Communal Conflict and the Plight of Religious Minorities in India

Its status presently as a secular democratic state notwithstanding, India has been experiencing increasing incidents of communal violence since the electoral victory of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 2014 in which religious minorities, such as Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, are being targeted by Hindu ultra-nationalist organisations that have the tacit support from some in the central government in India. According to an interim report by a human rights activist, Dr. John Dayal, the first 300 days of the Modi’s government have been marked by 43 deaths among 600 documented cases of violence against Christians and Muslims. The threat that religious minorities face in India is not just a fear of violence against their physical bodies and religious institutions, but the fear that their very existence is at risk in a country dominated by a Hindu majority that is increasingly taking on a fundamentalist hue.

Although the Modi administration promised to punish religious violence in India, communal conflicts are currently not being contained and functionaries of the government have been exacerbating them. Hindutva organisations, such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), tacitly supported by senior functionaries of the central government, have systematically sought ways to raise the communal tension between Hindus and religious minorities in forms of Ghar Wapsi, anti-Love Jihad protests, anti-conversion laws, bans on cow slaughter, discrimination in housing and employment, hate speeches and inflammatory statements, and the Saffronisation agenda. While communal tension has escalated due to the promotion of discriminatory policies, the judicial system in India is failing to protect religious minorities in which prosecutors and investigative agencies are forced to make decisions that are favorable to Hindu extremists. The Hindutva (Hindu ultra-nationalist) authoritarian government’s official investigative agencies seek to render the Indian legal system ineffective by setting them aside as mere bystanders, as the democratic rule of law is systematically subverted.
Reported cases of communal clashes and attacks on religious minorities since January 2015 reveal that communal incidents in India have not decreased and religious intolerance and structural violence against religious minorities still remain a major concern. Allowing for the unreported or underreported cases of religious conflict, there would presumably be more actual incidents of religious violence. Many reported communal clashes are often later described as incidents of personal enmity or as incidents that are committed without any communal overtone. Why is there more communal violence after the BJP victory? The central Indian government’s direct and indirect acquiescence to the aggressive stance of the Hindutva frontal organisations is the cause.

Government authorities have aggravated communal conflict through government orders that empowered Hindus, whereas they neglected or discriminated against religious minorities. For example, in educational institutions, the Ahmedabad School Board issued a circular directing all schools of the state, including Urdu medium schools, to perform compulsory Hindu religious invocations. The District Educational Officer of Ahmedabad made it mandatory for municipal schools to sing songs that are closely associated with the RSS as part of its morning ritual. While the government promoted Hindu practices, it strictly constrained religious practices and events of religious minorities, further intensifying communal tension. In May 2015, the Sub-Divisional Magistrate of Dhar in Madhya Pradesh, a BJP ruled state revoked permission to organise a three day Pentecostal Convention, citing a threat to law and order as a cause of concern. The government authority even interfered with the eating habits of ordinary citizens, and forced animistic tribals to follow Hindu customs. Moreover, the Indian government declined a visa to two senior Vatican officials, and froze domestic and international bank accounts of religious organizations and charities that are not Hindu. The government also approved construction plans that would destroy churches and mosques. Moreover, in Karnataka, a Congress ruled state, the Additional Director General of Police of the Internal Security Wing, Amar Kumar Pandey, issued a circular that ordered police commissioners to scrutinise passport applications from Muslims and Christians and collect details of their sects and denomination. According to the Dayal report, police forces have often displayed a tacit support to Hindutva outfits in implementing Hindu agendas and have attributed the damage of churches to a short circuit or drunken behavior rather than communal motivations, even when irrefutable evidence was available.
Ban on cow slaughter, anti-conversion laws, and promotion of Saffronisation agenda are other examples of how the government acquiesced to aggravated communal conflict in India. The governmental intervention in the dietary habits of ordinary citizens, that favored a particular religious community, has intensified already-existing conflicts between religious communities in India. Neglecting religious minorities in India who do not consider a cow to be a sacred animal, the enactment and support for a ban on cow slaughter not only empowered the Hindu fundamentalist cause, but also aggravated a communal tension. In addition, the anti-conversion laws raised religious tension even more. Although these laws were purposed to protect citizens from forced conversions, the term anti-conversion laws is misleading, since they are only concerned about conversions away from Hinduism but not to Hinduism. Therefore, by punishing anyone who uses force, fraud, or “inducement” to convert the Hindu population into other religions, anti-conversion laws have reinforced Hindu-centered policies and intensified division between religious communities in India. The Indian government has also sought to promote Saffronisation agenda in terms of education, Indian history, and historical monuments. Saffronisation seeks to glorify Hindu culture and history, while deemphasizing Islamic or Christian contributions. Such an agenda often accompanied by fabrication of the truth, and a secular approach to Indian history was rejected. Therefore, as the government sought to embellish Indian history and empower Hinduism, Hindu majoritarian society that disregards contributions of religious minorities has been further promoted.

The Ghar Wapsi, anti-Love Jihad protests, and hate speeches and inflammatory statements are examples of how the BJP government indirectly empowered the Hindu majoritarian groups by overlooking blatant discrimination and violence exerted by Hindutva organisations on religious minorities. The Ghar Wapsi, a religious ceremony that roughly translates into “returning home,” is mainly pushed forward by Hindutva organizations such as the RSS and the VHP. This movement aims to “reconvert” Muslims or Christians to Hinduism under a rationale that Muslims and Christians in India were initially Hindus themselves or had Hindu ancestors. The purpose of the Ghar Wapsi is to increase the Hindu population in order to establish a Hindu majoritarian society. Since force or inducement are utilized to “reconvert” religious minorities into Hindus, especially through depriving benefits that are only granted to Hindus, the Ghar Wapsi is one form of violence that threatens one’s religious identity. Unchecked by state legislation and overlooked by governmental authorities, mass reconversions to Hinduism, both
forced and induced, continue to happen across the country. Anti-Love Jihad protests originates from a belief that young Muslim men feign love to convert young girls of non-Muslim communities, especially those from the Hindu faith, and thus aim to increase the total population of Muslims in India. Since Hindutva organisations consider an ostensible decline in the Hindu population as one of the biggest threats, they have organised anti-Love Jihad protests and attacked individual citizens when couples of two different faiths decided to get married. The government has tacitly supported anti-Love Jihad protests by not regulating such activity, and thus, anti-Love Jihad protest exacerbated communal conflicts especially with the Muslim population and intensified divisive politics in India. Hate speeches and inflammatory statements are often made by members of the BJP, the RSS, and the VHP after the BJP came to power in the general election of May 2014. Under the apparent protection of the government, Hindutva outfits have constantly made obnoxious and inflammatory statements targeting religious minorities, and the government condoned and tolerated circulation of such aggressive statements. For example, a senior RSS leader, Mr. Dattatreya Hosabale, claimed that “culturally, nationally, and DNA-wise” all Indians are Hindus, and therefore, India has no minorities. Hate speeches embody constant attempts from Hindutva outfits to delegitimize non-Hindu faiths, by suppressing religious minorities.

Although a few Catholic bishops claimed that the Modi government was showing genuine concern over attacks on the minority community in the past several months, attacks on churches and Christians still continue. Sikhs are not fully recognized as a distinct religion due to Article 25 of the Constitution of India that states, “the reference to Hindus shall be construed as including a reference to persons professing the Sikh, Jaina, or Buddhist religion, and the reference to Hindu religious institutions shall be construed accordingly,” lumping Sikhs, Jains, and Buddhists together as Hindus. However, Article 25 of the Constitution of India also enumerates the freedom of conscience and the freedom to profess, practice, and propagate a religion of one’s choice. In addition, Article 15 of the Constitution prohibits discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth. Moreover, the Constitutional mandate prescribes the protection of the rights of minority communities in India. India is a signatory to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.
The BJP government has been, by its acts of omission and commission, reinforcing communal tension between different religious communities since its electoral victory in 2014. India as a nation that is committed to religious freedom as is enumerated not only in its Constitution but also in international covenants that it has signed is clearly under threat.

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