



turning to violence because of the misinformation and falsehoods about religion being fed to them. That they have spent their entire lives in a violent, undemocratic, militarized environment – that most have never even been to a movie theater – is disregarded. So is the rise of right-wing Hindu extremism across India. Yogi Adityanath, the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh has called Muslims “a crop of two-legged animals that has to be stopped,” and even openly announced at one of his rallies that “We are all preparing for religious war!” Such a statement, if made by a prominent Kashmiri, would certainly be considered dangerously extreme.

What is extremism? Extremism is fundamentally about deviant thoughts. There are two basic ways of conceptualizing it. The first, and the most popular, one is about the degree to which one’s thoughts and beliefs deviate from the conventional democratic norms. Those who reject democratic values or processes are extremists by that definition. The problem here is that, in a democratic system, pluralism and tolerance of diverse ideas are essential components. One has the right to think and believe in whatever one wishes. Freedom of thought is a nonnegotiable democratic freedom.

The second way of conceptualizing extremism is context-specific. The question here is how much one’s beliefs deviate from the “center” of whatever political context one is embedded in – be it democratic, authoritarian, or even totalitarian. In North Korea, one who values democracy and freedom would be considered a dangerous extremist.

Given these different ways of conceptualizing extremism, what do countries as politically diverse as India, China, United States, Israel, and Russia mean when they use the label? Remarkably, they mean virtually the same thing. They mean individuals, usually of Muslim background, who deserve to have their rights taken away for wanting to have more power than they currently have.

Underlying the asserted “danger” posed by these individuals are two assumptions. The first is that extremism automatically and always translates into violence. The second is that extremism is never justified.

The first notion has yet to be proven. Entertaining extreme or unusual ideas is a widely used pedagogical tool in higher education, and not all students who are exposed to the Socratic Method embrace violence. There are also plenty of cases of individuals with “moderate” beliefs, such as George W. Bush, using violence to achieve their political goals.

The latter assumption that all extremist views are illegitimate would certainly delegitimize the likes of Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, George Washington, and Nelson Mandela – individuals who, within the context they operated, held quite extreme ideas.

The world expects more of India than it does of China. Reeducation camps, which are currently popular in China, are not an option for India. And this is a good thing. Rather than waging a war on dangerous ideas, the Indian government must continue the hard work of addressing the material conditions that engender and validate them.

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Comments