

HINDU NATIONALISM: A RISE OF NEW RELIGIOUS RADICALISM IN INDIA

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 Analysis

“When Indians voted in parliamentary elections earlier this year, they did more than just elect a government. They also participated in the birth of India as a Hindu nation with a state to match.”¹ This statement was written by Kanchan Chandra, professors of politics at New York University, about the election where Narendra Modi was elected as Indian prime minister for the second time. It could be easily said that Narendra Modi is a Hindu nationalist leader who supports the ideology that defines Hindustan (India) as a state for Hindu people. This nationalism is beyond cultural or ethnical nationalism because the word “Hindu” represents religion; therefore this is a “religious nationalism” which excludes other religions. Hindu nationalism has been continuing since the late period of British colonialism in the Indian sub-continent. However, it began to get radicalized, especially after its independence from the British. After 2014, when BJP won

majority seats in the parliament and formed the government under Modi’s leadership, the world could see the establishment of the total “radicalized nationalist movement” based on religious identity. After his election, the ideology of Hindutva² started to spread with state support. The ongoing violent activities against religious minorities, especially against Muslims, increased. State-sponsored violent activities became rampant throughout India. A long process of Hindu radicalization turned into violent extremism. For instance, the government openly threatens Muslims and makes laws against them. In many parts of the country, Hindus are openly using violence on Muslim minority. Muslims are not safe in India; their properties are under threat. Hindu violence is increasing in the name of Hindu nationalism. Muslims are not even able to practice their religious rituals; they cannot protect their religious values.

On top of that, what is happening in Kashmir is blatant violation of human rights. They are conducting inhuman and violent acts against Muslims in Kashmir. In spite of these violent activities conducted by the government or with support of the government, no one is criticizing Hinduism and Hindus as much as they criticize Islam. No one is talking about Hindu radicalization or Hindu terrorism as they are using these terms for Islam. Why? In this paper, I will try to find the answer to this question. Why are there not much criticism and discourses about Hindu radicalization, violent extremism of Hindu radicalized nationalist movement or Hindu terror?

This article will consist of four parts. In the first part, I will give brief information about Hindu nationalism and its main political and social branches such as BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) and RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh). In the second part, I will try to indicate the activities and laws conducted by the government and Hindu people against Muslims. The third part of the article will try to find out why BJP is doing this and why people support the activities. Finally, in the last part of the article, I will focus on the silence about Hindu radicalization, why is no one talking about violent activities against Muslims in India? The main argument of the article is that the Indian government uses some policies to legitimate their activities and to get public support (mostly Hindus) such as using propaganda, creating fear of Islamic terror and Muslims, the ideology of Hindu nationalism and most affectively using violence in the name of counter-violence.

Hindu nationalism, BJP, and RSS

To understand Hindu nationalism and what is happening in India we should acknowledge about the BJP ruling party and its main supporter, RSS. BJP won the national election for the first time in 2014. Since then the rise of Hindu nationalism has been recorded in India. However, Hindu nationalism is not a new phenomenon in India.

“The Hindu nationalist movement in India— collectively known as the Sangh Parivar—

emerged in response to colonialism in the 1920s. It aims to ensure the predominance of Hinduism in Indian culture and society and seeks to drive out religious minorities from the country, claiming that Hindus are threatened by growing Muslim and Christian populations.”³

Shangh Paribar has many organizations that are actively working in various areas such as politics, education, and culture. *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS) is the principal organization of the Paribar. It is a paramilitary organization with millions of members with a strong educational wing known as the *Vidhya Barati*. This educational wing of RSS plays a significant role in spreading Hindu nationalist propaganda to two million students by operating twenty thousand schools in India.⁴

“The Hindu culture is the life-breath of Hindusthan. It is therefore clear that if Hindusthan is to be protected, we should first nourish the Hindu culture. If the Hindu culture perishes in Hindusthan itself, and if the Hindu society ceases to exist, it will hardly be appropriate to refer to the mere geographical entity that remains as Hindusthan. Mere geographical lumps do not make a nation. The entire society should be in such a vigilant and organized condition that no one would dare to cast an evil eye on any of our points of honour.”⁵

Here, RSS founder Dr. Keshav Baliram Hedgewar explains about the vision and mission of the organization. Its main goal is to make India the land of Hinduism and therefore spreading Hindutva (Hindu nationalism) ideology. This is a paramilitary organization with millions of volunteers working for Hindu nationalistic ideas. When Indians won their freedom from British rule in 1947, they established a pluralistic democracy based on secular principles.⁶ Nevertheless, their eventual goal was shaping India as a Hindu state. Through the process the got radicalized and finally, we can see a radicalized Hindu nationalist movement under the ruling party of India.

RSS was banned on the charge of murder of Gandhi, the founding father of India. Godse,

known as RSS member killed Gandhi because he believed Gandhi gave Muslims too many rights in the country. Godse was arrested and members of RSS were sent to jail. “Godse was convicted of Gandhi’s murder and was hanged. But in July 1949, the government lifted the RSS ban. An official investigation later absolved the RSS of any involvement in Gandhi’s death.”⁷

RSS has a strong presence in social, cultural, educational, labor, developmental, political and other fields of nationalist endeavor today. The *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP) is the political wing of RSS and the largest political party in India. Now it is the ruling party of India since the 2014 national election in which the party won majority seats under Narendra Modi’s leadership. BJP has been working for Hindutva ideology from the beginning being the political wing of, and with the support given by RSS. “The Gujarat incident” known as crime against humanity is an example to show BJP and Modi’s intention. On February 27, 2002, some Hindu religious volunteers were reportedly killed in a train attack by “Muslims.” Beginning February 28, the state of Gujarat witnessed unimaginable violent activities by Hindu nationalists against Muslims. They killed hundreds of Muslims, burned their business places, houses, and raped Muslim girls. The police stood by during these brutal activities. At the time of the incident, Modi was chief minister of Gujarat, who said that it was a “Hindu backlash” in response to the train attack.⁸ It was state-sponsored terrorism against Muslims in the city under Modi’s control, who currently is the prime minister of India.

What is happening to Muslims of India?

Before talking about the lacked criticism on Hindu radical nationalists and Hindu radicalism it would be better to focus on the incidents and violent activities happening against Muslims. The government’s new laws and regulations against Muslims, the situations of Muslims and their properties will be examined and explained to show the extreme radical activities of Hindu nationalists.

The BJP government has taken some steps against Muslims. The most controversial is the current Citizenship Amendment Bill. These days we read news of how deadly protests spread across India over this citizenship law, which was approved on December 11 2019, mostly for excluding Muslims from citizenship. Protests broke out at universities across the country, including Hyderabad, Varanasi, and the capital New Delhi. “Opposition parties say the law is discriminatory as it singles out Muslims in an officially secular nation of 1.3 billion people. Muslims form nearly 15 percent of the population.”⁹

“If ever in the post-independence history of India its secular character was under the threat of obliteration, it is now. The Citizenship Amendment Bill, the latest but not the last episode in the “politics of belonging” in India, has Muslims in its crosshairs. Any other explanation given by the ruling dispensation is malarkey.”¹⁰

Indian journalist Ritu Sharma wrote the above quote for *The Diplomat* to explain the bill. Yet the Indian government does not accept the accusations and gives various explanations for public acceptance on the bill. However, their explanation is really “malarkey” as Ritu Sharma said. Besides, the Babri mosque issue and the decision of India Supreme Court (November 2019) by which they handed over the mosque to Hindus for the construction of a temple is another example of government steps against Muslims.

“The Muslim side in the legal battle of Babri Mosque case possessed all the evidence under the law that the site belongs to the masjid”¹¹ said Zafaryab Jilani who was fighting the case. He also said that “the historic mosque, widely known as Babri Masjid, was built in 1528 during the reign of the first Mughal emperor Zahir ud-Din Muhammad Babur in today’s Ayodhya in the central Indian province of Uttar Pradesh (UP) and there was no claim of any Hindu deity having been born at the site.”¹²

Indian Muslims are not secured under the BJP government. They are not able to do their religious rituals; their properties and houses are under threat. A lot of incidents against Muslims occur every day in many parts of the country. Muslim girls face verbal and sexual harassment. Sometimes there would be news about a Muslim family who was beaten by Hindus for eating beef, some times for any other reasons. “Between May 2015 and December 2018, vigilante cow protection groups killed at least 44 people—mostly Muslim—accused of slaughtering, transporting, or consuming cattle.”¹³ Sangeeta Kamat and Biju Mathew (2003) describe the Gujarat incident (2002) as following, which is a good way to understand the situation of Muslim minority in India:

The stories included descriptions of murderous, slogan-chanting mobs of youth carrying swords, gas cylinders, guns, and sticks that isolated Muslim men from women, raped women in full view of their families, slayed infants with swords, destroyed Muslim-owned property, homes, and mosques, and chased the escaping crowd to set them on fire.”¹⁴

Indian journalist Manoj Singh described an incident that took place in the Uttar Pradesh (2017) under Uttar Pradesh’s BJP-appointed chief minister Yogi Adityanath, “I saw the burned shops. I saw the Muslim men who ran the shops trying to douse the fire. I knew one of the shopkeepers. He was very emotional. He said, ‘Look what has happened to me. I’m ruined’.”¹⁵

Another issue to focus on to understand the situations of Muslims in India and India-controlled-land is that of Kashmir. To some extent, it may be something beyond religious issues but what happened recently in Kashmir was a violation of human rights. The special status of Indian-controlled Kashmir was revoked by the BJP government to be under the control of the federal government for easy intervention. Hannah Ellis described the human rights violation done by the BJP government for *The Guardian* as follows:

“The decision by the Indian government, led by prime minister Narendra Modi, to revoke Jammu and Kashmir’s constitutional autonomy and split it into two territories under the control of the federal government – bringing an end to seven decades of semi-autonomous rule – was followed by a series of militaristic measures. Tens of thousands of troops moved in, former chief ministers, legislators, and separatist leaders were detained, curfews and travel restriction were imposed and all communication methods, including phone access to the internet, was cut off.”¹⁶

Why do people support...do they support?

Why is Modi’s government doing and supporting these radicalized activities? As we mentioned earlier BJP is the political wing of RSS, the radical Hindu nationalist movement whose main goal is to reshape India as a Hindu state. Although India is a secular, democratic, multi-religious and multi-cultural country, BJP is doing this openly because it estimates Hindu nationalism idea will gain as much support as it does in Israel. When we focus on the situation of India and Israel we can see a lot of similarities between both countries. Modi is using the nationalism idea for populism. BJP’s vote increase from 31.4% in 2014 to 32.2% in 2019¹⁷ shows that Modi succeeded in his populist activities. “A Pew Research Center poll in 2017 revealed that 88 percent of Indians held a favorable view of him (Modi), with 69 percent holding a “very favorable view.”¹⁸

This is interesting since India is a country with a secular constitution. It is a fruit of long-time work or ‘a profit of a long-run investment’. All branches of RSS have been working for a long time to spread Hindu nationalism idea to the Hindus. They did many services and other activities to get support, and eventually, they are now profiteering their investment they in the past. Sangeeta Kamat and Biju Mathew (2003) describe in detail why people support Modi and his government:

“The Hindu nationalist movement would not succeed without long-term cultural, social, and paramilitary work that lays the foundation for a specific trajectory of politics that is amenable to escalation into organized violence at particular moments, such as the Gujarat 2002 pogrom. A little-known service wing of the RSS, the Sewa Vibha, largely does this long-term work. It offers service and development through public activities such as schools for the poor, particularly in tribal areas, emergency relief disaster-struck regions, blood banks, free eye checkups in rural areas, distribution of clothing, group homes for widows, and organized tours temples. Sewa Vibhag has a network of “one-teacher schools,” staffed usually by males who have undergone training in RSS shaka and who’s a teacher is paid by the RSS. Such entities ensure that rural and expenses remote tribal areas have functioning schools, creating an ideal setting for propagating RSS ideology of Hindu supremacy.”¹⁹

Moreover, the Hindu nationalist movement tried to introduce religious minorities such as Muslims, Christians, Jewish, and Shiks as the ‘other’ who are not Indian. “All these communities are depicted in the writings and history textbooks of the movement as ‘outsiders’, or in the case of Muslims as ‘invaders’ who arrived into what Hindutva followers deemed a Hindu land.”²⁰

Besides, Modi’s policies in the economy may help him to win the second round. He supports free trade and foreign investment only in high-tech sectors, a stance illustrated by a pithy slogan “computer chips but not potato chips.”²¹

Why is no one talking about Hindu radicalization or Hindu terror?

The Indian government uses policies and creates discourses to legitimize their activities including open and secret support to violent activities throughout the country. They are propagating against Muslims and slandering Islam all the time. Using memories such as the Mumbai attack and discourses of ‘Islamic terror’ and ‘Jihad’ they create fear among the people of the country. “The Muslim is discursively constructed as a

site of fear, fantasy, distrust, anger, envy, and hatred, thus generating desires of emulation, abjection and/or extermination.”²² The media is a significant tool the Modi government uses easily for propagating and creating fear since “significant private and corporate funding supports the Indian news media which has developed a cozy relationship with the Modi government.”²³ “Public concern over the threat of terrorism in India is high. In 2013, India had the fourth highest number of citizens who labeled Islamic extremist groups as a “major threat” out of 40 countries polled.”²⁴ Discourses of ‘Islamic terrorism’ and ‘Islamic Jihad’ are the cause of this fear. “According to a 2013 Pew Research Center poll, 82 percent of Indians view Islamic extremist groups as a threat, with 67 percent labeling them as a “major threat.” Only three out of 40 countries polled had a higher percentage of citizens who labeled Islamic extremist groups as a ‘major threat.’”²⁵

Nationalism discourse is another tool of legitimizing what is taking place in India. Some of the government actions are justified in the name of nationalism and protecting the nation. Therefore, rejecting those actions or criticizing them may label the critics as anti-nationalist. For instance, people “have seen those who question the BJP’s actions and its total clampdown on the Muslim-majority Kashmir valley publicly shamed as being anti-national.”²⁶ Moreover, when we focus on the definition or what Hindu nationalism means, we can see all kinds of activities against religious minorities are becoming ‘national’ rejection that may label a person as ‘anti-national’. Parita Mukta (2010) gives a brief explanation of Hindu nationalism:

“Hindu nationalism today is firmly grounded in reformulating historical traditions to conform with its politics of vendetta (see Romila Thapar, this volume.) Within this, the political and social trajectories of the Sultanate and Mughal periods, as well as the time of British rule, are not only constructed as a fall from an original state of purity, but the citizens who today belong to the Muslim and Christian faiths are reduced to standing in for the Invader, the Plunderer, the

Desecrator, and are positioned as treasonable subjects to be disciplined and suborned within the nation-state. The (constructed) threat to the Hindu polity and Hindu community then necessitates both an offensive to protect these two entities and a larger attempt to reach out to Hindus living outside of the original homeland.”²⁷

Finally, the most influential and active way used by the Modi government to legitimize the activities against Muslims is the ‘security’ discourse. Violence in the name of counter-violence or extremism in the name of counter-extremism gives the Modi government legitimacy and public support. ‘Security’ is the magic word here thanks to which discourse governments pick to legitimize their illegal violent actions against certain groups. Dibyesh Anand from the University of Bath came up with a constructivist explanation about labeling or defining someone as a threat. He created a close link of security with identity politics and said that ‘how we define ourselves depends on how we represent others’. Representation of others as a threat means we will need security for ourselves. This ‘us’ and ‘other’ or threat and enemy of us is constructed by ourselves based on our identity or interest. This logic of the discourse of security dictates that the security of the ‘self’ facilitates and even demands the use of policing and violence against the ‘other’. He also used this explanation to illustrate the case of Hindutva’s politics of representation, which legitimizes anti-Muslim violence in the name of securing the Hindu body politic at various levels.²⁸ “This is the logic of this discourse of security that enables extreme violence to be normalized, systematized and institutionalized.”²⁹

India has counter-terrorism/counter-violence programs to fight, especially, ‘Islamic-terrorism’. The Indian government has several intelligence,

military, and police organizations that work to launch counterinsurgency operations, sometimes with the help of the paramilitary and other local groups, though some of these groups have been accused of perpetrating human rights abuses.³⁰ Besides, India has many legislations fighting against violence and terrorism. “However, some legislation has been highly controversial, such as the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA). AFSPA, which gives unconditional permission to Indian security forces to shoot on sight, has been implemented in several Indian states since 1958 in response to insurgencies.”³¹

To conclude, it can be seen that although India uses or support the use of violence against Muslims, people are not criticizing these actions and no one is talking about Hindu radicalization, Hindu terror or Hindu extremism in India. It is mostly because of the policies used by the Modi government such as propagating, creating fear of ‘Islamic terror’, violence under the nationalism and security discourses. Many state-sponsored violent activities take place in India against Muslims. Muslim minorities’ properties, homes, and lives are under threat. They are living in a country where they can be killed easily, their girls can be raped, and their business places may be burned by any radical Hindu nationalist who is either a member of RSS, an organization of radicalized Hindu nationalist movement or a normal Hindu who thinks India should be a state exclusively for Hindus. Modi and RSS’ BJP are enjoying support from most Hindus thanks to the long-term activities they have done in spreading their ideology. Representing Muslims as a threat for Hindus has enabled the Modi government and his supporter to use violence and make new laws and regulations against Muslim minority and therefore, no one even criticizes these actions or use Hindu terror/Hindu radicalization discourses for Hinduism.

Endnotes

- ¹ Chandra, “The Roots of Hindu Nationalism’s Triumph in India” <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/india/2019-09-11/roots-hindu-nationalisms-triumph-india>
- ² Hindutva (“Hindu-ness”), an ideology that sought to define Indian culture in terms of Hindu values.
- ³ Counter Extremism Project, “India: Extremism & Counter-Extremism”, p. 5.
- ⁴ Counter Extremism Project, “India: Extremism & Counter-Extremism”, p. 5.
- ⁵ <http://rss.org//Encyc/2012/10/22/rss-vision-and-mission.html>
- ⁶ <https://www.npr.org/2019/05/03/706808616/the-powerful-group-shaping-the-rise-of-hindu-nationalism-in-india>
- ⁷ <https://www.npr.org/2019/05/03/706808616/the-powerful-group-shaping-the-rise-of-hindu-nationalism-in-india>
- ⁸ Kamat & Mathew, “Mapping Political Violence in a Globalized World: The Case of Hindu Nationalism”, pp. 5-6.
- ⁹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/12/india-anti-muslim-citizenship-bill-191209095557419.html>
- ¹⁰ <https://thediplomat.com/2019/12/the-citizenship-amendment-bill-and-the-theocratization-of-india/>
- ¹¹ <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/-babri-mosque-all-evidence-was-with-us-says-muslim-lawyer/1639866>
- ¹² <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/-babri-mosque-all-evidence-was-with-us-says-muslim-lawyer/1639866>
- ¹³ Counter Extremism Project, “India: Extremism & Counter-Extremism”, p. 5.
- ¹⁴ Kamat & Mathew, “Mapping Political Violence in a Globalized World: The Case of Hindu Nationalism”, p. 5.
- ¹⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/26/modis-man-flexes-muscular-hinduism-shock-election>
- ¹⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/05/the-personal-and-economic-cost-of-kashmirs-internet-ban>
- ¹⁷ <http://www.indiavotes.com/>
- ¹⁸ Counter Extremism Project, “India: Extremism & Counter-Extremism”, p. 19.
- ¹⁹ Kamat & Mathew, “Mapping Political Violence in a Globalized World: The Case of Hindu Nationalism”, pp. 10-11.
- ²⁰ Kamat & Mathew, “Mapping Political Violence in a Globalized World: The Case of Hindu Nationalism”, p. 9.
- ²¹ <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/04/04/hindu-nationalism-and-s-economic-record-pub-78720>
- ²² Anand, “The Violence of Security: Hindu Nationalism and the Politics of Representing ‘the Muslim’ as a Danger”, p. 5.
- ²³ <http://theconversation.com/in-india-modis-nationalism-quashes-dissent-with-help-from-the-media-125700>
- ²⁴ Counter Extremism Project, “India: Extremism & Counter-Extremism”, p. 2.
- ²⁵ Counter Extremism Project, “India: Extremism & Counter-Extremism”, p. 18.
- ²⁶ <http://theconversation.com/in-india-modis-nationalism-quashes-dissent-with-help-from-the-media-125700>
- ²⁷ Mukta, “The public face of Hindu nationalism”, p. 3.
- ²⁸ Anand, “The Violence of Security: Hindu Nationalism and the Politics of Representing ‘the Muslim’ as a Danger”, p. 4.
- ²⁹ Anand, “The Violence of Security: Hindu Nationalism and the Politics of Representing ‘the Muslim’ as a Danger”, p. 1.
- ³⁰ Counter Extremism Project, “India: Extremism & Counter-Extremism”, p. 2.
- ³¹ Counter Extremism Project, “India: Extremism & Counter-Extremism”, p. 2.

