

The Rise of Hindutva: Challenges to Secularism and Democracy in India

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India, a country once glistening with pride over its secular democracy and diverse cultures, is now seeing narrowed opportunities for individual freedom. The recent surge in Hindu nationalism and the implementation of Hindutva policies under the watchful eye of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), are significantly undermining secularism in India, leading to a sharp decline in the country's democratic future. Core values of a true democracy; religious minorities and freedom of speech are all experiencing violence and harsh discrimination by the BJP's ultranationalism and its increasing support over the recent years. In this essay, I will explain what Hindutva is, what it means to be a secular state and the History of India's political beliefs, before explaining how changes to school curriculums, diminishing religious freedoms, and undermining the rules to freedom of speech are all being compromised by Hindutva and are contributing to the shaky future of Indian democracy.

Hindutva, a term colonized in 1923 by Indian politician Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, symbolizes a political ideology with the focus of illustrating Indian culture only in terms of Hindu values, and exercising the interests of the Hindu religion over other communities. Savarkar first used this term in one of his publications while writing about his beliefs that the Muslims were a threat to Indian Hindus after the fall of the Ottoman Empire (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024). He exploited his beliefs that the identity of India should revolve around a common culture and ancestry with Indian origins. He therefore defined Hindus not merely as followers of the religion but as those who share that culture and ancestry and was not accepting to those whose roots were based anywhere else. As the years progressed Hindutva, or Hindu Nationalism, continued to grow in popularity. Hindutva intensified greatly first with the rise of

the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, or the RSS, a national volunteer organization founded in 1925 (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024). The RSS established schools, clubs and provided welfare in order to spread the ideology and promote their vision of Hinduism, a vision aligning closely in value with Hindutva. In 1980, India saw the emergence of the largest political party in the world, the Bharatiya Jana Party, or the BJP, which still today is the face of Hindutva. The BJP was run by Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Lal Krishan Advani, and Murali Manohar Joshi, and first saw electoral success after destructing a muslim temple to demonstrate their anti-muslim ideology (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024). After a series of underwhelming elections for the party over the next decades, the BJP saw its fortunes increase with the election of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2014 (López Areu 2024) .

After winning independence from Britain in 1947, India chose to identify as a secular democracy. A secular democracy-in terms of religion- means that the government and religion are separate entities, and that religion cannot be dictated, controlled or favored by the law. Secularism promotes and respects harmony between different faiths and ethnic groups. This allowed India to grow into a culturally and religiously diverse country, seeing Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sihks, Buddhists and Jains all coexisting under the flexible secularistic country. But this ideology was not accepted by all. Many Hindu nationalists opposed secularism, favoring a vision of India centered on Hindu cultural identity and believed that, “India territorially belonged to Hindus,” (ISD Global, 2023.)

According to a 2023 article, “Secularism is currently the greatest obstacle to the Hindutva government,” (Singh 2023.) In order to diminish their opponent, Hindutva supporters,

under the guidance of Modi, have taken extreme measures to insure that India transitions away from being a secular state, and to weaken India's democracy. According to Rajeev Bhargava's article titled *Liberal, Secular Democracy and Explanations of Hindu Nationalism*, "over the years, and particularly due to the sustained work by BJP ideologues, the term 'secular' has become unrecognizable." (Bhargava, *Liberal, Secular Democracy and Explanations of Hindu Nationalism*, pg 92.)

The first example of this is seen in recent changes to school curriculums. In hopes to alter historical narrative in favor of Hindu nationalism, Prime Minister Modi has reissued school textbooks, removing great amounts of historical detail from children's educational experiences (Raj 2023.) The Hindutva government has taken out chapters on secularism, democracy, and citizenship from student's school textbooks, "leaving no space for alternative interpretations of history" (Singh 2024,) and to force learning to fit their political agenda. Erased also from the educational system are any mentions of Mughals, who were muslim rulers that controlled most of India during the 16th to 19th centuries (the Guardian 2023.) Again, this portion of History was removed from textbooks by Modi and his government to promote Hindu supremacy, and having children learn about a different religion in power in India was contrary to their agenda. Hindutva hopes to lessen the student's exposure to anything other than Hindutva policies so that they have no choice to understand anything else. In the eyes of Modi and Hindu Nationalists, "to be Indian is to be Hindu" (Lopez Areu 2024,) and being a supporter of secularism means that you are anti-hindu, which is completely unacceptable and they do not wish students to be raised in such a way. These new policies go against the very definition of a democracy, where power is supposed to be vested in the people.

A second example of Hindutva decreasing future democracy for India is their treatment of religious minorities. Though Hindu's make up the majority of India's population, there are still various other religions co-existing in the country as I listed above, with the second most populated religion being Muslim (Kachmar 2023.) Hindu's consider the cow a sacred animal. In the Hindu religion, there is no sacrificing of a cow for religious traditions, no consumption of beef, use of leather or any other activities that relate to the harming of their sacred animal (Shah 2024, pg 25.) Though coexisting religions in India do not all feel the same way or carry out the same policies relating to cows. Many religious minorities profit greatly off the beef industry, as beef is a main export of India. This is clearly a cause for problems in society, so as to exert their dominance and enforce their supremacy, the BJP started a violent campaign against anyone who was linked to the consumption of beef. They would unleash attacks on Muslims when they suspected them, or saw them disrespecting their sacred symbol. BJP officials would endorse and encourage these harsh attacks, and then work to cover them up for the public eye (ISD Global 2023). Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Raman Singh told press, "We will hang those who kill cows," and Vikram Saini, a Member of the Legislative Assembly from the BJP warned, "I had promised that I will break the hands and legs of those who do not consider cows their mother and kill them," (Yamini 2024). The sacredness of the cow is a Hindu tradition, not the tradition of all. India, still under the Constitution, is a secular state supposedly protecting religious freedom, so to show religious minorities violence for not obeying Hindu policies is an act of Hindutva's asserting their dominance and trying to erase India's democratic freedoms by putting down other faiths and making them follow Hindu terms.

Additionally, to continue their reign over religious minorities, Hindu Nationalists have passed a series of anti-conversion laws - laws that prevent individuals from converting from one religion to another. These laws were put in place to protect the Hindu religious majority, as Hindu's make up almost 80% of India's population and want to keep that religious dominance (Vaishnav 2019). According to a 2023 Humans Rights Brief published by Meher Shah titled, *Impact of Extreme Hindutva Ideology on Freedom of Speech*, "These laws require individuals who want to convert to notify the government and have a public call for objections, among other requirements. Such notification has often been used by government officials and non-state vigilante groups to harass, discriminate, or subject individuals to violence," (Shah 2024, page 25.) Many times when violence is asserted against religious minorities the cases do not get reported by police and local authorities. This is due to fear of what Hindu extremists would do if these cases were filed and the acts of retaliation that would be seen against them as punishment (Kachmar 2023.) These laws pose an unacceptable threat to religious freedom and personal liberty and are going against democratic values.

Article 19 of the International Covenant for Civil and Political Rights says that "Everyone shall have the right to hold opinions without interference," and "Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression" (Syed 2022). The Human Rights Committee stated that to harass, intimidate, or stigmatize anyone for their opinion would be a clear violation of Article 19 (Singh 2024.) But even with these laws, the BJP is still punishing Individuals, belonging to all religious groups, including Hindus, from speaking out against the Hindutva narrative. Liberty is shrinking drastically under the reign of Modi and his policies as he is cracking down on anyone who speaks against Hindutva policies. Critics of Hindutva, including journalists, activists, and

academics, often face legal charges such as sedition, defamation, or imprisonment. Activists and public figures have reported heightened harassment by Hindu nationalists, making it unsafe or undesirable for them to continue speaking out. When the Amnesty International branch in India wrote of authorities inflicting unlawful and politically motivated restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly, the Modi government forced the network to shut down, as it was speaking negatively of Hindutva. (Yadav 2023.) Journalists, such as Irfan Mehraj have been arrested for writing against Hindutva methodologies. Mehraj was detained with terrorism and criminal charges for his “civil society work and critical journalism on Indian government policies,” (Committee to Protect Journalism 2024.) These two examples are merely instances of freedom of speech that should be protected under the Constitution of India and the International Covenant for Civil and Political Rights, but yet the BJP and Modi are still whittling around them to protect their policies from any backlash. The rights to freedom of opinion and expression are fundamental pillars of a free and democratic society and Hindutva is taking that away.

By reorganizing India's political and social structures around a single religious identity, the rise of Hindutva poses a serious danger to the country's democratic foundation. Changes in education policies, restrictions on religious freedom, and restrictions on free expression are all examples of this influence, which further distances India from its secular and pluralistic foundations. Beyond specific laws, Hindutva has an impact on media integrity, judicial independence, and the inclusiveness that has long defined Indian society. The marginalization of minority groups, the suppression of criticism, and the selective application of justice are undermining public liberties and faith in democratic institutions. If India is to uphold its true democratic form, it must continue to separate the church and state, protect religious minorities,

and work on building up an environment where non-majority opinions can be expressed safely without fear of retaliation from either the government or Hindutva supremacists. India can only sustain a future democracy, with support and inclusion of all citizens and their religious values, by realigning its dedication to being a secular society and to India's constitution.

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