

## BJP-Led Hindu Extremism and its Impact on Indian Multi-Religious Society

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### Abstract

The article examines elections in the world's largest democratic country. Due to the size and population of the country, the national elections have been the largest electoral exercise in the world. In addition, the cultural, linguistic, ethnic and religious diversity of Indian society, as well as the federal character of the Indian state, further complicates the phenomenon. Despite India's democratic values, religious extremism has been rampant in India. Since 1947 the various minded Hindu-minded communal individuals and organizations demanding a Hindu India, sometimes using violent means and ignore other communities. Politicians and political parties, especially the current ruling party (BJP) and Prime Minister Narendra Modi himself, are known Hindu extremists. Ever since the BJP and Narendra Modi came to power, incidents of government-sponsored, politically motivated extremism have increased rapidly. The use of religion and religiously biased speeches and debates and anti-Muslim violence in Indian elections, always have been used in national elections. Consequently, it is producing a big challenge to the world's largest democratic state. This paper focuses on the Indian elections, particularly the religious extremist element that is adopted during the elections. The research methodology of the paper is descriptive-analytical and most of the data is collected from secondary sources.

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## Introduction

India is a country of religious, ethnic and linguistic diversity. An estimated 200 million Muslims, many of whom identify as Sunni, make up about 15 percent of the population, by far the largest minority group. Hindus make up about 80% of the population (Maizland, July 14, 2022). The country's Muslim communities are diverse, with differences in language, caste, ethnicity, and access to political and economic power.

The largest Muslim population in the world is there, but in a minority. Since India's independence, Muslims have often faced systematic discrimination, intolerance and violence despite constitutional protections.

When the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power after a change of government in the elections, there was a general perception across India that a BJP government would destroy India's secular image (Vohra, 2014, p. 328). As India is the world's largest democracy and a Hindu-majority country, it is important to protect the rights of people of different religions. But as everyone knows, BJP is not a secular political party like Congress and is a child organization of RSS, which is a religious extremist organization (Ruhel Chisty FRACI CChem A, 2013, p. 10). Apart from this Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) is another child organization of BJP whose main objective is to organize and stabilize Hindu society and serve and protect Hindu Dharma (Bhushan, 1982, p. 10). It can be argued that BJP and Prime Minister Narendra Modi are actually spreading religious extremism in India (Ahmed, Ahmad, & Brasted, 2022, p. 72). The Sangh Parivar with the RSS is its paramilitary arm, the BJP as its political arm and other organizations under its umbrella. The quantitative facts in India indicate the possibility of extremism, as 75% of the population of 1.3 billion is Hindus and 14% are Muslims, while other religious communities together make up the rest of the population. In these circumstances, it is not surprising that even before partition in 1947, several communally minded Hindu individuals and organizations had demanded a Hindu India, sometimes using violent means, ignoring other communities.

The dangerous philosophy of these extremist groups to defend the supreme leader of the RSS is similar with Nazi Germany. The idea is being put forward that non-Hindus in India should either adopt Hindu culture and language and learn Hinduism or remain subservient to Hindus (Puniyani, 2004, p. 68). This is the philosophy that informs the thinking and politics of the BJP in India today, now led by the sectarian Hindu Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who has been called a hero for his role in slaughtering Muslims in his state (Fulkness, December 02, 2019) but since 2002 in the Muslim community of he is known as "Qasai". A similar situation now exists in India, with 2900 incidents of communal violence in 2022 alone (Newindianexpress.com, December 07, 2022). But it has a long history, with the Babri Masjid case in the early 1990s and anti-Muslim violence in Gujarat perhaps two of the most significant. Moreover, the same mentality continues in the oppression of Kashmiris.

## **Hate Politics and Extremism in India**

India had embarked on a path towards impressive political development. The Indian system was impressive because it included many diverse ethnic, religious, and linguistic interests. But its enthusiasm was perhaps premature. As the country heads into another national election in which the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) will test its popularity with a citizenship now numbering 1.3 billion (Vaishnav, April 04, 2019), the BJP leadership has focused on the Hindu renaissance. This approach has brought back the division that was apparently overcome by the "India Idea". With roots in Hindu supremacy, the BJP has encouraged its followers to attack minorities, often in the name of Hinduism. As long as Hinduism is strong and as long as there are castes, there will be lower castes. The lower castes do not have significant numbers to fight back and this has resulted in violence that has been intimate, tragic and brutal (Thapa, Teijlingen, Regmi, & Heaslip, May 24, 2021, online).

## Spreading Hate against Indian Muslims

Hate crimes based on religion and caste have risen in India since the Hindu nationalist government of Narendra Modi came to power in 2014. According to new data and tracks reports of violence from Indian media show that Muslims are mostly the victims and Hindus the perpetrators of these incidents (Robinson, 2019, p. 132). More than half of the cases reported as of October this year came from the northern Indian states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Orissa, where Modi's BJP enjoys strong support. In a series of incidents, members of his party have been accused of supporting or inciting violence against Muslims, which many of the country's 172 million Muslims fear is the world's third-largest community (BBC, February 21, 2022).

Lower castes and Muslims were not the only targets of the BJP-dominated Hindu extremists but women as well. Women did not have the same rights as men. In October and November 2018, the Sabarimala temple in the state of Kerala became a symbol of the campaign for the equal rights of independent women (BBC., January 01, 2019). It is a centuries-old shrine dedicated to Lord Ayyappa, a deity who was considered celibate, and women of menstruating age were prohibited from entering. The temple receives lakhs of pilgrims annually, but women are not allowed to enter. In late September 2018, the Supreme Court issued a landmark ruling granting all women the right to worship in temples. According to a report, the court's decision sparked intense protests and became a milestone for women's rights, religious beliefs and state rights in India (Reuters, September 28, 2018). Since the decision, any woman between the ages of 10 and 50 years has been unable to enter the temple despite several attempts. Meanwhile, women who have publicly expressed their intention to visit the shrine have faced threats and intimidation (Reuters, September 28, 2018).

Physical attacks and threats are not the only weapons used by Hindu extremists to transform India into a Hindu political entity. As The Economist noted in its column in an issue, Prime Minister Modi has chosen the "Nehru jacket" as his official outfit, but he prefers it in a different color. Popularized by the first Prime Minister of India, it came in charcoal color, which the last Prime Minister wears in orange (ABP, August 15, 2021). This message was extraordinary to the people of India and to the world. Orange is not just a stripe on India's tricolor flag. It evokes the saffron robes of Hindu priests and thus symbolizes the revival of India's ancient faith (Couacaud, 2016 (online)). Indeed, Mr. Modi has given his Hindu nation what is the rebranding of a standard piece of clothing according to a partisan political agenda?

## Modi's Extreme Anti-Muslim Policy

Hindu extremism against Muslims is on the rise these days after more than 40 Indian soldiers were killed in the Pulwama attack, as in the latest act of brutality in Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, where more than 200 Muslim houses were demolished in a neighborhood poor (BBC, June 13, 2022.). Security officials blamed the heinous act on unknown wrongdoers, saying, "Some wrongdoers set the huts on fire when they tried to eliminate the encroachments (BBC, June 13, 2022.).

However, a video, which has been circulating widely, shows a Muslim accusing the police of burning down the shacks. Speaking of this incident, a social worker said: This is not something new. Since the work has

been doing as social workers in Uttar Pradesh, it is observed that these cases are increasing. This problem stands out due to its proximity to the national capital of Meerut.

However, things have not been good for the government in months. The Indian economy is recovering from the long-term effects of the 2016 demonetization decision and the failure to create new jobs. The BJP was also defeated in five state elections in 2018, including key Hindi belt states like Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. With Modi's economic credentials and good governance record in jeopardy, he has increasingly relied on the party's version of ultra-nationalism to retain popular support (Clary, Lalwani, Siddiqui, & Sircar, August 17, 2022). The BJP's Hindutva ideology views India as a Hindu country and believes that all Indian Muslims should have been forced to emigrate to Pakistan in 1947 and should now form a fifth column in the country. So an attack like the recent suicide bombing, whether actually provoked by Pakistan or not, plays into Modi's narrative.

India, which claims to be the largest democratic and secular country, has become a hell for religious minorities, as well as lower-caste Hindus, since the Modi government came to power. The Modi administration not only revived the concept of Hindutva to make the country a Hindu state, but also began persecuting religious minorities, especially Muslims, as well as attacking the lower caste Hindus, Dalits and Sikhs (Aiyar, November 24, 2020). This is in stark contrast to Mahatma Gandhi's vision of India. Gandhi's vision of the ideal society was a non-violent, democratic social order in which there would be a fair balance between individual freedom and social responsibility. He had very high ideals in human life. He said that without ideals, life would be meaningless because there would be no goals for which man could strive. In Gandhi's ideal society, satyagraha is especially emphasized as a means (which he describes as "love power" or "soul power" (Radhakrishnan, 2009, p. 145). This force, he wrote, is indestructible and while the force of arms is powerless against the force of love or spirit. He admits that there is no historical evidence that a nation rose through the exercise of this power. In this sense, Gandhi places great emphasis on gradual, peaceful and non-violent change. He believed that a new social order cannot be created by force. If the change is brought about by force, it will be a cure worse than the disease. Gandhi did not want to slow the pace of change, but it should be organic development, not violent hegemony. Organic growth itself had to result in a complete and radical social order (Paterson & Breu, 2019, p. 146).

The current Modi-led BJP/RSS government has not only ended Bapu's (Gandhi's) vision of a secular and tolerant India, but also state-sponsored atrocities against religious and social minorities, especially Kashmiri Muslims. Every day in Indian Administered Kashmir (IHK) there are cases of gouging out eyes, amputating vital organs, using new methods of persecution during endless curfews including gang rape, burning rioters alive (Donthi, June 28, 2022; Zaheer, October 25, 2021). Destruction of their villages, crops and their commercial and economic life in flagrant violation of international human rights laws India (Zaheer, October 25, 2021).

It is noteworthy that on June 14, 2018, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussain, released the first report on the situation of human rights in Jammu and Kashmir from July 2018 to April 2016. 2018 "based on allegations of serious and widespread human rights violations, particularly the excessive use of force by Indian security forces that resulted in numerous civilian

casualties (Zaheer M. A., October 11, 2021). The Office for Human Rights (OHCHR), Zeid Ra'ad Hussain, urged the Indian security forces to exercise utmost restraint and strictly adhere to international standards governing the use of force in dealing with future protests (Zaheer M. A., October 25, 2021; USCIRF, 2018). It is imperative that the Indian authorities take immediate and effective measures to prevent its recurrence. Numerous instances of excessive use of force by security forces are observed by media. The security situation in Kashmir, The UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres also expressed concern over the situation of Kashmir and reports of restrictions on the Indian side of Kashmir, which could further worsen the human rights situation in the region, and "called on all parties to refrain from taking steps that would harm Jammu and Kashmir." status, can be affected (UN, August 08, 2019).

Although India's constitution protects freedom of religion and prohibits discrimination on the basis of belief, incidents of violence against religious minorities have increased in recent years. A report by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) cited numerous examples of persecution, stating that "members of the ruling party have engaged in religious freedom violations involving Hindu extremists (USCIRF, 2018, p. 05). They have ties to extremist/terrorist groups, use religiously divisive language to incite tension, and call for additional laws that would limit religious freedom. Several Indian states have enacted anti-conversion laws that require investigations into conversions outside of Hinduism (US, April 2006, p. 677). These laws "only care about conversion away from Hinduism and create a hostile and sometimes violent environment for minority religious communities because they require no evidence to support allegations of wrong doing (US, April 2006, pp. 678-79). In practice, these laws have had violent consequences. In July 2016, for example, a minister was kidnapped and beaten, and authorities arrested the minister under the state's anti-conversion law (OIRF, June 02, 2022). There have also been cases of forced conversion to Hinduism. A few months earlier, radical RSS activists reportedly put up signs at railway stations across India saying that Christians must leave India or convert to Hinduism or are killed (USCIRF, 2018, p. 04). Even school textbooks and curricula are being amended, such as Non-vegetarians are social evils, Muslim leaders are barbarians, Christians are anti-national, and the creation of Pakistan does not make Indian Muslims patriotic; they are still a threat (Mehfooz, January 13, 2021, pp. 03-04).

Apart from religious persecution, social discrimination is also prevalent in India, Dalits are considered untouchable. Higher castes will not marry a Dalit, invite them into their homes or share food with them. Dalit children sit apart from other children in schools. In governments schools of rural areas Dalits children are prohibited from sitting with other (UN, The Dalit: Born into a life of discrimination and stigma, April 19, 2021). Dalits are prevented from entering police stations in 27.6% of rural villages, public health workers refuse to visit Dalit homes in 1 in 3 rural villages, almost half of villages Dalits do not have access to water sources. Fact, Dalits and non-Dalits cannot eat food (Divakar, June 2007). Furthermore, it is reiterated that India is not only projecting Hindutva under the pretext of democracy and secularism, but any movement to liberate Assam, Kashmir, Khalistan, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tamil Nadu and Tripura. Brute force is being used ruthlessly against freedom movements (Zaheer M. A., October 25, 2021). It should be noted that India is the most unsafe country for women, as incidents of rape against minority women, including by foreigners, are frequent (BBC, Is India really the most dangerous country for women?, June

28, 2018). In addition, the government's sponsorship of Hindu extremism and the oppression of minorities are leading India to lawlessness. Seeking closer ties with a country ravaged by nationalist-driven religious persecution would undermine the moral force behind the US push to limit China's expansionism. The latest International Religious Freedom Report for India from the US State Department found that Christians "have faced increased harassment and violence, including physical violence, arson, desecration of churches and bibles and the interruption of religious services". In addition, "local police rarely provided protection, refused to accept complaints, and rarely investigated incidents" (2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: India, June 2, 2022).

Minority religious groups in India continue to be subjected to cruelty and intolerance at the hands of an increasingly violent and extremist Hindu majority. Violence and denial of constitutional rights are common weapons used by Indian minorities to victimize the extremist Hindu majority (Human Rights Watch, February 19, 2021). In another incident, some villagers in the Shivpuri district of Madhya Pradesh beheaded two Scheduled Caste leaders of the Bahujan Samaj Party. A 15-year-old girl from the Kankir district of Chhattisgarh filed a rape case against a Hindu extremist (Times of India, March 13, 2021). Under "cow policy", Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan announced the creation of a new ministry for "cow service". With the rise of the BJP, there has also been more comfort and freedom for Hindu extremist groups like RSS, Shiv Sena, Vaishya Hindu Parishad (VHP) (Hashmi, September 14, 2019). Mahatma Gandhi's India has become "Modi's fascist India".

Since the election of Aditya Yogi (an extremist Hindu) as UP Chief Minister, fascist India is finding stronger colors than ever. The wave of Hindu extremism began with the increasing activities of RSS, Shiv Sena, and other extremist organizations. The Sangh Parivar proclaims the ideology of "Hindutva" with an agenda to subjugate or expel Sikhs, Muslims, Christians, and other communities (Petersen, September 20, 2022). Dharma Jagran Samiti (DJS) leader Rajeshwar Singh had threatened to make India Hindu by 2021 by expelling or reconverting Muslims and Christians (Srivastava, December 19, 2014). The Indian leadership is addressing the concerns at the national, regional and international levels by stepping up organized activities on stage. The threat has begun to manifest itself in many forms. Despite being the largest exporter of beef, schools and other educational institutions, including the curriculum, are being systematically Hinduized, followed by the "beef" ban. Muslims face massacres, Christians have churches vandalized and elderly nuns raped; the Sikh community is repressed in the name of Khalistan, and is denied separate socio-religious status, while Scheduled Castes and other communities face various intimidation tactics (Jaffrelot, 2021, pp. 159-160). An extremist Hindu country in a developing region will become a serious threat and challenge to regional peace and security. The threat posed by aggressive and fanatical Hindu fundamentalism to religious minorities has raised serious doubts among the international community about the secular perspective.

### **Extremist Regime and Kashmir**

Tensions were already rising in the Kashmir region following the recent killing of more than 40 Indian soldiers by a suicide bomber. India's 'preemptive strike' on the disputed border on Tuesday, the first such action by India since it went to war with Pakistan in 1971, has further aggravated the situation. India said

it had attacked a terrorist training camp and accused Pakistan of violating a 2003 ceasefire, while Pakistan now claims it shot down two Indian warplanes.

The suicide attack that killed Indian paramilitary personnel has additional significance in the context of India's upcoming general election in which the Narendra Modi-led BJP is trying to maintain its grip on power. Modi and his party BJP came to power in May 2014 with an overwhelming majority, a competent and clean government.

The attack was carried out by a young man from Indian Kashmir, which also reflects the failure of the Modi government to address the Kashmiri issue. For more than three years, the BJP itself was part of the Kashmiri government in alliance with People's Democratic Party and Mehbooba Mufti. The alliance fell apart in 2018, largely due to disagreements between the two sides over how to deal with rising violence in Kashmir and the radicalization of Kashmiri youth, who are once again taking up arms against India (Bukhari, March 11, 2019).

Today, both sides are making claims and counterclaims about what was achieved by the Indian bombing. Pakistan threatens to retaliate, so the volatile situation between the two nuclear-armed nations is likely to escalate. In the midst of a fierce war of words and actions between the two, only the BJP comes out on top (Apoorvanand, June 07, 2022). As racism continues to rise in India, he hopes to return to office at the crest of the tide.

## **Conclusion**

Since Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi came to power, the BJP's discriminatory policies against Indian Muslims have alarmed the international community. The BJP's policies are based on the RSS ideology of Hindutva or Hindu nationalism, which envisions the creation of Akhand Bharat, or an undivided Indian state that is the true representative of Hindu culture and religion. The BJP's extremist actions and discriminatory policies date back to its first term in power when notable events such as the 1998 nuclear explosions, violence against Christians, the Gujarat massacre and the strengthening of India-Israel ties. Now in its second term, the BJP government has used anti-Pakistan and anti-Muslim sentiments to gain a vote bank in the election campaign. At the same time, India has escalated violations on Line of Control and along Indo-Pakistani border. The terrorism has multiplied due to growing Hindu nationalism in the region. Therefore, it is the urgent need of the hour for the international community to take concrete steps to check the extremist actions and discriminatory policies of the BJP. The United Nations should work with other major powers like the US, Russia, Japan, China, etc. to pressure India to protect the rights of Indian Muslims and minorities. RSS and other extremist elements must be reviewed and controlled to reduce communal unrest and human rights violations. In short, Modi should review his hardline and dogmatic policies and work to create a balanced, peaceful and cooperative environment at home and abroad. A non-discriminatory, conciliatory and tolerant attitude should be adopted towards all sections of the Indian society.

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