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Sectarianism in Indian Islam: Historical Trajectories, Global Currents and State Politics

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Abstract

Since the 1979 revolution in Iran, Islamic sectarianism acquired a global context due to Iran-Saudi Arabia regional rivalry, impacting Muslims worldwide. Despite India having the second-largest Muslim population and second-largest Shia population after Iran, sectarian dynamics among Indian Muslims remain an understudied discipline. There is a widespread notion that sectarianism is absent among India's Muslims. This paper aims to expand discourses of sectarianism beyond West Asia by situating it within the historical trajectories and realities of Islam in India. This paper asserts that the question of sectarianism cannot be simply reduced to Saudi-Iranian rivalry, but must instead be examined through its own epistemic and empirical inquiry. The historical record shows that intra-Muslim tensions, particularly Shia-Sunni, were apparent in North India, particularly with Lucknow being the site of a significant contestation. In the contemporary moment, global currents such as Wahhabi reformism and Shia political mobilization have increased sectarian consciousness in India as well. Moreover, this paper highlights how the Indian state, particularly with the upsurge of Hindu majoritarian politics, has selectively engaged with sectarian identities, creating paradoxical alignment between Shia elites and right-wing Hindu forces.

Keywords: Islam, Sectarianism, Indian Muslim, Shias, Sunnis

1.Introduction

In the last few decades, sectarianism has emerged as an important field of multidisciplinary inquiry, being explored both as an epistemological question and as an ontological phenomenon. The inquiry has often extended beyond

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disciplinary boundaries and examined through ethnic, political, social and religious lenses. However, the discourse still mirrors a significant gap as much of the scholarship on sectarianism seeks a standardized definition. The global discourses on sectarianism have been dominated by Saudi -Iran rivalry since the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, significantly shaping debates of its implications for nearly two billion Muslims globally, irrespective of whether they live in Muslim-majority contexts. This paper, however, positions itself within the context of Indian Islam.

The central argument advanced here is that despite India having both the world's second-largest Muslim population and the second-largest Shia population after Iran, the discourse on sectarianism among Indian Muslims remains underdeveloped. This paper therefore aims to expand the debate beyond the West Asia. There are compelling scholarly reasons to pursue such an inquiry. First, in hegemonic understandings of sectarianism, Indian Islam rarely figures and is often subsumed under the rubric of minority status in India. Second, there persists a notion that sectarianism is absent among Indian Muslims. This paper challenges both assumptions,

analysing sectarianism not merely as an outcome of the Saudi–Iran rivalry but as an independent epistemic inquiry viewed through both historical and contemporary lenses.

Sectarianism as an epistemological question has traditionally been studied through the frameworks of primordialism and instrumentalism. However, the binary dominations of these paradigms have been challenged in recent decades with the growing use of constructivism. The explanatory value of these three approaches requires further examination to highlight how each defines and interprets sectarianism, which will be discussed later in the paper. At the same time, four foundational questions continue to animate general discussions on sectarianism: What precisely is sectarianism? How does Islamic history explain its trajectory? Should it be understood as a religious question or a political one with roots in early Islamic history? And finally, how has the Saudi–Iran dynamics post-1979 Iran revolution shaped its geopolitical impact on Muslims globally?

Historical trajectories and diverse sources provide valuable insight into the evolution of sectarianism in Islam. This paper argues that sectarianism is less about theology

or doctrinal disputes than about struggles for political power, particularly the contest over who inherits the authority of the Prophet Muhammad. It is this dynamic which in recent decades took a sharper geopolitical form after the 1979 Iranian Revolution, with the Saudi–Iran competition casting a long shadow over South Asia. Christopher Jaffrelot and Laurence Louër (2017) describe this as an 'Arabisation of South Asian Islam.'[1] Historically, South Asian Islam was shaped by a strong Sufi tradition, but since 1979 sectarianism has acquired a distinctly geopolitical presence in the region. Pakistan has witnessed its most violent manifestations, but the Indian context remains understudied. The common assumption that India does not face a sectarian problem requires critical interrogation.

This paper challenges that assumption at three levels. Firstly, there exists a strong resonance among Indian Muslims with the Saudi–Iran rivalry. Secondly, Indian Shias—who are a minority within a minority—have had complicated relations, historically and presently, with Sunnis, often relying on religiopolitical activism to maintain their socio-political interests by marking their sectarian identity. And thirdly, the role of the Indian state must be considered need attention,

particularly in light of the rise of Hindu majoritarianism under a far-right government of Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP).

According to Pew Research Center data, the global Muslim population is close to two billion, marked by diversity across cultural and ethnic lines. Its comprehensive 2009 survey covered nearly every country, estimating that Muslims constitute 23–24 per cent of the global population. Of these, approximately 60 per cent reside in Asia, while the Arab world and the MENA region account for only about 20 per cent.[2] Another significant finding is that over 300 million Muslims live as minorities in non-Muslim-majority countries. India alone accounts for the third-largest Muslim population worldwide. Similar demographic patterns are evident in China and Russia, where Muslim populations exceed those of several West Asian states. Sectarian distribution, according to the same study, reveals that Sunnis constitute a majority of Muslims at around 90 per cent, with Shias forming the minority concentrated in Iran, Pakistan, India, and Iraq. India, notably, is home to around 16 million Shias. Although India has one of the biggest Muslim populations in the world, sectarianism in Indian Islam is usually escapes the public and

scholarly attention. As such, this paper seeks to critically examine the dominant assumptions of the subject and to engage epistemologically and empirically.

2. Conceptual Framework: Understanding Sectarianism Beyond the Metanarratives

Sectarianism refers to a form of bigotry, discrimination, or hostility that emerges from attaching notions of superiority and inferiority to subdivisions within a group. These subdivisions may be religious denominations, ethnic identities, classes, regional affiliations within a state, or factions of a political movement. The ideological underpinnings of attitudes and behaviors labelled sectarian are extraordinarily varied. Edward Azar (1985) argues that identity-based conflicts are among the most fundamental drivers of violence.[3] This raises the question whether sectarianism is different from broader ethnic identity conflicts.

Horowitz (1985) suggests that all conflicts based on ascriptive group identities such as race, language, religion, tribe, or caste, can be ethnic. In the narrower construction of the term, this further divides into (a) religious, (b) racial, (c) linguistic, and (d) sectarian. The word 'ethnic' in the past might have been reserved for the second and third conflicts, but not extended to the first and the fourth."[4] As such, sectarianism is evident in societies which are divided along ethnic, religious, and cultural fault lines. Some examples include the Shia–Sunni divide among Muslims, confessional politics in Lebanon, and Protestant–Catholic relations in Northern Ireland. As Nasr (2000) emphasizes, sectarianism "entails ethnic posturing: mobilising group identity for political ends rather than along class, ideology, or party affiliation. This is also a politico-religious and ethnic discourse of power in a state wherein both are prevalent."[5] In the Indian case, this raises an analytical difference as to why is the term sectarianism typically applied to the Shia–Sunni divide, while communalism is reserved for Hindu–Muslim conflicts?

2.1 Primordialism versus Instrumentalism

Two major approaches frame the study of sectarianism: primordialism and instrumentalism. The primordialist perspective treats sectarian identities as natural phenomena, rooted in psychological and socially evolved bonds that constitute a shared identity.

Primordialism is particularly significant in explaining factors of mobilisation. In contrast, instrumentalism stresses political and socio-economic drivers, downplaying socially and culturally defined identities. Since sectarianism is also a discursive practice, both positions remain relevant in understanding its rise.

In broader debate, instrumentalism generally explains recent trajectories by foregrounding political dynamics over history, treating sectarianism as ideological rather than ethnic. Yet historical processes, which are rooted in beliefs, values, and identity, are equally important to contemporary debates, particularly in understanding what legitimises sectarian divisions.

In his 2007 *The Shi'a Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future*, Vali Reza Nasr argues that traditional concepts and categories used to explain West Asia dynamics, including modernity, democracy, fundamentalism and nationalism, no longer suffice in explaining the social and religiopolitical churn in the region. For him, "it is rather the old feud between Shi'as and Sunnis that shapes attitudes, define prejudices, draws political boundary lines, and even decides whether and to what extent those other trends have relevance."[6]

Pakistan provides an important case study where sectarianism has turned violent. As a Sunni-majoritarian state, its sectarian conflicts are influenced not only by political and economic forces but also by the geopolitical reverberations of the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the ensuing Saudi–Iran rivalry. Nasr (2000) notes that "differences between Shi'is and Sunnis have only recently become a notable divide in Pakistan's politics. Instrumentalist arguments, therefore, have greater utility in explaining sectarianism."[7]

Instrumentalists argue that politics and economics drive mobilisation, while identity is a social construct shaped by power struggles. Yet, as seen in Pakistan, identity often eclipses material factors. In the last decade, Shias have faced structural violence rooted not merely in economics or politics but in identity itself. Pakistani analyst Abdul Basit (2013) identifies four dimensions of Sunni majoritarianism: structural (conceptual and organisational), operational (rituals such as Muharram and the state's ambivalent role), ideological (the rise of Sunni militant groups and their networks), and regional (the broader process of radicalisation).[8]

Therefore, while instrumentalism takes into account aspects of

mobilization, it fails to explain fully the phenomenon of Pakistan's sectarianism which draws on historical and primordial processes. Here, sectarianism has been a constant phenomenon of socioreligious life for decades and is not monolithic. It is shaped by cultural, social, economic, and political differences that are often negotiated through elites, and affected by local contexts, and external actors, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, which have a history of sponsoring sectarian groups in the country. Therefore, while the primordialist–instrumentalist binary presents barriers to a more thorough analysis, it raises a much broader question of how sectarianism operates more generally.

Recent scholarship has attempted to move beyond this binary. Fanar Haddad's 2011 work, *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity*, is particularly significant. Though focused on Iraq, he identifies four key factors of "external influence, economic competition, competing myth-symbol complexes, and contested cultural ownership of the nation" shaping sectarian identity.[9] By integrating the role of social, cultural, economic, political, and theological factors as well as external actors, Hadad a greater depth to the sectarian thesis, which is something

that helps examine sectarianism at the micro-levels.

The Iranian revolution and its influence in the West Asia from Bahrain, Lebanon, Syria, saw further polarization on sectarian lines and did impact across the Muslim world. Lebanon provides a vital case for understanding the everyday functionality of sectarianism. As Makdisi (2000) argues, sectarian identity there became the only viable marker of political reform and the only authentic basis for political claims.[10] Similarly, after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the country became a template of the destructive impact of foreign interventions. With the United States leading the de-Baathification process of its state institutions, it empowered Shias over Sunnis, thereby entrenching country's sectarian divisions to a point of no-return. The rise of Al Qaeda in Iraq, and later ISIS, emerged from this polarisation, exacerbating Sunni victimhood narratives. These dynamics reflect Haddad's first two factors of external influence and economic competition while the commemorative rituals of Karbala embody the third factor of competing myth-symbol complexes.

The Indian case highlights this third factor most strongly. Volkan (1998) describes such dynamics as

"chosen traumas" and "chosen glories."[11] Among Shias, Karbala constitutes a chosen trauma embedded in collective memory, ritually commemorated through Muharram mourning practices. These rituals, as Judith Butler (1988) suggests, are collective performative actions, embodied expressions of identity.[12] Coupled with contested cultural ownership of the nation, these narratives forge a sense of ontological security. Anthony Smith's notion of ethnohistory (2009) thus becomes critical in situating sectarianism as both historical and contemporary.[13]

All these factors from myth-symbol complexes and 'chosen traumas and glories' shape contemporary identity by mixing history and faith and therefore the categories of sectarianism from a methodological consideration needs an expansion. As such, Valbjorn (2019) calls for going "beyond the beyond(s)," recommending a constructivist approach to expand the methodological tools available for analysing sectarianism.[14] This move recognises the layered interplay of history, faith, politics, and external influences in shaping sectarian identities.

2.2 Constructivists Response to Primordialism versus Instrumentalism

Constructivism offers a middle ground between primordialism and instrumentalism by foregrounding the social and political construction of identity. Unlike primordialists, constructivists do not treat identity as fixed and unlike instrumentalists, they take seriously the enduring power of religious and ethnic affiliations. This is very significant in understanding the growing Saudi-Iran rivalry and the impact of sectarian politics in Muslim majority countries.

Dixon (2018) argues that constructivist realist framework allows for realistic assessments of the multiple forces driving violence and an approach to negotiations that accepts difficult judgments and the 'messy morality' that often accompanies political accommodation.[15] Valbjorn (2019) critiques primordialists for overlooking identity markers beyond religion, such as race, ethnicity, and culture, and instrumentalists for being overly elitist, neglecting why sectarian
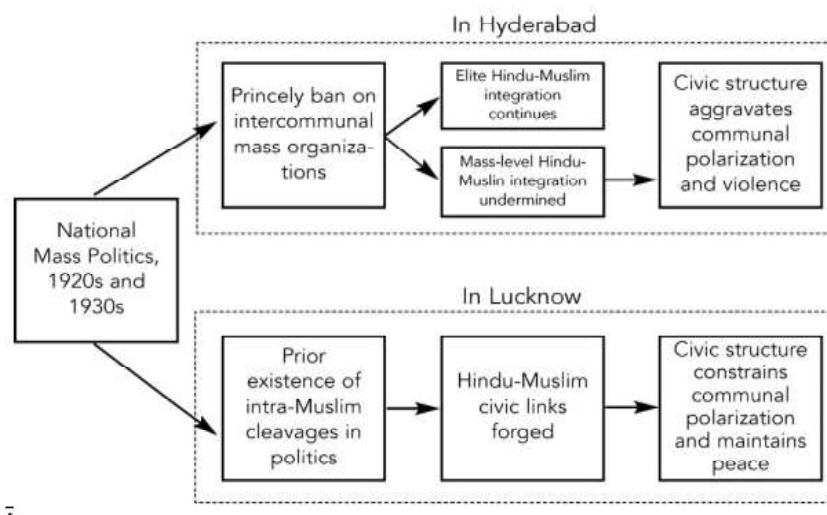
appeals resonate among populations at some times and not others. Instrumentalists, in turn, is too elitist, failing to take identities and ideational factors seriously and therefore leaves the question of why an instrumental "use of the 'sectarian card' sometimes resonates among a population if nobody really believes in these identities, and why at other times it does not."[16]

Constructivism, by contrast, emphasises the processes of categorisation and evolving narratives that sustain sectarian divisions. As identities are dynamic, sectarianism cannot be understood as a monolithic phenomenon, whether it is primordial, instrumentalist or constructivists approach. Haddad (2011) illustrates this dynamic by

distinguishing between assertive, passive, and banal sectarianism. While assertive and passive sectarian identities are not opposed to signalling sectarian symbols and allegiances, passive sectarianism is generally more aware of contextual dynamics and will only display a sectarian identity if necessary.[17] Thus, sectarian conflict in India highlights the importance of the interplay of international and domestic political factors.

3. Sectarianism among Indian Muslim: The Past and the Present

Sectarianism in India has been an evolving phenomenon. Although it has rarely entered mainstream discourse, violence along sectarian

Source: Adopted from Ashutosh Varshney (2002, p.174)

lines has intensified in scale and magnitude. Between the 1950s and 1990s, rural India accounted for less than four percent of communal violence incidents. As Varshney (2002) observes, Hindu–Muslim riots in India are largely an urban phenomenon, concentrated in particular localities. The most riot-prone cities during these decades—Ahmedabad, Bombay, Aligarh, Hyderabad, Meerut, Baroda, Calcutta, and Delhi—accounted for nearly 46 percent of deaths from Hindu–Muslim violence. Yet despite their notoriety, 82 percent of the urban population did not live in "riot-prone" areas.[18]

Although Hindu-Muslim communal tension has been a major source of inter-community tensions in the country and have a tendency to overshadow other issues, the sectarian contention within Muslims also merits scrutiny. It is instructive how the animosity between Shias and Sunnis has often manifested itself through riots and violence, especially in cities like Lucknow and Hyderabad, and yet there lacks an academic discourse over the same.

3.1 The Shia-Sunni Dispute and Rituals of Muharram in Lucknow

Hasan (1996) notes that in early nineteenth-century northern India, especially in Lucknow, Muslim culture reflected a fusion of religious and cultural traditions. "Yet by the end of the century, representations of unity gave way to symbols of discord as heightened sectarian consciousness and disharmony between Sunnis and Shias took hold".[19] Lucknow became one of the most riot prone cities witnessing sectarian violence among Shias and Sunni Muslims.

Varshney (2002) similarly observes that by the 1920s and 1930s, Shia–Sunni cleavages in Lucknow "had already emerged in a big way" that the national movement of this period could more easily foster Hindu–Muslim unity than intra-Muslim reconciliation. Since Lucknow had long been ruled by Shia princes, Muharram processions became integral to the city's cultural life.[20] These commemorations involved tazia processions with flags, mourning rituals, and chants of "Ya Hussain." Crooke (1998) describes the spectacle of participants lamenting, beating their chests until they bled, or collapsing in grief.[21] The contestations in Lucknow were thus primarily sectarian, rather than communal.

The earliest major instance of sectarian rivalry can be traced to 1905–06, when Sunnis promoted the Madh-e-Sahaba, which is public

Table 1[23]
Shia-Sunni Sectarian Incidents in India before Indian Independence

Year	Incident
1905	1905 The Sunni insisted on the *Madh-e-Sahaba* processions (The *Madh-e-Sahaba* processions refers to public recitation of verses praising the four Caliphs in public)
1905	The *Tabbara* procession initiated by the Shia as a response to the Sunni initiated procession. The *Tabbara* characterizes curses to the first three caliphs in public
1908	The first Shia-Sunni riot broke out
1909	The violence continued along with the dispute between the Shia and Sunni
1909	The Piggot Committee headed by Arthur Piggot under the Brstish Government was set up on the issue. According to the Committee, it reported prohibition of public recitation of *Madh-e-Sahaba*
1935-1942	Shia-Sunni violence on the *Madh-e-Sahaba*
1935	Sparked tension between Shia and Sunni on the pretext that on the day of *Chehlum*, Some Sunnis recited the *Madhe-Sahaba*
1935	The Allsop Committee was formed by the British Government headed by Justice Allsop of Allahabad High Court. The Committee was responsible to re- look into the issue public recitation of the *Madh-e-Sahaba*
28 March 1938	The report of the Allsop Committee which re confirmed restriction on the public recitation of the *Madh-e-Sahaba*.
April 1938	Declaration in a public meeting stating Madh-*e-Sahaba* could not be restricted at all. By any means. The declaration was made by two prominent leaders of the movement Zafrul Malik and Abdul Shakur, along with 26 eminent Sunni ulemas.
April 1938	Riot broke out. Bricks were thrown at a Shia *Tazia* procession in Patanala killing ten people and injured several others. This followed some escalation in tension between the Shia and Sunni.
31 March 1939	Communique was issued by the Congress Government after a negotiation with the Sunni. The Communique said that "the Sunnis will in any circumstances be given the opportunity of reciting Madh-e-Sahaba at a public meeting, and in a procession every year on the barawafat day subject to the condition that the time, place and route thereof shall be fixed by district authorities".

recitations praising the first four Caliphs, while Shias responded with the Tabbara, processions cursing the first three Caliphs. In 1906, Sunnis built a new Karbala at Phoolkatora, opposite an existing Shia Karbala in Talkatora, and coupled this with Madh-e-Sahaba. Shias countered with the Tabbara, prompting Sunnis to denounce Muharram rituals as heretical.[22] Violence erupted in 1908 when militant Sunnis attacked a Shia tazia procession.

The earliest major instance of sectarian rivalry can be traced to 1905–06, when Sunnis promoted the *Madh-e-Sahaba*, which is public recitations praising the first four Caliphs, while Shias responded with the *Tabbara*, processions cursing the first three Caliphs. In 1906, as Ilahi (2007) write, "some Sunni members built their local Karbala at Phoolkatora, precisely opposite the pre-existing Karbala in Talkatora; added to that was the Madh-e-sahaba. The Shia retaliated with the Tabbara. The Sunni declared the Muharram observances as heresy and encouraged people to avoid them."[24] As a result of this, the first Shia-Sunni riot broke out in 1908 when some Sunnis attacked the Shia *Tazia* processions.

The British set up the Piggot Committee, headed by Justice T.C. Piggot, with another Englishman and two Hindu members, to investigate.[25] The committee concluded that introducing Madh-e-Sahaba into Muharram was an "innovation" and found in favor of the Shia position. It recommended restrictions on reciting Madh-e-Sahaba during Ashura, Chehlum, and the 21st day of Ramzan.[26] However, as Ilahi (2007) notes, the British attempt to establish parity between Shias and Sunnis created a new arena for competition and conflict.[27]

The 1930s and 1940s saw further violence over Madh-e-Sahaba (see Table 1). In 1935, Sunnis defied government orders and recited Madh-e-Sahaba on *Chehlum*, sparking clashes. The Allsop Committee, headed by Justice Allsop of the Allahabad High Court, was appointed to examine the issue.[28] Its recommendations restricted Madh-e-Sahaba to specific days, which provoked further protests and riots in Lucknow.

Tensions escalated in 1937 when Sunnis from Jaunpur instigated violence in Lucknow and Ghazipur, looting property and killing people.[29] Dissatisfied with the Allsop Committee's report, Sunnis, who were supported by the Ahrar Party, launched a civil disobedience movement.[30] In April 1938, 26 Sunni

ulemas, including Zafrul Malik and Abdul Shakur, declared that Madh-e-Sahaba could not be restricted. Soon after, a Shia tazia procession was attacked with stones, resulting in deaths and injuries. Consequently, while Sunnis formed the *Anjuman Tahaffuz-e-Namus Sahaba*, Shias were organized under *Anjuman Tanzimul Momineen,* and the later became a major force to organize Tabbaras by 1939.[31]

Politically, Shias of Lucknow tended to support Indian National Congress (INC), while Sunnis growingly aligned with Mohammad Ali Jinnah's All India Muslim League (AIML). Govind Ballabh Pant, the Chief Minister of INC led United Province government, sought to appease Sunnis by assuring Jamat-e-Ulema leaders of permitting recitation of Madh-e-Sahaba under regulated conditions. Consequently, INC government issued a communique, stating that ""the Sunnis will in any circumstances be given the opportunity of reciting Madh-e- Sahaba at a public meeting and in a procession every year on the *barawafat* day subject to the condition that district authorities shall fix the time, place and route thereof."[32] However, despite such efforts, no lasting settlement emerged, and sectarian clashes persisted through the 1940s and 1950s (see Table 1). During Muharram, in expressing their grief and pain "One of the most difficult duties of the Indian magistrate is to regulate these processions and decide the precedence of its members. The air rings with the cries of these ardent fanatics, and their zeal often urges them to violence directed against Hindus or rival sectaries."[33]

Even after independence, tensions continued (see Table 2). In the early 1950s, both Shias and Sunnis petitioned for permission to hold Madh-e-Sahaba and Tabbara processions. In 1953–54, Sunni leaders approached the courts, arguing that reciting Madh-e-Sahaba was a fundamental right under freedom of religion.

Subsequent decades continued to witness recurrent unrest with growing intensity, with the dispute over Madh-e-Sahaba and Tabbara continuing to spark civil violence (see Table 2). The May 1969 riot, for example, began when stones were hurled at a Shia procession from a Sunni Mosque near Mahmood Nagar.[34] In 1977, the Congress government banned the *Azadari* movement in Lucknow, and the ban lasted two decades.[35] Limited concessions came only in 1997, allowing processions at restricted

venues such as homes and *Imambaras*, though public processions remained prohibited.

However, sectarian violence continued to persist and well into the 2000s. In January 2005, a *tazia* procession was bombed, leading to retaliatory attacks in Sunni neighbourhoods.[37] By 2010, the administration permitted only a limited number of processions under

Table-2[36]

Sectarianism among Indian Muslims: Post-Independence

Year	Govt.	Incident
1952	NC	Shia and Sunni applied to grant permission for public reciting of *Madh-e-Sahaba* and *Tabarra*
1953-54	INC	1953–54, The Sunni leaders moved the court on the grounds to allow reciting *Madh-e-Sahaba* as their freedom of religion.
26 May 1969	INC	Sparked Shia-Sunni riot on the ground that in Mahmood Nagar A Shia procession was brick-batted, the violence was carried out from a Sunni Mosque near Mahmood Nagar.
1977	Janata Party	Ban on *Azadari* processions by the UP Government due to riots and the violence attached to it.
1998	NDA	1998 Limited the Ban on *Azadari.* The Government banned the processions on public roads; however limited number of processions were allowed with much strict security arrangements.
17 December 2010	UPA	Shia- Sunni clash Lucknow on the Day of Ashura. Resulted injuring three people.
16 January 2013	NDA	Government fired shots at people coming out of majlis" at Deputy Saheb ka Imambara in Agha Mir Dyodhi.

heavy security. Despite that, clashes have been reported, though less frequently. For instance, on 17 December 2010, a Shia–Sunni clash injured three people on Ashura in Lucknow.[38] Similarly, on 16 January 2013, gunmen attacked worshippers leaving a majlis at *Deputy Saheb ka Imambara* in Wazirganj, killing and injuring several.[39]

4. The Globalization of Sectarianism: The Impact of Saudi -Iran rivalry on Indian Muslims

Alongside the historical roots of sectarian conflict among Indian Muslims, the Iran-Saudi rivalry since the 1979 Iranian Revolution also reverberated among Indian Muslims, and has contributed in shaping the intra-Muslim relations between Shias and Sunnis. The emergence of a Shia clerical regime in Tehran and its rhetoric of exporting revolution sparked a massive debate regarding its challenges among Gulf Sunnis regimes, particularly Saudi Arabia. It led the Saudis to expand its religious influence by build networks with Sunni Muslims globally, including South Asia, to counter Iranian influence. Importantly, Saudi Wahhabism, which traces its lineage to the 18th-century theologian Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab of Najd, became an important source of building Saudi influence and counter the Iranian revolutionary model.

Following the Afghan jihad of 1980s, South Asia became a key battleground of Saudi–Iranian rivalry. Wahhabism, as an ideology, denounces innovative practices *(bid'a)* and seeks to impose a Salafi order in which Shias are framed as internal adversaries. For instance, when Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei criticised the Saudi government for a stampede during annual Haj pilgrimage in 2016,[40] Saudi Arabia's Grand Mufti Sheikh Abdul Aziz al-Sheikh retorted: "We must understand these are not Muslims … they are the sons of the Magi and their hostility towards Muslims is an old one, especially with the People of the Tradition [Sunnis]."[41]

Since 1979, the rivalry has crystallized as a struggle for Muslim leadership with Sunnis under Saudi Arabia and Shias under Iran in what scholars call Sunni internationalism versus the Shia crescent.[42] The Iranian revolution set in motion, first, a struggle for domination between Riyadh and Tehran and, later, competition for influence and power across the Muslim world. Mabon (2015; 2018) argues that interpretations of this rivalry fall into three categories: national interest, theological tensions, or the

interplay of religion and geopolitics.[43] Matthiesen (2016) underscores the role of elites as "sectarian entrepreneurs," who exploit sectarianism for political ends.[44]

The Saudi–Iran rivalry has also reinforced global conflicts even though questions over the root cause of this rivalry as sectarian or geopolitical remains a point of discussion among scholars. Nevertheless, since the September 2001 terror attack in the United States, transnational Islamist groups have been linked to the ideological poles of Riyadh and Tehran. For Mabon (2015), the rivalry reflects an identity crisis;[45] what Mishra (2017) terms the "Incongruence Dilemma," blending classical realist ideas of power with constructivist insights into identity.[46]

India's position is particularly significant, as it hosts one of the world's largest Shia populations.[47] Pew Research Center (2009) estimates that 10–15 percent of Indian Muslims are Shia, accounting for 9–14 percent of the global Shia population.[48] This demographic importance makes India a crucial case for understanding sectarianism. Feyaad Allie (2019) notes that Saudi and Iranian religious influence in India has had major implications for sectarian politics. Lucknow, Mumbai, Hyderabad, Budgam, and Kargil have long been centers of Shia organization, closely linked with pilgrimage and seminaries in Iran and Iraq. Similarly, in Kerala and elsewhere, Sunnis have been shaped by Wahhabi currents through Gulf migration and local madrasas.[49]

Shia Muslims in India often demonstrate their sectarian affinity with Iran by expressing their symbolic support for its geopolitical gains or losses through celebratory marches or protests whenever anything of consequence for happens in that country. For instance, after Americans assassinated Iranian Revolutionary Guard commander Qassem Soleimani,[50] Israel killed Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah,[51] and the Saudis executed Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr,[52] protests were reported from several Shia dominated regions of India including Lucknow and Kargil. If there is any occasion which demonstrates the level of Iranian influence among Indian Shias, it is during Muharram processions in places like Kargil (Ladakh) and Budgam (Kashmir).[53] Additionally, large numbers of Shia students regularly travel to Qom, the religious center of Iran and where the Supreme Leader is based, for theological training, further solidifying the bonds.

Sectarianism also marks social life of Shias and Sunnis, with intermarriage uncommon and even discouraged and separate mosques. However, one crucial question is why sectarianism in Indian Islam is less understood or even less violent than Pakistan despite inhabiting equally significant Shia population. Here, two explanations are central. Firstly, Muslims are a minority in India where sectarianism gets overshadowed by Hindu-Muslim communalism, which is in contrast with Pakistan and Afghanistan, where Shia's, particularly, Hazara community, faces systemic persecution by Sunni majoritarianism groups. Second, Indian Shias have maintained close political ties with the state, which has been particularly reinforced under Hindu right wing Bhartiya Janata Party government.[54]

5. The Role of Indian State and Sectarianism in Indian Islam

The limited discourse on sectarianism in India is largely due to the minority status of Muslims in India, which often undermining their internal divisions. Since the rise of the Bhartiya Janata Party, a political offshoot of a far-right ethnonationalist *Rashtriya Swyamsevak Sangh* (RSS), majoritarianism has been intensified

in India. But this shift toward right-wing majoritarianism has altered how the state approaches the sectarian identity of Muslims. As such, under the BJP, Shias are often perceived as closer to the ruling party's agenda, which is seen as a reason why the rightwing groups have majorly targeted Sunnis Muslims. For many Shias, aligning with the Hindu majority becomes a strategy to safeguard their social and political interests in the country. This alignment, however, has also been sharpened by the broader Shia-Sunni discord than merely by socio-historical factors. The closeness between Shias and the state is most visible during elections, especially in Lucknow, where this relationship has long been prominent.

This pattern bolsters the argument that Shias are, in most circumstances, more aligned with the Indian state - particularly when it is a right-wing government - than are Sunnis, who, on many contentious issues, have taken to opposing the BJP. In recent decades, sectarian responses have emerged clearly around three particularly polarising cases, including triple talaq, Supreme Court's verdict on Babri Masjid-Ramjanambhoomi case, and cow slaughter bans. Each involved conflicts between the BJP-led

government and Sunni majority, represented by the All India Muslim Personal Law Board (AIMPLB). And in each case, Shia groups distanced themselves from the Sunni position and often sided with the state.

Arguably, the roots of Shia alignment with the BJP predate the formation of the All India Shia Personal Law Board (AISPLB) in 2005. As Jaffrelot & Rizvi (2018) note, "Shias of Lucknow were supportive of the Jana Sangh, the BJP's earlier avatar, even before the All India Shia Personal Law Board was founded by Mirza Athar in 2005. The foundation of the Board came during the time of former prime minister and BJP's top leader Atal Bihari Vajpayee's election from Lucknow."[55] This illustrates the longstanding Shia–BJP nexus in Lucknow. They further describe this relationship as a "curious friendship", noting that in April 2017, the AISPLB passed a resolution supporting the ban on cow slaughter after consulting Sheikh Basheer Hussain Najafi, one of Iraq's five Grand Ayatollahs. That same month, the AISPLB urged the central government to legislate against triple talaq. In March 2017, AISPLB leader Maulana Yasoob Abbas requested Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath to establish a welfare commission for Shias similar to the Sachar Committee. Abbas also called for modern reforms in Islamic marriage laws. As reported in the *Indian Express*,[56] he criticized the AIMPLB's rigid stance and advocated a "modern *nikahnama*". Similarly, *New Indian Express* reported in 2017 that the AISPLB argued there was "no mention of triple talaq in the Quran".[57]

Two recent cases further highlight this alignment: the triple talaq legislation and the Ayodhya verdict. In both, Shias largely avoided siding with Sunnis and instead echoed the position of the Narendra Modi led BJP government.[58] Moreover, the voting patterns of the two sectarian groups reinforces this trend as BJP often garners more support in constituencies where Shias form a majority than it does in Sunni-dominated constituencies (with exceptions such as Pasmanda communities of whom many have backed the right party after being marginalized by other secular parties as mere vote banks). Lucknow and Kargil are notable cases. While Lucknow has long been a BJP strong hold, its large Shia Population remains central to this political dynamic. At the same time, though Kargil has not delivered a BJP victory, voting patterns have growingly revealed a significant Shia backing for the right-wing party.[59]

This alignment represents a securitization of Shia identity: Shias perceive greater safety in cooperation with non-Muslim political forces, partly because of global sectarian currents. The Indian state itself plays little direct role in fostering sectarianism among Muslims as any overt involvement would make the country vulnerable the misadventures of the external actors, as seen in West Asia and Pakistan, among other places. Instead, indifference has served the state by deflecting responsibility for intra-Muslim sectarianism, even as anti-Muslim sentiment and communalism have intensified under the BJP.

6. Conclusion

The local, regional, and geopolitical factors have been a significant lens to unravel the sectarianism question. Historically, pre-independent India reflected sectarian presence; the present, however, is more vivid due to the geopolitical context and the deepening crisis between Saudi Arabia and Iran. This paper has sought to examine a few central questions on sectarianism among Indian Muslims both conceptually and empirically. Its purpose has been to situate the Indian case within existing literature through Primordial, Instrumentalist, and Constructivist approaches, highlighting its importance in widening the broader debate on sectarianism. The study, therefore, has attempted to address the missing link of Indian Islam within global discussions of sectarianism in the Muslim world and beyond. The communal versus sectarianism debate in India is also equally relevant, as it harbours this division internally. Yet the study has specific limitations, permitting further research on empirical lines and raising additional questions that must be addressed to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of sectarianism in Indian Islam. There remains considerable scope to study Shia-majority spaces in India and internal debates on socio-political lines, including inter-marriages among sectarian groups. Secondly, sectarianism within India requires more empirical data to support major propositions on the sectarian question, which this paper has sought to analyse. Lastly, the role of the state requires closer focus, ranging from macro- to micro-level dynamics. Sectarianism is certainly visible in India, but at the surface level it is less explicitly expressed. At higher levels, it is also less discussed, since Muslims remain a minority in India—unlike in other Muslim countries where sectarianism is more pronounced.

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