

The career of hindu nationalism in india politics essay



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Nationalism in India emerged as a reaction to British colonialism and presented India's nationalist elite with two competing visions of Indian national identity. One vision embodied by the Indian National Congress (Congress party), which was established in 1885, centered on the creation of a modern secular democratic state along Western lines. The other vision was centered on religion and included the creation of either a Hindu polity and/or an Islamic polity in the subcontinent. Religion and religious self-identification had started playing a significant role in the development of nationalism in colonial India.[1]

Secularism in India as Gandhi and Nehru saw it is distinctly different from the Western view of secularism. The "Gandhi-Nehru" secularism places the importance of the state's "neutrality" between India's many faiths.

India's independence "eventually came as a result of Congress' success in 1946 elections," [2] and as a result the emergent India embodied an "idea" of a political community that was brought together by modern notions such as individual rights, democracy, and citizenship irrespective of religious or other markers of ethnic identity. [3] The Congress party embraced a version of nationalism that promoted an inclusive and plural vision of the Indian state irrespective of religious or other identities.

According to Sen, the roots of Indian secularism can be traced back to its long and diverse multi-faith history. [4] India's constitution grants its citizens, individual as well as group rights. [5] As such, India's secularism tends to emphasize the "neutrality" of the state in religious affairs as opposed to a strict "separation" of the state from religion. According to Sen,

the first view requires the state to be “ equidistant” with respect to all religions - meaning that the state treatment of different religions and religious communities will be symmetrical. The second view requires that the state has absolutely no relationship with any religion. 20[6]

For the purpose of this essay first we will look if as per the Constitution India is secular State and second how Hindu nationalism affects India’s secularism.

Evolution of constitution

Nehru initiated the process of constitution making with the “ eight point resolution” for Independent India on December 13th, 1946. According to the resolution India was to be a “ union” of the provinces and the princely states. The constitution guaranteed the upholding of equality, justice, and freedom to the people of India. Along with these the constitution had special provisions for the people from the scheduled class, backward and under-developed areas. The constitution of Independent India had many things in common with the Government of India Act 1935 except the incorporation of Universal Adult Franchise as article 326 in June 1949 which marked its major differentiation with the Government of India Act.[7]

The Constitution, till the 42nd Amendment in 1976, did not contain the word ‘ secular’ except incidentally in Article 25(2)(b). Prof. K. T. Shah was the only member who made an effort to get a provision regarding the secular character of India included in the Constitution. The following amendment, moved as Amendment No. 366, was defeated on 3rd December 1948.

“ The State in India being secular shall have no concern with any religion, creed or profession of faith; and shall observe an attitude of absolute

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neutrality in all matters relating to the religion of any class of its citizens or other persons in the Union.”

The following extract from the speech of Pandit Laxmi Kanth Maitra on 6th December 1948 quoted by Justice R. A. Jahagirdar[8] can be said to reflect the consensus of the members:

By (a) secular State, as I understand it, is meant that the State is not going to make any discrimination whatsoever on the ground of religion or community against any person professing any particular form of religious faith. This means in essence that no particular religion in the State will receive any State patronage whatsoever.

As the BJP Home Minister L. K. Advani is quoted by James Chiriyakandath to have said:

The Constituent Assembly drew up a secular Constitution.... essentially because theocracy is alien to India's history, tradition and culture. The concept of Sarva Panth Sammabhav (equal respect for all faiths) has always been regarded as an essential attribute of the state and statecraft of our country.

The non-discriminatory character of a secular State is undoubtedly imprinted on the Constitution. There is individual and collective freedom of religion - the right to freely profess, practice and propagate religion. Every religious denomination has been given the fundamental right to establish and maintain its own institutions and to manage its own affairs in matters of religion (Art. 25).

While Article 25 gives individuals complete autonomy with regard to practice and performance of religious rituals, Article 26 allows every religious group an equal opportunity to operate within the prescribed domain, which is defined by the law.

Equal treatment of all religious denominations requires that the state does not associate itself with a particular religion or recognise a particular religion as the majority's religion which in India's case is Hinduism, the constitution rather disassociates itself from it. Article 27 stipulates that no person shall be compelled to pay any taxes, the proceeds of which are specifically appropriated in payment of expenses for the promotion or maintenance of any particular religion. Article 28(1) says: " No religious instruction shall be provided in any educational institution wholly maintained out of State funds".

These articles indicate separation of state and religion. Moreover, the silence of Indian constitution over the provision of an official religion speaks the most about separation of state and religion. As Smith says, " What the constitution does not say is just as important as what it does say."

On citizenship, the Indian constitution recognises the people of India as the citizens where the state has nothing to do with their religion, faith, belief or caste and acclaims to treat all citizens equally. Article 15(1) ensures religion as not being a cause of discrimination. It states:

" The state shall not discriminate any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, and place of birth or any of them."

Article 16(1) and (2) states:

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“ There shall be equality of opportunity for all citizens in matters relating to employment or appointment to any office under the state.”

“ No citizen shall, on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, descent, place of birth, residence or any of them, be ineligible for, or discriminated against in respect of, any employment or appointment under the state.”

The employment of the three clauses, individual and collective freedom of religion, separation of state and religion and citizenship in the Indian constitution excludes the role of religion in defining the relationship between the union and its citizens.

emergence of the Hindu nationalism and role of Hindutva in politics

The Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS) and the Akhil Bharat Hindu Mahasabha had been in the Indian political arena since 1951 and 1915 respectively. It was the political and institutional context of Indian politics in the 1980s, and not Hindu nationalist ideology per se, that facilitated the emergence of the BJP. 5[9]For BJP Hindu nationalism equates “ Indian-ness” with Hindutva (“ Hindu-ness”)11[10]as The threat that nationality based on territory and not religion. Thus the threat BJP poses is to Indian secularism and not to the continuation of a democratic state in India.

For this essay the impact of Hindu nationalism on India’s secularism is explained by assessing a) the Uniform Civil Code, b) the Ayodhya controversy and c) Article 370 of the Indian Constitution which gives Kashmir special status within the Indian union. We also look at d) the “ saffronization”

of education in India through a reinterpretation of Indian history by Hindu nationalists.

According to Savarkar a true citizen of India is one for whom India is not just the matribhoomi (motherland) but also the punyabhoomi (sacred land).

12[11]These two notions are congruent for “Hindus” – Hindus, Jains, Buddhists and Sikhs – whom they regard as the true citizens of India.

According to this argument, Christians and Muslims pose a cultural threat to Indian (Hindu) culture since their punyabhoomi does not coincide with the territory of India. They can live in India so long as they do not assert their identities and conform to the larger Indian (Hindu) culture. 13[12]

Hindu nationalists suffer from a historic sense of victimhood. According to them, Islamic and Christian powers like the Mughals and the British were able to politically establish themselves in India and solution lies in the “recovery” of a mythic “Golden Age” in the country’s pre-Islamic past.

14[13]because Hinduism was “weak” and the Hindus were divided along issues like caste and language. Ironically, the Hindu nationalists want to transform Hinduism into a militarized religion, similar to the way they perceive Islam and Christianity to be, as a way of redressing their historical grievances. 15[14]Finally, they wish to “Hinduize all politics” in India. 16[15]

The Hindu nationalist agenda operates at multiple levels within Indian society. The BJP (and its predecessor, the BJS) serve as the political arm of Hindu nationalism. The RSS fulfils a militant and ideological role; the Bajrang Dal is an organization aimed at radicalizing India’s Hindu youth; the Vishwa Hindu Parishad works as a social and cultural body espousing Hindu

nationalism (and even works with the radical elements within the Hindu diaspora); and the Vidya Bharti works as the educational arm of the RSS. Together, these and numerous similar organizations form what is known as the Sangh Parivar built around the RSS that aims to promote Hindu nationalism.

In 1948 RSS was temporarily declared to be an unlawful organization and its activities were proscribed as a result of Mahatma Gandhi's assassination by Nathuram Vinayak Godse, an RSS devotee. The Hindu Mahasabha, another political group of Hindutva escaped ban at this time but their activities were forbidden these groups were forced to maintain a lower profile.

Since independence, Congress party dominated the Indian political scene until 1989. Congress party's hegemony began to gradually decrease after Nehru's death in 1964. Indira Gandhi's imposition of emergency between 1975 and 1977 caused mass disillusionment with the Congress party across India. This ultimately led to the election of the first non-Congress party government in 1977, led by the Janata Party, a coalition of parties that included the BJS. However, the dominance of the Congress party has not been replaced by any single party. Within this political context BJP entered national politics in India. The BJP was formed in 1980. BJP tried an attempt to appear as a more moderate party and capture wider popular appeal which alienated the RSS, which in turn supported Rajiv Gandhi and the Congress party in the 1984 elections to demonstrate its displeasure. 28[16]As a result, the BJP returned to its Hindu nationalist ideological core. Use of religion by Indira Gandhi in the state of Punjab to challenge the appeal of its regional rival, the Akali Dal, a Sikh religious party and later Rajiv Gandhi's reversion of Supreme Court <https://assignbuster.com/the-career-of-hindu-nationalism-in-india-politics-essay/>

judgment that had granted alimony to Shah Bano³⁰[17] further assisted BJP's Hindutva cause rise.

Rajiv Gandhi helped pass legislation overturning the Supreme Court decision when he witnessed a growing backlash against this judgment amongst a segment of the conservative Muslim community. The BJP quickly seized upon the Congress party's decision to pacify the Muslim orthodoxy and argued that this step was contrary to the spirit and practice of Indian secularism as it privileged the sectarian interests of a particular religious community.

Thus the secular Congress party increasingly catered to the Hindu population by appealing to religion. In the late 1980s the Congress party used the state-run Doordarshan television channel to air the Hindu epics of the Mahabharata and Ramayana in an attempt to play "majoritarian" politics.

³¹[18] In 1989 Rajiv Gandhi began his electoral campaign in Faizabad district, where the town of Ayodhya is located. There he promised to create a "Ram Rajya" (rule of Ram), again playing "majoritarian" politics. In this same campaign Rajiv tacitly supported the Ramshila program, which involved the bringing of sacred bricks from all over India to Ayodhya for the construction of a Ram temple at the disputed site of the Babri Masjid.

³²[19] These political strategies employed by the Congress party for the sake of electoral success created the "de facto authorization of a majoritarian discourse on democracy and a culturalist discourse on political loyalties."

³³[20] BJP started to openly criticise the Congress party's manipulation of religious symbols as "pseudo-secularism."

However, the Congress party lost the 1989 elections and the era of coalition and minority-led governments was ushered in. V. P. Singh became the prime minister of the left-of-center National Front government that was supported by the BJP from the outside. In order to secure the support of the now mobilized lower castes, V. P. Singh's government put forth an affirmative action program - the Mandal Commission - that promised 27 percent of all government jobs and places in institutions of higher education. 34[21] This put the BJP in a tight spot between its upper-caste support base and the lower-caste electorate that was crucial for the success of its Hindu nationalist political agenda. In order to offset political split within the Hindu community, L. K. Advani launched a 10,000 kilometer-long rath yatra in 1990. He expected the "twin pillars of Mandal and Masjid" would ensure the rise of hindu nationalism in Indian politics.

While the BJP was only able to win 7.4 percent of the popular vote in the 1984 general elections, its vote share increased to 21 percent in 1991. 35 In 1996 the BJP formed a coalition government that only lasted 13 days, while the 1998 BJP-led coalition government, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), survived for a year. Finally, in 1999 the BJP-led NDA government formed the first non-Congress government that survived the full five-year term with Atal Bihari Vajpayee as its prime minister.

its impact on secularism

Jaffrelot has shown that the Hindu nationalist movement's strategies include both radical and moderate elements. 41[22] The BJP's radicalized, militant nature is demonstrated by the Babri Masjid demolition in 1992 and the

Gujarat violence a decade later ensured the support of its core constituency
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and the RSS. in spite of their coalition with ideologically different parties, the BJP succeeded in promoting a Hindu nationalist version of Indian history by implementing changes to the National Curriculum Framework. 48 The specific policy issues that were crucial to the Hindu nationalist agenda were;

Uniform Civil Code

In the late 1980s the controversy created by the Shah Bano case gave the BJP the ammunition to criticize the policies of the Congress party as pandering to “ minority-ism” and being “ pseudo-secular.” This case is an example of this tension between individual and group/religious rights guaranteed by the Indian Constitution. 51[23] However, as a consequence of the compromises that it struck in 1999 with its alliance partners, the BJP was forced to drop this issue from its common minimum agenda.

The Indian state did not show the same zeal for reform in Muslim laws as it did while enacting the Hindu laws in 1955 and 1956. According to Articles 37 and 44 of the Indian Constitution, the establishment of a uniform civil code is a “ directive principle” for the Indian state in making laws, even as it is not enforceable by any court. 54[24]

BJP moderated its position on the uniform civil code by dropping the issue from the NDA’s agenda, the party still remains committed to the implementation of a uniform (Hinduized) civil code.

The Ayodhya Controversy

The destruction of the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya in 1992 and controversies surrounding this mosque had been around since the nineteenth century, this <https://assignbuster.com/the-career-of-hindu-nationalism-in-india-politics-essay/>

issue had remained dormant since India's independence. 56[25] In the 1980s, the BJP used this issue as a political rallying point to unite the Hindu electorate irrespective of caste or language in an attempt to construct a "Hindu vote." 57[26] As an electoral strategy the Ayodhya issue paid off. The BJP increased its vote share from 11.4 percent in 1989 to 21 percent in the 1991 general elections. 58[27] The construction of a Ram temple at the site of the destroyed mosque remains on the agenda of the Hindu nationalists. However, BJP had to drop this issue from their 1999 NDA election manifesto due to the constraints of coalition politics.

The Ayodhya controversy erupted again in February 2002. This attack had all the signs of a systematic and pre-meditated political violence on minority Muslims in which the state government was actively complicit. This led to the rise of Hindu nationalism supporters so much so that Narendra Modi even campaigned on the Hindutva platform in the state elections in 2002 and won. The Hindu nationalists further threatened that Gujarat experience would serve as a "laboratory" to be replicated elsewhere in India. 63[28]

The BJP's active support in the destruction of the Babri Masjid, in addition to its role in the state-sanctioned Gujarat violence, demonstrates the radical tendencies of BJP despite the constraints of coalition politics. According to Nussbaum, Hindu nationalism in general, and the Gujarat incident in particular, poses a serious threat to the survival of democracy in India. 64[29] However, the general outrage amongst the Indian public in other states led BJP to drop this issue from their 1999 NDA election manifesto to replicate it in other Indian states.

Article 370 and Kashmir

Article 370 of the Indian Constitution grants Kashmir special status within the Indian union. This is a sticking point for the BJP as Kashmir is India's only Muslim-majority state but enjoys special provisions such as restrictive land-ownership. Article 371 of the Indian Constitution allows the governments of certain states such as Nagaland and Mizoram in northeast India to legislate on the ownership and transfer of land in these regions, thereby restricting migrations of Indians from elsewhere in the country. 73[30] India's Lakshadweep islands also enjoy a similar status as even Indian citizens require special permission to enter this restricted region. 74[31] However, it is only the Kashmir issue that is important to the Hindu nationalists given the complex history of its accession to the Indian union after independence. 75[32]

Reinterpretation of History and Changes in the Educational Curriculum

education policies that promoted a skewed interpretation of India's history along their ideological lines. In an attempt to show that India is the *matribhoomi* (motherland) of all Hindus, the Hindu nationalist historians claim that the Vedic Sanskrit-speaking Indo-Aryan peoples were indigenous to India, thereby implying that no Indo-Aryan migration into the subcontinent ever occurred. 76[33] to show that all of India's Hindus are the descendants of the original inhabitants of the subcontinent. 77[34] Islamic political dominance in the subcontinent has been reinterpreted by the Hindu nationalists to emphasize the more militant aspect of the rule of some of India's Muslim Emperors (notably that of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb)

and the exploitation of their Hindu subjects. periods of Hindu-Muslim cultural syncretism and good governance of some of India's Muslim Emperors (for example, the Mughal Emperor Akbar) is conspicuously absent from the Hindu nationalist narrative of this period of India's history. 78[35]Furthermore, these revised textbooks have deleted references to the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi in 1948 by a member of the Hindu Mahasabha. these textbooks blame Muslims for the partition of India. 80[36]Since the BJP has a long-term agenda to redefine Indian identity, they were not hesitant to use their power while in government to redefine India's past. Their intention is to mould the future generations' understanding of India's history along their ideological lines.

According to the "twin tolerations" argument, a broad range of religious-state relations are possible in a democracy. 97[37]reinterpreting Indian history and changing the education curriculum to reflect its corrupt and erroneous view of the Indian past. BJP's single major success has been the communalization of Indian politics by changing the discourse on secularism. First, in spite of the rise of Hindu nationalism, a standardization of Hinduism appears to be occurring for the first time in the religion's history. Second, India's lower castes are increasingly conforming to the religious and social norms of the upper castes as they climb the socio-economic ladder. This is resulting in further homogenization within Hindu society. 101[38]they may play into the hands of the Hindu nationalists.

is India a secular state?

What is India and who is an Indian are simple questions that are extremely difficult to answer.[39]Literature on comparative nationalism suggests that <https://assignbuster.com/the-career-of-hindu-nationalism-in-india-politics-essay/>

national identities have historically been based on several principles of collective belonging: ethnicity (Japan, Italy, Germany, and much of Europe), religion (Ireland, Pakistan and other parts of Middle East), ideology (successfully in the United States, unsuccessfully in former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia), and territory (Spain, Switzerland and a number of Third World nations).[40]One should note that the territorial idea inevitably becomes part of all nation-states, but territory does not have to be the defining principle of national identity.[41]

In 1995, in a landmark judgment the Supreme Court of India observed that “ Ordinarily, Hindutva is understood as a way of life or a state of mind and is not to be equated with or understood as religious Hindu fundamentalism. A Hindu may embrace a non-Hindu religion without ceasing to be a Hindu and since the Hindu is disposed to think synthetically and to regard other forms of worship, strange gods and divergent doctrines as inadequate rather than wrong or objectionable, he tends to believe that the highest divine powers complement each other for the well-being of the world and mankind.”[42]

In India everyone says he is a secularist. Hindutvavadis insist that they are the true secularists and the Congress is pseudo-secularist; some Muslim scholars – notable among them Dr. Rafiq Zacharia and Asghar Ali Engineer – propound a theory that Islam based upon the Holy Quran is secularist.

[43]Prof. D. E. Smith, contrary to popular understanding, does not assert that India is a secular State. Rather, he poses the question: What is the meaning of the term ‘ secular State’ in the Indian context? There were several features of the Constitution which were strongly suggestive of secularism.

The prevalent cultural indicators were supportive of secularism.

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Prof. T. N. Madan is a prolific writer on secularism – is of the view that secularism is a late Christian idea and it is not indigenous to the religious cultures of India. He argues that the demand for removal of religion from public life is predicated on the view that religion is irrational. He believes that “ in the prevailing circumstances secularism in South Asia as a generally shared credo of life is impossible, as a basis for State action impracticable, and as a blueprint for the foreseeable future impotent. He makes what he calls an excursus into South Asia’s major religion “ to make the point that the search for secular elements in the cultural traditions of this region is a futile exercise for it is not these but an ideology of secularism is absent and is resisted”.

He takes full note of the Muslims’ resistance to the reform of family law, Shah Bano case, the Hindutvavadis’ agitation for the demolition of Babri Mosque in Ayodhya and Sikh and Hindu fundamentalists facing each other in Punjab and the killing of innocents by Sikh terrorists – even in the context of secularisation in everyday life.

In the end Madan rejects secularism as a western modern idea unsuited to the pious society of India and stresses the need for some form of modern secularism in the Indian cultural context.

Aashis Nandy, canvasses the thesis of the cultural inappropriateness of secularism on grounds that the public/private distinction lying at the heart of modern secularism makes no sense to the faithful.

Theoretical formulation, interpretation, and implementation of secularism have varied in several countries. In Indian context, the votaries of Hindutva <https://assignbuster.com/the-career-of-hindu-nationalism-in-india-politics-essay/>

equate it with appeasement of minorities, thus “ pseudo-secularism.”

Apologists of Indian secularism call it “ religious equi-distance, not non-involvement,” meaning that Indian state is neutral between religions and religious communities.

A Secular State - No Less, No More