

## **POLITICS OF EXCLUSION IN INDIA: A THREAT TO LIBERAL DEMOCRACY AND REGIONAL INTEGRATION**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper explores the politics of exclusion in India and the threats it poses to the country's liberal democracy and regional integration. Using a qualitative research methodology, the paper uncovers how exclusionary policies in India have created serious threats for democracy and regional integration under Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The paper argues that politics of exclusion is increasingly becoming a threat to liberal democracy in India, citing instances like the Citizenship Amendment Bill (2019), erasure of certain chapters on Mughal history from textbooks, National Register of Citizens in Assam, increasing mob lynching, and revocation of Article 370 and 35A related to Kashmir. Furthermore, paper argues that such events are a threat to regional integration by impacting cross-border migration, cultural exchanges, and diplomatic relations with neighboring countries. Overall, the paper suggests that India must address the challenges posed by the politics of exclusion and promote inclusivity and diversity in all aspects of society to foster a more harmonious relationship between India and its neighbors in South Asia.*

**Keywords:** Politics of exclusion, Liberal democracy, Regional integration.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The politics of exclusion refers to the deliberate and systematic act of excluding certain individuals or groups from participating in the political process or accessing critical resources and include prejudicial restriction of benefits and opportunities. The politics of exclusion has been a topic of much scholarly attention over the past decade; it created the potential for conflict and polarization in society. Recent activities by the BJP-led government in India include: the erasure of Mughal history in the 12th class history book by the National Council of Educational Research (NCERT), revocation of Article 370 and 35A unilaterally, which changed the autonomous constitutional status of Kashmir and the passage of controversial Citizenship Amendment Bill (CAB) have primarily affected marginalized communities such as Dalits, Adivasis, Muslims, and other religious minorities.

The CAB represents politics of exclusion, a significant point of contention in India's political landscape. The Citizenship Amendment Bill is against India's constitution because it grants citizenship based on a person's religious identity, which goes against the country's secular values. Additionally, many believe the bill would only marginalize India's already sizeable Muslim population, which numbers around 200 million people (Regan, Gupta, and Khan 2019).

The impacts of politics of exclusion on liberal democracy in India have been significant and very lethal to democratic growth. Liberal democracy is based on equality, justice, and the protection of individual rights (Villani, 2018). However, the politics of exclusion and the usage of populist authoritarian tactics by the current Indian regime have undermined these principles by denying certain groups of people their rights and privileges.

Moreover, India's domestic politics under BJP and its exclusion policies have impacted regional integration in South Asia. The prospects and opportunities of regional integration depend mainly on the role of India, as it is a giant in the region and can play a reasonable role in the success of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARRC) and other regional initiatives (Naazer, 2015). However, the politics of exclusion has undermined these initiatives by creating divisions between different regions and communities.

The paper contends that these occurrences threaten regional integration by influencing transnational migration, cultural interchange, and diplomatic ties with neighboring nations. In order to gain a better and

comprehensive understanding of the politics of exclusion in India and its impacts on liberal democracy and regional integration, this paper will seek to answer the following research questions: How have exclusionary policies in India led to threats to liberal democracy and regional integration? And to what extent have recent developments, including the erasure of Mughal history from curricula, the Citizenship Amendment Bill, and revocation of Articles 370 and 35A, impacted cross-border migration and diplomatic relations with neighboring countries?

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The subsequent paragraphs will give an incisive analysis of previous literature written on the topic. India's liberal democracy under Modi has been facing multitudinous challenges including populist-driven political landscape and the rise of right wing mobilization (Bolsver, 2022). Author traces its roots under the current regime and its far reaching impacts on democracy and religious ethos and argues the ideologies and strategies employed by the BJP are dangerous to Indian democracy. Moreover, he conclusively says that the BJP has used populist and authoritarian tactics to forge ahead an ethno-religious nationalist agenda particularly during the 2019 general election.

Christophe Jafferlot provides a nuanced and thought-provoking analysis about the evolutionary trajectory of Hindu nationalism and Modi's populist style of rule in his scholarly work "*Modi's India: Hindu nationalism and the rise of ethnic democracy*" (2021). Author says Modi's type of populism is largely influenced by the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh), which is a Hindu nationalist organization in India (Jafferlot, 2021). Yadav (2021) agrees with Jafferlot and considers Indian democracy crippling since the rise of Modi amid recent developments including Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and National Register of Citizens (NRC).

Zoya Hasan (2016) maintains that the BJP came into the power with a majoritarian program which wrought worst communal polarization in the country. BJP's initiatives since 2014 brought India at the verge of social and economic exclusion (Hasan, 2016). Moreover, the politics of fear and hatred backed by current regime has created unrest among different religious communities. There is a pervasive feeling of social exclusion among various social groups that is eroding democratic principles.

Modi's brand of Hindutva populism, which involves using overt threats against India's Muslim and other minorities and policies of exclusion of certain groups, is causing the decline of India's economic fabric and eroding its democratic values (Rao, 2019).

The abolition of Article 370 unilaterally which altered the autonomous constitutional status of the state of Jammu and Kashmir triggered widespread response from the international community. The revocation of Article 370 and 35A has led to the increased militarization in the region and raised concerns about human rights violations and restrictions on civil liberties (Pathak & Mushahary, 2022). Authors maintain that the state of human rights in Kashmir following revocation of Article 370 and 35A could be seen as negative impacts on democracy. However, they fail to present human dimension of the conflict and far reaching impacts of such happenings at indigenous level.

The government entity responsible for creating the curricula and textbooks for schools, known as the NCERT, has recently updated its syllabus for upcoming terms. However, this action has faced backlash from experts and intellectuals who object to the exclusion of significant chapters covering Mughal history in Indian history and political science textbooks (Dutta, 2023). The decision overlooked Mughals and other significant Muslim dynasties who ruled Sub-continent for almost eight years and enormously contributed to its culture, architecture, music and art. Additionally, this act created a sense of exclusion among the 200 million Muslims of India.

Vinay Sitapati in his book "*India Before Modi: How the BJP Came to Power*" (2021) has thoroughly discussed the inception of BJP as a political party and its agenda of promoting Hindu nationalism. The decline of Congress and the nationalistic aspirations of BJP helped the party to gain legitimacy from the masses (Sitapati, 2021). Author further traces the early years of BJP and its making and notes about Vajpayee and Advani, who were united by their aspiration to establish a Hindu-centric Indian polity, formed a formidable team despite their conflicting ideologies. This partnership, underpinned

by the discipline of RSS, elucidates the character of BJP before Modi's ascension to power and its subsequent victory in elections.

Ashutosh Varshney provided an ingenious analysis about how current Indian regime played its role in eroding democratic norms in the country. Author claims that the India's democratic backsliding rightly started with the rise to power of Prime Minister Modi (Varshney, 2022). Author delineates the failure of BJP-led Indian government to ensure the rights of its minorities. The rights of the other minorities under the BJP are not respected. Electoral democracy does exist in India but it has been conflictual with the broader notion of democracy. Author further argues that the new version of Indian democracy has also diminished the ability to express oneself freely and restricted the right to form associations.

Several academics and scholars see India in a state of dis-connectivity since the 2014. The activities of BJP-led current Indian regime played a significant role in hindering regional integration in the region. The revocation of Article 370 and 35A has been seen aggressively by Pakistan and China; the erasure of Mughal history depicts the denial of the recognition of a larger community within the region. Diplomatic relations of India (particularly after these events) with its neighboring countries are in a state of stagnation. The prospects for regional integration and regional cooperation under Prime Minister Narendra Modi remain elusive (Michael, 2015).

### **The Rise of Hyper Nationalism: Tracing its Inception under the BJP**

The rise of hyper nationalism is a recent phenomenon that refers to an extreme form of nationalism that promotes the interests of a particular group and brings national chauvinism. Hyper nationalistic emergence is associated with a majoritarian change in patriotic preference (Mohan and Amal, 2020). The Hindu nationalist project has long historical roots, and there have been attempts to create a Hindu state in colonial times. Its origins can be traced back to the 1920s when the demands to establish a Hindu state were quite dominant among the different fractions inspired by the idea of Hindu nationalism (Jaffrelot, 1996). The followers of Hindu nationalism perceived three primary threats:

- A threat to Hindu culture and identity.
- The growing influence of colonialism (particularly from Christian missionaries).
- A Muslim threat as they ruled the region for more than eight centuries.

Several Hindu nationalist movements started in the subsequent years, including RSS. The organization was inspired by Hindu Rashtra and was supplemented and supported by different Hindu religious groups. These movements gained momentum in later years as India moved towards independence from British Raj. The movement's leaders, such as Vinayak Savarkar and M. S. Golwalkar, argued that Hindus were a distinct cultural and religious group and deserved a separate state in India. However, the idea of Hindu nationalism could not get currency universally, and it was opposed by Indian National Congress (INC), including its key leaders, Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. They categorically rejected the idea of Hindu Rashtra as divisive and exclusionary. Resultantly, India appeared as a secular state on the world map in 1947.

BJP was founded in 1980 and has played a significant role in promoting Hindu nationalism. The party's ideological roots lie in the RSS, which has long advocated for creating a Hindu state (Narayan, 2020). The creation of a nation based on the notion of Hindu practices (Sanskar) was put forward by the BJP, and it eventually gained legitimacy and popular support, particularly from Hindu far-right groups in the country.

The weakening of Congress also facilitated BJP to regroup and reorganize itself and enter the national electoral playing field. In the 1980s and 1990s, the BJP led a movement to build a Ram temple at the site of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh (UP). The temple was meant to symbolize the victory of Hinduism and Hindutva ideology over Islam; the BJP used the campaign to mobilize its Hindu nationalist base. Consequently, the Hindu nationalist movements gained much-needed impetus to play their role in the mainstream political landscape. The issue became a flashpoint for religious violence, and in 1992, a mob of Hindu nationalists tore down the Babri Mosque, sparking the riots that claimed the lives of over 2,000 people.

The BJP's rise to power in the late 1990s and early 2000s was mainly due to its appeal to Hindu nationalist sentiment. The party's leader, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, served as the PM from 1998 to 2004. During his term, the BJP pursued favorable policies for Hindus, including constructing the Sardar Sarovar Dam and scrapping the Haj subsidy.

### **Instances of exclusionary policies in India**

The subsequent paragraphs will give a detailed and comprehensive examination of politics of exclusion under BJP, particularly since 2014 and its impacts on liberal democracy and regional integration. An incisive analysis has also been provided to show how policies and laws implemented by the BJP systematically discriminated Muslims and other religious minorities in India.

### **Revocation of Article 370: Implications on Indian Democracy and Post-Revocation Aftermath**

The revocation of Article 370 by the India's BJP-led government in August 2019 sparked controversy and caused significant degree of backlash for India. The government's move to change the autonomous constitutional status of Kashmir was the result of widespread ideological context of Hindu nationalism which created further unrest in the troubled region (Medha, 2019). Previously, the Article 370 accorded an autonomous status to the disputed state of Jammu and Kashmir. It limited India's parliament to make laws for the state, and the state was allowed to have its own constitution, a reasonable amount of autonomy (particularly in the matters of citizenship, governance and land ownership) and flag. The mentioned provisions were incorporated in the constitution on 17 October, 1949, shortly after Nehru's visit to Kashmir. Moreover, Article 35A, which was incorporated into the Indian Constitution in 1954 under the provisions of Article 370, bestows upon the state of Jammu & Kashmir the authority to determine the individuals who can be classified as its permanent residents.

The following table shows changes before and after the revocation of Article 370.

**Table No 1: Changes before and after revocation of Article 370**

<b>Category</b>	<b>Pre-Article 370 Revocation</b>	<b>Post-Revocation of Article 370</b>
<b>Special Status</b>	Kashmir had a separate constitution and flag	Integrated into the Union without a separate constitution and flag
<b>Legislative Powers</b>	Had its own legislative assembly	Legislative assembly was dissolved, under direct control of central rule.
<b>Autonomy</b>	Kashmir had a special autonomous status.	The autonomous status of Kashmir was revoked.
<b>Property</b>	Only permanent residents could own property.	Non-residents can now purchase property.
<b>Education</b>	Had a separate education system and curriculum	Integrated into the Indian education system.
<b>Internet</b>	Internet and communication services were often suspended.	Restored with frequent disruptions.

**Source:** Prepared by the researcher

Overall, the revocation of Article 370 and 35A changed the autonomous legal and constitutional status of Jammu and Kashmir. The decision provided political mileage to current ruling BJP which particularly got more support and legitimacy from Hindu religious groups. This move largely jolted the state of human rights in Kashmir where their fundamental rights were seized and brought negative implications for democracy. The high speed internet was banned for more than 550 days and the communication clampdown continues to persist in the state of Jammu and Kashmir. Communication shutdowns in the region question the state of basic civil liberties and fundamental rights which are considered as democratic pillars.

Anurahda Bhasin (2022), in her work "*A Dismantled State: The Untold Story of Kashmir After Article 370*" has assessed the ramifications of Article 370 revocation on democracy and explained the misery of indigenous Kashmiris in post-revocation aftermath. She conclusively argues that what happened

on August 5, 2019 has left the people of Kashmir in deep distress, dilemma and dispossessed. Moreover, a sense of exclusion predominantly prevails among the Muslims of the region in post-revocation period.

**Citizenship Amendment Bill (2019)**

The Citizenship Amendment Bill (CAB) aims to grant Indian citizenship to religious minorities who have fled persecution in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan. However, the act has sparked controversy as it only mentions specific religious groups, such as Hindus, Sikhs, Christians, Jains, Buddhists, and Parsis, while excluding Muslims, Jews, and atheists. The new act radically changed the idea of Indian democracy raising serious concerns over the basic principles of liberty, equality, pluralism and nation building.

The following table mentions the communities included and excluded in the result of the CAB.

**Table No 2: Communities included and excluded in the result of CAB.**

Included	Not Included
Hindus	Jews
Sikhs	Muslims
Buddhists	Srilankan Tamils
Jains	
Parsis	
Christians	

**Source:** Prepared by the researcher using various sources

Mehta (2020) calls this policy divide and rule and argues that the attitude of current ruling India's BJP is arbitrary and discriminative toward 200 million Muslims in India. Several other scholars and academics inside and outside India shared their remarks about the act and considered it as exclusionary nature. The bill selectively grants citizenship to the six religious communities coming from neighboring countries excluding the Muslims, Jews and Srilankan Tamils, which is a blatant violation of secular principles entrenched in India's constitution. Secularism was primarily based upon the idea of free and equal citizenship regardless of religious identity.

The bill further wrought implications on democracy due to its discriminatory nature, polarization, concerns about identity and global image. It was regarded as discriminatory because the principle of equality before law (which was enshrined in constitution) was violated and came under question. Moreover, the bill provided much needed oxygen to the far right groups in the country and polarized the country along the religious lines. Communal tensions are deepened in the country in the aftermath of the act. Additionally, the bill has raised some serious concerns about the impact on the identity of the Northeast region, which has a complex history of ethnic and linguistic diversity. Furthermore, it has damaged the India's secular and pluralistic image in front of global community and caused apprehension about the direction of India's democracy.

The Citizenship Amendment Bill (CAB) 2019 has also had an impact on regional integration in South Asia. The bill has strained relations of India with Bangladesh and Pakistan which is seen as being targeted by the bill, as a large number of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh are Muslim. This goes against the principles of the SAARC, which aims to promote regional cooperation and integration among its member countries.

**National Register of Citizens (NRC): Impacts on Democracy and Minority Rights**

The National Register of Citizens (NRC) is a register containing the names of all Indian citizens. It was first created in 1951 to identify illegal immigrants in the state of Assam, in Northeast India with a history of migration from neighboring countries. It was primarily created to identify and deport illegal immigrants from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) who had entered India after March 24, 1971. In recent years, the NRC has been a highly contentious issue, with significant impacts on democracy and minority rights in India.

During a parliamentary session on 20<sup>th</sup> November, 2019 Amit Shah, the Home Minister declared an extension of National Register of Citizens to the entire country which sparked a controversy in India. Several legal experts and academics came out openly criticizing the contentious document. The NRC has been controversial since its introduction, with many opponents arguing that it is discriminatory and arbitrary and could lead to the exclusion of millions of Indian citizens. There have been concerns that the NRC could

be used to target certain communities, particularly Muslims, and create a situation where they are considered "illegal immigrants" in their own country. This could have significant ramifications for democracy in India, as it could lead to the disenfranchisement of a significant portion of the population and the erosion of their civil rights in the country.

NRC also brought some significant implications for regional integration. Firstly, a sense of exclusion prevails among minorities as a consequence of this document. Moreover, NRC has also been criticized for its potential impact on regional integration in India. Some have argued that the NRC could be used to create divisions between different states and communities, leading to increased tensions and conflicts. This could have implications for India's economic and political stability, as well as its ability to effectively address regional challenges such as poverty and inequality.

### **Erasure of Mughal history from Curriculum (2023)**

The NCERT recently announced a change in curricula and revised set of textbooks. One of the most significant changes made to the Class XII history book is the complete omission of a chapter related to the Mughal Empire, which delved into the workings of the imperial courts (Daniyal, 2023).

Mughal dynasty in India, from 1526 to 1761 was one of the most successful dynasty which left remarkable impact on the history of the region. The dynasty has contributed enormously and played a significant role in shaping the art, music, and architecture of India, and their legacy can be seen in the many impressive structures and monuments that still stand today. The Taj Mahal, for example, is one of the most iconic structures in the world and is a testament to the Mughal dynasty's mastery of architecture. In addition to their architectural achievements, the Mughals also contributed greatly to the development of Indian music and the arts, leaving behind a rich cultural legacy that endures to this day.

The decision of NCERT to erase certain chapters on Mughal history from the curricula received widespread criticism and shows how the exclusion policies under current BJP-led regime continues to persist in India. The stories of 200 million Muslims in India are being disregarded and silenced, indicating how exclusionary politics operates and leads to such ongoing situations. Moreover, such happenings are reducing India's inclusive and overlapping culture leaving negative implications for democracy and regional integration.

### **Prospects for Regional Integration under BJP**

Exclusionary politics in India under Prime Minister Modi has become a cause for concern for regional integration in South Asia. India, being the largest as well as the most powerful country in the region, holds significant influence over the political and economic affairs of its neighboring countries. However, the Modi government's recent policies and actions have created an environment of distrust and fear among South Asian nations, hindering any efforts towards regional integration. Resultantly, the prospects for regional integration and regional cooperation under Prime Minister Modi remain elusive (Michael, 2015).

One of the most important examples of exclusionary politics in India is the controversial Citizenship Amendment Bill (CAB) of 2019. The law provides a path to citizenship for illegal migrants from Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh who are Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis, and Christians, but not Muslims. The exclusion of Muslims has been heavily criticized by the global community, including several South Asian countries. The CAB, along with the National Register of Citizens (NRC), has sparked protests across India and raised concerns about the government's commitment to secularism and democracy.

The BJP government's policy towards its neighbors, particularly Pakistan and Bangladesh, has also been exclusionary and arbitrary. The government's decision to revoke the special status of Jammu and Kashmir and the ongoing conflict with Pakistan has further strained India's relations with its neighbors. Bangladesh, India's closest neighbor and a major economic partner, has also been impacted by India's exclusionary policies. The recent decision to exclude 1.9 million people from the final list of the NRC in the Indian state of Assam has created anxiety among Bangladeshi nationals living in India, many of whom fear deportation. These developments have also impacted on cross-border migration, cultural exchanges, and diplomatic relations with other neighboring countries.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the paper highlights the grave implications of the politics of exclusion in India on both liberal democracy and regional integration in South Asia. The research demonstrates how the exclusionary policies and practices of the current BJP-led government have undermined the principles of liberal democracy in India by denying certain groups of people their rights and privileges. This not only creates potential for conflict and polarization within the society but also threatens the prospects of regional integration in South Asia. The study has identified several instances, such as the Citizenship Amendment Bill, erasure of certain chapters from textbooks, National Register of Citizens in Assam, increasing mob lynching, and revocation of Article 370 and 35A, that have impacted cross-border migration, cultural exchanges, and diplomatic relations with neighboring countries. Such occurrences present a danger to regional integration by creating divisions between different regions and communities.

Therefore, it is imperative that India addresses the challenges posed by the politics of exclusion and promotes inclusivity and diversity in all aspects of society to foster a more harmonious relationship between India and its neighbors in South Asia. The paper highlights the importance of promoting liberal democratic principles and regional cooperation to ensure a more peaceful and prosperous future for South Asia. Ultimately, it is hoped that this research will contribute to the ongoing discourse on the politics of exclusion in India and its wider impact on regional integration and democratic development in South Asia.

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