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Negotiated Public Space and Symbolic Contestation: Unraveling Hindu Nationalism's Spatial Strategy

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Abstract

In the last few years, Hindu nationalism's effort to shape the Hindu identity of the nation has intensified. Apart from its move to assert cultural homogenisation over the diverse landscape, this ideology produces a newer understanding of spaces in the land. When it is read as a part of the broader Hindutva movement, the use of violence, bureaucratic overreach, or judicial intervention to rewrite the sacred topography of the land unmasks the territorial goal of *Hindu Rashtra*. The territorial manifestation of this ideology takes a strident effort inside the country to encroach and reclaim the spaces inhabited by the "other" as Hindu spaces in the name of the nation. This immediately establishes a clear and precise correlation between the spaces and the nature of the spaces. This territorialisation of the spaces indicates the spatial rearrangement of the public spaces to marginalise minorities, invisibilise Muslims, and push them into the "private" space.

Keywords: Hindu nationalism; Territoriality; Public space; Spatial; Muslims

Introduction

Public spaces reflect a community's cultural practices and values (Hayden, 1995). They are the sites where cultural and economic exchanges occur, and a sense of community and togetherness takes birth (Francis et al. 2012). The different use of architectural design in public spaces reflects different cultural meanings. Apart from design practices, access to public spaces and people's comprehension of spaces is almost always embedded in social and cultural overtones. Lynch, in his seminal work, demonstrated by cognitive mapping how different ethnic groups and gender groups in four American cities make sense of accessing the public space and how a feeling of "territoriality" is attached to the public spaces (Lynch, 1960). He emphasised that space and its user or inhabitants are perennially meshed in a mutual transformation deeply embedded in historical, cultural, and civic development, which can be explained through the concept of mental image, that is how a place is perceived, subsequently experienced, and remembered.

The significance of public space has also been studied from the politics of citizenship and belonging. In *The Production of Space*, Henry Lefebvre sees space as a means of production and, thus, a wider part of society's base. Therefore, "Every society in history has shaped a distinctive social space that meets its intertwined requirements for economic production and social" utility (Lefebvre 1991a). Public space has been preferred as the site where democracy is "performed" by protesting, debating, and expressing, where essentially issues become "public" — the collective power of the people is put to the test in a "public" space. Lefebvre further argued that humans mobilise spatial elements, such as material resources and multiple tools, in a defined manner to

organise "a sequence of actions with a certain 'objective' (that is the object to be produced) in view" (Lefebvre 1991a). Space is, thus, unfailingly socially produced and subjectively accessed.

Similarly, in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Certeau dissects the seemingly innocuous aspects of everyday life, shifting the binary between consumers and producers to users and producers, where "space" is personally understood and meaning is ascribed to the physical world. Thus, space becomes an actual site for meaning-making exercise, crucial for functioning ideologies. When public space is approached from theories of nationalism, it reveals how public space shapes "our collective social and political behavior" (Arefi and Meyers 2003). Contemporary social theory scholars have begun to consider and reevaluate the relationship between "space" and "nation" and how they attempt to transcend the natural division between the material and the mental. This evolving area of study examines how the nation, as an imagined community of nation-space, interacts with social groupings of different hegemonic ambitions "to reshape and appropriate this space" (Deshpande 1995). A significant body of theories pertaining to nationalism (B. Anderson 1983; Gellner 1983; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) has focused on the physical aspects of the nation's land or territory, as the preexisting backdrop suitable for the project of Nationalism. Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983) initially contended that nations are "imagined" constructs created by cultural technologies like print capitalism, not necessarily emerging organically from preexistent primordial loyalties. Ernest Gellner, in *Nations and Nationalism* (1983), also asserted that nationalism makes nations, not the other way around, emphasizing the contingent, modern nature of national identities. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's *The Invention of Tradition* (1983) also illustrated how traditions described as ancient are often recent inventions serving modern political ends. These critiques have given particular attention to how nationalism reifies territory as a natural, pre-political substrate for the nation. Nationalist projects frequently project modern political boundaries onto the land, treating it as an eternal, unquestioned given. This theory is rigorously examined by Thongchai Winichakul, demonstrating how the "geo-body" (Winichakul, 1997) of the nation is a cartographic invention. Thus, nations retrospectively inscribe symbolic meaning onto territory rather than emerging from the land to naturalise political claims. They view a nation's evolution in history as tied to its territory. However, this "de-spatialised" understanding of nationalism — when the territory is treated as "a predefined territorial goal, an already established symbol, or a known feeling of belonging" has been criticised (Grant 2005).

Successive scholars have focused on the physicality of the nation on a broader scale. However, previous studies have overlooked the subtle yet pervasive influence of nationalism in everyday public spaces, failing to capture how nationalist ideologies permeate the minutiae of daily life. Our research addresses this gap by offering a nuanced spatial understanding of Hindu nationalism, particularly how it shapes perceptions of national territory and transforms public spaces into extensions of "Hindu" domains. Lefebvre's spatial theory elucidates the spatial strategies of Hindu Nationalism by highlighting how space is actively produced and manipulated to assert ideological control. Through territorialisation, urban planning, and historical narratives, Hindu nationalism reshapes perceived and conceived spaces to reflect its vision. Everyday practices and symbols in lived spaces reinforce nationalist ideologies, while control over religious sites and surveillance exemplify the use of space as a tool of power. The article employs the critical terms "territory" and "territoriality" to build a case that these ideas are lived out in everyday public spaces through the spatial expression of a dominant cultural identity. Territory is a defined space controlled by a political authority, such as a state, where sovereignty and power are exercised. Territories are not just physical spaces but arenas where social meaning and power are manifested (Delaney 2009). Territoriality refers to strategies and practices by which individuals or groups use space to exert control over space to influence behavior, assert identity, and maintain power. Territoriality is how territory is claimed, administered, and symbolically constructed (Sack 1980).

Extensive research has examined the spatial dynamics of Hindu nationalism in the past. For instance, (Veer 1996) explores how Hindu Nationalism appropriates and transforms public spaces through the ritualistic organisation of violence, while (Jacobsen 2023) investigates the politicisation

of pilgrimage sites like Ayodhya. Zavos (2000) offers insights into the Hindu diaspora's reimagining of spatial identities, where traditional notions of the homeland are adapted to new contexts. Similarly, (Yilmaz and Saleem 2023) analyse how Hindu nationalism shapes public perception by framing Muslims as the "other," reinforcing spatial claims in physical and virtual realms. This article, however, seeks to contribute a new perspective by focusing on everyday public spaces, where Hindu nationalism has recently made strategic efforts to reclaim these areas. Thus, this article discusses the spatial strategies of Hindu nationalism by highlighting how space is actively produced and manipulated to assert ideological control through everyday practices and symbols in lived spaces. Political acts of renaming places,[1] building temples in disputed spaces, and displaying religious symbols and performances in public spaces are exemplary cases of territorial strategies aimed at Hinduizing the public space. It is a form of territoriality that reconfigures the spatial identity of urban and rural spaces into a Hindu nationalist vision, pushing minority presences and histories to the periphery. The territory becomes a space of governance and a symbolic field where cultural and political hegemony is actively produced and contested.

This article analyses the recent Namaz row to demonstrate how Hindu nationalism is assertively redefining public spaces as exclusively "Hindu" and compelling Muslims to retreat into private spheres. The authors have not undertaken one specific event (or at one specific location) of the namaz controversy, but instead treated the disputation over reading namaz in public space as a series of case studies. We argue that the religious-spatial politics of Hindu nationalism needs a concentrated look beyond the usual temple reclamation movements of destroying "illegal" mosques — such as Ayodhya, Mathura, and Gyanvapi — to everyday mundane public spaces accessed by Muslims, which have now turned into sites of struggle by Hindu Right organisations mobilising to "take back" the hallowed "Hindu geography" that the Muslim presence is purportedly defiling. The proposed research significantly contributes to understanding spatial dynamics in nationalist movements by demonstrating how public spaces are reimagined and contested as part of a larger ideological project. It also underscores how the exclusion of minority communities and the creation of sacred Hindu spaces serve to consolidate Hindu nationalist dominance, making space a central element in the propagation of their ideology. This research, therefore, provides a critical perspective on the intersection of space, religion, and power in contemporary India.

Methodology

The study is based on the review of 106 newspaper articles to gather context, examples, and perspectives that inform the analysis and narrative presented here. The news reports are used as sources of information to illustrate and support the discussion of Hindu nationalist objections to public namaz. This article draws on selected newspaper articles to examine how public namaz has been framed and contested in various contexts. These articles were read closely and critically to trace recurring themes, discursive strategies, and shifts in framing used by different actors, particularly concerning Hindu nationalist narratives. This interpretive approach allowed us to understand how news media representations reflect and shape public debates on religious practice and space.

To address the historical context of this controversy, we adopted a specific search strategy regarding the publication timeline of the articles. We conjectured that the public discussion and reported events concerning Namaz in public places considerably rose following the ascension of the Hindu right-wing party in India in 2014. Thus, to determine the occurrence and development of this controversy, our initial search for applicable news stories was undertaken without any preassigned publication date limit. It enabled us to determine any strong reporting on the matter before 2014. Our comprehensive search, finalised in May 2023, revealed no significant or sustained media coverage of this controversy before 2014. The controversy does seem to have become publicly prominent and continuously covered in the media around 2018, with an increasingly steady stream of associated reports since. As such, the 106 articles in this study are mainly from 2018 through to May 2023, which marks the height of media attention to this controversy. Although our search

ended in May 2023, the articles in this study capture the historical outline of the issue as revealed by our search parameters. Since the article relies on fleshing out arguments on the spatial nature of Hindu nationalism pertaining to offering Namaz in public spaces, a combination of keywords such as Muslims, Namaz, and Public spaces was deployed to source articles reported on such issues. The authors used the search terms combination of "Offering namaz OR reading namaz AND Muslims AND Public spaces AND India" in the Google News search bar. The search was restricted to accessing only English news articles published on the issue of reading Namaz in public spaces. We conducted a comprehensive review of 106 articles obtained from a Google News search. Among these, 17 were identified as opinion pieces, and three were categorised as fact-checks. Due to the inherent biases present in opinion pieces, they were excluded from our analysis.

Similarly, fact-check articles that did not contribute substantive insights to our understanding of the issue were omitted. As a result, our analysis focused on 86 news articles, which were selected for their factual reporting directly from the field. Of these, 52 articles concentrated on the Namaz row in Gurgaon and Noida, while the remaining 34 reported incidents from other regions of Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand. Since many of these reports covered overlapping events across multiple outlets, we have selectively quoted and cited a representative sample of reports in our analysis to ensure accuracy and relevance. The article intends to understand the increasing incidents of "public" disputes in India over the Namaz praying of Muslims in public spaces as a deliberate spatial strategy of Hindu Nationalism to territorialise those spaces as exclusively "Hindu" spaces.

Hindu Nationalism: A Brief Profile

Hindu nationalism, as expressed in the writings of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, is a specific populist ideology that resists Western typologies of ethnic or religious fundamentalism by focusing on relational psychological constructs and historical reinterpretation rather than static ethno-religious identity. Vikram Visana's reading situates Hindutva's roots in the dyadic categories of glory and humiliation, which Savarkar made operational to create an integrated Hindu political identity by shared affective investment, not over theological dogma. In contrast to the tradition of European political discourse, which restrained emotional excess through norms of public virtue, Savarkar's approach severed glory from shame sanctions, relocating it in a relational form where Hindu self-fulfilment hinged on surmounting perceived Muslim humiliation (Visana 2023). Janaki Bakhle's reading of *Essentials of Hindutva* (1923) highlights this ideological innovation, observing how Savarkar defined Hindu-ness (Hindutva) as a geographical and civilizational identity beyond religious practice, thus eschewing European-style ethnonationalism based on predetermined cultural or racial characteristics (Bakhle 2024). Vinayak Chaturvedi further entangles Western analogies by pointing out Savarkar's recourse to violence as a civic virtue, contending that Hindutva populism arose from a historiographic framing of Hindu unity through militarised resistance to external threats, particularly Muslims. It differs from secular or liberal paradigms, as Savarkar's ideology politicised historical narratives to tie together caste-divided Hindus into a majoritarian formation based on passion and desire instead of theological purity (Chaturvedi 2022). Collectively, these scholars unveil Hindutva as an unquestionable form of Indian subcontinental populism[2] that combines psychological mobilization, historical myth-making, and anti-liberal majoritarianism — separate from reductive Western characterisations of "fundamentalism" or ethnic nationalism emphasizing fluid political identity over rigid religious or ethnic categories.

Hindu nationalism constructs its discourse on democracy, rights, and nationhood through a reductionist grasp of majoritarian principles. Hindus are the "original" inhabitants of the land, "sons of the soil," which was hitherto usurped by the "Muslim invaders"; thus, Hindus have their "legitimate" right to finally assert their dominance and bring an end to appeasement of minorities. A core plank of the ideological movement rests on reimagining the history of India when a golden period of Hindu rule and prosperity existed before shattering invasions by Muslim "marauders," which ushered in the "Dark Age" and subsequent subjugation of Hindus under British colonialism.

By "*weaponising history*," Hindu Nationalism seeks to transform the Indian state by churning out a popular majoritarian mobilisation for an ethnoreligious state that represents "the people" while explicitly categorising minorities as "natural" enemies of the nation. Hindutva's mythical (and political) histories can materialise in the present through myth and history, where the physicality and specificity of the local sites (Ayodhya temple movement[3]) are transformed into a national(ist) space. Hindu nationalism's ideological (and territorial) imagining of the nation as a Hindu space is hinged on the exclusion of Muslims and othering the religious community as a perpetual "threat." This threat and construction as threatening "other" is predicated by the colonial discourse (Nandy 1983) that emphasises the Muslim rule as "[…] a catalogue of crimes of violence, plunder, and rape of Hindus; […] solely responsible for the partition of Akhanda Bharat (united India)" (Anand 2011). Thus, the Muslims and their inhabited space (mosque and their presence in public spheres) are discursively constructed as a site of fear, distrust, anxiety, and contamination. In an increasingly communalised[4] atmosphere where anti-muslim perceptions[5] persist in the near absence of riots, Muslims' religious life is progressively marginalised and invisibilised from the Indian public life.

The first mobilisation of Hindu nationalism came in the 19th century through socio-religious reforms when Hinduism came into contact with Europeans in India, especially the Christian missionaries. In order to counter proselytisation and further corruption in Hinduism (idolatry, superstition, caste inequalities, and the practice of Sati), Hindu reformist organisations like Arya Samaj and Brahmo Samaj sprang up to defend the religion by initiating internal reforms and simultaneously inventing a golden period of the faith. The reformers referred back to the Vedas and Sanskrit texts of antiquity to make the case that the ancestors practised a sober, progressive form of Hinduism and that corruption is only a recent phenomenon. Swami Dayananda Saraswati (of Arya Samaj) and Raja Ram Mohan Roy (of Brahmo Samaj) dived inward to formulate a more enlightened definition of Hinduism, one that can help restore the pride of those who practice the religion, an attempt to imbue Indian antiquity with the cultural and spiritual greatness of the "Indic civilisation." The founder of Arya Samaj, Dayananda Saraswati, claimed that Aryans of the Vedas constituted the indigenous people of Bharat, the land below the Himalayas. He even claimed that "Aryans were the sovereign rulers of the whole earth" (Saraswati, 1994). Dayananda imagined the Aryan society as egalitarian and reinterpreted the caste system as the varna system, a merit-based division of labor. The project to refashion and differentiate Hindu and Hinduism from Semitic religions (Muslims and Christians) had begun then. In other words, Dayananda's revivalism and the reformist project opened new possibilities for stigmatisation and constructing a threatening "Other." Hindu nationalism, as an ideology, took shape and crystallised in reaction to Indian Muslims' mobilisation during the Khilafat movement. This mobilisation affected Hindus, and South India witnessed the deterioration of relations between the two communities when the Mappilas or Moplahs, the Muslim peasants, clashed with their Hindu landlords (Gurukkal, 2021). The riots further spread throughout the country in the early 1920s. They fostered the galvanisation of Hindu solidarity, ultimately resulting in the (re)launch of the Hindu Mahasabha in the late 1930s. V.D. Savarkar led the Hindu Mahasabha as a communal fundamentalist party and codified Hindu nationalism as a majoritarian ideology in his book, *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* (1923). Savarkar put together Hindu nationalism based on the mythical-ethnic Aryan-Vedic Hindu identity, as Dayananda claimed. Savarkar proudly reclaims that identity as he asserts, "All Hindus claim to have in their veins the blood of the mighty race incorporated with and descended from the Vedic fathers" (Savarkar 1923). This version of ethnic nationalism is simultaneously territorial, as the idea of Vedic India is inseparable from its sacred geography. For Savakar, a Hindu, lives in the "territory" between the Indus River, the seas, and the Himalayas. The territory is so well delimited that Savarkar argued that "no country in the world is more closely marked out by the fingers of nature as a geographical unit […]" (Savarkar 1923). MS Golwalkar, the second chief of RSS, arrived at the territorial nature of belonging, reiterating the assertion that "[…] we Hindus came into this land from nowhere, but are indigenous children of the soil always, from times immemorial and are natural masters of the country" (Golwalkar, 1939). A Hindu considers this land a bounded

geographical unit and a profound reverence attached to the sacred topography ("Punya Bhoomi," as Savarkar calls it) within Hindutva Hinduism.

"Space" in Nationalism

With the resurgence of populist movements worldwide, it becomes imperative to understand how nationalist forces evoke determination and reassertion of "their" claim over the "land" in public spaces. Since "space is ineliminably social"(Moroni and Weberman 2016), nationalism becomes a powerful tool to construct a modern political community that draws upon older attachments and reproduces specific "spaces" as national. Studies in nationalism (Colomb and Tomaney 2020; Mohan 2016; Yiftachel 2002) have consistently shown how a nation occupies a space that is both abstract ("imagined community") and concrete (real geographical places). In other words, nationalism concretises the production of abstract ideas such as maps, territories, and borders by giving an emotional expression to "[…] the indissolubility of its geography, culture and history" (Assayag 1998). On the other side, on an individual scale, it produces an understanding of the local, such as streets, buildings, and public spaces that appropriate specific spaces as "national" and proscribe certain behaviors around those spaces and thereby engage a community in the same spatial knowledge as that of the ideology operating the national territory. The term "territory" is frequently deployed to refer "to an area of land claimed by a state, or to a "homeland" claimed by a national grouping seeking self-determination" (Storey 2018). Hence, territoriality is "seen as the actions or behaviours used to control or exert power over a geographically designated space" (Storey 2018). Although it is a concept treated regularly in political geography, territoriality has recently been exploited to interpret the spatial expression of power descriptively.

Territoriality is an innate nature of human beings since territoriality is an activity to defend, control, exclude, and include on a personal and social scale. Instead of treating territories as naturally occurring entities, out of bounds for power, territories must be understood with renewed focus to (re)imagine spaces and how those spaces are embedded in social and cultural practices. In effect, territories and territorial strategies beam overtures of political power, constantly drawing and redrawing spatial practices of human geography and weaving a narrative of (territorial) identity, to generate and reproduce a sense of affiliation and loyalty. One of the key concepts in political geography is the conception of the state. The state can be understood as a spatial expression of territorial determination — it administers a defined area over which it claims jurisdiction to influence the movement of people and ideas. Territory holds no substance; its relationship with humans is always socially mediated. We need interventions from social science to understand what motivates people and groups to appropriate the physical world and eventually produce conflict over the territory, since any territorial strategy, any expression of territoriality advanced by a neighborhood organisation, a business or ethnic group, or whatever, the state is, accordingly, of crucial significance (Cox 2002). However, to understand the significance and manifestation of territory, it is helpful to concentrate on its building block, space. The material dimension reflects the direct relationship between any space and the human being that prevails in any space. Also, space is a source of subdued, emotional power. The physical qualities of space are mediated through the human experience of time and agency, which has a solid capacity to evoke an emotional response. Human beings may provide an emotional response to the latent qualities of space, but when that space is transformed into "place" or "territory," its true potential is harnessed.

The symbolic dimension of space should not be overlooked. Symbolisation differentiates a space from a place as it endows a space segment with a name, a particular identity, and a permanence that fixates a relationship between specific values and meanings. A space transforms into a place when its blended social content is widely expressed and shared in symbolic terms, again determined by the historical circumstances that produce them. Hence, the symbolic aspect of a space is both a matter of power and an instrument of power.

The persistent presence of religion in Indian life has produced manifestations and dictated the terms of engagement with the spaces in urban cities. The majoritarian religious practices inform the socio-spatial imagination of the urban cityscape. Every day, religion in India exercises place-making strategies that continually appropriate public spaces that formulate and reformulate identities since "space influences subjectivities" (Srivastava 2023). Religiosity in India distributes symbolic capital by materially inscribing religious practices over urban spaces that seek to commoditise religion at one level and act as an ideological apparatus at another.[6]

In India, Hindu nationalists perceive space as simultaneously threatening, sacred, and a potential site for meaning-making exercises that impose their version of history. In such a scenario, studying public spaces in India becomes a critical way to understand the soaring project of the Hindutva movement and its territorial strategies of imposing meaning and endowing "sacred" status to any site or location. Supriya Gandhi eloquently describes the tension, "[…] the authoritarian state steadily works to reshape public space by claiming the right to destroy, preserve, and build" (Gandhi 2020). Hindu nationalism is a hegemonic ideology that seeks to redefine the nation-space by constantly articulating a connection between the community and its territorial domain.

Territoriality and Hindu Nationalism: Cult of *Punyabhoomi*

The spatial understanding produced by Hindu nationalism is a critical way to understand its ambition to achieve the territorial dream of *Akhand Hindu Rashtra.* Although uniting the ancient land is a geopolitical goal, an essential element in that spatial strategy is to reclaim and reterritorialise those spaces, which, to a Hindu nationalist, would appear as a "Muslim" space. A significant aspect of Hindu nationalism is a reiteration of "Hindu-ness" or "Hindutva" in the nation's and its citizens' identity. However, the ideology of Hindu nationalism also equips its adherents with powerful tools to understand the physical spaces around them. Understanding (public) spaces and subsequent efforts to redraw them in their image are critical, as they underscore various political actions.

Constructing the idea of India has always posed a formidable challenge. Since it had to retreat from the lived experience of colonial space and transport into 19th-century India as a bounded nation space, perpetually negotiating a course between the universal capitalistic idea of nationhood[7] and the nativistic project of "*Bharatvarsha*" that continually haunts the present. As a matter of practice, nationalism almost invariably invents antiquity, which retroactively reflects the idea of a modern nation — it evokes an ancient period that is perfect and timeless. It is followed by ideological investment to cultivate that antiquity to identify and render meaningful spaces, such as reappropriating the maps. Anthony Smith has illustrated how nationalists reclaim the colonial maps as a proprietary legacy to carry on, while simultaneously transforming the moral meaning of the maps (Smith 1986). With this moral reposturing, the nationalists can immediately vouch for a "great tradition," albeit briefly interrupted by colonialism. Hence, the nation is imagined as a "heterotopian space" that is historicised by "linking of a particular physical geography to a specific imagined community as its homeland" (Deshpande 1998). The relocation of cultural, religious, and sacred to the physical geography is not unique to India since spaces in the national territory are *vectors* for meaning-making exercises and identity formation.

However, India's sacred geography is significant to understanding Hindu nationalism. In her book *India: A Sacred Geography* (2012), Diana Eck surveys the intricate world of the divine realm and the mundane materiality of the religion by looking at how the tradition of pilgrimages is woven into the expansive geography of the subcontinent. The territory of India is portrayed and imagined as a sacred topography and an anthropomorphic entity — a holy land abundant with pilgrimage routes and shrines, as the *Priti bhoomi* (ancestral land) for Savarkar, or more popularly venerated as *Bharat Mata*, a divine embodiment of the mother goddess. Hence, the partition of the subcontinent was the disfiguring of the sacred geography, a "vivisection" of the Motherland; for a nationalist like Nehru, the spatial geography of post-colonial India was an economic space. The disintegration of

the body of India has always haunted the Hindu nationalists. The territorial integrity of India has been challenged by both pressures from inside (demands from the states and secession movements) and outside (creation of "Islamic" Pakistan and Bangladesh). In the Hindutva logic, modern India is born out of the "dismemberment of the original motherland by "foreigners" that is, Muslims (Assayag 1997). The "cartographic anxiety" (Krishna 1994) has motivated Hindu nationalists to invoke *yatra (pilgrimage)* in Indian politics, to resacralise the sacred geography by defining the nation-space in ethnonationalist terms, such as through the Ekatmata Yatra (Unity March) of 1983. For the Hindu nationalist Savarkar, in the absence of a preexisting *national* community, the political identity of the nation was inextricably linked with the religion of the majority. Hence, the emergence of modernist Hindu communalism must be read with Savarkar's conception of Hindutva, which was co-implicated to define and shape the Indian nation-space. A significant amount of ideological investment went into reimagining the nation space as an exclusively Hindu sacred space. According to the Hindu nationalists, the "Hindu-ness" of the land lends its inhabitants moral and political authority to assert what constitutes the nation. The communal understanding of the land and its history meant a constant search to find the "outsiders" who would forever remain unassimilated with the experiences of the "insiders."

By contrast, the Nehruvian era[8] (from independence to the mid-sixties) successfully displaced communalism from the national sphere by imagining the nation-space as an *economic sphere.* Nehruvian secularism found its inspiration in the Western model of a modern-day secular nation-state, which understood that if equality were given a legal guarantee to all citizens, then communalism would be discarded. British colonialism never succumbed to guaranteeing equality; thus, it fanned communalism to pit one community against the other. The nation's *geography* is primarily about an *economic space* and was emphatically disseminated across the schools and the national media. Nehruvian India invited the citizens to imagine the nation-space as a space of production and associate the place name with an associated economic activity (like Durgapur with "steel plants"). His vision of India's spatial geography was dotted with steel towns and dams as "a symbol of new temples […] all over India" (Modern Temple 2015) where the nation-space permeated and distributed across everyday life (S. Roy 2007). However, the intense spatial nature of Hindu worship is often exploited to articulate an exclusivist understanding of Indian nationalism. For Savarkar, "a Hindu is a person who regards this land of Bharata, extending from the River to the Sea, as Fatherland and Holyland" (Savarkar 1923). This precise definition operates on three levels: territorial (the land between the Indus and the sea), genealogical (the Fatherland), and religious (Holyland). Sikhs, Jains, and Buddhists can be part of this land, for they were born out of it.

Nevertheless, religious groups like Christians, Jews, Parsis, and Muslims only meet two parts of the criteria. India is not their "Holyland." Savarkar maintains, "Their holy land is far off in Arabia or Palestine. Their mythology and Godmen, ideas and heroes are not the children of this soil" (Savarkar 1923). Hence, their allegiance to the cause of the Hindu nation cannot be trusted. Effectively, this formulation targets Muslims and Christians with perpetual suspicion for "contamination, subversion, and sedition" (Oza 2007). Longkumer persuasively accounts for the Hindu Right-wing's vexation with the Northeast; "secessionist" Christianity is integral to local Indigenous faith and culture, and it finds itself hard-pressed to "[…] argue for territorial integrity given the 'foreignness' of Christianity" (Longkumer, 2017). The territorial claim to this land firmly lies with the claim to the sacred geography, in fact, above genealogical ("*pitrabhoomi*") and *jati.* A strong belief in India's sacred geography informs the spatial worldview of a Hindu nationalist who reveres the land as a venerated landscape interspersed with religious, cultural, and civilizational significance shrines. The demolition of Babri Masjid could be read as a Hindu nationalist's attempt to reclaim an exclusivist idea of India *territorially.* The event exemplified the central tenet of Hindu nationalism that "it is India's manifest destiny to be Hindu" (Jeffrey 2017). That incident and the following events of intense mobilisation represent a coercive and collaborative effort to redraw the diverse landscape of India, whose distinct Hindu past has been consumed by Muslim geography. Ravinder Kaur has identified "spatial purification" as an essential aspect of religious violence to gain

territorial control over a specific landscape (locality); it includes forcible eviction and trapping of a particular community in ghetto-like locations (Kaur 2005).

The RSS succeeded Savarkar in propagating the view of the Hindu land; the prayer its members recite before every session heralded the mythologising of the land. The "Hindu" territorial emphasis is also found in the organisational aspect of RSS, which was launched with the cause to strengthen and reform the Hindu community — it expanded and developed a vast network of branches (*Shakhas*). The rationale behind the endeavor was to imagine and then create localities as a Hindu space. A neighborhood is an everyday *space* of intimacy and familiarity; thus, spatial production and validation of an ideology are convenient and practical. Shakhas are deeply entrenched in the local milieu, where the cultural kinship of "our people" and territorial belonging of "our area" are constantly constructed and generated. Lalit Vachani explores Shakha's effectiveness and concludes, "[…] Hindutva ideology reproduces itself both formally and spatially" (Vachani 2022).

Reading Namaz and Reclaiming "Encroached" Spaces

Muslim space is now profoundly redefined as a problematic category. The space occupied by Muslims is recalled and produced nostalgically as "the old city," often communally as "the Muslim area," and in recent times, derogatorily, "Muslim ghettos." New idioms and phrases such as "mini Pakistan" and "terrorist hideouts" are churned out and regularly deployed to manufacture a perception and build a consensus that religion is an acceptable mode to draw spatial boundaries. Demarking Muslim neighborhoods as contested spaces — "maleficent Muslim presence" (Shah 2004) emphasises the underlying assumption that Indian *space* is imagined as overtly and predominantly Hindu. Unlike the many forms of residential segregation, the clustering of Muslims in urban spaces in India has now been defined in increasingly problematic terms (Gayer and Jaffrelot 2011). This redrawing of spatial boundaries on religious lines has sharpened since the rise of rightwing Hindu nationalism in the country. In this framework of ideology, constant vilification of Muslim practices — Azan, Mosques, Namaz,[9] food habits, and political behaviors has become the target of Hindu Nationalists (E. Anderson and Jaffrelot 2018; Biswas et al. 2021; Tyagi and Sen 2020). Anand expands on the framework, "The proponents of Hindutva mobilise and generate negative stereotypes of Islam and Muslims to legitimise violence against actual Muslims living in India" (Anand 2011). The Muslim-majority neighborhoods, emerging and expanding in India, are now called "Muslim ghettos" by the media and political class. "Ghettoisation" of Muslims is a phenomenon, as they are pushed out of city bounds, further *spatially* estranged; such spaces generate a negative assessment bearing out of an "entrenched spatial stigma" (A. Chatterjee 2017). Spatial rearrangement at the ground level further motivates the political vocabulary at the national level (Barton 2022). Lefebvre had drawn the interdependence between social space and mental space: "True space is a mental space whose dual function is to reduce 'real' space to the abstract and to induce minimal differences. The dogmatism of this kind serves the most nefarious enterprises of economic and political power" (Lefebvre 1991b). The ambition of Hindu nationalism is to create a homogeneous Hindu nation, the *Hindu Rashtra*. Such attempts to produce Hindu spaces have been accompanied by strategic sectarian violence to convert public spaces into Hindu spaces. The strategy has been to discredit Muslim claims to any "public" spaces and simultaneously fill those spaces with Hindu symbols and idioms accompanied by couched political rhetoric to construct a certain "Hinduness" (Dasgupta 2006).

Communal tension has been brewing over offering namaz in open public spaces in Gurugram. In October 2021, protesters from right-wing groups disrupted a Friday namaz offering, an event in the "Millennium City." However, this was not the first time Muslims faced the ire of right-wing groups for Namaz. In 2018, the *Sanyukt Hindu Sangharsh Samiti* (SHSS, the United Hindu Resistance Committee), a cohort of 22 local units of Hindutva groups, launched a protest program to disrupt the Friday prayer meeting. The group met with the Deputy Commissioner of Gurugram Police to submit a memorandum and, at the same time, issued an ultimatum that "they would not allow

Friday namaz to continue in any public space" ("Hindu Group issue ultimatum" 2021). At one time, Gurugram had 150 open spaces to offer Namaz. The number was cut to 37 in October 2018, then reduced to 20 in November 2021, and finally to just 6 in November 2022 (Joseph 2021). Gurugram has only 13 mosques for approximately 5 lakh Muslims. Incidentally, the local administration sanctioned the public sites on which Muslims pray on Friday (Bhel 2021). The sites that have faced protests from the local residents and the Hindu outfits were among 37 sites that the administration finalised in May 2018 as the site for Friday congregation. The "protest" gained more legitimacy when local residents joined and occupied the designated namaz spots with their trucks and cars. These protests to disrupt the Friday prayer meeting happened across many designated spots in Gurugram, such as Sector 37, Atlas Chowk, Sector 44, Sirhaul Park, Sector 22, and Genpact Park.

Almost ritualistically, the Hindu outfit SHSS organised the Govardhan puja[10] in sector 12A, one of the designated spots for Friday prayer meetings, to reclaim the *space* from the Muslims. Kapil Mishra, a leader from the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), was accused of hate speech to instigate the crowd for the infamous Delhi riots of 2020 (Chadha 2021), which ended up taking up almost 53 lives (of which 36 were Muslims) — attended the Govardhan Puja. Kapil Mishra called the disruptions at the Friday prayer meets "a movement for citizens' right for free roads" (Chadha 2021). Home Minister of the country Amit Shah also questioned Muslims' right to pray in public spaces (K. Singh 2021). The Hindu Right has displayed a coherent spatial strategy through a discourse of legitimacy to claim as the sole claimant of the nation-space. The idea is to map the Hindu space onto all national space and, in the process, destroy and reclaim (by encroaching) any spaces associated with Muslims. Controlling and delimiting the spaces is one of the central tenets of any religious nationalism. Peter van der Veer propounds, "[…] movement and the definition of space and territory are central elements in religious nationalism" (Veer, 1994). Such spatial practices of religious nationalism are part of a broader strategy to spatially reimagine the national space as exclusively Hindu by steadily consolidating and legitimising power to interpret and control the nation space. This vision has actualised itself in concerted on-the-ground mobilisation where Hindu Right activists have stormed into mosques to vandalise and erase any Muslim presence ("Assault inside mosque" 2023; Ellis-Petersen 2022). Hindu nationalism reconstructs history consistent with their vision: that every Muslim architecture symbolises Muslim "barbarity" and living evidence of Hindu subjugation under Muslim rule. The spatial strategy subsequently realigns itself on the line where the public spaces, such as mosques, open grounds (*Maidans*), roads, and wayside spaces are to be sanitised of Muslim presence and redesignated as solely Hindu spaces. Muslim architecture, such as mosques and their congregations around them, is *visually offensive* and must be scaled down and ultimately vanish from the public spaces. Hansen recounts an interaction with a Hindu youth from Aurangabad who was appalled by Muslim architecture propping up in the city and crowding the public space, giving them "undue visibility" (Hansen 1996).

The appropriation of Islamic buildings and "Muslim" historic sites in public spaces has been turned into a potent political symbol to mobilise the narrative of Islamic conquests. The "victory" associated with the demolition of Bari Masjid can be read as a "course correction" of Indian history, as a forceful occupation and reclaiming of national space. Public spaces "[…] materialise power relations, influence the social ordering of a nation, produce us as subjects" (Kavuri-Bauer 2011). The volatile aspect of space can help us understand how political movements and social identities are formed and imagined in India through the instruments of power and spatial practices they devise. The state exercises a spatial framework that employs a simplistic binary of the "national" political self and the prominent "other," which immediately removes the nature of plurality from public space and renders it unstable and malleable. In essence, these spatial practices demand that religious minorities must adopt and show allegiance to Hindu symbols publicly (in an extension to *Hindu Rashtra*) and retreat to private spaces to practice their religion. As Deshpande argues, Hindu nationalism's spatial character is a coarse effort to reverse the spatial arrangement principle of the Nehruvian idea of nation space as a competitive "economic geography" (Deshpande 1998) and

implement Savarkar's vision of nation space. In Nehruvian nation space, the "other" is identified as someone who refuses to pertain himself/herself in the exercise of modernist nation building, whereas, in Hindutva or Savarkar's conception of nation space, the "other" is characterised by indelible cultural and religious markers that arouse suspicions and fear of contamination.

With the rise of communalism in the Indian polity, the socio-spatial dimension of Hindu nationalism can be understood as a long-term project of "competitive de-secularisation" (Achin 1993) of Indian society and an enterprise in resacralising the nation space. The recent namaz row can be read as a forceful attempt to invisibilise Muslims from public spaces, populating those spaces with assertive Hindu-ness. The public discourse was vitiated with hateful bigotry towards Muslims during the COVID-19 pandemic when prominent Indian media houses paid skewed media scrutiny to Tablighi Jamaat,[11] the Islamic religious congregation organised at Nizamuddin, Delhi. Given the history and nature of religious conflict, the media's coverage and dissemination of misinformation-laced hatred was unfortunate. On the contrary, on the occasion of the Kumbh Mela[12] in Uttarakhand, the congregation was given overwhelming, favorable coverage even though it flouted most COVID-19 restrictions. The state facilitated its arrangement in open spaces during the pandemic. The Chief Minister of Uttarakhand defended the comparison between the two religious congregations by turning it into a one-upmanship "our people" versus "people from outside" by remarking, "There should be no comparison between Kumbh and Markaz. The Markaz was held in a closed space, in a Kothi-like structure, whereas the Kumbh is being held in the open on the sprawling ghats of the Ganga" (Tripathi 2021). Public space has become a competitive arena for motivated religiosity, where displaying community prowess and simultaneously territorialising the space is the focused outcome. The "Devbhoomi" (Land of Gods), Uttarakhand, recently witnessed increasing incidents of targeted violence[13] against Muslims, a deliberate move that seeks to restore the indigeneity of the Hindus in one of the holiest locations of the land. A ruckus broke out in Bhotia Padao when a group of Muslim men were offering namaz inside the basement of a building built over a "nazul land" (a category of public land utilised by the government for non-agricultural uses like construction roads, markets, playgrounds, or other public uses) (*Communal Tension Erupts in Uttarakhand's Haldwani* 2023). Add to the tension, the founder of "Devbhoomi Raksha Abhiyan" (Campaign for the protection of land), Swami Darshan Bharti, delivered a speech that implored Hindus: "To protect religion, sacrifice is required. [….] Do you want Devbhoomi to be the land of gods or the land of shrines and mosques?" (Ali 2023). Such measures, buttressed with hate speech, further consolidate the Hindu Right wing's resolve for spatial cleansing of Muslims to "purify" (Mittal and Jafri 2023) the "Hindu land."

A group of 30 to 40 Muslim men gathered to offer Namaz on the occasion of Taraveeh,[14] the special congregational prayer organised only in the holy month of Ramzan, in the vacant space of an upscale apartment tower (Supertech Eco Village II and Eco Village II) in Greater Noida. The group had permission from the apartment authority to gather and offer Namaz, as they had been doing for some years. However, a row erupted when the residents disrupted the meeting and objected to the gatherings of occupants of the same apartment. In the Supertech Eco, the congregation was disrupted by chanting Hanuman Chalisa[15] on a loudspeaker. The message from these protests is clear: Muslims should not look "Muslim" in public spaces and should not form a collective as a religious identity in public spaces. In events where they wish to congregate as a community, religious or social, they should retreat to exclusively segregated spaces of Muslims, such as Muslim colonies or ghettos. It is appropriate to recall the retaliatory religious and public response to Friday namaz, first initiated by the Shiv Sena party, the then ally of the BJP in Bombay, in the aftermath of the Babri Masjid riots in 1992–93. Shiv Sena organised *Maha Aarti*,[16] mass prayer outside temples on the street to rally a show of strength against Muslim solidarity at their Friday Prayer Meetings. In fact, the first *Maha Aarti* was organised on Friday, December 11, 1992, and was led by Shiv Sena leader Pramod Nawalkar amidst heavy security of police and Army personnel. It was Shiv Sena's "campaign against Muslim access to and perceived abuse of public space" (Banerjee 2021). The Maha Aarti was a deliberate political program since Hinduism has nothing similar to mass prayer.

It was a clear spatial strategy of Hindu nationalism to reclaim the public spaces (that is, streets) forcibly from Muslims in a ritualistic manner. By 1993, hundreds of *Maha Aartis* were organised as a counter-spatial strategy to push Muslims out of the streets to mosques and private spaces of the home. With hundreds of Maha Aartis organised on Bombay streets, Muslim prayers became the centre of local communal tensions as riots and arson spread. Hindu nationalists cultivated the ritual of *Maha Aarti* as a symbol of Hindu pride and harnessed it as an effective spatial strategy to counter the "encroaching" practices of Muslim prayer. The urbanity of Mumbai and Gurgram normalises certain methods of religious practices as accepted and "the others" as a threat to public law and order. The state's reaction to and intervention in the selective claims to the use of public spaces destroy the secular pretence[17] of urban living. Much like the Ayodhya *Ram Janmabhumi* movement, the Hindu Right led by the BJP, VHP (*Vishwa Hindu Parishad*), and RSS has sought to reconfigure every space of the land into the centuries-long spatial and ideological struggle of Hindus to wrest control from "barbaric" Muslims.

Hindu nationalism informs the spatial understanding of the land as a distinctly Hindu land. Hindu nationalist ideology mediates and interferes with the spatial perception of a Hindu nationalist. For a Hindu nationalist, any space on this land is sacred and bears profound cultural and religious implications, and all "aliens" and "invaders," such as Muslims, must be eliminated. India is not simply a country or an ordinary geographical space; the bodyscape of the nation is imagined as "Mother," a Woman and a Goddess- to particularise a specific vision of India as "Motherland" (Ramaswamy 2008). The "mother" had been chained by a "barbaric Muslim invader" (Roy 2020), the one who remains forever an outsider to the nation. Thus, any logic to state the "proper" use of public spaces is consistently reproduced with Hindutva religiosity. Appropriating public spaces, which are commonly neutral grounds, is seen as one of the ways in which Hindu nationalism operates spatially. Essentially, the celebration of religious festivals such as Ganesh Chaturthi (Kaur 2004) and the organisation of religious rituals such as *Maha Aartis* are acts of "co-articulation and imbrication of religious and nationalist rituals in public spaces" (Hansen 1999). Besides Maha Aartis, the procession of Ram Navami is the latest strategy that is weaponised to intimidate Muslims under the guise of religiosity that spatially aids their vision of nation-building. Ram Navami is a Hindu festival celebrating the mythical King-God Ram's birth, a central figure in the Hindu right-wing imagination. In recent years, Ram Navami's procession has instigated a significant spike in riots, arson, and violence against Muslims (Varshney and Joshi 2023). The provocative nature of the procession that often passes through Muslim-dominated areas and Mosques uses offensive slogans and music ("*Agar chhua mandir toh tujhe dikha denge*," "Do not Dare Touch the Temple"[18]) to generate an atmosphere of everyday fear and low-grade violence to assert a more visceral form of territorial assertion. Hindutva has made significant inroads into popular culture by producing and disseminating music that incites violence against Muslims and promotes the Hindu state. Hindutva pop serves as a conduit for transmitting and legitimising a visceral politics of hatred and intimidation against Muslims. Thematically, this music creates an *ambient Hindutva*, loudspeakers blaring Hindutva pop during religious festivals or political rallies, transforming public spaces into arenas of Hindu nationalist expression, often marginalising and intimidating Muslims. The pervasive presence of this music in public spaces not only redefines these areas as Hindu but also normalises exclusionary and often violent ideologies through repeated auditory exposure, thus reinforcing the spatial dominance of Hindu nationalism. These processions are often accompanied by a demolition drive that displaces Muslims from their settlement, which is often couched in administrative language such as "resettlement" and "migration" (C.U. Singh 2022).

Deepak Mehta's extensive fieldwork on the shantytown of Dharavi in Bombay in the aftermath of the 1993 Bombay riots reveals fascinating insights into how violence was an instrument to territorialise "Muslim" spaces by reproducing public space as "a zone of instability" (Mehta 2006). In 1993, during the riots in Mumbai, Muslim men found alone in "Hindu" areas were brutally lynched. The only way the mob found out the identity of a man was through his beard or skullcap. In 2019, a similar incident surfaced: a man returning from Namaaz in Gurugram was thrashed,

coerced to chant Jai Shri Ram, and forcibly removed his skullcap (*Muslim Man Beaten, Forced to Chant "Jai Shri Ram" for Wearing Skull Cap in Gurugram* 2019). Accounts of the interlocutors from the fieldwork exemplify Certeau's argument that space is not a naturally occurring logical entity; instead, it is shaped through discourse and embodied practices. The ethnographic account of the communal riots of Jaipur weaves a distressing tale, where "violence as ritual" (Mathur 2008) was operationalised for spatial cleansing of neighborhoods. A nation-state in the form of a national space is produced in the neighborhood as a fantasy by territorialising the "alien" spaces and controlling the "alien" bodies in those spaces.

The deliberate sacralisation of public spaces in India under the influence of Hindutva seeks to reframe these spaces as exclusively Hindu domains, often at the expense of Muslim presence. This process is evident in renaming cities with Islamic heritage, such as the change from Allahabad to Prayagraj (also Gurgaon to Gurugram, Aurangabad to Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar), and the increasing placement of Hindu religious symbols and idols in public areas. Additionally, the celebration of Hindu festivals in public spaces frequently excludes or marginalises Muslim participation. These actions are not merely symbolic but serve to assert Hindu dominance and rewrite the religious landscape. The use of bulldozers has become a symbol of state power used against dissenters, particularly in states like Uttar Pradesh, where the chief minister has been dubbed "Bulldozer Baba" for his aggressive stance on demolitions of Muslim properties. The government has framed the demolitions as punitive actions against illegal constructions, but many observers contend that they disproportionately target Muslim properties as a form of collective punishment (Pandey 2022). The spatial politics of bulldozer demolitions contribute to a landscape where Muslim communities are pushed to the peripheries, both geographically and politically. The destruction of homes, businesses, and religious structures not only displaces people but also signals a broader intent to reimagine the nation's spaces in a way that diminishes Muslim visibility and historical claims to the land (Aafaq 2023). This reconfiguration of space is a crucial component of the Hindutva ideology, which seeks to redefine Indian identity in exclusively Hindu terms, and it is reinforced by state machinery through the selective and symbolic use of demolitions.

Conclusion

Comparative scholarship on Right-wing political parties and organisations has drawn significant attention to understanding Right-wing extremism in India and its differences from the West. It is essential to declare that Hindu nationalism, unlike other forms of Right-wing movements (Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany), insists on both the sanctity of territorial land and the religion of those who inhabit that space. The Hindutva movement is an ethnonationalist force that kinetically challenges the "secular" idea of the state and peaceful coexistence of faiths in a multi-cultural landscape. It imagines the Hindu religion as a civilizational ethos that will dictate and secure the territory and draw new boundaries within the nation-space. We have argued that Hindu nationalism, since its germination, has been a spatial ideology that has crafted political and cultural strategies to realise and construct *Hindu Rashtra*. In its efforts, the ideology has made consistent moves to control and shape public spaces in Hindu terms assertively. The narrative of space generated by Hindu nationalism is exclusive in nature and discriminatory in practice. The conception of Hindu national space is progressively understood in strict terms of cultural and ethnic associations with the land. Invoking sacred topography and a flawed understanding of the past further intensifies the Hindu nationalists' effort to define and constantly refine spaces. As a result, "public" disputes over Namaz's innocuous acts have become volatile and steadily turned into a religious struggle over open spaces. The article has elucidated how the recent skirmishes over public space are an extension of the overt goal of Hindu nationalism of the "otherisation" of the Muslims by spatially controlling their bodies and restricting their access to public space. Thus, it is worth considering the spatial nature of Hindu nationalism and its steady and determined march to reconquest space for the ambitious project of homogenised Hindu space.

Limitation of the Study

The present study is influenced by methodological and analytical constraints framing its scope and evidence. The primary empirical data were 106 newspaper reports employed to reconstruct the chronology and contextual evolution of Hindu nationalist protests against Namaz in public spaces. The sources were utilised as documentary evidence to track factual occurrences and public reactions. A systematic content analysis of these media texts would be a rich potential next step, analyzing how language, tone, and narrative strategy contribute to reinforcing or subverting dominant ideologies. It would augment the existing narrative-focused methodology by looking at the discursive levels of the public sphere. Moreover, the study's reliance on secondary sources limits its qualitative depth. An ethnographic study could generate more profound insights into the lived experiences, motivations, and localised interactions of the involved actors. Fieldwork through participant observation and interviews would have unveiled localised dynamics, affective registers, and micro-political processes inaccessible through textual sources alone. Cumulatively, the limitations point to potential future research avenues. An integrated approach through content analysis and ethnographic research might better understand how public space is negotiated symbolically and materially, and represented and contested in modern-day India.

Disclosure. None.

Notes

1 Between 2015 and 2018, the Hindu right-wing-led state and central governments implemented a sequence of renaming activities directed toward sites with Islamic or Mughal heritage. Aurangzeb Road in Delhi was changed to Dr A.P.J. Abdul Kalam Road in 2015, while the Uttar Pradesh site of Mughalsarai Junction was changed to Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Junction in 2018. Allahabad had been renamed Prayagraj the same year, referencing its pre-Mughal heritage. These alterations, frequently defended as restorations of cultural or historical authenticity, serve the ideological goals of Hindu nationalism, which aims to symbolically reassert Hindu identity in public and historical realms. See (Truschke 2020).

2 See (Wojczewsk 2020) how the Hindu right-wing party deploys a populist-nationalist grammar, positioning Hindus as a unified "people" besieged by secular-liberal elites and minority "appeasement" (Hansen and Roy 2022) observe how Hindutva actualises as authoritarian populism, using state power to suppress dissent and invoke Hindu civilizational grandeur, Varshney et al.'s 2021 survey reports populist discourse under the current dispensation emphasises Hindu unity above caste divisions, but mass sentiment tends to differentiate populist anti-elitism from overt Hindu nationalism.

3 The Ayodhya or Ramjanmabhoomi movement, led by the Hindu right, sought to resolve a 125-year land dispute over the birthplace of Lord Ram in Ayodhya. The movement culminated on December 6, 1992, when activists demolished the Babri Mosque, claiming it was built on a Hindu temple site demolished by Mughal King Babar to construct the mosque. In 2019, the Supreme Court of India allowed the construction of a Ram temple on the disputed land.

4 According to a finding, "hate crimes against religious minorities increased by 514%" from 2014 when compared with the pre-2014 times (D. Basu 2021)

5 (CSDS 2019) survey found that half of the police showed anti-Muslim bias, making them less likely to stop crimes against Muslims

6 See Srivastava (2023); how the Kanwariya pilgrimage empowers Hindu men to use public space with administrative help and stigmatises the access of Muslim men

7 The "universal capitalistic idea of nationhood" refers to the model where nations are imagined primarily as economic units aligned with global capital flows, emphasizing the tenets of liberal democracy, free markets, and individual rights. (Appadurai 1996) emphasises how globalisation fragments national imaginaries, yet capitalism enforces uniform aspirations, development,

consumption, and economic growth, and (P. Chatterjee 1993) emphasises the contradiction between elite-led, globally-oriented "national" projects and local, cultural expressions of political belonging, where marginalised groups negotiate rights outside elite frameworks. Ernest Gellner theorised that industrial capitalism cultivated nationalism by virtue of standardised education and cultural homogenisation, and Benedict Anderson connected nationhood to "print capitalism," as vernacular media nurtured imagined political communities. Scholars such as Liah Greenfeld reversed this causality, situating nationalism as capitalism's antecedent (Greenfeld 2001). Rodrik's 2013 examination of the historical forms of capitalism emphasises the persistence of the nation-state in market regulation and the legitimation of globalisation. Modern debates (Basta 2024; Galbraith 2023) identify tensions between economic nationalism and hyper-globalisation, when capitalism depends on states for institutional stability, even though it is transnational in orientation. These scholarships collectively conceptualise nationhood both as a result and as a prerequisite of capitalist development, mediated by unequal power relations and institutional path dependencies. In India, this negotiation appears in the era of post-1991 liberalisation, during which the economy was incorporated into global circuits, presenting a new, capitalist India. At the same time, Hindu nationalist politics invigorates a nativist image of Bharatbharsha, representing India as an ancient spiritual civilisation based in Hindu dharma. This dual negotiation complicates India's national identity: the capitalist model requires a cosmopolitan, globally competitive subject, while Hindu nationalism requires an indigenous, culturally homogeneous citizen, pitting economic globalisation against cultural nativism.

8 Nehru envisioned postcolonial India as a secular, industrial modernity, redefining the nation-space through dams, steel cities, and planned metropolises like Chandigarh and Durgapur — emblems of rational, collective progress. But the reality of Nehruvian politics differed drastically: caste and communal identities continued to be at the heart of political mobilisation, as studies of Kothari (1970), Jaffrelot (1999), and Kaviraj (1994) illustrate. The Congress party under Nehru entrenched patronage and factionalism instead of transcending tradition — mobilisation through caste blocs, communal identities, and regional patronage networks remained central to electoral political practice (S. Das 2001). Secularism, less a social consensus than a state project, as Sudipta Kaviraj has noted, was often a top-down project, legally enshrined but unevenly internalised. From the Jabalpur riots of 1961 to communal tensions across North India, the routinely revealed persistent fractures within Nehru's imagined secular vision. So Nehru's modernist imagination generated aspirational enclaves within an electoral environment comprehensively embedded in inherited social and religious hierarchies. The nation-space was not uniformly secular or industrialised; rather, it was a patchwork where modernist symbols like Durgapur and Chandigarh coexisted with deeply traditional social landscapes.

9 The word "namaz" is the ritual Islamic prayer offered five times daily by Muslims. It consists of a series of physical postures, recitations, and supplications — considered as a focal act of worship in Islam. Although the Arabic word is salat, "namaz" is widely used in the subcontinent, such as in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh.

10 Gowardhan Puja, observed a day after Diwali, marks Lord Krishna's lifting of the mythical Gowardhan Hill to shield villagers from God Indra's fury. Devotees build cow dung models of the hill and conduct rituals paying tribute to cows and nature. Cow worship in Hinduism represents agrarian fertility, motherhood, and nonviolence. In the context of Hindu nationalism, however, cow worship has been politicised to claim Hindu identity. This has resulted in cow vigilantism, in which self-appointed saviours violently attack minorities, especially Muslims and Dalits, under the pretext of protecting cows. Therefore, traditional religious acts of reverence are becoming increasingly coupled with exclusionary nationalist politics and moral policing.

11 The Tablighi Jamaat, a global Islamic revival movement dedicated to grassroots preaching and religious reform, was the subject of intense scrutiny in India during the initial stage of the COVID-19 pandemic. An event at its Delhi headquarters in 2020 was associated with the viral

spread of COVID contagion, quickly framed by Hindu nationalist discourse as "corona jihad." This narrative spatialised the Muslim body as a threat, transforming mosques and Muslim localities into perceived zones of contagion and disorder. The controversy exemplified how Hindu nationalism weaponises crises to reinscribe communal boundaries, delegitimise Muslim presence in public space, and reinforce a territorial imaginary of India as a Hindu nation.

12 The Kumbh Mela is the largest religious gathering in the world, organised cyclically at four riverbank pilgrimage centres in India, representing spiritual cleansing through ritualistic bathing. The festival's temporary urban infrastructure, a meticulously planned "ephemeral mega-city" with grid layouts and geometrically aligned ceremonial spaces reflecting Vedic cosmic principles (Mehrotra 2013), transforms river confluences into arenas of mass Hindu mobilisation. Although a traditionally sacred occasion focused on mythological and religious narratives, under the context of Hindu nationalism, the Kumbh has acquired greater political and spatial meaning. It is increasingly utilised as a performative declaration of civilizational continuity, Hindu unity, Hindu demographic superiority, and territorial identity. The temporary ephemeral city becomes a sacred geography, affirming the notion of India as a Hindu homeland, and is used as a symbolic spatial claim that blurs the lines between religion and state, and spatially enacts the territorial imagination central to Hindutva ideology.

13 see (*Posters Asking Muslim Traders to Leave Surface in Uttarakhand* 2023) how the Hindu right is spatially driving out Muslims from the Hindu landscape

14 Taraweeh (also Tarawih) is the name given to special congregational prayers conducted by Muslims during the blessed month of Ramadan, following the compulsory night prayer (Isha). These prayers are Sunnah (practice) and strongly recommended, although not compulsory.

15 The Hanuman Chalisa is a 40-stanza devotional poem written by Tulsidas in the 16th century in honor of Lord Hanuman, a revered monkey deity in Hinduism representing strength, loyalty, and devotion. It is widely recited throughout India and is central to popular religious practice. In recent decades, the Hanuman Chalisa has experienced a complete transformation from personal devotion to public declaration, especially within the historical context of modern Hindu nationalism. Its public recitation — frequently tied to loudspeakers, street processions, or political rallies — has increasingly become a means of asserting Hindu identity in multi-religious public arenas, particularly in reaction to Islamic public religious practice. In 2022, Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) leader Raj Thackeray made headlines by asking for the dismantling of loudspeakers at mosques and threatening to play Hanuman Chalisa louder outside mosques if his requests were not fulfilled (Vinayak 2022). Such acts are not religious, as they signal reclaiming of public space by populating the soundscape with Hindutva acoustic environment and privileging majoritarian religious expression. Hanuman's own figure has been reframed and co-opted as a militant defender of the Hindu nation, situating his mythic figure within the belligerent registers of hypermasculine Hindutva ideology. The Hanuman Chalisa is thereby operates both as a devotional scripture and a performative emblem of Hindu assertion, part of a larger effort to appropriate religion for ethno-nationalist purposes (M. Chatterjee 2020).

16 Maha Aarti is a large Hindu ritual of community worship with synchronised chanting, offerings to the fire, and devotional songs, usually carried out at religious rivers or temple compounds. In recent times, particularly under Hindu nationalist politics, Maha Aartis have spilled over traditional religious spaces and spread into the public sphere, converting them into exhibitions of Hindu cultural hegemony. These performances are strategic acts of spatial intervention, "a kind of guerrilla form of public worship organised by Hindu groups to push Muslims out of streets and public spaces" (Appadurai 2000), and affirm religious majoritarianism in disputed urban or secular territory.

17 Indian urban spaces, while projected as secular arenas for harmonious coexistence, increasingly manifest exclusionary spatial politics that marginalise communities under the veneer of modernity. The privatisation and elite capture of public spaces- such as Mumbai's parks restricted by

entry fees or Ahmedabad's Sabarmati Riverfront designed as consumption zones- prioritise middle-class aesthetics and neoliberal ideals, displacing informal vendors, slum dwellers, and religious minorities (Chatterji and Roy 2018; Rajagopal 2011). Research demonstrates deep residential segregation by caste, class, and religion, where Muslims and Dalits are over-represented in unserved peripheries (Rao 2020; Sahoo 2016). These spatial exclusions are justified in terms of discourses of "beautification" and "security," which erase the poor while reinforcing elite dominance. The secular image, in turn, is sustained by tokenistic multicultur-alism in highly curated spaces such as malls or festivals, where differences are not politically engaged but commodified instead. These tensions highlight a paradox: secular semiotics of urban India exists in parallel with spatial hierarchies that reproduce and perpetuate socio-religious dis/advantages, reterritorializing public space as a space of managed consumption instead of egalitarian citizenship (Das et al. 2021). Moreover, Neoliberalism has contributed significantly towards creating an exclusive Hindu space by enabling upper- and middle-caste privatisation of the public realm. Economic liberalisation brought about commercialised and gated spaces ("enclaves") that covertly exclude religious minorities and lower castes (Baviskar and Ray 2011; P. Chatterjee 2004). In furthering consumer citizenship (Bhattacharya and Sanyal 2011; Fernandes 2006) at the expense of inclusive democracy, neoliberalism aligned itself with Hindutva projects that injected caste and religious segregation into cityscapes. The disintegra-tion of the public sphere through neoliberal governance has undermined the state's adherence to secular, inclusive urban planning and enabled market forces to drive spatial segregation (Cowan 2015). The Hindutva project has cynically exploited this economic reorientation, combining neoliberal ideals of property rights with individualism and communal identity politics in order to naturalise exclusive Hindu spaces.

18 See Purohit (2023) for Hindutva's weaponising of music to mobilise the majority

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