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## The RSS' Plans to Resolve the Muslim Question

By: Sanya Dhingra

*The Sangh's most recent outreach to Muslims is part of a history of plans for the "Indianisation" of Muslims by making them more Hindu. The goal of such assimilation is to negate any idea of a Muslim identity.*

Two recent political developments pertaining to the 'Muslim question' in India have confounded the secular-liberal intelligentsia.

In August, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) chief Mohan Bhagwat met with five Muslim intellectuals to discuss issues pertaining to Hindu-Muslim relations in the country. This was shortly after Prime Minister Narendra Modi told BJP party leaders and workers to reach out to the Pasmandas, subordinated-caste Muslims, by extending a "hand of affection" towards them.

Why are the Sangh and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which have expanded their socio-political base through marginalisation of the Muslim population, trying to reach out? Why now, when Muslims face unprecedented persecution in the history of independent India?

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The developments, dubbed as an outreach to Muslims, have led to a flurry of explanations of their underlying motivations from both Hindutva sympathisers and detractors. Some have argued that the BJP is trying to expand its vote base by wooing sections of the Muslim community. Others say the Indian government is trying to mend frayed ties with the Gulf countries. While both these arguments could have some element of truth, neither captures the significance of these developments in building the Hindu Rashtra that the RSS envisions.

The RSS' outreach to the Muslim community, and the sub-communities within it, is a well-strategised, ideological step, not just a concession or an ideological detour. The olive branch to Muslims has a long ideological history within the Sangh, which has consistently argued for the "mainstreaming" and "Indianisation" of Muslims by making them more "Hindu" – a word Sangh leaders use interchangeably with Indian or Bharatiya.

### Where do Muslims go?

As majoritarian violence has engulfed India over the last eight years, several liberals and persecuted Muslims have asked where does the RSS-BJP combine want to send India's Muslims? Surely, the trite 'go-to-Pakistan' jibes are little more than cheap, polarising rhetoric.

In September 2018, Bhagwat cleared the air on that particular question. A "Hindu Rashtra" is not possible without India's Muslims, he said. "The Sangh works for 'bandhubhav' (fraternity) and for this there is only one basis — unity in diversity. This is our thought process which the world calls as Hindutva and that's why we say we are a Hindu rashtra (nation). It does not mean that we do not need Muslims, this does not work. The day it is said that we do not need Muslims, that day it will not be Hindutva."

Bhagwat further went on to formally distance the RSS from M.S. Golwalkar's *Bunch of Thoughts*, in which the Sangh's second and longest-serving chief had called Muslims "shatru" (enemy). Bhagwat said that Golwalkar's remark had only a "temporary context" and has been deleted from the popular edition of the book.

If Muslims should neither leave India and nor are they enemies of Hindus, according to the RSS supremo, how do they fit into a Hindu Rashtra? Not even through religious conversion, Bhagwat said: "People are afraid that the Sangh will turn everyone into Hindus. We are not here to convert anyone. We are all from Bharat. To become a Hindu, we need not change anyone; we are already Hindus. We need to live with all sections of people."

Bhagwat reiterated this statement in his annual Vijay Dashami address this year too. The "fear mongering" about the threats posed to minorities in a Hindu Rashtra by "organised Hindus" were unfounded, he said. Speaking of his widely discussed meeting with Muslim

intellectuals in August, he added that such inter-faith meetings have been a tradition in the Sangh, and that “Samaj and rashtriyata should be our only interests”.

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Yet, in the same speech, Bhagwat spoke of the need to correct “religion-based population imbalances” caused by forced conversions, cross-border infiltrations, and lure. If unchecked, these could lead to changes in a country’s geographical boundaries, as happened in the case of India 75 years ago, he said, alluding to Partition. Further, he said that while the Hindu rashtra was based on the principle of *karuna* (compassion), self-defence when aggressors attack was not only “our” right, but also a duty.

### Accommodation through invisibilisation

Without understanding how Hindutva ideologues and the Sangh have grappled with the Muslim question, Bhagwat’s supposed overtures combined with subtle digs at the Muslim community are bound to create misconceptions and confusion.

Historically, the use of violence against 'enemies' of the Hindus has enjoyed widespread legitimacy in the writings of Hindutva ideologues. But there has consistently been a parallel search to settle the Muslim question through other ways when violence is either seen as politically unviable or unnecessary. The search has always culminated in attempts to make Muslims Hindu, but not only through religious conversion.

For Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, the original theorist of Hindutva, Muslims and Christians were not part of “Hindusthan.” But these communities could be made “Hindu” if they would embrace this land as not just their *pitribhu* (fatherland), but also their *punyabhua* (holy land) – thereby giving up their foreign, extra-territorial loyalties. Golwalkar too argued that Muslims, who were “demoralized and defeated” after the partition of India, could now be “assimilated” and made “part of ourselves” (quoted in Sharma (2009).

In order to “Indianise” themselves, Muslims were expected to subscribe to an “Indian culture,” for merely being born in India did not guarantee their Indianness.

This attempt to assimilate Muslims found its most articulate expression in Balraj Madhok, a top leader of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS), the forerunner of the BJP. Madhok euphemistically called this process “Indianisation” (Madhok 1970). According to Madhok, there was no such thing as “Muslim culture” in India, as culture was inherently linked to a country, and not a religion. Therefore, in order to “Indianise” themselves, Muslims were expected to subscribe to an “Indian culture,” for merely being born in India did not guarantee their Indianness.

According to Madhok, Indian culture entailed respect for the national flag, the national anthem, the national language, and national heroes, amongst others. Hindi – the “Bhasha Bharti” – would be the national language, while national festivals, which the government would actively celebrate, included Diwali, Dussehra, Onam, Baisakhi, Vasant, and Holi. Other festivals could not be termed national because they were “sectarian” in nature. Similarly, national heroes were figures like Ram, Arjun and Krishna, whom no “Indianised” Muslim should have any qualms about respecting. “Once this is realised by the rising generation of Muslims in India, there might be some rethinking in (their) names as well,” Madhok wrote. With Indianisation, the “Muslimness” of Indian Muslims, including their very names, would be “assimilated”.

### Conversion to being ‘Hindu’

These ideas have found their way into the world view of the Sangh’s electoral fronts. In its 1951 manifesto, the BJS stated, “Jana Sangh considers them (Muslims) flesh of our flesh, the blood of our blood. ...It looks forward to their disassociating foreign ways from the tenets of their religion. They are welcome to worship the Islamic way. They are expected to live the Bharatiya way.”

In this framework, Muslims are 'Hindus' who have been co-opted through religious conversion by 'foreign Muslim invaders' and must give up their 'foreign' ways to be considered Indian.

This strategic conflation of 'Hindu' to mean nationality, while 'Muslim' has strictly religious connotations, allows for a systematic erasure of all things Muslim – culture, names, festivals, icons – in the name of true secularism as opposed to 'pseudo-secularism'.

In this framework, Muslims are Hindus who have been co-opted through religious conversion by foreign Muslim invaders and must give up their foreign ways to be considered Indian. It is in this context that one should see the violence unleashed on Muslims who refuse to give up 'foreign' symbols of Muslimness – the hijab, beef-eating, offering namaz in public places, etc. Even when namaz is allowed as a way of worship, for example, it would need to be Indianised and washed off its foreignness. *Yoga and Islam* (2015) published by the Rashtriya Muslim Manch, the Muslim wing of the RSS, for instance, [states](#) that “namaz is one sort of yoga asana.”

The political scientist Jyotirmaya Sharma (2009) refers to this process as “digesting” the Muslim enemy by obliterating any distinct identity they may have. He explains the confounding oscillation between the exclusivist and accommodative nationalisms of the Sangh by arguing that the idea that Muslims are enemies is never really abandoned, and therefore, violence against them continues to enjoy legitimacy whenever their Muslimness is seen as a threat to Hindus. However, an ingenious alternative to this violence is symbolically killing them by “digesting” them and making them “part of ourselves”, as Golwakar had said in 1949. There is, of course, no better time for this “digestion” than when Muslims are “demoralized and defeated.”

This oscillation is also similar to Gramsci’s idea of hegemony, which he argued is exercised through “a combination of force and consensus variously equilibrated.” (Bates 1975). “The ruling class,” Gramsci argued, “falls back on the state’s coercive apparatus which disciplines those who do not ‘consent’.” Through their ostensible attempts of outreach to Muslims, the RSS and BJP have consistently offered Muslims the chance to be ruled by “consent”, even as the option of force and violence remains an active part of their apparatus. Of course, the threat of violence does not disappear in its entirety even for consenting Muslims, as we see in the [case](#) of Bajrang Dal activists assaulting Muslim youth attending a garba gathering during the navratra celebrations.

Gramsci’s writings on the missionary activities of the Catholic Church in colonial India are also instructive in understanding Bhagwat’s recent engagement with the five Muslim intellectuals and his visit to a madrasa in the national capital. Writing about the problems faced by the Jesuits in India, Gramsci wrote that there were very few in India who were converting to Catholicism, and those too belonged only to the lower castes (Gramsci 2007: 207). While the Indian intellectuals would not easily fall for missionary propaganda, the Pope insisted that it was important to work among them “especially because the masses would convert if the nuclei of important intellectuals converted.” The conversion of great masses also required an understanding of the ideologies and ways of thinking of their natural leaders, which could then be “destroyed” or “assimilated” as the need may be, he argued.

### **Pasmandas and the assimilation project**

In a recent [essay](#) in *Seminar*, Khalid Ansari has argued that the BJP’s outreach to the Pasmandas shows that the party and the Sangh are now seeking to resolve the Muslim question through assimilation, and not religious conversion. This seems true since assimilation or Indianisation, as we have seen, often refers to the cultural conversion of Muslims without a formal religious conversion.

The Pasmanda outreach, unlike Bhagwat’s meeting with the Muslim intellectuals, was initiated by the BJP itself, and not the other way round. Why has the RSS-BJP combine chosen to particularly target this marginalised community with *sneh yatras* — especially given the fact that the bulk of communal assaults on Muslims fall upon the Pasmandas?

Of course, the fact that they constitute 85% of the Muslim population, holds some electoral promise for the BJP. But the Pasmandas, who belong to the OBC, Dalit and Adivasi communities within the Muslim community, are also crucial to the larger RSS project.

While the BJP’s outreach to the Pasmanda Muslims shows their desire to assimilate them, it also allows the Sangh to simultaneously destroy the “ideologies and ways of thinking of their natural leaders”.

Since the 1920s, the Pasmanda movement has sought to break the monopoly of the dominant caste Ashrafs over the Muslim question by problematising a monolithic determination of who is an Indian Muslim. This problematisation has inadvertent overlaps with the RSS, which, for very different reasons, seeks to delegitimise the Muslim identity as well.

For example, while the BJS’ Madhok argued that Urdu was only “a style of Hindi” spoken by elites in Delhi and Lucknow, the Pasmanda movement has also challenged the view that Urdu is the language of all Muslims in India. They have instead battled for languages spoken by Muslim communities in different parts of the country. While the Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) has always

been an eyesore for the RSS, the Pasmada movement too has consistently questioned the university's Ashraf elitism. Further, the Pasmada movement has challenged the elite construction of a pan-India Muslim identity, instead choosing to make alternative alliances with other subaltern groups across religions. While such an alliance potentially challenges Hindutva politics; in the immediate instance it helps the Sangh and the BJP in the limited way of negating a Muslim identity itself.

As Ansari has argued, while the BJP's outreach to the Pasmada Muslims shows their desire to assimilate them, it also allows the Sangh to simultaneously destroy the "ideologies and ways of thinking of their natural leaders" – the dominant-caste Ashraf Muslims – and thereby attain complete hegemony in a Gramscian sense.

By trying to co-opt the Pasmada movement, the RSS, which has consistently sought to unite and organise Hindus across the country, and become their "sole spokesman" (Jalal 2010), seeks to permanently create a new power equation with the Muslims in a Hindu Rashtra. While Hindus, in this scheme of things, will be unified, the Muslim community will be proven as internally divided, caste-ridden, and barely even Muslim.

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