

## **Hindu Nationalism, Akhand Bharat, and Foreign Perceptions of India**

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### ABSTRACT

How might changing perceptions of Indian identity affect international politics? This essay considers two ideological initiatives closely associated with the government of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. First, it examines how Indian efforts to cultivate a Hindu nationalist identity domestically and globally might lead to growing foreign concerns over the status of Indian Muslims. Second, it assesses how India's public memory of past civilizational greatness and expressed ambitions to recapture prior glories can be perceived as revisionist intentions by India's neighbors. These ideological initiatives are considered through short case studies of reactions in states neighboring India as well as states with populist pan-Islamist leaders, such as Turkey and Malaysia. Together, the evidence presented here suggests these perceived identity changes have generated tangible but manageable costs that complicate India's foreign policy as New Delhi pursues great power aspirations.

*Keywords:* India; Narendra Modi; Hindu nationalism; Hindutva; civilizational state; nationalism; rising powers

## **El nacionalismo hindú, Akhand Bharat y las percepciones extranjeras de la India**

### RESUMEN

¿Cómo podrían afectar la cambiante percepción de la identidad india a la política internacional? Este ensayo analiza dos iniciativas ideológicas estrechamente relacionadas con el gobierno del primer ministro indio, Narendra Modi. En primer lugar, examina cómo los esfuerzos de la India por cultivar una identidad nacionalista hindú a nivel nacional e internacional podrían generar una creciente preocupación en el extranjero por la situación de los musulmanes indios. En segundo lugar, evalúa cómo la memoria pública de la India sobre la grandeza de su civilización pasada y sus ambicio-

nes expresadas de recuperar glorias pasadas pueden ser percibidas como intenciones revisionistas por sus vecinos. Estas iniciativas ideológicas se analizan mediante breves estudios de caso sobre las reacciones en estados vecinos de la India, así como en estados con líderes populistas panislamistas, como Turquía y Malasia. En conjunto, la evidencia presentada aquí sugiere que estos cambios de identidad percibidos han generado costos tangibles, pero manejables, que complican la política exterior de la India, mientras Nueva Delhi persigue sus aspiraciones de gran potencia.

**Palabras clave:** India; Narendra Modi; nacionalismo hindú; Hindutva; Estado civilizacional; nacionalismo; potencias en ascenso

## 印度教民族主义、大印度以及外国对印度的感知

### 摘要

对印度身份认同的感知转变将如何影响国际政治？本文探讨了与印度总理纳伦德拉·莫迪政府密切相关的两项意识形态举措。首先，本文分析了印度在国内和国际上培育印度教民族主义身份的举措如何可能引发越来越多国际社会对印度穆斯林地位的关切。其次，本文评估了“印度公众对昔日文明辉煌的记忆以及重现昔日荣光的雄心壮志”如何可能被印度邻国视为修正主义意图。通过对印度邻国以及土耳其和马来西亚等拥有民粹主义泛伊斯兰领导人的国家的反应进行简短的案例研究，本文考察了这些意识形态举措。本文提供的证据表明，这些感知的身份认同转变已经产生了切实但可控的代价，使新德里方面在追求大国地位的过程中面临复杂的外交政策。

关键词：印度，纳伦德拉·莫迪，印度教民族主义，印度教特性，文明国家，民族主义，新兴国家

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### Introduction

While other articles in this special issue focus on how domestic trends will directly change India, its economy, and its behavior at home and abroad, this article focuses on the consequences of those

changes for India's national security. It does so by tracing how changes to India's identity and worldview are perceived by foreign actors, which in turn shapes the foreign policy landscape that New Delhi must navigate.

In a society as vast and variegated as India, there are countless changes

that might be given emphasis. For analytic tractability, I focus on two ideological projects closely associated with the Modi government. The first is an anti-secular effort designed to create a Hindu *rashtra* (polity) even if that has the effect of alienating minorities broadly and Muslims specifically (see, e.g., Ganguly, Mistree, and Diamond 2024, 9–12). The second is a greater willingness by contemporary India to proclaim revisionist preferences even if there has not been a demonstrated willingness to act upon them. This has been especially evident in discourse surrounding an “undivided India” or *Akhand Bharat*. These ideological projects are primarily domestic in terms of their intended audience, but in the modern era even domestic discourse can be and is observed externally. These external perceptions trigger changes in attitudes and behavior in the observing state, and this article seeks to assess the direction and magnitude of those external reactions.

I argue that both ideological projects have begun to generate meaningful costs for India through this mechanism of changing foreign perceptions and the policy shifts that flow from those perceptions. This finding may appear to be in tension with prior scholarship, which largely found the impact of Hindu nationalism on India’s foreign policy under Modi to be “minimal,” “weak,” and “relatively insignificant” (Gupta et al. 2019, 5, 7). Such apparently contrasting findings arise for two reasons: (1) the ideological projects highlighted here became more salient externally only in recent years, especially since

2019, and (2) the consequences of these ideological efforts may be less evident in Indian foreign policy and more evident in how India is perceived. Those changing external perceptions and the consequences that flow from them are thus the focus of this study and not so much the diplomatic or national security initiatives emitting from New Delhi as deliberate foreign policy.

I argue that the resulting external costs to domestic changes have been clearest in India’s near abroad and, to a lesser extent, in certain Muslim-majority societies farther afield. Since India is a rising power with substantial and growing material resources at its disposal, these initial costs have been bearable even if they have made India’s rise harder than it might have otherwise been. If and when these ideological projects intensify further, the associated costs from changing foreign perceptions may also intensify. Alternatively, if India’s rise falters, then previously bearable costs may become less tolerable.

This article foregrounds the question whether domestic ideological change is associated with international relations consequences. While prior work has looked at whether ideological changes within a state cause the state in question to alter its foreign policy (e.g., Haas 2005) or whether ideological similarity between states alters their relations with one another (Walt 1987), this article is different because the nature of the Indian ideological change is different.

India’s ideological change is particularist, hierarchical, and revisionist.

This change is not located primarily in India's worldview but does have profound consequences for that worldview. India's embrace of Hindu nationalism is particularist because it is not shared by any of India's neighbors—of which, only one (Nepal) has a Hindu majority—and as such activates identity dissimilarities more than similarities. It is hierarchical because the ideological project views India as one of just a handful of civilizational states that have more durable status than their nation-state peers, while also viewing the division of the Indian subcontinent into separate nation-states as being contrary to this civilizational logic. It is revisionist because the boundaries of an imagined Indian civilization include territories far beyond India's present border, even though the ideology is vague about the means necessary to reconcile India's civilizational boundaries with its legal borders.

Both comparative political scientists and international relations scholars have studied changes in India's institutions and behavior over the last decade, but they have largely done so in separate analytical silos. As Huju (2023, 279) has argued, "the scholarly community that works on Indian IR has so far largely evaded *Hindutva* in favor of more conventional foreign-policy analysis under Modi's Premiership." Thus international relations scholars have noticed Indian domestic trends, but have largely analyzed them to assess changes to Indian power potential (in so doing focusing on Modi's economic reforms) or the grand strategic choices that India selects in employing those capabilities (in so doing focusing on Modi's relative

skepticism of India's non-alignment tradition and greater comfort with the use of force). These were and remain worthwhile objects of study, but they are not the only potential consequences of changes to the Indian polity that are unfolding. While dismantling the silos may be too ambitious, this article seeks to build connections between the siloed components with a hope of gaining a fuller picture of this evolving reality.

### **Change, Identity, and International Images**

**T**he ideological project of *Hindutva* is to reify a certain conception of Indian identity. Identity is a vast and fuzzy analytic concept widely employed across different social science disciplines. In discussing it, there is omnipresent danger of getting lost in philosophical excursions. This essay is concerned with a narrow subset of problems that are analytically more tractable. Namely, I seek to understand the politics of identity and how they spill over into the perceptions of others.

By the politics of identity, I mean a broad constellation of efforts "to persuade people that they are one; that they comprise a bounded, distinctive, solidary group; [and] that their internal differences do not matter, at least for the purpose at hand." (Brubaker and Cooper 2000, 34) These efforts include some attempt to draw on shared cultural symbols and a narrative of a shared history (see Deutsch 1966 [1953]). These stories and appeals do not necessarily require—but very often include—some set of "others" that help delineate

what makes “us” different from “them” (Lebow 2008). In any society, there are many potential narratives of a common past that could be employed, meaning political entrepreneurs have considerable—though not unlimited—flexibility in reinterpreting, reimagining, and redeploying shared cultural understandings for new identity purposes (Samuels 2003).

These identity reification efforts, which are primarily but not exclusively domestic in their orientation, spill over national borders. Appeals made within and by one society are heard by others who consider them alongside the behavior of the observed society. Outsiders, in turn, develop and carry with them images of other societies that often differ from the identities intended to be broadcast by national leaders. There may be meaningful and lasting disjunctures between the desired images and those held by others; moreover, those images are distinct from objective indices of national capability since reality is always mediated through perception. This potential for divergence brings opportunities and dangers for those practicing identity politics. “A desired image ... can often be of greater use than a significant increment of military or economic power. An undesired image can involve costs for which almost no amount of the usual kinds of power can compensate and can be a handicap almost impossible to overcome.” (Jervis 1970, 6)

This essay proposes that there have been real costs incurred as a consequence of changing outside images of

India’s identity, though these costs are still modest. While such images could change for many reasons, I propose that in the case of contemporary India those changes are attributable in substantial part to conscious, identity-defining efforts by the government of Narendra Modi and his political allies.

To understand this ideological project, it is important to distinguish three separate but related concepts.

The first is Hindu nationalism, which is the idea that the Hindu people are not merely a community of believers but also share ethno-racial traits (such as common descent) and a common sacred land, and consequently are entitled rights of self-determination (Jaffrelot 2021, 11–13). Hinduism is not just one of India’s many religious traditions, but rather it is central to Indian civilization (Varshney 1993). Hindu nationalism arose in the context of distinguishing itself from both European colonialism, Muslim nationalism (especially in the form of the Pakistan movement), and official secularism.

The second concept is *Hindutva*, or “Hindu-ness,” which goes beyond arguing that there exist a Hindu people with certain political rights but also delineates what constitutive norms apply in determining membership and proper behavior within that group identity. In so doing, it articulates a vision for a Hindu *rashtra*. *Hindutva* might be considered one type of many potential Hindu nationalisms, though it is the currently dominant strain, which is closely associated with the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) (Sullivan de Estrada

2023, 435; Haug and Roychoudhury 2023, 534).

The final idea is that of India represents a “civilizational state.” This category is perhaps the trickiest of the terms to define, in part because it is the newest. The notion of civilizational states as a distinct international actor gained support from (often state-supported) discourse in China, Russia, India, and Turkey. The idea conveys a state that is the inheritor of a cultural tradition older, deeper, and broader than mere national identity (see Zhang 2012, 53). Similar to Hindu nationalism, this discourse developed as a reaction against the dominance of (primarily Western) liberal internationalism and instead grounds legitimacy in what supporters argue is a culturally unique and superior civilizational tradition. Importantly, contemporary Hindu nationalist conceptions represent only one of the civilizational narratives available to Indian political elites; another, emphasizing pluralism and syncretism, has likewise been articulated from India’s multifaceted history (Srivastava 2023).

With these concepts in hand, this essay now turns to how the politics of identity in India are perceived by others.

### Is Indian Identity Changing?

While images and realities can diverge, it is reasonable to begin an analysis of whether perceived Indian identity shifts are generating foreign policy consequences by assessing if there are discernable identity shifts. The evidence demonstrates unequivocally that Indian leaders em-

phasize repeatedly and consciously that an identity transformation is underway. In multiple forums over many years, these leaders stress that a new India is emerging that seeks to reclaim a rich and temporarily lost historical tradition of greatness (Chacko 2023, 556).

Such messaging is recurrent in Prime Minister Modi’s speeches. When Modi went to the ramparts of the Red Fort on Independence Day in 2023, addressing his “beloved 140 crore [1.4 billion] family members” he wanted his audience to know “this is a new India, this is an India full of self-confidence..., this India is unstoppable, this India is tireless, this India does not gasp and this India does not give up” (Press Information Bureau 2023). Yet this identity shift is also demonstrated in countless other ways. Less than a month after Modi’s address, Indian officials made a point of using the Hindi name, *Bharat* instead of India, on G-20 invitations to underscore one way this new India was different than staler, more constrained conceptions of Indian identity (Jain 2023).

Indian officials said they are emphasizing this New India, this *Naya Bharat*, consciously for international audiences as much as domestic ones. External affairs minister S. Jaishankar waxed at length in 2024 about how he sought to broadcast a “brand Bharat” to the world. He thought the shift in naming conventions was apt because the “very term captures the civilisational aspect [of Indian identity], while underlining how much more rooted we have become.” He stressed that civilizational

point, “Our history, tradition, culture and heritage make us stand out. We are one of the rare ancient civilizations that have made a successful transition to a nation-state. In the past, when our overall standing was less, perhaps this did not count for that much. But when juxtaposed with our achievements in so many fields, it now assumes [a] very different connotation.” This idea of rootedness comes up often in discussions of why embracing Bharat and heritage is important and Jaishankar viewed it as an integral part of larger trend of “asserting ... independence from a globalized elite” (Ministry of External Affairs 2024).

Part of *Naya Bharat* entails an India more forceful against its foes. “This is a New India—we will answer terrorists in a language they understand and with interest!” Modi had stressed on Twitter (now X) in 2019 when airstrikes he authorized against Pakistan received mild criticism from members of the political opposition (Narendra Modi [@narendramodi], X (formerly Twitter), March 22, 2019, <https://x.com/narendramodi/status/1108964963190628352>). A few years later, Modi returned to the theme in 2024: “The headlines in *Naya Bharat* are ... India punishes Pakistan through surgical strikes” (Press Trust of India 2024). Indeed, some Indian diplomats anonymously lament that it is hard to project a more Hindutva-oriented foreign policy “without jingoism” (quoted in Huju 2023, 262).

Indian senior officials stress that the branding of a new India is not merely a domestic exercise. They argue

international perceptions are changing, though in their retelling those perceptual changes are exclusively to India’s benefit. Jaishankar wrote a book in 2024 to explain *Why Bharat Matters* and emphasized, “New India may be a message at home; it is equally an image abroad. It is not simply a more powerful and capable India that the world perceives; it is a more authentic and participative one, at ease as much with its nationalist spirit as with its international contributions” (Jaishankar 2024, 69).

While not the focus of this essay, it is interesting to contrast this brand profile of confidence, assertiveness, and willingness to use force to that public profile which China adopted under Deng Xiaoping during a similar period of rapid international ascent. Deng advocated that China must “observe calmly, secure our position, cope with affairs calmly, hide our capabilities and bide our time, maintain a low profile, never claim leadership, and accomplish something” (Quoted in Doshi 2021, 58–59). Modi’s India has sought to showcase India’s capabilities, heighten India’s profile on the world stage and claim global leadership. The divergence in desired images cultivated by two rising Asian powers helps to illustrate that identity creation efforts are not merely epiphenomenal to material power shifts.

What does it mean that Bharat is more “authentic” and “rooted”? What are the elements of the civilizational aspects of Indian identity? Here Jaishankar’s 2024 book is largely silent, mentioning neither the words “Hindu” nor “Muslim” in its more than two hundred

pages of text. It is implicit that the civilization is Hindu-centered since Jaishankar's book uses a rhetorical scaffold of interlacing contemporary analysis with lessons drawn from the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. Indeed, survey experimental work suggests that the term, Bharat, evokes more Hindu nationalist conceptions and weakens attachments to older secular visions of Indian identity among Indian respondents, than the name India did (Lindstam and Haas 2025).

Other national Indian political figures have been clearer about what Bharat ought to convey. In 2023, just days before the Modi government made headlines by issuing diplomatic invitations as "Bharat" rather than "India," Mohan Bhagwat had called for just such a move. Bhagwat serves as the head of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a Hindu nationalist umbrella organization. Bhagwat argued, "The name of our country has been Bharat for ages. Whatever may be the language, the name remains the same ... We will have to stop using the word 'India' and start using 'Bharat' in all practical fields. Only then will a change happen." What does it mean to be a citizen of Bharat? Well, here too the RSS chief offered a clear vision: "Ideologically, all Bharatiyas [Indians] are Hindus and Hindus mean all Bharatiyas. All those who are in Bharat today are related to the Hindu culture, Hindu ancestors, and the Hindu land," he explained. Rather than a pluralist society of separate entities this was a "Hindu *rashtra*," Bhagwat stressed (quoted in Thakur 2023).

Bhagwat's call to use Bharat happening less than a week before a publicized move to do that in a diplomatic setting suggests two possibilities: either Bhagwat was informed in advance such a move would happen, or the move happened because Bhagwat had called for it. Either possibility suggests a level of policy coordination between the RSS and the Modi government that then gives his words on what Bharat means more weight. (Modi's long tenure earlier in his life working in the RSS provides further weight to RSS pronouncements.)

Having established that there has been a concerted effort to project a new Indian identity at home and abroad, what negative baggage might this new Bharat carry that the old India did not?

### ***India as Anti-Muslim***

The first possible change involves the foreign perception that Indian Muslims are treated as second-class citizens in this new India. One criticism of the idea of a Hindu *rashtra* going back to at least B. R. Ambedkar's reading of V. D. Savarkar is that Hindu nationalists seek to create a society where "the Hindu nation will be enabled to occupy a predominant position that is due to it and the Muslim nation made to live in the position of subordinate co-operation with the Hindu nation." Hindu nationalism seeks hierarchy, rather than equality. Or as Ambedkar more forcefully puts it, "Savarkar will give the Hindus an empire over the Muslims and thereby satisfy their vanity and their pride in being an imperial race" (Ambedkar 2014 [1946], 142–145). If

anything, Ambedkar's criticism of Savarkar is even more valid for other Hindu nationalist thinkers of that era—M. S. Golwalkar (1939, 104–105) most clearly (Guha 2013, 338–345).

Many contemporary Hindu nationalists—including Bhagwat—argue that India is sufficiently capacious—after all Hinduism has thousands of gods—that it can accept any religion so long as Muslims don't insist on cultural or religious superiority (Press Trust of India 2023). They hint that the problem is Muslim chauvinism, not Hindu supremacism. Yet in other strands of contemporary Hindu nationalist rhetoric the sense of Muslim otherness is also clear.

In 2023, on India's Independence Day, Modi emphasized that India stood at the end of 1,000 years of slavery and was transitioning to 1,000 years of greatness (Press Information Bureau 2003). That arithmetic necessarily includes Mughal rule alongside colonialism in Modi's public historicizing of when Indian slavery began and ended. This accounting, consistent with an earlier generation of Hindu nationalist writers such as Savarkar, indicates a separateness and potential source of danger from Islam. It appears to consciously reject a more syncretic narrative of Indian identity proposed by Jawaharlal Nehru and other Congress leaders (e.g., Nehru 1994 [1946], 241).

Such a recasting of history promotes—indeed, necessitates—action and assertiveness against potential threats. As Bhagwat argued a few weeks after Modi's 2023 Independence Day

address, drawing on a similar chronology, "Hindu society has been at war for over 1,000 years—this fight has been going on against foreign aggressions, foreign influences, and foreign conspiracies ... Hindu society has awakened. It is but natural for those at war to be aggressive" (Press Trust of India 2023). Again, since the recounting of foreign threat includes the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal Empire as being "foreign" and a source of Indian "slavery," aggression is merited not just to repel threats now distant and far away, but rather to root out "foreign" influences that earlier Indian thinkers viewed as Indian in some important way.

If this were merely rhetorical, the effect on outsiders might be negligible. After all, certainly this is an age of heightened global rhetoric. Yet there are signs that this Hindu nationalist awakening may not secure outcomes that Indian Muslims perceive as just—or importantly, for this article's argument, that outside observers perceive as just. It is not mere rhetoric.

Indian Muslims have long-struggled to secure proportionate political and bureaucratic power—much before Modi emerged on the scene, it should be emphasized. Yet the Muslim share of elite government institutions has continued to decline in the Modi era even as the Muslim share of the population grows. Today Muslims are roughly 15 percent of India's population, up from less than 10 percent at the time of the first Indian census in 1951. Muslims make up just 4.4 percent of the lower house of parliament, 3.3 percent of

the Indian Administrative Service, and 3 percent of the Indian Police Service. While Modi-era numbers are not available, neither the Indian military nor Indian intelligence agencies seem to fare any better. Estimates of the Indian military officer corps suggest perhaps 2 percent are Muslim while anecdotal evidence suggests equivalently small (or smaller) numbers in the Intelligence Bureau and Research and Analysis Wing (Jaffrelot 2021, 408-412).

While this lack of representation predates Modi and the BJP, none of these trends have improved and many have worsened in the Modi era. Notably, there are no Muslim members of the BJP or the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance coalition in the Lok Sabha, nor are there any Muslim cabinet ministers in the current Modi government (cabinet ministers can also come from the upper house, Rajya Sabha).

This is hardly the only problem. Indian Muslims have been subject to vigilante violence and human rights groups allege that Muslims face higher rates of arbitrary and extrajudicial punishments, such as home demolition and public corporal punishment (Human Rights Watch 2022). There are widespread reports that Muslims face barriers (and in many cases, outright exclusion) from portions of the urban real estate market, and audit experiments by social scientists affirm Muslims receive callbacks from landlords at a substantively and statistically lower rate than Hindus (Datta and Pathania 2016). Hindu nationalist politicians accuse Muslim migrants to Indian cities creat-

ing “mini-Pakistans” (Mishra 2022) or “Palestines” (Sharma 2024) that threaten India from within. Interfaith and interethnic marriages are controversial for many different groups in India, but Muslims in particular have been singled out as waging a “love jihad” to lure non-Muslims into marriages (Malji and Raza 2021). Polling shows large majorities of Hindus believe the Muslim population is growing too fast and pluralities of Hindus say they do not desire a Muslim neighbor (Clary et al. 2024). In recent years, undocumented Muslim migrants from neighboring states, especially Bangladesh, have been subject to extraordinary bigotry, with senior Indian cabinet member Amit Shah likening them to “termites” (Ghoshal 2019).

In this context, when news stories raise the salience of the Hindu-Muslim divide in India, international observers notice and express concern. It is hard to pursue a policy domestically that affects a group with even modest international salience, like Indian Muslims, without that policy being noticed abroad. This is not a new problem, of course. In the aftermath of the 1992 destruction during a BJP rally of the Babri Masjid—a centuries-old mosque alleged by some to be at the site of the Hindu God Ram’s birthplace—the elderly former diplomat Arthur Lall wrote to his retired diplomatic colleague B.K. Nehru. What a “stupid lack of civilized restraint” had been displayed at Ayodhya, Lall lamented. Had the BJP “taken into account the regional and international consequences of its actions[;] not just its actions, but the interpretation that M[uslim]s around the world will give to them?”

(quoted in Huju 2023, 258).

When high-profile events happen to heighten the Hindu–Muslim divide in India, such concern in recent years has been voiced the loudest not from the autocratic states of the Middle East, but rather Muslim societies with some elements of electoral democracy, especially in places with Muslim populist leaders. In these instances, the particularism of Hindu nationalism appears to react especially poorly with populist pan-Islamic identities cultivated elsewhere. Such leaders may be on the lookout for anti-Muslim animus and hence Indian steps—rhetorical or tangible—in that regard take on heightened salience to them.

Two Modi-era episodes in 2019 and 2020 provide instructive data in this regard. In 2019, India decided to strip the Muslim-majority area of Jammu and Kashmir of its special status within the Indian constitution and downgrade the region to a union territory rather than a state within the Indian federal setup. The move drew widespread international attention and considerable criticism. Four countries elevated the issue to the most prominent international forum: speeches by national leaders at the annual UN General Assembly meeting in New York. Of the four that raised the matter at the UN gathering in September 2019: two were Indian rivals (China and Pakistan) but the other two were large Muslim-majority states, Malaysia and Turkey.

Malaysian prime minister Mahathir Mohamad was perhaps the most critical: “Despite [the] UN resolution

on Jammu and Kashmir, the country has been invaded and occupied,” he told the assembled diplomats and leaders. “There may be reasons for this action, but it is still wrong” (Prime Minister’s Office of Malaysia 2019). Turkey’s Recep Tayyip Erdoğan focused his criticism on the harsh lockdown that New Delhi imposed in Kashmir to prevent protests and riots following the constitutional change. The Turkish leader lamented the “blockade” where “8 million people” were “unable to step outside” and called for India-Pakistan dialogue to solve the dispute (Düz 2019). On the sidelines of the gathering, Erdoğan made it clear that he perceived a broader problem of anti-Muslim animus in contemporary India that demanded outside observers to speak up. Referencing vigilantes who targeted Muslims for cow slaughter, Erdoğan asked, “In India, how will we defend Muslim youth who are being whipped, beaten by machetes and even sentenced to death just for eating beef?” (Gunerigok and Hamit 2019).

The following year other events raised the salience of these problems again. In 2019, in addition to the Kashmir policy changes, the Modi government had pushed separately for legislation that would make it easier for non-Muslims to become Indian citizens but notably excluded this fast-track for foreign Muslims. Simmering tensions over the citizenship issue eventually caused Hindu-Muslim riots to break out in Delhi in 2020. The salience of the event was heightened internationally because the violence coincided with a visit to India by U.S. President Donald Trump.

Erdoğan linked the 2020 riots with India's great power aspirations. Erdoğan exaggerated the one-sidedness of the Delhi violence to a Turkish audience, saying contemporaneously, "India right now has become a country where massacres are widespread. What massacres? Massacres of Muslims. By who? Hindus." He went on to argue, "How will these people [Indians] make global peace possible? It is impossible. When making speeches—since they have a large population—they say 'we are strong' but that is not strength" (Agence France Presse 2020). In Indonesia, Vice President Ma'ruf Amin responded to non-governmental and clerical pressure to express concern and sadness about the Delhi riots amid comments on the dangers of religious radicalism (Antara Indonesian News Agency 2020). Closer to home, the Delhi riots led to protests in Bangladesh in February 2020 and appeals for the Sheikh Hasina government to cancel a planned visit by Modi to Dhaka that March (Associated Press 2020).

Some of these Modi-era criticisms passed quickly with only mild turbulence. Mahathir's comments led to a boycott movement against Malaysian palm oil, but Mahathir's tenure as prime minister ended in February 2020. Subsequent Malaysian governments have sought to turn the page with India (Das 2024). Malaysia has continued to support Pakistan, however, including publicly backing Islamabad becoming a full dialogue partner with the Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) compared to Pakistan's current status as a more limited sectoral

partner (Sajjad 2025).

Some external criticisms pre-saged more troubled bilateral tie with India. Erdoğan's criticisms were more vocal and recurrent, but their tone and volume were not immune to incentives. After five years of raising Kashmir at the United Nations, in 2024 the Turkish leader refrained from doing so. This was widely hypothesized as a concession Erdoğan was making in order to reduce Indian resistance to Turkish membership of an expanded BRICS grouping (Singh 2024).

Yet because of pan-Islamic unity or some other more mercantile driver, Turkey-Pakistan defense cooperation has deepened during the Erdoğan era. When a crisis broke out in 2025 between India and Pakistan following an attack in Kashmir on April 22, Turkey sent a naval vessel to Karachi port in early May despite heightened Indo-Pakistani tensions. When fighting eventually erupted, Pakistan allegedly used Turkish defense hardware against India in the short conflict from May 7 to 10 (Roy 2025). Turkey has since found itself subject to Indian ire following those India-Pakistan clashes in 2025. There have been calls in India for a consumer boycott (Pandya 2025), moves to cut ties with Turkish companies in logistics (Chaturvedi and Kalra 2025) and aviation (Ahuja 2025), and efforts to curtail links between educational establishments (Press Trust of India 2025a). At the UN in the fall of 2025, after a one-year hiatus, Erdoğan again raised Kashmir in his address the assembled leaders.

In Bangladesh, anti-India sentiment also has the potential to cause long-term damage to the bilateral relationship. Here Bangladesh's Islam-inflected nationalism reacts poorly with Hindu nationalism. By the end of Sheikh Hasina's tenure, the former Bangladeshi leader was widely perceived as being too subservient to India (Mustafa 2024). Unlike other cases involving distant powers, in Bangladesh, it is difficult to disentangle discontent with Sheikh Hasina from discontent with India, since to an extent Hasina and Indian reputations became tarnished in the eyes of some in Bangladesh because of their close interdependent relationships. In Bangladesh the concerns were not primarily about India as an anti-Muslim force but rather India as a hegemonic force in Bangladeshi life.

It remains to be seen whether the post-Hasina government will succeed or fail, and whether that success or failure will lead to a durable shift in Bangladeshi public opinion of India. So far, there are signs that Bangladesh's more assertive turn as an independent, Muslim-majority sovereign state has interacted poorly with India's more assertive Hindu nationalism. Concerns—some organic and some stoked by political and media entrepreneurs—about the fate of Bangladeshi Hindus have led to a sharp rise in anti-Bangladesh sentiment in India. While Bangladeshi Hindus have been caught up in the sometimes-violent political turmoil associated with Hasina's fall from power, many international observers have concluded that evidence of widespread anti-Hindu violence are overstated. In-

ternational media investigations have concluded that several videos and associated claims in India and elsewhere of an ongoing "Hindu genocide" in Bangladesh are false (Wakefield and Menon 2024).

Whether sincere or manufactured, these concerns have led to aggressive Indian rhetoric. The BJP leader of the opposition in neighboring West Bengal, Suwendu Adhikari compared the Yunus-led government to the Taliban and went so far as to threaten the neighboring state. "There are 40 Rafale aircraft stationed at Hasimara [in West Bengal]. Just sending two planes will do the job" of stopping persecution against Hindus. The BJP leader further argued that Bangladesh should remember it is dependent on India for many commodities, including electricity (*The Wire* 2024).

Interim Bangladeshi president Muhammad Yunus has blamed the Indian media for widespread misinformation about conditions in Bangladesh, especially for its Hindu minority (Rachman 2025). While Yunus generally has sought to disassociate the Government of India from the effort, other Bangladeshi activists in his coalition have been quicker to perceive a conscious effort by the BJP "to turn Bangladesh into an internal political issue for India" (Baruah 2024). Indeed, there does appear to be a concerted effort by the BJP to instrumentalize Bangladesh concerns as the party works to weaken the hold of the opposition Trinamool Congress (TMC) in West Bengal, especially ahead of planned state elec-

tions in 2026. “The Bangladesh turmoil, where Hindu minorities have been at the receiving end, has accelerated the [BJP party] membership drive, as people see the BJP as the only party capable of ensuring stability and are afraid of similar events under TMC’s rule, which is known for its minority appeasement,” state BJP president Sukanta Majumdar told the media in January 2025 (Press Trust of India 2025b).

For its part, Yunus’s interim government has strengthened previously anemic ties with Pakistan to India’s displeasure (Ethirajan 2025). Yunus’s attempt to garner foreign investment from China by pointing out that portions of India’s northeast are landlocked and dependent on Bangladesh for connectivity were perceived as threatening by some Indian observers. In turn, politicians from northeast India called Yunus’s remarks provocative and offensive. One such local party official from Tripura state in India went so far as to encourage India to forego the circuitous and costly effort to build infrastructure around Bangladesh and instead seize a route to Chittagong port just 70 kilometers from the southernmost tip of Tripura (Barman 2025). What might have begun as an identity divergence, then, has spiraled into security threats and revisionist territorial claims.

This leads to a second set of concerns in a more Hindu nationalist India that merits consideration.

### ***How Do Neighbors Perceive Akhand Bharat?***

“The homeland of the Hindus through millennia [sic] of their history has been nothing short of the whole of India stretching in its continental expanse from Kashmir to the Cape, from Nanga Parvat [in Gilgit-Baltistan] and Amarnath [Jammu and Kashmir] to Madura [Madurai] and Rameshwaram [Tamil Nadu] and from Dwarka [Gujarat] to Puri [Odisha]. The Hindus through the ages have built up the whole of this continent as their sacred, inviolable, and indivisible Mother Country and infused into it their very blood” (Mookerji 1945, 4). Thus began R. K. Mookerji in his address to the Akhand Bharat conference in New Delhi in October 1944, fighting unsuccessfully against the vivisection of Mother India to make a separate Pakistan. His pamphlet endures in the modern BJP’s online library of important reference materials.

Partition when it occurred in 1947 consequently led to a *khandit* (divided or fragmented) India. The goal for Hindu nationalists was and remains an *akhand* (undivided or unfragmented) India. How to achieve this objective is a frequent point of discussion in Hindu nationalist writings.

Sri Aurobindo ([1947] 2007), in a message written at the time of Independence, lamented,

India is free but she has not achieved unity, only a fissured and broken freedom ... the old communal division into Hindu and Muslim seems to have

hardened into the figure of a permanent political division of the country. It is to be hoped that the [Indian National] Congress [political party] and the nation will not accept the settled fact as for ever [*sic*] settled or as anything more than a temporary expedient. For if it lasts, India may be seriously weakened, even crippled: civil strife may remain always possible, possible even a new invasion and foreign conquest ... But by whatever means, the division must and will go.

Writing several years after independence, V. D. Savarkar (1971 [1963], 474) counsels patience in pursuit of an undivided Bharat. “[T]he real strategy for the Hindus from the point of view of their own benefit and the greater glory of Hindutwa [*sic*] is first to make the newly won Bharat wholly their own. The fragments that were left in the foreign hands could be attended to later on!” In Savarkar’s calculation winning back a Bharat from Muslim and Christian conquerors was no small feat and, with time, *Akhand Bharat* would also emerge.

This cursory intellectual history should suggest why it is hard to know what to make of Indian political figures who seek Akhand Bharat. Is this some distant goal or something more urgently felt? If Akhand Bharat is almost spiritually inevitable, then it may not require purposive politics or military force to bring it about now. The fragments of India will wither without the core and come back to it. This is how

the BJP chief minister of Uttar Pradesh Yogi Adityanath spoke about the issue in February 2023, “Pakistan is not a reality in the spiritual world. If something is not reality, it is fortunate that they survived for so long. It is in their interest to quickly amalgamate into India” (quoted in Kumar 2023). This idea that India has a spiritual core and perhaps other states do not would be consistent with civilizational rhetoric used in Russia and elsewhere (see Coker 2019).

Others have implied more volition by India. In 2022, RSS chief Bhagwat caused headlines by saying that at India’s current pace Akhand Bharat would become realized by India’s hundredth year of independent (2047) at the latest. With some effort, however, an undivided India might come into being as early as 2032. The analogy he offered alongside this timeline implied inevitability mixed with agency. “Our car is on its way. It has no brakes and only the accelerator. Anyone who comes in the way will be destroyed. Those who want can come join us in the car. This car won’t stop” (quoted in Das 2022).

RSS materials sometimes offered visualizations of what the boundaries of undivided India would mean: Akhand Bharat would stretch from Afghanistan in the west to Myanmar in the east, capturing all of Kashmir, Ladakh, and Tibet in the north and stretch down to encompass Sri Lanka in the south (Singh 2022). When a new parliament building was inaugurated in the summer of 2023, it also had a similar map in mural form. Many took the exhibit in the new complex to signify an expansive

vision of Akhand Bharat. The new map highlighted an area that stretched from Afghanistan, covering Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Myanmar. (It refrained from including Tibet.) The mural was, India's Ministry of External Affairs clarified, merely a memorialization of the spread of the Mauryan Empire under Ashoka and a reminder of "the idea of responsible and people-oriented governance that [Ashoka] adopted and propagated." Yet many in the neighborhood saw the map as an active goal not merely nostalgia. Some in India, too. A BJP cabinet minister (and longtime RSS member), Pralhad Joshi, shared the map on social media and said, "The resolve is clear - Akhand Bharat." Another BJP member of parliament, Manoj Kotak, also shared the map saying "Akhand Bharat in the new parliament building," showcasing in his view a "powerful and self-reliant India" (Reed 2023).

The reaction was immediate. In Bangladesh, parties from around the political spectrum condemned the map as an "insult" and a "threat to the country's independence and sovereignty." The India-friendly Awami League acknowledged popular anger and said it would seek clarification. Awami League allies asked for the map's amendment. Opposition parties demanded its immediate removal (*Prothom Alo* 2023).

The map angered many in Nepal, as well, despite the Nepalese government's explanations that the Indians had assured them that it was merely a cultural map. A publicity-seeking mayor in Kathmandu asked his aides

to install a map in his office of Greater Nepal, showing the territory Nepal possessed prior to the Treaty of Sugauli of 1816—slightly more than double Nepal's current territory. Even within the governing coalition there were public complaints of a too accommodative stand by the government in Kathmandu. Gagan Thapa, a senior leader of the largest party in the governing coalition, the Nepali Congress, encouraged the government to publish its own cultural map to counter the Indian one. Former Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli encouraged his successor, Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal, to ask for the new Indian map's removal from the parliament exhibit and to correct the cartographic mistake. Oli referenced a recent trip of Dahal's to India and argued, "There is no point in visiting India if you can't do that" (Giri 2023; *Al Jazeera* 2023).

Pakistan unsurprisingly was "appalled" and expressed "grave concern." The map was just another "manifestation," the Pakistan foreign office explained, of an "expansionist mindset that seek to subjugate the ideology and culture not only of India's neighbors but also its religious minorities" (Radio Pakistan 2023).

This storm largely passed in India's near abroad, but it is a reminder that even benign remembrances of past historical greatness can signal potentially revisionist intentions—to one's own populace and elites, as Pralhad Joshi's reaction indicates, as well as to international observers. Conceptualizing India as being a civilizational state

has often involved discussing boundaries outside of India's current borders. It is difficult to articulate that vision without trespassing on the national visions of India's neighbors. This is true despite the fact that the more expansive cultural project exists alongside an official policy of good neighborliness. The Akhand Bharat mural episode is an instructive example of how easy an undesired image can supplant the image cultivated by formal government policy. As Chatterjee and Das (2023, 494) stress, "[D]espite the continuity of India's official stance in the neighbourhood, its increasingly jingoistic domestic rhetoric about south Asia under the present political dispensation has elicited reactions from other south Asian states, ranging from criticism to imitation."

One final challenge bears emphasis which is the difficulty of narrow-casting to multiple audiences. While this challenge was and is present with regards to the perception of Indian Muslims (an issue abroad as much as at home) and cultural nostalgia for past civilizational greatness, sometimes domestic moves for mostly domestic consumption can signal revisionist intent. The prime example of this was India's changes to the status of Jammu and Kashmir in 2019. This policy shift entailed not just the downgrading of the erstwhile Jammu and Kashmir state within the Indian union but also the separation from that state of a new, separate Ladakh union territory as well. A new union territory necessitated a new map of its boundaries, which necessarily included republicizing India's long-standing claim of Aksai Chin.

During his explanation of the Modi government's decision, when questioned in parliament, Home Minister Amit Shah stressed that in his view both Pakistan-administered Kashmir and the disputed Aksai Chin plateau in Ladakh were part of India. When asked if the government's stance was too aggressive, Shah shouted down the questioner. "I am ready to give my life for this. You are talking about getting aggressive? I am ready to give my life for this" (Yadav 2020).

Several China watchers have argued that the Ladakh policy shift troubled the Chinese. Officially, China viewed the policy shift as an Indian effort "to undermine China's territorial sovereignty by unilaterally changing its domestic law" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2019). Such a statement might accompany any new map covering an area with a territorial dispute. There were other signs the complaints were not merely pro forma. Ashley Tellis, based on his conversations with Chinese interlocutors in late 2019 and early 2020, concludes, the Chinese "were reading the [2019 Kashmir] decision almost as if India was signaling an initiation of revanchism." Tellis tried to convince his Chinese counterparts that India's goals were domestic in nature, but he "was struck by the fact that [the decision] seems to have lodged in Chinese consciousness" (*Interpreting India* 2020). Ananth Krishnan, arguably the Indian journalist today who knows China best, said in 2020, "what I strongly believe did not help assuage Chinese anxieties [about India] was Amit Shah's

statement in Parliament, which I think was entirely needless, saying that India would die to get Aksai Chin back. And I think that even if that didn't really worry Chinese leaders, it gave them a great reason to do something to send a message to India, and I think it really was counterproductive" (*Grand Tamasha* 2020).

Since Chinese motives for the 2020 border clashes along the disputed Sino-Indian frontier are still poorly understood, these fears and concerns expressed in the months immediately before the clashes are one of the few pieces of evidence available of a possible Chinese motive. (India's long-term effort to build additional infrastructure along the border being the other important possible explanation.) Such a Chinese decision calculus to use force in the face of perceived greater Indian revisionism would be consistent with long-existing view in Western scholarship of China that concludes Beijing is most likely to escalate violence when it fears its position on a disputed frontier is worsening, especially if the Chinese domestic situation appears troubled (Whiting 1975; Fravel 2008).

It is of course possible that China's calculus did not involve a serious consideration of India's domestically oriented changes to Ladakh. Yet the potential for external misperception of rhetoric broadcast to and policies enacted for domestic audiences represents at least a potential challenge for a New India. If these Indian moves did help push China to escalation, then that escalation would be the costliest observed

consequence thus far for these ideological changes underway in Modi's India. China has agency as well and is hardly blameless in the escalation of hostilities, but this case—alongside territorial murmurs in the India-Bangladesh relationship discussed above—helps sketch out a way that these ideological shifts could worsen security dilemmas in international politics by causing outside states to believe India is revisionist—perhaps more revisionist than it truly is.

## Conclusion

The current government of India has sought to broadcast that there is a "new India" to domestic and international audiences. What that means for India and what that implies for other states is still uncertain. The ideological changes discussed here may be the overstated ambitions of merely some in the Indian elite. These changes are unlikely to be fully realized any time soon and the trajectory of ideological change is unlikely to be constant. Yet it is at least possible the ideological ambitions of some Indian elites will become widely shared societal ambitions. Even if some of this ideological vision is insincere, it is possible that rhetoric designed by elites to mobilize voters today becomes internalized by the next generation of elites tomorrow.

As such it is worth taking these ideological visions and their contestation within Indian society seriously. There has long been a tendency in international relations scholarship especially to treat India unproblematically as a status quo power facing revisionist threats

from Pakistan and China. This may have been an accurate diagnosis in the past and it may even be an accurate diagnosis today. But it is worth laying the groundwork that would permit a changing diagnosis in the event of a stark change in India's foreign policy preferences going forward. At a minimum, more widespread recognition is likely merited among external scholars that the image of India as a status quo actor was never held widely among India's neighbors and that view has become less common still over the last decade.

While this essay has focused on changes associated with India's Hindu nationalist identity, these are not the only shifts ongoing in Indian society and governance. Other scholars have foregrounded how the growing perception of Indian illiberalism might complicate and restrain how other liberal democratic regimes, primarily but not exclusively in the West, opt to cooperate with New Delhi (Markey 2022). The argument advanced above is that changes in India's identity toward a more forceful Hindu nationalist vision may also serve to discourage international cooperation with New Delhi for reasons related but distinct from concerns over illiberalism or procedural democracy.

Moreover, while this essay has focused on the consequences in India's near abroad and in certain Muslim societies with greater pan-Islamist populist movements, these examples are hardly exhaustive of potential future costs. Despite India's growing economic clout and adroit diplomacy in the Middle East, already there have been recent

episodes where alleged Islamophobia has spilled out of India's domestic discourse and into the international arena in those societies as well. Political and economic realism by autocratic leaders in those societies worked to quiet popular displeasure. Scholars have expressed concerns, however, that India's diplomatic gains in the Gulf may be fragile to unfavorable shifts in popular sentiment (Blarel 2022: 104; Ganguly and Blarel 2020). Such future shifts in Arab public opinion or changes in governing structures that might make those societies more beholden to popular will could stress India-Middle East ties going forward. India's perceived closeness to Israel over the last decade, including during the post-October 7, 2023, war in Gaza, may have made renewed Saudi-Pakistan defense cooperation more attractive to Riyadh, to take one concrete example from the recent period. Assessing the potential of such identity strains—as well as comparing these popular stressors against commercial, diplomatic, and national security interests that may favor cooperation—bears close watching.

Additionally, while the focus of this essay has been on the direct international consequences there may also be important indirect ones that deserve more scrutiny. Much of the ideological and political resistance to the Hindutva project as a reordering effort for Indian society has come from sub-national polities along India's peripheries. In the south and east, linguistic minorities in Tamil Nadu and West Bengal have resisted BJP's efforts to secure national political dominance. These state

governments in turn have had distinct views on the preferred approaches toward nearby neighbors in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. Even more notably, Hindutva sits uneasily at best with religious minorities that are majorities or pluralities in Punjab, Jammu and Kashmir, Ladakh, and many Northeast Indian states. Social movements based on these anti-Hindutva sentiments merge and co-mingle with other, older grievances against the Indian state. When these grievances generate non-state violence, as they have repeatedly, the need to quell such violence can divert military and paramilitary troops from other defense tasks for which resources are already scarce (Clary 2025). If these grievances persist, indigenous social movements may be the target for opportunistic assistance by India's contig-

uous rivals in China and Pakistan.

India offers a valuable case study into the consequences of evolving societal preferences, the reciprocal relationship between those preferences and shifting ideational worldviews, and how external actors perceive such preferences. It also illustrates how these largely ideational—rather than material—forces can influence foreign policy and international politics. This interplay is especially salient in a rising power like India, where changing material capabilities both reflect and reinforce national ambitions and the societal expressions of those ambitions. India, therefore, deserves urgent and focused scholarly attention, particularly from those willing to revisit long-standing assumptions about its role as an international actor.

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