Religious Militancy in South Asia: Genesis and Characteristics

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Introduction

Role of religious militancy in the world has attracted special attention since 9/11 and its role in South Asia since nuclearization of its two arch rivals, India and Pakistan, in 1998. According to some scholars, religious militancy in the region comprises Hindu militancy, Muslim militancy and Buddhist militancy situated in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh and Sri Lanka and its development is described in terms of their inter-relationship with one another.¹

Hinduism as a religion is far from militant and is, in fact, strictly speaking not a religion but has been called a “parliament of religions.”² But Pakistan and Bangladesh tend to define their self-identity as being different from Indian nation. Similarly, biggest minority of Sri Lanka, the Tamils, having ethnic affinity with Tamil Nadu state of India could possibly be a source of insecurity to the Buddhist majority in Sri Lanka.

On the other hand, historically India was more a civilization than a nation, in the modern sense of the term. All religions of what was once a united South Asia have been influenced by a common civilization heritage of the region. Within the region, even within the present countries of the region, local culture also had its impact.
The word Hindu owes its origin to the Arabic word *Sindhu* used by Arabs to describe people living east of the river Sind. Whenever local faiths acquired a common label of Hinduism, it has been an evolutionary religion with large diversity in beliefs, practices, gods and goddesses in which there is room for every form of belief and practice that is possible for the human imagination to conceive. Every new faith, Indians or of foreign origin, left its impact on its evolutionary process and was, in turn, influenced by whatever was the stage of Hinduism at that time.

Buddhism and Jainism, for instance, though arose as a revolt against the sacred Hindu scriptures and rejected most of its beliefs and practices, could not retain their separate identity. Their essential thoughts were absorbed within the flexible Hindu philosophical framework. None of the other local faiths could escape its assimilative character and establish a distinct social identity excepting Sikhism which prescribes distinct physical religious symbol. Christianity, too, had a profound influence on the Indian mind. According to Stephen Neil, "Hinduism is ready even to absorb Christ into itself...., it reveres Him as one of the greatest teachers of the world; there are many Hindus who sincerely regard themselves as His followers and yet reject His claim to be saviour of mankind. Though Christ, the oriental teacher, is to be reveres, the church is a western importation and a part of the exploitation of India by the West." Thus, though message of Christ was brought to India in 57 A.D and has become a part of Indian religious culture, the Christian community could not grow proportionately.

Islam's advent to India was, in many respects, a unique phenomenon. According to Murray T. Titus, "No doubt Islam, with its clear, definite, and simple creed, which stood in contrast to the indigenous vagaries of the imagination and speculation about God, appealed to many Hindus as a satisfying solution of the vexed problem of theology, to
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others its social democracy granted a welcome release from the bondage of caste. But when all is said, there seems to be little doubt that Hinduism has wrought a far greater change in Islam than Islam has wrought in Hinduism.⁵

But qualitative difference between Islam and other indigenous as well as foreign religions was that its followers could retain their community identity intact. Its prophet (PBUH) could not be accommodated in the pantheon of Hindu gods, goddesses and avtars as one more idol because idol worship is prohibited in Islam. Arabic names of Muslims were another identity making factor.

There was, however, no scope for a clash between amorphous sets of beliefs of Hinduism and message of Islam which was brought to South Asia mainly by nondogmatic Sufi Saints. For who influenced whom, cannot be quantitatively measured. "There seems to be ample reason for believing that a large proportion of the present Muslim population of India (undivided) can be regarded as the result of peaceful penetration than can be associated with the harsher methods of Muslim conquerors."⁶

The creative interaction between Hinduism and Islam flowed into a mighty social and spiritual revolution in the 15th and 16th centuries from the east to the west and from the north to the west of the subcontinent called Bhakti-Sufi movement which also ushered into a literary renaissance in most of the regional languages. Perhaps, the finest monument of the socio-political and literary revolution was Guru Nanak.

South Asia is the only part of the world where Muslims have ruled over a non-Muslim majority and shared power with local non-Muslim elite. This compulsion further liberated them from many shackles which dogmatic interpretations of their religion bound Muslims elsewhere. Indeed, culturally and intellectually they were the richest Muslim community of the world.
The aforementioned broad survey of pre-colonial undivided India does not imply that it was a golden age in every respect. Admittedly, there were many shortcomings in that age but religious militancy and violence were not among them. There were also occasional aberrations but none comparable to religious strife elsewhere.

Phase I

The British rule was in many respects a watershed in the history of this ancient civilization. It has been described in various ways. It brought about an administrative and political unity never witnessed before. Network of communications linked the people of different parts. But above all, it tended to convert a civilization into a nation. Little Traditions — evolved over centuries where religions mixed with local cultures made a harmonious whole — started giving way to Large Tradition. Pan India Muslim and Hindu identities developed weakening local common cultural and linguistic bonds between the two principal religions.

It was the first alien rule on India from an alien soil. Nationalist movements, particularly in their combative form, seek inspiration from their ancient glory, real or imaginary. In case of India, revival of interest in the past was encouraged by the monumental works of European scholars on rediscovering and translations of classical literature. But a typical paradox in case of India was that the re-discovered ancient schools of philosophy, mythology and epics formed the warp and weft of Hinduism. Thus, all ancient philosophical treatises were interpreted as various schools of Hindu philosophy. Mythological figures were owned as gods and goddesses of Hinduism. Epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata were treated as popular Hindu religious books and their heroes Ram and Krishnan as Hindu gods or avatars. In a way, Hinduism was a religionized version of Indian nationalism of which the deity
which had maximum emotive appeal was *Bharat Mata* (Mother India).

Thus, most of the nationalist Hindu leadership comprised religious personalities. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Aurobindo Ghosh, Vivekananda, Tilak, Madan Mohan Malviya and Gandhi were as good nationalist as good believers in Hindu religion. Nehru was, of course, a notable exception but he owed his strength as a second fiddle of Gandhi. However, Gandhi represented most tolerant stream of Hinduism which showed similar respect to other faiths. The extremist section of Hindu nationalists were also inspired by 19th century European concept of nationalism — based on one religion and one language. Led by Veer Savarkar, who was an atheist, its exclusivist appeal remained limited to the fringe of Hindu society. Moreover, as the main target of the nationalist movement was the British imperialism, Hindu nationalism directed against non-Muslims was perceived by most Hindus as a diversionary move.

Muslim reaction to the foreign rule took two forms. Muslim religious leaders were hostile to it not only because it had replaced the Muslim rule in India but also because the western civilization and religion of the rulers i.e., Christianity were perceived as threat to Islam. Politically, Ulama led by Maulana Abul Kalam Azad became ally of the nationalist movement led by Gandhi as both were anti-British.

Another reaction was represented by educated and modernized Muslim leaders concerned more with political and economic challenges that the new situation created for the Muslim community and much less with theological issues of Islam. Outstanding leaders of this line of thinking were Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, Ameer Ali, Chiragh Ali, Agha Khan, Allama Iqbal, Fazl-ul-Haq, and, above all, personality of Mohammad Ali Jinnah. The concept of Indian nationalism, with its religious content, was not acceptable
to them. Eventually, Jinnah who was the least religious personality, in his beliefs and practices, was acclaimed as Quaid-e-Azam and under his leadership, the Muslim League was able to sweep the Muslim masses away from the Ulama and their ally, the Indian National Congress.

Phase II

a) Pakistan

It is futile, more so for our present purpose, to discuss whether the partition was avoidable. But it is obvious that far from resolving the problems it had supposed to do, it aggravated some of them and added fresh set of problems in each of the new nation. Many Indians did not reconcile to the fact of partition which was described as tragic as cutting the limbs of the mother India. More fanatics of them would have liked to undo the partition by force while others liked to do it by "winning over the estranged brothers."

However, India still represented the continuity of history and its entire heritage of the subcontinent which had been recognized world over as one of the oldest civilizations of the world. Newly carved country of Pakistan had to define its civilizational and political entity. Was it a part of the subcontinent or of the Islamic world? The problem of historiography still haunts it. Its problems were aggravated by the early death of its founder Jinnah who had a secular vision of the country he had created.

Moreover, Pakistan included mostly those parts where the movement for its creation was rather weak. The movement has drawn maximum support from the Urdu speaking Muslims of the Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Bihar. But first to be disillusioned with the new country were Urdu speaking migrants called Mahajirs. Their leader, Altaf Hussain during his visit to India described the partition as the greatest blunder in human history. They demanded
separate Urdu Pradesh (to revive the nostalgia of the UP, a state in India wherefrom they had come) or even secession.

Another leader, who had once supported the creation of Pakistan, GM Syed became votary of independence of Sind which was claimed to be the oldest civilization of the world, as Mohenjodaro falls in that state. Erstwhile Congress stalwarts Abdul Samad Khan and Abdul Ghaffar Khan, also called Baluchi Gandhi and Frontier Gandhi, did not reconcile to the Muslim League led Pakistan. The latter spent most of his life either in jail in Pakistan or as an exile in Afghanistan.

Religious legitimacy and occasional army rule, in these circumstances were considered a political necessity to maintain the unity of the country. At this stage, external factors became equally important. In 1954, Pakistan entered into military treaties, for the defence of Middle East and South East Asia with the western powers led by America. With the increased supply of arms, Pakistan was trying to match armed strength of its neighbor whereas western powers got bases in strategic places to check the advance of communism from Soviet Union and Chinese republic.

While Pakistan government was able to crush sub national identities in its Western wing, which at one stage was merged into one unit by dissolution of state units, it was not easy for it to do so in its far off eastern wing and suppress Bangladeshi cultural and political urges. Ultimately, after a bloody struggle Bangladesh emerged as an independent country in 1971. The rest of Pakistan remained under army rule for more than half years of its existence. For suppression of democratic and sub national urges, it had to increasingly depend upon politicized Islam; which had already been declared an Islamic state. Thus religious maulvis and army nexus became the strongest political force in Pakistan. The continued tension with India
further strengthened the nexus and weakened the liberal content of Islam.

Religious extremism got its international legitimacy (of western powers) as a weapon in the cold war. It is a well known fact that when Soviet army entered Afghanistan in early eighties, American arms and militant religious leaders of Pakistan joined hands to build armed and ideological resistance of what later came to be known as Taliban. The ethnic base of Taliban was Pushtoon community, on both sides of the Durand line that divides Afghanistan from Pakistan and was inspired by Ghaffar Khan and Gandhi. It had all along opposed Pakistan and was friendly with India. But was shocked by the Indian support to Soviet Union and hence, they accepted the offer of support by Pakistan. Incidentally, they used modified Islamic ideology of Deoband that was in the vanguard in the freedom movement of India to train their jehadis. The same soldiers of Islam helped the insurgency movement in the Indian part of Kashmir since 1989. In short, this is the story of transformation of a liberal Muslim society to a political platform.

After 9/11, anti-terrorist crusade started by America and U-turn of General Musharraf in its Afghanistan policy, Pakistan government became strategic ally of America. But American miscalculation in attacking Iraq and support to Israeli suppression of Palestine have enraged Muslims all over the world, including those in Pakistan. Some of the Jehadi forces which were once the main prop of the army rule are threatening to become out of its control posing a dilemma for General Musharraf. On the one hand, in order to check political parties - Muslim League and PPP - he encouraged Mutihida Majlis Amal, a joint front of religious parties, led by Maulana Fazal-ul-Rehman and allowed it to form governments in two strategic provinces of Baluchistan and NWFP, on the other hand, he is also apprehensive of growing influence of extremist religious groups which can
threaten its alliance with America. Similarly, US government cannot afford to weaken General Musharraf, who is their safest bet in Pakistan. Nor would it like the influence of militant Islam grow. Hence, its policy inter alia, of encouraging Pakistan government - as also government of India - to defuse the tension in the subcontinent. It is also persuading Pakistan government to stop cross border infiltration and armed resistance to Indian part of Kashmir. How far army remains under the tight control of its chief, how far democratic urges of the people and those of cultural identities can be suppressed, how assertive its civil society can be and above all, how far relations with India improve are inter-related issues and depend upon a number of imponderables. India is a major factor in Pakistan politics. Though of late, there is considerable improvement in the relation between the two countries - more conspicuously at people to people level; both the governments are engaged in mutual dialogue and have already agreed on a number of Confidence Building Measure, no breakthrough is yet visible on the crucial issue of Kashmir.

b) Bangladesh

On the eastern end of South Asia, Bangladesh has yet not fully recovered from the trauma of two violent partitions - from India in 1947 and from Pakistan in 1971. Separated from its co-regionalist western Pakistan, to defend its distinct linguistic and cultural identity, it was considered as the final death of the two-nation theory by many a secular nationalist Indian. It was expected that a country that had suffered large scale massacre and brutalities by Pakistan army and exodus of millions of them to India to seek safety and achieved its independence with the help of the Indian army would never adopt the ideology of its erstwhile tormentors and have friendly relations with it. Friendship with India, on the other hand was taken for granted.
It would be presumptuous on my part to identify the causes that belied these expectations, on Bangladesh soil. But certain facts are fairly obvious. During Banga Bandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman’s regime from 1971 to 1975, Bangladesh became a democratic secular republic and its relations with India were excellent. But the promise of liberation movement abruptly ended with mysterious murder of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. A reverse process was started by his successor and leader of Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), Zia-ur-Rahman who lifted the ban on religious and fundamentalist parties and de-secularized the constitution in 1977. He, too, was assassinated in 1981 and the country had a long spell of army rule under General H. M. Ershad.

It was a period when Islamization had become a major instrument of US anti-communist strategy. In Pakistan as well as in Bangladesh, military dictatorship was supposed to be fit to play that role. According to a report, Jamaat-e-Islami of Bangladesh, which was a part of the Jamaat-e-Islami of the United Pakistan before separation of Bangladesh from it, "recruited no fewer than 5000 madrassa alumni as mujahideen and sent them in batches to Afghanistan to participate in the jihad against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan." On return they formed the nucleus of a number of terrorist outfits. By 1988, General HM Ershad, the army dictator, had declared Islam as the state religion. In 1991, on the restoration of democracy the Bangladesh National Party won the election. It claimed to be a nationalist party. In this context, when Prime Minister Khaleda Zia was asked to assist the presence of a group of Santhals at a global meeting of indigenous people, she is reported to have refused on the ground that "there were no minorities in Bangladesh, only Bangladeshis."8

Meanwhile relations with India had started deteriorating. Rise of Hindu nationalism which led to the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 provoked Islamic
fundamentalist backlash in Bangladesh. Reported ISI (of Pakistan) activities were another security concern. Border skirmishes added to the Indo-Bangladesh tension. A number of issues, regarding border demarcation and use of river water, had remained unresolved.

When Awami League led by Sheikh Hasina, daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, returned to power in 1996, she had to face the challenge of anti-secular and anti-democratic forces within and tension on the border. The opposition BNP accused her for being pro-India and as such Bangladeshi national interest was not safe in her hands.

The BNP contested in October 2001 election not merely on the plank of an assertive Bangladeshi nationalism but, to ensure its victory, in collaboration with Jamaat-e-Islami and Islami Oikya Jote. Post 9/11 events had given further fillip to Islamic sentiments. Invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq by US led coalition had alienated bulk of Muslims all over the world. Bangladesh was no exception. A number of militant outfits emerged after that. Their targets include not only Hindus, Christians, Buddhists, ethnic minorities and tribals but also leftists, liberals, intellectuals and other diversities. The attack on Sheikh Hasina and senior leaders of the Awami League at a public rally in Dhaka on 21 August killed 19 and injured more than a hundred Awami workers while Hasina narrowly escaped. Bomb attacks on Dainik Janakantha and killing of Humayun Kabir Balu, editor of the Dainik Janmabhumi and President of the Khulna Press Club were other attempts to silence voices of dissent. Even shrines of Muslim saints are no longer safe as Jamaat calls them anti-Islamic. The government does not own the acts of terrorism but opposition alleges that the presence of extremist religious organizations in the coalition government may encourage these acts which, in any case, do not seem to have been dealt with strongly and effectively.

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's call to Hasina to express his sympathy over her providential escape
provoked a fresh protest by the Bangladesh government as he had not made any enquiry from the Prime Minister. In a much harsher tone, the Bangladesh Foreign Minister, M. Morshed Khan warned India that the blame game over the issue of terrorism might shut the door of India-Bangladesh dialogue. Speaking at the inaugural function of the India-Bangladesh dialogue for young journalists at Dhaka, he referred to Indian media suggestion "to intervene in Bangladesh for making internal changes, and said, "it was a dangerous proposition which would disintegrate the whole of South Asia". He reminded India that although "Bangladesh is landlocked, Delhi has to remember that the seven northeastern Indian states are Bangladesh locked". Referring to the renewed charges made by the India's Home Minister, Shivraj Patil and the Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee about the existence of new insurgent camps in Bangladesh (200 in number), he made counter allegation of Bangladeshi insurgent groups such as the Bangladeshi Andolan, and criminals who were functioning from the Indian soil.9

Whatever be the truth about respective accusations, it clearly indicates collapse of normal diplomatic communication. At a time when dialogue at various official and non-official levels has started between India and Pakistan - traditionally two most hostile nations of South Asia- it is singularly unfortunate that a country, in the birth of which India had played a part, was not on proper speaking terms with India. It is, in fact, ironical that Pakistan which was responsible for so much atrocities on Bangladesh has gone out of its way to mend its fences with it after offering unconditional apology, India has failed to maintain the goodwill it had earned in that country.

In case of India and Pakistan, a crucial role has been played by the upsurge of Punjabi identity on both sides of the border. Why has not a common cultural heritage of Bengal - representing one of the richest cultures of South
Asia - played a sobering role in reducing tension between the two countries? An essential pre-condition of such a role is that sovereignty and independent identity of Bangladesh should be recognized without any reservations by the West Bengal. In any case, why is civil society not playing an active role as it is playing in case of India and Pakistan?

Again, while there is no doubt that India's north eastern states are in trouble and the reminder of Morshed Khan that they are land locked by Bangladesh is ominous, the entire trouble is not imported, and it is primarily India's responsibility to remove the unrest. The same applies to his allegation that Bangladeshi insurgent groups are operating from India. For it does not absolve Bangladesh of the responsibility to set its own house in order.

However, north eastern states are a small part of India and any kind of trouble in that area does not determine the national mood whereas the whole of Bangladesh would feel insecure from real or imaginary threat from India. As long as the sense of insecurity lasts, religious militancy will continue to be fuelled. Similarly, as long as Bangladesh Muslims share the perception of the rest of the Muslims elsewhere about possible threat to their religion from America, Islamic extremism will continue to be nourished. Possibly snide designation of Bangladesh by Henry Kissinger as "international basket-case" has left an ugly image on the mind of its people.

There is a need for further understanding on the part of policy makers of America and India of this and other socio-political-economic factors responsible for the present state of affairs in Bangladesh. But more than the outsiders, thinking elements within the country should ponder over the fact that its reaction has gone too far where it has become counter-productive and is threatening the nation in every field of its life. It must outgrow outdated European concept of homogenous nationalism, based on one religion and one language, and learn the virtues of diversity and
dissent, and independent judiciary to unfold the cultural and intellectual potentialities of a great nation.

c) Sri Lanka

Now we turn to Sri Lanka where, too, such a concept of nationalism based on Buddhist religion and Sinhalese language, played havoc with its experiment of democracy and nation-building. Like Pakistan, and now Bangladesh, it, too, opted for unitary constitution which as everywhere else - more so in plural societies - threatens - unity. Needless to recall that Buddhism has spread message of peace, tolerance and non-violence to far of places in the world. How did Buddhist-Sinhalese nationalism forget this message?

Nor was Tamil community, the largest minority of Sri Lanka was known for a martial tradition. How did it produce most desperate terrorists long before the current phase of terrorism started in other parts of the world? The civil war between the two principal communities of Sri Lanka has taken an estimated toll of 60,000 people in the island republic.\(^10\)

First assertion of Tamil identity in Sri Lanka was made by the Federal Party which tried to follow *Gandhian* method of non-violence. But failure of its *satyagrah* in 1961, led some of its leaders to doubt relevance of Mahatma Gandhi in Sri Lanka because they argued that his method of non-violence and non-cooperation succeeded in India where he was leading a majority against a minority whereas Tamils were in a minority in Sri Lanka. Siva Kumaram, a young man of 17 whose parents supported Federal Party and who compared its leader Chalvanayagam with Gandhi, opted for armed struggle. But he was trapped by the police on 5 June 1974, while attempting a bank robbery. Before he could be arrested, he swallowed a cyanide pill. Thus, cyanide culture was born which became a typical feature of Tamil terrorists.
and was a forerunner of Islamic *fidayeens* (suicide bombers). Martyr Sivakumaran was hailed as Eelam's Bhagat Singh (Indian terrorist hero).

On 14 May 1976, Tamil United Front and erstwhile Federal Party united to form Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) which resolved that "the restoration and reconstitution of a free, sovereign, secular, socialist state of Tamil *Eelam* on the basis of right of self-determination has become inevitable in order to safeguard the very existence of Tamil nation in this country". It still made occasional noises about *Gandhian* concept and contested elections in which it swept the Tamil majority Jaffna area. However, it is believed to have sympathies with militants who occasionally committed terrorist acts.

On 15 August 1977, three constables stopped three boys riding on cycles. Without warning one of the boys took out a revolver and fired, injuring one of the policemen. After chain of reactions, anti-Tamil riots followed. For the first time, large number of Hindu temples were attacked and two weeks of riots left many dead and larger number of Indian Tamils, who were opposed to *Eelam*, destitute. Many migrated to Tamil majority areas.

The riots evoked deep sympathy in the Tamil Nadu state of India where a general strike was observed and mammoth protest procession was organized. Towards the end of 1980, Sri Lanka government offered a modicum of autonomy to the TULF in the form of District Development Councils. Though TULF won DDC election in all the six districts in the Tamil areas, it was a typical case of too little too late. For district autonomy is no substitute for autonomy of the Tamil region. TULF by now had lost support. It satisfied neither the militants nor Colombo. Liberation Tamil Tigers had assumed full control of the *Eelam* movement and had acquired all the characteristics of a terrorist movement. In retaliation to its terrorist acts, policemen in Jaffna in July 1983 went on a rampage,
attacking, looting and burning houses shops and institutions. The security forces set fire to Jaffna public library, destroying a rich collection of books and rare Tamil manuscripts and made more Tamils refugees.

LTTE received more active support from not only Tamils in India but Tamil diasporas in the rest of the world in terms of funds and arms. The Tamils government in India provided training facilities for its armed militants, most probably with the connivance of the government of India.

However, soon the government of India realized the consequences of transnational ambitions of Tamils of India. It entered into a pact with Sri Lanka, without fully satisfying the demands of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). To enforce the agreement, Indian peacekeeping force (IPKF) was sent to Sri Lanka in 1987. By turn, Indira Gandhi had, thus, offended both the communities and called Indian forces back in 1990, without being able to suppress the Tamil uprising. In the following year, the Tamil Tigers took their revenge when a suicide bomber assassinated Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi during his tour of Tamil Nadu.

After 9/11, LTTE was one of the organizations which were included in the list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTO). The international sympathy and support too had declined for its terrorist acts. After number of mediatory efforts, in particular by Norway, the LTTE agreed to a solution within the framework of Sri Lanka under a federal constitution. But agreement on precise degree of autonomy and interim arrangement presented formidable difficulties, thanks to the years of violence that had vitiated mutual trust.

Meanwhile, revolt within the LTTE by the forces loyal to Karuna in the eastern part of the Tamil dominated region of Sri Lanka, polarization between two main evenly balanced fronts of Buddhist-Sinhalese population ruling United People’s Freedom Alliance (UPFA), and the opposition
United National Front - have paralyzed decision making capacity on both sides. For the time being the peace process was stalled.

Continuous drift in the situation since early sixties, as would be evident from the above narrative of major events acquits none of the parties, including the unwise intervention of the government of India, with glory. However, it highlights the futility of the concept of nationalism, which the Buddhist majority took for granted, and the use of indiscriminate terrorist acts by the LTTE for a sovereign independent state. Whenever dialogue is resumed it has to be on the basis of a secular, federal and democratic state in which political and cultural rights of regional and ethnic communities are recognized. However, it would be an over simplification to treat conflict in Sri Lanka as a clash between religious militancy of Buddhists and Hindus. It is essentially a clash between community of Buddhists- and not of religion; Sinhalese linguistic and cultural identity and Sri Lanka nationalism, on the one hand, and Tamil ethnic-not Hindu religion, on the other.

d) India

Finally let us return to India, the developments of which, as should be evident from the foregoing discussion, have a crucial impact on the course of religious militancy in other countries of South Asia, not only on account of its size and population but also because it is the only country whose borders touch all other countries of the region and it has transnational linguistic ethnic identities common with all of them.

The Partition of 1947 was seen as culmination of the struggle of the Muslim League for a separate homeland of Muslims as according to it they belonged to another nation. The question was raised whether those Muslims who had supported the movement for Pakistan, most of whom lived
in the resultant India, had a right to live in India and, if so, whether their loyalty to the country could be trusted. Large-scale killings of religious minorities in both the new countries had threatened secular claims of Indian leaders. But three major developments turned the tables decisively against forces of religious fanaticism. First, assassination of Mahatma Gandhi at the hands of a Hindu fanatic shocked the nation beyond measure about the designs of the forces he represented. Second, the decision of Sheikh Abdullah, representing overwhelming opinion of Kashmir Muslims to opt for India, rejecting the appeal of the coreligionist Pakistan. Thirdly, a resolute and visionary leadership of Nehru and his colleagues. They were able to channelize the aspiration of Indian nationalism to an international role.

Indian constitution, which provided for fundamental rights, autonomous institutions for checks on executive like judiciary, Auditor General, Election Commission and Public Service Commission and federal system were guarantees for a secular and democratic India. Linguistic reorganization of the country in 1956 recognized non-religious identities. In the new states, linguistic affinities between various religious communities acted as a common bond and to some extent diluted religion-based identities. The caste loyalties, which were gradually politicized, had a similar effect. Recognition of sub-national identities and international aspirations of independent India, were thus, checked aggressive nationalism.

In India, religious militancy as such is not a major force. But Hindu community identity is which masquerades as Indian nationalists. Hindu militancy without much theological religious contest assumes the form of national chauvinism, which threatens the minorities, particularly Muslims. The forces representing this viewpoint assert that Hindutva and Indian nationalism are synonymous. In that sense militant nationalism often paves the way for Hindu militancy.
Before independence this viewpoint was represented by Hindu Maha Sabha led by an atheist Veer Savarkar and Rashtriya Swayam Sevark Sangh (RSS). Both were marginal forces, mainly because the thrust of the national movement was anti-British imperialism and not anti-Muslim. But after independence, the "other" to define Indian nationalism became Pakistan. A harder line against Pakistan and on Kashmir became the principle planks of Hindu nationalism. But neither Rashtriya Swayam Sevark Sangh (RSS) which means national voluntary service organization nor Bhartiya Jana Sangh, roughly translated as Indian people's organization which was formed as its political wing in 1951, used the word Hindu in their names.

The process of alienation of Kashmiri Muslims which stated in 1953 (the reasons of it cannot be discussed here) and strained relations with Pakistan gave the new party its initial push. It tasted power for the first time, as a constituent of the Janata Party that Jayaprakash Narayan had formed in 1977 as a united front of opposition parties to challenge the emergency regime imposed by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and restore democracy. Thus, first derailment of democracy by the Congress enabled the Jana Sangh to project itself more democratic. The Janata Party split on the issue of dual membership which the Jana Sangh leaders insisted on having with the RSS and which was opposed by other secular components of the Janata Party. It re-emerged with a new name of Bhartiya Janata Party.

The secular nationalists competed with the Hindu nationalists, through sophisticated means by Nehru and by aggressive postures by his daughter and successor Indira Gandhi.

Her success in splitting Pakistan through an armed support to the liberation movement in Bangladesh in 1971, the iron hand with which she tried to crush the Sikh movement for autonomy for Punjab and attack on the
Golden temple at Amritsar and dismissal of an elected chief minister Farooq Abdullah in Kashmir state, stole the entire thunder of Hindu nationalists. Only the first achievement proved lasting. In Punjab, it gave rise to Sikh militancy and in Kashmir, it eventually culminated in a militant movement which tended towards Islamic militancy and was influenced by similar movements elsewhere.

After Indira Gandhi, who was murdered by her Sikh security guards in October 1984, and a decade later after the assassination of her son Rajiv Gandhi by a Tamil militant, Congress party was considerably weakened. The BJP tried to fill the vacuum. As a Hindu party, its greatest hour of "triumph" was demolition in 1992 of Babri Mosque in Ayodhya, built by Muslim King Babar in 1526, allegedly after demolition of a Hindu temple, at the birth place of Lord Rama, who was projected not only as an incarnation of God but also as a great national hero. The RSS leader Rajinder Singh said: "Ayodhya is not a Hindu-Muslim problem. Building the Ram Temple there is a matter of national self-respect and nothing else."12

In this task, the BJP got the support of Shiv Sena cadres; a Maharashtra-based frankly Hindu party and religious persons like Sadhus and Mahants of temples. Vishwa Hindu Parishad, a party of orthodox Hindus, became member of the RSS parivar (family) Muslim reaction was also sharp in India as well as in Pakistan and Bangladesh. It is at this stage that a trend towards semitization of Hinduism is discernible. In Lord Rama it discovered an equivalent of semitic prophets. Ayodhya, his birthplace, was called Hindu Mecca and Geeta was compared to the Quran or Bible.

It was not easy for Hindu political leaders to transform an ancient amorphous but unique religion into an imitation of Islam or Christianity as it soon discovered. In the state assembly elections that followed demolition of Babri Masjid, it lost power even in Hindi belt, its traditional base where it
could not make a winning combination of castes. In South, West Bengal and North East, it never mattered.

In a desperate bid to power, it made its ideology and tactics more flexible. Its organizational structure was radically modified to accommodate caste composition of every state; including backward castes. It sought maximum possible alliances with regional parties, even those who at some stage had stood for secession or autonomy like AIDMK in Tamilnadu, Akali Dal in Punjab and National Conference in Kashmir. As a part of a very broad based political front called National Democratic Alliance (NDA) it dropped its three core issues - Uniform Personal Law, abrogation of Article 370 of the constitution granting special status to Kashmir and building Ram temple at Ayodhya - which directly offended Muslims, to forge an alliance with Socialists led by George Fernandes and secular parties like Telugu Desam Party of Andhra, Trinamool Congress of West Bengal. It went to the extent of supporting the scheduled caste party, Bahujan Samaj, to form a government in the UP state. Having being votary of unitary form of government, it became believer in federalism.

To placate members of its parivar (family) it did make chauvinistic noises. Nuclear explosion in 1998 isolated India internationally and made India's superiority in conventional weapon over Pakistan redundant as Pakistan exploded similar bomb soon after. India mobilized almost its entire army on border with Pakistan for ten month to protest against terrorist acts sponsored by it in Kashmir. But had to withdraw its forces under international pressure without any tangible achievement.

In a U-turn of its Pakistan policy, Prime Minister extended "a hand of friendship" to Pakistan. His government also initiated talks with the Kashmiri secessionists without any pre-conditions. In a dramatic gesture to Muslims, he announced grants to madrasas for appointment of 2 lakh Urdu teachers. A number of Muslims leaders, including
Imam Bukhari of Jama Masjid of Delhi and Muslim intellectuals offered support to the BJP in 2004 election. It claimed to be the real Congress as it functioned under Gandhi and Nehru and owned all the icons of the freedom movement. The journey of the RSS, an exclusively Hindu volunteer force which did not believe in election, to the Jana Sangh, to the BJP to NDA competing with the Congress in secularism and liberalism and pleading for moderation in relation with Pakistan is an eloquent testimony of the power of democracy.

The BJP, thus, tried to cover the entire secular ground and all types of ethnic and religious diversities. It had succeeded mainly by default as its secular rival Congress had not come to terms with India's diversities and was opposed to coalition with any party. But it accepted the BJP challenge in 2004 by a drastic change in its strategy and offered alliances to all non-NDA parties. The result was crushing defeat of the BJP which is facing its worst crisis of identity. It is torn between two awkward choices: Should it return to its original roots or further broaden and liberalize its ideology?

The real issue in India is not religious militancy versus secular democracy. It has always been uniformity versus plurality. It has by now been established that no party or combination of parties, which does not believe in and accommodate vast diversity of the country can survive long in Indian politics. Democratization and politicization over years have increased assertiveness of these diversities. Aggressive nationalism, which is based on uniform concept of nationalism and sheltered Hindu militancy, has proved counter-productive as was demonstrated by its reaction in the form of Sikh militancy and Muslim militancy in Kashmir.

Another guarantee of Indian secular democracy is its autonomous institutions, including independent judiciary and free media. The worst ever anti-Muslim pogrom during
the NDA's tenure in power was in Gujarat in 2001 with complicity of the BJP government. The way Indian media universally condemned it and the Supreme Court of India and National Human Rights Commission came to the rescue of the victims have shaken the conscience of every Hindu of the country and put the BJP on the defensive. It has also restored the confidence of Indian Muslims in the constitution and secular forces of the country unlike in 1992 when Muslims backlash had encouraged revivalist tendencies among the community.

Conclusion

There are some common lessons from the experiences of the four countries covered in the aforesaid survey. Territorial nationalism, in its extreme and homogenized form, in each case accentuates religious militancy while its liberal and moderate form, which recognizes various kinds of diversities and tolerates dissent, guaranteed by a democratic constitution, releases creative potentialities of even religion. Further, a distinction needs to be drawn between religion as a set of theological beliefs and as a basis of community identity.

External factors have not always been beneficial. The harmful effects of European concept of nationalism, (which Europe is outgrowing), on each of the country surveyed, has been elaborately discussed. The use of religious militancy as a tool of cold war has now recoiled on its sponsors.

The inter-faith dialogue, sponsored by well-meaning western agencies, also tends to distort the South Asian reality. For, it first tries to standardize South Asian religions to the western pattern and then discover common ground among them. The very attempt at standardization makes them rigid and uproots these religions from the cultural moorings of the region. The impact of globalization on South Asia has been similar. Religious organizations like Vishva
Hindu Parishad and Islamic groups for religious propaganda are receiving abundant funds from abroad not only from friendly sources but also diasporas abroad where they are categorized into their respective religious communities. In many western countries religious teachings are a part of the curriculum in the name of promoting multi-culturalism.

Another pernicious theory being propagated by some American scholars is that "democratic openings do not inhibit but facilitate the rise and even dominance of religious nationalism, sometimes in extremist form." A scholar cited the example of Pakistan which "tended to be most secular when it has been most elitist and restrictive" but "extremist Islamic parties became more mass based and pervasive partly as a consequence of democratic opening."

I need not repeat the arguments of the preceding pages to prove exactly the opposite. Thus, what is needed is intra-regional dialogue among the scholars of South Asia and attempts to objectively study problems of each country and the causes and remedies for tension between the countries. Hence, more of such conferences are desired.

Endnotes

1. Timothy Samuel Shah, Paper read at US Institute of Peace, 2004
3. Ibid
4. Stephen Neil, Builders of the Christian Church, p.149
6. Ibid, p. 36
7. Timothy, *op.cit.*
8. Ibid
9. *The Hindu,* 9 September 2004
11. Ibid
12. *Times of India,* 13 February 1993