

MAKING SENSE OF A POLITICAL OUTREACH TO PASMANDA MUSLIMS

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A meeting organised by the party minority wing, in Lucknow | Photo Credit: SANDEEP SAXENA

There has been a considerable churn within the Indian Muslim community in response to [Prime Minister Narendra Modi's appeal](#) to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to make an outreach to deprived minority groups such as [Pasmanda Muslims](#), especially in Uttar Pradesh. The BJP president, J.P. Nadda, has directed party cadres to organise programmes for Pasmanda Muslims to accord them *sneh* (affection) and *samman* (respect).

Sceptics see it as an electoral tactic to fragment the social unity of Muslims and ameliorate the vote base of the BJP. However, considering that the BJP has triumphed in the past two general elections and multiple State elections without the electoral support of Muslims, this narrative seems off the mark. Whatever may be the motivation, it does signal an inflection point in the outlook of the BJP *vis-à-vis* India's largest minority — as a first serious attempt by the BJP to locate Muslims in its arc.

This development has spotlighted the identity of Pasmanda Muslims and issues related to social justice and stratification within the Muslim community. It is true that the caste system, as has traditionally existed among the Hindus, is not acknowledged under Islam. Yet, it has been assimilated in the cultural life of Muslims owing to their centuries' old coexistence with Hindus. The distinctiveness of Indian Muslims lies in their 'lived reality', having more socio-cultural affinity with Hindus than with Muslims in foreign lands.

The Indian Muslim community can be stratified along three lines — Ashrafs (elite class), Ajlaf (backward class) and Arzal (most backward class). According to estimates, Ashrafs constitute 15%-20% of the Muslim population. Pasmanda, literally meaning 'those left out' or 'marginalised', is a collective expression for Ajlaf and Arzal — who constitute the remaining 80%-85%. The norm of hereditary occupational specialisation, as a feature of the Indian caste system, is mirrored in the occupational profile of Pasmanda Muslims — barbers, weavers, potters, *faqirs*, *bidi* workers, etc. They are predominantly low-wage workers employed in the unorganised sector marked by pitiful work conditions. So, 'Pasmanda' is not a caste but a class which is representative of backward and subjugated castes within the Muslim community.

Political parties have not been mindful of this internal stratification within Muslims — with an emphasis only on religion as the basis for their inclusion. This has worked to the advantage of the Muslim elites or Ashrafs, who, despite being numerically inferior to the Pasmandas, have cornered most of the 'Muslim representation' in various political parties. The Ashraf-driven Muslim politics has over-emphasised sentimental issues such as Muslim personal law, Babri Masjid, etc., thereby subverting the bread and butter issues which resonate more with the Pasmandas.

Also read | [Pasmanda Muslims seek SC status for Dalit Muslims](#)

So, what drives the Prime Minister's Pasmanda outreach? It is but quite natural for a political party to have electoral considerations underpinning its outreach to social groups. However, the Prime Minister's and the BJP's desire to accommodate Pasmanda Muslims should be seen as serving multiple purposes.

First, it highlights the anomalies of political under-representation of deprived groups in the Muslim community *intra se*. Second, it brings issues related to their development to the forefront *vis-à-vis* issues of pure sentiments. This is in line with the Prime Minister's address to the Muslim community at the centenary celebrations of Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) in December 2020, where he laid out the essentials of empowerment — women's education, economic independence, entrepreneurship and employment — and played down the compulsions of ideological differences. He said, "The country is progressing on a path where none can be left behind because of religion." Third, it fits in with the Prime Minister's resolve of ' *sabka saath, sabka vikas, sabka vishwas, sabka prayas*'. Lastly, it suggests an acknowledgement within the BJP that accommodation of religious diversity should be an important consideration for a national party in a political democracy such as India.

Further, the BJP government has been highlighting that its various welfare schemes are benefiting all sections without discrimination. Be it funding the unfunded under the Pradhan Mantri Jan-Dhan Yojana or distribution of cooking gas under Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana, faces or identities of beneficiaries are irrelevant. The Pasmandas, an economically marginalised class, form a specific category of beneficiaries under these schemes. In fact, unofficial figures of the Ujjwala Yojana in Uttar Pradesh show that economically backward Muslims have benefited in a proportion greater than their population.

This outreach marks the first time that a major political party has extended an olive branch to the Pasmanda Muslims. In shaping their response, Muslims may draw lessons from the life of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, the founder of AMU. Facing stiff opposition from orthodox sections within the Muslim community against promoting enlightened education among the Muslim masses, he did not let his pragmatism be deflected by obstacles of emotionalism.

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