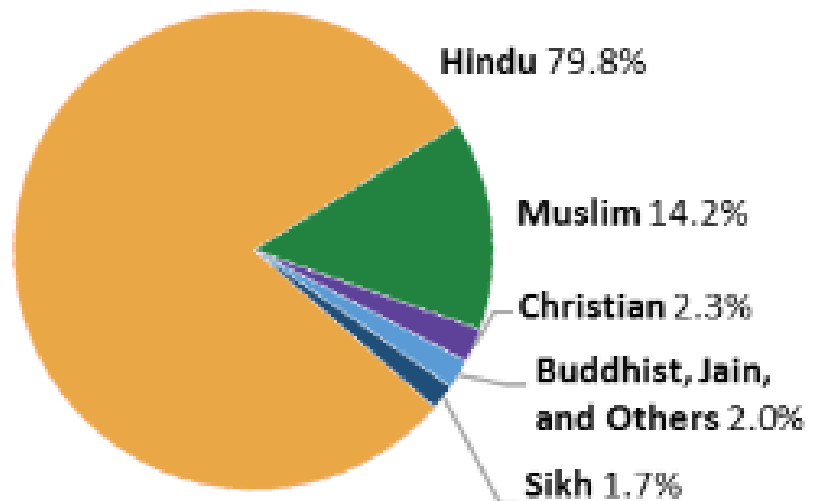


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ISSUE:	Measures to Alleviate Social Tensions by Mitigating Conflicts Among Religious Groups in India
STUDENT OFFICER:	Taeun Kim
POSITION:	President of Advisory Panel

Introduction

India has substantially more diverse ethnic and religious groups compared to most other countries. There are 8 major religions, 15 different languages spoken in various dialects, and numerous tribes and sects in India. Social tensions due to religious conflicts are common in India and have continued for many decades. Among these social tensions, conflicts between Hindus and Muslims have been predominant in India since its independence from the United Kingdom. Different characters, codes of good behavior, and lifestyles of these two religions highlights the cultural differences between them and create religious conflicts. Moreover, religious tensions in India have been intensified by COVID-19. India's health ministry blames Muslims for spreading the virus in India, leading to a spread of anti-Muslim attacks across India. Muslims in India were assaulted, beaten, expelled from neighbourhoods, and attacked in mosques. Sikhs, who are associated with Sikhism, sent messages to people not to buy milk from Muslim farmers because it was infected with COVID-19. Furthermore, fake videos were spread among Muslims not to wear masks and not to practice social distancing as if they wanted the Muslims to be infected with COVID-19. Religious conflicts intensified due to blames on gatherings for religious practices, and Muslims were targeted. The outbreak of COVID-19 dramatically escalated the level of hostility and increased the number of attacks on religious groups, aggravating the social tension in India.



Religion percentage in India 2021



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Background

One of the main causes of religious conflicts in India is Hindutva, which is an ideology that advocates for a Hindu state. The supporters of Hindutva believe that India should adopt Hindu culture as the national dominant culture and that other ethnic or religious groups should follow Hindu practices as well. This ideology encourages Hindus to threaten religious minorities and have pride as the majority group in India. Hindus only consider themselves as “true” Indians and thus practice violence towards minority ethnic and religious groups. An example that shows this principle is the demolition of the Babri Masjid, which was an attack of Hindus on a Muslim Mosque. Besides, there were frequent anti-Hindu violence, anti-Christian violence, and anti-atheist violence as well. Muslims and Christians attacked Hindu temples and Hindus numerous times, resulting in many deaths and injuries. The second Marad massacre, which was the murder of eight Hindus by Muslims in 2003, is one of the recent examples that show anti-Hindu violence. Not only Muslims but Christians in India were also attacked. Many Christians were forced to convert from Christians to Hindus, and Christian cemeteries were destructed. In 2008, Christian communities were attacked numerous times in Karnataka, India. Christian churches and prayer halls were destroyed, and bibles were burned. Lastly, atheists in India were persecuted and attacked.

Rationalists, atheists, and those who criticized religious groups were attacked by religious groups. M. M. Kalburgi, a scholar and rationalist, was shot for criticizing superstition and idol worship. K. S. Bhagwan, another rationalist, received a threatening letter from Hindus. In addition, A Farooq, who later became a rationalist and atheist, was killed by Muslims. These religious conflicts led to deaths, injuries, and damage, which intensified the social tensions in India especially after the outbreak of COVID-19.



Religious minorities in India attacked

Problems Raised

Discriminations Based on Religions

Blames against Muslims were intensified after the outbreak of COVID-19 and led to discriminations towards them in Indian society. Indian government further announced the Citizenship Amendment Act in 2019. The Citizenship Amendment Act 2019 provided Indian citizenship for



persecuted religious minorities from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan who are Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis, and Christians. The law does not grant these rights for Muslims, although majority of people in neighboring countries of India are Muslims. For the first time, India's citizenship was based on individual's religion. In other words, it made citizenship easier for non-Muslim immigrants from many neighboring Muslim countries. This act treated Muslim immigrants as illegal settlers in India and intensified the tensions between religious groups. Discrimination towards certain religious groups continues to exist due to conflicts among them.

Slow Development of India

The religious conflicts affected Indian laws and policies. Many Indian leaders are obsessed with religion, treating each religious group differently. In 2020, hundreds of Muslims gathered to hold a festival amid the COVID-19. The Muslim group was disbanded by the police. But a few days later, Hindus did the same with little opposition from the Indian government. Strengthening government regulations on religion caused political instability and rising tensions. The internal conflicts are limiting India from collapsing and becoming more prosperous. Religion remains significant in India, preventing it from advancing.

International Actions

USIP's Closing the Gap

United States Institute of Peace (USIP) partnered with USAID's Center for Faith and Opportunity Initiatives and initiated The Closing the Gap project. This project works to examine trends of rising government restrictions on religions in recent years. The project aims to find the relationship between religious freedom and peace and development through statistical analysis and case studies and is expected to provide more subtle, strategic, and influential policies and practices to promote religious peace. A significant amount of new data has been collected for the past decade on religious restrictions and discrimination. Religious restrictions and discriminations that are caused by religious conflicts continues to affect political stability and socio-economic development. Thus, The Closing the Gap project works on promoting a more effective policy and programming of



United States Institute of Peace (USIP)

global governments. In India, USIP is seeking a comprehensive solution as the new citizenship law heightens religious and social tensions.

Religion and Peacemaking Program

Based on the USIP's activities related to education in conflict zones and religious conflicts, the Religion and Peacemaking program of USIP holds a conferences on teaching religious "others" at schools, universities, and seminaries. The program was implemented internationally, including in India where religious conflicts are common. The program especially focused on the three Abrahamic beliefs and paid particular attention to countries with conflicts between two or more Abrahamic beliefs. The project began in part with the Chicago seminary working on a project to develop Islamic and Jewish textbooks for Christian theology students. Therefore, educational strategies to overcome religious stereotypes and misunderstandings were developed.

Key Players

India

The Indian government took action that dissatisfied the religious minorities and favored the Hindus. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which is one of the two major political parties in India, advocates Hinduism and supports it as the dominant culture of India. The BJP's victory in 2014 and Hindu majoritarianism weakened the secularism in current India. The political power of India can strengthen or weaken certain religious groups. For instance, in states such as Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Rajasthan where BJP rules, history textbooks were rewritten to disregard Islamic contributions to Indian history and culture. BJP's dominance led to discrimination against religious minorities and increased tensions between the Hindus and other religious groups.



Bharatiya Janata Party in India

United Nations Human Rights

United Nations Human Rights reported religious conflicts and violence that escalate tensions in India. It said that India will face a real risk of violence unless actions are not taken to deter religious hatred and prevent the political exploitation of existing tensions. Also, United Nations Human Rights



reported that India has a secular legal system, but many citizens, especially religious minorities, remain unhappy with the enforcement of the laws that are supposed to protect their rights. It acknowledged numerous reports of attacks and discriminations towards religious minorities, and that development in Indian policy is necessary to alleviate the tensions. But even though the United Nations Human Rights is aware of continued religious conflicts in India, it did not yet take any actions to solve the issue.

Possible Solutions

Decentralization of Power to States

One of the solutions to mitigate conflicts among religious groups is to further decentralization of power to states. For example, decentralization of power to states will help address the problems in Assam and Punjab. In Assam, India, there was an ethnic conflict between Assamese, Bengalis, and the tribals. Bengali Hindus and Muslims dominated Assamese with educational advantage and numerical superiority. When the Assamese middle class emerged, movements against the Assamese middle class emerged. Despite anti-Bengali movements, the migrants from Bengal could not be brought legally, and the Congress Party even gave voting rights to Muslim migrants who highly supported the Congress Party whether or not they had the Indian citizenship. The government intensified the antagonisms between Bengal Muslims and Assamese. In Punjab, India, there was a religious conflict between Hindus and Sikhs. Sikhs are the majority and Hindus are the minority in Punjab. Sikhs and Hindus often clashed in trades, and the political parties deepened the tension. The ruling Congress and the Akali Dal, parties dominated by Sikhs, contributed to the intensified tensions. Many religious conflicts in India have escalated tensions due to political parties that are dominated by one religion over other. Thus, decentralization is a possible solution that could alleviate social tensions.



Bengal Muslims in Assam

Improvement on Economic level and Education

One of the underlying causes behind the religious conflicts is the lack of resources. For example, land scarcity in Assam led to increased conflicts between Bengal Muslims and Assamese. Moreover, sharing of river waters for irrigation and monopoly of trade in urban markets led to conflicts between



Sikhs and Hindus in Punjab. If the economic level in India is increased, there will be less conflicts among religious groups in India due to a lack of resources. In addition, improvement in education will alleviate the social tensions, allowing people to manage differences in religious cultures in a non-conflictual way. They can re-evaluate their worldviews and remain true to their beliefs and faith. Education, especially for religious groups with socio-economic backwardness, can implement special education for them. The government would also be better at representing those religious groups.

Glossary

Religious conflict

Disagreement or argument with one religious group and another

Discrimination

Unjust treatment of different categories of people

Decentralization

Distribution of functions and powers especially in government

Hindutva

Predominant form of Hindu nationalism in India



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