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Mohammed Sinan Siyech

*Islamic and Middle East Studies Department at the University of Edinburgh*

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## **An Introduction to Right-Wing Extremism in India**

**Mohammed Sinan Siyech**

*Islamic and Middle East Studies Department at the University of Edinburgh*

### **Abstract**

Right-wing extremism has had a long history in India with the current atmosphere heavily tilted in favor of right-wing extremists. This article explores the history of the right wing in the nation and various factors that strengthened different actors within this spectrum of politics in India. Relying on secondary sources, it notes that the Indian caste system has played a role in bolstering the Hindu majoritarian identity that is currently dominant in India apart from various other factors, such as the incompetency of other political parties (including left-wing parties). Drawing on several examples, it argues that the unwillingness of the current government to tackle right-wing extremism could facilitate the rise of fringe groups that will eventually turn against the government for being too soft. As such, it aims to be an introductory article for readers unfamiliar with the phenomenon in India.

*Mohammed Sinan Siyech is a doctoral researcher at the Islamic and Middle East Studies Department at the University of Edinburgh, United Kingdom. He is also a Non-Resident Associate Fellow at the Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi, India. Previously he was a Senior Analyst at the International Center for Political Violence and Terrorism Research, a constituent unit of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He has written and spoken extensively on terrorism and extremism globally.*

**R**ight-wing extremism has been growing and has become a more mainstream phenomenon globally with various right-wing parties and, subsequently, right-wing extremists taking root and entrenching themselves in the political landscape of different countries. India has seen its own variant of right-wing politics in the form of Hindu right-wing politics. While the political ecosystem of India has been fraught with complex interactions between different actors on the ideological spectrum, it has become even more complicated with the rise of right-wing extremism.

This article discusses how India's right-wing extremists have gained strength over the years. It begins by providing a measure of rising Hindu nationalism in India and a brief literature review explaining Hindutva and its relation to the current government and to Hindu extremism, characterizing it as a form of ethno-nationalist extremism with a religious veneer. It explains an underlying, under-researched aspect of Hindu extremism: its relationship to the caste system in India. It moves on to explain other external factors that led to the rise of a Hindu right-wing government and the subsequent increase in right-wing extremism in the nation. It then points out a few facilitators of right-wing extremism, including social media and the silence of the current ruling party in the face of acts of violence perpetrated by extremists. As a logical conclusion of such silence and the cultivation of Hindu extremists, the article points out some events that presage the imminent uncontrollability of right-wing extremists.

## **Literature Review and Definitions**

Several terms and terminologies are employed to explain the wide spectrum of right-wing politics and extremism. The first is "Hindu nationalism," made famous by Bruce Graham in the 1990s and largely referring to the collection of political thought that is spiritually underpinned by the Hindu religious and cultural traditions of India.<sup>1</sup> It is important to note, as various authors point out, Hindu nationalism is not the same as Hinduism.

Hindu nationalism as a spectrum was guided by Hindutva, the political ideology that conflates geographically based cultural, national, and religious identities that focus on the manifestation of Hinduness. Like Islamism, it is not driven by religion but uses religion as a veneer to push its agenda. This phenomenon has been written about by such scholars as Christophe Jaffrelot, Van der Veer, Thomas Hansen Blom, Amartya Sen, Romila Thapar, and Arjun Appadurai. While Hindutva is exclusivist and initially focused on the protection of Hindus and the correction of historic rights, it is not violent.

Gradually, however, proponents of the ideology facilitated violence that was sometimes supported and sometimes ignored by the Indian government. As Alex Schmid argues, because of the inherent tendencies of exclusivist ideologies to turn to violence in the right circumstances, most extremist ideologies can be classified as "not violent" as opposed to "nonviolent" (signifying perennial nonviolence).<sup>2</sup>

Hindu extremism appears in only a few academic sources. Aparna Devare, for example, has used the term often. In referring to past literature, she draws on writings focused on Hindu nationalism and communalism, thereby juxtaposing the three terms.<sup>3</sup> Abhinav Pandya argues that when liberal anglicized media in India ignores the concerns of ordinary Hindus, Hindu extremists fill the vacuum.<sup>4</sup> The phenomenon often features in various news publications and websites in India, such as the *Diplomat*, *The Wire*, *Firstpost*, and *Indian Express*.<sup>5</sup>

One variation of Hindu extremism was "Saffron terror" (saffron is the most preferred color for followers of Hindutva). This term refers to a spate of violent terrorist attacks carried out in the mid-2000s, such as the bombings of a few mosques and Muslim shrines in India.<sup>6</sup> Intense lobbying by various actors on the right (characterizing such attacks as false-flag operations by the Indian government), however, resulted in the Indian government's dropping the term from the official lexicon.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, using Kumar Ramakrishna's definition of extremism, one can define Hindu extremism as an ethno-nationalist fundamentalist belief system with a religious sheen that legitimizes the structural violence of Hindus (the in-group) against Muslims, Dalits, and secular liberals (relevant out-groups).<sup>8</sup> This article uses the terms "Hindu extremism" and "right-wing extremism" interchangeably.

The article offers a brief explainer to non-Indian audiences about how Hindu extremism has been made manifest over the past decade. Drawing largely on secondary sources, including books, analytical reports, and news and journal articles, it breaks down some of the most recent trends of Hindu extremism in India in an effort to fill any gaps in the literature on contemporary Hindu extremism.

The article makes two important contributions. It argues that Hindu extremism should not be seen as a majority-minority issue alone; rather, it has complex internal interactions within what is known as Hinduism today. And it warns that because of the inherent divisiveness of Hindu extremists, some fragmentation, however miniscule, is likely to occur in the future that could pose a security threat for the state.

## **Measuring Hindu Extremism**

Hindu extremism in India has many visible manifestations. The most prominent has been the increase in lynchings of Muslims. Data published by Indiaspend, a news website that monitors lynchings, reveals a manifold rise in the number of mob lynchings of Muslims and Dalits who were perceived to be illegally transporting cows (considered by Hindus to be holy) for slaughter. More than 84 percent of the victims between 2010 and 2017 who died were Muslims; the rest of the victims were Dalits (also considered untouchables existing outside of the fold of the Hindu caste system).<sup>9</sup> Only one of the lynchings recorded in that report occurred before the current government, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) under Narendra Modi, came to power in 2014, demonstrating that lynching was directly related to the BJP government's reign at the center.

Lynchings are a signifier of the broader category of hate crimes that have taken place under the current government's watch. According to Hate Crime Watch, a platform dedicated to documenting instances of hate crime, 91 percent of the hate crimes that have been documented in the past decade have occurred since the Modi government came to power, that is, 99 deaths and 703 wounded between May 2014 and April 2019 in crimes motivated by religious hatred (mostly of Muslims).<sup>10</sup>

Most of these crimes were exacerbated by hate speech across the political spectrum. According to self-disclosed records, approximately four hundred political candidates fielded by various political parties experienced hate speech against them.<sup>11</sup> During election periods, instances of hate speech against the parties contesting elections often sky-rocketed. During the Delhi elections of February 2020, for example, several radicalized gun men, inspired by politicians' hate speech against antigovernment protestors, spent a week shooting at protestors.<sup>12</sup> A short while later, Delhi erupted in riots, during which several dozen Muslims were killed. Most of the rioters had been goaded by politicians. Many months later, none of the rioters were arrested, though several journalists and writers protesting government action were arrested and detained for months.<sup>13</sup>

These events coincided with a substantial dip in religious freedom in India, particularly for Muslims. In its 2020 annual report, for example, the United States Commission for International Religious Freedom identifies India as a country of particular concern, the first time India was ever placed in this category. Noting that legal systems have begun to disenfranchise non-Hindus in India, the report highlights various instances of interreligious violence with Hindu nationalist overtones.<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, India's rankings fell in the 2020 annual Varieties of Democracy report, which measures democratic ideals. The report notes a steep decline in democratic freedom in India facilitated by the current government and points out that the Hindu nationalist agenda is among the reasons for the decline.<sup>15</sup> According to these two different measures, Hindu nationalism and Hindu extremism has been on the rise in India.

## **Hindutva through the Ages**

Explaining Hindu extremism necessitates a discussion of Hindutva, the muscular political concept propagated by various ideologues in India. The concept of Hindutva was popularized by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, an ideologue living in pre-Independence India who was arrested many times by the British for his anticolonial activities.<sup>16</sup>

In a pamphlet written in 1923 titled *Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu?*, Savarkar defines the notion of Hinduness and outlines a political vision for India. Its biggest (and most controversial) contribution has been its definition of a Hindu as a person who accepts India as both their fatherland and their holy land. This definition effectively excludes Christians and Muslims, who consider different geopolitical spaces as their holy lands.<sup>17</sup> Later proponents of Hindutva, such as Mohan Bhagwat, head of the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak (the ideological mentor of the BJP), have argued that Muslims and Christians can stay in India as long as they accept Hinduism as the superior religion.<sup>18</sup>

Savarkar also introduced the matter of Hindu weakness. According to him, Hinduism was "polluted" and therefore weakened by the entry of the Mughal rulers in the sixteenth century and, later, the British colonizers from the nineteenth century. To overcome this weakness and assert the independence of Hinduism, these elements, including Muslims, he asserted, would have to be driven out. This call to drive out Muslims was one among the many motivations of the Partition of India in 1947 for members of the Hindu right.<sup>19</sup> Thus, though the British left India, the close to two hundred million Muslims in the nation was proof of an unfinished goal of Hindutva.

The main goal of Hindutva is to establish a Hindu *Rashtra*, that is, a Hindu state that has its version of *Rama Rajya* (Rule of Ram), a harken back to the golden era of Hinduism when the god Ram ruled India, as documented in the epic *Ramayana*.<sup>20</sup> This goal is similar to what Islamists often argue for: a caliphate modeled on past caliphates, such as the Umayyads and the Abbasids.<sup>21</sup> Some proponents of the Hindutva project a seemingly benign expression of justice and tolerance. But this stance belies the homogenization of Indian national identity embedded within the ideology with a hierarchy of religions that places Hinduism at the top and other faiths such as Christianity and Islam at the bottom.<sup>22</sup>

Because of this belief in a hierarchy of religions, scholars and analysts have linked the rise of Hindu extremism in India to the growth of the concept of Hindutva. And, as Eviane Leidig argues, Hindutva must be considered a variant of right-wing extremism because of its othering of Muslims, whose faith it sees as its main opponent, and because of the parallels with other right-wing extremist ideologies such as a homogenized identity and a belief in a common enemy and the need to subdue that enemy.<sup>23</sup>

Politicians and media in India propagate many narratives (some of which are rooted in truth) about Muslims that marginalize them as members of the community. For example:

- Muslims are invaders. This narrative is an allusion to the Muslim rulers who came to India from central Asia during the eighth and ninth centuries and thus is rooted in truth).<sup>24</sup> As some historians have noted, however, their identity was more ethnic than religious, which is why various Muslim rulers did fight against each other as well.

- Muslims are converting large numbers of Hindus to Islam with the help of Gulf nations. Distress among Hindus over this effort was exacerbated by the conversion of a thousand Dalits (Hindus outside the existing caste system) to Islam in 1984, which sparked widespread protests by common Hindus and Hindu extremists.<sup>25</sup>
- Muslims have the villainous intention of marrying Hindu women and then converting them to Islam in order to send them to participate in terror incidents. This infamous practice is known as “love jihad.”<sup>26</sup>
- Muslims are terrorists. This charge gained strength and was spread widely after the World Trade Center bombings in 2001.<sup>27</sup>

Savarkar’s ideology is important because it was also picked up by a group known as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), which adopted his *Who Is a Hindu?* as one of the principal publications that would guide it. This group, in existence since 1923, has been at the forefront of religious-based politics. Its cadres were also responsible for forming the BJP in 1980 and continuously supporting the party ever since through financial contributions and election campaigning, as is discussed shortly.<sup>28</sup>

In the immediate aftermath of the Partition and Independence, the right wing in India was ensconced within the Hindu Mahasabha, a political party formed during the colonial period to advocate for Hindu rights and the protection of Hindus. With the gradual admission of non-Hindus into the party, however, one of the leaders, Syama Prasad Mookherjee, left the party and started his own party, called the Bharatiya Jan Sangh (BJS) in 1951. BJS soon became the political arm of the RSS through a series of internal reforms and took up an economically capitalist and politically conservative stance toward the Soviet Union and China.<sup>29</sup> Through the growth of the RSS as a social movement and the BJS as a political party, India’s right-wing politics gradually took root across the nation.<sup>30</sup>

Several events in the 1970s and the 1980s that led to the strengthening of Hindu right-wing sentiments reached a crescendo in the late 1980s and early 1990s and culminated in the demolition of the Babri Mosque in 1992.<sup>31</sup> In the wake of this demolition, which clearly affected the secular fabric of India, the BJP government came to power between 1998 and 2004. The BJP government at that point was considered a much more refined version of its original form, though it continued to engage in mild acts of Islamophobia.<sup>32</sup> Ten years later, however, bolstered by anti-incumbent sentiments, the BJP resurged once again. That resurgence led to the BJP’s winning a majority in the Parliament of India.<sup>33</sup>

Analysts have marked this victory as the turning point in the increase of Hindu extremism in India.<sup>34</sup> By 2017, human rights groups reported a major increase in Islamophobia, measured by the number of hateful speeches circulating on media and acts of violence against Muslims, particularly those suspected of smuggling cattle for slaughter.<sup>35</sup> In 2018 the trend tracker Indiaspend identified more than 260 victims (belonging to Muslim and Dalit communities) of cow-related lynching in India since the rise of the BJP.<sup>36</sup> More worrying was the silence of leaders in the face of such violence.<sup>37</sup> In some cases, even the police were involved in perpetrating or not responding immediately to this violence.<sup>38</sup>

A major theme running through right-wing publications since the 1980s is the idea that Hindus are in danger of being overtaken by the Muslims, as expressed in the phrase *Hindus khatre main hain*. Arjun Appadurai characterizes this theme as “majoritarian insecurities,” the idea that a majority community can be destroyed by the minority.<sup>39</sup> This phenomenon occurs in other countries of South Asia, such as Pakistan and Bangladesh.<sup>40</sup> In India it has allowed a further otherization of the minority and the justification of crimes committed in the name of protecting the Hindu community from the existential threat of Muslims.

It is important to note here that, like the BJP, the Indian National Congress, the national party that ruled India for most of its independence, facilitated such trends through its decades-long reign in India. As the further sections show, there are many other factors that explain how

the Hindu right came to power. One of the most important is that the Indian right successfully constructed a majoritarian identity that preceded the phenomenon of majoritarian insecurity. The next section discusses one underlying factor that has been underexplored in non-Indian academic contexts, the caste system in India.

## **Hindu Caste System and the Majoritarian Identity**

The caste system is unique to Hinduism and India. While most scholars employ the term “Hindu” to refer to those practicing the religion of Hinduism (since the sixteenth century CE), linguistically, since the first millennium BCE, it was a term that was used to refer to all those living south of the Indus river regardless of religion.<sup>41</sup>

The Hinduism that we know today is a compilation of castes and subcastes. The caste system was introduced in ancient India as a system primarily of economic differentiation. But the practice soon devolved into a social stratification with immense political ramifications with the Brahmins (educated caste) providing scholarship, the Kshatriyas (warrior caste) ruling kingdoms, the Vaishyas (businessmen) running businesses, and the Shudras (lowest classes) doing all sorts of menial jobs.<sup>42</sup> One group, the Dalits, were considered outside the caste system and branded untouchables. The caste system included three thousand levels and twenty-five thousand more sublevels.<sup>43</sup>

Over the centuries, the power dynamics of Indian society were skewed in favor of the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas. Other religions, such as Buddhism and Jainism, formed in rebellion against the caste system and social stratification.<sup>44</sup> The arrival of the Muslim rulers and the British in India only exacerbated this divide, with the Brahmins receiving much political patronage.<sup>45</sup> The British also unified all the castes under the term “Hinduism” (probably because of their lack of understanding of the system) for administrative purposes.<sup>46</sup> At the dawn of Independence, many upper-caste intellectuals feared becoming a minority and thus argued for the continued inclusion of all castes under the umbrella of Hinduism. This position was given a major boost by Mahatma Gandhi, who did not want to fracture the Hindu community and harbored (naïve) notions of transcending the system.<sup>47</sup> The support shown by Gandhi and many others within his party, the Indian National Congress, also lends credence to the idea that the party was equally culpable in the rise of the right wing.

Yet, despite unification, Brahmins and other upper castes continued to exercise hegemony in the political sphere. Recognizing that a unified identity required a reason to be united, members of the upper castes, beginning at the time of Independence, encouraged a strong current of anti-Muslim sentiments. As Ganshyam Shah argues, one of the biggest projects of the Hindutva movement was to bring all the castes under one banner without disturbing the hierarchy of the caste system.<sup>48</sup>

These sentiments received a boost in the late 1980s with the Mandalization of politics in India, a reference to the Mandal Commission’s policy recommendations. The Mandal Commission, or the Socially and Educationally Backward Classes Commission, was set up in 1979 to investigate and find ways to alleviate the economic woes of various educationally and socially disadvantaged caste-based communities in India. The commission used eleven criteria to identify “backward” classes and recommend that members of these classes be provided with reservations and quotas for government jobs.<sup>49</sup> Though the commission used information from the 1931 census, its recommendations were extensive.

The commission observed that members of other backward classes (OBCs) amounted to more than 50 percent of the Indian population. When combined with members of scheduled castes (SCs) and scheduled tribes (STs), the actual number of people belonging to Hindu upper castes amounted to less than 20 percent of the population. This finding gave credence to Gandhi’s and many other politician’s fears that upper-caste members would be rendered a

minority in India. As Yogendra Yadav and others have noted, India is a country of minorities.<sup>50</sup> Accordingly, the commission recommended that the number of reservations for government posts be increased from 27 percent to 49.5 percent.<sup>51</sup>

The recommendations of the commission were set aside by the Indira Gandhi government for more than a decade. In the 1990s, when Prime Minister V. P. Singh tried to implement the recommendations, he faced massive blowback with students from nonreserved categories launching protests across the nation. Many of these protests involved students' self-immolation, which caused at least thirteen deaths.<sup>52</sup>

Despite the protests, a reaction that was feared by Indira Gandhi, who initiated and oversaw the study, V. P. Singh tried to implement the commission's recommendations as a political strategy to shore up support among members of the lower castes.<sup>53</sup> Fearing a further divide of the Hindu electoral community, the BJP, led by L. K. Advani, started the Rath Yatra, a procession from the east of India to the state of Uttar Pradesh in the west where a historical mosque, situated on the ruins of a temple (where the Hindu god Ram is believed to have born), was razed by more than a hundred thousand volunteers.<sup>54</sup> According to a former RSS member, most of the workers who engaged in the physical destruction belonged to the lower castes, validating the idea that members of the lower caste are often used as pawns in the greater game of upper-caste superiority.

Citing the fact that all the founders of the RSS except one belonged to the upper caste, Jean Drèze characterizes Hindu nationalism not as a conflict between the majority and the minority communities in India but as the domination of the society by an oppressive minority.<sup>55</sup> This dominance of the upper caste continues in the rule of the BJP. According to the *Print*, an analysis of more than a thousand BJP leaders showed that at least 75 percent of them were upper-caste members, though the upper caste makes up less than 20 percent of the total Indian population.<sup>56</sup> This dynamic played out at the national and state levels.

Present-day Hindu extremist narratives continue to perpetuate images of Hindu unity and the Muslim enemy while tacitly ignoring the status quo regarding caste dynamics. Thus, Muslims continue to be a useful and essential tool to unify different castes and perpetuate caste superiority to prevent Muslims from overtaking the society.

Two disclaimers are in order. First, despite their lack of social progress, most of the members of the traditionally "lower castes," who have been systematically subjected to ridicule and rape, arrests, and lynchings, have been able to make political progress. In the states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, for example, members of the lower castes have held dominant roles in politics.<sup>57</sup> Second, many factors other than caste have contributed to the rise of right-wing nationalism and, subsequently, Hindu extremism in India. Some of these factors are discussed next.

## **Factors Contributing to the Rise of Right-Wing Nationalism (and Extremism)**

According to Ramachandra Guha, among the several external factors that have contributed to the rise of Hindu right-wing nationalism and jingoism in India are the corruption of the Indian National Congress, the hypocrisy of left-wing parties, Islamist extremism in South Asia, and the rise of ethno-nationalism globally.<sup>58</sup>

### **Corruption and the Congress Party**

The Indian National Congress, also known as the Congress Party, which was formed in the late nineteenth century, became the primary political party in India at the national level. A large part of its prominence was due to the party's engagement in the freedom movement from the



British. Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, its two most prominent politicians, built the credibility of the party over years.<sup>59</sup> After Nehru, the party and India was steered by his daughter, Indira Gandhi (1964–1977 and 1980–1984), and barring a short stint with the Janata Party (1977–1980), by her son Rajiv Gandhi (1985–1992).<sup>60</sup> In subsequent years, the party's most prominent stint in the government was between 2004 and 2014 when Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was given the mandate twice to govern India.<sup>61</sup>

Despite receiving the mandate twice, however, the Congress Party and its allies, which formed the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) party, were rocked by scandals that racked up billions of dollars' worth of losses to the Indian taxpayer.<sup>62</sup> The Congress Party's association with the Gandhi family and those close to them (former prime minister Singh was always viewed as a political puppet by his opponents) led to further falls in popularity and an intense nationwide anticorruption movement that began in 2010 and finally led to the loss of the Congress government at the national level.<sup>63</sup>

### **Failure of Left-Wing Politics in India**

One major factor in bringing right-wing politics to center stage has been the failure of left-wing political parties to present a cogent ideological opposition to right-wing parties, compounded by their own internal issues. The best example is the Communist Party of India (Marxist), formed in 1925, which initially argued for social and economic equality, removal of caste barriers, and policies that favor the poor. It gained strength in the states of West Bengal, Tripura, and Kerala because of its promotion of extensive land reforms. It also commanded significant strength on the national front.<sup>64</sup>

Over the years, however, many of the party's leaders lost their ideological purity and began to profit from corruption and capitalist politics. In various states, the left wing was seen as dominated by upper-caste members of the society, leaving the so-called lower caste to flounder. Violence against lower-caste individuals in left-wing states such as Kerala became more and more commonplace. On the national front, the left wing was often silent on issues such as human rights violations in Kashmir and the US-India nuclear deal, which it ostensibly opposed but later supported (an issue that was exposed on Wikileaks).<sup>65</sup>

The RSS and other right-wing groups were adept at taking advantage of the differences between speech and action among the left and established strong bases across Kerala, West Bengal, and Tripura, further extending their reach.<sup>66</sup>

### **Islamist Extremism in South Asia**

With the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s, the global jihadist movement began a gradual rise. South Asia witnessed a mushrooming of jihadist groups during the War in Afghanistan that later began to turn toward India. These included the Jaish-e-Mohammed, Lashkar-e-Taiba, Harkat ul-Jihad Bangladesh, Jamaat ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh, and various affiliates of Al Qaeda.<sup>67</sup> Most of these groups were groomed by Pakistani and Bangladeshi government actors for various geopolitical and financial reasons. With the end of the Afghan jihad, these groups began to target India, especially in Kashmir but also all across the rest of India, almost leading to a war at the beginning of the twenty-first century because of an attack on the Indian parliament.<sup>68</sup>

With the rise in homegrown extremism and attacks in the 1990s and the 2000s, Indian authorities apprehended many Indians who colluded with Pakistani groups such as Lashkar e-Taiba and Jaish e-Mohammed, as well as many who offered to fight in Kashmir. The Hindu right wing used this activity as fuel to fan anti-Muslim sentiment in India.<sup>69</sup> Such sentiments were provided global credibility with the 9/11 attacks and the resultant demonization of Islam and Muslims worldwide. Hindu right-wing actors were able to capitalize on these sentiments

and accuse the Congress Party of pandering to the Muslim community for the sake of electoral votes (leading to major economic loss for the nation), thus firing the imaginations of youth who were struggling with unemployment and slowing economic growth in India.<sup>70</sup> A Pew study notes that more than 80 percent of Indians perceived Islamist extremism as an existential threat, demonstrating how widely entrenched this fear was.<sup>71</sup>

### **Global Rise of Ethno-Nationalism**

Beginning in the 2010s, right-wing movements across the world gained new currency and were able to expand their foothold in different parts of the world, including Europe, the United States, Australia, and parts of Asia. Populists such as Donald Trump (United States), Boris Johnson (United Kingdom), Victor Orban (Hungary), Rodrigo Duterte (Philippines), and Jair Bolsonaro (Brazil) gained power using similar tactics. These included flaunting their anti-establishment credentials and voicing anti-immigration and other politically incorrect opinions that were often portrayed as binaries despite the complexities underpinning them.<sup>72</sup>

Along with a rise in the power of tech companies and the use of anonymized accounts and the increased amplification of fake news and hate- and fear-filled rhetoric due to the algorithm models of tech companies, right-wing narratives (especially Islamophobia) spread across the world.<sup>73</sup> The rise in global ethno-nationalism further fueled many right-wing groups in India, amplifying the voices of white supremacist actors, especially those who harbored anti-Muslim sentiments.<sup>74</sup>

### **Silence of the Leaders**

Once the right wing gained power, the current government's reluctance to incarcerate or even penalize those who have been involved in committing anti-minority crime or spreading hate speech allowed extremism to flourish. For example, Shambulal, a Hindu extremist who hacked a Muslim to death and uploaded a digital recording of the incident online, was not merely acquitted; he stood for local elections in Rajasthan in 2018.<sup>75</sup> In another incident in 2018, a minister from the BJP government officially welcomed five men after they were acquitted of the charge of lynching because of a lack of evidence.<sup>76</sup>

Prime Minister Modi, who is an otherwise loquacious politician with weekly podcasts addressed to his supporters, offered only a few vague and feeble admonishments in response to these incidents and took few concrete steps.<sup>77</sup> Moreover, the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh (the most populous Indian state, with two hundred million people), Yogi Adityanath, demonstrated even greater reticence in such matters. After the 2018 lynching of a policeman by crowds protesting cow slaughters (an accusation that is still not proven true), Yogi Adityanath dismissed the death of the policeman as an accident and gave strong orders to arrest those involved in the slaughtering of cows.<sup>78</sup> In 2020, the Uttar Pradesh government led by Yogi Adityanath often criminalized those protesting in the state and even enacted laws to penalize interreligious couples under allegations of love jihad, the shady term described earlier that characterizes Muslim men marrying Hindu women in an effort to convert and funnel "gullible" women into terrorism.<sup>79</sup>

This aspect of silence and in some instances even the encouragement of violence signals a dangerous trend. As described by Elcheroth and Reicher, politicians can facilitate violence in any of three ways: by verbally encouraging violence; by keeping silent on incidents of violence, emboldening those groups who perpetrate violence; and by referencing historical clashes between two communities, perpetuating the narratives that such communities have been in opposition to each other for decades.<sup>80</sup>

The current government has been complicit in anti-minority violence by its silence on the lynching of minority community members. It has also exacerbated historical divides across the

nation by disregarding the contributions of Muslim empires and focusing only on the wrongs committed by them (which, while important, do not paint a full picture).<sup>81</sup> These dynamics have played out over the Internet as well.

### **The Internet as a Facilitator of Right-Wing Extremism**

The increasingly widespread use of the Internet and the rise of social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook have facilitated the growth and spread of right-wing extremism in India. These platforms have been instrumental in accommodating and emboldening extremist groups across the world to such an extent that their use gained special mention in the Global Terrorism Index of 2018 among factors identified as helping to spread right-wing extremism.<sup>82</sup>

The Internet and platforms such as Whatsapp and Facebook have created echo chambers that reflect the views of only one orientation. Social media companies, especially Facebook, use algorithms that encourage those posts with the highest amount of engagement; inevitably, these posts are laced with hatred or fear.<sup>83</sup> In India, where the cost of mobile data is in free fall, more and more people have been encouraged to use the Internet and in doing so, they have latched onto extreme views.<sup>84</sup> Even newer platforms, such as Tik Tok, became vehicles for spreading hatred of minorities, especially in small villages that had not yet been exposed to the influence of the Internet but where more than seven hundred thousand videos were reported in a five-month period in 2018 for dangerous content or hate speech.<sup>85</sup>

Hate speech and extremist views have been undergirded by the fake news infodemic in India. A BBC news report in 2018 showed that while the left wing was also involved in pushing fake news, the right wing was better organized to push fake stories, often with nationalist or anti-Muslim overtones, to the extent that they created an entire ecosystem. In 2020, further reports showed that a spike in fake news stories accusing Muslims of spreading the coronavirus created more hatred. These articles often promote Hindu superiority and portray Muslims in a negative light, further strengthening the right wing.

The dissemination of fake news is increased by the presence of troll armies online, which is another way in which the Hindu right has strengthened itself. According to the investigative journalist Swati Chaturvedi, the BJP and the Hindu right was also involved in the systematic dissemination of narratives that favored the Hindu right and were often intolerant at best. Police complaints against Twitter handles usually resulted in no action whatsoever, and according to one journalist, many of the handles that regularly spewed hate and fake news were also followed by the prime minister.<sup>86</sup>

Another way that social media has problematized extremism is through the almost instantaneous dissemination of video recordings of violent events such as mob lynchings.<sup>87</sup> Posting these videos ensures that people are desensitized to such violence and inspires imitation by other such groups in other cities of India as well. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, these online narratives have escalated significantly, with Muslims often being blamed for spreading the disease and even Muslim NGO workers attacked while distributing food to affected populations.<sup>88</sup>

Exacerbating the problem of the proliferation of online hate speech, as reported in an August 2020 *Wall Street Journal* article, was the collusion of the head of Facebook's public policy in India, Ankhi Das, an ardent supporter of the BJP who created internal policies that favored BJP party members. Das's actions allowed hate-filled posts by BJP party members to remain online.<sup>89</sup> Eventually, however, an investigation led to Das's resigning from her job.<sup>90</sup>

Since the role itself, however, involves liaising with government officials and because the BJP is in power, it is not possible for public policy heads belonging to Facebook or other social media companies to antagonize the BJP. In other words, any policy head will have to accommodate at least some of the demands of the BJP, which could lead to further such actions in the future. Furthermore, Shivnath Thukral, who replaced Das, is also connected to the BJP.

He was a media and later a corporate executive also campaigned for the BJP in 2014.<sup>91</sup> According to a *Time* magazine report, he also ignored many Facebook posts that were fake and had Islamophobic overtones.<sup>92</sup>

As much as tech companies have tried to engage and prevent the spread of hate speech on the Internet, the profit motive, weak checks and balances, and the use of algorithms only exacerbate the issues.

## **Hindu Extremist Blowback**

While Hindu extremists in India continue to attack Muslims, in the past decade or so they have added a new target: liberals and centrists who oppose Hindu extremism and any media that project liberal points of view. Using slurs such as “pseudo-seculars,” “libtards” (liberals + retards), and “presstitutes” (press + prostitutes), Hindu extremists have vilified the political campaigns of any liberals or liberal media that side with Muslims or oppose Hindu extremist narratives. Academics and journalists such as Ramachandra Guha, Romila Thapar, and Ravish Tiwari have had to face a slew of allegations against them.<sup>93</sup> This discourse has spread among the larger public with different sides vilifying those who don’t agree with them. For example, Hindus who sympathize with certain Hindu-related grievances are labeled “Bhakts” (a slur used to denote blind followers of Prime Minister Modi).

Right-wing extremist groups have also begun to attack any groups or actors that have deviated from mainstream narratives. For example, an advertising campaign introduced in the second half of 2020 by the jewelry company Tanishq, titled “Ekavatam,” that promoted love jihad, triggered such massive online hatred and calls for a boycott of the parent company, Tata, that, eventually, the advertisements were taken down.<sup>94</sup> Interestingly, Tata was the largest campaign contributor to the BJP.<sup>95</sup>

Another victim of online hatred was Akshay Kumar, a Canadian citizen of Indian origin and a Bollywood star who has acted in more than fifty movies over the past few decades. Since the election of the BJP to power, many of Kumar’s movies have adopted themes that coincide with government programs, such as increasing the number of toilets across India and providing sanitary pads for women.<sup>96</sup> Moreover, in keeping with a larger push in Bollywood to produce movies in line with nationalist narratives, Kumar’s movies have played on nationalist sentiments in a bid to earn bigger box office earnings.

Kumar was so beloved to right-wing parties because of his credentials that he was one of only two people who were allowed to conduct a (scripted) interview with Prime Minister Modi. Kumar, therefore, seemed like an unlikely target for the Hindu right wing. Yet, his 2020 movie *Lakshmi Bomb* (the name of a firecracker brand in India) became the target of widespread online hatred and trolling for defaming the name of the Indian goddess Laxmi. Eventually, Kumar, acquiescing to the troll attacks on him, changed the name of the movie,<sup>97</sup>

Hindu right-wing trolls also affected Indian foreign policy. In 2020, after the right wing engaged on a mass campaign to demonize Muslims for spreading coronavirus (a false assumption), an Arab activist who belonged to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) royal family drew the ire of Hindu right-wing trolls.<sup>98</sup> The trolling escalated so badly that eventually several Indian citizens based in the UAE were fired from their jobs for engaging in this online behavior, inspiring widespread debates in the Arab world about the influence of the Hindu right wing in India. It took the combined efforts of Prime Minister Modi’s tweets, external minister S. Jaishankar’s diplomatic phone calls to heads of states in the Gulf, and a communiqué issued by the Indian ambassador to the UAE to defuse the issue.<sup>99</sup>

Even the prime minister was not spared in this trolling. In a digital address at the Aligarh Muslim University in 2020, he called the university a microcosm of India. A short time later, the term “Maulana Modi” (Maulana is a honorific title given to Muslim clerics) began to

circulate and many accounts began to troll the prime minister.<sup>100</sup> According to analytical tools, approximately three hundred tweets have been generated with more than 1.5 million views (still marginal by Indian tweeter numbers).<sup>101</sup> Despite the marginality, it is clear that there exists a subgroup that considers Modi too soft for the Hindu narratives.

As these examples reveal, the cultivation of Hindu right-wing elements by the government is creating an ecosphere of unbridled online trolling and offline hatred that is spilling over to allies of the political actors setting the agenda as well as to external allies. This hatred and antagonism has very real effects with opponents of the right wing in India having to acquiesce to the demands of such trolls and even ministers having to diplomatically intervene to assuage the concerns of external allies.

This trend is not limited to India. As mentioned earlier, jihadist groups in Pakistan were provided implicit support by Pakistani authorities since they fulfilled Pakistani's strategic ambitions to administer what was called "death by a thousand cuts" to India.<sup>102</sup> After a certain amount of time, however, various splinter groups were formed, some of which began operating as anti-Pakistan terrorist groups.<sup>103</sup> As a result, Pakistan has had to expend far more resources trying to curb the activities of these terrorist groups, proof that its past strategy of supporting terrorist groups has backfired.

The Pakistani experience suggests that splinter groups of Hindu extremists could soon threaten the Indian government's security interests.

## **The Future of Hindu Extremism**

Hindu extremism in India is ethno-nationalist rather than religious and is intertwined with the country's political and social caste system, with some influence from its colonial past. The issue of caste is significant and is one of the pillars of the movement that policy makers should consider. Since the 1980s, Hindu right-wing politics has emerged as a strong contender to secular liberal politics in India, and since the ascension of the BJP in 2014, there has been no going back, with the party racking up major electoral successes in national- and state-level elections (barring a few exceptions).

During this time, right-wing extremist elements have been emboldened, spreading various narratives of hatred online that have had real-world effects too, including rioting, mob lynching, and economic sanctions against Muslims and Dalits. While it is hard to predict the future of Hindu extremism in India, this article posits that the unfettered growth of Hindu extremist groups will likely have negative implications for the government and various supportive actors, even if they support such groups tacitly or openly.

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