

Partition: The 'Pulsing Heart that Grieved'

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By way of framing Manan Ahmed Asif's intriguing personal (and poetic) reflection entitled "Idol in the Archive" in this current issue of the *Journal of Asian Studies*, it must always be remembered that in August of 1947, the old British Raj did not give birth to one but, rather, two independent nation-states, namely, India and Pakistan. India became a "Sovereign Democratic Republic" when its Constitution came into effect on 26 January 1950, following adoption of its draft Constitution by its Constituent Assembly on 26 November 1949. Pakistan took a bit longer, becoming the "Islamic Republic of Pakistan" when its first Constitution came into effect on 23 March 1956. Furthermore, of course, Pakistan underwent secession of its Eastern Province with the founding of the "People's Republic of Bangladesh" in 1971. It is hardly an exaggeration to suggest that Partition is the defining event of modern independent India and Pakistan, and, more than that, continues to be the defining event of India and Pakistan even after more than fifty years of independence.¹

Whatever else one might want to say about Hindu and Muslim traditions in South Asia since Partition in 1947 (and the later emergence of Bangladesh in 1971), in many ways the most important observation is that Partition represents a

fundamental paradigm shift in religious sensibility among many Hindus and Muslims in South Asia since independence. The achievement of independence or “liberation,” while on one level a celebratory occasion of joy and hope, was on its darker underside a profoundly negative event replete with some of the worst violence in the entire history of the subcontinent, involving the displacement of huge populations, the loss of property, separation of families and a legacy of suspicion and hostility that continues to the present day. Partition was not simply an ambivalent political event. It was also a profound and ambivalent religious event in which masses of Hindus and Muslims recognized, many for the first time that Hindu religious sensibilities could not co-exist with Muslim sensibilities in a modern, democratic polity. Gandhi’s argument that partition was a “patent untruth” was proved wrong, and the Gandhian non-violent non-cooperation ideology (*satyāgraha*), while having been effective as a dissidence strategy contra the British Raj, was finally not found to be workable “on the ground” to any of the other players in the unfolding drama of Partition, namely, Nehru, Vallabhbhai Patel, Jinnah and, finally, even Lord Mountbatten and the British authorities.² Nehru’s “tryst with destiny” was in important ways a “secular” Neo-Hindu destiny that could only be realized at the cost of surgically cutting off the far Northwest and large portions of the Northeast (to become West and East Pakistan, the latter eventually becoming Bangladesh).

Moreover, shortly after Partition, the conundrum of Kashmir would become the exception that would prove the rule of what can only be called the tragic creation narrative of Partition. That is, a majority Muslim population, under the leadership of a Hindu Maharaja, would accede to largely Hindu India thereby creating an anomaly within both India and Pakistan, with Hindus claiming that a majority Muslim state would legitimate the “secular” credentials of the emerging nation-state of India, and with Muslims in Pakistan claiming that Kashmir must find its ultimate destiny within the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. The conflict over Kashmir is perhaps the most salient symbol of the important religious significance of Partition. It is an open sore on the body of independent India and Pakistan that will never heal fully until some new status for Kashmir is properly re-negotiated by India, Pakistan and the people of the Kashmir region, a status that might well resemble the sort of reconfiguration that brought about the emergence of Bangladesh.

In any case, what makes Partition an important religious event is the stark antithesis of religious sensibilities between Hindus and Muslims, sensibilities that encompass ideology (and theology), historical understanding, basic values, social organization, and law. Islamic religion, on analogy or in continuity with older Jewish and Christian religions that arose in the Mediterranean region of Late Antiquity, focuses on an abstract belief system centering on one God

(Allah), a master text (the Qur'an), a master historical narrative (*Heilsgeschichte*), a master community (the Dar al-Islam), a specific sacred space (Mecca) and an all-encompassing sacred as well as "personal" law (Shari'a). Hindu religion, in contrast, on analogy or in continuity with other "dharma" traditions such as the Buddhists and Jains that stretch back to the first millennium BCE, is dramatically different in almost every respect. Instead of one transcendent deity, there is a polymorphic set of disparate deities or no deity at all. Instead of a single master historical narrative or *Heilsgeschichte*, there is a wide-ranging multi-narrativity. Instead of a single authoritative text, there is a pervasive multi-textuality, both written and oral. Instead of an abstract set of beliefs or credo (orthodoxy), there is the absence of any sort of cognitive regulation but various traditions, instead, of ortho-praxis that differs from one birth-group (*jāti*) to another and from one stage of life to another. And in place of a cohesive believing community, some sort of Dar al-Islam, there are pluralistic sets of mini-communities, to some degree normatively hierarchical in an official idiom of *varṇa* or "caste," but in reality a splintered texture of birth-groups (*jāti*) that vary from region to region on the subcontinent.

That Partition represents a profound religious event and that Hindu and Muslim religious sensibilities are the antithesis of one another is not to gainsay that there were some salient commonalities as well, especially on a popular

everyday level. Politically, both Hindus and Muslims disliked and distrusted what they considered to be the “divide and rule” tactics of the British Raj. They were both largely un-persuaded by the proselytizing of the missionaries, who flooded into the subcontinent in significant numbers after gaining permission to enter the region through the Charter Act of 1813. Both Hindus and Muslims detested the arrogance and racism of the Raj. Perhaps most of all, they were weary of the mindless hypocrisy of the British Raj that espoused the Enlightenment principles of freedom, self-determination, and democracy, while carefully postponing the full implementation of the same principles almost up until the last day of the British presence on the subcontinent. Even when the time for full implementation finally arrived, there was a mad rush for the exit, without adequate preparation or safeguards, which became undoubtedly an important causal factor for the terrible violence that ensued. Both Hindus and Muslims suffered terribly because of the British penchant for all too often operating in a “...fit of absent-mindedness,” to use Lord Palmerston’s famous quip regarding the British Raj as a whole.³

Likewise, even though their religious sensibilities differed markedly, there were also commonalities between Hindus and Muslims on other cultural (non-religious) levels in addition to their joint dislike of the political dominance of the Raj, including, for example, the cuisines of India and Pakistan, the classical music traditions of South Asia, pilgrimage traditions in and around the

subcontinent, the painting, sculpture and architecture traditions, linguistic interactions in both the various vernaculars (Hindi, Urdu, and so forth) and in the classical languages (Sanskrit and Arabic), patterns of everyday interaction in terms of trade, marketing, local public education, and perhaps most obviously, the great fondness among all citizens for “Bollywood” cinema, television programming, popular magazines and newspapers. These commonalities frequently cross religious boundaries and make up the complex and dense civil society of modern “secular” India and Muslim Pakistan. In addition, of course, there is the significant influence and use of the medium of English and the legacy of British culture and Institutional structures generally in India and Pakistan.

When referring to Partition, therefore, the point is that Hinduism and Islam in post independence South India have a number of new features which taken together suggest significantly changed religious sensibilities from what had gone before on the subcontinent. The most salient of these new features include (a) the recognition that Hinduism and Islam have now emerged as distinct cultural traditions functioning in modern democratic polities that require practitioners in both nations to take account of all sorts of minority religious traditions in their respective environments; (b) the recognition that the largest majority religious traditions (Hindu in India, Muslim in Pakistan) have had from the beginning up to the present moment great difficulty in accommodating their religious minorities

even after the major surgeries of partition; and most important, (c) the recognition for the need of new civil ideologies, both political and religious, that will permit the new nation-states to co-exist peacefully in the South Asian region.

This latter feature, that is, the need for new political and religious ideologies, has generated a profoundly important debate that continues in India and Pakistan up until today and will continue to unfold in the sub-continental region for many years to come.

Let me close with some verses from the famous poem of Faiz Ahmad Faiz, “Freedom’s Morning—August 1947,” verses that give painful expression to the tragedy and promise of Partition.⁴

This pitted dawn, snake-bitten sky of morning!

We waited for this day. It came at last.

But this was not our hope of heaven’s dawning—

The dreams our comrades cherished in the past.

Hope against hope, we looked towards the sky

To see where stars might set; that endless chain

Of waves that lap the shore by night, then die;

A haven for our ship; the end of pain.

....

I hear the plans we made are now complete.

Light and dark are joined with wandering feet.

And those who suffered quickly changed their ways;

They celebrate the victory they achieved;

They tell us there will be far better days.

But they forget the pulsing heart that grieved.

The lamp upon the road is almost spent;

The morning breeze still passes with a sigh.

We know not whence it came or where it went;

And there is conflict with the heart and eye.

There may be no relief, but still we strive

To keep our cause, our cherished goal alive.

ENDNOTES

¹ My comments in this essay are shortened and reformulated versions of much longer discussions in my book, Gerald James Larson, *India's Agony Over Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995; Delhi: Oxford

University Press, 1997), pp. 182 ff.; and my article, "Independent India (1947-)," *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, Volume 4, Knut A. Jacobsen, Editor-in-Chief (Leiden: Brill, 2012), pp. 121-122.

²India's Agony Over Religion, p.189.

³ India's Agony Over Religion, p. 49.

⁴ David Matthews, trans., *An Anthology of Urdu Verse in English* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 68-71.