

India: Spreading fear through stereotypes – the politics of “love jihad”

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How does Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s lofty slogan Sab ka Saath, Sab ka Vikaas (inclusion and development for all) square up with India’s social-political reality as vulnerable groups such as the religious minorities experience it? The honest answer is that these groups had the most to fear from a Bharatiya Janata Party election victory, and some of their fears are coming true. The BJP’s leaders, Mr Modi included, have done very little to allay them although it’s their duty to do so.

A common fear among India’s Muslims and Christians was that they would continue to face exclusion and discrimination in subtle and crude forms while being asked to subordinate their specific religious identities to a “larger” pan-Indian national entity or cultural super-identity which is essentially Hindu. It was bad enough that RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat demanded that all Indians must be called Hindu just as people who live in England are called English.

What was worse is that the Modi Cabinet’s sole Muslim, minority affairs minister Najma Heptullah, endorsed this by saying that there’s nothing wrong with the term Hindu being used for all Indians as a label of “national identity” (*Hindustan Times*, August 29). Under flak, she denied this and said she had used “Hindi”, an Arabic geographical description, not “Hindu”. This claim was belied by the audiotape which the paper posted on its website.

Earlier, Ms Heptullah had declared that Muslims, who form 13.4 percent of India’s population, cannot be called a minority; the term is valid only for tiny groups like the Parsis. How she can reconcile this with the post she occupies passes comprehension.

The BJP had made a dismal start in the recent Lok Sabha elections by giving tickets to just seven Muslims of the 482 candidates it fielded (only 1.45 percent of the total), not one of whom won. This is the first time in Independent India when the ruling party has no Muslim Lok Sabha MP. This speaks poorly of inclusion and breadth of representation of all communities. The same trend was also reflected in the abysmal share (0.7 percent) of funds allocated to minority welfare in the latest budget.

At a symbolic level, Mr Modi himself sent out a similar message. He has put on every conceivable kind of headgear (Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist and tribal included) in the past six months, but has taken care never to wear a skull-cap, even when one was offered to him. His is also the first government which did not host an Iftar party during the holy month of Ramzan, something that even the Vajpayee government did during each of its six years in power.

Symbols do matter. That’s precisely why the government declares national holidays not just on Hindu festivals, but on days that are important to the followers of all significant religions, including Christianity, Sikhism, Jainism, even Zoroastrianism, besides Islam. Many scholars consider this as a hallmark of Indian secularism which does not oppose politics and public life to religion, but follows

the Sarva Dharma Samabhav principle of nondiscrimination between different religions.

The minorities had other fears too—of coercion and violence being unleashed against them by Sangh Parivar elements. These too have materialised with a spate of communal incidents targeting Muslims, with more than 80 riots instigated in the past 100 days in Uttar Pradesh alone, and with 72 Dalit Christians being converted to Hinduism in UP's Aligarh district.

Even worse and potentially more dangerous than this is the insidious communal propaganda being unleashed in Western UP through the "love jihad" campaign, which claims that young Muslim men entice innocent Hindu women into a romantic relationship or marriage only to rape and abuse them after converting them to Islam. This is spreading like wildfire, with disastrous effects in the form of harassment and beating of innocent Muslim men, and the demonisation of an entire community.

No less a person than the BJP's Uttar Pradesh president Laxmikant Bajpai has stooped to this crass level. He said the other day: "Youngsters should be vigilant against 'love jihad'. Why is the government lenient to those who indulge in such practice? Have they got a licence to convert the girls of the majority community?... Have they got the certificate to rape girls because they belong to a particular religion?" He was soon joined by Union minister and senior BJP leader Kalraj Mishra.

The entire Sangh Parivar, including the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Hindu Jagran Manch, Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad and the Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha, have now joined hands to fight "love jihad" in UP, inspired by the likes of Yogi Adityanath, an MP who has been put in charge of the BJP's campaign for the coming 11 byelections in the state.

This is a throwback to the 1920s when the Arya Samaj and Hindu Mahasabha cynically exploited the idea of violation of a woman's body as a means of cohering an artificial Hindu identity and communalising large numbers of people. A shuddhikaran (purification) campaign too was launched as part of this to "reconvert" Muslims, especially Dalit Muslims, to Hinduism.

The central strategy behind such campaigns is to create irrational fears and insecurities and bring them into intimate spaces: the home, the family, the bedroom. The campaign does not need a cataclysmic event or even a genuine case of a forced Hindu-Muslim marriage or conversion. Even carefully planted rumours and whisper campaigns will serve the purpose of sowing fear and polarising communities.

It does not matter if the young Hindu woman, declared a victim, entered into a relationship with a Muslim man out of free will. In fact, the whole idea is to deny such free will or independent agency to the woman. She is, by definition, innocent and gullible, while the Muslim man is wicked, sexually charged and violent. She must be protected against the vile designs of the "love jihadi".

These terrible stereotypes serve a definite purpose: of playing on the patriarchal dread of female sexuality and free will, and of permitting the self-appointed guardians of community "honour" to police the behaviour of young women. This is similar to, but much more despicable than, khap panchayats banning the use of mobile phones by young women, as has happened in a number of villages in Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh.

The anti-"love jihad" campaign is meant to cover up the male aggression inherent to the patriarchal family and to externalise it by attributing it to another, hostile, community. It is socially regressive because it reinforces patriarchy, masculine authority, unfreedom, and the tyranny of hierarchy and women's oppression. It is calculated to inculcate male supremacist values by playing on the idea that a woman cannot make free choices about love, pleasure or marriage; these must always be made for her by men, her self-proclaimed protectors.

It is nothing short of disgraceful that the BJP should stoop to banking on “love jihad” to help it win the coming Assembly byelections, just as it had instigated the Muzaffarnagar communal riots to bring about communal polarisation before the Lok Sabha polls. But then, this is part of a well-established pattern with the Jana Sangh/BJP for decades.

And now Yogi Adityanath, who has a number of hate-crime cases pending against him, and who recently threatened to kill “10 Muslims for every Hindu killed”, has launched a viciously provocative communal attack on Muslims by telling a TV channel: “In places where there are 10 to 20 percent minorities, stray communal incidents take place. Where there are 20 to 35 percent of them, serious communal riots take place and where they are more than 35 percent, there is no place for non-Muslims.” He has also falsely attributed the term “love jihad” to Kerala’s respected Communist leader and former Chief Minister VS Achuthanandan, of all people!

There is a clear case for prosecuting Adityanath under Section 153A of the Indian Penal Code for promoting, on grounds of religion, race or community, disharmony or feelings of enmity, hatred or ill-will between different religious, racial or linguistic communities. But there’s a deafening silence from the BJP’s top leadership on the issue.

In particular, there isn’t even a squeak out of Mr Modi, who exhorted political leaders from the Red Fort to ensure that there is no communal and social strife “for the next 10 years”. But some people will detect a menacing sub-text here: India can safely return to strife after 10 years! Anyway, Mr Modi’s exhortation sounds hollow given what’s happening under own nose.

However, the BJP’s leaders should know better. If they want to build a minimally inclusive and secure society, in which vulnerable groups and religious minorities don’t feel persecuted and constantly fear that they are being reduced to second-class citizens, then the Sangh Parivar, the party and its government must change their ways. Or else, they risk dividing India further—violently and irreparably—for narrow political ends.

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<http://www.prafulbidwai.org/index.php?post/2014/09/11/Spreading-Fear-Through-Stereotypes%3A-The-politics-of-%E2%80%98love-jihad%E2%80%99>