

## India's Operation Sindoor and the Weaponization of Faith

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India and Pakistan engaged in an intense four-day military confrontation from May 7 to 10, 2025. The immediate trigger was a brutal attack on April 22 in Baisaran Valley near Pahalgam, Kashmir, where five terrorists killed 26 civilians. The assailants reportedly selected victims based on religion, targeting Hindu men and one Christian man. They also killed a local Muslim who tried to resist them.

Fortunately, before the hostility could escalate into full-scale war, both sides reached a mutual understanding to halt further military action. Despite political posturing and the ensuing arms-race, there remains a global hope that India and Pakistan will resolve their long standing disputes through negotiation rather than armed conflict. Leaving aside the broader geopolitical implications for a moment, let us examine the religious undertones that marked this episode.

Terror is a heinous crime against humanity, and in modern times no credible scholar of any religion offers it any theological justification. While many terrorists may invoke religious language, it is an internationally accepted premise that terror has no religion. Therefore, every nation is expected to respond to such attacks—like the one in Pahalgam—without validating the terrorists' claims of religious motivation.

Instead, India codenamed its recent military operation, presumably aimed at countering terror, Operation Sindoor—a reference to *sindoor*, the Hindi word for vermilion. Since vermilion traditionally adorns the parting of a married Hindu woman's hair, the religious connotation—and a selective one at that—is unmissable.

In invoking explicitly Hindu imagery while responding to an attack that claimed victims of multiple faiths, the state risks not only blurring the line between religion and national security, but also reinforcing a narrow, majoritarian narrative. That many view *sindoor* itself as a symbol of gender inequality (a Hindu husband is not obliged to display his marital status) is another matter altogether.

Military operations are typically codenamed by armed forces for internal documentation, often without emotional overtones or creative flourish. For instance, India's last such operation in Balakot, Pakistan was codenamed "Bandar" (meaning *monkey*)—a name devoid of symbolism.

The recent codename was presented across TV channels as a professionally designed logo featuring vermilion spilling from its traditional container, evoking a strong emotional and cultural resonance. This deliberate imagery turns the codename into a form of religious-political

posturing. Not to be outdone, Pakistan too adopted a religiously themed codename for its counter-operation.

While Pakistan openly identifies as an Islamic republic, India's use of religious symbolism in a military operation signals a disturbing shift for a Constitutionally secular nation. By framing counterterrorism in explicitly Hindu imagery, the state risks reinforcing a religious stereotype of terrorism—contrary to the globally accepted understanding that terrorism is not a religious identity but a political crime.

While the terrorists in Pahalgam used religion to select their victims and justify their cruelty, the act itself was intended to terrorize a population, provoke a communal backlash, and escalate conflict. Countering such an act with a militarily operation bearing a religious connotation plays directly into the attackers' narrative—an approach that ultimately weakens the broader fight against terrorism.

As if to reinforce the religious undertone of the military operation, India's Chief of Army Staff visited a Hindu pontiff in full military uniform to “seek his blessings” in the aftermath of Operation Sindoor. For an army that officially promotes religious equality among its ranks, the optics of this visit raised many eyebrows in the secular Indian republic.

No wonder religious dogmas continue to divert the Indian subcontinent from the pressing challenges it faces on the human development front. On 6 May 2025—a day before Operation Sindoor—the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) released its Human Development Report 2025, ranking India and Bangladesh at 130 (medium human development) and Pakistan at 168 (low human development) out of 193 nations. Tellingly, there has been little to no serious public debate in any of these nations over these sobering figures.

What South Asian nations desperately need is not the weaponization of tradition or religion, but a collective awakening to the state of development, reason, equity, and human dignity. Instead of drawing battle lines in the name of faith, the region's leaders must confront the real enemies: poverty, illiteracy, poor healthcare, gender inequality, and environmental degradation.

These shared challenges demand shared solutions—grounded in science, regional cooperation, and human compassion. As long as religion continues to distract from development, South Asia will remain trapped in a cycle of emotional posturing and material deprivation. The way forward lies not in 'sacred' symbols, but in the secular sense.