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Religious Radicalism and Minorities in South Asia

The South Asian subcontinent has never been regarded as a particularly stable part of the world. But its instabilities were largely seen as local, or at worst regional, with a limited capacity to affect the rest of the world. This view changed abruptly in the closing decades of the twentieth century, when the India-Pakistan nuclear tests and the 9/11 attacks in the United States put the subcontinent squarely on the map of global “hot spots.” In the wake of these two events, South Asia suddenly acquired the potential to affect not only its wider neighborhood, both to the west and southeast, but well beyond.

While the chief area of concern in both cases is Pakistan—a military regime that secretly exported nuclear materials to North Korea,¹ home to out-of-control jihadis, with “mad mullahs” now in government—and perhaps *because* the chief area of concern is Pakistan, India has come under pressure as well. A recent opinion poll by the Chicago Council on Foreign Affairs shows that India has jumped 20 points as an area of U.S. strategic concern in American

1. “Pakistan’s North Korea Deals Stir Scrutiny,” *Washington Post*, 15 November 2002.

public perception, and this jump is largely because India is seen as at risk of war.²

Moreover, the high level of hostility between India and Pakistan since the Kargil conflict and General Musharraf's coup of 1999, followed by the war on terrorism, has fed into Pakistan's rapid plunge downhill. The Islamic right, which gained steadily through the 1980s, rose sharply again in the late 1990s, this time with India as an avowed target. If the standoff between the two countries continues, as it has done over the past four years, Islamic radicalism will grow exponentially in Pakistan. Peace with India, on the other hand, could give Pakistan the chance to stabilize itself and turn its intelligence services and religious activists to reform.

But peace with India is harder to achieve today than it was five years ago. India too has been radicalized by the years of mounting hostility. The escalation of Islamic militancy in Kashmir,³ backed and increasingly manned by Pakistan, as well as its spillover into terrorist attacks in other parts of India, including the capital, Delhi, has given Hindu nationalism an enormous spur. Thanks to the end of state controls over the media and the rapid growth of Internet communication, millions of Indians are now familiar with the Islamists' hate speech against India and in particular against Hindus. As a result, Hindu xenophobia seems less wild to many Indians than it did earlier.

The Pakistan government's politics of denial and increasingly offensive allegations that terrorist attacks in India are engineered by the Indian government and security forces ("to give the mujahideen a bad name") have further fanned Hindu grievance. They have also contributed to a wider, or perhaps more open, wariness toward Islam, which has increased after 9/11 and permits quite unrelated issues to be linked, such as Pakistan-backed terrorism in India and the February 2002 pogrom against Muslims in the Indian state of Gujarat.

2. Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, "Worldviews 2002," a public opinion survey of U.S. and European attitudes on foreign policy, www.ccf.org.

3. Government figures for people killed in Kashmir-related conflict since 1990 have shot up from around thirty-five thousand in 1998 to about sixty thousand today. While the jump might also reflect a shift from under-reporting earlier (as widely alleged by human rights groups), a rough newspaper survey of the period does indicate a sharp rise since the Kargil conflict of summer 1999 till today, with an average of nine to ten people dying per day. Further, more than 50 percent of the militants are from Pakistan and Pakistan-held Kashmir, and since the mid-1990s Islamic fundamentalist groups have dominated the militancy.

The Gujarat pogrom, in which more than a thousand Muslims were killed in a state-tolerated—perhaps even sanctioned—revenge for the brutal slaying of fifty-eight Hindus, came as a considerable shock both domestically and internationally. India's Hindu nationalists, the general belief was, had moderated with experience in government. The contentious issues that led to the 1993 Hindu-Muslim riots had been shelved by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) at the center, and they would control their more radical Hindu partners. India, after all, was poised to be a regional and maybe global power.

In the wake of the Gujarat riots, many concluded that this was an optimistic assessment. The BJP government at the center might have put aside contentious issues, such as the campaign for a Hindu temple on the site of a mosque that Hindu radicals destroyed in 1992 (the Babri Masjid),⁴ but it was unable to restrain its radical wings in the states. The BJP-led Gujarat government revived the temple agitation when its allies tried to bury it; at the same time, Gujarat's extremist chief minister, Narendra Modi, made great play on Pakistan-backed terrorism in India.⁵ Gujarat's Hindus and Muslims were polarized, and one of Gujarat's previous hot spots, Godhra, erupted when Hindu temple activists came to blows with local Muslims at the railway station. Muslim radicals set fire to a carriageload of men, women and children, killing fifty-eight. Revenge riots broke out across Gujarat, many of them led by Hindu activists affiliated with the Gujarat government. The state government failed to stop the riots until more than a thousand Muslims were killed, some literally torn apart.

The Gujarat government's policy of "turning a blind eye" to the carnage, and the central government's decision to opt for pressure on

4. The campaign to build a temple to the widely worshipped Hindu figure Ram on the site of a seventeenth-century Muslim mosque in northern India was launched in the late 1980s. The mosque was destroyed by Hindu mobs in December 1992, followed by Hindu-Muslim riots in western India (where extremist Hindu organizations such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and the Shiv Sena have a strong presence). When the BJP came to power at the center in coalition with a number of regional parties, the temple campaign was put on a back burner, but when the BJP came to power in Gujarat under the leadership of Narendra Modi the campaign was revived—once again followed by Hindu-Muslim riots.

5. Because the Gujarat border has been relatively peaceful, most observers tend to forget that Gujarat has an ongoing dispute with Pakistan on the Rann of Kutch, and that Pakistani authorities regularly arrest Gujarati fishermen for straying into Pakistani waters. There are more than 250 fishermen in Pakistani custody at present.

the state government instead of dismissing it and placing the state under Governor's rule, allowed more than a thousand preventable deaths. Muslims continued to be harassed after the violence subsided. It looked as if India was beginning to undergo the same process of religious radicalization as so many of its neighbors—and with potentially worse consequences for its minorities, especially the 120 million-plus Indian Muslims (by virtue of scale).

The Bush administration especially criticized for not having reacted to the Gujarat pogrom more strongly than it did. The Europeans, who *had* reacted strongly, were under pressure to do more. Were not the Hindu xenophobes of Gujarat on par with Islamic fundamentalists? the U.S. and European administrations were asked, in parliament and by many civil society groups (especially in Britain where the Gujarati Muslim diaspora is strong). Should Hindu xenophobes not be considered as much a security threat as Islamic militants in Pakistan?

Domestically, Hindu xenophobes in India can be put on par with Islamic fundamentalists in Pakistan and Bangladesh, or Buddhist extremists in Sri Lanka and Bhutan. But they do not export terrorism, as do radical Islamists in Pakistan, nor have they been supported by Indian security and intelligence services, as are Islamic militants in Pakistan. In this sense Hindu xenophobia does not constitute a security threat to the world—and certainly not to the United States or U.S. interests. Indeed, many Hindu xenophobes believe that U.S. and Hindu interests converge in the “clash of civilizations” that the 9/11 attacks tried to precipitate.

In a wider sense, however, the threat that Hindu xenophobes pose to Hindu-Muslim coexistence in India is of considerable security concern to the United States. The U.S.-India relationship has strengthened steadily over the past five years, as it was fated to after the end of the Cold War. Though it is still largely concentrated in diaspora-homeland ties, and the two countries will take time to overcome the estrangement of the Cold War years, the U.S. administration has worked hard with the Indian administration to chart steps toward a long-term alliance on several levels, including security and trade. The U.S. interest, therefore, is in a stable and prosperous India.

It is in this context that the Gujarat pogrom raised fears that India might be becoming less rather than more stable. It underlined the vulnerability of Muslims in India at a time when India's Muslims were beginning to be considered a beacon for the country's open society.

Indian Muslims did not support al-Qaeda or the Taliban, nor did they believe the 9/11 attacks were justified in light of U.S. support for Israel against the Palestinians. Though there was enormous anxiety about the air campaign on Afghanistan, public protests were few.

In fact, Indian Muslims were beginning to emerge from a partly self-imposed isolation following the terrible violence that accompanied the partition of India in 1947, the three India-Pakistan wars that ensued, and the 1992–93 Hindu-Muslim riots that were sparked by the temple agitation. Over the past decade, Indian Muslims had begun to enter the mainstream in larger numbers than before. In several southern Indian states, a government policy to rapidly increase the proportion of Muslims in the civil services generated enthusiasm and spurred Muslim enrolment in educational institutions. India produced South Asia's first Fortune 500 Muslim billionaire. It looked as if Indian Muslims were beginning to seek benefits from India's new economic opportunities.

The Gujarat riots dealt a body blow to this process. Ironically, Gujarat's new assembly and service sector opportunities (after economic liberalization in the 1990s) drew a wave of Muslim immigration from poorer regions, in particular to the state capital, Ahmedabad. Many of these economic migrants died in the riots; others were forced to return to the poverty-stricken villages they had left in search of a new life.

As subsequent events show, however, Gujarat is an aberration rather than the norm. Hindu-Muslim violence tends to be heavily localized in India—the bulk of it takes place in five out of India's twenty-one states and in a handful of cities—and it only rarely spreads to other parts of the country. The Gujarat riots did not trigger violence across India; in fact, 80 percent of the deaths occurred in Ahmedabad alone.

After the riots, India's elephantine government slowly lumbered back to rule. The BJP government at the center acknowledged the "blot" the riots had stained India with, partly under pressure from their allies in the ruling coalition. Important watchdog institutions stepped in to pressure the Gujarat government. The National Human Rights Commission indicted the state government for its failure to stop the riots, and the Indian Election Commission forced the state to restore order by setting benchmarks for an assembly election. There was, too, enormous domestic outcry against the center's reluctance to intervene directly in the state to stop the violence.

Human rights and women's groups combined humanitarian aid with investigative reports. The media called for immediate government intervention to stop the riots. Religious groups—in particular, the Hindu priests who called the Hindu nationalists to account—disavowed the Gujarat xenophobes and led peace initiatives with Muslim leaders. Business groups such as the Confederation of Indian Industries expressed their concerns collectively as well as through individual members. And finally, India's new President Abdul Kalam Azad, himself a Muslim, brought a healing touch when he chose Gujarat for his first presidential visit within a week of his inauguration.

Perhaps for these reasons, Gujarat survived a second test peacefully when terrorists killed some thirty-five Hindu, Muslim and Sikh worshippers at the Akshardham temple in September 2002. This time the Gujarat government deployed security forces around all vulnerable areas. More important, there were no mobs baying for blood. Instead, Gandhians reported crowds of two thousand at their peace meetings.

It would be over-optimistic to conclude from this sequence of events that Gujarat has turned to lasting peace. The state has suffered from periodic outbreaks of Hindu-Muslim violence since the late 1970s—a period that is also marked by the rise of Hindu nationalism in Gujarat. Gujarat's Muslim-bashing chief minister shows little signs of post-conflict moderation. Much depends on how the December 2002 Gujarat assembly election turns out.

What we can conclude, however, is that the Indian government and elites, even under the leadership of Hindu nationalists, realize the danger of perpetuating Hindu-Muslim violence and will be more vigilant if another Gujarat is in the offing. Whether they are ready to take the larger lessons of Gujarat on board, however, is another matter.

The literature on ethnic conflict shows that multiethnic societies are most stable when they have achieved some degree of integration between their different communities—and the most potentially unstable when earlier integrative networks are in decline. Hindu nationalism rose in Gujarat as its once-flourishing textile industry gave way to the power loom sector, and the Textile Labor Association, one of India's most powerful trade unions, shriveled.⁶

6. Asutosh Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

Recent research shows that even small steps toward integration can keep the peace. India's south, where a large proportion of Indian Muslims live, is largely free of violence. This is chiefly due to a combination of government and civil society initiatives, such as minority education funding and open reading rooms, avenues that have crumbled in the five states where Hindu-Muslim violence recurs.⁷ Gujarat has become one of the most highly segregated states in India.

In other words, we now know what India can do to prevent riots such as the ones in Gujarat from recurring, and the task is not Herculean. Indeed, the majority of Hindu-Muslim deaths occur in a handful of cities. It is only a few areas that require concerted effort. We also know that the two most important avenues of integration are education and employment. Both are highly segregated in India and there is as yet limited readiness for change among educators and employers. The issue has, however, begun to be discussed by businessmen, partly thanks to India's modest information technology billionaire, N. Ramamurthy, who ruefully disclosed that there were no more than six Muslims among his thousands of employees. The Reliance Group, too, has just announced a new program to link all Gujarat's villages through the Internet. They have yet, however, to announce a policy to increase minority jobs.

Where education is concerned, the chief culprit is government. Most primary and secondary schools are government funded, as are most universities in India. A proactive policy by schools and university boards to increase the enrolment of minority candidates could make a great deal of difference. India has in any case shown new commitment to education programs such as universal literacy. Civil society too can play a useful role here, through pushing for de-segregation initiatives at the local level.

But whether these policies will be undertaken is an open question. The fact that Hindu-Muslim violence is concentrated in a handful of areas in the north and west of India is both good and bad news. It is good news because it indicates that India is unlikely to go the way of the former Yugoslavia. It is bad news because many of these states are especially vulnerable to India-Pakistan hostility, either because, like Gujarat, they border Pakistan, or because they are politically powerful at the center.

7. Ibid.

In the immediate term it is difficult to imagine India-Pakistan hostilities decreasing. The Pakistan-based jihad groups opposed the Kashmir election of September–October 2002, which was marred by a series of terrorist attacks. More than eight hundred people died during the three weeks of the election. The Pakistan election that followed hard on the heels of the Kashmir election yielded significant gains to the Islamists, who now have a critical mass in parliament. Their demands include the release of several militant leaders who were arrested between January and March 2002. In late October the Pakistan government released the chief of the banned Lashkar-e-Toiba group, Hafiz Saeed, and placed him under house arrest.⁸ Soon after, two alleged Lashkar-e-Toiba militants were killed while trying to attack a crowded shopping mall in Delhi.

These indications that Pakistan is continuing to lift the curbs that were imposed on militant groups following the attack on India's parliament in January 2002 have already rung alarm bells in India. Most Indian policymakers believe there will be more rather than fewer attacks in Kashmir and in the rest of India in the months to come—and the bulk of them will be by Pakistan-based jihad groups.

Yet few Indian policymakers are counting the domestic costs of this escalation. If, as this paper argues, there has been a general rise in Hindu-Muslim insecurity during the years of India-Pakistan hostility, then this trend is likely to continue with more terrorist attacks forecast. How will the Indian government deal with this rise in tensions—by waiting for another outbreak of rioting and praying it will not be for another ten years? (The previous outbreak of Hindu-Muslim rioting was in 1992–93.) Or by adopting proactive strategies of containment and prevention, such as rapid reaction to the first signs of impending violence, and investment in integration?

It is too early to say yet. But the signs are mixed. The Indian government has shown readiness to take considerable risks in pursuit of peace with Pakistan (first at Lahore in 1999, and then at Agra in 2000). But it has not shown the same readiness to make Muslim integration

8. In fact, the Pakistani government released Hafiz Saeed on March 31, 2001, and his first act was to call on all the subcontinent's Muslims to launch a jihad against India to avenge the Gujarat pogrom. Hafiz Muhammad Saeed, "Jihad Is the Best Defense for Oppressed Muslims," www.markazdawa.org. Under Indian and U.S. pressure he was taken back into custody in April 2002 but has not been charged with any offences.

a priority—as it should have—given the sharp escalation of India-Pakistan hostility. As long as this hostility continues Pakistan is bound to, and will, support Muslim disaffection in India. It is in India's vital interest, therefore, to prevent sources of disaffection. The Indian government is supporting proactive steps in Kashmir, where the newly elected state government has released separatist leaders from prison, counter insurgency is being rolled back, and economic reconstruction and devolution top the agenda. A peace process has begun in the state and could be strengthened if Pakistan were to support it.

There is too, as stated earlier, new awareness of the need to prevent Hindu-Muslim tensions India-wide in both government and civil society—though it would appear to flicker where government is concerned. As an ally with a large Indian American diaspora and a large Pakistani American diaspora, the United States could play a useful role in supporting Indian preventive action and encouraging Pakistan to do so as well. Indian government and civil society have been more receptive to international aid and ideas in the last decade, especially so to the diaspora. U.S. investments in India are low, but they could still be combined with support for minority and gender employment, as well as desegregated education (an area where the United States has learned its own hard lessons). International institutions, especially global trade organizations, could work with Indian partners to write minority employment and integrated education into programs for economic growth.

Much depends, however, on whether Pakistan can be persuaded to aid rather than hinder India in these efforts. Anti-Indian sentiment has multiplied exponentially in Pakistan since the 9/11 attacks and the international spotlight on Pakistan's role in Kashmir-related terrorism in India that ensued—which Pakistanis blame on India's stationing of a half a million troops on the border.

Though the two countries took the major step of troops' withdrawals after the Kashmir and Pakistan elections, it was accompanied by a rise in shrill rhetoric that frittered away its confidence-building potential. Pakistan has added Gujarat to its litany of Indian crimes, a move guaranteed to raise Indian hackles further given the sorry state of Hindus and Christians in Pakistan (indeed, the Gujarat chief minister has already used Pakistan's statements on the Gujarat pogrom in his election campaign). More worrisome, there appear to be fresh Pakistani initiatives to court anti-Indian lobbies in Bangladesh, whose Hindu population has more than halved since 1947.

India can, and I hope will, take unilateral steps to prevent serious domestic fallout from hostility with these two Muslim neighbors. But the political will and resources are likely to be uneven as long as the threat of Islamic terrorism is high, given that India's institutions of governance are already unable to keep pace with population growth and the rapid social and economic change that is taking place. Here again the United States could play a helpful role in working with the Pakistan government to control and eventually decommission and rehabilitate radical groups, as suggested by several other chapters in this volume. Sad as it is, especially for Indians who believe their numbers, territorial size and democracy insulate them from their smaller and weaker neighbors, the subcontinent's minorities and majorities impinge on each other across borders.

After Pakistan abolished separate electorates for the 2002 election, a Hindu friend from Karachi commented bitterly, "Why doesn't India welcome this as a positive step for Pakistani Hindus?" The Pakistani government could take a leaf from his book. Though it does not trigger it, arming and sending Islamic militants into India compounds the vulnerability of Indian Muslims. This is one more reason for the United States, increasingly embroiled in Pakistan and more closely involved with the two countries than before, to support preventive action in each country as well as at a regional level. At the moment, and for the near future, containing Pakistani militancy and strengthening Indian democracy are key, especially as the two impinge on each other.