**[The fringe group ruling India](https://www.dawn.com/news/1693579/the-fringe-group-ruling-india)**

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THE day the [Babri Masjid was demolished](https://www.dawn.com/news/1515939) in December 1992, Indian embassies from world capitals were knocking at J.N. Dixit’s door, the phlegmatic foreign secretary from the old world school of secular Indian diplomats, now an endangered species.

What should the embassies tell their host governments, Dixit was asked. Dixit cleaned his pipe very slowly with deliberate pauses, before summoning his familiar pout. He issued a memorable piece of advice: “Tell the host governments that some right-wing hoodlums carried out the crime and they would pay for it.”

This was more or less the policy stance taken by the Narasimha Rao government. Rao had, in fact, gone on to promise that the Babri Masjid would be rebuilt, as it was, where it was. For better or worse, it proved to be a tall claim.

Until this transpired. It wasn’t snowing in Delhi the other day. It hasn’t happened in living memory. Then why was India’s ruling party, the BJP, punishing its popular spokeswoman for making [insulting remarks](https://www.dawn.com/news/1693280) a week ago about Prophet Mohammed (PBUH)? Another senior member from the party was expelled, like it or not, for supporting Nupur Sharma’s views.

You may have thought Islamophobia was the BJP’s métier. The world knows the party thrives on hate and polarisation. Today though, a new, different truth was dawning. The party was flaunting what could pass for a revolutionary statement. It was praising India’s secularism and hugging the constitution that its bête noire B.R. Ambedkar framed, a constitution that has protected the flickering candle of democracy the founders lit in 1947. Jawaharlal Nehru could have drafted the statement; it was so rippling with the goodness of his India.

“The BJP strongly denounces insults of any religious personalities of any religion. The [party] is also against any ideology, which insults or demeans any sect or religion. The BJP does not promote such people or philosophy.”

The foreign ministry was nudged to act. It cautioned critics against conflating “fringe elements” with government policy. That saw the BJP’s former foreign minister Yashwant Sinha, coming to the nub of the matter.

“BJP’s national spokesperson is now a fringe element. What about the party itself? The fringe is unfortunately now in the centre.” Everyone in the opposition shared Sinha’s reaction. The Congress called it a ‘good cop bad cop strategy’.

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But the BJP kept on regardless. “During the thousands of years of the history of India every religion has blossomed and flourished. The Bharatiya Janata Party respects all religions.” It did snow in Delhi, it seems, and it was a blizzard.

“India’s constitution gives the right to every citizen to practise any religion of his/her choice and to honour and respect every religion,” the BJP wouldn’t stop. It was promising to make India a great country “where all are equal and everyone lives with dignity… .”

The news from Kanpur continued to mock the truant narrative though. A thousand ‘unidentified persons’ were charged with fomenting riots. It’s often a euphemism for Muslims protesting. A ‘mastermind’ was arrested together with a dozen others. They were protesting after offering the Friday prayers against the week-old derogatory comments by Nupur Sharma.

There’s a saying popular in northern India: The washerman vents his anger on the donkey. The state has mastered the art of pummelling the helpless and angry masses or anyone who comes in the way of its great march into the golden past. So, Kanpur in BJP-ruled Uttar Pradesh offered one narrative and the BJP’s statement another.

The fact is that the rulers in Delhi have often got away with murder as far as the Western countries are concerned — how the more powerful among them promised to act on the unending saga of state brutalities in Kashmir, in particular, and the vigilantes unleashed on a hapless nation elsewhere.

**Read:** [*India has turned Muslims into a 'persecuted minority', says Noam Chomsky*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1674696)

The rulers are smug that India is needed against China. Besides, it has a large market, of course. Which stymies the powers that frame and interpret the covenants for assorted freedoms and rights.

The Gulf countries too have indulged India. They are its lifeblood as far as dollar remittances are concerned. If the US contributed $11.7 billion in remittances under Prime Minister Modi’s watch in 2017, the UAE’s contribution alone was $13.8bn. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Qatar are equally critical sources of India’s dollar influx. And they have been generally nice and generous with India. Abu Dhabi gave away land for a Hindu temple to be constructed. And every country has put up with daily insults and threats meted out to Indian Muslims, in Srinagar or in Delhi or Lucknow, and now Kanpur.

This time, Qatar summoned India’s ambassador in Doha and Kuwait summoned the one in Kuwait City. They [demanded](https://www.dawn.com/news/1693454/more-muslim-countries-take-exception-to-bjp-leaders-derogatory-remarks-about-holy-prophet) a ‘public apology’ from New Delhi for the comments that were seen as Islamophobic. Iran too conveyed its concerns and Saudi Arabia was not far behind.

The controversy erupted as India’s Vice President Venkaiah Naidu was to begin his official visit to Doha, part of a three-nation tour. The Iranian protest came three days before the Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian will be going for his first visit to Delhi.

The 57-nation Organisation of Islamic Cooperation issued a “strong condemnation” of what it called “abuses by an official of the ruling party of India”, linking the comments to previous steps to [ban the hijab](https://www.dawn.com/news/1680095) at educational institutions in certain Indian states, perennial violence against minorities, and [demolitions](https://www.dawn.com/news/1685941) of their property.

In a withering comment on Twitter, Qatar’s assistant foreign minister and spokesperson Lolwah Alkhater noted that “Islamophobic discourse has reached dangerous levels in a country long known for its diversity and coexistence”. He said unless the government of India “officially and systemically” confronts hate speech, it would be considered a “deliberate insult” against 2bn Muslims worldwide.

Mr Naidu had to cancel his press conference in Doha. Dixit would have perhaps scowled and pouted again. But who were the hoodlums he had in mind?

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