

Tamil Nadu

The Rise of Islamist Fundamentalism

P.G. Rajamohan*

The latter half of the twentieth century witnessed a resurgence of different religions around the world. This resurgence has been marked by a revival in religious consciousness as also a rise in fundamentalist movements.¹ The origin of the idea of 'fundamentalism' is ironically distanced from its most urgent current associations, and, as the Webster's dictionary notes, "fundamentalism was a movement in American Protestantism that arose in the earlier part of the 20th century. It was a reaction to modernism, and stressed the infallibility of the Bible, not only in matters of faith and morals but also as a literal historical record. It stressed on belief in the Bible as the literal word of God."² Fundamentalism, consequently, originally referred to certain trends in within American evangelism proclaiming the infallibility of the revelations of the Bible, but was eventually widened to include all belief systems that asserted or advocated a return to the 'fundamentals' of their religion or ideology. It is characterized as a "worldview or movement

* P. G. Rajamohan is a Research Associate at the Institute for Conflict Management, New Delhi.

¹ Samuel Huntington, *Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York: Simon and Schuster, p. 45.

² Random House Webster's College Dictionary, New York: Random House, 1997, p. 526.

centred on restoring religious tradition or sacred text as guiding force in society, usually in opposition to ideas or practices considered modern.”³ Fundamentalists in various religious traditions believe that there was a ‘perfect moment’ in the past, and that the human endeavour should seek to recover or re-establish the character and values of that moment among mankind. Such an enterprise often involves a reaction – possibly a violent reaction – against developments, groups and individuals that are seen to threaten or obstruct the realization of the projected ideal – even if the ideal has never actually existed at any point in history.

Religious fundamentalism surfaced at the threshold of the 20th century as a prominent trend or as habit of mind found within religious communities and paradigmatically embodied in certain representative individuals and movements.⁴ The notion only came to be associated with Islam after the ‘Islamic Revolution’ of Iran in 1979, when Ayatollah Khomeini led a movement that toppled the Shah’s regime and sought to restore ‘traditional Islamic values’ in society and governance.

Religious fundamentalists, by and large, view history as a cosmic struggle between good and evil, using stark binary dichotomies to describe the opposing camps.⁵ Several forms of fundamentalism have sought to promote revivalist movements within various religions, but Islamist fundamentalism has had the most far-reaching impact in the contemporary era. The Islamist fundamentalist seeks to ‘Islamize’ society in its entirety and to establish a state based on *Shariat* (the law ordained by God and based on the Holy Quran and *Hadith*). To this end, all Islamist fundamentalists are united, irrespective of sectarian divisions or disagreements. Differences between Islamist fundamentalists, nevertheless, do exist and are most often located in the means employed or considered acceptable to achieve these goals. In Afghanistan, fundamentalism was the natural attitude of the

³ “Globalization Glossary”, *The Globalization Website*, www.emory.edu/SOC/globalization/glossary.html.

⁴ Martin E. Marty and R. Scott, eds., *Fundamentalism Observed*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991, p. 3.

⁵ Lionel Caplan in Caplan, ed., *Studies in Religious Fundamentalisms*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987, pp. 18- 19.

dominant urban clergy, the *ulema*, whereas the village *mullahs*, who had not mastered the whole corpus of the law, tended to be traditionalists, not fundamentalists.⁶

If fundamentalism means a return to the scriptures, the question of interpretation of the scriptures becomes a valid and urgent concern. In Islam, it is the *ulema* who exercise control over the interpretation of the text. Sunni Islam lacks an organized or textually ‘authorized’ clergy and does not accord any special status to the clergy. It is in Shiite Iran that the clergy enjoys an institutional dominance. The *ulema* in Sunni Islam have no special power or position, and must refer all judgements and prescriptions to their original sources in the sacred texts and within the traditions of their interpretation. Indeed, for some of the dominant streams of contemporary Sunni thought, only the scriptures matter – the extended commentary and the various ‘schools’ of interpretation that have been established through the ages have no force or validity. The fundamentalists – including, for instance, Gaddafi of Libya – believe only in the Qur’an, but the classical *alim* (pl.: *ulema*) considers classical texts – the Qur’an, Hadith, and an established tradition of interpretation, which would be unrecognizable except through the exegesis of the *ulema*. In Nasser’s Egypt, *Sharia* remained an option, but was not mandatory. The *Sharia*, in this case, was considered a retreat from the modern world, whereas to the orthodox Muslim, Islam is inseparable from *Sharia*: ‘any attempt to deflect the connection was tantamount to blasphemy.’⁷ The classicist fundamentalism of the *ulema* is juridical in nature and not a common or mass political phenomenon. For all the current focus on fiery Islamist extremists, it must be noted that they remain a minority in most Muslim societies and states. However, their insistent and vehement discourse has had much effect on the Muslim world, moving into the vacuum created by the failure of secular regimes, redefining orthodoxy, reconstituting the boundaries of political power relations, limiting the borders of the permissible,

⁶ Olivier Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986, p. 3.

⁷ R. Scott Appleby and Martin E. Marty, “Fundamentalism”, *Foreign Policy*, January/February 2002, p. 1.

resonating in the hearts of impoverished masses, and appealing to a new strata of literate and technically educated devout.⁸

Between the mid-1960s and the mid-1990s, the number of fundamentalist movements of all religious affiliations tripled worldwide.⁹ Further, as noted by Bruce Hoffman, there has been a virtual explosion of identifiable religious terrorist groups from none in 1968 to over 250 in the 1990s, as designated under US Executive Order 13224 of December 20, 2002, which identified nearly a quarter of all terrorist groups active throughout the world as being predominantly motivated by religious concerns.¹⁰

The evolution of religious terrorism has neither occurred in a vacuum nor does it represent a particularly new phenomenon. It has, however, been propelled to the forefront in the post-Cold War world, and has been exacerbated by the explosion of ethnic-religious conflicts all over the world, especially in Eastern Europe (the Balkans), Africa and Asia.

If we look at the relationship between fundamentalism and terrorism, the former uses terror as an important instrument for its growth, but the latter cannot always serve or coincide with religious fundamentalism. Consequently, the bond between fundamentalism and religion at large is stronger than the connection between terrorism and religion.

In the post-Cold War period, an overwhelming majority of terrorist groups have been religion-based and the greatest proportion of these is Islam-centric. Islamic movements and Islamist terrorist groups operating in West Asia, Central Asia and South Asia uphold the placard of Islam to secure broad-based support against Western nations, especially the US and Britain. Unlike the West Asian and Central Asian scenario, however, Islamic movements in India have not been pronouncedly anti-Western in temper, in some measure because of India's colonial past.

⁸ Salwa Isma'il, *Discourse and Ideology in Contemporary Egypt*, unpublished Ph.d thesis, Department of Political Science, McGill University, Canada, 1992, pp. 1-2.

⁹ Magnus Ranstorp, "Terrorism in the Name of Religion," *Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 50, no. 1, Summer 1996, p. 44.

¹⁰ Bruce Hoffman, *Holy Terror: The Implications of Terrorism Motivated by a Religious Imperative*, Santa Monica: Rand, 1993, p. 2.

In India, Islamic revivalism started well before Independence through various movements like Syed Ahmad Khan's Aligarh movement, Maulana Hussain Ahmad's Dar-ul-Uloom (Deoband movement), Maulana Syed Nazir Hussain's Ahl-i-Hadis (people of the Hadis), Maulavi Abdullah Chakralavi's Ahl-i-Quran (people of the Quran), Maulana Ahmad Riza Khan's Barelwi movement and Mirza Ghulam Ahmad's Ahmadiya movement, during the latter half of the nineteenth century. These organizations advocated the revival of Islamic religious practices, the resuscitation of classical Islam and the need to defend the faith against Christian missionaries and Hindu revivalists. Islamic revivalism turned into fundamentalism when radical Islamists like Maulana Abu Ala Maududi, who founded the Jamaat-e-Islami on August 26, 1941, took up the purification of the faith as their prime agenda. Islamist fundamentalism has also been periodically invigorated by the religious assertiveness of movements in other Faiths and violence connected with inter-faith (communal) tensions, including in more recent instances, the resurgence of Hindu fundamentalism through the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the Jan Sangh (predecessor of present day Bharatiya Janata Party or the BJP), the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), the Bajrang Dal and others in India.

From Independence to the early 1980s, Southern India, particularly the State of Tamil Nadu, remained relatively free from communal violence and religious fundamentalism. In fact, in the south, religious fundamentalism was widely regarded as an affliction peculiar to North India. Nevertheless, despite a generally harmonious relationship between the Hindu and Muslim communities, there have been many instances of communal disharmony and violence between the two communities in South India, including Tamil Nadu. Data recorded by the Gopala Krishna Commission Report (1985) showed that communal violence in India was highest between 1961 and 1971. During this decade, 11 out of 14 districts in Tamil Nadu witnessed communal violence.¹¹

¹¹ Abdul Azeez Saheb, *Muslims in Tamil Nadu: Some Aspects of their Inter-Relationship with the Social Environment*, Delhi: Anthropological Survey of India, vol. 46 (93-104), 1997, p. 101.

The victimization of minorities during these communal riots resulted, in some measure, in the germination of Islamist fundamentalist organizations in Tamil Nadu during the late 1980s and the early 1990s. Funded by local sympathizers and foreign agencies, these organizations were gradually motivated and mobilized for terrorist activities.

Fundamentalism and Subversion in Tamil Nadu

According to the police, Tamil Nadu has been witnessing Islamist fundamentalist activities since 1983.¹² Initially, during the early 1980s, Islamist fundamentalist organizations were noticeable in the State, through some violence did occur as a result of the activities of recalcitrant individuals. However, during the early 1990s, especially after the demolition of the Babri Masjid (Babri Mosque),¹³ Muslim fundamentalist and extremist organizations mushroomed all over India, and Tamil Nadu was no exception.

The stated objective of a majority of these organizations was the 'need to protect Islam' and the interests of Muslims, especially from what was then articulated as a 'Hindu onslaught.' During the latter half of the 1990s, Islamist fundamentalists resorted to planned attacks primarily targeting rival Hindu fundamentalists, as also state structures and institutions perceived to be supporting the latter. These fundamentalist groups – both small and big – began to organize Muslims and to articulate 'Muslim grievances', both real and perceived. Among others, in Tamil Nadu such organisations included Al Ummah, the All India Jihad Committee (AIJC), Al Mujahideen, Tamil Nadu Muslim Munnetra Kazhagam (TMMK), Islamic Defence Force (IDF), Jamaithul Ahlul Quran-o-Hadis (JAQH), Sunnat Jamaat Peravai, Sunnat Jamaat Ilaingnar Peravai and the Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI). While some of these organizations are primarily conservative or revivalist movements that seek to order life in keeping with the tenets of the Holy Quran and the

¹² Press Note on 5.5.1999, Office of the Inspector General of Police, Crime (SIT), CBCID, Admiralty House, Chennai, (Coimbatore Camp).

¹³ The Babri Masjid at Ayodhya in the State of Uttar Pradesh was demolished by extremist Hindus on December 6, 1992.

Sunnah,¹⁴ others like the Al Ummah, Jihad Committee and the IDF adopt and espouse violence, extensively using coercion, extortion and intimidation to achieve their goals.

Among these organisations, Al Ummah has been the most prominent, and by 1997 it had spread its tentacles all over Tamil Nadu. Formed in 1993, Al Ummah owes its genesis to a number of private armies supported by Muslim businessmen. It is a well structured organisation, with 11 member groups, each under an *Amir* (chief).¹⁵ The organization's activities reached their zenith under the guidance of its founder and President, Syed Ahmad Basha, who was a timber merchant in Coimbatore, and its prime motive was to 'protect Muslim interests' and to strike against those who spoke against Islam.¹⁶ Basha masterminded the attack at Coimbatore in 1984 on Jana Krishnamurthy, a State Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader, who later became national President of the party and a Union Minister in the late 1990s. However, Basha was projected as a 'defender of Islam' and Muslim interests only after the attack on the Hindu Munnani leader Rama Gopalan at the Madurai Railway Station in 1987. In both the cases, he was acquitted because of a lack of evidence. Soon after the 1987 incident, Basha organized Muslim youngsters under the Islamic Youth Association to continue attacks on Hindu Munnani leaders.¹⁷ Basha and his vigilante fundamentalist group also started extorting money from leading businessmen and imposed a 'tax' on residents and shop keepers in and around the Muslim-dominated areas of Coimbatore. They later fashioned Kangaroo courts (the *Kattai Panchayats*) and settled disputes outside the state's judicial process, engineering a fundamentalist ascendancy in civil society.¹⁸ Police sources indicate that, at one point, some fundamentalist groups ordered the people to withhold taxes due to

¹⁴ The Sunnah is the second source of Islamic jurisprudence, the first being the Qur'an.

¹⁵ Press Note on 28.09.98, Office of the Inspector General of Police, Crime (SIT), CBCID, Admiralty House, Chennai, (Coimbatore Camp).

¹⁶ J.B. Das Gupta, *Islamic Fundamentalism and India*, Haryana: Hope India Publications, 2002, p. 12.

¹⁷ Thakur Kuldip S Ludra, "Inter Services Intelligence Directorate's Fourth Leg in India – The Al Ummah", <http://members.tripod.com/israindia/isr/may22/simi.html>

¹⁸ T. S. Subramanian, "A Time of Troubles," *Frontline*, Chennai, vol. 15 no. 5, March 7-20, 1998.

the city corporation and Muslim populated areas, especially in Coimbatore city, became 'out of bounds' for Tamil Nadu Government officials, including the Police.¹⁹

Sporadic and targeted violence by both Hindu and Muslim extremist formations continued, as in the case of the retaliation for the murder of Muslim platform speaker (platform speakers are official speakers of the party who generally participate in all the meetings) Abdul Latheef by Hindu fundamentalists, two Hindu Munnani platform speakers, Veera Ganesh and Veera Sivakumar, were stabbed to death on August 30, 1989, and September 5, 1991, respectively.

Meanwhile, the demolition of the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh on December 6, 1992, which is regarded as a key development in polarizing the Hindu and Muslim communities, injured Muslim sentiments even in distant parts of India, extending even to the furthest Southern parts of the country, and led to a wave of radical mobilisation.²⁰ Soon after the demolition, Islamist fundamentalist forces began to exploit the incident to fuel anti-Hindu sentiments and a sense of siege among Muslims, even as they connived to extract money – voluntarily and coercively – from populations in their areas of influence, to fund their subversive activities. In 1993, the first anniversary of the Babri Masjid demolition was marked by disturbances in Tamil Nadu, with Islamist fundamentalists in Coimbatore expressing their resentment by picketing and arson. Police records indicate that, it was in 1993 that Basha along with Ahmed Pasha and Jawahirullah started the Al Ummah with its headquarters at Coimbatore.²¹

Gradually, Al Ummah became popular among Islamist fundamentalists and radicals in Tamil Nadu, and eventually came under the national spotlight after the bomb blast at the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) office in Chennai on August 8, 1993, in which 11 persons were killed.²² Basha and 15 others were

¹⁹ Author's interview with a police officer in Coimbatore, August 11, 2003.

²⁰ Author's interview with media persons at Coimbatore, August 13, 2003.

²¹ Press Note on 28.09.98, Office of the Inspector General of Police, Crime (SIT), CBCID, Admiralty House, Chennai.

²² Subramanian, "A time of troubles," *Frontline*, vol. 15 no. 5, March 7-20, 1998.

arrested under the National Security Act, 1980 (NSA) and the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act, 1987, (TADA), in connection with the blast and were imprisoned. However, after the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam's (DMK) ascent to power in the 1996 election, they were released in January 1997, as the regime did not want to 'hurt the sentiments' of the Muslim minority and dilute its 'vote bank'.

After the bomb blast at the RSS office at Chennai, the police became more alert and raided Muslim-dominated areas, particularly at Kottaimedu in Coimbatore, where the Al Ummah headquarters was situated. This densely populated area had long been used by terrorists and criminals as a safe-haven and a hub from where they launched violent and criminal activities elsewhere. The vigilante groups operating from Kottaimedu came under the scrutiny of security agencies after the recovery of a large cache of petrol bombs, gelatine sticks and country-made explosives. Check posts were erected in certain areas by the enforcement agencies to curtail underground activities and the movement of terrorists to other parts of Tamil Nadu.²³

In 1995, suspected Islamic Defence Force terrorists lobbed grenades on noted film director Mani Ratnam's house in Chennai on the grounds that his film, *Roja*, had projected Muslims as spearheading terrorism in Jammu & Kashmir (J&K). A series of bomb blasts were also carried out in many hotels owned by liberal Muslims in Chennai during 1996, and these attacks were also linked to the actions of Islamist fundamentalists. Hindu Munnani activists were also murdered in Melapalayam, which is predominantly populated by Muslims – five were killed in August 1997, one in 1998, and another on January 11, 2002. Islamist terrorists also planted bombs in three trains: the Pandyan Express at Trichy, the Cheran Express at Erode and the Alleppey Express at Thrissur, on the fifth anniversary of the Babri Masjid demolition on December 6, 1997. The IDF of Kerala and the AIJC, while claiming responsibility for these blasts, said that these were carried out to protest the Government's failure to punish those responsible for the demolition of the Babri Masjid.

²³ Author's interview with a senior police officer in Coimbatore on August 12, 2003.

On January 31, 2000, police arrested 10 terrorists belonging to the IDF and the AIJC.²⁴ On the same day, there was a bomb blast at Anna flyover in Chennai to condemn these arrests.²⁵

Subsequently, the Al Ummah made preparations to launch massive attacks in Coimbatore to avenge the death of 18 Muslims in the riots in the city during November-December 1997, in which the RSS, the Hindu Munnani and the Hindu Makkal Kathchi are alleged to have played a prominent role. Subsequent to the murder of a police constable, violence erupted on a large scale, accompanied by looting and arson. Al Ummah chief Basha and his cadres also plotted to assassinate prominent BJP leader L. K. Advani, who was on an election campaign in Tamil Nadu. However, due to a delay in his flight, Advani escaped the assassination bid, although subsequent events created unrest among the masses.

A series of bomb blasts, code-named *Operation Alla-hu-Akbar*, was executed through the outfit's suicide squad *Shaheed Padai* on February 14, 1998, in 18 places, causing the death of 58 persons and injuring more than 200.²⁶ According to intelligence reports, senior Al Ummah leaders instigated and exploited Muslim youngsters by showing them photographs and videos of bloated bodies with post-mortem stitches, of Muslims killed during previous riots.²⁷ The Government proscribed the Al Ummah and the Jihad Committee within three hours of the incident. Police investigations later revealed that the terrorists acquired explosives from the neighbouring States of Karnataka and Kerala through authorized Government dealers for large sums of money and transported them via Kerala to Coimbatore. Speedy investigation of this case led to clues which assisted in further probes of several unsolved cases in the State involving Islamist militants, including the murder of Hindu Munnani leaders Rajagopalan and Dr. Sridharan.

²⁴ Press Note on 12.01.01, Office of the Addl. Director General of Police, Crime (SIT), CBCID, Admiralty House, Chennai.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ "Conviction in blasts case," *Frontline*, vol. 20 no. 4, February 15-28, 2003.

²⁷ Author's interview with police officers and media personnel in Coimbatore city.

In addition to these incidents, fundamentalists also sparked trouble in 1998 through various incidents like the grenade attack on police personnel in Trichy (1998); the petrol bomb attack on the Coimbatore Ukkadam police station (December 11, 2000); the seizure of explosives at suburban areas of Vepperi and Tambaram in Chennai (1998); the parcel bomb blast in Nagore; and the lacing of sweets sent to the police station in Coimbatore with cyanide (August 5, 2000).²⁸ The seizure of a large cache of arms and ammunition from the Mohammadiya Mill at Saliyamangalam near Thanjavur on February 8, 1998, a week before the Coimbatore blasts, was a portent of things to come.²⁹ There were, in fact, 34 important cases of fundamentalist violence in districts and cities other than Coimbatore between 1990 and February 14, 1998, which constitute the back-drop of the serial bomb blasts that occurred at Coimbatore on that date.³⁰

Another important terrorist who made a mark in Tamil Nadu was Imam Ali, who was subsequently killed during an encounter with the police in Bangalore, capital city of Karnataka, on September 29, 2002. Imam Ali was a member of the AIJC, a terrorist group founded by the late Palani Baba, and was a prime accused in the bomb blast at the RSS office in Chennai in August 1993 in which 11 persons were killed.³¹ Ali, a school drop-out, was allegedly trained by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and later by the Hizb-ul-Mujahideen, a terrorist organisation active in Jammu and Kashmir.³² He had also visited Bangladesh and continued to maintain links with terrorist groups there and specialised in making remote controlled bombs with the objective of assassinating political leaders in India. He escaped twice from police custody in Tamil Nadu and was finally killed during an encounter along with four of his associates in Bangalore on September 29, 2002.³³ Intelligence reports revealed that Ali had

²⁸ Press Release, Office of the IGP (Crime), Special Investigation Team, CBCID, Chennai, Dated 5. 5. 1999.

²⁹ Press Note on 28.09.98, Office of the Inspector General of Police, Crime (SIT), CBCID, Admiralty House, Chennai.

³⁰ Press Release, Office of the IGP (Crime), Special Investigation Team, CBCID, Chennai, Dated 5. 5. 1999.

³¹ "The end of a chase," *Frontline*, vol. 19 no. 21, October 12-25, 2002.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ "Imam Ali shot dead in Bangalore," *The Hindu*, Chennai, September 30, 2002.

plans to assassinate Deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani, Union Human Resource Development Minister Murli Manohar Joshi and leaders of Hindu religious organizations. According to Ashutosh Shukla, Deputy Inspector-General of Police (Coimbatore Range), Imam Ali had allegedly made plans to trigger a series of blasts in major temples in South India, including the Meenakshi Amman temple in Madurai and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) temple in Bangalore, in order to trigger communal riots; as well as to blow up bridges and destroy strategic installations such as the headquarters of the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) in Bangalore.³⁴

Other prominent Islamist fundamentalists in Tamil Nadu included Palani Baba, Abdul Nasser Madani, Kunnangudi Hanifa and Kichan Buhari. Ahmad Ali alias Palani Baba, who formed the AIJC in 1987, was an ardent advocate of the ideology of militant Islam and gained popularity in the early 1990s after the demolition of Babri Masjid. The AIJC under his leadership operated in Tamil Nadu and he had instructed his followers to work in coordination with the All India Milli Council, a major propagator of radical Muslim interests in India. Palani Baba was allegedly killed by some Kerala-based RSS activists on January 28, 1997, at Pollachi near Coimbatore.³⁵

Growth of Fundamentalism in Tamil Nadu

Tamil Nadu caught the national attention after the February 14, 1998, serial bomb blasts in Coimbatore, which in a sense reflected the magnitude of religious fundamentalism in the State. The final report of the Justice P.R. Gokulakrishnan Commission of Inquiry, set up by the Tamil Nadu Government on February 22, 1998, to inquire into the causes and circumstances that led to the Coimbatore serial blasts of February 14, 1998, noted:

It has been categorically established that Muslim fundamentalist organizations, especially the Al-Ummah, headed by S.A. Basha, hatched a deep-rooted conspiracy

³⁴ "The end of a chase," *Frontline*, vol. 19 no. 21, October 12-25, 2002.

³⁵ "A Time of Troubles," *Frontline*, vol. 15 no. 5, March 7-20, 1998.

to explode bombs to avenge the death of 18 Muslims killed in the 1997 police firings and communal riots.³⁶

It is, at this point, pertinent to analyze the reasons for the emergence of fundamentalist forces in Tamil Nadu, which had, till 1980, remained immune to their activities.

The influence of the 'Dravida' ideology in Tamil Nadu well before Independence left little space for religious fundamentalism in the State. When the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) came to power in 1967, it was considered to be the party that would accommodate the concerns of the minority community, as well as of the various marginalised castes that were its primary constituency.

The roots of communal tension in the State are generally believed to date back to the early 1980s, when more than 1,200 Dalits (the poorest and most oppressed in the Hindu caste system) of Meenakshipuram, a village in the Kanyakumari district, embraced Islam on February 19, 1981, and even changed their village name to 'Rehmatnagar'. Thereafter, there was a wave of conversions in many places, including Tirunelveli, Ramanathapuram and Thanjavur districts, as also stray incidents of conversion or threat to conversion in some other districts such as Madurai, Madras (Chennai) and North Arcot as well. Conversion was generally seen as a means register protest by, and to uplift the social status of, the Dalits. The converted Dalits felt that the caste system in Hinduism was responsible for their low status, whereas Islam purportedly provided liberation from this stigma as it did not recognize social divisions on the basis of caste. Hindu activists wanted to stop these conversions and many national-level Hindu leaders visited the tiny hamlet of 'Rehmatnagar' and other areas affected by the conversions in order to 'bring back' the converted Dalits into their fold. It was these incidents of conversion and the Hindu response that are believed to have ignited tensions between the two main religious groups in Tamil Nadu.

Communal riots first broke out at Mandaikadu in the Kanyakumari district in March 1982, ironically between the Hindu and Christian communities, though again due to the alleged

³⁶ Interview with Police Officer.

conversion activities undertaken by Christian missionaries. The growing religious tensions in Tamil Nadu had already manifested themselves in violence, when, in the first such recorded incident, Islamist fundamentalists assaulted Tirukovilur Sundaram, a Hindu Munnani leader, at R. S. Puram in Coimbatore in 1981, after he was accused of delivering speeches against Islam and the Prophet Mohammed. Soon afterwards, radical elements of the Hindu Munnani are said to have publicly abused and reviled Islam. Within the Hindu community, a more radical element had crystallized with the formation of the Hindu Munnani in 1981 by Rama Gopalan, who had received training from the RSS.³⁷ Much later, the Hindu Makkal Katchi (Hindu People's Party) formed in 1993 as an offshoot of the Hindu Munnani, also joined forces with the Hindu fundamentalists. Analysts observe that Islamist and Hindu fundamentalists were emboldened by each others' actions and repeatedly accused each other of wrongdoing in public meetings.³⁸

Meanwhile, during this period, the long surviving 'Tamil identity' was gradually being overrun by competing religious identities.³⁹ The All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam's (AIADMK) bid to secure more Hindu votes by curbing Islamist fundamentalist organizations and the DMK's strategy of appeasing the Muslims led to a further polarization in the State's political spectrum. The RSS office bomb blast in 1993, during AIADMK rule, resulted in a heavy crackdown on fundamentalist organizations, especially the Al Ummah. But after the DMK's victory in the 1996 elections, all the 16 accused – including S.A. Basha – in connection with the incident were released immediately. The result was a sudden revival of Islamist fundamentalist activities in the immediate aftermath of the release of Basha and the other accused. Large-scale celebrations and processions by a certain section of the Muslim community were organized to welcome the released Al Ummah activists.

³⁷ Press Note on 28.09.98, Office of the Inspector General of Police, Crime (SIT), CBCID, Admiralty House, Chennai.

³⁸ Author's interaction with columnists and media personnel in Trichy on August 16, 2003.

³⁹ Hasan Mansur, "Nationalism and the Nuclear Bomb," *Islamic Voice*, June 1998; www.islamicvoice.com/june.98/features.htm#NAT

Thereafter, attacks on police personnel and police check posts by these fundamentalist groups were stepped up in Coimbatore, with the objective of looting arms and ammunitions.⁴⁰

The Gokulakrishnan Commission Report while establishing the 'deep-rooted conspiracy' of the 'Muslim fundamentalist organisations', particularly the Al Ummah, also indicted the police force for its apparent laxity. According to the Commission, "Due to lapse on the part of police personnel in discharging their duty more vigorously, vigilantly and intelligently, the Muslim fundamentalists more especially, Al-Ummah cadres were able to explode the bombs at various places."⁴¹

Despite detailed intelligence reports on January 31 and February 12 about the possibility of violence during L.K. Advani's visit, proper arrangements were not made to avert the incident.⁴² Police sources alleged that the then ruling DMK Government did not want to dilute its Muslim vote bank by initiating a police raid in the Muslim-dominated areas – Muslims constituted seven per cent of Coimbatore's population. The communalization of the police forces had a direct bearing on the psyche of the minority population, sections of which supported fundamentalist organizations. The state's inability to protect Muslims during communal violence further enabled Islamist fundamentalists to bring certain sections of the Muslim youth into their fold.⁴³

The absence of a popular political front to represent the Muslim community was also a significant reason for the inclination among Muslims towards fundamentalism, or their vulnerability to extremist mobilisation. There are more than 15 Muslim political parties claiming to represent Muslim interests in Tamil Nadu, where the community represents 13 per cent of the population. The fragmentation of the vote means that no Muslim group secures significant clout in State politics, and a general complaint among Muslim political parties is that they are not

⁴⁰ T. S. Subramanian, "Fundamentalism and a Flare-up," *Frontline*, December 18, 1998.

⁴¹ "Probe confirms plot to kill Advani," *The Tribune*, Chandigarh, May 19, 2000.

⁴² "Prior Warning not taken seriously," *Hindu*, February 19, 1998.

⁴³ Author's interview with SOCO Trust secretary Lajpatrai and People's Watch rights activists in Madurai on August 21-23, 2003.

given due importance in the State's political alliances. Other political parties do, of course, enter into electoral alliances with the Muslim parties, but this is essentially to exploit the 'vote bank', and there has been a steep decline in the representation of Muslim parties in the cabinet and legislature over the past 15 years, resulting in deep frustration within the Islamic community.⁴⁴ A divided Muslim leadership has consequently led to the community being divided across the political spectrum. Thus, for instance, the falling out of two front-ranking Muslim leaders in Tamil Nadu, Indian Union Muslim League president A.K.A. Abdus Samad and the general secretary M.A. Lateef, in 1987 led to the splitting of the Muslim vote-bank in favour of whichever major electoral partner (the DMK and AIADMK) they aligned themselves with, and the community gradually lost its electoral clout.⁴⁵

Extremist groups such as the Al-Umma and the AIJC have filled the void left by the fragmentation of Muslim parties, and by the actual or perceived failure of mainstream political formations to reflect Muslim aspiration, particularly in the post-Babri Mosque demolition era in Tamil Nadu. As the inclusive capacities of political parties were gradually diluted by the compulsions of *realpolitik*, fundamentalist groups were successful in weaning away a section of Muslim youth who earlier supported the mainstream formations. Significantly, this occurred despite the fact that radicalisation has been disowned by an overwhelming majority of Muslims in the State. Nevertheless, "local factors, lack of credible leadership and frustration among the youth, not to mention the unseen hands of Islamic fundamentalists and the alleged inspiration of Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence directorate are said to have activated the increased communal violence in the southern state."⁴⁶

The Muslim leadership's silence over the demolition of the Babri mosque also unnerved a section of the Muslim youth and unsettled the community at large. The result was that the

⁴⁴ Author's interview with columnist and reporter, Pandiyarajan, in Trichy on August 16, 2003.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ N Sathiya Moorthy, "Fear and loathing in Tamil Nadu," www.rediff.com/news/dec/15tn.htm.

community saw itself as confronted with a stark choice between various neo-political moderate groups and radical, violence-prone entities like Al Ummah and the AIJC.⁴⁷

According to official sources in the State, the main areas of fundamentalist activity are centred in Melapalayam, Dindigul, Madurai, Sivakasi, Tirupur, Chennai and Coimbatore. Poverty, illiteracy and social backwardness have also contributed to the vulnerability of the youth to the radicalization. In these and several other areas, poverty and the absence of job opportunities have been significant motivating elements for religious extremism, and have created the opportunities that were eventually exploited by extremist leaders like Basha, Palani Baba, Kundrakudi Hanifa, Kitchan Buhari and Imam Ali to recruit for the Al-Ummah, AIJC, Islamic Defence Force and Al-Mujahideen.⁴⁸

An important aspect of Islamist fundamentalist mobilisation in Tamil Nadu is that it has often been directed more towards countering the activities of Hindu extremist organizations, and is not entirely impelled by an independent vision, or by the mischief of external agencies. Many Muslims, for instance, mentioned⁴⁹ that extravagant and aggressive celebrations of Vinayaka Chaturthi, direct verbal attacks on Islam and Muslims by the Hindu Munnani and Hindu People's Party leaders, contributed to a sense of insecurity among the Muslims. Every year the Vinayaka Chaturthi celebrations create large-scale disturbances within the local community. Every year there is tension during these festivals, especially with regard to securing permission for the procession. In recent times, the security agencies have become more conscious about such problems and provide maximum security during this period in order to avert the growing tension between the two communities. On September 3, 2003, a clash occurred between Hindus and Muslims during the Vinayaka Chaturthi procession and eight people were injured during the incident at Nelpettai in Madurai city, where the Hindu Munnani and BJP is trying to gain ground.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ "Extreme measures in Tamil Nadu," *The Indian Express*, Delhi, October 5, 2002.

⁴⁹ Author's Field Notes, August 2003.

According to a White Paper presented in the State Legislative Assembly on April 23, 1998, “Provocative speeches made by some persons offended the religious sentiments of others. Conflicts arose when processions of followers of one religion passed in front of the places of worship of another.”⁵⁰ After analyzing communal clashes between Hindus and Muslims all over India, Abdul Azeez Saheb a former employee in the Anthropological Survey of India, Mysore, observed, “... in general, the reasons for the outbreak of small communal disturbances are the Hindu religious processions which play music before the mosque during prayer time.” This applies substantially to events in Tamil Nadu as well. What is often witnessed is a retaliatory cycle in which Hindu and Muslim extremists compete to inflict humiliation on their antagonists, and it is often difficult to locate specifically what the original triggering event was – whether the provocation came from Hindu fundamentalists abusing, provoking or attacking the Muslim community, or Islamist extremists targeting Hindus in a like manner. There have, in this cycle of retaliatory violence, for instance, been many reports of Hindu idols damaged in many places, including Chennai, Melapalayam, and Coimbatore.

Economic rivalry between Hindu and Muslim traders is another major reason for the growth of fundamentalist organizations in Tamil Nadu. Since 1991, Coimbatore, a city with a substantial high-tech industrial infrastructure has seen a translation of economic competition into fundamentalist confrontation. The business community uses these hardliners for their own economic and political benefits. It is much more prevalent in the small scale business enterprises which are active in the common Bazaars. For instance, the considerable textile industry in the city is organised along communal lines, and there is little cooperation, collaboration or interdependence between Hindu and Muslim textile traders. The intense competition between Hindu and Muslim traders has often exploited ‘misguided youth’ of each community to unleash hooliganism against each other. Indeed, after the formation of fundamentalist

⁵⁰ See for instance, T.S. Subramanian, “Human bombs and human error,” *Frontline*, vol. 15 no. 10, May 9-22, 1998.

organizations, the business class in both the communities is known to have heavily financed these organizations for their own vested interests.⁵¹ While the extremist gangs did engage in extortion and petty crimes, landlords, traders and merchants also channelled funds into rival communal groups. Shopkeepers and pavement vendors, divided not only communally but also geographically, also found it necessary to obtain the ‘protection’ of extremist elements, though this was especially the case with Muslim traders who were repeatedly at the receiving end in riot situations.⁵² According to Subramanian, “Muslim businessmen felt threatened when Hindu Munnani speakers appealed to Hindus not to patronise Muslim-owned shops. Even worse, the Hindu Munnani organised Hindu traders into associations.”⁵³ According to the Police, when the Hindu Munnani posed a threat to their businesses, Muslim businessmen nurtured Basha, who began his career as a footpath trader in the Ukkadam and Oppanakkara areas. When the sequence of stabbings and counter-stabbings intensified, youth on either side of the divide joined the Hindu Munnani or Al-Ummah, leading to increasing communal polarisation.⁵⁴

The Gokulakrishnan Commission noted that the Islamist fundamentalist groups also received finances and support from Pakistan’s external intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), and some Middle Eastern countries. Further, the Commission report confirmed that Al-Ummah cadres’ video recorded the dead bodies of Muslims in communal clashes and sent the recordings to Muslim countries to mobilize sympathy and finances for their *jihad* in India. Fundamentalism also emerged as big business, with frustrated youth, left out of the Gulf-jobs boom, falling easy prey, particularly if ideological moorings and financial incentives were merged in organisational membership.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Author’s discussion with general public in Coimbatore on August 14, 2003.

⁵² Jaishankar Karuppannan and Balamurugan Venkatesh, *Patterns of Crimes of Communal Violence and Terrorism in Coimbatore City: A GIS Analysis in India*, www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/maps/Conferences/02conf/Karuppannan.doc.

⁵³ T. S. Subramanian, “A time of troubles,” *Frontline*, vol. 15 no. 5, March 7-20, 1998.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ N Sathiya Moorthy, “Fear and loathing in Tamil Nadu,” www.rediff.com/news/dec/15tn.htm.

A regular money channel from Gulf countries and frequent visits of Islamist fundamentalists to these countries ensured many recruits and sympathizers for these terrorist groups. When Imam Ali floated the 'Al Mujahideen' group in March 2002, after his escape from police custody, he recruited people from the Madurai and Trichy districts. Al Mujahideen was funded by the Indian-born Saudi Arabia-settled Abu Hamsa alias Abdul Bari with the objective of extending Islamist fundamentalism to the extreme southern part of India. 20 Islamist fundamentalists were arrested following a tip-off in the wake of a bomb explosion at the Sai Baba Temple at Hyderabad on November 21, 2002. They had allegedly developed contacts with Abu Hamza and sought to open branches of the Saudi-based Muslim Defence Force (MDF) in Tamil Nadu to carry out explosions in important Hindu temples, and to foment communal violence.⁵⁶ Meanwhile, the connection of Tamil Islamists with other terrorists groups like the Tamil Nadu Liberation Army (TNLA) and the Tamil National Retrieval Troops (TNRT) helped the former to procure arms and ammunition.⁵⁷ It was reported that Imam Ali took rigorous arms training at Hizb-ul-Mujahideen and Lashkar-e-Toiba camps near Srinagar in 1992. Tamil Islamists also had links with Islamist groups in Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and Maharashtra.

The influx of Kerala Muslims into Tamil Nadu was another contributory factor in the extremist spiral. Police records reveal that, out of the 168 accused in the Coimbatore bomb blast case, 13 were arrested from Kerala and most of the other accused were also found to be original inhabitants of Kerala.⁵⁸ Apart from these, the presence of 10 accused from Andhra Pradesh, two from Karnataka and one from Kolkata demonstrated the inter-State linkages of the perpetrator groups. Crucially, Muslims from Mallapuram, Thrissur and Palakkad in Kerala were found to be involved in these fundamentalist activities. These three districts border with Tamil Nadu, and have high rates of population growth, particularly among the Muslim community. High levels

⁵⁶ Tamil Nadu Police, Policy Note on Demand 21, 2003-2004.

⁵⁷ Author's interview with a senior police officer in Chennai on August 29, 2003.

⁵⁸ Press Note, 5.5.1999, Office of the Inspector General of Police, Crime (SIT), CBCID, Admiralty House, Chennai.

of unemployment force people across the border into Tamil Nadu, where they often secure menial jobs for very low remuneration, in various towns in the State, particularly in Coimbatore. Former president of the banned Islamic Sevak Sangh (ISS) and leader of the People's Democratic Party (PDP), Abdul Nasser Madani, is now facing charges for facilitating the acquisition of arms and ammunition by the terrorists, as well as in enabling the financial transactions between foreign fund providers and local terrorists.⁵⁹ There was also a spill-over effect in Kerala, with seizures of huge quantities of explosives and the arrest of at least 10 persons from various parts of the State following the Coimbatore blasts. According to the police, one person who was arrested in Palakkad had also been involved in the bomb blast at the Hindu Munnani office in Chennai, and a group of nine persons arrested in Thrissur on their arrival from Coimbatore were suspected to have had a role in the Tamil Nadu bomb blasts.⁶⁰ Significantly, as early as in March 1997, soon after a haul of explosives was made in Chennai, the then Kerala Chief Minister E.K. Nayanar told the State Legislative Assembly that five to eight Islamist extremist groups were operating in northern Kerala and that they received funds and other forms of support from foreign countries, especially Iran and some countries in West Asia.⁶¹

The majority of Muslim youth involved in fundamentalist activity is either uneducated or unemployed or living in poor conditions. Initially, these youngsters are often enticed into associations with radical groups by the lure of money, but are later indoctrinated by radical religious leaders in secret meetings. Police sources indicate that the Al-Ummah conducted such secret meetings in mosques on every Friday.⁶² The Principal of the Arabic College in Kayalpattinam, Noohu Thambi Hamid Pakkiri, a member of the IDF and brother-in-law of Imam Ali, was arrested on December 1, 2002, for securing money from Gulf countries to conduct terrorist activities in Tamil Nadu. Pakkiri

⁵⁹ "Kerala a haven for subversive forces", *The Hindustan Times*, New Delhi, September 7, 2001.

⁶⁰ R. Krishnakumar, "Concern in Kerala," *Frontline*, vol. 15 no. 5, March 7-20, 1998.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Author's interview with police officers in Coimbatore on August 12, 2003.

reportedly attended the International Islamic Conference held in Sri Lanka in 2002 where he is suspected to have held meetings with benefactors from Gulf countries. The Arabic College, along with other similar seminaries focus on the teaching of Islamic literature, and modern educational curricula and tools are conspicuously absent. Their students, consequently, are particularly vulnerable to extremist mobilisation.

Islamist fundamentalism in Tamil Nadu, at the moment, is in a dormant stage since most of the most prominent protagonists, numbering around 300, are in prison, while some of the most dangerous actors have been killed. The result is a current and severe curtailment of their activities. The state's timely responses, especially the police department's immediate action to curb fundamentalist activities after the Coimbatore blast, have led to an erosion of the Islamist fundamentalist ranks in Tamil Nadu. This is reflected in the fact that while 45 persons died in communal clashes in the State during 1997, the numbers have been decreasing rapidly, with only a few deaths reported since then.

Year	Number of Deaths
1997	45
1998	2
1999	2
2000	1
2001	1
2002	2
2003 (till February 28)	Nil

Source: Tamil Nadu Police, Policy Note on Demand 21, 2003-2004⁶³

Nevertheless, the dangers persist. There are some reports of efforts to revive some of the organisations that have been neutralised by strong police action, and the fundamental dynamic that created the spaces for the operation of these groups has not been addressed.

The death of Imam Ali and four others during an encounter with the police in Bangalore in September 2002 was generally

⁶³ Can also be accessed at <http://www.tn.gov.in/police/homepolice2003.pdf>.

considered to have been an end for the fundamentalists' activity in this part of the State. However, recent intelligence reports have indicated a regrouping of the fundamentalists in the southern districts. The Cuddalore police claim to have busted a fundamentalist outfit – Manitha Neethi Pasarai (MNP) located at Nellikuppam – which has been allegedly converting Dalits into Islam and imparting training to them in handling weapons and martial arts.⁶⁴ The MNP was suspected to have links with other terrorist groups inside and outside the country and also allegedly received funds from foreign countries.

The increasing vigilance of security agencies in Tamil Nadu, particularly in pockets of radical and terrorist concentration, has helped contain the Islamist militancy in the State. The pressure on patrons, particularly from the business community, a major source of funding, and the loss of political support have also contributed to the decline of radical movements. A purge of *Hawala* transfers to the key personalities in the movements and their prominent supporters also undermined the capacities of these groups to extend or sustain activities. Nevertheless, the danger has not been completely eliminated, and the potential for a resurgence abides. Whether or not such a potential is realized will, however, depend substantially on the measure of political stability in the State, and the harnessing of communal issues and religious polarization in the processes of electoral and political mobilisation.

⁶⁴ “Fundamentalist outfit busted at Nellikuppam”, *Hindu*, October 29, 2004.