



Thursday, September 4, 2025

Op-Ed

[India: World's Largest Democracy in Retreat](#)

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A significant decline has been witnessed in India's democratic and secular credentials since Narendra Modi's entry into mainstream politics, first as the Chief Minister of Gujarat (2001–2014) and then as the Prime Minister of India (2014–present). India has been classified as an "Electoral Autocracy" for the ninth consecutive year by the Sweden-based Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute. According to its latest annual report titled "[Democracy Report 2025](#)," declining freedom of expression, repression of civil society, curbs on academic and cultural freedom, and increased disinformation and political polarization are key areas of concern in the country. The report underscores that "India now performs worse than during the 1975–77 Emergency in several dimensions of electoral integrity and civil liberties."

The emergence of Hindutva as the most radical form of Hindu nationalism during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's era has tarnished India's image beyond repair, both domestically and internationally. Dr Amit Singh, an expert on right-wing politics, [notes](#) that "under Narendra Modi, Hindutva fascism has crystallized in India." Narendra Modi was labeled as "the poster boy of Hindutva" by Pawan Atri, a New Delhi-based journalist specializing in Indian politics, in an opinion [article](#) published by Sputnik India on 7 May 2024.

Hindutva has been central to the Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which has close ideological and organizational ties to Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a Hindu paramilitary organization.

On 29 May 2015, Professor Dr Gurdarshan Singh Dhillon, a renowned Indian historian, in his [presentation](#) titled “Hindutva Agenda of the BJP,” delivered before the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission of the United States Congress, underscored that “in recent years, the BJP-RSS combine has brought about a radical shift in the country’s socio-political agenda. By appealing to the sentiments of the majority community, the BJP has successfully extended its influence in electoral politics and managed to come to the helm of affairs. Its communal agenda, carried out through the RSS, has prompted minorities to reconsider their place and future in India. In fact, this agenda has threatened to undermine the sanctity of the Indian state. This has led to a sense of superiority among Hindus and a feeling of insecurity among minorities.”

Dr Rebecca de Souza, Associate Professor at San Diego State University, has [opined](#) that “Hindutva deploys primordial and xenophobic discourses to frame Muslims and Christians as the enemy, while building solidarity among those who identify as Hindu.”

According to [Hannah Ellis-Petersen](#), South Asia correspondent for *The Guardian*, “Hindu nationalism has been part of Indian politics for decades and, at various points, has been deployed as a populist political tool to win the vote of the country’s Hindu majority.” Prime Minister Modi has been advancing an anti-minorities agenda, especially against Muslims and Christians. He has a strong proclivity for anti-Muslim rhetoric during his public meetings, political rallies, and electoral campaigns. His speeches were often criticized for invoking anti-Muslim tropes during the last three general elections. He frequently makes a scathing reference to Muslims as “infiltrators.” The scornful choice of words used against the country’s most significant religious minority belies the image of a global leader that he untiringly presents on the world stage.

During the 2024 general elections, Prime Minister Narendra Modi frequently [referred](#) to the construction of the Ram Mandir, the abrogation of Article 370, the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (2019), and the criminalization of Triple Talaq as some of his most significant achievements during his previous tenure. These developments were advertised as forerunners to an exclusive *Hindu Rashtra*, and ultimately, the *Akhand Bharat*.

According to a [report](#) titled “India: Hate Speech Fueled Modi’s Election Campaign,” published on 14 August 2024 by *Human Rights Watch*, he was found to have made Islamophobic remarks in “110 out of the 173” speeches he delivered during the 2024 election campaign. The report analyzed all of his speeches after the “Model Code of Conduct” was implemented for the parliamentary poll, which prohibited appealing to “communal feelings for securing votes.”

Narendra Modi always presents himself as a leader deeply committed to Hindu values, blending religious symbolism. Ironically, his anti-minorities policies and public persona have resonated with a broad segment of the Indian population, mainly Hindus, who consider him as the protector of Hindu heritage amid perceived threats from secularism and external influences. Christophe Jaffrelot, in his book titled *Modi’s India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy*, [remarks](#) that “Narendra Modi had become the Hindu Hriday Samrat – the Emperor of Hindu Hearts – in the wake of the worst anti-Muslim pogrom that Gujarat had experienced since Partition in 1947.”

The persistent anti-Muslim rhetoric has given rise to a narrative that “Hindus in India are under threat from Muslims, be it through population shifts, interfaith marriage, commonly known as *Love Jihad*, and illegal Muslim immigrants.”

The plight of Christians in India is no different. According to the [United Christian Forum](#) and several international human rights organizations, the persecution of Christians in India has significantly intensified since 2014. Reported incidents of violence, harassment, and discrimination against Christians have risen sharply, from 127 cases in 2014 to over 830 in 2024. These include mob attacks on Churches, physical assaults during worship services, and the arrest of Pastors under anti-conversion laws. Notably, since 2023, Meitei Hindus have [targeted](#) the Christian Kuki community in widespread violence in Manipur, which has involved destruction of more than 250 Churches, burning of hundreds of homes, and killing of scores of Christians.

According to a [report](#) titled “Hegemony and Demolitions: The Tale of Communal Riots in India in 2024,” published by the Centre for Study of

Society and Secularism (CSSS), a civil society organization located in Mumbai, “49 of the 59 communal riots took place in states where the BJP is ruling either on its own, or in coalition with other parties.”

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom’s (USCIRF) Annual [Report](#) 2025 recommends that the US designate India as a “Country of Particular Concern” due to its ongoing and severe violations of religious freedom. According to the report, “in 2024, religious freedom conditions in India continued to deteriorate as attacks and discrimination against religious minorities continued to rise.”

India’s democratic backsliding under Narendra Modi is not only evident in the erosion of civil liberties and institutional independence but also in the systematic targeting of religious minorities, significantly transforming India’s political, electoral, and social landscape. According to *The Economist* [brief](#), published on 23 January 2020, “Narendra Modi’s sectarianism is eroding India’s secular democracy.” The world’s largest democracy is indeed in retreat. In fact, in the [words](#) of Arundhati Roy, “India is transitioning pretty brazenly into a criminal Hindu fascist enterprise.”



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