

The Role of Political Rhetoric in Spreading Intergroup Prejudice in India

Parnika Jhunhunwala

Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies

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Since the 2014 general elections and the rise of the right-wing Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the political climate in India is becoming increasingly intolerant. In the first six months of 2019 alone, the number of hate crime cases spiked to more than double what they were a year and a half ago, and the second largest victimized group of these hate crimes were Muslims (“Amnesty Report”, 2019). Through this commentary, I scrutinize whether the dominant Hindu nationalist party plays a role in fostering intergroup prejudice. I do so by examining speeches made by politicians belonging to the BJP at election rallies, or their comments made during interviews. I analyse any overt or subtle references to certain communities, the language used for them, and the historical references invoked to influence the masses. The analysis highlights the presence of intergroup prejudice, group-focused enmity, and an appeal to the emotions of pride and revenge.

Historical Background

The Indian partition of 1947 occurred on the basis of religion into Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan, followed by ghastly sectarian violence and mass migrations to the newly formed countries. Mohammed Ali Jinnah, called the “Father of Pakistan” in the early 1940s adopted the idea, popularly known as the two-nation theory, that Muslims have their own customs, religion and traditions, and therefore must have separate nation. In Indian accounts, Jinnah was painted as partly responsible for the partition (Britannica, n.d.). The Indian National Congress (INC) dominated the Indian independence movement and governed India for a few decades after independence, carrying forward their socialist and secular ideology. Irrespective of

the INC's staunch secular ideology, post-independence India witnessed communal riots that strengthened the communal hatred.

While the entire country was fighting for political independence, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), set up in 1925, started working to instil sentiments of nationalism based on a Hindu identity. BJP was formed by former members of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS) after they split with the Janata Party in 1979, on the issue of members holding a dual membership with the RSS. This led to the formation of the BJP which is the political arm of RSS. The main aim of RSS is

to activate the dormant Hindu society, to make it come out of its self-oblivion and realise its past mistakes, to instill in it a firm determination to set them right, and finally to make it bestir itself to reassert its honour and self-respect so that no power on earth dares challenge it in the days to come" (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh [RSS], 2012).

Narendra Modi, the Prime Minister of India, is a member of the RSS, and 71 percent of the current BJP ministers have an RSS background (Pandey & Arnimesh, 2020). The RSS holds daily hour-long gatherings and members partake in patriotic and physical fitness activities (RSS, 2012). The continuous personal exposure to such group activities could have important effects on their positive valuation of the group and their motivation to continue to belong to it, i.e., group cohesiveness (Janis, 1982). Increased group cohesiveness brings about a greater conformity to the group's norms (Janis, 1982), which in this case is to uphold Hindutva. While it is not necessary that the group was exposed to issues of groupthink, a point to consider is that it was founded with the aim of reviving Hindu culture. By successfully maintaining a tight-knit community, it laid down the foundation of a strong social identity and allegiance to the group, which is vividly reflected in today's national politics.

Instances of Intergroup Prejudice

Prejudice is defined as "negative evaluations of groups or of individuals as members of out-groups. They may be expressed openly and directly, for example through negative remarks and stereotypes, or subtly, for instance denying sympathy for an out-group or overstressing intergroup differences" (Küpper & Zick, 2014, p. 243). There are several instances of Indian politicians making prejudiced remarks. For example, the then BJP Minister of State for Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, Anantkumar Hegde, said in 2017 that "as long as there is Islam in the world, there will be terrorism. Until we uproot Islam, we can't remove terrorism. Islam is a bomb for world peace." ("Can't end terror until", 2017). Yogi Adityanath, a priest turned politician (from BJP) and the current chief minister of Uttar Pradesh (UP), a state in which one-fifth of the Muslim population resides (Government of India, 2011), in a speech

delivered in 2007, said “if the blood of one Hindu is spilled, then to avenge the murder of one Hindu, we will not file First Information Reports with the administration, but will get at least 10 people murdered...”; following which communal riots broke out in the region (“What is the Yogi Adityanath hate speech,” 2018). In his speech he further explicitly stated that they “will not allow any tazia¹ to be held here”, clearly referring to the Muslim community in both the preceding statements. In 2019, he declared that the “Muslim League Party was a virus that had divided the country during the independence movement”, and rhetorically asked, “think what will happen if they win? The virus will spread throughout the country” (“Election Commission asks for report,” 2019). The former Minister of State for Culture Mahesh Sharma (BJP), in a television interview, described former Indian President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam as a “great man” who was a “nationalist” and a “humanist” “despite being a Muslim” (“Culture minister Mahesh Sharma”, 2015).

Such prejudice towards outgroups helps legitimize discrimination and violence that maintains social inequalities, as is the premise of social dominance theory (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Moreover, when politicians give prejudiced speeches and interviews, discrimination is legitimised. The strong social dominance beliefs held by some members of the BJP were reflected in an interview in 2020 with Member of Parliament, Subramanian Swamy, in which he said that “where the Muslim population is large, there is always trouble” and further said that the constitutionally enshrined right to equality, given to all citizens of India, “was being misinterpreted” as it “guarantees equality of equals” and “Muslims are not in the equal category” (VICE News, 2020). Such views buttress the hard-line view of group-based hierarchies, and of the superiority of Hindus over Muslims. This general ideology of inequality, a classic factor of group-focused enmity, also highlights the fact that such attitudes can be transformed into behaviour when the overall climate in the society is conducive to undertake such actions (Küpper & Zick, 2014). Unfortunately, India’s society seems to have favourable conditions for such an environment.

Alongside these explicit comments, members of the BJP have also been found making veiled references to the Muslim community. Prime Minister Modi at a 2019 election rally in Jharkhand, held shortly after Anti-Citizenship Amendment Act protests erupted throughout the country, said that “those protesting against the Citizenship Bill can be identified by the clothes they wear,” referring to the distinct skull caps that are commonly worn in the Muslim community (“Can be identified by their clothes,” 2019). Invoking Muslim community’s culture while also defaming the opposition INC, Yogi Adityanath in an election rally in 2019 said that “Congress government used to serve biryani² to terrorists, and Modi’s Army sends bullets and bombs their way” (“Can be identified by their clothes”, 2019). This reflects the dominant belief held by Hindu

¹ Tazia is a Muslim passion play celebrated by the Shia group during Muharram.

² Biryani is a dish that, in certain contexts, is associated with Muslims.

fundamentalists — of equating terrorists with Muslims — adding an additional dimension to strengthen the outgroup derogation.

The Role of Emotions

Brader and Marcus (2013) briefly mention emotion-specific patterns for explicitly political actions. For example, pride should promote expressive displays of group loyalty. This is visible in the pride that most Hindus take in their culture, and their loyalty to the political party that has sworn to protect it. Along with this pride in Hindu culture, fear of the outgroup is palpable, particularly with regards to the rate of growth of the Muslim population. Even though fertility rates for Muslims are falling in India, it is a belief held by most people that they are procreating faster than Hindus. The RSS chief, Mohan Bhagwat, said that “if this continues, how will we live here as a Hindu nation? Won’t this nation become an Islamic country?” (Soz, 2016). This threat exemplifies the antecedents to anger discussed by Brader and Marcus (2013), namely the presence of an external cause which can be blamed (here Muslims and their rate of growth), the perception that the situation is unfair (to the Hindu majority, as expressed by the RSS chief, and by Yogi Adityanath’s “virus” statement), and providing sufficient grounds for arousing anger against the outgroup, which might also snowball into violence.

Another dominant emotion echoed through the speeches of some politicians is that of revenge. This feeling of revenge is rooted in their understanding of India’s communal past; in their speeches the politicians emphasised certain historical events. For example, communal riots between the Hindu Jat community and the Muslims broke out in 2013, Muzaffarnagar, Uttar Pradesh (UP). The following year, at an election campaign in Western UP in 2014, then BJP’s general secretary, Amit Shah, asked the Jat community “to seek revenge for the insult” inflicted during the riots (“Indian media,” 2014) and “teach a lesson to those who committed injustice” (Zanane, 2014; NDTV, 2014). He further said that this “is an election of honour and people must take revenge in the ballot and vote for BJP” (Zanane, 2015). He seems to subtly hint that BJP is ready to avenge the Jat community, if brought to power. In an interview, former Member of Parliament from the BJP, Vinay Katiyar, said that “Muslims should not stay in this country. They have partitioned the country on the basis of population. So why are they here? Muslims have been given their share. They should go to Bangladesh or Pakistan... they have no business being in India” (Sanyal, 2018). Giriraj Singh, a minister from the BJP said in 2020 that “Muslims should have been sent to Pakistan in 1947” (“Muslims should have been sent to Pak,” 2020). Six years earlier, while rallying in Jharkhand, he had said that “all those who are opposing Narendra Modi will have no place in India or Jharkhand in the coming days, only in Pakistan” (“Those opposing Modi,” 2014).

It is through such statements that the wounds of partition, and the hatred against it are still visible, and are now being directed at the Muslim community (Löwenheim & Heimann (2008, p.

691) discuss revenge in international politics, but these can also be applied to BJP's actions in the domestic sphere. The goals of "infliction of suffering" as well as "correcting the past" (conveying the message that the repetition of harm will not be tolerated) are reflected in the speeches of Yogi Adityanath and Amit Shah. The behavioural characteristics of explicitness of revenge (revengers being proud of their revenge) and longevity (harbouring revenge for very long periods of time as seen by the reference "go back to Pakistan") are also observed clearly. This observation suggests that conditions conducive for the state to seek revenge are created, and fulfilled by the national party leaders themselves. As Stern (1995) discusses, leaders try to mobilize support for national collective action during times of war by appealing to their emotions rather than self-interest. Similarly, Indian politicians are also using emotions, to amass support for waging a "war" against the outgroup.

Conclusion

By examining speeches that are considered particularly controversial or communal made by politicians belonging to the BJP, I have demonstrated how politicians articulate strong out-group prejudice that stems from emotions of revenge and pride. The fact that BJP was re-elected in 2019, with a higher majority than 2014, reflects that the people are onboard with their ideology, creating a dangerous environment for the survival of a secular, democratic nation.

Allport's finding of "people who reject one outgroup are also likely to reject other outgroups" (Allport, 1954 as cited in Küpper & Zick, 2014, p 243) has not been strongly echoed in the analyses of political speeches in India. For instance, even though communities of Dalits and Scheduled Tribes experience prejudice in India, they are not openly spoken against or derided by politicians themselves. This lends greater credibility to the fact that this specific prejudice towards Muslims stems from reasons other than their minority or outgroup status; it is rooted in historical incidents. The Prime Minister's suggestion of the creation of a *shamshaan* (Hindu cremation site) if the state government built a *kabristaan* (Muslim graveyard) in a village to ensure "there is no discrimination" (Naqvi, 2017), puts forward a flawed metric of social progress. Emotional appeals that compel people to revisit and revise history with a rekindled sense of pride and revenge is deepening cultural and democratic fissures, strengthening populist promises and spewing nothing but hatred and religious fundamentalism.

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