

## BOOK REVIEW

**Muhammad, Mujeeb Afzal, *Bharatiya Janata Party and the Indian Muslims* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2014), 451.**

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The rise of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has set India on a dangerous path. The growing intolerance against minorities, especially Muslims, has not only raised concerns about the ideological makeup of the party, but has also brought into question the political orientation of Indian state and society. Muhammad Mujeeb Afzal, in his book, *Bharatiya Janata Party and the Indian Muslims*, canvasses the complex relation between Hindu nationalism and the Indian Muslims.

The book, spanning over seven chapters, explains in detail the rise of Hindu nationalism in Indian politics. Afzal analyses the relations between the two communities in three successive periods of modern Indian history; the Raj era, the post-independence Congress-dominated era and the post-Congress dominated era. The book starts with the ‘Construction of Identities in India’ and identifies the basis of antagonistic interaction between Hindu nationalism and the Indian Muslims. The process of construction of modern identities in India began with the arrival of British imperialism. The colonial masters with collaboration of local elites gathered and recruited people of diverse ethnic and geographical identities to fulfil the imperialistic requirements and to control the masses. This modernisation process disrupted the local traditional pattern of socio-political interaction and behaviour. Consequently, the origin of identities in India was essentially the result of interaction between British Indian Empire, its process of modernisation and the Indian society that created the space in which these identities were constructed.

Going back to the early history, the book looks at the history of the evolution of BJP, its function and decision making process. A group of upper caste elite-middle class Hindus initiated the process of construction of ‘Hindu’ identity. They not only wanted to participate in the new political and economic structures but also wished to protect the

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Brahminical traditions which reflected their social position. This process stirred the local's desire of getting more share in socio-political system; consequently, it initiated a competition between the two. Two parties, Mahasabha and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) developed the concept of 'Hindutva' to explicitly separate them from other communities. However, due to dominant discourse of Indian secular-composite identity in post-independence politics, the attempt to institutionalise the Hindu identity through political methods failed. Consequently, Bhartaya Jana Sang (BJS) was organised which also failed to make significant inroads into Indian politics due to its association with RSS. The formation of BJP was a consequence of this coalition experiment.

The Indian Muslim identity construction was initiated in the areas where the Muslims were in minority but had the privileged politico-economic positions. They initiated the process to preserve their distinct tradition of Pan-Islamism and Urdu language in India. This Islam-Urdu identity was constructed to enable the Indian Muslims to participate in the modernity process. The process of institutionalization of Muslim identity was initiated through education at the Aligarh Muslim University and the political movement that resulted in the formation of All-India Muslim League (AIML). During this period, they refused to surrender to any of the elements against their identity, such as, the Muslim Personal Law (MPL) or Babri Masjid.

The book includes interesting account of Hindu nationalist construct of the 'other'. This construct is used for two objectives: Firstly, to assert the religio-cultural elements of Hindu 'in-group' and secondly, to blame them for distortion and pollution of religio-cultural tradition. Consequently, the Muslim community was perceived as having a singular interest that was in permanent conflict with Hindus, their beliefs, norms and values. The author writes that Muslims, as a significant minority, presents a serious problem in the construction of Hindu nation.

Afzal describes that in the pre-independence phase the Hindu nationalists, in order to construct a Hindu nation, adopted a strategy to communicate with the masses and mobilise them. Later, the BJP after its formation successfully exploited the weaknesses of the Congress-led leadership and mobilised large chunks of Hindus in the name of Ram

Janmabhoomi and a politically and economically strong India. In response to this mobilisation, the Indian Muslims strived for self-preservation and refused to make any compromise over the Babri Mosque issue and Hindu mobilisation for the construction of Ram Janmabhoomi at the site of the mosque.

In the post-independence phase, the Congress leadership deprived RSS and BJP of their Hindu agenda including, cow protection and Hindi language and declared them a communal and non-democratic entity. In retaliation, the Hindu nationalists started a struggle against the Congress system and declared their concept of secularism as a non-Indian concept rented from the British to conciliate the Indian Muslims and projected 'Hindutva' in opposition to the Congress.

The author maintains that the rise of BJP reflected the dynamic changes in Indian politics. The response of the Indian Muslims towards BJP remained largely that of suspicion and distrust. The author highlights the BJP's policy of 'soft-Hindutva' of the pragmatic-moderate faction within the BJP. This policy, again, contributed to strengthen the Indian Muslims perception of BJP, because this policy provided BJP with excellent opportunity to rewrite the Indian history according to their celebrated myth of Hindu Rashtra. The aim was to suppress the locals and other challenging particularities. It is also argued that the BJP, after coming into power, failed to change the interaction between Indian Muslims and Hindu nationalists, since the latter always considered Indianisation of the Indian Muslims essential for the success of Hindu rashtra. Due to its antagonism towards Muslims, BJP's defeat in two national elections in 2004 and 2009, brought comfort and peace to the Indian Muslims and they define this defeat of BJP as a victory for secularism. The author describes its recent victory to the mismanagement of the Congress government.

The book is an innovative academic study of India. This is a welcome addition to the existing scholarship on the logic of Hindu nationalism without display of emotions. However, further research is needed to explain the BJP's contemporary and future politics. *Bharatiya Janata Party and the Indian Muslims* should be an essential reading for policy makers and academia to understand the BJP's politics of identities, Hindu-Muslim relations and India's politics.