

# BELEAGUERED COMMUNITY — BEING A MUSLIM IN NEW INDIA

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'This deliberate invisibilisation of Muslims is multi-pronged' | Photo Credit: AFP

To be a Muslim is to be voiceless in the new India. Almost all mainstream political parties refrain from using the word, Muslim, often preferring the euphemism of alpsankhyak or the minorities. The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) fares worse. The party which abolished the Maulana Azad Fellowship for the minorities stands in denial of discrimination. Unsurprisingly, Prime Minister Narendra Modi claimed all was fair and fine in his media interaction at the White House on June 23. Responding to a question on the steps his government was taking “to improve the rights of Muslims and other minorities” in the country, he said, “We have always proved that democracy can deliver. And when I say deliver, this is regardless of caste, creed, religion, gender. There is absolutely no space for discrimination.” This denial came on the heels of former United States President Barack Obama expressing concern about the “protection of the Muslim minority in a Hindu majority India” in a televised interview.

Mr. Modi side-stepped the systematic diminution in Muslim representation in all spheres of life. In the Karnataka Assembly elections in May, the BJP did not put up a single Muslim candidate in a House of 224 Members of the Legislative Assembly. It was the same in Gujarat; and before that, in Uttar Pradesh, Delhi and Bihar. At the Centre, for the first time since Independence, there is not a single Muslim Minister. The BJP is the first ruling party without a single Muslim parliamentarian. Of course, as Mr. Modi claims, it is not due to any discrimination.

The denial of representation to Muslims is not limited to the BJP. There is not a single Muslim Chief Minister in India today despite there being non-BJP governments in Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Delhi, Rajasthan, Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, West Bengal, Odisha, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and now Karnataka. The parties talk of pluralism, but practise majoritarianism. A little before the 2019 Lok Sabha election when the seasoned (then) Congress leader, Ghulam Nabi Azad, complained of not being wanted as a campaigner by most candidates, it seemed to be the lament of a man yearning for his glory days. Subsequent events have proved him right, with the self-professed secular parties keen not to be seen aligning with either Muslim voters or leaders. They want their vote, but hush-hush, and furtively — like the Samajwadi Party leader, Akhilesh Yadav, did during the elections in Uttar Pradesh in 2022 where he minimised the appearance of Muslim leaders on stage.

This deliberate invisibilisation of Muslims is multi-pronged. Political parties that were vociferous

in their condemnation of the lynching of Mohammed Akhlaq in Dadri, Uttar Pradesh, in September 2015, have now lapsed into silent mode when there are reports of the lynching of Muslim men, from Bihar, Jharkhand, Rajasthan and Maharashtra. What is being ignored is the fact that over 97% of the cases of lynching since Independence have been reported after 2014, with an overwhelming majority of victims being Muslims.

Yet, no leader of any political hue has deemed it wise to visit the families of the dead. The absence of political noise over constant killings compelled the Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind to lead a delegation of Muslim leaders to meet the Union Home Minister in April. The Minister assured them of action within 72 hours if any specific instance was brought to his notice. The words rang hollow. Within hours of his assurance, cases of lynching were reported from Jharkhand and Haryana. The news was either ignored by the media or confined to a few sentences on the inside pages. The lynching of Muslims was reduced to a weather bulletin in the new India — pale and predictable.

Harangued not long ago for refusing to say 'Vande Mataram' or 'Bharat Mata ki Jai', Muslims are now forced to shout 'Jai Shri Ram', the new slogan of the purveyors of hatred. Not long ago, some right-wing goons issued a warning at Jantar Mantar, barely a kilometre from Parliament: 'Jab mulle kate jayenge, Jai Sri Ram chillayenge (When Muslims would be slaughtered, they would cry, Jai Sri Ram)'. When one of the participants surrendered to the police later, he did so sporting garlands while perched atop the shoulders of his supporters even as the policemen watched. He could have been an Olympic medal winner.

Despite the Supreme Court of India's order to the State governments to take suo motu action, there has been an exponential rise in hate speech targeted at the community. While the likes of Yati Narsinghanand and Kalicharan Maharaj have slandered not only Muslims but also the Prophet with impunity, we have had a Member of Parliament, Pragya Singh Thakur, urging Hindus to keep their knives sharpened at home. She has been at it for a long time.

Recently, she attended the screening of The Kerala Story to tell the audiences that "they" are 32%, and if "they" become 40%, your daughters will not be safe. Similar bile was on display when The Kashmir Files released. There was a time when one looked forward to new cinematic offerings every Friday; now, many a venture comes wrapped with shades of Islamophobia. Gone are the days of a kind Khan Chacha or a pluralist Amar Akbar Anthony. The Kerala Story is the sign of the times.

To be a Muslim today is to wake up to a daily avalanche of hate on social media, political circles, and in real life. The assaults at the very being of Muslims continue unabated. When film-makers are not producing their next pile of prejudice, politicians rename old towns to erase any association with Muslim rulers or Islam. Beyond the high-profile places such as Mughal Sarai and Aurangabad, we have had Islam Nagar and Ahmednagar being renamed in Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra, respectively. There is a demand to rename Mohammadpur in Delhi too. Islam, Muhammad, Ahmed, all seem an anomaly in India today.

It is the same with attacks on food, clothing and even sources of earning. During Navratri, a shopkeeper cannot sell meat nor can a consumer procure it in Delhi, Haryana or Uttar Pradesh, never mind if Navratri coincides with Ramzan. One faith is deemed superior to another. If in Karnataka, girls were barred from wearing the hijab to school, in Delhi, we had a Member of Parliament calling for the economic boycott of Muslims. He was playing catch up. A couple of years earlier, a party colleague had hit the political jackpot by insinuating that an entire community was full of traitors who deserved to be shot. Remember the hateful 'Desh ke gaddaron ko....'? The young Member of Parliament understood what his boss wanted, and dished it out with relish.

Add to this the annual attacks on mosques during Ram Navami and Hanuman Jayanti, and we have a picture of a beleaguered Muslim community, wounded, browbeaten and forsaken. The marginalised in the new India.

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