

WEAPONISATION OF RELIGION

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The weaponisation of religion has a long history. Partition of India provided a fertile ground and a platform in the form of Pakistan to practice this to the hilt. The story that developed in Pakistan thereafter is all about hardening of religious edges whose natural corollary is the toxic anti-minority sentiment resulting in total social transformation of the society. To practice the supremacy of religion in public life, it turned out to be a manna from heaven for the religious hardliners. The centuries old protracted battle both political, social and legal and the demolition of Babri Masjid in India was used as an instrument for the hardened attitudes of the people of Pakistan to vent their ire on the hapless Hindu minority which increased the pace of forced conversion of girls, demolition of temples and a strident minority hatred.

Muslim politics in Pakistan is best understood by its policies towards the religious minorities which is a toxic mix of hate ideology resultantly being treated as second class citizens. It finds expression by instilling recurrent insecurity in them and squeezing their religious space which adversely affects the freedom to practice their religion openly. There is an uninterrupted continuity in such policies best exemplified by the fact that there are only 31 temples functional out of 1288 pre-partition temples registered with Pakistan Evacuee Trust Board. Not only that the 16th century *Ram Mandir Islamabad* has been reduced to a tourist spot and Hindus are not allowed to worship there. The recent destruction of Hindu temple site at Islamabad is yet another example of persistent discrimination faced by Hindu community in Pakistan.

BRIEF HISTORY OF TEMPLE CONSTRUCTION

Pakistan is home to about 75 lakh Hindus constituting the largest non-Muslim minority of Pakistan and there are about 3000 Hindus living in Islamabad. In the absence of any crematorium in Islamabad people were forced to travel to miles to undertake cremations and perform the last of their dead. Understanding the dire need for a temple complex housing a Temple, community centre and a crematorium, Pakistan Hindu Panchayat spearheaded the campaign for allotment of the land for the said purpose. On the direction of National Human Rights Commission, land measuring about 1860/Sq. metre at Sector H-9/2 Islamabad was allotted by Capital Development Authority to Hindu Panchayat in 2017 for the construction of Temple Complex. As a goodwill gesture the present Pakistan Govt. released an amount of Rs.10 lakh for the construction of Krishna Temple. Consequently the Hindu Panchayat started preparations for the construction of the Boundary wall on the allotted land on June 22 2020. Muslim clerics stepped in and things started changing by denying the construction on the plea that Since Pakistan was a Muslim Country as such Hindu Temple should not be built.

There is an unrelenting resistance to the construction of Temple therefore under the mounting pressure from hardline religious organizations, Political class and opposition even from the alliance partner of ruling PTI, Speaker MNA Chowdhary Pervaiz Elahi, CDA halted the construction citing non procurement of blue print as a reason. The confrontation reached a feverish pitch and erupted on Sunday when a group of hardliners vandalized the site terming it as their Islamic duty.

The story that developed thereafter is whether the Temple could be built on Tax payers money. In order to seek clarity on the issue, the matter was referred to Council of Islamic ideology, a constitutional body for its opinion on the subject. Meanwhile Pakistan Court dismissed three identical petitions challenging the construction of Temple. Though there are some saner people also who raised their voices and demonstrated in favour of Temple construction. Even religious organization like Pakistan Ulema Council (PUC) gave its approval for Temple construction.

INHERENTLY INTOLERANT

The construction of Krishna Temple first since 1947 was a new chapter in Pakistan's long history of pursuing discriminatory policies towards its religious minorities which affected their human rights and religious freedom in a big way. Furthermore using Blasphemy laws as a legal instrument disproportionately affected and posed as an existential threat to them. It is the political ideology which is inherently intolerant towards its minorities and constitutes the basis of social prejudice and harassment to them.

Had the Temple complex been allowed to be constructed, It would have become a game changer for Pakistan by presenting it as a religiously tolerant state in the making. It has only exposed it further for its hypocrisy when it is seen advocating the cause of Kashmir and Kashmiri Muslims. It is to be seen if the civil society musters enough courage to stand up before the religious fanatics and call a spade a spade. There still is a silver lining.