

India, Pakistan Celebrate Independence Day But Not Freedom

By Muqtedar Khan | August 16, 2003

On Aug. 14 and 15, the 56th anniversary of the independence of Pakistan and India from British colonial rule, it is a sad commentary on the political condition of South Asia that even though the region has been independent for over half a century, it is still not free.

Today, both India and Pakistan are gripped in the frenzy of a religious fervor that is fundamentally negative in its orientation. Religious activism and mass mobilization in both nations is directed against, rather than standing for, something.

India's religious revival is taking the form of a Hindu nationalist movement, Hindutva, which is rabidly opposed to secularism and to religious minorities. The movement showed its true saffron in March 2002 when it retaliated against alleged Muslim rioting by unleashing a state-sponsored pogrom that slaughtered, murdered, and burned alive over 2,000 Muslims. In addition, nearly 200,000 Muslims' property was seized and their businesses and livelihoods destroyed, making them refugees in their own homeland. Today, thanks to the Hindutva movement, the color saffron stands more for the color of Muslim blood than Hindu faith.

U.S. officials' discrimination against the Muslim minority in the United States following the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks by Arabs on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon pale in comparison to the Indian officials' treatment of them after the rioting that killed 60 train passengers in a fire. In Gujarat, India, both politicians and bureaucrats worked with mobs to facilitate the massacre of Muslims. In Gujarat, the stench of burning flesh was mixed with the stench of the burning of India's secularism, pluralism, democracy, and hopes for freedom.

Perhaps in terms of shock value and implications for the future, the Hindutva movement has perpetrated the worst crime against India's soul since its independence. Nations should not harbor mass murderers in leadership positions. The events of Gujarat will come back to haunt India as it aspires for international recognition and seeks an important role in global governance.

In Pakistan, attempts to apply Islam in the public sphere quickly lead to violence against some religious minority. Muslim extremists continue to enjoy great freedom in

Pakistan. They seem to have only one purpose in life, to find communities that they can hate and target for violence. Ahmadis, Shiis, and Christians have all experienced the violent hatred of Islamization in Pakistan. In the past 10 years, religiously motivated sectarian violence has taken thousands of lives in Pakistan and prevented the emergence of a stable state or the establishment of a safe society. Democracy still remains only a glimmer on Pakistan's horizon.

With the growing Talibanization of Pakistan and the emergence of extremely odious characters such as Maulana Fazlur Rahman as prominent political forces, the future prospects of Pakistan remain deeply entangled with religious hatred and violence. If religious parties do not immediately abandon the path of rhetoric and ideology in favor of moderate and pragmatic programs, it is but a matter of time until Pakistan itself will become a victim of terrorism by Muslim militants and most certainly the next stop in the United States' war on terror.

Besides giving religion a bad name, religious zealots have contributed to the destabilization of South Asia and heightened the prospects of a nuclear disaster. As religious extremists jockey for positions of power in India and Pakistan, their past records and the thought of seeing their murderous hands on nuclear triggers are rapidly becoming another source of nightmares for security experts in the region and elsewhere.

Between Success and Disaster

Both India and Pakistan are deeply traditional and religious societies. It is difficult to expect them to become completely secular. Somehow the two nations must find a way to accommodate the political impulses of their faith-based communities without undermining the civil liberties of minorities, without disrupting political and economic development, and most importantly, without raising nuclear security dilemmas.



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Today, religious fanatics in both nations remain a domestic as well as an international threat. Both India and Pakistan, in spite of all their wars and socio-political turmoil, have progressed economically as well as technologically. Both are poised to break away from their low-income status and become middle-income, industrializing, and globalizing nations. Both have large international Diasporas that can help bring in credit, technology, and foreign business.

India is already well situated to become a major economic and cultural power worldwide. Indian cinema is giving the country popular pull. It alone can compete with China in terms of its huge pool of management and technical experts. Pakistan's credentials as a nuclear power and its current role as the frontline state in the war on terror, have forced the world to finally accept it as an important global player. Pakistanis in Europe and America are also developing their own tech-centered capabilities that will contribute to their country's development.

It looks as if only God—or somebody's concept of it—stands between success and disaster in South Asia. The competing processes of economic and technological growth versus religious-political degeneration manifest a unique example of the phenomenon described by

Benjamin Barber in his 1992 *Atlantic* article "Jihad vs. MacWorld," about global integration and disintegration. It is a tragedy that even after independence, India and Pakistan remain slaves to their own demons.

Religion should be used to empower not enslave. Religion should be employed to enlighten humans, not make beasts out of them.

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Recommended citation:

Muqtedar Khan, "India, Pakistan Celebrate Independence Day But Not Freedom," (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, August 16, 2003).

Web location:

<http://www.fpif.org/commentary/2003/0308indpak.html>

Production Information:

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Editor: John Gershman, IRC

Layout: Tonya Cannariato, IRC

