When Refuge Becomes a Matter of Faith: Is India's Taliban Diplomacy a Mirror of Hindutva Politics?

When the Taliban's foreign minister arrived in New Delhi this October, promising to protect Hindu and Sikh shrines, the gesture produced more confusion than clarity. Some watched with surprise, others with cautious relief. Afghanistan's Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi's visit, part of the Taliban's wider regional outreach- was widely reported in both Indian and international media.

All it brings out is the image of a regime known for religious absolutism, briefly casting itself as a guardian of minorities. The relationship it is attempting to build with India leaves us with a stream of questions, especially when India's own treatment of its minorities paints a very different picture. A country once celebrated as a secular democracy now appears to shrink from the constitutional foundations that shaped its earlier refugee morality. The hypocrisy lies at the centre, where we rarely pause to question how the world's largest democracy tightens its citizenship rules, institutionalizes exclusion, and deliberately leaves Muslim refugees outside the circle of compassion.

The relations don't appear as a reciprocity of commitments toward protection when the onus of responsibility remains in limbo. Instead, they produce discomfort, rooted in the widening gap between India's diplomatic expectations abroad and its moral obligations at home. India readily embraces symbolic assurances of minority protection from a regime like the Taliban, while refusing to extend similar assurances to its own Muslim citizens and Muslim refugees.

Their stance does not invite a comparison; rather, it forces us to confront the ambiguity of political correctness and the failed promises within India's own borders.

Religion, rather than persecution, is increasingly becoming the filter through which refuge is imagined. The Taliban's outreach to Hindus and Sikhs, and India's selective use of the CAA and

NRC, operate in entirely different contexts with different motivations, yet both mobilize religious identity as a narrative tool.

Faith as a Filter of Refuge

The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) of 2019[i] offers fast-track citizenship to Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis, and Christians from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan, but pointedly excludes Muslims[ii]. Framed as a humanitarian gesture, the law transforms persecution into a religious test and normalizes the cycles of discrimination.

When paired with the National Register of Citizens (NRC), which demands proof of ancestry, the CAA produces a layered system of belonging. Those left out of the NRC may seek rescue under the CAA—but only if they belong to one of the six approved religions[iii]. Muslims have no such safety net, leaving them exposed to the threat of statelessness.

Rights groups such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch[iv] have repeatedly warned that India's CAA-NRC framework risks rendering millions stateless[v], particularly Muslims[vi].

Diplomacy as Legitimising Theatre

India's engagement with the Taliban is often described as geopolitical pragmatism — a practical response to regional realities rather than political alignment[vii]. As New Delhi strengthens its ties with the Taliban, domestic actions against Muslims grow harsher and more systematic. In Assam, entire villages of Bengali-speaking Muslims have faced eviction drives [viii] condemned as discriminatory. In Uttar Pradesh, houses of Muslims were bulldozed [ix] under the pretext of maintaining law and order. In Karnataka and Madhya Pradesh, hijab bans[x], mosque surveillances[xi], and crackdowns on Muslim organisations were justified under the rhetoric of national security[xii]. Across states, many Muslims continue to be struck off voter lists or labelled "foreigners[xiii]." particularly in border regions.

When India engages diplomatically with the Taliban while simultaneously promoting a citizenship architecture that privileges certain religious groups through the CAA, it constructs a hierarchy of deservingness—where some communities appear worthy of refuge and recognition, while Muslims, whether citizens, migrants, or refugees, remain structurally unprotected. This

contradiction is the central discomfort because India seeks assurances of protection abroad that it is unwilling to extend within its own borders.

In this sense, diplomacy becomes a stage performance — a moral theatre that helps legitimise a larger project of exclusion.

When the Taliban declares that it will protect Hindu and Sikh temples, the statement cannot be read as an expression of pluralism. It is better understood as a calculated geopolitical stance, shaped by the need for regional and international legitimacy. India's engagement with religious protection, however, presents a different picture—one that is more consequential precisely because India is a constitutional democracy. Here, protection does not remain at the level of diplomatic speech; it is written into law. The Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019, formally distinguishes between religious communities, offering recognition to selected minorities while leaving Muslim minorities outside its protective frame. What emerges is not a contradiction of intent, but a structurally designed pattern of exclusion, implemented without adequate regard for democratic principles.

India endorses the language of minority protection in its diplomatic engagements while simultaneously constructing a domestic legal framework that institutionalizes religious exclusion. Belonging, in this context, is not symbolically negotiated but legally arranged, producing graded access to citizenship and refuge.

This shows religious identity increasingly mobilised as a political resource—deployed to assert legitimacy, manage perception, and consolidate majoritarian narratives, not only within national borders but across the region as a whole.

The Rohingya and the Jurisprudence of Exclusion

The Rohingya crisis and their statelessness expose how these selective frameworks function in practice. Fleeing genocide in Myanmar, many sought safety in India, yet the government treated deportation as a matter of policy rather than a human rights concern.

In *Mohammad Salimullah v. Union of India* (2021)[xiv], the Supreme Court refused to stop Rohingya deportations, calling it a matter of state policy, not an enforceable right. This effectively treated

the principle of non-refoulement—the rule forbidding the return of refugees to danger—as optional[xv].

While the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) is framed as a humanitarian law for persecuted minorities, its compassion stops at the Rohingya. Their exclusion exposes a framework where suffering is filtered through faith. The Rohingya, meanwhile, are criminalized as security threats and rendered legally invisible—a population displaced twice: first from their homeland, and then from the promise of refuge.

Hindutva as the Organizing Project

Taken together, the CAA, NRC, the exclusion of the Rohingya, eviction drives, and expulsions of Muslims to Bangladesh reveal a coherent political vision. It is the Hindutva project, which seeks to redefine citizenship not as a constitutional guarantee but as an expression of civilizational belonging—a civilization that defies wholeness.

The promise of refuge to selected persecuted minorities becomes a moral façade, a gesture of compassion offered with one hand while the other redraws the demographic boundaries of the republic. Muslim citizens learn to live in the shadow of paperwork, surveillance, and suspicion. Belonging is no longer a right, but a performance of ideological compliance.

This atmosphere of conditional belonging expands in the digital realm. Technologies of identification biometric systems, digital IDs, and documentation regimes are presented as neutral governance tools. In reality, their impact varies sharply. For some, they offer proof of belonging and access to citizenship. For Muslims, these often become tools of scrutiny and control. Transparency becomes another layer of surveillance—another checkpoint in an already narrowing citizenship.

In the CAA–NRC context, digitized tracking and verification ensure that exclusion is not merely ideological but technologically reproduced. The CAA is not an administrative oversight; it is a deliberate ideological project that reimagines India as a civilizational home for selected communities while pushing others—especially Muslims—into legal, social, and political precarity.

Narratives of Protection and the Politics They Enable

India's selective refugee and citizenship policies, particularly under the CAA, operate within a unique political and institutional context. Yet both India and the Taliban rely, in distinct and unrelated ways, on the language of religious protection.

Understanding this distinction matters. The Taliban's rhetoric is a geopolitical strategy; India's policy choices reshape the legal structure of citizenship. Their convergence occurs only at the level of discourse, where both invoke religious identity to claim moral ground.

Recognizing this prevents analytical conflation while allowing a clearer focus on how India's policies recast the boundaries of legal refuge. The overlap risks normalizing the CAA's religious test by situating it within a wider regional language of "protection," even though the motivations and consequences differ profoundly.

Constitutional and Moral Reckoning

India's Constitution promises equality, secularism, and dignity to all. When political decisions begin to narrow inclusion along ideological and religious lines, the distance between constitutional commitments and identity-driven policies widens visibly. Refuge cannot be determined by faith, and citizenship cannot become an instrument of ideology. A democracy's measure lies not in whom it shelters because of religion, but in whom it protects despite it.

The central question, then, is not whether India should engage the Taliban or offer support to persecuted minorities. The question is whether faith will be allowed to override justice as the organizing principle of the state.

Acts of selective compassion under the CAA, eviction drives labelled as "anti-infiltrator measures," and the persistent silence on the Rohingya crisis collectively erode the republic's secular foundations. What is being engineered is not mere governance; it is an ideological remaking of the nation. It is the slow conversion of a constitutional democracy into a majoritarian Hindu state, where discrimination is framed as order, and exclusion is dressed as patriotism.

[i] The Citizenship (Amendment) Act 2019, Act No 47 of 2019, Gazette of India, Extraordinary, Part II, Section 1, No 201, 12 December 2019 https://indiancitizenshiponline.nic.in/Documents/UserGuide/E-gazette_2019_20122019.pdf

[ii] A Jaldi, 'India's Citizenship Amendment Act: A Critical Appraisal' (Policy Center for the New South, Policy Brief PB-20/23, January 2021) https://www.policycenter.ma/sites/default/files/2021-01/PB%20-%2020-23%20%28A%20Jaldi%29.pdf & Human Rights Watch, 'India: Citizenship Bill Discriminates Against Muslims' (11 December 2019) https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/12/11/india-citizenship-bill-discriminates-against-muslims

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[xii] 'Ban on Islamic Organization Draws Mixed Reactions in India' (VOA News, 30 September 2022) https://www.voanews.com/a/ban-on-islamic-organization-draws-mixed-reactions-in-india/6771344.html

[xiii] R. Zaman, 'After violent eviction, Assam residents now stare at deletion of names from voter list' Scroll.in (2 Dec 2024) https://scroll.in/article/1076273/after-violent-eviction-assam-residents-now-stare-at-deletion-of-names-from-voter-list

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