# Assess the Primary Causes of Religious Conflict in India

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India is often seen as a post-colonial success story. It is the world's largest democracy with a thriving civil society and a culture of pluralism and tolerance. Despite its huge size and multi-ethnic character, conflict has been rare and multiple groups coexist peacefully. The major exception to this is the religious conflict between Hindus and Muslims which has spilled over into violence numerous times in the years since independence. Recently there has been a rise in communal rioting linked to the ascendancy of Hindu right wing politics will I will address specifically in this essay.

I will define conflict broadly to mean both violent and ideological/political clashes to reveal India's religious conflict as a continuous factor rather than an occasional one. However, I will pay particular attention to the violent outbursts which show the conflict at its most extreme. I will use Anand's term, 'communalism,' to refer to the ideology of difference and separateness held by hardliners on both sides, and 'communal conflict' to refer to clashes between these groups. (2005: 205)

I will argue that the rise of religious conflict in India is not merely a continuation of former religious clashes but has risen out of a specific political and cultural context. Firstly, I will examine the nature of the religious conflict and the standard explanation given. In the next two sections I will examine the immediate cause of conflict, the ideology of Hindutva, and the wider context of political fragmentation in which this ideology has risen to prominence. Finally, I will explain the role of civil society and government structures for restricting the violence.

**Recent Religious Conflict**

Recent religious violence in India has been overwhelmingly associated with two atrocities; the destruction of the Babri Masjid Mosque in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh in 1992, and the 2002 massacres in Gujerat. Both have sparked riots and retaliations across the country and have played an important role in politics.

The Babri Masjid is a mosque built on a sacred Hindu site. It is alleged, probably falsely, that a previously existing

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Hindu temple was knocked down and replaced. (Karner, 2002: 4) BJP activists campaigned on the issue until, in 1992, they managed to gather 200,000 willing people to demolish the mosque forcibly. (BBC, 06/12/92) In the ensuing violence thousands of people were killed in riots across the country. The BJP state government was dismissed for its complicity in the attacks and failure to control the violence. (BBC, 06/12/92) In 2002, attempts to begin building a Hindu temple on the site led a group of Muslims to torch a train carrying activists, killing 58 people. There followed a long-running campaign of anti-Muslim violence centred in the state of Gujerat in which around 2,000 Muslims were murdered and 100,000 forced to flee. (Kumar, 2002) There is evidence that the state government both failed to intervene on behalf of the Muslim population and in some cases also helped plan the attacks. (IRF Report, 2002)

These events are explained by some by looking at the country's history and the cultural differences between the two groups. They claim that there has been tension between Islam and Hinduism since Islam arrived with the Mughal conquerors in the sixteenth century. Cultural differences are emphasised; the differing characters of the two religions, codes of acceptable behaviour, and lifestyles supposedly create a gulf between the two groups. (Mitra, 1992: 2) The partition of secular, Hindu dominated India and Muslim Pakistan in 1947 demonstrated the extent of this communal tension and sparked extraordinary brutality of which the struggle for Kashmir is a lasting reminder. Muslim feelings of victimisation and Hindu fears of Kashmiri terrorism supposedly serve to feed an unending cycle of violence.

For proponents of this view, including many in India for whom the conflict has become naturalised, there is nothing special about the recent violence. However, if we are to believe this idea of the conflict as a cultural and historical legacy of past atrocities, how then do we account for the more general peace and cooperation between Hindus and Muslims, and why do we see an escalation of tensions now?

A more enlightening framework in which to understand the conflict is the active politicisation of religion for political gain. Violence may be linked to ideas of the past, but this is not natural, rather a deliberate and very sucessful political strategy. Although also a tactic of other organisations, the politicisation of religion is overwhelmingly linked to the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its ideology of 'Hindutva' – Hindu identity. (Dion-Viens, 2002)

**Hindutva: The Immediate Cause of Conflict**

Hindutva is a nationalist ideology which promotes the idea of a Hindu state; proponents of Hindutva believe that the dominant Hindu culture should be adopted as the Indian national identity and that other groups should adjust their practices accordingly. (IRF Report, 2002) Like many forms of nationalism, it plays upon the pride and fear of the

majority group and attempts to demonise supposedly threatening minorities.

A nationalist rewriting of history which portrays a humiliating series of Hindu defeats by the Islamic Mughals and the Christian British serves to evoke feelings of wounded pride. These ideas of former oppression are integral to the lack of tolerance for other groups; Hindus are presented as the "true" Indians while all others are outsiders. (Fickett, 2003: 10) The destruction of the Babri Masjid mosque was a demonstration of this force in action as it was presented as symbolic of an overthrow of Muslim oppression. (Fickett, 2003: 5)

The Hindutva ideology also presents Hindu identity as threatened by minority groups. In particular, it has sought to present legislation protecting minority rights as an erosion of Hindu culture. (Anand, 2005: 204) Muslims are singled out particularly, because of their position as the largest minority group (approximately 12%) and demonised by remarkably pervasive stereotypes. (Anand, 2005: 208) One aspect is the portrayal of Muslim men as particularly virile, and the women as very fertile. This plays on fears of future domination – some believe that in a few decades Hindus will be a minority and will eventually cease to exist. (Anand, 2005: 208-9) Thus Muslims are presented by Hindutva forces as a threat to Hindu security and violence against them is legitimised as national defence. (Brass, 200: 13) It is this politicisation of religion that is behind the rise of communal violence in recent years, not a natural and historical conflict as proponents of Hindutva claim.

**Fractured Politics: The Wider Context**

If we accept that recent communal violence has been sparked by the existence of Hindu nationalist ideology, the causes of this conflict must lie in the factors which allowed Hindutva, and the BJP, to gain influence. How did the BJP, a small, marginalised, 'pariah party' in the 1980s, become the leading member of the governing coalition by 1998? (Jenkins, 2005: 277) Although on the surface it may appear that the BJP succeeded in tapping into a well of strong Hindu feeling, the primary explanation in fact lies in the decline of the power of the Congress Party and the resulting competition among smaller parties for whom the politicisation of difference was a helpful electoral tactic.

The secular Congress Party has been the dominant force throughout India's independent history. It enjoyed uninterrupted rule from independence until the 1990s on the back of its independence credentials, the popularity of its leaders, and its appeal to the diversity of Indian society. (Schaffer and Saigal-Arora, 1999: 144) However, the party had been in serious decline since the late 1970s. Growing disillusionment fuelled by corruption, scandal, and occasional authoritarian tendencies, led to a breakdown of Congress' dominance and cohesion and paved the way for multi-party competition. (Dion-Viens, 2002)

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The decline of Congress created the opportunity for smaller parties to have influence in the federal government as part of a coalition. One of the easiest ways to achieve this (particularly when opposing secular Congress politicians) was to appeal to a particular dissatisfied group and thus the 1980s and 90s saw a great increase in the number of parties playing up social divisions for political gain. (Brass, 2000: 12) The strength of the BJP was its appeal to the majority religious group; activists presented secular politicians as pandering to minority groups at the expense of Hindus and encouraged beliefs that were Hindus being discriminated against in 'their own' country. (Muralidhar, 2004: 4) Although not powerful enough to govern alone, aliances with other opponants of Congress allowed the BJP to gain federal power in 1998.

That the violence in Ayodhya and Gujerat were parts of the electoral strategy of the BJP is clear. The campaign against the Babri Masjid was openly organised by high ranking BJP politicians. (BBC, 25/09/02) It proved to be a very successful political tactic; although immediately suspended from their place as state governors in Uttar Pradesh for complicity in the violence and destruction, the BJP made gains overall. For the first time the BJP was able to count on support from poor and rural areas and dramatically increased their share of the Northern vote. (Brass, 2000: 11; Muralidhar, 2004: 4)

Similarly, the state elections immediately following the 2002 Gujerat massacres gave the BJP its largest electoral victory ever. There is evidence that the conflict was planned by BJP members prior to the elections to prove their standing as the main advocate of Hindu interests. (Brass, 200: 11) Government address lists of Muslim residents were provided to the rioters and many witnesses claimed that the police failed to intervene or sided against the victims. (Fickett, 2003: 7; IRF Report, 2002) Both the state and federal governments (controlled by the BJP) failed to intervene to stop the conflict or to bring perpetrators satisfactorily to justice. (Fickett, 2003:3)

The religious conflict of the 1990s and since, can be seen as part of the wider political context in India. Violence was a result of BJP politicisation of religion at the time when Congress had become too weak to control and repress divisive politics as it had done in the past. (Dion-Viens, 2002)

**Restraints on Conflict**

Despite significant political attempts to push India into religious conflict, the vast majority of the country has remained peaceful. Religious violence has barely touched rural areas, the vast majority of the country, and more than half of all related deaths have been in just eight of India's more than 400 cities. (Varshney in Kumar, 2002) So what is it that has restrained conflict in India? The creation of a strong, secular national identity, active civil society, and the nature

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of the political system are key reasons.

Integrating Indians into a single, secular nation began during India's independence struggle under the uniting leadership of Ghandi and Nerhu, and was continued sucessfully by Congress. (Scarritt, 2005: 79) Multi-ethnic civil organisations were actively promoted by the state and played a very important role in uniting society. Varshney's analysis of conflict in India suggests that this integrated civil society has been particularly influential in constraining communal forces. (in Jenkins, 2005: 283) In both Gujerat and Mumbai, where integration is low and violence high, local government and the police have been very sucessful in averting conflict through fostering ties between community and religious leaders. (IRF Report, 2002; Jenkins, 2005: 283; Coulter, 2002; Kumar, 2002)

The broad distribution of power in the governmental structure is also important. The BJP has only captured power in a few state governments, including the governments of Uttar Pradesh and Gujerat at the times violence broke out. Other states with committed secular governments have had little trouble with communalist politics and are able to prevent its spread from other areas. (IRF Report, 2002) Further, in federal government, the BJP was unable to implement much of its communalist politics as it was severely constrained by the many other members of its coalition government. (Schaffal and Saigal-Arora, 1999: 146) Despite the strength of the Hindu nationalists, India is remarkably well equipped to constrain them.

*Conclusion*

I have argued that India is currently experiencing a new wave of religious conflict spurred by the rise of Hindu nationalism, or Hindutva. Although commonly explained by ancient grudges, the conflict is primarily a product of a specific political context.

Hindutva is a form of nationalism which promotes communalism. It presents its own view of hisory and politics in which the Hindu majority are oppressed and overlooked in favour of other groups, and serves to legitimise violence against Muslims who are seen as a threat. It rose to prominence in the context of the factionalisation of politics and the decline of the dominant Congress Party by deliberately politicising religious differences and organising violence against Muslim communities.

However, religious conflict in India has been quite restricted. Secular Indian national identity and the existence of mixed-religion organisations in civil society have proved to be very effective in overcoming communal tensions. The weak political position held by the BJP in federal government also moderates its policy.

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In conclusion, the primary reasons for religious conflict in India are the intentional stirring up of religious hatred and the emergence of a political context in which this can become a powerful force.

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