

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The Saffronization of Public Knowledge in India

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## Abstract

During the political regime of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), public knowledge in India has been tarnished with political colors. The BJP has used the color saffron, which is closely associated with the Indian National Flag, as a sociopolitical tool to signal patriotism, nationalism, indigenization, and decolonization. However, the government's policies and messages focus on the self-profiting mechanisms of Hindutva ideology. According to the BJP, the notions of pre-colonial knowledge systems and patriotism are only related to the Hindu religion. Thus, public knowledge in India has been politicized through “saffronization”: the color saffron, rightwing political ideologies, and religious fundamentalism combine to create false beliefs about Indian history and culture, which then inspire and excuse hate and crime.

**Keywords:** BJP; color; Hindu-mania; Islamophobia; public spheres; saffronization

Public knowledge in India has been politicized through saffronization: the color saffron, rightwing political ideologies, and religious fundamentalism combine to create false beliefs about Indian history and culture, which then inspire and excuse hate and crime.

The saffron of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) flag is not just a color. It represents Hindutva – *Hindu-ness* – an ideology connected to religious and cultural puritanism that has created hatred against other religious beliefs and practices, especially Islam, by demeaning them as militants, invaders, and barbarians. The BJP's rise to power in 2014 was marked by a saffronization of the public sphere. Tropes labeled Muslims as breeders and terrorists and provoked Hindu communities to erase them physically and geographically from India. Yet it is precisely a Hindu–Muslim sibling solidarity that can oppose the saffronization of public knowledge in India.

## 1. The color saffron

In the Hindu religion, saffron is regarded as a symbol of purity, sacrifice, light, and salvation. Usually, Indians who attain monkhood or gain certain forms of religious and spiritual status wear saffron robes. Eventually, they are perceived as culturally, spiritually, and ethically “pure” beings. Thus, wearing saffron robes is not just a physical act. It pushes individuals toward existential, spiritual, and intellectual exceptionality – a state of being that is, in

Eduardo Kohn's definition, "fundamentally separate from the rest of the world," unquestionable, and far from the physical and ideological reach of ordinary folks.<sup>1</sup>

This saffron exceptionality can only be accessed by those with specific cultural, spiritual, political, and economic privileges, such as Baba Ramdev (brand ambassador of Patanjali Ayurveda), Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh (head of the social group Dera Sacha Sauda), Asaram Bapu (self-styled Indian spiritual leader), and Radhe Maa (self-styled Indian God Woman). Despite being convicted for several cases of dowry, rape, sexual slavery, monetary extortions, and other crimes, these figures continue to be appreciated and worshipped as ideal citizens.<sup>2</sup>

Their saffron exceptionality has enabled them to create manipulative and unquestionable structures for making public knowledge. Such structures are gatekept by socially, economically, and politically powerful individuals and are selectively accessible. No matter how myopically and unethically the structures operate, any form of criticism is put down as anti-Indian and anti-traditional.<sup>3</sup> With time, these rightwing saffronized structures have normalized rape culture and erased Islamic histories from the public spheres and classrooms in India.

## 2. The saffronization of rape culture

BJP ministers have defended the normalization of rape culture in India by citing the increasing influence of Western cultures and the loss of Hindu Puritan cultures. However, a thorough investigation shows how BJP's interpretation of gender and sexuality is centered on the notion of hyper-masculinity. Ideas of nation, nationhood, Hindu masculinity, and religious identities have been reimagined "along gendered lines," which serve as a "foundation of governing practices" of the BJP.<sup>4</sup>

According to the Hindutva ideology, female chastity is defined by attitudes like silence, soft-spokenness, and being ready to be abused by men.<sup>5</sup> A segment of the population (including women) feels that raping, abusing, schooling, and silencing women in India are essential correctional processes to maintain the cultural and traditional roots of India and preserve a Hindu Puritan image.<sup>6</sup>

When human rights organizations have questioned such narratives, BJP leaders like Mohan Bhagwat and Kailash Vijayvargiya (who has been charged with committing several rapes) argued that "rapes and gangrapes are restricted to urban India with its western culture," where they claim women seduce males to commit such acts by wearing exposing dresses in public.<sup>7</sup>

During the BJP regime, these narratives have shaped the nationwide understanding of gender and sexual perspectives. Many school curriculums in India celebrate rapes and rapists in textbooks. In 2015, a class three textbook in a school in the Jodhpur district of Rajasthan was found to be appreciating rape-accused self-styled godman Asaram Bapu as a

<sup>1</sup> Kohn 2013, 7.

<sup>2</sup> Chowdhury 2024.

<sup>3</sup> Lalwani 2024.

<sup>4</sup> Kinnvall 2019, 283.

<sup>5</sup> N. M. and Kuruvilla 2022.

<sup>6</sup> VK 2023.

<sup>7</sup> Das 2023; India Today Online 2013.

spiritual saint.<sup>8</sup> In 2023, a portion of the Gujarat riots that talked about the rape, murder, looting, and communal violence was erased from the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) textbooks. NCERT defended this initiative as “syllabus rationalization” and removing “irrelevant” histories.<sup>9</sup>

These educational practices inform the public sphere by transferring classroom teachings into workplace ethics, admission procedures, and recruitment systems. Distorted narratives become a pretext for justifying high-caste Hindu-mania and Islamophobia as moral acts of moving away from Western ideologies and reviving Hinduism as an Indigenous cultural and religious ideology.<sup>10</sup> An uncritical fetishism of Hinducentrism serves BJP’s narrative of de-westernization and decolonization.

### 3. The saffronization of Islamic history

The BJP argues that Hinduism is the only authentic religion of India and all the other religious entities are settler communities.<sup>11</sup> To promote a Hindu Puritan image of the country, the BJP government has selectively erased Islamic histories and heritages from the school textbooks.<sup>12</sup> The class 12 textbooks on history and political sciences have either “slashed or removed” the chapters on Mughal history, “covering the hundreds of years of Muslim rule.”<sup>13</sup> The erasure is justified as an act of retrieving and reinstating India’s “original” histories.

The Hindu Puritan image is connected to a fictional pre-colonial high-caste Hindu India that the BJP has successfully imagined and executed by introducing ancient Hindu texts of *Vedas*, *Puranas*, *Upanishads*, and *Manusmriti* within the mainstream public spheres. These texts are promoted in speeches and workshops organized by right-wing BJP-affiliated religious and political groups. During these events, specific contexts that serve the BJP’s right-wing Hindu nationalist propaganda are cherry-picked from these texts and presented to the audience in an all-encompassing manner. The audience, which often has not actually read these texts, banks on these events to build their ideas of traditional social, cultural, and learning practices.

Islamophobia then spreads from deleted histories to demolishing historical and religious structures and building pro-Hindu and anti-Muslim policies. Islamophobia has been successfully established by bulldozing historic buildings like a hundred-year-old mosque in Uttar Pradesh’s Barabanki district and a sixteenth-century mosque in Prayagraj city<sup>14</sup> and designing anti-Muslim policies. Anti-Muslim policies are reflected through the citizenship laws (National Register for Citizens), political patronages, and open practices of bigotry.<sup>15</sup>

Rumors function as another vital tool for the BJP to perpetuate Islamophobia across the country. At the time of the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020, several fake videos were circulated about how Muslims in India were deliberately spreading coronavirus in India. The videos

<sup>8</sup> Press Trust of India 2015.

<sup>9</sup> PTI 2023.

<sup>10</sup> Raina 2023.

<sup>11</sup> Babar 2024.

<sup>12</sup> Kaur 2023.

<sup>13</sup> Raj 2023.

<sup>14</sup> Explainer 2024.

<sup>15</sup> Human Rights Watch 2021.

showed Muslim fruit sellers spit on the fruits before selling them and served food on reusable plates that had not been washed.<sup>16</sup>

The saffronization of public knowledge has practical consequences. According to a report by Human Rights Watch, a New York-based rights group, between May 2015 and December 2018, “more than 100 beef-related attacks took place in India, in which 280 people were injured and 44 died – an overwhelming majority of them Muslims.”<sup>17</sup> Legal investigations have revealed that a majority of the convicts are firm advocates of the Hindutva ideology of the BJP. During the trial, they defended their violent acts as a way of protecting the sacredness of the Hindu religion.<sup>18</sup>

#### 4. From saffronization to sibling solidarity

The saffronization of public knowledge in India under the BJP requires urgent attention. Narendra Modi and the BJP party have won the elections for the third consecutive term. However, compared with the previous two occasions, the BJP has received fewer seats and has failed to obtain a single-party majority in the parliament, which would allow other political parties to participate actively in policymaking strategies.

This result shows how, amidst severe censorship and erasures, India’s public spheres have established what Suraj Yengde calls a “sibling solidarity” to resist the intellectually fractured state of daily existence.<sup>19</sup> Suraj says sibling solidarity is not built “through identification as sameness, but rather through a feeling of relation/relatedness with other.”<sup>20</sup> The social solidarities (rise in Hindu–Muslim companionships), cultural solidarities (Ambedkarite movement and the promotion of the color blue as a radical political idea), and economic solidarities (rise in Hindu–Muslim commercial partnerships) display an identical approach. Much needs to be done to recover the damaged state of public spheres in India, and it begins with social, political, and radical sibling solidarities across India.

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<sup>16</sup> Regan, Sur, and Sud 2020.

<sup>17</sup> MN 2023.

<sup>18</sup> Kumar 2017.

<sup>19</sup> Dey, 2022, 2023; Yengde 2023, 22.

<sup>20</sup> Yengde 2023, 23.

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