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Indian Muslims in the Crosshairs: The BJP and Its Anti-Beef Crusade

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Indian Muslims in the Crosshairs: The BJP and Its Anti-Beef Crusade

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In late July 2018, Akbar Khan, a 28-year-old Indian Muslim man, was transporting recently purchased cattle along the Alwar-Delhi highway in western Rajasthan state.¹ He intended to sell the cow's milk to local dairy owners to help provide for his family. Without warning, he was surrounded by the sound of motorcycles and gunshots from a local gang. He quickly dropped the ropes around the cattle's necks and ran away but was caught. Despite his screams, they beat him under suspicion of transporting cattle for slaughter. He died en route to the hospital. The emergence of these cow protection gangs committing attacks known as "cow lynchings" has haunted the Indian Muslim community in recent years.

The rise of Hindu nationalism, especially following the election of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 2014 under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has put a sharper focus on the long-standing struggle over the nature of India's political and cultural identity. Within the Hindu nationalist frame, any part of India's culture or history associated with its non-Hindu minorities, especially the Muslim community, is viewed as antithetical to Indian identity. This has politicized many aspects of daily life, turning even food and the consumption of meat into a deadly battlefield on which this political struggle is now taking place.

Hindutva and Indian History

The BJP, along with its parent organization Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), has long promoted the *Hindutva* ('Hindu-ness') ideology, which views the Hindu religion, culture, and history as the core of Indian civilization. Distinct from the ancient Hindu religion, Hindutva as a political ideology is quite new to the Indian Subcontinent. The movement is based on the writings of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, an anti-British activist, who first introduced Hindutva

¹ Zeenat Saber, "India: Village mourns death of man killed in cow-related lynching," *Al Jazeera*, July 22, 2018.

in a 1923 pamphlet written from Ratnagiri Jail in Bombay.² He developed a vision of a Hindu nation premised on the idea of Hinduism as a religious, ethnic, political, and cultural identity with special claim to the land of the people's and religion's birth. He understands Hindu identity to be more than a religious identity but a racial one able to transcend matters of caste and sect, writing "The Hindus are not merely the citizens of the India state because they are united not only by the bonds of the love they bear to a common motherland but also by the bonds of a common blood."³ In the defense of his view of Hindu identity and their right to the land of India (or *Bharat*), he made explicit references to the Jewish people and Zionist arguments for the Jewish right to Palestine. For Hindutva advocates, it is imperative for non-Hindu minorities to assimilate into Hindu culture and accept their fate as less than second class citizens. M.S. Golwalkar, a former RSS chief and one of the Hindutva movement's key ideologues, wrote in 1938:

The non-Hindu people of Hindustan must either adopt Hindu culture and language, must learn and respect and hold in reverence the Hindu religion, must entertain no idea but of those of glorification of the Hindu race and culture ... in a word they must cease to be foreigners, or may stay in the country, wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment—not even citizens' rights.⁴

To be Indian, in the Hindutva frame, is necessarily to be Hindu.

This ideological and historical frame in particular sees Muslims, who comprise 15% of the nation's total population today, as outsiders who entered the Subcontinent as foreign conquerors in the late 12th century, much like the British after them, and degraded and desecrated Indian culture under centuries of Islamic rule. Savarkar wrote, "The Indians saw that the cherished ideals of their race—their thrones and their families and the very Gods they worshipped—were trampled under foot the holy land of their love devastated and sacked by hordes of barbarians, so inferior to them in language, religion, philosophy, mercy and all the

² Vinayak Domadar Savarkar, *The Essentials of Hindutva, Fifth Edition* (Bombay: S.S. Savarkar, 1969).

³ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁴ M.S. Golwalkar, *We, or Our Nation Defined* (Nagpur: Bharat Prakashan, 1938), 55-56.

soft and human attributes of man and God—but superior to them in strength alone—strength that summed up its creed in two words, Fire and Sword!”⁵ He saw the entire history of Islam as a history of violent expansion destroying what came before it: “From year to year, decade to decade, century to century, the contest continued. Arabia ceased to be what Arabia was; Iran annihilated; Egypt, Syria, Afghanistan, Baluchistan, Tartary—from Granada to Gazni—nations and civilizations fell in heaps before the sword of Islam of Peace!”⁶ He argued the history of Islam in India was no different and was a “prolonged and furious conflict” between Hindu and Muslim in which the Hindu people struggled to maintain their identity under the “striking sword” of their enemy—the Muslim rulers who “defiled our sacred places” and “desecrated our religion”.⁷ The movement to establish and protect India as a Hindu nation was seen to be a defensive action. He wrote, “We will, therefore, protect our religion and for that we would even lose our lives. We will acquire new kingdoms by our power and that bread we will eat.”⁸ It was this conflict that helped to make Hindus conscious of themselves as a nation, creating an identity in contrast to an enemy. He further argues that Muslims have no right to Indian land given the absence of “the common blood that courses through [Hindu] veins,” defining India essentially as an ethnic state.⁹

Historians have rejected this simplistic interpretation of an antagonistic relationship between the two religious communities and shown how the interactions between Hindus and Muslims is much more nuanced and varied throughout history.¹⁰ Modern Indian politicians have also rejected the Hindutva view of Indian Muslims, the country’s largest religious minority, and see them as an integral part of Indian culture. Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first prime minister, wrote in his magnum opus *Discovery of India*,

It is, therefore, entirely misleading to refer to Indian culture as Hindu culture.

In later ages this culture was greatly influenced by the impact of Islam and yet

⁵ Savarkar, *The Essentials of Hindutva*, 21.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 92.

¹⁰ Javed Alam, “The composite culture and its historiography,” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 22(1) 1999: 29-37; Audrey Truschke, *Aurangzeb: The Life and Legacy of India’s Most Controversial King* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017).

it remained basically and distinctively Indian... Whatever the word we may use, Indian or Hindi or Hindustani, for our cultural tradition, we see in the past that some inner urge towards synthesis... was the dominant feature of Indian cultural, and even racial, development. Each incursion of foreign elements was a challenge to this culture, but it was met successfully by a new synthesis and a process of absorption. This was also a process of rejuvenation and new blooms of culture arose out of it.”¹¹

Gandhi further saw that “Indian culture is neither Hindu, Islamic, nor any other, wholly. It is a fusion of all.”¹² The Hindutva interpretation of the historical relationship between Muslims and Hindus, however, was given further weight by the violence of Partition and the creation of a Muslim Pakistan in 1947. This created the sentiment that Indian Muslims were a fifth column for India’s newly established Muslim neighbor and state enemy.

Challenging the “Indian-ness” of Indian Muslims

In India, the Muslim minority faces pressure from broader Indian society in a number of different ways. In 2006, the Indian government under Prime Minister Manmohan Singh released a study titled “Social, Economic, and Educational Status of the Muslim Community of India.”¹³ The study outlined the daily prejudice Muslims face in housing, employment, access to education, and interactions with the government and police. The study further found that many of within the Indian Muslim community often felt targeted and viewed with suspicion “not only by certain sections of society but also by public institutions and governance structures.” Given their association with Pakistan, many Muslims feel pressured to constantly prove their loyalty to the state, even when India plays Pakistan in cricket.

Exacerbating this marginalization, the BJP’s fiery rhetoric often focuses on challenging the “Indian-ness” of the Muslim population. Any part of India’s history and culture, from cuisine to architecture, associated with Islam has been targeted by the BJP as foreign and an

¹¹ Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India: The Centenary Edition*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), 75, 76

¹² *Ibid.*, 363.

¹³ Prime Minister’s High Level Committee, *Social, Economic and Educational Status of the Muslim Community of India: A Report*, Cabinet Secretariat, Government of India, November 2006. Accessed at: <https://www.sabrang.com/sachar/sacharreport.pdf>

illegitimate part of the state. One BJP politician, for example, referred to the Taj Mahal, perhaps the most globally famous of India's many historical monuments, as a "blot" on India built by "traitors" and "should have no place in Indian history."¹⁴ In June 2017, Yogi Adityanath, the BJP Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh and a Hindu cleric perpetually clad in saffron robes, remarked, "Foreign dignitaries visiting the country used to be gifted replicas of the Taj Mahal and other minarets which did not reflect Indian culture."¹⁵ He praised Prime Minister Modi for instead giving copies of the Bhagavad Gita and Ramayana, sacred Hindu religious texts. In July 2018, India's Supreme Court chastised the BJP government for deliberately neglecting the required maintenance for the Taj Mahal and allowing it to be degraded by air pollution, leading to loss of revenue for the state.¹⁶

Senior BJP politicians have made the argument that, unlike Hindu temples, mosques are not holy places and therefore can be safely destroyed.¹⁷ In 1992, leaders of the BJP, along with the Hindu nationalist Vishva Hindu Prashad and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, broke through the barrier surrounding the 16th century Babri Masjid in Ayodhya and pounded the structure to the ground with sledgehammers.¹⁸ These groups have long argued that the mosque, constructed by request of the Mughal Emperor Babur, was built over a destroyed Hindu temple, a claim contested by scholars, near the site traditionally considered to be Lord Rama's birthplace. A survey similarly found that during the 2002 Gujarat riots in which almost 1,000 Muslims were killed, 230 Islamic historic sites were destroyed.¹⁹ Modi was then serving as Chief Minister of Gujarat State and was blamed by critics for stoking communal violence against Muslims. During the riot, one of the participants in the destruction of the tomb of Vali Gujarati, a 17th century Muslim poet, stated, "We have broken a mosque and made a temple. We used hammers. Muslims should not live in India. They should live in Pakistan."²⁰ Reflecting this view, Yogi Adityanath stated in 2014 that mosques should display Hindu deities. He also promised to cleanse India

¹⁴ Harrison Akins, "How Hindu Nationalists Politicized the Taj Mahal," *The Atlantic*, November 27, 2017.

¹⁵ "Taj Mahal doesn't reflect Indian culture: Yogi Adityanath," *Indian Express*, June 16, 2017.

¹⁶ Rahul Bedi, "Judges threaten to shut Taj Mahal in warning to Indian government over neglect of building," *The Telegraph*, July 11, 2018.

¹⁷ "Mosque is not a religious place: BJP leader Subramanian Swamy," *Hindustan Times*, March 15, 2015.

¹⁸ "Timeline: Ayodhya holy site crisis," *BBC News*, December 6, 2012.

¹⁹ Luke Harding, "Gujarat's Muslim heritage smashed in riots," *The Guardian*, June 29, 2002.

²⁰ Luke Harding, "Islamic heritage under attack," *The Guardian*, June 10, 2002.

of other religions, proclaiming that this is the “century of Hindutva.”²¹ Surendra Singh, a BJP Member of Uttar Pradesh’s Legislative Assembly, announced in January 2018 that India would become a purely Hindu nation by 2024 and all Muslims will need to either convert to Hinduism or leave the country. He argued, “There are a very few Muslims who are patriotic. Once India becomes a Hindu *rashtra* [nation], Muslims who assimilate into our culture will stay in India. Those who will not are free to take asylum in any other country.”²²

Hinduism and the Cow

After gaining political power in the 2014 elections, the BJP began pursuing a number of policies reflecting their ideological stance, including policies aimed at protecting the cow. Cows are considered sacred within Hinduism because of their agricultural importance.²³ Sitting in a *mandir* (Hindu temple) in Lucknow, an old woman wrapped in a sari explained to me that Hindus consider the cow sacred because of their life-giving milk and subsequent status as a mother figure for the community. Mahatma Gandhi further wrote, “The cow is the protector of India, because it, being an agricultural country, is dependent on the cow’s progeny. She is a most useful animal in hundreds of ways.”²⁴ As a result of this reverence for the cow, observant Hindus abstain from eating beef with many keeping a vegetarian diet. Many Hindus even argue it is incumbent to care for and protect them, with cows an ever-present sight in India as they roam unfettered through the streets. This protection, however, remains tempered by social demands. Gandhi explains,

A man is just as useful as a cow, no matter whether he be a Mahomedan or a Hindu. Am I, then, to fight with or kill a Mahomedan in order to save a cow? In doing so, I would become an enemy as well of the cow as of the Mahomedan. Therefore, the only method I know of protecting the cow is that I should approach my Mahomedan brother and urge him for the sake of the country to join me in protecting her. If he would not listen to me, I should let the cow go for the simple

²¹ Swati Gupta and Annie Gowen, “Modi’s party picks Yogi Adityanath, strident Hindu nationalist priest, as leader of India’s biggest state,” *Washington Post*, March 19, 2017.

²² “By 2024, Muslims who assimilate into Hindu culture can stay in India: BJP MLA,” *Hindustan Times*, January 14, 2018.

²³ Wendy Doniger, *On Hinduism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014; Frank J. Korom, “Holy Cow! The Apotheosis of Zebu, or Why the Cow is Sacred in Hinduism,” *Asian Folklore Studies* 59(2) 2000: 181-203.

²⁴ M.K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj and Other Writings*, ed. Anthony J. Parel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 54.

reason that the matter is beyond my ability. If I were overfull of pity for the cow, I should sacrifice my life to save her, but not take my brother's. This, I hold, is the law of our religion."²⁵

A political movement for cow protection emerged in the late 19th century as a strategy of Hindu groups amidst the communal politics of British colonialism.²⁶ This movement's targets included the British and Muslims, both of whom largely opposed to this campaign. While the British were subjected to verbal attacks, Muslims experienced coercion and violence in the name of cow protection. At India's founding in 1947, a number of Hindus advocated for a ban on cow slaughter to be included in the new constitution.²⁷ The leadership of the Indian National Congress under Jawaharlal Nehru supported a secular government for India and pushed back against this proposal. This secular position against such a ban even garnered support from Gandhi, ever sensitive to the position of non-Hindu minorities. He wrote, "How can my religion also be the religion of the rest of Indians. It will mean coercion against those Indians who are not Hindus... It is not as if there are only Hindus in the Indian Union. There are Muslims, Parsis, Christians and other religious groups here. The assumption of the Hindus that India has now become the land of the Hindus is erroneous. India belongs to everyone who lives here."²⁸

The federal government eventually passed final responsibility for cow protection legislation to state governments, which instituted a wide range of laws governing cow slaughter. These laws varied between permission to slaughter all cattle such as in Kerala, permitting only the slaughter of bulls as in Bihar, and a total prohibition as in Uttar Pradesh.²⁹ By 2017, 84% of Indian states and union territories possessed laws prohibiting some type of cow slaughter, along with transport and consumption of beef from cattle.³⁰ However, the slaughter and consumption of water buffalo meat (an animal absent any religious significance), combined with regions

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ C.S. Adcock, "Sacred Cows and Secular History: Cow Protection Debates in Colonial North India," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 30(2) 2010: 297-311.

²⁷ Gautam Bhatia, "Cow slaughter and the Constitution," *The Hindu*, June 1, 2017.

²⁸ Mahatma Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Volume 88*. (New Delhi: The Publications Division, Government of India, 1983), 424.

²⁹ "Cow Slaughter Prevention Laws in India," *Citizens for Justice and Peace*, July 2, 2018. Accessed at: <https://cjp.org.in/cow-slaughter-prevention-laws-in-india/>

³⁰ Alison Saldanha, "More than 99% Indians now live in areas under cow protection laws, Gujarat has strictest rules," *Hindustan Times*, April 29, 2017.

permissive of cow slaughter for export, led to the establishment of a robust beef industry, with India eventually becoming one of the largest beef exporters in the world.³¹

Given its status within Hinduism, the cow, along with measures to protect it, became a key symbol for political groups promoting Hindutva.³² In 2012, Modi, then serving as the Chief Minister of Gujarat, stated in a speech to the Jain International Trade Organization:

It is the Central government's dream that they will bring about a Pink Revolution

In India and export meat throughout the world. This year, the Centre has itself announced that India is the world's largest beef exporter. Is this what we pride ourselves on? Brothers and sisters, I don't know whether this saddens you, but my heart screams out at this. I am unable to understand why you are silent, why are you taking this lying down?³³

Modi's rhetoric during the 2014 campaign continually focused on the "Pink Revolution" (a name derived from the color of cooked meat) and the need for cow protection to stoke religious passion and garner support. One of the BJP's popular electoral slogans was "Vote for Modi, give life to the cow".

After ascending to power, the BJP government strengthened existing anti-beef laws and implemented stricter controls for cow protection, introducing a wide-ranging ban in many parts of the country on the slaughter, sale, and consumption of beef with harsher punishments. The government also began closing down small-scale slaughterhouses, overwhelmingly owned and staffed by Muslims, accusing them of illegally butchering cows, with many individuals losing their jobs and livelihood.³⁴ These closings have negatively impacted the economic welfare of the Muslim community. This also has led to a meat shortage for many meat-serving restaurants such as Muslim-owned Tunday Kababi in Uttar Pradesh's capital city of Lucknow, one of the city's oldest shops with walls decorated with Quranic verses and photos of the Kaaba in Mecca.

³¹ Virginia Harrison, "Holy cow! India is the world's largest beef exporter," *CNN*, August 5, 2015.

³² Radha Sarkar and Amar Sarkar, "Sacred Slaughter: An Analysis of Historical, Communal, and Constitutional Aspects of Beef Bans in India," *Politics, Religion, and Ideology* 17(4) 2017: 329-351.

³³ Shoaib Daniyal, "How Narendra Modi helped spread anti-beef hysteria," *Al Jazeera*, October 6, 2015.

³⁴ Ellen Barry and Suhasini Raj, "Buffalo Meat Industry Facing Government Shutdowns in India," *New York Times*, March 24, 2017.

Speaking with the men preparing the kebabs around the open-flamed cooking fires, they told me that it was becoming increasingly difficult to procure enough water buffalo meat to make their famous *galouti* kebabs as a result of the forced closures. Following the widespread shuttering of slaughterhouses, Tunday Kababi was forced to temporarily close their doors due to lack of meat.³⁵ The new law banning cow slaughter nationwide was extreme enough for the Supreme Court to suspend it in July 2017.³⁶

Many see these policies as specifically targeting Muslims. Ali Khan Mahmudabad, a professor of history at Ashoka University and the son of the Raja of Mahmudabad, explained to me during my visit to his forebearers' palace outside of Lucknow that attacks against Muslims and closing down of Muslim shops are for the twin purpose of asserting a Hindu identity for India and economically weakening the Muslim community. The BJP meat ban was about destroying the Muslims' economic independence, making them reliant on large slaughterhouses that are predominately run by Hindus. These policies served to further polarize the already vulnerable Muslim community. In our conversation beneath the fading portraits of his royal lineage, he drew parallels to the Nazis in Germany during the 1930s first targeting the Jewish community's economic livelihood.

Cow Vigilantes Run Amok

On a typical evening in late September 2015 in the small village of Dadri on the outskirts of Delhi, Mohammad Akhlaq was asleep in his small home after a long day of working on a local farm. The Akhlaqs were the only Muslim family in the village but had lived there for four generations without incident. Earlier in the evening, Mohammad had enjoyed dinner with his family and discussed the many mundane topics that occupy a family's nightly conversation. Eid-al-Adha, the Muslim holiday commemorating Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son before God, had just passed. This feast, known as *Bakri Eid* (goat Eid), is celebrated by killing a goat or sheep to be shared with family and community. Perhaps their conversations dwelled on the

³⁵ "Lucknow's famous Tunday Kababi shuts one outlet due to meat shortage," *India Today*, March 23, 2017.

³⁶ "India Supreme Court suspends cattle slaughter ban," *BBC News*, July 11, 2017.

feast's events and the family and friends with whom they had celebrated. After finishing their meal, Mohammad retired to his nightly routine of evening prayers and preparation for bed.³⁷

Little did he know, a nearby Hindu temple was raising the clarion call over a rumor rapidly spreading amongst the community after a neighbor's calf went missing—Mohammad and his family had illegally slaughtered and eaten the calf for Eid and were, in fact, still storing the beef in their home. Following an announcement over the temple's loudspeaker, the anger spread through the crowd like waves as a mob quickly formed to take revenge for the calf's death. By the time the mob reached the Akhlaq home, it counted nearly one hundred individuals. They rushed the house, breaking down the door, and, forced their way into the room where Mohammad slept alongside his son, Danish. They shouted accusations of cow slaughter with the family's cries of innocence falling on deaf ears. Grabbing a nearby sewing machine, someone bashed Mohammad in the head and dragged him and his son into the family's courtyard. Hindu neighbors attempted to intervene but to no avail. Members of the mob picked up loose bricks and sticks and repeatedly beat and stabbed Mohammad and Danish's lifeless bodies, while the remainder of the family was forced to watch this horror take place. By the time the police arrived an hour later, Mohammad laid dead and Danish unconscious, barely clinging onto life. Six people were arrested, including the son of a local BJP leader, in connection with the attack. Local BJP leaders argued that if beef was present in their home, despite the family's claim that the meat in their refrigerator was mutton, then the fault for the incident lay with the victims and pushed for the Akhlaq family to be tried for beef consumption. Given the laws banning cow slaughter in Uttar Pradesh, the police had the meat in the Akhlaq's refrigerator sent for testing. It was mutton, just as the family had claimed.

The BJP's fiery rhetoric and policies targeting Muslims helps to create social divisions that lead to this kind of violence. Following the 2014 elections, cow vigilante groups across the country were emboldened to commit increasingly brazen attacks against Muslims under suspicion of slaughtering and eating cows. A month after the 2015 attack on the Akhlaq family a 16-year-old Muslim teenager, Zahid Rasool Bhatt, was killed when his truck was targeted

³⁷ "Why India man was lynched over beef rumours," *BBC News*, October 1, 2015.

with a petrol bomb in Udampur.³⁸ In March 2017 in Latehar, a cow vigilante group hanged to death Muhammad Majloom and Azad Khan after torturing them on suspicions of cattle trading.³⁹ Three months later, a mob attacked and beat three Muslim youth in Maharashtra, accusing them of carrying beef to sell it for consumption in their community.⁴⁰ The following month, another Muslim teenager, Junaid Khan, was stabbed to death on a train in Haryana after being accused of carrying beef.⁴¹ In July 2017, an “irate mob” in Jharkhand attacked Ainul Ansari as he headed to an Iftar party during Ramadan after mistaking the mutton he carried for beef.⁴² Recently, in May 2018, a Muslim tailor, Siraj Khan, was beaten to death by a cow vigilante mob in Madhya Pradesh following accusations of slaughtering a bull.⁴³ Since 2010, there have been 60 such attacks across the country.⁴⁴ Some mobs are formed in response to specific rumors, as in the case of the Akhlaq family, with the use of social media expanding their reach. There are also incidents in which cow vigilante gangs roam highways and villages targeting anyone suspected of illegally smuggling or killing cows, such as the July 2018 killing of Akbar Khan in Rajasthan. Hindutva critics also argue that these cow lynchings are merely excuses to attack Muslims and other minorities, such as Dalits, with the BJP’s rhetoric and policies creating opportunities and excuses for this type of targeted violence.⁴⁵ While large scale communal rioting between Hindus and Muslims has taken place repeatedly in Indian history, 97% of cow lynchings have occurred after the 2014 election.⁴⁶

Opponents argue that Modi is doing little to address the violence or rein in the divisive rhetoric of senior level BJP politicians seen to help motivate the actions of these groups.⁴⁷ Modi was criticized for waiting eight days to break his silence about Mohammad Akhlaq’s murder and for failing to resolutely denounce violence against Muslims. His most forceful denunciations

³⁸ “16-year-old victim of Udampur truck attack dies in Delhi,” *India Today*, October 18, 2015.

³⁹ “Two Muslim cattle traders assaulted, hanged in Jharkand,” *Deccan Chronicle*, March 19, 2016.

⁴⁰ “Maharashtra: Cow vigilantes thrash 3 youth for possessing ‘beef’, 7 arrested,” *Hindustan Times*, June 14, 2017.

⁴¹ Ramesh Vinayek, “Those who lynched Junaid on train will be punished, says Haryana CM Khattar,” *Hindustan Times*, July 16, 2017.

⁴² Subhash Mishra, “Jharkhand: Muslim man attacked by irate mob for taking ‘beef’ to Iftar party,” *Hindustan Times*, July 16, 2017.

⁴³ Milind Ghatwai, “MP: Man lynched for slaughtering bull,” *Indian Express*, May 20, 2018.

⁴⁴ Delna Abraham and Ojaswi Rao, “84% Dead in Cow-Related Violence Since 2010 are Muslims; 97% of Attacks After 2014,” *India Spend*, June 28, 2017.

⁴⁵ Nimisha Jaiswal, “Why India’s beef lurching is not about a dead cow,” *USA Today*, October 13, 2015.

⁴⁶ Abraham and Rao, “84% Dead in Cow-Related Violence Since 2010 are Muslims; 97% of Attacks After 2014.”

⁴⁷ Nilanjana Bhowmick, “As India’s Muslims are lynched, Modi keeps silent,” *Washington Post*, June 28, 2017.

have been against attacks targeting Dalits, with attacks against Muslims often drawing lackluster and perfunctory remarks. There have even been accusations that police purposefully delay help to the victims of these attacks and make little effort in their investigations and bringing the culprits to justice.⁴⁸ Ashutosh Varshney, a political scientist at Brown University, recognizes that further polarization between Hindus and Muslims is politically advantageous for the BJP but the economic and social disruption associated with widespread rioting is not. Communal rioting could potentially alienate voters supportive of the BJP's economic policies but opposed to its Hindu nationalist posturing.⁴⁹ Therefore, he expects a steady increase in the smaller scale violence of cow lynchings drawing on the BJP elites' narrative of cow protection.

This further marginalizes the already marginalized Muslim population and creates an antagonistic and fear-based relationship with the government and broader society. During a visit to the Jama Masjid in Lucknow, its elderly muezzin showed me around the cavernous mosque. As we slowly strolled beneath the vaulted and intricately decorated ceilings and arches, we spoke of the mosque's history and Persian-inspired architecture, constructed in the early 19th century by Nawab Muhammad Ali Shah with the intention of surpassing in beauty the Jama Masjid of Delhi. As our conversation turned to the current political situation under the BJP government, his warm and hospitable visage changed. With anger coloring his voice, he said that it was not only Muslims' economic well-being but also their lives that were placed in danger. He repeatedly, and with emotion, called the BJP government, "*mussulman ka dushman*"—the Muslim's enemy.

Hindu Nationalism and the Struggle for Indian Identity

South Asian scholar Christophe Jaffrelot argues that the perceived threat of the Muslim minority to the Hindu majority was exacerbated by the communal politics of British colonialism, based on the principle of "divide and rule".⁵⁰ This perception crystallized the Hindu nationalist movement in the early 20th century. The creation of Pakistan as a Muslim state amidst the horrors of Partition also helped to frame a Hindu-Muslim dichotomy in the Subcontinent and create a perception of South Asian Muslims as the enemy of Hinduism, bringing greater

⁴⁸ "India 'cow lynching': Police accused of delaying help," *BBC News*, July 23, 2018.

⁴⁹ Ashutosh Varshney, "Crime and context," *Indian Express*, July 7, 2017.

⁵⁰ Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

scrutiny to India's own Muslim population. The Trinidadian-Indian writer V.S. Naipaul, writing in the 1970s, further recognized the growing attraction toward this religious nationalism as a response to the rapid modernization occurring in India following independence.⁵¹ Many rejected this change and embraced an idea of Indian history and culture that was seen to be a purer manifestation of Indian identity free from influence and corruption by external forces. With the decline in the 1970s and 1980s of the Indian National Congress who had dominated and defined national politics since independence, Hindutva rose to fill this political opening and challenge the secularism espoused by Congress.

This struggle for identity has come to color and politicize many aspects of Indian life, turning even food into a battle for life and death. This is not to deny the violence that has occurred throughout Indian history, with many Hindutva advocates pointing to the 17th century Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb's intolerance against Hindus as justification for the present policies targeting Muslims. This, in the words of Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen, is "a proposal for matching a historical folly by creating a new folly" in punishing the present Muslim community for historical acts for which they bear no responsibility.⁵² This also ignores other Muslim rulers within India, such as Aurangzeb's great-grandfather Akbar who embraced the diversity of his domain and promoted religious tolerance.

India is a country of layers with many cultures, religions, histories, and peoples interacting and overlapping in a civilizational conversation. Gandhi wrote in his *Hind Swaraj*:

India cannot cease to be one nation because people belonging to different religions live in it...In reality, there are as many religions as there are individuals... If the Hindus believe that India should be peopled only by Hindus, they are living in dreamland...In no part of the world are one nationality and one religion synonymous terms: nor has it ever been so in India."⁵³

⁵¹ V.S. Naipaul, *India: A Wounded Civilization* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977).

⁵² Amartya Sen, *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian History, Culture, and Identity* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 59.

⁵³ Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj and Other Writings*, 52-53.

Yet, some wish to ignore this depth and complexity and define national identity in a single, narrow way, denying many Indians their rightful place within their own country. Religious divides are over-shadowing the traditions of cultural synthesis between Hinduism and Islam that existed in India for centuries, a cultural legacy known as *Gunga-Jamuni tehzeeb*.⁵⁴ Hindu nationalists are, in essence, re-inventing the history of their country in ways that fit their ideological frame. BJP politician Sangeet Som even argued, “If these people are part of our history, then it is very sad, and we will change this history.”⁵⁵ The BJP’s anti-beef crusade is emblematic of this fundamental struggle within Indian society, as the party has a stated goal of purifying the country to become a Hindu *rashtra*. As history has shown us, however, the purification of a land, especially one so rich with diversity, is never a peaceful process.

⁵⁴ Harrison Akins, “India’s model for tolerance,” *BBC*, December 8, 2016.

⁵⁵ Michael Safi, “Hardline Hindu nationalists campaign against Taj Mahal,” *Guardian*, October 30, 2017.

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