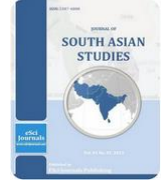




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## Book Review

### RELIGION-POLITICS INTERFACE IN SOUTH ASIA: A COMPLEX WEB

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***Religion and Conflict in Modern South Asia* by William Gould, Cambridge University Press, New Delhi, 2012. pp. 344. ISBN 978-1-107-02921-7. USD**

***Religion and Politics in South Asia* edited by Ali Riaz, Routledge, Oxon & New York, 2010, pp.210, ISBN 978-0-415-77801-8. USD 49.95.**

#### INTRODUCTION

The interplay of religion with politics is complicated what Leo Strauss terms as “theologico-political problem”, as it is inextricably entwined within the existing functionalities of social apparatuses and ultimately the political behavior of the people. Although conventional understanding of the issue limits it in merely returning to electoral politics predicating on religion based political parties, which frequently maintained by many scholars that a black-and-white treatment of the issue would not be inclusive as the undercurrents of interfaces between religious organizations and political parties can move into numerous direct as well as implied forms. It is evident that both historically and in contemporary societies, religion have played a crucial role in political life, and often it has done so for the worse, ended up with violence. Even though nearly all geographical areas of the world are affected by religion- politics interrelations, contemporary South Asia is regarded to be one of the worst experienced regions. Despite its endemic nature, little research has been undertaken in elucidating the complicated phenomenon. Among existing literature, two core contributions are: *Religion and Conflict in Modern South Asia* by William Gould and *Religion and Politics in South Asia* by Ali Riaz, which are referent point of the present essay. The paper, based on Gould and Riaz’s thesis, attempts to analyze the underlying

facets regarding the interface of religion- politics and religion- violence in contemporary South Asia as well as shed light on why religion has emerged so potent way in the politics of South Asia.

**Religion-Politics Interplay in South Asia: An Overview:** In South Asia, whether secular or not, all the states have been experiencing the role of religion in politics, but the nature and its intensity vary country to country.

India, although constitutionally secular, in practice, the rise of right-wing Hindu nationalism has threatened its secular flaunt. The 1992 Babri Mosque demolition, 2002 Gujrat riot, communal riot in Odissa and so forth have produced a large scale misgivings regarding Indian state’s secular acclamation and the status of non- Hindu religious communities. Christophe Jaffrelot claims, “In post-1990s, India has become, to some extent, ethno-democracy given the impact of Hindu majoritarianism, which has reduced certain religious minorities to the status of second class citizen”. Moreover, Amalendu Misra points out that although Bharatya Janata Party (BJP) emerged based on Hindu nationalism and changed the political landscape of secular India recently, it was not stuck to its ideology, rather has adapted to the changing demands and dominant theories of the time, from militant nationalism to capitalism, along with accommodating other religions. But, still the party can hardly escape from the allegation of fomenting communal fire.

In contrast, William Gould demonstrates that religion based politics and communal violence in India is not

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recent, but the seed of it was sown by colonial masters. It created 'representatives of communities' in politics by their gullible policy 'divide and rule' Indian society in late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Later Hunter Commission in 1882, while providing Muslims with special educational facilities and reservation in jobs for backward areas, ignited Hindu communalism against Muslims. He further contends that in the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century, religio-politics of Indian subcontinent took more violent turn through *Shawdeshi* Movement based on Hindu nationalism in one hand and Pan-Islamic propaganda based on Aligar and Deobandi campaign on the other that ultimately ended up with atrocious Hindu-Muslim communal violence.

In Pakistan, politics is intertwined with religion in a way that one can hardly be distinguished from the other as constitution itself has made religion a politically potent force, which ultimately paved the country to the long totalitarian regime and religious extremism. Arshi Saleem Hashmi argues that in Pakistan the political use of religion has heightened religious antagonism and acrimony, besides creating space for religious militancy and extremism. Although the root of religion-politics intermingle in Pakistan date back to pre-partition era through the puritan movements of Shah Waliullah and other Muslim ideologues, in post-partition period, the acclivity of it was wholeheartedly supported by the military rulers, particularly President Ziaul Haq who initiated "moral purification" movement in Pakistan. It is argued that Ziaul Haq accommodated the Islamists political parties to get legitimacy as Nasr maintained that Jamat-e-Islami Pakistan convinced President Zia to be ideologically similar and established a relationship with Zia's government that is called mother-daughter relationship. Moreover, Farhat Haq contends that military iron man Zia-ul-Haq used Moududi's radical ideas and writings to legitimize his regime and initiated the Islamization of Pakistan with so-called Sharia laws. Similarly, religion occupied a central place in Bangladesh politics. In Bangladesh, constitutionally, religion based politics was banned and secularism was declared as one of the key national ideologies. Therefore, it was expected that only secular political parties would survive. But the opposite thing happened. In late 1970s, after the assassination of Shakh Mujibur Rahman, military government grabbed the power. As they did not have legitimacy, they used religious card well to obtain mass justification. General Ziaur Rahman

provided legitimacy to religion based political parties to compete in parliamentary election and his successor General Ershad declared Bangladesh as an Islamic state through constitutional amendment. Riaz rightly opines that Military rulers played a key role in awakening Islamic parties to legitimize themselves and declared Bangladesh an Islamic country.

Even though, Afghanistan was not ruled by the military, the strategic use of religion helped Afghan politicians to legitimize their actions, mobilize support, undermine rivals and attract foreign aid. Abdulkader Sinno argues that religion played a central role in mobilizing people against the Soviet regime, and in the creation of the Taliban and the Mujahideen forces by the United States. He further points out that using Islam and its symbol and rhetoric, religious leaders—namely King Abdullah, Abdur Rahman and Mullah Omar—declared themselves the authority of Islam and ruled the country with Islamic Sharia law.

But in Nepal, Subho Basu outlines, relation between religion and politics is fundamentally inscribed in the Nepali psyche through the process of nation-building. She further claims that monarchic and dynastic leaders used religion to consolidate their control through the manipulation of symbols, rituals and the social stratification process. Being declared as Hindu state, religion remained the state ideology until 2006 when the rebel Maoists declared the country as secular one, but still India based political religio-political parties, for example, Pashupati Sena, Nepal Shiv Sena emerged.

Finally, in Sri Lanka, political elites employ religious symbols and rhetoric for electoral favor. A.R.M. Imtiyaz indicates that the result of the politicization of religion in Sri Lanka has two significant outcomes: first, the erosion of the secular state and its institutions, such as bureaucracy, the judiciary, public education and the police force; and second, the deepening distrust of marginalized minorities, particularly the Tamils, which ended up with ethnic violence. Gould observes that in post-colonial Sri Lanka, structural violence against Tamils, for instance, denying linguistic, political and primordial ethnographic representations, educational deprivation, ritualistic heresy, and so forth have led to organized violence in 1980s that later turned to long traumatic civil war. Now we require investigating why religion ascended as a powerful actor in contemporary South Asian politics.

**Rise of Religion Based Politics in South Asia:**

**Fundamental Causes:** In post- colonial South Asia, it is undeniable that religion has ascended as a powerful political ideology. Therefore, the key question to ask: why did religion become such potent political ideology in the South Asian politics? Riaz and Gould have attempted to answer the question through their research. In the introduction of his edited volume, Riaz challenges the view that religion is always monolithic, static and immutable; instead, to him, every religion has multifarious aspects. He demonstrates three points why religion occupies a strong place in the political landscape of contemporary South Asia that includes: (a) the interface of religion and politics in the region is not aberration, but has long historical antecedents; (b) the dismal failure of secular states in South Asia to deliver fundamental goods and services has delegitimized the state in one hand, and ruling blocs on the other, within which religion has emerged as the ideology of ruling class as well as mass people; (c) the demand of religious identity is a consequence of ontological insecurity and existential uncertainty of the individuals because of globalization.

Riaz substantiates his arguments through historical explanation of the role of religion in the political arena, from the Mughal Empire to British colonial rule to the post- colonial South Asian politics. He examines how the legacy of religion's role in anti-colonial uprisings such as the Sepoy Mutiny, the Peasant Uprisings, the Farazi Movement and the 1848 Sri Lankan rebellion, continues to dominate politics. Moreover, country specific causes of increasing role of religion in politics have been outlined. For example, Sinno demonstrates that madrasa education, the network of transnational Islamic groups, the lack of economic development and the tribal structure of the country helped sustain the spread of Islamic domination in Afghanistan. He further holds that using Islam and its symbol and rhetoric, religious leaders declared them the authority of Islam and ruled the country with Sharia law.

In Bangladesh Riaz contends that both domestic and international factors are responsible for the Islamisation of politics. Among the domestic factors, the failure of political parties in the post- liberation period in ensuring both economic growth and political stability, and the procrastination of civil society, contributed to stir up political Islam. Externally, interaction with countries in the Middle East and the Gulf for economic imperatives

also impacted the motley of politics and Islamism in Bangladesh. In India, Mishra argues that although the founding leaders of India stressed secularism as one of the state principles and hoped to keep religion apart from politics, the failure of the Congress party to keep its electoral promises of economic development resulted in Hinduvta ideology growing in ascendance and, accordingly, the BJP emerged, survived and flourished. Religion became potent factor in Nepali politics, Basu claims, because monarchic and dynastic leaders used religion to consolidate their control through the manipulation of symbols, rituals and the social stratification process. In Pakistan politics, in Haq's words, political Islam dominates politics because of its short-sighted leadership in the post-independence era, propelled by the Jamat-e-Islami and Maulana Moududi's radical attempt to establish Pakistan as an Islamic state and finally, like other countries, the political leaders' intentional use of religion in electoral politics, gave space to religion to dominate politics.

But, Gould poses different arguments regarding the increasing role of religion in South Asian politics. He contends that religion- politics interplay or peculiar community violence in South Asia is not because of religion solely nor for illiteracy, rather because of enigmatic nature of state formation and political representation. He provides three vital points to understand religion and political movements in South Asia: first, there is no clear demarcation between institutions ostensibly espousing secularism and those of religio-political mobilization; second, 'Hindu-Muslim' conflict is never an uncomplicated matter of clashes of civilizations or religious outlook and need to examine how contexts and circumstances are negotiated by the ideological and political choices of those involved in conflict; finally, in looking at violence, we need to move away from looking it aberration, a moment of madness, to more in terms of everyday struggle of people attempting to make sense of their predicament.

Gould supports his arguments through impressive historical research of different religious movements across South Asia, particularly he tries to show how religious tensions turned into communal violence. To him, although major religions- Hindu through *Arya* and *Brahmno Samaj*, Muslim through *Ulema* Movement, Shikhs uprising in Panjab, Christians in Kerala and Tamil Nadu- initiated sort of anti-colonial nationalistic movements, which soon after, were politicized and

turned to communal violence, for example, cow protection movement of Hindus against Muslims in Uttar Pradesh, Conflict regarding music before mosques in different Muslim majority areas and so forth. He holds that these conflicts were not just expression of religious anxieties; they were also attempts of powerful political leaders to substantiate their claims of being genuine representatives of Muslim and Hindu communities. He further argues that, in India, Congress although established as secular party, religious biasness was back in its mind. Gould shows how leaders of Congress in regional and local level were supportive to communal politics, despite secular rhetoric of national leaderships. In case of Pakistan and Bangladesh, Gould's arguments overlap with Riaz's, but in Srilanka, he maintains that the political mobilization of Buddhist Monks in one side, and political deprivation

of Tamils' on the other, contributed more to civil war than Buddhist religious ideology.

#### **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Riaz and Gould have postulated the endemic nature of religion's intermingling with politics and factors contributed here. The fundamental causes, they found, include: the failure of secular political parties to keep their words, the rise of military rule, intentional use of religion for political purpose, historical antecedents and so forth. But the cause and intensity of the rise of religion based politics shifts with the changing political climates of the region. The recent 'shahbag uprising' in Bangladesh that established new religion based Islamic group named Hepazat - e- Islam, and the debate on religion's use in politics in BJP led government in India provide different stories in the region than before, which demands further in-depth research in the field.