

**Navigating the Intersection of *Hindutva* and Secularism: The BJP's Challenge to India's**

**Democracy**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP's) internal evolutionary process over the last four decades. This analysis reveals in detail how the party leveraged the *Hindutva* ideology (political movement arguing for Hindu nationalism) to strengthen its political position. By chronicling how the BJP has integrated *Hindutva* theories since its inception, this paper demonstrates how the party has systematically and categorically marginalized non-Hindu communities (especially Muslims) in India. The paper scrutinizes BJP's renewed communal polarization and the *Hindutva* movement's resurgence over the last decade. It also considers the BJP's electoral strategies and how they harm secular democracy. Finally, this paper offers insights into how Indian society could be more inclusive and recommends strengthening democratic governance.

*Keywords:* Hindu nationalism, minority rights, constitutional democracy, religious politics, democratic principles.

## Introduction

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), founded in 1980, has become one of India's most popular political parties. This party is predicated on the doctrines of *Hindutva*. *Hindutva* unites the BJP's supporters but also helps explain why the party is so divisive. To understand the BJP — one must study its rise to power, learn how the *Hindutva* ideology developed, and consider the threat it poses to India's secular democracy.

The BJP's rise to power is characterized by strategic political maneuvering, organizational control, and persuasive political rhetoric. BJP originates with the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, which used to be an ideological wing of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). Since then, it has struggled to gain acceptance outside of ideologues. Over the years, the BJP has worked to become more mainstream by reinventing its brand. As a result, the party has gradually expanded its electoral base (THE HINDU VISUAL STORY TEAM Published: April 17, 2024 Updated: April 18, 2024). The peak of this base was in 2019 when the BJP held 303 out of 543 seats in the Lok Sabha, the Parliament's lower house. In his analysis of the 2019 Indian General Election, Nakamizo (2020) addresses the rise of illiberal democracy and global challenges to democratic principles, as well as how these forces impact India's democratic development.

In the 1990s, the campaign to build the Ram *Janmabhoomi* (birthplace) temple in Ayodhya helped the BJP position itself as a protector of the Hindu community's interests. By endorsing the construction of a temple at a disputed site, the BJP earned the support of many devout Hindus. Not too long after that, the BJP became nationally relevant. The emergence of Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Narendra Modi helped strengthen the BJP's electoral power. Modi started as a Chief Minister in the State of Gujarat and gained popularity for developing the region. Currently serving as Prime Minister for his third term, Modi spearheaded many

movements to gain the favor of Hindus, which solidified BJP's standing in the political landscape (The Hindu Bureau). Indeed, in the 2014 and 2019 elections, the BJP performed remarkably well. In 2014, 39% of first-time voters backed the BJP, and only 19% supported Congress (DNA 2014). Moreover, a heavily fragmented political landscape allowed the BJP to win the election with only 31% of the vote (TNN). On the other hand, in 2019, the BJP went from winning plurality to the majority, which was a major win for the party (BBC News). Abbas (2018) shows that — once in power — the BJP has attempted to create, enforce, and promote its Hindu nationalist agenda; it has done so by attacking Indian minorities and pushing the country towards a majoritarian, ethnic democracy. In trying to accomplish this, the BJP-led government has courted many legal challenges (Abbas, 2018).

The essence of the BJP's appeal lies in *Hindutva*. This philosophy has multiple dimensions: it endorses the supremacy of Hindu religious and cultural values in India. At the beginning of the 20th century, V.D. Savarkar, a prominent Hindu nationalist, created the *Hindutva* ideology to unite Hindus by viewing religious minorities as the enemy (Lal). This ideology's supporters claim it only aims to preserve the Hindu heritage and traditions. Its opponents worry that it encourages racism and constitutes a credible threat to the Indian secular identity. In any case, the BJP wields *Hindutva* as a political weapon. Overall, Hindu iconography, electoral tactics, and religious rhetoric have helped the BJP mobilize a range of castes, classes, sects, and regional communities. Ultimately, *Hindutva*'s precise meaning is highly contested, but it resonates with many Indians who view their national identity as inseparable from Hinduism. This reality empowers the BJP and makes it a politically dominant force by creating a narrative centered on national unity.

## **Problem Statement**

The BJP's formation and its commitment to *Hindutva* constitutes an assault on India's secular democracy. It has rejected pluralism which has exacerbated existing divisions (Swamy). The BJP's approach also undermines secularism and societal cohesion. This research paper offers insights into these dynamics, explore the implications for India's secular democracy, and address the challenges they create.

## ***Hindutva* and Marginalization of Non-Hindu Groups**

*Hindutva*'s supporters claim that Hindu needs must come first and Hinduism must become the basis of state identity. They propose promulgating and preserving Hindu customs, traditions, and values — viewing them as innate to India's national character. This brand of ideology envisages the Hindu community as being civically superior to other sects and religions in India. Moreover, Hindu supremacy asserts a need for Hindu icons, symbols, and practices to be made part of public life.

*Hindutva* rejects secularism and, therefore, Western democracy. In other words, *Hindutva* opposes the separation of church and state. Instead, it recognizes Hinduism's cultural and religious supremacy. At the same time, it claims to respect the rights and desires of other religions. This worldview is prepared to protect the rights of the Hindu majority, even if it endangers minorities' rights and freedoms. In India, this majoritarian approach to governance is reflected in policies and practices that uphold the majority Hindu faith.

*Hindutva* emboldens Hindus to integrate their religion into India's social and political fabric. As a result, their opponents are often marginalized and excluded from social involvement. This is especially true for Indian Muslims. *Hindutva* polarizes society on religious lines — frequently fostering hatred of those who are different. Usually, the easiest scapegoats are

religious and ethnic minorities. This ideology instigates violence that targets religious minorities, namely Muslims. The 2013 Muzzafarnagar riots are just one example of violent incidents that have included mob lynching, anti-Muslim riots, and other pogroms (Maizland). They have led to loss of life, displacement, and trauma within minority communities.

The adoption of discriminative laws and rules — including the Citizenship Act Amendment and the Truer of the Citizens and Country (NRC) — discriminates against religious minorities, especially Muslims. These laws target the Muslim-immigrant minority and undermine their rights. In effect, they institutionalize religious-based prejudice. Furthermore, Hindu majority groups have launched several legal challenges to weaken aspects of the Indian Constitution meant to protect minority rights. Efforts to subdue minority institutions that once enjoyed educational, spiritual, and personal autonomy are constantly under threat. The demeaning treatment of religious minorities in the name of *Hindutva* is perhaps the most formidable challenge to the secular character of Indian democracy and its pluralist traditions. While *Hindutva* ideology glorifies the Hindu ethos and interests, such ideas disregard fundamental rights. It dismisses cherished ideals of equality, inclusivity, and religious freedom which are enshrined in India's Constitution. Overcoming these obstacles would require supporters of secularism, tolerance, and minority rights to unite socially and politically.

## Historical Context of the BJP

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was founded in 1951 by Syama Prasad Mookerjee as a political arm of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sang (RSS). The BJP's origins can be traced back to Indian independence and was a reaction to Pakistan also becoming a sovereign state. The Bharatiya Jain Sanghatana (BJS) grew strongest in North India by advocating for Hindu cultural nationalism and traditional values (Khosla and Vaishnav, 2021).

While the Congress Party was dominant during the 1950s and 1960s, the BJS positioned itself as a principled opposition to the government's policies on national integration, economic planning, and secularism. Nevertheless, its electoral success was limited even as it backed local groups protesting against the vestiges of colonialism and supporting native identity. BJS, BJP's predecessor, began to transform in 1980 under Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Lal Krishna Advani's leadership. They started a process of strategic rebranding and modifying the party's political agenda. The renaming, however, was not just symbolic.

*Hindutva*, which Vinayak Damodar Savarkar originated in the early 20th century, comprises several concepts: making India a Hindu ethnostate and claiming that Hindu political dominance is the only future for the Indian civilization. For the BJP, *Hindutva* is both a rallying cry and a guiding principle; this distinguishes it from its rivals. Its Hindu supremacy agenda permeates its positions in politics, culture, and economics. This ideology inspires those Indians who see Hinduism as the primary foundation of Indian civilization and wish to defend their ancestors' traditions and values at all costs. Analyzing the demographics, 80% of Indians are Hindu (Pathi and Saaliq).

Using fear, the BJP's *Hindutva* has been a driver of religious discrimination; it has also helped the party overcome the traditional boundaries of caste, class, and geography. With the

help of Hindu symbolism, rhetoric, and cultural narratives — the BJP has managed to exploit Hindu identity (Sharma). Additionally, *Hindutva* affects the BJP's electoral strategy in that it focuses on attacking religious minorities and marginalized groups. Through articulating the grievances of Hindus and exacerbating religious tensions, the party has tried to portray itself as defending Hindu interests. It does so by exaggerating the threat minority appeasement and secularism pose. *Hindutva* has been the BJP's political identity and a key to its success. While *Hindutva* has been warmly received in some quarters, it has also become the subject of criticism and controversy among many Indians. Opponents condemn it for increasing intolerance and majoritarianism (The Economist).

### **Literature Review**

Ogden (2012) explores how the Bharatiya Janata Party-National Democratic Alliance (NDA) Party's government influenced Indian domestic politics from 1996-2004 (in 1996, the BJP was the majority party but its control of congress was more tenuous) ("India (12/06)"). Ogden demonstrates how the party's rise threatened democracy and promoted communalism. Institutionally, the BJP spearheaded changes through historical revisionism and communal politics. In doing so, Congress became less secular and increased divisions among local populations (Vaishnav). Examples of BJP blurring the lines between church and state can be seen through the Citizen Amendment Act, which excluded Muslim internationals from a path to citizenship, along with the removal of Article 370, which assimilated the Muslim majority Jammu and Kashmir with the Hindu majority India (Vaishnav). Overall, Ogden's analysis underscores the BJP's enduring legacy and contends that it has shaped India's political discourse,



even when the party's power has ebbed (from about 2004 -2014, the BJP was not the largest political party but still retained a great deal of influence within India (Kawoosa)).

Basu (2018) points to how the Indian Constitution is paradoxical in that it's secular in its goals but favors the Hindu majority's interests and marginalizes minority religious groups in practice. This article associates Hindu nationalism with the BJP. More specifically, Basu (2018) criticizes the BJP for promoting nationalism, which has encouraged anti-democratic behavior against minority groups. Moreover, it suggests the BJP seeks to limit minority groups's autonomy. Overall, Basu raises the alarm about the growing threat of Hindu nationalism.

Bolover (2022) considers the BJP's technophobic authoritarian populist rhetoric — especially on social media — to advance an ethno-nationalist project. The analysis establishes that BJP's online presence bolsters the narrative that Modi is a charismatic leader who understands what menaces democracy. Bolover (2022) argues that authoritarian populism combined with ethnoreligious nationalism imperils Indian democracy. Collectively, these partisan media outlets (this is in conjunction with BJP-sponsored social media campaigns) contribute to the erosion of minority rights, the significant growth of Hindu nationalism, and political mobilization (Rajvanshi) and (Keshavan).

In the “Three Faces of the Indian State” by Khosla and Vaishnav (2021), the authors show how many recent institutional changes and bureaucratic practices have corrupted India's constitutional order. These include the Citizen Amendment Act and the National Register of Citizens (Congressional Research Service). The authors contend that India's contemporary political environment depends on the masses' strong support. As of late, politicians have been indulging the worst qualities of the masses and manipulating this party to cause more religious tension. They used their support to speak to our worst instincts instead of our best. Gondal and

Butt's (2020) "Secularism and Liberalism in India: A Case Study of Modi's Era" chronicles the transformation from Nehruvian India to the rise of extreme-right ideologies and authoritarianism under Narendra Modi's leadership (Gondal and Butt, 2020). It describes how Modi's speeches reflect his right-wing ideology, majoritarian nationalism, and marginalization of minorities. This scholarship also examines how Modi's government has disregarded liberalism and secularism in India. Finally, it speculates on the future of Indian democracy, claiming that Modi's ultra-right-wing ideologies put India's sense of democracy at risk, particularly with regard to potential constitutional changes to be made in alignment with *Hindutva* values (Gondal and Butt, 2020).

Under Modi's leadership, the BJP has dominated federal elections in India, winning in 2014, 2019, and, with the help of a coalition, in 2024. (Varshney, 2019). The BJP was India's most prominent political party from 1998 to 2004 and 2014 to the present day. Although some experts did not anticipate an electoral landslide (Taneja) and (BBC News, *India Election 2019: Narendra Modi Thanks Voters for "historic Mandate"*) in 2019, the BJP emerged as the majority with a more workable coalition (which emboldened the BJP to pass more laws and even amend the constitution). Varshney notes how liberty is shrinking and that the courts are struggling to check Modi's power. The article tracks an increase in censorship and violence against the press. Of course, this approach weakens civil liberties and the stability of state institutions, which gradually undermines the rule of law.

Mate (2018) scrutinizes the foundations of India's Constitutional democracy by examining the growth of religious politics. It focuses on how the BJP relies on Hinduism to rally the electorate. The BJP's electoral victories have successfully shifted India's political ground towards Hindu majoritarian ideology, which was central to its platform. Mate makes it clear that

the BJP exploits religion during campaigns and formulates policies that target Muslims, which diminishes India's secular traditions. As seen throughout, a vital example of this is the Citizen Amendment Act (BBC News, *CAA: India's New Citizenship Law Explained*). Although the Supreme Court could intervene, the Court's refusal to overturn those decisions has allowed the BJP to use religion in its political rhetoric during campaigns — setting a dangerous precedent. In this context, Peker (2019) provides valuable information on religious populism in India during the Modi era. He argues that the BJP has embraced religious populism, and the phenomenon is on the rise. Ultimately, the article contends that the BJP is reshaping a national identity that is hostile to religious minorities.

How seriously has the BJP's rise to power impacted its secular democracy? Jaffrelot and Verniers (2020) claim that after the 2019 election, the BJP has pushed India towards a Hindu dominated state that abandons its secular and democratic origins. Overall, Modi's party promotes pro-business economic policies, authoritarianism, and Hindu nationalism. Qurban (2023) agrees that the BJP government under Modi's leadership has instituted Hindu nationalist policies at minority groups' expense. Moreover, Singh (2019) states that the BJP's Hindu power ideology has challenged traditional notions of Indian democracy which constitutes a seismic change in Indian politics. These studies suggest that the BJP is attacking India's secular tradition through its policies and ideology (Jaffrelot & Verniers, 2020; Qurban, 2023; Singh, 2019).

## **Discrimination Against Muslims in India's History**

Discrimination against Muslims in India have long standing historical roots — both before and after Indian independence. Before Indian independence (i.e., during British rule) in 1947, Indian Muslims were marginalized — economically and politically. The British strategically sided with specific religious groups and castes which heightened domestic tensions. Simultaneously, the division of India along religious lines that took place in 1947 caused enormous displacement and atrocities. In the process, millions of Muslims lost their homes and land — becoming refugees. After India became independent, the discrimination against Muslims continued but it assumed different forms. Even though the Constitution tried to protect values of equality and secularism, this didn't end discrimination against Muslims. Economic disparities and underrepresentation in government put Muslims at considerable disadvantage.

The caste tensions and major instances of communal violence are testament to the discrimination the Muslim community has faced. The partition violence of 1947 was the inevitable result of one of history's largest forced migrations in human history. The events of this period included instances of Indian communities targeting defenseless Muslims. The Babri Masjid's destruction in 1992 caused rioting where Muslims suffered the consequences of this disturbance. The 2020 Delhi massacre has also exacerbated long-standing communal tensions and illuminated failures of state agencies to provide security to vulnerable groups. Muslim persecution in India remains overwhelming and pervasive. Overcoming these historical wrongs through nondiscrimination, adhering to the law, and safeguarding individual rights regardless of their religious affiliation must be a joint endeavor.

## **BJP's Amplification of Anti-Muslim Sentiment**

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is often accused of amplifying anti-Muslim sentiments through rhetoric, actions, and policies. Numerous case studies and examples highlight how the party has stimulated this type of sentiment; in doing so, the tensions have continued to grow within many communities — contributing to an atmosphere of bias and bigotry. One very clear example of this sort is the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) adopted by the BJP-dominated federal government in 2019. Seen as discriminatory against Muslims, this law inspired large protests. More specifically, this law made it easier for non-Muslim migrants from neighboring countries to immigrate. Further, the portrayal of CAA as a measure to protect persecuted minorities from the neighboring Muslim-dominated countries promoted anti-Muslim sentiments in the country. It helped portray the country's Muslims as a real threat by encouraging them to be viewed as 'outsiders' and a potential national security threat.

The rise of the BJP is inextricably linked with the demonization of Muslims as it characterizes them as enemies of the state. The campaign, the party, and especially its leaders make incendiary comments about India's Muslim citizens. Amit Shah, Modi's home minister, derided Muslims as, "Termites and Infiltrators." (Dalmia) The BJP even flirts with committing acts of violence toward Muslims. Additionally, the BJP's strategy in dealing with communal riots and atrocities against minorities reinforces its reputation for intolerance. The BJP is often accused of showing indifference toward the episodes of communal riots or mob violence perpetrated against Muslims. It has even shown admiration for Hindu nationalist perpetrators.

Propaganda and social media contribute to the rise of anti-Muslim sentiment in India. The BJP and its affiliates use online platforms to spread falsehoods and hate speech. Through the distortion of news, the fabrication of video evidence about Muslims, and the frequent sharing of

memes intended to ignite communal tensions — the BJP signals to bigots that the party's agenda is to foment sectarian tensions. Social media spread anti-Muslim propaganda rapidly and anonymously, which creates an atmosphere of fear that endangers Muslim communities (Bolsover, 2022). Also, the party's control over major media outlets — including newspapers and television channels — makes it possible for them to generate anti-Muslim narratives. Indeed, the BJP shapes news stories and editorials that propagate anti-Muslim sentiment. Media outlets that are on good terms with the party frequently portray Muslims in a negative light which reinforces prejudice and stereotyped views among the general population.

### **Implications for India's Secular Democracy**

BJP's *Hindutva* programs have enormous repercussions on secularism in India and minority rights. *Hindutva* threatens the Indian Constitution's secularism. The Constitution's secular provisions prevent the state from endorsing any religion; rather, it prioritizes equal treatment under the law as well as freedom of religion. Peker (2019) argues that the BJP has made Hinduism the central tenant of the national identity while excluding religious minorities. By promoting *Hindutva* as the basis of Indian nationalism, the BJP tries to erase the distinctions between religion and politics. In other words, Hindu interests and identity must come first.

The BJP's deliberate anti-minority *Hindutva* initiative erodes India's pluralistic and multicultural traditions. The BJP's efforts to project a limited and exclusive definition of Indian identity marginalizes minority groups. This practice poses a great danger to a country that values diversity and peaceful co-existence. Azad (2022) explains how the Modi government has discouraged civil discourse. This approach underpins the BJP's majoritarian project.

The erosion of the institutional safeguards and equal rights of minorities in the BJP era is evident throughout the country. The governing party's absolute power over some organs —

namely the judiciary, law enforcement, and education — weakens potential opposition to creeping authoritarianism. Judgements in favor of BJP or its affiliates weaken the rule of law. Additionally, BJP's discriminatory policies applied through legislation — including the Citizen Rights Amendment Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC) — strip minorities of some of their rights. The CAA does the same. More specifically, it provides expedited citizenship to Hindu, Sikh, Jain, Buddhist, or Christian migrants from neighboring countries while Muslims remain second-class citizens in their own country. Indian Muslims must also possess the proper documentation should their citizenship status be questioned. The burden of this requirement is usually shouldered by marginalized groups which demonstrates governmental bias. In their paper, Yaseen, Muzaffar, and Aslam (2022) outline the BJP's policies and their implications for secularism in India. Their report corroborates the perceived mistreatment of minorities, which undermines India's secular fabric and diminishes the country's standing internationally.

The BJP erodes minority rights through the lawmaking process but also through state-sponsored violence and discrimination against religious minorities. Communal clashes, hate crimes, and attacks against holy places have become more frequent which instills fear in marginalized communities. The party's inability and unwillingness to prosecute extremists — much less deliver justice to the victims — fuels distrust in democratic institutions. Consequently, the BJP's Hindu superiority policy constitutes one of the most serious threats to secular democracy. The party promotes a nationalistic and dangerous type of patriotism. To overcome those challenges, India must prioritize secularism, pluralism, and inclusiveness. That way, all citizens receive equal rights and are treated with dignity.

## **Future of Secular Democracy in India**

In India, secular democracy is under attack. As a result, democrats must unify around a pro-democracy agenda. That means challenging BJP's majoritarian politics and *Hindutva* ideology but also putting forth an alternative vision. Secularism can only be preserved if Hinduism doesn't receive preferential treatment. Moreover, any attempt to endorse anti-Muslim language or policies are incompatible with fidelity to the Indian Constitution (Haksar and Vaishnav, 2022).

Additionally, the politicization of key institutions jeopardizes Indian democratic governance. The BJP party's domination of institutions — the courts, law enforcement, and media — weakens the checks and balances that are a hallmark of any vibrant democracy. Ultimately, the dismantling of Indian democracy begins with the occupant of its highest political office. Inflaming existing divisions fuel religious polarization and sectarian conflicts in India. Communal riots, hate crimes, and extreme rhetoric makes social cohesion impossible. The absence of effective state protection and the lack of accountability among political leaders for violence and other crimes alienate victims (Alam, Bhatti, and Khan, 2022).

In India, secularism and democracy can still be salvaged. Of course, that requires political leaders to publicly defend secularism, pluralism, religious tolerance, and equality under the law. They must also focus on social harmony and inclusivity. In addition, media outlets, civil society organizations, and religious leaders need to be unifiers, reject intolerance, and restrain political rhetoric. Beyond promoting interfaith dialogue, civic leaders should try to build bridges among the religious communities. Finally, media outlets must adhere to journalistic ethics and standards. Educational institutions also play a critical role in promoting democratic values and cultivating critical thinking skills in the next generation of Indians. The inclusion of civic education and



human rights into curricula helps foster important values — such as tolerance, respect, and compassion.

### **Conclusion**

Indian secularism is in jeopardy. With its *Hindutva* agenda, the BJP is pushing India in a dangerous direction. The acceptance of Hindu supremacy at religious minorities' expense exacerbates social divisions and marginalization. Undermining key institutions contributes to the dilemma India presently faces. Fundamentally, one party rule with few checks and balances is unhealthy. The deterioration and the breakdown of democratic norms as well as the rule of law diminishes public confidence in democratic institutions.

Religious clashes and communal violence driven by religious extremism make India's already fragile secular democracy more troubled. Communal strife manifesting as riots, hate crimes, and recurrent attacks on religious minorities is a danger that decreases many Indians' quality of life. The government's inaction and its unwillingness to hold extremists accountable makes marginalized communities more vulnerable. By promoting tolerance, religious harmony, and democracy — India's secular nature can be preserved. Political officials, civil servants, religious leaders, and must adhere to the principles of secularism, pluralism endorsement, and equal protection under the law. By fostering dialogue, promoting tolerance, and combating hate speech and misinformation — India can build a more inclusive and resilient democracy where all citizens enjoy equal rights and opportunities.

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