

Muslims and an Inclusive India under Modi 2.0

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Summary

The landslide victory of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India's recent parliamentary elections and the re-election of Narendra Modi as Prime Minister have, once again, cast a spotlight on the plight of Muslims in India. Although Muslim fears of a BJP-led government are not unfounded, Modi has been sending out positive signals in his outreach to them. However, Modi needs to match his rhetoric with action during his second term if he is to live up to his promise of building a strong and inclusive India.

Introduction

The landslide victory of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India's recent parliamentary elections led many to believe that Muslims would be further relegated to the margins of Indian society.

However, within days of his re-election, Prime Minister Narendra Modi sought to allay these concerns by publicly calling for a strong and inclusive India. Modi exhorted party members and his fellow parliamentarians to regain the trust of the country's minorities, including Muslims through "Sabka Sath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas" (collective efforts, inclusive growth, with everyone's trust).¹

Bowing his head in front of the country's constitution, the Prime Minister also urged India's Muslims to refute the myth that their fear had been aided and abetted by vote-bank politics. While Modi's pronouncement could be taken positively, the bitter reality is that the BJP has engendered a trust deficit and cynicism in the minds of Muslims by constructing a regime that has marginalised them.

Palpable Fear among Muslims

Muslim fears towards a BJP-led government have not been irrational or unfounded. Modi's former role as Chief Minister of Gujarat during the deadly riots of 2002, which saw hundreds of Muslims attacked and killed, has cast a dark shadow over his prime ministership since 2014. However, instead of healing old wounds, Modi's first term seemed to have created new fissures in the minds of Muslims, making them feel alienated and helpless.

¹ "“After Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, win Sabka Vishwas’: Modi’s message of inclusion” *Hindustan Times*, 27 May 2019.

<https://www.hindustantimes.com/editorials/after-sabka-saath-sabka-vikas-win-sabka-vishwas-modi-s-message-of-inclusion/story-6i8Lo7ve0ibklPOR7E4jql.html>

During the BJP's five years in power, there has been a spike in vigilante attacks against Muslims accused of killing or transporting cows for slaughter or simply eating beef, chiefly in states governed by the ruling party. According to an IndiaSpend analysis, Muslims were the target of 52 per cent of the violence on bovine issues from 2010 to 2017, 97 per cent of which took place after Modi came into power in 2014.² According to a Human Rights Watch report, around 36 Muslims across 12 Indian states have been killed in vigilante attacks on bovine issues between May 2015 and December 2018.³

Many of the perpetrators have gone unpunished either because of stalled police investigations or they have been shielded by the state machinery. Some BJP leaders have publicly incited mob violence via provocative statements and felicitated lynching convicts.⁴ The abrupt closure of abattoirs due to pressure from Hindu nationalist groups has also affected the livelihoods of many Muslims.⁵

Not surprisingly, some BJP leaders have also regularly spewed anti-Muslim rhetoric and peddled the imagined fear of Hinduism in danger. Their deliberate portrayal of Muslims as anti-national, terrorist, pro-Pakistan and enemies of the Hindu nation has gained credence and, consequently, appears to exacerbate communalism across Indian society and undermine the secular fabric of the country.

As if that was not enough, interfaith couples have been harassed and arrested in the name of "love jihad",⁶ religious minorities including Muslims have been threatened to convert to Hinduism, books have been revised to demonise Muslim rulers of India, and cities renamed to erase India's past links to Muslims. Affecting minorities, including Muslims, is the proposal mooted by BJP leaders to redefine the secular basis of Indian citizenship as seen from the framing of the Citizenship Amendment Bill.⁷

Appointing hard-line nationalists to key government posts has also raised doubts over Modi's pledge for an "inclusive India". In 2017, Yogi Adityanath, an assertive Hindu ascetic monk known for making anti-Muslim remarks and calling for India to become a Hindu state,⁸ was

² "84% dead in cow-related violence since 2010 are Muslim; 97% attacks after 2014" *India Spend*, 28 June 2017.

<https://archive.indiaspend.com/cover-story/86-dead-in-cow-related-violence-since-2010-are-muslim-97-attacks-after-2014-2014>

³ "Violent cow protection in India vigilante groups attack minorities" *Human Rights Watch*, 18 February 2019.

<https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/02/18/violent-cow-protection-india/vigilante-groups-attack-minorities>

⁴ "Union minister Jayant Sinha garlands 8 lynching convicts, faces opposition flak" *Times of India*, 8 July 2019.

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/union-minister-jayant-sinha-garlands-8-lynching-convicts-faces-opposition-flak/articleshow/64901863.cms>

⁵ "After beef ban, Hindu groups force Indian abattoirs to close" *Today*, 21 June 2019.

<https://www.todayonline.com/world/after-beef-ban-hindu-groups-force-indian-abattoirs-close>

⁶ "A Muslim and a Hindu thought they could be a couple. Then came the 'love jihad' hit list." *The Washington Post*, 26 April 2018.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/a-muslim-and-a-hindu-thought-they-could-be-a-couple-then-came-the-love-jihad-hit-list/2018/04/26/257010be-2d1b-11e8-8dc9-3b51e028b845_story.html

⁷ "India Citizenship Amendment Bill dropped amid protests" *BBC News*, 13 February 2019.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-47226858>

⁸ "Meet the militant monk spreading Islamophobia in India" *The Washington Post*, 24 March 2017.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2017/03/24/meet-the-militant-monk-spreading-islamophobia-in-india/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.e91526288dac

made Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh. Amit Shah, who had called Muslim migrants from Bangladesh “infiltrators” and “termites”⁹ and promised to “remove every single infiltrator from the country, except Buddha, Hindus and Sikhs”¹⁰ has been appointed Minister of Home Affairs in Modi’s new Cabinet. And Pragya Singh Thakur, a Hindu nun and BJP parliamentarian, is facing terrorism charges linked to a bomb attack on Muslims.¹¹

Giving the appearance of tokenism on the part of the BJP, Modi appointed one Muslim representative to his new cabinet, Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi. He has been palpably appointed Minister for Minority Affairs – a portfolio that is seen as uncontroversial and relatively insignificant in the Cabinet.

Together, the above has created a perception in the Muslim community that the Indian government has become anti-Muslim in ethos and practice. There are fears that another term of Modi will further embolden right-wing Hindu groups, not least the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS).

Within days of the BJP’s electoral victory, there were reports of Islamophobic attacks in different parts of India.¹² In Delhi, a Muslim man was beaten, asked to remove his skull cap and chant ‘Jai Shri Ram’, meaning Hail Lord Rama, a Hindu deity.¹³ In Madhya Pradesh, three men were beaten for allegedly carrying beef.¹⁴ In Maharashtra, a Muslim taxi driver was hit, abused and forced to chant “Jai Shri Ram”.¹⁵ In Bihar, a man was shot at after he revealed his Muslim name.¹⁶ Most appallingly, 22-year-old Tabrez Ansari, a Muslim man, was killed in Jharkhand after being suspected of being a thief. He was lynched by a Hindu mob who also forced him to chant praises to Hindu gods. This sparked protests in several Indian cities,

⁹ “Infiltrators are termites, will throw them out: Amit Shah” *The Hindu*, 11 April 2019.
<https://www.thehindu.com/elections/lok-sabha-2019/infiltrators-are-termites-will-throw-them-out-amit-shah/article26805646.ece>

¹⁰ Outrage over BJP promise to ‘remove every single infiltrator’ from India” *CNN*, 12 April 2019.
<https://edition.cnn.com/2019/04/12/india/india-bjp-tweet-intl/index.html>

¹¹ “Meet one of India’s most divisive new legislators: A Hindu nun charged with terrorism” *The Washington Post*, 13 June 2019
https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/meet-one-of-indias-most-divisive-new-legislators-a-hindu-nun-charged-with-terrorism/2019/06/12/0ea4f162-885d-11e9-9d73-e2ba6bbf1b9b_story.html?utm_term=.021c5b8ac333

¹² “Exploiting Islamophobia is an election-winning tool in India” *South China Morning Post*, 10 May 2019
<https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/opinion/article/3009682/exploiting-islamophobia-election-winning-tool-india>

¹³ “Gurugram: Muslim man allegedly thrashed, asked to remove skull cap and chant Jai Shri Ram” *Scroll.in*, 26 May 2019
https://scroll.in/latest/924826/gurugram-muslim-man-allegedly-thrashed-asked-to-remove-skull-cap-and-chant-jai-shri-ram?fbclid=IwAR2lktN7PKDnw0qYKvGgf-gLpEoIG8yR6TRm4VEndx2Y3YOcVtxWEC_9-gl

¹⁴ “3 beaten up for carrying beef in MP, cops arrest them and 5 attackers” *The Telegraph*, 25 May 2019
<https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/3-beaten-up-for-carrying-beef-in-mp-cops-arrest-them-and-5-attackers/cid/1691226>

¹⁵ “Thane cab driver beaten, ‘forced to chant Jai Shri Ram’” *Indian Express*, 28 June 2019.
<https://indianexpress.com/article/india/crime/thane-cab-driver-beaten-forced-to-chant-jai-shri-ram-5803798/>

¹⁶ “Man shot at in Begusarai after he reveals his ‘Muslim name’” *The Hindu*, 27 May 2019.
https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/man-shot-at-in-begusarai-for-his-muslim-name/article27259779.ece?utm_campaign=socialflow&fbclid=IwAR2c-pQYdbI2kaOYx51Celcz77G8evAqwHKiMrGeKjQLqNaYP7bORTNYgJU

prompting Modi to call for “the strictest possible punishment to the accused.”¹⁷ An annual report on international religious freedom released by the United States in June 2019 highlighted rising religious intolerance under India’s right-wing government. It revealed how Hindutva groups had used “violence, intimidation, and harassment” against Muslims and low-caste Dalits to force a religion-based national identity for India.¹⁸

Outreach Efforts to Muslims

Central to the idea of inclusivity is the protection of minorities, and, in this instance, Muslims. Crucially, Modi’s promise of an inclusive India cannot be realised unless his rhetoric is matched by action. To be fair, during his first term in office, Modi’s overtures towards the Shia (mainly Bohras) and Sufi Muslims were received positively by segments of India’s heterogeneous Muslim community. Modi’s outreach efforts to these two communities included his keynote address at the 2016 World Islamic Sufi Conference in Delhi and visit to a Dawoodi Bohra mosque in Indore, where he met the community’s leaders during a commemoration of Ashura (martyrdom of Prophet Muhammad’s grandson) in 2018. Admittedly, the BJP concentrates its efforts on Muslim women and minority Muslim communities, who are often at loggerheads with the mainstream Sunni Muslims in India. As such, commentators have noted that BJP is trying to exploit pre-existing intra-religious fissures in Islam to increase its vote bank without jeopardising its popularity within its core Hindu nationalist constituencies¹⁹ while enhancing Modi’s image of creating an inclusive India. On the other hand, the minority Muslim communities (that is, Shias and Sufis) too benefit from this political affiliation with the ruling party as it allows them a better social standing against the mainstream Sunni forces, as well as security in an increasingly Islamophobic region.

Nonetheless, common policies implemented by Modi’s government during the first term, such as electrifying villages and subsidising LPG connections generated Muslim support for the BJP from all sects. This was seen by a marginal increase in support for the BJP among Muslim voters based on a pre-poll survey of the 2019 election.²⁰ Modi’s recent announcement of a special scholarship scheme for minority communities, including Muslims, to make education more accessible to them has also engendered much commendation.

The Modi government’s efforts to abrogate the instant triple *talaq* (divorce in Islam) would have been better regarded had some influential members of the BJP not politicised it by demonising Muslim males and belittling Islam as regressive, archaic, patriarchal and misogynistic. The triple *talaq* ordinance was also criticised for its hasty drafting, which

¹⁷ “Protests in Indian cities after Muslim man beaten to death” *Al-Jazeera*, 27 June 2019.
<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/06/protests-indian-cities-muslim-man-beaten-death-190627005534986.html>

¹⁸ “India rejects critical US religious freedom report”, *Al Jazeera*, 24 June 2019.
<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/06/india-rejects-critical-religious-freedom-report-190623065422842.html>

¹⁹ “Performing pluralism: why the BJP wants Muslim friends”, *New Mandala*, 20 February 2019.
<https://www.newmandala.org/performing-pluralism-why-the-bjp-wants-muslim-friends/>

²⁰ “Lokniti-CSDS-Tiranga TV-The Hindu-Dainik Bhaskar Pre Poll Survey 2019” *Lokniti CSDS*, 24-31 March 2019.
https://www.lokniti.org/media/upload_files/Compiled%20Report%20Day%204.pdf

diluted the purported good it sought to do.²¹ This issue has again been thrust into the spotlight because BJP's push to make triple *talaq* a criminal offence has reignited fresh debate on the use of criminal law in civil matters. The criminalisation of triple *talaq* has also engendered resistance from Muslim religious groups in India.²²

On balance, there is cause for Muslims to welcome Modi's proclivity to win the trust of the minorities. In a letter addressed to Modi, prominent Muslim community leaders including from a leading Muslim organisation in India, the Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind (Council of Indian Muslim theologians) called for active engagement on pertinent issues confronting the community, such as jobs and education and the need for confidence-building measures to curb communal violence and combat Islamophobia.²³ That Muslims are also reaching out to engage the Modi administration is a forward-looking footstep as it would take the proverbial two hands to clap for there to be harmonious Hindu-Muslim relations.

The abovementioned measures paired with suggestions of parity between Hindus and non-Hindus may however result in political resistance by hardliners of Sangh Parivar (the family of Hindu nationalist organisations, to which BJP is affiliated). Gautam Gambhir, a newly-elected BJP parliamentarian, had to quote Modi's new vision of inclusivity to defend himself from criticism by BJP sympathisers for his condemnation of a mob attack on a Muslim in the city of Gurgaon located in the state of Haryana.²⁴

Conclusion

The implications of burgeoning anti-Muslim rhetoric and rising Islamophobia in India are grave. If unchecked, these grievances can fuel religious discrimination and alienate Muslim communities. They also call India's vibrant pluralistic traditions into question, and breed mistrust and mutual suspicion.

Extrapolating further, these grievances can affect India's national security by agitating minorities and providing fodder for terrorist groups. The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in particular has been adept at exploiting sectarian and communal fault-lines to recruit sympathisers and foot soldiers in executing suicide attacks, as was recently witnessed in Sri Lanka. The Easter Sunday attacks in Sri Lanka illustrated the resurgence of ISIS in South Asia,

²¹ "A deeply flawed Triple Talaq Bill fails the litmus test" *National Herald*, 28 December 2018.
<https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/india/triple-talaq>

²² "Muslim religious bodies to oppose new bill on triple talaq" *Hindustan Times*, 18 June 2019.
<https://www.hindustantimes.com/lucknow/muslim-religious-bodies-to-oppose-new-bill-on-triple-talaq/story-109gGVNAMtIrSXUstPRT7K.html>

²³ "Muslim leaders seek CBMs from Modi" *The Hindu*, 12 June 2019.
<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/muslim-leaders-seek-cbms-from-modi/article27823401.ece>

²⁴ "Assault on Gurugram Muslim man: Gautam Gambhir demands action against attackers" *The Hindu*, 27 May 2019.
<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/assault-on-gurugram-muslim-man-gautam-gambhir-demands-action-against-attackers/article27259770.ece>

putting the region on alert and jolting the South Asian countries such as India to take the ISIS threat seriously rather than remain in a state of denial.²⁵

India's aspirations of being a global leader and an economic superpower could also be jeopardised if India fails to keep its domestic house in order. To project a more favourable image to the international community and conduct an effective foreign policy, India must be able to convey to countries, chiefly those with multicultural societies like in Southeast Asia that it is inclusive, pluralistic and harmonious.

What is required in Modi's second term is to move beyond slogans to genuine action that brings about tangible outcomes. To live up to his promise of building a strong and inclusive India, Modi will need to display strong leadership by moving beyond political expediency and rising above domestic hardline Hindu nationalist sentiments. He and his colleagues need to speak out against attacks on Muslims just as Modi had done when a Muslim was killed by a Hindu mob in Jharkhand, as aforementioned.

The RSS-affiliated Muslim Rashtriya Manch (MRM) can also be used as an avenue to reach out to Muslims, though the organisation is heavily criticised for legitimising Hindu nationalist objectives. The MRM, however, has to rebrand itself, in which it does not just have BJP's listening ear, but can also position itself as being palatable enough to be able to engage the diverse Muslim organisations in India. Interfaith dialogues and peacebuilding efforts should also be actively supported and encouraged if the BJP-led government truly wants a more united and inclusive India. Importantly, Modi should look inward for a new legacy as a leader who actively promotes pluralism and inclusiveness. Only then would Modi be able to narrow the domestic trust deficit that looms large between his BJP-led government and India's sizeable Muslim community. As such, the onus is on Modi to prove his critics wrong by matching his rhetoric with action during his second term in office.

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²⁵ "Lessons from the Sri Lankan Easter Sunday Tragedy" *ISAS Insights*, 29 May 2019. <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/isas-insight-lessons-from-sl-easter-sunday-tragedy.pdf>