

# Examining the State of Muslim Minority under Modi's BJP since 2014

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## Abstract

*The Muslims in India comprise 14 per cent of the population and have been recognised empirically as a minority, facing social and economic concerns for over a decade. With the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its slogans of Hindutva, discourse against the Muslims of India has been deteriorated significantly. Prime Minister Modi's government came to power in 2014, and the four years since have led to persecution and some of the most troubling crimes against the Muslims and other minorities, centred around communal issues. As a result, violence and discrimination have increased as has the rhetoric from the Hindu right-wing organisations that are supported, in one way or the other, by the mainstream BJP politicians. In this paper, the current state of the Muslim minority is examined and analysed using recent sources, including human rights reports from international organisations, as it is argued that Hindutva forces and ideological backing of the BJP have emboldened extremist mindsets and embedded them in society. This means that even ostensibly "secular" political agents of the Congress party have resorted to forms of Hindu domination in an environment where history is being rewritten and minorities are framed as outsiders in India.*

**Keywords:** India, Indian Muslims, Hindutva, Cow Vigilantism, Sachar Report.

## Introduction

With multiple and everyday incidents of violence against minorities at the hands of Hindutva groups emerging from India, especially with the rise of social media, to document and communicate, incidents that would otherwise perhaps be ignored, conventional wisdom suggests that in India, the Muslims under Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) rule since 2014, have faced

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tremendous violence and discrimination. In this paper, an attempt is made to more methodically look at the ideologies, policies and perceptions in order to examine the state of the Muslim minority under the BJP rule. Long-term effects on minorities in general and the Muslims in particular, will, of course, reveal themselves in future, depending on the success of the BJP policies and desires for a “Hindu rashtra.” However, it has been only four years since the BJP’s rise to government in 2014, and, at the time of writing this paper, its tenure is still not completed as it prepares for the next elections in 2019 — and yet, it has only taken four years for the principles and ideologies of Hindutva to reveal themselves in mob violence, lynchings, accusations and rumours against minorities to become commonplace. Moreover, even the BJP’s ostensibly secular opponents at the national stage the Congress – to develop their own approach to Hinduism, such as their leaders ensuring visits to temples extensively and distancing themselves from comments that appear to portray them as being close to the Muslims. It is also noteworthy that violence against minorities has reached to such an acceptable stage and has become so normalised that the BJP officials have often publicly sided with and supported mobs and Hindu extremists for their actions, including the cases of lynching the Muslims as part of “cow vigilantism” and even in the brutal rape and murder of the eight-year-old Asifa in Kathua.<sup>1</sup> This is Hindutva’s India – which, as the BJP notes, is “here to stay.”<sup>2</sup> It is thus, not surprising that far from being condemned for supporting violence, the politicians appeal to Hindu extremism in order to appease the Hindu masses. In this regard, the position of Muslims in India, the violence they face and the reactions and responses they have developed are issues of some significance.

The marginalisation of and discrimination against the Muslims — and other minorities — at the hands of the current BJP government did not emerge out of a vacuum rather the signs and trajectories have been there for all to see. After all, the pogrom against the Muslims in Gujarat in 2002, took place under the then Chief Minister of the state, Narendra Modi. This was when, as Pankaj Mishra reminds us, “More than 2,000 Muslims were

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<sup>1</sup> Rifat Fareed, “Kashmir Rape Case: The Girl, her Family and the Accused,” *Al-Jazeera*, April 16, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/india-asifa-rape-killing-girl-family-accused-180416070659470.html>

<sup>2</sup> “Hindutva: The Great Nationalist Ideology,” *Bharatiya Janata Party*, [http://www.bjp.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=369:hindutva-the-great-nationalist-ideology&Itemid=501](http://www.bjp.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=369:hindutva-the-great-nationalist-ideology&Itemid=501)

murdered and tens of thousands rendered homeless in carefully planned and coordinated attacks of unprecedented savagery.”<sup>3</sup> The new India of today, under the saffronised BJP rule that idolises the extremist notions of Hindutva and supports mob violence and Hindu extremists, is then perhaps not so new after all. What has, however, happened is the normalisation of bigotry, exclusivity and violence that has come as a result of mainstream political leaders’ lauding and protecting, rather than condemning and refuting perpetrators of hate.

Given that all minorities are affected by the BJP’s policies and strategies, indeed all minorities need to be studied and examined separately as well as collectively but in this paper, it is primarily the Muslim minority that is being examined. And there are several reasons why this is a worthwhile study. After all, the South Asian historiography has often been seen with regard to Hindu and the Muslim periods. While partition in 1947 and its preceding politics in the freedom movement, gave rise to the two-nation theory which had its own distinct communalistic circumstances. In this context, the Muslim minority in India has since independence been an entity of some interest.

Currently, the Muslims of India are a unique subject as they represent the third-largest Muslim population in the world, with 172 million Muslims in India’s population of some 1.3 billion. Clearly, their numbers alone warrant the community — in all its diversity — significant attention. It has increasingly become better understood that such a large and distinct minority has disproportionately been ignored and, as a result, was not faring as well as others in India. It was thus, that the well-known Sachar Committee (called so because it was headed by Justice Rajindar Sachar) was constituted to look into the “Social, Economic and Educational Status of the Muslim Community of India” in 2005, with its report the following year providing quantitative and qualitative frameworks and recommendations for future policies.

Conventionally called the Sachar report, its intent was to rectify the existing situation marked by the lack of information about the Muslim community including their socio-economic status, employment opportunities,

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<sup>3</sup> Pankaj Mishra, “The Gujarat Massacre: New India’s Blood Rite,” *Guardian*, March 14, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/mar/14/new-india-gujarat-massacre>

education levels, etc. The idea was to ensure that adequate policies for the future could be formulated in order to better integrate them with mainstream social and economic development process and ensure that they enjoy same rights as others in the country. The committee found that the Muslims of India did, in fact, lag behind the national average in terms of, inter alia, literacy, employment rates, skills development, opportunities and access to loans and presence in terms of jobs in major sectors and government departments. The report subsequently concluded that the Muslim community stood deprived practically in all areas of development and made multiple recommendations to begin a process that could end structural and institutional issues that prevented the Muslims from being mainstreamed and caused obstacles in their path to progress.<sup>4</sup> Just over a decade, after this well-intentioned and necessary exercise, however, the Sachar report has become a figment of a past since the rise of BJP has led to even more fundamental and ideologically discriminatory approach towards the Muslims in India since 2014. Indeed, the issue of Muslim participation has become more contentious than ever – as references to the Congress being a “Muslim party” and subsequent political reactions to such a notion continue to highlight the controversies attached to even innocuous political campaigning of reaching out to Muslims.<sup>5</sup> This, then, is the context in which the Muslims, since 2014, have found themselves in Hindutva’s India and it is worthwhile to elaborate on how the BJP sees itself, the Indian nation, and the Muslims living in it.

## **BJP: Ideology and History**

The BJP’s approach to minorities should not be surprising given the context and history of the party, whose political ascendance is in part due to the extremist Hindu ideology of Hindutva, with the well-known ideologue *Veer Savarkar* becoming a figure of veneration in the party and its affiliated

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<sup>4</sup> “Sachar Committee Report on Social, Economic and Educational Status of the Muslim Community of India,”

[http://mhrd.gov.in/sites/upload\\_files/mhrd/files/sachar\\_comm.pdf](http://mhrd.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/sachar_comm.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> In July 2018, Congress leader, Rahul Gandhi, was reported to have met some “Muslim intellectuals,” which caused the Indian defence minister to criticise him and his party severely, with claims that the Congress had become — and had long been — a sympathiser of the Muslims. Also see: Mahtab Alam, “Only Person Who Heard Rahul’s ‘Muslim Party’ Remark was Reporter who wasn’t Present,” *Wire*, July 18, 2018, <https://thewire.in/politics/only-person-who-heard-rahul-gandhis-muslim-party-remark-was-a-reporter-who-wasnt-present>

cadres. In his conceptualisation of India and its only rightful inhabitants – the nation of Hindus – Savarkar saw the Muslims as outsiders.<sup>6</sup> Hindutva, in this regard, is the belief that Hindus are united around a common culture which forms a basis for the Indian nation.”<sup>7</sup> The BJP’s appropriation of these notions can be gauged from its declaration that Hindutva is “the great nationalist ideology” and depicting Hindus as tolerant people who only respectfully asked for “the return of their most holy religious site, Ayodhya” in the 1980s and 1990s as they sought freedom from their oppressors.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Ayodhya, which is the site of the Babri Mosque that they claim as Ram Temple, is a primary focus for the BJP’s current identity.

In its self-conceptualisation, the BJP is a party that seeks to represent all of India but ironically and proudly affirms its loyalty to only one nation of Hindus and belittles and demonises other religions and minorities living in India. It has both benefitted from such ideas in its politics by appealing to Hindu extremists and advocating for their myriad movements and demands and given further credence and emphasis to ideologies of hatred and exclusivism. As some scholars have convincingly shown, the BJP (and the Hindu right in general) borrows heavily from colonial histories in its revisionist attempt to portray Hindus as the authentic and original Indians, shedding images of femininity that colonial writers had embellished and calling for an imagined “golden age” of Hinduism.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, such is the appeal of these ideas that any platform where the Muslims or the Islamic history of India are highlighted become sites of contention – roads have been renamed, iconic architectural structures criticised, filmmakers attacked; all this highlights Hindutva, which is the biggest weapon of the Hindu right.<sup>10</sup> The BJP has, in fact, been officially rewriting history since it came to power, in order to ensure that a Hindu past is highlighted at the expense of any other portrayal of history, with institutions comprised of

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<sup>6</sup> V D Savarkar, *Hindutva: Who is Hindu* (1923).

<sup>7</sup> Ketan Alder, “A Short History of the Rise and Rise of Hindu Nationalism in India,” *Quartz India*, March 2, 2016, <https://qz.com/630144/explainer-what-are-the-origins-of-todays-hindu-nationalism/>

<sup>8</sup> “Hindutva: The Great Nationalist Ideology.”

<sup>9</sup> Alder, “A Short History of the Rise and Rise of Hindu Nationalism in India.”

<sup>10</sup> Shivani Radhakrishnan, “In India, Right-wing Hindu Groups are Recycling Britain’s Colonial Ideas about Religion,” *Washington Post*, January 29, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2018/01/29/in-india-right-wing-hindu-groups-are-recycling-britains-colonial-ideas-about-religion/?utm\\_term=.2c543281976c](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2018/01/29/in-india-right-wing-hindu-groups-are-recycling-britains-colonial-ideas-about-religion/?utm_term=.2c543281976c)

Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) affiliated individuals effectively manufacturing history for fashioning the new Indian citizen.<sup>11</sup>

This Hindutva project, as Valerian Rodrigues highlights, has multiple effects on Muslims beyond India as well on policies about Islam, since it seeks to define and delineate normative religion — such as Sufism — and seeks partners among minorities within the Muslim minority in order to ensure its own leadership in the process.<sup>12</sup> As a result, overtures towards certain groups of the Muslims such as Sufis are also made possible in the context of ideological and political goals of the Hindu right. For the BJP, this much is clear: highlighting Hindutva and undermining minorities has become a political strategy to paper over failures in majority-focused development objectives — so that, as one analyst notes, “if development does not deliver, then the BJP-RSS jointly pushes for Hindutva politics, mobilising communal polarisation while claiming integration through development.”<sup>13</sup> This political convenience has, of course, not gone unnoticed elsewhere in India — so that the Congress, labelled a pro-Muslim party by its BJP opponents — is also seen by others as following a “soft Hindutva” approach to shed any such image and appease the Hindu majority.<sup>14</sup>

In these circumstances, it becomes imperative to understand the peculiarities of the Muslim experience, in India, under the BJP government’s

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<sup>11</sup> The RSS or the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh is possibly the most infamous of the Hindu right wing nationalist organisations, formed in 1925, and regarded to have been the parent of the BJP. Its aims were to unite Hindus and form a Hindu nation, in a time in the early twentieth century when similar organisations were responding to conditions of colonialism in their own ways. Shamli Prakash, “Are RSS Forces Rewriting History for Hindutva Glory?,” *Daily O*, May 25, 2018, <https://www.dailyo.in/politics/history-veer-savarkar-nehru-hindutva-mahatma-rewriting-history-textbooks-rajasthan-board-rss-dinanath-batra/story/1/24493.html>

<sup>12</sup> Valerian Rodrigues, “An Expansive Hindutva Agenda?,” *Hindu*, March 30, 2017, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/an-expansive-hindutva-agenda/article17739345.ece>

<sup>13</sup> Ajay Gudavarthy, “BJP’s Strategy of Pitting Hindutva as an Alternative Agenda to Development is Unravelling,” *Wire*, March 1, 2018, <https://thewire.in/communalism/bjp-strategy-hindutva-alternative-agenda-development-unravelling>

<sup>14</sup> “Temple Run: Hard Lessons for Rahul Gandhi’s ‘Soft Hindutva,’” *Economic Times*, May 16, 2018, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/temple-run-hard-lessons-for-rahul-gandhis-soft-hindutva/articleshow/64185364.cms>

Hindu-centric rule of discrimination against minorities, with the acknowledgement that there can simply not be a singular Muslim experience. The concern, thus, is with generalities and institutional and structural issues that can be said to have affected the Muslims of India under the BJP.

Anuj Nadadur has described the rise of the BJP in the 1990s as part of a process to “bring Hinduism into mainstream politics.”<sup>15</sup> He notes that this was made possible by a growing assertion of Hindu domination and the parallel and flawed discourse of rising Muslim numbers that were used to create fear in the minds of the Hindu right. It was this sense of insecurity, he argues, that gave credence to the BJP’s values and views — since even as some of the demographic trends were correct such as the Muslim birth rate being slightly higher than the Hindus, it was only with the work of the BJP and other members of the Sangh Parivar that they came to mass attention. This led, in part, to the BJP’s rise as a “protector” of the Hindus.<sup>16</sup> Writing over a decade ago in 2006, however, even Nadadur underestimated the appeal of such politics, suggesting that such political manoeuvres cannot provide the BJP with long-lasting success and that a policy of moderation will have to be followed by the party to remain a mainstream and successful entity. Yet, as the BJP’s ascension to power in 2014, and subsequently consistent antagonistic rhetoric and policies against the Muslims have shown, a policy of moderation has not been required to remain a dynamic political entity. Rather, a policy of discrimination and extolling Hindutva appears to have found a firm footing in the BJP’s self-perception and political machinations. In fact, it has become a declared and effusive slogan for its politicians.

Several prominent BJP members, including Prime Minister Modi, have a history of controversial statements about the Muslims. Modi has been dismissive at best about the mass killings of the Muslims in Gujarat during his time as chief minister of the state; while the current Chief Minister of UP, Yogi Adityanath, has been categorical as a hardliner in his vehemence towards the Muslims. Others such as Subramanian Swamy have also often been outspoken in expressing their Hindutva ideals. Minor politicians then have significant backing at the ideological level from leaders of the ruling

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<sup>15</sup> Anuj Nadadur, “The ‘Muslim Threat’ and the Bharatiya Janata Party’s Rise to Power,” *Peace and Democracy in South Asia* 2, no. 1-2 (2006), <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.452.1228&rep=rep1&type=pdf>

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

party for their own narratives of hatred, because of which “cow vigilantism” and other forms of attacks on Muslims and other minorities have become entrenched.<sup>17</sup>

For the BJP, in fact, Hindutva is recognised as “the great nationalist ideology.” This is clear, from an essay published on the party’s official website and it is worthwhile to briefly examine this sentiment since it guides the party’s views towards the Muslims and towards the history of India. Lauding Hindutva as a movement of the late twentieth century that is “changing the very foundations of Bharat and Hindu society,” the BJP views it as the culmination of centuries of Hindu victimisation at the hands of cruel Muslim rulers of India. In this version of Hindutva-inspired BJP history, it is emphasised that: “Hindus never lost their tolerance and willingness to change. However, the Muslims, led by the Islamic clergy and Islamic society’s innate unwillingness to change, did not notice the scars that Hindus felt from the Indian past. It is admirable that Hindus never took advantage of the debt Muslims owed Hindus for their tolerance and non-vengefulness.” And, it continues, it is after centuries of such victimisation that the Hindus are finally ensuring their freedom by reclaiming their history and rights in India.<sup>18</sup> The Muslims are, of course, the primary enemy in this narrative — indeed, their very identity as the Indians have been called into question.

The BJP, after all, seeks to highlight that Hindus are India’s original first inhabitants since many thousands of years ago and their holy texts reflect its history and not its myths. The idea that is promoted through this reasoning is that India “is a nation of and for Hindus” — the very definition of Hindutva.<sup>19</sup> This has been further reinforced and emboldened with the sort of historical revisionism from the RSS cadres that is almost universally ridiculed among academics, in which the Muslim past of India including its architecture and religious places has been labelled as entirely the result of the desecration of Hindu sites. As one analyst notes, however, “such claims

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<sup>17</sup> “Minority Rights Violations in India,” *Alliance for Justice & Accountability*, May 23, 2017 (Washington, D.C.). The report contains several popular examples — indeed there are also videos and a multitude of snippets of discriminatory language online — of statements by the politicians mentioned in this paragraph.

<sup>18</sup> “Hindutva: The Great Nationalist Ideology.”

<sup>19</sup> Rupam Jain and Rom Lasseter, “By Rewriting History, Hindu Nationalists Aim to Assert their Dominance over India,” *Reuters*, March 6, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/india-modi-culture/>

end up making the Hindutva forces a laughing stock in the eyes of the world because they are too preposterous to deserve serious academic consideration.”<sup>20</sup> Yet, it is not academics who vote parties and ideas into power and recent experience has shown that such visions about the past, present and future of India centred on a distinct version of Hinduism has worked well for the BJP in elections. Minorities such as Muslims have suffered as a result. This is evident not just in how they are discussed in history, or in rhetoric against them. Rather, their very lives and security become threatened.

### **Violence against Muslims**

A new phase of the anti-Muslim discourse with full intensity and to the maximum extent began in the early 1990s with the destruction of the Babri Masjid on December 6, 1992. This eventually passed into a new phase in the Indian politics that has since seen the rise of the BJP under which engaging with Muslims, as a distinct community, has become a heated topic. More important, especially since the rise of social media that has showcased discrimination, violence and marginalisation as perhaps never before, has been the social dynamic that is inextricably linked to politics. In the assessment below, the particular circumstances of human rights abuses under the BJP are addressed, ignoring long-standing conflicts such as those in Kashmir where the violations of human rights affecting the Muslims are of a different nature, pre-dating the rise of the BJP. However, particular incidents even in Kashmir — such as infamous and horrific rape and murder of the eight-year-old Asifa in Kathua, as well as cases of human shields — need to be seen within the ambit of this study, since they also reflect an animosity towards the Muslim communities coming from and supported by, state institutions with a Hindutva view of society.

Some of the most important objective sources to have provided impartial assessments of the state of Muslims and other religious communities — are reports from international human rights organisations. Given the current and immediate nature of the subject, since the BJP government is yet to complete its tenure, these are buttressed by independent analyses and research from India by scholars and journalists who are living through troubled and remarkably fluid times in the Indian

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<sup>20</sup> Kuldeep Kumar, “The BJP’s Attack on the ‘Muslim’ Taj Mahal is Part of a Wider Project,” *Wire*, October 17, 2017, <https://thewire.in/history/taj-mahal-bjp>

history. Perhaps no platform is more indicative of facts on the ground and more scathing of the state for its support or tacit approval of human rights abuses, than the annual reports on India under the BJP by the Human Rights Watch. The 2017 report of the organisation, focusing on events in the preceding year — almost two years into the BJP’s government — highlighted what has since become a major topic in India, as it noted: “Hindu vigilante groups [in 2016] attacked Muslims and Dalits over suspicions that they had killed, stolen, or sold cows for beef. The violence took place amid an aggressive push by several BJP leaders and militant Hindu groups to protect cows and ban beef consumption.”<sup>21</sup> Giving multiple examples of incidents of “cow vigilantism,” it showcases the seriousness of an issue that has continued unabated since 2014. The most recent 2018 report of the Human Rights Watch, in fact, assessing the situation of 2017, has even more clearly called out the government for its complicity in such acts of violence. It notes: “Vigilante violence aimed at religious minorities, marginalised communities and critics of the government — often carried out by groups claiming to support the ruling BJP — became an increasing threat in India in 2017. The government failed to promptly or credibly investigate the attacks, while many senior BJP leaders publicly promoted Hindu supremacy and ultra-nationalism, which encouraged further violence.”<sup>22</sup> This is a severe indictment of the state as a complicit party in institutionalised violence against the Muslims as well as minorities belonging to other religions.

“Cow vigilantism” has been a major source of communalist violence in India. Its trend has been rising since 2014, and, while Muslims are not the only victims, they represent the largest proportion of victims of cow-related violence. *IndiaSpend* — a database that documents and records hate crimes, has given some attention to this phenomenon and shown that there are alarming correlations between the BJP government and “cow vigilantism.” In fact, from 2010 and 2011, when no incidents of hate crime were reported, we have reached a stage between 2012 and 2017 when cow-related violence had led to 29 killings — out of which 25 were Muslims.

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<sup>21</sup>“India,” Human Rights Watch (2017), <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2017/country-chapters/india>

<sup>22</sup>“India,” Human Rights Watch (2018), <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/india>

Moreover, while most cow-related crimes were limited to north India until 2015, the vigilante phenomenon seems to have spread to multiple parts of the country now. Overall, since the BJP assumed power in May 2014 till the end of 2017, there were 76 cow-related hate crimes, with a majority of those killed or injured in these crimes being Muslim.<sup>23</sup> It appears that this trend is not slowing down. Only in the first seven months of 2018, nine incidents of cow-related violence from various parts of the country have led to five deaths in a total number of 16 victims — most of them were the Muslims.<sup>24</sup>

Given the unique numerical strength of the Muslims in India who make up some 174 million people according to the 2011 census, there are those who question the term “minority” for them in the first place since the absolute numbers – regardless of comparisons with Hindus – make them a supposedly powerful entity – distinct from a small minority inevitably facing numerical pressures. However, even in such analyses, the assessment remains one of attempting to understand the Muslim community as a whole despite its diversity, ensuring nuance in the process so that simplistic studies can be discounted. Nida Kirmani has noted, for instance, that despite Muslims in India occupying important positions in state and society, their marginalisation in the country is hard to deny especially since 2014. She continues that the BJP and its partner organisations have “started a concerted campaign against all religious minorities, including Muslims,” accusing them of “love jihad” and converting them under the pretext of “gharwapsi,” the former demonises the Muslims who develop relationships with non-Muslim girls and the latter is used for conversions to Hinduism.<sup>25</sup> Added to “cow vigilantism” and hatred towards Muslims due to suspected or actual sale and consumption of beef, these projects and ideas have helped to create an environment in which Muslims are the clear “other” in the normative Hindu ideal. This is exacerbated beyond rhetoric, however, since such notions are accompanied by violence and threats of violence and supported directly and indirectly and explicitly and tacitly, by the BJP and its affiliates. After all, it is from official sources and protests that calls come

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<sup>23</sup> Alison Saldanha, “Cow-Related Hate Crimes Peaked in 2017, 86% of Those Killed Muslim,” *Wire*, December 8, 2017, <https://thewire.in/communalism/cow-vigilantism-violence-2017-muslims-hate-crime>

<sup>24</sup> “Hate Crime: Cow-Related Violence in India,” *India Spend*, <http://lynch.factchecker.in/>

<sup>25</sup> Nida Kirmani, “How Oppressed are Muslims in India?,” *Dawn*, August 2, 2016, <https://herald.dawn.com/news/1153473/how-oppressed-are-muslims-in-india>

for changing the names of monuments and roads, contentions arise over the status and history of the Taj Mahal including its removal from a state tourism booklet and the opposition is raised against works of historical fiction depicted in Bollywood films. In all of this, the purpose is to tarnish the image of the Muslim past of India. That Uttar Pradesh (UP), India's most populous state with the highest concentration and population of Muslims in the country, has as its chief minister — the controversial Yogi Adityanath, who has several deeply problematic statements against Muslims, is also indicative of the environment under the BJP for a minority as large as the Muslims.<sup>26</sup>

This trajectory has been followed since the early days of the BJP government. As the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) in its report on India had noted for the year 2015 — the first full year under the BJP — minority communities “experienced numerous incidents of intimidation, harassment and violence, largely at the hands of Hindu nationalist groups” that were “tacitly supported” by members of the BJP who also “used religiously-divisive language to further inflame tensions.”<sup>27</sup> Indeed, the report continues, there is “a pervasive climate of impunity, where religious minority communities feel increasingly insecure, with no recourse, when religiously-motivated crimes occur.” This is a scathing indictment of the proverbial largest democracy in the world, due to which India is closely monitored to ascertain if it should be designated as a “country of particular concern” due to “systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom.”<sup>28</sup>

As for the Muslims, the USCIRF report continues, the situation in the country has been one of contention as the community has faced harassment, violence, targeted hate campaigns, accusations of being terrorists and spying for Pakistan and allegations of marrying and converting Hindu women to Islam. This is, in addition to “cow vigilantism” that predominantly targets the Muslims, as well as claims of the BJP members that Muslims plan to diminish the Hindu majority in India. Muslims have also, the report notes,

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<sup>26</sup> “Six Controversial Statements from Hindu Extremist Leader and UP’s CM Yogi Adityanath,” *Express Tribune*, March 21, 2017, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1361718/six-controversial-statements-hindu-extremist-leader-ups-cm-yogi-adityanath/>

<sup>27</sup> “India,” *USCIRF*, [https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF\\_Tier2\\_India.pdf](https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF_Tier2_India.pdf)

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

claimed that their sites of worship are monitored by the state and, particularly in Kashmir, young boys and men “detained regularly and indiscriminately and held without charges on the pretext of countering terrorism.”<sup>29</sup> The Muslim minority, the report highlights, while perhaps the most visibly affected, is not the only community facing such issues under the BJP as Christians and Sikhs have also faced similar violence and accusations from the Hindu right.

One of the reasons behind this violence and discrimination is the theoretical and pseudo-scientific assumptions of the right-wing Hindu ideologues. This includes the flawed ideas and assumptions and harsh rhetoric about the Muslim population overtaking Hindus in India, which has continued in different ways as well, with even elected representatives of the BJP referring to the Muslims as a demographic threat — ideas that have been convincingly downplayed by scholars.<sup>30</sup> As a result, the fear-mongering comes from some of the highest levels of the party’s hierarchies. However, even in the incidents where support from members of the BJP has not been explicit, tacit support is evident in the form of silence and absence of condemnation. Indeed, in an age when social media has enabled, even encouraged politicians, to voice their opinions about any injustice or event in the world — a practice that shrewd politicians such as Modi have embraced — silence on matters of violence against Muslims in India has been conspicuous. Dozens of cases of the lynching of Muslims, in addition to other acts of violence, as Nilanjhana Bhowmik notes, “have not elicited a single tweet of condemnation from India’s social media savvy prime minister, who is quick to condemn atrocities all over the world.” Derisive in her criticism, she sees this phenomenon as a “redux of the Gujarat riots in 2002 which killed more than 1,000 people, mostly Muslims.”<sup>31</sup>

Under the BJP, in fact, between 2014 and 2017, just under 3000 communal incidents have taken place in which around 400 people have been

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Chaitanya Mallapur, “BJP Leaders Cite Growing Muslim Population as Threat to India; Facts don’t Back their Claims,” *First Post*, January 15, 2018, <https://www.firstpost.com/india/bjp-leaders-cite-growing-muslim-population-as-threat-to-india-facts-dont-back-their-claims-4303403.html>

<sup>31</sup> Nilanjana Bhowmick, “As India’s Muslims are Killed, Modi Keeps Silent,” *Washington Post*, June 28, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2017/06/28/as-indias-muslims-are-killed-modi-keeps-silent/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=f2e88e7b7cd7](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2017/06/28/as-indias-muslims-are-killed-modi-keeps-silent/?noredirect=on&utm_term=f2e88e7b7cd7)

killed. These are the official figures of the government, despite some mainstream politicians ignoring the rising trend of violence involving religious identities.<sup>32</sup> The Alliance for Justice and Accountability, in its report on minority rights in India, published in 2017, gave a clear assessment and critique of this rise of extremism with the BJP, as it concluded:

*The victory of the BJP in India's national elections in May 2014 brought to power a party that has openly espoused Hindutva, an ultranationalist ideology marked by extreme animus towards Muslims, Christians and other religious minorities. While votaries of Hindutva are actually a minority among Hindus, the BJP rode to power on promises of inclusive development, while also satisfying their core base of Hindu supremacists led by the RSS and its many affiliates. The result, over the last three years, can only be termed as an assault on human rights and religious freedom of minorities that is shocking both in its intensity and its brazenness.*<sup>33</sup>

Given that the government has not completed its tenure and that violence against minorities and the ideological entrenchment in society behind this violence is an ongoing process, there have been few detailed attempts at understanding and documenting these myriad phenomena. A report titled “A Narrowing Space: Violence and Discrimination against India’s Religious Minorities,” published by the Centre for Study of Society and Secularism and Minority Rights Group International (2017) is possibly the most reliable and significant in these circumstances, given its attention to the subject. While it details the discrimination faced by all religious minorities in India, it assesses that the Muslims in particular are affected adversely by communal violence. More importantly, it points to impunity or even direct complicity from state actors in these events, pointing out that while the BJP members are significant in this regard, such discrimination is not exclusive to the party. While noting that Hindu right-wing organisations and members have been emboldened under the BJP rule, it also highlights that this is not in a vacuum since silence from the state and its highest echelons over violence against minorities is also accompanied by policies and legislation (such as the punishment announced in Gujarat since March

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<sup>32</sup> “In Four Years of Modi Rule, 3,000 Communal Incidents in India, 389 Dead,” Caravan Daily, July 5, 2018, <http://caravandaily.com/portal/in-four-years-of-modi-rule-3000-communal-incidents-in-india-389-dead/>

<sup>33</sup> “Minority Rights Violations in India.”

2017 that cow slaughter would be lead to a life sentence) that categorically seek to undermine religious minorities.<sup>34</sup>

The report additionally highlights certain trends that are significant especially in the context of the BJP's rise to power and the Muslim experience under its rule since 2014. It thus, notes that communal violence has remained high in India though mostly tends to be concentrated in certain key states and that while such riots are incidents are primarily an urban concern, they are also now occurring in rural areas and smaller towns. The report asserts that the Muslims are most disproportionately affected, lamenting, however, that there is little comprehensive data on communal violence to understand the seriousness of the situation. Rather, it notes, only selected incidents to come to the fore and thus, various organisations working on human rights issues, for instance, have collected them to give a better sense of discrimination and violence against Muslims in incidents of communal violence, which also suggest that the community faces legislative discrimination as well. Such incidents, the report emphasises, are "only a fraction of India's recent communal violence" and a comprehensive data set encompassing multidimensional factors is needed. Even so, it concludes that "the evidence suggests that communal violence, while affecting all communities, still mostly affects the Muslim community in India."<sup>35</sup>

In addition to the incidents of violence over issues such as cow slaughter or "love jihad," Hindutva's India has also ensured that an anti-minority sentiment pervades society and emboldens right-wing and nationalist groups such as the RSS, which also represents senior government positions. In these circumstances and despite laws prohibiting them, coercive and forced conversions have also become part of the anti-minority project, with "gharwapsi" or homecoming becoming a catch all term for conversions to Hinduism. Multiple reports of this have emerged from all over India, with Muslims and other minorities also affected.<sup>36</sup> The violence and reactions to Muslims have thus, been sustained, consistent and following myriad platforms in the BJP's India, and it is their structural and institutional nature that makes their circumstances unique and worthy of immediate attention.

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<sup>34</sup> "A Narrowing Space: Violence and Discrimination against India's Religious Minorities," Center for Study of Society and Secularism and Minority Rights Group International (2017).

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

## Conclusion

In the absence of a central or unanimously accepted Muslim representative party or organisation, it is difficult to establish a coherent “Muslim response” to life under the BJP and its Hindutva ideals. It is also too early to come up with generalised reactions. What one is limited to thus, are individual stories and responses which are also often in a climate of hate and suspicion and thus, can lead to intense scrutiny and criticism. As a result, individual experiences may or may not be empirically sound accounts to establish a certain narrative about even a local minority community, leave alone at the top level, yet, the importance of these individual experiences cannot be denied, especially when they are encountered by well-known public figures. This has, for instance, been the experience of popular and beloved Bollywood actors who have questioned and reflected on the religious environment in the country, only to be vilified as a result. One can then imagine how a diverse Muslim community, already suspected and marginalised and economically backward for the most part, would be unable and unwilling to criticise its oppressors. There are partners among liberal Hindus, however, critical of Hindutva and its organisations, who have also been calling for tolerance and supporting minorities who suffer under the BJP. The fear is that their voices are too sporadic, weak and also facing the wrath of the extremists. In fact, and this is an important point, the Muslims both in India and their advocates from outside, while being aware of the specific circumstances and particularities of each minority group or community, have much to gain by putting up a combined front of the multiple oppressed minorities to counter the extremist narratives and the violence emanating from the extremist Hindu right-wing. This means that while women, Dalits, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs and other oppressed communities in India have their own legitimate grievances resulting from the discrimination faced by Hindu extremists under the BJP, they also have a collective cause. Recognising this will enable better advocacy to emerge for human rights.

For the Muslims in India, one reason why they need such collaborations with other communities is their weakened state that has pre-dated the rise of the BJP. The Sachar report from 2006 had already elaborated on the quantifiable data to show the gap between the Muslims and other communities given their proportion in the population. It had, in fact, placed the Muslims even below scheduled castes and scheduled tribes in their

backwardness. Around 10 years after the Sachar report in 2016, analysts noted that there was “no major change in the condition of India’s Muslims” and that it had deteriorated further in certain respects, such as in their presence in the country’s police force.<sup>37</sup> This is of course not to dispute that the Sachar report had its own critics due to its methodology and thus, a parallel narrative that issues of poverty, health, unemployment and education in India cut across religious backgrounds and Muslims are just one of many affected communities.<sup>38</sup> However, given its context, it is unreasonable to discount the seriousness of the report about the largest religious minority in India even if there are technical disagreements over certain variables. It would also be reasonable, given the rise of Hindutva and extremist narratives since 2014, to suggest that in many ways, the situation of Muslims as a generalised community has suffered even more, with new problems of violence, structural discrimination, historical revisionism and communal hatred being added to the existing socio-economic ones. This is not to say that these did not exist before; however, their importance and extent has escalated with the BJP government and its ideological backing of exclusivist discourses.

After all, as the Alliance for Justice and Accountability has highlighted, singling out Prime Minister Modi as well, “RSS-BJP leaders have a long record of encouraging, verbalising and even blatantly carrying out an anti-minority agenda.”<sup>39</sup> It is not surprising then that state elections throughout 2017 and continuing in 2018, such as in Gujarat, Tripura and Karnataka were high on Hindutva rhetoric since it has become a useful slogan for political gains. Sidharth Bhatia had, for this reason, suggested that 2018 — when multiple state elections, as well as campaigns for general elections 2019, will start in earnest — was going to be “the year of peak Hindutva.”<sup>40</sup> He has been proven correct. Indeed, the BJP manifesto has been proudly

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<sup>37</sup> Zeeshan Shaikh, “Ten Years after Sachar Report,” *Indian Express*, December 26, 2016, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/ten-years-after-sachar-report-no-major-change-in-the-condition-of-indias-muslims-4444809/>

<sup>38</sup> Vivek V Gumaste, “Revisiting the Sachar Report: 10 Years on, the Same Old Myths Prevail,” *Huffington Post*, January 25, 2017, [https://www.huffingtonpost.in/vivek-v-gumaste/revisiting-the-sachar-report-10-years-on-the-same-old-myths-pr\\_a\\_21659994/](https://www.huffingtonpost.in/vivek-v-gumaste/revisiting-the-sachar-report-10-years-on-the-same-old-myths-pr_a_21659994/)

<sup>39</sup> “Minority Rights Violations in India.”

<sup>40</sup> Sidharth Bhatia, “This Will Be the Year of Peak Hindutva,” *Wire*, January 4, 2018, <https://thewire.in/communalism/hindutva-india-2018-bjp-rss-sangh>

raising the slogan of Hindutva in state elections such as in Karnataka<sup>41</sup> and senior BJP leader, Subramanian Swamy, has also confidently asserted that Hindutva would help his party in the elections of 2019.<sup>42</sup>

There are also, however, corresponding and contradictory trends at play as the party attempts to develop a positive image for it and seeks more political mileage at multiple levels. For instance, in West Bengal, it fielded more than 800 Muslim candidates in *panchayat* elections — a huge difference from previous occasions when the elections took place in the state.<sup>43</sup> Such ostensibly positive stories are, however, politically motivated, sporadic and largely insignificant when one considers the blatant violence that Muslims and other minorities have continued to face, directly and indirectly, at the hands of the BJP policies and ideology and the ensuing supporters of the party emboldened by its stance. As one analyst has warned — perhaps with some hyperbole, but certainly not without reason: “There is a silent but systematic slaughter against Muslims in progress in India. It is not too late to call it out.”<sup>44</sup> For human rights advocates and defenders all over the world, including in India, this warning should not be taken lightly.

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<sup>41</sup> “BJP Manifesto High on Hindutva,” *New Indian Express*, May 5, 2018, <http://www.newindianexpress.com/elections/karnataka-polls-2018/2018/may/05/bjp-manifesto-high-on-hindutva-1810460.html>

<sup>42</sup> “Hindutva is Going to Help BJP in 2019, says Subramanian Swamy,” *India Today*, July 9, 2018, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/hindutva-is-going-to-help-bjp-in-2019-says-subramanian-swamy-1281035-2018-07-09>

<sup>43</sup> Madhuparna Des, “Major Shift in Policy, BJP Fields Record Number of Muslim Candidates in Bengal Panchayat Election,” May 3, 2018, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/major-shift-in-policy-bjp-fields-record-number-of-muslim-candidates-in-bengal-panchayat-election/articleshow/64010325.cms>

<sup>44</sup> Bhowmick, “As India’s Muslims are killed, Modi Keeps Silent.”