

Communalising the Socio-Political Space and/ amidst the Pandemic

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The politics of pathological religious hatred pursued by India's majoritarian governing party and its myriad affiliates can hardly be overlooked, especially in the context of how it manifested in the Indian government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This is not only because of their ideological positions against India's Muslim minorities but also because when the world (including countries where a good number of Indian expatriates work and live and contribute to India's forex reserves through their remittance economy) was already battling COVID-19, the Union government was busy inflicting on a section of its citizens the pains of what is widely understood as graded and 'fundamentally discriminatory' citizenship.¹ This came to be perceived by Muslims as the State trying to disenfranchise them; as the National People's Register-National Register of Indian Citizens (NPR-NRIC) exercise was sought to be implemented across India, there were massive protests, mainly by Muslims, across the country. The state retaliated to it by resorting to unprecedented and massive repression: imposing financial penalties only upon Muslim citizens and ransacking the libraries and guest houses of universities that were more vocal in voicing their dissent against this kind of faith-based citizenship. The police—across India but mostly in states ruled by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a Hindu Supremacist party—was slapping the harshest possible concocted charges against dissenting student activists and civil rights defenders, to incarcerate them under harshest penalties and harass them through the judicial processes, without any evidence whatsoever.

“Muslims in India have been increasingly at risk since ... 2014. ... BJP leaders have repeatedly made Hindu nationalist and anti-Muslim remarks in their speeches and interviews. These have, at times, encouraged and even incited violent attacks by party-supporters who believe they have political protection and approval. They have beaten Muslim men for dating Hindu women.”²

The peaceful Constitutionalist agitations (against the citizenship law) by Muslim women, youth and students, in New Delhi and elsewhere, which were joined by many non-Muslims

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too, were sought to be criminalised. Goons affiliated to saffron outfits were unleashed, firing gunshots straight at the agitators, that too in broad daylight in the police's presence. These incidents were captured on video and circulated on social media. Yet almost all such goons remain beyond the reach of the agencies meant to enforce law and order. This proves the fact that those dangerous goons have absolute impunity, not only from the politicians and ministers, but also from the police, bureaucracy, judiciary, and sections of the mainstream/popular news channels, not to mention the popular endorsements on social media.³ This further testifies to the growing anti-Muslim hatred in India today.

These events were eventually followed by an episode of gory communal violence in the north-eastern districts of the capital city of New Delhi, in late-February 2020.⁴ It was followed by a gala reception for the USA president, Donald Trump, in New Delhi and Ahmedabad.

All this was happening when India had already reported its first cases of COVID-19, mostly among those coming from abroad. The government did not appear to be bothered about screening incoming passengers on selected airports. Despite the electorally emaciated opposition leader, Rahul Gandhi, imploring the government in early February to be serious about COVID-19, about screening, testing-kits, and strengthening the infrastructure of public hospitals, the ruling regime as well as the vocal middle-class (netizens)—a very significant number of whom appear to have become enamoured with the saffron regime—were paying absolutely no heed.

Suddenly, the Prime Minister became very much concerned about the pandemic and asked citizens to observe a 'Janata Curfew' on 22 March. The government's efforts towards educating citizens about social/physical distancing to avoid infection were so half-hearted and superficial, that in at least one case even a district police chief and the district magistrate took out a public procession in the pre-sunset afternoon on the day of the Janata Curfew. Even while entering the third decade of the 21st century, our scientific awareness is so low and our superstition so deep that people beat plates and clapped to create enough noise to make the deadly virus run away. "While Mr Modi had asked people to step out on their balconies, verandas or doorways and express their appreciation by clapping or beating plates, the Pilibhit officials were criticised on social media for prima facie breaking isolation and social distancing protocols" (Rashid 2020). This was in utter disregard of the Constitutional provision about developing scientific temperament [Article 51 A (h)]. Yet, the PM did not bother to dissuade people from resorting to such superstitious practices even in his subsequent radio addresses. Far from it, the Prime Minister 'thanked the people for the gesture'.⁵

This was followed by a sudden and prolonged lockdown with effect from 25 March 2020. The announcement was made just four hours ahead of its enforcement.⁶ A large number of citizens got stuck and stranded away from their homes.

Given the acute regional imbalance in India's economic and industrial development, for millions of daily-wage earners and labourers—working mostly in the informal sectors—this lockdown predictably turned out to be devastating. They lost jobs and had no food to eat to keep themselves alive. Hunger and looming death made them emotionally more restless to unite with their families back home. As the government appeared least bothered even to feed them, or to let them travel back to their homes, they set out on foot to travel hundreds and thousands of kilometres. “In the first three months of the year, other priorities claimed our top leaders’ attention—anti-CAA protests, US President Donald Trump’s visit, the Motera stadium congregation, communal riots, toppling the MP government”, commented the senior journalist Nalini Singh, calling it the ‘world’s harshest lockdown’, which fell like a ‘guillotine’ on the stranded labourers, on 25 March 2020.⁷

Even in the capital city of New Delhi, lakhs of wage-earners assembled to board buses bound for their hometowns. This mass movement of migrants to their hometowns came to be characterised as reverse migration. More impoverished regions like eastern Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal (particularly its northern districts) are major suppliers of cheap labour. Since decades, such regions, particularly Bihar, are termed ‘the internal colony’ (Sinha 1973).

On their way, many of the wage-earners died of hunger and dehydration. Some were mowed down by vehicles. The most heartrending of such incidents was the crushing of more than a dozen Madhya-Pradesh-bound labourers sleeping on the railway tracks, under a goods train near Aurangabad in Maharashtra.

Harrowing visuals of pregnant women, people carrying small babies, little kids, and older people, travelling on foot through the roads and rail-tracks, shook most of us. Yet, one failed to detect any anger among most of these suffering labourers against the regime which had implemented the lockdown with such shocking suddenness, through just a radio announcement, without spelling out the course of action to facilitate the travels, food, quarantine, sanitisation, etc. [Contrast it with the massive anger against the regime on a horrible rape and brutal killing of a girl onboard a bus in Delhi in December 2012. Even the bone-chilling winter was no deterrence then. Also, contrast it with the ‘movement’ called India Against Corruption (IAC) which had achieved a massive mobilisation of citizens].

This apparent lack of anger against the regime has been puzzling for most observers who at least admit the mismanagement and non-justification of the sudden and unprepared enforcement of the lockdown.

How to comprehend this? Can this be explained through the deep and widespread anti-Muslim hatred or competitive communal polarisation? Is it because non-Muslim labourers think that their sufferings are small contributions towards helping the regime led by Narendra

Modi—the *Hindu Hriday Samrat*—establish the Hindu Rashtra, so that the unwanted components of the Indian demography—the Muslims—would be shown their place?

This essay attempts at finding a possible, if contestable, explanation to this pertinent question. Let me begin this attempt by correlating certain developments in mid-to-late March 2020 (during this pandemic) in my ancestral village in north Bihar, where I was educated and brought up before I migrated to Aligarh Muslim University in 1990 to pursue my higher studies, and where I now work and live.

I refer to my ancestral village because this locality was largely free from communal hatred between Hindus and Muslims until recently (Sajjad 2014). However, things have changed dramatically for the worse in the last few years (Sajjad 2015; 2016; 2018). The villages in our Panchayat and the adjacent ones got extremely alarmed when Chitanand Dvivedi, the Brahman *Mukhiya* (elected village chief) of the Datapur Panchayat (under the Saraiya Police Station, Muzaffarpur District, Bihar, with a mostly-Brahman-and-upper-caste Hindu population), issued a video on social media (specifically on the village WhatsApp groups and Facebook groups). In the video, he shared his desperation about the government's absolute apathy in testing the members of a family of six, at least one of whose members had come back from Gujarat. They had shut themselves in their house and were not responding to the calls/door-knocks of the *Mukhiya* and other neighbours. The *Mukhiya* became suspicious that they might be infected and might soon infect the co-villagers. As soon as this video, mainly indicting the district administration for its alleged apathy, was released and circulated on various WhatsApp groups (including one related to my village, which I am a member of), all of a sudden, another kind of forwarded messages began circulating on these very WhatsApp groups.

A group member, who had recently become a sympathiser of the Sangh outfits, began to push messages about some Muslims working in Arab countries returning to their homes via Nepal. The messages only revealed names and no other details such as fathers' names or their villages. This blatant falsehood was clearly an attempt to give a wicked twist to the issue and shifting the blame for carrying COVID-19 to remote villages on Muslims, rather than on Hindus.

It is important here to note that the one who forwarded this message is educated and quite prosperous economically, belongs to a very prominent and elite family of Bhumihars (upper-caste Hindus) and is a descendent of a freedom-fighter. His family was not known to be anti-Muslim — neither in their everyday-lives nor in electoral-political terms. This thing has very recently undergone a noticeable change.

How to explain his transformation? One possible explanation is as follows. A village adjacent to his village in the Panchayat comprises Muslims ('upper'-caste Shaikhs and 'lower'-caste

Rayeens). Till the 1980s, these Muslims were quite poor. Since the late 1980s, they gradually began to go to the Gulf countries to work and earn as hotel-waiters, drivers, electricians, construction-labourers, and other humble, blue-collared jobs. Gradually, their affluence started becoming visible in their *pucca* houses. In addition to the village's government primary school, they opened a madrasa, preferably for girls, which had good enrolment and attendance. The village's masjid got a loudspeaker along with *minars* (spires) and *gumbad* (domes). Many Gulf-based workers in this village and another adjacent village emerged as high depositors in a nationalised bank branch. Politically, their newfound affluence and their open inclination towards the 'backward' Lalu-Rabri regime (1990–2005) enabled them to 'invest' in elections for the rural local bodies, wherein the elected Panchayat chief or other representatives would invariably be a Muslim of the said village; this was the case in the adjacent Panchayats too. As a result of the economic, educational, and political 'resurgence' of Muslims, one could easily notice growing jealousies among Hindus against these Muslims, even though this is contradictory to the Post-Sachar Evaluation Committee Report (2014), the India Exclusion Report and the latest National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) reports. It, therefore, awaits field-based surveys for wider validation. In a later section of this essay, we will re-examine how this factor caused Hindu-Muslim tensions in recent times.

Coming back to the story in the village WhatsApp group, I immediately intervened to ask about specifics (father's names, villages to which the purported/fictitious Muslims belonged) of those names (said to have stealthily sneaked into the villages after having come back from the Arab countries), so that the veracity of such messages could be checked. When such queries were raised, the group's admin also intervened and advised the member not to circulate messages that could not be verified but could create communal hatred.

Even though the advice of the WhatsApp group admin was heeded, it alarmed many members that people associated with the Sangh outfits, even in the remotest of villages, were trying to communalise the pandemic by putting the blame for the spread of the virus on imaginary Muslims returning from Arab countries and thereby creating an impression that these Muslims were to be blamed for spreading the infection.⁸

Within a few days of this 'spat' on our village WhatsApp group, a faction of the *Tablighi Jamaat* (TJ, with its headquarters at *Markaz* in New Delhi) caught the media's attention, and for the next few weeks, the issue played out in the popular and largely pro-establishment news channels, as if only the TJ was to be blamed for spreading the COVID-19 infection in India.

Should one see a link or interconnection between this and what happened in my village Panchayat and the Panchayats adjacent to it? Does it help us see through the game plan of the media-Sangh nexus conspiring to put the blame for COVID-19 squarely on Muslims?

Let us pause this episode here and analyse what followed once the suffering labourers, mostly Hindu OBCs (Other Backward Classes) and Dalits, began to reach their homes 12 weeks after the lockdown, and faced untold deprivations even as they were quarantined in the schools of those very villages and Panchayats. In the initial days of the lockdown-1, they would discuss that the COVID-19 is mainly a Muslim-specific threat and that Hindus need not bother much about it, except that they should avoid village-markets (*haats*) where they might get in touch with the Muslims. This is how Muslim vendors/retailers' economic boycott got operationalised in the bazaars around our villages. The message of this boycott was hardly subtle. It was made quite explicit to the Muslims, as confided to me by some Muslim retailers/vendors.

By the end of lockdown-4, the rationalisation about the identity-based probability of infection had started to change. Any casual or serious discussion with the Hindu men and women of these villages would invariably tell us that mostly Muslims work in the Arab countries and that they are the ones who have brought this infection endangering the lives of the fellow Hindus.⁹ There are other newly 'saffronised' people, who would begin with some inclination to blame Muslims in conversations on this issue. When probed further about the maltreatment of labourers on reverse-migration, they would reluctantly concede to some extent that the government could have done a little better, but they will quickly add: should Prime Minister Narendra Modi be blamed for every wrong? This desperate haste to absolve the Prime Minister is remarkable and interesting.¹⁰ The PM has succeeded in getting absolved of the suffering unleashed by each of the harsh steps that he has taken, be it the sudden demonetisation in November 2016 or the implementation of Goods and Services Tax (GST) that resulted in a usurpation of the revenues of the federal units by the Union/Central government.¹¹

Equally important would be to understand this tendency to blame Muslims, popularised and perpetuated with the aid of news channels and social media.¹²

In the Hindu neighbourhoods of Aligarh, throughout April, the pandemic was perceived to be confined to the Muslim localities. There was an informal political and administrative pressure on health officials that out of every hundred persons tested, not more than five should be Hindu.¹³ The motive was that the daily list of infected people, based on test reports, should show an over-representation of Muslims. On certain occasions, in its press briefing, the district administration revealed the name of a Muslim who tested positive, while hiding the religious identity of a Hindu.

In such a situation, it so happened that a very prominent real estate builder/ property developer of Aligarh, a Hindu, came to be tested positive and subsequently succumbed to COVID-19. He also happened to have been very close to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). He probably got infected because he hosted a huge gathering on the *terahvin* (post-death

community gathering on the thirteenth day) of his mother who had died of COVID-19 earlier. This gathering was graced by the ‘who’s who’ of the city—legislators, district officers, functionaries of the ruling party, etc.¹⁴ This gathering was in stark defiance of the lockdown enforced by the government to deal with the pandemic. Yet, neither the local media expressed its outrage nor did the district administration initiate any legal/administrative action against the guests and the host. Ever since then, more and more positive cases began to emerge in the Hindu neighbourhoods in Aligarh. This was in sharp contrast to the decreasing number of positive cases amongst Muslims. A separate data was maintained for the Muslims associated with the *Tablighi Jamaat*. Majoritarian pressure about the COVID-Muslim linkage was so great that a group of 80-odd Muslim civil servants had to issue a specific advisory to their co-religionists as to how should they deal with the pandemic to avoid majoritarian vilification of Muslims.¹⁵ No such appeal from Hindu civil servants to their co-religionists came out when the Tirupati temple reported large-scale infection.¹⁶

The *Tablighi Jamaat* (TJ) as a Fall Guy

In the context of the sudden spike in COVID-19 cases in certain Hindu neighbourhoods of Aligarh, when we tried to talk to some people from these neighbourhoods, they had no hesitation in blaming the TJ. These two anecdotes, one from a remote village in north Bihar, hitherto least communalised, and the other from Aligarh (infamous for being prone to communal tension and violence in the post-Independence period) clearly reveal how the pandemic has been communalised.¹⁷

Thus, the Muslim as a convenient fall guy became the popularised narrative. It will not be out of place to add here that the TJ is a movement since the late 1920s, dedicated primarily to helping believers become better Muslims by observing the mandatory daily prayers (Sikand 2002; Noor 2012). In the pre-lockdown period, they routinely had their gatherings of delegates from across the country and abroad, who visited here only after obtaining visas from the Indian government. It was only because of the sudden lockdown that they got stuck in Delhi. There were instances of some Hindu pilgrims stuck elsewhere. But the whipping and lashing, particularly by TV news channels having the most extensive reach, was reserved only for the Muslims who were described as (criminally?) hiding (*chhupey huay*), whereas Hindu gatherings in similar instances, such as the one at Jammu’s Vaishno Devi temple, were termed as stuck/stranded (*phansey huay*).

Further, there were news reports of Muslim vendors who suffered assaults and humiliations in Hindu neighbourhoods.¹⁸ Many Muslim retailers faced an economic boycott in various places, including the village markets and *haats* in Bihar. The Aurangabad bench of the Bombay High Court (21 August 2020), while absolving the TJ, observed: “There was big propaganda in print media and electronic media against the Markaz Delhi and an attempt was made to create a picture that [the Tablighis] were responsible for spreading COVID-19 virus in India.”

Many Muslims and others kept explaining, and also conceding, that the chief of the TJ should have acted more responsibly and should have cancelled the gathering at least by mid-March, even though the Indian government had not issued any prohibition till then. All such explanations were just unable to help mitigate the blame, simply because the popular television news channels, regional and sub-regional editions of vernacular media and the social media were running their own agenda of vilifying Muslims.

Blaming subjugated and excluded groups for a pandemic is not a new phenomenon. As pointed out by Orhan Pamuk, “People have always responded to epidemics by spreading rumour and false information, and portraying the disease as foreign and brought in with malicious intent”; he says that the Christians were blamed ‘in the Roman Empire for the Antonine smallpox plague’, and ‘the Jews were accused of poisoning the wells both in the Ottoman Empire and Christian Europe’. Pamuk also underlines Muslim ‘fatalism’ and adds that historically it had always been harder to convince Muslims to tolerate quarantine measures during a pandemic than Christians, especially in the Ottoman Empire. The commercially-motivated protests that shopkeepers and rural folks of all faiths tended to raise when resisting quarantine were compounded, among Muslim communities, by issues around female modesty and domestic privacy. At the start of the 19th century, Muslim communities demanded ‘Muslim doctors,’ for most doctors were Christians, even in the Ottoman Empire (Pamuk 2020). A similar observation is about the Hindu Rajputs who were ‘furious when they heard about forced segregation (quarantine), finding it unbearable and morally wrong to part with their children and women’ (*The Bombay Gazette* 1896, 6). In this context, let it be further added here that even during the 1896–97 Plague in India, the attitude of the Brahmans in Poona was ‘generally unfriendly’, as noted by Walter Rand, the Plague Commissioner of erstwhile Poona who was killed by the Chapekar Brothers, in his plague report (Rashid 2020).

In this context, an observation made by the Aurangabad bench of the Bombay High Court (21 August 2020) is a damning indictment of the government: “A political government tries to find the scapegoat when there is pandemic or calamity”.

Lynching of Muslims

This rise of anti-Muslim hatred did not happen overnight. A state-sponsored spreading of anti-Muslim hatred has been in effect since 2014 when the BJP came to power at the Centre. The horrific lynching of Mohammad Akhlaq in Dadri in western Uttar Pradesh, very close to Delhi, in September 2015 was the first of many such incidents. These incidents were more frequent in the then-BJP-ruled provinces of Jharkhand, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh.¹⁹ Irfan Ahmad asserts:

“[T]he lynching of Muslims in India is a form of terrorism because it is being done to generate fear for a particular purpose and that purpose is a political one, not a personal one.” (Ahmad 2018)²⁰

The anti-Muslim prejudice of the state agencies stands exposed by the fact that in 30% of the lynching cases, the police registered cases against the Muslim victims or survivors.²¹ Furthermore, only some of even the non-BJP ruled states legislated laws to penalise the lynchers, that too in response to a guideline issued by the Supreme Court in 2017, though law too is no guarantee for the protection of what George Orwell (1945) called the ‘inconvenient minorities’, who ‘will be persecuted, even if laws exist to protect them’.

In its second stint, the incumbent regime resorted to a more virulent form of muscularity in subjugating and persecuting its Muslim citizens. Extending and deepening its anti-Muslim hatred on its re-election in 2019, the BJP regime first snatched away the special status of the only Muslim majority province of Jammu and Kashmir (on 5 August 2019), turning the whole state into a prison (Filkins 2019). It then went ahead with legislating the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA).

Disenfranchisement and Repression of Muslims: A Longstanding Saffron Agenda

India’s amended citizenship law is contrary to the relevant international laws. This is evidenced by the fact that persecuted minorities in many of our neighbouring countries, such as Sri Lanka, whose Tamil minorities face persecution from the Sinhala Buddhist majority, or Myanmar, where Rohingyas face persecution from the Buddhists, or Nepal and Bhutan, where Tibetan Buddhists face discrimination, have been excluded from the protections offered by the Act. Only non-Muslims coming from just three Muslim-majority countries in the neighbourhood are referred to in India’s new citizenship law.

The CAA followed the National Register of Citizenship (NRC) exercise in Assam, which had declared lakhs of Hindus as non-citizens in August 2019. Through the blatantly discriminatory CAA, the BJP government at the Centre sought to announce that the non-Muslims excluded by the NRC in Assam would be granted citizenship through CAA, but not the Muslims. News stories of detention camps being erected in Assam, Karnataka, and elsewhere added to India’s Muslims’ fears. The Assam experience added to the anxieties. In the words of Mihir Desai:

“The Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019 is unconstitutional for its discriminatory and arbitrary provisions. The linked exercises of the National Population Register (NPR) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC) threaten to disenfranchise crores [i.e., millions] of [Muslim] people, rendering them stateless and without rights.”
(Desai 2020)

The CAA is quite consistent with the treatment meted out to the Palestinians by Israel, whose unmistakably Zionist ideology is that only Jews are entitled to citizenship (Smootha 2002; Rubin 2015).

Explaining the Sharper Rise of Hindu Supremacists in the 21st Century

In India, Hindu supremacism and hatred for Muslims has been rising more stridently since the mid-1980s. This has gained further momentum in recent times. Arguably, this manifested first in the western province of Gujarat in January 1985, after the Congress government in the state, led by Madhav Singh Solanki, attempted to enhance from 10% to 28% the reserved quota for the backward classes in public employment and educational institutions, just before Assembly elections. In the list of the OBCs, out of a total of eighty-two castes, at least twenty were from Muslim communities. Interestingly, though the anti-reservation protest started in January, it was only after 18 March 1985 that it suddenly turned into anti-Muslim violence. It is also noteworthy that while the tribals and Dalits had defended the Muslim victims in the communal violence of 1981 in Ahmedabad, they actively participated in the violence, loot and arson of 1985 and 1986. Many scholars have surmised that the root cause of the revival of communalism since the 1980s did not lie in Hindu-Muslim antagonism alone; it was, in fact, an expression of the deepening tensions among the Hindus themselves (Shani 2007; Yagnik and Sheth 2005; Spodek 2011; Sud 2012; Berenschot 2011).

From 1986 onwards, through the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, the saffronisation of India's sociopolitical space kept happening apace. It sought to integrate subordinated Hindu communities with the upper castes. The BJP 'established welfare networks for Dalits, providing them with health support and legal aid, which Dalit leaders were not able to offer' (Shani 2007, 173). The Gujarati diaspora started investing in the saffron project of luring subaltern Hindus (Dalits and Tribes) to the side of *Hindutva*; millions of diasporic dollars and pounds started feeding the *Hindutva* project in India. The Hindu Right's money for charity entered an underfunded sector of the Indian society, whereby it began to leverage enormous power over subaltern populations. The Hindu Right may also have exploited spaces created by the Islamophobia prevalent in the world, especially post-9/11 (the attack on New York's World Trade Centre on 11 September 2001). For instance, a National Hindu Students Forum (UK) pamphlet titled 'Beware!' warns Hindu students that 'Islamic terrorists are operating in British universities', '*jihad* (Holy War) is being waged', and that attempts are being made to convert them (Sud 2008; Anderson and Clibbens 2018). The diasporic funding of a communally divisive agenda was sought to be also accomplished through charitable relief works in the event of natural disasters such as earthquakes and floods (Simpson 2013).

This exercise of creating a type of ethno-Hinduism was sought to be halted by the Union government by implementing the Mandal Commission Report in August 1990, reserving 27% of government jobs and seats in government educational institutions for the OBCs. This was followed soon by the liberalisation-privatisation of the Indian economy in 1991, which, to some extent, caused an economic dislocation of the upper castes, at least in certain parts of India (the 'cow-belt', Hindi-belt, or north India), whereby they shifted to private jobs in

greater numbers. Gujarat, of course, had its own trajectory, where the Hindutva juggernaut kept moving. In Gujarat, the neo-liberal order had ‘radically altered the structure of state and society’, and ‘by isolating Muslims from economic resources and political representation, the organisations of Hindu nationalism enliven their own foundational myths, which state that the Hindu majority needs protection from the troublesome, isolationist and secretive Muslim minority’, where ‘apparently sane and thoughtful people have said hateful things about Muslims’ (Simpson 2006).

After the economic recession of 2008 and the resultant lay-offs (retrenchment) in the private and corporate sectors, when the upper castes came back to get into public employment, they now felt a greater pinch of the OBC reservations. The educated segments of the OBCs and Dalits, on the other hand, had their discontents as they could now realise that public employment had shrunk because of neoliberal economic reforms.²²

Meanwhile, as mentioned earlier, the Muslims had been improving their economic and educational profile. Most of the subaltern Muslims belonged to artisanal and professional classes, such as taxi-drivers, motor mechanics, tyre-tube puncture-fitters, painters, masons, construction labourers, electricians, plumbers, welders, carpenters, and tailors. With liberalisation, these professionals perceptively improved their economic profiles within India’s urban and semi-urban spaces. This is contrary to the Sachar Report and the NSSO Reports, which might not have taken these factors into account. I say this based on my observations about a large number of villages and district towns in Bihar and the districts of and around Aligarh.²³

Since the 1980s, there has been a large-scale migration to the Gulf countries amongst Muslims, where they obtained various kinds of blue-collar employment. These Gulf-based working Muslims invested substantially in the education (preferably technical) of their younger generations/siblings. Their second and third generations, therefore, obtained relatively better-paid employment in the Gulf countries. They now got employment as technicians, engineers, accountants, salespersons, and even as academicians. Their affluence was now becoming quite visible in their neighbourhoods. Their newfound affluence reflected in their houses, masjids, festive/religious and marriage ceremonies.²⁴

Some of these newly-affluent Muslims now invested in local trading, creating an economic competition with, and drawing rivalry and jealousy from, the pre-existing local traders (mostly Hindus).

In terms of political empowerment, their access to politician/legislators became enhanced first through their informal funding of the winnable candidates in elections, and later, through their becoming election-contestants themselves. More particularly, in rural and urban local bodies (ULBs), Muslim representation increased significantly. In Bihar, the Muslim share

was almost 16% in rural local bodies in 2001; it rose significantly when seats came to be reserved for the EBCs (the Extremely Backward Classes or the *Ati Pichhada*), because of the large number of Muslim communities included in that list (Gupta 2001; Pankaj and Singh 2005).²⁵

In the case of Uttar Pradesh, this came to be characterised as ‘Muslim Resurgence’, with a forewarning that the Muslims having ‘massive over-representation in ULBs, that too at the cost of Dalits and non-Muslim OBCs, is a matter of concern and can lead to a range of difficult and dangerous political situations in the future’ (Verma 2012).²⁶ In populous states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, the dominant upper castes were already angry with the Muslims because the post-Congress regimes, led by regional political parties affiliated to the upper OBCs and upper Dalits, had the reliable support of Muslims.

It may be argued here that it was this majoritarian anger that was reflected in the unprecedented Hindu consolidation in the Lok Sabha elections of 2014, as also in 2019, and in the Vidhan Sabha elections in UP in 2017 which saw the least Muslim representation till date; the 2012 UP Assembly elections had elected the highest ever—68 out of 403—Muslim MLAs. In September 2013, there were many episodes of communal violence and displacement in Muzaffarnagar and adjoining districts in western Uttar Pradesh (Ahmed 2013; Jamil 2014). Added to this ‘Muslim Resurgence’ was the politics of portraying Muslim hoodlums and gangsters as part of an international syndicate of terrorists. Mumbai’s Dawood Ibrahim, responsible for the serial bomb blasts in Mumbai on 12 March 1993, and Ahmedabad’s Abdul Latif (1952–1997), a bootlegging mafia ‘don’, came to be used as reference points for any neighbourhood Muslim hoodlum. If any such Muslim hoodlum/gangster turned into a legislator, then the task of Hindu consolidation and the political project of spreading anti-Muslim hatred became much easier.²⁷

After the impact of the recession of 2008 became more apparent, the anti-Muslim narratives started to become much more strident. Such stereotypes and mobilisations received momentum with the development of new information technology that introduced social media — widely accessible and economically affordable to a larger number of people (Ali 2020; Udapa 2019).

The atmosphere of anti-minority hatred contributed to how the UPA regime (2004–2014) came to be perceived, evaluated, and criticised. This regime was led by a Sikh, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, and was one of the largest ruling coalitions in the country’s history. The Congress party was headed by Sonia Gandhi, a Christian by birth, and whose political secretary, Ahmad Patel, was a Muslim from Gujarat; the Vice President of the republic, Hamid Ansari, was a Muslim. These symbolisms of representation and a half-hearted ‘liberal spring’ had, as it turned out, its implications.

“In retrospect, the UPA I’s first three years of policy formation on religious minorities, and Muslims in particular, probably represented the high watermark of India’s ‘liberal spring’ ... but the new policy initiatives ... were short-lived as the ‘liberal spring’ gave way to the intense heat of the Indian summer generated by the opposition to these proposals...”(Kim 2019, 207)

The proposals referred to above included the reports of the Sachar Committee, Ranganath Mishra Committee, and the Communal Violence Bill (2005 and 2011) which was frustrated by the institutionalised administrative, judicial and political opposition to it (including from the UPA partners) (ibid). This was in sharp contrast to the UK where, post-9/11, many social and political organisations of religious minorities, especially Muslims, have been sponsored by the government and justified as part of ‘capacity building’ among communities that have traditionally lacked structures and organisations to interface with the state.

Far from it, in the India of the twenty-first century, the state came to be re-imagined and fashioned along majoritarian lines. The Muslims had to be shown their subordinated place, and this became more blatant after 2014 when Narendra Modi assumed the office of Prime Minister, and since Ajay Singh Bisht (Yogi Adityanath) became the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh in 2017. The two respondents bear this out to the correspondents of *The New York Times*: Vijay Yadav, 21, who said, “If you talk too much, we will kill you. This is our saying for Muslims.”, and Sonu Yadav, 24, who admitted, “All of us in our colony felt that Modi would allow us to kill Muslims ... Muslims were scared. But nothing happened. When Yogi became chief minister, they were scared again.”²⁸

Conclusion: Is There a Way Out?

In the context of the ongoing story of majoritarian assault against the Muslim minorities, their vilification as ‘super-spreaders’ of COVID-19, the manner in which social spaces have been communalised, and the kind of repressive and intrusive state one has seen in recent times, particularly in dealing with Muslim protesters against the citizenship laws, before as well as during the COVID-19 crisis, do we see as inevitable the transformation of India into a Hindu Rashtra? Or will India really revert to its pre-2014 phase, by letting its Constitution prevail in letter and spirit? Why could India not overcome its communitarian fault-lines even during a severe and deadly pandemic?

Even in the case of the USA, the writer Fareed Zakaria demonstrates only a guarded optimism. He says:

“The whole point of liberal democracy is to create a system that reflects and addresses popular passions but also allows for some deliberation, for some consideration of liberal values like the rights of minorities and free expression ...

These values cannot be overridden by popular passions, and one of the things you see consistently from [Donald] Trump is the feeling that if he finds something that hits a nerve with the public, like the ban on Muslims, the fact that it may be unconstitutional or deeply illiberal doesn't seem to bother him at all. This is very troubling, to say the least."²⁹

In such a 'troubling' situation, what can be said about a society like India? Well, the picture in India might be even less optimistic. As mentioned earlier, much of what is now happening in India has already happened in Pakistan and is currently happening in Israel.

"[T]here is also something of Israel in India today ... India will probably replicate structurally some of the features of an 'ethnic democracy'. Minorities will retain some rights but, *de facto*, they will be second-class citizens." (Jaffrelot 2018)

In short, the pandemic will go and the ravages caused by it will be re-built. But what about the prospects of India's Muslim community, in the face of the state-sponsored communalisation that continued unabated even during a pandemic?

The newly-emerging small educated middle classes of Muslim men and women came out on the streets to reclaim the Constitution. Will a formidable proportion of Hindu masses come out to join them and to defend and safeguard the Constitution? What about India's inter-faith relations, the fabric of which is being torn asunder? It remains to be seen if the apprehensions expressed above would really be proved wrong by India's Hindus in the near future.

India awaits those kinds of popular struggles. Will they happen?

Notes

1. The Citizenship (Amendment) Act 2019 seeks to amend the definition of illegal immigrant for Hindus, Sikhs, Parsis, Buddhists, and Christian immigrants from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh who have lived in India without documentation. They will be granted fast-track Indian citizenship in six years. So far twelve years of residence had been the standard eligibility requirement for naturalisation. However, the only exception to the list mentioned is the Muslims. What alarmed Muslims more is the fact that this legislation was brought only after finding in Assam that out of the 1.9 million (out of a total population of 33 million) of the excluded, around 1.4 million were non-Muslims. Aman Wadud therefore put it more candidly and 'bluntly', "Citizenship Bill has only one aim: protect non-Muslims, harass Muslims." In *The Print*, 10 December 2019. <https://theprint.in/opinion/citizenship-bill-has-one-aim-protect-non-muslims-harass-muslims/332873/>; UNHRC called it "fundamentally discriminatory in nature." *Indian Express*, 17 December 2019. <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-what-is-the-un-body-that-has-criticised-india-for-new-citizenship-act-6167392/>.

2. Human Rights Watch. 2020. "Shoot the Traitors: Discrimination Against Muslims under India's New Citizenship Policy." 9 April. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/04/10/shoot-traitors/discrimination-against-muslims-under-indias-new-citizenship-policy>.
3. Saurabh Trivedi. 2020. "Slogan-shouting shooter injures Jamia student." *The Hindu*, 30 January. Also see, Vijayta Lalwani and Shoaib Daniyal. 2020. "Delhi Violence, From planning murder to praising Modi: WhatsApp chats offer a window into the minds of Delhi rioters." 9 July. <https://scroll.in/article/966775/from-planning-murder-to-praising-modi-whatsapp-chats-offer-a-window-into-the-minds-of-delhi-rioters> (accessed 11 July 2020). For overall context, see Jharna Pathak. 2020. "Indifference in the Time of Political Repression." *The Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy*, 17 February.
4. N. D. Jayaprakash. 2020. "Delhi Riots 2020: A Critique of Two Purported Fact-Finding Reports." *The Wire*, 6–10 July. Tanweer Fazal. 2020. "A Pogrom and its Genealogies." *the baffler.com*, 26 March 2020; Irfan Ahmad. 2020. "Violence after Violence: The Politics of Narratives over the Delhi Pogrom." *The Polis Project*, 28 March; Manisha Sethi. 2020. "Delhi Riot Conspiracy Theory: Aim is to Make Every Muslim Guilty." *OutlookIndia.com*, 28 April; Hartosh Singh Bal. 2020, "Why Delhi Police Did Nothing to Stop Attacks on Muslims." *New York Times*, 3 March.
5. *The Economic Times*, 22 March 2020. Accessed 10 July 2020. https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/sounds-of-bells-conches-fill-the-air-as-grateful-country-appreciates-essential-service-providers-pm-say-long-battle-ahead/articleshow/74761503.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst.
6. This seems to be a trend with the Modi regime that the prime minister often enforces such shocking decisions, with a notice of barely a few hours. This is what he did on 8 November 2016 when he demonetised more than 86% of India's currency notes of INR 500/- and of 1000/-.
7. *The New Indian Express*, 17 June 2020, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/migrant-labour-crisis-india-coronavirus-lockdown-reverse-exodus-6462286/>.
8. Pragya Singh. 2020. "Lockdown in Rural Bihar: Social Rift Works, but Not Distancing." *NewsClick.in*, April 9.
9. Series of telephonic conversations with Ankit Mishra, Muzaffarpur, during April 3 to 12, 2020.

10. “77% Indians satisfied with PM Modi’s handling of Covid-19 crisis, shows MOTN survey.” *India Today*, 7 August 7 2020. <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/mood-of-the-nation/story/20200817-77-per-cent-indians-satisfied-pm-modi-coronavirus-crisis-motn-survey-1708927-2020-08-07>.
11. Shoaib Daniyal. 2020. “With the Centre refusing to pay compensation to states, is GST nearing an end?” *Scroll.In*, 29 August 29. <https://scroll.in/article/971657/with-the-centre-refusing-to-pay-compensation-to-states-is-gst-nearing-an-end>.
12. Mohammad Sajjad. 2020. “Corona Jihad and Media’s Communal Polarisation.” *NewsClick.in*, 8 April.
13. For the eight districts adjoining Aligarh, the COVID-19 testing was/is done at the Aligarh Muslim University (AMU)’s Jawaharlal Nehru Medical College and Hospital (JNMCH). Being an insider, I am in the know of such administrative things.
14. *Amar Ujala* (Hindi daily), Aligarh, 14 May 2020.
15. <https://theprint.in/india/muslim-ias-ips-officers-covid-19-appeal-to-community-dont-give-anyone-reason-to-blame-you/395665/>.
16. “Tirupati temple records over 700 Covid-19 cases since June.” *The Indian Express*, 11 August 2020. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/tirumalas-lord-venkateswara-temple-reports-over-700-covid-19-cases-since-june-11-6549773/>.
17. Ashutosh Varshney has listed Aligarh among India’s five most communalised towns, see *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India* (Yale University Press, 2002). Paul R. Brass provides minute details and analysis thereof pertaining to the communal violence in Aligarh, see *Production of Hindu Muslim Violence in Contemporary India* (University of Washington, 2003).
18. Aditya Menon.2020. “Attacks on Muslims in the Name of COVID-19 Surge Across India.” *The Quint*, 8 April. <https://www.thequint.com/news/india/coronavirus-muslims-attacked-covid19-karnataka-haryana>; also see a PTI report (13 April 2020), “Muslim Vegetable Vendor Abused, Thrashed in Delhi, One Arrested,” <https://www.newsclick.in/Muslim-Vegetable-Vendor-Abused-Thrashed-Delhi-One-Arrested>.
19. Ziya Us Salam documents most of those lynching, in his, *Lynch Files: The Forgotten Saga of Victims of Hate Crime*. Delhi: Sage, 2019.

20. Also see, Vikram Doctor. 2019. "The Political Dynamics of Lynching," *Economic Times*, 18 October.
21. Delna Abraham & Ojaswi Rao. 2017. "84 % Dead in Cow-Related Violence Since 2010 Are Muslim; 97% Attacks After 2014," 28 June. <https://archive.indiaspend.com/cover-story/86-dead-in-cow-related-violence-since-2010-are-muslim-97-attacks-after-2014-2014>.
22. This can be gauged from the oft-published news-reports of engineering graduates, many from prestigious institutions, began to write competitive recruitment tests of public employment, even in Group 'C' services. In provinces like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, engineering graduates and post-graduates applied for teachers in primary schools, for office clerks, and even for constabulary.
23. A field-survey based research needs to be conducted to ascertain these. The Bihar State Minorities Commission and Asian development Research Institute Report 2005 and its subsequent two reports also ignore these except saying that certain districts send as many as 40% of their adult Muslim males to the Gulf countries. The expanding colonies of middle-class Muslim settlements in district towns across Bihar and Uttar Pradesh and in parts of Delhi, will easily confirm what I say here. With regard to Kerala, see Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella. 2009. "Muslim entrepreneurs in public life between India and the Gulf: making good and doing good." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*; for coastal Karnataka, see Muzaffar Assadi. 1999. "Communal Violence in Coastal Belt," *Economic and Political Weekly* 34(8), 20–26 February: 446–448. For Hyderabad, see, Javeed Alam. 1998. "Communalism Among Muslims: the Majlis-e-Ittehad ulMuslimeen in Hyderabad." In *Region, Religion, Caste, Gender and Culture in Contemporary India*, edited by T.V. Satyamurthy, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
24. This specific aspect needs to be studied to collate precise and concrete data for India, with province and district-wise break up. In case of Bihar, "Socio-Economic and educational Status of Muslims in Bihar" (2005), of the Asian Development Research Institute (ADRI) and Bihar State Minorities Commission (BSMC) pays attention to it only superficially and inadequately; the ADRI Report (2017), "Status of Muslim Youth in Bihar: Quantitative and Qualitative Assessment," just overlooks it. Even the Sachar Report also overlooks this specific aspect.
25. Also see my, "Muslims between the Communal-Secular Divide," *Seminar*, no. 678, February 2016; "Why Are Bihar's Muslims Frightened," and "Losing Bihar's Middle Ground," *Rediff.com*, 21 July 2017.

26. For coastal Karnataka, see, Muzaffar Assadi. 1999. “Communal Violence in Coastal Belt.” *Economic and Political Weekly* 34 (8), 20–26 February; “Hindutva Policies in Coastal Region: Towards a Social Coalition.” *Economic and Political Weekly* 37(23), 8–14 June 2002; Greeshma Kuthar. 2019. “How Coastal Karnataka was Saffronised.” 18 part reports, *Firstpost.com*, serialised from April 07 to July 26. For West Bengal, see my *Rediff.com* column, “Understanding the BJP’s Rise in Bengal,” 14 June 2019.
27. I say this particularly on the basis of my conversations with Hindus of many Panchayats of north Bihar where elected chief (*Mukhiya*) are Muslims. Similar anti-Muslim sentiment was expressed by Hindu respondents of western Uttar Pradesh. Vidya Subrahmaniam. 2019. “How Harmony Lost Out: Voices from Western UP Over the Years.” *The Wire*, 5 June. <https://thewire.in/politics/western-up-jats-elections-2019>.
28. Ellen Barry and Suhasini Raj. 2017. “Firebrand Hindu Cleric Ascends India’s Political Ladder.” *New York Times*, 12 July. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/12/world/asia/india-yogi-adityanath-bjp-modi.html>.
29. Sean Illing. 2017. “Fareed Zakaria made a scary prediction about democracy in 1997 — and it’s coming true.” 4 July. <https://www.vox.com/conversations/2017/1/18/14250364/democracy-liberalism-donald-trump-populism-fareed-zakaria-europe-fascism>. Accessed 25 June 2020. This guarded optimism, in fact bordering on pessimism of Zakaria, is largely shared by Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt. 2019. *How Democracies Die*. Harlow, England: Penguin.