The hindu 7 01 2015

Islamic difference and radicalisation

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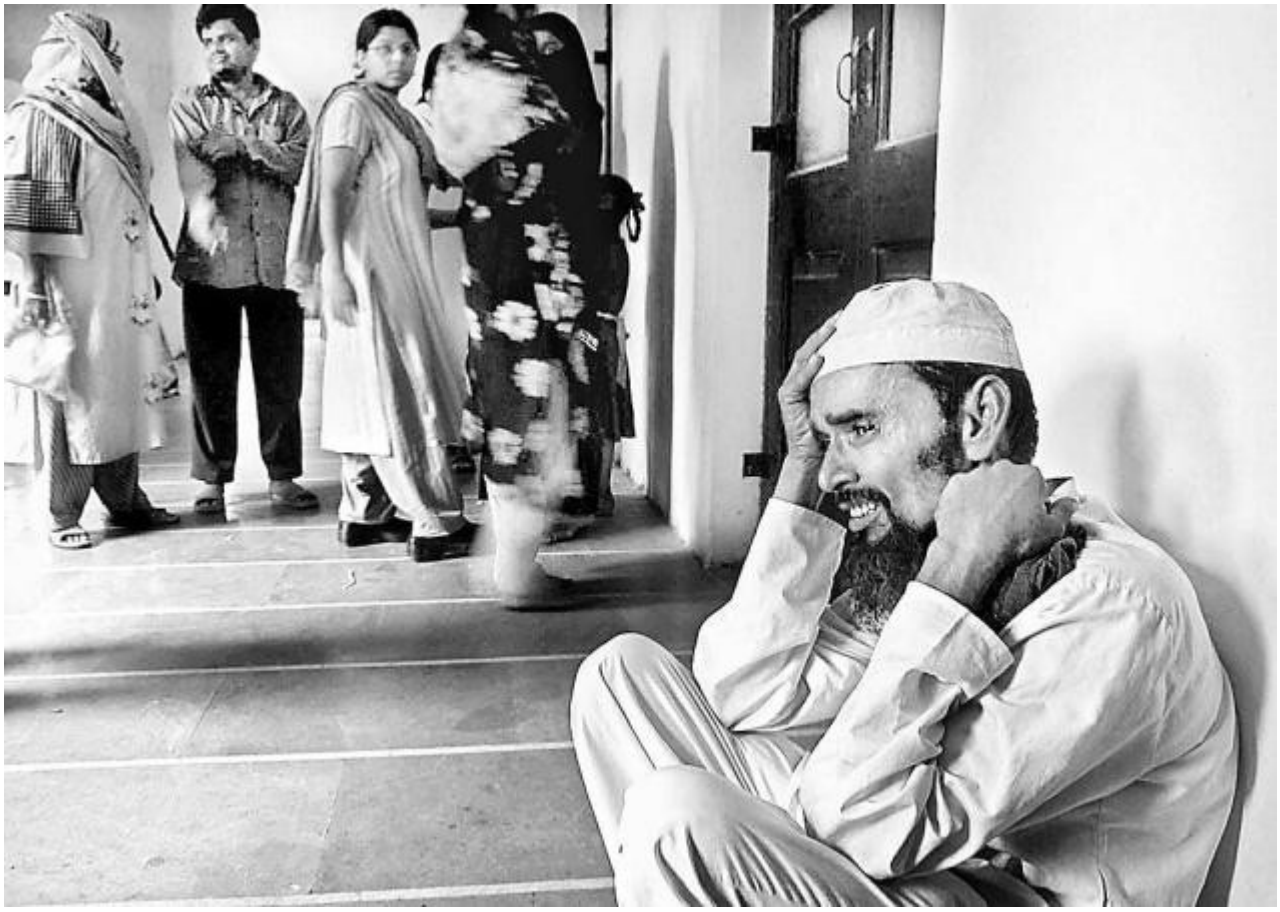

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REPRESSIVE: “The Hindu nationalist discourse rallied around the claim that Muslims threatened Hindus.” Picture shows a man waiting for his turn to be heard by the Nanavati Commission after the Gujarat riots.

TOPICS

religion and belief

social issue

The radicalisation discourse in India has overwhelmingly contributed to normalising prejudice and dehumanising an entire community

“Radicalisation” has become the standard term used to describe “what goes on before the bomb goes off.” Radicalisation as a precursor to terrorism, and in certain cases even a root cause of terrorism and socio-political violence, is a mainstay among pundits, policymakers and journalists alike. However, the immense popularity of the concept represents no direct relationship to its actual explanatory power regarding what causes terrorism. Instead, aphorisms on radicalisation have

emptied the term of its analytical value, so that the label of "radicalisation," as concept and as an industry, has become an extremely powerful and destructive political label employed against Muslim communities in India and elsewhere. It allows for the stigmatisation of Muslims, their exclusion from political processes, and for the state and the media to engage in a process of differentiating 'good Muslims' from 'bad Muslims' — unless proved to be good, every Muslim is considered to be bad.

Judgements are increasingly being passed on entire communities based on acts of individuals; Muslim political identity has become increasingly linked to their religious faith.

The earlier discourse on terrorism focussed on the circumstances, the ideology, the group, and the individual. However, following the September 11, 2001 terror attacks, the term radicalisation privileged the individual and to some extent the ideology, but neglected to investigate the wider historical, social, and geopolitical circumstances. An analytical investigation of the root causes of terror became almost impossible post-9/11 in the face of growing Islamophobia and the rhetoric of 'us' and 'them.'

The discourse reduced radicalisation largely to a sense of Islamic 'difference.' Often this 'difference' was explained in terms of 'lack of integration,' 'lack of secularism,' or 'external Islamic influences' from Saudi Arabia among Muslim communities. Following the logic of difference, it is still argued that the exploitation of these differences culminates in terrorism, either by passively rationalising violence or by explicitly abetting it.

Historicity of Islam

What this discourse repeatedly fails to understand is the complex and rich historicity of Islam in South Asia. Muslims in India are socially diverse: each city, each district, each village and each family carries a personal history that is a product of long, complex political encounters. Their responses to acts of the state as well as their political beliefs are based on those vastly varying histories. Yet, the global exclusionary narratives which marked Muslims as a potential threat to the state were incorporated into the security and radicalisation discourses. The 2003 report of the International Initiative for Justice articulates this in its conclusion: "What follows then is an easy subliminal association of Muslim-Terrorist-Aggressor… The idea of exacting collective punishment against an entire community for the actions of unrelated individuals, or of attacking a much weaker and numerically smaller group in the name of "self-defence" has acquired new validity in the post-September 11 scenario."

"The state and the media engage in a process of differentiating 'good Muslims' from 'bad Muslims' — unless proved to be good, every Muslim is considered to be bad"

The discourse of radicalisation regularly turns people into religious and cultural categories. It is tacitly implied that social and political behaviour is a residue of one's religious and cultural beliefs. The unofficial mandate of securing India is equated with the task of preventing "Muslim terrorist infiltration" in India. It is not just about combating militancy, terror or insurgency; it is Islamic militancy, Islamic terror and Islamic insurgency. Logic follows that before you identify the terrorist you have to identify the Muslim.

Islamophobia in India

Islamophobia, an irrational fear or prejudice towards Islam and Muslims, exists across the world. In India this takes a specific Hindu-Muslim dimension. In India, the Hindu nationalist discourse began gaining popularity in the 1980s. This discourse sought to remake India as a Hindu state, rallied around the claim that Muslims were appeased by the state and that Muslim minorities threatened Hindus.

The constant depiction of Muslims as the "problematic other" plays a major role in dehumanising

the entire community. The act of systematic dehumanisation of a community has historically been used to justify mass violence as retaliation, and shifts the burden of responsibility for the violence on the marginalised communities. The radicalisation discourse not only defines itself in opposition to the "other," but often engages in violence against this "other." In India, the discourse has overwhelmingly contributed to the normalisation of prejudice, dehumanisation of an entire community, legitimated violence and enabled a steady erosion of rights.

Following 9/11 and the attacks on the Indian Parliament buildings, India enacted the Prevention of Terrorism Act of 2002 (POTA). POTA inherited many of the provisions found in the earlier Act, the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act (TADA), which remained in effect from 1985 to 1995. While POTA was repealed in 2004, some of POTA's key provisions remain preserved.

POTA was framed and adopted with strong ideological and political content. It was repressive and authoritarian in its conception, legal framework and implementation, and was informed by a specific notion of the terror problem, which was centred on "Muslim militancy." It was a "violence of jurisprudence" that was inflicted on India's body politic, where law became the midwife of organising state violence. TADA institutionalised the general suspicion towards the Muslim minority. With the passing of POTA, it seemed to many Muslims that they were excluded from the due process of law and refused recourse to judicial processes.

Julia Eckert, researcher and political scientist, wrote on POTA: "On February 28, 2002, in Godhra [...] a compartment of the Sabarmati Express train was burned. The fire killed 57 people...Under POTA, 131 Muslims were charged. Initially, the police filed a case under ordinary criminal law, but by September 2002, six months after the event, the government of Gujarat under Narendra Modi of the BJP decided to treat the attack on the train as an act of terrorism. There is evidence that the Modi government instructed the police to investigate "the conspiracy angle" of the fire to have a solid case of premeditated violence that could more easily be classed under POTA. At the same time, none of the Hindu rioters who participated in the pogroms that followed the train fire were charged under POTA. The large scale pogroms left over 2,000 Muslims dead."

Both POTA and TADA have been criticised for criminalising identity. The criminalisation of Muslim identity continues in India today, along with the communalisation of nationalism. The Muzaffarnagar riots of 2013 made it clear that prejudice arising from radicalisation and Islamophobic discourse has a bearing on the actual killings. Violence robs people of their history. The consistent denial of justice and social exclusion creates second class citizenships. In a speech in 1948 in Lucknow, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel said: "I want to tell them [Muslims] frankly that mere declarations of loyalty to the Indian Union will not help them at this critical juncture. They must give practical proof of their declaration." It is 67 years too late to still demand of Muslim citizens a practical proof of loyalty.

(Suchitra Vijayan is a barrister, political analyst and a writer.)