

*Three Dimensional Islam:  
A Multi-scale Approach to Hindu/Muslim Violence in India*

**Introduction:**

Violence between Hindus and Muslims within India manifests itself in at least three different geographic scales. A geographic scale can be defined as “the scope of economic, social, and political interactions within different and nested structural layers.” (Flint, 1999, p. 20) The geographic scales that will be taken into consideration throughout this paper are local, State, and international. Within each of these scales exists “economic, social, and political interactions” (Flint, 1999, p. 20) that amalgamate into reoccurring violence between Hindus and Muslims. The close examination of economic, social and political phenomenon for each of the three geographic scales is too broad for the confines of this paper. So the focus will be narrowed to the dynamics of societal Islam at each scale. By comparing and contrasting Islamic practices at each scale, it will be discovered that the use of the catch phrase “Hindu/Muslim violence” oversimplifies a complex situation; a situation that varies according to the geographic scale through which it is being perceived. The media spun perception of Hindu/Muslim violence in India equivocates the violence to being State sponsored terrorism by Pakistan against India. This perception causes a chain reaction of nationalistic fanaticism that ultimately punishes innocent Indian Muslims. At every geographic scale, the media’s profitable spin ignores the unique historical developments of Islam on the Indian Subcontinent. The purpose of this paper is to challenge the media’s perception of Hindu/Muslim violence in India by evaluating the developments and practices of societal Islam at the local, State, and international scale.

### **The Media's Spin of the Problem of Hindu/Muslim Violence:**

Recent instances of Hindu/Muslim violence within India illustrate how the media perceive the violence. When an act of violence happens between Hindus and Muslims within an occupied territory of India the media subtly links the cause of the violence to Pakistan. By insinuating that the State of Pakistan provides support to violent Indian Muslims, the media distorts the regional venue of the violence. The reality of the problem may be isolated to the local and or State geographic scale. However, the media connects the problem's origin to the international geographic scale. Once this connection is made, the concerns associated with the looming international conflict eclipse any local roots of the violence.

The media's tendency to escalate geographic scales from local and State to international can be exemplified by a number of media sources. During the Kashmir elections of 2002, Islamic militants repeatedly attacked the citizens of Kashmir. These militants were attempting to disrupt the election by spreading fear to those who wanted to vote. The militants claimed that the previous election in Kashmir was a sham. So in order to be heard, they protested against the whole system. The media spin of the situation overlooked the complexity of the local dynamics and enlarged the geographic scale from the State level to the international level by featuring a story about how India blamed Pakistan for planting the militants in Kashmir. (*New York Times*, September 22, 2002, p. A13)

In addition, an article in the *Washington Post* entitled "32 Dead in Hindu Temple Attack" further demonstrates how the media translates Hindu/Muslim violence in India into an international clandestine struggle between India and Pakistan. At Gandhinagar, India, a city ironically named after independence leader Mohandas K. Gandhi, two gunmen took control of

the 10-story Akshardham Hindu Temple where approximately 600 people were worshipping. The gunmen, described as “resembling Kashmiri militants,” (*Washington Post*, September 25, 2002, p. A16) were killed during the ordeal but not before they took the lives of 29 men, women, and children. Gandhinagar is the capital for the western state of Gujarat, where at least 1,000 people, mostly Muslims, were killed in Hindu/Muslim bloodshed in March of 2002. (*India Today International*, March 18, 2002, p. 19) Indian Deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani blamed “the enemies of the country” (*Washington Post*, September 25, 2002, p. A16) for the attack. He also stated, “I see in this a very deliberate design,” (id.) meaning that leaders in Islamabad planned the attack as an effort to shift attention away from the Kashmir elections that were underway.

Plus, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* both went on a twenty-day reporting spree in October 2002 about how Pakistan and India successfully test fired rockets capable of carrying nuclear weapons. These media sources also extensively detailed the troop buildups along the India/Pakistani border during the same time span. Although these October 2002 articles relied important information about the South Asian region to the rest of the world, the media laced this information with Hindu/Muslim overtones.

Thus, the media succeeded to portray the violence between Hindus and Muslims as being waged on an international scale. Even after troops were retreating from the border an article was printed that quoted the Prime Minister of India as saying, “[o]ur neighbor is assuming the role of a terrorist state. It makes a show of fighting terrorism around the world. But it doesn’t hesitate to send suicide squads into our country to kill innocent women and children.” (*Washington Post*, October 26, 2002, p. A26) The rhetorical danger of such statements lies not in the validity of what is said but in the way the general population receives and reacts to the rhetoric. When the media interchanges Pakistan and Islam as being equivalent, horrendous local acts follow.

Consequently, the terrorist acts of February 27, 2002 ignited Hindu nationalism. On that date in the city of Godhra, a passenger train made a scheduled stop. The train originated in Ayodhya and its destination included various cities throughout Gujarat. Most of the passengers were family members of Hindu Ram sevaks, advocates of rebuilding a controversial Hindu temple in the city of Ayodhya where the Babri Masjid once stood. Islamic militants ambushed the train at its scheduled stop in Godhra. Fifty-seven people were burned to death. Twenty-five of those killed were women and fourteen were children. Immediately following the carnage, Indian Defense Minister George Fernandes connected the attack to Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence agency. (*India Today International*, March 11, 2002, p. 22-24)

Hindus focused their retaliation to the train attack directly at the Indian Muslim population. In one Gujarat city a mob of 5,000 Hindus ravished Muslim homes and businesses. A group of this same mob chased a pregnant woman to the end of a dead-end street. They forced out her unborn child. Burned it in front of the woman. Then they murdered the woman. Over 1,000 Indian Muslims were killed during the riots that followed the train massacre. Defense Minister George Fernandes went to Gujarat in an attempt to stop the Hindu violence against Indian Muslims. His welcome included being pelted with stones as mobs of Hindus chanted, "Why isn't India attacking Pakistan?" (*India Today International*, March 18, 2002, p. 19-20)

In sum, the obvious problem of Hindu/Muslim violence in India desperately needs to be resolved. Since these acts of violence occur on multiple geographic scales, it is essential to try and understand the impetus driving the violence at each scale. Oversimplifying the problem by the media and government officials only deepens its roots into India's social bedrock. Specifically, the rise of Indian nationalism against Pakistan in the face of Hindu/Muslim violence in India buries any remedy for what might be a domestic problem.

### **The Function of Societal Islam on the Local Scale:**

The practice of Islam, as a societal construct, differs fundamentally throughout India. From the point of view of geographic scale, this contemporary non-uniformity of practice exists as a by-product of the original spread of Islam across the medieval Indian sub-continent. During the Middle Ages, Sufism contributed the most to the spread of Islam at the local scale. Sufism was a charismatic movement within Islam that impacted remote regions throughout South Asia. Some aspects of the movement radically varied from the mainstream ideas of medieval Islam. For instance, the community leader, or Shaykh, functioned as a semi-divine sinless oracle of God on Earth. A Shaykh introduced his variation of Islam to a geographically isolated territory like Gujarat or Kashmir. The Shaykh's local authority became undisputable. When Shaykhs died their followers celebrated them as one who became at one with God. These factions would then honor them by building grave shrines where generations of future cult worshipers could remember. However, the mainstream authority of Islam for South Asia, located at the time in Delhi, did not recognize Shaykhs as messengers of the faith. (Lawrence, 1982, p. 29)

In order to be effective, these Shaykhs methodically placed themselves at the periphery of Dar-al-Islam. Therefore it doesn't seem coincidental that the premier Shaykh of the major Sultanate Sufi order, Mu in al-Din, chose to settle in Ajmer, the capitol of Rajasthan. The medieval geographic situation of Rajasthan had strategic importance because it connected Delhi to the coasts of Gujarat. (Lawrence, 1982, p. 34) The enormous tomb complex in Ajmer, dedicated as al-Din's memorial, not only survived the potential destruction of the colonial British reign, but also it withstood this century's assaults of Partition. (Lawrence, 1982, p. 35) It is significant to note that Mu in al-Din's cult still thrives today, after six centuries of evolution.

Sufism in the coastal lowlands of Gujarat developed in an irregular pattern due to the diverse linguistic, ethnic, and cultural traditions of the region. (Lawrence, 1982, p. 37) As a result of this Islamic diversity, Gujarat has two significant shrines dedicated to former Shaykhs within its borders. The most acclaimed of all Gujarati Shaykhs, Ahmad Khattu (d.1445), is buried in a small town outside of modern day Ahmadabad. A mosque still functions at Khattu's gravesite. (Id.) The second shrine is dedicated to the former Shaykh named Sayyid Burhan al-Din Qutb-I Alam Bukhari (d. 1453). There exists a peculiar regional mystic tradition tied to Burhan al-Din. A mysterious rock at his tomb complex is believed to be tangible evidence to the Shaykh's spiritual mastery. The importance placed on this rock, revered by Muslims and historically even Hindus, hints to the mixing of indigenous shamanistic practices with Islam. (Lawrence, 1982, p. 38) Neither of these two Gujarati Shaykhs is famous outside of Gujarat. Actually, their acclaim does not even extend beyond the local network of villages that are connected to Ahmadabad. (Id.) Therefore, the local Islam practiced in Gujarat today developed independent of the North Indian Turco-Muslim elite. (Lawrence, 1982, p. 39-40)

Further, the high elevation valley of Kashmir has much in common with Gujarat. During medieval times both regions were beyond the grip of the Sultans in Delhi. So both regions share in common their unique local variation of Sufism induced Islam. Kashmir perhaps even more so than Gujarat, reacts stubbornly to non-indigenous cultural change. The valley developed culturally for centuries without being influenced significantly by outside ideas. But when the charismatic Sufism movement penetrated ancient traditions a unique form of Islam was born. (Lawrence, 1982, p. 40) Sayyid Ali Hamadani entered the Kashmiri valley in 1379 with 700 disciples. For the next five years he lived in Srinagar and proactively spread Islam throughout the valley. At his death a towering wood framed mosque was built in Srinagar to honor him.

The mosque still serves the Kashmir people. (Id.) For the purposes of this paper, it is once again significant to point out that Sayyid Ali Hamadani's influence remained limited to the Kashmir valley. (Lawrence, 1982, p. 41)

Since different Shaykhs planted a variety of seeds in the medieval Indian cultural soil, the modern fruits of those early roots do not produce a pan-India concept of Muslim identity. The three examples of Rajasthan, Gujarat, and Kashmir exemplify how Muslim societies throughout the Indian Sub-Continent differ according to how those societies were introduced to Islam. As such, the media's oversimplification of using the terminology, "Hindu/Muslim violence" can be misleading and dangerous. A local scale analysis of Muslim societies in India demonstrates how the native meaning of being a Muslim does not have universal implications.

### **The Function of Societal Islam on a State Scale:**

The model of India being divided into two socio-religious camps, namely Hindus and Muslims, is a direct provocation imported to India by the United Kingdom. Hindus and Muslims were unified against the British during the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Their union horrified the British. Therefore, the British policy for India became focused on dividing the polity of the sub-continent into competitive factions. England demarcated the population along religious lines. They used propaganda for divisive purposes. By separating the polity into competitive groups, the United Kingdom controlled the politics of India. Voters were classified either as being a Hindu or a Muslim. Plus, the democratic representatives were elected either as Hindus or Muslims. (Ibrahim, 2000, p. 77) The British colonization of India injected political overtones into the vernacular of "Hindu" and "Muslim".

Consequentially, the forces that drive Hindu/Muslim violence on the State scale are real. Hindu/Muslim violence in India has a unique property that allows it to transcend through geographic scales. A local incident causes nationalistic impulses to react internationally. Instead of taking international action, retaliatory violence finds expression at the State scale. However, something bizarre happens in between the international geographic scale and the State scale. During that transition, the focus of hatred subtly shifts from revenge against another State to revenge against a minority group within its own borders. At that decisive point the frustrations of the majority undermine the very footings of their society by acting in the name of British inspired Hinduism instead of in the name of India. (Ibrahim, 2000, p. 78)

### **The Function of Islam on the International Scale:**

Due to terrorism, Islam has unfortunately developed an international persona of being a religion of intolerance and hate. Geographic fault lines exist between those who view Islam negatively and those who embrace its teachings. These cultural demarcations are most apparent at the international scale when a border separates secular States from non-secular ones. Specifically stated, those States that are Western oriented verses those that are not. (Huntington, 1996, p. 184) Since its founding, “[t]he concept of secularism has been introduced as the basis of Indian democracy with the sole objective of sustaining national unity and strengthening democracy in a multicultural society.” (Ibrahim, 2000, p. 73)

However, Pakistan was founded on religious and not secular principles. Pakistan, created eight months before the State of Israel, was the first state created following World War II. The State of Pakistan was to become a homeland for a specific group of people. Therefore, the founders of Pakistan established its borders around densely populated Muslim regions.

(Choudhary, 2001, p. 11) This explains why Bangladesh, formerly known as Eastern Pakistan, did not remain as part of secular India when British colonialism came to an end. At the end of their rule, the success of the British' propaganda forced them to organize South Asian countries along Hindu/Muslim lines.

Notwithstanding good intentions, the architectural establishment of Pakistan as a Muslim State being situated alongside secular India developed an international geographic scale where only a national scale once existed. Now, the deeply embedded differences between Hindus and Muslims carry consequences beyond the original imagination of the British propagandists. These consequences have become ever more poignant since the recent acquisition of nuclear weapons by both States. The international boundary that partitions India from Pakistan has complicated a nationalistic problem that becomes apparent in multiple scales throughout Indian life.

### **Conclusion:**

In conclusion, by examining the problem of Hindu/Muslim violence through a multi-scale lens certain patterns develop. First, the local scale Islamic society differs throughout India. Because of these differences the realization of a genuine Muslim coalition in India becomes frustrated. Since the violence that erupts between Hindus and Muslims does not categorically include the different Muslim interests throughout India it is misleading for the media to broadly oversimplify the problem as being solely one of the Hindu population against the Muslim population. Secondly, the historic divide between Hindus and Muslims is an artificial social construct resulting from British propaganda. The media could recognize the problem for its political and not only religious nature. Hindu nationalism rears its head against the Indian

Muslim population as a substitute for its desires to wage war against Pakistan. This leads to the final point; within India it is difficult to differentiate between international frustrations felt toward Pakistan and the general sentiments manifest against Muslims. The establishment of the State of Pakistan for the purpose of being a homeland for South Asian Muslims created an international fault line between Pakistan and secular India. Since the consequences of nationalistic rivalry are now compounded by nuclear factors, the media's escalation of local and State violence to the international scale is dangerous.

There is no doubt, a problem does exist in India between the Hindu and Muslim populations. However, recognition of the existence of this problem does not automatically lead to viable solutions. By examining the problem of Hindu/Muslim violence through multiple geographic scales, it becomes more possible to see the problem as it really is and to then deal with it where it really exists.

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