

Barelvis and Deobandis

The conflicting views of the modernists and the radicals are reflected in the different schools of Islamic thought on the subcontinent. While some 75 per cent of the Pakistani population are Sunni Muslims [20% are Shī'ah], there are significant fissures within the Sunni community. Some Sunnis in Pakistan describe themselves as Barelvis; others say they are Deobandis. It is an important distinction.

Deoband is a town a hundred miles north of Delhi and a madrasa was established there in 1867. It brought together many Muslims who were not only fiercely hostile to British rule but also committed to a literal and austere interpretation of Islam. The founders of the madrasa saw modern technology as nothing more than a method by which the people of the West kept Muslims in subjugation. They argued that the Quran and Sunnah (the words and deeds of the Prophet) provided a complete guide for life that needed no improvement by man. Despite the fact that most leading Deobandi clerics were strongly opposed to Jinnah's call for the creation of Pakistan, many Deobandi teachers moved to the new country in 1947. They have been a vocal, and often militant, element of Pakistani society ever since.

Talibs (religious students) from Deobandi madrasas formed the backbone of the Taliban movement that

swept to power in Afghanistan in 1996. Some leading Deobandi clerics, such as Sami ul Haq from the famous Haqqaniya madrasa at Akhora Khattak in NWFP [Northwest Frontier Province], have freely admitted that whenever the Taliban put out a call for fighters they closed down their schools and sent their students to Afghanistan. The Deobandi talibs have also tried to impose their views within Pakistan. In December 1998, for example, just before the onset of Ramadan, some Deobandis began a campaign to purge the Baloch capital Quetta of video rental shops, video recorders and televisions. The campaign has continued periodically ever since. In late 2000 young religious students encouraged by madrasa teachers and local mullahs ordered the burning of television sets, video players and satellite dishes in a number of villages in NWFP. 'This is an ongoing process,' said one mullah who helped organise a TV bonfire. 'We will continue to burn TV sets, VCRs and other similar things to spread the message that their misuse is threatening our religion, society and family life.'

General Musharraf has never shown any sympathy for the Deobandi mindset. His claim that only around 10 to 15 per cent of the Pakistani people opposed his decision to align Pakistan with the US rested on the fact that some 15 per cent of Pakistan's Sunni Muslims would consider themselves part of the Deobandi tradition. A far greater number, some 60 per cent, are in the Barelvi tradition. Compared to the Deobandis, the Barelvis have

a moderate and tolerant interpretation of Islam. They trace their origins to pre-partition northern India. There, in the town of Bareilly, a leading Muslim scholar, Mullah Ahmad Raza Khan Bareilvi, developed a large following. Bareilvi and his followers felt there was no contradiction between practising Islam and drawing on the subcontinent's ancient religious practices. The Barelvis regularly offer prayers to holy men or pirs, both dead and alive. To this day, many Pakistanis believe that pirs and their direct descendants have supernatural powers and, each year, millions visit shrines to the pirs so that they can participate in ceremonies replete with lavish supplies of cannabis and music. The Deobandis shun such practices as pagan, ungodly distractions.

Ever since Pakistan was created, the Barelvis have been the Islamic radicals' most effective obstacle. In a fascinating study, an American academic, Richard Kurin, has illustrated why that is the case. Kurin went to live in a small Punjabi village so that he could assess attitudes to Islam in a typical Bareilvi community. He found that two men in the village were trying to propagate Islam: the local syed (descendant of the prophet) and the mullah. The syed's chosen method was to commandeer the loudspeaker of the village mosque at dawn and deliver a lecture on the merits of following the ways of the Quran and the Prophet. He would speak for several hours at a time. Much to his frustration, however, the villagers failed to show much interest in his exhortations and he regarded most of them as

uneducated cheats. In private, the villagers would talk about the syed as a man who took life too seriously and who got worked up about issues that didn't really matter.

The second Islamic figure in the village, the mullah, was expected to preside over the daily prayers, teach the Quran to young boys and generally, as the villagers put it, 'do all the Allah stuff'. Like the syed, the mullah felt he had to put up with a somewhat wayward flock. Only a handful of the villagers would say their prayers five times a day and in the month of Ramadan most only managed to fast for five to ten days rather than for the whole month. Worse still, around a dozen villagers were having adulterous affairs that were the subject of much idle gossip. The villagers did, however, show considerable enthusiasm for attending the many shrines in the area. Virtually every man in the village had a pir who would offer him spiritual guidance.

The picture presented by Kurin is true of many villages throughout Pakistan. Clearly there are important cultural distinctions that affect attitudes in different parts of the country. In many Barelvi communities in Sindh, for example, any hint of adultery would be taken far more seriously and could well lead to the murder of those involved. Such conduct, however, is more a reflection of cultural as opposed to religious conservatism. The situation is complicated by the fact that in many parts of the country a Deobandi-style

interpretation of Islam is used as an excuse to justify regressive cultural practices. Separating Deobandi orthodoxy from traditional practice is not easy not least because, to some extent, the two feed off each other. It is nonetheless important to remember that most Pakistanis are loyal to the Barelvi tradition. That fact has had an important bearing on the nature of the Pakistani state.

The dispute between the modernists and the radicals predates Pakistan's creation. As he advanced the arguments for a separate Muslim state, Mohammed Ali Jinnah relied in part on an appeal to Islam. Indeed, religious identity provided the basis for his demand. The argument that Jinnah presented to the British was that the Muslims and the Hindus of the subcontinent constituted two separate nations that could not live together. In 1947 his arguments prevailed and Pakistan was created as a Muslim homeland. But what did that mean? Was it simply a country for Muslims to live in or was it, in fact, a Muslim country? Was Jinnah the founding father of an Islamic state or merely a state in which Islam could be practised without fear of discrimination? Ever since 1947 the modernists and the Islamic radicals have fiercely contested these questions.

SOURCE: Owen Bennett Jones. *Pakistan: Eye of the Storm*, 2nd edition. Yale Nota Bene. 2002. Pp. 9-11.