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***RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE AS A CHALLENGE TO PLURALISTIC  
EXISTENCE. INDIA'S EXPERIENCE***

**Abstract:** The socialist, secular and democratic republic of India takes pride in the motto of "Unity in diversity". The founders of the Indian Constitution have taken much effort to consider its religious, linguistic and ethnic diversity in order to make the concept of a federal or unified India a reality. Given its amazing diversities and contrasts, India offers the biggest example that can express the characteristics, challenges, threats and prospects of the pluralistic existence of any society. This paper looks into the challenges of communalism, which can be explained as the politicization of religious intolerance, to the religious pluralism in India. Though India's successful development, with its secular credentials and federal nature, has always faced continuous challenges and grave threats from the divisive forces of communalism, provincialism, and religious and linguistic extremism, this paper argues that India's pluralism has an inherent capacity to remain intact in the long run, and India cannot neglect its religious diversities forever.

**Keywords:** *Religious Pluralism, Islamic State, Secular State, Egyptian Revolution.*

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**INTRODUCTION**

In August-September 2013, the Muzaffar Nagar district of India's largest state, Uttar Pradesh (UP), witnessed a deadly Hindu-Muslim riot that resulted in the death of 62 (20 Hindus and 42 Muslims) and the displacement of over 50,000 people, mostly Muslims. The initial causes of the riot is alternatively said to be a bike accident and an incident of eve-teasing involving members from both communities. The tension was gravitated with the involvement of the community

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leaders and politicians who always look to secure their “vote-banks”. Incitement to riots reportedly came from several parts, including an alleged inflammatory Facebook post by a Muslim leader, and an alleged uploading by a Hindu leader of a fake video showing a Hindu youth being brutally murdered by a Muslim mob. Sporadic simmering of communal tensions followed in different areas of the Western Uttar Pradesh in the following days, and a communal polarization was highly visible before the National Election. When the Hindutva party, Bharatiya Janata Party, won all the seats on offer in Uttar Pradesh, to grab the power at the Centre, in May 2014, analysts pointed out yet another example of communalizing the politics, or politicizing religious intolerance.

Religious pluralism and the coexistence of diverse belief systems in India face the biggest threat from this and several other concerted efforts by vested interests aiming at polarizing India’s population by triggering religious tensions to reap political results. An analytical understanding of the dynamics of this increasing phenomenon, defined in India as communalism, would help make a futuristic perception on religious pluralism in India.

#### **INDIA: UNITY IN DIVERSITY**

India suits best for a thorough case study of pluralism due to its uncountable diversities in terms of religion, ethnicity, class, caste, culture, dress, food, music and art. A population of over 1.21 billion (the census from 2011) makes India the second most populous country in the world, inhabited by one sixth (17.5%) of the total world population. India is home to almost all religions in the world, and religious life, in all its forms, is highly visible in public life. According to 2001 census (2011 census analysis does not give religious data), Hindus make up 80.5% of the population followed by Muslims (13.4%), Christians (2.3%), Sikhs (1.9%), Buddhist (0.8%), Jains (0.4%) and others, consisting of Baha’is, Jews and Parsis (0.6%). Though India has a good number of atheists/Marxists or non-religious people, census data do not speak about them. The religious communities cannot be treated as monolithic for they represent a wide range of diversity in all variants termed above, and India’s demography can be explained in terms of a highly hierarchical caste system and ethnicity. There are about 3,000 castes and over 25,000 sub-castes. The caste system divides the majority of the Hindu community into minority elites and majority backward communities or scheduled castes. Muslims and Christians are also not free from the caste hierarchy in many parts of the country. This complex mix of caste, ethnicity and religion reflects the pluralistic existence of Indian society.

The linguistic and cultural diversity adds to these factors in a big way. Out of 1635 recognized mother tongues in the country, there are 30 languages with over

a million speakers and 122 with over 10000 speakers. Hindi and English are the official and administrative languages, and there are 22 national languages. The borders of the states are drawn on socio-linguistic lines. In addition to this, Sanskrit, Arabic and Persian languages are part of the educational system considering their religious, historical or economic values. The efforts to make Hindi as a single national language in 1960s had resulted in deadly anti-Hindi riots in some regions. The call from the Hindu right wing party for making highly sanskritised Hindi as the sole national language<sup>1</sup> is always opposed by the secular community, terming it as part of the Hindutva agenda. Culturally, each region, religion, ethnicity and cast provide the ground for a host of food varieties, dressing habits, performances, rituals, arts and music. This create a cultural symbiosis, and helps people know each other in a better and cordial way. However, the same situation causes cultural tensions in many ways. The eating habits of one community may offend the beliefs of the other, the public display of one's cultural fest may be felt as a disturbance for the other, consequently leading to conflicts.

To acknowledge, manage and channelize these diversities for the integration and development of the country was the biggest task and challenge faced by the first leaders of the newly independent India. After much thoughts and debates, they drafted a Constitution that declared India as a Sovereign, Socialist, Secular, and Democratic Republic. The constitutional concept of "Socialism" calls for equal status and opportunities for all, without any discrimination based on religion, race, color, caste, sex, or language, while "Secularism" calls for equal treatment, respect and freedom for all religions.

India has no state religion, but it gives the right to profess, practice and propagate any religion not only to individuals, but also to communities. It does not necessarily divorce religion from the state or separate religion and public life. Religious communities can establish their own religious, charitable and educational institutions, and they may avail financial assistance from the government. Government will administer, regulate and/or support religious institutions like historic/important places of worships, pilgrimage centers, Hajj Cell, Wakf (endowment) Boards, etc. The state has declared public holidays almost all major religious festivals. One of the major characteristics of Indian secularism is the acknowledgement, alongside the common and civil laws, of Hindu and Muslim Personal laws to govern issues related to marriage, divorce, inheritance, succession, adoption, maintenance, guardianship, custody of children, in addition to specific religious and cultural practices and control of religious institutions.

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<sup>1</sup> In the end of May 2014, just at his coming to power, Prime Minister Narendra Modi instructed the bureaucracy to give prominence to Hindi on social media, government websites and government communications.

India stands firmly secular, while all of India's neighbors keep a religious identity. Pakistan and Bangladesh are Islamic states, whereas Nepal is a Hindu state and Sri Lanka officially focuses on Buddhism. There are many instances that reflect India's unity in diversity. Communities tend to respect each other in personal and public spheres, and co-operate with each other during festivals, rites of passages, disasters etc. In different localities, one can see places of worship belonging to different communities staying adjacent one to another, people from different religious background share jobs, political positions or work places, help each other in needs and even in constructing places of worship.

### **CHALLENGES TO RELIGIOUS PLURALISM**

India's secular credentials and its potential for religious pluralism face serious challenges from the efforts to channelize religious intolerance for power and political gains. The religious mix of the country and the high level of the religious consciousness of the people is widely used to trigger religious tensions by vested interests. There have been tensions between Hindus and Sikhs, Hindus and Christians, and Christians and Muslims. However, the tensions between Hindus and Muslims are highly politicized. The majority communalism always tries to showcase Muslims or Hindus as invaders who dominated the majority and tried to destroy their belief and culture.

In India, the term "Communalism" is widely used to explain the attempts to politicize religious intolerance and to stimulate tensions and violence between diverse religious communities by misusing religious symbols, beliefs, rituals. There have been several studies regarding communalism in India, with a predominant view that considering community in terms of religion is the legacy of the colonial understanding of communities in India. According to Dick Kooiman, "Under colonialism, the religious definition of community has become so predominant that in common discourse communalism has become more or less synonymous with communalism of the religious variety"<sup>2</sup>. In a recent study, Surya Prakash Upadhyay and Rowena Robinson<sup>3</sup> said that "Communalism is commonly understood as conflicts over secular issues between religious communities, particularly between Hindus and Muslims. Though there were such struggles in the pre-colonial period, a full-blown communalism took place in the colonial period". They linked Communalism, under its political, economic and social aspects to the search for

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<sup>2</sup> Dick Kooiman, *Communalism and Indian Princely States: Travancore, Baroda and Hyderabad in the 1930s* (New Delhi, Manohar, 2002), 249.

<sup>3</sup> Surya Prakash Upadhyay, Rowena Robinson, "Revisiting Communalism and Fundamentalism in India," *EPW Economic & Political Weekly* vol. XLVII, September 8 (2012).

community identity and to the tendencies of the communities to resist or seek domination.

### GENEALOGY OF COMMUNALISM IN INDIA

History gives the pictures of several kings and rulers who utilized religions for their interests. However, such a tendency took a concrete shape during the period of the British rule, who effectively tried to escalate communities' competitive aspirations that derive out of threats, grievances, insecurities and distrust. The British colonizers are widely criticized for their "divide and rule" policy aiming at destroying the joint Hindu-Muslim efforts to fight for independence. Such efforts became more visible in all the policies adopted by the British following India's First War of Independence (Sipoy/Army rebellion) in 1857, in which both Hindus and Muslims participated. The British realized that "the existence side by side of the hostile creeds is one the strongest points in our political position in India"<sup>4</sup>.

The 1857 incident was highly decisive of the fate of the Muslims in India. From the position of rulers of the region for several centuries, the Muslims were thrown deep into the crisis of existence and they had to face the challenges of a newly emerged socio-political scenario. The establishment of the traditionalist Deoband movement, that called for the revival of religious education, and the modernist Aligarh movement, which called for the acceptance of British Education, were part of the Muslim attempts to reclaim existence in the new environment. In the political front, the Indian National Congress was founded in 1885 to coordinate and lead the movement for independence. However, many Muslim leaders, who were already having ill feelings towards the British policies, felt marginalization in the movement and formed All India Muslim League, in order to advocate for the rights of the Muslims. When the British introduced electoral democracy in India, Muslims demanded for separate electorates to select their own representatives, claiming that joint electorates will favor only the Hindu majority.

Simultaneously, a Hindu mobilization was on track by some leaders, who opposed the secular views propounded by the Indian National Congress. They were also annoyed by the Muslims' call for separate electorates, and by the conversions of Hindus to Christianity and Islam. They founded the All India Hindu Assembly (Hindu Mahasabha), calling for a Hindu political unity, the reconversion of the converted Hindus, and for the economic and educational development of the Hindus. In 1923, V.D. Savarkar published a pamphlet "Hindutva: Who is a

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<sup>4</sup> Neil Stewart, "Divide and Rule: British Policy in Indian History," *Science and Society* vol. 15, no. 1, Winter (1951): 49-57.

Hindu?”, defining Hindu nationalism. In 1925, another Mahasabha leader, K.B. Hedgavar formed the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), an ultra-nationalist Hindu paramilitary organization, established in order to achieve the goals of Hindutva. It called for the primacy of Hindu culture, religion and heritage and termed India as a “Hindu Rashtra” (Hindu Nation). It advocated for cultural nationalism, called the Muslims and the Christians as foreigners, and formed a number of affiliated organizations (Sangh Parivar, RSS Family) in order to achieve its goal of Hindu Rashtra. It mobilized people on Hindutva ideology, recruited activists and trained them as a strong cadre wing.

The two nations theory – a Hindu Majority in India and a Muslim Majority in Pakistan – was created and promoted through these two religious lines, tacitly supported and encouraged by the British. The demands for rights and privileges on religious lines, and the ensuing communalist discourses by vested interests, resulted in heightened religious intolerances and communal polarization among Hindus and Muslims. It led to the disastrous Partition of 1947, which saw widespread communal riots among Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs, one million deaths and the migration of 1.4 million people.

While many Muslims from North India migrated to Pakistan, a large number of Muslims stayed back in India, and, despite being a minority (12-15%), form one of the largest Muslim populations in the world<sup>5</sup>. India’s freedom leaders decided India to be secular nation, with no state religion. The Hindutva forces, widely accused of active participation in post-partition communal riots, were annoyed for not being able to create a Hindu Rashtra in a country having a Hindu majority. In 1948, a Hindutva activist assassinated Mahatma Gandhi, the father of India, accusing him of bias towards Muslims and Pakistan, during and after the Partition.

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, which was banned following Gandhi’s assassination, formed its political wing, the Bharatiya Jana Sangh or BJS, in 1951, succeeded by the Bharatiya Janata Party, in 1980. The Sangh Parivar, led by Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, consistently tried to use the Hindutva ideology to gain political power and domination. Hindutva historians rewrote several histories creating the feeling of a “suppressed Hindu majority and dominating Muslim minority”, of the humiliations and defeats of the Hindus by the Muslims. Several incidents involving Mughal Muslim rulers were depicted as anti-Hindu,

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<sup>5</sup> With an estimate of 176 mln, Indian Muslims are the 3rd largest Muslim population, after that from Indonesia and Pakistan. They also represent 10% of the total Muslim population and the world's largest Muslim-minority population. Muslims are a majority in Lakshadweep and Jammu and Kashmir. Around 47% of all Muslims are concentrated in Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal and Bihar, while Assam, Kerala, Maharashtra, Jharkhand and Karnataka have a good number of Muslim population.

and some stories of demolitions or lootings of Hindu temples by the Muslim armies to construct mosques were created. These stories were even taught through the textbooks, wherever Hindutva forces came to power. As Prakash and Rowena put it, using this constructed Hindutva feeling, Hindu communalism morphed into fundamentalism, with the Sangh parivar and its cultural politics of Hindutva playing the major roles.

The independent India witnessed a host of small and big communal riots and almost all government probe reports pointed fingers towards the active involvement of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh or its allies in planning, orchestrating, instigating and unleashing these riots targeting minorities. It always created a situation that any small conflict, criminal tendency or usual misconducts in the social interactions among communities could lead to big mob violence and communal riots. Issues may be as simple as explained above, but they will be used by the communalist elements to evoke tensions. In most of the cases, the lower middle class or poor people are used as the infantry in the riots.

Several public discourses also exacerbated the communal tensions. The Hindutva perception of “Mother India” (Bharat Mata) and the demands to see India as a Goddess to be worshiped is one of the examples. Heated debates over the Hindutva demand for a Uniform Civil Code, based on Indian culture and replacing all existing Personal Laws is another one. Issues concerning cow slaughter and vegetarianism are some other. (a) Muslims’ opposition to the calls by the Hindutva forces to sing the song “Vande Matharam” in schools and at other official functions, on the ground that it is against their basic belief, (b) Muslims’ strong reactions towards any attempts to repeal the Muslim Personal Law and the implementation of an Uniform Civil Code, (c) Muslims’ feelings of belongingness to the heartlands of Islam and their solidarity with global Muslim issues, and (d) eating beef, especially cow meat, all these issues are exploited by the Hindutva forces to present the Muslims as alien.

However, India’s political process and social structure gave little space for the communal forces to emerge until 1980s. The politics of patronage<sup>6</sup>, exercised during the prolonged Congress rule, is said to have given an edge for the communal forces to grow faster. It paved the ways for the politics of “vote-bank” and “appeasement”, issues which had their influence in keeping communal tensions alive.

In 1980s, India witnessed a deep rooted polarization on religious lines. Bharatiya Janata Party, the new political wing of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh,

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<sup>6</sup> Politics of patronage are attempts by the political parties to create vote-banks on communal, cast-related or ethnic lines, promising protection and benefits in exchange for collective voting. The parties bargained with communities for vote showcasing state schemes and privileges.

took up the Hindutva claim<sup>7</sup> for Babri Masjid, a mosque in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, constructed by the Mughal ruler Babar, in 1527, and started a movement to demolish the mosque and construct a Rama temple there. A big controversy concerning the applicability of the Muslim Personal Law, following a Supreme Court verdict in the Shabanoo Case, helped the Hindutva forces resound their voices well. The Ram Temple movement gave BJP a big political dividend, raising its seats in the Parliament from 2 in 1985 to 177 in 1991.

India's secularism and religious pluralism witnessed yet another disaster when Hindutva forces demolished Babri Masjid, in a daring act, in December 1992. Deadly communal riots across the country followed the demolition of the mosque. Feeling insecure, some Muslims resorted to extremist tendencies, and this paved the way for minority communalism. The Bharatiya Janata Party came to power in May 1996, but it could rule only for 15 days. They regained the rule in March 1998, in alliance with some communal and secular parties, and ruled till March 2004. Though Bharatiya Janata Party came to prominence with the help of its extremist communal agenda and reaping the results of religious intolerance, one can see that it came to power putting off its Hindutva agenda and creating a common, relatively pro-secular platform, alongside with other parties.

Since the ascension to power of the Bharatiya Janata Party, in the late 1990s, India witnessed some new forms of communal polarization. There occurred several explosions and terrorist attacks, especially the deadly Parliament attack in 2001, during the rule of the Bharatiya Janata Party, and the Mumbai terror attacks, in 2008. There also happened a number of communal riots and pogroms, including the mass massacres of the Muslims in Gujarat, in 2002, where the now Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, was the chief minister. India always accuses cross-border terrorism supported by Pakistan, in cooperation with India-born Muslim terrorist or separatist organizations, for almost all terror attacks inside the country, claiming that Pakistan wants to inflame the communal tensions in India. Thousands of Muslims were arrested under draconian laws like POTA and many kept in prison for years, without trial, in the aftermath of these terror attacks. The frequent terror attacks put Muslims in the pressure of proving their patriotism and secular image again and again. However, investigations to several terror attacks proved that elements or sleeper cells belonging to Hindutva forces planned and implemented many of them, in order to ignite communal tensions and garner the majority Hindu votes. It also came to the public view that the Hindutva forces in the Police planned

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<sup>7</sup> Hindutva history claims that Babar demolished a temple in Ayodhya and constructed the mosque there. They claim that the mosque was built on the birth place of Lord Rama (Rama Janmabhumi). The Hindutva forces demanded the destruction of several mosques and monuments in India, constructed during the Mughal Period, saying that all were built after demolishing ancient temples.



fake encounters in which many Muslims were brutally killed in cold blood and were presented to the media as terrorists killed in encounters, while trying to wage terror attacks<sup>8</sup>.

While Muslims agree with the presence of a minority of youth resorting to terror tactics and extremism reacting against the Hindutva communalist forces, there has been a general tendency from the Hindutva forces, supported by certain media and pro-Hindutva elements in the security forces, to present Muslims as terrorists and anti-Indian, and to implicate them in cases with severe anti-national charges. However, in many such cases, Muslim youths were set free, being proved innocent in the court, after 10 or 15 years. In May 2014, the day the new Bharatiya Janata Party government came to power, the Supreme Court, in a major trial, acquitted, after almost 13 years in jail, 6 Muslims who purposefully implicated in the Akshrdham Temple attack case, in 2002.

The attempts of the Hindu communalist forces to present the Muslims as a dangerous and anti-national “other”, along with the limited extremist responses of the Muslims are creating big challenges to India’s religious pluralism. Many places in India are communally tense and the emerging middle class is highly subscribing to this communal polarization. Minorities in India, especially Muslims, came to a big shock and utter disappointment when, in the 2014 May national election, the Bharatiya Janata Party came to power with an absolute majority and with Narendra Modi, who was the chief minister of Gujarat during the anti-Muslim riot of 2002, at the helm.

However, while analyzing the political trends and the grassroots level social undercurrents, one can argue that the victories of the communalist forces are only temporary. The Bharatiya Janata Party faced a crucial identity crisis back in 2004, when they lost the power after more than five years in rule. To the surprise of many, the Indian electorate rejected the Bharatiya Janata Party in 2004 and 2009, electing the Congress-led secular alliances. According to the analysts, the thumping victory of the Bharatiya Janata Party is largely because of the anti-incumbency waves and of the severe displeasure of the public in the economic and other policies of the Congress-led government that had ruled for 10 years. So, it is too early to state that Modi’s victory is a proof for the Indian electorate’s shift towards Hindutva and its cultural nationalism. In addition, in total, Bharatiya Janata Party has pocketed only less than 35% of the total votes polled.

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<sup>8</sup> Amit Shah, the newly selected National President of the Bharatiya Janata Party, who is accused of being behind the communal tensions in Uttar Pradesh, that fetched big results for Bharatiya Janata Party in the national elections, is facing court proceedings for his involvement in several fake encounter cases as Home Minister.

## CONCLUSION

In March 2014, two persons from Gujarat - Qutubuddin Ansari and Ashok Mochi – came together on a public program and shared flowers and pleasantries. When Ansari, whose photograph with folded hands begging for his life became an emblematic image of 2002 Gujarat violence victims, and Mochi, a strong Bajrang Dal (an extreme Hindutva outfit) activist whose image wielding an iron stick and roaring at Muslims in the backdrop of arson and violence represented the threatening face of Gujarat riot perpetrator, sat together opening their hearts and apologizing, it confirmed the claims of many social scientists and activists, that religious intolerance is being misused and exploited by vested interests to reap political gains. It also proved that a small elite group is exploiting the poverty and ignorance of poor backward people to employ them in communal tensions and riots. Mochi, a Dalit cobbler, regretting and repenting his involvement in the Gujarat riot, said he realized that he was being used by his masters and by the forces of hatred.

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