

Hindutva at Crossroads: Phased History, Prejudicial Present, and Segregated Future

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Abstract

Right-wing extremism has emerged as a global phenomenon manifest in various forms and locations of exclusionary nationalism. This paper provides a concise comparative discourse on the historical and modern similarities between fascist ideologies, before delving into the specific case of Hindutva, or Hindu fundamentalism, which has evolved into a violent right-wing entity. Beginning with a historical outlining of Hindutva –which phases its history into ancient, modern twentieth-century, and postmodern to contemporary paradigms- this discourse moves onto merging the theoretical foundations of Hindutva to its practices of violence and discrimination against minority groups and depressed classes of India and for Indian foreign policy towards other South Asian countries. The second part of this paper studies Hindutva and its paraphernalia as tools of populist politics in India –including but not limited to propaganda through social media, saffron brigades of ‘sevaks’ or fringe paramilitary groups, and civic organizations advocating to restore Hindu culture. Key findings of this paper include: a) Hindutva is not an isolated phenomenon but a piece in the global machinery of far-right politics in the contemporary era; b) measures such as "anti-Romeo" squads and bans on meat-eating are used as pretexts for multidimensional violence against Muslims, Christians, Dalits, and other lower classes; c) the current Indian occupation of Kashmir can be seen as an extension of Hindutva; and d) by defining Hindus as ‘insiders’ and Muslims as ‘outsiders’, " the Modi regime has irreparably damaged the communal ethic of coexistence in South Asia, paving the way for a segregated future in the region.

Keywords: Hindutva, history, Modi regime, right-wing extremism, South Asia.

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Introduction

Populism refers to a political strategy that relies on a popular agency or a popular regime based on a divisive ideology that divides people into 'us' versus 'them' and demands an overhaul of the sociopolitical setup of a country (European Center for Populism Studies). The Modi government came to power in a wave of populism, challenging the very basis of secularism in India. The seculars and their Congress party were discredited, and a one-size-fits-all solution was proposed: to make India a Hindu state.

The cognitive tools of populist politics in India include 'imaginaries,' or imagined entities used for 'ontological security provision': rethinking and reimagining nationhood to manage the insecurities of ordinary Indians - a perceived and reinforced sense of insecurity that prevents a common Indian from achieving their true identity, i.e., being Hindu (Kinnvall, 2019). According to Leidig (2020),

"In order to construct a narrative that furthered Hindu insecurity, Modi mobilized his campaign by appealing to recurring themes of a Muslim 'threat' to the Hindu majority. The result is that Hindutva has become synonymous with Indian nationalism."

Politics in India has been in a state of continuous flux and has seemingly culminated in Hindu nationalism, which has become a formidable political force to be reckoned with. In the recent past, the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), the leading Hindu nationalist political party, has experienced a great surge in its electoral prospects. The general election of 2014 was a watershed moment for the party, as it achieved its first overall majority. This triumph was brought about by an innovatively manipulative election campaign led by Narendra Modi and Amit Shah. Other contributing factors included the ineffectiveness, corruption charges, and politically uninspiring leadership of the Congress party.¹

Current Wave of Saffron Politics

In 2014, Hindu nationalism transformed from a sporadic demand for Hindu rights to an established ideological force. The BJP's electoral success allowed religious politics to spread beyond the ballot box and establish

¹ With an interval of a decade, BJP got a leading position in the country –meanwhile in the background it metamorphosed and set off on a path to becoming a political monstrosity.

majoritarianism. This expanded its influence into the social realm by creating a false sense of politico-religious dominance among the Hindu population (Anderson and Longkumer, 2018). At the state level, the BJP controlled 21 out of 29 states, with some states being ruled by Hindu extremists like Yogi Adityanath, who was known for his anti-Muslim rhetoric (Safi, 2021). There have been many other political endorsements of Hindutva both at the state and union levels. A union minister went to the extent of garlanding the leaders of the lynch mob convicted of lynching a Muslim trader in Jharkhand (Anderson and Longkumer, 2018). It would not be wrong to suggest that the federalization of Hindutva has been adopted as a political norm with profound negative implications for Indian society. For a considerable stretch of time, religious pluralism and secularism have been core values of the Indian polity. Muslims are a key populace in the religious composition of India. According to PEW Research Center (2021), Muslims are 15% of the country's population. With a history of communal rioting and clashes of faith-based geographies (e.g., the Babri Mosque), hate-mongering against Muslims and their culture poses a significant risk to India's social fabric.² The manifestation of bigotry against a religious minority represents, as Christophe Jaffrelot (2017) puts it, "the path India has taken towards a Hindu state."

The projection of India as a custodian of democracy is diametrically opposed to the ground realities today. It is merely an eyewash to sustain neoliberal nationalism (Nitasha, 2019).

Historical Background: Outlining Hindutva

Based on historical and descriptive research methodologies, a method of analysis has been developed for this study, termed here as "phased history." Phased history considers the development of Hindutva as a progression of phases rather than a series of isolated events that have taken place in India. The underlying premise is that Hindutva has transformed from a cultural movement into an ideology, and from an ideology into an instrument of right-wing extremism that wields control over a state. It has evolved into a radical force that is redefining the Indian political landscape.

² Recently, Yogi Adityanath went on a politico-cultural tirade against Muslims by taunting them as "people who say abba jaan". This was one of the ways in which the cultural ethos of the Muslims community in India have been mocked at in the spirit of satire and aggression. This leaves an entire community vulnerable and at the risk of social persecution at street level.

This paper's phased history comprises three phases: ancient/colonial, modern/20th century, and postmodern to contemporary.

In post-colonial societies, violence took on different shapes and forms. As far as India is concerned, the narrative gradually became in favor of the imperial past: "divide and rule" had been inherited from the British colonialists, which tainted the Hindu-Muslim relationship for the rest of time. The British convinced Hindus that Muslims were despots and faith invaders. For example, the East India Company portrayed the Talpurs of Sindh as barbarians and "the greatest ruffians" who "occasionally enjoyed human sacrifice". Defeating the Talpurs was claimed as a Christian duty for the emancipation of native Hindus. In 1843, Charles Napier annexed the princely state of Sindh (Asif, 2021).

Secondly, the origins of Hindutva can be traced back to nineteenth century Bengal. It was born out of two factors: (a) the perceived threat to Hindus, and (b) the need to counter Western influence on Hinduism by initiating socio-religious reformist movements, such as Brahma Samaj, to achieve an Indian Renaissance.

In the latter half of the 19th century, the depiction of India as 'mother' gained fame. The atmosphere in the Bengali educational institutions was not ideal for Hindu students because of their exposure to western culture and knowledge which had been generating an inferiority complex among the youth. Efforts were being made by Hindu writers to awaken nationalistic feelings. The most famous and controversial work at that time was Bankim Chatterjee's hymn '*Bande Matram*' which was later published in Ananda Math in 1882. This literary work created intense social impact and controversy for containing anti-Muslim sentiment: it aimed at countering western while not intending to keep the Muslims alone. Bankim also wrote an article³ in which he refused to accept the history of Muslim rulers as the history of Bengal and urged his contemporaries to look for Bengal's true history. In fact, according to Ahmad Sofa, Bankim inspired the Partition of Bengal (Bhattacharya, 2021).

In 1892, Chandra Nath Basu's book titled "Hindutva" was published, which was reviewed as a revival of Hindu nationalism. Towards the end of the 19th century, various underground revolutionary societies started emerging in Bengal and Maharashtra. These secret societies were mostly composed

³ "*Bangalar itihās sanmandhe koekti kotha*"

of upper-caste, wealthy Bengalis. However, a few lower castes were also granted space, but none included Muslims.

Things took a shift when Muslims started taking interest in the political matters of the country at the beginning of the 20th century. U.N. Mukerjee's book "Hindus: A Dying Race," published in 1929, intensified Hindu consciousness by arguing that Hindus were in danger due to foreign (Western) invasion and were becoming a decaying race as the land that once belonged to them was being overtaken and they were being gradually outnumbered by Muslims. Such misrepresentation of facts sowed the false idea that Muslims planned to turn Hindus from a majority to a minority, a notion that still persists today.

During the period between the two world wars, while the British Empire was facing challenges from European nations such as Germany and Italy, Hindutva had evolved through "sustained interaction with Italian and Nazi fascist ideologues (and vice versa)" (Leidig, 2020). After India's independence and partition, Hindutva actors played a significant role in radicalizing the nation-building process and forming a majoritarian identity. Since then, Hindutva has been shaking the foundations of India's secularism.

Metropolitan Hindutva: This phase of Hindutva's history is set in the late 20th century. It is marked by the "rise of an urban, right-wing Hindu nationalist ideology". It wouldn't be wrong to suggest that in this phase India witnessed a complete transformation of Hindutva from an old Brahmanical ideology to an urban right-wing populist movement. This phase has been characterized for this study as follows:

1. Transformation of a socio-religious ideology into a sociopolitical power hub.
2. It was a bold, new version of Hindutva.
3. Hindutva's mutation or growth has been horizontal: different geographical regions responded differently to this process. For example, the growth of Hindutva in the coastal regions of India, as in coastal Karnataka, boomed when it combated the economic and social cohesion and the resilient communal cohabitation patterns among Hindus and Muslims. Hindutva consolidated its base by tapping into diverse castes (Assadi, 2002).
4. Recurrent communal riots and confrontations in metropolitan areas strengthened Hindutva's urban base.

A Postmodern Shift: Towards Contemporary Hindutva: In the 1990s, Hindutva forces adopted the guise of an Indian cultural renaissance to eradicate all differences, including the existence of Muslims, which had to be 'managed' rather than accepted as different from the majority Hindus. This was a superficial construction of the postmodern 'us' and 'them' which would mar Indian politics for decades to come.⁴

Mainstreaming of Hindutva in the Modi regime,

“By marking Hindus as ‘insiders’ and other religious groups, notably Muslims, as ‘outsiders’, Modi’s government has constructed Hindutva as synonymous with Indian nationalism” (Leidig, 2020).

The contours of contemporary Hindutva are traced in the technological and developmental processes simultaneously: technology has been used to maul democracy. In order to create a sense of vigilantism in public (Chowdhury, 2021), the facts of history and common sense are being manipulated through digital tools of communication by generating an “appeal to one section of a dangerously split Indian public” (Banaji, 2018). Banaji (2018) has further divulged this pathological relationship between technology and politics in the context of Hindutva as,

“Enlightenment rhetoric of progress, democracy, and technological development is apparently embodied by WhatsApp groups, electronic voting machines, and laws to protect cows. Voting – as a marker of democratic citizenship – becomes a masquerade protecting a resurgent far-right Hindutva (Hindu fascist) regime under the aegis of Narendra Modi and the BJP. Caste Hinduism’s association of cows with deities, and the proscription on meat-eating in certain versions of religious practice, are used as pretexts for unimaginable violence against Muslims, Christians, Dalits, and working class/lower caste Hindus. Violence against those whom dissent is rationalized as patriotic.”

Hindu radicalization in India has been a state-driven phenomenon under the BJP government. In a country of 84% Hindu population and only about 15%

⁴ Postmodernism is being referred to here in the context of high sensitivity to ideology and the role it should play in asserting and maintaining political and economic power.

Muslim, the ruling party has created “a deep sense of Hindu victimhood” by floating and propagating slogans like “Hindus are in danger”.

The tools used for the othering of Muslims include disinformation, hate speech, reminiscing about old religious clashes, manipulation of a state-subservient media, silencing dissent and progressive activists, and last but not the least, empowering vigilante Hindu supremacist groups (Savarkar, 2016).

This Hindutva-driven Islamophobia has brought about crude anti-Muslim rhetoric, an increase in lynching incidents, communal hatred, and human rights violations in Kashmir. If we look back at the workings and “mechanisms of Hindu nationalist identity-building” (Pandey, 1993), it had been achieved through “stigmatizing and threatening others, principally, Muslims and Christians” (Behera, 2002), who were conveniently excluded from the nation-building process. The propagation of socio-communal stigma was used as a tool for sustaining Hindutva (Jaffrelot, 1999).

Similar to Hindutva, the Modi doctrine⁵ redefines Hinduism as an identity rather than a religion. Modi regime has an extended history of fueling tensions with Muslims to augment Hindutva’s political and ideological legitimacy. The arbitrary revocation of Articles 370 and 35A by the BJP government is seen as an extension of Hindutva beyond the state and national borders of India. For Kashmiri Muslims, Hindutva's ideology is no different from the ubiquitous issue of Islamophobia. This tenet of Hindutva provided an opportunity for the Modi government to utilize all tactics to advance the exclusionary agenda of labeling Muslims as "outsiders" in India. The struggle for Hindu dominancy has had profound negative implications on the lives of Kashmiri Muslims. The Modi government's policies, including the annexation of Kashmir, the repeal of Articles 35A and 370, the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), the increased presence of Indian armed forces, and human rights violations in Indian-occupied Kashmir (IOK), are a reflection of the central tenets of Hindutva.

Major Findings

The findings of this paper have been divided into three equally important heads: historical, contemporary, and predictive.

⁵ Modi doctrine includes: domestic and foreign policies with reference to orthodox Hindu approach, where he prioritized India as a Hindu state with nationalist approach. For the purposes of this study, this policy framework has been termed as “Hindus First Policy”.

Historical

1. Hindutva originated in the colonial period, originally to counter the western influence in the country through social movements and literary works which urged the Hindus to become conscious of their identity.
2. The strategy of stigmatization and othering and a misguided notion of Muslim disloyalty to the Indian nation has been the cornerstone of Hindu nationalist movements.
3. Muslims' involvement in the country's political matters at the beginning of the 20th century fueled Hindu nationalist sentiment.
4. The radicalization of the nation-building process by Hindutva actors threatened the secular core of India in the post-independence period. The superstructure of hate and exclusion altered the very foundation on which the polity had been built.
5. In the 90s, Hindutva entered into a phase where it diversified its base and revamped its organizational strategy throughout the country, especially in urban areas. It brought an ideological mooring to urbanized discourses of spatial exclusion and created a divide among city-dwellers into 'us' and 'them.'

Contemporary

1. Following Leideg's (2020) scholarship, owing to "paradigmatic resemblances between different exclusionary nationalisms" existing today, Hindutva has to be seen as a unit of the global phenomenon of right-wing extremism. Simply put, it is not an isolated phenomenon but set in the global landscape of extremisms.
2. Religious fault lines have existed in India for a very long time but there has been a surge in violence against Muslims since 2014.
3. Technology has been used to maul democracy in India since Modi's BJP came to power in 2014. Through social media groups information on communal gatherings and at times offensive mobs have been disseminated which makes it all the more convenient for the agents of hate to gather for discursive and deliberative, and action purposes.
4. The Muslim fertility myth has been created to stereotype Muslims and portray them as the source of demographic discontent and engineering in India.
5. Hindutva has flowed beyond the state and national borders of India. Hindutva aims at the restoration of *Akhand Bharat*; which means the

recovery of territory lost to Pakistan at the time of Partition and China in the aftermath of the Sino-Indian strife of 1962 (Virk, 2021). The areas India claims in this context are Kashmir, Gilgit-Baltistan, and Ladakh in its entirety –such an ambition doesn't settle well with the current regional dynamics.

6. Therefore, the mainstreaming of Hindutva in India has profound negative implications for peace in South Asia. In a region that is so fragile in terms of geopolitics, social development, ideological battles, and nuclear threat, an exclusionary and popular right-wing ideology only exacerbates the crisis.

Predictive Findings: Hindutva in the Future

1. In the short term, Hindutva will grow more powerful within India by furthering the segregation of Muslims and Hindus.
2. The policy-making process will be manipulated to adopt and implement policies of racial cleansing.
3. Social dynamics of communal coexistence could undergo drastic changes and Muslims in India will have to face socioeconomic and political inequalities.
4. Hindu supremacist groups will continue terrorizing the minority population via incendiary rhetoric (Basu, 2017), vigilante justice, and mob rule.
5. Hindutva's exponential growth will change the mobilization and escalation patterns in South Asia.
6. Hindutva's territorial ambition could trigger conventional war in the region. If the combatants are India and China, Pakistan will extend its support to China. However, if the conflict is between Pakistan and India, China may provide military equipment but would never go to war with India.
7. For Pakistan, it is anticipated that facing Hindutva in the future would be tantamount to a full-blown hybrid war: ideological struggle and national security maintenance vis-à-vis India.

Conclusion

As the self-proclaimed 'world's largest democracy' or as Narendra Modi went on to say during his visit to the U.S. at the 76th UNGA, 'mother of all democracies' has been arrested by a rightwing Hindu extremist ideology, it is not at all out of context to question the very foundations of Indian

secularism: can religious extremism be so potent that it can overturn a nation's political system?

In an effort to solve this sociopolitical puzzle, this paper has traced the origins and analyzed the growth patterns of Hindutva from the colonial period to contemporary India. Hindutva can be compared to an octopus, with one head (or a figurehead like Modi) and numerous tentacles. Each of these tentacles has drained secularism out of the social fabric and infiltrated all geographical regions of India. In terms of communalism, Hindutva's exponential growth has been directly proportional to minority persecution, i.e., of the Muslims.

Today, Hindutva has captured the essence of the entire Union of India and has even spread beyond its national borders, which has both short-term and long-term implications for peace in South Asia. One of the fallouts of Hindutva's capture of national power was the unilateral merging of Kashmir into the union. It has been predicted that a Hindu extremist capture of India has affected the strategic stability and will alter, in the long run, the escalation patterns between India and Pakistan. In short, Hindutva has gained a threat perpetuity status for Pakistan, which is already fighting many battles on socioeconomic and political fronts. The devastation caused by the recent flash floods and the near-default economy is a testament to the fact that the country cannot absorb any external shockwaves which might lead to an actual conflict, as what started as imaginary ideological contests mostly end up on the battlefield. In the case of South Asia in general, and Pakistan in particular, Hindutva and its socio-spatial expansion are as real as an existential threat can be. To counter this perpetual threat, it is suggested that Pakistan adopts a broad-based strategy covering a balanced conventional war-fighting capability, building counter-narratives, and sophisticated intelligence mechanisms.

Other than military means, the state needs to invest in public domains and spheres of influence where political thought and opinions are manufactured. It is within popular discourses that Hindutva must be challenged through discussions on alternates to right-wing extremism both domestically and internationally. Nothing short of an outright ideological contest will work in decreasing the power of Hindutva; as diamond cuts diamond, an ideology can only be defeated with the help of ideological tools.

With an exploratory aim, this paper concludes by offering a new multidisciplinary perspective on Hindutva to both academics and

practitioners in various fields. The paper proposes the OCTOPOSE (Organizational Capture Through Overhauling Politics of Segregation and Elections) model as a means of studying Hindutva and other right-wing powerhouses worldwide.

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