dr Kalam's credentials, we have the right to oppose him. After all, he does represent the militant nationalism of the BJP" <<http://headlines.sify.com/945news1.html?headline=Kalam~symbolises~BJP's~militant~nationalism:~Left>>. In fact, Dr. Kalam represents *Indian nationalism*, which has been his trademark in his commencement speeches and other writings, praising India's contributions to world culture and prodding his fellow citizens to live up to that great heritage. However, in an article sent via email by South Asia Citizens Web, an organization that forwards leftist and secular/socialist news articles and petitions, Praful Bidwai wrote that Abdul Kalam was the "RSS' 'poster-boy Muslim'," (SACW #1, 16 June 2002, see: <http://www.mnet.fr/aiindex>). There is obviously a double standard here. Akbar, the left's favorite historical Indian Muslim, is lauded for being ecumenical and secular because he embraced elements of the indigenous traditions. However, these same folks who have built up Akbar as the father of Indian cultural integration, are criticizing Abdul Kalam for his expressed appreciation of India's Hindu culture and heritage.

<sup>55</sup> "A Faith Besieged", by SOUTIK BISWAS, SANJAY SURI, S. ANAND, *Outlook India*, July 8, 2002, <http://www.outlookindia.com/full.asp?fodname=20020708&fname=Cover+Story&sid=1>

a term with negative referents particularly among leftist elites and in segments of the English language media.<sup>56</sup>

During the eighties, the generally agreed upon term to describe the BJP was to call them Fascists, or “Hindu Fundamentalists”. The term fundamentalist was gradually discarded because of the inherently religiously diverse and non-dogmatic nature of Hinduism wherein there are no absolutes or essential “fundamentals” that practitioners were obliged to follow to remain in the “Hindu fold”. So the word “fundamentalism” soon seemed inapplicable. After several years of using the word “fascist”, no one really believed that the BJP was actually fascist--Swadeshi Jagaran Manch<sup>57</sup>, sarva dharma samabhava<sup>58</sup>, the Uniform Civil Code<sup>59</sup>, and many of the mottos and motives of the BJP simply cannot be classified as fascist ideas. So this term has gradually grown out of use though it still crops up in the most vitriolic critiques by commentators such as the journalist Praful Bidwai and the historian K.N. Panikkar..

The “anti-Hindutva brigade” soon settled on the word “saffron” which is the color of the flag of the RSS. Saffronization is used as a marker to signify the prejudice that progressives or leftists have against the Hindu Revivalist Movement or, the dreaded “Saffron brigade”. For this group of educated Indians in predominantly urban areas who hailed from Congress party and/or leftist political backgrounds, the term “saffron” came to be synonymous with Hindu fanaticism and was a blanket term to describe all the policies and parts of the Sangh Parivar, the BJP, RSS, and VHP. And importantly, it was the term used to brand al in the English media, there has been

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<sup>56</sup> In Hindi language newspapers, the term used to translate the negative implications of the word 'Saffron' is “the word 'bhagawa,' [which refers to] the color of the RSS flag as well as flags that fly over Hindu temples. In Hindi, Saffronization is generally translated as 'bhagwakaran,' which for most Hindus has a positive ring. Sometimes 'kesarikaran' is used [...]. In either case, the Hindi (or other translations) have no negative connotation in most people's minds. If anything it denotes positive values. So it is not surprising that their propaganda is having the opposite of the intended effect. Most people feel it is a good thing”. (From email communication with N.S. Rajaram, who has published many books presenting alternative views of Indian history.)

<sup>57</sup> Self-sufficiency awakening movement (literally, swa = self-created or one's own, and desh = land or place and by extension, swadeshi means domestic or indigenous production models). The Swadeshi Jagaran Manch was formed in 1991 by the RSS to counter the economic globalization represented by the IMF and World Bank and protect traditional Indian trades and products from predatory transnational corporations. Information about the *swadeshi jagaran manch* can be found at: <http://www.rss.org/SWADESHI%20JAGARAN%20MANCH.htm>, and <http://www.swadeshi.org/>. The message of the Swadeshi Jagaran Manch is very in line with the basic arguments of leftist ideologues, irregardless, they condemn it as a front for globalization and a misuse of Gandhi's ideas.

<sup>58</sup> Literally, “all religions are the same” -a famous Sanskrit saying often quoted by members of the Sangh Parivar to defend their perspectives of religious pluralism in India.

<sup>59</sup> When the BJP came out in support of Article 144 of the constitution--the yet unenforced Uniform Civil Code--many groups such as Communists, feminists, and those who traditionally considered themselves left of center, backed off in their support for the implementation of this statute, so as not to be on the same side of any issue as the Sangh Parivar. When the BJP made pronouncements about elimination of caste, the

the subtle realization that the majority of people in India feel a kinship with the word "saffron". Most Hindu Indians actually see it as a positive indicator of Hindu culture. It is the uppermost color on the tri-colored Indian flag representing the Dharmic traditions of the subcontinent and actually has positive connotations for the vast majority of Indian citizens. In addition, the term Saffron had no significant referent among the general population in the West, and only had any connotations at all within a limited group of non-Indian academicians who study South Asia.

The most recent term currently in use to insult and dehumanize those who are advocating policies of the present government is the term, "Talibanization"<sup>60</sup>. The use of this term was popularized as an insult for their political foes by the Indian opposition parties along with various leftist politicians and intellectuals when the Taliban destroyed the thousands year old statues of Buddha in Bamiyan, Afghanistan in March of 2001. Naturally, many groups of Hindus and Buddhists protested this wanton destruction. However, the "leftist intellectuals" and politicians in opposition to the BJP, including many editors in the English media, seemed to condone the destruction of the ancient Buddhas, as an act somehow vindicated if not validated by Quranic injunction, but most importantly, as an act that paled in comparison to the destruction of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Babri Mosque.

Because of their opposition to the Sangh Parivar, many people may have inadvertently dismissed the Taliban's destruction of world heritage treasures by comparing it to the demolition of the Babri Masjid by Hindus in 1992. Importantly, Hindus have no Vedic compunction to destroy the sacred places of non-Vedic religions. For many Indian leftist intellectuals, most of the problems in the country arise from the attachments that their fellow Indians, especially Hindus, have to their ancestral religious traditions. They despise the Hindu Revivalist Movement and now, all international terrorism, including the destruction of the World Trade Center buildings as well as the destruction of the Bamiyam Buddhas, is an opportunity to compare the BJP to Islamic extremists, even though the BJP, as well as their more militant colleagues such as the VHP, are far more middle of the road than Al Qaeda or the Taliban. The BJP is, nonetheless, hated by Indian leftists as much as most Americans despise Osama bin Laden.

Now the name "Taliban" is liberally used to apply to the BJP and the phrase "Talibanization of education", stated repeatedly even in the Lok Sabha, has become a common

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<sup>60</sup> A sensationalist article appeared in The Hindustan Times, on November 25, 2001, "Talibanising our Education". by Vir Sanghvi, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/nonfram/251101/VIR45.asp>

headline concerning any curriculum policy or directive of the present government. After September 11, 2001, no contemporary boggy is worse than the Taliban's dreaded Ministry for Fostering Virtue and Suppression of Vice. The opponents of the BJP have now latched on to this Taliban analogy as a front-page insult. M.M. Joshi, the BJP's controversial minister of the Department of Human Resource Development (HRD) is often compared to the Taliban's hard line Mullah, Sheikh Omar, though his policy suggestions, such as encouraging colleges to teach Sanskrit, are far from the tyrannical edicts and fatwas issued by Mullah Omar and his minions.

Since September 2001, the phrase "Talibanization" (of education) has become the vogue and is being used repeatedly in critiques of political and academic controversies such as the deletion of what were called "objectionable phrases" from NCERT textbooks in October 2001, and the Supreme Court case holding up the publication of the new NCERT textbooks in April 2002, as well as the on-going yet unresolved ICHR controversy concerning the recall of the two volumes of the Toward Freedom Project.

Today there are many up and coming scholars who have now found the unprecedented academic space and professional support to question the dominance of Marxist analyses in the writing of Indian history, unfortunately, their ideas are dismissed and insults are often the only retort. As well, there are many established scholars such as the new chair of the ICHR, Dr. Narayanan, who for many years published his papers in anthologies along with the leading leftist historians, such as R.S. Sharma, but now, because they have come out with critiques of Marxism in the understanding of Indian history, or other politically incorrect research, they are considered to have been co-opted by the saffron brigade.

For several decades, political appointees nominated to chair institutions such as the ICHR (Indian Council for Historical Research) and the ICSSR (Indian Council for Social Science Research) as well as the NCERT (National Council for Education Research and Training) tended to be from the left-leaning schools, Nehruvian socialists, Marxists, Communists—appointees of the Congress Party, such as the famous historian Irfan Habib. After the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) came to power at the center in 1998, many of the scholars who had been favored by the Congress-led governments were not reappointed to their posts after several consecutive terms, or upon retirement of a bureaucrat, an official more sympathetic to the BJP was appointed. The chairmanships of institutions that had for years been traditional intellectual and scholarly

strongholds of Marxist/leftist social paradigms were suddenly supplanted by the appointment of non-leftists scholars.

Since coming to power in 1998 through alliances with other parties, the BJP led coalition government has made numerous appointments to various boards and directorships of academic institutions. As in the case in all nations, the winning political party has the right to make appointments. Just as George W. Bush appointed oilmen and timber contractors to the Environmental Protection Agency and an Attorney General with a very conservative orientation, so did Bill Clinton appoint individuals to those posts who shared his more liberal social perspectives. All democratic governments appoint individuals who are in line with or sympathetic to the political agenda of the winning party. Such appointments can often provoke condemnations from the press and naturally from the opposition. In India, this uproar is particularly vicious in regards to the appointments of the BJP government wherein scholars and journalists, from an anti-BJP ideological persuasion, are caustic, virulent, and unwilling to even consider that the BJP, like previous governments, has the right to make such appointments.

In this approach of absolute condemnation, there is no room to communicate or compromise. In a country where state jobs and official patronage can make a huge difference in one's standard of living, many scholars are aghast that their own paradigms, which were constructed and implemented during several decades of patronage by previous governments, are now being deconstructed by the new dispensation. This division between camps of intellectuals in India is central to my research and has been discussed in detail throughout this study of the rewriting of history in the Indian Subcontinent. Similar divides exist in Pakistan, Bangladesh, as well as the USA and indeed in all countries that have a school system of any kind.

The BJP's political appointments, though all such appointments are always political, have caused great consternation on the part of those who feel they are no longer able to control the direction of official historiography in India. In response, the scholars who are losing official sponsorship are writing pamphlets, newspaper articles, and holding news conferences to warn their colleagues and countrymen about the dangers of "obscurantist saffron historiography"-- which of course is their perfectly legal right and makes my research all the more juicy. It seems as well, or so I was informed by several non-Marxist scholars, that the "leftist historians have increased their travels to the West to give lectures at universities in order to spread the word about the saffronization of education and the danger posed by 'Hindu-Nazis' to India's secular

institutions”. I attended one such lecture presented by Prof. K.N. Panikkar at The University of Texas at Austin in November, 2000, which is discussed below.

According to the leftist or “progressive” intellectuals I interviewed in Delhi, there is a conspiracy by a rapidly expanding group of communal historians and archeologists who are distorting the historical record to promote a chauvinistic form of ethno-nationalism that is the antithesis of India’s secular, socialist, constitutional democracy. This growing tendency in the academic community and among the majority population in India is, they claim, worse than Adolf Hitler himself. For reasons tied up in their own theoretical constructs about the purpose of history and the obligation of the historian to help guide society towards a particular model, many leftist/progressive historians in India are adverse to writing anything that pays too much positive attention to the civilizational contributions and philosophical and scientific sophistication of the ancient Hindu past, hoping therefore to dilute the culture of the majority population. They are particularly annoyed about “saffron archeology” especially when excavations dig up examples of enduring and culturally specific symbols of Hinduism unearthed at far-flung sites across the Subcontinent—lending credence to the ancientness/cultural continuity orientation of the nationalist historians.

Most controversial and significant to my research is the fear or hesitation on the part of the progressives, formally known as leftists, to *accurately* or vividly portray the medieval period, the early years of the Islamic interface in the Subcontinent. This is also one of the core sore points among historians of the Sangh Parivar persuasion, who claim that textbooks written by leftists, which for over thirty years have been the official textbooks in most government schools in India, “whitewashed the Muslim atrocities” of the medieval period. This topic takes center stage in many of the recent critiques of the government-sponsored textbooks published by the National Council for Education Research and Training (NCERT) in New Delhi.

While I was in India in the spring and summer of 2000, there was a press release from a coterie of leftist/progressive scholars suggesting that there should be a moratorium on archeological excavations into the medieval period because the findings are too easily communalized.<sup>61</sup> Making my research more exciting, for months this intellectual spectacle

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<sup>61</sup> Communalism in the Indian context means something quite opposite than the common interpretation of the term arising from the French Revolution and the Communes, related to the word community, or to commune with nature. In India the word communal has a negative connotation referring to differences and antagonisms between different communities, specifically Hindu and Muslim.



played out in the newspapers with one side making biased assumptions, and hurling the standard insults at the other side.

The intellectual boxing rounds and name calling continues: self-identified Hindu Nationalists, who see themselves as *Indian* Nationalists, are referred to as Nazis, fascists, and fundamentalists by members of the other camp who self-identify themselves as progressives but are called Stalinists and Maoists by their non-Marxist nemeses. When I interviewed Romila Thapar at her home in New Delhi, she said,

Professionally I am very worried about the fact that shoddy scholarship or the lack of scholarship is now beginning to encroach on to the profession and you're beginning to get people talking about things in a way which it wouldn't have happened in the past because there would have been a certain barrier of scholarship which doesn't exist now

I asked her what those barriers were, and she replied "There was a certain requirement of scholarship. You couldn't just get up and come up with wild statements, and be accepted and be treated seriously". I mentioned that the "Saffronites" would say they felt that the Marxist historians had exercised institutional hegemony that acted as a barrier to all other kinds of scholarship. They would also say that the leftists had gone overboard in their interpretations and were mining texts and twisting data to try to prove wild ideas, such as beef eating in Vedic India and the beneficence of Muslim rule. Prof. Thapar warned me not to over-simplify the issue,

You must get one thing straight. This is not a battle between Saffronites and Marxists. You *must* get that straight. Because this is the kind of propaganda that the saffronites are putting out. The people who are opposed to the Hindutva interpretation of Indian History, half of them are not Marxists<sup>62</sup>. More than half are not Marxists and it's not going to hurt the Hindutva interpretation by going on saying that the Marxists have gone overboard.<sup>63</sup> Because there is a whole slew of Indian historians who are writing first rate history but unfortunately are only being read outside India and are not being circulated in schools and colleges in India because of the Saffronization.

Hindu-centric scholars would offer the rejoinder that much of the history that is taught outside of India, and of course the historiography of the Indian Marxist historians, that is taught

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<sup>62</sup> The historians most despised by the "saffron camp" are those associated with Marxist organizations such as SAHMAT or the CPI, for example, R.S. Sharma and K.N. Panikkar. Though Prof. Thapar may not have as many tangible ties to Marxist organizations, her association with historians with these links and her view of historiography, which is essentially the same as R.S. Sharma, Bipin Chandra, et al, and her very vocal and public demeanor, has cast her in with the so-called Marxist camp.

<sup>63</sup> When talking with Prof. Thapar and in reading her articles, it often seems that hurting the Saffronites is more important than dispassionate scholarship.

outside and within India, considers India to be a derivative civilization...that there was hardly anything of importance in the Subcontinent until foreigners brought it. Arun Shourie complains that Marxist historians

have made India out to have been an empty land--filled by successive invaders. They have made present-day India, and Hinduism even more so, out to be a zoo--an agglomeration of assorted, disparate, specimens. No such thing as "India", just a geographical expression, just a construct of the British, no such thing as Hinduism, just a word used by Arabs to describe the assortment they encountered, just an invention of the communalists to impose a uniformity--that has been their stance. For this, they have blackened the Hindu period of our history, and [...] strained to whitewash the Islamic period. They have denounced ancient India's social system as the epitome of oppression, and made totalitarian ideologies out to be egalitarian and just.

This heated rhetoric certainly provides colorful examples of passionate professional positioning about the meaning and function of investigations into the past and their impact on society. It was colorful and interesting, as long as I wasn't personally called a fascist simply for listening to the "saffronized" side and asking the other side to please explain certain imbalances. Yet, even entertaining the Hindu-centric perspective as something worth discussing caused certain historians at JNU and NCERT to ask me if I was a fascist sympathizer. I was told again and again that in their estimation the blossoming Indic orientation in the interpretation of history was invalid, dangerous even. I was warned that anyone who even considered that issues broached by the BJP, such as the unequal implementation of secularism in the Indian context or that possible changes in the narration of history should be discussed, was obviously politically tainted or just plain misguided.

The historiography battles raging in the press were of great interest to my research. There are not only irreconcilable differences, but real hatred between the well established, well respected school of Indian leftists, whom I might add seem to have more access to the popular media, and the other camp composed of several retired scholars and lesser known but, in my opinion, just as well informed professors and lecturers of history in Delhi and in regional universities and colleges. These non-leftists, even if they were well-published octogenarians, were represented by the media and the leftists I interviewed as either "pugnacious upstarts" or "opportunistic retirees from third rate colleges" all because they are Indo-centric intellectuals.

The protagonists and antagonists, depending on your perspective, took themselves and their ideas very, very seriously. Several leftist historians told me that their intellectual world was falling apart and their life's work was being trashed. Many of the historians and scholars on the opposing side were jubilant, their sitting rooms were abuzz, because their ideas were finally getting some notice after five decades of socialist dominance of the intellectual sphere. During several visits I made to Delhi between 1998 and 2001, the tumultuousness regarding the rewriting of history charged the intellectual atmosphere and was discussed daily in not only the newspapers, but the Lok Sabha (India's legislative body) and the tea stalls and coffee shops of the capitol.<sup>64</sup>

[The next sections, not included here will deal with the controversy that erupted when the Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR) recalled two volumes of the Toward Freedom Project in February 2000. The fate of those volumes, as of this writing, is still unknown. Following that, it will continue to look at the BJP government's efforts to change the history curriculum in NCERT textbooks and the subsequent fall out. It will draw materials from the textbooks, curriculum documents, and the media, as well as from interviews with concerned historians and officials. It also deals with the controversies regarding archaeology, looking at some of the contests that have caused Marxist historians to denigrate the ASI (Archaeological Survey of India) and especially try to discredit the work of renowned archaeologists such as B. Lal because their findings are not consistent with the Marxist school of historiography.]

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<sup>64</sup> This very public debate is not necessarily as popular a topic in all parts of India and may find more media attention with the English press in Delhi than in other areas of the country. According to a friend of mine in Chennai, a native of Tamilnadu, the Delhi intellectuals who are so very upset about the "saffronization of education" use words such as "saffronization" because, "They are that much out of touch with the common man [for whom saffron has positive connotations]. When you say 'English speaking elite', you are really just thinking of a bunch of intellectuals (professors and journalists) in Delhi. The entire population of this vocal group, even those in other parts of India, would be at most a few thousands...I don't think we are talking about more than that...which means that this entire debate is micro...that it does not really matter to the average Indian".