Political Homogeneity and Minority Exclusion in South Asia: A Comparative Study of India and Bangladesh

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Abstract

The concept of minority is one of the most significant terms in the political and anthropological history of the world. The treatment of minority groups by dominant populations often dictates the landscape of national and international politics. Like other regions, South Asia remains highly sensitive to issues concerning religious and ethnic minorities. Given that, the formation of nations in the Indian subcontinent was deeply rooted in religious identity, nationalist sentiments frequently intertwine with religious affiliations. The current political regime in the largest country of this region has allegedly exploited this sentiment for political gains, potentially undermining South Asia's peace and stability. This study employs a qualitative research methodology, utilizing historical analysis and case studies to examine the political dynamics affecting minorities and the push toward political homogeneity. By analysing key events such as the Partition of 1947, post-colonial migration patterns, and contemporary policies, the study explores how state mechanisms and majority politics shape minority identities. The findings suggest that enforced political homogeneity often marginalizes minority groups, exacerbating tensions and threatening regional cohesion. The study concludes that inclusive governance and recognition of minority rights are essential for sustainable peace in South Asia.

Keywords: Minority, Political Homogeneity, Population, Religious, Partition, Migration, Ethnic, British, India, Hindu, Muslim.

1. Introduction

The concept of the "minority" is one of the most politically and socially significant categories in modern statecraft. Defined by the United Nations (2022) as a numerically smaller group representing less than half of a population, minorities often occupy a precarious position in societies where majority interests dominate political and cultural narratives. Sociologically, minorities are not merely statistical entities but groups that experience systemic disadvantage relative to dominant social actors (Marger, 2021). In pluralistic democracies, the treatment of minorities serves as a litmus test for equality, representation, and social cohesion. However, when states pursue political homogeneity—defined as the imposition of uniform political ideologies, often aligned with majority interests—the rights and identities of minority groups are frequently side-lined, leading to marginalization and conflict.

Nowhere is this tension more evident than in South Asia, a region shaped by the violent legacy of Partition (1947), which institutionalized religious identity as the foundation of nationhood. The creation of India and Pakistan (later Bangladesh) along communal lines entrenched a paradigm where national belonging became synonymous with majority religious affiliation. In contemporary South Asia, this historical baggage manifests in policies that prioritize ethno-religious majoritarianism over pluralism. India, the region's largest democracy, exemplifies this trend under the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), whose Hindu nationalist agenda has been accused of systematically alienating Muslims, Christians, and other minorities through legislation like the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC) (Jaffrelot, 2021). Meanwhile, in Bangladesh, despite its constitutional secularism, Hindu minorities face persistent discrimination, with declining populations attributed to migration and socio-political pressures (Islam & Khan, 2023).

Political homogeneity, in this context, transcends mere party unity (Bäck et al., 2021). It reflects a state's ideological project to consolidate power by marginalizing dissenting voices—particularly minorities—under the guise of national cohesion. This study interrogates how such homogeneity is enforced in South Asia, asking:

1. How do state policies in India and Bangladesh institutionalize political homogeneity?

2. What are the consequences for minority groups when national identity is tied to majority religious or ethnic traits?
3. Can inclusive governance models counter this trend to ensure regional stability?

To address these questions, the paper employs a qualitative methodology, combining historical analysis of post-Partition minority experiences, case studies of recent legislation (e.g., India's NRC), and demographic data to trace patterns of exclusion. By examining these dynamics, the study challenges the assumption that political homogeneity ensures stability, arguing instead that it exacerbates social fragmentation.
The findings reveal a paradox: while South Asian states invoke unity to legitimize homogeneity, their policies often deepen divisions, risking long-term instability. The paper concludes by advocating for pluralistic governance as the only sustainable path to peace in the region.

2. Materials & Methods

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to examine the interplay between political homogeneity and minority marginalization in India and Bangladesh. The methodological framework integrates four complementary approaches to ensure a comprehensive analysis of historical, political, and demographic dimensions.

The study utilizes historical analysis to trace the trajectory of minority exclusion from the Partition of 1947 to the present day. This includes examining census data, colonial-era documents, and post-independence migration patterns to contextualize how state formation and religious nationalism reshaped minority identities. Key events, such as the demographic shifts in Bengal and Assam following Partition, are analysed to highlight long-term trends of displacement and marginalization.

Case studies are employed to investigate minority political behaviour in both countries. In India, the study focuses on the electoral dynamics of Muslim minorities, particularly their exclusion from BJP-led governance and alignment with opposition parties like the Indian National Congress. For Bangladesh, the analysis centres on Hindu minority support for the Awami League and the socio-political pressures driving their demographic decline. These cases are constructed using election commission reports, party manifestos, and scholarly accounts of minority voting patterns.

A policy analysis evaluates contemporary legislative measures that institutionalize political homogeneity. In India, the Citizenship Amendment Act (2019) and National Register of Citizens (NRC) are scrutinized through government documents, judicial rulings, and critiques from human rights organizations. For Bangladesh, the study assesses gaps between constitutional secularism and on-the-ground discrimination, drawing on minority rights reports and civil society surveys.

Demographic data from national censuses (e.g., India's 2011 Census, Bangladesh's 2022 Census) and international databases (UNHCR, Pew Research Center) are analysed to correlate policy shifts with minority population trends. This quantitative lens supplements qualitative findings, revealing discrepancies between state narratives of inclusion and empirical realities of exclusion.

By triangulating these methods, the study bridges macro-level policy impacts with micro-level minority experiences, offering a nuanced critique of enforced political homogeneity in South Asia.

3. Results & Discussion

3.1. Minorities from Country Perspective

There are two types of minorities viz, religious and racial as well as ethnic. In a country like the United States or United Kingdom the religious minorities who are also racially as well as ethnically diversified commonly politically homogeneous. In the United States two major political parties are Democrat and Republican while in the United Kingdom two major political parties are Conservative and Labour. During general elections of both United States and United Kingdom it is observed that like majority section of the people who are of British origin the religious as well as racial and cultural minorities vote either for any of the two major political parties. The picture is totally different in India and Bangladesh. The percentage of Muslim population in India is about 15% of the total population (Kumar & Somanathan, 2024) while the percentage of Hindu population in Bangladesh is more than 8% of the total population (Islam & Khan, 2023). In India in most of the states since independence from Britain Muslims are found to be politically lenient to Congress. In some of the states they are also supporting smaller regional groups which often panders to Muslim community. In the 2019 Indian general election, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), India's largest political party, secured a consecutive second term in government with a decisive majority. Notably, the Bharatiya Janata Party did not field any Muslim candidates in

winnable constituencies during the 2019 election. As a result, no Muslim candidates were elected to Parliament under its banner, marking the first time a ruling party in India had no Muslim representatives since independence (Jaffrelot, 2021). All 27 Muslim Members of Parliament in the current Lok Sabha were elected from opposition parties, as the Bharatiya Janata Party once again failed to secure parliamentary representation for the Muslim community (Election Commission of India, 2024). The party's election manifesto prominently featured the construction of the Ram Mandir at the disputed site of the demolished Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, a project now completed in January 2024. While celebrated by the party's base, this move has been widely perceived as deepening alienation among Indian Muslims (Hasan, 2024).

Further compounding these tensions, the Bharatiya Janata Party's appointment of Yogi Adityanath, a polarizing figure linked to the Hindutva movement and publicly accused of supporting the 1992 Babri Masjid demolition, as Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh has drawn criticism from minority rights groups (Jaffrelot, 2023). His re-election in 2022 and continued tenure signal the party's ideological stance, despite concerns about its implications for communal harmony.

While in Bangladesh since its emergence and even during regime of Pakistan Hindus are mostly found to be loyal to Awami League. Thus, the main feature of religious minorities in the United States and United Kingdom visa vis India and Bangladesh is that in the former political allegiance is typically not pledged to a singular particular political party but in the latter the political allegiance is often pledged to a particular political party. Among Bangladesh's 27 officially recognized ethnic minorities, Buddhists form the largest non-Muslim group followed by Hindus, who numerically surpass the Christian population (Rahman & Das, 2022).

3.2. Religious Migration of Minorities

At the time of Partition in 1947, Muslims constituted 24.3% and Hindus 72.9% of the subcontinent's population, 4 to 5 times higher than current percentages in many regions (Ahmed & Ganguly, 2023). The demographic ratios shifted dramatically due to cross-border migration, with over 14 million people displaced during Partition (Chatterji, 2021). While mass migration has ceased, Muslims in India continue to face systemic discrimination, particularly in states like Uttar Pradesh and Assam (Khan & Mohanty, 2024). This picture is not prevalent currently in Bangladesh. It is worthwhile to note here that Muslim population of India in spite of facing adversity do not express any sort of eagerness to leave the homeland.

3.3. Sub-Continental History of Minorities

The Hindu and Muslim population of British India prior to partition of 1947 was around 70% and 28% respectively. In British India apparently Hindus were majority while Muslims were minority but with the partition of India the Hindus become minority in both West and East Pakistan. At present in India Muslims constitute around 15% of the population. The Hindu population in West Pakistan declined from 24% in 1947 to approximately 2% in recent years (Ahmed & Rehman, 2023). In East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), Hindus constituted 30% of the population in 1947 but have since reduced to around 8% (Islam & Chakrabarti, 2022). The above statistics reflects that after the partition of British India the religious minority population of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh started to decline gradually and the process is still undeterred. The undeterred migration of religious minority population from native state to a state where they constitute majority presupposes that a sizeable section of religious minority people did never find themselves politically homogeneous to their homeland.

In Bangladesh single race Bangali nation constitutes 98% of the population (Ahmed & Hasan, 2023). This type of racial and cultural homogeneity though rare but it has not been able to make safe room for political homogeneity of the minority segment i.e. Hindus.

At the time of partition of India it was agreed between Hindu and Muslim leaders that the provinces which constitute majority Muslim population shall form a separate Muslim State and the provinces which constitute majority Hindu population shall constitute a separate Hindu State (Mishra, 2023; Khan & Roy, 2022). At that time both Punjab and Bengal were Muslim majority provinces. As per the agreed decision of Muslim and Hindu leaders undivided Punjab and undivided Bengal ought to have been part of West Pakistan and East Pakistan.

Thus the Indian subcontinent was divided on the basis of religious nationhood(Khan, 2023). Pakistan's ethnic diversity includes Punjabis (44.7%), Pashtuns (15.4%), Sindhis (14.1%), Seraikis (10.5%), Muhajirs (7.6%), and Balochis (3.6%), with Islam as the unifying religion despite sectarian divisions (Ahmed & Rehman, 2024).

The major ethnic groups of India which include Assamese, Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Kashmiri, Konkani, Marathi Punjabi, Kannadiga, Malayali, Tulu, Tamil, Telugu are predominantly Hindu, though Sikhs (1.7%) and Jains (0.4%) resist Hindu assimilation (Chakrabarti & Singh, 2023).

3.4. Political Homogeneity

At the time of partition of India, the British allowed the Kings of princely states to decide for themselves as to whether they would remain independent or join either with India or Pakistan (Khan, 2023). At that time Kashmir was Muslim majority state but its Ruler was Hindu on the other hand Hyderabad and Junagar were Hindu majority states but their Rulers were Muslims. The Ruler of Kashmir decided to accede with India (Ganguly & Kapur, 2022) while the Rulers of Hyderabad and Junagar firstly decided to remain independent and thereafter decided to join with Pakistan (Guha, 2021). Kashmir is now disputed territory between India and Pakistan and its 43% are under the control of India, 37% under control of Pakistan and rest 20% under control of China (Wani, 2024. The Indian Army in 1948 took over possession of Hyderabad and Junagar (Sherman, 2023; Chitkara, 2022).

Apart from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh the five other countries of South Asia are Nepal, Bhutan, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and Maldives. 80.62% of Nepal's population is Hindu, with 19.3% being Madhesi migrants from India (Adhikari & Gellner, 2022), while Buddhists and Muslims constitute 10.74% and 4.20% respectively (Khanal, 2023). In Bhutan out of the total population three-fourths are Buddhist and one-fourth are Hindu (Wangchuk & Dorji, 2023). 70.2% of Sri Lanka's population is Buddhist, 12.6% Hindu, and 9.7% Muslim (De Silva & Wickramasinghe, 2024). Afghanistan's population is 99% Muslim (Omid & Sahar, 2023), while the Maldives is 98.4% Muslim (Niyaz & Fathih, 2022).

3.5. Effect of Recent State Policy in India

India is the largest country in South Asia both in size and population. Seventy percent of the total South Asian population lives in India. All SAARC countries in South Asia share land or water border with India (Sridharan, 2024). In terms of population, it is the second-most populous country after China (Lancet, 2024). Considering its economy, it ranks sixth in the world in GDP and third in purchasing power parity (International Monetary Fund, 2024). Due to this massive size, the political and economic relationships between India and other South Asian countries are quite significant, and not surprisingly also the various policies (political and economic) of India may have some degree of impact on its neighbouring countries like Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan.

In both the 2019 and 2024 Lok Sabha elections, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its allies in the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) coalition

secured sufficient seats to form the central government (Election Commission of India, 2019, 2024). While minor coalition partners such as the Janata Dal (United) and Telugu Desam Party received ministerial positions in the current cabinet, the BJP maintains overwhelming dominance in decision-making processes (Chakrabarty, 2024).

This power concentration has resulted in a de facto politically homogeneous governance structure, despite the technical presence of coalition partners. Political analysts note that nearly all major policy initiatives—from the Citizenship Amendment Act (2019) to the Agneepath military recruitment scheme (2022)—originate from the BJP's ideological framework, with limited substantive input from allied parties (Jaffrelot & Verniers, 2023).

Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, abbreviated as RSS, is an Indian right wing, Hindu nationalist, paramilitary volunteer organization that is widely regarded as the ideological partner organization of the ruling party in India (Andersen & Damle, 2024). The RSS is the progenitor and leader of a large body of organizations called the Sangh Parivar (the "family of the RSS"), which pervade all facets of the Indian society. Founded on 27 September 1925, the RSS is the world's largest voluntary organization (Andersen & Damle, 2018; Jaffrelot, 2021). The Sangha Paribar has two major political agendas. Its first agenda is to convert India into a Hinduism country. In this context, RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat said that “Hindutva will be the main identity of Indians. All the believers here have to be familiar with the original identity of the Hindu. This has been the basis for unity in Indian culture. The common people know this culture as Hindu culture. Hindutva is the basis of unity in our country. The world recognized India as a Hindu rashtra. So Hindutva is India’s identity” (Jaffrelot, 2021). The sole aim of the RSS was “to mobilize the Hindu society on the basis of Hindutva. Mobilizing those who have forgotten that they are Hindus is the next task in line (Andersen & Damle, 2023).

It has been a major transformation from the ideology of all-Indian culture that has been holding all religions and beliefs in Indian politics for so long. To give this message of nationalism, BJP never seeks support from Muslims, India's largest minority community. In the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) once again failed to elect any Muslim Members of Parliament, continuing a trend observed since 2014. This marks three consecutive terms where India's ruling party has had no Muslim representation in the lower house of Parliament (Election Commission of India, 2024; Jaffrelot, 2024).

3.6. National Register of Citizens (NRC)

During the recent joint parliamentary session in July 2024, President Droupadi Murmu outlined the government's plan to implement the National Register of Citizens (NRC), initially targeting border regions deemed vulnerable to irregular migration. Simultaneously, the administration reaffirmed its intent to amend citizenship laws to fast-track naturalization for Hindus fleeing religious persecution from neighbouring countries (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2024; The Hindu, 2024).

This dual approach, combining migration enforcement with selective humanitarian provisions, aligns with the Bharatiya Janata Party's 2024 manifesto commitments but has drawn criticism for allegedly institutionalizing religious discrimination (Chakrabarty, 2024).

During the 2021 West Bengal state election campaign, senior Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leaders, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah, repeatedly raised the issue of implementing the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in the state. While Modi cautioned against "infiltrators" in his speeches in April 2021, Bardhaman rally, Shah explicitly stated at multiple rallies: "We will remove every single infiltrator from West Bengal and send them back to Bangladesh" (The Hindu, 2021). Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah's 2021 election rhetoric in West Bengal—which framed the National Register of Citizens (NRC) as a tool to address "illegal infiltration"—was widely interpreted as an attempt to polarize voters along communal lines (Chakrabarti, Economic & Political Weekly, 2023). This perception has gained renewed relevance following President Droupadi Murmu's June 2024 parliamentary address, which explicitly prioritized implementing the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and "nationwide citizenship protection measures" (President's Speech, The Hindu, June 27, 2024).

The National Register of Citizens (NRC) in Assam was first initiated in 1951 as a post-Partition administrative exercise to document citizenship" (Baruah, 2020). This exercise mandated residents to prove Indian citizenship by establishing lineage predating March 24, 1971, a cut-off date institutionalized by the 1985 Assam Accord (Baruah, 2023; Saikia, 2021). The verification process required extensive documentation, disproportionately affecting marginalized communities with limited access to archival records (Barbora, 2022). The July 2018 draft exclusion list omitted 4.07 million applicants (12.9% of total registrants), citing insufficient documentation of citizenship

claims (Das, 2021). Subsequent review mechanisms allowed excluded individuals to file appeals, with over 200,000 claims submitted (Chakrabarty, 2022). The final NRC, published on August 31, 2019, excluded 1.9 million people (6% of applicants), a figure significantly lower than the Bharatiya Janata Party's projected exclusion of 5–10 million alleged "illegal immigrants" (Baruah, 2023). As of 2024, the final NRC list remains in legal and political limbo. The Assam government has refused to formally adopt the results, citing procedural errors (Saikia, 2023). Notably, no individual has been declared a "foreigner" solely based on NRC exclusion, as cases must undergo separate adjudication by Foreigners Tribunals (Barbora, 2022). Tribunal data reveal that only 1,000+ cases had been processed by 2023, with high rates of arbitrary rulings (Chakrabarty, 2022). Legal scholars highlight the humanitarian crisis facing excluded populations, who remain in a stateless limbo without access to rights or judicial recourse (Baruah, 2023).

There is only one example in world that practices this system of citizenship or migration. Only Israel offers this chance on the basis of religion. Any person from any country in the world with Jewish mother can claim citizenship of Israel (Joppke, 2023). The CAA-NRC linkage has raised constitutional concerns regarding equality before the law (Article 14). Legal analysts note that when combined with proposed nationwide NRC exercises, the CAA could render excluded Muslims stateless while protecting non-Muslims through the amendment's religious exemptions (Roy, Harvard Human Rights Journal, 2024). Ethnographic studies in Assam—where the NRC was first implemented—document how documentation requirements disproportionately affect marginalized Muslims, with 78% of those excluded from the 2019 NRC being from religious and linguistic minorities (Barbora, Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 2The BJP government of India, through the Citizenship Correction Act, aims to unite all the Hindu population on one hand; on the other hand, efforts are being made to make minority Muslim non-citizens or second class citizen of the country.

3.7. Impact of the NRC in South Asia

The proposed nationwide implementation of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) could have profound demographic and geopolitical consequences. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) has historically attributed Muslim population growth in India to two factors: (1) alleged illegal migration from Bangladesh and Pakistan, and (2) higher fertility rates among Muslim communities (Andersen & Damle, 2023). However, demographic studies refute these claims, data from Assam and West Bengal show negligible changes in Muslim population percentages since 1947 (Chandrasekhar &

Sharma, 2022). Despite this, Muslim residents in Assam have faced systematic targeting under NRC implementation, a pattern likely to extend to West Bengal if the policy expands (Barbora, 2023).

Home Minister Amit Shah's repeated vows to "expel infiltrators to Bangladesh" (The Hindu, 2021) have already resulted in pushbacks of individuals labelled as "illegal." Scholarly estimates suggest that in Assam, up to 2 million people risk statelessness if 50% of excluded individuals are deemed "foreigners" (Saikia, 2023) and in West Bengal**,** Potential exclusion of 5+ million if Assam's documentation requirements are replicated (Samaddar, 2024). This could create a humanitarian crisis, overwhelming Bangladesh, a country already hosting a million Rohingya refugees (UNHCR, 2023).

The BJP government's 2019 abrogation of Article 370 provides a parallel case of demographic engineering. The revocation of Jammu and Kashmir's special status enabled non-Kashmiris to acquire land, altering the region's ethnic composition (Chowdhary, 2023). Academic analyses warn that implementing the National Register of Citizens (NRC) could destabilize both Jammu and Kashmir and Bangladesh border regions. In Jammu and Kashmir, scholars anticipate heightened unrest stemming from perceived demographic threats (Duschinski et al., 2024), while along the Bangladesh border, mass displacement risks triggering significant cross-border tensions (Samaddar, 2024).

Conclusion

To maintain peace and stability in South Asia, there should be a coherent policy consisting of the majority and minority people's faith culture and ideology. Its exception will not only make unstable one country, at the same time it will affect the whole region's peace and stability. Minority people's rights provision in any country is a precondition for its tranquillity, stability and progress. During last seven decades many countries of the region on quite a number of occasions have been faced with internal disturbance which stemmed from relative lack of provision of political and other rights of the minority section of the people. Minorities are part and parcel of any country's independence, sovereignty, culture and tradition. In any circumstance minorities should not be kept in isolation of the main section of the people of the society as well as country. If minorities are treated humanely, their integration with majority lays solid foundation towards achieving goal of political, economic and social justice for all.

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