

**Gendered Islamophobia: The Overlapping Parallels of Hindu and Buddhist Nationalism in South Asia**

## Background

‘Wherever there are Muslims, there are problems.’ Female Rashtriya Sevika Samiti member, BJP state level leader, former mayor of large city, Gujarat (Malji 2019a)

Hinduism and Buddhism are not popularly associated with nationalism or violence. Instead the typical depiction is one of peace and non-aggression. Likewise, nationalism has typically been studied in the context of Western countries and Abrahamic faiths. This popular depiction, however, overlooks the impact religious nationalism has on policy, inter-religious relationships, and communal harmony in South Asia.

India’s 1.3 billion population is approximately 80% Hindu and 14% Muslim. Jains, Sikhs, Buddhists and Christians make up the remaining 6%. The Constitution of India declares the country to abide by socialism and secularism. Hindu nationalists assert that as the only Hindu country in the world it is important for Hindus to protect themselves from external threats and diminishing influence amid increased religious diversity.<sup>1</sup> These external threats are mostly characterized as Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, and Indian Muslims allegedly influenced by outsiders, namely Pakistan. Hindu nationalists stress that many Islamic countries exist, but Hindus have only one homeland, thus the importance of protecting and promoting Hinduism. The growing power of Hindu Nationalism alongside the leadership of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Prime Minister Narendra Modi means that Hindu Nationalist goals mostly coincide with state policy. In 2019 this centred around removing special status (article 370a) for India’s only Muslim majority state Kashmir in addition to the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), which provides streamlined citizenship for refugees claiming religious persecution in neighbouring Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. The religious persecution however is only applicable for Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists, Parsis, and Christians, not Muslims. The CAA alongside the National Register of Citizens (NRC) provoked widescale protests throughout India because of perceived anti-Muslim bias. The NRC, set to be implemented throughout India in 2020, requires individuals living in India to demonstrate Indian ancestry. Both the Prime Minister and home minister Amit Shah have referred to illegal immigrants, which are predominantly Bangladeshi, as ‘termites’ and ‘infiltrators’, further casting doubts about the purpose of the programs (Press Trust of India 2019a).

In Sri Lanka, nationalism has defined the post-Independence era. Although Sri Lanka’s population is much smaller than India (21 million), its internal problems have been comparatively larger. Unlike India’s commitment to secularism, Sri Lanka’s constitution favours a single religion, Buddhism. Although other religions are given freedoms, the duty of the Sri Lankan state is to protect and uphold Buddhism. This favouritism toward Buddhism, and consequently Sinhalese identity, is an underlying reason for historical conflict in modern Sri Lanka. Both Tamil and Sinhalese nationalism led Sri Lanka toward a 30-year civil war that killed more than 50,000 civilians. However, nationalism associated with Tamil identity is no longer the defining feature of post-conflict Sri Lanka since 2009. Instead Buddhist nationalism has become a defining feature. The Muslim population, which faced discrimination from both Sinhalese and Tamils, received relatively little focus during analyses of the Civil War. However, nationalism and the dynamics among these populations are a defining feature of post-conflict Sri Lanka and worth increased investigation.

Similar to the percent of Hindus in India, Sinhalese make up approximately 75% of the population. What is distinct about religion and ethnicity in Sri Lanka is that both are more closely related than in India. Most Sinhalese people follow Theravada Buddhism, whereas most Tamils follow Hinduism. Approximately 10% of the population are Christians, mostly of Tamil ancestry. Islam plays a unique role compared to Tamils and Sinhalese because Muslims have chosen to identify based more on their religion rather than ethnicity, although this has varied based on political and historical context 2015 (Faslan and Vanniasinkam 2015: 7). Muslims are typically associated with Moor ethnicity, although there are five Muslim ethnic groups (Nuhuman 2007:17). Like Hindu nationalism in India, Buddhist nationalism has been strongly linked to the ruling party and influences governing principles. Although distinct, Hindu and Buddhist nationalism also have many parallels, specifically in how they perceive the threat of the minority Muslim population toward the majority religion.

### **Nationalism in the South Asian Context**

‘My nationalism, fierce though it is, is not exclusive, is not devised to harm any nation or individual’- Mahatma Gandhi 26 March 1931

#### ***Independence and Post Colonialism***

Nationalism was an important component of independence from British colonialism. South Asian countries were incredibly diverse, and nationalism originally had very little link to ethnic or religious identity. In India and Sri Lanka, nationalism centred on the colonized uniting against a colonizer, although this sentiment was most pervasive in India. Anti-colonialism was the underlying motivation and the movement was mostly secular and democratic throughout South Asia with Western educated elite leadership asserting varying secular anti-colonial nationalist sentiment (Upreti 2006). Following decolonization, many sub-nationalist movements arose throughout South Asia. These movements shifted away from the broad secular anti-colonial viewpoint and moved toward regional ethnic and religious identity.

In India, ethno-nationalist movements escalated into several regional separatist campaigns. With the British colonial forces now gone, the sentiment of occupation shifted toward the central government of India. The unifying sentiments that characterized colonial nationalism were no longer present. Multiple groups felt they had unique historical, ethnic, and even geographic differences from the rest of India, especially in Northeast India. In Assam, numerous movements emerged in the 1970s, with United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) being the largest (Pawar 2016:68-70). ULFA and similar Assamese organizations sought independence from India and carried out many violent attacks. Nagaland, Punjab, Manipur, and Mizoram also experienced multiple ethno-nationalist separatist movements. Tamil Nadu also saw nationalist sentiment centring around Tamil identity, although it did not escalate into violence the way it did in Northeast India and Punjab. Although the democratic and secular ideals of the nationalist movement were enshrined in the Constitution, it no longer served as a unifying nationalist force, especially since the original target of the earlier nationalist movement was now gone.

In Sri Lanka, the Sinhalese quickly moved toward religious-ethnic nationalism in order to downplay what many Sinhalese felt were the lasting legacies of Tamil favouritism and unequal leadership under colonial rule (Devotta 2000:60). In 1951, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) campaigned on Sinhalese nationalism and making Sinhala the national language. The SLFP won

the 1955 elections, and by 1956 passed the Sinhala only act, which replaced English as the official language in favour of Sinhala. Sinhala was not spoken by approximately 30% of the population, including Tamils and most Muslims. The Sinhalese nationalism disenfranchised Tamils and subsequently led to a rise in Tamil Nationalism that ultimately sought a separate Tamil homeland and was the foundation of the 30-year Civil War.

### *Rise of Hindu Nationalism*

Although there are earlier references and organizations related to Hindu Nationalism, especially Hindu revivalist movements such as Arya Samaj, as a modern concept Hindu Nationalism often coincides with the birth of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in 1923. The RSS is a Hindu volunteer organization, that centres on *Sanghathan* (Organization) and *Seva* (Service). RSS has been referred to as a right-wing paramilitary group by scholars, but members see themselves as a social organization devoted to service, patriotism, and education of Hindu values (Basu 2015:23). As of 2020, the organization is estimated to have around 5 million active members, but official numbers are not collected so it is difficult to get an accurate count. RSS members meet each morning for exercises and patriotic songs. Although separate organizations with distinct purposes, the RSS is well-known for its close connections with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Perhaps the most well-known RSS volunteer is Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. He is joined by nearly 5 million other active members of the RSS. For many, RSS membership may be seen as a pathway that can lead to future leadership positions within the BJP.

Organizations like the RSS work to protect and assert Hindu identity and influence policy. On its homepage, the RSS asserts:

‘The Hindu culture is the life-breath of Hindusthan [Hindu India]. It is therefore clear that if Hindusthan is to be protected, we should first nourish the Hindu culture.’<sup>2</sup>

During the colonial era, the influence of Hindu Nationalism as a unifying concept held less popular support compared to the anti-colonial nationalism of the time. Certain Hindu ideals and history did influence the movements such as Ramarajya and Satyagraha, yet in his writings Gandhi explicitly said he did not mean Hindu based governance or supremacy (Bhatt 2001).

There are several transformational moments in the ascent of the Hindu nationalist movement. The partition of India was among the first key shifts of Hindu nationalist sentiment and support. Gandhi’s leadership, and what Hindu Nationalists considered appeasement of Muslims, was considered betrayal, including by his assassin Nathuram Godse. The creation of Pakistan was seen as taking away ancestral Hindu homeland and giving it to Muslims. The RSS grew in popularity as it protested the policies of the secular left-leaning, often authoritarian, Indira Gandhi and the Congress party (INC) in the 1970s. The dissatisfaction with the INC provided support for political wing of the RSS, the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, which later dissolved and merged with several other nationalist parties and became the Janata Party and eventually the modern Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 1980.

A galvanizing event that demonstrated the increased organization and power of the Hindu Nationalist movement is the destruction of the Ayodhya Mosque in Uttar Pradesh India. According to Hindu Nationalists, the mosque at Ayodhya, named Babri Masjid, was

allegedly built on top of an ancient Hindu temple. This Hindu temple was of key importance because it was located at the birthplace of the God Rama. Hindu Nationalists allege the mosque was built over the Rama temple during the era of Islamic Mughal rule. On December 6, 1992 nearly 150,000 Kar Sevaks (religious volunteers), gathered at Ayodhya to participate in a stone laying ceremony. The ceremony quickly escalated into destruction of the mosque by the Kar Sevaks. This was not the first time Hindu nationalists gathered at the site. The Vishva Hindu Parishad (VJP), BJP, and RSS had visited the site throughout the 1980s in increasing numbers, which ultimately culminated in the 1992 mosque destruction. The Babri Masjid became a symbolic representation of what Hindu nationalists perceived as historical subjugation by Muslims. Hindus reference Islamic invasions throughout history and Mughal rule as evidence that the majority can be subjugated by a minority and their cultural sites destroyed. Consequently, in modernity, to prevent future subjugation by Muslims, Hindus nationalists suggest they must actively protect their religion and cultural practices.

The destruction of the Babri Masjid triggered some of the most violent Hindu-Muslim riots in post-independence India. The epicentre of the Babri Masjid riots was in Mumbai, 1500 kilometres away, where pre-existing communal tensions escalated following the news. The subsequent riots, which carried on from December 6, 1992-January 26, 1993, killed 700 people, mostly Muslims. Less than two months later, Mumbai experienced terror attacks carried out by Dawood Ibrahim and Muslim affiliated crime syndicates. The attacks resulted in the deaths of 317 and injuries of 1400 injuries. Ultimately, the attack escalated already poor relations between Hindus and Muslims, especially in Mumbai and the neighbouring state of Gujarat. The post Babri-Masjid destruction era coupled with increasing Hindu-Muslim tensions further popularized Hindu Nationalism, both politically and socially.

The first national election after Ayodhya and the subsequent riots changed the political dynamics of India. Since independence in 1947, the secular progressive Congress party (INC) had dominated the elections. Except for the 1977 Lok Sabha (Parliamentary) elections, when the BJP precursor Janata Party won, the INC had won every election. In 1996, the Bharatiya Janata Party won the majority of seats for the first time. The 1996 election produced political instability though, with 3 Prime Ministers in two years. In the February 1998 election, the BJP increased their seat share and secured a weak coalition, resulting in the Prime Ministership of Atul Vajpayee. During the 1998 campaign, the BJP promoted an 'openly nuclear' policy alongside increased aggression toward Pakistan regarding control of Kashmir and Pakistan's sponsorship of terrorism. Shortly after Vajpayee's electoral success, in May 1998, India carried out nuclear tests. Two weeks later Pakistan also carried out its nuclear test, escalating tensions in the region and creating two nuclear powers. Within a year the two nuclear powers directly clashed over Kashmir during the Kargil conflict, the highest intensity direct conflict between two nuclear states in history (Bell and MacDonald 2019)

Vajpayee would continue as Prime Minister during tumultuous times in India. In December 2001, the Indian Parliament was attacked by Pakistan linked terrorist groups Lashkar e Taiba and Jaish e Mohammed. The incident further fuelled tensions between the two countries that were on the brink of nuclear war two years earlier. Domestically, Hindu-Muslim tensions escalated once again following an attack on a train of Hindu kar sevak pilgrims returning from the demolished Babri Masjid. The train car was set on fire in Godhra, Gujarat killing 59 people, primarily

women and children. This incident created immediate outrage that resulted in wide scale rioting and pogroms throughout Gujarat.

During the riots between 1-2000 civilians, mostly Muslims, were killed. Sexual violence was widespread with reports of mass rape of women, girls, and infants, acid attacks, and sodomy. The sexual violence against women was systematic and symbolic. Before their deaths, women were paraded naked, and gang raped. Specific incidents included cutting off breasts, carving religious Hindu objects on women's bodies, slitting their reproductive organs, and gutting pregnant women (Khanna 2008).

Future Prime Minister Narendra Modi was the Chief Minister of Gujarat at the time of the riots. Modi and state officials were criticized for not effectively responding to the riots, with many academic sources calling the 2002 riots ethnic cleansing (Nussbaum 2008, Bobbio 2012, Ornit 2007). Later Supreme Court Investigations cleared Modi of the charges. In 2014, Modi became the Prime Minister and was re-elected in a landslide in 2019.

Since Modi's election, the popularity of Hindu nationalist organizations like the RSS continue to grow. Affiliated college organizations like Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) are experiencing membership growth throughout India's campuses. The ABVP, founded in 1948 by an RSS activist, is now considered the largest student organization in India with approximately 3.1 million members (Jaffrelot 2010: 47). Related organizations like the Bajrang Dal and Vishva Hindu Parishad also continue to grow in membership.

Nationalists in South Asia assert that nationalism is not a negative word the way it is in the West. Instead, nationalism means promoting country and religion first. One state-level veteran leader of RSS in Gujarat contrasted Hindu nationalism to nationalism in the West in the following way:

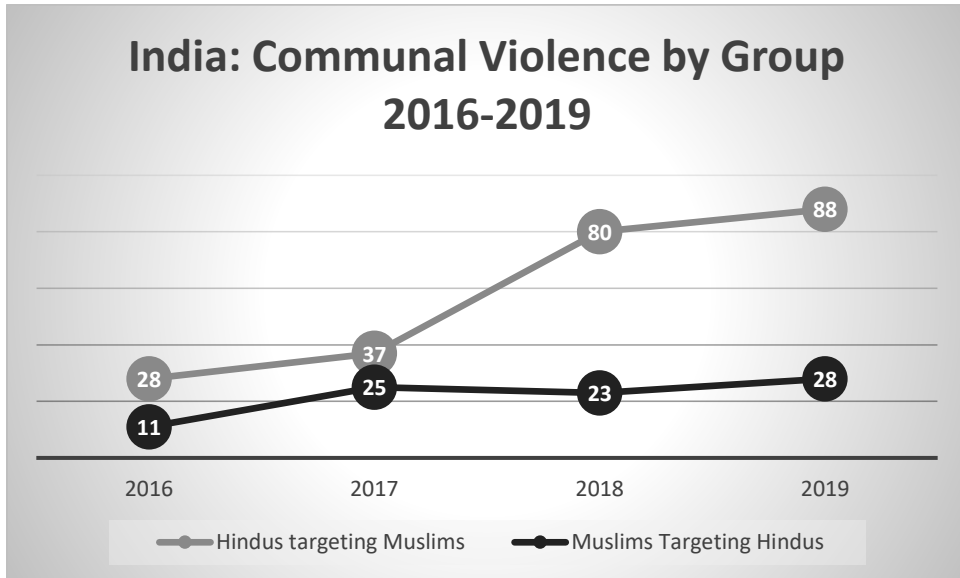
'In the West nationalism is associated with imperialism, India has never invaded a country. In India, nationalism only means country first and survival of culture.' (Malji 2019b)

What does country first and survival of culture imply in a place as diverse in India? Culture within the context of India depends upon who you ask. There are 22 official languages and a fractured Hindu identity due to diverse regional and historical traditions in addition to the caste system. Hindus in Tamil Nadu vary in practice and history compared to Hindus from Gujarat and the practices of Brahmins differ significantly from the Dalits. Hindu Nationalists wish to make this a more uniform and unitary Hindu culture that centres on the supremacy of Hinduism (Bhatt 2001).

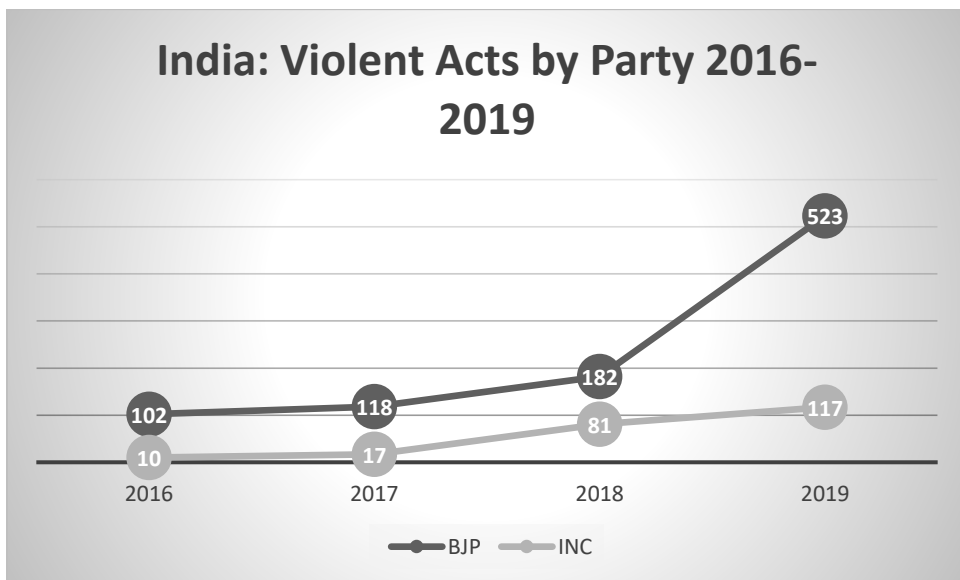
### ***Violent Trends and Hindu Nationalism***

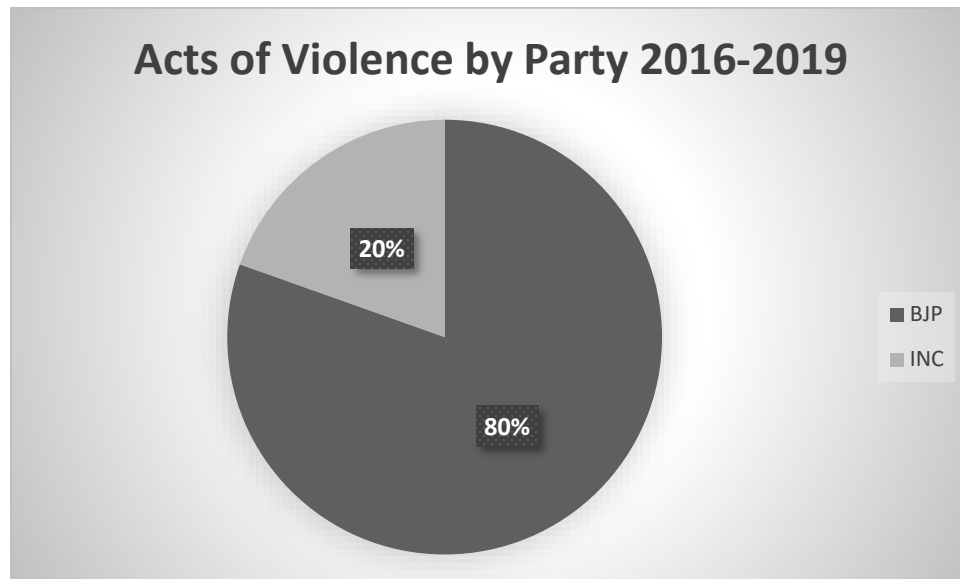
The Armed Conflict and Event Data (ACLED) systematically collects disaggregated data on acts of violence throughout the world, including South Asia. Information on the actors, the date, and types of violence are included in the database. For India, data is available from 2016-2019. I reviewed the data broken into two categories: perpetrator and victim. Any event that did not involve Hindu or Muslim as either of those categories were excluded. Next, I examined how many acts of violence were carried out by Hindus specifically targeting Muslims and then acts of

violence by Muslims targeting Hindus. Any data that had doubts surrounding the initial perpetrator of the attack was excluded. As Figure 1 demonstrates, violence by Hindus targeting Muslims tripled in the short time frame. However, violence by Muslims targeting Hindus did not see such exponential growth. There is a notable increase in violence leading up to the 2019 election.



Next, I examine violence associated with the BJP and its supporters in comparison to the other main party, INC. Any cases of uncertainty were excluded. The results demonstrate a stark difference between parties. Although there is an increase in acts of violence carried out by both parties leading up to the 2019 election, Figures 2 and 3 demonstrate the BJP carried out the vast majority of the attacks.





#### *Buddhist Nationalism in Sri Lanka*

Approximately 10% of the world is considered Buddhist. The religion originated in modern day India around 623 BC when the future Buddha Prince Siddhartha was born. Although Buddhism has its origins in India, most Buddhists are now concentrated in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Cambodia, Thailand, and Laos and practice Theravada Buddhism. Buddhism is popularly associated with non-violence, yet scholars of historical Buddhism note that since Buddhism has stood alongside some state capacity, there has been violence and conflict (Keyes 2016).

By the 13th century, Sri Lanka was ruled under Buddhist monarchs. Sri Lanka, and most Buddhist Kingdoms of Southeast Asia, were marred with conflict throughout the reign of the Buddhist kings until the colonial era (Gombrich 2006). Like Hinduism in India, Sri Lanka experienced a Buddhist revivalism in the late 1800s. The father of modern Buddhist nationalism in Sri Lanka is generally considered Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933). Dharmapala saw the colonizing British forces as immoral and barbaric whereas Buddhism and Sinhalese people were enlightened. Likewise, the Tamils were considered invaders as were the Muslims. Dharmapala emphasized that Buddhism was under threat by these outside forces. In his public speeches and writing he frequently referenced 2nd century Sri Lankan king Dutugemunu, who supposedly fought against non-Buddhists alongside monks and killed nonbelievers using a Buddhist relic embedded in his spear. The deaths carried out by Dutugemunu, according to Dharmapala, were justified and not a sin because the men were like beasts (Obeyesekere 1975). Today, the radical element of Buddhist nationalism has revived his story and wish to carry on his legacy.

The revivalism of Dharmapala and his stories of Dutugemunu helped promote the rise of Buddhist nationalism, which was explicitly tied to Sinhalese ethnicity. Following independence in 1948, Sinhalese leaders quickly institutionalized their dominance. S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, a convert to Buddhism in the 1930s, became Prime Minister in 1956 and helped consolidate a Sinhalese Buddhist state by making Sinhala the national language, teaching, and emphasizing Buddhist history in public schools, and creating close ties with Buddhist monks. Although Bandaranaike was assassinated by a monk, the increased state ties to Buddhism only



strengthened after his death. In 1972, Sri Lanka was given its current name. The new constitution of 1972 further limited the rights of Tamils and moved many Sinhalese settlers into predominantly Tamil areas, which led to the creation of the Tamil United Liberation Front in 1976, the predecessor of the LTTE. This also marked the beginning of the nearly 30-year civil war. Organized Tamil nationalism mostly diminished when LTTE leader Vellupai Prabhakaran was killed in an especially violent end to the Civil War in 2009 under the leadership of Mahinda Rajapaksa. However, Buddhist nationalism did not diminish, instead it appeared to strengthen and with the threat from Tamils dissipating the focus shifted toward Muslims.

Muslims were mostly excluded from analyses related to the Civil War since it was seen as a primarily Tamil-Sinhalese problem. However, Muslims were an important component of Sri Lankan society whose stories were often relegated to the margins in academic work on conflict and ethnicity. Muslims have historically coexisted peacefully alongside their Sinhalese neighbours. Except for the 1915 Sinhalese-Muslim riots, the historical interaction between the groups was mostly without conflict (Dewaraja 1994). Muslim groups and sites did experience targeted violence at the hands of the LTTE. For example, 262 Muslims were killed in mosque attacks in Kattankudy and Eravur in 1990 by the LTTE. That same year 75,000 Muslims were expelled from the predominantly northern Tamil provinces. However, over the period of the conflict they were not the primary, or even secondary, focus of attacks.

Since the end of the Civil War, the relative peace between the Sinhalese and Muslim population has decreased. One of the most important developments in Buddhist-Muslim dynamics post-Civil War occurred in 2012 with the formal establishment of the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS). The BBS was inspired by the Buddhist nationalist 969 movement in Myanmar, whose founder visited Sri Lanka in 2014 upon invitation from the BBS (Deegalle 2017). The formal formation of the group coincided with a pattern of increasing communal violence. In 2011, a 300-year-old Muslim shrine in Anuradhapura was destroyed by a mob led by a Buddhist monk. With folkloric rationale similar to the Babri Masjid, Buddhist leaders argued the shrine was built on Buddhist land (Haviland 2011). In 2012, a mosque in Dambulla also considered to be on sacred Buddhist land, was attacked by a Buddhist mob. D.M Jayaratne, who served as both Prime Minister and head of the Ministry of Buddhism and religious affairs at the time ordered the mosque to be relocated (Gunatilleke 2015). Anti-Muslim violence became more organized in 2013. Propaganda was increasingly being utilized to spread anti-Muslim rumours online (Ibid). In 2014, riots between Sinhalese and Muslim residents broke out in several towns in Southwestern Sri Lanka killing 4, injuring 8, and displacing 10,000. Nearly all the victims were Muslim (Karunaratne 2014).

Communal tensions appeared to temporarily decrease following the surprising electoral defeat of Rajapaksa in the 2015 election. Maithripala Sirisena, a former Minister of Health in the Rajapaksa cabinet, defected from the party and ran on the platform of abolishing the executive presidency, addressing corruption, and a domestic inquiry into war crimes by the Rajapaksa government during the Civil War. The platform was a drastic shift from the previous policies of Rajapaksa and led many Sri Lankans to believe a new era of communal harmony may be on the horizon. Unfortunately, this promise of communal harmony was short lived and campaign promises unmet. The Sirisena government faced many difficulties and by 2017 violence spiked once again alongside the constitutional crisis in 2018. The 2018 anti-Muslim riots in Digana and

surrounding areas supposedly served as a key moment to recruit disaffected youth into National Tawheed Jamaat (NTJ), an Islamic extremist organization led by Zahran Hashim that went on to carry out some of the deadliest attacks in Sri Lankan history (Malji 2019c).

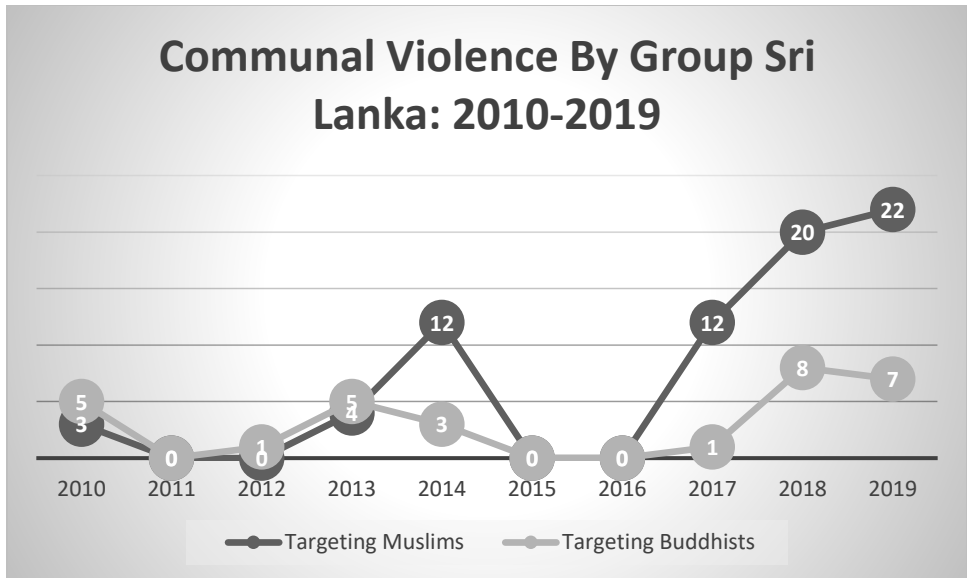
On Easter day 2019, almost exactly 10 years since the end of the Civil War, the post-conflict dynamics changed dramatically. The NTJ carried out eight suicide attacks on churches, luxury hotels, and housing complexes. A total of 259 people died in the attacks. Although Buddhists were not the primary target of the attacks, Buddhist nationalist mobs orchestrated attacks against Muslims from late April through June (Dibbert 2019). The Easter attacks and subsequent anti-Muslim attacks occurred within the shadow of the upcoming November 2019 Presidential election. The attacks undoubtedly shaped the post-conflict landscape. Within a week of the Easter attacks, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, brother of former President Mahinda Rajapaksa announced he would run for President. Gotabaya previously served as the Secretary of Defence under his brother's leadership during the Civil War. The hawkish history of Rajapaksa, which includes war crime allegations, was appealing to those that feared future terrorist attacks. However, no group supported the Rajapaksa candidacy more than Buddhist nationalists.

The nationalists knew that a Rajapaksa presidency meant that Buddhist nationalist policies would be adopted. The Catholic population, the primary targets of the attack also supported the Rajapaksa candidacy. Throughout the election Gotabaya referenced the Easter attacks and campaigned alongside nationalist monks proclaiming he is the only one that can restore security. Not surprisingly, on November 2019 Gotabaya won the election and dominated in the Sinhalese and Catholic districts while performing poorly in Tamil, Evangelical, and Muslim dominant areas (Foizee 2019). Gotabaya appointed his brother Mahinda as the Prime Minister, cementing the family's dynastic legacy and challenging growing democratic norms in Sri Lanka. After Gotabaya's successful election, the leader of the Bodu Bala Sena, Buddhist monk proclaimed:

'We built an ideology that the country needs a Sinhala leader who does not bend down in front of minorities, now that ideology has won.' Galagoda Gnanasara 27 November 2019 (Schmall 2019)

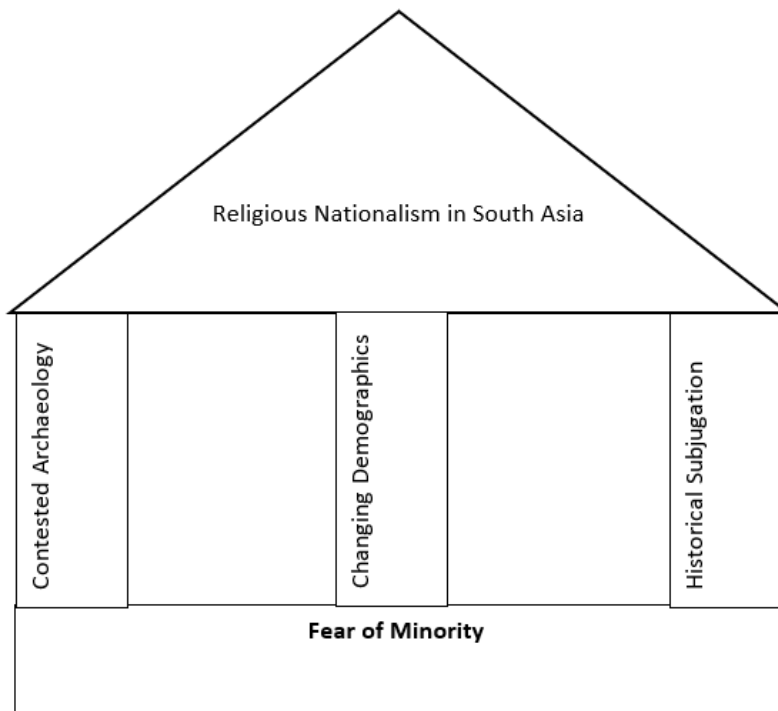
### ***Violent Trends and Buddhist Nationalism***

It is not surprising that the rise of Buddhist nationalism occurred alongside rising levels of violence. With a party in power with close ties to the BBS many Muslim communities fear what their future may look like under a regime that actively treats them as suspicious. Figure 4 utilizes ACLED data for Sri Lanka from 2010-2019 alongside data from the Secretariat for Muslims in Sri Lanka to demonstrate how targeted anti-Muslim violence is increasing.



The first initial spike of violence occurs following the formation of the BBS in 2012. A clear drop in violence occurs with the election of Sirisena in late 2015 and diminishes as it becomes clear he will not be pursuing the former Rajapaksa regime for war crimes. Amid increasing social media rumours and communal tensions, riots dramatically increase from 2017 onward and reach their highest levels in 2019 following the Easter attacks. There have not been any communal attacks since the November 2019 elections, but tensions and distrust remain high.

**Theoretical Foundations of Nationalism in South Asia**



### *Historical Subjugation*

There are several parallels that tie Hindu and Buddhist nationalism together. At the foundation of religious nationalism in South Asia is the fear of a minority. Specifically, this manifests as a fear of subjugation by the minority. In both India and Sri Lanka, the dominant groups are substantially larger than the minority Muslims. However, nationalists from both groups refer to the past to highlight their fear and historical reality of minority subjugation.

In the case of India, there are two key historical reference points, centuries of Muslim rule, and Western colonialism. The Mughals, who were Muslim, ruled over much of Northern India despite Hindus being the majority. The attitudes and policies of Muslim rulers toward Hindus varied widely during the time of Islamic conquest. Mughal Emperor Akbar, for example, was tolerant toward other religions and even visited and built Hindu temples. Akbar's grandson, Aurangzeb, quite the opposite, destroyed temples and demonstrated limited tolerance toward other religions (Pillalamarri 2016). Once the Mughal era came to an end, rule by other minority outsiders began, which serves as the second historical reference point of subjugation by the minority. Historical colonization by the Dutch, Portuguese, and especially the British demonstrate that a group does not have to be the majority to exert control. For example, by 1890, only 6,000 British officials maintained control over 250 million Indians (Tharoor 2017). The atrocities committed under colonial rule helped to consolidate the concern that only your group can protect your culture and that strength in numbers is not always true.

In addition to the wide scale atrocities carried out by the colonizing forces, the British also actively emasculated the men they colonized. The imperial archetype reinforced by the British was one of white Christian manliness and weak subjugated effeminate brown men (Banerjee 2006). The men were unable to protect their own country. Actively trying to counter this stereotype was at the foundation of Hindu nationalist organizations (Sarkar 2001). Hindu nationalist organizations such as the Bajrang Dal, RSS, and Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) focus on becoming masculine warriors through the imagery of ‘Hindu soldier’ and ‘Warrior Monk’ (Banerjee 2006). Through learning martial arts, daily fitness routines, and pledges to defend Mother India, members of these organizations seek to overturn the historical stereotype of weak masculinity so they will not face subjugation again. Their daily routine prepares them mentally to face an inevitable future battle for the sake of Hinduism and Mother India.

In Sri Lanka, historical legends circulate with allegorical references to the threat of minority rule. The popular Galebandara legend from Kurunegala references a 13<sup>th</sup> century Sinhala King named Buveneka Bahu I. According to the legend, King Bahu I failed to produce a male offspring heir among his 20 Sinhala wives and secretly married a Muslim woman who gave birth to a boy named Waththimi Bandara. The prince was raised by his Muslim relatives in a nearby town and returned to Kurunegala to watch over the kingdom while his father was away at battle, on that same day the King’s Sinhala wife gave birth to a son and the King won his battle. Due to miscommunication from a drunk messenger, the Sinhala wives of the King believed he lost the battle and thus they committed mass suicide. Only Waththimi remained and the Muslims arranged to crown him as successor. Once in power King Waththimi alienated the Buddhists and showed preference to the Muslims by appointing them to his court. The Sinhalese feared this new domination and the Buddhists priests plotted to assassinate him. Following the assassination, the king was reborn as a demon that killed all those who plotted against him and terrorized the town. The god Kataragama eventually bargained with the demon to stop killing the townspeople in exchange for making him a God named Galebandara. Today the shrine of Galebandara remains an important pilgrimage site for both Sufi Muslims and Buddhists, demonstrating the historical peaceful relationship between the two communities. However, this popular legend references the potential terror that can be unleashed when power is distributed outside of the ethnic-religious line.

Like India, Sri Lanka also experienced a long period of colonialism. Sri Lanka was colonized by the Dutch, British, and Portuguese. During their rule, the colonizing forces suppressed Buddhism (De Silva 2004). BBS members reference the Dutch, British, and Portuguese attempts to destroy the Buddhist fabric of Sri Lankan society by killing Sinhalese Buddhists and Buddhist monks and by giving government jobs to Sri Lankans that converted to Christianity. The historical experience of the Sinhala people thus references multiple times of oppression by the minority. The stories remind the Sinhalese that their hospitality has often been exploited and used against them, thus the importance of defending the culture from both internal and external threats.

In a December 2019 interview with Dilanthe Withange by the author, the CEO and founding member of BBS discussed how ‘the Global Islamic Agenda’ threatens Sri Lanka’s future stability. Withange emphasized that his organization had long warned the government and Sinhalese community about the threat of Islamic radicalization within Sri Lanka. Nevertheless,

Withange made a distinction about where the threat originated. It was not from the historical Muslims that lived in Sri Lanka for the past several hundred years, they were mostly peaceful. Instead, the threat came from Islamic influence from outside Sri Lanka, specifically the Gulf countries. These countries had built mosques, madrassas, and radicalized local Muslims. Indeed, increased internal conflict between the historically Sufi Muslims of Sri Lanka and the increasing Wahabi sect have created strife within the Muslim community of Sri Lanka (McGilvray 2011; Faslan and Vanniasinkam 2015). Withange referenced the historical subjugation by colonizers to contrast the modern-day threat of radical Muslims within Sri Lanka (Malji 2019c).

The Civil War and tensions with Tamils demonstrated to the Buddhist Nationalists that minority groups can threaten their power. Early Buddhist nationalist leaders such as Dharampala, emphasized the wealth and success of ‘outsider’ Muslims. Using anti-Semitic language, he considered the success unfair and at the expense of the Sinhalese

The Muhammedans, an alien people, ... by shylockian methods become prosperous like Jews. The Sinhala sons of the soil, whose ancestors for 2358 years had shed rivers of blood to keep the country free of alien invaders ... are in the eyes of the British only vagabonds. The Alien South Indian Muhammedan come to Ceylon, sees the neglected villager, without any experience in trade ... and the result is that the Muhammedan thrives and the sons of the soil go to the wall (Jayawardena 1985: 27).

Therefore, although the historical Sinhalese-Muslim relationship was mostly cordial, there was still an underlying assumption of a guest-host dynamic (Gunatilleke 2015). Muslims were the guests, who despite being outsiders had been more successful than the indigenous Sinhalese, which created resentment. However, if they complied by the hosts rules, there would be no confrontation.

Contentious relationships may risk escalation when it comes to symbolic representation of the people. Religious sites especially are entrenched with deep meaning that represent history, identity, family, and tradition. Historical transformation of religious sites may change over time, especially with conquest and colonization. Hassner (2003) calls these changes the ‘layering of sacred space.’ In this instance, religious structures may be, or claim to be, destroyed or change. Historical conquest that destroyed or changed the architecture of religious sites may serve as a painful reminder to members of the targeted groups. The narrative of cultural and religious destruction by minority rulers has been popular in both India and Sri Lanka and the confrontation often centres around contested archaeological sites.

### *Contested Archaeology*

Historically both India and Sri Lanka have been religiously pluralistic spaces (Silva, Niwas, Wickramasinghe 2016). Multiple archaeological sites throughout both countries have served as gathering places for Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims. The Kahatapitiya mosque in Gampola, the Galebandara shrine in Kurunegala, the Haji Ali shrine in Mumbai, or Akbar’s mosque in Ajmer. With time, the historical narrative of these locations’ changes, while some remain peaceful gathering places, others transform into hotly contested sites that escalate into violence.

Hindus claim that many temples and heritage sites were destroyed during Islamic invasion and occupation, especially and during the Mughal era and Delhi Sultanate. Islamic conquest between 1000-1300 prior to the Mughal era destroyed many major temples in Northern India (Pillalamarri 2016). Locations heavily impacted include Allahabad, Ayodhya, Kannau, Mathura, Multan, Vrindavan, Varanasi, and Thanesar. The most well-known contested archaeological site in India is the Babri Masjid/Ram Janmabhoomi. However, nationalists' reference numerous additional Hindu sites that were destroyed and constructed over during the Mughal era including the Bindu-Madhav and Kashi Vishwanath temples in Varanasi. Numerous other unnamed Hindu temples are also referenced in the inscriptions on Mughal era mosques, such as the Quwwat Al-Islam mosque in New Delhi and the Jami Masjid in Banaskantha Gujarat. In the case of Kashi Vishwanath, the destruction of the temple allegedly served as a warning to anti-Mughal factions about the power of the regime and their ability to destroy religious sites (Asher 1992: 278-279).

In Sri Lanka, BBS members reference destruction and takeover of Buddhist holy sites by colonizers, Tamils, and Muslims. The first threat came from the Portuguese Catholic missionaries in the 16th century followed by the Catholics in Kandy and coastal areas, the British forces in the 19th century through the 20th century. The British forces supposedly looted and destroyed temples as they established control, especially in Kandy (Gott 2011:200). Since independence the threat has come from minorities that live inside the country.

In 1985, the LTTE carried out an attack that killed 146 at the Sri Maha Bodhi shrine where the Buddha was said to achieve enlightenment. During the Civil War the Tamils bombed the most sacred Buddhist site in Sri Lanka, the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy (1998). Contestations with Muslims occurred when mosques were said to be built on or near sacred land or historical Buddhist sites. These contested sites include among others include: the Daftar Jailini cave mosque in Balangoda, the Sheikh Sikkander Waliullah in Anuradhapura, and the Dambulla Mosque. In 2013, the primary mosque in Grandpass pursued a new location following plans by the Urban Development Authority to acquire the land. Muslims moved to a nearby area site close to Buddhist temples that was converted into Muslim prayer centre. Buddhists protested the new prayer centre and sought removal of the site, the protests escalated into riots. In Mawanella town, Devangala rock is a multicultural archaeological site with historic Buddhist and Hindu monuments. The rock is surrounded by Muslim and Sinhala villages, with Muslims historically employing Sinhalese workers in the areas surrounding the rock. Since 2012, Buddhist nationalist groups including the BBS and other nationalist organizations such as the Sinhala Ravaya, Maitree Sahana Padanama and Parakum Sena have mobilized around the monument and called for the eviction of Muslims living near the rock (Silva, Niwas, Wickramasinghe 2016: 7-12).

Despite centuries of mostly peaceful interaction at these sites, Hindu and Buddhist nationalist groups have attempted to revise historical narratives and redefine historical multiculturalism into historical dominance. Acts that escalated into violence were often preceded by verbal contestation of the history and ownership of the sites. The changing historical narrative of these contested sites was set against a warning of a possible return to minority subjugation. However, this time the minority was plotting to become the majority.

### *Changing Demographics*

The third pillar that helps uphold religious nationalism in South Asia is the perceived threat to the majority's population dominance. This threat manifests in three ways. First, through increased minority birth rates and declining majority birth rates. Second, through religious conversion. Third, through migration.

Muslim birth rates in India and Sri Lanka are indeed higher than the majority religions. Between 1981-2012, the Buddhist population in Sri Lanka increased by 38.52% compared to 75.41% for the Muslim population. In India, the Muslim population growth for the same time period is 24.6% compared to 16.8% for Hindus, however, Muslim total fertility rate has declined more rapidly for Muslims than any other group (National Family and Health Survey 2016).

Alongside this population growth was also an increase in what scholars call Muslim visibility. Due to internal conflicts between local Islamic sects, an increasing number of mosques were built, and Muslim clothing choices changed (Fasland and Vanniasinkam 2015; McGilvray 2011). The increasing popularity of reformist conservative movements like Thabligi Jamaat and Jamaa te Islamii led Muslims to adopt more traditional Arab dress in the form of jubbabs, hijabs, niqabs, and beards whereas before they opted for traditional conservative South Asian attire (Faslan and Vanniasinkam 2015).

In Sri Lanka and India, nationalists decry the use of missionaries and religious conversions. This is primarily a Christian phenomenon, with a 172.30% increase in evangelical Christianity in Sri Lanka (Department of Census and Statistics 2015; Sarvananthan 2016) and 18% increase in India (Pew Research 2015). However, in the author's interviews with leaders within the Hindu and Buddhist nationalist, members claim Muslims and Christians are actively undermining the majority religion by deceptively converting Hindus and Buddhists with financial incentives. Accordingly, BBS identifies evangelical (not Catholic) Christianity as a threat. Conversions to Christianity became increasingly common as international aid groups went to war-torn locations in Sri Lanka (Matthews 2007). BBS members claim that aid was often offered in exchange for conversion to Christianity. In India, many low caste Hindus and Dalits convert to Islam and Christianity to escape the caste system.

Finally, migration is another reason demographics shift. In Sri Lanka, the geography of the island has made this less of an issue although the BBS says there has been a concerning number of preachers from the Gulf countries that overstay their visas (Malji 2019e). In India, concerns of illegal migration from neighbouring Muslim-majority Bangladesh dominate the agenda. Leaders of the BJP, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah, have frequently referred to migrants as 'infiltrators.' The fear of shifting dynamics, especially in the border state of Assam, led to the passage of the CAA and NRC bills.

The underlying foundations of nationalism in South Asia rely on implicit assumptions about the motives of the minority. Historical conquest and archaeological disputes are mostly concerns from the past that impact discussions today. However, the foundation of changing demographics is a present concern at the forefront of nationalist dialogue, at the core of this concern is an ultimately gendered discussion that promotes Islamophobia in South Asia.



## **The Gendered Nature of Islamophobia in South Asia**

Gendered conceptions of who belongs and their role in society is an important component of nationalist movements (Nagel 1998; Mayer 2000; Ranchod-Nilsson and Tetreault 2000). Women's bodies become symbolic depictions of the nation and the need to protect it from outside forces that threaten their way of life, especially during conflict (Enloe 1998). Women are perceived as caretakers that through birth and maternal duties continue the traditions and people of the nation (Muholland, Montagna and Sanders-McDonagh 2018). Recent scholarship has also identified an emerging type of nationalism, femonationalism. Femonationalism draws upon depictions of Muslim men as dangerous to Muslim women and utilizes gender equality and feminism to promote Islamophobic rhetoric and policies (Farris 2017). The discussion of femonationalism has generally been framed in the European context where male Muslim migrants constitute a threat to all women, especially Muslim women. However, the same principles of femonationalism are present within South Asia. The rhetoric utilized by Buddhist and Hindu nationalists give women little agency over their decisions or bodies. This lack of agency is compounded by the simplistic popular view of Muslim women as either oppressed or dangerous (Esal 2016). Likewise, the Hindu or Sinhala woman must be protected from the or else face domination by Muslim men.

In each of the author's interviews with RSS and BJP leaders in 2019, the interviewees cited the greatest recent achievement of the party as the elimination of the triple talaq. The Triple talaq refers to the ability for Muslim men to divorce their wives after saying the word talaq three times. The BJP and RSS proclaim that eliminating triple talaq promotes Muslim women's rights, something they claim the Congress party never did. Although it does occur, and nearly 90% of Muslim women in India oppose it (Khalid 2017), the emphasized focus on triple talaq by Hindu nationalists in the name of feminism is curious. Nationalists likely emphasize their opposition to triple talaq as part of a strategy to dehumanize Muslim men and characterize them as dangerous and without moral character. One BJP member of parliament said triple talaq is used by Muslims to satisfy lust (Khalid 2017). Second, eliminating triple talaq acts as a precursor to eliminate Muslim personal law in favour of a uniform civil code. The BJP has already demonstrated its commitment to eliminate special provisions granted to Muslim majority Kashmir. The RSS and BJP openly speak about their commitment to eliminating Muslim personal law. Eliminating certain, mostly universally opposed provisions, will provide precedent to further strike down Muslim personal law. Vocally criticizing abolition of the triple talaq law is constructed as opposing women's rights thus making it difficult to critique the intention behind the policy and address the underlying femonationalist motivations.

The femonationalist approach is paternalistically utilized as a tool to allegedly help 'save' Muslim women from their religion and Muslim men. In addition to this femonationalist framework, figure 6 demonstrates the three underlying fears that constitute gendered Islamophobia in South Asia: Fear of intermarriage, unequal fertility rates, and Islamic clothing.

### **Figure 6**

#### **Unequal Fertility Rates**

‘They keep to themselves, have too many kids, send them to their own schools and teach them to hate us’- Sinhalese Taxi Driver, 21 December 2019 (Malji 2019e)

The nationalist pillar of ‘changing demographics’ centres around fertility, family planning, and fears surrounding sterilization. According to nationalists in India and Sri Lanka, Muslim women have too many children. Harmful rumours predominate social media because of the concern of the growing Muslim population amid the allegedly declining Hindu/Buddhist fertility rate.

In Sri Lanka, rumours regarding Sinhalese sterilization by Muslims have been especially popular since 2016 (Borham and Attanayake 2018). Unfounded social media rumours often escalate into violent encounters. In 2018, a Sinhalese patron of a Muslim owned restaurant in Ampara claimed to find a sterilization pill in his meal. Although the pill was merely a lump of flour, the patron confronted the restaurant worker, who did not speak Sinhala, and accused him of spiking his food. The video of the confrontation went viral and within the day the shop was burned, the worker beaten, and additional mobs throughout the country burned Muslim homes and mosques. Similar claims on Facebook and Whatsapp report finding sterilization pills in Muslim businesses. One false Facebook claim reported that police found 23,000 sterilization pills in the office of a Muslim pharmacist (Taub and Fisher 2018). Another claim led to the arrest of a Muslim gynaecologist in Kurunegala who reportedly sterilized 3,000 Sinhalese women. Despite the arrest and subsequent trial, no physical evidence of sterilization was presented against the doctor. In Devangala, rumours circulated of Muslim owned clothing stores lacing Sinhala women’s underwear with contraception (Silva, Niswas, and Wickramasinghe 2016).

‘They [Muslims] breed like animals. They have taken over the neighbourhood.’ Hindu woman in Surat, Gujarat, 28 December 2019 (Malji 2019f)

In India, the sterilization discussion manifests differently. Tubal ligation is one of the most popular government funded techniques for birth control in India (Klibanoff 2017). However, Muslims see the practice as *haram* and do not participate. Government officials alongside RSS and other Hindu nationalist organizations are increasingly promoting Population Regulation Bills via sterilization in order to address what they call ‘cultural imbalance.’ In 2015, the RSS passed a resolution to promote the implementation of population control. Within the resolution the text claims the Muslim population has increased from 9.1% in 1951 to 14.23% in 2011 due to high Muslim birth rates and illegal immigration (Samvada 2015). BJP parliament members have proclaimed that Muslims are the only group responsible for the population explosion (Purohit 2019). One BJP MP said those found violating his proposed two child policy should be imprisoned and stripped of voting rights (Press Trust of India 2019). The Hindu nationalist political party, Shiv Sena, called upon compulsory sterilization of Muslims to address the cultural and social imbalance in the Hindu nation (Times of India 2018).

### ***Religious Inter-marriage***

Fear that the Muslim birth rate is too high is compounded by a parallel concern of Muslim men marrying Hindu or Buddhist women. In India, Hindu nationalists, and their associated vigilante groups, rebel against so-called ‘love-jihad’, a practice of intermarriage between Hindu women and Muslim men. Hindu nationalists claim that Muslim men are waging a silent jihad by

pressuring Hindu women to marry them, convert to Islam, have Muslim children, and ultimately increase the Muslim population (Rao 2011: 425). In Sri Lanka, the father of Buddhist nationalism proclaimed that Sinhalese women not mix with minorities (Wijesiriwardhana 2010:222-223). Today, Buddhist nationalists continue to accuse Muslims of ‘seducing our daughters’ (Gravers 2015; Sarjoon, Yusoff, and Hussin 2016). In Aligarh, the Hindu Nationalist Hindu Mahasabha party has created an unsanctioned Hindu court to push back against Muslim personal courts. The Hindu judge says she often presides over cases of inter-religious marriages between Hindu girls and Muslim men. The judge says she performs a puja to cleanse the girl’s mind and free Hindu daughters from Muslim men (Sen 2019).

According to Amnesty International India and Hate Crime Watch India, there has been a sharp rise in reported acts of violence targeting inter-religious relationships in India since 2014, the same year the BJP won national elections.<sup>3</sup> Much of this data is likely underreported as marriage and relationships discord are considered private or community affairs and acts of violence are often not externally reported. However, since 2013 there have been increased reports of vigilante BJP, RSS, and VHP mobs preventing Hindu-Muslim marriages. Figure 7 demonstrates the rising number of reports of violence targeting inter-religious couples between 2013 and 2018. Although inter-caste and inter-religious marriage have long been subject to violence and honour killings, the increasingly public involvement of the surrounding community participating in the violence represents a marked shift. Most of the reported attacks on inter-religious couples in India were carried out by mobs. As figure 8 demonstrates, most of the attacks targeted Hindu-Muslim couples, and the Muslim was the victim of the attack in 76% of cases

Insert Figure 7 here

Insert Figure 8 here

The response in Sri Lanka to interfaith marriages has not escalated to violent levels like India, but it remains a concern loudly voiced by Buddhist Nationalists that puts converts in inter-religious relationships in danger. In a March 2012 BBS meeting in Kandy, Secretary General of the BBS Rev. Gnanasara, read out the names of Sinhala women who converted to Islam and in some cases married Muslim men. Buddhist-Muslim riots were often preceded by unfounded rumours and accusatory speeches. The public nature of the rhetoric used by the BBS leader put the women in danger. The monk implied that the women were coerced or lured by Muslim men because they worked at a Muslim owned clothing store (Haniffa 2016).

### *Islamic Clothing*

Women are the primary victims of Islamophobic attacks and discrimination in non-Muslim countries (Isal 2016). For Muslim women, their clothing choice may also signal identity. Wearing the hijab, abaya, or niqab creates a visibility of religion. As a result of this visibility, Muslim women have frequently been targets of harassment and assault. Although similar studies have not been carried out in India or Sri Lanka, reports from Europe show that 90% of

Islamophobic attacks targeted women and 98% of those women wore clothing that signalled they were Muslim. Most of the perpetrators were men (71%) unknown to the women. The primary form of assault was spitting on them, pushing them, or pulling off their hijab or clothing (Open Society Institute 2009; Amnesty 2012; ENAR 2016). The clothing choices of Muslim women in South Asia can impact her in three distinct ways. First, she can face public harassment. Second, she can be told her clothing choices are a security risk or at odds with social conformity. Third, she is told her clothing choice is an example of oppression.

In 2018, in the 91% Hindu town of Kathua in Jammu and Kashmir, an 8-year-old Muslim girl from the nomadic Bakarwal tribe was gang raped and murdered by Hindu men in a nearby temple. Rather than initiate universal outrage, Asifa Bano's rape and murder mobilized Hindu nationalists in defence of the alleged murderers. Protestors and Hindu lawyers physically blocked police from entering the courthouse to place charges. Despite DNA evidence and over 100 witnesses linking the perpetrators to Asifa's rape and murder, protestors rejected the investigation because some of the police officers in the investigation are Muslim like the victim. Female Hindu protestors proclaimed that if 'their' men were not released they would burn themselves because 'they are against our religion' (Gettleman 2018). When Muslim women are the minority, as they are in Kathua, wearing Islamic clothing serves as a visual cue to the outside world. In the case of the Bakarwal people, they are identifiable by their distinct clothing, including blue headscarves and silver jewellery.

Because of the public visibility of women's Islamic clothing they are subject to restrictions regarding what they can wear in certain settings. Such bans rarely impact men's clothing. The niqab or burqa is specifically targeted and seen as an article of clothing that oppresses women and/or as a security threat. The burqa or niqab is contextualized by Hindu and Buddhist nationalists as a visual demonstration of the oppressive nature of Islam and Muslim men. This femonationalist view overlaps with many liberals that seek to 'liberate' Muslim women from patriarchy.

At a BBS rally in Kandy, Buddhist monk and university lecturer reflected on the niqab in the following way:

Who knows who is behind that head covering? What kind of criminal might be hiding there? Let's say, I get into this garb? Who will know who is inside? Socks on the feet, gloves covering the arms, and they walk everywhere. Is this Arabia? Also, how dangerous is this? Even I can go into a mosque like that, I can even go into the women's prayer room and you know what I can do? - Ven. Dr. Madegoda Abhayatissa, March 2013 (Haniffa 2016).

Following the Easter attacks one of the first acts instituted by the Sirisena government was a ban on the face veil/niqab. Although the ban was later removed following the end of the state of emergency, the act itself demonstrated the government saw the garment as shrouded in mistrust and able to conceal identity. Several Hindu nationalist groups praised Sri Lanka for their security measures and urged India to do the same, although BJP leaders stopped short of endorsing the measure. The Hindu Nationalist Shiv Sena party drew upon Hindu imagery when it published its request for an Indian niqab ban online in its newsletter

‘[The burqa ban] has already come in Ravana's (Sri) Lanka, when will it be implemented in Ram's Ayodhya -- this is our question to (Prime Minister) Narendra Modi.’ 01 May 2019

Throughout India, Muslim women have faced different levels of confrontation due to their choice of wearing Islamic clothing. They have been stopped from traveling on public transportation or denied entry to universities (Parikh 2019). They have faced public harassment and been accused of encouraging communal divisiveness (Goswami 2019), threatening public safety (Gassem-Fachandi 2006: 117)), and casting false votes (Parikh 2019). Although specific surveys of women wearing the face veil or burqa have not been carried out in South Asia, surveys around the world show that many women choose to veil against the request of their family, not by their force (for example see: Clarke 2013: 41). Ultimately, the choice centres around the freedom to wear it rather than the femonationalist decision made on behalf of the women without their consultation.

The narrative of security centers around gendered constructs and assumptions primarily made by male decisionmakers. Despite their centrality in the matter, women are often excluded from these conversations by both nationalist and academic discourse. This study is limited by the lack of data in South Asia that includes women’s voices. Future discussions and analyses on religious nationalism can be improved by systematic collection of opinion data that includes Muslim women.

### **Conclusion**

The concerns of Hindu and Buddhist nationalists overlap in many ways and ultimately manifest in gendered terms. Religious nationalists utilize distinct narratives to frame what they consider a growing threat from the minority Muslim population. Although there are key organizational differences in the leading nationalist organizations in India and Sri Lanka, the underlying fears and goals are similar. Both Hindu and Buddhist nationalists utilize historical reference to minority subjugation to warn of potential reoccurrence. These historical concerns manifest in modern day disputes over cultural and religious heritage sites. Fears of changing population dynamics via increased Muslim reproduction rates, religious conversion, and intermarriage enhance these concerns. Social media based rumours then exploit these fears and often create escalatory violence.

The data and case studies included in this paper indicate an increasing number of violent acts targeting Muslims in South Asia. However, such acts often remain underreported or are considered private in nature. Furthermore, systematic data collection of such acts remains limited. This study attempts to advance these data limitations by compiling and merging from existing data sources, but much work remains. Despite the data limitations, acts of violence and discrimination are increasingly reported, demonstrating the need for analysis by academics, activists, and policymakers.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Nepal is also a Hindu majority country but was not mentioned by interviewees

<sup>2</sup> Vision and Mission of the RSS can be found at: <http://rss.org//Encyc/2012/10/22/rss-vision-and-mission.html>

<sup>3</sup> There has been controversy over the Hate Crime Watch database, and it was eventually taken offline due to threats from Hindu Nationalists. The authors of the database sent me the data and I included incidents that were well-documented with links to verifiable sources.