European powers gained interest in the Indian subcontinent by the late fifteenth century. Competing powers, including the Dutch, French, Portuguese, and British, sought to control valuable resources and trade routes centered around spices, textiles, and tea. The British ultimately established their dominance in the subcontinent when British crown rule was formally declared in 1858 following a protracted nationalist uprising known as the Sepoy mutiny. The next ninety years would be especially turbulent for India and the world.

India’s largest political party, the Indian National Congress (INC), was founded shortly after 1885. The party was central to the eventual independence movement. Although the ideology was not clearly defined from the beginning, World War I seemed to be a key turning point. India volunteered over 1.5 million troops to British war efforts, which ultimately led to more than 45,000 casualties and near-bankruptcy for India. Some leaders hoped Indian war efforts would lead to increased sovereignty from the British, but that was not the case. Post-World War I angst helped transform the INC into a leading independence movement that included both prominent Muslim and Hindu voices. Jawaharlal Nehru, Mohandas Gandhi, and Muhammad Ali Jinnah were some of the key figures. Gandhi returned to India in 1915 after a short stay in South Africa following his law school graduation. His experience with racism as a new lawyer transformed his outlook and inspired him to return home to India and promote independence via peaceful resolution. Likewise, Nehru, a self-proclaimed nationalist, was also a British-educated lawyer and returned to India after completing his education. Jinnah, a Muslim and recently graduated British-educated lawyer, worked at the Bombay High Court and emphasized Hindu–Muslim unity.

Shortly after the end of World War I, growing tensions and riots between Hindus and Muslims created a sense of unease among the Muslim minority. Ideological and political differences between the groups had risen to alarming heights, as both religious groups sought to gain political and geographical representation. Amid the growing tensions, the INC firmly declared its commitment to secularism and the Gandhian idea of Satyagraha (peaceful civil disobedience). This political strategy was intended to be inclusive, but it left some Muslims, specifically the leaders of the All India Muslim League, disillusioned. Jinnah considered Satyagraha to be political anarchy. Until this point, Muslims and Hindus had been relatively united under the banner of independence, as demonstrated by the 1916 Lucknow Pact agreeing to establish quotas guaranteeing representation of Muslims and other minorities in public offices. That unity quickly started to dissipate when Jinnah resigned from the INC, citing his disagreement with Satyagraha as a strategy. Jinnah withdrew from politics for the next decade, only deciding to return after the election of 1937, after the Muslim League gained only 6.7 percent of votes and failed to win the majority in any province, including those with a Muslim majority. This event was transformational for Jinnah and overturned his long-held belief that Muslims could be protected in a majority Hindu country. Jinnah’s new political strategy was to promote a two-state solution, one for Muslims and one for Hindus. This new political strategy coincided with an awakening of Jinnah’s own Muslim identity, a shift away from his earlier sense of broad secularism. Islamic nationalist leaders (Jinnah, center, front row) after a dinner party given at the residence of Mian Bashir Ahmad, Lahore, 1940. Source: Wikimedia Commons at https://tinyurl.com/yamhi4c.

The Rise of Hindu Nationalism and Its Regional and Global Ramifications

By Andrea Malji

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Calls for independence amplified during and shortly after World War II as Indian soldiers again entered a world war fighting on behalf of the British. The Congress Party demonstrated its disapproval by initiating a campaign of civil disobedience against the British. Both Gandhi and Nehru were eventually arrested for their displays of opposition. During their incarceration, Jinnah nearly consolidated support from the Muslim community, identifying himself as the fierce protector of Muslims in the subcontinent. As World War II came to an end, riots and interreligious violence between Hindus and Muslims was occurring at alarming rates. Public animosity between Gandhi and Jinnah, in addition to inflammatory speeches by regional politicians, further inflamed communal tensions. Muslims and Hindus fought to control neighborhoods that had historically been religiously diverse. The future was increasingly unclear, and each side held the other responsible for the uncertainty.

Exhausted from World War II, the British were ready to withdraw their personnel. In 1946, one year after the war ended, nationwide elections were held with both the Muslim League, led by Jinnah, and the INC, led by Nehru, on the ballots. Compared to 1937, the Muslim League did substantially better, winning the vast majority, 90 percent, of Muslim districts. Jinnah took this result to mean widespread support for his call for a separate Muslim homeland. Upon independence, there were 565 princely states throughout India. Princely states were independent polities and not formally considered part of British India. Following the Partition, princely states were given the decision to select which country to join. For most princely states, this was a simple decision; Muslim-majority states in close proximity to Pakistan joined Pakistan, while Hindu states joined India. One leader, Maharaja Hari Singh, had difficulty deciding which side to join. Singh was a Hindu leader of the primarily Muslim state of Kashmir. Before he could make his decision, Pakistani and tribal forces attacked and occupied the princely state. The maharaja turned to India for help. India agreed to intervene on the condition that Singh sign an instrument of accession agreeing to cede Kashmir to India. The maharaja agreed, but the conflict continued until both parties went to the UN to resolve the conflict in April 1948. Both parties agreed to the resolution (Resolution 47), and eventually, a line of control was adopted, with India gaining two-thirds of Kashmir's territory (India-occupied Kashmir) and Pakistan obtaining one-third of the territory (Pakistan-occupied Kashmir). The resolution included several conditions, including withdrawal of Pakistani forces, a reduction in
Indian military presence, and an eventual plebiscite allowing Kashmiris to vote on the issue. Although both sides had objections, India and Pakistan agreed to the resolution and brought an end to the war. Despite the original agreement, the Kashmir conflict continued to be a defining issue between the two countries in the following decades. Since the initial 1947–1948 war, three additional wars have been fought over the territory, with no clear resolution in sight.

Kashmir remains a central issue for distinct reasons that reflect the founding philosophy of both countries. To Pakistan, a Muslim-majority province should be governed by a country founded as a Muslim homeland in the Indian subcontinent. To India, governing a Muslim-majority region solidifies its identity as a secular and multicultural state, and honoring the initial wishes of Singh. These conflicts are further amplified by the rise of Hindu nationalism in India and Islamic extremism in Pakistan, with both sides claiming Kashmir as an integral part of their homeland.

The Rise of Hindu Nationalism

Although Kashmir was a defining issue between India and Pakistan and Hindu and Muslims, the two-state solution failed to resolve internal tensions. Despite India's constitutional foundation as secular, strict adherence to Hindu and Islamic identities rose in popularity, specifically in the 1990s. Riots between the groups, in addition to Sikhs and Christians, occurred throughout the country from independence onward. The Kashmir conflict seemed to exacerbate the tensions. During this time, the ideology of Hindutva, a political movement embracing Hindu fundamentalism and identity, gained prominence. Likewise, Islamic extremism, within Kashmir and throughout India and Pakistan, also gained popularity.

The INC remained the primary party in power and maintained its commitment to secularism as a central tenant for nearly half a century. No party could gain enough power to challenge the INC until the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The BJP's central philosophy centers on Hindu nationalism. From 1947 to 2000, the INC held the majority of seats in parliament, with the exceptions of 1977–1979 and 1996–1999, when the BJP gained a majority of votes. The increasing popularity of the BJP was not coincidental and occurred alongside increasing tensions between Hindus and Muslims, as detailed below.

One key event that sparked tensions throughout the country was the destruction of the Babri Masjid. The Babri Masjid was a mosque built in 1528 in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, India’s largest state. Many Hindus believed the mosque was built at the birthplace of the Hindu deity Rama. The BJP, alongside the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), a militant Hindu group, called for the destruction of the mosque and the construction of a Hindu temple. In 1992, while Hindus were performing a stone-laying ceremony outside the mosque during a political rally, a group of associated militants began destroying the mosque. Nearly 150,000 other participants joined in. The destruction of the mosque marked a critical turning point in Hindu–Muslim relations within India. Following the destruction, riots broke out in Mumbai, India’s largest city, for several months. The riots eventually led to approximately 2,000 deaths, primarily Muslims.

Just as Mumbai was recovering from the 1993 riots, it experienced the worst terrorist attack in its fifty-year history. A series of car bombs detonated throughout the city and left 257 dead and over 1,000 injured. The attacks were believed to be coordinated by Muslims involved in the Indian criminal underworld. Following the attacks, Hindu militant groups such as the VHP and the Shiv Sena rose in popularity to fight what they believed was a growing assault on Hindu values. As more Hindus feared terrorism at the hands of Islamic extremism, they began to reevaluate the constitutional enshrinement of secularism.

In 1996, the first election since the 1993 riots, the BJP won a majority of seats in the parliament for the first time. The BJP ran on a platform of Hindu nationalism and pushed for the banning of cow slaughter, a meat eaten by Muslims, as well as reclaimed Kashmir as fully Indian. The BJP continued to gain in popularity at the national and state levels, as well. In the state of Gujarat, a key figure named Narendra Modi took office as the chief minister in 2001. Because he grew up impoverished and from a low caste, Modi was an inspirational figure to many Hindus and low caste members. Modi is a lifelong member of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), an ultraconservative Hindu organization devoted to preserving and restoring Hindu identity in India, particularly through the establishment of a Hindu state. The RSS, the radical Shiv Sena, and VHP remain closely tied. Many members of these organizations become leaders in the BJP.
In 2014, Modi not only received a US visa, he was also welcomed by President Barack Obama at the White House and by 20,000 supporters at a Madison Square Garden rally.

In 2002, Modi’s name would be brought to national and international prominence when a new set of Hindu–Muslim riots occurred in the state of Gujarat. As a train of Hindu pilgrims was returning from Ayodhya, it was attacked and burned by a mob of 1,000–2,000 villagers that were believed to be Muslim. Sixty pilgrims died in the attack. The train attack led to widescale riots in Gujarat. What made these riots so controversial was the response by the BJP government and Modi. Human rights organizers and scholars have claimed the BJP was complicit in the riots and failed to respond appropriately; some scholars have even called it pogroms, or “ethnic cleansing.” Over 2,000 people, the majority Muslim, were killed in subsequent rioting. Another 150,000 were displaced and ended up in refugee camps. In 2005, Modi’s ties to the riots led the United States to deny him a diplomatic visa and revoke his existing visa. Modi was the first official to ever be denied entry under the International Religious Freedom Act, which prevents US entry of a foreign government official responsible to ever be denied entry under the International Religious Freedom Act, which prevents US entry of a foreign government official responsible for violations of religious freedom. An investigation by a Supreme Court-appointed panel in 2012 ultimately found Modi’s actions not to be prosecutable; however, the report still found Modi to have a discriminatory attitude that justified the killing of innocents.

The controversy surrounding Modi’s role in the riots ultimately did not tarnish his reputation in the eyes of the BJP. The BJP named Modi as their candidate for prime minister in 2013. Throughout the campaign in the following year, Modi attempted to distance himself from the Hindutva rhetoric he relied on in the past, invoking secularist language reminiscent of Nehru. Instead, the primary focus shifted to Gujarat’s rapid economic development under Modi. However, the BJP as a whole still invoked nationalist rhetoric, including leaders calling for Muslim eviction from Hindu areas and for critics of Modi to move to Pakistan. Cow slaughter ban proposals remained on the agenda, and Modi would not condemn these remarks in his campaign. He also refused to apologize for the government’s response to the 2002 riots when asked if he was sorry. Modi and the BJP went on to win an astounding majority in parliament, gaining 166 seats while the INC lost 162 seats, its worst defeat since independence. In 2014, Modi not only received a US visa, he was also welcomed by President Barack Obama at the White House and by 20,000 supporters at a Madison Square Garden rally.

The saffronization of India was well underway by 2014. Just as Hindu priests wear saffron robes, Hindu nationalists also adorn the color to signify their political and religious convictions. In the 2014 election, nearly every single district in northern and western India was won by the BJP.
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initiated a response if they assemble, not just launch, their nuclear weapons. This further redefined what “first use” means, claiming that the other side has initiated a response if they assemble, not just launch, their nuclear weapons. With two nuclear powers willing to use first strike, it substantially increases the chances of miscalculation. With a history of repeated conflict over a territory, including when both countries had weapons, it signals that nuclear deterrence may not be as effective in the Indian subcontinent.

The rise of Hindu nationalism also changes the dynamics of international relationships. Nehru’s foreign policy during the Cold War was non-alignment and heavy investment in international institutions, like the UN. At the end of the Cold War, India still maintained its distance from the US, forming military alliances with other countries. The United States developed closer relationships with Pakistan and China. In 2009, as part of Obama’s pivot to Asia strategy, India and the US began developing closer ties, including the US advocating for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council for India. The pivot to Asia and friendlier relations with India was mostly part of the US interest in countering a growing regional and global threat from China.

A more interesting development in the US–India relationship occurred in 2016 during the US election. Hindu nationalist parties began rallying behind Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump. The groups were invigorated by what they perceived as Trump’s hard-line stance on Muslim immigration and terrorism. Shiv Sena, the VHP, and other Hindu nationalist parties held large public prayer ceremonies for Trump. During election season, Trump became aware of his growing popularity among certain segments of the Indian population and used it in his campaign. Perhaps most interesting is the use of a Trump campaign ad by Shalabh Kumar, Chairman of the Trump campaign’s Indian American Advisory Council, appealing to American Hindus. Hindu symbology and music were used within the ad, and it concluded with Trump speaking in Hindi saying, “Ab ki baar, Trump sarkar,” meaning, “Next time, there will be a Trump government.” The slogan holds little meaning once translated, but the usage of it was significant because it was the same slogan Modi used in his 2014 campaign.

Trump’s support of Hindu nationalists may also be an attempt to check Islamic extremism in Pakistan. To India, Trump’s rhetoric and ties to Hindu nationalists can be seen as tacit support for a hard-line approach toward Pakistan. In late December 2017, Trump announced a plan to withhold military aid to Pakistan due to Pakistan providing a safe haven for terrorists. This announcement was applauded by India and marks a significant shift following decades of US military and economic support for Pakistan.

**NOTES**


**CORRECTION**

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