DEFENCE AND DIPLOMACY

IN PURSUIT OF NATIONAL SECURITY

Special Issue: Extremism, Radicalisation and Terrorism

DECIPHERING RADICALISATION IN INDIA

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INTRODUCTION

The rise of the Islamic State (IS), a transnational terror group aimed at establishing a global Caliphate, has opened a new chapter of sectarianism in South Asia. The need to spread hardline sectarianism was a precursor to establish the Caliphate. The spread initially was through Central Asia where normally a singular culture, religion and society were found in the nations. However, the endeavour to radicalise India resulted in a unique flavour of the same. Islamic radicalisation in India is a multi-faceted phenomenon, influenced by both internal and external push-pull factors, from retention of native customs after conversion to the unique blend of Hanafi Islam i.e. Barelvis and Deobandis. Radicalisation and sectarianism in India differ from noticeable trends which have persisted in South Asia. Despite having a larger Muslim population, India has seen a relatively low number of violent sectarian incidents. Strands of divisive sectarian attitudes exist in our society. However, the trend of joining/creating violent sectarian groups is low. Since 2013, there have been dedicated efforts by extremist groups to aggravate sectarian fault lines within Indian society. However, their influence on extremism and sectarian violence is low, and there is a need to decipher the myth of sectarian

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radicalisation in India to evolve a counter-radicalisation strategy in order to mitigate future challenges.

GLOBAL TRENDS

Political Islam transcends geographic borders and ideologies, resulting in Islamic activism and its utilisation to securitise the political and religious landscapes by various state and non-state actors. Since the Iranian revolution, multiple events have resulted in a surge in sectarianism in the Middle East and South Asia. Sectarian-based identity increased in the 1980s, with Saddam and Ayatollah Khomeini framing nationalism with sectarian identity: Sunni and Shia Islam. General Zia-ul-Haq gave patronage to Sunni Islam to establish his legitimacy among the masses. Non-state actors like Al-Qaeda, Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) and Hizb-ur-Tahrir (HuT) have utilised Salafism and branded it puritan to advance their agenda through violent struggle and carnage. Due to the transitional changes that political Islam and religious Islam are undergoing, and the resurgence of conflicting versions, it has become challenging to sift the chalk from the cheese and define sectarianism.

UNDERSTANDING SECTARIANISM

The term 'sect' is understood as a socio-religious grouping; however, sectarianism refers to a group or individuals having contrasting opinions within the same religion. Sectarianism believes in an intolerant attitude, and focusses on an individual or a group adhering to a particular sect or religion (jurisprudence) and adopting an attitude of disdain towards other sects of the same faith.[1] Sectarianism fuels extremist behaviour, narrow-mindedness, and violence practised by sectarian groups towards one another.

ISLAM IN THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT AND VARIOUS SCHOOLS OF JURISPRUDENCE

Sunni and Shia are the two major sects of Islam in the Indian sub-continent. However, in addition to the Shia-Sunni divide, intra-sectarian divisions also exist, tracing their roots to the 19th century

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1. Peter L. Berger, "The Sociological Study of Sectarianism," *Social Research,* pp.367-385.

Indian subcontinent. Barelvi, Deobandi, and Ahl-e-Hadith are the three main sub-sects of Sunni Islam.The advent of Islam in the Indian subcontinent is associated with the conquest of Sindh by Muhammad ibn al-Qasim in 711-12 AD. The conquest led to the defeat of Raja Dahir and the capture of territory along the river up to Multan, and the event began Islam's spread throughout the Indian subcontinent.[2]

The various schools of Islam in India are as shown in Fig 1.

Fig 1: Various Sects of Islam in India
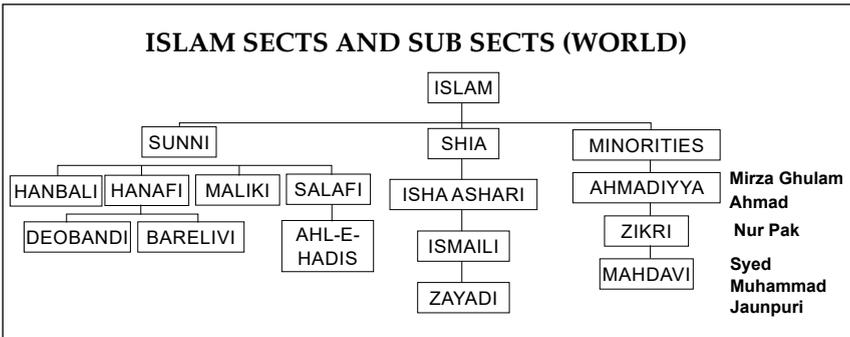
Source: Created by the Pakistan Study Centre, Rashtriya Raksha University, Gandhinagar, 2021

The rise of the Islamic State (IS), a transnational terror group aimed at establishing a global Caliphate, opened a new chapter of sectarianism in South Asia. After Prophet's Mohammad death, disagreements over the leadership erupted between the followers of Hussain, the grandson of Prophet Mohammad and the Umayyad dynasty, which led to a spilt in the *ummah* (Muslim community) and the birth of the Shia-Sunni schism. Various *madhhabs* (schools of jurisprudence) emerged over time. There are four primary Sunni schools: Hanbali, Hanafi, Maliki and Salafi; and three schools among Shia Islam: Isna Ashari, Ismaili and Zaydi. As Sunni Islam dominates in most of South Asia, the differences among Sunni Islam become vital.

2.. Anne Maria Schimmel, *Islam in the Indian Subcontinent* (Leiden, Brill Publishers, 1980), p. 4.

Hanafi School

It is the oldest of the Sunni schools, built upon the teachings of Abū Hanifah. The school utilises *qiyas* (analogical reasoning) as legal reasoning. It relies significantly on reasoned opinion (*ra'y*). It gives significant weight to the consensus of the local community (*ijma*) and is considered the most flexible among the schools. It favours *istihsan* (juristic preference). Hanafi Islam is followed significantly by all Sunni countries to this day. The Hanafi school is more protective of the individual's liberty and choice than the other schools, as it tends to be more lenient in matters of crime and punishment.[3]

Maliki School

It is the second oldest school after the Hanafi, and was founded by Malik ibn Anas around 795 CE. The Maliki school has most of its followers in the North African region. It is known for its versatility and comprehensiveness. The Maliki school emphasises the practices of the people of Medina (*amal*) as a source of law. It gives importance to the traditions and practices of the early Muslim community in Medina. It also advocates for the doctrine of *istislah* (consideration of public interests) as a source of law over weak Hadiths.

Shafi'i School

The school was founded by Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shafi'i (820 CE), a disciple of Malik ibn Anas. Al Shafi'i emphasised the Qur'an, *ijma* consensus, *qiyas,* and *Sunnah.* The Shafi'i schools discarded the Hanafi school's idea of the *istihsan* and the Maliki school's doctrine of *istislah.* It is known for its balanced approach between reason and traditions and strongly supports the *Sunnah.* The Shafi'i school is prevalent in Egypt, Indonesia and East Asia.

Hanbali School

Ahmad ibn Hanbal founded the Hanbali school around 855 CE. It is known for its strict adherence to the Quran and Hadith. It lays less emphasis on the Hanafi and Maliki doctrines preferring to stick closely to the literal texts—the Qur'an and Hadith—and relies very

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3. Mohammed Hashim Kamali, *Shariah Law Questions and Answers* (New York: One World Publishers, 2017).

little on *qiyas*. It is also called the Wahhabi/Salafi school. In the 18th century, the Hanbali school flourished in the Arabian Peninsula under the puritanical Wahhabi movement which was inspired by the works of Ahmad Taqi al-Din Ibn Taymiyyah.

The Hanafi sect of Islam has been prevalent in South Asia since colonial times. As part of the resurrection of Islam post-war of independence in 1857, the Deobandi and Barelvi schools of Sunni Islam came into existence in India. By the late 18th century, Islam in India had seen a transformational shift. The battle of 1857 resulted in the British sidelining the Mughal rule in India. The necessity of the revival of Islamic pride resulted in the evolution of the Dar-ul-Uloom seminary in Deoband, Uttar Pradesh, by Rashid Ahmad Gangohi (1826-1905) and Yaqub Nanautawi (1833-84). The Barelvi school of thought came with Imam Ahmed Raza Khan (1856–1921) in Bareilly. Comparatively, Barelvi Islam was a tolerant form of Sunni Islam, with the Deobandi school believing in *Insaan-e-Kamil* (the person who has reached perfection). The Deobandi and Barelvi schools differ over the status of *pirs* (saints) and the practice of *qawwali* singing to manifest religious thought.[4] The Barelvis believe in *Insaan-e-noor* (the perfect human being), and and also in *pirs* and *murshids*, a concept which embraces Sufism.

ISLAM IN INDIA

Islam in North India

Islam's journey began with it spreading via the plains of Sindh. People converted for various reasons but also continued with their old traditions. Even though the Mughal rulers were Muslim, Islam became indigenised and flourished alongside Indian Hindu traditions. The establishment of the Barelvi and Deobandi schools defined Islam in a particular way but did not enforce it much against the existing traditions. Moreover, Sufism embraced one and all, irrespective of caste and creed.

Islam's encounter with pluralism in the Indian subcontinent has been more profound. The historical interaction between Islamic

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4. Ashok K. Behuria, "Sects Within Sect: The Case of Deobandi-Barelvi Encounter in Pakistan." *Strategic Analysis,* vol. 32, 2008, pp. 60-61.

traditions and the pluralism and diverse belief systems of India comprised an assimilation of Hindu religious traditions as part of the local version of Islam, despite the monolithic and homogenising thrust of Islamic traditions. Perhaps the persistence of various doctrines, the cultural variety, and diversity within Islam and its ability to adapt to the local cultural landscape have nowhere been more evident than in India. Acceptance of gurus like Guru Nanak and Kabir as religious saints is one such adaptation by Muslims in India.

The majority of Muslims in India are primarily converts from Hinduism. As a result, they have inherited pluralistic ideas and there is little difference in food, cultural and social habits between Hindus and Muslims. For example, Kayamkhani Muslims wear a *tilak*, carry a sword for weddings and follow all Rajputana traditions. The practice of carrying the *taziya* (a replica of the mausoleum of Hazrat Ali) during *ashura,* the tenth day of *Muharram*, is unique to the Indian subcontinent. In many parts of the country, Muslim women still wear the *sindoor* and *mangal sutra* as part of the continuation of old traditions. Hindus and Muslims both revere the writings of Amir Khusrao, Baba Bulleh Shah, Baba Farid, Raskhan and Abdul Rahim Khankhana. Given the preponderance of the Barelvi and Deobandi schools, the majority of Muslims follow Hanafi Islam, which helps in understanding why the exclusive, literal, hierarchical, masculine, violence-prone, Wahhabi-radical-Salafi understanding of Islam represented by fringe Muslim radicals/militant groups like the Students' Islamic Movement of India (SIMI) and Islamist terrorist groups has been unable to make any substantial appeal to a significant section of the Muslim population and mark its ingress into the minds of Muslim of North India.[5]

Islam in South India

Since time immemorial, South Indian Hindu and Arab traders have cemented cultural ties through operational dealings. The leading merchandise consisted of gold, Arabian horses, and ivory. Along with the trade, Arab traders brought Islam to South India. South India's

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5. Dr. Anwar Alam, "Understanding the Process of Radicalisation Amongst Muslims in India," Policy Perspectives Foundation 59. Understanding_the_process_-1-12-18_(1)2.pdf (ppf.org.in). Accessed on July 15, 2024.

tryst with Islam began with the construction of the Cheraman Juma Mosque in Thrissur during Prophet Muhammad's lifetime, which signifies the early connection between the South Indian peninsula and Arabia. The religious landscape slowly changed as various Malabar Coast communities embraced Islam. The Mappila Muslims of Kerala have been trading with the Gulf region for centuries, establishing a continuous exchange of culture and religious practices. The Muslim community of South and West India is quite distinct from that of North India

Influence of Gulf Money and Ideologies

Longstanding ties with the Arab lands have facilitated the flow of religious ideas and financial resources. The influx of remittances from the Indian diaspora and expatriates has greatly influenced Islamic institutions in South and West India, often associating them with Wahhabism and Salafism from the Arabian peninsula. As per the 2022 financial stability report of the Central Bank of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) 32.29 billion United Arab Emirates Dirham (AED) was remitted to india as part of personal remittances. Consequently, there has been an upsurge in Salafisation and Wahhabisation of regions along the Malabar coast. Plus, the influence of the Barelvi and Deobandi schools in South India is limited. The Arabist shift[6] is notably higher in these regions compared to the north. A sizeable number of mosques called Salafi mosques have come up in Kerala which do not show any allegiance to local Indian schools or sects. Various factors that have contributed to the rise of the Arabist shift are as follows:

- **Peripheral Institutions:** Despite their presence, these institutions are considered peripheral compared to those in the north, which may drive some within the Muslim community to assert their Islamic identity more strongly.

- **Contemporary Movements and Organisations:** The rise of various Islamic organisations in the south reflects the convoluted religious landscape. Ahmad Madhani founded the Islamic Sevak

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6. Arabist shift—the tendency to view the present in terms of an imagined Arab past with the Arab as the only "real/pure" Muslim, and using it to purge the eclecticism and intellectuality of the Sufi order.

Sangh (ISS) in the mid-1990s. After its metamorphosis, the ISS transitioned itself into the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and National Democratic Front (NDF), which eventually led it to become a quintessential part of the People's Front of India (PFI), a proscribed organisation banned by the Ministry of Home Affairs.

- **Rise of Salafism:** The Ahl-e-Hadith movement (brand of Salafism in the Indian subcontinent), advocating a puritanical interpretation of Islam, is gaining significant influence in the south, particularly in Kerala. This movement aligns with the region's broader trends of Salafisation and Wahhabisation. The spread of Wahhabism is linked to the economic influence of the Gulf states. Saudi Arabia espouses the Wahhabism thought of the Hanbali school. To find lucrative jobs, many Indian Muslims have gravitated to the Wahhabism and Salafist ideology for economic dividends.

The unique historical and contemporary factors shaping the Muslim community in South and West India have led to distinct religious dynamics. The influence of religious funding and assertiveness of a particular ideology, combined with the absence of historically significant Islamic institutions, creates an opportunity for various socio-religious expressions, including a possible inclination towards militancy as a means to assert the Islamic identity. Understanding these regional differences is crucial for comprehending the diverse expressions of Islam in India and addressing the specific needs and challenges of the Muslim communities across the country.

The educated segment of the Muslim population in South India tends to identify more with 'reformist Islam' such as the Jamaat-e-Islami, Salafism, and Ahl-e-Hadith as against the 'traditional' Ahl-e-Sunnat Wal Jamaat, which believes in the moderate understanding of Islam and its various local practices such as veneration of Sufi practices.[7] These are considered as 'unIslamic' or corrupt practices of Islam. Salafism seeks to establish a direct relationship between God and individual Muslims by obliterating all intermediaries in between.

Due to the growth of the Indian diaspora in the Gulf nations, there has been a transition from moderate Islam advocated by the

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7. Alam, n. 5, p. 60.

Hanafi school to the Hanbali school, as Hanbali Islam dominates in the Arabian peninsula. The returnees from the Arab world pride themselves on a new and purer understanding of Islam, as the Arab world and Saudi Arabia, in particular, has been the custodian of Islam and is considered to have the most puritanical system of the religion. The influence of trade, inter-marriages, and identities has resulted in a particular affinity among the Muslims in South India. Many follow the festivals and rituals based on Arab society—it is a common feature that festivals are celebrated here on different dates from the rest of the Indian Muslim population. The state government of Kerala, in the early 1950s, created Arabic institutions where the students acquired fluency in the language, resulting in gaining access to opportunities in the Gulf. Thus, travel and trade with the Gulf brought Salafi Islam, which had no exposure to the pluralistic society on the Indian shores.

Islam has been a religion for centuries. Ibn Tamiyah in Egypt and Maulana Maududi in India advocated Islam as a way of life, over and above religion. This resulted in the Islamic Brotherhood in Egypt and Jamaat-e-Islami in India, graduating Islam from religion to a political movement. Maududi's ideology and Ibn Tamiyah's Muslim Brotherhood philosophy of Egypt germinated the idea of a great Islamic state run by a Caliphate, as in the first three centuries of Islam. The birth of political Islam in India happened with Maulana Maududi's ideology of the Jamaat-e-Islami.[8] This period coincided with the Indian Freedom Movement and the establishment of the Muslim League, resulting in an easy flow of ideology to Southern India. Maulana Maudidi emphasised the following.

- **Sovereignty of Allah:** Maududi emphasised that sovereignty belongs exclusively to Allah. The state's laws should be based on the Quran and *Sunnah*, rejecting human-made laws that contradict Islamic principles.
- **Islam as a Complete System:** Maududi viewed Islam as a complete and comprehensive system, covering all aspects of life, including politics, economics, social relations, and individual conduct.

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8. Nadeem F. Paracha, "Abul Ala Maududi: An Existentialist History," 2015, *Dawn*, https://www.dawn.com/news/119. Accessed on July 16, 2024.

- **Establishment of an Islamic State:** Maududi advocated the creation of an Islamic state that implements the *Shariah* law. He believed this was essential for Muslims to live a genuinely Islamic life. He opposed secular nationalism and thought that the primary identity of Muslims should be their religious identity, not their nationality or ethnicity.
- **Role of Jihad:** Maududi considered *jihad* (struggle in the way of Allah) as essential for establishing and defending an Islamic state. He emphasised both spiritual and physical aspects of *jihad*. He was critical of Western political systems, including democracy, socialism and secularism, considering them incompatible with Islam. He stressed the importance of Islamic education and the need to reform society according to Islamic principles, which include personal piety, social justice, and eliminating unIslamic practices.

Contrary to popular belief, most of the *madrassa*-educated people of the Hanafi school are more tolerant of a pluralistic society. However, it is observed that due to sectarian differences, Hanbali/Salafi/Ahl-e-Hadis *madrassas'* teachings are more rigid and puritanical. Generally, sectarian differences exist in the practices and methods. However, lately, speakers like Zakir Naik, Faratullah Ghori and other Salafi Islamic scholars have used religion to target the urban and semi-urban Muslim youth. Their talks' themes include financial hardships and miseries due to *shirk* (polytheism and idolatry) and not following a puritan Islam. They convince people that redemption is possible only by returning to puritan Islam. So, irrespective of the sect the youth belong to, they get radicalised and endeavour to establish an Islamic state. It is an uncanny mix of veneration of saints and the establishment of the Caliphate. A minor aberration in their lives enables these *maulanas* to push the youth toward radical thought processes.

RADICALISATION

- **Individual Level:** This involves individuals facing identity issues, lack of integration, feelings of alienation, marginalisation, discrimination, relative deprivation, and humiliation (direct

or indirect). These experiences often lead to stigmatisation and rejection, which can be coupled with moral outrage and a desire for (vicarious) revenge.

- **Group Level:** This encompasses the broader radical environment—the supportive or complicit social circle that serves as a rallying point. This level is the crucial link between terrorists and their wider community, which feels aggrieved about injustices. These conditions can radicalise segments of the youth and lead to the formation of terrorist organisations.
- **Society Level:** This pertains to the role of the government and society, both domestically and internationally. It includes the radicalisation of public opinion and party politics, strained majority-minority relationships (especially concerning the foreign diasporas), and a lack of socio-economic opportunities for entire sections of society. These factors contribute to the mobilisation and radicalisation of the discontented, with some potentially turning to terrorism.

Radicalisation in a standalone mode may not be violent; people may be radical but not violent, but it makes them susceptible to take drastic steps, which, in turn, end up becoming violent. These transformations are on the rise due to a low level of tolerance, a generic phenomenon in today's environment.

After deliberations about, and assimilation of, data from various sources, the law enforcement agencies have come to a consensus on specific essential steps that comprise the journey from radicalisation to terrorism.

The sequence from radicalisation to terrorism is explained as under:

- **Grievance Identification:** Recognising and interpreting a problem as an injustice rather than a mere misfortune.
- **Ideological Framing:** Adopting a belief system that morally justifies violent actions, often rooted in religious, ideological, or political ideologies.
- **Victim Blaming:** Assigning blame to specific individuals or groups, claiming that they are responsible for the perceived injustice.

- **Dehumanisation:** Using derogatory language and symbols to strip the targeted victims of their humanity, making violence against them seem more acceptable.
- **Responsibility Displacement:** Shifting or diffusing responsibility for violent acts by claiming that a higher authority (such as God or a political leader) commanded the action or asserting that the group, not the individual, is accountable.
- **Minimisation of Harm:** Downplaying or misrepresenting the harmful effects of violence by using euphemisms or comparing them to worse actions to make them seem less severe.
- **Mobilisation:** Transitioning from radical thoughts to violent actions, often through the involvement with radical groups or networks that support and escalate these beliefs and behaviours.

While Fathali Moghaddam, Clark Maculay and other researchers have researched and spoken about radicalisation, the element of political Islam needs to be dovetailed into it. The propagation of the political thought that Islam is not a religion but a way of life and governance further justifies *jihad* and the implementation of the *Shariah*, with *jihad* being the violent kind. A lot of lone-wolf terrorists have no sectarian loyalties, but their urge for Islamic loyalties, coupled with the desire for the *Shariah* and the righteous way of life, gets them into terror/suicide attacks.

A significant element which contributes to this radicalisation is a lack of complete knowledge of Islam as the terms *kafir* and *jihad* find a new definition with every sect/terror group or community. There is an urgent need to stem this fundamentalist element in the bud to prevent a major law and order problem in the future, and keep the diversity of India intact.

CONCLUSION

The generic understanding of Islamic radicalisation has typically been associated with a particular sect due to its ideological beliefs. In the case of the Indian subcontinent, Islam, on its arrival, had interacted with a pluralistic society, resulting in suitable additions to the Islamic way of life. Islam in North India is Hanafi-dominated, whereas South

India has more Wahhabi influence. The understanding of Islam by an average urban / semi-urban person is limited, and the drivers of radicalisation, in their case, have more to do with Islamic identity rather than alignment with a particular sect. The identity dilemma and the urge to be seen as an "adherent follower of Islam" results in radicalisation when exposed to selective literature and the media. Wahhabism, radicalisation, and terrorism are terms taken in the same breath as far as Islamic terror is concerned. Though they are linked, they comprise three distinct identities and a correct understanding of these is mandatory to prevent and mitigate the phenomenon's expansion as, often, the journey from radicalisation to terrorism is externally triggered.