

Competing Religious Nationalisms and the Partition of British India

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This paper attempts to explain the partition of British India, particularly the Muslim freedom movement and the consequent emergence of Pakistan, within the perspective of competing religious nationalisms. It argues that Hindu nationalism and Muslim nationalism—as two competing religious forces—reinforced each other in such a way that the rise of the former led to the growth of the latter. The British colonial policy of ‘divide and rule’ might have contributed to sharpening the Hindu-Muslim nationalist divide, especially during a couple of decades preceding the partition. However, its principal cause was the emergence of Hindu revivalism in the late 19 century and Hindu domination of the Indian National Congress at the start of the 20 century, which forewarned the Subcontinent’s moderate Muslim leaders such as Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, Allama Muhammad Iqbal and Muhammad Ali Jinnah about the impending threat to Muslim survival in a post-colonial India politically dominated by an increasingly chauvinistic Hindu majority. The persecution of Muslims by chauvinistic Hindus in Hindu dominated provinces of British India in the late 1930s particularly strengthened the nationalist feelings of Muslims, which played a critical role in the creation of Pakistan. Given that, the paper addresses two questions: first, was Muslim nationalism really a consequence of Hindu nationalism or Congress communalism? Secondly, could the partition of British India be

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avoided, if Hindu nationalist wave had not gripped British India or if Congress had remained a truly Indian nationalist organization?

While tracing the roots of Hindu nationalism, it is important to mention that Hinduism itself had for centuries been more of a culture than a religion. It had a capacity for integration, which hardly seemed compatible with the expression of a collective consciousness of the sort visible in religions such as Islam, Christianity and Judaism. It was during the British period that Hinduism started to reflect radicalism. Hindu nationalism was constructed as an ideology between 1870s and 1920s. It grew out of socio-religious movements initiated by Brahmins.

The Arya Samaj, the first of such movements, was founded by Swami Dayananda in 1875. It sought to lead India “back to Vedas” in an effort to recover and restore the Aryan past. It strongly reacted to the influences of Islam and Christianity, and its fundamentalism contributed to the rise of Hindu enmity towards the Muslim community. The Arya Samaj represented a militant strand from where three Hindu nationalist organizations, Hindu Mahasabha, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and Hindu Sabha emerged. The Hindu nationalist ideology, like Italian fascism and German national socialism, envisaged the organization of the whole of society as a means of producing a new kind of people.¹

The Idiom of Hindutva

In 1923, V.D. Savarkar, the leader of Hindu Mahasabha, wrote the first ideological account of Hindu nationalism titled *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* He argued that the Aryans who settled in India in 1,500 BC already formed “a nation now embodied in the Hindus. Their Hindutva rested on three pillars: geographical unity, racial features and a common culture.” Savarkar rejected any form of nation-state based on an abstract social contract and thereby comprising individualized citizen dwelling within the country’s administrative tiers. He emphasized the ethnic and racial substance

1 Christopher Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp.53-64. Also see Robert L. Hardgrave and Stanley A. Kochanek, *India: Government and Politics in a Developing Nation* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, 1993), pp.31-35.

of the Hindu nation. In his words, “The Hindus are not only a nation but race-*jati*. The word *Jati*, derived from the root Jan, means a brotherhood, a race determined by a common origin, possessing a common blood. All Hindus claim to have in their veins the blood of the mighty race incorporated with and descended from the Vedic fathers.”²

In 1925, Dr. K.B. Hedgewar founded the RSS after reading *Hindutva* and meeting Savarkar. The RSS founder had received his political initiation from B.S. Moonje, a leader of Hindu Sabha and aide to its founder Bal Gangadhar Tilak. Savarkar codified the ideology of *Hindutva*. Hedgewar undertook to implement it by providing Hindu nationalism with a social model of the Hindu nation and an organizational network. He took upon himself the task of liberating Hindu society from the demoralized and degraded state and organizing it to assert as exclusively constituting the nation. Dr. Hedgewar did not believe that Indian culture was an amalgam of various traditions. The RSS shared symbol of Swastika with the Nazis—and the principles of the primacy of social organism, the organization above men, and following an all-powerful leader with both German Nazism and Italian Fascism. RSS founders were so much inspired by the European racist and totalitarian ideologies that not only they chose to write a similar chapter in Indian history but they also travelled to Italy and Germany to see what great advances the two nations had then made. Dr. Hedgewar and his successor, Guru M.S. Golwalkar, were inspired by the works of racist German writers such as Bluntschli, Gettel and Burgers. No surprise that Golwalkar’s writings preached racism.³

“Germany has shown how well-nigh impossible it is for races and cultures, having differences going to the root, to be assimilated into one united whole, a good lesson for us in Hindustan to learn and profit by,” wrote Guru M.S. Golwalkar in *We or Our Nationhood Defined*, which was published in 1938. “From this standpoint sanctioned by the experience of shrewd old nations (i.e., Germany), the foreign races in Hindustan must either adopt the

2 V.D. *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* (Bombay: S.S. Savarkar, 1969), pp.84-85.

3 Jaffrelot, *op.cit.*, pp.53-64.

Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect and hold in reverence Hindu religion, must entertain no ideas but those of the glorification of the Hindu race and culture; i.e., they must not only give up their attitude of intolerance and ungratefulness towards this land and its age-old traditions, but must also cultivate the positive attitude of love and devotion instead; in one word, they must cease to be foreigners or may stay in the country wholly sub-subordinated to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less preferential treatment, not even citizens' rights."⁴

The Muslims of British India became a particular target of racism preached by leaders of the RSS and Hindu Mahasabha and other Hindu nationalist organizations, and practiced by their militant followers. The Muslims of the Subcontinent, despite being in minority, had ruled over the majority Hindus since the eleventh century—first under the Sultanate and then under the Mughals—until the British colonized the region in 1858. Since Muslims were the rulers before, and Hindus the subjects, it was natural on the part of the British to consider Hindus as their natural ally. The British blamed the Muslims for staging the 'mutiny' of 1857. Thus, the heavy hand of the British fell more upon Muslims than on the Hindus.⁵ Subsequently, the Muslim community suffered setbacks in the social, economic and political fields, which came under Hindu domination. It was in this backdrop that Hindu revivalism and nationalism occurred during the British period. The RSS, Hindu Mahasabha and Hindu Sabha as well as Shuddhi and Sangathan movements—an offshoot of the Arya Samaj—specifically targeted Muslims in the Hindu majority provinces. The Sangathan movement aimed to unite Hindu society by transcending divisions of caste and sect. The Shuddhi movement proved more threatening for the Muslims, as its aim was the forcible conversion of Subcontinent's religious minorities into Hindus. Its founder Swami Shardhanand concentrated on reconverting the Malkana Muslim Rajputs. In short, all of the Hindu nationalist movements that started to consolidate in British

4 M.S. Golwalker *We, or Our Nationhood Defined* (Nagpur: Bharat Publications, 1939), p.35.

5 Jawaharlal Nehru, *An Autobiography* (London: The Bodley Head, 1955), p.460.

India from the 1920s were essentially based on the concept of “threatening Others:”⁶ their aim was to rejuvenate Hinduism by eliminating religious minorities, particularly Muslims.

The conflict between Hindus and Muslims engendered by the activities of the Arya Samaj served only to underscore the alienation of the Muslim community in India. The collapse of the Mughal rule brought confusion and doubt to the Muslims. The Muslim reaction to British rule was by no means uniform, but, clinging to traditions of the past and to memories of their former glory, many Muslims remained unresponsive to the changes around them. Because they regarded English as “the highway to infidelity,” the Muslims of British India failed to take advantage of English education and were soon displaced in the civil services by the rising Hindu middle class. It was in this backdrop that the Muslim reformer and educator Sir Syed Ahmad Khan sought to convince the British of Muslim loyalty and to bring the community into cooperation with British authorities. At the same time, however, Sir Syed warned Muslims of the dangers of Hindu domination under democratic rule. According to him, Hindu rule would fall more heavily upon Muslims than the neutral authority of the British.⁷

Hinduisation of the Congress

The Indian National Congress, which was established in 1885 as an association for Indian political representation within the British India Empire, was initially joined by both Hindu and Muslim political leaders. However, gradually, it started to be dominated by the Hindus— as did the Indian civil services. From 1905 until 1920, the Congress remained in the hands of extremist Hindu leaders such as Bal Gangadhar Tilak.⁸ Consequently,

6 Jaffrelot, *op.cit.*, pp.11-79.

7 See Ishtiaq Ahmed, *The Concept of an Islamic State in Pakistan: An Analysis of ideological Controversies* (Lahore: Vanguard Books Ltd., 1991), pp.70-71; and K.K. Aziz, *The Making of Pakistan: A Study in Nationalism* (Lahore: Islamic Book Service, 1989), pp.18-28.

8 Tilak, who founded Hindu Sabha in the Punjab, evoked the memory of Shivaji, founder of the Maratha kingdom, and of his struggle against the Muslim invaders. Tilak recalled the days of Maratha and Hindu glory and, not without concern among Muslims sought to stir a revival of Hindu religious consciousness to serve his political ends.

Muslims established their own political organization, the All India Muslim League, in 1906. Most of the leadership for the League was produced by the educational institutions set up by Sir Syed, especially the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College, which later became Aligarh University. As part of what is called the Aligarh Movement, Sir Syed published his journal *Tahzib al-Akhlaq*, which provided his modernistic Islamic perspective on a broad range of topics. He warned Muslims not to join the Congress which he believed was a Hindu organization. Sir Syed insisted that Hindus and Muslims were two separate nations. He denounced all superstitious practices among the Indian Muslims, urging them to acquire modern scientific knowledge and Western skills.

Despite the concerns expressed by Sir Syed, Muhammad Ali Jinnah joined the Congress. It took the Quaid only a few years to realize the veracity of Sir Syed's argument. In 1913, he joined the All-India Muslim League, a Muslim political party born out of Hindu domination of the Congress. However, due to his liberal spirit, Jinnah retained his Congress membership until 1920 in the hope of creating a truly Indian nationalist front against the colonial British. He was instrumental in bringing the two parties to a single platform in 1916 and conclude the Lucknow Pact, in which the Congress accepted the Muslim demand for separate electorates. It was only when the Congress came under practical Hindu domination under Tilak's leadership that Jinnah quit the party. As the 1920s started, the wedge between the Hindus and Muslims of India further widened. The Khilafat Movement—which was an Indian response to British-led European bid to demolish the Ottoman Caliphate—was the only exception in the sense that Mahatma Gandhi and moderate Hindu leaders of the Congress joined hands with Muslim leaders to pressure the British in the Subcontinent. However, as far as RSS-led Hindu nationalism was concerned, it was reinforced by the Khilafat Movement, which depicted a collective Muslim response to an event threatening the citadel of Muslim power.⁹

The leaders and followers of the RSS, Hindus Mahasabha, Hindu Sabha, Shuddhi and Sangathan movements were no doubt in

⁹ See John L. Esposito, *Islam and Politics* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1984), pp.88-90.

the forefront of Hindu nationalist bid for domination in India, the Indian National Congress also showed a domineering Hindu outlook, especially by the end of the 1920s, when it declared it *swaraj* as its goal and backed out from its earlier consent on separate electorates for the Muslims. The Muslim demand for separate representation—conceded in 1909 by the British and accepted in 1916 by the Congress—was rejected by the Motilal Nehru Report of 1928 and the Congress in unqualified terms. The Muslims were completely disillusioned, and from then onwards the Congress became all but in name a Hindu body. However, for the Muslims, the Nehru Report proved a blessing in disguise: it helped them emerge as a united political force demanding the creation of a separate Muslim homeland.

Jinnah responded by announcing his Fourteen Points proposal, which demanded constitutional arrangements guaranteeing electoral majorities in the five provinces with Muslim-majority populations, a weak federal system in which the central government would have little power over the provinces, as well as one-third of the seats in the central legislature and a 75 percent majority requirement for action by the legislature. In fact, since its creation in 1906, the League had been demanding constitutional safeguards and other political privileges for the Subcontinent's Muslim population. The reason for this could be best explained by underlining a psychological dilemma facing a minority population that had ruled a country for centuries but in colonial setup had started to perceive a credible threat to its very political survival from its former majority subjects with externally-instigated revengeful instincts. That is why in all the pre-partition constitutional formulas offered and enforced by the British for representative provincial and national governmental structures in India, the Muslim leadership continued to insist on separate electorates and representation for Muslims and complete autonomy for the Muslim majority provinces. It was only after the consistent refusal by the Hindu leadership to accept the Muslim demand for due political representation in India that the Muslim leadership was left with no option but to demand separate state.

The Rise of Muslim Nationalism

Allama Muhammad Iqbal conceptualized the idea of Pakistan at the annual session of the Muslim League at Allahabad in 1930. He said: "The Muslim demand for the creation of a Muslim India within India is perfectly justified... the formation of a consolidated North-West Indian Muslim State appears to me the final destiny of the Muslims, at least of North-West India." For Iqbal, the creation of a Muslim homeland and its emergence as a modern state necessitated an Islamic state, one whose institutions and laws should be based on Islam.¹⁰

As the 1930s started, the British tried to introduce a representative structure in India within the British Empire, which should be acceptable to both the Congress and Muslim League leadership. For the purpose, a number of Round Table Conferences were held in London, which resulted in the enactment of the Constitutional Act of India, 1935. In 1937, provincial elections were held. The Congress swept the provincial elections for Hindu seats and formed ministries in 7 of the 11 provinces. The Muslim League fared poorly among the Muslim electorate and failed to secure majorities in any of the four predominantly Muslim provinces. Jinnah offered to form coalition ministries with the Congress in each province, but the Congress refused to recognize the League as representative of India's 90 million Muslims. "There are," Nehru remarked, "only two forces in India today, British imperialism and Indian nationalism." History, however, bore out Jinnah's response: "No, there is a third party, the Mussulmans." The Hindu-controlled Congress provincial governments behaved arrogantly and this caused the 'phenomenal growth' of Muslim nationalism. The Muslims and mosques were targeted by chauvinistic Hindus belonging to the RSS, Hindu Mahasabha, Hindu Sabha, Shuddhi and Sangathan movements. A well-intentioned effort was made by the Congress, in collusion with the Hindu nationalists, to impose Hindu norms and values upon minority Muslims in Hindu majority provinces. Thus, when in

10 Iqbal argued, "The State according to Islam is only an effort to realize the spiritual in a human organization. It is in this sense alone that the State in Islam is a theocracy." For details, see Sir Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1960), pp.146-80.

1939, the Second World War began and the Congress rule in Hindu majority provinces ended, the Muslim League celebrated the event as the “Day of Deliverance” from the “tyranny, oppression and injustice” of the Congress rule.¹¹

On 23 March 1940, Jinnah presented a Two Nation Theory at the annual session of the Muslim League in Lahore. He declared that Hindus and Muslims formed two separate nations, which could not live in a single State. He said:

The Hindus and Muslims belong to two different religions, philosophies, social customs and literatures. They neither intermarry nor dine together and, indeed, they belong to two different civilizations which are based mainly on conflicting ideas and conceptions. Their aspects on life and of life are different. It is quite clear that Hindus and Musalmans derive their inspiration from different sources of history. They have different epics, different heroes, and different episodes. Very often the hero of one is the foe of the other, and, likewise, their victories and defeats overlap. To yoke together two such nations under a single State, one as a numerical minority and the other as a majority, must lead to growing discontent and final destruction of any fabric that may be so built up for the government of such a nation.¹²

Jinnah’s Two Nation Theory maintained that the Muslims of the shared a common cultural identity and thus constituted a separate community from Hindus. Muslim nationalism was based on the use of religion to provide a common bond and to mould disparate ethnic/linguistic communities into a single nation. However, for Jinnah, Islam was simply the common cultural heritage and identity of the Muslims; Pakistan was to be a Muslim homeland or state in this sense.¹³

The Lahore session of the Muslim League also adopted as its goal the creation of a separate and independent Islamic state, Pakistan. The Pakistan Resolution stated: “No Constitutional plan would be workable in this country or acceptable to the Muslims unless it is designed on the following principle, viz., that geographically contiguous units are demarcated into regions which

11 Hardgrave and Kochanek, *op.cit.*, p.48.

12 Jamil ul-din Ahmad (ed.), *Speeches and Writings of Mr Jinnah* (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1952), p.177.

13 For information on differences in the ideological vision of Jinnah and Iqbal the Pakistan, see John L Esposito and John O. Voll, *Islam and Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p.103.

should be so constituted with such territorial adjustments as may be necessary that the areas in which the Muslims are numerically in majority, as in the northwestern and northeastern zones of India, should be grouped to constitute 'independent states' in which the constituent units shall be autonomous and sovereign."¹⁴

In 1942, the British sent Sir Stafford Cripps to India with an offer of independence. The offer, however, provided the provinces an opportunity to secede from federation either separately or in groups. The Congress rejected the Cripps offer and launched the 'quit India' movement. By now, the League had emerged as a mass Muslim party. The Two Nation Theory found its first political expression when the Muslim League swept all the Muslim seats in the 1946 national elections. The same year, a Cabinet Mission Plan was offered by the British to the Congress and League leadership. The Plan sought to preserve united India and to allay Muslim fears of Hindu domination through the proposal of a loose federation between two federated states sharing foreign, defence and communication affairs at the Centre. The Muslim League accepted the Plan, while the Congress rejected it. Its Hindu leaders, particularly Jawaharlal Nehru, were not willing to accord the Muslim League its claim to represent all Muslims and therefore to have the right to fill all seats reserved for Muslims in the Cabinet. Despite rejecting the Cabinet Mission Plan, Nehru took office in September 1946 as *de facto* Prime Minister of the interim government, which was also joined by the Muslim League under Jinnah's leadership. However, due to consistent Hindu-Muslim schism, the government could not work in harmony and the formation of Pakistan emerged as the only solution. In February 1947, the British government declared its intention to quit India. In August 1947, the Subcontinent was partitioned.¹⁵

Conclusion

It is clear from the above discussion that had Hindu nationalism not first emerged as a powerful force, the rise of

14 G. Allana, *Pakistan Movement: Historical Documents* (Lahore: Islamic Book Service, 1977), pp.226-27.

15 See P. Hardy, *The Muslims of British India* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1972), pp.222-55. Also see Hardgrave and Kochanek, *op.cit.*, pp.50-52.

Muslim nationalism as a counter-political force might not have occurred in British India. Moreover, had Nehru-led Congress fully accepted the 1946 Cabinet Mission Plan, just as Jinnah-led League did, a united India in the form of a loose federation might have existed today. Similarly, had the Congress-led governments in Hindu majority provinces during 1937-39 not persecuted minority Muslims, the latter might not have developed a sense of insecurity and a fear of Hindu domination in a post-British united India. In fact, the Congress-led provincial rule proved to be a turning point in consolidating Muslim perceptions of Hindu domination. This practical manifestation of Hindu domination at the provincial level was enough to warn Muslims of British India about the danger of living in a post-colonial Hindu-majority country. The rise of Hindu nationalism was not only confined to the creation of Hindu organizations such as the RSS, Hindu Mahasabha, Hindu Sabha, Shuddhi and Sangathan movements, it also paved the way for domination of the Congress by extremist Hindu leaders. Given that, the role of Indian National Congress leaders, particularly Tilak and the two Nehrus, in creating Muslim nationalism and, ultimately, Pakistan cannot be underestimated.