

CONTEXTUALISING ISLAMOPHOBIA IN INDIA



JUSTICE AND EMPOWERMENT
OF MINORITIES

(A Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind Initiative)





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Executive Summary

In the last 20 years in particular, Islamophobia has assumed such negative connotations and perceptions and pervaded every day life of global citizens so much that the United Nations has been forced to take notice of the same and has declared 15 March as the International Day to Combat Islamophobia. In a way it shows the seriousness of the issue and its negative impact on such a vast multitude of people that it is now considered a global issue. And the realisation has set in that the global community has to take steps to rectify its negative impact on the second largest religious minority in the world.

One wonders what has led to an increase in Islamophobia across the globe. Not finding any over the surface reason for it, one is forced to conjure that perhaps the western world and other religions of the world are afraid of Islam's concept of *Ijtamaiyat* or Collectiveness, which is manifest on every Friday at the local masjids and annually on the occasion of Hajj.

A false perception prevails that Islam is a monolith religion and every adherent or practitioner of Islam follows what it's taught through the Holy Quran or by its Ulemas. But nothing could be more far away from the truth, than this perception. Followers of Islam follow the five pillars of Islam and the Holy Quran but in every country

or region it also assimilates certain local and customary traditions and values. As far as people who portray a negative physical presentation of Islam with overflowing beards, turbans and robes are concerned; it is manifestly a personal choice. Every Muslim is allowed to follow the dress code or physical appearance of his choice keeping in mind the basic Islamic fundamentals related to personal hygiene and appearance.

Islamophobia as a convenient attack tool enables other faiths to belittle or condemn Islam, its followers, their practices and observance and education, without any rational or theoretical basis. In most cases such attacks are often individually led or negative connotations are individually upheld in absence of any specific or authentic knowledge of Islam and its teachings.

Over the years, Islamophobia has been used as a convenient political tool in addition to an important component of Agenda Setting policies of the political practitioners, as raising the bogey of Islamophobia offers them quick easy wins.

However, to a certain extent the Muslim community too is responsible in the spread of Islamophobia. One of the identifiable primary reasons for this could be its inertia to handle the bull, heads on. Its religious leaders have also not been very successful in promoting



the peace loving and humane aspects of the religion. In addition, Islamists have to present Islam in its most easily understandable form, not fiddling with its obscurantist form, and prove that it is a religion which could keep pace with modernity along with traditions and religious teachings.

What is Islamophobia?

Islamophobia has been a controversial concept ever since it first gained popular currency. One of the main sticking points over the term is whether or not it refers to religion. For both detractors and advocates of the term alike, religion should be or is removed from the meaning of Islamophobia, which is conceived as a form of anti-Muslim racism.

Islam, we might say, is thereby removed from Islamophobia. Yet, in doing so, it falls short on two of its key objectives, i.e., identifying the particular forms of discrimination that Muslims face in society and subsequently providing a positive basis from which to address this discrimination.

According to the existing literature as well as a study of converts to Islam, it is suggested that Islam as a religion is both an important feature of Islamophobia as well as central to the identities of many Muslims, and then it is suggested why and how we should think about including religion into the scope of thinking on Islamophobia and how it is addressed.

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Different connotations are given to define Islamophobia, varying from expert to countries. Basically, Islamophobia could be described as the fear, prejudice and hatred of Muslims that leads to provocation, hostility and intolerance by means of threatening, harassment, abuse, incitement and intimidation of Muslims and non-Muslims, both in the online and offline world.

It is motivated by institutional, ideological, political and religious hostility that transcends into structural and cultural racism, it targets the symbols and markers of being a Muslim.

This definition emphasises the link between institutional levels of Islamophobia and manifestations of such attitudes, triggered by the visibility of the victim's perceived Muslim identity. This approach also interprets Islamophobia as a form of racism, whereby Islamic religion, tradition and culture are seen as a 'threat' to the Western values.

According to Oxford English Dictionary Islamophobia is "hatred or

Islamophobia has kept growing in some parts of the world, through intensive campaigns and public discourses disseminating fear of Islam

fear of Islam, especially as a political force; hostility or prejudice towards Muslims”. In the context of this reference, the term Islamophobia was first used in 1976 in the *International Journal of Middle East*.

Tahir Abbas gives its definition as: Islamophobia is the alarming and fear of Islam and Muslims. In an international context the awareness of non-Muslims related to Muslims and Islam has been portrayed in a very negative sense. To represent Islam and Muslims in media is conflict, ignorant, barbaric, intolerant, maddened terrorist, religious zealots and distorted images are still portrayed to internationally. (Abbas, T., 2004)

According to Dinnet & Ibrahim (1925), the issue of Islamophobia was not created to represent unelaborated and insufficient awareness and knowledge towards Muslims and Islam, which was also an assault by false reports. Intentionally misrepresented, Islam and Muslims were portrayed as an extremist terrorist and backward in customs and belief, and also the teaching and message of Islam

related to religion were purposefully misinterpreted by media at the international level. Both scholars did not consider it essential to give definition of Islamophobia, but their formula put forward that they pair it as a struggle to “do away with Islam all together”

The States of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), describes Islamophobia as a combination of hate, fear, and prejudice against Islam, against Muslims, as well as against anything associated with the religion, such as Masajids, Islamic Centers, Holy Qur'an, Hijab, etc. It also constitutes hatred, stigmatisation, racism and discriminations in daily life, in Media, at workplace, in political sphere, etc.

It rests in the mind and it reflects in attitudes, and could be manifested through violent actions, such as burning masajids, vandalising properties, abusing women wearing scarf, veil and hijab, or insulting the Prophet or sacred symbols of Islam. That is more or less, how Islamophobia is identifiable, how it manifests, which can be seen not only from incidents, but also through perspectives, statements, behaviour, and gestures.

During the last two decades in particular, Islamophobia kept growing in some parts of the world, through intensive campaigns and public discourses disseminating fear of Islam,



and through significant number of incidents targeting Muslims, masajids, Islamic attires, and most-revered Islamic figures.

The OIC has been given a mandate to monitor the trend of Islamophobia and to provide periodical reports to Member States; while being encouraged to take necessary measures to address the phenomenon in coordination and cooperation with Member States, international communities and the UN Human Rights mechanism, as well as with other international entities whenever it is possible. Through a dedicated unit within the OIC General Secretariat which is the Islamophobia Observatory, such mandate is being implemented mainly by monitoring events and incidents on daily basis; scanning the attitudes, public feelings, incidents, and everything that serves as a possible indicator of Islamophobia; by reporting to Member States on regular basis (Monthly, Quarterly, Annually), by initiating counter-measures against Islamophobes or Xenophobes; by initiating dialogue for projecting the true and peaceful values of Islam; by raising global awareness of the phenomenon; by spreading the basic tenets of moderation and modernisation in Islam; and by empowering communities around the world to meet the challenges related to the Islamophobia. Such endeavours are undertaken through multiple ways and tools.

A recent report by the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and Belief found that suspicion, discrimination and outright hatred towards Muslims has risen to ‘epidemic proportions.’

Mostly, this trend started after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 and other horrific acts of terrorism purportedly carried out in the name of Islam, they completely changed the anti-Muslim narrative and also the various government’s view of institutional suspicion of Muslims and those perceived to be Muslims, which escalated to epidemic proportions.

Numerous states, as well as regional and international bodies, have responded to security threats by adopting measures that disproportionately target Muslims and define Muslims as high-risk and at risk of radicalisation. At the same time, widespread negative representations of Islam, and harmful stereotypes that depict Muslims and their beliefs

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and culture as a threat have served to perpetuate, validate and normalise discrimination, hostility and violence towards Muslim individuals and communities.

In states where they are in the minority, Muslims often experience discrimination in accessing goods and services, in finding employment and in education. In some states they are denied citizenship or legal immigration status due to xenophobic perceptions that Muslims represent national security and terrorist threats. Muslim women are disproportionately targeted in Islamophobic hate crimes.

The United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution in 2022, sponsored by 60 member-states of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), which designated 15 March as the International Day to Combat Islamophobia. The document stresses that terrorism and violent extremism cannot and should not be associated with any religion, nationality, civilisation, or ethnic group. It calls for a global dialogue on the

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promotion of a culture of tolerance and peace, based on respect for human rights and for the diversity of religions and belief.

Marking the first International Day to Combat Islamophobia in 2023, UN Secretary-General António Guterres pointed out that anti-Muslim bigotry is part of a larger trend of a resurgence in ethno-nationalism, neo-Nazism, stigma and hate speech targeting vulnerable populations including Muslims, Jews, some minority Christian communities, as well as others. “As the Holy Quran reminds us: nations and tribes were created to know one another. Diversity is a richness, not a threat,” he added.

In response to the alarming trend of rising hate speech around the world, Secretary-General António Guterres launched the United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech.

Studies show that the number of Islamophobic hate crimes frequently increases following events beyond the control of most Muslims, including terrorist attacks and anniversaries of such attacks. These trigger events illustrate how Islamophobia may attribute collective responsibility to all Muslims for the actions of a very select few, or feed upon inflammatory rhetoric.

Many Governments have taken steps to combat Islamophobia by establishing



anti-hate-crime legislation and measures to prevent and prosecute hate crimes and by conducting public awareness campaigns about Muslims and Islam, designed to dispel negative myths and misconceptions.

Islamophobia in India

Farhan Mujahid Chak, an Associate Professor of Political Science, at the Gulf Studies Graduate Programme, Qatar University, in an article on Islamophobia in India wrote that, “Nowhere in the world has Islamophobia been as dangerously manifested as it has in India today. Well-known academic and Islamophobia specialist Khaled Beydoun has categorically described India as the “epicenter of global Islamophobia.” This is not just because of the frequency of Islamophobic attacks – a daily occurrence now – or the depth of depravity when listening to the demonizing language or even the level of violence perpetrated against Muslims. Beyond that, the gravity of Islamophobia in India is twofold: first, the unabashed institutional support for Islamophobia in the highest political offices in the country documented by Human Rights Watch (HRW) and second is no recourse for Indian Muslims to appeal to the judiciary, police or any other legal authorities for meaningful protection.

“Today, it’s open season on Muslims in India. With such hubris, there isn’t even the pretence of abiding by the rule

Well-known academic and Islamophobia analyst, Khaled Beydoun says that nowhere in the world has Islamophobia been as dangerously manifested as it has been in India today

of law or acknowledging the rights of minorities. It is a rabid, unadulterated, hate-mongering that demonstrates in the most obscene of ways. This includes well-documented, blatant prejudice and discrimination against Muslims and other minorities that has stripped citizenship from millions of people and demagoguery that threatens to lynch Muslims in broad daylight – with police watching. In a twisted way, there seems to be a sense of amusement, even glee, at the rising levels of hate speech and violence directed toward Muslims, Christians, Dalits, Sikhs and other minorities.”¹

Farhan further says that to understand the origins of Islamophobia in India, it’s important to consider its direct link to the Hindutva social imaginary, a poisonous social imaginary that paints a misleading, false, monolithic image of India and then positions Muslims as its nemesis. Unless this imaginary is challenged, Islamophobia and violence will continue to rise. Already, that demonizing narrative is being used to justify acts of violence such as

“cow vigilantism,” also known as “gau rakshak,” which has led to lynching of Muslims on the dubious, perverse rationale that they are secretly killing cows. Ironically, a country where cows are sacred is among the largest beef exporters in the world, “ghar wapsi” – forced conversion. India is encouraging Muslims to convert to Hinduism under the threat of violence. All in all, there is a carefully orchestrated strategy with clear political support to demonize Islam and Muslims to rationalize crimes against them both in India and Kashmir. Finally, now, it seems enough is enough and the Arabian Gulf has decided to retaliate, and it remains to be seen how India will respond.²

Historical Background of Islamophobia in India

However, before delving into the realities of Islamophobia in today’s India, we’ll have to delve into its past, too and understand how deep are the fissures in the Indian society, which have contributed to the increased Islamophobia, which earlier used to be described as pure ‘discrimination’ on

Since India’s independence, Muslims have faced systematic discrimination, prejudice, and violence, despite constitutional protections

religious grounds. Lindsay Maizland, Editor – Asia, CFR, in her analysis for the Washington-based, Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), *India’s Muslims: An Increasingly Marginalised Population*, gives a detailed background to this earlier history of Hindu-Muslim relations in India.

Maizland says that India is home to some two hundred million Muslims, one of the world’s largest Muslim populations but a minority in the predominantly Hindu country. Since India’s independence, Muslims have faced systematic discrimination, prejudice, and violence, despite constitutional protections.³

Experts say anti-Muslim sentiments have heightened under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which has pursued a Hindu nationalist agenda since elected to power in 2014. Since Modi’s reelection in 2019, the government has pushed controversial policies that critics say explicitly ignore Muslims’ rights and are intended to disenfranchise millions of Muslims. Under Modi, violence against Muslims has become more common. The moves have sparked protests in India and drawn international condemnation.

How did India’s partition influence Hindu-Muslim relations?

While studying the historical background of Islamophobia in India, we have to trace its origin to the genesis



of the Partition and even before that. Some of the animus between India's Hindus and Muslims can be traced to the cataclysmic partition of British India in 1947, scholars say. Economically devastated after World War II, the British lacked the resources to maintain their empire and moved to leave the subcontinent. In the years before partition, the Indian National Congress party, under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, pushed for independence, organizing civil disobedience and mass protests against British rule. Meanwhile, the All-India Muslim League political group, led by Muhammad Ali Jinnah, called for a separate state for Muslims.⁴

In 1947, a British judge hastily decided the borders for a Hindu-majority India and a Muslim-majority Pakistan (including what is today Bangladesh). The partition sparked deadly riots, gruesome communal violence, and mass migrations of Muslims to Pakistan and Hindus and Sikhs to India. Survivors recall blood-soaked trains carrying refugees from one country to the other, towns burned to the ground, and bodies thrown in the streets. Historians estimate between two hundred thousand and two million people were killed.

Why communities that had coexisted for hundreds of years attacked each other remains unclear. Some experts fault the British and their "divide-and-rule" strategy, which provided some

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electoral privileges for the Muslim minority, about 25 percent of the population. Others point to tensions between Hindu and Muslim political movements, which rallied constituents along religious lines. Around thirty-five million Muslims stayed in India after partition.

How did religion factor into India's constitution?

The country's now seventy-year-old constitution enshrines egalitarian principles, including social equality and non-discrimination. The word "secular" was added to the preamble in 1976, but the constitution does not explicitly require the separation of religion and government.⁵

Leaders of the Congress party who fought for independence advocated for an India that recognised all citizens and faiths as equal. Gandhi, who envisioned a secular state free from discrimination, was assassinated in 1948 by a Hindu nationalist. Nehru, India's first prime minister, believed that secularism was essential to building a peaceful society and avoiding another tragedy like what followed partition; he saw those

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trying to divide India along religious lines, especially Hindu groups, as the nation's greatest threat.

How did Hindu nationalists come to power?

Hindu nationalism was first articulated in the 1920s by Indian author and politician V. D. Savarkar in his book *Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu?*. Hindu nationalists believe Hindus are the “true sons of the soil” because their holy lands are in India, whereas the Christian and Muslim holy lands are outside it. They generally champion policies intended to make India a Hindu state. Many see Indian Muslims as suspect foreigners, despite the fact that most are descendants of Hindus who converted to Islam. Hindu nationalists point to partition and the creation of Pakistan as the ultimate manifestation of Muslim disloyalty.⁶

Political tensions started to strain India's secular model in the 1980s. After suffering an electoral defeat in

1977, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi exploited religious divisions to help return the Congress party to power. Gandhi, who was assassinated by Sikh bodyguards in 1984, was succeeded by her son, Rajiv, who further favoured Hindus. “Congress's sustained move toward Hindu majoritarianism over several decades created fertile ground for the more extreme ideology of the BJP,” Kanchan Chandra writes in *Foreign Affairs*.

Founded in 1980, the BJP traces its origins to the political wing of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a Hindu nationalist paramilitary volunteer group. The BJP came to power in 1998 elections, though it shelved its more radical goals to hold together a coalition it led until 2004 when the Congress party regained power. These goals included ending the special status of Kashmir, a disputed Muslim-majority region; constructing a Hindu temple in the northern city of Ayodhya; and creating a uniform civil code so all citizens would have the same personal laws. (There is currently a separate Muslim personal law for issues such as marriage and inheritance.)⁷

In 2014, the BJP won a single-party majority for the first time in the Lok Sabha - the lower house of parliament and India's most influential political body - making party leader Narendra Modi prime minister. The party again secured a majority in 2019



after a divisive campaign filled with anti-Muslim messaging, and Modi's government is expected to stay in power for its full five-year term ending in 2024.

What types of discrimination do India's Muslims face?

Muslims have experienced discrimination in areas including employment, education, and housing. Many encounter barriers to achieving political power and wealth, and lack access to health care and basic services. Moreover, they often struggle to secure justice after suffering discrimination, despite constitutional protections.

Over the last two decades, the representation of Muslims in parliament has stagnated: after the 2019 elections, Muslims held just 5 percent of seats. That's partly due to the rise of the BJP, which by mid-2022 had no Muslim members of its party in parliament.

Meanwhile, a 2019 report by India-based nongovernmental organisation ***Common Cause*** found that half of police surveyed showed anti-Muslim bias, making them less likely to intervene to stop crimes against Muslims. Analysts have also noted widespread impunity for those who attack Muslims. In recent years, courts and government bodies have sometimes overturned convictions or withdrawn cases that accused Hindus of involvement in violence against Muslims. States have increasingly

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passed laws restricting Muslims' religious freedoms, including anti-conversion laws and bans on wearing headscarves in school.⁸

In addition, authorities have turned to extrajudicial means to punish Muslims, through a practice critics call "bulldozer justice." In 2022, authorities in several states destroyed people's homes, alleging that the demolished buildings lacked proper permits. However, critics said they primarily targeted Muslims, some of whom had recently participated in protests. In response, India's Supreme Court said that demolitions "cannot be retaliatory," though the practice has continued.

Recent controversial actions taken with regard to Muslims

In December 2019, the parliament passed and Modi signed the Citizenship Amendment Act, which allows for the fast-tracking of citizenship for Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi, and Christian migrants from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. Critics say the law is discriminatory because

it excludes Muslims and applies a religious criteria for the first time to the question of citizenship. The Modi government argues that the law is designed to provide protection for vulnerable religious minorities who faced persecution in these three Muslim-majority countries.⁹

At the same time, the BJP promised in its 2019 election manifesto to complete a National Register of Citizens (NRC). The NRC was created in the 1950s for the unique case of the state of Assam to determine whether residents were Indian citizens or migrants from what is now neighboring Bangladesh. In 2019, the Assam government updated its register, which excluded nearly two million people. If implemented nationwide, all Indians would be required to prove their citizenship. Critics say this process could render many Muslims stateless because they lack necessary documents and are not eligible for fast-tracked citizenship under the Citizenship Amendment Act.

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Modi has meanwhile diminished the political standing of what was India's only Muslim-majority state: Jammu and Kashmir. In August 2019, the government split the state, which lies in the mountainous border region in dispute with Pakistan, into two territories and stripped away its special constitutional autonomy. Since then, Indian authorities have cracked down on the rights of people in the region, oftentimes under the guise of maintaining security. They shut down the internet eighty-five times in 2021, harassed and arrested journalists, and detained prominent political figures and activists. Dozens of civilians have been killed by armed groups since the division, despite government claims that the security situation had improved.

“The longer Hindu nationalists are in power, the greater the change will be to Muslims’ status and the harder it will be to reverse such changes,” says Ashutosh Varshney, an expert on Indian intercommunal conflict at Brown University.

What have been the recent largest outbursts of violence?

Babri Masjid, 1992

Disputes over the mosque in the northern city of Ayodhya have turned deadly in recent decades. Hindus claim a general from the Muslim Mughal empire built the mosque on



the birthplace of the Hindu deity Ram during the sixteenth century. In 1992, Hindu militants destroyed the mosque. An estimated three thousand people, most of them Muslim, died in ensuing riots—the deadliest religious clashes since partition. In 2020, Modi set the cornerstone for a new Hindu temple on the site after the Supreme Court approved its construction.

Gujarat riots, 2002

Nationwide clashes broke out after a train of Hindu pilgrims traveling from Ayodhya through the western state of Gujarat caught fire, killing dozens of people. Blaming Muslims for starting the fire, Hindu mobs throughout Gujarat killed hundreds of Muslims, raped Muslim women, and destroyed Muslim businesses and places of worship. Opposition politicians, human rights groups, and U.S. lawmakers criticized Modi, then Gujarat's chief minister, and the BJP for not doing enough to prevent the violence and in some cases encouraging it. An Indian government investigation said the train fire was an accident, but conflicting reports have said it was arson.

Muzaffarnagar riots, 2013

In towns near the city of Muzaffarnagar, more than sixty people were killed in clashes that broke out between Hindus and Muslims after two Hindu men died in an altercation with Muslim men. An estimated fifty thousand people, most of them Muslim, fled the violence;

Hindu mob attacks have become so common in recent years that India's Supreme Court has warned that they could become the “new normal”

many lived in relief camps for months, and some never returned home.

Anti-Muslim mobs

Hindu mob attacks have become so common in recent years that India's Supreme Court warned that they could become the “new normal.” One of the most common forms of anti-Muslim violence is vigilante groups attacking people rumored to trade or kill cows, which many Hindus believe are sacred. At least forty-four people, most of them Muslims, have been killed by these so-called cow protection groups, according to a 2019 Human Rights Watch report. Muslim men have also been attacked after being accused of “love jihad,” a term used by Hindu groups to describe Muslim men allegedly trying to seduce and marry Hindu women to convert them. Hundreds of Muslim men have been arrested for violating anti-conversion laws that several BJP-led states passed in an effort to prevent love jihad.

New Delhi violence, 2020

Violence broke out as Muslims and others protested the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in New Delhi.

Around fifty people were killed, most of them Muslim, in the capital city's worst communal violence in decades. Some BJP politicians helped incite the violence, and police reportedly did not intervene to stop Hindu mobs from attacking Muslims. A 2021 Human Rights Watch report found that authorities had not investigated police complicity, while they had charged more than a dozen protesters.

Protests over Islamophobic rhetoric, 2022

In May, two BJP officials made profane comments about Prophet Mohammed, leading to deadly protests across India and condemnation from Muslim-majority countries. The BJP suspended the officials. The following month, two Muslim men killed a Hindu man who supported one of the BJP officials in an attack they filmed and shared online.

"The idea was that if you were a Muslim, you were liable to be attacked anywhere, anytime.", says Ghazala Jamil, Assistant Professor, Jawaharlal Nehru University.

Although anti-Muslim sentiment is rising among Hindus, not all Hindus and not all people who voted for the BJP are anti-Muslim

Critics say that BJP officials have ignored recent violence against Muslims. "During Modi's first five-year term, there were continuous attacks on Muslim individuals, which kind of made the community feel under siege," says Ghazala Jamil, an assistant professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi. "The idea was that if you were a Muslim, you were liable to be attacked anywhere, anytime." Hate speech and misinformation spread online have also encouraged violence against Muslims.¹⁰

Who wants to preserve India's secularism?

Experts note that although anti-Muslim sentiment is rising among Hindus, not all Hindus and not all people who voted for the BJP are anti-Muslim. Both Muslims and Hindus, including activists, legal scholars, and students, have fought against the BJP's moves to undermine India's secularism. For example, after the Citizenship Amendment Act was passed, chief ministers of several states said they would not implement the law and nearly two thousand academics and professionals signed a statement condemning it for violating the spirit of the constitution.

How is the world responding to the rising discrimination in India?

Many foreign governments and international bodies have condemned the BJP's discrimination of Muslims, citing actions in Kashmir, the Citizenship Amendment Act, and anti-Muslim rhetoric as particular concerns.



The UN human rights office described the Citizenship Amendment Act as “fundamentally discriminatory.” Iran, Kuwait, and Qatar were among the Muslim-majority countries that lodged formal complaints against India in 2022 over public officials’ Islamophobic remarks. The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), a group of fifty-seven member states, called on India to curb the “growing spate of hatred and defamation of Islam” and “systematic practices against Indian Muslims.”

Successive U.S. administrations have been reluctant to publicly call out India’s abuses as they have boosted ties with the country. For example, when President Donald Trump visited India in February 2020, he praised Modi’s commitment to religious freedom and said nothing about the outbreak of violence in Delhi. The Joe Biden administration has reportedly voiced concerns in private, while expanding cooperation with India including through the so-called Quad. Meanwhile, in its 2020 report, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, an independent government agency, classified India as a “country of particular concern”—its lowest rating—for the first time since 2004. The latest reports have maintained that designation and urged the U.S. government to sanction Indian officials responsible for abuses. Some members of Congress have also expressed concerns.¹¹

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Is Islamophobia becoming the norm in today’s India?

The BJP has long faced accusations of stoking anti-Muslim sentiment in India and pursuing policies that discriminate against Muslims and other religious minorities. In March, India objected to the creation of a United Nations-recognised international day to combat Islamophobia that was deftly coordinated by Pakistan under the leadership of former Prime Minister Imran Khan. But, still there was no large-scale condemnation of India for doing so. Now, the situation has turned. And the Arabian Gulf is furious at this Hindutva demagoguery.

Writing on 11 Nov, 2021 parliamentarian Shashi Tharoor opines that over the last seven years in India, the persecution of Muslims has been gradually normalised, and Indians have become increasingly inured to it. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party are entirely to blame.¹¹

Referring to a recent incident Tharoor writes that after India’s recent defeat by Pakistan at the T20 World Cup

There has also been a dramatic increase in lynching of Muslims, especially for the “offense” of transporting or consuming beef

cricket tournament, Indian bowler Mohammed Shami confronted vicious trolling on social media. It was the latest display of the Islamophobic bigotry that has consumed Indian society under the rule of Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

Shami had performed poorly in the match. But so had ten other Indian players in the rout by Pakistan. Shami was singled out because he is a Muslim. His failure was viewed not merely as a sporting issue, but as a failure to do his best against an opposing team composed of his co-religionists.

Unpleasant as it was, the Shami episode pales in comparison to other recent incidents of Islamophobia in India. In Darrang district, in the northeastern state of Assam, the state’s BJP government launched an eviction drive against Muslims whom it decided were “illegal settlers” on public land. During a protest against the evictions, police shot and beat a villager, and a photographer officially documenting the demolition drive brutally stomped

him, in full view of cameras, even after his body appeared lifeless.

Video footage of the murderous assault went viral on social media, prompting much hand-wringing among those sections of the public not yet inured to stories of violent hate crimes against its Muslim minority, which have proliferated under BJP rule. In recent years, a spate of inflammatory anti-Muslim rallies have sometimes erupted in violence. In February 2020, riots consumed parts of the capital, New Delhi, leaving more than 53 dead. Most of the victims were Muslim.

There has also been a dramatic increase in lynchings of Muslims, especially for the “offense” of transporting or consuming beef (the cow is considered holy in Hinduism). Most states have enacted laws prohibiting the slaughter of cows, and both police and self-appointed mobs are enforcing them with greater zeal than judgment. Cow “vigilantes” have been known to beat Muslims, forcing them to chant Hindu religious slogans. Such hate crimes are committed with impunity.

As disturbing as these trends are, they should not be surprising, given that senior political figures express their bigotry openly. Modi once declared that anti-government protesters could be identified by their clothes – that is, traditional Muslim attire. And prior to



the 2019 general election, BJP President Amit Shah called Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants “termites” and pledged that a BJP government would “pick up infiltrators one by one and throw them into the Bay of Bengal.” Islamophobic sentiment is stoked further via social media, often in BJP-curated WhatsApp groups, where the sins – both real and imagined – of past Muslim invaders and rulers are blamed on the entire community.

Whereas previous governments sought to temper communal passions, promote harmony, and provide official support (including tax incentives) for efforts to promote India’s pluralism and diversity, the BJP unapologetically embraces an intolerant majoritarian Hindutva ideology. Those close to the ruling establishment routinely excoriate the Muslim minority – and previous governments’ alleged appeasement of it – as a threat to India’s Hindu identity.

Tharoor says that under BJP rule, campaigns have been launched against interfaith romance (with Muslim men being accused of waging “love jihad” to entrap Hindu women), religious conversion (despite it being permitted by India’s constitution), and Muslim practices of marriage, divorce, and alimony (which are viewed as incompatible with women’s rights). A popular apparel firm was browbeaten into withdrawing an advertising

campaign deemed by zealots to be inserting Muslim elements into the Hindu festival of Diwali. A Muslim religious gathering was deemed a COVID-19 super-spreader event, even as the far larger Hindu Kumbh Mela festival was allowed – even encouraged – to proceed.

Shashi is of the view that the BJP government also enacted a law offering fast-track citizenship to refugees from neighboring Muslim-majority countries – provided they were not Muslim. And family-planning campaigns have been portrayed as efforts to preserve India’s “demographic balance” – India is 80% Hindu – in the face of higher Muslim fertility.

What dismays liberals like me is how thin the veneer of India’s constitutional secularism has turned out to be. In just seven years of BJP rule, the cultural pluralism and Hindu-Muslim amity that India has touted for decades have been annihilated.

What dismays liberals like me is how thin the veneer of India’s constitutional secularism has turned out to be. The cultural pluralism and Hindu-Muslim amity that India has touted for decades have been annihilated: Shashi Tharoor

There was a time when government officials would point proudly to Muslims in prominent positions as evidence of India's ability to overcome the bitter legacy of Partition with Pakistan. Today, Muslims are dramatically underrepresented in the police forces and elite central administrative services, and they are overrepresented in the prisons. Sentiments that would have been deemed impolite to express a generation ago are declaimed from political platforms. The police often enable, rather than stop, the torment of Muslims.

Islamophobia now seems to have colonized a significant segment of north Indian society, though the south has yet to succumb. India's much-vaunted free press has been complicit – and even

an active participant – in the erasure of its longstanding syncretic cultural traditions.

Under BJP rule, the segregation and disempowerment of Muslims – the division of Indian society into “us” and “them” – is being gradually normalized, and Indians are becoming desensitized to the routine expression and practice of anti-Muslim bigotry. A Muslim who points this out will be told to “go to Pakistan.” Hindus like me are derided as “anti-national.”

I have been called that myself. In 2015, speaking in parliament, I repeated a friend's observation: in BJP-ruled India, it is safer to be a cow than a Muslim. Sadly, that rings even truer today, Tharoor wrote.





Conclusion

We can conclude that Islamophobia in India is multi-dimensional, all pervasive, deeply rooted (particularly in the urban settings), and dangerously ascendant, especially in the ways that affect marginalised Muslim populations in economically deprived or politically conflicted regions. Muslims in India have to contend with racist stereotypes, prove their patriotism, face increasing physical and symbolic violence, and still be seen as latent Pakistani stooges or probable non-citizen migrants or refugees. What Muslims face in India, is egregious violation of rights and accelerating violence; this is exacerbated both by the use of technology in the form of surveillance and large-scale data registers, restrictions on Internet use, social media hate, and newer “non-lethal crowd control” style weaponry, and by developing infrastructures such as detention camps or enacting legislation to enable land grabs or demographic change.

The Hindutva ideology is an important source of violence in India. It is driving the anti-Muslim violence in the country, which has assumed grave proportions in recent years. The anti-Muslim violence has manifested itself not only in rising physical attacks on Muslims but in other insidious and no-less dangerous ways: virulent hate speech and demonisation of Muslims and their way of life. Equally dire are ongoing moves on the legislative front that are undermining Muslim rights and their identity and could even strip millions of Muslims of their citizenship. The rapid inroads that Hindutva is making into India’s Constitution, the manner in which it is prejudicing the outlook of people and colouring social interaction and politics should concern not just Muslims or Christians but Hindus as well, and it does not augur well for the Indian democratic and secular credentials and traditions.

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Justice and Empowerment of Minorities (JEM) is an initiative of Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind, the country's oldest and largest socio-cultural organisation of Indian Muslims.

JEM's mission is to safeguard the human rights of country's minorities while countering hate speech targeted against them. It endeavours to collect, collate and present cases of harassment, in any form, perpetrated against the minorities by right-wing elements. It's aim is to promote Rule of Law and access to justice, equal rights, citizen's security and human rights, in addition to defending and empowering religious minorities, marginalised and persecuted individuals, groups and communities through Advocacy.

JEM's aim is to empower and provide justice and judicial assistance to the victims of such crimes, which could be categorised under 'Hate Crimes'. It further aims to strengthen the constitutional edifice of the country, which guarantees the rights and dignity of minority groups, apart from helping to build a vibrant, thriving and affluent India.

JEM publishes four Quarterly Reviews and an Annual Review every year, highlighting the hate crimes against minorities, and additionally responding to marginalisation and persecution of minorities, in addition to ensuring implementation of equal rights, justice and peace, religious tolerance and coexistence in the country.



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