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The Curious Politics of Islam in Pakistan: An Agent of Subversion?

Ashok Behuria*

Abstract

Far from being a glue that was supposed to bind people together, Islam has emerged as an agent of subversion in the state of Pakistan during the last seven decades of its existence. The overemphasis of the state on Islam led it to look for common factors of cohesion among different denominations of Islam, as soon as the realisation was there that Islam was not a monolith and there were as many interpretations of Islam as there were sects within it, often in violent opposition to one another. However, the commonalities have proved to be weaker than differences among various sects and an intensely sectarian Islamic version of Islam championed by the TTP today appears determined to establish an Islamic Emirate in Pakistan like the Taliban did in Afghanistan. This article makes an attempt to trace and analyse the socio-political processes that led to this sorry state of affairs in Pakistan.

Key words: Islam, TTP, Islamists, Deobandi, Wahabi, Barelvi



Pakistan has been facing a chronic internal security challenge from an Islamist entity called Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) since the last almost two decades. The threat from TTP has indeed intensified ever since the Taliban

took over Kabul on 15 August 2021. This has left security managers of Pakistan devastated because they had imagined that in return for the moral and material support that Pakistan had provided to them over the years, the Taliban would be sensitive to Pakistan's security needs after coming to power in

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Afghanistan. On the contrary, the TTP, which has modelled itself after the Taliban, has carried out attacks on Pakistani security forces regularly. As per UN reports¹, TTP was responsible for 573 attacks in 2021, 715 in 2022 and 1,210 in 2023 and the trend continued into 2024. On the one hand, the government of Pakistan declared TTP as 'Fitna-al-Khawarij' and regarded its activities as "detrimental to Islamic faith" and "in contradiction to the true teachings & essence of Islam".² The TTP on the other hand, following the Islamic ideology championed by the Taliban, regards the state of Pakistan as un-Islamic and its struggle or movement (Tehreek) to overthrow the system of governance obtaining there as perfectly Islamic and legitimate. It is thus a bloody competition going on in Pakistan between different versions of what their proponents would regard as "true" Islam. How did Pakistan arrive at this critical juncture of history where its emphasis on Islam as the ideology of the state has actually become so divisive? This article seeks to analyse various socio-political processes that have brought Pakistan to such a sorry state.

Pakistan was originally conceived as state for the Muslims of the subcontinent, wherein they could practise their faith without any fear.

During the course of the movement for creation of the state out of British India, however, the Muslim elite seeking to mobilise the Muslim masses, projected the state as an Islamic state. In the process, the Islamist clergy acquired tremendous political legitimacy which only persisted with the success of the movement. While the political leadership sought to use Islam in a symbolic way, and did come out with an overarching secular vision of the state where 'citizenship' would matter more than 'faith', the Islamist clergy would consistently raise the banner of Islam and demand that the state of Pakistan, originally built for the Muslims, would have to eventually become an Islamic state. This debate— whether Pakistan should be a 'Muslim state' or an 'Islamic state'— continues to this day even after 77 years of its formation, with the balance continually tilting in favour of the Islamists.

With an overwhelming number, about 95-98 per cent, of the people practising the faith of Islam, one would have expected Islam to be a uniting factor bringing stability and cohesiveness to the state of Pakistan. However, the socio-cultural space in Pakistan today is fraught with ethnic and sectarian discord and violence of the worst kind. It is most surprising that over-emphasis on religion has in fact

led to Islam acting as an agent of division and disruption. The following discussion makes a case for that.

Tale of capitulation by liberal politicians

The Pakistani state has been under pressure from the right wing ulema (religious scholars) since its very inception to convert the western-style Pakistani statecraft to a Sharia-based Islamic system. The modernist elite in Pakistan has, over time, conceded space to the Islamist demands with a view to coopting such demands and stealing the thunder from the populist campaign by the Islamists. However, in the bargain Islam has gained tremendous political legitimacy.

Pakistan was carved out of British India for the minority Mussalmans who felt insecure about the prospect of being marginalised in a democratic set up by the majority Hindu population. The leadership of the movement for Pakistan, mostly from northern India and elitist and feudal in orientation, used Islam in their mobilisation strategy to attract the Muslim masses. During the course of the movement, the bogey of Islamic-culture-in-danger was also raised to elicit stronger mass support and by the time of the creation of Pakistan, Islam had figured as a binding principle, a natural adhesive to bind the Muslims together.

However, once the state of Pakistan came into being, its main architect, and its sole spokesman, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, who claimed to have carved it with the help of a typewriter, underplayed the Islamic dimension and defined the core of the statecraft in liberal and secular terms. However, he passed away exactly 1 year and 29 days after Pakistan was creation, before the constitution was drawn up enshrining the principles he outlined in his address to the nation on August 11, 1947.³

The leaders succeeding him were unable to contend with the Islamist forces that were encouraged during the movement for Pakistan. "What was the need of founding Pakistan if it were to be a secular one?"⁴, some of the conservative right-wing leaders asked. As the debate on the nature of the Pakistani state gathered momentum in the Pakistani constitutional assembly, it soon came to notice in the "Objective Resolution"⁵ of the Pakistani constitution in 1949 that Islam had entered the constitution as an unalterable frame of reference.⁶ Even secular leaders like Ayub Khan and Z.A. Bhutto had to insert 'Islamic provisions'⁷ in the constitutions enacted during their rule.

From Islamisation to 'Militantisation'

Article 2 of the 1973 constitution declares Islam as the official state

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religion and right in the beginning the preamble emphasises the point that sovereignty belongs to Allah. Article 227 very clearly states that all “existing laws shall be brought in conformity with the injunctions of Islam as laid down in the holy Qur’aan and Sunnah...and no law shall be enacted which is repugnant to such injunctions (Article 227). The ulema (Islamic scholars) have thus been allowed to play an officially recognised role in shaping the Pakistani polity, including the writing of legislation.

The clergy has also been accorded a constitutional place through the establishment of the Council of Islamic Ideology (CII). The CII was first introduced by Ayub in his 1962 constitution and Ayub used his influence and discretion to select only conformist clerics who would adopt a modernist line and attest his policies. The constitution of 1973 also made constitutional provision for CII with a mandate to examine existing laws and recommend ways of bringing them into conformity with Islam’s injunctions. The constitution had even promised to make all laws conform to the principles of Islam within ten years from the promulgation of the constitution. It is another thing that Z.A. Bhutto did not make any effort in this regard. But the damage had been done, and CII

has served as a body prescribing conservative steps to be taken by the governments from time to time. This has exerted unnecessary pressure on the government and at times various governments have made use of the recommendations of the CII to demonstrate their Islamic credentials.

During Zia-ul-Haq’s rule CII worked most enthusiastically and served as Chief Advisory Council to the President entrusted with the responsibility of examining whether federal and provincial laws were in line with Islamic principles. So far CII has recommended repeal of 829 federal laws passed till 1977.⁸ Many more laws are currently under review. As a result of their influence, Islamisation is, at least formally, the ultimate objective of the constitution and the basis of the state’s legitimacy.

The attempt at Islamisation did not stop there. Zia-ul-Haq added Sharia benches to Provincial courts and a Sharia appellate bench to the Federal Supreme Court to decide matters concerning Islamic laws. Zia’s infamous Hudood ordinances sought to introduce medieval forms of punishment like flogging, amputation, public stoning etc. It has been very difficult to repeal these regressive provisions in Pakistan. All this, in many ways, signals a gradual Islamisation of the Pakistani state and society.

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Islam has been successfully tried by almost all the Pakistani rulers as a potent crutch for ensuring their hold on power. In times of crises, there is tendency to attribute all problems to the sinking standards of Islam in the society and an overwhelmingly illiterate populace is easily persuaded into believing that nothing short of a bold step forward to bring Islamic rule to Pakistan can reverse trend of decline. Islam has so closely woven into warp of Pakistan identity that it has assumed a life of its own.

Ritual invocation of Islam forms an inalienable part of Pakistan's identity. What could explain this extreme sense of insecurity about its identity and existence? Waheed uz Zaman, would say: "If we let go the ideology of Islam, we cannot hold together as a nation by any other means... If the Arabs, the Turks, the Iranians, God forbid, give up Islam, the Arabs yet remain Arabs, the Turks remain Turks, the Iranians remains Iranians, but what do we remain if we give up Islam?"⁹

All through the history of Pakistan, civilian rulers with liberal credentials felt it necessary to invoke Islam while the world outside may find the whole business quite farcical. For the people of Pakistan, however, this has falsely been projected as an existential necessity.

Once the debate on whether Pakistan should be an Islamic or secular-liberal state is resolved in favour of Islam, the next issue that begs examination is which version of Islam should be the official one. Islam is not monolithic and different *madhahib/mazhahibs* as well as sects advocate different interpretations of Islam. Most of these denominations within Islam consider their own version as the most authoritative and regard the rest as either non-Islamic or un-Islamic. Even within same sects sometimes there are major divisions like the one between the *Deobandis* and *Barelvis*. Even if Muslims belonging to these two sects might be following the same madhab (Hanafi in this case) there approaches to Islam vary widely to the extent that they regard each other as non-Muslims. While in normal circumstances, people with such ideological differences can coexist peacefully, in a situation where one of the sects seeks to dominate the statecraft in the name of Islam, the other is likely to revolt.

For example, when Zia-ul-Haq known for his sympathies for *Jamat-i-Islami* (closer to Deobandi thought but non-sectarian) sought to bring about Sharia rule in Pakistan and introduced the system of compulsory collection and distribution of Zakat and Ushr in 1979, the Shia expressed their displeasure vehemently. There

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are differences in fiqh jurisprudence also in marriage and divorce, inheritance and wills and imposition of hadd punishments even in the same set following different madhabs. This plurality is impossible to manage if the state were to subscribe to a particular version of Islam, which amounts to delegitimization of other versions practised by many Muslims in the same state. Zia understood this well quite early in his tenure as Martial Law Administrator and later as President and all his Islamic ordinances were proclaimed during the first three years of his rule, while during the rest eight years, he used Islam rather symbolically even if his bias for Jamat-i-Islami-Deobandi version stood out in the shape of his patronization of JI during the Afghan Jihad years of 1979-1989.

During the subsequent years until the rise of the Taliban in 1994, interestingly, the rot of sectarian politics had gone so deep that liberal left-leaning government of Benazir Bhutto was seen patronising core Deobandi outfits like various splinter groups of Jamiat-ul-Ulema-i-Islam (JUI), who had gained massively during the Jihad years. While the non-sectarian JI of the previous decade (1979-1989) was in the driver's seat in the Jihad in Afghanistan, this had resulted in mujahideens of different sects

coming together to fight the Soviet forces. However, the circumstances leading to the rise of Taliban propelled by Pakistani Deobandi groups like JUI-Fazlur and JUI-Shami-ul-Haq. The sectarian outlook of Taliban was manifest in the way the group dealt with the Shia Hazaras once they fanned out of Kandahar to establish its control over whole of Afghanistan. The Afghan experience certainly attests to the ill effects of progressive Islamisation.

The concept of "Takfir" or excommunication is central to sectarian thinking, especially within Islam. In an environment surcharged with orthodox thinking, often actively promoted or passively tolerated by the state, there is a temptation to brand difference as apostasy. In Pakistan such a spirit of excommunication gained currency immediately after the state was born. During the movement for Pakistan, a minority community calling itself Muslim Ahmadiyas played a significant role in propagating the cause of a separate state for Muslims of India. One of the most trusted lieutenants, Sir Zafarullah Khan, played an outstanding role in advocating the cause of Pakistan at the international level. However, soon after partition, other sectarian denominations of Islam came together to declare Ahmadiyas non-Muslims, and the infamous

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movement for Khatm-e-Nabuwat (Finality of Prophethood) was unleashed against them leading to anti-Ahmadiya riots. Justice Munir, who investigated these riots found to his disbelief that despite their overwhelming consensus on the need to excommunicate Ahmadiyas from the fold of Islam, the views of the Mullahs on “who-is-a-Muslim” were remarkably dissimilar and often contradictory. He famously wrote in his judgment:

Keeping in view the several definitions given by the ulama, need we make any comment except that no two learned divines are agreed on this fundamental. If we attempt our own definition as each learned divine has done and that definition differs from that given by all others, we unanimously go out of the fold of Islam. And if we adopt the definition given by any one of the ulama, we remain Muslims according to the view of that alim but kafirs according to the definition of every one else.¹⁰

These are observations that have been quoted and requoted over the years to acknowledge the sagacity of Justice Munir but nobody has taken any clue from it to try to reform the society in light of such remarks. It is quite another thing that Justice Munir himself was greatly responsible for setting off the tradition of military

rule which undermined the process of consolidation of democracy which could have absorbed such sentiments and encouraged genuine pluralism and tolerance. In fact, such sentiments have survived because of failure of democracy and good governance because of regular intervention of the army in politics facilitated by judges like Munir, who referred to the clause of necessity to legitimize Ayub Khan’s takeover. Ever since, all rulers have invoked Islam to lend legitimacy to their rule and perpetuation in power. In the process they have legitimized role of religion in politics to such an extent that it has divided people and set them up at each other’s throat— all for the sake of exaltation of one’s own sectarian version at the cost of everyone else’s.

Soon after the Sunnis and the Shias forced the state to declare Ahmadiyas as non-Muslims, it was the turn of the minority Shias (15-20%) to bear the brunt of the majority Sunnis in the 1980s. Militant Sunni outfits like Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, Sipah-e-Sahaba and later Tehrik-e-Nifaz-Shariat-e-Muhammadi, came up propagating a militant Deobandi worldview. The Shias were progressively seen as non-Muslims and anti-Shia riots took place rather frequently in the late 1980s and early 1990s forcing the Shias to set up their own outfits like Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Fiqh-e-Jafaria

(TNFJ) and Sipah-e-Muhammadi to protect themselves. Once Shia-Sunni encounters plateaued out, it was the turn of the Sunni Barelvi groups to suffer at the hands of their Sunni Deobandi cousins. Ironically, among the Sunnis, the Barelvis account for almost 70-80 percent of the population. Even then, leaders and places of worship of the Barelvis have been increasingly targeted since the 1990s by minority Deobandi militants. Many Pakistanis believe it is primarily because the Deobandi Ulama had successfully defined the scope of Islam as advocated by the Pakistani state ever since partition. The state machinery, many would argue, has a distinct Sunni-Deobandi bias.

TTP's Islam confronts Islam of the Pakistan State

The inter-sectarian as well as intra-sectarian clashes that take place almost on everyday basis have led Pakistani society to acute violence and destabilized economy and politics of Pakistan. As Pakistan has journeyed through coups and self-aggrandizing politics, an overall environment conducive to orthodoxy and intolerance has replaced the liberalism and openness that characterized the first few decades of Pakistan's existence. Progressive incursion of degenerate and

primitive thought process into the political mainstream has legitimized the role of religion in politics in a regressive manner. The situation has worsened to such a level that even the Deobandi State of Pakistan has been confronted with a more radical constituency that seeks to impose even a harsher and more orthodox near-Wahabi version of Islam on the Pakistani state. The assertive presence of Pakistan Taliban (Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan or TTP) points to an extreme form of such degeneration. TTP regards Pakistan State and the army as un-Islamic, which need overhauling for a true Islamic state to emerge from its debris.

TTP's journal, *Nawa-i-Afghan Jihad* in its November 2014 issue carried an article "Pakistani regime is an agent of the Satan", by Adam Yahya Gadahn, the Egyptian American Al Qaeda spokesperson which called Pakistan "the lieutenant of the Satan (read the US)". He accused the Pakistani military and security agencies of "dancing to the tune of Uncle Sam and the Bull Dog [Britain]", who have "control over all our 55 Muslim nations" with the help of Saudi Arabia, their "most wicked and Satanic partner". Gadahn even went on to exhort Pakistani people to rise in revolt:

How many of us are ready to resort to extreme steps and dare to come

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forward to remind our puppet rulers that they are on the wrong path, which cannot be tolerated anymore? How many of us have come out in protests on roads with the resolve that we would not return to our homes until the puppet regime in Pakistan is replaced with Shariat laws!..... [Pakistan] has become an "ulcer" for the Muslim world! That is why I invite all my Pakistani brethren to revolt against the present rulers in Islamabad and Rawalpindi and thus perform your pious duty to serve your religion. We have to dislodge the present rulers and target US/Western interests, their officers, embassies, and this should continue till all the foreigners retreat to their own countries.....If this was not the right/opportune moment for removing them, then could there be a better time? Or should we wait until Pakistan is torn into further pieces and Uncle Sam takes over our atomic assets, or China and India plan attacks on Pakistan with the help of their own local assets inside Pakistan? Have we not learnt our lessons from losing Bangladesh?²¹

The main aim of TTP and jihadis to establish Shariah-based system of government in Pakistan is a lasting refrain with most writers. In the March (2015) issue of *Nawa-i-Afghan Jihad* also this rhetoric is very obvious:

....there is a religious and moral obligation upon every one of us to

stop Pakistani *fauj* (military) and government from hatching malicious intrigues and plans to disturb our jihad! On the one hand, the purpose of Pakistani jihadi groups is to oust an infidel government and establish a Shariat regime, while on the other hand, there has been full-fledged popular support for Sharia regime in Afghanistan, and its stability and security!¹²

Clarifying the TTP position on what they meant by Islamic state, Fazlullah said in a video message that if Muslims lived peacefully in either a Muslim or non-Muslim majority country, where only their religious freedoms were guaranteed, they were not being true to Islam. They would have to work towards imposing Sharia rule in their countries through jihad. This shows the resolve of the TTP leadership to impose Sharia rule in Pakistan by all means. He would say:

I want to tell my countrymen that our people have made great sacrifices for this nation. Hundreds of thousand people have sacrificed their lives just because the essence of Pakistan is "La ila ha Illallah". They wanted la ila ha illallah to be our system, otherwise it would have been better to live with the Hindus. We did not fight for this country so that we will pray, fast, go for Haj and open Madrassas. I want to inform

you that when we were under British rule nobody was stopped from praying, fasting and going to Haj. Namaz is allowed in America and Europe. If a country becomes Islamic just by allowing its citizens to offer prayers and go to Haj then India is also an Islamic country; so is Europe and America. Unless and until Islamic principles are collectively implemented a country cannot be called 'Islamic'.¹³

Surrender of the State?

The entire society is concerned about it but does not know how to contend with it. In fact, the elite in Pakistan forgets that TTP's violent advocacy is a result of the blind championing of the Islamist cause over the years. Today, it is the TTP that has sadly set the terms of the discourse often forcing the judiciary, the army and other institutions of the Pakistani state to pledge their commitment to true Islam. According to a Pakistani analyst: "Islam in Pakistan... has ceased to be a religion and worldview; it has become an obsession, a pathology. It has been drained of all ethics and has become a mechanism for oppression and injustice."¹⁴ Even the former army chief, Gen Pervez Ashfaq Kayani went on record saying that: 'Pakistan was founded by our forefathers in the name of Islam and we should work

to strengthen the country and make committed efforts to achieve the goal of turning it into a true Islamic state'.¹⁵ Few days later, while responding to a suicide attack claimed by TTP, on a mosque in Rawalpindi on December 4, 2009,¹⁶ he repeated: "Pakistan is our motherland. It is the bastion of Islam and we live for the glory of Islam and Pakistan...Our faith, resolve and pride in our religion and in our country is an asset, which is further reinforced after each terrorist incident".¹⁷

Is there a way out?

The power elite of Pakistan have thus succumbed to the Islamists and allowed the latter to dictate the terms of popular discourse. Rather than encouraging moderation, they have invoked 'Islam' to convince the masses that they too are ardent exponents of Islamic principles and Islamic state. The elite does not realise that it is indirectly legitimising the demand of the radical elements for the establishment of an 'Islamic state' in Pakistan and in a theological debate they cannot contest the rhetorical competence of a mullah to sell his point of view as more apt and genuine. On a whole, it does not realise that it is fighting a losing battle and is ultimately left with the choice of being coopted by the orthodox section.

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The inability of the elite to define Pakistani nation in non-religious geo-cultural terms has allowed Islam to endure as the most important marker of the Pakistani identity. This sense of identity-crisis persists even after almost seven decades of its sovereign existence as an independent entity in the comity of nations. Ironically, as long as Islam remains the most potent referent, it is certain to emit strong Islamist impulses which will indirectly legitimise the operation of radical Islamic groups in Pakistan.

Rather than leading to a consensus, the increasing accent of the state on Islam has hardened the boundaries between different sects and groups within Islam. Each of these groups have tried to define Islam in narrow and exclusivist terms and sought to impose their world-views on others in militant ways. If one goes by their separate versions of Pakistan, one will find many Pakistans within Pakistan competing for influence and legitimacy.¹⁸ Rather than fighting them or trying to transcend such fissiparous trend by promoting a progressive version of Islam, the state apparatus has collaborated with

the Islamists and even granted them their mini-emirates in far-flung areas. Inevitably, the Islamist discourse has been dominated by sectarian and regressive *maulanas* of all shades, pushing the resultant vector in the direction of growing Islamisation of Pakistani society with each passing day. The trend is too obvious to be ignored and appears irreversible in present circumstances.

The Pakistani strategy of using jihadi elements against India has strengthened hold of the militant constituencies further and led to unintended consequences at the internal level. The rising incidence of sectarian violence and the spread of Taliban into the hinterland amply demonstrate this trend. Pakistan is thus likely to countenance prolonged period of chaos and turmoil. It will require a total transformation of Pakistani society to lift Pakistan out of the mess it is in today. Pakistan can arrest its decline and reverse the trend by de-emphasising its Islamic identity, reconstituting itself as a liberal democracy, bringing about people-centric socio-economic reforms, and define itself in geo-cultural rather than religious terms.

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3. In his inaugural address on August 11, 1947, Jinnah promised equal rights for all citizens regardless of religion, caste or creed. He famously said:

"If we want to make this great State of Pakistan happy and prosperous we should wholly and solely concentrate on the well-being of the people, and especially of the masses and the poor... you are free- you are free to go to your temples mosques or any other place of worship in this state of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion, caste or creed that has nothing to do with the business of the state... in due course of time Hindus will cease to be Hindus and Muslims will cease to be Muslims- not in a religious sense for that is the personal faith of an individual- but in a political sense as citizens of one state". http://www.pakistan.gov.pk/Quaid/governor_g.htm accessed on August 18, 2007
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6. An interesting analytical piece titled "Talibanization of Pakistan ", by Rafi Aamer, came up recently in *The Dawn* (Karachi), August 12, 2008, which also argues out the same.

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7. Ayub had to include Islamic clauses in the 1962 Constitution. These could not be challenged in any court of law. The state was originally named the Republic of Pakistan, but the first amendment added the word "Islamic" to the name. The word "Islam" and not "Quran and Sunnah" was used in the Islamic clauses to give a liberal touch to the Constitution. The Advisory Council of Islamic Ideology was introduced whose job was to recommend to the government ways and means to enable Muslims to live their lives according to the teachings of Islam.
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16. Forty people including a including a major general, a brigadier, two lieutenant colonels and two majors were killed in the attack. Report by Mohammad Asghar, "Carnage in Pindi army mosque as Taliban breach security", *The Dawn*, December 04, 2009.
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18. Ashok K Behuria, "Many Pakistanis within Pakistan: The Case of Sectarian Conflicts in a Talibanised Context", Omprakash Mishra and Sucheta Ghosh, eds., *Terrorism and Low Intensity Conflict in South Asian Region*, New Delhi: Manak Publications, 2003

Note for readers and subscribers

We are happy to inform you that from January 2009 we have introduced the system of peer review of articles to ensure quality of publications and improve the scholarly value of our journal. We have a renowned group of scholars and academicians associated with our Centre and they are helping us in this process. We are grateful to them for their kind support and cooperation.

We would request our readers and subscribers to take note of these changes and we would, as ever, encourage them to send in research articles for publication to us. The manuscripts of research papers submitted for publication should be neatly typed in double space and the length of the papers should be ideally between 3,000-5000 words including the references. They should contain an abstract and a short introduction of the author. The authors should use Chicago Manual Style for their references. The articles can be sent to us in an electronic format, preferably Ms Word. For detailed guidelines they may send their queries to us in the following address.

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