

Opinion – Pakistan Hatred Sells in Modi's India

Written by Sarmad Ishfaq

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SARMAD ISHFAQ, JUL 4 2024

Since 2014, under a Hindutva-centric government, one of BJP's central tenets has been to undermine and demonize Pakistan. From public obloquy to outright war-mongering, from stereotypical films to jingoistic news anchors, Modi's India is awash with anti-Pakistan sentiment. For example, during the 2014 elections, BJP's Giriraj Singh stated that all the people who do not vote for Modi should go to Pakistan. He also noted that "our ancestors committed a major lapse...if at that time [1947] the Muslims had been sent there [Pakistan], we would not have had to face this situation." In 2017, while campaigning for assembly elections in Gujarat, Modi shocked the subcontinent by stating (baselessly) that a secret meeting between Congress leadership and Pakistani diplomats and elites was evidence they were in connivance to steal the elections.

This trend of connecting Pakistan with Congress is a perennial one. During the 2019 election campaign, BJP's then Chief Minister of Gujarat Vijay Rupani remarked that if Congress wins "then Diwali will be celebrated in Pakistan". Things became especially frenzied during the 2019 elections due to the Pulwama attack in which 40 Indian paramilitary soldiers were killed. Without conducting an investigation, the BJP and the Indian Armed Forces were quick to blame Pakistan (which it vehemently denied). The BJP shouted "We will enter your homes [Pakistan] and hit you", and then escalated the situation further by conducting an airstrike in Pakistan's Balakot. This led to Pakistan retaliating which led to its air force downing an Indian MiG-21. As tensions rose, the BJP not only manufactured, but rode, this anti-Pakistan wave to a massive electoral victory in 2019.

Regarding all this, the former governor of Indian-held Kashmir Satya Pal stated that right before the 2019 Pulwama attack the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) had asked for aircrafts since such a huge convoy never travels by road. He said the request was put to the Home Ministry and not to him but the former had refused. Pal states that he had a conversation with Modi and Ajit Doval, the national security advisor, where he stated that the Pulwama incident was "our fault." He says both Modi and Doval told him to quiet down and not to let people know it was their mistake. It is important to clarify here that Pal opines that Pulwama was not possible without Pakistan's complicity (alleged) but is asserting that the BJP willfully ignored this. He further says, "...I realized that this entire onus is going to be put on Pakistan..." to reap electoral gains. In another interview, he asserts "I fear [BJP]...can orchestrate an attack on the Ram Temple. They can plot to kill a BJP leader. If they can do a Pulwama attack, they can do anything."

In the 2024 elections, Modi painted an image of a hegemonic India juxtaposed to the inconsequentiality of Pakistan due to its failing economy and political instability. Furthermore, the two-for-one strategy of connecting Congress and Pakistan was reused in the latest election. For example, while campaigning for the 2024 election in Gujarat, Modi remarked "Pakistan is impatient to make Shehzada [Rahul Gandhi] the prime minister... And we know that Congress is a disciple of Pakistan." As should be now evident, this antagonism against Pakistan is the BJP's bread and butter – and their hardcore base eats this rhetoric up. In one of the now-common anti-Muslim rallies in India, young women dressed in saffron were "holding placards asking Muslims to choose between "Pakistan or Qabristan" (Pakistan or the graveyard)". Modi and company also leveraged Kashmir to stir up nationalism in the elections. "We will take it [Kashmir] back", clamored Amit Shah, Modi's right-hand man, and BJP minister at a 2024 election rally.

Pakistan hatred goes beyond mere affectation. According to a recent report from The Guardian, India's RAW carried out 20 assassinations on Pakistani soil since 2020. This was confirmed to the publication by Indian and Pakistani intelligence officers. This also gives further credence to Canada's allegations that India was behind the killing of

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Hardeep Singh Nijjar – a Khalistan movement leader. This, however, might play to the BJP's hardcore base as it vindicates their tough stance on Pakistan according to analysts.

Similar to the BJP's political maleficence, India's film industry, once beloved in Pakistan, has taken a punitive stance against the country. Recent films that have caused a stir include "The Kashmir Files" which focuses on the exodus of Kashmiri Pandits (Hindus) by Pakistan-backed militants from Indian-held Kashmir in the 1990s. The movie's depiction of a genocide was considered inaccurate by many scholars and its portrayal of Muslims was considered Islamophobic and ignominious. Contrariwise and unsurprisingly, the BJP supported the film's version of events. BJP leader Smriti Irani was the most vocal in promoting it while Modi himself attacked critics who were giving negative reviews to the film – calling this a conspiracy to suppress the truth.

Indian Muslim actors are routinely harassed by the BJP and its followers. For example, arguably Bollywood's biggest stars Salman Khan, Amir Khan, and Shah Rukh (all Muslims), have "faced criticism from BJP figures in recent years, along with the usual gibes that they should 'go to Pakistan'". Due to this, they have either remained silent or acquiesced for fear of their careers.

Shah Rukh Khan, once beloved in Pakistan, recently starred in an anti-Pakistan 2023 movie "Pathaan". In it a Pakistani general who does not have much time to live, endeavors to punish India because it revoked Kashmir's article 370. Writing for The Guardian, Fatima Bhutto writes that "Pathaan's plot is nonsensical...article 370 was the instrument that allowed Kashmir's ascension into the Indian union; if it is declared null and void, then so too is Kashmir's ascension to India..." Despite the plot holes, it has become the 6th highest-grossing Indian film of all time. In her article, Bhutto calls out Shahrukh Khan for not taking a stand against Modi. In fact, he been publicly ingratiating Modi on his "efforts" for India to the disappointment of millions of Muslims and Pakistanis.

"Fighter" which came out in 2024 is yet another propaganda project. The film has references to Pulwama-Balakot and the subsequent dogfight between both nations. BBC journalist Haroon Rashid stated that the movie "distorts facts to such an extent that it puts forward a version of history that didn't happen and instigates hatred amongst communities." However, such anti-Pakistan movies sell in India as Fighter grossed ₹337.2 crores (\$40 million) and is also one of the top 50 highest-grossing Indian movies of all time.

Today India's media is littered with what is called *Godi* media (a play on "Modi" and the word for "lapdogs") by Indian critics. I have previously argued that "coercion and enticement" by the BJP is what caused the media's obsequy. According to the Reporters Without Borders 2024 ranking, India's media ranks 159th. It further reports that violence against journalists, monopolized media, and political affinity means that "press freedom is in crisis in 'the world's largest democracy'".

One reason why the Indian media is a mere marionette to BJP wishes is because many of the major media houses are owned by a few powerful individuals. Mukesh Ambani, the billionaire ally of Modi, "owns more than 70 media outlets that are followed by at least 800 million Indians." Moreover, in 2022, in a major blow to independent journalism, Gautam Adani, Asia's richest person and another confidante of Modi, bought NDTV – one of India's largest media companies.

The Pulwama-Balakot debacle accurately illustrates the low standards of today's Indian media. Not only did the media rant that India must punish Pakistan (before any investigation), it spread lies – as shown by international media). Perhaps even more embarrassing for the BJP-media nexus was the EU DisinfoLab report of 2019 that unveiled how India was resurrecting dead NGOs, think tanks, and even people to disseminate content that primarily undermines Pakistan. This network is led by the Srivastava Group and augmented by ANI, one of India's leading news agencies. ANI spreads op-eds from dummy websites which it would "quote as credible reports from the European media".

Although both countries have historically meddled in each other's affairs, supported insurgencies on the other's soil (Kashmir to Khalistan), and have fought a series of wars, the hate in India for Pakistan on a governmental and societal level far exceeds the converse. Modi's India and its obsession with Pakistan will likely not subside even if the

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BJP loses power. The reason being that millions of Hindutva followers have become radicalized into hating Pakistan as an ideological pre-requisite. To appeal to this base, the BJP war mongers every chance it gets as Modi knows that Pakistan hatred sells.

About the author:

Sarmad Ishfaq is the CEO of the think tank, Paradigm Shift. His work has been published in *The Diplomat*, *Middle East Monitor*, *Harvard*, *Open Democracy*, *GVS*, and *Eurasia Review*. He has also been published in peer-reviewed journals such as *Social Identities*. Previously he worked as a research fellow for the Lahore Center for Peace Research. He has a master's degree in International Relations from the University of Wollongong in Dubai where he was recognized as the 'Top Graduate'.