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BALANCING ACT: COMBATTING ISLAMIST RADICALISATION AND ADVANCING SECULAR EDUCATION IN ASSAM

SHALINI CHAWLA AND PRIYADARSHINI BARUAH

In March 2024, a student of the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Guwahati, Tauseef Ali Farooqui, was arrested by the Assam Police after he expressed his sympathies and allegiance to the Islamic State (IS)/ISIS (Islamic State of Syria and Iraq) via the social media platform, LinkedIn, wherein he wrote an alarming open letter stating the reason for his decision to join it.¹ When a search took place in Tauseef's hostel room, an IS flag and IS literature were found in his possession. Tauseef's social media accounts suggested that he had openly expressed his desire to join the ISIS.² What is deeply concerning

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1. "IIT-Guwahati Student Arrested under UAPA for Links with ISIS", *The Indian Express*, March 24, 2024, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/iit-student-join-isis-detained-assam-police-9230911/>. Accessed on May 2, 2024.
2. Sumit (@SumitHansd), X (Twitter), March 24, 2024, <https://twitter.com/SumitHansd/status/1771803823293505645/photo/2>. Accessed on May 2, 2024.

about such an incident is that it highlights the direct dangers of radicalisation and increasing extremism within the nation's premium educational institutions.

Four days before Tauseef's arrest, two other alleged top leaders of the IS, Haris Farooqi, supposedly the head of the IS faction in India (the *Wilayat-e-Hind* faction), and his associate Aurag Singh, alias Rehan, were nabbed in Assam's Dhubri district after they crossed over from Bangladesh.³ The two are highly indoctrinated and have been engaging in conspiracies involving the recruitment of gullible university youths for terror activities and the financing of terror attacks using Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) across India. They had plans of committing an IED attack after crossing over from Bangladesh.⁴ Several cases are pending against the two, and the National Investigation Agency (NIA) had been on the hunt for Haris Farooqi since July 2023.

The NIA chargesheet (August 2023) implicated two individuals Md. Akbar Ali, *nom de guerre* Akbar Ali, and Abul Kalam Azad, on charges of actively engaging in recruitment and radicalisation activities in the bordering districts of Assam.⁵ Both were linked to the AQIS (Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent) and ABT (Ansarullah Bangla Team) modules. Their arrest underscored the ongoing challenge of illegal immigration and infiltration of radical Islamist elements from Bangladesh to India's northeastern bordering states.

The demographic change happening in the bordering districts of Assam and West Bengal due to rampant illegal Bangladeshi immigration provides a natural cover to these violent extremist outfits. Assam is particularly besieged by this problem. Though the NIA and Assam Police are robustly taking strong measures to counter the menace of growing Islamist threats, the complete eradication

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3. "ISIS India Head Haris Farooqi and His Aide Arrested in Assam", *The Hindu*, March 21, 2024, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/isis-india-head-haris-farooqi-and-his-aide-arrested-in-assam/article67973991.ece>. Accessed on May 2, 2024.
 4. Bikash Singh, "Assam STF Questions Maulvi in IIT Guwahati Student's ISIS Links Case", *The Economic Times*, April 6, 2024, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/assam-stf-questions-maulvi-in-iit-guwahati-student-isis-links-case/articleshow/109091615.cms?from=mdr>. Accessed on May 2, 2024.
 5. "NIA Places 5 States on High Alert Including Assam", *India Today NE*, September 14, 2023, <https://www.indiatodayne.in/assam/story/nia-places-5-states-on-high-alert-including-assam-678093-2023-09-14>. Accessed on March 15, 2024.

of these elements needs thoughtful and consistent measures. More importantly, there is a need to address the root causes of radicalisation in the area.

With the downfall of Sheikh Hasina's political regime in Bangladesh in August 2024, there is potential for heightened radicalisation, with enhanced instability. Hasina had prohibited the ABT groups that were suspected of having connections to the Jamiat group. However, in the absence of the Awami League government, these groups may be granted more freedom/leeway. Additionally, there are indications of the participation of Islamists in the civil war in Bangladesh, and the likelihood that these groups may acquire political influence/power or exert control over the new government.

THE MUSHROOMING OF ISLAMIST MILITANCY IN EASTERN INDIA: UNDERSTANDING ITS COMPLEXITY AND HISTORICAL EVIDENCE

During the tumultuous years preceding partition in 1947, the Pakistani leadership lobbied hard for an undivided Assam in Pakistan. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, a friend of India, but a staunch supporter of partition all his life, argued in 1944, "Because Eastern Pakistan must have sufficient land for its expansion and because Assam has abundant forests and mineral resources, coal, petroleum, etc., Eastern Pakistan must include Assam to be financially and economically strong."⁶

The inability to annex Assam into East Pakistan during the partition of 1947 had always pained the Pakistani leadership. Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, in this book, *The Myth of Independence*, wrote, "It would be wrong to think that Kashmir is the only dispute that divides India and Pakistan, though undoubtedly the most significant. One at least as nearly as important as the Kashmir dispute, is that of Assam and some districts of India adjacent to East Pakistan."⁷ Therefore, both the West and East wings of Pakistan were united in their irredentism for Northeast India. There was an understanding in the deep state of

6. Manju Singh, *Politics of Migration & Quest for Identity* (Assam: Anita Publications, 1990), p. 168.

7. Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, *The Myth of Independence* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), p.16.

Pakistan that the erstwhile Assam was probably the only province that was never ruled by Islamic rulers.⁸ Thus, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) believed that it was imperative for it to devise a very different policy/strategy for the northeastern region of India in order to further succeed in the aim of destabilising India. Proxy war as a tool to pursue foreign policy goals and strategic objectives has been the Pakistan military's preferred option. Pakistan launched its first covert war under the name of a tribal revolt in Kashmir as early as 1949.⁹

Pakistan's linkages to the northeast insurgent groups can be traced back to as early as the 1950s.¹⁰ The ISI played a significant role in fostering the growth and expansion of extremist organisations in Assam and other states of the northeastern region.¹¹ It began by supporting the Naga insurgency in Nagaland. General Ayub Khan was known to have influence over the Muslim population in Northeast India, encouraging them to provide tacit support to the Naga National Council (NNC).¹² The policy of utilising militants as a component of its strategic arsenal established a foundation for extremism in Northeast India.

INCEPTION OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM FROM BANGLADESH, PAKISTAN'S PROXY WAR AND NORTHEAST INDIA

The emergence of the first generation violent Islamist organisations in Bangladesh can be traced back to the late 1980s, with groups such as Muslim Millat Bahini (MMB) and Harkatul Jihad-al-Islami Bangladesh (HuJI-B) being among the earliest.¹³ These were then

8. Dr Saroj Kumar Rath, "Empirical Analysis of Islamic Extremism in North-East India", *Journal of North-East India Studies*, v. 10(1), January-June, 2020, p. 56, <https://www.jneis.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/10.1.3.pdf>. Accessed on March 19, 2024.

9. Shalini Chawla, *Pakistan's Military and Its Strategy* (New Delhi: KW Publishers, 2009), pp. 155-164.

10. "ISI's Links with Northeast Insurgent Groups", Institute of Conflict Management, South Asia Terrorism Portal, https://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/document/papers/Pakistan_report/Anex_G.htm. Accessed on April 2, 2024.

11. Rath, n. 8, p. 55.

12. Hein Keissling, *Faith, Unity, Discipline: The ISI of Pakistan* (London: C. Hurst & Co. United Kingdom, 2016) p. 161.

13. Tipu Sultan, "Rooted in Mujahids Returning from Afghanistan", *Prothom Alo*, August 6, 2016, <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/Rooted-in-mujahids-returning-from-Afghanistan>. Accessed on March 19, 2024.

followed by subsequent organisations like the Jamaat-ul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), and finally, AQIS/ABT.¹⁴ The inception of Islamic terrorism in Bangladesh can be attributed to a combination of global events that significantly radicalised and motivated the Islamists to join as advocates of the establishment of a global worldwide Caliphate for Islam, similar to the ideologues of the ISIS. The chronology of Islamic militancy in Bangladesh is as under:

- First Generation: The Muslim Millat Bahini (MMB), formed by the dismissed Army Major Matiur Rahman, marked the genesis of Islamic militancy in Bangladesh, drawing inspiration from the Israel-Palestine conflict.¹⁵ This organisation consolidated the returning Bangladeshi Mujahideen, becoming one of the country's earliest violent Islamist groups.
- Second Generation: Subsequently, the Soviet-Afghan War contributed to the emergence of the second generation Islamic militant groups like the Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB), and Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami Bangladesh (HuJI-B), which dispatched Mujahideen to various perceived *jihad* fronts.¹⁶
- Third Generation: Islamic militancy in Bangladesh, represented by the AQIS/ABT, exhibits tangible affiliations and ideological ties to the ISIS/Islamic Caliphate, established in Raqqa and Mosul in 2014, as well as with Al Qaeda.¹⁷

With regard to the third generation Islamist organisations like AQIS, ABT or ISIS, these *jihadist* outfits have undergone significant transformations, especially with regard to radicalisation and recruitment, due to their adaptation to the evolving digital communication landscape. These outfits have learned how to adopt and use new media as a potent tool or a medium to disseminate Islamist/*jihadist* propaganda to their target audience. For instance, according to the *Daily Star* news report:

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

16. Shafi Md Mostofa, "Cyber Radicalization by Bangladeshi Islamists", *The Diplomat*, May 17, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/05/cyber-radicalization-by-bangladeshi-islamists/>. Accessed on March 19, 2024.

17. Ibid.

The arrest of Zobaida Siddiqua Nabila, a 19-year-old college student from Dhaka, dubbed as the first-ever female operative of the ABT or Ansar-al-Islam reveals how modern digital communication platforms have become the new recruitment centres for modern-day *jihadists*. Nabila used platforms such as Facebook, Telegram, and Chipwire to disseminate extremist materials targeting the young audience. Reportedly, Nabila operated 15 telegram channels with 25,000 followers, where extremist content like manuals for bomb-making, etc. was regularly shared.¹⁸

In addition to widely recognised social media platforms like Telegram and Facebook, the Bangladeshi extremists have demonstrated proficiency in utilising various encrypted digital communication channels. Interestingly, these channels, which are less familiar to the general public, are namely, Transfer.Sh, the Internet Archive, Yandex.Com, File.Fm, Fromsmash.Com, Gofile.Io, Tune.Pk, Wettransfer.com, a pro-IS private file hosting site on Nextcloud, and Mediafire.¹⁹ Thus, substantiating the argument of ‘new media as a medium of terrorist propaganda’.

Pakistan’s role in the 1980s as the frontline state for the United States in fighting Communist Russia brought in not only Western military equipment but also rich experience in conducting covert war. During this period, Pakistan recruited thousands of Mujahideen.²⁰ A good number of second generation Bangladeshi Mujahideen also actively participated in the Afghan War.²¹ The gradual proliferation of Islamic groups in Bangladesh facilitated the intermingling of Islamist militants from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh within each other’s territories.²² As a result of this intermingling, a structured *jihadi* network emerged on either side of the India-Bangladesh border

18. “First-ever Female Operative of Ansar-al-Islam Arrested, Police Claim”, *The Daily Star*, August 29, 2021, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/crime-justice/news/first-ever-female-operative-ansar-al-islam-arrested-police-claim-2163711>. Accessed on March 19, 2024.

19. “Extremist Content Online: IS Videos Found on Facebook, 13 Other Websites”, *Dhaka Tribune*, October 12, 2021, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/world/315459/extremist-content-online-is-videos-found-on>. Accessed on March 19, 2024.

20. Chawla, n. 9, pp.184-185.

21. Rath, n. 8, p. 56.

22. *Ibid.*

which led to an increase in Islamist extremism in Northeast India. The ISI exploited the rise in tensions between illegal Muslim infiltrators from Bangladesh and the indigenous communities in the northeast region, particularly in Assam, to good effect, which led to many illegal Bangladeshi Muslims residing in Assam joining Pakistan's *jihad* in the region.

ASSAM: THE JIHAD HOTBED?

In terms of the concentration of the Muslim population with respect to the total population of the state, Assam ranks third after Lakshadweep and Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) out of all the states and Union Territories of India.²³ This Muslim demography in the state comprises two distinct ethnic groups: the Bengali-speaking Muslims of Bangladeshi origin and the indigenous Assamese-speaking Muslims. It is interesting to note that the majority of the Muslim population in Assam consists of migrants of Bangladeshi origin. Indigenous Assamese-speaking Muslims represent roughly 37 per cent of the total Muslim population, while the migrant Bengali-speaking Muslims constitute the remaining 63 per cent.²⁴

Assam also faces the challenge of human trafficking and illegal migration from Bangladesh and Myanmar (Rohingyas). Although Pakistan's covert actions had already been ongoing in the region, exploiting the demographic vulnerabilities, owing to the shared border with Bangladesh, distinct *jihadi* activities in the state were noticed as early as 1999. Years of radicalisation have taken a new turn, as a new generation of *jihadists* in Assam is becoming increasingly pan-Islamist in nature. Although Pakistan has fanned Islamic *jihad* in the region, the new-generation *jihadists* are not influenced by the desire to carve out the northeast region for Pakistan; rather, their allegiance is to Salafi pan-Islamist extremist groups.

23. "Hindu Muslim Population in India", Population Census, <https://www.census2011.co.in/religion.php>. Accessed on May 24, 2024.

24. Prabin Kalita, "Assam CM Himanta Biswa Sarma Lays Down 'Indigenous' Rules for Bangladesh-Origin Muslims", *The Times of India*, March 24, 2024, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/assam-cm-himanta-biswa-sarma-lays-down-indigenous-rules-for-bdesh-origin-muslims/articleshow/108739246.cms>. Accessed on May 23, 2024.

One of the glaring incidents indicating this trend came to notice in August 2022, when two men linked with Al Qaeda of the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) were arrested in the Barpeta district of Assam.²⁵ Their arrest marked, and created, significant media furore as Al Qaeda's growing footprint in Assam became apparent. The AQIS/ABT operatives entered Assam disguised as *imams*. They established *madrassas* with the objective of radicalising the youth for sleeper cells.²⁶

As such, the immediate objective of the AQIS/ABT in Assam does not involve direct military engagement; rather, it focusses on penetrating the psyche of the Muslim youth through softer approaches, such as disseminating propaganda via *madrassas* or leveraging digital platforms for indoctrination. Since 2021, Assam has been a core focus of the AQIS. In October 2021, a video titled "Don't Sit Idly by Grieving" was released, appealing to Muslims to perform *hijrah* to Kashmir and Assam.²⁷ In April 2022, Al Qaeda leader Ayman Al Zawahiri exhorted Muslims in India for *jihadi*.²⁸ In the first half of 2022, the Assam Police alone busted at least five modules of the *jihadi* terror outfits.²⁹

To better understand the level of 'technical sophistication' or the use of various digital platforms by terrorist outfits like the AQIS, ABT or ISIS in Assam, the Chief Minister of Assam, Dr Himanta Biswa Sarma, in a press conference in 2022, commented, "They have messaging systems with peer-to-peer encryption, unknown apps for one-time use and deletion and self-destruct programmes.

25. "Assam CM Himanta Biswa Ups the Ante against Radicalism as Cops Nab Terrorists from Madrasas", YouTube video, 0:00-0:14, Times Now, August 29, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K_YzmOfMTDY. Accessed on March 15, 2024.

26. Prabin Kalita, "Assam Razes Second Madrassa with 'Qaida' Links in Barpeta", *The Times of India*, August 30, 2022, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/assam-razes-second-madrassa-with-qaida-links-in-barpeta/articleshow/93864992.cms>. Accessed on March 21, 2024.

27. Balasubramanியan Viswanathan, "Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent: Still a Threat to India?" *Geopolitical Monitor*, January 25, 2023, <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/al-qaeda-in-the-indian-sub-continent-still-a-threat-to-india/>. Accessed on April 10, 2024.

28. Ibid.

29. Bikash Singh, "Assam Police Arrests Two Suspected Terrorists with Links to Al Qaeda", *The Economic Times*, August 21, 2022, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/assam-police-arrests-two-suspected-terrorists-with-links-to-al-qaeda/articleshow/93695334.cms?from=mdr>. Accessed on February 5, 2024.

Their financial transactions have also been in small doses to avoid suspicion.”³⁰

The promotion of pan-Islamist radicalism in Assam is not limited to extra-territorial groups like Al Qaeda. Even home-grown Salafist organisations have penetrated the state. Pallab Bhattacharyya, former additional director-general of Assam Police, highlighted the role of Indian Salafist groups like the Popular Front of India’s (PFI’s) drive to radicalise the Muslim population of Assam:

The subsequent advent of the Kerala-based organisation Popular Front of India (PFI) and its ingress into Goalpara, Karimganj, Silchar, Hailakandi, Kamrup, Barpeta, Baksa, Chirang, Kokrajhar, Dhubri, South Salmara, Lakhimpur, Nagaon, and Tinsukia Districts of Assam in the process of updating of NRC, paved the ground for the germination of radicalisation in Assam.³¹

DEALING WITH RADICALISATION IN ASSAM: SECULARISATION OF EDUCATION

The threat of radicalisation from extremist elements outside the state has been acknowledged by the Assam government, and measures have been undertaken by the state security apparatus to address the threat. In August 2022, Assam Chief Minister Dr Sarma announced that Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) have been designed in Assam to ensure that “*imams* and other people coming to *madrassas* from outside states” will have to register their names on a government portal.³²

The criticality of education has been well recognised in terms of dealing with radicalisation in states. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) report published in 2017 titled, “Preventing Violent Extremism Through Education”, highlights the role of education:

30. “Hi-tech Radicals Turning Assam into Islamist Hub: CM Himanta Biswa Sarma”, *The Hindu*, August 4, 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/assam-becoming-hotbed-of-jihadi-activities-cm-himanta-biswa-sarma/article65726341.ece>. Accessed on March 21, 2024.

31. Pallab Bhattacharyya, “Tackling Radicalization in the Land of Sankar-Azan”, *Awaz The Voice*, July 30, 2022, <https://www.awazthevoice.in/opinion-news/tackling-radicalization-in-the-land-of-sankar-azan-14191.html>. Accessed on April 29, 2024.

32. n. 25.

The provision of relevant education of good quality can help create the conditions that make it difficult for violent extremist ideologies and acts to proliferate. More specifically, education policies can ensure that places of learning do not become a breeding ground for violent extremism. They can also ensure that educational contents and teaching/learning approaches develop the learner's resilience to violent extremism.³³

The state government has also accurately assessed the criticality of the *madrassas*, their strict monitoring and restructuring. Reports suggested radicalisation of the young minds at the *madrassas*, and the government's efforts have now been diverted to address the challenge. In a crucial move, the Assam government has initiated secularisation of education at the state level.

On December 30, 2020, the Assam Repealing Bill, 2020, was passed by the state Assembly, under which all the provincialised, government-funded *madrassas* were to be transformed into general schools. The Assam Repealing Bill, 2020, came into effect on January 27, 2021.³⁴ The Bill sought to abolish:

- The Assam Madrasa Education (Provincialisation) Act, 1995.
- The Assam Madrasa Education (Provincialisation of Services of Employees and Reorganisation of Madrasa Educational Institutions) Act, 2018.
- Following the passage of the Bill, another Act relating to the provincialisation of *madrassas*, which was passed by the state government in 2011, stood repealed.³⁵

In December 2023, the Department of School Education in Assam announced that the government and provincialised *madrassas* in 31

33. UNESCO, "Preventing Violent Extremism Through Education: A Guide to Policy-Makers", 2017, p. 22, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000247764>. Accessed on April 15, 2024.

34. "Writ Petition (C) No.3038 of 2021", Gauhati High Court, February 4, 2022, Para: 55 and 56, pp. 45-46, https://hcservices.ecourts.gov.in/ecourtindiaHC/cases/s_kiosk_order.php?state_cd=6&dist_cd=1&stateNm=Assam%22. Accessed on May 20, 2024.

35. Ibid.; Ratna Singh, "Gauhati High Court Upholds Act Of 2020 To Repeal Madrasa Education Provincialisation Act", *Law Beat*, February 5, 2022, <https://www.lawbeat.in/top-stories/gauhati-high-court-upholds-act-2020-repeal-madrassa-education-provincialisation-act>. Accessed on May 23, 2024.

districts, numbering 1,281, will be converted into general schools under the Board of Secondary Education Assam or SEBA.³⁶

The Educational Minister, Ranaj Pegu, tweeted the decision:

Consequent to conversion of all Govt and Provincialized Madrasa's into general schools under SEBA @SchoolEdnAssam has changed the names of ME Madrasas into ME Schools by a notification today 13 December 2023.³⁷

The *madrassas* have been converted into regular schools, and the Sanskrit *tols* will become centres of learning for ancient studies. Reportedly, the teaching faculty at the *tols* are in the process of being transferred to the high schools or to the university level for teaching Sanskrit. There have been changes in the curriculum, for example, subjects like general science, general mathematics, social sciences, and languages, including Assamese, Hindi, and English, have been introduced. Sports have been included as part of the curriculum at schools, and school uniforms have also been introduced.

Even with these measures, there are close to 1,500 private *madrassas* which continue to function but are under strict monitoring. The alterations in the education policy and inclusion of general but professionally essential subjects like mathematics, science and social science will not only facilitate the integration of the students at the national and international levels but will also enable them to find employment. The monitoring of the *madrassas* has been a critical contributor in tracking extremist elements within these institutions.³⁸

While the impact of these initiatives will depend on the effectiveness of the execution of the measures and will take time to reflect broader changes, nonetheless, the initiative is certainly a bold step in addressing the root cause of radicalisation. The initiative to secularise education is in sync with the ongoing de-radicalisation

36. "1,281 Madrasas Converted to Regular Schools in Assam", *The Assam Tribune*, December 14, 2023, <https://assamtribune.com/assam/1281-madrassas-converted-to-regular-schools-in-assam-1509468?infinitemscroll=1>. Accessed on January 10, 2024.

37. Ranaj Pegu (@ranajpeguassam), X (Twitter), December 13, 2023, <https://x.com/ranajpeguassam/>. Accessed on May 23, 2024.

38. "Assam Bulldozes Another Madrassa Linked to Al-Qaeda", *The Hindu*, August 31, 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/assam-bulldozes-another-madrassa-linked-to-al-qaeda/article65833677.ece>. Accessed on April 01, 2024.

and counter-radicalisation initiatives in India, which primarily focus on community engagement, family involvement, and broadening employment potentials. The case study of Maharashtra's de-radicalisation programme run by the state's Anti-Terror Squad (ATS) is a good example of how communities and institutions can play a key role in de-radicalisation initiatives. Addressing the menace of radicalisation requires a multi-pronged approach, and certainly, nurturing of young minds and guarding them against radical motivations are required to fight it.