

Jai Shri Ram, Allah o Akbar, and India's Dying Secularism

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Introduction

India is currently grappling with the sustainability of its contemporary political framework of Hindu fundamentalism or, more commonly, the Hindu revivalism or Hindu nationalism.¹ This idea of reviving Hindu culture began with the Hindutva ideology gaining much popularity in the 20th century. However, the ideology of Hindutva is considered more or less as a cultural construct, where the emphasis lies on the idea of common heroes, common mythology, common attire, common dietary habits, and acceptance of common caste and creed system. This in return has consciously given birth to adopting a way of life that is culturally Hindu.

The idea of creating a society/state that is a by-product of a common value system, however, automatically marginalises minorities because of their inability to fall into the premises of the desired. Thus, in a similar vein, the current leadership of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is side-lining minorities via different means with Hindutva as the core ideology of their political party. In a nutshell, politically, India has reached a level where it is relentlessly capturing power in central government and culturally, it is alienating the minorities who do not share with them the same Hindu culture and history.² This study thus aims to uncover the current atrocities of the Indian state against Muslims in light of the recent 'hijab row' and, secondly, it comments on how India's secularism is slowly dying while it romances with its prevalent Hindutva ideology.

Story Behind Stories

This ideologically driven hard politics of

India has created an environment of chaos in the state and is becoming a threat to its minorities, especially Muslims. The cases of violating human rights in India are routine now, where victims are exposed to violence justified in the name of the BJP's political ideology. Incidents like Haridwar hate speech and its subsequent episodes,³ attacks by Hindu mobs,⁴ and other stories of religious hate crimes⁵ have grabbed attention of social media. However, more recently, a video has gone viral where a Muslim girl is seen wearing a Hijab and chanting slogans of 'Allah o Akbar' (God is Greatest) against 'Jai Shri Ram' (Glory to Lord Rama).⁶ Nevertheless, this defiant behaviour did not emerge in a vacuum. It was a product of different instances and episodes occurring over a period of time.

This wave of communal flare sparked in December 2021. Beginning with six students from the Udupi Women's PU college protesting for weeks outside their college, where they accused the authorities of not letting them wear hijabs in the classrooms.⁷ In response to the weeks-long protests, some Hindu students belonging to First Grade College in Koppa, Chikmagalur staged a counter-protest wearing saffron scarves. Their main point of advocacy was to let them wear these saffron scarves in retaliation to Muslim girls wearing Hijab as part of their religious obligation.⁸ One after another, the hijab controversy started to sprinkle in other colleges, and in the very first week of the issue, around three colleges in Karnataka were already victims of this religious division. A right-wing Hindu girl who was participating in these saffron-clad protests stated:

If Muslim girl students are allowed to wear hijabs (headscarves),

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then we too will wear saffron scarves.⁹

Similarly, another protest at Byndoor Government PU college came to light where around 300+ Hindu students wore saffron scarves to college. It was reported that these anti-hijab protests were backed by Hindutva organizations as part of their right-wing political interests. Nevertheless, with everyday growing chaos, the case subsequently reached from classrooms to the Karnataka High Court. The Karnataka High court took several rounds and daily hearings to discuss what could be done about the discriminatory attitude in the prevailing political environment. During the hearings, it was made clear that while the judgment is made, the students shall avoid wearing all sorts of religious elements and should adhere to the college dress code strictly.¹⁰

In the middle of all the debate in courts, the protests and counter-protests continued and reached a level where the Karnataka government unequivocally justified the Hijab ban.¹¹ Referring to the 1983 Education Act, the court stated that under Section 133 of the Act, the government reserved the right to issue directions to schools that were deemed appropriate to maintain public order. In another news, the Advocate General of Karnataka Prabhuling Navadgi said to the court of Chief Justice Ritu Raj Awasthi, Justice JM Khazi, and Justice Krishna M Dixit, "Wearing a hijab does not necessarily constitute a practice of Islam and does not own religious essentiality. Similarly, averting it does not by any means violate the constitution."¹² Let us remember that these communal tensions over dress codes are not alien to Karnataka. Over the years, Mangaluru and Udupi have witnessed and have been part of a communal divide among students over their choices of clothing.

In due course, following the recent developments, on Friday, 25 February 2022, after 11 days of the hearing, the Karnataka High

Court reserved its verdict in the batch of petitions filed by Muslim girls on Hijab Ban. The decision awaits more hearings but the clear analysis here is that a certain segment of the society, i.e., Muslims, is a target of the growing Hindu ideology of 'Akhand Bharat' (United India) and as the case unfolds, one can clearly see the same 'creating a Hindu Rashtra' mentality and approach of Hindus in their dialect and debate. Beginning with the discussion revolving around hijab either being a religious obligation or freedom of expression itself. The Hindus, in order to justify themselves, are ultimately making this statement a basis for curbing hijab for disciplinary measures. However, the point raised here is neither about maintaining public order nor about constituting hijab as less religious but, more about a personal choice.

"If Hijab is imposed, fight against it but if Hijab is your choice, fight for it."

Ideologically Inspired Political Motives

The current state of the Indian government and its irrational but politically motivated mandate is a form of religious discrepancy. It is discriminatory and is designed to marginalise and disempower the minorities, especially Muslims. Taking an example from the above-stated events, the secular fabric of the Indian society has become fragile and is threatened to its core. This ultimately leads the readers to a simple yet a gruelling question, i.e., is the Republic of India politically motivated or constitutionally protected?

Jawahir Lal Nehru, whose secularistic credentials were unimpeachable¹³ pronounced India's amalgamated structure as one of its greatest strengths. However, the Hindu nationalists who later populated the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have propagated a starkly different view. They, by all means, view India as a majoritarian nation-state and not a



multicultural one.¹⁴ India, indeed used to be a secular state with a diverse group of cultures and identities but with the landmark victory of BJP in 2014, the country's ideological preferences have been shifted to a more right-wing side. Speaking of its secularistic credentials, India's constitution is enshrined with elements that portray the state as a secular one. Article 25 of the Indian Constitution explicitly guarantees the freedom of conscience and the freedom to profess, practice, and propagate religion to all citizens.¹⁵ However, the violation of the Indian constitution by right-wing Hindutva outfits doesn't end on Article 25. Article 15 in the Constitution of India 1949 also broadly falls in the category, i.e., prohibits discrimination of every sort. Article 15(1) states that the state shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth, or any of them.¹⁶ Besides documented evidence of its secularism and democratic values, the BJP government is still displaying a show of laws and constitution infringement.

However, the democratic smokescreen that India has adopted is slowly fading away. Strengthened by its routine targeting of minorities, the extremist forces, which were formerly considered marginal, are now moving their violent ideology towards the mainstream, inciting racial hatred in a bid to change India's constitutionally protected secular republic into a Hindu state. This hate is fuelled by Hindu nationalism, backed by authorities, and carried out with impunity. It has penetrated so deeply in the Indian state that it is slowly eating the democratic skin of the Republic of India and is raising doubts about India's future as to whether a secular state or a state with fragments of extremism.

Conclusion

The holocaust did not begin with the gas chambers, it began with hate speech, with propaganda, with the dehumanization of a certain class to perpetrate or tolerate violence against them. The state of Muslims in today's India is no less than what Hitler created for Nazis in the early 20th century. During the anti-Semitism drive, the Nazi's ideology was to eliminate the Jews as essential to the purification and salvation of the people of Germany.¹⁷ So is the ideology of BJP's Hindutva aimed at creating a Hindu Rashtra. The Hindutva movement and the Narendra Modi government are aiming to marginalise Muslims and sever the communal ties that bind the country together. The Indian government is attempting to eliminate and disenfranchise Muslims to construct an exclusivist Hindu Rashtra out of a multi-faith citizenry.¹⁸ However, India's historical precedent, as well as the constitution in its current form, provide for strong protection of its Muslim minority through instruments such as the Muslim Personal Law and fundamental rights available to all Indians regardless of faith. However, the development of Hindu nationalism has jeopardised India's secularity and its identity as a liberal democracy that ensures religious liberties without establishing religion and defends individuals' fundamental rights.¹⁹ Already, India has dropped from 41 on the democracy index in 2018 to 53 in 2020.²⁰ It is currently known as an electoral autocracy and the Hindutva movement is eroding India's communal peace and democratic nature by attempting to marginalise Muslims. In a nutshell, the destiny of Indian Muslims is inextricably linked to the fate of secularism and democracy in India and neither one of them is protected at the moment.

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