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Events of 2015

The year 2015 proved a critical test for Narendra Modi, the leader of the right-wing Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) elected to power the previous year. While many hoped that Modi might realize campaign promises to foster a strong multicultural India, for the most part he has done little outside the scope of the BJP's *Hindutva*, a potent form of 'cultural nationalism' that sees the state as Hindu and minority cultures as a threat.

These sentiments, actively encouraged by Hindu extremists, appeared to be supported by data from the country's 2011 census released by the government during the year, showing that the Hindu population had dropped below 80 per cent, the lowest level since independence, while the Muslim population has increased since the last census in 2001. However, while a simplistic reading of these figures could play into extremist propaganda, commentators highlighted that growth rates across all communities are slowing down, suggesting a stabilizing trend. As BJP hard-liners have routinely exploited demographic fears for political gain, with one party member calling in January for Hindu women to bear more children to protect the Hindu religion, it was still feared that the data could be used to deepen inter-communal divisions.

This obsession with the erosion of Hindu identity is also reflected in the practice of mass conversions or *ghar wapsi*, carried out primarily by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), a right-wing nationalist organization. As VHP members consider Hinduism the original religion of all Indians before colonialism and proselytization, they have reportedly undertaken drives to 'reconvert' minorities and indigenous tribes practising Christianity, Islam and other faiths. A report released by the VHP during the year claimed to have 'returned' 33,975 people to their 'original' faith between June 2014 and June 2015, while also preventing 48,651 conversions to other religions. *Hindutva* forces have in fact been responsible for pushing for a national anti-conversion law, often under the guise of freedom of religion laws, to prevent what they see as mass conversions of Hindus to Christianity and Islam. While similar laws exist in a handful of states, they are not used to prevent conversions among religious minorities, Dalits and indigenous Adivasis; rather, these laws require either prior approval from district magistrates or that a local official is informed. In any case, minority activists have criticized the proposed law as a means for the government to exert greater control over the religious rights of their communities.

Another source of contention in national politics is the issue of beef slaughter, traditionally taboo for devout Hindus as the cow is considered sacred. One of Modi's key election campaign points was a promise to curb the beef industry, run for the most part by India's Muslim community, once he came to power. While few steps had been taken in the early part of 2015 to do so, some members of parliament (MPs) became increasingly vocal in their calls for a ban, with BJP Minority Affairs Minister Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi, who is Muslim, saying in May that, 'Those who are dying without eating beef, can go to Pakistan.'

Not long before, the BJP-governed state of Maharashtra, one of the few states where beef slaughter was still permitted in some form, banned the practice in March – a crime now punishable with up to five years in prison and an INR 10,000 fine.

Amid these tensions, related attacks against Muslims dramatically increased, culminating in a Muslim man being beaten to death in Dadri, Uttar Pradesh in late September, after rumours spread that he had beef stored in his house. Modi remained silent for weeks before describing the incident as 'saddening', though he deflected blame from the central government. A commission of inquiry found the incident was premeditated and not spontaneous as claimed by some BJP MPs, and by December 15 people had been charged in the attack. Several other attacks followed, including the murder of a Muslim headmaster by a crowd in Manipur in November after he was accused of allegedly stealing a calf.

Communal violence remains a persistent problem in India, often triggered by identity-related issues such as music or religious processions, and in turn heritage may often be a primary target during a violent outbreak. Arson attacks against mosques, temples and other important religious sites have frequently preceded or accompanied wider outbreaks of violence. Increasing mutual respect and tolerance for cultural differences is therefore an important dimension to conflict prevention and resolution between different religious communities. This is illustrated by the case of the Babri Masjid, a centuries-old Muslim mosque in Ayodhya that some claimed had been built over a temple erected at the birthplace of Ram. In 1992, Hindu extremists destroyed the mosque and consecrated a makeshift Ram temple in its place. While the incident immediately provoked riots across the country that left more than 2,000 dead, the land dispute itself has remained unresolved for more than two decades. In April 2015, a court ruled that the land be split two-thirds to Hindu plaintiffs, and one-third to the Sunni Muslim Waqf Board – a judgment the latter stated it would challenge at the Supreme Court. In August the Supreme Court, although it did not yet make a ruling, declared that Hindu worship at the temple could go on as usual. This case has been highly politicized, with VHP members apparently attempting to begin construction of the temple.

Another factor contributing to targeted violence is the continued influence of India's exclusionary caste system on its Dalit population, also known collectively as Scheduled Castes, who are among the country's most marginalized groups. Statistics released by the National Crime Records Bureau in 2015 suggest a 19 per cent rise in violent crimes against Dalits during 2014 compared to the preceding year, following a 17 per cent rise in 2013, mostly committed by members of upper-caste groups. Some have suggested that rising assertions of Dalit rights have triggered the backlash, although Dalits still face considerable obstacles in accessing justice. Dalit women, who face even greater discrimination than their male counterparts, are at particular risk of violence both from inside their community and at the hands of the upper castes.

Despite ongoing violence, the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Amendment Bill was passed, reportedly with little debate, by the upper house of Parliament on 21 December. This progressive amendment added new categories of offences, including: dedicating Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe (SC/ST) women as *devadasis* (temple servants often forced to engage in sex); garlanding SC/ST persons with shoes (a traditional insult); using SC/ST persons to engage in manual scavenging or carcass removal; sexual abuse or advances against SC/ST

women; and preventing the use of common property and wrongly occupying land of SC/ST persons, among others. Special courts are mandated to try these crimes. Though significant, the impacts of the amendments will likely be limited if the broader shortcomings and biases of the justice system are not addressed. According to the most recent available data from the National Crime Records Bureau, from 2014, conviction rates for offenders remain very low at just 28.8 per cent. Similarly, the International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN) reports that less than 2 per cent of rape cases against Dalit women result in convictions, compared to 25 per cent against women in India generally.

Many of India's indigenous peoples also struggle with exclusion and land rights issues, often exacerbated by conflicts with other groups in their territories. During 2015, violence flared up in the north-eastern state of Manipur. Meiteis have traditionally resided in the valley of Manipur, and government policies have frequently had the effect of pitting them against hill-residing indigenous communities, including Naga and Kuki. Protests began to be organized in July, coordinated mostly by Meitei student organizations, pushing for the reinstatement of the Inner Line Permit (ILP) system – a form of colonial-era regulation still used in parts of India to control movements in protected areas – to prevent those from outside Manipur from settling in the state. Although the push for the ILP was not successful, the Manipur state assembly – in a move apparently designed to appease protesters – quickly passed three bills on 31 August that proved to be highly controversial for the indigenous Naga and Kuki communities. While the bills attempted to limit migration into the area, Naga and Kuki felt that they were passed without their free, prior and informed consent, and that they infringed on their land rights and would result in the eventual destruction of their identities. Opposition protests broke out in early September, MPs had their houses burned by demonstrators and eight protesters were killed by police. Opposition to the bills continued throughout the remainder of the year.

Negotiating a peace deal with Naga separatist groups also proved to be a priority for Modi, with an unreleased 'Framework Agreement' signed between the Government of India and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isak-Muivah) (NSCN-IM) on 3 August. NSCN-IM is one of a number of groups that have been fighting since before Indian independence to establish a homeland for Nagas, an indigenous people spread throughout the north-east states. The agreement led to calls to repeal the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) that still remains in place and gives security forces impunity for human rights violations.

Finally, Modi also made attempts to enforce provisions in the 2006 Forest Rights Act (FRA), an important piece of legislation that could potentially secure the rights of India's indigenous Adivasi communities to their customary lands and forests. Implementation of the FRA has been extremely slow until now, with collective claims languishing in bureaucratic processes and less than 2 per cent of potential claims reportedly resolved. On 23 June, however, Modi issued a directive to the Ministry of Tribal Affairs calling for the implementation of the FRA by granting land rights to Adivasis within the next two months. These instructions came as a surprise to many, as Modi had also this year been pushing for an amendment to the Land Acquisition Bill that would remove community consent clauses, though by August the government bowed to pressure and the clauses on consent remained in the amendment.

Securing the rights of the country's indigenous peoples to their ancestral lands is essential for the maintenance and transmission of their cultural practices to the next generation. India's Dongria Kondh people of the Niyamgiri hill range in Odisha state, for example, consider the mountain Niyam Dongar the seat of their god and believe that as the god's descendants it is their duty to protect the mountain, along with their identity and traditions. Though the mountain was slated to be mined, the Dongria Kondh won a rare victory blocking the development in 2014. Since then, however, the continued threat to their mountain, traditional lands and livelihoods – in effect, their

very identity – has hung over them. 'If they take away these rocks', a Dongria man explains of his mountain, 'we'll all die. We'll lose our soul. Niyamgiri is our soul.'

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