

How does India deal with Political Islam?

By Aditi Bhaduri

There is very little knowledge in India about political Islam. What is in the public domain filters in mostly through foreign media and literature. The discourse is limited to within the Muslim community and out of the domain of average Indians; at times analysts or policy influencers have touched upon it but couched in very politically correct terms. This is strange considering in the modern world India was the nursery of political Islam through institutions like the still functioning seminary at Deoband, Firangi Mahal and others. This in turn created first the concept and later the state of Pakistan. For historical and social reasons the state of India treated with kid gloves any expression of Islamism.

However, what Indians fear and what is often debated interchangeably with political Islam are Muslim separatism and Islamist or jihadi terrorism - both of which have occurred in post-independence India.

Modern state of India was born in the midst of great violence between Hindus and Muslims and the partition of India into Muslim Pakistan and Hindu-majority India. Much of the educated Muslim gentry, especially in northern and central India migrated to Pakistan. Those who stayed back were a handful of rich landed aristocrats who had too much to lose should they migrate, and the much larger community of poor and little educated Muslim who could not afford the migration. Ideologues of political Islam like Abu Ala Maududi were actually against partition of India, which they deemed demoted the failure of Islam in India - success was to convert the whole of India to Islam, or like the earlier rulers establish Sharia across entire India. It was considered that Islamists had all migrated to Pakistan and that was the end of political Islam in India.

For a number of reasons - historical, political, and socio-economic - the Constitution of India allowed communities to follow their own particular laws (deriving from their different religions) in civil matters, while the criminal code was common for all. Any attempt at external activism or change regarding the Muslim community was seen and interpreted as an incroachment on the community's right and a violation of India's secularism. The result has been that communities live pretty much segregated from each other, the ghettoisation of Muslims and the entrenchment of some of the most regressive practices within them. While there have been some reformers within the community the strangle hold of the clergy out did them. The clergy, in order to keep itself relevant, discouraged reforms, to the extent of once even imposing a fatwa against polio drops for children once. They often act as intermediaries between political parties and their constituencies, promising votes to whoever patronised them. Meanwhile institutions like Darul Uloom Deoband flourished because India's laws guarantee total autonomy for minority institutions.

India's liberals lobby has also colluded in keeping Indian Muslim's largely poor and backward. With time the community grew more assertive of their identity, visible mostly through its external markers. The oil boom in the Gulf region when many Muslims travelled there to work and send back money home further changed their attitude. Many of the syncretic traditions that had marked India's Muslims disappeared, and began to be replaced by a rigid Salafist ideology, often called "Wahabism" here. Closure of Sufi shrines, the mushrooming of organisations like Ahl i Hardee's, Alh I Quran, and other

preaching a rigid Islam, the widespread use of the hijab (not traditionally the Muslim head gear in India), greater segregation of the sexes as well as from India's other community were the manifestation of this rigidity. All of this, combined with political disenfranchisement and external instigation from Pakistan, erupted in the separatist movement in Jammu and Kashmir, the only Muslim majority state in India. The tiny Hindu minority community was ethnically cleansed from the state. The government came down heavily because though India is a federation its constitution does not allow for secession of any federal unit.

The insurgency in Kashmir, even with greater autonomy than in the rest of India, became an Islamist jihad, whose main backer and recruits were drawn from the different wings of the Kashmir branch of Jamaat I Islami, the party Maududi had founded, and whose aim became the establishment of Sharia law in Kashmir through jihad. They were amply aided by arms, funds, training by Pakistan's military intelligence.

Since then, there are allegations that a soft separatism flourishes in pockets of India, while jihadi terrorism has struck time and again beginning at least since 1991. Organisations like the Students Islamic Movement of India provided ideological fodder and recruits. Others like the Indian Mujahideen sprang up. A turning point came with the 9/11 attacks in 2001 in New York. The perpetrators were educated and lived privileged lives. The power of indoctrination came to the fore.

How did the government deal with these challenges?

The government has no clear cut policy, at times it even appears to be confused. It's approach is to deal with separatism and jihadism in a way that does not alienate the larger community as communal unrest in India would be disastrous for the country; it would also cost the ruling party, whichever is in power, its government.

It has therefore tried to use the carrot and the stick policy.

Carrot and stick policy

The government came down heavily on separatists and jihadists in Kashmir and elsewhere. SIMI was banned: the Indian Mujahideen stands decimated. Those who have been found guilty of terrorism or abetting terrorism have been handed the death penalty and executed, though after a lengthy judicial process, though India uses the death penalty very sparingly and in the rarest of the rare cases.

Others, like the case recently of researcher Sharjeel Imam, who had been found espousing Muslim unity to dismember India have been taken into custody and a judicial process is being followed with the case being sub juice.

However, it did not ban groups like Ahl I Hadees stressing a separate Muslim identity, or the Deoband seminary, or even preachers like Zakir Naik. The reason was primarily not to alienate the Muslim community who would perceive any such move as marginalization of the community. There was also

fear that it may cause law and order problems as with increased assertiveness Muslim groups had by then also begun to resort to violence for perceived wrongs.¹

The ban on Zakir Naik came only after Bangladesh lodged a complaint against him and accused him of abetment to terror attacks inside Bangladesh, and already after a number of countries like UK had banned his entry. Inside India, though there had been numerous complaints against his divisive, communal speeches, and regressive ideas² not just by non-Muslims but even by many Muslims who did not agree with his interpretation of Islam.

The carrot policy

On the other hand the government has embarked on a long-term strategy to empower Muslims, especially the youth, through education, jobs, reforms, legislation, and women's empowerment. In this it synergises with intelligence agencies, law enforcement officials, religious leaders, and local communities.

Establishment of Ministry of Minority Affairs

A dedicated ministry to ensure and promote the welfare of India's many minority communities was established in 2006. Most important aspect was the scholarships and grants disbursed for students of these communities from low income groups, and for establishment of minority institutions to promote the education and professional training of members of minority communities. The Muslim community as the largest minority community gets the lion's share of all these grants and scholarships.

Reform of madrassahs

According to official data India has 24,010 madrasas, of which 4,878 were unrecognised, in 2018-19. This appears to be sanitized data when compared with data offered by researchers. For instance, quoting from government data Arjumand Ara, of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Delhi writes that 500,000 madrassahs exist in India with 50,000,000 students enrolled in them; part time and evening madrassahs are not included in them.

Historically madrassahs in India have been inward looking, and resistant to change and modernization with few exceptions, continuing to stress on Islamic theology, jurisprudence with little to offer students for jobs and employment in a modern world. Yet, they continue to attract millions of students from impoverished homes because they offer free education, free food and many even free boarding and lodging. In many rural and remote places they offer the only avenues for any kind of education. The cycle of poverty, unemployment, and backwardness is thus perpetuated.

¹ For instance, the violence indulged in against Bangladeshi author Tasleema Nasrin at several locations in India because her books were deemed offensive to Muslims.

² For instance, he espouses polygamy

However, madrassahs also earned a reputation for fostering separatism, as they kept their students away from the mainstream, and also as places for terror recruits. Growth of madrassahs in Kashmir for instance, coincided with the rise of militancy there. Intelligence agencies have pointed to mushrooming of madrassahs on India's vulnerable border areas with foreign funds, primarily from Pakistan to destabilize India³, but also from Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Qatar.

Post 9/11 the madrassahs came under security scanner and the government embarked on the path to modernize them. Darul Uloom Deoband, the largest seminary in South Asia, for instance, received government support to start a computer centre and an English language center. Numerous other initiatives for the spread of computer education, teaching of science and other subjects in sync with the modern world, better qualified teachers have been initiated.

Government aid and involvement is kept invisible most of the times to not create perceptions of government interference in community affairs.

Funds and revenues are also coming in for scrutiny but the challenge is that constitution guarantees full autonomy and many exceptions for minority institutions, this includes funds, which are not always transparent as some of it comes through *zaqaat*, etc., which are difficult to account for.

Promoting Sufism

The current right of centre BJP government in power in India under Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been actively promoting Sufi Islam, as an antidote to rigid puritanical Islam that has formed cleavage between India's Muslims and majority Hindu population. This initiative gained traction particularly after the rise of Da'esh in Iraq and Syria.

India's Muslims minority, whatever their tensions with non-Muslim Indians maybe, have been one of the most peaceful Muslim communities in the world. Representing the third largest Muslim population in the world, it is remarkable that they had kept aloof from global jihad, though jihadist groups did sprout in India but were quickly crushed. However, Da'esh has had a different impact with Indians joining them or offering the group support in different ways like online recruitment, drafting literature etc. Though numbers are small this has rung alarm bells in Delhi. Sufis are generally considered more peaceful, syncretic, tolerant and uninterested in political power.

The government has extended support to Sufi shrines, sponsored activities like the World Sufi Forum, helped in establishing Sufi mosques, funded alternate narratives online, online portals and news sites promoting the Sufi world view, including allegiance to India as the motherland, and various related activities.

The government has also pitched in the support of the Shia community, who representing only 20% of India's Muslims keep a low profile and have repeatedly stressed their nationalist credentials. When Da'esh rose in the Middle East some Sunni organisations had offered support to them. The brutal

³ It is well known that the 2008 Mumbai attack perpetrators from Pakistan had received help from within India.

treatment of the Shias in their hands also drove the Shia community closer to the Indian state as many of them have linkages with Shia communities and Imams in Iran and Iraq.

Women's Empowerment

Women's empowerment has been another prong of the government not just to counter Muslim separatism or extremism but in general for the upliftment of women of all communities across India. Successive legislation like the law against domestic violence has helped women. However, reforms from within the Muslim community have been very slow. The result has been that Muslim women continue to suffer from regressive practices like polygamy, triple talaq, *halala* system, and in some Muslim communities female genital mutilation. Though activists have been trying to bring an end to them they are outnumbered by more orthodox voices within the community - both clergy and community leaders who do not want to lose their control and power within the community.

In this regard the government has been supporting women activists who are engaging with grassroots communities to provide a more gendered interpretation of Islam, like drawing up women friendly marriage contracts, building mosques for women, so that they are not held hostage to misogynistic laws. However, all of this usually happens with keeping the state's role in the background so not to scare away or alienate the community.

Legislation

Related to this is a legislation that the government passed in 2019 that made divorce by triple talaq (talaq e biddah) illegal. The BJP government was the first in India to get parliament to pass a law regarding Muslim civil rights. Though it was met by stiff opposition from opposition parties, many Muslim community leaders, and liberals, it was welcomed, often privately by large numbers of Muslim women, and by Indians at large.

This is also a prong in the government's endeavor to bring in a unified civil code for all Indians and narrow down differences. However, it is difficult to envisage that happening anytime in the near future and will require sustained and uphill effort.

Clamping down on foreign funds

More pertinent to the challenge of political Islam is the government's clamping down on foreign funding for NGOs and activists in India. This has drawn large flack from the human rights groups and the left-liberal lobby. The government says it is a necessary step in battling activities that are apparently non-violent and seemingly for a good cause but are instigated by funding from abroad to encourage movements and actions by Indians which are detrimental to India's interests and security in the long run.

According to Kumar Anikhet, who is a Finance Consultant and specialist in Islamic Finance working for long years with the community, the 2020 protests against a proposed citizenship law by the government was in large part instigated and funded by foreign money. While usually such funding has often come from Pakistan, a significant amount this time came from China, who is also interested in destabilizing India.

Similarly, according to Kumar, Qatar has now emerged a major funder for many of the Islamist organisations or activities that are thriving in India, like the Popular Front of India (PFI), whose student wing the Campus Front of India created the recent hijab controversy in the country. The PFI is notorious for engaging in violence and for indoctrination of youth. It's favorite method is taking up an issue under the garb of human rights and then giving it a communal spin, garnering support both inside and especially outside India.

More recently funding from Turkey has come under the scanner of the Indian security agencies. Turkey has recently begun sending funds to Indian universities, funding Turkish studies as well as offering many scholarships to Indian students and jobs to Indian journalists mostly from Kashmir.

Challenges

India's approach to political Islam is severely riddled with challenges. First, there is little awareness and understanding amongst the people at large of the phenomenon itself. The government is unable to take any preemptive steps because India's democracy and its human rights lobby make it difficult to do so. So it can take measures only when there is a visible danger presented in the form of any concrete seditious or terrorist activity. It is equally important to understand that there is very little scope for political Islam to achieve its end goal any time in the near future - that is set up a state ruled on Sharia. However, the threat of separatism is always present, though not always or widely discussed.

Successive government's, including the current government, have shied away from taking preemptive measures like banning organisations like the PFI or Tabhleeghi Jamaat, which is banned in several Muslim countries, or even imposing any dress code like banning the hijab or burkha. Banning them has the potential to spark off national wide protests and riots which will severely damage not only society's fibre but also the economy.

Earlier governments had also failed to usher in reforms regarding the Muslim community in large part due to their political calculations. The current BJP government came to power with an anti-minority image. Because of this Muslim community has, by and large, preferred to keep itself aloof from it. But Modi's government has actually increased support, funds and grants for minority welfare schemes, scholarships, and so on. Many of their policies like the banning of the triple talaq has resonated with large sections of the Muslim community, especially women, but as one well known activists (Name withheld) told me they prefer not to go public with this support for fear of losing credibility with their community and sometimes out of fear of violence.

Nevertheless, many community members are working with government resources because it is from within the Muslim community itself that opposition to rigid Salafist practices and ideologies has come.

Beaurocratic red tape and pervasive corruption in Indian society further compounds the challenge.

Political Islam does not imply violence or terrorism. But its incipient manifestations are dress code, rigid piety, stress on a separate identity. In the Indian context the threat of political Islam is not in the establishment of Sharia rule but in violence extremism and separatism.

