# Hindu Nationalism:
# Impact on Multicultural Societies

*By Antara Chakraborthy*

## SYNOPSIS

*The growing influence of Hindutva ideology in Hindu diasporic nationalism poses a challenge for diverse and multicultural societies outside India. There are potential implications for Singapore's multiracial communities and social cohesion, and the government and society at large must continue their proactive efforts to strengthen the country's social fabric.*

## COMMENTARY

The recent controversy surrounding the ban of a BBC documentary on the political career of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi with the ruling Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) has also highlighted the ongoing religious and political polarisation in both India and Indian diaspora communities.

This schism centres on the rise of Hindutva, a far-right ideology that seeks to establish a Hindu polity in India. Modi's government has faced criticism for mainstreaming this ideology. These sentiments have penetrated Indian diasporic communities, where the increasing support for Modi and the BJP pose significant challenges to social cohesion and multiculturalism in host societies.

The first episode of the documentary titled, 'India: The Modi Question', focuses on Modi's early years in the BJP and his alleged involvement in the 2002 Gujarat riots as the state's chief minister. The riots resulted in the deaths of over 1,000 people, mostly Muslims, and is described as one of the worst instances of communal violence in India's history.

It also sparked a heated debate on social media about Modi's role in the riots, following which the Indian government banned the sharing of clips from the documentary online

using emergency powers under its information technology laws. While an unpublished British Foreign Office report cited by the BBC states that Modi was "directly responsible" for the violence, an Indian Supreme Court panel in 2013 ruled that there was insufficient evidence to charge him.

As free speech activists and student groups in India continue to advocate for the restoration of the banned documentary on social media, Hindu diasporic communities in countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom have strongly condemned the BBC for what they perceive as "anti-India" and "Hinduphobic" content. Several members of various Indian diaspora organisations gathered outside the BBC's offices in cities including London and San Francisco, to protest against what they branded as "fake news" behind the broadcaster's controversial series on Modi.

## Engaging Indians Overseas and Hindu Nationalism

The BJP has a long history of engaging with the diaspora to spread "Indian values and culture" and to encourage them to invest in India's economic growth. But, the BJP under Modi has recognized the diaspora's potential for political gains beyond cultural and economic empowerment.

Using Modi's particular brand of Hindu nationalism, combined with his immense popularity, the BJP has been successful in mobilising the vast Indian diaspora and to normalize the spread of Hindu transnationalism – resulting in the emergence of Hindu diasporic nationalism that is inextricably linked to Hindutva.

Hindu nationalism, which is central to the tenets of Hindutva, has dominated the political landscape of India since Modi took office in 2014, with the BJP openly stating that they aimed to make India a Hindu *rashtra* (state) on several occasions. Hindutva has been described by scholars and opinion makers as an exclusionary ideology – one that seeks to hegemonise Hinduism, relegating minorities in India to the fringes.

In addition to the steady rise of religious polarisation within India, the ideology of Hindutva has also found traction within the Indian diaspora around the world. This has empowered sections of the Hindu diasporic communities to assert their cultural, religious, and political identities in their host countries. While it is important to acknowledge that Hindutva is not synonymous with Hinduism, various advocates of Hindu nationalism conflate these identities with discriminatory political undertones.

## Impacting Multicultural Societies Beyond India

The fallout from the controversy surrounding the BBC documentary is not an isolated incident. The increased socio-political debates in India, marked by growing religious fragmentation, have had an impact on countries with significant Indian populations. The surge of diasporic nationalism among BJP and Hindu nationalist supporters has led to tensions and even violent confrontations between various cultural and religious groups within the Indian diaspora and their host societies in the UK, the US, Australia, and Canada.

One such incident happened in Leicester in September 2022, where around 200 Hindu men marched through an area in the eastern part of the English city. Leicester is a city

[celebrated for its multiculturalism](#). The men were chanting "*Jai Shri Ram*," a slogan that has been associated with the persecution of Muslims in India, and its use in the UK further fuelled tensions between the two communities.

On 15 August 2022, Hindu nationalists in the American state of [New Jersey](#) organised an India Independence Day rally where [posters of Modi and bulldozers](#), which have come to represent oppression in Indian politics due to their use in demolishing Muslim homes, were on display. According to official records of the US government, more than 420,000 people of Indian ancestry live in New Jersey.

The [tensions between Sikhs and Hindu nationalists in Australia](#) are also a cause for concern where pro-Modi groups and the Sikh community have clashed over the [2019 farmer protests](#) about India's new farm rules. There have also been [incidents](#) of Hindus attacking Sikhs and calls for a boycott of Sikh businesses in Sydney.

These examples demonstrate how the politics of the Indian subcontinent can spill over into diasporic communities and exacerbate existing interfaith tensions, as well as give rise to identity politics and polarisation. The [spread of Hindu nationalism](#) amongst the diaspora clashes with the values and practices of other cultural and religious communities, especially in multicultural societies. As such, it is important to address these issues and promote dialogue and understanding among diverse communities.

**Examining Implications for Singapore**

The [Indian diasporic community in Singapore](#) is large and multifaceted, comprising people from various regions and religions. They form the third largest ethnic group, after the Singaporean Chinese and Singaporean Malays respectively. This diversity has [contributed](#) significantly to the creation of a national identity, with mechanisms in place to promote unity between races and religions.

[Initiatives](#) like the International Conference on Cohesive Societies, Racial and Religious Harmony Circles, and Presidential Council for Religious Harmony, have played key roles in fostering a sense of [national identity](#) while recognising the unique cultural and religious identities of different groups.

Though the vast majority of the Indian diaspora in Singapore do not identify with or support the Hindu nationalist identity, the promotion of Hindutva's exclusionary language and ideas emanating from India has the potential to cause tensions with other ethnic and religious groups in the country, posing a potential threat to Singapore's social harmony and stability.

The Singapore government has taken a strong stance against exclusionary thought and intolerance in all its forms. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong [highlighted](#) the importance of preserving Singapore's values of racial and religious harmony in a speech, warning against ideologies that may undermine these values.

Therefore, it is crucial for the relevant bodies to monitor the spread of diasporic Hindu nationalism, just as they monitor and take action (if necessary) against other forms of extremist thinking that could affect social cohesion. Additionally, the government must

continue to support and refresh initiatives that promote diversity and inclusivity, to further strengthen Singapore's social fabric.

By maintaining a vigilant and proactive approach, all communities in Singapore can uphold their commitment to cultivate a safe and equitable society that upholds the fundamental rights and dignity of all individuals, irrespective of their beliefs and origins.

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