

Jan Swasthya Abhiyan

Statement condemning growing communal violence – a matter of serious public health concern Demanding government accountability and action

We, the members of Jan Swasthya Abhiyan (JSA) are extremely concerned about the ongoing state-led and state-sponsored targeted violence and discrimination which is particularly directed against Muslims, while also affecting groups like Christians and Dalits. This violence has been particularly witnessed in Karnataka and BJP ruled states, as well as in some other states like Delhi and Rajasthan. JSA is a national level network working across various states on public health issues, with the belief that people's right to health is intrinsically linked to their human rights, including the right to live and work without discrimination or fear of violence.

In recent period India has seen Hindutva groups unleashing a wave of violence and orchestrated hatred against Muslims, supported through discriminatory practices and malign patronage by the State. The aggressive everyday efforts towards humiliating and subjugating the community are increasingly visible and are being practised with near impunity. This targeting of Muslims has denied them recourse to police support, judicial oversight and even objective media reporting.

In Karnataka, thousands of young Muslim women and girls who are eager to learn have been subjected to daily harassment on the pretext of the hijab, which has become a tool to deny education. Women and girls, irrespective of whether they wear a hijab or not, have inalienable fundamental rights of equality and equity in education, and all other aspects of life enshrined in the Constitution of India. We are outraged by the reprehensible targeting of Muslim women on GitHub (a free web platform), where Twitter handles and photographs of Muslim women were uploaded with the explicit aim of directing sexualised hate and harm at these women.

Karnataka has also witnessed vicious public campaigns to boycott Muslim businesses, instigated by sitting ministers and led by Hindutva groups. This includes the attacks on stalls of Muslim traders at fairs and festivals, calls to boycott Muslim drivers and tour operators, and seeking a ban on the Azaan. These along with regressive laws that ban cattle slaughter are pushing Muslim and Dalit communities to economic destitution. Such casteist methods of social and economic boycotts are discriminatory and are in clear conflict with the Constitutional principles as embodied in Article 19(1)(g) and violative of Articles 14 and 15 of the Indian Constitution.

Jan Swasthya Abhiyan staunchly opposes the rise of 'Food Fascism' across the country, which includes calls by Hindutva groups to ban meat shops along with Government targeting of meat sellers, imposing restrictions on sale of halal meat while harassing Muslim traders, attacks on Muslim fruit vendors referred to as 'fruit jihad', and denying provision of nutritious eggs to children through midday meals in BJP ruled states. Such highly discriminatory actions are adding to communal tensions, are causing huge damage to the economic security of vast masses of working people, and are blocking access to much-needed animal sources of protein and nutrients for deprived populations across the country. (JSA will be issuing a separate detailed statement soon on various aspects of this theme of Hindutva based assaults

on food security and nutrition, which are deleterious to health, as well as being violations of health and human rights.)

We are alarmed to note that during the recent Ram Navami and Hanuman Jayanti festivals, provocative and aggressive marches, processions around Masjids and Muslim bastis by communal groups took place in Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Delhi and other states, that led to the eruption of communal violence. Moreover, the governments in Madhya Pradesh and Delhi egregiously demolished the residences and shops belonging predominantly to Muslims, while selective arrests and harassment of Muslims in the context of the violence have obfuscated the obvious communal intent and motivation behind these actions.

As Health activists we are shocked by this ongoing, systematic campaign which is unleashing hatred, prejudice and violence against Muslim communities, that can have several long lasting and adverse consequences for people's health and wellbeing. Communal violence and discrimination have serious public health implications, that JSA has been foregrounding for many years. They aggravate barriers to accessing health care, due to non-inclusive, discriminatory services, differential treatment, delay and denial of health care. Communalisation of the public sphere also impacts key entitlements and services such as ICDS, mid-day meals and results in loss of livelihoods, wages and income, affecting people's nutritional status and health. Most importantly, the real threat of violence and continuing discrimination have a direct, unambiguous impact on the health of individuals, families and communities. Poor mental health leads to a host of health concerns, which may include chronic headaches, suicidal thoughts/intent, gastritis, ulcers, insomnia, depression and many other adverse health outcomes. Girls and women are particularly affected physically and mentally by restrictions on their education, movement, and independent choices.

We note with alarm that the State which is tasked with upholding the law and Constitution, has often itself become an enabler of orchestrated criminal and anti-social actions. The current situation is a blatant denial of the human rights to health and life, guarantees which are enshrined in the Constitution of India, including Article 21. We hold elected governments squarely responsible for tackling and preventing such targeted violence and discrimination against Muslims and vulnerable communities in their respective states. We urgently demand that they immediately take the range of necessary actions which are detailed below.

As members of the people's health movement in the country, we demand that:

- a. All involved governments must ensure the safety, security and wellbeing of the Muslim community, as well as other minority and marginalised populations, while protecting the way of life of their members according to principles of the Constitution. All instigators and perpetrators of acts of violence and hate crimes must be brought to justice, especially those who are principally responsible for organising these actions, however powerful they may be.
- b. Involved State governments must act decisively against hate speeches, fake news and inciting of communal hatred on news channels and other media, calls for violence, as well as social and economic boycotts.
- c. Involved governments must abide by their political and constitutional commitments to ensure that all girls and women, irrespective of their religion, dress, caste, region, have equal and

equitable access to education without discrimination. Government of Karnataka must ensure the security of girls/women in all educational institutions in the state to ensure that exclusion and denial of right to education and other human rights does not take place in any context.

- d. Courts in all states should take *suo moto* cognisance of any misinformation and false stories against vulnerable communities that aggravate their risk of being subjected to violence and discrimination. After following due legal procedure, punishment of offenders must be ensured. This includes misinformation through social media and other media platforms.
- e. All governments should take dedicated measures to ensure that equitable and adequate access to health services for Muslim communities and other discriminated groups is ensured at all levels and in all areas, including sexual, reproductive and mental health services.
- f. Governments must immediately eliminate official and non-official constraints on the food practices and nutrition rights of marginalised and deprived communities. These include calls to boycott and bans on sale of meat, removal of animal proteins from food supplementation programmes, and interfering in people's choice of food and livelihood by imposing elite 'vegetarianism'.
- g. The social determinants of health such as employment, education, food security, water, sanitation, nutrition must be addressed on priority basis, while ending any attempts to restrict these entitlements for Muslim communities and other marginalised and deprived populations.

Jan Swasthya Abhiyan holds governments – at state as well as central levels – completely accountable for ensuring these constitutionally endorsed rights, through means of taking the entire range of relevant actions. In parallel we also call upon all concerned movements, networks, organisations and individuals to not keep silent, and to take all possible actions in the current situation. Communal discrimination, hatred, and violence are as much a public health crisis as the Covid pandemic, and can spread just as virulently. This epidemic of violence and hatred has its roots in both state as well as society, and hence needs to be countered and eliminated at both levels, in an integrated manner. This crisis needs as serious and urgent intervention as any other public health crisis; together we must stop the scourge of communal hatred and violence in its tracks, before it is allowed to spread any further.

National coordination committee of Jan Swasthya Abhiyan

All India People's Science Network (AIPSN) · All India Drug Action Network (AIDAN) · Asian Community Health Action Network (ACHAN) · All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) · Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti (BGVS) · Breast Feeding Promotion Network in India (BPNI) · Catholic Health Association of India (CHAI) · Centre for Community Health and Social Medicine, JNU · Christian Medical Association of India (CMAI) · SOCHARA · Forum for Creche and Child Care Services (FORCES) · Federation of Medical Representative Associations of India (FMRAI) · Healthwatch Forum · Joint Women's Programme (JWP) · Medico Friends Circle (MFC) · National Alliance of People's Movements (NAPM) · National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW) · National Association of Women's Organisations (NAWO) · Prayas, Rajasthan · Public Health Resource Network · SAMA – Resource Group on Women's Health · SATHI

Contacts:

Sulakshana Nandi (9406090595), N.B. Sarojini (9818664634), Deepa Venkatachalam (9871642320)
T. Sundararaman (9987438253), Amulya Nidhi (9425311547)