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Islam and Politics in India  
Address  
Jaipat Singh Jain

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India has lived through, and is a rich laboratory of events relating to, many faiths. Some of the faiths that survive have gone through various cycles of revival, struggle, conflict and decline. Among those that survived through modern times, the earliest known religion was Jainism. It was practiced by the people of the Indus Valley Civilization along with the practice of yoga and worship of Siva. That was long before the pyramids of Giza, before Mesopotamia, before the Mayan civilization – almost 10,000 years ago.

The Indus Valley Civilization was followed by the civilization that developed around the river Ganga. It and the civilization around other major river systems of India were dominated by Vedic Hinduism, with its well-known caste system, and the epics of Mahabharata and Ramayana. That was followed by Buddhism and another wave of Jainism and then Vedic Hinduism again.

One characteristic of the people who lived in the Indo-Gangetic Plains was that they lived in small, independent, republics. Hundreds of republics! Each with its own language, customs, dresses, and of course, gods! Each strong enough to defend against a neighbor but not against an invasion from a larger, alien armed force. Only once in while during the last 3,000 years, were they led or held together by a powerful central ruler. And even when they had such a monarch, that central leadership rarely tried to make one nation out of these disparate people. It let them be themselves, so long as they owed allegiance to the central command.

Early Islamic invaders from Persia and Central Asia found these weak but prosperous republics ripe for plunder. Armed with fierce weapons and extraordinary zeal to expand the dominion of Islam, they began invading parts of India soon after the death of the Prophet, peace be upon him. Islam was seen by them as a liberating force and they thought of themselves as divinely endowed. As it happens, some of the invasions made in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century are said to be some of the bloodiest in human history.

A characteristic of most of these incursions into India was that the invaders mostly returned to their homeland after periods of occupation and plunder. This, however, changed in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The conquerors came in to stay. So, from “to go,” it became, “to stay,” so to say. They made India their home. For the next 500 years, they built dynasties and empires. The most well-known of these is the Mughal dynasty. It gave the world enlightened emperors like Akbar the Great who crafted a new religion – Din-e-Illahi – that distilled the best of all religions. The dynasty also gave us Shah Jahan, the emperor who gifted the world the Taj Mahal in fond memory of his beloved. If you have seen the Taj Mahal, you know that it immortalizes love like nothing else. His beloved was his wife Mumtaz who bore him 14 children. She died during child birth. That dynasty also gave us Aurangzeb – a pious, Islamic zealot who created the world’s largest empire. He is most remembered as one who imposed a tax on non-Muslims. His religious zeal was responsible for the empire to begin crumbling upon his death in 1707.

A take away from this brief review of the history of the Muslim dynasties in India is that barring Aurangzeb and some others, even when Islam was the religion of the sovereign, most rulers in India did not compel the people to adopt Islam as their faith. Thus, even at its zenith, Islam remained a minority religion in India. Albeit, a dominant minority.

Just when the Mughal dynasty began to totter, India reverted to a land of many small kingdoms even if nominally under the Mughal empire. That's when the British began building their empire. That was late 18<sup>th</sup> century. For the next 150 years or so, Christianity was the religion of the rulers. That is, until 1947, when India was partitioned into two countries – a Pakistan and the Union of India.

While the extended Muslim reign of India gave Muslims a sense of entitlement to rule, the personalities and events that have most shaped Islam and politics in modern India have their origin in the British period of India's history. Let's briefly talk about that.

British rulers introduced secular, liberal ideas, education and English as a language of the state. These were adopted early on by the Hindus in and around Calcutta, which was then the capital of British India. These people, called Bengalis, were also among the earliest Indians to join British government and civil services. The Muslim citizens, however, for the most part, continued with traditional religious schooling of children. Liberal ideas, education and English were not their cup of tea, so to say.

Liberal ideas, education and cross-cultural influences kindled in Hindus democratic aspirations. Soon, there came to be founded by a Scotsman – AU Hume - in 1885, the Indian National Congress. The Congress was comprised of Indians and India-loving British civil servants and theosophists. At its founding, its objective was to obtain greater share in government for the educated Indians. Its first president was a native Bengali. Within a few years, however, the demands of the Congress became more radical in the face of constant opposition from the government. And of course, years later, it led the movement for India's independence.

In this background, the earliest Muslim intellectuals and leaders in British India counseled the *qaum* – the Muslim community – to remain mindful of their special identity (as Muslims and former rulers) and to recognize that their interests would be better served by cultivating friendship with the British rather than joining political organizations such as the Indian National Congress. Thus for example, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan - the most towering Muslim intellectual and leader of the second-half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – articulated in 1888 a theory that would in the decades to come have a profound effect on Indian politics. He proclaimed that the Muslims were a separate nation within India. One country, two nations, he said. One, a nation of Islam, and the other, a nation of all others collectively called Hindus. This was the first time that such a view was publicly voiced – that the interests of India's Muslims were separate from those of the Hindus. Let me quote some excerpts from his 1888 speech:

“You know, gentlemen, that from a long time, our friends, the Bengalis have shown very warm feelings on political matters. Three years ago they founded a very big assembly, with its sittings in various places, and they have given it the name “National Congress.” We and our nation gave no thought to the matter...Our Mohammedan nation has hitherto sat silent... I do not think the Bengali politics useful for my brother Musalmans...We ought to unite with who we can unite.”

Sir Syed Ahmed Khan then goes on to talk about the British rulers (and I quote):

“No Mohameddan can say that the English are not “people of the Book.” [The British were Christians]. No Mohameddan can deny this: that God has said that no people of other religions can be friends of Mohammedans except the Christians...At this time our nation is in bad state as regards education and wealth, but God has given us the light of religion, and the Koran is present for our guidance, which has ordained them and us to be friends. Now God has made them rulers over us. [The Hindus are people of the Book]. Therefore we should cultivate friendship when them, and should adopt that method by which their rule may remain permanent and firm in India and may not pass into the hands of the Bengalis. ..We do not want to become subjects of the Hindus instead of the subjects of the people of the Book...Therefore, the method we ought to adopt is this: that we should hold ourselves aloof from the political uproar and reflect on our condition, that we are behind them in education and are deficient in wealth.”

In the next 20 years, the British government became sympathetic to greater participation of native people in the governance of India. In 1906, 85 rich and influential Muslims met in Dacca, capital of present day Bangladesh, and formed their first political organization – the Muslim League. Their meeting was chaired by Mushtaq Hussain, a noble from Uttar Pradesh. I quote from his opening remarks:

“Gentlemen, that which has drawn us here today is not a need which has only now been felt by us. When the National Congress was founded in India, the need had even then been felt, and the late Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, to whose foresight and statesmanship Musalmans should always be grateful, had made great endeavors to impress upon Musalmans the belief that their safety and prosperity lay in their keeping aloof from the Congress.”

He goes on to say that in order to protect and advance the political rights of the Musalmans, it was necessary to form our own separate political organization. He says (and I quote):

“The Musalmans are only a fifth in number as compared with the total population of the country, and it is manifest that if at any remote period, the British Government ceases to exist in India, then the rule of India will pass into the hands of that community which is nearly four times as large as ourselves... And to prevent the realization of such aspirations, the Musalmans cannot find better and surer means than to congregate under the banner of Great Britain, and to devote their lives and prosperity in its protection.”

The take away from this survey is that Muslim political stirrings in modern day India began on the premise that democracy would result in a dominating minority to become a dominated minority. And as such, continued British rule was preferable.

Note that in the Muslim view of the world, the separation of spiritual and temporal is not as in modern-day Christianity where the state and the church are neatly separated. In India, this was most eloquently expressed by a great Muslim poet, scholar, and political leader, Sir Mohammad Iqbal. I must confess here that Iqbal is one of my favorite poets of India. In a speech delivered to the Muslim League in 1930, he said:

“Europe uncritically accepted the duality of spirit and matter...This mistaken separation of spiritual and temporal has largely influenced European religious and political thought. It has resulted in the total exclusion of Christianity from the life of European States. The result is a set of mutually ill-adjusted states dominated by interests that are not human, but national.”

He goes on to ask:

“Is religion a private affair?...The question becomes of special importance in India where the Muslims happen to be a minority... The nature of the Prophet’s religious experience...is ...creative of a social order. Its...civic significance cannot be belittled merely because [the] origin is revelation. The religious idea of Islam...is organically related to the social order which it has created. Therefore the construction of a polity on national lines, if it means a displacement of the Islamic principles of solidarity, is simply unthinkable to a Muslim”

In other words, Islam is a separate nation by itself, and the spiritual and the temporal is one whole. Iqbal goes on to say:

“The Muslims demand for the creation of a Muslim India within India is, therefore, perfectly justified... The Hindu thinks that separate electorates are contrary to the spirit of true nationalism because he understands the word “nation” to mean a kind of universal amalgamation in which no communal entity ought to retain its private individuality. Such a state of things, however, does not exist. India is a land of racial and religious variety...We are 70 million, and far more homogenous than any other people in India. Indeed, the Muslims of India are the only Indian people who can fitly be described as a nation in the modern sense of the word... In the word of the Quran, “Hold fast to yourself; no one who erreth can hurt you, provided you are well-guided.”

Thus was nurtured the idea of one country, two nations.

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, one of the most respected leaders of the Indian National Congress and perhaps its longest-serving president, in his book “India Wins Freedom,” says that there were three phases in the development of the Muslim League, the political organization that founded Pakistan. The first phase was of being loyal to the British. The second was to derive from the British special benefits for the Muslims following political concessions extracted by the Congress through mass political agitations. The prime example of special benefits was the idea of “separate electorates.” In 1909, soon after it was formed, the Muslim League persuaded the British to reserve seats in various levels of government for the Muslims. Only Muslims could occupy these seats and only Muslims could elect members to it. The seats reserved were in excess of their relative proportion in the population. Thus 25% of the seats were reserved in the Imperial Executive Council of the Viceroy of India. //If you have heard of the British policy of divide and rule, that’s a glowing example.// The third phase was the phase led by Quaid-a-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan.

As Maulana Azad explains, Jinnah reasoned that if independent India were a democracy, as it would be, the Muslims would be a minority. Thus, representation in proportion to relative population would not work. He therefore sought to negotiate for equal representation of Muslims at various levels of government. Thus, if the Executive Council of the Viceroy – which was the highest executive body in pre-independence India – was comprised of 14 members, it must (according to Jinnah) have at least seven Muslims. Furthermore, he argued that the Muslim League alone should have the authority to nominate Muslim members to the Council, and that the Congress could not nominate any Muslim. The Congress, however, always thought of itself as a national party representing all peoples and faiths. The idea that Muslims alone could nominate Muslims was unacceptable to it. Moreover, its then president was Maulana Azad, himself a staunch Muslim.

I do not want to go into the politics of the creation of Pakistan and the partition of India. It is a separate subject altogether. Suffice to note here that the partition of India continues to be the most damaging event for Muslims in India, politically and socially.

To those of us who do not know, the partition of India was one of the largest and most rapid migrations in human history - an estimated 14.5 million people migrated within four years: about 7.3 million moved from each country to the other. It has been estimated that about 2.2 million people were either killed, missing or unaccounted for during the partition.

The partition was on communal lines. Muslim majority parts of India in the north-west and the north-east collectively became Pakistan. At that time, India's population was about 387 million people. Of these, about 57m citizens became part of Pakistan. About 45m Muslims, however, chose to remain in India. The population of Muslims in India is estimated to be around 170 million.

In orchestrating the partition of India, the Muslim League's single-minded concern was that in a democracy, the Muslims would be a minority and therefore condemned to perpetual domination by the Hindus, politically and otherwise. As it happens, partition worsened the lot of the Muslims that remained in India. It made them numerically even less and therefore politically weaker. Equally important, the idea that Muslims were a nation unto themselves – supranational, even when within the country of India – made them a perpetual and often mistaken target of Hindu nationalists. This is in spite of the fact that 3 of 12 presidents of India, the current vice-president of India, the current chief justice of the supreme court, the current foreign minister of India, and countless other leaders and dignitaries were and continue to be Muslims.

Missed in all this is that Hindus are not one people and do not speak with one voice. They never did. Not even when Mahatma Gandhi was alive. It is little wonder that if someone were to assassinate Mahatma Gandhi, it would be a Hindu zealot. India's largest Hindu nationalist party has been in power at the federal level for only 5 of India's 65 years since independence. And too as a coalition government! Today there are 6 national parties and 66 regional parties. As to the Muslim League, it has only 2 members in India's lower house of Parliament comprised of 545 members.

The most visible feature of modern-day politics of India is that the smaller parties hold the trump cards. They play a deciding role in a fractured Parliament and in various states. They are the proverbial tail that wags the dog. Thus, for instance, even though the Muslim League has only 2 representatives in the lower house of Parliament, it has a representative in the Federal cabinet. If only Quid-e-Azam Jinnah had the benefit of hindsight!

Because minority parties and minority votes matter so much, some political parties are said to pander for their votes. The Congress has traditionally been seen as a party that seeks to appease the Muslims. And over the years, several other secular parties have sought to step into those shoes. They view the Muslims as a vote bank. After all, the Muslims appear more homogenous than the Hindus who are fractured along caste, language, regional and rural-urban lines.

An outcome of this has been that unelected representatives of the Muslims – many of whom are religious leaders – have a greater influence on public policy than elected Muslim leaders. If the best person to get things done for the Muslims is the Imam, Ulema or another religious leader, rather than an elected representative, the elected representative is less influential in shaping public policies. In other words, the democratic path of political expression – of public participation and struggle and of electing representatives that make the laws that reflect the genius and the will of the people they

represent – the very road that the Muslim League chose not to take 100 years ago – continues to be a lightly tread road.

Thank you!