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*Report – Webinar*

# **“Contemporary India: Violence and Discrimination against Religious Minorities”**

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India Study Centre at Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI) organised a webinar titled “Contemporary India: Violence and Discrimination against Religious Minorities” in collaboration with the Centre for South Asian Studies, Punjab University on May 21, 2020. Ambassador Aisha Farrqui, spokesperson of Pakistan Foreign Office delivered keynote address on the occasion. Eminent scholars including Dr. Riffat Hussain, Head of Department of Government and Public Policy at NUST, Prof. Dr. Umbreen Javaid, Dean Faculty of Behavioral and Social Sciences, Punjab University, and also Director Centre for South Asian Studies and Dr. Ishtiaq Ahmad, Vice Chancellor, University of Sargodha were present to express their views on the subject. Prof. Dr. Saadat Gulden Ayman, professor of International Relations at Faculty of Political Science at Istanbul University also joined the webinar from Istanbul as a guest of honour. Apart from academicians, Ambassador Shahid Kiani was also present on the occasion to share his views in the light of his experience as a distinguished diplomat.

While welcoming the guests, Director India Study Centre, Dr. Saif Malik said that Islamophobia has taken deep roots in India under the RSS-BJP government. Not only state failed to protect its own people but it has also introduced laws that are only discriminatory towards Muslims. Presently, while the world is busy combating Covid 19, India on the other hand preferred to divert its attention and malign its own people because they belong to a different religion. Such was the severity of the hate that even the international community could not turn a blind eye. He went on to appraise audience regarding the reactions of Organisation of Islamic Cooperation and World Health Organization in response to the discriminatory treatment of Indian government towards its own minorities particularly Muslims. The prevailing situation also led the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) to suggest the State Department that India should be declared a ‘country of concern’ and put on a religious freedom blacklist.

In his special message, the Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi said that world is busy fighting the corona virus which does not differentiate between religion and ethnicity. But in India, there is growing Islamophobia and Muslims are being discriminated. Even the Muslim patients are not being treated properly. The discriminatory laws that are being enforced in India are matter of great concern. International community must take note of this and stop attack on Muslims.

The official spokesperson of Pakistan Foreign Office, Ms. Aisha Farooqi delivered the key note address. While expressing her views on the subject, she said that in 2014 when Prime Minister Modi assumed office, it was believed by many in India that finally there is a man fully in tune with Indian language and culture and that he could relate easily with the common man. She said that the BJP government is marked by identity politics and in the last six years, Prime Minister Modi has never been shy of displaying his religious and cultural orientation. Today, the real power in India lies with RSS. Modi and all his ministers are members of RSS. The RSS ideology has made its way into every institution in the country - army, courts, and civil services etc. RSS had long wanted changes in Indian constitution to make India a Hindu state. Ms. Farooqi further added that there are three ways that clearly show that RSS agenda is being implemented across India. First is the series of amendments in Indian constitution, second is the brazen co-opting of the India media to project nationalist agenda based on hate, fear and propaganda, and third is silencing any dissenting voice that raises questions on policies through the use of draconian laws. She said that there has been a spate of reports, commentaries and debates in the international community in this regard. Human rights organisations, media, United Nations, Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, European Union, all have been talking about the situation of minorities in India since the beginning of the second term of Modi. India's credentials in recent months had been seriously damaged as a secular, tolerant, democratic and pluralistic society that it showcased to the world. She also said that there is recurrent pattern that whenever India faces any internal problem, it tries to divert the attention of global community by resorting to heavy artillery fire across LoC and working boundary. Already, in 2020, there have been 1100 cease of fire violations targeting civilians deliberately. She expressed her apprehensions regarding the prospect of false flag operation as there has been a series of provocative statements from across the border.

Speaking on the occasion, the Director General ISS, Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhary said that the topic of this webinar is of utmost importance for peace in South Asia. He appraised the audience regarding the distorted facts projected on websites like Wikipedia, where incidents against the minorities were painted as anti-Hindu riots. With the help of these distorted facts, message is being conveyed that Hindus are victims. While quoting Amit Shah who equated Muslims with termites, the Director General said that Modi government is getting exposed. The people of Indian occupied Kashmir are fighting on two fronts – Covid -19 and curfew. He said

that today, it is a world of narratives and therefore, it is the responsibility of institutions like ISSI to highlight facts and bring the truth before the world.

Dr. Umbreen Javed was of the view that the ill treatment of Muslims is not only a matter of concerns for aggrieved community but also for the neighboring countries and the world at large. She said that the current situation has given more credence to Pakistani narrative and now Pakistan can get India on global radar for its ill treatment of Muslims especially in Kashmir. She also sensitized that Pakistan should be extremely careful regarding its own minorities as India will take advantage if any untoward situation arises in Pakistan that involves minorities.

Dr. Riffat Hussain expressed his apprehensions that as long as BJP will remain in power, Muslims will have no respite. There is a huge difference between Modi and previous BJP leaders like Atal Bihari Vajpayee. During Trump visit to New Delhi, worst kinds of atrocities were committed against Muslims as their shops and homes were burned.

Dr. Ishtiaq Ahmad expressed that Pakistan always had a problematic relationship with its eastern neighbour but at this particular time, a monster is rising. Whatever is happening in India today is the manifestation of Nazi ideology of racism. Followers of Hindutva ideology believe that India is only for Hindus and all other religious minorities need to conform to Hindu believes and traditions or leave India. The pogrom of Muslims in Gujarat in 2002 was only the first in the series of incidents. The current situation in Kashmir is basically a cover up to change the demography of the state of Indian occupied Kashmir. Unfortunately, other political parties and civil society is not able to resist the goons of RSS. He also warned that Pakistan also needs to be careful so as India must not avail opportunity to exploit any act of religious intolerance in the country.

Ambassador Kiani was of the view that at a time when both the countries are faced with the challenges of COVID-19, Indian effort to demonise Muslims is not helpful at all. As people of Pakistan and Indian Muslims are related by faith, Pakistan cannot turn a blind eye from the atrocities being committed towards the Muslims of India. The silence of Indian civil society and international human rights organisations is unfortunate. Modi should actually learn from his predecessor Vajpayee, who came to Lahore and even decided to visit Meenar-e-Pakistan.



Dr. Saadat Gulden Ayman who had joined the webinar from Istanbul University, Turkey as Guest of Honour also expressed her views on the occasion. She said that the Modi government is trying to change the history and present Muslims as enemies. Bollywood has also been pressured to show that Muslims are the real enemies of Hindus. She also said that India is encouraged to pursue its anti-Muslim agenda because of nexus between US-India and Israel. India pretends to be an emerging power but its human resource development index does not support its claims. She lamented that the Muslim world should appear with a unified response to injustices being committed against Muslims.

The discussion was followed by a vibrant interactive session. A question was raised whether the voices emerging from within India against the discriminatory treatment towards Muslims strong enough to make a difference. Dr. Riffat Hussain said that the voices from within India are yet to reach a level where it can make a difference. This will need political leadership which at the moment is not in sight. Ambassador Kiani commented that the relationship between two neighbours is not good at all and perhaps it is time that Pakistan should proactively convince the world about the outcomes of the issue in question. Dr. Riffat also commented that India and Pakistan had signed Nehru-Liaquat Pact in 1950 and Pakistan should ask India to implement this pact. Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhary said that India is not in a mood of dialogue and it was India's decision to call back its High Commission from Pakistan. Pakistan only followed the suit. Pakistan is always ready for dialogue but it takes two hands to clap.

Towards the end of webinar, Chairman, Board of Governors, ISSI, Ambassador Khalid Mahmood said that the topic of the webinar is very important as it impacts the lives of millions of people in India. While on one hand, the RSS ideology is discriminating against its own people, on the other hand, same ideology is expressed in increased hostility towards Pakistan with extensive violations on the Line of Control. The important capitals around the world know what exactly is going on in India but they choose to remain silent because of their own interests. However, it is time to check this trend.