

World News Roundup

Special Report

Bid to rewrite history

Hindu nationalists aim to assert 'dominance'

NEW DELHI, March 6, (RTRS): During the first week of January last year, a group of Indian scholars gathered in a white bungalow on a leafy boulevard in central New Delhi. The focus of their discussion: how to rewrite the history of the nation.

The government of Hindu nationalist Prime Minister **Narendra Modi** had quietly appointed the committee of scholars about six months earlier. Details of its existence are reported here for the first time.



Modi

Minutes of the meeting, reviewed by Reuters, and interviews with committee members set out its aims: to use evidence such as archaeological finds and DNA to prove that today's Hindus are directly descended from the land's first inhabitants many thousands of years ago, and make the case that ancient Hindu scriptures are fact not myth.

Interviews with members of the 14-person committee and ministers in Modi's government suggest the ambitions of Hindu nationalists extend beyond holding political power in this nation of 1.3 billion people — a kaleidoscope of religions. They want ultimately to shape the national identity to match their religious views, that India is a nation of and for Hindus.

In doing so, they are challenging a more multicultural narrative that has dominated since the time of British rule, that modern-day India is a tapestry born of migrations, invasions and conversions. That view is rooted in demographic fact. While the majority of Indians are Hindus, Muslims and people of other faiths account for some 240 million, or a fifth, of the populace.

The committee's chairman, K.N. Dikshit, told Reuters, "I have been asked to present a report that will help the government rewrite certain aspects of ancient history." The committee's creator, Culture Minister Mahesh Sharma, confirmed in an interview that the group's work was part of larger plans to revise India's history.

Violence

For India's Muslims, who have pointed to incidents of religious violence and discrimination since Modi took office in 2014, the development is ominous. The head of Muslim party All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen, Asaduddin Owaisi, said his people had "never felt so marginalised in the independent history of India."

"The government," he said, "wants Muslims to live in India as second-class citizens."

Modi did not respond to a request for comment for this article.

Helping to drive the debate over Indian history is an ideological, nationalist Hindu group called the Rashtriya Swamsevaka Sangh (RSS). It helped sweep Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party to power in 2014 and now counts among its members the ministers in charge of agriculture, highways and internal security.

The RSS asserts that ancestors of all people of Indian origin — including 172 million Muslims — were Hindu and that they must accept their common ancestry as part of Bharat Mata, or Mother India. Modi has been a member of the RSS since childhood. An official biography of Culture Minister Sharma says he too has been a "dedicated follower" of the RSS for many years.

Referring to the emblematic colour of the Hindu nationalist movement, RSS spokesman Manmohan Vaidya told Reuters that "the true colour of Indian history is saffron and to bring about cultural changes we have to rewrite history."

Balmukund Pandey, the head of the historical research wing of the RSS, said he meets regularly with Culture Minister Sharma. "The time is now," Pandey said, to restore India's past glory by establishing that ancient Hindu texts are fact not myth.

Sharma told Reuters he expects the conclusions of the committee to find their way into school textbooks and academic research. The panel is referred to in government documents as the committee for "holistic study of origin and evolution of Indian culture since 12,000 years before present and its interface with other cultures of the world."

Curriculum

Sharma said this "Hindu first" version of Indian history will be added to a school curriculum which has long taught that people from central Asia arrived in India much more recently, some 3,000 to 4,000 years ago, and transformed the population.

Hindu nationalists and senior figures in Modi's party reject the idea that India was forged from a mass migration. They believe that today's Hindu population is directly descended from the land's first inhabitants. Historian Romila Thapar said the question of who first stood on the soil was important to nationalists because "if the Hindus are to have primacy as citizens in a Hindu Rashtra (kingdom), their foundational religion cannot be an imported one." To assert that primacy, nationalists need to claim descent from ancestors and a religion that were indigenous, said Thapar, 86, who taught at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi for decades and has authored books on ancient Indian history.

The theory of an influx of people from central Asia 3,000 to 4,000 years ago was embraced during British rule.

India's first post-independence leader, Jawaharlal Nehru, who promoted a secular state and tolerance of India's Muslims, said it was "entirely misleading to refer to Indian culture as Hindu culture." That outlook informed the way India was governed by Nehru and then by his Congress party for more than half a century. The rights of minorities — including the prohibition of discrimination based on religion — are enshrined in India's constitution, of which Nehru was a signatory in 1950.

Shashi Tharoor, a prominent member of the Congress party, said right wing Hindus are "leading a political campaign over Indian history that seeks to reinvent the idea of India itself." "For seven decades after independence, Indianness rested on faith in the country's pluralism," Tharoor said, but the rise of Hindu nationalism had brought with it a "sense of cultural superiority."

The history committee met in the offices of the director general of the Archaeological Survey of India, a federal body that oversees archaeological research. Among the committee's 14 members are bureaucrats and academics. The chairman, Dikshit, is a former senior official with the Archaeological Survey.



Kashmiri village women react as they watch from a distance the funeral of civilian Suhail Ahmad at Pinjura village 52 kms (33 miles) south of Srinagar, Indian controlled Kashmir on March 5. More than a dozen protests erupted across Kashmir on Monday, with government forces firing tear gas and demonstrators hurling rocks as tens of thousands of protesters poured into the streets of the disputed Himalayan region after soldiers killed four civilians and two suspected militants. (AP)



Sri Lankan police commandos patrol on the streets of Pallekkele, a suburb of Kandy, on March 6, following anti-Muslim riots that have prompted the government to declare a state of emergency. Sri Lanka declared a nationwide state of emergency to quell anti-Muslim riots that have killed at least two people and damaged dozens of mosques and homes. The curfew in the district was extended after the body of a Muslim man was pulled from the ashes of a burnt building threatening to further raise communal tensions that have flared up across Sri Lanka in recent weeks. (AFP)

Subcontinent

Child marriages decline: A significant fall in the number of child marriages in South Asia has helped reduce the rate of marriage for girls globally, the UN children's agency said Tuesday.

More educational opportunities for young girls, government investments in adolescent girls and strong advocacy about the illegality of child marriage saw 25 million fewer child marriages in the last decade.

UNICEF says progress in India helped reduce the risk of a girl in South Asia mar-

rying before her 18th birthday to about 30 percent from nearly 50 percent.

Some 650 million women living today were married as children. (AP)



25 killed as truck overturns: A truck carrying a wedding party plunged off a bridge early Tuesday in western India killing at least 25 people, most of them women and children, officials said.

Initial investigations indicated the driver lost control causing the truck to swerve off the bridge and fall eight metres (26 feet) onto a dry riverbed in Gujarat state, police said. "Around 60 persons were travelling in the truck and most victims are women and children," Gujarat police inspector K.J. Kadapda told AFP.

Officials indicated the toll could rise as

many of the passengers, who were on their way to a wedding, remained trapped under the truck which overturned. Other injured victims have been rushed to hospital. (AFP)



Students' mobile phones burned: A hardline Islamic school in Bangladesh said Tuesday it had confiscated hundreds of mobile phones and torched them in a bonfire because they were distracting students from their learning.

Pupils at the seminary in southeast Bangladesh were ordered to hand over their cellphones Sunday to school administrators who then tossed the devices en masse into a fire in a nearby field.

"These devices are ruining their character," said Azizul Hoque, a spokesman for

violence elsewhere recently.

A police spokesman said earlier Tuesday hundreds of commandos from the police Special Task Force had been deployed to Kandy to restore order and enforce the curfew.

Muslim homes, business and mosques were badly damaged in riots Monday triggered by the death of a Sinhalese man at the hands of a mob last week.

The Sinhalese are a mainly Buddhist ethnic group making up nearly three-quarters of Sri Lanka's 21 million people. Muslims account for 10 percent of its population. More than two dozen arrests have been made and an inquiry opened into police conduct in Kandy, just the latest region to be plagued by religious and ethnic conflict.

The Darul Ulum Moinul Islam madrasa, or Islamic seminary. (AFP)



'Consider Ghani peace talk': The United States on Monday called on the Taliban to consider an offer for peace talks extended by Afghan President Ashraf Ghani.

Ghani at an international conference in Kabul last week unveiled a plan to open talks with the Taliban, including eventually recognizing them as a political party.

In return, Ghani said the militants should officially recognize the Afghan government and constitution, a perennial sticking point in past attempts to open talks. Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid has maligned the Kabul Process, tweeting that the conference sought the Taliban's "surrender." (AFP)

Unrest

Buddhist-Muslim tension growing

Sri Lanka declares emergency over riots

COLOMBO, March 6, (AFP): Sri Lanka Tuesday declared a nationwide state of emergency to quell anti-Muslim riots that have killed at least two people and damaged dozens of mosques and homes.

"The cabinet of ministers decided on tough measures, including a 10-day nationwide state of emergency," Minister of City Planning Rauff Hakeem said as police imposed a curfew in the riot-hit central district of Kandy.

The government deployed heavily-armed police commandos in the hill station region, which is popular with tourists, after rioters defied an overnight curfew and went on the rampage.

The curfew in the district was extended after the body of a Muslim man was pulled from the ashes of a burnt build-

ahadaf NEW SERVICE Free

Subscribe to our service "AlHadaf WhatsApp" to stay updated



الهداف الإعلاني plus الهداف الهداف

To activate this Service:

- 1- Save our number on your contacts +965 55633508
- 2- Send a WhatsApp message with the word "Start" to the number you saved.