

When Faith Burns: The Pahalgam Incident and the Crisis of Secular India

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Abstract:

This paper examines the increasing frequency and severity of Hindu-Muslim conflicts in contemporary India through the lens of the April 2025 Pahalgam incident. Using critical socio-political frameworks, the study evaluates the historical roots of communal tensions, the role of political rhetoric, and the complicity or failure of state mechanisms in managing or preventing violence. Supplementing the Kashmir case, this paper also briefly examines recent communal disturbances in Murshidabad and Malda, two sensitive districts in West Bengal, to provide a comparative regional insight into the persistence of religious discord in a secular democracy. This analysis considers the social, cultural, and political undercurrents that feed into religious intolerance. By examining recent incidents across various Indian states, it explores how localized disputes escalate into national debates on identity, belonging, and citizenship. The study not only investigates the causative factors behind individual episodes of violence but also explores the structural issues that allow such tensions to persist and flare up. Through a comparative analysis of incidents across regions, it identifies common patterns, such as delayed state intervention, politically motivated narratives, and the role of media in shaping public perception. Ultimately, the paper aims to provide actionable insights into preventing future communal conflicts through institutional reform, inclusive governance, and grassroots reconciliation. It also examines how collective memory, political narratives, and community dynamics influence communal behavior. The intersections of caste, class, and religion are further scrutinized to unpack the layered nature of these conflicts.

Key Words: Communalism, Hindu-Muslim conflict, Pahalgam riots, Murshidabad, Malda, secularism, Kashmir, violence, politics, state response

Introduction:

India's secular fabric has long been strained by episodes of communal violence, most frequently between its two largest religious communities: Hindus and Muslims. Despite constitutional guarantees of religious freedom, the last few decades have witnessed a surge in localized riots, politically-motivated polarization, and a steady erosion of trust between communities. The Pahalgam riot of April 2025, marked by an outburst of targeted violence and symbolic aggression, is a chilling reminder of this growing fragility. This paper explores the complex causality behind such incidents and juxtaposes them with similar events from Murshidabad and Malda—regions that have historically experienced communal volatility.

The significance of these developments lies in their implications for democracy and the rule of law. With each incident, the gap widens between secular ideals enshrined in the Constitution and the harsh realities of communal polarization visible on the ground. This introduction further underscores the need to explore how local incidents can reflect and influence national-level communal sentiments, shaping public opinion and electoral outcomes.

Pahalgam, a scenic town in South Kashmir, is known for its shared spaces among Hindus and Muslims, especially during the Amarnath Yatra. However, this delicate balance was shattered on April 22, 2025. A Hindu religious procession coinciding with a Muslim prayer gathering in a disputed neighborhood reportedly ignited tensions. Slogans deemed provocative by some attendees quickly led to clashes.

Timeline:

- Morning: Religious processions began peacefully, but tension was brewing due to overlapping routes.
- Noon: Minor scuffles broke out near the main market; stone-pelting was reported.
- Afternoon: Violence escalated with arson attacks, destruction of shops, and property damage.
- Evening: Police imposed curfew; 4 deaths and over 50 injuries were reported by nightfall.

Government Response:

The J&K administration-imposed Section 144, internet shutdowns, and sent Rapid Action Forces (RAF). However, criticism mounted due to the delayed deployment of forces and the ineffectiveness in preventing escalation. In addition to property loss, the psychological trauma experienced by local residents, especially children and elderly people, has been immense. Relief camps were hastily arranged, and several NGOs expressed concern about the lack of coordination in aid distribution. Notably, schools were closed, daily life came to a standstill, and local businesses suffered irreversible

economic losses, plunging many families into crisis.

India's communal tensions date back to the colonial era when the British policy of 'divide and rule' institutionalized religious divisions. Post-Partition trauma, coupled with sporadic riots (e.g., 1984 Delhi, 1992 Babri demolition, 2002 Gujarat, 2020 Delhi violence), have deepened communal faultiness. These incidents often arise from a mix of religious processions intersecting with minority neighborhoods, disputes over religious structures, provocative political speeches, and fake news. These communal divides have not only been exploited by politicians but have also been normalized in mainstream discourse. Cinema, literature, and media narratives often perpetuate stereotypes, contributing to a collective historical amnesia about co-existence. The legacy of Partition and subsequent border politics continue to shape attitudes, often fueling suspicions and resentment across generations.

The instrumentalization of religion for electoral gains is a recurring pattern. Politicians often use coded language or direct incitement to divide voter bases. Social media platforms—especially WhatsApp groups—serve as vehicles for misinformation and fear-mongering. In the Pahalgam case, fake news of 'planned attacks' circulated hours before the actual violence, inflaming emotions. The political climate today rewards polarizing statements, with little to no consequences for those inciting hatred. This enables a dangerous culture of impunity, where political mileage is often gained at the cost of social unity. Sensationalist headlines, communal framing of news, and selective reporting all contribute to the deepening divide. Biased coverage not only misinforms the public but also validates fringe ideologies.

Murshidabad (March 2025): A Hindu procession celebrating Ram Navami in Lalbagh reportedly passed through a Muslim-majority area with aggressive sloganeering. Tensions escalated into a riot, with 3 reported deaths, mosque vandalism, and retaliatory arson of temples.

Malda (April 2025): Following the alleged molestation of a schoolgirl by a member of a different community, mobs assembled and launched attacks on shops and houses belonging to the accused's community. Police opened fire to disperse the crowd, injuring 12 and killing one minor.

These cases, like Pahalgam, show similar patterns: Police delay or inefficiency, politicians stoking tension, post-riot blame games, and lack of long-term reconciliation efforts. In both Murshidabad and Malda, post-riot surveys indicate a drastic drop in inter-community collaboration, with residents avoiding interfaith commerce and social events, fearing backlash or ostracization. Residents of these districts report rising fear and alienation, with many expressing concerns about the lack of political and administrative will to ensure long-term peace.

The state machinery, tasked with preserving order and upholding secularism, often fails to respond swiftly or acts with bias. Reports from Kashmir and Bengal suggest that the police often wait for political orders before taking action. In some instances, riot perpetrators are not arrested, while victims are framed under preventive laws. Additionally, bureaucratic red-tape often delays compensation and justice for victims, fostering resentment and pushing affected individuals toward extremism or political disengagement.

The role of the government in such communal crises remains highly contentious. Ideally, the government should act as a neutral and protective force that safeguards citizens irrespective of religious affiliations. However, in many incidents, including the Pahalgam riots, questions have been raised about delayed response, partisan police behavior, and the lack of coordinated relief. Government silence or inaction in the face of rising communal rhetoric further erodes public trust. Efforts to establish fact-finding committees and compensation packages are often symbolic and insufficient. True governmental accountability lies in preventing such incidents through proactive dialogue, inter-religious programs, and strict enforcement against hate crimes. Judicial delays and weak enforcement of laws further demoralize victims and embolden perpetrators, creating a vicious cycle of violence and impunity.

The aftershocks of such events last for months: segregation of neighborhoods, boycotts of businesses, psychological trauma among women and children, and stigmatization of entire communities. Educational institutions, workplaces, and marketplaces see deepening mistrust and avoidance. Long-term damage includes school dropouts, ghettoization of communities, and increased recruitment by radical groups who exploit the narrative of victimhood to gain followers. Social media has also become a battlefield of hate, where communities are targeted with digital propaganda and hate campaigns that inflame offline tensions. To address the growing divide:

1. Strict action against hate speech.
2. Monitoring social media to prevent rumor-mongering.
3. Educational reforms promoting communal harmony.
4. Fast-track courts to try communal violence cases.
5. Interfaith dialogue initiatives at grassroots levels.

Beyond government initiatives, civil society must play a proactive role in healing fractured communities. Artists, educators, and religious leaders should come together to build alternative narratives of peace and shared heritage. Community policing, educational outreach, and interfaith youth programs should be developed in collaboration with NGOs, schools, and cultural institutions to rebuild social cohesion.

Conclusion:

The Pahalgam incident is not isolated—it is emblematic of a broader, dangerous trend in contemporary India. If such incidents are allowed to continue unchecked, they threaten the foundational ideals of secularism, tolerance, and unity in diversity. A nation as pluralistic as India must ensure that every citizen, regardless of faith, feels safe, heard, and protected. The state must rise above political interests to genuinely serve as a neutral guardian of justice and peace. The urgent need for inclusive governance, transparent justice, and empathetic leadership cannot be overstated. India must re-commit to its pluralistic roots by embracing policy reforms and community engagement at every level. The long-term healing process must involve not just political will, but also cultural, educational, and religious efforts.

Legislative changes should be implemented to criminalize hate speech and communal incitement with stricter penalties. Furthermore, public educational curricula should include conflict resolution modules and interfaith ethics. Journalistic standards must also be raised to combat sensationalism and bias in communal reporting. Only by engaging at multiple levels of society—legal, cultural, educational, and spiritual—can India restore communal harmony. The journey toward peace is difficult, but ignoring the underlying issues will only allow them to grow more dangerous and entrenched.

There is a growing perception that the government's relaxed attitude toward rising communal tensions contributes directly to such outbreaks of violence. In the case of Pahalgam, many believe that early warning signs, including social media threats and local disputes, were ignored or downplayed by authorities. When state machinery appears indifferent or selective in its response, it sends a message of tacit approval to extremist elements. A more vigilant and preventive approach by the government could potentially curb these violent eruptions before they escalate beyond control. Hence, the government's passive stance, whether deliberate or due to institutional inefficiency, plays a critical role in the deterioration of communal harmony.

Moving forward, addressing communal conflict in India requires a collective awakening. Society must demand accountability from its leaders, and individuals must reject the rhetoric of hate. Educational institutions, media houses, religious leaders, and social influencers must play a role in dismantling narratives of division. Only through sustained, inclusive efforts can India hope to preserve its core ideals of secularism and unity in diversity. The Pahalgam incident, like many before it, is not just a story of violence—it is a call to action for every citizen committed to peace and justice. Political parties in India have, time and again, been accused of exacerbating Hindu-Muslim tensions for electoral gain. By exploiting religious identities and historical grievances, these parties create and sustain divisions that serve their vote-bank politics.

Dog-whistle campaigns, selective outrage, and patronage networks often contribute to communal segregation. In the aftermath of the Pahalgam incident, political leaders were seen trading accusations rather than calling for peace, revealing a deeper malaise within the political discourse. This politicization of identity not only threatens communal harmony but also weakens democratic institutions and undermines the rule of law.

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