HINDUTVA AT CROSSROADS: PHASED HISTORY, PREJUDICIAL PRESENT, AND SEGREGATED FUTURE

*Hassan F. Virk, Farwa Batool and Sania Muneer**

Abstract

Right-wing extremism has emerged as a global phenomenon manifest in various forms and locations of exclusionary nationalism. Following a concise comparative discourse on the historical and modern resemblances between fascist ideologues, this paper focuses on Hindutva or Hindu fundamentalism which has metamorphosed into a right-wing violent 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. 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) elements and measures like 'anti-Romeo' squads and ban 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 South Asian communal ethic of coexistence which has laid the ground for a segregated future for the region.

Keywords: Hindutva, History, Right-wing Extremism, South Asia, Modi Regime.

Introduction

Populism refers to the politics of popularity or a popular regime based on any radical ideology demanding an overhaul of the socio-political setup of a country. Modi government came to power in a shock wave of populism, challenging the very basis of secularism in India. The seculars and their Congress party had been debunked and a one-size-fits-all solution was floated: make India a Hindu state.

*Hassan F. Virk, Farwa Batool and Sania Muneer are working at University of Lahore.

According to Kinnvall, the cognitive tools of populist politics in India include 'imaginaries' or imagined entities for the purposes of 'ontological security provision':[1] re-thinking and re-imagining nationhood for managing insecurity in the mind of an ordinary Indian – insecurity which keeps a common Indian man from his true identity, i.e., Hindu.

> *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.*[2]

Politics in India has been in continuous flux and has seemingly culminated in Hindu nationalism – which has become a formidable political force to reckon with. In the recent past, the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), the leading Hindu nationalist political party, has seen a great surge in its electoral prospects. The general election of 2014 was a watershed moment for the party with its first overall majority. This triumph was brought about by an innovatively manipulative election campaign by Narendra Modi and Amit Shah. Other contributing factors included the ineffectiveness, corruption charges, and politically dull leadership of the Congress party.[3]

The year 2014 marked the transition from an intermittent exertion of Hindu rights to an outright ideological force. The political victory brought forth religious politics to an arena of majoritarianism. It extended its sphere of influence "beyond the electoral ballot"[4] and towards the social side by creating a general emotionality and a false sense of politico-religious primacy of the Hindu population. At the state level, the BJP was holding power in 21 of 29 states – with a few ruled by Hindu extremists like the elected chief minister of UP Yogi Adityanath who happened to be a firebrand anti-Muslim preacher.[5] 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.[6] It would not be wrong to suggest that the federalisation 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 Centre, Muslims are 15% of the country's population.[7] With a history of communal rioting and clashes of faith-based geographies (e.g. the Babri Mosque), hate-mongering against Muslims and their cultural traits will further the risk of a social collapse.[8] These manifestations of bigotry against a religious minority represent, borrowing from Christophe Jaffrelot, the path India has taken "toward a Hindu

state". [9] The projection of India's image as the custodian of democracy is diametrically opposite to the ground realities today. It is a mere eyewash to sustain neoliberal nationalism. [10]

Building on the historical and descriptive research methodologies, a method of analysis has been deliberated for this study and is termed here as 'phased history'. Phased history understands the evolution of Hindutva as a sequence of phases rather than as a series of events that have occurred in India. The surmise is that Hindutva has metamorphosed from a cultural movement into an ideology and from an ideology to an agency of right-wing extremism controlling a state: it has culminated into a radical agent which is redefining the Indian polity. This phased history, as laid out in this paper, comprises three phases: ancient/colonial, modern/20th century, and postmodern to contemporary.

Historical Background: Outlining Hindutva

Violence in post-colonial societies took different shapes and forms. As far as India is concerned, the narrative gradually proved to be in favour of the imperial past: divide and rule had been inherited from the British colonialists which would taint 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, "greatest ruffians" who "occasionally enjoyed human sacrifice". It was claimed as a Christian duty to defeat the Talpurs for the emancipation of native Hindus. In 1843, Charles Napier annexed the princely state of Sindh. [11] Secondly, the origins of Hindutva can be traced back to the nineteenth century Bengal. It was born out of two factors; Hindus were in danger, and to counter the Western influence on Hinduism, socio-religious reformist movements, such as Brahmo Samaj, had to be set in motion for achieving an Indian renaissance.

In the latter half of the 19th century, the depiction of India as a '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 along. Bankim also wrote an article, [12] 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.[13]

In 1892, Chandra Nath Basu's book titled "Hindutva" was published which was reviewed as being the 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 of upper caste, wealthy Bengalis; however, a few lower castes were 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 "Hindus: A Dying Race", published in 1909, aggravated Hindu consciousness by putting forth the argument that Hindus were in danger due to foreign (western) invasion and were becoming a decaying race as the Hindu land that once belonged to them was being overtaken and they were being gradually outnumbered by the Muslims.[14] Such misappropriation of facts germinated the false idea that Muslims plan to turn Hindus from a majority to a minority – it lingers even today.

In between the two world wars, when the British Empire was in trouble with European troublemakers like Germany and Italy, Hindutva had evolved as a result of "sustained interaction with Italian and Nazi fascist ideologues (and vice versa)"[15]. Following the independence and partition of the subcontinent, Hindutva actors made a significant contribution to radicalising the nation-building process and forming a majoritarian identity. Since then, Hindutva has been sending shockwaves to India's secular foundations.

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 Brahamanical ideology to an urban right-wing populist movement. During this phase, the socio-religious ideology of Hindutva was transformed into a socio-political hub. This era has been characterised as a bold and new version of Hindutva. The careful analysis of this time suggests that its 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.[16] Moreover, recurrent

communal riots and confrontations in metropolitan areas strengthened Hindutva's urban base. Resultantly, India witnessed a postmodern shift which breaded the contemporary Hindutva.

A Postmodern Shift: Towards Contemporary Hindutva. Hindutva forces took on the cloak of Indian cultural renaissance in the 90s in a bid to exterminate all differences; for instance, the existence of Muslims had to be 'managed' rather than 'accepted' as different than the majority Hindus. This was a superficial construction of the postmodern 'us' and 'them' which would mar Indian politics for decades to come.[17]

Mainstreaming of Hindutva in 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."*[18]

The contours of contemporary Hindutva are traced in the technological and developmental process simultaneously: technology has been used to maul democracy. In order to create a sense of vigilantism in public,[19] 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."[20] Banaji has further divulged this pathological relationship between technology and politics in the context of Hindutva as:

> *Enlightenment rhetoric of progress, democracy and technological development are 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, is used as pretexts for unimaginable violence against Muslims, Christians, Dalits, and working class/lower caste Hindus. Violence against those who dissent is rationalized as patriotic.*[21]

Hindu radicalisation in India has been a state-driven phenomenon under the BJP government. In a country of 84% Hindu population and only about 15% 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.[22]

This Hindutva-driven Islamophobia has brought about crude anti-Muslim rhetoric, increased cases of lynching, communal hatred, and human rights violations in Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK) along with other parts of India. If one looks back at the workings and "mechanisms of Hindu nationalist identity-building",[23] it had been achieved through "stigmatizing and threatening others, principally, Muslims and Christians",[24] which were conveniently excluded from the process of nation-building.[25] The propagation of socio-communal stigma was used as a tool for sustaining Hindutva.[26]

Synonymous with Hindutva, the Modi doctrine reframes Hinduism not as a religion but as an identity.[27] Modi regime has an extended history of fuelling 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. In the case of Kashmiri Muslims, Hindutva ideology is not very different from the ubiquitous phenomenon of Islamophobia. This tenet of Hindutva provided an opportunity for the Modi government to utilise all tactics to serve the exclusionary agenda of making Muslims 'outsiders' in India. The struggle for Hindu dominancy has had profound negative implications on the lives of Kashmiri Muslims. Policies of the Modi government such as the annexation of Kashmir, revocation of Articles 35 A and 370, Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), the increased presence of Indian armed forces and human rights violations in IIOJK are the manifestations of the core elements of Hindutva.

Findings

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

Historical

- 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.
- The strategy of stigmatisation and othering and a misguided notion of Muslim disloyalty to the Indian nation has been the cornerstone of Hindu nationalist movements.
- Muslims' involvement in the political matters of the country at the beginning of the 20th century caused a boom in Hindu nationalistic sentiment.

- The radicalisation of the nation-building process by Hindutva actors threatened the secular core of India in the post-independence period.
- In the 90s, Hindutva entered into a phase where it diversified its base and revamped its organisation strategy throughout the country, especially in the urban areas.

Contemporary

- Following Leideg's 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.[28]
- Religious fault lines have existed in India for a very long time but there has been a surge in violence against Muslims since 2014.
- Technology has been used to maul democracy in India since Modi's BJP came to power in 2014.
- The Muslim fertility myth has been created to stereotype Muslims and portray them as the source of demographic discontent and engineering in India.
- Hindutva has flowed beyond the state and national borders of India. Hindutva aims at the restoration of *Akhand Bharat*;[29] 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.[30] The areas India claims in this context are Jammu and Kashmir, Gilgit-Baltistan, and Ladakh in its entirety – such an ambition doesn't settle well with the current regional dynamics.
- Hence, mainstreaming of Hindutva in India has profound negative implications for peace in South Asia.

Predictive Findings: Hindutva in Future

- In the short term, Hindutva will grow more powerful within India by furthering the segregation of Muslims and Hindus.
- Policy-making process in India will be manipulated to adopt and carry out policies of racial cleansing.
- Social dynamics of communal coexistence could undergo drastic changes and Muslims in India will have to face socio-economic and political inequalities.
- Hindu supremacist groups will continue terrorising the minority population via incendiary rhetoric,[31] vigilante justice, and mob rule.

- Hindutva's exponential growth will change the mobilisation and escalation patterns in South Asia.
- 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; but, if the conflict is between Pakistan and India, China may provide military equipment but would never go to war with India.
- For Pakistan, it is anticipated that facing Hindutva in 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 recent visit to the US, 'mother of all democracies' has been arrested by a right-wing Hindu extremist ideology, it is not at all out of context to question the very foundations of Indian secularism: can religious extremism be so powerful that it overhauls a polity? Hindutva can be compared to an octopus, with one head (or a figurehead like Modi) and numerous tentacles: each of these tentacles have sucked secularism out of the social fabric and all the 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 spirit and the entire Union of India. In fact, it has flowed beyond the national borders of India and into the region – which has short to long-term implications for peace in South Asia. One of the fallouts of Hindutva's capture of national power was the unilateral merging of the state of Jammu and Kashmir into the Indian 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. To counter this perpetual threat, it is suggested that Pakistan may adopt a broad-based strategy covering increased conventional war-fighting capability, building counter-narratives, and sophisticated intelligence mechanisms – in this context hybridity of counterintelligence and counterespionage has been recommended.

References

1   Kinnvall, C. (2019). Populism, ontological insecurity and Hindutva: Modi and the masculinization of Indian politics. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 32(3), 283-302.

2   Leidig, Eviane. "Hindutva as a variant of right-wing extremism." *Patterns of Prejudice* 54, no. 3 (2020): 215-237.

3   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.

4   Anderson, Edward, and Arkotong Longkumer. "'Neo-Hindutva': evolving forms, spaces, and expressions of Hindu nationalism." (2018): 371-377.

5   Michael Safi, "Controversial Hindu priest chosen as Uttar Pradesh chief minister". The Guardian. https://www. theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/19/uttar-pradesh-yogi-adityanath-hindu-priest-chief-minister (accessed on 2 September 2021)

6   Ibid. Anderson, E., & Longkumer, A. (2018).

7   Pew Research Center. "Religious Composition of India". (2021) https://www.pewforum.org/2021/09/21/population-growth-and-religious-composition/ (accessed on 10 October 2021)

8   Recently, Yogi Adityanath went on a politico-cultural tirade against Muslims by taunting them as "*people who say abba jaan*".

9   Jaffrelot, Christophe. "India's democracy at 70: Toward a Hindu state?" *Journal of Democracy* 28, no. 3 (2017): 52-63.

10   Kaul, Nitasha. "The political project of postcolonial neoliberal nationalism." *Indian Politics & Policy* 2, no. 1 (2019): 3-30.

11   Asif, Ahmed Manan. "How the British convinced Hindus that Muslims were despots and religious invaders". Scroll, https://scroll.in/magazine/850787/how-the-british-convinced-hindus-that-muslims-were-despots-and-religious-invaders (accessed on 2 September 2021)

12   "*Bangalar itihas sanmandhe koekti kotha*"

13   Bhattacharya, Snigdhendu . "Hindutva and idea that 'Hindus are in danger' were born in Bengal". *The Print*. https://theprint.in/pageturner/excerpt/hindutva-and-idea-that-hindus-in-danger-born-in-bengal/513174/ (accessed on 27 September 2021)

14   Mukerji, U.N. "Dying race". Calcutta: Bhaskar Mukerjee, 1929.

15   Leidig, Eviane. "Hindutva as a variant of right-wing extremism." *Patterns of Prejudice* 54, no. 3 (2020): 215-237.

16   Assadi, Muzaffar. "Hindutva policies in coastal region: Towards a social coalition." *Economic and Political Weekly* (2002): 2211-2213.

17   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.

18   Leidig, Eviane. "Hindutva as a variant of right-wing extremism." *Patterns of Prejudice* 54, no. 3 (2020): 215-237.

19   Chowdhury, Debasish Roy. "Is India Headed for an Anti-Muslim Genocide?" *TIME*. https://time.com/6103284/india-hindu-supremacy-extremism-genocide-bjp-modi/ (accessed on 29 September 2021)

20   Banaji, Shakuntala. "Vigilante publics: Orientalism, modernity and Hindutva fascism in India." *Javnost-The Public* 25, no. 4 (2018): 333-350.

21   Ibid.

22   Chowdhury, 2021. "Is India Headed for an Anti-Muslim Genocide?" *TIME*. https://time.com/6103284/india-hindu-supremacy-extremism-genocide-bjp-modi/

23   Savarkar, Vinayak Damodar. *Essentials of hindutva*. 2016.

24   Pandey, Gyanendra. *Hindus and Others: The question of identity in India today*. Viking, 1993.

25   Behera, Navnita Chadha. "Kashmir: A testing ground." *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 25, no. 3 (2002): 343-364.

26   Jaffrelot, Christophe. *The Hindu nationalist movement and Indian politics: 1925 to the 1990s: strategies of identity-building, implantation and mobilisation (with special reference to Central India)*. Penguin Books India, 1999.

27   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".

28   For a detailed analysis, see Leideg's framework for the universal dimensions of right-wing extremism:

29   Undivided India

30   Virk, Hassan F. "CPEC, J&K, and Ladakh: Revisiting Chaos in the Himalayas". *Pakistan Politico* (accessed October 1, 2021)

31   Basu, M. (2017). *The Rhetoric of Hindu India: Language and Urban Nationalism*. Cambridge University Press.