

## **The Hindu Nationalist Agenda on Kashmir**

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### **Abstract**

What is the Hindu Nationalist agenda on the Kashmir Valley? Kashmir is one of the most contentious territories in the world. Both Pakistan and India lay claim to it which has made the region a hotspot for war, terrorism, extremism and instability. Hindu nationalism has been on the rise in recent decades with the increased power of the BJP which has established a divisive rhetoric in India that has been at the expense of various minorities. The current Prime Minister and leader of the BJP, Narendra Modi, has recently revoked the special status of Kashmir and has placed the region under curfew leading to many cases of human rights abuse and arrests. Through an in-depth historical analysis, this research seeks to determine the agenda of the BJP and Hindu nationalists on Kashmir and how it effects Kashmiris and the secular democracy of India. This project will explore key points of Indian history tracking Hindu nationalists' sentiments and political agendas throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Much of the research will be focused on the past two decades and the Modi government since this period has been the height of power for the BJP. Understanding the changing political environment in India allows for better policymaking and effective action. This paper seeks to accomplish that goal.

**Keywords: Hindu Nationalism, Kashmir, India**

### **1. Introduction**

In the past three decades, India has seen a rise in Hindu nationalism. Several political parties have gained power in the Indian government that have ran on a Hindu nationalist platform. The most successful of which is the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) which controls the current government. The Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, is a member of this party. Hindu nationalists seek to make India for the Hindus and in some more extreme cases, seek to expel all non-Hindus from the land. Not only is this message polarizing towards minorities but it has manifested into severe policies that have directly harmed such groups, especially Muslims. Moreover, Hindu nationalist groups have taken a special interest in Kashmir which is India's only Muslim majority state. Since August 2019, Prime Minister Modi has put the state under curfew which has led to school closings, job loss, economic devastation and violence<sup>1</sup>. Their overall agenda for Kashmir is to slowly transform it into a Hindu majority state by allowing Hindu settlements in the region which are currently illegal. However, Modi has shown that he is willing to change the law when he abolished the legislation that allows Kashmiris to have a certain degree of autonomy. Hindu nationalist groups such as the BJP seek to fully incorporate the Kashmir valley into India in order to further their nationalist agenda.

This project focuses primarily on the past two decades of Indian politics but relevant background information on Hindu nationalism from the twentieth century will also be explored in order to provide history for the Hindu nationalist or Hindutva movement and its agenda and political ideology for Kashmir. This project will be significant to current literature because it combines two issues in the South Asia region together. There is an abundance of research on Jammu and Kashmir and on Hindu Nationalism but there is not as much concerning both. Furthermore, since the

project will focus heavily on modern times, up to the spring of 2020, it will provide an update to the current research. This project's focus will add to a richer and fuller understanding of the Kashmir valley. There has been a growing trend towards religious nationalism in recent years around the world, including Northern Ireland, Myanmar, Israel, and Palestine, and even the United States. My addition to the literature will provide a deeper analysis of the foundations of religious nationalism in the context of India and how it can affect a divided nation.

## 2. Background

Kashmir is one of the most contentious territories in the world. Both Pakistan and India have laid claim to it since their independence from the British in 1947. The British divided the Indian sub-continent by religion meaning states that had a mostly Muslim majority population became a part of either East or West Pakistan, while regions with a mostly Hindu population formed India. The state of Kashmir and Jammu was given a choice by the British to either join Pakistan or India since it was a Muslim majority state but was ruled by a Hindu leader, Hari Singh. Despite much of the Kashmiri people's protests, Singh decided to join India. Pakistani leaders disagreed with this decision and tried to include the region as a part of new-found Pakistan<sup>2</sup>. These conflicting goals led to four wars between Pakistan and India and remains the biggest national security problem between the two nations to this day. Over seventy years of conflict and tension has hurt the Kashmiri people the most with curfews, human rights abuses, violence by both Pakistani and Indian armies, and much more heinous crimes.

Hindu nationalism has been developing since the late nineteenth century during the British Raj<sup>3</sup>. In response to the British takeover, a revival of Hinduism and Hindu culture occurred which sought to explain how the British and other past invaders such as the Muslims and Mughals were able to conquer India. Some thinkers at this time such as Dayananda Saraswati argued Hindus had divided themselves too much into different sects and in some cases into separate religions as with Jainism and Buddhism. He believed that this divided society had weakened Hindus. His proposal was to unite all Hindus and read and live only by the Vedas as the Aryans did during what he calls the "Golden Age" of Hinduism. Saraswati hoped to unite all Hindus but his philosophy excludes all other thoughts or sects: "What he proposed eliminated the possibility of a pluralistic model of Hinduism"<sup>4</sup>. Conversions to other religions such as Christianity or Islam were seen as a direct threat to Hinduism so Saraswati created reconversion rituals for Indians who wanted to be "purified" as Hindus again<sup>5</sup>. For Saraswati, India was a sacred land for Hindus, and his views of other religions as threats to Hindus are still prevalent today in modern Hindutva movements.

The term Hindutva was first coined by Vinayak Savarkar who, while in jail, wrote *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* which explores Hindu identity and is essentially the charter of Hindu nationalism. His definition of a Hindu is not actually based solely on following the religion of Hinduism because Savarkar himself was an atheist and "politicized religion and introduced religious metaphors into politics"<sup>6</sup>. He was more interested in using religion to further a particular political agenda. Savarkar wanted to build a purely Hindu nation and aggressively despised all other religious groups, particularly Muslims. Hindus were the "Hindu self" and Muslims were the "non-self" and therefore the enemy. Jaffrelot<sup>7</sup> explains that Hindu identity was instead based on "geographical unity, racial features and a common culture." Hindutva emphasizes territory because the land east of the Indus river and between the Himalayans and the Indian Ocean was chosen by the ancient Aryan race to settle on and thus makes the land sacred. The common culture is based on the customs, values, rituals, and language that come from Hinduism. For Savarkar, Sanskrit and Hindi are seen as the superior languages and should be considered the national language for all Hindus<sup>8</sup>. Though Savarkar's book was published almost a hundred years ago, the general principles it outlines are still used today by politicians to unite Hindus to form a Hindu state.

The modern Hindutva movement has much of its roots in the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) organization which developed in 1925. Its initial agenda was to unite Hindus to free India from colonial rule and to strengthen Hindus against minority groups such as Muslims and Christians which they feared were denationalizing Hindus<sup>9</sup>. It has since then evolved to be at the forefront of the Hindutva movement. Modern RSS members have taken to "cultural vigilantism" meaning they have vigilante groups that enforce Hindu customs and values such as cow protection. Despite beef consumption being legal in most of India, cow protectors have taken upon themselves to punish anyone who may sell, buy or consume beef which are usually non-Hindus<sup>10</sup>. The RSS has wanted to include Kashmir and Jammu as part of the Hindu nation since Partition. It has throughout the years protested against any resolution that does not lead to the complete inclusion of Kashmir and Jammu<sup>11</sup>. This includes Article 370 which has been integrated into the Indian constitution and gives the region special status and a certain degree of autonomy. This is important because the RSS is considered the parent of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) which is the current ruling party of India and has recently annulled Kashmir and Jammu's special status and put the region under curfew.

### 3. Findings And Analysis

#### 3.1 The Elections of 1989 & 1991

For the past three decades, the BJP has grown in popularity in India. Its first major success was in the national election of 1989 where the party won eighty-eight seats in the lower chamber. And then in 1991, it won 119 seats<sup>12</sup>. Having had run on a platform of Hindu nationalism which was incompatible with Nehru's vision of a secular India, the BJP's victory was a surprise for many Indian politicians. The BJP was influenced by many Hindu nationalist groups before it like the RSS, Jana Sangh, and others. It holds the belief that India has lost its traditional ways and must strengthen itself and the Hindu culture. Some promises BJP leaders made were to make Hindi and not Urdu (a Muslim and Mughal language) the language of Northern India, to have more cow protection, pious Hindu leaders, and revert to traditional customs and social order<sup>13</sup>. This message highlights the party's Hindu agenda, its want for an India for Hindus, and the dominance of Hindu culture which is an intriguing message for many Indians. It preys on the fears of many Hindus who were and still are scared of Islamic fundamentalism and the loss of traditional culture.

The BJP has been advocating to strip Kashmir of its special privileges by removing Article 370 from the constitution since the 1960s<sup>14</sup>. In fact, after the BJP's victory in 1991, the president of the party, Dr. Joshi, organized a traveling rally that started from the southern tip of India and ended in India controlled Kashmir. The battle cry of the rally was "Save Kashmir" and "Forward to Kashmir"<sup>15</sup>. This suggests that Kashmir, the only Muslim majority territory in India, needs saving and that the BJP, a Hindu nationalist party is going to save it. Kashmir had been plagued with Islamic terrorism and extremism during this time so perhaps the BJP is implying that the problem with Kashmir is Islam and Muslim culture and the only solution is to spread Hindu culture and Hinduism itself. This sentiment continues to be used in India's current political environment.

The elections of 1989 and 1991 are worth noting because they are the first instance where a Hindu nationalist party has had considerable success in Indian national politics. This begs the question: why? Why was the Hindutva movement appealing at that time? India was built on the ideas of secularism and democracy but now a large amount of the population voted for a party that is against those ideals. Austin and Lyon<sup>16</sup> argue one reason is that the previously dominant parties had become weak and disappointing: "The success of the BJP probably owes as much to the weakness of its rivals as to the strategy of the Hindutva camp." Many Indians had lost confidence with other parties such as the Indian National Congress party (Congress henceforth) which was muddled with corruption, scandal, assassinations, inner fighting, and poor leadership. The BJP offered new hope to people with a disciplined agenda that emphasized the strength of India and its potential. It painted itself as clear-minded, strong, and willing to reform the political system that has disappointed so many Indians. This resonated with the population and gave the BJP tremendous power in the Indian national government.

#### 3.2 The Hindutva Court Cases

In the 1990s, a series of court cases were conducted that concerned the status of the Hindutva ideology and movement in politics. This was prompted after concern arose that the movement was inherently religious and therefore could not be used in government as it would violate the secularist mandate. This issue came to light after the December 1992 riots between Muslims and Hindus in Ayodhya which led to the death of around two thousand people<sup>17</sup>. The riots were over the Babri Masjid which was made under Mughal rule but is claimed by Hindus as the birthplace of Ram, a deity in Hinduism. Hindu activists gathered in 1992 and demolished the mosque. Conflicting claims of ownership dragged the issue to the courts<sup>18</sup>. Leaders of the BJP were accused of inciting the riots and some were arrested, however, they were released shortly after due to technicalities. While the legality of the demolition remained undecided for several decades, these riots did bring up important questions about secularism, freedom of speech, and religious oppression.

The term secularism has always been difficult to define in India and therefore discussions of what is legal and illegal in the political system were debatable. During the Hindutva cases in the 1990s, courts in India separated the term Hindutva from Hinduism. Hindutva was labeled as a way of life as opposed to the religion of Hinduism<sup>19</sup>. This ruling allowed for Hindutva or Hindu nationalism to participate in elections and politics without being accused of employing religion which was considered a corrupt practice. Hindutva was labeled as secular and a term for Indian culture. In the courts, it did not mean anti-minorities or anti-Muslim but instead meant inclusiveness of all things India<sup>20</sup>. Whether or not this is true in practice is another matter. Regardless, Hindu nationalists' parties were able to rely on this ruling to legitimize their platform and reach a bigger audience. They no longer had to worry about being anti-secular since the court labeled them as secular. It is likely no coincidence that the BJP was able to continue to grow in power as

these court cases were happening. This ruling empowered and legitimized the BJP's message without seriously regarding the negative impact of such a divisive ideology.

### 3.3 Gujarat Riots of 2002

Narendra Modi is the current Prime Minister of India and a Hindu nationalist. His policymaking has led to drastic changes in Kashmir therefore it is important to understand him. Before he became Prime Minister, Modi was the Chief Minister of Gujarat, a state located on the western coast of India. Modi's success, tactics, and viewpoints can be analyzed in the Gujarat Riots of 2002. The riots occurred after a train filled with Hindu activists was found burned with fifty-nine people dead<sup>21</sup>. Though riots have become common in India, this was the first case where the country had 24-hour television coverage of a riot. Indians, for the first time, were able to see the victims' bodies live<sup>22</sup>. This is a big shift from just reading about violence in the newspaper. It is much more graphic and emotive as people can see the corpses, the charred train, and the pain in the bystanders. The media, believing they were purely reporting the truth, made it clear that the attack was along religious lines<sup>23</sup>. Not long after the train was found, violent riots ensued across the state of Gujarat leading to the deaths of around two thousand people, most of whom were Muslim<sup>24</sup>. These riots showcase the tensions between Hindus and Muslims in some parts of India. Even though India is made up of a diverse group of people with multiple religious and ethnic groups, there does seem to be an us vs them mentality in many places. Hindu nationalists, including Modi, were able to take advantage of this tension for their own political gain.

After the riots, Modi and the BJP were able to get their biggest victory in Gujarat. Modi was able to do this by taking advantage of the television coverage of the riots and their aftermath. National coverage of the riots was perceived by many Gujarati people as biased and highly critical of the Gujarati government. In an effort to build support, Modi went on a "pride" tour around Gujarat and made speeches where he criticized the national media coverage and praised the Gujarati media for its accurate portrayal of the anger towards Muslims<sup>25</sup>. Modi made several controversial statements on his tour from anti-Muslim rhetoric to mocking other politicians. This in itself was a tactic since it kept him in the news cycle and attracted many people not only in Gujarat but also in other places in India. He drew on the fears of Hindu Indians in his speeches by emphasizing the Muslim population's increasing size<sup>26</sup>. Even though Hindus are the clear majority in India, there are still fears that the Muslim population will grow, become the majority and oppress Hindus. This fear was likely reignited after the attack on the fifty-nine Hindu activists. Modi was able to profit from this fear and garner more support for himself and the BJP party. In another angle, the Gujarati riots were a violent attack on the Muslim population in the region and so, many Muslims had to flee the state for their own safety. Having known this, Modi continued to push for elections despite protests from advisors regarding the tumultuous situation. The BJP broadcasted several commercials that took advantage of the train attack and displayed Modi as the sole hero that could stop such madness<sup>27</sup>. This polarizing message, that resonated with many Hindus, along with the shifting demographics led to the biggest BJP win in Gujarat.

### 3.4 The Election of 2014

Modi continued to be the Chief Minister of Gujarat for twelve more years until 2014 when he won the Prime Minister seat. The BJP was able to win because of the weakness of Congress, its own campaign strategy, and the growing Hindutva movement. Akin to the elections of 1989 and 1991 mentioned previously, Congress has been muddled with poor leadership, corruption and general ineffectiveness<sup>28</sup>. Congress was the biggest opponent of the BJP; it is the party of Nehru, one of the founding fathers of India. It has been in power for decades and has been a staple part of Indian leadership<sup>29</sup>. But due to poor campaigning and negative perceptions, Congress was unable to secure a majority within the government. The BJP was much smarter in its tactics and message and was therefore, able to win.

Hindutva has been a growing movement in India for several decades. Its ideas of a strong Hindu nation, traditional values, and a national family was attractive to many people, especially when compared to the shortfalls of past governments. It has a history of using media to spread its message and appeal to a broader base whether it be through television, print media or more currently social media. In the national election of 2014, the BJP and Modi employed a comprehensive, systematic social media campaign strategy, the first of its kind in Indian politics. Because of the Gujarati riots, Modi, at this time, was seen by some as a tarnished leader. However, through this campaign he was able to change his image into "a messiah of 'New India'; the teams working for Modi deployed a meticulously crafted social media campaign that appealed not only to the country's youth but also to expatriate Indians and the broader international community"<sup>30</sup>. For Modi to do well in the national election he needed to attract the whole country not just his state of Gujarat. His image was recreated as a savior of India which echoes the commercials used in the past

by him and the BJP. Social media is widely available to Indians due to cheap mobile phones and internet access, so Modi was able to reach a large audience across India which enabled him to grow his following.

Economic development was at the forefront of Modi's campaign, but he also appealed to rising Hindu nationalist sentiments. In his campaign trail, Modi promised to amend the Citizenship Act of 1950 so that any refugee from Afghanistan, Bangladesh or Pakistan who is a Christian, Hindu, Jain, Parsee or Sikh can gain automatic citizenship - explicitly leaving out Muslims<sup>31</sup>. This amendment was eventually passed in December of 2019 along with another clause that residents of the state of Assam had to prove their citizenship and if they could not, they would be considered illegal immigrants even if they have lived in India their entire lives<sup>32</sup>. This especially targets poor Indians who likely do not have documentation of their residency or family history. This law not only discriminates against Muslims but also upends the secularist ideas India was built on. The government is overtly creating laws that protect certain religious groups and hurts others. Even though Modi made such bold, divisive promises, he still won the election which suggests that Hindu superiority sentiments are gaining more traction in India.

### 3.5 Revocation Of The Special Status Of Jammu And Kashmir

On August 5<sup>th</sup>, 2019, the Indian government, headed by the BJP, unilaterally revoked the special status given to the state of Jammu and Kashmir. They effectively abrogated Article 370 which has given the region a certain level of autonomy since 1947<sup>33</sup>. Even though Jammu and Kashmir are a territory of India, under the Indian Constitution they have freedom over their own domestic issues such as laws, property rights, and citizenship. In 1954, through a Presidential Order, Article 35a was added to the Indian constitution which gave the Kashmiri government the right to define who is considered a permanent resident<sup>34,35</sup>. Hindu nationalists have long criticized this article since permanent residents are those that resided in Kashmir in 1954 and anyone who has lived there for ten years after. Only permanent residents are allowed to own immovable property, vote in elections, and join the state government<sup>36</sup>. The article was created to protect the demographics of the region. Since it is the only Muslim majority state in India, there were concerns that Hindu populations may migrate to Kashmir and slowly outnumber the Muslim population. Hindu nationalists believe that these articles have hindered the region's full integration into India.

Rescinding Article 370 and 35a has been a key part of the Hindutva movement for decades. Hindutva ideology is not only rooted in religious or linguistic grounds, but it also emphasizes a need for geographical unity. Savarkar made it clear that the physical land of India is itself sacred and must be united<sup>37</sup>. The notion of Akhand Bharat, the complete unification of India which includes Pakistan, Bangladesh, Kashmir, Nepal, Bhutan, and Sri Lanka, rose in the 1950s as a response to Partition. One of the reasons Hindu nationalists have always wanted to integrate Jammu and Kashmir is because of this idea of a united India. Article 370 and 35a were seen as direct inhibitors to this goal. From their perspective, the articles prevent Jammu and Kashmir from being a part of India and promote separatist movements and thus make India weaker.

Many Hindu nationalists have criticized the government in the past for allowing separatist sentiments to run rampant. The BJP and the RSS have always seen this as dangerous not only for India but for Kashmiris as well. Kashmir has essentially been entrenched in violence and human rights abuses since Partition. Hindu nationalists believe that the violence was able to grow over the years due to the Indian government's weakness and the lack of Jammu and Kashmir's integration. Article 370 gave the State a degree of autonomy which allowed separatist attitudes to manifest and grow. As Jaffrelot<sup>38</sup> explains the Pakistani government took advantage of this situation: "[Pakistan] has been...financing, arming and training terrorists in J&K State and creating pockets of subversion." These terrorist organizations have committed atrocious acts such as the killing of Hindu leaders, destroying temples, rape, abduction, and have issued threats to many families in the region. In the past, the Indian government has done little to respond to such violence, but the BJP has consistently been an active voice for the Valley<sup>39</sup>. The BJP and Hindu nationalists have wanted to revoke Article 370 because they see it as the most effective way to integrate the Kashmir Valley into India and to save it with their own agenda.

Though the BJP claims to want to save Kashmir from violence, the recent repeal of Article 370 seems to have done more harm than good. Expecting protests, Modi deployed thousands of extra troops to the already highly militarized region. The government essentially ordered a lockdown of the whole region. Businesses, banks, and schools have been shut down rendering many Kashmiris jobless, hungry, and forced to stay indoors<sup>40,41</sup>. The internet, phones, and landlines have been severed so that the region is completely cut off from the rest of the world. Life is far more dangerous for Kashmiris due to the increased military presence. In response to the new legislation, thousands of Kashmiris took to the streets in peaceful protests and were attacked by Indian troops<sup>42</sup>. Jammu and Kashmir appear to be worse off especially since their autonomous status has been dissolved. The region has dealt with lockdowns before but now it can no longer have any control over its own affairs. Kashmiris are under the control of New Delhi which

could mean harsher conditions, further alienation, and a takeover from other Indians who can now easily migrate to the area.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Hindu nationalists have long wanted to fully integrate the Kashmir valley into India. Though originally seen as an obscure voice in Indian politics that was incompatible with Indian values, Hindu nationalism was able to garner support over the past couple of decades which has led to the stripping of Kashmir's autonomous status. Kashmiris have had to suffer greatly due to this divisive ideology. Modi claims to be a champion of Kashmir and the rest of India but in reality, he and his party have created an India that is home to religious discrimination, intolerance, and violence. The amendment to the Citizenship Act is another example of the policies that his government has implemented that has harmed millions of Indians. This growing trend of nationalism and religious nationalism has occurred across the world including Myanmar, Northern Ireland, Sri Lanka, and the United States. Given the information gathered in this paper, it is clear that these trends can have violent outcomes that result in unrest, rioting, displacement, and cause great suffering to minority groups.

The future of India's democracy is at a crossroads. Under Modi, secularism is slowly eroding away, and anti-Islamic sentiments are running rampant in political spheres. What could this mean for India's future? Christophe Jaffrelot<sup>43</sup> argues that India is on the path to becoming an ethnic democracy meaning that one core ethnic group will form the core nation in the state and rule the government and see nonmembers of the core group as a threat and will thus grant them limited rights. There will be a legal distinction between the majority and minorities. In India's case, the core group would be Hindus and all other minorities would be part of the noncore group. The BJP's rhetoric and policies have marginalized and demonized minority groups such as Kashmiris and Muslims and have stood back while local vigilantes have taken justice in their own hands against Muslims and Christians<sup>44</sup>. Given the evidence garnered through this research paper, I agree with Jaffrelot's prediction. If Modi and the BJP continue to be power, India will continue to go down the path it has started on. Minorities will likely continue to lose their rights and experience further discrimination and prejudice. Unfortunately, the complete integration of Jammu and Kashmir will likely be difficult and met with violent resistance.

For India to retain its secular roots and move forward as a peaceful and prosperous country that respects each of its citizens, there must be better policymaking and stronger political competition. Modi and the BJP must include Kashmiris in all decisions that affect Kashmiri land and people. Otherwise, riots and violence will continue for years, possibly decades on end. If Hindu nationalists truly want to unify India, they must be respectful to all minorities. Local vigilantes who attack anyone they deem suspicious of breaking the law regardless of evidence must be stopped and prosecuted. Some BJP leaders have defended these attacks during speeches and rallies<sup>45</sup> which only further empowers these vigilantes and widens the divide between Hindus and minority groups. Jaffrelot's prediction will likely come to pass if effective legislation is not passed that ensures the equal protection of all citizens regardless of religious or ethnic backgrounds. Furthermore, opposition groups to the BJP, including the Congress party, need to strengthen their party and project themselves as capable leaders who can bring peace to this divided nation. Modi was able to win the Prime Minister seat in 2014, in part due to the weakness of Congress. Therefore, Congress must better its image to stand a chance against the BJP. Through this, Congress may also be able to create enough momentum to pressure the ruling party to create policies that protect minority groups. Hindu nationalism has wreaked havoc on Indian society and politics by preying on the fears of regular Hindu people to meet their own political goals at the expense of vulnerable populations such as the Kashmiris. However, India is still a strong democracy and can therefore work towards creating a more secure society that respects and celebrates its diversity.

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