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Reinterpreting Muslim Nationalism from Conquest to Freedom

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Abstract

This paper explores how Muslim nationalism developed during colonial India and how the way we interpret that history continues to shape today's discourse, especially the tendency to label Indian Muslims as 'anti-national.' By looking closely at influential Muslim thinkers and political leaders, the paper pushes back against the notion that Muslim political thought was always about separation. This paper argues that colonial-era Muslim nationalism had vast political ideas beyond separatism, including cultural autonomy, constitutional safeguards, and reformed citizenship within a united India. There is a misconception about Muslim nationalism in the modern era, which has resulted in Muslims in India being termed as 'anti nationalist'.

Introduction

The modern political discourse labels the political thought among Muslims under colonial rule as anti-national, a fact reflected in the ongoing marginalisation of the Muslim community in post-colonial India. The research paper examines how the Muslim political thinking developed from conquest to freedom, with a specific emphasis on how Muslim intellectuals and leaders handled the issues of identity, belonging and their place in Indian nationalism and the concept of a future nation-state.

The central research question is "How has the history of Muslim nationalism in colonial India been misunderstood in ways that contribute to the portrayal of Indian Muslims as 'anti-national' in contemporary discourse?" The complexity of Muslim political thought during the colonial period needs to be reconsidered and move beyond just thinking of it as a reason for partition.

This paper draws on Muhammad Iqbal's 'Presidential Address' to the All-India Muslim League, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's 'Causes of the Indian Revolt,' and Ayesha Jalal's 'Jinnah's Pakistan' to argue that Muslim political thought in colonial India was complex, diverse, and far from inherently separatist. It was a response to diverse challenges that the muslims in India faced due to colonialism, majoritism and modernisation. This paper challenges the contemporary narratives that use selective readings to marginalise Indian Muslims.

Literature Review

The literature that deals with the historiography of Muslim nationalism has evolved from the colonial to the post-independence period. There is a subsequent shift from the partition discourse to the nationalist discourse to the more recent cultural discourse.

In the years after independence, much of the early historical writing was shaped by nationalist perspectives. Historians like R.C. Majumdar and S.R. Mehrotra often portrayed Muslim politics in colonial India as consistently separatist, casting figures like Sir Syed Ahmed Khan and Muhammad Iqbal

as early champions of the 'two-nation theory' and eventual partition.[1] This view often reduces Muslim political identity to just religious difference. This identity, due to religious difference, portrays Muslim nationalism standing against Indian Nationalism rather than being a more complex part of it.

But in the 1970s and 1980s, these nationalist accounts were challenged. Mushirul Hasan's study of Muslim politics in the United Provinces showed that Muslim political identity was not monolithic or predetermined, pointing to the considerable support for the Congress among Muslims well into the 1930s.[2] Likewise, Gyanendra Pandey's "The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India" demonstrated that communal identities weren't fixed or old; they were constructed and reinforced by the manner colonial rulers classified individuals and created knowledge about them.[3] Ayesha Jalal's seminal book "The Sole Spokesman" essentially questioned the conventional narrative of Partition by contending that Pakistan was not a mere consequence of Muslim separatism but, instead, unfolded out of political exigencies and strategic choices in an extremely uncertain situation.[4] As per Jalal, Jinnah was not seeking a separate state on religious lines, he was merely employing Pakistan as a bargaining chip to gain maximum political protection for Muslims in a united India, who eventually agreed to partition when his bargaining plan did not work.

Subaltern scholars have subsequently broadened our knowledge by illustrating how colonial power influenced the political reactions of both Hindus and Muslims, how those reactions were themselves shaped by the structures they opposed. Intellectuals such as Ranajit Guha and Partha Chatterjee identified that Indian nationalism tended to appropriate the same colonial concepts it sought to counter, and in so doing became a form of 'derivative discourse' formed in the terms and logic of colonial domination.[5] Scholars such as Faisal Devji's "Muslim Zion" critically examined the intellectual roots of Pakistan as a political concept, positing that it was tapping into global notions of political belonging rather than exclusive religious identity.[6] Likewise, Venkat Dhulipala's "Creating a New Medina" explored how religious discourse informed popular notions of Pakistan, countering Jalal's elite-led reading by pointing out the religious aspects of Muslim mass politics.[7]

More currently, researchers are interested in the linkage between historical accounts and Indian Muslims' marginalisation in modern India. Researchers such as Christophe Jaffrelot and Thomas Blom Hansen have explored how selective historical accounts of Muslim "separatism" operate in modern Hindu nationalist discourse to explain the marginalisation of Muslims as inherently disloyal citizens.[8] This connects history to the modern-day question of belonging and exclusion. Despite the quantity of sources at our disposal, there are several gaps. Firstly, there has not been sufficient emphasis on how Muslim political thought

[1] R. C. Majumdar, *The Sepoy Mutiny and the Revolt of 1857* (Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1957), 125-128; S. R. Mehrotra, *The Emergence of the Indian National Congress* (Vikas Publications, 1979), 203-210.

[2] Mushirul Hasan, *Nationalism and Communal Politics in India, 1916-1928* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1979), 87-95.

[3] Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), 23-28.

[4] Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League and the Demand for Pakistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 4-7.

[5] Ranajit Guha, *Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982), ix-xii; Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (Zed Books, 1986), 36-53.

[6] Faisal Devji, *Muslim Zion: Pakistan as a Political Idea* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 15-22.

[7] Venkat Dhulipala, *Creating a New Medina: State Power, Islam, and the Quest for Pakistan in Late Colonial North India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 3-15.

[8] Christophe Jaffrelot, *Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy* (Princeton University Press, 2021), 142-157; Thomas Blom Hansen, *The Law of Force: The Violent Heart of Indian Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 98-115.

reacted to particular historical pressures, as opposed to simply going in a linear direction toward separatism. There is also a need to better understand the broad spectrum of voices in Muslim political thought from integrationists such as Maulana Azad, to autonomy-advocating figures such as Iqbal, to outright separatists. Finally, we have yet to examine more closely how the manner we have narrated these histories thus far continues to influence the way Indian Muslims perceive and are perceived today. This paper aims to address these gaps by focusing on the link between how history is interpreted and how marginalisation plays out in the present.

The Colonial Origins of Muslim Political Consciousness

Sir Syed Ahmed Khan's political thought, shaped after the 1857 Rebellion, offers one of the earliest Muslim responses to British colonial rule. It resists being easily labelled as 'separatist' or 'anti-national.' In his 1858 essay "*Causes of the Indian Revolt*," he presents a thoughtful critique of colonial governance, pointing to the British failure to understand Indian customs and their exclusion of Indians from positions of power as major reasons behind the rebellion.

Khan writes, "The primary causes of rebellion are, I fancy, everywhere the same. It invariably results from the existence of a policy obnoxious to the dispositions, aims, habits, and views of those by whom the rebellion is brought about."[9]Instead of promoting a religiously separatist agenda, this analysis presents common grievances throughout communities concerning colonial authority and demands increased Indian participation in government.

Khan's subsequent work in education, particularly establishing the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College at Aligarh, later Aligarh Muslim University, showed his commitment to the view that Muslims had to respond to colonial modernity by adopting Western-style education while maintaining essential aspects of their Islamic heritage. His now-famous declaration that Hindus and Muslims were "two eyes of the beautiful bride that is Hindustan" reflects a vision of complementary communities within one national body, not inherently distinct nations.[10]

What's often labelled today as Sir Syed Ahmed Khan's 'separatism' was, in its time, a pragmatic response to the political realities he faced. His early opposition to the Indian National Congress wasn't because he was against the idea of Indian political progress. It was because he worried that pushing too hard, too soon, could backfire on the Muslim community, which he saw as lagging in education and economic strength compared to the Hindu majority. Khan argued, "The unfitness of my nation compels me to stand up and say something against the schemes of the Congress."[11]

Khan's political stance was determined by the politics of his time, but it's often been misread in hindsight as proof of some intrinsic Muslim separatism. In reality, his writing demonstrates a consistent commitment to Hindu-Muslim collaboration, even as he recognised the specific challenges of the Muslim community. His ideas are better interpreted as pragmatic accommodation, which tried to protect Muslim interests within the colonial system while pushing for gradual reform, without advocating for rejection of Indian unity or a desire for religious separation.

[9] Syed Ahmed Khan, "Causes of the Indian Revolt" (1858), *Texts from the Internet Archives*, ed. Frances Pritchett, Columbia University, accessed April 15, 2025, www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00urdu/asbab/index.html.

[10] David Lelyveld, *Aligarh's First Generation: Muslim Solidarity in British India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 103.

[11] Francis Robinson, *Separatism Among Indian Muslims: The Politics of the United Provinces' Muslims, 1860-1923* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 125.

The Evolution of Muslim Nationalism: From Minority Rights to Separate Nationhood

One of the most thoughtful and detailed reflection of Muslim political thought in colonial India can be found in the 1930 Presidential Address to the All-India Muslim League delivered by Muhammad Iqbal. Today, however, his ideas are often oversimplified, as if he simply supported the 'two-nation theory' or was an early advocate for Pakistani separatism, ignoring the depth and evolution of his thought In the center of Iqbal's speech lies an attempt to reconcile the universal ideals of Islam with the particular realities confronting Muslims resident in India. He argues, "The unity of an Indian nation, therefore, must be sought not in the negation, but in the mutual harmony and cooperation, of the many."[12]Iqbal's vision resists the notion that national unity is based on everyone being alike; he envisioned a form of nationalism that would allow for various cultural and religious communities to co-exist.

When proposing "the formation of a consolidated North-West Indian Muslim state" within "the British Empire, or without the British Empire" as "the final destiny of the Muslims, at least of North-West India," Iqbal is not advocating for a separate sovereign nation-states, but is suggesting the reconfiguration of provincial boundaries along cultural lines within India.[13] He explicitly frames this proposal as "the only possible way to secure a peaceful India and save Muslims from the domination of Non-Muslims."

Beneath all this, Iqbal's political ideology wasn't one of religious segregation; on the other hand, it was one where cultural independence must be preserved, and Muslims must not be dominated by a majority population. As he writes, "I would like to see the Punjab, North-West Frontier Province, Sind, and Baluchistan amalgamated into a single state. Self-government within the British Empire, or without the British Empire, the formation of a consolidated North-West Indian Muslim state appears to me to be the final destiny of the Muslims, at least of North-West India."[14]

Iqbal saw Islam not just as a religion, but as a way of life. For him, it is a complete social and moral framework. For him, redrawing territorial boundaries wasn't about breaking away from others, but about creating space where Muslims could grow and thrive according to their cultural values. That didn't mean he was against working with other communities or being part of a larger Indian federation. His vision still left room for cooperation and shared political life. Indeed, Iqbal explicitly states in the same address that "the Muslims of India are sufficiently homogeneous to want to lead a corporate life."[15]

To reduce Iqbal's richly considered political thought to mere separatism is to do him a disservice. His writing grappled with tricky questions such as cultural autonomy, equitable political representation, and how to safeguard minority communities from domination by the majority, issues which remain relevant to multicultural democracies today. To return to the richness and sophistication of Iqbal's ideas is to challenge the assumption that Muslim political thinking is somehow intrinsically separatist or 'anti-national.

Challenging the Inevitability of Partition

Ayesha Jalal's groundbreaking work in "*The Sole Spokesman"* (1985) and her later writings challenge the traditional view of Muslim separatism and the inevitability of Partition. She argues that Pakistan wasn't the preordained outcome of Muslim politics, but rather came about through a complicated process of

[12] Muhammad Iqbal, "Presidential Address to the All-India Muslim League," in *Speeches, Writings, and Statements of Iqbal*, comp. Latif Ahmed Sherwani, 5th ed. (Iqbal Academy, 2015), 12.
[13] Iqbal, "Presidential Address," 15.
[14] Iqbal, "Presidential Address," 16.
[15] Iqbal, "Presidential Address," 14.

political negotiation. Interestingly, Jalal suggests that Jinnah accepted Partition not as a victory, but as a compromise.

Jalal writes in 'Jinnah's Pakistan' that "Far from being the realisation of the 'dream' of Indian Muslims, Pakistan was a 'maimed, mutilated and moth-eaten' travesty of the idea first publicised by a few passionate students at Cambridge."[16] This alternative perspective challenges the oversimplified view that all Muslim politics were always destined to lead to separation.

As per Jalal, Jinnah initially employed the call for Pakistan more as a strategic bargaining card to secure guarantees for Muslims within an undivided India, as opposed to an end in itself. She contends that Jinnah "desired a federation of Indian provinces with central federal control over defence, communications and foreign affairs; the remainder would have to be left to the constituent units," which would enable Muslims to retain autonomy in provinces where they were in the majority.[17]

This interpretation resists the dominant account of Muslim political demands always being made to secure separation. Rather, it contends that Muslim leaders primarily sought constitutional safeguards to protect their community from future domination by a Hindu-dominated India. Partition did not follow from an inherent Muslim need to be separate, but rather resulted from collapsed constitutional talks and the difficult decisions taken by political leaders facing particular historical imperatives.

Jalal's revisionist approach changes how we view contemporary representations of Muslim nationalism. If Pakistan was not the necessary terminus of Muslim political imagination but the result of broken negotiations, then it's inaccurate to label colonial Muslim politics as necessarily separatist or 'anti-national.' This warped perception fuels modern political discourse by presenting Muslims as perpetual outsiders in India, instead of being engaged players in the contentious debates around the nation's destiny.

Colonial Categories and Contemporary Marginalisation

The way Indian Muslims are marginalised as 'anti-national' today draws on colonial-era thinking that oversimplified political identity by tying it directly to religion. British census operations, education policies, and administrative practices all reinforced the idea that Hindus and Muslims were separate, fixed communities with fundamentally different political interests.

As Bernard Cohn has demonstrated, colonial knowledge practices transformed fluid identities into fixed categories.[18] The colonial census forced people to choose one religious community. The census did not allow for multiple, potentially overlapping, identities. Colonial historians also framed India's history by focusing on the religious conflict between Hindus and Muslims and viewing all political conflicts from a communal perspective.

In this regard, Muslim political thought developed as a reaction to these externally imposed categories to safeguard Muslim interests within an already existing system that had already identified them as a distinct political community. As Pandey argues, what appears in retrospect as "communalism" was often a rational response to a political system that had made religious identity the basis for resource allocation and political representation.[19]

[16] Ayesha Jalal, "Jinnah's Pakistan," in *The Oxford Companion to Pakistani History*, ed. Ayesha Jalal (Oxford University Press, 2012), 174.
[17] Jalal, "Jinnah's Pakistan," 179.
[18] Bernard S. Cohn, *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), 224-254.
[19] Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism*, 156-173.

The way in which Indian Muslims are today accused of being 'anti-national' based on cherry-picking colonial-era Muslim politics is continuing to reinforce the very same old colonial categories, while ignoring how they were constructed in the first place. Names such as Iqbal, Jinnah, and Sir Syed are quoted out of context as always being separatist, ignoring the political nuance and evolving perceptions they entertained over time. Muslim politics is seen only through the prism of Partition, with it being regarded as the necessary culmination of all Muslim political imagination, while other visions that never came to be are ignored. The rich variety within Muslim political thought, ranging from Maulana Azad's strong nationalism to Jinnah's more conditional separatism, is reduced to a single, unified "Muslim stance." The real challenges Muslim leaders faced, such as colonial rule, fears of majoritarian dominance, and economic and educational disadvantages, are overlooked in favour of explanations that rely solely on religious difference."

These strategies help justify the ongoing marginalisation of Indian Muslims by portraying them as always being outside the national community. But by revisiting the complexity of Muslim political thought during the colonial era, we can push back against these narrow narratives and acknowledge the many ways in which Muslims were actively involved in shaping the vision of the Indian nation.

Conclusion

This research has shown that the historical path of Muslim nationalism in colonial India has been misunderstood in ways that contribute to the contemporary marginalisation of Indian Muslims as 'anti-national.' By examining key Muslim thinkers and leaders, especially Muhammad Iqbal and Sir Syed Ahmed Khan and drawing on Ayesha Jalal's revisionist work, this paper demonstrates that Muslim political thought during the colonial era was far from one-dimensional or inherently separatist.

Sir Syed Ahmed Khan's strategy was pragmatic, seeking educational progress and political representation in the colonial system, not separation from other Indian communities. Muhammad Iqbal's political thought demanded cultural autonomy and safeguarding against majority domination, not a breakaway nation as inevitable. Ayesha Jalal's research demonstrates that Pakistan's demand was primarily an instrument of bargaining towards gaining Muslim rights in a united India, but not an indispensable aim of Muslim politics.

Recent narratives describing colonial Muslim political thought as by definition separatist or 'anti-national' oversimplify the richness of this diversity through careful choice of quotes, suppression of internal diversity and historical context within narratives. The impact of this process is to assist in legitimising marginalisation by illustrating Muslims as always being outside of the nation. Through the retrieval of the complexity and colonial-period contingency of Muslim political thought in colonial India, this book resists such narratives and highlights the multi-dimensional manner in which Muslim leaders contributed to building the vision of an Indian nation. It suggests that their political activities were responses to specific dilemmas, rather than reactions to an intrinsic separatism. This deeper historical understanding provides a way to resist the current discourses that stigmatise Indian Muslims as 'anti-national' based on distorted readings of their political history.

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