

Statecraft: Building a Hindu Nationalist Intellectual Ecosystem in India

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Abstract : The rise of authoritarian populist regimes has been accompanied by hardened nationalism and heightened divisions between 'us' and 'them'. Political actors reinforce these sentiments through coercion, but also through inciting fear about imagined threats and by transforming public discourse about policy concerns. Extremist ideas can penetrate national policy, as newly appointed intellectuals and 'experts' in knowledge-producing institutions, such as government committees, universities, and think tanks, succeed in transforming public discourse. While attacking left and liberal academics, universities, and the press, the current Indian government is building new institutions to provide authority to its particularly rigid, nationalist discourse. This paper examines the building of a Hindu-nationalist intellectual ecosystem in India, interrogating the key role of hyper-nationalist think tanks. While some are explicit about their political and ideological leanings, others claim neutrality and pursue their agenda through coded technocratic language and resonant historical narratives. Their key is to change thinking by normalizing it. Six years before winning the election in 2014, India's Hindu-nationalist party, the BJP, put together its own network of elite policy experts. In a national newspaper, the vice-president of the BJP described this as an intentional shift: from 'being action-oriented to solidifying its ideological underpinnings in a policy framework'. When the BJP came to power in 2014, 'experts' from these think tanks filled key positions in the central government. The BJP has since been circulating dominant ideas of Hindu supremacy through regional parties, grassroots political organisations, and civil society organisations. These think tanks have the authority to articulate and legitimate Hindu nationalism within a credible technocratic policy framework. This paper is based on ethnography and over 50 interviews in New Delhi, before and after the BJP's staggering election victory in 2019. It outlines the party's attempt to take over existing institutions while developing its own cadre of nationalist policy-making professionals.

Keywords : ideology, politics, South Asia, technocracy

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