

Tracing the Legacy of Religious Tolerance, Intolerance, and its Impact on South Asian Pluralist Society

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ABSTRACT

Aim of the Study: This study traces the legacy of religious tolerance and intolerance in South Asian society and its impact on pluralist South Asia over centuries by highlighting a series of several historical and contemporary examples. These examples shed light on how the state institutions and ruling elites have at several occasions either fostered inter-religious coexistence or mobilized religious identities to legitimize violence and exclusion.

Methodology: The study employs a qualitative, historical and analytical methodology approach. The data is drawn from ancient scriptures, textual sources, travelogues, chronicles and several contemporary scholarly works on South Asian politics and religions. These are supported by contemporary media reports and analyses concerning major upheavals like the 2019 Pulwama attack, the revocation of Article 370, the most recent Indian “Operation *Sindoor*” and several attacks on minorities in India, Myanmar and Sri Lanka.

Findings: The analytics indicate South Asia having a long and complex tradition of religious plurality and at various occasions displaying robust tolerance, as seen under emperors such as Ashoka, Kanishka, Harsha and Akbar who are remembered for their policies that allowed multiple faiths to coexist. At the same time, the instrumental use of religion by the ruling elites, rigid caste system and sectarian politics in the contemporary time with the use of media has led to religious intolerance and violence.

Conclusion: The future peace and prosperity of South Asia is depended upon reclaiming and reinforcing its older legacy of religious tolerance while critically challenging media driven and state sponsored forms of religious intolerance. As historical examples suggest that respecting religious diversity and protection of freedom of belief resulted in greater stability and public trust towards the ruling elite, while exploiting religious divisions for political gains leave deep social scars, as witnessed during the 1947 partition and the disputed Kashmir territory.

Keywords: South Asia; Religious Tolerance; Religious Intolerance; Article 370; Operation *Sindoor*; Partition of India.

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1. INTRODUCTION

As a student, scholar and researcher of Art History, many a times we come across information and situations that indirectly or directly links our present to our past and future. It is under such circumstances that one leaves behind one's original field of interest to jump into something different in a quest, not only to save the present but the past for the future too. In this spirit I follow Professor Slavoj Zizek observation that, '*Political issues are too serious to be left only to politicians*' (Fig. 1).

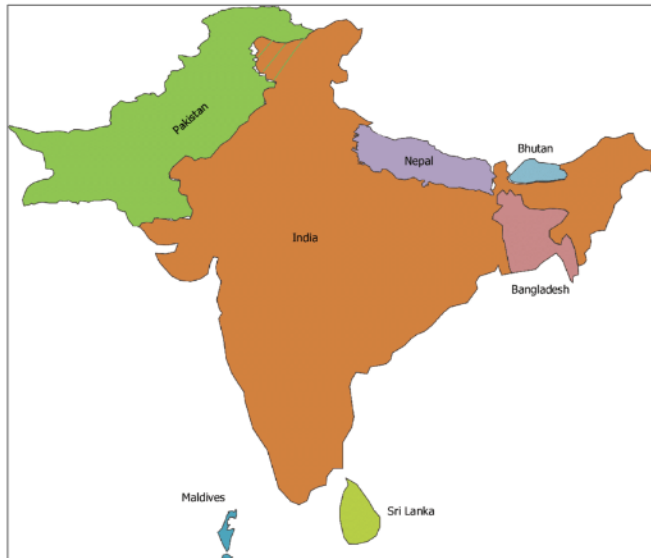


Figure 1: Map of South Asia

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Pulwama (2019), Media Narratives, and Article 370

February 14th, 2019, was not just another day in the lives of the people living in South Asia, but a day that instigated diversified emotions among people living on both sides of the border in Pakistan and India. On a paramilitary convoy in Pulwama, in Indian administrated Kashmir a suicide attack was carried out that killed more than 40 Indian security personnel (Fig. 2, 3 & 4). This attack was within minutes attributed by the Indian media to a Pakistan based militant group, while New Delhi also later endorsed it (Arms Control Association, 2025).



Figure 2: Pulwama Attack February 14th, 2019.
<https://www.instagram.com/p/DUuWvcBEcRj/>



Figure 3: Pulwama Attack February 14th, 2019.
<https://www.dawn.com/news/1472343>



Figure 4: Pulwama Attack February 14th, 2019.
<https://tribune.com.pk/story/1919095/reality-pulwama-incident>



Figure 5: Indian Media Coverage.

In less than an hour of the Pulwama Attack most of the reputed Indian channels openly blamed Pakistan and a media trial began (Singh, 2019; Khan & Shabir, 2023; Ijaz et al., 2021) without any substantial evidence being publicly presented (The Indian Express, 2019a; Rising Kashmir, 2019; Times Now, 2019). Highly charged headlines and multiple talk shows within India built a narrative that this attack was against the Hindus led by Pakistani Muslims (Sreepada & Coman, 2024; Singh, 2019) (Fig. 5).

This narrative resulted in creating an atmosphere of polarization, instigating hatred among majority of the Hindus that created opportunities for the government to use the Indian Air Force to carry out the so-called “surgical strike” across the Line of Control, targeting a terrorist camp inside Pakistan as was described by New Delhi (Daily Times, 2019; The News International, 2019; The Indian Express, 2019; Greater Kashmir, 2019; Rising Kashmir; The Indian Express) (Fig. 6 - 10).



Figure 6: International Media Coverage.
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-47278145>



Figure 7: Media Coverage



Figure 8: Indian Media Coverage

Figure 9: Indian Media Coverage

The instigation of hatred among the Indian masses created a situation that seemed preplanned (Ijaz et al., 2021; Khan & Shabir, 2023); however, Pakistan's stance was clear that no terrorist camp existed in the place of surgical strike as claimed by New Delhi (The News, 2019; Daily Times, 2019; The Nation, 2019; Dawn, 2019) (Fig. 11, 12 & 13).



Figure 11: Pakistani Media Coverage



Figure 12: Pakistani Media Coverage



Figure 13: Pakistani Media Coverage

The military and strategic significance of the strike remains debated (Misra, 2022; Singh, 2019); however, its political gain was evident for the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the general elections of April-May 2019. The BJP secured the highest vote share by a single party since the 1989 general election. Analysts across the world have linked this outcome to the party's success in heightening the anti-Pakistan and anti-Muslim sentiment among significant segments of Hindu voters, backed and aided by emotional media coverage and social media campaigns (BBC News, 2019; India Today, 2019) (Fig. 14 & 15).

Indian election results 2019

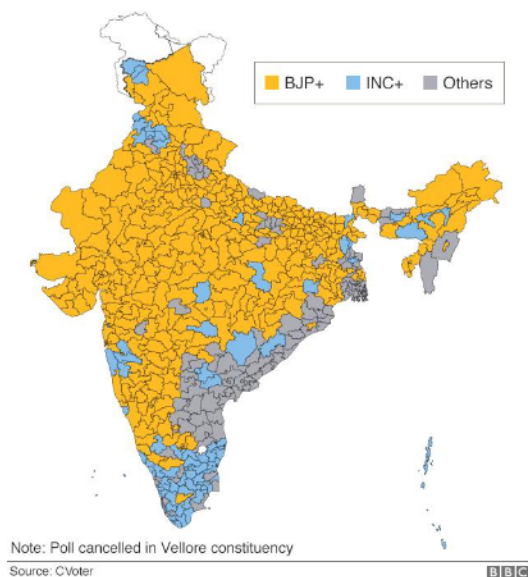


Figure 14: 2019 Election Results held in India

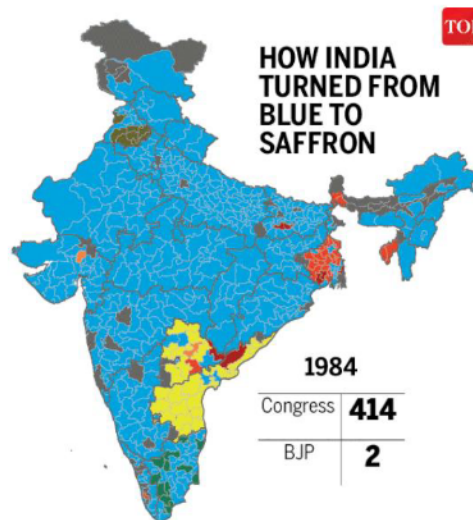


Figure 15: Election Results from 1984 to 2019. BJP from 02 to 303 seats

This significant victory enabled the BJP led government to revoke article 370 of the Indian constitution on August 5th, 2019, thereby stripping Jammu and Kashmir of its special autonomous status (Misra, 2022) (Fig. 16, 17, 18 & 19). The region was subsequently locked down under an extended communications blackout and heavy military presence, effectively besieging its population (The Economic Times, 2019; The Hindu, 2019; The Indian Express, 2019; The New York Times, 2019; The Times of India, 2019) (Fig. 20 & 21).



Figure 16: Revoking Article 370



Figure 17: Revoking Article 370



Figure 18: Revoking Article 370



Figure 19: Revoking Article 370



Figure 20: Siege of Kashmir on August 5th, 2019



Figure 21: Siege of Kashmir on August 5th, 2019

These developments were not isolated. They formed part of a broader pattern in which incidents of violence, whether in Kashmir or in Indian cities were framed and instrumentalized in ways that intensified hostility not only towards Pakistan but also towards India's own Muslim, Christian, Sikh, Dalit, and other

minority communities (Al Jazeera, 2019; Beech, 2013; India Today, 2019; Time Magazine, 2013) and are sufficient to understand the growing radical extremism in the region today in the name of cleansing India (Fig. 22).

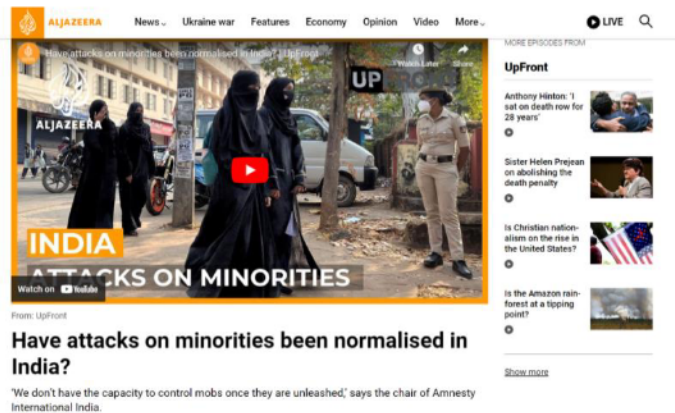


Figure 22: *Attacks on Minorities in India and what masses desire*



Figure 23: *Attacks on Minorities in India and what masses desire*

It is important to emphasize that such dynamics do not represent “Hindus” as a whole (Fig. 23). Rather, they reflect the ideological project of Hindutva promoted by organizations such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and advanced by the BJP leadership, which seeks to redefine India as a Hindu-majoritarian polity. Many Hindus, along with members of other communities, continue to oppose sectarian politics and to defend the secular and pluralist principles of India’s constitution.

Hindus belonging to Bhartiya Janata Party - BJP believe that India also known as Hindustan only belongs to them, thus it is their duty to either kill or make the lives of the minorities so difficult that they leave this land on their own accord. This stance of RSS followed today by the BJP government should be an eye opener for not just people living in this region about across the world too (Mehta, 2022; Hussain, 2023; Jodhka, 1994) (Fig. 24).



Figure 24: *Hindustan is only for Hindus*

It is unfortunate that India being a secular state and the largest democracy of the world today is being led by a party of Hindu extremists and is propagating an agenda of cleansing India of minorities that loudly

negates the religious foundations of this region. The atrocities against minorities in Burma and Sri Lanka led by Buddhist monks should also be remembered as their agenda is like BJP's agenda and against the teachings of Buddha (Malji, 2021) (Fig. 25 & 26).



Figure 25: *The Face of Buddhist Terror during Burma Genocide* **Figure 26:** *The Face of Buddhist Terror during Burma Genocide*

2.2 Operation Sindoor and Bunyan Marsoos

The sequence of escalation and crisis did not end with the Pulwama attack of 2019, as in April 2025 an attack on tourists in Pahalgam, in Indian administrated Kashmir killed 26 people and reignited tensions between Pakistan and India (Arms Control Association, 2025). In retaliation on May 7th, 2025, India launched a series of coordinated missile and air strikes in Pakistan against what they described as terrorist infrastructure in Pakistan and Pakistan administrated Kashmir and named it “Operation Sindoor” (Fig. 27) (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2025; NDTV, 2025, Aljazeera, 2025).



Figure 27: “Operation Sindoor” targeted site in Pakistan, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/5/7/operation-sindoor-whats-the-significance-of-indias-pakistan-targets>

Indian officials stated that 24 missiles were fired in a 25-minute window against nine alleged militant camps, and that the operation was designed to “deter” and “pre-empt” further cross-border attacks (NDTV, 2025). Pakistan rejected the allegations, condemned the strikes as an “act of war,” and responded with its own drone, missile, and artillery attacks targeting Indian military facilities and settlements near the Line of Control and, reportedly, deeper into Indian territory (Al Jazeera, 2025; Arms Control Association, 2025; The Guardian, 2025, 2025).

The four-day crisis from 7 to 10 May 2025 was the most serious military confrontation between the two nuclear-armed neighbors since the Kargil conflict and the 2019 Balakot episode. Early morning on May 10, Pakistan in response to India's retaliation launched its own operation titled "*Bunyan Marsoos*" and claimed it downed five Indian jets including three Rafales (Al Jazeera, 2025) (Fig. 28). Tens of thousands of civilians on both sides of the Line of Control were displaced or sought shelter as heavy cross-border fire, drone incursions, and missile strikes continued (Al Jazeera, 2025; Los Angeles Times, 2025). Eventually, under intense international pressure, India and Pakistan agreed to a ceasefire that halted major military actions as of the evening of 10 May 2025 (Arms Control Association, 2025; NDTV, 2025).



Figure 28: *Bunyan Marsoos*, <https://islamabadpost.com.pk/pakistan-india-war-2025-decisive-victory-with-op-bunyan-um-marsus/>

From the perspective of this article, Operation *Sindoor* is significant not only as a military event but also as an example of how terror incidents and border clashes are quickly woven into nationalistic and religious narratives. Indian and Pakistani media, along with social-media ecosystems, produced competing stories of victimhood, heroism, and divine sanction, often casting the other side in religiously inflected terms (Al Jazeera, 2025; India Today, 2025). These narratives reinforced older tropes of Hindu–Muslim civilizational conflict, obscuring the complex historical reality of South Asia as a region with deep traditions of religious coexistence and syncretism.

3. DISCUSSION

3.1 *South Asia's Religious Past: Pluralism, Caste, and Reform*

South Asia is a region that has been home to several religions since ancient times a fact that is pretty evident when one traces the history of this region (Matthews, 1999; Philpott & Shah, 2019) (Fig. 29).

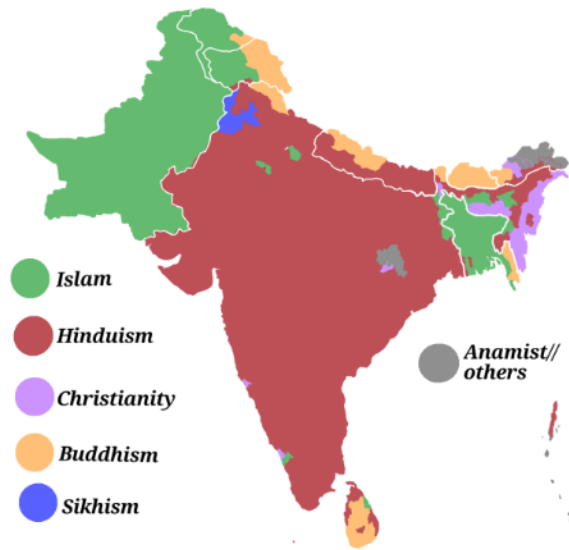


Figure 29: Map of South Asia based on Religions.

The earliest writing from this land was found from the Indus Valley civilization and roughly dates to 6500 BCE; though, it remains undeciphered. I have argued elsewhere based on archeological data that the religion of the Indus Valley civilization appears to be grounded on concept of equality and justice, which functioned as the most important binding force that allowed its successful social continuity for years, as is evident from the material culture, its urban architecture, water management, artifacts, and objects of daily use, at a time when its contemporary civilizations were busy fighting over territorial gains. The Indus Valley Civilization is the only civilization that does not show any evidence of production of weaponry at any of the excavated sites unlike its contemporaries considering that it was geographically double in size (Umer, 2018). There is also an absence of monumental royal burials akin to Egyptian pyramids, which further supports the view that hierarchy may have been less dramatically expressed in funerary practice (Fig. 30 & 31) (Umer, 2018).



Figure 30: No elaborate burials at Indus Valley Civilization.
<https://www.harappa.com/blog/burials-harappa>

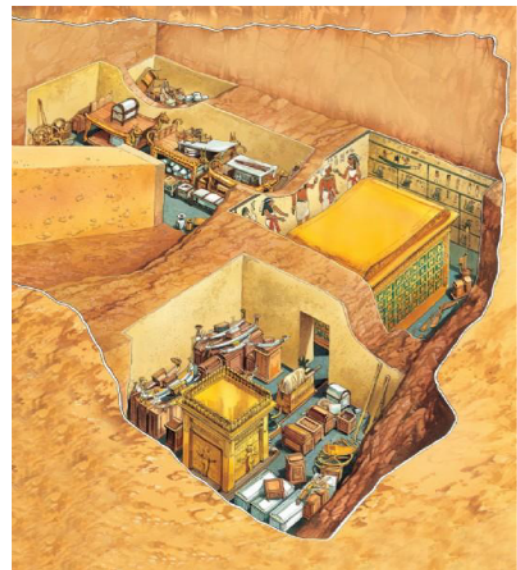


Figure 31: Inside of Tutankhamun's Tomb.
<https://www.q-files.com/history/ancient-egypt/tutankhamuns-tomb>

Interestingly, the modest figurines from the Indus Valley look nothing like the massive temple deities of nearby civilizations (Fig. 32). This distinction has led scholars to challenge the old assumption that the Indus religion was just another version of Egyptian or Mesopotamian polytheism (Fig. 33 & 34). Instead, their spiritual world likely revolved around abstract concepts rather than personified gods (Umer, 2018). Final answers will have to wait until we crack the code of the Indus script, but for now, the clues point to a religion built on shared social norms rather than the worship of divine rulers, as archeological evidence negates the existence of a polytheistic Indus society.



Figure 32: *Figurines found Indus Valley.*
<https://www.harappa.com/slideshows/embodiment-indus-life>



Figure 33: *The Great Temple, built by Pharaoh Ramses II, features floor-to-ceiling hieroglyphics (Credit: EmmePi Travel/Alamy)*



Figure 34: *Twelve votive figures, from the Square Temple at Eshnunna (modern Tell Asmar, Iraq), c. 2900–2350 B.C.E. (Early Dynastic period).* <https://roguearthistorian.substack.com/p/ziggurats-as-power-towers-architecture>

3.2 Vedic Texts, Monotheistic Strands, and the Aryan Debate

Rigveda, the earliest Vedic scripture dating back only to 1500 - 1200 BCE of this region, also talks about a personal God (Rigveda, trans. Jamison & Brereton, 2014), while the Muslim geographer Abu Rehn Alberuni (1910) in the 11th AC notes strands of monotheism in the Bhagavad-Gita. Additionally, Kosambi (2002) argues that the Vedic scriptures are not written in pure Aryan and sees earlier non-Aryan grammatical structures and forms in both syntax and vocabulary in them, which strength an argument that the religious history of Indus region might be much older.

Jim Wills (2007) has based a theory on more recent archaeological excavation reports from northwest India (present day Pakistan) that Hinduism just might prove to be much older than scholars initially thought and might have arisen completely independent of an Aryan cultural influence. According to Warren Matthews (1999) that would be before anyone kept contemporary written records and thus must have been transmitted only orally from one generation to the next. In short, Hinduism would predate the Aryans conquests by centuries and could have a historical identity with the Indus Valley civilization: the Aryans did not invent early Hinduism, they simply conquered the lands where it was practiced (Matthews, 1999; Wills 2007).

3.3 Caste, Buddhism, Jainism, and the Upanishads

With the arrival of Alexander, the Great in 326 BCE and the uprise of the Mauryan dynasty in 322 BCE, the historical record becomes richer, documenting the presence of several religions practiced in the region (Durrant, 1954; Kosambi, 2002). As late as Ashok's reign (250 BCE) there was no established form for a follower of Hinduism: they were referred as either Sramanas or Brahmans. Moreover, the creation of Hinduism as a single religion took place even after the beginning of Buddhism and Jainism, in the 6th century BCE. Nevertheless, the effects of the rigid caste division were pretty pronounced before the 6th century BCE and this rigidity severely affected the masses, it immensely increased their sufferings and as a result also damaged the religious ideology of the Indus people – ancestors of this land.

Hence, it was in response to this inflexibility of the Hindu caste system and its many disadvantages that indigenous religions like Buddhism and Jainism sprang and evolved from within the land to counter its effects and rescue the people from its consequences and several adverse effects, as it was against the ideology of the masses living in this land since olden days i.e., during Indus civilization.

Another stimulating detail is that the founder of both these religions (Buddha and Mahavira) belonged to a higher Hindu caste, both were Hindu princes in line to claim kingship, nevertheless they both preached religions that believed in equality among all humans, hence relieving them of sufferings caused by fellow beings, which was in direct contradiction to the Hindu caste system. In response to these religions and their growing popularity, Hinduism also came up with a book of reforms around 500 BCE known as Upanishads not only to sustain its credibility but also to ensure that Hindu following did not drop (Durrant, 1954; Matthews, 1999).

3.4 Monarchs, Tolerance, and the Politics of Religion

Historical sources record significant variation in how South Asian rulers approached religious diversity. During and after Ashok's regime the recorded documents shed light on several regime changes and about the preferred religion of the Monarchs that eventually played a key role in either the suppression or propagation of some religions. The spread of Buddhism during Ashok's regime, while the suppression of Buddhism by Shunga dynasty are examples that may have laid the foundation of religious intolerance and unrest in the region (Durrant, 1954; Kosambi, 2002).

Similarly, while tracing the history of this region, we come across Monarchs who despite their own religious preference were known to have practiced religious tolerance towards other religions practiced in the region by understanding the desires and religious preferences of their subjects. Among such Monarchs Ashok – Mauryan Dynasty, Kanishka – Kushan Dynasty, Harsha – Post Gupta Period and Akbar –

Mughal Dynasty are known to have won the hearts of the masses (Ahmed, 2018; Kinra, 2020; Umar, 2024); thus, their ruling time was a time of prosperity and a time when their subjects were allowed to follow the religion of their choice. Ashoka, after his conversion to Buddhism, issued edicts promoting respect for all sects and discouraging religious hatred (Durant, 1954). Kanishka is associated with the spread of Mahayana Buddhism across Central and East Asia, while Harsha and Akbar are remembered for supporting multiple religious communities and engaging in inter-religious dialogue (Durant, 1954; Matthews, 1999).

In the book *Our Oriental Heritage* Durant (1954), captures the unique relationship that the people of this land have had with religion.

“In no other country is religion so powerful, or so important, as in India. If the Hindus have permitted alien governments to be set over them again and again it is partly because they did not care much who ruled or exploited them-natives or foreigners; the crucial matter was religion, not politics; the soul, not the body; endless later lives rather than this passing one. When Ashok became a saint, and Akbar almost adopted Hinduism, the power of religion was revealed over even the strongest men. In our century it is a saint, rather than a statesman, who for the first time in history has unified all India.”

This observation underlines both the resilience of religious sentiment and its potential vulnerability to political manipulation.

3.5 Colonial “Divide and Rule” and the Partition of 1947

The history of this land proclaims that religion has been used as a stimulant by Monarchs to divide people for their own vaster interests (Baber, 2004; Khan, 2024; Shah, 2023), the current Modi regime asserts this stance as has been discussed. However, the British regime should also not be forgotten whose ruling motto was “Divide and Rule” and the repercussions of the seeds of religious division that they sowed during their time in India was witnessed not only during the partition in 1947 when more than 1 to 2 million people lost their lives due to religious intolerance and uprisings either due to intentional or ill planning of the British regime, while 15 million relocated (Bhat, 2020) (Fig. 35 & 36). Like this, the partition of 1947 is a thorn that was cleverly administered to split the masses and unfortunately altered the legacy of this land which had always been home to pluralist religions (Bhat, 2020; Shah, 2023).

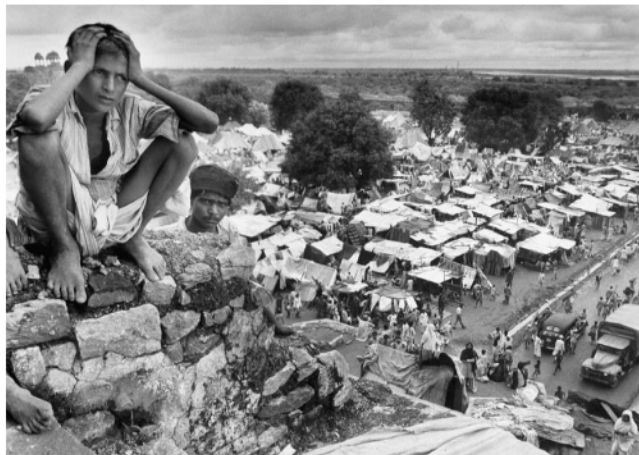


Figure 35: Partition displaced fifteen million people and killed more than a million. Photograph by Margaret Bourke-White / LIFE Picture Collection / Getty.
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/06/29/the-great-divide-books-dalrymple>



Figure 36: Muslim refugees attempting to flee India sit on the roof of an overcrowded train near Delhi in September 1947. Photograph: AP.
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/aug/02/wounds-have-never-healed-living-through-terror-partition-india-pakistan-1947>

Documents and testimonies from the period suggest that British policy makers were fully aware that drawing boundaries along religious lines would likely produce violence, yet they proceeded, prioritizing imperial exit over local stability (Khan, 2007). The religious card, once institutionalized, has remained a powerful tool in the political repertoires of many post-colonial elites. The contemporary plight of Kashmiris, Sikhs, Christians, Shudras, Rohingya, and other minorities in South Asia can be seen, in part, as a continuation of patterns established during late colonial rule and intensified by subsequent national projects (Al Jazeera, 2019; Beech, 2013; Khan, 2007; Time Magazine, 2013).

4. FINDINGS

Across these historical and contemporary cases, several patterns emerge. First, South Asia's religious landscape has long been plural, with significant periods in which rulers either tolerated or actively supported multiple faiths. In such periods, religious freedom often coincided with relative political stability and cultural flourishing, as under Ashoka, Kanishka, Harsha, and Akbar (Durant, 1954; Matthews, 1999).

Second, episodes of intense religious intolerance typically correlate with moments when religion is instrumentalized for political ends whether to shore up dynastic power, as in some ancient and medieval contexts, to facilitate colonial control, as under British rule, or to consolidate majoritarian electoral coalitions in the present (Beech, 2013; India Today, 2019; Khan, 2007).

Third, modern mass media and digital platforms significantly accelerate these dynamics. The framing of the Pulwama attack and the Balakot strikes, as well as the coverage of Operation *Sindoor/Bunyan Marsoos* in 2025, reveal how quickly complex security incidents can be refracted through religious and nationalist lenses, leaving little room for nuance or dissent (Al Jazeera, 2019, 2025; Arms Control Association, 2025; Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2025; NDTV, 2025).

Finally, these patterns have economic as well as moral consequences. Before colonial rule, the Indian subcontinent accounted for roughly 23.9% of the world's known wealth, a share roughly comparable to that of the contemporary United States (Investopedia, 2021; World Bank, 2021) (Fig. 37). Today, persistent mistrust, militarization, and closed borders have contributed to under-development and missed opportunities for regional trade and cooperation.



Figure 37: Glimpses of devastation during World War I and II.

5. CONCLUSION

The hearts of South Asians can only be captured when they are freely allowed to follow the religion of their choice by the ruling regime who exercise religious tolerance (Durant, 1954; Matthews, 1999). Yet, instead of practicing religious tolerance today to sustain peace, the ruling regimes in several countries of the region are using religion to create rifts among the masses, leading to unrest and bloodshed (Al Jazeera, 2019, 2025; Beech, 2013; India Today, 2019; Time Magazine, 2013). So, the question is whose agenda are these regimes following because the duty of any regime is to ensure the safety of all its subjects regardless of the religion they follow, as only a secure environment can yield growth and prosperity.

The 2019 Pulwama, Balakot crisis and the 2025 Operation *Sindoor/Bunyan Marsoos* confrontation demonstrate how easily isolated attacks can spiral into major military escalations when combined with hyper-nationalist media narratives and unresolved historical grievances (Arms Control Association, 2025; Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2025). These dynamics divert attention and resources away from pressing socio-economic needs and lock the region into patterns of insecurity.

Europe's devastating 20th century experience; the two world wars followed a gradual project of regional integration and peace offers a cautionary parallel. Even after fighting two world wars, today the borders of most European countries are open for trade and exchange and as a result prosperity has returned to the region after destruction of alarming magnitude (Kershaw, 2012).

South Asian borders are sealed for trade and travelling due to which the masses of the region are suffering at the hands of poverty even though this region before the British regime contained 23.9 per cent of the known world's wealth only due to its abundant resources and is equivalent to the USA share in global economy 23.93% today.

For a prosperous and peaceful South Asia, it is important to understand the history of religious tolerance and intolerance considering regimes and monarchs and the positive or negative impact of their rule on South Asian pluralist society to not only avoid mistakes of the past but to live a better present leading to a prosperous tomorrow. As philosopher George Santayana (1905/1954) once said, "***Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.***" Recognizing the recurring instrumentalization of religion from ancient courts to colonial administrators to contemporary regimes and media outlets can help South Asians resist manipulation and work towards a more just and pluralist future.

Finally, this article calls for a renewed ethical and political commitment: to be tolerant and respectful towards other religions, to safeguard minorities, and to prioritize human security over nationalist spectacle. Only then can South Asia hope to transform its legacy of religious diversity from a source of conflict into a foundation for shared prosperity.

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Conflict of Interest

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