

THE GULF OF SENSITIVITY THAT INDIA WILL HAVE TO CROSS

Relevant for: Post-Independence India | Topic: Recent Developments in Indian Politics

'While there is an assertion of religiosity, there is also a lack of curiosity about other faiths' | Photo Credit: Getty Images/iStockphoto

The strong and widespread targeting of India in the Islamic world over the past few days arose from a specific theological consideration. It was not directly related to the politics or policies of India's ruling dispensation though its opponents within India would wish to give it that colour. The veracity of this assessment is borne out by the general apathy of the Islamic ummah towards India's Muslim population. From time to time, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) has criticised the Indian state's alleged discrimination of its Muslim minorities. However, the organisation's views have never formed the basis of its member-states' bilateral ties with India. And, Islamic states have not been swayed by Pakistan's consistent portrayal of the Narendra Modi government as fascist and anti-Muslim.

Indeed, India's relations with some significant Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have strengthened since Prime Minister Narendra Modi assumed office in May 2014. It is possible that the current resentment, even outrage, on account of the present controversy may lead to a greater scrutiny in the ummah of the Modi government's policies towards the country's Muslims. India's social situation may come under a deeper focus but the governments of Islamic countries would not want their India policies to be determined by theological considerations; they have an array of interests at stake in their India ties.

That the Islamic governments protested against the comments made regarding the Prophet by the former Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) National Spokesperson, Nupur Sharma, and the former media head of the party's Delhi unit, Naveen Kumar Jindal, was not surprising. What was so though was that neither the Government nor the ruling party seemed to have realised the great offence they constituted to all Muslims worldwide and the anger the comments would generate. At least the astute External Affairs Minister, S. Jaishankar, who has been a distinguished diplomat in his earlier avatar, should have known that despite enormous differences within themselves, Muslims venerate the Prophet; they all find any perception of disrespect towards him to be intolerable. Thus, there is a distinction between criticising some social practices of Muslims and what is perceived to be an attack on the personality of the Prophet.

Ms. Sharma's remarks during a talk show on a prominent TV channel were made on May 26. The next day a clip of these remarks was added to a tweet. That drew wide attention in India and Ms. Sharma complained of having received threats to her person and also her family members. At the same time a Muslim organisation lodged a legal complaint against Ms. Sharma. It was inevitable that in these times of instant communications and social media, Ms. Sharma's comments would find an audience in Islamic countries; and, that anti-India elements would also seek to publicise them. Yet, it appears that the Indian establishment perhaps thought if attention was given to this matter at all, that Ms. Sharma's remarks would be placed in the context of the shrill charges and counter-charges made daily on Indian TV, and would therefore not be taken seriously.

Is this because the Indian system, including the ruling dispensation, has an inadequate appreciation of the sensitivities of different faiths? Is it because the Indian intellectual tradition as it has evolved after Independence does not pay sufficient attention to faith, perhaps, considering

it backward? And, now while there is an assertion of religiosity, there is also a lack of curiosity about other faiths. This seems to cut across all segments of society and has led to a lack of knowledge of other religions, leading to misperceptions. This is illustrated in simple things such as innocently sending 'happy' messages on occasions of mourning of adherents of another faith or in works of art. But there is a darker side to society too which is witnessed in the reinforcement of prejudice about other faiths and the use of words and expressions which cause offence. This can also be witnessed in extolling the virtues of one's own faith and putting another in an unfavourable light. Clearly, all this points to the need to foster an understanding in society at large of other faiths and their sensitivities. This is especially needed in our multi-faith society at a time when religiosity is rising sharply across the world.

It was unfortunate that the situation arising out of Ms. Sharma's remarks occurred at a time when the Vice-President of India, M. Venkaiah Naidu, was on a three-nation tour of Gabon, Senegal and Qatar. Mr Naidu left India on May 30 and after visiting the two African countries, was to reach Doha on June 4. Clearly, the Indian foreign policy establishment led by the External Affairs Minister missed the sentiment brewing in the Islamic world because of Ms. Sharma's comments. If the External Affairs Minister had assessed what was happening, he would have surely taken action to prevent any embarrassment to the Vice-President on foreign soil. It can hardly be disputed that the President of India, the Vice-President and the Prime Minister, should never be put even in an uncomfortable position when they are abroad. Did this lapse occur because of a lack of appreciation of how Islamic sentiment is roused because of a perception of an insult to the Prophet?

Also read | [Protests in many States over remarks on the Prophet](#)

According to a report in this newspaper, the "damage control" process began when the Vice-President was flying from Senegal to Doha and the Qataris conveyed that the ceremonial banquet of Mr. Naidu's host, the Deputy Amir of Qatar, would have to be called off because he was suspected to have been exposed to COVID-19. In such circumstances a very senior person hosts the customary banquet but it is not cancelled. It also appears now that the Indian side was taken aback when the Indian Ambassador in Doha was called in on June 5 and Qatar while appreciating the action taken against Ms. Sharma and Mr. Jindal by the BJP demanded that India issues a public apology for Ms. Sharma's remarks against the Prophet. There is no question of making one for the remarks of a party functionary.

This can only be called a very offensive action against India by Qatar. It could only have caused the greatest embarrassment to Mr. Naidu. It is to his credit that he proceeded with the visit. After the Qataris went public with their action, other Islamic countries lodged protests too. India did well to reject the statements of the OIC and Pakistan for they reeked of political considerations.

There is a mutuality of interests between the Arab states and India, and hence when the temperature cools, the flow of relations will go on. But India must take the obvious lessons from this entire episode, beginning with greater sensitivity to all faiths both for social harmony and promotions of India's external interests.

Vivek Katju is a former diplomat

[Our code of editorial values](#)

END

CrackIAS.com