

## Intimidation, imitation, economics: Why youth are taking to terror

- Abhijit Banerjee
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While there are people who take to violence only because they feel a threat to their religion, for many of those involved the possibility of violence is exciting and a big part of the attraction, just as it is for the drug dealers and the political hoodlums, writes Abhijit Banerjee. (Reuters Photo)

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Men between the ages of 18 and 35 become terrorists. They kill rationalists in Karnataka and cartoonists in Paris, in the name of Mao, Mohammad, or the mother religion. The same demographic supplies most drug dealers or violent criminals everywhere in the world, as well as that uniquely American phenomenon, the lone deranged gun-man. In south Asia and probably elsewhere, they also become the foot soldiers of political parties, offering intimidation wherever needed.

These are not new patterns; probably the same kind of people fought in the crusades, joined Gengis Khan in his marauding, manned Walter Raleigh's pirate ships. Nor is it a universal — far from it. Most young men, now and perhaps always, opt for the mundane pleasures of love and work and family.

But it is definitely a pattern and it is worth thinking about what it means. The first point to be made is just as no one becomes a terrorist for the money, the same is also true of drug dealers. Steve Levitt of Freakonomics fame and Sudhir Venkatesh, a Columbia University sociology professor, collected data on this, and their finding is that the average person in the drug trade in the United States makes substantially less than minimum wages — indeed so little that they have no choice but to live with

their parents. And while I don't know this for a fact, I strongly suspect neither Uddhav Thackeray nor MK Stalin pays his boys a lot.

This is even more remarkable given that these jobs are risky — terrorists often end up dead, and Levitt and Venkatesh estimate that the monthly death rates in the community of drug dealers they studied were between one and 2%, orders of magnitude more than the average death rate for their age group. Most were killed. Even the Sena boys must worry about ending up in MNS territory and getting thrashed.

Why do they do it? In part because of imitation and/or intimidation. It is what a lot of my friends are doing; it is what the local big guy or the coolest dude wants me to do; and I dare not say no.

Two economists at UCLA, Leo Burzstyn and Rob Jensen, carried out a fascinating experiment to demonstrate the enormous power of conformity in the lives of the young. In three Los Angeles high schools that draw mostly from low-income populations, students in the 11th grade were offered free SAT coaching by a reputable coaching outfit. The offer was made in the middle of a class, and they were asked to take a decision on whether they wanted it then and there. Some were told that their decision will remain private; the rest were told that it would be shared with the rest of the classroom.

What they found was rather remarkable. Those who, purely by chance, happened to be in an honours classroom (where the studious go) when they were asked to choose, were less likely to opt for the coaching when the decision was private. They clearly believed that the cool thing to do in an honours classroom would be to go for the coaching and therefore, when everyone was going to find out their decision was what they chose. By contrast, otherwise identical boys and girls who ended up being asked to make that same choice in a non-honours classroom, where the norm was to disdain school work and play tough, were much more likely to choose coaching when it was a secret than when it was not.

The power of cool is why organisations like the Islamic State (IS) rely so heavily on charismatic recruiters to fill their ranks and why it may be very important to expose young people to a diverse set of role models. It is also why ghettos are so dangerous — it is much harder for any one group of people to take charge of defining the cool in diverse environments where there are competing definitions of success.

Imitation is of course not enough of an explanation. We have wars over religion and drugs and politics, but no wars over cricket or free speech, even though many people also feel passionately about them. The key difference comes from the fact that there is a group of people who find it in their interest to encourage and fund violence in defence of their religion, their drug sales or their political influence, whereas cricket supporters may get into a fight but there is no one whose overarching interest is in people fighting over cricket.

While I do not doubt that there are people who take to violence only because they feel a threat to their religion, for many of those involved, the possibility of violence is exciting and a big part of the attraction, just as it is for the drug dealers and the political hoodlums. It is telling that many of those involved in the Paris massacre had at some point been petty criminals or drug dealers, and most of them seem to be into violent computer games, drugs and alcohol — their Islamic allegiances notwithstanding.

I imagine them to be more or less normal young men, a bit bored with their lives and unable to find anything in their future to redeem their unexciting present, looking for some way to shake things up. In African-American communities in many US inner cities, they might have become drug dealers, in Mumbai or Chennai, an agent of political muscle.

In this view, economic stagnation is at the heart of the problem. The West is now full of communities where the promise of the future has been lost, where each generation can at best expect to maintain the standards of living that their parents had already achieved for them. This is the history of many of the Paris gunmen whose parents came from north Africa or west Asia in a successful search for a better living, and who are now either unable get the jobs that their parents had or unwilling to do them. It is also the history of the African-American community in the US, though there stagnation already hit a generation ago.

If this analysis is correct, we are getting it exactly wrong in India right now. Muslims were always somewhat ghettoised, but by all accounts, the brazenness with which Hindu landlords refuse Muslim tenants has gone up a notch. At the same time the educational deficit that Muslims already face and the kind of discrimination in the labour market recently splashed across the newspapers, makes it more likely that young Mussalmans would end up frustrated with their economic options and tempted by some ideology of violent reprisals.

***Abhijit Banerjee is Ford Foundation International Professor of Economics, and director, Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab, MIT. The views expressed are personal.***