

RELIGIOUS POLARIZATION AND ELECTORAL POLITICS IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA: TRENDS, CHALLENGES AND DEMOCRATIC IMPLICATIONS

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ABSTRACT:

Religious polarization has emerged as one of the most significant features of contemporary Indian electoral politics. In a multicultural and constitutionally secular democracy like India, religion has increasingly become a powerful instrument of political mobilization, influencing electoral behavior, party strategies, and public discourse. The growing intersection between religion and politics has transformed electoral competition into identity-based political contests, particularly after the rise of mass media, social media platforms, and populist political narratives. This study examines the relationship between religious polarization and electoral politics in contemporary India, with special emphasis on the role of political parties, media narratives, and digital communication in shaping communal identities during elections. The primary objective of this research is to analyze how religious identities are politically mobilized and how such polarization affects democratic values, secularism, and social cohesion. The study adopts a qualitative, descriptive, and analytical methodology based on secondary sources such as scholarly books, journal articles, election reports, media coverage, and survey data. The findings suggest that identity politics has significantly strengthened electoral polarization, while social media and digital propaganda have accelerated communal narratives and emotional political mobilization. The study further reveals that increasing religious polarization poses challenges to constitutional secularism, democratic pluralism, and inclusive governance. The article concludes that strengthening democratic institutions, promoting constitutional values, regulating hate speech, and encouraging civic awareness are essential for preserving India's pluralistic democratic framework.

Keywords: Religious Polarization, Electoral Politics, Identity Politics, Secularism, Democracy, India

INTRODUCTION

"Politics and religion are inseparable in India's democratic discourse."

India is one of the world's largest and most diverse democracies, characterized by multiple religions, languages, castes, cultures, and identities. In such a pluralistic society, religion has historically played a significant role not only in shaping social life but also in influencing political processes and electoral behavior. In recent decades, religious polarization has emerged as a crucial feature of contemporary Indian politics, deeply affecting democratic institutions, electoral competition, and public discourse. Religious polarization refers to the process through which religious identities become politically divided and mobilized in opposition to one another. It creates a situation where communities increasingly perceive political interests through the lens of religious identity rather than broader democratic or developmental concerns. In electoral politics, polarization often transforms elections

into contests of identity, where religion becomes a central factor in voting behavior, campaign strategies, and political narratives.

Electoral politics in India operates within a democratic framework based on universal adult franchise, multi-party competition, and constitutional values. However, political mobilization in India has frequently relied upon social identities such as caste, religion, ethnicity, and language. Among these, religion has become one of the most influential tools of political mobilization in contemporary times. Political parties often use religious symbolism, communal narratives, and identity-based appeals to consolidate vote banks and strengthen electoral support.

The Indian Constitution envisions a secular democratic republic where all religions receive equal respect and protection from the state. The constitutional idea of secularism, reflected in the Preamble and Fundamental Rights, particularly Articles 14, 15, 25–28, seeks to ensure equality, religious freedom, and harmonious coexistence among diverse communities. Unlike the Western model of secularism that emphasizes strict separation between state and religion, Indian secularism is based on the principle of equal respect for all religions. Nevertheless, the increasing politicization of religion has raised serious concerns regarding the weakening of secular democratic ideals. The rise of identity-based politics after the 1980s significantly transformed India's political landscape. Events such as the Shah Bano controversy, the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, the Mandal-Mandir politics, and subsequent communal mobilizations intensified the role of religion in electoral politics. The emergence of Hindu nationalist politics, coupled with debates over minority appeasement and majoritarianism, contributed to the growing polarization of Indian society. Since the 1990s, electoral competition has increasingly reflected identity-based alignments rather than purely ideological or developmental concerns.

In the contemporary political environment, religious polarization has acquired new dimensions through the expansion of digital media, social networking platforms, and televised political communication. Social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, and X (formerly Twitter) have become influential tools for spreading political propaganda, emotional narratives, and communal messaging. The rapid circulation of misinformation, hate speech, and divisive political content has intensified communal sentiments during election campaigns and contributed to the normalization of polarized political discourse. Religion today functions not merely as a matter of personal faith but also as a strategic political instrument for electoral mobilization. Political parties often invoke religious symbols, cultural nationalism, temple politics, and communal narratives to appeal to majority or minority communities. Such strategies are frequently linked with majoritarian politics, where the interests and identities of the religious majority are projected as synonymous with national identity and political legitimacy. Consequently, electoral politics increasingly revolves around identity consolidation, emotional mobilization, and symbolic political issues.

The role of political parties in promoting or countering religious polarization has become highly significant. While some parties advocate secular and pluralistic politics, others actively employ religious rhetoric and identity narratives to secure electoral advantage. Election campaigns increasingly witness communal speeches, religious symbolism, and debates surrounding religious conversion, minority rights, personal laws, and cultural nationalism. These developments raise important questions regarding democratic inclusiveness, constitutional morality, and the future of secularism in India. Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to examine the relationship between religious polarization and electoral politics in contemporary India. It attempts to analyze how religion has become a central instrument of political mobilization, how media and political actors

contribute to communal narratives, and what implications such polarization carries for democracy, secularism, and social harmony in India.

The present study seeks to examine the growing influence of religious polarization on electoral politics and democratic functioning in contemporary India. The central problem of the study is to understand how religion-based political mobilization is shaping voting behavior, electoral strategies, and democratic discourse in a constitutionally secular society. In recent years, electoral competition in India has increasingly reflected communal narratives and identity-based alignments, where religious identity often becomes a decisive factor in political participation and voting patterns. Such developments have raised serious concerns regarding the weakening of secular democracy, social cohesion, constitutional morality, and inclusive political culture. Against this background, the study aims to analyze the rise of religious polarization in contemporary India and examine the relationship between religion and electoral mobilization. It further seeks to study the role of political parties, traditional media, and social media platforms in promoting communal narratives and intensifying identity politics during elections. The study also evaluates the broader implications of religious polarization for Indian democracy, secularism, and pluralistic values, while suggesting measures for strengthening democratic harmony and constitutional ethics. In this context, the research addresses important questions such as: What are the major causes of religious polarization in India? How does religious identity influence voting behavior? What role do political parties and media play in shaping communal polarization? And what are the long-term implications of such polarization for democracy and secularism in India? The study is based on the hypothesis that religious polarization significantly influences electoral behavior and strengthens identity-based political mobilization in contemporary India. At the same time, the alternative hypothesis argues that increasing religious polarization weakens democratic pluralism, secular political culture, and the spirit of constitutional democracy.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The issue of religious polarization and electoral politics in India has been widely discussed by several political scientists, sociologists, and historians. **Rajni Kothari** significantly contributed to the understanding of identity-based politics in India through his analysis of caste, community, and political mobilization. He argued that Indian democracy operates through the interaction of social identities and political competition, where caste and religion often become instruments of electoral consolidation. Similarly, **Paul Brass** examined the relationship between communalism, ethnic violence, and political manipulation. His studies highlighted how communal tensions are frequently shaped and utilized by political elites for electoral purposes.

Ashutosh Varshney provided an important perspective on ethnic conflict and civic networks. He emphasized that strong civic engagement and inter-community associations can reduce communal violence and strengthen democratic harmony. In contrast, **Christophe Jaffrelot** extensively analyzed the rise of Hindu nationalism and its impact on Indian democracy. His works explain how religious nationalism and identity politics have transformed electoral competition and political discourse in contemporary India.

Amartya Sen discussed the dangers of singular identity politics and emphasized pluralism, tolerance, and inclusive democracy. According to him, reducing individuals to a single religious identity threatens democratic coexistence and social harmony. Likewise, Mushirul Hasan focused on secularism, communalism, and the historical evolution of religious politics in India, stressing the importance of constitutional secularism in maintaining national unity.

Despite extensive scholarship, an important gap remains in the existing literature. Most studies primarily focus either on communal violence or on party politics separately. Limited attention has been given to the combined role of digital media, electoral campaigns, social media propaganda, and contemporary religious polarization in shaping voting behavior and democratic discourse in present-day India.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The present study is based on multiple theoretical perspectives that help explain the relationship between religious polarization and electoral politics in contemporary India. These theories provide a conceptual understanding of how religion becomes a political instrument and influences democratic processes, voting behavior, and public discourse.

A. Identity Politics Theory

Identity Politics Theory forms the primary framework of this study. The theory explains how social identities such as religion, caste, ethnicity, and language become central to political mobilization and electoral competition. In the Indian context, religion has increasingly emerged as a powerful political identity that shapes collective consciousness and voting behavior. Political actors often construct “us versus them” narratives to consolidate support among particular religious communities. Such narratives strengthen group solidarity by portraying one community as culturally or politically threatened by another. Consequently, elections are transformed from policy-based contests into identity-centered political struggles. This framework helps explain the rise of communal polarization and emotional political mobilization in contemporary India.

B. Secularism Theory

Secularism Theory is another important framework for understanding the constitutional and democratic dimensions of religious politics in India. Unlike the Western model of secularism, which emphasizes strict separation between religion and state, Indian secularism is based on the principle of equal respect for all religions. The Indian Constitution guarantees religious freedom, equality, and protection of minority rights through Articles 14, 15, and 25–28. Constitutional secularism seeks to maintain harmony among diverse religious communities while ensuring that the state remains neutral in matters of faith. However, increasing religious polarization and communal political rhetoric challenge these constitutional ideals and raise concerns regarding the erosion of secular democratic culture.

C. Political Mobilization Theory

Political Mobilization Theory explains how political parties and leaders strategically use religious identities to influence electoral outcomes. Through speeches, campaigns, media narratives, and symbolic issues, political actors mobilize voters by appealing to emotions, cultural identity, and collective fears. Electoral strategies based on identity formation often create communal divisions and intensify polarization during elections.

D. Majoritarianism Theory

Majoritarianism Theory examines how democratic politics may become dominated by the interests and narratives of the majority community. In contemporary India, majoritarian politics often associates

national identity with the religious identity of the majority population. This tendency can marginalize minority voices and weaken democratic pluralism, constitutional morality, and inclusive governance. Therefore, this framework is essential for analyzing the democratic implications of religious polarization in India.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF RELIGIOUS POLITICS IN INDIA

Religious politics in India has deep historical roots shaped by colonial policies, communal identities, and post-independence political developments. The legacy of the Partition of 1947 remains one of the most significant turning points in the history of communal politics in India. The division of British India into India and Pakistan on religious grounds led to large-scale communal violence, mass migration, and deep psychological divisions between religious communities. The trauma of Partition created long-lasting communal anxieties and significantly influenced the nature of political discourse in independent India. Although the Indian Constitution adopted secularism as a guiding principle, religious identity continued to remain an important factor in political mobilization.

In the decades following independence, communal politics periodically emerged despite the dominance of secular-nationalist politics under the leadership of the Indian National Congress. Religious riots, minority-majority tensions, and debates over personal laws continued to shape electoral politics. During the 1960s and 1970s, communal organizations and identity-based political groups gradually expanded their influence, particularly in North India. Political parties increasingly began to recognize the electoral importance of religious communities and vote-bank politics.

A major turning point in contemporary religious politics was the Shah Bano case of 1985. The Supreme Court's judgment granting maintenance rights to Shah Bano, a Muslim woman, triggered intense political controversy regarding Muslim Personal Law and minority appeasement. The subsequent decision of the government to enact legislation overturning the judgment was criticized by many groups and contributed to the rise of religious polarization. This controversy intensified debates surrounding secularism, minority rights, and identity politics in India.

Another crucial development was the Ram Janmabhoomi movement during the late 1980s and early 1990s. The movement, centered around the demand for the construction of a Ram temple at Ayodhya, transformed religious symbolism into a powerful political mobilization strategy. The demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 marked a significant moment in Indian politics and led to widespread communal violence across the country. The movement strengthened Hindu nationalist politics and permanently altered electoral discourse in India.

The Gujarat riots of 2002 further intensified discussions on communalism, majoritarian politics, and state accountability. The violence following the Godhra train incident resulted in severe communal tensions and attracted national and international attention regarding religious polarization and democratic governance.

After 2014, India witnessed a significant political transformation marked by the increasing prominence of nationalism, religious identity, and majoritarian political narratives. Electoral campaigns increasingly incorporated religious symbolism, cultural nationalism, and debates surrounding issues such as cow protection, citizenship, religious conversion, and temple politics. The rapid growth of digital media and social media platforms further amplified communal narratives and identity-based mobilization. As a result, religion has become an increasingly influential factor in shaping electoral behavior, political discourse, and democratic processes in contemporary India.

RELIGIOUS POLARIZATION IN CONTEMPORARY ELECTIONS

Religious polarization has become a defining feature of contemporary electoral politics in India. In recent decades, election campaigns have increasingly relied upon religious rhetoric, identity-based narratives, and emotional political appeals to mobilize voters. Political parties frequently use religion not merely as a cultural or spiritual element but as an electoral strategy for consolidating support among specific communities. Consequently, electoral competition often shifts from developmental issues toward identity-centered political discourse.

One of the major features of contemporary elections is the increasing use of religious rhetoric during political campaigns. Political leaders often invoke religious sentiments, historical grievances, and cultural nationalism to influence public opinion and strengthen community-based voting patterns. Religious symbolism, slogans, and references to faith-based identities have become common components of political speeches and campaign strategies. Such rhetoric contributes to the creation of “majority versus minority” political narratives, thereby intensifying communal polarization during elections.

Temple politics has also emerged as a significant aspect of electoral mobilization. Religious sites and symbols are frequently used to establish political legitimacy and emotional connection with voters. The Ram Temple issue in Ayodhya became one of the most influential political movements in modern Indian politics and significantly shaped electoral outcomes over several decades. In recent years, visits by political leaders to temples and public displays of religious identity have become increasingly visible during election campaigns, reflecting the growing role of religion in political communication.

Another important issue in contemporary electoral discourse is the debate surrounding minority appeasement. Political parties often accuse each other of either favoring minority communities for vote-bank politics or promoting majoritarian agendas. These narratives deepen social divisions and contribute to the perception that electoral politics is driven by communal interests rather than constitutional principles or developmental concerns.

Hate speech and divisive political narratives have further intensified religious polarization during elections. Campaign speeches, social media content, and television debates frequently contain communal undertones that reinforce suspicion and hostility between religious communities. The rapid spread of misinformation and emotionally charged propaganda through digital media platforms has accelerated communal mobilization and polarized public opinion.

The 2014 Lok Sabha Election marked a major turning point in Indian politics, characterized by the rise of strong nationalist and religious narratives alongside promises of development and governance reforms. The election witnessed the consolidation of majority identity politics and the growing influence of cultural nationalism in electoral discourse. Similarly, the 2019 Lok Sabha Election further strengthened identity-based mobilization, where issues related to nationalism, security, religion, and cultural identity played a central role in shaping voter behavior.

State elections, particularly in states such as Uttar Pradesh and Karnataka, have also reflected increasing communal polarization. In Uttar Pradesh, religious identity and communal narratives have frequently influenced electoral campaigns and political alignments. Likewise, elections in Karnataka have witnessed debates surrounding hijab controversies, temple-mosque disputes, and communal narratives that significantly shaped political discourse. These developments indicate that religious

polarization has become an increasingly influential factor in both national and regional electoral politics in contemporary India.

ROLE OF MEDIA AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Media and social media have emerged as powerful instruments in shaping religious polarization and electoral politics in contemporary India. Digital platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, and X (formerly Twitter) are increasingly used for political communication, mass mobilization, and opinion formation. Among these, “WhatsApp politics” has become particularly influential, as political messages, videos, religious narratives, and emotionally charged content are rapidly circulated through private groups and networks. Such platforms often create echo chambers where individuals are repeatedly exposed to similar ideological views, reinforcing communal biases and political polarization.

The spread of fake news and misinformation has further intensified religious tensions during elections. Morphed videos, misleading narratives, and unverified communal content are frequently circulated to influence public perception and mobilize voters along religious lines. Algorithmic polarization on digital platforms also contributes to this process by promoting sensational, divisive, and emotionally engaging content that increases user interaction.

Television debates and media sensationalism often amplify communal narratives by framing political issues through religious conflict and identity-based discourse. Prime-time debates frequently encourage confrontational politics rather than rational democratic discussion. In addition, digital propaganda through organized IT cells, targeted campaigns, and online political messaging has significantly transformed electoral mobilization, making media a central actor in contemporary religious polarization.

CONCLUSION

Religious polarization has emerged as a significant force reshaping electoral politics in contemporary India. The increasing use of religious identity, communal narratives, and cultural symbolism in election campaigns demonstrates how electoral competition is gradually becoming more identity-centered than issue-based. Political parties, media platforms, and digital communication networks have contributed to the expansion of religious mobilization, influencing voting behavior and public discourse across the country. While religion has always been an important aspect of Indian society, its growing politicization has intensified social divisions and raised concerns regarding the future of secular democratic culture.

The study highlights that democracy in a diverse society like India cannot function effectively without pluralism, tolerance, inclusiveness, and constitutional morality. The Indian Constitution envisions a secular democratic framework where all religious communities coexist with equality, dignity, and mutual respect. However, increasing communal polarization and majoritarian political tendencies pose serious challenges to these constitutional ideals. Identity-based political mobilization may provide short-term electoral gains, but excessive polarization weakens social cohesion, democratic dialogue, and national unity.

Long-term democratic stability in India depends upon maintaining a balance between identity and inclusiveness. Democratic politics must move beyond divisive communal narratives and focus on constitutional values, social justice, economic development, and inclusive governance. In this context,

strengthening secular institutions, promoting civic education, ensuring responsible media practices, regulating hate speech, and encouraging interfaith harmony are essential for preserving India's pluralistic democratic structure. Ultimately, the future of Indian democracy depends not only on electoral success but also on the protection of democratic ethics, secularism, and constitutional principles that sustain unity in diversity.

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