



Nationalism

Religious Nationalism in South Asia

Building Nations, Breaking Communities?

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A recent series of violent acts raises the question of a relation between the rise of religious nationalism and communal violence in South Asia. Here, we will shed some light on the roots and development of religious nationalism in South Asia and its impact on social cohesion.

Religious and national identities are considered powerful sources of political engagement. While religions promote unity among all creed-sharing believers, irrespective of their residence, nations claim a unity of those sharing characteristics, such as language and ethnicity, within a particular territory. Although the combination of religion and nationalism appears counterintuitive – one transcending space, the other bound to it – the call for nation-states built upon (and for) a religiously homogenous community in a particular territory, separated from other religious communities, shapes South Asia to this day.

Reports about clashes between Muslims and Hindus in India, Buddhists and Muslims in Sri Lanka, and attacks on religious minorities and secularists in Pakistan and Bangladesh have raised the question of a relation between the rise of religious nationalism and communal violence in South Asia – and of the possibility to create stable nations in religiously diverse societies in general.

This essay seeks to answer the questions of where religious nationalism in South Asia comes from, why it has gained saliency in recent years, and which impact its rise has on communal violence and social cohesion.

The Roots of South Asian Nationalism

Neither nationalism in general nor religious nationalism in particular is new to South Asia. Different streams of nationalism emerged in resistance to British colonial rule¹ already in the late 19th and early 20th century. One of the key institutions, the Indian National Congress (INC), was founded as early as 1885, and essentially shaped the non-violent independence

movement in India – while also inspiring others all over the world. On the Indian subcontinent, three major streams of nationalism, represented by INC, All-India Muslim League, and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), represented different understandings of how the independent Indian state should look, and mutually reinforced their ideals in delineation to one another.

The INC comprised a variety of ideological, religious, linguistic, and ethnic groups, held together by the shared pursuit of an independent and unified India. Spearheaded by Mahatma Gandhi and later by Jawaharlal Nehru, the Congress sought to overcome caste, class, and religious differences and to bring Indians of all kinds together in a unified Indian state.

The Muslim League built its ideal of a nation based on Islam. Inspired by the ideas outlined in the “Two Nation Theory”, the League demanded a separate state for Muslims consisting of Muslim-majoritarian regions and states in British India.²

The third important stream of nationalism was represented by RSS, whose nation-ideal built on the concept of Hindutva. Among others, Hindutva aimed at creating a Hindu state underpinned by Hindu values, culture, and an essentially Hindu nation. While the RSS did not directly engage in anti-British activities throughout the independence struggle, it still promoted Hindutva through social activities. The RSS pushed for Hindutva despite its multiple bans by both colonial and post-colonial governments, and brought it into electoral politics through its associated political parties, first Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS) and later Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

The political manifestation and interplay of these diverging nationalisms divided British India. The horrors of partition – millions of people became refugees, hundreds of thousands were killed, raped, or traumatised – continue to shape the collective memories of people today. The unresolved land dispute around Kashmir has also led India and Pakistan into several wars (1947, 1965 and 1999), and continues to reinforce the politicisation of identities based on religion even decades after independence.³ Religious nationalism has therefore laid the foundation for the political boundaries of the Indian subcontinent as we know it today.

Bangladesh – From Religious Nationalism to Secular Nationalism and Back?

Pakistan, comprising West and East Pakistan, separated from one another by Indian state territory, was built on the idea of Islam as a binding force between the culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse Muslims of British India. Religion retained its central role in the Pakistani state's narrative and conception of the nation, although the role of Islam in the state's institutions and governments was subject to variation. It experienced its heyday during General Muhammad Zia ul-Haq's rule from 1977 to 1988, who institutionalised the fusion of Islam and the state and promoted the creation of an "ideal" Islamic society.⁴

This concept of the nation, however, was contested by ethnic and linguistic nationalism, such as that of the Balochis or Bengalis, as well as it is today by the pan-Islamic movement. The demands for separate homelands and secession from Pakistan on ethnic lines fundamentally challenged – and still challenge – the legitimacy of a state and nation built on shared faith, and made defeating such claims a vital interest of Pakistan's political elite.

East Pakistan, predominantly populated by Bengali-speakers, received little recognition, both culturally and politically. While East Pakistan comprised more than half of the population, they were not accordingly represented in state

institutions. The unequal access to resources and power promoted the secessionist forces' capacity to mobilise.⁵ In 1971, the violent repression of their claims led East Pakistan into an independence war. The Awami League (AL) spearheaded the struggle, led by a university-educated elite, staunchly convinced of a secular, culturally, and linguistically based nation-ideal.⁶ The secular, cultural nationalism, which they advocated, enabled them to turn their backs on Pakistan's narrative of Islamic unity.

The idea of a secular nation found its way into the constitution of newly founded Bangladesh.

With the AL, the idea of a secular nation found its way into the constitution of newly founded Bangladesh. Yet, for large parts of the population, the Bengali and Muslim identities were not mutually exclusive.⁷ The AL's secular political elite had lost its central role following a series of assassinations and the establishment of military rule. Paralleling the Islamisation of state and society in Pakistan, the military regime of General Ziaur Rahman removed the constitution's ideals of secularism and socialism in 1977 – not even a decade after the separation from Pakistan. Instead, there was a promotion of religious politics and the invocation of faith in Allah, with the essence of the understanding of the nation, formerly built on ethnicity and language, having been replaced with Islam. In 1988, Islam became the state religion.⁸

Following a return to more democratic governance, the Awami League re-emerged as a dominant political force in 2008, rallying support based on secular Bangladeshi nationalism. In the meantime, the Bangladeshi society underwent a transformation. Foreign influences have encouraged identification with the transnational Islamic community, or *umma*, and promoted the Arabisation of Muslim identity. The AL's elite, once the bearer of secular Bangladeshi



In rank and file: Hindu-nationalist groups experience increasing support. Source: © Amit Dave, Reuters.

nationalism, has also adapted to the heightened salience of Islam. While the AL revived its secular outlook in 2008, it made a drastic turn by promoting what has elsewhere been termed “a state-led Islamisation in Bangladesh”.⁹

A fundamental shift from secular to religious nationalism due to the growing importance of religious sentiments has swayed Bangladeshi politics, turning the boundaries of the nation into the boundaries of the Bangladeshi community adhering to Islam. Attacks on religious minorities and secular bloggers visibly increased as a result.

India – From Secularism to Hindutva?

In contrast to the Muslim League’s religious nationalism, the INC fundamentally opposed

India’s partition along religious lines. The Congress leadership had sought to create a sense of unity among the religious communities and promoted the ideals of secularism and socialism to overcome cleavages within society. However, the British rulers gave in to the League’s demands, and split India into two independent states. While Muhammad Ali Jinnah became the head of the Muslim state, Pakistan, Jawaharlal Nehru became the Prime Minister of India and the Congress remained a ruling party until 1977.

The INC’s principles of secularism and socialism became deeply ingrained in the early independent Indian state, shaping India’s political landscape. “The word ‘secular’ was inserted into the preamble to the constitution in 1976. In Indian usage, it implies both a wall of separation



between the church and state, and an equal status to all religions.”¹⁰ Thus, despite building on Indian religious traditions, the nationalism of Congress underpinned the secular Indian state.

Notwithstanding the INC’s popular support, expressed in its electoral success until 1977, its narrative of the Indian nation has never convinced everyone. Throughout its independent history, India has faced insurgencies and secessionist movements. These were based on ethnic or linguistic nationalisms, such as Tamil nationalism in the 1960s, or religious nationalism, such as the Sikh’s pursuit of Khalistan in the 1970s and 1980s. With its two-pronged strategy of offering accommodation on the one hand, and a hard hand against violent groups on the other, the Indian state has been able to rule in these rebels.¹¹

Religious communities’ acceptance of the secular state was incentivised by accommodating measures such as “positive discrimination” or financial support for religious activities, acceptance of religious community laws, or special statuses for certain groups and states. While providing a source of stability in the short term, this only postponed the negotiation about national identities, defining rights and duties of citizenship, and importantly, the question of loyalty. However, the dominance of regional, religious, or ethnic identities defies an overriding Indian identity. Muslim family laws, the state subsidy for the pilgrimage (hajj), and the special status for Kashmir have reinforced religious identities among Muslims and Hindus alike.¹² Islamist terrorist attacks reputedly funded by Pakistan, frequent skirmishes with

Pakistan, and tensions and conflicts between Hindus and Muslims, most prominently visible in the conflict surrounding the Ram Temple and Babri Mosque in Ayodhya, challenge the loyalty to the secular state and fellow citizens.

From these unresolved questions and conflicting answers arises the increasing support for RSS and BJP. The rejection of “appeasement” policies,¹³ the status of the Ram Temple, and the special status of Kashmir, have all been part of the 2019 election manifesto.¹⁴ Policies implemented by the current BJP-government refer to the promises made in this manifesto and to resolving issues, most of which have been pending since the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947.

The BJP’s growing support hints at India’s desire to build the nation and to respond to transnational issues.

There has been widespread criticism of subsequent BJP-governments’ (2014 to 2019, since 2019) activities. But not all protests, like those in the course of the implementation of the new Citizenship Amendment Act, rejected radical changes. In Assam many protests have emerged out of a feeling of broken promises, claiming that the BJP-government was not rigorous enough when opposing illegal immigration from Bangladesh, and has left them alone with the threat to their culturally distinct Assamese identity.¹⁵

The reversion of policies considered as “minority appeasement”, such as the gradual abolition of the subsidy for Muslims’ pilgrimage by 2022, and the rededication of funds saved for minority girls’ and women’s education,¹⁶ aims to overcome the negative perceptions that the state favours minorities over the Hindu majority.

While individual steps and implemented laws may be questioned, the ever-growing support for the BJP also hints at a desire within India to build the nation and to respond to transnational

issues, such as illegal migration, changing identities and loyalties outside India.

The electoral success of the Hindu nationalists not only arises from identity politics. The BJP’s ability to mobilise people through social media campaigns, plans to empower women and youth, Narendra Modi’s non-elite background, and the provision of a vision for India’s future have impacted BJP’s long unrivalled electoral victory. Yet, the willingness of Indian citizens to overcome identity politics by securing a state for Hindus and to work on the future of the nation, whose boundaries are clearly delineated, has surely added to the BJP’s success.

The BJP’s project might be understood as an attempt at turning a *state-nation* into a *nation-state*. The Hindu-nationalist nation-building project is founded on a rejection of the Congress’ secularism, in clear opposition to Pakistani Islamic nationalism, at the same time also responding to transnational challenges.

Sri Lanka – Buddhist Nationalism as a Weapon against Islamisation?

Buddhism has played a significant role in the island’s politics. While there was no independence struggle of the Indian kind in Ceylon, a Buddhist revivalist movement with anti-British undertones came closest to what could be understood as a popular movement against colonial rule. Similar to the Indian Congress, however, the political elite guided by D.S. Senanayake, which had shaped the transition from British rule to dominion status and the newly self-governed state, rejected the influence of religion on state and politics. The Ceylonese state was a secular one, and Senanayake’s United National Party (UNP), as major political party, promoted a clear distinction between the state and the religious institutions¹⁷ – albeit just like the INC, it comprised a variety of diverse factions. One of these factions, willing to give Buddhism a prominent role in state and society, split from the UNP in 1952. Under S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike’s leadership, the newly formed Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) became Ceylon’s

second major party.¹⁸ Questions of cultural assertion and equal representation of the major ethnic minority, the Sri Lankan Tamils, were a critical aspect of contentious politics prior to independence; however, demands based on Tamil nationalism increased in scope and prominence in the founding years of Ceylon. Faced with Tamil minority's ethno-nationalism, the majority's ethno-religious nationalism gained strength, resulting in the electoral overthrow of the secular UNP elite in 1956 and a constitutional change in 1972. This turned the secular state into one where Buddhism was dominant. Despite the UNP's introduction of a new constitution in 1978, Buddhism retained the "foremost place".¹⁹ While the contention between Tamils and Sinhalese escalated into brutal violence and ultimately into a three-decade long civil war between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL), relations between the Buddhist majority and the Muslim minority have been cordial throughout most of Sri Lanka's independent history. Subsequent UNP- and SLFP-led governments had Muslim politicians in prominent cabinet positions. Although Ceylonese Muslims' pan-Islamic identification had resulted in a rift between Tamil nationalist leaders and the Muslim political elite shortly after independence,²⁰ a distinct Sri Lankan Muslim nationalism played no major role in the 20th century.

Despite the participation of Muslims in government, their vital interests were neglected in peace negotiations in Sri Lanka.

This changed with worsening relations between the Muslim political leadership and the Eastern Muslim population during the last decade of the civil war (1999 to 2009). The LTTE had frequently targeted Muslims in territories it considered *Tamil Eelam*, e.g. Tamil homeland, resulting in the entire Muslim population's repulsion

from Sri Lanka's northern region in 1990²¹ and the continuous killing of Muslims in the East, where they form the majority population in some areas. The vital interests of these Muslims' were neglected during peace negotiations between the LTTE and the GoSL in the early 2000s, however; and this is despite the participation of Muslim parties in government.

Support from Muslim countries, like Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, for infrastructure and institutions in the island's Muslim-majoritarian areas changed the identities and political aims of Sri Lankan Muslims. These changes were accompanied by lethal attacks on Sufi-Muslims and on Buddhist shrines and statues.²² A popular Islamic movement in the East, which rejected the Muslim political leadership, resulted in a resolution with the declared aim of creating a Muslim state within Sri Lanka called *Muslim Thesam*, e.g. Muslim homeland. While some of the emerging Islamic groups were supplied with arms, their armament was tolerated, as they challenged the LTTE during the war and due to dependence on the Muslims' vote for majorities in parliament thereafter.

Several groups formed to raise awareness of what was seen as the emerging threat of Islamist terrorism. Some of these merged into a Buddhist monk-led organisation called Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) in 2012. Presented as the promoter of Buddhist nationalism, the group not only protested against what it saw as Islamisation, such as the introduction of halal certification and Arab-styled dresses into Sri Lanka, but also advocated implementing Buddhist values in state and society. The focal point of contention between the BBS and radical Muslim organisations became the change of the Muslim Marriage Law, and the minimum age for Muslim girls' marriage in 2016. While Muslim groups demanded self-determination, the Buddhist nationalists claimed the need for "one law for one people" and the abolition of community-specific laws for Muslims as a whole.²³

In many cases, Buddhist nationalists mobilised by making reference to developments in

the Asian neighbourhood, and the expansion of Islam elsewhere. The RSS and BJP in India often served as role model of how to deal with the threat.²⁴ The BBS was not taken seriously even by many members of the Sinhalese society and in 2015, the SLFP-led government coalition, allegedly Buddhist-Sinhalese nationalists, was replaced by a more liberal, minority-accommodating UNP-led coalition.

Arabic versions of Islamic interpretation challenge a more moderate and culturally grounded Islam.

The Islamist attacks in April 2019 fundamentally changed this, and it was his resort to the symbols and demands of Buddhist nationalism that facilitated Gotabaya Rajapaksa's election to presidency.

Clashes between Muslims and members of other religious communities following the Islamist attacks even further emphasise the threat posed by transnational loyalties to social cohesion in Sri Lanka. The support for those representing religious nationalism needs to be viewed in this context.

The Maldivian Path – Religion without Nationalism?

In the archipelago state of the Maldives, widely known for its paradise-like islands, the issue of nationhood or citizenship has not led to popular movements. Despite the more recent democratisation of the former British protectorate, nationalism has not yet evolved. Islam is the tie that binds the mostly homogenous society. All citizens of the Maldives are Muslims by law, only people adhering to Islam can be naturalised. While the dominance of Islam is not contested, its interpretation is. In recent years, foreign influences have had an impact on the Maldivian society. Arabic versions of Islamic interpretation challenge a more moderate and

culturally grounded Islam. This was highlighted by a controversial law case in 2013.

The *hudud* punishment practised in the Maldives has led to the conviction of a 15-year-old girl, raped by her stepfather, to one hundred lashes for having premarital sex. The verdict sparked inner-societal dissent about the rigorous *hudud* punishment, polarising society between moderates and fundamentalists.²⁵

Today, the Maldives struggle for support in dealing with the large number of foreign fighters returning home after helping IS in Syria and Iraq.²⁶ The rejection of transnational Muslim identity, induced in the Maldives, sparked a struggle for an own Maldivian Islam. A Maldivian nationalism might emerge as an attempt to protect the *local* Maldivian against the *global* Islamic way of life.

Conclusion

This brief perusal of religious nationalism in South Asia has shown that, while recently gaining in prominence, it is not new to South Asia but has instead shaped the region as we know it today. While religious nationalism acts as a catalyst for intercommunal violence, the sources of conflicts lie in the different political and societal aims, the diversity of which might root in the societies' diversity itself. Serving as a source of collective identity, religion in South Asia provides a basis for values and notions about the ideal state, nation, and society. In the past, the resulting differences in such ideals have promoted societal conflict, war, and separation.

The enormous support for parties and groups representing identity interests in South Asia has shown that mere cohabitation in a shared territory and under a shared administration, even if it is centuries-old, does not suffice to create a broader national solidarity beyond religious and ethnic lines. Looking at the different South Asian states as well as the paths shunned and taken, it seems that the political rise of and return to religious nationalism presents an attempt to build rather than to break social cohesion.



The exclusivism accompanying nationalism, might result from the incompatibility of the immense diversity of South Asian populations with the concept of nation itself, which builds on people's shared characteristics and mutual loyalty among fellow citizens and the state. Increasing identification with transnational communities furthermore challenges the very core of the nation-state, its sovereignty, and the social

cohesion of its people. In such contexts, for some, religious nationalism might be seen as a tool to safeguard the local cultural and religious particulars. For others, it may represent the beginning of the degeneration to a primordial past. In any case, the current rise in religious nationalism in South Asia harbours the opportunity to solve long-standing societal conflicts, as much as it bears the risk of indescribable agony.



Spiral of violence: Clashes between Muslims and members of other religious communities following the Islamist attacks in April 2019 further emphasise the threat of transnational loyalties to social cohesion in Sri Lanka. Source: © Dinuka Liyanawatte, Reuters.

And yet, these issues of state and nation currently negotiated in South Asia are by no means specific to South Asia. The drive to create a basis for cooperation on a common ground, that is, to create a (religiously or ethnically) homogenous society of those who feel they belong together, has been the very endeavour of nation builders all over the world, both in the past and present. Particularly in a globalised world where migration and increased exchange confront diverse values and ideas about state and society, the onus is on political decision-makers to recognise that a diversification of political and societal ideals is likely to spark conflict and, at times, violent confrontation. The developments in South Asia demonstrate the need for developing plans in order to deal with diversity in a meaningful way.

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- 5 Rais, Rasul Bakhsh 2002: *Politics of Ethnicity and Democratic Process in Pakistan*, in: Singh, Gurnam (ed.): *Ethno-Nationalism and the Emerging World (Dis)Order*, New Delhi, pp. 220–246.
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- 7 Ibid.
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- 9 Ibid., p. 257.
- 10 Mitra, Subrata K. 2011: *Politics in India: Structure, Process and Policy*, Oxon, p. 50.
- 11 Mitra, Subrata K.: *Governance by Stealth: The Ministry of Home Affairs and the Making of the Indian State* (forthcoming), London.
- 12 Malik 1993, n. 3.
- 13 Religious minorities became increasingly politically active, and request more benefits, similar to those given to SC, ST and OBC through a quota system, known in India as "reservation". This accelerated resentment against "minority appeasement" and furthered support for BJP. Mitra / Waha 2018, n. 4.
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- 17 Although they used religious institutions for campaigning.
- 18 Manor, James 2011: *The Bandaranaike Legend*, in: Holt, John Clifford: *The Sri Lanka Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, Durham / London, pp. 599–606.

- 19 Sri Lankan Constitution 1978: Chapter II, in: <https://bit.ly/2zCS9UN> [27 Apr 2020].
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