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Hindutva as a factor of unification and confrontation in Indian society

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Abstract. While in power, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), under the leadership of Narendra Modi, has been using Hindutva — the ideology of the Hindu nationalism — as the basis of its public policies aimed at deeply modernising the country and mobilising the Indian society. Historical memory management becomes a key tool for strengthening the religious identity, with Hindutva acting not only as a unifying narrative but also as an ideological core. Such policies are aimed at creating a new official version of the historical past, which emphasises the emergence of India as a unique Hindu civilization, which evokes mixed reactions among different sections of the Indian society. The relevance of this topic lies in its impact on the political processes of contemporary India and the socio-cultural transformations brought about by the spread of Hindutva. The authors of the study analyses problems of heightened tensions between Hindus and Muslims, the penetration of Hindutva into popular culture, and the political role of caste relations in shaping electoral strategy. Demonstrating heterogeneity of Hindutva perception in the Indian society, the authors identify the major contradictions of the BJP historical policy and its impact on the outcome of the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. Thus, the authors reveal the mechanisms of historical policy formation in India, its influence on social, religious and political processes, as well as make assessments of the prospects for the development of Indian society in the context of the Hindutva growing influence.

Keywords: India, Narendra Modi, Hindu Nationalism, Historical Policy, Bharatiya Janata Party, Increased Role of Hinduism

Хиндутва как фактор объединения и конфронтации в индийском обществе

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Аннотация. Находясь у власти, партия Бхаратия Джаната Парти под руководством Нарендры Моди использует хиндутву — идеологию индусского национализма — в качестве основы государственной политики, нацеленной на глубокую модернизацию страны и мобилизацию индийского общества. Управление исторической памятью становится ключевым инструментом для укрепления религиозной идентичности, где хиндутва выполняет роль не только объединяющего нарратива, но и идеологического стержня. Подобная политика направлена на создание новой официальной версии исторического прошлого, где подчеркивается становление Индии как уникальной индусской цивилизации, что вызывает неоднозначную реакцию среди различных слоев индийского общества. Актуальность данной темы заключается в ее влиянии на политические процессы современной Индии и социально-культурные трансформации, вызванные продвижением хиндутвы. Рассмотрены проблемы обострения напряженности между индусами и мусульманами, проникновение хиндутвы в массовую культуру, а также политическая роль кастовых отношений в формировании электоральной стратегии. Демонстрируя неоднородность восприятия хиндутвы в индийском обществе, авторы выявляют основные противоречия проводимой БДП исторической политики и ее влияние на результаты выборов в Лок Сабху 2024 г. Исследование раскрывает механизмы формирования исторической политики в Индии, ее влияния на социальные, религиозные и политические процессы, а также оценивает перспективы развития индийского общества в условиях роста влияния хиндутвы.

Ключевые слова: Индия, Нарендра Моди, индусский национализм, историческая политика, Бхаратия джаната парти, усиление роли индуизма

Introduction

India is striving to become the world's third largest economy, which will undoubtedly change its role on the international arena and allow it to claim the status of a global power. Amid large-scale modernization of the country and efforts

to strengthen its influence on the Indian society, the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), under the leadership of Narendra Modi, is utilizing various tools for managing collective historical memory. This approach can be characterized as "historical politics", aimed at reinterpreting key events of the past, the roles of historical and mythological figures, as well as shaping new views and preferences within society. The foundation of this policy is the ideology of Hindutva[1] (Hindu nationalism), positioned as the new domestic state ideology. Under this circumstances, historical assessments are being transformed in society, changes are being made to school history textbooks, and alternative national heroes and leaders are being introduced into public consciousness. A new official version of India's past is emerging, in which the country's history is presented through the lens of the formation of a unique Hindu civilization. This approach leads to increased religiosity in the country and strengthens the position of Hinduism, exacerbating existing social and caste tensions. In particular, this affects the status of people from lower social groups, making «the caste issue» one of the key topics in the political agenda and during the recent elections in India. Since the issues of the relationship between religion and the state are directly tied to the political processes taking place within the country, it receives serious attention in the academic community. Scholars address topics such as the growing tension between Hindus and Muslims [1], the penetration of Hindutva into mass culture [2] and the internet space [3], women's rights in the context of Hindu nationalism [4], and other issues. At the same time, the question of the vulnerability of attitudes toward Hindutva and the existence of internal contradictions within the country, which go against the government's aspirations to "saffronize" India's past, present, and future [5. P. 5], also sparks rather intense debate. This will be the focus of this study (by "saffronization", we mean the increasing influence of Hinduism on various spheres of the country's life, with the term referring to the saffron robes worn by Hindu monks).

Hindutva: From Savarkar to BJP Historical Politics

Collective memory of the Indian society has traditionally been rooted in the heroic struggle against colonialism and the experience of building Indian statehood under the leadership of the Indian National Congress (INC). This positive narrative dominated the minds of Indians for a long time. However, with BJP rise to power, led by Narendra Modi, there emerged a need to create a new "myth" built on a new

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[1] Can be referred as "Hinduness" from Sanskrit.

historical platform of Hindutva, which became the foundation of BJP government's historical policy.

The term "Hindutva" was introduced by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, who first used it in his 1923 book "Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?" [6. P. 99]. At the core of Savarkar's views was the identification of the Indian nation with the Hindu nation. Savarkar understood Hindutva as a political community united by geography, race, and a shared culture [7. P. 86].

The most important structure advocating for the identity of Hinduism and the Indian nation is the Sangh Parivar ("Family of Organizations"), which includes the cultural wing — Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the religious wing — Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), and the political organization — Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). In addition to these, there are a number of smaller associations within these organizations, forming a "tree" with roots tracing back to the Sangh Parivar [8. P. 372].

As a result, BJP seeking to instill in people's minds the idea of the richness, antiquity, and perfection of Hindu culture, aims to embed the belief among Indians that only belonging to Hinduism makes them the true actors of this culture, excluding those who have lived in the territory of modern India for a long time but belong to other religions.

One of the key ideas of Hindu nationalists is the aspiration to transform India into a "Hindu Rashtra" (Hindu state), in which followers of Hinduism should have priority (religious, cultural, legal, and political). They are convinced that Hinduism has become an integral part of the Indian cultural code, which should not be forgotten in the present day.

Hindutva as a Tool of Domestic Policy

To popularize "Hinduness" and to promote the ideas of Hindutva in the country, the ruling party uses the education system, which is intended to contribute to the spread of these ideas and strengthening the religiosity in the Indian society.

In 2018, under the directive of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, a special Commission of 12 Indian scholars was established within the Ministry of Culture, with the primary goal of "rewriting" Indian history. In an interview with Reuters, one of the Commission members, K.N. Dikshit, noted that he had been tasked by BJP to prepare a report that could help the government to rewrite certain aspects

of ancient Indian history[2]. Former Minister of Culture Mahesh Sharma, in the same interview, stated his readiness to lobby for this report in the Ministry of Human Resource Development to include the findings in school history textbooks[3]. In several states where BJP has been winning the elections over a long period, changes to history textbooks have already been made. For example, in Maharashtra textbooks, an entire chapter on the Mughal Empire has been removed[4]. Following the completion of the Commission work, 1,334 amendments were made to 182 Indian history textbooks[5]. The version of history promoted by the government is supported by BJP, well-funded, and popularized through mass media.

A striking manifestation of the legal establishment of the privileged position of Hindus in modern India was the adoption of amendments to the Citizenship Act of 1955 in December 2019. The amendment introduces a simplified process for granting Indian citizenship to representatives of "persecuted" religious minorities — specifically Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, Parsis, and Sikhs — from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan who fled their countries "to escape religious persecution"[6] and settled in India before 2014. However, individuals who practice Islam, including members of various Islamic sects that are also often subjected to persecution, are not included in this list. Critics of the amendments (including the UN representatives[7]) argue that the bill is discriminatory and contradicts the provisions of the Indian Constitution, and the passage of the amendments sparked prolonged protests across the country[8].

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[2] Jain R, Lasseter T. By rewriting history, Hindu nationalists aim to assert their dominance over India. *Reuters*. 06.03.2018. Available from: https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/india-modi-culture/ [accessed: 19.04.2024].

[3] Jain R, Lasseter T. By rewriting history, Hindu nationalists aim to assert their dominance over India. *Reuters*. 06.03.2018. Available from: https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/india-modi-culture/ [accessed: 19.04.2024].

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[6] The Parliament of India. The Citizenship (Amendment) Bill. 2019. P. 6.

[7] New citizenship law in India 'fundamentally discriminatory': UN human rights office. *UN News*. 13.12.2019. Available from: https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/12/1053511 [accessed: 09.04.2024].

[8] Bhandari A, Katakam A. India's citizenship protests: How over three months of protests have unfolded. *Reuters*. 30.03.2020. Available from: https://www.reuters.com/graphics/INDIA-CITIZENSHIP/PROTESTS/jxlbpgqlpqd/ [accessed: 21.09.2024].

Another significant sociocultural manifestation of Hindutva policy was the activation of the Ram Janmabhoomi movement ("The Birthplace of Rama"), which aimed to "liberate" the site where the Babri Masjid, a Muslim shrine in Ayodhya (the mosque built by Babur), stood for the construction of a temple to Rama. According to myths, Rama, the earthly incarnation of the god Vishnu and the main hero of the Indian epic "Ramayana", was born there. Hindus believe that a Hindu temple once stood on that site, which was destroyed by Muslims who built the mosque in the 16th century, named after the founder of the Mughal dynasty. As T.L. Shaumyan notes, starting from the 1980s, "BJP turned the need to 'liberate' the birthplace of Rama into its main political slogan" [9, p. 113].

The peak of the Ram Janmabhoomi movement occurred on December 6, 1992, when a large crowd of Hindus stormed the Babri Masjid and destroyed it. These events marked the beginning of serious interreligious clashes between Hindus and Muslims, resulting in the deaths of over 2,000 people, according to various reports[9]. The demolition of the mosque and the construction of the Rama temple became a turning point when religious disagreements were elevated to the level of politics. The event attracted numerous influential guests, including politicians, film stars, renowned athletes, religious leaders, and others, but the central figure at the temple consecration ceremony on January 22, 2024, was Narendra Modi[10]. He participated in the ceremonial laying of the first stone for the temple foundation, thereby signaling that the construction of the Rama temple in Ayodhya is a matter of national importance. However, the celebrations raised concerns among the religious minority residents of Ayodhya, especially Muslims, who "do not fear their Hindu neighbours, but the lakhs of devotees expected to descend on the town for the Ram temple consecration ceremony from across the country"[11].

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[9] Babri Masjid demolition: December 6, 1992, a day that lives in infamy. *India Today*. 06.12.2018. Available from: https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/babri-masjid-demolition-anniversary-1403792-2018-12-06 [accessed: 20.09.2024].

[10] Gupta AK. Ram Temple inauguration: List of VVIP invitees for Ayodhya event. *The Hindustan Times*. 22.01.2024. Available from: https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/ram-temple-inauguration-list-of-vvip-invitees-for-ayodhya-event-101705892980925.html [accessed: 06.06.2024].

[11] Kumar M. Muslims in Ayodhya cite past violence, request strict security. *The Hindu*. 21.01.2024. Available from: https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/fearful-of-past-communal-incidents-ayodhyas-muslims-request-police-security-for-january-22/article67759882.ece [accessed: 28.09.2024].

Narendra Modi involvement in the temple foundation demonstrated that the dispute in Ayodhya has never been just a question of land ownership; it has been (and continues to be) a matter of cultural dominance of the Hindu community, restitution, cultural and religious identity, and, of course, differing perspectives on history, which would later become the foundation for shaping Modi historical policy.

The Influence of Historical Policy on the Value System of Modern India

The spread of Hindutva ideology and the use of historical policy by BJP have led to a significant increase in religiosity in the country. The nationwide trend of supporting Hinduism and its privileged status has gained relevance during BJP rule and has affected the overall position of the country in the global value landscape.

We can trace this process through the "Cultural Values Map" by Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel[12], which demonstrates global sociocultural differences between countries and groups of countries, showing how various societies balance between preserving traditions and adapting to modern value realities. Every five years, a collective of researchers, including over 150 research groups worldwide, conducts large-scale surveys of respondents from 120 countries, covering more than 94% of the world population. Researchers document the main value orientations and their dynamics, then process the collected data using a range of statistical indicators. The results of this sociological analysis generate widespread global resonance and have been cited over 60,000 times in academic publications[13].

On this map it is clearly visible what the dynamics of India's position represent: while there is a general global trend shifting toward atheism and self-exploration, an active personal stance, and civil liberties (moving to the upper right part of the map), the opposite trend is observed in India. For example, on the map for the period 2010–2014, India's coordinates corresponded to the levels of countries in South and Southeast Asia (Fig. 1), but by 2017–2022 (Fig. 2), India's position in terms of value coordinates approached that of Muslim countries with an official religion (e.g., Iran and Iraq).

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[12] The Inglehart — Welzel World Cultural Map — World Values. URL: https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSContents.jsp (accessed: 28.09.2024).

[13] World Values Survey. The Inglehart-Welzel World Cultural Map. 2023. Available from: https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSContents.jsp [accessed: 29.09.2024].

Figure 1. The Inglehart — Welzel World Cultural Map (2010–2014)
Source: The Inglehart — Welzel World Cultural Map — World Values. Survey 6. URL: https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/
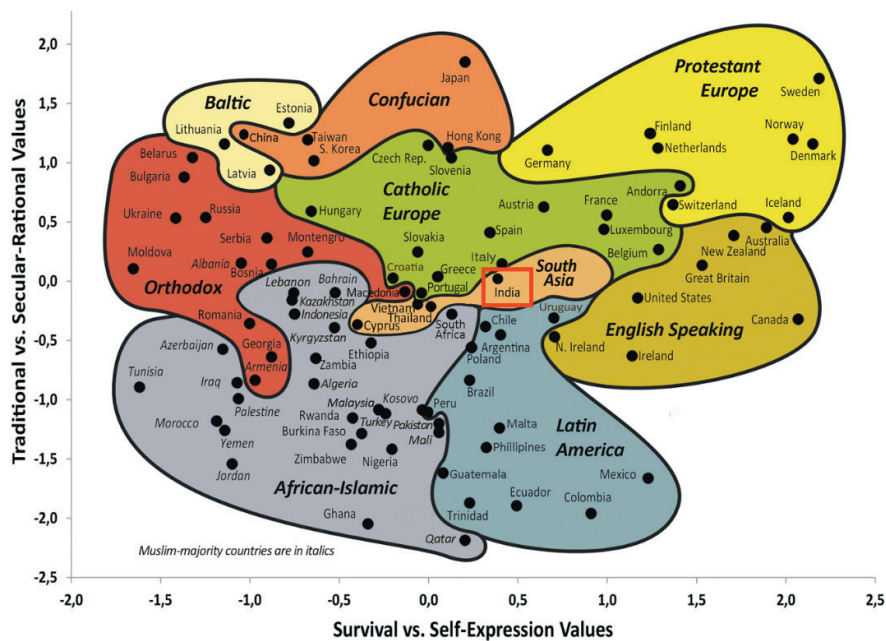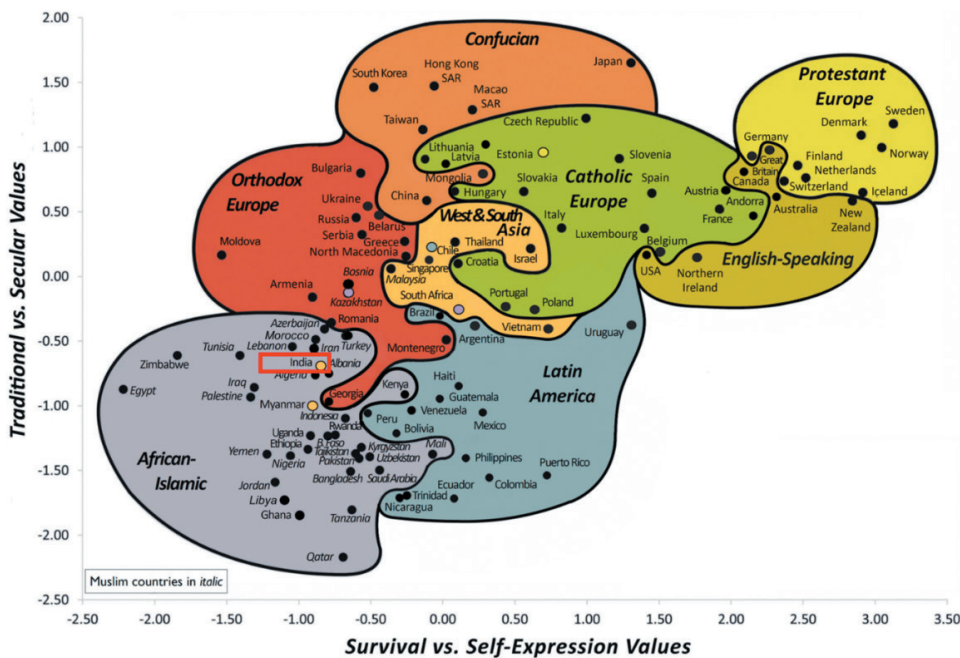WVSContents.jsp (accessed: 28.09.2024).

Figure 2. The Inglehart — Welzel World Cultural Map (2017–2022)
Source: The Inglehart — Welzel World Cultural Map — World Values. Survey 7. URL: https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/
WVSContents.jsp (accessed: 28.09.2024).

Such changes in India's position on the map can serve as the direct evidence of the actively promoted "Hinduness" within the country. The return to traditionalism and religious conservatism resonates with the mentality of the Hindu majority, which perceives it as a return to its roots and a liberation from everything foreign that was imposed during the period of enslavement and colonization.

The Heterogeneity of Support for Hindutva in Modern India

In modern India, attitudes toward Hindutva are not unambiguous. On one hand, there are political supporters of the ruling coalition (including BJP) known as the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) who endorse the ideology. On the other hand, Hindutva is sharply criticized by supporters of the opposition Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA), primarily represented by the Indian National Congress (INC).

INC members criticize Hindutva for deviating from the core principles of Hinduism, claiming that BJP politicizes religion beyond recognition, and for the fact that "the terms 'Hindutva' and 'Hinduism' often become interchangeable"[14]. While the political discourse of INC in the early decades of independent India was based on Western European ideas of secularism, the rise of BJP has shifted the emphasis toward a historical discourse rooted in national traditions and religion.

In his latest election campaign, Narendra Modi built his socio-political strategy on the presumed religious unity of Hindu society. However, high religiosity and identification with Hinduism did not imply unity within the target group that Modi hoped to mobilize. Hinduism does not promote equality among people, dividing society into numerous castes. Although the caste system has been formally abolished at the constitutional level, millennia-old traditions cannot be eradicated from society through legal acts in such a short time, and discrimination against lower castes remains relevant. For instance, according to the Pew Research Center, about 70% of Indians identify as belonging to lower castes (including registered castes and tribes)[15]. Among

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[14] Puniyani R. Rahul Gandhi's Humane Hinduism Totally Differs from Violent and Hateful Hindutva of BJP-RSS. *The Wire.* 09.07.2024. Available from: https://thewire.in/politics/rahul-gandhis-humane-hinduism-totally-differs-from-violent-and-hateful-hindutva-of-bjp-rss [accessed: 21.09.2024].

[15] Pew Research Centre. Attitudes about caste. Religion in India: Tolerance and Segregation. 29.06.2021. Available from: https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/06/29/attitudes-about-caste/ [accessed: 09.06.2024].

this same sample of respondents, only 4% identify as belonging to higher castes[16]. This fragmentation among Hindus is further compounded by the nearly 200 million Muslim population in the country (which, along with other religious minorities, tends to support INC)[17]. All these groups are situated at the bottom of the social ladder.

Thus, by supporting BJP, members of the lower castes endorse the traditionally established religious hierarchy and accept an unfavorable position in society. Relying on Hindus (the religious majority in the country: 79.8%[18]) and the ideas of Hindutva initially gave Modi broad support, but eventually led to increasing contradictions between BJP and its electorate. Members of the lower castes have actively begun to form their own political parties, which, although not as numerous as BJP and INC, still have the potential to change the political landscape of the country by supporting major political alliances. These parties are starting to "bargain" and demand preferences in exchange for membership in the alliance. INC has taken advantage of this in the current election campaign, betting on the lack of unity both within the Hindu community and among representatives of different religions throughout the country, cooperating with both lower caste representatives and other faiths, particularly Muslims.

Moreover, in addition to miscalculations regarding religious unity, a significant factor in the shift of part of the electorate away from BJP can be attributed to insufficient economic growth rates in India, which have not kept pace with Modi's plans to transform India into the third-largest economy in the world. Aiming to elevate the country to "developed" economy status by 2047[19] (which would require increasing the country's GDP for six

[16] Pew Research Centre. Attitudes about caste. Religion in India: Tolerance and Segregation. 29.06.2021. Available from: https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/06/29/attitudes-about-caste/ [accessed: 09.06.2024].

[17] Bhattacharya S. How Minorities Voted in the Indian General Election. *The Diplomat*. 10.06.2024. Available from: https://thediplomat.com/2024/06/how-minorities-voted-in-the-indian-general-election/ [accessed: 21.09.2024].

[18] Registrar General and Census Commissioner. Population Census 2011. Census 2011 data on Population by Religious Communities. Available from: https://pib.gov.in/newsite/printrelease.aspx?relid=126326#:~:text=Total%20Population%20in%202011%20is,Stated%200.29%20crores%20 (0.2%25) (accessed: 28.09.2024).

[19] Vibrant Gujarat Summit: PM Modi unveils 25-year vision, pledges to make India a developed nation. *Economic Times*. 10.01.2024. Available from: https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/vibrant-gujarat-summit-pm-modi-unveils-25-year-vision-pledges-to-make-india-a-developed-nation/articleshow/106685801.cms [accessed: 21.09.2024].

times[20]), the lower threshold for the required growth rate of the Indian economy over the next 20 years must rise to 8% annually, which is much higher than current projections (most experts agree that in the coming years, the country's economy will grow at approximately 6.6% annually[21]). In comparison, with the start of the policy of reform and openness in China (a series of economic reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping), the annual growth of the economy was around 9%, and from 1982 to 1996, the country's GDP increased for four times [10], which is a unique global example of rapid economic expansion.

Another factor contributing to the electorate departure from BJP, which has not received adequate attention from Modi administration, is the nature of employment. While the significance of India in the global development of new technologies, particularly in the IT sector, cannot be denied, it is important to note that such fields provide jobs for a relatively narrow layer of highly skilled professionals, while the largest segments of the population face a lack of job opportunities. As of 2022, over 5 million residents of India work in the IT sector[22], while more than 333 million are self-employed, which often implies unskilled labor[23].

Thus, social factors related to the fragmentation of the Hindu community in the country, combined with the overall religious diversity of all residents of India, hinder the successful implementation of Modi's initial tactics and appeals to the religiosity of voters. These circumstances clash with the ruling party's desire to maintain and promote "Hinduness" in all areas of societal life. They are compounded by economic issues such as the inability to bring the country's economy to desired indicators during their time in power and serious unemployment. It is this complex of factors that led to Modi entering his third term as Prime Minister against a backdrop of unprecedented opposition resistance.

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[21] Pew Research Centre. Attitudes about caste. Religion in India: Tolerance and Segregation. 29.06.2021. Available from: https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/06/29/attitudes-about-caste/ [accessed: 09.06.2024].

[22] Press Information Bureau, Government of India, Ministry of Electronics & IT. Number of employees in IT. 03.08.2022. Available from: https://www.pib.gov.in/Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=1847841 (accessed: 28.09.2024).

[23] GlobalData. India: Number of Self-Employed Workers. 01.12.2022. Available from: https://www.globaldata.com/data-insights/macroeconomic/number-of-self-employed-in-india-2137687/ (accessed: 28.09.2024).

Hindutva, or Hindu nationalism, has become the core of Narendra Modi's election campaign in 2024. However, by focusing on the overarching "Hinduness" of the nation, the authorities have encountered social heterogeneity within the Hindu community itself, rooted in the caste system, where discrimination against individuals from lower castes continues to persist. Many Hindu voters and representatives of religious minorities have shifted their support toward INC, as reflected in the results of the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, allowing the party to strengthen its position. Thus, the results of the 2024 parliamentary elections were the outcome of several factors related to the internal politics of BJP. The decline in support for Narendra Modi's party is linked to miscalculations regarding the promoted historical policy based on Hindutva, discrimination against lower castes, insufficient economic growth rates, and challenges in creating new job opportunities.

Conclusion

During the two terms that BJP, under Modi leadership, has been in power, the country has undergone significant transformations concerning the increase in the population's religiosity and the value system promoted by the authorities, with Hinduism becoming its cornerstone, often in its radical form. Although Hindutva appeals to the Hindu majority, it does not eliminate the contradictions that are present in the caste system on which Hinduism is traditionally based. Discrimination against lower castes, despite constitutional prohibitions, remains a part of the country's social reality. In the context of growing religious tension, this policy exacerbates problems related to inter-religious and inter-caste relations, particularly affecting the status of individuals from lower castes and religious minorities. This was first seen during the 2024 elections.

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