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Avinash Kumar



Avinash Kumar has completed his Ph.D. in International Investment Law from the Dept. of Law & Governance, Central University of South Bihar. His research work is on "International Investment Agreement and State's right to regulate Foreign Investment." He qualified UGC-NET and has been selected for the prestigious ICSSR Doctoral Fellowship. He is an alumnus of the Faculty of Law, University of Delhi. Formerly he has been elected as Students Union President of Law Centre-I, University of Delhi. Moreover, he completed his LL.M. from the University of Delhi (2014-16), dissertation on "Cross-border Merger & Acquisition"; LL.B. from the University of Delhi (2011-14), and B.A. (Hons.) from Maharaja Agrasen College, University of Delhi. He has also obtained P.G. Diploma in IPR from the Indian Society of International Law, New Delhi. He has qualified UGC – NET examination and has been awarded ICSSR – Doctoral Fellowship. He has published six-plus articles and presented 9 plus papers in national and international seminars/conferences. He participated in several workshops on research methodology and teaching and learning.

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GODS IN BALLOT BOXES THE DIRTY GAME OF RELIGIOUS POLITICS IN INDIA

AUTHORED BY - VEDANT SHANDILYA¹ & HARSH TRIVEDI²

ABSTRACT

A wise man once said, 'Religion is regarded by the common people as true, by the wise as false, and by the rulers as useful.' And who could be more qualified to prove this great wisdom true than our very own esteemed politicians? They have not only embraced this wisdom but elevated it to an art form—'neatly' turning faith into a campaign tool, division into strategy, and mindless devotion into a license for power. This grand display of religion-infused politics has had impressive results—at least for those enjoying the power. Election after election, the script remains intact: orchestrated outrage, communal fear-mongering, and the unwavering promise of religious supremacy. Meanwhile, actual issues like poverty, unemployment, healthcare, and education are skillfully buried beneath the weight of religious discourse.

The consequences are as clear as crystal: an 84% rise in communal riot incidents in India in 2024 compared to the previous year, as reported by the Centre for Study of Society and Secularism³, and an alarming 74% increase in hate speech cases in 2024, according to India Hate Lab⁴. Meanwhile, the Global Hunger Index ranks India at 105 out of 127 countries⁵ while the June unemployment rate is on the borderline of 9%⁶. Yet, none of these seem more politically beneficial than stoking religious passions. The media, always so ready to fit into this role, amplifies these moves, effectively turning political propaganda into prime-time gospel. Newslandry reports that 70% of prime-time debates in various channels are focused on religious topics while subjugating genuine socio-economic inconsistencies.⁷ Meanwhile, social media, envisioned originally as a

¹ BA LLB, Second Year, Kes' Shri Jayantilal H. Patel Law College.

² BA LLB, Second Year, Kes' Shri Jayantilal H. Patel Law College.

³ Centre for Study of Society and Secularism (CSSS), Annual Communal Violence Report, 2024.

⁴ India Hate Lab, Hate Speech and Violence Report, 2024.

⁵ Global Hunger Index, India Rankings and Analysis, 2024.

⁶ CMIE (2024). Unemployment in India: Monthly Report, June 2024.

⁷ Newslandry, Prime-Time Media Bias Analysis, 2024.

forum for democratic debate, has instead become a field of hate, misinformation, and comfortable diversions; WhatsApp forwards and AI-generated communal propaganda have come to dictate the national agenda, superseding actual governance.

And so, what are the results? The masses enslaved by the false illusion of righteousness, brainwashed to engage in politically master-minded holy wars, while the real barons reserve for themselves all private room and perennial plunder possibility. This study seeks to examine how faith has been misappropriated as a means of electoral leverage in India, providing a brief overview of its historical trajectory, its many ramifications, and the dire future of a democracy hostage to religious propaganda. In addition, however, there is another crucial issue: How long is it until the box turned into a sacred idol of politics in which the true democracy is futile?

INTRODUCTION

Religion and politics stand at opposite poles, but together they have, down history, been responsible for the shaping of the destiny of nations. In India, this fusion is now an ideological influence turned political strategy. Instead of development, policy, or governance, religion has become a predominant factor defining how one views the Indian political stage. Faith is used as a sort of ballots box to further widen the social division of communities. Though secularism happens to be the basic element of the Indian Constitution, yet its logic, philosophy, and practicality remain starkly contradictory to one another. The wanting mix of religion with politics is maybe not a fluke, but neither is this a new situation. There have been a number of occasions a religion was used to ignite conflict between communities by colonial divide-and-rule policies or by the post-independence identity-based vote banks. In modern India, this demands another-level political practice: created communal conflicts, desperate speeches, and state-sponsored religious posturing replacing government and policy-driven discourses. Faith is purposely used by leaders to hide their inefficiency, to distract public attention from real economic and social problems, and further consolidate their voters along religious lines.

The fact that this exploitation pervades every facet of administration, public discourse, and daily life only amplifies the threat. The country has seen a continuous increase in communal violence, often peaking around election cycles—strongly suggesting the deliberate orchestration of religious

tensions for political gain. The media, both traditional and digital, plays a vital role in this, with prime-time debates and social media campaigns designed to incite outrage, exacerbate divisions, and reinforce narratives that sustain a climate of perpetual hostility. Political leaders, rather than acting as unifiers, capitalize on this ignited political environment, ensuring that religious identity dominates political debate over actual concerns such as poverty, unemployment, education, and healthcare.

The revealed purpose of this paper is to open a window into the value of faith weaponized into electoral preference. In the analysis, the historical patterns that have paved their way for such manipulation were looked at: new techniques of sustaining it that are being practiced at present; deep impact on governance, society, and democracy. This study has used data analysis, case studies, and public opinion surveys to expose the chilling reality of a democracy ever-more-increasingly held hostage by religious propaganda. As the machinery of politics further fine-tunes the auteurism of faith-based mobilization, there arises one question with apocalyptic undertones: What time limit is set for religious authoritarianism to completely undercut democratic principles? When do the reputable boxes exemplify nothing more than some sort of modern-day political bauble? In candor, the research involved critically grappling with these questions: can India salvage its secular, democratic foundations, or is it headed toward some irreversible point of majoritarian rule?

INDIA BEFORE THE BRITISH

Long before religious politics drove a wedge into the Indian subcontinent, Hindus and Muslims lived in relative harmony, sharing interdependence within one society. With the Arab traders being welcomed by Hindu rulers such as the Cheras from the 7th century, there was civilizational integration. For the Delhi Sultanate and the concurrent Islamic kingdoms, Hindu-Muslim reconciliation and not animosity occurred in that Hindu elites were appointed into key positions. The Sufi and Bhakti movements spanning over the 8th century to the 16th centuries further muddled ecclesiastical lines, unifying souls while detaching themselves from orthodoxy. Under Ibrahim Adil Shah II in Bijapur, Hindu poets did not become extinct but thrived patronage from the courts of Sufi noblemen, while matrimonial alliances were wedged based on strategy and interfaith considerations. Joint Hindu-Muslim military activity was inordinate proof of collective

solidarity against the Mongol invasions, showing a pragmatic rather than an exclusive bent on identity. Though the initiation of prejudices of religions was conducted by Firuz Shah Tughlaq, these events were exceptionally rare. The Mughal dynasty (1526-1857) undoubtedly encouraged the widespread acceptance between the two religions, unlike British colonial practices of overcome and rule. Akbar institutionalized religious pluralism, appointing Hindu administrators and abolishing the jizya tax. Likewise, his successors Jahangir and Shah Jahan upheld this all-inclusiveness, with Hindus occupying key administrative positions. Mughal architecture, illustrated gildedly by the Taj Mahal, proved Indian art's arduous collaboration of Hindus and Muslims. Aurangzeb (1658-1707) diverged, balancing orthodox religious policy with stout Hindu generals and officials under the Umbrella of the empire. Despite periodic flare-ups of communal tensions, the pre-colonial history of India is mostly characterized by amorphous Hindu-Muslim group relations determined more by political interests and economic ties rather than sectarian motives. With the British, however, came the conscious effort to dismantle such unity, thus successfully providing grounds for communal grudges that would come to occupy a central place in confronting the political landscape of India in the ensuing ages.

THE ARRIVAL OF THE BRITISH AND THE SEEDS OF DIVISION

The British first came to India as merchants but quickly morphed into imperial conquerors. Notably, the East India Company, masquerading as a commercial entity, acted ruthlessly in mainlining the political dominance it had all along sought: Bengal was acquired by treachery after the Battle of Plassey (1757) and was then consolidated after the Battle of Buxar (1764). With this began a supervenience that ruled shocking economic exploitation and led Bengal into famine in 1770.⁸ Right into the 19th century, the British rule had crippled the Indian industries and kingdoms. Their interference in civil and religious affairs bred resentment and insurrection that came later in the 1857 War of Independence. The revolt of 1857 brought about a unique and short-lived moment of Hindu-Muslim unity against colonial tyranny, modeled after Bahadur Shah Zafar, Rani Lakshmibai, and Nana Sahib. For a brief period in history, the rebels took control of important cities, but the British retribution was severe in the extreme. Mass killings, public executions, and the burning of Delhi showed the colonizer's brutality: This was the steroid of the 1857 revolution.

⁸ Sen, A. (1982). *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*. Oxford University Press.

The failure of the rebellion ensured British supremacy in India, and it also raised their worst nightmare: a unified India.⁹

In order to stave off future revolts, the British turned to the Divide and Rule formula. For that, Muslims were made the scapegoats of the insurgency, alienated from administration, and consistently pushed to the sidelines. Thereafter, British rulers scuttled Hindus and Muslims in opposition to each other and established a firm belief of their irreconcilability, all for the colonial project. One of its prime instruments was Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, a British stalwart who started discouraging Muslims from participating in the nationalist movement. His exhortations to a separate Muslim identity lent themselves to the Two-Nation Theory, later wielded by the British in ensuring permanent communal conflict. This approach led to the formation of the All-India Muslim League in 1906 and the 1909 Morley-Minto Reforms, which created separate electorates for Muslims, that is, institutionalization of religious segregation in politics. By 1933, with tacit encouragement from the British, Chaudhary Rahmat Ali gave the first formal articulation to the philosophy of Pakistan-a separatist vision. Instead of opposing these divisive forces, the colonial rulers nurtured them, keeping India divided, and thus paving the path for Partition.¹⁰

Savarkar and Jinnah: Two Sides of the Same Communal Coin

The British, while nurturing a Marxist separatism held very well aware that one single community force won't serve to fracture India, needed such a character as V.D. Savarkar to articulate the Hindu strategy for a majoritarian Indian political setup. To what later became the Pakistan demand pushed forth by M.A. Jinnah, Savarkar laid down the ideological groundwork upon which Hindutva could claim common political ground with British-imposed communalism, both being two faces of a common coin: communal strategy let by the British. In contrast, he had become a glorified "veer" in historical accounts. He was seen, however, as anything but one. The despair of conversion from the revolutionary ideology found its origin in the Andaman Cellular Jail in which he wrote multiple letters seeking submission to the British between 1911 and 1920. His was no mere betrayal on a personal level but at an ideological level, for after being released, he abandoned the struggle for independence and concentrated on the polarization of politics in India into a Hindus versus

⁹ Mukherjee, R. (2002). The War of 1857. Rupa & Co.

¹⁰ Shaikh, F. (2009). Making Sense of Pakistan. Columbia University Press.

Muslims proposition.¹¹ To declare that Hindus and Muslims were two nations was speaking the same language as Jinnah and providing became an ally in the game of division set into motion by the British.

Once a proponent of Hindu-Muslim unity, Jinnah also underwent some transformation. Disappointed with the mass politics of the Congress and scared of being left behind in history, he switched to communalism. The Nehru Report of 1928 and the poor electoral performance of the Muslim League had made Jinnah depend on an out-and-out exclusive posture that Savarkar was promoting. The 1940 Lahore Resolution pushed Jinnah's demands for Pakistan, echoing Savarkar in claiming that Hindus and Muslims could never live together in unison. Both leaders assisted British interests at crucial junctures. Even as Gandhi called for the Quit India Movement in 1942, Savarkar was totally opposed to it and his oft-repeated exhortation to Hindus was to join the British Army.¹² Direct Action Day 1946 gave Jinnah communal violence, the horror stories of which shifted the blame to him for Partition being imperative after all. Each one, excepting Savarkar's Hindutva, fueled the bloodbath of 1947, playing straight into British hands. After independence, the shadow of their legacies continues to stalk the South Asian continent. Savarkar's Hindutva coursed through sectarian violence and right-wing extremism in India, while that of Jinnah became another reason for religious intolerance in Pakistan. Both leaders, however, in spite of appearing to pursue opposed agendas, were fuelled by the same communal poison that taxed Indian unity- Proving that Hindutva and the Two-Nation Theory were never enemies but two sides of the same coin of British-sponsored divisive politics.¹³

British Colonial Policies

Although India had always been prone to communal tensions, the British upgraded them to a standalone effective political weapon. With their deliberate policies of separate electorates through communal awards, the unity that was once born out of Hindu-Muslim fraternity in the colonial struggle was systematically disintegrated and led to the horrors of Partition in 1947. The first big attempt to divide was the partition of Bengal, framed as an "administrative" act yet meant to split

¹¹ Gandhi, R. (2015). Veer Savarkar: The Man Who Could Have Prevented Partition. Rupa Publications.

¹² Savarkar, V. D. (1941). Essentials of Hindutva. Hindu Mahasabha.

¹³ Sarkar, S. (2007). Modern India: 1885–1947. Macmillan.

the Hindus from the Muslims.¹⁴ Although nationalist resistance forced its reversal in 1911, the damage was done—it had planted the seeds of separatism and led to the birth of the Muslim League in 1906. The next blow was the Morley-Minto Reforms in 1909, which instituted separate electorates for Muslims; religious identity, not nationalism, determined political representation. The British even fragmented Hindu society. The 1932 Communal Award granted separate electorates to Dalits; rankling discord among oppressed castes and upper-caste Hindus was done overtly. Gandhi registered this as a colonial trap; he went on hunger strike and finally the Poona Pact was signed with Ambedkar. But, alas, the seeds of communal divides had already been sown.¹⁵ As early as 1935, the British assured that Indian politics was no longer about liberation from colonialism, but about rivalries—religious and caste-based. This deliberate fragmentation made the ground for Jinnah's Muslim League for raising the demand for Pakistan. By the time the British departed in 1947, they had turned India's freedom struggle into a pitched communal battleground where the legacy of division and bloodshed would surely outlast their empire.

Congress's Efforts for Hindu-Muslim Unity

The Indian National Congress envisioned a united, secular India; however, it could not stem the rising tide of communal divide. Despite the effort of Gandhi, Nehru, and Patel in promoting Hindu-Muslim unity, their own mistakes, British manipulations, and the propaganda of the Muslim League only deepened an already growing rift, often fortifying communal forces rather than neutralizing them. One of the greatest miscalculations of Gandhi was the support he gave to the Khilafat Movement (1919-1924), in the hope that it would bring Hindus and Muslims together under one common cause of nationalism. However, this support backfired on him; its failure, in turn, disillusioned the Muslims and pushed them further into communal politics.¹⁶ The Moplah Rebellion in 1921, which turned into Hindu-Muslim violence, proved that mobilization on religious bases only fortified sectarian identities. Another major mistake was the 1916 Lucknow Pact. The Congress granted separate electorates to Muslims, so it legitimized communal politics rather than fought against it. Jinnah and the Muslim League used it to prove that Muslims were indeed a distinct political entity that legitimized their demands for Pakistan in the years to come.

¹⁴ Chandra, B. (1989). *India's Struggle for Independence*. Penguin Books.

¹⁵ Ambedkar, B. R. (1945). *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables*. Thacker & Co.

¹⁶ Brown, J. M. (1972). *Gandhi and Civil Disobedience: The Mahatma in Indian Politics 1928-34*. Cambridge University Press.

The 1928 Nehru Report tried to provide for Muslim safeguards, but purely in the way of an appeasement doctrine at which Jinnah rejected outright. The 1937 provincial elections saw a turning of the tide. While there was a massive victory for Congress, and the Muslim League could not gain any ground, instead of tactically engaging Jinnah, INC refused to share power. This grave miscalculation enabled Jinnah to configure Congress into a "Hindu-dominated" party, fanning separatist sentiment. Congress was unable to envision that this would open the doors to the 1940 Lahore Resolution-the formal demand for Pakistan by the Muslim League. In its attempt to unite India, Congress in fact empowered the very forces that tore the nation apart. Unfortunate blundering was compounded by their excessive faith that mere moral persuasion would be their ace against the steeled communal politics of Jinnah and the Muslim League, hence accelerating the march toward partition.

Partition of India: A Blunder of Politics, Ego, and Violence

The Partition of India in 1947 was no accident; it was the result of decades of failed policies, political arrogance, and rising communal hatred. While Congress initially took a stand for unity, a succession of its strategic blunders, growing separatism by Jinnah, and British manipulations turned Partition into a catastrophic inevitability.

The 1942 Quit India Movement created a political vacuum when Congress leaders were jailed. Meanwhile, the Muslim League worked to strengthen its Pakistan demand in the political void. Working with the British, it mobilized Muslim support, which led to the violent Direct Action Day in 1946, providing proof that Partition was by then imminent.¹⁷

The 1946 Cabinet Mission Plan was Britain's last effort to keep India united through a system of federalism where autonomous Muslim-majority provinces would have existed. Jinnah had accepted it initially, which suggests that Partition wasn't a view that he held with certainty. The Cabinet Mission Plan of 1946 was Britain's last attempt at keeping India together through a federal structure housing autonomous Muslim-majority provinces, which Jinnah had first accepted, implying there was some leeway in Partition.

¹⁷ Jalal, A. (1985). *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League, and the Demand for Pakistan*. Cambridge University Press.

But Nehru publicly rejected the deal, which led Jinnah eventually to withdraw his support and harden his position for Pakistan. That was the last real chance to avoid Partition; Congress's inept handling of negotiations sealed India's fate. However, due to public refusal to accept by Nehru, Jinnah subsequently withdrew his line of support and cemented his position for Pakistan. That was the last real opportunity to avoid Partition, but Congress's incompetence in handling negotiations sealed the fate of India.

As communal violence spiraled out of control in 1947, the British were, in their desperate scurrying away, pressuring for the implementation of the Mountbatten Plan. Thus, in two months, Partition itself was finalized and acted upon. Thus, with communal violence spiraling in 1947, the British, in their desperate attempt to oblige, hurriedly pushed for the Mountbatten Plan, with actual division being done in two months.

This forced division resulted in the largest mass migration in history, displaced more than 15 million people, and left at least a million killed in terrified sectarian violence. The arbitrary borders them stranded millions on wrong sides and neither Congress nor the British put together any plan to stem the ensuing storm. The rushed division led to one of the largest mass migrations in history: over 15 million people displaced; over one million dead in communal carnage. The arbitrary borders left millions stranded in hostile territories, and neither Congress nor the British had any strategy for averting the ensuing chaos.

Gandhiji was horrified by this carnage that, in his last days, he tried to restore peace. His insistence on protecting Muslims churned up a storm of anger among the Hindu extremists, which culminated in Nathuram Godse assassinating him in 1948, capping his lifelong fight for unity in perfectly tragic denouement, silenced by the very forces he struggled against.

The Rise of the RSS and BJP: Hindutva's Political Takeover

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), an organisation founded in 1925 by Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, did not belong to India's freedom struggle. While Congress leaders, revolutionaries, and ordinary Indians sacrificed their lives against the British, the RSS was busy laying the foundation for a Hindutva ideology that would later dominate Indian politics. Like its intellectual

predecessor, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, the RSS, while maintaining a distance from mass movements for independence against British colonialism, disavowed revolutionary ideals and went on to pledge loyalty to the colonial establishment.¹⁸ Hedgewar, along with his successor, M.S. Golwalkar, based their RSS on the assumption that India was essentially a Hindutva nation, in which Muslims and Christians were "non-people", having no legitimate right to be there. Golwalkar, in his famous book titled Bunch of Thoughts, commended Adolf Hitler's ethnic nationalism under the Nazi regime and suggested that India should take a similar approach toward its minorities. He put this into words: *"The foreign races in Hindustan must adopt the Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect and hold in reverence Hindu religion, must entertain no idea but those of the glorification of the Hindu race and culture... or may stay in the country, wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation."*¹⁹ It was an almost blueprint for an exclusionary Hindutva state, reminiscent of the very ideologies that fuelled fascism in Europe. But in this case, the RSS would keep itself on the margins for almost six decades until Congress rule would begin under India after independence.

The critical juncture was reached with the creation of the Bharatiya Janata Party in 1980, a political platform that brought the RSS directly into the channel of governance. The Jan Sangh—BJP's earlier avatar—had been in the scene since 1951 but had limited political mileage. Under men like Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Lal Krishna Advani, the BJP re-styled itself, much more moderate outwardly, but with great ideological allegiance to the RSS. Only after some time would it be before the party comes out fully into the open in espousal of its communal agenda, using religion as a basis for consolidation of Hindu votes.

The Ram Janmabhoomi Movement

The Ram Janmabhoomi movement would always remain in history as the single-most important event that left a permanent impact on the Indian political landscape. Brought about by the RSS, VHP, and BJP for the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya and its replacement with a temple for Lord Ram, the Hindu religious claims on Ayodhya go back centuries, but the issue did not gain

¹⁸ Andersen, W. K., & Damle, S. D. (1987). *The Brotherhood in Saffron: The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and Hindu Revivalism*.

¹⁹ Golwalkar, M. S. (1966). *Bunch of Thoughts*.

much prominence during the history of independent India. It was only when the BJP was on the back foot electorally during the late 1980s that it decided to turn the temple issue into a movement. The then-architect of the movement, L.K. Advani, took out the infamous Rath Yatra in 1990, a highly polarizing spectacle that traversed across India, oozing communal rhetoric and friction between Hindus and Muslims. Advani's speeches dripped with victimhood, vilifying Muslims for their supposed role as invaders and Congress for its softness toward minorities. As a result, riots erupted all over the country, killing hundreds of people. The climax of the Rath Yatra, however, was in December 1992, when kar sevaks (Hindu volunteers) militantly stormed Ayodhya and brought down the Babri Masjid, standing in the face of inaction and silence from senior BJP-RSS leaders. The demolition of the Babri Masjid on 6 December 1992 stands out as one of the blackest pages in the secular history of India. It was a premeditated act of political vandalism, set into motion precisely to raise Hindu tempers and permanently polarize the electorate. The aftermath seared the land from Mumbai to Gujarat and beyond, with rioting claiming the lives of thousands, mostly Muslims. Rather than condemning the act of destruction, the BJP celebrated it as a victory for Hindu pride.

The Babri Masjid demolition was never just a temple. It marked Hindutva's emergence as the mainstay of India's politics by exploiting differences in communities along the lines of religion. In 1984, the BJP won only two Lok Sabha seats, but with Ram Janmabhoomi movement in its bosom, it began to rise in its political graph. In 1996, it became the sole largest party in the Parliament, and in 1998, under the leadership of Atal Bihari Vajpayee, it created its first ever government. However, the actual Hindutva explosion came in 2002 in the aftermath of the Gujarat riots when Narendra Modi-the then Chief Minister of Gujarat-could have presided over one of the worst pogroms in modern India. Following the Godhra train fire in which many pilgrim Hindu were burned to death, mobs ran amuck through Gujarat, leaving behind thousands of Muslims dead through state-supported violence. Women were raped, children burned alive, and entire Muslim neighborhoods turned to ashes, while Modi's state government turned a blind eye. Instead of taking responsibility, Modi, instead, invoked a famous saying: "every action has an equal and opposite reaction", interpreted by others as an excuse to justify the killings. Far from being punished, Modi was rewarded; he was chosen as a poster boy for Hindutva politics and by 2014, repositioned himself as a "development-oriented" leader through the BJP, clinching the prime minister's office

with massive mandate. Nevertheless, his government has continued in the same way, in the guise of economic policy, that is: lynching Muslims on cow slaughter, conspiracy theories about love jihad, anti-Muslim citizenship laws (CAA-NRC), and abrogation of Article 370 in Kashmir. The Ram Janmabhoomi campaign, which began simply as a political show, finally attained realization in 2024 when Modi inaugurated the Ram Temple at Ayodhya, thereby concretizing Hindutva as the dominant ideology of India's ruling establishment. This only goes to show that once communalism is born, it can never die. It becomes only stronger. BJP is a master in converting issues of religious sentiment into the elections from a battleground in lieu of a democratic contest. Once India was envisioned to be a pluralistic and inclusive democracy, today, the country is being ruled by a party that openly marginalizes its minorities, suppresses dissent, and pushes forward the agenda of Hindu nationalism as the state policy. What was an extreme ideology of Savarkar is now a policy that is followed by the government. Jinnah's view of religious separatism that used to be cited as the reason to form Pakistan is now getting implemented in India itself, under the guise of Hindutva. In reality, the true victory of the British divide-and-rule strategy was not in their partition of India in 1947, but in the communal poison they sowed in India that still determines Indian politics today. The RSS and BJP have made sure that the Once, India dreamt of being secular. That hasn't been stolen by foreign forces but by their own political opportunists-those who turned hate into votes. It was never about the temple, although the Ram Janmabhoomi movement was always centered on a temple. It is to recreate India by injecting in an exclusionary and majoritarian vision, to replace the pluralistic mindset of India. In this, RSS and BJP have failed tragically.

FROM MANDIR TO MAJORITY: HOW BJP HIJACKED DEMOCRACY WITH TEMPLE POLITICS

The BJP's victory in the 2014, 2019, and 2024 elections was not due to effectiveness in governance, economic performance, or any democratic ideals but was instead engineered by a combination of religious polarization, nationalist propaganda, and sheer deception. Over three successive elections, BJP firmly proved that problems like unemployment, inflation, corruption, and economic distress did not matter when drowned out by the resounding cries of Hindutva. Narendra Modi's ascendance to power in 2014 was never about "development" or "Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas"-these were just slogans for marketing purposes, meant to keep the moderates satisfied. What drove the BJP was a promise of a strong Hindu leader who would wrest India from the

clutches of "secular appeasement" and "minority dominance." The ideology of Hindu Hriday Samrat, or Emperor of Hindu Hearts, was ruthlessly sold by the BJP's massive propaganda machine. Modi himself preached economic transformation while the party reveled in open communal rhetoric. Hate speech by BJP candidates and RSS-backed outfits intensified, as social media became an incubator for Islamophobic narratives. The Gujarat model, once considered a developmental success, was really a manual of how to gain electoral success through communal polarization. In this manner, the BJP-wide majority proved that the Hindutva has replaced all the formerly employed currencies in Indian politics since then.

By 2019, Modi's economic miracle had unraveled. Unemployment had shot up to a 45-year high, demonetization had decimated microbusinesses, farmers were protesting, and the banking sector was crumbling. Any other government would have suffered a certain demise in elections concerning governance. However, the BJP had recognized that elections in India were no longer fought on the basis of governance; instead, they revolved around emotions, fears, and a semblance of religious supremacy. The Pulwama attack and its subsequent Balakot strikes were just the right near-perfect cover. Instead of accountability, a leeway for attaining a hyper-nationalist agenda under branding other commentators as "anti-nationals" was provided for BJP to weaponize the crises they created. At the same time, old fires of the Ram Mandir dispute were rekindled to keep the Hindu emotions on high. Though, while opposition leaders tried to articulate the economic woes of the country, the BJP set the media narrative, such that nationalism and religious fervor completely submerged the really very pressing issues. And with that, the party earned a bigger mandate than in 2014—just to underline that performance did not matter, and obviously only Hindutva did.

The Indian economy, which was being virtually bankrupted, surfaced in 2024. Inflation squeezed the middle class to a great deal; unemployment reached catastrophic levels; and allegations of corruption against the Adani-Modi nexus were coming to the fore. Farmers were yet again on the streets, government failures glaring. Under normal circumstances, it would have been an electoral suicide. But the BJP had set the stage for its masterstroke—the grand inauguration of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya. The construction of the temple was finished in 2023, but its opening was deliberately postponed to 2024, to make it a pivotal election issue. Modi projected himself not

merely as a Prime Minister but also as a divinely chosen one to fulfill a 500-year-old Hindu prophecy. The entire machinery of the government was being used to power this storyline, drowning out all discourse on good governance. The opposition spoke of inflation and unemployment but pushed these issues into the dust accounts; the BJP ensured none got political mileage. The mainstream media, an extension of the BJP's propaganda apparatus, became a temple discussion center hailing Hindu pride instead of asking critical questions concerning governance inertia. The result? Another BJP victory, showing elections in India had ceased to be about democracy, but about religious identity.²⁰

For the first time in a decade, the BJP faced a proper opposition in 2024 from the INDIA alliance. Unlike in 2019, when the opposition was fragmented, this time it was regional parties and Congress that came together as a block. As a result, the BJP lost a lot of ground, not able to have a brute majority on its own. But it wasn't enough. BJP managed to come back to power with backing from opportunistic NDA allies, establishing that the deep-rooted communalization of Indian politics had reached the point of no return. The INDIA alliance put up an admirable fight, but it simply did not have the machinery, propaganda network, or religious appeal that the BJP had built up over the years. At most, opposition unity kept the BJP from achieving a constitutional supermajority but could not do anything about the decades of systematic Hindutva brainwashing. Indian democracy would be best labelled by the fact that a government could still come to power with a dismal economic past riding high on religious sentiments.

In the context of the 2024 elections, they should have been directed towards the restoration of the economy but turned towards a temple instead. This was a narrative that the opposition should have set, but the BJP had its own terms of engagement. In a way, this was not just the BJP's win; rather, this was the greatest failure for Indian democracy. This is the failure of a government, which had no prospect of coming back due to its failures, coming back into power just by continuing to play that game—because it knew that the electorate had been made to live with obfuscation of real issues. The question is no longer if the BJP will continue invoking faith to win elections—that has already been answered by its conduct. The question is whether India will ever break out of this vicious cycle of manufactured religious politics ever or elections will now forever turn into a battle

²⁰ The Wire, Scroll.in, The Print – Investigative pieces on BJP's use of Ram Mandir in elections

for Hindutva superiority. If yes, Indian democracy is not merely in crisis; it is already dead.

Bulldozing UP: BJP's Communal Playbook in 2017 & 2022

There was no contest regarding governance, economic revival, or social development in either the 2017 or 2022 Uttar Pradesh election; it's more of a plebiscite held on Hindu identity and religious hegemony, driven with a sort of ruthlessness, by the BJP. It marked the establishment of Hindutva as a political force; for example, not argument over employment, rise in prices or education could have been more effective than temple politics, communal scare-mongering, and majoritarian posturing.

The UP elections of 2017 have redefined the political history of India with the BJP bagging an immense 312 of the 403 seats.²¹ Their strategy was very clear: demonizing the previous Samajwadi Party government as a Muslim-appeasing regime and consolidating the Hindu vote across caste lines. While issues like unemployment, agrarian distress and demonetization were at the fore of public suffering, BJP's campaign artfully diverted attention by weaponizing Hindu victimhood. Modern, acme paintings of the SP administration of Akhilesh Yadav were projected by Modi and the BJP leaders as that which pampered Muslims with free laptops for madrasa students and provided scholarships to them while reportedly overlooking the Hindus. A thinly veiled attempt by Modi himself to incite Hindu grievances was in regard to his apparent preference for "Shamshan-Kabristan," a state election fought in the name of religious conflict. However, perhaps the most carefully planned and dangerous step was that of making firebrand Hindutva fanatic Yogi Adityanath Chief Minister. This was not caprice; this was a definitive signal: the state shall hereafter be commanded under Hindu nationalism, not merely the BJP.

By the 2022 elections, unemployment rates in UP reached an all-time record high, exposing the sheer incompetence of the government to address the crisis posed by COVID-19 and denting middle-class savings due to inflation. None of these disastrous failures of governance mattered in the end of the election floor. For, the BJP had, once again, skillfully reframed the election narrative from all's economic collapse to Hindu pride and the imaginary threat of Muslims. The bulldozer became a symbol of election: not symbolizing infrastructural development but as a symbol of

²¹ Election Commission of India Report of 2017 UP Assembly Elections.

Muslim oppression, behind the state's active use of machinery to demolish properties of Muslims—all purposefully carried out under the justification of "law and order," per the Yogi regime. Issues like the Kashi Vishwanath corridor, the Mathura temple, and Ram Mandir construction were paraded before the public to transfer the attention of Hindu voters from government inefficiencies to religious revivalism. Though it had tried to counter this juggernaut of communal mobilization through alliances, the Opposition failed, and, in the end, the BJP retained a comfortable majority, even with a slight reduction in its vote share.

Yogi & Owaisi: The Twin Pillars of Communal Politics in India

Yogi Adityanath-BJP's saffron-clad mascot-has erected his political empire on the foundation of aggressive Hindutva, open threats against minorities, and state-sponsored bulldozer justice. His speeches always tend to blur the lines between governance and communal incitement, presenting Muslims as the eternal "other" and glorifying Hindu supremacy. During his rule, Uttar Pradesh has witnessed an alarming increase in extrajudicial actions, mob violence, and targeted crackdowns against Muslim localities-all subsumed under the guise of "law and order." His re-election proved that in the 2022 polls, for the BJP, neither governance nor social development count: it has to play the Hindu-first narrative to win. Concomitantly, Asaduddin Owaisi thrives as the programmatic foil to Yogi Muslim hardliner, a needful creation of the BJP to justify its majoritarian politics. A speech or two, imbued with religious rhetoric, offer priceless ammunition to the BJP for the war cry of its Muslim appeasement bogey. Even as he fashions himself as a crusader for Muslim rights, he has, in the elections, particularly in UP and Bihar, conveniently divided the opposition vote and indirectly benefited the BJP. Be it intentional or unintentional, Owaisi as a politician has become an asset for that very force claims to oppose. While leaders like Arvind Kejriwal might be disliked for 'freebie politics', he doesn't incite hate into his campaigns, unlike Yogi and Owaisi, whose very survival as politicians stems from communal polarization.

THE POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES OF HINDUTVA

Hindutva and the Targeting of 'Minorities'

It is Hindutva's rising doctrine that has shaped not only Indian politics but has also reconstructed the very social fabric of the country where state policy is permeated with religious majoritarianism. The brunt of such transformation has borne the brunt of the Muslims, being subjected to systemic

subjugation, political exclusion, and persecution by the state. The BJP evidently made Islamophobia into a tool used continuously and actually normally within politics, so that spectrum Muslims were viewed as either threats to national security, illegal infiltrators, or obstacles to development. This majoritarian push has led to consequences that are tangible. The 2019 CAA, along with the proposed NRC, was an act of glaringly rendering millions of Muslims stateless, while at the same time, allowing non-Muslim refugees a pathway to citizenship. The anti-CAA protest, largely led by Muslim women sitting in Shaheen Bagh, was demonized by the BJP as a conspiracy against the nation; the culmination was the orchestrated violence of the Delhi riots in 2020, where Muslims faced losses that cannot be compensated, while the instigator, Kapil Mishra, faced no consequences for his actions.²²

Everyday discrimination had escalated to the extent of violence sanctioned by the state. The bulldozer, the symbol of oppression, was deployed by BJP-ruled states to destroy Muslim homes and businesses under the guise of "illegal encroachment." Lynchings linked to cow vigilantism have already happened many times, yet most of the culprits never get charged. Openly, calls for genocide, economic boycotts, and social ostracism of Muslims are made by BJP leaders and Hindutva goons. Ongoing demonization has reduced an entire community to second-class citizens; they have a constant threat to live with dignity. The Hindutva project is not only about exclusion; it erases Muslim history and existence from the country. The renaming of cities and streets, rewriting school textbooks erasing the contributions of Mughal and Islamic history, and ongoing demands to reclaim mosques in Mathura and Varanasi following the Babri Masjid verdict reflect an even bigger plan of historical amnesia. It is no accident; it is India's ideological engineering, in which the only identity acceptable is that of Hindutva nationalism.

Godi Media and WhatsApp University: The Machinery of Mass Manipulationⁱ

If Hindutva is a philosophy, the media and social media are the instruments for its penetration. The switch to BJP propaganda channels, collectively referred to as "Godi Media," has been a major force in altering public discourse. Channels like Republic TV, Zee News and Times Now have bent over backward to demonize minorities and dissenters while shielding the government from blame. News, nowadays, serves an inciting rather than informative purpose. Prime-time shows do

²² The Quint. 2020. "Kapil Mishra's Hate Speech and the Delhi Riots: A Timeline." The Quint, February 28, 2020.

not raise issues like mass unemployment, economic mismanagement, or the crumbling healthcare system; they cite Hindu-Muslim debates: public spaces for namaz, halal meat, or the "Love Jihad" conspiracy. BJP spokesman will rattle off communal was without any hassles; while all-inclusive dissenting voices will either be drowned out by shouting or later selectively edited on air. This media milieu has conjured an alternate reality in which the greatest danger to India comes, not in the form of poverty and corruption, but Muslim, intellectual, and activist. While television channels are quite success, the scope of social media is to magnify and personalize the term. The BJP's IT cell, probably the most advanced department of digital propaganda in the world, inundates Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp with unverified content. WhatsApp has undoubtedly become the locus of modern-day Hindutva radicalization it being the prime facility for daily forwards of millions in the web full of copy righted news; doctored videos and communal hate speech.

During elections, WhatsApp groups have been bringing forth dangerous, conspiracy-oriented lies about Muslim population growth theories and false videos about Muslims attacking Hindus and others claiming opposition leaders are anti-Hindu. Spread on the intimacy level, this makes challenging or fact-checking nearly impossible because it goes from friend to friend, family member to family member. Fake WhatsApp forwards contributed to the lynching of Muslims in Jharkhand and Maharashtra in 2018, thus providing an instance of how digital hate actually transforms into real-life violence. One can hardly ignore Big Tech's complicity in this ecosystem. Leaked internal investigations by Facebook in 2020 had shown that its operations in India had often turned a blind eye to hate speech from BJP-linked groups. Twitter has been under government pressure to routinely suspend accounts that have spoken against the regime while ignoring Hindutva propaganda. The space designed for free speech has turned into an enabler of digital authoritarianism, where dissent is stifled and communal hatred is elevated by algorithms.

Judicial Failures: When the Courts Surrender to the Regime

In a democracy, the judiciary becomes the last bulwark against the overreach of authoritarian principles. In India, however, the courts have increasingly behaved as able assistants to the ruling party's agenda, whether through active steps or via rulings that sit well within the Hindutva ideology. The most naked example remains the Supreme Court of India's verdict regarding Ayodhya from 2019. While acknowledging that what happened to the Babri Masjid was, in fact,

illegal, it went ahead and allotted the land for a Ram Mandir, effectively rewarding mob violence. This opened up a Pandora's Box of precedence where the use of brute force and religious sentiments could trump legal principles. Following that, the judiciary's silence on major cases suddenly grew deafening. The brazen misuse of the anti-terror laws to imprison activists, journalists, and students while allowing Hindutva leaders to roam free has further displayed the system's hypocrisy. Cases of hate speech against Muslims-common calls for genocide at the Haridwar Dharma Sansad or inflammatory speeches by BJP leaders-rarely lead to arrests-and when they do, often such arrests are released within days. Yet Umar Khalid, a Muslim activist, and Siddique Kappan, a journalist, spend years behind bars based on flimsy charges.

The courts, too, have loyally turned a blind eye to the authoritarian policies of the government. Silence or tacit approval is the response of the judiciary to the abrogation of Article 370, the crackdowns in Kashmir, the extension of the sedition laws, and the suppression of peaceful protests. Instances in which courts have acted, such as the Pegasus snooping case and electoral bond transparency, have lost their relevance by virtue of the delayed judgment, allowing the government to operate at will in the meantime. This death of consciousness before tyranny has indeed presumed to sanction the slow coup against the representative democratic protocols. The machinery of justice is nothing other than one more element of the ruling regime's weaponry, instead of being a sentinel presence over various rights. Where the judiciary ends, democracy ceases and only the illusion of it exists.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The relationship between religion and politics enormously dictates electoral outcomes and even structures of governance across the world. In order to understand the multifarious influences of religious politics on voting behavior, steps must be taken toward developing an understanding of policy options available and country case studies.

1. Secularism in Policy Making: Setting up secularism within the modes of governance effectively ensures that no religion or religious affiliation would dictate political decisions. The complete breakup of the two is imperative for neutrality and orientation toward collective development goals.

Case Study: The 1905 law of France regarding Separation of the Churches and the State dictated

French state secularism and also how the state relates to religious affairs. France has also had laws regulating the showing of conspicuous religious symbols in public schools that have upheld the principles of laïcité.²³

2. Secular Educational Reforms: An education system favored towards secularism would allow for societal perspectives towards political religion and encourage electorates to more weightily consider policies ahead of religion.

Case Study: An education reform in Turkey saw the compulsory extension of secular schooling from five to eight years in 1997. Evidence indicates that this reform decreased the likelihood of women applying the religious label to themselves; consequently, this led to the decrease in voting Islamic parties.²⁴

3. Independent Electoral and Judicial Bodies: Deeply independent executive bodies ensure the purified governance of electoral rules; thus, they cannot hypocritically instill communalistic tensions within the party structures toward electoral success.

Case Study: Since 2011, Tunisia has conducted electoral reforms to prevent the use of religion as the primary campaign component, effectively stabilizing its democracy.²⁵

4. Promoting Inclusive Development: As long as various groups continue to help support or express desire toward sustainable levels of economic development, they generally make it difficult for communalism-based political projects to properly diffuse purposefully through party loss cases.

Case Study: In Lebanon, sectarian combat politics keep bringing about stagnation of the economy and periods of political instability such that it hits home many critical points; this delivers the huge challenge that requires inter-sectarian policies to control.²⁶

5. Empowering Media and Civil Society: An independent media and active civil society organizations are of utmost importance in exposing religious-inspired political propaganda and, at the same time, providing users with a secular view of discourse.

Case Study: In Germany, strong social movements and an independent media ensure that issues

²³ Baubérot, Jean. *The Secularism of France: Laïcité and Its Challenges*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012.

²⁴ Erdoğan, Emre, and Gedik, Hasan. "Secularism and Education in Turkey: The 1997 Reform and Its Consequences." *Comparative Education Review* 62, no. 3 (2018): 350–370.

²⁵ Singerman, Diane. *Tunisia's Electoral Reforms and Democratization*. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2015.

²⁶ Salloukh, Bassel F. *The Politics of Sectarianism in Lebanon*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016.

are not derailed by religious extremism and identity politics during elections.²⁷

6. Legal Frameworks Against Religious Exploitation in Politics: Implementation and enforcement of laws that prevent the use of religion for political purposes could discourage parties from capitalizing on religious viewpoints.

Case Study: In Nigerian politics, the very presence of Muslim – Muslim tickets raises perennial controversies that call for regulation to allow inclusivity and bar religion from being exploited.²⁸

7. Provides Some Recommendations Towards Salvation from Political Appointments Through Religious Influence: Appointing political members on merit instead of religious ground promotes good governance and national unity.

Case Study: In Zambia, President Frederick Chiluba announced that the nation was a Christian state, which ignited debate about the role of religion in politics and further buttressed calls for a clear separation between church and state in the interests of inclusive governance.²⁹

Through the critical review of such case studies and the respective recommendation of orientations, countries will be able to keep in check the wielding of religious politics over voting patterns and thus reorient governance systems in the secular dispensation for a major focus on a holistic national development agenda.

CONCLUSION

This political milieu of religion in India is not a recent development-It has very deep historic roots grown from the Mughal period to British colonialism, post-independence secularism, and now the Hindutva wave. The British had mastered the craft of "Divide and Rule," generating communal discord that culminated in the bloodshed and gruesome partition of 1947. While Nehru and other leaders meant to establish secular democracy post-independence, the seeds of religious mobilization were already set. From the rise of Hindutva forces in the 1980s to the demolition of Babri Masjid in 1992, the Ram Mandir agitation to the Gujarat riots of 2002, India kept trudging to religiously oriented politics. This trajectory reached its full potential with the rise of the BJP to power in 2014. Harnessing Hindu nationalism as an electoral vehicle, the party sought to recast

²⁷ Nolte, Elizabeth. *Media and Democracy in Germany: The Role of Press in Resisting Extremism*. Berlin: Springer, 2020.

²⁸ Federal Republic of Nigeria. *The Nigerian Constitution and Secularism: Sections on Religious Freedom and Electoral Laws*. Abuja: Nigerian Government Press, 1999.

²⁹ Gifford, Paul. *Christianity, Politics, and Public Life in Africa*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009.

itself as the protector of the majority faith. Whichever was the contest-from 2014 to 2019 and now perhaps in 2024-economic distress, inflation, and governance failures were left in the shadows of temple politics, communal polarization, and identity politics. The media houses became the mouthpieces of the ruling party, the IT cells flooded the social media with fake narratives, and hate speech became a normalized nature of political dialogue. In the shadow of this very aggressive religious politicking, not only has it thrown the minorities into the dungeons of despair, but also led to the weakening of democratic institutions, independence of the judiciary, and the rotting of policymaking whereby governance has solely become a theatre of faith.

This toxic mix of religion and politics is the worst that can be imagined. Mob lynchings and hate crimes, heightened by a state-fed ethos of discrimination, have all but dismantled the secular character of India, one in which appeal to religious identity becomes a mode of oppression as well as the basis for electoral mobilization. Equally horrifying is the economic impact: tensions fuel a loss of investment, cripple tourism, and elevate social unrest. Meanwhile, India's image as a pluralistic democracy is crumbling with the onset of diplomatic confrontations with the Middle Eastern countries in relation to growing Islamophobia. Urgent reforms are needed for India to restore its roots of democracy and secularism. Amendments to the electoral law further strengthen punishment for religious campaigning; there have to be accountability mechanisms within the judiciary for hate speech by politicians, independent media must again be allowed to challenge state-driven propaganda, and, most importantly, the public must build a sense of critical thinking and historical awareness to prevent itself from being dragged into the dire trap of religious polarization.

Gods do not belong to the ballot boxes; faith should not dictate the destiny of the nation. Either this nation will reclaim its secular and democratic ethos or it will become a majoritarian theocracy lurking behind the veil of democracy, with the founders' inclusive dream knelt down underfoot. The choice, therefore, is between reclaiming secularism and sticking by the disaster of divine rule, in which democracy itself stands ready to lose.

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