

# Tackling the Hindutva bugbear

## Dalit-Muslim alliances are not enough to restore secularism; upper caste Hindus are needed too

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Ever since the Sachar Committee Report of 2006 demonstrated that the socio-economic conditions of Muslims have worsened compared to Dalits, some have argued that Muslims have become India's new Dalits. It is further proposed that the two communities should forge an alliance to fight the Hindu Right to restore secularism because together they constitute a significant number: Muslims constitute 14.2% of the population and Dalits, 16.63% (Census 2011).

### Differences

There are some basic differences between the two communities. Muslims are historically a multi-class community, whereas Dalits are evolving into one, boosted by reservation policies. There are further nuanced differences. Consider rhetorical questions such as: who is the Shah Rukh Khan or Sania Mirza or Bismillah Khan of Dalits? In the psychological domain, discrepancies are equally apparent. A working class Muslim can embrace the Red Fort or the Taj Mahal as a proud legacy of his ancestors, but Dalits have no such iconic symbols. Thousands of years of subjugation of Dalits by upper caste Hindus have presented them as people not worthy of history or even without history. The Hindu Right has weaponised the history of Muslims against them. Therefore, BSP leader Mayawati had compelling reasons to build statues of Dalit icons, which received flak from many upper caste Hindus.

Dalits continue to suffer from organised violence unleashed by upper caste Hindus. The flogging of a Dalit family in Una in 2016 is a case in point. Some Dalits, research suggests, have occasionally participated in violence against Muslims in riots (in Gujarat in 2002, for instance). In modern India, Muslims have not participated in organised violence against Dalits, nor have they systematically raised their voice against it because Muslims are quite lost as a political community. This explains their failure to organise a worthwhile resistance against lynching. Whatever protest occurred was spearheaded by secular forces with artists and intellectuals at the forefront. Muslims

almost seemed like benign onlookers. The anti-Citizenship (Amendment) Act protests were a face-saver, but those too was below the potential of a 200 million-strong community.

In rare instances, there are warm social relationships between a fraction of the Pasmanda community, Dalit Muslims and Dalit Hindus. Nevertheless, social bonding between the Ashraf Muslims and Hindu Dalits is constricted. B.R. Ambedkar knew this. Once he chastised a Muslim man who declined to offer him water by saying untouchability has no place in Islam. In his speech on conversion on May 31, 1936, Ambedkar exhorted Dalits to leave the Hindu fold for any religion including Islam.

In recent years, upper caste Hindus have gravitated towards the Hindu Right causing the breakdown of the secular project for at least two reasons. First, upper caste Hindus have been persuaded by the Hindu Right's campaign that Indian secularism is a Muslim project. In every election, the BJP deploys incendiary concepts such as 'appeasement' and 'vote bank politics' with greater intensity to deepen the politics of polarisation. This triggers asymmetric counter-polarisation among Muslims. Second, policies of the Western states in the post-9/11 era contributed to Islamophobia's rise. This swayed the Indian diaspora, drawn mainly from upper caste Hindus. They fail to register the distinct multicultural profile of Indian Muslims. While a good fraction of upper caste Hindus is now wedded to the Hindu Right's majoritarian project, plenty embrace it for circumstantial reasons and remain indifferent to Muslim suffering.

The paradox of Indian democracy is that upper caste Hindus, a tiny minority, control the labyrinth of power in all spheres. Even historically, the Mughals and the British had to have upper caste Hindus in their army and bureaucracy to run their empire. Therefore, the upper caste Hindus have to be on board to restore India's wounded secular project because Dalit-Muslim alliances are not enough.

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