Religious-Nationalism and Historical Anomalies:
A Tale of Nagpur Violence

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Introduction

Religion resurged as an important factor shaping the political landscape in twenty first century. Historically, some have denied this influence, but contemporary politics often reflect religiously driven nationalism. In India under the governance of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Hindu nationalism plays a pivotal role in the socio-political sphere. Renaming and altering historical narratives are strategies employed to further the overarching objective of establishing a religiously nationalistic state. Nevertheless, considering the country's demographic and religious heterogeneity, the potential ramifications and destructive nature of these policies warrant serious examination.

On March 17, 2025, a violent conflict erupted in Nagpur between two prominent religious communities following rallies organised by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and Bajrang Dal, which is an affiliate of the Sangh Parivar, driven by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). The cadres of these organisations are predominantly composed of high-caste, middle-class Hindus from urban areas within the Hindi and Marathi-speaking regions.[1] According to *the Hindu*, these clashes were provoked by an incident which involved burning of cloth with Islamic *Qalma* written on it.[2] Also, it was reported by *Hindustan Times* that approximately 33 policemen including three Deputy Commissioners of Police (DCPs) got injured.[3] These clashes spread across areas of close proximity including Kotwali and Ganeshpeth village, in the state of Maharashtra. As a result, authorities imposed section144 and instituted curfew to cater escalation.[3]

The genealogy of Nagpur is deeply rooted in the ideological narratives. For instance, VHP and Bajrang Dal have their distinct conception of history and are in opposition of the legacy of the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb. They consider him to be adversary of their religious ideology and responsible for the persecution of native Hindus.[4] This narrative resulted in increased demand for the removal of historical legacy associated with Mughal dynasty especially emperor Aurangzeb. In Nagpur, Bajrang Dal demanded removal of Aurangzeb's tomb. Located in Khuldabad, near Sambhaji Nagar

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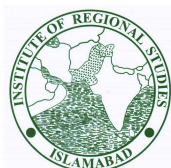
(originally named Aurangabad until its renaming by the Shiv Sena in 2022), the Aurangzeb Tomb is associated with the Dargah Complex, which is dedicated to Sheikh Zainuddin, a prominent Sufi Saint of the period.[5]

The VHP and Bajrang Dal characterised the reign of emperor Aurangzeb with religious intolerance, destruction of Hindu temples and execution of their forefathers like Chhatrapati Sambhaji Maharaj (second Chhatrapati of Maratha Empire). Historically the Maratha Empire had ruled Marathwada region while Mughals overpowered the region in 1689.[6] However, followers of Shiv Sena, VHP and Bajrang Dal consider Maratha's Sambhaji Maharaj as a beacon of resistance against emperor Aurangzeb and actively advocate the rewriting of region's fate through renaming, removal, and repudiation tactics.

RSS and Hindutva

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) provided the ideological parenthood to both the VHP and the Bajrang Dal and had been instrumental in building narrative surrounding Mughals.[7] Emperor Aurangzeb was also considered as the embodiment of suppression in terms of non-Muslims and killing of Guru Tegh Bahadur and other prominent Chhatrapatis. Critics question the symbolism associated with the Mughals and Marathas, as historical reinterpretation

seems to align with the broader Hindutva objective of reshaping India's historical narrative to reaffirm Hindu identity.

Keeping in mind the contentious nature and violence, for Sangh Parivar and its offshoots, the tomb of Aurangzeb reminds them of foreign rule and suppression of indigenous population. They consider the tomb to be a symbol of defamation for their warriors who resisted Mughal emperors. Their call for removal will be another step to grand Hindutva aspirations.

Media: Role in Aggravating Conflict

The hatred for Mughal emperors was further intensified by subjecting them as aggressors in media. For instance, movies like Padmavati and Chhaava are extension of Hindutva ideologues. Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis also acknowledged that the confrontations were "pre-planned" and the release of Chhaava movie fueled public outrage.[8] The storyline of the movie revolves around Chhatrapati Sambhaji Maharaj, his resistance against Mughal emperor Aurangzeb and brutal execution by the emperor.

Discourse Formation

The narratives surrounding Aurangzeb's tomb aim not only at highlighting its status as a mere burial site,

but give insights of how India remembers its past and defines its national identity. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and its affiliated groups aim at reshaping history by aligning their vision of a Hindutva. With this manipulated history, their vision is to cultivate a narrative where Hindus suffered and resisted the tyranny of Mughal emperors like Aurangzeb. Also, the movie Chaava particularly appraised figures such as Shivaji and Sambhaji Maharaj.[9] This reconstruction of history is a political mobilisation strategy, which influences attitudes and policies.

The roots of the Aurangzeb tomb issue hints how historical narratives are shaped to advance contemporary political objectives strategically. The tomb, according to the torchbearers of the Hindutva movement, represents the re-dressal of historical injustices in the present.[10] Their effort for its removal is part of an effort to re-strengthen Hindu cultural and political dominance. But this ideological stance deteriorates interfaith relations in India. It perpetuates fragmentations in society and enhance communal tensions as evidenced in Nagpur violence.

Conclusion

The violent clashes in Nagpur underscore the significant impact that historical narratives and anomalies exert on the contemporary political culture of India. Whether through cinematic mediums such as the film "Chhaava" or through political discourse, the manner in which history is remembered and recounted, has tangible consequences. The ongoing debate surrounding figures like Aurangzeb and his tomb presents a complex challenge, as it offers Hindutva-oriented political elites an example in India's enduring ideological struggle for identity. For a country like India, characterised by diverse religious population, addressing these historical conflicts is crucial. It fosters a nuanced understanding of the past, recognising the complexities of history rather than merely engaging in confrontation.

The true challenge posed by incidents such as those in Nagpur lies with civil society, which advocates for secularism and interfaith harmony. As a countermeasure, it is imperative to navigate conflicting historical interpretations and promote unity rather than division. The communal conflicts in Nagpur illustrate the importance of intercommunal dialogue and historical reconciliation in the twenty-first century, with history functioning as a tool for understanding rather than a political weapon.

Notes and References

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