

Rising Religious Intolerance in South Asia

NEETI NAIR

South Asia has historically been known for its plurality—of languages, religions, and cultures. To be a good ruler, in the lexicon of an earlier age, was to uphold the *dharma*, the social order, and protect both the dominant and the less dominant—in contemporary terms, the majority and the minority. The constitution of the great Mughal Emperor Akbar (who reigned from 1556 to 1605), *Ain-e-Akbari*, describes the role of the sovereign as enforcing *sulh-i-kul* (peace to all), with an emphasis on tolerance toward people of different religions and faiths.

Today, conversely, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the great hope of populist and corporate India, is better at upholding a kind of *adharma*—an uncivil, immoral order—with a silence so deafening that it has resulted in the unending harassment of religious minorities on public roads and in private homes across India. The murder of 16-year-old Junaid Khan on a train just outside Delhi in June 2017, allegedly because he refused to give up his seat to a gang of hoodlums who called themselves Hindu, did not garner even a token admonishment from Modi.

However, the callousness of the other passengers on the train, who failed to protect Khan and his brothers from being repeatedly stabbed, did lead to some soul-searching. In towns and cities nationwide, people marched in protests with signs declaring “Not in My Name.” They were proclaiming and defending India’s status as a secular country that protects its religious minorities.

Yet the targeting of religious minorities, especially Muslims like Khan, has become an increasingly acceptable pastime in India. Over the past couple of years, there have been repeated killings of Muslims by gangs of unemployed men who describe themselves as *gau rakshaks* (cow protectors). Few perpetrators have been convicted. (Contrary to commonly held belief,

cow were consumed for meat in ancient India, and continue to be eaten by upper-caste Hindus, especially but not only in Bengal, Kerala, and Kashmir, and by Muslims, Christians, and Dalits across India.)

A “hate tracker” website intended to serve as a crowd-funded national database of crimes motivated by religion, caste, race, and other markers of difference was hosted by the *Hindustan Times*, one of India’s leading English-language newspapers, for two months, from July to September 2017. Then the newspaper’s editor was asked to resign and the “hate tracker” was taken offline, reportedly after a meeting between Modi and the owner of the *Hindustan Times*.

The Indian government’s anti-Muslim slant is also evident in the way it has dealt with the Rohingya crisis, the region’s worst humanitarian disaster in several decades. On the spurious ground that India is not a signatory to the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention, ministers in Modi’s cabinet have called for the repatriation of 40,000 Rohingya who took refuge in India after fleeing from Myanmar. Criticized by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights for falling afoul of the universal principle of non-refoulement—which forbids forcing refugees to return to a country where they are likely to face persecution—the government’s position is spelled out in a case currently before the Supreme Court. One of the many prominent lawyers defending the Rohingya, Colin Gonsalves, has called the Modi government’s response to the crisis “part of the anti-Muslim sentiment that pervades the country.”

The Rohingya policy is at odds with India’s historical openness to refugees from Tibet and Afghanistan. But it is worth recalling that India had considerable difficulty accommodating Muslim refugees from Pakistan who wished to return to their original homes in the months and years following the partition of the subcontinent in 1947. Some were held in prison for years as alleged spies. The cold shoulder for Muslims was in stark contrast to the government’s welcoming stance toward Hindu refugees from Pakistan. Similarly, in 2016,

NEETI NAIR is an associate professor of history at the University of Virginia and a fellow at the Woodrow Wilson Center’s Asia Program. She is the author of *Changing Homelands: Hindu Politics and the Partition of India* (Harvard University Press, 2011).

the Modi government proposed an amendment to the Citizenship Act of 1955 that would make it possible for non-Muslim migrants from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan to become eligible for citizenship.

PANDERING IN PAKISTAN

In Pakistan, too, the government led by the Pakistan Muslim League–Nawaz party, while lauded for its developmentalist vision, has been slow to curb the bigotry of fringe groups. One such group is the recently formed Tehreek-e-Labbaik ya Rasool Allah (Movement to Protect the Honor of the Prophet). This group hails as a martyr Mumtaz Qadri, a security guard who in 2011 murdered Salman Taseer, the governor of Punjab, Pakistan's largest province, because he had called for reform of the nation's blasphemy laws.

Qadri was sentenced to death by the Pakistan Supreme Court in 2015 and hanged in 2016. His grave in Islamabad has turned into a shrine that now draws thousands of devotees. Images of Qadri have been prominently placed on Tehreek-e-Labbaik's campaign posters for recent by-elections. Its candidates have come in third or fourth, a creditable performance for a party barely two years old.

In October 2017, Tehreek-e-Labbaik, along with other groups, held Islamabad hostage by blocking the main highway junction leading into the capital city for almost a month. They demanded that a recently amended electoral oath be rescinded and that the law minister they held responsible for the change be fired. The wording of the oath had merely changed from "I swear" to "I declare," but the modification was perceived as somehow catering to the Ahmadis, a much-reviled dissident group within Islam whom the Pakistani state and constitution have defined as "non-Muslim." By the time the government halted its ineffective negotiations with Tehreek-e-Labbaik and its allies, the army had to be called in. As the crowd of protesters swelled and the situation on the ground worsened, the government caved in and fired its own minister.

Groups such as Tehreek-e-Labbaik are reaping the fruits of decades of state pandering to religious bigotry. Pakistan's blasphemy law, Section 295-C of the penal code, calls for the death sentence for anyone found guilty of insulting the Prophet Mu-

hammad. Misuse of this loosely drafted law has led to mob vigilantism and murders. The victims, often religious minorities, were accused under the law but had yet to face trial or be convicted. Lawyers who defended accused blasphemers have also been murdered.

One in a long line of victims of mob vigilantism was 23-year-old Mashal Khan, a student at Abdul Wali Khan University in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. Khan was beaten and shot by a mob of university students and political activists on April 13, 2017, after it was alleged that he had posted blasphemous messages on Facebook. This gruesome incident was videotaped, apparently to deter others from committing blasphemy. Investigators reported later in the summer that the accusations against Khan were without substance. In February 2018, an antiterrorism court sentenced one of the killers to death, five to multiple terms of life imprisonment, and 25 others to three-year jail sentences, but acquitted another 26 defendants for want of sufficient evidence. Khan's family, as well as those convicted, will appeal the verdict.

It is reassuring that Khan's murder has been widely condemned, and that this thoughtful, intelligent journalism student was named Pakistan's

Person of the Year by the *Herald* magazine. But it is disturbing that Khan's detractors have celebrated the acquittals in videos posted on social media and persist in calling him a blasphemer and his killers "ghazis" (an honorific used for Muslims who wage jihad against non-Muslims). The case of Mashal Khan epitomizes the contest between two ideas of Pakistan—one espoused by vigilante mobs that are organizing themselves and contesting elections, and the other by a far more liberal civil society.

'ORPHANS OF EMPIRE'

In Myanmar (formerly known as Burma), the Rohingya, an ethnic group that is one of South Asia's many "orphans of empire," have been persecuted and denied the rights of citizenship for several decades on the grounds of being non-indigenous and non-Buddhist. The 1982 Citizenship Law defines indigeneity as requiring descent from a group deemed to have been resident in Burma before 1823—which is to say, before the British conquest. Although the Rohingya have had a

The targeting of religious minorities has become an increasingly acceptable pastime in India.

presence within the borders of present-day Myanmar for longer than that, they were located in the frontier region of Arakan, which had been an independent kingdom. Their integration into a newly independent nation was never going to be easy. As the historian Mandy Sadan asks, “From whom or from what do you become independent if you are to be incorporated into a nation of which you were never formally a part?”

Buddhists in Myanmar, like their counterparts in Sri Lanka, fear that Muslims will take over their nation (both are among the last remaining Buddhist-dominated countries). It has been the peculiar burden of Nobel Peace Prize laureate and now State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi to stand by while the military directs the ethnic cleansing of Rohingya Muslims, driving hundreds of thousands into “Muslim-only” prison-like camps, and forcing an estimated 700,000 to seek refuge in neighboring Bangladesh. She has dismissed her increasingly voluble critics abroad for believing what she calls an “iceberg of misinformation.” Yet she seems to have no interest in providing better information, given that she has not called for the military to allow UN observers to visit Rakhine state or to release Reuters journalists who were arrested after reporting on the murder of Rohingya and the presence of mass graves in Rakhine.

Meanwhile, the ruling party in Bangladesh, the Awami League, is facing the challenges posed by nearly a million Rohingya refugees who have fled sure death across a porous border. Recent news reports indicate that the governments of Bangladesh and Myanmar have reached an agreement that will allow for the gradual repatriation of refugees who have documentation to support their residency in Myanmar, provided conditions there improve. But most refugees who fled their homes under duress have no supporting documentation. They are likely to be resettled in low-lying coastal areas of Bangladesh such as Cox’s Bazar and the island of Thengar Char in the Bay of Ben-

gal, which are especially vulnerable to the effects of climate change.

PEACE TO ALL?

Religious intolerance in each country in South Asia is tied to a specific set of histories; yet these are also intertwined with histories forged before and beyond the borders of postcolonial nation-states. In an essay published last fall in the Indian journal *Seminar*, the Sri Lankan political scientist Jayadeva Uyangoda suggests that the “new crisis of Indian democracy” concerns its “South Asian civilizational legitimacy.” He regards “philosophical pluralism and pluralist tolerance of world views and cultures” as India’s “most important precolonial democratic legacy.” That same democratic impulse animated the drafting of India’s Constitution.

Reflecting on the “rabidly anti-democratic” Hindu political movement that brought Modi to power, Uyangoda asks, “Hasn’t India now come to a historical phase where fellow South Asian citizens feel both embarrassed and shocked about the new political model India seems to offer to the world?” If it becomes a “majoritarian ethno-ocratic republic,” he warns, “India can hardly be a source of political inspiration for citizens of South Asia.” In a similar vein, the Pakistani novelist and journalist Mohammed Hanif said in an interview with me last summer that he was saddened by the change in “the India story.” He explained, “What happens there will have effects on what happens in Pakistan. We are connected.”

The ill-treatment of religious minorities is South Asia’s greatest vulnerability—it can weaken and even destroy the entire region. Tackling this escalating issue with courage, conviction, and by democratic and constitutional means will be South Asia’s greatest victory. To return to a space of *sulh-i-kul*, peace to all, where followers of all religions flourish with equality and respect, can be South Asia’s only destiny worthy of its long history of pluralism. ■