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Abstract
This essay examines the relationship between religion and the concept of nationhood in late colonial India. Religion was a crucial element in the formation of modern states in the early 20th century in South Asia. Different religious groups had different opinions about nation: Hindus and Muslims had different ideas of nationhood; even within the Hindu tradition, the Hindus themselves had very different views of nationhood and how to organize a new nation-state in relation to their religion. This essay explores the different points of view concerning the relationship between religion and nation in both Hindu and Muslim communities which led to the Partition of 1947.

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Religion and Nationhood in Late Colonial India

Chao Ren

Religion has always been a contentious issue in modern South Asian history, especially if we examine the importance of religion in retrospect, after the partition of India and Pakistan in August of 1947. When confronted with the urgency of forming a concept of nation-state in the late colonial period, Hindus and Muslims had different points of view with respect to India. Hinduism held the majority of the population, while Islam, with a comparatively smaller but still significant number of believers, had been the religion of the ruling class in India for several centuries. Differences also existed even within the "Hindu camp." Since the rule and political influence of the Muslim Mughal Empire had already faded away, the Hindus now had a stronger voice in the discussion about nationhood. There was a very strong inclination for them to have a "tyranny of the majority," and to be intolerant towards the Muslims in the building of the new nation, or at least the construction of the concept of a nation. Therefore, there were differences concerning the concept of "the Nation" not only between Hindus and Muslims, but among the Hindus themselves as well.

The search for a definition of Indian nationhood, or a concept of India as "the Nation," did not begin until the coming of the English. In Thomas Hansen's book, *The Saffron Wave*, the author quotes Deshpande as saying that it was "doubtful whether the people talked of themselves as Hindus before the colonial phase of our country."[1] It was only when the Indians met the English, who were superior in technology and easily dwarfed the locals, that the Indians, like the Chinese, finally started to reconsider their self-perception as the central civilisation of the world.[2] The English brought to India not only material symbols of modernity, such as the railroad, postal service, etc., but also non-material marks of modernity as well. For example, during the rule of Dalhousie in the middle of the nineteenth century, non-material modern institutions such as precise national borders and concepts of national sovereignty were introduced into India. The concept of nation-state also came to India during the British Raj. Faced with the contemporary condition of subjugation, the Indian people underwent an unprecedented intellectual crisis. They started to consider their national identity in a broad global context. They started to question: Who are we? What is the essence that makes India, India? M. S. Golwalkar has an excellent passage in the Preface of *We or Our Nationhood Defined* that explains the problem faced by all who were on their search for Indian nationhood:

> We stand for national regeneration and not for that hap-hazard bundle of political rights—the state. What we want is swaraj; and we must be definite what this

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[1] Thomas B. Hansen, *The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 65.

[2] I do not have much concrete evidence for this statement about the Indian (pre-) colonial self-perception. It was a perceived observation of mine. The basis for this statement comes from my understanding of documents such as *Hind Swaraj*, *Hindutva*, and *We or Our Nationhood Defined*, combined with my knowledge of Chinese and Japanese history around the mid-19th century when the two countries were first met with the West. I would really like to know if any concrete evidence exists that argues for or against my perception.

> "swa" means. "Our kingdom"—who are we? It is this question, most pertinent at this stage, that we shall attempt to answer.[3]

In regard to the question of Indian nationhood, the Hindus had three major influential answers, which were similar to each other but also with significant differences. Those are the answers of Mahatma Gandhi, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, and Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar, specifically embodied in their three influential booklets, respectively: *Hind Swaraj*, *Hindutva*, and *We or Our Nationhood Defined*.

In his *Hind Swaraj*, written in 1909, Mahatma Gandhi discusses the issue of Indian nationhood as related to religion. The Mahatma uses an analogy that compares the Hindus and the Muslims as two brothers living in one household, sharing the same ancestry and the same blood that flows in their veins. Gandhi denies that there has ever been any deep-rooted enmity and hatred between the Hindus and the Muslims; he says even brothers would sometimes disagree and quarrel, so the differences and dislikes between Hindus and Muslims could just be as natural. Gandhi also refutes the position that the introduction of Islam into India had unmade the nation. He argues, "In no part of the world are one nationality and one religion synonymous terms;" even different persons would have different "religions," let alone in a vast country like India.[4] Gandhi suggests that as long as the two sides work together properly, it is very likely that the Hindus and the Muslims could live together in peace in one country, just like two brothers. Gandhi argues that this possibility came from the fact that "[r]eligions are different roads converging to the same point."[5] He then questions the reader in turn, "What does it matter that we take different roads, so long as we reach the same goal?"[6]

Again, the idealistic Mahatma is painting a rosy picture of India, in accord with his own wishes. His deliberate, though good-willed, ignoring of the Indian reality was later criticized by the Muslim leader Mohammad Iqbal, who said in his "Presidential Address to the All-India Muslim League" in December 1930:

> The unity of an Indian nation, therefore, must be sought not in the negation, but in the mutual harmony and cooperation, of the many. True statesmanship cannot ignore facts, however unpleasant they may be. The only practical course is not to assume the existence of a state of things which does not exist, but to recognise facts as they are, and to exploit them to our greatest advantage.[7]

Gandhi's naive assumption of the natural, brotherly, and amicable relationship between the Hindus and the Muslims comes completely out of his own wishes. There are two specific critiques that I would like to raise on Gandhi's conception of nationhood concerning religion issues. First, in painting his rosy picture of religious harmony, Gandhi consciously confused the

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[3] Shamsul Islam,. *Golwalkar's We or Our Nationhood Defined: a Critique, with the Full Text of the Book* (New Delhi: Pharos Media & Pub, 2006).

[4] Mahatma Gandhi, *The Essential Gandhi: an anthology of his writings on his life, work, and ideas*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2002), 107.

[5] Ibid., 185.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Mohammad Iqbal, "Presidential Address to the All-India Muslim League," Allahabad, 1930, 2c.

two meanings that he gave to the word "religion" (dharma). In the notes provided by Professor Anthony J. Parel, the editor carefully distinguishes the meaning of the word "religion" each time that Gandhi uses to the word, marking in the footnotes the cases in which the word means "sect" and in which instances the word means "ethics." This deliberate confusion of the two meanings of the word provides the basis for his argument that every person has his or her own religions, which further serves as the foundation for his argument for the idealistic communal religious harmony in India. My second critique is that one of Gandhi's basic principles, that "[r]eligions are different roads converging to the same point," is more his own thought than what was perceived and understood by the masses at that time, and therefore detached from the political reality of India. Gandhi's personal dedication to the golden five-letter word "truth" can explain one of his beliefs: he believes that all religions are aimed at the discovery of truth, and all religions claim that the truth is embodied by some kind of divinity. Therefore, all religions should agree on the ultimate end of their pursuit and inquiry—that is, the truth, or the divinity, or dharma, the three being essentially the same thing. This belief was Gandhi's own and not one that was widespread: the public did not have such observations on religions, especially the fanatics, who saw more difference than similarity between Hinduism and Islam. Here, Gandhi was great as a thinker and a sage, but horribly unrealistic as a politician.

The second influential work of the Hindu conceptualization of the Indian nationhood was Vinayak Damodar Savarkar's book, *Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu?* Published in 1923, *Hindutva* was a systematic attempt to seek the essence of Hindu-ness. The question that the author raises is, "Who can be precisely called a Hindu?" The author starts by investigating the history of the word "Hindu" from a linguistic perspective and finds roots of the word in the names of rivers and seas. The word "Sindhu," Savarkar argues, means the land that lays between Sindhu (Indus River and Brahmaputra River, the latter of which was claimed by the author as having the same origin with the Indus) and Sindhu (the seas: Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea), and was more widely used and respected over the words "Bharat" or "Bharatavarsha." After explaining the legitimacy of the name by examining the history, Savarkar then sets out to justify Hinduism as part of the cultural essence of Hindutva by telling stories of the rise and fall of Buddhism in India. A return to the Vedic tradition, the author argues, was what saved India historically from the vulnerability of a universal religion. Therefore, the common Vedic tradition is the common culture that defines the essence of Hindutva. Hindutva is thus an ethnic and cultural, and therefore political identity, bound to the land of Sindhu. Savarkar also introduces the factors of common Sanskrit language and mutually practiced laws and rituals. At the end of the book Savarkar gives a comprehensive definition of Hindutva:

> A Hindu, therefore, to sum up the conclusions arrived at, is he who looks upon the land that extends from Sindhu to Sindhu—from the Indus to the Seas—as the land of his forefathers —his Fatherland (Pitribhu), who inherits the blood of that race whose first discernible source could be traced to the Vedic Saptasindhus and which on its onward march, assimilating much that was incorporated and ennobling much that was assimilated, has come to be known as the Hindu people, who has inherited and claims as his own the culture of that race as expressed chiefly in their common classical language Sanskrit and represented by a common history, a common literature, art and architecture, law and jurisprudence, rites and rituals, ceremonies and sacraments, fairs and festivals; and who above all, addresses this land, this Sindhusthan as his Holyland (Punyabhu), as the land of

> his prophets and seers, of his godmen and gurus, the land of piety and pilgrimage.[8]

On the relation between Hindutva and Hinduism, Savarkar remarks at the beginning of the book that "Hindutva is not a word but a history," and Hinduism is only a derivative of it. However, this "history" that he talks about is a history that he created himself, out of the doctrines of cultural nationalism, in strong favour of Hinduism over Islam. This is a good example of the manipulation of history as a tool of identity construction, a theme that occurs frequently in South Asian history.

It should be pointed out that according to Savarkar, one very important qualification for Hindutva is indigenousness. This principle is the central feature of Savarkar's theory of Hindutva, which dictates his attitude towards the Muslims. Savakar thinks that all Hindus should regard the land of Sindhu as their "holy-land," from which their belief came from and towards which they worship for their faith. Buddhists, Jains, and Sikhs are all included in Hindutva, because they worship religions that were "made in India."[9] The Muslims, on the other hand, are not considered Hindu because they, like the Jews and the Christians, hold "extraterritorial loyalties." This cultural nationalism is expressed in the following passage in *Hindutva* on the status of the Muslim Indians:

> So although the root-meaning of the word Hindu like the sister epithet Hindi may mean only an Indian, yet as it is we would be straining the usage of words too much—we fear, to the point of breaking—if we call a Mohammedan a Hindu because of his being a resident of India. It may be that at some future time the word Hindu may come to indicate a citizen of Hindusthan and nothing else.[10]

As for the conceptualization of Indian nationhood, there is a major difference between the thought of Gandhi and that of Savarkar: the different attitudes toward the Muslims. Gandhi regards the Muslims as brotherly fellow Indians, who also suffer from the inflictions of modern civilization. His primary concern is modern civilization rather than religions. Savarkar, however, considers the Muslims to be non-Hindus and therefore thinks they should be excluded from the concept of Indian nationhood. His primary concern is the essence of Hindutva: what is it that makes Hindus, Hindus. Among the answers that he gives is the indigenousness of faith.

One step further in the direction of extremism was Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar, the hero of the famous and infamous RSS. In his book *We or Our Nationhood Defined*, which was published in 1939, Golwalkar agrees with Savarkar on his cultural nationalism and identifies the concept of nation as consisting of five elements: country, race, religion, culture, and language. The answers that he finds for India are, respectively, Hindusthan, racial purity, Hinduism (religion and culture combined), Sanskrit. What is different about Golwarkar's thought is his idea of racial superiority and his suggestion of ethnic cleansing of non-Hindu races in Hindusthan. Consequently, Golwalkar was an admirer of the Nazi ideology in Germany. Compared to Gandhi and Savarkar, Golwalkar is far more extreme on his advocacy of Hindu

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[8] V.D. Savarkar, *Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu?* (New Delhi: Hindi Sahitya Sadan, 2003), 100.

[9] Hansen, *The Saffron Wave*, 78-9.

[10] Savarkar, *Hindutva*, 83.

racial superiority and obsession with Hindu racial purity. Among different kinds of cultural nationalism in India, Golwalkar's thought is the most extreme and the closest to that of Nazi Germany's.

The Muslim conceptualisation of Indian nationhood was strongly shadowed by the powerful voice of the Hindus. Therefore, Indian Muslim discussions on this topic seemed more like responses to Hindu nationalism rather than free, original thoughts of their own. The most important Muslim document produced on this topic is Mohammad Iqbal's "Presidential Address to the All-India Muslim League," delivered near the end of 1930. Worrying that Muslims might not be entitled to full and free development and cultural autonomy, Iqbal realistically proposed the Two-Nation Theory, calling for a "Muslim India within India."

The address is an obvious response to Hindu nationalism and is full of underlying worries and political realism. Near the beginning of the speech, by quoting someone else, Iqbal expresses a concept of nation that is totally different from that of the Hindu nationalists:

> "Man," says Renan, "is enslaved neither by his race, nor by his religion, nor by the course of rivers, nor by the direction of mountain ranges. A great aggregation of men, sane of mind and warm of heart, creates a moral consciousness which is called a nation." Such a formation is quite possible, though it involves the long and arduous process of practically remaking men and furnishing them with a fresh emotional equipment.[11]

Here Iqbal denounces the concept of nation advocated by the Hindus, which is determined by race, religion, and land. Instead, he proposes a concept of nation that is very un-national in the Hindu sense. However, Iqbal is equipped with enough realistic political wit that he knows his proposition of an idealistic, universal, un-national nationalism is not realistic in real world politics. Iqbal does have good wishes of religious and communal harmony, like Gandhi does, but on the other hand, unlike Gandhi, Iqbal recognises the problem that exists between the Hindus and the Muslim, and is always alert of the threat of possible Hindu tyranny over Muslim communities. He observes the failure of achieving harmony and attributes its reason to the fact that both the Hindus and the Muslims "suspect each other's intentions and inwardly aim at dominating each other" and that both sides are "unwilling to recognise that each group has a right to free development according to its own cultural traditions."[12]

According to Iqbal, the goal of Muslim politics is to achieve "full and free development on the lines of [Muslim's] own culture and tradition in [Muslim's] own Indian home-lands" (Iqbal, 2d). He has hope, nonetheless he is not very positive about the possibility of such achievement, given the minority status of Indian Muslims. Therefore, Iqbal proposes his Two-Nation Theory as a solution to the politics of India, which becomes the prelude to the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947:

> "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-

[11] Iqbal, "Presidential Address," 2b.
[12] Ibid., 2d.

West Indian Muslim State appears to me to be the final destiny of the Muslims, at least of North-West India."[13]

The conceptualisation of Indian nationhood was a question posed to the Indians from the collision of India and the West. Confronted with this question, both Hindus and Muslims in India underwent rigorous thinking and came up with different answers. Mahatma Gandhi conceptualised Indian nationhood in a very idealistic way, still along his path of denouncing modern civilisation. Other Hindus more or less tended to appreciate Hindu cultural nationalism, proposed by Savarkar, who wrote about Hindutva, a political identity based on geographical, ethnic, and cultural inheritance. Golwalkar provided his own answer, a very shocking one, claiming Hindu racial superiority and advocating ethnic cleansing, leaving much behind for those to argue for a Hindu imperialism within India. The Muslims, however, were not in a position to conceptualise the nationhood of the whole country. Given their minority status, their goal was to achieve free development on the lines of their own culture. Iqbal, who was not very positive about this possibility under a Hindu majority, proposed a Two-Nation Theory and self-government for the Indian Muslims. Each author mentioned above had very different thoughts on the concepts of "the Nation," and their thoughts influenced Indian politics in various levels and degrees in the following decades.

[13] Iqbal, "Presidential Address," 3b.