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## HINDU NATIONALISM: A CHALLENGE TO INDIA'S SECULAR DEMOCRACY

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### Abstract

The concept of Hindu nationalism has a significant meaning in modern Indian politics. For seven decades, India has been held together by its constitution, which promises equal to all religions. The paper will examine the rise Hindu nationalism that often clash with the general principles of India's secular democracy, particularly minority rights. Moreover, the paper also seeks to trace the ideological roots and organisational principles of Hindu nationalism. The paper will explore how Hindu nationalism based on the ideology of Hindutva has pervaded formal institutions of state, and how it exerts control over the civil society through different vigilante groups. In addition, this work also focusses on the BJP's electoral resurgence in the 2014 and 2019 parliamentary elections that has called into question the future viability of India's secularism and its commitment to diversity. Finally, the paper will argue that the Hindu nationalism aims to make secular India a "Hindu Rashtra" where some people are counted as more Indians than others.

**Keywords:** Secularism, Democracy, Hindutva, Sangh Parivar, CAA, BJP, Minorities.

### Introduction

India is a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-religious country. Though Hindus are in majority, there is a sizeable Muslim population as well as followers of all other major religions. The preamble of constitution defines India as; "Sovereign, Socialist, Secular, Democratic, Republic." Terms like 'socialist' and 'secular' did not appear in the original text of constitution but were added in the preamble by the 42<sup>nd</sup> constitutional amendment act in 1976. The term 'secular' in the constitution's preamble refers to the Indian state being secular both in terms of separation of religion from politics as well as in the sense of equal toleration of all religions.<sup>i</sup> Under Indian constitution, every citizen is guaranteed 'freedom of conscience and of worship'. Article 15 of the constitution prohibits any form discrimination on religious grounds. In the same line, article 25 of the Indian constitution guarantees every citizen right to profess, practice and propagate their religion. Thus, India fulfils all of Charles Taylor's requirements of secularism; "everyone can freely practice his or her religion; equal respect for all religions, whether of majority or minority; and all spiritual families must be heard."<sup>ii</sup>

In Indian context secularism refers to the peaceful coexistence of all religion, rather than being based on separation of the religion from political spheres, without state recognition to any of the religion. Therefore, Indian secularism reflects the commitment of equal toleration of all religions without any preferential treatment for any of them. While defining the meaning of secularism in India, Jawaharlal Nehru said, "When we talk about a secular state in India. It is perhaps not very easy to find a good word in 'Hindi' for 'secular.' Some people think it means something opposed to religion. That obviously is not correct. What it means is that the state honours all faiths equally and gives them equal opportunities."<sup>iii</sup> The former president of the India, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan further redefined Nehru's thinking of secularism by saying that "India as a secular state does not mean we reject the reality of religion to life... Though faith in the supreme is the basic principle of the Indian tradition, the Indian state will not identify itself with or be controlled by any particular religion."<sup>iv</sup>

Despite these commitments, India after seventy years of experimentation with secularism the country has found itself in the throes of Hindu nationalism. Since independence, Hindu nationalists have been challenging the practice of secularism arguing that the political parties such as Congress have departed from the original meaning of secularism and are promoting a form of "pseudo-secularism" which gives minorities (Muslims and Christians) preferential treatment, thus discriminating majority Hindus.<sup>v</sup> Therefore, Hindu nationalism is an exclusive ideology that seeks to redefine India in opposition to secularism enshrined in its constitution. The study of post 1990s phase of Indian politics reveals that secular future of India is more uncertain than any time since its independence in 1947. The BJP's victory in the 2014 general election marked a new beginning in Indian politics. Since then, the BJP has pursued a number of policies aimed at the marginalization or even the exclusion of Muslims. The state and its institutions have been continuously targeting Muslims particularly after 2019 largely due to the increased the authority in the upper house (Rajya Sabha) of the parliament.



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Recently, on December 11, 2019, the Indian Parliament passed the Citizenship Amendment Bill (CAB) that came to be known as Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). According to this law, India will accept the Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsis or Christian refugees as citizens except Muslims arrived before the end of December 2014 from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh.<sup>vi</sup> This amendment act marked a shift towards an ethno-religious definition of citizenship thus violating the secular provisions of Indian constitution. Hence, this new legislation of citizenship has been criticised as discriminatory, particularly for excluding Muslims. The promotion of religious discrimination through the legislation suggests that BJP government is attempting to transform India, which has diverse cultures and religions, into a Hindu Rashtra.

This paper has been divided into five sections. Following this introductory section, section II, focusses on the history of Hindu nationalism to understand the project that traces its genealogy in the early writings of Hindutva ideologues and what they had in mind. Section III, highlights the dramatic rise of Hindu nationalism and BJP during 1980s and 1990s. Section IV of the paper forms main part of the paper. This section includes the discussion on the resurgence of BJP in 2014 and 2019 general elections that has boosted Hindutva and helped it to touch new heights. This section also highlights new trends and manifestations of Hindu nationalism that has led to the escalation of anti-Muslim violence in India and making India a de facto Hindu Rashtra. The final section, section V, presents some concluding observation.

### Hindu Nationalism and Sangh Parivar

Hindu nationalism has a significant meaning in contemporary Indian politics. In modern times, the xenophobic Hindu nationalist agendas and discourses have pervaded the daily lives of Indian masses, causing a significant shift in India's political culture. The Hindu nationalism has been dubbed as 'cultural nationalism', where the "core is some form of primordial element such as race, language, religion, culture etc."<sup>vii</sup> Consequently, Hindu nationalism is defined as an ideology that aims to construct a state (nation) based on common Hindu culture. The French political scientist Christophe Jefferlot theorises Hindu nationalism within the framework of 'ethnic nationalism.' He defines ethnic nationalism as "the ideology of group that consider itself bound by racial, linguistic, religious or other cultural characteristics and derives from these bounds a strong sense of belonging and often of superiority."<sup>viii</sup> He believes that it is this ethnicity, which distinguishes Hindu nationalism from Indian nationalist ideology based on the secular and democratic principles. Moreover, he claims that the primary goal of Hindu nationalist is to transform Indian political culture into national culture (Bhartiya culture) that would eventually lead to the establishment of Hindu Rastra.<sup>ix</sup>

The Hindu nationalism, led by the RSS, with branches and subsidiaries in many fields of life in contemporary India, has grown into most powerful political and cultural organisations in the country. Although the general masses of India noticed Hindu nationalism in operation in the early 1990s, but it had already been active in Indian politics since the early decades of twentieth century. In fact, Hindu nationalism is one of the India's oldest ideological movements. Hindu nationalism as an ideology arose as a reaction to the pan-Islamic inclination of Indian Muslims towards Muslim countries, as well as dropping proportion of Hindu population from 74.3 percent in 1881 to 68.2 percent in 1931 that prompted Hindu nationalist ideologues to refer Hindu community as a 'dying race.'<sup>x</sup> Therefore, under these circumstances V. D. Savarkar developed the ideology of Hindu nationalism in his book entitled "Hindutva; who is a Hindu?" published in 1923. Much like Muslim separatism, Hindu nationalism also rejected the Gandhian and Congress versions of nationalism that recognised the synthesis of Indian culture. According to Savarkar the Indian national identity is embodied in Hindu culture that includes not only Hinduism as a religion but also language, Sanskrit -with Hindi as its main vernacular derivative.<sup>xi</sup> He therefore minimises the religious criteria in the definition of Hindus and consider Hinduism as one of the attributes of Hinduness. This implicitly implies that the ideological construction of Hindu nationalism is primarily based on three pillars such as religious identity, common language and geographical unity. Therefore, his chief motto was Hindu, Hindi, and Hindustan. Savarkar asserted that only those people are qualified to call themselves as Indians whose pitribhoomi (fatherland) and punyabhoomi (holy land) was in India. Whereas those countrymen whose pitribhoomi was in India but punyabhoomi elsewhere could not call themselves as true Indians.<sup>xii</sup> This assertion explicitly entails that the people practising Semitic religions were excluded from being Indians.

The Savarkar's ideology of Hindutva was supplemented by the publication of M. S. Gowalkar's book "We, or Our Nationhood Defined" in 1930s, which sought to define Hindu nationhood. Much like his predecessor, Gowalkar's targeted not only minorities (Muslims and Christians) but also 'Indian National Congress' and its "amazing theory... that Nation is composed of all those who, for one reason or another happen to live, at the time in same country."<sup>xiii</sup> Both Savarkar's and Gowalkar's views of nationalism converges with a subset of 'ethnic nationalism'. As a result, their ideological construction is based on the ethnic myth defines Hindus as the 'superior race.' In their view, the religious minorities (Muslims and Christians) could practice their religion within private spheres but they are required to pay allegiance to the dominant Hindu identity. Golwalkar writes;



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“The [non-Hindu people] must either adopt the Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect and hold in reverence Hindu religion, must entertain no idea but those of glorification of the Hindu race and culture..., or may stay in this country, wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privilege, far less any preferential treatment-not even citizens' rights.”<sup>xiv</sup>

These Golwalkar's lines support the concept of Hindu Rashtra (nation) based on Hindutva ideology. In order to establish the Hindu Rashtra over Indian subcontinent, the Hindutva ideology took a concrete shape in 1925 with the foundation of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS or the National Volunteer Corps) at Nagpur by one of the Savarkar's admirer, K. B. Hedgerwar. Initially, the RSS preferred to stay out of politics and did not aim to seize the power of state. Instead, it sought to bring about the kind of social revolution from below. Therefore, RSS did not aim to conquer state power rather they wanted to conquer society and bring desired changes through the establishment of shakhas (branches). At present, there are 66000 shakhas active across India. These shakhas serve as the framework for spreading and inculcating Hindutva ideas among the Hindus, particularly children, through regular sessions that include the history lessons ranging from golden Vedic age to the stories of Shivaji and other Hindu warriors who fought against Muslims at different stages of Indian history.<sup>xv</sup> Moreover, these shakhas are tasked with recruiting new members without any distinction on the basis of caste. This process of recruiting new members through shakhas suggest that RSS aimed not only to abolish 'caste system' but also to strengthen Hindus physically.

Until 1950s, the RSS preferred to remain away from politics, fearing that it could corrupt the mind of its members (swayamsewaks). Golwalkar, who took over the RSS in 1940, used to dismiss the political activities by saying, “We aspire to become the radiating centre of all the age-old cherished ideals of our society- just as the indescribable power which radiates through sun. Then the political power which draws its life from that source of society will have no other goal but to reflect same radiance.”<sup>xvi</sup> However, in 1948-49 RSS suffered severe setback due to its ban on the grounds of assassination of Mahatma Gandhi by Nathu Ram Godse, a close associate of Savarkar and allegedly active member of RSS. During the ban, no major political force supported RSS in parliament or elsewhere. Following the ban, the then chief of RSS, Golwalkar changed his mind for tactical reasons. He realized that RSS could not achieve its desired goals unless seizing the political power. Now, Golwalkar along with other senior RSS leaders thought of creating new specialised organisations to reach out the domains in which they are not active, such as party politics. In Dec 1949, one of the RSS member K. R. Malkani, wrote; “Sangh must take part in politics not only to protect itself against the greedy design of politicians, but to stop the un-Bharatiya and anti-Bharatiya policies of the Government and to advance and expedite the cause of Bharatiya through state machinery side by side with official effort in the same direction...”<sup>xvii</sup> With this purpose in mind, they began to built up its family of organisation, the Sangh Parivar, with RSS at the centre. The RSS first established a student union in 1948 and then co-founded Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS, Indian People's Association), a mainstream political party, just few months before the first general elections in 1951. Later on, BJS merged with several other parties to form Janata Party in 1977 and finally Janata party dissolved and was succeeded by Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP, People's Party of India) in 1980. Since then, the BJP has played a significant role as the mainstream political organisation of RSS.

In addition, another important specialised organisation was established in 1950s. In 1955, the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS, Indian Workers Association) was founded to counter the growing influence of communism among the Hindu working class. Similarly, the issue of Hindu conversion to other religions justified the establishment of Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP, The World Council of Hindus) in 1964. Its main mission was to bring together as many heads of Hindu sects as possible in order “to endow Hinduism with church like centralised structure and use this ecclesiastical apparatus to counter Christian proselyte activities.”<sup>xviii</sup> One of the most recent of all these organisations is Bajrang Dal, a militant Hindu youth organisation set up by VHP in 1984, that has supplied its men for violent attacks on minorities. Besides these organisations, the Sangh Parivar have also included other important organisations, such as Seva Bharti (Indian Service), Sarasvati Shishu Mandir (Temple for Students of Sarasvati), Rashtra Sevika Samiti (RSS) also known as 'women wing of RSS', for social service that have considerably developed over a course of time. These subsidiary organisations along with the RSS not only help in promoting unity among Hindus but they play a substantial role in the mobilization of Hindu community. Despite diverse circumstances that led to the emergence of subsidiary organisation a consensus is ensured by the origin of their cadres. Therefore, it is said that all these subsidiary organisations originated from the RSS, 'the parental organisation', which rotates them from “one organisation to another and one region to another for preventing them from identifying with specific issues and places.”<sup>xix</sup>

### Ram Janmbhoomi Movement and the early rise of BJP

Since its inception in 1980, the BJP has served as a beacon of hope for crores of Indians who cherish the ideals of Hindu nationalism. As the BJP pursued a strategy of playing mainstream party politics by considerably moderating Hindu nationalism



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ideology, the VHP launched the Ram Janmabhoomi movement to liberate the site in Ayodhya Uttar Pradesh, where they believed Ram (Hindu deity) was born. They claim that the first Mughal King, Babar tore down a temple that once existed there and build a mosque (Babri Masjid) in its place. Thus, VHP began to focus on Ram Janmbhoomi campaign, which aimed to rebuild the Ram Mandir (temple), on the alleged birthplace of the Ram at Ayodhya. The BJP convinced of the strategic importance of the Ayodhya agitation began to rally around this campaign. Despite the ruling of Supreme Court to maintain the status quo, the then president of BJP, L. K. Advani took the major step 1990 to launch a huge religious rally, “chariot procession” (Rath Yatra), across India to mobilise public support for the (re)construction Ram Mandir on the site of Babri Masjid in Ayodhya.<sup>xx</sup> The Rath Yatra sparked communal violence in several Northern Indian towns and cities. As a result, the then Lalu Prasad Yadav’s government in Bihar arrested L. K. Advani before reaching his final destination in Ayodhya. Following the arrest of Advani, the BJP withdrew its support for V. P. Singh government at centre, resulting in an early election in 1991 in which the BJP increased its seat count from 85 in 1989 to 119 seats due to the religious polarisation caused by Yatra.

Despite the arrest of Advani, the Yatra continued march towards Ayodhya. The Yatra culminated with the demolition of the Babri Masjid by the Hindu extremist forces on December 6, 1992. The BJP leadership claimed that the destruction of Babri Masjid was an example of spontaneous activism. However, the leaked report of enquiry commission reveals that the demolition was orchestrated by the BJP, which governed Uttar Pradesh at that time.<sup>xxi</sup> The Ayodhya agitation followed by the communal riots in northern part of India, particularly Uttar Pradesh, polarized the electorate and politics along communal lines aided BJP to increase its seat tally election after election. The data reveals that from 2 seats in 1984, BJP won 85 in 1989, 119 in 1991, 160 in 1996.<sup>xxii</sup> Despite winning the larger number of seats than any other party in the parliament, BJP was unable to form a coalition when called upon to form the government. Subsequently, the BJP adopted moderate approach to politics in order to make allies. Advani recall this moment as a turning point in the history of BJP. He said, “Though we were the largest party, we failed to form a government. It was felt that on an ideological basis we could not go further. So, we embarked on the course of alliance-based coalition.”<sup>xxiii</sup>

In the wake of early elections in 1998, there was a clear shift in the ideology of BJP towards a more moderate ideology. The BJP dropped some of the key ideas from its rhetoric. The most prominent of these was the idea of (re)construction of Ram Mandir in Ayodhya. It also abandoned the idea of repealing Jammu and Kashmir’s special status under Article 370 of the Indian constitution, as well as introducing the Uniform Civil Code (UCC) that would end the personal laws of Muslim community.<sup>xxiv</sup> In 1999, in the new early elections due to the defection of some NDA members, the BJP secured 182 seats. At that time, it was single largest party in the Lok Sabha to form a coalition government with its allies. In October 1999, A. B. Vajpayee, leader of an Alliance, took the oath as Prime Minister of India. He remained in office until 2004 becoming the first non-Congress Prime Minister to completed full term of five years.

Although, RSS and the other organisations of the Sangh Parivar applauded some of the bold steps taken by the Vajpayee government (1999-2004), such as the testing of a nuclear bomb, but they were dissatisfied with his overall performance. The BJP was resented for not taking any concrete steps to (re)construct Ram Mandir in Ayodhya. All the Sangh organisations including RSS claimed the BJP leaders had been victims of their thirst for power, who instead of sticking to their principles preferred to compromise with them in order to remain in power.

Following the BJP’s defeat in the 2004 and 2009 parliamentary elections, its office bearers thought of devising a new strategy that would enable it to seize power while preventing the expansion of social programmes that contradict Hindu nationalist doctrines and the interests of its constituency. In this setting, Narendra Modi was chosen as a man of the time because of his ability to transcend caste barriers while wielding a version of Hindu nationalist populism that he had previously done in Gujrat.<sup>xxv</sup> As a full-time member of RSS since his childhood, and then a pracharak (preacher or propagator) of RSS, Modi has been highly influenced by Hindutva ideology. In addition, the organized pogrom against Muslims in 2002 in Gujrat during his tenure as Chief Minister has already helped him to earn the title of a ‘Hindu Hriday Samrat’ (the Emperor of Hindu Hearts).<sup>xxvi</sup>

### Modi’s Rule: A De Facto Hindu Rashtra

RSS as a right Hindu organisation has always stood for the social and cultural revivalism of Hinduism. The BJP as a political wing of RSS adopted a new strategy of communal politics in the 2014 election campaign, combining the desire for the ‘development’ with a consciousness based on “religious identity.” They had realized that religious based politics alone could not succeed without being linked to desire for ‘development’ that had arisen in the minds of ordinary people, struggling with poverty.<sup>xxvii</sup> Narendra Modi was conflating the concept of ‘development’ with a sense of Hindutva. The election campaign slogans such as sabka saath sabka vikaas (Everyone’s support, everyone’s development), achhe din aaye gy (Good days will come), Congress Mukth Bharat (Congress



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free India) were largely successful that it helped to win 2014 parliamentary elections with 30 percent vote share, which the party had been unable to achieve before.

Although, Modi did not emphasise the Hindu nationalist aspects of his personal conviction during the 2014 election campaign. However, his dedication towards the Hindu nationalist’s project was evident from the fact that the BJP nominated only 7 Muslim candidates out of 428 (constitutes less than 2 percent) and none of the Muslim candidate were elected. Consequently, for the first time since independence, the winning party had no Muslim representative in its parliament. The BJP’s decision to field relatively small number of candidates from the Muslim community indicated that the party wanted to free itself from the ‘Muslim vote.’<sup>xxviii</sup> In contrast to the BJP dominated National Democratic Alliance government from 1999-2004, the current BJP government is more committed towards creating Hindu Rashtra (Hindu nation-state) that has employed legal as well as illegal means to promote Hindu dominance at both regional and national level.

Since 2014, the BJP officials have made statements aimed at emphasizing Hindu essence of Indian identity over secularism, despite the fact that the latter is enshrined in the Constitution. On the occasion of the inauguration of highway in Uttar Pradesh, the former BJP president and current transport minister described BJP government as , “a government of Ram bhakts [devotees of the god ram]... a government of those who gave the slogan of Jai Shri Ram”.<sup>xxix</sup> Similarly, while applauding Modi’s gesture of presenting ‘Bhagvat Gita’ to world leaders, the former foreign minister Sushma Swaraj advocated for India to recognize the ‘Bhagavat Gita’ as a national holy book (Rashtriya Granth). In addition, the RSS established the ‘Bharatiya Shiksha Niti Ayog’ with the goal of ‘saffronizing, the education system by influencing the policies of Ministry of Human Resource Development, which is in charge of formulating the policies of education. The committee was in charge of Dinanath Batra, a long-serving RSS member, who had specialised in rewriting the history in accordance to the precepts of Hindu nationalism. The NCERT textbooks used in the CBSE affiliated schools have undergone significant changes. According to Indian Express reports, the continuous interventions from the HRD ministry (Prakesh Javadar, another RSS member) resulted in at least 1334 changes in 182 NCERT textbooks without consulting the subject experts.<sup>xxx</sup> The revised NCERT textbooks endorse ancient Indian History and lays new emphasis on important Hindu figures such as Maharana Pratap, Chattrapati Shivaji, Aurobindo Ghosh, Swami Vivekananda and others, of the past in opposition to the Muslims.

Hindu nationalist organisations have sparked widespread violence against the minority Muslim community. The Hindu nationalist groups have launched various types of campaigns against what they call ‘love jihad’, against Muslim occupation of urban space (also known as ‘land jihad’) and against conversion to Islam and Christianity (also known as ghar wapsi- to reconvert Muslims and Christians back into Hinduism).<sup>xxxi</sup> The campaign of ‘ghar wapsi’ implicitly asserts Hindu superiority and a refusal to recognize religious pluralism. Moreover, the Hindu nationalists organized the self-styled cow protection groups that attack Muslims on the pretext of killing cows and consuming beef. As a result, numerous incidents of mob lynching took place across northern and central India. The lynching of Pehlu Khan in Alwar district of Rajasthan and Mohammad Akhalaq in Uttar Pradesh's Dadri district are two prominent examples of mob violence. According to the reports, between May 2015 and December 2018 44 people, including 36 Muslims, were killed and injured 280 in over 100 attacks across India.<sup>xxxii</sup> In many lynching cases, there have been allegations that the Police and the BJP politicians often obstruct prosecutions in order to let the accused off the hook.

On July 30, 2019, months after Modi was re-elected to power, the Parliament passed legislation criminalising the centuries-old Muslim practice of ‘triple talaq’ (instant divorce).<sup>xxxiii</sup> Some Muslim women, such as Zakia Soman of ‘Bhartiya Muslim Mahila Adolan’ (BMMA) maintain that the legislation would empower the “Muslim women in relation to marriage and divorce.” However, the supporters of the ‘triple talaq’ practice, on the other hand, argue that this new legislation violates the constitutional right of Muslims to have their own personal laws, such as marriage, divorce and so on, which could aid BJP in introducing Uniform Civil Code (UCC), a key item on the Hindutva agenda.<sup>xxxiv</sup> The Hindutva nationalists scored a major victory in November 2019, when a five-member bench of “Supreme Court in its unanimous judgement not only handed the disputed Babri Masjid site in Ayodhya to Hindus but it also redirected the government to create a trust that would be in charge of the construction of temple.”<sup>xxxv</sup> This verdict not only legitimised/ justified the unlawful destruction of the Babri masjid and with this judgment, many scholars claim, “the ‘Hinduization’ or ‘Hindutva-ization’ of the Supreme Court has been greatly extended.”<sup>xxxvi</sup>

In addition, the Indian Parliament passed the ‘Citizenship Amendment Act’ (CAA) which provides a pathway for citizenship to the undocumented immigrants from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan, unless they are Muslims. This amendment act also reduced the residence requirement for naturalisation, from twelve years to six, for Hindu, Sikh, Jain, Parsi and Christians immigrants who arrived in India before 31 December 2014.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Unlike the previous Citizenship Act of 1955 that had established blood and



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descent as the basis of citizenship, the Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019 has overtly used religious identity as a criterion citizenship, specifically excluding Muslims. This act gives non-Muslim immigrants from Muslim majority neighbouring countries the option of obtaining citizenship on the grounds of their alleged persecution as religious minorities in their home countries. This legislation explicitly reflects the long-held goal of defining India as a homeland for Hindus and other religious communities as indigenous to India. In this respect, scholars argue, “defining any non-Muslim from the wider region as belonging to the ‘Hindu homeland’ reflects the RSS long-standing vision of the entire subcontinent as ‘Akhand Bharat’ [translated as] greater India.”<sup>xxxviii</sup>

Through the Citizenship Amendment Act, the Modi government has challenged the secular principles of constitution and the very foundation of Indian nation. This Act has been criticized as discriminatory, especially for “reducing Muslims to second class citizens.”<sup>xxxix</sup> Scholars along with student activists claim that the CAA is another Hindu nationalist agenda of Modi’s BJP government that aims to target Muslim population. Being discriminatory on the basis of religion, it is argued that the CAA take forward the Hindutva ideology that describe India as a Hindu state and Islam as alien religion. The CAA sparked large-scale protests throughout India particularly in Assam and north-eastern states over the fears that granting citizenship to immigrants would result in the loss of their “political, culture and land rights” and could motivate further migration from Bangladesh.<sup>xl</sup> The government’s response to CAA protests has been violent. Following the massive protests against the anti-CAA, the current BJP government unleashed a reign of terror on Muslims across India, arresting, detaining or even torturing Muslim activists on the flimsiest of pretexts. The police arrested and injured hundreds of students who protested against the citizenship laws at two predominantly Muslim varsities, Jamia Millia Islamia and Aligrah Muslim University, in mid-December 2019.<sup>xli</sup> In Delhi, the BJP leaders such as Anurag Thakur and Kapil Mishra provoked the majority Hindus against anti-CAA Muslim protesters, leading to communal violence in north-eastern part of Delhi in which fifty-three people, mostly Muslims, were killed. The Hindu mob vandalised Muslim houses and burned mosques in the open eye of Delhi police, who did nothing against the BJP officials incited the violence. The silence of BJP officials over the target violence against Muslims in north-east Delhi highlights the dangerous imbrication of right-wing populism.

The trend of Hindu nationalism was further exacerbated by national lockdown imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Through the management of pandemic, the BJP government advanced its commitments towards Hindutva. The members of Tabligh-e-Jama’at (a reformist Islamic movement), who took the part in an international religious congregation at Nizamuddin in Delhi were accused of spreading the virus on purpose. Despite the fact that gathering was not illegal, but the BJP officials, TV anchors including Arnab Goswami on Republic TV, and Sudhir Chaudhary on Zee News continued to blame the participants of Nizamuddin religious congregation.<sup>xlii</sup> As a result, police across the country began to arrest as many Tabligh-e-Jama’at members as possible. In addition to the arrest of Tablighi members, common Muslims were also targeted during the pandemic. The Anti-Muslim campaign with the hashtag #Coronajihad has resulted to boycott the Muslim vendors and hospitals refusing treatments to the Muslims patients and in case they were admitted, they were placed in separate hospital wards from Hindus.<sup>xliii</sup> Therefore, the pandemic has further worsened existing prejudice, making the ongoing Muslim exclusion even more systematic. This exclusion is reminder of ‘caste system’ and serves as a conformation that Muslims are India’s new untouchables.

### Concluding Remark

This paper attempted to make sense of the political trajectory of India from secular to the de facto Hindu Rashtra in a journey of less than seventy-five years. The Indian experience of democracy in the last two decades challenges several assumptions about the universality of the western secular democracy. The Indian experience of Hindu nationalism based on exclusive Hindutva ideology explicitly suggests that the democracy very often gives birth to authoritarianism and anti-democratic or majoritarian regimes.

The paper highlighted that the India’s secular democracy faces threat in the guise of Hindu nationalism. Moreover, the paper concludes that the contemporary position of Hindu nationalist movement was not a sudden political occurrence, but rather a well-defined and strategically executed project that was well aware of what, when and how of Indian politics. The Hindu nationalists have promoted their version of ‘Hindu culture’ as a tool of maintaining their hegemony over the vast majority of the Indian people. Since 2014, the BJP government has moved India towards a form “Majoritarianism”, by establishing ethno-religious and populist style of rule, thereby relegating minorities (Muslims and Christians) to an inferior second-class citizen. Moreover, under the Modi rule, Muslims were made victims of the repeated campaigns led by right-wing Hindu groups in their fights against the religious conversion, love jihad, land jihad and in its cow protection operations, that sometimes resulted the lynching of Muslims.

The study has showed that the Hindu nationalism has gradually become a hegemonic discourse in the sense that it is now considered as the only legitimate force in India. The article also highlights that the present BJP government attempt to divide Indian society along religious lines has been successful largely. Prominent scholars argue that the defeat in elections can only stop BJP’s



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resolute march towards creating a “new hegemony.” However, the electoral defeat may not make much difference because the Sangh Parivar is so deeply rooted in the social fabric of Indian society that it may continue to dictate its terms to the state even if BJP is voted out of power. Thus, the paper concludes the right-wing Hindu organisations such as RSS, BJP, Bajrang Dal and other organisation have weakened India’s secular democracy in the last two decades.

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