

# Communalism and Indian History

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Communalism is the term used in India, and more generally throughout South Asia, to denote the politics of religious sectarianism. Communal politics in India and Pakistan are premised on one fundamental assumption: that India is a society fractured into two overarching religious communities – Hindus and Muslims. These communities are not only supposed to be separate and distinct, but also irreconcilably opposed. Their cultures, values, social practices and beliefs have little in common. Their histories are histories of discord, of mutual hostility, hatred, conflict and battles for domination. The boundaries of the communities are categorically drawn by a century of mutual antagonism.

This is not a matter of one academic perception contesting another. Two incidents from the past quarter century should warn that it goes well beyond that. Between 1987 and 1992, the Bharatiya Janata Party, affiliated to the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh, and allied to other constituents of the Sangh's network of organizations like the Viswa Hindu Parishad and the Bajrang Dal, campaigned for the destruction of a four and a half century old mosque on the spurious claim that it had been built by destroying a temple on the exact spot where Rama, a mythic hero, had been born. This campaign was the centerpiece of their struggle for power. Flouting court orders and constitutional obligations, on 6<sup>th</sup> December 1992 they did gather a massive mob, and with a provincial government controlled by them, they had no difficulty in destroying the mosque. This campaign moved the BJP, a party that in 1984 had a handful of members in the Indian parliament, to the centre stage, and riding its Hindutva wave, by the second half of the 1990s it was in power as part of a rightwing coalition.

In 2002, some unidentified people set fire to a coach in the Sabarmati Express at Godhra, Gujarat province. A number of kar sevaks, or Hindutva volunteers to build the Rama temple at Ayodhya, were killed in the fire. Within 24 hours, a systematic pogrom broke out. Using voter lists and sales tax records, houses and shops of Muslims were attacked. Hundreds of thousands of leaflets were issued, showing weeks of advance planning. A report of how Hindu women had been dragged into a Madarsa (Muslim educational institution) and raped before being killed was reported (the Press council of India later reported that it was a false news). Using these techniques, over 2000 Muslims were killed and tens of thousands forced into camps for months. A very larger number of Muslim women were gang raped.

There was a great similarity between Nazi racism and this communal politics. When one enraged Jewish youth shot and killed a Nazi in France, Hitler and Goebbels unleashed the krsytallnacht. The same logic was used by the Hindutva brigades. Every Indian Muslim was held responsible for the crimes committed at Godhra, supposedly by some Muslims. Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi, an RSS man, declared that the pogroms were merely Newton's third Law.

Communal politics relies above all on a historical narrative to gain legitimacy in the public domain. So the struggle over history is one of the vital struggles in present day India and the battle for secularism and democracy. It is significant that whenever the RSS and its affiliates have been close

to power in any province, or the county as a whole, radical and secular historians have been among their principal ideological targets. While India has a good many very accomplished radical economists, sociologists or political scientists, they have never been so directly targeted. The RSS campaigns have indeed been international, as when Romila Thapar's appointment in 2004 as the First holder of the Kluge Chair in Countries and Cultures of the South by the library of Congress was met by a ferocious campaign, including an online petition to bloc her and large volumes of hate mail.

So we need to trace the history of communal historiography in some detail. British colonial rulers were the first in the field, and they operated in a number of ways. There were two currents of British writings about India – the Anglicists or the Utilitarians, and the Orientalists. James Mill, the Utilitarian, attempted to justify British rule by presenting the early period of Indian history as rude and barbarous. He denied that ancient India had produced anything of lasting social or cultural value. For example, he denied that Aryabhata had produced significant mathematics, denied that zero and the positional numbering system came from Indian mathematics. He wrote that the Hindu, like the Eunuch, excels in the quality of the slave. And he proceeded to divide Indian history into three periods – the Hindu period, the Muslim period and the British period. The other school, the Orientalists, presented a romanticized picture of a great Indian past, ruined by racial intermixing between Aryan Hindus and Semitic Muslims. Colonial administrators, such as Sir Henry Elliott, wanted to respond to the rising demands for civil liberties by producing histories that showed how blood-stained was Muslim rule in India, so that the Hindus would accept British rule as good. Elliott made his purpose explicit in his introduction to the book *The History of India as Told By its Own Historians*. He selected those narratives that would create an image of a murderous Islamic horde, an image that also suited the viewpoint of 19<sup>th</sup> century Christian conquerors, steeped since the Crusades in an anti-Islamic standpoint. Other British administrators followed similar lines, fixing these voices from the past that showed Hindus and Muslims as antagonists, particularly after the revolt of 1857, in which Hindus and Muslims did unite to try and overthrow British rule.

Emergent Indian nationalism had different possible strategies. But I am going to describe only one – the one that would eventually give rise to Hindutva.

The British ridiculed the Hindus as cowardly, effeminate, and so on. Indira Chowdhury and others have described the nationalist responses to these. Here, I just want to say that one response was to turn to the past and find freedom fighter ancestors. Naturally, this meant finding Hindus who had fought Muslims (there had been no British to fight, before the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century). Moreover, many of the early writers were Bengalis, so when they identified Rajput kings or Marathas, religion based identity alone could provide a link between the author and the “national” hero. Hindus thus began to be seen as the original nation and the others as interlopers. While I cannot discuss the individuals in detail, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Swami Vivekananda, and Aurobindo Ghosh were three crucial figures. A more aggressive Hindu identity was built up by Swami Dayanand and his Arya Samaj, stressing the Vedas as the source of Indian ethos, campaigning for a ban on cow slaughter (the occasions for many a communal riot in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries).

While Indian nationalism was not systematically communal – it looked at the British as the opponents, not the Muslims – it did have a Hindu tinge, till Nehru and diverse socialists and communists arrived, much later, on the scene. As a result, Muslim modernization also followed a similar path and produced a Muslim tinge in nationalism, which would eventually give rise to aggressive Muslim communalism.

It was an aggressive Hindu communalism that emerged first, though. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, two important organizations were founded – the Hindu Mahasabha by V. D. Savarkar, and the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh by K. B. Hegdewar. Both were organizations following a fuhrerprinzip, both had fascist links in the 1930s, and both developed a communalist view of history very similar to Nazi

racism. This ideology was very distinct from an Indian nationalism with a Hindu tinge. It clearly saw the Muslims, rather than the British, as the enemies. The RSS, for example, was to tell its members to stay away from the anti-colonial struggles, including in 1942, when the massive Quit India movement was launched. As for Savarkar, an approver identified him as having been a co-conspirator with Nathuram Godse for the Gandhi assassination a few months after independence. Godse was convicted and hanged, but Savarkar got off, because by the Evidence Act, the word of one approver was not enough to convict him.

The sharp anti-communal backlash after a Hindu communalist had assassinated Gandhi checked the aspirations of the Hindu communal forces for several decades. But a “soft Hindu” viewpoint continued, drawing in inputs from aggressive Hindu communalism, both its openly political spokespersons like Savarkar and Golwalkar (Hedgewar’s successor as the chief of the RSS), and the foremost communalist historian of the age, R. C. Majumdar.

Savarkar’s *Six Glorious Epochs of Indian History*, along with his earlier works *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?*, and *Hindu Rashtra Darshan* laid down certain basic parameters, summing up ideas he had been developing over half a century.

- Vedic Aryans were the original inhabitants of India. They were the Hindus. They had created Indian culture and civilization, and had inspired other civilizations.
- The definition of Hindu was not religion as much as nation (Savarkar was a self-proclaimed atheist), but only those who had their *punyabhumi* (Holy Land), as well as *pitribhumi* (Fatherland), in India, were true members of the nation.
- Muslims were portrayed as the eternal Other of the Indian nation, their permanent enemies, seeking always to harm them.

The Muslims aimed to reduce the Hindu population by all means, including murders, abduction of Hindu women on a large scale, and forced conversion.

M.S. Golwalkar followed the same line of arguments. In his 1939 book *We, or Our Nationhood Defined*, he extolled the Nazis, particularly the *Krystallnacht*, and suggested that Hindus should follow the Nazis. Savarkar also advocated retributational rape of Muslim women.

While the more extreme positions remained the property of the then small current, a dilute version was widely propagated. A number of conservative historians played a role in this. A. S. Altekar, for example, argued that women had a very high status in ancient India, and it was Islamic invasion and the designs of Muslims on Hindu women that led to their domestic confinement and lack of equality. But it was R. C. Majumdar who rendered heroic services to *Hindutva*. An indefatigable worker, he edited and also wrote the bulk of the eleven volumes *History and Culture of the Indian People*, published by the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan with ample government subsidy. This gave the book a stamp of authority, making it the standard general reference for Indian history for two decades or more. Majumdar put into the academic domain many of the key arguments of Hindu communalism. The fantastic claim that Indo-Europeans originated in India and went out from here to civilize the world, now so much in fashion among academic circles close to the VHP, found its articulation in serious literature in vol.I, of the *Bhartiya Vidya Bhavan* series. Majumdar also legitimized communal identities in the academic sphere, by talking about Muslim rulers, instead of Turks, Afghans, and Mughals. For the colonial period, he rejected the view that the revolt of 1857 constituted a freedom struggle, claiming that real freedom struggles began in 1905 with the anti-Bengal partition movement (which was led by Calcutta based Hindu upper caste leaders, and in course of which they alienated Muslims). For Majumdar, only the Muslims were communalists. Yet the two-nation theory is present, implicitly, through his volumes.

How successful Majumdar was is something that came home to me about a decade back. After the BJP dominated national Democratic Alliance had come to power, they launched a very sharp attack

on secular history and historians, reconstituting the Indian Council for Historical Research, trying to take out a series of school text books written by Romila Thapar, Satish Chandra, Bipan Chandra and others and replacing them by shoddy, communal books. At that time, while fighting this agenda, my wife and I, both professional historians, decided to examine text books from West Bengal, where the Marxist left has been strong both intellectually and in politics (a CPIM led government has been in power since 1977), to bring out a contrast between secular and communal writings. What we found was that while secular scholars, whether nationalists or Marxists, might have done a lot of research, text books still toed a communal line. Out of about a dozen school and a dozen college level text books written in Bengali, we found the majority writing only about Muslim communalism and not about Hindu communalism in talking about the colonial era. We found comments such as “Muslim rule in its early centuries was established by sword and by blood” liberally sprinkled. Of course, rulers have often been conquerors. But did medieval India have Muslim rule? Were all or most Muslims part of the ruling elite? Was the ruling elite fully Muslim? Did Hindu rulers not establish their rule by the sword? This image, then, was intended to create a picture of Muslims, collectively, as fanatically violent, whereas others were not so. For example, the same text books did not use the same kind of language to describe the British conquest of India, the extremely brutal mass killings after the Santal Rebellion or the Revolt of 1857.

In fact, the text books were marching hand in hand with the courses taught. A study of about 15 years of question papers on the colonial rule and the freedom movement, for undergraduate students of Calcutta University, West Bengal’s biggest University, showed that practically every alternate year, there is a question on either “Muslim Politics”, usually from 1906 (formation of the Muslim league) to 1940 (the year of the Lahore Resolution) or on whether Sir Syed Ahmed was the father of the two nation theory. No question has ever been set on Hindu communalism.

In other words, even many professed leftists, people who vote for the left parties in election times and are active in leftist teachers’ associations, do not think there is anything wrong in absorbing a dose of Majumdar.

The Hindutva agenda therefore has the great advantage of being present as part of the national common sense in a diluted form. However, having said this, I would also argue, that just as Nazism was not simply one more version of pre-existing racism and anti-Semitism, so present day Hindutva and its intense hate propaganda against Muslims cannot be reduced to communal elements in other types of history writing. So let me take up in a little more detail a few of the major concerns of the Hindutva forcers.

**I.** India was the original homeland of the Aryans. The Aryans were Hindus, and they spread out from India to educate and enlighten the world. This leads to a narrative structure that involves a whole series of denials and rewritings. It has to deal with the urban Indus Valley civilization (now mostly in Pakistan). So the Vedas are pushed back from about 1500-1000 BCE to 5000 BCE. The so-called Sarasvati civilization, supposedly located in Rajasthan and Haryana, is claimed to be older than the Indus Valley civilization. Also, by making the Aryans the sole original inhabitants, Dravidian culture of South India is erased, and the adivasis of much of western, central and eastern India are just wiped out.

**II.** Since the Rama Janambhumi movement was the core of the Hindutva mobilizations, it means that the Ramayana or the story of Rama is turned from a myth into history. While numerous variants of the Rama katha exist in reality, only one version is privileged and turned into authentic history that cannot be challenged. While Gupta kings of the fourth and fifth centuries CE renamed Saketa as Ayodhya because they were creating a Hinduisim, in opposition to Buddhism, and patronizing Brahmanical domination, this Ayodhya is now claimed as the real birthplace of Rama. It is claimed that a Rama temple was first built there by Maharaj Kush (son of Rama) and another one built by the

Gupta rulers. It is further claimed that Babar's general Baqi Khan destroyed that temple to build a mosque over it, so that the war cry of the mobilizations was "mandir wahan i banayenge" (we will build the temple just there). In RSS run schools, the Vidya Bharatis, booklets are given to students to learn by heart. History is taught, not critically, but as something to be remembered as true, without reference to sources. Some of the questions and answers are like this:

"Q. Who was the first foreign invader who destroyed Sri Ram temple? A. Menander of Greece (150 B.C.)

Q. Who got the present Rama Temple built? A. Maharaja Chandragupta Vikramaditya (A.D. 380-413).

Q. Which Muslim plunderer invaded the temples in Ayodhya in A.D. 1033? A. Mahmud Ghaznavi's nephew Salar Masud.

Q. Which Mughal invader destroyed the Rama Temple in A.D. 1528? A. Babur.

Q. Why is Babri Masjid not a mosque? A. Because Muslims have never till today offered Namaz there.

Q. How many devotees of Rama laid down their life to liberate Rama temple from A.D. 1528 to A.D. 1914? A. Three lakh fifty thousand.

Q. How many times did the foreigners invade Shri Ramajnanma-bhumi? A. Seventy-seven times.

Q. "Which day was decided by Sri Ram Kar Sewa Samiti to start Kar Sewa? A. 30 October, 1990.

Q. Why will 2 November 1990 be inscribed in black letters in the history of India? A. Because on that day, the then Chief Minister by ordering the Police to shoot unarmed Kar Sewaks massacred hundreds of them.

Q. When was the Shilanyas of the temple laid in Sri Ram Janmbhumi? A. 1 November 1989.

Q. What was the number of the struggle for the liberation of Ram Janmabhumi which was launched on 30 October 1990? A. 78<sup>th</sup> struggle."

**III.** The aim of all Muslim rulers in India was to finish off the Hindus. A Belgian named Koenraad Elst in his book *Negationism in India* claims that every new invader made literally hills of Hindu skulls. In Afghanistan the entire Hindu population was slaughtered. The Bahamani sultans in the Deccan made it a rule to kill 100,000 Hindus in a year. Elst's source is K. S. Lal's *Growth of Muslim Population in India*. Lal, without providing any statistical evidence, comes to the conclusion that between 1000 and 1525, the Hindu population decreased by 80 million, making it the biggest genocide in history. Not surprisingly, when the RSS tried to set up an alternative academic association, in opposition to the staunchly secular Indian History Congress, Lal was chosen as one of its patrons. Interestingly, Lal's writings, as well as the entire RSS arguments about how Muslims are bent on killing non-Muslims, got a new life after Western politicians and scholars started talking about Jihad as a permanent feature of Islamic politics, and so on. However, here, as in the Ram Janambhumi case, contemporary issues are linked to the assessment of the past. Since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, there has been a recurrent theme often called "the dying Hindu". Hindu population is supposedly declining, and Muslims are supposed to be overtaking the Hindus rapidly. In 1980, the Viswa Hindu Parishad launched an aggressive campaign about how by 2000 the Muslims, permitted polygamy, were going to overtake the Hindus, who were monogamous. A little digression at this point will be necessary. Hindu polygamy was not illegalized till the 1950s. But the claim that

Muslims are going to overtake the Hindus has been in existence since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. A second point to note is that when Hindu polygamy was banned, Hindutva forces in parliament and outside it campaigned shrilly against it. They had two arguments. One was that parliament did not have the right to change Hindu laws, only Hindu pundits and holy men could do it. The other argument, made in parliament, no less, was that banning polygamy would lead to an increased in prostitution.

**IV.** In the same way, Hindutva forces attempt a wholesale rewriting of the freedom struggle. For Savarkar, the entire period from the Arab conquest of Sindh, or at least from the Turkish conquest of North India, was a period of freedom struggle. One of the most important stumbling blocks to such a picture is of course the Mughal era. The Mughals built a stable empire, because they were able to create a composite ruling class. Rajputs, Marathas, and other Hindus formed part of the Mughal elite, and sometimes crack Mughal generals, not only under Akbar, but even under the much reviled Aurangzeb. This has been ably demonstrated by many scholars, notably Athar ali in his *The Mughal Nobility Under Aurangzeb* and *The Apparatus of Empire*.

**V.** Another aspect of the Hindutva use of history as a central weapon to spread poison is the claim that destroying temples was an essential aspect of Muslim rulership. I want to look at the cases of two temples that really were destroyed, in part or in full, by two different rulers. Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni, who raided India rather than trying to conquer any part of the country, was supposed to have attacked the Somnatha temple many times because of his fanatical Islamic outlook. A college text book in Maharashtra, examined by Communalism Combat magazine, took the opportunity of writing about Mahmud and Somnatha to attack Islam generally. Here, secular historians have taken two approaches, both valid, but taking up different dimensions. The great historian, Muhammad Habib, in his book on Mahmud, was critical of Mahmud. But Habib pointed out that there was a clear possibility that what attracted Mahmud to Somnatha was its wealth, rather than religion. A very different line of study was followed by Romila Thapar. In her book on the Somnatha temple, she showed that there had been a variety of narratives, those of the conquerors, local products, and so on. The event was perceived and represented in a number of ways. Thapar's object was not to find out the "real" motive of Mahmud. Rather, she sought to understand how his raids entered historical imagination. What are often considered facts about the raid, argued Thapar, are in fact the products of a long process of historical fashioning and encoding of memories. From among various versions, the colonial rulers selected and fixed the narrative of Muhammad Ibrahim Ferishta, because this account underlined the violence and fanaticism of Muslims. Canonised by the writings of Alexander Dow, this colonial story of Somnatha entered the nationalist as well as communalist writings.

**VI.** The other temple is the Keshav Rai temple of Mathura, destroyed by Aurangzeb. Once again, there are different ways of looking at this. Historians like Satish Chandra have pointed out that Aurangzeb attacked the temple because it was part of a Jat rebellion. The nationalist historian B. N. Pande had a different approach. He collected a substantial number of firmans (imperial decrees) of Aurangzeb to argue that in a large number of cases, Aurangzeb had granted tax-free land to Hindu and Jain temples and Sikh Gurdwaras so that they could be maintained. This does not deny the destruction of a particular temple, but indicates that the course of history was rather more complicated than communalists would like.

As my discussions suggest, secular responses to communal history have varied. Many secular historians have found reason to celebrate the emperor Akbar. He sought to marginalize the orthodox elements (as did Alauddin Khalji and Muhammad Tughluq during the Sultanat). More than that, he built up, as I said, a composite ruling class. He undercut the powers of the theologians, and put forward a concept, *sulh-i-kul*, which saw different religions as paths to the same God, and emphasized the need for the state to be impartial. Communal historiography has responded by arguing that Akbar was at best an exception, and temple destructions and bigotry began returning

from the time of his son Jahangir, culminating in Aurangzeb's systematic anti-Hindu policy. Secular strategy here has been to deny this, using a variety of facts, and even to show that Aurangzeb's anti-Hindu policy was dictated more by political necessity than religious fanaticism, and was restricted to a small phase of his half century long reign. Iqtidar Alam Khan has argued that the main trend in medieval Indian statecraft under the Mughals was a tendency to secularism, without which modern Indian notions of secularism cannot be understood. Another secular scholar, Neeladri Bhattacharya, has seen in this a secular teleology that is inadequate. Bhattacharya correctly points out that the sources from the past speak with many voices, and we cannot arbitrarily decide that one is right and the others wrong. The capture of the Maratha king Sambhaji was followed by a debate over what to do with him. Eventually Aurangzeb decided to have him executed. Satish Chandra cites the contemporary author Khafi Khan to argue that it was a political decision, and Aurangzeb referred the matter to theologians just to get a religious gloss over it. Bhattacharya argues that Chandra's decision to accept Khafi Khan's version, and to treat the consultation of the theologians as in some way inauthentic, shows how facts are emplotted within structures of narratives, how conflicting evidence is negotiated, how causal connections are made through narrative strategies, and how the narrative truth emerges in the process. I do not wish to debunk Chandra. But the existence of conflicting voices suggest that we cannot always reconcile them into a simple and coherent narrative. Confronted with communal stereotypes, and aware of the urgency of countering them, secular historians have too often framed their arguments within problematic binaries. Muzaffar Alam's *The Languages of Political Islam in India, c. 1200-1800*, in fact shows us that there was not a single narrative of assimilation overcoming all hurdles, but a diversity of voices, ranging from assimilation to orthodoxy.

The more recent works, whether Thapar on Somnatha or Alam on political Islam, are extremely important. Secular histories have always been intimately connected to the politics of the public sphere. Over the last quarter of a century, a very different type of communal historiography has emerged – not published in peer reviewed journals or as books by formidable publishing houses with well known academic credibility, but in popular magazines, in tracts put out by local groups or by 'social and cultural organisations' that are fronts for the RSS, or by publishing houses that do not care for academic norms even when claiming to publish scholarly books. Tracts like *Rama Janambhumi ka Rakta Ranjit Itihas* by Ram Gopal Pandey, or Pratap Narain Misra's *Kya Kahati Hai Saraytu Dhara?* claim to be based on authentic history. The latter pamphlet does not have the author speak. It is the river Saraytu that is bearing witness. Obviously, these do not conform to our historical methods. Equally obviously to a secular historian living in India, these carried much more weight than the secular books, articles and pamphlets we turned out by the hundreds back in 1987-92. The point is not that these are palpably wrong. It is not difficult to prove that to any serious academic audience. The point is that people, and not merely illiterates or semi-literates, believed in these, at times even while they accepted many claims of academic historians. Certainly, we need to challenge communal 'facts', as these 'facts' often make up the constitutive ingredients of a narrative, so that debunking false facts, such as the date of composition of the Vedas or the claim that the Aryans originated in India, can puncture the whole narrative of Hindus being the original inhabitants of India and therefore being alone fit to be considered the Indian nation.

But challenging communal history has to go beyond challenging the authenticity of communal facts. The communal tracts produce a social imagination of a very different kind. It is necessary to comprehend the premises of popular understanding, to ask why even now, after nearly half a century of high quality secular historiography, it is R.C. Majumdar and even Savarkar and Golwalkar who should influence the common sense of popular and school and undergraduate history? We have to see how specific conceptions come to be accepted as true, look at the production of the stories and the politics of that production. But we also have to look at how the popular and the academic interact. Historians may not have to provide "correct solutions" for the present, but political

practices of the present cannot be easily delinked from the questions of memory and history. Reconstitution of identities is premised on reconstitution of the past. If we think that communal politics of the RSS type is leading India to increasing sectarian violence and an authoritarian state, regardless of whether we agree with the “fascist” label, we have to understand the centrality of history for this political project. And we have to contest it by, among other things, putting forward secular history in ways not restricted to academic terms.

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**P.S.**

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