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*Reading Islamophobia in Hindutva: An Analysis of Narendra Modi's
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ABSTRACT: This article analyzes the narratives of Islamophobia in Hindu Nationalism (Hindutva). Specifically, it analyzes how Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, from the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), articulates Islamophobia in his speeches, interviews, and podcasts. In total, a discourse analysis of 35 such documents has been conducted. Conceptually, this article applies the notion of language-games to understand how Modi articulates Islamophobia. The article contends that while Modi's Islamophobia is executed subtly, it is nonetheless a function of the way in which Hindutva conceives of Muslims as subordinate to Hindus. Two Islamophobic narratives in Modi's political discourse have been mapped out: (1) the erasure of Indian Muslim histories in Modi's economic development agenda, and (2) the characterization of Hinduism as having a taming effect on Islam in India. The article provides a conceptual overview of language-games and a review of how Hindutva defines Hindus and Muslims, before analyzing how Modi articulates Islamophobia. The article concludes by suggesting that a Hindutva-driven Islamophobia may have permeated into the Hindu mainstream.

Keywords: Hindutva, Islamophobia, discourse analysis, language-games, Narendra Modi

INTRODUCTION

Hindu Nationalism (Hindutva) is as an ideology premised on otherization. It constructs an idealized Hindu as the archetypical citizen of India. Through the superiorization of the Hindu, Hindutva necessarily imagines an array of identities to be unworthy of belonging to its conception of India. Hindutva's otherization project inferiorizes a number of identities: Dalits, liberals, Christians, feminists, but most of all, Muslims (Sharma 2011). Hindutva thus envisions India to have always been a Hindu nation, and perceives Islam and Muslims as an alien force which, through invasion and war, caused a seismic demographic shift to the detriment of the natural state of Hinduness in the subcontinent (Flåten 2016). India's Hindu population is estimated to be at 80%, while Muslims are the country's largest religious minority comprising roughly 15% of the population (Central Intelligence Agency 2018a). Members of Hindutva groups such as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) have been accused of instigating violence between Hindus and Muslims (Jaffrelot 2009a), forcibly converting Muslims to Hinduism (Eshwar 2009), assaulting and murdering Muslim men because they fear Muslims are attempting to increase their population by duping Hindu women into converting and marrying them (i.e. "Love Jihad") (Dey 2017), and rallying supporters to lynch Muslims for eating beef because the cow is considered sacred in Hinduism (Ramachandran 2017). Beyond physical acts of violence, Hindutva engages in symbolic assaults against Muslim selfhood by attempting to anchor the history of Muslim predominance in the subcontinent as a period of unrivaled violence (Flåten 2016), characterizing Muslim men as ruthless oppressors of Muslim women (Agnes 2016), and portraying Muslims as the fifth column biding their time before seizing control of India—just

as they are deemed to have done 800 years ago (Afzal 2014). In this context, it is clear that Hindutva is Islamophobic by design.

With this in mind, this article aims to analyze the narratives of Islamophobia in the Hindutva discourse. The concern is with demonstrating how Hindutva organizes its vision of India as a Hindu nation through the otherization of Muslims. To achieve this, I shall analyze the narratives of Islamophobia in podcasts, interviews, and speeches given by the Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, since he took office in 2014.¹ A discourse analysis has been conducted on 35 podcasts, interviews, and speeches. This entails analyzing the construction of chains of equivalences in the corpus, or the way in which statements are mobilized into particular ideas, and the resulting ideas into narratives (Critchley and Marchart 2004; Dallmayr 2004; Laclau 2004; Sayyid 2003). Conceptually, the article applies the notion of language-games—as developed by Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953), and taken further in the context of Islamophobia by Salman Sayyid (2014). To my knowledge, this article is the first empirical application of Sayyid’s conceptualization of Islamophobia. Not so much as a validation of his conceptual approach, since everything is a language-game, but as a demonstration of how language-games can be approached empirically. Additionally, it does not yet appear that a discourse analysis of an Indian statesman’s political narratives has been conducted to analyze and explain how Islamophobia is articulated. These are the two research gaps this article aims to address. Two Islamophobic narratives in Modi’s political discourse have been mapped out: (1) the erasure of Indian Muslim histories in Modi’s economic development agenda, and (2) the characterization of Hinduism as having a taming effect on Islam in India. Before discussing these narratives, this article shall first provide a conceptual overview of language-games, relate it to Islamophobia, and then explain how Hindutva characterizes the categories “Hindu” and “Muslim” as existing in an irreconcilable antagonistic relationship. The article concludes by suggesting that Hindutva’s Islamophobia has permeated outside of the confines of Hindu nationalist ideas and into the Hindu mainstream, but cautions that this claim still needs empirical validation.

LANGUAGE-GAMES: AN OVERVIEW

In the “*Philosophical Investigations*,” Wittgenstein (1953) proposed that language-use is a context-bound activity. Referring to this as language-games, he argued that to understand how people use signifiers to communicate and convey specific messages, one must first understand the contextual undercurrents that predispose them toward using signifiers in particular ways (Wittgenstein 1953). In other words, the way in which language is used cannot be divorced from the contexts in which they reside. An insult can only be understood as an insult because the context in which it is used allows it to be interpreted as an insult. Using the word “blue” as a racial slur would make little sense, but using the “N word” does. Why is this so? Neither the term “blue” nor the “N word” possesses an essential racial undertone. Signifiers have no essence. Indeed, Roland Barthes (1977) demonstrated that signifiers are polysemic. They mean what they mean depending on the contexts in which they are used. Thus, with the “N word” comes centuries of social, political, economic, and cultural dehumanization and decimation of blacks—what Salman Sayyid (2014, 22) termed as a particular arrangement of contextual “assemblages”—that renders it possible to read, interpret, and feel insulted by even hearing or reading it.² Since the signifier “blue” does not reflect and carry the burden of such conditions, it would make for an unintelligible racial slur.

Importantly, how we use language continuously reproduces the norms, values, and beliefs that both structure the social world and provide the cues that make it possible to navigate through the social world (Bernans 1999; Butler 1996). Asking a shopkeeper “how much” effectively

reproduces the relations of commerce between the buyer and seller—both materially, in that actual things are bought and sold, and immaterially, in that those social roles are acknowledged and maintained. Similarly, the act of using the “N word” reproduces the racialization of people into blacks and non-blacks, the notion that people can be racialized in such a way in the first place, the concomitant racism—and crucially, the relations of power between those who use racist language and those who suffer from it. In other words, a racist language-game reflects and reproduces power differentials between races, and thus reflects and reproduces racial hierarchies between people (Sayyid 2014). Wittgenstein (1953) therefore argued that language-games also *sustain* the forms of life—or societal contexts—they are situated in.

The example given thus far, of the “N word,” is one that seeks to thread the relationship between a signifier used to convey explicit racism with the structures of race relations in society. Yet, racism is often implicit as well. Everyday racism in the form of microaggressions can be used by people unconsciously (Delgado and Stefancic 2012; Quillian 2008). Racism at the policy level can become institutionalized, normalized, and thus pass undetected (Giroux 2003). The demands on racial minorities to assimilate into the majority culture can be dressed up as narratives of social integration that seek to foster social harmony (Louati 2015). These examples are comparatively subtler than explicit racial slurs, but remain potent in their otherization of specific people. It is, therefore, necessary to demonstrate how and why language-games are conceptually relevant to analyses of implicit types of racism. After all, if the point of language-games is to provide a conceptual measure of racism, then its application cannot be exclusively limited to types that are explicit. Here, the Wittgensteinian notions of language-games being rule-governed activities and having family resemblances lend themselves well to this discussion (Wittgenstein 1953). Given that language-games operate within specific contexts, people can only successfully participate in a language-game if they have been socialized into sufficient proximity³ of the context sustaining that language-game (Noor 2016; Rodney and Stephan 2012). Indeed, language-games are bound by the shared body of knowledge which weaves together a particular grouping of people. Thus, Farish Noor (2016, 202–03) places considerable emphasis on the notion that language-use is a socially learnt activity. Just as one needs to learn the rules of football, rugby, and cricket to play each of those sports, one must “*learn* the rules of dating . . . *learn* the rules of joking, and . . . *learn* the rules of lying” (emphasis original) to be able to date, joke, and lie successfully (Noor 2016, 202).

In the same vein, one must have also learned the rules of a language-game to identify, interpret, and understand it—even if he is not a physical participant of that language-game. As such, Sayyid (2014, 21–22) duly notes that being able to identify racism *as racism* is an interpretive practice premised on the idea that one would know what cues to look out for. In other words, the language-game of racism has specific rules that must be followed or understood for it to constitute racism in the first place. The fundamental rule that renders a racist language-game identifiable is its mobilization of signifiers in ways that seek to undermine the capacity of people to enact their racial identities (Sayyid 2014, 14). A racist language-game is one that marginalizes people because of their racial identities, and thus chips away at their sense of selfhood. Consequently, different types of racism—both explicit and implicit—become identifiable as racism because they follow this fundamental rule of racism. Here, the Wittgensteinian notion of family resemblances becomes relevant. Different activities such as rugby, football, chess, cricket, and poker share “a complicated network of similarities” that predisposes people toward classifying them under the rubric of “game” (Wittgenstein 1953, proposition 66). To understand how this applies to racism, consider the following examples:

1. Being told to go back to “your” country because your presence defies the country’s ethno-national archetype.
2. Being the repeated target of police brutality, like with the blacks in the United States.
3. Being problematized by the state’s health authorities—as happens often to both Indians and Malay-Muslims in Singapore.
4. Being told to “get over” your anger at the structural damage caused by colonial legacies to your country.
5. Being the butt of racist humor outside of contexts in which racialized humor may be intersubjectively permissible.⁴
6. As is the subject of this article, nationalist political speeches that demarcate the ethno-national parameters of membership to the nation.

Each form of racism may be semantically similar or different from another both in terms of how, as well as the extent to which they may marginalize a racial identity. Yet, because they all share in common the agenda of racial marginalization, there is a resemblance between all these forms of racism. Thus, Sayyid (2014) argues that Islamophobia too becomes identifiable as a specific racist language-game by virtue of the fact that (1) various forms of Islamophobia resemble various forms of racism, (2) though tactically different, various types of Islamophobia become identifiable as such because they resemble each other in their marginalization of the Muslim identity, (3) Islamophobia both reflects and reproduces a hierarchy of racialized groupings, with Muslims relegated beneath the race that has been rendered socially, politically, economically, and culturally privileged in that specific context, and (4) Islamophobia reflects and reproduces the racist common sensibilities of a given cultural context. In Modi’s renditions of Hindutva, Islam and Muslims assume the position of the antagonistic Other subordinated to Hindutva’s version of the Hindu. While Modi’s speeches rely on and reproduce the cultural common sense of BJP’s vision of a Hindutva India, his use of Islamophobia is subtle and implicit. Yet, it resembles the racial hierarchization central to Hindutva, and thus becomes identifiable as Islamophobic. Before demonstrating this, it is first necessary to explain what the signifiers “Hindu” and “Muslim” mean in the context of the Hindutva ideology.

WHO IS A HINDU?

The term “Hindu” was first used as a geographical signifier in the fifth century BCE to denote the region east of the Indus River (Khilnani 2017). It only evolved into a religious signifier 1,300 years later in the eighth century CE because Muslim traders and travelers to South Asia—themselves members of a new but relatively coherent monotheistic religion—needed a signifier to overcome the cognitive disarray that came with encountering a gamut of animistic beliefs and practices that, in some instances, were similar to each other, and in others, starkly contradictory (Khilnani 2017). Indeed, far from being a cohesive religion, what is today referred to as Hinduism has been defined as a “conglomeration of sects” (Thapar 1989, 216). Notably, the term only came to possess religious signification for Hindus themselves in the sixteenth century CE, though the set of traditions it signifies continues to remain diverse (Lipner 2012, 12). For these reasons, “Hinduism as a religious category” has been described as “a practical signifier . . . scholars of religion” rely on to make epistemic claims, though this does not of course override the fact that it remains a category for thoroughly heterogeneous beliefs (Ahuja 2016, 5). In Hindutva, the signification of “Hindu” loses considerable nuance. Instead, it signifies the coagulation of multiple concepts—land, language, and religion—into a monolithically racialized category (Sarvakar 2009).

Hindutva contends that Hindusthan (land of Hindus) encompasses what is today known as India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. This concept has been referred to as *Akhand Bharat* (undivided India) since partition in 1947 (Krishna 1994; Ogden 2010). The dominant language defining the people of this land is deemed to be Hindi (Chand 2011), with the dominant religious identification being Hinduism (Jaffrelot 2009b). As such, Hindutva imagines Hindus as a race descendent from those who historically lived in Hindusthan, spoke Sanskrit, the language from which Hindi is mostly derived, and practiced Hinduism. In the context of a Westphalian international system, Hindutva reconfigures the otherwise heterogeneous “Hindu” into a singularized and thus racialized ideological tool for an Indian ethno-nationalist project. While these founding ideas of Hindutva originated in the nineteenth century, the grassroots movements—like the Hindu Mahasabha and the RSS—organized formally in the 1920s (1) in response to the Khilafat movement, a pan-Islamist movement which sought the restoration of the caliphate after the fall of the Ottoman Empire and (2) as an independence movement against British colonial rule (Jaffrelot 2009b). Insofar as they were anticolonial in their actions and aspirations, the Hindutva movements have till today adopted the racialized discourse the British produced of the subcontinent (Thapar 2014). One of the most brutal legacies of European colonialism is the invention of race (Alatas 1977; Fanon 1967; Forman 2006; Gowing 1979; Mbembe 2001; Noor 2016; Said 1978; Stoler 1997). Race was constructed to organize and divide colonial subjects who seemingly shared “visible and heritable traits” (Goldberg 2009, 4) into discernible groupings to make colonial rule administratively easier (Alatas 1977).

In South Asia, a critical manifestation of colonial racialization was the grouping of people into mutually antagonistic and indeed, monolithic religious categories of Hindus and Muslims (Nandy 2002). To construct a racialized cartography of South Asia, the colonial administration gathered historical data and interpreted it through the lens of a pseudo-scientific racial logic (Thapar 2014). This was a fourfold process which entailed (1) the reduction of a person’s diverse identities into an all-encompassing singular identity, (2) the abstraction of those defined and anchored in terms of that singularized identity into a monolithic group, (3) the deduction that a person’s every action can be understood as a manifestation of his singularized identity, and (4) the notion that those actions could then be treated as defining characteristics of the entire group of people who have been anchored in terms of that singularized identity (Sen 2006). The consequence of this logic was the division of precolonial South Asia by the British into two distinct, and indeed, mutually hostile epochs defined by religion—the Hindu civilization (i.e. Ancient India, pre-thirteenth century CE) and the Muslim civilization (i.e. Medieval India, thirteenth century CE to nineteenth century CE) (Mill 1817). Notwithstanding the ahistorical quality of such a characterization of South Asia—“counting numbers and giving them religious labels was unheard of prior to the nineteenth century,” indicating that South Asians did not *just* identify with their religious affiliations—the production of racialized knowledge has had damning consequences for the religio-political composition for colonial and post-colonial India (Thapar 2014, 53). Not only did it provide the historical justification for the British colonial state to define, act toward, and govern South Asians in terms of their apparent all-encompassing religious identifications, both Hindu nationalists and Islamists have derived their divisive political ideologies from the monolithic significations of the colonial categories of “Hindu” and “Muslim” (Thapar 2014).

In the context of Hindutva, colonial definitions of “Hindu” and “Muslim” became and remain foundational to an ethno-nationalist vision of a distinctly Hindu India. Hindutva actors have appropriated the problematic notion that Ancient India was a coherent and cohesive Hindu civilization to argue that Hindu predominance over the region coincided with India’s golden era—as global leaders in political innovation, economic development,

and the creative arts (Flåten 2016). The golden era came to an end after what is deemed to be the Muslim invasion of Hindu India (Flåten 2016). The BJP's outline of a Hindutva vision of India characterizes the decline of the country with the arrival of the "Islamic sword," and indeed, refers to the "era of Islamic invasions" as "the bloodiest period in the history of mankind" (Bharatiya Janata Party n.d.).⁵ Hindus were thus deemed to have been trapped in a state of "enslavement" since the commencement of Muslim rule (Sharma 2009, 152). By labeling Muslims as invaders—thus, fundamentally foreign to the region—Hindutva actors (1) assume the historical people and polities of South Asia to have been held together by a collective consciousness of shared Hinduness (Mahmood 1993), (2) imagine the contemporary nation-state of India as possessing an essential relationship with those polities (Sharma 2011), and thus (3) characterize contemporary Hindus as the natural "inheritors of the past and claimants to dominance in the present" because, to them, India has *always* been Hindu (Thapar 2014, 119). Thus, to Hindutva actors "Hindu" mutates into a signifier that delineates the parameters of belonging in the Hindu nation of India. By virtue of its ethno-nationalist quality, it is a project that privileges and safeguards majoritarian groups through the de-minoritization of public space (Kemp 2004). To do so, Hindutva must project itself above and against other forms of identification that do not fit into the rubric of its conception of a Hindu. Identities often on the receiving end of subalternization include (1) Christians, because they are deemed to be reminiscent of colonialism (Clarke 2002), (2) leftists, because they contest the ideology's ahistorical narration of South Asian history (Thapar 2009), and (3) as is the subject of this article, Muslims, because they are deemed to be the unrivaled threat to the Hindu nation of India (Afzal 2014).

MUSLIMS AS THE ANTAGONISTIC OTHER

Hindutva frames Muslims as antagonistic to Hindu India in a number of ways. As has been mentioned briefly, the period of Muslim predominance is viewed as a foreign invasion. Hindutva narrations of historical wars that occurred between different kingdoms tend to be amputated from their spatio-temporal contexts and become reframed as a series of wars between heroic indigenous Hindus and barbaric foreign Muslims. Three notable examples of this include narrations of the twelfth-century battles between the Rajput Prithviraj Chauhan and Sultan Muhammad Ghaur, the sixteenth-century battles between the Rajput Maharana Pratap and the Mughal emperor Akbar, and the seventeenth-century battles between the Maratha ruler Shivaji and the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb. Claimed to be the final Hindu Emperor, Prithviraj Chauhan is depicted (1) as having lost to Muhammad Ghaur's devious warring tactics and (2) as having been captured, blinded, and executed—though not before assassinating Muhammad Ghaur as a blind prisoner of war (McLeod and Bhatnagar 2001). Prithviraj Chauhan receives even greater veneration because he courageously refused to convert to Islam (Talbot 2015). Maharana Pratap is characterized as having defended Hindu India (i.e. Hinduism) from Akbar's territorial expansion (i.e. expansion of Islam) even though historical evidence indicates that "both sides had the support of *both* Muslims and Hindus" (emphasis mine; Siddiqui 2017, 160). Finally, while Shivaji was a pragmatic leader willing to enter into alliances with and against Hindus and Muslims alike (Khilnani 2017), Hindutva ignores his embracement of *realpolitik* and instead describes him as a bastion of Hinduism who valiantly defended Maharashtra from Aurangzeb's Islamic tyranny (Hansen 2001). Through the rehistoricization of these conflicts as examples of the endemic Hindu-Muslim conflict, Hinduism became conflated with courage and righteousness, while Islam became equated with barbarism and wickedness.

It has been noted that Hindutva regards the period preceding Muslim predominance as the golden era of Hindu civilization. Beyond the political, economic, and cultural achievements of Hindu kingdoms, it appears that Hindutva conceives of Hindu civilization as glorious because of the absence of a significant number of Muslims in the region. Consequently, the numerical growth of Muslims is regarded with suspicion. Since Muslim rulers were regarded as barbaric and wicked, the implication was that Islam could only spread through barbarism and wickedness. Thus, Hindutva rationalizes the numerical growth of Islam and Muslims to be a function of conversions enforced *en masse* by ruthless Muslim rulers—though this too is an ahistorical account (Eaton 1985; Thapar 2014). It has been empirically demonstrated that Islam spread gradually, over a period of some 400 years, because of geological changes (e.g. the way rivers flow) and the resultant economic contingencies (e.g. implications for irrigation and agriculture) (Eaton 1985), rather than in a sudden massive wave that Hindutva actors claim. Nonetheless, the origins of the 500 million or so Muslims in South Asia today (India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh) are treated to be a product of a vicious Medieval Muslim policy: convert or die. The logic of Hindutva dictates that (1) Muslims only became Muslims out of fear, (2) all Muslims in the region were originally Hindu, and thus (3) Muslims today can and should be reconverted to Hinduism since their Hindu ancestors only became Muslim as the alternative was death (Eshwar 2009; Kim 2017; Singh 2015).

Beyond invading the subcontinent, brutalizing the Hindu Kingdoms, and forcibly converting Hindus to Islam, Hindutva claims that Muslim rulers were zealots because they repeatedly destroyed Hindu temples across South Asia (Van der Veer 1987). While Muslim rulers and their representatives no doubt destroyed numerous temples, they also patronized and funded many (Metcalf and Metcalf 2006; Thapar 2014). What is more, Hindu rulers too were responsible for destroying the temples of their Hindu rivals (Khilnani 2017). Hindu and Muslim rulers alike destroyed temples because they were sites of political and economic power, not *just* religious symbolism. Temples signified a sovereign's control over the region and also functioned as a storage facility for wealth (Eaton 2000). It is, therefore, hardly surprising that regardless of their religious convictions, aspiring hegemons would seek to assert their control by destroying spaces of power associated with their rivals. Nonetheless, Hindutva imposes a modern understanding of temples as purely religious spaces onto the past, zeros in exclusively onto incidents of temple destruction by Muslims, and rationalizes it through the lens of Hindu–Muslim religious irreconcilability (Sen 1993). Consequently, temple destructions become framed as an Islamic—and indeed, *sacrilegious*—assault on sites of Hindu worship, and thus the Hindu Gods themselves—rendering Muslim rulers as embodiments of *Rakshasas* (the demon enemies of the Hindu Gods) (Sharma 2009). As such, Muslims are conceived of as barbaric, wicked, and demonic in opposition to the courageous, righteous, and Godly Hindus. One of the most devastating implications of this discourse was the series of Hindu–Muslim riots which claimed over 2,000 lives in the aftermath of the 1992 destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, by Hindutva militants who argued that the 460-year-old mosque ought to be destroyed to avenge the hitherto unverified claim that a Hindu temple dedicated to the God-King Rama was demolished to make room for it (Ganguly 2003; Islam 1997; Jaffrelot 2009a; Thakur 1993). Their interpretation of the Hindu epic, the Ramayana, has also led them to conclude Rama's birthplace to be Ayodhya—thus elevating not just the perceived sacrosanctity of the space, but their hostility toward the very presence of a mosque there.

Hindutva also characterizes Muslims as bandits for having (1) stolen land and dividing Hindusthan into India and Pakistan, and (2) robbing India of secularism and religious equality. While Pakistan's founder Muhammad Ali Jinnah arguably intended for the country to be a secular Muslim-majority state (Ahmar 2012; Ahmed 2010; Cohen 2002), Pakistan has often been

subsumed by polarizing and repressive Islamist influences—perhaps most notably under the dictatorship of General Zia-ul-Haq (Burki 1988; Nasr 2004; Richter 1979; Ziring 1988). The prevalence of Islamism, as well as the fact that Pakistan has lagged behind India considerably on most development indicators (Central Intelligence Agency 2018a, 2018b), has arguably provided the factual and logical foundation necessary for Hindutva to characterize Pakistan as a poorly governed territory. That it was nonetheless carved out for Muslims at the expense of a unified India, the birthright of the Hindus as it were, only exasperates the frustration Hindutva articulates toward the very existence of Pakistan. As such, Pakistan embodies both the failure of contemporary Muslim-majority rule and the detrimental effect of losing land to them—because an India free of Muslim-majoritarianism outranks Pakistan in terms of political maturity and economic development. Within India, the fact that Muslims maintain religious laws to govern personal affairs (e.g. marriage, divorce, inheritance) is perceived as a violation of the secular foundations of the Indian Constitution (Ogden 2012). The establishment of a separate Muslim Personal Law is perceived as an unfair concession to Muslims—a peculiar accusation given that Hindus too have a set of personal laws under the Hindu Code Bill (Kumar 2017).

That said, the notoriety of the 1985 Shah Bano Case, the debate over the constitutionality of triple *talaq*, and the concomitant demand for the government to stay out of issues concerning Muslim Personal Law by (extremely) vocal conservative clerics who managed to mobilize popular support in favor of their antigovernment stand (Mohanty 2016) has arguably rendered Muslim Personal Law more visible than any other religious laws in Indian media discourse. This has made it easy to gloss over the fact that religious laws in India are not exclusive to Muslims—which would render *all* religious groups in technical violation of Hindutva's apparent desire for secularism. In this context, Muslims are framed not only as barbaric, wicked, and demonic, but as bandits for having stolen land and secularism. Hindus occupy the role of the courageous, righteous, and Godly victims of Muslim thievery. Islamophobia is thus a function of Hindu–Muslim antagonisms in India, and indeed, operate through the racial hierarchy which mandates that Muslims be subordinate to Hindus in a plethora of ways. As shall be demonstrated, Modi's narratives resemble these antagonisms and hierarchies, albeit more subtly.

ERASING INDIAN MUSLIM HISTORIES

Throughout his tenure as Prime Minister, Modi has consistently pushed his economic development agenda to the forefront of India's political discourse (Modi 2014b, 2015a, 2016a, 2017i). He argues that the problems plaguing India today—communalism, casteism, open defecation, corruption, poverty, nepotism, labor precarity, the lack of clean water, inequitable distribution of energy, and the absence of proper sanitation—can be eliminated if Indians were to collectively prioritize economic development (Modi 2017d). This is why he has repeatedly called for Indians to come together as one—as “team India”—and “march towards development” (Modi 2017d). Framing development as a catch-all solution for a range of problems that have deep material and non-material consequences for most Indians no doubt elevates the appeal of Modi's neoliberal vision. He is correct to state that India needs a better transportation network, a more efficient government bureaucracy, and needs to literally be cleaned up. What is more, the political mobilization of caste and religion has had damning consequences for the country's socio-political fabric. His vision is presented rationally and, to the frustrated public, can come across as emancipating. It purports to bring the entire population, “125 crore countrymen,” together to “build a New India”—one that is “secure, prosperous, and strong” (Modi 2017d). The development agenda is logical, seductive, and easy to get behind.

Modi's vision of a developed India is reliant on the imagery of the past. He seeks to bring Indians into his developmental fold by using a discourse that visualizes the past—one in which India was a political, cultural, and economic powerhouse—as the nostalgic nodal point which manufactures a longing for a return to that past, and thus functions as the reference point for what contemporary India must strive toward. Modi (2017d) therefore says that “team India” must take up the cause to reclaim India's historical glory. To do this, Modi has proposed that they undertake a number of actions:

1. Indians should buy goods made in India, particularly clothing made of “Khaadi . . . on a regular basis,” as doing so “helps poor people” who sew the fabric to earn an income (Modi 2014d). Indeed, Modi (2017d) claims that if Indians were to purchase Khaadi, it would facilitate the drive toward economic independence, not unlike how Mahatma Gandhi encouraged Indians to boycott British-made goods, and thus the British economy, by “(empowering) his countrymen to weave the fabric of independence with cotton and the spinning wheel.”
2. Patna University needs to lead the charge of innovation to relive the glory of when “Nalanda and Vikramshila”—universities “as old as the river Ganga,” a potent simile given that the Ganges has quite likely existed for a few millennia—made Bihar the region's leading education hub (Modi 2017a).
3. Biharis must “take Bihar to new heights,” away from endemic poverty and underdevelopment, to replicate the “grand history of . . . three great ancient states—Ang, Magadh and Mithila”—which at different junctures, spread across the subcontinent from modern-day Bihar (Modi 2017g).
4. Modi (2017f) insists that the “Kandla Port” in Gujarat “can not only be the focal point of Gujarat's economy, but can also play a significant role in driving India's economy through the transport sector.” This would effectively revive “India's maritime trade legacy” from “5000 years ago,” when the ancient “Port of Lothal,” also in Gujarat, “was . . . a great centre of maritime trade” Modi (2017f). The claim that “the flags of more than 84 countries” were located at Lothal indicates the sizeable volume of trade flowing through the historical port, and functions as a reminder that this economic “strength can be restored again” (Modi 2017f).
5. About 800 years ago, the priest Lord Basaveshwar argued that the only path to “Kailash, the abode of Shiva”—the residence of one of the central Hindu Gods (i.e. heaven)—available is through “labour, hard work,” and “perseverance” (Modi 2017c)—a Hindu ethic and spirit of capitalism, as it were. Indians today thus need to embrace these values, not just to make India an economic powerhouse, but “to attain Swarga” (heaven) (Modi 2017c).
6. Indians needs to reclaim the knowledge foundations that enabled genetic sciences to be used for child birth in the time of the Hindu epic, the Mahabharata, plastic surgery to enable the rebirth of the Elephant God Ganesh, and advances in astronomy made by Aryabhata in 500 AD (Modi 2014c).⁶

The common thread among all these examples—there are numerous others in many of his speeches on economic development—is that they make references to forms of life that are distinctly underpinned by Hindu experiences, at least retroactively. There is of course nothing problematic *per se* about using Hindu examples to discuss an economic development agenda. There is much South Asians have to be proud of in the social, political, cultural, and economic heritage they have inherited from empires of the past. What is problematic though is the fact that *only* Hindu experiences are being made central to the development discourse—no other.

This is important for three reasons. First, making linkages between the historical and mythical achievements of Hindu figures and Gods with his current development aspirations constructs, reinforces, and normalizes the idea that—as Sharma (2011) has argued in a different context—there is an essential relationship between the nation-state of India today and the ostensibly Hindu polities of the past. Such a discourse attempts to make this connection seem intuitive, natural, and unquestionable. Second, this discourse seeks to characterize the category Hindu as having been eternally dominant in India—both in terms of material control and as the primary tool of identification. In other words, it imposes a contemporary vision of a Hindu past onto the past (Thapar 2014). Third, monopolizing the economic development discourse with Hindu experiences effectively negates the positive significance of non-Hindu experiences altogether. This feeds into the larger context of the Hindutva narrative on Muslims.

As discussed earlier, the Hindutva discourse views Islam and Muslims as foreign, violent, and thus hostile to the seemingly natural state of Hinduness in the subcontinent (Afzal 2014; Flåten 2016; Jaffrelot 2009b; Sharma 2009, 2011; Thapar 2014). Wars between Hindus are, of course, never discussed. Consequently, it is not possible to imagine the Hindu past as being anything but positive—and the Muslim past as categorically negative. This dishonest assessment of history does its best to entrench the conception of Muslims as outsiders—as if there was an objectively real inside to begin with. Modi does not go as far as his fellow Hindutva ideologues by chastising the history of the Muslim period as one of plunder and death. Yet, it is crucial to situate Modi's silence on this period within the larger context of Hindutva ideas. His decision to stay mum on all references to Muslims ignores all contributions made by various Muslim figures to the political, economic, and cultural inheritance of modern India. The silence on the economic, philosophical, governance, and military innovations that Muslim rulers brought to the subcontinent through inter-civilizational encounter is problematic because it effectively negates these contributions and thus entrenches the impossibility of imagining Muslims as having had a positive influence on modern-day India; beyond tokenistic mentions of the Taj Mahal and Sufi poetry. Consequently, Modi's decision to omit reference to any Muslim contribution silences the Muslim voice of history to legitimize a thoroughly skewed anti-Muslim version as the one that best captures India's genealogy. Thus, Modi's insistence on using the Hindu past to purportedly unite all Indians regardless of religion—recall the signifiers “125 crore countrymen” and “team India” (Modi 2017d)—through the insidious erasure of Muslim histories necessarily renders his neoliberal vision of India a divisive and Islamophobic discourse.

AN ISLAM TAMED BY HINDUISM

On the surface, various statements Modi has made about Muslims and terrorism appear counter-intuitive to an argument that attempts to characterize his narratives as Islamophobic. He has referred to “Indian Muslims” as loyal and patriotic citizens who “will live for India” and “die for India,” and has even dismissed those who may think Indian Muslims would join groups like Al-Qaeda as “delusional” (Modi 2014a). Modi has also repeatedly stated that terrorism is “a global threat” that is “bent on destroying” those who stand for humanitarian values of “democracy,” “love and non-violence” (Modi 2017h). What is more, Modi has consistently maintained that terrorism has no faith, and is not a product of any religious belief—fringe or otherwise. Indeed, he said that “(the world needs) to undertake . . . a focused measure . . . to delink terrorism from religion” (Modi 2015b). In 2016, Modi was even invited to speak at the World Islamic Sufi Conference held in New Delhi, where he praised the contributions of Sufi saints and poets, Sufi ideas, and the Quran for spreading the “message of harmony,” and “of peace, tolerance and love” (Modi 2016b). It should be remembered that Modi is the head of an

ethno-nationalist government with a number of explicitly anti-Muslim leaders. When Modi was the Chief Minister of Gujarat, he was even accused of being complicit in the mass murder of nearly 800 Muslims in his state during the infamous 2002 riots (*BBC News* 2012). Yet, the statements Modi has made are, in and of themselves, difficult to disagree with. As shall be demonstrated however, it is precisely his use of language that appears empathetic toward Muslims that obscures his own mobilization of Islamophobia—a potent strategy that perhaps enables the racism in his discourse to pass unchecked. To understand how Modi demonstrates Islamophobia through his apparent defense and praise of Islam, it is necessary to interrogate his use of signifiers such as humanity, India, Indian, and Sufi.

When articulating the civilizational accomplishments of Ancient India, a recurrent point Modi makes is that Ancient Indians were defined by an humanitarian ethos. This he believes is indicated by the fact that prominent social reformists like Buddha, Mahavir, Saint Sri Ramanuja Acharyaji (Modi 2016c), and Sri Madhvacharya led “reforms against evils in (Indian) society” (Modi 2017e). To Modi, the fact that they plied their revolutionary trade in Ancient India functions as the historical precedent necessary to account for why generations of Indian reformists—Mahatma Gandhi, Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, and Pandit Deen Dayal to name a few (Modi 2016c)—rose to prominence and gained immense popularity amongst the masses. Since India’s “ancestors” were willing to “live and die for” these beliefs, they have not only “kept the Indian civilization alive for centuries,” but have effectively ensured that the notion of “humanity is in our blood” (Modi 2017j). Thus, Modi states that “compassion, kindness, brotherhood, and harmony are” values that are “naturally a part of [India]” (Modi 2017j). The apparent emergence of a continuous stream of social reformists across multiple generations is rationalized through the argument that India and Indians are inseparable from this humanitarian ethos. In other words, to be Indian is to inevitably be humanitarian. Indeed, he claims that Indians today have inherited a “cultural legacy” defined by “Buddha,” “Gandhi,” and the Hindu God Krishna—one of the central figures who champions righteousness (*dharmā*) in the Hindu epic, Mahabharata, the Hindu scripture, Bhagavad Gita, and a number of other stories in Hinduism (Modi 2017d). This cultural inheritance is deemed to function as an in-built bulwark against violence within Indians which guarantees the permanence of humanitarian values in India.

Thus far, Modi is making a rhetorical connection between a set of significant but nonetheless vague values with ancient and contemporary figures who are, today, classified as Hindu. Though Buddha and Mahavir were very much anti-Brahmanical and thus founded their own religious movements, Buddhism and Jainism, that were (theoretically) free of the caste system’s hierarchical segregation of people (Khilnani 2017), Modi’s narrative co-opts them into the rubric of Hinduism. Here, Modi falls back onto the fact that Hindutva regards Buddhism and Jainism, not as independent religious movements, but as sects of Hinduism (Jaffrelot 2009b). It is perhaps the ambiguity of what constitutes Hinduism—the very fact that it is first and foremost “a practical signifier” (Ahuja 2016, 5)—that enables Hindutva and Modi to accomplish this. In dominant versions of Hinduism, Buddha is regarded as the ninth incarnation of the Hindu God Vishnu (Holt 2004). The significance of this point cannot be understated. The founder of Buddhism, Gautama Siddhartha, is believed to have been born in the sixth century BCE (Marques 2017). If he was the second last incarnation—Vishnu is said to have 10—this by implication makes it possible to frame Hinduism as an older source of knowledge for other religions. Indeed, versions of Hinduism which regard Buddha as an incarnation of Vishnu also characterize the popularly known Rama and Krishna as the seventh and eighth incarnations respectively. In this context, Buddha is defined as a revolutionary humanitarian, not because of his agency as the founder of Buddhism, but through his status as a Hindu God. In other words, the humanitarian values Modi speaks of become framed

as foundational and intuitive to Hinduism. Other systems of belief only come to contain humanitarianism *because* of their contact with Hinduism.

This then elucidates what Modi (2016b) actually means when he states that “Sufism is the voice of peace, co-existence, compassion and equality; a call to universal brotherhood.” To Modi (2016b), it is clear that Hinduism and Sufism share a specific set of values in common. Sufism is described as a religious orientation predicated on “humanism,” love for nature, eradication of discrimination—an orientation in which “service to God meant service to humanity.” Building upon this, he crucially states that “Sufism blossomed in India’s openness and pluralism” (Modi 2016b). Here, it must be remembered that in Hindutva, the nation-state of India is one that is characteristically Hindu—geographically, linguistically, and religiously. Therefore, the logic of Hindutva dictates that India’s body of cultural knowledge—the totality of norms, values, and beliefs that purport to weave Indians into a unified cultural fabric—is by definition Hindu as well. Any distinction between Indian and Hindu effectively collapses. Consequently, just as Buddhism and Jainism are treated as peaceful offshoots of Hinduism, every other religion can only become one of peace because it has been sufficiently made to fit into the workings of Hinduism. In other words, there are no Islamic values of peace, love, and humanity outside of Hinduism. The very idea, the *very possibility* of plurality and co-existence in Islamic thought can only exist when it is mediated and filtered through Hinduism. Deemed to be “the face of Islam in India,” Sufism becomes the Hinduization of Islam. Not syncretic, but fundamentally Hindu in its orientation. In this context, the Islamophobia in Modi’s statement, that Indian Muslims are patriotic people who would never be drawn to terror groups like Al-Qaeda, becomes clear. He is in effect stating that Indian Muslims have inherited a legacy of a Hinduized Islam, and are thus predisposed toward being loving and peaceful—just like other Indians. Indian Muslims are peaceful because they are believers of a Hinduized Islam. Given that Hindutva otherwise frames Islam and Muslims as violent, the implication of Modi’s narrative is that it is Hinduism that has made the Indian brand of Islam nonviolent and humanitarian. A peaceful Islam would have been impossible without its contact with Hinduism. In other words, Indian Muslims have not joined terrorist outfits because their violent Islamic inclinations have been tamed by Hinduism. God forbid what would have become of them otherwise.⁷

CONCLUSION

Using the notion of language-games, this article has provided an analysis of the Islamophobic narratives in Modi’s discourse. The Islamophobia in his narratives are a reflection of the Hindu–Muslim antagonisms prevalent in Hindutva. As Sayyid (2014) notes, racism is made possible because of the racial hierarchies that structure society. With this in mind, this article has sought to demonstrate Hindutva’s conception of a racialized hierarchy in which Muslims are subordinated to Hindus and thus Hindutva’s employment of Islamophobia, through an analysis of Modi’s narratives. While Hindutva explicitly frames Muslims as the irreconcilable Other to its conception of a Hindu, Modi’s otherization of Muslims is comparatively subtle—at times, done through the defense of Muslims. Though Modi’s language is considerably less violent than how Hindutva conventionally denounces Muslims, there are telling similarities—family resemblances, in Wittgensteinian terms—between his and Hindutva’s assault on the Muslim identity. The two narratives discussed in this article are the erasure of Muslim histories in his economic development agenda and the notion that Hinduism has had a taming effect on Islam in India. Before concluding, it is prudent to recall the Wittgensteinian notion of language-games being rule-governed activities, which entails that people need to be socialized into sufficient proximity of the context in which that language is being used for them to understand how

and why signifiers are mobilized in particular ways (Noor 2016; Sayyid 2014; Wittgenstein 1953). To understand what Modi is articulating necessarily implies a sufficient familiarity with the set of ideas Modi is drawing upon, as well as the rules he is employing to narrate those ideas. In other words, if Modi is being Islamophobic and, not just getting away with it, but becoming more popular (Stokes, Manevich, and Chwe 2017), this implies that the people to whom he is speaking not only understand his Islamophobia, but they *permit him* to become more popular while using it. There are, of course, a number of interpretations of this apparent empirical trend that do not immediately assume Indians are pro-Islamophobia. Indeed, it would be ridiculous to assume that some 90% of Indians are racist because they approve of Modi's leadership (Stokes, Manevich, and Chwe 2017).

Here, it is possible to put forth three interpretations of this data. First, there may be a small group of people who staunchly believe in the ideals of Hindutva, and thus approve the subordination of Muslims in India. Second, a large number of people may not interpret Modi's narratives as Islamophobic, and therefore do not associate him with being racist. Finally, another large segment of Indians either attempt to disconnect Modi's Islamophobia from his economic promises, or are willing to tolerate the Islamophobia so long as their socio-economic conditions do not deteriorate. This point is significant since most people surveyed were urbanites, and they perceived Modi's economic policies somewhat positively (Stokes, Manevich, and Chwe 2017). In every case, the people are themselves either supportive of Islamophobia, blind to it, or are willing to let the racism pass out of socio-economic self-interest. No matter which position they may fall into, they are necessarily complicit in the perpetuation of his Islamophobia. To say they do not understand him does not make sense, or else he would have hardly been on the winning side of the 2014 federal elections. A loss would have meant that he was playing a different language-game alien to the audience. Evidently, this is not the case. Consequently, the one salient conclusion that can be drawn from this is that there appears to have been a significant normalization of Islamophobia in India insofar that the characterization of Muslims as subordinate to Hindus may have permeated outside of Hindutva and into the Hindu mainstream—though not homogeneously. Future researchers would be advised to conduct qualitative and quantitative studies to verify this hypothesis, and if validated, analyze the extent to which Islamophobia has been normalized in India. Only then can strategies to dismantle Islamophobia be proposed to better the conditions of life Indian Muslims find themselves in—lest Modi's (2017b) claim, that “India takes pride in being the land of diversity,” ceases to be meaningful.

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ENDNOTES

¹Led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a Hindutva political party won the 2014 Indian federal elections by a landslide. Since then, they have won 14 state governments, with member-parties of its coalition, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), controlling an additional five.

²Even here, it is crucial to note that this is not a hard and fast rule. There are a number of contexts in which the “N word” does not have a racist connotation. Common examples include hip-hop music and stand-up comedy. The point is, context always matters.

³I do not think it is possible to measure proximity. One need not be American to understand American slang. One could even belong to a society that is vigorously anti-American and still understand American slang because of exposure to American pop culture. Proximity and sufficiency are subjective qualities that will inevitably differ in terms of degree from person to person.

⁴Indeed, there is a fundamental difference between racist humor being used among friends versus how Charlie Hebdo unilaterally imposes its version of racist humor upon everyone at the expense of minorities.

⁵Even bloodier than the (hitherto) bloodiest war in history—World War II.

⁶In the Mahabharata, the warrior Karna and his brothers, the five Pandavas, were born not of child birth, but as a result of the blessings of six different Gods. Modi deems their unconventional birth to be a consequence of genetic science. Prior to becoming the Elephant God, Ganesh was decapitated by Shiva, before being resurrected by him with the head of an elephant. Modi states this could only have been done through plastic surgery. Aryabhata was a historically real astronomer who made a number of hypotheses that—as a result of euro-centric scientific knowledge production—have been mostly attributed to European scientists.

⁷Two possible points can build upon this argument. First, is how he would describe non-Indian Muslims in the context of terrorism. The only example he employs is his frequent condemnation of Pakistan as a country that sponsors terrorism. To be clear, his use of such language is limited only to the government of Pakistan—not the people. While he does tacitly frame India as a Hindu nation located in a complex geopolitical environment, he does not remotely insinuate Pakistan as being a state that uses terrorism to attack Hinduism through India. Pakistan is repeatedly condemned, but not because it is Muslim-majority. At the same time, Modi continues to praise other Muslim-majority countries—UAE, Afghanistan, and Malaysia to name a few—as he would any other non-Muslim majority country. In the context of foreign policy, there is little evidence to suggest he is using Islamophobic language. The second issue would be how he discusses allegations of state-backed crimes against humanity in Kashmir. Here, there is definitely a more substantive argument to be made that he is describing it in Islamophobic terms—particularly through his unfortunate dismissal of the atrocities committed by the Indian army against Kashmiri Muslim civilians. To the extent that this could be a significant line of argument to make, I do not possess sufficient knowledge on the Kashmir dispute to comfortably offer a discussion.

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