
The Challenge of Extremism and the Future of South Asia



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Abstract

The challenge of extremism in South Asia needs to be understood and analysed from four angles. First, the failure of the state and society to eradicate the misuse of religion for political purposes. Second, the surge of intolerance and radicalization of youth which threatens peace and stability. Third, the erosion of rule of law and the justice system which encourages extremist elements. Finally, economic and social underdevelopment which provides a fertile ground to promote and flourish an extremist mindset. As a result, all South Asian countries are exposed and vulnerable to widespread extremism which leads to the outbreak of violence and terrorism. The paper will highlight fault lines in society which augment the threat of extremism and how the future of South Asia can be secured by unleashing a thought process that can promote tolerance at the grassroots level. The final part of the paper is composed of policy recommendations with an emphasis on following a collaborative approach on the part of South Asian countries to effectively deal with the challenge and menace of extremism.

Keywords: radicalization, violence, extremism, terrorism, peace, stability.

Introduction

South Asia is facing a major threat from the forces that promote intolerance, militancy, extremism, violence, and terrorism by exploiting religious, communal, and ethnic polarization. Extremism is both a challenge and an opportunity. Termed a lethal virus causing colossal damage to state and society, extremism is an opportunity to unleash the process of enlightenment¹ and tolerance by providing

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better education to deal with a mindset which promotes retrogression, intolerance, the radicalization of youth, violence, and terrorism.

The challenge of extremism in South Asia needs to be understood and analysed from four angles. First, the failure of the state and society to eradicate the misuse of religion for political purposes. Second, the surge of intolerance and radicalization of youth² which threatens peace and stability. Third, the erosion of rule of law and the justice system which encourages extremist elements. Finally, economic and social underdevelopment which provides a fertile ground to promote and flourish an extremist mindset. As a result, all South Asian countries are exposed and vulnerable to widespread extremism which leads to the outbreak of violence and terrorism.

This paper examines the *challenge* of extremism in South Asia and how it is a *threat* to regional peace and security. Particularly, since 9/11 extremism is equated with religious and ethnic intolerance whereby innocent people are targeted and lynched by armed individuals or mobs to cause fear among ethnic and religious minorities. Furthermore, the paper highlights fault lines in society which augment the threat of extremism and how the future of South Asia can be secured by unleashing a thought process which can promote tolerance at the grassroots level. The final part of the paper is composed of policy recommendations with an emphasis on following a collaborative approach on the part of South Asian countries to effectively deal with the challenge of extremism. Following are some of the questions that may be raised and will be responded to in this paper:

1. Why and how extremism is a *threat* to South Asian peace and stability?
2. What are the issues which *augment* extremism in society?

3. Why there is a lack of coordination and connectivity among the South Asian countries to deal with the *menace* of extremism?
4. How the *challenge* of extremism is a threat to the future of South Asia?

While extremism is a global phenomenon which reflected its intensity in the last few decades, particularly after 9/11, there is no unified approach which can effectively deal with factors promoting intolerance, anger, antagonism, militancy, violence, and terrorism. Extremism is the first indication of a society with the potential to turn violent and causes colossal human and material destruction. In the tree of terrorism, extremism is an entrenched root among many, which if not cut can plunge society into a perpetual state of instability and violence.

South Asia, which has been the cradle of several civilizations and religions, failed to cope with this major threat to peace. If intolerance has permeated South Asia in the last several decades, it means both state and society failed to understand the dynamics of issues that gave an impetus to the lack of peaceful coexistence. Negative cultural transformation in South Asia also mitigated sanity, tolerance, and peace, which led to the surge of extremism and violence. Radicalization of youth is another major phenomenon which gave stimulus to intolerance and an extremist mindset which led to the surge of violence and societal polarization primarily at religious, sectarian, and ethnic levels. Moreover, in the absence of intra-regional coordination to combat extremism and terrorism, the outcome is the degeneration of society and a free hand given to those who use religion for political purposes. The political culture of South Asia, which reflected its centuries-old civilization, seems to have degenerated. Tolerance, peaceful coexistence, patience, and broadmindedness which remained a hallmark of South Asian culture

for centuries tend to be replaced with extremism, intolerance, anger, antagonism, and chauvinism.

Understanding the Concept of Extremism

Extremism is not a new phenomenon. It is rooted in human nature and psyche as people tend to be aggressive in their approach and way of doing things. But when it comes to a situation where extremism becomes a threat to human survival and society is taken hostage by various extremist groups, it is the obligation of state authorities to take firm action against those who propagate hate, anger, antagonism, and violence.

To seek clarity about the *why* and *how* of extremism in South Asia it is imperative to seek a definitional discourse on what extremism is all about. According to the Macmillan English Dictionary extremism is a "tendency to have political or religious ideas that are considered extremely unreasonable by most people."³ In Safire's Political Dictionary, extremism has been defined as "a position at either end of the ideological spectrum and home of politically far-out."⁴ Dictionary.com defines extremism as: "a person who goes to extremes, especially in political matters. A supporter or advocate of extreme doctrines or practices."⁵ *The Greenwood Encyclopaedia of International Relations* defines extremism as, "immoderation in policy or in one's intellectual political, or social opinions and judgments."⁶ Oxford English Dictionary defines extremism as "opposed to moderate."⁷ In the book *Extremism and the Internet* by Peter Brophy, Jenny Craven and Shelagh Fisher, extremism is defined as "an individual or group's willingness to promote their cause by violence and by the denial of fundamental human rights to others."⁸ Merriam-Webster dictionary defines extremism as, "the quality or state of being extreme." Collins Cobuild English Dictionary defines extremism as "behaviour or beliefs of extremists."⁹

In the book *Political Extremism and Rationality* edited by Albert Breton et.al, an extremist has been defined as “one who uses extremist methods, for example, bombings, inflammatory language, terrorist activity, and so forth, but whose platform is or may be centrist rather than extremist in political (left-right) space.”¹⁰ Nobel laureate from South Africa, Archbishop Desmond Tutu defines extremism as follows:

When you do not allow for a different point of view; when you hold your own views as being quite exclusive; when you don't allow the possibility of difference. When extremism starts to have a political end, for example, to force governments to the table of negotiations for some changes in their policies. It starts to become synonymous with radicalization.¹¹

Furthermore, an extremist has been defined as, “someone who has beliefs or opinions that are considered to be extremely unreasonable by most people.”¹² Concise Oxford Dictionary defines an extremist as, “A person who holds extreme political or religious views.”¹³ Furthermore, “groups deemed to be extremist could include any group that holds strong views and which will go to great lengths in pursuit of its beliefs. Such groups can encompass a huge range of ideologies.”¹⁴ While summing up extremism and extremists, two things should be taken into account: first, it is the mindset, particularly at the youth level, which is negatively transformed by inducting hate and intolerance against a particular community. Second, it exhibits the failure of saner elements of society to prevent the surge of those groups who target a particular community because of their different social, cultural, and religious identities.

What is violent extremism and how it destabilizes a society? How violent extremism can be countered? According to United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes (UNODC), there are many different governmental and intergovernmental definitional approaches to the concept of violent extremism, some examples of which are given here.

For instance, governmental and non-governmental explanations of violent extremism are as follows in various developed societies:

Governmental

Australia: "Violent extremism is the beliefs and actions of people who support or use violence to achieve ideological, religious or political goals. This includes terrorism and other forms of politically motivated and communal violence."

Canada: "[V]iolent extremism" is where an offence is "primarily motivated by extreme political, religious or ideological views". Some definitions explicitly note that radical views are by no means a problem in themselves, but that they become a threat to national security when such views are put into violent action

USA: The FBI defines violent extremism as the "encouraging, condoning, justifying, or supporting the commission of a violent act to achieve political, ideological, religious, social, or economic goals", whilst USAID defines violent extremist activities as the "advocating, engaging in, preparing, or otherwise supporting ideologically motivated or justified violence to further social, economic or political objectives".

Norway: Violent extremism constitutes activities of persons and groups that are willing to use violence to achieve political, ideological or religious goals.

Sweden: A violent extremist is someone "deemed repeatedly to have displayed behaviour that does not just accept the use of violence but also supports or exercises ideologically motivated violence to promote something."

UK: Extremism is defined as the vocal or active opposition to fundamental values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and the mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs, as well as calls for the death of United Kingdom armed forces at home or abroad.¹⁵

Intergovernmental

The organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) defines extremism as: "[P]romoting views which foment and incite violence in furtherance of particular beliefs, and foster hatred which might lead to inter-community violence". United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO): Whilst recognizing that there is no internationally agreed-upon definition, UNESCO, within the *Preventing violent extremism through education: a guide for policy-makers* document, suggested that the most common understanding of the term, and the one which it follows within the guide, is one that "refers to the beliefs and actions of people who support or use violence to achieve ideological, religious or political goals". This can include "terrorism and other forms of politically motivated violence".¹⁶ How extremism, which is as old as human history, gets an impetus when the government and inter-governmental agencies fail to take steps to eradicate issues which cause the outbreak of violence? It is not only society which has a responsibility to check extremism, the role of the state is equally relevant in this regard.

Having conceptualized the term extremism through multiple sources, now one can look at the situation in South Asia to decipher the nature of extremism in South Asia and also to understand why and how extremism is a burgeoning threat to peace in the region.

Why and How Extremism is a Threat to Peace in South Asia?

With a population of one billion plus, no South Asian country is safe from the menace of extremism. There are six major characteristics which shape and re-shape extremism in South Asia. First, ethnic and religious intolerance at the grassroots level promotes an intolerant mindset. Second, economic and social backwardness provides a fertile ground to the forces that exploit poverty and economic stratification.

Taking advantage of frustration particularly among the unemployed youth, 'mafias' promote a sense of deprivation for unleashing a process of violence. Third, when the justice system is ineffective in promoting rule of law and good governance is lacking, the outcome is more and more anger, antagonism, violence, and terrorism in society. When more than half of the world's poor and illiterate live in South Asia, one can expect the lethality of crimes, violence, and the permeation of extremism in society. Fourth, lack of coordinated and united efforts to deal with issues that promote extremism in a society is a fundamental cause of failure at the state and societal level to deal with intolerance, militancy, and violence. It is the failure of civil society groups in South Asia that the surge of religious extremism and fanaticism is rampant in the region.

Fifth, the role of civil society—which should have been vibrant in neutralizing all such elements that promote an extremist mindset—cannot be seen in prevailing circumstances. Finally, there is the failure of the state and its institutions to rein in those forces responsible for inducting intolerance, militancy, violence, and terrorism either in educational institutions or through a network of groups instigating violence against religious and ethnic minorities. When state institutions like bureaucracy, judiciary, and military are filled with appointees who are patronized by ultra-nationalist political parties, the state loses its neutrality. The rise of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Shiv Sena and winning their general elections in 2014 and 2019 led to their influencing of state organs comparable to the surge of the Nazi Socialist Party in Germany during the inter-war period.

Issues that Augment Extremism in Society

Since the decolonization of South Asia in 1947-48, at least four major issues which could have ensured peace and stability in the region failed to materialize.

First, economic and political reforms particularly in Pakistan could have eradicated feudalism and tribalism in the country. India introduced land reforms after partition which eradicated the influence of landowners and the feudal class. Unfortunately, in Pakistan, the culture of feudalism and tribalism which promoted an extremist mindset remained intact. Second, democracy and political pluralism which should have galvanized the culture of tolerance and political participation became victims of an authoritarian mindset as reflected in several military takeovers from 1958 to 1999 that resulted in the deterioration of political pluralism in Pakistan.

Second, the erosion of democracy promoted forces that wanted to use ethnicity and religion for imposing their way of life. Had Pakistan followed the democratic road and political pluralism, the country would have remained united and an extremist mindset which permeated because of the authoritarian system wouldn't have got any substantial space.

Third, the issue of religious intolerance is a major hurdle in ensuring peace and stability in South Asia. For instance, in Pakistan, this issue is as old as the history of this country. In the formative phase of Pakistan, extremism was not a major issue but over time it got out of control. For example, on 1 November 1970, a PIA van driver barged into the line of a visiting Polish delegation and killed Polish Deputy Foreign Minister Zygfryd Wolniak.¹⁷ The van driver identified as Mohammad Feroz was found shouting to claim that he had accomplished his mission when he was arrested. According to the Associated Press (AP), the van driver who killed the Polish Deputy Foreign Minister was a fanatic Muslim who was trying to wipe out the visiting Communist delegation. While the van driver was arrested and after a trial was hanged but the damage was done and it reflected how an extremist mindset instigated the killer to kill socialists as they were according to him enemies of Islam.

The 1 November 1970 incident took place when the election campaign was at its peak and the slogan raised by a religious political party that 'Islam was in danger' motivated all those who thought that it was their national duty to save their religion from the enemies of Islam. It was the fanaticism of the van driver Feroz Abdullah which enabled him to kill the visiting Polish Deputy Foreign Minister. Had the state of Pakistan expressed zero tolerance against all such elements who wanted to use religion for political purposes, the history of the country would have been different. The break-up of Pakistan in 1971 further strengthened religious extremist forces in the successor state of the country which got an impetus after the Afghan jihad.

It is not only in Pakistan that the surge of religious extremism became a reality. The steady erosion of intolerance in India vis-à-vis religious minorities also reflected how secularism, which guaranteed religious freedom, became a casualty. Communal riots in India from 1947 till today took thousands of lives of Muslims but it was till the avowed demonstrations of violence against Muslims and their places of worship that the world began to give second thoughts to India as a secular state. The turning point of the surge of religious extremism in India came in December 1992 when Babri Mosque, a 16th-century Muslim place of worship, was demolished by fanatic Hindu demonstrators having the support of the BJP and Shiv Sena. The claim that Babri mosque was constructed where there was Ram temple in Ayodhya, provided no justification for demolishing that mosque. The worst form of a cover-up of the demolition of Babri Mosque took place when Indian courts in September 2020 acquitted BJP leaders in the demolition of that mosque.

According to BBC News, the court verdict acquitted 32 of the 49 people charged—17 had died while the case was under way. The court maintained that there was insufficient evidence to prove the demolition had been planned. Hindus believe the mosque was built over the birthplace of their deity Lord Ram. The controversial verdict

comes nearly a year after another historic judgment over the site of the mosque. In 2019, the Supreme Court gave the land to Hindus, ending a decades-long legal battle. It gave Muslims another plot of land in Ayodhya on which they were allowed to construct a mosque. In August 2020, Prime Minister Narendra Modi laid the foundation stone for a Hindu temple at the site—a core promise made by his BJP and a hugely symbolic moment for its strident Hindu nationalist base.¹⁸

According to a BBC report, Muslim groups and opposition parties criticized the acquittals. The influential All India Muslim Personal Law Board, which represents Muslim social and political groups in India, said that it would appeal against the ruling in the High Court. "There were police officers, government officials and senior journalists who appeared as witnesses. What about their testimony? The court should have said whether these eyewitnesses were lying," the board's lawyer, Zafaryab Jilani, told the BBC. Many political observers believe the verdict is likely to add to the feeling of discontent and marginalization among India's 200-million Muslim minority. Opposition leaders and some political commentators decried the ruling. Congress party's Randeep Surjewala called it an "egregious violation of the law" that ran counter to "the constitutional spirit," and Sitaram Yehchury, from the Communist Party of India (Marxist), said that it was "a complete travesty of Justice". MP Asaduddin Owaisi told BBC Telugu that he was "pained" at the verdict and called it "a black day for [the] judiciary". "Was it some magic that the masjid [mosque] got demolished? It seems violent acts pay politically."¹⁹ If Hindu extremists have been able to get away with the demolition of Babri mosque and courts also sided with those who 30 years ago in broad day light marched towards the mosque and caused its demolition, it means the destruction of Indian secularism and democracy.

Another deplorable event which reflected how India has persecuted the Muslim minority took place in February 2002 when Narendra Modi, then Chief Minister of the Indian state of Gujarat,

allowed Hindu fanatics to unleash a reign of terror against vulnerable segments of the Muslim population who became a victim of Hindu mayhem. The burning of a train in Godhra on 27 February 2002 killing 59 Hindu pilgrims alive was blamed on Muslims triggering a mob attack and lynching of 790 Muslims. In a report titled *What is 2002 Godhra burning case? The Indian Express* stated:

On the morning of February 27, 2002, a coach of the Sabarmati Express — Coach S6 — was set ablaze and 59 passengers travelling in that coach were charred to death. The train had arrived at Godhra station in Gujarat just then. The victims included 27 women and 10 children. Injuries were suffered by another 48 passengers on the train. A Commission of Inquiry was constituted by the Gujarat government headed by then Chief Minister Narendra Modi. The Commission consisted of Justice GT Nanavati and Justice KG Shah. The Commission in its report submitted that most of the 59 people killed were *kar sevaks* who were returning from Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh.²⁰

The train burning incident had within hours triggered violent riots across the state. The riots broke out on the evening of February 28 and continued for 2-3 months across the state. The Centre in 2005 informed Rajya Sabha that the riots claimed the lives of 254 Hindus and 790 Muslims. A total of 223 people were reported missing. Tens of thousands were rendered homeless as well. The details were later published at the recommendation of the National Human Rights Commission.

The Congress-led UPA government set up a separate inquiry commission headed by Justice UC Banerjee, who in his report submitted in March 2006, called the incident to be an accident. The Supreme Court rejected the report as unconstitutional and invalid. Afterwards, the Supreme Court constituted a Special Investigation Team. Justice KG Shah died in March 2008 before the commission could complete its inquiry. His position was taken over by Justice

Akshay H Mehta. Justice Nanavati and Justice Akshay Mehta submitted the final report of the Nanavati-Shah Commission that same year describing the train burning as a conspiracy.²¹ Like the Babri mosque demolition case, those responsible for the massacre of Muslims of Ahmedabad were able to get away including the then Chief Minister of Gujarat Narendra Modi. Modi was blamed for collaborating with Hindu fanatics involved in massacring and lynching Muslims as he directed police and administration to look the other way when Hindu mobs were involved in the killing, raping, looting and destroying Muslim property. Both Ayodha and Gujarat anti-Muslim riots erased not only secularism and democracy from Indian political culture but also raised serious questions about state patronage of religious extremism. Today, the manner in which Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its ally Shiv Sena are targeting religious minorities, particularly Muslims of India, is sufficient to prove how civil society in India has failed to curb forces of violence and extremism.

The fourth issue which tends to augment extremism in South Asia is the indifference of the state and society on matters which in the last several decades seem to have accentuated intolerance, anger, antagonism, violence, and terrorism. The erosion of values, ethics, and culture in South Asia has taken a toll on tolerance, political pluralism, and democracy. If religious extremism in Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, and Sri Lanka tends to reach new heights, it has to do with state authorities who take no action against those who take the law into their hands. When religious minorities in South Asia are targeted and persecuted, it means the failure of states to ensure the rule of law. When under the cover of blasphemy laws, personal scores are settled and people are implicated on religious grounds it means justice is not granted. When thousands of Muslims are killed in the aftermath of the demolition of the Babri Mosque and the Gujarat riots, it means extremism as a mindset is covered up by those who are supposed to maintain the writ of the state. Incidents of attacks against

religious minorities in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka reflect how deadly the threat of extremism has become.

The Way Forward?

The future of South Asia would remain at a crossroads unless the menace of extremism, which has emerged as a major destabilizing factor in the region, is neutralized. The surge of the religious right can only be mitigated by ensuring the neutrality of law enforcement agencies, bureaucracy, and judiciary. For the last several years, the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is in limbo and, since November 2016, no SAARC summit has been held because of a boycott by India, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan to participate in the 19th SAARC summit which was scheduled to be held in Islamabad. As a result, SAARC, a regional organization, is unable to play a leadership role on issues which promote and deepen extremism. Earlier, when SAARC was a functional organization since its inception in December 1985, back-to-back efforts were made under its ambit to combat terrorism and violence in the region. For instance, on 4 November 1987, on the occasion of SAARC's third summit held in Kathmandu, the Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism was signed.

Furthermore, during the twelfth SAARC Summit held in Islamabad in January 2004, the Council of Ministers signed the Additional Protocol to the SAARC Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism. The purpose of this Additional Protocol is to strengthen the SAARC Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism, particularly by criminalizing the provision, collection, or acquisition of funds to commit terrorist acts and take further measures to prevent and suppress the financing of such acts. Unfortunately, because of the dormant nature of SAARC for the last more than a decade, the case of violence and extremism in South Asia got an impetus and no headway was made to implement the SAARC

convention and additional protocol for the suppression of terrorism in South Asia. So, there is a dire need to revive the SAARC forum to address extremism.

The way forward to deal with the challenge of extremism in South Asia is three-fold. First, eradicating poverty, illiteracy, and social backwardness will go a long way in curbing the menace of extremism in South Asia. Since extremism is a common issue faced by all South Asian countries, its eradication cannot be done in an isolation. By ensuring better education at the grassroots' level, young minds cannot be polluted and biased. Second, the positive use of technology will help in promoting moderation, tolerance, and political pluralism so that young minds are not poisoned and the images of mob lynching and violence against religious minorities are discouraged in print and electronic media. The manner in which media pursues an irresponsible approach in disseminating negative images of acts of religious extremism needs to be checked. Finally, policies which ensure the rule of law, an effective justice system, accountability, and good governance will unleash a process of moderation and tolerance in society. For that matter, the state must be neutral as far as religious matters are concerned so that an extremist mindset is not given any space. To sum up, there is no shortcut to eradicating the menace of extremism in society but if the process of enlightenment, peace, tolerance, and peaceful coexistence is unleashed, one can expect a qualitative change culminating in the mitigation of violence.

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