

An analysis of the narrowing space of secularism in India and its ramifications in the region

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Abstract

Indian society was diverse and complex in nature from its emergence and was marred with communal conflicts. Hence, it was inevitable for the founding fathers of the Indian state to adopt an inclusive political system based on democracy, secularism, and pluralism to achieve unity in diversity. Due to the self-centric mindset of succeeding politicians who began to drift away from these ideals, secularism has been declining for a long time. The appalling political behaviour of the ruling elite has been enlarging the gulf between the theory and practice of secularism since the rule of the Indian National Congress, starting from the demise of Nehru. It has been damaging the idea of composite cultural nationalism by narrowing its societal space. That practice has also created an ideological vacuum filled by religious nationalism over time and reached its culminating point when Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came into power in India. This article analytically explores the consequences of the narrowing space of secularism and the resultant rise of Hindutva. It also delineates the destabilization of the domestic environment and an alarming regional security situation affected by the emerging extremist ideology in place of secularism in India.

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1. Introduction

The study of Indian society shows that it had diversity which time and again aggravated communal conflicts during the freedom struggle for the protection of their identities and interests. In this context, the religious communities were more sensitive and had a long competing *history* in the past. Aware of the communal sensitivities, Congress tried to create 'unity among the diversities by establishing a political system based on democratic principles, inclusive pluralism, and the Indian brand of secularism or composite cultural nationalism. Indian secularism was not akin to the European notion of secularism, especially concerning the 'separation of state and religion'; instead, it was a combination of the philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi and Nehru's idea of composite cultural nationalism. This concept was one of the three competing ideas of nationalism presented by Hindu ideologues since the time of the Indian national movement.

After independence, the first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, and his cabinet successfully incorporated secularism into the Indian constitution so that people of all religions lived together with unity. Though under various articles, India constitution provided with guarantees to protect minorities, especially religious communities, there were some contradictions, i.e., the contrast between articles 44 and that of 48. Article 44 describes equal treatment for all religions whereas article 48 projects the 'Sanctity of Cow', indirectly giving particular respect to Hindu mythology. Such contradictory and confusing points created space for varying interpretations of secularism, making it easier for Hindutva Ideologues to make space for themselves (Rahman, 2017). That is why dissatisfaction of minorities became visible in the 60s, whereas later scenarios of politics presented a grim picture due to the *Desecularization phenomenon* (Ghosh, 2012).

As the decline of secularism did not happen in a day, it took a long time to reach its lowest level. It was started by the Congress leadership that began to play a religious card in politics for electoral gains. To begin with, Prime Minister Indra Gandhi capitalized on her politics exploiting religious differences among various communities while ignoring secular ideas blatantly. Rajiv Gandhi adopted a more tainted policy about secularism when he became prime minister following his mother's death in 1984 (Kumar, 2017). By violating India's traditions of secularism through their practice, Indra and Rajiv Gandhi opened the door to religious nationalism. Hindu nationalists started blaming the Congress Party for following pseudo-secularism for the appeasement of minorities at the cost of the Hindu majority. Nevertheless, the Congress party started using religion in politics by cultivating the concept of Ram Rajya; the BJP accelerated its speed, catapulting itself to the forefront by playing the religious card publicly in politics. This religious politicization started promoting religious nationalism and helped it reach the highest level when *Babri Masjid* was demolished in Ayodhya on December 6, 1992.

Meanwhile, RSS (*Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*) was expanding its access in all the segments

of society as a parent organization and was spawning Sangh Parivar (a family of organizations in the Hindutva fold) from the decade of 1960s (Palshikar, 2015). During the 1980s and 1990s, its ideology known as '*Hindutva*' came to the mainstream as a social and political movement to fill the vacuum of secular ideology (Bhatt & Parita, 2000). In those decades, the BJP started achieving unprecedented electoral success with the active support of the RSS at the cost of secular ideology. As the party had only two seats in the lower house of the Parliament in 1984, its number increased to 88 in 1989, 120 in 1991, 161 in 1996, and 178 in 1998, and it made a giant leap to win 282 seats in the 2014 elections. After this victory, it began implementing Hindutva's fundamental political and cultural agenda. As its modus operandi, the Modi-led BJP openly held an anti-secular stance; however, it avoided indulging in more controversial issues in its first tenure. Later, politics of polarization, being the primary strategy of RSS, was followed forcefully by raising divisive issues, disturbing the communal harmony, disturbing old social fabric, producing myths, creating Islamophobia, constructing a *Ram Temple*, abrogating article 370 to end the special autonomy given to Kashmiris, and application of the uniform civil code to deprive the Muslims of their '*Personal Laws*'. The violence against minorities (Muslims and Christians) increased in scope and intensity.

In short, the Indian state has vitiated its features like secularism and pluralism because its ruling parties have gone away from the basic ideology of early leadership. To find the impact of the phenomenon on the diverse and already fragile social fabric of Indian society and the consequences of the emerging expansionist mindset on the regional situation, the light has been thrown on the events spurring communal riots and religious fervour among the Hindus during BJP rule with the beginning of the processes of Hindutva expansion and of receding of secularism with equally increasing the level of desecularization. It is pertinent to mention that the term desecularization as counter-secularization reflecting the reaction against forces and trend of secularization (Berger, 2013, p. 06); is a process of social change including (a) *a close relationship between previously secularized institutions and religious norms*; (b) *a resurrection of religious beliefs and practices*, and (c) *a return of religion (derma in context of India) to the public sphere*, (d) *a resurgence of religious content in all the subsystems*, and (e) *religious inspired socio-political changes in various fields of society* (Karpov, 2010).

After Berger's new conception of desecularization, many western sociologists and political analysts have presented their studies, focusing on American, Russian, or European countries' desecularization. However, little effort has been made to explore the phenomenon in Asian countries, particularly the Indian desecularizing process, which is quite evident now (Alam *et al.*, 2022). This article attempts to cover the lag. What to talk of ignoring the decline of secularisation, the general impression of the Indian state is still taken as a secular and pluralistic state by most Western scholars, which is untrue and fake, firstly due to the narrowing space of secularism (Ansari, 2016). Secondly, the political culture of India has now been entirely and thoroughly infected with religious intolerance, casteism, and communalism (Fatima, 2017). Though, it is a reality of the day, yet every Indian ruling party remains in denial and is known to reject any criticism even on international forums including the UNO.

2. Nature of Indian society

India is a land of diversities inhabiting different groups concerning caste, creed, religion, tribe, language and regional culture, etc. Uberoi (1993, p. 45) has rightly described that Indian society is 'regionally diverse (north/south/east/west), communally differentiated (Hindu/ Muslim/ Sikh/ Christian/ Buddhist, etc.), socially stratified (in terms of caste or class), and culturally discrete'. Similarly, Srinivas (1965) states that discussing values and various features of any society is complex, and the difficulty increases manifold when one discusses India, where society has different characteristics and values based on religion, caste, creed, ethnicity, and region. The social structure, religion, kinship, and regional variation of the Indian society help comprehend its diversified fabric and, consequently, the need for secularism in the state. A summary of significant diversity is given to understand the nature of society. Its cleavages changed the course of politics of the country since its inception in 1947.

2.1. Religious diversity

The most dynamic factor of Indian society is religion. For centuries religion was an integral part of all aspects of Indian's lives (Mandelbaum, 1996). In the colonial era, separate representation in elected bodies was given to the Hindus and the Muslims due to divergent interests and identities based on religion. Religion was the main reason for partitioning the subcontinent into India and Pakistan. It is still part and parcel of individual life and significantly affects the Indian psyche and political structure (Das, 2000). India's diversity in terms of religion, as shown by the census of 2011, presents that there are eight religious' groups within India; Hinduism is the main religion of 80.5 per cent, and Muslims are the second major group comprising 13.4% of the total population. Christians 2.3%, Sikhs 1.9%, Buddhists 0.8%, Jains 0.4%, and other religions (Parsis, Jews etc.) are 0.6% of the Indian population, while 0.1% of the population has no religion (Ghosh, 2012, p. 394). The major religions also have further subgroups (Deol, 1995). All these religions are bifurcated into two groups, i.e., the indigenous religion is Hinduism. At the same time, Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism are its modified offshoots, whereas Islam, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism are the religions that have been introduced into India by outsiders (Mandelbaum, 1996, p. 525). However, each religion has an indelible imprint on its followers because the culture and way of life of all segments of Indian society have deep religious roots (Venkatesh & Dholakia, 1995). Even the caste system of Hindu social life is based on their religious beliefs and practices according to the views of some scholars; that is why the caste system has always remained part of Hinduism (Béteille, 1991).

2.2. Caste system

The other salient feature of Indian society is its caste system. The statutory commission of 1930, highlighting the caste system in India, stated in its report that every Hindu belongs to the caste of his/her parents and could not change the caste by acquiring wealth, a high post, or any prestigious thing, etc. This caste system is based on a fourfold social structure (*varna*) showing

varying societal statuses and functions. According to *Purusasukta*, these four social groups are *Brahmana*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaishya*, and *shudra*. In the beginning, there were functional distinctions among the *varnas*, but it got rigid, and ultimately social mobility within the *varnas* became closed in the *post-Vedic* period. In the British era, the caste system was interlinked with the class system due to new landholding. Then in the pre-independence period, the caste was politicized without vanishing the *varnas* under the impact of politics (Ghosh, 2012, p. 383). From these *varnas* gradually emerged hundreds of *Jati* through the local division of functions and social stratification of society (Srinivas, 1965, p. 03). It is an ancient legacy of the society which linked closely with Hinduism and still prevails in the society. The *Brahmanas* were the elite, learned, and landed class. The *Kshatriyas* were the warriors, the *Vaishyas* were the traders, and the *Shudras* included the menials and the lowest class (Raina, 2004). So, there has been an established hierarchy in society among various castes. According to descending order, Brahmin is considered at the top, and the *Shudra* falls at the lowest place in the social order (Rangarajan, 2000).

2.3. Linguistic diversity

India is also a linguistically heterogeneous land as there are 1,652 languages according to the Indian Census of 1961 (Chaudhary, 2004). As per the 2001 census, 122 official languages (22 scheduled + 100 non-scheduled languages) have been entered in the eighth schedule of the Indian Constitution and 234 mother tongues. Later, four more languages were added to the eighth schedule under the 92nd constitutional amendment of 2003 (Ghosh, 2012, p. 389). However, almost 38 mother tongues still need to be included in the scheduled language groups (Stern, 2003). As far as local languages are concerned, a single ethnic area or a state may have many languages. For instance, Nagaland has 19 languages and dialects (Deol, 1995). This multilingualism developed gradually using a series of conquest through past centuries. The amalgamation of a wide variety of languages and imposition of the language of the ruling group appeared as an official language, mainly English (Ross, 2016). Overall, Hindi is spoken by more or less 400 million people, English by the elite class of Indians and Sanskrit, which is claimed to be of great cultural and religious significance for the Hindus, is hardly spoken by anyone (Stern, 2003). As the linguistic differences and sentiments became more assertive and turbulent over time, the Indian government had to reorganize the first separate state based on a language in 1953, 14 in 1956, and further states were established in 1960 and 1966. There are more demands for the formation of new states based on languages. Thus, the language is an active and forceful dynamic of Indian society (Ghosh, 2012, p. 393).

2.4. Tribal divide

Tribes are ethnic groups that constitute 8.1 per cent of the Indian population, as per the 2001 census (Ghosh, 2012), and maintain their distinctive characteristics in terms of language, dialect, ritual, social structure, way of life, and culture. The tribal peoples of India are also known as *Adivasis*, which means ‘Indigenous People’ or ‘Original inhabitants of a given

region.’ Most of the population of the tribes is found in Chhattisgarh, Orissa, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, North-eastern states, and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (Kumbhkar, 2010). Tribes are backward groups and have the lowest status in Indian society. Their backwardness is generally due to geographical and cultural isolation, lack of opportunities, lack of facilities and resources, political representation, etc. Being always the disadvantaged group of society, the Indian tribes remained irritated and unsatisfied with the governments, (Paul & Milcah, 2019).

Consequently, they started many spontaneous movements during the British Raj. The Indian government has also been facing such unrest on the part of tribes. Some tribal insurgent groups like the Naga National Council (NNC), National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), Mizo National Front (MNF), People’s Liberation Army of Manipur (PLA), All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF), United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), etc. also demand separate statehood and even secession from India (Ghosh, 2012, p. 399).

2.5. Regional diversity

Regarding regional diversity, most countries differ in many ways, especially in socioeconomic features, culture, ethnicity, climate, etc. (Roth, 1995). India also is not an exception in this sense. Being a vast country, having a geographic area of 329 million acres (Cheema, 2011), it also has diverse regional and sub-regional variations (Kumar, 2001). It “can be divided into regions differing along geographic, climatic, economic, linguistic or ethnic lines and generally assumed to differ culturally” (Hofstede, 1980).

3. Methodology and theoretical framework

The research is a qualitative study, based on historical observations taken from published and electronic material, keeping the socio-political dimensions of the society in mind. As once a powerful ruling party and proponent of secularism, Congress lost the confidence of the masses due to its deteriorating ideological image and poor performance (Varshney, 1993). This loss of confidence in the Congress party created an ideological and organizational vacuum in Indian politics. The vacuum ultimately was filled by BJP with the support of RSS due to its “ideological cohesion, organizational discipline” and the “class-based mobilization” (Bose, 2009).

Many scholars have attempted to explain, why only Hindutva has occupied the vacuum left by secularism in Indian society. Why not any other ideology? Many scholars mentioned that secularization stressed the exclusion of religion from the public domain, while Indian society was inherently religious. That incompatibility resulted, by way of a reaction, in an increase in support for religious nationalism and extremist religious organizations like RSS. They also view religion and modernity as opposing forces.

Consequently, religion has also been repressed with the pace of modernization. However, Hansen (1999) does not attribute the development of religious fanaticism to the repression of religion in modern life; instead, he argues that religious nationalism prevails in India because of its capacity to adapt and accommodate modernization processes. Religion found new avenues of expression, such as mass media and created new spheres of influence in modern life (Hansen, 1999). During the theoretical discussion of the rise of Hindu Nationalism in India, two factors are pointed out. Firstly, threat perception created by Pseudo-secularist policies among the Hindu community caused them to react by turning to the ideology of Hindutva for security and identity. Secondly, it strengthens the appeal of Hindu Nationalism, presenting its ability to make India prosperous through economic and technological modernization. In other words, the politicization of religion in India results from the simultaneous anxieties and opportunities created with the help of modern technology and economic progress (Bose, 2009).

4. Need for secularism as a unifying force

In this context of the diverse nature of Indian society, the religious communities have been sensitive and have a long competing history in the past. For example, the whole freedom movement against British rule mainly revolved around Hindu versus Muslim nationalism besides other factors. Ultimately, the movement culminated in the partitioning of the Indo-Pak subcontinent, which most scholars call a partition of civilization. Having such variations in society, on the one hand, and resilient communities, on the other hand, the system based on secularism was desperately needed for the unity of the state. Another view for the following secularism is that India, the only Hindu state, could not expect many advantages in international relations based on its 'Hindu' identity. So, the constitutional declaration of secularism by the Indian government was and would always remain public because of specific political requirements; and not by choice or a commitment to secularism (Rahman, 2017).

Jawaharlal Nehru, when he became the Prime Minister of India, realized that in a country strikingly divided into communal differences of fundamental nature based on caste, creed, religion, ethnicity, regionalism etc. He viewed that only secularism could work as a tremendous cementing force for the diverse communities of India and make them grow together in unity based on equality, fraternity and justice (Ali, 2004). Thus, Nehru and B.R. Ambedkar, along with other advocates of secular nationalism, won the debate in favour of cultural secularism to create a conducive environment for 'composite culture' during the drafting of the Indian Constitution, despite the pressure exerted by the right-wing leadership of the Congress for the defence of *Ayurveda* (Hindu traditions) (Jaffrelot, 2004). It is important to note that Hindu nationalists, at that time, had no representation in the Constituent Assembly.

4.1. Indian secularism according to views of Gandhi and Nehru

Aware of the communal sensitivities, the leadership of the Congress tried to create unity among the diversity in India by establishing a political system based on democratic principles and the

Indian brand of secularism or cultural nationalism. This secularism was not akin to the European notion of secularism, especially about the 'separation of state and religion'; instead, it was a combination of the religious philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi and Nehru's ideology of composite cultural nationalism.

Elaborating on his views about secularism Gandhi himself says that 'for me every...activity is governed by what I consider my religion and 'I cannot conceive of politics as divorced from religion' (Gandhi, 1958, p. 292). Here he refers to religion as dharma, the truth, morality, or spirituality, which cannot be separated from politics (Gandhi, 1958, p. 74). At the same time, he stresses that "if I were a dictator, religion and state would be separate, and he again asserts that I swear by my religion, I will die for it. Nevertheless, it is my personal affair. The state has nothing to do with it. The state would look after my secular welfare...but your or my religion. That is everybody's personal concern!" (Gandhi, 1958, p. 190). Gandhi further says, "the state should undoubtedly be secular. Everyone in it should be entitled to profess his religion without... hindrance" (Marbaniang, 2009). In short, Gandhi desired that the state seeks guidance from religion in public affairs, but it should not intervene in the private religious affairs of individuals.

Moreover, Gandhi viewed secularism from a religious perspective in terms of '*Sarva Dharma Sambhav*' (tolerance for all religions). He was convinced that religion and the state are inseparable. If the state abandons the religion, it will encourage the demoralization of the citizens. Therefore, the state's policy must be pluralistic with equal respect for all religions (Sharma, 2017).

Secularism, when broadly described in a political context refers to a system where the state has nothing to do with the religion since the relations of secularism and religion are mutually exclusive (Waterhouse, 1908). Nehru (1962) was a proponent of the western form of secularism based on the separation of religion and the state in his earlier days. As he wrote in his autobiography, if India is supposed to be a religious country above everything else; the spectacle of what is ... at any rate organized religion in India or elsewhere, has filled me with horror. Masud (2003) also considers him to be the first politician in India to favour European secularism. He writes: While Mahatma Gandhi and Maulana Azad spoke of secularism from the perspective of religion, Pandit Nehru was the first in the sub-continent to accept the western concept of secularism.

Similarly, Sharma (2017, p. 434) says that as far as, Gandhi stressed the '*Sarva Dharma Sambhav*' which refers to equal respect for all religions or equality of all religions and religious pluralism. Nehru was more inclined towards the European concept of secularism, representing the pluralism of culture and modernity of the enlightenment in India. From 1920 onwards, Nehru's view that all human affairs should be rescued from religious dominance became more evident. Throughout the Independence movement, Nehru kept on professing that it was wrong for religion to interfere in politics. According to Friedlander (2016, p. 74), Nehru's view on

secularism was reflected in the Hindi concept of '*dharma nirpeksha*' which highlights a sense of "not being aligned with any religion." Though Nehru always fought against all forms of communalism, especially religious communalism, he was not against religion. Explaining the point in 1961, Nehru said, 'We talk about a secular state in India. Finding a good word in Hindi for 'secular' takes work. Some people think it means something opposed to religion. That is not correct. It means that it is a state which honours all faiths equally and gives them equal opportunities (Gopal, 1980). However, later practice of secularism shows various unequal measures in this context.

In short, it was the visionary leadership of Nehru that held India together throughout the early turbulent years of the country (Cox, 2013, p. 76). It was his secular vision that helped maintain the 'rule of law' in a democracy which was continually in danger of falling into the 'rule of people' (Mangalwadi, 1997).

4.2. Secularism under Indian Constitution

The constitution highlights the secular feature of the Indian state having no official religion of the polity. Though the 42nd amendment incorporated the term 'secular' (1976), its spirit has always existed in the constitution. Besides the preamble, the constitution possesses several provisions such as Articles 14-16, 25-30, etc, inserted in Part III and Part IV for religious freedom in India (Ghosh, 2012). Since secularism in India does not refer to the complete separation of religion and state. The proper domain of religion and the nature of secularism is clarified by inserting three fundamental right types: positive, negative, and neutral in the Indian Constitution. The positive one is freedoms like religious freedom based on Articles 25, 26, and 30, which deals with the freedom of faith, practice, and propagation of one's religion and to manage religious affairs. Articles 15(1), 15(4), and 25 etc. highlight the negative aspect of prohibiting discrimination based on religion. Similarly, Article 17 abolishes untouchability; Article 29(2) protects the interests of minorities. The Neutral aspect is portrayed by Art. 27, 290 (A) and 28(1) (2) (3), etc, which stress that 'no religious instructions be imparted through the institutions run or aided by the state'.

However, the constitution also contains contradictions; for example, article 44 projects secularism as a phenomenon that would ultimately do away with religion in the personal lives of its citizens, while Art. 48 protect the sanctity of Cow indirectly providing dominance of Hinduism. Hence secularism in the Indian context also has some contradictory and confusing points, which create room for varying interpretations of secularism (Rahman, 2017).

Though India has a secular constitutional framework to maintain 'unity in the diversity' on the land of all conceivable religions and different ways of life (Fatima, 2017), and Supreme Court under Article 32 and High Courts by Article 226 is made guarantor and protector of the fundamental rights of the citizens yet contemporary scenario of politics based on the politicization of religion, presents a grim picture in this regard (Ghosh, 2012).

4.3. The practice of secularism in Congress rule

The founders of India considered the philosophy of secularism as a vanguard to establish inclusive plurality in Indian society keeping in mind the deep-rooted fear of communalism. That fear turned into conviction when Mahatma Gandhi was murdered in 1948 by Nathuram Godse a member of RSS (Jaffrelot, 2019). So, the first Congress government, in that environment, tried to maintain a balance among religious communities of India following the idea of secularism without unduly favouring any one group (Vaishnav, 2019). During the 60s, the secular constitutional model of India remained in practice and seemed to work reasonably well. Religious minorities, including Muslims, had reasonable representation in the union and provinces elected assemblies (Jaffrelot & Kumar, 2009). Though there were communal protests and even riots at that time, the causes of discontent were mainly the demand for cultural rights, educational admissions, job quotas, and protection of personal laws, etc. (Ghosh, 2012, p. 396). To combat communalism, Nehru advised Indian politicians that religion should not be used for political gain. Also, Section 123 of the Representation of the Peoples Act of 1951 was enforced in the country and forbade politicians from campaigning on religious symbols for electoral gains (The Representation of People Act, 1951).

Starting from the general election of 1967, the Congress Party began to vacillate from one religious' community to another covertly for electoral interests by moving away from secular politics. To begin with, Prime Minister Indra Gandhi, who began to capitalize on religious differences among various communities while ignoring secular ideas wilfully. Among other violations of secularism, the recognition of Aligarh Muslim University as a minority institution (Shaban, 2018); the promotion of militant Sikhs like Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and others to destabilize the Akali Dal in Punjab; and the inauguration of the Bharat Mata Mandir, a temple constructed in 1983 for appeasement of the *Vishva Hindu Parishad* (VHP); as a few to mention to consolidate her vote bank. Rajiv Gandhi adopted a tainted policy about secularism when he became prime minister allowing his mother's death in 1984. His point of view about secularism was, as Rajiv once said, that too secular India does not deserve the glory of its civilization and the glorious future (Kumar, 2017). His political performance was poor and objectionable. Hindu nationalists started to blame the Congress Party for having pseudo-secularism due to mishandling the state's political affairs, such as the furore over the Shah Bano Case and Uniform Civil Code. On the other hand, the secular elements criticized the policies based on the appeasement of Hindus for electoral mileage. Despite much criticism, Rajiv Gandhi kept eroding secularism's traditions by opening the door for religious nationalism.

The leadership of the Indian National Congress was traditionally known to repeat its commitment to secular nationalism. However, in practice, it has often invoked religious sentiments for its vested political interests in the wake of Nehru's period. As a departure from India's secular tradition, this tendency has grown over time. The increasing gulf between the theory and practice of secularism, firstly, raised many questions about India's long-standing commitment to the idea of "unity in diversity" (Gottlob, 2007). Secondly, it helped the rise of

Hindutva and increased Communal violence both in frequency and intensity in India. Apart from un-reported incidents, some major events of communal and caste-based riots under Congress and its coalition rule of UPA in India can be mentioned as Bihar, Ranchi Riots 1967; Ahmadabad, Gujarat Communal Riots 1969; Bhiwandi Communal riots 1970; Jamshedpur, Bihar Communal Riots 1979; Moradabad, Uttar Pradesh Communal Riots 1980; Nellie, Assam Communal Riots 1983; Bombay and Bhiwandi Maharashtra 1984; Delhi, Sikh Communal Riots 1984; Ahmadabad Gujarat, 1985; Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, 1987; The Varanasi Communal Riots 1989; Bhagalpur Communal Riots 1989; Bombay Communal (Babri Masjid) Riots 1992; Gujarat Train riots 2002; Aligarh Communal Riots 2006; Odisha riots against Christians 2008, Assam Communal Riots 2012; Muzaffarnagar, UP Communal Riots 2013 (MRGI, 2017) to name but a few. No doubt most of the events of abuse and discrimination of minorities, except for major events, remained less discussed until recently as they had no apparent backing from the governments of that era (Razia, 2015).

4.4. The rise of Hindu nationalism

History shows that the Hindu nationalists held roots back to reformist movements such as the Brahma Samaj (1828) and the Arya Samaj (1875) etc. These extremist groups were worried about the growing influence of Christianity and Islam, under which Hinduism, in their opinion, would gradually be diminished, at least in the subcontinent (Hansen, 1999). To protect Hindu culture, Hindu Mahasabha, under the leadership of Madan Mohan Malaviya, first appeared in 1915. Then more extremist Hindu organization, RSS, was established by Keshav Baliram Hedgewar in 1925, which was initially a volunteer organization. In 1951, RSS helped establish its political wing, the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS), whose electoral progress remained limited during the 1950s and 1960s. However, RSS itself was taking deep-rooted connections in the Hindu community through the establishment of new Sangh Parivar groups such as the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), a right-wing student organization; the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS), a trade union; and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), etc. The period of emergency rule enforced by Indira Gandhi proved a turning point for the electoral success of the Jana Sangh alliance in 1977. It was the first time in Indian history that an alliance of Hindu nationalists came into power in New Delhi for a short period. In the 1980s, the BJS reorganized itself into Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) under the leadership of Atal Bihari Vajpayee (Chhibber & Verma, 2018).

In the decades of the 80s and 90s, an organized cultural campaign with modern techniques and social services movements was launched to acquire mass support for Hindutva ideology and its agenda. On the other hand, Muslims were projected as an enemy of Hindus for creating threat perception, and the Hindutva narrative was instilled into public consciousness through popular cultural productions, i.e., films, cultural stages, etc. (Murty, 2009). By infusing the concept of Hindutva across the Hindu community, the RSS was using its supervising influence to highlight and conflate the cultural, religious, and political aspects of Hindu identity (Rajagopal, 2001). In short, religious nationalism or Hindutva became a mainstream ideology

in society, irrespective of the party in central government. This sustained campaign of ethno-religious mobilization by the Sangh Parivar and RSS paid many benefits to the BJP, by which it made its political footprint in India.

4.5. The role of BJP in eroding secularism

Whereas the Congress party started using religion in politics by cultivating the concept of Ram Rajya, the BJP kept accelerating despite; there exist many secular provisions in the constitution. From day first, BJP or its coalition, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), catapulted itself to the forefront by playing the religious card in politics under the influence of RSS. Whereas the politicization of religion was narrowing the space of secularism, it was also strengthening religious nationalism that reached its culminating point with a campaign for the demolition of Babri Masjid in Ayodhya on December 6, 1992. During those decades, the Hindu community of Gujrat, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and other provinces were mobilized by Hindutva extremists against Muslims and Christians. It brought out communal violence, such as Hindu-Sikh clashes in Punjab, violence against Buddhists in Bihar, attacks on Christians in Orissa and Kerala, especially the Godhra train fire incident of 2002 in Gujrat, and the violent attacks of 2007 in Kandhamal District of Orissa (Ghosh, 2012). Exploiting the compromised position of Congress on secularism, the BJP's coalition, National Democratic Alliance (NDA), under PM Vajpayee, reached power in New Delhi in the late 1990s. The party's first two stints were short-lived. However, starting in 1999, it completed its full term. During the period of the coalition government, though the BJP was compelled to avoid publicly taking up the Hindutva agenda, it certainly did not disavow it (Friedlander, 2016).

Meanwhile, under the chief ministership of Modi in Gujarat, an organized pogrom against Muslims took place. More than 2000 people, mainly Muslims were murdered. Modi's image as a hardliner Hindu nationalist in the wake of the worst communal riots in Gujarat in 2002 (Venkatesan, 2004) not only broadened the electoral base of BJP among Hindu nationalists but also made him a first-rank BJP leader who remained the Chief Minister of Gujarat from 2001 to 2014 (The Reuters, December 20, 2012).

What was the cause of triggering the 2002 pogrom is debatable as two fact-finding commissions, one by the regional BJP government and the other by the central government, have come to the contradictory conclusions that the fire was a conspiracy or an accident (Sarkar, 2002).

In 2014, the BJP came into power in the centre under Modi's leadership for the first time. Though during its first tenure, the party avoided indulging in more controversial issues like the construction of the temple in Ayodhya, the legislation on a uniform civil code, and the abolition of Article 370 to end the autonomous status of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), yet victimization of the Muslims by extremist elements became a routine matter. For example, groups of Hindutva vigilantes started to suppress minorities such as Muslims, Christians, etc., with the state apparatus's connivance working as a form of cultural policing (Jaffrelot, 2019).

Since coming into power, the BJP has been adopting two-prong strategies and trying to balance the two conflicting approaches. To maintain its positive international image, it has been continuing with the secular image of India, having a secular constitution in place since then. On the other hand, it has been pursuing its hard-line posture and policies to retain its Hindu support. So, it is easy to comprehend the deteriorating situation of minorities and violence in India despite its constitutional secularism. The situation is getting worse with every passing day as the radical elements of the RSS in the garb of Hindu nationalism are imposing new laws, such as the ban on cow slaughter etc, which directly target the religious sentiments and social status of minorities (Rahman, 2017).

The second term of BJP won based on anti-Muslim and anti-Pakistan rhetoric in the general election of 2019, to create a sense of insecurity for capturing the Hindu vote bank. Thus, a false flag operation of Pulwama was staged in Feb. 2019 and had to face disgrace after a prompt response from Pakistan Air Force. In that hyper-tense situation, the political rise of the BJP, in its second term, boosted the Hindutva agenda. It is evident that Prime Minister Narendra Modi and 62 per cent of his ministers in 2020 belong to both the RSS and BJP, which shows irrefutable proof of the close connections between the two organizations (The Hindustan Times, October 25, 2020). The erosion of democracy, and disregard for the Constitution in India, did not happen in a single moment, or because of a single party, yet RSS inspired BJP Government, under the leadership of Modi, has played a central role in the collusion of Hindutva ideologues, plaintiff court, biased police, violent groups of Sangh Parivar and vigilante justice.

4.6. Impact of Hindutva on Indian society

In contrast to secularism, Hindutva is a violent ideology intended to create Hindu supremacy, a deeply exclusionist outlook, and the leading cause of communal tensions (Ramachandran, 2020). Violence is its core belief for establishing a Hindu *Rashtra* by reconverting Christians and Muslims into Hinduism, receding their citizenship, or pushing them out of India (Savarkar, 1923, p. 113). Hindutva-inspired members of Sangh Parivar, being indoctrinated with such ideology, are not only violent extremists, but they are alleged terrorists involved in terrorist attacks such as Jalna in 2004; Malegaon in 2006 and 2008; the Samjhauta Express, Ajmer Dargah, and Mecca Masjid in 2007; Modasa in 2008 and other unreported incidents which are higher in number according to Indian journalists. While a 28% increase has been noticed in communal violence inflicted by terrorist organizations, including *Bajrang Dal*, *Shiv Sena*, etc., from 2014 to 2017 (Marshall, 2004), the frequency and intensity of such riots have currently grown.

Hindutva vigilantism has now been frequently appearing in many ways. The vigilante groups have attacked Muslims accusing them of seducing and marrying Hindu girls to convert them, labelling this action as *love jihad*. So, an organized movement of *Gharwapsi* (homecoming) for converting Muslims and Christians to the Hindu faith was started to avenge the *love jihad*.

Hindutva activists formed an organization named *Gau Raksha Dal* to protect cows. These militias keep watch on roads to ensure that Muslims are not taking cows for slaughter. The group is also linked with Sangh Parivar like the *Bajrang Dal*, a violent group created in 1984 to launch the Ayodhya movement (Jaffrelot, 2017). The *Gau Raksha Dal* has followed extrajudicial methods of enforcing its will, leading to a rise in vigilante justice, lynching, and mob violence (The Washington Post, October 31, 2018). From 2015 to 2018, more than 46 Muslims were lynched to death by *Gau Raksha Dal*. 1 620 reported outbreaks of violence against Christians labelled as the 'Pope's soldiers' between January 2014 and March 2018 (Open Doors, 2019).

Though Muslims and Christians were the prime targets of violent groups yet this pool of killing is now being expanded to Hindus who are critics of Hindutva, including the killing of an author, Narendra Dabholkar, Govind Pansare (a vocal critic of Hindutva), M.M Kalburgiand, Gauri Lankesh (Critics of Modi led BJP Government). Responsibility for all these incidents is allegedly put on Hindutva groups because those people were hurting Hindu sentiments according to Hindu activists (Iqbal, 2019).

Regarding anti-Muslim violence, a joint report by UK-Based Minority Rights Groups International (MRG) and Mumbai-based Centre for Study of Society and Secularism of Mumbai said that more than 700 incidents of communal violence occurred in India in 2017 that killed 86 and injured 2,321 persons excluding unreported cases (Bhowmick, 2017). In most of the violent incidents and major terror attacks, the politicians, the police, and the courts allegedly remained in collusion with culprits to walk the perpetrators free (The Hindu, August 14, 2019). Those criminals are not only acquitted in such cases but have also been rewarded. As Pragya Thakur, an accused in the 2008 Malegaon blasts case, is yet to be cleared of any charges under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, the BJP gave her a ticket to contest the 2019 general election and also appointed her to a parliamentary defence panel but had to cancel it later on due to protest of opposition (The Wire, November 22, 2020). Under Modi's regime, the Indian curriculum is being changed to radicalize future generations of Hindus, thus providing a continuous supply of extremists willing to die and kill for their ideology. Moreover, more than 25000 Hindu seminaries organized by RSS across India are propagating hate and intolerance to its approximately 5-6 million students (Iqbal, 2019).

During the 2nd tenure of BJP, the constitutional autonomy of Jammu and Kashmir was abrogated; seven million troops began annihilating Kashmiri Muslims to crush their demand for the right of self-determination with impunity; a new citizenship Act has been passed to change the demography of Muslims; agricultural reforms have triggered unrest among farmers; not to mention the protests of doctors, students, women and Dalits who fight for their rights. However, the crackdown on freedom of expression, crushing of dissent in legal cases, and personal threats against journalists and media have made it evident that there is 'the end of Indian idea' based on equality, justice, liberty, fraternity, etc. This situation also illustrates how far the state has strayed from its founding ideals (Krishnan, 2021).

4.7. Impact of Hindutva on regional peace and security

Hindutva has an expansionist agenda, and its affiliates believe in the idea of *Akhand Bharatas*; it is projected by RSS on its website including all the areas of the Empire of Chandragupta Maurya. Carrying the dream of 'greater India', BJS and Hindu extremists like Lt. Col Purohit, etc openly defended the idea of Hindu Rashtra and Akhand Bharat (Jaffrelet, 2010). Similarly, BJP leadership, such as Modi and former secretary-general of Congress, Ram Madhav, asserts that “one day [Pakistan and Bangladesh] will again, through popular goodwill, come together and Akhand *Bharat* will be created” (The Times of India, March 20, 2018). According to a few scholars like Dhamija, BJP and RSS later abandoned the idea. The fact is that most of the politicians of BJP avoided mentioning *Akhand Bharat* but the RSS and Sang Privar are still religiously pursuing the idea through their statements and activities (The Times of India, March 20, 2018). Hindutva, being a transnational movement, its members have transnational links with militant organizations of neighbouring countries such as *Bodu Bala Sena* of Sri Lanka and 969 of Myanmar and created Nepal Defence Army (NDA), *Ranabir Sena* (R.S.). The two terrorists’ organization to safeguard the only Hindu Kingdom in Nepal, Abhinav Bharat, had close links with the ousted Nepal monarchy (The Milli Gazette, January 31, 2013).

In the context of its arch-rival in the region, India has started organizing subversive activities under the supervision of Ajit Doval in Pakistan, particularly in Baluchistan, in tribal areas and Karachi, etc. Recent research mentions that India is involved in spy activities playing the ‘Bloch and Pashtun cards’ in Pakistan. It is noted that “Indian Intelligence officials, for instance, admitted in off-the-record conversations that both [the] TTP and Baloch elements seek covert military and financial support from India and have reached out to Indian officers posted in Afghanistan” (Paliwal, 2017). Paliwal further added that India is playing a proxy war against Pakistan in Afghanistan. He has also mentioned Kalbhushan Jadhav: “Whether Jadhav is indeed a spy who undertook subversive activities in Pakistan is yet to be established, but the incident raised many questions about the R&AW's operations in Pakistan and threatened to compromise India's moral high ground vis-a-vis Pakistan” (Paliwal, 2017, p. 284).

Similarly, India has reinforced the military infrastructures along the LAC (BBC News, June 16, 2020) and then issued a new Indian map showing the disputed area of Ladakh and even Aksai Chin as the union territory of India; China felt the compulsion to give immediate response to prevent illegal Indian measures. Consequently, severe confrontations with the Indian army in the Pangong Tso region and Galwan valley occurred later on various occasions (Global Times, June 17, 2020). The most concerning thing is that this is happening according to the Hindutva agenda, which has dominated the landscape of Indian politics, foreign policy, and defence strategy in the wake of the down sliding of secularism and pluralism, etc.

5. Conclusion

It is evident from the increasing communalization of Indian politics that secularism, one of the

founding ideals, is losing its place in society. Over time, the Congress party lost its confidence and popularity among the masses and created an ideological and organizational vacuum in Indian politics. The vacuum ultimately was filled, according to the theory of Thomas Bloom Hansen, by the Hindu nationalist party BJP under the leadership of Modi, with the support of the religious extremist organization RSS. However, the second landslide victory of Modi-led BJP was won only on the slogan of Hindu security and supremacy along with anti-Muslim, anti-Pakistan rhetoric, while the prosperous India factor of the said theory was missing in the election campaign as the dream of economic progress did not come true during the ^{first} term of BJP. It indicates that the Hindu identity and superiority of the theory are more attractive than the other. Hence, with a narrowing space of secular nationalism, an extreme variant of religious nationalism, i.e., Hindutva rose to prominence in the society, occupying the vacuum left by secularism.

Hindutva ideology now persists both at the social and decision-making level in the Indian government. This ideology has added fuel to the fire inciting conflicts in a troubled society. It has increased the frequency and intensity of communal riots because of its abusive and discriminatory behaviour toward minorities, especially Muslims. Thus, it has destabilized the fragile Indian social fabric and will keep on weakening India from the inside due to making more than 170 million Muslims hostile to the Modi-led BJP government. The highhandedness of the majority community and Hindu vigilante groups are not only suppressing the Muslims but also has the potential of negative repercussions for all other communities of the society. As the discourse of Sangh Parivar became more vitriolic since the dominance of Hindutva in place of secular democratic ideals over the last few decades, the situation has more deteriorated under the current Hindutva-guided regime. This government not only sowed the seeds of discord in Indian society but also destabilized the already volatile situation of peace and security in the South Asian region and the whole world. It is also worth mentioning that the increasingly volatile situation of the region may provide new opportunities for governments to support armed groups across borders, to get required results from pre-existing conflicts, and to avenge grievances.

Hindutva is an expansionist and transnational ideology. Its followers and affiliate organizations have close links with most militant groups in neighbouring countries. Such activities of Sangh Parivar are causing tensions between India and regional countries. Moreover, it seems more likely that India might engage in the Kashmir conflict with Pakistan and possibly with China on the LAC issue. As the region is already marred with many conflicts and is known to be a nuclear flashpoint in the world, the Indian aggressive security strategy guided by Hindutva has far-reaching effects on the region in particular and the world at large.

Henceforth, in the given perspective, the situation poses challenges for all concerned stakeholders from within and outside the country to play their roles effectively. For instance, Indian intellectuals and academics, the legal community, media, and civil society circles are still followers of Indian founding ideals, especially secularism. They should play a more active

role in replacing prevailing religious nationalism with secularism. They must try to minimize ongoing discrimination against minorities and weak segments of society despite the harsh opposition of *Sangh Parivar*.

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