



Religious Nationalism in the Context of Pakistan Harmony Pre-Colonisation, Divide and Rule and The Partition



Short Essays

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Harmony Pre-Colonisation, Divide and Rule and The Partition

The Indian subcontinent witnessed the beginning of Islamic conquests in 1021 when Lahore was captured. In 1192, Hindu rulers in Delhi were overthrown by the Persianized Turks (from present-day Central Afghanistan), and a Sultanate, extending from Gujarat in the West to Bengal in the East and Madurai in the South was formed by 1323. Although these conquests are now closely associated with Muslims, religious affiliations were not used as primary identifiers in medieval Sanskrit texts. An Indo-Islamic society evolved through the centuries, promoting an amalgamation of cultures and coexistence throughout the subcontinent.

In 1757, the British expanded its dominance over India through the East India Company until 1858, when the British Raj was established and the government directly started its rule. While tension between the Hindu-Muslim communities was found pre-colonisation, the British government's divide-and-rule policies during this time intensified communal conflicts. Added to this, the expansion of communal organisations in the first half of the 20th century polarised the two communities causing friction and violence for political gains and corporate interests. Ultimately, when the British declared it would quit India, minority Muslims in pre-partitioned India (25% of the population) feared they would be marginalised in an independent India governed mostly by Hindus. Therefore, a Two Nation Theory backed by Muhammad Ali Jinnah demanded a separate nation, Pakistan in the West and East of India splitting the country and the two communities. What followed was among the most gruesome and horrifying migrations in history. While millions of Muslims made their way West or East to the newly formed Pakistan, countless Hindus and Sikhs walked in the opposite direction to India displacing over 12 million people. Consequently, the partition triggered a long-term rivalry between the two nations which resulted in three wars, the development of nuclear weapons and travel restrictions while impacting South Asia's geopolitical landscape. In religious contexts, India remained a secular country home to multiple religions including Muslims, Christians, and Sikhs with a Hindu majority. Although Pakistan was formed as a welfare Islamic state, it promoted a peaceful and equitable society where other minority religions could co-exist. Such minority communities, including the Hindus, are represented in the white colour of the Pakistani flag.

However, contrary to India's ideas of secularism and Pakistan's peaceful and equitable society, oppression of the majority over religious minorities has been prevalent. The political animosity between Hindu-majority India and predominantly Muslim Pakistan over the years has caused serious challenges to the minority communities.

In Pakistan, Hinduism constitutes the largest minority community with nearly 2.14% of the population practicing the religion. While religious freedom is facilitated through the Objective Resolution, Pakistan's fundamental and defining constitutional documents, it is not typical for Hindus to openly practice their religion. Similar to India's (and various other countries') political landscape, minority communities have been targeted for the inefficiencies of an administration and political gains. Hindus, considered to be anti-state and anti-Islam, are subject to discrimination and persecution while the electorate is mobilised and unified through the propagation of Islamic ideologies. However, contrary to the diversity and inclusions that exist(ed) in Indian societies, religious establishments, the state-run media and educational institutions perpetuate prejudice and discrimination against Hindus. Representation in the armed forces, judiciary and other positions of authority in public services is significantly lower, triggering further challenges. These issues, coupled with forced conversion and atrocities against the community have caused a steady exodus of Hindus from Pakistan. This essay examines the interplay between religion, nationalism and politics drawing examples from the exploitation of minority communities in Pakistan and through history.

Religious Nationalism in the Global Context

Shared pasts and memories foster a sense of kinship or solidarity among citizens, eventually nurturing a feeling of a nation and identity. While these recollections are potentially of heroic struggles or the nation's victories, they may also evoke memories of religious intolerance, betrayal and persecution. Typically, the desire for power is intrinsically linked to nationalism; therefore, competitive prestige is the ultimate objective. Events in history are perceived to be the perpetual rise and fall of superpowers while all that unfolds is evidence that their side is winning, and a hated rival is losing. Although nationalism is often confused with patriotism, the latter is defensive and is a strong commitment to a country that is not imposed on others. Therefore, a principal objective of nationalism is the increased power and prestige of the country over others and the certainty of righteousness. Historically, nationalistic ideas have led to discrimination, civil wars, oppression and genocide.

A conservative solidarity among citizens allegedly bound to a country through race, culture or biological background and the prioritisation of their needs – These were primary principles of Hitler and Mussolini extending their nationalistic ideologies and undermining democracy. Ethnic minority groups are frequently targets of discrimination and persecution by governments that have worked to safeguard or uphold a single dominant culture. Germany's misfortune including the defeat in World War 1, the harsh terms of the Treaty of Versailles, and the economic depression, were all used as justifications to persecute and genocide of the Jews in Adolf Hitler's Nazi Germany, murdering over six million Jewish people.



In Italy, a combination of nationalism, populism and violence to harness dissatisfaction led to the rise of Mussolini's fascist party. While these two cases are from an earlier era, contemporary history is populated with similar instances of discrimination and oppression stemming from nationalism.

In Xinjiang (northwest of China), China has been accused of crimes against and possible genocide of the minority Uyghur population. The broader issues of Islamic identity in Central Asia have fuelled ethno-religious conflicts and discrimination. Moreover, the heightened fight worldwide against terrorism after 9/11 has essentially made it possible for the Chinese government to conflate terrorism and separatism, further prioritising the Han Chinese (majority) over the mostly Muslim Uyghur population (minority). In Russia, Putin's nationalistic vision to defy the West coupled with the resurgence of Tsarist imperial nationalists who deny the existence of Ukraine and Ukrainians has triggered long-standing conflict. Russia's nationalism is motivated by the feeling of betrayal and the need for a strong leader, enabling them to tolerate authoritative leaders over the years including Vladimir Putin. However, his ideas of a "Russian world" consisting of Russia, Ukraine and other predominantly ethnic Russian nations, led to the takeover of Crimea and triggered the ongoing conflict with Ukraine. In the United States, Trump's presidency energised white nationalists through his rhetoric, personnel and policy decisions, giving white supremacists a platform, unparalleled in contemporary political landscapes. He connected to his core voters through campaigns that primarily featured his charisma, use of nationalist populism rhetoric and the stress on security threats due to illegal immigration. The Trump era in the United States, therefore, witnessed increased discrimination against immigrants and greater support for white nationalistic ideas. All the above-mentioned cases point to the oppression of a minority community irrespective of factors including religion, race, and location. The concept of the "other" that has betrayed or caused a downfall to "ours" and the need to perpetually win against them is a common factor and a primary cause of discrimination.

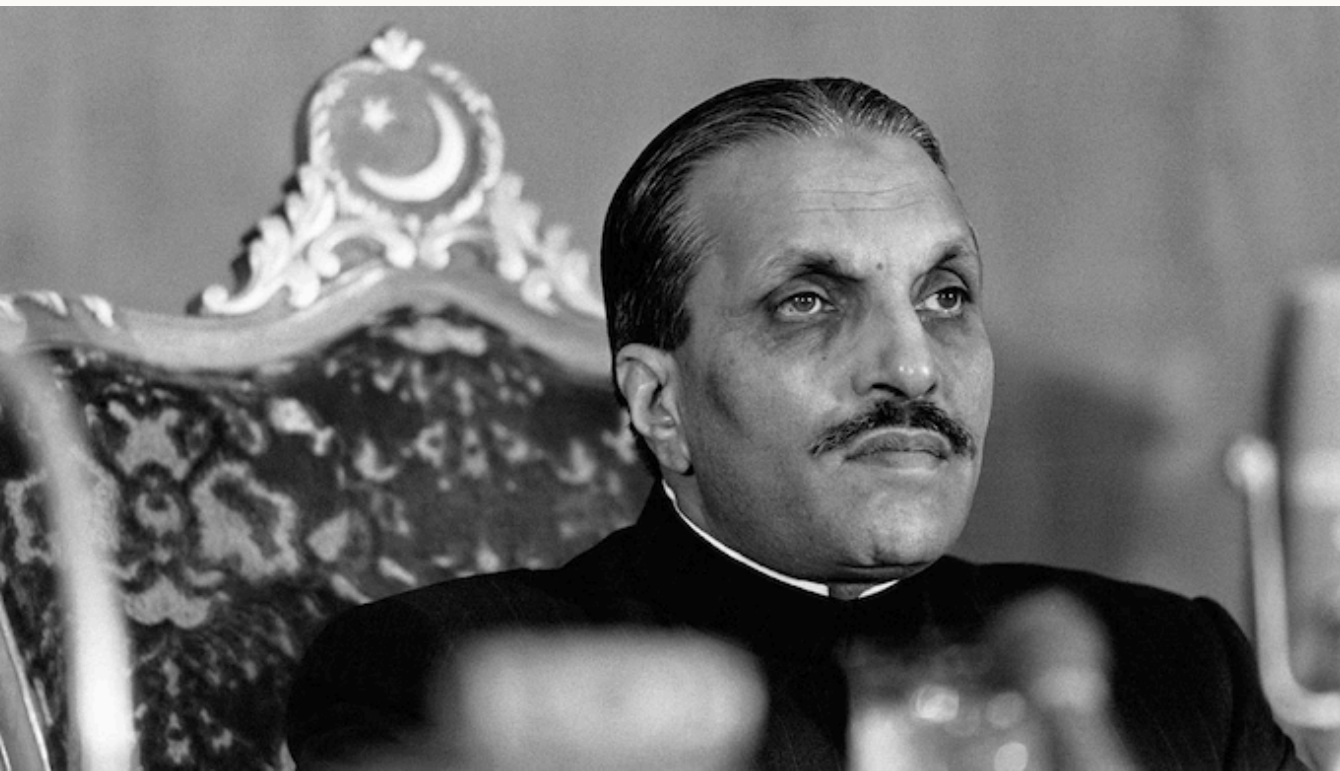
Religious Nationalism and Oppression in Pakistan

With a decentralised approach to governance in the Indian subcontinent throughout history, regional decolonisation created political and institutional vacuums where Muslims and Hindus had to compete. Consequently, the two-nation theory was justified and supported by Islam, creating West and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). Pakistan's national identity was heavily contentious due to identities of exclusions. The concept of Pakistan was fundamentally rooted in religion, aspiring to create a unified Islamic nation thus promoting ideas of religious nationalism in the country. Contrary to these ideas, on 11 August 1947, 3 days before the creation of Pakistan, Jinnah's crucial speech addressing the Constituent Assembly announced the country would be tolerant, inclusive and secular. In the speech quoted often, Jinnah declared "You may belong to any religion or caste or creed – that has nothing to do with the business of the state." However, religious idealists argued that this was incompatible with the anti-Indian and anti-Hindu narrative they were attempting to establish and subsequent military governments were accused of manipulating or even deleting the speech from official records.

. Following Jinnah's death, several civilian and in tandem with religious groups have attempted to transform him into an Islamic leader to align with the anti-Hindu sentiment and gain legitimacy in Pakistani society. Amidst a longstanding national identity crisis, this helped them find a new identity that gained traction in the 1970s during General Zia-ul-Haq's rule. To combat mainstream opposition to his rule and gain support from religious extremists, Zia employed Islamization extending his mission to "cleanse and purify Pakistan". While discriminatory laws against minorities were introduced, any opposition to the laws was silenced either through assassinations or charges of blasphemy. These laws have often been used by vested interests against Pakistan's minority groups. Thus, deviating from the founder's vision for the country, the implementation of discriminatory laws against minorities and the propagation of Islamic ideas advanced religious nationalism in Pakistan.

Violence against religious minorities in Pakistan escalated due to the growth of Sunni Islamist militants, which recruited and inspired members by condemning non-Sunni Muslims. Military intimidation, violence and the government's failure to enforce laws have further allowed such religious extremists to carry out acts of violence in the name of religion. Every year, there are persistent allegations of Hindu women being abducted, forced to convert to Islam and forced into marriages with Muslim men. While thousands of Christian and Hindu girls suffer forced conversion by Muslim men, police inaction, the failure of the justice system and the non-recognition of Hindu marriages in court make Hindu women vulnerable to these heinous crimes. A minor Hindu girl was threatened to convert to Islam and marry against her will in 2023 triggered a debate about Pakistan's justice system. Several such cases of mostly minor Hindu girls are reported in Pakistan with generally no response from authorities. Condemning violations of human rights, the United Nations urged Pakistan to respect their international commitment, prosecute offenders, enforce laws pertaining to child and forced marriage and abduction and trafficking of minor girls. Accounts also suggest the mainstream media fail to report on such issues accurately. In 2020, construction of a temple in Pakistan's capital was halted due to pressure from political elites and after a mob demolished the boundary wall. Nearly a decade ago, after claims that a Hindu had desecrated the Qur'an, a crowd set fire to a Hindu community centre in Southern Pakistan, which was followed by attacks on four other Hindu temples. The persistent violence against Hindu properties and temples depicts the discrimination faced by Hindu communities.

While the cases mentioned above bring to light direct or visible discrimination against the Hindu minorities in Pakistan, unnoticed reports of discrimination and oppression are frequent. In Sindh province with the largest population of Hindus, conversions are widespread owing to social and religious discrimination, economic hardships or protection. Taking advantage of the minorities' economic disadvantage, local religious leaders converted nearly 50 Hindus in a single mass conversion. Mostly living in poverty, a large number of Hindus convert to Islam every year as they are guaranteed land ownership and an increased economic status for the family. Further, with minimal representation of Hindus in positions of power or authority in government institutions, conversion is rampant to reach a higher status.



Often, the contributions of the minority communities in Pakistan are also forgotten since the names of Hindu-founded institutions changed. Therefore, the minority Hindu community in Pakistan faces perpetual discrimination and oppression through forced conversion, violence, intolerance and hate. The creation of Pakistan as an Islamic state and the subsequent rise in religious nationalism has further fuelled religious discrimination, violence and intolerance.

Conclusions

The oppression of minority Hindus in Pakistan helps understand the causes and consequences of religious nationalism and abuse of absolute power. With increased polarisation and communal disharmony worldwide, mitigating such extremism has now become vital. In Gaza for example, similar narratives and sentiments have led to a genocide of the minority population. In India, discrimination against minority Muslims and the demolition of the Babri Masjid led to violence against minority Hindus in Pakistan. While such religious discrimination is a serious threat and defies human rights conventions, it is important to understand they cause long-lasting ripple effects. To that end, this essay demonstrates the need to amplify discourse and debate against religious nationalism and discrimination.



About the Author

I'm Pranav Rao, a graduate of MA in Political Communication from the School of Journalism, Media and Culture, Cardiff University. My research interest includes the rise in right-wing populist governments, public opinion and the media's representation of democracies. Through my research and work, I aim to inspire positive political decisions.

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