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Unlikely Friends: A Brief Look at Hindu-Muslim Relations

Introduction

The world seems like a dark place with fears and strife constantly looming around us and in the news. So, news articles about two people getting along are comforting, especially if the parties involved are known for disliking each other. Recently, an article was published for the *Indian Express* that covers that topic, a Hindu artist who receives help and friendship from Muslims. An article like this may not seem like it is of great importance, however after understanding the history of relations between these two groups through a geographic perspective, the friendship is unique and transcends history and religion.

In this paper, I will give a brief overview of the article and make connections with course material. I will look at possible reasons for the high tensions between Muslim and Hindu individuals. By looking at scholarly articles and tying it back in with course concepts, I will show the reasons why the tensions are high between the groups, but on an individual level, it does not always remain that way.

Current Event Overview

In Bengal, there are many artisans creating figures and statues of Hindu idols. In Arnab Mitra's article for the *Indian Express* he talks about a Hindu artisan whose shop is next to a mosque. Many of the artisan's Muslim friends and neighbors often lend a helping hand to the

artisan and his employees. Even when it is hard for them to come by food, their Muslim friends will serve them food (Mitra 2017). With the rise of tensions between Hindus and Muslims, the friendship between these two groups goes beyond the scope of religion and adds to the importance of their friendship.

Geographic Aspects and Link to Course Materials

When looking at this article, it is important to understand the history and relations between Muslims and Hindus. Between the two groups, tensions are high, and there have often been riots and violent opposition. Reasons the tensions are high are attributed to different things like the existence of enclaves and Hindutva. However, there are reasons for their friendships, which might be because they are poor or in a poor area, or even in slums.

There are a few possible reasons why tensions are high between Hindus and Muslims. One reason could be attributed to border disputes, with the enclaves between India and Bangladesh. Another possible reason is the ideology, Hindutva. A third possible reason to look at is the issue of urbanization.

Scholarly Journal Articles' Overview and Link to Current Events

In Raphael Susewind's paper, *Muslims in Indian cities: Degrees of segregation and the elusive ghetto*, the author looks at the segregation of Muslims in India. Susewind uses the names of voters in a recent election and then makes assumptions of religion based on the voters last name (Susewind 2017, 1291). From this information, their findings show that Muslim voters generally live in the same area of cities. Some cities have larger groupings, while others are more dispersed. However, they do not believe that Muslims living in the same area is the status quo

and is more of a trend (Susewind 2017, 1305). This trend is possibly attributed to the state's negligence toward the Muslim population.

It is also important to note that the capital of West Bengal is a major hub for the IT industry, this leads to a rise of slums, and most people living in the slums are very poor. With the capital becoming an IT hub, more people move there for employment, if the area cannot fully support everyone there, that leads to a rise in slums. The individuals who could afford to live around the IT hub will, however, those who cannot must go to the slums.

In Hosna Shewly's paper, *Life in de facto statelessness in enclaves in India and Bangladesh*, the author talks about their experiences while living in enclaves for field research as well as the experiences of others who lived in enclaves first hand. The individuals living in enclaves were technically citizens with rights, however they were not able to access their rights (Shewly 2017, 112). The laws in the enclaves used to bring about violence, which caused "fear, uncertainty, vulnerability and precariousness" in the enclaves before the change (Shewly 2017, 114). The people living in the enclaves were not allowed to go to the host country to survive, and going across the border was illegal and punishable. Guards entered houses to check for smuggled goods and even beat the occupants unnecessarily. The enclaves became a way to confine the people living in there, to stay in there.

One possible reason the tensions are high between the two groups is attributed to the existence of enclaves. Until a few years ago, there were enclaves of Indians in Bangladesh, and enclaves of Bangladeshis in India. The governments agreed that each country would retain the land in their respective country. One Indian state that had many Bangladesh enclaves is West Bengal. In India, the majority religion is Hinduism, whereas in Bangladesh it is Islam. So, after the enclaves were absorbed into each country, it is not surprising to have many Muslims in West

Bengal. These enclaves are attributed to some tensions between the two groups. The people in the enclaves in India and Bangladesh had no access to government or any rights, and were often treated as enemies within their own country. Although the enclaves were absorbed into the host country, the years of harassment and discrimination remain in the minds of the residents. Because the respective citizens in each area were treated poorly, it makes sense that they would have a grudge. The lasting grudge can add to why there are tensions between them.

In Ranjan Bandyopadhyay's paper, *Who owns the past? The politics of religious heritage in contemporary India*, the author discusses the tensions between Muslims and Hindus. The demolition of the Babri Masjid is considered one of the major faults for recent Hindu-Muslim riots. The destruction of this mosque is not just about who owns the site, but it is about the political struggles about the conflicting claims of the land and cultural identity (Bandyopadhyay 2016, 234). The author also looks at Hindutva as a source of tension between Muslims and Hindus. Christians and Muslims are looked upon as invaders, and for Muslims to be part of the Indian nation they must acknowledge key Hindu figures as civilization heroes, accept that Muslim rulers destroyed the pillars of Hindu civilization, and assimilate (Bandyopadhyay 2016, 237).

Another driving force for the tensions between Muslims and Hindus is Hindutva. Hindutva is an ideology to have a culturally homogenized state, in this case, meaning everyone in India is Hindu. It is an ideology that someone belongs to the soil and where their religious roots lie. So, Hindutva makes Muslims viewed as outsiders since their motherland and prayer land are different. When Hindutva is brought to its extreme, it causes tensions between Hindus and every minority in India to rise. Muslims, an already alienated group is further estranged from India; it is not surprising that tensions are high between the two groups because of this ideology.

In Philippa Williams' paper, *Reproducing Everyday Peace in North India: Process, Politics, and Power*, the author looks at the friendship between some Hindu and Muslim individuals. When talking to a friend, Williams learned that relations between Hindus and Muslims are well in the silk sari industry (Williams 2012, 232). Williams uses "Hindu-Muslim brotherhood" to describe the relationship between the two groups. This "brotherhood" describes the mutual trust and respect that exists between Hindus and Muslims. However, with many family relationships, this brotherhood also fosters a sense of competition between the two parties and a having one better than the other (Williams 2012, 237). When looking at less financially secure Muslims, they are more financially vulnerable and experience discrimination. While there are certainly cases of (low-caste) Hindus suffering issues of being swindled and discriminated against, Muslims perceive the discrimination through their religious identity, this heightened their perception of their vulnerability (Williams 2012, 238).

This brotherhood and friendship shows that even though there are high tensions between the groups, a lot of the tension is political. This shows that on an individual level the people still care for each other for one reason or another. Perhaps because they are neighbors, maybe because the relationship is mutually beneficial.

Conclusion

Hindu and Muslims have strains in their relationship for many reasons. It may have started when the Mughals invaded India, however it remains to this day because of enclaves and Hindutva. However, the tensions between the two groups are at political levels and individual levels. On the political level, the most strife can be seen here as the India government promotes Hindutva and some political parties encourage a separation between the two religions and peoples. However, when looking at individuals and their relations, while tensions can be seen,

peace can be seen. From the day to day lives of artisans or silk sari makers, peace and understanding can be seen. Although this small day to day peace is not seen on the large scale, it is hopefully, a small step toward understanding and peace between Hindus and Muslims.

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