

Secularism vs. Sectarianism: The Turbulent Relationship Between Politics and Religion in Post-Colonial Indian Communities

THARUN VENKAT explores the root causes of modern-day conflicts in India over political-religious questions and the role of the constitutional principle of secularism.

Post-colonial India has long struggled with balancing religion and politics within its diverse polity. The ongoing travails of Indian minority communities under Prime Minister Narendra Modi is only the most recent example (Sahoo 2020, 12). India is a diverse and multifaceted country, and as in other multicultural nations like the United States, there are a myriad of debates about who belongs to the 'Indian community.' Due to burgeoning Hindu nationalism within India, this has been increasingly tied with religious identity. Post-colonial India was framed as a secular and inclusive nation-state by its founding fathers, most notably Jawaharlal Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi (Karfa 2020, 132). Secularism and freedom of religion were enshrined within India's constitution, but these concepts hold infinite interpretations within this diverse community (De Roover et al. 2011, 573). Disagreements arose when the secular constitution was framed, and India has witnessed Hindu majoritarian political tendencies emerging ever since (Ganguly 2003, 13). The 1947 partition—which cost over a million lives—bloodied the new India, making it wary of the religion's potential to invoke inter-community tensions (Sen 2010, 3; Bhargava 2002, 1). The constitution, a document meant to contain India's core values, was planned to avoid the repetition

of such tragedies. The drafters knew that liberal democracy was necessary to avoid communal and parochial tensions from exploding (Karfa 2020, 136). However, despite their best efforts to secularize India for its own security, these attempts have largely been in vain. Democracy relies on compromise and inclusion, yet tensions fuelled by both implicit and explicit support from India's overzealous political class have only served to weaken India's founding principles (Gupta 2007, 30). While the Modi government is the culmination of decades of this tumultuous experiment, India has had a harrowing past concerning the relationship between religion and politics.

For context, certain parameters and key events must be established. This article is primarily concerned with contextualising Modi's eventual rise to power, and, therefore, discusses post-colonial religious altercations with politics to establish the presence of religious issues in Indian politics. Religious majoritarianism and its adverse effects on the relationship between religion and politics shall be examined in three key areas. First, this article discusses legal issues by examining the Hindu Code Bill debates, demonstrating how India's founding fathers, including Nehru, framed secularism within India's constitution as one that was radically different from the West. 'Nehruvian' secularism



A Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) organised march in Bhopal, India.

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was meant to instigate reform within religious hierarchies, as well as safeguard religious freedom (Karfa 2020, 135). This article will subsequently examine the events surrounding Babri Masjid, a saga concerning an alleged historical wrong committed upon Hindus by Muslim invaders, who built a mosque in place of a temple to the Hindu god Rama (Karfa 2020, 135). It remains one of India's most highly contested issues, but the politicisation of the site is notable, especially by the Hindutva right and their banner organisation, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Singh (RSS); this gives us a key historical context to the relationship between religion and politics. The final incident is the 2002 anti-Muslim pogroms in Gujarat, where political negligence killed approximately 2000 people, giving a distinctly political angle to the relationship between Indian politics and religion (Sen 2010, 4). These are arguably the most significant areas to discuss, given that Gujarat's Chief Minister at

the time, Modi himself, currently occupies India's premiership (Ganguly 2003, 12-13). Though countless other incidents in India's post-colonial history are relevant, the events discussed here established the dangerous legal, historical, and political relationship between Indian politics and religion—one which is consistently changing for the worse.

As Gupta (2007, 31) notes, practising democracy is difficult. Historically, it is an unnatural social arrangement, especially among a diverse population like India's. Democracy's primary purpose is to overcome the primal impulse within humans to view those different from 'us' as 'them' (Gupta 2007, 35-36). Liberal democracy in particular seeks to assign belonging based on citizenship, allowing all to prosper fairly, rather than become a solely nationalistic state based on birth, blood or creed; secularism is one key aspect used to ensure rights and liberties are protected within nation-

states (Gupta 2007, 32). Western secularism, the kind embodied by the United States, focuses largely on freedom of religion being created through non-intervention from governments, called ‘assimilative’ secularism (Jacobson 1996, 6). Indian secularism, and the concomitant equal stature given to all religions, is instead supposed to be ‘ameliorative’ (Khalidi 2008, 1546). However, such ameliorative processes were manipulated to corrupt secularism, and the value of freedom of religion to one of the world’s most diverse communities (Jacobsohn 1996, 23). This was not its original intention. It aimed to implement reform within religions to level inequalities inherent in religious hierarchies, such as gender or caste (De Roover et al. 2011, 585-586). Nehru and others believed the government should actively ensure equality existed between, and within, religions through constitutional secularism and legal reform, achieved via legislation and judicial fiat, even when contradicting conventional religious practices (Jacobsohn 1996, 39-40). Passed later as four separate acts between 1952 and 1956, the Hindu Code Bills helped to remove gender-based divisions by granting both sexes equal property rights, marriage rights, and abolishing the practice of dowries (Som 1994, 172). However, opposition came from Nehru’s more traditional allies, as well as the Hindutva right, about upsetting traditional practices—practices which are now seen as misogynistic and contrary to liberal democratic values (Som 1994, 171-172). Further criticism came from those arguing these bills left Muslim personal codes and concomitant gender disparities untouched; Muslim women still received disproportionate inheritances, and practices like polygamy are legal for Muslim men while forbidden for Hindu men (Khalidi 2008, 1547). Reform was not immediate and seemingly accounted for minority appeasement through only reforming the practices of the majority. Legislative change from above did not necessarily equate to actual social change, often resulting in a conservative backlash. These reforms help to better explain the legal foundation of the relationship

between religion and politics in India, in which a disparity remains between the supposed intentions of the founding fathers and reality. This article will argue that this already complex relationship changed largely for the worse.

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The historical relationship between religion and politics in India can be understood better by examining the Babri Masjid issue and Hindu nationalists’ wishes to create a Hindu Rashtra (nation). Babri Masjid remains at the core of the political ambitions of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Singh (RSS), a volunteer Hindu nationalist charitable and political organization; Bharat Mata’s (Mother India’s) children were solely Hindus to them (Reddy 2011, 441). The Bharatiya Janata Party, RSS’ political wing, keeps Babri Masjid as a wedge issue within its manifesto, championing proposals to build a Hindu temple to Rama over Babri Masjid, his hypothesised birthplace, under Ram Janmabhoomi’s banner (Reddy 2011, 444-446). The mosque was allegedly constructed over a previous Hindu temple by Muslim invaders, though most historians argue there is little evidence on which to base this claim (Bacchetta 2000, 256). This purported encroachment onto holy Hindu territory led to the RSS demanding justice for this alleged historical wrong (Bacchetta 2000, 256-257). Key members invoking its destruction were BJP leader Lal Krishna Advani and future BJP PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee; the Liberhan Commission, ordered to investigate the incident, named both specifically (Ananth 2010, 12). The Commission also noted Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Kalyan Singh’s failures in deploying insufficient security forces to hold back

the nationalist crowds; notably, Singh had won the 1991 state general election by appealing to this Hindu nationalist desire to construct the temple (Ananth 2010, 12). Congress had been reluctant to hold back Hindu nationalists from imposing within Babri Masjid long prior; they even allowed foundation stones for a Hindu temple to be placed near the complex (Ganguly 2003, 19). Meanwhile, the BJP utilised this crisis in their electoral strategy, winning the 1998 general election with the promise to reconstruct the temple (Bacchetta 2000, 258). India itself faced more violence between Hindus and Muslims in the aftermath of the mosque's demolition, and Hindutva leaders had few qualms in capitalising on this for political gains. Meanwhile, Rao dismissed the state government, but took little action to quell inter-communal violence over Babri Masjid's destruction, showing either a disregard for, or a lack of control over, Hindu-Muslim religious tensions in India (Ganguly 2003, 20). 2000 more lives were lost due to dubious historical claims by a Hindu supremacist organisation, and insufficient action simply emboldened the RSS and associated groups to demand further Hinduisation. Even at the highest levels of government, however, politicians have been complicit in political violence in the name of anti-secular objectives.

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Politicians exploiting societal differences is commonplace in every nation. However, political complicity in actual violence is rampant and contributes to the most significant factor in analysing the relationship between politics and religion. The relationship did not calm at the turn of the century; 2002 brought one of post-colonial India's darkest episodes, interlinked with previous altercations over Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, and under Modi's

own gaze as Gujarat's Chief Minister. After Hindu pilgrims returned to their home state, they chanted Hindu nationalist slogans aboard their train, taunting and threatening Muslim passengers. In Godhra, a mob of Muslims attacked and burned a railway carriage, killing 59 Hindu pilgrims (Ganguly 2003, 11). Following this incident, nearby Hindu leaders gathered and sought mob revenge, which would lead to the deaths of another 2000 or so Muslims (Sen 2010, 4). Even more worryingly, credible allegations of complicity arose in relation to the Modi administration (Ganguly 2003, 11-12); Modi himself has expressed scant remorse over these deaths. Modi's government took days to act over the incident, costing hundreds of Muslim lives. Jaffrelot (2003, 5-7) describes this concentration of anti-Muslim violence as highly organised, with lists drawn up of specific Muslim targets. The national government, under Modi's ally, Vajpayee, refused to condemn Modi's state government, and unlike Rao in 1992, did not impose President's rule on Gujarat despite clear failings to maintain peace and order (Ganguly 2003, 12). The RSS—and by extension, the BJP—are the most important component of these religious movements, with both its past and current leader heavily interconnected with political failings in Gujarat. They had succeeded in gaining political favour in the 1998 elections, and the man in charge of Gujarat during the riots of 2002 is amongst the most powerful men in the world (Jaffrelot 8-9). Sahoo (2020, 9) highlights Indian polarisation at its worst under Modi, whose political colours were revealed in Godhra. Modi may not have ordered the killings himself, but he undoubtedly turned a blind eye toward a tragedy he has shown no remorse over.

In conclusion, Hindu identity politics is primordial in nature, reflecting how politics and religion, as warned by India's founding father, do not mix well in efforts to build peace. There was a post-colonial bargain struck within India's diverse polity by the founding fathers, and liberal democracy was needed to prevent any religious tendencies from turning India into a discriminatory state. Religion

would be private and would allow free conduct, cognisant of its divisive capabilities. This has been twisted through political meddling to prioritise the Hindu majority, with Modi's administration being a mere culmination of these efforts. Babri Masjid, and Congress' weak response, alongside minority appeasement through not addressing discrepancies in religious law reform, shows how all components of India's broad political spectrum have insufficiently maintained post-colonial secularism within India, right from the start (Sahoo 2020, 11). The relationship between religion and politics in Indian communities has changed, deepened, and worsened. It has largely failed to cultivate a secure, secular culture in India, allowing religion and identity to interfere in politics. Bharat Mata was meant to be inclusive of all peoples, regardless of race, creed, gender or religion, and no Mother should disavow hundreds of millions of her Muslim children so harshly, over a difference in beliefs, to service dangerous nationalism. Change must occur for the better, establishing, or perhaps re-establishing, a truly inclusive secular democracy. However, with India becoming increasingly polarised over the role of religion in politics, exemplified in places like Babri Masjid, the situation will likely worsen.

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