



## The “Idea of India” after Mumbai

By Apoorva Shah

*India’s founding ideal of multicultural democracy is critical to both domestic cohesion and geopolitical interest, and it has defined how the country confronts terrorism at home. Modern India has much experience with terrorism, but most attacks have been rooted in separatist and ethnic insurgencies in rural frontier provinces. In the last decade, however, India has seen a steep rise in the number of attacks in urban areas, aimed at civilians, and committed not by rural insurgents but by young, middle-class jihadists. These domestic threats, which expose fault lines in the “idea of India,” have been welcomed and at times supported by Pakistan, whose existence is founded in opposition to India. In fact, the apparent paradox between Pakistan’s tolerance of the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) terrorist group leading up to the November 26, 2008, attacks in Mumbai and Pakistan’s internal struggle against extremists can be understood in the framework of these conflicting ideologies. For India, countering the threat of domestic jihadism is not only a security imperative; it is also a strategic necessity. This merits a new counterterrorism response by the Indian government and a renewed understanding of Indian Muslims and their place in India’s pluralistic society.*

In 1947, as the British Raj prepared to devolve its former colony to the newly independent Republic of India, Jawaharlal Nehru and Mohandas Gandhi envisioned a modern, multicultural, and secular democracy whose first priority was economic progress, not ethnic communalism.<sup>1</sup> Nehru and Gandhi’s “idea of India” rejected the Balkanization of the subcontinent based on religious or ethnic division. Prior to and following independence, they strived to create and then preserve a unified nation.

Indian foreign policy and strategic interests, especially in relation to Pakistan, are closely linked to this founding idea. Since the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, Pakistani founder Muhammad Ali Jinnah’s “two-nation theory” of a separate, united Muslim state has inherently contradicted the “idea of India.” This conflict has played out in a series of geopolitical skirmishes throughout the subcontinent.<sup>2</sup>

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### Key points in this Asian Outlook:

- In the past ten years, India has seen a new kind of terrorism aimed at civilians and committed by young, middle-class jihadists.
- Pakistan has tolerated (and some elements within Pakistan have supported) the jihadists, despite its own internal struggle against extremists.
- The growing strength of domestic Islamist terrorism undermines the “idea of India,” the multicultural and secular founding principle of the Indian nation.
- India must renew its focus on the integration and assimilation of minorities, especially its Muslims, and reassess its strategy to fight terrorism.

The disputed territory of Kashmir has been at center stage in this struggle, with each side justifying accession based on its founding theory. On the Indian side, the secession of Kashmir would be “a defeat for secularism, [which] is not acceptable if the Indian republic is to be nurtured and brought to fruition,” K. Subrahmanyam, an Indian strategic analyst, writes.<sup>3</sup> For Pakistan, majority-Muslim Kashmir is critical to the “two-nation theory.” If India relinquishes Kashmir, then Muslim “self-determination,” not secular identity, can define the division between the two rivals. And, as Stephen P. Cohen notes, the Kashmir dispute is specifically important “to those Pakistanis who focus on strategic and security issues, notably the army.”<sup>4</sup>

The “idea of India” has also underlined domestic policy in India since the days of Nehru and Gandhi. For example, in 1947, civil servant V. P. Menon spent two years negotiating with the leaders of five hundred princely states and chiefdoms in order to absorb them into the Indian state.<sup>5</sup> (He did not succeed in Kashmir.) Since then, ethnic separatists, from the Nagas in the northeast to the Tamils in the south, have attempted to undermine the idea, but the country has responded with both military force and socioeconomic assistance in order to deter secession.

## The Changing Threat to the “Idea of India”

For most of India’s history, dissenting parties to its founding idea—at least the ones that also pose threats of secession and violence—have metastasized in the form of separatist insurgencies. The majority of terrorist incidents in India have been the work of these insurgencies. Therefore, India’s original counterterrorism strategy has been, in fact, a counterinsurgency strategy. For example, the Rashtriya Rifles, a specialized counterinsurgency force, was created to fight small-scale, low-intensity conflicts in Jammu and Kashmir, and the Indian army learned to integrate former insurgents, called *ikhwanis*, into cohorts that gather local intelligence in conflict zones. The government also provided civilian support and development assistance to insurgency areas in Punjab and Mizoram, addressing socioeconomic issues like unemployment, wealth disparities, and lack of education that exacerbate local tensions.<sup>6</sup> But terrorism in India is

no longer relegated to the mountains of Kashmir or the valleys of Manipur, and the culprits are not poor locals but rather well-trained urban soldiers.<sup>7</sup>

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Insurgencies employ terrorism for short-term tactical gains, but their preferred modus operandi is ideological indoctrination.<sup>8</sup> Many terrorists, however, favor indiscriminate violence aimed at generating feelings of insecurity and provoking harsh responses by the targeted governments.<sup>9</sup> Terrorism in India has moved away from the ideological cast of insurgency. The indiscriminate nature of Indian jihadist violence today is evident in the terrorist attacks conducted over the last three years by radicalized members of the Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI) and the Indian Mujahideen (IM), a prominent and well-networked Indian terrorist organization. In July 2006, SIMI militants detonated seven bombs on the suburban Mumbai railway system, killing two hundred commuters. Then, in 2008, the cities of Jaipur, Bangalore, Ahmedabad, and New Delhi were all sites of IM bombings whose casualties were all civilians. This is distinct from separatist operations, which tend to target security personnel.<sup>10</sup> The IM and rogue members of SIMI are based domestically, and their attacks are intended to target major urban and suburban areas in order to inflict heavy civilian casualties. Not only are their motives fundamentalist and pan-Islamist, but the groups are also fueled by domestic grievances, such as ethnic riots, religious discrimination, and opposition to Hindu nationalist politics.

The IM, an umbrella organization that includes members of SIMI and other smaller groups, networks Indian terrorists across the country and organizes attacks. Its leaders, Riyaz Bhatkal and Abdul Subhan Usman Qureshi, both former engineers raised in middle-class families in Mumbai, have built a network of young radicals (including former software engineers and small businessmen) to manufacture bombs and attack India’s largest cities.<sup>11</sup>

Consider the July 2008 bombings in Ahmedabad. The IM prepared for these attacks in a highly coordinated, albeit decentralized, manner. Atif Amin, an IM commander, led the assault team, which planted the bombs, while a computer graphics designer, Qayamuddin Kapadia, provided safe houses and logistical support. At the same time, Bhatkal designed the bombs, and Qureshi coordinated the entire operation.<sup>12</sup> A few days before

their mission, three IM operatives took a train from New Delhi to Ahmedabad to conduct reconnaissance, finding unsecured wireless Internet sites for use during the bombings.<sup>13</sup> Based in several cities, including Ahmedabad, Mumbai, New Delhi, and Mangalore, these terrorists used cell phones, Wi-Fi, and GPS to run a sophisticated and efficient operation that was difficult to track in real time.

In an e-mail entitled “The Rise of Jihad, Revenge of Gujarat,” sent by the IM following the Ahmedabad bombings, the terrorists invoke distinctly political tones in their tirade against Hindu nationalist organizations such as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, calling for Gujarati Muslims to take revenge for the 2002 Hindu-Muslim riots in their state. The e-mail also lashes out at counterterrorist police forces in several states for their alleged religious profiling and at the Indian government in general for its discrimination and “harassment” of Muslims. Finally, the e-mail concludes with a request “to Lashkar-e-Toiba and other organizations, for the sake of Allah, not to claim the responsibility for these attacks.”<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the IM and similar domestic jihadists are distinctly Indian groups with Indian goals, but they have become allies of convenience with Pakistan and Pakistani operatives.

## The Pakistan Question

Indian Muslim radicals expose India’s cultural and religious fissures and fault lines, just as Sikhs, Tamils, and Nagas have in the past. The terrorists attempt to redress their grievances through acts of violence and propagate the notion that minorities—especially Muslims—cannot live peacefully in the Hindu-dominated Indian democracy. This is an image that Pakistan takes advantage of for its own strategic interests in Kashmir and for Indian-Pakistani relations in general.

Many analysts argued that the three-day siege of Mumbai in November 2008 by LeT only confirmed Pakistan’s internal instability and inability to control expanding jihadist threats. Even the U.S. Joint Forces Command referred to Pakistan as a possible “failed state.”<sup>15</sup> Quite the contrary: Pakistan’s strong military, which keeps Pakistan from failing, appears to dictate the country’s internal and external decision-making for its own strategic interests. In the context of the geopolitical duel between Pakistan and India, which is underlined by their conflict of founding ideas, LeT’s operations and Pakistan’s inaction toward them make sense. LeT is

simply another operative in Pakistan’s quest to corrode the idea of India, and as LeT’s proxy war raises tensions on the border, the Pakistani military can also shift focus away from a difficult mission in the tribal areas of Baluchistan and the North West Frontier Province.<sup>16</sup> Even though Pakistan fights the same Islamists at home, the benefit provided by their operations in India makes the Pakistani choice more complex than it appears. Yet, Pakistani attempts to chip away at the idea of India are nothing new.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Punjabi Sikh militants who were part of the Khalistan independence movement, which advocated for the creation of a separate Sikh state, engaged in a series of riots, assassinations, and bombings across India. During this time, Pakistan and its Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) provided funding, refuge, and training sites for these militants.<sup>17</sup> Since then, the leader of the International Sikh Youth Federation, Lakhbir Singh Rode, who has been accused of “arms smuggling and conspiracy to attack government and political leaders in Delhi,” has been allowed to live in and work from Lahore.<sup>18</sup> Apart from the Sikh movement, Pakistani militants supported by the ISI have sponsored and conducted attacks in Jammu and Kashmir.<sup>19</sup> LeT, for example, has conducted the majority of its operations in the disputed region, with eighteen attacks between September 2001 and October 2004.<sup>20</sup>

New evidence also shows that LeT has been able to conspire with Indian separatist groups that did not previously associate with radical Islamists. In Northeast India, the United Liberation Front of Assam, the National Democratic Front of Bodoland, and other militants have worked with jihadist groups in their latest attacks. In what the Jamestown Foundation calls “ethno-Islamist” terrorism, there were, for the first time, “tell-tale signs of collaboration between ethnic-separatist militants and Muslim jihadi groups with a strong cross-border reach.”<sup>21</sup> After more than a decade of calm, it also appears that Pakistan has begun to renew its support for Sikh militants fighting for an independent Khalistan—this time with the support of LeT and Jaish-e-Mohammad, another Pakistan-based jihadist group.<sup>22</sup>

In each of these cases, from the Khalistan movement to the Mumbai shootings, the involvement of LeT and Pakistani operatives only reflects the increasing internationalization of the jihadist threat in India. The threat is still rooted domestically, under the leadership of Indian Muslim jihadists, but both Pakistan and LeT have been able to take advantage of the vacuum in which these

jihadists operate in order to pursue their own strategic goals, whether they are geopolitical gains or global jihad. Just as India used counterinsurgency strategy in the past to contain domestic separatists, it will have to create a new counterterrorism strategy to deter domestic jihadists.

## The State of Indian Muslims

The increasing radical activity of Indian Muslims—especially those of the urban middle class—poses questions: Do Indian Muslims in general buy in to the “idea of India”? Is domestic terrorism reflective of wider sentiment among the Indian *ummah*, or are these attacks merely outliers conducted by disillusioned rogues acting irrationally and excessively?

The World Values Survey asks subjects to respond to a series of questions about cultural and national identity, trust, and happiness. It is possible to tabulate these responses based on religion. In the case of India, not only are Indian Muslims equally as happy and proud to be Indian as Hindus, they tend to be apolitical and broadly respectful of democracy.<sup>23</sup> Approximately 90 percent of Indian Muslims and Hindus express pride in being Indian, assert the importance of democracy, and are willing to fight for their country. According to the survey, Muslims are also slightly more active in religious practice (90 percent versus 80 percent) and less trusting of others (71 percent versus 61 percent) than Hindus, but they believe almost as strongly as Hindus that society should not be radically changed (85 percent to 86 percent).<sup>24</sup>

Anecdotal evidence adds further confirmation of Muslim integration. Muslims play prominent roles in Indian popular culture and political life. Three of the country’s most famous and widely adored Bollywood actors are Muslims named Khan (Salman Khan, Shah Rukh Khan, and Aamir Khan). The award-winning song by Muslim composer A. R. Rahman, “Jai Ho,” from the blockbuster *Slumdog Millionaire* (which itself features a successful Muslim protagonist), became this year’s campaign theme song for India’s Congress Party. And in politics, A. P. J. Abdul Kalam was elected the first Muslim president of India by the parliament in 2002. Muslims are underrepresented in politics at the national level, but not significantly; they hold 8 percent of the seats against their national population share of 13.4 percent.

Evidence from the World Values Survey and examples of Muslim integration in Indian popular culture appear to support the idea that Muslims are not inherently excluded from the country’s identity. Nevertheless, as a report by the Prime Minister’s High Level Committee (the Sachar Commission) on the status of India’s Muslims shows, there are still significant discrepancies between the socioeconomic status of Muslims and other

Indians. By some measures, Muslims rank near the “untouchable” Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes.<sup>25</sup>

While Hindus had a literacy rate of 80.5 percent in 2004–2005, the rate for Muslims was 59.9 percent.<sup>26</sup> Higher education graduation rates are also significantly disparate, with only 4.5 percent of Muslims between the ages of twenty and thirty having degrees at the tertiary level in 2004–2005, as opposed to 18.6 percent of Hindus aged twenty to thirty. As the report states, “In urban areas, Muslims are falling behind not only vis-à-vis ‘All Other [Minorities],’ but also Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes

in several states.”

Compared to the national average, a larger proportion of Indian Muslims work in the informal sector of the economy or are engaged in “small proprietary enterprises.” Yet, as the Sachar Commission report notes, “the access of Muslims to bank credit . . . is low and inadequate,” and the share of banking facilities is much lower in villages where the percentage of the Muslim population exceeds 50 percent.

Discrimination against Muslims is also evident in civil society, in which segregation continues to be the rule rather than the exception. In 2006, Muslims made up only 4.9 percent of all government employees and 3.2 percent of all civil service officers.<sup>27</sup> It is also important to note the vast underrepresentation of Muslims in the Indian army: out of 1.1 million soldiers, only 29,000 (2.6 percent) are Muslims.<sup>28</sup>

In addition to social rifts, the ongoing religious and political tug-of-war between certain Hindu and Muslim factions could exacerbate extremism. Three events in modern Indian history—the destruction of the Babri Mosque in 1992, the 2002 riots in Gujarat, and the 1986 Shah Bano case—have dictated these tensions. The first two events, cases of religious violence between Hindu and Muslim fanatics, are of importance because of their

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human toll in addition to their impact on political debate. In 1992, a group of Hindu nationalists destroyed a sixteenth-century mosque in the town of Ayodhya, claiming that the mosque was built on the birthplace of the Hindu god Ram. A riot spread following the destruction, in which two thousand Indians, mostly Muslims, were killed. In 2002, more than one thousand people perished in riots in Gujarat following an arson attack on a train of Hindu pilgrims. Once again, the majority of victims were Muslims, and the BJP-led state government was widely criticized for its failure to respond to the pogrom.

The origins of these riots still evoke debate among members of the BJP, secular Hindu politicians, and Muslims in fear of a reprisal. The Hindu-Muslim conflict also hinders political discourse by prioritizing ethnic and religious divisions over critical social and economic issues. For example, in the latest election campaign, BJP candidate Varun Gandhi—an estranged member of the Nehru-Gandhi political dynasty and grandson of former prime minister Indira Gandhi—was arrested after making disparaging remarks about Muslim parliamentary candidates and telling supporters at a rally that he would “cut the hands” of anyone who “raised a finger towards Hindus.”<sup>29</sup>

The other turning point, the Shah Bano case of 1986, reflects discrepancies in the legal and institutional status of Muslims versus those of other Indians. In 1986, Shah Bano, a sixty-two-year-old Muslim divorcée, filed a suit to claim alimony from her husband, claiming that she had no means to support herself and her children. While orthodox Muslims felt that alimony was unacceptable according to *sharia* law, the Supreme Court ruled in her favor, invoking the Indian Code of Criminal Procedure. Following the ruling, an organization of Muslim community leaders and intellectuals successfully lobbied the government to overrule the court’s decision. The government’s appeasement was derided as “pseudosecularism” by its opponents, and it set a precedent for Indian Muslims that has made room for self-imposed compartmentalization and isolation from mainstream society.

Despite the presence of Muslims in prominent political and cultural spaces in India, the majority of Indian political and economic power still rests in the hands of Hindus, both secular and orthodox. As the primary owners

of the country’s political and economic capital, these Hindus should be conscious of their implicit responsibility to prevent calamities like the Babri Mosque destruction and the Gujarat riots and to bolster the social and economic inclusion of Muslims in the country.

But there is also an onus on the leaders of the Indian Muslim community to reconcile Muslim identity with Indian identity and address Indian Muslims’ radicalization and social segregation. The ability of external forces, regardless of their strength, to influence the

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Muslim community is limited, compared to the capacity of Muslims themselves to address these issues. The Shah Bano case is an example of self-imposed isolation that hinders ethnic and cultural integration and compromises the secular nature of the Indian polity, which, as the World Values Survey shows, is not contrary to wider Muslim sentiment.

## Conclusion

There is no easy path to prevent middle-class Indian Muslims from radicalizing and attacking their fellow citizens. But before addressing the problem, the Indian government must understand the roots of domestic jihadism and its impli-

cations for India’s long-term strategy. As Angel Rabasa et al. write, “[A]t the strategic level, the Mumbai attack underscores the imperative of addressing the transnational sources of Islamist terrorism in India. How to do this is an extraordinarily difficult question that will require the reassessment of basic assumptions concerning policy toward Pakistan by members of the international community.”<sup>30</sup>

Nevertheless, the transnationalization of Islamist terrorism in India is rooted in the growing strength and scope of domestic Islamist terrorism, as evidenced by the increasing frequency and magnitude of attacks in urban areas of India. The attacks in Mumbai were merely one more step down a road that organizations such as the IM have been paving for more than a decade.

For more than six decades, Indian governments, despite occasional domestic pressures from the far right and left wings, have remained steadfast in their commitment to preserving the “idea of India.” The threats to this idea continue to exist, but they have changed significantly. In a “post-11/26” world, preserving Nehru and

Gandhi's vision of a secular and pluralistic democracy will require more than just a tough stance across the Indian-Pakistani Line of Control. It will require a reassessment of counterterrorism and counterinsurgency at home and a renewed focus toward the integration and assimilation of minorities, specifically Muslims, into the expansive definition of India.

## Notes

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3. K. Subrahmanyam, "Don't Give In to Them," *Times of India*, August 22, 2008.
4. Stephen P. Cohen, *The Idea of Pakistan* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2004), 52–54.
5. Ramachandra Guha, *India After Gandhi: The History of the World's Largest Democracy* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007).
6. Moeed Yusuf and Anit Mukherjee, "Counterinsurgency in Pakistan: Learning from India," *National Security Outlook* (September 2007), available at [www.aei.org/publication26888](http://www.aei.org/publication26888).
7. For an interactive map of terrorist attacks in India since 2001, based on information from the South Asia Terrorism Portal at [www.satp.org](http://www.satp.org), visit [www.aei.org/indiaterrorism](http://www.aei.org/indiaterrorism).
8. Kurt M. Campbell and Richard Weitz, "Non-Military Strategies for Countering Islamist Terrorism: Lessons Learned from Past Counterinsurgencies" (working paper, Princeton Project on National Security, Princeton, NJ), available at [www.princeton.edu/~ppns/papers/counterinsurgency.pdf](http://www.princeton.edu/~ppns/papers/counterinsurgency.pdf) (accessed April 17, 2009).
9. Ibid.
10. For example, in Jammu and Kashmir, from 2001 to 2008, one security force member was killed for every two civilian casualties in terrorist violence. (South Asia Terrorism Portal, "Annual Fatalities in Terrorist Violence, 1988–2009," available at [www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/jandk/data\\_sheets/annual\\_casualties.htm](http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/jandk/data_sheets/annual_casualties.htm) [accessed April 17, 2009].)
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14. Indian Mujahideen, "The Rise of Jihad, Revenge of Gujarat," published by Islamic Terrorism in India, August 7, 2008, available at <http://islamicterrorism.wordpress.com/2008/08/07/full-text-of-indian-mujahideen-14-pages-email-on-terror-attacks/> (accessed April 17, 2009).
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16. Angel Rabasa et al., "The Lessons of Mumbai" (occasional paper, RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, CA, January 9, 2009), available at [www.rand.org/pubs/occasional\\_papers/OP249/](http://www.rand.org/pubs/occasional_papers/OP249/) (accessed April 17, 2009).
17. Mukhtar A. Khan, "India's Sikh Militants Forming Ties with Lashkar-e-Taiba and Pakistani Intelligence," *Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor* 7, no. 1 (January 9, 2009), available at [www.jamestown.org/fileadmin/JamestownContent/Book\\_Images/TM\\_007\\_1.pdf](http://www.jamestown.org/fileadmin/JamestownContent/Book_Images/TM_007_1.pdf) (accessed April 17, 2009).
18. Ibid.
19. Roy McCarthy, "Dangerous Game of State-Sponsored Terror That Threatens Nuclear Conflict," *Guardian* (London), May 25, 2002.
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