Debunking Hindutva Appropriation of Decolonial Thought

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Abstract

With the increasing popularity of the terms 'decolonising' and 'decolonial', some movements across the world have co-opted the terms in a move to appear radical, progressive and/or anti-west. In this paper, I highlight this trend in the Hindutva movement and its recent scholarship which presents the far-Right Hindu nationalist movement as decolonial, with a particular focus on J. Sai Deepak's recent work (2021). I draw out key themes found within this scholarship – invoking an anti-colonial sentiment; making the case for a return to Hindu 'indigeneity'; and invisibilising the exclusion of marginalised groups through othering and sanctioning violence against those perceived as threats. In turn, I provide a critique of this literature by engaging decolonial and postcolonial concepts, emphasising the misappropriation of the concept of 'indigeneity', the reinforcement of colonial binaries, the erasure of indigenous feminist literature and ignoring anti-caste scholarship, suggesting that these moves are rooted in a highly selective masculinist reading of decolonial literature. I argue that, because of the above, the Hindutva movement and its literature are not decolonial. Rather, I argue that this reinforcement of colonial binaries and hierarchies supports the coloniality of the Indian nation-state, justifying its violence against minorities. In the final section, I reflect on, and suggest, some decolonial possibilities for the postcolonial nation-state of India.

Keywords: decolonial theory, Hindutva, India.

Introduction

> .. seeds [of decoloniality] ...need to not just be remembered but also resown in contemporary times and with attention to present-day reality of deterritorialisations, dispossessions, expropriations, co-options and false inclusions, and the recoloniality of power, being, knowledge and nature (Walsh, 2018, 101).

The term 'decolonial' has become a trend in academia in all its variations – decolonising the curriculum, universities, mind, knowledge, research, and pedagogical practice (Vandeyar, 2022; Moghli & Kadiwal, 2021). The use of the term as a prefix seems to magically transform any ideology, object, place, or activity into something progressive and radical. However, this decolonial bandwagon bears the risk of co-opting this language and school of thought to reinscribe coloniality (Moosavi, 2019). In this light, the far-right Hindutva movement is an important case study as it has often been (mis)represented as an anti-colonial movement due to its opposition[1] to those deemed as foreigners, in this case, the British. The current Indian government is ruled by the Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People's Party, BJP), a political party strongly aligned with the Hindutva movement I demonstrate that the narrative of the Hindutva movement as a decolonising one has become louder and more dominant in recent years, with ideologues of the movement co-opting 'decolonising' to justify Hindu supremacy. Therefore, it is urgent for scholars, especially those working with the decolonial school of thought, to interrogate and challenge these claims rigorously while highlighting the dangers associated with such appropriations.

In this article, I argue that the Hindutva movement appropriates key decolonial arguments based on a highly selective and masculinist reading of the decolonial theory broadly, and the decolonial concept of "Indigeneity" in particular. First, I explain the methodology employed in this article followed by an introduction of the Hindutva movement's tools of propagation used by its supporters and believers. Next, I provide evidence of literature that presents the Hindutva movement as decolonial, which is followed by a critique of this scholarship by engaging in decolonial praxis. Specifically, I juxtapose this literature with the work of decolonial and postcolonial scholars to draw out the coloniality within Hindutva scholarship, whilst outlining some ways in which decolonial thought is itself complicit in such moves. Lastly, I reflect on the implications of the above findings for the decolonial school of thought and the possibility of decolonising the Indian state.

[1] I refuse to use the word 'resistance' to describe this as the major intellectuals of the Hindutva movement worked with and supported the British empire in varying capacities. For an analysis of Savarkar's loyalty to the British empire, please see Kulkarni (2019).

Methodological Considerations

In this paper, I employ a research methodology drawing upon the works of postcolonial and decolonial schools together. In doing this, I seek to emulate Gurminder Bhambra's call for connecting the strengths of both schools (2017) to be able to overcome shortcomings. In this section, I expand on the rationale behind my methodological framework and the shortcomings which are relevant to the project. Next, I explain my method of analysis and the rationale determining the selection of certain texts. In the final section, taking note of the decolonial praxis of visibilising the researcher and the call from postcolonial scholars such as Dibyesh Anand (2007) for a "critical reflexivity", I acknowledge my own complicity in risking the replication of colonial structures in my own research.

In this research, I draw upon a framework based on postcolonial and decolonial scholarship, noting their shared aims of critically interrogating colonial structures and challenging their epistemic and ontological legacies while amplifying the voices of those marginalised within the present marked by the coloniality of modernity (coloniality/modernity) (Quijano 2007). Scholars in both schools are increasingly interrogating contemporary colonial structures within postcolonial nation-states as observed in my own work (Menon, 2022) and other scholars (Kaul, 2021; Zia, 2020) who work on visibilising the Indian state's colonial strategies in the region of Indian Administered Jammu and Kashmir.

These schools also have their own shortcomings, some of which I address here. The decolonial school of thought has been critiqued for erasing feminist scholarship, especially by women of colour (Cusicanqui, 2012) and for replicating colonial hierarchies (Ortega, 2017) through practices of gatekeeping within the intellectual academy. The decolonial school of thought also does not typically include caste as an analytical category, which cannot be the case in the context of South Asia. In South America, where the decolonial school of thought originated, race is the key colonial construct that determines social, political, and economic hierarchies through a fixed distribution of labour and control over knowledge production (Quijano, 2000). In South Asia, society was already divided based on caste, a fundamental oppressive structure that was further exploited by the colonisers and subsequent postcolonial elites. Ignoring the role of caste and of Brahminism[2] in the making of contemporary hegemonic structures in the region would be a massive shortcoming.[3]

[2] Brahminism is the dominance of Brahmins who are considered at the top of the caste hierarchy according to Hindu scriptures. For a detailed critique of Brahminism – both from a theoretical and empirical perspective – please see Ilaiah Shepherd (2019 [1996]). For the links between Brahminism, liberalism and postcolonial theory and how the three have shared epistemic linkages, please see Gudavarthy (2016). This should also clarify that neither postcolonial nor decolonial schools of thought can be said to be "anti-caste scholarship"; however, the concept of intersectionality does allow us to move beyond rigid borders of theory to centre caste to inform our analysis.

[3] Understanding and research on racialisation within India has expanded to include caste as a key analytical category. The special issue on racialisation in India by Jesús F. Châirez-Garza, Mabel Denzin Gergan, Malini Ranganathan and Pavithra Vasudevan (2021) is worth noting here.

In this paper, taking note of the politics of citation (Ahmed, 2017, 17), I ensure that the scholarship on which I base my own intellectual learning and analysis is duly credited and highlighted. I am cognizant of my position as an upper-caste woman of Indian nationality who is placed in a foreign institution and can reinforce the idea of knowledge production as a sphere dominated by upper-caste people. Every attempt has been made to make the analysis as intersectional as possible, noting key categories of caste and gender and the interplay of these two within Hindutva scholarship. This is in keeping with a decolonial ethos where theory is not seen as something rigid but rather expands and evolves to study hegemonic structures, including that of Brahminism.

The method of analysis used in this paper is critical discourse analysis (CDA) which involves a critical reading of the discourse with a normative motivation. This explains and assesses the reality that the discourse is a part of and, simultaneously, creates. CDA, then, not only studies discourse but focuses on the power relations embedded within this discourse. As Norman Fairclough states (2013), CDA oscillates between a focus on structures, strategies, and orders of discourse though I do not use CDA as a methodology but as a tool of analysis. This is primarily because of the suitability of the decolonial and postcolonial schools of thought for interrogating colonial discourses and challenging the appropriation of 'decolonial language' by Hindutva scholars.

Taking note of this, I have only included texts of two kinds: first, texts written by those who support the Hindutva movement (Savarkar, 1923; Tembarai, 2004) and second, texts which claim to be 'decolonial' or 'decolonising' by the authors themselves (Elst, 2001; Deepak, 2021). These texts are available in predominantly Hindi and English although works of prominent ideologues such as V.D Savarkar within the movement are also available in other regional languages. However, the key texts which claim to be 'decolonial' are mostly written in English and then translated, an indicator of the expected audience: English-speaking upper-caste Indians; diasporic populations that are often key supporters and lobbyists for the movement;[4] and English-speaking western audiences who provide potential legitimacy to a movement that is based on violent practices domestically but is made possible on its current scale due to funding that is sourced from predominantly, the 'West'.[5]

This section highlighted the decolonial framework that is employed in this research along with some methodological concerns regarding the erasure of feminist scholarship, the absence of caste as an analytical category and the perpetuation of colonial hierarchies. This section also noted how I will address this in this paper, followed by a discussion on the use of CDA as a method of analysis. The following section provides a brief introduction to the Hindutva

[4] For a study of the functioning of Hindutva forces in the UK and US, please see Kaul & Menon (2021).

[5] To clarify and reiterate, this includes repatriations from diasporic populations. For more on this, please see Sud (2008) and Macher (2022).

movement and goes on to focus on their tools of propagation to contextualise the 'decolonial literature' produced within it.

The Hindutva Movement – Glorifying the Past with Modern Tools

Hindutva is the political ideology that seeks to establish a Hindu nation. The foundational basis is the idea of Hindu supremacy, one which places Hinduism as the original civilisation on the Indian subcontinent, and since then plundered by various foreign 'invasions' (Tiwari, 1987). Chief proponents of the movement such as Savarkar did not draw a distinction between Hinduism and Hindutva, seeing Hindutva as an entire social-political-religious system to which Hinduism simply belonged to (1923). He called for the establishment of the Hindu nation as the rightful culmination of the Hindutva movement:

> Thirty crores [300 million] of people, with India for their basis of operation, for their Fatherland and for the Holyland with such a history behind them, bound together by ties of a common blood and common culture can dictate their terms to the whole world. A day will come when mankind will have to face the force (Savarkar, 1923, 66).

Today, with the sustained efforts of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh[6] (National Voluntary Corps, RSS), the BJP has achieved political prominence at the national level and has remained in power since 2014. Since then, there has been a normalisation of violence that takes the form of physical brutalisation, socially engineered riots, and pogroms to name a few. This is reflected in the significant decline in India's democracy index, with the country rated as "Partly free" in the most recent rankings (Freedom House, 2022). The direct burden of this is borne by those who have been marginalised based on religion, caste, gender, and income status. There have been several reports documenting this, as can be seen in the annual report of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF, 2022) that designated India as a 'Country of Particular Concern' over the weakening protections for religious minorities, the South Asia State of Minorities Report (2020) and Human Rights Watch report on India (2021) to list a few.

The BJP's model of Hindu nationalism often uses the story of an ancient Hindu past to impose a sense of homogeneous ethnic belonging to the land upon its followers; however, it subscribes to a Eurocentric conception of progress and development. Nitasha Kaul (2017) notes how the success of this model is based on the BJP's ability to appeal to different electoral constituencies, by creating and sustaining opposing dualities such as "corporate/grassroots, national/international, India/Bharat". The use of these "forked-tongues" is what

[6] The RSS is a paramilitary youth-wing Hindutva group that has been in operation since 1923. It boasts of being the world's largest voluntary group dedicated to "India's resurgence and global peace" (RSS, n.d.). It is also the leader of a large group of organisations, the Sangh Parivar, that seek to engage and represent all groups within Indian society.

enables the government to often distract from pressing issues by reverting the narrative to tradition and culture. These dualities allow the BJP to maintain support amongst a diverse range of voters while avoiding criticism from either and are used to directly support the myth of the current Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, as a versatile man most suited to lead the country. This has led to the creation of Modi as a cult leader, whose policies must not be criticised. For instance, if there is an economic crisis, the party attempts to unite people in the name of religion, and so on. This discursive strategy has far-reaching material implications. During the early waves of the Covid-19 pandemic, when 100,000 Indians had lost their lives, the National Health Ministry was promoting traditional remedies as cures, further perpetuating and capitalising on the colonial binary of 'tradition' vs modern' (Pulla, 2020; Bhowmick, 2021). The strategy of co-opting trends should be seen as a continuation of the Hindutva movement's usual strategy of propagation over the years. To take one example, despite the insistence to return to the Hindu golden age, they have been one of the earliest adopters of the Internet as a medium to maintain social groups and disseminate ideological literature. In fact, Hindutva proponents were on a platform called USENET in 1985, pre-internet, to unify Hinduism through online media (Helland, 2007). In 1996, the Hindu Students Council in the US also launched the Global Hindu Electronic Network and connected with the platform Hindu Universe. Currently, they are still active and present a Hindu version of India to the US and accuse critical westerners of being racists. Modi's own election campaign in 2014 spent exorbitant sums to project spectacular technically advanced rallies and speeches, often involving holograms of the man himself (Welch, 2014). Hence, despite the Hindu Right's insistence on the 'return to the golden age' in India's history, the Hindutva movement is modernist and co-opts trends to garner worldwide support and sympathy.

In addition, the Hindutva movement and its proponents accept violence as integral to establishing Hindu dominance. They call for the resurgence of the Hindu man who has been made docile against primarily three enemies: Muslims, Secularists, and the Communists (Anand, 2011). However, the movement uses a language cloaked in spirituality and universal humanism for greater acceptance. This 'soft power' has been embraced by the BJP as it builds support for its actions locally and internationally in areas such as Ayurveda, Bollywood, Buddhism, Cricket, Cuisine, Informational Technology, Performing and Fine Arts and Yoga. For example, Kaul & Menon (2021, 170-172) note that the BJP (and by extension, the Hindutva movement) shift their stance depending upon their audience as long as the final goal of establishing a Hindu nation remains intact. Here, then, the appropriation of decolonial thought comes as little surprise. In turn, it is pertinent to question which concepts in decolonial theory are liable to be used for movements which, in reality, reiterate structures such as the binary of 'tradition vs modern' and 'Hindu vs Muslim', that subscribe to a patriarchal and capitalist coloniality/modernity. The next section offers a review of the Hindutva literature

claiming to be decolonial. I draw out the dominant themes within them, before offering a critical analysis of this scholarship.

Decolonial Hindutva Literature/Hindutva as Decolonisation?

Hindutva literature itself has a long history, but for the purpose of this paper, I focus mostly on the texts that call for decolonising the Hindu mind and India. From a survey of this literature, I argue that it often invokes anti-colonial sentiment, makes a case for a return to Hindu indigeneity, and invisibilises the exclusion of marginalised groups through othering as well as sanctioning violence against those perceived as threats.

A prominent example is Rajesh Tembarai's work, 'Call for an Intellectual Kshatriya' (2004) which lays out its aim of inspiring young Indians to take up the cause of the country while perpetuating and upholding the extremely oppressive Hindu caste system. Rajiv Malhotra, an American citizen no less, has written several books where he focuses on the implications of Western intervention in India (Malhotra, 2011) while also conflating the Indian nation-state and civilisation as one (2013), lending support to the Hindutva narrative of a homogenous Hindu past disrupted by foreign interventions. The work of both writers does not claim a particular methodological framework and is lacking in academic rigour as it fails to provide sources for the data provided, lays accusations on anybody who does not align with Hindu nationalist thought[7] and adopts aggressive language to call upon Hindus to reclaim their lost prestige.

This literature is highly Islamophobic, using Pakistan as a scapegoat for internal issues of India but more alarmingly, it belittles Indian Muslims as violent, terrorists, and hyper-sexual thus having higher reproductive rates than other communities (Krishnamachari, 2004; Hedgewar in Bhishikar, 2013 [1979]). This is used to stoke fears about the Muslim population instigating demographic change within India, a conspiracy that has been proven wrong repeatedly through the census produced by the Indian government itself and more recently, the Pew Research Centre's study on the growth of religious groups in India (Kramer, 2021). Regardless, this idea has even garnered support from non-Hindu scholars who find common ground in their right-wing tendencies, as can be seen in the works of Flemish author and long-term Hindutva proponent Koenraad Elst.

Elst's efforts to portray Aryans as indigenous to the Indian subcontinent have been largely discarded by scholars (Bryant, 2004). Yet his work, *Decolonizing the Hindu Mind* (2011) remains a widely read text which supports the narrative of a 'weak Hindu man' and labels India's nationalist freedom movement as a struggle

[7] Krishnamachari goes to the extent of listing the challenges against the Intellectual Hindu warrior as stemming from ten sections of the Indian nation, some of which are: Mullah (referring to Sunni Muslim elite), Missionary, "Minorityist", Maoist, Marxist, Mandalist (those who support caste-based reservations) and so on (2004). He offers little reasoning behind this, but it would not be amiss to note the anti-Islam and Christian sentiment along with a disdain for academics and historians who do not support the Hindutva narrative.

for the "Hindu cause" (Ibid). The most recent addition to this canon is J. Sai Deepak who applies the decolonial school of thought to make an argument for India's return to its ancient civilisation, which he sees as 'Bharat' (2021).[8] He calls for an interrogation of the coloniality of the "Bhartiya" mind and reduces decoloniality to that which can "reinscribe the primacy of indigeneity, indigenous consciousness and its subjectivity in formerly colonised societies and civilisations" (2021, Foreword).

The author situates the location of his analysis in a global yet local setting, first focusing on the period of European colonisation and how it led to the formation of hegemonic global capitalism. He then studies the impact of coloniality on 'Bharat' – referring to the name for India preferred by those speaking Hindi and other languages belonging to the same linguistic group, the use of this term is deliberate, and appeals to a certain category of readers. His last section focuses on arguing that the Indian Constitution is a legacy of British colonial rule and that the use of international law is to universalise the evangelical mission of the British governments – thus rendering both as colonial enemies of Bharat (Deepak, 2021).

While his work is celebrated by Hindutva supporters as 'scholarly', and as "emancipating us[9] from the rut postcolonial thought has become" (Dey, 2021), and has been platformed alongside prominent Indian politicians such as Shashi Tharoor,[10] the text has several issues – both within the text itself and with its engagement with the decolonial school of thought. Issues within the text such as his claim that Indian history is only known through the European gaze[11] (2021, 226) are problematic and show his lack of knowledge of the broad range of Indian historiography and the rich debates and discussions that exist therein. The continued presence of Indic historians/Indologists, despite severe methodological issues,[12] is demonstrative of the plurality of Indian historiography. However, it is his engagement with postcolonial and decolonial schools of thought that is of prime interest to this paper and is discussed further in the next section.

The aforementioned work is reminiscent of early Hindutva writings such as Savarkar's (1923) that push forth a primordialist approach to the nation and construct a fixed identity of what it means to be a Hindu. These approaches (including older Hindutva literature) uphold the caste system and Brahmin

[8] Bharat is the Hindi terminology for India.

[9] It remains unclear throughout the article who this 'us' is referring to since postcolonial theory, with its criticisms, continues to be a widely used canon of scholarship that is used interdisciplinary and has influenced other theoretical schools.

[10] A disturbing yet interesting discussion between the two can be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R1cKMj_lauU [accessed 7 June 2022].

[11] Lately, a controversy on the dismissal of 'Indian history' from school textbooks in India has been gaining attention. These provocations are based on severe ignorance – school history textbooks do cover empires and kingdoms all over South Asia without really focusing on their religious leanings as has been pointed out repeatedly over the years (Thapar, 2009; Leidig, 2016; Jaiswal, 2021). Personally, I have studied History throughout school across different states in North, East and Western parts of the country and our curriculum had issues but ignoring 'Hindu' kingdoms/empires was not one of them.

[12] For an insightful critique of Indology and the implications of Hindutva on it, please see Bailey (2014).

supremacy while rejecting religious conversions, imposing the myth that all humans belonging to the subcontinent are Hindus. In fact, in this most recent work by Deepak, coloniality is employed as an analytic to recover the "Bhartiya (Indian) consciousness" while making the argument that Hindus who continue to be internally colonised, have now become "self-hating" Hindus who are critical of Hinduism and by extension, of "Bharat" (Deepak, 2021).

Before moving on to a decolonial reading of the above literature, it is important to highlight *why* this latest co-option by the Hindutva movement is taking place. I identify three reasons: it justifies the movement's Islamophobia along with state-backed violence against minoritized communities; it makes Hindutva more palatable to the West and enables them to garner support from those critical of all things 'west'; and it avoids all critique by labelling it as 'Hinduphobic'. I argue that Hindutva ideologues co-opt the banner of decolonial theory to appear progressive, radical, and anti-west even though many of them live in, and economically benefit from, what is broadly understood as the 'West'. The ability to appeal to 'Western' audiences through language is crucial not only for narrative legitimacy (Kumar & Lacy, 2020, John 2019) is key in maintaining a certain image of India in the 'West', but also for monetary support (South Asia Citizens Web, 2014).

These ideologues, across time periods, use this approach to silence all criticism of Hinduism, Hindutva, and by extension, India by portraying themselves as the real victims. This is directly adopted from the Hindutva movement which justifies violence against Muslims as 'payback' for the centuries of oppression faced by Hindus at the hands of Muslim invaders (Savarkar, 1923). Similarly, critical scholars are now termed as 'Hinduphobic'[13] and viciously slandered on social media if they live internationally (Ellis-Petersen, 2021), or even physically attacked if they happen to live in India (Deb, 2021).

The Hindutva movement and its defining narrative is based on the active othering, marginalisation and perpetuating brutal violence towards several communities (Anand, 2007), including the Dalit ('lower caste') community – many of whom could be Hindus. It seeks to assimilate all the spiritual and religious traditions that have existed in South Asia as Hindu apart from Islam and Christianity. It curtails all criticism of the religion, the political movement and now, the country, calling for a 'resurgence of Hindus' (Tiwari, 2007; Krishnamachari, 2004), now based in a supposed decolonial school of thought. The next section investigates this engagement with the decolonial school of thought, examining its nature and argument. Further, I use decolonial theory to provide a critique of the same, arguing for a decolonial ethos that challenges false narratives of victimhood, decentralisation of knowledge production and centring anti-colonial, decolonial, and postcolonial thinkers and doers in the world.

[13] This is not to imply that Hindus who live in 'Western' countries might not face racism or other forms of prejudice. However, the claim of Hinduphobia has largely been laid against critical scholars/thinkers who may or may not be Hindu and may be of Indian origin or be Indian.

Reading Coloniality in Hindutva Literature

The last section provided a lengthy discussion on the key trends I identified in Hindu literature, focusing on the turn to decolonial theory. This section elaborates on four key issues found in the literature discussed above which show the Hindutva author's limited and reductive understanding of the decolonial school of thought. These are: misappropriating the decolonial concept of 'indigeneity', upholding and perpetuating colonial binaries, ignoring indigenous feminist work, and limiting a focus on caste as simply a colonial construct while dismissing anti-caste scholarship. I expand upon these by using the work of decolonial, postcolonial, and anti-caste scholars in the next few paragraphs.

A common word across Hindutva literature is 'resurgence' and its variations – calling for the resurgence of the Hindu man, the reawakening of Hindu consciousness, and so on. The idea being propagated is the importance of recovering what has been lost because of foreign 'invasions' to build a Hindu nation. Deepak uses the decolonial concept of 'indigeneity' for this purpose and it is decolonial theory's focus on the reclamation of indigenous thought which makes him prefer it over postcolonial thought. He sees postcolonial theory as a "language rooted in Europeanism" (2021, 152) and dealing only with the coloniser's consciousness. Alongside the lack of evidence, it also ignores the work already existing in the postcolonial school that critiques the role of the "postcolonial critic" (Spivak, 1999) or the work of Albert Memmi problematising the categories of the coloniser and colonised (1957) by critiquing their own positionality. This work is extremely self-critical and addresses not only the postcolonial individual but extends its analysis to the identity of the postcolonial nation in the contemporary neoliberal world (Mamdani, 2001; Parasram, 2014). Deepak's limited reading of postcolonial theory does not end here but continues to be observable in other arguments presented below.

Deepak claims that postcolonial theory believes that colonisation is over and hence uses the term 'post', despite this being refuted at great length by postcolonial scholars such as Dibyesh Anand (2012) and Kwame A. Appiah (1992).[14] He writes about postcolonial theory:

> Even if its original intent was the subversion of Western hegemony, its unintended consequences, at least in the case of Bharat, are: the reinforcement, entrenchment, and secularisation of colonialism (whose origins are not secular), the alienation of the native's own cultural experience, the stifling and suppression of indigenous consciousness, and its replacement with self-loathing (Deepak 2021, 190).

This statement is unsubstantiated and presented without any evidence or reference to postcolonial scholarly work that allegedly does the above.

[14] The scholars argue that the term 'post-colonial' signifies the period after colonisation and the term postcolonial shows the persisting and ongoing impact of colonisation across geographical borders and time periods.

Returning to the concept of indigeneity, Deepak's entire project revolves around making a case for reclaiming the indigenous Bhartiya consciousness. His understanding of Bhartiya consciousness, similarly to other Hindutva literature mentioned in this paper, is dependent on Hindu (Brahminical) supremacy, reiterating that all Indians are Hindus and critiquing birth and ethnicity-based metrics for indigeneity. He masks this supremacist aspect by focusing on the relations of indigenous peoples with nature, invoking examples of different communities based in South America; ironically, he offers little critique of the ongoing displacement of tribal communities in India in the name of progress and development.[15] Therefore, it becomes crucial to ask, who is considered indigenous in Hindutva literature and who is excluded? Moreover, what are the implications of this? One of the objectives of the decolonial school of thought has been to improve access to social justice for the marginalised. In the absence of this objective in the Hindutva co-optation of indigeneity, we must ask, who pays the cost of recovering Hindutva indigeneity?

The concept of indigeneity is important to decolonial scholars based in the Americas primarily because of the mode of colonisation that they were subjected to. In the Americas, modern European colonialism depended on the complete eradication of indigenous communities; hence, decoloniality calls for a search for their own indigenous history, not a return to their past. This is further complicated by the fact of ongoing settler-colonial regimes, especially in the Americas, Australia, and New Zealand where indigenous communities have been subjected to brutal oppression and marginalisation. In the words of indigenous Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor who uses the term "survivance" to describe surviving genocide while resisting colonial domination (2008, 1994), "Survivance entails physical and cultural survival"; it is "an active sense of presence over absence…is the continuation of stories," and is oriented not backward, recalling what was lost, but forwards, toward "renewal and continuity into the future." (Vizenor, 2008, 1, 25 in Robinson, 2020). In the case of South Asia, British colonialism was not based on the eradication of native populations, but rather on their domination and manufactured consent (Guha, 1997), so this call for indigeneity to one specific past in a region with multiple histories is not only misleading but also violent towards people who do not identify with that specific past.

Catherine Walsh (2018) similarly warns us against the "decolonial danger" (84) of oversimplifying and oversubjectifying indigeneity. As the epigraph at the beginning of this article reminds us, we need to pay attention to how our current movements might be reinscribing or contributing to the coloniality of power, feeding into a structure where power remains in the hands of the social, political, and economic elites. Hindutva literature does precisely this by providing a biased and reductive view of Indian history and making false claims of the "world's longest ongoing genocide" against Hindus (Hindugenocide.com, n.d.) that traces

[15] He does refer to decolonial thinker Arturo Escobar but only as a recommended read for development practitioners.

its beginning to the "Islamic Period" (unsurprisingly) in 653 AD with the grim caption "So it begins" to portray Hindus as the ultimate victims (Ibid). This implies that since Hindus have also been subject to genocide, it is only right that they be allowed to revive their past; in turn, this implies that Muslims are not indigenous to the country. However, this monolithic category of 'Hindu' itself, as noted earlier, is problematic, and the decolonial school of thought does not propagate a blatant return to the past that reinforces oppressive structures such as patriarchy and the caste system.

Second, this attempt at decolonial work reinforces and fixes colonial binaries, which were originally constructed by colonisers to define and thus divide people (Mamdani, 2012). Binarised categories such as Hindu-Muslim, Civilised-Savage, and Developed-Primitive are colonial in nature and reinforce the supremacy of the oppressor over the oppressed. The decolonial school of thought considers these colonial binaries as essential to maintaining the "colonial difference" (Mignolo, 2007), whereas postcolonial scholars refer to the "self-other" binary to illustrate that not only is the other different from the self, but the 'self' is *the* principled way of being (Said, 1978). To give an example, European colonisers used the trope of the 'civilising mission' wherein, as the more technologically advanced society, they had a moral duty to colonise and develop the 'native savages' (Mitchell, 1991). In the case of Hindutva literature, the category of Hindu is constructed in direct and permanent opposition to Islam and Christianity where both Abrahamic religions are portrayed as foreign to the Indian subcontinent and as inherently imperialistic for their conversion tactics.

This narrative maintains the Hindu-Muslim and Hindu-Christian binaries and represents Hinduism as a peaceful religion in contrast to both despite contrary evidence. The recent campaign of '*Ghar Wapsi*'" (Coming Home) that called for mass conversions to Hinduism from Islam and Christianity and was led by paramilitary Hindu right-wing groups such as the previously mentioned RSS is a good example of this. The name of the campaign literally translating to 'Return to Home' is illustrative of the Hindu right's belief of all Indians originally being Hindus and that those 'forcefully' converted (they view all conversions from Hinduism as forced, including those by Dalits) can now return to their 'natural' state of being (Sarkar, 1999; Rajeshwar & Amore, 2019). Hence, if Hinduism is natural, then everything in opposition, primarily Islam and Christianity, become 'unnatural' and liable for dehumanisation. This binary supports Hindu supremacy and disparages any other way of being.

Therefore, these binaries uphold coloniality as established by European colonisers. Any challenge to coloniality would imply breaking down these binaries to overcome colonial divisions and create alternative futures that attempt radical inclusion rather than religious exclusion, something which Hindutva literature absolutely fails to do.

Third, Hindutva literature actively ignores the wide corpus of indigenous feminist work that can be understood as decolonial or as sharing decolonial objectives.

This is done through an exclusive reading of the decolonial school of thought that focuses on scholarship produced by men. The decolonial school has been criticised by feminist scholars for gatekeeping practices that result in the erasure of women and minoritized genders while centring men based in Western universities and publishing in English (Cusicanqui, 2012, 102-104; Ortega, 2017). Deepak's work is a clear example of this trend that hardly focuses on work produced by indigenous feminist scholars. In the few instances he does, such as his references to Gloria Anzaldùa and Sylvia Wynter (2021), their theoretical contributions are not adequately engaged beyond simply naming them. This is illustrative of Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui's critique that theory produced by women is often relegated to the arena of experience, understood as inferior to serious academic scholarship that demands serious engagement (Cusicanqui, 2012; Mendoza, 2016, 103; Lugones, 2010). This reinforces colonial hierarchies where only the educated, English-speaking man can be an authentic knowledge producer (Ortega, 2017). This deliberate ignorance is crucial as it helps the Hindu right in fuelling "hegemonic masculinist Indian nationalism" (Kaul, 2018) which is dependent on a specific understanding of gender within the Hindutva movement – the feminisation of India as Bharat Mata (Mother India) and calling for the resurgence of the docile Hindu (preferably Man) to protect this Bharat Mata. This reductive reading, in turn, further entrenches patriarchal understandings of gender and gender relations within the modern nation-state which in turn also shapes political action such as gendered violence (ibid).

The practice of ignoring women is not just reflected in the scholarly text of Hindutva literature but also in the context in which it is situated. For Deepak's work, it is worthy to note that it was Mignolo's endorsement that brought the book into the limelight, especially for academics. While Mignolo has since rescinded his support, it remains significant that it was Mignolo's position that provided the book with a much larger audience than intended. The list of endorsements for Deepak's book is composed of all men except for a token woman (who is left conspicuously absent from the book cover). All of them except Mignolo are upper-caste Hindus. These aspects become crucial to remember when aligned with the book's motives – a revival of the ancient Hindu past where it is Hindu upper-caste men who hold power. These endorsements should not be viewed as an endowment of academic credibility but rather as a desire amongst Hindu elites to retain their positions of power, particularly in the field of knowledge production.

My final critique focuses on the application of the concept of coloniality in Deepak's work which completely ignores how Hinduism is based on an extremely oppressive caste system and Hindutva's discourse of caste. Texts considered central to Hinduism such as the *Manusmriti* uphold caste as an essential social division of society, one that is hereditary and determined by one's actions in previous lives. In contradiction, Hindutva scholars claim that caste itself is not an oppressive and violent system, but that it is the exploitation of caste as a category by the British colonial rulers that transformed it into a violent system. Deepak,

then, follows a wide range of scholarship produced by Hindutva ideologues[16] that claims caste to be a colonial invention (Deepak, 2021, 345) which obscures the role played by caste in oppressing lower caste communities historically and in contemporary times. This narrative is held with utmost importance by the Hindu right wing and has been employed by the diaspora to stop legislation banning anti-caste discrimination (Kaul & Menon, 2021). In my own work (Menon, 2022) I argue that the colonial matrix of power does not focus on caste and that utilising decolonial concepts in the context of South Asia would require a serious reckoning with caste and anti-caste scholarship.

Caste should be visibilised as ever-present in any kind of coloniality we discuss. To take one example, if we argue for the revival of traditional knowledge systems in India, that will imply that only Brahmins (upper-caste) would be keepers and producers of knowledge. Where would this place the majority of the country that is not Brahmin? Why would we want to revert to a system where all knowledge, and by extension, power, is monopolised in the hands of Brahmins? This would go against the decolonial school's insistence on the decentralisation of knowledge control as a key requirement for decolonising (Maldonado-Torres, 2004). Furthermore, caste as a hierarchy has global implications and has remained resilient as a social structure in relatively modern structures of the nation-state[17] (Banerjee & Knight, 1985; Equality Labs, 2018) and of globalisation (Fernandez, 2017, Equality Labs, 2018; Soundararajan, 2020).

It should be noted that Deepak, like other Hindutva supporters, quotes the political leader and Dalit revolutionary, B.R. Ambedkar for the purpose of othering Islam and Pakistan but refuses to engage with his anti-caste critique, reducing it to a difference of belief. Ambedkar's radical anti-casteism theorised in one of his most prominent works, *Annihilation of Caste* (1936) is simply ignored. Additionally, as anti-caste scholars point out, decolonising caste would critique the colonial, Brahminical, and post-colonial constructions and understandings of caste (Jangam, 2021). Limiting ourselves to the colonial period simply ignores the contemporary violence unleashed by upper castes and the methods used by them to impose social, political, and economic dominance as these have been drawn from Hindutva historiographies. There can be no decolonising in the context of India without breaking down one of the most oppressive social hierarchies, one which has also impacted other religions in the subcontinent such as Islam and Christianity. A 'decolonising' project that maintains the supremacy of Brahmins is reiterating the pre-existing status quo and does not have any emancipatory objectives.

From the above discussion, I have argued that Hindutva literature more broadly, and Deepak's work specifically, cannot claim to be decolonial in nature as it

[16] For a critical analysis of this work, please see O'Hanlon (2017).

[17] For an informative read on South Asian complicity in reproducing caste and anti-black logic in the settler colonial regimes in North America, please see Patel (2016).

reinforces colonial binaries which legitimise contemporary violence against the 'others' – in this case, Muslims, and Christians - as well as glorifying an indigeneity that reinforces Brahminical Hindu supremacy, which was never destroyed but simply adapted to the rulers it was under. Further, this literature ignores a wide range of indigenous feminist scholarship and anti-caste scholarship, hence perpetuating coloniality whereby predominantly upper-caste Hindu men are at the helm of producing 'acceptable' scholarship whilst obscuring these material hierarchies. This implies that Hindutva literature is not motivated by the goals of decolonising, but rather by replacing British supremacy with Hindu supremacy in the context of India. The final section summarises my critique before shifting towards a reflective exploration of the alternative possibilities of decolonising India.

A Decolonial India?

This paper has provided a brief review of Hindutva literature, drawing out some key themes relevant to analysing the 'decolonial' claim in this literature. In doing so, the following themes emerge: an uncritical glorification of indigeneity where 'indigenous' is understood as a monolithic Hindu existence; reinforcing colonial binaries with the aim to justify violence against those minoritized; and the ignoring of the wide range of indigenous feminist work while representing the caste system as a colonial construct, ignoring its historical precolonial and postcolonial contexts. This literature is far from being 'decolonial', even in the most abstract sense, as it simply reinforces colonial hierarchies and demands the shift of power from European elites to Brahmin elites. The purpose is neatly summarised in Deepak's own words:

> however, what must replace coloniality and what must be the priority of indigeneity should be determined not by scholars of decoloniality, but by decolonised indigenous societies, even if it takes the shape of an ethnic or religious identification project based on their respective histories (2021, 171).

The exclusionary basis of such an ethnic or religious identification project as we observe in the case of the world's only 'ethnic democracy' Israel, or in religious movements such as the Hindutva movement, are completely overlooked by the author. Additionally, it raises the bigger question: whose indigeneity are we returning to (Mamdani 2012)? In the case of India, Brahmins and other upper castes have always held power either directly, or through collaborations with the rulers, both historical and colonial. The project of decolonising must involve and centre the aim to end all forms of oppressive power structures; Hindutva literature not only fails to do this but seeks to be the sole administrator of such oppression in India.

Recognising the danger of these appropriations, Priyamvada Gopal (2021) reminds us that the only way forward is by centring anti-colonial thought. Gopal's article

focuses on the University setting arguing how the verb 'decolonising' has been co-opted by the neoliberal university to appeal to a certain market while doing little to address questions of decolonisation itself (Ibid). She points out how the already few efforts by universities to repatriate wealth or artefacts to previously colonised countries cause great controversy and Universities tend to ignore the hard question of returning the profits made from resource and human extraction from the Global South. A staunch critic of the decolonial school of thought, Gopal calls for centring anti-colonial thought that "harnesses oppositional and interrogative energies, not only enabling contestations and challenges but also the imagining and elaboration of alternatives that are not 'returns' to prior states" (Ibid). Though written in the context of the university, focusing on anti-colonial thought and social justice in practices of decolonisation are essential in any context, including postcolonial nation-states, because both the nation-state and the University exist in the same neoliberal world, and we have evidence of both co-opting progressive movements to justify their oppressive actions.

Given this, and thinking about the broader implications of Hindutva hegemony in India, is it possible for such a modern nation-state, based on a Eurocentric conception of sovereignty and building their own colonial projects, such the Indian state's colonisation of Jammu & Kashmir (Menon, 2022; Hogan, 2016) to decolonise? The main purpose of ethical and emancipatory theories, including decolonial theory, is to challenge any and all oppression, both state and non-state, by amplifying those who have been deliberately disempowered. In the context of India, it would mean paying close attention to and learning from anti-caste, anti-patriarchal, anti-colonial, anti-Islamophobic, and anti-capitalist movements which provide an intersectional challenge to oppressive regimes. Any move towards decolonisation must be focused on centring the marginalised, dismantling existing power structures, listening and learning from folks who work in spaces that challenge the colonial, capitalist modernity we live in.

I want to conclude this article not on critique, but rather with my vision for movement(s) towards decolonising India and the Indian state. This movement would centre the voice of anti-colonial resistance in the country such as the works of Bhagat Singh (Elam, 2016; Singh, 2019) or the actions of Nangeli, who cut off her breasts in opposition to the British imposed casteist breast tax and demanded autonomy for women not belonging to dominant castes (Sebastian, 2016). It would support the ongoing workers and peasants-based movements, recent examples of this being the Farmers Protest (Jaswal, 2021) which have been some of the few successful movements in recent times. The state would not impose Eurocentric notions of development on its own citizens (Kaul 2021). It would support the rights of protesting healthcare and childcare workers who, at the time of writing, have been demonstrating for six months (Pathak, 2022; Zargar, 2022). It would be a state that is not threatened but empowered by the popular anti-Hindutva slogan "smash Brahmanical Patriarchy". It would respect the right to self-determination of the people in Indian Administered Jammu & Kashmir and globally. It would be a

pluralistic state in every sense, where there is no dominant language, religion, culture or one way of being 'Indian'. Any decolonising of the Indian state, in short, requires the dismantling of the modern nation-state and its structures towards a pluralistic vision of society grounded in the notion of anti-caste communities geared towards holistic and equitable development that prioritises the protection of the environment and its peoples.

For people like myself affiliated with the Indian state, by choice or not, it becomes our responsibility to listen and follow the lead of Dalit scholars who provide the most comprehensive critique of Brahminical patriarchy to date; of Adivasi environmentalists who are the frontline defenders of South Asia's natural resources; of trans educators demanding inclusion in academia, governance, medicine; of anti-colonial leaders who fought for an egalitarian society based on social justice, and of Kashmiris who are a beacon of resistance against brutal militarization and suppression by the Indian state. Any decolonising initiative, in conclusion, requires an awareness of our own positionalities and the oppression they perpetuate, along with our material effort to use our privilege for collective gains, not the justification of violence against those minoritised based on fabricated histories and misplaced outrage.

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