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VIGILANTE PUBLICS: ORIENTALISM, MODERNITY AND HINDUTVA FASCISM IN INDIA

Shakuntala Banaji

This paper explores the interconnections of Hindutva fascist repertoires in India and quasi-orientalist discourses. History and common sense are re-written through audiovisual communications to appeal to one section of a dangerously split Indian public and a neoliberal-touristic sensibility elsewhere. Enlightenment rhetorics of progress, democracy and technological development are apparently embodied by WhatsApp groups, electronic voting machines and laws to protect cows. Voting—as a marker of democratic citizenship— becomes a masquerade protecting a resurgent far right Hindutva (Hindu fascist) regime under the aegis of Narendra Modi and the BJP. Caste Hinduism's association of cows with deities, and the proscription on meat-eating in certain versions of religious practice, are used as pretexts for unimaginable violence against Muslims, Christians, Dalits, and working class/lower caste Hindus. Violence against those who dissent is rationalised as patriotic. Hindutva's banal and spectacular audiovisual discourse overwhelms public communication. Its consequences are a form of vigilante citizenship *that is marked on the bodies of dead victims and of* vigilante publics *ready to be mobilised either in ethno-cultural violence or its defence and disavowal. Meanwhile, attracted to India as an enormous market, Western governments and corporations have colluded with the Hindutva regime's self-promotion as a bastion of development.*

KEYWORDS   vigilante publics; Hindutva; Hindu chauvinism; enlightenment racism; Indian politics; orientalism

Introduction: What Is At Stake?

Colonial and imperialist historiography and postcolonial national(ist) mediation practices (Alexander 2005; King 1999) are seamlessly integrated into discussions of modern media and communications. Contemporary accounts either defer to or enhance Eurocentric notions about the West's special role in the Enlightenment and in spreading modern scientific thinking. Such accounts range from histories of technology and development to discussions of rationality and the public sphere; most lay claim to the west's unique intellectual and moral superiority while disavowing its coercive violence, obscurantism and susceptibility to myth-making. I use the term myth here in a Barthian sense (Barthes 1972, 132– 148) to mean an ideological narrative, a historical fiction, but not quite a lie, that serves to naturalise the power and actions of particular groups, at the expense of others. The lack of reflexivity at the heart of many Western accounts of post-Enlightenment communications have diminished theory and legitimised myth-making elsewhere. One example can

be found in characterisations of the Arab Middle East as essentially "traditional" (Lerner 1958); another in a strand of argumentation which decries Marxism and feminism for neglecting the significance of religion to the actions of subalterns without attending to its significant historical and practical purchase for these very populations (Chakrabarty 2000; Kishwar 1990); yet another assumes the genealogical purity of ideas in science and social science, seeing media encounters as governed by essential differences in the nature of "whites" and "others" (McLuhan [2003] 2008; Voltmer 2012). Further, sanitised or fabricated versions of colonial history and slavery are taught in European school text books (Aldrich 2006). Eurocentrism is ubiquitous in development campaigns and histories (Kothari 2005); and orientalism common in tourist guides and websites about the global south (Alderman and Modlin 2008; Edwards and Ramamurthy 2017).

The flip side of the coin of European racism, its obsession with the exceptionalism of its enlightenment, and the time taken up in critiques thereof, is the lack of attention to discussions of postcolonial communication, violence and public consciousness. So, cultural and religious nationalisms in some global south countries can be presented as attempts to counter the dominance of colonialism and westernisation. Postcolonial violence and pre-colonial inequality are disavowed as the fruits of colonial rule. In one notable instance, as I will discuss in this paper, the semiotics of Indian fascism (also Hindu nationalism, Hindutva fascism) which dominate everyday life in India are camouflaged in a rhetoric of pride and national security that is palatable to Western governments and publics and to the majority of the two hundred million-strong Indian (Hindu) middle classes. Schooled by enlightenment colonial histories in the manner of selling infected historiography, a new class of postcolonial communications springs up to serve the interests of powerful groups.

The current ruling narrative in India posits a narrow and rigid version of Hinduism as fundamental to Indianness (Bhatt 2001; Mankekar 2015). The popularisation of this repressive, high caste, vegetarian and chauvinist version of Hinduism is a relatively recent phenomenon—having been propagated in the 1920s by the far right ideologue Savarkar, and spread since the 1990s by the Baratiya Janata Party and its allies.[1] Hindu syncretism, eroticism, dissent and secular practice are constructed rhetorically as "foreign" imports, while at the same time providing a cover for Hindutva to claim tolerance as its abiding virtue in venues where a rhetoric of diversity proves profitable. This narrative positions Adivasis, Muslims, Christians and atheists as outsiders, a threat to the nation and the state, citizens only in a "minority" sense: on sufferance. Despite some legal protections and "reservations" to redress persistent poverty, Dalits, who exist below the caste hierarchy, are alternately disciplined through violence and wooed. They experience multiple forms of discrimination in domains from marriage and work to housing and access to water (Ohm 2010; Deshpande 2011; Mander 2015). An experience of violence and fear moulds India's subaltern populations into social configurations that even Fanon could not explain or recognise. Vicious physical atrocities within families and against members of despised communities are rife. Kidnapping, rape, gang-rape, molestation, lynching, extra-judicial killings of and pogroms against Muslims, Dalits, Adivasis, Buddhists, Christians, Sikhs, Kashmiris and populations of contested regions of the North East occur regularly (Teltumbde 2010; Mander 2015; Puniyani 2017). State and central governments often collude. So, why is it that, even when reported extensively, these crimes have drawn little opprobrium from the vast majority of India's literate population?

Writing of a parallel historical moment in Indonesia, in which she documents the mobilisation of violent non-state actors responding to the building of a temple, Telle (2013, 186)

notes that "as citizenship has been implemented under the double logic of democracy and security, albeit biased toward the latter, civilian security groups effectively exercise a form of vigilante citizenship." As Rajagopal (2001) has demonstrated, such ostensibly civic violence in India, when communicated via electronic media, operates under multiple logics of neoliberal market, religion and ethnocultural nationalism. It "splits" and reconstitutes India's publics around notions of "disgust" and "offence" (George 2016) in ways which have devastating consequences for citizens from religious minorities. Above all, I am interested in the ways in which these fractured publics become mobilised, through profoundly modern calls for civic participation, into violence and into condoning violence. Working with the concepts of vigilante citizenship (Telle) and split publics (Rajagopal), this paper coins the term "vigilante publics" to describe the wholesale co-optation of India's caste Hindu and Jain populations to the cause of the Indian far right. Feelings of group superiority and cohesion are enhanced by verbal and physical actions against those positioned as anathema to vigilante public sentiment. In the context of the sort of vigilante publics that I outline here, spectacular violence and atrocity are thus embodied forms of communication. These can at once be endorsed and disavowed by the state, whose purposes are furthered through participatory violence. Combining a reading of contemporary political events, Hindutva media productions, and rhetoric with historical analysis, I discuss the consequences of an alliance between Hindutva (Hindu fascist) communications, global neoliberal capitalism and an orientalist desire to recuperate a single high-caste version of Hinduism.

Hindu Nationalism: A History of Violence

Stretching from bright colours (including saffron, the chosen colour of the Hindu right) to cow worship, polytheism, vegetarianism, hospitality, female chastity and obedience, and a rejection of Islam and Christianity, the expectations of diasporic Hindutva groups and foreign travellers in the region collude with and reinforce aspects of the ruling Hindutva narrative. This narrative has been carefully manufactured and crafted by, among others, ideologues of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sang (RSS) or "National self-help organisation." Since the 1920s proponents of Hindu nationalism in India have bided their time, and at no point in the history of modern India have they wielded so much— or such legitimate—power within the Indian state and among India's middle classes as they do now. The RSS is a Hindu fascist "grassroots" organisation similar in its values to the Hitler Youth (with "Muslims" replacing "Jews" in their propaganda). Bhatt (2001), Hansen and Jaffrelot (1998), Ludden (1996), Malik and Singh (1994), Sarkar (1996), George (2016) and numerous other social scientists have documented their ideology and strategic rise to power. The RSS operates through thousands of decentralised branches across India and in the diaspora. Started by Hindu chauvinist ideologue, Hedgewar, in the 1920s, the RSS posed as an *apolitical* civic organisation for decades. Godse, who murdered Mahatma Gandhi, was steeped in this ideology, and although he left the organisation before committing the crime, the rationale for the assassination remained at one with the patriotic, anti-Muslim chauvinism of the RSS. Banned briefly through the efforts of Prime Minister Jawarharlal Nehru in the late 1940s, the RSS has continued to grow. In the past two decades, increasing numbers of BJP politicians and civil servants at local, state and national levels have openly declared their loyalty to the RSS, or been shown to have links with it.[2] The Prime Minister Narendra Modi himself was a long-time member. In fact, a concerted campaign of infiltration into

the structures of Indian political and civic life means that few municipal corporations, trade bodies, housing societies, legal networks, media outlets and educational bodies are free of RSS infiltrators in positions of authority; indoctrination and propaganda are rife; and many of these are now operating openly for the first time in seven decades.

As if civil society infiltration were not enough, the RSS "lead" a cluster of openly violent cadre-based organisations which sprang up between the 1960s and the 1980s. These operate semi-autonomously around students' unions, media events, women's issues and other civil society matters. With names such as the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP; World Hindu Council) and its militaristic youth wing, the Bajrang Dal, and Rashtra Sevika Samiti (Women volunteers committee), these organisations are collectively called the "Sangh Parivar" (the Sangh Family). Given the levels of violence against women across India (John and Nair 2000; Mondal 2009), and incidents of everyday violence, it might seem difficult to decide when an incident is specifically linked to Hindutva ideology and mobilisation. However, the recent emboldening due to perceived political and legislative empowerment means that less and less care is being taken to disguise Hindutva violence. A spate of lynching against Dalits and Muslims by groups of Hindu men armed with knives, swords, tridents and sticks, what Jha (2017) describes as Hindutva's "shadow armies" and "foot soldiers," has turned some international attention towards politically motivated Hindu violence in India:[3]

> On June 23, three days before India celebrated Eid, 15-year-old Junaid Khan was stabbed to death by a group of men aboard a train. He was going home to Khandawli, a village in the north Indian state of Haryana, after shopping for new clothes in New Delhi, accompanied by his brother and a couple of friends. The mob mocked their skullcaps and taunted them for eating beef, before stabbing them. (Bhowmick 2017)

In 2002, five Dalit men were beaten to death by the side of a road in the northern state of Haryana. From a community manoeuvred into working with leather and meat by discrimination in other occupations, their only "crime" was to be spotted by a mob of caste Hindu men who decided they were killing a live cow rather than skinning a dead one. In analysing the events which led to and unfolded following these brutal murders, Jodhka and Dhar (2003) explore the politics of caste and the role of the police, of groups such as the VHP (World Hindu Organisation) and dominant Jat caste members in the locality, and the ways in which long-term disempowerment and terrorising of entire Dalit communities led to false testimonies that did not hold the murderers to account. They conclude their article with a warning about communalisation (the mobilisation of sentiments of discrimination and violence against certain communities by other communities) through apparently innocuous Hindu civic education institutions, and the use of emotive visual symbols from the new lexicon of Hindutva:

> Hindutva forces see a potential in the symbol of the cow for mobilising the rural masses of Haryana on a communalist agenda. Though Jhajjar does not have any history of communal conflict, institutions like "gaushallas" and "gurukuls" mostly run by the local Arya Samajis could provide a base for Hindutva politics. Such a process is already visible in the hoardings depicting a cow being slaughtered, presumably by a Muslim, that have been put up by VHP in different parts of the state. (2003, 176)

As the number of dead rises, a Guardian article,[4] reporting haphazardly on the lynching of Muslims and Dalits, mentions a melange of reasons, excuses and propaganda

statements from those in authority with no attempt to present readers with a historicised view. In contrast, Apoorvanand, once a member of the Hindu Right and now a prominent secular activist, reports for Al-Jazeera[5] that:

> these cases would not have been so frequent if it weren't for the atmosphere of hate and suspicion against Muslims, created through a sustained political campaign. Engaging in 'meat politics' and calling for cow protection have been a favourite tool for many Hindu nationalist politicians. Even PM Narendra Modi has indulged in its use.

Discussing a "clear history of mob violence and lynching in India, reflecting a society with palpable remnants of pre-modern values—the barbaric caste system being the most glaring example," Baksi and Nagarajan (2017) detail more than a hundred cases of vigilante violence against Dalits and Muslims since the Modi government took power. They describe:

> an entirely new category of violence—*bovine-related mob lynching deaths*. This category has its own characteristics—the victims are largely Muslims, the proximate causes often based on rumours, built upon the prejudices against a community. It is also revealing that the proportion of this type of lynching among all cases of mob violence has increased in the last three years … [gaining] ground under the current governing dispensation (this includes the fact that a majority of the cases have been reported in BJP-governed states).[6]

The plausible if depressing disavowal by urban, educated and middle-class Hindu populations of this kind of violence in previous years has been superseded in recent decades by attempts to excuse the mobs as victims of "provocation" by already-suspect minority citizens or to legislate in ways that protect vigilantes[7]—a tactic that resonates with Western histories of colonial violence in places as far apart as Kenya and the Levant. It is this claiming of honourable bloodshed by Hindu mobs as part of a proud recapitulation of Hindu publicness, and the feeble attempts on the part of the state and its functionaries to censure such violence, that reveals most clearly a vigilante public. It is precisely the fascist consciousness of this vigilante public that is called upon and mobilised by the BJP in its attempt to secure electoral victory and immunity from all charges.

The normalisation of murder against Dalits and religious minorities, while rife also in neighbouring Pakistan and Bangladesh, has a peculiarly modernist and totalitarian character in India, in that it is justified in the name of democratic affects. In moving from vigilante citizens (as individuals, albeit in incidental groups) to vigilante publics (as groups, or even nations, who are willing to encourage and condone sectarian violence) the idea that violent punishment of those who apparently hurt one's group sentiments or threaten one's beliefs is not just *an* acceptable, but *the* desirable mode of public participation has become a shared understanding. In an inversion of guerrilla tactics that provide weapons to the weak, among vigilante publics, anti-minority violence is collectively endorsed as *civic action*, where any action, even in self-defence, by othered communities is conceptualised *only as violence*, as criminality or as provocation. In ways that resonate with the treatment of African-Americans in the United States, laws against violent actions are disproportionately used against Muslim suspects of crimes—most police hail from communities with prejudices against Muslims and Dalits—while actual crimes by Hindus, and particularly upper caste Hindus, are excused as stemming either from a sense of perceived threat to their traditions and identity or from accident and mischance. Further, as was the case with those who participated in and turned a blind eye to the mass-murder of

Muslims in Gujarat in 2002, many of the fascist groups, leaders and police were rewarded and promoted for their part in the violence (Ohm 2015; Ayub 2016). In recent years, new laws have been passed that criminalise even further actions such as the possession or sale of cow meat which are associated with Dalits and Muslims.

Nurturing *Vigilante Publics*: Techno-Fascism Meets Romantic Pastoralism

Historian Dilip Simeon argues that "the term 'reactionary' when used to refer to ultra-right-wing movements gives the impression that fascism is somehow linked with an antipathy for modernity. This is a misconception" (2016, 193). In a compulsively modern manner, Hindutva communication cannibalises and harnesses the tactics and vocabularies of anti-terrorism, anti-imperialism, digitisation and development, as well as of older Hindu scopic regimes from painting and calendar art to folk theatre and cinema (Jain 2007). This communication has turned Hindu rituals into public political spectacles, and posited violence against India's non-Hindu groups and the chastity of women as religious actions *and* acts of nationalism. Thus, a section of the ruling Hindu far right in India argues loudly for economic development in the form of increased privatisation, technology and digitisation—including electronic voting machines. As Edwards and Ramamurthy (2017, 325) suggest, the *Incredible India* branding campaign "frames India as a hybrid nation, open to global capital but distinctively Hindu in nature [and] can be understood as an extension of cultural chauvinism, justified through the economic imperative to engage with global markets." Further, "The language of modernity … presents marketable, generic locations and experiences, but is simultaneously characterised by Orientalist representations emphasising cultural difference, spirituality, and paradisal spaces as symbols of India's fundamental nature."

Writing in 1999, Christiane Brosius noted a change in the way in which the Hindu Nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party and the RSS had been using media to propagandise. Engaged, prior to the 1980s, in textual readings and face-to-face discussions about the "true" path for a Hindu nation with supporters and members in neighbourhood branches, the 1980s saw the RSS turn to cassette-tape and video-based communication. This was an attempt to popularise the message of aggressive Hindutva further afield and to win voters for the BJP. Visually, the basic communications of the Hindu Right were initially precise, curtailed—the saffron flag for Hinduism, iconic images of Hindu chauvinist leaders or leaders claimed by Hindutva, Gods and the repeated image of Mother India (Bharat Mata). As increasing numbers of quasi-fictional "documentary" propaganda videos were circulated to encourage a unified militant Hindu consciousness around the issue of destroying a sixteenth-century mosque (the Babri Masjid), to construct a temple marking the ostensible birthplace of the Hindu God Ram, the aesthetic began to change and expand, moving between fictional depictions of the early life of the God Ram to shots of Hindu crowds apparently being detained or denied their right to show their religious sentiments by the police; these are intercut with excerpts of interviews with Hindu citizens claiming their right to the land of the Mosque and devotional Hindu music as a background (Brosius 1999, 119–122, 2002). BJP campaign videos showed the grey haired but fiery leader of the BJP, Advani, posing in a crown such as the one depicted on the head of Krishna or with a bow and arrow such as the one in the mythical serialisation *Ramayana* (Rajagopal 2001, 224–226). Describing one such video, produced by a prominent member of the BJP, Brosius (2002) notes:

The centrality of Ram posters in the montage indexes Hindutva's visual stylisation of the god-king as the ideal national man (rashtra purush), an idol to be worshipped by all Indians alike, regardless of their personal religious beliefs. It also indicates that the ideologues of Hindutva nationalism claim the power to define what is essentially Indian—the "Hindu way of life"—on behalf of the majority of Indians, the Hindus. (22)

Brosius proceeds to cite the BJP's White paper on Ayodhya (1993), which asserts that the campaign over the birthplace of Ram was undertaken to counter the "erosion of our national identity and national consciousness … as corrective to this denationalised politics" (BJP 1993, 12–13 in Brosius 2002, 267). In analysing "Hindutva intervisuality" and "internalised orientalism," Brosius exposes the ideologically contradictory messages of such videos, and in the posters, maps of "Mother India" or "whole India" (which include Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Pakistan) and songs that populate them. These audiovisual communications were circulated privately but also shown at campaign events, rallies, meetings and screened at festivals and religious gatherings. Terms such as "martyrs," "rulers," "sacred," "blessed," "whole" (i.e. un-partitioned), "liberated," "true" and "spiritual" as well as "strong," "masculine," "powerful" and "dominant" pepper the voice-overs in propaganda films and BJP speeches. She identifies in these media a claim about fusing a pastoral, romantic, mythical, Arcadian past in which the whole of South Asia including Pakistan and Bangladesh form part of India, alongside a scientific, rational and technological present, replete with successful businessmen and venture capitalists taking over silicon valley; an appeal to modern, populist and democratic impulses (among the Hindu public) and a celebration of the God-King Ram visualised in a manner that celebrates an authoritarian and anti-democratic form of governance: "the romantic and the scientific gaze merge in the 'wish-image' of the map of India as a signifier of nationalist passion and power" (2005, 150).

Hindutva political communications are thus infused with symbols of muscular religion in a concerted attempt to build a new Hindu majoritarian "national subject," with an adherence to mythological beliefs—including ones around gender—and loyalty to the BJP leadership as the prime measures of citizenship and national belonging. Given that temples have traditionally been major wealth producing institutions for the Hindu upper castes and priests, the Sangh Parivar and BJP's campaign to destroy mosques and build temples was not merely a shrewd political move, but also an economic one. In 1991, donations to the "campaign trail" poured in and were used to fund spectacular events and processions ("rath yatras") replete with gold-spangled chariots carrying hundred-foot painted cut-outs of the God Ram in the style of Indian folk theatre and calendar art. Thousands of mostly male Hindutva activists from the RSS, BJP and VHP joined processions to Ayodhya, and despite the court order staying the demolition, the centuries old mosque was physically attacked by them and devastated in December 1992.

By 2013, much of this spectacular pomp and circumstance was accorded to the rallies at which Narendra Modi spoke—he displayed himself eagerly in traditional Hindu costumes, wearing golden turbans, shawls, head cloths, pointing his finger, carrying swords, inspecting guns, kissing children, embracing billionaires, touching the feet of old women and Hindu gods. In several images, he was garlanded with flowers, waving graciously like a leader-king or joining his hands in greeting; often his path was red carpeted, his seat formed in the shape of a throne. By 2014, the imagery of the early BJP and RSS videos had metamorphosed into online communications, comic book versions of Modi's life, Facebook posts about his exploits, Twitter fandoms, You Tube videos and visual holograms of

the quasi-sacred hero-leader Modi transmitted to an adoring—or even a worshipful—audience. A new narrative of a forward-thinking, development-oriented leader who would deliver wealth and national pride to Indians and business opportunities to industrialists took root. British media, indeed almost all Western media, allowed itself to be beguiled. But the road to this symbolic fusing of propaganda, cultural narrative and technology is crimson with *real* blood. *Real* violence punctuates and underscores the symbolic violence of Hindutva communications: if you will not be charmed, if you will not be beguiled into loyalty to our cause, if you cannot be won over because you do not belong within the Hindutva narrative: we will hurt you and drive you out.

Extreme Violence as Spectacle in Hindutva Communication

A majority of Indian Muslims, already discriminated against, criminalised and browbeaten, and recollecting other vicious episodes of communal rage such as the anti-Sikh pogroms of 1984, were further terrified by the violent processions in December 1992; they remained at home. However, vocal Muslim groups held protests; there were episodes of sporadic violence in which both Muslim protestors and Hindutva activists died; this was subsequently used as an excuse for extreme violence against Muslim communities. Police colluded with Hindutva mobs. Estimates suggest that between 2000 and 3000 people, mainly Muslim, were butchered or burned in cold blood; thousands were displaced; tens of thousands fled. The army was called in. The BBC, reporting at the time, contributed to the myth that Indian Muslims and Hindus had begun another one of their apparently incomprehensible intercommunal blood-lettings: "A mob of Hindu militants has torn down a mosque and attacked other Muslim targets in the north Indian town of Ayodhya, in one of *India's worst outbreaks of inter-communal violence.*"[8] Although several Western news reports did draw attention to "Hindu mobs" or "zealots," several disavowed the organised, institutional violence, arguing that there is no such thing as "fundamentalism" in Hinduism.

Two decades later, and in the wake of a problematic court judgement over the disputed site of the destroyed Babri mosque, an opinion piece by Ramesh Rao in the UK *Guardian* concludes, "[t]he modern story of Ayodhya is emblematic of Indian democracy—which is messier than most other democracies—but India is a much more complex and larger country than most, struggling with contentious history, millennia old."[9] Here again, notwithstanding 20 years of evidence about targeted Hindutva aggression and intimidation (Ghassem-Fachandi 2009; Jha 2017), and infiltration of the judiciary by RSS cadres, *The Guardian* gave voice to what can be described as a "soft" version of the Hindutva hard-line on the Babri Mosque dispute, whitewashing much of the Hindutva violence in the process and including the murders of innocent Muslim citizens as if it is part of a chain of events, "millennia old." The mainstreaming of far right positions on a number of issues concerning Muslims in India has been only one of the ways in which mainstream media both in India and the West have colluded to allow the rise of fascism.

The 1992–1993 violence, especially in the once-cosmopolitan city of Bombay, was devastating. Although there were news reports with photographs of burning shantytowns, vehicles, charred bodies—these appeared under the captions "rioting." These events have been carefully evidenced in the Sri Krishna Commission Report[10] as an orchestrated pogrom by Hindu chauvinist cadres with the support of those in power. Secure in the knowledge that prosecutions for communal violence were slow and ineffective, that

foreign media would run stories which catalogued violence but supported a theory of Muslim first aggression or failing that, of "rioting," that police would protect Hindu perpetrators, and that the dead could not speak, activists from the Shiv Sena, the BJP and the Sangh Parivar continued a targeted offline and online campaign organisations and individuals providing legal support for Muslim complainants.

A decade later, in Gujarat with Narendra Modi presiding as Chief Minister, an even more concentrated pogrom against Muslims took place (Ahmed 2002; Ayub 2016). Another 2000 mainly Muslim citizens were murdered. What "sparked" the 2002 Gujarat pogrom is bitterly contested, and the actual facts may never be known since two fact finding commissions to date, one by the regional BJP government and one by the Central government, have come to the opposing conclusions that the fire was a conspiracy and an accident. At the time, the damning and immediate Muslim-aggression narrative rolled out across the Indian media by the Hindutva groups and the then Gujarat ruling party the BJP was as follows. A train carrying Hindu Pilgrims (actually Hindutva activists) returning through Gujarat from Ayodhya, stopped at a station called Godhra, where an altercation took place between Muslim stall vendors and Hindu pilgrims (actually Hindutva activists) passengers on the train. In the hegemonic narrative circulated by Hindu fascist organisations and their mainstream media plants, vicious and organised Muslims deliberately burnt two Hindu train carriages from the outside, killing more than 50 Hindu pilgrims. In reality, meticulous legal work still only speculates on how the fire started, and the latest evidence suggests that it began inside one of the train carriages.

This pogrom—which included gang rapes of Muslims and women married to Muslims, Muslim foetuses ripped from bellies with swords, the castration, stabbing, beheading and burning to death of Muslims, and Muslim housing societies set aflame while cordons of Hindutva women and police refused to allow fire trucks to save anyone—have been represented and discussed extensively (Sarkar 2002; Ohm 2010). Sarkar's "semiotics of terror" analyses the pogrom itself as a calculated performance of a spectacle of bloodletting, with which the perpetrators wished the minds of all Indian Muslims and secular citizens to be imprinted. Ergo, the spectacle of this incredible, genocidal violence was a call to arms for some, a final warning for others. It was part of the visual repertoire of Hindutva in tandem with the banal presence of saffron flags, headbands, pictures of Gods and the other communicative paraphernalia of Hindusim that had been co-opted by the Hindutva organisations.

As Rajagopal (2001), Mankekar (2000) and Brosius (2005) have evidenced in ethnographic detail, mediated images and narratives are pivotal to the spread and success of this targeted hegemonic project; but desensitisation to the public spectacle of violence against "others" is no less pivotal to the construction of vigilante publics. In the decade between the pogroms of 1992–1993 and that of 2002, images of the demolition of the Ayodhya mosque, of jubilant Hindutva activists (kaarsevaks), of politicians and processions, and even depictions of the rape and murder of Muslim girls and women, were "privately" edited into Hindutva videos for the cadres of the Bajrang Dal, and circulated with increasing confidence. This time, however, it was captured and documented by journalists and human rights organisations, and reported live by shaken members of India's English language media. Despite overwhelming audiovisual evidence, the murder of Muslims was disavowed by Hindu audiences as "fake news," and then claimed proudly as a victory in defence of Hinduism (Ohm 2010). The repetition of images from the pogroms on screens across the nation was quickly followed by an impetus to reimagine history.

The pogrom of 2002 thus offers a template for the consolidation of a vigilante public, with a high tolerance for mass-murder, and without conscience or regret. Although in this instance consisting of Hindus, other examples of such publics can be seen across the globe —including in the United States and South Africa.

The narrative of Hindu superiority and innocence, of India as a (democratic) Hindu nation, and of Muslims as dirty, lascivious, foreign aggressors, guilty of terrorism and of trying to kidnap Hindu girls through "love jihad," has achieved hegemonic status. In accepting this narrative—which has been propagated and circulated through hundreds of thousands of RSS shakhas (branches) at home and World Hindu Organisations groups abroad, though Hindutva newspapers, tapes, videos, CDs, films, television serials, online websites, WhatsApp groups, pamphlets, brochures and songs—many Hindus and Jains have effectively adopted a "nazi conscience" (Koonz 2003). These groups, with their blunted or absent sense of responsibility towards "other humans" and heightened intersubjective solidarity towards cows and Hindu (upper castes), form the bedrock of what I define as India's new vigilante publics. If a fascist consciousness pervades vigilante publics, such publics are, in turn, a necessary base for state fascism. However, in order to ensure the integrity of such public belief in the coming golden age of Hindu "rashtra," and to avoid any internal fractures and possibilities for critique, it is not enough to dictate to mainstream and alternative media; history too must be selectively culled and rewritten.

Casteist Fantasies: Orientalism and Hindutva as Perverse Bedfellows

Since the ascendance to power of the Bharatiya Janata Party in 2014, history text books across India have been subjected to an unprecedented assault by powerful ideologues of the Hindu Right. Investigative reports[11] note that the RSS-affiliated Shiksha Sanskriti Utthan Nyas, headed by Dinanath Batra and responsible for Penguin India withdrawing Wendy Donniger's *The Hindus* and the banning of A. K. Ramanujan's essay *Three Hundred Ramayanas* from the Delhi University syllabus, sent the National Council for Education and Research Training a five-page list of recommendations on how to make school textbooks less "biased" and more "inspiring." Required cuts include:

> From the class seven history book, a line that says [the Mughal Emperor] Akbar introduced a "Sulah-e-Kul policy," which said that "the followers of all religions have an equal place … (before) God's grace" should also be removed, according to the organisation. As should a section on the caste system in the class 12 history book which says, "In this system the status was probably determined by birth. They (Brahmins) tried to make people realise that their prestige was based on birth … such parameters were often strengthened by stories in many books like The Mahabharata."[12]

The cuts cited above demonstrate the strategy of Hindutva ideologues to delete any critique of the caste system, and of Brahmins in particular, and to excise even mildly positive historical accounts of India's Mughal rulers. Such representations are characterised as somehow anti-national. In a narrative that posits Hinduism as enlightened and Islam as benighted, Hinduism as peace-loving and Islam as violent, no hint that any previous Muslim rulers had modern, liberal or secular ideas and non-violent practices can be allowed to creep into the curriculum. Indeed, other censored events include references to the Muslim dead in the 2002 Gujarat pogrom.

Fascist histories and myths that demonise particular communities are accepted by local populations and internalised precisely because they are disseminated by legitimate arms of the state (Rosenberg 1934; Koonz 2003). Indeed, such indifference to national history curricula has long precedent across the globe. Tightening censorship of school text books and the insertion of pro-Hindutva propaganda has not brought people onto the streets. This is partly because there have been so many equally pressing concerns, but also because most public space is now seen as belonging to vigilante publics, loyal to the Hindutva regime.

Equally troubling is that Hindutva censorship and propaganda has caused little demonstrable concern among Western governments, businesses and media. This could be viewed as stemming from a pragmatic approach to Indian domestic affairs, an acceptance of Indian sovereignty. However, the collusion of Western governments and businesses with a rabidly Hindutva government's version of India has a more complex genealogy and rationale.

Over the past two decades, the BJP has championed neoliberal structural adjustment programmes, actively advertised its burgeoning middle-class consumer-public through *Shining India* and *Incredible India* campaigns, and is pursuing widespread privatisation (Lakha 2002; Gopalakrishnan 2006; Mander 2015). Swathes of public land are being transferred at low-cost to Indian and Western corporations. Further, a connection can be traced between different historical moments in the West's relationship to India and to Indian religions. The current moment encompasses a US-initiated "war on terror" that had constructed all Muslim communities as potentially harbouring terrorist intentions against their home states. In this context, India's illiberalism can wear the veneer of a just fight against Islamic terror, which again casts Hindus and the Indian state as innocent Western allies. This narrative is easy to decipher in the number of column inches in Indian newspapers and online devoted to issues of "Islamic terror" and in the Bollywood dramatisations of Muslim anti-heroes. There is, additionally, a historical narrative, which has connections to contemporary Hindutva.

Discussing eighteenth-century enlightenment historian William Robertson's *Disquisition on India* which is a notable early orientalist account of trade and other cultural relations between Europe and India, Brown (2009) draws attention to Robertson's pursuit of Sanskrit texts as embodiments of knowledge paralleling Greek and Roman ones. He also discusses, at length, Robertson's view that the caste system was, in fact, an enlightened and democratising influence (*sic*):

> [Robertson] defended India's caste system, arguing that from earliest times *caste had provided India with the subordination of social ranks that was necessary for the stability and harmony of advanced civilisation*. By the caste system, he observed, "the station of every individual is unalterably fixed; his destiny is irrevocable; and the walk of life is marked out, from which he must never deviate." Robertson acknowledged that the caste system restricted the rise of exceptional talent through the social ranks, and could "confine to the functions of an inferior cast, talents fitted to shine in an higher sphere." "But," he continued, "the arrangements of civil government are made, not for what is extraordinary, but for what is common; not for the few, but for the many" … . Turning to the intellectual achievements of India, Robertson was still more fulsome in his praise. For him, the hereditary Brahmin caste formed an intellectual class, a learned society which reflected the Enlightenment ideal of a republic of letters. [According to Robertson, t]his intellectual

class had gradually amassed a unique knowledge of the natural world through careful scientific observations conducted over long periods of time. [305–306, emphasis added; including quotes from Robertson's *Historical Disquisition*: 1794, 232 & 233]

Robertson's endorsement of the iniquitous caste system is singular because it asserts a belief in this fixed and immutable system's apparent benefits to the multitudes right at the moment when Payne's *Rights of Man* were being debated and finding favour with social theorists across Europe. Such an endorsement, by a British historian of this stature could be indicative of what now gets called a "politically correct" sensibility, that valorises the actions and ideologies of certain global south elites in an attempt to counter writings and ideas which consign the whole global south to a uniform, uncivilised essence. Or, it could be a classic example of relativism.

Unquestionably, in the eighteenth century, some of Robertson's other assertions—and especially those pertaining to the ways in which early Indian texts explore mathematical and scientific knowledge—are valuable antidotes to the predominant vicious racism against Indian "natives," and to the colonial derision with which Hindu religious practices and beliefs were viewed. Robertson himself was bemused and repulsed by some polytheistic and overtly erotic practices of popular religious worship around Indian deities, and tried to argue these away as vestiges of "primitive religion," against which Brahmin "monotheistic rationality" was pitted. Having identified Brahmins as the true inheritors of the enlightenment, Robertson did not find a need to endorse conversion to Christianity. Crucially, and also in line with other British orientalists of his time, he ignored and erased the long history of Islam and Buddhism in India, making only passing references to the knowledge and policies of Mughal rulers. This, among other editorial exclusions, is much in line with the contemporary decisions being taken about what to teach children in history lessons in Indian states such as Rajasthan and Maharashtra.[13]

As part of his wider project linking postcolonial critique to the study of world religions, Richard King interrogates the origins of the "idea" of Hinduism as a single and cohesive religion that ignored its divergent syncretic oral and performative traditions, enforcing a singular, ahistorical, puritanical vision. His estimation is that this notion is largely a nineteenth century construction by Western orientalists, purveyed through colonial laws, media and education systems, and assisted by the specifically Western emphasis on texts and scripture which had previously not played much of a role in the variety of Hindu rituals. He argues also that this modern notion of Hinduism has been taken up strategically by members of the Indian higher castes (Brahmins specifically) and disseminated as if uncontested and arising from a primordial past. These allies have co-constructed the modern notion of Hinduism alongside the modern notion of India as a nation. King (1999, 165) cites the orientalist David Kopf (1980, 502), who with no vestige of reflection or irony writes that "the work of integrating a vast collection of myths, beliefs, rituals and laws into a coherent religion, and of shaping an amorphous heritage into a rational faith known as 'Hinduism' were endeavours initiated by orientalists."

Drawing attention to the work of scholars such as Vinay Dharwadkar who have explored "the Sanskritic bias of Western orientalists," Kings' work outlines the complex interplay of power and desire in how Brahamin elites of the time and British orientalists inflected and encouraged an elision between (Sanskritic) Vedic pronouncements and Hinduism. Drawing on Foucault's arguments in *The Order of Things* (1973), King contends that:

> This new *episteme* created a conceptual space in the form of a rising perception that Hinduism had become a corrupt shadow of its former self (which was now located in certain key sacred texts such as the Vedas, the Upnishads and the Bhagvad Gita, all taken to provide an unproblematic account of ancient Hindu religiosity). (1999, 174)

Traces of this argument can be seen everywhere in the Hindutva public sphere.

The notion that secular and intellectual traditions in India—and tolerance towards people from many faiths—epitomise political weakness, economic decline and a corruption of India's greatness has been propagated ceaselessly by ideologues in speeches and by hired or volunteer digital trolls on behalf of the BJP, RSS and other Sangh Parivar outfits (Chaturvedi 2016; Manchanda 2002). Connections between tolerance and weakness, or secularism and corruption have gained such tremendous legitimacy among sections of the Indian (Hindu) middle classes that gross examples of corporate corruption by upper caste industrialists and the ruling BJP are pronounced to be transparent, modernising and charitable actions, while attempts to enforce the rule of law with regard to vigilante citizens are blocked and undermined as anti-national interference.

The new episteme identified by King—that drew on partial orientalist readings of ancient texts to urge the innate scientificness and modernity of various Hindu practices —has been taken up by Hindu nationalists in the twin domains of commercialised religion (which includes an appeal to the followers of rival gods) and politicised religion in India (which includes funding by and participation from diasporic elites in the UK and the US), and Hindu nationalists have drawn on it in their decades long battle for hegemonic control of the political and cultural sphere in India. Modi himself travels abroad claiming that heroes of Hindu epics such as Karna were born through ancient Indian genetic science.[14] In the process, multiple complex histories of India have been censored and erased, a version of sanskritised Hindi has been imposed on communications across the country, secular historians, lawyers and journalists have been terrorised, attacked and targeted with hate speech, diverse Hindu deities and scholars, and other traditions of Indian thought have been appropriated to the Hindutva cause. Yet dire poverty stubbornly refuses to disappear, except in the minds of the millionaire business leaders and politicians who rank India to be a wealthy BRIC nation.[15]

The quarter century from 1992 has brought India to the following place: With economic policies in ruins—Modi's dastardly removal of more than 80 per cent of Indian currency in 2016 has been hailed a monumental failure by the Indian Reserve Bank Annual report—and new gimmicks slow to take off, there are reports that the cutting of tons of marble for the construction of a temple on the site of the old Babri mosque are soon to begin.[16] When justification of violence appears to fail even among the largely quiescent Indian and international media, the Prime Minister might finally— and half-heartedly—disavow his shadow armies. But they know the drill, and remain on high alert.

Conclusion

The Hindutva project currently under way in India is a modern, indigenised version of fascism, not yet complete or able to reject electoral democracy, but with an alertness to the West's current fetishisation of Muslims as a worthy enemy and an ability to de-democratise and subvert democratic processes under the guise of democracy. Hindutva fascism's

various actors are not united by any means: but they are both shrewd and patient, and have been far more effective in fusing violent othering with an acceptable facade of participation, modernisation and democracy than religious nationalists in neighbouring nations.

The insidious process of flooding the public sphere with images and signs of Hindu supremacy, of culling text books, and initiating Hindu supremacist schools, colleges and training camps has been joined by the faster and more agile processes of taking over boardrooms and media houses, running networks of trolls and normalising extreme violence. Thus, vigilante publics are created, while mobs, storm troopers and their mouth pieces in media and judiciary are supported by political allies' adept at demonising liberal-secular discourse. While Hinduism and Hindutva are by no means synonymous, the leaders of the Hindu far right, and those who spread their voice in the west, have done their best to ensure that they appear as a singular entity. The vigilante publics created to bolster Hindutva now strive to erase all contention. The few high-profile Hindus to gainsay this narrative are labelled traitors and pseudo-secularists, while ordinary practicing Hindus who resist are silenced and persecuted. Despite its absorption of British orientalist narratives, laws and strategies, Hindutva is an autonomous postcolonial project, with ambitions to suppress, delegitimise, command or eliminate many existing cultures—and peoples—in India and surrounding countries.

There are several reasons for the myopia and negligence which attends mediated accounts of Indian fascism and colonial violence. Noteworthy among these are: an exceptionalist fixation on the genocidal violence in mid-twentieth-century Europe and the idea that Europe would never let this happen again; postcolonial myths about the "essential" peace-loving "nature" of Indians and India as the largest democracy on earth; and a misguided political correctness which cedes the telling of global south histories to particular groups of powerful "natives." If viewed alongside contemporary, colonial and imperialist representations of India as a poverty-stricken, illiterate and superstitious "rape-capital," with a justice system and railways bequeathed by the British, it is possible to see how the modern imaginary and counter-narrative of "shining India," a global economic superpower replete with traditional beauty, faithful housewives and ancient (Hindu) temples (and surrounded by barbaric, terrorist Muslim neighbours), has a magnetic appeal for groups of Indian nationalists. But the fetishisation of a diminished form of democracy which allows India to clothe itself in the rhetoric of enlightened participatory modernity, and the refusal of many scholars and media in the rest of the world to take a stand against Hindutva is not so easy to comprehend, and will have repercussions across the globe.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

NOTES

1.   Devan Chaudhury explores the historical development of the Hindutva brand of Hinduism in a particularly fascinating way in this article about the early geographical roots of the word Hindu: https://www.dailyo.in/variety/hindu-hinduism-hindustan-hindutva/story/1/20120.html.

2.   "I'm a proud RSS man" has become a common assertion during my recent fieldwork on demonetisation.

3.   https://qz.com/1014162/lynchistan-muslims-die-hindus-watch-in-silence-as-india-descends-into-primeval-bloodletting/.

4.   https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/05/muslim-man-dies-in-india-after-attack-by-hindu-cow-protectors.

5.   http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2017/07/india-epidemic-mob-lynching-170706113733914.html.

6.   https://www.newslaundry.com/2017/07/04/mob-lynchings-in-india-a-look-at-data-and-the-story-behind-the-numbers.

7.   In 2017, the Gujarat government made the killing of cows punishable by life imprisonment. In Chhattisgarh, the BJP chief minister announced openly: "We will hang those who kill cows." The majority of Hindu citizens, meanwhile, do not speak out against extra-judicial killing by sanctioned "cow protectors."

8.   http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/december/6/newsid_3712000/3712777.stm.

9.   https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2010/sep/30/ayodhya-emblematic-indian-democracy.

10.   http://www.sabrang.com/srikrish/hinrole.htm.

11.   http://indianexpress.com/article/india/dina-nath-batra-again-he-wants-tagore-urdu-words-off-school-texts-4764094/.

12.   https://thewire.in/160977/dinanath-batra-textbooks-ncert/.

13.   https://thewire.in/165360/maharashtra-education-board-removes-traces-mughals-history-textbooks/.

14.   https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/28/indian-prime-minister-genetic-science-existed-ancient-times.

15.   http://www.economist.com/node/15912964.

16.   http://indianexpress.com/article/india/stones-from-rajasthan-arrive-for-ram-temple-in-ayodhya-4737970/.

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