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THE RISE OF THE FAR-RIGHT AND THE “POLITICS OF MEMORY” IN INDIA UNDER THE BHARATIYA JANATA PARTY (BJP)

ABSTRACT This article aims to establish the correlation between far-right political ideology and the politics of memory to study the rise of the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) in India and the increasing attempts to reimagine memory. The course of Indian politics took a turn after the rise of the right-wing party in the Indian government in 2014. The Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), led by Narendra Modi, adopted many policies that marginalise or exploit the non-Hindu population in India. It is evident that communal politics have gained momentum under Modi's prime ministership, as the government overlooks many atrocities caused by Hindu individuals or organisations against Muslims. Similarly, the Modi government and BJP-led state governments are involved in the reimagining of memory. From a broader perspective, politicians frequently use mythologised understandings of the past to mobilise memory as a political tool in the present. Having said that, this article aims to study the attempt to distort history through the lens of “politics of memory”.

Keywords: Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), India, far-right politics, politics of memory, Hindu nationalism

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to create a correlation between the far right and the politics of memory in India under the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) since 2014. Modi's rise in the Indian government since 2014 has shifted mainstream Indian politics toward the right, hence the ongoing re-imagination of memory.

Ideologically, the far-right landscape includes all actors on the right side of the political spectrum of the mainstream political discussion, which also encompasses the conservative right. The ideology of these groups is based on the belief that inequalities are natural and that some groups are, therefore, superior to others, which informs their nativist and authoritarian views of society. All far-right groups see order and punishment (or "law and order") as critical to society's survival. Extreme right organisations, on the other hand, typically reject democracy's bare minimum: popular sovereignty and majority rule. Thus, they perceive society through the lens of security rather than social policy or welfare. They believe in a system ruled by individuals who possess special leadership characteristics and are, therefore, naturally different from the rest of the "people" and are often inspired by fascism or national socialism.¹ As a result, they oppose democracy and party politics, all forms of ethnic and cultural diversity within the nation state and are willing to use violence to achieve political objectives.² The neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn in Greece, the paramilitary organisation Rashtriya Swayam-sevak Sangh (RSS) (National Volunteer Organisation) in India and the white supremacist Ku Klux Klan in the United States are recent examples of extreme right actors. The politics of memory is one of the best instruments that far-right politics uses to rise or sustain its power in the modern political framework.

The term "politics of memory" first appeared in North America after World War II, as a result of a social and political necessity to deal with the Holocaust's legacy. However, in recent years, due to the rise of "right-wing" politics in the world, the politics of memory has become a trend to push far-right ideas in society. This is the case in Indian politics following the rise of the Hindu National right-wing party, namely the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which is a political wing of the RSS. One might ask whether the BJP is a far-right party or not. The BJP often discards this idea by saying that they are a pro-secular, pro-democratic party; however, their umbrella organisation, the RSS, is certainly a far-right paramilitary organisation.

Politics of memory refers to the public activities of various social institutions and actors aimed at promoting specific interpretations of a collective past and establishing an appropriate sociocultural infrastructure of remembrance, school curricula and, in some cases, special legislation. Memory is essential for any identity. Nation states are regarded as important but not the only actors in memory politics. Various institutions, groups and even individuals with relevant social capital and communicative resources comprise the range of mnemonic actors or "political forces interested in specific

¹ C. Mudde, *The Ideology of the Extreme Right*, Manchester 2002.

² R. Eatwell, *Fascism: A History*, London 2011.

interpretations of the past”.³ Typically, studies of memory politics focus on the activities of memory entrepreneurs from various social sectors, including politics, academia, victims’ associations, “national memory institutes”⁴ and state officials. Mnemonic actors use national myths and symbols to shape and delimit the identities of their societies, legitimise their power, mobilise electoral support and exchange power resources.

Due to the global rise of right-wing politics in recent years, there has been a significant increase in so-called “memory politics” among far-right political actors, parties and movements. Likewise, the rise of India’s Hindu Nationalist Right has translated into an imagined, mythologised or idealised past that has infiltrated the public sphere. Far-right actors have (re)articulated, (re)interpreted, banalised or manipulated specific pre-existing historical tropes in order to gain political legitimacy as the “true heirs” and bearers of allegedly inalienable national historical traditions and values.⁵ When the government of particular countries emerges from different imaginings of the past and present of their histories, they tend to engage in politics of official memory. Official memory may refer to the various ways in which historical images, people and events of national significance are remembered, evoked and commemorated through the performance of a set of official rituals. In this sense, the concept of official memory is inextricably linked to the official history of the state and the specific ritualistic modes that have evolved in the postcolonial Indian political milieu.⁶

After the three consecutive victories in the Indian elections in 2014, 2019 and 2024, the BJP, with its right-wing manifestation, has tried to re-write or re-define history, which ultimately impacts existing knowledge and the knowledge for upcoming generations.⁷ Having these premises regarding the correlation between right-wing ideology and the politics of memory in mind, this article intends to investigate the answers to the following questions:

- a. What is the fundamental ideological difference between the BJP and other political parties in India, which has translated into the re-imagination of memory?
- b. What are the tools and instruments that the BJP is using to initiate the unnatural imagination of India’s memory?

Methodologically, this article is embedded in qualitative studies. The primary and secondary methods play a vital role in terms of resource gathering and analysis. On the

³ M.H. Bernhard, J. Kubik (eds), *Twenty Years after Communism: The Politics of Memory and Commemoration*, Oxford 2016, p. 4.

⁴ L. Neumayer, “Integrating the Central European Past into a Common Narrative: The Mobilisations around the ‘Crimes of Communism’ in the European Parliament,” *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, vol. 23, no. 3 (2015), pp. 344-363.

⁵ S. Couperus, P.D. Tortola, L. Rensmann, “Memory Politics of the Far Right in Europe,” *European Politics and Society*, vol. 24, no. 4 (2023), pp. 435-444.

⁶ H. Ahmed, “What Is an ‘Official’ Memory?,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, 7 July 2014, at <https://www.epw.in/blog/hilal-ahmed/what-official-memory.html>, 24 August 2025.

⁷ S. Muneer. S.K. Aryal, “Institutional Instrumentalization and Democratic Backsliding in India under the Rule of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP),” *Romanian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 24, no. 1 (2024), pp. 29-43.

other hand, observation has been employed as a subsidiary method. Lamont referred to it as a triangulation of methods.⁸ The author has been closely observing the political situation in India for a decade. Additionally, the author has previous publications that deal with India's right turn and changes in the political thought process.⁹

RIGHT WING AND THE POLITICS OF MEMORY

In 2017, the leader of the German far-right party *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD), which is likely to have a bigger electoral mandate in the 2025 German election, proposed that Germans be allowed to be proud of “the achievements of German soldiers in two world wars”, similar to how the French regard Napoleon and the British regard Nelson and Churchill (Rosette et al., 2021). Similarly, far-right protest groups such as *Génération Identitaire* in France, PEGIDA (an anti-Islam, anti-immigrant organisation) in Germany and the Golden Dawn-related neo-Nazi vigilante movement in Greece mobilise an imagined past that ultimately fosters an essentialist, primordialist, racist, antisemitic, sexist, ethnocentric, nationalist, homophobic and heteronormative ideational outlook.¹⁰ First and foremost, this historical revisionism and the post-factual counter-narratives it employs are inextricably linked to manifestations of “nostalgic nationalism”.¹¹ By idealising, instrumentalising and whitewashing national histories, it seeks to rehabilitate and glorify ethno-national community models in opposition to cosmopolitan social change.

The anti-ideology from shared politico-cultural self-understandings, supporting constitutional practices and liberal democracy, is a key feature of far-right political groups. Their political conduct includes extreme, radical and populist formations. One way far-right actors distance themselves from liberal-democratic norms is through the deliberate coarsening of political discourse and the “politics of transgression” (Rensmann, 2017),¹² i.e. by challenging the boundaries of what is considered legitimate pub-

⁸ Ch. Lamont, *Research Methods in International Relations*, Los Angeles–London–New Delhi–Singapore–Washington 2021.

⁹ See more: S.K. Aryal, S.S. Bharti, “Focus 83 – Impact of Hindu Nationalism in India's Foreign Policy Conduct,” *South Asian Democratic Forum*, 7 July 2022, at <https://www.sadf.online/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Focus.83-1.pdf>, 24 August 2025; S.K. Aryal, S.S. Bharti, “Changing the Media Landscape in India under the Modi Government: a Case Study Based on the Narrative Policy Framework,” *Studia z Polityki Publicznej/Public Policy Studies*, vol. 9, no. 3 (2022), pp. 47–64.

¹⁰ P. Castelli Gattinara, C. Froio, A.L. Pirro, “Far-Right Protest Mobilisation in Europe: Grievances, Opportunities and Resources,” *European Journal of Political Research*, vol. 61, no. 4 (2022), pp. 1019–1041; L.D. Valencia-García (ed.), *Far-right Revisionism and the End of History: Alt/Histories*, Abingdon 2020.

¹¹ L. Rensmann, “Im Schatten des Trumpismus: Autoritärer Populismus in der Regierung und die Neuformierung der radikalen Rechten in den USA,” *ZRex – Zeitschrift für Rechtsextremismusforschung*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2021), p. 8.

¹² L. Rensmann, “The Noisy Counter-Revolution: Understanding the Cultural Conditions and Dynamics of Populist Politics in Europe in the Digital Age,” *Politics and Governance*, vol. 5, no. 4 (2017), pp. 123–135.

lic debate and thus eventually eroding the boundaries of the speakable, thereby normalising respective transgressions. Substantively, this frequently includes the positive reframing, glorification or whitewashing of an authoritarian-nationalist past, as well as the rehabilitation of respective “alternative models” of community-building and political order to varying degrees.

The ethno-nationalist imaginary of the contemporary far right, which ultimately relies on historical glorifications of a pre-democratic, authoritarian past associated with ethnic nationalism, can accordingly be placed in the context of a cultural backlash against democratic social value change.¹³ Faced with a never-ending cycle of learning and forgetting in the aftermath of past crimes,¹⁴ institutional democratisation and critical public processing of historical atrocities have aided in mainstreaming a culture of contrition, remembrance and reflection on national identity and history in Europe.¹⁵ This political culture is one of the targets of a “noisy counter-revolution”¹⁶ led by far-right agents. It is a reaction to inclusive, post-ethnic, cosmopolitan social value change in a diverse migration society; the “silent revolution” towards self-expression values demonstrating independent support for democratic ideals; and the democratisation of society as a whole.

Within memory politics, there are two variables we can distinguish when analysing the actors and the characteristics of those actors: the types of mnemonic actors and the type of memory regime that emerges as a result of their interaction (dominated either by coexistence or conflict). We can identify four ideal types of such actors (individuals, parties, organisations and so on): mnemonic warriors, mnemonic pluralists, mnemonic abnegators and mnemonic prospectives.

Memory regimes are institutionalised methods of determining and managing the supply and demand for remembrance in historical contexts. Insofar as it implies a governance of issues relating to the past in modern societies, the concept goes beyond the more common “politics of memory” or “collective memory”; on the one hand, discourse on the past is produced by the state, its institutions and various other organisations (clubs, associations and so on), opposition party leaders, opinion makers and other informal networks of communication; on the other hand, memory patterns also produce social identities. A memory regime is the means by which both ends are met, both politically and culturally. Memory regimes drive dynamics: the supply and demand for memory are rarely in a state of “general equilibrium”, so there is always some kind of friction that, as contexts change, leads to the elaboration of discourse and the reinterpretation of past events as traumatic.¹⁷ A memory regime usually allows for multiple, sometimes incoherent, even contradictory discourses on the past.

¹³ P. Norris, R. Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism*, Cambridge 2019.

¹⁴ S. Friedländer, *Reflections of Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death*, transl. by T. Weyr, New York 1984.

¹⁵ T. Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945*, New York 2006.

¹⁶ L. Rensmann, “The Noisy Counter-Revolution...”, pp. 123-135.

¹⁷ I.Z. Dénes, “Interpreting Regimes of Memory,” *European Review*, vol. 21, no. 4 (2013), pp. 465-469.

Table 1. Types of mnemonic actors and their dominant strategies

	Mnemonic warriors	Mnemonic pluralists	Mnemonic abnegators	Mnemonic prospective
<i>Who</i> are the participants in memory politics?	Us versus them.	Us and them.	Those who dwell on the past – not us.	Expansive and exhaustive us.
<i>What</i> is the pre-dominant vision of collective memory?	Memory is non-negotiable, as there is only one “true” vision of the past.	Negotiation on memory issues but within an agreement on the fundamentals of mnemonic politics.	Low salience of memory issues for politics.	The riddle of history has been solved – both the past and the future are known.
<i>When</i> are the events to be remembered happening?	In a single mythical past (wrongs of the past are part of the tissue of present politics).	(Probably) in multiple pasts. Different interpretations of the past exist.	Never mind when – it is not important. There is no time like the present.	In the future. Teleological orientation. There is an inevitable or desirable and attainable end state.
<i>How</i> is the mnemonic contest to be carried out? What are the culturally prescribed strategies of action?	Defeat, deny power to, delegitimise alternative visions of the past. Do not negotiate – avoid compromise.	Practice respect, toleration for alternative views of the past on the basis of a common understanding of the fundamentals. Be ready to negotiate or disagree.	Avoid mnemonic contests. They are a waste of time.	Focus political energy on building a “brighter” future and challenge competing visions of the past in the name of the correct, revolutionary interpretation.
<i>Why</i> is it worthwhile or not worthwhile to engage in mnemonic struggle?	Fundamentalism: our “true” vision of the past legitimises our claim to power.	Pluralism: there are several visions of the past that are acceptable. Our claim to power rests on our effort to institutionalise a frame for their coexistence.	Pragmatism: propagating a pre-dominant vision of the past is not seen as worthwhile in comparison to responding to present-day problems.	Utopianism: An idealised future is attainable but requires action in the present.

Source: J. Kubik, M.H. Bernhard, “A Theory of the Politics of Memory,” in M.H. Bernhard, J. Kubik (eds), *Twenty Years after Communism...*, pp. 7-34.

Thus, when one wants to analyse the politics of memory and far-right politics, they should consider the interconnectedness between micro-level actors, institutions and far-right decision makers. For India, this framework fits due to three broader reasons. Firstly, the whole political discourse in India can now be reduced to one person, Prime

Minister Modi, as someone who is chosen by God (he claims this himself¹⁸) or the saviour of India or the Hindus. Secondly, the political ideology that the BJP embeds itself in disregards secularism and understands India as a monotheistic Hindu nation. They also believe that those religions whose religious shrines (Islam or Christianity) are outside of India do not belong to India. Thirdly, in the political space, the BJP is working hard to erase the achievements that Gandhi or Nehru had in institutionalising secularism and democracy by questioning or misrepresenting them as something that should not have been done. As a result, all of these aforementioned attempts need a formalised narrative (politics of memory).

BJP AND UPSCALING HINDU NATIONALISM IN INDIA

Before we enter into the politics of memory in India, it is necessary to understand what these re-imaginings of memories are based on. The ruling party of India since 2014, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), has a deep-rooted ideology of Political Hinduism or Hindutva. The umbrella organisation of the BJP is the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), which believes in the revival of India as a Hindu *Rashtra* (nation). The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), an all-male Hindu nationalist volunteer group often described as a paramilitary organisation, was formed in the 1920s and is at the heart of India's Hindu nationalist movement. It was established to provide the Hindu community with unity and discipline in order to build the Hindu Rashtra (the Hindu state). With over five million members, it is still working to spread Hindutva ideology today.¹⁹ The RSS leads the *Sangh Parivar*, an umbrella group of Hindu nationalist organisations that have established schools, charities and clubs but have also been linked to communal violence. The RSS has been banned three times since its inception, including after Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated in 1948 by a former RSS member. The RSS gave rise to India's ruling political party, the BJP, and the two remain inextricably linked.

Since the Hindu nationalist BJP's massive political victories in 2014 and 2019 and the formation of government in 2024, a phenomenon of extreme polarisation has become increasingly concerning. Partisan attacks on India's independent political institutions have grown more frequent, opposition parties have grown tired of defending pluralism and secularism, and hatred and violence against minority populations have increased. Despite the BJP's hard-line Hindu nationalist agenda, some argue that the party's foreign policy has taken a predictable and reasonable path (meaning minimal or no impact on it). When

¹⁸ See H. Jose, "Modi Claimed He Was 'Sent By God', but Has His Aura of Invincibility Cracked?," *ABC News*, 20 July 2024, at <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-07-21/narendra-modi-image-after-indian-election/104103332>, 24 August 2025.

¹⁹ H. Ellis-Petersen, "What is Hindu Nationalism and How Does It Relate to Trouble in Leicester?," *The Guardian*, 20 September 2022, at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/20/what-is-hindu-nationalism-and-who-are-the-rss>, 24 August 2025.

it came to dealing with physical power (in areas such as security and the economy), as well as relations with stronger nations, the influence of ideology in BJP actions and declarations was less obvious.²⁰ However, recently, India's macho man hardliner domestic politics and the flavour of right-wing Hindu nationalism have had a severe impact on foreign policy, mostly due to the Indian diaspora's behaviour in recipient countries. For instance, the situation in Canada²¹, Australia²² and United Kingdom²³.

There are two major aspects to consider if one wants to trace Hindu nationalism as a political discourse in India. Firstly, although the BJP as a party was founded only in 1980, all of its predecessor organisations (or political parties) stood for Hindu nationalism. Hindutva, which is now nearly nine decades old, was institutionally born in the 1920s. Although the ideology has changed, some of its core values have not. The fundamental concept of Hindutva is that India is a Hindu nation.²⁴ Likewise, Hindu nationalists since the early decades have asserted how other religions, especially Islam, should learn to coexist within Hindu ideas. Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar, an early stalwart and towering figure in the Hindu-nationalist ideological pantheon, asserted in an infamous passage written in the late 1930s: *The foreign races in Hindustan [India] must... adopt the Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect and hold in reverence the Hindu religion, must entertain no ideas but those of the glorification of the Hindu race and culture... [and] may [only] stay in the country wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing... not even citizens' rights.*²⁵ One can argue that this was the past and that the party and the ideology have evolved since then. But following the BJP's victory in 2014, Ashok Singhal, leader of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), the BJP's sister organisation, stated: "Muslims... must learn to respect Hindu senti-

²⁰ S.K. Aryal, S.S. Bharti, "Focus 83 – Impact of Hindu Nationalism..."

²¹ There is an ongoing row between the Government of Canada and India about the killing of a Sikh leader (a Canadian citizen) supposedly with the support of the Indian government. On the sidelines of the increasing tension between the governments, the Hindus are taking matters into their own hands to intensify the anti-Sikh riots and violence in Canada. For more: H. Lex, "Clashes Erupted outside a Hindu Temple near Toronto. They're the Latest Sign of Canada and India's Spiraling Relations," *CNN World*, 29 November 2024, at <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/11/29/india/clashes-hindu-sikh-canada-india-intl-hnk/index.html>, 24 August 2025.

²² In 2023, there was a similar brawl between Hindus and Sikh in Melbourne. For more: R. Maloney, "Religious Figures Call for Calm after Violence and Vandalism among Victoria's Indian Communities," *News*, 31 January 2023, at <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-02-01/sikh-hindu-khalistan-tensions-religious-leaders-call-for-unity/101910030>, 24 August 2025.

²³ As conflict broke out between the city's Muslim and Hindu populations in August and September of 2022, Leicester, England, served as the setting for the meeting point of local and global forces. The report suggests that it is the outcome of rise of Hindu Nationalism in India. For more: "Hindutva in Britain," *Community Policy Forum*, November 2023, at <https://bridge.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Hindutva-in-Britain.pdf>, 24 August 2025.

²⁴ A. Varshney, "India's Watershed Vote: Hindu Nationalism in Power?," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 25, no. 4 (2014), pp. 34-45.

²⁵ D.K. Jha, "Has The RSS Revived Golwalkar's Plan for Muslims?," *The Caravan. A Journal of Politics & Culture*, 30 March 2022, at <https://caravanmagazine.in/politics/has-the-rss-revived-golwalkars-plan-for-muslims>, 15 September 2025.

ments. If they keep opposing Hindus, how long can they survive?" The electoral dissatisfaction of Hindu nationalists began right after independence. When India gained independence in 1947, the Indian freedom movements, led by the Congress Party and its leaders, advocated for secular nationalism. Others have always considered Hindu nationalism a main feature of India's constitutional governance, given that the majority of the population is Hindu. Although the BJP's election campaign did not mention anything about being anti-secular and pro-Hindutva, it challenged all of the ideas that Gandhi and Nehru envisioned for India, including secularism. Modi's roughly eight-month-long election campaign of 2014 was dominated by three themes: economic growth, good governance and an unflinching critique of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty and its hegemonic hold on the Congress party and its government. The trend continued in the 2019 and 2024 election campaigns as well, where the underlying message was that despite knowing India is a Hindu nation, Gandhi and Nehru did not do anything for Hindus (meaning Modi will change that mistake). Therefore, people in the opposition now fear that the BJP is hoping to change the constitution to erase the Gandhi-Nehru legacy regarding secularism. Former Union Minister P. Chidambaram, who represents the Indian Congress, claimed that the BJP is working hard to gain a two-thirds majority in the Rajya Sabha (upper house), and that if they do, they will rewrite the Constitution.²⁶ *Aab ki Baar, 400 Paar* (this time, over 400 seats) was the main tagline of the 2024 BJP election campaign. This proves Chidambaram's arguments. Thankfully, the BJP did not even get the majority to form the government by themselves, but the idea was clear about what they wanted to do if they had a two-thirds majority.

Following the re-imagination of India as an *Akhand Bharat* by Hindu radical forces, momentum has gained after the victory of the BJP in 2014. The term *Akhand Bharat* is associated with Hindutva ideology. The concept longs for a mythological India that predates state formation and the partition era. It assumes "Hindu hegemony". As a result, right-wing Hindu nationalist parties in India, such as the RSS, VHP, Shiv Sena and BJP, support the majoritarian concept. Members of the Sangh are known to keep a map of *Akhand Bharat* in their homes and offices, which shows the entity as comprising Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Tibet, Bhutan, Nepal and Aksai Chin.²⁷ In the modern world, *Akhand Bharat* has an antagonistic relationship with the Westphalian order. It attempts to overthrow the concept of sovereignty on the basis of a so-called "historical claim" and advocates for physical expansion – a fascist method of increasing land boundaries. Although the concept was considered radical in its early days, the BJP's extended rule over the last decade has made it mainstream

²⁶ "BJP Will Rewrite Constitution if It Gets Two-Thirds Majority in RS: Chidambaram," *The Hindu*, 8 June 2022a, at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/bjp-will-rewrite-constitution-if-it-gets-two-thirds-majority-in-rs-chidambaram/article65505005.ece>, 24 August 2025.

²⁷ M. Das, "What RSS Chief Bhagwat Really Meant when He Said 'Akhand Bharat' Could Be Reality in 10-15 yrs," *The Print*, 23 May 2022, at <https://theprint.in/india/what-rss-chief-bhagwat-really-meant-when-he-said-akhand-bharat-could-be-reality-in-10-15-yrs/963004>, 24 August 2025.

through similar media coverage.²⁸ In reality, however, there was never a time when the subcontinent was ruled by a singular ruler as a united territory. Thus, the BJP or RSS do not have any evidential argument about why the subcontinent is an *Akhand Bharat*, so they take refuge in constructed narratives.

As this section provides glimpses of how the legacy of radical Hindu ideas has been carried on or softly supported by the government, the next section will present evidence of the re-narration or rewriting of memories under the BJP government. Simply basing the theoretical argument on the politics of memory, the BJP has been acting either as a mnemonic actor or as a supporter of the memory regime in India.

EVIDENCE OF MEMORY POLITICS IN INDIA

When a far-right government rises in any particular country, it tends to initiate memory politics in two ways: mnemonic actors/warriors and memory regime. In terms of India, the memory regime and the mnemonic warriors, both associated with a far-right Hindu group, have run a narrative of “us versus them” against the Muslim population. Likewise, in retrospect, they have also separated themselves from the long-time ruling party of India, the Indian Congress, in an “us and them” manner. After the BJP’s landslide victories, especially in 2014 and 2019 in India’s general elections, the people or organisations involved in the re-imagination of memory received institutional support from the government. While analysing the evidence on how the re-imagination of memory in India has occurred in an organised manner, we can divide it into two parts: long-term and short-term.

The long-term plan of right-wing Hindu nationalist groups is to change the essence of the constitution of India and make it a “Hindu nation”. To do so, many narratives exist that provide alternative arguments (as a foundation for their actions) to secular India. One of those narratives is about the so-called “*Akhand Bharat*”. The internet is littered with materials claiming that the concept of *Akhand Bharat* is as old as the “civilisation” that spread across modern-day Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal, Burma, Tibet, Bhutan and Bangladesh. The idea gained traction among Hindu nationalists in 1924 and was publicly promoted in 1937. The concept was founded on the *ultimate vision of a perfectly organised ‘State of Society’ in which each individual was to be moulded into an ideal Hindu manhood*.²⁹

The *Hindu Mahasabha*, *RSS*, *VHP*, *Shiv Sena*, *Hindu Sena* and *Hindu Jana Jagriti Samiti* have recently joined the call for *Akhand Bharat*. In fact, the RSS Chief in 2015 set a deadline of 15 years to realise the idea. Though the roadmap for achieving this goal has not been made public, the overall strategy has become quite clear. Nobody,

²⁸ “BJP’s ‘Akhand Bharat’ Dream Is Not Only Problematic, Fascist Also,” *Modern Diplomacy*, 30 September 2022a, at <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2022/09/30/bjps-akhand-bharat-dream-is-not-only-problematic-fascist-also/>, 24 August 2025.

²⁹ F. Qamar, “Akhand Bharat: 50 Shades of Grey,” *National Herald*, 8 May 2022, at <https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/opinion/akhand-bharat-50-shades-of-grey>, 24 August 2025.

according to the RSS chief, can stop India's march forward toward the greater Hindu nation. "Those attempting to obstruct the country's progress will either move away or be removed from the scene," he has been quoted as saying in the media. The concept remains an ideal conceptual framework of far-right Hindu nationalists for a very long time.³⁰ However, after the succession of the BJP in the Indian government, the concept is gaining official endorsement.

On September 7, 2020, Assam Chief Minister (CM) Himanta Biswa Sarma made a highly divisive remark about "integrating Bangladesh and Pakistan". Minister Sarma attempted to counter the Congress' "Bharat Jodo Yatra"³¹ by stating that "India is united" and not in need of a so-called "uniting India movement". He added that India stretches from Kashmir to Kanyakumari, Silchar to Saurashtra. The Minister accused the Indian Congress government of dividing the country into India and Pakistan, stating that it would have never happened if a pro-Hindu government had been in place. The whole point of this speech was to create a binary between the BJP and Congress by asserting that the BJP is pro-Hindu (and, therefore, nationalist) while the Indian Congress is anti-Hindu (and hence anti-national, allowing for the division of India). There are frequent attacks on Rahul Gandhi, India's opposition leader since 2024, questioning whether he feels remorse for his maternal grandfather's [Jawaharlal Nehru's] mistakes, and if he regrets them, then there is no point in having "Bharat Jodo" in Indian territory. Rather, Mr. Gandhi should *try to integrate Pakistan and Bangladesh and strive to create Akhand Bharat*.³² Though it may appear that the BJP leader was attempting to "tease" the Indian Congress, the rhetoric falls under the larger narrative of the BJP's contentious *Akhand Bharat* concept, which envisions a unified India encompassing all of South Asia and Myanmar. As a result, the concept is quite concerning for the sovereignty of all other South Asian states.³³ When the Indian parliament was shifted to the new building in 2023, they placed the map of *Akhand Bharat* inside the parliament. India claims it is a cultural map when Nepal raised questions with India.³⁴ Mainstream universities and

³⁰ Ibidem.

³¹ A major leader of India's main opposition Congress party, Rahul Gandhi, MP, participated in a 4,000-kilometre (2,485-mile) 'unity march' across the country. The southern Tamil Nadu state of Kanyakumari marked the start of the five-month march, which ended in Srinagar, the capital of Jammu and Kashmir. Numerous celebrities have endorsed the march, which has attracted large crowds nationwide.

³² "Assam's Himanta Sarma's Controversial Remark Amid Bangladesh PM's Visit," *NDTV*, 7 September 2022, at <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/himanta-biswa-sarma-sheikh-hasina-india-bangladesh-ties-assams-himanta-sarmas-controversial-remark-amid-bangladesh-pms-visit-3323210>, 24 August 2025.

³³ K. Chowdhury, "School Social Science Textbook Revisions in India Kick Up Controversy," *The Diplomat*, 28 July 2022, at <https://thediplomat.com/2022/07/school-social-science-textbook-revisions-in-india-kick-up-controversy/>, 24 August 2025.

³⁴ "Nepal PM Prachanda Calls for Further Study on India's Claim 'Akhand Bharat' Map Is Cultural, Not Political," *National Herald*, 7 June 2023, at <https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/international/nepal-pm-prachanda-calls-for-further-study-on-indias-claim-akhand-bharat-map-is-cultural-not-political>, 24 August 2025.

academia also hold many seminars and discussions on *Akhand Bharat* and various aspects of Hindu nationalism with the endorsement of government agencies.³⁵

Similarly, on the short-term side, the combination of far-right government and actors is working on multiple fronts. First, there is visible work being done in revising academic textbooks. The Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) already removed certain topics from school Social Science and History textbooks in June 2022. The history of the Mughal courts, communal riots in Gujarat (when Modi was the Chief Minister of Gujarat), the Emergency, Dalit writers, the Naxalite (Maoist) movement and the fight for equality are among the topics removed from grades 6 to 12 textbooks.³⁶ While the CBSE described the deletion as a “syllabus rationalisation” exercise, the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), which publishes the textbooks used in CBSE schools, stated that the deleted content was “overlapping” and “irrelevant”.³⁷ According to previous (2019-2024) Union Minister of State for Education Annapurna Devi, schoolchildren struggled to learn through online classes during the pandemic. Concerns about “curriculum overload” were raised, she explained, justifying the deletion of topics from textbooks. Devi made the remarks in response to a written question from the Lok Sabha. Historians see it as an attempt to rewrite the past.³⁸ While it is not clear why the so-called “curriculum overload” chose to alienate certain aspects of history, especially those related to Muslim heritage.

The Union Education Ministry also launched the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) for foundational stage education of children aged three to eight years. The National Curriculum Framework for School Education, the National Curriculum Framework for Early Childhood Care and Education, the National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education and the National Curriculum Framework for Adult Education are the four sections of the NCF. The framework is based on the *panchakosha* concept, which refers to the ancient Indian emphasis on the body-mind connection. The NCF defines five components of child education: physical development (*sharirik vikas*), life energy development (*pranik vikas*), emotional and mental development (*manasik vikas*), intellectual development (*bauddhik vikas*) and spiritual development (*chaitsik*

³⁵ “JNU to Establish Center Focused on Shivaji Maharaj’s Legacy and ‘Akhand Bharat,’” *ANI News*, 18 October 2024, at <https://www.aninews.in/news/national/general-news/jnu-to-establish-center-focused-on-shivaji-maharajs-legacy-and-akhand-bharat20241018174337/>, 24 September 2025; “Ramjas College to Hold Quiz on ‘Akhand Bharat’ Today,” *The Hindu*, 22 March 2017, at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Delhi/ramjas-college-to-hold-quiz-on-akhand-bharat-today/article17567000.ece>, 24 August 2025.

³⁶ D. Chowdhury D., “BJP’s ‘Akhand Bharat’ Dream...”

³⁷ “Citing Overlap, NCERT Removes Portions on 2002 Gujarat Riots, Emergency, Mughal Courts from Class 12 Books,” *The Hindu*, 17 June 2022, at <https://www.thehindu.com/education/overlapping-ncert-portions-2002-gujarat-riots-emergency-mughal-courts-class-12-books/article65537166.ece>, 24 August 2025.

³⁸ “Rationalisation of Textbooks Done for Speedy Recovery, Compensating Time Loss Due to Covid: MoE,” *The Economic Times*, 18 July 2022, at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/rationalisation-of-textbooks-done-for-speedy-recovery-compensating-time-loss-due-to-covid-moe/articleshow/92956369.cms?from=mdr>, 24 August 2025.

vikas).³⁹ In March 2022, Gujarat's education minister announced plans to teach the *Gita* (an ancient Hindu text) in schools.⁴⁰ Although the decision was overruled by the Gujarat High Court, the state government is pushing hard by arguing that this text belongs to everyone, regardless of their belief in other religions. According to The Indian Express, 1,334 changes were made to 182 textbooks published by the NCERT between 2015 and 2019. The revision of history is motivated by a desire to blur the distinctions between history and mythology.⁴¹

Additionally, under the BJP government, superstition and pseudoscience have become mainstream in academia. This includes India's premier institutes such as the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) and the Indian Institute of Management (IIM). These institutions have produced the CEOs of global information technology (IT) firms such as Google and Apple. Many scientists view the propagation of pseudoscience by top authorities and individuals, including scientists in high positions in key education and research institutes, under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's reign as part of a political mission of India's Hindu nationalists. The general secretary of the Breakthrough Science Society (BSS) mentioned that the recent curriculum changes, the initiative to rewrite history and the systematic spread of pseudoscience are connected and aimed at the same goal of instilling in the public psyche an idea of ancient Hindu superiority.⁴²

Similarly, there is a huge movement ongoing in terms of changing names from Muslim and colonial heritage to something nationalist and Hindu. However, the pattern that one can identify regarding changing names is not really about colonial heritage. In 2023, India hosted the G20. It was referred to as the "President of Bharat" in a dinner invitation from Indian President Droupadi Murmu, which sparked intense conjecture in political and media circles that the nation may soon undergo an official name change.⁴³ During the summit, the PM, External Affairs Minister and other dignitaries were called representatives of "Bharat".⁴⁴ If a country is willing to change

³⁹ "Govt Launches National Curriculum Framework for Education of Children in 3-8 Yrs Age Group," *The Economic Times*, 21 October 2022, at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/govt-launches-national-curriculum-framework-for-education-of-children-in-3-8-yrs-age-group/article-show/94988153.cms>, 24 August 2025.

⁴⁰ "Gujarat HC Issues Notice to Government on Introducing Bhagavad Gita in Schools," *The Economic Times*, 11 July 2022, at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/gujarat-hc-issues-notice-to-government-on-introducing-bhagavad-gita-in-schools/articleshow/92808117.cms>, 24 August 2025.

⁴¹ N. Jayakumar, "Building Fascism: Why Is BJP Renaming Cities & Altering History?," *Feminism in India*, 21 January 2020, at <https://feminisminindia.com/2020/01/22/building-fascism-bjp-renaming-cities-altering-history/>, at 24 August 2025.

⁴² S. Bhattacharya, "Indian Government's Intensifying Attack on Scientific Temperament Worries Scientists," *The Diplomat*, 14 August 2024, at <https://thediplomat.com/2024/08/indian-governments-intensifying-attack-on-scientific-temperament-worries-scientists/>, at 24 August 2025.

⁴³ A. Singh, "It's Not Just about Its Colonial Past. Here's what India's Possible Name Change is All about," *Revista De Prensa*, 24 September 2023, at <https://www.almendron.com/tribuna/its-not-just-about-its-colonial-past-heres-what-indias-possible-name-change-is-all-about/>, 24 August 2025.

⁴⁴ "President of India: Government's G20 Invite from 'Bharat' Sparks Row," *BBC*, 5 September 2023, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-66716541>, 24 August 2025.

its name to align more closely with its larger goals, then changing the names of places seems a smaller aspect.

The chief minister of India's northern Uttar Pradesh state, Mr Yogi Adityanath, renamed *Allahabad* to *Prayagraj* and *Faizabad* to *Ayodhya* in November 2018. These are major cities in Uttar Pradesh. Yogi Adityanath and the ruling party BJP in the federal capital New Delhi justified the move by claiming it was simply a return to the cities' historical names, which had been changed by Muslim emperors who ruled the Indian subcontinent prior to British rule, which technically began in 1857. It has a greater significance as PM Modi laid the foundation stone of the Ram Temple (on a site where the Babri Masjid was demolished by right-wing Hindu nationalists in 1992). The Ram Temple became the foremost instrument of BJP's election campaign in 2024 as a Hindu accomplishment.⁴⁵ Thus, it would not have been a great idea to build a temple in a city with a Muslim name (i.e. Faizabad). The name change campaign is not limited to Uttar Pradesh; chief ministers in other BJP-led states are also renaming cities, airports and streets.⁴⁶ The BJP-led government in the state of Gujarat is considering renaming *Ahmedabad* to *Karnavati*. Raja Singh, a BJP state legislator from Telangana's southern state, also proposed the name *Bhagyanagar* for the state capital, Hyderabad. *Gurgaon*, also known as India's "Millennium City" and representing the country's ambitions to be the world's back office, now has a new name. *Gurugram* is intended to bring the modern glass and chrome city closer to its ancient Hindu roots, as told in the Sanskrit epic the Mahabharata. The royal princes were trained in the arts of warfare in the village of their teacher, *Guru Dronacharya* (*gram* is the Sanskrit word for "village").⁴⁷

According to a Press Trust of India (PTI) report, the Centre has approved the re-naming of at least 25 towns and villages across India in 2017 alone. Among the pending proposals, the majority of which come from BJP-ruled states, is one for West Bengal, with a resounding call to rename it Bangla.⁴⁸ Until now, the trend of changing names has become a major initiative of BJP-led state governments in India. Alongside attacking names associated with Muslim rulers, India has also initiated the change from colonial heritage to something more Hindu.

Within the discussion of the name changing or re-writing of the history that aligns with the Hindu narratives, there is another serious trend that has been occurring in

⁴⁵ "India's Narendra Modi Opens Flashpoint Ram Temple Ahead of Re-election Bid," *SBS News*, 30 January 2024, at <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/indias-narendra-modi-opens-flashpoint-ram-temple-ahead-of-re-election-bid/s4sbk01oj>, 24 August 2025.

⁴⁶ M. Krishnan, "Why is India Changing cities' Muslim Names?," *Deutsche Welle*, 12 November 2018, at <https://www.dw.com/en/why-is-india-hinduising-cities-muslim-names/a-46259523>, 24 August 2025.

⁴⁷ R.R. Lall, "Why do Governments Change Place Names?," *The National*, 20 April 2016, at <https://www.thenationalnews.com/opinion/why-do-governments-change-place-names-1.137490>, 24 August 2025.

⁴⁸ Sh. Sengar, "25 And Counting: Name-Change Syndrome Has Travelled from Streets to Cities in India," *IndiaTimes*, 14 November 2018, at <https://www.indiatimes.com/news/india/25-and-counting-name-change-syndrome-has-travelled-from-streets-to-cities-in-india-356604.html>, 24 August 2025.

India under the BJP government. On December 6, 1992, a group of Karsevaks (religious volunteers) destroyed and vandalised the Babri Mosque, which sparked the “Place of Worship Act”⁴⁹ chapters in India. The Supreme Court of India has been considering the Hindus’ claim to the Muslim site ever since. A five-judge Constitution Bench unanimously granted the Hindus ownership of the contested property on November 9, 2019. Likewise, one of the holiest cities in Hinduism, Varanasi, is the site of the centuries-old *Gyanvapi* mosque, which is currently embroiled in legal disputes. A legal debate also surrounds the validity of the *Mathura Shabi Idgah mosque* in the northern city of Mathura.⁵⁰ Hindu nationalists are filing petitions, obtaining judgements in their favour due to the support of the government and excavating or conducting large-scale surveys at many Muslim sites. It has extended to the claim of the Taj Mahal as a Hindu temple by Hindu nationalist groups.⁵¹

Thirdly, the BJP government is also countering the very belief of independent India by presenting Vinayak Damodar Savarkar as an alternative figure to Mahatma Gandhi. Swami Vivekananda (a philosopher), Bhim Rao Ambedkar (a reformist), Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (a profounder of *Hindutva*) and Mahatma Gandhi (the father of a nation) are four iconic figures broadly associated with India’s national awakening and the fight against British colonial rule. Vivekananda is held in high regard and pride throughout India, and no one feels the need to denounce anyone in order to honour him. A similar sense of admiration exists in the minds of all Indians for Ambedkar, even if some of his disciples feel compelled to disparage both Gandhi and Savarkar while paying tribute to him. On the contrary, the scenario is different in the case of Gandhi and Savarkar. In the current scenario, if one tends to follow Gandhi or Savarkar, de-meaning the contribution to the making of India is necessary. Gandhi and Savarkar represented two opposing concepts of nationalism and religion.⁵²

The Modi government has started fulfilling the BJP’s core ideological vision faster in the first two months of its new term in office in 2019 than it did in its entire first term. The palatable, faux Gandhian Hindutva ideologue *Deen Dayal Upadhyaya* (his life philosophy was similar to that of Swami Vivekananda and Mahatma Gandhi) was the ideological lodestar of Modi’s first term. However, in its second term, the Modi government has already embraced the unabashed, aggressive Hindutva embodied by

⁴⁹ According to the law, any house of worship, including temples, mosques, churches and gurdwaras, shall preserve its religious identity as it existed on 15 August, 1947 – the day India gained its independence. For more, see: N. Farooquee, N. Yadav, “Explained: India’s Controversial Places of Worship Law,” *BBC*, 13 December 2024, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cwypgp8gnjjo>, 24 August 2025.

⁵⁰ M. Krishnan, “India: What is Behind the ‘Reclaiming Temples’ Campaign?,” *Deutsche Welle*, 2 December 2024, at <https://www.dw.com/en/india-what-is-behind-the-reclaiming-temples-campaign/a-70937598>, 24 August 2025.

⁵¹ R. Malhotra, “Explained: The Persistent Theory that Taj Mahal Was a Hindu Temple Called ‘Tejo Mahalaya’,” *The Indian Express*, 15 May 2022, at <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/taj-mahal-controversy-hindu-temple-tejo-mahalaya-7916684/>, 24 August 2025.

⁵² B.G. Bhosale B.G., “Indian Nationalism: Gandhi vis-a-vis Tilak and Savarkar,” *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 70, no. 2 (2009), pp. 419-427.

Savarkar.⁵³ The instalment of the large portrait of Savarkar directly opposite Gandhi's portrait in parliament tells us something. If Modi looks towards Savarkar's portrait, then he automatically has to show his back to Gandhi, which he did right after moving to the new parliament house in 2023.

On the other hand, the BJP is institutionally re-imagining the role played by Savarkar in the freedom movement by undermining the contributions made by Gandhi. In a state government textbook of Rajasthan, Savarkar is lauded, while the Father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi, and the first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, are dismissed in a few lines and are virtually absent in other textbooks.⁵⁴ Another controversy erupted in 2022 in India's southern state of Karnataka. According to the Kannada textbook for class 8, Mr Savarkar used to fly out to visit his country while incarcerated in the Andaman jail by sitting on the wings of a bird. The cell in which Savarkar was imprisoned did not even have a keyhole. Yet, according to a section in the new textbook, Savarkar used to sit on their wings and fly out to visit the motherland every day, and Bulbul birds used to visit the room.⁵⁵ The contribution of Savarkar to India's freedom movement was rather controversial as his plea letters to the British from Nicobar and Andaman Islands, where he was imprisoned, signal that he promised the British rulers he would comply with their expectations. Likewise, the conspirators who were to ensure Gandhi's murder, including Nathuram Godse and Gopal Godse, met Savarkar, then president of the Hindu Mahasabha, at his residence on January 29 in the evening, the day before his assassination on January 30, 1948.⁵⁶

CONCLUSION

The current ruling government in India has made history very interesting to ordinary people. The RSS and other Hindu right-wing organisations have made bizarre claims about Indian history as mentioned above, particularly the medieval period, which has been (mis)used to widen the divide between two communities in India (Hindus and Muslims). Twisting history to gain political advantage today has consequences for India's political and social stability in the long run. History can help us plan for the future, but using it to further a nefarious agenda will harm communal harmony and peace in our society.

⁵³ A. Ali, "In His Second Term, Modi Govt Has Moved from Deen Dayal Upadhyaya to Veer Savarkar," *ThePrint*, 2 September 2019, at <https://theprint.in/opinion/in-his-second-term-modi-govt-has-moved-from-deen-dayal-upadhyaya-to-veer-savarkar/284977/>, 24 August 2025.

⁵⁴ K.M. Chenoy, "BJP Distorting History: Savarkar Outshines Gandhi in Rajasthan Textbooks," *Dailyo*, 9 June 2017, at <https://www.dailyo.in/politics/bjp-rewriting-history-veer-savarkar-gandhi-nehru-rajasthan-17721>, 24 August 2025.

⁵⁵ N. Kidwai, A. Kumar, "Savarkar Flew Out of Jail on Birds: Karnataka Book for Class 8 Students," *NDTV*, 29 August 2022, at <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/savarkar-lesson-in-revised-karnataka-school-textbooks-triggers-outrage-3294207>, 24 August 2025.

⁵⁶ K.M. Chenoy, "BJP Distorting History..."

As mentioned in the discussion section on the politics of memory, this study can verify that under the rule of the BJP, the mnemonic regime and actors have gained confidence. For instance, the far-right Hindu organisation is now claiming and pursuing civilisational ideas based on a distorted imagination of memory, which is increasing the communal drift between Hindus and Muslims in society. Likewise, individuals who believe in the re-imagination of existing memory are also coming up with creative ideas such as filing thousands of cases in regional courts to change textbooks, names of places and exclude certain parts of history from society. On the one hand, the government's inclination towards "Hindu Nationalism" is promoting and provoking communal violence against the Muslim population in India, and on the other hand, the ongoing re-imagination of India's history has a long-term impact as it will completely affect the memory of upcoming generations.

The binary of "us versus them" is gaining traction in India as well as in the countries with large Indian diasporas. The fight of conflicting ideas in India, be it religious or political, is also changing the course of internal politics. The massive instrumentalisation of the media and social networks to amplify the doctored messages on the re-imagined history of the civilisation, Muslims' space, the political ideology of freedom fighters and the macho identity of Modi has become a normal phenomenon in India. This not only impacts the current state of political discourse in India, but also lays a foundation for cementing an alternative memory of India as a country.

Declaration of Interest

There is no any conflict of interest associated with this article.

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