On identity and extremism

SELIM JAHAN

A person may have multiple identities—he or she may be known by different traits. Just look at me. I am a person with more than one identity. I am a South Asian, I am a Bangali, I belong to a certain age-group, I am a man, I am a father of two daughters, I am a professional and so on.

These multiple identities of mine have many dimensions. The fact is, the more I expand my identity-sphere, the diversity of my traits would undoubtedly be enhanced. This is true of the identity of any human being. Thus, if we accept the diversity of identities in a society, and be respectful of it, the diversity itself becomes the strength of the society. At the same time, if we agree on the freedom of any human being to choose his or her identities to define themselves, we can build a society with peaceful co-existence. For example, if we accept the fact that the choice of a person's religion or citizenship is a personal choice, the probability of violence and conflict would be minimal.

Quite often, people choose one particular aspect of their multiple identities as their unique identity and try to define themselves by it. That is fine as long as they are respectful of the chosen identities of others. But the problem starts when some of us do not stop there. We start to claim that the identity we have chosen to define us is the best on earth—in fact the supreme one. And those, who are either not part of that identity or do not conform to that, are inferior to us and thus, are not acceptable to us. Under such circumstances, division, hatred, conflict and violence are inevitable. The case of white supremacists is a classic example of what social damage the notion and perception of supremacy with regard to identity can do.

The above picture becomes more prominent with regard to religious identity. The faith of a human being is very much based on that person's personal belief and feeling. If we accept that and remain respectful and tolerant of the religious faith of others at personal, communal and societal level, peaceful coexistence in any society is possible. In fact, such was the historical tradition of various societies for ages. For generations, people of different faiths have lived side by side in friendship and fellowship. They have kept their own religion in their personal life, practiced it, but at the same time have remained respectful of other religious beliefs and the freedom to practise them. In fact, such a respectful co-existence has resulted in two positive outcomes.

First, as people of different faiths have lived in an environment of brotherhood and camaraderie, every group has always joined and enjoyed the religious celebrations of others. For example, in our childhood, we joined the Puja celebrations of our Hindu friends, and similarly, they also enjoyed our Eid celebrations. That did not mean that we were converted and there was no outcry that religion had been in danger. On the contrary, respect for other faiths has taught us to be tolerant in every sphere of life.

Second, through such friendly interactions among people of different faiths, a unified culture has developed in our everyday living. Thus, irrespective of religious faith, all farmers sing the same hymn while they plant rice. Boatmen of all religious faiths utter "Badar, Badar" while they set off for a journey. Everyone, whether Hindu or Muslim, who enters the Sundarbans to cut wood or collect honey, worships Bonbibi before entering the forest. In our society, historically, there have been similar culture, outlook and values in everyday living, dress, and food of different religious groups. Does it mean that there has not been any difference? Definitely, there was. But such differences did not destroy the broader similarities of life and living in the society.

Unfortunately, over time, such religious tolerance and respect have vanished in different societies and religious fanaticism, disrespect and intolerance have replaced them. But a question lingers on. In life, there are divisions on many fronts, but such divisions do not end up in fanatic intolerant violence. I have not heard that even with their differences, people who appreciate classical music have engaged in a conflict with the followers of pop music. Or the vegetarians of the world want to eliminate the non-vegetarians. Therefore, the question is how come, when it comes to religion, differences end up in a fanatic, disrespectful and intolerant environment?

SOURCE: WWW.GEDENKMOVEMENT.ORG

Various explanations can be put forward, no doubt, but one may be quite convincing. For example, with regard to the vegetarian and non-vegetarian issue, based on arguments, judgments, data and information, a meaningful debate can emerge without taking an extreme position. In that debate, neither the vegetarians nor the non-vegetarians identify their food habit as their only and unique identity, not to speak of its supremacy. As a result, peaceful co-existence is possible.

On the other hand, when it comes to religious beliefs, unlike the vegetarian and non-vegetarian issue, scope for arguments and debates is minimal. In that context, a number of people assume their religious faith as their only, unique and supreme identity and push away all other identities of theirs to the periphery. In that process, they take an extreme position with respect to the supremacy and purity of their own religion. As a result, their flexibility, respect, and tolerance of other religious beliefs and identities virtually evaporate and in that vacuum an environment for fanaticism, conflict and violence is born.

As this is true in the case of an individual, it is also relevant to a society and to a state. Thus, if a group of people in a society defines their identity only in terms of their religious faith, believes in the supremacy of their religion and from that extreme position demeans the followers of other religions, conflicts are inevitable. When people take moral teachings from religions, a peaceful coexistence in a society does not face any danger. But when in an effort to establish the supremacy of faith, religion is being used; conflict and violence are most likely to happen. And conflicts and violence lead the way to terrorism.

Terrorism is intended mainly to spread fear. From the hatred towards others, the desire to eliminate people and the intention to prove supremacy of something, an atmosphere of fear is created. Hatred towards some specific groups results in hateful writings on the walls, slurs on the streets and various obstacles against them in their everyday life. As a part of the efforts to eliminate some groups, houses, localities and human lives are destroyed. In order to prove the supremacy of a religion, the houses of worships of other faiths, their sculptures and artworks are attacked. Needless to say, muscle power and weapons are the main instruments in the process.

Three issues must be borne in mind. First, things that the terrorists want to establish are not based on logic. They lack objective thinking, proper judgments are absent there, and they are driven by some kind of a distorted fanaticism. Under such circumstances, there is naturally no alternative to muscle power, weapons and terror. Terrorism is pursued because of disrespect for human lives, intolerance and a lack of stronger logic based on arguments and facts. In the ultimate analysis, as the reasons behind terrorism do not pass the test of objectivity, the terrorists also stand on thin logical grounds.

Second, religious fanaticism acts as a major driving force behind terrorism. Thus it is rather incorrect to say, "terrorism has nothing to do with religion". Many terrorist acts are executed in the name of religion and religious fanaticism has given rise to terrorism. We have observed the role that religious fanaticism has played over time in initiating and nurturing communal riots in many places.

Third, terrorism may create a wide sense of fear among common people about some specific groups or institutions. Sometimes we try to convince others that there is no basis for such fear. The fact is that fear is not borne out of nowhere and no fear is nebulous. We are afraid of the dark, as we do not see in the dark and as a result, we become unsure of our surroundings and positions. When we are in the air, we become nervous, as we are cut off from the ground.

If we want to avoid the conflict and terrorism that arise because of taking extreme positions on religious identity, three things need to be ensured. One, we need to go back to the basics. "Humanity first and first we are humans" should be our motto, from which we can say that humanity is the common minimum denominator of all humans. Two, if we agree on "humanity first", it becomes easy to be respectful to the other religious beliefs, to accept diversity, and to be tolerant. Three, if we keep our own faith in our personal spheres, we can be faithful not only to our religion, but can also be secular. If we follow these three routes, it may be possible to overcome the ills of divisions and conflicts and a peaceful coexistence by all may not remain a dream, but may become a reality.

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PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

A test match with the Taliban

AWAKENING INDIA
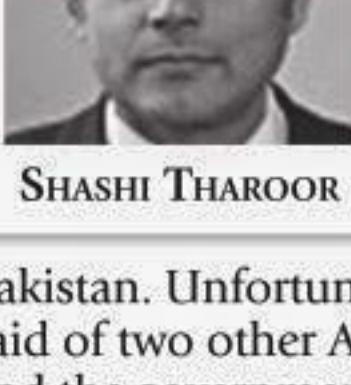
SHASHI THAROOR

At the recent World Cup cricket tournament in England, a plucky Afghan team composed mainly of former refugees gave a surprisingly good account of themselves, including in matches against their neighbours, India and Pakistan. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of two other Afghan teams—the Taliban and the government—that met in Doha, Qatar, earlier this month to agree on a "road map for peace."

The Afghan government officials who participated in the Doha talks could not even claim to be what they were, because their interlocutors, a murderous band of fanatics, do not recognise the Afghan government. Instead, the delegation was politely described as a group of representatives from Afghanistan, without saying whom exactly they represented.

After two days of talks, the participants agreed on eight points in a joint resolution, prompting Zalmay Khalilzad, the US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, to tweet that the talks had "concluded on a very positive note." He congratulated the participants "for finding common ground."

Observers in India—Afghanistan's second-largest aid donor after the United States—could be forgiven for a dose of scepticism. For one thing, the two sides had agreed in Doha to reduce "civilian casualties to zero." But even while they were meeting, their "common ground"—the soil of Afghanistan—was being soaked in blood from relentless attacks by the Taliban, who had rejected a ceasefire for Eid al-Fitr, the traditional Muslim holiday at the end of the holy month of Ramadan.

The violence has not abated since, with a series of Taliban attacks leaving dozens dead and hundreds injured in recent days. On July 1, Taliban fighters killed up to 40 people in an attack on a government compound in Kabul. Six days later, the Taliban carried out a suicide bombing on a national intelligence complex in central Ghazni province, leaving at least a dozen people dead and some 180 wounded. In both attacks, a number of nearby buildings were damaged, including schools in the vicinity, killing and maiming children. According to the *New York Times*'s weekly Afghan War Casualty Report, the death toll between June 28 and July 4 was the highest so far in 2019, with 264 government personnel and 58 civilians killed.

The conflict shows no signs of ending. Winston Churchill reportedly argued that "jaw-jaw is better than war-war," but the Taliban have perfected the art of talking while fighting. They have made no secret of their desire to restore their Islamic Emirate, which ruled—and brutalised—Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001, until it collapsed under a hailstorm of US bombs in the wake of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

With that successful assault on a vicious regime, the US inherited the problems the Russians had tried to solve during their disastrous occupation of Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989. With the Soviet Union's departure, Afghanistan was plunged into years of civil war and fratricidal killing, culminating in the Taliban's takeover and establishment of a strict Islamic theocracy, featuring frequent executions, amputations, and stonings. Girls were barred from school, and women,

Afghan men walk on a road as smoke rises from the site of an attack in Kabul. PHOTO: AFP

forbidden to venture out of their homes without an accompanying male guardian, were rendered publicly invisible by the burka. Cinema, television, and music were abolished. Under the tutelage of Pakistan's military, the Taliban brought peace to Afghanistan, but it was the peace of the graveyard.

A month after 9/11, the US-led NATO mission "Operation Enduring Freedom" destroyed the Taliban government. The hope was that freedom would endure without an enduring American presence in Afghanistan. But, with significant assistance from their Pakistani patrons, the Taliban regrouped and embarked on a well-resourced campaign to take back their country from the occupiers. Eighteen years later, the US is still there, albeit under a new banner—"Operation Freedom's Sentinel," adopted in 2015. The international coalition has incurred some 3,500 casualties, and many of the countries that had been press-ganged by the US into participating have pulled out. The US would dearly like to do the same, rather than incurring more casualties, with no end in sight. But to withdraw under Taliban assault would be an admission of defeat.

Now, however, that calculus has evidently changed. Like his predecessor, Barack Obama, US President Donald Trump campaigned for his job on a promise to withdraw American troops from the country. Unlike Obama, however, Trump is determined to cut his losses, and has fully embraced peace talks with the Taliban, with the principal purpose being to permit the orderly—and complete—withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan.

India has watched with concern as this process has unfolded. The Taliban's Islamic Emirate was involved in the hijacking of an Air India plane to Kandahar in 1999, resulting in the loss of Indian lives and even greater loss of prestige, as India's government acceded to the hijackers' demand for the release of three Pakistani terrorists. The last thing India wants is the return of an Islamist Taliban regime in its neighbourhood.

India's alarm is understandable. Encouraged by the security established by the international coalition forces, India has invested more than USD 2 billion dollars in Afghanistan. It has helped to build the country's largest hospital for women and children, erect schools, construct the Afghan-India Friendship Dam (formerly known as the Salma Dam), carve the Delaram-Zaranj Highway across the country's southwest (to open trade routes to the west), ensure uninterrupted electricity in Kabul, and even build the new Parliament.

But no one in India believes the Afghans are anywhere near ready to manage their security without any international presence. After all, Taliban attacks have killed 1.4-2 million Afghans since 2001. The fact that the US is talking to the group, and even pressing the Afghan government to do so, without any credible assurances that the Taliban will lay down its weapons, is deeply dismaying, to say the least.

India's objective has been to stabilise Afghanistan's democracy and strengthen its civil society, so that Afghans are better able to take control of their own destiny. This is also why cricket-obsessed India gave Afghanistan's national team a home and watched, in admiration, as the players demonstrated their excellence at the World Cup. The last time the Taliban ruled, they banned cricket, too.

Shashi Tharoor, a former UN under-secretary-general and former Indian Minister of State for External Affairs and Minister of State for Human Resource Development, is currently Chairman of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs and an MP for the Indian National Congress.
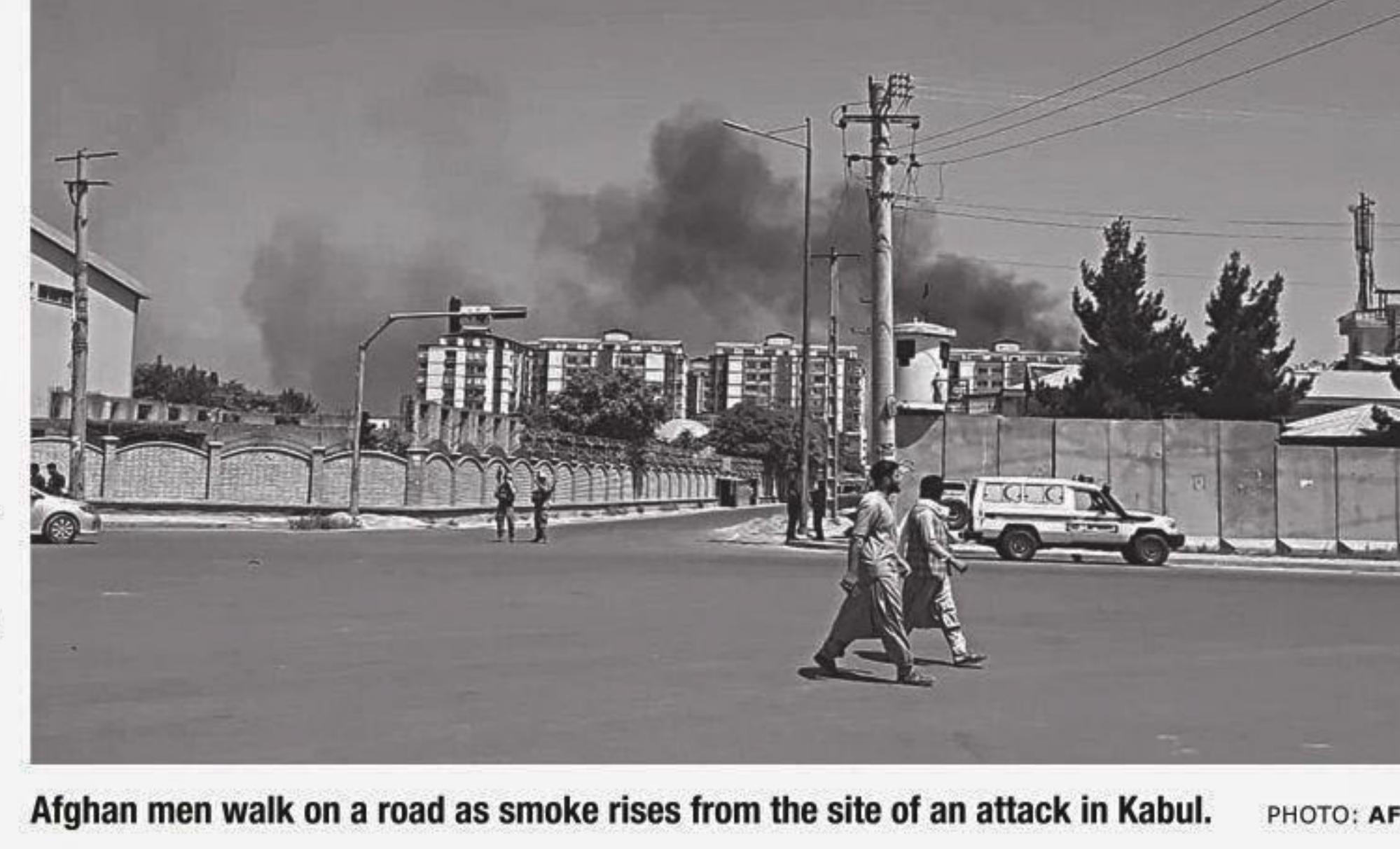
CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 "That was close!"
5 "Return of the Jedi" villain
10 Fable writer
12 Story meanies
13 Mill powerers
15 Greek vowel
16 Writer Fleming
17 Golf's Michelle
18 Notice
20 Sugar source
21 Zellweger of "Chicago"
22 Throws in
23 Lorry quartet
25 Do some modeling
28 Constructed
31 One with regrets
32 Writer Hemingway
34 Mel of the Giants
35 Commotion
36 Wide shoe letters
37 Diving and kayaking
40 Hollywood deal maker
41 "Give it--!"
42 Marsh plants
43 Pindar poems

DOWN
1 Treated roughly
2 Fastball, in slang
3 Ritzy home
4 Misery
5 Paul's collaborator
6 Wisdom bringer
7 Made tea
8 Contradicted
9 Useful skills
11 Expensive
14 Sloshy sleep spots
19 Door sign
20 Washroom sight
24 Moon of Jupiter
25 Hawk's stance
26 Power problem
27 Sofa's cousin
29 Looked lewdly
30 Deadly fly
33 Exams
35 Liberal study
38 Conclusion
39 Spanish gold

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

SEEK • RILES
LAVA • ERASES
OVEN • TOPCAT
PENGUIN • ALA
ESTATES • PAR
RED • BENT
TRIOS • BUSTS
RENO • MAC
ASP • TICKING
CAL • ETHANOL
ELAINE • RATA
SECTOR • OLES
SEERS • OLDS

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott