

INDIA'S HINDU-MUSLIM DIVIDE: MODERATE VOICES NEEDED

by
Mark S. Cogan

In the northern Indian state of Himachal Pradesh, religious tensions boiled over this past September. In response to what Hindus claim was an [attack on a local businessman](#) by Muslims in the northern city of Shimla, protesters marched in the streets demanding the demolition of a mosque in the Sanjauli area of the city they claim was illegally constructed.

Calls for the destructions of mosques across India are increasingly a part of tactics employed by right-wing Hindu nationalists after the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) proclaimed victory [in the Lok Sabha national election](#) earlier this year. Political polarization on the streets has seen BJP leaders take more aggressive positions. In September for example, Shimla's former deputy mayor Rakesh Sharma raised the temperature by calling for the destruction of a mosque in the Kasumpti area of the city, claiming that the mosque was constructed without the permission of local authorities and on land that belonged to India's central government.

Rising Religious Tensions

While the destruction of cultural and religious property is not a new tactic in religious conflicts, the old adage, "what's past is prologue", isn't quite right. While the past can set the tone for present events, in India's Hindu-Muslim conflict, the post-election rhetoric of the ruling BJP has exacerbated religious tensions with destructive consequences. To make matters even worse, the voices of moderation that tempered emotion in the past are almost completely absent in the present.

Incendiary language was reflected in the religious rhetoric of local officials who doubled down on tropes and slogans, such as "Jai Shri Ram" or "Hindu Ekta Zindabad" which are frequently deployed when religious tensions are high. BJP political figures like Sharma suggested the mosque was a part of several

others in Shimla that right-wing groups [have claimed create a "climate of fear"](#), as foreigners could "come here with some illegal plan." Claims that Muslims are foreigners have been circulated by Hindu nationalists for decades, but they are now codified in the controversial [Citizenship Law](#) that was passed in December that put more than 200 million Muslims in India on the defensive. The controversial law gave citizenship to refugees from many South Asian faiths, with the sole exception of Islam.

The right wing in India, boosted by the Hindutva ideology, has claimed that both Muslims and Christians were foreign invaders, with many instances where the language not only resonated, but resulted in the needless slaughter of Muslims in the country. The destruction of the Babri Masjid in 1991 fueled violence against Muslims and [led to simultaneous acts of retaliation](#). Prior to that, when Muslims in Gujarat protested the arson that destroyed the al-Aqsa mosque, right-wing nationalists were quick to signal that their loyalties to India were suspect. Several years ago in Goa, Hindu nationalists also pushed anti-Muslim sentiments amid a declining Hindu population and an increase in the Muslim population. A [2006 report](#) documented a number of desecrations of mosques and cemeteries by nationalist mobs in the state, which was otherwise known for religious tolerance.

In recent years, both in Goa and outside of it, that [trend is reversing](#). In 2017, several Catholic churches were targeted as crosses were desecrated. Some residents claimed tensions increased after "inflammatory" speeches were made against religious minorities [at the All India Hindu Convention that year](#). More recently, a Christian church in New Delhi [was attacked](#) by a right-wing Hindu group. But as tensions have increased nationwide, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has remained quiet, despite claiming in 2022 that there was "no space for discrimination" in his BJP government. The Prime Minister was silent for two weeks after two women were [paraded around naked by a Hindu mob](#) in July 2023.

This past February, two mosques were demolished in Uttarakhand state and Delhi, where in the aftermath,



[five people were killed](#). Just prior to that, Modi presided over the inauguration of the Ram Mandir temple, built on the foundations of Babri Masjid, a 16th century mosque that was demolished by Hindus in the 1990s. The claim was that it was built on an ancient Ram temple site. Even then, these claims were old news. Indian nationalists have suggested in the past that thousands of mosques in India were either built illegally or were constructed over Hindu temple ruins.

Cultural Nationalism Now Mainstream

Recent calls for the destruction of mosques across India are not just recycled political tactics. They are increasingly common while calls for restraint among BJP leadership are rare. It was local Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) religious leaders, former city councilors and village leaders that were [among the 50 people that were arrested](#) for participating in the violence surrounding the call for the destruction of the mosque in Himachal Pradesh.

Missing from the national discourse are [moderate voices](#) like the Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen, who in the past, spoke publicly about the promise of secularism and political pluralism in India as a cornerstone of Indian identity—even after the events surrounding the destruction of Babri Masjid.

The reality that India must confront in this era of violence is that the assertiveness of Hindu-aligned nationalism is akin to ‘saffron terrorism’ and a long-held belief that secularism in India is dangerous. This

cultural nationalism, once limited to the fringes of Hindu society has now become mainstream through BJP dominance. And where there were once political parties and a more multicultural response to such brazen violence, these voices are now dimmed.

There have been international voices urging calm, [such as Gregory Stanton](#), the founder of the group, Genocide Watch in 2022. That call came amid related news that [a Hindu religious leader](#) actively called Hindus to “pick up weapons and conduct a cleanliness drive”, reminiscent of the 1994 Hutu call in Rwanda for cleansing of the minority Tutsi population.

In India, only moderate voices can now balance out the pervasive voice of Hindu nationalism that dominates the body politic. The destruction of cultural and religious identity of minority populations will only repeat the many mistakes of the past, including the bloody Bombay riots of the 1990s, or the lesser known violence last year in Haryana in northern India where [mobs burned shops owned by Muslims](#). Only moderate Hindu voices can restore calm among a population used to being provoked by age-old fears and historical anxieties about the fictitious ‘evil’ posed by foreign invaders.

Mark S. Cogan is an Associate Professor of Peace and Conflict Studies at Kansai Gaidai University, based in Osaka Prefecture, Japan, and a Senior Associated Research Fellow with ISDP. He is a former communications specialist with the United Nations in Southeast Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and the Middle East.