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Report – Public Talk
“Rising Extremism in India”

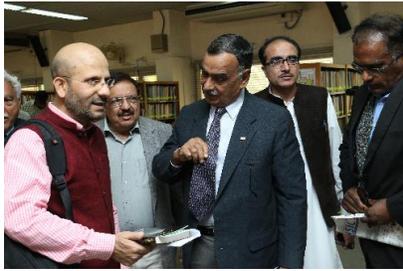
March 9, 2018



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Pictures of the Event



The Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI) organized a Public Talk on March 9, 2018 by Mr. Murtaza Shibli, a British-Kashmiri journalist, author, and communications expert, on “*Rising Extremism in India*”.

Welcoming the Speaker and the audience, Ambassador Khalid Mahmood, Chairman ISSI framed the rising extremism in India as part of the disturbing trend of rising extremism worldwide, including in the United States and Europe, noting that exclusionist attitude had gripped several countries in recent years. Despite India’s much heralded diversity and democratic values, he reminded the audience that this phenomenon of extremism and exclusion had in fact existed in India in various forms already, and is also inherent in the caste-ridden society. It is now, however, that the sub-surface extremism which existed in the time of the avowedly secular Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, has now come out in the open.

Ambassador Mahmood presented the quantitative facts in India that perhaps demonstrated the possibility of extremism, as in a population of 1.3 billion, 75% are Hindu and 14% Muslim, while other religious communities together make up the rest of the population. In these circumstances, it is not surprising that since even before partition in 1947, various Hindu communal-minded individuals and organizations had, sometimes using violent means, called for a Hindu India, ignoring the other communities. These included the Sangh Parivar, consisting of RSS as its paramilitary and BJP as its political arm, in addition to other organizations under its umbrella.

Pointing to the dangerous philosophies followed by these extremism groups, Ambassador Mahmood highlighted the case of the RSS supreme leader’s advocacy for the approach of Nazi Germany. The idea being pushed after all was that the non-Hindus in India must adopt Hindu culture and language, and learn the Hindu religion, or stay subordinate to the Hindu. Such is the philosophy that informs the thinking and policy of the BJP presently in India, he continued, which is now led by the communalist Hindu Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who was known as the “butcher of Muslims” due to his role in the massacre of Muslims in his home state Gujarat in 2002. Such is the situation in India now that there were 700 incidents of communal violence in 2016 alone. But this has a longer history, with the Babri Mosque case in the early 1990s and the anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujarat perhaps two of the most important junctures. In addition, the

Ambassador reminded the audience, a similar mindset continues unabated in the oppression of Kashmiris.

Perhaps the more alarming aspect of the current situation, Ambassador Mahmood opined, is that discrimination against Muslims and other minorities is being institutionalized in the attitude and actions of judiciary, security forces, and the parliament. For instance, the judiciary's decision to divide Babri mosque between Hindus and Muslims was said to follow "public aspirations" and not law. Moreover, issues such as cow protection laws, love jihad, 'Ghar wapsi' movement, are all directed to restrict and deny space to Muslims as equal citizens. Indeed, he asserted, hate speech is now commonly tolerated in India, and often comes from politicians, citing the example of several high-ranking BJP politicians and office-holders who had publicly made very discriminatory, if not incendiary, comments about Muslims in India. It is not surprising in these circumstances that Muslims are constantly looked upon by a great degree of suspicion. However, he pointed out, while Muslims have faced the brunt of the attacks by Hindu extremists, Sikhs and Christians have also been targeted.

Overall, Ambassador Mahmood suggested in laying out the sorry state of affairs, the communal forces in India enjoy impunity and face little accountability. Indeed, even institutions such as the film industry, literature, tourism, and history, have not been spared. The Taj Mahal was omitted from a recent official tourism booklet as the history of Muslims is being erased. The idea being put forward then is that India is of and for the Hindus, and discrimination against religious minorities has become entrenched in society. This has caused a recent report published by The Hudson Institute to conclude that there is egregious systematic and ongoing violence against minorities in India. Moreover, the Ambassador continued, while internally these are the issues being created by Hindutva thinking, it also transfigures itself in aggressive anti-Pakistan notions externally.

All of this, for Ambassador Mahmood, was rendering as suspect all of India's much touted secular credentials, and tarnishing its image around the world. He concluded by pointing out that the international community needs to take note of this situation and press upon India its international obligations to protect the rights of citizens. The big powers with influence in India bear a special responsibility in this regard, and the Ambassador hoped that economic and

strategic goals will not come in the way of international responsibilities and commitments to human rights, which are being affected badly in India.

Mr. Murtaza Shibli divided his presentation into three broad segments: the current situation in India; the history of the Hindutva project; and the future possibilities of what can happen in 2019 when elections are due. These elections, he pointed out at the onset, are important as Modi is trying to hold the elections of all states and constituencies in one go, which was not done before as previous elections varied from region to region in order to control law and order situation.

Beginning with the ongoing developments, Mr. Shibli informed the audience that the BJP has recently – on March 3, 2018 – won elections in Tripura, a north-eastern state bordering Bangladesh. The BJP was successful in 43 of the 60 seats, leaving the Congress-supporting Marxist CPIM party with 16 seats. The CPIM had been in power in the state for a long time, and its downfall was unfortunate, noted Mr. Shibli, since the Chief Minister had demonstrated his honesty, as despite having been the CM for over two decades, he did not even own a car or a house. The issues emerged on the second day after the election as Modi in his victory speech in the party headquarters in New Delhi termed it an ideological victory over communists, and an India without Communists was upheld as the way forward. In the aftermath of this victory in Tripura, continued Mr. Shibli, more than 2000 houses were damaged, over 200 buildings destroyed in arson attacks, some 150 CPIM offices destroyed, and more than 200 people captured by BJP. Moreover, a famous statue of Lenin was razed and its head severed and BJP workers played football with it, while chanting “Hail Mother India”. All of this happened just within three days of the BJP victory.

In order to contextualize the BJP victory in the larger scheme of things in northeast India, Mr. Shibli gave a brief political situation of the region. Out of the seven “sister states” of the north east, four are currently under direct BJP rule, while in a further two the BJP is in a ruling coalition, and these states have diverse populations. Only Mizoram is under Congress control at this time. And this, he continued, is a sharp and dramatic change from 2014 when Modi came to power at a time when there was hardly any presence of the BJP in the region.

Overall, Mr. Shibli asserted, 21 states in India are being ruled by the BJP either alone or in coalition, and it is preparing for the 2019 elections using anti-Muslim violence and rhetoric, such

as by raising the Babri mosque issue, and anti- Pakistan sentiments. The aim, he suggested, is to make India a Hindu-rashtra, or a Hindu nation by 2023, or at the latest by 2025, in a process that will see the secular constitution being abrogated, and Muslims and other minorities being termed second-class citizens who will face even more discrimination. Already, he dismayingly asserted, several BJP members have given ultimatums to Muslims to convert or face consequences, with the primary notion being that of “ghar wapsi” – i.e. forcibly converging Muslims to Hinduism, claiming they were originally from Hindu families who now should return to their origins.

Mr. Shibli gave evidence for his analysis by pointing to a privately circulated draft in 1998 by the Akhil Bharti Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), a Hindu rightist student organization, which had called for a three tiered structure to replace the current political system. At the apex of this ideal system will be a Guru Sabha (comprised of sanyasis and gurus) nominated by the Prime Minister, which will run through all bills to be passed and also act as a judicial committee to nominate Supreme Court judges. Then a Rakshsha Sabha which is made of serving armed forces chiefs, which will be followed by the Lok Sabha. This structure effectively and firmly will makes India a Hindu country.

Rewriting history, Mr. Shibli asserted, is part of this idea of Hindu Rashtra. It is for this purpose that in 2016, the BJP government formed a committee to secretly rewrite the history of India, and this only came to public knowledge in January 2017. The aim was to show that today’s Hindus were descended from thousands of years’ old civilizations, and archaeological findings and DNA tests were to prove claims that Hindu myths were grounded in fact. The idea also was to discredit Muslims through this rewriting, and Mr. Shibli continued, the BJP and Hindutva groups have already begun to publicize these narratives to ostracize minorities, including Muslims. After all, the RSS spokesperson recently said that the ancestors of all people were Hindus, and they must accept their common ancestry as part of Bharat Mata. In this regard, the Ministry of Culture with a huge budget of US \$400 million was given the charge to change history, and the Minister Mahesh Sharma expects the conclusions of the aforementioned committee to become part of the school curriculum, with hundreds of workshops and seminars already being conducted by the ministry to prove the superiority of the Indian past as Hindu.

After depicting this dire state of affairs, Mr. Shibli moved on to the second segment of his talk – the Hindutva history. He informed the audience that despite perceptions to the contrary, the Congress even before 1947 had many revisionist Hindus, or closet Hindutva supporters opposed to secularism, many of whom left the party after independence. However, there is enough evidence that Congress supported a soft Hindu vision under the garb of secularism. This is what led Muhammad Ali Jinnah in 1937 to observe that the Congress had formed a Hindu government, and in 1939, he rejoiced and celebrated a Day of Deliverance when the Congress resigned. Later, his Muslim League made coalition governments with the Hindu Mahasaba in three provinces, which Mr. Shibli noted, indicates that Jinnah was pragmatic and preferred Hindutva forces that were at least honest about their positions. The Congress was dangerous since it was hiding its position. After all, it was the Hindu Mahashaba that first propounded idea of two-nation theory in 1937, in its 19th Open Session in Ahmedabad, where its leader stated the “unpleasant facts” of India not being unitary and homogenous as it was home to two nations – Hindus and Muslims.

Moving ahead with this history, Mr. Shibli noted that Hindutva groups wanted to derail the secular mission of the Congress, and there followed violence, hate speech, collaborations, as well as the assassination of Gandhi. However, this put pressure on the group as well, and so the RSS changed its strategy, now directing anger against Muslims and Islamic symbols, blaming them for partition and all the historical wrongs and afflictions faced by Hindus. In effect, the Muslims in India became soft targets – and there was tacit approval of Congress here as well, though it maintained its alibi for plausible deniability with layers of secular language.

Mr. Shibli highlighted, that in the RSS’s targeting of Muslims, the one major attack early on was that on the Babri Masjid, as in 1949 an idol of Lord Ram was planted in the mosque, and a Hindu yogi member of the RSS was accused for doing this. However, there are theories, he suggested, that this act was also idealized by the Congress for its future vision for India and for its local politics in the region. Thus, he continued, the Congress deliberately prolonged the conflict so the case was not solved. Indeed, the person who started the series of events, Ram Janmubhumi Udharak, never had a case pursued against him, while the Allahabad court also did not rule for the removal of the idol. Moreover, the Congress had top lawyers but they were never

systematically deployed to win the case. And thus, nothing of note happened for 37 years despite the RSS running campaigns to turn the mosque into a temple.

It was only in the time of the reign of the Congress Leader Rajiv Gandhi in 1986, that he called for the mosque to be opened and allowed Hindu rituals and worship to take place. The RSS gained new strength and was invigorated, with sacred stones from all over coming to Ayodhya for the construction of a temple, leading to massive riots particularly in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. The idea after all, Mr. Shibli argued, was one of the slogan being raised: “Say it with pride that we are Hindus”. Rajiv Gandhi played the “temple card”, allowing in 1989 to lay the foundation of a temple, which however was termed illegal by the court. And yet, Gandhi continued with his politics in this trend, beginning his election campaign in Ayodhya, and promising a Ram Rajya, or Ram’s government. And thus, Mr. Shibli suggested, all this goes to show that what eventually happened was not sudden but had been going on for decades. After all, the huge quantity of marble was being sculpted practically next to the mosque, and under the direct support of the Congress.

However, as Mr. Shibli moved on to discuss the rise of the BJP, this also invigorated the Hindutva groups that supported strongly the cause for Ram mandir after the foundational stone had been laid. From then on, the BJP saw a dramatic rise in politics – in 1984, it had 2 MPs in parliament, in 1989 it had 85. In 1990, the Ram Advani-led movement and campaign for construction of the temple, led to scores of anti-Muslim riots along his route, causing deaths of hundreds of Muslims, as well as damage to property. And this was followed by the BJP having 120 MPs in parliament. It was in the wake of this political clout that the BJP was able to destroy the mosque, which was also facilitated by the Congress, argued Mr. Shibli, as it felt that the BJP movement will ebb and a pro-Hindu compromise will allow it to gain the political dividends. However, the BJP rise continued, as it even claimed Hindu authority over other Muslim monuments. As it is, he continued, the BJP has gained in polls whenever riots against Muslims have taken place – its rise to prominence continued over the 1990s, as in 1996 it won 161 seats, followed by 182 seats in 1998 when it formed a coalition government. This was the beginning of the Hindutva project in 1998.

The backdrop of this however, noted Mr. Shibli, started over two decades earlier in 1977 when the first non-Congress government under the Janata Party with Morarji Desai as Prime Minister came to power. The RSS worker Ram Advani had then become Information and Broadcasting Minister, and he paved way for the Hindutva narrative. This came to fruition in 1987-88, as there was a spurt of Hindu programming on the official channel Doordarshan, including the famous mythical Hindu stories such as Ramayana that became very popular. Hindutva in this time was gaining fertile ground being mainstreamed, he noted, albeit with the veneer of secularism.

Mr. Shibli pointed out that it was this consistent work together with anti-Muslim hatred and violence that led in 1998 to the BJP forming a coalition government. And while it was generous in giving ministries to partners, it retained the Ministry of Primary Education which was being run under the strict guidance of RSS. Thus one can see the priorities of the BJP in its Hindutva project - Murli Manohar Joshi, a RSS man and anti-Muslim hatemonger became Minister, and content over the six years was revamped as text books were lavishly peppered with hatred of Muslims and Pakistan. Through a network of more than 6000 large schools and tens of thousands of one-teacher schools, with official and private funding, it was taught to Indian Hindus that Muslims were enemies, while RSS also ran “children’s temples” in summer programs that also cultivated hatred.

This linear development led in 2002 to the massive killing of Muslims in Gujarat, and there was no accountability of the instigator Modi. The BJP had in this, suggested Mr. Shibli, matched its rhetoric with action. Prime Minister Vajpayee could portray himself and his party as a strong Hindu force no longer afraid of Muslims, and dispel the shame felt by RSS for centuries of being under Muslim rule. Modi also won a second term as Chief Minister, so the anti-Muslim violence also worked in his favor. Eventually, Mr. Shibli concluded this section of his talk by noting that Modi became the Prime Minister in 2014 after running a campaign anti-Muslim credentials and anti-Pakistan rhetoric.

Moving on to the third part of his talk, Mr. Shibli put forward the question: What is likely to happen in the future for the 2019 elections. After all, this is a dangerous juncture, he said, since Hindutva groups are waiting to abrogate the secular constitution and create a Hindu raj, and thus violence will certainly be used as there is empirical evidence that the only way they gain votes is

through valence and violent rhetoric. Mr. Shibli in this regard pointed to five broad scenarios or tools that the BJP and Hindutva groups can operationalize in the run-up to the elections, discussing the merits of each alternative in turn.

The first possibility, Mr. Shibli opined, is that the cow as a symbol will be used to justify violence. However, he noted that this had lost relevance over the past few years, and several states under BJP rule – such as in the northeast and in the south – have beef-eating populations. And thus for half the country, protecting the cow does not work, even as Muslims will continue to be attacked on this pretext.

The second possibility, he continued, is to develop a potent narrative around the issue of Ram mandir. However, in this case the matter is *sub judice*, and there are reports that BJP wanted a favorable decision from the Supreme Court to use it as a springboard, and for which they had installed a Chief Justice who is a RSS man. But, Mr. Shibli countered, this seems doubtful as a strategy as well since recently there was a revolt against the Chief Justice by Supreme Court judges. Moreover, he continued, other issues have also come to the fore, with the religious leader Sri Sri Ravi Shankar earlier in the week saying that if the court gives a verdict against Hindus, then India will turn into Syria. He had been working with the ulema on this issue as well, persuading them to voluntarily give up land in a goodwill gesture. Finally, he noted that the Supreme Court is under pressure also from Asaduddin Owaisi, a Muslim parliamentarian who has asked the court to delay decision till after the 2019 elections. However, Mr. Shibli concluded his second point by noting that the BJP still has another card - anti-Muslim riots, which is the third possibility it can avail.

The BJP has after all benefited from large scale anti-Muslim riots and it could engineer this once again, but Mr. Shibli contended, this could damage its image. And while at times this is not a problem, the current negative image means that it could end up preferring to make coalitions etc., and so anti-Muslim riots are a possibility but not a probability.

A fourth possibility for the BJP though is very probable, and that is the continuation of harsh measures against Kashmiris, which is already happening and is the easiest of all the approaches that the BJP is deployed. This, Mr. Shibli asserted, will continue, and gave very recent examples

of the oppression, bloodshed, and anti-democratic incidents in which BJP politicians protected the attackers and rapists, and indeed incidents that also do not get reported in the media.

The final, and most dangerous possibility for the BJP, Mr. Shibli continued, is an escalation of violence or a small war with Pakistan. If nothing else works, the BJP could go for this approach. He noted that this was already in process as we see regular violations along the Line of Control, in which civilians are being killed and ambulances and school buses deliberately targeted to provoke Pakistan. And, he reasoned, the Pakistan army also responds as a result. Indeed, he continued, the worst case scenario in this regard is a larger escalation that would benefit India and the US, and harm Pakistan and China. He saw this escalation as already scripted some two decades ago. To make this point, Mr. Shibli referred to a study commissioned by the US Undersecretary of Policy in 1990, with an India expert as well. Titled “Asia 2025”, this document was privately circulated, and then some years later became part of Indian rhetoric. Explaining the document, Mr. Shibli noted that it gave some scenarios for the future, and the first scenario is of interest since it gives good comparisons with what has been transpiring since.

In a nutshell, the scenario as detailed by Mr. Shibli included the following steps: imminent collapse of Pakistan in 2010 with ongoing economic crises, ethnic issues, and law and order situation that makes the state unstable. By 2012, the study envisages, the Pakistan state is completely paralyzed and loses control of Islamic extremists who move to Kashmir. Subsequently, India moves into AJK to protect its interests, and China does not intervene because of US pressure. Pakistan in the end launches a nuclear strike along its border. This is followed, in the scenario’s series of events, by the US launching strikes on Pakistani nuclear sites, as complete anarchy ensues, following which India moves into Pakistan to restore order. As the country disintegrates, the scenario concludes, Sindh, Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa vote to join the Indian confederation, followed by Punjab which also relents and merges with the Punjab in India to form a greater Punjab province. As a result of Pakistan disappearing from the map, further regional dynamics change, as Afghanistan too disintegrates. With Pakistan completely disappearing by 2020, the Indian confederation aligns with the US against China. In this study, finally, the US planners also envisage that India – and surprisingly Iran – would be the biggest partners to take on enhanced roles and protect sea lanes for oil. For Mr. Shibli, this shows the signs and planning of Indian policymakers and the extent to which

they can go in order to assert their ideologies, and hence makes this final possibility also a project that has been in the making for some time.

With these final words of caution, Mr. Shibli thanked the audience and the ISSI, and proceeded to answer some questions put to him.

Responding to a question about the international media and its role in highlighting the oppression in India, Mr. Shibli frankly noted that one should not be optimistic about this. He pointed to a correlation between the rise of Hindu extremism and the West. Hindu extremism's second biggest center is the US where all the Hindutva groups operate, going back to the Cold War. Indeed, he reminded the audience that the Hindutva supported the US and the West even in the Vietnam war. Thus the rise of Indian Hindu extremism has occurred with other extremism such as Christian extremism in the US, and far right extremism in Europe. It is thus not surprising he suggested that after Muslims, the biggest threat in India is faced by communists, and the trend is also worldwide. As a result, he cautioned against depending on western structures of diplomacy or human rights, as these are bureaucratic relics and operate at the commands of the US.

In response to another question, Mr. Shibli also advised Pakistani institutions to raise awareness about India and the rise of Hindu extremism, a discourse that he felt was missing in Pakistan. He also cautioned against the rabid and Islamophobic Indian media, and criticized those who fall in the trap of Indian soft power and end up participating in its media programs.

Responding to a question about the rise of Hindutva in both Congress and BJP eras, Mr. Shibli pointed to the "soft Hindutva" of Rahul Gandhi today, as he noted that Congress was pandering to the same constituency even if it is not publicly open about its views. After all, going back to the history of the philosophy of Hindutva, he noted that it was Congress leadership that had been in power when the Babri masjid issues erupted, and when there were several anti-Muslim and anti-Sikh riots. The biggest riots and massacres under BJP are a more recent phenomenon (in 1992 and then in 2002). All this suggests, he pointed out, that the Hindutva ideology will remain dominant for years to come – until some natural or huge incident such as an India-China war derails it. In a second similar question, he also noted that even as the Hindutva philosophy was not generated by the Congress, the two share a mutually beneficial relationship, feeding off each other. But with the BJP, there is a deeper relationship, as the RSS is the alma mater, the mother,

of BJP, and thus there are serious desires and plans to turn India into a Hindu Rashtra, reinvent history and create hatred against Muslims and Pakistan. Indeed, he argued, that it is India that is obsessed with Pakistan and not the other way round, and one can see this in the election campaigns in the country.

In response to a question about what Pakistan should do in this situation, Mr. Shibli advised that Pakistan needs to come up with a national narrative and remove confusions. He suggested that Pakistan gets destroyed and pulled apart at all platforms since it does not prepare itself, and allows the narrative of chaos to be created against its interests. What is required, he suggested, is principled, committed, academic work looking into issues such as Hindu terrorism, for which Social Science departments at universities are of utmost importance and need to be incentivized.

At the end of a vibrant and engaging session, Ambassador Khalid Mahmood again thanked the speaker and the audience, and commended Mr. Shibli for his scholarly and detailed talk. He pointed out that perhaps it is the soft corner in India for Hindutva ideologies that shows why Muslims fought for Pakistan, and ended the event with the hope that the right leadership can enable Pakistan to rise to the occasion and tackle the difficult situation facing Muslims all over the world.