

## **Changing Dynamics of Religious Extremism: Rise of Urban Religiously Motivating Violence in Pakistan and India**

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### **Abstract**

Religiously motivated violence in the form of communal riots in India and sectarian violence in Pakistan has been a dominant factor inciting hate against the minorities. The new dynamics however, now being experienced is the urban youth being mobilized in the name of religion, they are otherwise relatively educated, live in cities, practice religion and professionals. These young “normal” people find motivation following their leaders and indulge in committing acts of violence against the “other”. In India, with the rise of BJP under Modi and the political space RSS *Sanghis* acquired has resulted in violent expression of their commitment to the cause of Hindutva.

Pakistan on the other hand, while dealing militarily with the Taliban (who happen to be *Deobandis*) ignored the fact that more larger population of urban youth following *Braelvi* school of thought has managed to acquire the social and political space. This has resulted in mass mobilization by the leaders of Sunni *Braelvis* in the cities in the name of Prophet (PBUH). These young mobilized city dwellers proved to be extremely intolerant towards other sects and minorities. In both countries, unlike old extremists, the new extremists prefer to participate in democratic politics and yet believe in violently convincing the other.

The paper is significant to understand the changing dynamics of extremists in both countries that is weakening the democratic order of the post-colonial

South Asian states. It is also important as the threat is within and unlike traditional Pakistan-India conflict, it endorses the ideological hardening which makes both the states vulnerable to ideologically driven mass mobilization of young urban extremists, thus making it extremely difficult to establish peace in the region.

**Keywords:** Religion Extremism, Sectarianism, Hindutva, Secularism, RSS, *Braelvi*, *Deobandi*

### **Introduction**

Pakistan and India are witnessing religiously motivating violence ever since time of partition, even before, during the independence movement, religion was dominant in inciting hate against the other. The new dynamics that is now being experienced is the urban youth being mobilized in the name of religion, they are otherwise relatively educated, live in cities, practicing religion and professionals. These young "normal" people find motivation following their leaders and indulge in committing acts of violence against the "other". In India, with the rise of BJP under Modi and the political space RSS *Sanghis* acquired has resulted in violent expression of their commitment to the cause of *Hindutva*. Pakistan on the other hand, while dealing militarily with the Taliban (who happen to be *Deobandis*) ignored the fact that more larger population of urban youth following *Braelvi* school of thought managed to acquire the social and political space resulting in mass mobilization by the leaders of Sunni *Braelvis* in the cities in the name of Prophet (PBUH). These young mobilized city dwellers proved to be extremely intolerant towards other sects and minorities.

There can be many reasons for such development. In India, the accommodative policy of present BJP government of not taking action against RSS ideologically driven youth expanding their activities based on the idea of a Hindu India and bringing back the post-colonial South Asian states in the fold of “*Akhand Bharat*” (United India). India's definition of violent extremist has been on ideologically driven Kashmiri jihadists and the Maoist in the North East. RSS motivated young *Sanghis* in India target Muslims as well as seculars whom they find responsible for India's failure to become a true Hindu state. In Pakistan, it was the focus of both military and civil government on eliminating Taliban in the country. These factors have helped other local groups to inspire and attract recruitment of educated young people to claim their identity on the basis of their religious beliefs and express violently against other people of different sect and religion. *Braelev Sunni* followers believe that the respect and honor that Prophet (PBUH) deserves is in danger because other sects and minorities have been given space and hence Islam is in danger.

The paper is significant to understand the changing dynamics of extremism in both the countries that is weakening the democratic order of the post-colonial South Asian states. It is also important as the threat is within and unlike traditional India-Pakistan conflict, it endorses the ideological hardening which makes both the states vulnerable to ideologically driven mass mobilization of young urban extremists. Also, unlike the Jihadists, both Indian and Pakistani new radicals are part of the political process, they vote and support candidates in the elections and do not reject the constitutional framework, instead demand more inclusion of religious doctrines in the constitution. This generation of urban extremists uses

various social media platforms for propaganda dissemination, recruitment and operational planning. In addition to robust social media monitoring capabilities and operational preparedness, governments in Pakistan and India would require robust counter-ideological responses to overcome and neutralize their appeal among the young people.

### **Global Rise of Religious Extremism: Politics Turning to the Right**

Global politics in the early 21st century is being defined by two complementary extremisms: Islamist extremism and the far right be it Christian or Hindu extremism. The global resurgence of religion is part of the search for authenticity and development in the Third World as Scott M. Thomas stated, "the global resurgence of religion in developing countries can be seen as part of the 'revolt against the West'."<sup>1</sup> Hedley Bull identified three waves of revolt: "the first, from the 1940s through the 1960s, was the anti-colonial struggle for independence and sovereign equality; the second, from 1970s through the 1980s, was the struggle for racial equality and economic justice; and the third is the struggle for cultural liberation, it is the reassertion of the traditional and indigenous cultures in the Third World."<sup>2</sup>

Religious communities are reasserting with show of strength for many decades now. Contrary to the notion that religion would cease to exist as a political force, they appear to be more organized and mobilized through social institutions. Human service institutions such as hospitals

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<sup>1</sup> Scott M. Thomas, "Taking Religious and Cultural Pluralism Seriously: The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Society", *Millennium*, Vol 29, Issue 3, December 1, 2000, pp. 815 - 841

<sup>2</sup> Hedley Bull, "The Revolt Against the West," in Hedley Bull and Adam Watson (ed) *The Expansion of International Society* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1984)

schools and charities are run in the name of their respective religious denominations. In Pakistan the induction of Islamic laws as public law and in India Hindu nationalists attempt to establish their creed as the state privileged religion. In the US, the Christian Right tries to capture the state for the dissemination and implementation of the eternal truth as they understand it.<sup>3</sup>

Secularism used to be the new normal for politics. Thus, the political theories of International Relations were devoid of any discussion on religion because, such religion is supposed to be *outside* politics. In mid 1990s Peter L. Berger declared that a religious resurgence was underway.<sup>4</sup> The conservative Christian Jimmy Carter in White House, the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the rise of *Mujahideen* against Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the public approval of the Solidarity movement in Poland were some of the major changes. Berger's opinion of religious rise in politics came full circle with the events of September 11, global war on terror transformed the political discourse globally.

The western idea of progress under liberalism is being challenged and communities are redefining political life based on moral and religious values. The potent mix of religion, nationalism and globalization is wreaking havoc on old tradition of politics and development thus challenging the global idea of state craft. Religiosity has become the most important factor in global politics, given the nature of religion taking

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<sup>3</sup> Andreas Hasenclever and Volker Rittberger, "Does Religion Make a Difference?" in Fabio Petito and Pavlos Hatzopoulos (eds) *Religion in International Relations: The Return from Exile*, New York Palgrave Macmillan 2003 p- 107

<sup>4</sup> Peter L. Berger, "Secularism in Retreat," *The National Interest* 46 (1996/97): 3–12.

leading role in the politics, it seems that the current time that we live in has certainly become God's century.

Countries like Pakistan and India despite their different constitutional characters, fast embracing religion as a source of legitimacy which is influencing the belief system and behavior of their population. Thus, an era of populism based on religion is unleashed and has become a political strategy for mass mobilization.

Religion or religiosity is certainly not a problem, it only become an issue use of extreme religious views bring new dimensions to conflicts making them more complex. The conflicts within and outside the state have become more personalized because of faith with promises heavenly luxuries providing vehicles of social mobilization that embrace supporters. Through organizational network of religious institutions like mosques and temples, the actions are legitimized getting moral justification for political encounters and violence.

The faith-based struggle changes the perception of the conflict transforming into extreme opposing position. This tendency is evident in South Asia with its emotionally charged young population looking for divine help to solve their everyday problems. An analysis of Pakistan and India rising religious mobilization translating in politics making it emotionally charged, judged on moral grounds and justifying violence is important to review the current trends of local politics affecting the democratic process in post-colonial South Asian states.

### **India: A Religious Society with Secular Constitution**

India preferred to adopt a secularist agenda since inception. The

constitution of India 1949 guarantees freedom of religion as the fundamental right. The word "secular" could not be made part of the constitution till 42nd amendment in 1976. Later with major decisions by successive regimes, secularism became a significant part of constitution of India. The rise of BJP and allies has changed that well protected secular credentials of Indian since 1947. But even before, the uniqueness of Indian secularism was such that, the state was supposed to be neutral regarding religion but was allowed to interfere equally, without preference, in all religions.

Politically, secularism was accepted but the social and political structure continued to be dominated by Hinduism. Post-independence initiatives were more focused on indigenous culture and identity than secularization of institutions. Hindu nationalists benefitted the most in post-Independence India, they managed to transform the political and social discourse in India.<sup>5</sup> Though existed since 1925, RSS has come to fore as the motivating force committed to Hindu revivalism but it was only in 1998-99 that the political rise of the RSS after an alliance with BJP was witnessed.

### **Indian Local Politics and Ultra-Orthodox Hindu Extremism**

BJP's active role in Indian politics emerged in 1990s though it was established in 1980, it was which reflects the fact that till late 1980s, secular identity of political parties was more popular among the masses in India. It was in 1998 and 1999 that BJP managed to secure majority in the

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<sup>5</sup> Dyahadroy, Swati, " " Gender\_culture and seva\_a study of Dnyana Prabodhini," Department of Sociology, Savitribai Phule Pune University, Chapter 1 available at [http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/185093/9/07\\_chapter%201.pdf](http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/185093/9/07_chapter%201.pdf)

parliament thus began an era of religiously motivated politics in India. India's image as a democracy with religious pluralism with Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism and Christianity faces a great challenge of ultra right wing Hindu extremism, for instance, the Ayodhya made a dent in India's secular image. The dispute turned into serious communal violence. Ironically, it was Congress party's decision to launch its 1991 election campaign. Later BJP intensified its campaign for Ram temple at the place of Ayodhya mosque. The use of religious sentiments undermined the secular credentials of India.

Hindu extremism came to fore through the political campaigns of RSS and VHP in the 1980s and 1990s that culminated in the Gujarat violence against the Muslims. Religion got a prominent role in politics instead of social and material issues. BJP first ever government in the center brought communal rioting as a tool to political groups. Communal violence in Gujarat in 2002 targeted Muslims, it was a systematic genocide of the Muslim population of the state.

The *Hindutva* ideology works on exploiting sense of victimhood for Hindu identity being attacked by the "outsiders" who have been attacking India and thus forcing the Hindus to become either Muslim or Christian through their rule. This however, remains a flawed argument, even after Muslim and British rule, Hinduism remained the religion of majority of the people.

### **Pakistan: A Religious Society with Religious Constitution**

In contemporary global politics, Pakistan is considered as weak democracy influenced by religious forces having both institutional and out of mainstream political role. The role of religion and political accommodation

has unleashed the forces of religious intolerance and violent extremism that has not only affected its own society but the region and the world at large. Though, as a policy, the state does not approve violent extremism, the political space to various religious groups over the years has empowered the extremist forces. These forces brought the state to a situation where majority political discourse is hijacked by the minority religious fanaticism leading to religious extremism and its violent manifestation in the country as well as in the region.

Two years after the inception of the new state and just one year after the demise of the founder of Pakistan, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the Objectives Resolution was passed in 1949 by the constituent assembly. Though Islamic in nature, Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan reassured the minorities protection of their rights as envisioned by the Quaid-e-Azam. However, the constitution framed several years after Liaquat Ali Khan's assassination, cannot really claimed to be very welcoming to the minorities. "The 1956 Constitution was perhaps the most cognizant of Pakistan's multicultural character and, while paying its due respect to the Islamic culture and civilization, the constitution remained non-committal on a state religion and guaranteed complete equality."<sup>6</sup>

Constitutionally, any law or custom that is inconsistent with the fundamental right is nullified. An independent judiciary enforces that. 1973 Constitution does have a more definite Islamic Character than the previous Constitutions. Nevertheless, 1973 Constitution with its articles on Islam as the state religion and offices of both President and Prime

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<sup>6</sup> Yasir Hamdani, Pakistani Constitution, Islam and Minority, Criterion Quarterly, February 1, 2016

Minister reserved for Muslims, it does not technically call for a theocratic state. Parliament with its representatives of Pakistani citizens is the sole maker of the legislations. Supreme Court interprets the laws and a Council of Islamic Ideology that does exist is only there in advisory role but cannot enforce. This however has never got a place in public discourse. Lawyers and Judges avoid discussion on it. During General Zia's regime several amendments changed the character of the constitution towards orthodoxy. *Hudood Ordinance*<sup>7</sup> brought in practice a number of laws based on "Sharia" while the civilian and criminal laws remained intact, the duality brought confusion and used according to convenience.

Later Gen. Musharraf's regime managed to bring some changes discarding some of the articles in the *Hudood* ordinance while the attempt to review blasphemy law was criticized and sparked a protest by the religious groups. The current constitutional character is a mix of civil laws and vague references to the Islamic injunctions which are used politically and provide space for religious exploitation. Religious groups never get electoral victory in Pakistan but their political and social mobilization bring pressure to the mainstream political parties who prefer not to take any decision that would anger the religious groups. Pakistan is thus an interesting case where people do not vote religious groups but stand behind them to watch the government of mainstream political parties against any decision that may appear "un-Islamic".

Pakistan has witnessed thousands of casualties due to terrorism specially in last two decades. Religiously motivated violence by Tehrik-e-Taliban

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<sup>7</sup> A Critical Report on Hudood Ordinance, 1979, available at Council of Islamic Ideology <http://cii.gov.pk/publications/h.report.pdf>

Pakistan (TTP), Al-Qaeda or sectarian outfits like Lashkar-e-*Jhangvi* (LeJ) and *Ahl-e-Sunnat Wal Jamat* (ASWJ) belonging to *Deobandi* school of thought primarily targeting Shi'ites and Ahmadis. TTP's attacks on markets, schools and hospitals have killed even the innocent civilians from Sunni sect as well. Thanks to the successive military operations against the TTP, there has been a decline in overall incidents of terrorism across the country. Terrorism has surely declined but violent extremism is still rife across Pakistan. The recent display of aggressive and extreme behavior by the relatively quiet *Braelvi Sunni* sect in Pakistan which happens to be followed by the majority of Sunni population in Pakistan is in talk of the town. *Braelvis* in the sub-continent are the followers of the Sufi branch of the Sunni sect with generational linkages with great Sufi preachers who came to the Sub-continent and buried in various shrines across the region and venerated by the local population.

Compared to transnational nature of other groups, this sect has been indigenous and kept mild and low profile in the politics of the country. Though there have been political parties like *Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Pakistan* which claimed to be representing the *Braelvis* but they never rose to the stature of enjoying the political space and patronage that was once given to the *Deobandis* due to the Jihad in Afghanistan against the Soviets. Thus, due to lack of financial and political patronage, the followers remained focused on personal piety and faith, with the only exception in Karachi where *Sunni Tehrik* under Mohammed Saleem Qadri tried to engage violently with the MQM in city's local turf war.

A rapid transformation was observed among the follower of often mistaken "moderate Sufis" after the execution of Mumtaz Qadri, the

bodyguard of Governor of Punjab, Salman Taseer and a staunch supporter of anti-blasphemy law, who killed the governor on the grounds that he supported Asia Bibi accused of blasphemy. Mumtaz Qadri was arrested and after a long trial was sentenced to death by the High Court. An appeal to Supreme Court also resulted in rejection of his stance. *Braelevi* across Pakistan reacted aggressively and vowed to take revenge from the government. A shrine was built in the town where Mumtaz Qadri was buried and both old and young, urbanite residents of Punjab's cities paid homage. While the event was dismissed by the authorities as a temporary reaction, it continued to expand and led to emotional mobilization of once apolitical, non-violent followers of the 'moderate Sufi' sect.

The current political stage has now new religious players along with the *Deobandis*, the *Barelvīs* are fast becoming the new face of extremism in Pakistan. Extremist Barelvi groups like the *Sunni Tehreek*, *Sunni Ittehad Council*, *Majlis-e-Tahaffuz-e-Khatm-e-Nabuwat* etc. have lately intensified their witch-hunt of religious minorities and 'liberals' across the country.<sup>8</sup>

Dealing militarily with the terrorists was not easy but the major military operations have successfully eliminated the expanding Pakistani Taliban outfits in the country. However, the bigger challenge is to change the vituperative mindset that fuels extremism, highly emotional young followers of the *Barelvi* sect are threatening the core of the society and Pakistan will have to deal with it with a completely different policy, the rise of *Barelvi* Sunni extremism can be a much bigger challenge as it is not

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<sup>8</sup> Kashif Chaudhry, Pakistan and the Rise of Barelvi Sunni Extremism, Huffington Post, January, 2017

an outside ideology but based on very local motivation that has roots in the land.

### **The Old versus the New Extremism**

#### ***Pakistan: Anti Blasphemy Groups***

Religious politics has evolved into narrower sectarian (*Braelvi* extremism) from more global Islam (the old jihadists) with the political mobilization of *Braelvi* sect under new banners. However, it would be wrong to say that *Braelvi* extremism is a new phenomenon. In 2001, when Musharaff's regime declared that many religious groups were now be banned because of their extremist ideology and violent behavior, traditional Sufi variant of Sunni *Hanafi* sect, *Braelvi* groups were given space as the face of "moderate Islam". True to an extent that *Braelvis* though in majority had been largely non-violent and submissive compared to politically patronized *Deobandis*, it was the socio-political space that worked in their empowerment while the state was after the Taliban who happened to be *Deobandis*. *Deobandi Madrassas* were under the watch while military operation was being carried out to eliminate terrorism. While this was happening, *Braelvis* holding the banner of anti-blasphemy, continued to expand their influence in nook and corner of the country in last 15 years. The socio-political space helped them organize more and assert at the societal level their aggressive stance. Unlike, the Taliban, *Braelvis* do not have a large agenda vis-à-vis establishing *Sharia* in Pakistan. Their assertiveness is more focused and based on single agenda, that is, preserving and protecting anti-blasphemy law.

The transition from old to new form of extremism took almost two

decades but last ten years have been instrumental. Since, the traditional Islam that is followed by majority of the people involves music and emotional binding through religious songs, without asking for a more stringent rituals of *Deobandi* or *Salafi* commitment. It is attractive for urban young followers who want to ascertain their faith while continue to engage in worldly life.

In post 9/11 world, the discourse developed that the extremist ideology is not the Islam which is followed by the majority of Muslim hence idea of 'moderate Islam' got attention in global press. In Pakistan, Musharraf regime started to institutionalize Sufi Islam in Pakistan to counter the new wave of religious extremism by establishing the 'National Council for Promotion of Sufism.' It was argued that Sufism was based on tolerance and harmony which suited to Pakistan's diversity. The United States also took a great interest and even sponsored the Sunni Ittehad Council (SIC)—a *Barelvi* religious party which was primarily established to encourage *Barelvis* to counter the influence of the Taliban and extremist ideologies.<sup>9</sup>

Asif Ali Zardari of Pakistan People's Party initiated a policy to promote Sufi values to counter the threat of extremism and terrorism by renaming the Council as Sufi Advisory Council.<sup>10</sup> The narrative got popularized by the *Barelvi* clerics that *Deobandis* were responsible of the violent extremism in the country, *Barelvis* came forward aggressively to promote

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<sup>9</sup> Huma Imtiaz, "US aid to Sunni Ittehad Council backfired," The Express Tribune, January 12, 2012, available at <https://tribune.com.pk/story/320193/one-off-grant-us-aid-to-sunni-ittehad-council-backfired/>

<sup>10</sup> Government to set up Sufi Advisory Council, DAWN, June 7, 2009 available at <https://www.dawn.com/news/958940>

this narrative which widened the gulf of sectarianism in society. Governor Salman Taseer's support for Asia Bibi (a Christian woman accused of blasphemy) triggered unrest in Barelvi sect resulted into the assassination of Salman Taseer. The death sentence awarded to the murderer (Mumtaz Qadi) by the Supreme Court strengthened the waves of Barelvi extremism. The *Barelvi* clerics used this as an opportunity to mobilize the followers and managed considerable strength in public with no specific resistance from the government. In this background, a religio-political organization named *Labaik Ya Rasool Allah* came into being.<sup>11</sup> The blatant show of force during the sit-in by the party under Maulana Khadim Hussain Rizvi was a practical manifestation of rising extremism in Barelvi sect.

The anti-blasphemy groups have got stronger since then causing many violent incidents resulted in murder of citizen accused of blasphemy. However, this did not stop here but transformed into a political party pledged to contest elections on single agenda of protecting and preserving the blasphemy law.

The recently held election result has brought TLP as mainstream religio-political party. It contested elections across the country, managed to win a few seats but where it lost, it still managed to garner votes. There are few factors that makes it an interesting yet alarming case.

Unlike other parties, TLP on its one-point agenda of preserving the sanctity of the Prophet (PBUH) attracted voters from diverse background from all across Pakistan. But the most astonishing factor is the growing

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<sup>11</sup> Kalbe Ali, Who is leading this sit-in? DAWN, March 29, 2016 available at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1248570>

following among the young, relatively educated Karachi population. TLP managed to win seat from Karachi and this factor alone could be a challenge to deal with violent extremism and intolerance. These people, mostly from low income area, residing in urban setting are fast joining the cadres of TLP with a sense of empowerment which they otherwise do not enjoy in class based social setting.<sup>12</sup>

### ***India: The Rise of Saffron Brigade***

India has been actively projecting its image as a greatest democracy based on religious pluralism and diversity within the framework of secular constitution. However, the rise of religiously motivated self-righteous behavior to establish a Hindu state has made such deep dents in the polity that would require re-hauling of the socio-political system for decades. The reason behind this dent is the rise of *saffron brigade* or the RSS ideologues.

The major aim of the organization was to motivate and mobilize youth for Hindutva and bring a cultural unity. The objective was to have a force of followers who can work for Hindu unity. Hindu nationalists exploiting religious sentiments asserted that the Hindus need discipline and organization to resist the aggression. Ideologically RSS follows the teaching of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar who coined the term Hindutva to create a collective Hindu identity. Politically Hedgewar, who was the first Chief of the RSS and his successor Golwalkar laid the foundation for Hindu mobilization. The RSS branded itself as a cultural organization. It believed that "Hindus as a collective community were threatened by the

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<sup>12</sup> Ahmed Yusuf, "What is Behind the sudden Rise of TLP", DAWN, August 5, 2018, available at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1425085>

outsiders particularly the Muslims. Hence, it set out to create a martial brand of Hinduism by reshaping the mind and body of the Hindus in order to make them warrior-like."<sup>13</sup>

The RSS stresses on cultural unity, but in practice, it promotes its political agenda of Hindu Rashtra with an objective of a Hindu India, the idea of a monolithic Hindu Identity runs deep in the agenda of RSS.

### **Politics of Populism: Unleashing the Youth**

In Pakistan, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) is known for mobilizing the youth and ensuring victory in 2018 election. The success of PTI in attracting the young members in their sit in made an example to follow by relatively smaller groups who found it an apt strategy to gather people at city's important point to make it to the news. Taking the lead from PTI, a small *Barelvi* group, TLP paralyzed Islamabad-Rawalpindi, and eventually forced the government to accept all its demands. The show of power by exploiting a highly sensitive issue of sanctity of the Prophet (PBUH) was unexpected and sudden.

The *Barelvi* political narrative is based on victimhood at the hands of rival sects particularly the *Deobandis*. The hanging of Mumtaz Qadri strengthened the discourse through use of social media as well as public gatherings. *Barelvis* managed to make a space despite many differences within the *Barelvi* sects. People follow various saints and Sufis and claim their lineage, hence prevent any consolidated single leadership within the group. Nevertheless, *Tehreek Labaik* Pakistan has emerged as the group

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<sup>13</sup> Dyahadroy, Swati, "Chapter 1 available at [http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/185093/9/07\\_chapter%201.pdf](http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/185093/9/07_chapter%201.pdf)

transforming the silent majority to expressive politics. Due to the disillusionment among the people with politicians, many young first-time voters turned towards TLP to attain salvation as well as letting the mainstream political parties feel the pain of losing in election. The rise of TLP is more of anti-mainstream political parties and less for TLP itself. The feeling of discontent and anger found expression in spiritual submission that worked well for the *Braelvi* politics.

BJP's rise in power in Indian politics not only brought *Hindutva* in the forefront but socially it opened the gates for social transformation in the form of forced campaigns whether in the form of Gau Raksha (cow protection), beef ban or anti conversion from Hinduism to any other religion. While these campaigns did mobilize BJP followers, the young *Hindutva* followers found special interest in popular campaigns like RSS and VHP's Ghar Wapsi and Bahu Lao Beti Bachao to counter *Love Jihad* myth all across India.<sup>14</sup> The saffronization of young Indians has been going for many decades but BJP's current regime has accelerated it and its accommodative policies have provided a political space to religious extremism, young self-proclaimed *Sanghis* and *Bakhts* (RSS/BJP activists) have taken it as their duty to purify the nation by "eliminating evil".

### ***Cow Vigilante***

The unleashed youth in cities and villages have taken up the task for the 'sanctity' of cow. It is the reason for many violent episodes in India since

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<sup>14</sup> Hindu outfit plans 'beti bachao, bahu lao' campaign to counter love jihad, Hindustan Times, December 1, 2017 available at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/lucknow/hindu-outfit-plans-beti-bachao-bahu-lao-campaign-to-counter-love-jihad/story-HVxTzT8Vn8bAYmYNYVZysI.html>

the BJP coming to power in 2014. Common people found eating beef or trading cow are being lynched and killed by vigilante mobs in the name of defending Hindu values. BJP regime came up with a proposal of an electronic ID system to identify cows, the system is similar to the system for Indian citizen identity.<sup>15</sup> Using "meat politics" government patronization of those involved in mob lynching to "protect" cow further encourages and provides space to act more violently against minorities.<sup>16</sup> According to Delhi University historian Dwijendra Narayan Jha, cow being a sacred animal in Hinduisim is a myth. But the myth or not, the young emotionally mobilized activists are not ready to listen to any research-based opinion, they are more interested in following the rhetoric that has been promoted for decades by the RSS and later BJP's members. The sane voices rejecting any historical or religious link to the "sanctity" of "holy cow" could not stop the mob from murdering a 55-year-old Rajasthan dairy farmer, Pehlu Khan. He was brutally thrashed and the video went viral on social media. Ignoring condemnation and criticism, the Rajasthan home minister, Gulab Chand Kataria defended not only the act but praised the cow vigilante for doing a great job.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> C.P. Surendran, "Cows in India may get their own 'Adhaar card'", Khaleej Times, April 25, 2017, available at <http://www.khaleejtimes.com/international/india/cows-in-india-may-get-their-own-aadhaar-card>

<sup>16</sup> Aftab Alam, "As Nationalism Surges in India, Cows Are Protected More Than Minorities", US news, May 1, 2017 available at <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/articles/2017-05-01/as-hindu-nationalism-grows-in-india-cows-are-protected-more-than-minorities>

<sup>17</sup> Pehlu Khan killed by gau rakshaks in Alwar: Rajasthan home minister defends the mob, *First Post*, April 6, 2017, available at <https://www.firstpost.com/india/pehlu-khan-killed-by-gau-rakshaks-in-alwar-rajasthan-home-minister-defends-the-mob-3371150.html>

### *The Rise of the Yogi*

It was rare in Indian politics for a religious leader who happens to be openly against the minorities particularly the Muslims to get to the top political position of Chief Minister of a province. Yogi Adityanath's electoral victory in Indian state of United Province which has significant Muslim population and traditionally has been defending country's constitutional secular character. Had it been to personal purity and religious obsession, it would not have been a big issue, but it is his extremist movement "*Hindu Yuvu Vahini*" (Hindu Youth Organization), which is known for controversies. Yogi Adityanath is known for his anti-minority rhetoric, in 2015, his organization instigated communal tension calling Aligarh Muslim university a nursery of terrorism.<sup>18</sup> Same year, exploiting the youth, Yogi instigated people not to follow Muslim Bollywood celebrities by comparing the super star Shah Rukh Khan to most controversial figure Hafiz Saeed whom India accused of Mumbai attack. He did not stop here but labeled late Mother Teresa as part of a conspiracy to "Christianize" India.<sup>19</sup> Adityanath got support from Hindu extremist across the country when he supported Donald Trump's immigrant ban and proposed similar ban in India.<sup>20</sup>

Muslims are not the only minority facing the burnt, Indian Christians

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<sup>18</sup> Lalmani Verma, Adityanath's outfit terms AMU 'nursery of terrorism', The Indian Express, September 18, 2015

<sup>19</sup> "Yogi Adityanath slams SRK, compares him with Hafiz Saeed", The Hindu, November 4, 2015 available at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/yogi-adityanath-attacks-shah-rukh-khan-compares-him-with-hafiz-saeed/article7841809.ece>

<sup>20</sup> "BJP's Adityanath praises US Prez Trump's 'Muslim ban', recommends it for India", Hindustan Times, January 31, 2017 available at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/bjp-s-adityanath-praises-us-prez-trump-s-muslim-ban-recommends-it-for-india/story-KVpanqzFOYdmX0LLoPHpEP.html>

face the ire of Hindu extremist as well. The Christian minority is vulnerable to Hindu extremism and this was documented by many international organizations. Holland based Christian human rights organization, Open Door stated that violence against Christians in India has increased since 2016 and many Churches have been destroyed and incidents of priests and nuns beating have been reported.<sup>21</sup> The young Indian urban followers of RSS are fast taking the role of the vigilantes targeting couples belonging to different faiths specially if one of them happens to be Hindu. Indian boys belonging to faith other than Hinduism if found dating a Hindu girl are violently dealt with, extremist calling them "*Love jihadis*". These vigilantes have taken it to them to attack young couples resulting in casualties. The actions have government backing since yogi Adityanath took office of Chief Minister of UP. Even the police have taken the role of anti-Romeo squads.<sup>22</sup>

### **Religious Mobilization: From Rural to Urban Areas**

Traditionally, religious groups focused on rural areas for motivating and mobilizing the young followers as illiterate and lacking exposure have always been easy to be convinced without much logic and rationale. This trend changed with the change in strategy where the religious groups started focusing on young people in the cities using media and new innovations, making it attractive to increase the followers. The argument

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<sup>21</sup> "Christians in India increasingly under attack, study shows", The guardian, January 11, 2017 available at

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/11/christians-in-india-increasingly-under-attack-study-shows>

<sup>22</sup> "UP 'anti-Romeo squads' to get more teeth", Times of India, July 15, 2018, available at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/up-anti-romeo-squads-to-get-more-teeth/articleshow/64996016.cms>

of cosmic war that Jürgen Meyersmer has written extensively gets credence here, in most religious traditions, a conflict outcome is often considered a manifestation of God's will, the followers are made to believe that they are in a constant war which they have to win at any cost. Another important factor that plays an important role is when religion goes beyond faith to nationalism. BJP's rise on the basis of religious nationalism is a case in point. The shift of religion to religion-based nationalism from rural to urban areas, attracting educated middle class in cities and small towns is a significant development. In the words of Peter van der Veer, "To study these aspects - movements, discourses, practices, we need a shift in emphasis from the political scientist's study of political parties and voting behavior to anthropologist's study of religious movements and ritual action as

part of historical practices. It is feelings of collective belonging into religious nationalism".<sup>23</sup> The project of establishing a Hindu state which started with BJP in alliance with VHP and RSS motivated religious politics of reclaiming Ayodhya building Ram temple on place of Ayodhya mosque continued and enhanced the political space for BJP till its victory under Vajpaae and later under the leadership of Modi from 2014 to date. The current regime's policy has given a free hand to RSS militants to establish their agenda of a *Hinduization*. With the inclusion of educated middle class guided by self-righteousness, the impact of their idea of a "Hindu India" is fast taking roots. Young Indian men and women locally called "*Bakhts*" or "*Sanghis*" make sure to ever present on the internet, using

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<sup>23</sup> Peter van der Veer, "Religious Nationalism" University of California Press, Berkely, 1994, p-ix

facebook, twitter and whatsapp etc to spread their hate messages. They abuse the opponents using explicit, quoting religious texts justifying their hate.

### ***Rise of Internet 'Hindu'***

Sagarika Ghose, an Indian television anchor tweeted in 2010, "Internet Hindus are like swarms of bees, they come swarming after you".<sup>24</sup> The internet Hindus are right wing blogger and tweeters who followed her and reacted violently on her tweets. They are large in number and tech savvy, their aggressive presence with abusive rhetoric has put a mark on legislators' commitment to free speech. Some famous Indian artists like M. F. Hussain and filmmaker Deepa Mehta faced threats for the work the extremists deem insulting to Hinduism. Famous Indian journalist Barkha Dutt has been the target of hate speech and internet bullying. Very few of the intolerant Internet activists disclose their political or religious affiliation online, mostly they express their disdain for the Congress party. However, the fact of the matter is they sympathize with *Hindutva*, influenced by RSS and support BJP.

In the words of a 23 years old internet Hindu not yet a member of any political organization, "I want the Hindu dignity of India to be restored, we've had a glorious past but the Muslim invaders, the Mughals and the Brits destroyed our sense of pride. After independence, the [Congress] continued with that policy. It continued with blatant Muslims appeasement while Hindus were reduced to second-grade citizens in their

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<sup>24</sup> Jason Overdorf, "India: Meet the 'Internet Hindus', Public Radio International (PRI), June 18, 2012 available at <https://www.pri.org/stories/2012-06-18/india-meet-internet-hindus>

own land.”<sup>25</sup>

According to an informal online survey, the Internet Hindus are mostly young, educated professionals with computer skills and command over English. The survey reveals, "more than half of them are under 30 years old, 80 percent have undergraduate or graduate degrees, and two-thirds of them earn more than \$10,000 a year — putting them on the high end of India's middle class."<sup>26</sup>

According to the Lokniti report, titled *Attitudes, Anxieties and Aspirations of India's Youth: Changing Patterns*, "survey 2016 was based on 6,122 people between the ages of 15 and 34, across 19 Indian states, around 25% of the country's youth identifies itself with the BJP, making the party's base among the young, the biggest among all political parties. But it is worth noting that a majority of respondents do not identify with any political party."<sup>27</sup>

### ***Shrinking Intellectual Spaces in Universities***

With BJP's patronage, the RSS, *Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi (AVBP)*, *Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP)* and the *Bajrang Dal* have gradually managed to hijack the public space. Not only threats to students and faculty by these groups but some of the universities have right wing vice chancellors sympathizing with ultra conservative mindset.<sup>28</sup> The

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid

<sup>26</sup> Jason Overdorf, India: Meet the Internet Hindu", Global Post, June 18, 2012 available at <http://jasonoverdorf.blogspot.com/2012/06>

<sup>27</sup> Pankaj Madan, Mark Alexander Friedrich, " Attitudes, Anxieties and Aspirations of India's Youth: Changing Patterns", Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, April 3, 2017

<sup>28</sup> "Delhi University Teachers Association releases white paper against VC", India education review.com. August 5, 2014 available at <http://indiaeducationreview.com/delhi-university-teachers-association-releases-white-paper-against-vc/>

ABVP, particularly focused on top universities pursuing BJP agenda. That's because the majority of faculty members who enjoy considerable influence on students are left oriented and some of them are members of the communist party of India.<sup>29</sup> The young and educated in urban areas are getting "role models" in the form of right-wing successful professionals heading educational institutions and government departments. The government prefers top positions to those sympathetic to RSS and believe in *Hindutva* ideology.

Pakistan has had its share of urbanization of violence, with groups rising in favor of blasphemy and murdering minorities as well as fellow Muslim on the basis of "*Fatwas*" by the Imam of the mosques. Mob violence is a regular feature which even police finds it hard to control when faith is involved. Some politician though not member of extremist groups but publicly use issue of blasphemy to get public support. Pakistani intelligentsia got a great shock when a public display of anger and violence was carried out in Mardan university, where a young 23 years old Mashal Khan was murdered by the mob, comprising university students provoked by the speeches declaring Mashal Khan a blasphemer. The gruesome act of killing a young man at the campus should be enough to send shock waves in the society, but the reaction was divided, while many did condemn the act and government initiated legal process, there were

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<sup>29</sup> Aftab Alam, "Growing intolerance is threatening free inquiry and open debate in India's universities". August 19, 2017, South Asia Journal, available at: <http://southasiajournal.net/growing-intolerance-is-threatening-free-inquiry-and-open-debate-in-indias-universities/>, see also Debobrat Ghose, "JNU provides atmosphere of free thinking to students, says varsity's only president from ABVP", First Post, February 26, 2016 available at <https://www.firstpost.com/politics/jnu-provides-atmosphere-of-free-thinking-to-students-says-varsitys-only-president-from-abvp-2642638.html>

many who still justified the act.

Mashal Khan's murder is the watershed that opens the flood gates on urban, educated extremists in Pakistan. While such acts are driven by mob mentality but there is a complete method into this madness. At the campuses, it is usually the student bodies who ignite the emotions of the young students, in offices and markets, professional jealousy is the motive used to blame an individual of committing blasphemy. Once an individual or a group is accused of blasphemy, it takes very little time to gather the crowd and incite for violence. Such is the state of emotional mobilization of religious followers.

The *Braelvi* extremists are rapidly capturing space through their presence in schools, colleges and universities using music and spiritual songs to attract the young students and professionals. Had it been a non-violent act of showing spiritual conviction, it wouldn't have been a problem, but while on their spiritual journey, these young souls get off track and find it hard to distinguish between intolerance, extremism and dedication and faith. They find it difficult to not to express violently if a person is found not convinced of their ideas. Since, they are urbanite, professionals or students, they have means of communications, having access to media, social site etc. They have successfully managed to control the public space, where an intellectual discussion of the framing of blasphemy law, review of the procedure can lead to death threats and even murder.

This shift of violent intolerance from rural to urban areas are even evident in the media, TV programs, discussions and even entertainment programs are careful not to mention any thing that could hurt the feelings of the *Bralevi*s. Newspapers columnists have taken up self-censorship not to write

anything, intellectually great but not acceptable to the followers. *Tehreek-e-Labaik* (TLP) chief Khadim Hussain Rizvi exploiting the political polarization has managed to bring TLP from margins to the center stage city movement, remodeling the Islamization process.<sup>30</sup>

### Conclusion

Religious extremism and intolerant mindset are based on irrationality. Generally, followers of religious groups see their destiny as a result of the grand divine design. Economically marginalized or deprived ones start taking their worldly life as temporal. They do not see any benefit in utilizing their potential for physical and intellectual output but often lead a life of inactivity resulting into lack of economic and social development. It therefore ensures that they do not become part of the social development process. It does not allow them to contribute to the development of their family and society. On the contrary, they remain a burden for basic human needs.

Religious groups unlike political parties are sometimes referred as cults for two defining features. First, the tension between the group and its surrounding society and second, the high degree of control over the followers and supporters by the leaders. Often the reason for aggressive and violent behavior is due to the perceived threat from the outside, which could be their own society or the government, the "us versus them" phenomenon. Another reason could be solely a group leader's own perception, when challenged by others often calls for violence and justify

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<sup>30</sup> Abdul Basit, "New Extremist Religious Groups Are Wrecking Pakistan", National Interest, December 24, 2017, available at <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/new-extremist-religious-groups-are-wrecking-pakistan-23779>

being victim who is forced to protect the group. As RAND report states, "when religious extremists are convinced that their cause is sacred and ordained by God, they are capable of savage and relentless violence and what is striking about "religious terrorism" is that "it is almost exclusively symbolic, performed in remarkably dramatic ways."<sup>31</sup>

Religious extremism in through RSS's exclusivist approach based on creating a Hindu state espouses a strong and militant religious philosophy. Their religious view, with its cosmic dimension, remains a threat to the idea of India as a secular state. India's situation is more alarming because here the idea of a democracy on the basis of inclusive approach is being challenged, it is more of illiberal democracy. BJP with its allies that include RSS, Shiv Sina claim to have won through democratic process. Religious extremism is being institutionalized through government's endorsement in India.

In case of Pakistan, the rising intolerant version of Sufi Islam that came to fore after Mumtaz Qadri's execution in the name of protection of blasphemy law is worrisome. The highly charged and aggressive anti blasphemy movement got approval of young Pakistanis particularly in Punjab and Sindh province. Yet, the recent elections showed the trend where the party on these slogans could not get significant votes. This brings us to the issue of political dynamics in both the countries. Religiously mobilized, aggressive parties are challenging the political process without rejecting the democratic process. Both in Pakistan and

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<sup>31</sup> Gregory F. Treverton, Heather S. Gregg, Daniel Gibran, Charles W. Yost, " Exploring Religious Conflict" RAND, 2005 , available at [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/conf\\_proceedings/2005/RAND\\_CF211.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/conf_proceedings/2005/RAND_CF211.pdf) 0098

India, BJP cadres and TLP's followers are confident that they can bring a change within the system. This shows the behavioral change in the young voters, they are convinced that they are doing it rights within constitutional framework unlike the terrorists who reject the existing system. One question that arises is both RSS influenced extremism in India and TLP's aggressive posturing is if these movements are really religious or political? This distinction is hard to parse. Religious extremists create stories, myths, narratives and commands from scriptures to justify their world view.

If right wing ultra conservative groups with motivation and mobilization continue their aggressive agenda within the democratic framework and continue to make their presence in the political space through votes in electoral process, this will define the concept of democracy. This normalization of religious extremism in politics will create exclusivist, intolerant and violent societies with grave implications on the economy, which would result in chaos and more violence thus destroying the very idea of liberal democratic order.

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