

Footprints of Fascism in India: Implications for Local Muslims

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Abstract

Fascism, a twentieth century Eurocentric phenomenon, seems to be knocking at the world's doors through a number of populist regimes. Distinguished among them is that of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) led Narendra Modi government in India, which shares many characteristics with classical fascist regimes of Italy and Germany. Under the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government, India is steadfastly moving from its secular constitutional values to a rigid and fascist future which is exclusive of everything disliked by the Hindutva forces. The Indian minorities—Muslims, Christians and Dalits—have the same status in a Hindu India which Jews had in 'Nazi Germany' and Communists in 'Fascist Italy.' This paper, while explaining the theoretical aspects of classical fascism, attempts to draw a comparison between classical fascist regimes and the present day India under the BJP's rule. It also examines the argument that the institutional mechanism of the state is not only supporting this fascist agenda but is actively involved in it. The paper then goes on to briefly analyze the response by different segments of the society to this form of fascism prevailing in India.

Keywords: Fascism, Hindutva, India, Muslims, Minorities, RSS, BJP.

Introduction

'Fascism' is a political philosophy, known for its radical form of authoritarian nationalism. Fascism has been defined as a political philosophy, movement, or regime that exalts nation and often race above the individual and that stands for a centralized autocratic government headed by a dictatorial leader, severe economic and social regimentation and forcible suppression of the opposition.¹ As an ideology, it demands a totalitarian state where political power is exercised by one leader buttressed by state-controlled media and political repression including the use of terror.²

James D. Forman views the phenomenon as 'seizure and control of economic, social, political and cultural aspects of a state by a large segment of the conservative middle and upper classes ... to the end that the state becomes intensely nationalistic, anti-communist, militaristic, and finally, imperialistic.'³ Forman thinks that the characteristics of fascism include one political party system; narrow contact with other

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people, socially, culturally and economically; limiting civil liberties to the point of extinction; stern censorship to political criticism; call for a world-wide struggle; and post-democratic and post-industrial in nature, while maintaining its upper-class industrialists to support the racial war which it intends to wage.⁴

Although the fascist parties and movements across the world differ significantly from one another. They have many characteristics in common including extreme militaristic nationalism; contempt for electoral democracy; political and cultural liberalism; a belief in natural social hierarchy and the rule of elites; and the desire to create a *Volksgemeinschaft* (people's community), in which individual interests would be subordinated to the good of the nation.⁵

A state may not be a perfect fascist state with all its characteristics of a classical Nazi state, but still it can demonstrate semi-fascist state and society's behavior against the norms of contemporary constitutional democracy. This paper argues that despite certain differences from the earlier fascist regimes, present RSS-led BJP government of India has enough potential to qualify the definition and characteristics of fascism. Scholars' opinions vary regarding the description of fascism and they do not agree on a single definition of the term. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify a number of general characteristics that fascist movements manifest.⁶ Therefore, the present situation indicates that despite a few differences from the classical instances of fascism, there is much to reflect on the resemblance between the current Indian regime and the twentieth century fascists. The paper, therefore, attempts to evaluate the argument that India is on its way to transform into a fascist state, if it has not completely transformed yet.

The fascist tendencies of RSS, BJP and other organizations and parties following Hindutva agenda are not a novel phenomenon. While the origin, evolution and rise of Hindu nationalist parties have numerous instances to show their fascist inclinations, the leaders of RSS—the broad-based cultural organization thriving to uphold Hindutva, and mother organization of the BJP—have repeatedly idealized philosophy and practices of Benito Mussolini and Adolph Hitler and shown desire to adopt similar strategies in India.⁷ In the same context, when an RSS sympathizer (and current Hindutva idol) Nathuram Godse assassinated Mahatma Gandhi in 1948, the then Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru had labeled RSS as a Nazi-like fascist group because of its visible paramilitary outfit.⁸

Finally, the paper will evaluate the recent measures and policies of the current nationalist government in India driven by Hindutva and explore if it manifests the characteristics of fascism explained earlier, with frequent references to the practices of the twentieth century fascists of Italy and Germany for the sake of comparison.

Militaristic Nationalism

Nation, to fascists, is supreme sovereign with an absolute authority.⁹ Nationalism propagated by fascists is a complete package of militaristic ambitions that are fundamentally violent in nature. Fascism transforms a nation into a permanently mobilized armed force to conquer, maintain and expand its power. It engrains into the people a fighting spirit, military discipline, ruthlessness and action.¹⁰ Nation and national cause get so much supremacy that the individual goes much down the ladder. A single party becomes the state and latter is in search for more enemies to fulfil its final objective, i.e. imperialistic expansion.¹¹

Due to the militaristic nature of its goals and perceived internal as well as external threats, youth is involved in martial activities through athletic programs and schooling is narrowed with criticism eliminated and chauvinism prevailing. The military is expanded until the whole nation is deemed capable of expansion.¹²

Anyone who knows anything about the Hindutva organizations of India, would find the above characteristics clearly demonstrated by them. The RSS, since the early years of its inception, organized itself under a military-like discipline and particularly focused on recruiting youth in its ranks. Though this 'cultural' organization spreads its appeal and organization to almost all segments of society, dedicated and motivated youth proved to be its key carrier of ideology with the commitment to the goals and objectives of a Hindu India. The RSS focused on providing physical training to its young workers and the *Akharas* (wrestling rings) became centers of RSS activities. The upper caste Hindu youth found this masculine identity more attractive than Gandhi's non-violence.¹³ People were mobilized through emotional appeals against Muslims 'from Middle East to Afghanistan' who could supposedly again dominate Hindus through their rapid reproduction.¹⁴ The *Bharatiya Jana Sangh* (BJS)—the first political outfit of RSS—used Indian wars with China in 1962 and with Pakistan in 1965 as an opportunity to step up its nationalist agenda in the society. Its strong nationalist stance increased its support among the masses.¹⁵

The BJS was formed to represent the RSS in politics. It was established in 1951 and remained active till 1977. Later on, it was

merged into the opposition alliance i.e., Janata Party—an opposition alliance formed in order to pose collective opposition to the Indian National Congress (INC). It was succeeded by BJP in 1980. The BJP, which replaced BJS as the new political face of the RSS, claims to own 85,000 *shakhas* (cells) where physical as well as the ideological training is given to the party members.¹⁶ The RSS has also started its first 'army' school 'Rajju Bhaiya Sainik Vidya Mandir' in Bulandshahr, Uttar Pradesh to train students to join the army.¹⁷

This social militarization and approach of Hindu nationalism won RSS and BJP a lot of popularity and its support base increased dramatically since 1990s. The hate-based and militaristic objectives showed themselves when Narendra Modi called for re-election immediately after the notorious Gujarat massacre of 2002 under the watch of his provincial administration, and successfully used the anti-Muslim sentiment to win popularity. Arundhati Roy notes that Modi won the election, not 'despite the massacre, but because of it.'¹⁸ The same strategy was seemingly applied to win a second consecutive term in the center when BJP used February 2019 attacks in Pulwama, Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK), as an opportunity to win in the upcoming general election.¹⁹ It was a suicide attack on an Indian convoy taking Indian security personnel on the Srinagar National Highway which took the lives of at least 40 policemen.²⁰

The recent wave of extremism at social level in the form of beef-related violence, mob killing and lynching is a natural outcome of what has been instilled in the society in the name of Hindu nationalism and protection of Hindu ethos. A 2019 report by the Human Rights Watch (HRW) mentions that between May 2015 and December 2018, at least 44 people—36 of them Muslims—were killed in this way across 12 Indian states. During the same period, around 280 people were injured in over 100 different incidents across 20 states.²¹ All such instances reinforce that the ruling BJP and its parent body, RSS, have steadfastly worked over the years to mobilize the Indian youth in a fascist strategy under the banner of Hindutva nationalism and have organized large sections of Hindu society on militaristic lines.

Creating 'Other'

The goal of militarization of the nation cannot be achieved until the existence of a real or perceived enemy against whom the military power and mobility has to be utilized. For this purpose, a group or community is portrayed and propagated as 'other,' and alien to the nation and the land, and thus an enemy. The Communists in Italy and the Jews in Nazi Germany became the target of this otherization. The fascists found

potential scapegoats in them for their woes and failures.²² Similar is the case with the Muslims and other minorities in India. The Indian Muslims to RSS founding fathers were the same as the Jews in Nazi Germany. In their view, there was no place for the Muslims in a Hindu India.²³

Hindutva is described to be 'inclusive of everything Indic,' but in a way that alienates and discriminates on the basis of religion.²⁴ In this context, only Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs and Jains are considered Indians as India was the birthplace of their religions. M. S. Golwalkar, an RSS ideologue considered Muslims an inherent threat to India and termed all Muslim-inhabited areas as 'Miniature Pakistans.'²⁵ This skepticism regarding the loyalty of Indian Muslims is so central in the narrative of Hindutva ideologues that the founder President of BJP and former Prime Minister of India Atal Bihari Vajpayee was unequivocal in saying that '... many Muslims find Pakistan dearer than India.'²⁶

Otherization of the Muslims, Christians and other minorities as well as lower castes is being normalized in a graded discrimination that is inherent in Hinduism on the basis of caste and race. BJP has traditionally been upholding the divisive ideology. When the implementation of the Mandal Commission Report (1983) was sought in 1990 with an aim to mainstream the Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) including Muslims through affirmative action, the RSS, BJP and their affiliates violently opposed it.²⁷ This violence is reported to have claimed more than 50 lives.²⁸ Similarly, when the Sachar Committee (2006) recommended certain measures to uplift Muslims in India, it was the Modi-led BJP Government in Gujarat State that had challenged the very constitution of the Commission in the Supreme Court of India on the basis of grievance that its 'target was to help Muslims only.'²⁹

The Muslims, therefore, constitute the primary target and the perceived enemies of the Hindus against whom the rhetoric is developed, sentiments are aroused and hate-based union is achieved for militaristic nationalism. During six years of BJP rule since 2014, Hindutva-inspired otherization has not remained confined to the Muslims but has more aggressively expanded to other already marginalized sections including Dalits, liberals, and Christians.³⁰

The RSS has gradually worked to transform the hatred against Muslims into a social trait and has attempted to inculcate it into the next generations through educational texts. The Hindu nationalists believe that promoting secularism through textbooks in a Hindu India was something that had to be changed.³¹ For the purpose of this transformation, history had to be rewritten to exploit communal and

religious fault lines in the interest of Hindu nationalism. They believed that mentioning 'subjugation' of Hindus by Muslims in pre-colonial India was a deliberate effort to appease the Muslim minority and to damage Hindu identity. Therefore, BJP and the RSS have a long-standing commitment to rewrite history and revise curricula in order to expose the role of Muslim 'invaders' to subjugate Hindus.³² As of 2016, *Vidya Bharti Akhil Bharatiya Shikshan Sansthan*, an educational organization inspired by the RSS ideology and mission, was running an estimated 12363 formal schools and 12,001 single-teacher schools across the country.³³ Along with the numerous *Shishu Mandirs* (student temples of Saraswati, the goddess of learning as per the Hindu beliefs), these schools kept training the young minds about the Hindutva nationalism.³⁴ In many states, the texts for secondary and primary levels were rewritten on renewed accounts about the Indian history and have impacted the minds, which is being manifested in the lynching and other violent incidents now.³⁵

As part of this otherization, all symbols that remind of the Muslim rule in Hindu India, including the monuments, names of roads, cities or places are being gradually scratched away.³⁶ The fact, however, is that millions among present generations of Indian Muslims are the descendants of the people who had converted to Islam during different phases of history.³⁷

Despite the skepticism on their patriotism, Muslims constitute a sizable vote bank in India as well. They have, therefore, been labeled as anti-nationalists at socioeconomic levels but at the political level they had to be appeased through certain cosmetic measures.³⁸ BJP has adopted a different strategy and has deliberately taken a stance in two consecutive elections (2014 and 2019) that further marginalizes and ignores Muslims even as voters. BJP has successfully demonstrated that the potential to unite Hindu vote bank using anti-Muslim sentiment is more effective than winning over the 'Muslim vote.' With their political representation further shrinking, Indian Muslims are becoming more vulnerable. They are facing various kinds of undeclared social boycott adding to their economic and social vulnerabilities.³⁹

Roy suggests that lynching and mob killing are part of a deliberate attempt to remind Indian Muslims that they are at the mercy of the mob; and that the policing forces, law, government and even the vocal portions of the society are not very much concerned about them; rather befriended with the mob. According to her, the culprits of lynching and hate crimes, including mass murders, are rewarded with public offices and honored by ministers of Modi's cabinet.⁴⁰

Contempt of Electoral Democracy and Political and Cultural Liberalism

Fascism rejects the idea of individual liberty and equality of men and races.⁴¹ Mussolini himself described fascism as 'organized concentrated democracy on a national basis.'⁴² Hitler and Mussolini superficially accepted political channels to seize power but there always remained terror and brute force below the surface.⁴³ Similarly, Hindutva fascists have also used the democratic route to assume power and now, in office, they are on the their task to defy the ethos of equality and non-discrimination proclaimed by the Indian constitution.⁴⁴

Extremist Hindutva nationalism lies in the foundation of the whole edifice of the RSS and BJP which in its own essence is the opponent to the democratic values and individual as well as societal freedoms. Hindu nationalists publicly dislike and denounce the democratic, secular, liberal and pluralistic values of the Indian constitution and promote the exclusive Hindu culture and nationalism.⁴⁵ Since the 1980s, when the new political outfit of RSS, BJP disproved and challenged the secularism as prescribed and promoted by the INC, there has been a visible decline in the strength of secular norms in India. The BJP criticized Congress for using secularism as a tool to gain minority votes. The former, however, camouflaged its Hindutva motivations under the alternate term of 'Positive Secularism' that claims to recognize diversity in the Indian society but does not exploit minorities for political ends. This, however, was interpreted in a way that actually asked for a Hindu society with a claim that the minorities could easily be accommodated in the Hindu religious and cultural model because of its flexibility and tolerance.⁴⁶

In power, BJP successfully radicalized ordinary individuals and the hate instilled in them showed itself into attacks against perceived enemies of Hindus—individuals, worship places, symbols and monuments. During Modi's first term (2014 to 2019), fascism was confined only to public lynching and hate crimes initiated by infuriated mobs against minority communities. Although law-enforcement agencies remained standing by or being complicit during such violence as well,⁴⁷ but institutionalization of fascism became more explicit during Modi's second term; to the extent that constitutional changes were made to 'otherize' and alienate Muslims. Abrogation of the Article 370 of the constitution on August 5, 2019 was not merely a strategic move to violate human rights and international law in IIOJK but also a deliberate move against the only Muslim majority under *de facto* Indian control. A revised National Register of Citizens (NRC) in the state of Assam is aimed at depriving the Indian Muslims of their citizenship for their failure to prove their identity.⁴⁸ The Citizen Amendment Act (CAA), brought forth in November

2019, is a nationwide move with the similar objective as of NRC. Demolition of historical Babri Masjid by BJP and RSS in 1992 too had received legal protection through a Supreme Court verdict in November 2019.⁴⁹ The secular, inclusive republic envisaged in the constitution is being threatened,⁵⁰ and any attempt to salvage it is met with immediate 'disciplinary action.' A recent example of this kind is of Justice Muralidhar of the Delhi High Court, who had been transferred to the High Court of Punjab and Haryana on his attempt to question Delhi Police's inaction during the course of violence against Muslims in February 2020.⁵¹

With individual liberties shrunk, sane voices silenced, and democratic norms ignored rather mocked, Indian pluralist democracy is giving way to the Hindutva fascism to run the state and society in a totalitarian manner.

Suppression of the Opposition

Suppression of the opposition is one of the key characteristics of a fascist regime. In India, this suppression has been witnessed at both societal as well as the state levels.

At the societal level, India's image as a lynching nation has prevailed since 2014.⁵² According to a report by *The Quint*, around 113 persons have been killed in mob violence across India since 2015, while scores of people have survived deadly attacks.⁵³ The vigilante Hindu mobs have been engaged in public lynching of the Muslims and Dalits and beating them to death in broad daylight. Roy is of the view that this violence is not spontaneous, rather these incidents have a clear ideological underpinning. The lynchers know that they are unlikely to be prosecuted by the police and the government. A number of cases, such as Tabrez Ansari's public murder on June 17, 2019, are twisted by the police in a way that the victim is portrayed as a criminal while courts protect the accused.⁵⁴

While at the state level, Hindutva nationalists are making every effort to suppress the opposition groups and communities. In February 2020, Delhi protests against the proposed discriminatory amendments in Citizenship laws, followed by violence in Muslim-majority northeastern part of the city, were deliberately criminalized by the Modi government.⁵⁵ Anti-terror and sedition charges have been filed against student leaders who raised their voice against Hindutva-driven terrorism.⁵⁶ Protestors, Muslims and their sympathizers, who were victims of the violence themselves, were blamed to provoke violence.⁵⁷

Indian prisons are packed with political prisoners and most of them are accused of either being Maoists or Islamic 'terrorists.'⁵⁸ These

terms have been defined so broadly that almost anyone who disagrees with the government policy can be charged with it.⁵⁹

Institutionalization of Fascism and Hatred against Muslims

The present BJP government led by Narendra Modi has made the marginalization of Muslims a state policy, in a way that the Supreme Court, Election Commission, Reserve Bank of India, Army, and almost every single institution has been packed with pro-BJP persons.⁶⁰ This way, these institutions have turned out to be the very facilitators of the ongoing fascist agenda of Hindutva in India.

Some of the steps that have been taken by the Indian State to inculcate Hindutva in the Indian society have briefly been discussed above. The hatred-driven policy towards Muslims is reflected through these steps that have far-reaching impact on the Muslims living in India. In the General Elections during the first quarter of 2019, BJP had acquired more power in the Parliament through its campaign that was based on hatred and prejudice, and had got enough capacity to speedily move towards official initiatives for making India a Hindu state.

Abrogation of Article 370 of the Indian constitution in August 2019 was soon followed by the establishment of the Narendra Modi government in its second term. Stripping off the disputed IIOJK from its distinctive character under international law has paved the way for RSS and BJP to take legal and administrative measures for bringing about demographic changes against the Muslim majority. On the 31st of the same month, i.e., August 2019, final version of the NRC was displayed largely affecting the Muslims residing in the northeastern state of Assam. Soon after, Indian Supreme Court announced its long-delayed verdict on the Babri Masjid/Ram Temple issue in Ayodhya on November 9, 2019.

Towards the end of year 2019, an amendment in the Citizenship Act, 1955 proved to be a fresh attempt to discriminate against Muslim minority in India. With Citizen Amendment Act, 2019 (CAA 2019), it was constitutionally approved to offer citizenship to allegedly persecuted minority communities from neighboring Muslim countries i.e. Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan. According to CAA 2019, the communities eligible to enjoy the Indian citizenship include Hindus, Parsis, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains and Christians, but not Muslims. The move to revise the NRC was essentially for the northeastern state of Assam which borders Muslim-majority Bangladesh. The NRC confines the right to Indian citizenship to those who could provide evidence that they resided in India before March 24, 1971. This demarcation is significant because the people from the then-Eastern part of Pakistan had allegedly

fled to Assam to escape the India-Pakistan war in 1971 in which Indian forces had intervened to help establish Bangladesh. The majority of these migrants were Muslims. Assam became a new home for them and their next generations.

However, the revised NRC has excluded more than 1.9 million citizens which means they are now taken as 'illegal immigrants' in India. As per the policy, the victims may appeal to 'Foreigners Tribunal' against their exclusion from registration, but after decades of their arrival in India, it is not in any way easy to prove their identity as Indians. Those failing to produce any authentic document are taken to the detention centers established for this very purpose. The tribunals which are supposed to entertain the complaints of the victims are allegedly biased and inexperienced in dealing with the immigrants. The Amnesty International has tagged the job of these bodies as 'shoddy and lackadaisical.'⁶¹ On social level, public opinion is being shaped by convincing the Hindus that Muslims were deliberately attempting a high birth-rate to finally takeover the rule and impose an Islamic order,⁶² whereas, the actual figures show that the fertility rate is falling among Indian Muslims families as compared to the past. The *National Family Health Survey 2015-16* indicates that the fertility gap between Hindu and Muslim families, which was at 30.8 percent in 2005-6 with Muslims leading the figures has narrowed down to 23.8 percent in 2015-16.⁶³

The verdict regarding the controversy of the Babri Masjid and the Ram Temple in Ayodhya, which by the Indian Supreme Court on November 9, 2019 further reflected the extent of hatred against Muslims and gravity of their deprivation. BJP had emerged at the national sphere of Indian politics by successfully exploiting the anti-Muslim sentiment by demolishing Babri Masjid. Since then, the Hindu nationalists had been anxious to get a legal sanction for this act and avoid any criminal charges for its perpetrators. The 5-member bench directed the government to allot an alternative five-acre area to the Muslims as a 'restitution' for the unlawful destruction of the Babri Masjid. However, a special court of Lucknow in its verdict on September 30, 2020 has acquitted all 32 people who were accused of the mosque's demolition.⁶⁴

The former Indian Supreme Court Judge Justice Markandey Katju sees the outrageous decision, as a surrender to the Hindutva forces by the top Indian court. 'In substance it has said that might is right, and has laid down a dangerous precedent sanctifying aggression. It is like a bully snatching a kid's sandwich in school, and the teacher giving a 'balanced judgment' by allowing the bully to keep the sandwich, and giving the kid a slice of bread instead.'⁶⁵

Taking impunity from this disastrous precedent, the Hindu fundamentalists have started campaigning against mosques in Varanasi, Mathura, Kansi as well.⁶⁶ Surprisingly, some extremist Hindus even claim that Taj Mahal too was once a Hindu temple, and therefore, it should be demolished.⁶⁷ Dejected, broken and let down, Muslims did not have an option but to accept the decision in their attempt to avoid the wrath of the Hindu nationalists.⁶⁸

The December 2019 enactment to amend the Citizenship Act of 1955 is also a step forward towards discrimination against Muslims. The Citizenship Act did not provide citizenship on the basis of religious identity.⁶⁹ Effectively promoting itself as a Hindu State, the 2019 amendment, enabled the Hindu and Sikh migrants from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan to claim citizenship of India. In the context of the NRC that expels Muslims, this Act is controversial and troublesome in the sense that it too excludes Muslims.⁷⁰ If the NRC is confined only to the state of Assam, CAA has a large nationwide impact and implication.

Dictatorial Leadership

A key characteristic of fascism is that it lays emphasis on the indisputable authority of the leader behind whom the people are expected to form an unbreakable unity.⁷¹ Forman too is of the view that dictatorship, authoritarianism and totalitarianism constitute the ingredients of fascism.⁷²

Prime Minister Narendra Modi is indispensable for the nationalist project of the RSS, in whom the organization sees a ruthless *Swayamsevak* (volunteer for the Hindu cause) who has the ability to come up with a *Rashtra* (state) idealized by the Hindutva nationalists.⁷³ From being a hardcore Hindutvadi Chief Minister of Gujarat, he had demonstrated his skills to use government machinery against the lives and interests of Muslims, while at the same time his portrayal as a good administrator for common people, garnered him support of the majority of the Hindu community because in him they saw a guardian of the country's Hindu identity. With this aura of a 'great leader' created for him, he could openly speak against the Muslims of Bengal-origin in Assam, and ask them to pack their bags.⁷⁴ At the same time, he remained very vocal to advocate the Hindu migrants from Bangladesh to get them accommodated in Assam.⁷⁵

According to Roy, being a long term *pracharak* (activist) of the RSS, Modi owes his allegiance to his parent body above all else.⁷⁶ But at the same time, he has a strong grip over the policy formulation process. He has successfully projected himself as a leader without whom RSS

cannot complete its mission of the Hindu *Rashtra*. To demonstrate this, he made a deal with France to purchase Rafale fighter plane during his visit to Paris in April 2015 while even his defense Minister was not aware of it.⁷⁷ In fact, Modi has shown his potential as a fascist leader.

Internal Response to the Hindutva Fascism

The paper briefly looks into the role that various segments of the society have been playing in response to the Modi government's hatred towards Muslims. Political leadership, media houses and civil society are few important stakeholders in the context.

There have been certain leaders within BJP who were perceived as a potential threat or possible trouble for Modi and his agenda, therefore, they were already sent home or sidelined.⁷⁸ The party is primarily being led by those who are anti-Muslim by heart with no sympathy for religious and ethnic minorities as a whole. Hence, there are no signs of resistance for hate-based agenda from within the party. Pranab Mukherjee, who served as President of India from 2012 to 2017, had presented a rare example among key office bearers in the country, when he expressed concern over the increasing vulnerability and marginalization of the weaker segments of the Indian society, while addressing on the country's independence day in 2016.⁷⁹ Coming himself from INC, he too could not point out the PM for this increased hatemongering against minorities in India.

The INC, a self-proclaimed secular force of India, seems more concerned about its fragmented vote bank. It cannot afford to criticize Hindu nationalist agenda as this may result in further shrinking its space in the Hindu dominant society where Muslim bashing appears to bring more support than a talk of inclusivity and rights. The INC has already lost much of its Hindu constituency to the BJP as in Bengal where hundreds of its workers left the party to join the BJP.⁸⁰ The leadership vacuum which Congress is facing nowadays is clearly reflected in the recent political crisis of Madhya Pradesh, a state where the Congress won election in December 2018 after being ruled by BJP for 15 years. But only after 15 months in the government, 23 Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) of the ruling party resigned. By-election on 28 vacant seats proved to be a nightmare for Congress as it lost 18 of these seats to the BJP, which has now taken driving seat of the state government in Madhya Pradesh.⁸¹ The Congress leadership fears that its opposition to Hindu nationalism will be taken as appeasement to minorities and the majority will not welcome it. That is the reason, the Congress has taken line of indirectly joining the Hindutva forces or at least staying quiet on latter's exploitation of the minorities. The current party head, Rahul

Gandhi, instead of adopting traditional claims of Congress of being secular and pluralist, tries his best to appease Hindu factions and thus pull them out of the BJP's support base.⁸² He proudly claims he is a practicing Brahmin and pays frequent visits to the temples.⁸³

The Congress candidates, contesting the 2019 general election were clearly told not to share stage with the Muslims and not to pay visits to the Muslim localities.⁸⁴ There is a feeling in Congress that it got defeated in 2014 election mainly due to its pro-minority tag. A fact finding committee was formed by the Congress leadership to analyze the causes of their worst defeat in the 2014 election, which found party's pro-minority strategy to be the cause.⁸⁵ Therefore, Rahul Gandhi is trying to get rid of this tag. Thus he is coming with a *soft* Hindutva⁸⁶ approach and projecting himself as a protector of Hindus.

Abandoned by the secular parties, minority Muslim community is the most vulnerable today. They are increasingly being told by these parties to appear 'tolerant,' 'friendly' to the majority Hindus, 'loyal' to the country and become 'rooted in the Indian (Brahminical) culture.'⁸⁷

Most of the Indian media outlets are often considered part of the establishment.⁸⁸ Despite the constitutional guarantees of freedom of speech, mainstream media, journalists and reporters are continuously threatened by the Modi administration and BJP. Consequently, Modi's first term has proved to be disastrous for liberal media—along with others. According to the 2020 Index of Reporters Without Borders, India has been ranked 142nd out of 180 countries for being least free and secure for media persons. While it was on number 140 in 2019, 138 in 2018, 136 in 2017 and 133 in 2016.⁸⁹ Some journalists report being threatened by the extremists if they are critical of Modi or his administration, while the female reporters are threatened with gang rape against themselves and their families.⁹⁰

On the other hand, those willing to work for BJP cause are paid by the government in an organized fashion.⁹¹ In response, such media houses, anchors and journalists openly campaign for the extremist sentiments and against those disliked by their sponsors. In the aftermath of the Pulwama attack in February 2019, a frenzy was noticed on leading Indian news channels to wage a war against Pakistan. Most Indian journalists evaded talking about the longest curfew and ongoing crisis in IIOJK in the wake of the revocation of Article 370 and 35-A, openly and fairly. There was no willingness to respond to the aspirations of the people of Jammu and Kashmir.⁹²

The wave of protests, starting after CAA, proved to be the watershed moment as the civil society consisting of students, human rights activists and general public condemned the amendment and stripping of Indian Muslims of their right to citizenship. There was a severe crackdown on the students of renowned institutions like the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) and Jamia Millia Islamia (JMI) on the call for protests against the controversial bill. Nonetheless, a general view depicts that the Indian Media, opposition parties and the civil society lack the courage to go against majoritarian 'frenzy.' The so-called secular forces also do not want to go against the public belief of the majority community.

Conclusion

Rising hatred, intolerance and hate crimes against the ethnic and religious minorities in India are gradually increasing, which is altering the Indian culture, society and consequently, the state of India—adversely. The gradual rise of Hindutva has led to the seizure of power by the extremist Hindutva forces in 2014. On assuming power, the present Indian government started working to ingrain and institutionalize hatred and intolerance for minorities, Muslims in particular. The second consecutive victory of BJP in 2019 brought with itself a number of constitutional, judicial and social developments which contribute to the worsening situation of day-to-day life for Muslims living in India. BJP's rise and six years in power provide a lot of material to compare the present day India with twentieth century fascist regimes of Germany and Italy. The society has been mobilized in the name of national cause and majoritarian ethos. This mobilization has turned violent against vulnerable communities at the state and social levels. Increase in Modi's popularity despite accelerated the scale of violent incidents across the country indicates that the so-called largest democracy of the world is endangered by the wave of fascism. There has not been any satisfactory resistance to Modi Government's hate policy from the political elite, media and civil society.

The INC, while posing to be the only guardian of secular values and defendant of minority rights, has mostly been a preferred choice of Indian Muslims for political representation. However, gradually it has become apparent that the party has no interest in preserving the rights, dignity and security of the minority groups—Muslims in particular. The disappointment of Muslims from the two major political parties of the country—BJP and INC—will surely push them to look for alternative sociopolitical options. Given that Muslim community of India can pose only a moderate resistance to the increasing Hindutva fascism, even with some support from other religious and ethnic minorities, there is an

obvious likelihood that the suppressive policies and measures against them might backfire.

Therefore, the impact of anti-Muslim trends would not remain confined to India. Recent years have seen improved relations between India and Muslim countries, particularly the Gulf States. Owing to the economic interests of India in these countries, it would be very difficult for India to ignore a social and diplomatic pressure emanating from the Gulf countries. Such reaction had become visible when a campaign to put responsibility of the spread of Novel Coronavirus on Muslims started through electronic as well as social media platforms.⁹³ The countrywide trends were observed on Twitter, with the hashtag of Corona *Jihad*. The governments and civil society of the Gulf States strongly opposed this hateful campaign while showing their potential to protect Muslims in India.⁹⁴ More importantly, these countries can cause a diplomatic move with collective action through the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). These and other Muslim countries need to consider the severity of the situation in India and exercise diplomatic as well as economic pressure on the country to end human and minority rights violations in the garb of Hindu nationalism.

The gross violations of human rights against Muslims at the state and social levels in India may prove to be a solid justification for the non-state actors to disturb regional peace. Thus, the situation requires immediate attention from all the regional countries which together can play an effective role by putting pressure on India.

Unfortunately, there has not been satisfactory resistance from the international government and non-government forums. International civil society also needs to play its required role in the international arena in order to develop a strong voice against the suppression of Indian minorities and violation of human rights in India. There is a dire need to work on diplomatic and academic avenues to contain footprints of the fascist Hindutva agenda. The issue of Indian Muslims is of great concern for Pakistan because Muslims living on both sides of the border are knitted not only in the same religious tradition but also because a considerable portion of them descends from the same ancestry. Therefore, any trouble for the Muslims living in India naturally brings worries and disturbance for the people in Pakistan too. Yet, in spite of enormous implications for Pakistan and the region, the required academic and media attention has not yet been paid to the Indian Muslim community and evolving society around them. This matter must now come to the special focus of Pakistani academia, educational and research institutions, media outlets and policymaking elite so as to define Pakistan's due role at regional and international levels to expose the

present state of affairs and formulate a comprehensive strategy in case the issue affects Pakistan in any form.

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