

Article Title: “Perceptions matter: It’s no coincidence that the narrative of rising intolerance has been peaking around elections”

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- See more at: <http://demo.jaypanda.in/opinion/perceptions-matter-its-no-coincidence-that-the-narrative-of-rising-intolerance-has-been-peaking-around-elections-2/#sthash.sPZoJID3.dpuf>

It has been some months now since news reports of attacks on churches in India disappeared from the headlines. And thank goodness for that! Yet, for a while late last year and early this year, such reports had seemed to dominate the news, at least in the mainstream English media if not in its much larger vernacular cousins nationwide. In hindsight, it can be useful to examine what happened, as well as assess other allegations and reports of intolerance that have now taken centre stage.

Did the reports of church attacks fade away because, as Vatican Radio reported in May, after many months “prominent Christian leaders (felt the government was finally showing) genuine concern over attacks on the minority community”, causing a sudden cessation of violence? Or was it the case, as argued by many equally prominent voices, that a handful of isolated incidents, some of which were clearly not of a communal nature, had been played up into something worse?

The latter argument is bolstered by the fact that even larger numbers of robberies, vandalism and desecration of other places of worship rarely get reported in the media. For instance, on Christmas Eve last year there was a rather spectacular robbery and desecration of a famous temple in my constituency. Despite creating much consternation locally, the incident barely registered in the regional media, and didn’t get even a passing mention nationally. Fortunately, it was not communal in nature and, equally importantly, no one tried to claim it was.

But discontinued stories of church attacks have given way to a sustained and broader narrative of intolerance against minorities, again much more so in the English rather than vernacular media. Then, as now, the allegations are that fringe elements with political connections to the government have become emboldened and are fanning confrontations, from the controversies over beef, to ink attacks, all the way up to a mob lynching.

This narrative continues to be countered by arguments from the right, which essentially claim that there is no increase in the frequency of such incidents, and that a long entrenched left liberal ecosystem is resisting its political marginalisation by deliberately, selectively and hypocritically playing them up.

That stand has got some support, albeit qualified, from even respectable bastions of liberalism. The BBC, for example, earlier this month commented “there certainly wasn’t a

shortage of religious intolerance before Modi was elected". More on that shortly, but even prominent author Taslima Nasreen, while supporting protesting writers, has commented on the biases of some Indian liberals.

Articulate, prominent voices on both sides continue to duke it out, debating whether the statistics indicate a rising trend of intolerance, and if statistics matter or the perception is bad enough, and dissecting instances of reverse intolerance for and against the charge of selective outrage. Relying on statistics can be a slippery slope, at least in the short term. The BBC blog quoted above refers to an Indian newspaper report indicating a year on year 25% rise in communal incidents in the first five months of 2015. Yet the same newspaper had earlier reported on the topic of church attacks that the numbers were no different than in the previous two years.

As the journalist and author Anand Ranganathan has pointed out, some of the commentators that cite statistics to claim rising intolerance often fail to acknowledge previous years' data – for example, on average two communal incidents per day in 2011-13.

In any event, it is surely no coincidence that, real or exaggerated, this narrative of rising intolerance has been peaking around elections. Just as in the earlier phase of reported church attacks bunched around the Delhi state election, so too now the crucial Bihar election is undoubtedly a catalyst. The bigger question is, for whom? For no one side or party has a monopoly on such tactics.

Because this government is, above all, a Narendra Modi government, a big part of the narrative focusses on whether the PM is doing enough to tackle the situation. Although he has spoken against communalism on several occasions, inside and outside Parliament, the debate still rages whether he has spoken out enough, whether he has spoken swiftly enough, and whether he has done enough.

Some commentators and public intellectuals supportive of the PM have questioned the idea that he ought to speak out more, concluding that if he were to react to every alleged or real communal incident, he would have time for little else. They are convinced his opponents have succeeded in setting him up, and that he must devote himself to real issues of governance rather than perceptions of rising intolerance.

Nevertheless, even some of his staunchest supporters are now joining the chorus that he ought to say and do more. At the very least, they recognise the power of perception for earning or dissipating political capital.

In fact, many insiders are even acknowledging the damage caused by the irresponsible statements and actions of some of their fellow travellers. This has been apparently addressed by what is said to be an internal ticking off, behind closed doors. But was it real or just a rap on the knuckles, and whether it will actually lead to contrition, only time will tell.