Dealing with Religious Militancy in South Asia: Regional and Extra-Regional Cooperation
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Introduction

History is replete with conflicts among communities. The cohesive bond among the members of many of these communities has been a belief in a common religion. Common belief in a religion not only creates to a significant extent a commonality of cultural practices but communal feelings may lead to a perceived common social, political and economic interests. As religion extends beyond the metaphysical domain and the private moral and ethical life of the individual, it enters the socio-political realm, and immediately transforms itself into a potent political force – cohesive as well as divisive – depending on its use by the able hands. In the South Asian region, religion gives a socio-political identity to the inhabitants, and history has evolved in such a fashion that religion continues to play an important role in shaping the polity of the constituting states in the region. Naturally, religious conflicts (as also religious tolerance in varying degrees at different points of time) are a constant feature of South Asian experience. However, religious militancy as a phenomenon with regional and extra-regional impact has emerged as a contemporary predicament that impinges on South Asian security. This
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paper, in three sections, briefly explores the nature of religious militancy, the challenges it poses to the South Asian security, and the ways and means to deal with the problem with special reference to regional and extra-regional cooperation.

Section I

Religious communalism in the past, one might argue, led to communal killings and hate campaigns, partitioned British India, remnants of which continued to adversely affect the South Asian lives and relations. As time passed by, new generations appear with a congenital handicap of carrying on the burdens of history and the apparent responsibility of a possible rectification of historical mistakes. For our purpose, however, the past needs to be rendered irrelevant, as the very survival of individual with some dignity in South Asia has become a contemporary priority issue. Clinging to the past would only jeopardize fresh moves. Therefore, religious militancy needs to be defined from a contemporary perspective with a focus on security considerations. It is perhaps difficult to form a widely acceptable definition but an attempt can be made. Religious militancy is not a temporary (or perpetual) attribute of a religious community, or a particular condition of religious self. It has very little to do with either the principle of secularism or that of theocracy upon which nation-building in a particular state may take place. Religious militancy for our purpose can be ordinarily defined as violence and threat of violence based on religious animosity — and as such the definition connotes aggressive acts on part of individuals or group or institutions against others. To specify, any form of persecution or injury on life, property, honor and legitimate personal freedom of an individual by an individual, a group or any institution on the ground that the victimized person subscribes to a different religion, is an act of religious militancy. One also
includes thereby communal clashes and riots on religious line within the ambit of this definition. In other words, religious militancy violates human security and large scale and/or frequent violations of human security challenge the authority of the state.

Militancy stems from a sense of deprivation. In the populous states of South Asia there are many (especially the men who have little or nothing at stake for a stable political system that gives them nothing worthwhile in fact) who for different reasons harbor a feeling of deprivation and these sentiments are not necessarily directed against the government inefficiency but also against other groups (which are soft targets) in the society. Social frustration and political vacuum lead to insecurity and the erosion of liberal values. With little skill (just by birth) one can be a member of an exclusivist religious group and his ire and hate against the system can be guided against any other religious group. Culture and history of the region make him extra-sensitive, economy makes him vulnerable and polity makes him a willing tool in the hands of the vested interests. In addition to it, the acts of terrorism involving actors from beyond the borders further complicate the ground situation. In the absence of a general consent, coercion becomes the instrument and force is liberally used by the contending parties.

Writing in the mid-1990s, a scholar succinctly pointed out the extent of disillusionment in the region. In his words:

Today's crisis is all the more severe because all the states in the region are today in the grip of an overwhelming pessimism born out of such facts as the failure to establish stable democracy, inability to prevent corruption at high places, unworkability of the models of economic development adopted in the past, crisis of state authority more directly created by constitutional deadlocks and/or terrorist attacks. Not that each of the states is equally affected by these, but something or the other affects them all....2
The dynamics of inter-communal behavior had been analyzed *inter alia* on the basis of modernization paradigm where "the guiding assumption was that the processes of differentiation would feed coordinate demands for higher levels of interdependence and that together, these forces would weaken and eventually undermine the primordial ties underwriting communal solidarity". States, however, often fail to manufacture and maintain dreams of a prosperous future where the scope for individual upward mobility, opportunities to acquire and execute skills and the minimum dignity of life would be ensured. Nevertheless, people who establish direct relations with the state through state institutions and processes — and not through ethnic groups or communities — have little interest in a religious existence that tends to disturb their professional lives. An individual's ethnic identity can operate in a supra-territorial space which need not come in the way of his relations with the state. It is understandable that the effects of development campaigns are not perceptibly impressive, especially in poor and backward societies, and moreover, not all the groups are in a position to derive the benefits at an equal pace. Still, economic development cannot be viewed as unachievable and the obstacles as insurmountable.

Ordinarily, as the sense of optimism increasingly evaporates, a sense of alienation sets in. Under the circumstances, orthodoxy and fundamentalism reclaim legitimacy and a communal mobilization begins. Communal demands may be accommodated by the state apparatus and as a result the nature of the polity of the state might change. It is worthwhile to remember here what Mustafa Kemal Pasha set out to do in Turkey — the enforced secularization of the 1920s and 1930s vigorously seeking to change the identities of the people — and how many of the old practices gradually reappeared and reclaimed legality once the so called "godless" People's Party was removed from power. In no way, however, such developments may be
equated with religious militancy. Orthodoxy and fundamentalism (not in a pejorative sense) relate to basic principles of the religion or adherence to the basic guidelines, ranging from inflexibility to traditionalism and a rejection of the modern society. In this sense, it is an alternative to the Western modernization model unless it degenerates into a program of violence against other religious communities. As the Nietzschean genealogist argue, the state is a historical phenomenon and “it will be impervious to formal definition, and will not have any one fixed ‘nature’ or ‘essence’ - one set of powers, structures, goals, purposes, or functions which never changes”. Moreover, “...as human purposes and beliefs change over time, one can expect these changes to find expression in human institutions”.

On the same line, Rasul Bakhsh Rais made pertinent points when he stressed that the Western models are not universal and modernization cannot be equated with Westernization. Allowing the Islamists, he prescribed, to share power might convert them in responsible partners, while the denial of a democratic option might breed extremism. Indeed, alliances for electoral gains are often made by the political parties; communities are used as vote banks in the process; civilizational identities - harping on certain symbols - are projected; and the net outcome is the accommodation of religious orthodoxy in the political system.

Communalism is an individual trait that pre-supposes antipathy towards other communities; it might even spread to some in the community and consequently, lead to communal clashes. It does not necessarily mean that all the members of the community are “communal”. This is not particular to religious communities alone; there are instances of clashes between caste-based or language-based communities. Clashes between religious communities qualify to be included within the scope of religious
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militancy, but religious militancy is increasingly becoming a sustained program of action that seeks to generate and maintain a crusade that (though impacts heavily on the local issues) transcends state boundaries in its spirit. Isolated acts at different corners of the world converge at the level of cognizance as the expression of the belief, and as an integrated common program of a religious community. On the one hand, this has the shades of a very modest and pruned version of Huntington’s thesis of the clash of civilization identities, on the other, it sustains a clash between religious norms and the municipal law within the state.

Section II

States today are very much non-nation states despite all the attempts at nation-building. Nation-building harps on the unifying features and common objectives, goals and destiny. The moment the state seeks to absorb or submerge the group identities and interests in an all-pervasive cloak of nationalism, ethnic schism becomes primarily an instrument of sub-nationalism gradually assuming the shape of a security threat from within the state. Imperatives of politics accentuate the differences and the failure and inability of the government to adequately respond to the particularities of group interests lead to internal conflicts. Further, the state being a vast repository of coercive force tends to use compulsive measures to pressurize the unwilling to fall in line, thereby making perceived apprehensions of the group increasingly real. Particularities do exist and competition for political assertion brings out in the open apparently dormant sources of differences. An ethnic group, in its attempt to ensure its own interests, tends to become insensitive to the legitimate interests and vulnerabilities of other groups and becomes a threat to cohesiveness and stability of the nation state.
It is in vogue today to focus on non-traditional security threats – in terms of internal instability, economic disparity, problems of legitimacy, forced migration and population displacement, ethnic schisms, environmental degradation and the like. Religious militancy is yet another form of threat to security. It is worthwhile to note that comprehensive national strength depends not only on military might but many other aspects including economic development, political stability and a general perception on how the state is steering itself through in the international system. When the comprehensive national strength is viewed in its many prismatic elements, the distinction between internal and external security tends to get blurred. Some may argue that in perception, at least, boundaries are being obliterated and while on the one hand, sub-national security issues are taking precedence, on the other, a certain internationalization of local/regional issues are taking place. Many of these issues have more to do with the problems of good governance in a pluralistic society i.e., ensuring egalitarian economic development, accommodating group interests, and pledging a judicious balance between persuasion and coercion. Despite the well-intended prescriptions available at hand – which in effect, constitutes a desperate appeal to live in harmony - religious militancy does exist for different reasons outlined above. It disturbs civic order, unduly undermines social and political freedom of individuals, kills people, and triggers a chain-reaction which might jeopardize the political survival of the state. The issue is sensitive enough to seriously hamper bilateral and international relations of the states involved.

A form of religious militancy is terrorism with a religious fervor. Terrorism is now viewed as a low intensity conflict – mostly a hit and run operation on a protracted basis. The post 9/11 era of terror war signifies constant fear and apprehension of a terrorist outrage and unrelenting preparedness against extreme possibilities. Intermittent terror attacks confined to different parts of the
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world also assume significance with the international networking. International terrorism is further boosted by the extension of the ideology of political Jihad by the interested parties. Narrowly, Jihad is often viewed as an Islamist outrage against the policies of the United States and its allies. Broadly defined, it is almost all-pervasive to mean anything that involves violent activities against non-members based on a religious identity. For example, one scholar pointed out that inspired by the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the Mujahidin experience in Afghanistan, the Islamists did aspire to stage an Islamic revolution in Pakistan itself and to fight a battle to end the “Hindu occupation of the Muslim Kashmir Nation” and for the “...liberation of Muslim brethren of Central Asian states and beyond”. Attempts to guise a calculated tactical battle by espousing the ideology of Islamic Jihad now immediately alarm the Western powers and bring forth extra-regional pressure upon the sponsoring entities as happened during the Kargil war. However, an act of pre-emption in the region is ruled out as too premature but a velvet intrusion (in terms of do-s and don’t-s) and greater Western interest in the regional policies and treatments towards the communities is a possibility. It is not difficult to understand the complications as different states are thrown into a situation where they have to readjust their erstwhile relations, and the competing interests of states make the region further vulnerable to protracted conflicts within and beyond the boundaries. Measures of terrorism and counter-terrorism make the whole process a war of attrition. The terrorists have used violence - including bombings, kidnappings and hijackings - to promote their political agenda. If the agenda becomes vague, blurred and clearly not discernible, aims and goals become diffused, catastrophic terrorism might not be implausible especially if terrorist outrage is motivated by a sense of humiliation and revenge.
Section III

It is pertinent to deal with the problems of religious militancy and security at two levels: (1) at the intra-state level and (2) at the inter-state level. The state, which is understood as organized human collectivity with a territorial identity, in the absence of any other equally powerful political organization, remains the institution that is only capable to ensure human security. Internal dynamics of security requires that forms of civic disorder arising from religious communalism have to be regarded as a law and order problem to be controlled effectively by the coercive machinery of the state. On the other hand, good governance still remains the most practical (though apparently intangible and elusive) option. Dissent has to be articulated through democratic channels and the state on its part has the duty to respond.

One may very well ask whether such an ideal arrangement is possible in reality in the developing world where the states suffer from systemic failures and more importantly, how do we define a State, its essence, and its role? In South Asia, like the individuals, state identities too are evolving, subjective and multiple, where democracy and monarchy, theocracy and secularism, regimentation and liberalism co-exist and influence one another within the region. Homogeneity is unattainable. The arrangement appears to be imperfect (in the sense of gaps in the electoral system, little accountability, and corruption at high places and that the system is not producing the desired rectifying results). If the state itself is vulnerable, how can it ensure human security, face the challenges of internal instability and ensure its own survival? These are questions of security that may be theoretically debated from different viewpoints with different paradigms, ranging from regional security structures, balancing threats and dependency on external powers.
The question that concerns us more in South Asia is what happens if the state or its administrative agencies - irrespective of the structure and constitution - themselves collude, generate and perpetuate religious militancy? According to a scholar, "in order to come to grips with the realities of the political situation in the developing world, it is necessary to take into account the existence of non-state human collectivities in between the individual and the state as a fact of political life". The author conceptualizes these non-state human collectivities as based on collective ethnic identity and argues that "... insecurity of such entities has serious ramifications for the security of the state." The concept, however, may be extended to include also the non-state human collectivities based on certain universal values, ideas and beliefs of rationalism and humanism, overriding their identities based on race, caste, language, region or religion. This in a way formulates the civil society within a state. It is a disparate band of people comprising professionals, academicians, artists and rights activists. Though the civil society is generally perceived as an idea but ideas too can be forceful in determining human behavior and can act as a counter-balance to other ideas including the ideas of fanaticism and religious bigotry. Civil society can influence and shape public opinion and thereby run counter to the institutionalized bias towards a particular community - religious or otherwise - within a state. However, it requires a vibrant participatory movement with a strong media support to be really effective.

In the international system, technological progress in communication and media since the beginning of the 20th century has been playing a very significant role in bringing people in close virtual proximity obliterating physical distance. Ideas spread quickly and a network is soon established among the sympathizers, broad (and often vague) agenda takes shape and local issues hitherto confined to a particular region - being integrated within the broad agenda - acquire an international dimension. Such a
network not only ensures recognition to the local cause from beyond the borders but also material support, financial and otherwise. Herein rests the challenge to the state authority. The state finds it increasingly difficult to deal with the dissenter groups which draw on their sustenance from beyond the borders. Since the phenomena of religious militancy are no longer confined to the respective states alone and the impact spreads beyond the state boundaries, regional and extra-regional cooperation to deal with the phenomena is a necessity. As a line of argument emphasizes, security, viewed in the post cold war perspective, is primarily international – not national – and contemporary security is basically common security.\textsuperscript{16}

The historical experience often generates a debate of who is responsible for the radicalization of whom – for example, whether the Hindu communalist is to be blamed for the radicalization of the Islamist and the vice versa – that starts at the domestic levels and spreads beyond the borders, and usually ends up with a mutual blame-game. Often “the fear of a perceived Muslim thrust into India” coupled with the politics of so-called “minority appeasement policies” are identified as reasons for the evolution of the notion of \textit{Hindutva} and consequently, the growth of Hindu religious militancy in India. It is to be noted here that there are multiple Hindu traditions, and a monolithic concept of \textit{Hindutva} is hardly possible. After the Gujarat riots, the BJP – which depended on a coalition composed mostly of regional parties - contested the general elections on secular slogans like ‘India shining’ and ‘feel good’ factor mostly relying on the issues of economic development, and lost the elections. On the other hand, the Opposition campaigned highlighting the failure of the law enforcing machinery in the state of Gujarat. However, transnational ethnic groups in South Asia have been straining the inter-state relations in the region while drawing sustenance from such debates. Scholars have pointed out that in South Asia “... the political environment is charged with religious frenzy. Under
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the circumstances collective identity deriving from religion is easily prone to politicization."\(^{17}\)

At any rate, once religious militancy is accorded the status of an international issue and international cooperation to deal with the issue is advocated, an acceptable definition of religious militancy – preferably in the form of a Convention - has to be put together. Like many other stipulations in international relations, an acceptable definition of religious militancy too may prove elusive and if there is no agreement on what constitutes religious militancy at the international level, it will be well-nigh impossible to formulate common minimum programs of international cooperation. We have mentioned earlier that religious militancy should not be equated with a form of terrorism though religious militancy under certain circumstances can engineer and contribute to terrorist activities. A global campaign against religious militancy per se is difficult to achieve at this stage. It appears then that the definitional problem has to be tackled either bilaterally between the states which are willing to cooperate with each other, or at best regionally, within a region-specific framework, to start with. A belief in certain common elements in policies of the 'coalition of the willing' might help.

Public pressure by foreign powers over a state, let alone actual coercive intimidation, is generally viewed as 'unwarranted interference in the internal affairs' by the states where people tend to rally round the flag against any form of perceived foreign interference. Therefore, any form of intimidation may hardly work. Adverse international public opinion (evolved, for example in the General Assembly of the UN) carries with it a legitimate influence but criticisms advanced by a state or a group of states lack this legitimacy. Such criticisms can be dubbed as duplicitous, hypocritical and motivated. Sanctions, if imposed by one or more states, cannot discriminate
between the target groups and the rest, and therefore, the sanctions too are liable to fail to achieve desired results. Further, sanctions might spawn more militants.

Under the circumstances, a quiet diplomacy among the states is a viable option. Here again, two modes of activities - which are complementary to each other - can be suggested at the bilateral or regional frameworks. On the one hand, the focus is on the peaceful cooperative methods. Here, in the true spirit of a team effort, coordination initiatives are necessary and a common minimum program needs to be outlined. A formal agreement is better than an informal understanding. A small body of experts can be formed in each interested state, which in consultation with the NGOs and people representing differing viewpoints within the state, would form a platform on which the structure of the common minimum program could be erected. These may include: cooperation and assistance in adoption of new state laws and improvement of existing state laws along with necessary enforcement mechanisms to curb the lethal effects of religious militancy. Technical assistance, as and when necessary, can be exchanged among the states.

An important point raised by Ishtiaq Ahmed in the context of ethnic conflicts in South Asia is also appropriate here. Ahmed maintains that the role of the international actors can be more positive if *inter alia*

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Activities are co-ordinated and organized so that the political and social forces within the Western societies which are contributing to the aggravation of conflicts are exposed and held answerable for such misdoings. The weapons with which the post-colonial state and its opponents fight their war games are often purchased from countries where the main human rights organizations... are based.

More concretely, the supply of funds and weapons via the diaspora communities and hostile states has to be watched and appropriate action by the international community on such matters co-ordinated.¹⁸
Along with this, should follow information exchange and intelligence cooperation, and also the cooperation in monitoring over the activities of the potential agents of peril.

On the other, a complementary method, which might involve an element of coercion, should involve inspections by a joint body of experts to determine which states are in compliance with the common minimum program. However, though such measures might be opposed generally by the states as they are extra-sensitive about their sovereignty and detest any form of intrusion, nevertheless, some form of verification would be required.

Regionally, the states must restrain from injuring each other's interests through activities which may be seen as leverage for diplomatic bargaining in a Machiavellian way. Instead – though the prescription has become a cliché now - economic cooperation and confidence-building must be accorded a greater priority. It is heartening to see that despite the odds, incremental progress has been made in these respects in the forms of SAARC Preferential Trading Arrangement or the Free Trade Agreement, but one would do well to remember that economic means too are vulnerable to political and diplomatic overtures and bargaining.

Indeed, a realization is necessary that while the non-state human alliances are establishing links among themselves, the states fail to act in unison to meet the challenges generated by the process. The state still follows the age-old practices and customs based on self-help considerations of realism viewing itself as an exclusive unit even in this interdependent world. Self-help is fine but sometimes it requires others' help as well, not on the basis of subsidiary alliance format but on the basis of equal partnership status. The states in the region, unfortunately, have many grievances against one another. On the one hand, Indian support and cooperation may strengthen mutual security with a neighboring land, but if it is
accompanied by a patronizing political and diplomatic style, it would amount to insensitivity to local needs affecting regime interests and public opinion. On the other - India might be inclined to believe - if nation building in India’s neighboring countries is sought to be effected by using the bogey of Indian domination, and by looking the other way while India suffers from terrorist activities with the belief that India thereby will be kept in leash – might prove detrimental to the interest of the region in the long run. Almost every state in the region suffers from the same evil and a concerted effort is best suited to tackle the problem. It is imperative that in the interest of evolving such a concerted effort some standard perceptions be made powerless. A contest, in verbal tirade and allegations, has become habitual to the states, which does not serve any useful purpose.

A South Asian Parliament, it is felt in some quarters, can evolve into an effective means to build on the strengths that the South Asian states share rather than highlighting the divisive elements – in other words, a mechanism that goes beyond the sector-specific cooperation under the SAARC.20 To quote Javed Jabbar, who formulated a proposal for the South Asian Parliament:

One significant and immediate benefit would surely be an improved environment for minorities because the dynamics of dialogue between political parties that have a communal dimension with national frontiers temporarily removed are bound to increase tolerance and reduce religious animosities.21

Jabbar proceeds to say, “If official participation is initially difficult, then Parliament could assemble regularly on a non-official, people-to-people basis”.22 However, since the states will retain their internal legislative sovereignty, it is doubtful whether a huge body of non-official South Asian
representatives can truly become effective, and bereft of worthwhile power, it might remain a decorative agency composed of a few well-meaning people. As a form of confidence building frequent exchange of parliamentary delegations among the South Asian states, however, is a reasonable option.

A further impetus to people-to-people contacts or citizen diplomacy – in the form of cultural events and festivals, frequent sports and educational tours, visits by media personnel, seminars and conferences and encouraging tourism – will be sensible enough. The focus of such activities need not aim at brainwashing or converting people into a particular fold or preaching a particular philosophy, but to re-emphasizing the fact and the belief that people everywhere – irrespective of their cultural, linguistic, religious differences – are essentially the same. The people-to-people contact, on its own, would not resolve disputes but knowing each other would curb animosities towards the 'foreigner'. The time has come to question the misperceptions and not to blindly follow certain stereotype images and positions.

**Conclusion**

It is always easier to formulate means and ways to deal with a problem than actually implementing them. Often we end up by saying that a political will is necessary for bringing in changes in the existing arrangements and in a way that induces us to rely heavily on the political leadership of the respective countries. People have developed some ways to exercise influence over the decision-makers especially when matters tend to go out of the hand. Marching in demonstrations, signing petitions, writing letters, posterering and leafleting campaigns and meeting with the elected representatives and the decision-
makers are generally accepted as useful democratic means of influencing policy decisions. However, spontaneous public emotion is only aroused under adverse circumstances when the actual or potential threat to survival or a sense of loss and deprivation assumes a serious credibility, but it might lose momentum fairly quickly. In normal times, therefore, it becomes the duty of the civil society (as non-state human collectivity based on certain universal values, ideas and beliefs overriding their fractured identities based on race, caste, language, region or religion) to guide the state by generating public opinion favorable for a particular policy. Religious militancy - sometimes dormant, sometimes active - is and will remain a feature of South Asian life, the present task is to manoeuver through the crises with ad-hoc fire-extinguishing measures - in terms of policies outlined above - till a stage is reached when ideas will compete, confront and accommodate, and then, far more ambitious plans of penetrating cooperation among states will likely to prove fruitful.

Endnotes


3. Neil NeVitte, “Analyzing Intercommunal Conflict: Theoretical Approaches and Comparative Cases” in Dhirendra Vajpeyi and
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6. Ibid.


15. Ibid. p. 214.


18. Ibid. p. 305.


21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.