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978-0-521-04826-2 - Separatism among Indian Muslims: The Politics of the United Provinces' Muslims, 1860-1923

Francis Robinson

Excerpt

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Introduction

The British united the peoples of India under one government, but left them under two. As the empire drew its subjects together, and they organised to face the challenges of imperialism, some of the divisive tendencies of Indian society were broken down, but others were exacerbated. The most notable was the tendency of some Muslims to claim that the Indian Muslims were a distinct and separate group. By the end of the nineteenth century, they had begun to express this view in politics. In 1906, they secured public recognition from government of their special status, and of their particular need for a reserved share of the power which was being devolved upon Indians. In 1916, they gained acceptance of this same point from the leading organisation of nationalist politics, the Congress. Moreover, from 1909, this principle of Muslim separatism was implemented in every constitutional change. In the last years of British rule, Muslim demands for a separate Muslim state were so strong that neither the government nor the Congress could deny them. So the British were forced to leave India divided, a result which has contributed to two wars, twenty-five years of preparation for war, and immense expense in life, money and lost opportunities for development. Clearly the existence of Muslim separatism under British rule is a fact of the first importance in the recent history of the Indian subcontinent.

Various explanations of Muslim separatism already exist. Some, after a long and vigorous life, are beginning to be discredited; others still persist. The first derives from the theory put forward by W. W. Hunter in 1870 that the Muslims had been discriminated against by the British, had been slow in taking advantage of western education, and as a result had fallen behind in the competition for jobs and economic advancement.¹ This theory of Muslim backwardness was loudly repeated by Muslim leaders at the time. Since

¹ W. W. Hunter, *The Indian Musalmans*, reprinted from the 3rd edn, London, 1876 (Delhi, 1969).

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then it has found favour with Marxist and Muslim historians in showing why Muslims organised as a community.¹ A second proposition is that the British deliberately created division in Indian society for their own imperial purpose. An important pillar of this view is the statement attributed to Elphinstone: “‘Divide et impera’ was the old Roman motto, and it should be ours.”² On occasion it is thought to be proof enough of British iniquity. When further explanation is resorted to the British are usually seen as throwing their weight first behind one community and then behind the other to keep them divided. Indian nationalist historians found the argument particularly attractive and accuse their imperial rulers of having broken an evolving synthesis of Hindu–Muslim culture.³ A third, less common but still important, theory suggests that Indian nationalists would do well to look at their own record. Muslim communalism, it is argued, was due to the failure of nationalism to develop a truly non-communal ethos. Nationalism was associated with a frequently aggressive Hindu revivalism, and its symbols, its idiom and its inspiration were all Hindu.⁴ Most Pakistani historians readily admit such arguments concerning the Hindu face of Indian nationalism; they provide ammunition for their own explanation that there was not one nation in India but two. They emphasise, of course, that Muslim separatism was no Pavlovian reaction to Hindu organisation, but the natural expression of the realisation that Indian Muslims were a separate community. This fact, they claim, had been evident right

¹ For approaches influenced by Marxist thinking see W. C. Smith, *Modern Islam in India* (London, 1946), and A. R. Desai, *Social Background of Indian Nationalism* (Bombay, 1948). For Muslim historians influenced by the Muslim backwardness theory, see Abdul Hamid, *Muslim Separatism in India: A brief Survey 1858–1947* (Oxford, 1967), and Rafiq Zakaria, *Rise of Muslims in Indian Politics* (Bombay, 1970).

² Desai, *Indian Nationalism*, p. 354. For variations on the same theme see R. P. Dutt, *India Today*, revised Indian edn (Bombay, 1949), p. 428.

³ The best formulation of the divide and rule thesis is in A. Mehta and A. Patwardhan, *The Communal Triangle in India* (Allahabad, 1942). The most prominent of the more recent subscribers to this view is Ram Gopal, *Indian Muslims: A Political History (1858–1947)* (Bombay, 1959). For the arguments concerning the smashing of a Hindu–Muslim cultural synthesis, see J. Nehru, *An Autobiography* (London, 1936), and *The Discovery of India*, 4th edn (London, 1956), and K. B. Krishna, *The Problem of Minorities or Communal Representation in India*, cited in Gopal Krishna, ‘Religion in Politics’, *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, VIII, No. 4 (December 1971), p. 374.

⁴ See recent papers by I. Ahmad and P. Gupta cited by Gopal Krishna, *ibid.*, p. 377.

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from the eighth-century invasion of Muhammad Bin Qasim, was manifest in the way Muslims lived in India and was acknowledged, as it should have been, by the creation of Pakistan.¹ These are the four main lines of explanation. They have many variants and refinements. Most explanations, moreover, are not confined exclusively to one approach but present a blend of several in which one ingredient is predominant. Many, it should be noted, assume that the Indian Muslims were a group whose situation, outlook and interests were generally the same.

This book will consider the problems raised by these various theories of Muslim separatism. Its aim, however, is not to produce a critique of other men's ideas but to ask and answer two basic questions. Unashamedly it asks again: why did Muslim separatist politics develop on the Indian subcontinent under British rule? It couples this with a second question: which Muslims promoted and organised these politics? The time is ripe to reopen the case. Much fresh research material has recently become available. In 1966, the reduction of the fifty-year rule to thirty released at one stroke a large quantity of government records and private papers housed at the India Office Library in London. The activity of the new Nehru Memorial Museum, in addition to that of the National Archives of India, has led to the accumulation in Delhi over the last few years of a considerable collection of material on modern Indian history, in particular the files of Indian newspapers. Elsewhere, the private papers of several men closely connected with Muslim politics have come to light, among them those of Mahomed Ali and Maulana Abdul Bari.

The origins of Muslim separatism will be investigated not so much in the context of the subcontinent as in that of one region, the United Provinces.² This may appear strange; the UP Muslims

¹ The classic formulation of this argument is in I. H. Qureshi, *The Muslim Community of the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent (610-1947)* (The Hague, 1962). It is followed quite faithfully by more recent works, for instance the introduction to a recent collection of Muslim League documents, Syed Sharifuddin Pirzada (ed.), *Foundations of Pakistan: All-India Muslim League Documents: 1906-1947* (Karachi, 1970), Vol. II, pp. xi-xxxv.

² Throughout this work the area known variously between 1860 and 1923 as the North-West Provinces and Oudh, and the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh, will be referred to in the text as the UP. The term 'UP Muslim', however, has a slightly broader application. It does not refer merely to those Muslims born and brought up in the province, but also to those who made it the centre of their political activities. I refer particularly to men such as Raja Ghulam Husain, Syud Hussain and Hakim Ajmal Khan.

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were a mere fourteen per cent of the population of the area and a smaller proportion of the Muslim population of India. Why not choose Bengal or the Punjab, where the Muslim population was large? The answer is very simple: for much of the period of British rule Muslims from both these provinces contributed little to specifically Muslim politics, their politicians preferring to use other platforms. UP Muslims, on the other hand, were at the heart of Muslim separatism. They mainly founded and, with the exception of the Bombay-based Jinnah, mainly led the organisations which represented the Muslim interest in Indian politics. Syed Ahmed Khan founded in 1875 the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College at Aligarh, which directed much early Muslim political activity and nurtured many Muslim League politicians. He followed this with the establishment of the All-India Muslim Educational Conference in 1886, which helped him impress his political will on Indian Muslims. In 1906, large numbers of Muslims from the UP flocked to Dacca to found the All-India Muslim League. In this organisation the secretaryship was the most powerful position; and between 1906 and 1910 it was held by UP Muslims in Aligarh, and between 1910 and 1926 by UP Muslims in Lucknow. After World War One, Muslims from the same province set up an association of Indian ulama and made the Central Khilafat Committee an organisation of all-India importance.

Men with such a big part to play in the organisations of Muslim separatist politics played no smaller part in the formulation of their policies. Syed Ahmed Khan taught Muslims that government was the best protector of their interests and shepherded many of them away from the Congress and from political agitation of any kind. When in 1906 this policy was weakened both by the apparent withdrawal of government favour and by the threatened broadening of elective government, his political heir, Mohsin-ul-Mulk, strengthened it. He organised the Muslim deputation to the Viceroy which gained government's recognition of the Muslim claim to separate representation on elected bodies in which the proportion of seats was to be worked out on the contentious basis of the community's 'political importance'. When a few years later government seemed to be even less well disposed towards Muslim interests than it had been in 1906, it was Wazir Hasan of Lucknow who, as secretary of the All-India Muslim League, managed the

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UP Muslim campaign to ensure that Muslim claims were not ignored. His endeavours culminated in the Lucknow Pact of 1916 in which the Congress agreed to the same privileges for Muslims in future constitutional reforms as the government had agreed to in 1906. Then, when Muslim political and religious interests appeared to be endangered after World War One, it was these same Muslims who, with Gandhi, virtually captured the Congress for the Muslim cause and helped to launch it into a policy of non-co-operation with government. Using the mass religious fervour, which only the unfurling of the green flag of Islam could unleash, they pressed this policy home throughout the subcontinent and helped to transform the politics of the Congress from those of the 'discreet dialogue' of the few in council and durbar into the clamour of the many in the towns and villages of India.

In the 1920s and 1930s, many UP Muslims deserted the organisations of Muslim separatist politics. Muslim landlords went into landlord politics, professional men joined the Congress, and many left politics altogether. Muslim political organisations shrank; some disappeared. Muslim separatism was no longer the powerful force it had been. Nor was it till UP Muslims rejoined the Muslim League in large numbers after the 1937 elections that Muslim separatism revived. In the League's years of glory from 1940 to partition, UP Muslims were at the heart of the organisation; they held the two most important posts after that of the president, and dominated its committees.¹ Throughout the development of Muslim separatism in British India, whenever the politics of All-India Muslim organisations were vigorous they were more the politics of UP Muslims than those of any other group of Indian Muslims.

This book examines what might be termed the first period of Muslim separatism under the British raj. It stretches from the beginnings of communal politics during the break-up of the Urdu-speaking elite in the second half of the nineteenth century to their decline and the breakdown of the organisations of all-India Muslim politics in the early 1920s. No magic should be attached to the date 1860; it is merely a point at which to begin. There is, however, something special about 1923; this was the year in which Muslims lost the power to dictate Congress policy, and the Muslim front in Indian politics fell to pieces.

¹ Khalid B. Sayeed, *Pakistan: The Formative Phase 1857-1948*, 2nd edn (London, 1968), p. 192.

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The first four chapters of the book are concerned primarily with the problem of how by 1909 an All-India Muslim League had been founded and separate representation had been granted. The situation of Muslims in mid-nineteenth-century UP society is analysed with a view to discovering how far they were organised as a community and how strong the connections of different Muslim groups were with other communities. The impact of political, bureaucratic and economic change on these various elements of UP society, and their reaction to it, is examined. We need to know how uneven this impact was, how different the reactions of various groups were, and how their relationships with each other were altered. Throughout, close attention will be paid to the needs and attitudes of government and the part they played in influencing the various reactions to change. This should reveal why some Muslims organised for politics on a communal basis and why government was willing to recognise the Muslims as an important group in Indian politics. It should also tell us, to some extent, how UP Muslims were able to assume leadership of all Indian Muslims. It will not, however, reveal anything about the more overt forms of communalism, such as the insensate violence which erupted periodically in the bazars and mohallas of Indian towns. The emphasis of the analysis will be on the various elite groups concerned in making politics, and it is interested in other manifestations of communalism only in so far as they might affect these politics.

The last five chapters are mainly devoted to discovering the objectives of Muslim communal politics between 1909 and 1923. To do this they seek to discover who supported Muslim separatism, when they did so, and why. The different groups in Muslim politics are identified, the relationships between them are examined, and their impact on politics as a whole is assessed. With the aid of over 130 biographies of leading Muslim politicians, three major groupings in the politics of UP Muslims have been uncovered, the 'Old Party', the 'Young Party' and the 'Ulama'. The labels are crude and are employed largely for convenience, although they are descriptions which were often used at the time. The groupings were not parties in any narrow sense; they had no formal organisation, and the differences within them are as illuminating as those between them. Nevertheless, they do represent three major interests among Muslims in the UP. The result of

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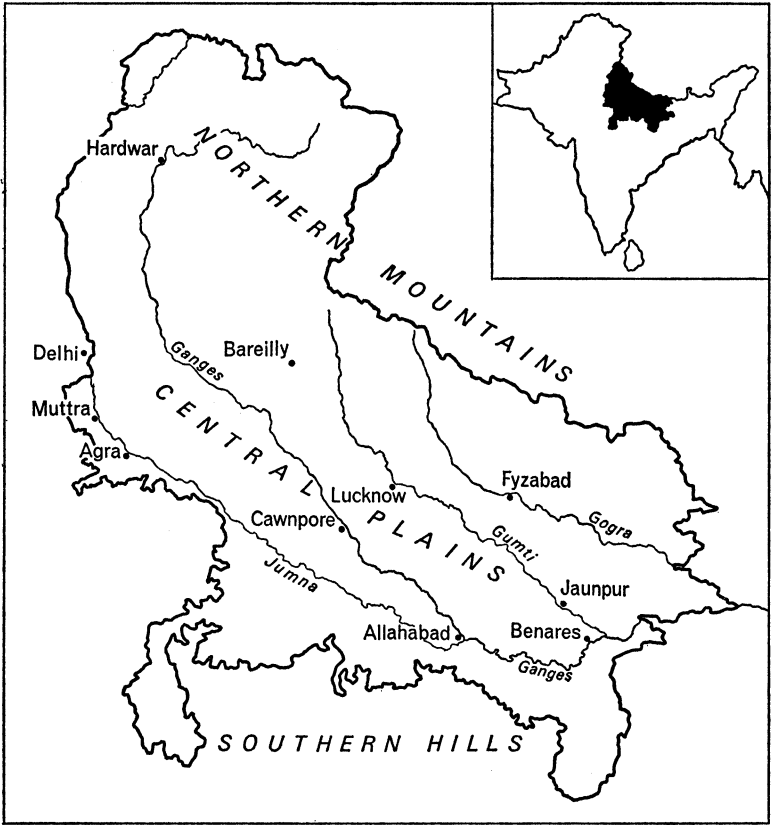
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this study should show why the Muslim League became hostile to the government and why it allied with the Congress. It should illustrate how UP Muslims maintained the leadership of Indian Muslim politics and how they came to be of great influence in the Congress between 1920 and 1923. Moreover, it should explain why the Khilafat agitation grew so great and why the organisations of specifically Muslim politics declined in the 1920s and 1930s.

India under British rule had its fair share of selfless men and selfish men, of heroes and cowards, of great men and ordinary men. There were many who went to gaol for the cause; there were some who betrayed it. This study illustrates the role of those who were fired by religious beliefs or spurred by nationalist ideals; it also illustrates the many calculations of advantage and political interest which every politician must make. A man may have both ideals and political skills, indeed he must temper the former with the latter if he is to survive in politics. Only in myth does Shiva drive a straight path through the opposition with his trident. In human affairs great national leaders must bow before the political process; they must make accommodations with their fellow men. This is not to deny their greatness but to emphasise another dimension of it – their mastery of politics. Myth is an important part of the fabric of national life, but so also is a proper understanding of what happened in the past. With the aim not of reducing the reputations of historical figures but of enlarging our knowledge of them it is hoped that this book will shed light not only on the causes and nature of Muslim separatism but also on the workings of imperialism, nationalism and Islamic responses to the west in modern times.

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Map 1. The United Provinces: geographical features.

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Map 2. The United Provinces: districts and divisions, 1911.

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CHAPTER 1

The Muslims in the United Provinces

The UP lay at the heart of the Indian subcontinent midway between the Hindu Kush, over which Muslim invaders had poured in search of land and loot, and the shores of Bengal, where British traders had first beached their boats in search of commerce and profit. To the north, the province was shut off from Tibet by the great Himalayan barrier; to the south, it was divided from the Deccan by the Vindhyan mountain range.¹

The province was an artifact. It had been formed gradually by conquest and annexation. In 1775, the British first acquired formal sovereignty in the region when Benares was ceded. In 1801, Wellesley acquired the lower Doab (the Doab was the land between the rivers Jumna and Ganges), Rohilkhand, and Gorakhpur. In 1803, the Anglo-Maratha War led to the annexation of the upper Doab and Bundelkhand (the districts of Jalaun, Hamirpur and Jhansi). In 1815, after the Anglo-Nepalese War, most of Kumaon was added. Other small enclaves were absorbed and finally, in 1856, the last major territorial acquisition was made with the annexation of Oudh. This mosaic, put together by the victories of British arms and the failures of British policy, was administered by a lieutenant-governor who controlled officers in nine revenue divisions which were divided again into forty-nine districts.²

As was to be expected from such a piecemeal construction, the result was not homogeneous. The province fell into roughly three major geographical areas – the northern mountains, the southern hills and the central plains. The northern region, Kumaon, forms the central part of the Himalayan range. The southern hill and plateau districts, including Mirzapur, Jhansi, Jalaun, Hamirpur and Banda, lie on the fringe of the Vindhyan range of hills. The central plains, where nine out of ten of the people live in just over two-thirds of the area of the province, form part of the Gangetic basin. The central plains themselves can be divided into two distinct

¹ Map 1.² Map 2.