

# Will India's future generations forgive its decay into anti-Muslim hatred?

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Sameena Dalwai



People stand in front of an eatery after it was vandalised by a mob following clashes between Hindus and Muslims that erupted on Monday, in Gurugram, Haryana, on the outskirts of New Delhi, India, August 1, 2023 [Reuters]

A part of the Indian state where I live is on fire. Barely 77km (48 miles) from the university where I teach in Haryana state, a mob set a mosque on fire on early Tuesday and shot dead a young imam in a neighbouring district.

It's the latest bloodstain on India's social fabric, which is already in tatters. If history's any guide, these stains will haunt India — and Indians — for decades to come.

Ninety years ago, on May 10, 1933, 5000 students of the Nazi students union and their professors gathered in Bebelplatz, Berlin, with flaming torches. They set fire to a pile of nearly 20,000 books written mainly by Jewish authors and communist thinkers like Karl Marx and Rosa Luxemburg — both of whom also had Jewish roots. Forty thousand people watched this event.

The students read out their mantra: "Against decadence and moral decay! For discipline and decency in the family and the nation! I commit to the flames, the writings of....."

Writer Eric Kastner, whose books were hurled into the fire, was standing in the crowd, unrecognised. He later described this as Begräbniswetter or funeral weather. The day was dark and cloudy, and the rain extinguished the fire. So the students had to keep pouring petrol for the flames to live and the books to die.

I was reminded of this in April, when a mob burned down a madrasa library with 4,500 books — including ancient manuscripts and handwritten Islamic texts in calligraphy — in the town of Bihar Sharif in the state of Bihar. The library was 113 years old and preserved a priceless collection of books over several generations. The attackers came prepared with sticks, stones and petrol bombs.

If Kastner and hundreds of writers and artists left Germany and lived in exile while their homeland was violently reshaped by the Nazis, right-wing politicians are today openly naming historians and journalists and telling them to leave India.

In Germany on May 10, 2023, nine outstanding artists read texts from writers like Rezzo Kastner and Kurt Tucholsky whose books were burned that day 90 years ago. Directly under Bebelplatz is now a library memorial with empty white shelves with space for around 20,000 books. There is also a bronze plate with the inscription:

That was but a prelude; where they burn books,  
They will ultimately burn people as well.  
Heinrich Heine 1820

In India that order has been reversed. We burned people and have now reached books. The Mumbai riots after the demolition of Babri Masjid in 1992. The 2002 Gujarat carnage. A mother's testimony in Gujarat narrated how they tied her disabled son to a tree and beat him up. He cried for water but they fed him petrol. A match was put on him and he blew up like a bomb. It's a vision the mother is fated to carry. but I wonder if his killers remember it. Are they tormented by it?

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In the Holocaust, trains carrying Jewish people stopped at several stations where men, women and children trapped in cattle cages cried for water. Families were taken away from homes, old people shot in the streets. Germans saw all this. What did they feel?

Today that collective memory has made Germany a rare nation that confronts at least some of its horrid past in its lived present. The country's painful modern history is commemorated everywhere — a police station where the Stasi tortured suspects, a

hospital where cruel experiments were conducted upon Roma children, Jewish homes from where families were deported to the gas chambers.

India has never had any such reckoning — not even over the subcontinent's partition, during which more than one million people were murdered, and 15 million migrated between India and the new state of Pakistan.

We have no plaques, painted walls and hardly any memorials, only memory. Visions carved into the minds of people and passed on from generation to generation.

In Germany, it started with attacks on Jewish trades and bans on their professional work, grew into the capture of Jewish property and homes, but very soon turned to deportation to ghettos, followed by mass murders. All this while non-Jewish Germans watched. Could they have stopped it?

In India, we are watching the rapid poisoning of the collective mind with propaganda that the ancient glory of Hindus was tarnished by Muslim rulers. That contemporary India's rise is being held back by Muslims — who are blamed for everything from the country's large population and the spread of the coronavirus to anti-women practices and even inflation. From the withdrawal of scholarships for Muslims to amendments to the citizenship law that discriminate against Muslim asylum seekers, the ruling party is leaving no stone unturned to fan the fuels of division.

Periodic violence and lynchings, as in Haryana this week, help push Muslims further and further into ghettos. Muslim women's organisations working towards domestic equality, Muslim youth trying to adopt a liberal way of life away from the community gaze, and children trying to get education and economic mobility are all pushed back into the ghetto. They are then compelled to live a Muslimness that is defined by others — the Hindu right and self-proclaimed Muslim leaders determine how a Muslim should look, behave and dress. Fanatics from both sides debate over it, clash swords over it.

The voices of the common Muslim — youth, children, women, men and professionals — are lost. As a result, an unchanging target is preserved for the merchants of hate.

Many decades after the Holocaust, Germany still carries the burden of its history. We Indians are living that history right here, right now. Is it too late to amend it? Or are our future generations condemned to carry the weight of what we did — and didn't do?

***The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera's editorial stance.***

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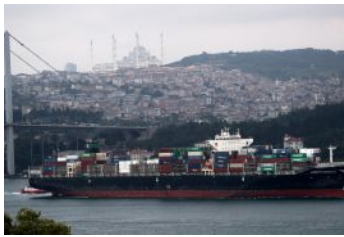
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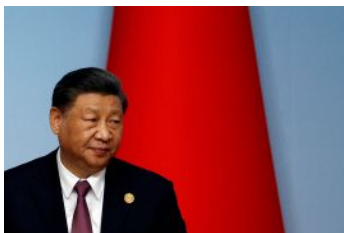
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