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From decolonisation to authoritarianism: the co-option of the decolonial agenda in higher education by right-wing nationalist elites in Russia and India

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Abstract

This article discusses how the critique of the monopoly of Western liberal thought through the decolonisation movement that was intended to increase the number of voices heard has been co-opted by nationalist politics in India and Russia. The debates in higher education in these countries reflect current key questions on the nature of the Indian and Russian nations—both under respective nationalist governments—where both are advocating a cutting off from Western modernity. Using Mignolo's concept of "de-linking" that was intended to raise up non-Western ways of thinking, the article shows that India and Russia have adapted and simplified decolonial discourse to reject "Western-influenced" critiques of development, inequality, and authoritarianism. Under political pressure from these authoritarian regimes, universities have helped to embed repressive majoritarian politics through anti-Western rhetoric disguised as de-linking, enabling democratic backsliding by discrediting opposition. This is done to protect a new identity based upon state conceptions of traditional values, paradoxically erasing minority voices that do not fit neatly into the unified national narrative. When universities are branded as Western agents for being critical of local traditions and schools of thought, the space for critical thinking and democratic debate is ultimately removed, leaving those who oppose Putin and Modi with no safe way to engage with political discourse, and this actually undermines the intentions of decolonial philosophy.

Introduction

Recent research on authoritarian leaders and regimes, including Russia's Vladimir Putin (Krastev & Holmes, 2019), India's Narendra Modi (Jaffrelot, 2021), and China's Xi Jinping (Perry, 2015) discusses how populist politics polarises society, weakening democracy.

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These leaders capitalise on grassroots and academic calls for increased freedom from Western neoliberal hegemony, linking to and co-opting the work of decolonial national philosophers who call for the empowerment of local knowledge producers and the reinstatement of traditional ways of being and knowing within these contexts. Local scholars argue that the historic and cultural exceptionalism of contexts like Russia and India necessitates an intellectual de-linking to break away from an entrenched dependency on Western knowledge hegemony. Ruling parties, government representatives, elite universities, and university leaders co-opt this rhetoric to justify the promotion of anti-democratic, repressive political reforms that serve to entrench authoritarianism on an anti-Western platform, using the politics of division and the Western "enemy" as a pretext for curtailing freedom of expression. Under political pressure from authoritarian regimes, universities help to embed populist majoritarian politics and provide narrative legitimacy to authorised cultural and political discourse. The effect of this is the suppression, and silencing of grassroots calls for change, including (paradoxically) those that helped to shape local decolonial thinking. While academia can be a place of debate and progress, it is also elitist and plays a role in supporting power through social reproduction.

Part and parcel of democratic backsliding in India and Russia are the amassing of excessive executive power and the politicisation of ethnicity and religion, leading to discrimination against minorities and anti-immigration discourses, at odds with decolonial principles (Mettler & Lieberman, 2020). Decolonial thinkers have been central to the promotion of minority rights in various repressive contexts (Majumdar, 2015). However, the weakening of democratic institutions in India and Russia, which reinforces the infringements of rights and freedom of expression, is legitimised through association with over-simplified decolonial ideas, where to shut down critiques of the regimes in power, authoritarianism accuses Western liberal thought of creating the ills of a globalising world. Universities are made to toe this line (willingly or unwillingly) through various repressive tactics, such as political appointments, curriculum reform, control of finances, policing of students, and dismissal or arrests of staff.

This article discusses how the critique of the monopoly of Western liberal thought through the decolonisation movement, which was intended to increase the number of voices heard, has been co-opted by authoritarian regimes through universities to promote a "return to the roots" rhetoric to stifle domestic critics. It starts with a discussion of some key principles of decolonisation before engaging with evidence from higher education in India and Russia. We explore Mignolo's writing as one illustrative example of how ideas of decolonial de-linking have been articulated.

Superficially, India and Russia might be considered non-comparable, owing to their respective development statuses. In India, previously independent states were colonised by the British to create a single multi-ethnic state with a dominant North Indian group, while in Russia, the Russians conquered a large area to form the Russian empire, in which other nationalities were assimilated or marginalised. Yet both are thus diverse countries, encompassing a wide variety of social and ethnic groups whose existence is used to maintain horizontal and vertical inequalities by state and economic structures. Both countries claim to be secular, but religion plays a significant role in the promotion of their nationalist politics. Lastly, both are led by leaders who control the national media and higher education to repress dissenting views, using coercion, legislation, and a dominant authorised discourse of culture, nation, and identity. We systematically reviewed the last decade of higher education in both countries, drawing parallels between the Russian and Indian experiences, and found similar trends towards repression that is justified through an over-simplified de-linking rhetoric.

De-linking in decolonialism

Decolonialism is rooted within a long historical movement, shaped through anti-colonial power struggles. It has been essential to opening academic spaces for critical discussion of elitism and inequality. Philosophically rooted in the works of Arendt, Césaire, Fanon, Foucault, Said, and others, decolonialism has empowered scholars to reject intellectual subjugation that has persisted after the legal dismantling of Western colonialism. Decolonialism is related to but distinct from postcolonialism. Postcolonial theorists challenged the Eurocentric assumptions that had characterised Western thought and its global dominance to foreground the lives of colonised peoples. As Darian-Smith notes, "postcolonialism's most explicit intellectual and theoretical foundation lies in Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978)", which examined "the West's historical construction of the Orient as the oppositional referent - the Other - to itself, both as essentialized self-reflection and constructed mimesis" (1996, p. 293). From there, postcolonial theorists emphasised the importance of language, representation, and power in shaping societies. Decolonialism has moved beyond this position by advocating for redistribution and restructuring of social, political, and economic systems (though one approach did not predate the other). Ideas within this frame have varied widely, from the poetic humanism of Césaire who advocated for integration for a shared future, to Arendt's critique of the crisis of modernity and its bureaucratic banality, to Dussel's evocative philosophy of liberation, to the work of more radical scholars like Fanon, a theorist and activist who wrote from raw personal experience of subjugation to critique racism and advocate for violent liberation from colonial legacies.

Within this context, we cannot speak about a "post" colonial world because interrelations between power and knowledge are embedded within dominant international discourse, cemented through genocide, violence, and repression, favouring Western values and modernity, dissipating across formally colonised and colonising populations, entrenching biases, dependency, and global inequalities (Maldonado-Torres, 2020, p. 119). Some "Western" knowledge has adapted to suit local contexts, not always negatively (e.g. through scientific and medical progress); however, benefits are highly contested (Arendt, 1958).

One key figure in contemporary decolonial scholarship is Walter Mignolo. Building on Quijano's critique of the coloniality of power in Latin America (2000), Mignolo argued in 2007 for an intellectual de-linking of the postcolonial world from Western epistemology in the name of decolonisation. Others had expounded the impact of colonialism on education, critiquing how different forms of knowledge had been subjugated or erased by colonial systems (Battiste, 2004; Crossley & Tikly, 2004). Mignolo claimed that "both 'liberation'" from the colonial legacy "and 'decolonisation'" pointed towards a need for "conceptual (and therefore epistemic) projects of de-linking from the colonial matrix of power" (p. 451). The narrative is similar but distinct from anti-Western discourses that we see emerging in Russia and India, as we will expand.

According to Foucault, "power and knowledge directly imply one another", because "there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations" (1975, p. 27). The colonial matrix of power that Mignolo identifies is visible in lingering trade and geopolitical ties that bind the Global North and South together and in resulting academic framings of development inequalities within international development discourse. Knowledge and power are mutually determining and limit our ability to see beyond the confines and thought processes that we are routinely manoeuvred into adopting by the matrix itself. Wiley explains that the "stories we tell about our fields … to situate our own

work, depend upon the invocation of particular genealogies of those fields", and they "render alternate genealogies invisible" (Wiley, 2016, p. 994). Once entrenched, they "make it difficult to see other ways we could tell the story" (ibid). Academia is complicit in this process by lending gravity to certain types of knowledge while erasing/negating others.

In the Indian academy, these processes have been most famously critiqued by Chakrabarty, Spivak, Visvanathan, and Shiva. De-linking from its British colonial legacy is nothing new; the rise of subaltern studies, led by writings of Guha and Chatterjee, shows how Indian postcolonial academia tried to de-link from a colonial interpretation of Indian history. Putting ordinary people at the centre of the historical narrative was both novel and revolutionary, opening the space for a much wider discussion on India's past and the British colonial legacy, including the partition violence.

At the core of this is the question of what it means to be Indian. Historically, Savarkar's conception of Indian identity and the state, which forms the foundation of much of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)'s contemporary Hindutva agenda, sought to de-link India from its colonial roots even before 1947. This construction of Indian identity, linked to Hindu religion and culture, was diametrically opposed to its predecessor, the inclusive Nehruvian Doctrine (Lall, 2001). Less popular with contemporary BJP politicians, but even more important, was Gandhi's decolonial legacy, especially his argument that India should be structured as a village democracy, rather than taking on the structures of its colonial masters.

The Gandhian narrative, which identifies a unique development trajectory for India, reflects a fundamental element of decolonial scholarship more broadly and what Maldonado-Torres describes as the "decolonial turn", which is a turn away from *modernity* (2011). From Mignolo, we can read such modernity as comprising a forced imposition of Western models of governance and development upon postcolonial nations:

> Under the spell of neo-liberalism … , modernity and modernization, together with democracy, are being sold as a package trip to the promised land of happiness … . Yet, when people do not buy the package willingly … they become subject to all kinds of direct and indirect violence. (Mignolo, 2007, p. 452)

Kaviraj (2000) argues that India developed its own conception of modernity in response to its overt colonisation and subordination by Europe; this has broadly split along two lines. The first, developed by Nehru at independence, promised that India would embrace socialism and non-alignment. The second has led today to Hindu nationalism—whereby India's ancient civilisation is seen to be the basis for India's contemporary modernity, which is conceptualised as superior to the colonial governance systems imposed by the British. This has been the basis of public and political thought since the early 2000s and rejects Western liberal ways. Democracy is not rejected in theory, but in practice, not all voices can express themselves. Only those in support of the Hindu nationalist project can be heard. Others, as discussed below, are suppressed and find their freedoms curtailed by a new Indian hegemonic discourse that uses anti-Western rhetoric to promote a primordial Hindu nationalist way of being and dismiss full democratic participation of minorities as a Eurocentric conception of modernity. This discourse, as we unpack, runs counter to most decolonial scholarship.

While democracy has, as Mignolo implies, been bundled into development packages to justify contemporary neocolonial intervention, we do not believe that modernity, democracy, and neoliberalism are a "package trip". Indeed, their correlation provides opportunities for fascist co-option to creep in. Democracy is a distinct concept, which is lumped together with Eurocentrism by autocrats in India and Russia to dismiss calls for freedom.

As Temin summarises, democracy has erroneously been conceptualised as a "heritage for the white" Westerners (2021, p. 1082). Mangu (2006) argues that the idea that democracy is not feasible in Africa, for example, is part of both a problematic tradition of Western Barbarisation of African cultures (Reyna, 2010) and a conceit of Eurocentric thinking that retroactively justifies the anti-democratic subordination of African peoples under colonial rule. Similarly, Hamid (2011) rejects Western devaluation of Arab civil society prior to the Arab Spring. Thus, Singh notes, the relationship between decolonialism and democracy must be interrogated by decolonial scholars, posing the following question—"In what ways does decolonization unsettle the project of democracy, including its more critical or radical forms?" (2019, p.332). The answer is not clear.

It may seem odd to talk about postcolonial and decolonial scholarship in the context of Russia, itself a former empire not a colony. However, the history of the Russian Empire from Peter the Great onwards displays a tension between a view of Russia as technically and economically backward, inferior to Western Europe and needing to learn from and imitate the West in order to catch up, and an alternative view of Russia as spiritually superior to Western Europe, with its own unique culture and Orthodox Christian heritage, uncorrupted by materialism. In the nineteenth century, this found expression in the Slavophiles vs Westernisers dispute. The development of the concept of Eurasianism in Russia may be seen as a continuation of the Slavophile view of Russian culture and tradition as unique and superior.

In Russia, post- and decolonial scholarship is divided between those who decry the government as a coloniser of its own peoples, such as Etkind, Verkhovsky, Petrushevskaya, Hokanson, and Kovalyov, and those who object to the infiltration of uncritical Eurocentrism into Russian discourse, such as Bakhtin, Berdyaev, Lotman, and Shestov. While the former group criticise the Russian state for emulating Western modernity, the latter, in contrast to Césaire, are more concerned with explicitly rejecting the notion of a universal humanism, allowing for Russian cultural exceptionalism. Their work, because it does not criticise Russia's own role in global inequality, has been used to shape the current state and academic narrative that Russia must forge its own path, where philosophical critiques of Western cultural influences and questions of de-linking Russia have turned into a paranoid search to root out Western-minded traitors and liberals, as detailed below. In this process, the voices of the former group of Kremlin critics are being silenced. We are beginning to see similar processes of sidelining of minority rights scholars in India, who, rather than advocating for de-linking from Western hegemony, criticise the emergence of a new Hindu nationalist hegemony at home, such as Amartya Sen, Romila Thapar, and Pratap Bhanu Mehta. Despite its more complex origins within critical philosophies, de-linking from a Western enemy, complicit for all national problems, is an idea that is more appealing to the majoritarian politics of right-wing nationalists and is entrenched through selective academic funding and other mechanisms.

Mignolo's work (and those of the other authors mentioned) is far more nuanced than anti-Westernist co-option indicates. He advocates for a de-linking from Western knowledge hegemony for the sake of an epistemic shift towards "plural-versality". De-linking is not intended to imply cutting off knowledge exchange with the West, but rather raising up non-Western ways of thinking and knowing within global discourse, to liberate humanity from the conceptually parasitic shackles of colonialism. To Fanon, who had the Algerian context specifically in mind, this meant liberating native communities from their internalised perceptions of inferiority and settlers from their internalised perceptions of superiority: "Both must turn their backs on inhuman voices which were those of their respective ancestors in order that authentic communication be possible", not for the sake of silencing debate

(Fanon, 1952, p. 231). Mignolo envisaged not an abandonment of Western scholarship, but a revolution against its hegemony to create room for plurality of discourse wherein a multitude of voices can be heard and real communication can thrive. Such free exchange of knowledge, in which the quality of ideas is valued above their origin, is key to ensuring the academic freedom needed to promote genuine progress in scholarship globally and is actually in the spirit of many Russian and Indian decolonial writers, including Bakhtin and Spivak.

Stein (2017) argues that Western universities are complicit in producing power–knowledge hierarchies by mining postcolonial contexts for data and converting this into knowledge as part of a system in which indigenous generators of knowledge cannot produce discourse that is heard in mainstream academic debate. Smith goes further, damning the "unrelenting research" to which Indigenous communities have been subjected and its role in filtering their voices through external values and cultural orientations (2021, p. 49). Western universities that have benefited from colonially produced global inequalities may now be committing to reforming themselves out of alleged altruism, but are "failing to effectively address persistent racialised inequalities" (Shain et al., 2021, p. 920). Non-Western academic institutions are also implicated in these colonial legacies, either by following the lead of Western scholarship or by promoting new knowledge hierarchies within a national or regional context, as we investigate in Russia and India. Similar to Hindu nationalism, in Russia, the new hegemony is rooted in Russian exceptionalism and Eurasianism, a philosophy in which nationalists self-identify as neither purely Asian nor European in order to contest Eurocentrism and promote a common identity to justify the continued dominance of ethnic Russians over diverse minority lands. Gerasimov et al. explain that the Eurasianists "pronounce[d] Russia a colony of the West" because of its epistemic subjectivity (2013, p. 104). Thus, Eurasianism contests Western epistemological imperialism by rejecting Europe as a benchmark for development and seeks to "unlearn the West" (Laruelle, 2008, p. 31). It has been used by successive regimes to justify Russia's turn from Western liberal democratic principles towards autocracy (Ostrovsky, 2015) and to justify military expansion into Ukraine, which Putin sees as comprising Russian lands[1]. Dugin, one of Russia's most prominent contemporary philosophers, therefore claims that Russia's war against Ukraine represents a battle against "absolute Evil, embodied in Western civilisation" and "its liberal-totalitarian hegemony" (MKRU, 2022).

As in India, rejecting the West and what it stands for is not a new trend in Russia. Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy's works offer concerns about the dangerous influence of Western culture on Russian thinking. But these authors empowered Western-leaning characters to have informed debates about the tensions between Eurocentric modernity and tradition, while today's rising authoritarianism is constraining the space for such analysis, because Western-leaning liberal thinking has become implicitly "evil" and treasonous. Such framing is much closer to Dugin's fascist thinking and Ilyin's before him.

The parallels between decolonialism and Eurasianism therefore come apart in the depth of critical debate that the two frameworks allow: decolonialism is fast evolving as a rejection of modernity but allows for debate and is plural-versile, while Eurasianism offers an alternative vision of modernity within Russian institutional structures but in current scholarship shuts down any critique of the Kremlin's power and is Russo-hegemonic.

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[1] See Putin's speech "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians", 2021. Available at: http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181.

Evidence from India's Hindu nationalist movement

After almost 45 years of following a socialist economic model, India found itself in the midst of a balance of payment crisis and initiated comprehensive economic reforms in 1991 (Lall, 2001). While it took well over a decade for many of these neoliberal reforms to be completed, the effects of economic change were felt rather quickly, especially by the poorer sections of society. As India joined the "globalised" world, many, in particular the middle classes, started to question the effects of Westernisation. The ruling BJP tapped into these fears and Hindu nationalism as a political force rose in response to them (Lall & Anand, 2022). At first, it seemed opposed to globalisation, promising to protect India's Hindu essence, yet soon after gaining power, the BJP co-opted the neoliberal reforms but rejected what it defined as "Western" values. Nanda (2011) demonstrates how neoliberalism seeped into Hinduism as a "God market" emerged to cater to the increasingly affluent middle classes. The cultural "return to the roots", in the midst of rising economic growth, was underpinned by changes in India's school textbooks, where history was rewritten from a Hindu nationalist perspective. The resulting contradiction between a Western-style globalisation—complete with the aspiration of Western elite education—under the auspices of a Hindu nationalist leadership, changed Indian politics and society in a way that even 10 years of Congress government between 2004 and 2014 could not reverse (Lall & Anand, 2022).

In 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the BJP were elected with an absolute majority. Since then, there have been concerns about the state of India's democracy. The rise of Hindu nationalism is today underpinned by a Modi personality cult, the strong, incorruptible man who embodies India's future and alone is capable of leading India back to greatness (Jaffrelot, 2021). Modi's critique of Western practices and a return to Indian roots has resulted in a rejection of human rights and freedom of speech and an intense control of civil society. The V-Dem Institute *Democracy Report* changed India's status from democracy to electoral autocracy in 2021: the practice of democracy has thinned out to merely include elections. Since the advent of the BJP in coalition government in 1998, and more rapidly since its absolute win in 2014, India has changed from a largely inclusive society to one where polarising nationalist politics resulted in minorities being denied their basic rights. According to Freedom House, India's status declined "free" to "partly free" due to a multiyear pattern in which the Hindu nationalist government and its allies have presided over rising violence and discriminatory policies affecting the Muslim population and pursued a crackdown on expressions of dissent by the media, academics, civil society groups, and protesters (2021). This includes specific discrimination against Muslims through the Ghar Wapsi campaign[2] and the cow slaughter ban. Hindus consider the cow to be a scared symbol of life; in the Vedas (Hindu scriptures), the cow is referred to as the mother of all the gods. Lynch mobs, often organised over social media, have attacked minorities, mainly Muslims, but also Christians and Dalits, under suspicion of eating beef, slaughtering cows, or transporting cattle for slaughter (Jha, 2002).

In its second term in office after 2019, the BJP government dropped most of the development rhetoric, focusing instead on communal goals—such as the changing of Kashmir's status in 2019 (Jaffrelot & Verniers, 2020) which resulted in Kashmir's internet being shut

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[2] This refers to a movement to try and "reconvert" Christians and Muslims to Hinduism and translates as "coming home".

down for a year to quell protests (see Sherman, 2020), the roll out of the national verifica-tion of citizens in Assam (Jaffrelot & Verniers, 2020), and the finalising and inauguration of the politically controversial Ram temple in Ayodhya. There is increasing evidence that India's judiciary is no longer fair or transparent, instead being used to intimidate political opposition.[3] The law allowing non-Muslims from neighbouring countries to become Indian citizens in an accelerated way is a direct repudiation of India's secular and Nehruvian con-stitution. This did engender protests (Mujahid, 2020), with over 50 Muslims killed and over 250 injured during the riots that followed; however, protests and critiques of government policies now result in severe repercussions by the authorities. Much of the national media and the wider BJP-supporting population do not think of this behaviour by the govern-ment of the "largest democracy" on earth odd, largely because of the fundamentalisation of education that has been taking place in parallel (Lall & Anand, 2022). While education at all levels has been transformed to reflect India's Hindu nationalist trajectory, however this article's focus on decolonisation relates most closely to what has happened in higher education.

The role of higher education has been a central part of the Hindu Nationalist project. It started with the BJP appointments of Hindu ideologues in 2000. Since 2014, the Hindu nationalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) has influenced the appointments of vice chancellors (VCs) and heads of research institutions as well as recruiting pro-RSS faculty across public universities (Kanungo, 2019; Venugopal, 2018). One example is the Indian Council for Historical Research (ICHR) appointing Y. Sudershan Rao as their Chief, whose perspective on the direction that Social Science and History education was taking mirrored that of the RSS, arguing that history research had become dominated by Western perspectives. He has argued: "I honestly feel that Indian social science research in general and history research in particular is dominated by Western perspectives, in the name of liberal or left perspectives. […] Every nation has the right to write its own history from its own perspective, with certain national objectives. I call this process as 'Indianisation'. At best you can call it a patriotic approach" (cited in Jaffrelot, 2015, para.1). The appointment of Hindu nationalist VCs is more prevalent in central universities where the Ministry of Education (MoE) makes the appointment; state university appointments are not under the purview of the MoE, which means that the control of universities by right-wing VCs dif-fers from state to state. Nevertheless, a large number of state governments are now ruled at least in coalition with the BJP, and as with schooling and textbooks, the Modi government can leave much of the saffronisation to reliable federally based state governments (Lall & Anand, 2022).

There has been a fundamental war waged against public universities, in particular in the social sciences where critical thought might be cultivated (Padma, 2019). Delegitimis-ing scholars—especially English-speaking cosmopolitan scholars who are critical of BJP policies—is something that the Modi regime shares with other anti-intellectual regimes (Conolly, 2017; Stanley, 2018). As senior academics have started to espouse the views of the Hindu right in the name of patriotism, the academic space for debate and discussion has shrunk.

The resulting "Indianisation" of history includes the funding of centres for Sanskrit, yoga, astrology, and other subjects related to India's ancient past (Bhatty & Sundar, 2020). Much of this "revivalism" serves to underpin the Hindu Nationalist fear of globalisation

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3 https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/09/18/indias-democracy-is-under-threat/ and https://www.economist.com/briefing/2020/11/28/narendra-modi-threatens-to-turn-india-into-a-one-party-state

and Westernisation. The BJP's project does not however go beyond Ancient India to study its rich reservoir of knowledge embodied in the practices of indigenous/ tribal communities, or Muslim and Dravidian scholarship (Bhatty & Sundar, 2020). The focus is on a North Indian version of politicised Hinduism. Institutional resources are being provided on these lines, for instance, in 2020, an inter-Ministerial funding programme on developing products from indigenous cows (SUTRA-PIC India[4]). AIIMS Rishikesh was asked to undertake clinical trials on the efficacy of the Gayatri Mantra (a Hindu prayer) in treating COVID-19 (Koshy, 2021). "Refresher courses" which all faculty who want promotions must take are used as occasions for RSS propaganda (Anand & Niaz, 2022). The wider acceptance of Hindutva in higher education rhetoric is reflected in the IIT Kharagpur calendar for 2022, which promotes the Hindu nationalist agenda and pseudo-scientific temper by challenging the "Aryan invasion theory" of ancient Indian history through pieces of evidence embedded in the Vedas in order to counter colonial and Western teachings. The aim of the calendar is also to encourage research in domains like Indian history, advanced archaeological exploration, Indian language systems, Indian systems of geometry and mathematics, cosmology, positional astronomy, and Indian constructs of ecological and working ethics (Mihindukulasuriya, 2021). This is important as IITs (Indian Institutes of Technology) are elite institutions that are deeply respected and that India is fiercely proud of.

Particular higher education institutions, such as Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) (known for its left-wing politics), are gradually discredited and infiltrated (Sharma, 2020). Faculty recruitment, just like the appointment of the VC, is being done on an ideological basis, prioritising those with a Hindu Nationalist view (Lall & Anand, 2022). Opening engineering and management courses as well as offering fee-paying short-term courses has changed the composition of students to dilute left-wing student politics. Students have seen their democratic right to protest against the political rhetoric of nationalism curtailed. An unfortunate incident in 2016 brought JNU into the news across India as it was accused of harbouring "anti-national activities calling for the breakup of India" (PTI, 2020, para.1). The president of the JNU Students Union, Kanhaiya Kumar, was arrested on charges of sedition along with three other students, as he was accused of raising "anti-national slogans". The JNU Teachers' Association (JNUTA) started a "Save JNU" campaign, which was quickly picked up by other universities across the country and opened up the debate on academic freedom of expression and autonomy. JNUTA also organised teach-ins at Freedom Square to defend the tradition of intellectual debate and discussion on campus, focusing particularly on the meaning of nationalism (Azad et al., 2016, cited in Sharma et al., 2022 in Chattopadhyay et al., 2022, p.225). As a result, JNUTA was evicted. Since then, the term "anti-national" has been employed by the BJP against those it accuses of working against the interests of the nation and sedition charges are increasingly used to silence dissent, in particular of academics Vaishnav (2021).

Increasing national pride on campus is part of the BJP higher education programme. In 2020, a statue of Swami Vivekananda was installed at JNU campus. Narendra Modi has said that he hoped "the statue instils courage and compassion that Swami Vivekananda wanted to see in everyone. When we were oppressed during colonialism, Swami Vivekananda went to Michigan University[5] in the earlier part of the last century and had said

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[4] See Government of India (n.d.) "Open Call for Research & Development Proposals", https://dst.gov.in/sites/default/files/SUTRA-%20PIC%20Format.pdf.

[5] Actually, this was Chicago University and is incorrectly cited by the article in Express web.

that even though this century is yours, next century will belong to India. It is our responsibility to realise this statement vision".[6] Anand and Niaz (2022) explore how university space has been used to provide "a physical, social, and symbolic context of student experiences". This includes the glorification of the armed forces. The Ministry of Education has offered a wall of heroes to all universities across the country. These walls contain the portraits of war heroes to cultivate respect for Indian soldiers (Anand & Niaz, 2022).

The ways to stifle criticism and protests include police surveillance on campuses, including at Delhi University (Chattarji, 2019, p. 84). Academic freedom is increasingly under threat (*The Guardian*, 2020). Public universities have tried to impose service rules that would prohibit faculty from writing for the press and participating in demonstrations (Vajpeyi, 2017). Students have been arrested for being "polluted" by Western literature and thought. For example, a Muslim JNU PhD student, Sharjeel Imam, was prosecuted for, among other things, reading the wrong kind of books[7], written mainly by Westerners, for his MPhil thesis on pre-partition attacks on Muslims in Bihar (Sundar, 2021). The Delhi policies said, "By reading only such literature and not researching alternative sources, the accused became highly radicalised and religiously bigoted" (Sundar, 2021, para 9). But it is not only the content of "Western" literature that is seen as a threat. English-speaking cosmopolitan scholars, who are critical of BJP policies, are also being delegitimised (Conolly, 2017; Stanley, 2018).

This way of thinking is reflected in the 2020 National Education Policy (NEP), which plans to restructure higher education and mandates the sector to bring India back to its cultural and epistemic roots. The NEP is seen as an instrument of decolonisation and perceived as such by those who work in the Indian education sector.[8] The policy text reflects the Hindu pride that is to be instilled in the system, reminding domestic and international readers of India's ancient glory and linking the reforms of HE with institutions that operated in the pre-Islamic period such as Takshashila, Nalanda, Vallabhi, and Vikramshila (MHRD, 2020, p.34). The overall aim is to return India to its rightful place as the world's teacher or guru: India will be promoted as a global study destination providing premium education at affordable costs, thereby helping to restore its role as a Vishwa Guru or world teacher (MHRD, 2020, p.39).

The rise of anti-Westernism in post-Soviet Russia

As in India, the 1990s brought extreme socio-cultural change for Russia, during which the country reached for a new national trajectory following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The introduction of market liberalisation led to a scramble for state-owned industries and resources. A select few with pre-existing ties to the former leadership of the USSR became suddenly wealthy (Yurchak, 2003). Many more were negatively impacted and struggled to survive in the emerging market economy. "The gangster 90 s" were marked by lawlessness and violence. Degrees could be purchased and university admissions became contingent on bribes, the higher education sector was vastly discredited, and minority and periphery students were disadvantaged (Francesconi et al., 2019, p. 59). In contrast to the West, where

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[6] See Express Web Desk (2020), https://indianexpress.com/article/india/narendra-modi-jnu-swami-vivek ananda-statue-live-updates-7049144/.

[7] Such as *Forms of Collective Violence: Riots, Pogroms and Genocide in Modern India* by Paul Brass.

[8] See Webinar on the NEP held by Forum France India on the 26th of October 2022.

neoliberalism was introduced gradually, the sudden opening of the economy in Russia led to extreme corruption, criminality, and abuses of power (Arkhangelskiy, 2016; Molchanov, 2005). Today, the United Russia Party (URP) maintains control through authoritarianism, which it conceptualises as comprising "traditional Russian values" that help to overcome the challenges of the 1990s' failed experiment with Western-style democracy[9]. Such rhetoric has led to the securitisation of Russian identity—the central pillar of Putin's power—based on Orthodox Christianity and Eurasianism, defined in contrast to the West and at the expense of minority representation. Universities have been used by the state through political appointments and dismissals, budget control, and academic censorship to promote this national project.

In the USSR, citizens were guaranteed a right to higher education (although there were massive inequalities in the application of this right (Karklins, 1984)). Some academics in the natural sciences were able to accrue "symbolic capital", enabling them to establish limited cooperation with other countries, and democratise internally before the country did by electing rectors and deans (Dubrovsky, 2017). There was little "freedom of inquiry" (ibid), even though tuition was free and higher education was a priority area of strategic investment and expansion (Rosen, 1980). Despite this, those academics who had successfully established a platform became advocates of human rights and democratisation in the 1980s and were well placed to promote these values when privatisation granted them greater autonomy in the 1990s. For many Soviet citizens, the socialist ideals and values of equality, community, and the state providing security had been genuinely important (Yurchak, 2003). As these eroded with the USSR's collapse, many Russians were disillusioned. The 1990s therefore became a period of "perceived de-ideologisation and moral crisis" (Bækken & Enstad, 2020, p. 327), and many hoped that capitalism would bring "a new, humanist system, focused on the individual, their life, freedom, and liberties" (Arkhangelskiy, 2016). Capitalism was seen as the only path after Gorbachev's *perestroika* process, which began in 1986, revealed the true extent of development inequalities between Soviet and Western societies, and scientists who had gained academic prominence through the 80 s were key supporters of this idea. Unfortunately, when looking towards the West failed to bring about the kind of rapid modernisation that the public craved, academia (and society broadly) began to fragment along cultural lines between reformists and traditionalists.

In 1992, Yeltsin privatised most enterprise and liberalised trade and capital flows. The weakened Communist Party, together with the nationalist movements, opposed these changes, re-introducing into mainstream political debate an anti-Western and anti-liberal discourse, based in Russian exceptionalism (Ostrovsky, 2015). By 1993, this discontent transitioned into a direct military confrontation between Yeltsin and the Russian Parliament, in which Yeltsin won. The Parliament was replaced with the Duma, which had a weaker mandate, and the new constitution granted significant powers to the Office of the President, which continues to empower Putin today (Ananyev, 2018; Satter, 2016).

Universities were affected by these societal shifts. They lost most of their state funding in the 1990s, and many began charging tuition. They faced pressure to compete for students and resources by signalling academic excellence through internationalisation and participation in English language academia. Academics who had had privileged access to international dialogue with Western universities in the USSR had a natural advantage, possessing superior English language skills and access to existing networks for collaboration.

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[9] See *Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 02.07.2021 № 400* for examples of government rhetoric.

However, they faced resistance and reprisals from traditionalist and nationalist colleagues, many of whom did not speak English as freely: these rivals doubled down on the need for universities to publish exclusively in Russian and maintain an intellectual distance from the Western world, evoking principles of de-linking, implicitly or explicitly. Corruption was rampant, and it was easier to fake publications within Russian language journals, either through the duplication of papers or outright plagiarism, so there was a double incentive by low-performing institutions to adopt a de-linking narrative (Rara-Avis, 2021).

When Putin rose to power in 1999, he brought rival factions under his control within the URP, absorbing the old Communist Party and nationalist politicians in 2000, entrenching anti-Westernism as a Russian nationalist ideal within the Kremlin. Universities have promoted this narrative. In 2016, academics claimed that Russia was the target of a US-directed information war and that history teaching was a national security issue, justifying state control (Bækken & Enstad, 2020, p. 321). This enabled Putin to sign a decree in 2021 establishing an interdepartmental commission on historical education, comprising members of the Federal Security Service (FSB), Foreign Intelligence Service, Interior Ministry, Investigative Committee, Security Council, Prosecutor-General's Office, and Presidential Administration (Sokolov, 2021), along with the members of the education sector and historical societies. The commission aims at "counteracting systematic attempts to falsify Russian history, coming from abroad" (Kremlin, 2021).

In 2003, Russia had implemented the Bologna Process to integrate the higher education sector with Europe. Yet Russian universities struggled to compete in research internationally due to low production of international publications (where the natural sciences still dominated and the social sciences were under-represented). Owing to persisting quality deficits, in 2005, the Russian Government created new grants for universities, which were disseminated by rankings (Forrat, 2016). However, the reintroduction of state funding "masked an attack on the universities' autonomy, [making] each institution more vulnerable to the regime's discretion": it established "an implicit agreement between the regime and those universities" receiving funding that "the well-being of the institution was conditional on the prevention of student anti-regime mobilization" (ibid, p. 300). Rectorship appointments became conditional on the Ministry of Education approval in universities receiving funding: first, in 2006, an "attestation commission" was formed to approve elected candidates for rectorships, and then, the election of university leaders itself became the exception rather than the norm (Gerashchenko, 2021). Elite institutions began seeing rectorships filled by individuals with close ties to Putin's regime, such as Viktor Sadovnichiy (Moscow State University), Anatoly Torkunov (Moscow State Institute of International Relations), and Mikhail Kotyukov (Russian State University for the Humanities). In 2022, the Russian Union of Rectors issued an open letter advocating in favour of the war in Ukraine, demonstrating their support of the state (Russian Union of Rectors, 2022). Dissenting academics have been fired or imprisoned (Standish, 2023). Across Russia, University Governance Boards have (re)incorporated state officials to monitor how government grants are being spent, as part of a "legacy of mistrust", which "has legitimised and empowered the bureaucracies within Russian higher education", encouraging the government to police university life and reinforce cooperation (Oleksiyenko, 2020, p. 391).

Putin initially embraced European values but has since taken an anti-democratic turn, arguing that the imposition of alien Western liberalism is to blame for Russia's decline. The media has taken up this narrative through an extreme masculinisation of Putin as a "strong man", standing in opposition to *Gayropa* (i.e. "Gay Europe")—a "degenerate" Europe "manifested in the collapse of the traditional gender order" and "the triumph of homosexuals and feminists": emerging from the prioritisation of "such values as tolerance,

secularism, and, above all, democracy", so that the corrosive influence of Europe is seen as a contagion against which "Russia appears as a bastion of 'moral principles'" (Riabov & Riabova, 2014, p. 29). Owing to the state's control of universities, this narrative has gained prominence. Ripple effects have been felt across academia, as gender study faculties are pressured to close (Craciun & Mihut, 2017).

Many academics have been dismissed for spreading an "un-Russian" LGBTQ-positive agenda, including Mikhail Lobanov[10] and Andrei Zayakin from the Russian State University for the Humanities in Moscow, Maria Maltseva from the Ural Federal University in Yekaterinburg, Lyudmila Stebenkova from the Siberian Federal University in Krasnoyarsk, and Anna Makhova from the Higher School of Economics in Moscow. All of them had been critical of Russia's anti-gay laws, corruption, or increasing repressions. Their termination indicates that deviation from the hegemonic discourse of identity, strong-man politics and gender relations is no longer tolerated. In 2022, Russia introduced a new requirement for universities to have "a rector for students' moral development", to help students become "fully fledged citizens of Russian society" by state standards (Lem, 2022). This has been seen by many academics as a poorly veiled pretext to integrate propaganda into higher education and control political and cultural behaviour (ibid). It is the latest step in a gradual process. Following youth-led anti-Putin protests in 2011–2012, student freedom has been restricted by anti-extremist legislation, which led to the criminalisation of instigations to protest (Dubrovsky, 2019). It has also impacted research. The 2012 Foreign Agents Law identifies and persecutes individuals who either receive funding from the West or express Western values and ideals: "only Russian state grants and state tenders" can be used "and taking them makes you a hostage" (Rara-Avis, 2021).

Orthodoxy has been integrated into the morality discourse, with state media emphasising Putin's religiosity (Lamoreaux & Flake, 2018). This promotes a hegemonic vision of what it means to be Russian, and Putin acknowledges non-ethnic and non-Orthodox Russian diversity only when this suits a political need (Plets, 2015). He has been constructing a supranational identity that homogenises the diverse peoples of the Russian Federation into one interest group (Hutchings & Tolz, 2015). Federal power has been eroded, and peripheral universities have not been exempt from state centralisation and control (Gerashchenko, 2021). Russian Muslim, Jewish, and other ethnic populations are othered, with a slew of universities introducing bans on the hijab (Laruelle & Yudina, 2018). The legitimation of narratives that promote "Russian pride" and the use of laws to stifle "treasonous" critiques of the state have emboldened white Russian academics to make public Islamophobic and anti-Semitic statements. Since the 1990s, Russia has "gradually built measures to restrict the influence of religious groups with foreign origins", leading religious leaders to scramble to prove their Russian authenticity (Tuna, 2020, pp. 32–3). While Islam is acknowledged as an official Russian faith and it is common for Russian scholars to argue that Islam is regarded more positively in Russia than in Western Europe (Aitamurto, 2021), the spread of its "misinterpretation" for the sake of "extremism" is deemed "foreign". The Chechen Wars have further allowed the state and higher education sector to restrict the free practice of Islam. Suppression is justified by contrasting with the West, because, according to this narrative, Western suppression of Islam is "racially" founded, while Russian suppression of Islam is due to "real" security concerns. Framing Russian restrictions of Islamic freedoms through an anti-Western lens shuts down the space for discursive resistance.

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[10] Later imprisoned for his stance on Ukraine.

Research has consistently shown that Russian academics, even during liberalisation in the 1990s, worried that any academic freedom that they had was illusory, so that self-censorship in academia became the norm (albeit with several notable exceptions) (Oleksiyenko, 2020). Academics have been conditioned to restrict their own speech and censor their curricula. Rara-Avis dubs this a Bakhtinian "syndrome of public silence" (2021). The silence extends to committee meetings and social media, which makes outliers stand out and become vulnerable to retribution.

Conclusion

The recent call for a decolonial de-linking from Western academic, intellectual, and cultural hegemony, which emerges from work by Mignolo (2007) and that of other scholars, is timely. It has led to essential critique of the role of Western universities in maintaining a neocolonial order by demonstrating their complicity in (1) dominating academic discourse, (2) extracting data from formally colonised societies, and (3) promoting elitist exclusionary practices. Mignolo's work has given us the tools with which to question and push back against this hegemony by decolonising Western curricula and research (though further analysis is needed to assess whether Western institutional compliance with these processes has been meaningful). Such writing has also emerged alongside a push back from some universities and academics in the Global South, who have used decolonising ideas to reclaim their own power and promote plural-versality.

The decolonial movement was meant to increase debate and liberate the world from the conceptual limitations that remain as entrenched legacies of colonial practices. This is not anti-Westernist, but rather anti-Eurocentrist[11]. Decolonialism encourages deep self-reflection on the architectures and structures of knowledge, to break through the filters on our perception of global inequalities and promote non-Western knowledge producers, particularly from minority backgrounds. However, as we have shown, the co-opted version of decolonialism is superficially anti-Western, wherein complex decolonial scholarship is stripped of intellectual complexity and realigned with nationalist positions for the sake of creating new hegemonies at a national level. Rather than encouraging critical thinking on the parasitic nature of knowledge hierarchies, when decolonial principles are co-opted by nationalist agendas, they are used to promote exclusionary structures, elevating a singular national identity and its political needs at the expense of plural-versality and minority representation. In India and Russia, de-linking is used to cut off engagement with Western academic discourse and reject "Western-influenced" critiques of development, inequality, and authoritarianism. This is done to protect national ways of being based upon state conceptions of traditional values, paradoxically erasing minority voices that do not fit neatly into the unified national narrative as well as silencing critics. The debate in higher education reflects the current key questions on the nature of the Indian and Russian nations—both under respective nationalist governments. When universities are seen as Western or critical of local traditions and schools of thought, the space for critical thinking and democratic debate is ultimately removed, leaving those who oppose Putin and Modi with no safe way to engage with political discourse.

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[11] Though there are explicitly anti-Western scholars among the countless academics who subscribe to these philosophies.

With Western Europe and North America aligning themselves narratively with so-called "universal principles" of human rights, freedom of expression, and democracy, Putin and Modi have capitalised on anti-Western turns in Russian and Indian scholarship to reject all calls for increased liberalisation as the slow creep of unwanted alien concepts into national spaces that must be protected from these destabilising ideas. In both cases, anti-Westernism, legitimated through exploitation of well-founded concerns about the problematic neocolonial perpetuation of Western hegemony, has become a convenient justification for increased repression and authoritarianism.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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