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TERRORISM AND RELIGION (AN ANALYSIS OF TERRORIST ACTIVITIES IN INDIA)

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ABSTRACT

Indian terrorism is a complex phenomenon and cannot be narrowed down to one ideology or movement. It has been expressed in various ways; secessionist insurgency in the Northeast, Sikh militancy in Punjab, Islamist violence in Kashmir, left-wing extremism throughout the Red Corridor, and Hindutva violence against minorities. Although these movements may be different in their causes and methods, the state, the media, and the international actors do not treat them equally as some movements are perceived as terrorism, whereas others are perceived as riots, as law-and-order problems, or communal clashes.

The paper is a critical discussion of the intersection between religion, politics, and ideology with terrorism, specifically, Islamist violence is continually reported as terrorism, even as Hindutva violence and Maoist insurrections are scaled down or repackaged. It also emphasizes the impact of media discourses, legal activities, and global speech in these perceptions, which usually support political interests. Bias in the application of the law is further exemplified by the discrimination in the use of counter-terrorism laws like the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA).

This study proposes a more sophisticated and uniform interpretation of violence by studying terrorism in historical, religious, and political contexts. It demands the same responsibility of all types of structured violence, the separation of religion and extremist interpretation, and the rejection of one-sided labelling. Such an approach is only capable of protecting pluralism in India and ensuring that counter-terrorism initiatives are fair, reputable and efficient.

INTRODUCTION

Terrorism has quietly become the bogeyman that keeps governments and ordinary people awake at night. Ten diplomats will define terrorism in ten different ways, but most researchers and the UN generally land on the same basic points, someone breaks the law to hurt or scare civilians, hoping the panic will pressure the rest of us into handing over political, ideological, or religious concessions. ¹Yet for all the talk, the single most argued-over part is still the link well, what link? between terror and whatever “ism” motivates the attackers. Moreover, the linkage between Terrorism and religion is particularly established after the 9/11 attack where Islamic groups were associated with terrorism. However, the fact is religious terrorism isn't picky about which God it claims to serve. ²Juergens Meyer (2003) points out that pretty much every major faith has its dark chapters: Christian militias, Hindu nationalists, even Buddhist extremists in Asia. When people want to hurt each other, they will grab whatever holy book is handy to make look like a righteous deed, and once they do, governments and news outlets jump on the religious angle to it making it an easy story, even if it misses half the picture. ³In a country like India this whole conversation gets unimaginably messier. A country that's basically a patchwork of faiths, languages and castes naturally breeds more than one kind of violence. You've got bombs planted in the name of jihad, sure but you also have mobs carrying tridents, or secessionist hit lists that don't make the nightly news under the “terror” banner. When the attackers happen to be Muslim, the T-word flashes across screens within minutes but whereas the attackers who wear saffron, the headlines are often “Retaliatory strike” or displayed as “Clashes” and “Unrest”. ⁴Scholars such as Noorani and Wilkinson have been pointing out this labelling game from past two decades, same broken bodies but different filing cabinet, where the shelf of evidence is thick but removed considering it to be not a part of the record. Therefore, examining terrorism through the lens of religion requires a subtle approach rather than a one- sided one, an approach the distinguishes faith from extremist interpretation, while critically analyzing how states and societies take advantage by using the label of “religious terrorism” to advance political ends.

¹ United Nations General Assembly, Resolution 49/60, Measures to Eliminate International Terrorism, UN Doc. A/RES/49/60 (1994).

² Piazza, James A., “Is Islamist Terrorism More Dangerous?: An Empirical Study”, 21 *Terrorism and Political Violence* 62 (2009).

³ Juergens Meyer, Mark, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, (University of California Press, 3rd edn., 2003).

⁴ Noorani, A.G., *The Babri Masjid Question, 1528–2003: A Matter of National Honour*, (Tulika Books, 2003); Wilkinson, Paul, *Terrorism Versus Democracy: The Liberal State Response*, (Routledge, 2006).

MEANING:

Terrorism is the unlawful use of violence, force or intimidation by an individual, group, or organization against civilians, governments, or societies to influence them to achieve political, ideological, religious, or social objectives. The major aim of terrorism is to control the population by creating fear or terror in the minds of people to influence policies or decisions.

DEFINITION:

1. ⁵United Nations (UN): -

Terrorism is generally described as “criminal acts intended or calculated to provoke a state of terror in the general public, a group of persons, or particular persons for political purposes.”

2. ⁶U.S. Code (Title 22, Section 2656f(d)(2)): -

“Premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience”.

3. ⁷Oxford Dictionary: -

The calculated use of violence or threat of violence to inculcate fear. Terrorism is intended to coerce or intimidate governments or societies in the pursuit of goals that are generally political, religious, or ideological.

4. In India: -

The Indian government uses the following working definition of terrorism, same as one widely used by Western nations as well as the United Nations, proposed by Schmid and Jongman in 1988.

“⁸Terrorism is an anxiety-inspiring method of repeated violent action, employed by (semi-) clandestine individual, group or state actors, for idiosyncratic, criminal or political reasons, whereby the direct targets of violence are not the main targets. The immediate human victims of violence are generally chosen randomly {targets of opportunity} or selectively

⁵ United Nations, “International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism”, GA Res. 54/109, UN Doc. A/RES/54/109 (1999).

⁶ U.S. Code, Title 22, § 2656f(d)(2).

⁷ Oxford English Dictionary, “Terrorism”, (2000).

⁸ Schmid, Alex P. and Jongman, Albert J., *Political Terrorism: A New Guide to Actors, Authors, Concepts, Data Bases, Theories, and Literature*, (Transaction Publishers, 1988).

{representative or symbolic targets} from a target population and serve as the message generators. Threat and violence-based communication processes between terrorist organization, victims, and main targets are used to manipulate the main target (audience(s)), turning it into a target of terror, a target of demands, or a target of attention, depending on whether intimidation, coercion, or propaganda is primarily sought”.

—Alex Schmid and Albert Jongman.

Apart from this the 8th report on Terrorism in India published in 2008 defined terrorism as the Peacetime equivalent of war time.

TERRORISM IN INDIA

Historical background: -

The terrorist activity in India cannot be divorced from its history and context. Political violence has been a feature all the way back to colonial times, but in very different forms. Revolutionary organisations, such as the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association (HSRA), the Anushilan Samiti, or individuals in their ranks such as ⁹Bhagat Singh and Khudiram Bose, carried out bombings or assassinations against British officials. While these were most certainly acts of terrorism according to present-day definitions¹⁰, at the time they were hailed as part of the freedom struggle. It is this duality that demonstrates now that what is considered the terrorism or the resistance is profoundly affected by the political circumstances and stories. Spurred by communal partitioning violence and the mission of uniting regions. India’s political life was pulled to shape after independence in 1947. In the decades that followed, terrorism and political violence would take different waves, containing distinct grievances: ethno-nationalist secessionism; left-wing causes; religious fundamentalism. India’s story is indicative of not one terrorism trajectory but several, and significantly how state and societal reactions differed according to takers.

SECESSIONIST AND ETHNO- NATIONALIST VIOLENCE: -

Secessionist Insurgency is one of THE oldest and most enduring forms of terrorism in Free India. In the north-east, rebel groups such as United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and

⁹ Chaliha, Monirul Hussain, “Terrorism in Colonial India: A Historical Study”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (2000).

¹⁰ Noorani, A.G., *The Trial of Bhagat Singh*, (Oxford University Press, 2005).

National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), had tried for decades to enlist mass support for their separatist aims through bombings, murders and guerrilla fighting. These movements and activities regularly had a transnational dimension with safe havens in neighbouring states including Myanmar and Bangladesh.

You also had ¹¹the Khalistan movement in the 1980s (in Punjab), that was another big wave of terrorism. Sadly the Sikh extremists, Stimulated by separatism, executed a high-profile assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1984 and carried out public bombings such as the 1985 Air India Flight 182 bombing. ¹² Indian state responded with immense militarization and further radicalized by operation Blue Star at Golden Temple. This led to the anti-Sikh pogroms in 1984 which left thousands of Sikhs dead: Here, the distinction between terrorism, communal violence and state collusion became blurred. ¹³ in international conversations on the violence of 1984, Sikh militancy was treated as terrorism while shifting from the massacres to “the riots” connoted selective uses of that term.

ISLAMIST TERRORISM: -

Islamist Terrorism has been in the picture since the late 1980's it has dominated India's counter- terrorism discourse, particularly in Jammu and Kashmir' context, and ever since the rebellion carried out in Kashmir, initially which was a political movement soon ended up intertwined with Islamist militancy, with groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed having cross border supports. These organizations operated the targeted killings, bombings and kidnappings, with the aim of integrating Kashmir with Pakistan or establishing Islamic order. ¹⁴The parliament attack 2001 by Jaish-e-Mohammed militants became a turning point, prompting international discussions and condemn. It almost brough India and Pakistan into a war state as the assault was made on the very heart of the Indian democracy. Later the 2008 Mumbai attacks marked the internationally visible terrorist incident in India. An attack delivered by Lashkar-e-Taiba that killed over 170 people including foreigners. Which provoked the narrative of “Islamist terrorism” globally. These episodes established the strong link between religion and terrorism in India. Islamist Violence is swiftly and repeatedly labelled

¹¹ Baruah, Sanjib, *Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India*, (Oxford University Press, 2005).

¹² Tatla, Darsham Singh, *The Sikh Diaspora: The Search for Statehood*, (UCL Press, 1999).

¹³ Brass, Paul R., *The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India*, (University of Washington Press, 2003).

¹⁴ Riedel, Bruce, *The Search for Al Qaeda: Its Leadership, Ideology, and Future*, (Brookings Institution, 2008).

as terrorism both domestically and internationally, lacking ambiguity in discourse. ¹⁵Further the 9/11 incident resulting into a global “War on Terror” reinforced this alignment, enabling India to frame its domestic security concerns in Kashmir by becoming a part of the international fight against terrorism.

THE LEFT- WING EXTRIMISM: -

Also, in conjunction with the religiously based terrorism, there has also been a lot of violence against India by the left-wing extremists, better known as the Naxalites or Maoists. The movement originated in Naxalbari, West Bengal in 1967, a radical peasant revolt which was influenced by Maoist ideas. Gradually, it grew into a massive insurgency that spanned the so-called Red Corridor of central and eastern India and included the states of Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Bihar, and Odisha.

The Maoists have been using methods that involve ambushing security agencies, killing political leaders, and explosions of landmines. ¹⁶Such high profile cases as the 2010 Dantewada massacre, where 76 Central Reserve Police Force officers were murdered, and the 2013 Darbha Valley attack, where Congress party leaders were the targets in Chhattisgarh, occurred. One infamous quote of the former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh referred to Maoist insurgency as the biggest internal security threat to India.

¹⁷However, even with the magnitude of violence, Naxalism is hardly referred to as terrorism in popular discussions. Rather it is powdered as an insurgency, law and order problem or a development problem. This is a significant difference in that ¹⁸when violence is based on socio-economic dissatisfaction, violence, however executed in terrorist means, does not get the same religiously tinged labeling.

THE SAFFRON TERROR: -

Another more complicated and politically delicate aspect of terrorism in India is the Hindutva-related or Hindu nationalist terrorism. Although they are often discussed as communal violence, there are certain cases when the features of terrorism could be detected.

¹⁵ Swami, Praveen, *India, Pakistan and the Secret Jihad: The Covert War in Kashmir, 1947–2004*, (Routledge, 2007).

¹⁶ Banerjee, Sumanta, *India's Simmering Revolution: The Naxalite Uprising*, (Zed Books, 1984).

¹⁷ “Dantewada Massacre: Maoists Kill 76 CRPF Personnel”, *The Hindu*, 7 April 2010.

¹⁸ Kunnath, George, “Naxalism as Resistance Culture”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 44, No. 7 (2009).

The Babri Masjid destruction in 1992, which was orchestrated by the Hindu nationalists, led to riots throughout the whole of India, in which thousands of people died. Anti-Muslim violence on a scale broke out in the state of Gujarat in 2002 following the burning of the Godhra train which resulted in killings, sexual assault, and forced displacement. Although it was evident that organized groups were involved in such incidences as they were aimed at ripping civilians with the aim of instilling fear, it was termed as riots and not terrorism.

¹⁹An even closer recognition of Hindutva-related terrorism emerged with the Malegaon blasts (2006 and 2008) and the Samjhauta Express blasts (2007). They were initially accused of Islamist groups, but subsequent ²⁰enquiries showed that Hindu extremist groups like Abhinav Bharat were involved, and both Sadhvi Pragya Singh Thakur and Lt. Col. Purohit were involved. ²¹Saffron terror was briefly discussed in the popular press but was politically opposed and quickly disappeared.

The situation has only been complicated in recent years with mob lynchings of Muslims and Dalits, being carried out in the name of cow protection. Although these are organized, ideologically instigated and meant to cause fear among the minorities, such acts are never prosecuted as acts of terrorism. They are rather called communal incidents or vigilantism.

LIST OF THE PROHIBITED ORGANIZATIONS AS REQUIRED BY THE MINISTRY OF HOME AFFAIRS IN INDIA: -

TERRORIST ORGANISATIONS LISTED IN THE FIRST SCHEDULE OF THE UNLAWFUL ACTIVITIES (PREVENTION) ACT, 1967²²

SL. NO.	ORGANIZATIONS	SL. NO.	ORGANIZATIONS
1.	Babbar Khalsa International	22.	National Liberation Front of Tripura
2.	Khalistan Commando Force	23.	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)
3.	Khalistan Zindabad Force	24.	Students Islamic Movement of India

¹⁹ Engineer, Asghar Ali, *Communal Riots in Post-Independence India*, (Shipra Publications, 1991).

²⁰ Gatade, Subhash, *Godse's Children: Hindutva Terror in India*, (Pharos Media, 2011).

²¹ Jaffrelot, Christophe, *Hindu Nationalism: A Reader*, (Princeton University Press, 2007).

²² <https://www.mha.gov.in>

4.	International Sikh Youth Federation	25.	Deendar Anjuman
5.	Lashkar-E-Taiba/Pasban-E-Ahle Hadis	26.	Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) -- People's War, all its formations and front organizations
6.	Jaish-E-Mohammed/Tahrik-E-Furqan	27.	Maoist Communist Centre (MCC), all its formations and Front Organisations
7.	Harkat-UI-Mujahideen or Harkat-UI-Ansar or Harkat-UI-Jehad-E-Islami or Ansar-UI-Ummah (AUU)	28.	Al Badr
8.	Hizb-UI-Mujahideen/ Hizb-UI-Mujahideen Pir Panjal Regiment	29.	Jamiat-ul-Mujahideen
9.	Al-Umar-Mujahideen	30.	Al-Qaida/Al-Qaida in Indian Sub-continent (AQIS) and all its manifestations
10.	Jammu and Kashmir Islamic Front	31.	Dukhtaran-E-Millat (DEM)
11.	United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA)	32.	Tamil Nadu Liberation Army (TNLA)
12.	National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) in Assam	33.	Tamil National Retrieval Troops (TNRT)
13.	People's Liberation Army (PLA)	34.	Akhil Bharat Nepali Ekta Samaj (ABNES)
14.	United National Liberation Front (UNLF)	35.	Organisations listed in the Schedule to the U.N. Prevention and Suppression of Terrorism (Implementation of Security Council Resolutions) Order, 2007 made under section 2 of the United Nations (Security Council) Act, 1947 and amended from time to time
15.	People's Liberation Army (PLA)	36.	Communist Party of India (Maoist) all its formations and front organizations
16.	United National Liberation Front (UNLF)	37.	Indian Mujahideen, all its formations and front organizations

17.	People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK)	38.	Garo National Liberation Army (GNLA), all its formations and front organizations
18.	Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP)	39.	Kamatapur Liberation Organisation, all its formations and front organizations
19.	Kanglei Yaol Kanba Lup (KYKL)	40.	Islamic State/Islamic State of Iraq and Levant/Islamic State of Iraq and Syria/Daish/Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP)/ISIS Wilayah Khorasan/Islamic State of Iraq and the Sham-Khorasan (ISIS-K)and all its manifestations
20.	Manipur People's Liberation Front (MPLF)	41.	National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Khaplang) [NSCN(K)], all its formations and front organisations
21.	All Tripura Tiger Force	42.	The Khalistan Liberation Force (KLF) and all its manifestations

APPROACH OF LAW, MEDIA AND INTERNATIONAL DISCOURSE: -

The dissimilarity between the treatment of terrorism in India shows how religious and political biases are used in the creation of narratives.

Media Representation: Islamist violence always features on the headlines with the direct term of terrorism.²³The violence of Hindutva is often buffered as communal clashes or riots. The left-wing extremism is discussed as a socio-economic problem, and little attention is paid to the terrorist aspects of the problem.

Legal Practice: Counter-terrorism law like the²⁴Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) is not applied fairly to the Muslim suspects. Litigation against actors of Hindutva is followed by losses in cases because of poor evidence or political influence. Extremists on the left are

²³ Thussu, Daya Kishan, "Media Coverage of Terrorism: Methods and Biases", *Global Media Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (2004).

²⁴ *Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act*, No. 37 of 1967, § 15 (India).

charged according to security and penal statutes, and not anti-terrorism statutes.²⁵The UAPA Act is the most misused acts today abused by the power of the one ruling, The Supreme Court has addressed misuse in ²⁶*In re: Ramlila Maidan Incident v. Home Secretary, Union of India*, this act is used on innocents to mute them for standing against atrocities of the government, most of the Youngsters who could be the voice of tomorrow, their lives were ruined by these misappropriations by the ruling government. And for what? For being bold enough to question? In these aspects they were denied justice.

International Discourse: ²⁷International terrorist attacks on India receive instant international criticism and are situated in the context of the War on Terror. On the other hand, Hindutva violence is not depicted as terrorism by other countries but rather communal violence or religious riots. Left extremism is almost not an issue of international concern as it is perceived as an internal governing problem.

This biased presentation highlights the fact in which terrorism is not just and purely a category of law or security, but it is a political term used in manners which are influenced by ideological leanings and internationalist affiliations.

CONCLUSION

The problem of terrorism in India cannot be viewed in a linear manner, but it is a multi-dimensional process that is influenced by history, politics, and ideology. Since the revolutionary violence of the colonial period, to the secessionist violence of the Northeast, to the Khalistan violence of Punjab, to the Islamist violence of Kashmir, to the Maoist violence, to the Hindutva violence, each wave has had its share of grievances, techniques, and outcomes. However, such acts are not neutrally defined, labeled and remembered. When terrorism is perpetrated by one group of people, it is termed as the same act of violence but when perpetrated by another group it becomes riots, clashes and law and order problems. Not only does this ²⁸selective labelling by the media, law, and state institutions mislead the populace but also further divides the communities and political boundaries.

²⁵ Amnesty International, *Weaponizing Counter-Terrorism: India's Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act*, Report, 2022.

²⁶ *In re: Ramlila Maidan Incident v. Home Secretary, Union of India*, (2012) 5 SCC 1.

²⁷ Chhibber, Pradeep, "International Dimensions of Terrorism in South Asia", *Asian Survey*, Vol. 43, No. 6 (2003).

²⁸ Wilkinson, Paul, *Terrorism Versus Democracy: The Liberal State Response*, (Routledge, 2006).

The abuse of the anti-terror legislation such as UAPA is another good example that terrorism is not only a security issue but also a political weapon. As Islamist groups are quickly labeled as terrorists, Hindutva violence is not so labeled, and left-wing extremism is presented as a socio-economic issue. This imbalanced application is a disturbing truth that terrorism only is not merely about violence, but about the discourses that states and societies build around it.

To handle the issue of terrorism with integrity and success, India should transcend the temptation of biased categorization and take all the kind of organized violence equally seriously. It is not religious books, ideologies or even political dogmas that murder a person, and people do, taking advantage of these signs of power. ²⁹India requires a way to secure its democracy and pluralism and thus differentiating faith and fanaticism, dissent and destruction, rebellion and terror and charge all those who have perpetrated violence with equal law. It is at that point that the war on terror can be justified and fair.

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²⁹ Juergensmeyer, Mark, *Global Rebellion: Religious Challenges to the Secular State*, (University of California Press, 2008).

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