

# World

## Indian citizenship bill takes aim at Islam

HYDERABAD, INDIA

Lower house of Parliament excludes Muslim migrants as it welcomes other faiths

BY JEFFREY GETTLEMAN  
AND SUHASINI RAJ

India took a major step toward the official marginalization of Muslims on Tuesday as one house of Parliament passed a bill that would establish a religious test for migrants who want to become citizens, solidifying Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist agenda.

The measure would give migrants of all of South Asia's major religions a clear path to Indian citizenship — except Islam. The legislation is the most significant move yet to profoundly alter India's secular nature enshrined by its founding leaders when the country gained independence in 1947.

The bill passed in the lower house, the Lok Sabha, a few minutes after midnight, following a few hours of debate. The vote was 311 to 80. The measure now moves to the upper house, the Rajya Sabha, where Mr. Modi seems to have enough allies that most analysts predict it will soon become law.

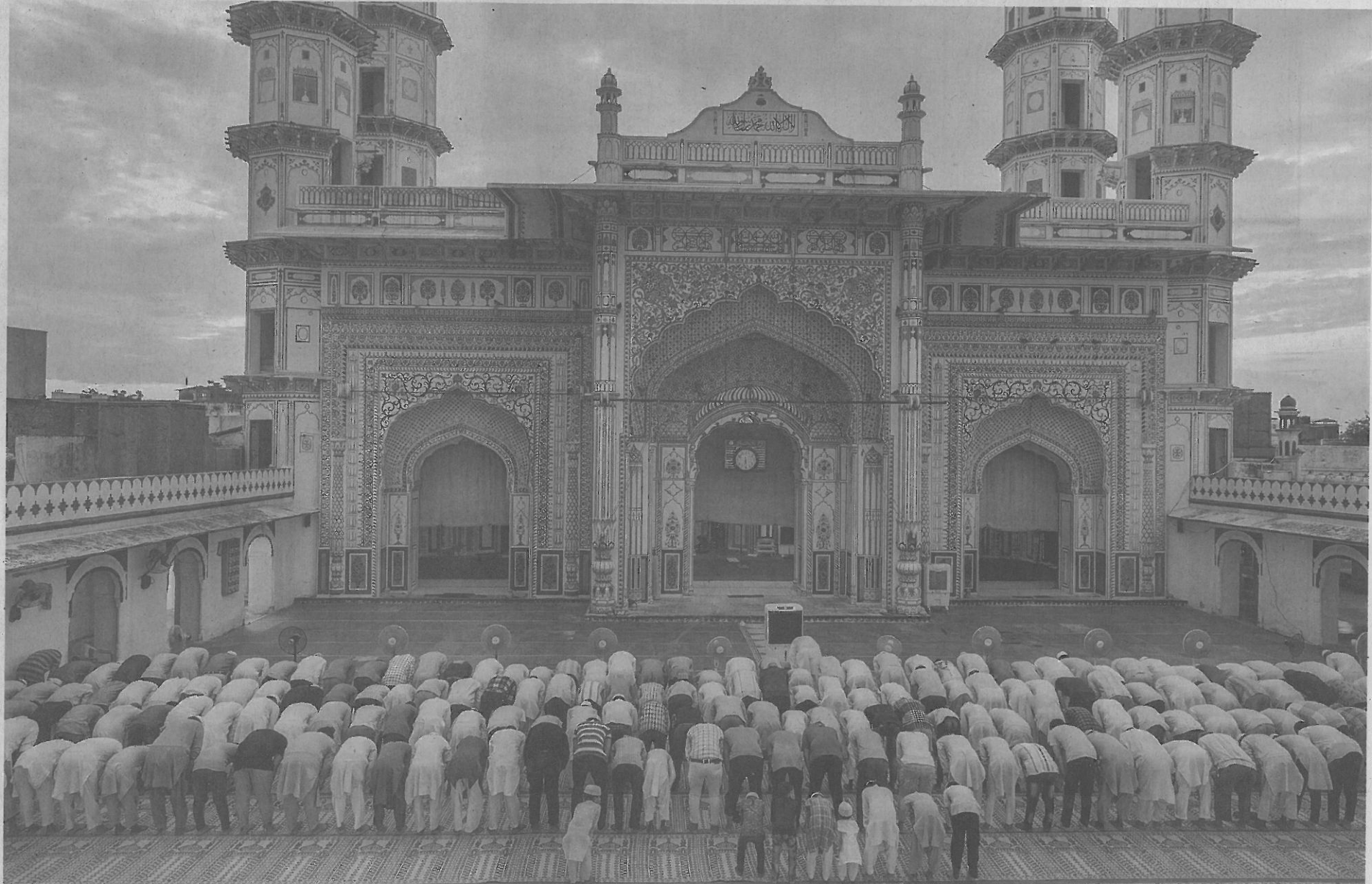
Muslim Indians are deeply unsettled. They see the new measure, called the Citizenship Amendment Bill, as the first step by the governing party to make second-class citizens of India's 200 million Muslims, one of the largest Muslim populations in the world, and render many of them stateless.

"We are heading toward totalitarianism, a fascist state," said Asaduddin Owaisi, a Muslim lawmaker, who on Monday dramatically tore up a copy of the bill while giving a speech in Parliament. "We are making India a theocratic country."

The legislation goes hand in hand with a contentious program that began in the northeastern state of Assam this year, in which all 33 million residents of the state had to prove, with documentary evidence, that they or their ancestors were Indian citizens. Approximately two million people — many of them Muslims, and many of them lifelong residents of India — were left off the state's citizenship rolls after that exercise.

Now, Mr. Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party, or B.J.P., is hoping to expand that kind of citizenship test to other states. And the new legislation would become a guiding principle for who could hope to call themselves Indians.

Mr. Modi and his party are deeply rooted in an ideology that sees India as a Hindu nation. And since the B.J.P.'s landslide re-election win in May, Mr. Modi's administration has celebrated one Hindu nationalist victory after another, each a demoralizing drumbeat for Mus-



Muslims praying at a mosque in Tonk, India. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his party are deeply rooted in an ideology that sees India as a Hindu nation, despite there being 200 million Muslims in the country.

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easier to incarcerate and deport Muslim residents, even those whose families have been in India for generations, if they cannot produce proof of citizenship.

Under Mr. Modi's leadership, anti-Muslim sentiment has become blatantly more mainstream and public. Intimidation and attacks against Muslim communities have increased in recent years. And overt displays of Hindu piety and nationalism have become central in pop culture and politics.

Mr. Modi's fellow lawmakers in the B.J.P. are unapologetic about their pro-Hindu position.

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gram began last summer, thousands of people have marched in the streets, hoisting placards and torches and shouting out their opposition to the bill. People are talking of mass fasts and boycotts of schools and markets. On Monday, some hanged effigies of Mr. Modi and his right-hand man, Amit Shah, the home minister.

The leaders of the opposition Indian National Congress party are trying to paint the bill as a danger to India's democracy. After India won its independence, its founding leaders, Mohandas K.

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seats in the lower house.

Forging India into an overtly Hindu nation has been a core goal of Mr. Modi's party and of the R.S.S., a right-wing volunteer group whose ranks Mr. Modi rose up through and which provides him a backbone of support. And India's recent moves in Kashmir, along with the Ayodhya temple ruling and the Assam citizenship tests, have been hugely popular with the prime minister's base.

Earlier this year, Mr. Modi's government tried to push similar citizenship legislation. The bill sailed through the lower house but stalled after many politicians in Assam said they did not like the religious dimension the B.J.P. was

campaign to identify and deport Muslims who have been living in India for years, critics of the bill say. It lays out a path to Indian citizenship for migrants from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan if they can prove they have been in India for at least five years and ascribe to the specified religions.

To overcome the resistance from politicians in Assam, who do not want Hindu or Muslim migrants taking their land, the new version of the bill carves out special protections for areas predominated by indigenous people.

Mr. Modi's supporters employ a certain logic when defending the bill's exclusion of Muslims. They say Muslims

Hindu nationalists have an answer for that, as well.

"We are not talking about citizens," said Ramesh Shinde, a spokesman for the Hindu Janajagruti Samiti, a Hindu organization that is considered a far-right group. "We are talking about migrants."

Both sides agree on one thing: The bill could have far-reaching consequences.

The Indian government is already racing to build an enormous network of prisons to house thousands of migrants. If immigration law is applied selectively, Hindu migrants who are swept up in raids may be released and allowed to apply for citizenship, while Muslim mi-

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Mr. Modi and his party are deeply rooted in an ideology that sees India as a Hindu nation. And since the B.J.P.'s landslide re-election win in May, Mr. Modi's administration has celebrated one Hindu nationalist victory after another, each a demoralizing drumbeat for Muslims.

First came the Assam citizenship tests. Then Mr. Modi stripped away autonomy and statehood for Kashmir, which used to be India's only state with a Muslim majority. And last month, Hindu fundamentalists scored a big court victory allowing them to build a new temple over the ruins of a demolished mosque in the flash-point city of Ayodhya.

With the new citizenship bill, Mr. Modi's party says it is simply trying to protect persecuted Hindus, Buddhists and Christians (and members of a few smaller religions) who migrate from predominantly Muslim countries such as Pakistan or Afghanistan.

But the legislation would also make it

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Under Mr. Modi's leadership, anti-Muslim sentiment has become blatantly more mainstream and public. Intimidation and attacks against Muslim communities have increased in recent years. And overt displays of Hindu piety and nationalism have become central in pop culture and politics.

Mr. Modi's fellow lawmakers in the B.J.P. are unapologetic about their pro-Hindu position.

"There are Muslim countries, there are Jew countries; everybody has their own identity. And we are a billion-plus, right? We must have one identity," said Ravi Kishan, a famous action-film hero and member of Parliament who is a central supporter of the citizenship legislation.

When asked if he was trying to turn India into a Hindu nation, he laughed. "India has *always* been a Hindu nation," he said. "The Muslims also are Hindus." (This is a common Hindu nationalist belief: that India's Muslims are relatively recent converts, even though Islam arrived in India hundreds of years ago.)

Even before lawmakers in the Lok Sabha voted, protests were breaking out.

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gram began last summer, thousands of people have marched in the streets, hoisting placards and torches and shouting out their opposition to the bill.

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Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru among them, made a clear decision: Even though the country was 80 percent Hindu, it would not be an officially Hindu nation. Minorities, especially Muslims, would be treated equally.

Rahul Gandhi, a party leader and great-grandson of Mr. Nehru, said, "India belongs to everybody — all communities, all religions, all cultures."

But the Congress party is at a low point in its 100-year-plus history. And Mr. Modi's party has the numbers: With allies, it controls nearly two-thirds of the

seats in the lower house.

Forging India into an overtly Hindu nation has been a core goal of Mr. Modi's party and of the R.S.S., a right-wing volunteer group whose ranks Mr. Modi rose up through and which provides him a backbone of support. And India's recent moves in Kashmir, along with the Ayodhya temple ruling and the Assam citizenship tests, have been hugely popular with the prime minister's base.

Earlier this year, Mr. Modi's government tried to push similar citizenship legislation. The bill sailed through the lower house but stalled after many politicians in Assam said they did not like the religious dimension the B.J.P. was injecting — or the possibility that a large number of Hindu Bengalis would be made citizens and would be able to legally acquire land in Assam.

The bill gathered new momentum this fall, after the citizenship test in Assam. Assam has witnessed waves of migration over the years, and many of those people whose citizenship was being questioned were migrants, both Hindus and Muslims, from neighboring Bangladesh.

Mr. Shah, the home minister and architect of the B.J.P.'s recent political victories, promised to protect the Hindus and other non-Muslims. Mr. Shah has also promised to impose the citizenship test from Assam on the entire country.

The citizenship bill is a piece of the

campaign to identify and deport Muslims who have been living in India for years, critics of the bill say. It lays out a path to Indian citizenship for migrants from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan if they can prove they have been in India for at least five years and ascribe to the specified religions.

To overcome the resistance from politicians in Assam, who do not want Hindu or Muslim migrants taking their land, the new version of the bill carves out special protections for areas predominated by indigenous people.

Mr. Modi's supporters employ a certain logic when defending the bill's exclusion of Muslims. They say Muslims are not persecuted in Pakistan, Bangladesh or Afghanistan, which is mostly true.

They also say that when India and Pakistan were granted independence in 1947, the British carved out Pakistan as a haven for Muslims, while India remained predominantly Hindu. To them, the extension of that process is to ask illegal Muslims migrants to leave India and seek refuge in neighboring, mainly Muslim nations.

Article 25 of the Indian Constitution says, "All persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess, practice and propagate religion." Given that, many opponents of the bill say the citizenship legislation is patently unconstitutional. But the

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Mr. Kishan, the action hero turned politician, said he would next push to change India's name to Bharat, the traditional Hindi word for India. But he said that he was not anti-Muslim, and that Muslims living in India legally had nothing to fear.

"How can I be anti-Muslim? My staff in Mumbai is Muslim," he said.

"Hindus and Muslims in India are like this," he said, interlacing his fingers. "But," he added with a big smile, "I love Hindus."

*Jeffrey Gettleman reported from Hyderabad, India, and Suhasini Raj from New Delhi.*