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Introduction

While writing this article, I reminisce about an incident which occurred while waiting in the office of the staff officer to the commandant of CME, Pune, I happened to strike up a conversation with, a Sikh gentleman. He told me something that still reverberates in my mind. He said, "Gentlemen, in today's world, radicalisation is just one click away." He was referring to the incendiary and radical material available online, specially designed to poison and radicalise young minds. Being an avid reader and student of geopolitics and world affairs, I could easily deduce what he was referring to. At that time, the Government of India seemed oblivious to this emerging threat and was unaware of the false propaganda circulated online with nefarious and devious agendas. However, today, the government understands the reach and power of online propaganda and is actively working to ban these internet sites and accounts in India. Given the very real threat, it is imperative for defence personnel to discuss not only religious extremism but also politics, as in the Indian subcontinent, these two variables are inseparable and often affect the politics of one nation and the dynamics of the entire subcontinent.

The rise of a new political party named Tehreek-e-Labbaik in Pakistan is an event in the Indian subcontinent that will have effects far beyond Pakistan's borders. TLP is not a militant organisation that can be easily banned by Pakistan or militarily defeated by India. It is a political party with deep social roots in the majority of the Muslim population in both Pakistan and India. The sect of Islam that this party represents, Barelvi Islam, is followed by more than 60 per cent of Pakistanis and over two-thirds of Indian Muslims. The meteoric rise of this once marginalised and suppressed Islamic sect, and the way it has challenged the government's authority in Pakistan, has intrigued political thinkers worldwide. They want to understand this new phenomenon and deduce its implications for India and the entire subcontinent. We should remember that the killers of the tailor named Kanaiya Lal Teli, in their viral video, raised the religious slogans of Tehreek-e-Labbaik, specifically "Labbaik ya Rasool Allah," clearly boasting their affiliation with this movement. In the subsequent segments of this article, I will help readers understand Barelvi ideology. I will briefly touch upon the origins of this ideology. Still, the focus will be on understanding the present rise of its newly amalgamated political wing (Tehreek-e-Labbaik), the shift from its Sufi roots to its current highly radicalised and far-right mindset, and the implications I foresee for Pakistan and India.

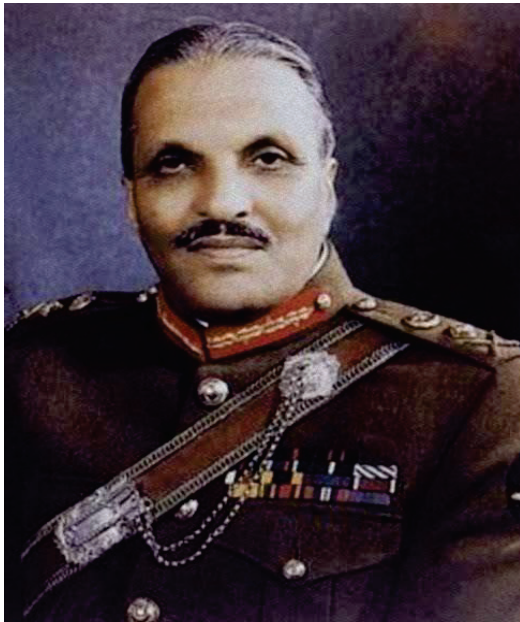
The beginning



Ahmed Raza Khan Bareilvi, the founder of Bareilvi movement

The Bareilvi movement, also known as Ahl-al Sunnah wal-Jamaah (People of the Prophet's Way and the Community), was founded in Bareilly, India, by Ahmed Raza Khan Bareilvi in the 1880s as a Sunni revivalist movement¹. Its support base primarily spans today's North India and Pakistan's Punjab and Sindh provinces. The Bareilvi movement is considered a Sufi movement known for its message of peace, brotherhood, and inclusiveness. It is seen as the principal adversary to other dominant Islamic sects in the Indian subcontinent, namely the Deobandis and Wahhabis, with many fundamental differences over the interpretation of the Quran and the status of the Prophet Muhammad in Islam. The Bareilvis were at the forefront of the Muslim League's efforts to create Pakistan. However, after the partition and the creation of Pakistan, the political power and organisational influence of the Bareilvis did not become prominent. Various factors, such as internal friction among its leadership, limited the Bareilvis from establishing a pan-national presence. Additionally, the emergence of the ethnically centred Muhajir Qaumi Movement (later known as Muttahida Qaumi Movement) in Sindh marginalised religious-based Bareilvi political parties such as Jamiat Ulema-e-Pakistan (JUP).

The Zia era and Islamisation of Pakistan



General Zia ul Haq



Malik Ishaq, founder of lashkar-e-jhangvi

The Zia era (1977-88) marked the Islamization of not only Pakistani politics but also its society². The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 further accelerated Pakistan's drift toward Islamic radicalisation, as it provided Zia with a perfect excuse to divert the nation's attention from internal turmoil to the jihad in Afghanistan. Zia sought religious warriors to fight a holy war in Afghanistan, and he chose to endorse Deobandi Islam over its Barelvi counterpart for two specific reasons. Firstly, Deobandi Islam was more prominent in the western tribal belt of Pakistan, which borders Afghanistan. Secondly, Zia viewed the Barelvis, with their mystic Sufism and Dargahs, as an abomination of Pakistan's Hindu cultural past and too soft to be endorsed for jihad. During Zia's era, there was religious appeasement and state-sponsored religious policies and laws. Elements of Sharia were incorporated into the judiciary, and Sharia-based punishments, such as public flogging, were introduced. Deobandi madrasas and organisations began receiving financial support from the Pakistani state, as well as from American and Saudi sources. This sudden rise in Deobandi influence further marginalised the Barelvis. Many localised militant Deobandi groups were formed during this era, such as Sipah-e-Sahaba and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi. These groups targeted anything and everything not associated with Deobandi ideology. Still, the main brunt was felt by the Barelvis, who suffered targeted killings and attacks on their mosques and madrasas³. The state largely remained a mute spectator to these attacks, as the nation's focus was diverted toward the so-called jihad in Afghanistan. During this period, despite being the majority sect in Pakistan, the Barelvis generally remained disorganised and divided, with no single political party or organisation commanding the unconditional support of the entire Barelvi sect.

Post Zia and the state's effort to de-radicalise the nation.

Post-Zia, and particularly after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan, the Pakistani state realised that it was time to subdue Deobandi radicalisation. With the war in Afghanistan over and the funds from the U.S. and Saudi Arabia drying up, there was no longer a need to create new mujahideen. The Pakistani state decided to counter the hard-line and radicalised approach of the Deobandis with the softer, more harmonious Sufi approach of the Bareilvis. This shift began in the late 1980s, during a period when the government, a military dictatorship, was committed to the Islamization of society. Music was frowned upon, and women were not only asked to cover their heads but also increasingly to cover their faces. The public was urged to display more visible signs of religiosity. Alcohol and dance parties were strictly banned and viewed as invasions of Western culture. Even the mere mingling of the sexes was considered a grave offence against religion, all of which was officially sanctioned by the state. Amidst this restrictive atmosphere, a young woman from Sindh, with short hair and an uncovered head, burst onto PTV screens, breaking through all societal and state-imposed barriers. This was Abida Parveen, the Sufi singer, whose performance of "Mere Yaar Di Ghadoli" electrified and intrigued Pakistani intellectuals, particularly those of democratic and liberal leanings. Everything the state was suppressing seemed to be embodied in this young woman's performance of a Sufi classic. In that moment, many of Pakistan's modernists, liberals, and progressive intellectuals fell in love with **Sufism, seeing it as the expression of a secular, syncretic, tolerant, humanist, and pluralistic movement within Islam.** The historical precedent was clear: for generations, those seeking to escape the oppressive grip of a puritanical form of Islam had always taken refuge in the doctrine of Sufism. For four decades, this expression and belief in Sufism persisted in Pakistan, whether through the enlightened moderation of Pervez Musharraf or the liberal populism of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP). The Sufi doctrine was propagated and encouraged, resulting in a passionate, almost torrid affair between Pakistan's intellectual modernising elite and Sufism. However, as with all torrid affairs, this one, too, has its limits and is now ending in a messy and bloody way. The result is that **Sufism, once intended to serve as a tool for the de-radicalisation of society, has itself been radicalised by that very society.** The historical precedents were present but were ignored by Pakistani intellectual elites. Sufism has its own sectarianism, tendencies toward Takreer (ways of thinking), and hierarchy of clerics. But, as the saying goes in Hindi, "Doobte ko tinke ka sahara" (A drowning person clutches at straws). In the ocean of radicalisation under Zia and the Afghan war, Sufism was that straw for Pakistan. The declarations of Ahmed Raza Bareilvi, who famously declared all non-Bareilvis (Wahhabis, Ahmadiyas, Deobandis) as Kafirs (non-believers), were well known to all but were conveniently ignored by the Pakistani establishment while promoting and advocating Sufism⁴.

The state-sponsored rise of Sufi Islam.



Sarfraz Ahmed Naeemi of sunni

During General Musharraf's period, after aligning with the United States in its war on terror, the state institutionalised Sufi Islam by establishing "The National Council for the Promotion of Sufism" in 2006 under the leadership of Yusuf Salauddin, the grandson of Allama Iqbal. Later, the Pakistan People's Party similarly strengthened the culture of Urs (Sufi festivals) throughout the country as a counterweight to Deobandi Islam. Corporate forces also got involved, leading to the emergence of Coke Studio, which featured Sufi music and songs under the slogan "The Sound of the Nation." The Sunni Ittihad Council, which grew out of this particular conjunction of historical forces, threw its weight behind the government's anti-terrorism efforts. Sarfraz Ahmed Naeemi, a prominent Barelvi leader from the Sunni Ittihad Council, organised massive demonstrations against the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). He declared, "The military must eliminate the TTP once and for all. Otherwise, they will capture the entire country, which would be a catastrophe." Naeemi issued a fatwa denouncing suicide bombings and criticised the TTP leader, Sufi Mohammad, saying he should wear bangles if he is hiding like a woman. He was the first prominent leader to unite about 20 major Barelvi parties under one umbrella, giving the Barelvis a pan-national presence for the first time. However, it was still fractured in many ways. On June 12, 2009, the TTP sent a clean-shaven 19-year-old man to blow himself up and kill Sarfraz Ahmed Naeemi⁶. With Naeemi gone, the militant anti-Taliban leadership of the Barelvis was effectively beheaded. In 2010, the Sunni Ittihad Council (an alliance of the eight most potent Sunni Barelvi organisations) launched the "Save Pakistan Movement" against the Taliban. In response, the Taliban continued their attacks on Barelvi leadership, particularly through suicide bombings. Other militant Deobandi groups affiliated with the TTP, such as Sipah-e-Sahaba and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, also intensified their attacks against the Barelvis. Barelvi mosques, shrines, madrasas, and religious festivals were all targeted in these assaults. As the saying goes, "**Marginalisation and radicalisation are correlated**"—**the more one is marginalised, the higher the chances of radicalisation**. This proved true for the Barelvis. Bloodied and battered, the Barelvis shifted gears; out of the rubble and the beheading of the old guard emerged a new leadership that had supposedly "learned the lesson" of confronting the TTP and the Deobandi lobby. To win support, the Barelvis realised they needed a different strategy. Instead of targeting the TTP, they began attacking the

government. They saw that by focusing on the question of the finality of the Prophet, they could gain more sympathy, particularly by attacking liberal, secular forces and modernists. The Barelvi leadership believed this was a better path to outflank and out-radicalise the Deobandi radicals.

The rise of Tehreek – e – Labbaik Pakistan



Salman Taseer meeting Aasiya bibi



Mumtaz Qadri immediately after his arrest

In 2011, the Barelvi Ulema turned against the secular governor of Punjab, Salman Taseer, for attempting to intercede on behalf of Aasiya Bibi (also known as Aasiya Noreen), whom he believed was wrongly accused of blasphemy. Taseer also criticised Article 295c, Pakistan's blasphemy law. The campaign against him intensified until he was assassinated by his police bodyguard while exiting an upscale restaurant in Islamabad. His assassin, Mumtaz Qadri, was lionised by Khadim Hussain Rizwi, who later founded the Tehreek-e-LabbaiK (TLP) party in 2015. Qadri became the poster boy for this party, earning the title of "Shaheed" after his execution for the crime he committed. In 2016, his funeral was attended by more than 100,000 people, most of whom were Barelvis. This marked the beginning of Pakistan's most potent Barelvi political movement. Under Khadim Hussain Rizwi's leadership, the TLP unified almost all Barelvi organisations in Pakistan into a single political party. However, this time, the target was not the Deobandis or the TTP, but the Pakistani government, liberals, and secularists, particularly on the issue of "The Finality of the Prophet." Rizwi openly propagated violence, even claiming that Islam is not a religion of peace, but of the sword. He asserted, "Before the Prophet picked up the sword, the condition of Muslims was pitiable; it is only after the Prophet picked up the sword that the light of Islam spread." In doing so, he effectively ended the secular, syncretic, tolerant, humanist, and pluralistic approach of Sufism, replacing it with extreme radicalisation.



Khadim Hussain Rizvi



Saad Rizvi, Khadim Rizvi's son and successor

In 2017, the TLP launched a campaign against Law Minister Zahid Hamid over a minor change in the electoral oath, where the Anti-Ahmadi declaration was altered from “I solemnly swear” to “I believe,” while the rest of the text remained unchanged. Even though this modification had no impact on the legal standing of the clause, the TLP reacted aggressively, claiming it was an attempt to change the status of Ahmadiyas from ‘non-Muslims’ to ‘Muslims’ in Pakistan. The TLP initiated a nationwide violent agitation, and the government quickly capitulated to their demands. This was the first time the TLP successfully pressured the government, solidifying its position as a political force. What was particularly disheartening was the widespread public support the TLP received for shifting its focus from opposing the Taliban to targeting the Ahmadiyas and defending the blasphemy laws. The TLP gained significant popular support by shifting its focus from the TTP to opposing liberals and secularists. The government's inability to control or present a coherent counter-narrative to Barelvi radicalisation has allowed the TLP to emerge as potentially the third-largest political party in the country. This marks a significant shift in Pakistani politics, as the radicalisation of two-thirds of Muslims in Pakistan who adhere to Barelvi ideology has now deeply permeated society. This shift is evident in the increasing incidents of mob lynching over mere suspicions of *Gustakh-e-Rasool* (insulting the Prophet Muhammad) or *Gustakh-e-Quran* (insulting the Quran). From the lynching of a Sri Lankan manager at a Sialkot factory to the murder of a student named Mashal Khan in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the list continues to grow. All these crimes were committed by mobs affiliated with the TLP. As Friedrich Nietzsche said, “Madness in a single man is a choice, but in a crowd, it is a rule.” The TLP's infamous slogan, “*Gustakh-e-Rasool ki ek hi saza, sir tan se juda, sir tan se juda*” (There is only one punishment for insulting the Prophet, and it is beheading), has become a chilling rallying cry. The most disturbing aspect is that during these lynching and killings, the large mobs involved were cheering and shouting slogans in support of the crimes. In November 2020, TLP leader Khadim Hussain Rizvi once again led his supporters towards Islamabad, demanding that Prime Minister Imran Khan's government sever diplomatic ties with France. This was in response to a Parisian magazine publishing blasphemous caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad, and the subsequent remarks by French President Emmanuel Macron, who vowed not to “give up cartoons” depicting the Prophet following the beheading of a history teacher who had shown blasphemous sketches in class. The TLP's protest brought the Pakistani government to its knees, forcing it to sign an agreement with the TLP to end the demonstrations.

By this standard, what the TLP has achieved surpasses even the Islamization efforts of General Zia⁵. The TLP has managed to radicalise the very core of Pakistani society. The rallies organised by the TLP in the name of the “finality of the Prophet” have outmatched any religious

gatherings in Pakistan's history. Despite this, many in Pakistan continue to argue that Sufism should not be blamed for the radical and violent ways of the TLP. However, the facts are clear: the Sufi Bareilvi sect, once steeped in centuries of mysticism and metaphysical thought, has been wholly radicalised, shifting towards a more puritanical form of Islam, far removed from the tolerant and inclusive tradition it was once known for. It is essential to recognise that doctrines themselves do not make history; they do not take action, possess consciousness, or have an understanding of historical forces. Doctrines are not people. It is people who make history, and they often disregard the internal contradictions between their actions and their doctrines. The competitive struggle between different Islamic sects to capture an increasingly radicalised populace is driving Pakistani society towards a dangerous level of religious sectarianism.

Implications for India

The Bareilvi Sufi sect of Islam, which originated in Bareilly, India, commands significant support within the country. About two-thirds of Indian Muslims, particularly in North India, adhere to this sect. During the Arab Spring and the subsequent rise of the Islamic State (IS), very few Indian Muslims were radicalised to join IS—a phenomenon many political analysts attribute to the inclusiveness and tolerance inherent in Sufi Islam. While the rise of Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) has drastically altered the interpretation of Sufism among Bareilvi Muslims in Pakistan, the same cannot be said for Bareilvis in India. This difference stems mainly from the fact that Bareilvi Sufism lacks a unified political base in India, allowing it to remain untainted by the insidious agendas of religious politics. India's democratic framework grants every citizen the freedom and fundamental right to express and practice their religious beliefs, offering protection even to the most persecuted religious sects globally. For instance, in Pakistan, the Ahmadiyya community, a sect of Islam, is prohibited from identifying as Muslims, and their places of worship cannot be called mosques. However, in India, they are allowed to practice their religion and beliefs under the protection of the Indian Constitution. This irony is especially poignant, considering that the Ahmadiyyas were among the strongest supporters of the Muslim League in its quest to create Pakistan. In this country, they are now the most persecuted community.

As highlighted in the introduction, the advent of the internet has significantly amplified the influence of propaganda. Today, an ideology can spread at an unprecedented speed. While it took Islam roughly 1,000 years to reach the American continent, a single sermon or speech by any religious figure can now reach millions worldwide within minutes. This capability also brings the potential for manipulation, as false information can be rapidly disseminated to advance insidious or devious agendas.

This dynamic is evident in the rise of Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP). The politicisation of Sufi Islam in Pakistan has begun to surface in India as well. Although the slogan "Gustakh-e-Rasool ki ek hi saza, sar tan se juda" (There is only one punishment for the blasphemer of the Prophet, beheading) is not as intense or widespread in India, it has nonetheless made its presence felt. The most alarming incident was the beheading of a tailor named Kanhaiya Lal Teli in Udaipur by assailants who believed he had insulted their prophet simply by sharing a picture in support of Nupur Sharma. This case made national headlines, but there have been other similar incidents, such as the killing of Krishan Bharwad in Dhandhuka, Gujarat. However, it would be incorrect to say these incidents indicate an

organised or coordinated pan-national effort. Moreover, the Sufi Barelvis in India have consistently distanced themselves from groups like Indian Mujahideen (IM), a Deobandi-affiliated terrorist organisation operating in India. For now, the tolerant and inclusive fabric of Barelvi Sufism in India remains largely intact and uncorrupted by its radicalised counterpart in Pakistan. Additionally, the key factor that led to the integration and extreme radicalisation of all Barelvi organisations in Pakistan—namely, their marginalisation and targeting by other extremist groups and the state's indifference—is absent in India's secular constitutional framework.

Conclusion

The rise of Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) has starkly illustrated how the infusion of religion into politics can corrupt and radically alter even the most tolerant and inclusive doctrines. This development serves as a potent reminder that the marriage between politics and religion often ends in a violent and destructive rupture. Today, in classical political science terminology, TLP can no longer be merely classified as a pressure group; it is rapidly evolving into a formidable deep state within Pakistan. Unlike the religious radicalisation efforts during General Zia-ul-Haq's regime, which focused primarily on the already puritanical Deobandi sect, TLP has managed to achieve something unprecedented. Zia was aware that the majority of Muslims in Pakistan did not align with the hardline stance of Deobandi Islam. His strategy ensured that religious radicalisation remained fragmented, preventing it from coalescing into a unified political force with nationwide influence. The Deobandi sect, although influential, did not command majority support in Pakistan, while the Barelvis, despite their numerical superiority, were too fractured and marginalised to pose a significant political challenge. However, TLP has fundamentally altered this dynamic. By uniting the various Barelvi organisations under a single political umbrella, TLP has successfully transformed the traditionally peaceful and inclusive doctrine of Sufism to align with its political ambitions. This shift has not only given TLP a powerful and unified base but also enabled it to gain significant influence over Pakistan's political landscape. Particularly concerning is how mainstream political parties in Pakistan have responded to TLP's rise. Rather than opposing the surge of Barelvi radicalism, many political leaders have sought to exploit it for their gain. Whether through justifying the growing religious radicalisation or pandering to TLP's extremist stance in their rallies, these parties are inadvertently legitimising and strengthening TLP's influence. This dangerous interplay between religion and politics is reshaping Pakistan's socio-political fabric, pushing the country towards an increasingly radicalised and polarised future. The situation underscores the broader risks of allowing religious extremism to become a tool for political mobilisation, with consequences that could be far-reaching and devastating for the nation's stability and cohesion.

End Notes:

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