The Partition Factor In The Status Of Indian Muslims
The moulding of Hindu attitudes towards Muslims, and the outcome for the Muslims of India.

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India and Pakistan are conventionally looked upon as sovereign nation states with a border dispute. This description ignores the significant fact that no border ever existed where one does now between India and Pakistan, and that all Pakistanis were once Indians, within living memory. Ignoring, or forgetting these facts leads to a skewed viewpoint that precludes understanding of the special incestuous relationship that India and Pakistan have. India's relationship with Pakistan, and Pakistan's accusations about the Indian treatment of its Muslims have played a role in the moulding of Hindu attitudes in India towards Muslims in general and Pakistan in particular.

A brief review of how Pakistan suddenly appeared on the map in 1947 is necessary. The areas that are now called "Pakistan" and "Bangladesh" were parts of India. They were not even independent provinces - but they were areas that had a majority population of Muslims. Other areas of India too had Muslims, but the Muslims in other areas were in a minority compared to non-Muslims, primarily Hindus who were in a majority.

Until the British, who ruled over India, conducted the first ever census of India in 1872, the idea that there were "Muslim majority areas" and "Hindu majority areas" in India did not even exist for Indians. The British are to be given credit for figuring out this statistic in their reductionist urge to classify everything as part of the scientific revolution that was sweeping across Europe and Britain. Just over three 3 decades later the eastern state of Bengal had been split into a Muslim majority Eastern and a Hindu majority Western half - an act that was politically unpopular, and was annulled in a few years. But this did set the precedent for the subsequent partitioning of India on religion based lines, given that India could now be reliably classified by the decennial census into areas that were "Muslim majority" or 'Hindu majority".

By 1885, when The Indian National Congress party, the party that oversaw India's independence 62 years later was formed, there were already rumblings of discontent among the elite Muslims of India who perceived that their status was gradually being eroded with respect to Hindus. The Indian National Congress party was formed as a party to include all Indians with no bias towards any specific religious group. However, sections of the malcontent Muslim elite refused to accept the Congress as an inclusive party, accusing it of being a cover for Hindu dominance. A rival Muslim-only party called the Muslim League was formed in 1906. While that party sought separate representation for Muslims, and represented Muslim grievances and exclusivism, its mandate did not extend to demanding a separate country. However the demand for an India free from the British was growing and it was becoming apparent that independence for India would become inevitable.

In the ensuing years the differences between the secular Congress Party and the Muslim-only Muslim league could not be patched up. The Muslim League led by Jinnah demanded a minimum one third representation of Muslims in the central government as well as separate electorates for Muslims in a set of demands that were unacceptable to the Congress party. Shortly thereafter the concept of a separate state for Muslims was conceived by Mohammad Iqbal based on the idea that Muslims and Hindus formed "two separate nations" that were incompatible. The name, "Pakistan" was proposed for such a Muslim only state in 1930. But even in 1946, the formation of a separate country called "Pakistan" was not assured.

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The British plan for the independence of India came to be known as the "Cripps Cabinet Mission Plan" (of 1946) and involved one of two alternative plans - called the "May 16th plan" and the "June 16th plan". The May 16th plan envisaged the division of a united India into Muslim majority and Hindu majority provinces. The June 16th plan envisaged the division of India into a Muslim majority nation state called Pakistan leaving a Hindu majority India. The Congress party rejected the partition plan (of June 16th) outright and was unwilling to accept the May 16 plan except for its idea of forming a constitution for India. The Muslim League, furious at the Congress Party's outright rejection of the June 16th plan for the formation of an independent Pakistan attempted to demonstrate Muslim militant power by initiating what was called the "Direct Action Day" (August 16th 1946) in which thousands of Hindus and Sikhs were massacred in Calcutta (Kolkata). The violence later spread to other parts of India.

This "Direct Action Day" led to two consequences, only one of which is acknowledged. It is acknowledged that the Direct Action Day instigated by the Muslim League set the stage for the partition of India. What is not acknowledged and does not get a mention in the incompletely written history of India is the fact that this "Direct Action Day" was to be remembered by the Hindus of India, rightly or wrongly, as an indicator that Muslims were prone to violence and either needed to be treated with special care, or were to be expected to react with violence. Less than a year after "Direct Action Day" India became independent and Pakistan was created. The massacres that followed partition not only increased Hindu suspicions that violence was to be expected as a norm from Muslims, but it equally had the effect of making the Indian Muslims who went to Pakistan become fearful and distrustful of what they felt was "Hindu India".

Since independence India's relationship with Pakistan has developed more in terms of "Who is correct?" rather than the relationship that is developed between two sovereign states such as India and Brazil for example. The Pakistan experiment was based on the idea that Muslims can never ever live with Hindus in India, and that any Muslims who remained behind would be subjugated and enslaved. Once Pakistan was formed, every action from Pakistan towards India was geared towards proving that India was subjugating and enslaving Muslims. The accession of a "Hindu king" - Hari Singh of Kashmir to India was held up as proof of why Muslims needed a separate state, or needed to be rescued from Hindus.

But while Pakistan's reactions to India are well documented, little is said about India's handling of Muslims, Pakistan and the idea of the "two nation theory".

The formation of Pakistan required India to prove to itself, to the world at large and to the Muslims remaining in India that India stood for equality, and that Muslims would not be subjugated, and that all of Pakistan's accusations were false - and that Pakistan itself was therefore irrelevant. At the same time, many Hindus were both concerned and suspicious of Muslims. The violence of Direct Action Day and the Partition were fresh in their memories. Traumatized and bereaved families were still trying to come to terms with loss. Indian policy allowed Muslims remaining in independent India to migrate to Pakistan if they wished. This created a climate of suspicion in which it was not known if a given Muslim in India might suddenly change his mind and migrate to Pakistan. On the other hand, it was not possible for India to stop Muslims who wanted to migrate from doing so. This dilemma almost certainly served to paint a negative picture of those Muslims who chose to remain in India as potential traitors and sources of violent conflict. This resulted in an invisible bias against Muslims who were perceived as covert supporters of Pakistan and as a people who were prone to violent disruption. This invisible bias has played a role in the post independence history of India.
Given this atmosphere of suspicion, proving that Muslims would not be subjugated in India and speaking "equality" in the same breath was difficult. India had to have a one-man-one-vote system, but Indian Muslims had to be given anything else they wanted to show that their ability to lead Muslim lives would not in any way be hampered by their remaining in India. The constitution and legislation in India therefore favored allowing Muslims to be wholly Islamic and placed no demands on them to join the rest of the population in any way.

The consequences of such a policy need to be understood. The Indian state did not build Islamic or Hindu or Christian schools. The Indian state built only secular schools offering a modern education. Non Muslims of India who wanted an education had no choice other than to join these secular schools, and they did so in vast numbers. Muslims on the other hand were never actively encouraged to join secular schools. There were never any official restrictions on them if they wanted to join secular schools, but there was no pressure on them to do so. They were officially allowed to opt out of secular education if Muslims felt that is what they wanted. In addition, the invisible bias against Muslims probably did serve to discourage some Muslims from continuing a secular education. All that was required of Muslims was to live in India as they liked. They did not specifically have to change their attitudes or lifestyle in keeping with the demands of a modernizing world and a developing country. There was an unspoken, but privately expressed fear among non-Muslim Indians that "Muslims may revolt and become violent" if they were compelled to submit to the secular education that was required in the creation of vast numbers of engineers and others needed for building a modern India.

Thus two separate types of bias have helped to create the situation that we see in modern India. One was the invisible bias among non Muslims that was suspicious of Muslims. The second was the active encouragement by the Indian state to allow Muslims to live wholly Islamic lives with few restrictions. This was done to "prove" that a wholly Islamic lifestyle was wholly compatible with the secular Indian state. For the Indian state, a Muslim living a wholly Islamic life in India served as a "poster boy" of Islam in India. India could then hold up its Muslim poster boys and tell the world in general, and Pakistan in particular: "Look how secular we are. Look at this devout Muslim. He is an Indian living an unrestricted Islamic life in India".

In 1947 the Muslims of the Indian subcontinent were given two choices. Sixty years after independence it is possible to pass some comments on what has happened to the Muslims of the subcontinent and compare the results of the two choices:

1) Live in Pakistan where "pure" (Paki) Islam would rule, undiluted by interference from Hindus. Muslims would be free to rule themselves as they wished. In theory the state would be democratic, but not secular.
2) Live in India. Here Muslims would be free to elect their leaders and free to lead their lives as Muslims. Muslims could live by the Quran if they wished but the state would officially be secular and democratic.

As an Islamic state, Pakistan has moved down the rankings of human development and towards Islamic radicalism. It has also already broken up into two countries - Pakistan and Bangladesh. The Indian Muslims who became Pakistanis are now divided among two countries, and inside Pakistan they are at war with each other as well as being at war with Afghanistan, the West and India.

The Muslims of India have been given every opportunity to live their lives as Muslims, and this has led to the following effects

1) Non Muslim Indians have accused each other of being extra soft and accommodating towards Muslims. It has been said that India has followed a policy of Muslim appeasement in which no demands are placed
on Muslims for nation building while every policy is aimed at satisfying any requirement that is deemed as necessary for being properly Islamic. A Muslim only has to demand something as being an Islamic necessity for Muslims, and the Indian state will promptly grant it as a secular state ever eager to prove its Muslim-friendly credentials.

2) Huge numbers of Indian Muslims have not been forced in any way to see the harsh realities of the world in which it is essential to acquire a secular education and join the mainstream of the world economy. In fact the opposite has occurred in India. Indian Muslims have, in effect, been told: "OK you are Muslims - so you must be Muslim and lead your Muslim life. No need for college/school - after all Quran is enough for you". I believe Muslims in India have faced the double effects of backward thinking among their elders as well as a pseudo-secular insistence on keeping them as visibly devout Muslims to prove the point that undiluted and unrestricted Islam is alive and well in India - much more so than in Pakistan. So while some Muslims have done well in India - they have remained backward in thought and action and education.

This, it would seem, goes some way towards explaining the differences between Muslim and non Muslim development statistics in India as highlighted in the Sachar committee report1. These differences are now leading to a "second wave" of Muslim grievances in which some Muslims feel they are being discriminated against. In contrast it appears that the government and the majority non Muslims of India are unable to see beyond the statistics as to why Muslims should be finding new grievances when the laws are notionally neutral to all but are perceived in practice as being especially "Muslim friendly". Muslims grievances are thus seen as unreasonable demands being made by a minority who have received every concession in the name of Islam and who are prone to get violent at the slightest provocation.

The root of this mess it would seem lies at least partly in attitudes created among the majority non Muslims of India by the violent history of partition, the perceived ambiguous nationality of Muslims, and the fear that Muslims may resort to violence. There has been a tendency for the Indian state to instantly give in to demands by fundamentalist Muslims for any Islamic cause, but in doing that Indian Muslims are being "excused" and allowed to exclude themselves from education and jobs so long as they go on living as peaceful and devout "poster-boy" Indian Muslims. A lot of young Indian Muslims seek education and jobs like everyone else and not the compulsion to remain as devout "poster-boy" Muslims which has been encouraged by an Indian state that dutifully bends to every fundamentalist Islamic demand.

Sadly, lack of understanding of these complex dynamics is causing some Muslims to resort to violence. This violence is being viewed by the non Muslim majority as "further proof" that Muslims are violent "by nature". While violence must not be tolerated, it is important for both the Muslims and non Muslims of India to understand the history and events that have led to each group suspecting the other of being biased, scheming and less than human. The Indian state and polity need to recognize that their action in feeding Islamic fundamentalism by acceding to fundamentalist demands like mindless banning of books and authors, and forcing certain judgements, needs to be replaced by understanding how their deeds often support medieval fundamentalism rather than encouraging progressive Muslim thought.

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