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Islamic Liberation Theology and Decolonial Studies: The Case of Hindutva Extractivism

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Abstract: Decolonial studies define the coloniality of power as a complex assemblage of dominance and hegemony that emerged during the modern era or the era of colonialism, which stretches from the conquest of the Americas to the present. This article argues that, as part of the critical dialogue between decolonial studies and Islamic liberation theology, the latter should position itself in a decolonial political praxis around the preferential option for the poor that takes both a decolonial turn and a decolonial option seriously. There is a tendency to appropriate certain brands of decolonial studies to engage with forms of nationalism, such as Hindutva, to build a "decolonial option" in the global South by undermining the key insights of the "decolonial turn". This article specifically engages with the claims of "decolonial Hindutva" to critique the nationalist appropriation in decolonial studies, thereby marking its divergence from decolonial Islamic liberation theology.

Keywords: Islamic liberation theology; decoloniality; coloniality; Hindutva; India; Empire

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1. Introduction

The University of South Africa in Pretoria hosted its third annual Decoloniality Summer School between 11 and 22 January 2016 (Segalo 2020, p. 47). This summer school coincided with the first mass protest against the Narendra Modi government seeking justice for the institutional murder of Rohith Vemula[1] (17 January 2016) at the University of Hyderabad in India. The Pretoria Summer School, which was mainly focused on the critical theories of African liberation and building solidarities across liberatory movements, came out in solidarity with the student protestors in India against the ascendance of Hindutva nationalism, declaring that "to debrahmanize[2] is to decolonize, decolonization is debrahmanization" (Maktoob Staff 2016).

Decolonial studies have gained popularity worldwide, leading to the organization of various summer schools and teach-in programs in different regions of the world. Introduced under the title of "Critical Muslim Studies: Decolonial Struggles and Liberation Theologies" in 2011, Islamic liberation theology has now become an important critical decolonial pedagogy at the Granada Summer School (Spain).[3] The summer school brought together decolonial thinkers and activists, critical Muslim studies[4] projects, Islamic liberation theology, and Islamic feminism[5] (Ingleby 2017). The emerging consensus is that decolonial[6] Islamic liberation theology enables Muslim politics to think about the positionality of the oppressed and, simultaneously, locate Muslim questions in the global context of coloniality and epistemic hegemonies of racial–capitalist modernity[7] at the national and global level (Abbasi 2020, pp. 1–31; Ali 2017, pp. 287–305).

This article attempts to locate the limits and potentials of decolonial studies in the context of the ongoing resistance against Hindutva nationalist politics in India by demarcating its points of divergence and convergence with Islamic liberation theology. While the immediate antagonist of decolonial Islamic liberation theology in India is the aggressive nationalist politics of Hindutva, concurrently and ironically, Hindutva has also been

mobilizing decoloniality as a frame for their political articulation, especially after the ascendance of Narendra Modi in 2014 (Upadhyay 2020, p. 465). The position of decolonial Islamic liberation theology, as articulated here, is not merely a theoretical abstraction of the relevance of a decolonial critical project (Kunnummal 2017). It is a political praxis borne out by the experience of Islamophobia against Muslim minorities in postcolonial India, rooted in their resistance against nationalist and fascist Hindutva programs of exclusion and annihilation. However, the Indian context provides valuable contextual understanding for the advancement of decolonial Islamic liberation theology while also considering its points of convergence and divergence with decolonial studies.

This article examines the challenges that arise from the selective implementation of decolonial frameworks in Hindutva's use of decolonial studies. Its primary focus is on a critical analysis of how Hindutva actors strategically deploy decolonial language to advance their nationalist objectives. Importantly, this critique extends beyond cautioning Islamic liberation theology against Hindutva's extractivism of decolonial studies. The argument emphasizes the imperative of resisting Hindutva's co-optation of decolonial studies, which undermines the struggle for justice and liberation that decolonial studies seek to promote. The larger objective of this article is to investigate the intersection and divergence of Islamic liberation theology and decolonial studies, with a particular focus on Hindutva's appropriation of decolonial frameworks.

This article[8] is divided into four sections. The first section of the article presents a concise overview of the historical background surrounding the emergence of Hindutva in India, recognized as the planet's most populous postcolonial democracy, emphasizing the circumstances experienced by Muslim minority groups. The second section explores the relationship between decoloniality and liberation theology, highlighting the two-tier structure of theoretical and practical methods known as the decolonial turn and the decolonial option. The third part discusses how Hindutva appropriates the decolonial option, reducing the critical importance of the decolonial turn. As a case study, it examines J Sai Deepak's text, *India that is Bharat: Coloniality, Civilization, Constitution* (Deepak 2021), which presents three problematic aspects of the oxymoron "Hindutva decoloniality". This section also discusses alternative possibilities for decolonial politics in India beyond Hindutva's appropriation. Finally, the fourth section discusses the convergence of the decolonial turn and the decolonial option in the development of a new future for decolonial Islamic liberation theology in India and beyond.

2. Hindutva, Muslim Minority, and Marginalization in India

The origins of Hindutva[9] can be traced back to the colonial era, and it gained institutional power with the emergence of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in 1925 (Bhatt 2001, p. 81). The RSS formed as a reactionary nationalist movement in response to the growing anticaste[10] and minority religious movements, with Muslims as their primary target (Bhatt 2001, pp. 115–19). The rise of Hindu nationalist street groups promoting Hindutva in the 1960s and their violent acts against Muslims, along with the ascendancy of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)[11] as a political platform for Hindu nationalism in the 1980s and the subsequent demolition of the Babri Masjid[12] in 1992, represented a major political transformative moment in postcolonial India (Muralidharan 1990, pp. 27–49). Hindutva emerged as a dominant social force in the early 21st century, especially after the Gujarat carnage[13] in 2002 when Narendra Modi held the position of Chief Minister in the state of Gujarat (Spodek 2010, pp. 349–99). The global proliferation of post-Cold War Islamophobia and the War on Terror discourse further contributed to the changing character of the Indian state, with Hindutva gaining even more power, leading to the political expansion and consolidation of the BJP (Jones 2009, pp. 290–304). The culmination of these developments resulted in the Hindu nationalists gaining power over the Indian state, leading to the election of Narendra Modi as India's Prime Minister in 2014.

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the political climate in India, it is crucial to examine the ascent of the Hindutva movement to state authority and its potential

consequences for the Muslim minority. Muslims are the largest religious minority in India, comprising around 14% of the population of its 1.2 billion people. Muslims in India have never had fair and equal representation in the Indian Parliament since the first parliamentary election in 1952 (Farooqui 2020, p. 157). Although Muslims achieved their highest representation in the upper house at 9% between 1980 and 1984, the 2019 Indian parliamentary elections saw Muslims holding only 5% of the seats, reminiscent of the 1950s (Buchholz 2020). The Indian Parliament's representation issue resulted in legal discrimination against Indian Muslims through the Citizenship (Amendment) Act of December 2019, which grants citizenship solely to "non-Muslim illegal immigrants". In addition, NDTV's hate speech tracker in India has shown an 1130% increase in hate speech by politicians, including chief ministers and parliament members, during Modi's tenure, with the BJP accounting for 80% of the hateful rhetoric (Jaiswal et al. 2018).

The judiciary is often seen as the last bastion of hope for protecting the constitutional and legal rights of minorities. Yet a study examining the "in-group bias" in Indian criminal courts[14], which analyzed data from over 80 million legal cases between 2010 and 2018, found that Muslims account for only 7% of district court judges (Ash et al. 2023). Similarly, a 2019 study by Tata Trusts revealed that only 3–4% of the Indian police forces are Muslims (Mandhani 2019). According to a 2019 report by "Common Cause" (NGO), 50% of the police officers surveyed showed a bias against Muslims, resulting in their reluctance to prevent crimes committed against the Muslim community (Maizland 2022). Interestingly, Muslims are over-represented by 3% in criminal charges in general (Ash et al. 2023). The Prison Statistics of India in 2021 further show that more than 30% of all detainees in Indian prisons are Muslims (Radhakrishnan and Nihalani 2021).

The political and legal representation of Indian Muslims (or lack thereof) is intrinsically linked to broader concerns of cultural, social, economic, and educational representation. This is exemplified by the fact that Muslim leadership positions only account for 3% of top media positions (Mujtaba 2022). A Twitter data review from 2019 to 2020 shows India, the UK, and the US are responsible for 85% of global Islamophobic tweets due to the elimination of conventional media gatekeeping. Indian Twitter users contributed 55.12% of these tweets (Butler 2022). Due to a lack of media representation and widespread misinformation, the Muslim community has faced a surge in fascist propaganda, exemplified by the India Today—Karvy Insights Mood of the Nation survey that revealed 54% of respondents strongly believed in the "love Jihad"[15] conspiracy theory (Malji and Raza 2021).

In the realm of socioeconomic development, the Centre for New Economics Studies (CNES) conducted a study in 2021 to create an "Access (In)Equality Index" and found that Indian Muslims faced greater inequality in accessing basic services compared to other highly marginalized groups (Mohan 2022). Based on the 2019 Periodic Labor Survey data, it is evident that approximately 85% of Muslim wage workers operate without written contracts (ibid). Additionally, over half of the Muslim community's workforce is self-employed, while 25% work in casual employment (ibid). Muslims had lower attendance ratios and the highest proportion of nonenrolment in formal education among all communities aged 3 to 35, as per the National Sample Survey Report of the 75th Round (2018), with the most significant gap being observed at the higher secondary level (Khan 2021).

Modi's ascension to the position of India's Prime Minister in 2014 has garnered global attention, with concerns expressed by Gregory H. Stanton, President of Genocide Watch, over the possibility of genocide against Muslim minorities and Jason Stanley, a scholar in fascism studies, drawing attention to the ideological parallels and genocidal tactics between Hindutva and Nazi movements in Germany (Stanton 2023; Bhatia 2022). For instance, in 2022, the Indian National Congress released a report card on Modi's tenure, citing 10,000 incidents of inter-religious violence and expressing concerns for Muslim minorities (Masoud 2022). There has been a concerning surge in mob lynching incidents of Muslims disguised as cow vigilantism[16], with about 90% of these violent acts occurring since 2014 (Raza 2022). The politics of minorities and the issue of margins in India have reached a critical juncture due to the violence, annihilation, and exclusion perpetrated by

the Hindutva regime, requiring urgent interrogation from the perspective of decolonial Islamic liberation theology.

3. Decoloniality and Liberation Theology: The Decolonial Turn and the Decolonial Option

Ivan Petrella (2004), an Argentinian liberation theologian, identified two fundamental principles that guide the practice of liberation theologies: firstly, the preferential option to align with the oppressed, and secondly, the need to adapt social analysis and theoretical approaches to address evolving sociopolitical circumstances. As different expressions of marginalization, otherness, and oppression emerge across diverse sociohistorical and geopolitical contexts, the process of identifying the oppressed experiences continual transformation and adaptation. Decolonial studies, as a tool of social analysis, were not a part of early forms of liberation theology.[17] The decolonial turn in liberation theology can bring about a renewal of the politics of marginalization and oppression, extending beyond the postcolonial milieu.

There are at least three levels to the critical project of decoloniality: power, knowledge, and being. The political praxis of decoloniality is about the power of thinking and acting from the underside of the global South and postcolonial world (Quijano 2000). It is a critique of the racial and imperial political organizing of the world in its totality, i.e., the coloniality of power (Grosfoguel 2007, p. 219). Decoloniality, as the politics of knowledge, is a conscious move from the northern colonial paradigm of knowledge to a pluriversal decolonial epistemic horizon (Castro-Gomez 2002, p. 217). Decoloniality is also a new critique of being, which argues that coloniality is about the colonization of the human by the dominant colonial self that relegates the "other" to the level of the subhuman through the racialization[18] of the world (Maldonado-Torres 2007, p. 242).

Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2011, p. 3) posits that the decolonial turn has been present since the fall of Al-Andalus in the fifteenth century and continues into the twenty-first century. The colonized world has made numerous attempts to resist the effects of colonialism, but the events of the twentieth century, including the world wars and subsequent decolonization, caused a significant shift towards a decolonial horizon of freedom and self-determination, particularly for Africa, Asia, and South America. The global rise of Islamophobia, concurrent with the end of the Cold War and the 500th anniversary of the "discovery" of the Americas, marked a third significant event in the decolonial turn, critical to the formation of decolonial Islamic liberation theology (Maldonado-Torres 2017, p. 121).

The decolonial option, on the other hand, refers to the practical and contextual application of decolonial principles and perspectives in various fields of knowledge and power, such as education, politics, culture, and social movements (Maldonado-Torres 2017, p. 112). It is an attempt to actively resist and challenge the ongoing legacy of colonialism and promote alternative ways of understanding and engaging with the world. According to Maldonado-Torres (2017, p. 112), "the decolonial turn introduces decoloniality fundamentally as an imperative, a need for survival, and as a project, from which then can also be taken up as a possibility or an option." In short, the decolonial turn is a shift in discourse as a form of knowledge and power. In contrast, the decolonial option is the active contextual application of decolonial methods in various fields. There is no decolonial option without a decolonial turn.

To clarify,[19] "colonialism" refers to political and social structures of domination, while "neo-colonialism" denotes the persistence of economic colonial structures without the same level of formal political control. However, the conception of coloniality goes beyond this dichotomy, recognizing the power of colonialism as discourse and knowledge. Decoloniality thus becomes a discursive and epistemological project aimed at creating a decolonial future. It must necessarily encompass the political, economic, and discursive dimensions of the power, being, and ontology of coloniality, making the decolonial turn a praxis-based approach to social change. Without this decolonial turn and political commitment to anti-colonial liberation, any decolonial option risks becoming a disembodied, praxis-lacking

appropriation of decolonial language, perpetuating coloniality and maintaining material, epistemological, and political power over marginalized groups.

A critical problem that has arisen since the popularization of the decolonial paradigm is the application of a decolonial option without the decolonial turn. While decoloniality initially arose as a fundamental critique of postcolonial elites' coloniality, these elites have since subverted the *ethical* imperative of the decolonial turn. Instead, they have replaced it with an *identitarian* logic of authenticity and nativism and now use the decolonial option solely for neocolonial political purposes. The prophetic task of decolonial Islamic liberation theology in its opposition to Hindutva fascism, as it emerges from the margins of Muslim minorities, is to further reconfigure decoloniality as the political praxis of the oppressed of the world (decolonial turn) rather than only as a politics of positions or ideas (decolonial option).

4. The Extractivism of Hindutva: In the Name of Decoloniality

Several groups and individuals within the fold of Hindutva use the language of "decolonization" for various purposes. For instance, Koenraad Elst's (2001) *Decolonizing the Hindu Mind: Ideological Development of Hindu Revivalism* was one of the early articulations of a decolonizing movement within the fold of Hindutva (Deepak 2021, p. 11). Even though Elst's work does not bear the language of decoloniality, it has been used within Hindutva circles to justify the destruction of the Babri Masjid. Elst (1990, p. 30), writing as an outsider to the Hindu tradition, argued that the Babri Masjid was built on what some people believe to be the birthplace of Lord Rama, a deity who lived in Ayodhya during the early first millennium B.C.

Hindutva politics in India and worldwide are increasingly appropriating the discourse of decoloniality to normalize Hindu nationalism, especially after the BJP's rise to power in 2014. This co-option and appropriation of decolonial language, which erases anticaste politics, projects Islamophobia, and appeals to Euro–American social justice discourses to posit Hindutva as a new form of "indigenous" decolonial politics, has a long history even before the ascendance of Modi. The erasure of Hindu caste politics that effectively pits lower caste and Indigenous outcaste groups against Muslims and other minorities is Hindutva's most successful tactic that gave rise to its power, especially after the formation of the BJP in 1980 (Nigam and Menon 2007, p. 49). Rather than caste, the alleged religiosity of the Muslims became the master signifier in the fascist ascendancy of Hindutva. In the world at large, the alleged global excessiveness of Islam, rather than race in the colonial/modern world, is an enduring problem for the global Hindutva project. In both cases, the contradiction of caste is displaced into the religion of Islam for the racial politics of Hindutva.

After Modi came to power in 2014, the Hindutva camp started using the language of decolonization with enthusiasm, especially in social science and humanities, to search for a space for their nationalist project (Rajaram 2015). The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) chief Mohan Bhagwat spoke about the "decolonization of the Indian mind" at a program organized in Karnawati (Ahmedabad, Gujarat) on 15 and 16 April 2017 (VSK Telangana 2017). Of the Hindutva propagandists who deploy decolonial studies, J. Sai Deepak is the only one who has written substantively on it.

Deepak, who was originally a mechanical engineer, is now practicing law in the Supreme Court of India. He has gained a significant following on social media platforms, such as Twitter and YouTube, where he actively promotes Hindutva ideology. Deepak strongly advocates for the establishment of a "Hindu State", considering his Brahmin caste Hindu heritage as the "missionary arm of the Hindu society" (Deepak 2022a, 2023). Additionally, he opposes secularism as an imported Western ideology (Deepak 2022a). Furthermore, he takes a firm stance against the import of the "woke left" ideology from the United States to India (ibid). Deepak has also discussed Israel's approach to physical aggression, speaking about the "SIP principle", which stands for "Spiritually fit, intellectually fit, and certainly get physically fit" (ibid). Furthermore, Deepak has attributed the

perpetuation of the caste system to intracaste violence within lower-caste communities, placing the blame back on the oppressed castes (Deepak 2023).

Although he lacks formal academic credentials in decolonial studies, Deepak has utilized the language of this field to defend Hindutva ideology. He has published two books, *India, That is Bharat: Coloniality, Civilization and Constitution* in 2021 and a sequel titled *India, Bharat and Pakistan: The Constitutional Journey of a Sandwiched Civilizations* in 2022 (Deepak 2021, 2022b). The former work campaigned for inclusion in the syllabi of 24 National Law University branches across India, particularly those under the rule of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). In this section, I am focusing on *India, That is Bharat: Coloniality, Civilization and Constitution* due to its significant role in promoting Hindutva ideology and contributing to the development of fascist propaganda in India vis-à-vis the language of decolonial studies.

Before jumping into Deepak's work, let me clarify what I mean by Hindutva's "extractivism". Extractivism refers to the systemic process of natural resource extraction in the global South as part of neocolonial social relations, whereby resources and wealth are appropriated by wealthy corporations for their sole benefit while also causing environmental, political, and economic destruction. Epistemic extractivism is a parallel concept to denote how marginalized and oppressed epistemologies have been superficially appropriated or extracted by theorists from the global North or in elite academic/political spaces without due acknowledgement or political commitment and responsibility (Grosfoguel 2020, pp. 203–18). In the course of our discussion during the writing of this article, Ramón Grosfoguel introduced the term extractivism as a means of characterizing the Hindutva endeavor to appropriate the discourse of decoloniality. Hindutva extractivism is the extraction of the epistemologies of the marginalized in the global South for the Hindu nationalist elite (also situated, paradoxically, in the global South) to undermine the struggles of the marginalized in postcolonial India. Deepak draws upon the writings of pioneering scholars in decolonial studies, such as Ramón Grosfoguel, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Walter Mignolo, and Sylvia Wynter, in his propagation/defense of Hindutva throughout the book. It is worth noting, however, that these very authors are decidedly critical of the Islamophobia propagated by the Hindutva movement that Deepak champions.

4.1. Entanglement of Religion and Race: Construction of the Religious "Other"

Deepak departs from existing scholarship on decoloniality with his notion that decolonial thought emerging primarily from Latin America and Africa has focused on race, not religion, as the primary contradiction, despite the entanglements between Christianity and the Western colonial project (Deepak 2021, p. 31). The reason, according to Deepak, is that Latin Americans and Africans have converted to either Christianity or Islam and have lost their Indigenous traditions, while Asians have managed to retain their precolonial religions as living civilizational projects. His idea is primarily of Bharat[20]—India as a millennia-old Indic[21] civilization, surviving despite the colonization projects of both Christianity and Islam (Deepak 2021, p. 32). Next, he argues that the focus on race emerged from Critical Race Theory, that, according to him, was not taking religion seriously. He writes (ibid):

> *the preoccupation of decolonial scholarship with race and its reluctance to address religion with the same degree of candor may be attributed to the fact that the regions that have produced much of the scholarship on coloniality so far, follow the religion of the colonizer, namely Christianity.*

The development of decoloniality through Asia, according to Deepak (2021, p. 34), specifically Bharat, would be to think through the negation of coloniality as an affirmation of Indigenous religions against the dominance of colonial civilizational theologies.

As Junaid Rana (2007, pp. 150–51) commented, the historical analysis of race assumes a critical framework that emphasizes religious difference not as a simple form of cultural prejudice or irrational religious discrimination, thereby deploying it towards a systemic analysis of the power of racism. Deepak's project is not about the entanglement of religion and race in the modern world; it is an essentialism of the religion-only framework of

Hindutva. Deepak's argument that religion has been ignored in decolonial scholarship remains unsupported by the existing body of work, which has long accented the systemic entanglement between religion and race and the transformation of religious and racial differences under colonial modernity.

For instance, in his conceptualization of the progression of racial and religious differences between the Old and New Worlds, Maldonado-Torres (2014, p. 657) marks a sharp shift from what he calls the religious difference of the Old World to the racial difference between the New World; that is, from the Old World religious polemic (between Christendom and the Islamicate) to the New World racial rhetoric inaugurated in Al-Andalus and South America (Maldonado-Torres 2014, p. 653). In other words, Christopher Columbus and the Spanish conquistadors did not view South American Indigenous people merely as people with the wrong religion, as they did with Muslims and Jews in the Old World, but as people with no religion, hence, soulless (Maldonado-Torres 2014, p. 646). For Maldonado-Torres, this shift to a people with "no religion" and "no soul" means that the First Nations people of South America were treated in a fundamentally new way that makes for an unprecedented break in relations from the "Other" as known to the Old World. Maldonado-Torres' arguments are mainly based on two central claims: one, following from the works of Aníbal Quijano, is that First Nations people were seen as people without souls, which is assumed to be novel in the formation of modern racial hierarchies and the coloniality of being (Maldonado-Torres 2014, pp. 652–53); and two, the Indigenous people were not simply those with the wrong religion, like the Muslims and Jews of the Old World, but those of no religion, establishing the racial and secular difference of the New World (ibid).

Maldonado-Torres' treatment of religion in coloniality demonstrates far more complexity than Deepak's argument of religion as the sole contradiction of coloniality. The former performs an important operation for decolonial thought as it showcases the ways in which racial difference is constructed through historical encounters rather than as a continuation of age-old religious differences. Unthinking coloniality, thus, cannot emerge out of simply reviving religious differences but by undoing race itself in the formation of racialized religion.

4.2. Locating the Muslim Question: Construction of Middle Eastern Coloniality

Another crucial aspect of Deepak's work is his refusal to locate (that is, to erase effectively) Islam and the Muslim question in formulating decoloniality. Deepak (2021, p. 29) marks Columbus' voyage in 1492 and the subsequent colonization of the Indigenous people of the Americas as the beginning of coloniality. However, decolonial scholarship has given critical importance to the colonization of Granada in the same year as the simultaneous and global emergence of coloniality as a logic of power (Grosfoguel 2015, p. 29). Significantly, Deepak ignores this crucial link with Islam and its consequences in thinking about both the racialization of religion and the transnational problem of the Muslim question in the construction of coloniality. He further ignores South Asia's colonial encounter from the moment of Vasco De Gama's arrival in South India in 1498, which also introduced the Muslim question as a form of Indigenous resistance to the matrix of coloniality (Choudhary 1985, pp. 63–64). Although commissioned by the Portuguese King Emmanuel for trade and commerce, Da Gama was also tasked with locating the legendary Christian king of the East, Prester John, capturing Muslim trading routes, and participating in a crusade to reconquer the Holy Land (Ghazanfar 2018, p. 16). The rationale behind Da Gama's expedition to find Christians in India may appear unclear, yet it is crucial to understand the ideological and epistemic world inhabited by individuals like him, which was molded by religion and later by biological theories of racial character, historical theories of civilizational achievement, and socioeconomic theories of institutional development (Chatterjee 2011, p. 29). After such omission of the Muslim question from decoloniality—not undertaken, significantly, by any of his decolonial interlocutors—Deepak goes on to

construct "Middle Eastern coloniality" as a *parallel problem* to European coloniality and as an antagonist of the Indian/Bharat civilization and its decolonial future.

While the Sultanates of India primarily emerged from Central Asia, Deepak argues that "Middle Eastern coloniality" is the appropriate term as the logic of its coloniality emerged from the Middle East through the birth of Islam. He claims that Middle Eastern coloniality differs from European coloniality in at least two aspects (Deepak 2021, pp. 161–62). For one, it has a much longer history than European colonialism, where European coloniality started in the fifteenth century, while Middle Eastern coloniality began in the eighth century. Secondly, he believes it was a project of annihilation as opposed to the European project of co-option. But despite preceding European colonialism, Middle Eastern coloniality continues to disrupt the Bharat civilization. Therefore, he attributes problems in places like Kashmir, Bengal, and Kerala—in other words, the Muslim question—to an expression and persistence of Middle Eastern coloniality (Deepak 2021, p. 163).

Deepak subverts the Muslim question equivalent to coloniality by saying it is "Middle Eastern coloniality." After omitting the anticaste works of Bhim Rao Ambedkar,[22] which regard caste as a critique of the unification drive of Bharat, Deepak returns to Ambedkar as a pre-eminent critique of Middle Eastern coloniality (Deepak 2021, pp. 169–73). In an interesting move, Deepak sidesteps Ambedkar's collection of work on caste as a Dalit[23] intellectual by arguing that he accepts Ambedkar's experience of caste but not his scholarship on caste. In effect, this allows for the rejection of Ambedkar's anticaste challenge while selectively appropriating Ambedkar as a critic of "Muslim colonialism." Hence, using the works of Ambedkar, Deepak omits the racialization of Islam under the colonial project to create an "Islamic threat" to India. At its core, Hindutva's weaponization of coloniality against Islam is not meant as a decolonial critique of the world but to legitimate the further marginalization of Muslim minorities within the Indian nation-state. The "decolonial" project of Hindutva is to portray Islam and Christianity as civilizational threats to the so-called civilizational landscape of India/Bharat.

4.3. Hindutva: Beyond Nationalism and towards Civilization

One of the aims of Deepak's "decolonial" project is to propose Bharat as a civilizational state, as opposed to being a nation-state formed through its encounter with European and Middle Eastern coloniality/modernity. Deepak's project believes that India was (and is) a civilizational state encompassing all its current territories and beyond (including Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka) before it was interrupted by Islamic and Western Christian colonialism (Deepak 2021, p. 225). This framework is curiously used to dismiss the criticism (coming from postcolonial scholars and Marxists) that this is a project of Hindu nationalism or majoritarianism, as such criticism, he claims, emerges from the colonial consciousness of the critics unable to address Bharat as a civilizational entity capable of its self-determination and Indigenous consciousness (Deepak 2021, p. 163).

Unlike Islam and Christianity, which follows the logic of religion in order to organize diverse faiths and practices as a civilization entity, Deepak (2021, pp. 183–84) argues that there is no such thing as a Hindu *religion* in the Abrahamic sense (which, on its own, is an accurate point). Instead, he relies on Bharat as a land mass, which forms the logic of the Hindu civilization with its pious attachment to a land-based culture of worship and pilgrimage in order to tease out a distinct positionality for Hindu religion and Bharat civilization (Deepak 2021, p. 184). He (ibid) posits that the Bharat civilization and Hindu spiritual ontology do not have the concept of an out-group (as, say, "kafir" for Muslims) that the religion needs to be professed to, as it is primarily a relationship to land encompassing various traditions of Bharat. Moreover, Hindu nationalism is not about territorial nationalism based on material expansion, as proposed in the European colonial model. However, it is the "cultural veneration of the Indic native" as a spiritual project within the Hindu Dharmic fold (Deepak 2021, p. 211).

Deepak maintains that there was indeed a precolonial spiritual identity in Bharat, which he dubs as "Dharmic Unity", that traverses formations like Hinduism, Buddhism,

Jainism, and other Indic faith systems. Hence, the existing categories to understand religion vis-à-vis coloniality, such as priesthood, text/scripture, and law, are insufficient to approach the truth of the Dharmic system (Deepak 2021, p. 292). Instead, colonial categories and their dissemination through law and (secular) state unduly destroy the true meanings of categories like Brahmin[24] by its translation to the colonial category of the priesthood. Anti-Brahmin orientation in India is thus attributed to (that is, rescripted as) the colonial influence of Christian missionaries and their understanding of religion (Deepak 2021, p. 309). In a similar vein, he argues that caste and tribe are colonial constructions that obscure the precolonial realities of "jati"[25] and "varna."[26] Thus, before understanding these from the standpoint of their own realities, a "decolonization"—as delinking from such categories—must be initiated for the recovery of Bharat as a civilization. By attributing the caste question to colonial consciousness, Deepak (2021, p. 309) insidiously sidesteps one of the biggest challenges to the construction of Bharat-as-civilization in the form of anticaste critique and non-Brahmin life worlds, as any attempt to empower Bharat as a "pseudo decolonial standpoint" requires ignoring the interior challenge to its claim to unity, which is achieved by erasing Indigenous scholars of caste and religion.

However, a cursory glance at the early twentieth-century writings of Hindutva ideologues shows a different picture. Zaheer Baber (2022, p. 161) argues:

> *Even though in the case of India, the twin lenses of caste and religion rather than "race" are salient when it comes to demarcating group identities, it does not necessarily follow that the processes of racialization and racism—understood here as the attribution of certain allegedly inheritable cultural characteristics that are deemed to be negative and inferior for the purposes of claiming and monopolizing material and non-material resources—do not exist.*

The meanings of race, caste, and religion in India were transformed during colonial times (Slate 2011, p. 63). According to Baber (2022, pp. 158–59), a part of the early fascination of modern Hindutva nationalism was with claims of racial superiority and the thesis of race as "purity of blood" along the lines of German Nazis and the European Aryan racial project. V.D. Savarkar, a major proponent of the idea of the "Hindu race", drew inspiration from social Darwinist thinkers like Herbert Spencer, T.H. Huxley, and German zoologist Ernst Haeckel, who had previously supported racial domination (Baber 2022, p. 158). In 1923, he used their works to create the influential text *Hindutva—Who is a Hindu?* which set the agenda for the RSS-led Hindu nationalism (ibid). Savarkar defined Hindus as the same race, culture, and civilization or, in other words, the same "race-*jati*" (Baber 2022, p. 159). The Hindus as a modern secular racial project were developed through the imagination of a single people of Bharat with its identification of "sacred" geography (Chatterjee 1992).

In an ironic twist to Deepak's claim of Bharat as an Indigenous identity, the original proponents of Bharat civilization and Hindu nationalism have argued that they were not of the inferior Indigenous races of India but Aryan colonizers from *outside* India (Thapar 1996, p. 6). This was a parallel argument to the European colonial argument. European racial superiority was the reason for the colonization of the "natives" of India. Similarly, early ideologues of Hindutva argued that the Aryan colonization of the natives of India was made possible because of the superior status of Brahmins (Thapar 1996, p. 7). Through the appropriation of Sanskritic symbols, placed out of context, the myth of Brahmin and white supremacy and the idea of a racially superior Aryan were created, sidelining the issues of caste in India (ibid). According to Romila Thapar (1996, p. 7):

> *The Aryan theory also provided the colonized with status and self-esteem, arguing that they were linguistically and racially of the same stock as the colonizers. However, the separation of European Aryans from the Asian Aryans was in effect a denial of this status. Such a denial was necessary in the view of those who proposed a radical structuring of colonial society through new legislation and administration and in accordance with the conversion of the colony into a viable source of revenue. The complexities of caste*

were simplified in its being explained as racial segregation, demarcating the Aryans from others.

The history of "India", understood as a superior civilization, was appropriated into the paranoiac Nazi nationalist upsurge in Europe (specifically, Germany) through the imagination of Europeans as the civilizational brothers of Aryan Brahmins (Birkvad 2020, p. 62). The recent upsurge of white supremacist right-wing groups in Europe has revived this notion and found its allies within the Hindutva groups (Birkvad 2020, p. 78). Therefore, the Nazi model of Hindutva mobilization has a close theoretical affinity to the Aryan civilization rhetoric of the European Far Right, which develops through the twin axis of white supremacy and Islamophobia rather than decoloniality (Birkvad 2020, p. 78). This rhetoric uses the decolonial option, without the decolonial turn, to conceal the racist mythologies of the twentieth century.

5. Decolonial Islamic Liberation Theology in India and Beyond

In summary, there are two practical proposals for the future of decolonial Islamic liberation theology. The first proposal stresses the importance of decoloniality in the political resistance of Islamic liberation theology, specifically in the global South and even more specifically, in India, where Hindutva is a crucial nodal point of the contemporary coloniality of the Empire. The second proposal involves a call for further research into the global political outlook of Islamic liberation theology, with a consideration of the framework of decoloniality.

The decolonial turn identifies the racialization of Islam as one of the organizing principles of modern coloniality (Abdou 2022, p. 43). Decolonial Islamic liberation theology takes the decolonial turn as a first step in articulating the practice of decolonial options in any given context. It is essential to contextualize Deepak's arguments to their unsaid epistemic foundations in Hindu nationalism and Hindutva, which is a movement led by "upper" caste men that attempts to impose its hegemonic casteist political theology on India's subaltern masses and exclude, or indeed, outright eliminate, its minorities through new forms of racialization (Omvedt 2011, pp. 3–4). The problem of the racialized entanglement of caste and religion—in the context of the Dalit, minorities, gender, and Islamophobia questions—must define the notion of India's subaltern identity, viz., the vast majority of the Indian population. As such, a decolonial Islamic liberation theology must resist any attempt to recast(e) Hindutva as a decolonial standpoint for at least two reasons. Firstly, Hindutva has historically been a manifestly genocidal political program that targets India's Muslim minorities directly, maintains the caste hegemony indirectly, and continues to frame Muslims as invaders and colonizers, thereby excluding Muslims from the intersection of colonized people. Secondly, by systemically ignoring and sidestepping the anticaste challenge from subaltern classes, Hindutva is also attempting to fabricate a unified cultural nationalist Hindu Indian identity. In the case of the former, decolonial Islamic liberation theology is part of an existential political struggle of Indian Muslim minorities. In the latter instance, the anticaste movements are the site of political and ethical solidarity and convergence for such liberation theology.

While Hindutva nationalists have used decoloniality to support their exclusionary claims, many scholars have dismissed decoloniality as vulnerable to right-wing nationalist appropriation (Gopal 2022). On the other hand, Aditya Nigam's (2020) recent volume on Indian postcolonial engagement with decoloniality ignores the complexity of the decolonial question, specifically the connection between decolonial Islam and the larger global decolonial conversation. This article argues that rather than dismissing or appropriating decoloniality, it is important to preserve and fortify its critical dimension in naming and confronting the destructive legacies of colonial modernity through a pluriversal framework. In India, this means the solidarity and political praxis between oppressed castes, religions, genders, regions, minorities, and nations.

This article highlights the potential issue of the decolonial project becoming merely a decolonial option (ideas without praxis) without a decolonial turn (praxis with ideas).

Nevertheless, to ensure the future of Islamic liberation theology in India and beyond, a shift from postcolonialism to decoloniality is necessary.[27] In conjunction with Islamic liberation theology, the postcolonial critical project took the lead in challenging the politics of Islamic reform. However, a fundamental shortcoming of the postcolonial project was its failure to provide a positive vision for articulating the Muslim political self, despite critiquing the othering of Muslims by the dominant self-narratives of the Empire. Islamic liberation theologians such as Farid Esack (2018) and Hamid Dabashi (2011) warned against the adoption of liberal theology[28] by "progressive Islam"[29] and challenged the co-option of reformist Islam[30] for serving the interests of the Empire without necessarily utilizing postcolonial critique. The essence of the postcolonial critique and Islamic liberation theology was that Muslim reformers sought to improve the bodies and communities of Muslims through observation, analysis, and cataloguing, leading to disciplinary societies of Muslims following 9/11 (Azad 2017). The reform of Islam was pursued through both liberal–secular interpretative frameworks and old forms of repressive colonialism through war (Mahmood 2006).

However, the Empire has undergone a transition from a unipolar world to a multipolar world, and in this postliberal order, it is using its influence to conceptualize traditional Islam as an alternative to reformist Islam, especially after the Arab uprising in 2011 (Warren 2017). This new manifestation of traditional Islam aims to achieve self-mastery through tradition without the need for reform. There is an increasing trend in the social engineering projects of the Empire to prioritize adherence to tradition through hierarchy while still upholding the concept of warfare, as opposed to earlier disciplinary techniques that were based on reforming tradition and the logic of warfare. For instance, Muslim soft power politics attempt to appeal to Muslim culture and traditions at the national level through tactics such as interfaith dialogue, spirituality, infotainments, sports, and capital-intensive development projects, and these efforts do not fundamentally alter the neocolonial dynamics of global neoliberal warfare (Douai 2017, pp. 297–304). In contrast, Muslim popular culture exemplifies the fusion of modern cyber Islam with new traditionalism through the Muslim spiritual quest, which uses both smartphones and a traditional rosary to evoke tradition and a reimagined version of Muslim masculinity based on conventional social hierarchy (Birt 2017). An Indian example of this is the four-day World Sufi Forum held in New Delhi in 2016 from 17 to 20 March, where even Narendra Modi lauded the importance of traditional Islam (Kunnummal 2016). In this context, decolonial Islamic liberation theology in India and beyond requires a critical perspective on the Empire's changing nature while rekindling a dedication to a liberatory Islamic praxis that transcends the secular reformism–religious traditionalism binary.

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Notes

1 For a detailed engagement on the politics of higher education and the movement for justice for Rohith Vemula, see Sukumar (2022).

2 The Hindu caste system was organized based on the social identity of the Brahmin priestly and scholarly class. Consequently, a resistance movement against the caste system emerged in India that was directed at the dominant power of Brahminism. In the Indian context, the process of decolonization is synonymous with debrahmanization, according to an anticaste decolonial framework proposed by Braj Ranjan Mani (2005).

3 Ramón Grosfoguel, Nelson Maldonado Torres, and Santiago Slabodksy form the core faculty of the Granada Summer School, along with Salman Sayyid, Houria Bouteldja, Asma Barlas, Ella Shohat, Farid Esack, and Hatem Bazian, among a number of others.

4 Salman Sayyid's proposed Critical Muslim Studies is a recent research field that centers on the relationship between Islam and Muslims with the contemporary world, emphasizing critical decolonial perspectives.

5 One of the central lectures of the summer school featured Houria Bouteldja (2017), who provides a decolonial perspective on Islam, racism, and feminism.

6 For a recent engagement on the connection between decoloniality and various liberation theologies, see Medina et al. (2021).

7 Decolonial thinkers use the concept of modernity/coloniality to assert that the two categories are mutually interdependent and reinforce each other and that in order to confront colonialism, it is necessary to confront its continued influence on modernity's views on humanity, rationality, and economy (Quijano 2007).

8 I am grateful for the comments and suggestions of Ramón Grosfoguel and Shadaab Rahemtulla, which have helped to improve the arguments and structure of this article.

9 Vinayak Damodar Savarkar or V. D. Savarkar, an upper-caste Hindu Brahmin male from Maharashtra, coined the term Hindutva in colonial north India, which defined Hinduism as a religious way of life and distinguished it from the political and racial superior ideology of Hindutva, and the RSS drew ideological inspiration from Savarkar's early writings. However, anticaste critics resist the politicization of Hindutva as an analytical category by Hindu nationalist groups like the RSS, as it obscures the recent construction of Hindu/Hinduism through census politics in the late colonial era.

10 The traditional Hindu caste system assigns people to a particular caste based on their birth, which determines their occupation, social status, and interactions, with the four main castes being Brahmins (priests and scholars), Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers), Vaishyas (merchants and traders), and Shudras (servants and laborers), while the Dalits, considered outside the caste system, face social discrimination and exclusion.

11 The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) established in 1980 is the political wing of the RSS.

12 The Babri Masjid was a mosque located in the city of Ayodhya, in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. It was built in the 16th century by the Mughal emperor Babur and was considered to be one of the oldest mosques in India.

13 The Gujarat riots of 2002 were a series of violent incidents and mass killings that took place in the Indian state of Gujarat, resulting in the deaths of several thousand Muslims.

14 There are 1 Supreme Court, 25 state High Courts, and 672 district courts below them, in addition to approximately 7000 subordinate courts in India.

15 Hindutva groups perpetuate the discredited conspiracy theory of "love Jihad", which alleges that Muslim men in India lure Hindu women into marriage and convert them to Islam.

16 Cow vigilantism refers to violent actions carried out by individuals or groups who self-appoint themselves as protectors of cows, an animal considered sacred in Hinduism, against Muslims and lower castes who are involved in the beef industry or are accused of cow slaughter, often leading to incidents of beatings, lynchings, and even murder. Cow vigilantism is associated with the Hindu nationalist movement in India, which advocates for upper caste Hindu values and beliefs and considers cow protection to be a critical aspect of its agenda.

17 For example, Gustavo Gutiérrez's work did not consider the coloniality of the global South since the sixteenth century, while the decoloniality paradigm in liberation theology is more sensitive to the issue of the preferential option of the poor by defining it as the "other" in the colony since the fall of Al-Andalus and the discovery of the Americas (Arce-Valentín 2017, pp. 46–47). Enrique Dussel's concept of the "other" is a broader decolonial category of the preferential option of the poor than previous liberation theology projects (Vuola 2000).

18 Racialization refers to how social, cultural, and economic systems construct and maintain racial categories and their meanings, which lead to the concepts of race and racism.

19 I am indebted to the inputs and comments provided by Shadaab Rahemtulla for the writing of this section.

20 Bhārata, or Bharat, is a term used to designate the Indian subcontinent in ancient epics like the *Mahabharata*.

21 Indic is a term used in both academic and political contexts to refer to the specific nature or formation of the religious and cultural landscape and logic in the Indian subcontinent.

22 Bhim Rao Ambedkar is recognized as an anticaste revolutionary and the most prominent subaltern intellectual in India. He formulated a theory that identified the persistence of caste as an organizing principle in the Indian subcontinent, going beyond the conventional binary of colonialism versus nationalism and religion versus secularism, in order to understand the politics of the Indian state.

23 Dalit as a term refers to a group of people rendered as untouchables and out of the organization of the caste system. In the Marathi language and associated vernacular languages, Dalit was translated as "split or broken" and was politically mobilized as an affirmation of the resistance towards the caste order.

24 The term Brahmin refers to the highest caste in the traditional Hindu caste system, composed of priests and scholars.

25 Jati refers to the birth-based social groups in Hindu society. These groups are usually associated with a particular occupation or profession and are believed to have their own distinct culture and traditions. The Jati system is often referred to as the sub-caste system.

[26] Varna refers to the four main social groups in Hindu society. These classes are the Brahmins (priests and scholars), Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers), Vaishyas (merchants and traders), and Shudras (manual laborers). The Varna system is often referred to as the caste system.

[27] Postcolonial studies have extended the concept of imperialist domination beyond economic determinism to encompass culture while also acknowledging the effects of colonialism (Grosfoguel 2011). However, decolonial studies have critiqued postcolonial studies for their epistemic bias towards poststructuralism and postmodernism, which reproduce colonial power/knowledge structures (ibid). As a result, decolonial studies advocate for a broader canon of thought beyond the Western (including the Leftist Western) canon and a universal perspective that emerges from diverse epistemic, ethical, and political projects towards a pluriversal world (ibid).

[28] According to Farid Esack (2018, p. 87), liberal theologians placed significant emphasis on the value of reason and critical thinking as fundamental elements of religious belief. However, Esack has expressed criticism towards liberal theology, citing its tendency to undermine the significance of social and political factors, specifically the impact of the US-led Empire, in influencing religious beliefs and practices.

[29] Farid Esack (2018, p. 80) recognizes that there are diverse interpretations of progressive Islam across the various regions of the Muslim world. Esack considers the terms "Progressive Muslim" or "Progressive Islam" in the North Atlantic region as a political mobilization in the soft war waged by US-led imperialism to influence Muslim communities and organizations after the 9/11 attacks.

[30] While acknowledging the different streams within reformist Islam, this article positions the emergence of reformist Islam in the aftermath of the Cold War and 9/11 attacks as the primary subject of the postcolonial analysis.

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