

Why minorities feel alienated in India

There is an unofficial political mechanism that has produced a sense of fear in the last five years



HILAL AHMED

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's statement that the new National Democratic Alliance government should win the trust of minorities and puncture the 'myth of fear' has been received in two different ways. A section of political observers remain unconvinced about this assurance. They argue that aggressive Hindutva politics has marginalised the minorities. If the Modi government is serious about this lack of trust, it needs to do much more. On the other hand, some have optimistically received Mr. Modi's statement. They claim that minorities, especially Muslims, must appreciate Mr. Modi's positive gesture and explore possibilities of constructive dialogue.

These definite and categorical sets of argument are partly appropriate. The increasing alienation of minorities is certainly not a myth and expecting the new government to respond to the anxieties, aspirations and imaginations of these communities is morally legitimate and politically justifiable. However, there is a serious need to ask a fundamental question: Why do minorities feel alienated in contemporary India?

This question takes us to an unofficial political mechanism that has produced a sense of fear among minorities in the last five years. This political mechanism relies heavily on a minority-majority binary to establish that Hindus and Muslims are the two core fundamental identities that represent two distinct and conflicting world views. There are four identifiable components of this unofficial political mechanism: discourse of violence, events of violence, justification of violence, and silence on violence.

Discourse and events

The media – TV, newspapers, social media such as Facebook and WhatsApp and even films – has played a significant role in creating a violent anti-Muslim Hindu victimhood discourse in the last five years. Every aspect of Muslim life in India has been



"Every aspect of Muslim life has been targeted to create an impression that Muslims are the main problem of the country." Shahista (right), daughter of Mohammad Akhlaq, who was lynched in Dadri, in 2015. —SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

targeted to create an impression that Muslims are the main problem of the country. For instance, we are told that the birth of a Muslim child is a threat to the Hindu population; the education of a Muslim child is a symbol of separatism; the eating habits of Muslims are anti-Hindu (as Muslims eat beef); the married life of a Muslim couple is a social evil (as Muslims practice triple talaq); and even the death of Muslims is an anti-national act (because Muslims occupy valuable land for graveyards).

This aggressive anti-Muslim propaganda nurtured an equally powerful imagination of 'Hindu victimhood', at least in three possible ways. First, Hindus are presented as a homogeneous nation-state community with a unique and distinct culture. Hindu belief in multiple gods and goddesses is articulated as a distinctive feature of Hinduism to create a defining binary between Hindus and Muslims.

Second, the marginalisation of Hindus is demonstrated by producing quantifiable data/evidence. The Hindu Human Rights Report 2017 is an example of this political strategy. This report records the violation of human rights of Hindus in India. It argues that despite being a numerical majority, Hindus are treated as second-class citizens. In order to justify this claim, atrocities faced by Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes are also included in the

crimes-against-Hindus list.

Third, Hindutva groups construct what political theorist Partha Chatterjee calls the two imaginary domains of politics. The inner domain is defined as a realm of Hindu faith and culture where the state is not allowed to intervene. The Hindutva positions on Babri Masjid and Sabarimala stem from this inner domain of politics. However, this is not the case with the outer political domain, where Hindutva unequivocally invokes legal-constitutional discourse. The demand to recognise Hindus as a minority in eight States is an example of this selective use of the Constitution and law.

Despite establishing this discourse of hatred and violence, Hindutva forces failed to provoke Muslims to create a large-scale riot-like situation in the last five years. Issues like 'love jihad', 'ghar wapsi', Ram temple, and even the ban on triple talaq could not generate riots. In this hostile communal atmosphere, a new style of violence was invented, however – the lynching of Muslims. A few Muslim individuals were killed to create a powerful impact. It was very easy to mobilise a mob of unemployed youth in the name of Hindu pride, especially in the cow-belt region.

Justification and silence

Interestingly, the government did not condemn this new form of anti-Muslim violence. On the contrary,

Bharatiya Janata Party leaders not merely justified such events but also offered legal and political support to the accused. It began in September 2015 when Mohammad Akhlaq was lynched in Dadri, and his son Danish was brutally beaten up for allegedly eating and storing beef on Eid. Union Minister Mahesh Sharma, who was also the MP from Gautam Buddha Nagar, did not condemn this incident. He described the Dadri killing as an "accident", visited the house of the main accused and avoided any contact with the family of victim.

Former Minister of State for Civil Aviation Jayant Sinha evoked this line of argument differently in 2018. Mr. Sinha provided legal aid to the main accused involved in a lynching case in Jharkhand. When a fast-track court accepted the bail of the eight accused, he welcomed them at a public function. Justifying his move Mr. Sinha argued that the court had granted bail to the accused upholding the fairness of justice and, therefore, as an elected representative of people as well as a Union Minister, he was entitled to honour the "due process of law".

The Prime Minister maintained a strange silence on all this for a long time. In June 2017, he finally said "no person has the right to take the law into his own hands". Although he denounced cow vigilantism, Mr. Modi did not recognise the lynching of Muslims as a specific form of anti-Muslim violence. He reduced it to a law and order problem.

These political reflections, it seems, created the impression that lynching Muslims is a natural social phenomenon and the ruling establishment subscribes to the discourse of Hindu victimhood.

If the new BJP government is concerned about the myth of fear among minorities, it should systematically dismantle the mechanism that has actually created an atmosphere in which violence on religious lines has become normal and acceptable.

Of course, killing innocent Muslims is certainly a law and order problem. We do have a few laws to deal with such incidences of violence. But we certainly do not have an order.

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FROM THE READERS' EDITOR

Noise too is a form of censorship

Sometimes when journalists cannot talk of certain issues, they talk a lot about other innocuous stories



A.S. PANNEERSELVAM

I am overwhelmed by the support extended by readers to my last column, "Electoral outcomes don't alter the purpose of journalism" (May 27). But this section may not be aware of the cynicism that is pervading our public sphere. For instance, Gopal Vaidya, a reader, observed online: "There are many forms of bias that exist in this paper: selection of what to highlight, what to hide, articles that avoid other perspectives, selective use of readers' comments... Indian papers have a long way to go in this regard." How can a news ombudsman handle general criticism? "Indian papers" covers the whole of print journalism but it does not reflect the wide range of publications within this sector. From serious broadsheets to sensationalist tabloids, the Indian print media encompasses all forms of reportage. My focus is restricted to serious broadsheet newspapers alone.

The media landscape is not pluralistic

Readers may appreciate the role of a newspaper like *The Hindu* if they are aware of the important findings of the Media Ownership Monitor, a research project carried out in India by Reporters Without Borders and the Delhi-based digital media company, DataLEADS. Though India has some 1.2 lakh print publications, over 550 FM radio stations and nearly 880 satellite TV channels, including more than 380 claiming to be news channels, the study says the Indian media landscape is hardly pluralistic. The research found the media space to be "tight", with state monopoly in radio news, and regional newspaper markets being "controlled by a small number of powerful owners, some of whom have strong political affiliations". It notes that the production and distribution of content are getting concentrated in the hands of a few. The research attributes the high level of ownership concentration to "considerable gaps in the regulatory framework".

As Readers' Editor, I take specific complaints seriously and I rely on the core values and cardinal principles of journalism to eval-

uate the merits of those complaints. But is it possible to examine vague, sweeping statements that cast aspersions on journalists and writers? A decade ago, novelist and philosopher Umberto Eco identified two forms of censorship: censorship through silence and censorship through noise. While all of us are aware of censorship through silence, wherein the state disapproves of certain ideas, we are not conscious enough of the censorship that flows from noise. In his lecture at the conference of the Italian Association for Semiotic Studies in 2009, Eco paraphrased the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein to explain a trend that is engulfing us today: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must talk a great deal." The lecture is a part of an anthology of essays, "Inventing the Enemy" – again, a malady that is afflicting us.

Creating suspicion

In "Censorship and silence", Eco eloquently explained how innocuous stories are given disproportionate space so that readers do not notice the silence in covering important stories that the media ought to have covered. He used the example of how the press controlled by Silvio Berlusconi undermined the authority of the magistrate who criticised the Prime Minister by reporting that he wore turquoise socks. According to Eco, to make noise you don't have to invent stories; "all you have to do is report a story that is real but irrelevant, yet creates a hint of suspicion by the simple fact that it has been reported. It is true and irrelevant that the magistrate wears turquoise socks, but the fact it has been reported creates a suggestion of something not quite confessed, leaving a mark, an impression. Nothing is more difficult to dispose of than an irrelevant but true story." All of us watching prime-time news channels in India can relate to this.

As a news ombudsman, I make a crucial distinction between multiple voices and noise that is meant to drown out voices. I am aware of the fact that with regards to censorship, noise can be more powerful than silence because those who deploy this tactic are aware of the impact of this noise: "An accusation that is not an accusation cannot be challenged."

Journalism is neither silence nor noise but a credible voice.

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SINGLE FILE

Realising grand objectives

Many regional policy challenges can be addressed with three major fixes

DHRUVA JAISHANKAR



It is common to assess a country's foreign policy by examining individual bilateral relationships or specific outcomes. But this risks missing the forest for the trees. While the broad directions of India's foreign relations – with the neighbourhood, Afghanistan, the U.S., China, Indo-Pacific, Russia, and Europe –

have been set over the past several years, the main factors inhibiting India's performance are ultimately domestic in nature. Three stand out.

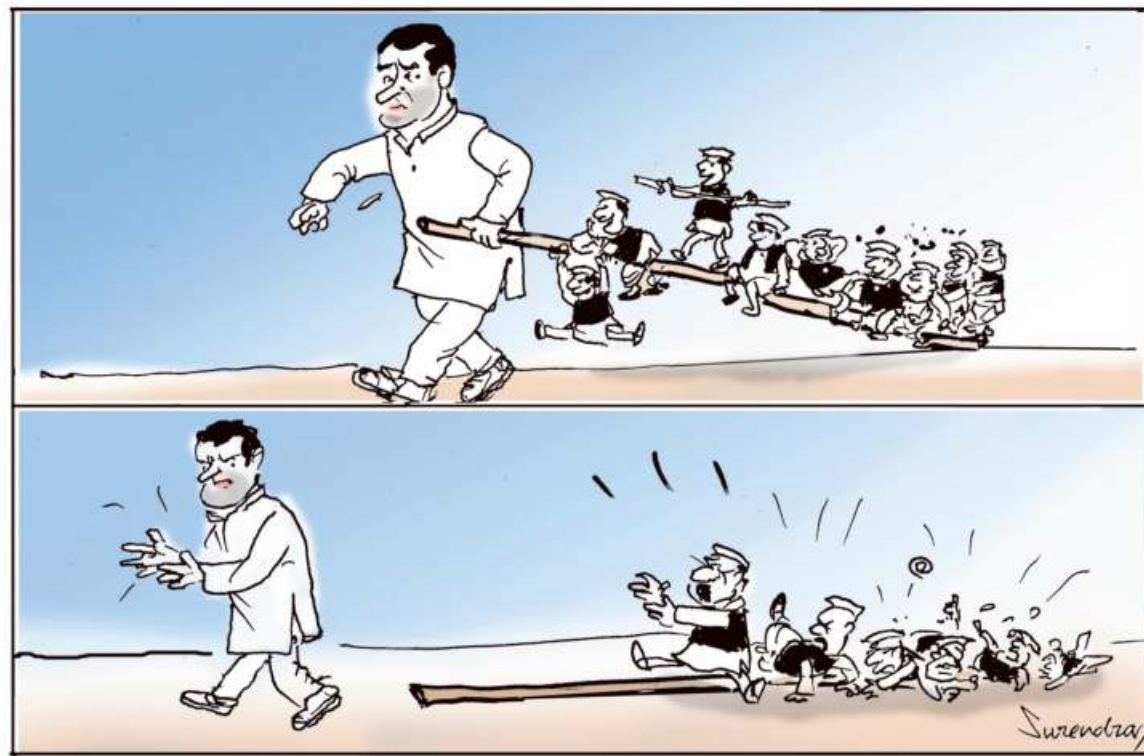
The first is trade. It often surprises people that India's trade-to-GDP ratio is higher than China's or the U.S.'s. India's market, and access to it, remains a valuable lever with other countries. But much of India's commerce involves raw materials and low value-added goods, and is still insufficiently integrated into global supply chains. With global trade stagnant and the World Trade Organization at a standstill, the only way for India to seize a larger share of exports is through well-negotiated preferential trade agreements. India's past record in this department has been poor, leaving some sectors exposed to dumping and others unnecessarily cloistered. A smarter trade agenda will not only create jobs and drive reforms at home, it could become a potent strategic tool in international affairs.

The second concerns defence. India has the world's fifth largest defence budget but is also the world's second largest arms importer. Not only does this compromise national security, it means that India cannot offer an alternative as a defence supplier to countries in its region. Defence indigenisation will require financing for defence capital expenditure; assessments of costs, technology transfer capabilities, and export potential early in the procurement process; and fair competition between the Indian private and public sectors.

The third concerns overseas project implementation. India's outgoing aid budget has been relatively flat, reflecting a scepticism of grant aid from India's own experience as a recipient. Instead, it has now started to explore other financing options. Indian overseas credit has increased significantly, with over \$24 billion extended primarily to South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Africa. But building on several recent steps will significantly increase the country's delivery and regional credibility. These include better project planning, more attractive and competitive financing terms, more reliable disbursement of funds, and enhanced coordination and communication with the private sector for implementation.

Many regional policy challenges would be addressed with these three major fixes. None will be easy as they will require tackling vested interests. While the first Modi government made its strategic objectives known and set out a clear direction, key policy interventions in these three areas will now be necessary for India to realise its grander objectives.

The writer is a Foreign Policy Fellow at the Brookings Institution's India Center



DATA POINT

How health workers are unevenly distributed

By Vignesh Radhakrishnan

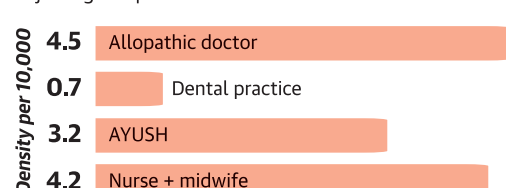
Two sources, two figures

A research paper* released recently relied on the 68th round of the NSSO and various medical bodies where doctors must get registered in order to obtain data on the concentration of health workers in India. The table shows how health professionals are split across sectors and their density per 10,000 people in India

Health worker	According to the registry	According to the NSSO
Allopathic doctor	7.1	5.9
Dental practice	1.2	0.7
AYUSH	5.7	4
Physiotherapy, diagnostic practice, and others	0.5	0.7
The above + non-medical staff	38.2	29.1
Doctor + nurse + midwife	26.7	20.6

Removing quacks

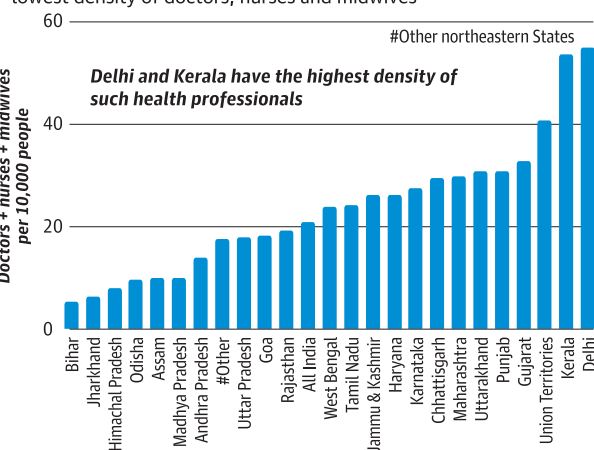
The paper found that many of the NSSO respondents who claimed to be health workers lacked the necessary qualifications/medical training. The graph below shows that the density of health professionals came down after adjusting for qualification



* Size, composition and distribution of human resource for health in India: New estimates using NSSO and Registry data, BMJ Open

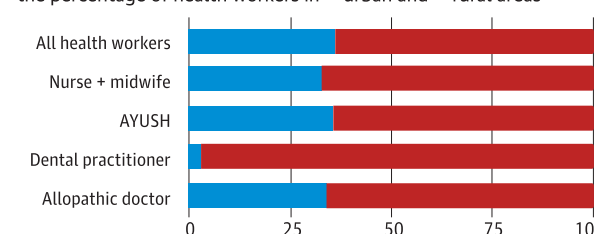
East is worst

Many eastern States such as Bihar, Odisha and Jharkhand have the lowest density of doctors, nurses and midwives



Urban skew

The density of health workers was significantly higher in urban areas compared to rural areas. This was especially in the case of dentists (97% of them practise in urban areas). The graph shows the percentage of health workers in urban and rural areas



FROM THE HINDU ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO JUNE 3, 1969

Soviet plans to land man on moon

A Soviet cosmonaut has said the Soviet Union plans to land a man or men on the moon by the end of this year or early next year, if all goes well, according to reports from Japanese correspondents in Moscow. A group of nine Japanese science reporters now visiting Moscow reported to-day [June 2] that the remark was made by Soviet cosmonaut Alexei Leonov, the first man in the world to walk in space in 1965, in an interview with them on Sunday night [June 1]. Cosmonaut Leonov indicated that, unlike the U.S. Apollo project which sends spacecrafts directly from the earth to the moon, the Soviet moon project would launch a lunar probe from a space station assembled while in orbit around the earth.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JUNE 3, 1919

Mr. Tilak's Service. Mr. Gandhi's Speech.

A public meeting was held on Saturday [May 31] evening [in Bombay] under the presidency of Mr. Gandhi for expressing appreciation of the services rendered by Mr. Tilak to India and calling upon his countrymen to contribute to the Tilak Purse Fund started with the object of defraying the expenses incurred by him in the case against Sir Valentine Chirol. Mr. Gandhi in his opening remarks said that the goal of every Indian patriot was the same although each one might follow a different path. Mr. Tilak had one way of achieving his aim which differed from his (Mr. Gandhi's) but Mr. Tilak had displayed the courage of his conviction in going to an English court of law and fighting an Englishman and this fact had evoked his special admiration. It would, however, have been a splendid thing if Mr. Tilak had been a Satyagrahi as then he would not have troubled about going to a court of law at all and would have saved the disappointment of defeat and consequent pecuniary loss.

CONCEPTUAL Loss leader

BUSINESS

This refers to a common pricing strategy that is used by businesses wherein certain products are sold at a minimal profit or even at a price that is well below their cost price in order to boost the sale of other products that are more profitable. A supermarket chain, for instance, might decide to sell certain common household goods at a low profit so that more customers feel attracted to its store. It may believe that customers coming to the store to buy these commonly used items may in turn decide to purchase other goods in the store which can add to profits. If a store chooses not to sell these loss leader items, customers may simply decide not to shop at the store.

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bit.ly/FirstTimeWomenMPs