

## The Rise of *Hindutva*, Saffron Terrorism and South Asian Regional Security

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### Abstract

*Regardless of increasing number of organized violent attacks by far right, non-Islamist militants across the globe, Western policy and scholarly discourse on terrorism remains excessively focused on violent extremism in Muslims. South Asia is no exception. The regional security agenda is often constructed by disproportionately highlighting Islamist extremism. On the contrary, Saffron terrorism in India is conveniently ignored. Nevertheless, the second political triumph of Bharatya Janata Party (BJP) under Modi, the political face of Hindu fundamentalists in India is barefaced. This paper seeks to offer an alternative perspective by focusing on the rising threat of Hindu extremists and how their ascendance to and consolidation of political power in New Delhi will impact South Asian regional security. Using adversarial threat analysis framework, the paper first establishes Hindutva terror as a potent threat, challenging the apologists' notions that tend to downplay this new wave of violence by terming it as "acts conducted by isolated fringe elements". The paper also highlights growing acknowledgement of the threat among academia*

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*but reluctance of policy makers in and around India to acknowledge Hindutva as a threat, which could further complicate the regional political environment. Since anti-Pakistanism is central to Hindutva ideology, there is a need for Islamabad to adopt counter-measures and sensitize the world about the growing role of Hindu fundamentalists in Indian policy-making process. The paper concludes that the Saffronisation of violence and politics in nuclear-armed India is irreversible thus it will continue to impact South Asian security in a most profound manner in the decades to come.*

**Keywords:** South Asian security, saffron terrorism, India, RSS Narendra Modi

## **Introduction**

The world is witnessing an unprecedented surge of far-right extremism. White supremacist, anti-immigration and Islamophobe fringe movements from Europe to Asia are now part of mainstream. In 2014, India too became the “first of the great democracies to fall to populism”.<sup>2</sup> This fall is absolute and irreversible. Unlike Europe where far-right political parties have only managed to secure few seats in electoral politics, the Indian far right represented by the BJP was able to form government in the center. The fall from democratic glory continues unabated as the Bharatya Janata Party (BJP) secured a second landslide victory in 2019 on a purely communal and ultra-nationalist agenda known as “Hindutva”.

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<sup>2</sup>Aatish Taseer, "Can the World's Largest Democracy Endure Another Five Years of a Modi Government?" *Time*, May 09, 2019, <http://time.com/5586415/india-election-narendra-modi-2019/>, last accessed May 28, 2019

The term *Hindutva* unites people of India based on the belief in India as a “holy land”. Thus by this definition only Hindus, Sikhs, Budhists and Jains are entitled to call themselves “Hindu” whereas Muslims and Christians are excluded from this definition.<sup>3</sup> Thus the definition suggests for reconverting Muslims and Christian into *Hinduism*, else stripping them off their citizenship. This according to Savarkar and Glowalkar is only possible through converting India into a *Hindu Rashtra*.<sup>4</sup> The phenomenon, therefore, is interpreted as an ethnically exclusivist and religiously extremist ideology, which by no means comply with the Nehruvian idea of “unity in diversity” of pluralistic and polytheistic religion of *Hinduism*.

Most of the experts of *Hindutva* including Jha, Jaffrelot, Brass, Noorani, Afzal and Veer equate *Hindutva* with *Brahmanism*, a movement essentially formed and driven by upper-caste Hindus with few showmen such as Narendra Modi belonging to lower caste. According to this school, *Hindutva* was an attempt by *Brahmin* elite to stay politically relevant in the then newly introduced modernization system by the British.<sup>5</sup> Traits of modernization system like elections, democracy, quota for jobs etc threatened the status quo enjoyed by elite class *Brahmins*. *Hindutva* reinterpreted *Hinduism* served best to consolidate political force against the new system. Such contentions, however, stumble in view of the history of pre-British India, in which the Muslims but not *Hindu Brahmins* held reins of power. *Hindutva* movement instead was a British ploy intended to divide Hindu and Muslims along communal lines to prevent any united front against the *Raj*. Saffron terrorism is a by-product of *Hindutva*. It is defined

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<sup>3</sup> Vinayak D. Savakrak, *Hindutva: Who is Hindu?* (Bombay: S.S. Savarkar, 1928).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Mujeeb Afzal, *Bharatia Janata Party and Indian Muslims* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2014), xix.

as use or intended use of forces by organizations of varying size associated with and/or breakaway factions of the Sangh Parivar in pursuit of religio-political dogma created by likes of Savarkar, Golwalker and Moonje . In recent times, more specifically since 2014, there has been a dramatic rise in the acts of terrorism perpetrated by Hindu groups targeting the country's Muslim Christian and secular segments. Nonetheless, policy and scholarly discourse on terrorism remains excessively focused on the "Islamist" variation of violent extremism. This paper seeks to offer an alternative perspective by focusing on the rising threat of Hindu extremists and how their ascendance to and consolidation of political power in New Delhi will impact South Asian regional security. Questions discussed include:

1. Is there acknowledgement of the threat posed by *Hindutva* and Saffron terrorism?
2. Why is the Western policymaking community complacent regarding *Hinduization* of the Indian state and society?
3. How *Hindutva*-led Kashmir policy will impact the militant movement in Indian-held Kashmir?
4. How institutionalization of Saffron power and increasing social acceptance will impact domestic terrorism in India?
5. And finally, how the action-reaction paradox on terrorism (Hindu and Islamist) will shape India-Pakistan relations?

### **The Rise and Consolidation of *Hindutva* - A Background**

After the second consecutive victory of the BJP, the *Hindutva* movement in India has entered the consolidation phase. The BJP's ideological agenda is dictated by Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a group banned thrice in India (1948, 1975, and 1992) for its involvement in terrorism and communal violence. The previous phase (2014-2019) was characterized by a systematic drive to embed an ultra-conservative version of Hindu nationalism in

accordance with RSS's vision of an *Akhand Bharat* that theoretically stretches from Pakistan to Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Myanmar and Indonesia. RSS influence was evident from the composition of Modi's first cabinet, which included nine (out of 19) ministers from RSS and there were at least a dozen other state ministers who were not full-time RSS *pracharaks* but associated with the Sangh through its students' wing, Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP).<sup>6</sup> Key portfolios such as the National Security Advisor were also filled with individuals with strong *Hidutva* background. Ajit Doval, Modi's National Security Advisor (NSA) since 2014, has been openly aligned to RSS and director of one of eight think tanks that Sangh created to shape BJP's policies. Doval's son, Shaurya Doval jointly founded India Foundation with influential RSS leader Ram Madhav. The think-tank is thought to be the principle driving force behind BJP's high policy issues.<sup>7</sup> Today *Hindutva* enthusiasts shape Indian policies through eight RSS-funded think tanks (Vivekananda International Foundation (VIF), India Policy Foundation (IPF), Forum for Integrated National Security, Syama Prasad Mookerjee Research Foundation, Forum for Strategic and Security Studies, Public Policy Research Centre and Centre for Policy Studies) that enjoy uninterrupted access to the country's strategic community. This institutional penetration has allowed RSS to shape and influence Indian policies on everything ranging from education to national security. Lauren Frayer of National Public Radio observed

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<sup>6</sup> Betwa Sharma, "Almost Half Of Modi's New Ministers Are From The RSS: Report", *Huffington Post*, May 06, 2016, <https://www.huffingtonpost.in/2016/07/05/modi-cabinet> , last updated May 15, 2016

<sup>7</sup> Rahul Tripathi, "How National Security Advisor Ajit Doval's son Shaurya reinvented himself into a key policy player", *The Economic Times*, October 14, 2018, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/how-national-security-advisor-ajit-dovals-son-shaurya-reinvented-himself-into-a-key-policy-player/articleshow/48322773.cms?from=mdr>, last accessed on May 29, 2019

“The RSS’ influence can now be seen in national policies affecting everything from education to commerce and food. It helps shape India’s public school curriculum, which, in some BJP-led states, teaches Hindu scripture as historical fact. Through its affiliates, it has been able to scuttle legislation it doesn’t like. And it pressurizes the Indian government to be more protectionists when it comes to big multinational companies entering the country.”<sup>8</sup>

The most worrying aspect of consolidation of far-right Hindus’ political, social and institutional power could be its potential to endanger the equilibrium in the state-community relationship across various castes, regions and religions.<sup>9</sup> Rehman contends that one of many consequences of majoritarian aggression could be massive communal violence in India. Such a scenario will pave the way for transnational Islamist terrorist outfits such as Al–Qaeda and IS to penetrate in India.

### **Scaling the Threat of Saffron Terrorism**

The saffron terror discourse generally revolves around seven incidents of terrorism between 2004 and 2008,<sup>10</sup> but the actual number of attacks conducted by the RSS, her allies and breakaway factions far exceeds the above-mentioned number. According to India’s Home Ministry and its National Commission for Minorities, Indian Christians faced over a hundred religiously motivated attacks per year, but the real number is certainly higher, as Indian

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<sup>8</sup> Lauren Frayer, "The Powerful Group Shaping The Rise Of Hindu Nationalism In India", *NPR*, May 03, 2019, [www.npr.org/2019/05/03/706808616/the-powerful-group-shaping-the-rise-of-hindu-nationalism-in-india](http://www.npr.org/2019/05/03/706808616/the-powerful-group-shaping-the-rise-of-hindu-nationalism-in-india), last accessed on May 29, 2019

<sup>9</sup> Mujeebur Rehman, ed., *The Rise of Saffron Power: Reflections on Indian Politics* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2018), 3.

<sup>10</sup> Jalna in 2004; Malegaon in 2006 and 2008; the Samjhauta Express, Ajmer Dargah, and Mecca Masjid in 2007; and Modasa in 2008.

journalists estimate that only some ten percent of incidents are ever reported.<sup>11</sup> The attacks on Indian Muslims are far higher in frequency and intensity. From 2014 to 2017, there has been 28% increase in incidents of communal violence involving saffron terrorist organizations including Bajrang Dal, Shiv Sena, etc<sup>12</sup>.

This study utilizes Adversarial Threat Analysis Framework (ATAF) to scale the threat posed by *Hindutva*-inspired organizations. The framework incorporates a close examination of a group's intentions (gauged through ideological disposition and past activities), capabilities (measured through quality and quantity of fighters, training facilities, financial status and weaponry) and opportunities (assessed through the vulnerability of targeted community, overall security environment and composition of the support base).

### **Intentions**

A scrutiny of public statements and interviews of the Saffron leadership, official websites and their history of development establishes following points;

1. The Sangh, her affiliates and breakaway factions vocally endorse the use of violent means in pursuit of their goals
2. Saffron organizations aspire to operate transnationally.
3. Their target selection is not only limited to Muslims and Christians but also those Hindus who oppose *Hindutva* ideology or who are not adequately Hindus.

Use of force has resided in *Hindutva* ideology since its inception. To transform his idea of militarized *Hindudom* into reality

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<sup>11</sup> Paul Marshall, "Hinduism and Terror" *Hudson Institute*, June 1, 2004, <https://www.hudson.org/research/4575-hinduism-and-terror>, last accessed on 27 May 2019.

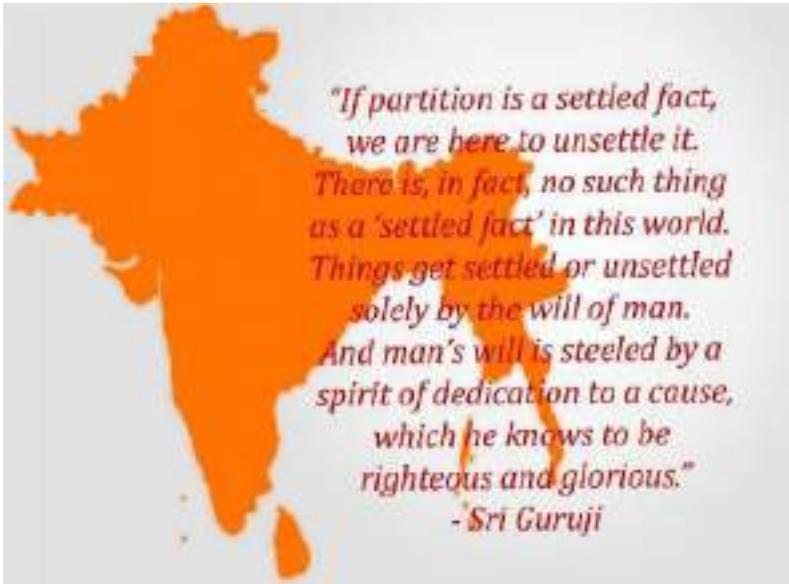
<sup>12</sup> Ibid

Savarkar enthusiastically encouraged young Hindus to enroll for British Army during World War II. This helped Savarkar to further strengthen his relationship with the Raj on one hand and complimented his vision for a large cohort of battle-hardened Hindu youth for the civil war with Muslims of India on the other. Savarkar also supported the idea of a specialized military training school that B S Moonje, one of his close associates in the Hindu Mahasabha, had initiated in the 1930s. The school known as Bhonsle Military School (BMS), was designed to impart military training for young recruits of the RSS and associates. Dhirendhra K Jha's "The Shadow Army" (2017) presents fascinating details about the role of BMS in preparing new generation of violent Hindu radicals who are equipped with using modern weaponry and art of organized mob violence. Contemporary saffron leadership has jealously guarded their "inherent right to defensive violence. For instance, Bal Thakrey, the founder of Shiv Sena, once said in a TV interview "Islamic terrorism is growing, and the Hindu terrorism is the only way to counter it. We need suicide bomb squads to protect India and Hindus".<sup>13</sup>

That *Hindutva* is transnational is vividly reflected in the maps of *Akhand Bharat* produced by RSS on its website. The map includes territories that constituted the Third century BC Empire of Chandragupta Maurya. This would incorporate the modern day nations of Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Tibet, Bhutan and Bangladesh.

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<sup>13</sup> "Politicians indulge in hate speech with impunity", *News 18*, April 06, 2009, <https://www.news18.com/videos/india/meet-dog-mathematics-313086.html>, last accessed May 26, 2019



Source: Image from RSS official website showing *Akhand Bharat*

The dream of greater India continues to inspire generation after generation of far-right Hindu radicals to pursue their dreams through a combination of political and violent means. In 1965, *Bharatya Jana Sangh*, a right wing political party with strong ties to the RSS, passed a resolution that "*Akhand Bharat* will be a reality, unifying India and Pakistan." In 2012, before coming to office Prime Minister Narendra Modi clarified his party's thinking, that *Akhand Bharat* "does not mean we wage war on any country ... without war, through popular consent, it can happen ... We call this Sanskritik Bharat (Cultural Bharat)."<sup>14</sup> In September 2007, Lt. Col Purohit of the Indian Army who was also one of the founding members of *Abhinav Bharat*, the group involved in terrorist attacks

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<sup>14</sup>Bhanu Dhamija, "Dream of Greater India: Forget *Akhand Bharat* or Hindu Rashtra, Bharat Mahasangh of like-minded nations is a more feasible goal", *Times of India*, March 20, 2018, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/toi-edit-page/dream-of-greater-india-forget-akhand-bharat-or-hindu-rashtra-bharat-mahasangh-of-like-minded-nations-is-a-more-feasible-goal/>, last accessed May 26, 2019

of Malegaon (2006), Ajmer Sharif (2007), Mecca Masjid (2007) and Samjhota train bombing (2008) spoke about his idea of Akhand Bharat and making India a Hindu Rashtra in a meeting took place in Deolali.<sup>15</sup> In December 2015, after Modi made a surprise short visit to Pakistan, BJP's national secretary Ram Madhav declared that as a member of RSS he still believes in the idea and that "one day [Pakistan and Bangladesh] will again, through popular goodwill, come together and *Akhand Bharat* will be created."<sup>16</sup>

The possibility that a greater India can multiply Muslim population by uniting 200 million Muslims of Pakistan, 150 million from Bangladesh, and 36 million from Afghanistan with 200 million Muslims residing in India has led few in *Hindutva* circles to reconsider their idea of *Akhand Bharat*. According to Dhamija both BJP and RSS have abandoned the goal altogether. *Akhand Bharat* finds no mention in the mission statements of either group. This may be true in case of BJP, which tacitly distance itself from any statement by the Sangh regarding *Akhand Bharat* but the RSS is religiously pursuing the idea as is mentioned by official propaganda material of the organization and public statements issued by its leadership.

Muslims and Christians remain prime target of *Hindutva*-led violence but the target pool is gradually expanding including fellow Hindus who disapprove politicization of Hindu religion. Regarding anti-Muslim violence, a joint report by Mumbai-based Centre for Study of Society and Secularism and UK-Bases Minority Rights Groups International (MRG) mentions that in 2017 alone, more than 700 outbreaks of communal violence occurred in India that killed 86 and injured 2,321 people. The actual number, however,

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<sup>15</sup> Christophe Jaffrelot, "Abhinav Bharat, the Malegaon Blast and Hindu Nationalism: Resting and Emulating Islamist Terrorism", *Economic and Political Weekly* 45, No. 36 (September 4-10, 2010): 51-58

<sup>16</sup> Op.cit., Dhamija, (2018)

could be higher as many cases go unreported.<sup>17</sup> Between 2015 to 2018, more than 46 Muslims have been lynched to death by “Cow vigilantes”. Against Christians, there was 1, 620 reported incidents of violence from January 2014 to March 2018.<sup>18</sup> Indian Christians are demonized by the RSS as the “Pope’s soldiers” who use “violence and barbaric means to decimate all those who don’t follow the Roman Catholic religion.”<sup>19</sup> In recent years Hindu organizations have also targeted rationalists. Prominent cases include killing of Narendra Dabholkar (social activist and author from Maharashtra), Govind Pansare (a prominent communist leader and vocal critic of *Hindutva*), MM Kalburgi (scholar and writer) and Gauri Lankesh (a journalist and outspoken critic of Prime Minister Modi’s Hindu nationalist government). All these incidents point finger of suspicion towards *Hindutva* groups, who were hunting for them for hurting Hindu sentiments.

### **Capabilities**

The second component of ATAF is the assessment of capabilities, measured through quality and quantity of fighter, pool of potential recruits, training facilities, financial status and weaponry. Number of investigative stories prepared primarily by Indian journalist provides in-depth information on military capabilities of Hindu nationalist organizations. Bhonsala Military School serves as the backbone of militant *Hindutva*. The school was created by Moonje following his return from Italy in 1930, where he met top

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<sup>17</sup> Nilanjana Bhowmick, "Modi's party stokes anti-Muslim violence in India, report says" *South China Morning Post*, 29 June 2017, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/2100513/modis-party-stokes-anti-muslim-violence-india-report-says?>, last accede on May 20, 2019

<sup>18</sup> "We Are Indians Too", *Open Doors*, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Were-Indians-Too-Report-Digital-for-Website-corrected.pdf>, last accede on May 20, 2019

<sup>19</sup> Op.cit., Marshall, (2014)

leadership of Italian Facists including Mussolini. Moonje who wrote a paper entitled "Preface to the Scheme of the Central Hindu Military Society and its Military School" in which he rationalized creating specialized training school for preparing Hindu youth "for the game of killing masses of men with the ambition of winning with the best possible casualties (sic) of dead and wounded while causing the utmost possible to the adversary."<sup>20</sup> The school provides firearm training and indoctrination to dozen of batches every year. Col. Prohit also imparted training at BMS. The school, which is run by Central Hindu Military Education Society (CHMES) is expanding at an unprecedented scale with new branch for training pilots and a new school in Nasik to train female fighters.

Vishwa Hindu Parshad (VHP) on its part has established a specialized woman wing to provide military style combat training to radical Hindu women.<sup>21</sup> The wing called Durga Vahini (The Army of Durga) is composed of hundreds of thousands of Hindu women mostly belonging to rural India with little education. Every year the branch organized training camps for 15-20 days, which train the attendees in "dagger wielding" and use of firearms. Anti-Pakistan sentiments are inculcated at all these camps as part of indoctrination. One of the official chants of the groups means "Hindustan is for Hindus. Pakistan can go to hell!"<sup>22</sup>

A member of Durga Vahini has helped creating a militant training camp in the UP province for children as young as eight. In

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<sup>20</sup>Shamsul Islam, "Mohan Bhagwat Threatens To Overrun Indian Republic With Hindutva Mercenaries" *Counter Currents*, February 14, 2018, <https://countercurrents.org/2018/02/mohan-bhagwat-threatens-overrun-indian-republic-hindutva-mercenaries>, accessed on May 2, 2019

<sup>21</sup> "Inside an Indian camp for radical Hindu women", *BBC*, November 09, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-29798148>, accessed on May 20, 2019

<sup>22</sup> "Inside an Indian camp", (2014)

January 2016, this group known as “*Hindu Swabhiman*” claimed to have prepared a “Holy Army” (*Dharma Sena*) of 15000 soldiers, whose apparent objective was to fight Islamic State (IS) but ultimately to takeover UP by 2020.<sup>23</sup> There are approximately 50 known and hundreds of clandestine training camps organized by *Hindu Swabhiman*, where firearms training are preceded by six months indoctrination, which includes excerpts from Gita (Hindu holy book), History of Hindu subjugations at the hands of Muslims and Christians and contemporary issues such as “government’s inaction on incidents such as Pathankot”.<sup>24</sup> One of the camps was run by Parminder Arya, an ex-serviceman of Indian Army.

The collusion of serving and retired Indian military officers with violent Hindu supremacist organizations has further augmented the operational capabilities of Saffron terrorist organizations. Whether this is a trend, or few isolated incidents remains to be established. Members of Indian armed forces have however been found involved in number of terrorist attacks. Take for example, Abhinav Bharat (AB); the group responsible for number of terrorist attacks during 2006 to 2008 had three serving officers of Indian Army including Lt. Col Purohit, Col Aditya Dhar and Major Parag Modak who was the in-charge of AB’s international office. Another Army officer who was arrested for his involvement in Malegaon attack was Major Ramesh Upadhyaya, who admitted to have attended three meetings with Pragya Singh and her accomplices on the Nasik BMS premises to plan the Malegaon blast.

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<sup>23</sup>Sandeep Rai and Uday Singh Rana, "15,000-strong 'dharma sena' in Uttar Pradesh readies for war with Islamic State" *Times of India*, January 20, 2019, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/15000-strong-dharma-sena-in-Uttar-Pradesh-readies-for-war-with-Islamic-State/articleshow/50646587.cms>, last accessed May 30, 2019

<sup>24</sup> Rai and Rana, "15,000-strong 'dharma sena'", (2019)

According to the charge-sheet filed by Anti-Terrorism Squad of Indian state Maharashtra, Abhinave Bharat and the Nepalese monarchy embarked on an ambitious mission to radicalize, recruit and train serving officers and soldiers of Indian Army and members of *Hindutva* terrorists in India for the revival of Hindu kingdom in Nepal.<sup>25</sup> Considering long history of Indian servicemen's association with RSS there is possibility that the number of Indian Army officers and soldiers would far exceed than the figures publicized thus far.

The RSS maintains a vast pool of six million radicals who could be instantly mobilized more swiftly than the Indian Army, claimed Mohan Bhagat in 2018. This trained manpower that is spread all across India comes very useful during communal riots, which are often projected by Indian authorities as "spontaneous, unorganized" incidents. Saffronization of Indian curriculum under Modi's regime will continue to radicalize generations of Hindus to come, thus providing an uninterrupted supply of fanatics willing to die and kill for their faith. Like Taliban madrassas where violent ideologies are taught, RSS maintains more than 25000 Hindu seminaries across India preaching hate and intolerance to its more than 5-6 million students.

Transnational links also provide insights into groups operational capabilities. Thus far Saffron militancy has attracted recruits from Bangladesh, established contacts with Buddhist militant organizations such as, Bodu Bala Sena (Sri Lanka) and 969 (Myanmar) and created front organizations in Nepal to safeguard the only Hindu Kingdom. I have mentioned in one of my earlier works on South Asia how Nepal's transition from the world's only Hindu monarchy into a democracy came as a shock for Hindu

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<sup>25</sup>Zafarul-Islam Khan, "Hindutva terror comes to Nepal", *The Milli Gazette* (16-30 September 2009), Published Online: Feb 01, 2013, <http://www.milligazette.com/news/6110-hindutva-terror-comes-to-nepal>, last accessed May 30, 2019

fundamentalists of neighboring India, for whom the Hindu King of Nepal was seen as an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, the god of protection. Saffron fundamentalist groups of India, which later came to assume power after the general elections of 2014, resorted to support Ranabir Sena (RS) and Nepal Defense Army (NDA), the two terrorist organizations for the restoration of King and to reinstate Hinduism as the state religion of Nepal. Abhinav Bharat had close ties with the ousted Nepal monarchy.<sup>26</sup> Although timely and effective action by the new republican forces prevented RS and NDA from rising as a formidable force, bilateral relations between Kathmandu and New Delhi were damaged beyond repair. The breaking point came in September 2015 when on the pretext of ethnic tensions in Nepalese territory bordering India, Modi government imposed a complete blockade of Nepal.

### **Opportunitie**

An environment is considered conducive for the growth of terrorism if following conditions are present;

1. Population that terrorists aspire to represent suffers from bad socio-economic conditions.
2. Ideology espoused by particular groups finds widespread resonance among the masses.
3. The state machinery is complacent or unwilling to deal with the problem.
4. Availability of small arms and explosives generally weapons of choice for militant organizations.
5. Ethnic and communal fault lines.

Except for first, India today embodies all conditions, which make the overall environment conducive for the growth of saffron terrorism. Electoral victory of Sadhvi Pragya Singh Thakur (the key

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<sup>26</sup>Khan, "Hindutva terror comes to Nepal", (2013)

accused in series of terrorist attacks) on BJP's ticket, legal impunity for those involved in Saffron terrorism, Hinduization of Indian security apparatus and educational system, narrowing space for open debate in media and academia all indicate that India is either very close to evolve into a *Hindu Rashtra* or almost there.

### **Is there an acknowledgement of the threat?**

The study shows that Indian scholarly community had long acknowledged and warned about the threat but policy makers in India and beyond are yet to recognize that Saffron terrorism exists. A quick search on Academia, a key platform for academics to share their research, with a key word of *Hindutva* yielded 6317 research articles, mostly contributed by Indian scholars and journalists respectively. "Amartya Sen's India at Risk", Christophe Jaffrelot's "The Hindu Nationalist Movement in India", Tanika Sarar's "Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags", Mujibur Rehman's "Rise of Saffron Power", John Elliot's "Implosion" and Dhirendhra K Jha's "The Shadow Armies" remain major contributions on the threat. Without doubt a substantial amount of writing has been seen in recent years with significant contributions of Indian and Western scholars and journalists. But in spite of enormous implications for Islamabad, the state of scholarship and journalistic focus on *Hindutva* or saffron threat is dismal in Pakistan. Thus far, the country has produced one PhD on BJP's electoral politics.<sup>27</sup>

Although, there have been an ample amount of research and investigation into Saffron terrorism since Gujrat riots of 2010, the parlance did not reach American policy-making circles until 2019, when Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) classified two Hindu groups— Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Bajrang Dal — as "militant religious outfits" and called Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) a

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<sup>27</sup> Op.cit., Rehman, *The Rise of Saffron Power*.

nationalist organization.”<sup>28</sup> Since then the US is yet to utilize her global clout to have saffron terrorism included in global security policy discourse at different multilateral forums. This is mainly due to strategic convergence with India on the issue that concerns most in the present American administration; containing China.

Domestically, the ruling BJP refuses to accept saffron terrorism as a reality and terms any such suggestion patently anti-Indian. When Congress warned about the threat in 2010 the BJP accused the Congress of “defaming” the Hindu religion by coining the term “saffron terror” and demanded apologies from Rahul Gandhi and Sonia Gandhi. So intense was the pressure and fear of losing vote bank among increasingly radical constituencies that Congress had to backtrack on the statement. In April 2018, only a year prior to Indian elections of 2019, Congress spokesman said “neither its president Rahul Gandhi nor any other party functionary ever used the term “saffron terror” and that its adversaries were leveling baseless allegations in this regard. Show me a video or a sound clip where Rahul Gandhi or any other Congress functionary is seen using the term ‘Bhagva aatankwad’ (saffron terror). There is no such thing as saffron terror”<sup>29</sup> The damage was already done; the BJP had successfully stigmatized Congress as an anti-Hindu force, which helped the former to claim a thumping majority in parliamentary elections of 2019.

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<sup>28</sup> “CIA classifies two Hindu groups as ‘militant religious outfits” *Dawn*, June 19, 2018, [www.dawn.com/news/1414652](http://www.dawn.com/news/1414652), last visited May 27, 2019

<sup>29</sup> “No such thing as ‘saffron terror’, says Congress after BJP’s accusation” *Hindustan Times*, April 16, 2018, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/no-such-thing-as-saffron-terror-says-congress-after-bjp-s-accusation/story-ncKB91PGYktctFwYHx1c3L.html>, last visited May 27, 2017

## Implications

Unprecedented rise of saffron power raises plethora of questions with regards to South Asian Regional Security. What are the possible consequences for regional countries? How the institutionalization of *Hindutva* will influence Indian foreign policy vis-a-vis Pakistan? How this variation of terrorism will affect militant landscape of Kashmir in particular and India in general. The following section attempts to answer these questions.

Since ideational factors play an important role in shaping foreign policy options for any country, the social and institutional rise of *Hindutva* will certainly impact Indian foreign policy. And two South Asian countries most likely to suffer are Nepal and Pakistan for variety of reasons.

Regarding Nepal, I have mentioned in one of my earlier works on South Asia how Nepal's transition from the world's only Hindu monarchy into a democracy came as a shock for Hindu fundamentalists of neighboring India, for whom the Hindu King of Nepal was seen as an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, the god of protection. Saffron fundamentalist groups of India, which later came to assume power after the general elections of 2014, resorted to support Ranabir Sena (RS) and Nepal Defense Army (NDA), the two terrorist organizations for the restoration of King and to reinstate Hinduism as the state religion of Nepal. Abhinav Bharat had close ties with the ousted Nepal monarchy.<sup>30</sup> Although timely and effective action by the new republican forces prevented RS and NDA from rising as a formidable force, bilateral relations between Kathmandu and New Delhi were damaged beyond repair. The breaking point came in September 2015, when on pretext of ethnic tensions in Nepalese territory bordering the India, Modi government imposed a complete blockade of Nepal. Such

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<sup>30</sup> Op.cit., Khan, (2009)

ideologically driven antagonism from India has driven Nepal closer to China and Pakistan. Pakistani Prime Minister was the first foreign head of state to visit Nepal after KP Sharma Oli became the first Prime Minister of Nepal in February 2018. The invitation from the Nepalese side was a clear signal to India to mend its ways else Kathmandu will diversify her foreign policy and economic options. Nepal is also keen to build a trans-Himalayan Rail network with China to reduce its economic dependence on India.

About domestic terrorism in India, the threat is likely to transform dramatically with the arrival of reactionary transnational Islamist organizations. Scholars have often presented secular outlook of Indian society and security apparatus as a major bulwark preventing global Jihadi networks penetrating India. Eventually groups like Al-Qaeda and Daesh will attempt to manipulate Muslim subjugation at the hands of *Hindutva* forces. With increasing Saffronization of Indian state and society this argument is not relevant any longer. Al-Qaeda has already started a virtual campaign to highlight anti-Muslim policies through a series of videos. First such video was broadcasted in December 2016, which depicted footage of Muslims forced to praise Hindu gods and denounce Islam. Since then number of video footages have emerged evoking Muslim anger by showing hate speeches of Hindu right-wing leaders, footages of public lynching of Muslims by cow vigilantes and construction of Ram Mandir on the site of Babri Masjid.<sup>31</sup>

In Kashmir, BJP's heavy-handedness and inability of local militant groups such as *Hizb-ul-Mujahideen* to give a befitting response has paved the way for groups like Islamic State. In July 2018, Zair Musa, a local commander previously affiliated with *Hizb-*

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<sup>31</sup> Animesh Roul, "Saffron Scare: al-Qaeda's Propaganda War in India" *Terrorism Monitor* 16, no.6, <https://jamestown.org/program/saffron-scare-al-qaedas-propaganda-war-india/>, accessed on May 30, 2019

*ul-Mujahideen* parted ways and formed *AnsarGhazwat-ul-Hind*, an AQ franchise. Unlike nationalist insurgents, Zakir condemned nationalism as un-Islamic and also called for *Jihad* against Pakistan, which according to him was no adequately Islamic.<sup>32</sup> In May 2019, Islamic State also announced a new chapter "*Wilayah-e-Hind*" claiming few attacks on Indian security forces in Kashmir. Arrival of transnational actors, although very limited at the time of writing, can potentially alter the nationalist character of Kashmir movement, which could damage the cause and also provide India an excuse to justify any inhuman, unconstitutional move to quell the uprising in guise of fighting transnational terrorism.

## Conclusion

*Hindutva* is on the rise and the world is in denial. With the second electoral victory of the BJP in 2019 elections under Modi, the RSS will ensure further consolidation of Hindu nationalism and the marginalization of Muslims and Christians. The shades of strong ideological tilt towards Hindu nationalism are far too visible when it comes to New Delhi's policies towards Nepal, Kashmir and Pakistan. As the rise of saffron terrorism results in reactionary transnational *Jihadism* in India, one could not expect a rational response from Modi's administration, rather it will benefit by linking any such development to Pakistan. This will not only complement *Hindutva's* rise but also isolate Pakistan internationally. Particularly acute is the perception among Pakistani policy-makers that New Delhi will continue to protect and promote saffron terrorism as a state policy, which will have far-reaching impact on South Asia in general and Pakistan in particular.

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<sup>32</sup> "Al-Qaeda linked cell Ansar Ghazwat-ul-Hind announces Zair Musa as its chief in Kashmir" *Times of India*, July 27, 2019, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/al-qaida-linked-cell-ansar-ghazwat-ul-hind-announces-zakir-musa-as-its-chief-in-kashmir/articleshow/59792567.cms>, accessed on May 30, 2019

## Recommendations

In pursuit of their grand-strategic designs, Western capital tend to examine Islamist militancy with a magnifying glass while continue to downplay other sorts of extremism. Given the centrality of anti-Pakistan mantra of the rising Saffron power, Islamabad however can ill-afford to look the other way. The policy makers in Pakistan may consider following steps to prevent any fallout from Saffronization of Indian state and society.

1. Firstly, there is a need to expand local knowledge based on the issue of *Hindutva*. The government agencies or affiliated research centers may consider establishing databanks with updated information on all developments related to the rise of *Hindutva* in the neighboring India. This database will also help raising public awareness domestically and internationally.
2. This is high time that Islamabad uses its diplomatic offices to push for an all-encompassing definition of terrorism on international forums. This will help dealing with *Islamophobia* on a global level, help holding Indian state accountable for its patronage of saffron terrorism and elevate Pakistan's image among Indian Muslims. The Organization of Islamic Cooperation maybe an appropriate start.
3. If the persecution of Muslims continues unabated at the hands of Hindu fundamentalists in India, this could trigger a Muslim migration wave towards Pakistan and Bangladesh. Given the regional impact of this phenomenon this issue must be included on the agenda of any high-level regional forum in the future.