



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Terrorism in South Asia: The History of Its Genesis

Prasanta Sahoo^{1,*}

¹Associate Professor, Centre for International Politics, Organisation and Disarmament, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, 110067, New Delhi, India

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* Corresponding author.

Prasanta Sahoo

prasantasahoo12@yahoo.co.in
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ABSTRACT

South Asia continues to be the hot spot of international terrorism, which makes it one of the world's biggest crisis regions in the 21st century. South Asia stands as one of the world's most complex and volatile regions regarding terrorism, hosting a very complex, diverse web of extremist movements and terror networks that have evolved over decades. This article explores the history of the genesis of terrorism in South Asia, examining the complex reasons that have contributed to its emergence and survival in the region. It delves into the political, social, and economic factors that have possibly driven extremist ideologies and violent movements like insurgency and terrorism across countries such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. The article tries to examine the role of ethnic tensions, state policies, and foreign interventions in shaping the reign of terrorism in the region. By analysing the South Asian states through the historical contexts, the article aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the linked complexities surrounding terrorism in South Asia. Ultimately, it emphasises the need for inclusive governance, economic development, and community dialogue as essential components in addressing the root causes of terrorism and fostering long-term peace and stability in the region.

Keywords: Extremism; Insurgency; Kashmir; Security; Terrorism

INTRODUCTION

South Asia continues to be the hot spot of international terrorism, which makes it one of the world's biggest crisis regions in the 21st century. South Asia stands as one of the world's most complex and volatile regions regarding terrorism, hosting a very complex, diverse web of extremist movements that have evolved over decades. From the snow-capped mountains of Afghanistan and Kashmir to the tropical shores of Sri Lanka and the densely populated plains of Bangladesh and the island nation of the Maldives, the region has witnessed the emergence of numerous terrorist organisations with varying ideologies, methods, and objectives. This makes the obvious case to know the history of its genesis, reasons for spreading and surviving so long, with no hope for its destruction in the near future.

The genesis of terrorism in South Asia has never been divorced from the region's tumultuous history. The 1947 unscientific partition of the Indian sub-continent into independent countries India and Pakistan created unresolved territorial disputes, most notably over Kashmir, that later became a flashpoint for state-sponsored terrorism in the region. The Cold War further complicated the issue through the superpower competition that transformed Afghanistan into a battleground. The United States and its allies, for the first time, supported Islamist mujahedin to resist Soviet forces. They carelessly laid the groundwork for the transnational terrorist networks to flourish in South Asia.

This article examines the historical root causes of the genesis of terrorism and its chronological development across South Asia. It explores how colonial past, geopolitical conflicts, religious radicalisation, and socioeconomic reasons have collectively contributed to an environment



conducive to religious extremism and terrorism to grow and mature. By understanding this complex history of the genesis of terrorism, we can better comprehend the challenges facing the region and realise how big the impact of this menace is.

DEFINING TERRORISM

Terrorism is very complex and controversial in nature due to the lack of a universal definition.¹ For ambiguity in understanding, the term terrorism is very difficult to define, mainly because of its ever-changing contexts of use.² The commonly-used definition of terrorism is often described as “the use of unlawful violence and threats, especially against civilians, to achieve political, ideological or religious goals.”³ French revolutionaries during the French Revolution in the 1790s used the term ‘Terrorism’ for the first time, indicating the anti-revolutionary oppressors, who staged severe violence and mass execution from September 1793 to July 1794, as the ‘Reign of Terror’.⁴ One revolutionary leader, Maximilien Robespierre, best known for spearheading the Reign of Terror, through leading the Committee of Public Safety, proclaimed in 1794, “Terror is nothing other than justice, prompt, severe, inflexible.”⁵ Well-known scholar Michael Walzer has defined Terrorism as “the deliberate killing of innocent people, at random, to spread fear through a whole population and force the hand of its political leaders.”⁶ However, this definition is not universally accepted, as the term encompasses a wide range of actions and motivations that differ across cultures and historical periods.

One of the primary difficulties in defining terrorism lies in the confused nature of the term itself. When one group labels terrorism as an act of violence, another may view it as a legitimate struggle for freedom or self-determination for a marginalised or ethnic community.⁷ Because of the subjective complications attached to its international discourse and legal frameworks, states often adopt different definitions or perspectives that may serve their political interests. Overall, experts have distinguished terrorism or political extremism from other forms of violence, such as ethnic based-insurgency or guerrilla warfare.⁸ The primary objective of terrorism has always been to make the common people fear and create a psychological atmosphere in its favour, as well as to achieve political goals through military means.⁹

HISTORY OF ITS GENESIS

1. Kashmir

Scholars and experts believe the genesis of terrorism in South Asia occurred with the Kashmir issue itself. The roots of terrorism and religious extremism in Jammu and Kashmir go back to the complex political misunderstanding and territorial dispute following the unscientific and artificially created borders by the British Rule in 1947.¹⁰ In the wake

of independence and the transfer of political powers, all the existing princely states were directed to join either side of India or Pakistan. The Hindu Maharaja of Kashmir chose India despite its having a majority Muslim population, which triggered the first India-Pakistan war in 1948.¹¹ Low-intensity violence was continuing in several parts of Kashmir for decades, but in the late 1980s, the modern terrorist movement began.¹² The 1987 state elections were considered the grave turning point for the extremist movement in the region.¹³

The second chapter of extremist violence in Kashmir started with the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), which launched the militant movement in 1989 with the objective of achieving independence for Kashmir.¹⁴ In addition, the extremist movement was soon amplified by Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), with its supporting pro-Pakistan Islamist groups like Hizbul Mujahideen (HM),¹⁵ spreading the narrative of religious militancy in the state. Another devastating development in 1990 was the ethnic cleansing of Kashmiri Pandits by the Islamic radicals supported by extremist groups. By the mid-1990s, the insurgency and the political extremism had evolved into a complex web of local militants, foreign jihadists, and Pakistan-backed terror groups. In addition, the emergence of organisations like Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) (1993) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) (2000), with their global jihadist agendas, made the valley a violent place.¹⁶

2. Kabul

The history of terrorism in Afghanistan is very unique in nature, as it has been deeply intertwined with Cold War geopolitics, regional struggles, and great power politics.¹⁷ The major turning point came in 1979 with the Soviet invasion and a decade-long resistance by various mujahideen groups, mainly backed by the United States. These fighters were later supported by Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Egypt, and employed guerrilla tactics against Soviet forces, including attacks on civilian targets.¹⁸ However, following the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, Afghanistan descended into chaos as rival mujahideen factions turned against each other.¹⁹ This power vacuum allowed for the emergence of the Taliban in 1994,²⁰ and by 1996, it captured Kabul and established a fundamentalist Islamic regime in Afghanistan.²¹ During this period, Afghanistan became a sanctuary for international terrorist organisations, most notably Al-Qaeda, led by Osama bin Laden.²² From their Afghan-based, Al-Qaeda planned and executed several terrorist attacks even before 9/11,²³ including the 1998 attacks in the American Embassy in Kenya and Tanzania,²⁴ as well as the USS Cole bombing in 2000 in the port of Yemen.²⁵



3. *Khyber Pakhtunkhwa*

The genesis of terrorism in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP)²⁶ can be traced back to a complex interplay of historical, geopolitical, and socio-economic factors. Very little is talked about, but the region has long been popularised for its strategic location along the Afghan-Pakistan border. This has made it a focal point and sanctuary for various militant groups and insurgents operating in both countries.²⁷ Historically, KP has been a merging point of diverse cultures and ethnic groups and several tribal legacies. The situation escalated significantly after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. KP became a frontline state in the Cold War, with the U.S. and its allies supporting the Afghan mujahideen against Soviet forces.²⁸ The post-9/11 era was a turning point for extremism in KP, as Pakistan became a key ally in the War on Terrorism led by the U.S. The subsequent counterterror military operations against the Taliban and al-Qaeda in the tribal areas had escalated the violence. Several militant groups, including the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) (2007), born out of it,²⁹ later emerged as a major challenger to the state's policies.

4. *Other countries in South Asia: Bangladesh, Maldives and Sri Lanka*

The inception of terrorism in Bangladesh, the Maldives and Sri Lanka can be attributed to several factors, such as political, social, and economic. The environment often created by political instability in Bangladesh, due to power struggles and corruption, paved the way for extremism to flourish. The rise of radical Islamist ideology, which was fuelled by socio-economic disparities and unemployment, had exacerbated the situation to a larger extent. The counterterror measures and operations of the government, including crackdowns along with the formulation of the anti-terrorism laws, alienated many communities and fueled cycles of violence and unrest in the country.³⁰

Terrorism in the Maldives goes back to some incidents that took place following its independence in 1965.³¹ The nation experienced serious political instability and economic crisis, provoked by poverty and alienation of a larger community that helped fuel extremism. The genesis of political violence in Sri Lanka was primarily rooted in the ethnic tensions, particularly between the Sinhalese Buddhist majority community and the Tamil and Muslim minorities. The history of the creation of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka, their guerrilla tactics in the 1970s and 80s,³² as many argue, was a response to systemic discrimination and marginalisation faced by Tamils. Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), a People's Liberation Front, also led insurgency movements against the Sri Lankan government from 1971 to 1989.³³ The 2019 terror attacks also identified the emergence of a new terror outfit in Sri Lanka named National Thowheeth Jama'ath (NTJ).³⁴

ROOT-CAUSE OF TERRORISM IN SOUTH ASIA

1. *Domestic Compulsions*

i. *Kashmir Fiasco*

The Kashmir dispute is one of the biggest unresolved issues in South Asia, which has serious implications for regional stability as well as the rise of terrorism.³⁵ The origin of the conflict dates back to 1947, when British India partitioned the subcontinent along a religious line. The then ruler of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir decided to join India, which became a main reason for conflict between the two nations. Following the accession of Kashmir to India, Pakistan contested the logic and legitimacy of this decision and started a proxy war to satisfy its ego.³⁶ Terror outfits such as LeT and JeM have emerged in such an environment, advocating for Kashmir to integrate with Pakistan. The Kashmir issue continues as a significant motivation for terrorism, which has been used by the radical leaders to provoke youths in India and Pakistan.³⁷ However, geopolitical dynamics, including the interests of the extra-regional powers like the USA and China in the region, along with the strategic rivalry between India and Pakistan, have been complicating the whole issue and blocking the possible roads to peace.³⁸

ii. *Fast-Growing Radicalisation*

Islamic and religious radicalisation in South Asia is born out of a complex web of phenomena deeply rooted in critical historical events, political discrimination among communities, and socio-economic disparities among states across countries in the region, particularly in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan. While radicalisation in Pakistan originated with Jamaat-e-Islami using the issue of partition and the Kashmir dispute,³⁹ the same started in Afghanistan with the Soviet-Afghan War (1979-1989), when several Islamic countries officially sponsored the jihadist networks to resist Soviet forces. The TTP has since evolved into a formidable threat, which provided unprecedented "strategic depth" to Pakistani militant groups.⁴⁰

Bangladesh, which inherited the legacy of radicalisation by the Jamaat, originated in undivided India and later Pakistan,⁴¹ and witnessed a rise in Islamic extremism since 2013⁴² and again by the deadly Holey Artisan Bakery attack in 2016⁴³ in Dhaka. The Awami League (AL) government's counterterror laws and measures to suppress Islamic parties like Jamaat-e-Islami and Islami Oikya Jote, and co-opting radical groups like Hefazat-e-Islam, simultaneously, have inadvertently amplified extremist ideologies.⁴⁴ Islamic radicalisation is also high among the Muslim community in Sri Lanka, which led the government to ban three Islamic organisations, such as NTJ, the Jamaath-e-Millah Ibrahim (JMI), and the Willayath As Seylani (WAS), in the wake of the Easter Bombings.^{45,46} Modern-day social media platforms provide a safe corridor for such activities to flourish beyond



the government's reach.⁴⁷

iii. Appeasement Politics

Islamic appeasement politics in South Asia characterise a strategic electoral phenomenon where some political parties announce concessions and benefits for people of Muslim communities to get their electoral support in the elections.⁴⁸ In India, parties like the Congress, communists and some regional parties often use it as "vote bank politics" and have historically secured Muslim votes.⁴⁹ Many argue that even the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has been aiming at Pasmanda Muslims (backward-caste) for the same reasons.⁵⁰

Bangladesh presents a rare example, where the so-called secular Awami League has been systematically appeasing radical groups like Hefazat-e-Islam to replace the vote bank of the radical group like Jamaat.⁵¹ AL strategically accepted the hardline demands of the religious radicals, including changes in textbooks, removal of symbols of secularism, and suppressing secular agents. Pakistan's major parties—PML-N and PPP—similarly engage in religious symbolism and accommodate Islamic groups' demands during election campaigns.⁵² Many argue that such kinds of appeasement to the Muslim community were also seen in Sri Lanka at the time of civil war to get their support against the LTTE and JVP.⁵³

iv. Lack of Political Will

The lack of political will has been one of the major hurdles in tackling terrorism in South Asia.⁵⁴ The short-term political goals of the countries have been hampering the comprehensive counter-terrorism strategies, resulting in providing motivations for these non-state actors to survive easily. In many cases, political leaders found it easy to exploit these extremist groups for their electoral benefits or geopolitical gain, which further complicates the joint endeavours to address the root causes of this menace.⁵⁵ Corruption and political instability further exacerbate the situation because political parties in power often misuse the funds intended for counter-terrorism initiatives in their respective countries.^{56,57} In addition to these, the complex interplay among ethnic, religious, and national identities generally leads to support for certain militant groups, due to their pursuit of some specific political agendas.

2. Selfish Interests of the International Community

i. Pakistan and ISI Supporting Terrorism

Pakistan's support for terrorism across South Asia has been seriously impacting regional security and stability. It is a strong belief in South Asia that Pakistan/ISI provides support to various militant groups that are primarily targeting India.⁵⁸ Terror groups like LeT and JeM have made several major attacks in India, including the 2008 Mumbai attacks.⁵⁹ Pakistan has also supported the Taliban

in Afghanistan, which complicates the peace process in that country, along with complicating the regional security in the region. Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) has been commonly accused of supporting terrorism in India, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh. Experts believe this has been Pakistan's strategic tool to wield influence and achieve geopolitical goals.⁶⁰

ii. America's Selfish Interest

America has always taken an anti-terrorism position worldwide, while simultaneously supporting Pakistan, a country that harbours terror, highlighting a complex relationship.^{61,62} On one hand, the U.S. urges Pakistan to curb militant groups active in its soil while recognising it as an important strategic ally in its war against terrorism, showing its double standard. That's why many scholars argue that big countries always try to control terrorism as an asset to use as a political weapon.⁶³ Therefore, America's global war against terrorism is a 'strategic trap' to have control over the terror network by manipulating Pakistan.^{61,64} History has witnessed that America always came to business-as-usual with Pakistan after criticising it for harbouring terror outfits in its backyard.^{62,65} The USA recognises that Islamabad's cooperation would be vital to any anti-terror operation in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria or the overall Middle East.⁶⁶

iii. China's Regional Strategy

China's involvement in South Asia has a direct connection with its indirect support for terrorism, which has always raised serious concerns.⁶⁷ It has strategic partnerships and large economic investments in Muslim states worldwide, where radicalisation is high. China's Xinjiang Province is highly affected by terrorism,⁶⁸ but its close ties with Pakistan, a country accused of harbouring militant groups, complicate the stance.⁶⁹ The best example is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Additionally, China's support for certain extremist groups in Afghanistan, such as the Taliban, is seen as a validation of the argument of its indirect support for terror activities.

TERRORIST ORGANISATIONS ACTIVE IN SOUTH ASIA

South Asia remains the epicentre of international terrorism. Terrorist operates across national boundaries in the region. India, the most powerful country in the region, has been the primary target of several terror groups operating from Pakistan, such as HM, LeT, and JeM, which have a primary focus on disturbing Kashmir. Similarly, TTP poses a significant internal security threat to Pakistan. In Afghanistan, the Taliban, the most powerful political entity, has historically supported terror outfits like Al-Qaeda and the Haqqani Network, which are responsible for sophisticated attacks around the world. Bangladesh is also fighting with homegrown Islamist groups like Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) and Ansar al-Islam, which



were responsible for the 2016 Dhaka Bakery attack.⁷⁰ In Sri Lanka, too, there is now the presence of several Al-Qaeda and ISIS-inspired terror/insurgency/extremist groups like NTJ, which was behind the Easter Sunday terror attacks in 2019.⁷¹ Similar kinds of Pakistan-based terror groups like LeT, JeM, and Al-Qaeda are increasing their presence in the Himalayan nation of Nepal, which worries the regional peace and security in South Asia.⁷²

THE 9/11 AND THE GLOBAL WAR AGAINST TERRORISM

The September 11, 2001, attacks on the twin towers of the World Trade Centre (WTC) in the USA, orchestrated by Al-Qaeda from its Afghan sanctuary under Taliban protection, were a seismic global event.⁷³ Nineteen hijackers turned commercial airliners into weapons, destroying the WTC towers, damaging the Pentagon, and killing nearly 3,000 people. In response, President George W. Bush launched the “Global War on Terrorism” (GWOT).⁷⁴ Its first major military action was Operation Enduring Freedom, the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001. The GWOT led to the 2003 Iraq invasion by the USA.⁷⁵ These events vastly increased global counterterrorism cooperation, intelligence sharing, and security measures, and prompted controversial policies like drone strikes and increased severe interrogation by states.

CONCLUSION

The history of terrorism in South Asia has been very complex, intertwined with political, social, and economic reasons that have evolved over decades. Rooted in historical mistakes along with ethnic tensions and socio-economic inequalities among religious communities, terrorism has emerged as a potential response across the region. From the insurgencies and political violence in Kashmir and the genesis of the LTTE and JVP in Sri Lanka to the radicalisation of youth in Bangladesh and Pakistan and the influence of extremist ideologies in Afghanistan, along with the brewing of radicalisation in the Maldives, each country presents a unique narrative of extremism shaped across the region.

The interplay of anti-terrorism laws and other related state policies, foreign interventions, and the proliferation of extremist ideologies has further complicated the whole issue. Governments in South Asia often opt for stringent counterterror measures, which have been alienating Muslim youths, resulting in political violence. Significantly, the involvement of foreign powers, such as America’s South Asia plans and China’s strategic interests, adds several layers of complexity to the already sensitive issue.

In a nutshell, addressing a most complicated issue like terrorism in South Asia requires a multifaceted and holistic approach that goes beyond stringent military solutions.⁷⁶ The first and foremost requirement is to understand the root

causes, promote inclusive governance models, foster accessible economic development reaching across the communities irrespective of their number and political participation, and facilitate inclusive dialogue among communities as its stakeholders. Only through the formulation and adoption of a comprehensive strategy with unanimously accepted counterterror measures can we hopefully break the cycle of extremist violence and terrorism across the South Asia region.

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