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ARTICLE

Hindutva Decolonization: From Inverted Discourse to Practice

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Abstract

This article examines how Hindu nationalist (Hindutva) political actors in India have strategically co-opted the language of decolonization to advance a majoritarian ethno-religious agenda—one that, paradoxically, reproduces the exclusionary dynamics that postcolonial theory was originally developed to critique. The article identifies three core rhetorical vectors: a "double colonialism" thesis that frames Muslim rule as equivalent to British colonialism; curriculum reform that erases Muslim contributions to Indian history while privileging a mythologized Hindu past; and the reframing of caste discrimination as itself a colonial invention, undermining the legitimacy of affirmative action. Beyond rhetoric, the article traces how decolonization has been operationalized as state policy—through legal reform, changes in the military, urban renaming, and education reforms—to systematically Hinduize public institutions. This article further argues that this recent semantic appropriation of decolonial vocabulary is deployed to legitimize the implementation of old Hindu nationalist ideas.

Keywords: decolonial appropriation; decolonization; Hindu nationalism; India; majoritarian nationalism

On January 24, 2024, two days after Narendra Modi inaugurated a temple dedicated to the deity Ram in Ayodhya, the Indian Union Cabinet published a congratulatory resolution in which the ministers declared that the consecration of the idol of Lord Ram fulfilled a five century-old dream held by the Indian civilization, and that while "the body of this country became independent" in 1947, "it had now achieved the soul's consecration, which has brought spiritual joy to everyone."[1] The inauguration of the temple was presented as both the realization of an old dream and the ushering in of a new era for Hindu civilization and for India as a global power.

At the site two days earlier, the Prime Minister had spoken of the Ram Janmabhoomi Mandir at Ayodhya as a temple of national consciousness in the form of Ram. He presented the deity as "the faith of India, the idea of India, the law of India, the prestige of India, the glory of India, the policy of India." Thus, the inauguration of the temple was presented as an act of liberation, the moment when India achieved genuine independence, free from the shackles

[1] Prime Minister's Office 2024.

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of colonialism, which, according to Hindu nationalists, continued to linger after India gained independence, particularly when the Congress party was in power.

Ever since they came to power in 2014, the BJP and leaders of the Sangh Parivar—the family of Hindu nationalist organizations—have used the language of decolonization to describe their ascent and the ushering in of a new era in India's political history. When Narendra Modi was appointed prime minister, *The Guardian* published an editorial titled "India: Another Tryst with Destiny," a reference to Jawaharlal Nehru's famous independence speech.[2] The editorial stated that the day "may well go down in history as the day when Britain finally left India."

Hindu nationalists have long considered Congress rule, a 30-year period of one-party dominance following independence, as a continuation of British rule. After 1947, India's Constituent Assembly opted to retain much of the colonial institutional and bureaucratic architecture when it designed India's parliamentary system of government, even though it sought to redefine and expand the role of the state and brought considerable innovation to the process of constitution making.[3] From their point of view, the Congress, both as a movement and as a party, was led by an Anglophone and anglophile elite whose worldview, lifestyles, and social and political aspirations were shaped by what they had learned from Europe. It has always been the Sangh's contention that the Congress has been at odds with India's true social and cultural ethos and that Narendra Modi's ascent to power represents a departure from a long, unbroken history of colonization that began more than a thousand years ago and included Congress rule.

In recent years, however, the use of decolonization by Hindu nationalists has greatly expanded from a rhetorical tool articulated against their opponents to a tool for transforming the state and, ultimately, society. Decolonization has been invoked to explain and legitimize alterations to the law, to institutions, and to the nature of public symbols, to promote the Hinduization of the state and society, a project itself framed as a form of decolonization.

The concept of decolonization has also been used by a new generation of far-right-leaning thinkers to "reclaim" India's historiography by challenging what they describe as "left-leaning" or "Marxist" interpretations of Indian history. These interpretations, according to them, downplay India's civilizational achievements and over-emphasize caste discrimination, religious minorities' contributions, or syncretic narratives. They advocate views that emphasize a glorious ancient Hindu civilization, presenting Indian history and culture as fundamentally rooted in *Sanatana Dharma* (an idea of eternal moral and cosmic order rooted in Hindu scriptures).

Decolonization in this context refers not only to the colonized countries' formal accession to independence but also to the liberation from the colonial legacies that persisted after independence was formally gained, an idea that is a staple of postcolonial literature. Mahmood Mamdani, Frantz Fanon, Lauren Benton, Edward Said, Walter Mignolo, to name but a few, have written extensively about the persistence or transformation of colonial structures in postcolonial contexts across political economy, state formation, law, culture, and knowledge production. In the Indian context, Partha Chatterjee has detailed how

[2] The Guardian 2014.

[3] De and Shani 2025; Khosla 2020.

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colonial governmental rationalities persist in postcolonial state practices and in the management of populations.[4] Ranajit Guha has argued that colonial modes of dominance continued to shape elite politics and state-society relations in India.[5] And Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak wrote about how colonial categories continue to structure voice and representation among subaltern populations.[6]

When rooted in postcolonial theory, the concept of decolonization serves a conceptual, epistemic, and political project. This project seeks to restore political sovereignty and undo structures of imperial domination. It serves to challenge Eurocentric epistemologies and validate alternative intellectual traditions. It aims to restore dignity and agency to formerly colonized peoples. For thinkers like Fanon, colonialism produces internalized inferiority and racialized self-perception, which should be substituted by self-definition beyond colonial frames.

But once the concept migrates beyond its original political and scholarly context and is reappropriated by the far right, it ceases to serve that emancipatory project and is instead used strategically to advance ethnonationalist ends. In the process, the emancipatory intent of decolonial theory (i.e., liberation of the marginalized) is turned against the very groups it was designed to protect.

In the case of India, authentic anticolonial grievances are selectively mobilized, recoded, and redirected not simply against the legacies of British rule as such but against Indian Muslims, Christians, Dalits, secularism, and Western liberal academia. The first three have historically been targets of far-right violence in India. Secularism has always been defined by Hindu nationalists as a colonial import foreign to India's cultural ethos. And Western liberal academia—and their domestic allies—is seen by them as the site of production of "anti-India" or "anti-Hindu" literature. As such, the Hindu far-right use of postcolonial theory or decolonial language can be understood as a reconfiguration of the expression of the core tenets of their ideology.

This article aims to describe various facets of the appropriation of the concept of decolonization by Hindu nationalists: first, as a semantic appropriation of decolonial rhetoric; and second, as forms of power exercise (praxis). The re-appropriation of decolonial discourse has already been the subject of scholarly attention.[7] Most of these contributions focus on rhetoric, historiographic debate, or the debunking of far-right postcolonial inversions.

This paper's main argument is that since their accession to power in 2014, decolonization is no longer merely a rhetorical tool in the hands of Hindu nationalists to narrate their revivalist project and to target adversaries. Beyond rhetoric, it has become a central tool for the political project of transforming both state and society in India. In this context, decolonization in practice can be seen as a cover and as a path toward the Hinduization of the state, institutions, and public systems.

The first section of this article deals with three key vectors of Hindutva decolonial rhetoric: the expansion of the scope of colonialism, the stigmatization of postcolonial successors, and the reversal of victimhood. The second section focuses on six domains of state intervention

[4] Chatterjee 1993.
[5] Guha 1997.
[6] Spivak 1988.
[7] See Asif 2020; Menon 2022; Nanda 2025a, 2025b; Shah 2024; Wilson, Chandra, and Narayanaswamy 2023.

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that aim at "breaking the shackles of colonial legacies." The third section compares the Indian case to other examples of far-right appropriation of decolonization. The fourth section discusses the meaning and some of the implications of decolonization as state intervention.

1. Three vectors of Hindutva decolonial rhetoric

1.1. The "double colonialism" thesis

The foundational claim in Hindutva decolonial discourse is the notion that India suffered not one but two colonial occupations: first, a "Muslim invasion" lasting approximately eight centuries and then British rule. True to a long-held view of Hindu nationalists, Prime minister Modi frequently refers to a period of "1000 years of slavery" to lump both periods. Speaking from the ramparts of Red Fort—the last seat of Mughal power in India and the location from which Jawaharlal Nehru proclaimed India's Independence in 1947—the Prime Minister stated: "We all know that our country was invaded 1000–1200 years ago. A small kingdom and its king were defeated. However, we couldn't have known that this event would lead India into a thousand years of subjugation. We got ensnared in slavery, and whoever came, looted us, and ruled over us. What an adverse period it must have been, that thousand-year span."[8] This is a recurrent motif of his interventions. In his first speech in Parliament, Narendra Modi stated that this "slave mentality of 1,200 years is troubling us. Often, when we meet a person of high stature, we fail to muster strength to speak up."[9]

The "double colonialism" thesis is the ideological cornerstone of Hindutva's claim to decolonial authority. By treating the medieval past as an era of foreign occupation equivalent to British colonialism, Hindutva ideologues posit that Indian Muslims—who make 14 percent of the population—are not co-citizens but the demographic residue of colonial occupation. This legitimizes the removal of ancient institutional and epistemic legacies, to be substituted by Hindu symbols and content. This framework, beyond being historically inaccurate, also generates, according to historian Audrey Truschke, a "dangerous rewriting of history" and provides fuel for a politics of grievance used to justify present-day discrimination and violence against Muslims in India.[10]

1.2. Curricular reform and the rewriting of history

The second form of appropriation of decolonization—perhaps the most materially consequential one—is occurring in education. Since the BJP's rise to power under Narendra Modi in 2014, and accelerating significantly after 2019, Hindu nationalists have pursued aggressive curriculum reform under the banner of decolonizing Indian education. As documented by scholars (including trained historians), history textbook revisions have sought to minimize or remove contributions of Muslim rulers, present precolonial Hindu civilization as a self-contained golden age, and promote indigenous knowledge systems associated with a mythified Hindu past.[11]

The most sweeping act of deletion occurred in April 2023, when a chapter covering 235 years of Mughal rule was removed from the Class 12 history textbook under the Central Board of

[8] Press Information Bureau 2024.
[9] Ghose 2014.
[10] Truschke 2020.
[11] Wilson, Chandra, and Narayanaswamy 2023.

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Secondary Education (CBSE) curriculum.[12] In 2025, the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), an autonomous body advising the Ministry of Education tasked with preparing model school textbooks, dropped chapters on Muslim rulers and the Delhi Sultanate from Class 7 and 8 history syllabi, replacing them with sections on ancient civilizations, pilgrimage sites, and Hindu spiritual traditions.[13]

Muslim contributors to India's liberation, such as Maulana Abdul Kalam Azad, have also been removed from textbooks, excising Muslim statesmen from the founding narrative of India's republic.[14] The name of Gandhi's assassin, as well as his caste affiliations and his connection to the RSS, were removed from the Class 12 political science textbook. So were the motives behind his assassination.

Similar erasures have concerned major political events, such as the 2002 Gujarat riots, the Babri Masjid demolition, or figures associated with the struggle against caste discrimination, such as B.R. Ambedkar, a Dalit jurist who drafted India's constitution and spent his life fighting caste oppression. Even Charles Darwin was not spared as his theory of evolution was dropped from Class 9 and 10 syllabi. Satya Pal Singh, the then minister of state for Human Resource Development (now Ministry of Education), said Darwin's theory of evolution was "scientifically wrong." "Since man has been seen on Earth, he has always been a man. Nobody saw an ape turning into a man."[15]

In 2020, the Government of India passed legislation to create an Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) policy, designed to integrate classical and indigenous Indian intellectual traditions into contemporary education, research, and public policy. This policy was described as an essential means to achieve the decolonization of Indian knowledge and to reclaim India's civilizational heritage.

IKS typically includes Vedic and post-Vedic philosophy (Nyāya, Vedānta), Vedic mathematics and astronomy, ayurveda and traditional medicine, indigenous environmental practices, Sanskrit textual traditions, and ancient political thought, such as Kautilya's Arthaśāstra. The policy frames these subjects as coherent civilizational knowledge traditions and insists on their contemporary relevance. These forms of knowledge are now part of the core curricula of all central (public) universities.

1.3. Caste, indigeneity, and the erasure of internal hierarchy

A third vector of decolonization rhetoric concerns caste. Hindutva ideologues have along argued that the caste system itself was a colonial construction, introduced or dramatically hardened by the British through the census and administrative codification. From this premise, they argue that caste-based reservations (affirmative action policies) are themselves colonial legacies to be dismantled in the name of decolonization.

Author and figure of the decolonial movement of the Hindu right, J. Sai Deepak, has argued that caste, as it is commonly understood today, is largely a Western, Christian, colonial construct. Not that caste or social hierarchy did not exist earlier, but that "the 'castification' of the pre-existing varna-jati complex resulted in presenting an outside and incorrect view

[12] Chopra 2023.
[13] Kumar 2025.
[14] Porecha 2023.
[15] Jaswal 2023.

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of how the complex operated, including its structure, rigidity, and the scale of atrocities arising from "caste-consciousness."[16] Relying on Nicholas Dirk's scholarship detailing the impact of colonial census on ascriptive identities in India, Deepak maintains that the word "caste," a Portuguese term, imposed a foreign classificatory grid on diverse Indian social realities and that such operations were tools in the hands of the missionary-colonial compact to malign the Hindu society to create the "humanitarian" justifications needed for religious, cultural, and politico-legal intervention.[17]

This view of caste exonerates upper castes from any responsibility or complicity in the centuries of documented caste-based discrimination in India and seeks to delegitimize social justice interventions based on these alleged colonial categories. Wilson et al. further note that Hindutva claims to "indigenous" identity for the dominant Hindu majority simultaneously erase the genuine indigeneity claims of Adivasi (indigenous) communities, who face corporate dispossession and cultural assimilation under Hindu nationalist rule.[18]

These three vectors of Hindutva decolonial rhetoric show that the appropriation of concepts originating in postcolonial theory does not merely target and neutralize political opponents but also justifies, legitimates, and supports state intervention in areas deemed necessary to Hindu nationalists' majoritarian project, that is, the reappropriation of history, culture, education and knowledge systems, and the very social categories used to ground a discourse of social justice.

While appropriating the conceptual vocabulary of decolonial theory, traditionally rooted in critical humanities and social science scholarship, Hindu nationalist thinkers enact a series of significant inversions. First, they expand the temporal and conceptual scope of colonialism to encompass periods of Muslim rule, thereby reframing precolonial polities as foreign occupations. This move collapses important historical distinctions, including the fact that neither the Mughal nor earlier Indo-Islamic regimes exercised uniform sovereignty over the entire subcontinent.

Second, they redeploy analytical tools originally designed to identify and dismantle British colonial structures in order to stigmatize contemporary political and social actors cast as heirs to colonial domination. In this narrative, the Indian National Congress is positioned as the institutional successor to British rule, while Muslims are portrayed as the civilizational remnants of earlier "colonial" incursions. Decolonization thus becomes less a critique of structural power and more a polemical instrument in present-day political contestation.

Third, and perhaps most strikingly, this discourse enables a reversal of victimhood. Social groups historically most closely aligned with colonial administration—particularly segments of upper-caste elites—are reimagined as victims of a postcolonial state that extends affirmative action and legal protections to communities understood to have suffered systemic dispossession and exclusion under postcolonial, colonial, and precolonial hierarchies, including Dalits, Adivasis, and religious minorities. In this configuration, decolonization is recast not as a project of redistributive justice but as a claim to majoritarian redress.

[16] Deepak 2024.
[17] Deepak 2021.
[18] Wilson, Chandra, and Narayanaswamy 2023.

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With Hindu nationalists in power, the reappropriation of decolonization is not merely rhetorical but also geared toward action. The next section details important fields of decolonial intervention under the BJP government.

2. Decolonization of state intervention

2.1. Education and curriculum

We have already described how the state intervened in recent years to alter the teaching of India's history, erasing references or sections associated with India's expanded colonial past and replacing them with references to a version of ancient history that blurs the distinction between history and mythology, science and pseudo-science.

One can add to this the contributions of the 2020 National Education Policy (NEP), an attempt by the Government of India to "transform India's education system, with the aim of addressing the needs of 21st-century learners and preparing them for the future."[19] The NEP calls for the systematic integration of "Indian Knowledge Systems" (IKS) into curricula across disciplines—ranging from philosophy, linguistics, and mathematics to medicine, astronomy, and environmental thought. Under this policy, higher education institutions are encouraged to establish IKS centers and research chairs. By doing so, the NEP seeks to "recover" suppressed knowledge traditions and restore epistemic self-confidence (often described as civilizational self-respect). Decolonization in this context refers to correcting an epistemic imbalance. The NEP also calls for curricular revision to foreground India's civilizational continuity, scientific achievement, and cultural unity.

The government's decolonial claim rests on three broader propositions: the epistemic displacement thesis postulating that colonialism delegitimized indigenous knowledge systems and privileged Western epistemology; a cultural alienation thesis contending that English-medium and Eurocentric curricula alienated Indians from their heritage; and a restorative sovereignty thesis advancing that true political independence requires intellectual and educational sovereignty.

In this framing, decolonization is less about critiquing global capitalism or structural inequalities (as in much postcolonial theory) and more about civilizational recovery and epistemic re-centering.

The focus on IKS in the National Education Policy in 2020 is an enactment of an old practice of the Hindu right, which consists of blurring the lines between modern science and ancient forms of knowledge (including Vedic sciences and pseudoscientific forms of knowledge), for the purpose of glorifying a mythicized Hindu past and future. Meera Nanda enumerates four different kinds of appropriation: staking priority claims for ancient India for landmark discoveries in mathematics and medicine (such as the Pythagorean Theorem, algebra, and zero), the erasure of demarcation between myth and historical evidence, the erasure of demarcation between science and certified pseudosciences, like astrology, and the promotion of a "higher kind of pseudoscience that is generated by grafting spiritual concepts like *prana* (or breath), *prakriti* or *akasha* (the 'subtle' material substrate of nature) on to physicists' concepts of 'energy' and 'ether'; karmically determined birth and rebirth on

[19] Government of India 2020.

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theories of evolution of species; chakras with actual neural structures, and so on and so forth."[20]

2.2. *The legal system*

In 2023, the government replaced the entire tripartite architecture of British-era criminal law—the Indian Penal Code (1860), the Criminal Procedure Code, and the Indian Evidence Act—with three new statutes bearing Sanskritized Hindi names: the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, and the Bharatiya Sakshya Adhiniyam. The reform was presented as a "modernization of the existing legal framework and an overhaul of the criminal justice system," as well as a break from the colonial origins of criminal law.[21] In terms of content, however, the reform maintained many of the drastic laws inherited from the British penal codes and extended the duration of precharge police detention from 15 days to up to 90 days in some cases. Despite claiming a push toward more reformatory justice, it "mostly retained the current punitive character of the criminal justice system."[22]

M.K. Stalin, then Chief Minister of the State of Tamil Nadu, criticized the Indian government's new criminal law bills, calling them "recolonization in the name of decolonization" for imposing Hindi terminology and undermining India's linguistic diversity. He argued that this move was an attempt to assert Hindi dominance over non-Hindi-speaking states, which he views as a threat to regional identities. He also quipped that "South Indian lawyers are going to spend most of the time in courts trying to pronounce these names."[23]

Nomenclature and language aside, legal experts have argued that India's new criminal codes fail to achieve their stated goals of decolonization, despite the government's rhetoric. According to three legal scholars from the National Law School in Bangalore, rather than dismantling colonial-era legal structures, the new laws largely reproduce them and, in some ways, reinforce them.[24] The three experts argue that the reform expanded the state's coercive power, preserved colonial-era morality, and ignored the issue of discriminatory application of the law altogether.

In their comprehensive review of the new codes, Arushi Bajpai, Akash Gupta, and Askhat Indisekhar reach the same conclusion.[25] They add that the transformation of the provisions on sedition have a potentially broader chilling effect on dissent than the colonial original. They also conclude that "while the names of the new bills would suggest a greater Indianization of the penal system, as proposed, the substantive results leave much to be desired."

2.3. *Toponymy and public architecture*

Since 2014, the Indian government has engaged in a selective renaming of cities, railway stations, and monuments, favoring Sanskrit or Hindu names over those of Mughal or Muslim

[20] Nanda 2016. For more on this subject, see Nanda's 2003 book, *Prophets Facing Backwards*, and her 2005 collection of essays: "The wrongs of the religious right: reflections on science, secularism, and Hindutva."
[21] PRS 2024.
[22] PRS 2024.
[23] The Wire 2023.
[24] Pandey, Dash, and Satish 2024.
[25] Bajpai, Gupta, and Indusekhar 2024.

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origin. Allahabad and Faizabad districts in Uttar Pradesh were renamed Prayagraj and Ayodhya; Aurangabad and Osmanabad in Maharashtra are now Chhatrapati Sambhaji Nagar and Dharashiv, with a wish list extending to Ahmedabad, Hyderabad, and Aligarh, all cities with important Muslim histories and communities. Mughalsarai Junction, one of north India's busiest railway stations, was renamed after right-wing Hindu ideologue Deen Dayal Upadhyaya. The Mughal Gardens in the Presidential Palace, modeled on sixteenth-century Mughal design and planted in 1928, were renamed Amrit Udyan after 95 years of its existence.

The Government of India used various arguments to justify these changes: rectifying colonial mistakes made by Mughal emperors, restoring preexisting Vedic names (as in the case of Prayagraj), or "decolonize the colonial mindset" through psychological decolonization and the restoration of pride in Indian heritage. Other arguments include reclaiming cultural roots or the necessity of ending symbolic slavery, embodied in these locales.

This is the double colonization thesis in its toponymic application: Muslim-era place names are cast as chains on the Hindu psyche, their continued existence in public space a daily re-enactment of subjugation. The language of "symbolic slavery" also borrows from genuinely emancipatory postcolonial and Black liberation traditions—the idea that colonial symbols embedded in public space perpetuate psychological oppression—and redirects it against Muslim heritage. By conflating the Mughal and pre-Mughal periods with British colonialism, these decisions reveal that they have little to do with the British as such and much to do with the erasure of the Muslim past. Here again, Hindu nationalists exploit the legitimacy of an anticolonial argument to carry the political freight of another.

The BJP's heritage ideology also involves the gradual obliteration of material traces related to the presence of Muslims in the subcontinent through physical elimination, legal challenge, or renaming, resulting in the growing Hinduization of India's public space. This takes two primary forms. First, a wave of legal petitions—heavily backed by BJP-affiliated organizations—claiming that major Indo-Islamic heritage sites were built by destroying Hindu temples. A BJP functionary approached a court requesting that the Archaeological Survey of India open 22 rooms within the Taj Mahal to ascertain whether they house Hindu idols, based on the long-debunked "Tejo Mahalaya" conspiracy theory. Another Hindu radical outfit claimed that the Qutb Minar, built in Delhi in the early thirteenth century, was originally a Vishnu temple. Second, the consecration of the Ram Mandir at Ayodhya in January 2024—built on the site of the demolished Babri Masjid—represents the apex of this domain: the physical replacement of Muslim sacred space with a Hindu temple.

Autonomous institutions, such as the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), are mobilized to verify claims made by Hindu organizations. In July 2023, a district court in Varanasi ordered the ASI to carry out a "scientific investigation/survey/excavation" at the Gyanvapi Masjid, a disputed site in Uttar Pradesh, within two weeks.[26]

Under the guise of decolonization, these practices aim at the Hinduization of public spaces through the substitution of Hindu for British or Muslim references. The smallest changes, such as substituting the Finance Minister's budget briefcase for a pouch styled like the

[26] Agha 2025.

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traditional red cloth-bound ledger ("bahi khata"), are presented as steps toward the decolonization of India.[27]

This policy includes major architectural projects, such as the remaking of Rajpath, the ceremonial avenue linking the Presidential palace to India Gate, into a "Central Vista" meant to project India's civilizational renaissance. The project includes a new Parliament, the displacement of India's National Archive as well as several key ministries as Home, and External Affairs, and the renaming of Rajpath to Kartavya Path (Path of Duty). Prime Minister Modi inaugurated the new Parliament surrounded by priests, carrying a golden scepter meant to evoke the transfer of power from Britain to India.[28] The Prime Minister called the building, which contains a mural depicting *Akhand Bharat* (Greater India) "a temple of democracy," a phrase that collapses the distinction between the sacred and the civic.

2.4. The Indian army

One of India's democratic successes has been to maintain the army as a secular institution.[29] Under the BJP government, attempts have been made to erase certain aspects of its British colonial legacy. The transformation of the Indian military operates across two overlapping registers: a formal decolonization program targeting British-derived symbols and a saffronization program infusing Hindu nationalist ideology into military culture, naming, ritual, and space. The two are deliberately conflated in government rhetoric, allowing the second to borrow legitimacy from the first.

Since 2022, the government of India has introduced changes to symbols, uniforms, and insignia—the Naval Ensign, epaulettes, batons, and ceremonial dress—referencing heroic Hindu figures such as Chhatrapati Shivaji or Vedic deities such as Varuna. The Beating the Retreat ceremony was modified to include Indian classical instruments and Vedic hymns.

The ideological project is most visible in the naming of military operations. According to former Congress Minister Mani Shankar Aiyar, from the second World War to the 2019 Balakot air strike, the naming of Indian operations "strictly eschewed any religious or scriptural connotation."[30] The break came in 2025: Operation Sindoor—the vermilion worn by Hindu wives, wiped off at widowhood—was followed by operations named Mahadev and Shivshakti, with the proposed air-defense shield branded "Sudarshan Chakra."[31]

The pattern extends to formations. In 2025, new frontline units were named *Rudra* (destruction), *Bhairav* (ferocious), and *Shaktibaan* (divine power), three references to Hindu deities and mythology.[32] Announced on *Kargil Vijay Diwas* ("Kargil Victory Day," or the

[27] Dhingra 2023.

[28] The Sengol, a silver gold-plated rod, is an artifact that was gifted to Jawaharlal Nehru by a delegation of priests from Tanjore in 1947. The Indian Government affirmed, wrongly, that the Sengol had been used in an official ceremony to symbolize the transfer of power from Britain to India. The rod was placed next to the Speaker's Chair during the new Parliament's inauguration.

[29] Wilkinson 2015.

[30] Aiyar 2025.

[31] In Hindu mythology, the Sudarshan Chakra is a divine spinning disc, attributed to Vishnu. It is a heavenly weapon and a representation of truth and justice.

[32] *Rudra* is one of the names of Shiva in the Rigveda, associated with storms, destruction, and fearsome power. *Bhairav* (or Bhairava) is a fierce manifestation of Shiva, associated with annihilation, terror, and the destruction of evil. *Shaktibaan* combines two Sanskrit concepts: *Shakti* (divine feminine power, often associated with the goddess

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commemoration of India's victory over Pakistan in the Kargil War), these newly named units were, according to defense journalist Rahul Bedi, "largely a repackaging of the 2019 Integrated Battle Group concept, wrapped in symbolism."[33]

Physical spaces have also been reordered. In December 2024, the painting commemorating Pakistan's 1971 surrender was removed from the Army Chief's lounge and replaced with imagery depicting Krishna, Chanakya, and Garuda, provoking a rebuke from the Indian Ex-Services League.[34] Among them, Lt. General H.S. Panag (retired) stated that "*The photo/painting symbolising India's first major military victory in a 1000 years and also first as a united nation, in 1971, has been removed by a hierarchy which believes that mythology, religion and distant fragmented feudal past will inspire future victories.*"[35] In the same month, a Shivaji statue and saffron flag were installed at Pangong Tso—a region with no historical ties to Shivaji—drawing protests from Ladakhi leaders.[36]

The consequences for minority personnel have begun to materialize institutionally. Chiara Cacco documents in 2025 a Delhi High Court ruling upholding the dismissal of a Christian officer for refusing to participate in Hindu temple rituals, characterizing his refusal as "indiscipline."[37] Meanwhile, Rahul Bedi reported that officers who aligned with BJP nationalist messaging received promotions and postretirement appointments, blurring "the boundary between professional military service and political utility."[38]

At the same time, the boundary between the army and religion has also been blurred. In a complete departure from norms and traditions—and in breach of service rules—high-ranking officers have met godmen and religious figures on multiple occasions in recent years, sometimes in the company of political figures. While some wore their uniforms on religious occasions, others wore religious garb, as in the case of Chief of Army Staff General Upendra Dwivedi, who participated in religious rituals alongside the Minister of Defense Rajnath Singh at the Shri Mahakaleshwar Jyotirlinga Temple in Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh.[39] In May 2026, the Army Chief—this time in uniform—took a religious initiation (*Shree Yuval Ram*) from "Jagadguru" Swami Ramabhadracharya, a Hindu spiritual leader, head of the Kanch temple in Chitrakoot, Uttar Pradesh. The spiritual leader reportedly asked the General to gift him Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK—the term used in India for Pakistan-administered Kashmir) as *guru dakshina* (a preceptor's fee, sometimes in kind).[40] Similar boundaries were blurred when the army partnered with Baba Ramdev, a prominent BJP-

Durga or Parvati, and more broadly with cosmic energy) and *baan* (arrow or bearer). So it roughly means "bearer/wielder of divine power"—evoking both martial prowess and goddess worship. All three sit firmly within the Shaivite-Shakta strand of Hinduism specifically. At any rate, they are not neutral pan-Indian cultural references but draw from a particular devotional tradition, which makes their use in a military context that includes Sikhs, Muslims, Christians, and others even more theologically loaded than it might first appear.

[33] Bedi 2025a, 2025b.

[34] Bhattacharya 2025.

[35] Panag 2024.

[36] Shivaji was a seventeenth-century Maratha king who built an empire in western India by warring against the Mughal empire's Muslim rulers, making him the foremost symbol of Hindu resistance to Muslim rule in the Hindu nationalist imagination—the RSS celebrates his coronation day as "Hindu Empire Day." Bhattacharya 2025.

[37] Cacco 2025.

[38] Bedi 2025.

[39] Panag 2025.

[40] Newsdesk 2025.

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associated yoga guru and businessman, to train military personnel to become yoga trainers.[41]

Taken together, the evidence points to a systematic effort to reconfigure the Indian military as a vehicle for Hindu nationalist identity assertion, using formal decolonization as political cover for what is, in effect, a saffronization of one of India's most consequential secular institutions.[42] According to military expert Ali Ahmed, these changes have already had a noticeable hardening impact on army culture.[43]

2.5. *Foreign policy and India's civilizational discourse*

"Decolonizing" India's foreign policy takes two forms. First, a clear rejection of Nehru's postcolonial internationalism, framed as the liberation of Indian diplomacy from a Westernized, secularist elite. The second aspect, which is detailed here, is the positive construction of a Hindu civilizational discourse and identity, as the new foundation of India's place in the world. While the first element predates the Modi government, the second was adopted in official language after 2014.[44]

India today presents itself as a "civilizational state" on par with major powers such as China and Russia, rather than a simple democracy. According to the Stanford Civilizationism Project, civilizational state projects involve a redefinition of the nature of the state, with far-reaching implications for domestic and foreign policy.[45] Its components include a recasting of a glorious past (often imperial) in new terms, a repackaging of the cultural statecraft and soft power, nationalism, and the claim that civilization-states are the basic units of an emergent polycentric world order. In addition, they also bear "the notion that civilizational difference will be manifested most in the borderlands, which are sites of 'civilizational' competition."[46]

Hindu nationalists define India as an Indic civilizational state, unified by an essentialized Hindu identity. This discourse is not synonymous with religious practice, but rather a political ideology that interprets the Hindu heritage as the heart of the Indian nation.[47] It is a discourse that takes up the founding elements of Hindu nationalist ideology and transposes them to a political project adapted to today's context. Under this discourse, public action, including international action, is "Hinduised": yoga diplomacy, cultural exports, audiovisual production.

This civilizational discourse is organized around the concept of "vishwaguru" (world teacher or world leader), wherein India's spiritual, philosophical, and intellectual traditions are projected as a source of moral leadership for the world. This enables India's foreign policy to be infused with Hindu semantics while projecting a benign, benevolent image of India's cultural ethos abroad.

[41] Ahmed 2016.

[42] Atif 2025.

[43] Ahmed 2019a, 2019b.

[44] On the saffronization of India's diplomatic corps and diplomacy, see Huju's 2023 book: Cosmopolitan elites: Indian diplomats and the social hierarchies of global order.

[45] See the Stanford Civilizationism Project working group conception page: https://thecivilizationismproject.stanford.edu/reading-lists/civilizational-state.

[46] See Stanford Civilizationism Project. https://thecivilizationismproject.stanford.edu/.

[47] In this sense, it conforms with Brubaker 2017's view that civilizationism is "better understood as a new articulation of nationalism than as an alternative to it."

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Another aspect of the saffronization of Indian foreign policy is religious diplomacy. The Government of India intervenes to facilitate the construction of Hindu temples abroad, as done notably in Abu Dhabi. Prime Minister Modi also visits temples during foreign trips, signaling his willingness to stand up for Hindus and Hinduism worldwide. India's civilizational discourse is also used to legitimize and deepen relations with other civilizational states, such as Israel or Russia.[48]

This decolonial framing provides legitimate cover for the normative changes in India's foreign policy. By claiming to liberate Indian diplomacy from a Westernized elite and restore its authentic civilizational voice, the BJP has been able to systematically replace a secular, pluralist diplomatic identity with an explicitly Hindu nationalist one.[49]

3. Comparative cases

It is worth noting that India is not a unique case in South Asia. Sinhala Buddhist nationalists in Sri Lanka have long contended that their claims to power were justified by the necessity to rid the country of its colonial-minded anglophone elites.[50] The 1956 Sinhala Only Act—a paradigmatic act of postcolonial majoritarian assertion—was explicitly framed as the restoration of a language and culture suppressed under British colonial rule. Yet, its primary effect was the systematic exclusion of Tamil-speaking communities from public employment and civic life.[51]

One could also describe the project of Islamization of Pakistan under Zia as an attempt to use decolonization (of legal and educational frameworks) to legitimize the Islamization program of the late 1970s and 1980s.[52] Here again, a decolonial rhetoric was used to justify the marginalization of religious minorities, such as Ahmadis and Shias.

Beyond South Asia, the use of decolonization by Hindu nationalists differs from the far-right decolonial appropriation by identitarian movements in Western Europe. Scholars of the far right have traced how identitarian groups in France, Germany, Austria, and Italy have repurposed decolonial language to frame immigration and multiculturalism as forms of "inverse colonization."[53] Drawing on Renaud Camus's "Great Replacement" theory, these movements claim that European ethno-cultural identities are being "colonized" by Muslim and African immigrants, and that resistance constitutes a form of decolonial self-determination. The use of decolonization by the Hindu far right stands on stronger ground, given the fact that India was indisputably colonized by the British.

In Brazil, scholars have examined how Bolsonarist and related far-right movements appropriated anti-imperialist and decolonial language to attack academic institutions, gender studies programs, and Afro-Brazilian cultural rights, framing these as products of "cultural colonialism" imposed by international progressive organizations.[54]

[48] In an essay on civilizationism, Kundnani and Roy (2025) argue that the concept of civilization is "useful to political elites as a source of legitimacy."

[49] Huju 2023.

[50] DeVotta 2004, 2021; Tambiah 1992.

[51] Tambiah 1992.

[52] Jalal 1995.

[53] Camus and Lebourg 2017; Mudde 2019.

[54] Caldeira Neto Odilon, 2025.

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These cases, while operating differently, suggest that the far-right appropriation of decolonial rhetoric is a global phenomenon, shaped, however, by political and historical specificities. The far right across the world has adopted the language of decolonization to mainstream and legitimize its claims, using the codes and conceptual apparatus of scholars who have fought not only against colonialism but also authoritarianism in its various forms.

4. Discussion: Old wine in new bottles

While the phenomenon of semantic inversion of decolonization might seem recent, the ideas are not. Hindu nationalists have been making these claims consistently for a very long time.[55] What has changed is that these claims and this language have been adopted by the state since Hindu nationalists have been in power with a majority of their own. Decolonization becomes the job of bureaucrats, not just academics and politicians. Another difference is that Hindu nationalists have kept pace with postcolonial literature and its terminology and have adopted it for their own purposes.

The appropriation and inversion of decolonial concepts by the far right has been the object of postcolonial scholars and historians' scrutiny. Manan Ahmed Asif, for instance, has argued that Hindutva's conception of decolonization is itself colonial insofar as it reproduces British imperial categorization of Muslims as alien oppressors and Hindus as subjugated subjects, allegedly protected by colonial rule.[56] Much of Hindutva's decolonial discourse serves to legitimize Hindutva's majoritarian project. The central paradox is that Hindu nationalists have adopted the vocabulary of decolonization—framing their project as a recovery of authentic Hindu civilization from centuries of colonial oppressions—while simultaneously enacting a form of internal colonialism against minorities, Dalits and Adivasis.

Annapurna Menon has compellingly argued that the Hindu far right's reappropriation of decolonial categories amounts to a misappropriation of postcolonial theory.[57] Focusing on J. Sai Deepak's work, she points to the misappropriation of indigeneity, collapsed into a monolithic Hindu identity, and the reinforcement of colonial binaries, such as Hindu and Muslim. She also points to the erasure of indigenous feminist scholarship, as well as anti-caste scholarship. She argues that Hindu nationalists weaponize decolonial concepts to justify exclusion and violence against minorities. It is also a substitutive gesture—of one upper caste elite by another, of colonialism by majoritarianism. As pointed out earlier, the emancipatory core of decolonial theory is entirely absent. As Asif claims, the aim is to assert Hindu majoritarian dominance rather than to challenge all hierarchies of power. Menon further notes that the adoption of decolonial language serves three practical purposes: it legitimizes Islamophobia and state violence against minorities; it makes Hindutva palatable to Western audiences; and it preemptively deflects criticism by labeling any pushback as "Hinduphobic."[58]

[55] See Anderson and Damle 1987, and Jaffrelot 1996.

[56] Asif 2020.

[57] Menon 2022.

[58] I find this explanation more compelling than Meera Nanda's argument regarding the convergence of postcolonial left and Hindu right (Nanda 2025a, 2025b). Nanda's convergence thesis risks conflating rhetorical mimicry with substantive intellectual alignment. The strategic appropriation of postcolonial concepts and stylistic registers by Hindu nationalist thinkers does not constitute a genuine meeting of two thought systems whose normative commitments remain fundamentally opposed. Moreover, framing this as convergence carries an analytical cost: it distributes intellectual responsibility symmetrically across actors whose relationship to power, and whose effects on marginalized communities, are anything but symmetrical.

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Alpa Shah pushes the critique further by stating that the Hindu right is recolonizing India, instead of decolonizing it, by replacing one form of domination with another.[59] She notes that the language of decolonization serves to legitimize this transfer of power and not dismantle oppressive structures. This is particularly salient considering that the Hindu right targets those doing genuine anticolonial work—intellectuals and activists fighting for Adivasi (indigenous) land rights, Dalit liberation and labor rights. Shah notes that the language of decolonization is inverted and used to criminalize genuine liberation movements while protecting the forces of oppression.

In a recent interview, noted historian Romila Thapar pointed out that Hindu nationalists resorting to decolonization ought to "reconsider first their own ideology, which is very rooted in 1920s European history."[60] She adds that their understanding of Hinduism itself is "based on the colonial framing of Hinduism centered on Brahmanical texts."

While in agreement with these critiques, this article furthers the discussion by describing how the Hindu far-right uses decolonial discourse to legitimize the saffronization (or Hinduization) of the state and of public systems: how institutions, the law, state practices, and rituals become infused with ethnoreligious nationalist content in the name of decolonization. This goes well beyond strategic and cynical co-optation of decolonial rhetoric, or its use to target adversaries and dissenters. Its intent is to complete the substitution of India's secular, pluralist, and civic nationalist constitutional model by a majoritarian ideology.[61]

There are other aspects or domains of intervention to the project of Hindutva decolonization in India than those described and analyzed in this paper. Considerable investment has been made in cultural production, notably the film industry, to popularize decolonial themes.[62] This takes the form of productions rehabilitating or creating heroic figures from a Hindu past, as well as polemical films on sensitive issues such as Kashmir or the growth of Islam in Kerala.

Medicine and science are other domains in which the government has sought to inject indigenous content, granting equal status to certain forms of traditional medicine and espousing false claims about past scientific achievements.[63] The article limits its analysis to state intervention in public institutions, particularly in institutions that have historically embodied India's secular ethos—the army and the law.

5. Conclusion

Considering the breadth of decolonial discourse and intervention of Hindu nationalist organizations and actors, I argue that the decolonial discourse deployed by Hindu nationalists currently in power in India extends well beyond a rhetorical strategy designed merely to neutralize or counter normative opposition. Rather, decolonization functions as a discursive register through which the Hinduization of the state, public institutions, and public space is actively legitimized. It operates simultaneously on several registers: silencing

[59] Shah 2024.
[60] Dhaniyal and Kakkar 2026.
[61] Jaffrelot and Gilles 2020.
[62] Gehlawat 2024.
[63] See Meera Nanda's *Prophets Facing Backwards* (2006) and *Postcolonial Theory and the Making of Hindu Nationalism: The Wages of Unreason* (2025a, 2025b).

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critique, asserting a reconstituted vision of India—its history, traditions, civilization, and political trajectory—and furnishing intellectual legitimation to the Hindu nationalist project through symbolic evocation and ideological signaling. It further serves as a mechanism for political and electoral mobilization, performing indigeneity, authenticity, and civilizational rootedness. Under this framework, decolonization becomes a central instrument in mainstreaming Hindu nationalism and in its diffusion both domestically and in the diaspora. It is equally constitutive of the Sangh Parivar's broader project of historical reframing—a systematic rewriting of the past in contemporary Hindu nationalist terms.

Beyond its discursive functions, decolonization proves instrumental to the construction not merely of electoral majorities, but of a hegemonic regime: that is, to the institutionalization of Hindu nationalist norms and ideas within the structures of governance themselves.[64] Taken together, these decolonial gestures serve to mainstream, legitimize, and ultimately entrench the Hindu nationalist project. They cultivate inherited wounds and historical grievances as political resources, sustaining a discourse of Hindu victimhood—articulated both within India and across its diaspora—while simultaneously mobilizing publics along religious and ethnic lines. This forms part of a wider process of ethnicization of religious identity, one that equates Hinduness with a new civilizational order ushered in under Narendra Modi and the Sangh Parivar.

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[64] On the transformation of India's political system into a hegemonic regime, see Jaffrelot (2021).

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