

Leicester Riots: When Hindu Nationalism Came to Britain

The ugly events in Leicester cannot be explained without taking into account the rise of the Hindutva movement in Britain

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Hindus on one side, Muslims on the other. Police officers wielding batons keep the two sides apart.

Close by, cars are being smashed. One is overturned and its driver beaten up. Local residents trapped in their houses, afraid to go out. Masked and hooded men march through the streets.

This wasn’t a scene in [India](#), a country notoriously [prone to](#) outbursts of brutal communal violence. It happened last Saturday night in the British city of Leicester. For locals, it felt close to civil war.

Nothing like this has happened before in [Britain’s](#) [most multicultural](#) city. In recent months, though, something has changed. Hindu nationalism has come to Britain.

In India, hatred against religious minorities, especially the country’s 200 million Muslims, is [growing](#). It is fuelled by [Hindutva](#), a common term for the Hindu nationalism propagated by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh ([RSS](#)), a paramilitary organisation. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi [received](#) his political education in the RSS. The ruling party, the BJP, was established in 1951 as its [political wing](#).

Whereas Hinduism is a great and ancient religious tradition, the RSS is modern to its core, [modelled](#) on 20th-century European fascism. One of its most influential ideologues, Madhav Sadashivrao Golwalkar, admired the Nazis and [compared](#) Indian Muslims to Jews in Germany.

Growing tension

Today the Hindutva vision – to forge India into a Hindu, rather than religiously plural, nation – is closer than ever to being realised.

In India, this has meant death, terror and destruction, much of it involving attacks on Muslims. But the RSS's influence is no longer confined to India. It is active in Britain. In Leicester, tensions have been growing amid a series of anti-Muslim attacks.

In May, 30 men [attacked](#) a Muslim teenager with bats and poles in the street after asking him whether he was Muslim. One of his arms was broken and he was [hospitalised](#). An unprovoked religious attack, routine in Modi's [India](#) but till now unusual in Britain.

Then, on 28 [August](#), violence escalated. After India defeated Pakistan in a cricket match, a mob [chanting](#) "Death to Pakistan" took to the streets of Leicester. The mob attacked a Sikh bystander and a police officer.

In a horrific [incident](#) a few nights later, several men stormed through a Hindu majority area, attacking people and property. One man was videoed with a knife in hand, while another pulled a religious flag off a Hindu house.

Around the same time, a 20-year-old Muslim man was [confronted](#) late at night by a group of men. They asked if he was Muslim. When he said yes, they attacked him.

The threat escalated once more last Saturday. Around [200](#) Hindu men, most of them masked and hooded, [marched](#) through a Muslim-majority area in East Leicester. As they marched, they shouted "Jai Shri Ram". This innocuous-sounding Hindu religious statement, meaning "Hail Lord Ram!", has become [synonymous with Hindutva violence](#) in India.

Riots continue in Leicester, England. Hindu far right groups shouting 'Jai Sri Ram' and attacking Muslims on the streets. pic.twitter.com/97fTIBsBiX

— Ashok Swain (@ashoswai) [September 18, 2022](#)

Across the sub-continent lynch mobs have [forced](#) Muslims to repeat "Jai Shri Ram". The crowds that tore down a 16th-century mosque brick by brick in Ayodhya chanted the slogan. Some Hindutva protesters in Leicester, chanting "Jai Shri Ram", [assaulted](#) Muslim bystanders. Local Muslim men confronted the Hindutva protesters. Police kept the groups apart.

More Muslims gradually arrived and at sunset dozens [prostrated themselves in prayer](#) in congregation in the middle of Uppingham Road.

A dangerous phenomenon

As night set in violence broke out – from both sides. Muslims attacked one Hindutva marcher in his car, pushing it over onto its side.

A masked man climbed onto a Hindu temple and took down its flag. On [Melton Road](#), as two lines of police officers stood between Hindutva and Muslim protestors, some members of the

Hindutva mob threw glass bottles towards the Muslims. "I saw the whole road blocked," a witness told Middle East Eye. "The police had batons and dogs. They weren't letting anyone through. I saw police officers scattered throughout the surrounding streets."

Eventually, police managed to disperse the crowds, but more violence erupted the following evening. Hindus spray-painted the outer wall of a mosque, while Muslims removed a temple flag and set it on fire. Masked men of both groups roamed the streets, before being dispersed by police.

Most press reporting so far suggests that both sides of the conflict are equally to blame, as Faisal Hanif has [noted](#) for Middle East Eye. It must be stressed that the picture is confused, and there have been horrifying Muslim assaults on Hindus. But the ugly events of this summer cannot be explained without taking into account the rise of the Hindutva movement in Britain.

This dangerous phenomenon of great importance has so far been almost entirely ignored in the press. But not by India itself. In a dangerous intervention, the High Commission of India in London has painted violence in Leicester as a purely Muslim phenomenon.

An inflammatory [press release](#) on Monday stated: "We strongly condemn the violence perpetrated against the Indian Community in Leicester and vandalism of premises and symbols of Hindu religion."

This is sinister.

Who is Indian?

By only condemning attacks on Hindus, it turns a blind eye to the violence against Muslims. The Indian High Commission is unforgivably taking sides in a religious conflict in a foreign country.

It's standard practice from Modi's government to favour Hindus and ignore anti-Muslim violence back home in India – thus allowing fanatical militants to terrorise minorities with impunity. Yet there is an even more disturbing element to the High Commission of India's press release: it refers to "violence perpetrated against the Indian community".

In fact, as the Indian High Commission must have known, the clashes were largely between people with an Indian background.

The majority of Leicester's Muslims are Indian, with many tracing their origins to [Gujarat](#), the site of the 2002 massacre in which Modi, then chief minister of Gujaraat, was [implicated](#). The statement, therefore, suggests that the High Commission recognises Indian Hindus but not Indian Muslims as part of the "Indian community".

This in itself is a terrifying manifestation of Hindutva ideology, which paints India as a fundamentally Hindu country assaulted by foreign Muslim invasions, so that Indian Muslims today are themselves not a real part of the nation.

MEE approached the Indian High Commission for a comment, but there was no response until this column went to print.

It's deeply worrying that the Indian High Commission should breach all diplomatic protocol

by echoing the ugly language of religious militants back in India. Many Hindus in Leicester reject the Indian High Commission analysis.

We spoke to a young Hindu woman who fears for the safety of her local area. Speaking on condition of anonymity, this is what she told us: “My grandma goes to the Mandir [temple] daily so I don’t feel good about that. Mob mentality is terrifying,” she said.

“This was something that always scared me about the rise of the BJP in India – how that’s going to impact the diaspora. It’s so sad to see – growing up here it’s always been largely peaceful between all communities. This is horrific.”

Shamingly it has suited British politicians to turn a blind eye to the rise of the Hindutva movement in the UK. Cynical electoral politics may be the reason.

Strategic silence

In recent years, the Conservative Party has entered into an unspoken electoral alliance with India’s ruling BJP.

It is often forgotten that Modi was [banned](#) from entering Britain after the 2002 massacre of over 1,000 Muslims in Gujarat. But in 2014 Modi was elected as prime minister, and since then the British government has embraced him wholeheartedly.

In April former prime minister Boris Johnson visited India, where he announced [new investment deals](#) in technology and posed in photos with Modi. No mention of the murderous attacks on Muslims on the rise throughout the country.

The Holocaust Memorial Museum in the United States considers India the [second most likely](#) country to experience mass killings in 2022. Yet, the British government maintains a strategic silence on the matter.

In fact, the Conservatives seem determined to suck up to Modi’s BJP. In May a delegation of Indian opposition politicians were received at a reception in the British parliament. Conservative MPs were noticeably absent, according to a [report](#) in the Guardian.

Former Home Secretary Priti Patel is an open admirer of Modi, [praising](#) his “dynamic leadership” when she was in government. In 2014, she went to the extraordinary lengths of writing a [letter of congratulations](#) to HSS-UK, the overseas wing of the RSS, for their event entitled “RSS: A Vision in Action – a new Dawn”. Patel told its members they “should be very proud of what they have achieved for Britain’s Hindu community.”

The Conservative Party has seen potential for electoral gain in collaborating with the ruling BJP, which responds in kind. In the 2019 general election, the general-secretary of the National Council of Hindu Temples, which has [links](#) with the BJP, was [suspended](#) after revelations that he had been personally urging people to vote Conservative on social media.

In the same year, the president of the Hindu Forum of Britain was [videoed](#) telling an audience that she would ban Labour politicians from Hindu functions. A group called Overseas Friends of BJP UK, meanwhile, [invited](#) 300 Indians to a meeting with Conservative candidate Dr Anwara Ali and Conservative MP Bob Blackman.

Blackman has a record of [Islamophobic views](#), is known for [retweeting anti-Muslim](#) social

media posts by the former leader of the English Defence League Tommy Robinson (he later apologised [citing an “error”](#) over the tweet), and sharing a [platform](#) with the far-right commentator Katie Hopkins. In 2018 he hosted Hindu nationalist leader [Tapan Ghosh](#) in Parliament. Ghosh has called on the UN to “control the Muslim birth rate world over”.

This may help explain why, at the time of writing, there has been no statement on the violence from British Home Secretary Suella Braverman – and little substantial coverage of the story in Britain’s notoriously Islamophobic mainstream press.

It’s time for Britain’s ruling Conservatives to stop ingratiating themselves with Modi – and wake up to his link to far-right communal politics, not just in India but in Britain too.

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Peter Osborne won best commentary/blogging in both 2022 and 2017, and was also named freelancer of the year in 2016 at the Drum Online Media Awards for articles he wrote for Middle East Eye. He was also named as British Press Awards Columnist of the Year in 2013. He resigned as chief political columnist of the Daily Telegraph in 2015. His latest book is The Fate of Abraham: Why the West is Wrong about Islam, published in May by Simon & Schuster. His previous books include The Triumph of the Political Class, The Rise of Political Lying, Why the West is Wrong about Nuclear Iran and The Assault on Truth: Boris Johnson, Donald Trump and the Emergence of a New Moral Barbarism.

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Featured image: In Leicester, tensions have been growing amid a series of anti-Muslim attacks in recent months (Video screen grab via MEE)

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