

GROWING ISLAMOPHOBIA IN INDIA: SHOCKWAVE ACROSS MUSLIM WORLD

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



Known for its anti-Muslim stance and policies, the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) under Narendra Modi found itself in an embarrassing situation when two of its leaders made derogatory remarks against Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

It was on May 26, 2022 that during an argument on live TV show regarding ongoing controversy over Gyanvapi mosque,¹ that BJP's spokesperson Nupur Sharma made unfortunate comments on Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) hurting the sentiments of millions of Muslims across the globe. Within few days, another leader of BJP Naveen Kumar Jindal tweeted offensive remarks against the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as well.

The statement by Nupur Sharma and Jindal certainly sent shock waves across India but it was the reaction of the international community, particularly by the Arab countries that took India off guard. It was the silence of the Modi government following the derogatory remarks that forced the Muslim countries to raise their voice. In its protest, Qatar expressed "its total rejection and condemnation (of) the controversial remarks made by an official in the ruling party in India against Prophet Mohammed...Islam and Muslims."² Qatar had also demanded a public apology from the Indian

¹ Gyanvapi is a centuries old mosque in the Indian city of Varanasi. Hindu nationalists claim that the mosque was built after demolishing a temple - a claim denied by Muslims.

² "Qatar summons Indian envoy to protest controversial remarks against Prophet," *Hindustan Times*, June 5, 2022, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/qatar-summons-indian-envoy-to-protest-controversial-remarks-against-prophet-101654438844878.html>

government during the visit of Indian Vice President Venkaiah Naidu to that country.³

Kuwait, in its protest, denounced the remarks made by BJP officials and like Qatar demanded a public apology. It expressed its concern that such statements will only "increase extremism and hatred".⁴ In addition to official protest, a Kuwaiti supermarket also pulled Indian goods from its shelves as the call for boycotting Indian goods grew louder on social media.⁶

Saudi Arabia too expressed its displeasure and in a statement expressed "permanent rejection of prejudice against the symbols of the Islamic religion."⁷ Similarly, the United Arab Emirates viewed the statements of BJP officials as "contrary to moral and humanitarian values and principles" and stressed the "need for respecting religious symbols... and countering hate speech".⁸ Besides the foreign ministry of Oman, the Grand Mufti Ahmad bin Hamad al-Khalili expressed his anger for "the insolent and obscene rudeness of the official spokesman for the ruling extremist party in India against the messenger of Islam."⁹

The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation while condemning the incident stated "These cases of defamation are part of a growing spate of hatred and defamation of Islam in India and systematic practices against Indian Muslims, particularly in light of a set of decisions to prohibit the use of hijab in educational institutions in some Indian states, including demolition of Muslims' properties and growing violence against them."¹⁰

³ "Qatar, other Muslim nations condemn India over anti-Islam remarks," *Aljazeera*, June 6, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/6/6/qatar-other-muslim-nations-condemn-india-over-anti-islam-remarks>

⁴ "Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia condemn remarks over prophet by BJP spokesperson," *Indian Express*, June 6, 2022, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/kuwait-qatar-saudi-arabia-remarks-over-prophet-bjp-nupur-sharma-7954892/>

⁵ "Kuwaiti supermarket pulls Indian products from shelves in protest over remarks on Prophet : Report," *Hindustan times*, June 6, 2022, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/kuwaiti-supermarket-pulls-indian-products-from-shelves-in-protest-over-remarks-on-prophet-report-101654513600937.html>

⁶ "Muslim nations slam India over insulting remarks about Islam," *Diplomat*, June 7, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/06/muslim-nations-slam-india-over-insulting-remarks-about-islam/>

⁷ "Saudi Arabia condemns controversial remarks of BJP leader against Prophet Mohammed," *Outlook*, June 6, 2022, <https://www.outlookindia.com/national/saudi-arabia-condemns-controversial-remarks-of-bjp-leader-against-prophet-mohammed-news-200528>

⁸ "UAE joins Muslim nations in condemning India over Prophet remarks," *Aljazeera*, June 7, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/6/7/uae-joins-muslim-nations-in-slamming-india-over-prophet-remarks>

⁹ Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, "India faces a diplomatic storm in the Middle East," *Observer Research Foundation*, June 13, 2022, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/india-faces-a-diplomatic-storm-in-the-middle-east/>

¹⁰ "OIC General Secretariat strongly condemns denigration of Prophet Muhammad by India ruling party's official," *Organisation of Islamic Conference*, June 5, 2022, https://www.oic-oci.org/topic/?t_id=36974&t_ref=25697&lan=en

This strong reaction from West Asian countries not only tarnished India's global image of a secular country but also put Indian interest in that region at stake. India shares US\$ 87.36 billion bilateral trade with GCC countries¹¹ and depends on it for its energy needs and foreign remittances worth \$35 billion¹² from its expats residing in Gulf countries. Hence, the Modi government was forced to finally announce the suspension of Nupur Sharma and expulsion of Naveen Kumar Jindal from the party. It also issued a clarification that BJP is "against any ideology which insults or demeans any sect or religion" and it "does not promote such people or philosophy."¹³ But it was too little and too late. By this time Iran, Afghanistan, Indonesia, Maldives, Turkey, China and Pakistan had all joined in to condemn the Indian government in strongest possible terms.

This incident had stirred a storm within India too. The Left parties blamed BJP for its late action and said that BJP was "forced to act " against Nupur Sharma only because of foreign pressure. Congress on the other hand blames BJP for bringing a bad name to India and demanded that the two BJP officials be immediately arrested. For Aam Aadmi Party, the incident brought India to the point where "even small countries are now challenging the great nation of India."¹⁴ Protests also erupted in various cities across India as a result of which two people lost their lives, ¹⁵hundreds were arrested and showing worst form of vengeance, houses of Muslim protesters were also demolished by the BJP government. ¹⁶

Though, this incident was perhaps first of its kind but the mindset behind this is certainly not new. In past too, BJP never shied away from expressing its anti Muslim sentiment. After all, in 2002 it was under Narendra Modi (then Chief Minister of Gujarat State), that the state of Gujarat saw one of the worst communal clashes in which more than 1,000 Muslims were killed by Hindu extremists.¹⁷ Since 2014, it is under the BJP rule that the names of Muslims cities and monuments are being changed. There is also a steep rise in hate speech. As per one report, there have been 384 incidents of hate

¹¹ "India GCC Relations," *Embassy of India*, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, <https://www.eoiriyadh.gov.in/page/india-gcc-relations/>

¹² Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, "India faces a diplomatic storm in the Middle East," op.cit

¹³ "BJP says it respects all religions amid row over Nupur Sharma's alleged remarks on Prophet Muhammad," *Indian Express*, June 6, 2022, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/bjp-says-it-respects-all-religions-strongly-denounces-insult-of-any-religious-personality-7953728/>

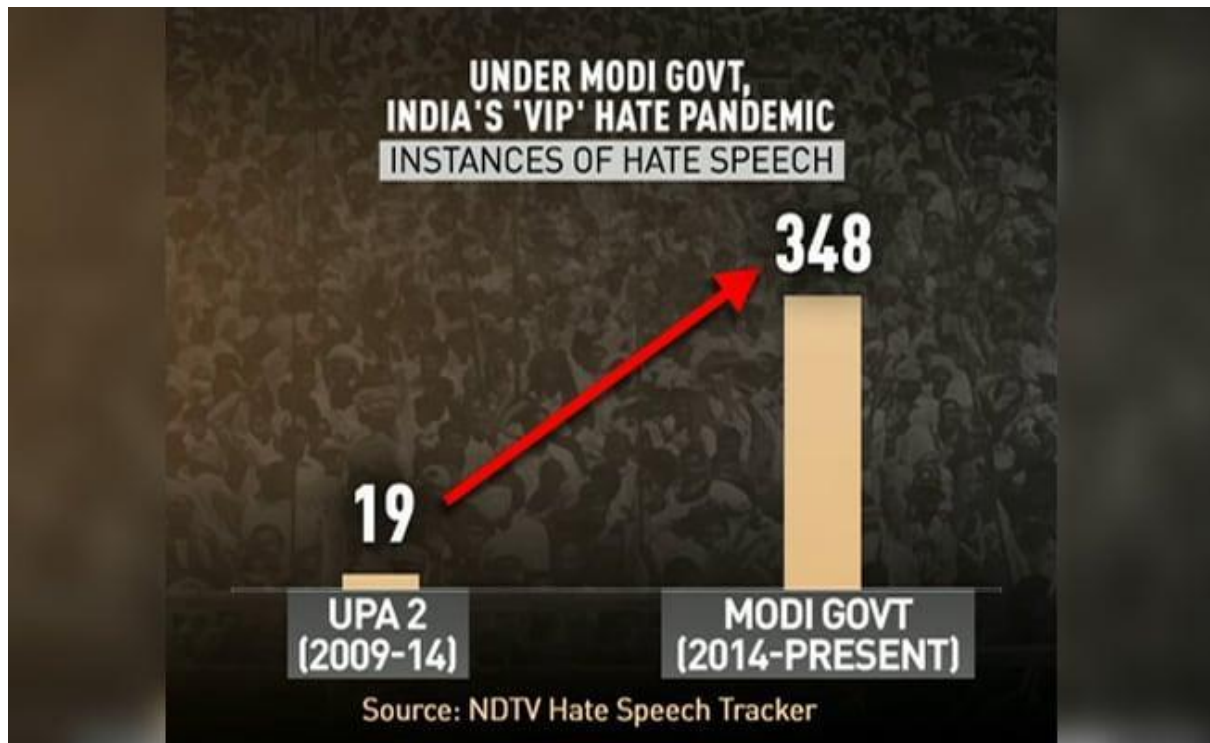
¹⁴ "Prophet remarks : Left, Congress, AAP call out BJP for 'Defaming' India internationally," *Newsclick*, June 6, 2022, <https://www.newsclick.in/Prophet-Remarks-Left-Congress-AAP-Call-BJP-Defaming-India-Internationally>

¹⁵ "Prophet row : Two dead in Ranchi; Howrah simmers; authorities take action against protesters across states," *Deccan Herald*, June 11, 2022, <https://www.deccanherald.com/national/prophet-row-two-dead-in-ranchi-howrah-simmers-authorities-take-action-against-protesters-across-states-1117340.html>

¹⁶ "Indian officials demolish several houses after protests over anti - Islam remarks," *CNN*, June 13, 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/06/12/asia/india-demolish-houses-islam-remarks-intl-hnk/index.html>

¹⁷ "Narendra Modi 'allowed' Gujarat 2002 anti Muslim riots," *BBC News*, April 22, 2011, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-13170914>

speech involving high ranking political figures under BJP government (2014- Jan 2022) as compared to 19 incidents during UPA rule (2009-2014).



Source: "BJP tops India's 'VIP' hate pandemic, NDTV finds," NDTV, January 12, 2022, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/bjp-tops-indias-vip-hate-pandemic-ndtv-finds-2703827>

Similarly, incidents of lynching of Muslims on mere suspicion of beef consumption and forcing Muslims to chant slogans glorifying Hindu deities has become a norm in India.

While all this was happening in India, the world community and particularly the Muslim world had decided to turn a blind eye from the deteriorating conditions of Muslims. But this latest episode of Islamophobia where direct attacks are made against the Holy Prophet and Muslims are being killed and their homes being demolished for the crime of their protest against this mindset should be an eye opener not only for the Muslim world but also for the rest of the world community and particularly, the UN. In this regard, the statement by state department spokesperson condemning the blasphemous statements¹⁸ is a welcome development but needless to say, a lot more needs to be done.

¹⁸ "US slams 'offensive comments' on Prophet by BJP members in India," *Aljazeera*, June 17, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/6/17/us-slams-offensive-comments-on-prophet-by-bjp-members-in-india>