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India's Hate Speech Pandemic: Communal Intolerance and Sectarian Violence

By Akanksha Narain

Synopsis

There is uproar in India over Prime Minister Narendra Modi's studied silence on the seemingly increasing communal intolerance in the country. It is more important to focus on why these acts are being committed and how the government tackles the sectarian violence.

Commentary

PRIME MINISTER Narendra Modi's studied silence on recent incidents of sectarian violence and anti-Muslim hate speech have been seen as giving the green light to right-wing Hindu extremists to wreak havoc among minority communities.

Although, the prime minister is not expected to respond to every incident, the grisly lynching of a person or brutal rape of a nun in a church are not just a "small incident", contrary to what some of his party members may claim. Moreover, his lack of action against his own ministers and party members, who further stoke communal tensions, sends the wrong message to the Indian public and the world.

Symptomatic of fundamental problems

These incidents are not standalone problems; they are symptoms of a deeper and graver problem. 'Love Jihad', organising mass *gharvapsi* (homecoming), Jains trying to impose a six-day long meat ban on an entire city and lynching of people over presumed acts of eating beef and cow slaughter or simply throwing ink on people for organising a beef party are not isolated incidents. They are a chain of events that indicates underlying intolerant and exclusivist ideologies. The issue is not whether a

beef ban should be imposed or not. It is about people respecting diversity of beliefs and religious practices.

Despite the blatant use of religious rhetoric to incite people there is little that law enforcement agencies are doing or can do. Already there is political rallying so as to ensure that those involved in the Dadri case, where a 52-year old Muslim who was presumed to have consumed beef was lynched to death by a mob, go scot-free.

Narendra Modi is unable to silence members of his own party and other organisations that have been inciting intolerance and violence, especially religious friction, as these organisations and parties have played a major role in Bhartiya Janta Party's (BJP) decisive victory in the 2014 general election.

Political compulsions

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a Hindu nationalist organisation, has and continues to provide BJP the manpower during national and state elections. During the 2014 elections the organisation actively campaigned for BJP, particularly for Narendra Modi. The organisation's mouthpiece *Panchjanya*, in its recent edition, carried a cover story saying the *Vedas (Hindu scripture)* orders the killing of "sinners" who slaughter cows. It also alleges that madrasas and the Muslim leadership teach Indian Muslims to hate the country's traditions. Despite the hate-speech the government has not taken any action against the publishers for hurting religious sentiments and inciting hatred.

Historically, RSS has been the ideological backbone of the BJP. Moreover, Modi himself was a member of the organisation and his government has appointed a number of RSS members as heads of various government committees and universities. This means that it will be very difficult for Modi to not only take action against RSS but also distance himself and his government from the acts carried out by them. Furthermore, BJP itself has tried to capture the Hindu vote by promising to build a Ram temple at the same contentious spot where the Babri mosque in Ayodhya, was demolished by Hindu extremists.

In the state of Maharashtra BJP is stuck in alliance with Shiv Sena (SS), another Hindu right wing party, which has been flexing its muscles not only in the state but also in other parts of the country. SS activists not only assaulted two Muslims youths for carrying ox hide but also condemned Modi for calling the Dadri incident "sad" given his "connection" with the Godhra riots.

Identity-based politics is not a new phenomenon in India. Vote banks on the basis of caste, class, ethnicity, and language are intrinsic to the country's politics. However, today political parties gleefully cash in on religious polarisation as public discourse is being hijacked by extremists on either side. The on-going electoral 'beef' between the supposed cow defenders and the cow eaters in the state of Bihar provides a sneak-peak into what is happening across the country. On the one hand Hindu right wing organisations campaigned for BJP, and on the other hand one sees the debut of the All India Majlis-e-IttehadulMuslimeen (AIMIM) in the state so as to exploit the Muslim vote bank.

Way forward

While PM Modi has been traversing all corners of the world trying to sell the idea of a digital and emerging India, the country is battling with meat bans, mob lynching and murder of writers and rationalists. It seems that certain radical elements are feeling emboldened to carry out more vicious attacks while saner voices of academicians and intellectuals can do no more than surrender their national awards in protest.

It is time that Narendra Modi travelled the length and breadth of the country sending out a loud and clear message: intolerance, whether intra or inter-religious, is unacceptable. This of course, cannot just be limited to words; action must soon follow. Those who throw ink on individuals, kill people over what they eat, ban people of a particular religion from taking part in religious festivities of another group, must be dealt with firmly.

The same goes for government officials who have refused to take any action against the hate mongers or have directly or indirectly supported them. One cannot focus on India's economic development while its social fabric withers away, especially when social and political instability can have adverse effects on the economic output of a country.

How India deals with its minorities and upholds secular, liberal values enshrined in its constitution, is going to be a major litmus test for the country, especially when India is poised to become the country with the highest Muslim population by 2050. The world's largest democracy has always taken pride in being a diverse country; it is time to protect that diversity, especially religious diversity. It is time for the Indian masses, Hindus and Muslims, to step up and push aside the handful of fundamentalists who thrive on polarisation.

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