Introduction

Can a Muslim university be an Indian university? In his landmark article 'Can a Muslim Be an Indian?' Gyanendra Pandey draws a revealing comparison between two common expressions—Hindu nationalists and nationalist Muslims. While Hindus are considered to be 'natural' Indians, who are nationalist by default—Hindu nationalism being one brand of nationalism—Indian Muslims are taken to be primarily Muslims, whatever their political stance may be. Unlike Hindus, their commitment to the nation cannot be taken for granted; it has to be proven, for their Muslimness casts doubt on their Indianness.

Similar apprehensions affect Muslim institutions, including universities. By Muslim universities, I refer to institutions established by Muslim individuals or organisations, primarily—*though not exclusively*—for Muslim students.[1] Unlike madrasas, these universities offer mostly non-religious education along the same lines as other non-Muslim universities. Therefore, their 'Muslim' character rests on their foundation's history and on their Muslim-majority population, much more than on their educational programmes. Visible Islamic symbols, such as mosques or tombs, may act as reminders of this character; so too can students, teachers and administrators' frequent allusions to the need to preserve and promote 'Muslim culture'. However, there is no consensus on either the interpretation of 'Muslim culture' among university members or how and to what extent it should frame life on campus.

For many external observers, there seems to be a fundamental tension between these universities' Muslim character and their capacity, or even their willingness to serve the nation. These apprehensions, inherited from partition, surfaced again recently during the debates around the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). In December 2019, a wave of protests broke out across India when the parliament adopted this Act, which introduced, for the first time, a religious criterion in the rules of access to Indian citizenship.[2]

On 15 December, amidst growing student mobilisation, police forces stormed into two of India's prime universities—Jamia Millia Islamia (JMI) and Aligarh Muslim University (AMU). These two institutions had one clear common denominator: they were both Muslim universities. For part of the press and the political body, this was reason enough to suspect a 'jihadi' influence behind students' protests. The institutions had become, they suggested, dens of 'urban naxal jihadi conspiracy' harbouring 'terrorists' and traitors to the nation.[3] 'Sons of Jinnah, go to Pakistan, you are disloyal to this country,' a policeman shouted at JMI students.[4] More than seventy-five years after independence, the shadows of partition continued to loom over these institutions, suspected of nurturing anti-national trends.

For students and supporters, however, their opposition to the Act was not a fight against the nation. It was a fight to salvage the secular principles of the Constitution. Protesters repeatedly invoked India's foundational text. One of the figures whom they cited the most was B. R. Ambedkar, the father of the Constitution and the leader of the Dalits' political movement.[5] This was a way for protesters to show that their battle mattered not only to Muslims but to all Indian citizens. Theirs was a battle to rescue the vision of India as an inclusive nation state, in which Muslims and other disadvantaged groups would be recognised as full-fledged citizens.

It was not the first time that AMU and JMI found themselves at the heart of heated debates over Muslims' place in the Indian nation state. As institutions claiming to serve *both* the nation and the community, the two universities have crystallised much of the discussions on Muslims' status as citizens, as a minority and as a backward group since India's independence. From the question of access to citizenship to the bitter discussions over these universities' Muslim character or the campaigns for minority status, AMU and JMI have been both objects and arenas of debates involving a wide range of actors—from students, teachers and university authorities to community organisations and state actors. Through their speeches, petitions, negotiations and protests, these actors have articulated, and sometimes revised, their conceptions of what is, or should be, Muslims' place in the Indian nation. These discussions imply, explicitly or not, a debate on the notion of a Muslim *qaum* (community) as well as discussions on the very notion of the Indian nation state. By closely looking at the debates that took place *within* and *around* these institutions, this book explores the role of Muslim universities as crucibles for competing conceptions of 'Indian Muslimness' in post-independence India.

Universities as political sites

This book looks at these educational institutions as *political sites*. Since the 1980s, neoliberal policies have deeply transformed the higher education landscape throughout the globe. Governments increasingly rely on private funding and institutions to address the growing needs of their populations. Tuition fees have escalated. So too has competition among universities to improve their ranking and access resources for research.[6] This neoliberal turn has given renewed momentum to the debates on the meaning and function of universities. For a wide range of political leaders across the globe, universities should focus on training a skilled workforce that will foster economic growth instead of 'wasting' time on subjects that bring no quantifiable return on investment. Following this line of thought, Barack Obama reportedly argued that universities should 'spend less time teaching things that don't matter, and more time teaching things that do'.[7] This conception of university education, which makes a distinction between 'useful' and 'superfluous' subjects, also serves to de-legitimise the politicisation of the academic sphere. The assumption is that 'pure' science or knowledge exists independently of politics. Within this framework, political discussions appear to be an act of partisanship that threatens academic integrity. As for political mobilisations, they appear to be a distraction from studies, a waste of time and public money, or, worse, a source of agitation that jeopardises the social order.[8]

Many scholars and educationists vigorously reject this conception of university education,[9] highlighting instead the key role that universities have to play in the development of democracy. Universities can prepare students to cultivate rational thinking and civic virtues, all qualities required to sustain a vibrant democratic society.[10] They constitute sites of political socialisation, which may have a transformative impact on individuals' political affiliations.[11] By promoting critical thought, they can also become sites of resistance against different forms of oppression,[12] from authoritarian regimes to racial, gender-, class- or caste-based discrimination.

This debate is not new. Writing twenty years after the end of World War II, Jürgen Habermas regretted that all too often universities confined themselves to the production and transmission of technologically exploitable knowledge. Against the notion that academic knowledge should be separated from political discussions, he highlighted the 'immanent relation' between universities' enterprise of knowledge and democratic decision-making: both require self-reflection, critical reasoning as well as a rational discussion in a context free from domination. For this reason, he argued, universities are

'ideally suited place[s] for the discussion of political issues'. They provide an arena for discussion and train students to engage in open, rational and critical deliberations.[13]

For Habermas, the role of universities is all the more important given the influence that academic discourses exert on the 'self-understanding' that a society has of itself. Universities, he argues, 'transmit, interpret and develop the cultural tradition of the society'.[14] They can either 'continuously reproduce' these traditions or 'critically transform' them. In other words, universities can act as forces of the status quo, consolidating the dominant narratives that exist in a society, or become actors of change. By training students to think critically, universities can open up a space to question the image that a society has of itself and possibly transform its 'active traditions' and sociopolitical structures. This is precisely the reason why Habermas sees in the democratisation of universities a crucial step towards the democratisation of society.[15] Conversely, this also explains why political leaders less enthused with democratic ideals aim to reduce university education to apolitical vocationalism. Critical discussions represent for them a disturbance or a threat, and hence the need to tame these institutions.

From the colonial to the postcolonial state

Habermas' vision of the role of universities is premised upon his conception of the public sphere as a discursive space located outside the immediate control of the state, in a civil society that acts as a counter-power to state and market forces.[16] For him, the quality of democracy depends ultimately on the possibility for civil society actors—including university members—to engage in a rational discussion on public matters in an atmosphere free from coercion. This, however, is a much idealised vision of both the public sphere and of universities' autonomy. In practice, the public sphere is hardly an open, neutral space that is free from coercion. The capacity to speak and to be heard is not open equally to everyone, far from it. It is shaped by normative discourses and pre-existing limitations upon public speech as well as by one's location in society and access to power.[17] As for universities, they are seldom completely free from state control, including in democratic regimes.

In postcolonial India, the state retains significant control over public universities. This is largely a legacy from the colonial period. When colonial authorities first established universities in British India, their aim was essentially to train bureaucrats and professionals who could help them run their vast empire. Their objective, as Thomas Macaulay famously put it,

was to produce 'a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect'.[18] With this objective in mind, colonial authorities promoted English as a medium of instruction and Western knowledge, deemed to be superior to Indian languages and knowledge. University education thus had a practical as well as an ideological objective: it served to strengthen and justify colonisation.[19] It became, as Gauri Viswanathan argues, a 'mask of conquest'.[20]

In the late nineteenth century, the British transformed some of these universities into constituencies, with elected representatives in the provincial assemblies (1892). This was yet another way to harness universities at the service of the colonial enterprise. Ten years earlier, Lord Ripon had argued: '[A]s education advances, there is rapidly growing up all over the country an intelligent class of public spirited men whom it is not only bad policy, but sheer waste of power to fail to utilise.'[21] The purpose of these university constituencies was to facilitate the incorporation of educated Indian elites into colonial structures of power. Targeting these privileged and educated sections of society would also help them contain more radical forces, or so the British hoped.[22]

The British, however, were not in a position to exert full control over universities, even less so over the education system in general. A number of works show that education quickly emerged as a 'contested terrain' between the coloniser and the colonised.[23] In her study on Banaras, Nita Kumar underlines the 'creative resistance' of the colonised population to achieve cultural reproduction and continuity. This resistance could take many forms—from indifference or subversive agendas within seemingly normative institutions to the creation of alternative schools.[24] It could be combined with the appropriation of elements taken from the colonial model, be it the teaching of English and Western science or the adoption of a bureaucratic form of organisation inspired by the British.[25] In that sense, we may want to speak of creative adaptation as much as creative resistance. These contestations against colonial authority did not erase tensions and differences among the colonised themselves. Quite on the contrary, the schools and colleges that emerged during this period often reinforced class, caste, religious or linguistic identities.[26] Yet some of these educational institutions, independent of colonial control, did serve as platforms to imagine the future independent nation. Kavita Datla thus demonstrates that the founders of Osmania University in Hyderabad sought to promote, through Urdu-medium education, a secular national culture that would include both Hindus and Muslims.[27]

As the anti-colonial movement gathered momentum, universities became major hotspots of mobilisation. In the early 1920s, large sections of students and graduates joined the Non-Cooperation movement. Students understood that if their cooperation was key to running the colonial state, withholding it could have a lethal impact on the British Empire. The students' involvement in the freedom movement reached a new peak in the 1930s with M. K. Gandhi's Civil Disobedience movement, followed by the establishment of the All India Students' Federation (AISF) (1936).[28] By the end of the colonial period, university students had become a major component of the fight for independence.

Postcolonial India inherited these institutions. At the time of independence, the new state authorities aimed to reorient them to serve the new political regime. Their topmost priority was nation-building.[29] The central government was eager to secure the viability of the newly independent state, emerging with pain from the embers of partition. They were pressed for time. In a context of great fluidity and uncertainty,[30] universities were to 'enable the country to attain, in as short a time as possible, freedom from want, disease and ignorance'.[31] According to Humayun Kabir, education secretary (1948–1956), World War II had revealed the 'glaring deficiencies' in India's economy. It was all the more urgent to promote scientific and technical education to allow for the large-scale industrialisation of the country, seen as the main path to economic growth and independence.[32]

The task of the universities was not limited to fast industrialisation and economic growth. State authorities were conscious of the role that universities could play in shaping India's 'self-understanding'. The University Commission, led by renowned philosopher Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, themselves declared: '[W]e are building a civilisation, not a factory or a workshop.'[33] For the members of the commission,

> [n]ational unity and progress require a deeper foundation than political and economic arrangement. *It is the life of the spirit* that has shaped and unified our collective existence and has been the real bond of oneness among the Indian people.[34]

The role of universities, then, was to foster this 'spiritual' unity. They were to serve as the 'sanctuaries of the inner life of the nation'.[35]

This 'spiritual' unity was not a given. Building a 'common civilisation' would require, for the members of the University Commission, an awareness of India's weaknesses—'her spirit of reaction and narrow-mindedness'—and

a critical and selective engagement with India's past in order to 'illumine the present'.[36] Likewise, Kabir, the education secretary, recognised the difficulties in evolving a 'synthesis of cultures' for the nation, particularly at a time when the memories of partition were still vivid in people's minds. According to him, an 'approximation of synthesis' existed, but only 'at the level of practice, emotion and intuition'. This synthesis 'lacked the solidity which intellectual articulation can give'.[37] The role of universities was therefore to provide this intellectual articulation in order to strengthen the cultural unity of the nation.

Given the strategic role that universities had to play in the nation's construction, it is no surprise that central state authorities sought to retain a significant degree of control over these institutions, even as the Radhakrishnan Commission insisted on the need to preserve their autonomy.[38] Education remained, like before independence, a state subject, but the Constituent Assembly expanded the responsibilities of central state authorities in the development of university education. Under the Constitution, they assumed the task of coordinating and maintaining the standards of higher education across the country through institutions such as the University Grants Commission (UGC). The Constitution further granted central state authorities the power to control central universities, which they directly funded (Schedule 7 of the Constitution). Much like the viceroy before him, the president of India acted as the universities' visitor, endowed with the power to nominate several members of the administrative bodies and, most importantly, to choose the vice-chancellors out of a panel of pre-selected candidates. Central state authorities further kept a close watch on the institutions' finances. Every year, a nominee of the comptroller and auditor-general audited the accounts of the universities.[39] In this way, Indian authorities maintained colonial instruments of control to ensure that universities would serve their nation-building project.

Nation-building and minorities

What function did state-sponsored Muslim universities—AMU and JMI—fulfil within this framework in newly independent India? What role could institutions explicitly associated with India's largest minority play in the construction of the nation?

Much of the literature on nations and nationalism highlights the homogenising trend and majoritarian bias of nation-building. These works show that the formation of the nation as an 'imagined community' is premised upon the constitution of a cohesive 'we' and its demarcation from 'they', the external enemy or the internal other.[40] In a critical reading of Benedict

Anderson's work, Talal Asad insists that our sense of belonging to the nation is never direct. It is mediated through authoritative representations that distinguish the nation's 'core' from minority groups who do not fit fully into these representations.[41] The formation of the nation thus involves simultaneously the identification of minority groups, who become the nation's internal others.

This can be true even in liberal nation states, which claim to define citizenship on secular grounds, independent of religion or ethnicity. In his *Formations of the Secular*, Asad argues that secularism does not merely consist of the neutral separation between state and religious institutions. It is a political doctrine that introduces a dichotomy between the world we 'really' live in, that is, the nation state, and the religious world, which exists only in our 'imagination'.[42] By using the language of secularism, the modern nation state presents citizenship as the primary principle of identity, transcending other identities. Within this framework, citizens are expected to put aside their religious affiliation to prioritise their allegiance to the nation. However, this expectation is not even across all religions. Speaking of Muslims' position in Europe, Asad argues that the secular narrative in Europe is often combined with the widespread notion that Islamic and European civilisations form two separate civilisations. In other words, the assumption is that European Muslims may be *in* Europe but that they are not essentially *of* Europe. Within this framework, they can be, at best, tolerated as a religious minority, or they must put aside the markers of their 'difference' so that they may assimilate into the nation.[43]

Asad's critique of the modern secular state in Europe resonates with the debates that have emerged in India, particularly since the 1990s when the Hindu right rose to power.[44] Partha Chatterjee argues, along with Ashis Nandy and others, that far from containing communal forces, the modern secular state actually contributed to the emergence of majoritarianism by promoting a homogenised conception of citizenship.[45] This 'universal' conception of citizenship tends to de-legitimise religious particularisms and offers little protection against majoritarianism, even as religious identities continue, de facto, to inform conceptions of citizenship and belonging.[46]

Indeed, recent historical studies show that partition has had a lasting impact on the production of 'marked' and 'unmarked' citizens, despite the adoption of a liberal definition of citizenship based on *jus soli* (that is, on one's place of birth) rather than *jus sanguinis* (that is, on descent). Already during colonial times, dominant representations of the nation often borrowed from

a reconstituted upper-caste Hinduism. Partition deepened the demarcation between the Hindu 'core' and religious minorities, as many in state circles and among ground-level actors suspected Muslims of disloyalty to the nation. These 'informal notions of belonging', mediated by religious identity, continued to shape conceptions of citizenship long after partition. Even after the Constituent Assembly adopted a liberal definition of citizenship, Indian Muslims remained, for many, 'hyphenated citizens', whose belonging to the nation was constantly called into question.[47]

In these circumstances, how do minority citizens themselves articulate their position within the secular nation state, as citizens and members of a religious group? This is the main question that this book seeks to address. Against the notion advanced by Asad, Nandy and Chatterjee, that secular liberal principles are an inherent part of the majoritarian problem, a number of liberal scholars have sought to disentangle liberal democracy and secularism from a homogenising view of citizenship. They insist that these principles can accommodate diversity and protect minorities. Rajeev Bhargava thus argues that secularism does not systematically require uniform rights for all groups of citizens. He defends a conception of secularism based on 'principled distance', whereby the state must remain neutral in its *intention* but need not implement the same measures for all groups.[48] In a similar vein, Gurpreet Mahajan puts forward the principle of 'evenhandedness': the state should intervene in such a way that it minimises the disadvantages faced by minorities.[49] These authors thus argue that liberal principles *can* be reconciled with group-based rights, provided we recognise, and seek to compensate, the dissymmetry between majority and minority groups.[50] Instead of rejecting secularism and liberal citizenship, they hint at the possible appropriation of these principles to protect vulnerable groups. However, their approach is essentially normative and state-centric. These works speak of what a secular liberal democracy *should* be like. They seek to define guiding principles so that the state may simultaneously uphold individuals' fundamental rights and protect minority groups from majoritarian intrusions. As a result, they have little to tell us about the concrete ways in which ordinary citizens negotiate, appropriate or question these principles on the ground.

By contrast, this book shifts attention to minority citizens themselves and to their relationship with state actors. In India as well as in Europe, Muslim minorities have not simply been victims of majoritarianism. They have taken an active part in the debates on the definition of national identity and citizenship in secular states. Recent works have shown that 'new generations

of Muslims born in Europe use the narrative of citizenship to demand rights from an equal footing as other European citizens'.[51] Some Muslim Europeans have even argued that their commitment to Islamic principles reinforced rather than weakened their commitment as citizens to the nation's good. These individuals challenge the assimilationist model of integration, pushing instead for a more inclusive conception of citizenship, which legitimises the public expression of cultural and religious differences.[52]

Likewise, in India, many Muslim groups and individuals have appropriated the language of citizenship to assert their belonging to the nation state, much before the heated debates on the CAA brought back this issue to the fore. Julten Abdelhalim and Yoginder Sikand argue, for instance, that some Muslims have used the language of Islam to make sense of their role and status as Indian citizens. According to Sikand, Indian Muslims' position as a minority prompted Muslim scholars to engage in a process of creative interpretation (*ijtihad*) of the Islamic tradition in order to articulate their commitment to Islam with their responsibilities as citizens.[53] In a similar way, Abdelhalim argues that some Muslims reinterpret the call for jihad as a call for 'self-reform' or 'striving for upward mobility' in order to define their role as 'active citizens'.[54] These works should not, however, create the impression that Muslims necessarily make sense of their role as citizens within an *Islamic* framework. This view is problematic as it suggests that all Muslims define themselves primarily as *believers* and that Islam is, for all of them, a 'complete way of life'.[55]

Just as other citizens, many Indian Muslims appropriate conceptions of citizenship that are defined primarily in legal and political terms. They may invoke a liberal conception of citizenship focused on the language of rights, which some extend to group-based rights, or a more republican conception of citizenship, based on the notion of the 'common good'. Ornit Shani argues that the coexistence of these different conceptions of citizenship has allowed Muslims to negotiate their position in India despite majoritarian pressures.[56] Much like liberal scholars, however, she does not say much about the *concrete* ways in which ordinary citizens interacted with state representatives and appropriated, resisted or contributed to producing these ideas of citizenship. Moreover, by defining citizenship as a 'mechanism of incorporation' used by the state to 'manage' social diversity and to ensure the unity of the nation, she tends to project the state as a neutral 'manager', detached from party politics, thus downplaying its exclusionary potential vis-à-vis minority citizens.[57]