

# Hindu nationalism, White supremacism threaten to morally impoverish the two democracies

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India's Muslims are racially similar to the Hindus, but religiously different.  
(Source: AP)

Are America's Blacks and India's Muslims politically comparable? This question has acquired a new salience with the rise of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, underway for weeks in the US, covering several hundred cities. Comparisons have been drawn with the anti-CAA protests in India, lasting three months after mid-December, rebelling against the attempted demotion of India's Muslims to secondary citizenship. The mainstream Black argument that Blacks have been treated as inferior Americans, with Whites as the putative owners of the nation, is not altogether distinct.

In what ways, then, are India's Muslims and America's Blacks similar or different? And are such similarities and differences politically consequential? Blacks, of course, are not religiously distinct from Whites. They are predominantly Christian. In contrast, India's Muslims are racially similar to the Hindus, but religiously different.

Similarities emerge when we turn to demography and politics. Blacks are a little over 12 per cent of the US population, Muslims slightly over 14 per cent of India's. Democracies tend to privilege numbers. In conditions of polarisation, racial or religious minorities can get swamped by racial or religious majorities. When a majority of Hindus or Whites vote communally or racially, the threat to minorities can become quite real.

Consider the political arithmetic underlying the proposition above. Hindus are roughly 80 per cent of India, and Whites about 73 per cent of America's electorate. If 50 per cent of Hindus vote for the [BJP](#), it would constitute 40 per cent of the national vote, which, given a certain geographic distribution, is enough for victory in a parliamentary system, if not in a presidential system. When it won 44 per cent of Hindu vote, the BJP approximated this possibility in 2019. Indeed, only 1.4 per cent of BJP's national vote last year was non-Hindu. That level of Hindu concentration, a voting novelty in India, allowed the [Narendra Modi](#) regime to embark on an anti-Muslim legislative frenzy between

July and December, culminating in the CAA.

Analogously, if 70 per cent of Whites vote for a racist party in the US, it can easily win the presidential elections, assuming a certain distribution of that vote. Republicans, under Trump, were not too far from this target in 2016, when Trump received 64 per cent of White vote (and only six per cent of the Black vote). After victory, Trump has followed a White racist agenda, and the strategy for November 2020 is also clearly aimed at racial polarisation. He may not, of course, succeed. The BLM protests have been remarkably multi-racial, and polls show a substantial reduction in Trump's White support.

The greatest difference between the US Blacks and Indian Muslims is, of course, historical. The Blacks were brought to the US as slaves, starting 1619. Bought and sold as commodities with no rights, families often split and violence frequently inflicted, they bore the pain of slavery till 1864. After slavery ended, the suffering of the Jim Crow era began, when the recently won equality and voting rights were obliterated, segregation enforced, and lynchings and pogroms unleashed. Finally, after equality and voting rights returned in the mid-1960s, police violence emerged as a method of social control. The nine-minute police knee on George Floyd's neck was the wrenching tip of a vast iceberg.

Though the parallel is not exact, untouchability in India came closest to slavery. That is why some social scientists have sought to compare Blacks and Dalits. Muslims were neither forced into slavery, nor untouchability. Between the 11th and 18th centuries, much of India was ruled by Muslim princes. There is no Black parallel in US history. Blacks have been at the bottom of American society for four centuries.

This historical contrast has been undeniably consequential. Muslim princely power has been used by Hindu nationalists to transform the conduct of some

Muslim rulers, especially Babur and Aurangzeb, and before them, the invasion of Ghazni and Ghouri, into a larger anti-Muslim political narrative. M S Golwalkar's formulation "barah sau saal ki ghulami" (1,200 years of servitude, thus colonisation starting before the British conquest), which Modi repeatedly articulated when he came to power in 2014, refers to the West and Central Asian invasions from 8th century onwards.

This narrative is very different from the anti-Black narrative of White racism. In the Hindu nationalist narrative, Muslims have always been disloyal to the Indian nation, which in turn is equated with the Hindu majority. India's partition is presented as the latest proof of Muslim infidelity. It is their everlasting disloyalty which makes Muslims unworthy of equality with the Hindus. In the White supremacist narrative, Blacks are not disloyal to the US which is, of course, viewed as a White nation. But Blacks, for them, are irredeemably inferior, and therefore, entirely undeserving of equality and respect. The two narratives construct unworthiness differently.

Both narratives are fundamentally flawed. The Hindu nationalist narrative errs when it flattens the behavioural plurality of the Muslim princes. The proverbial comparison between Akbar and Aurangzeb — the two biggest Mughal emperors — belongs to this discursive realm. It is impossible to prove Akbar's disloyalty to India, and as for Aurangzeb, even [Jawaharlal Nehru](#) wrote, in *The Discovery of India*, that "Aurangzeb set the clock back". No serious historian finds an unbroken chain of Hindu-repression and India-hatred running across centuries of Muslim rule.

More fundamentally, how are Muslim masses implicated in the princely conduct? Why punish them? Historically, Muslim social structure has been bi-modal. A small court-based princely and aristocratic class coexisted with a vast mass of poor Muslims. And in 2005, the Sachar Committee conclusively demonstrated something already intuitively known: That, along with Dalits and

Adivasis, Muslims are the poorest community of India.

This is where the Black-Muslim comparison begins to recover its validity. Like Blacks, India's Muslims are mostly poor and deprived, and like them, they are a minority. After the mid 20th century, a democracy is not a proper democracy unless it safeguards minorities. And if the minorities are also poor, the protection becomes even more necessary. A poor minority deserves empathy and justice, not hatred and repression. It is a morally diminished and normatively impoverished society, which adopts the latter path..

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