

Examining the Muslim role in the ongoing protests in India

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Introduction

In December 2019, the world woke up to protests taking place in the most populous democracy in the world, India. Tens of thousands of people were gathered in various cities across the nation to protest a controversial law called the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) that was supposed to enable fast track citizenship to non-Muslims from three neighboring countries i.e. Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan.¹ Many people feared that in combination with a nationwide National Register of Citizens (NRC), the CAA would end up depriving Muslims in India of citizenship – a process that some have argued is a stepping stone that could lead to the ethnic cleansing of Muslims.²

Various twists and turns have emerged in the protests with violence against protesters as well as against security forces trying to quell the protests. More than 20 people were killed across the nation with many more injured.³ While the protests remained a part of the larger Indian citizenry, the role of Muslims in the protests has become much more prominent given that it is the very first time that Indian Muslims have engaged with democratic freedoms. This article aims to explore the role that Muslims in and out of India have played in the protests and what sort of future trends may emerge.

Historic Marginalization

Muslims in India have had a long history which at times has been turbulent. Although different parts of India have witnessed Muslims entering the nation in different eras, Muslims have normally been painted as invaders who entered (north) India to plunder and destroy temples while also converting and killing non-Muslims already residing in the nation.⁴ Yet, such a narrative has belied the peaceful entry of Muslims into the South via trade routes and the proliferation of Islam in other parts of India via Sufi saints and traders.⁵ Nor does it also encompass the centuries old theological and political synergy that existed between Muslims and various other religious adherents in the nation.⁶

These narratives led to political personalities capitalizing on the sentiment of fear thereby, leading to the partition and creation of a country largely for Muslims in 1947, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan.⁷ Over time, the Muslims that remained in India have often been asked to prove their fealty to the nation due to being labelled as fifth columnists and Pakistani spies.⁸

Two major trends that have been seen due to this otherization of Muslims was 1) The large number of riots between Hindus and Muslims

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post-independence (1947) 2) The gradual marginalization of Muslims in the economic, social and political sphere.

The most violent manifestation of this was the destruction of the Babri Masjid in 1992 when Hindu right wing extremists razed a historic mosque on the grounds that it was originally built on after a temple was destroyed in the very same place.⁹ Ten years later in 2002, Indian Muslims were subject to a pogrom by the Gujarat state when hundreds of Muslims were killed, raped and mutilated, allegedly at the behest of the then ruling government which was headed by the current PM Narendra Modi who was the chief Minister of the state at the time.¹⁰

Since 2014, when the current right-wing BJP government came to power, various rights groups reported on the increasing marginalization of Muslims.¹¹ A number of newer trends and major incidents occurred during this time. Firstly, Muslims began to be lynched by random mobs on suspicions of smuggling cows, an incidence that was never witnessed before.¹² Second, many historic cities and monuments with Muslim names were renamed to reflect a Hindu past.¹³ Third, Kashmir which was a Muslim majority state was reduced to a union territory and its citizens were placed in an (ongoing) internet shutdown lasting close to six months.¹⁴

All of this resulted not just in the marginalization of the Muslim community externally, but also in a gradual internal resignation to the flow of events that were taking place. Many Muslim leaders such as the heads of the Jamiat Ulama – e- Hind as well as the influential Deoband Madrassa, the Jamiat Ahle Hadeeth (Salafist organization in India), the Shia law board and others slowly succumbed to the government's advances.¹⁵ Common masses were left in the lurch, looking for direction and effective leadership to push back against the discriminatory policies it was facing.

The CAA Protests and the Muslim role

Against this background, the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) was introduced in December 2019. While protests against it began as, (and continues to remain) secular and in defense of the Indian constitution, it is interesting, also quite pertinent, to examine the Muslim role. The first icons of the protests against the government were two Muslim girls clad in headscarves. These protesters first agitated in Jamia Millia Islamia University, New Delhi, a Muslim run institution that was formed to take an active role against British colonizers pre-1947.¹⁶

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The resultant blowback from the police which was unnecessarily harsh led students (Muslim and Non-Muslim) across India to take part in protests against the government. Subsequently, while the first images of protests were of two Muslim women, many more images emerged across the country showing the pro-activeness of Muslims in asserting their identity and refusing to bow down to the perceived discriminatory laws of the government.¹⁷

In addition, mosques such as the Jama Masjid in Delhi became a launching pad for various protests against the government, especially after the Friday prayers.¹⁸ Anecdotal examples of women being protected by Muslim masses as well as Muslim crowds waving the Indian flag also became a mainstay of the protests. Various mosques and mosque leaders were heard giving out sermons and speeches asking to maintain law and order while simultaneously dissenting against the government.¹⁹ Indeed, in extraordinary shows of unity, states like Kerala even witnessed Muslim devotees praying in a church, while Hindu marriages were conducted in mosques showcasing the desire to assert the spirit of harmony.²⁰

Two major trends also dominated the Muslim community internally during the protests. Firstly, Muslims across the board no longer

subscribed to some of the community leaders that favored reconciliation with the government. For instance, the Shahi imam of the famous Jamia Masjid in Delhi was ignored and brushed aside after his attempts to justify the government's policy, while a non-Muslim leader, Chandrashekhar Azad was cheered for, by thousands of Muslim devotees in the vicinity of the mosque.²¹ Many of the other Muslim leaders who initially supported the government also reversed their tone when they saw the waves of anti-government protests as well demonstrating the rise of the Muslim masses against what they concluded as complacent leaders.²²

The second trend was that of women occupying a stronger and more dominant role in the protests. Indeed, apart from the virally shared images of the two women who started the agitation, places like Shaheen Bagh in New Delhi and other areas across the nation saw a larger turnout of women both with and without headscarves, denoting the unity of sentiment across women of all religious tendencies within Islam.²³

Much of this opposition which came from the Muslim community happened for a few reasons. To begin, the anti-government protests have been unfolding across the nation with students and women being strong stakeholders, allowing for Muslims to

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participate without the fear of these protests being termed as a Muslim only issue. Most importantly, the fear of losing citizenship (which happened to many Assamese) was the last straw that induced so many Muslims to come out in protest.²⁴

Yet, some of the trends were also negative in nature. Of the 20 people who died across India, most of the victims were Muslims including in the southern coastal town of Mangalore, as well as the Northern state of Uttar Pradesh where police forces were allegedly involved in destroying Muslim houses and snatching the property of such people in compensation for damages to public property.

Both locations have had a history of communal violence with UP being governed by a far-right Hindu figure, Yogi Adityanath, whose self-declared criminal cases include rioting and destruction of public property.²⁵ Political activists like Harsh Mander have decried the communal role of security forces which only targeted Muslim houses and even mistakenly sent notices to people who had died more than five years ago.²⁶

Charting the International Muslim responses

It is important to note that these protests were not limited to India. Muslim nations across the world also participated in condemning the Indian government, although it could be marked as symbolic in some cases. Pakistan for instance, which has often crusaded for Muslim rights in India and specifically in Kashmir - over which it continues to dispute with India - was quick to further criticize India.²⁷ Although such support often undermines the Muslim cause in India by allowing the right wing to equate Indian Muslims with Pakistanis, the neighboring nation was also involved in organizing or encouraging other diplomatic responses.

A case in point is the KL Summit which was a meeting between Turkey, Indonesia, Qatar, Iran and Malaysia in which many issues pertaining to the Muslim world were discussed. The group unanimously condemned India for its proclivity to discriminate against Indian Muslims.²⁸ While Pakistan was initially slated to be present in the summit as well, it was dissuaded by Saudi Arabia which regarded the summit as a threat to the Saudi led, 57 member state, Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC), an ostensible representative of the Muslim world.²⁹

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As such, while Pakistan stayed away from the summit, Saudi Arabia conceded to Pakistani demands regarding India, by first getting the OIC to issue a condemnation of the CAA and second, by agreeing to hold a special OIC meeting on the Kashmir issue.³⁰ Even though this meeting may lack the teeth required to effect any change, the fact that the OIC allowed for it to take place is significant.

This is because the OIC so far has largely kept silent on many Muslim related issues in India such as the marginalization of Muslims in India despite claiming to be the voice of global Muslims.³¹ The silence on such issues has largely been due to the burgeoning relations between India and the Gulf nations over the last few years on account of many shared perspectives on economics, defense and security.³² However, the condemnation of the OIC threatens to roll back some of the advances due to the Indian government's treatment of Muslims and the attention that other Muslim nations have been giving it.

Where will the Muslims be in the new Decade?

The Muslim question within the ongoing turmoil in India is but only one among the various issues that the events have unearthed such as the role of students, universities and other minorities (physically disabled,

transgender, Hindu lower caste etc.). Similarly, the response by Muslim nations is only part of the response provided including those by editorials of various western newspapers, the United Nations and other groups.

Nonetheless, these are still important developments to follow given the precedence they set. Accordingly, a few future trends can be predicted; firstly, Indian Muslim participation in domestic politics to fight back against perceived discrimination and assert their otherwise beleaguered Indian identity will likely increase. Secondly, this pushback will not just be against external forces but also against leaders within the community, especially those who have long enjoyed the influence of the Muslim masses without working for its betterment.

Thirdly, it is quite plausible that the participation of women among Muslims will also see a crest over time. Fourthly, in states like Uttar Pradesh where security forces have been discriminatory, there are higher chances that violence against Muslims may continue unabated unless the state government overhauls their approach to communal issues in such states.

These trends will also trickle down into the international Muslim arena. It will likely be common to see Muslim nations denouncing the Indian government's moves, especially when

international opinion is skewed against India. In addition, if such condemnation continues, it is plausible that bilateral relations between India and especially the gulf nations may slightly sour although it may not be a mainstay of the year.

In essence, the anti – CAA protests in India may not become a turning point for policy implementation by the current government which still dominates both houses in the Indian parliament. However, it definitely has sparked a perception of difference which has also led to a re-energized Muslim participation both in and out of India. It remains to be seen if this features in ruminations among Indian law makers in the future.



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