

## **Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Politics: Challenges Faced by Indian Muslims and Christians**

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Received:  
June 4, 2023

Revised:  
June 20, 2023

Published:  
June 27, 2023

### **ABSTRACT**

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is a prominent political party in India that espouses Hindu nationalist ideology. The party was founded on April 6, 1980, and has emerged as one of the major political forces in India. The BJP has attained power in national politics multiple times, with its most significant victory occurring in the 2014 General Elections, where it autonomously secured a resounding majority. The BJP actively pursues an agenda that is in line with its core principles of Hindutva, emphasizing the cultural and political superiority of Hinduism. During the tenure of the BJP, the party has implemented various laws and policies that have benefited the Hindu communities. However, these same laws and policies have brought some challenges for the religious minority communities, particularly Indian Muslims and Christians, who constitute a significant portion of the Indian population. This research paper delves into the current challenges faced by Indian Muslims and Christians under the leadership of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India. It examines the specific issues encountered by these religious minority communities and provides some recommendations to address these challenges.

**Key Words:** **Bharatiya Janata Party, Christians, Hindus, India, Muslims, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh.**

### **Introduction**

India is a multicultural country where people from different ethnicities, linguistic, religious, and cultural backgrounds have lived with each other for centuries, and the interaction between these communities has led to a unique blend of traditions, customs, and cultures. The country's diversity is well known, having been shaped over many thousands of years by waves of immigration that brought with them unique cultures and traditions. Although predominantly inhabited by Hindus (96.63 crores, 79.8%), who are regionally rooted, plural in beliefs and practices, and divided by castes and languages (Bhattacharyya, 2003), India's population also includes a large proportion of Muslims (17.22 crores, 14.2%), Christians (2.78 crores, 2.3%), Sikhs (2.08 crores, 1.7%), Buddhists (0.84 crores, 0.7%), and Jains (0.45 crores, 0.4%) ("RGI Releases Census," 2015).

The Constitution of the state recognizes this diversity and uniqueness and guarantees the right to freedom of religion, culture, and language to all its citizens. The Constitution incorporates the principle of secularism in its Preamble, which means that it ensures fundamental rights to its citizens without any discrimination based on caste, class, race, religion, language, etc. Under six categories, these Rights have been classified, which include the Right to Equality, Right to Freedom, Right against Exploitation, Right to Constitutional Remedies, Right to Freedom of Religion, and Cultural and Educational Rights (Singh, 2022). The Independent institutions of India, including the Minorities Commission, Human Rights Commission, and Judiciary also protect and promote minorities' basic rights ("Measure to Promote," n.d.).

Although India is a secular state, Indian life and society have been and continue to be significantly influenced by religion (Rajasekhariah, 1987). The founding fathers of India tried to separate the state from religion. On many occasions, the "Spiritual Father" of secular India, Mahatma Gandhi, expressed his strong sentiment that the state and religion should remain separate because he believed that the influence of religion in political life can be harmful. In one instance, he declared, "I swear by my religion, I will die for it. But it is my personal affair. The state has nothing to do with it. The state would look after your secular welfare . . . but not your or my religion. That is everybody's personal concern!" (Gandhi, 2001-2002).

Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of Independent India, indeed had the idea of a pluralistic society and a strong commitment to secularism. He firmly believed that secularism was essential for fostering unity and maintaining social harmony in diverse India. Nehru frequently emphasized that India's composite culture was one of its greatest assets. He significantly shaped India's social, economic, and political policies during its early years as an independent state. But the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), an Indian right-wing and Hindu nationalist volunteer organization, had some reservations and disagreements with Nehru's approach to secularism.

The RSS has always advocated for the primacy of Hindu values and culture in India. The RSS leaders believe that Nehru's secularism neglects the Hindu identity and instead promotes a more uniform approach that undermines the distinctiveness of Hindu traditions. Additionally, they hold that Indian identity is embodied in Hinduism because Hindus form India's majority community and are sons of the soil (Jaffrelot, 2019). The RSS has always promoted Hindutva ideology, a set of beliefs and principles that emphasizes the Hindu community's cultural, political, and historical unity in India. Thus, it will not be wrong to say that the RSS is indeed associated with the promotion of Hindutva ideology. Thus, it will not be wrong to say that the RSS is indeed associated with the promotion of Hindutva ideology.

The RSS has significantly influenced the ideologies and policies of several Hindu nationalist parties, most notably the BJP, which is currently in power in India. The BJP has a close historical association with the RSS and shares

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numerous core principles with the organization. It has always prioritized the protection and progress of Hindu interests and has implemented policies aligned with the ideology of Hindutva. Notable instances of such policies include the controversial Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), the National Register of Citizens (NRC), and the construction of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya. Amit Shah, the current Minister of Home Affairs of India, has also acknowledged that a uniform civil code, the abolition of Article 370, and the construction of a Ram temple in Ayodhya have always been part of the BJP's manifesto (Salam, 2021). Under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the ruling BJP, which has pursued a Hindu nationalist agenda since coming to power in 2014, there have been increasing concerns about the rise of anti-Muslim and anti-Christian sentiments.

The influence of BJP politics in India has resulted in a significant increase in hate speech and physical attacks specifically targeting minorities, including Muslims and Christians, as well as their places of worship. A few months after Narendra Modi assumed office as Prime Minister in 2014, Rajeshwar Singh, an RSS pracharak and BJP leader, made the claim that Muslims and Christians would be wiped out of India by December 31, 2021 (Salam, 2019). At that time, his statement was promptly dismissed as the expression of a fringe element. However, a few years later, it has been seen in India that the actions and policies of the Modi government align with the sentiments expressed in Singh's hate speech, leading to concerns that it may be seen as validating. The Citizenship Amendment Bill passed by the Indian Parliament in December 2019 shuts the door on Muslim immigrants from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan (Salam, 2019).

Like Muslims, Christians in India are also facing an increasing number of attacks from right-wing Hindu nationalist groups affiliated with the BJP, highlighting a concerning trend of increasing religious-based violence. The number of violent incidents against Christians has witnessed a significant rise in recent years, with 2021, in particular, witnessing a sharp increase in such incidents. According to a report by a Human Rights Group, there were over 300 recorded incidents of attacks specifically targeting Indian Christians during the initial nine months of 2021. Among these attacks, four north Indian states reported a significant number, with Uttar Pradesh, ruled by the BJP, recording 66 incidents, Chhattisgarh, under Congress rule, reporting 47 incidents, Jharkhand, with a tribal-dominated population, documenting 30 incidents, and Madhya Pradesh, also under BJP rule, registering 30 incidents ("Why Christian Tribals Flee," 2022).

The Ghar Wapsi movement, which involves the conversion of individuals from religious minority communities back to Hinduism, has gained significant traction in India with active promotion by leaders affiliated with the BJP. One such instance was observed during Christmas 2021 when Tejasvi Surya, a BJP lawmaker, called for a ghar wapsi movement, advocating for the conversion of Muslims and Christians (Ganguly, 2021). This paper aims to explore the multifaceted challenges faced by Indian Christians and Muslims under BJP rule.

This research study not only examines the impact of policies, laws, and socio-political dynamics on religious minority communities but also assesses their implications for the overall social fabric of the country.

### **Historical Development of Hindu Nationalism and the Emergence, and Growth of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)**

Hindu nationalism and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) are indeed intricately interconnected, and this ideology serves as a driving force and foundational principle behind the policies, rhetoric, and actions of the BJP. The historical background of Hindu nationalism is multifaceted and has its roots in various political, social, and cultural developments in India. Sajib Kumar Banik (2021), an intellectual, believes that Hindu nationalism's ideological roots lie in the religious movement. This ideology originated in the 19th century during the struggle for the independence of Indians against British rule (Eviane, 2020). During this period, India witnessed a Hindu renaissance characterized by the emergence of various reform movements aimed at rejuvenating Hindu rituals, traditions, culture, and religious practices. The years 1828 and 1875 are of great significance in the development of Hindu nationalism in British India, as they mark the establishment of two important organizations, namely the Brahma Samaj and the Arya Samaj. Both of these organizations advocated for the concept of a Vedic golden age, emphasizing the ideals and values of ancient Vedic scriptures, which later became a source of inspiration and guidance for the present-day Hindu community (Vaishna, 2019).

After a few years, colonial India witnessed the emergence of Hindu nationalist political parties. The Hindu Mahasabha (1915) and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (1925) emerged as Hindu nationalist political parties during colonial India, advocating for the interests and concerns of the Hindu community. The ideology of Hindutva has played a crucial role in bolstering the foundations of Hindu nationalism. Hindutva ideology emerged in the 1920s and was initially presented by Indian author and politician V. D. Savarkar in his book titled "Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu?" He chose the word 'Hindutva' to describe the quality of being a Hindu in political, ethnic, and cultural terms. He contended that a Hindu is someone who regards India as his holy land (Punyabhumi), his motherland (Matrbhumi), and the land of his ancestors (Pitrabhumi). Savarkar further explained that India is the homeland of Hindus due to their Indian ethnicity and the fact that the Hindu faith originated in India. According to him, other religions that originated in India, such as Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism, are also classified as variations of Hinduism as they meet the same three criteria. However, Islam and Christianity, having originated outside of India, do not fulfill these criteria (Tharoor, 2018).

M.S. Golwalkar, the founder of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), espoused and promoted the Hindutva ideology put forth by Savarkar. In his work "We or Nationhood Defined," he expressed the view that non-Hindu people must

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learn to respect and hold to the Hindu religion, must adopt the Hindu culture and language, and must adopt the idea of glorifying the Hindu race and culture. They are expected to relinquish any mindset of intolerance and ingratitude towards this land and its rich traditions and instead embrace a positive outlook of love and devotion. They must renounce their status as foreigners (Salam, 2019). It is not wrong to say that Savarkar and Hedgewar played influential roles in articulating and promoting the idea of Hindu nationalism. After gaining independence, India adopted secular principles. However, in 1951, another Hindu nationalist political party called the Bharatiya Jan Sangh emerged in India. This party, along with Hindu nationalist groups such as the RSS, vehemently opposed the secular principles adopted by the state. They argued for a greater emphasis on Hinduism in the public sphere and expressed apprehensions about the alleged disregard for Hindu interests and values.

In 1948, Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated by a member of the RSS, Ramachandra Vinayak Godse. Following this tragic event, the RSS decided to distance itself from active involvement in politics. On the other side, the electoral reach of the BJS remained limited during the 1950s and 1960s. Despite the limited electoral reach of the BJS and the decision of the RSS to distance itself from active politics, the Hindutva movement continued to gain influence and expand its reach through the establishment of new affiliates within the Sangh Parivar. In 1975, Indira Gandhi, the Prime Minister of India at the time, declared a state of emergency in the country. During this dark period in Indian history, many key opposition leaders, including prominent figures associated with the Hindu right, were imprisoned or subjected to persecution. However, in 1977, Indira Gandhi lifted the emergency and announced the holding of elections. In the 1977 General Elections, the Janata Alliance, a coalition of opposition parties, was swept into power. It was the first time in Indian political history that a non-Congress group of parties came into power. In a span of two years, the Janata experiment faced internal contradictions that ultimately led to its collapse. In 1980, the BJS underwent a transformation and evolved into the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) under the leadership of Atal Bihari Vajpayee. The BJP participated in the 1984 General Elections but unfortunately managed to secure only two seats.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the BJP played a significant role in reviving the Ram Mandir issue and demanding the construction of the Ram Janmabhoomi temple in Ayodhya. The BJP's active participation in the Ram Mandir movement and its unwavering support for the temple's construction solidified its position as a prominent force in Indian politics. This movement, along with the BJP's commitment to Hindu traditions and aspirations, contributed to its rise in popularity and electoral success. Despite setbacks such as limited electoral success in the early years and the controversy surrounding the Gujarat riots in 2002, the BJP continued to grow and eventually came to power. Narendra Modi, who was the Chief Minister of Gujarat during the Gujarat riots in 2002, became the Prime Minister of India in 2014 and was re-elected in 2019. Under the BJP's leadership,

several key initiatives that are aligned with its Hindutva agenda have been implemented, including the abrogation of Article 370, the enactment of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), the construction of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya, and the implementation of anti-conversion laws. The initiatives taken by the BJP have caused anxiety and uncertainty among religious minorities, particularly Muslims and Christians, regarding their future.

## **Literature Review**

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a right-wing Hindu nationalist political organization, has emerged as a prominent and influential force in Indian politics. The BJP is actively pursuing the agenda of Hindutva, which aims to protect Hindu culture and language and introduce India as a Hindu state. The rise of the BJP in India has brought forth various complexities and challenges for religious minority communities, particularly Indian Christians and Muslims. This literature aims to examine the challenges faced by religious communities, specifically Muslims and Christians, under BJP rule. By analyzing existing scholarly works, this review seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the specific challenges and complexes, their underlying causes, and their consequences for Indian Christians and Muslims.

In recent years, Hindutva ideology, which is the core principle of Hindu nationalist parties, has been the subject of much research. According to Sudha (2020), the alarming rise in anti-Muslim violence in India is rooted in the Hindutva ideology, which seeks to transform India into a Hindu state, undermining its secular foundations. By consistently attacking India's secularism, Hindutva radicals have not only weakened the essence of the country but also compromised the security of all its citizens. In another research work, Audrey (2020) finds that Hindu nationalists are strongly committed to distorting Indian history in order to promote their contemporary and unapologetically discriminatory political agenda. It is important to note that Hindu nationalism and Hindutva are political ideologies that are distinct from the religion of Hinduism. The Hindutva ideology has also affected the state's institutions. Since the ascent to power by majoritarian forces in India following the 2014 elections, there has been a noticeable deterioration in the strength and effectiveness of the state's institutions. Ali Ahmad (2019) believes that the Indian military, widely recognized as a professional, apolitical, and secular force, has been and will be affected by Hindutva ideology.

Fascism appears to be making its presence felt in India through the alarming rise of communal violence. In his research work, Usama Hameed (2020) argues that under the governance of the BJP, India is witnessing a concerning shift away from its secular constitutional principles towards a rigid and exclusionary future, aligning with the ideologies of Hindutva forces. This transformation raises concerns about the erosion of pluralism and the rise of a potentially fascist environment. In recent years, Indian minorities, including Muslims, Christians, and Dalits, have been treated similarly in Hindu India as the Jews were treated in

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Nazi Germany and the Communists were treated in Fascist Italy. Communal violence is a prevalent issue in Indian society. According to Sali Augustine (2009), communal violence, particularly between Muslims and Hindus, and Christians and Hindus, has shocked India, especially over the past two decades. These incidents are of great concern, considering India's ongoing efforts towards democratization and development since gaining independence. The emerging cultural nationalist hegemony in India has significantly influenced the growing economy and, coupled with religious sentiments, introduces new challenges and conflicts within the democratic framework.

The author, C. Werleman (2021), points out that communal violence has been a persistent issue in India since gaining independence. However, it is undeniable that crimes and incidents of hate specifically targeting the Muslim community have increased in frequency since the BJP, led by Narendra Modi, came into power in 2014. Anti-Muslim animosity and discrimination have become prevalent in mainstream political discourse and government policies. These realities have pushed Muslims to the brink of genocide, both in India and in the disputed region of Kashmir. The increasing prevalence of Islamophobia in India has posed significant challenges for the Muslim community, and Narendra Modi, the Indian Prime Minister, has only made things worse. In Narendra Modi's Political Discourse, Prashant Waikar (2018) explores how Modi expresses Islamophobia. Waikar identifies two Islamophobic narratives present in Modi's political discourse: firstly, the neglect of Indian Muslim histories in Modi's economic development agenda, and secondly, the portrayal of Hinduism as a force that subdues Islam in India. In another research work, Mohammed and Akanksha (2018) conduct a focused examination of the difficult circumstances faced by Indian Muslims under the governance of the BJP-led government. Their work sheds light on the distressing state experienced by this community. They describe that the goal of Hindu right-wing groups is to marginalize Muslims by depicting them as "Others" and then rationalize acts of violence against them. The anti-Muslim propaganda, especially in cases where Muslims are accused of cow slaughter, further fuels instances of violence against them.

Another researcher, Kameshwar Choudhary (1991), argues that the BJP has consistently been actively involved in changing the perception of Hindu-Muslim relations in India. Not only Muslims but also Christians are suffering in India at the hands of Hindu nationalist groups affiliated with the BJP. Dhinakaran (2022) argues that Indian democracy is rapidly being reshaped as Hindu nationalism, which disregards the country's constitutional secularism and undermines its tradition of religious, cultural, and linguistic diversity, inclusivity, and pluralism. The imposed uniformity consciously aims to establish a unified India with a singular religion (Hindu), a singular culture (Hindu), and a singular language (Hindi). By falsely portraying Hinduism as being under threat from "invader" religions, nationalist ideologues have manipulated the emotions of the majority community and fueled their fears against minority groups, especially Christians.

Dhinakaran suggests that urgent initiatives are needed to protect the identity, distinctiveness, rights, and freedom of these minority groups.

### **Research Questions**

- 1- How has the increasing influence of Hindu nationalism under the BJP contributed to the rise of communal violence and affected inter-religious dynamics in India?
- 2- What are the key policies and actions of the BJP that have impacted the rights of Indian Christians and Muslims?
- 3- What are the key challenges faced by Indian Christians and Muslims under BJP rule?
- 4- What are the potential strategies and initiatives that can be implemented to promote religious harmony, tolerance, and inclusivity in the face of challenges posed by BJP politics towards Indian Christians and Muslims?

### **Research Objectives**

- 1- To examine the specific policies and initiatives of the BJP that have had a significant impact on the rights of Indian Christians and Muslims.
- 2- To analyze the role of BJP leaders and their rhetoric in promoting tensions between different religious communities in India.
- 3- To explore the social, economic, and political status of Indian Christians and Muslims under BJP rule.
- 4- To identify potential policy recommendations that address the challenges faced by Indian Christians and Muslims in the context of the BJP, with the aim of fostering religious harmony, social inclusivity, and equal rights for all.

### **Research Methodology**

The research methodology section explains the approach and techniques employed to analyze the challenges faced by Indian Muslims and Christians under the governance of the BJP. This study utilizes a qualitative approach to comprehend and explore the diverse challenges experienced by Indian Christians and Muslims within the political context of the BJP. The qualitative approach offers a valuable framework for investigating the subjective experiences, perspectives, and lived realities of individuals belonging to the Indian Christian and Muslim communities. Secondary data has been chosen as the primary source of information due to its broad accessibility, enabling a comprehensive analysis of the BJP's policies, rhetoric, and actions pertaining to religious minorities.

The secondary data used in this research study encompasses a range of sources, such as academic journals, books, government reports, media articles,



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magazines, research reports, surveys, and other relevant publications. The selection of these sources has been done meticulously, considering their credibility, relevance, reliability, and applicability to the research topic. The data collection process has involved conducting extensive literature reviews, accessing various databases, and utilizing online resources to collect the necessary secondary data for analysis. All secondary data sources have been properly cited and acknowledged to ensure ethical considerations in this research.

This research identifies and analyzes recurring issues, patterns, and themes related to the challenges faced by Indian Muslims and Christians under BJP rule. By employing secondary data analysis, this study aims to provide valuable insights into the socio-political challenges experienced by Indian Christians and Muslims in the BJP-led political environment, contributing to a broader understanding of the impact of BJP politics on religious minorities in India. Despite the advantages of using secondary data, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this research methodology. Potential limitations include data gaps, biases present in the secondary data sources, and the inability to capture real-time dynamics.

### **Finding and Discussion**

Since India gained its independence from the British on August 15, 1947, it has always been a secular, democratic, and plural society. However, following the victory of India's right-wing Hindu nationalist BJP in 2014, religious minorities, particularly Muslims and Christians, have witnessed a deterioration of their rights and freedom. The BJP-led government, at both the state and national levels, has ignored its constitutional commitments to safeguard the rights of religious minorities. State and national laws have often been used to violate the religious freedom of minorities. In this environment, minority communities, specifically Muslims and Christians, are filled with apprehension about what the future holds for them (Cheema, 2017). The politics of the BJP in India has raised several challenges for Indian Muslims and Christians.

### **Communal Polarization**

Constitutionally, India is a multicultural country, and 20% of its 1.3 billion population comprises Christians, Muslims, Sikhs, and followers of other religions (Prasad, 2019). The BJP's political agenda is associated with Hindutva ideology, which seeks to shape a national identity that includes certain religions (Hinduism, Sikhism, Jainism, and Buddhism) while excluding Abrahamic religions (Christianity and Islam). In this manner, it has fostered a sense of 'us vs. them' (Hindus vs. Muslims or Hindus vs. Christians) and exacerbated social divisions (Kulkarni, 2019). Since assuming power, the BJP's political discourse has contributed to the exacerbation of communal tensions between Hindus and Muslims (Singh, 2022). The ban on hijab in schools in Kerala, the implementation

of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in 2019, the construction of the Ram Mandir, and the revocation of Kashmir's constitutional autonomy are manifestations of the BJP's agenda that promotes Hindu supremacy. These initiatives taken by the BJP have generated fear among Muslim groups by portraying Muslims as second-class citizens in India and by dissuading Muslims and Hindus from living together. Given the increasing instances of violence targeting the Muslim minority in India, Gregory H. Stanton, the president of Genocide Watch, has raised serious concerns and made predictions regarding the potential for genocide against Muslims in the country (Singh, 2019).

The BJP has not only pursued its communal agenda by targeting Muslim minorities but has also extended its focus to other religious minorities, resulting in a significant increase in attacks against Christian communities. At a conference in New Delhi, Father Z. Devasagaya Raj highlighted the plight of Indian Christians, stating that they are confronted with symbolic, structural, and physical violence perpetrated by Hindu extremists across the country (Rand, 2016). The BJP-affiliated group Bajrang Dal, in particular, has been involved in demonizing and instilling fear among Indian Christians across various states, from Karnataka to Uttarakhand. Incidents of violent attacks on Christians have been reported during the Christmas season and have become more frequent throughout the country. This escalating hostility towards Christian minorities is a consequence of the deepening communal polarization, with the BJP shifting its targeting from Muslims to other religious minority groups in India (Singh, 2019).

## **Communal Violence**

Under the slogan "Achhe din aane waale hain" ("good days are coming") coined by Narendra Modi, the BJP achieved its most significant victory in 2014. During Modi's two terms of governance, India has witnessed the emergence of a communal and authoritarian regime, supported by an extensive network of Hindu nationalist organizations collectively known as the Sangh Parivar. This ideological network, which includes groups such as the RSS, has exerted significant influence on policy-making and societal dynamics, promoting a Hindu nationalist agenda (Singh, 2022). Communal violence against Muslims and Christians in India has become a concerning issue. Incidents of violence targeting these religious groups have occurred in different parts of the country. These acts of violence often stem from religious tensions, communal polarization, and intolerance.

Muslims in India have faced instances of targeted violence, such as mob attacks, lynching, and destruction of property, based on communal narratives and allegations of religious conversions, love jihad, and cow slaughter. In December 2021, the "Dharam Sansad," a three-day event held in Haridwar, Uttarakhand, witnessed a series of hate speeches specifically targeting Muslims, with alarming calls for genocide being made. Several prominent members of the BJP attended this event, but not a single member condemned these hate speeches. Prime Minister Modi himself remained silent on the matter, and Sudhanshu Trivedi, the

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BJP's spokesperson, avoided associating the party with the event (Singh, 2022). The Human Rights Watch report mentions that since Modi came to power in 2014, violence in India has escalated to alarming levels. BJP leaders have openly encouraged Hindus to take aggressive action against Muslims. The Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Yogi Adityanath, is notorious for making derogatory remarks against Muslims during his public demonstrations. He explicitly instigated Hindus to target Muslim women. If a Muslim man marries a Hindu girl, suggesting that in revenge, Hindus should take one hundred Muslim women. He also urged Hindus to retaliate with violence by killing at least 10 Muslims for every Hindu killed ("Indian Politician Banned," 2019).

In February 2020, Delhi witnessed a wave of violence resulting in the deaths of nearly 53 people, the injuries of over 200 individuals, the destruction of properties, and the displacement of communities. These targeted attacks were carried out by Hindu mobs. The outbreak of violence followed weeks of peaceful protests against the discriminatory citizenship policies of the Indian government. Tensions had been escalating for weeks, with BJP leaders openly endorsing violence against the protesters, referring to them as "traitors" who should be shot. According to a report by the Delhi Minorities Commission, the violence in Delhi was deemed "planned and targeted." The report also highlighted the concerning fact that the police were registering cases against Muslim victims of the violence while failing to take appropriate action against the BJP leaders who were responsible for inciting it (Roth, n.d.).

There was a surge in anti-Muslim rhetoric following the outbreak of COVID-19. In March 2020, when Indian authorities discovered a significant number of COVID-19 positive cases among Muslims who had attended a mass religious gathering in Delhi, some BJP leaders labeled the meeting a "Talibani crime" and "Corona Terrorism." Pro-government media outlets sensationalized the issue with terms like "Corona Jihad," and social media platforms were filled with calls for social and economic boycotts of Muslims. This hostile environment led to numerous physical attacks on Muslims, including those involved in distributing relief materials, based on false accusations of deliberately spreading the virus (Roth, n.d.).

After Muslims, Christians in India are also experiencing communal tensions. These tensions are led by Hindu nationalist groups that are affiliated with the BJP, which is currently in power in India. The acts of violence include the conversion of Christians by force, physical violence, sexual assaults, rapes, murders, arson of churches, and the destruction of Christian cemeteries, schools, and colleges. Hindu nationalist organizations are also advocating for policies and laws that restrict the rights and activities of Christians. This includes laws related to religious conversions, restrictions on religious practices, or regulations that affect the functioning of Christian educational institutions or social organizations.

### **Discrimination and Marginalization**

Muslims and Christians in India have unfortunately experienced discrimination in various forms. They are subjected to political, social, and economic marginalization based on their religious identity. Discrimination against them manifests in different ways, including denial of equal opportunities, unequal treatment in employment and education, targeted violence, and restrictions on the practice of their religion. According to the report by Human Rights Watch, in India, authorities have adopted policies and laws that systematically discriminate against religious minorities and stigmatize critics of the Indian government. The biases ingrained within the ruling Hindu nationalist BJP have permeated independent institutions like the police and the courts, granting nationalist groups the ability to intimidate, victimize, and assault religious minorities, specifically Muslims, without impunity (Chowdhury, 2023).

Muslims and Christians in India have been subject to various forms of discrimination in crucial areas such as education, employment, and housing. They experience biases during job interviews, unequal pay, limited opportunities for career growth, and exclusion from certain professions due to their religious identity. Both communities also face discriminatory practices within educational institutions, including disparities in access to quality education, inadequate resources and facilities in schools and colleges, biased admission procedures, and differential treatment by teachers and peers. Discrimination in finding suitable housing is another challenge they confront, with landlords, real estate agents, and housing societies refusing to rent or sell properties based on their religious background. Consequently, this results in segregation and limited housing options for these communities. Muslims and Christians frequently experience social discrimination encompassing prejudice, stereotypes, and stigmatization. They encounter exclusion, marginalization, and social alienation in various social settings, significantly impacting their sense of belonging and integration within society.

### **Hate Speech and Physical Attacks**

Hate speech refers to the use of offensive remarks, derogatory language, or incitement to violence. It creates a toxic environment and contributes to the marginalization and stigmatization of targeted groups. Physical attacks, on the other hand, involve acts of violence or aggression directed towards individuals or places of worship associated with religious minorities. The rising wave of hate crimes against Christians and Muslims is being witnessed in Modi's India, as both communities suffer from hate speeches and physical attacks in the country. Non-state actors and government officials are continuing to use social media platforms, mainstream media platforms, and other forms of communication to spread and promote hatred, as well as disinformation, against religious minorities, particularly Christians and Muslims. The rapid dissemination of misinformation online has led

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to a significant increase in the number of violent attacks in the country (“Religious Freedom Conditions,” 2022).

In present times, there is an alarming rise of far-right Hindu nationalists in India who, with the support and sometimes endorsement of the government and local authorities, are creating an environment where Muslims are being marginalized and treated as second-class citizens. Their religious practices, including dietary habits and rituals, are being targeted and even criminalized. Muslim women face humiliation and harassment solely based on their religious identity. In January 2022, an app called Bulli Bai circulated photographs of over 100 Muslim women with the disturbing claim that they were “for sale as maids.” This act of targeting did not spare prominent journalists, actresses, and activists, who were also subjected to such harassment and malicious intent (Apoorvanand, 2022). Additionally, Muslim livelihoods are being threatened, and there are distressing calls for the genocide of Muslims. According to the 2022 report by the Kashmir Media Services, there have been calls for the genocide of Muslims by Hindu leaders at a hate speech conclave in Haridwar (“Muslims Suffer from Hate Speeches,” 2022). These hate speeches against religious minorities, specifically Muslims, are motivated by Hindutva ideology. Being Muslim in BJP-ruled India is no longer a safe experience (Apoorvanand, 2022).

Like Muslims, Christians also face challenges and concerns regarding their safety and well-being in India. A large number of incidents of violence, discrimination, and attacks against Christians have been reported in various parts of the country. These incidents range from physical assaults on individuals and attacks on churches to harassment and intimidation. According to a 2022 report from the United Christian Forum (UCF), an interdenominational organization advocating for the rights of Christians in India, there has been a significant rise in incidents of violence targeting the Christian community. By the end of July 2022, a total of 302 such incidents had been recorded, marking a drastic increase compared to the 186 incidents reported in 2021 (Jain, 2022). In 2021, the BJP-led government blocked Mother Teresa's charity from receiving funds from abroad, which was perceived as hurting the religious sentiments of Christians. This charity organization, established by Mother Teresa in 1950, operates a network of shelters across India that are led by nuns with the aim of assisting underprivileged and impoverished individuals.

Hindu extremist groups associated with Modi's party frequently allege that the Missionaries of Charity (MoC) engage in religious conversion activities disguised as charitable work. These accusations claimed that the MoC entices impoverished Hindus and tribal communities with financial incentives, free education, and shelter as part of their conversion programs (“India Prohibits Foreign Funding,” 2021). Christians in India's tribal belts, especially in the states of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan, Jharkhand, Odisha, and South Gujarat, regularly report incidents of pastors being attacked, churches being targeted, demolished, burned, and congregations being attacked by Hindu radical groups that have spread

throughout these areas. Much physical violence in these tribal areas goes unreported (“Religious Minorities in India,” 2017).

### **Anti-Conversion Law**

Anti-conversion laws are legislative measures aimed at preventing or prohibiting religious conversions from one religion to another. Anti-conversion laws are legislative measures aimed at preventing or prohibiting religious conversions from one religion to another. People convert to a different religion for different reasons, including secondary conversion, deathbed conversion, active conversion by free choice due to a change in beliefs, marital conversion, forced conversion, and conversion for convenience (“Anti-Conversion Laws,” 2023). Anti-conversion laws in India have been a subject of controversy and debate, with some viewing them as a violation of secularism and religious freedom protected under the Fundamental Rights of the Indian Constitution.

In India, most of the anti-conversion laws were implemented after the Modi-led BJP took over the government in 2014, except in Himachal Pradesh, Odisha, and Chhattisgarh. In 2003, the anti-conversion law was enacted in Gujarat when the BJP ruled the state legislature under Narendra Modi. According to the report by USCIRF, Hindu groups, and leaders affiliated with India's ruling Hindu nationalist BJP have made allegations that Christian missionaries are engaging in conversions across the country using methods such as enticement, coercion, and fraudulent practices. In recent years, there have also been claims that Muslims have been converting people to Islam through unfair means (Rahman, 2023).

After India gained independence, several anti-conversion bills were introduced in Parliament. However, none of them were successfully enforced. There is no federal law regarding anti-conversion in India. Nonetheless, there are state-level anti-conversion laws enacted in 12 out of the country's 28 states (Rahman, 2023). Most states in India share common characteristics in their anti-conversion laws, which include provisions to ban forceful or fraudulent conversions. However, specific states such as Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh have gone further and imposed a ban on conversions through marriage. In some states of India, the controversial anti-conversion laws enacted are aimed at harassing and persecuting Muslim and Christian minorities.

Chander Uday Singh, a senior counsel at India's Supreme Court, stated that there is no doubt that the anti-conversion laws in India are specifically designed to marginalize and persecute Muslims and Christians (Rahman, 2023). In Uttar Pradesh, the largest state in India, a law called the "Prohibition of Unlawful Religious Conversion Ordinance" has been passed. This law is based on the controversial concept of "Love Jihad," which alleges that Muslim men entice Hindu girls into relationships with the intention of converting their religion to Islam. According to the law, any individual who wants to convert to another religion must get permission from local district authorities. The law also imposes a punishment of up to 10 years of imprisonment for individuals found guilty of

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forcing others to convert through fraud, coercion, misleading information, or misrepresentation (Zishan, Kakar & Fatima, 2022). While this law is intended to apply to individuals of all religious backgrounds, it is observed that a significant number of reported cases involve victims from the Muslim community. Out of the 86 cases that were filed, most were filed by the girl's family, not the girl herself. Among these cases, 79 were related to individuals from the Muslim community, while the remaining cases were related to individuals from the Christian community. The implementation of this anti-conversion law has generated significant apprehension among interfaith couples who are already vulnerable to scrutiny from their families and Hindu nationalist organizations ("India: Government Policies," 2021).

### **Cow Slaughter Law**

The cow holds a sacred status in Hinduism, and its protection is an important aspect of the country's cultural practices. The slaughter of cows and their progeny is indeed banned in many states of India, and the consumption of their meat is prohibited or highly restricted in certain regions due to religious and cultural beliefs. Article 48 of the Constitution of India and most Indian states (24 out of 29, as of 2015) ban cow slaughter (Cheema, 2017). States like Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, and Gujarat completely ban the slaughter of cows. On the other hand, states like West Bengal allow cow slaughter in cases of unfit or old cows after the acquisition of a fit-for-slaughter certificate. The punishment for violating cow slaughter laws differs from state to state in India. However, states such as Kerala, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Sikkim, Tripura, Manipur, and Mizoram do not have laws prohibiting cow slaughter (Deol, 2021).

In 2004, the BJP-led lower house of the Indian legislature passed a resolution calling for a nationwide ban on cow slaughter. During the 2014 election campaign of Prime Minister Modi, Hindu ultranationalist organizations widely utilized slogans such as "BJP ka sandesh, bachegi gai, bachege desh" (BJP's message, the cow will be saved, the country will be saved) and "Modi ko matdan, gai ko jeevan dan" (Vote for Modi, give life to the cow). Cow protection was also a crucial condition set by Hindu right-wing organizations to support Narendra Modi as the prime ministerial candidate of the BJP (Soumya, 2014). In 2017, the Ministry of Environment of the Government of India, led by the BJP, imposed a ban on the purchase and sale of cattle for slaughter at animal markets across the country. This ban was imposed under the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals statutes (Bera & Agarwal, 2017).

However, in the same year, the Supreme Court of India suspended the ban on the sale of cattle, providing relief to the beef and leather industries ("Supreme Court Suspends Ban," 2017). In India, beef is considered an important source of nutrition for Muslim, Christian, and Dalit communities. It is a dietary preference

for these communities as part of their regular meals. However, for those who regard the cow as sacred, it is an emotional issue. The cow holds religious significance for them. Cow slaughter has been a persistent source of tension between Hindus and Muslims in India. The cow protection laws are frequently intertwined with anti-Muslim sentiment. Radical right-wing Hindu groups have formed their own gangs called Gau Raksha Dal (Cow Protection Front) in various parts of India.

These groups often carry firearms, batons, and swords. They take it upon themselves to patrol major cities and highways, targeting individuals, specifically Muslims, involved in the transportation, possession, consumption, or sale of cattle or beef. When they apprehend a person, they subject them to severe acts of violence, including stripping them naked, verbally abusing their religious beliefs, beating them, and torturing them. These acts are often recorded and shared on social media platforms like Facebook or YouTube (Bajoria, 2016). In 2020, the government of Uttar Pradesh took strict action against alleged cow slaughter by arresting approximately 4,000 individuals under this law that prohibits such activities. Additionally, the authorities utilized the National Security Act to detain 76 individuals who were accused of involvement in cow slaughter. (“India: Government Policies,” 2021). The implementation of the ban on cow slaughter and the trade of beef has affected not only Muslims but also Christians in India.

## **Religious Freedom**

In India, religious freedom is protected by the Constitution. It allows individuals the freedom to profess, practice, and propagate their religion of choice. However, it is important to acknowledge that, despite these constitutional safeguards, there have been instances of discrimination, violence, and prejudice based on religion in India. There have been instances where the religious freedoms of Muslim and Christian communities have been curtailed or infringed upon. This includes incidents of violence, attacks on places of worship, and controversial policies or laws that are seen as targeting these religious minorities. According to the report of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, religious freedom conditions remained poor in India in 2022. The Indian government, at the local, state, and national levels, has continued to enforce and promote policies that negatively affect religious minorities, specifically Muslims and Christians. These policies include restrictions on interfaith relationships, regulations on cow slaughter, and laws targeting religious conversion. The national government also engaged in suppressing critical voices, particularly those of religious minorities and their advocates. This suppression took various forms, including surveillance, harassment, demolition of property, arbitrary travel bans, and detention under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA). Furthermore, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were targeted under the Financial Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA). These actions further restricted the freedom of expression and activities of religious minorities in India (“Religious Freedom Conditions,” 2022).



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The actions undertaken by the government demonstrate a persistent threat to human rights and religious freedom in India.

### **Conclusion**

India is a diverse country that has fostered coexistence among people of various ethnicities, languages, religions, and cultures. This intermingling of communities has resulted in a rich tapestry of traditions, customs, and cultural practices. From festivals and rituals to cuisine, music, dance, and art forms, India's diverse communities have made invaluable contributions, enriching the nation's collective heritage. After gaining independence from the British, India embraced the principles of secularism in its governance and social fabric. However, Hindu nationalist parties, such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), have consistently expressed reservations and disagreements with the principles of secularism. The RSS has always advocated for the ideology of Hindutva, which comprises a set of beliefs and principles that underscore the cultural, political, and historical unity of the Hindu community in India. The RSS has exerted a substantial influence on the ideologies and policies of several Hindu nationalist parties, most notably the BJP, which is presently in power in India.

Under the rule of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's BJP government, there have been increasing concerns about the rise of anti-Muslim and anti-Christian sentiments. The party has implemented various laws and policies that have benefited the Hindu communities. However, these same laws and policies have brought some challenges for the religious minority communities, particularly Muslims and Christians, who constitute a significant portion of the Indian population. There have been instances of communal violence, hate crimes, and targeted attacks on Muslim and Christian communities. Furthermore, policies and initiatives implemented by the BJP government have raised concerns about the protection of minority rights and the preservation of religious freedom. The challenges faced by Muslims and Christians under the rule of the BJP in India demand immediate attention and concerted efforts to promote inclusivity, equality, and harmony among all religious communities. It is crucial to address these challenges promptly and foster an environment where every individual, regardless of religious affiliation, can enjoy equal rights, opportunities, and social cohesion. By actively working towards these goals, India can effectively strive for a society that cherishes the principles of unity, diversity, and mutual respect among its varied religious communities.

### **Recommendations**

- The BJP should recognize and uphold the fundamental rights of all individuals, regardless of their religious affiliation, and actively work

towards strengthening peace, tolerance, harmony, and religious pluralism in society.

- The party leadership should discourage hate speech and physical attacks against religious groups and take strict action against groups or individuals promoting communal violence or discrimination based on religious grounds.
- The leadership of the BJP should engage in constructive dialogues with the representatives of Indian Christian and Muslim communities, aiming to understand their concerns and address them effectively.
- The Indian government should encourage interfaith dialogue, tolerance, cooperation, and initiatives that foster harmony, understanding, and empathy among diverse religious communities in India.
- The Indian government should prioritize the effective implementation of existing policies and laws that protect the rights and interests of minorities and take steps to rectify any gaps or shortcomings in these measures.
- The BJP leadership should promote awareness programs that foster religious tolerance, harmony, respect, and inclusivity from an early age, promoting a culture of mutual cooperation, understanding, and acceptance.
- The BJP leaders should accept the participation and representation of Indian Christians and Muslims in the economic, social, political, and decision-making processes to ensure their interests are adequately represented and their voices are also heard.
- The state should strengthen the independence and effectiveness of state-level and national-level human rights commissions to address complaints of religious violence and discrimination.
- The BJP leadership should encourage partnerships between religious leaders, government agencies, and civil society organizations to address communal tensions, promote religious harmony, and facilitate conflict resolution.
- The state should continuously assess and monitor the impact of policies and initiatives on the well-being and rights of Indian Christians and Muslims and make some necessary adjustments and improvements to ensure their full inclusion and protection.

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