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Dimensions of Violence in South Asia: The Indian Context

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Abstract

As a result of the division of Indian sub-continent Pakistan was created as a sovereign, independent country in August 1947 while its eastern part became independent in December 1971 and formed the independent country called Bangladesh. The three independent countries of South Asia Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan have a Muslim majority population following Islam actively while India is a Hindu majority country having the followers of different religions. Although five countries–India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka have the tradition of political violence the problem of terrorism erupted in last four decades. It is a region of Jihadi–dominated terrorism which is nowhere near containment and it propagates the pernicious ideology of hate, revenge, and violence. It treats all conflicts with non-Muslims worthy of Jihadi and even considers liberal Islamic regimes, organisations and individuals as unIslamic. In most of the countries there are anti–terror laws but lack of political will to take effective and stern action against the terrorist have made the laws useless or partially useful.

Key words: South Asia; Violence; Social tension; Religion; Indian society

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INTRODUCTION

India is bearing the burnt of the terrorist violence in South Asia which has risen sharply in recent years. It is facing multifarious challenges in the management of its internal security. There is an upsurge of terrorist activities, intensification of cross- border terrorist activities and insurgent groups in different parts of the country. Terrorism has now acquired global dimensions and has become the challenge for the world. The reach and methods adopted by terrorist groups and organisation take the advantage of modern means of communication and technology using high tech facilities available in the form of communication system, transport, sophisticated arms and various other means. This has enabled them to strike and create terror among people at will. Like every constitution of the world the constitution of India also provides for modifications in law to enable the state to face challenges to its unity and integrity and the security of its citizens. In fact the entire criminal justice system which gives the state the power to use force against its own citizens, going even to the extent of resorting to killing, is designed for the purpose (Menon, 2009). But in this age of globalisation the heightening levels of political and social consciousness have resulted in higher expectations by the people and consequently states and societies are coming under pressure (Kalkat,2006). The spectre of terrorism haunts us as an omnipotent and omnipresent phenomenon. Living in fear of terrorist attacks is almost becoming today the way of life.

The Indian constitution, born in difficult times after partition, does provide for a legal regime which can accommodate restrictions on liberty, the standards of which can vary depending on the gravity of the challenge and the risks involved for basic rights and constitutional values. It is a secular system with pluralism as its foundation. Here, pluralism must not be confused with secularism. The latter carries overtones of atheism and was born out of twin struggles in the West: of democracy

with the Church and monarchy, and of Darwinism with Christianity. Pluralism, by contrast, involves no break with religion and what is more important, with tradition. Instead, it requires acceptance of, and mutual respect between, the many religions in a country. A pluralist state is also secular, but in a different way. For its legal and civil codes seek to accommodate and incorporate particular religious customs and beliefs and not banish them from the public domain (Jha, 2013). The Indian constitution safeguarded pluralism by creating an ethnic federation on the one hand, and by protecting the marriage, inheritance, educational and cultural practices of the minorities, on the other. The two sets of enactments gave Indians a security of identity that is the secret of modern India's extraordinary stability. Every community wears its identity openly like a badge, because it does not feel threatened. In the absence of threat, no one feels pressured to conform. Historically, every Indian empire, from the Mauryan to the British, flourished because it respected the diversity of identities within India and treated all races and cultures as equal.

PROBLEMS OF INDIAN SOCIO-POLITICAL LIFE

As an organising principle of social and political life, the separation of church and state has its origin in the vicious and debilitating 16th–century sectarian wars within European Christianity. Ultimately, the only way Western European societies could live with sectarian diversity was via the separation of church and state. Over time, with the rise to prominence of new social groups, long distance trade and industrial capitalism, these ideas were further reinforced. Religion was relegated to the domain of the private (Joshi, 2002). Public or political structures now had to be secular. It is the time when the rest of the world is being evaluated on their ability to imitate this European model, what we do need to recognise is that these ideas of public secularity were the product of a particular history, the result of a certain political, economic and social context. Asia, Africa, or the region we call the Middle East today, had historically developed their own methods of dispute resolution and dealing with diversity. These methods did not necessarily relegate religion to the realm of the personal. As a result, the European colonialism dismissed the methods as primitive or backward. However in India as elsewhere in the world, we have too many examples of how religious and indigenous ideologies have helped a few oppressed the many to be able to make a universal case for religion against secularity.

In fact, the plurality and diversity that we found today in Indian society, were existed in pre-1947 era and independent India was born with these contradictions. A dispassionate assessment of history will reveal that the violent outbursts that are tearing apart the fabric of Indian society today are expressions of the same contradictions–religious, class, ethnic, caste and otherwise that often exploded into violence even during the colonial period. Despite the Indian state's declared profession of adherence to non–violence, in practice the Indian state has repeatedly resorted to the language of violence in trying to resolve these contradictions that plague Indian society (Banerjee, 1996, pp.81-82). In India's case Independence was brought about through a non–violent mid–wife called 'Gandhism', which is the state's proclaimed ideology. For instance, the Hindu-Muslim communal riots that preceded the partition of the sub- continent and led to the birth of India, are a historical reality which not only knocks the bottom out of the Indian state's official and ideological claim to its non–violent parentage, but also challenges the doctrine of non–violence as propounded by Gandhi as a harbinger of change.

The Indian state acquired a military character almost from its infancy. It started at two levels–external and internal. At the external level, the new born state sent its troops to Kashmir in October 1947 to fight first the Pakistan–aided tribals, and later the regular forces of the Pakistan army, in order to protect a territory which had been acceded hurriedly to the Indian Union by the then Maharaja of Kashmir. The Kashmir adventure of 1947 was followed by four major wars–the 1962 war with China, and the 1965, 1971 and 1999 wars with Pakistan. The internal sources of violence and militarisation can be traced back to the highly centralised model of development adopted by the post–Independence Indian state, which instead of eliminating semi–feudal production relations in large parts of the country opted for investment in selected sectors and regions. As a result, while inequitable distribution of income has sharpened class fragmentation and contradiction, uneven development has led to imbalances in regional growth (Pradhan, 1989, p.85). The perceived sense of injustice among the people divided them on the lines of caste, ethnic loyalties, language, religious beliefs–which the Indian polity has failed to overcome, despite its commitment to a "socialist secular democratic republic".

BEGINNING OF VIOLENCE IN INDIAN STATES

This apart, in initial years of independence India faced two such situation–the Telengana Movement in 1948 and Naga demand for independence in 1953. The Telengana movement was one of the earliest indications of the Indian state's attitude towards the underprivileged and of its determination to suppress violently any attempt by the rural people to end outmoded social and economic relations. The same treatment was meted out to an ethnic minority group when the state sent its armed forces to Nagaland to suppress the Naga demand for independence. The core of the conflict between these various groups on the one hand,

and the Centre on the other, basically concerns how to find an amicable solution to relations between the central authority and different regional communities that inhabit a multi–national state. Keeping in view the dangers ahead the Indian state also augmented throughout the years its repressive apparatus. In 1949, it raised the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), modelled on the British government's plan of Crown Representative Police Force (Pradhan, 1989, pp.85-86). Since then, the number of central paramilitary forces has increased steadily, with the formation of Border Security Force (BSF), the Central Industrial Security Force (CISF), the National Security Guard (NSG) and the commando force called "Black Cats".

Gradually, the pattern of state response towards popular grievances followed a common sequence of policy decisions and actions–whether in relation to demands of poor peasants, industrial workers or ethnic minorities. At the initial stage of any demonstration of popular demands, the state then decides to ignore them. When accumulation of the ignored grievances manifests itself in desperate militant agitation, the state decides to treat them as law and order problems and deploy its police to suppress them. Such deployment often helps the state to contain the outbursts temporarily and prevent them from exploding into armed insurgencies. But the same situation and response had a different meaning and depth when the affected area is situated in Border States. They witness, normally, better–armed and better–organised insurgencies as the case is in north-west and north eastern states. However, there is a basic difference between the political character of the Naxalite armed movement and that of the insurgencies in other parts of the country. While the former seeks to base itself on the politics of class conflict, the latter are concerned with more general issues and concerns related to their respective communities, irrespective of class differences that might otherwise divide them.

The region north–east is a compact zone of sub-national states attributing to high levels of ethnic violence. It is comprised by extraordinary ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic diversity and constituted the seven sister states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. The region is inhabited by three distinct groups of people; the hill tribes, the plain tribes and non–tribal population of the plains. Geographically, the north–east of India is located between the two great traditions of the Indic Asia and the Mongoloid Asia. It was only after the British had merged the entire region under the British India administration that the region came to be associated with India (Shivananda, 2009, pp.29-31). Ethnically, it is diverse and heterogeneous alike the rest of the country.

Historically, immigration from the East–Bengal now Bangladesh, became illegal after the demarcation of international boundary in 1947 between India and Pakistan. But movement of people from East Bengal, later East Pakistan and then Bangladesh into different parts of North–east India continued unabatedly. This has primarily generated a multiple cause for destabilising political, social, economic, ethnic and communal tensions in the region. Large scale and unabated influx of population from the neighbouring countries has resulted in a phenomenon that is visibly reshaping and transforming the demographic, ethnic, religious and linguistic profile of large parts of the region. Consequently, the region has opened up to radicalism and to a network of fundamentalist campaigns which have access to arms and easy connections to sanctuaries across the porous international borders which had made difficult for the north eastern states to comprehend and address. The impact of ethnic–conflict on the security of the region and the nation is enormous and is adding to the problems of the northeastern people.

IDEOLOGY-RELATED VIOLENCE

In recent years the problem of Naxalism is posing a serious threat to the security of India, democracy and rule of law, particularly in Chattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal and a few other places. It is said that over 230 districts in the country are in the grip of Maoists, Naxalites etc. and the Union Home Minister has declared that countering Naxalism is the biggest challenge (Rao, 2010, p.11). In the areas where the Naxalites have established their influence, they impose taxes mete out quick justice and run administrative bureaucracies, schools and health services. Naxalism unleashed a flow of events which escalated over the years into a political movement that brought about far–reaching changes in India's socio–cultural scene. The fact is that despite the continuing use of the most repressive methods by the police to crush its cadres and inspite of a series of splits that had fissured the movement during the next three or four decades, Naxalism as an ideology has become a force to reckon with in India. Its continuity can be explained by the persistence and exacerbation of the basic causes that gave it birth–feudal exploitation and oppression over the rural poor.

The term "Naxalism" typify a particular kind of militant and violent armed struggle by the peasants tribals, and dalits, led by a leadership drawing a doctrinal support from Marxism–Leninism and strategic inspiration from Mao Zedong. The term itself came from Naxalbari, a small village in West Bengal where a section of Communist Party of India (Marxist) led by Kanu Sanyal led a violent uprising in 1967. At the sametime Mao launched his Cultural Revolution and in India a group that broke away from the CPM, mobilised about 15,000 peasants in Naxalbari and launched a violent anti landlord movement, patterned on the Telengana movement two decades earlier (Koithara, 1999, pp.104-05). The Naxalites drew heavily upon the iniquitous land tenure system and exploitation of the poor peasants and agricultural labour by landlords in framing their ideological aims.

In 1967, Naxalites organised the All India Coordination Committee of Communist Revolutionaries (AICCCR), which in 1969 gave birth to the most notable Naxalite organisation, the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) and defined the objective of the Party as 'seizure of power through an agrarian revolution'. The strategy was the elimination of feudal order in the Indian countryside to free the poor from the clutches of the oppressive landlords and replace the world order with an alternative one that would implement land reforms. The tactics to achieve it was through guerilla warfare by the peasants (Madhumita, 2010, pp.27-29). This way they would eliminate the landlords and build up a resistance against the state's police force. Gradually, they would set up a 'liberated zone' in different parts of the country that would eventually coalesce into a territorial unit under Naxalite hegemony.

Today Naxalism/Maoism has become a significant socio–political force having abiding faith in guerilla warfare and violent means to achieve its objectives. The government figures reveal that the total number of people killed by the Naxalites violence rose by 30% between 2003 and 2005. The number of policemen killed jumped to an astonishing 53% between 2004 and 2005. The annual report of the Ministry of Home Affairs 2005-06 also admitted that the Naxalism is not merely a law and order problem but has deep socio–economic dimensions. Left wing radicalism and extremism is motivated by prevailing socio–economic deprivation (Madhumita, pp.27-29). The various groups of Maoists be they called Naxalites or Peoples War Group (PWG) or otherwise adjective, all have declared very clearly that they have no faith in the constitution of India, in the multi-party democracy and elections. There has to be a strategy by the government to fight the low–intensity war and promote good governance and development. Politically, the liberal democratic state in India needs to be critiqued of the economic policies that have created islands of deprivation, which have over the years emerged as pockets of support for the Maoist movement in the country.

POLITICALLY MOTIVATED/INSTIGATED VIOLENCE

In line the terror attacks and incidents appeared in 1980s in the Indian state of Punjab and Kashmir. This form of terrorism was different from organised mass movements, or guerilla warfare. Guerilla–based insurrections in China, Vietnam and Latin American countries in the past involved the willing participation of the local people, both in direct and indirect ways, but unlike those forms of armed struggle, the insurgencies in Punjab and Kashmir are dominated by a leadership which aims at harnessing popular nationalistic urges to the objective of establishing theocratic autocracies in these states. The leadership of Punjab and Kashmir appeared to owe allegiance to a form of religious fundamentalism that aims at subjugating members of their respective communities to conservative norms and practices, selectively excerpted from their traditional religious scriptures and systems on the plea of restoring the fundamental purity of their respective religions (Banerjee, 1996, p.87). Since terrorism without publicity is a weapon that fires only blank, such terrorist actions have had to be directed not only against representatives of the state like policemen, security forces and government officials, but also at gatherings of ordinary innocent citizens. Bomb blast in crowded places that kill indiscriminately a large number of people invariably become news and give the terrorist maximum publicity. In general, their ideology is intolerant of dissent views, and therefore, they also attack those members of their own community who refuge to accept their fundamentalist religious views.

In real the alienation of the Sikhs began at the time of the reorganisation of states in 1956 when they failed to get a Sikh majority state carved out of the then Hindu majority in Punjab. The relations between the two communities began to sour in 1960s and Punjabi farmers were discontended because they were bound to sell their commodities on prices fixed by the administrators. Rapid industrialisation and shift of the economic power from rural to urban areas also strengthened the feeling that identity of their religion was at stake. In the circumstances there was a perception that native Punjabi enterprise, combined with investment capital from the Sikh diaspora could make 'Khalistan' bloom in a manner that Punjab, mired in India's administrative stodginess, could not hope to. On the other hand, the political needs of the Indian National Congress (INC) played a role in the final lap into insurgency. To undercut the electoral draw of the Sikh political party, the Akali Dal, the INC promoted Bhindranwale, a Sikh preacher even more radical than the Akalis. Initially Bhindranwale campaigned for the INC but soon became first choice of the Congress party in Punjab and was allowed to create an armed fortress in Amritsar's Golden Temple. As a result, a two–day major military operation became essential in June 1984 to clear the Golden Temple in which 83 dead and 248 wounded (Koithara, 1999, pp.108-10). In Punjab, according to government count, nearly 500 civilians were killed in hit-and-run attacks during the period from 1980 to just before the June 1984. Temporary success in the cleaning up of the Golden Temple in "Operation Bluestar,' the arrest and killing of few 'terrorist' leaders in Punjab have left a trail of destruction which gave birth to a new generation of insurgents in the state. Many among them–particularly the youth–go underground and joined the insurgency, either for protection or for revenge.

THE DEADLIEST FORM OF VIOLENCE

Terrorism and insurgency continued in Punjab between 1984 and 1993 and during the period over 12,000 people were killed. The storming of the temple devastated the

Sikhs. Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India, was killed by her Sikh security guards four months later in October 1984 which in turn led to a violent anti–Sikh reaction that cold bloodedly killed about 3,000 Sikhs in the capital Delhi alone. After a one- year–long lull sparked by the rout of the temple militants, a fresh surge of terrorist violence broke out with the assassination of moderate Sikh leader Sant Harchand Singh Longowal shortly after he signed a so–called "Peace accord" with Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in July 1985. The intensity and frequency of terrorist attacks had risen sharply since late 1985, with no end in sight to the ever–growing spiral of violence. The extremists had extended their terror campaign to many areas outside Punjab forcing authorities to constantly review and beef up security in a prime terrorist target–New Delhi. The extremists, armed with powerful, sophisticated guns had often targeted government and police officers and Hindu and moderate Sikh politicians; but, frequently, they had been engaged in the random mass killing of ordinary Hindu civilians (Crosette, 1988). Several Sikh groups had helped turn the rich farms of Punjab into India's "killing fields" (United States Department of State, 1988). They include the Khalistan Commando Force, the Babbar Khalsa, the All–India Sikh Students Federation, the Khalistan Liberation Army, the Dal Khalsa and the Dashmesh Regiment. At least two of these groups, the Babbar Khalsa and the Dashmesh Regiment were believed to be active overseas, particularly in Canada and West Germany.

By the time organised terrorism in India, as elsewhere had been able to acquire newer weapons in an age when sophisticated technology was not contained by national boundaries. At the peak of terrorism in Punjab between 1988 and 1991 there were 5,000 to 6,000 hard core militants enjoying the active support of another 10,000 to 15,000 people. Pakistan supported the insurgency by providing arms, training and sanctuaries. Hand guns were used initially, but by 1987 the terrorists had assault rifles, sniper rifles and rocket launchers. Very soon they were using mortars and sophisticated explosive devices (Narayanan, 1994, p.110). The terrorist outfits had kept pace with the Indian state in arms race. While the state's armed forces compete with their Pakistani counterparts by bidding for the latest weaponry, bombers and submarines from the West, the terrorists had been buying from the same source armaments that suit their own military tactics. Gradually, the Punjab police built up the members and developed the motivation, confidence and skills needed to prevail. The country including the Sikh community supported the ruthless counter–terror approach that the Punjab police pursued using tactics that noted the fine line between what is legal and what is not (Gupta, 1995,p.28). Effective interdiction of Pak border crossings and the weariness of Sikh funders abroad also contributed.

CONCLUSIONS

Thus, the tradition of violence in independent India has expanded widely and became an integral part of day-to-day life. The language of gun is a decisive force in political discourse in India. It is gradually edging out debates in a democratic framework, and suppressing dissent of the traditional humanitarian variety. India has been troubled by sectarian violence for decades, reflecting a constant conflict between its federal system and ethnic and regional aspirations (Leventhal and Chellaney,1988, p.3). But the recent growth and expansion of terrorism across the nation strikes at the very heart of India's constitution and democratic system as a whole.

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