



09/24

27 May 2024

CHALLENGES OF ISLAMIC RADICALISATION IN ASSAM AND SECULARISATION OF EDUCATION

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In March 2024, a student of IIT Guwahati, Tauseef Ali Farooqui, was arrested by Assam police right after he expressed his sympathies and allegiance to the Islamic State (IS)/ISIS via a social media platform, LinkedIn, where he wrote an alarming open letter stating the reason for his decision to join the IS.¹ When a search took place in Tauseef's hostel room, an IS flag and various IS literature were found in his possession. Tauseef's social media accounts suggested that he had openly expressed his wish to join ISIS.² What is deeply concerning about such an incident is that it highlights the direct dangers of radicalisation and increasing extremism within the nation's premium educational institutions.

Four days before Tauseef's arrest, two other alleged top leaders of the IS, Haris Farooqi, supposedly the head of the IS faction in India (the *Wilayat-e-Hind* faction), and his associate Anurag Singh, alias Rehan, were nabbed in Assam's Dhubri district after they crossed over from Bangladesh.³ The two are highly indoctrinated and have been engaging in conspiracies involving the recruitment of gullible university youths for terror activities and the financing of terror attacks using improvised explosive devices (IEDs) across India. They had plans of committing an IED attack after crossing over from Bangladesh.⁴ Several cases are pending against the two, and the National Investigation Agency (NIA) has been on the hunt for Haris Farooqi since July 2023.

NIA chargesheet (August 2023) implicated two individuals, Md. Akbar Ali, *nom*

de guerre Akbar Ali, and Abul Kalam Azad, on charges of actively engaging in recruitment and radicalisation activities in the bordering districts of Assam.⁵ Both were linked to the AQIS (Al Qaeda Indian Subcontinent) and ABT (Ansarullah Bangla Team) module. Their arrest underscored the ongoing challenge of illegal immigration and infiltration of radical Islamist elements from Bangladesh to India's North Eastern bordering states.

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The demographic change happening in the bordering districts of Assam and West Bengal due to rampant illegal Bangladeshi immigration provides a natural cover to these violent extremist outfits. Assam is particularly besieged by this problem. Though the NIA and Assam Police are robustly taking strong measures to counter the menace of growing Islamist threats, the complete eradication of these elements needs thoughtful and consistent measures. More importantly, there is a need to address the root causes of radicalisation in the area.

The Mushrooming of Islamist Militancy in Eastern India: Understanding its Complexity and Historical Evidence

During the tumultuous years preceding partition in 1947, Pakistani leadership lobbied hard for undivided Assam in Pakistan. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, a friend of India but a staunch supporter of partition all his life, argued in 1944 that "Because Eastern Pakistan must have sufficient land for its expansion and because Assam has abundant forests and mineral resources, coal, petroleum etc., Eastern Pakistan must include Assam to be financially and economically strong".⁶

The inability to annex Assam into East Pakistan during the partition of 1947 had always pained the Pakistani leadership. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, in his book, *The Myth of Independence*, said, "It would be wrong to think that Kashmir is the only dispute that divides India and Pakistan, though undoubtedly the most significant. One at least is nearly as important as the Kashmir dispute, that of Assam and some districts of India adjacent to East Pakistan."⁷ Therefore, both the west and east wings of Pakistan were united in their irredentism for North East India. There was an understanding in the deep state of Pakistan that erstwhile Assam was probably the only province that was never ruled by the Islamic rulers.⁸ Thus, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) believed that it was imperative for them to devise a very different policy/strategy in the North Eastern region of India in order to further succeed in their aim of destabilising India. Proxy war as a tool to pursue foreign policy goals and strategic objectives has been the Pakistan military's preferred option. Pakistan launched its first covert war under the name of tribal revolt in Kashmir as early as 1947.⁹

Pakistan's linkages to the North East insurgent groups can be traced back to as early as the 1950s.¹⁰ The ISI played a significant role in fostering the growth and expansion of extremist organisations in Assam and other states of the North Eastern region.¹¹ It began by supporting the Naga insurgency in Nagaland. Gen. Ayub Khan was known to have an influence over the Muslim demography in North East India, encouraging them to provide tacit support to the Naga National Council (NNC).¹² The policy of utilising militants as a component of its strategic arsenal established a foundation for extremism in North Eastern India.

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Pakistan's Proxy War and North East India

Pakistan's role in the 1980s as the front-line state for the United States in fighting communist Russia brought in not only Western military equipment but also a rich experience in conducting covert war. During this period, Pakistan recruited thousands of mujahideen.¹³ A good number of Bangladeshi mujahideen too actively participated in the Afghan war.¹⁴ The gradual proliferation of Islamic groups in Bangladesh facilitated the intermingling of Islamist militants from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh within each other's territories.¹⁵ As a result of this intermingling, a structured jihadi network emerged on either side of the India-Bangladesh border which led to an increase in Islamist extremism in North East India. The ISI exploited the rise in tensions between illegal Muslim infiltrators from Bangladesh and the indigenous communities in the North East region, particularly in Assam, to good effect, which led to many illegal Bangladeshi Muslims residing in Assam joining Pakistan's Jihad in the region.

Assam: The Jihad Hotbed?

In terms of the concentration of Muslim population with respect to the total population of the state, Assam ranks third after Lakshadweep and Jammu and Kashmir out of all the states and Union Territories of India.¹⁶ This Muslim demography in the state comprises two distinct ethnic groups— Bengali-speaking Muslims of Bangladeshi origin and the indigenous Assamese-speaking Muslims. It is interesting to note that the majority of the Muslim population in Assam consists of migrants of Bangladeshi origin. Indigenous Assamese-speaking Muslims represent roughly 37 per cent of the total Muslim population, while the migrant Bengali-speaking Muslims constitute the remaining 63 per cent.¹⁷

Years of radicalisation have taken a new turn, as a new generation of jihadists in Assam is becoming increasingly pan-Islamist in nature.

Assam does face the challenge of human trafficking and illegal migration from Bangladesh and Myanmar (Rohingyas). Although Pakistan's covert actions had already been active in the region, exploiting the demographic vulnerabilities owing to the border sharing with Bangladesh, distinct jihadi activities in the state were noticed as early as 1999. Years of radicalisation have taken a new turn, as a new generation of jihadists in Assam is becoming increasingly pan-Islamist in nature. Although Pakistan fanned Islamic jihad in the region, new-generation jihadists are not influenced by the desire to carve out the North East for Pakistan; rather, they swear their allegiance to Salafi pan-Islamist extremist groups.

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One of the glaring incidents indicating this trend came to notice in August 2022, when two men linked with the Al Qaeda Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) were arrested in the Barpeta district of Assam.¹⁸ Their arrest marked and created significant media furore as Al Qaeda's growing footprint in Assam became apparent. The AQIS/ABT operatives entered Assam disguised as Imams. They established madrassas with the objective of radicalising the youth for sleeper cells.¹⁹

As such, the immediate objective of the AQIS/ABT in Assam does not involve direct military engagement; rather, it focuses on penetrating the psyche of Muslim youth through softer approaches, such as disseminating propaganda via madrassas or leveraging digital platforms for indoctrination. Since 2021, Assam has been a core focus of the AQIS. In October 2021, a video titled 'Don't Sit Idly by Grieving' was released, appealing to Muslims to perform Hijrah to Kashmir and Assam.²⁰ In April 2022, the Al Qaeda leader Ayman Al Zawahiri spoke on hijab and called for jihad from Muslims in India.²¹ In the first half of 2022, Assam police alone busted at least five modules of the jihadi terror outfits.²²

To better understand the level of 'technical sophistication' or the use of various digital platforms by terrorist outfits like–AQIS, ATB or ISIS in Assam, the Chief Minister of Assam, Dr Himanta Biswa Sarma, in a press conference in 2022, commented that, "They have messaging systems with peer-to-peer encryption, unknown apps for one-time use and deletion and self-destruct programmes. Their financial transactions have also been in small doses to avoid suspicion".²³

This pan-Islamist radicalism promotion in Assam is not just limited to extra-territorial groups like the Al Qaeda. Even home-grown Salafist organisations have penetrated the state. Pallab Bhattacharyya, former Additional Director-General of Assam Police, highlighted the role of Indian Salafist groups like–The Popular Front

of India's (PFI) drive to radicalise the Muslim population of Assam:

“The subsequent advent of Kerala-based organisation Popular Front of India (PFI) and its ingress into Goalpara, Karimganj, Silchar, Hailakandi, Kamrup, Barpeta, Baksa, Chirang, Kokrajhar, Dhubri, South Salmara, Lakhimpur, Nagaon and Tinsukia Districts of Assam in the process of updating of NRC paved the ground for the germination of radicalization in Assam.”²⁴

Reports suggested radicalisation of the young minds at the madrassas, and the government's efforts were now diverted to address the challenge. In a crucial move, the Assam government has initiated secularisation of education at the state level.

Dealing with Radicalisation in Assam: Secularisation of Education

The threat of radicalisation from extremist elements outside the state has been acknowledged by the Assam government, and measures have been undertaken by the state security apparatus to address the threat. In August 2022, Assam Chief Minister Dr Sarma announced that Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) have been designed in Assam to ensure that ‘imams and other people coming to madrassas from outside states’ will have to register their names on a government portal.²⁵

The criticality of education has been well recognised in terms of dealing with radicalisation in states. The UNESCO report published in 2017 titled, ‘Preventing Violent Extremism through Education’, highlights the role of education:

“The provision of relevant education of good quality can help create the conditions that make it difficult for violent extremist ideologies and acts to proliferate. More specifically, education policies can ensure that places of learning do not become a breeding ground for violent extremism. They can also ensure that educational contents and teaching/learning approaches develop learner's resilience to violent extremism.”²⁶

State government has also accurately assessed the criticality of the madrassas, their strict monitoring and restructuring. Reports suggested radicalisation of the young minds at the madrassas, and the government's efforts were now diverted to address the challenge. In a crucial move, the Assam government has initiated secularisation of education at the state level.

On December 30, 2020, the Assam Repealing Bill 2020 was passed by the state Assembly, under which all the provincialised, government-funded madrassas were to be transformed into general schools. The Assam Repealing Act 2020 came into effect on January 27, 2021.²⁷

The madrassas have been converted into regular schools, and the Sanskrit tols will become centres of learning for ancient studies.

The Bill sought to abolish:

- “The Assam Madrassa Education (Provincialisation) Act, 1995.
- The Assam Madrassa Education (Provincialisation of Services of Employees and Re-Organisation of Madrassa Educational Institutions) Act, 2018.
- Following the passage of the Bill, another act relating to the provincialisation of madrassas, which was passed by the state government in 2011, stood repealed.”²⁸

In December 2023, the Department of School Education in Assam announced that the government and provincialised madrassas in 31 districts, which are 1,281 in number, will be converted into general schools under the Board of Secondary Education Assam or SEBA.²⁹

The Education Minister, Ranoj Pegu, tweeted the decision:

“Consequent to conversion of all Govt and Provincialized Madrasa’s into general schools under SEBA @SchoolEdnAssam has changed the names of ME Madrasas into ME School by a notification today 13 December 2023.”³⁰

The madrassas have been converted into regular schools, and the Sanskrit tols will become centres of learning for ancient studies. Reportedly, the teaching staff at the tols are in the process of being transferred to high school or to the university level for teaching Sanskrit. There have been changes in the curriculum, for example, subjects like general science, general mathematics, social sciences, and languages, including Assamese, Hindi and English, have been introduced. Sports have been included as part of the curriculum at schools, and school uniforms have also been introduced.

Even with these measures there are close to 1500 private madrassas which continue to function but are under strict monitoring. The alterations in the education policy and inclusion of general but professionally essential subjects like mathematics, science and social science will not only facilitate integration of the students at the national and international level but will also enable them to find employment. The monitoring of the madrassas has been a critical contributor in tracking extremist elements within these institutions.³¹

While the impact of these initiatives will depend on the effectiveness of the execution of the measures and will take time to reflect broader changes, nonetheless, the initiative is certainly a bold step in addressing the root cause of radicalisation. The initiative to secularise education is in sync with the ongoing deradicalisation and counter-radicalisation initiatives in India, which primarily focus on

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community engagement, family involvement, and broadening employment potentials. The case study of Maharashtra's deradicalisation programme run by the state's Anti-Terror Squad (ATS) is a good example of how communities and institutions can play a key role in deradicalisation initiatives. Addressing the menace of radicalisation requires a multipronged approach, and certainly, nurturing young minds and guarding them against radical motivations is required to fight it.

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² Sumit (@SumitHansd), X (Twitter), March 24, 2024, <https://twitter.com/SumitHansd/status/1771803823293505645/photo/2>. Accessed on May 2, 2024.

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⁷ Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, *The Myth of Independence* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), p.16.

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¹¹ Dr Saroj Kumar Rath, n. 8, p. 55.

¹² Hein Keissling, *Faith, Unity, Discipline: The ISI of Pakistan*, (London: C. Hurst & Co. United Kingdom, 2016) p. 161.

¹³ Shalini Chawla, n. 9, pp. 184-185.

¹⁴ Dr Saroj Kumar Rath, n. 8, p. 56

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ "Hindu Muslim Population in India", Population Census, <https://www.census2011.co.in/religion.php>. Accessed on May 24, 2024.

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