India's Muslims and Hindu Nationalism

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Abstract

India is in the midst of changing its definition of what it means to be Indian. For the first time since becoming an independent nation in 1947, the government of India has chosen to use religion as a criteria for citizenship. This paper examines the critical importance of this development as it pertains to Muslims currently living in India, as well as for anyone living in South Asia who may wish to seek asylum in India in the future. The paper also examines the significance of the world's most populous democracy shifting from secular to sectarian governance, a development with local, regional, and global impacts.

The immediate effect of using religion as a criteria for citizenship has immediate and far-reaching consequences for India's minority Muslim population. The criteria also impacts other religious groups in India and the south Asia region. This significant change has already resulted in deleterious effects including mob violence, internal displacement of Indian-born Muslims into newly constructed detention camps, and the expectation of massive deportation of Muslims from India.

The findings presented in this paper are based on information obtained from historical sources provided by human rights organizations, government foreign affairs reports, and current references including media, non-government organizations, and political think tanks.

Keywords: India, Hindu, Muslim, citizenship, Modi, nationalism

1. Introduction

1.1 India is Changing Its Citizenship Criteria to Include Religion

Following a six-year buildup of Hindu nationalism and the re-election of Prime Minister Narendra Modi for a second term, a significant benchmark was established with the passage of a new citizenship law in late 2019. The law states that religious immigrants in south Asia are welcome to seek asylum in India with one notable exception: Muslims are no longer welcome.

More egregious to Muslims already living in India, including millions born and raised there, is the legal demand they prove their residency by providing birth records most do not possess. Adding to the problem of establishing proof is the high rate of illiteracy among poorer Muslims, making it nearly impossible for them to sift through decades of documents in search of records that may not even exist. As a result, over 2 million Muslim Indians have already learned they are not citizens of India. The number may reach 4 million. In the aftermath of the passage of citizenship law, Indian Muslims were immediately accused of and arrested on suspicion of being "foreign migrants." These charges were made despite the fact that many of those targeted have voted in India throughout their lifetimes, and some have also served in India's military. The pain of being excluded from the list of citizens drove dozens to commit suicide. (Gettleman, J., Kumar, H. 2019). Even those Muslims able to pass the citizenship test and remain in their homes fear a future as a second-class citizen in a country whose leadership is demonstrating they are no longer welcome.

1.2 Impact on Muslims in India Unable to Prove Citizenship

Among the many outcomes for those Muslims unable to prove their birth records in India is detention in newly constructed camps, or worse, deportation with nowhere to go. A more immediate result is the unrestrained vitriol and violence being directed toward Indian Muslims by the majority Hindu population that appears to have the government's *carte blanche* permission. In February of 2020, just two months after the new citizenship law was enacted, Hindu mobs in Delhi attacked Muslim homes and businesses. At least 56 Muslims were beaten to death in street violence or by being

burned to death inside their homes. Multiple reports indicate the police watched as mayhem unfolded without engaging or preventing injury or death. (Sameer,Y., Perrigo, B., 2020.)

India's constitution grants people of all faiths equal protection under the law. However, many of India's Muslims fear the new law is being used to illegally strip them of Indian citizenship in order to tilt the state's demographics further in favor of increasing the Hindu majority. This pivot away from a free, democratic country toward one based on sectarian divides is so far reaching India may need to change its constitution if it continues to embark on this path. (Guha, D. 2020.) Government leadership has the power to alleviate expressions of discriminatory behavior among its populace, just as it has the ability to plant and nourish racist attitudes and actions. Unfortunately for the minority Muslim community in India, for the equitable future of the entire populace, and for the health of its democracy, encouraging anti-Muslim rhetoric and actions is the new path the government of India has chosen. Not only has the citizenship law and its implementation helped stoke fear and hatred toward India's Muslim minority, the government has committed acts of rampant recklessness and outright brutality toward Muslims while inspiring the majority Hindu population to mount what can accurately be described as a "hate campaign." Such actions are not covert; they are visible to leaders around the world who have universally condemned India's prime minister for his government's ruthless and reckless behavior.

1.3 Opening Door to Non-Muslims Seeking Asylum While Closing Door to Muslims

The passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act in 2019 made it easier for Christian, Sikh, Jain, Buddhist, and Parsee immigrants primarily from Bangladesh, Afghanistan, and Pakistan to acquire asylum and citizenship, and nearly impossible for Muslims from the same countries to do so. At the same time, Muslims inside India are accused of being traitors, super-spreaders of the Covid-19 virus, jihadists, and more.

Years of mounting Hindu nationalism materialized in May 2019 when Prime Minister Narendra Modi was overwhelmingly reelected for a second term. Known for his commitment to empowering India's Hindu majority and disempowering its Muslim minority, his near-mandate raised fears of an extreme agenda that would harm Muslims' rights. Those fears have now been realized as millions of Indian-born Muslims were declared "non-citizens" and fear they will soon be deported.

Despite the intense efforts of myriad organizations, countries, cities, international human rights NGO's, activists, and representatives from the United Nations and the Vatican calling on India to reverse its new law and protect its minority Muslim population, the law stands and reversing it now appears unlikely. Some observers believe India is facing the darkest period in its history of independence that began in 1947. (Sameer, Y., Perrigo, B. 2020).

2. Region and Country Profile

2.1 Current Attitudes Reflect Historical Events

Ancient civilizations flourished in the Indus Valley as early as the 3rd millennium B.C.E. Various civilizations rose and fell in the region over the centuries, all contributing to India's rich and unique culture. While religious tensions are centuries old, India's current upswing in religious intolerance has roots in 1947-1948, when India gained independence after 200 years of British rule.

The landmass often referred to as a "subcontinent" was summarily divided between India and Pakistan, largely along religious lines. India was to be predominantly Hindu, and Pakistan predominantly Muslim. History has proven multiple times that such divisions are never as tidy in reality as those drawing them on paper propose, and this particular map creation and accompanying population upheavals were no exception. A major contributor to the morass was Britain's uneven and incomplete control of the land, as other countries and players also claimed territorial possessions within India, including France, Portugal, and Oman, along with 584 local monarchs overseeing areas called "princely states," which were minor regions of influence in the region. (Asrar, S. 2019.) In the thirty years that followed the division of land, each of the princely states, also referred to as native states, eventually chose to accede to either India or Pakistan. Sikkim, the last holdout, joined India in 1975.

2.2 Kashmir

France, Portugal, and Oman eventually sold or bartered their claims to the land, leaving one major land dispute between India and Pakistan that has since evolved into one of the world's more dangerous hotspots—the Kashmir region in the north of India that borders Pakistan's eastern edge. The Kashmir region was originally one of the princely states, and the battle over the territory began immediately with a war between India and Pakistan in 1947. That war ended with a ceasefire line that essentially split the region in two between the two countries, yet the land split was never fully resolved. As a result, the Kashmir conflict simmers on with tensions occasionally flaring into battles and on three occasions, all-out war.

The tensions that exist in Kashmir, where India has long been accused of mistreating Muslims, feeds the daily disputes inside India between Hindus and Muslims. The Kashmir standoff that has lasted nearly 65 years can also be blamed for creating much of the ill-will between Hindus and Muslims that drove India to enact the new citizenship law that allows them to eject and reject Muslims from its borders. Kashmir's Muslim population has borne the weight of India's most oppressive tendencies, having lived in a military state since the majority of Hindus fled Kashmir to escape battles with Muslim militants in 1990. (Ahmed, Z., 2016.) The situation deteriorated to a full blown security lockdown in 2019 (Wani, R., 2020), including suspension of phone and internet communication, after Modi's government rescinded Article 307 of India's constitution that gave Jammu and Kashmir autonomy as an Indian state.(Medha, 2020.)

2.3 Population, Religion, and Language Differences Contribute to Pressures

In a land mass approximately one-third of the United States, today India is home to 1.3 billion people, the second most populous nation in the world after China. (India's nemesis, Pakistan, is not far behind as the fifth most populous nation.) Nearly 80% of the country is Hindu, 14% are Muslim, with Christians, Sikhs, and others comprising the balance. This vast imbalance has contributed to the rise of religious nationalism.

Hindu nationalism began in earnest early in the 19th century, when India's native population rejected British and Portuguese colonialism and their Christian missionaries. The backlash to foreign hegemony and its religious persuasions served to strengthen Hindu devotion and culture.

Just as religious domination has strengthened current divisions, the 22 languages spoken in India present another challenge. Hindi is most prevalent, spoken by 44% of the population, nearly all of whom are Hindu. Bengali, spoken by immigrants from Bangladesh, is second most prevalent at 8%. Urdu is the language spoken by most Muslims in India and remains a point of contention as it has since colonial times when a conflict arose over whether Hindi or Urdu should be chosen as India's official language. Eleven different languages make up the remaining 48% of the population, with about 5-6% comprised of a mix from countries around the world. English is often the common denominator, as it considered, along with Hindi, as the official language of the national government. English is also commonly used as a nexus on the internet, in advertisements, and to conduct business between Indians who speak different languages.

These factors—origin of birth, religion, and language, combined in a cauldron of over one billion people—makes every governmental action benefiting one group over another take on seismic proportions. A healthy democracy encourages such diversity and strengthens the nation's health; a government that alters citizenship requirements for a select portion of its people, in this case, Muslims, risks unraveling the entire democracy. This is exactly what many across the world fear and why so many governments have called on India's leaders to rethink their new law and strategies.
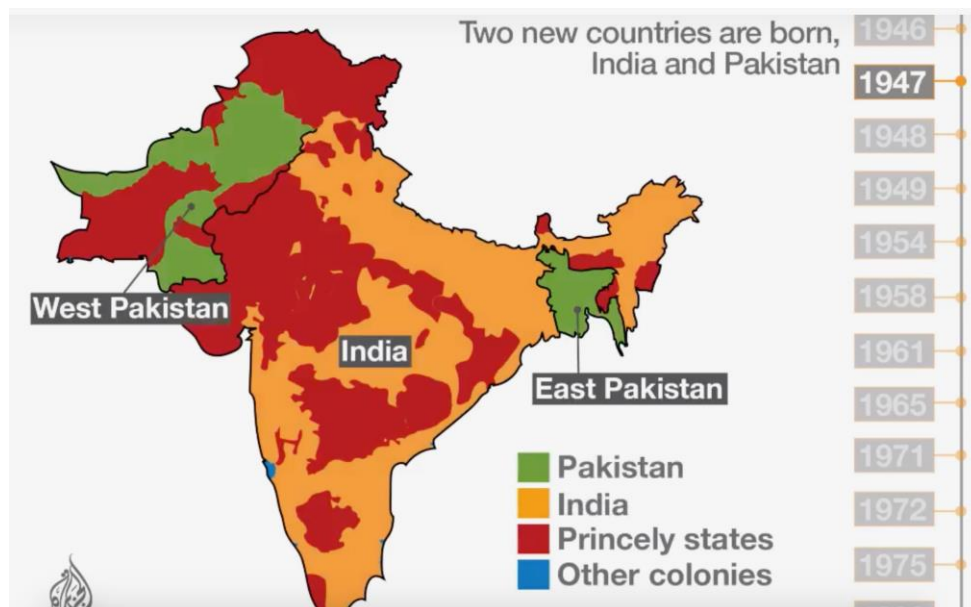

Figure 1. How India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh Were Formed. (Asrar, S. 2019.)

2.4 Struggles over the Babri Masjid Mosque

Another significant factor that has negatively impacted relations between India's Muslim and Hindu populations for centuries has been the conflict over a large mosque built in 1528 in Uttar Pradesh, the most populous state in the country.

The Babri Masjid mosque was built on a hill some Hindus claimed was the birthplace of Rama, believed to be the seventh avatar of the Hindu deity, Vishnu. In 1992, Hindu activists destroyed the mosque, and widespread violence between Muslims and Hindus erupted across India. After twenty-seven years of ongoing conflict over the incident, the case was heard by India's Supreme Court in 2019. The justices considered an archeological survey to conclude that Hindus be given the land to construct a temple to Lord Ram. They also announced Muslims would be given another plot of land to build a new mosque, and in February 2020, the Sunni Central Waqf Board was granted a five-acre plot in Uttar Pradesh (Singh, R. 2020.)

3. India's Shift Toward Hindu Nationalism

3.1 Rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party

Modern Hindu nationalism can be traced to the early 1800's, when India's native population rejected British and Portuguese colonialism and their Christian missionaries. The backlash to foreign hegemony and its religious persuasions served to strengthen Hindu devotion and culture. Though the force of Hindu nationalism has ebbed and flowed over the past 200 years, it has gained increasing strength under the current prime minster, Narendra Modi, and members of his ruling party, Bharatiya Janata Party, or BJP.

The BJP was formed forty years ago on the ashes of its predecessor party, the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (or BJS; meaning Indian People's Association). The BJS advocated for the rebuilding of the true Indian state based on Hindu culture. While that party eventually disbanded due to factionalism, a portion of its leaders went on to form the BJP in 1980, with an ideology based firmly on Hindu values. The core of the party has long opposed notions of secularism and was openly opposed to the concepts of tolerance and pluralism preached by Mahatma Ghandi, the leading figure in India's efforts to gain independence from Great Britain. In the 1980's the BJP began its efforts to discredit India's Muslim population, describing Congressional policies toward Muslim as 'appeasement'. A campaign to convince India's Hindus that Muslims were "privileged", "not patriotic", and "pro-Pakistan" ensued and succeeded in swaying the majority Hindus to reject the rights of their Muslim countrymen. (Engineer, A. 1998.)

While Modi appealed to Muslims in order to win his first election, he no longer needed them in order to win his second. In what was considered a referendum on Hinduism, Modi and the BJP won a sweeping victory in May of 2019, awarding them a second term while simultaneously raising trepidation among India's Muslims who could easily see the writing on the wall. During Modi's first term, they witnessed an increase in Hindu-centric policy, what some referred to as Hindutva, or Hindu pride, and others described as increasing Hindu hegemony. That Modi had won a second term so decisively with a landslide victory for the BJP (Dale, B., Jeavans, C. 2019) was a sign of approaching trouble obvious not only to India's Muslims, but also to the outside world watching the election with immense concern for the future of the world's largest democracy. Milan Vaishnav, who directs the South Asia Program at the Carnegie Endowment in Washington, D.C. opined about the importance of the election: (Frayer, L. 2019.)

> *The shape of India is at stake. One of the important things this election is going to determine is India's future as a secular republic that embraces pluralism and adheres to the founders' notion that India's unity is strengthened by its diversity.*

The tangible signs of this sectarian shift are numerous, ranging from seemingly insignificant to monumental. One example is a new ban on the slaughter of cows and consumption of beef, as Hindus consider cows to be sacred. The new law is stridently enforced by police, and those in violation can spend up to ten years in jail and be fined. (Frayer, L. 2019.) Another distressing development for many was a proposed change of the symbol on Indian passports to reflect the lotus, the symbol of Modi's party, the BJP. The move enraged the opposition party, and a local newspaper described it as "further 'saffronisation' of the government establishment given that the lotus was the election symbol of the BJP." 'Saffronisation' refers to the Hindu nationalist agenda in toto. (Gettleman J., Kumar, H., 2019.)

Another development that reveals India's sharp turn to an extreme-right agenda is the Modi government's growing suppression of India's media. Indian, Eastern, and Western news outlets such as The Economist, Quartz, New York Times, Washington Post, The Diplomat, The Guardian, The Logical India, Al Jazeera, Foreign Policy and scores more have highlighted the crackdown on India's freedom of the press. Collectively, they have accused Modi's government of silencing dissent, "branding critical journalists as 'anti-nationals' and charging them under 'anti-terror' laws." (Puranam, E., 2020.)

3.2 The New Citizenship Act and National Citizen Registry

Yet by far the most impactful, egregious, and dangerous action to date has been the passage of the Citizenship Amendment Bill, alternately referred to as CAB, (also referred to as the Citizenship Amendment Act, CAA). As

mentioned, the measure gives migrants of all South Asia's religions a clear path to Indian citizenship with the one exception of Islam. The bill had the immediate impact of relegating India's 200 million Muslims—one of largest Muslim populations in the world—as second class citizens.

The CAB followed and further supported another contentious program dubbed the National Register of Citizens, which was implemented in India's northeast region in 2019, soon after the May election result gave Modi a mandate. The program first impacted residents of Assam, a Muslim-dominant state in northern India with a desperately poor population, calling on them to provide documentary evidence that they or their ancestors were Indian citizens. Once the program was complete, approximately 2 million Muslims, many of them lifelong residents who had voted and even served in India's military, suddenly found themselves removed from citizenship rolls.

Legitimate reasons for the lack of citizenship documentation are plentiful, and fully 38% of Indian children under five years of age do not have birth certificates. Older people also lack proper papers. (Changiwala, P., 2020.)

> The reasons for this are varied—lack of awareness, inaccessible registration
> centers, and no immediate requirement for these certificates to access social
> services. Government data shows that 6.8 million births were not registered
> in India in 2015-2016, and the situation is worse for older residents, who
> were born when home births were more prevalent in the country.

4. Diplomatic Efforts to Keep India Secular

4.1 The World Reacts

Protests against the new discriminatory policies erupted not only across India but globally as well, with governments, human rights groups, and prominent individuals demanding a reversal of the bill. In early 2020, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights called the law "fundamentally discriminatory," and UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres expressed his concern for the future of religious minorities in India and his worry about the "risk of statelessness." A month later, in March of 2020, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom called on the US government to "consider sanctions against the home minister and other principal leadership." During a follow-up hearing one of the commissioners raised concerns that "The law, in conjunction with a planned National Population Register and a potential nationwide National Register of Citizens, or NRC, could result in the wide-scale disenfranchisement of Indian Muslims." (Human Rights Watch, 2020.)

The US Congress addressed the issue during a hearing on global religious persecution, and the European Parliament deemed India's new citizenship law and citizenship verification process to be "discriminatory in nature and dangerously divisive." Several UN human rights experts sent letters to the Indian government raising concerns over the discriminatory Assam nationality registration process.

4.2 India's Rejection

Despite this cacophony of criticism, Indian parliamentarians and diplomats rebuffed all opinions and warned outsiders that this was an internal matter. Thus, the question of what the international community can do to prevent further discriminatory action remains an open one.

5. Coupling Fears of Pandemic and Islam

5.1 Using Tragedy for Gain

India's internal dissention combined with international condemnation has not yet showed success in influencing Prime Minister Modi or his BDP party's viewpoint, nor have they resulted in a reversal in policies toward Muslims. However, a cessation in deportations has occurred along with efforts to move India's undocumented Muslims into detention camps. The situation is a temporary one, however, and credit goes not to diplomatic efforts but to the overwhelming influence of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has shut down movement and government action on many fronts.

On the surface this may look benevolent, but a closer look reveals an alternate reality: India is using the pandemic to strengthen its power, suppress its critics in the media and on campuses, and to ramp up its attacks on Muslims while the world is distracted with trying to stop the spread of the virus. According to a report by The Guardian, "Journalists, intellectuals, and dissidents are being threatened by Modi's government." Reporters have been harassed and arrested on trumped up or highly exaggerated charges, such as "promoting enmity, hatred, or ill-will among classes." Others have been accused of assassination plots. The charges have been widely panned and dismissed as being politically motivated. (Priyamvada, G., Tripathi, S.2020.)

5.2 CoronaJihad#

The most dramatic abuse of power has had one serious and deadly impact—that of placing the blame for the spread of the virus squarely on India's Muslim population. (Frayer, L. 2020.) The charges were initially aimed at a Muslim conference in Delhi held in early March, in which the large crowd did not follow social distancing rules. Though difficult to confirm, the conference goers, many of whom contracted the virus and unknowingly spread it around India when they returned to their homes, may have comprised about 30% of the spread in early March. But many other religious events, including a Hindu chariot-pulling festival, have since been held in violation of lockdown rules. No one has attributed blame to those non-Muslims who also broke social distancing rules.

The worst rhetoric has been the co-mingling of two unrelated fears to ramp up hatred—Islamist terror and Covid-19. According to an Indian website whose mission is to debunk fake news: "The right wing has found all these old videos and is circulating them to insinuate that Indian Muslims are knowingly spreading coronavirus and that it is equivalent to terrorist activity." The *CoronaJihad* hashtag is trending widely in India, being used to imply that Muslims are using the virus as a form of Islamic holy war. It's often accompanied by videos purportedly showing Muslims spitting and sneezing on food. (Patel, J. 2020.)

The result of this misinformation campaign has generated a new wave of violence toward Muslims across India. The head of the Muslim conference was charged with culpable homicide and has since gone into hiding. One member of Modi's MPJ party is quoted as saying that members of the group attending the conference should be shot. As a result, not only have Muslims been targeted nationwide, they have been blocked from conducting commerce. Muslim vendors have been shut down. Others have been refused treatment at medical facilities. One Muslim group was attacked by a mob yielding cricket bats as the Muslims delivered food to the poor. (Frayer, L. 2020.)

Thus, while deportations and further movement into detention camps appear to have been put on hold, the cessations can be attributed solely to the pandemic and are very likely to commence once health risks are reduced to acceptable levels. Meanwhile, there is no cessation of hate-mongering or relaxation of the arrest and detention of those who would speak out against the government.

6. Conclusion

That sectarian developments in India present a grave danger to its Muslim population has been demonstrated. Millions have already suffered, and the country is only one year into the second term of a prime minister and party determined to strengthen Hindu nationalism at the expense of its Muslim minority. Yet the danger is not limited to India alone, and could ensnare the entire world, as India's slow turn from democracy raises the specter of war with its nuclear nemesis, Pakistan. That battle could threaten every species on the planet.

This danger is not limited to physical confrontation and war; it is ideological as well. As the world's largest democracy, one that has enshrined secularity in its constitution for seventy years, India is violating its democratic foundation with its discriminatory actions. While the New Citizenship Act is being challenged in court for legality, it is unlikely that India's Supreme Court will find fault given its contentious ruling to grant title for the construction of a Hindu temple on the site of the former Babri Masjid mosque.

The Indian government has already initiated a populist movement that cannot easily be stopped. The masses have taken to the streets and shown unrestrained, murderous violence toward their Muslim neighbors. By refusing to arrest or punish those responsible for their actions in a credible way, the Modi government has condoned and strengthened the perpetrators to a point where a reversal of mindset may be impossible to establish. In any case, the government has shown no inclination to change course.

All of this points to a rising instability within the country that is home to the second largest population in the world. The only way to slow the direction from outside is for other nations to consider capping trade or placing sanctions on India. However, with many of the world's most powerful and populous nations moving in a similar direction toward nationalism, change may be a long time coming.

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