

INDIA: SECULAR COUNTRY AT A CROSSROAD

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 Analysis

Over the past weeks tens of thousands have taken to the streets in India to protest against Prime Minister Narendra Modi's new citizenship law. The law threatens India's status as a secular democracy and is seen as outright discrimination of the Muslim minority. Passed in December, the Citizenship Amendment Act offers a legal platform for persecuted minorities from neighbouring countries to become eligible for Indian citizenship except for Muslims. It is the first time that the country has incorporated religious considerations in her policies on migration and refugees. Activists see the new law as one of the latest in a string of actions by the ruling party aimed at mobilizing Hindu nationalist sentiments against Muslim minorities for political expediency.

Modi has ventured to transform India from a secular- accommodating democracy to that of a Hindu dominated nation, pushing other

minorities, including at least two hundred million Muslims, to the margins. The founders of India, Gandhi and Nehru had envisioned a secular state where Muslim-Hindu harmony was to be paramount. As the British Empire prepared its handover, Muslims were so terrified over the possible Hindu domination that they demanded a separate Muslim state. In 1947, Pakistan was formed forcing millions of people to cross from one country to another. In the process, millions were affected. The remaining Muslims constituting over fourteen per cent of the population sought to protect themselves by forging an alliance with Gandhi-Nehru's group, the Congress Party.

As the founding fathers of India were moulding a secular state, an alternative discourse was also taking shape. In 1925, K.B Hedgewar, a physician from central India founded an organization that came to embody this abysmal



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religio-politico discourse until today. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (R.S.S), as the group was known, was dedicated to the idea that India was a Hindu state and that Hindus had to dominate the minorities. Members of this group believed that Gandhi and Nehru were appeasers who had to be fought. In 1948, a former R.S.S member and staunch Hindu nationalist Nathuram Vinayak Godse assassinated Gandhi. Subsequent crackdowns on the group forced it to the margins until the mid 1970's when it re-organized and widened its membership base. Among the new recruits from lower castes was the current Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Coming from the low-ranking Ganchi caste, Modi quickly rose through the R.S.S ranks moving to the group's political branch, the Bharatiya Janata Party (B.J.P). With only two seats in parliament at the time, the party needed an issue as a means to mobilize. This issue was found in a religious dispute in the northern city of Ayodhya. There was a mosque called Babri Masjid that was constructed by the Mughal emperor Babul in 1528. After independence, Hindus started placing idols inside the mosque and argued that it was built on the site of a Hindu temple, where god Ram was born. In 1990, a senior BJP member L.K Advani began to call for the masjid to be destroyed and a temple was to be built on it. In 1992, R.S.S members swarmed Babri Mosque and razed it down completely. Hindu-Muslim riots ensued across the country and the vision of harmony destroyed. As lives and livelihoods were shattered, the political star of Narendra Modi was just rising. In 2002, as a chief Minister of Gujarat state, Modi became invisible as R.S.S members allegedly carried out extreme acts of violence against Muslims including cutting open the bellies of pregnant women to kill their babies, gang raping women and girls, as well as burning and dismembering Muslims. Ehsan Jafri, an elderly Congress Party member was "paraded naked and then dismembered and burned".

Now that the BJP came to power in 2014, the R.S.S ideology is guiding the government policies from education to politics and the media. Critics say about half of the cabinet have strong links to R.S.S, including the powerful Home Minister Amit Shah who is allegedly behind many of Modi's divisive policies. Indian media has been bullied into endorsing this agenda, calling it the "New India."

How can this situation be ameliorated?

A solution is urgently needed otherwise tens of thousands of Muslims are in the danger of being stripped of citizenship. Already the Indian authorities have started constructing detention centres in Assam state, engendering panic among Muslims there. This goes against the spirit of Indian constitution and against the spirit of humanism. The country needs to return to an inclusive democracy, which was envisioned for a country that is home to almost all major world religions. This would require efforts towards Diversity Management.

Diversity Management is defined as governing diversity of ideas, interests, innate and inherited qualities by accommodating them. What we see in present-day India is a deliberate process to dis-accommodate Muslims. The conflict we are witnessing is the exact result of failure within the social management systems.

Indian authorities are endeavouring to close the Indian space from Muslims to exclude them in the process of becoming a closed civilization. A closed civilization by nature always leads to clashes and conflicts. A multi-religious society like India requires the bridging of "us/they" line. That was the vision of India's founding fathers. The Preamble of the Constitution too stated that India is a secular country. People should not be classified based on their religion or caste, and that remains the right thing to do.