

Hindu and Hindutva Ideology in Indian Polity: Examining Modi's Administration

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Abstract

The idea of India as an inclusive and secular nation-state has been challenged by the rise of Hindu nationalist ideology known as Hindutva. Promoted by organisations like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and political parties like the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Hindutva advocates for the establishment of a Hindu Rashtra (nation) in India by marginalising minority groups. It involves the “otherisation” of non-Hindus, especially Muslims and Christians, and promotes the Hindu-centric narrative in the country’s history, culture, legislative and administrative setup, which seeks to transform India from a secular democratic republic to an authoritarian Hindu-supremacist one. The paper aims to analyse the widespread resentment towards Indian Muslims arguing that the formation of Hindu identity is deeply intertwined with political processes influenced by the ideologies of the RSS and BJP. It examines various facets of Indian politics, especially under Modi’s government to gain insights into the normative implementation of Hindutva within the contexts of institutionalism and linguistic discourse. It posits that the BJP’s policies and the narrative of Hindus as the ‘sons of the soil’ contribute to the marginalisation of other identities, particularly Indian Muslims. The paper examines modes to understand Hindutva’s normative approach in Modi’s government within the framework of institutionalism and linguistic discourse, focusing on Indian polity.

Keywords: India, Hindutva, BJP, Identity Politics, RSS.

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Introduction

Against the backdrop of India's diverse history and its intrinsic civilisation, the nation's identity has faced a persistent challenge rooted in political intricacies. The complicated tapestry of India's multiethnic composition, encompassing numerous ethnic and tribal groups has coexisted within its borders.¹ Nevertheless, the very idea of India has become entangled in ambiguity and contention, primarily fuelled by political considerations. Furthermore, the leaders of the largest democracy aim at an inclusive society, but are still unable to define the "idea of India." This uncertainty has given rise to a questioning of the intended nationalist values that were meant to unite its people.² The process of India's independence, while liberating the nation from colonial rule, inadvertently embedded sectarian divisions, adding layers of complexity to its national narrative. The rejection of majoritarianism by the democratic dispensation underscores the constant struggle to reconcile diverse identities within a democratic framework.³ The preamble of the Indian Constitution, emphasising the unification of the nation, positions this goal as a cornerstone, yet historical inequalities have cast a shadow over the realisation of India's democratic principles since the constitution's inception in 1950.⁴

As the political landscape has evolved, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) emerged as a formidable force in Indian politics, altering the dynamics of governance.⁵ However, this rise has been marked by growing polarisation in Indian politics which has led to a sense of animosity among some members of the majority groups toward the minority groups.⁶ Since Narendra Modi became Prime Minister leading the BJP in 2014, he has advanced a Hindu nationalist agenda that aligns with Hindutva ideology. This has involved utilising both political

¹ Amit Kumar Sharma, "Elements of Indian Civilisation: A Sociological Perspective," *Indian Anthropologist* 33, no. 1 (2003): 82.

² Lars Tore Flåten, *Hindu Nationalism, History and Identity in India: Narrating a Hindu Past under the BJP* (Taylor & Francis, 2016), 78.

³ Sanjaya Baru, *India's Power Elite: Class, Caste and a Cultural Revolution*, 2021, 97.

⁴ Edward Anderson and Arkotong Longkumer, *Neo-Hindutva: Evolving Forms, Spaces, and Expressions of Hindu Nationalism* (Taylor & Francis Limited, 2021), 68.

⁵ Shaila Seshia, "Divide and Rule in Indian Party Politics: The Rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party," *Asian Survey* 38, no. 11 (1998): 1045, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2645684>.

⁶ "The Secret behind Success of India's Ruling Party BJP," *BBC News*, December 2, 2020, sec. India, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-55049627>

rhetoric and policy to promote a Hindu-centric narrative of India while targeting minority groups. For instance, controversial moves like the revocation of Kashmir's autonomy and the passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act, which discriminates against Muslims, have been enacted.⁷ These moves have been accompanied by a surge in violence and intimidation against minorities indicative of a broader effort to reshape India's secular pluralist democracy into what some perceive as an authoritarian Hindu *Rashtra*.⁸ In the context of this transformative phase, this research paper delves into an analysis of Modi's promotion of *Hindutva* and its profound impacts on Indian politics and society. Providing a nuanced background on the *Hindutva* ideology and its underlying assumptions, the paper systematically dissects how Hindu nationalism has manifested under BJP rule. The examination extends beyond mere political discourse, encompassing both linguistic and institutional mechanisms employed to advance this agenda. The central argument posits that Modi's strategic exploitation of religious identity for political gains poses a tangible threat to the foundational principles of India's inclusive democracy. As the paper unfolds, it scrutinises the implications of *Hindutva* for Indian democracy and diversity, weaving together the narrative of a nation at the crossroads of its identity.

Examining Complex Roots and Evolution of *Hindutva* Ideology in Indian Polity

Contested Origins and Colonial Influences

The contemporary form of Hindu identity and *Hindutva* ideology have complex roots. These include the political mobilisation of the Brahmin caste interests as well as orientalist interpretations of Indian society and history institutionalised under Britain's colonial rule.

⁷ Angana P. Chatterji, Thomas Blom Hansen and Christophe Jaffrelot, *Majoritarian State: How Hindu Nationalism Is Changing India* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 89.

⁸ Wesley Rahan, "India: Is 'Hindutva' a Civilizational Principle?,"

<https://www.dw.com/en/india-is-the-ruling-bjps-hindutva-approach-a-civilizational-principle/a-60835665>

Time and again the Hindu identity is redefined under the notion of Hinduism.⁹ Hindutva is considered as a movement by many experts which is founded and led by the upper caste of Hindus and it has used the lower caste as a showman to establish its authority.¹⁰ Similarly, the formation of Hindu identity is considered — a construct by the Brahmin Elite which is five% of the population to remain politically relevant in the modernised system of Britain.¹¹ The introduction of the quota system, election, and implementation of a democratic style of governance threatened the status of the Brahmin elite.¹² Reinterpreting Hinduism's essence facilitated their continued claim to leadership of a seemingly unified Hindu bloc in alliance with imperial interests. This also enabled targeting Muslims as threatening "others" wielding influence disproportionate to their number.¹³ What is now referred to as Hinduism had no religious connotation for Hindus till the 15th century.¹⁴ Consequently, the meaning of "Hindu" loses a lot of complexity in Hindutva. Instead, it represents the amalgamation of several ideas, including land, language and religion into a wholly racist entity.¹⁵ Through strategic syncretism, the Brahminical elite forged a nationalist ideology perpetuating their traditional caste privileges within a modern institutional context. Their primary goal was to insulate their ascendancy against democratizing pressures by forging a numerical majority united through symbols of Hindu-Muslim antagonism.¹⁶ Hindutva, thus, represents the upper-caste Hindu elite with their entrenched socio-cultural capital, manoeuvring to shape mass politics in a manner that perpetuates their

⁹ Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, *Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu?* (Hindi Sahitya Sadan, 2003), 57.

¹⁰ Savarkar, 58.

¹¹ Christophe Jaffrelot, "Hindu Nationalism: Strategic Syncretism in Ideology Building," *Economic and Political Weekly* 28, no. 12/13 (1993): 519.

¹² Jaffrelot, "Hindu Nationalism," 520.

¹³ Sagarika Dutt, "Identities and the Indian State: An Overview," *Third World Quarterly* 19, no. 3 (1998): 427.

¹⁴ Giorgio Shani, "Towards a Hindu Rashtra: Hindutva, Religion, and Nationalism in India," *Religion, State and Society* 49, no. 3 (May 27, 2021): 267, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2021.1947731>

¹⁵ M. A. Muqtedar Khan and Rifat Binte Lutful, "Emerging Hindu Rashtra and Its Impact on Indian Muslims," *Religions* 12, no. 9 (September 2021): 694, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12090693>

¹⁶ Kusum Sharma, *Ambedkar and Indian Constitution* (Ashish Publishing House, 1992), 89.

historical domination.¹⁷ Their quest relies on forging a seeming Hindu majority united by symbols of Muslim antagonism rather than common material interests.¹⁸ According to Hindutva ideology, the territory of Hindus encompasses the entire Indian subcontinent, referred to as ‘*Akhand Bharat*’ (undivided India).¹⁹ Hindi is projected as the national language while Hinduism is depicted as the religion quintessentially representing this supposed racial and geo-cultural bloc descended from groups inhabiting this land since ancient times. This subsumes the tremendous diversity among residents into a singular Hindu subject targeted against non-Hindu minorities as alleged outsiders.²⁰

In effect, Hindutva transforms the fluid, multivalent lived experiences of inhabitants marked as Hindus into a monolithic ethno-religious project for majoritarian domination. Disparate caste and linguistic identities are repackaged behind the veil of Hinduness to serve political ambitions, not dismantling the underlying socioeconomic hierarchies. It forges an exclusionary ideology fundamentally at odds with the syncretism and pluralism otherwise underlying Indian civilisation.²¹

Colonial Roots

In term of its roots, Hindutva’s premises rest upon questionable assumptions about India’s past and the nature of religious conversions that can be traced back to colonial rule. The British administration sought to categorise Indian society into neatly delineated groups to better understand and control the population.²² They relied upon Orientalist erudition that essentialised

¹⁷ Sanjaya Baru, *India’s Power Elite: Class, Caste and Cu: Caste, Class and Cultural Revolution* (Gurgaon, Haryana: Penguin Books India, 2021), 90.

¹⁸ Francis Robinson, “The British Empire and Muslim Identity in South Asia,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 8 (1998): 278, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3679298>

¹⁹ Shani, “Towards a Hindu Rashtra,” 276.

²⁰ Walter Andersen and Shridhar D. Damle, *Messengers of Hindu Nationalism: How the RSS Reshaped India* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 94.

²¹ Aniket Nandan, “Revival of Hindu Nationalism: Interplay of Religion and Caste in 21st Century India,” 5, no. 4 (October 2018): 445.

²² Volker Kaul and Ananya Vajpeyi, *Minorities and Populism – Critical Perspectives from South Asia and Europe* (Springer Nature, 2020), 165.

religious identities and interpreted history through a communal lens.²³ Colonial historians propagated the notion that an ancient “Hindu society” defined India until the entrance of Muslim invaders. Supposedly, these conquering armies violently converted Hindus to Islam, spurring communal conflict ever since.²⁴ However, pre-colonial Indian society lacked clearly demarcated religious boundaries. Rather, complex, fluid religious and regional identities prevailed without neat categorisation. The colonial project of classifying Indian ethnicities and social groups into discrete communities is an overly simplified reality.²⁵ As historian Romila Thapar notes, “The colonial interpretation of Indian society as being divided into major religious communities is no longer regarded as accurate.”²⁶ By reinterpreting Hinduism into a political force of resistance under the new Hindutva banner, Hindu’s sought to preserve caste hierarchy amidst societal change. Critically, Hindutva transforms diverse communities practicing localized Hindu customs into a singularised Hindu identity for nationalist consolidation. Segregating communities fostered a sense of separateness that politicised religious differences.

Over time, Hindutva evolved from its questionable premises around Hindu victimisation to become a contemporary vehicle for the political unification of the majority religious community.²⁷ While instrumentally harnessing selective Hindu symbols and grievances, its core thrust is to establish cultural dominance rather than theology. Distinct from Hinduism’s pluralism, Hindutva deploys identity politics towards the political end of consolidating the majority vote. Thereby, the essence of Hindutva lies in establishing Hindu nationalist hegemony through majoritarian consolidation not as an ideology per se.²⁸

²³ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (Penguin Books Limited, 2016), 76.

²⁴ Prashant Waikar, “Reading Islamophobia in Hindutva: An Analysis of Narendra Modi’s Political Discourse,” *Islamophobia Studies Journal* 4, no. 2 (2018): 167, <https://doi.org/10.13169/islastudj.4.2.0161>.

²⁵ Lucy Carroll, “Colonial Perceptions of Indian Society and the Emergence of Caste(s) Associations,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 37, no. 2 (February 1978): 240, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2054164>.

²⁶ Romila Thapar, “Communalism and the Historical Legacy: Some Facets,” *Social Scientist* 18, no. 6/7 (1990): 6, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3517476>.

²⁷ Farahnaz Ispahani, *Politics of Hate: Religious Majoritarianism in South Asia* (HarperCollins Publishers India, 2023), 87.

²⁸ Chatterji, Hansen, and Jaffreot, *Majoritarian State*, 87.

Key Hindutva Groups and Constitutional Contradictions

Distinguishing itself from Hinduism, Hindutva emerges as a contemporary political ideology that envisions establishing India as a Hindu nation-state. This involves aligning the cultural fabric with selectively defined Hindu values. A key distinction is that while Hinduism denotes a decentralised world religion with diverse beliefs and localised variants, Hindutva promotes a homogenised political conception of Hindu identity in order to unify and consolidate broader Hindu interests across communities.²⁹ Instrumental groups promoting Hindutva include the Sangh Parivar, an umbrella of radical Hindu nationalist organisations led by the paramilitary Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), as well as the more moderate Hindu support-oriented Bharatiya Hindu Parivar (BHP). Their roles are crucial in understanding the dynamics of Hindutva ideology within Indian politics particularly during Modi's regime.

The Sangh Parivar is an umbrella of Hindutva groups led by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a paramilitary organisation founded in 1925. It includes groups such as the Bajrang Dal, Shiv Sena and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad.³⁰ They articulate a militant Hindu nationalist politics opposing the Muslims as 'others.' On the other hand, the BHP is a charitable organisation focused on providing support to the Hindu community.³¹

The organisation is involved in various charitable activities such as providing food, clothing, and shelter to those in need. In the early buildup of Hindutva, these organisations play a pivotal role in building connectivity within the Hindu community and promoting the vision of India as a Hindu nation. While their activities differ, they share roots in furthering Hindutva's majoritarian religious nationalism vision of India's identity and policies.

²⁹ Anderson and Longkumer, *Neo-Hindutva*, 93.

³⁰ "The Musclemen of Hindutva," *Hindu*, December 11, 2015, sec. Lead, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/On-the-Bajrang-Dals-birth-evolution-and-activity/article62116497.ece>.

³¹ Brinda Karat, *RSS_book*, 2014, 12, http://archive.org/details/rss_book

Vinayak Damodar Sarvarkar and Golwalkar's Theorisation of Hindu Dominance

Hindutva took its aspiration from the 1923 treatise by the Hindutva ideologue Vinayak Damodar Sarvarkar, the ideology posits that Hindus alone can be considered true Indians, as their pitrbhu (fatherland) and punyabhū (holy land) reside within India. Sarvarkar excludes Muslims and Christians from this definition, asserting that their holy lands are situated in “far off Arabia or Palestine.”³² Building upon Sarvarkar's ideas, his ideological successor, Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar, a key figure in the RSS, emphasises that the “foreign races” in India, referring to Muslims and Christians, must either assimilate into Hindu culture, language, and religion or exist subordinated to the Hindu Nation.³³ Golwalkar advocates for a scenario where these communities lose their separate identities, merging into the broader Hindu race, or accept a subordinate status within the country without claiming privileges or preferential treatment including citizen's rights. Hindutva's upper-caste essence manifests in Golwalkar's assertions, too.³⁴ He framed caste identities performing their ritual duties, however degrading as an orderly system, denouncing dissent as “anti-national.”³⁵

This ideological framework, distinguishing between Hindutva and Hinduism, underscores the inherently political nature of Hindutva as it endeavours to shape India's cultural and national identity. It is crucial to recognise that this philosophy primarily hinges on religious doctrine or an organised system, commonly referred to as an “ism.” However, delving into the fundamental meaning of Hindutva reveals a lack of both theocratic and practical aspects to be unequivocally labelled an ideology.³⁶ Instead, it emerges as a political unification of all Hindus in India, marking a shift from religious conflict to a political one, where religion serves as a tool to achieve political motives.³⁷ Subsequently, RSS advanced Savarkar's

³² Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, *Essentials of Hindutva* (Independently Published, 2019), 123.

³³ V. D. Savarkar Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, *Essentials of Hindutva*, 1923, 11, <http://archive.org/details/essentials-of-hindutva>.

³⁴ M S Golwalkar, *We or Our Nationhood Defined*, 1st ed., vol. 1 (India: Bharat Parkashan, 1944), 72, <http://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.66003>.

³⁵ Golwalkar, 1:123.

³⁶ Savarkar, *Essentials of Hindutva*, 102.

³⁷ Nandan, “Revival of Hindu Nationalism,” 448.

Hindutva ideas towards sharpening divides between Hindutva's narrow conceptualisation of Indian nationalism and minority groups portrayed as outsiders refusing to assimilate.³⁸ The RSS operates clandestinely to propagate its vision of Indian culture defined by Hindu hegemony.³⁹ The RSS constructive ideology based on campaign *Ghar Wapsi* campaign is a refurbished version of purification based on cultural nationalism.⁴⁰ This ideology was further adopted by BJP where LK Advani started cultural violence and culminated in violent action against the cultural disparities existing in India. Decades later, the 1980s Ram Janambhoomi agitation exemplified weaponising religious symbols of historic subjugation to spark a popular movement that galvanised these latent Hindutva ideas.⁴¹ The 1992 Babri Masjid demolition represented the symbolic manifestation of this kind of virulent cultural nationalism serving political consolidation of radical Hindu interests.⁴² The BJP not only embraced this ideology but, during the 1996 Lok Sabha election, pledged support to Hindutva in their political manifesto.⁴³ It cemented Hindutva's meteoric rise from the fringes to centre stage of Indian politics.

Currently in power since 2014, the BJP regime demonstrates an effective blend of symbolic moves that pander to the Hindu majority along with institutional changes eroding minority rights.⁴⁴ Thereby, contemporary Hindutva retains its core essence as political instrument centered on identity politics and selective historical interpretations to achieve the enduring goal of consolidating the majority Hindu vote behind a majoritarian platform.

³⁸ Savarkar, *Essentials of Hindutva*, 128.

³⁹ Koushiki Dasgupta, *Sadhus in Indian Politics: Dynamics of Hindutva* (SAGE Publishing India, 2021), 134.

⁴⁰ Yashasvini Rajeshwar and Roy C. Amore, "Coming Home (Ghar Wapsi) and Going Away: Politics and the Mass Conversion Controversy in India," *Religions* 10, no. 5 (May 2019): 5, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10050313>.

⁴¹ P. K. D. Nambiar, "Ram Janambhoomi: The Movement That Changed India's Political Landscape," *Sunday Guardian Live*, <https://sundayguardianlive.com/opinion/ram-janambhoomi-the-movement-that-changed-indias-political-landscape>.

⁴² Amom Malemnganba Singh, "The BJP and the Rise of Communal Violence," *South Asian Voices*, February 7, 2022, <https://southasianvoices.org/the-bjp-and-the-rise-of-communal-violence/>.

⁴³ Flåten, *Hindu Nationalism, History and Identity in India*, 120.

⁴⁴ Subramanian Swamy, *Hindutva and National Renaissance* (Har-Anand Publications, 2010).

This majoritarian ideology rooted in Hindu nationalism has clear foundations in India's history that the BJP has strategically tapped into. Under Modi's regime, the BJP has translated this manifesto into action, targeting the cultural and educational setup of other religions.⁴⁵ The conflict, predominantly rooted in culture and politics, intricately links with the past, marking a significant chapter in India's complex socio-political landscape.⁴⁶

Hindu Nationalism under Modi's Administration: Structural and Linguistic Discourse Analysis

Hindutva retains its essence as an instrument of identity politics and selective historical interpretations aiming to consolidate the Hindu vote under a majoritarian Hindu nationalist platform. This ideology, rooted in India's history, has been strategically revived by the BJP, particularly under the Modi government. This political manoeuvre involves translating the Hindutva manifesto into action, with a specific focus on targeting minority cultural and educational institutions, thereby intertwining culture and politics in a conflict that shapes India's socio-political landscape.⁴⁷ The utilisation of history and interpretation becomes evident in the linguistic construction of a Hindu nationalist reality under the Modi administration.⁴⁸ Drawing from social constructivist theory which emphasizes the role of discourse, rhetoric and language in shaping social and political realities. It is argued that language plays a crucial role in constructing the world.⁴⁹ According to theorists like Habermas, Searle, and Onuf, people construct social reality through language making it a principal means of social construction.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ "Bharatiya Janata Party," Bharatiya Janata Party, 2019, <https://www.bjp.org/>.

⁴⁶ Various, *Making Sense of Modi's India* (HarperCollins, 2016), 102.

⁴⁷ Waikar, "Reading Islamophobia in Hindutva," 169.

⁴⁸ Hajira Maryam, "Identity and Belonging in Modi's India:," *The World Research Centre*, February 2020, 6.

⁴⁹ Nicholas Greenwood Onuf, *World of Our Making: Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations*, Routledge (Routledge, 2012), 92, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203722428>.

⁵⁰ John R Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality, The Construction of Social Reality*, New Ed (Penguin, 1996), 98.

Modi, through speeches actively promotes Hindutva as a defining national ideology, seeking to establish Hindu primacy and reconstruct India's identity along majoritarian Hindu lines.⁵¹ The periodisation of the Hindu community in India, through the lens of Hindutva, involves a deliberate move away from the secularism that characterised India before Modi's ascension to power. This shift is marked by the adoption of discriminatory language and silence against religious extremism. Hindutva's otherisation, a key element in this narrative, projects the inferiority of other identities within India, with a specific focus on Muslims, Sikhs and Christians.⁵² Aligning with the RSS vision of Hindu authoritarianism, Modi constructed a narrative suggesting that Hindus were historically suppressed by Muslims creating a sense of victimhood.⁵³ This narrative is substantiated by the events in Gujarat, where the Muslim community was depicted as being rightfully targeted, as conveyed by Modi's statement in his 2013 speech: "will do the same with people who will support Pakistan." The backdrop of the Red Fort replica in the speech serves as a symbolic reinforcement for his campaign.⁵⁴

On international platforms, Modi further amplifies his polarised stance by comparing events like 9/11 to radical Islamic terrorism, blaming Muslims for conspiracies against the West.⁵⁵ This rhetoric, coupled with slogans like "*Mujhe Ganga Maiyya ne bulaya hai*" (Mother Ganga has summoned me) and "*Unke liye Ganga ek nadi hai, mere liye Ganga Maa Hai,*" (for them Ganga is a canal but for me it is my mother (motherland)) and I am Hindu nationalist, serves to instigate resentment and hatred against other identities particularly Muslims.⁵⁶

⁵¹ Amy Kazmin and India Ross, "How Hindu Nationalism Went Mainstream in Modi's India," *Financial Times*, May 9, 2019, sec. FT Magazine, <https://www.ft.com/content/4b68c89c-711c-11e9-bf5c-6eeb837566c5>.

⁵² Milan Vaishnav, "Religious Nationalism and India's Future — The BJP in Power: Indian Democracy and Religious Nationalism," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/04/04/religious-nationalism-and-india-s-future-pub-78703>.

⁵³ Christophe Jaffrelot, *Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy* (Princeton University Press, 2021), 55.

⁵⁴ "In Chhattisgarh, a Red Fort Replica for Narendra Modi Speech Today."

⁵⁵ Rohit Chopra, *The Virtual Hindu Rashtra: Saffron Nationalism and New Media* (HarperCollins India, 2019), 132.

⁵⁶ "PM Modi Says; Na Main Yahan Aaya Hoon, Na Laya Gaya Hoon... mujhe Maa Ganga Ne Bulaya Hai," *Azir Khobor* blog, December 13, 2021,

These catchphrases in his speeches have not only signified his aspiration of instigating resentment and hatred against other identities but have established the fact that Hindutva's ideology is a sign of unity for Hindus.⁵⁷

To bolster Hindu nationalism, the Modi government enacted the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), a move veiled in the assertion that it is unrelated to religion. The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) was passed in India in 2019.⁵⁸ It provides a pathway to Indian citizenship for non-Muslim minorities from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan who entered India illegally before 2015.⁵⁹ Specifically, it applies to Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis and Christians.⁶⁰ On the surface, the government asserted that the CAA is not related to religion. They stated it is simply meant to provide refuge to persecuted minority groups in Muslim-majority nations like Pakistan and Bangladesh. However, the law explicitly excludes Muslims from its purview, making religion a criterion for citizenship.⁶¹ CAA promotes the idea that India's identity is fundamentally Hindu in nature. The law aligns with Modi's vision of India as a nation that privileges its Hindu majority over other religious groups like Muslims. In a 2019, Modi emphasised the accommodation of Hindu migrants while implying the exclusion of Bangladeshi Muslims, particularly from Assam. This sentiment was echoed by Home Minister Amit Shah, who bluntly advocated for the expulsion of Muslim immigrants, a stance that remained unchecked by the BJP under Modi's leadership.⁶² In 2019, Minister of Home Affairs, Amit Shah repeated the same language by saying to terminate the Muslim immigrants from Bangladesh and BJP will pick them up and throw them into the Bay of Bengal.⁶³ Furthermore, Under Modi's administration, the

<https://azirkhobor.com/2021/12/13/pm-modi-says-na-main-yahan-aaya-hoon-na-laya-gaya-hoon-mujhe-maa-ganga-ne-bulaya-hai/>.

⁵⁷ Aakar Patel, *Our Hindu Rashtra: What It Is. How We Got Here* (Penguin Random House India Private Limited, 2022), 127.

⁵⁸ "The Citizenship Amendment Bill 2019" (Indian Government, December 2019), https://loksabhadocs.nic.in/Refinput/New_Reference_Notes/English/09122019_104728_1021205239.pdf.

⁵⁹ "The Citizenship Amendment Bill 2019."

⁶⁰ "The Citizenship Amendment Bill 2019."

⁶¹ "The Citizenship Amendment Bill 2019."

⁶² Kai Schultz, "Modi Defends Indian Citizenship Law Amid Violent Protests," *New York Times*, December 22, 2019, sec. World,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/22/world/asia/modi-india-citizenship-law.html>.

⁶³ "Amit Shah Vows to Throw Illegal Immigrants into Bay of Bengal | Reuters."

exploitation of political narratives under the guise of Hindutva has expanded its targets from anti-Muslim sentiments to encompass other minority communities notably Christians. The BJP, alongside its affiliate Bajrang Dal, has orchestrated a surge in violent attacks against Indian Christians, creating fear and painting them negatively from Karnataka to Uttarakhand.⁶⁴ This alarming rise in attacks during the Christmas season stems from a deepening communal polarisation, extending the BJP's previous focus on Muslims to include other religious communities across India. Assam emerges as a new focal point for Hindutva politics, where the BJP strategically manipulates the state's history of ethnonationalism. By portraying Muslims as a threat to "Assamese" culture and aligning with xenophobic Assamese ethnonationalism, the BJP intensifies animosity towards Muslim minorities. In December 2021, the BJP's promotion of violence escalated during the three-day "*Dharam Sansad*" in Haridwar, Uttarakhand — a state under BJP control and heading into elections.⁶⁵ The event featured hate speeches against Muslims and calls for genocide with the participation of prominent BJP members.⁶⁶ This calculated strategy led to a significant victory for the BJP in the 2021 Legislative Assembly elections, securing their second term in the state. Chief Minister of Assam, Himanta Biswa Sarma further saffronises Assam's local culture by integrating it with the BJP's Hindu nationalist agenda.⁶⁷ Utilising anti-Muslim rhetoric and associating with Assamese Hindu figures like Sankardev — the BJP solidifies its communal political base. The National Register of Citizens (NRC) exacerbates communal polarisation in Assam rendering Muslim minority populations stateless.⁶⁸ By invoking historical figures like Lachit Borphukan — the BJP portrays Muslims as outsiders and

⁶⁴ Neel Madhav Jafri Alishan, "Why India Is Witnessing Spike in Attacks on Christians, Churches," *Al Jazeera*, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/12/2/india-christians-church-hindu-groups-bjp-conversion>.

⁶⁵ "Haridwar Hate Speeches Target Minorities, Call for Violence; DGP Says Illegal," *Indian Express* blog, December 23, 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/haridwar-meet-seeks-weapons-for-hindus-war-on-muslims-ex-bjp-spokesperson-among-speakers-7686714/>.

⁶⁶ "Haridwar Hate Speeches Target Minorities, Call for Violence; DGP Says Illegal."

⁶⁷ Nistula Hebbar, "Himanta Biswa Sarma: The Go-to Man Who Put out Many Fires for BJP in Assam," *Hindu*, May 9, 2021, sec. Assam, <https://www.thehindu.com/elections/assam-assembly/himanta-biswa-sarma-profile-the-go-to-man-who-put-out-many-fires-for-bjp-in-assam/article34519698.ece>.

⁶⁸ Singh, "The BJP and the Rise of Communal Violence."

initiates “encroachment drives” to displace Muslim occupants. Sarma’s influence extends beyond Assam, heading the North-East Democratic Alliance (NEDA), a sub-regional group of Modi’s National Democratic Alliance (NDA).⁶⁹ Employing citizenship as a political tool, Sarma seeks to alter the state’s demography for electoral gains. The BJP’s longstanding ambition to control the Northeast, facilitated by NEDA could lead to strategies that fracture pluralism and the region’s ethnoreligious diversity, favouring Hindu voters. Consequently, in a strategic self-presentation, Modi has crafted an image of a “*Karmayogi*” — a selfless Hindu ascetic devoted to the nation drawing inspiration from Hindu scriptures especially the Bhagavad Gita.⁷⁰ This image has been carefully constructed through linguistic choice and decade of Hindutva emphasises on Hindu cultural dominance which also resonates with supporters who connect through vernacular tongues.⁷¹

At the institutional level, Hindutva nationalism draws on the stereotyped dangers of Islamophobia and the “Otherisation” of Muslims which are presented as enemies of the purported Hindu vision of India.⁷² Modi’s vision for a developed India is a reflection of this strategy. Only Hindu contributions are key to this development rhetoric when imagining India’s glorious past; non-Hindus are viewed as unimportant. The ideological and political discourse of the Indian state is being gravely altered by the transformation of Indian territorial nationalism into religious nationalism.⁷³ In two consecutive tenures, the Modi government has established a power nexus by promoting Hindu nationalist discourse, sidelining secular liberalist ideologies.⁷⁴ This transformation, as highlighted by Sanjaya Baru in “India’s Power Elite,” has shifted the public discourse on religion, caste, and

⁶⁹ Angana P. Chatterji, “Detention, Criminalisation, Statelessness: The Aftermath of Assam’s NRC,” *The Wire*, September 9, 2021, <https://thewire.in/rights/detention-criminalisation-statelessness-the-aftermath-of-assams-nrc>.

⁷⁰ The Conversation Chandrima Chakraborty, “Modi as the Karmayogi: How the Prime Minister Has Modelled Himself as a New-Age Hindu Ascetic,” Text, Scroll.in (<https://scroll.in>, May 29, 2019), <https://scroll.in/article/925041/modi-as-the-karmayogi-how-the-prime-minister-has-modelled-himself-as-a-new-age-hindu-ascetic>.

⁷¹ “Narendra Modi’s Victory Speech Delivers Visions of a Hindu Nationalist Ascetic.”

⁷² Wendy Doniger and Martha Craven Nussbaum, *Pluralism and Democracy in India: Debating the Hindu Right* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 97.

⁷³ Khan and Lutful, “Emerging Hindu Rashtra and Its Impact on Indian Muslims.”

⁷⁴ Baru, *India’s Power Elite*, 120.

language, with the BJP leveraging these elements for a Hindu nationalist revolution.⁷⁵ The identification of India under Modi's leadership is centered on the promotion of Hindi, Hinduism and Hindustan. Modi often justifies ethno-national violence by invoking the concept of "Undivided India" or "*Akhand Bharat*," legitimising violence in the pursuit of a greater unified Bharat.⁷⁶ This narrative has formed a robust power nexus between the Hindu majority and the BJP, fostering acceptance of violence against other communities.⁷⁷ Instances like a BJP representative promoting the idea to convert India into a Hindu Rashtra underscore how language and normative approaches have been wielded to institutionalise Hinduism across India.⁷⁸ In symbolic shifts, Modi has focused on highlighting cultural and religious aspects e.g. the 'Bhumi Pujan' (land worship) for the Ayodhya Ram temple, marking emblematic shift toward Hindu Rashtra. The grand spectacle signalled Modi as a monarchical protector of the community's faith. Beyond consecrating the temple, Modi's act represented a novel form of political power, aligning him with the traditional role of Hindu kingship in consecrating and safeguarding temples. In a pivotal December 2021 speech at the Summit of Democracy, Modi positioned Indian democracy not as a Western institution but as a human (popular/majoritarian) institution, reinforcing the grounds for Hindutva and asserting Hindu majoritarian rule under his ideology of Hindu nationalism.⁷⁹ The departure of the Modi government from Jawaharlal Nehru's secular legacy has further resulted in a significant reshaping of India, increasingly identifying as a Hindu nation, thereby intensifying discrimination against minorities, particularly Muslims.⁸⁰ This ideological shift is reflected in the restructuring of schoolbooks, strategically eliminating references to anti-Hindu nationalism stance and pre-Raj Mughal rulers. Furthermore, the BJP's deliberate

⁷⁵ Baru, 121.

⁷⁶ Andersen and Damle, *Messengers of Hindu Nationalism*, 76.

⁷⁷ Uday Mahurkar, *Marching with a Billion: Analysing Narendra Modi's Government at Midterm* (Penguin Random House India Pvt. Limited, 2019), 75.

⁷⁸ Eviane Leidig, "Hindutva as a Variant of Right-Wing Extremism,"

<https://doi.org/10.1080/0031322X.2020.1759861>, 2020, 231,

<https://doi.org/10.1080/0031322X.2020.1759861>.

⁷⁹ Ashutosh Nagda and Angshuman Choudhury, "Unpacking Modi's Summit for Democracy Speech," *The Diplomat*, December 14, 2021,

<https://thediplomat.com/2021/12/unpacking-modis-summit-for-democracy-speech/>.

⁸⁰ "The Observer View on the Growing Threat to Democracy in India," *The Observer*, April 23, 2023, sec. Opinion,

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/apr/23/the-observer-view-on-narendra-modi-growing-threat-to-democracy>.

softening towards the RSS and the removal of the ban on militant Hindu organisations following Gandhi's assassination reveal a calculated effort to align with the militant ideology promoted by the RSS.⁸¹

Modi's vision of Hindu nationalist identity contradicts India's constitutional secularism and democratic foundations established by leaders like Nehru.⁸² From an institutional perspective, the erosion of secular ideals chips away at the pillars of checks and balances vital to democracy. Concentrating authority in the hands of Modi and the BJP undermines separation of powers. Fusion of party and state makes it increasingly difficult to dissent. Tactical political manoeuvres to consolidate power could be seen as democratic backsliding.

Through a constructivist lens, the cultivation of the new rhetoric and symbols shapes a majoritarian Hindu national identity. This identity building threatens pluralism and risks turning citizenship into a politicised, exclusionary concept tied to religion. It may deepen social divisions and conflict between communities. Constructing the "other" to solidify the in group limits diversity of perspectives — a vital component of substantive democracy. The trajectory signals a deficit for liberal constitutional democracy in India.

Conclusion

Regardless of their diversity in religion, culture or history, Indians present a unified consciousness and identity under the banner of "Indian nationalism." All religious minorities and ethnic groups in India are a component of the country's larger composite culture. However, contemporary Hindu nationalism poses tangible threats to India's pluralist democracy and social fabric. Viewed structurally, the BJP regime demonstrates an effective blend of symbolic pandering to the Hindu majority along with tangible moves that undermine minority rights. The erosion of institutional safeguards like

⁸¹ "RSS and the Government: Tracing the History down the Years," *Indian Express*, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/rss-and-the-government-the-equation-how-it-works/>.

⁸² Sumit Ganguly, "The Great Fight Over India's Myths," *Foreign Policy*, blog, November 27, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/07/15/india-nehru-history-myths-modi-bjp-politics-review/>.

judicial independence and federalism concentrate power in ways that defy separation of checks and balances vital for democracy. Meanwhile, additions to the legal code explicitly target minorities, CAA and NRC process reveals how citizenship can serve as a political tool for demographic engineering. Tactically unleashing organs of the state apparatus against dissidents also contravenes civil liberties. Collectively, these institutional shifts exhibit features of democratic backsliding. The cultivation of majoritarian Hindu nationalism also plays out discursively through Modi's rhetoric that amplifies divides. Constructing Muslims as threats intricately tied to invaders, Pakistan and terrorism fosters an exclusionary vision of Indian identity at odds with constitutional secularism. Deploying vernacular slogans, Modi strategically evokes symbolic resentment around victimisation to consolidate the Hindu vote. Connecting Hindu identity to national identity while silencing minority persecutions shapes a majoritarian reality. This divide serves the underlying political end of retaining power not forging an inclusive nationalism. Overall, Hindutva under Modi involves the state actively privileging the majority identity rather than standing neutral between communities as expected in pluralist democracies. The result is an erosion of the protections and separation of powers designed to check majorities. Allowing any group to capture state institutions risks political marginalisation of minorities. Instead of transcending differences, contemporary Hindu nationalism instrumentalises identity politics in ways that undermine e-pluribus-unum. The current manifestation of Hindu nationalism signals India stands at a crossroads between an exclusionary majoritarianism and the syncretic pluralism underpinning its civilizational ethos.

Modi's contemporary Hindu nationalism poses substantive threats to Indian democracy and risks fracturing the underlying pluralism of Indian society. But its essence remains contingent and constructed rather than primordial. India's future trajectory will be determined by how its leaders and institutions respond to the rising tide of divisive religious identity politics