

RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM IN ASIA

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1. Introduction

Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilization and the Remaking of World Order* places before the humanity the challenge of religion in the century ahead of us. According to him there will be three civilization emerging at the end of this century, they are the Western civilization, the Islamic civilization and the Chinic or Chinese civilization. He also predicts violent clashes among the three and there will be more bloodshed in the name of religion and God. The above is a dangerous prediction but at the same time the increasing communal tension among various religions is on the increase. The Asian continent, the birthplace of almost of all the major religions of the Word, is faced with the growing religious fundamentalism and communal clashes.

2. The Political Scenario in Asia

Last half a century has witness dramatic changes in the society of Asian countries. Beginning with the decolonization process in Asia, most of the countries achieved independency with much blood shed. India and Sri Lanka from Britain, Indonesia from Holland, Indo-China from France, China from Japan and from cultural revolution under Mao; the oil rich middle eastern countries too were liberated from clutches of foreign rule. In the middle of the last half a century some of the dictators of Asia were chased out by popular movements spearheaded by students, workers, women and generally by the working class. Marcos and Suharto were driven out by popular movements within the country. Some dictators go strong in the region such as Myanmar and Pakistan. The military junta which has tasted the civilian power like the man-eaters refuse to go back to the barracks. In Nepal the single party panchayat system has given way to multi-party system with regular election. Hong-Kong and Macau have joined the mainland China after centuries of rule under Britain and Portuguese. Taiwan is still struggling to decide to join mainland China or not. One can see all forms of governments in Asia democracy, low intensity democracy, dictatorship, authoritarianism, guided democracy so on and so forth.

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3. Rising Fundamentalism in Asian Countries

'Fundamentalism' here means going to the root or fundamental of the religion rejecting the existence of other religions and claiming superiority of one's own religion. The fundamentalist attitude of one religion if it is followed by a majority in a country it becomes a conflict between the adherents of that religions and other religious minorities.

3.1. The Islamic Fundamentalism

The Muslim population stands between 600 to 900 million at the end of the third quarter of the 20th century. Two-thirds of them live in Muslim-majority countries, one-third live as a minority in several non-Muslim states. 92 percent nearly 590 million live in Muslim majority states and 245 million live as a minority in several non-Muslim states. There are rich countries and poor countries in the Islamic World. The oil rich middle east countries are the riches and the eight countries in West Africa and Bangladesh are considered as the poorest countries. The rift between the Muslims and other religions were created as a result of colonialism and imperialism. Anwar Moazzem calls Islamic resurgence a 'semi-political development'. He asks can these semi-political developments be described as Islamic resurgence. If this term is to mean the strengthening of Islamic fundamentalism, then it is not at tall a new trend. What is new is the state-sponsored Islamic revival and a political and social system through partial implementation of Sharia. [1 Islamic fundamentalism by Asghar Ali Engineer]. The Iranian revolution in the late seventies actually witnessed the overthrow of Shah of Iran for his repressive rule, he was called by people as 'janayatkhar Shah' [the criminal shah] it was only Aytollah Khomeini gave it a religious turn. This was the time when Mujahidin-e-Khalqi-iran and Fidaiyan-e-Khalqi-Iran were quite influential among the people and they wanted to give a decisive turn to movement in favour of social change. The ruling classes of Iran and clergy led by Ayotollah Khomeini were fully aware of the revolutionary potential of the movement with the result Khomeini introduced medieval Islam. He was a fanatic and turned against militant Mujahidin, they are committed to radical Islam. They reject medieval Islam and believe in establishing a just society, ending exploitation of man by man. Ayotollah came down heavily on the Mujahidin because they look at Islam as a revolutionary force and not an medieval ideology to maintain status quo. The rulers used it for their own purpose in Iraq and Pakistan.

(i) The Rise of Taliban

Taliban is the Persian and Pashtho plural of the Arabic word 'Talib' which means religious student. On August 8, 1998, the taliban movement of Afghanistan took control of Mazari-I-Sharif with the city's capture, the taliban now hold nearly all the country's territory. The taliban followers, perhaps the best-known fact about the taliban is the restrictions they have imposed on women. These require women to be fully veiled, forbid them most education and employment and impose strict limitation on their access to public services, including health care. It also required men to grow full-untrimmed beards, cut their hair short and attend mosque. They forbid any social mingling or communication among men and women outside family. Taliban network of teachers and students are from private rural bases students in the 'madrasas' trained in the ulema in Afghanistan and the nearby pashtun-populated areas of Pakistan. They played a major role against Soviet forces in the 1970's and 80's important source of recruitment for Mujahidin [holy-warriors]. A group of madrasa teachers and students led by mullah Muhammad Umar formed the taliban movement to end the power of these warlords failure of mujahidin to establish stable government between 1989-1992. Mullah Muhammad Umar [commander of the believers] made himself elected by an assembly of 1200 invited ulema from Quandahar.

The Shia-Sunni conflict began 1300 years ago with a rift between followers of Muhammad's son-in-law [Shaiias] and adherents of the hereditary caliphate [Sunnis]. In predominantly Sunni Pakistan, Shias probably make up to 15% of the population. Tensions between the two groups arose after the Islamic Revolution in Shia Iran in 1979 and were intensified further by the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-88 the recent civil war in Afghanistan, both of which placed one community against another. Since 1990 the fanatics in Pakistan's two major Muslim communities began attacking members of the other, several people have died. [2 'the politics of religion', Economist, October 09, 1999].

4. Religion and Nationalism

It is often said that religion and nationalism as opposed to one to the other and to treat nationalism as a modern secular phenomenon and religion as traditional and backward. In the book on 'nation and religion: perspectives on Europe and Asia' [3 Nation and Religion: Perspectives of Europe and Asia by Peter van deer veer and hartmut Lehmann, Princeton

University Press, 1999] the editors have disputed the alleged assumption and their book is designed to show various ways in which nationalism and religion have interacted with each other, how nationalism often have a religious component and religions may contribute to the formation of the concepts of national identity. It gives as example the development of religious and national identities in the Netherlands, Britain, India, and Japan. In Japan the role of the Yasukina shine as a commemoration of Japan's heroes more precisely of its war dead is cited to show the success of the interaction between religion and nationalism.

5. Women and Fundamentalism

The secular feminism has dismissed organized religion's as 'unredeemable patriarchal' or has focused on women's problematic integration within mainline traditions. In the three essays on 'Islamic fundamentalism' in the book 'Mixed blessings: gender and religious fundamentalism' Keng-Fong Pangs highlight the 'Islamic fundamentalism and women's empowerment on Hainan Island in the People's Republic of China. It deconstructs the notion of a monolithic western feminist standard in favour of a wider creativity in how women negotiate their agency, identity and status. In the book on 'Women and fundamentalism' Shahin Gerami's Iranian case she argues that Iranian women have not internalized the social identity that revolutionary fundamentalism has set forth. Particularly as they strive to maintain their right to public space. From her interviews with 38 Iranian women leaders and three focus groups of working-class women, she points out that informants do not challenge Islam itself but do challenge the interpretation that exploit women. She also highlight in her book the young, highly educated Egyptian women, and their apparent lack of internalized fundamentlistic religious ideology and strategic appropriation of its social and practical aspects, although the case could be developed in greater depth. [Women and fundamentalism: Islam and Christianity by Shahin Gerami, New York and London: Garland, 1996].

6. Resurgence of Islam in Southeast Asia

Islam is an important factor in the main countries of Southeast Asia such as Indonesia, Malaysia and Philippines. In the recent times in some of the regions in the countries, some local Muslim groups show the sign of recent resurgence of Islam in the areas as a manifestation of fundamentalism. The new Islam in Southeast Asia is mostly led by urban, politically active

intellectuals, influenced by contacts not only with the Middle East, but also with the western world. In contrast traditional Islam in the region is generally rural, led by a long-established aristocracy and often incorporating significant pre-Muslim elements in its local customs, which are challenged by the modernisers. The tension between the old and new are further complicated by their relationships with the modern independent states of Southeast Asia. These inherited the policies of their colonial predecessors towards Islamic societies, which they have either modified and reversed, in an attempt both to claim Muslim support and to contain the political ambitions and power of the Muslim communities. The traditional customs challenge the modern influence in the case of Cotabato in Mindanao, missionary activities of a Pakistani-based group in a small Philippine island on an international sea route, the tension between reformists and traditionalists in the Gayo community of northern Sumatra. [Islam in an era of nation-states: politics and religions renewal in Muslim Southeast Asia by Robert W. Hefner and Patricia Horvatich [eds.] University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1997].

7. The Characteristics of Fundamentalist Religious Organizations

Fundamentalistic groups have a number of common characteristics. They interpret the holy text with aspirations to political power. The religious-political link has been used to justify capitalism, communism, feudalism and even slavery. The other feature is some fundamentalists claim that theses ancient texts solve all the problems of present-day life. Finally these movements pursue power by whatever means, including assassination, mass mobilization and guerrilla warfare also the intolerance is common to all totalitarian regimes. There are a number of reasons for the spread of religious fundamentalism in recent years. In some countries such as Iran, Algeria and India, it has replaced regimes which have failed to meet the aspirations of the masses and have been corrupt. Its appeal can also be explained as a response to the spiritual alienation people sometimes experience in the modern world. The contemporary Islamic fundamentalism has failed as it is not a united force. Khomeini's Iran, Hussains' Iraq and the Taliban in Afghanistan have different goals to pursue and not a united force. [Does Islamic fundamentalism pose a threat to the West? Institute of Jewish policy research, a report, No.2, March 1996]

Ross Mallick's work highlight the author's critique of official policies in removing the social-economic inequalities from India, Pakistan,

Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. He holds the ruling elites, ngo's and foreign aid agencies responsible for accentuating communal and ethnic strife all over South Asia. Ethnicity to him is a recent development which evolved under the British rule and was misperceived and mishandled by all the subsequent regimes. The consequence of this to him is the rule of Brahmins in India or Punjabis in Pakistan they continue to dominate the state with democracy turning into a sham. In this book he expresses his genuine concern of social-economic disempowerment of minorities like the dalits in India. In addition he finds the religious and caste minorities bearing the brunt of multiple discrimination both from the majoritarian forces in society and the ruling elites in the state structure. [Development, ethnicity and Human rights in South Asia. By Ross Mallick, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 1998].

8. Fundamentalism and the Economy of Asia

The collapse of the Asian financial market is causing great concern to the countries with regard to employment, prices, human development, poverty and social capital. Unemployment rates are on the rise. In Indonesia the rate rose to 5.5 percent in 1998, up from 4.7 the previous year. In Thailand it reached 5.3 percent, compared with just above 1 percent in 1997. The unemployment rate in Korea more than doubled to 6.8 percent. While in the Philippines it climbed to 9/6 percent. Standards of living are falling as inflation outstrips any increase in nominal incomes. Observers cite notable enrollment decreases or dropout increases, particularly at secondary level. Estimates indicate that in Indonesia more than 6 million students have dropped out of school and in Thailand about 250,000 students have dropped out. In Malaysia private hospitals and clinics have reported a fall of up to 50 percent in the number of patients seeking treatment. The report observed that in many countries the informal norms and social relationships that enable people to cooperate in pursuit of a common benefit are breaking down as a result of the crisis. This is seen in an increase in crime and violence and in weakening of the community. [The social impact of the Asian Economics Crisis, Asian development outlook 1998].

9. Globalization and Fundamentalism

The integration of national economies with the global one has removed the economies frontier and there is free flow of goods in the region. The prosperity of 70's and 80's were followed by economic depression in the Asian countries. A total of 435 Malaysian firms were declared bankrupt

between July 1997 and March 1998. In Indonesia and additional 40 million people or 20 percent of the population are estimated to have fallen into poverty. In Korea and Thailand poverty is expected to rise with 12 percent of the population affected in each country –5.5 million in Korea and 6.7 million in Thailand. The economic crisis has hit the women badly. Employment declined by 7.1 percent among women between April 1997 and April 1998. The number of unemployed among those aged 15-29 doubled in 1997-98 from 300,000 to 600,000 and it tripled for the unskilled, rising from 1.7% to 5.4%. migrant workers were also hit hard as they did not have valid papers with the danger of returning to the country of origin. [Human development report 1999].

The stage of unemployment becomes a fertile place for communal organizations to recruit people for perpetuating fundamentalism. Poverty becomes the place of discrimination on the basis of color, religion, race, language etc. The globalization process also has sharpened the differences as basis for discrimination and attack.