Religious Extremism/Militancy in South Asia: Issues in Levels and Spheres of Cooperation

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Introduction

Voltaire declared in 19th century that, 'An Age of Enlightenment' would replace superstition and authoritarian religious order. However, religion has returned to global center stage, by the end of twentieth century and early twenty first century, with a vengeance. Religious extremism is an issue that confronts the whole world today. South Asia is no exception. Rather South Asia is the most affected region. Religious extremism becomes a menace when it takes violent shape that we call terrorism today, which it easily slips into. Dealing with the problem needs serious debate within the region. This paper argues for a regional approach that is within the overall international context. It is further presented that one must differentiate between cooperation and intervention, while talking especially, however, not only of, extra regional cooperation.

Strategies for dealing with religious extremism, especially its violent level, must be based on understanding of its conceptual basis. It is how one classifies religious extremism and where one puts it on the political spectrum as well as identifies its location within the global political
and economic contradictions, which will determine the adoption of a strategy for dealing with it. That will also tell us at what level or rather levels to control and eliminate the menace of violent religious extremism. This paper first makes an attempt to explain the nature of religious extremism in global context followed by studying its geography and nature in the South Asian arena. The paper concludes with identifying the various levels at which religious extremism has to be checked and how it could be done at a particular level.

**Conceptual Basis and Classification of Religious Extremism**

Globally, in the post Cold War era, free market economy and western liberal democracy can be termed as the ideas of an international establishment, composed of Multinational Corporations and International Commercial Interests, spread strongly through a revolutionarily advanced media that is reaching even the furthest and remotest corners of the world. This establishment has the military and economic support and protection, mainly of United States of America. Various European States including Russia and Japan, with some minor differences on specific issues and methodologies are also part of this global establishment. The ruling elites of the developing world are also important albeit junior partners of the global establishment. The United Nations Organisation, the International Court of Justice, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization and various other international as well as regional organisations are its international institutional manifestations. This establishment represents the global governance today. It is being attacked and challenged both from right and left to a varying degree of intensity. To left of the center are all those civil society movements that are attacking the establishment on economic policies, environmental issues,
Human Rights causes and continued use of force by states, whether inter or intra state, to suppress popular causes or for that matter use of force for solving any dispute. They distinguish themselves from the extremist rightist position by condemning the use of force at any level generally, and against civilian targets specifically, whatever the cause may be. On the right are various religious and other conservative, backward looking forces, who argue that the world has become bad place to live and the injustice or western, especially United States domination rather hegemony of the international system including its economic and cultural aspects representing decay of whatever good there was in humanity or their specific cultures and religions. So they argue and actively work for a return to a "golden past". Nationalist movements can not be classified within these divides so easily, as they may be progressive and left of center in some regions and on some issues, while conservative and reactionary in other areas and on other issues. They may at times be centrist, statist and closer to the establishment at times. There are extremist positions within all the above-mentioned divisions along the political spectrum. Divisions on political beliefs and understanding and/or interests are normal to human nature and existence. They also are a living proof of the plurality and democratic nature of the human person highlighting the need for tolerant, democratic and secular human governance at all levels that ensures justice and has credible dispute settlement mechanisms for enduring peace and sustainable human progress along with conserving the progress already made. It is when they become intolerant and violent that they become a threat to human security and a problem.

Extremism is a default option. That is when the existing system or systems actually fail or are popularly perceived to have failed to provide for justice and fair play that some or more, gradually turn towards extremism. "Attempts at modernization have been unsuccessful in much of the Third
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World and have undermined local traditions and community values, causing a backlash of pent up grievances by religious movements, including mass mobilization and modern political institutions such as political parties.\textsuperscript{2} Extremism, including, however, not exclusively, the religious variant, provides justification as well as recruiting grounds for potential users of violent means to achieve political ends, referred to today as terrorists. Violent eruption is however, not the only problem coming out of religious extremism, weaker sections of society are victims of many serious crimes, atrocities and discrimination. Women and minorities are the obvious examples.

Religious extremism being on the extreme right end of the political spectrum, is an idea that justifies its political claims on the basis of the various injustices and weaknesses of the prevailing international as well as national systems, works on the agenda of the rejection of the existing and a return to a real or imagined glorious and just past. Thus, it is reactionary and not radical. It is important to point out the significance of correct use of semantics and terminology. To a centrist, both radical and reactionary may appear to be the same; a violent challenger of the existing, which she/he considers worth preserving it makes a lot of substantial difference to the genuine detractor and protestor of the injustices of the existing order. Radical connotes something forward looking and not necessarily evil or bad. Avoiding the new debate that this may open, which is out of the scope of this paper, it is enough to say there is no need to make all your detractors allies, by lumping all the challengers together. Due to the fact of the current level of human progress that has brought movements, peoples and interests across state boundaries together and closer and the non state has become a very powerful international actor, religious extremism also is international and can not be confined to national and state or regional and territorial boundaries. Muslim religious
extremism being more in the limelight is having its more international existence than other religious extremisms which are equally bad or good, depending on one's political conceptual or ideological orientation and position and as dictated by interests or political expediencies. For example, Hindu extremism is confined to only one state. However, that does not make it less of a problem, even if it is of no immediate concern to the International Society. Having thus classified it, religious extremism may have a potential for disrupting the existing, it cannot replace it, as human history goes forward and that cycle cannot be turned back. The main cause for its attractiveness is due to lack of a credible liberal, progressive, forward looking and democratic alternative to the existing.

Strategies to deal with it have to be based on realizing this place of religious extremism in the political realm. Such classification demands a multi-level and a multi-faceted approach and cooperation. It has to be in the sphere of the state as well as the non-state sphere. In the sphere of the state, it has to be within each state, on regional level as well as extra regional level. At non-state sphere, also, it cannot be and, thus, must not be confined to state boundaries and loyalties.

**State Level**

States must address the issues of good governance on priority basis. They must fulfil their international obligations in the area of human rights with more force and agility. Of very crucial significance and importance is education. It is education that fills the minds of young human beings with ideas, beliefs and identity that they carry with them to their adult lives, wherever that might be. Syllabi must be cleansed of religious bigotry and distortion of history that glorifies war, violence and emphasises religious exclusiveness. Economic and administrative justice is another crucial element of any long-term strategy.
Economic well being and development with their broad social and cultural meaning and integration and identification of interests with international economy may help create popular vested interests in peace and rule of law. Law and order approach cannot be totally ignored, however, strategies based on the assumption that this will solve the problem misses the real point. Better policing etc. can minimize or limit the worst fallouts of religious extremism; however, it cannot redress the issue on long term basis. Rather over emphasis on administrative solutions may at times result in furthering the support base of extremism. Then it is fundamental that the law and order means to scrupulously follow the requirements of law. Violation of law gives credibility and strength to those using force and terrorist tactics for political objectives. South Asian societies and states are more plural than reflected by state structures, constitutions, and dominant state sponsored ideologies and identities. The insistence on one state one nation approach of most of the states is creating and has fuelled controversies, crisis and conflicts, both inter and intra state that has made violence a justified means of correcting wrongs and achieving rights- real or perceived. State structures and policymaking as well as policy implementation must realize this plurality. Issues of administrative, economic and social justice must take priority.

The post-colonial South Asian state with its emphasis on denial of diversity and centralization needs a basic fundamental overhaul. The denial of sub-state national or ethnic identities that permeates throughout the South Asian land mass is fuelling extremism. This denial of diversity has resulted in statism and almost a religious devotion to oneness of the people living within state boundaries. Appeals to religion to augment these state exclusivisms have also added to the not very attractive regional security situation.
Regional Level

South Asian region today has a formal organisation i.e. South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). The adoption of agreement of regional cooperation for combat of terrorism along with the recent additional protocol, adopted at SAARC summit held in Islamabad in January 2004, is a good step in the right direction. However, that legal instrument needs to be given real substance. It still has a long way to go. The real problem is political will, which forms the basis of legal action. Unfortunately, that is still lacking in most states of South Asia.

The main, if not the only stumbling block, in creating a workable system for regional cooperation at any level in South Asia is the Indo-Pak rivalry. The history of their independence movement continues to burden them with an ideological baggage that nags them whenever any progress is made towards bilateral peaceful and friendly relations and solution of long standing issues. When tensions between the two neighbours are high, the religious rhetoric and vocabulary is also more in vogue. When there is movement towards decrease of tensions, religious role is downplayed. For regional cooperation to be meaningful, India and Pakistan must find solutions to their problems. The bilateral issues between these two are holding the region at ransom. Other SAARC members need to play a more proactive role in this regard. They must not permit progress on issues of significance, religious extremism, militancy or terrorism being one of the most important one, to remain hostage to relationship or rivalries between the two South Asian nuclear states. That role may be through the structure of SAARC or out of its fold. Their tit for tat nuclearization is another issue that has put the whole South Asian region a dangerous place to live. Discussing that is out of the scope of this presentation and conference, however, one must keep in mind that religious militant
argument has provided and is providing justification for their nuclear programmes. Further, the interests that support nuclearization and militarization of these two states as well as other states use religious rhetoric to justify them and convince people to support these at a colossal cost for human development needs and progress.

The regional states need to further institutionalize their cooperation in dealing with religious extremism. They can explore having a human rights charter and a real working system for its respect for the region. Work on creation of a South Asian trade bloc needs to be prioritized. Religious extremism will be contained and made non offensive and non lethal only through a comprehensive regional cooperation and development of friendlier and a peaceful region. Progress on all the above-mentioned fronts and more can work directly in reducing religious extremism. Cooperation and good neighbourly relations can only be built on respect for sovereign equality of states. Cooperation should not be interpreted as intervention in another state’s internal affairs.

States are entering the global arena through regions, so regionalism is an important and a more suitable method for solving and dealing with most issues that confront states and peoples today. Most issues, religious extremism being one of the most conspicuous among them, even if global in content and nature, have regional peculiarities. A regional approach to them helps in dealing with them. However, this regionalism cannot be and must not be permitted to become exclusivist.

**Extra-Regional / International Level**

International has become a very important element of the national and regional and with each day is becoming more so. This is despite the fact that September 11, 2001 may have temporarily, and superficially, separated the two,
by bringing security to the center of international agenda and thus re-inventing statism and policies of unilateralism. The role of the United Nations, European Union, International Financial Institutions or individual global powers such as the United States of America, Germany, France, Russia, Japan and Britain as well as other regions or states and organisations is important. International Cooperation for dealing with religious extremism is not only being partner in the US led War against Terrorism, that being one very important part issue of dealing with religious extremism. It is not intended in any way to downplay the significance of that 'war', which is central to the international efforts in this regard today, but the point to understand is that is it is only one aspect with a specific and of limited and immediate significance.

South Asia needs to cooperate and coordinate its efforts with global efforts in this regard, both at individual as well as collective regional level. The argument of this paper is that religious extremism is a challenge of extreme right and is reactionary. With a difference in style and intensity, policies of unilateralism are also placed on the right side of the above explained political spectrum. South Asia needs to be on side of multilateralism, having a forward-looking conceptual basis for policy. The role of international institutions must be strengthened and respect for rules of International must be ensured. The role of the United Nations in international security areas must be strengthened and emphasized. When one violates law to deal with violations of law, one provides justification for those breaking the law initially. South Asian states need to cooperate and there are real time basis for such cooperation, on common issues in international fora. More democratization of international institutional decision making and insurance of respect for their decisions is where the weight of South Asia states must be.
Bangladesh is the only signatory to the nascent International Criminal Court (ICC). While this makes Bangladesh a step ahead of the rest of the regional states, this is simply not good enough. There is a need for all South Asian states to become full parties to International Criminal Court. Bangladesh can keep its lead by going ahead by becoming a party to the ICC and perhaps play a role in canvassing for it in the region. It must be understood that institutionalization of international society and its decision making can be more protective of weaker states than stronger ones, as is the popular belief in most of the developing countries.

While not losing sight of the long term policy changes and strategic activities, states can take some actions, both at regional level and cooperate with extra regional efforts in this connection. They can be termed as administrative or management actions. Cooperation on these can be initiated and carried out at both regional and extra regional levels:

- Promote enhanced mutual assistance of a legal nature;
- Pursue measures to prevent the terrorist access to and use of nuclear, chemical and biological materials;
- Inhibit the movement of terrorists and falsification of documents;
- Strengthen counter-terrorism cooperation in maritime, air and other transportation sectors;
- Counter terrorist attacks against public facilities and infrastructure;
- Deprive terrorists of funds, and
- Increase counter-terrorism training.

The long term and more lasting methods of dealing with religious extremism have to be taken in the non state sphere, to which we turn now.
Religious extremism is a non state international phenomenon with no fixed geographic location. It is a problem both for the state and the society, as it mainly is a challenge from societal groups directed at states and the state system. So, civil society has to be the main challenger that is capable of dealing with religious extremism and its violent manifestation i.e., terrorism, more successfully. Religious extremism becomes a real issue for the public when it enters the collective arena, starts playing a political role and takes up a political agenda, more significantly when it considers the use of violence justified by the 'so believed' holy aims and objectives. It is a political activity and so has to be dealt with on the political playing field. This makes the role of the political activist and political party central along with the crucial role of the intellectual and the research/academic institutions. The roles of political activist and political party is to give real and credible representation to the genuine issues of the people and put democracy as a real practicable decision making system that can deliver and can really be a vehicle of change for better and good governance, administrative, social and economic justice, in the process ensuring respect for their rights as humans.

The role of the intellectual, both within the formal institutional folds of academic and research institutions or outside them, is to enlighten the society, initiate and conduct educated debate of real issues facing the people. They also have to come up with progressive and democratic alternatives for the existing, on the intellectual and conceptual front. As one very significant reason for the attractiveness of the religious extremist solutions is lack of any credible alternative to the prevailing and dominant, which have failed to meet the standards of justice and fair play in the perception of a large section of human society. A
significant part of that section is turning violent and becoming terrorists.

Extremism, turning militant or terrorist, is the new international security issue. It is a security issue of totally different and new type and, thus, the application of traditional methods of dealing with security issues cannot succeed in dealing with it. As in so many other fields, which are mainly related to the social welfare sector, state has to concede sphere of authority and action to the non state in the still jealously guarded and protected sphere of security. On the other hand, the non state has also to assert itself in areas of human concern especially security areas, that states are still trying to keep within their exclusive domain.

Prof. Mary Kaldor has presented civil society in a new role that is as ‘an answer to war’. Prof Kaldor defines civil society as ‘the medium through which one or many social contracts between individuals, both men and women, and the political and economic centres of power are negotiated and reproduced’. According to the learned Professor, this new global society can offer a solution, through an emphasis on society organising itself, on international humanitarian law, on multilateral enforcement, on supporting local democrats and moderates and on external sanctions that have the support of local actors. Such a programme can fuel an alliance against terror and the ‘war on terror’ an alternative to the global establishment. Thus, civil society in South Asia, which is quite active, within state boundaries, needs to further strengthen its cooperative and collaborative activities at regional level and at international level. Though one sees a lot of collaborative activities between the Indian and Pakistani civil societies, it needs to be expanded to the whole regional level. That will give it the much needed strength and better insight and foresight, besides making it more effective and influential. Similarly, the South Asian civil society organisations need to open up and expand in all directions, that is it must go
down to their own societies, to others in the region as well as it must be more active participant of the global civil society. Civil society organizations, one must accept has not been very successful in playing its essential role of helping the civil society mature into an assertive political force with a controlling presence in decision making processes in most of the states of South Asia, variations apply.

States need to accept the role of civil society and not be jealous of its sphere. Time has come when state has to concede, it can not hold on to its exclusive domains any more. Each state of South Asia has its own peculiarities. Foremost, it has not entered the modern era out of its own historical experiences, or as a response to its own societal needs and demands. It is essentially a post colonial state having the modern era under colonial rule. It has the centrist and statist features of the post colonial state. It is finding difficult to give up power and authoritarian tendencies. However, it is the demand of enlightened self interest of even the elites of the region to concede some space. Thus, state needs to look at civil society organisations as collaborators rather than rivals.

**Conclusion**

Extremism is the denial of otherness. Such refusal to accept variation in human life style coming from which ever side is dangerous. That denial coming in the name of liberalism or religion, are both two sides of the same coin. In the prevalent international political debate, be that republican led United States or Osama bin Laden sponsored terrorists, are conceptually on the same side. Both have a strong belief on ownership of truth and violence to be the proper, correct and the right way rather the only way of solving disputes. The difference is of geography and economic and political location and not of location on the
political spectrum. The language and tone of National Strategy Report 2002 issued by the White House very neatly puts its authors in the extreme right corner of the conceptual divide, along with forces it is supposedly fighting a war against, i.e., religious extremists turned terrorists. Cooperation to be meaningful, at regional/extra regional level or in the sphere of the non state must strive to steer the humanity at large out of this artificial two way divide. Cooperation must be based on and aimed at accepting rights of peoples and cultures to be different colours of the family of humankind.

Endnotes

