

RISE OF FUNDAMENTALISM IN INDIA: ITS EFFECTS ON INDIA'S SOCIAL FABRIC AND NEIGHBORING NATIONS IN SOUTH ASIA

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ABSTRACT

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the world has witnessed a new wave of rising religious and national fundamentalism. The fundamentalist ideas of superiority of religion, race, and ethnicity have been reignited in the minds of common people by many politicians across the world. Owing to the fundamentalist ideas of India's far-right Bharatiya Janata Party, India, and its neighboring countries are also witnessing a new radical mindset in the region that is leading this region towards a pitfall of disastrous instability. In the following lines, there will be an attempt to understand how fundamentalism can be disastrous for any State and what repercussions can Indian democracy, society, its immediate neighbors, and the world at large can face in the wake of rising Hindutva fundamentalism therein.

Keywords: Fundamentalism, Hindutva, BJP, Ideology, Secularism, Indian Constitution, Destabilization.

INTRODUCTION

For centuries, fundamentalist ideas and themes based on religion, nationality, race, and ethnicity have been prevalent in various parts of the world. The ideas of protecting one's national interest, the surge of liberal religious interpretations, and the threat of being replaced by a rival nation, race, religious ideologies, or beliefs have ignited many waves of fundamentalism in the past. Valid examples of fundamentalist movements during history can be the rise of British and American fundamentalist Protestant movements at the dawn of the 20th century and the rise of nationalist Nazi ideology in Germany during the 1930s.

It is widely believed that the inspiration behind the rise of fundamentalist Hindutva ideology which will be discussed in the following pages can be attributed to the above-mentioned far-right Nazi ideology which was envisaged by Adolf Hitler in his book *Mein Kampf* in 1925.



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This idea can be further cemented by the fact that the founder of modern Hindutva ideology Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, whose writings have provided ideological impetus to RSS since the beginning, created a rift between secular Indian leaders and radical nationalists like himself. He did so by openly praising Hitler's fundamentalist Nazi ideology and criticizing his countrymen like Jawahir Lal Nehru for opposing Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini (Sharma, 2019). This rift has since become wider and has created considerable ripples of instability and hatred not only in India but in South Asian region at large which continues to this day.

The pervasive nature of this fundamentalist ideology became more evident when RSS started to do politics based on Hindutva ideology in the early 1980s. Gradually, it gained momentum in the following decades by spewing hate against religious minorities in India and instilling resentment in the minds of its followers against India's neighboring States. By winning two consecutive elections in India during the past decade, BJP has finally unveiled its spiteful ulterior motives by destabilizing this region with its discriminatory citizenship laws and feuds with neighboring states (Khaliq, 2019).

To understand how the rise of this Hindutva ideology has affected India and its neighboring surrounding countries, there is a need to understand how fundamentalism can be catastrophic for any society which will be explained in the following lines.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Radical political ideologies based on highly controversial and controversial radical ideologies have plagued mankind for many centuries. To give a clear picture of how such radical viewpoints destroy nations, a comparison has been given between the fascist Adolf Hitler's Third Reich and the current radical anti-Muslim BJP regime in India. To aptly construe this comparison, Sandipan Sharma's article named "The Real Savarkar: A British Stooge, Hitler's Admirer or a Bharat Ratna?" (Sharma, 2019).

Multiple credible scholarly sources shed light on India's demonic and impetuous approach towards its internal and external problems. For understanding the far-reaching repercussions of BJP's radical onslaught against their rivals, coveted author Milan Vaishnav's "Religious Nationalism and India's Future" published by Carnegie Endowment for International Peace aptly discusses how this contagious ideological regime is bad in so many ways (Vaishnav, 2019). For understanding the paradoxical nature of Indian society at the moment, relevant provisions related to the so-called secular nature of India found in the constitution of the Indian Union have been reproduced and construed herein below.

To visualize the radically exacerbating political landscape of the Indian society right now, credible articles published in both Pakistan and India have been thoroughly analyzed. To understand the current predicament of Muslim and other minorities in India, the venomous statements of India's ruling lawmakers have been elaborated in the article "Muslims 'Not in Equal Category' which was published by *The News International* (The News International, 2020). Moreover, the highly detrimental and ominous citizenship law passed by the BJP government last year has been aptly analyzed by Sigal Samuel in his article "India Just Redefined Its Citizenship Criteria to Exclude Muslims" (Samuel, 2019).

The hazardous effects of the Narendra Modi-led BJP government have overspilled into all the South Asian countries and beyond since the middle of the last decade. It is a no-brainer that BJP hates Pakistan and China because these countries impede in the way of its expansionism. However, its oppressive relations with its so-called regional allies like Bangladesh, Nepal, and Bhutan have also been dented. This situation is masterfully explained by Seema Guha in the article "BJP's Hindutva Agenda May Affect Indo-Bangladesh Relations" (Guha, 2020).

Inevitably, all these activities by the incumbent Indian government have greatly hampered the regional connectivity and prosperity projects. To understand this predicament, Sujeev Shakya has masterfully elaborated negative effects of radical Hindu nationalism in his article "Hindu Nationalism Could Hinder Modern Development" (Shakya, 2017).

Understanding Fundamentalism and its Potential to Destabilize a Region

In its strict sense, fundamentalism can be construed as a type of conservative religious movement characterized by the advocacy of strict conformity to sacred texts. However, since the first common usage of this term was in the context of Protestant religious movements back in the 20th century, therefore a need was felt in the aftermath of these protests to create a wider definition of fundamentalism that could cover

other fundamentalist ideas and narratives based on nationality, race, ethnicity, culture, etc. This need for a wider definition was fulfilled by American scholars Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby who argued that fundamentalism is not just traditional religiosity but an inherently political phenomenon, though this dimension may sometimes be dormant. They also emphasized that fundamentalism is inherently totalitarian, insofar as it seeks to remake all aspects of society and government on religious principles (Munson, 2020).

This inherent fundamentalist totalitarianism mentioned above has the potential to destabilize any region if it is not checked and controlled properly by the authorities. Such conflict-prone manifestation of fundamentalism can unveil itself anytime if principles of democracy, equality, and national cohesion are weakened. This is done by far-right nationalist parties like BJP on the pretext that ultra-radical nationalist ideas should be given more priority over agendas of national cohesion and unity otherwise influence and identity of dominant power in a State or region can diminish over time (Vaishnav, 2019).

In the wake of such a volatile era when fundamentalist ideas are spreading rampantly, it is important to eradicate nationalist fundamental ideas based on intolerance, religious hatred, and other dimensions of violence and conflict otherwise fundamentalists can become enraged on even the slightest disregard of their fundamentalist beliefs and can resort to militant ways to protect their endangered identity (Arbuckle, 2016). Unsurprisingly, all of these things are happening in India right now and people from minority communities are continuously getting harassed and tortured under broad daylight which is not possible without silent support from the ruling BJP party.

How Hindutva ideology is at loggerheads with Indian Secularism?

As mentioned before, the founder of Hindutva Vivayank Damodar Savarkar was always critical of secular Indian politicians and thinkers like Jawahar Lal Nehru. This enmity boiled over when the founding father of India Mohandas Gandhi was assassinated in broad daylight by a lifelong RSS member after which RSS was banned by Jawahar Lal Nehru. Since then both parties have represented different mindsets in Indian politics with the support of their vote bank.

Fast-forwarding to the last decade, we find that the election of Narendra Modi led BJP as India's ruling party has created a further divide between various factions of Indian society especially when BJP has attempted to change the secular nature of the Indian constitution after getting a two-third majority in the Indian parliament. There are many other reasons which support this notion which will be discussed below:

a. How Hindutva ideology is in contravention of the Indian constitution?

The Indian constitution has been deemed secular since it came into force after the partition of British India in 1947 as per its part III which deals with fundamental rights. This secular nature of the Indian constitution was further cemented by the 42nd amendment in the Indian constitution according to which India was deemed as a *Sovereign Socialist Secular Democratic Republic*. The incumbent fundamentalist BJP government is adamant to change the secular nature of Indian which became evident when the Citizenship Amendment Bill was passed by the Indian parliament where Narendra Modi led BJP passed a law that enabled the Indian government to grant expedited Indian citizenship to Hindus from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan and attempted to send hundreds and thousands of people living in Eastern parts of India to concentration camps on the pretext that they were not Indian citizens although most of them are living in India for more than two generations now (Samuel, 2019). The protests held by many secular and minority communities in India against this fascist policy were shown the cold shoulder by the leaders of Hindutva inspired Indian government. For example, prominent BJP leader Subramaniam



Swamy spewed venom during an interview earlier this year when he said that calling all Indians equal as mentioned in article 14 of the Indian constitution is a misinterpretation. He further propagated the divide in Indian society by saying that "If Muslims become more than 30 percent then that country's danger." (The News International, 2020).

b. Genocidal statements by BJP backed Radical Monks

It can be rightly said that after years of suspicion, the real menace known as Hindutva has started to show its true colors. During the last days of 2021, Hindutva leaders implicitly supported by the radical BJP government have openly called for genocide against Indian Muslims. Consequently, tensions between Muslims and Hindus have sky-rocketed once more in India which is leading this country towards an inevitable black hole (thewire.in, 2021).

c. Attacks against Modesty of Indian Muslim Women

During the last year, the radicalized Indian public has tried to make apps that purportedly "sell" the services of prominent educated Muslim women (with completely shameless and sinister disregard towards their age or service to their country) who live in India. The extremely concerning issue in this regard is that some of the creators of these apps are teenagers who have confessed in early 2022 that they don't regret their actions because of their extreme hate against Muslims (Jaswal, 2022).

This unfortunate predicament also infers that the future of India might not be as bright as some optimists persist as many Narendra Modi-like radicals want to use all the young and old RSS and BJP radicals for disseminating hate in their own country.

d. How Fundamentalist Hindutva Ideology is Damaging India's Social Fabric?

Even though tensions between Hindus and minority communities in India like Muslims and Sikhs have surfaced on multiple occasions since the partition of British India, nevertheless, past Indian governments were more or less successful in portraying India as a country of peace of country and harmony until 2014.

However, once Narendra Modi led BJP came into power in 2014; the tide has turned, and this abovementioned image of shining and peaceful India became blemished after continuous events of mob lynching (mostly on pretexts of cow slaughter) and acts of violence and forced conversion (Akram, 2020) of Muslims by fundamentalist RSS members destroyed the social fabric of India. This narrative was echoed by India's opposition leader Rahul Gandhi as well earlier this year when he said that although India was known as a country of peace and harmony, often cited as a contrast to Pakistan, but this image has changed now under the fundamentalist Hindutva agenda (Press Trust of India, 2020).

e. Attempts by BJP to disturb religious harmony in India

Under the fundamentalist Hindutva ideology preached by RSS to its members, Muslims are considered as outsiders and invaders and their contribution to the prosperity and betterment of India is blatantly ignored and distorted according to their concocted narrative of Indian history (Frayer and Khan, 2019). Because of this false narrative, the incumbent BJP government has changed the Islamic names of Indian cities in the recent past. For example, Ahmedabad was named as Prayagraj by UP chief minister Yogi Adityanath who is a close supporter of current Prime Minister Narendra Modi and firmly supports fundamentalist Hindutva ideology.

Construction of Ram Temple in place of Babri Masjid which was demolished in 1992 was personally attended by Prime Minister Narendra Modi who has been a vocal supporter of the construction of this temple for decades and has shown a cold shoulder towards grievances of Muslims regarding this whole event which has been a serious bone of contention between Muslims and Hindus for almost three decades now.

Under Modi's India, members of RSS and its political wing BJP are adamant to wreak havoc on Muslims and putting them in their place along with other minority groups living in India. This rise in blatant violation of fundamental rights of religious minorities in India is partly because India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been painfully slow in acting against such extremist implementation of the Hindutva policy (Chacko, Priya, et.al, 2020).

Many Muslim academics, student leaders, and active members of civil society have been arrested and tried on various false allegations under the fundamentalist Modi government. A prominent name among those incarcerated is flamboyant student activist Umar Khalid who has been arrested and tried based on concocted and false charges of engineering Delhi riots earlier this year. Many prominent scholars, activists, and thinkers from different parts of the world including the likes of Noam Chomsky and Arundhati Roy have raised their voices for the release of these Internees (Scroll.in, 2020).

The Repercussion of India's Radical Hindutva Ideology towards Pakistan-India Relations

As mentioned before, the radical Hindutva policy practiced by RSS which is based on the concept of racial purity has made many of its follower's hate Muslims as a result of which they are considered outsiders in fundamentalist Hindutva teachings. This hate has ultimately led radical Hindu nationalists to believe that the creation of Pakistan was a mistake and therefore 15th August should not be celebrated as an Independence Day since India was divided on that day. Furthermore, many RSS members believe that murder of Mohandas Gandhi in broad daylight was an act of great honor and patriotism which was carried out by one of their former Members (Yasir, 2020).

After the creation of Pakistan, BJP has left no stones unturned to destabilize and harm Pakistan. The hate that RSS has for Pakistan is so great that despite their differences with the Congress party since the partition of India, they have eagerly joined hands with them whenever a conflict between Pakistan and India has emerged (Ashraf, 2019).

However, since BJP came into power in the 1990s after gaining support from radical elements of Indian society because of its role in the fall of Babri Masjid, it started to create a nuclear bomb despite repeated warnings from the western world against it. As a result of this India became the first nuclear power in South Asia on 11th May 1998 after which Pakistan was forced to show its nuclear strength to the world on 28th May 1998 to keep the equilibrium of power intact in the region. The ill-motivated and expansionist warmongering agenda of the incumbent BJP government is so deep that despite knowing that both Pakistan and India possess an arsenal of lethal nuclear weapons which have the potential to ruin this whole region, Indian Defense

Minister Rajnath Singh has given the veiled threat of nuclear war in this region (The Express Tribune, 2019). Such insane war rhetoric speaks volumes about the real fundamentalist objectives of the incumbent far-right Indian government which has the potential to destabilize this whole region.

Fast-forwarding to the year 2014, we find that Narendra Modi-led BJP came to power on the claims of teaching Pakistan a lesson and revoking the special status of IIOJ&K which makes its hate-driven policy against Pakistan quite clear. The BJP government attempted to do both these acts in the long run and has paid a hefty price for destabilizing the region firstly by getting soundly beaten by Pakistan in an aerial dog fight on 27th February 2019 and then by surrendering 1,000 sq. km of land in Ladakh to China's People's Liberation Army as of 31st August 2020 as per India's intelligence reports which have been shamelessly denied by Narendra Modi on multiple occasions since hostilities started with China earlier this year (Singh, 2020). Economic repercussions for these expansionist policies have also hampered the Indian economy because of their over-reliance on Chinese investments in their country.

All of this has happened because of BJP led government's war mantra and expansionist policies against its neighbors and with a crumbling Indian economy, the cost of continuing this warmongering can be way more for the Indian government than they expect.

Effects of India's Hindutva Ideology on its smaller neighboring Countries

Ever since Narendra Modi became Indian Prime Minister in 2014, India's relations with its small neighboring countries like Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka have considerably deteriorated because of its discriminatory policies motivated by expansionist Hindutva ideology. Bangladesh has been India's vocal supporter since its independence and has remained a closed ally in various socio-economic initiatives for decades. However, since the controversial Citizenship Amendment Bill has been passed by the Indian parliament, relations between both countries have been quite tense and Bangladesh has not welcomed India's decision to discriminate against its migrants entering India based on religion. This is because although the majority of Bangladesh's population is Muslim, yet it has never imposed any kind of religious indoctrination on its citizens because of the secular nature of its society (Guha, 2020).

Similarly, India's small neighbors Nepal and Sri Lanka have also been taken aback by India's expansionist agenda under BJP's Hindutva ideology especially after the start of the second term of the current Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Nepal has been greatly skeptical about rising Hindutva in India despite its long historical ties with India based on religious and cultural similarities. India attempted to impose an economic blockade on Nepal after alleging that Nepal ignored the rights ethnic Madeshi population in its southern part which has close links with India (Shakya, 2017). Unsurprisingly, Sri Lankan people have also distanced themselves from the discriminatory Citizenship Amendment Bill. The Tamil community in Sri Lanka has openly criticized this law and has declared it discriminatory against Muslims. It is worth noting here that although both Nepal and Sri Lanka have large Hindu populations in their country, yet they have distanced themselves from this fundamentalist Hindutva ideology which has become India's state policy since Narendra Modi led BJP won elections in 2014.

Unsurprisingly, China has emerged as the main beneficiary of these tense relations between India and its above-mentioned neighbors as it has offered billions of dollars as COVID-19 aid and for various infrastructure projects to Sri Lanka, Maldives, Bangladesh, and Nepal which can further lead to these countries to join China's main Belt & Road initiative in the future (Bhaumik, 2019).

Influence of Hindutva Ideology on Global Far-Right Movements

History repeatedly tells us that Hindutva was greatly influenced by fundamentalist Nazi ideology back in the 1930s when Germans thought it was a good idea to support Nazism to avenge their losses during World War I. During that era, far-right fundamentalists in Germany claimed that they belonged to the same pure Aryan race which originated in India in an attempt to legitimize their brutal ethnic cleansing of Jews and Gypsies from the European areas which they occupied during World War II (Chaudhury, 2018).



Fast-forwarding to the 21st century, the strength of this ill-motivated unholy alliance between fundamentalist Hindutva ideology and European far-right organizations is still strong and has become multi-faceted. There are many far-right nationalist groups in many European countries like England, Austria, and Poland where fundamentalist organizations have gained much support and momentum during recent years. Various members of Indian Diasporas in the USA, Canada, and England actively participate and facilitate radical decision-making in these countries by fundraisings and their widespread propaganda machinery in an attempt to uplift fundamentalist governments there. For example, the National Hindu Council of Temples (NHCTUK), a Hindu charity organization based in England, caused controversy by

inviting far-right Hindu nationalist Tapan Ghosh to speak at the parliament in 2018 despite his abominable radical views against Muslims like “controlling the birth rate of Muslims” (Chaudhury, 2018).

However, this tide of religious fundamentalism is gradually turning in Europe nowadays and countries like the USA, United Kingdom, Austria, and the Netherlands as course curriculums are being updated in schools to teach positive values of nonviolence, peaceful coexistence, and tolerance to the younger generations in these countries (Bajpai and Kaushik, 2017).

CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that it is a fact that India becomes a trillion-dollar economy thanks to the Congress party's vigilant economic and fiscal reforms in the 1990s and early 2000s, yet this was achieved on the backdrop of keeping Indian domestic harmony intact and by attempting to have closer relations with India's neighbors. However, since the incompetent BJP led Indian government was formed after the 2014 elections in India, all of this apparent progress and cohesion has gradually faded away because of radical fundamentalist policies of the incumbent BJP government during the last decade. The world has now started to see a new face of India which is driven by hate and anger against anybody who disagrees with fascist Hindutva ideology. The BJP led Indian government has become a real threat to India's social fabric and the wider stability of the region. In such circumstances, tolerant and secular sections of Indian society must join hands to reinstate harmony and peace in their country. Furthermore, it is the collective responsibility of not only the regional countries surrounding India but the entire international community to curb this menacing Hindutva ideology which has the potential to turn this region into a nuclear battleground if the world keeps showing a cold shoulder towards this realistic threat on their doorsteps.

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