Duty, Discipline, and Dreams: Childhood and Time in Hindutva Nation

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Childhood and time constitute key sites of regulation for nationalist authoritarian regimes. However, the influence of time on contemporary nationalist discourses of childhood located in the Global South remains an underresearched area. This paper critically analyzes two spectacles involving Hindu nationalist Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and secondary school students on the occasions of Teachers Day 2014 and 2015. Temporal language, markers, and symbols rooted in discourses of colonialism/Orientalism, Brahminical Hinduism, and capitalist development are deconstructed to show how nationalist constructions of childhood can penetrate deep into the everyday lives of particular children who are deemed worthy to serve their nation. The paper concludes by highlighting specific ways in which time and temporality are weaponized to reproduce and legitimize a social hierarchy of childhoods that is necessary to sustain Hindu ethno-religious nationalism.

Key words: *childhood and time; Hindu nationalism; India; teachers; populism*

Time and temporality are central to how we signal values and construct meaning, belonging, and connection for ourselves and each other. Burman (2021, in conversation with Millei, 2021) reminds that social constructions of time serve to structure social relations and the pace and rhythm of life. The language of time performs the work of making and marking relationships through and across time—for the individual (e.g., biological time) and between people (e.g., biographical and generational time). The language of time also implicitly and explicitly signals values—values that are worth preserving and celebrating (continuity) and those that need to be replaced (change)—and, relatedly, the rate and order/sequence of change. Discourses of time (as in periods of time as well as time in) are central to establishing social relationships and order and therefore the control and regulation of societies and social change (Adam, 2008). Childhoods as symbolic sites of change and continuity are central to nationalist projects of regulation and domination that emerge in times of intensified economic and cultural conflict (Millei & Imre, 2021). However, the influence of time on contemporary ethno-religious nationalist discourses of childhood located in the Global South remains an underresearched area.

Since his first national election victory in 2014, the Indian prime minister and avowed Hindu nationalist Narendra Modi has regularly communicated with his "young friends"—the children of India—through large televised meetings, radio programs, social media, and books written for children. Modi is not the first Indian politician to incorporate children into his political discourse of nation and nationalism or to promote national identity through schooling. This precedent was set by the first prime minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, who came to be known as *Chacha*, or Uncle Nehru, in popular discourse because of his frequent interactions with children. His grandson, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, made history with a nationally broadcast and apparently unscripted televised Q&A session with school children in 1985. Like all nationalist political speeches, Modi's discourse appears to be full of jingoistic clichés and aphorisms. However, this paper undertakes to read the Teachers Day speeches against the

backdrop of the Hindu nationalist movement asserting political power at a scale at which it has never been done before.[1]

Specifically, this paper critically analyzes two spectacles involving Hindu nationalist Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and secondary school students on the occasion of Teachers Day in 2014 and 2015. It draws from a larger qualitative research project of similar spectacles involving schoolchildren between 2014 and 2019. For the purposes of data analysis, transcripts of what was said at these events were either downloaded from Modi's official website or transcribed in Hindi and English from official recordings by the public service broadcaster Doordarshan TV and made available on YouTube. Other texts that informed this analysis include Modi's monthly radio broadcast *"Mann ki Baat,"* (Inner Thoughts) where he regularly directedly addressed children, as well as news media reports and government policy documents. The analysis of language, markers, and symbols rooted in multiple discourses of temporality, including Brahminical Hinduism and capitalist development, are deconstructed to show how nationalist constructions of childhood can penetrate deeply into the everyday lives of particular children who are deemed worthy to serve their nation. The paper concludes by highlighting specific ways in which time and temporality are weaponized to reproduce and legitimize a social hierarchy of childhoods that is necessary to sustain Hindu ethno-religious nationalism.

Hindu nationalism and Modi

Hindu nationalism is a hundred-year-old supremacist ideology that aspires toward a Hindu ethno-state in India. Early influences include anticolonial Hindu nationalist activism and European fascism. The ideas and imaginaries of Hindu ethno-religious pride and power that we see in the transnational Hindutva movement today are also shaped by neoliberal ideologies of economic and technological globalization along with contemporary local or vernacular public cultures that are highly mediatized (see, e.g., Chatterji et al., 2019). These ideologies (not always unified or coherent) are promoted and pursued by a vast transnational network that revolves around the central organizational nexus of a paramilitary volunteer activist organization, the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS, National Volunteer Corp). It includes the political party that represents the movement, the *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP, Indian People's Party) which now holds political office across India.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi is currently in his second five-year term in national office. Prior to becoming PM, he held office for 12 years as chief minister of Gujarat. The 2002 Godhra genocide against Muslims included the murder of at least one thousand Muslims—men, women and babies, countless more rapes of Muslim women and girls, and permanent dislocation of hundreds of thousands of people. He participated in RSS activities as a child and joined the movement as a teenager as full-time grassroots organizer. He quickly developed a reputation for anti-minority oratory as well as organizing, and he quickly rose through the ranks to elected office (see Jaffrelot, 2021).

Since 2002 Modi has rebranded himself from a powerful and virulently anti-Muslim Hindu nationalist to a hi-tech, pro-business, populist statesman with national and global presence. He was amongst the first, if not the first, Indian political leader to fully harness the communicative power of digital networking platforms and encourage "selfie nationalism"—a performance of nationalism mediated by economic and technological globalization (see, e.g., Pal, 2015). These early investments enabled Modi to craft a persona as not only the most capable but also the most selfless leader the nation could desire—epitomized in his 2014 election campaign slogan of *Chowkidar*, or Watchman (see, e.g., Chakravartty & Roy, 2015).

As a master orator, Modi composes his speeches with a rich vocabulary of time and temporality to communicate intensely affective messages about the chaos and crises facing India and how true Indians can save and reclaim their

nation. The Teachers Day speeches are no exception. In constructing childhood in the Hindutva nation, he uses the language of biographical or lifespan time (birth, child, parent, young, old, death) and clock and calendar times (days, nights, hours, weeks, years, seasons), as well as the languages of timing (right/wrong time), tempo (speed, intensity, and rate of change), duration (timepoints, instantaneity), and sequence (order, priority, instantaneity; see Adam, 2008).

In particular, Modi conveys an intimate knowledge of the temporal routines, schedules, and habits of the children in his audience (e.g., school assembly time, confiding in teacher time, sports time, coming home from school time, homework time, leisure time, and so forth). The knowledge and ability to relate to these significant moments in children's daily lives create an instantaneous sense of familiarity and proximity. This is consistent with a defining feature of his oratory: the ability to present himself, not as a politician or elected representative, but as an ordinary yet exceptional Indian citizen (Chakravartty & Roy, 2015).

Another key strategy is the use of banal, instant feel-good polysemic messaging about moral purity, positivity, growth, and development (Pal, 2015). These messages simultaneously convey multiple and even contradictory images and meanings about nation (e.g., traditional majoritarian Hindu symbols juxtaposed with modern corporate values) and Modi himself (e.g., as both ordinary man and exceptional statesman). The skill with which Modi is able to insert nationalism into everyday practice and as a worldview has earned him a cult following unlike any other contemporary Indian politician (see, e.g., Visvanathan, 2014). As a whole, these strategies maintain the image of a great leader and savior who is directly and intimately familiar with his people (despite Modi's steadfast refusal to speak directly to professional journalists).

Time and the pedagogy of Hindutva

Modi is a product of the pedagogy of the Hindu right, which simultaneously seeks to educate into tradition and modernity (Patel, 2000); both teachers and students are objects of Hindu nationalism. The Hindutva education project spearheaded by the RSS is purportedly oriented toward undoing the effects of colonization (and more broadly Westernization) and reclaiming and remaking the Hindu nation by drawing on a combination of ancient, patriarchal Brahminical Hindu knowledge and culture and modern technology (Manjrekar, 2011; T. Sarkar, 1994). It calls on all Hindus to work together to restore the glorious Hindu nation that existed in the time of the Vedas (Brahmin Hindu scripture). Mother India is both feminine and divine, all Hindus are referred to as indigenous children, and all good Hindus must serve her as good and dutiful children serve their parents.

Since Independence, the organization has devoted its considerable energies and resources to establishing a national network of formal schools through front organizations[2] as well as less formal educational spaces for poor communities in urban slums and Indigenous communities in remote areas. According to Bhatty and Sundar (2020), this network currently encompasses an estimated 12,800 formal schools located in urban and semi-urban areas with approximately 3,465,600 enrollments; an estimated 4,900 informal schools for poor communities; 6,400 schools specifically for Adivasi (Indigenous) children; and free private tutoring for students in government schools (see also Iwanek, 2022). There is no room for questioning or open-ended inquiry in the schools of the Hindu right (Sundar, 2004). Like colonized peoples, the child is treated as an unknowing, passive blank slate—to be acted upon by supposedly well-meaning others.

The discursive configuration of time has always been part of political projects. Recently, we have seen one populist radical-right movement after another construct particular orders of past, present, and future time to attract people to their cause (Taş, 2022). The discipline of history occupies a central position within the Hindu ethno-religious nationalist imagination akin to what the "science" of race difference was to Nazi ideology, according to historian

Tanika Sarkar (2019), where political mission is exalted as "accredited Truth" (p. 152). Contemporary discourses of Hindu nationalism are rooted in idealized patriarchal dominant-caste Hinduized notions of time where the world cycles continuously through four periods—of moral and social perfection, deterioration, corruption, and recreation of perfection (T. Sarkar, 1996). These discourses feed into and are fed by longings to move away from the crisis-ridden present toward a future timeless, true India that recaptures a glorious if mythical Brahminical Hindu past. Hindutva discourse has also incorporated the Protestant Christian and capitalist utilitarian temporalities introduced by British colonialism, for example, the discipline of work bounded by the constraints of clock time (T. Sarkar, 1996). The technology of the clock of course did not just change the way we worked but how we came to understand and value what constituted work and related social and cultural practices (T. Sarkar, 1996). Moreover, Patel (2000) points out that affective Protestant Christian temporal notions of good and bad and salvation or the possibility of future redemption resonate with the longings, fears, and desires of Brahmin and other dominant-caste Hindus—that is, nostalgic longing for the past, anxiety/fear of a present ruined by Muslim invasion and British colonialism, and desire for a future that guarantees redemption and reinvention.

RSS curriculum and pedagogy narrate a historical time that requires learners to inculcate collective but gendered conceptions of a past, present, and future Hindu national identity. For example, RSS textbooks and books only refer to historical periods, events, and great men who contribute to the historicization of a Hindu nation. Hindu gods, mythological figures, and male Hindu nationalist leaders, scientists, and politicians are routinely presented in a single continuum that blurs myth and reality to create a narrative structure where "demons, colonialists and Muslims occupy the same undifferentiated space" (T. Sarkar, 1994, p. 13).[3] This repeated, seamless conflation of myth and history work to inscribe patriarchal Brahminical Hindu thinking into the consciousness of learners of all ages (T. Sarkar, 2019).

The Teachers Day spectacles

As with authoritarian populist movements elsewhere, highly mediatized spectacle has long been central to the political modus operandi of the Hindu right in India. Notorious examples include the 1996 spectacle of the apparently spontaneous brick-by-brick destruction of the 14th-century Babri Masjid (mosque) by a mob of Hindu youth in Ayodhya and the 1998 unprovoked nuclear tests by the Vajpayee-led BJP administration. In addition to digital communications, Narendra Modi has proved himself as a master in using spectacle to advance his personal brand and political project and to manufacture a brand and cult following (see also, e.g., Visvanathan, 2014). His brand appears to remain untarnished despite stunning failures on virtually every promise related to economic development and social welfare (in his tenure both as chief minister and prime minister) including most recently the failed response to the deadly COVID-19 pandemic (Sirimane & Thapliyal, 2020; *The Caravan*, 2021).

The first Teachers Day spectacle was organized on September 5, 2014. Teachers Day itself was first instituted in 1962 to honour Dr. Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan, the second president of independent India, scholar of Hindu philosophy and religion, and life-long educator. About 800 secondary school students from elite urban and rural government schools[4] attended the two-hour event staged at the Maneckshaw auditorium in the capital city of New Delhi. The students who asked questions after the speeches proudly introduced themselves as students of either *Kendriya* or *Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalayas*. These well-funded government schools are part of a national network of approximately 2,000 schools established for the children of urban and rural civil servants (Darak, 2014). They have little in common with the approximately 1.4 million government schools attended by the majority of Indian children. Instead, they offer all the privileges of elite, private schools, including highly selective admissions, English-medium instruction, ample resources, and a high-stakes exams-driven curriculum and pedagogy. While affirmative action policies for public education institutions have increased to enable participation of students from

oppressed caste and indigenous backgrounds, the culture of schooling in these institutions remains oriented to the aspirations of dominant-caste and middle-class families (see also Thapliyal, 2016).

The Human Resources Development (HRD) Ministry ordered all schools to virtually attend the Teachers Day proceedings through video conferencing and report attendance information. To comply, government schools had to expend scarce funds and teachers had to organize the purchase of televisions, mount projection screens, order backup electricity, and maintain attendance lists (Darak, 2014). Television crews contributed to the build-up by interviewing school children—not teachers—across India. The event had an estimated 90 million viewers and received in-depth coverage in English and Hindi newspapers and through Modi's official digital media accounts, including his website and Twitter (#TeachersDayLive). The event was repeated once more in 2015 and then stopped, perhaps because some members of the media helpfully pointed out that teachers appeared to be incidental in these spectacles.

The two spectacles followed a similar format consisting of introductions by students and the HRD minister followed by an approximately 20-minute speech by Modi delivered without notes or prompter. Both speeches began with some preliminary remarks about the importance of recognizing teachers and talked about the lasting influence that teachers have on students' lives, the responsibility of teachers, and the respect that students should have for their teachers. The main themes in both speeches were the meaning of education and relatedly service to the nation. These narratives were interwoven with commentary on the problems facing the nation and the hashtag-friendly solutions introduced by Modi in response to the challenges facing India. In 2014, flagship programs named in the spectacles included Clean India Clean Toilets (*Swachh Bharat Swachh Vidyalaya Abhiyaan*), Digital India, Save Daughters, Educate Daughters (*Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao*) and Made In India and in 2015 named programs included Skill India #KalaUtsav (Arts Festival).

The final segment consisted of 45 minutes of question and answer (Q&A) with the students in the audience. Students asked questions primarily in English, but Modi always replied in Hindi. In 2014, most of the students who spoke during the Q&A session were physically present in the audience in Delhi, but in 2015 Modi used videoconferencing technology to respond to students located in different regions of India. He had previously used videoconferencing in the 2014 election campaigns with great success to connect with the so-called ordinary Indian as part of the *Chai Pe Charcha*[5] (literally, talking over tea) component of the 2014 national election campaign (Rai, 2019). There is little information available about the selection process for student speakers. However, comments made by Modi in 2015 suggest that academic and extracurricular accomplishments (e.g., participation in the Math Olympiads and Special Olympics) played a role in selection. Teachers were mentioned briefly in the speeches, but the Q&A segment focused exclusively on Modi. Six main themes emerged across the 15 questions asked in 2014 and 17 questions asked in 2015: Modi as leader (9), problems facing the nation (8), Modi as child and student (5), how children could serve the nation (5), the purpose of education (4), and teaching (3). Of the three questions related to teaching, two again focused on Modi. The three questions were as follows: Did you learn from your life experiences or your teachers? (Question 2, 2014); If you were a teacher, who would you concentrate more on—an intelligent student who is lazy or an average student who is very hard working? (Question 8, 2014); and How can you attract the best of the youth today to the teaching profession and motivate them to become the next Sir Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan of tomorrow? (Question 8, 2015).

Despite the short amount of time devoted to the profession during the Teachers Day spectacles, the construction of the teacher and the work of teaching centers again on what is and is not of use to the nation. As Patel (2000) writes, producing nationalism as a collective fantasy requires "at least three ways of telling time at once" (p. 47). Constructions of teachers and teaching refer to time as past or what has been, time as present or what is to be, and

time as future or what could be and will be.

Modi began by talking about the role that teachers play in the lives of great men:

> Ask any successful person in the world, the person will definitely say two things. Firstly, he or she will give credit to his mother and secondly, credit will be given to the teacher. In the lives of almost all the great men, we get to hear these things. (Modi, 2014)

> In every person's life you can see, any biography or autobiography you read, one thing is always mentioned—a mother gives birth and a teacher gives life. (Modi, 2015)

His listeners were encouraged to aspire to future greatness by reading about the lives of great men, as Modi himself did as a child. Teachers were reminded that they have a great responsibility because students spend "maximum time" with teachers, more than with their families (Modi, 2015). For Modi, the work of a teacher is similar to the work of an illiterate gardener who grows plants out of manure (Modi, 2014) or an illiterate potter who shapes pots out of earth (Modi, 2015).

> For a teacher, there is no child above or below the other, nor ahead or behind the other. All the students are equal for the teacher. One has to identify the potential in each and every student. (Modi, 2014)

What is key here is lifelong dedication to serving the nation, as exemplified by the great man and teacher whose birthday is honoured with Teachers Day:

> Despite reaching the pinnacle in his lifetime Dr. Radhakrishnan kept the teacher within him alive. He never let the teacher inside him die. A teacher is never tied to age; a teacher never retires, that is, if he is a real teacher. (Modi, 2015)

The call to imagine and work toward a better future was accompanied by reminders of a present time where the Indian nation is mired in crisis, confusion, and loss. In Vedic times, the relationship between the Brahmin teacher and his Brahmin students was a sacred one, but according to Modi there is little respect or remembrance for them today:

> There was an era where there was such reverence towards a teacher. In every village the most respected person had to be the teacher. Gradually, the situation has changed. We can reestablish that situation. (Modi, 2014)

> Today all the teachers here who are listening to me must also be wondering—so many students have studied under us but nobody remembers us. What kind of relation was that, what was missing, this feeling of closeness. (Modi, 2014)

The deprofessionalization of teaching as public service takes multiple forms. On the one hand, Modi admonished his listeners for forgetting hallowed traditions of teaching as serving, and on the other, he blamed teachers for their current predicament. He repeatedly referred to the lack of talented teachers while also suggesting that teachers did not require training, as indicated above. In 2014, he proposed the following solution to the problem of teacher shortages: "If in India all the educated people can take one period every week, no matter how big an officer they are, can they sit with children and educate them?" He also suggested that teachers were not teaching what children really needed to learn:

> The children with whom we are living, who are growing up in the age of technology, we should not deprive them. If we deprive them, then this will be tantamount to a big crime. It is a social crime. It should be our endeavour that our children should be tuned in with the modern technology. (Modi,

2014)

Modern technology as a vehicle for progress has always been central to Modi's speeches and policies. In 2014, Digital India became a national slogan and digital technologies were proffered as solutions to everything from communication infrastructure, to corrupt governance, to the shortage of teachers. Online education was presented as a key strategy to increasing girls' access to secondary education in this way:

> We want to use technology to its maximum potential for quality of education. Today what is the solution when a good teacher is not ready to go to a distant village? Long distance education technologies can be promoted. Just as I am talking now with children from all the corners of the country … from Leh, Tirupati, Port Blair … Similarly, in the future good teachers can teach using this medium. One teacher from the center stage can teach good things to millions of students. Children have a very good grasping power; they will internalize this immediately. If we are able to do this then we will be successful in giving quality education to girls also. (Modi, 2014)

These remarks foreshadowed a policy regime focused on accelerated privatization of a chronically underresourced and multitiered public education system (Bhatty & Sundar, 2020). Technology also serves as another polysemic symbol which reminds listeners that the Hindutva project values modern technology as well as ancient Brahminical Hindu traditions. In fact, Hindutva history of science has made origin claims on modern scientific discoveries ranging from mathematics, medicine, surgery, spaceships, and nuclear power, to genetics (Nanda, 2016). Simultaneous and multiple tellings of time to collapse myth and reality is a central feature of ethno-religious narratives of nationalism. In the next section, I continue to analyze the politics of time that underpin constructions of the idealized child and childhood around three main themes: time to remember, time to dream, and time to serve.

Time to remember

The ideal nation requires an ideal child who knows what is important to remember (and to forget). Faced with an unstable, disordered present and an uncertain immediate future, Hindu nationalism offers a temporal anchor rooted in reclaiming the values and social order of a Brahmin-Vedic Hindu past. The idealized child must be taught to remember the idealized past in order to understand the kind of nation that is to be reclaimed and recreated in the future. This kind of moralized collective memory making is a distinctive feature of cyclical narratives of past glory, present decay, and future redemption.

Remembering three particular periods of historical time was highlighted by Modi: a perfect if distant ancient Vedic past before the time of invasion by foreign invaders (i.e., Muslims and Christians); the time of Hindu resistance to colonizers (Muslim and British); and what might be referred to as the time of Modi. For example, to link the immediate present to the ancient past, Modi (2015) reminded listeners that President Radhakrishan's birthday coincides with the birthday of the Hindu god Krishna in the Hindu calendar. Similarly, to link the immediate present to the time of Hindu resistance, Modi told his listeners to read about the lives of great Indian men, such as dominant-caste Hindu philosopher Swami Vivekananda, who opposed British colonialism (S. Sarkar, 1992). These kinds of slippages between time periods and anticolonial historical figures present Hindu nationalists as freedom fighters and conveniently obscure the historical fact that leaders of the Hindu nationalist movement colluded with the British.

In the next two excerpts, Modi moved seamlessly between these moralized constructions of past, present, and future to suggest that India's environmental challenges can be solved through traditional Hindu culture.

When we are children then what does our mummy tell us? See this moon, this moon is your maternal uncle. This sun is your paternal grandfather. These things were taught to us very simply and they gave us environmental education in the most simple and easy manner in our simple lives. But I do not know how this change came and everything that we know became bad. We were scolded and punished, and we were forced to believe that all this is not good and because of that we have come to our present situation. (Modi, 2014)

There is no climate change; we have changed and our habits have changed. We have got bad habits and because of that we have damaged the entire environment. If we change then that is also ready to change. God has kept such a mechanism that equilibrium is reached immediately. But the first condition is that humans should not come into conflict with nature. Humans should love nature, be it water, air, or plants; love everything. And that is why here in our scripture plants are called supreme souls; rivers are called mothers. But since we have forgotten about all this even Ganga has been polluted. (Modi, 2014)

In the above excerpts, Modi did not explicitly name Hinduism as the reference point. Instead, in talking about bedtime stories and scriptures, he reminded his audience of unspoken but widely shared knowledge. Similar to his acclaimed speech about Yoga to the United Nations (Puri, 2019), Modi did not need to use the word Hindu because of "settled associations between antiquity, epistemology, and upper-caste Hinduism even outside of India" (p. 323). This allowed him to evoke a mythical Hindu past where all Hindus lived in harmony with nature, a present in crisis due to the loss of true or right values, and a way forward to a better future if ancient values and habits are reclaimed.

Of course, Modi's track record on environmental policies is dominated by the exploitation of nature, often to the benefit of his good friend and mining magnate Gautam Adani (Kothari, 2018). However, Modi is not alone today in looking for a past time when humans lived in harmony with other forms of life on this planet. Stereotypes about inherently ecologically sensitive Indians (read Hindus) abound within India and beyond, despite evidence of a diversity of precolonial Hindu attitudes to nature including both preservation and destruction—for example, clearing of forests and traditional lands of Adivasis (Indigenous peoples). In the absence of critical historical consciousness, these kinds of utterances are easily read as emancipatory and even decolonial.

If what the ideal child should remember about the past is highly circumscribed, the future appears to be open and full of possibility. Here, Modi draws on his own childhood as well as adulthood to convey desired ways to be and become. Specifically, Modi encourages children to see themselves as individuals and to see childhood as a time to be playful and to dream and discover their own interests and aptitudes.

Time to dream

Modi began his 2014 speech by thanking his audience for the opportunity to speak to the children "whose eyes shine with dreams of future India." The invitation to dream is intrinsic to the work of making spectacle; dreams hold the potential to bridge desire and reality, whether the present or the recent past (Kaur & Hansen, 2016). During his 2014 election campaign, Modi sold voters a collective dream of new and better times to come, and of course undivided India is a longstanding dream for Hindu nationalists. When encouraged by a leader like Modi, dreaming becomes a national duty.

Modi repeatedly exhorted children, teachers, and parents that childhood is a time to be playful, to explore, and to dream.

Your age is such, you should run so much, have lots of fun, take time out so that you sweat at least four

> times a day. Otherwise, what will your life become? (Modi, 2014)

> This is the age when you come to know many things, you understand many things, and you have a lot of courage to try things. (Modi, 2014)

> The respect which the students have for the teachers, the dedication of teachers towards teaching, and a feeling of bonding between teachers and students is a combination which does not only serve knowledge but also teaches the skill of living a life and inculcates a habit of honing dreams. (Modi, 2015)

The references to play and exercise and the linkages between physical health and moral strength construct a discourse of nation as body (Neuman, 2022). For Modi, dreaming is also necessary for becoming and doing something meaningful in the future. During the Q&A segments, the highest number of questions from students focus on how to deal with the pressure of doing well on school examinations. In response, Modi tells students to change how they think about the belief that future success is guaranteed by performing well on school-leaving exams.

> Being a student, even you would be having many dreams. I do not believe that circumstances can stop anybody in life if the person who has to rise has strong determination. And I believe the youth and the children of our country have this potential. (Modi, 2014)

> There is a problem in most of the people: If they become unsuccessful then they make a graveyard of their dreams. Failures should never be allowed to make a graveyard of the dreams. Actually, failures should become a base for us to learn the lessons to fulfill our dreams. (Modi, 2015)

As an alternative to academic success, Modi advocated for the value of the arts, which prevent people from "becoming robots" (Modi, 2015). As evidence he cited his own successes—as an orator, a published poet, as well as becoming prime minister.

> When we set ourselves free and decide that I like to write poems so I will write poems and I shall see what happens. You will become your own Rembrandt, and if you like to paint then do it. (Modi, 2015)

He half-jokingly issued multiple warnings to parents who deprive their children of their present (childhood) through unrelenting pressure to do well in school:

> Parents who pressure their children like this [academic performance] don't know their children—their ability, their inclinations…. They should spend more time with their children. (Modi, 2015)

And in case these words were not enough, Modi evoked fear about the loss of childhood by confiding that the questions students asked made him feel "scared that somewhere the child in you is withering away. Questions from children should be children's questions" (Modi, 2014).

It was at these moments in the speeches, that Modi was able to present himself as someone who was closer to the realities of children than their own parents and teachers. He offered his own ordinary yet exceptional childhood as an exemplar to his audience. The picture he painted of his journey from humble beginnings to prime minister was coloured by themes of playfulness and curiosity balanced with humility, self-discipline (particularly in terms of cleanliness and physical fitness), and a driving desire to be of service.

> Did I also play pranks? Can there be any child who does not play any pranks or do any mischief? Is it possible? If there is such a child then I really worry that the childhood is dying very fast these days. The time of childhood should be long lived. There should be pranks; there should be a lot of fun. It is

essential for development in life. (Modi, 2014)

> I have come to understand that sometimes grand ambitions [becoming PM] can become a big burden. I have seen many people who are depressed because of the fact that they had an ambition to become something. One should have dreams, but instead of dreaming about what to become one should dream about how to do something meaningful. (Modi, 2014)

Modi presents himself as a child who was not only determined to learn but was someone for whom the most valued learning took place outside the classroom through reading about great men and observation.

> For me observation was my personality type. I used to observe a lot of things in great details. I wanted to understand things, not only in the classroom, but also outside the classroom. I used to keep looking for opportunities to observe. When the War of 1965 broke out we were very young. There was a station next to our village from where army men were going to war. The people from our village took sweets for them. I went with them and that is the first time I saw and registered a very different world. I saw that people are going to give their lives away; they are going to die for the country. When I started seeing these things then I felt there is a vast world out there, so gradually I started trying to learn from these things. (Modi, 2015)

Here an example of a moment of learning through life observation also delivers a message about learning patriotism since the War of 1965 refers to the second war between India and Pakistan over Kashmir. These encouragements to children to be true to themselves and to resist the regimentation of schooling and even home socialization were enmeshed with reminders to serve the nation. This mix of unapologetic individualism and selfless service is unique to Modi in a movement built on self-effacing service (Jaffrelot, 2021). It has enabled him to cultivate an image that combines a bold entrepreneurial spirit that is not afraid to strike out on new and different paths but always regulated by majoritarian Hindu cultural frameworks.

Time to serve

Sewa, or selfless and self-effacing voluntary humanitarian service, has always been a core building block of character in Hindutva pedagogy, as well as a highly effective recruitment tool across the nation (T. Sarkar, 1994). The politics of Hindu elites giving time or giving up time for *sewa* draws on multiple temporalities, including Hindu and Christian religious temporalities as well as capitalist clock-time conceptions of work time, free time, and so forth (Bhattacharjee, 2016).

Modi told his listeners that they could perform *sewa* in many small ways, for example, by saving electricity at home, planting trees to save the environment, and above all making "no compromise in cleanliness and hygiene" (Modi, 2014). As an exemplar, he recounted observations made during a visit to Japanese primary schools:

> I observed many small things which I really liked. Technology is being used to its full capacity. Even small children are trying to understand and learn things with the help of technology. I have seen that they stress two things: they have a lot of scientific temperament and their discipline is very simple; they are very comfortable with maintaining hygiene and sanitation and also with giving respect. (Modi, 2014)

In this excerpt, *sewa*, technology, physical discipline, and cleanliness are interwoven as ideal attributes of an Indian child. The use of an example from Japan is no coincidence given Japan's hi-tech brand as well as the historical ties between Indian and Japanese nationalist thinkers and Modi's longstanding relationship with former prime minister Shinzo Abe.

Modi's discourse of *sewa* also incorporates capitalist and neoliberal managerialist temporalities. Volunteering to help in this way is underpinned by a capitalist temporal discourse that normalizes and legitimizes a social order where elites (the time rich) control both their own time and the time of non-elites (the time poor; Julkunen, 1977). This discourse assumes that we all, whether adults or children, have the same amount of time at our disposal, that individuals are responsible for managing their own time, and relatedly, that decisions on whether and how to use or waste our time are a matter of personal choice. Modi's solutions to India's problems are always presented as simple, instant, and easily measurable. In 2014, he proposed the following solution to the problem of teacher shortages:

> If in India all the educated people can take one period every week, no matter how big an officer they are, can they sit with children and educate them? ... Let us transform nation building into mass mobilization, add everybody's strength. We are not that type of a country which needs to be so backward. We can go very far ahead, and that is why our effort and emphasis should be to determine our national character. (Modi, 2014)

This message was repeated in 2015 as follows: "Those in our society who have achieved a lot—engineers, doctors, lawyers, judges—could take one hour a week or 100 hours in a year to teach—this would infuse new strength in our schools" (Modi, 2015). These moral-temporal relations normalize rather than question a deeply unequal social order that places an elite few adults and children in the position of "helping" others. The welfare of the have-nots is dependent on the beneficence and patronage of the haves. In the following excerpt, Modi used intersecting markers of age as well as gender and class to highlight this unequal social order:

> Suppose we are educated and some woman comes to our house to do the laundry. Her age is 40-50 years. Has it ever occurred to you that I should make her sit and learn. That I can give half an hour to you and make you learn how to read and write? I believe that these elderly women who work in our houses, if we educate them and teach them how to read and write then they form a large section of the society and it is a big service to the country. There is no patriotism bigger than millions of people doing these small things for our country. (Modi, 2015)

It is worth noting that while in his late 60s at the time of this utterance, Modi avoided referring to himself as elderly. An agile, virile, and celibate masculinity remain key to his image through regular advocacy of fitness and public performances of yoga. He repeatedly conflated control over one's own body with saving the nation. In sum, this discourse of service for salvation recognizes and affirms particular children and childhoods as worthy and valuable in the present and future nation. Before concluding the analysis, I make a few additional observations about the social hierarchies constructed by this moral-temporal discourse of childhood and nationalism.

Time and social hierarchy

I have shown that while these Teachers Day events may have been broadcast to all students in India, the idealized constructions of childhood are not meant to be universal. As previously indicated, the composition of the physical audience mirror the Hindu caste and class groups known to be predominantly Modi and BJP supporters (Chatterji et al., 2019). It is their concerns about the chaotic present and uncertain futures that Modi has continuously sought to assuage by framing himself as a *Vikas Purush* (man of development) and using rhetoric about economic prosperity, military strength, and unapologetic nationalist pride. It is also children from these aspirational (and privileged) classes that are vital for the promises of *Acche Din* (good days) to come—a key campaign slogan. These children have the time and other means (e.g., digital connectivity) to attend and complete 12 years of formal schooling. They have time to study, time to play, time to dream, and time to serve their nation albeit in gendered ways.

This temporal narrative of childhood of course assumes not only time to attend school and the possibility of disposable time but also control over what occurs in this free time. The narrative therefore excludes children who live and experience time in schools and childhood very differently from those in the audience. To begin with, the vast majority of Indian children—migrant, poor, and working-class children from Muslim, Dalit, Bahujan, and other oppressed castes and Adivasi (Indigenous) children—continue to be denied rights to and in education (Thapliyal, 2016). These same groups are constructed as dangerous impediments to neocolonial projects of the Modi administration ranging from the use of colonial-era sedition laws to imprison student protesters, to the use of hi-tech bio surveillance, the unchecked proliferation of anti-minority violence, and the intensification of the settler-colonial project in Kashmir.

Modi himself points to a social hierarchy of children: "There are two types of children. You have to decide if you live in an organized manner and if you are serving your country or not" (Modi, 2014). Time is being used here to mark out expectations, responsibility, ability, and desirability. As previously mentioned, cleanliness is a central trope in the pedagogy of the Hindu right; in particular women and girls carry a disproportionate burden of responsibility for protecting and maintaining the physical and cultural purity of their families and homes (Manjrekar, 2011). Read against this context, the attributes and dispositions of the ideal, desired child are clearly superior to those of the undesirable or problem children, and perhaps even the child who is dirty, lazy, and unwilling to serve or is of no use to the nation. Waste and cleanliness are inherently nationalist symbols in that they indicate order and place, who belongs on the inside and who on the outside, and for whom there is no place at all (Chakrabarty, 1992). This temporalized binary and hierarchical construction of childhood contributes to the production and maintenance of an ethno-religious nationalist social order based on Brahminical Hindu fears about purity and pollution.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have explored how an authoritarian Hindu nationalist leader deploys time to naturalize Brahminical Hindu heritage and construct ethno-religious imaginaries and narratives about childhood and nation in contemporary India. The 2014 and 2015 Teachers Day spectacles provided this populist leader with a channel to establish connections to every aspect of the moral-temporal lives and relations of the children in his audience. Idealized, affect-laden, religious notions of children and childhood play a vital role in communicating a desired social order, distribution of power and a way to achieve the dream of a future Hindu India.

At the time of completing this manuscript, all talk of good days to come has quieted. In his second administration, Modi has reverted to his earlier avatar of being a crusader for the Hindu cause. After a short hiatus, Modi published a book titled *Exam Warriors*[6] in January 2018, after which the spectacle involving school students was revived under the auspices of *Pareeksha Pe Charcha* (Let's Talk About Exams). The annual event is timed early in the year ahead of the school-leaving examinations for government schools. Since 2019, participation is determined through a transnational online competition where students and parents submit writing about what they have learned about success and failure from Modi's book (*Outlook India*, 2019). Through this time-infused discourse, Modi continues to communicate what is desired and expected of dutiful Indian children in order to progress toward an ordered and prosperous future.

Acknowledgments

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1   Hindu nationalist aggression intensified dramatically in the first two years of the Modi administration through accelerated neoliberal assaults on the secular and public character of Indian universities, crackdown on political dissent, intimidation of news media and judiciary, exponential and unpunished rise in gendered violence against Dalits and Muslims (including beef lynchings, rapes, and tortured murders), and widespread hypermilitarism (see, e.g., Chatterji et al., 2019).

2   Prominent institutions include the Vidya Bharati and Vivekananda Kendra networks of schools.

3   However, the RSS is not the only nationalist education project in India. Schooling for "emotional integration" or patriotism was a founding goal of post-Independence education policy, as documented extensively by the scholarship of Krishna Kumar, Manish Jain, and Veronique Benei, among others.

4   In fact, media reports highlighted complaints about being excluded from participation by principals of elite private schools located in the capital city of Delhi (*Economic Times*, 2014).

5   The Chai Pe Charcha campaign connected 1,000 tea/chai shops across 300 parliamentary constituencies across India using the internet and satellite television. A radically different format from political rallies and televised debates, this format was used by Modi on a weekly basis to connect with and respond to questions from voters.

6   The book is a 200-page 25-chapter compilation of *mantras* (chants) and pictures for parents and students on ways to deal with exam-related stress for 10th- and 12th-standard students. A Twitter account called @ExamWarriors was created to accompany the book release.