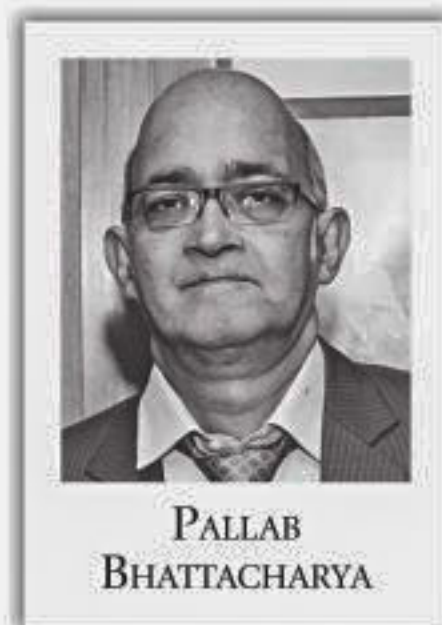


# Modi, minorities and their 'viswas'



PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

SOON after becoming the prime minister of India for the first time five years ago, Narendra Modi had declared that the guiding light of his government would be "sabka saath, sabka vikas". On May 25, 2019, he added two more words to that slogan: "sabka viswas".

On both the occasions, the aim was to stave off the perception that the Modi government pursued Hindu majoritarianism and discriminated against religious minorities. "Sabka saath, sabka vikas, sabka viswas" is a much more refined version of the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) old coinage of "development for all and appeasement of none" that was used to fight its political rivals who accused the saffron party of being biased against the minorities and erroneously projecting the minorities as being favoured with special treatment from the non-BJP federal government of the day.

That is why Modi bringing in "sabka viswas" was significant in his speech at the very first meeting of the newly-elected lawmakers of the BJP and its allies on May 25, a couple of days after the comprehensive victory in the parliamentary elections. This was the meeting where Modi was elected as the leader of the joint parliamentary party of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) paving the way for his taking over as the prime minister for a second successive term that would shape India for the next five years and possibly beyond. This was the meeting where Modi articulated his broad vision of his

government for the country.

The two most important points of Modi's May 25 meeting were: (a) repeated assertions of commitment to the Constitution and (b) his remarks about how his government wants to deal with the minorities. He said the minorities had been "deceived" and made to live in fear over the years and reiterated in this context how the other parties treated them as their vote bank. The prime minister emphasised the need for winning over the trust of the minorities as well as that of those who did not vote for the BJP. Hence "sabka viswas".

So, how will Modi go about bridging the trust deficit with the minorities? Is the search for an honest answer to the question possible without asking if the hardline Hindutva ideology and the actions of the BJP and the other Sangh Parivar members have contributed to it or not? The main reason why Modi was seen as a polarising figure was the communal riots of 2002 in Gujarat when he was the state's chief minister. But no court of law has found him at fault for that and India has moved on.

Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay, well-known social scientist, wrote in a persuasive newspaper article in April that the BJP's victory in 2014 parliamentary elections "underscored that ethnic democratic model could work in India and Congress appeared reconciled to this. Consequently, Muslims were left with little political choice and a small fraction—especially those who developed stakes—began backing the BJP in a limited way." Mukhopadhyay would have us believe that "in certain states, the BJP vote share among Muslims has risen..." Perhaps, the same is true of the BJP's even bigger mandate in the 2019 elections although there are no



Prime Minister Narendra Modi has claimed a landslide victory in India's national elections this year, making him one of the most powerful politicians of the neighbouring country in decades.

PHOTO: AFP

quantifiable statistics as yet.

At the heart of Modi's "sabka saath, sabka vikas" is the belief that accelerated economic development is a mighty leveller and a unifying force in Indian society that has the potential to bury caste, ethnic and religious faultlines. The BJP seems to believe—and this belief has been strengthened substantially after the 2017 assembly poll results in Uttar Pradesh and the emphatic mandate of this year's parliamentary polls—that if economic prosperity of all sections of society is taken care of, even those who do not agree with hardline Hindutva are ready to put up, if not support, with isolated instances of extremism

like cow vigilantism and attacks on those consuming beef. The BJP rightly points out that no major riot took place during the first five-year reign of Modi and the Modi government's development schemes like universal healthcare for the poor, clean toilets, and electricity and cooking gas connections to the villages have not discriminated against any religious group. The BJP believes that only economic prosperity can mainstream the minorities in India's developmental narrative and there is no need for separate incentives for minorities as distinctive groups with district issues. It is debatable whether this is the right approach because there are problems

peculiar to each minority group which need to be addressed separately.

At the same time, one cannot be oblivious of the fact that it was the BJP and Modi who, during the campaign in this year's election, took a dig at Congress Chief Rahul Gandhi for contesting from minority-dominated Wayanad constituency in Kerala. One also cannot forget BJP President Amit Shah's high-pitched campaign against "infiltrators" in the northeast and West Bengal and him terming them as "termites."

Is all this mere election-specific rhetoric or reflection of a prejudiced mindset? No doubt, there are those whose politics thrived on the opposition to the Hindutva agenda. In a way, the perceived allegiance of the minorities of India to anti-BJP forces is reminiscent of the Hindus being traditionally considered as the support base ("amanat") of the Awami League in Bangladesh. It is estimated that Muslims constitute over 30 percent of the electorate in about 50 parliamentary constituencies across India. But more important than electoral considerations is the dignity of the minorities.

Modi's "sabka viswas" has the potential to set a new paradigm for an inclusive narrative of nationalism provided it is followed up in letter and spirit. It can help Modi cement a new legacy. What gives cause for hope is Modi's repeated commitment at the NDA meeting to uphold the Constitution whose preamble contains the word "secularism" even though the BJP's view on secularism is at variance with that of the opposition.

Pallab Bhattacharya is a special correspondent for The Daily Star.

## The rise of hate

"The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing"



ZIAUS SHAMS CHOWDHURY

AN evil that is metastasising in a lethal fashion across the face of our planet is the culture of hate. If the spectre of global warming threatens humankind's

physical existence, the rise of hate has become a scourge to the very soul of humanity.

Ruthlessly exploiting opportunities that a strife-ridden world has presented, a clutch of leaders in powerful nations have embraced this culture. They have done this with incredible cynicism. They have abdicated their moral obligations, their conscience, their compassion for the distressed. Obsessing only with power, they are turning the world into an inferno of horror and mayhem.

Yes, it is normal for politicians to covet power. But if that power is not employed in the service of humanity, what is the point? If global leaders ignore the importance of the idea that they need to live beyond their own selves and serve a higher cause, the world cannot be saved from its present incontinent descent into a pit of abject misery.

We cannot escape the fact that diversities among human beings in the form of race, colour, religion, and ethnicity are the things that God has created. Our creator did not do so with the intent that we should be demonising and dehumanising races and ethno-religious groups different from ours.



People gathered and lighted candles on April 21, 2019 in Karachi, Pakistan, to mourn victims of eight blasts that hit churches and hotels on Easter Sunday in Sri Lanka.

PHOTO: RIZWAN TABASSUM/AFP

Three recent horrors come to mind when we ponder upon the hate culture.

The most recent one is the mindless act of terror in Sri Lanka—which ISIS has claimed responsibility for—carried out by suicide bombers targeting worshippers in several churches that killed scores of innocent people.

A little more than two months ago, the mosque shootings in Christchurch, New Zealand, perpetrated by a votary of a white supremacist, Brenton Tarrant, that killed at least 50 innocent people, convulsed the whole world. In the aftermath of the shootings, New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's compassion and empathy

towards the tiny beleaguered Muslim community elevated her status among leaders of other developed nations.

The third episode that comes to mind is the shooting in the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania on October 27, 2018 by an anti-Semitic man named Robert Bowers. Eleven people were killed. Governor of Pennsylvania Tom Wolf said: "These senseless acts of violence are not who we are as Americans."

People of all faiths, it seems, are under attack. Other than the evident threat of white supremacists, the fact is that Muslims have been under the world media's glare because it is our community that has been the most

fertile ground for recruitment of terrorists.

Before we criticise others, we, as Muslims, need to look into our own soul. We have let a deranged, fringe group smear and debase us all over the world. In the name of false loyalty to Islam, they are trampling upon the core tenets of Islam. These groups, that go under the rubric of "jihadists", have taken to killing innocent people in the name of saving and promoting Islam.

They are utterly indifferent to the harm their acts are bringing on their fellow Muslims who have nothing to do with their perverse and diabolical ideas. They are the reason why the vast majority of Muslims get a bad name. Just think about the grievous harm the 9/11 attacks brought on Muslims living in America and other western countries.

We, as Muslims, have an urgent moral and spiritual duty to fight and eviscerate these misguided terror groups. We need to affirm clearly and forcefully that Islam is a tolerant faith—that its essence is peace. In the mosques, our imams need to talk about what it means to be a good human being. They need to talk about the gentle life our Holy Prophet (PBUH) lived.

As Bangladeshis, we can say with humility that our record when it comes to the way we treat other communities compares well with what is happening in our vicinity. It was so timely, in this holy month of Ramadan, that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina made a passionate appeal to the people to cultivate interfaith goodwill and harmony. "The Creator will decide what is good or bad, and what is right or wrong. The Almighty

did not task human beings with that responsibility," she said.

Unfortunately, the violence and insecurity in some of the conflict zones today have triggered flows of migrants to countries like America and some European countries. In turn, this has led to the growth of a very aggressive, exclusionary breed of nationalism.

Another issue we need to note is that there is a lamentable lack of courageous and charismatic leaders who can stand up against the hate culture. We do not have leaders today like Abraham Lincoln and Nelson Mandela who had a unifying vision.

In our subcontinent, during the partition era, Gandhi and Jinnah were the main forces against communalism. Desperate to prevent the breakup of India, Gandhi got Mounbatten to try out his idea that Jinnah be made India's first prime minister which he believed was the only way to keep India united. Jinnah's total freedom from communal prejudice was universally accepted. The plan failed because of the reservations of several top-ranking Congress leaders. Had Pakistan followed Jinnah's vision, affirmed in his great Constitutional assembly speech of August 11, 1947, Pakistan's destiny would have been much brighter. He said all communities would be "citizens and equal citizens of one state"—that "Hindus would cease to be Hindus and Muslims would cease to be Muslims."

A very popular quotation of modern times, usually attributed to the British parliamentarian Edmund Burke, has never been more relevant than in the context of today's world: "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing."

Ziaus Shams Chowdhury is a former ambassador.

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May 29, 1953

#### EXPLORERS REACH THE TOP OF MOUNT EVEREST FOR THE FIRST TIME

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