TRUTH-TELLING IN MODI’S INDIA AND THE DECLINE OF THE LEFT

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[Colleagues: I apologize in advance for the brevity of this essay. I am a late addition to
the conference and wanted to make some contribution from the standpoint of my field.
AT some point, I would like to develop this into a ‘real’ paper but for now, kindly accept
it for what it is … a conversation starter.]

As we consider various global contexts of our “post truth” era, I would like to
draw your attention to troubling developments concerning the enterprise of history
writing in India. The Hindu nationalist party now in power, the BJP, is promoting an
agenda (known as “Hindutva” or Hindu-ness) aimed at making India an officially Hindu
nation. This involves the suppression of dissent of any kind, especially from secular
intellectuals or members of religious minority communities. An important aspect of the
hindutva agenda is to rewrite history in a way that makes Hindu identity (conceived
monolithically) central to India’s heritage. As the spokesman of the militant Hindu RSS
(Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) organization stated, “the true color of Indian history is
safron and to bring about cultural changes we need to rewrite history.”\(^1\)

The government now decries the “leftist” or “Western” forms of history writing
that have dominated Indian history classrooms, since these have allegedly marginalized,
denigrated or distorted Hinduism. It advocates instead a revisionist history that would
restore Hinduism to the center of a glorious Indian past, while demonizing “foreign
religions,” such as Islam or Christianity, by highlighting their historic crimes against
Indian culture. At one level, this project is no different from any form of jingoistic

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\(^1\) Rupam Jain, Tom Lasseter, “By Rewriting History, Hindu Nationalists aim to assert their
Dominance over India,” Reuters, March 6, 2018.
history writing that champions the achievements of the majority, while naming and scapegoating “outsiders.” What makes this particular form of heritage making unique, however, is the manner in which it invokes the law in India and ideals of multiculturalism in the West in order to advance a Hindu-centric history.

In this brief paper, I first describe instances in which the Government of India or other proponents of hindutva have suppressed intellectual freedom and, moreover, have advanced claims about the past that have no grounding in empirical data. I then describe how despite strident defenses of secularism in India by progressive intellectuals, Hindu nationalists have maintained an onward march toward the acquisition of political power. I conclude the essay by exploring why India’s “left,” which has played such a vital role in defending India’s secular constitution, has been largely ineffective in mounting effective resistance.

Offending Hindu Feelings

Several years ago, Chicago scholar Wendy Doniger was at the center of a controversy concerning freedom of speech. In India, Penguin Press decided not to publish her book, *The Hindus: An Alternative History* because of contents that offended the feelings of Hindus. Penguin’s decision was the result of a lawsuit lasting four years, in which Hindu activists sued the press for its plans to publish the allegedly offensive material. Their case rested on two laws in India (IPC 295-A and IPC 153-A), which prohibit speech that is likely to insult the feelings of members of other communities or incite communal conflict. Among the aspects of Doniger’s book to which the plaintiffs took objection were passages depicting the sexuality of Hindu gods (which builds on a major theme in Doniger’s work, that of eroticism and religion), her portrayals of the role
of animals in Hindu belief, and her revisionist interpretation of the Ramayana, a central epic of Hinduism.²

Penguin’s decision to withdraw the book ignited intense debate in India over the value of freedom of speech vs. the preservation of national heritage. Within academic circles in the United States and Europe, it raised basic questions about the transnational “publics” being impacted by the writing of history and the intersection of history and identity politics. For Hindu radicals, telling “the truth” about the past not only requires a sympathetic treatment of Hinduism, but also a recognition of the victimization of Hindus at the hands of conquering religions such as Islam and Christianity. These religions, after all, came to India on the heels of imperial conquests. That much of the conversions to Islam or Christianity occurred independently of such imperial conquest (either by predating them or by having occurred in regions far removed from centers of imperial power) is irrelevant to the victimization narrative espoused by proponents of hindutva.

The debate over Doniger’s book erupted in 2014, just as Narendra Modi and his Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) were en route to a landslide victory in the general elections. Modi’s campaign won the support of a young electorate through a high tech campaign pledging market growth and an end to corruption. He and his party are also committed to “restoring” the nation’s heritage by promoting Hinduness, or hindutva. In 1998, when the BJP had first come to power, a series of “history wars” were set in motion that resulted in death threats to a number of historians who, like Doniger, were accused of tarnishing Hinduism. The rise of the BJP also sparked a call to rewrite textbooks in public schools. Since the late 90’s the National Council on Educational

Research and Textbooks (NCERT) has dismissed the history taught in history textbooks as being tainted by a leftist agenda. This agenda misconstrues the history of India by failing to properly situate “Hindu civilization” at the center of India’s heritage.

Sometimes it isn’t simply that a scholar has misrepresented Hinduism, but that she or he has failed to duly criticize an “enemy” religion such as Islam. In 2014, Audrey Truschke published a book about the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb. The Mughals, who ruled India prior to the rise of the English East India Company in the 18th century, are often portrayed as having ruled India with a high degree of religious tolerance, especially toward the multitudes of subjects who were non-Muslim. An exception to this rule is Aurangzeb, who is widely portrayed as being intolerant toward non-Muslims, especially Hindus. Truschke set out to show that much of the criticism Aurangzeb has received for his “intolerance” has been exaggeration and additionally, has been informed by the contemporary climate of Hindu nationalism and its demonization of Islam. For writing such a book, Truschke was vilified on Hindu blogs and media controlled by the Hindu Right. She received death threats, calls to ban her entry into India for research, and was sent incendiary hate mail.

One of the first acts of the Modi administration was to appoint Professor Y. Sudershan Rao to chair the Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR). Sudershan Rao has not published a single peer reviewed article in any historical journal; nor has he written a scholarly monograph. He has become known, in some circles, for his interest in spirituality, yoga, and spiritual links between India and Southeast Asia. Among his stated goals for his new role is to demonstrate the historicity of the Hindu epics, the

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Ramayana and the Mahabharata, and to challenge what he calls the “Marxist” influences of those who had previously staffed the ICHR.

As of a week ago, Prime Minister Modi has reconstituted a committee of scholars for the purpose of rewriting India’s history. One of the chief tasks with which he has charged the committee is to find DNA and archeological evidence to support the notion that the descendants of present day “Hindus” have an ancestry traceable to the Indian subcontinent. This is aimed at refuting the theory of the “Aryan invasion,” which traces the origins of Hindu civilization to waves of Indo-European speaking migrants from Persia (known as Aryans). This notion of an “invasion” undermines nationalist claims that they are true “sons of the soil” and should enjoy elevated status above “foreigners”. The vast majority of India’s Muslims and Christians, however, did not descent from migrants but are converts from India’s population. What makes them foreign, and objects of vilification, is the non-Indian origin of their religion and their commitment to propagating their religion on “Hindu soil.”

Another venue in which such politics are being played out are educational institutions in America. Affluent members of the Hindu diaspora have objected to what they consider to be disparaging or inaccurate representations of Hindus in Western (chiefly American) academia.⁴ Their crusade against Western scholars is often predicated on the idea that as non-Hindus, they are in no position to write about the content of Hinduism, in spite of their training in Sanskrit and extensive fieldwork (which often involves mining regional archives in India, kept under the lock and key of inefficiency and mismanagement). Treating Western academicians as neo-Orientalists (à la Edward Said), these self-styled “Kshaitrya Intellectuals” (a “Kshaitrya” is a member of

⁴ See Romila Thapar, “Good Times are Gone,” Outlook India, March 24, 2014.
the warrior caste of India) consider it their duty to “return the gaze” and place established scholars under scrutiny. 5

Some of these crusaders have become quite adept at gaining a platform for their ideas by exploiting American academia’s commitment to multiculturalism and tolerance. In March 2011, for instance, the Religious Life Office at Princeton University hosted a book launch for *Breaking India*, which describes how Western forces, including Marxists, Evangelical Christians, and state officials are all contributing to India’s disintegration. 6 The book is co-authored by Aravindan Neelakandan and Rajiv Malhotra. Malhotra is an Indian American entrepreneur who left a lucrative career in the I.T. industry to found the Infinity Foundation, which is committed to promoting the study of Hinduism. In *Breaking India*, the authors devote considerable attention to the influx of Western funds that are advancing the causes of Dalits (formerly, “untouchables”) in India, and are allegedly being used to induce Dalits to convert to Christianity.

It appears that writing about India’s past in a way that displeases either the Hindu public in India or the Hindu diaspora in the West can result in lawsuits or death threats, not unlike writing about Islam in “the wrong way” can bring forth a fatwa. Rumor has it that it has now become a status symbol to make it on the blacklist of the Hindu Right (a distinction I have not yet achieved).

5 Vamsi Jaluri draws upon this *ad hominem* argument in “The Scholars: An Alternative Story about Wendy Doniger and *The Hindus*, Huffington Post, 2/18/2014; http://www.huffingtonpost.com/vamsee-jaluri/the-scholars-analternati_b_4787082.html

The Demise of the Left

During the 1980’s and 90’s, Hindu nationalism was making significant strides toward entering the mainstream of Indian politics. Their platform of *hindutva* gained traction among India’s bourgeoning middle class, which was benefitting from economic liberalization. The BJP rallied around the cause of reclaiming the historic birthplace of the Hindu god Ram in the city of Ayodhya. On December 6, 1992 large numbers of Hindus carrying picks and shovels entered the compound of the Babri Masjid (in violation of the Government’s orders) and demolished it. The event ignited the worst riots since the Partition of India and Pakistan (1947).

During the years leading up to “demolition day” and subsequently, intellectuals who were significantly influenced by Marxism played a leading role in opposing what they called “Hindu fascism” and in defending India’s constitution. Among them are Romila Thapar, Bipan Chandra, A.G. Noorani, Sumit Sarkar, Aijaz Ahmed, K. Balagopal, and many others. Some of these scholars are also activists, whereas others held appointments in some of the most prestigious universities in India. As such, they are committed to norms that are central to the historical discipline, namely research in primary texts or archeological evidence, and reasoned defense of historical claims. So influential were their voices that they came to epitomize what it means to be ‘secular’ in India.

What is clearly and sadly the case is that the existence of such voices did next to nothing to stem the tide of *hindutva* activism and its anchoring in populist sentiments of a growing Hindu middle class. Polished speeches about secularism, religious freedom, or Dalit rights on university campuses did little to hamper the inroads Hindu nationalism
was making in different sections of the populace. The consensus of multi-religion and multi-culture that once held sway had given way to dominant voices of Hindu chauvinism. At least then, the above named scholars expressed their voices and ‘pushed back’ in op-ed pieces and feature articles in popular magazines such as *Frontline, Times of India, Outlook, or Economic and Political Weekly*. Today, things have changed. A shrill cloud of silence has descended upon Indian universities. Muslim or Dalit academics are increasingly wary of voicing their opposition to the Government in fear of being lynched, blacklisted, or stigmatized in some way by the Hindu Right. Moreover, many of the luminaries of days past have either passed away or are too deep into retirement to be of any influence. They do not seem to have been replaced by a younger generation committed to secular values of the Indian Constitution.

What lessons can be gleaned from what appears to be a decline of the left in India’s public life?

1. The university is not a microcosm of the nation. The discourses that may achieve consensus on college campuses are far removed from the intolerances that all too easily become centerpieces for populist mobilization.

2. Like Trump’s America, Modi’s India succeeded because of some measure of disengagement on the part of progressives with society. This includes the matter of religion. So profoundly influenced by Marxism were a generation of progressive intellectuals that they failed to appreciate the role of religious identity in the lives of most Indians. An ideological perspective that dismissed religion as “false
consciousness’ did little to help us appreciate how easily religion could be wedded to majoritarian politics and claims to ownership of “the nation”.