

Murshidabad, Pahalgam, Islamophobia: April Harvests Cruelty in West Bengal

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April is the cruellest month...", TS Eliot had once declared. April this year has indeed been unusually cruel.

On the third day of the month, the Central government rammed the controversial Waqf (Amendment) Bill through an incensed Lok Sabha — obviously more to needle the Muslims than grab their endowments. The next day, it harangued and bickered and bullied the Rajya Sabha, until it cleared the amendment at 2 o'clock in the morning. Muslims seethed with rage, while the Opposition licked its wounds.

Our staid President rushed to put her rubber stamp on the controversial legislation the very next day, 5 April, even as opponents of the Act moved the Supreme Court for 'justice'.

This was on the eve of Ram Navami — a festival that has been successfully weaponised in the last few years, to intimidate Muslims. Saffron flags fixed on roaring motorcycles, its riders and passengers draped in saffron and deadly red vermilion, waving menacing swords and *trishuls* had become a common sight in mixed localities and Muslim majority areas.

Weaponising Ram Navami & Waqf

In 2018, 17 clashes or riots were reported across the nation, while in 2022, we find 6 states reported violence, and in 2023, Ram Navami celebrations turned violent in at least six states — West Bengal, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Gujarat.

Last year's Ram Navami celebrations were also marred by several incidents of violence across India, particularly in West Bengal, Bihar, Karnataka, Maharashtra and Gujarat. Surprisingly, all apprehensions and arrangements for 'repeat riots' in 2025 were allayed as someone must have decided that there would be no Ram Navami riots in 2025. The victory over Waqfs was too delirious to be shared with other lesser provocations.

Though the Navami on 6 April was peaceful, there was palpable tension and acrimony was thick in the air as protests broke out against the Waqf Act. While

they made have been generally peaceful in 779 of 780 districts in India, the district of Murshidabad in West Bengal burst out, violently — for reasons that are still not clear.

True, it was Muslim majority by 2:1, but then there are some 45 other Muslim-majority districts elsewhere. The mayhem was against the Waqf Act, but soon it appeared to be directed more at the local Hindus, rather than at the Centre. Everyone, including an inept administration, was taken aback for five days between 8-12 April, as Muslim ‘protesters’ went on a rampage — attacking, looting and setting ablaze public property, of both the Centre and the State.

The media reported, with alarm, the one-sided vandalism in Murshidabad and how mobs were seriously threatening and killing Hindu villagers. Belligerent mobs forced some 400 Hindu villagers to flee and cross over to adjacent Malda, as traumatised, homeless refugees.

This was totally unacceptable to all. The national media, especially that section that operates on the regime’s whistles, joined in their legions by equally divisive sections of the totally non-accountable social media. With these platforms injecting the (in)appropriate doses of propaganda, many soon alleged that a “genocide of Hindus” had begun, thanks to the ruling Trinamool Congress (TMC)’s ‘appeasement’ — and that Bengali Muslims from both sides of the border had joined the carnage.

The Calcutta High Court promptly ordered the Central BSF (Border Security Force) to display its might and save lives and property. Some whispered that this was the ploy of the TMC to divert attention from the massive agitation it faced in Kolkata from some 26,000 school-teachers whose appointment was declared illegal by the Supreme Court because of irregularities. It is true that Mamata Banerjee’s government was squirming because its own corruption lay at the root of the problem. And yet, this theory was not plausible, as Banerjee’s own MP’s office was also vandalised by protesters and her party supporters had to run for cover.

It appears that district administration had got so used to following orders of the CM and her important satraps that it had forgotten how to think and act on its own and on time. As centralised instructions usually take time to reach the marionettes in charge of law and order, the situation deteriorated. The interim sloth allowed resentment to snowball until a huge wave of Islamophobia took over, hitting even the so-called ‘*bhadraloks*’, the saner, purportedly secular Bengalis. With the party’s credibility at an all-time low, the TMC’s allegations that the BSF and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) were colluding were pooh-poohed away. Even the CM’s repeated assurance that the Waqf amendments would not be implemented in West Bengal were scorned at by a large section of Muslims — on whose support her government rests.

After the dust and acrid smoke had cleared, it appeared that the much-touted ‘genocide’ consisted of one case of albeit brutal (and unquestionably unpardonable) hacking of a Hindu father-son duo, and a third death of a Muslim youth shot by the police.

However short-lived, small scale or localised the riot was, it left the desired impact — deep gashes and uncontrollable fits of anger, especially among those who needed fresh logs to recharge their deeply entrenched phobia of the other religion. The riotous outburst of five days whipped up passions for over 10 full days of TV time and media space and it stopped only when 26 tourists were shot down in Pahalgam on the 22 April, when the vultures found new prey.

But before we take up Pahalgam, it may be worthwhile to go over a report released on 29 April by a Fact Finding Team (FFT) comprising of five civil society organisations — namely, the Association for Protection of Democratic Rights (APDR), Feminists in Resistance (FIR), Nari Chetna, Committee for the Release of Political Prisoners (CRPP), and Gono Songram Moncho (Peoples’ Resistance Forum). According to FFT’s well-documented field visit and evidence collected from affected areas, the Murshidabad violence was not just a communal clash but a ‘deeply organised’ riot. It was a “politically driven situation, where religious polarisation, state inaction, and police repression have combined to disturb years of peaceful coexistence.”

The report blames the local administration for “indifference and inaction that allowed this violence to spread” and claims that “fake BSF raids targeted only Muslim villages” and “police atrocities created an atmosphere of fear in Muslim villages”. This is, indeed, an eye-opener, and it notes that “people from both communities are terrified and there is deep mistrust.”

The FFT, in its interim report, has sought for immediate and independent judicial investigation, but the CM, who has neither displayed demonstrative action nor reacted to the report, is busy inaugurating a copy-cat Jagannath Mandir in Digha, West Bengal.

Blood in the Meadow, Smoke in Bengal

Let’s fast forward to Pahalgam and its aftermath. We accost bitter Islamophobia, its incubators waiting for such a golden recharge.

BJP’s Suvendu Adhikari wastes no time with his theatrics and Bengal’s secular image took a hit when a Hindu doctor refused treatment to a pregnant woman, just because as she was Muslim

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No one asked who was responsible for one of the biggest security lapses in India's history. How could hardened terrorists saunter into a tourist spot, crossing roads and checkpoints, staring back at grave security personnel and menacing guns, without catching a security personnel's eye? The attackers took their own time to pick and choose and kill. Could not the first shots alert security forces nearby, for the Valley is teeming with them?

Those of us who did ask these questions are trolled mercilessly as the whole of *Hindustan* is suddenly immersed in the vicarious excitement of watching our patriotic TV anchors fight whole brigades of Pakistanis, like *Rambo*. The herd is now high on Islamophobia, yelling, "All Muslims are terrorists". The more "sensible, secular" types dial down the hate a bit and instead say, "All terrorists are Muslims".

Does it mean that Hindus like Pragya Thakur, Col Shrikant Purohit and Major Ramesh Upadhyay, the prime accused in the Malegaon case, are expelled from the Valhalla of terrorists?

What is more despicable is how hapless Kashmiri Muslims, mainly students, are being targeted every day in different cities and are either roughed up or thrown out or both. All the efforts to integrate Kashmir into India go for a painful toss when Kashmiris are treated with undisguised hostility.

Jingoism may enrich patriotic media persons, but it destroys a nation. It plays down on how local Kashmiris went out of the way to help the stranded and terrified, by risking their lives. The houses of a handful of 'jehadi-bhakts' (did the administration know who they were?) are demolished, quite illegally, to compensate for the regime's utter frustration in being outwitted, outflanked and left with a bloody nose.

The general viewer is fed the deliberately misleading diet that the area is infested only by India-haters. Forgotten is the fact that one of the first Kashmiris to give up his life to protect Hindu tourists was the local pony-guide, Syed Adil Hussain Shah. To hell with him, says a regime that is tearing its hair as its response is highly restricted. The world will not allow one nuclear power to attack another and much-flaunted reprisals like stopping the Indus waters are just hot air. They cannot really be implemented hard enough to devastate.

A Sacrifice Forgotten

It is time to turn back to reality — to a village in Nadia district, in West Bengal, not too far from the border and the epicentre of the Murshidabad riots. Its name is Patharghata, where a frail old Sabur Ali Shaikh sobs at intermittent intervals, grieving the loss of his son, Havildar Jhantu Ali Sheikh. Jhantu, a commando with the elite 6 Para Special Forces of the Indian Army, who was killed by Muslim terrorists

during a counter-terror operation in Kashmir's Udhampur district, two days after the Pahalgam slaughter.

Shaikh is proud that his son died for the country and his other son, Rafiqul, a subedar in an artillery regiment in Kashmir, could come home, to lead his brother's funeral procession. On the very day that Rafiqul swore revenge on Muslim terrorists who had killed his sibling, policemen in Gujarat were on a special operation to ferret out illegal Bangladeshis from every city and parade them around like 'proxy Pakistanis'. They were, after all, Muslims of this subcontinent.

What is unforgivable is that, in the process, they arrested many legitimate Indian citizens— Bengali Muslims of West Bengal. Patriots Jhantu and still-fighting Rafiqul are specimens of these three crore people — who are tormented at will as Bangladeshis and Rohingyas by many ill-informed Indians or by Islamophobes. Their religion and language are enough to persecute them.

This 'mistake' is happening much too often, and it hurts most because while Jhantus and Rafiquls lay down their lives for India, those who vilify and terrorise them have never dreamt of risking their lives and businesses to defend the motherland. They revel in some weird make-believe world of a religion-backed, non-sacrificing, faux super-patriotism