INDIA'S MUSLIMS: THE "OTHER" WITHIN?

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Introduction

In this paper, I explore how the Colonial period shaped the modern discourse on the Muslim community in India. First, I shall point to the role played by the Colonial state in interpreting Indian society. Then, I will point to the fallacies in the official British narratives on the Indian Muslim community by highlighting the intricacies of Islamic history in the subcontinent. Thereafter, I will touch upon the relation between British colonial narratives and statements issued by the two earliest RSS chiefs, figures who were crucial to the formation of the Hindu Right in India. Besides pointing to discursive resemblances, I will also show how British colonial interventions in India engendered the episteme central to the RSS chiefs' claims about Indian Muslims. Finally, I have to admit to a major pitfall of this work. In exploring premodern Islam in India, I largely rely on Richard Eaton's work on Muslim conversions in India. At the same time, by pointing to enduring misconceptions about Muslims in India that his work deals with, I will highlight the need for a reaffirmation of Eaton's argument.

The British Understanding of Indian Muslims

The most basic intervention made by the colonial state in Indian society was a demarcation of identity. The colonial analysis of Indian society was based on an understanding that it contained discrete categories of social groups, unable to relate to each other. The task of colonial administrators, ethnographers, and historians was to articulate these categories and to help the state administer and interact with the subject population at large. In this, the most common and broadest structural unit to categorize Indian society was that of religion. For instance, the 1881 Census understood the Indian society as comprising Muslims, Aryans, and a third broad category including Aborigines and those of mixed aborigine-Aryan descent. Importantly, this was an unprecedented attempt at providing an aggregate, homogenous view of over fifty million Indian Muslims.[1]

Another significant vestige of the colonial period is the interpretation of the Indian past in which the ancient period is synonymous with the Hindu period, the medieval with the Islamic, and the modern with the British. First proposed by James Mill in *The History of British India* (1817), this periodization is based on the

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[1] David Lelyveld, *Aligarh's First Generation: Muslim Solidarity in British India* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978), 14.

understanding that the coming of Islam created a rupture in the history of India, i.e., it was culturally discontinuous with its ancient past.[2]

Besides this interpretation of Islamic history and the Muslim masses of the subcontinent, some important British administrators and politicians also perceived this subject population as a martial race, antagonistic to colonial rule in India. This was representative of the general fear in the colonial administration about Muslim disloyalty, noticeable in the wake of the revolt of 1857. William Hunter, a leading figure of the Indian Civil Service, fervently expressed the anxiety in his book, *The Indian Musalmans* (1871). The book itself was written at the viceroy's request to help formulate the British policy towards Muslims. In the text, Hunter discusses an obligation among the "whole Muhammadan community" to rebel against the crown, an obligation to which the lower classes are most responsive. Further, he affirms the foreignness of Indian Muslims, who are part of the "Muhammadan world", united from Constantinople to China, at odds with Hindus who are "the real natives of the country." Around the time of *The Indian Musalmans'* publication, Lord Salisbury took a similar stance in London, when he referred to the political ambitions of Indian Muslims to spread Islamic rule, with their design on places as far as Cairo and Constantinople.[3]

Intricacies of the Subcontinent's History

In these few instances of the British colonial discourse, we encounter certain assumptions about the Indian Muslim community that have lived on in post-colonial India. First, there is the apprehension of Indian Muslims as a separate collectivity. Secondly, they are conceived as belonging to a foreign civilization. Finally, related to this is the presupposition of their allegiance to the *ummah*, a transnational community of believers, which undermines their loyalty to a modern, non-Islamic state. As much as these assumptions seem obvious today, especially in a pre-modern context, they hold little ground. On the question of Muslim allegiance to the *ummah*, a glimpse at the Mughal paradigm presents a different picture. The Mughal power structure was based on a kinship-based hierarchy, with the Mughal dynasty based in North India at its apex. All members of the state's ruling class, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, had to swear the allegiance of their lineage to that of the emperor. This allegiance to the sovereign took precedence over any other loyalties, including allegiance to a pan-Islamic institute like the Caliphate. For the officials of the imperial court, mostly Muslims from Central Asia and Iran, this meant that their allegiance was bound to their sovereign, more than to their indigenous societies.[4]

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[2] Romila Thapar, *Early India: From the Origins to AD 300* (California: University of California Press, 2004), 5.

[3] David Lelyveld, *Aligarh's First Generation: Muslim Solidarity in British India* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978), 9.

[4] Ibid at 24.

However, beyond the Muslim elites of the Mughal state were the Muslim masses of pre-modern India, who had a fairly limited affinity with the *ummah*. This was a result of the manner through which large-scale conversions occurred in Western Punjab and Eastern Bengal, by far the most extensive Islamic conversions in the subcontinent. In Punjab, mass conversions took place among itinerant *Jat* groups, through their exposure to Sufi shrines in the region from the thirteenth century onwards. In East Bengal, a similar process of mass conversions began in the sixteenth century.[5]

Owing to the local context, centered around local shrines and saints, and due to the gradual process spanning centuries, the two aforementioned paradigms of Islamization exemplify what Richard Eaton calls "the accretion aspect of conversion." Here, the social behavior of the converts was shaped in a regional setting, in conjunction with their already-existing customs. Furthermore, characteristic of the accretion process, there didn't exist among the newly converted communities an urge to discard their erstwhile religious customs. In Punjab, the accretion aspect is demonstrated by the naming pattern of a Punjabi Jat group, the Sials. In the early fifteenth century, ten percent of the recorded Sial males had Muslim names. This number rose to fifty-six percent by the mid-seventeenth century, then seventy-five percent a century later. Finally, by the early nineteenth century, all the recorded males of the community had Muslim names. In the case of Bengal, the accretion aspect can be discerned through the ways in which local Muslim poets referred to the sole God of the Quran. In the sixteenth century, the poet, Sayyid Sultan, referred to himself as *Iswara* and identified the prophet as his avatar. As late as the eighteenth century, terms such as *Prabhu*, *Niranjan,* and *Kartar*, among others, were being used by Bengali Muslim poets to denote God.[6]

The accretion aspect of conversion destabilizes the Colonial narratives on the Indian Muslim community that I touched upon earlier. Firstly, Islam cannot be considered foreign to India; the religion was not imported to the country all of a sudden. For many communities of the subcontinent, conversion implied gradual incorporation of Islam into their cultural life, without removal of their existing religious practices. In this sense, the advent of Islam in India was continuous with the country's pre-Islamic past. Moreover, as the Muslim communities evolved in a regional paradigm, their social behavior had more in common with the non-Muslim neighbors in their vicinity than with the Muslims in some far-off corner of the world, or for that matter, of the subcontinent. In essence, the faith of Muslims in Punjab would have been rooted in Multan or Pakpattan rather than in Cairo or Constantinople. This unsettles the conception of Indian Muslims as a discrete social group as well as the

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[5] Richard Eaton, "Approaches to the Study of Conversion to Islam in India." In *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*. Edited by Richard. C. Martin (New York: One Word Press, 1987), 120.
[6] Ibid at 114

apprehension of their heightened allegiance and alignment with a global community of believers.

Yet, around the time of the first census in India, there was indeed a growing consciousness among Indian Muslims regarding their solidarity with the *ummah*. An important source of this shift in consciousness was the emergence of Islamic reform movements in the country.[7] More than anything else, it was due to the improved transportation systems of the nineteenth century that strengthened the contacts of the Indian Muslim masses with Mecca, that these movements became widespread.[8] Hereon, returnees from Hajj, with a heightened awareness of the universal truth of Islam that could be at odds with how the religion was expressed in the pilgrim's native village or town, could initiate Islamic reform movements. The participants of these movements strove to set a standard of correct religious belief and practice for their followers for a return to a perceived "true Islam." In this, they usually eschewed customary practices and rather, encouraged a fulfillment of the obligations of Islam based on the written records of the Quran and the Hadith.

This development facilitated the further integration of Indian Muslims with the wider *ummah*. Under the influence of reformist movements, Indian Muslims could now acquire an awareness of being part of a world religion. They could relate to Muslims from diverse geographical backgrounds through the resonance of their religious universals. At the same time, this awareness came at the cost of parochial customs, which would be discarded if considered incongruous with Islamic universals. Hence, this process crystallized the cultural distinctiveness of Indian Muslim communities within their respective regional vicinities. An early-twentieth-century ballad on Haji Shariat Allah (d. 1840), the founder of an Islamic reform movement in Bengal, demonstrates this transformation. The author lauds the figure for abolishing the worship of shrines and trampling down all *shirk* and *bidat*, so that "the sun of Islam rose high in the sky."[9] Here, we see abstinence from local shrine-based worship and a larger iconoclastic streak, which was not present among the Bengali poets that I discussed earlier. There is also a firmer assertion of belongingness to a universal faith that exists independently of local, popular customs. This assertion of religious identity distinguishes the reform from the accretion aspect of conversion.

Yet, there is no reason to believe that the penetration of reform movements was absolute among the Indian masses. Eaton points to Muslim communities in India that remained unaffected even by the strong reform currents of the nineteenth century. An example is the Meo community of Rajasthan, whose marriage and inheritance customs are non-Islamic, akin to their Hindu neighbors, while their rituals related to

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[7] Barbara Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1982), 8.

[8] Richard Eaton, "Approaches to the Study of Conversion to Islam in India." In *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*. Edited by Richard. C. Martin (New York: One Word Press, 1987), 121.

[9] Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760* (California: University of California Press, 1996), 282.

life cycles, like burying the dead, are Islamic.[10] Similar trends can be seen among the Muslims of Punjab and Bengal. According to nineteenth-century district gazetteers, Mohammed Mujeeb could point to the spiritual dependence of Punjabi Muslims on miracles and magic, "to a degree incompatible with genuine belief in any omnipotent God." Likewise, the 1901 census of India reported Bengali Muslims joining in Durga puja and using Hindu astrologers in their daily lives. In certain aspects of social identity then, these Muslims were still indistinct from their non-Muslim neighbors.[11]

Legacy of the Colonial Period

This reality of Muslim existence in India clearly undermines a simplistic colonial construction of Indian society, whereby all Muslims of the subcontinent are pitted against the other religious groups. Certainly, during the colonial period, there was an emerging consciousness among many Indian Muslims of their religious identity spurred by reformist movements, but the influence of such movements cannot be considered all-pervasive. Moreover, the idea that affinity to the Islamic world deems Indian Muslims (or for that matter Muslims anywhere else) hostile to a non-Islamic modern state is highly problematic. Ayesha Jalal, in her analysis of Maulana Azad's politics, demonstrates the limitations of such notion. Azad frequently made recourse to Islamic conceptions, such as that of Jihad, in his career. Moreover, his anti-colonial thought was driven by a sense of pan-Islamic solidarity in the face of colonial oppression. Thus, his pan-Islamism was in no way contradictory to his Indian nationalism.[12]

Rather, it can be argued that colonial administrators were affected by their own assumptions about the age-old struggle between Islam and Christendom while making claims about the divided loyalties of Indian Muslims, which would urge them to rebel. This colonial viewpoint may have contributed heavily to the modern Indian suspicion about Muslim loyalty to India, especially prevalent in the Hindu Right. Gowalkwer, the second chief of the RSS, vehemently raised this suspicion. In reference to non-Hindus, he once noted, "They have developed a feeling of identification with the enemies of the land. They look to some foreign lands as their holy places. They call themselves Sheikhs or Syeds." Likewise, in *We, or Our Nationhood Defined*, he wrote, "the foreign races in Hindustan must lose their separate existence to merge in the Hindu race." In a similar vein, his predecessor, Hegdewar, called Muslims *yavana* (foreign snakes).[13] These RSS chiefs resemble the likes of Lord Salisbury and Hunter

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[10] Richard Eaton, "Approaches to the Study of Conversion to Islam in India." In *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*. Edited by Richard. C. Martin (New York: One Word Press, 1987), 112.

[11] Ibid at 121.

[12] Ayesha Jalal, "Striking a Just Balance: Maulana Azad as a Theorist of Trans-national Jihad." *Modern Intellectual History* 4, no. 1 (2007): 97.

[13] Ali Khan Mahmudabad. *Poetry of Belonging: Muslim Imaginings of India 1850-1950* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2020), 15.

in their anxiety about the Indian Muslims' affiliation with the *ummah*. More importantly, their attacks on the Muslim community are possible because of the colonial discourse on Indian society, whereby Islam and Hinduism represent two different civilizations, with the prior conceived as a foreign import, a proposition that was not supported by the realities of the subcontinent.

Conclusion

I have attempted to show how the colonial period shaped the modern discourse on the Indian Muslim community. I first investigated the colonial state's interpretation of Indian society, which partook in a vision of Indian Muslims as a homogenous community. I also examined narratives on the Muslim community espoused by influential figures of the colonial state. These narratives were in fact based on the colonial framework of interpreting Indian society. Then, I delved into some caveats of Islamic history in the subcontinent, which undermine the veracity of these narratives. Finally, I briefly highlighted the role of these colonial constructs in influencing the discourse of the Hindu Right in India.

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