



THE INDIAN MUSLIM LIVING BETWEEN FAITH AND FEAR

Executive Summary

"The silence of the majority is the consent of oppression."

— Maulana Abul Kalam Azad

September 2025 marked a significant and perilous escalation in the systemic pressure faced by India's Muslim minority at hands of a majoritarian government. The month's events, spanning multiple states and domains of public life, revealed a coordinated, multi-pronged assault on the community's rights, security, and public presence. This was not a series of isolated incidents but a coherent pattern of marginalization, manifesting simultaneously in the streets through engineered clashes, in public discourse through the normalization of hate speech, through coercive state action, and within the nation's legal and administrative architecture.

The primary flashpoint was the I Love Muhammad controversy, a social media trend that began as a simple expression of devotional faith. This act was swiftly framed by Hindutva groups and state authorities as a provocation, triggering a cascade of police actions, communal violence, and political recriminations. The state's response, particularly in Uttar Pradesh, was characterized by a heavy-handed crackdown, mass arrests, and the deployment of bulldozer justice—the extra-judicial demolition of properties—as a form of collective punishment. This punitive action was sanctioned and encouraged by the highest level of the state's political leadership, whose rhetoric framed the protestors as enemies of the state deserving of a lesson their future generations will remember.

Concurrently, the normalization of anti-Muslim animus continued unabated. Hindu religious and cultural festivals were weaponized as platforms for incendiary hate speech, where right-wing leaders openly vilified Muslims, propagated dangerous conspiracy theories, and called for their exclusion from public life with impunity.

At the institutional level, the month presented a bifurcated picture. The Supreme Court of India offered a significant, though isolated, instance of institutional resistance by staying key provisions of the controversial Waqf (Amendment) Act, 2025, thereby checking an



executive attempt to gain arbitrary control over Muslim religious endowments. However, this judicial safeguard was overshadowed by legislative and administrative actions that further entrenched discrimination. The passage of a draconian anti-conversion bill in Rajasthan provided legal cover for vigilante harassment of minorities, while a new central government immigration order created a religiously selective asylum policy, offering refuge to non-Muslims from neighboring countries while simultaneously intensifying the persecution and deportation of Rohingya Muslim refugees.

In synthesis, the developments of September 2025 illustrate a grim synergy between social bigotry, state coercion, and legal disenfranchisement. Online rhetoric fueled on-the-ground violence, which in turn was used to justify a punitive state response, while new laws provided a formal framework that legitimizes and perpetuates the cycle of discrimination. These events paint a portrait of a minority community under siege from multiple vectors, with the very fabric of India's secular and constitutional protections being systematically dismantled.



Main Points

- September 2025 marked a turning point in India's campaign of systemic marginalization against Muslims, a coordinated convergence of state coercion, mob violence, and legislative discrimination across multiple states.
- A devotional slogan turned national flashpoint when the Uttar Pradesh government criminalized a peaceful display of faith in Kanpur. The resulting protests and police actions exposed the state's predisposition to criminalize Muslim identity.
- What began as a social media trend evolved into nationwide clashes as digital polarization spilled onto the streets. The state's aggressive response, marked by mass FIRs and bulldozer demolitions, deepened the climate of fear and alienation.
- Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath's rhetoric framed dissent as criminal defiance. His call for "denting-painting" and threats of generational punishment legitimized state violence as a moral and political necessity.
- Hindu religious festivals, especially Ganesh Chaturthi, were exploited by right-wing groups as vehicles for anti-Muslim hate speech, normalizing bigotry under the guise of faith and cultural pride, without consequence or state censure.

- Legislative and administrative actions entrenched structural discrimination: Rajasthan's anticonversion bill empowered vigilante policing of minorities, while the new immigration order codified a religiously selective asylum regime that excluded Rohingya Muslims.

The I Love Muhammad Campaign: From Devotional Expression to National Flashpoint

Genesis in Kanpur: The Politics of Public Space and "New Traditions"

The controversy that would engulf multiple Indian states in September 2025 began with a seemingly innocuous act of religious decoration. On September 4, in the Rawatpur area of Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, members of the local Muslim community erected an illuminated banner displaying the words "I Love Muhammad" as part of preparations for Eid Milad-un-Nabi, the celebration of the Prophet's birth.

This display, intended as a simple expression of faith, was immediately contestedⁱ by local Hindu groups. The objection was not centered on the content of the slogan itself but on its context and location. Activists, including one associated with the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), framed the banner as the establishment of a new tradition in a mixed-communal space that was also traditionally used for Hindu festivals like Ram Navami. This argument transformed the devotional banner from a personal or community expression into a political act, a perceived encroachment upon and redefinition of shared public space. The dispute was thus rooted in a contest over symbolic territory, where the introduction of a new minority expression was interpreted as a challenge to the established majoritarian presence.

This local grievance was swiftly validated and amplified by the state apparatus. On September 9, Kanpur police registered a First Information Report (FIR)ⁱⁱ against 24 individuals, including nine named persons, under sections of the penal code related to promoting enmity between groups and disturbing communal harmony. The FIR explicitly cited the new tradition argument and included allegations that Hindu religious posters had been torn down during the procession. While senior police

officials later attempted to clarify that the FIR was not filed against the slogan itself, but rather for placing the banner at a nontraditional location and for the alleged poster damage, this nuanced distinction was largely lost in the ensuing publicⁱⁱⁱ and political firestorm. The police narrative was vigorously contested by Muslim residents and the accused. They argued that the claim of poster tearing was baseless and that a similar I Love Muhammad message had been displayed on a cloth banner during the previous year's celebrations without any objection.

One of the accused, Mohammad Siraj, questioned the sudden controversy^{iv}, stating, "Last year, we displayed the same message on a cloth banner, and no one raised objections. This year, we used a light board, and suddenly people started protesting. I don't understand why." This highlights the subjective and politically charged nature of what constitutes tradition in contested public spaces, where the acceptability of a minority's actions can be arbitrarily revoked by the majoritarian group's grievance. The state's decision to intervene not as a mediator but as an enforcer of the majoritarian complaint, through the filing of a criminal case, was the critical act that escalated a local dispute into a national flashpoint.



Digital Contagion: Social Media as an Arena for Competitive Devotionalism

The police action in Kanpur served as the catalyst that transformed a localized conflict into a pan-India digital movement. News of the FIR spread rapidly on social media, where it was widely perceived by Muslims as an unjustifiable suppression of their fundamental right to religious expression. In response, the slogan I Love Muhammad was adopted as a symbol of both faith and defiance. Across the country, Muslims began putting up banners and stickers on their homes and vehicles and, most visibly, changing their social media profile pictures and trending the hashtag #ILoveMuhammad

This digital mobilization was an act of solidarity with the accused in Kanpur and a broader assertion of religious identity in a climate of perceived persecution.

The campaign gained significant political traction when prominent figures like Asaduddin Owaisi, chief of the All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM), publicly championed the cause. On September 15, Owaisi posted on the social media platform X, directly tagging the Kanpur police and asserting, "Saying I Love Muhammad is not a crime," arguing that such expression is protected under Article 25 of the Indian Constitution, which guarantees freedom of religion. This intervention amplified the movement's visibility and framed the issue squarely as a matter of constitutional rights versus state overreach.

The surge of the #ILoveMuhammad trend prompted an immediate and organized counter-mobilization from Hindu nationalist groups and their online supporters. This reaction was not one of tolerance or indifference but of direct competition. Hashtags such as #ILoveMahadev and #ILoveRam exploded on social media platforms^v, accompanied by fervent declarations of faith and calls for "Sanatani and Hindu unity." One viral post under the #ILoveMahadev hashtag, which garnered thousands of interactions, explicitly urged followers to showcase Hindu unity. This dynamic created a digital battleground characterized by a phenomenon that can be termed "competitive devotionalism". In this framework, public expressions of faith are stripped of their intrinsic spiritual meaning and re-contextualized as zero-sum declarations of religious and political

identity. The Muslim expression of love for their Prophet was not seen as an additive voice in a pluralistic public square but as a competitive act that necessitated a powerful and visible majoritarian counter-assertion. The public sphere, both physical and digital, was thus transformed into an arena for a contest of religious pride and numerical strength. This entire episode demonstrated how, in a deeply polarized society, a simple devotional message can be instrumentalized by all sides, becoming a proxy for broader anxieties about community identity, public space, and political power.



Street-Level Escalation: On Ground Violence

The digital contest over religious slogans did not remain confined to the virtual realm. Throughout September, the I Love Muhammad campaign and the reactive counter-campaigns served as direct triggers for on-the-ground confrontations and communal violence in

several states. What began as a dispute over a banner in Kanpur metastasized into street-level clashes, revealing the dangerously permeable barrier between online rhetoric and physical conflict.

The Bareilly Confrontation (Sept 26-27)

The most explosive manifestation of the controversy occurred in Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh. The violence on September 26 and 27 was a direct consequence of the state's initial action in Kanpur. The trigger was a protest called by Maulana Tauqeer Raza Khan^{vi}, a prominent local cleric and chief of the Ittehad-e-Millat Council (IMC), to demonstrate against the FIR filed in Kanpur. Following Friday prayers on September 26, a large crowd, estimated to be between 1,000 and 2,000 people, gathered near the Kotwali mosque and attempted to march towards the Islamia Ground^{vii} for the protest.

When blocked by a heavy police deployment, the situation rapidly degenerated into a violent confrontation. Protestors and Police engaged in intense stone-pelting. There were also reports of firing in the air, and the clashes resulted in injuries to dozens. The police acted with force, using lathi (baton) charges and tear gas to disperse the crowd, which led to a stampede-like situation.

The aftermath saw a massive and systematic crackdown by the state administration. Internet services across Bareilly district were suspended for 48 hours^{viii} to prevent further mobilization and control the narrative.

At least 11 FIRs^{ix} were registered across various police stations, implicating over 2,500 people, most of them unnamed. This tactic of filing mass FIRs with a large number of unnamed accused is a well-documented strategy used to cast a wide net of legal intimidation over a community. By the end of the month, over 80 individuals had been arrested, including Tauqeer Raza Khan and his key associates, who were promptly sent to 14-day judicial custody. Senior police officials and the state government framed the entire incident not as a spontaneous protest that turned violent, but as a pre-planned conspiracy to disrupt social harmony and undermine the state's development agenda. This narrative served to retroactively justify the state's denial of permission for the protest and its subsequent heavy-handed response.



A Pattern of Localized Conflicts

The major confrontation in Bareilly was emblematic of a wider pattern of localized friction that spread across the country in response to the I Love Muhammad campaign.

- **Barabanki, Uttar Pradesh:** Communal tension flared late on September 26 after a village watchman named Dhaniram tore down an "I Love Muhammad" banner. This act enraged local Muslim residents, and a crowd of around 150 people gathered at his house, and started to protest. His family claimed their home was vandalized and they were held hostage. The police intervened with a heavy force, arresting eight individuals on the spot and booking a total of 159 people in the subsequent FIR

- **Davanagere, Karnataka:** On the night of September 24, a dispute over the placement of an "I Love Muhammad" banner in the Karl Marx Nagar area escalated into a violent clash between local Hindu and Muslim groups. The altercation involved stone-pelting^x that resulted in damage to several houses and injuries to a few individuals, including a young girl.

- **Nationwide Spread:** The unrest was not limited to these high-profile incidents. Protests, processions, and police actions were reported in numerous other towns and cities. In Unnao, Uttar Pradesh, youths carrying banners clashed with police, leading to stone-pelting and multiple arrests. In Mau and Varanasi, processions were dispersed, and arrests were made. Similar disturbances, though of varying

intensity, were also reported from Kashipur in Uttarakhand and Nagpur in Maharashtra, indicating the pan-Indian scope of the controversy

The pattern of these events reveals a predictable and dangerous trajectory. The state's initial action in Kanpur created a grievance. When citizens in Bareilly attempted to protest this grievance through democratic means, the state blocked that channel by denying permission. This created the conditions for a confrontation, which the state then met with overwhelming force before framing the protestors as conspirators. This suggests a strategy of managing dissent not through dialogue or accommodation but through engineered confrontation, which then serves as a justification for further repression.

The State's Response: Coercion, Rhetoric, and Punitive Action

The response of the state, particularly in Uttar Pradesh, to the I Love Muhammad issue was not merely a law-and-order operation. It was a multifaceted campaign of coercion, intimidation, and punitive action, sanctioned and articulated by the highest echelons of the political executive. The approach combined threatening rhetoric with the physical force of the state machinery, creating an environment of fear and signaling a policy of zero tolerance for minority mobilization.

The "Denting-Painting" Doctrine

In the immediate aftermath of the Bareilly violence, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath delivered a series of public statements that went far beyond typical political condemnation. His language was direct, personalized, and laden with threat. Speaking at a media event on September 27, he declared that "a Maulana forgot who is in power" in the state, a clear reference to the detained cleric Tauqeer Raza Khan.

He warned that for those with bad habits that are not easily shed, "denting-painting are required," a colloquialism for physical punishment or roughing up. This threatening metaphor was part of a broader message of retribution. Adityanath vowed that rioters would be taught a lesson that their "future generations will also remember" and asserted that his government would not allow anyone to hold the system hostage with protests

His rhetoric also invoked religious and nationalist tropes, warning against the supposed dream of "Ghazwa-e-Hind"^{xi} (a prophesied Islamic conquest of India) and promising a one-way ticket to hell for anyone attempting to create anarchy.

This language is significant because it represents a direct sanction for extra-legal state action from the head of the executive. The "denting-painting" doctrine is not just political posturing; it is an ideological justification for the punitive measures that followed. It creates a powerful feedback loop where the coercive actions of the administration are presented as the fulfillment of the leader's populist promise to be tough, thereby reinforcing his political image and normalizing punitive state violence as a legitimate tool of governance.



The Bulldozer Justice:

A garage belonging to Mohsin Raza, who was related to an associate of Tauqeer Raza Khan, was razed. A resort and a marriage hall owned by other aides of the cleric were also sealed by the authorities^{xii}.

Officially, these demolitions were justified as routine administrative actions against illegal encroachments. However, this practice, widely known as bulldozer justice,ⁱⁱⁱ is recognized by international human rights organizations like Amnesty International^{xiii} and UN experts as a form of extra-judicial, collective punishment. These demolitions are disproportionately targeted at Muslims in India, particularly in Uttar Pradesh under Chief Minister Adityanath, who has earned the moniker Bulldozer Baba for his aggressive use of this tactic. The demolitions serve as a highly visible and intimidating form of state retribution. They are often carried out without affording the occupant's due process, such as adequate notice or an opportunity for a hearing, and sometimes in direct violation of court orders, a practice for which the Uttar Pradesh government has previously been admonished by the Supreme Court^{xiv}. The physical act of demolition is the tangible manifestation of the "denting-painting" threat, demonstrating a direct, causal link between the highest level of political speech and the on-the-ground actions of the bureaucracy. This blurs the line between the rule of law and the exercise of raw political will, transforming administrative tools into weapons of communal punishment.

The Law and Order Apparatus: Mass FIRs and Administrative Suppression

Beyond the spectacular violence of the bulldozer, the state's response was characterized by the systematic use of the legal and administrative apparatus for mass intimidation. The primary tool was the filing of mass FIRs. The Association for Protection of Civil Rights (APCR), a civil rights group, documented that by September 23, at least 21 FIRs had been filed across four states in connection with the I Love Muhammad campaign, naming a total of 1,324 people.

In Bareilly alone, the numbers were staggering, with authorities booking over 2,500 individuals across 11 different FIRs. This strategy of naming a small number of individuals and adding hundreds or thousands of unnamed persons to the FIR is a deliberate tactic^{xv}. It transforms the legal process from a tool for targeted justice into an instrument of broad, community-level intimidation. It places entire localities under a persistent cloud of potential police action, granting law enforcement with a

wide latitude for future investigations and arrests. This creates a powerful chilling effect, suppressing not only illegal acts but also legitimate dissent, freedom of expression, and the right to assembly, as anyone present in the vicinity of a protest could potentially be implicated.

Complementing the legal pressure was the use of administrative suppression. The pre-emptive and widespread suspension of internet services in affected areas like Bareilly for 48 hours is a standard component of the state's crisis management playbook.

While officially justified as a measure to prevent the spread of rumors and misinformation, it also serves as a powerful tool of administrative control, effectively crippling the ability of communities to organize, document abuses, and communicate with the outside world. Together, the mass FIRs and internet shutdowns constitute a formidable apparatus for pacifying a targeted demographic, using the color of law to achieve political ends.



The Public Narrative: Normalizing Anti-Muslim Animus

The state-led crackdown on the I Love Muhammad campaign did not occur in a vacuum. It was enabled and reinforced by a public narrative that has been systematically cultivated to frame Muslims as a hostile and threatening "other." In September 2025, a particularly potent vector for this narrative was the weaponization of Hindu religious festivals, which were used as platforms to disseminate vitriolic anti-Muslim hate speech, thereby normalizing bigotry within a sacred context.

Weaponizing Hindu Festivals

Across central and northern India, Ganesh Chaturthi celebrations in early September became venues for organized incitement against Muslims^{xvi} by right-wing Hindu nationalist leaders. These events, traditionally occasions for community bonding and spiritual observance, were transformed into sites for political mobilization and the laundering of hate.

- Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh (September 4): At a Ganesh Chaturthi event organized by leaders of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and Bajrang Dal, a speaker named Manish Saini delivered incendiary speeches that portrayed Muslims as a predatory demographic threat. He invoked well-worn conspiracy theories, including love jihad, cow slaughter, and a supposed deliberate agenda to attack Hindu women. This rhetoric frames religious minorities as internal enemies actively working to destroy the social and moral fabric of the Hindu community.

- Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh (August 31): During a local festival function, a Hindu nationalist figure, Thakur Ram Singh, took to the microphone to deliver a public diatribe against both Muslims and Christians. He accused them of carrying out forced conversions and used deeply offensive and dehumanizing language, referring to them as "illegitimate children of Chadar-Father" in an attempt to delegitimize their very identity in a public forum

- Dehradun, Uttarakhand (August 31): A rally celebrating Ganesh Chaturthi, hosted by the Hindu Raksha Dal, featured speeches that were explicitly genocidal in their undertones. Swami Darshan Bharti, a speaker at the event, insisted that Islam needed to be crushed in the state of Uttarakhand. Another leader, and communal slurs to refer to Muslims, including

"topi-dariwale" (hat-and-beard-wearers), "burkhewale" (burqawearers), "kuthmulle," and "jihadi". Such language is designed to engender fear, promote demographic anxiety, and cast ordinary expressions of Muslim identity as signs of a dangerous enemy.

A crucial element in these incidents was the climate of impunity. There were no reports of police or administrative action being taken against the speakers for their openly inflammatory and hateful rhetoric. This absence of state response sends a powerful message that such speech is permissible, if not tacitly endorsed, further emboldening purveyors of hate.

This process can be understood as the sacralization of bigotry. By embedding anti-Muslim narratives within the sacred context of a religious festival, these actors effectively launder hate speech. The rhetoric is no longer merely political; it is presented as a defense of the faith and the community. This cloaks bigotry in a veneer of religious sanctity, making it more palatable and defensible to a wider audience.



Institutional Levers: Legal and Administrative Frameworks of Exclusion

Beyond the immediate dynamics of street clashes and public rhetoric, September 2025 also witnessed significant developments at the institutional level, where the legal and administrative frameworks governing minority rights were actively contested and reshaped. These events reveal a critical trend: the transition from informal, street-level prejudice to its formal codification within the state's legal and administrative code.

Legislative Empowerment of Vigilantism: The Rajasthan Anti-Conversion Bill

On September 9, the state assembly passed the "Rajasthan Prohibition of Unlawful Conversion of Religion Bill, 2025,"^{xvii} one of the most stringent anti-conversion laws in the country. The law contains several draconian provisions that civil liberties groups have condemned as unconstitutional:

- It employs an exceptionally broad and vague definition of allurement for conversion, which could potentially criminalize ordinary charitable work or inter-faith dialogue.
- It reverses the burden of proof, placing it on the accused to prove that a conversion was not unlawful, a departure from the standard legal principle of innocent until proven guilty.
- It mandates that individuals wishing to convert must provide advance notice to the District Magistrate, whose office will then display the details on a public notice board—a clear violation of the right to privacy and belief, which could expose converts to harassment and violence.
- Crucially, the law exempts re-conversion to one's immediate previous religion, a clause widely seen as designed to protect and encourage conversions to Hinduism while penalizing conversions away from it.
- The penalties prescribed are severe, ranging from long prison sentences to life imprisonment and even the demolition of properties belonging to institutions found to be involved in mass conversions.

The impact of the law was immediate and chilling. Civil society organizations, including the People's Union for Civil Liberties, reported a direct and sudden spike in incidents of harassment and attacks against the Christian minority in the days following the bill's passage. They documented at least 10 such incidents across six districts, alleging that the new law had effectively given a license to rightwing vigilante groups like the Bajrang Dal and VHP. The reports also claimed police complicity, with law enforcement often intervening on the side of the attackers or arresting pastors on false charges of coercive conversion (PUCL, 2025). This law provides a clear example of how majoritarian ideology is being translated into a

zerosum declarations of religious and political legal framework that legitimizes the actions of non-state vigilante actors, effectively empowering them as enforcers of the state's ideological agenda.

A Bifurcated Asylum Policy: The Immigration Order and the Rohingya Crisis

The principle of religiously selective state policy was further cemented at the national level through a new administrative order on immigration. In early September, the Union Ministry of Home Affairs notified the Immigration and Foreigners (Exemption) Order, 2025. This order grants a significant exemption to specific groups of refugees, allowing them to reside in India without valid passports or travel documents. The beneficiaries are explicitly defined as non-Muslim minorities, namely Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis, and Christians, who fled religious persecution from the neighboring Muslim-majority countries of Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh and had entered India on or before December 31, 2024^{xviii}. This policy of offering refuge based on religious identity stands in stark and brutal contrast to the Indian state's simultaneous treatment of Rohingya Muslim refugees. Throughout 2025, and continuing in September, Indian authorities have engaged in a systematic and intensified crackdown on the Rohingya community. A report by Human Rights Watch released in late August detailed how, since May 2025, BJP-led state governments have spearheaded a campaign to detain and expel Rohingya, labeling them as illegal immigrants^{xix}.

This campaign has involved the arbitrary detention of hundreds of Rohingya and the expulsion of scores to Bangladesh and, in some cases, forcing them to swim ashore to Myanmar, the very country where they face genocidal persecution

The juxtaposition of these two policies within the same month exposes a clear and unambiguous bifurcated asylum policy. It is a framework where the determination of who is a legitimate refugee deserving of protection is based not on the degree of persecution they face, but on their religious affiliation. This codifies a religious filter into India's approach to humanitarian protection, formalizing a distinction between desirable non-Muslim refugees and undesirable Muslim refugees. This

administrative action translates the demographic anxieties and exclusionary ideology of Hindu nationalism into official state policy, undermining India's obligations under customary international law, particularly the principle of non-refoulement.



Conclusion

The events of September 2025 reveal a chilling synthesis between mob sentiment, political ideology, and state machinery in modern India. The “I Love Muhammad” controversy was not an anomaly, it was the mirror image of a broader design where expressions of Muslim identity are criminalized, their protests crushed, and their places of belonging systematically erased. From the rhetoric of “denting-painting” to the roar of bulldozers, the month’s developments underscore how majoritarianism has moved from the periphery of politics to the very core of statecraft.

In essence, India’s secular promise stands at its most perilous juncture, with the law, the street, and the public narrative converging to script the slow unmaking of constitutional equality.

About Authors:

Usama Khan

Usama Khan holds a degree in IR from University of Exeter. His research focuses on South Asian history, political dynamics, militancy, and civil conflicts.

Faiqa Khanam

Faiqa Khanam holds a degree in Journalism from University of The Punjab. Her interests in research include history, politics and conflict studies.

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