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RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM IN SOUTH ASIA

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Editorial

RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM IN SOUTH ASIA

South Asia has been a melting pot with many cultures, languages, religions, races, tribes with very long historical traditions, which have captured the interest of people all over the globe. The South Asian population of about 1.5 billion people include most of the Hindus and Muslims in the world. It is also the birthplace of religions such as Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism and various traditions of Hinduism. In addition, the Christian community claims that its origin dates back to the visit of the Apostle St. Thomas in the first century and Islam developed a unique cultural blend with several traditions including Sufism. Before the British conquest of the South Asian region, relations between regional peoples and sovereign power had not been defined wholly by religion. In the post-colonial era, religious identity has been closely linked to the emerging nation states in South Asia. The partition of the Indian sub-continent into two nations, India and Pakistan, on the basis of religious identity disrupted centuries old networks of communication as well as cultural and material exchange. In addition, it resulted in violence in which more than a million people perished and about fifteen million people were displaced. The scars of this colonial legacy still define the nationalism debate in the South Asian sub-continent. The nexus between religion and nation, as well as region and center, has been playing out during the last seven decades that has resulted in wars and internal civil strife in many parts of the region even today. The dismemberment of Pakistan resulting in the formation of Bangladesh exposed the limits of imposing a religious bond to guarantee national unity.

Pakistan was created as a homeland for Muslims in the sub-continent, where they would be free from domination of Hindus. Therefore, in Pakistan, religion did not become a strictly a private matter despite its founder Muhammad Ali Jinnah hoping that the religious identity of the people would be subsumed by a political identity as citizens of the state. Pakistan became a constitutionally defined Islamic State, where the numbers of minorities such as Hindus, Christians and Sikhs were too few in number and too unimportant to attract much attention. However, sustaining a nation based on religious identity became

difficult resulting in a clash of regional aspirations with national claims drawing exclusively on religion. The negotiating of tensions between the center and the provinces resulted in short lived democratically elected governments and extended periods of military authoritarianism. Today, the democratic political space is controlled by an oligarchy, who has to pander to the interests of the armed forces on the one hand and radical Islamic groups on the other for its survival.

In India, Mahatma Gandhi established a pathway for independence of India based on religiously inspired non-violence. After independence, Jawaharlal Nehru advocated for a secular state, where religion would be a strictly private matter not influencing public policy. He argued that the cardinal doctrine of a modern democratic state is the separation of the state and religion, as the idea of a religious state has no place in the mind of the modern man. Interestingly, India was home to a large number of Muslims, even more than those living in Pakistan. Besides, India has a large number of communities having different religious affiliations, such as Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Jews and others. They enjoy rights guaranteed by the Constitution, including the right to practise and propagate one's faith and to establish their own institutions. The democratic federalism of India was held together in the initial decades of independence by the Indian National Congress, which was a nationally based political party that enjoyed the support of all sections of society. But the ensuing erosion of Congress' organizational and electoral base, gave rise to several regional parties vying for political space using identity based politics. Several communal riots during the last few decades resulted in the polarization of communities in which right-wing political parties reaped rich dividends. Today, the idea of a secular India is under stress from Hindu nationalist groups led by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), who have become so powerful, that they are within reach of dismantling the secular democratic ethos of India to establish a Hindu Rashtra, where the values and ancient traditions of Hindu culture, termed as 'Hindutva', become part of the fabric of Indian society.

Other countries in the South Asian region has also witnessed the fusion of religion and nationalism resulting in violence and civil war. Besides, modern nation states with their homogenizing logic and language of equal rights of citizenship have been generally averse to assertions

of religious difference by minority communities seeking preferential treatment. In Sri Lanka, the nationalism debate also had ethnic roots. Less than a decade after independence in 1948, the Ceylon Citizenship Act disenfranchised Indian Tamils and the Sinhala Only Act imposed Sinhala language and the Buddhist culture on other minorities. This created resentment among minorities especially the Tamils, who waged a civil war until it was defeated in 2009. The ethno-religious nationalism played out in Sri Lanka continues to generate social tensions and violence in the country.

Bangladesh was born in 1971 out of Bengali nationalism rather than religious nationalism and the Awami league that spearheaded the struggle for independence upheld a rather secular ideal of the nation. However, the country's powerful military began to use religion to counter this secular ideal and seized power in the mid-1970s. The military rulers went on to drop secularism as one of the four cornerstones of Bangladesh's constitution and change the image of Bangladesh from a liberal Muslim country to an Islamic state by making Islam the state religion of Bangladesh. They supported radical Islamic groups and founded the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) which has become the political face of the Islamic nationalism in Bangladesh. This has resulted in several incidents of violence against minorities and secular professionals even today.

Nepal had been a Hindu Kingdom ruled by the Shah dynasty until 2008, when constitutional monarchy was abolished and Nepal became a republic. Ever since, there has been a heated debate on whether Nepal should be a secular country or a Hindu nation. Hindu nationalists have been arguing in favour of a Hindu nation. However, they have not been able to prevent the secular Constitution from being approved and coming into force in September, 2015.

Bhutan is a small kingdom in the Himalayas, where national identity and religious identity is intimately linked. The Buddhist Constitutionalism in Bhutan is an illustration of religious nationalism and constitutional theocracy, though the Constitution is committed to separation of religion from politics and does not declare Buddhism as the state religion.

In order to understand the complexity of the phenomenon of religious nationalism in South Asia, various authors have explained the phenomenon from different perspectives. Rudolf Heredia has highlighted

the spawning of religious movements in the context of the processes of globalisation and secularisation. Swapnil Dhanraj has presented the politics of nativism and Hindu nationalism promoted by Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS). A feminist ethic of care is proposed as an alternative approach to religious nationalism by Roopa Rathnam, while Sushree Panigrahi and Jeet Singh describes the Hindu women footsoldiers for establishing Hindu Rashtra in India. Paul D'Souza examines the phenomenon of nationalism prevailing in India resulting in a culture of polarization and intolerance which is posing a serious threat to the idea of India that cherishes plurality and inclusiveness. Finally, Rajanikanta Jena analyses the phenomenon of Hindu nationalism in India from several communal incidents that have taken place in recent times.

Religious nationalism is a political project of those who would like to remain in power using the emotional appeal of religion. These trends have only led to greater social strife and violence leading to loss of life and property. It is high time that the people of South Asia, who have suffered due to the advocates of a nationalism based on religious identity, realise that peace and prosperity of the region can only be possible with a nationalism that cherishes multiplicity, plurality, justice, liberty, equality and fraternity.

Denzil Fernandes