

To be effective, critiques of Hindutva must incorporate the ideas of the Pasmanda Muslim movement

scroll.in/article/1052314/why-the-liberal-critique-of-hindutva-politics-cannot-ignore-caste-hierarchies-among-muslims

Smitana Saikia



A peace vigil against the rise in hate crimes and violence against Muslims in India. | Anushree Fadnavis/Reuters

With Narendra Modi's recent official visit to the United States, there is a renewed focus on the treatment of India's minorities by his Bharatiya Janata Party and its ideological allies.

This discussion has been given additional fuel by the [articles in the US media](#) looking back on the attacks on minorities, both physical and legal, over the nine years of Modi's reign.

Even as [institutionalised riot politics](#) is on the wane in India, liberals have noted that Indian Muslims have been subjected to constant low-intensity violence since 2014.

The community faces mob lynchings, "bulldozer" politics and vitriolic campaigns accusing them of trying to convert Hindu women or grabbing land belonging to Hindus. In addition, draconian security laws such as the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act are often misapplied against ordinary Muslim citizens.

But even as Modi's critics point to the deteriorating rights of religious minorities under the BJP, they need to adopt a more nuanced reading of the social realities of Indian Muslims – especially with regard to the party's recent overtures to Pasmanda or lower caste Muslims.

Their well-intentioned criticism of Modi's politics ends up homogenising Indian Muslims as a monolithic community and serves Hindutva's simplistic binary of Hindu vs Muslim.

The Pasmanda political discourse is based on an anti-caste framework of social justice. Instead of merely focussing on the religious minority status of Muslims as a whole, the Pasmanda movement has pushed for unity of various backward and Dalit communities across religions.

The political identity of Pasmandas – Persian for “the ones who have been left behind” – is used for lower-caste Ajlaf and Arzal (Dalit) communities to denote their historical oppression by upper-caste Ashraf Muslims. Pasmanda scholars estimate that almost 85% of the Muslim population in India is socio-economically backward. The movement demands the extension of affirmative action policies, proportional representation in various institutions and a caste-census for all these marginal groups.

Further, the Pasmanda political imagination criticises the idea of a Hindu-Muslim binary, which they say only serves the interests of the upper-caste elites of both Hindus and Muslims. They argue that India's political elite have used religious identities and communalism to subvert the demands of lower-caste groups in both religions and kept their dominance intact.

Instead, the Pasmanda movement supports the idea of horizontal solidarities based on shared pain among members of the oppressed castes across religions.

Pasmanda Muslim communities face double discrimination: for their religious identity as Muslims and for being the lowest in the caste hierarchy. In an open letter to Prime Minister Modi after he last year announced a sneh yatra outreach programme for Pasmandas, community leader Ali Anwar remarked that the community wants sammaan (equality and dignity), not sneh (affection).

Anwar noted that Pasmandas, owing to their historical caste occupations, are often targets of Hindutva communal campaigns such as the ghar wapsi initiative to pressure members of religious minorities to return home to their “original” Hindu faith and mob lynchings on the suspicion of cow slaughter or consuming beef.

This is the backdrop against which the concerted effort of the BJP and its parent organisation, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, to woo Pasmanda Muslims must be understood.

The party's effort is perhaps most visible in Uttar Pradesh, where Hindutva hardliner Chief Minister Adityanath has included Danish Azad Ansari, a Pasmanda, in his cabinet.

VIDEO | "SP, BSP and Congress always tried to keep Pasmada Muslims away from education and employment. Only the BJP is taking concrete steps for their development," says UP Minister Danish Azad Ansari on PM Modi's statement on Pasmada Muslims during his interaction with BJP... pic.twitter.com/qfBRUAOLrp

— Press Trust of India (@PTI_News) [June 27, 2023](#)

Adityanath has also given prominent positions to a few other Pasmada leaders. In the Uttar Pradesh municipal elections in May, [61 of 391 Muslim candidates fielded by the BJP](#) won. The majority of the Muslims who contested on BJP tickets belonged to Pasmada communities, observers say.

At first glance, the BJP's outreach to these communities may seem like a simple electoral calculation – and that may indeed be a short-term goal. However, as Pasmada scholar Khalid Ansari writes, the party's campaign is a consequence of the complex ways in which the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh engaged with its concerns about the Muslim community in the early 20th century. Hindu nationalist ideologues viewed Muslims as outsiders and enemies and Muslim converts tainted due to their purported pan-Islamic affiliations.

Savarkar's idea of a real nation required geographical unity, "racial" and cultural commonalities. For Golwalkar, a citizenry built on "racial purity" in a defined territory was the crucible for the creation of a nation. Partition was thus seen as an attempt to reestablish "Muslim rule" and the ensuing communal violence was underpinned by the demonisation of Muslims by Hindu nationalists.

However after Independence, supporters of a Hindu Rashtra had to contend with the presence of a large number of Muslims in India. This uneasiness is evident in many Golwalkar speeches post 1947. As political scientist Jyotirmaya Sharma summed up Golwalkar's views: "The only way to 'digest' the Muslims (after Independence), therefore, was to either warn them by telling them that their days of rule were over and that they must learn to love India, or to bring them back to the Hindu fold."

Returning to the fold did not necessarily mean religious conversion but a display of permanent, unflinching allegiance to "Hindu culture" and its symbols. To digest is not simply to assimilate outsiders; it is to consume the Muslim into the body politic of the Hindu Rashtra through cultural annihilation – the symbolic killing of the Muslim, as Sharma puts it.

It is possible that today's RSS under Mohan Bhagwat has taken this cultural view and that its outreach programme could be seen as the beginning of a long-term project of culturally "digesting" Pasmada Muslims.

On June 24, Afaan Abdul Ansari was killed by a group of cow vigilantes in Nashik, while transporting 450 kg of meat in a car, the police said. The vigilantes suspected it was beef. <https://t.co/NvTdpYO91d>

His friend Nasir Qureshi, who was travelling with him, was also beaten up. <pic.twitter.com/rjjro34TGR>

— Scroll.in (@scroll_in) [June 27, 2023](#)

In this context, it is no surprise that the BJP's aim to include a higher number of Pasmanda beneficiaries in welfare schemes and ensure better political representation elides fundamental questions of social justice and emancipation that are central to the Pasmanda movement. This is evident in the BJP government's backtracking on its initial [decision to consider extending Scheduled Caste status](#) to Dalit Muslims and Dalit Christians. This would have allowed them to access quotas in educational institutions and government jobs.

The BJP has also neglected the long-time Pasmanda demand for a caste census. Such a census would offer proof of the social realities of the lower-castes and Dalits at the national level – already noted in the reports of the Sachar and Ranganath Mishra committees, giving fuel to the demands for reservation and affirmative action. This would undoubtedly be opposed by the BJP's core constituency, which would see this as “minority appeasement”.

The liberal critique of Hindutva politics needs to acknowledge the hierarchies in the Indian Muslim society and the caste-oppressed communities among Indian Muslims that are most vulnerable in the face of Hindutva's aggressive majoritarian politics.

A nuanced understanding of the Pasmanda movement with its social justice framework would provide an alternate political imagination to the BJP's Hindutva politics.

Smitana Saikia teaches at Azim Premji University and Srijan Shukla is an independent researcher. Views expressed are personal.