

**International Conference – 2025: Developed India @ 2047****Charting Multidisciplinary and Multi-Institutional Pathways for Inclusive Growth and Global Leadership held on 4th & 5th April, 2025****Organised by: IQAC - Gossner College, Ranchi**

Religion and Politics in Contemporary India: Implications and Challenges

Rishav Kumar

Ph.D Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, Ranchi University, Ranchi.

Abstract

Religion and politics are closely connected in India, shaping how people vote, how political parties work, and how policies are made. This paper looks at how religion influences politics and how political leaders use religious identities to gain support. It also traces how this relationship has changed over time, from British rule to modern India, where the Constitution promotes secularism, but religion still plays an important role in political life. Political parties often use religion to attract voters, which sometimes leads to tensions between communities. The rise of majority-based politics and demands for minority rights have sparked debates about India's secular values. This paper examines how major parties like the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Indian National Congress (INC), along with regional parties, have shaped discussions on religion and governance. The paper also explores how religious politics affects laws and government decisions. Controversial issues like personal laws, freedom of speech, and state control over religious matters have led to legal battles and policy debates. Important topics include the Uniform Civil Code (UCC), reservations for religious minorities, and how religious institutions are managed. Another key focus is the role of media, especially social media, in shaping public opinion on religion and politics. The spread of information (and misinformation) on digital platforms has played a big role in religious and political campaigns, sometimes leading to divisions in society. Despite these challenges, India's democracy still provides space for different religions and beliefs to coexist. The paper discusses efforts by interfaith groups, local communities, and legal protections that help maintain religious harmony. In conclusion, the paper highlights the need for fair and inclusive policies that respect all religions while keeping politics secular. It suggests that open discussions and a strong commitment to democratic values can help India manage the complex relationship between religion and politics in a positive way.

Keywords: Religion, Politics, Personal Laws, Uniform Civil Code, Religious Minorities, Secular.

Introduction

India, known for its pluralistic society, has a deep-rooted tradition of religious harmony. The nation hosts a variety of faiths, such as Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism, and Jainism, all contributing to its diverse cultural and social identity. However, the merging of religion and politics has been a mixed blessing, sometimes fostering unity while at other times deepening divisions.

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The Indian Constitution establishes a secular state, where the government maintains neutrality toward all religions and guarantees equal rights for every faith. Despite this, political strategies have frequently weakened these principles, as parties, leaders, and advocacy groups have historically exploited religious sentiments for electoral and ideological benefits. This trend has sparked significant discussions on how religion shapes public policies, governance, and societal unity.

In present-day India, religious politics takes various forms, including communal campaigns, religious nationalism, legal disputes over sacred sites, and conflicts surrounding personal laws. The rise of social media and digital platforms has further intensified religious debates, often resulting in societal polarization and the spread of misinformation. Additionally, contentious topics like religious conversion, the enforcement of anti-conversion laws, and discussions on uniform civil codes have heightened political tensions.

This paper explores the consequences of religious politics on democratic governance and social stability, examining both historical and contemporary perspectives. It assesses how religious affiliations impact voting behavior, policy formulation, and inter-community relationships. The study also addresses the legal and constitutional difficulties in managing religious diversity within a democratic system. Furthermore, it highlights regional dynamics, such as the ongoing debates on religious conversion and the removal of converted tribal groups from Scheduled Tribe (ST) status in states like Jharkhand.

By critically evaluating these concerns, this paper seeks to offer a deeper understanding of the evolving connection between religion and politics in India. It also discusses the wider implications for secularism, governance, and national unity, proposing policy recommendations to reduce religious conflicts in the political arena.

Historical Evolution of Religion in Indian Politics

Religion has been a key factor in Indian politics since ancient times. In the Vedic era, governance was closely linked to religious teachings, with rulers deriving authority from divine approval. During the Mauryan Empire under Ashoka (3rd century BCE), Buddhist ethics were integrated into statecraft, advocating peace and ethical leadership. Likewise, medieval India saw rulers supporting religious establishments, including the Mughals, who fostered a blended culture combining Hindu and Islamic traditions.

Under British colonial rule, religious identity became a means of political influence. Policies such as the introduction of separate electorates for Muslims in 1909 widened communal rifts. The Indian independence movement, led by figures like Mahatma Gandhi, aimed to unite different religious groups under a shared nationalist vision. However, the emergence of the Muslim League and the push for Pakistan ultimately resulted in the Partition of India in 1947, triggering widespread sectarian violence.

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After independence, India's leaders, especially Jawaharlal Nehru, adopted secularism as a foundational principle. The Constitution sought to uphold religious freedoms while ensuring state impartiality. Nevertheless, religion has remained a powerful force in politics, with various parties leveraging religious identities for electoral advantages. Key events like the rise of Hindutva ideology, the Shah Bano controversy (1985), the Babri Masjid demolition (1992), and the Gujarat riots (2002) highlight the ongoing entanglement of religion and politics in modern India.

Constitutional Framework and Secularism in India

India's secularism differs from Western interpretations. Instead of a complete separation between religion and state, India follows the concept of 'principled distance,' permitting state intervention in religious matters to promote equality and justice. The Constitution ensures religious freedom under Articles 25-28 while banning discrimination based on religion under Articles 14-15. However, the coexistence of secular governance with religious personal laws and minority protections creates legal complexities.

Despite constitutional guarantees, the practice of secularism remains debated. Political parties and advocacy groups frequently manipulate religious sentiments for electoral gains, obscuring the boundaries between state and religion. Debates over policies such as the Uniform Civil Code (UCC), anti-conversion laws, and the management of religious institutions highlight the challenges in defining the state's role in religious affairs.

Political Mobilization and Religion

Religion has been a central tool in political mobilization across India's electoral history. National and regional parties have strategically employed religious narratives to garner support, using rhetoric, policy pledges, symbolic acts, and direct engagement with faith-based communities.

The growth of religious nationalism, particularly through Hindutva ideology, has reshaped India's political scene. Groups like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and its associated bodies have been instrumental in politicizing Hindu identity, shaping the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) electoral tactics. Similarly, minority groups have seen political movements, with parties presenting themselves as defenders of religious rights, especially in regions with sizable Muslim, Christian, or Sikh populations.

Major elections have underscored the influence of religious mobilization. For instance, the Ram Janmabhoomi campaign and the Babri Masjid's destruction in 1992 heightened identity-based politics. The 2002 Gujarat riots further entrenched religious divisions in elections. Recently, political campaigns have increasingly relied on religious themes, such as politicians visiting temples and debates on issues like cow protection, interfaith relationships, and conversion laws.

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Beyond elections, religious mobilization affects policymaking and governance. Decisions on personal laws, religious institution management, and state-sponsored pilgrimages demonstrate the intersection of religion and politics. Social media has amplified these efforts, often spreading false information and worsening communal tensions.

Communalism and Religious Polarization

Communalism, the exploitation of religious identities to create societal divisions, has worsened religious polarization in India. Political parties, media outlets, and social organizations have sometimes manipulated religious differences to secure votes, leading to heightened tensions and violent clashes.

Instances of communal violence, such as the Gujarat riots (2002), Muzaffarnagar clashes (2013), and Delhi riots (2020), reveal the destructive consequences of religious divisions. The spread of hate speech, religious propaganda, and false narratives on digital platforms has deepened societal fractures. Government measures, including curfews and legal actions, have often been viewed as biased, worsening public discontent.

Social media's role in amplifying communal rhetoric is particularly alarming. Platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter have been used to disseminate divisive content, sometimes inciting real-world violence. Policymakers face the challenge of regulating hate speech while safeguarding free expression to prevent further communal strife.

Religious Freedom and Legal Disputes in India

Religious freedom in India is protected under Articles 25-28 of the Constitution, allowing individuals to freely follow, practice, and spread their faith while maintaining the state's secular nature. Yet, despite these constitutional safeguards, religious freedom remains a polarizing topic, frequently clashing with legal and political conflicts.

Constitutional Structure and Legal Provisions

India's Constitution establishes a secular system, promising equal rights for all religions.

- Article 25 ensures religious freedom, limited by public order, morality, and health concerns.
- Article 26 grants religious groups independence in handling their matters.
- Article 27 bans state funding for religious purposes.
- Article 28 restricts religious teaching in schools to certain cases.

Even with these laws, disagreements persist due to varying interpretations and enforcement. 8

**International Conference – 2025: Developed India @ 2047****Charting Multidisciplinary and Multi-Institutional Pathways for Inclusive Growth and Global Leadership held on 4th & 5th April, 2025****Organised by: IQAC - Gossner College, Ranchi**Major Legal Disputes

1. Anti-Conversion Regulations

Some Indian states have passed anti-conversion laws to stop forced faith changes, citing manipulation and bribes. Opponents claim these rules violate the freedom to practice and share religion. States like Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Uttarakhand have penalized conversions under specific conditions, sparking legal battles and claims of minority targeting.

2. Personal Laws and the Uniform Civil Code (UCC)

Religious freedom also clashes with personal laws on marriage, divorce, and inheritance. While Hindus, Muslims, Christians, and others follow faith-based laws, the push for a Uniform Civil Code (UCC) aims to ensure equal rights. Supporters believe it strengthens secularism, while critics view it as undermining religious traditions.

3. Worship Sites and Community Conflicts

High-profile cases like the Ayodhya-Babri Masjid conflict and the Gyanvapi Mosque issue reveal the challenges of balancing religious freedom and historical claims. The 2019 Supreme Court ruling on Ayodhya awarded the land to Hindu groups while providing a separate mosque site, demonstrating legal mediation in faith-based disputes.

4. Hijab Restrictions and Religious Rights

In 2022, the Karnataka High Court supported a hijab ban in schools, fueling discussions on personal faith versus institutional rules. The Supreme Court later reviewed the case, highlighting ongoing struggles over religious expression in public life.

Case Study: Religious Conversion and Delisting in Jharkhand

Jharkhand, a state in eastern India with a large tribal population, has become a focal point in discussions about religious conversion and the removal of Scheduled Tribe (ST) status for those adopting non-indigenous faiths. The clash between tribal identity, religion, and legal frameworks has sparked political, judicial, and social conflicts. Delisting, which strips ST privileges from converts to religions outside Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sikhism, remains controversial, affecting affirmative action rights and cultural acknowledgment.

The state's tribal communities have traditionally practiced the Sarna religion, but Christian missionary activity has led to increasing conversions. Critics claim these conversions are often driven by external pressures rather than genuine belief, prompting the Jharkhand Freedom of Religion Act, 2017. This law requires prior notification to district officials before converting, aiming to prevent forced or incentivized changes of faith.

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Delisting advocates argue that ST reservations should assist those adhering to ancestral tribal religions, as conversion might change their socio-economic standing. Opponents counter that denying ST status based on religion violates constitutional rights. Groups like the RSS push for delisting, asserting that conversions weaken tribal heritage. Meanwhile, the 2023 proposal for a Sarna Code in the Census added complexity by seeking separate recognition for indigenous faith.

Case of Delisting Attempts

In 2020, the Jharkhand High Court examined petitions questioning ST benefits for converted tribals, exposing inconsistencies in reservation policies. The court weighed whether tribal identity should depend solely on religion or also consider cultural and historical ties.

Impact on Society and Governance

1. Political Polarization: The debate has sharpened ideological divides—BJP backs delisting, while JMM and Congress resist it, wary of alienating tribal voters.
2. Legal Challenges: Courts are interpreting Articles 25 and 342, balancing religious freedom against tribal protections.
3. Tribal Identity Crisis: Some fear delisting will worsen marginalization, while others oppose religious assimilation.

Policy Recommendations

To tackle the impact of religion and politics in India, policies should reinforce secularism by upholding constitutional principles and banning religious appeals in polls. Electoral changes must bar divisive campaigning, alongside tougher laws on hate speech and false information. Education should focus on secular values and interfaith discussions. Protecting minority rights through legal safeguards and equal representation is crucial. Additionally, encouraging ethical media, fast-tracking justice for communal violence, and backing interfaith efforts for peace are key to curbing religion's political exploitation and nurturing societal unity.

Conclusion

In summary, the overlap of religion and politics in modern India is a intricate and layered matter, profoundly impacting the country's socio-political environment. Religion remains central in molding political beliefs, policies, and electoral choices. Although India's secular constitution upholds religious equality, the growing use of religion in politics has created major challenges, such as the surge of religious nationalism, communal conflicts, and the exclusion of minority groups.

These trends have deep consequences for India's democratic foundation, as they risk weakening the principles of diversity, acceptance, and unity. The Jharkhand case study further underscores rising issues tied to religious conversion, identity-based politics, and the intricate relationship between


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tribal communities, religious groups, and government policies. Tackling these challenges demands a refined grasp of India's socio-political context, along with a dedication to reinforcing secularism and safeguarding the rights of all citizens, regardless of faith. Ultimately, reconciling religious influences with democratic values and social equity will be vital for fostering a cohesive and inclusive future for India.

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