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OPINION

Imagining a Nation: Muslim Political thought and identity in South Asia - 1850-1950

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Abstract

The paper delineates the Muslim imagination of a nation and identity in South Asia, between 1850 and 1950, in the historical phase of colonialism, social change, and conjectural rise of nationalist movements. It critically discusses the way in which the Muslim masses interrogated the questions of identity, community, and nationhood at a time when the Mughal empire was declining and British imperialism was ascending. While based on the larger narration of Indian nationalism, the paper retraces, those major speculations on loyalty, representation, and religious identity, pointing to poetry as a robust medium for fermenting these ideas of nationhood and identity. Analysing the development of ideas that would fashion the Muslim imagination of the nation and contribute to the formation of its political identity, respectively, leading to demand for a separate nation. Quite similar in exploratory vein, it navigates the substrate of religion, politics, and modernity to understand the articulation of Muslim responses to colonialism and nationalism in that critical century.

Introduction

The concept of nationhood in South Asia between 1850 and 1950 emerged within a complex landscape of historical, political, social, and religious transformation (Hasan, 2006). In British India, Muslims formed a significant

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minority, a status that continually raised pressing questions about identity, representation, and governance in a rapidly evolving colonial world (Talbot, 1995). This period saw the final decline of the Mughal Empire, the consolidation of British rule, and the rise of nationalist movements (Hasan, 2006)— developments that profoundly shaped political thought among Muslim intellectuals and leaders.

Following the failed 1857 rebellion, in which Muslims played a prominent role, British reprisals further marginalized Muslim elites and marked the formal end of the Mughal dynasty, a longstanding symbol of Muslim sovereignty (Talbot, 1995). In the aftermath, Muslim thinkers sought ways to preserve their cultural identity and political agency under colonial rule. One of the earliest and most influential responses came from Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, who, deeply affected by the events of 1857, advocated modern education and collaboration with the British as strategic avenues for Muslim empowerment. His Aligarh Movement championed educational reform, integrating Western scientific learning with Islamic intellectual traditions, and encouraged loyalty to the British crown as a means of securing Muslim interests within a diverse society (Hasan, 2006).

Even as the Indian National Congress, founded in 1885, grew into a mass nationalist platform by the early 20th century (Talbot, 1995), many Muslims viewed its Hindu-majority leadership with suspicion. Concerns about majoritarian dominance and political marginalisation contributed to the emergence of an alternative vision of Muslim identity and political autonomy (Azad, 1998). These tensions culminated in the formation of the All-India Muslim League in 1906, which positioned itself as the representative of Muslim political interests under colonial rule (Khan, 2001).

Between 1900 and 1940, Muslim politics in India underwent significant ideological shifts. While the Muslim League increasingly embraced identity-based politics, prominent leaders such as Maulana Abul Kalam Azad remained committed to a unified, secular nationalism and Hindu-Muslim coexistence (Azad, 1998). Meanwhile, the idea of Muslims as a distinct political community, beyond their religious identity, gained traction. One of the earliest proponents of this idea was poet-philosopher Muhammad Iqbal, who envisioned a separate Muslim homeland in northwest India. Iqbal conceptualised Islam as a comprehensive socio-political

system requiring territorial sovereignty for its preservation (Iqbal, 2003).

The Aligarh Movement played a pivotal role in this ideological evolution. It offered a strategic counterpoint to the growing influence of Indian nationalism, which was increasingly framed through a Hindu cultural lens. By promoting modern education and institutional reform, the movement aimed to reverse Muslim socio-economic decline and redefine Muslim identity in the context of colonial modernity (Hasan, 2006). Institutions like the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College, later Aligarh Muslim University, became key sites for nurturing a new Muslim intelligentsia equipped to navigate modern political challenges.

The ideological ferment within the Muslim community during this period fostered competing visions of national belonging. While Azad and others argued for inclusive, secular unity, reformist trends inspired by the Aligarh ethos pushed for a distinct political identity. This duality not only reshaped Muslim self-perception but also reframed broader debates on nationhood, cultural autonomy, and political participation in colonial India. The Aligarh Movement thus left a lasting legacy: it modernised Muslim education while laying the intellectual groundwork for a

separate Muslim political consciousness that would come to challenge and redefine the dominant narratives of Indian nationalism.

Historical Background: Muslim Socio-Political Conditions

By the mid-19th century, South Asian Muslims experienced a profound transformation in their political and social landscape, particularly with the decline of the Mughal Empire (Hasan, 2006). Once the dominant force in the Indian subcontinent, the Mughals rapidly lost ground to rising religious kingdoms and the expanding British East India Company (Talbot, 1995). A pivotal moment in this shift was the Revolt of 1857, widely regarded as a turning point (Khan, 2001). Although it was a broader uprising against British rule, many Muslims—including members of the dwindling Mughal nobility—participated, hoping to revive Mughal sovereignty (Azad, 1998). However, the rebellion's failure marked the definitive end of the Mughal Empire. Its authority was reduced to a mere formality as the British deposed the last emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar, sealing the fate of Muslim political dominance in the region (Talbot, 1995).

During the British colonial regime, Muslims were gradually pushed to

the fringes of both political and economic power (Hasan, 2006). They were frequently suspected by the British, who had enjoyed close ties with the erstwhile Mughal administration, as the primary instigators of rebellion (Khan, 2001). Consequently, the British systematically excluded Muslims from civil administration, military roles, and even land ownership (Azad, 1998), triggering a decline in influence within a society that had once been at the centre of the old imperial order (Talbot, 1995).

In response to these challenges, the Muslim elite adopted divergent strategies, with some encouraging a collaborationist approach with the British and advocating for the modernisation of Muslim society (Hasan, 2006). Thus, this period set the stage for the emergence of distinct Muslim political movements, as leaders sought new ways to navigate their community's place in a rapidly changing colonial world (Khan, 2001).

One of the most significant responses to this crisis was the emergence of the Aligarh Movement, spearheaded by reformers such as Sir Syed Ahmed Khan. The movement was not only a call for educational and social upliftment but also a measured response to the socio-economic setbacks that had beleaguered the Muslim community (Hasan, 2006). Sir Syed recognised that without a fundamental transformation in the way Muslims engaged with modern education and economic systems, the community's traditional structures would remain incapable of contending with the forces of modernity and colonial domination. The Aligarh Movement, therefore, sought to bridge the gap between traditional Islamic scholarship and contemporary scientific and administrative knowledge, offering a vision of economic revival that was closely tied to cultural rejuvenation. In doing so, it laid the groundwork for a new form of Muslim nationalism that was as much about reclaiming lost socio-economic status as it was about asserting a unique cultural identity (Khan, 2001).

The interplay between economic conditions and cultural imagination is further evident in the burgeoning literary and poetic movements of the time. Poets and writers emerged as influential commentators on the socio-economic decline experienced by their community, using language as a tool to articulate the collective grief and resolve of a people in crisis (Iqbal, 2003). Through their verses, these literary figures lamented the loss of economic prosperity and cultural grandeur, while simultaneously invoking the

promise of renewal through education and political mobilisation. Their work resonated deeply with a population that was seeking both a moral and material renaissance, effectively linking the struggle for economic justice with a broader quest for national identity. In effect, the literary articulation of socio-economic woes became a rallying cry for a distinct Muslim national consciousness, one that envisioned self-reliance and cultural revival as pathways to overcoming the structural inequities imposed by colonial rule (Azad, 1998).

Moreover, the cumulative effect of economic disenfranchisement and cultural disintegration provided fertile ground for political mobilisation. As Muslims increasingly found themselves marginalised within the broader framework of Indian nationalism—a movement that was perceived to be dominated by the interests of the Hindu majority—the quest for socio-economic justice gradually intertwined with the demand for political autonomy (Talbot, 1995). Economic decline underscored the argument that Muslims constituted a separate nation with its unique historical trajectory and socio-economic imperatives, which could not be adequately addressed within the existing political structures of colonial India. This line of thought eventually gave impetus to the formation of distinct political organisations, such as the All-India Muslim League, which explicitly sought to secure separate political rights and foster an environment conducive to economic rejuvenation (Rashid, 2012).

The socio-economic conditions of 19th-century Muslims, characterised by a dramatic decline in traditional power structures, economic marginalisation under British colonial policies, and the resultant cultural dissonance, played a pivotal role in shaping the imagination of a Muslim nation. Faced with economic deprivation and diminished social stature, the Muslim community responded by reimagining its identity, not only as a repository of a rich historical and cultural legacy but also as a proactive, modern nation capable of reclaiming its rightful place in a rapidly changing world. The confluence of these economic hardships with intellectual and cultural revivals paved the way for a political awakening that would ultimately culminate in the demand for a separate Muslim state, a movement that underscored the

inseparable link between economic conditions and national imagination (Chaudhry, 2004; Jalal, 1994).

Emergence of Muslim Political Consciousness: The Founding of the Muslim League

In colonial India, the emergence of the Indian National Congress in 1885 marked a watershed moment in political organisation, and in its early years, many Muslim leaders actively aligned with this nationalist platform. At the outset, the Congress provided a unifying platform for various anti-colonial grievances and for demanding improved political representation. Notable figures such as Badruddin Tyabji worked in collaboration with Congress colleagues to build a united front against British rule (Khan, 2001). During this period, the optimism of many Muslim leaders was rooted in the belief that participating within the broad nationalist framework could secure greater political and social reforms that would ultimately benefit all Indians, including Muslims (Talbot, 1995).

However, as the Congress began to grow in popularity and its membership increasingly reflected Hindu-majority interests, leading to fears among many Muslim intellectuals and leaders that their distinct cultural and religious priorities might get marginalised within a unified national movement. Critics argued that the very structure of a majority-rule democratic framework could lead to the systematic neglect of Muslim concerns, as their numbers were likely to be outweighed by the Hindu majority in political decision-making processes (Azad, 1998). This growing sense of alienation compelled several Muslim leaders to reconsider their strategies, questioning whether their continued cooperation with the Congress would truly safeguard the unique interests of their community. In response to this perceived marginalisation, the idea of creating a separate political entity specifically designed to protect Muslim rights began to take shape.

The formation of the All-India Muslim League in 1906 in Dhaka marked a decisive turning point in this reevaluation. The League was established with the primary objective of ensuring that Muslims had dedicated representation and that their political rights would be secured in any future constitutional reforms (Hasan, 2006). One of the principal demands advanced by the League was the institution of separate electorates, a measure intended to guarantee that Muslim voices would not be drowned out in a general electoral process dominated by the Hindu majority (Talbot, 1995).

This strategic shift also signalled a broader transformation in the political imagination of Indian Muslims. While earlier leaders had seen value in an integrated national struggle, the reality of growing communal and electoral imbalances led to the realisation that safeguarding Muslim identity required its political vehicle. The Muslim League's formation thus not only represented a break from the earlier cooperative approach with the Congress but also laid the ideological groundwork for later demands for a separate Muslim state (Khan, 2001).

Over time, what began as an effort to protect communal interests within a colonial framework evolved into a movement that would eventually claim an independent homeland for Muslims—a transformation that fundamentally reshaped the political landscape of South Asia (Chaudhry, 2004). Ultimately, the journey from cooperation under the INC to the establishment of the Muslim League reflects an intricate interplay between political pragmatism and the assertion of distinct communal identities. This evolution was driven by the recognition that without dedicated representation, the cultural and religious priorities of Muslims could be perpetually sidelined, thus necessitating the formation of an organisation that would champion their rights and redefine their political destiny within—and eventually beyond—the colonial context (Azad, 1998).

Intellectual Debates on Muslim Nationhood: From Iqbal to Jinnah

The colonial Indian debates over Muslim nationhood that eventually laid the groundwork for Pakistan owe much to the intellectual and political luminaries who defined the contours of a separate Muslim homeland (Jalal, 1994; Chaudhry, 2004). These debates did not arise in a vacuum but were the culmination of decades of transformation in South Asia—a region where centuries of Mughal rule had long established a distinct cultural and political identity for Muslims. With the disintegration of the Mughal Empire and the subsequent rise of colonial power, traditional structures were dismantled, forcing Muslim intellectuals to reassess and rearticulate their identity in a rapidly changing context. In this environment, two figures emerged as central to the discourse: Allama Mohammad Iqbal and Mohammad Ali Jinnah, whose intellectual journeys and visions evolved in divergent directions over time (Siddiqui, 2005).

Allama Iqbal's contributions were deeply rooted in his philosophical

and poetic expressions. In his influential 1930 Allahabad address of Muslim League, Iqbal propagated the vision of a separate and independent Muslim state in northwestern India. Although he did not use the term "Pakistan"—nor did he envision a fully formed political entity based solely on cultural, social, and religious dimensions—Iqbal's rhetoric was nonetheless seen by many as revolutionary. He promoted the idea that the Muslim community was not a mere religious minority but as a distinct nation with its own historical experiences and cultural values, worthy of the same political freedom granted to other nations (Jalal, 1994). Iqbal argued that Islam, far from being only a set of ritualistic practices, embodied a comprehensive sociopolitical system that could establish justice, promote equality, and ensure the collective good. This view suggested that only in a state where Muslims were the dominant force could the moral and spiritual principles of Islam be fully implemented—a notion that resonated with many who felt marginalised in the colonial order (Siddiqui, 2005).

On the other hand, Mohammad Ali Jinnah's evolution as a political leader was shaped by his direct engagement with the colonial political process. Initially an advocate of Hindu-Muslim unity, Jinnah worked within the framework of the Indian National Congress and even collaborated with leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi. However, as the Congress increasingly became dominated by Hindu perspectives, and particularly after the 1928 Nehru Report rejected critical Muslim demands such as separate electorates and constitutional safeguards, Jinnah's disillusionment grew (Chaudhry, 2004). The provincial elections of 1937 served as a decisive turning point for him; Congress's electoral success convinced Jinnah that Muslims would continue to be politically marginalised in a Hindu-majority independent India. This realisation led him to gradually embrace the two-nation theory— a political doctrine asserting that Muslims and Hindus were inherently distinct and that Muslims required a separate state to secure their rights and identity (Rashid, 2012).

Under Jinnah's leadership, the Muslim League began to articulate these concerns more forcefully. The League's growing advocacy for a separate Muslim state was not merely about safeguarding communal interests but also about redefining political power in a way that resonated with the evolving self-conception of the Muslim community. The formal endorsement of this demand came with the Lahore

Resolution of 1940, which crystallised the idea that the creation of a separate state was the only viable means of preserving Muslim political autonomy and cultural integrity (Rashid, 2012). Scholars have noted that while Iqbal provided the philosophical and intellectual foundation for this movement, it was Jinnah's pragmatic political strategy that transformed abstract ideas into concrete political action.

In essence, the debates over Muslim nationhood in colonial India were both a reflection of and a response to the profound sociopolitical changes wrought by colonial rule. The intellectual legacy of Iqbal and the political evolution of Jinnah, though distinct in approach, together forged a vision of Muslim identity that continues to influence intercommunal relations and the political landscape of South Asia to this day (Jalal, 1994; Siddiqui, 2005; Chaudhry, 2004; Rashid, 2012).

Poetry and the culture imagination of a Muslim nation

In colonial India, poetry played a pivotal role in fashioning Muslim identity and imagination (Iqbal, 2003; Hasan, 2006). It gave voice to Muslims to express their cultural dimensions, engage in intellectual debates, and resist the subjugation policies of the colonial regime (Azad, 1998; Khan, 2001). Poets articulated the struggle of a community that had faced a profound loss in political power and socioeconomic devaluation (Iqbal, 2003). The most significant influence of this category was Allama Muhammad Iqbal, whose works went remarkably deep into Muslim political thought in the first half 20th century. Iqbal used his poetry to call Muslims towards spiritual and cultural revivalism, combating philosophy and poetic artistry in his works. In one of his best-known poems, in *Bang-e-Dara* (The Call of the Marching Bell), a sense of love for the land runs through the lines while trying to seal the need for cultural pride.

Yunan-o-misr-o-ruma, sb mit gaya jahan se
Ab tak magar hai baqi nam-o-nishan hamara
(Greece, Egypt, and Rome are all gone from the world,
But we still have our name and identity intact)

This is because he believed that Muslim identity was strong enough to overcome the attacks of colonisation. Mirza Ghalib is so influential that despite his career belonging to a period previous to his influence resonates across generations of poets. Ghalib's poetry is a testimonial to the trauma of the fall of the Mughal empire and the

alienation among Muslims post the 1857 revolt.

*Hui muddat ke Ghalib mar gaya,
par yaad aata hai,.
Woh kahta hai ek baat pe, yoon
hota to kya hota.*
(It's been centuries since Ghalib
died, yet I remember how.
He'd ruminate over everything,
'What if this had been so?)

The ordinary gloomy reflection of the disillusionment so many Muslims felt in finding their place in a changing world at that time. The poetry of the students of Ghalib such as Altaf Hussain Hali painted in vivid colour the Muslim downfall and appealed towards self-reform and education in *Musaddas-e-Hali*. Hence, he poignantly laments over the pitiful state of the Muslim community in this stirring verse.

*Kahan ka tha is qarz ka jo jaye
ada karte,
Zamana me yeh kaam hai sab se
zyada karte.*
(How could we repay this debt?
In this age, it's the hardest thing
to do)

Hali's poetry called upon Muslims to wake up from their slumber and modernise with education. This suited Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and his reformist movement perfectly. Finally, Akbar Allahabadi was known for his satire and sarcasm that he used in the form of his poems while criticising colonialism and the blind adoption of Westernism. In one of his satirical verses, he wrote to someone:

*Dunya mein hoon duniya ka
talabgar nahi hoon,
Bazaar se guzra hoon, kharidaar
nahi hoon.*
(I exist in this world, but I am not
a seeker of worldly pleasures,
I walk through the bazaar, but I
am no shopper.)

By such lines, Akbar Allahabadi warned against the erosion of traditional Muslim values in the face of the onslaught of modernity and colonialism and made a prescriptive demand for a proud Muslim identity based on its own cultural and religious idiom.

This way, poets like Iqbal, Ghalib, Hali, and Akbar Allahabadi used poetry to contribute toward cultural revival and political mobilisation, contributing uniquely toward the intellectual base that eventually led to the formation of Pakistan. Their works provided a sense of spiritual rejuvenation and moral leadership for the Muslims of India and essentially became a critical force in imagining a nation where the identity of being Muslim could flourish nationally.

Conclusion

The evolution of political thought for South Asian Muslims was an

intricate and transformative journey from the mid-19th century until the inception of Pakistan in 1947. Due to the fall of the Mughal Empire, the rising tide of British colonial power pushed Muslims to the sidelines of the emerging social, political, and economic fields. The collapse of the Mughal dominion did not just demolish the political system that had stood for hundreds of years; it also shook up the self-perception of the Muslims as a community. This generated an urgent need for the renewal of their intellectual and political thought.

During colonial rule, Muslims felt disenfranchised as they were grossly underrepresented in bureaucracy, military, and financial institutions. While marginalisation deepened, a dynamic intellectual movement emerged, driven by Muslim scholars and leaders seeking to reconcile Islamic tradition with the demands of modern governance. Visionaries like Sir Syed Ahmed Khan and Allama Iqbal redefined Islam, not merely as a set of religious beliefs, but as a comprehensive sociopolitical ethos— a framework through which an alternative to both colonial rule and Hindu-majority nationalism could take shape. .

The rethinking of identity eventually gave life to the idea of Muslims as a separate political community, which coalesced into *the*

Two-Nation Theory. Gradually, the idea that Muslims were a separate nation gained acceptance among a significant proportion of Indian Muslims, especially the upper-class sections. It insisted that the community was distinguished by their own religious, cultural, and historical ethos and perceptions, which became more firmly etched in communal consciousness with colonial interference, coupled with the decreasing influence of Hindu-dominated nationalist movements. All-India Muslim League's formation in 1906 formalised these political aspirations and became the main platform for articulating and ultimately achieving the demand for Pakistan.

The partition of British India in 1947 was thus not merely a redrawing of borders but a radical reconstitution of identity. For Pakistan, the new state was envisioned as a homeland where Islamic principles could guide law, governance, and cultural life. In contrast, India adopted a secular framework that promised equality for all but continually grappled with the integration of its Muslim minority. These divergent national trajectories have left lasting imprints: Pakistan has struggled with the tensions of defining its Islamic identity within a modern nation-state, while India's secularism remains contested amid growing communal polarisation. However, the secession

of East Pakistan in 1971 was a terrible blow to the idea of a Muslim homeland. It exposed the fact that religious identity alone was insufficient to hold people together in the absence of cultural, linguistic, and regional cohesion. This rupture highlighted the internal diversities within Muslim communities and demonstrated the limits of a monolithic vision of Islamic nationalism.

Throughout this period, South Asian Muslim political thought was never monolithic, but rather it involved internal debates on means, identity, and involvement with colonial structures. While some sought reform and cooperation within existing institutions, others pushed for a separate homeland. The tensions between idealistic patterns of thought embodied in Iqbal and concrete forms of political action in the person of Jinnah were what made the dynamic nature of this political tradition.

The intellectual legacy of this era continues to shape contemporary South Asia. In Pakistan, Islamic identity remains central to national discourse, influencing law, education, and foreign policy. In India, Muslims navigate their place within a secular yet increasingly majoritarian state. The debates over representation, minority rights, and religious pluralism in both countries echo the unresolved questions of the colonial period.

Nevertheless, the evolution of Muslim political identity in South Asia was not merely a response to colonial subjugation, but a broader civilizational reckoning. The project of reconciling Islamic heritage with modern political forms gave rise to enduring institutions, ideologies, and identities. Partition was both a culmination of this intellectual journey and the beginning of new challenges, as the newly independent states grappled with the meaning of nationhood, secularism, and pluralism. The foundational debates of the colonial period remain alive today, continuing to shape the region's politics, social fabric, and collective memory. ∎

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