

OPEN

COLUMNS | GUEST COLUMN

The Battle for Religious Reform

Someone needs to challenge the radical and revisionist interpretations of Islam

Ram Madhav, 30 June 2022



Jashoda Sahu Teli, wife of tailor Kanhaiya Lal, June 29, 2022, Udaipur

The horror of Udaipur is a chilling reminder of the deep penetration of Islamist radicalism among the Indian Muslim youth. Hindu–Muslim tensions have a history of more than a century in India. There were many occasions when Hindus and Muslims had fought pitched battles on the streets. Communal clashes, witnessed largely in Muslim-dominated towns

and cities across the country, were a regular phenomenon in the last century, especially in the 1980s and '90s. But those were largely seen as law and order problems and many times police action or “peace meetings” would help resolve the dispute over which those riots would erupt.

But, with the rise of Islamist politics in the 1980s in West Asia on the ill-conceived premise of “Islam in danger”, radicalism and terrorism sneaked into India too.

Mumbai was the first city to witness Islamic terror in the early 1990s, a result of years of radicalisation among the country’s Muslims. We blamed neighbouring Pakistan for its support to Islamic terror in India. No doubt, Pakistan became the mothership of Islamic terror in the region in the last two decades of the previous century. It subsequently became the global terror capital too. While it exported political terrorism in the form JKLF in Kashmir, it simultaneously exported Islamic terror into several Muslim-dominated areas in the country. Starting with the 1990s, the country witnessed countless incidents of terror all across its length and breadth, from Kerala to Assam and Tamil Nadu to Jammu.

Every terror incident was condemned, the recalcitrant neighbour blamed, but somehow, political correctness prevented many from underscoring the radicalisation of the Indian Muslim youth in general. This radicalisation of individual Muslims, on the fictitious notion that “Islam is in danger”, started with the rise of outfits like Abdul Nasser Madani’s Islamic Sevak Sangh in Uttar Pradesh in the mid-1990s, and continues to this day through outfits like the Popular Front of India (PFI) in Kerala.

Indian intelligence and security agencies have been closely monitoring and acting against the mushrooming radical Islamist outfits. Greater radicalisation was witnessed in south India, once prided over religious amity, in the last two decades. Hyderabad, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and coastal Karnataka became the hub of radical Islamist outfits like Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI), Al Ummah, Tamil Nadu Thowheed Jamath (TNTJ), Indian Mujahideen and even Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS). The latest among them is Kerala’s PFI. These groups have expanded their network to all parts of the country and built connections with global terror outfits like Al-Qaeda and ISIS. The PFI alone is said to have its presence in more than 300 districts in the country, according to Indian Intelligence agencies.

In a report released in 2020, even the United Nations had warned India that Islamic radicalism was on a steep rise on its soil. It manifested through several instances in the last few years, recent examples being the death threats issued by the TNTJ activists to the Karnataka judges who delivered judgment in the hijab case, or “death to Hindus” chants by a Muslim boy at a PFI rally in Kerala. Beheadings, like the widely reported Udaipur incident and unreported incidents in Maharashtra, are the latest, but unlikely to be the last, incidents of this nature.

Islamic radicalism grew in West Asia, Afghanistan and Pakistan because of state patronage. But in India, it is the liberal political and intellectual apologist ecosystem, coupled with stony silence, if not tacit support, of the Muslim leadership, that is emboldening these radical outfits and individuals. Central agencies, like the IB and NIA, are working hard to

curb the activities of the radical outfits that promote terror and violence. But state agencies, especially in states controlled by the opposition parties, like Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Rajasthan, refuse to do their bit.

More importantly, state action is not going to be sufficient to curb the rise of Islamic radicalism. From Afghanistan to Yemen, that has been the experience, even of the most powerful countries in the world. It is the Muslim world that has to stand up and respond. When certain extremist forces tried to hijack Sikhism, it was the Sikh religious and political leadership that had stood up against the terrorists and saved the religion. Such an initiative should come from the Indian Muslim leadership too.

When I recently said in an interview that the Muslims should discard concepts like Ummah, Kafir and Jihad, some well-intentioned Muslim scholars responded by insisting that those concepts had a different meaning. But what is the use of telling Hindus about a 'different meaning', when the madrasa and the mosque consistently propagate hatred and exclusivity! How does it help hiding behind the facetious argument of "Islamophobia" when some Hindus point out the need for reform?

It is this attitude egged on by the reckless liberal intelligentsia in the country that is squarely responsible for the Udaipur terror. It also makes some Hindus to conclude that Islam will not change.

But religions do undergo reform and transformation. Human history is a testimony to that. Hinduism had shed many of its outdated legacies like sati, untouchability, etc. Reform has been integral to its progress. It took 1,500 years for Christianity to implement major reforms in its anti-secular, anti-science and anti-democratic demeanour during which time it waged wars against its own people and, of course, against Islamists, burnt to death women and unbelievers in hordes and ruled ruthlessly over populations in Europe. Galileo had to go to prison; Henry the VIIIth had to openly challenge the clergy; and the Italian Nationalists had to endure the army of the Pope. But in the end, it led to Reformation and paved the way for Enlightenment.

Time for such a reform has come for Islam too. The first three centuries of Islam were the period of intellectual blossoming. Islamic scholars had aggregated knowledge from all over the world—from Greeks and Romans to Hindus from whom they took mathematics and the concept of zero—and Arabised knowledge. Names of Ibn Sina or Avicenna, Ibn Hazm and Ibn Rushd or Averroes evoke respect even to this day. But the desire to conquer the world brought Islam the same kind of infamy as that of medieval Christianity. As wars started bringing diminishing results and modernity started influencing societies in Europe and Asia, a new orthodox and illiberal brand of Islam took birth in the mid-18th century. Started by a Sunni Islamic revivalist and fundamentalist theologian called Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahab, this puritanical Islamic movement, known today as Wahhabism, became a dominant stream in Sunni Islam in the last two centuries. Heft was added to this brand of Islam by petrodollars. From Palestine to Pakistan, it is this hardline Wahhabism that is leading to the rise of radicalism and fundamentalism among the Muslims.

Wahhabism came to influence Indian Islam in the 19th century itself through the Ahl-e Hadith movement started in Bhopal. This puritanical movement was in a way an attempt at negating the growing Hindu-Muslim bonhomie witnessed during the First War of Independence in 1857, and a version of syncretic Islam that was taking root in the form of worship of saints and *dargahs*. Ahl-e Hadith was the Indian version of Wahhabism that gained sweeping influence over Arab lands just a century before, thanks largely to the patronage Abd al-Wahab, its founder, received from Mohammad bin Saud, the founding father of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. That this revisionist and exclusivist version of Islam had succeeded in its mission can be gauged from the fact that the Hindus and Muslims who had fought together against the British in 1857 were seen fighting against each other nine decades later, resulting in the Partition of India on communal lines and the creation of Pakistan.

India's Muslims have to seriously ponder over this Wahhabist Islam's growing influence. Cynics may conclude that Islam means Wahhabism. But some examples suggest otherwise, too. In Saudi Arabia, the mothership of Wahhabi Islam, young prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) is bringing about rapid reforms. MBS had even questioned the very existence of Wahhabism saying nobody "can define this Wahhabism". He introduced a new education policy focused on "Saudi national identity" as against the identity of "Islamic Ummat". He changed the "Saudi Founding Day", the national day of Saudi Arabia, from that of the day of the pact between al-Wahab and King Saud in 1744, to February 22 when the Emirate of Dir'iyah, the Saudi state, was first established by King Saud in the year 1727. He thus tried to distance Saudi identity from Wahhabism.

The United Arab Emirates (UAE), too, is following suit. Rejecting the Wahhabist idea that the Muslims of the world form one "Ummah", Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, the founding father of the UAE, had once declared, "Everyone on this earth is a servant of god. We are all." Marking a watershed moment in the two-millennia-old history of the Catholic Church, in a first ever visit to the Arab peninsula, Pope Francis visited the UAE in February 2019 on the invitation of Sheikh Khalifa. There he signed a "Human Fraternity Document" together with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar mosque in Cairo, Egypt, an important seat of Islamic theology. "Open Islam, not a closed Islam", Pope declared in exhilaration.

A year later, in 2020, the UAE rulers had taken the historic step of signing an accord with Israel, brokered by Donald Trump. The Jews, long regarded as enemies of Islam, are today the closest friends of the UAE rulers. They even made a Torah, especially in honour of the late Sheikh Zayed of the UAE.

The most inspiring example comes from the world's largest Islamic nation, Indonesia. Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the largest Islamic organisation in the country boasting 90 million membership and close links with the ruling government of Joko Widodo, has openly come out against Wahhabism in a declaration in 2018. Calling upon the Muslims to reject Wahhabi influence, the NU leadership insisted that respecting nation-state and constitution was the duty of every Muslim theologically. In other words, it rejected the concept that all Muslims are one Ummah and asked them to develop patriotism first. In a historic declaration in 2021, it also proclaimed that nobody can be called a Kafir. The NU is taking a unique and significant initiative of organising R-20 (Religions-20) on the sidelines of G-20,

which is going to be hosted by the Indonesian government in December this year. R-20 will bring together leaders of all the important world religions to assist the leaders of G-20 governments in building a united, pluralist and peaceful world.

Hopefully, these efforts will lead to the rejection of the Wahhabist exclusivism and the violent and radicalised form of Islam for the larger good of the Muslims and humanity.

This is a civilisational battle. Reform needs courage. Lacking that courage, people mostly become apologists or indulge in platitudes. It took 1,500 years and a Martin Luther to boldly come out with his Ninety-five Theses to challenge the Catholic Church's orthodoxy in the 16th century that had set off a chain of transformative reforms. Islam is into its 1,500 years now. Someone needs to challenge the radical and revisionist interpretations of it. For, after all, "there are no facts, only interpretations" in theological matters, as the German philosopher Nietzsche put it.

Failing to do that means acquiescing to the radicals, irrespective of the statements made by the Imam of Jama Masjid or politicians like Asaduddin Owaisi. "If the battle for civilisation comes down to the wimps versus the barbarians, the barbarians are going to win", warned American social philosopher Thomas Sowell.

But this battle should be for reform of religions from radicalism. Doing it the wrong way has the potential to convert catholic and inclusive religions like Hinduism into their poor Semitised versions.

<https://openthemagazine.com/columns/column/battle-religious-reform/>