Making it difficult to ‘Other’ the Muslim

#TalkToAMuslim marks a symbolic victory; but it is shameful that Muslims should be made to initiate such an outreach

A new hashtag, #TalkToAMuslim, began trending on Twitter earlier this week. In what is an ironic comment on the times, a campaign seeking to counter communal polarisation itself fell prey to polarisation. In a matter of hours, social media was riven into two hostile camps: one scathing in its criticism of the hashtag, and the other steadfast in its defence of it.

Both Hindus and Muslims participated in the campaign, which involved individuals posting a selfie with a placard that held a message and the hashtag. Muslims posted selfies with messages that said, “I am an Indian Muslim, I’m human too! You can talk to me.” Placards of the Hindu participants typically read, “I am a Hindu. I talk to Muslims. Guess they are humans too,” #TalkToAMuslim.

The context

The immediate trigger for the campaign was the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)’s attack on Congress president Rahul Gandhi, after he met with a group of intellectuals from the Muslim community. BJP leaders “accused” Mr. Gandhi of turning the Congress into a “Muslim party”.

It is indeed troubling that talking to Muslims – which is all that Mr. Gandhi did – could even be formulated as an accusation. In no sane society can an accusation of this kind, first of all, make any sense as an accusation, and second, gain traction among vast swathes of public opinion. Recent events, however, suggest that India is hurting away from sanity at great speed. In this context, the #TalkToAMuslim campaign represents nothing more than an attempt – a feeble and not a particularly smart one – to apply the brakes.

The hashtag is, of course, descending towards Muslims insofar as the framework of the interaction is premised on Muslims making themselves available to help non-Muslims relinquish their bigotry. Majoritarian bigotry is not a problem that could be solved by the minorities. Moreover, by pitching religious identity as the primary reason for talking to a person, the campaign ends up reinforcing precisely what it seeks to counter: the reduction of personhood to religious identity.

Another criticism directed against #TalkToAMuslim is that it is elitist, and that it would only help well-heeled Muslims and Hindus to engage in mutually beneficial virtue signalling. They could use this hashtag activism to acquire useful social capital, and then go back to their privileged lives, while poor Muslims would have to carry on as before, acutely conscious of the ever-present danger of the lynching mob and of the state machinery’s impotence before it.

The ‘Othering’ of the Muslim

Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to dismiss the campaign or the arguments put forward by those who participated in it. Their rationale can be summed up as follows: at present, Muslims are being ‘Othered’ – not just in the loose sense of the word, which is often used to signify a people being marginalised, but also in the classical sense of the term ‘Other’. It refers to a phenomenon where the (Othered) minority becomes a foil against which the majority constructs its collective ‘self’ or identity. Put another way, in the Hindutva universe, Muslim-hatred is the glue that aggregates a vast number of individuals from different castes, classes, and ethnicities into a homogeneous political community of Hindus.

Take away the Muslim ‘Other’ in this case, and all you are left with are disparate individuals who happen to do puja, follow caste norms, and worship some Hindu gods – there is neither a collective that politically self-identifies as a ‘Hindu community’, nor a cause for such a self-identification. This putative ‘Hindu community’ cannot come into existence without a prior or contextual invocation of the Muslim ‘Other’, which naturally requires that the Muslim be ‘othered’.

The Nazis, experts in ‘Othering’, followed its logic to the end point, which was the detention camp. If the ongoing, energetic ‘Othering’ of the Indian Muslim is to be countered, what options are available? One would be to get the majority to imagine them as members of the same community to which they belong – the community of friends, acquaintances and citizens. This is what the hashtag aimed to do. It sought to mobilise talk between Muslims and Hindus so that it became difficult to ‘Other’ the Muslim as this demonic entity whose only mission is to be the Hindu’s enemy – on the face of it, a ridiculous notion, but one that seems to work rather well for those polarising the nation along religious lines.

To the extent that this campaign serves to name the pathology – the notion that talking to Muslims is a problem – it has value. Naming the pathology is vital if one wants to stop the pathology from being normalised. Hindus who have never had a meaningful conversation with a Muslim may or may not end up talking to one as a result of this hashtag.

Still, even if nothing comes of it at the material level, the hashtag represents a minor victory in the symbolic realm, for it is important to publicly say it – to say, ‘talk to a Muslim’ – for it is not unimaginable that, in the foreseeable future, it may prove unthinkable to say even this, with or without a hashtag. In that sense, saying #TalkToAMuslim is both the means and the end of the campaign. It is shameful that Indian Muslims should feel compelled to initiate such an ‘outreach’ to the majority community. But the shame of it is not theirs to bear.

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