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Conservative Public History in India

Abstract: This article explores the conservative turn in India's public history, examining its shift from a pluralistic, regionally grounded tradition to a centralized, ideologically driven narrative under the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Since 2014, public history has been increasingly reframed through the lens of Hindutva nationalism, marginalizing minority voices and emphasizing a singular Hindu civilizational past. This "saffronization" is reflected in curriculum reforms, state-sponsored monuments, and the commercialization of heritage. Through examples such as the Ram Mandir, the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor, and corporate-sponsored heritage sites, the paper shows how historical memory is being curated to support a narrow ideological project. Despite this, pluralist initiatives persist at the community level, including grassroots archives, urban heritage walks, and NGO-supported preservation efforts. These offer critical counter-narratives and underscore the ongoing contestation over India's past. The paper argues that public history in India has become a terrain of political struggle, where historical representation is deeply entwined with questions of democracy, identity, and power.

Keywords: public history; hindutva; cultural heritage; historical memory; community history; India

1 Introduction: Public History and Pluralism in India After 1947

Until fairly recently, India enjoyed a pluralistic approach to its public history. Unlike other countries, there were no state-controlled offices associated with the historical profession there, at least for the first 25 years.[1] Whereas the UK has its regius chairs of history at Oxford and Cambridge, and the position of Royal Historiographer in Scotland, and the US has the Office of Historian attached to the Secretary of State, India has often stood out for its regional and pluralistic approach to its past; indeed the first state-controlled entity, the Indian Council of Historical Research, was set up by the Government of India only in 1972.[2] In this way, an identifiable "conservative" turn in public history in India is a recent phenomenon. After 1947, the founders of independent India ostensibly encouraged toleration and dialogue in debating India's long and complicated national story. The key text for this tradition is Jawaharlal Nehru's *The Discovery of India*, written from prison and first published in 1946, on the eve of the end of British colonial rule. Not only a sprawling and epic survey of Indian history, Nehru's volume is also a statement about how to deal with the burden of history for an old nation in new circumstances. He warned against triumphant nationalism, observing, "[A] country under foreign domination seeks escape from the present in dreams of a vanished age, and finds consolation in visions of past greatness. That is a foolish and dangerous pastime in which many of us indulge."[3] At the same time, Nehru issued a clear call for a resurgence of national pride in Indian culture in all its varieties:

> Our lives are encumbered with the dead wood of this past; all that is dead and has served its purpose has to go. But that does not mean a break with, or a forgetting of, the vital and life-giving in that past. We can never forget the ideals that have moved our race, the dreams of the Indian people through the ages, the wisdom of the ancients, the buoyant energy and love of life and nature of our forefathers, their spirit of curiosity and mental adventure, the daring of their thought, their splendid achievements in literature, art and culture, their love of truth and beauty and freedom, the basic values that they set up, their understanding of life's mysterious ways, their toleration of other ways than theirs, their capacity to absorb other peoples and their cultural accomplishments, to synthesize them and develop a varied and mixed culture; nor can we forget the myriad experiences which have built up our ancient race and lie embedded in our sub-conscious minds.[4]

These fine sentiments obviously made sense in 1947 as India emerged from colonial subjection in which the British strategy of divide and rule had deepened social conflict on religion, region, and caste. Despite the vicissitudes of democratic politics, the myriad interpretations of Nehru's theory and practice, and the contradictions inherent in Nehru's

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1 See Indian Council of Historical Research, History, http://ichr.ac.in/v3/history.php.

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2 For the place of pluralism in India's knowledge economy, see Ramachandra Guha, "Pluralism in the Indian University," *Economic and Political Weekly* 42, no. 7 (2002): 564–70.

3 Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (Calcutta: Signet Press, 1946), 59.

4 Nehru, *Discovery of India*, 449–50.

ideals versus India's cleaved reality, Nehru's belief in a multi-faceted understanding of Indian history has stood the test of time.[5] It is reflected in classic work such as Amartya Sen's *The Argumentative Indian* (2005), and the influential "history from below" of the Subaltern Studies collective (c. 1982–2000).[6] Perhaps the most eloquent recent restatement of this pluralism comes from one of the Subaltern Studies group, Dipesh Chakrabarty. He has argued that "[s]ocieties are not integrated wholes. They do not represent any kind of oneness," and that conflict, discussion, and debate by different groups who make up a national public are inevitable.[7] In India there has been a long tradition of such public history both at a local level and in higher education. This tradition dates back to the street theater groups of the 1970s and the activities of groups such as the Sound and Picture Archives for Research on Women (SPARROW), established in 1988.[8] In the universities there have been masters programs in public history and oral history running at the Centre for Public History at Srishti School of Art, Design and Technology in Bangalore, since 2011, established by Indira Chowdhury.[9] More recently, Ahmedabad University has set up the Centre for Heritage Management, a program of "critical heritage studies."[10]

However, since 2014 this consensus around public history in India as an open conversation has been challenged and undermined by the right-wing Hindu nationalist government of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led by Narendra Modi. Three successive election victories have entrenched a new *Hindutva* (Hinduness) culture war, in which public history has turned conservative. In particular, minority versions of Indian history – those of low-caste groups, Muslims, Christians, and other 'foreign' peoples of India – have been marginalized. So far, the "Saffronization" (saffron being a sacred color in Hinduism) of history has been analyzed by scholars in terms of its takeover of school history textbooks and the increasing dominance of the ideological wing of the BJP, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), in the Ministry of Culture and across the higher education sector.[11] In the rest of this short survey, I wish to point up the wider manifestations of conservative public history in contemporary India, but also describe the resilience of the pluralist tradition at the local and community level.

2 The BJP and the "Saffronization" of Historical Memorials

Alongside its intervention in the national curriculum and tertiary education sector, the BJP government has promoted a Hindu story of the national past at every turn. Mythic gods and stories of national origins are now celebrated in a number of ways. Huge monuments have been erected to celebrate the supremacy of Hindu civilization. The most controversial is the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya, built on the ruins of a 16th century mosque that was torn down by Hindu nationalists in 1992, and reopened just ahead of the 2024 general election. Another huge project was the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor in Varanasi which was completed in 2021. New towering statues of Hindu leaders past and present have gone up to dominate the urban landscape of India, such as the Statue of Unity complex in Kevadia, Gujarat, the centerpiece of which is a statue of Vallabhbhai (or Sardar) Patel, the nationalist leader considered most amenable to Hindu nationalism. Some existing traditions such as the centuries old festival, the Kumbh Mela, have been commercialized and described as "Disneyfied."[12] As Vera Lazzaretti has written of the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor, the

5 I refer here to the historical debate on Nehru and the agenda and limitations he specifically brought to his leadership over his party and country in 1947. See Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* (London: Zed Books, 1986); Benjamin. Zachariah, *Nehru* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004); Taylor Sherman, *Nehru's India: A History in Seven Myths* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022); and Manash Firaq Bhattacharjee, *Nehru and the Spirit of India* (India: Penguin Random House, 2022).

6 Amartya Sen, *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity* (London: Penguin, 2006); Ranajit Guha, ed., *A Subaltern Studies Reader, 1986–1995* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

7 Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Public Life of History: An Argument out of India," *Postcolonial Studies* 11, no. 2 (2008): 169–90, 182.

8 Aparna Mahiyaria, "The Role of Organisation in Political Theatre: A Study of Street-Theatre in New Delhi, India", PhD diss., University of Exeter, 2020, https://ore.exeter.ac.uk/repository/handle/10871/40586?show=full; https://www.sparrowonline.org/profile/.

9 For Chowdhury's approach, see, for example: Indira Chowdhury and Srijan Mandal, "Public History in India: Towards a People's Past," in *What Is Public History Globally? Working with the Past in the Present*, eds. Paul Ashton and Alex Trapeznik (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 79–92.

10 Master of Management Studies in Heritage Management, Ahmedabad University, https://ahduni.edu.in/master-heritage-management/#:~:text=The%20Centre%20for%20Heritage%20Management,Heritage%20(APHEN%2DICH).

11 Shalini Sharma, "The BJP and the War on History," in *Passionate Politics and the Battle for India's Soul: India's 2019 General Elections*, ed. Indrajit Roy (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2023), 53–62; Sayan Dey, "The Saffronization of Public Knowledge in India," *Public Humanities* 1 (2025), https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/public-humanities/article/saffronization-of-public-knowledge-in-india/520D2B38E5C37E657CB2657D4D608322.

12 Ananya Rao, "Commercialising Kumbh: VIP culture, consumerist fad pervade sacred space," https://thesouthfirst.com/news/commercialising-kumbh-vip-culture-consumerist-fad-pervade-sacred-space/.

Indian government projects a singular view of India's past: "to domesticate and provide suitable alternatives to, the existing monumental heritage – heritage that … inevitably recalls India's heterogeneous and ethno-religiously diverse past."[13] Other grandiose schemes include a mural map inside the new Parliament building in Delhi (to replace the one built by the British). The frontiers of India, now renamed "Bharat" (the ancient Sanskrit name for the Indian sub-continent), are re-imagined as encompassing Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.[14]

Because of the way India is governed, it is very difficult to disentangle the Saffronization of Indian public history from the central state. Heritage initiatives in different parts of India that are acceptable to a conservative public history are promoted, while others are discouraged or prevented. Take the example of the Punjab, one of the areas of India most affected by Partition in 1947. In 2019 the site of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 1919 at Amritsar in the Punjab was renovated by the Indian government, whose appointed developers transformed preserved features of the historic location into a garden and outdoor museum. Critics accused the entire project of ignoring local sensitivities and replacing the storied walls and spaces with sanitized murals and an ornamental garden.[15] Similarly in 2021, the Modi government inaugurated a new memorial day, "Partition Horrors Remembrance Day" (August 14), to mark the trauma experienced by Hindus when millions of families were forced to leave what is now Pakistan, while millions of Muslims moved in the other direction. This new anniversary turned a complex historical event into a simplified sectarian story and also appropriated a regional tragedy as a national experience.[16] Significantly, both these government initiatives came at the same time that farmers' protests in the Punjab were being crushed by the military police.[17]

As well as memorial projects initiated by the government, the BJP has encouraged ventures through which private money can adopt heritage sites to pay for facilities, maintain their upkeep, and advertise their brand. The "Adopt a Heritage" program announced by the Ministry of Tourism in 2017 listed 10 monuments open to sponsorship by commercial companies to choose over five years, as a statement of their corporate responsibility.[18] One example of this scheme is the famous Red Fort of Delhi, the iconic Mughal citadel, now maintained by the Dalmia Cement company, which has installed shops and other tourist amenities. Critics have decried the lack of local consultation, especially with adjacent residential occupiers. As Lynn Meskell observed, "[o]n the streets and in the media, the past was presented as up for grabs by corporate raiders who could transform heritage sites into theme parks, deprive citizens of access, and generally control the future of iconic sites like the red fort that have deep associations and attachments."[19]

By way of complete contrast, public history commemorations which do not fit with the conservative turn face condemnation and violence. On December 31, 2017, crowds assembled in Bhima Koregaon, Maharashtra to mark the bicentenary of a battle that took place on January 1, 1818, in which an East India army battalion, composed of Dalits, defeated the forces of a Brahmin prince.[20] Right-wing militias raided the event, violent clashes ensued, and afterwards 18 poets, human rights activists, local historians, and Dalit political leaders were arrested for incitement. Two of the activists died in jail, others remain under house arrest or are still in custody with no date set as yet for trial.[21]

3 Community Histories

Despite the increasing stranglehold of conservative public history, independent projects still thrive. There are heritage tours such as the urban walks (both physical and virtual) run by the non-profit group Sahapedia, in which local residents can rediscover their cities.[22] The emphasis is on "slow

13 Vera Lazzaretti, "New Monuments for the New India: Heritage-Making in a "Timeless City,"" *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 27, no. 11 (2021): 1085–1100.

14 Sophie Landrin, "India's Cartographic 'Invasion' of its Neighbours," *Le Monde*, June 16, 2023, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/06/16/india-s-cartographic-invasion-of-its-neighbors_6032695_4.html.

15 "Jallianwala Bagh: Indian Outrage over Revamp of Memorial," https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-58382434.

16 For criticism at the time, see: A. G. Noorani in *Frontline*, September 25, 2021, https://frontline.thehindu.com/the-nation/partition-horrors-remembrance-day-a-prime-minister-determined-to-flout-the-nations-consensus/article36530024.ece.

17 "India farmer protests: 'War-like fortification' to protect Delhi," BBC News, February 3, 2021, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-55899754.

18 Mayashree Acharya, "Adopt a Heritage Scheme: List of Adopted Monuments & Amenties," https://cleartax.in/s/adopt-a-heritage-scheme.

19 Lynn Meskell, "Toilets First, Temples Second: Adopting Heritage in Neoliberal India," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 27, no. 2 (2021): 151–69, 157.

20 Dalit means oppressed or broken, signifying groups who have been subject to caste untouchability. For further information, see: https://dalitlivesmatter.org/about-dalits/.

21 Alpa Shah, *The Incarcerations: BK-16 and the search for democracy in India* (London: Collins, 2024).

22 "My City, My heritage," https://www.sahapedia.org/my-city-my-heritage.

walking" (*gohalluhallu*), so that participants can see first-hand the traditions and culture of often forgotten communities.[23] Private think tanks such as the architecture group Bombay61 prioritize participation from local communities in their projects, which often involve reclaiming and repurposing urban space.[24] Other initiatives are creating new networks of information. For example, the People's Archive of Rural India, set up by the acclaimed journalist Palagummi Sainath, is building a vault of stories about rural India.[25] Similarly, another non-profit is the Milli Archives Foundation, a group of scholars and archivists "passionate about nurturing archives in South Asia," because "archives enable diverse stories."[26] In these initiatives, materials, ideas, and memories are curated by community actors, lacking the doctrinaire language and purpose of government initiatives. Indeed, such projects eschew state support. For example, when the survivors of the Bhopal gas poisoning tragedy of 1985 established a small museum to preserve their accounts and memories, they publicly refused state funding, to indicate their disapproval of government complicity in the coverup of the tragedy.[27] Sadly, since then, the museum has closed, a reminder of the precarity of philanthropic or crowd-sourced ventures.

A more sustainable type of venture is NGO work that relies on a mixture of funding sources. One such cooperative is the Keystone Foundation, based in the Nilgiri Mountains of Tamil Nadu, in which partners work in research and archival practice through participative processes with indigenous communities from the Nilgiris Biosphere Reserve. A significant aspect of the work of this ecological organization is documenting the histories of the various tribal groups which constitute the Nilgiris region. This involves looking at how to preserve traditional livelihoods and skills and map local cultural knowledge, in so doing raising the awareness of the importance of Adivasi history.[28] Similarly, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture has supported work in Nizammudin Basti, a predominantly Muslim area of Delhi and home to a 14th century mausoleum and Sufi shrine which is visited by thousands of people every day. The Trust has put into place initiatives that interweave heritage with improved sanitation, health

facilities, and civic spaces for the inhabitants of the enclave. Again, Lynn Meskell notes, "[s]tepping in where the state has demurred, foundations and NGOs increasingly recognize that there can be no conservation without community, no preservation of the past without attending to the needs of the living."[29] However, any attempt to engage with these histories needs to be ethical and alert to the community fear of extractive research methods used by academics when pursuing their investigations. These are histories about which much of the urban Indian population is only dimly aware. Public history practitioners have been targeted by the spokesmen of the "Hindutva" mainstream. One example is the work of Rajiv Malhotra (b. 1950), an influential American based Hindu educational philanthropist and writer. In the last decade, Malhotra has written five books about India, established a YouTube channel known as *BreakingIndia* (with almost 300,000 subscribers) and, via his Infinity Foundation, promoted Indic study in the USA. Narendra Modi has endorsed Malhotra's philanthropy and writing, saying that it has "glorified" India's "priceless heritage" and "cleared misinterpretations about it."[30] In 2018, academic recognition came Malhotra's way too, with an honorary professorship at JNU in Delhi, a university which has historically been a bastion of India's secular and egalitarian values.[31] Malhotra is a gatekeeper for conservative public history. In 2022 he wrote a second edition of his book that denounced a British Academy funded project "The Ownership of Public History in India" (for which I was principal investigator) as one of the many ways in which the very investigation of minoritized or disempowered voices in the field of public history threatens to "break India."[32] Malhotra and others demonize attempts to critique Indian history as "Hinduphobia."

Some of the best-known modern historians of India have chosen to ignore or minimize the rise of conservative public history, turning their ire instead on academia. On the publication of his twelfth monograph, William Dalrymple accused historians of India of neglecting the public: "My personal bugbear is that the study of history in academia entered a long phase from about the '50s through to the

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23 "Rediscover Mumbai, Slowly, Slowly," https://www.outlooktraveller.com/travelnews/go-hallu-hallu-is-the-slow-walking-project-you-need-to-sign-up-for-this-winter.
24 "Bombay61 studio," https://www.bombay61.com.
25 P. Sainath, "Many Worlds, One Website," https://ruralindiaonline.org/en/article/many-worlds-one-website-en.
26 "About Milli Archives Foundation," https://milli.link/about/.
27 "Remember Bhopal Museum," https://rememberbhopal.net./
28 See Keystone's homepage: https://keystone-foundation.org.

29 Meskell, "Toilets First," 154.
30 As described on the cover of Malhotra's *Being Different: An Indian Challenge to Western Universalism* (Delhi: Harper Collins India, 2011).
31 "JNU: Appointment of Rajiv Malhotra as honorary professor triggers unease," https://www.theweek.in/news/india/2018/10/31/jnu-appointment-rajiv-malhotra-honorary-professor-unease.html.
32 Rajiv Malhotra and Vijaya Viswnathan, *Snakes in the Ganga: Breaking India 2.0* (Noida: Bluone Ink, 2022), 523–26. For the project see: https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/projects/humanities-social-sciences-tackling-global-challenges-ownership-public-history-india/.

beginning of the present century, where academics only talked to each other, and often did so in deliberately obscure language of the Subaltern Studies Collective and so on… [a]s a result, you've got the growth of 'WhatsApp history' and 'WhatsApp University.'[33] Dalrymple's line of attack makes invisible the experience of historians who have publicly challenged ideological history in the volatile climate of South Asian politics in India and in its overseas diaspora. It also minimizes the financial and bureaucratic barriers that historians must surmount if they are to pursue any form of public history activity in the country nowadays.

4 Conclusions

Public history is a political project. It thrives in democratic spaces where communities, minority voices, and diverse groups can safely contemplate, present, and preserve alternative interpretations of their past. As Janaki Nair writes, "history in India needs to be a safe space for disagreement rather than an effort to 'produce a coherent truth.'[34] Public history requires an infrastructure in which the ethics and pedagogy of the practice can be constantly and systematically renewed. There is huge potential for this in a democracy such as India. However, the current reality is one of sporadic bursts of independent public history activity, alongside the privatization and commercialization of heritage. Instead of supporting and celebrating India's vibrant historical past, the Indian state is strengthening the regulatory structure of public history and discouraging minority and dissenting narratives.

33 "Historian William Dalrymple at Idea Exchange: Failure of Indian Academics to Reach out to General Audiences has Allowed the Growth of WhatsApp history," *Indian Express*, November 4, 2024.

34 J. Nair, "Textbook Controversies and the Demand for a Past: Public Lives of Indian History," *History Workshop Journal* 82 (Autumn 2016): 250.