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Hindu–Muslim Conflict in India: Causes, Consequences & Resolution

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Abstract

India, renowned for its status as the world's largest democracy, is a richly diverse nation characterized by a multitude of ethnicities, languages, religions, and cultures. This diversity, while a source of national pride, also reveals profound fissures where historical grievances, socioeconomic disparities, and political aspirations intersect, fostering significant communal and ethnopolitical conflicts. The Hindu-Muslim conflict serves as a prominent example of such tensions, deeply rooted and shaping the socio-political fabric of the nation for centuries. This research paper investigates the origins and complexities of the Hindu-Muslim conflict by addressing three fundamental questions: What are the underlying causes of this persistent violence? Who bears responsibility for perpetuating these conflicts? And what practical and effective measures can be implemented to address and prevent their recurrence? To answer these questions, the paper employs a robust theoretical framework that synthesizes perspectives from sociology, political science, and conflict studies, with a primary focus on the instrumentalist approach to ethnopolitical conflicts. This approach highlights how political actors exploit ethnic identities and historical grievances for strategic gains. The study is underpinned by a detailed analysis of major case studies of communal violence, offering insights into the interplay between ethnic identity formation, historical legacies, and socioeconomic inequalities. The paper further examines the role of contemporary political elites in exacerbating tensions through strategic manipulation of communal identities and the politicization of cultural symbols. By exploring the dynamics of these factors, the research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the conflict's origins and persistence. It also proposes actionable strategies for conflict resolution, including policy recommendations and community-based interventions, to foster long-term communal harmony and stability. Ultimately, this study contributes to the broader discourse on managing ethnopolitical conflicts by offering nuanced insights and practical solutions for mitigating violence and promoting peace in a diverse and complex societal context.

Keywords: *Hindu–Muslim; Conflict; India*

1. Introduction

India, often celebrated as the world's largest democracy, is a tapestry of diversity, woven together by myriad ethnicities, languages, religions, and cultures. From the snow-capped peaks of the Himalayas to the sun-kissed shores of the Indian Ocean, the Indian subcontinent paints a stunning portrait of pluralism. Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism, Jainism, and numerous indigenous faiths converge, each contributing a vibrant spectrum of customs, traditions, and rituals. This multiplicity of religious communities not only enriches India's cultural fabric but also stands as a testament to the nation's enduring pluralistic ethos [1] (Chhokar, 2007). Yet, beneath this diversity lie fissures and fault lines where ethnic identities intersect with historical grievances, socioeconomic disparities, and political aspirations, creating a breeding ground for escalating communal and ethnopolitical friction [2] (Kaufman, 2022). These tensions, left unchecked, frequently erupt into violent conflicts, posing a grave threat to the delicate fabric of social harmony. A prime example of this phenomenon is the multifaceted and deeply rooted issue of the Hindu-Muslim conflict in India, which has shaped the socio-political landscape of the nation for centuries. Over the past few decades, instances of religious and ethnic riots, particularly between Hindus and Muslims, have witnessed a troubling surge. According to Nityanand Rai, the Indian Minister of State for Home Affairs, there were approximately 3,400 communal riots based on religion or ethnicity between 2016 and 2020, as disclosed to the Indian Parliament [3] (Murali, 2022).

Strikingly, the majority of these riots follow remarkably similar patterns. They typically begin with a mobilized mob, armed with weapons and swords, marching in a rally where insults are hurled at followers of different religions. Concurrently, religious figures and politicians deliver inflammatory speeches, further stoking tensions. Soon after, disturbances escalate as individuals, allegedly brought in to instigate chaos, ignite violence by throwing stones, vandalizing public property, or setting fires [4] (Brass, 2011). In the aftermath of these riots, heart-wrenching tales of sorrow and devastation unfold, shedding light on the profound anguish experienced by individuals and families. The loss of loved ones leaves gaping wounds in communities as people grapple with the pain of saying goodbye to those they held dear. Harrowing accounts emerge of women subjected to unspeakable violence, enduring the trauma of rape and assault. Innocent children are left orphaned, their lives forever altered by the unfathomable cruelty unleashed during the riots. The destruction wrought by these riots extends far beyond the loss of human life; families are left homeless, their dwellings reduced to ashes, and their livelihoods shattered [5] (Rehman, 2019). Amidst these tragedies, heartwarming stories of humanity and solidarity emerge, shining bright as beacons of hope. Whether it's Hindu neighbors standing as guardians, bravely protecting their Muslim counterparts, or Muslims offering refuge and support to Hindu families, these acts of compassion and bravery serve as powerful reminders of the resilience of the human spirit [6] (Godbole, 2020).

The central questions posed here revolve around the origins of this specific type of violence: Why does it arise in the first place? Who bears responsibility for its occurrence? And what feasible solutions can be implemented to address and prevent its recurrence? To explore these questions, this research paper delves into the historical, cultural, and socio-political complexities of the Hindu-Muslim conflict in India. By examining the key events and underlying factors that have contributed to this ongoing issue, the paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the conflict and potential pathways for resolution.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this paper will integrate diverse theories and models from sociology, political science, and conflict studies - aiming to provide a comprehensive analysis of the Hindu-Muslim conflict in India, offering a multifaceted understanding of the conflict's complexity.

2.1 Ethnicity and Identity Formation

Ethnicity, as a concept, plays a fundamental role in shaping individuals' sense of belonging and identity within a group. At its core, ethnicity revolves around key elements that focus on distinctive cultural attributes uniting individuals within a specific group. These attributes encompass a wide range of factors, including common ancestry, shared traditions, language, historical experiences, religious practices, and patterns of social interaction. Such cultural traits serve as the building blocks of ethnic identity, providing a sense of continuity and cohesion among group members [2](Kaufman, 2022). As individuals navigate the intricate terrain of their racial and ethnic identities, they emerge as active agents in the construction of societies, the evolution of religions, and the dynamics of social interactions. This process of personal identification lays the foundation for the formation of cohesive ethnic communities, each characterized by a rich tapestry of cultural heritage and a profound sense of collective belonging. However, the distinction that fosters a sense of unity within ethnic communities can also serve as a catalyst for ethno-political conflicts when confronted with the broader societal fabric. While ethnic identity provides a source of pride, solidarity, and belonging for individuals within their respective communities, it can also exacerbate tensions and divisions when perceived as being in conflict with other groups or the larger society [7] (Carter, Irani, & Volkan, 2009).

2.2 Ethno-political Conflicts: Instrumentalist Perspective

The academic discourse on the conceptualization of ethno-political conflicts reveals a multifaceted spectrum of perspectives, each contributing distinctive insights into the intricate dynamics involved. Within this array, the instrumentalist perspective is particularly notable for its pragmatic and nuanced examination of ethnic conflict, especially with regard to the Hindu-Muslim tensions in India.

The instrumentalist perspective conceptualizes ethno-political conflicts as the outcome of strategic calculations, wherein political actors exploit ethnic identities to further their objectives. Unlike primordial or essentialist approaches, which emphasize inherent ethnic characteristics, instrumentalism underscores the use of ethnic identities as tools for political maneuvering and power consolidation [2] (Kaufman, 2022). The 'divide and rule' policy implemented by colonial powers, particularly the British, during the colonial era exemplifies the instrumentalist perspective on ethno-political conflicts. This policy represented a deliberate strategy by colonial authorities to manipulate pre-existing ethnic and religious divisions within colonized societies, often intensifying tensions and rivalries among different groups [8](Rahman, Clarke, & Byrne, 2017). Moreover, colonial powers not only exploited existing ethnic and religious divisions within colonized societies but also imposed arbitrary territorial boundaries that often ignored pre-existing ethnic, tribal, and cultural affiliations. This process of 'partitioning' or 'territorial demarcation' had profound and enduring impacts on the affected regions, intensifying intergroup tensions and setting the stage for future conflicts. The repercussions of colonial boundary drawing continue to influence the geopolitical landscape of many post-colonial states, fueling ongoing disputes and conflicts over contested territories and borderlands. In certain instances, these artificial borders have become persistent sources of tension and instability, aggravating ethnic, religious, and nationalist sentiments and obstructing efforts toward regional integration and cooperation [9](Bose, 2007).

2.3 Generational Trauma and Collective Memory

The traumas stemming from violence and upheaval during partitions can have a profound and enduring impact, passing through generations via familial narratives, cultural practices, and collective memory. These experiences leave lasting scars on individuals, families, and communities, shaping their worldviews, attitudes, and behaviors, and influencing their interactions with others and their sense of belonging in society [10](Muller, 2022). As these traumas are transmitted across generations, they can contribute to the perpetuation of intercommunal hatred and animosity. The narratives of suffering, loss, and victimhood passed down within communities can foster a sense of collective grievance and

resentment towards perceived “others,” fueling cycles of distrust, fear, and hostility [11](Byrne, 2008). Maurice Halbwachs' concept of collective memory highlights that our recollections of the past are shaped and sustained by the social groups to which we belong, rather than being purely individual phenomena. According to Halbwachs, memories are reconstructed in the present to serve the needs and concerns of these groups, making collective memory dynamic and adaptable. Political leaders and social actors can manipulate this memory by emphasizing or downplaying certain historical events to mobilize support, justify actions, or legitimize policies. This manipulation can lead to heightened tensions and conflicts, as differing historical narratives between groups can fuel disputes and misunderstandings. Thus, collective memory plays a crucial role in shaping group identity and influencing socio-political dynamics [12](Halbwachs, 1992).

2.4 Political Dynamics: The Strategic Exploitation of Ethnic Divisions in Modern Politics

The tactics of 'divide and rule' remain prevalent in contemporary politics, particularly within many developing countries, where ruling elites often exploit inter-religious and inter-ethnic divisions to consolidate their control over power and resources [7](Carter, Irani, & Volkan, 2009). A common strategy involves intensifying existing divisions along religious or ethnic lines, casting certain groups as outsiders or adversaries of the state. By scapegoating particular communities, ruling elites can divert attention from their own failures or corruption and mobilize support from the majority population [13](Kabir, 2020).

2.5 Politicization of Monuments and Heritage

Another strategic maneuver employed by ruling elites involves the deliberate portrayal of monuments and heritage associated with one community as detrimental to the national culture. This calculated distortion is designed to undermine the perceived legitimacy and significance of cultural symbols belonging to minority groups. By framing such heritage as incompatible with or threatening to the dominant national identity, elites can inflame ethnopolitical tensions and mobilize nationalist sentiment. This manipulation serves multiple purposes. It reinforces divisive narratives that pit communities against one another, heightening tensions and fostering a sense of competition or conflict over cultural dominance. This strategy also works to marginalize minority groups by delegitimizing their cultural contributions and historical presence, thereby reinforcing their exclusion from the national mainstream. As a result, the broader societal discourse becomes polarized, with the majority community's narratives and symbols being elevated, while those of the minorities are marginalized or vilified [14](Russian, 2022).

2.6 Historical Insights: Bhagat Singh's Analysis

Bhagat Singh's analysis of communal conflicts in India, written nearly a century ago, remains strikingly relevant today. His perceptive observations and insights into the underlying causes of communal tensions provide a valuable framework for understanding the enduring challenges faced by Indian society. In his 1928 article, 'Communal Riots and Their Solution,' Bhagat Singh identifies the communal mindset prevalent among certain individuals as a primary factor contributing to communal violence. The violence perpetrated by rioters from various religious backgrounds highlights the indiscriminate nature of such conflicts, wherein innocent individuals are targeted solely due to their religious affiliation. He also emphasizes the herd mentality that often characterizes communal conflicts, where individuals, influenced by heightened emotions, succumb to the collective frenzy of violent mobs. Driven by a desire to assert dominance and a sense of solidarity, individuals are easily swept up in the communal upheaval. During periods of tension, the sight of others from the same religious or ethnic group arming themselves can elicit a heightened sense of solidarity and a compulsion to protect one's community. This intensified emotional state increases susceptibility to participating in acts of violence, as individuals feel a strong imperative to defend their group against perceived threats. Furthermore, Bhagat Singh critiques the role of communal politicians in exacerbating tensions and inciting violence through

inflammatory rhetoric. By capitalizing on religious divisions and amplifying sectarian animosities, these politicians aim to rally support from their respective religious communities and solidify their power base. This exploitation perpetuates a cycle of communal violence and discord, undermining social cohesion and threatening the integrity of Indian society [15](Kumar, 2018).

2.7 Socio-Economic Disparities and Communal Violence

Though the factors contributing to communal violence are indeed multifaceted, but underlying these are fundamental economic considerations that often act as catalysts for such conflicts. Karl Marx's theory posits that economic factors are central to societal dynamics, asserting that disparities in wealth and opportunity play a crucial role in shaping social relations and conflicts. According to Marx, economic inequality creates a foundation for social stratification and marginalization, which can lead to tensions and violence [16](Stanfield, 1979). Conversely, unresolved economic grievances can also lead to social discord and the rise of authoritarian regimes. The ascension of Adolf Hitler in Germany during the interwar period is a poignant example of this phenomenon [17](Straumann, 2019). Thus, both revolutionary movements and the rise of authoritarian figures can be understood as responses to severe economic crises and the failure of established institutions to resolve these issues constructively.

In contemporary India, economic disparities and socio-economic marginalization significantly exacerbate intergroup tensions and contribute to outbreaks of communal violence. Economic inequality often manifests as unequal access to essential resources such as education, employment, and healthcare, fostering feelings of injustice and frustration among marginalized groups intensifying existing prejudices and heighten intergroup animosity, creating cycles of violence and retaliation where economic and communal tensions reinforce each other [18](More, 2023).

3. Historical Backdrop Against Which Hindu-Muslim Conflict Unfolds

3.1 Mughal Era: Political and Religious Dynamics

The Indian subcontinent has long been a melting pot of diverse cultures, religions, and civilizations. Hinduism, with its intricate tapestry of beliefs and practices, coexisted alongside Islam, which arrived with Arab traders and later spread through conquest and missionary endeavors. While periods of harmony and cultural exchange were prevalent, tensions occasionally surfaced, particularly during times of political upheaval and power struggles among various rulers. One notable example from the Mughal era illustrates this dynamic: Aurangzeb's imposition of the Jizyah tax on non-Muslims, driven by religious zeal, incited resistance from Hindu leaders like Shivaji Bhonsle, exacerbating tensions between the Mughal Empire and Hindu rulers. However, it is crucial to recognize that the escalation of tensions during the Mughal era was primarily driven by a complex interplay of political ambitions, power struggles, and territorial disputes among the empires of the time. While religious differences certainly played a role, they were not the predominant driving force behind these conflicts. Instead, competing agendas for political supremacy and control over strategic territories emerged as pivotal factors in heightening tensions between the Mughal Empire and other regional powers. Furthermore, while examining the historical dynamics between Hindus and Muslims in India, it is imperative to recognize the complexity beyond simplistic narratives. Contrary to the oversimplified depictions found in many historical accounts, which often portray Hindus and Muslims as rigidly distinct and perpetually in conflict, the reality was far more nuanced. Prior to the colonial era, religious identities were not always rigidly defined or immutable. Individuals frequently belonged to multiple communities, and interactions between Hindus and Muslims were characterized by fluidity rather than strict delineation [19](Verghese, 2018).

3.2 Divide and Rule: The British Strategy for Managing Colonial India

The British colonial administration is widely recognized for sowing the seeds of communal and religious animosity, a legacy that endures and continues to affect religious harmony in India [19](Verghese, 2018). The "divide and rule" policies employed by the British were designed to exploit pre-existing religious and cultural divisions for political gain, deliberately setting communities against each other to maintain colonial control. By inciting inter-group and inter-religious conflicts, colonial powers aimed to prevent unity among the colonized populace, thereby diverting attention from socio-political injustices and economic exploitation [20](Lemonius, 2017). Furthermore, the colonial authorities systematically institutionalized ethnic divisions by categorizing communities along religious and ethnic lines, favoring specific groups in governance and administration. These policies included discriminatory practices in employment, housing, and political representation, privileging certain ethnic communities while marginalizing others, thereby intensifying existing social and religious tensions [11](Byrne, 2008). In India, British colonial rulers frequently favored the Brahmin caste, which holds high social status in Hindu society, in administrative matters. This preferential treatment reinforced religion- and caste-based inequalities, marginalizing other communities within Indian society. Brahmin Hindus were often overrepresented in administrative positions, enjoying privileges denied to other groups [21](Chakravorty, 2019).

3.3 The Partition of India: A Watershed Event

The partition of India in 1947 was a watershed moment that dramatically altered Hindu-Muslim relations. The demand for a separate Muslim state, driven by leaders such as Muhammad Ali Jinnah and the Muslim League, led to the creation of Pakistan. The partition was fueled by fears of religious persecution and the desire for self-determination among Muslims, as well as the perceived inability of the Congress Party to adequately represent Muslim interests. The partition resulted in one of the largest mass migrations in the history, resulting in the forcible displacement of millions of Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs, leading to extensive violence, bloodshed, and communal riots that caused significant loss of life and property. The enduring trauma of partition continues to echo in the collective memory of the people of India and Pakistan, shaping their national identities and influencing inter-communal relations [22](Brass, 2003).

3.4 Early Post-Independence Efforts

In the wake of India's independence in 1947, the newly established government implemented several measures aimed at fostering communal harmony and integration among its diverse population. One of the foundational steps was the adoption of the Indian Constitution in 1950, which enshrined key principles designed to promote equality and unity. The Constitution established India as a secular state, guaranteeing freedom of religion and prohibiting discrimination based on religion, caste, or ethnicity. This framework aimed to protect minority rights and ensure that all citizens had equal access to opportunities and resources. The Indian government also undertook various social and economic initiatives to address the disparities and grievances that could lead to communal tensions. [23](Chandra, 2008).

4. Some Glaring Instances and Features of Hindu-Muslim Conflict

4.1 Gujarat Riots 2002

2002 Gujarat riots represent a tragic episode in India's recent history, exemplifying the catastrophic effects of unchecked political manipulation and the heightened vulnerability of marginalized communities to communal violence. The riots were ignited when a train carrying Hindu pilgrims returning from Ayodhya stopped in Godhra, a town with a significant Muslim population and a history of

religious tensions. Allegedly, Hindu activists aboard the train were chanting religious slogans, which led to a confrontation with local Muslim residents. Within moments, Coach S-6 of the train was engulfed in flames [24](Engineer, 2002).

The charred remains of the 59 victims were displayed publicly in Ahmedabad, Gujarat's largest city. This public display, combined with incendiary rhetoric from religious and political leaders, exacerbated communal animosity and fueled further violence. The aftermath of the incident unleashed widespread violence and destruction, with Muslim communities bearing the brunt of the brutality. The anger over the deaths of the pilgrims led enraged Hindu mobs to engage in a horrific spree of rampage, rape, looting, and murder that persisted for over two months. The atrocities committed during this period were extreme: mothers were impaled, children were burned alive, and fathers were brutally hacked to death. The human toll was staggering, with approximately 1,000 individuals, predominantly Muslims, losing their lives. Around 20,000 Muslim homes and businesses were destroyed, along with 360 places of worship, displacing roughly 150,000 people [25](Sinha & Suppes, 2015). Among the most heinous incidents were the massacres at Naroda Patiya, where approximately 97 people were killed, and at Gulbarg Society, a Muslim housing complex. In a desperate attempt to seek refuge, Muslims gathered at the home of Ehsan Jafri, a former Member of Parliament. Despite Mr. Jafri's urgent pleas for assistance to influential figures, no aid was forthcoming. Tragically, 69 people, including Mr. Jafri, were brutally killed, with Mr. Jafri himself being dismembered and burned [26](Ray, 2018). It is pertinent to mention here that in 2005, an official investigation by the Indian government determined that the fire was accidental and not the result of any deliberate action by Muslims.

4.2 Babri Masjid Demolition

Demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 is a pivotal event in Indian history. On that day, tens of thousands of Hindu activists stormed the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya, systematically demolishing it with sledgehammers. Despite an order from India's Supreme Court to preserve the site, L.K. Advani, a prominent leader of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (B.J.P.) and the World Hindu Council, played a crucial role in mobilizing the mob that demolished the mosque. The mob, driven by the belief that the site was the birthplace of the Hindu deity Ram, asserted that the mosque had been built by the first Mughal emperor, Babur, in the 16th century, thereby usurping a site of profound religious significance for Hindus. The aftermath of the Babri Masjid demolition was devastating, resulting in widespread riots that claimed the lives of over 1,000 people, the majority of whom were Muslims. These clashes were among the most severe religious conflicts in India since the violent partition of British India in 1947 [27](Bacchetta, 2000). Subsequent construction of the Ram Mandir, following the Supreme Court of India's landmark decision in 2019 to adjudicate the contentious Babri Masjid-Ram Mandir dispute, underscored the legal system's hypocrisy regarding the rights of minority communities. Although the judgment's concluding remarks acknowledged the wrongful deprivation of the Muslim community's place of worship and expressed regret over the destruction of the Babri Masjid, it was immediately followed by a denial of their claim to the disputed property [28](Sharma, 2019).

4.3 Haryana Riots 2023

Haryana Riots 2023, also known as the Nuh violence, underscore the dangerous outcomes of inflammatory rhetoric and the susceptibility of social media to exploitation by individuals with extremist ideologies. The violence began on July 31, 2023, in the state of Haryana, located about 75 kilometers south of New Delhi. The unrest was triggered by a religious procession organized by Hindu nationalist factions, which was intended to celebrate a Hindu festival. The situation rapidly deteriorated when Monu Manesar, a prominent figure associated with the far-right Hindu nationalist group Bajrang Dal and under police investigation for his alleged involvement in the lynching of two Muslim cattle traders earlier that year, began disseminating a series of incendiary videos on social media. In these videos, Manesar

launched derogatory attacks against the Muslim community and declared his intention to join the Hindu rally, particularly as it passed through areas with significant Muslim populations. The virality of Manesar's videos, fueled by their provocative and extremist content, attracted individuals with radical religious sentiments, further inflaming an already tense atmosphere. The dissemination of such content served to escalate communal tensions and mobilize people for confrontation. In response, members of the Muslim community organized themselves to challenge the procession, which led to violent clashes. The violence resulted in the deaths of six individuals, including two police officers, and caused widespread fear and unrest in the region [29](Jain, 2023).

4.4 Bangalore Violence 2020

The Bangalore Violence of 2020 also serves as a striking example of how social media can exacerbate tensions and trigger violent outbreaks. The incident began with allegedly derogatory posts on Facebook made by P. Naveen, the nephew of a Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) in Karnataka. These posts were perceived as offensive to Prophet Muhammad and Islamic beliefs, leading to significant outrage among local communities. The controversy rapidly spread as screenshots of the posts circulated widely through WhatsApp groups and other social media platforms. The viral nature of the content fueled anger and resentment, prompting calls for action across various social media channels. On the same day, social media platforms played a crucial role in mobilizing people to gather at the local police station to protest against the offensive posts. Approximately 1,000 individuals, spurred by religious and political leaders, assembled outside the police station. The protest quickly escalated into violence, with the mob setting several police cars on fire and forcefully entering the police station. The violence extended to P. Naveen's residence, which was vandalized and set ablaze by the mob. As the situation spiraled out of control, police reinforcements were deployed to protect the police station. Despite the use of tear gas to disperse the unruly crowd, the mob continued its attacks, leading law enforcement to resort to live ammunition in self-defense. Tragically, the gunfire resulted in the deaths of three individuals, and approximately 50 police personnel sustained injuries [30](Arakal, 2020).

4.5 North-East Delhi Riots 2020

The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), enacted by the Indian Government in December 2019, represents one of the most contentious pieces of legislation in recent Indian history, sparking widespread debate and protest both domestically and internationally. Furthermore, the controversy surrounding the CAA is exacerbated by its potential conjunction with the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the National Population Register (NPR). The NRC, which was previously implemented in the northeastern state of Assam, requires individuals to provide documentary proof of their citizenship. Critics fear that if the NRC is implemented nationwide, millions of Indians, particularly Muslims, who are unable to produce the requisite documentation could be declared illegal immigrants [31](Seshadri, 2020).

Beginning on December 15, 2019, and continuing until March 24, 2020, the Shaheen Bagh protests, a landmark movement of peaceful resistance that erupted in Delhi was primarily led by Muslim women, who took to the streets to voice their opposition to the CAA, NRC, and NPR. The Shaheen Bagh protest became a powerful symbol of grassroots activism, as women, many of whom were homemakers with little previous experience in political activism, braved harsh winter conditions to maintain a 24-hour sit-in on a major public road in Delhi. Their resolve and determination garnered widespread attention and support, both nationally and internationally, as they articulated their fears of being rendered stateless in their own country [32](Bhatia & Gajjala, 2020). The remarkable support garnered by the peaceful protest at Shaheen Bagh, against the backdrop of a rising Hindu supremacist ideology, significantly unsettled the ruling classes and posed a formidable challenge to their authority. This challenge was met with a brutal and devastating response, as evidenced by the 2020 Delhi riots, also known as the North-East Delhi riots. The riots, characterized by waves of bloodshed and widespread property destruction in North-East Delhi,

began on February 23, 2020, and were primarily instigated by Hindu mobs targeting Muslim communities. The epicenter of the violence was Jaffrabad, a neighborhood where a sit-in protest against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) had been ongoing [33](Arora, Chitalkar & Malhotra, 2020)

The situation reached a tipping point when Kapil Mishra, a prominent leader of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) known for his inflammatory rhetoric, issued an ultimatum to the Delhi Police, demanding that they clear the roads of protestors or face consequences. Mishra's ultimatum, delivered publicly and in a highly charged atmosphere, acted as a catalyst for the violence that followed. Shortly after his statement, large groups of rioters, many of whom were armed and carrying saffron flags symbolizing Hindu nationalism, began attacking Muslim-majority neighborhoods. The violence quickly escalated, spreading to several localities, including Shiv Vihar, where rioters systematically targeted Muslim homes, businesses, and places of worship. Eyewitnesses and reports from the ground revealed that the rioters were not only well-organized but also acted with impunity, often in the presence of law enforcement officials who either did nothing to stop the violence or were allegedly complicit in it. Over the course of three days, the violence resulted in significant loss of life and widespread destruction. At least 53 people were killed, the vast majority of whom were Muslims, and approximately 200 others were injured. The scale of the destruction was immense, with many Muslim families losing their homes, businesses, and places of worship. The riots left deep scars on the affected communities, with thousands of Muslims forced to flee their neighborhoods, abandoning their belongings and ancestral roots out of fear for their lives. [33](Arora, Chitalkar & Malhotra, 2020).

The response from the authorities in the aftermath of the riots further exacerbated the situation, particularly regarding the targeting of Muslim youth. Zafarul Islam Khan, the former chairman of the Delhi Minorities Commission, highlighted a disturbing trend of arrests and detentions of Muslim youths in the wake of the violence. Since the riots began, approximately 1,300 Muslim youths have been arrested, raising concerns about a concerted effort to shift the blame for the violence onto the victims rather than the perpetrators. Among those arrested were prominent student activists, including Umar Khalid, along with seven other students from Jamia Millia Islamia and Jawaharlal Nehru University—two of India's most prestigious academic institutions known for their vocal criticism of the government's policies. These individuals were charged under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), a controversial law that grants sweeping powers to law enforcement agencies, allowing them to detain individuals without bail and hold them in custody for extended periods without due process. [34](Taskin, 2020).

4.6 Being Gender-Specific

The collapse of social structures and the erosion of protective measures during ethno-political conflicts create a perilous environment for women, who are often disproportionately affected by such upheavals. In the chaos of conflict, armed factions may deliberately target women as a means of asserting dominance, instilling terror, and undermining the fabric of entire communities. Women's bodies become battlegrounds for power struggles, and their suffering is used strategically to further the objectives of warring parties. Rape and sexual violence are frequently employed as tools of warfare, deliberately inflicted to intimidate, humiliate, and subdue entire populations. This form of violence is not merely an act of aggression but a calculated strategy designed to break the spirit of a community and destabilize social cohesion. [35](Wilmer, 2022). One such heart-wrenching example is the case of Bilkis Bano, who was just 20 years old when she fled Godhra in February 2002, following communal riots. In their search for safety, Bilkis and her family were confronted with unimaginable horror when they were attacked by a group of 30 armed men in Chapparwad village. Despite being five months pregnant, Bilkis was subjected to brutal gang rape along with her mother and three other women. Tragically, she was the sole survivor among the women, losing 14 family members that day, including her 3-year-old daughter [36](Explained Desk, 2024).

4.7 Cross-Religious Victimization

During the riots, the violence transcended religious boundaries, driven by a broader agenda of communal polarization and vengeance, which fueled a climate of fear and mistrust. This indiscriminate nature of violence highlights the pervasive and chaotic nature of such communal unrest, where affiliations and personal relationships were often disregarded in the frenzy of hostility. The attackers targeted anyone perceived to be connected to or sympathetic towards the Muslim community, regardless of their own religious identity [37](Jha, 2017). Gauri's experience starkly illustrates this brutal reality of violence during communal riots. Although she was Hindu, she became a target when a Hindu mob attacked her village during the 2002 Gujarat Riots. Gauri, who was in a relationship with a Muslim man and living with him, had hoped that her Hindu identity might offer some degree of protection. In a horrifying act of violence, Gauri was gang-raped in front of 30 to 40 villagers, none of whom intervened. This egregious act of violence highlights the extreme breakdown of social norms and the pervasive nature of communal hatred, where even the personal affiliations and religious identities of victims fail to shield them from brutal attacks. [37](Jha, 2017).

5. Factors Inciting Contemporary Hindu-Muslim Conflict in India

5.1 Identity Politics and Religious Exploitation

India exemplifies a significant case study in identity and ethnic politics, where political leaders exploit tensions between Hindu and Muslim communities to enhance their electoral support. By portraying Muslims as antagonists to Indian nationalism and insinuating ambitions of dominance, these leaders foster division and suspicion among religious groups. This manipulation of religious divisions for political advantage becomes particularly pronounced during electoral campaigns, where inflammatory rhetoric and polarizing narratives are strategically employed to galvanize support from the majority Hindu electorate. By framing Muslims as 'others' who threaten Hindu identity and national unity, these leaders aim to consolidate their power and secure electoral victories [38](Chatterji, 2022).

5.2 Hate Speech and Incitement

A particularly alarming manifestation of this trend occurred on December 22, 2021, when a viral video revealed the proceedings of a "Dharma Sansad" (religious parliament) in Haridwar, Uttarakhand. In this gathering, spiritual leaders, politicians, and activists took an oath to transform India into a Hindu Rashtra (state) through the extermination of Muslims. The event, attended by influential figures, openly justified genocidal violence and called for the ethnocide of Muslims, urging Hindus to engage in violent campaigns against the Muslim community [38] (Chatterji, 2022). Data from the India Hate Lab reveals a troubling trend in the rise of hate speech incidents targeting Muslims, with 668 documented cases reported in 2023 alone. Approximately 75% of these incidents occurred in states governed by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. [39](Muzaffar, 2024).

5.3 Socio-Economic Disparities

Economic competition between communities can significantly contribute to communal tensions. As resources such as jobs, educational opportunities, and economic benefits become increasingly scarce, competition for these limited assets can generate friction and conflict. This competition often intensifies communal divisions, as individuals and groups perceive their economic struggles as part of a broader contest with rival communities. Political rhetoric and social divisions further amplify these tensions. By framing economic struggles as a zero-sum game, where one community's gain is perceived as another's loss, such rhetoric reinforces stereotypes and deepens existing grievances. This manipulation of economic

competition through political and social lenses exacerbates communal tensions, creating a more polarized and conflict-prone environment [40](Mitra, & Ray, 2014). An empirical study conducted by (Mitra, & Ray, 2014), highlights a pronounced correlation between increasing Muslim per-capita expenditures and rising levels of religious conflict over the years. Specifically, the analysis reveals that as economic well-being among Muslims improves, there is a significant uptick in religious violence. This pattern contrasts starkly with the relationship observed for Hindus: Hindu economic gains do not correspond to a rise in conflict. In fact, the study finds a negative correlation between Hindu per-capita expenditures and conflict.

5.4 Infiltration of Ethnopolitical Tensions into Educational Institutions

Another distressing aspect of ethnopolitical tension in India is its infiltration into educational institutions and universities, where student politics often become a battleground for communal and ideological conflicts. This intrusion of political and sectarian strife into academic environments sow seeds of hatred and division at the grassroots level of society, affecting the younger generation's perspectives and interactions. A prime illustration of this phenomenon is Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU). Renowned for its progressive thought and activism, JNU has often been derogatorily labeled the “Anti-National Hub of India” by pro-Hindu ruling elites. This pejorative label arises from the university’s active defense of India’s secular identity and its opposition to the harsh policies of the Hindu nationalist government. The ruling elites, supported by Hindu supremacist ideology, view the university’s progressive values as a direct challenge to their agenda of Hindu dominance [41](Narayan, 2016).

5.5 Traditional Media

Traditional media, encompassing newspapers, radio, and television, has historically been crucial in shaping public opinion and framing communal issues. Sensationalist journalism, with its emphasis on dramatic headlines and emotionally charged content, often exacerbates communal tensions by amplifying conflicts and stirring fears. This type of reporting frequently portrays certain communities negatively, reinforcing stereotypes and increasing polarization [42](Kleemans, & Hendriks Vettehen, 2009). Additionally, biased journalism, which favors specific communities or political interests, distorts public perception by presenting skewed or incomplete coverage, thereby perpetuating misinformation and deepening divisions [43](Narayana, Kapur, 2011). Government and political influences further impact media portrayal, with censorship and controlled narratives reflecting the biases of those in power. Politically motivated reporting may advance particular agendas, suppress dissenting voices, or align with ruling party objectives, especially during political unrest or elections [44](Gehlbach, & Sonin, 2014). In the context of India, this issue is particularly pronounced. A notable segment of the media, especially among the numerous 24-hour TV news channels, has gained infamy for its biased reporting and role in exacerbating communal hatred. Many of these channels, driven by sensationalism and partisanship, spread misinformation and fuel animosity towards the country’s substantial Muslim population, thereby fostering Islamophobia. As critics have remarked, “the Indian media is not doing journalism but waging a jihad (holy war) against Muslims; it acts like hyenas.” These media outlets often promote the agendas of Hindutva forces, including the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), its political arm, the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), and its National Democratic Alliance (NDA) partners. Prominent examples of these pro-BJP/RSS news outlets include English-language channels such as Republic TV, Times Now, India Today, and CNN-News18, as well as Hindi channels like Zee News, ABP News, Aaj Tak, India TV, Sudarshan News, News Nation, and News24. These platforms not only amplify divisive narratives but also contribute significantly to a polarized and contentious social climate, shaping public discourse in ways that perpetuate conflict and division.

5.6 Role of Social Media

The proliferation of social media has introduced a new dimension to ethno-political conflicts, significantly altering their dynamics and outcomes. Social media platforms have emerged as powerful tools for disseminating information, mobilizing supporters, and shaping public opinion on a global scale. This widespread connectivity and immediacy have profound implications for how conflicts are waged and perceived. One significant aspect of social media's influence is its capacity to amplify hate speech and extremist ideologies. Extremist groups and individuals exploit these platforms to spread propaganda, circulate false information, and incite violence against specific ethnic or religious communities. By leveraging social media's broad reach, these actors can effectively fuel sectarian tensions and heighten the intensity of conflicts [45](Bepari, 2020).

5.7 Governmental Hostility and Communal Tensions

In response to the alarming rise in communal violence and atrocities across India, it is crucial for the government to adopt a comprehensive and multifaceted approach to address the underlying causes and prevent future occurrences. Such an approach would ideally involve strengthening legal frameworks, promoting social cohesion, ensuring economic justice, and fostering a culture of inclusivity and respect for diversity. However, the current government, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and supported by an ideology rooted in Hindu supremacy, has pursued policies and legislative measures that have, in many instances, deepened societal divisions and further alienated minority communities, particularly Muslims.

6. Pathways to Peace and Social Cohesion

Addressing the Hindu-Muslim conflict in India requires a multifaceted approach that tackles the root causes, promotes reconciliation, and fosters long-term social harmony. This section will explore potential pathways to progress, focusing on conflict resolution, social integration, policy reforms, and community-driven initiatives.

6.1 Facilitated Dialogue

Facilitated dialogue is essential for resolving conflicts and fostering mutual understanding between Hindu and Muslim communities. Establishing platforms for open communication is key to allowing individuals from both communities to express their grievances and concerns in a constructive manner. These platforms can take various forms, including public forums, roundtable discussions, and community meetings, designed to create an environment where open, honest dialogue can occur. To ensure that these discussions are fair and productive, it is crucial to engage neutral facilitators or mediators who possess the skills and expertise to guide the process impartially [46](Milz, 2022). It is also important to involve a diverse range of participants, including community leaders who can influence public opinion, activists working on conflict resolution, and representatives from both Hindu and Muslim communities. Furthermore, a structured framework for these dialogues should include follow-up mechanisms and action plans to ensure that the discussions lead to tangible outcomes. This framework should detail how the insights and agreements reached during the dialogues will be implemented, monitored, and evaluated. Establishing clear goals and procedures for follow-up can enhance the credibility and impact of the dialogue process, building trust among participants and fostering long-term reconciliation [46](Milz, 2022).

6.2 Community Mediation

Community mediation is an effective approach to addressing local conflicts by involving respected members of the community or local organizations. This process relies on establishing mediation

committees or forums composed of community elders, religious leaders, and representatives from local non-governmental organizations (NGOs). These mediators play a crucial role in facilitating discussions, negotiating solutions, and helping parties reach mutually acceptable agreements. Mediation committees should be composed of individuals who are widely respected for their impartiality, wisdom, and understanding of local dynamics. Training these mediators in conflict resolution techniques is essential to ensure they are equipped to handle disputes effectively. Training programs should cover skills such as active listening, negotiation, and impartial facilitation, as well as cultural sensitivity to navigate the complexities of communal conflicts [47](Hedeen, 2004).

6.3 Improving Education and Skills Development

Access to quality education is a cornerstone for long-term socio-economic development and plays a pivotal role in shaping future opportunities for individuals and communities. To enhance the learning experience and ensure equitable educational outcomes, investments in educational infrastructure, teacher training, and curriculum development are essential. This is particularly important for schools serving both Hindu and Muslim communities, where equitable access to high-quality education can bridge gaps and promote social cohesion. Furthermore, developing a curriculum that reflects the diverse cultural and religious backgrounds of students fosters inclusivity and respect [48](Narula, 2014).

6.4 Imparting Peacebuilding Education

Equipping the general populace with essential conflict resolution skills through peacebuilding education and awareness-raising initiatives is crucial for fostering a more harmonious and inclusive society. These efforts are fundamental in challenging stereotypes, promoting tolerance, and countering extremism. By integrating peace education into both formal and informal educational curricula, schools and universities can play a pivotal role in instilling core values of empathy, respect, and diversity among future generations [49](Lopes Cardozo & Hoeks, 2015).

6.6 Cultural and Social Exchange Programs

Cultural and social exchange programs are essential tools for building relationships and fostering understanding between Hindu and Muslim communities. Organizing events, festivals, and cultural exchanges that highlight both the diversity and shared heritage of these communities can create opportunities for positive interactions and strengthen mutual bonds. Events such as joint festivals, art exhibitions, and cultural fairs celebrate the rich traditions of both communities while promoting a shared sense of identity. These events not only provide a platform for individuals to showcase their cultural heritage but also encourage cross-cultural dialogue and cooperation. By participating in each other's cultural celebrations, community members can gain a deeper appreciation for the traditions and values of their neighbors [50](Agbai, Agbai, & Oko-Jaja, 2024).

6.7 Gender-Inclusive Peacebuilding

When discussing local stakeholders in peacebuilding, it is crucial to acknowledge the unique contributions and perspectives of women, particularly through gender-inclusive peacebuilding initiatives. Women-led initiatives are pivotal in addressing issues of sexual and gender equality, as they actively challenge the prevailing culture of silence and impunity that often surrounds crimes of gender-based violence. Women, through their roles as peacebuilders, advocates, and community leaders, bring vital insights and approaches to addressing the specific needs and concerns of women and marginalized groups. Their initiatives often focus on breaking down barriers related to sexual violence, discrimination, and inequality, thereby promoting a more equitable and just society. By confronting these issues head-on, women-led peacebuilding efforts help to dismantle the systemic factors that perpetuate gender-based violence and discrimination [51](Satkunanathan, 2016).

6.8 Transcultural Storytelling

Constructive transcultural storytelling is a vital tool in addressing systemic discrimination and advancing peacebuilding efforts. By sharing stories that transcend cultural boundaries, transcultural storytelling fosters empathy, understanding, and respect for diverse perspectives. This approach plays a crucial role in breaking down stereotypes, challenging prejudices, and facilitating intercultural dialogue [52](Senehi, 2009). Punjab stands as a notable example of interreligious harmony, particularly due to its rich historical context involving Hindu-Muslim-Sikh relations. The region's narratives of Hindu-Muslim-Sikh brotherhood underscore a shared history of peaceful coexistence and cooperation among these communities. These stories illustrate how Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs lived together harmoniously in a unified India, fostering a deep sense of inter-religious unity and mutual respect among the Punjabi people [53](Karmarkar, 2022).

6.9 Leveraging Religious Values

A nuanced interpretation of religious values is critical for leveraging the moral authority and ethical teachings inherent within religious institutions. Given that ethno-political conflicts often misuse religious rhetoric to justify violence, it is essential to highlight that no major religion inherently advocates for violence or the killing of others. By focusing on the core principles of compassion, forgiveness, and justice found in many religious traditions, these organizations can counteract extremist interpretations and advocate for a more inclusive and equitable society [54](Clark, 2011).

6.10 Acknowledging Indigenous Approaches

In addition to contemporary liberal peace initiatives, it is crucial to recognize and re-examine indigenous peacebuilding efforts, which colonial powers systematically suppressed to maintain control over their colonies. Colonial administrations intentionally marginalized and undermined these indigenous approaches to conflict management, resolution, and transformation to perpetuate their dominance and suppress local autonomy (Eke & Byrne, 2022). Indigenous methods of peacebuilding are inherently diverse and multifaceted, deeply rooted in localized contexts, communal traditions, and holistic perspectives. These approaches are characterized by their intrinsic connection to the land, communal values, and ancestral wisdom, reflecting centuries of cultural evolution and adaptation. Unlike conventional Western models that often prioritize individual rights and legal frameworks, indigenous initiatives emphasize collective well-being, intergenerational harmony, and environmental stewardship [55](Lundy, Downs & Reinke, 2022).

6.11 Promoting Equality and Anti-Discrimination Laws

To effectively address communal tensions and safeguard minority rights, it is imperative to promote and rigorously enforce laws that ensure equality and prevent discrimination. Comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation plays a critical role in protecting communities from hate speech, religious discrimination, and communal violence. Such laws provide a legal framework to address and penalize discriminatory actions, contributing to a more inclusive and equitable society. Strengthening the capacity of legal institutions is also crucial for handling cases related to communal violence and discrimination. This involves training law enforcement, judiciary, and other relevant authorities in dealing with such cases sensitively and effectively. Ensuring that these institutions have the resources, expertise, and commitment to uphold justice is fundamental for maintaining the rule of law and promoting a fair legal process [56](Aiken, 2016).

Conclusion

The Hindu-Muslim conflict in India is a complex issue deeply intertwined with historical, political, social, and cultural factors. Throughout India's history, there have been periods of coexistence and collaboration between these two communities, as well as instances of profound violence and division. However, amid these challenges, there are glimpses of hope for peace and reconciliation.

Colonial policies and responses have undeniably influenced the dynamics of communal tensions in India, sometimes exacerbating existing divisions and at other times offering opportunities for mitigation. However, the responsibility for fostering inter-communal harmony transcends governmental actions alone. Civil society organizations, media outlets, educational institutions, religious leaders, and individuals all have pivotal roles to play in promoting understanding, empathy, and respect for diversity.

By recognizing and addressing the multifaceted nature of the Hindu-Muslim conflict and by actively engaging with various stakeholders to promote dialogue, tolerance, and inclusivity, India can work towards building a society where people of all backgrounds can live together in peace and harmony.

In his poignant article titled "Disunity, a Phase," Mahatma Gandhi reflects on the tragic divisions within the Indian society, by articulating that;

"It is with great sorrow that I must acknowledge the profound division within our own house. We find ourselves embroiled in conflict, driven by cowardice and unfounded fears. Hindus harbor suspicions of Muslims out of cowardice and apprehension, while Muslims reciprocate these feelings with equal timidity and baseless anxieties. Throughout history, Islam has exemplified unmatched bravery and a commitment to peace. Therefore, it is not a matter of pride for Muslims to harbor fear of Hindus. Similarly, Hindus have no cause for pride in fearing Muslims, even if they receive support from Muslims worldwide. Are we truly so diminished that we tremble in the face of our own shadows? It is time for us to transcend these base instincts, to confront our fears with courage, and to embrace one another as equal citizens of our beloved nation." (Gandhi & Engineer, 1994).

Gandhi's words serve as a powerful call to action, urging us to transcend our fears and embrace the principles of courage, understanding, and unity. They remind us that only by addressing the root causes of division and fostering genuine empathy and respect can we hope to overcome the shadows of discord and forge a path towards lasting peace and harmony [57](Gandhi & Engineer, 1994).

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