Secularism in India: Myth or Reality

Wajeeha Najam

Abstract

Frequent incidents of religious intolerance are quite surprising for many of us, as India is better known for its secular and democratic ideals. However, the recent wave of violence motivated (instigated) by the Hindutva politics has raised many questions about the authenticity of the Indian claim of being a secular state. A secular state refers to the concept that there must be a clear separation of religion from state affairs and a secular state must refrain itself from indulging with any religious affiliation. In contrast to the provisions guaranteed in the Indian constitution regarding the protection of rights of minorities, freedom of religion and non-discrimination of people irrespective of their caste, race, gender and religion appears mainly theoretical which still needs to be implemented in its original spirit aspired by its architect, B. R. Ambedker.1 However, the constant rise and influence of Hindutva based political actors upon policy matters and government affairs seems to obliterate the existing face of Indian secularism rather than to physically implement its theoretical ideals. To support my argument this paper provides a historical background of emerging religious extremism in India and causes of frequent violence on communal grounds whereas the qualitative method of research has been adopted to explore the topic under discussion.

Keywords: Secularism, Hindutva, communal violence, saffron, nationalism.

Introduction

It is clear that the word ‘secular’ in the term ‘secular state’ is used to denote the character of a state. To understand the concept of a secular state, it is necessary to understand the significance of the term ‘secular.’ The term, according to Encyclopaedia Britannica, means ‘non-spiritual, having no (connection) with religious or spiritual matters... anything that is distinct, opposed to, or not connected with religion or ecclesiastical

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It is used to describe those ideas or acts that are not connected with or devoted to religion.

The separation of religion from state is the foundation of secularism. It ensures non-interference of religious groups in state affairs and, simultaneously, the state must refrain from adopting any religious beliefs. A secular society seeks to ensure and protect the freedom of religious beliefs and practices for all citizens. Secularists want freedom of thought and conscience to apply equally to all, believers and non-believers alike. In a secular society, religion is a private matter for individuals and the state has no obligations regarding the implementation of religious beliefs and norms.

This paper highlights the concept of secularism prevailing in the religiously-pluralistic society of India, which ensures neutrality or impartiality among the variety of religious faiths found in the country. The constitution of India guarantees religious freedom, but this guarantee is largely theoretical and still needs to be put into practice. To support this argument, this paper provides the chronology of religiously-motivated violence that has surfaced since 1961 in post-independence India, where political factors have played a significant role in instigating violence on communal bases for their own interests.

Concept of secularism in India and constitutional provisions

India is the birthplace of four major religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, and Jainism have all originated from India. Furthermore, it has the world’s third largest Muslim population and almost 2.3 per cent of its inhabitants practise Christianity (as shown in Figure 1). Thus, secularism is not merely a concept but an instrument for promoting peace and harmony.

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2 Encyclopaedia Britannica, Vol. XX (1955) p. 264. The word ‘opposed to’ seems to have been used here in the sense of ‘as distinguished from’ and not as meaning ‘hostile to.’
among all the religions to bind them together.\textsuperscript{5} As Venkataraman stated, ‘The Indian state is secular which is neither religious, nor irreligious, nor anti-religious, but is wholly detached from religious dogmas and activities and thus neutral in religious matters.\textsuperscript{6}

The word ‘secular’ was inserted in the Indian constitution by the 42nd amendment in 1976.\textsuperscript{7} In the preamble of the Indian constitution,\textsuperscript{8} India has clearly been referred to as a sovereign, socialist, secular democratic republic. It secures for all its citizens social, economic, and political justice; liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith, and worship; and equality of status and opportunity. It also promotes among them fraternity, assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity and integrity of the nation.\textsuperscript{9} One of the fundamental rights guaranteed in the constitution of India is the right to freedom of religion which is described in Articles 25, 26, 27, and 28 of the Indian constitution (as shown below).\textsuperscript{10}

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Right to freedom of religion in the Indian Constitution</th>
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<td>A(25) Freedom of conscience and free profession, practice and propagation of religion</td>
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<td>A (26) Freedom to manage religious affairs</td>
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<td>A (27) No person shall be compelled to pay any tax for the promotion or maintenance of any religion.</td>
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<td>A (28) Freedom as to attend religious instruction or religious worship in certain educational institutions</td>
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Source: Constitution of India https://www.constitution.org/cons/india/p03.html

\textsuperscript{5} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., p. 12.
According to these fundamental rights, every citizen has the right to practise and spread his or her religion peacefully. In addition, if any incidence of religious intolerance occurs in India, it is the duty of the Indian government to take strict action against the perpetrators.

To ensure neutrality in the multi-religious entity of India as a country, the Indian constitution encourages secularism in its polity. However, it is pertinent to note here that despite legal provisions and efforts to promote inter-faith harmony, communalism remains a matter of concern in Indian society. Several incidents of communal riots witnessed brutal violence, vandalism, acts of arson, and the massacre of thousands of people. India’s first major communal conflagration took place in Jabalpur in February 1961 during the premiership of Jawaharlal Nehru. Kingshuk Nag writes:

Nehru was very disturbed by the turn of events. What troubled him more was that members of his party did nothing to stop the riots even though the reigning government in the state was that of the Congress. Undoubtedly, Nehru sought to govern India as a secular republic. But, in reality, this secularism was only skin-deep; on paper, the country was administered as a secular republic, but barring a few men like Nehru, others were quite pro-Hindu in their thinking.\(^{11}\)

This illustrates the wide gap between the theoretical provisions of secularism and the implementation of these principles. The historic victory of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the 2014 elections and the subsequent events of communal hatred and religious intolerance indicate the deep religious stratification of the masses in India. It seems that the right-wing Hindu political parties have gained momentum over the past decades and are more inclined towards the implementation of their political ideology based on Hindutva, rather than on equality, non-discrimination, and secularism.

**Historical background of Hindu-centric politics and Indian nationalism**

Recent political developments appear to demonstrate that religious phenomena and Hindutva politics are new factors in the Indian political and social domain. However, an historical analysis of the facts related to the emergence of religiously-motivated, right-wing Hindu political parties contradicts this argument.

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It started with the emergence of Hindu reformist movements during the mid-19th century, which eventually transformed into Hindu revivalism. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, a Bengali intellectual and founder of Brahma Samaj (the society of Brahma) initially sought to eradicate erroneous religious beliefs and associated societal norms among the Hindus. He advocated and, in fact, worked alongside British authorities to abolish the traditional practice of sati (immolation of a Hindu widow on the funeral pyre of her deceased husband) from Bengal in 1829. He tried to reconstruct the approach, beliefs, and norms of Hinduism and considered the Upanishads (ancient religious scriptures of the Aryans) as the true source of the religion. However, after his death, the reformist movement of Brahma Samaj fell under the influence of fundamentalists and lost its original spirit. His successors used his ideology to interpret religion based on the orthodox approach of Hinduism. The last quarter of the 19th century witnessed an upsurge in Hindu revivalism under the tutelage of various religious leaders aiming to establish the supremacy of Hinduism as a monolithic religion. Their aim was to bridge the gap between people of different cultural, social, and linguistic backgrounds and to convince them about their commonality as followers of a common Hindu religion in order to acquire and strengthen their political superiority in the affairs of government and policymaking.

Swami Vivekananda was a staunch Hindu revivalist from Bengal; he founded the Vedanta Society and represented Hinduism at the Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893. He became a missionary and converted many people. Moreover, he emphasized the validity of shuddhi, a term used for the forceful reconversion of mainly Muslims and Christians to Hinduism. Thus, the political consciousness, which started during the Hindu reformist movements, gained momentum under the leadership of Vivekananda who exploited the sentiments of the common people by associating national aspirations with religious symbols.

Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, the prominent author and poet who wrote the Indian national song Vande Mataram, contributed to the Hindu revivalist movement. Vande Mataram is part of Chattopadhyay’s novel, Anandamath, published in 1882. The novel depicts the communal sentiments and biases of Indian society. His attempt to glorify the Hindu rebellion against Muslims and project the latter as a real threat and as

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enemies of Hindus in the novel indicates his belief in religious fanaticism and militancy. He personified India as the mother goddesses Durga, Saraswati, and Lakshmi in the song Vande Mataram, contrary to the beliefs of Indian Muslims. This resulted in the creation of a rift between the two communities on its status as the national anthem. The controversy compelled the Congress Working Committee in 1937 to acknowledge the concerns of Muslims and declare that only the first two stanzas should be sung as the Indian national anthem, while the remaining three stanzas would not be imposed as mandatory for the Muslims of India to sing. Bankimachandra’s concept of nationalism was Hindu in nature rather than Indian as is obvious in several novels he wrote, which contain passionate outbursts against Muslim rule in India. He preferred Hindu epics in which heroes like Krishna and Rama provided role models to be followed by the nation. Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, an Indian historian, made this analysis: ‘Bankimachandra converted patriotism into religion and religion into patriotism.’

Another prominent movement of Hindu revivalism was the Arya Samaj founded by Dayananda Sarasvati in 1875 in Bombay. He believed that the Vedas were the only true source of knowledge and the essence of Hinduism; he rejected every religion except Hinduism. In 1877, he went to the Punjab and, within a short span of time, succeeded in grabbing the attention of Punjabi Hindus and swiftly organized his movement. He started the practice of shuddhi: reconversion of people to Hinduism in Punjab. Arya Samaj became more hostile to other religions and opposed Muslims and Christians vehemently. In order to attain their political interests, they started a campaign for the protection of cows, the Gaurakshini Sabha. Within the Arya Samaj, a group of people propagated religious violence and militancy. They sought to create a new social identity of Arya Hindu and garnered the support of many people.

These revivalist movements contributed to the fundamentalist tendencies in India and the Hindu Mahasabha was formed in 1915. The objective was to attain political strength through mass support and the implementation of their Hindu philosophy. Madan Mohan Malviya and Lala Lajpat Rai were both Congress leaders but they promoted the efforts to strengthen the Hindu Mahasabha as a strong political force. Lala Lajpat Rai was also a prominent leader of the Arya Samaj. The Hindu Mahasabha worked to promote Hindi as the national language and Malviya was one of the early proponents of this concept that led to the Hindi-Urdu controversy in pre-independence India.

15 Ibid., pp. 211-215.
Vinayak Damodar Savarkar was a notable leader of the Mahasabha and he explained the concept of Hindu-ness in his book *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu*, published in 1923. He emphatically favoured the term ‘Hindu’, rejected non-Vedic faiths such as Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism, and claimed that there was a common nationality (*rashtra*), a common race (*jati*), and a common culture or civilization (*sanskriti*).\(^{16}\) Moreover, he equated Hindutva with the triad of ‘Hindi, Hindu, Hindustan.’ Chad Bauman, an expert on religion and society in India, writes: ‘Through Savarkar’s work, Hindu nationalism appears for the first time as resulting from the super-imposition of a religion, a culture, a language, and a sacred territory.’\(^{17}\)

The concept of Hindu nationalism initiated by Savarkar was modified by the formation of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in 1925. Keshav Baliram Hedgewar founded the RSS to propagate the ideology of Hindutva, while infusing new physical strength into the majority community.\(^{18}\)

Madhav Sadashiv Golwalker succeeded to the leadership of the RSS after the death of his predecessor in 1940. He provided a clear ideological framework for the members of his organization that spread throughout India under his leadership. He embarked upon a policy of Hindu nationalism and propagated the concept of nationality that originated from the mythological philosophy of Hinduism. He considered the territory of the Indian subcontinent as both fatherland (*pitribhumi*) and a sacred land (*punyabhumi*) in which Muslims and Christians were portrayed as belonging to foreign religions and thus excluded from his perspective of an Indian nation.

Tapan Basu cited a quotation from Golwalker’s *We or Our Nationhood Defined* in his own publication *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags*:

The non-Hindu people in Hindustan must either adopt the Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect and revere Hindu religion, must entertain no idea but the glorification of the Hindu religion, that is they must not only give up their attitude of intolerance and ingratitude towards this land and its age-long tradition but must also cultivate the positive attitude of love and

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\(^{16}\) Ibid., pp. 218-219.


\(^{18}\) Ibid.
devotion instead; in one 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 citizen’s rights.\(^{19}\)

Furthermore, he praised the ideology of German Nazism and wrote:

German race pride has now become the topic of the day. To keep up the purity of the race and its culture, Germany shocked the world by purging the country of the Semitic race – the Jews. Race pride at its highest has been manifested here. Germany has also shown how well-nigh impossible it is for races and cultures, having differences going to the roots, to be assimilated into one united whole, a good lesson for us in Hindustan to learn and profit by.\(^{20}\)

The depiction of Muslims and Christians as foreigners and the instigation of hatred against them was an effective tool for consolidating Hindu revivalism. Moreover, the initiation of conversion and reconversion of people to Hinduism had political objectives: to ensure the dominance of the Hindu majority in the future power structure of India. However, the Indian National Congress opposed such discriminatory politics and urged the promotion of secularism and religious harmony in post-independence India. But religious biases and the inclination towards imposing the dominance of the Hindu majority remained undeniable facts, which resulted in several incidents of communal violence and persecution of minority communities in post-independence India.

**Emergence of BJP as a dominant political force**

The Indian National Congress consolidated its grip over government affairs in India after August 1947. Nehru endeavoured to build the image of an India based on secularism as the main feature of his policies, which, in the opinion of many, was a better way to administer a country with people of diverse religions and sub-nationalities. However, religious intolerance continued to be a factor in the social and political domain, as evident from the assassination of M. K. Gandhi on 30 January 1948. Nathuram Godse admitted in court that he assassinated Gandhi because of his policy of appeasement towards Muslims. He said:


\(^{20}\) Ibid.
I do say that my shots were fired at the person whose policy and action had brought wrack and ruin and destruction to millions of Hindus. I bear no ill will towards anyone individually, but I do say that I had no respect for the present government owing to their policy, which was unfairly favourable towards the Muslims. But at the same time I could clearly see that the policy was entirely due to the presence of Gandhi.\textsuperscript{21}

Godse was a right-wing activist of both the RSS and the Hindu Mahasabha and published a nationalist newspaper called \textit{Hindu Rashtra}.

Tushar Arun Gandhi, the great-grandson of Gandhi writes:

The assassination of Gandhi could not have been possible without organisational involvement. There were two organisations with whom all the accused were closely associated—the RSS and the Hindu Mahasabha. For some strange reason, despite clues and confessions, these two organisations were never investigated.\textsuperscript{22}

This indicates that the right-wing political activists were against the policies of the Congress, policies based on secularism and liberal democracy, and their desire to implement their ideology of Hindu nationalism which, however, did not succeed.

The Hindu rightist faction realized that they could not achieve their objectives unless they garnered the majority of votes from the community and united the Hindus under the umbrella of Hindu nationalism. Syama Prasad Mukherjee founded the Bharatiya Jana Sangh in 1951 as an alternative to the Congress because he believed that the Congress was not reflecting the Hindu cause adequately, nor securing the interests of Hindus effectively. Although he himself was a member of the Nehru cabinet, he resigned and established the Jana Sangh as a reaction to the problems of Bengali Hindu refugees who had migrated to West Bengal in the wake of Partition. From its inception, the Jana Sangh adopted the principles of protecting and promoting Hindu cultural identity in India.


and countering the perceived threats from Muslims in order to achieve their objectives. Unlike the Hindu Mahasabha, which lost its popularity because of a very conservative Hindu viewpoint, the Jana Sangh promised progress, growth, development, and social reforms to attain the support of the masses. But the core of the party remained Hindu-centric as it was established with the active collaboration of the RSS.

After the demise of Mookerjee in 1953, the Jana Sangh fell under the direct control of the RSS and Deendayal Upadhyaya, a young activist of the RSS, was appointed to manage its affairs. Despite the efforts of these parties to secure Hindu votes, Congress managed to govern as a major political force until 1977. Jana Sangh actively participated in the anti-government protests across the country during the period of emergency imposed by the Congress premier, Indira Gandhi, in 1975. The emergency was lifted in 1977 and elections were held in the same year. The Jana Sangh merged with other political factions and formed the Janata Party against Congress and formed the government under the premiership of Morarji Desai in 1977. However, the alliance collapsed in 1980 because the members of the Jana Sangh refused to renounce their membership of the RSS as it was their alma mater and source of ideological inspiration. Consequently, Congress regained power and Indira Gandhi took control of the government for the second time.

The Jana Sangh reinvigorated itself as the Bharatiya Janata Party in June 1980 after breaking off from the Janata Party. Vajpayee, as the first president of the party, sought to include Gandhian socialism as part of its manifesto, besides the core objectives of Hindu nationalism of its predecessor, the Jana Sangh. However, the party did not succeed in the next elections because the assassination of Mrs Gandhi just ahead of the elections paved the way for Congress to secure the majority of sympathy votes from across the country. Although Congress ruled during the 1980s, the decade witnessed an increase in communal tensions between Hindus and Muslims. Several incidents of communal violence occurred during this period, including violence against Christians.

Lal Krishan Advani became the president of the BJP in 1984 and propagated the issue of Ram Janmabhoomi to mobilize Hindu society. Under the leadership of Advani, the BJP fuelled communal sentiments over the issue of the Babri mosque in order to achieve political advantage. Right-wing Hindu parties had long awaited such an issue, which could turn the majority of Hindus in their favour. According to Hindu belief, Ayodhya was the birthplace of the Hindu deity, Ram. It was argued that

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23 Kingshuk Nag, op. cit., pp. 6-7.
the Babri mosque was built where a temple had existed; the Muslims denied these claims as mere allegations. It was a small, district-level dispute in Uttar Pradesh (UP) until the BJP exploited the issue, propagating their stance across the country to promote and strengthen Hindutva ideology. Kingshuk Nag writes:

All this was happening in the late 1980s when television, too, played a huge role in Hindu revivalism. The popularity of Ramayana and Mahabharata, two epics being serialized during the period was tremendous and it is not an exaggeration to say that on Sunday mornings when they were aired, the roads would be empty. The result of this was a significant rise in Hindu consciousness in urban and semi-urban areas. The BJP capitalized on this by putting up some actors of Ramayana and Mahabharata as candidates for the Lok Sabha polls in 1989. They won.24

In the 1989 elections, the BJP aligned with the Janata Dal but cautiously chose to stay out of the government and Vishwanath Pratap Singh became the prime minister. However, the decision of V. P. Singh to make the Mandal Commission report public to ensure a reserved quota for Backward Castes and Other Backward Castes (OBCs) in educational institutions and government jobs alarmed the BJP. It tried to consolidate the Hindu votes but the move of Singh’s government had the potential to divide these votes into OBC and higher castes. The BJP quickly withdrew its support to Singh’s government and Advani embarked on a *rath yatra* to galvanize Hindus on the issue of Ram Janmabhoomi. It was due to his yatra that the BJP succeeded in forming the government in the largest state, UP, for the first time in 1991. Congress again managed to form the central government after acquiring sympathy votes due to the demise of Rajiv Gandhi in the same year. BJP took benefit of its government in UP and intensified its movement of Ram Janmabhoomi which aimed to build a Ram temple at his birthplace in Ayodhya. On 6 December 1992, the Babri mosque was razed by activists of the BJP, the RSS, and the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) who had gathered under the leadership of Advani to lay the foundation stone of the Ram temple.25

The demolition of the Babri mosque was a serious blow to the secular identity of India and paved the way for the BJP to emerge as a major political force against Congress. The party subsequently formed a coalition government in 1998. However, it lost the elections in 2004 in the

aftermath of the 2002 Gujarat massacre in which the current prime minister, Narendra Modi, was the main accused. The reason for the unexpected failure of the BJP in the 2004 elections was that the minorities were fearful of its designs and consolidated their votes in favour of the Congress. This gave the BJP an edge, projecting itself as the only party that represented Hindu ideology and interests; consequently, it secured the majority of votes in the 2014 elections and formed the government without the support of any other party. As expected, the incidents of religious intolerance and violence against minorities have increased during the past four years of BJP rule. The party still pursues its core objective of implementing Hindutva and turning India into a ‘saffron nation.’

Communal violence in India

Violence instigated due to the strength of religious sentiments has proportionally increased in India. The term ‘communal violence’ is not new in Indian politics; rather, the phenomenon has been witnessed consistently since the country’s independence. It affects the religious minorities residing there and is often motivated by political and economic gains under the cover of religion. It not only exacerbates fear among the minority communities but also has far-reaching consequences in the socioeconomic and political domains. Though communal violence emerged in 1961 in post-independence India, it intensified in the 1980s and 1990s. The country experienced a surge in religious violence during this period and almost every year witnessed several casualties and loss of public and private property, as shown in Figure 2.26

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Political factors have played a significant role in instigating violence on a communal basis. It appears that political parties indulge in propagating hate speech and violence to pursue their interests during election campaigns. In August 1967, communal riots broke out in Ranchi on the status of Urdu, spoken overwhelmingly by Muslims, with the move to have it declared the second official language in Bihar.²⁷ Right-wing

Hindu nationalists provoked violence during the general elections held a few months earlier in the same year.

The state of Gujarat witnessed several incidents of communal violence during the 1960s but the worst occurred in September 1969. Economic rivalry between Hindus and Muslims in the textile industry of Ahmadabad turned into communal animosity. The situation was successfully exploited by the political parties, including members of the ruling Congress. However, the Jana Sangh and the RSS were more active in instigating violence because they perceived Muslims as a real threat to the development and political strength of Hindus.

A similar pattern of communal violence was observed before the 1971 general elections at several places in Maharashtra. The motive was to secure Hindu votes as the Hindu nationalist parties viewed violence against Muslims as an effective tool to consolidate their vote bank. Police negligence was also reported there. In most of the cases, violence against minorities was incited through hate speeches during religious processions. Later, when the Jana Sangh formed the government in coalition with other political parties in 1977, a surge in communal violence was witnessed in the states of Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, and Bihar. Socioeconomic distrust among the communities was instrumental in fanning communal sentiments, which subsequently favoured the ultra-nationalist parties.

Following the inception of the BJP in 1980, violence escalated further, spreading to the states of Gujarat, Assam, and Maharashtra. Extreme violence against Muslims was reported during the state elections at Nellie, Assam in February 1983. The assassination of Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards sparked anti-Sikh riots in Delhi and its surrounding areas in October 1984. Congress leaders were also involved in attacks on the Sikh community. Despite the Congress rule, consistent incidents of communal violence were reported during the 1980s.

30 http://www.bjp.org/
Moreover, large-scale violence broke out during the Ram Shila procession in the district of Bhagalpur, Bihar, in October 1989, a month prior to the general elections.

During the 1990s, numerous incidents of violence occurred on the issue of the Babri mosque as the BJP was determined to construct the Ram temple at the site of the mosque. In 1998, the BJP formed a coalition government with Vajpayee as the prime minister, and the subsequent year witnessed a horrific incident of violence in the state of Odisha. An Australian missionary, Graham Staines, was burnt alive with his minor sons in January 1999 by some Hindu extremists on charges of converting the local people to Christianity. Hindu nationalists turned against the minority Christian community after Sonia Gandhi became the president of Congress in 1997. Several incidents of violence against Christians were reported in Gujarat during 1998 and a systematic campaign was launched against them during this period.

Another incident of severe violence erupted in February 2002, in the state of Gujarat as retaliation for the burning of a train in Godhra. It resulted in as many as 2,000 casualties and around 100,000 people were displaced. The then-state government of Gujarat was accused of negligence in maintaining peace and curbing atrocities. Before the 2009 general elections, anti-Christian violence resurfaced in the state of Odisha in August 2008, following the assassination of a Hindu nationalist leader, resulting in casualties and mass displacement of the local people. Moreover, 230 places of worship were destroyed.

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35 ‘Staines’ killing: Murder of Australian missionary and his two sons in Orissa shocks India’, India Today, 8 February 1999.
38 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
In September 2013, Muslims were targeted in Muzaffarnagar and Shamli districts of UP. These riots broke out on accusations of a Muslim man harassing a Jat Hindu woman. At least 65 people lost their lives and 50,000 were displaced. The significant majority of the dead and displaced were Muslims. Sexual violence against women of minority communities was also reported. Like previous incidents of communal violence, the Shamli incident occurred just a few months prior to the 2014 general elections and many people viewed it as an attempt by the political parties to consolidate Hindu votes.

**Communal violence linked to cow vigilantes**

A new trend of low-scale violence emerged after the victory of BJP in 2014. Incidents of violence and lynching, committed on suspicion of the consumption of beef, have been reported frequently from several states, as shown in Figure 3 below.

![Figure 3: Lynching reported (2015-2017)](source)

Source: Minority Rights Group International and Keesing’s Record of World Events

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42 Ibid.

Cattle traders, dairy farmers, slaughter houses, and other businesses belonging to Muslim and Dalit communities have been deliberately targeted. Cow vigilante violence against individuals was encouraged by the failure of states to take strict measures against the perpetrators. They were supported by right-wing organizations instead of facing legal consequences for instigating violence. On the other hand, the victims were investigated by the police on charges of violating the ‘Cow Protection Law.’ This has led to greater insecurity and fear among the minority community as they were left under siege of the Hindu nationalists.

**Conclusion**

Socio-political dynamics indicate that the constitutional provisions enshrined to uphold secularism as a principal feature of Indian polity are far from being realized. The inherent prejudice and subsequent prevalence of violence on a communal basis deeply affect secular ideals in India. There is a difference between the theory and practice of secularism in Indian socio-political norms. The constitution declares that the state should be governed on secular principles and considers religion as a private matter of individuals. However, religion plays a pivotal role in the political sphere and is systematically used to achieve desired goals and interests. As discussed above, social and economic disputes have turned into religious animosity and violent clashes; these have been exploited by political elements, especially by the Hindu nationalists, to assert their influence over the masses. It shows a sharp contrast between the conceptual framework provided in the constitution and the political approach of activists and leaders of political parties in dealing with the issue of secularism.

Incidents of communal violence and intimidation have been consistently witnessed since the early 1960s; the nationalists argue that the reason behind the violence is the provision of religious freedom to the minorities, which undermines the democratic rights of the majority community. They have argued against the constitutional guarantee provided to the minorities relating to their faith and practices, while favouring the right of the majority community to profess and revere their religion. Their political inclination is similar to the approach of the 19th century Hindu revivalist movements. The initiation of the ‘Ghar Wapsi’ campaign since the current regime came into power in 2014, political point scoring on the issue of inter-religion marriages as ‘love jihad’, and cow vigilantism are a few examples of their views on democracy.

It is obvious that the nationalists’ belief in democracy is due to the demographic religious supremacy of Hindus in India. They perceive
Muslims, Christians, and other minorities as a potential threat and are critical of the constitutional safeguards related to them. It is pertinent to mention that Christians constitute a very small minority as per the 2011 census in India. However, the majority community still views them as a threat and the ‘Freedom of Religion Act’, commonly regarded as an anti-Christian law, is fully enforced within six states; it provides legal cover against the conversion of people from Hinduism to other religions. Christian missionaries have always criticized this law and termed it anti-Christian. It was first introduced in the state of Orissa in 1967 during Congress rule and all major political actors are unanimously in favour of its implementation, while nationalist parties seek its implementation at the central level. The controversy relating to the law is its one-sidedness, which typically allows a change of faith to Hinduism, considering it to be the original religion of India. We have mentioned in the previous section that a surge of violence emerged against Christians when Sonia Gandhi became the president of Congress. As leadership of the Congress is still based on family lineage, it was unacceptable for the masses to let Sonia become the prime minister of India. The period witnessed an increase in violence and hate crimes against Christian communities, which was a new trend in the socio-political domain of India. Due to such visible contradictions, it can be argued that the notion of secularism is just an illusion within the Indian polity and needs to be discussed rationally to seek a way forward.