Increasing Polarization of Hindu-Muslim Identity in India

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Abstract

We document the long-term evolution of religious identity in India by analyzing the names of 505 million Hindus and Muslims born between 1950 and 1995. We find that names increasingly signal a strong religious identity, showing heightened religious polarization. A preference for religious doctrine does not explain this rising polarization. Instead, we show how social dynamics generate asymmetric behaviors. First, Muslims are less likely to adopt Hindu names over time, while Hindus rarely use Muslim names. Second, polarization for Hindus is rooted in parents giving their children more distinct names than their own, while for Muslims, neighborhood factors such as segregation shape polarization. Going beyond accounts of rising religious fundamentalism in India, our findings highlight the differential social roots of Hindu and Muslim cultural practices.

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"The only cleavage that has the potential to rip India apart is the divide between Hindus and Muslims."
– Varshney 1998, p.44

"Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls; ....Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake."
– Tagore 1913, p.27

Rising polarization along identity cleavages – such as deepening native-immigrant divides in Europe [21, 2, 22] and Black-White divisions in the United States [25] fuels social instability and endangers democracy. In India, the largest democracy in the world, religion is increasingly seen as the defining social and political cleavage. The minority Muslim community, which comprises 14 percent of the population, bears the heaviest impact of this divide. They experience escalating communal violence [53, 52], widespread discrimination [34, 26, 24], diminishing political inclusion [9, 27, 5], and a pattern of downward mobility in recent decades [11]. More broadly, this growing religious divide hinders social cooperation in everyday life and imposes costs on Hindus and Muslims [52, 37].

We document long-term and slow-moving changes in cultural identity by studying the naming practices of Hindus and Muslims through a comprehensive dataset of 505 million voters' names across 28 states and 7 union territories in India, covering individuals born between 1950 and 1995 [32, 46]. The names parents choose for their children are ubiquitous markers of slow-moving cultural and religious identity worldwide [12, 15]. One's name affects success in the labor, housing, and marriage markets [45, 50]. Parents make naming decisions to transmit culture, assimilate to a dominant identity, and shape key life trajectories [19, 29, 1, 30, 16].

We first explore how patterns of naming reflect identity transmission among Hindus and Muslims in India. Our data comprises individuals who are between the ages of 29 and 74 in 2024, giving us unique insights into historical and contemporary India. We calculate the *Religious Name Index* (RNI) which measures the relative popularity of names among Hindus and Muslims [28, 30]. We use this index to categorize names as signaling Hindu, Muslim, or an "ambiguous" identity, and show how identity polarization between Hindus and Muslims is increasing over time.

Does rising religious identity polarization in India reflect a turn towards religion itself or a manifestation of social dynamics that make religion salient? We first unpack the religious roots of polarization by studying whether parents are more likely to select names derived from religious scriptures. The selection of religiously rooted names reflects the sticky contours of

the transmission of cultural identities. We do not find evidence for such patterns. Instead, we present evidence in line with social dynamics. Polarization patterns are shaped by the intergenerational transmission of identity and the social transmission within neighborhoods. First, we show that, starting from the 1960s, parents in an already polarized India transmit either their own or stronger versions of their own identity to their children, thus contributing to rising polarization through this vertical mechanism [7, 3, 39]. Second, we find that name distinctiveness is strongly predicted by one's peer group as measured by spatial segregation along religious lines: more segregated places exhibit stronger group identity, while mixed places showcase a drop in distinctiveness, a pattern that is stronger for Muslims.

Measuring Religious Distinctiveness of Indian Names

A Publicly Available PDF Voter Rolls

B Inferring Religion with Machine Learning Algorithm

Voter Father's Name → ML Algorithm → Inferred Religion

REDS Training Data
Name | Religion
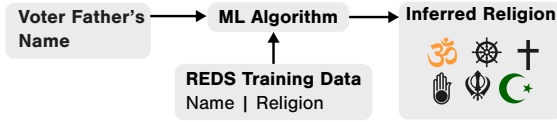
C Extracting Voter's Personal Name

	Voter's Full Name	Father's Full Name
1 Raw Name Parts	Mohd Mustak Ali	Mohd Aadil Hussain
2 Remove Overlap	~~Mohd~~ Mustak Ali	~~Mohd~~ Aadil Hussain
3 Retain First Part	Mustak ~~Ali~~	Aadil ~~Hussain~~
4 Personal Name	Mustak	Aadil

D Probability of Name n adopted in Year t by Group

$$\Pr(\text{Name}_n | \text{Muslim})_t = \frac{\#\ \text{Muslims with Name}_{n,t}}{\#\ \text{Muslims}_{n,t}}$$

$$\Pr(\text{Name}_n | \text{Hindu})_t = \frac{\#\ \text{Hindus with Name}_{n,t}}{\#\ \text{Hindus}_{n,t}}$$

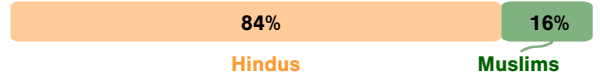**E Religious Name Index - $RNI_{n,t}$ of Name n for Year t**

$$RNI_{n,t} = \frac{\Pr(\text{Name}_n | \text{Muslim})_t}{\Pr(\text{Name}_n | \text{Muslim})_t + \Pr(\text{Name}_n | \text{Hindu})_t}$$

F $\overline{RNI}_{religion,t}$ for Names N weighted by Popularity in t

$$\overline{RNI}_{Muslim,\,t} = \frac{1}{\#\ \text{Muslims}_t} \sum_{n=1}^{N} (\#\ \text{Muslims w/ Name}_{n,t} \times RNI_{n,t})$$

$$\overline{RNI}_{Hindu,\,t} = \frac{1}{\#\ \text{Hindus}_t} \sum_{n=1}^{N} (\#\ \text{Hindus w/ Name}_{n,t} \times RNI_{n,t})$$

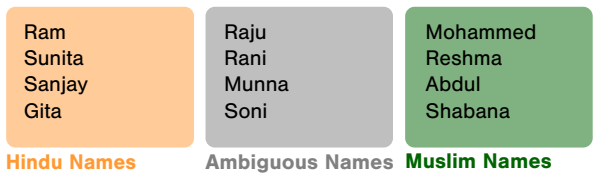**G Sample Composition by Religion**

84%	16%
Hindus	**Muslims**

H Sample Composition in $RNI_{n,t}$ Categories

73%	14%	14%
Hindu Names	**Ambiguous Names**	**Muslim Names**

I Selected Top 10 Names in $RNI_{n,t}$ Categories

Ram	Raju	Mohammed
Sunita	Rani	Reshma
Sanjay	Munna	Abdul
Gita	Soni	Shabana
Hindu Names	**Ambiguous Names**	**Muslim Names**

Our data was sourced from publicly available PDF voter rolls (illustrated in Fig. 1 (A)) found on state election commission websites [32, 46]. The data include the voter's name, age, gender, location, and father's name. An advantage of using voter lists is that they contain the formal/legal name by which citizens are legible to the government.
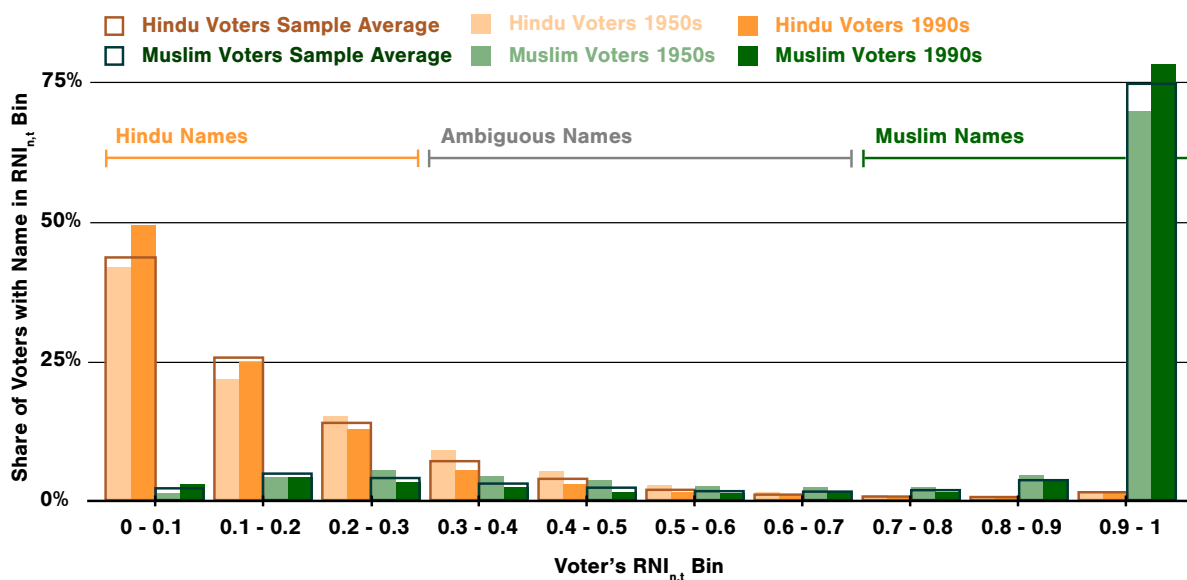
Crucially, the raw data lack information on individuals' religion, a key variable for our analysis. To address this, we use an algorithm that infers each voter's religion, using the father's name—or, in the case of married women, the husband's name, given the prevalence of endogamy. In turn, to infer each father's or husband's religion, we implemented a supervised machine learning algorithm as illustrated in Fig. 1 (B) [20] that leverages linguistically distinct signatures of names across religious groups in India [4, 36]. We trained this algorithm using the Rural Economic and Demographic Survey (REDS; [42]), a commonly used representative dataset containing individuals' names and religions nationwide [20]. This approach achieves 95.6% accuracy in an out-of-sample validation exercise. This number indicates the share of all observations that were classified correctly. In extensive robustness exercises, we find that our results are robust to conservative sample restrictions and the use of another model (see Supplementary Material: Inferring Voters' Religion).

We measured the religious distinctiveness of names using a *Religious Name Index* (RNI, [28, 30]), which quantifies the relative frequency of a name among Muslims and Hindus (Fig. 1 (D) - (F)). For each name in a given birth year, we calculated the probabilities of it being given to a Muslim or a Hindu based on our inferred religious assignments. Combining these probabilities, we computed the $RNI_{n,t}$ for each name and the average $RNI_{Religion,t}$ for Muslims and Hindus born in that year. The $RNI_{n,t}$ ranges from 0 (most distinctively Hindu) to 1 (most distinctively Muslim) and captures shifts in naming practices over time and between religious groups.
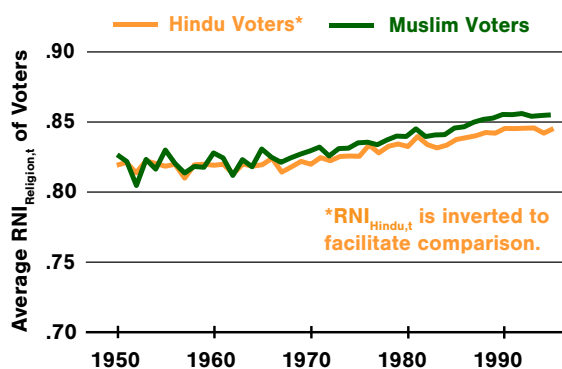
In our analysis below, we label names according to their $RNI_{n,t}$ as follows: values of [0-0.3] are *Hindu names* (0.3-0.7] are *Ambiguous names*, (0.7-1] are *Muslim names* [35]. While this binning affords analytic clarity, we recognize that $RNI_{n,t}$ varies along a spectrum of religious distinctiveness. For example, in Delhi, both Lakshmi and Ram are considered common among Hindus (ranking 14th and 1st respectively) and fall under our *Hindu name* bracket. However, Lakshmi has an $RNI_{Lakshmi,1992} = 0.05$ that indicates very strong Hindu distinctiveness as the name is largely ignored by Muslims, while Ram has $RNI_{Ram,1992} = 0.18$ because it is also adopted by Muslims, making it less distinctively Hindu.
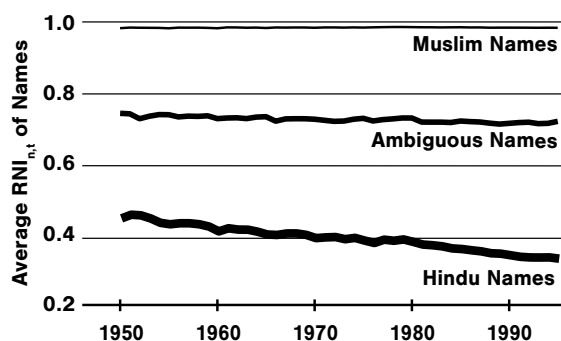
Rising Polarization in India
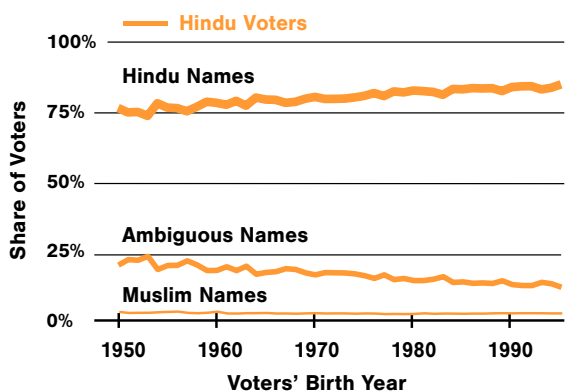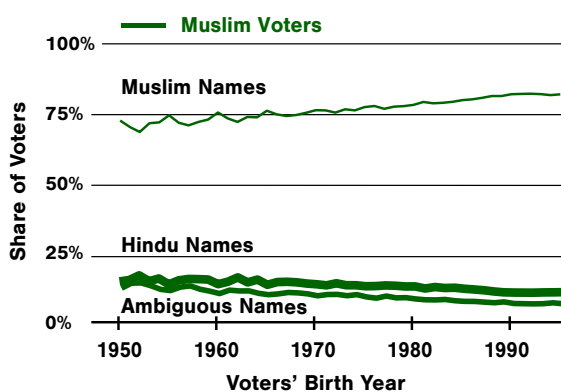
A RNI and Polarization

- ☐ **Hindu Voters Sample Average**
- ☐ **Muslim Voters Sample Average**
- **Hindu Voters 1950s**
- **Muslim Voters 1950s**
- **Hindu Voters 1990s**
- **Muslim Voters 1990s**

Share of Voters with Name in $RNI_{n,t}$ Bin

Hindu Names   Ambiguous Names   Muslim Names

75%

50%

25%

0%

0 - 0.1   0.1 - 0.2   0.2 - 0.3   0.3 - 0.4   0.4 - 0.5   0.5 - 0.6   0.6 - 0.7   0.7 - 0.8   0.8 - 0.9   0.9 - 1

Voter's $RNI_{n,t}$ Bin

B Religious Polarization over Time

— Hindu Voters*   — Muslim Voters

Average $RNI_{Religion,t}$ of Voters

.90
.85
.80
.75
.70

1950   1960   1970   1980   1990

*$RNI_{Hindu,t}$ is inverted to facilitate comparison.

C Change of Name $RNI_{n,t}$

Average $RNI_{n,t}$ of Names

1.0
0.8
0.6
0.4
0.2

Muslim Names

Ambiguous Names

Hindu Names

1950   1960   1970   1980   1990

D Hindu Name Adoption

— Hindu Voters

Share of Voters

100%
75%
50%
25%
0%

Hindu Names

Ambiguous Names

Muslim Names

1950   1960   1970   1980   1990

Voters' Birth Year

E Muslim Name Adoption

— Muslim Voters

Share of Voters

100%
75%
50%
25%
0%

Muslim Names

Hindu Names

Ambiguous Names

1950   1960   1970   1980   1990

Voters' Birth Year

4

Identity Polarization among Hindus and Muslims Fig. 2 (A) shows that for our full sample period (births from 1950 to 1995), 84% of Hindu voters have distinctively Hindu names and 81% of Muslim voters have distinctively Muslim names. A plurality of Hindus and Muslims adopt extremely religiously distinctive names ($RNI_{n,t}$ of (0.9-1] for Muslims and $RNI_{n,t}$ of [0-0.1] for Hindus), a phenomenon that is more prevalent among Muslims (76% Muslims vs. 47% Hindus).

The Space for Cultural Middle Ground Despite Hindu-Muslim polarization in naming, there exists space for a cultural middleground: a significant portion of Indian voters (14%) do not adopt distinctively in-group names. When Muslims adopt out-group names they pick between Hindu and Ambiguous names (10% and 8% of Muslims respectively), whereas when Hindus choose out-group names they primarily pick from Ambiguous names (13%). Therefore, the polarization patterns we document are codetermined by both groups. Muslim naming choices dilute the religious distinctiveness of Hindu names, causing Hindu names to become more dispersed across the distinctively Hindu $RNI_{n,t}$ spectrum.

Polarization Across 1950-1995 We also examine dynamic patterns in naming decisions. Fig. 2 (B) shows that Hindus and Muslims have adopted slightly more religiously distinct names on average over time. However, these average movements mask the more pronounced change in the adoption of distinctively Hindu and Muslim names that we see in Fig. 2 (A) where the sample average increased from 79% to 87% for Hindus and from 77% to 84% for Muslims from 1950 to 1990. These results highlight how over the last half-century, both Hindus and Muslims have made naming decisions that confirm concerns about an increasingly religiously polarized society.

The Role of Distinctiveness and Adoption

The results so far document increasing patterns of polarization and the shrinking practice of ambiguity in naming decisions. What drives these results? We decompose $RNI_{n,t}$ into two theoretical components. Polarization could increase because the religious *distinctiveness* of names increases (Fig. 2 (C)), and/or a greater share of individuals *adopt* more distinctive names (Fig. 2 (D) & 2 (E)). Distinguishing between these two channels—*distinctiveness* and *adoption*—is crucial to allow us to understand whether polarization arises from changes in the social boundaries of religious identity or shifts in individual behavior within these boundaries.

   We investigate these channels for Muslim names first. Fig. 2 (C) shows that Muslim

names retain their high initial level of distinctiveness over time because Hindus rarely adopt Muslim names (Fig. 2 (D)), suggesting that the *distinctiveness* channel does not drive polarization of Muslim names. Instead, for Muslims, we find evidence for the *adoption* channel: Muslims are increasingly likely to adopt Muslim names over time (Fig. 2 (E)). In other words, the polarization of Muslim names is driven by changes in Muslim behavior only, because Hindu adoption of Muslim names remains low and unchanged throughout the period we study.

Next, we examine the two channels for Hindu names: unlike Muslim names, we find that Hindu names become more religiously distinct over time (Fig. 2 (C)). This is due to a declining minority of Muslims adopting Hindu names (Fig. 2 (E)), which is evidence for the *distinctiveness* channel. Changes in both Hindu and Muslim behavior therefore explain the increasing polarization of names for Hindus. Furthermore, the *adoption* channel also contributes to the polarization of Hindu Names, as evidenced by the increasing adoption of Hindu names by Hindus (Fig. 2 (D)).

An important force behind the polarization is that Hindus and Muslims are adopting names that already signal a stronger religious identity over time. In additional analyses in *Supplementary Materials: Common Names* we show how these patterns manifest through the rise of common names in India: parents are more likely to name their children from a smaller set of religion-specific names, which further suggests that identity expression is coalescing within each religious group.

Unpacking Religious and Social Roots of Polarization

The rising religious polarization in India that we document can be understood via two broad theoretical frameworks. The first attributes rising religious identity polarization to growing religiosity in the population. Religiosity can be observed through behaviors such as mosque or temple attendance, frequency of prayer, self-reported importance of religion to daily life, and central to our investigation, naming one's child based on religious doctrine [31, 10]. The second framework views polarization as a consequence of societal dynamics that amplify the salience of religion. Polarization occurs when parents choose names for their children to socially signal distinct religious identities, not necessarily rooted in religion itself. We turn to an empirical examination of these frameworks below.

The Religious Roots of Polarization

To measure whether names have religious doctrinal roots, we use a *Large Language Model* (LLM) to systematically classify names, as outlined in Fig. 3 (A) and *Supplementary Material: Classification of Names by Religious Origin*. We consider names to have religious doctrinal origins if they appear directly in religious scriptures — figures or deities and their epithets or relatives in Hindu sacred texts, and figures or attributes of God in Islamic scripture like the Quran, Hadith, or Seerah [10].

A Classifying Religious Origin Names

Hindu Religious Origin Names	Anil	Lakshmi
1 Figure or God in Mythology	✗	✓
2 Epithet or Relative of a God	✗	✗
Religious Origin Name?	no	yes

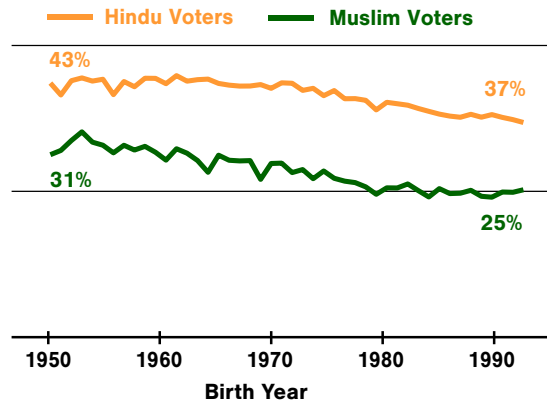| Muslim Religious Origin Names	Imran	Farhana
3 Figure in Islamic Scripture	✓	✗
4 Name of Allah in Quran	✗	✗
Religious Origin Name?	yes	no

B Religious Origin Names are in decline

Fig. 3 (B) shows no evidence of an increasing use of names with religious origin: 43% of Hindus had doctrinal names in 1950 which decreased to 37% by 1990. Similarly, 31% of Muslims had doctrinal names in 1950 which decreased to 25% by 1990. This decline in the adoption of names rooted in religious doctrine suggests that growing polarization in India is not driven by a turn toward religion.

A Intergenerational Transmission
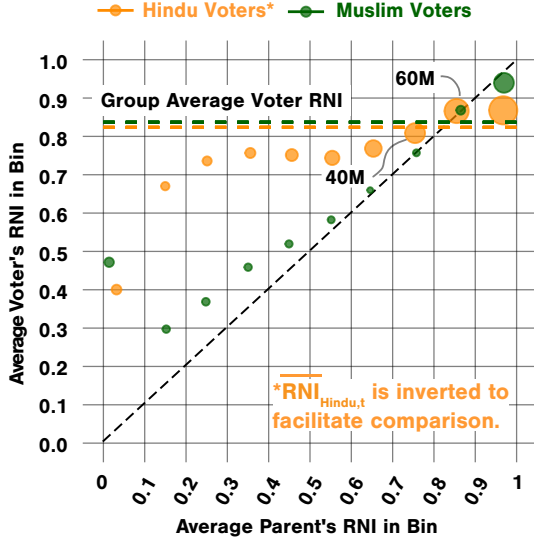
B Segregation and RNI
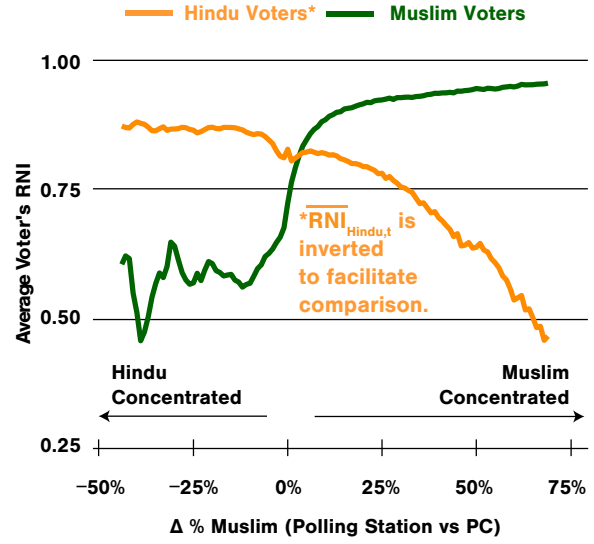
The Social Roots of Polarization

We now turn to showing that social dynamics are important in shaping polarization by studying the transmission of identity within the household as well as in neighborhoods [17].

Transmitting Identity Across Generations In Fig. 4 (A), we examine intergenerational transmission of religious identity within households by comparing the $RNI_{n,t}$ of children and their parents. Among Hindus, we find limited transmission: Hindu parents give their children significantly more religiously distinct names than their own names. In contrast, among Muslims, there is strong evidence of intergenerational transmission, meaning that Muslim parents and children have relatively similar religiously distinct names as measured by similar $RNI_{n,t}$ levels.

Transmitting Identity in Segregated Spaces In Fig. 4 (B), we examine religious identity distinction by spatial concentration. We implement a disaggregated form of the *Dissimilarity Index* which measures segregation. Positive (negative) values indicate higher Muslim (Hindu) concentration in the neighborhood relative to the regional average. For instance, a neighborhood with 30% Muslims in a region with 10% Muslims will have a value of +20%. Both Hindus' and Muslims' names have higher $RNI_{n,t}$ in neighborhoods where their own group is more concentrated and lower $RNI_{n,t}$ in areas where their group's concentration is lower. This suggests that naming conventions are correlated with the social environment. However, one important difference emerges: Muslim $RNI_{n,t}$ declines sharply as one moves from neighborhoods that are Muslim concentrated to Hindu concentrated. In contrast,

moving from Hindu to Muslim concentrated neighborhoods reduces Hindu $RNI_{n,t}$ relatively gradually. Examining these patterns over time, we show in in *Supplementary Material 3* that identity distinctiveness for Muslims is increasing more strongly in Hindu concentrated neighborhoods over time, while for Hindus the temporal increase in distinctiveness is not correlated with spatial segregation.

Discussion

In this study, we explored the long-term evolution of Hindu and Muslim identity polarization in India through an analysis of naming practices among children born from 1950 to 1995. We find that naming choices increasingly signal religious identity, showing heightened religious polarization. This polarization trend is marked by both Hindu and Muslim communities increasingly picking names that are religiously more distinct. These findings contribute to our understanding of majority-minority relations in divided societies, by showing how both groups double-down on identity-affirming behavior [13, 6]. Amid a highly polarized society, we show that there exists space, albeit shrinking, for a cultural middle ground.

We find that this growing polarization in India lacks roots in religious doctrine. While the country has witnessed a rise in religious nationalism [26], our results reveal that individual identity choices are not a results of growing commitment to the theological origins of religion. Our findings suggests that the increasing polarization is not a consequence of immutable doctrine but can rather be changed by both positive and negative forces such as policy on the one hand and political entrepreneurs on the other.

Our results reveal that the roots of polarization are asymmetric across Hindus and Muslims. First, our investigation of distinctiveness and adoption channels show that Muslims adopt both Hindu and Muslim names while Hindus almost exclusively adopt Hindu names. Therefore, minorities lead the shift in the boundaries between identity groups by taking up the practices of the majority. Second, our exploration of social channels uncovers that Hindu polarization is driven by intergenerational transmission within households while Muslim polarization is more responsive to neighborhood dynamics. Identity-affirming behavior therefore operates at different sites for the majority and minority groups: social factors like backlash and discrimination might have a larger influence on identity transmission among minorities.

Our measure of the religious distinctiveness of naming choices is powerful because it provides a common metric of cultural change temporally, spatially, and across religious groups. While our study period covers many decades of Indian history, including periods of significant religious strife, such as the demolition of the Babri Mosque, our window of analysis ends

with individuals born in 1995. As such, our study does not encompass the more recent rise of the BJP, associated with Hindu nationalism [49]. A second challenge with our sample is that there is evidence that some Muslim voters may be removed from voter lists in highly competitive political races [23]. While such manipulation is an important problem, our results present a marginal lower-bound on rising polarization as manipulation likely targets the most religiously distinct Muslim names. Finally, while we do not test the consequences of adopting religiously distinct names, several previous studies show that the identity distinctiveness of names is important [28, 30], including in India [45, 24, 50].

Our results suggest the need to study how focal events are a causal source of the polarization that we identify, such as the Partition of the subcontinent [38], religious riots [37, 53, 52], religious festivals [8, 14], and political campaigns and representation [9, 32, 44, 18]. Moreover, the increased consolidation within religious groups suggests the need to examine how this coordination occurs. For example, future work could study the role *sanskritization* plays in explaining the rise in the distinction of Hindu names, whereby members of marginalized castes increasingly adopt upper caste names [47]. A final important line of research is examining policies that promote intergroup engagement that can help mitigate the socio-cultural impacts of such identity polarization [43, 33, 40, 41].

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