

## Focus 56 - The interpretation of religious texts and historical narratives around Hindu-Muslim conflict in contemporary India

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### Abstract

The nationalist ambitions of individual leaders during the independence struggle, and the subsequent ethnic violence during partition, did not deter India from making itself a constitutionally safe haven for religious minorities. However, the system or its political parties are not without electoral entrenchment in religion, bolstering its agenda of communal divide through the institutionalisation of ethno-religious conflict. More than often, this communal divide is a projection of animosity between two major religions – Hinduism and Islam. The vice of this othering and vilification has led to countless pockets of violence throughout India, sometimes re-branding the entire socio-political context of the nation. Academics have explained this othering as a post-modern phenomenon, exacerbated by the socio-political or economic ‘divide et impera’ of the colonial rule in India. Nevertheless, answers were not provided for the resolution of this protracted, cold conflict, which has majorly been backed by religious symbolism, ‘mythomoteurs’, instances of cosmic war, and invocation of historical storytelling to widen the gap between us vs them. Moreover, the ontological defect of neglecting interfaith friction in western peacebuilding theories has ignored the rationale of these religious narratives in keeping the skirmish between Hindus and Muslims alive, even today, playing effectively into the hand of certain political parties to peddle their agenda of never-ending religious hatred in India. It is this religious and historical hatred that percolates and upholds every other sector of friction between Hindus and Muslims in India.

### Key Words

Institutional Riots, Hinduism, Islam, Communalism, Judiciary, State, Colonialism, Religion, Law Enforcement

## Introduction

The dichotomy of religion in a highly heterogeneous community and its repercussions have been the most challenging and distrusted issue plaguing this post-World War II globe. Emerging as a result of globalisation, in the form of higher communication, immigration and conversion, the ideals of a religion are not confined to a particular region anymore. Moreover, with a lack of lucid mutual understanding between foreign and indigenous religions within a specific area, added with the ambiguity of theistic proofs in the form of scriptures, there has been a massive case of negative othering or in simpler terms, “us v/s them” - in the entire world, and especially in South Asia. Home to at least five major religions - Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism, some of them present in the region since the middle of the last millennium BCE (Murphy) – South Asia has become the melting pot of culture and diversity. However, the melting pot is not without its saturation, wherein one or more religions have experienced historical skirmishes. One of these conflicts, and perhaps the most visible one, even in the 21st century, is the Hindu-Muslim divide - a quest for dominance in South Asia.

Hindu-Muslim division and the subsequent violence in post-colonial India at large have been attributed to the misadventures of the British Raj. Described as the colonial project of ‘divide et impera’, this imperial fomentation has been said to not only contribute to the gruesome partition but also to have cursed majoritarian Hindus and minoritarian Muslims in India to a life-long, unresolvable skirmish - and a geopolitical time-bomb in the name of Kashmir. However, many notable historians and social scientists have rebuked the above-stated apologist facts, and through their thorough research contributed to the perception that Hindus and Muslims have transitioned through a phase of coexistence and conflict much before the colonial arrival. In fact, the princely states had a higher rate of communal riots than the British controlled provinces (Pillalamarri, 2019). Contemporary conflicts are a result of that pre-colonial interaction, skewed through what we can call as a gross misinterpretation of religious texts and history. Moreover, such interpretations and narratives, peddled by the elites through the institutionalisation of religion and history, have polarised the communal character in the entire country, leading to mass mobilisation on the virtue of religious sloganeering. Adding fuel to

the fire, this dormant yet explosive conflict has not been appropriately explained by Western theories of secular peacebuilding - and threatens to grow more prominent over time.

This paper, taking inference from the above-stated information, will look into the interpretation of religious texts and historical narratives regarding Hindu-Muslim conflicts in contemporary India. Circumnavigating Brass's explanation (Brass, *Explaining Communal Violence*, 2003, pp. 5-39), who time and again has iterated colonialism as the divisive factor between these two religions, it will further delve into the biased interpretations of religious texts and historical narratives, as the epistemological contribution for phases of Hindu-Muslim conflict in India. Furthermore, it is also highly essential to understand the role of socio-political institutions and elites in aggravating communal strife in India, underlining actors who have played an instrumental role in sustaining the conflict even until today.

### Types of interpretation in the Hindu-Muslim divide

Hinduism and Islam, in terms of religious roles, can be analysed into six categories in India, or the whole of South Asia. They act as – 1) a politico-religious community with proper institutions to support it; 2) a set of teachings with a different set of knowledge and ideas open for interpretation; 3) a form of spirituality motivating the behaviour of individuals and communities; 4) as a practice, and finally 5) as a discourse which binds all the former categories. All of these, in turn, have transformed Hinduism and Islam into a distinct identity marker (6) used to justify ethno-nationalist conflicts, conflict-escalating patterns, and divisive behaviour. Unfortunately, in terms of finding a solution for such divisions, both identity discourses became manifestations of equally valid arguments (Frazer & Friedll, 2015), forcing a neutral being to look at both identities as sacred, and stopping one from vilifying any one religious community with a value judgement.

Moreover, a religious skirmish between Hindus and Muslims can be explained through two distinct lenses – primordialism/instrumentalism and institutionalism, taking inference from two of the most distinguished social scientists – Sudhir Kakar, and Paul Brass respectively (Buckell, 2011, pp. 1-34). Sudhir Kakar's analysis of the conflict can be categorised under the first lens of primordialism/instrumentalism, wherein there is a greater emphasis on religious identities alone as a factor of communalism and wherein individuals in a

community interpret their religion and religious feeling. It asserts that the Hindu-Muslim divide is a pre-colonial construct, and according to Kakar's psychoanalysis, "it is a realisation of one's self that becomes one's religious identity, holding a mental representation of its group, its culture and its response towards social othering" (Kakar, 1996, pp. 239-253). The religious identity mentioned above by Kakar is mostly consolidated through cultural and religious symbols, 'mythomoteurs' and scriptures, which have a historical significance for the community, since time immemorial. Institutionalists, on the other hand, are the exact opposite of 'instrumentalists'. They believe that the role of history before colonialism is contentious in the explanation of Hindu-Muslim divide and that it is the construct of colonial and post-colonial institutions which have led to the skirmish as we see it today (Buckell, 2011, pp. 1-34). Paul Brass falls into the category of such institutionalists; according to him, "Hindu-Muslim consciousness is largely a modern construct, in which the British colonial ruler played a major role, either through direct policies or deliberate categorisation and classification of major religions" (Brass, Explaining Communal Violence, 2003, pp. 5-39). Therefore, it makes the friction between Hindus and Muslims a matter of class, group, and elite political interests. Here historical identities are perceived as more flexible and accommodating.

### Religious and historical interpretations of the Hindu-Muslim Divide

Hindus and Muslims, as iterated earlier, have been in mild conflict for a very long, time, and have seen each other since time immemorial through a lens of either a martial threat or a subservient community. Moreover, the attitude of both communities towards each other has often been determined by socio-political or economic interests. Religion has cut through these factors, maintaining the stigma of othering (Engineer, 1999, pp. 396-400). Both religions have time and again taken to religious scriptures, mostly the Bhagavad Gita for Hindus and the Quran for Muslims, to wage war against each other in the name of righteousness, and force away the infidels. There has been an invocation of cosmic war against each other, which pitched the Asian Muslim nobles and Hindu elites against each other - much before colonisation, around the early first millennium BCE. Hinduism in the Bhagavad Gita has underlined such violence against infidels as righteous or Dharmic, where Shri Krishna told the supreme archer Arjuna to commit fratricide against evildoers, as it is his Dharma to do so (Chapter 18, Verse 66). Lord Krishna

further holds that violence as a factor affects the body and not the soul unless one has considerable self-doubt over his acts (BBC, 2005). Islam also follows a similar cosmic code, deriving its status of the war from holy scriptures, wherein Muslims are free to wage war over Allah's justice and punish those who fight in the way of Shaitan (Qur'an 4:76) (BBC, 2009). Furthermore, it has often been said that beyond the interpretive ambiguity of both the Bhagavad Gita and Quran, Hindus have used Ramayana as a concrete text of othering - wherein Hindus have been seen as the descendants of Lord Ram, and everyone else, including the foreign Muslim invaders, have been seen as Asuras (Monsters) (Pollock, 1993, pp. 261-297). Similar inferences can also be drawn from Islam's perception of Dar ul-Islam (Region of Islam) and Dar al-Harb (Region of Savages/Infidels) (Al-Dawoody, 2011, pp. 43-69).

The most important use of such religious symbolism and 'mythomoteurs' has occurred before colonisation, under the banner of society, politics and economy - when Hindu beliefs were said to be continuously suppressed by the invading Turks, Persians and Pashtuns, all bannered as Muslims, since 1200 CE onwards (Talbot, 1995, pp. 692-722). This period is inferred to have given a severe blow to the masculine and dominant Hindu religion, which was supposed to have risen in small pockets in the Deccan, Western and Northern India to protest against the so-called vilification of Hindu culture, religion and identity by such Muslim foreigners (Fischer-Tine, 2003, pp. 110-139). This eventually made Hindus and Muslims two distinct nations occupying the same piece of land - wherein the projection of separation was kept alive as two communities opposed to each other.

However, with the advent of British colonialism in 1600 and its consolidation in 1857 after the defeat of the last Mughal Sultanate in the Sepoy Mutiny, the scale of the Hindu-Muslim divide tipped in favour of Hindus, as with the retreating Mughal Empire retreated the more significant idea of Persian Islamic lineage, which gave the Muslims greater religious-cultural leverage over Hindus in India. Muslims were reduced to a newly formed Indo-Islamic identity in the 19th century - unfortunately stacked within the Hindi belt of Northern India as a minority (Engineer, 1999, pp. 396-400). The British were also favourable towards the Brahmanical and Kshatriya Hindus in high clerical jobs, which made Muslims more isolated within the Indian colonial context. Furthermore, as years passed, along with the struggle for

Independence against British colonialism rose a nationalist political sentiment whose primary objective was to take revenge against Muslims for historically desecrating their primary symbols of culture – Temples. It was then propagated amongst nationalistic circles that the Muslim invaders razed as many as 60,000 temples and built over 3000 mosques over these temple foundations (Singh & Suman, 2014, pp. 67-87). Nationalist movements emanating from the ideologies of Hedgewar, Golwalkar, Savarkar and Moonje took inference from past symbolisms and shaped the political mechanisms of anti-colonial struggle, feeding into Hindu anxiety about a weakened Bharat dying out before an increasing Muslim influence. It articulated the glories of the erstwhile robust Hindu nations, built on the idea of a Ram Rajya - wherein Muslims were projected as enemies lurking at the gate (Barua, 2017, pp. 49-78).

Moreover, religious-nationalistic figures such as Aurobindo and Dayanand Saraswati also joined the rally of Hindutva, invoking religious scriptures, myths, and Vedic analogies to drive a polarised political view in favour of Hindus. Violence against the infidel Muslims was also portrayed as a credible option through a cosmic war between the righteous gods of Hindus and the Muslims, which were portrayed as monsters (Minor, 1986, pp. 61-87). Not only that, but historical figures such as Maharaja Rana Pratap, Rani Laxmibai and Shivaji Maharaj also became the politically symbolic crusaders of Hindus against both colonialists and the Muslims.

This Hindu nationalistic group was also majorly responsible for casually defenestrating Gandhi's ideology of non-violence during the freedom struggle, calling him a potential black spot on masculine Hindu religion. This feeling further culminated into Hindu-Muslim riots all around India between 1940 and 1948, wherein Hindu nationalists blamed Gandhi for further dividing India and politically appeasing Muslims, who were supposed to be under Hindu dominion with minimal to no privileges at all. This angst led to the assassination of Gandhi in 1948, ending his idea of non-violence. A non-violent Hindu ideology from then onwards was seen as effeminate and docile, subordinate to the foreign Muslims (Barua, 2017, pp. 49-78).

The role of institutions in contemporary India: The state, the judiciary, and law enforcement

From the matters mentioned above, it has been made very clear that the Hindu-Muslim divide is not a British construct, as an institutionalist would argue, but a convergence of both primordial and institutional factors - wherein the British colonial rule acted as a catalyst and a shifting point of Hindu-Muslim friction flowing down from centuries before. This section will further elucidate the political and social relevance of religion in Hindu-Muslim friction, and its overall sustenance in Indian politics, exemplifying this dynamic through the mechanism of state politics, law and policing systems, and the economy.

### The state

There has been no subtlety in the fact that religion and its persistence in the Hindu-Muslim conflict have been present in state political mechanisms, as an evident factor of group mobilisation. India is one of the first nation-states to have been divided along religious lines; this political polarisation is not a surprise at all. The creation of right-wing political parties such as the Jan Sangh in 1951, its subsequent upgrading to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the existence of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) during and after colonisation, and the creation of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) all attest to a religious polarisation which takes its cues of political mobilisation from ancient incidents and scriptures. The RSS has more than once been accused of brewing seeds of hatred in post-independent India, including the significant pogroms during partition (Graff & Juliette, 2013). There have also been significant accusations against all major political parties, beyond the BJP and the Sangh Parivar, who have been instrumental in brewing conflicts in various parts of India for political and electoral gains. The role of Congress in instigating riots in 1964 in West Bengal, Indira Gandhi's support for a Marathi Hindu nationalistic party Shiv Sena during her tenure as Prime Minister (Gupta, 2014), manifesting the construction of Ram Mandir in Ayodhya between 1984-1989 as an electoral promise by Rajiv Gandhi, the failure of Mulayam Singh Yadav in maintaining law and order during the massive riots over Ram Mandir in UP from 1990-92 are some among the prime examples of such omissions or deliberate instigation by various political institutions (Brass, *The Persistence of Hindu-Muslim Violence*, 2003, pp. 355-384). However, the Ayodhya Ram Mandir issue in 1992 and the Gujarat Riots in 2002, both instigated by the BJP and the Sangh Parivar, have been the most instrumental saturation point of Hindu-Muslim relations in India. It is to be noted that the ideology behind such incidents came



from a quest for revenge against a historical Muslim invader - Babar, who was accused of desecrating the temple of Ram and building the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya.

In contrast, the pogroms in Gujarat in 2002 is an extension of that Masjid-Mandir dilemma wherein Hindus portrayed Muslims as the sons and daughters of Babar and other foreign invaders. The hatred has seeped until now, with the current BJP government which formed a majoritarian government in both 2014 and 2019 acting as a custodian of Hindu religious and cultural faith - aiming to create a de facto Hindu state and sustain an atmosphere of tension for state minorities, especially Muslims, through mob-lynching, hate speeches and unjust laws, i.e. the Beef Ban. Hate crimes against Muslims over the issue of beef consumption, cow slaughter and religious desecration have risen to over 400% since BJP took over in 2014 (Sridharan, 2019).

### The judiciary and law enforcement

This section will look into the role of both the law-making court system and the law implementing police system in escalating or de-escalating conflicts in India. The court system in India is hailed as the most effective, independent, and righteous pillar of state-building, and in fact, it has more than once been instrumental in de-escalating and mediating conflicts between Hindus and Muslims. However, it is not without its flip side, which in turn has added to the caveats in the Hindu-Muslim battle and its sustenance by political institutions. The monumental failure of hate-crime laws mentioned in Article 153(A) and 295(A) of the Code of Criminal Procedure (CRPC) (Law Commission of India, 2017) and the lack of Suo-Moto Cognizance in the Indian judiciary have allowed political institutions to circumnavigate national laws and polarise a religious community at their will for electoral gains. Moreover, the punishment for hate crimes with disastrous circumstances is nothing more than aailable warrant and a fine of meagre 5000 INR, which is nothing more than a slap on the wrist. Other than that, there is also a failure of recognition for the People's Representation Act of 1951 and Amendment Act of 2013, which explicitly makes the use of religious, caste and class preferences illegal in electoral processes. These Acts are currently facing stagnation due to their limited use by the judiciary - even after explicit religious polarity in electoral processes. Moreover, the judiciary, on 19th November 2019, has been accused of



giving a biased judgement to appease the Hindu majority as regards the Ayodhya issue, wherein the verdict was handed over to the Hindus through a matter of faith, historical shreds of evidence in travelogues and belief, all of which are inadmissible as objective evidence in court.

Statistics for the Hindu-Muslim casualties during riots, mostly during the 1992 Ayodhya riots and the 2002 Gujarat riots, shows that more Muslims have been killed than Hindus. The role of the police is called into question several times for siding with parties according to their religious preferences. They have been accused time and again of systematic and sporadic patterns of violence, wherein they have either allowed Hindus to slaughter Muslims or joined them in the pogrom (Brass, *Police Views of Hindu-Muslim Violence*, 2003, pp. 328-343). Nonetheless, since the police is a centrally controlled unit with an independent service mandate, the actions mentioned above do not hold up to any circumstantial evidence. However, the State Armed Constabulary (SAC) – which is operated, recruited and maintained by the separate states in India - has more than once been caught siding with the religious preference of the state government and helped rioters (Brass, *Police Views of Hindu-Muslim Violence*, 2003, pp. 328-343). More than often, the SAC in UP in Gujarat have been accused of being an anti-Muslim force, wherein their support has been instrumental for the mass slaughter of Muslims in both 1992 and 2002.

### Conclusion

According to famous conflict theorist, Edward Azar, protracted social conflicts take inference from historical anecdotes, colonialism, or foreign instigation to incite violence after a long-dormant phase (Azar & Moon, 1986). Hindu-Muslim violence can be analysed as such a protracted social conflict, the roots of which have been strongly tied to its historical formation and religious anecdotes, much before the advent of British colonisation. Looking at the current political situation over the divide, the legal entity of Lord Ram is more to blame than the British Raj, whose main contribution in this conflict was to widen the historical division through hierarchical religious preference to Hindus. Moreover, the political and judicial functions of the state have also compromised the secular fabric of the nation and have exposed its constitution to long and never-ending frictions for years to come. The major challenge in tackling the animosity between Hindus and Muslims lies with the wrong semantic of deeming such conflicts as riots - which are impromptu,

sudden, and unpredictable. For, looking at the patterns and sustenance of conflict just before electoral processes, it seems more of a planned conflict with predictable outcomes for a certain majoritarian elite.

On top of that, the conflict, which at first was limited to elite areas of political competition, has now percolated to rural settings, with more exceptional communication, making its origin impossible to trace. Therefore, in the end, it will only be safe to attribute the sustenance of such conflicts to the political and law-making elites - and which will only die out once these elites realise their fallacy in bringing out such devastating outcomes for political and electoral gains. Until then, the discussion between focussed groups in conflicts, prayer meetings, and inter-faith reconciliation between Hindus and Muslims will only act as a minor catalyst of peace, not able to percolate till the upper elite and peaceful for a short period.

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