

A BRIEF HISTORY OF INDIA'S PRESENT

Relevant for: Indian Polity | Topic: Issues and Challenges Pertaining to the Federal Structure, Dispute Redressal Mechanisms, and the Centre-State Relations

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'Although the ordinary Indian is putting up a brave fight to douse these fires of hate, it seems akin to throwing a bucket of water at a wildfire' | Photo Credit: Getty Images

Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, and Bengal (1947). Calcutta (1964). Ahmedabad (1969). Bhiwandi (1970). Delhi (1976). Assam (1983). Delhi and Bhiwandi (1984). Meerut (1987). Bhagalpur (1989). Somnath–Ayodhya–Bombay (1990-1993). Gujarat (2002). Muzaffarnagar (2013). Delhi (2020). Manipur and Gurugram (2023). Here is a cursory list of the big ticket #riots, the ones that get column space on the front page of newspapers; the ones that make the 9 p.m. headlines night after night, even if the victims are not always remembered.

Section 144 of the Indian Penal Code dutifully imposes a curfew; Sections 153A and 295A are used to arrest those who hurt religious sentiments, and the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 is to punish those who commit crimes against castes. The Model Code of Conduct is supposed to penalise those who violate a "model code of conduct" during election time. All laws (journalists, historians and political scientists have documented in painstaking detail) have been deployed selectively, politically. The suspension of the Internet is a new device, used with equal facility to curb the spread of information and misinformation (and cheating during examinations).

Old colonial laws, new independent-India-laws, newly renamed, wannabe laws. Seventy-five years of artfully maintaining "law and order", rinsing, repeating, and normalising an increasingly Hindu majoritarian status quo.

Every student of the Partition violence of 1947 has come across news reports of a physically brave Jawaharlal Nehru stepping into a mob of rioters and rescuing Muslims from being beaten to death. In 2023, we wait, count the days, weeks, months it takes for the Prime Minister to break his silence and tweet a message of condemnation over a death caused by Hindu vigilantes, or expend three minutes of time in Parliament to refer to the state of collapse in Manipur. Seventy-five years of riots have reduced our expectations so spectacularly, even of our political leadership. How did we come to such a pass? Perhaps we should reckon with a founding act of violence, and its long shadow over our polity.

Nathuram Godse was a journalist, an editor of newspapers, and a co-founder of rifle clubs across the Bombay Presidency during the Second World War.

He was a devotee of V.D. Savarkar, the long-time leader of the Hindu Mahasabha, and fully internalised his slogan to “Militarise Hinduism and Hinduise the Military”. Godse’s newspapers, Agrani, and later Hindu Rashtra, had to deposit security for hate-filled writings that were deemed to breach public security in 1947. Godse killed Gandhi because he held him responsible for Partition; he wanted to create a purely Hindu Rashtra and opposed the return of Muslims to civil-war-torn-Delhi.

Godse used his defence during the Gandhi murder trial as an opportunity to narrate his version of the recent past. He spoke so persuasively that High Court judge G.D. Khosla recorded in his memoirs that had he faced a jury trial, Godse would have earned a verdict of not guilty. Godse was photogenic and articulate; in today’s India, he would have worked as a journalist on television, narrating his version of events on prime time, and possibly raking in high ratings.

Godse’s demand for a nation where Muslims should be rendered invisible, or forced to leave India, appears to be coming true. At least the first half of Savarkar’s popular slogan — “militarise Hinduism” — has been on display in recent marches and rallies of the Bajrang Dal and allied organisations across north India.

What will the historian of the future, if we can conceive of a future for our planet, write in a history of this time 200 years from now? First, they will not be able to read parliamentary debates. Instead, they will confront endless “interruptions” and “comments expunged” from the record. Less than one handful of Members of Parliament from regional parties such as the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and the Trinamool Congress have been able to and permitted to speak and finish their speeches in the last decade.

Second, our historian of the future will despair at tracing the outlines of an argument as key interlocutors shift political allegiances for immediate political gains. Who said what in 2013 will hardly matter if the ground shifts so dramatically two years later. What context and set of ideological principles will explain the 180-degree about-turn of a political opponent-turned ally in record time?

Third, if equipped with an archaeologist’s tools, our historian will wonder why our monuments were all suddenly being dug up... but only up to a certain stratum. Why were they not dug up to reveal an older history, a possibly Buddhist era?

Fourth, our historian will ask if we have been too slow to name this age of extreme hate, to recognise the significance of ideology in reshaping India into a Hindu Rashtra. With leaders gaining notoriety for inventing catchy hate slogans and fuelling violence and being rewarded with political office, with what credibility can political leaders request the public to pay regard to norms of civility and propriety? Hate is the new normal, the speech that is politically correct, the speech that is politically rewarded.

While we do not have an elaborate description of the Hindu Rashtra of Godse’s desire, it is now possible to outline what such a state might look like and feel like for its citizens. A Hindu Rashtra will be a state that imposes a particular set of upper-caste Hindu norms on the entire country in the name of uniformity and homogeneity: where Muslims are afraid to “look Muslim” in public places such as trains, and in protected spaces such as schools and colleges; where Muslim homes are raided for “forensic” analysis of their refrigerator; where Muslims are prohibited from renting or buying in gated communities and neighbourhoods that are “vegetarian-only”; where Hindu festivals are celebrated in some parts of India with anti-Muslim hate speech blaring out of loudspeakers in the guise of rap music; where all Hindus are expected to provide donations for a temple regardless of their particular religious sympathies; where bulldozers target and destroy Muslim homes; where Muslim trades and businesses are boycotted (this tactic is listed in

Godse's articles); where the token (assimilable) Muslim film star is feted at the same time that a Muslim cricketer is abused when a match is lost and a Muslim comedian imprisoned for a joke he did not crack; where textbooks are "rationalised" to brainwash a new generation of students into believing in authoritarian leaders and a simplistic past; where the voice of justice is soft, routinely late, and ignored by the political class.

And where upper caste Hindu norms of women's subservience and seclusion are imposed on and imbibed by half a billion women, quietly. Where the plummeting rate of women in the workforce, despite increasing educational qualifications and declining fertility, leaves India in the bottom five nations of the world along with Iraq, Pakistan, Syria, and Yemen, according to the 2020 World Economic Forum Report on gender gaps in economic participation. This increasing gender gap, unique for a middle-income country, has been analysed by generations of economists including, most recently, Shrayana Bhattacharya.

A Hindu Rashtra will be a state whose fires will consume us all — Muslim, Christian, Sikh, Dalit, Buddhist, and those not deemed sufficiently Hindu. And although the ordinary Indian is putting up a brave fight to douse these fires of hate, it seems akin to throwing a bucket of water at a wildfire. We, the people of India, will have to choose between Godse's Hindu Rashtra, and the idea of India in the Constitution.

Neeti Nair is the author of 'Hurt Sentiments: Secularism and Belonging in South Asia', 2023 and 'Changing Homelands: Hindu Politics and the Partition of India', 2011. She is Professor of History at the University of Virginia, U.S., and Global Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars

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