

# ‘Attempts to impose Hindi not new’

Interview with **Audrey Truschke**, author and activist. BY **DIVYA TRIVEDI**

THE historian, author and activist Audrey Truschke’s work on pre-modern Indian languages and society lies at the fault lines of the debate raging in India today. Over the past half decade or so, she has explored many forgotten or obscure aspects of the Mughal Empire. Her 2016 book, *Culture of Encounters: Sanskrit at the Mughal Court*, illustrates how the Mughals poured immense energy into drawing Sanskrit thinkers to their courts, adopted and adapted Sanskrit-based practices, translated dozens of Sanskrit texts into Persian, and composed Persian accounts of Indian philosophy. The Mughal Empire appears to have been a multilingual state that collaborated with its Indian subjects to build a Mughal polity, which went on to shape the literary and political culture of early modern India. An associate professor of South Asian history at Rutgers University in Newark, New Jersey, Audrey Truschke is no stranger to controversy, having faced troll attacks and even court cases from the Hindutva Right.

The historian is currently working on a sweeping history of India, ranging from the Indus Valley civilisation to the 21st century. In this interview, she talks about her last book, *The Language of History: Sanskrit Narratives of Indo-Muslim Rule*, and about the language debate raging in the country.

**Both Hindi and English are our official languages, as stated by the Constitution, and India does not have a national language. What is your view on this debate?**

“Hindi, hindu, hindustan” is an old nationalist chant, and current attempts to impose Hindi are, frankly, nothing new in the history of independent India. Such a language imposition remains ahistorical insofar as Indian anxieties about being a multilingual place are decidedly modern. Practically, I don’t know if the current Hindu nationalist government has the ability to force Hindi down people’s throats, but if they did, they would destroy much of Indian culture in the process.

**The language debate has become emotive, but there seems to be a lack of solid historical evidence to guide us in any particular direction.**

Hindutva ideologues, who are largely shaping India’s national debates at present, deny even the basic facts about how languages relate to one another. They shout that Hindi and Sanskrit, for example, are not Indo-European. Speaking with such dogmatic people is akin to trying to reason with those who say that the



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earth is flat. For those who want to know more about India’s multilingual past, my advice is to read scholars on the subject and immerse yourself in Indian history.

**Of late, there has been a systematic attempt at creating a new Hinduism that would unite all Hindus across regional and cultural diversities. What are your thoughts? Does the language debate fall in this category?**

I live in the United States, where conservative Christians have, for decades, tried to define their religion according to a set of political ideas. They are now reaping the rewards of their efforts, namely, some success in their political agenda accompanied by a severe drop-off in the percentage of Americans who identify as Christian.

One wonders if we will see something similar happen as Hindutva ideologues attempt to hollow out the diverse Hindu tradition. Then again, V.D. Savarkar, the godfather of Hindutva, was an atheist who mocked Hindus for cow worship, so maybe such an outcome is consistent with Hindutva’s iconoclasm.

**Given the plurality inherent in the subcontinent, can the language debate ever be settled in favour of Hindi? Is there a possibility that Hindi might erase other Indian tongues?**

Plurality is not inherent to the subcontinent, although it has long been a feature of Indian life. People can remake almost everything, given enough power, except, of course, history.

**In The Language of History you refer to the pre-modern terms used for Muslims: mlechha, tamra, and yavana. Did these words necessarily have derogatory connotations?**

Sanskrit intellectuals wrote about Muslims, especially political figures, quite a lot between the 12th and 18th centuries, and many depictions lack animus. In fact, quite commonly, pre-modern Sanskrit thinkers portrayed Indo-Muslim rulers as no different [from] other Indian rulers, and sometimes the portrayals are rather positive. This is hardly surprising given that the subcontinent had long hosted kings of various religious inclinations, including different kinds of “Hindus” (a largely anachronistic term for this period). Many Sanskrit thinkers criticised various kings and dynasties but generally over issues other than religious identity.