Hindutva's Rise and Social Cohesion

By Antara Chakraborthy

SYNOPSIS

As Hindutva's strong influence continues to grow in India, an intensification of this exclusivist doctrine and ethno-nationalist ideology will have profound implications for social cohesion in multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies around the world.

COMMENTARY

SINCE ITS ascension to power in 2014, there has been growing consensus among experts that the *Bharatiya Janata* Party (BJP) and the *Hindutva* movement it represents will attempt to establish a hegemonic [Hindu rashtra](#) (Hindu polity) within India. This has transformed the framework of Indian politics and will potentially have implications for its diasporic communities around the world.

In December 2021, a three-day '[Dharam Sansad](#)' (religious parliament) was organised by several high-profile religious Hindu leaders in the holy city of Haridwar, situated in the northern region of India. Videos that have emerged from the event show the clerics urging Hindus to take up arms against the Muslim community with an open call for genocide and ethnic cleansing. With the organisers having [close political ties](#) with the ruling BJP government and at least one BJP spokesperson in attendance, the *Dharam Sansad* has since sparked outrage in several quarters. Questions were asked about BJP's involvement and validation. This is the latest manifestation of the growing acrimony in India over BJP's anti-Muslim/anti-minority rhetoric.

Away from Secular Democracy: India as an 'Electoral Autocracy'

While calls for genocide may be considered an outlier by some analysts, it must also be viewed as part of a long chain of events unfolding in India that provide a disheartening view of the country's [slide from a secular democracy](#) to a political system

based on dominance by a particular ethnic and religious group fuelled by an exclusionary form of nationalism.

The Haridwar gathering is symptomatic of the direction India has taken since 2014, when Narendra Modi first ushered the BJP to power. In the first term, Modi won the election on a platform that emphasised economic growth over cultural nationalism. However, in the lead-up to the second term in 2019, the BJP was allowed to run a campaign that was solely focused on Hindu nationalism.

The result has been the normalisation of a more militant *Hindutva* — where an extreme form of anti-minority rhetoric is increasingly accepted as normal; this is causing a decline of political rights and civil liberties in the country, especially where BJP controls the state governments. Consequently, international institutions monitoring political systems around the world and compiling annual reports on global democracy/liberal freedoms are beginning to see India as an "electoral autocracy". They highlighted the violence against non-Hindu minorities.

Hindutva as a socio-political philosophy is underpinned by a pronounced sense of victimhood and historical injustice, and demands a reorganisation of society which will place Hindus at the cultural centre of the Indian nation. It further equates Indian identity with Hindu culture, and by this extension, non-Hindu minorities are immediately relegated to the fringes of India's society.

Therefore, events like *Dharam Sansad* can be viewed as a step closer to the collective aim of accomplishing a strong Hindu nation where minorities in India must demonstrate unconditional obeisance or risk organised violence against them. This sense of vulnerability is increasingly acute among the Muslims in India who number about 200 million among the country's 1.38 billion population (based on mid-2021 UN estimates).

Hindutva in the Indian Diaspora

This form of Hindu nationalism has extended beyond the borders of India. The potential influence of the diasporic community is being recognised as a vital political resource and this is further indicated by the growing presence of *Hindutva* groups in other countries with a goal to unite all of them under a common Hindu identity.

The Indian diasporic community, considered to be the world's largest diaspora population, is a significant group. Official estimates suggest over 25 million Non-Resident Indians spread across every major region of the world. Though the community comprises a diverse group of people, with different ethnic identities within India, the cultural and political mobilisation has been traditionally defined by religion — with Hindus forming the majority.

While the engagement of the diaspora with the Indian political community has existed for decades, it has been reinforced under Modi. Grassroot *sanghs* (organisations) like the *Vishva Hindu Parishad* (VHP) — listed by the CIA as a "religious militant" organization — have played a huge role in expanding the Hindu nationalist base overseas.

The populist appeal of Modi as a strongman Hindu world leader has effectively consolidated economic and political support from Indian expatriates. The majority of Indian-Hindu diaspora subscribes to *Hindutva*, and organisations with an explicit and implicit Hindu bent have become increasingly visible in the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, the Gulf states, and parts of Africa.

A revival of a staunch Hindu identity can be observed among sizeable segments of Indians living outside India. The myth that Hinduism is in danger from secular or anti-Hindu forces has been pushed aggressively within the diaspora itself. This translates into a form of chauvinism that views any anti-minority decree as a victory for 'Hinduism'.

For instance, in the UK, the Hindu community expressed great admiration for Modi after the contentious Ayodhya verdict in 2019, when the Supreme Court of India ruled in favour of a Ram temple being built on the site of the demolished Babri Mosque.

Wider Implications

Hindutva and a Hindu nationalist India seem to have emboldened the diasporic communities to mobilise along communal lines and to harden Hindu attitudes vis-à-vis the non-Hindus. This is shaping the ideological and socio-political sphere within India, and in their resident countries. Apart from hefty financial donations to the BJP camp, several Hindu overseas organisations have reportedly raised funds to support groups in India that perpetrate violence against non-Hindu minorities.

It is important to recognise *Hindutva* as an exclusivist doctrine. Its strongest advocate today is *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS), the largest volunteer grassroots organisation in India with far-right ethno-nationalist sensibilities.

The organisation has primarily been responsible for lacerating communal relations in India with hate speeches and calls for genocide targeting minorities. As the ideological force behind the BJP, RSS has also created profound implications for governments in countries with multi-ethnic and multi-religious populations, and that have significant political, economic and kinship ties with India.

The conflation of Hinduism, a peaceful world religion, with *Hindutva*, requires careful study and policy consideration. Singapore must stay alert to the potential communal mobilisation within its multi-ethnic and multi-religious society to the detriment of its much vaunted and celebrated social cohesion. A strongly positive factor is the close relationship between the leaders of India and Singapore.

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