

Colonial 'Muslim' Politics in Bihar

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It was regional rather than religious categories that predominated among Muslims up until the interventions of reformist orthodoxy and political communalism in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, these developments occurred in the context of a long-standing sense of community among Muslims.¹ One that was reinforced by intellectual, economic and political communication as well as a tradition of free movement among service elites and religious teachers.² Briefly, South Asian Muslims are regarded to have 'acquired' a sense of political community from the late nineteenth century.³

Critiquing the inclination to construct a 'Muslim identity' solely around Islam, to the exclusion of 'everything else' Mushirul Hasan has questioned the justification of a discussion in terms of an absolute Muslim/Islamic consciousness.⁴ In that direction this paper considers Farzana Shaikh's linking of 'Muslim political action' in colonial India to what she describes as the dominant Islamically derived political discourse.⁵ A discourse which, she argues, was common to the well-born *ashraf* Muslims, whether reformist or liberal/ modernist, as well as the non-*ashraf*.⁶

Shaikh's thesis is examined in the context of the politics of Bihar's Jamiyat al ulama i Hind and Momin Conference.⁷ Both these organizations were ranged against the separatist politics of the Muslim League. To sum up her argument, following its 1937 electoral debacle, what accounted, decisively for the Muslim League's claim to represent Indian Muslims was its drawing on two motifs that comprised the core of 'Indo-Muslim' modernist thinking on *ijma* or consensus. One, that it could not be the exclusive preserve of the *ulama* (theologians). The other, that an authoritative Muslim consensus could not be equated with a democratic majority.⁸

To elaborate, these ideas of representation and legitimate rule are traced to the influence of Mughal values and the political norms governing that tradition.⁹ These norms, associated with the 'Mongol-Mughal' ideas of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which later comprised the 'heart of *sharif* culture' hinged on the premise that being a 'Muslim' consisted of belonging to and identifying with the ruling

power. A correlate notion was that Muslims ('or at least those who counted politically') formed part of a superior race whose noble foreign origins entitled them to a deference not commonly accorded to indigenous Indian groups.¹⁰ Unsurprisingly for Shaikh, those who subscribed to these claims found Western liberal representation 'fundamentally inadmissible'. In that the one-man-one-vote slogan rejected any *a priori* claims to power and also denied all social and political distinctions based on class and race, as legitimate grounds for claiming representation.¹¹

After the 1860s-80s diverse interpretations of who should constitute the *ijma* of Muslims in India surfaced sharply during the Khilafat movement (1919-22).¹² Relying on the late nineteenth century modernist discourse on *ijma*, the Muslim League asserted that formulating the consensus of the modern Muslim community be entrusted not to the *ulama* but an organization of lay Muslims such as itself.¹³ Subsequently, after the Congress won the 1937 election in six out of eleven provinces, an outpaced Jinnah, 'not known' for his indebtedness to 'Islamic' modes of thinking' drew on and acknowledged the authority of a non-arithmetical consensus. All this to establish the 'Muslim' community's 'charismatic' character and thus establish its *a priori* claims to power and leadership.¹⁴

In a redefinition of the community, the right to parity ['with Hindus'], postulated a Muslim 'nation' whose right to be represented was disengaged from numerical criteria.¹⁵ A corollary of this position was that Muslimness being an elementary condition of legitimate power, not only did the Congress not represent Muslims but as a 'non-Muslim' body it *could not* represent a Muslim consensus.¹⁶

It is Farzana Shaikh's thesis that there was an unmistakable 'awareness of the ideal of Muslim brotherhood, a belief in the superiority of Muslim culture, and a recognition of the belief that Muslims ought to live under Muslim governments' right 'across the political spectrum'.¹⁷ Also, as mentioned earlier, 'Muslim assumptions' about the nature of Islamic community, its relationship to non-Muslims were more widely shared than is commonly acknowledged. Thus the reformist and nationalist *ulama* who shared the Congress commitment to political independence did not share its vision of a secular India. Or its notion of a political society with no relation to religious affiliations.¹⁸

It is beyond the scope of this paper to detail the different strands in the Congress Muslim formation,¹⁹ or the Bihar Jamiyat al *ulama*'s frequent pre-1947 despairing over its quest for cultural autonomy for Muslims vis-a-vis Congress governments.²⁰ What is, however, important to note is that

while both the broadly Deoband and Aligarh trends regarded the Muslims as a distinct cultural community, they took opposite stands towards the nationalist movement.²¹ Clearly, there was no one set of 'Muslim' assumptions irrespective of the specificities of ideology, class and region that underpinned the intersecting explorations of the forthcoming status of Islam in South Asia.

The Jamiyat al ulama, founded in 1919, worked out a theory of Islamic nationalism, grounded in the basic tenets of Islam that it deployed against imperialism and subsequently the Muslim League's communalism.²² Thus an important section of the *ulama* did not perceive their role only in relation to the community. They developed a theory of composite nationalism and intervened in politics through an integrated alliance with other groups and communities. Thus it was Maulana Abul Kalam Azad's view that the prophet's covenant with the people of Medina [A.D. 628], which included the Jews and pagans, was valid as a precedent for other situations and in other lands in the subsequent history of Islam and was, in particular, pertinent in India.²³ On his part Iqbal, the ideologue of the Muslim League, denied that Muslims had ever been party to this contractual arrangement with non-Muslims.²⁴

A very central argument against Western representation, attributed by Farzana Shaikh to 'Indian Muslims', was that common political interests could not emerge in a society whose 'hallmarks were its intense religious and racial differences'.²⁵ However, Azad's rallying point in forging Hindu-Muslim unity for the Khilafat movement was that the divide was not one between Muslims and non-Muslims but between those who do not attack Muslims (the Hindus) and those who do (the British). This he supported with a quranic quotation.²⁶

Likewise, the Jamiyat al ulama's president, Husain Ahmad Madani, in his exchanges with Iqbal in 1938 on his theory of *mutahhidah qaumiyat* (composite nationalism) argued that Indian Muslims, though separate from others in religion, were fellow-nationals with other communities and groups in India. In his scheme of things both Muslims and non-Muslims would be co-partners in creating a society and an administration which, though not modelled entirely on the conception of an Islamic state, envisaged effective and influential Muslim elements.²⁷

On the question of nationhood the positions taken by Madani and Iqbal were as follows. To the extent that contemporary nations were formed and defined by reference to land, Muslims were not a nation, according to Madani. However, as a *millat* (religious community) they could co-exist with other religious communities not as a *qaum* (nation)

in the modern sense, but as a *qaum* in the Quranic sense; i.e., as part of a confederation of religious communities.²⁸

According to Iqbal, Muslims were a nation not because they occupied a particular territory but because they were bound by a common religious ideal. It was not so much the espousal of 'European political thinking' but the fact that the ethical ideal of Islam was incapable of fulfilment in India without its embodiment in a polity that necessitated the 'national' development of Muslims along territorial lines.²⁹

In June 1921 the *Imarat i Shariah* (office for the governance of Islamic principles and ideology), a legal-spiritual institution was set up in Bihar, as part of Maulana Azad's *Amir-e-Hind* scheme in a meeting of the *Jamiyat al ulama*. Projected as a necessity for the guidance of Muslims in non-Islamic states, the *Imarat* was to owe allegiance to the *Khilafat*.³⁰ In the mid-thirties there was a tussle between the *ulama* and Western educated Muslim over providing electoral leadership to the Bihar Muslims. In September 1936 the *Jamiyat al ulama* and *Imarat i Shariah* supported the floating of the Bihar Muslim Independent Party (MIP). Working in tandem with the Congress, the MIP aimed at securing a guarantee from the Congress that 'Muslim religion and culture be preserved and protected in the future constitution of India'. In the 1937 election the MIP won the largest number of Muslim seats (15/40) in the Bihar legislature.³¹

Three years later, Maulana Abul Mohsin Mohammed Sajjad, the naib-Amir of the *Imarat i Shariah* and president of the Bihar *Jamiyat ul ulama i Hind* critiqued the Muslim League's Lahore resolution soon after it was passed in 1940.³² What he found glaring was the disjuncture between the League's litany about the fate of Muslims in provinces such as Bihar where they were the *aqliyat* (minority: 10.1%) and a resolution which only envisaged the 'liberation' of Muslims living in provinces where they were the *aksariat* (majority) via the creation of Pakistan. In the *Jamiyat's* federal scheme of things, all those who lived in Hindustan belonged to one nation. More specifically, the *aksariat subah* (province) Muslims were not prioritized in any way.³³ Moreover, unlike the Pakistan of the Muslim League which would confine Islam to the subcontinent's east and west, the *Imarat i Shariah* contemplated stalling the *kafiristan*-ization of Hindustan implied by the political geography of the imminent Pakistan.³⁴

Subsequently in 1946 the MIP lost out electorally to the Muslim League (34/40) and the Momin Conference (5/40). For a while, after the October-November 1946 riot in which about 30,000 Muslims were killed in Bihar, the *Jamiyat* was estranged from the Congress, which it

blamed for the riot and veered somewhat towards the Muslim League. But in the months immediately after the Partition, it had only the deepest criticism for 'ten years of wrong politics' as practiced by the Muslim League.³⁵

The Muslim League's denominational politics was also contested by the Abdul Qaiyum Ansari led Momin (weavers) Conference, from 1938.³⁶ It questioned the monolithizing *qaumspeak* of the Muslim League, which it argued represented the *sharif* and not the *razil* (labouring people) Muslims.

The correction of the non-Islamic *razil-sharif* divide was initially taken up by setting up an enquiry committee to look into the cases of oppression by Muslim zamindars that had been received by the Momin Conference. This aspect of its agenda, however, fell by the wayside with the focus shifting to a contestatory enumeration of the Momins in the 1941 census returns.

The Muslim League's census directive that Muslims were not to record their 'caste' was perceived and represented as a deliberate attempt to deprive the Momins of their 'rights', given that they formed the single largest group in the community [more than 20% in Bihar], and had in fact attempted reclaiming their rights on the *basis* of their numbers.

In an argument similar to that made by the Jamiyat al Ulama and the Imarat i Shariah the Momin Conference argued that the *hijrat* implicit in the Lahore resolution meant that Muslims would have to leave their *masjids* and *kabiristans* in the hands of the *kafirs*. Moreover, the creation of Pakistan was in no way going to provide any 'protection' to Muslims in provinces where they were in the *aqliat*, such as in Bihar.

The self-image of the Momin Conference to date underlines that while it stolidly opposed the Partition, it was the Congress that yielded to the Muslim League's demand. And had it not been for the Momin movement 'more areas' in the east and west would have gone into the making of Pakistan. This is explicated by emphasizing the 'son-of-the-soil' roots of the Momins. The clincher being that the *sharif* Muslims, who traced their ancestry to foreign lineages, saw themselves as aliens and therefore could not but support separatist politics.³⁷

To sum up, Farzana Shaikh traces the historical antecedents of the modernist discourse of *ijma* and the idea of a 'Muslim' nation outside a common Indian nation to the Mongol-Mughal tradition. The intellectual hold of this tradition, according to her, was 'far from eroded in the 1920s'.³⁸ In fact it was this tradition and the 'Muslim' assumptions flowing from it that enabled the League to withstand both the pressures

of the *ulama's* claims to represent a modern community. Also the challenge of provincial Muslims' parties who sought to redefine a Muslim consensus via exclusively democratic criteria.³⁹

Yet, in the case of Bihar, as elsewhere,⁴⁰ the Muslim League could not really take on the repertoire of composite nationalism.⁴¹ Thus the Jamiyat al-*ulama* i Hind unsettled the League's solespeak by transcending the denominational divide, albeit with an insistence on 'cultural autonomy' in the forthcoming *swaraj*, by rooting its territorial nationalism in the Quran and *sunna*. The Momin Conference's contestation of the Muslim League was directed at correcting the material *razil-sharif* divide through a pointedly counter-hegemonic deployment of *biradari* arithmetic.⁴²

What is important to note is that the early twentieth century closing up of the ideological split between the *ulama* and liberal intelligentsia crafted an Islamicate identity which was thrust on Muslims. This creation of a corporate identity unyoked Muslims from their class, regional and linguistic specificities.⁴³ Notions of sectarian nationalism, however, did not necessarily conform with the day-to-day experience of people whose bonds of co-existence spanned a whole range of social and cultural interactions.⁴⁴ All of this awaits detailing. More so because doubts have been expressed over the nature of Hindu-Muslim interaction in the sub-continent in the reading of Indian Islam, by liberal and secular minded Muslims.⁴⁵

The inflation of religion to a foundational status in communitarian-identitarian and communal politics negated a whole range of social processes that cross-cut the redefining and reformation of major religions in nineteenth-century north India. Homogenizing attempts succeeded only in segmentary ways.⁴⁶ Given the deeply fractured and fragmented internal structures of the Muslim community, the organization of Muslims as a religious collectivity was and is based on mistaken assumptions.⁴⁷ This the *muhajirs*, Partition's refugees in Pakistan and Bangladesh, are still bitterly coming to terms with.⁴⁸

NOTES

1. Peter Robb, 'The Impact of British Rule on Religious Community: Reflections on the Trial of Maulvi Ahmadullah of Patna in 1865', in Peter Robb (ed.), *Society and Ideology: Essays in South Asian History presented to Prof. K. A. Ballhatchet* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 146.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 147.

3. Peter Robb, 'Texts, Communities and the History of Change in Modern South Asia',

in *Society and Ideology*, p. 20.

4. Mushirul Hasan, 'Muslim Intellectuals, Institutions and the Post-Colonial Predicament', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol XXX, No. 47, 25 November 1995, p. 2995.

5. Farzana Shaikh, *Community and Consensus in Islam: Muslim Representation in Colonial India* (Bombay: Cambridge University Press in association with Orient Longman, 1991), p.2.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

7. See Papiya Ghosh, 'The Discourse and Politics of *Qaum*, *Mazhab* and *Biradari* in 1940s Bihar', Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, workshop on 'Northern India and Indian Independence, 6-9 December 1993 (Seminar volume in press).

8. Shaikh, pp. 162-4.

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 94-6.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 79, 94-5.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 79.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 183.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 176, 181-2.

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 192-3.

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 194-5.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 236.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 230.

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 233, 205 and 48.

19. Mushirul Hasan, "'Congress Muslims" and Indian Nationalism: Dilemma and Decline, 1928-34', Occasional Papers on History and Society, No. XXIII, April 1985, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, pp. 11-12. The term 'Congress Muslims' has been used to describe the 'many Muslims groups that were connected with the Congress at various levels' and had a 'pro-Congress' thrust.

20. Papiya Ghosh, 'Mutahhidah Qaumiyat in Aqliyat Bihar: The Imarat i Shariah in the 1940s', ch. 3 of forthcoming 'Community and Nation: Bihar in the 1940s' (Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla).

21. See Javeed Alam, 'Composite Culture and Communal Consciousness: The Ittehadul Muslimeen in Hyderabad' in Vasudha Dalmia and Heinrich von Stietencron (eds.), *Representing Hinduism: The Construction of Religious Traditions and National Identity* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1995), p. 342. However, see Mushirul Hasan, *India Partitioned: The Other Face of Freedom* (New Delhi: Roli Books, 1995), vol. 1 pp. 18-19, for a corrective mention of liberal-socialist campus politics in the Aligarh Muslim University well into the early forties.

22. See Mushirul Hasan, *A Nationalist Conscience: M.A. Ansari, the Congress and the Raj* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1987), p. 205, and *Nationalism and Communal Politics in India 1885-1930*, (New Delhi: Manohar, 1991), p. 292.

23. *Nationalism and Communal Politics*, p. 176; Ian Henderson Douglas, *Abul Kalam Azad: An Intellectual and Religious Biography*, ed., Gail Minault and Christian W. Troll (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 176; *Naqeeb*, 23 February 1946, Husain Ahmad Madani's statement, 'Siyasat e Hazra' (Current Politics and Muslims).

24. Shaikh, p. 204, Significantly (pp. 38-9), note a 'fundamental shift' in Muhammad following his A.D. 629 victory over the Meccans. In a redefinition of relations between Muslims and non-Muslims that followed, he 'now excluded all those who did not accept message' (emphasis added).

25. *Ibid.*, p. 105.

26. Douglas, op. cit., pp. 175-6.
27. *Nationalism and Communal Politics*, pp. 174-5.
28. Shaikh, p. 203.
29. Ibid., p. 201.
30. See Papiya Ghosh, 'Community Questions and Bihar Politics 1917-23', *The Indian Historical Review*, Vol XVI, Nos. 1-2, July 1989-January 1990, pp. 206-7; Shah Muhammad (ed.), *The Indian Muslims - A Documentary Record 1900-1947* (New Delhi, 1983), vol. 7, pp. 84-95; Aijaz Ahmad, 'Azad's Careers: Roads Taken and Not Taken', p. 126 and Ali Ashraf, 'Appraisal of Azad's Religious Political Trajectory', p. 109 in Mushirul Hasan (ed.), *Islam and Indian Nationalism: Reflections on Abul Kalam Azad* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1992).
31. A.M. Zaidi (ed.), *Evolution of Muslim Political Thought in India* (Delhi, 1978) Vol 4, pp. 638-9; Papiya Ghosh, 'The Making of the Congress Muslim Stereotype: Bihar, 1937-39', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol XXVIII, No. 4, October-December 1991, pp. 421-31.
32. Sajjad, 'Muslim India Aur Hindu India Ke Scheme Par Ek Aham Tabsara', *Naqeeb* 10 January 1946 (reprinted from *Naqeeb* 14 April 1940).
33. Abus Samad Rahmani and Md. Moinuddin Qadri, Phulwari Sharif, 'Jamiyat al ulama i Hind Aur Muslim League Ke Nazarie Ki Wazahat', *Naqeeb* 22 November 1945, 11 December 1945.
34. Ibid., 8 February 1946.
35. See 'Mutahhidah Qaumiyyat'.
36. What follows is based on Papiya Ghosh, 'Contesting the Sharif: The Momin Conference - Muslim League Interface in Bihar, 1938-47', Seminar on 'Caste and Class in India', Joshi-Adhikari Institute of Social Studies, New Delhi, 4 April 1992 (unpublished). The Momins affiliated to the Muslim League were led by Latifur Rahman.
37. Hasan Nishat Ansari, *The Momin-Congress Relation* (Patna: Bihar Momin Intellectuals Forum, 1989), p. 85.
38. Shaikh, p. 182.
39. Ibid., pp. 175, 235-6.
40. See Mushirul Hasan, 'Introduction', in Mushirul Hasan (ed.), *India's Partition: Process, Strategy and Mobilization* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), p.33.
41. Contrary to what has been argued by Shaikh on p. 204.
42. Both these organizations have endured in Bihar's politics. See Papiya Ghosh, 'Enumerating for Social Justice: 'Religious Minorities' and the Indian Constitution', Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 10-14 February 1994 (Mysore seminar volume in press). Given her preoccupation with overdrawing the hold of the modernist political discourse Farzana Shaikh has ignored the reconciliation of territorial nationalism and Pan-Islamism that was manifest during the Khilafat movement and emphasized the 'jurisprudential apartheid' endorsed by the *ulama*.
- See Rajat Kanta Ray, 'Race, Religion and Realm: The Political Theory of "The Reigning Indian Crusade", 1857', in Mushirul Hasan and Narayani Gupta (eds.), *India's Colonial Encounter: Essays in Memory of Eric Stokes* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1993), pp. 135, 145, and 151-2 for the argument that the naming of Hindus and Muslims as a political category bonded by the perception of Hindustan as 'one land' was perhaps the most original contribution of 1857. Also that this half-articulated conception 'reappeared' in 1920-22.
43. 'Muslim Intellectuals', p. 2997; also Aijaz Ahmad, op. cit., pp. 136-9 for the elite roots of Azad's ideology.

44. Mushirul Hasan, 'Introduction' in Mushirul Hasan (ed.), *India Partitioned : The Other Face of Freedom*, vol. 1 p. 28.

45. As has been noted in 'Muslim Intellectuals', p. 3000. That this is an under-researched subject is evident from the following. Sudipta Kaviraj, 'On The Structure of Nationalist Discourse,' in T.V. Sathyamurthy (ed.), *State and Nation in the Context of Social Change* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994) p. 330, argues that the national movement 'encouraged a massive pretence' because nationalist ideology 'projected an exaggerated argument about India's composite culture'. Also Javeed Alam, op. cit., p. 340, concludes that composite culture is 'fragile by nature precisely because it is unable to withstand interventions from above'.

46. See Kumkum Sangari, 'Politics of Diversity: Religious Communities and Multiple Patriarchies', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol XXX, No. 51, 23 December 1995.

47. Mushirul Hasan, 'Fractured and Fragmented', *The Hindustan Times* (Sunday Magazine), 13 August 1995.

48. Papiya Ghosh, 'Reinvoking the Pakistan of the 1940: Bihar's "Stranded Pakistanis"', *Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 1995

For the homogenizing, masculinist politics of the Hindu Mahasabha, see my forthcoming 'Community and Nation : Bihar in the 1940s', ch. 6.

