



DISCUSSION PAPER

# Identity and Belonging in Modi's India:

The Legitimisation of  
Hindutva and the Citizenship  
Amendment Act

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## Introduction

**O**n the 11th of December 2019, the Parliament of India passed the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), sparking a series of violent protests across the country and abroad. It did this by amending the Citizenship Act of 1955, which did not exclude granting citizenship rights to a specific religious community and required that the applicant resided in India for a total of 11 years. The bill aims to provide Indian citizenship to minority communities, namely Hindus, Parsis, Buddhists, Jains and Christians arriving before December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2014, from India's neighbouring countries: Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan. However, the bill excludes the persecuted Muslim population, like the Rohingyas, and the Muslim minorities belonging to the Shia and Ahmadi backgrounds in the proposed neighbouring countries.

Critics argue that the bill re-enforces the growing anti-Muslim sentiment in the Indian society by discrediting its secular credentials. Another compelling factor with regards to the CAA is its correlation with the controversy that surrounds the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in the state of Assam. The NRC demanded residents present documents regarding their ancestry to be enlisted as Indian citizens, resulting in 1.9 million residents being excluded as citizens, including Hindus. Notwithstanding the sequence of events, the NRC and the CAA are in alignment considering that the laws lead primarily to the exclusion of the Muslim population.

In the context of Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) government and its attacks on India's traditional foundations, India has witnessed a surge in student-led protests contesting the BJP's Hindu-nationalist policies.

It is noteworthy that ever since Modi's appointment as Prime Minister in 2014, the far-right Hindu-nationalist ideology of Hindutva has been emboldened in varied ways through the 'invisible' instruments of daily social life—ranging from pop-culture to sports. Using these media to perpetuate the Hindutva ideology has come with an effective capacity to influence audience on a wider framework (Berti, 2011). Therefore, unlike the culture and 'visibility' of mob violence to push the Hindutva ideology, Narendra Modi grounding his leadership on these subtle features points to the ways in which the Hindutva ideology has gained more acceptance and how prejudiced action become more legitimate in the eyes of the state.

The main aim of this paper is to highlight how the ideology of Hindutva under Modi's rule has gained an increased foothold by way of subtle features, especially in spheres of new media, which has facilitated its increased legitimacy in Indian society. The CAA is the result of this approach in state structures and its subsequent impact on the consciousness of the masses. The paper will also highlight how the local and the international oppositional response vis-à-vis student led protests through similar forms of media have contested the bill's implementation.

# The Expansion of Hindutva under the BJP

In the past few decades, political and social developments in India have led to an advancement of a far-right Hindu nationalism known as Hindutva coinciding with the rise of the far-right Hindu nationalist party, the BJP. Chatterjee, Hansen and Jaffrelot regard this triumph as comprising two key elements: the winning of a Hindu nationalist majority in the 2014 elections in the lower house of the parliament, and the centrality of power revolving around an eccentric personality of Narendra Modi (Chatterjee, et al., 2019).

Representing a distinct mode of thought, Modi regards himself as a leader who belongs to the people, and as a result, ascribing to populist tendencies which can be argued to *'demonstrate affinity with the "true", "pure" or "real" people, seeking to cement their bond with them and reinforce their status as "us versus them" or "good versus evil" terminology'*. Such features of populism can lead one towards 'a slippery slope of fascism' (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018).

The remodelled BJP under Modi is seeking to combine the state's national pride and its vision in making India a global power. In this aspect *'the BJP's plan of action is focused on winning elections and using the existing provisions of law and administrative decrees to impose a more restrictive but not fully authoritarian regime'* (Chatterjee, et al., 2019). In more recent terms, according to Ratna Kapur, the role of the Indian judiciary (especially during the BJP rule) has provided a pathway towards a more majoritarian society and has homogenised the sole identity of the Indian state to be more inclined towards Hinduism (Kapur, 2019).

These developments can be observed in revocation of Article 370, which granted the Muslim majority state of Jammu and Kashmir autonomy, the Supreme Court verdict for granting the disputed site of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya to Hindus, and the increase in lynchings targeting Muslim and the Dalit minorities (Apoorvanand, 2017). All these aspects are coupled with passing multiple laws in the Parliament, all of

which reflect an anti-minority sentiment and a form of nationalistic chauvinism against "the other".

While India has retained its label as the world's 'largest democracy', under Modi's government international overserves and Indian liberals have begun to question the relevance of the secular foundations of the modern Indian state, the core underpinning of the post-colonial values the nation was built upon. In this context, it is useful to discuss how evolving societal features have also led to the emboldening of the Hindutva and the far-right religious nationalism we see today.

While the fact that violence has been a foundational element of the Hindutva should not be overlooked, Thomas Blom Hansen also ascribes other political realities to the Indian state that have furthered the current political climate. For instance, the Congress leadership or Left leaning parties never promised liberties and the rule of law as a priority during their political campaigns. Additionally, as India's democracy deepened in the 1980s and 90s, it allowed the mobilisation of lower caste communities<sup>1</sup>, regional movements, coupled with tenets of Hindu nationalism. All of these developments mainly functioned through a language of resistance, making violence and anger as the primary means of expressing one's political standing. These sentiments have been perfected by the Hindu nationalist movements over the past decades, increasing their political mobilisation and setting in the state's power structure (Hansen, 2019)

In similar light, according to Milan Vaishnav, although India ever since its independence has characterized itself as a secular nation, the merging of politics with religion is nothing new even in its post-colonial context. Although the previous Congress leadership branded itself as a secular political party, on many occasions it has maintained a rubric of invoking various religious sentiments to increase its support base (Vaishnav, 2019). The rise of the BJP has presented, as Vaishnav argues, an 'alternative nationalism', which roots itself

<sup>1</sup> In the 90s the BJP promoted itself as the party of the upper caste, however, it also emphasized the promotion of lower caste leaders. For example, Kalyan Singh in Uttar Pradesh and Narendra Modi in Gujarat. This was the BJP's strategy for social engineering. Today, this practice of social engineering is inclined to involve less dominant caste and sub-caste in the Indian society. Therefore, the BJP markets itself in defeating traditional caste politics in India. This is coined as the idea called "Samagra Hindutva".



Students at Jamia Millia Islamia University take part in a protest against the Narendra Modi-led government's Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the National Population Register (NRP) on the death anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi in Dehli on January 30, 2020. ( Javed Sultan - Anadolu Agency )

with the idea of India being a nation for the 'Hindus'. Even though the entire concept of Hindutva predates independence, it has experienced a 'renaissance' of sorts under the BJP.

One example which is the increasing embracing of globalization and the model of the market economy in the political structure and the rhetoric of the ruling BJP (Chacko, 2019). Chacko's argument draws upon from the fact that ever since the 1990's, the political elites and the bureaucrats of India have adapted a stance towards the market economy, regarding it to be the main driving force for the society and its transformation.

This vision of making the economic machine work for 'the people' has been a constant trademark of Modi's public rhetoric. Correspondingly, emphasizing the slogans related to the economic development of the country comes with enhancing the corporate sector, the creation of jobs and allowing what Chacko terms as the 'recreation' of an emerging middle class. Additionally, the behaviour of this emerging middle class in Modi's era 'is regulated by the framework of Hindu nationalism' (Chacko, 2019). Therefore, the masses that accept this form of ideology in Modi's era come with a capacity to accept the tenets of Hindutva's cultural framing of what constitutes a nation. As a result, the citizenry who are not part of this idea of proposed 'nationhood' are excluded from the society, i.e., the lower caste and other religious minorities.

It can be argued that this merging of a Hindu nationalist far-right ideology with the economic sphere reflects one of the insidious Hindutva features that has become more pronounced in Modi's India. Such a consolidation in the social domain allows discriminatory actions in a society to become more legitimate. This 'soft' Hindutva approach to make the features of Hindu nationalism more legitimate, according to Daniela Berti, is a factor that has led to a 'normalisation of Hindutva clichés in the contemporary Indian society'. Berti makes this argument by looking at the notion of entrenchment, proposing that various modes of Hindutva in the forms of popular culture, daily speech, and banal nationalism form an integral part in day-to-day practices of life in Indian society (Berti, 2011).

Consequently, while expanding on these arguments of understanding Hindutva and how it has emerged as a force among large sections of the population, the way social media has cultivated Narendra Modi's strongman image cannot be omitted. Modi's political strategy concerning social media, displaying himself as a strong leader and his appearance in various staged performances facilitates symbols associated with the Hindutva ideology. By providing a sense of security for the Indian state, Catarina Kinnvall argues that Narendra Modi, through his populist politics is capable of re-inventing the idea of what nationhood really means. This is done by re-inventing the aspects of religion and subscribing to Hindu masculinity (Kinnvall, 2018). Correspondingly, these features of Hindutva become entrenched in the public mind.

## Contesting the CAA and the NRC

The subtle form of Hindutva which has gained more momentum in the public, especially through the tools which showcase a certain identity of 'Hindu-ness' in digital and economic spaces, come with a tendency to re-invent the concept of the state through law and the constitution. Such a transformation of the Indian state seems to have come from a top-down approach, where the state authority of a leader dictates the course of the society. At the same time, it also subscribes to a bottom-up framework where normalisation of the far-right ideology among the masses dictates the transformation of the state. For instance, the lifting of Article 370 in the state of Jammu and Kashmir is considered to be legitimate among the far-right Hindu nationalist supporters despite the fact that the revoking of the article is seen as undemocratic and anti-minority in the view of human rights organization<sup>2</sup> and in the framework of international public opinion.

Nevertheless, what cannot be ignored is the growing international criticism against the Indian government, which affects its image globally. As the recent happenings in Kashmir were already in the headlines, the attacks on students caused a wave of criticism across the globe<sup>4</sup>.

One of the most notable responses to the CAA has been the Indian students protesting the bill, giving a purposeful rhetoric of the 'true' Indian identity rooted in its historically secular credentials. Student protests in India are ingrained in its complex history going back to the colonial era. Similarly, throughout the post-independence period as well, student politics across India represents multiple dimensions, where the main emphasis of these movements ranges from addressing student grievances to rising against broader socio-economic grievances and ideology (Hazary, 1988). The protest campaigns against the BJP's citizenship bill can be related to two reasons stated above: the protest being associated with a broader political movement in the area surrounding the universities, and with demands being imposed by students on non-university authorities,

i.e., the state. As the student opposition against the CAA and the NRC was met with physical brutality by the Delhi police, it has led to an even greater reaction, mobilizing thousands of students across the country and in the international arena. In that regard, Mukul Kesavan opines that as the Delhi police attacked students of JMU with grenades, teargas and beating students violently, the recent upsurges of these protests and the state's reaction reflects the 'reasons that define the ruling Bharatiya Janata party's majoritarian project-its reason for being' (Kasavan, 2019). Correspondingly, the hyphenation of anti-Muslim sentiment and establishing a homogenized far-right Hindu identity for India.

A recent report, released by women's rights organization 'Independent Women's Initiative', outlines a series of interviews with female participant subjects who are part of these student led protest movement in the city of Delhi. The report finds that these protest movements have been predominantly led by the women between the ages of 19-31. The key observations have been that the violence against students by the Delhi police was unprovoked, as the students were unarmed and were conducting a peaceful protest; physical assaults by male police officers against the female and males alike have been humiliating, making them look like criminals. For instance, the accounts highlight that the students were made to leave the libraries with their hands up in the air (Naqvi, et al., 2019).

Additionally, the report highlights that *'the loss of trust in the capacity of the University to protect its students and the expectation that it should have responded with more assertion against the aggression of the police, was a recurring theme in these accounts - for the attack of December 13 was followed by an even more brutal attack, both on and off campus, on December 15'* (Naqvi, et al., 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Human Rights Watch stated that the measures taken by Indian authorities regarding the anticipation of an unrest in Jammu and Kashmir raises serious human rights concerns (For more: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/08/06/india-basic-freedoms-risk-kashmir>). Human Rights Watch also demanded ceasing the use of unnecessary force against the protestors condemning the CAA (For more: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/12/23/india-deadly-force-used-against-protesters>)

<sup>3</sup> Amnesty international released a petition 'Let Kashmir Speak' following the lockdown (For more: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/get-involved/take-action/let-kashmir-speak/>)

<sup>4</sup> For more: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/01/thousands-protest-cities-india-citizenship-law-200127083331402.html>  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/17/world/asia/india-protests-aishwarya-gosh.html>  
<https://www.ft.com/content/c946aee4-235c-11ea-b8a1-584213ee7b2b>

This reaction in the form of protest movements against the CAA and the NRC has now become a transnational movement as well, taking place on the campuses of the most prestigious universities across the world. The statements issued by the students' (at the University of Oxford) demands that there must be accountability on finding out who 'ordered' the police to enter campus spaces of the Jamia Millia Islamia University and conduct a brutal crackdown against the students. The students deemed the acts to be '*shameful*', also stating that '*the dignity and care with which a country treats its students reflects on its development*'. Moreover, the community also expressed that the attack is undemocratic in nature, and the CAA '*stipulates preferential treatment to religious minorities from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan, excluding the Muslims*,' and a result, '*violates the ideals of equality, pluralism and secularism enshrined in the constitution*.'

These Indian students-led protest movements on campuses and beyond is reflective of how student

activism in India comes with the capacity to change the ongoing far-right political discourse. The University, in this sense becomes a centre for resistance, and the identity-based student movements in this landscape according to Gaurav J. Pathania correspond to being cultural movements as well (Pathania, 2018).

The shared cultural imagination in this context is one, which encompasses a series of youth-led voices against the majoritarian government of the BJP. Here, the student activism has become a political force, which is challenging the status quo of the Hindutva led consciousness across India. There is an evolution of a group identity among young activists, who are in par with the transformations that are taking place in the society, thereby using effective communication to push a purposeful rhetoric of change in the present context of things, where, as constantly mentioned laws are reframed and amended which symbolize factors of a pro-Hindutva discourse.



Students at Jamia Millia Islamia University take part in a protest against the Narendra Modi-led government's Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the National Population Register (NRP) on the death anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi in Dehli on January 30, 2020. (Javed Sultan - Anadolu Agency)

# Implications for India's Global Image

One of the biggest setbacks for India under the Modi era due to the developments mentioned in this paper in the domestic political sphere has been the global image of India in the international community. Although, Modi is known to utilize soft-power tools in his diplomacy by reaching out to the diaspora communities and liberalisation of the visa processes; along with getting the United Nations on board to have a 'yoga day', can all be seen as tools of soft-power to win public opinion (Mohan, 2019). Nevertheless, Daya Kishan Thussu argues that possessing soft-power elements is not enough in making India attractive enough in the global space (Thussu, 2013). In that regard and by looking at Thussu's argument, India failing to utilize a right mix of its soft and hard power, which remains open to communication and cooperation, is widely debated in the BJP led era. For Mohan, this comes with the difference in the type of Hindu-Buddhist culture that is promoted abroad, than the 'dark' realities more in favour of Hindu-nationalist in the local domain. Similarly, the growing tensions regarding caste and religion, dents India's image as a 'multi-religious and a multi-cultural society' in the ongoing Modi decade (Mohan, 2019).

Therefore, the global and international criticism that has dawned upon the Modi-led state of India needs to be underscored. While the criticism regarding the revoking of Article 370 was on the grounds, the global condemnation regarding India's decision has ranged. The Organization of Islamic cooperation has expressed concern over the recent passing of the CAA, mentioning that it has been closely following developments regarding the Muslim minorities in India. Similarly, US policymakers have been critical regarding India's 'rightward' shifts in its policymaking. This can be seen in the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USIRF) raising concerns over the legislation. Correspondingly, demanding sanctions against the Home Minister, Amit Shah. Similarly, various US leaders from the democratic wing question the culture of shared values that rest on honesty and respect of religious pluralism. In addition, anti-CAA draft resolutions were passed in the EU parliament, which the Indian state refuted claiming CAA as being an internal matter.

Another assessment that needs to be made in relation to

the Modi dynamics is how all the passing of legislations and harbouring an anti-minority sentiment in the state of India, has affected regional policy frameworks, India's image, and perceptions with the neighbouring countries. For the purposes of this paper, two countries that will be considered (who are also part of the CAA): Pakistan and Bangladesh. While in the former case the constant post-colonial rivalry and the contest over the region of Kashmir remains the focal issue with constant structural problems, the relationship with the latter seemed to show signs of transformation over the years under Modi (Mohan, 2019).

In Pakistan's context and by drawing upon the Kashmir issue, India's crackdown in Kashmir gained attention among the international community, especially in multilateral platforms such as the United Nations. Realizing the escalation between two nuclear armed rivals, the members voiced grave concerns over the situation, with the UN Secretary general stating that the situation is being observed with 'great concern' (Nations, 2019).

Previously, what has also remained more controversial with the Kashmir issue according to Krishnasamy and Wuold's argument is India's image in the public domain and how its peacekeeping role is paradoxical; with India being a torchbearer of peacekeeping missions abroad while avoiding UN presence in the disputed territory (Krishnasamy & Weigold, 2003). Looking at this practice in the post-Cold war context, they argue that India vowing itself to be an active peacekeeper does come with enhancing its international image and being interested in its global power ambitions, it is still prominent that in the region of Kashmir—considered to be the most contested one—UN peacekeeping is not in India's agenda (Krishnasamy & Weigold, 2003).

Ignoring such 'foreign' interventions and statements, it comes as no surprise that most of the rhetoric regarding the disputed territory and the lifting of Article 370 has been consistently emphasized as an 'internal matter' by the Modi-led BJP government. Similar rhetoric has also been used regarding the most recent happenings related to the CAA. Experts argue that regarding these developments to be solely an 'internal matter' does not

provide a convincing explanation in the end, considering that India's secular and democratic credentials have taken a hit (Rajagopalan, 2020).

There is no doubt that the relationship between Pakistan and India under the BJP rule has become more contested and complicated, especially during Modi's leadership; on the other hand, the newly passed CAA also undermines India's relationship with neighbouring Bangladesh, which remains a Muslim majority country.

In the case of Bangladesh within the contemporary political framework, Pattanaik puts forth the role of perception building and how it cultivates a form of a discourse, which also influences the nation's foreign and bilateral policymaking. According to Pattanaik, during the last decade, there has been a flourishing of relationship and greater co-operation between the two countries, with both countries engaging in trade, anti-terror activities coupled with intelligence cooperation (Pattanaik, 2018).

## Conclusion

All the features related to far-right Hindu nationalism which come with re-inventing what is really meant by being an 'Indian' have gained greater momentum during the Modi-led BJP era. This is not to say that the state of India under previous leadership did not have caste divisions and anti-minority sentiments. These features have always been part of the conditioning of the society since the colonial period and the post-colonial period that followed independence. What deserves to be noted is that within these complex workings in the Indian society, how the notion of Hindutva, cultivated through the far-right ideology is not anymore ascribed merely to mob culture and vigilantism. Transformation in media and its culture, trends in political transnationalism (i.e. rise in global populism) as well as globalisation coupled with the increase in popularity of the BJP has harboured various 'milder' and 'softer' versions of the Hindutva. As

However, due to recent developments regarding the NRC and the CAA, both moves have complicated the India and Bangladeshi ties. After the passing of the CAA in the Indian parliament, Bangladeshi diplomats have withdrawn their interest in visiting India and have postponed meetings to discuss issues related to river management (Ranjan, 2020). Moreover, what has also been of concern for Bangladesh is the influx of refugees that will be created after the NRC in the state of Assam, similar to the Rohingya crisis, which is not in Bangladesh's capacity to withstand. Furthermore, considering that Bangladesh is a Muslim majority country, what has been of greater concern is the anti-Muslim character of the CAA and the NRC. With that in regard, the far-right BJP initiatives come with a capacity in receiving a backlash as Islamist fundamentalists group, which operate in the state of Bangladesh, may retaliate with extremist measures (Habib, 2020).

a result, the 'othering' of the people who are not deemed fit enough to be part of the Hindutva doctrine has been increasingly normalised.

Passing the CAA and the NRC and resulting changes to the constitution are all correlated factors of this process of the normalisation of the far-right BJP led discourse. Modi's nationalism, in this sense, goes beyond the formal branding of the government and has entrenched itself into the culture. Furthermore, it has contributed to the cultivation a culture of impunity and terror among its own population. All these aspects of the Modi-led era; however, present the majoritarian approach of the BJP led government in a negative spectrum, denting India's image globally, where Modi's soft-power diplomacy fails to work and regional bilateral relationships have been damaged.

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