

‘Othering’, Marginalization of Muslim Minority and Majoritarianism : New Face of Indian Democracy

- **Nadeem Hasnain**

Abstract

Indian Muslims form the largest religious minority of India constituting only around fourteen percent of India's population. But in terms of numbers they are second or third largest Muslim population of the world. The Constitution of India not only gives them equal rights but also gives them rights to preserve their language, religion and culture. Unfortunately, the democracy which ensures equal rights for them is being transformed into 'Majoritarianism', negation of the very essence of democracy. It is being supplemented by 'othering' and marginalization.

Key words: democracy, majoritarianism, othering, marginalization

Indian Muslims constitute an integral part of the nation. Their history is a part of Indian history and their blood has mingled with the rest of Indian blood in common causes. They have always been an integral part of Indian society and they have been contributing to the nation building process. They are 'Muslims' and also 'Indians' and they have shown that there is no contradiction in their identity as Indian Muslims.

The 'othering' and demonizing the Muslim minority is largely based on their stereotyping. On the one hand Indian Muslims exhibit their distinctiveness, in every aspect of society and culture, from the West Asian/Middle Eastern/African Muslim populations, on the other hand they are not a homogenous population. Significantly, Indian Muslims are neither a 'cultural community' (because they do not have a common/shared culture) nor a compact ethnic population. They speak different languages and live by different cultures. Further, they live through layers of identities in the complex Indian society. They may be seen through a provincial/linguistic/ethnic category as in Ladakh, as tribal biradari in Lakshdweep and through such scheduled tribes like Gaddi and Bakriwal, through such sectarian perspective like Sunni, Shia, Khoja, Bohra and Ahmedia, through various Maslaks/Islamic schools such as Deobandi, Bareilvi, Ahle Hadees and through a large stratification/caste like system as *Ashraf* (higher caste groups) and *Ajlaf* (lower caste groups, mostly Muslim OBCs). Thus, they are not a monolithic or homogenous community. Yet the forces of *Hindutva* through a sustained campaign are projecting the Muslims as one united, monolithic population threatening the various existence of the majority community as well as the Indian nation itself. This has helped these forces polarize the Indian society in a big way generating lethal hatred against the Muslims and, to a lesser extent, the Christians.

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Unfortunately, even the educated sections of the society fail to distinguish between Democracy and Majoritarianism. They believe that a fair and free election is the only condition of democracy. When a majority claims sovereign authority to impose its will on the rest of the society, it kills democracy. Needless to say, majoritarianism is based on the belief that the majority community has a right to rule the country in whatever way it wants. On the contrary Liberal Democracy requires more than a free and fair election. It should be inclusive, consensual, ensure equal rights, rule of law, tolerance for dissent, independent media and judiciary. It must also be committed to the empowerment of the disadvantaged sections and all types of minorities-religious, linguistic, ethnic, and sexual(LGBTQ). When majoritarianism is based on religious identity, it leads to religious nationalism in which religious minorities have no place.

Majoritarianism and Indian Muslims:

Majoritarianism is defined as the form of legitimate political authority which expresses the will of the majority. In a pluralistic society where several religions and their followers live the will of the religious majority (in this case the Hindus) even if this is expressed through a democratic process becomes the anti-thesis of democracy. Majoritarianism does not like diversity. Perhaps the oft repeated slogan of ‘One nation, one culture’ reveals the very nature of majoritarianism. In order to accomplish this ‘mission’ it endeavours to :

- Achieve cultural homogeneity
- Mobilize the majority community against a common enemy
- Control the mass media- news paper, TV channels, cinema certification and social media
- Create a sense of insecurity among the majority community through such propaganda as the rising population of minorities threatening to take over the country in near future hiding the opinion and studies of the demographers
- Influence the judiciary
- Sustained hate campaign against the minorities using mass media, school text books etc.

We should not forget that Hitler captured the German state through a democratic election. The history testifies that fascism achieves success by climbing over the shoulder of democracy. The strategy is to attain power through democracy and after coming into power weaken and destroy democracy. We should also not forget that a Liberal Democracy is the best protection for the weaker, disadvantaged, and marginalized sections of the society.

Majoritarianism is promoting hate campaign and projecting the largest minority of the nation as anti-national. The Indian nation is rapidly coming under siege and majoritarianism is calling the shot. It now controls the mass media and trying to influence even judiciary. The law enforcing agencies, mainly police, far from upholding the rule of law now some time acts as an arm of the communal forces furthering their agenda. Moreover, the law seem to have

been weaponised as the most preferred tool of harassment of minorities. Tragically, the Indian society is now being increasingly driven by a binary system- either you agree and conform to the majoritarian narrative or you are a traitor- jihadi,urban naxal etc, who must be crushed.

The process of ‘othering’ of Indian Muslims is being followed to force them to accept a second grade citizen status finally leading to the status of ‘nowhere people’. This seems to be a part of design to break their will to live with self-respect,dignity,and honour. The first priority of a majoritarian state is to consolidate the majority community as a vote bank by mobilizing and uniting it (despite so many differences and diversity) against a ‘common enemy’, the ‘dangerous minority.’ What follows is to marginalize the minority, even make them irrelevant, to the political life of the nation. We can see now there is only a token presence of Muslims in the parliament and assemblies of several states have no Muslim representation.

To make the Muslims invisible , it began with changing the names of Muslim kings and Nawabs. The next stage began with changing any Muslim/ Urdu sounding names. They are now being pushed out from Indian history and the newly introduced school text books either do not make mention of them or they are projected as villains who have ‘polluted’ India’s culture and civilization and have not made any contribution to Indian nation. The only two persons who are exception are the Martyr Abdul Hameed and APJ Abdul Kalam. The saddest part of the story is that first those in power are pushing them to the margins and now the larger society too has joined this endeavour. From the Gopal Singh Committee report to the Sachar Committee report, testified that the educational and economic status of Muslims is only a little better than those of scheduled castes, yet the narrative of ‘appeasement of Muslims stick.

Can a nation afford to keep such a large , disgruntled, frustrated, and alienated minority in its fold and live with peace, harmony, and progress? Our Indian nation and society have to seriously think about it.