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## RESEARCH PAPER

### Religiously Motivated Politics in Democratic India Under the BJP Government

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## RELIGIOUSLY MOTIVATED POLITICS IN DEMOCRATIC INDIA UNDER THE BJP GOVERNMENT

Zara Qurban\*

### *Abstract*

*The prevalence of democracy is contingent upon sustainable peace and good governance, wherein individuals are granted freedom to practice their cultural and religious beliefs. In South Asia, the politicisation of religion has been a vexing issue, with dominant religious groups, both protected and non-protected, threatening democratic ideals. This paper argues that India, which is among the world's largest secular democratic states, has witnessed the emergence of fascist and authoritarian policies and manifestations under the leadership of Prime Minister Modi, allowing extremist Hindutva groups and BJP to promote Hindu nationalism at the expense of other marginalised groups. The paper also highlights that the BJP government has employed religion to manipulate and mobilise individuals against minorities, jeopardising democratic values and undermining state institutions. It concludes that if the Indian government persists in practising fascist tenets, it will have grave repercussions for regional stability and the democratic rights of minorities at home.*

**Keywords:** Fanaticism, Extremism, Religious Politicising, Hindutva, Hindu Nationalism.

### **Introduction**

**T**he persistent and pernicious influence of fanaticism, terrorism and violence in South Asia poses a serious threat to the region's security and economic growth. Ethnic, religious and political differences have caused long-standing conflicts in South Asia, resulting in terrorism, sectarianism and divisive ideologies. In addition to disputes over resources, territorial boundaries and divergent political philosophies, Hindu nationalism has emerged as a particularly destructive force. India has used religious affiliation to further its political objectives, leading to potentially negative consequences for the stability and progress of the region. International institutions still need to address these challenges hindering sustainable peace and development. The politicisation of religion is of particular concern, as religion is manipulated to achieve political objectives. When non-believers use religious affiliation for political power, it can have disastrous consequences, as seen in Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>1</sup> If

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the politicisation of religion is not curtailed, it could have severe implications for democratic institutions in South Asia.

Religion is an undeniable force that shapes political systems, but there needs to be more scholarly inquiry into the impact of religious extremism on politics. Given the growing importance of religion worldwide, sociologists need to analyse the interplay between religion and political dynamics. Religious radicalism poses a significant threat to individual safety and security and hinders the establishment of a more inclusive and pluralistic political order. Political trends and developments in India, a country with one-sixth of the world's population, are highly consequential for South Asia.<sup>2</sup> It is, therefore, essential to examine how religiously motivated politics, such as the Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) and Hindu nationalism, affect the foundations of Indian democracy. A thorough analysis of the current political scenario in India can provide insights into the dynamics of the issue.

The paper analyses the empirical evidence that sheds light on India's deviation from the normative expectations of democratic governance. It highlights the plight of minorities, particularly Muslims, who have borne the brunt of religious intolerance, particularly under the BJP leadership, which has been in power under the stewardship of Narendra Modi since 2014. Despite earlier setbacks, BJP has successfully transformed itself from a cultural and social movement to a political force deeply committed to promoting Hindu nationalism, which poses a serious threat to the secular character of India.<sup>3</sup> The paper endeavours to analyse these developments, drawing upon various empirical sources comprehensively.

## **Religious Nationalism in Democratic India**

There exists a significant degree of commonality among various religious nationalist movements, despite their differences. In general, such movements are founded on a moralistic basis that eventually becomes the basis for their approaches to governance. Additionally, religious nationalists often rely on puritanical arguments to criticise existing policies, and they also tend to marginalise minority religious groups to construct a unifying national identity. This approach has the effect of subordinating and sidelining religious minorities and subgroups. The fusion of politics and religion in India originated from the State's patronage of Brahminical Vedic practice, which posited that clerics were the guardians of the State.<sup>4</sup>

Since achieving independence from British rule, India has espoused a constitution grounded in secular principles and rejected the conflation of religion and politics. However, the nature of secularism in India differs significantly from the Western conception, emphasising a clear separation between religious and political spheres to promote equality and civic peace. Unfortunately, starting in the 1990s, religion began to assume a more prominent role in Indian electoral politics, particularly in the rise of the Hindu nationalist BJP, which gained significant ground

under the leadership of Narendra Modi in the 2000s. This development has posed significant challenges to India's traditional commitment to "Unity in Diversity."<sup>5</sup>

## Hindu Nationalism

In its essence, *Hindutva* represents the ideology of Hindu nationalism, aiming to establish a Hindu state (*Hindu Rashtra*) where being a Hindu or identifying with Hinduism is the predominant characteristic. The philosophy of nationalism was initiated in the Western world, on one side through linguistics and language and on the other side, it took the shape of political manifestation and religion. With the help of the process of exclusion and inclusion, it attempts to create national and further incorporate those with minimal social alterations and exclude those who do not fit the desired criteria. However, the religious nationalism of Hindus often falls in the category of 'cultural nationalism', which is essentially a movement with many political facets involved aimed at acquiring power. What do these ideologies hold in terms of commonalities? It is their disdain targeted directly towards the non-Hindus, Muslims in particular. Muslims are often stigmatised as 'others' or 'outsiders'. Due to the memories of historical events, Muslims in India are considered ones who must be consigned to the status of subservient, along with constant suppression and ethnic cleansing.

Arguably, Hindu nationalists firmly believe in the indispensable role of three elements in advancing *Hindu Jati*, which refers to the community, although the term generally connotes caste. These elements include shared linguistic heritage, religious commonality and communal unity based on common origins. The slogan 'Hindi, Hindu, Hindustan' was thus conceived to evoke nationalist sentiments.<sup>6</sup> Under BJP's leadership, the radical ideology of *Hindutva* has gained new momentum and has exposed the true face of the Indian State while simultaneously unravelling its claims to secularism. The lower-caste Hindus, coupled with other minorities, such as Christians, Sikhs and Muslims, are being systematically discriminated against and treated as second-class citizens of the State.

While observing the extremism practised by al Qaeda, one can observe that al Qaeda has sanctioned violence, extremism and terrorism to fill the voids by rejecting the values of a majoritarian rule or tolerance. Repudiating Western ideology and ideals for al Qaeda is a way to achieve Islamic rejuvenation. They construe Islam in a particular context and do not recognise the right of others to practice it. Similarly, the *Hindutva* doctrine in India demands uniformity of faith and consistency, akin to a radical mindset propagated by self-proclaimed custodians of faith.<sup>7</sup> If India continues blaming Pakistan and the Islamic religion for being radical, it necessitates a profound reflection.

## BJP and Extremism

The values of democracy, individual freedoms, secularism and egalitarianism, regardless of religious or sexual orientation, that the Indian people have fervently championed throughout their struggle for national liberation against imperialism and diligently maintained for about five decades post-independence now face imminent and dire jeopardy. This precarious predicament is attributed to joint forces, disseminating their doctrines of animosity at the grassroots level and even amongst the youth, leveraging various State apparatus, for instance, the government, judiciary, media, police and the education system.<sup>8</sup> BJP, which emerged as a political extension of the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS), officially espoused the *Hindutva* ideology in 1989 and has progressively pursued strident Hindu nationalist policies in India. Within three years of adopting the *Hindutva* ideology, BJP, in tandem with other Hindu nationalist parties in India, effectively mobilised Hindu fundamentalists.<sup>9</sup>

Under the auspices of the BJP, several Indian states have modified prevailing regulations on cow slaughter to augment the scope of such prohibitions and impose stricter penalties for infractions. For instance, Gujarat has amended its legislation to impose life imprisonment for cow slaughter. Further, some BJP leaders have publicly advocated capital punishment for those who engage in cow slaughter, primarily targeting Muslims, and have even urged vigilantes to take the law into their own hands.<sup>10</sup> These official proclamations have fostered an environment where acts of violence against Muslims are unleashed by Hindu nationalists, ostensibly to safeguard their reverence for the bovine.

The ascendancy of BJP, which falls in the category of one of the conservative Hindu national parties, marked a significant shift to right-wing Indian politics, having ramifications for lower castes, especially Muslims and Christians, during the 2014 and 2019 general elections under Narendra Modi. Given BJP's affiliation with RSS and their utmost commitment towards *Hindutva* to revive Hindu nationalism, it was reasonable to anticipate instances of radicalism based on religion targeting minorities in India. Nonetheless, the current wave of religious nationalism, or more accurately religious radicalism, was initiated and sparked by the destruction of Babri Mosque in 1992 and then the indiscriminate massacre of Muslims in Gujrat amounting to about 2000 by the hands of Hindu fundamentalists in the year 2000 under Narendra Modi as Chief Minister of the state. The Sachar Committee Report (commissioned in 2005 by the Indian government and later stalled in the Indian Parliament in 2006) underscored the deplorable conditions of the Muslims in various Indian states. The report revealed that, in many respects, their plight was worse than that of Dalits, owing to the prevalence of practices extremely discriminating in India.<sup>11</sup>

Practising torture and cruelty are prevalent in India without any ceiling or limitations. To investigate and extract information from prisoners and detained individuals, Indian police and armed forces resort to illicit coercive measures with impunity because such practices are embedded within the law enforcement structural

design. Often torture during custody leads to the death of detainees, and due to the poor law and order situation within India, cases against responsible officers are not appropriately investigated. According to Asian Human Rights Commission's report in 2012, the forensics facility is in the hands of unskilled personnel to do autopsies and examinations—influential politicians back officers who resort to coercive tools and measure to extract information.<sup>12</sup> The political landscape in India has undergone a significant transformation since Prime Minister Narendra Modi's re-election in 2019. While the rest of the world views Modi as a polished statesman, he and his Hindu nationalist party (BJP) have demonstrated a willingness to subjugate politics to achieve their domestic objectives. Nevertheless, in the last twenty-five years, the idea of India as a pluralistic nation has been subjected to a severe challenge from an animated religious nationalism.

### **Fascism Under Liberal Constitution – Modi's Democracy**

The ascendancy of Narendra Modi as a leader is emblematic of the rise of fascism in India, a State that purports to be secular but is increasingly beholden to xenophobic and nationalist doctrines espoused by RFF and BJP. Modi's ascendancy is a threat to India and the stability and concord of the South Asia region and potentially other regions. Despite India's claims to be the world's largest democracy, BJP has constructed a 'personality cult' around Modi since 2014. The term 'personality cult' was first used to describe the leadership of Joseph Stalin and denotes a leader who exhibits superhuman qualities, eliciting blind faith from their followers.<sup>13</sup>

Since assuming office and power in 2014, Indian Premier Narendra Modi has been a subject of interest for various media profiles. However, Modi has been criticised for his opposing and atrocious traits rather than positive acclaim. Karl Vick, the editor of TIME magazine, has stated that India has experienced the most doleful and condescending form of democracy under the Modi government. Merely holding elections does not define the ultimate form of democracy; true democracy ensures the rights of those who did not choose to elect him. India has diverse ethnicities, cultures, and religions, with a population of approximately 1.4 billion. However, Modi has raised doubts about core Indian values by explicitly showing prejudice against Indian Muslims. Additionally, minorities were directly and indirectly blamed for the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic during the February 2020 riots.<sup>14</sup> These actions have reflected Modi's xenophobic and nationalist beliefs and pose a threat not only to India but to the peace of the South Asian region and the world.

Finchelstein asserts that Narendra Modi's inclination towards right-wing ideology was apparent even before he became the Prime Minister of India. His administration has polarised Indian society into two categories: the elites and the masses, leading to a sense of opposition against the military, politics, judiciary and mainstream media, with prejudice and intolerance at its core. It has resulted in excluding ideas or people not aligning with *Hindutva* ideology.<sup>15</sup> Hameed points out that minority groups in India are treated with the same hostility that communists

experienced in fascist Italy and Jews in Nazi-led Germany. The incidents of violence against these groups, such as the Gujarat Massacre in 2002, the cow slaughter ban and associated violence on Muslims, the annulment of Article 370, 35(A) and the Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019, raise serious questions about the practices of a democratic leader like Modi in so-called democratic India.<sup>16</sup> Democratic societies are founded on freedom of religion and culture for all individuals. However, what was once a peaceful civilisation has become increasingly intolerant towards religious minorities, including Muslims, Christians, Sikhs and Dalits, under the leadership of Modi and his Hindu nationalist government.<sup>17</sup>

The current political and social scenario in India is marred by the rise of extremist voices and actions which have eroded the pluralistic and tolerant fabric of Indian society. Hindu religious leaders who wield significant influence exacerbate the circumstances with their inflammatory rhetoric and incitement to violence. For instance, a Hindu pundit from *Badi Sangat Ashram* located in Uttar Pradesh made a public threat to carry out mass rape of Muslim women. In contrast, another influential pundit called for the genocide of Muslim men. Such alarming incidents of hate speech and incitement to violence are a matter of grave concern for India and the international community. Furthermore, the Indian government's push for a Uniform Civil Code (UCC) can further undermine the cultural and religious values of minorities other than Hindus. The UCC, which aims to establish a single law for matters such as inheritance, marriage, adoption and divorce, has been a part of the Modi government's manifesto since 2019. However, it poses a threat to the diverse religious and cultural practices of minorities and could further marginalise them.<sup>18</sup> As a society, it is imperative to safeguard the rights and freedoms of all individuals and respect their diversity.

Classifying Hinduism as a unified religion is challenging, for it is a composite of diverse religious faiths that share similar beliefs, deities, practices and sacred customs but have not arrived at a unified doctrine or structure.<sup>19</sup> Certain Hindu nationalist groups are deliberately fanning communal tensions, arguing that they aim to instigate riots to reinforce the notion that Muslims intrinsically need robust political treatment. Consequently, Muslims reject India's secularism as a mere facade behind which India's Hindu majority dominates national policy.<sup>20</sup>

Hindu nationalism in India can also be translated as the resurgence of Brahmanism. However, it is not only related to the *Brahmin* caste alone but rather represents the efforts made by upper and middle castes in India to preserve their privileges along with their status, wealth and social standing by the discriminating caste hierarchy. According to India's dilapidated caste hierarchy system, if one belongs to a higher caste, the social, political and economic power and privileges will also be higher and vice versa. The Constitution of India mandates the protection and promotion of the rights of all citizens, regardless of their culture, religion, caste or belief system, through institutional reforms such as education, law and politics.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, those who hold sway in Indian society are responding aggressively to

prevent minorities from enjoying equal benefits, driven by entrenched religious radicalism and animosity towards Muslims, reflected in their political and social representation.

In today's world, terrorism is often associated with Islam and groups that claim to be adherents of the religion without carefully considering the strict definition of the term or waiting for facts to emerge.<sup>22</sup> However, the actions of Hindu extremists are equally abhorrent and destructive as those of terrorist organisations such as ISIS, or even worse, especially when one considers the complexity and contextualises ignorance of the Indian government to take strict actions opposed to the interests and practices of the *Bhartiya Gau Raksha Dal's* unleashing of violence against Muslims, which has deepened the sentiment of separation on a societal level of the State. India has constantly failed to hold those accountable who coordinated and perpetrated the horrendous series of coercion against Muslims, such as the riots of Gujrat and Bombay. These violent occurrences have driven numerous young skilled Muslims to take up arms against the State.<sup>23</sup>

Numerous scholars and human rights activists emphasise religious violence as a crucial aspect of contemporary political and civil liberties. In many instances, the significance of religious beliefs makes preventing religious violence a priority. Some contend that religious violence is a barometer for broader political and social liberties; when religious extremism is curtailed in society, other anti-democratic measures such as media censorship, the dismantling of the legislature, and subversion of electoral procedures are likely to follow.<sup>24</sup>

## Political Scenario

The emergence of Hindu radicalism has profound implications for the bilateral social, economic and political relations between Pakistan and India. The fundamental posturing of the incumbent BJP government in India contradicts the principles of balance and diplomacy in Pakistan-India relations. Instead, India is likely to adopt a rigid and coercive approach designed to coerce Pakistan into accepting its unilateral demands on issues such as psychological warfare, dominance in South Asia and disputes over Kashmir, Siachen and Sir Creek. It is anticipated that Pakistan will resist such demands vis-a-vis India.

The political landscape is witnessing the gradual elimination of conservative voices, thereby allowing hardliners to dictate the terms of discourse. Furthermore, India and Pakistan's possession of nuclear weapons has complicated the already contentious issue of religiously driven patriotism. The hostile history between the two countries calls for cautious and deliberate measures to contain extremist elements, as even the slightest misstep could lead to a catastrophe. It is imperative to recognise that religion is not the solution, and the only viable path forward is one grounded in the principles of logic and reason - that of secular humanism. A nation founded on the principle that power belongs to the people should be committed to a constitutional



democracy that upholds religious freedom and human dignity. This commitment holds the promise of guaranteeing every citizen their fundamental rights, such as the right to life, happiness and liberty.

World is presently engaged in a global war against terrorism. In contrast, the *Hindu Rashtra* movement in India is currently not perceived as a significant international threat since it is limited to India, and its radicalism is not deemed to have global ramifications. However, this assessment may be a critical misjudgement with far-reaching implications. The ascent of the Taliban in Afghanistan can be attributed to the proliferation of radical religious beliefs. It is crucial to recognise the significance of Hindutva politics and not confine the analysis to realism. Religious fervour has the potential to create deep fissures among India's diverse communities and undermine the country's integrity. It could trigger a Muslim backlash, impacting Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India's Muslim population.<sup>25</sup>

In comparison to Pakistan, India is grappling with far more pressing challenges. However, the international community and the media tend to be more critical of Pakistan, ignoring the efforts and sacrifice the Pakistani State and its people have made in the global war against terrorism. Pakistan has made more strides against terrorism in the past 17 years than all the combined efforts of the US, NATO and ISAF forces. On the other hand, the Modi government in India has not only legitimised but also encouraged radical activities in the country.<sup>26</sup> On October 18, 2022, on the orders of the Indian government, 11 men who were initially granted life imprisonment for brutally raping a Muslim woman and killing their family members were released. During his visit on October 19, 2022, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres expressed his deepest concerns regarding the human rights violations in India. However, despite that Modi-led BJP government only intensified its nefarious attitude towards Muslims and other minorities. It is incumbent upon domestic and regional actors to exert pressure on India to take concrete measures to stem the tide of Hindu radicalism in Indian society. India must take concrete steps to curb Hindu extremism and bigotry because the extreme ideology of *Hindutva*, especially, is pushing 200 million Muslim-minority in distress.<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, it is imperative for the international community also to take note of the human rights violations being committed in Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK), despite the repeated calls from the UN for an inquiry. It must be recognised that any assistance extended to India would inadvertently support Hindu radicalism without holding it accountable for the atrocities perpetrated against the people of IIOJK and without resolving the Kashmir issue. The global community must awaken from its slumber and confront the human rights violations and abuses being perpetrated by India. Ignoring Indian atrocities due to personal interests may yield short-term benefits, but it will have far-reaching ramifications for humanity. Since the 2019 elections, there has been an upsurge in anti-Muslim violence carried out by Hindu extremists to consolidate their political position in India through the BJP, which has a long history of perpetrating violence against Muslims under the pretext of

cow slaughter, and the leadership has shielded rapists, attackers and murderers who have violated fundamental humanitarian norms in IIOJK. India has been fomenting violence along the Line of Control, and the Indian government is inculcating in its people the notion that killing a Muslim is somehow virtuous.<sup>28</sup>

Governments across South Asia have witnessed violent campaigns to secure vested political interests, and these extremist religious entities have become so entrenched that the region has been unable to contain them. In India, these religiously radicalised opinions have provided advantages and benefits to the ruling class and political parties. It has resulted in a menace that transcends inter-state and transnational borders because external forces have been actively stoking the flames of this disease, gradually infecting even the most rational minds. Given that most of India's population is Hindu, the rise of Hindu chauvinism at the expense of minorities has reached its zenith and is evident. However, the *Hindutva*-oriented Indian government has remained silent and actively supportive of this violence. Democracy in India is constantly under pressure due to the self-serving leadership and their administrations perpetuating radical ideologies and practices.<sup>29</sup>

## Conclusion

The ongoing mistreatment and violence against minorities in India contradict the country's claim to being a secular democratic State. The BJP government's fascist policies and manipulation of religious beliefs have swayed public opinion in their favour and exacerbated religious tensions. India's pursuit of regional power has further strained relations with neighbouring countries like Pakistan. The Modi government's use of Hindu nationalism to marginalise minorities, particularly Muslims, has destabilised the country and undermined democratic values. Examples of human rights violations include the Gujarat massacre, killings of Muslims over cow slaughter, revocation of Articles 370 and 35(A) in IIOJK, and the annulment of CAA. If swift action is not taken to counter Modi's authoritarian regime, the future could see continued upheaval and distress within and beyond India's borders. The BJP's electoral success in 2019, despite rampant discrimination against minorities, foreshadows the possibility of escalating tensions and jeopardising the region's peace. The Modi government's *Hindutva* extremism and flawed structural systems pose a grave threat to democracy. This brand of authoritarianism sets a dangerous example for the world, making it imperative for political parties and media outlets to take notice and act.

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