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Cover Picture: Historic Kutub Minar—Victory Tower, 1199 AD, in Delhi, India, the first Islamic (victory) structure in the Subcontinent. Picture by Sachi G. Dastidar

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Shuvo Dastidar
Ispad Project Coordinator

The fourth annual Partition Studies conference was held at the State University of New York, Old Westbury campus on October 18th, 2014. There was a festive aura in the air not only because of the conference but also because it was the last day of Panther Pride Week of the campus homecoming celebrations. Distinguished Service Professor Dr. Sachi G. Dastidar, in his capacity as Conference Chair, officially began the conference with a few words to greet all those in attendance as well as to recognize all those who made the conference possible. Dr. Tom Lilly, Esq., Professor and Board member, welcomed the conference speakers, participants, and the audience. The few words he spoke were similar to his classroom manner: educational and witty. Dr. Wayne Edwards, Interim V. P. of Student Affairs at SUNY Old Westbury, as well as Dr. Barbara Hillery, Dean of School of Arts and Sciences at SUNY Old Westbury took time out of their hectic schedules that day to welcome the conference participants. Their attendance and support (of both The ISPaD Project and Partition Studies Conference) as individuals as well employees of the university has occurred with admirable regularity. They both praised ISPaD for running the project relying exclusively upon private donations and individual sponsorships. They expressed their respect for how difficult it must be to run The ISPaD Project amidst the current financial condition as an NGO on “a no shoe-string budget.”

The third ISPaD journal was unveiled by Dr. Lilly, and distributed to the patrons, Board Members, sponsors, and the attendees. The journal contains articles from the U.S., India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. All in attendance agreed with Dean Hillery when she spoke of “the slick look” of the cover, worthy of the papers published within. Then Mr. Shuvo Dastidar, ISPaD Project Coordinator, shared a short report of last year’s conference and thanked all those in attendance for assisting ISPaD’s efforts just before the four panels began.

Panelists, from left, Mathew Reiss, Mathew Fisher, Pratip Dasgupta, Khurshidul Islam and Sachi G. Dastidar

The first session was about the Moral and Rights Issues around the World. Chair of this session was Dr. Tom Lilly. Papers presented in this session were: “Save the Victims of Partition: Know truth and truth will set you free” by Professor Chitta Mondol covered the partition victims, their sufferings, and the reality of impacts of partition. Mondol’s paper was read by Mr. Pratip Dasgupta as Mondol had to leave for Bangladesh. Professor Dastidar presented his paper entitled “India Election2014: the Pundits, Media, the Left in Partitioned Bengal, Contradictions and Misinformation.” Mr. Mathew Zaro Fisher, a graduate student at Claremont Lincoln University, California, presented his work done in partnership with the International school for Jain Studies, and the Federation of Jains in North America to present “Jain Narrative of the Impact of the 1947 Partition of India.” This ongoing research project addresses Jainism’s
unique philosophy of non-violence (ahimsa) and its impact during 1947 partition. Mr. Khurshidul Islam, a social activist in New York, discussed “Communalism in Bangladesh and Developing Countries”. The final speaker of this panel was Mr. Mathew Reiss, professor at Rutgers University in New Jersey, whose paper “Delineating the divide between pro-mainland, and pro-Taiwan, Taiwanese” had been severely effected in the time between its initial submission and his presentation of it. Mr. Reiss explained what global events impacted his paper.

The second session was dedicated exclusively to the planning of one of the oldest cities of the world, Varanasi, India. Dr. Amita Sinha of the University of Illinois, Urbana presented “Ghats in Varanasi, India, reclaiming the Cultural Landscape” with an interesting history and slide show. Dr. Shefali Dastidar was the Chair, she felt very much attached with this presentation and she explained her own experience while working as a Urban Planner in State of Uttar Pradesh where Varanasi (Banaras) is located. (See picture below)

Partition of India:
One U.S. diplomat's notes

B. Z. KHASRU
Journalist, New York

Partition of India in 1947 by Britain to create Pakistan wrought havoc in both human lives and miseries. It killed two million people, according to various estimates, and displaced 14 million. Its lega-
cy, the two siblings of the midnight -- nuclear-armed Pakistan and India -- are still at loggerheads. Was this was inevitable?

To find an answer, one needs to examine the major factors that led to this fateful decision. Apart from intricate socio-economic and political reasons, one thing that contributed big time to the partition was mutual distrust of the Indian National Congress Party and the Muslim League Party. Congress leaders Jawharlal Nehru and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel both doubted sincerity of their League counterparts Mohammad Ali Jinnah and Liaquat Ali Khan. Likewise, Jinnah and Liaquat never trusted Nehru and Patel.

U.S. diplomatic cables from New Delhi on conversations with these leaders during a crucial phase in India's freedom struggle give an interesting insight into what was behind the tragedy. One such cable came to the State Department on 14 December 1946 from Charge d’Affaires George Merrell, then highest-ranking American diplomat in India, who reported his talk with Nehru the night before. He interestingly noted that Nehru in his remarks painted Jinnah as a Hindu and identified himself more closely with Muslims.

Was Jinnah Hindu?

Nehru “embarked on restrained but lengthy attack on Jinnah who he said had Hindu background and lived according to Hindu law, Nehru himself being imbued with more Muslim culture, linguistically and in other ways, than Jinnah,” Merrell wrote.[1]

On the issue of Pakistan’s creation, Nehru was baffled by Jinnah's posture. Congress had endeavored to learn what Jinnah wanted, but had never been able to receive satisfactory replies. Jinnah had never even adequately defined Pakistan. Nehru believed that Jinnah might have sought some change, but did not want a democratic government. Nehru's reasoning was based on the assumption that prominent Leaguers were landholders, so they preferred to continue under antiquated land laws -- British rule.

The British, on the contrary, believed that Jinnah initially embraced the Pakistan idea primarily for bargaining purposes, but by the mid-1940s the movement had gained such momentum that neither he nor anyone else could apply the brakes.[2] Still, had Nehru accepted Jinnah's demand for parity in the federal legislature and regional groupings as outlined in the British Cabinet Mission plan, India would have possibly remained united. He could have served India better by following the policy President Abraham Lincoln adopted during the American Civil War:

“I would save the Union. … If I could save the Union without freeing any slave, I would do it; and if could save it by freeing all the slaves, I would do it. … What I do about Slavery and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save this Union,” Lincoln wrote in an open letter to Horace Greeley, editor of the New York Tribune, which appeared in the newspaper on 25 August 1862.

Likewise, Nehru's mantra should have been, "I would keep India united. ..."

The crux of the internal problem that India faced before the partition stemmed from differences of opinion between Congress and League as to the conditions under which provinces would join or remain out of sub-federations in northwest and northeast India.

U.S. Favored United India

“I am confident that if the Indian leaders show the magnanimous spirit the occasion demands, they can go forward
together on the basis of the clear provisions on this point contained in the constitutional plan proposed by the British Cabinet Mission last spring to forge an Indian federal union in which all elements of the population have ample scope to achieve their legitimate political and economic aspirations,” Merrell wrote to Washington. [3]

Britain wanted the two major political parties to jointly frame India's constitution as a prelude to independence. This idea resulted from the British Cabinet Mission to India in 1946. The mission proposed a united India, having groupings of Muslim-majority provinces and that of Hindu-majority provinces. These groupings would have given Hindus and Muslims parity in the Central Legislature. Congress abhorred the idea, and League refused to accept any changes to this plan, because the parity that Congress was loath to accept formed the basis of Muslim demands of political safeguards built into post-British Indian laws to prevent absolute rule of Hindus over Muslims. Reaching an impasse, the British proposed an alternative plan on 16 June 1946. [4] This plan arranged for India to be divided into a Hindu-majority India and a Muslim-majority Pakistan.

As a fallout, the region witnessed bloodbath and mass migration of an unprecedented scale. In the riots that preceded the partition in the Punjab region alone, as many as a half million people were killed in a retributive genocide, and 14 million Sikhs and Muslims were displaced. [5]

Did Nehru Foresee Carnage?

No one knows for sure whether Nehru anticipated this carnage. He remained convinced that League would ultimately join the Constituent Assembly. Nehru, however, doubted that League would ever work constructively in a coalition government in free India. Congress never liked the Cabinet Mission proposal, but in the interest of peaceful and fair settlement had formed the interim government. This decision was based on the understanding that League would cooperate, but League members said they joined the cabinet to fight. If they entered the Constituent Assembly, where Muslims held 73 seats against Congress' 208, “it would be with the purpose of wrecking it,” [6] Nehru vented.

One sticking point in the partition plan was the division of Bengal and Punjab. On Bengal's status, on 11 December 1946, Merrell talked with Chakravarti Rajagopalachari, an interim cabinet member and favorite of both Nehru and M. K. Gandhi, India's paramount independence leader. Rajagopalachari told the envoy that “Congress could not possibly agree to [the] interpretation of cabinet proposals which would inevitably place millions of Hindus under Muslim rule particularly in [the] Bengal-Assam group.” [7] Asked how the basis for a democratic government could be established as long as mutual distrust between Hindus and Muslims exemplified by this view persisted, Rajagopalachari evaded the issue.

The United States, which favored India's early emancipation and pushed Britain toward this end, strove to persuade Nehru to accept the Cabinet Mission plan that envisaged a weak federal administration and strong regional governments for free India.

What Could Prevent Partition

“We have found that a central [government] initially with limited powers gradually acquires, as experience demonstrates necessity therefor, the additional authority which it must have to meet problems of the Federal Union,” the State Department said in a message to
Nehru. “Our hope that Congress accept clear implications Brit Cabinet Mission plan...on reciprocal undertaking by Muslim League to work loyally within [the] framework [of] Indian Federal Union, subject only to reopening constitutional issue after 10 years of experiment.”[8]

Muslim League's views on its difficulty with Congress were articulated by Liaquat Ali Khan during a discussion with Merrell on 27 December 1946. Muslims, Liaquat said, “would not agree to independence [from British rule] unless adequate safeguards for minorities were provided.”[9]

He expressed grave doubts whether Congress would accommodate Muslims.

“Liaquat ... discussed at length his conviction that Congress leaders have no intention of trying to work Cabinet Mission plan conscientiously but are determined to seize power without regard for Muslim rights,” Merrell wrote.[10]

As evidence of Nehru's lack of interest in Congress-League cooperation, Liaquat pointed out that Asaf Ali was appointed India's first ambassador to the United States without any consultation with League members of the interim government. Liaquat came to know about the appointment when he read press report in London. Asaf Ali, he said, did not command respect or confidence of Muslim Indians.

**Muslim League Distrusted Congress**

Furthermore, Liaquat added, as soon as League joined the interim government he proposed two League representatives -- Begum Shah Nawaz, a Punjab lawmaker, and Mirza Abol Hassan Ispahani, a Constituent Assembly member who later became Pakistan's first ambassador to Washington -- be appointed to the UN delegation. But Nehru refused on the ground that the number was limited to five and the appointment of these two would mean replacing the two who had already prepared themselves for work at the UN.

When League joined the interim government, Liaquat continued, he proposed that in the interest of efficiency and cooperation, questions concerning more than one department be discussed by ministers concerned prior to full cabinet meetings, regardless of whether these ministers were Congress or League members. Nehru again refused to agree on the ground it was preferable to thrash out all questions in full cabinet meetings. When Merrell asked whether all votes in cabinet meetings were along party lines, Liaquat answered in the affirmative. [11]

In reply to a question from Merrell, Liaquat said he was convinced Gandhi had no desire for Hindu-Muslim cooperation, but was working for Hindu domination of India -- to be attained through violence, if necessary. When the envoy further asked whether Liaquat believed Gandhi’s activities in East Bengal were a deliberate attempt to embarrass the Bengal government and to divert attention from Bihar, where communal violence had killed thousands of Muslims, he said “there was no question about it.”[12]

Gandhi had gone to East Bengal on a mission to restore communal harmony after a series of massacres, rapes, abductions and forced conversions of Hindus as well as looting and arson of Hindu properties by Muslims in October–November 1946, [13] a year before India won freedom from British rule. However, the peace mission failed to restore confidence among the survivors, who couldn't be permanently rehabilitated in their villages. Meanwhile, Congress accepted India's partition and the peace mission and other relief camps were
abandoned, making this tragedy a permanent feature in South Asia.

Endnotes:


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Christians and Refugee Relief during Partition of India and Korean War: Comparative Studies between India and Korea

Youngsoo Kong
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Introduction

India experienced tragedy of violence during partition in 1947. Similarly, Korea underwent partition-related Korean War. These turbulent events went far beyond control of newly independent govern-
ments in India and Korea. Christian communities in both India and Korea played a pivotal role in the field of refugee relief in such situations. However, similarity in relief contributions did not guarantee similar outcomes. Christians in both west and east Punjab were socio-politically invisible and communally neutral during partition. Invisibility [1] reveals their social status and political power relations in Punjab whereas neutrality characterizes their contribution to secular nation-building. However, Christians in Korea during partition and Korean War had far different stories. Although numerically small like Punjab Christians, Korean Christians’ influence on society and politics was greater than numbers. [2] They were also politically right-sided, which thus created ideological disputes with communist North. [3]

My goal in this paper is to argue that Christian relief work during partition violence and Korean War would usher us understanding unique, but pivotal roles of minority communities in partition history of both India and Korea, and clarifying both peculiarity and commonality of partition experience and its impact by comparative studies.

Christian Refugee Relief Work in India during Partition

Christian refugee relief work was a highly distinct event to expose Christian ethos of non-communality and indiscriminate hospitality. Despite their invisibility and powerlessness in partition politics, [4] Christians were able to participate in nation-building in both India and Pakistan. Christianity was often suspected as foreign or non-nationalistic religion during British rule in India. [5] Such accusations became worse when independence and partition came into reality in 1940s. Therefore, Indian Christians had to prove that they were true citizens of independent India. Relief activities were such attempts to show their loyalty to the new governments. On 10 September, 1947, the National Christian Council of India, Burma and Ceylon (hereafter, NCC) Relief Committee was formed in Delhi. The committee agreed that ‘this tragedy offered an opportunity to the Church to perform its essential duty as a ‘Good Samaritan’, and to win the goodwill of the present Government and the people of country.’ [6]

The Governments of both Dominions offered to provide facilities such as customs duty exemption for relief supplies. And they asked for help in forming medical teams to work in refugee camps scattered over wide areas in both East Punjab and West Pakistan. [7] Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, a Punjabi Christian as a Health minister of the Government of India at the time was overwhelmed by such quick and united relief work that the Christian community was rendering. [8] Christian relief teams were the only groups welcomed by the people and the governments from both India and Pakistan. [9] It was because Christians were the only community who could work on any of the wounded victims of other faiths.

Churches in India sent volunteers and fund contributions. As far as relief funds [10] are concerned, they were not geographically and physically bound whereas volunteer works required physical presence and at least certain skills to contribute for the needy. Funding activities were carried out in pan-Indian level and even beyond. [11] Such relief activities were motivated by social demands at the time rather than by political negotiations with majority communities.

In East Punjab, Christian medical relief work began before partition. When the Muslims attacked the Sikhs in Amritsar in March 1947, staffs of St. Catherine’s hospital at Amritsar began their relief work. [12] There were five mission hospitals in East Punjab, strategically situated in the path of the migration. There
were the Philadelphia Hospital at Ambala; the Women’s Medical College and Hospital at Ludhiana; the Frances Newton Hospital at Ferozepur; the St. Catherine’s Hospital at Amritsar and the Salvation Army Hospital at Dhariwal. Doctors, nurses and hospital staffs worked both in their hospitals and the refugee camps nearby since the beginning of the communal disturbances. While many mission schools were used as refugee camps, principals of those schools were often appointed as in-charges of relief work by the local governments. [13]

In West Punjab, B.L. Rallia Ram, a secretary of YMCA India in Lahore became the president of the Christian Relief Committee of Pakistan. According to a report of Christian medical teams, NCC medical teams worked at Sargodha and Lyallpur while the Friends’ service Unit worked at Khanewal and others at mission hospitals in Sialkot and Jhelum. And the CEZMS hospital at Multan, the Reformed Presbyterian hospital at Montgomery, the Scottish Mission hospital at Gujrat and Jalapur-Jattan also did a medical relief. [14] Volunteers for medical relief, unlike in India, were less because fifty percent of Pakistan’s medical personnel, consisting of Hindus and Sikhs, had already evacuated Pakistan for India making the situation much worse. [15] Moreover there were fewer mission hospitals in Pakistan than in India. In order to meet other needs, almost all Christians in West Punjab poured whatever resources available into relief work. [16]

In Delhi, It was a cooperative activity with over 200 workers from the Churches of Delhi, St. Stephen’s College, St. Stephen’s Hospital, Queen Mary’s School, Friends Service Unit, YWCA and YMCA under the banner of the National Christian Council. They worked at Kingsway Camp, Kalka Mandir Camp, Okhla, Purana Qila and Humayan’s Tomb Camps, etc. [17] Initial refugee relief was carried out for outgoing Muslim refugees who had fled to Purana Qila and later to Humayun’s Tomb. However, the challenge was that the volunteers themselves were threatened by angry Hindus and Sikhs. Leaders of Christian refugee relief organizations were warned to quit or be killed.

**Korean War and Christian Relief Activities**

During Korean War (1950-53), Christian relief work was an essential part of Church activities which impacted entire country along with missionary work. The government of Korea and non-governmental organizations were not able to handle massive needs of relief work as almost forty percent of the population was refugees and war sufferers. [18] The United Nations relief effort was supported by voluntary Christian groups in the U.S. A. It was partly because Churches leaders in Korea actively appealed to foreign relief. Thus, two-third of non-governmental foreign relief aids were sent by Christian organizations from the U.S.A. [19] Christian foreign relief funds and materials were distributed through Korean churches and Christian leaders. In 1950, Rev. Han Kyungchik, a founder of Yougnak church (It was the biggest North Korean refugee church in the South at the time), formed ‘Kidokkyo Kukukhoe [the Christian National Salvation Assembly]’ to promote and coordinate relief works amongst Christians. He and many Korean church leaders were strongly anti-communistic and a few U.S.-educated English-speaking elites among the Korean educated. Such qualifications enabled them to play higher roles in relief controls. In collaboration with the U.S. based Christian charity organizations, their works provided a positive image of Christianity to the Korean public. In 1950s, Korean churches experienced the
most active ‘social work era’ in the history of Korean church. [20] As a result, the Church in 1950s was widely recognized as a relief organization in South Korean society. [21] Relief work was mainly concentrated on the several areas: 1) orphans’ welfare, 2) widows’ welfare, 3) refugee rehabilitations, 4) food distribution, 5) medical aids, and 6) missionary activities. War orphans were estimated around one hundred thousand. [22] Their situation was worst kind of social problems among war-ravaged people. Christian Children’s Fund, Everett Swanson Evangelistic Association, World Vision and other denominational Church missions took part in orphanage constructions and oversees adoption for them. War widows were also serious concerns for the relief team. They numbered nearly three hundred thousand and two hundred thousand were their children to be equally paid attention on. [23] Church World Service (CWS), Methodists, Oriental Missionary society, Mennonites, World Vision, Maryknoll Sisters, United Church of Canada Mission, YWCA, and several other Korean Christian women’s organizations participated in construction of widow homes, fundraising, tailoring training and supplying consuming goods, etc. Widow homes were established in Seoul, Pusan and Kyungnam during the war. Refugee rehabilitation was mainly taken care of by Church World Service and the Salvation Army. North Korean refugees and prisoners of wars were given free food stations. Such facilities were established throughout the country and continued after the war. [24] Christian medical aids were provided by Church World Service and already existing mission hospitals. Especially, Severance hospital in Seoul opened rehabilitation clinic providing artificial limbs for the disabled during the war in October 1952. Similar centres were set up in Daejun, Daegu and Junjoo. [25] In fact, relief work was not a sole objective to more than half of Christian relief organizations during the war, but multiple objectives including religious activities. [26] Many Christian oversees donors and Korean Christian leaders were active not only in rebuilding destroyed Christian facilities such as church buildings, mission schools, mission hospitals and seminaries in the course of relief works, [27] but also constructing new churches and Christian institutions. Furthermore with consent from the government of the Republic of Korea and help from the U.S. Army, a military Chaplains Corps was set up in February, 1952 during the war. The first thirty-nine Korean chaplains were all Christian clergies. It was good for the Church to propagate Christian faiths in the military while it was also beneficial for the government and the U.S. army to boost anti-communistic sentiments in the midst of ideological warfare. [28] Their activities were extended to prisoners of wars (POWs) camps. These Christian activities were, as Haga opines, attempts to impose ‘the relevance of religion as an ideological alternative to the communist utopia.’ [29] It was also in tune with the U.S. foreign policy at the time. Therefore, both partition and the war ushered the Church an immense opportunity to maximize her religious influence on South Korean politics and society. As a result, population of Korean church rapidly sprang up during and after Korean War. In 1950, there were only 600,000 Christians, [30] but in 1960 they became doubled numbering around 1,300,000. [31]

**Conclusion**

Christians in both India and Korea made an impact in new nation-building through refugee relief work during turbulent time of partition and Korean War. In
India, They were involved in medical, educational, administrative and financial aids. While insanity prevailed, a sane code of conduct amongst Christians soon became a valuable ‘national asset’ [32] to both newly independent India and Pakistan. However, such ethical reputation didn’t guarantee socio-political gains of Christians. Christians in Punjab remained marginalized in post-partition India and Pakistan. [33] In Korea, huge demands for non-governmental relief aids paved a way for Churches to maximize their religious, social and political influence through relief works during Korean War. It was possible through collaboration between Korean Church leaders and the Korean government along with foreign supports mainly from Churches in the U.S.A. Their ideological tie-up with the government of South Korea enabled Christian leaders to act as defenders of anti-communism while they were at the forefront of relief and religious activities during the war.

Endnotes:

[1] Most of Punjab Christians were from Dalit background and they were socially, economically and politically backward even after conversion. See John C.B. Webster, A Social History of Christianity: North-west India Since 1800 (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007).


[4] Punjab Christians were not consulted for partition proceedings while Hindu, Muslim and Sikh leaders were busy fighting for their shares. Their voice was not heard for decision making. See the details in Youngsoo Kong, ‘Partition and Christians in Punjab’, Unpublished M.Phil. Dissertation: Jawaharlal Nehru University, 2012, pp. 40-46.

[5] Golwalkar, an ideologue of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (hereafter, RSS) during partition, suspected loyalty of Indian Christians for being non-Hindus to the nation by saying that: “They [Non-Hindus] must not only give up their attitude of intolerance and ungratefulness towards this land and its age long traditions but must also cultivate the positive attitude of love and devotion instead in one word they, must cease to be foreigners, or may stay in the country, wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment- not even citizen’s rights.” M.S. Golwalkar, We or Our Nationhood Defined (4th ed., Nagpur, 1947), pp. 55-56. Such statements were strongly asserted and supported while there were high communal sentiments during partition.


[7] Ibid., pp. 610-611.


[11] The government of the U.S.A. was busy with supporting war-torn Europe after 1945 and equally busy for safeguarding anti-communist (or anti-Soviet) alliances. Non-European countries were not given priority for relief help. Therefore, non-governmental organizations were more active in rendering help for partition relief in India and Pakistan.
Christian World Service (CWS) was distinct among them. Christians in India were identified as partner relief agency in India with CWS. (E.C. Batty, ‘Refugee Relief’, NCCR (December, 1948), p. 609)


[22] Robert T. Oliver, Ibid.


[24] Ibid., p. 68.

[25] Ibid.


[27] It is one of common concerns of missionaries for relief aid as one American Methodist relief worker mentioned in his letter, “As I see it, our task in the immediate present is to bring relief aid to needy people, especially to Christian workers and their families, and to help with repairs on damaged churches” in Mokwon University Theological Study Institute (ed.), Letters of Charles D. Stokes (Seoul: the Institute for Korean Church History, 2004), p. 73.


[30] Ibid. 104.


[33] When partition took place, 80 percent of Punjab Christians remained in Pakistan region and they composed 2 percent of Pakistan population whereas in India only 20 percent of Punjab Christians stayed in Indian Punjab which composed less than 1 percent. Numerical strength due to division was weakened and stronger religious counterparts (Muslims in Pakistan, Hindus and Sikhs in India) who took more control over minority community made Christian community marginalized even after partition.

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Communalism, Still!

Dr. Mohsin Siddique
Engineer and Social Activist,
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"The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living." - The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte; Karl Marx, 1852.

Communalism in South Asia is a nightmare left behind by generations past; it can raise its ugly head at any moment, and seems like a phenomenon without a foreseeable end. Admittedly, at this time in the second decade of the 21st century social progress in many areas can be claimed. Yet it is also true that religious bias, related ignorance, hatred, opportunism, terrorism, etc., some of which predate what we understand as modern civilization, continue to cause havoc throughout the region in various degrees. It is easy to take advantage of the sense of insecurity imbedded in class divided societies to encourage suspicion of others, provoke riots, and forcibly occupy properties of the minorities, often the last bit of possession - their homestead. The savage practice of forcible conversion – even though banned – often of abducted individuals, continues illegally though sporadically. Taking advantage of ambiguities of bourgeois democracy, unscrupulous politicians freely employ communal divisiveness to win elections.

Of the three countries created by dividing India as it existed through the British rule, Pakistan, true to its foundational premise does not claim to be a secular country and has more or less solved the ‘minority’ problem by ‘managing’ this demography to near extinction. India and Bangladesh vehemently claim to be ‘secular’. But the litany of riots since August 1947 including those of 2002 & 2006 in Gujarat, India and of 2013 in Bangladesh, show the persistence & power of communal forces in these countries! Nearly 70 years after the independence and exodus of millions across political boundaries that never existed before— the tragic historic event that was supposed to solve the problem of communalism causes mayhem and death. Minorities in their respective countries do not feel accepted as full citizens. They are treated as burdens; authorities provide very little protection from communal attacks against them, condemning them to a permanent state of insecurity.

There has always been opposition to this menace for reasons both practical and moral. Expansion of modern education and culture has made significant impact on the size of the population that has extricated themselves from the narrow confines of faith-based biases that is exploitable for fomenting communal violence. Transition of from feudal to capitalist phase contributes to secularization of the society, but does not entirely shut out the opportunity to deploy communalism, especially as a way to divide the
working class. What is disturbing is the persistence of a segment of the population that continues to thrive on the false ideology of superiority of their faith and exclusivity of their rights over those of others. The relative strength of these, not necessarily numeric, but in their influence, is what resulted in the division of India.

In Bangladesh, along with the Liberation, the commitment to secularism (and to democracy & socialism) at its inception was indeed cause for jubilation to those who have felt the brunt of and fought against the scourge of communalism. It appears that the wishes of the secular forces that shaped the ideological basis for Bangladesh – youth & student leaders affiliated with the Awami League (AL) and the Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB), were recognized in the core principles of the first constitution of the country. The reversal of public opinion that not long ago had subscribed to the fraudulent two nation theory (2NT), an openly communal construct to increase the alienation between Muslims and Hindus, i.e., to ‘prove’ that their interests are irreconcilably different and on that basis, demanded a separate country for the Muslims of India [1], seemed revolutionary. However subsequent events indicate that not much thought was given on how to go about practically eradicating communalism’s influence in our culture. It seems that the leadership, including the Father of the Nation, assumed that inclusion of intent in the country’s constitution was sufficient step to solve the problem once and for all. Further, as often happens in times of euphoria such as the period following the victory in the Liberation War, wishful thinking lead to misleading confidence and underestimation of the strength of those opposed to these changes. [2] The realities of nation with an ambiguous if not unsettled national identity, [3] which manifests directly and indirectly as communalism, anti-Hindu, anti-minority, anti-India sentiments, and the strength of the forces that encouraged this sentiment, was and is ignored.

Creation of Bangladesh can be viewed as a delayed (partial) fulfillment of a long standing Bengali Nationalist dream. There was some recognition that such an entity has to be secular. However, the nature of the Bengali Nation State (BNS) was perceived by different parties (slightly) differently. It became very important after being obvious soon after 1947 when conflict over national language of Pakistan ensued, and the dishonesty of the two nation theory (2NT) began to be exposed. The exploitative nature of the relation imposed by West Pakistan exposed as being a source of capital accumulation for investment in West Pakistan, and the desire to extricate from it got stronger. After independence, Bangladeshis had to assume some kind of nationalism! However, even then controversy arose between Bangladeshi Nationalism & Bengali Nationalism. The effort of a portion of the Bengali Muslims to distance themselves from the Hindus and what they call Hindu culture has been persistent throughout the history of this land, and with it, communalism. Contradictions abound.

The military take over of the country by staging a coup after killing the Father of the Nation and many in his close family was an eerie reminder of Pakistan and an indication of how much progress the country has not made in its commitment to secularism and democracy; socialism was out the door with the failure of nationalization debacle. The junta removed ‘secularism’ from the constitution, changed the name of the country to Islamic Republic of Bangladesh and placed a verse from the Quran at the start of it. They brought back the notorious Jamat-i-Islam, many of whose leaders openly
collaborated with the Pakistani military, organized & participated in killing of intellectuals, often targeting the Hindu community. It was allowed to reopen political shop for business in Bangladesh. To be fair, it should be noted that soon after the liberation, Sheikh himself felt the need to align with the Islamic powers in the Middle East, who vehemently opposed liberation of Bangladesh! [4] What was he afraid of, India, whose help he sought since 1962 to get out of the clutches of Pakistan? What do these imply in terms of dealing with communalism that has devastated the fate of this country? [5]

Though regrettable, it is not entirely surprising that Sheikh’s daughter the current Prime Minister, even with an absolute majority in the parliament, refuses to restore the spirit and the letter of the original constitution. Neither is there any concern with one of the most remarkable changes in the country that consciously nurtures communalism, - the proliferation of madrasas [6] that have mushroomed following the entrance of Bangladesh into the ambit of the Islamic world. They seem to operate independently, with funds from sources that are unknown to the public or the government, and curriculum that has not much relevance to national educational goals. It is suspected that the assassins, who have hacked several bloggers and others to death, may have been trained at some of these institutions. Most of the political parties in Bangladesh in one way or another is implicated in the resurgence of religion based politics. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), created by the leader of the first coup, has formed coalition with Jamat. Only the CPB and the Socialist Party of Bangladesh consistently opposed legitimizing JI and the politics of theocracy in a country proudly claims to be secular. The promise that was Bangladesh has been broken formally by altering the constitution and in practice made lesser by strengthening the communal forces, especially the most virulent form of it, the Islamic jihadists. They have made their intent public and clear: a Hindu-free Islamic state based on laws/rules (sharia) that was developed in the 6th century Arabia. There is talk of making Bangladesh part of the khalifat as well. [7]

At its core, communalism is a weapon used in struggle for political power. Even in its elemental form, though it manifests as rivalry for dominance of one faith over another, it is related to struggle over territory, resources, supporters, access to labor-power & assurance of (biological) reproduction, etc. Because it is directly linked to man’s earthly concerns, when necessary the so called ‘insurmountable differences’ between people of different faith can be set aside, civil societies can be constructed, and people can go on living as citizens of a polity of diverse faith, cultures, habits, etc. Such formations are democracies. Evoking communal differences for gaining political power is to argue for theocracy, and to imply that the communities with identical self interests exist. Empirical evidence proves otherwise.

To succeed in attaining power by deploying communalism requires generating communal hatred. For historical reasons, often economic, social, cultural divisions have coincided with divided lines along faith differences. This then becomes valuable instruments in the hands of those seek power and profit. The problem however is that given the devastation communalism causes in the lives of individuals, makes it difficult to even suggest expecting elimination of the problem to wait until the causes can be eliminated. The need for immediate combating of the problem cannot be overstated. British rule ended and independence was wan a long time ago; zamindari
(Indian-style feudalism) system that is cited as one of the causes of why communalism and merged with class division, also ended a long time ago; secular education has reached a great deal more people than before; modernism in various forms (unfortunately predominantly as consumerism) has introduced itself; yet communalism persist in its destruction of lives. And, we are nowhere near elimination of class division and its divisive influences on the society. So, it becomes a cruel hoax to suggest that the minorities should be patient to be treated as full citizens, and then expect full protection of the state power against attacks on their communities. It is essential to find ways of stopping these atrocities against the now, without excuses and delays, by fully engaging the power of the state, civic institutions, secular political parties, and ordinary citizens.

Minorities in the subcontinent have already suffered a great deal. In Pakistan these communities have been reduced to miniscule sizes. Often they are falsely accused of insulting the dominant faith and are persecuted, often killed. Hindus in Bangladesh do not exert any undue influence on economic or political influence, yet they are targets of constant attack & harassment by the purveyors of religious & communal politics. On the other hand, in spite of complains by Hindu fundamentalist political parties in India, Indian Muslims are not better off economically compared to other citizens. In fact the Sachar Committee painted a rather dismal picture of the state of the Muslims in the country. However, there has been increase in the Muslim population in India, currently at 13.4%, whereas Hindu population has declined drastically in Bangladesh (from 23% in 1947 to 9.2%); in Pakistan this community is near extinction: only 1.2% population is Hindu & 1.9% is Christian. After all the devastations of communalism our people have suffered, it is difficult not to be disheartened by the revival of Jamat-i-Islam and emergence of such primitive religious extremist organization like the Hefajat-i-Islam intent on imposing theocracy in Bangladesh.

The reincarnation of medievalism in politics requires reevaluation of the policies and practices so far employed in combating communalism & religious fanaticism. This complex economic-political-social & cultural challenge deserves attention of progressive intellectuals. Two of the pioneers addressing the problem are Badruddin Umar of Bangladesh & Bipan Chandra of India. New issues have cropped up and need research attention, Reemergence of these trends, especially the strength of the reactionary forces, their base, their ability & mechanism to intimidate democratic forces and ordinary citizen, etc., are worthy research areas.

Research on various issues afflicting the minority communities should continue, but emphasis needs to shift to actions needed to protect them from assault by communalists. This does require cognizance of the ‘reasons’ for the animosity that is rooted in the objective fact of their cohabitation – wanted or unwanted – but clearly was unavoidable. Although colonial rulers are often blamed – and they ought to be – without the objective reasons, they could not exploit communal divisions for their selfish exploitative powers. It is also necessary to recognize that even though the communities often share the same history, their perception of it can be destructively different. Importance of considering these issues in formulating policies to combat communalism has been discussed elsewhere and will not be repeated here.

An integral part of the struggle for democracy must be principled fight against communalism: there cannot be democra-
cy without eliminating discrimination based on one’s faith. Unfortunately even those who recognize the significance of this remain confined in passive indirect activities and do not think or act in practical terms how to intervene in the present to stop communal carnage from taking place in the first place. The indirect efforts, most common in Bangladesh seem to be secular native (revived) traditional cultural activities, which are important, though it is necessary to expand it out of its city-centricity to be more effective in changing communal attitudes in rural Bangladesh. Lacking are concrete steps necessary to stop the next communal attacks on the minority communities. But it is incumbent upon the progressive communities to organize resistance to communal attacks before they occur. The primary responsibility to protect lives of citizens from criminals is with police and other state apparatuses of law & order. However, in the past, there have been cases where the police did not take steps to preempt communal attacks, did not come to the aide of distressed citizens (perhaps they do not know or do not agree with the fact that the minorities are legally full citizens of the country) on time, and refuse to take legal action against criminals even when reported, etc. Progressives should be vigilant about the steps authorities are taking at times of such attacks, insist that they do, and be organized and prepared to step in, with consent and in collaboration with the affected communities. It is also necessary for anti-communalist forces in the sub-continent to join forces to end this ongoing nightmare.

The most serious failure in combating communalism is in our education system. People are not born communalists, they become so by learning from the environment they live in. Yet there is very little proactive education against communalism. Two essential changes are necessary: ban teaching of religious hatred in every educational institution – public, private, parochial or not. Second is to create curriculum to teach non-communal, secular, democratic citizenship. While it is better for the government to adopt and implement these policies nationwide; if it refuses to do so, progressives must step in and create alternate organizations and centers of power and take on this vital task. A better future requires putting down the seeds of change in the old society; it enhances the chances of cracking up the ossified, the obsolete and the anachronistic faster!

(Endnotes)

[1] This was first proposed by poet Allama Iqbal in 1940 at the Lahore conference of the Muslim League. The idea of religion based ‘nation’ did not originate with him. It was first published in a manuscript crafted by a leading intellectual of Hindu Nationalism, Damodor Savarkar in 1922.

[2] Although the reception Benazir Bhutto received when he visited Bangladesh after the liberation should have been a good indication!

[3] Briefly, Bengali Muslims have not figured out how to be Muslims in Bengal and perhaps somewhat insecure in their relation to the Hindu neighbor; for more see writings of late Prof. Ahmed Sharif. See, e.g., his: বঙ্গশতকে বাঙালী; ঢাকা, ২০০১।

[4] In fairness, so did China, yet Bangladesh has a very involved relation with China, and it has implications in the triangulation involving Bangladesh, India & China.

[5] Perhaps Historian Muntassir Mamoon wrote about this “এ কারনে মাঝে মাঝে বলি, আমাদের পরাণের গভীর গভীরে কথা থায় যান হজোরা [হফজোত+জামায়ত+বিএনপি] মনে একটুকরো। সমতলে মুক্তিয়ে রেখেছি।” (That is why I
say once in a while I say that some where in our heart of hearts, we preserve a bit of hijabi (Hefajat+Jamati+BNP) mentality.

The Daily Janakantha (দৈনিক জনকন্ঠ), May ২২, ২০১৫; Dhaka, Bangladesh 


[11] সাম্প্রদায়িকতা, বদরুদ্দীন উমর; জনমৈত্রী পাবলিকেশনস লিমিটেড, ঢাকা ১৯৬৬।

(Sampradikata [communalism], Badaruddin Umar, Janamaitree Publications Limited, Dhaka, 1966)


See “Contemporary World Situation and Validity of Marxism: Proceedings of International Seminar of Communist Parties Marking the 175th Birth Anniversary of Karl Marx” (in Kolkata, India); CPI(M) Publication, June 1993; in particular, note observations of Canadian and South African delegates.

Mohsin Siddique, Ekabingsha Satabdi O Sampradiyakar Samasya (Twenty-first Century and problems of communalism) একবিংশ শতাব্দী ও সাম্প্রদায়িকতার সমস্যা; মহসিন সিদ্দীক; look for “21st Century and the Problems of Communalism” in http://independent.academia.edu/MohsinSiddique

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See “From Partition to Bangladesh: on the Trajectory of a Troubled Quest”; https://www.academia.edu/4575612/From_Partition_to_Bangladesh_on_the_Trajectory_of_a_Troubled_Quest

See “Contemporary World Situation and Validity of Marxism: Proceedings of International Seminar of Communist Parties Marking the 175th Birth Anniversary of Karl Marx” (in Kolkata, India); CPI(M) Publication, June 1993; in particular, note observations of Canadian and South African delegates.

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Population Debate in Indian Subcontinent after Partition

Anish Gupta
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In India, the very issue of population growth of different religious groups is a sensitive one, enough to make a lot of scholars, media persons and politicians uncomfortable. The current censuses have shown an augmentation in the population growth of Muslims in almost all states in India. The arguments that are put forward, justifying the growth, are that the population growth of Muslims is obviously not different from Hindus, and that Islam is not against family planning. The media groups, very astonishingly, try to bring out selective and somehow specific cases to prove no difference in the growth rate of Muslims and Hindus. Similarly, there are two types of academia. One claims no difference in the population growth of Hindus and Muslims, and the other accepts the differential but justifies it by blaming it on circumstantial occurrences, like poverty, illiteracy and insecurity.

Scholars, sometimes, overtly defend Muslims and their population growth. Jairam Ramesh, a famous congress leader, who happens to be an ex-minister of the previous government, along with Pandey and Bhandari [1], in their adventure to prove that the fertility of Muslims is lower than Hindus, compared the total fertility rate in Bangladesh with that of some selected states of India, and concluded that the fertility rate in Bangladesh, despite being a Muslim-dominated country, is lower than that of India, which is a Hindu-dominated country. Similarly, Asgar [2] tried to prove that the implementation of family planning is higher among Muslims than Hindus in fifteen major states. Arun [3] also reported that the hullabaloo about Muslim population growth is basically without foundation. Other academicians like Rajan [4] tried to show in his study that the fertility differential among Hindus and Muslims is negligible in the western and southern parts of India. He simplifies his analysis by saying that fertility among Muslims is higher in eastern and north-eastern India because of the literacy differential. Hussain [5] held poverty, illiteracy and deprivation responsible for Islamic terrorism and high population growth. Hussain, Abbas and Owais [6] tried to link high population growth of Muslims with literacy. Many social scientists also argue that the Muslims are reproducing at an alarming rate because of their insecurity as a minority group.

The purpose of this article is to address the following questions with reference to the Indian subcontinent:

Does the insecurity attached to their minority status lead Muslims to reproduce rapidly?

Are the varying levels of illiteracy and poverty causing the increase in the population?

In an attempt to address the first question, I have tried to compare India and Bangladesh, since both the Hindu and Muslim communities are minority in one country and majority in the other. As for the second question, I have compared the literacy and poverty levels of both communities, along with the average monthly income per household. In case of India, I have compared the Scheduled Castes with Muslims because of the similarity in their social conditions, in terms of literacy, poverty and social strata.

The case of Bangladesh

After getting independence from Pakistan, when the first census was conducted in 1974, the share of Hindu and Muslim population within the total population was 13.5% and 85.4% respectively. However, every subsequent census witnessed a fall in the Hindu population share. The share of Hindu population growth in the censuses of 1981, 1991,
2001 and 2011 were 12.13%, 10.52%, 9.34% and 8.54% respectively, whereas, the share of Muslim population kept on increasing for the same period, to 85.65%, 88.31%, 89.58% and 90.39% respectively. The decadal population growth of Muslims was three to four times higher than that of Hindus. The population of Muslims in 2011, 2001 and 1991 had grown at the rate of 16.9%, 18.7% and 24.4% respectively in last three decades, while during the same period the population of Hindus had grown only at the rate of 5.9%, 3.8% and 5.8% respectively. [7]

The Literacy Assessment Survey (LAS-2011) [8] showed that the Muslim literacy was higher than Hindus only in Chittagong. Barisal, Dhaka, Khulna, Rajshahi and Sylhet showed otherwise. However, in the urban area of the Rajshahi division, the literacy of Muslim was also higher than Hindus. In all the other divisions, the Muslim literacy was lower than Hindus irrespective of the rural-urban differentiation. But, as mentioned earlier, in all the four censuses held (1981, 1991, 2001 and 2011), the rate of population growth of Muslims has been higher than the population growth of all non-Muslims including Hindus in all the divisions irrespective of the rural-urban differentiation of the divisions. The table below shows the levels of poverty and monthly income of both the communities (next column).

Other arguments posed by most of the scholars are related to poverty and the average income. Though the data of all the divisions related to poverty could not be accessed for the comparison, I have here taken the poverty levels of 2005 as well as per capita monthly income in rural and urban areas of Bangladesh.

The poverty data of 2005 shows that the poverty ratio among Muslims, in both the definitions of poverty (lower poverty line & upper poverty line), was lower than that of Hindus. A more minute analysis of rural and urban areas indicate that poverty among Muslims in rural areas is lower than Hindus while poverty among Hindus is lower in urban areas than Muslims.

| Table 1: Religion-wise Poverty and Average Monthly Income in Bangladesh |
|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| **Indicators** | **Muslims** | **Hindus** |
| **Poverty in percentage** | | |
| **(using lower poverty line 2005)** | | |
| Rural | 28.3 | 30.0 |
| Urban | 15.0 | 10.4 |
| Total | 24.9 | 28.3 |
| **Poverty in percentage** | | |
| **(using upper poverty line 2005)** | | |
| Rural | 42.9 | 50.4 |
| Urban | 28.7 | 25.0 |
| Total | 39.2 | 45.7 |
| **Average monthly income** | | |
| **(HIES 2010)** | | |
| Rural | 9737.7 | 9089 |
| Urban | 16599.4 | 15076.6 |
| Total | 11613.2 | 10588.7 |

types of classifications. This evidence clearly shows that the Muslim population growth was higher in all the divisions irrespective of their literacy levels, poverty levels and per household monthly income in comparison to Hindus and other minorities.

**The case of India**

Contrary to Bangladesh, India has a majority of Hindus and a minority of Muslims. The socio-economic conditions of Muslim in India have been compared to Scheduled Caste Hindus, as they are economically and academically more comparable to each other. The Scheduled Tribes are not considered here since a lot of Muslims fall under this category, which is why they are not mutually exclusive. All the Indian states can be broadly divided into four categories on the basis of relative literacy [9] (2001) and poverty [10] (2004-05) levels of Muslims in comparison to Scheduled Caste Hindus.

Higher literacy and lower poverty rates: Almost all of the major states fall under this category. Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar have a higher literacy rate as well as a lower poverty rate of Muslims rather than Scheduled Caste Hindus. Census reports of 2011 indicate that despite higher literacy and lower poverty rates, all of these states display higher population growth of Muslims than Scheduled Caste Hindus.

Higher literacy and lower poverty rates: No state in India has a higher literacy as well as a lower poverty rate of Muslims than Scheduled Caste Hindus. Census reports of 2011 indicate that despite higher literacy and lower poverty rates, all of these states display higher population growth of Muslims than Scheduled Caste Hindus.

**Lower literacy and lower poverty rates**: Delhi, Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Jammu and Kashmir and Haryana fall under this category. Here, the literacy rate of Muslims is lower than Scheduled Caste Hindus, and their poverty levels are also lower than the latter. Despite lesser poverty and literacy rates, the population growth rate of Muslims is not only higher than all the other religious groups, but also higher than the Scheduled Caste Hindus.

Lower literacy and higher poverty rates: Only two states viz. West Bengal and Assam constitute of Muslims with literacy rates lower than the Scheduled Caste Hindus. The poverty ratio of Muslims is also higher to the latter. Here again, the rate of population growth of Muslims is higher than not only non-Muslims but also Scheduled Caste Hindus. In case of West Bengal, the population growth of Muslims during the last decade was 21.8%, which was approximately 40% higher than Scheduled Caste Hindus and approximately 100% higher than all non-Muslims. The population growth of Muslims was even higher in the state of Assam than West Bengal. The population growth of Muslims during the last decade was 29.5%. This was approximately 50% higher than the population growth of Scheduled Caste Hindus. The table below shows literacy, poverty and population growth rates among Muslims and Scheduled Caste Hindus in different Indian states. (see Table 2)

This table helps to prove that the Muslim population growth has been higher than any other religious and social group in India, irrespective of their literacy and poverty levels. Even Scheduled Caste Hindus, who are mostly less literate and poorer than Muslims, have lower population growth rates. The inference drawn by the “secular academia” that the Muslim population growth is higher than the others due to lack of education and increasing poverty among them, was based only on West Bengal and Assam, where Muslims were incidentally poorer and less literate than any other social group. They, however, ignored the facts from
the other major India states, where the Muslim population growth has been higher than Scheduled Caste Hindus despite having higher literacy and lower poverty rates.

The fact that the state of Kerala is the most literate in India and holds the topmost rank in Human Development Index has always been ignored while taking into account the Muslim population growth in relation to literacy and poverty. The 2001 census indicates that the literacy level of Muslims (89.4%) was higher than Scheduled Caste Hindus (82.6%). The 68th round of NSSO on poverty head count survey for the year 2004-05 indicated that the poverty rates in Kerala were higher among the Scheduled Caste Hindus than Muslims, in spite of the population growth of Muslims being very much higher than Scheduled Caste Hindus.

Conclusions:

Muslims are a minority community in India and a majority one in Bangladesh. Even then, in both the countries, the population growth of Muslims is higher than that of Hindus. It completely refutes the argument that the insecurity among Muslims is causing a higher population growth. The evidences from both Bangladesh and India, show that, in all the states of India and in all the divisions of Bangladesh, the population growth of Muslims is higher than Hindus, irrespective of their literacy, poverty and rates of income. This clearly rejects the argument that illiteracy, poverty and insecurity are the driving forces for the higher population growth in Muslims. It is, instead,
driven by some other factors that need to be analyzed in depth. In many Indian states, Muslims had better standards of living that they do now. However, in every subsequent poverty head count survey, the number of states where Muslims were less poor are decreasing.

How can the cause and effect be established in the case of the Muslim population growth? The pertinent question that needs to be answered is whether the Muslim population growth is increasing because of their poverty, or is it the other way around? Both of these are evidently true, but their effectiveness differs. The real cause of this problem needs to be looked into carefully, because many are not ready to understand and recognize this problem, and almost everybody in power choose to ignore it.

The Muslim population growth should not be seen in isolation, but relative to the population growth of other communities co-existing with them in a particular region.

Endnotes:

[8] Literacy Assessment Survey (LAS) 2011, Bangladesh
[9] Literacy levels according to census 2001
[10] Poverty levels according 61st round of NSS

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First Person Narrative

Silent Shuffles Towards not Sticking Out

Dr. Garga Chatterjee
Indian Statistical Institute
A narrative set around the displacement during the partition of Bengal in 1947, exploring traumas not so explicit, adaptations not so consensual. And imprints of things thought to be lost.

I have crossed the border between the two Bengalis multiple times. In February 2013, I took back my maternal uncle Bacchu Mama to his ancestral home in East Bengal (now part of the People's Republic of Bangladesh). He had fled after his matriculation, a little before the 1965 war. When we reached his 2-story modest tin-shed erstwhile home in the Janaki Singho Road of the Kawnia neighborhood of Barishal town, I saw this mama (maternal uncle) of mine, trying to touch and feel dusty walls and stairs. He is by far the jolliest person I have seen. This was for the first time I have ever seen his eyes tear up. The story that follows is of his paternal aunt, or pishi.

Having taken active interest and in some cases active participation in anti-displacement agitations of various sorts and hues, what does ring hollow to my privileged existence is the real trauma of the experience. I know the statistics, the caste break up of the internally displaced, the pain of being transformed from sharecroppers to urban shack dweller – raw stories of loss and displacement. The “on-the-face” ness of the accounts, unfortunately, has a numbing effect. With a populace numbed to the explicit, its sensitivity to things hidden is nearly non-existent. In spite of my association with causes of displacement, in my heart of heart, I empathize but don’t relate. Nobody I have grown up with seemed to have any psychological scar or trauma about it – at least none that they carried around, although I grew up around victims of one of the biggest mass displacements of all times – I am talking about the partition of Bengal in 1947.

When I grew up in Calcutta in the 80s, visits to my maternal grandparents’ place were a weekly feature. They were Bangals (regional name for the East Bengalis) to my father’s extended family – we lived in a 30 something strong joint (extended) family, firmly rooted in West Bengal, very Ghoti (regional name for West Bengalis.) Bangals are East Bengalis, a people with a culture less-sophisticated, in the minds of the Ghotis. In later years, especially post-1947, the term also came to mean refugees and hence evoked certain discomfiture about the presence of Bangals in West Bengali minds, if not outright animosity. With time, ties-political, amorous and otherwise were built between certain sections of the two communities. I am a child of mixed heritage – with a Ghoti father and a Bangal mother. Much of what I have said, except the last statement are generalizations, but they are useful in terms of broadly demarcating the space within which the narrative is set.

The people of my mother’s extended family had their displacement stories – not really of trauma, but a sense of material loss- the money they couldn’t bring, their land that had been expropriated ever since, the struggle of some families they knew, etc. Calcutta subsumed much of their selves now that they were here and most of them had been here in Calcutta for most of their lives. The character of importance here is my maternal grandmother, my Dida. She was married off to my maternal grandfather, my Dadu, who I hear was visibly unwilling about the marriage at that time, if not the match itself – both were teenagers. When she came to Calcutta in tow with her husband, she was still quite young. My mother was born in Calcutta.

They lived in a rented place near Deshopriya Park. There was a certain air of dampness about the place – it connected to the metaled road by a longish and
narrow path, not revolting but full of a strange smell of dampness. The path, gritty and dimly lit, was nearly metaphorical of my Dida’s connection to her new world – connecting to the mainstream required a certain effort. Inside that house, it was strange and intriguing to me. The lingo was different – they spoke Bangal (an East Bengali dialect) with a Barishal twang (Barishal was one of the more populous districts of East Bengal) called Barishailya. Dida referred to chokh (eye) as tsokkhu and amader (our) as amago. I used to pick these up and relate it to my Ghoti joint family, regaling them. Now I don’t think it is hard to imagine that many Bangals didn’t like the fact that other people found simple pronouncements in their dialect amusing and even comical. (Some comedians have used this aspect in Bengali comedy. I am reminded of black clowns with artificial and heightened mannerisms who regaled White audiences).

Dida cooked well and was known for it. What did she want to be known for? My mother related to me how her father was a great lover of letters and sciences. This was somewhat true – sometimes I abhorred going to him because he would not only tell me to do a math problem but also ask me why did I do it that way. He tried to get all his children formally educated – a Bangal signature of the time with imprints still continuing. Markedly different was his attitude towards Dida – I remember numerous instances of “o tumi bozba na” (You wouldn’t understand that.) On her 50th marriage anniversary, her children got together for a celebration. The couple garlanded each other. She looked happy with her self and her world. “Togo sara amar ar ki aase” (What else do I have but you people) was her pronouncement. Something happened a few years later that made me question the exhaustive nature of her statement.

Things happened in quick succession after this. The brothers and sisters split. The turn of events resulted in Dida staying with us. Our joint family had ceased to exist too. By now, I was a medical student. Dida was getting worse due to diabetes. So, I spent time with her. I remember her trying to speak (and miserably failing) our non-Bangal Bengali dialect, to my paternal grandmother. She did try to mingle in, for circumstances demanded that she do. At the time, I thought that she was extraordinarily fortunate. With my new-found sensitivity towards “identities”, I thought, she must have been very happy to speak Bangal until now. She did her groceries at a bazaar full of grocers who were themselves refugees from East Bengal. In fact one bazaar near my home in Chetla is actually called the Bastuhara Bajar (the homestead loser’s bazar). Her husband’s extended family was essentially her social circle and they all chattered away in Bangal. They ate their fish their way and did their own thing. In spite of being displaced from East Bengal, she had retained her identity, her “self”. Or so I thought.

She suffered a cerebral stroke sometime later. A stroke is tragic and fascinating. It cripples and unmasks. The social beings we are, who care about what words to speak to whom, what state of dress or undress to be where and when, etc. this complex monument of pretense can come crashing down in a stroke. She had been for a day in what would medically be termed “delirium”, characterized by, among other things, speech that may be incoherent to the rest of us. She couldn’t move much and spoke what to us what was nearly gibberish- names we didn’t know, places we hadn’t heard of. To ascertain the stage of cerebral damage, one asks questions like Who are you? Where are we? What is the date? Etc. I was alone with her when I asked
this first. Who are you? “Ami Shonkor Gupto bareer meye”. (I am a girl from Shonkor Gupto’s family). I repeated, and she gave the same answer. She couldn’t tell me her name. Shonkor Gupto wasn’t her father but an ancestor who had built their house in Goila village of Barisal, East Bengal. She recovered from the stroke and remembered nothing of the incident. When I asked her later, she replied “Jyotsna Sen” or “Tor mare zigga” (Ask your mother). “Who are you” and “What’s your name” had become one and the same, again. She died sometime later. Another stroke felled her.

Displacement brings trauma with it. And the trauma can be cryptic. It can be hidden. It can be pushed down, sunk deep with the wish that it doesn’t surface. But displacement from home is a strange phenomenon – resurfacing in odd ways. And often an involuntary journey away from home is a journey away from one’s self too. The journey of displacement is hardly linear. It is more like a long arc. In most cases, the arc doesn’t turn back to where it started from. The journey looks unhindered by identities left back. But we can sometimes peer deeper. Nobody called my Dida by the name Jyotsna Sen – she merely signed papers by the name. She had a name by which people called her before her marriage – “Monu”. This name had become hazy after her marriage and journey to her husband’s house and then essentially lost after she migrated to Calcutta. She had been doubly removed from the people, the household, the organic milieu that knew “Monu”. She had 3 children, 4 grandchildren, a husband, a new city. Where was she? And when all this was shorn off, what remained was a teenage girl from East Bengal village – a place she hadn’t been in 60 years, may be the only place where she will be much of herself. Monu of Shankar Gupto’s house.

At this point, I wonder, whether she silently bled all through. Would she have bled similarly if she had choices about her own life or at a bare minimum, if she had an active participation in the decisions that changed her life’s trajectory? The speculative nature of the inferences I draw from her “unmasking” story is not a hindrance to imagine what could have been. A little looking around might show such stories of long-drawn suppressions all around – suppressions we consider facts of life and take for granted. Who knows what she would have wanted at age 15 or at 22. Where was her voice, her own thing in the whole Calcutta saga that followed? The picture perfect 50th anniversary clearly didn’t capture all that she was. Her husband believed she had her due – what more does one need, he thought for her. My mother thought, with a well-intentioned husband that her father was, Dida must be happy. The identity-politics fired lefty in me had thought she hadn’t been displaced enough, given her Bangal milieu! We were all wrong! A part of her lived repressed all along. In the microcosms we inhabit, there are stories of displacement, failed rehabilitation and denial of life choices. It is my suspicion that on learning about the Narmada valley displaced, a part of my Dida’s self would have differed vehemently with the Supreme Court judges Kirpal and Anand [1] – stances which often elude the nuanced mind of the intellectual.

**Endnote:**

[1] Justice Kirpal and Anand in their majority decision disposed of Narmada Bachao Andolan’s (save Narmada [river] movement) public interest litigation and allowed the resumption of construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam and increasing of its height up to EL 90m, resulting in further displacements of many more families, in addition to the thousands already affected.
A First Person Narrative

O Mother Goddess, Our Creator, Give us Goonda Terrorists to Live in Peace

Dr. Sachi Ghosh Dastidar
Professor, State University of N.Y. and Partition Documentation Project

At the last minute Sukumar’s schoolmate Jahangir Nayan informed “I am forced to stay back in Dhaka as several members of our extended family have just arrived to spend Id holiday with us. They even offered korbani (Islamic slaughter) of a milk cow for our Muslim festival. Generally people leave cities to go to their villages for Id, but this time they have come to the city as I am here. You’ll have no problem in staying with Aurabindo and Aparna in Keshtopur. They are Hindu like you. They know Shilaidaha, the former home of Noble Laureate Rabindranath Tagore, Lalon Akhra (Lalon the baul singer’s commune) and ancient Hindu sites near Keshtopur.” He then added, “Ask Aurabindo for transport and direction to those places. Aurabindo holds a responsible job with Januma Insurance Company.” After a friendly chitchat Jahangir Nayan said “I will meet you at the Purbaani Long Distance Bus Terminal to see you and Aparna Boudi (sister-in-law) off before my mid-day johar namaz prayer. I’ll bring the tickets from the owner Abedine of Padma Bus Lines as long distance tickets were sold off months ago because of the holiday. You’ll sit next to the driver as special guests of the owner of the bus.” Nayan added, “At this time of the year you can only get ticket if you have connection.”

Mr. Sukumar Goyali, aka Kumar, a Hindu belonging to a traditional oppressed caste, and Sheikh Mohammad Jahangir Nayan, aka SMJ Nayan, a Muslim belonged to atraf privileged caste, are from a remote Monpura Island at the mouth of Ganga River, known locally as Shahbajpur River, in the Bay of Bengal. Kumar’s family is engaged in above-subsistence agriculture of paan leaf, beetle nut, cocoanut, rice and jute in about an acre of land. Nayan’s family is arotdar or low-level wholesaler with their main business located at the river-port of Sitala Ghat, next to the Hindu temple of Goddess of Sitala, the protector of diseases. Both went to the local Sitala Ghat Mahamaya High School, and after graduation headed to distant Dhaka, the capital, for their college education. Kumar is slim, medium built, 5’10” – a bit tall for a Bengali, dark complexion with thick bushy hair. Because of his height he got at least two nicknames at school, Lombu or tall, and Supari-gacch or the 6” inch diameter, 25’ feet high pole-like beetle-nut (supari) tree. In his immediate family he had eight siblings. Two of the uncles’ families were part of the same household, sharing the same food, same kitchen, children sharing the same bed, and one bank account with nine more members of those two families. Two more families of agricultural workers also shared the family compound – two small thatch-roof mud huts – but with their own kitchens; still the children of those families mostly ate lunch with Kumar kids. Being a bit better off than their workers all of Kumar’s four separate structures were mud-walled, but had tin roof instead of thatched roof of poorer workers. In Bengali and Indian
vocabulary Kumar’s family was known as “joint” or “extended” family.

In early days of his school Nayan was known by his Islamic Persian given name, Jahangir. He adopted Nayan in high school which means “eye” because of his Bengali teacher had once mentioned that he had beautiful eyes and addressed him by Sundar Nayan or Beautiful Eyes. He was a bit shorter of the two, about 5’1”, with a muscular build. Of the two he was a better swimmer. Almost daily, especially during summer holidays they would often challenge each other at the nearby Sitala River, at the bathing ghat or steps leading to the water on the back of Kumar’s homestead. By local standard Nayan’s family was a “nuclear-type,” meaning no other families of his father’s brothers lived under the same roof. Still his was a large family too because of his father’s multiple marriage. Nayan was a product of a loving family, but it started to change during his high school days. His mother, known as Parul Begum to her friends but as Sultana Akram Meherunessa in her marriage document, came from a large wealthy family of nearby ChandraBhog Island. Although on map it was ‘nearby’ it took half-a-day of travel by boat and then on foot to reach her parents’ home. That was Nayan’s MamaBari or Maternal Uncle’s Home in local jargon. Nayan’s mother gave birth to eleven babies in sixteen years of which six survived. While in the final year of high school Nayan found his father brought home another woman and introduced her as his Chhoto Ma or Younger Mother. It was revealed much later that Nayan’s mother may have known what was going on, but neither could persuade his father of not taking another woman nor could she share that information with Nayan, her beloved son, a teenager then. Since that marriage Nayan, his siblings and his mother were spending increasingly more time at ChandraBhog, and less at Monpura. And it was his maternal grandfather’s influence that got him into the prestigious City University of Dhaka where Kumar was also admitted. During their college days they would often travel together on overnight riverboat journeys, and shared the same bed on weekends and on holidays. During Hindu Durga Puja festival in the fall Nayan, a Muslim, would always travel back to the island to join with Kumar at the Hindu temple and the communal celebration at the village center’s temporary marquee or pandal. Kumar would be invited to Islamic Id festival to Nayan’s home, but never to the mosque or to dinners served with prohibited cow flesh. At the end of their undergraduate education both of them appeared for the National Civil Service examination, both passed. Kumar never received a call for interview while Nayan received his first appointment in the relatively prosperous Sylhet District. Nayan consoled Kumar, “After the results were published when they saw your Hindu name they must have canceled your interview. That’s why I did not even write my name Nayan for the exam so that by mistake the officials think I am Hindu. Nayan is a Bengali name. I will ask my Nana Grandpa, to look for a job for you. Don’t worry Kumar. I feel proud as you got higher marks than me.” Thus life moved in two separate paths for two friends. Still religion did not divide them. Yet, unknown to anyone, Kumar felt a degree of separation each time he found Jahangir Nayan drawing prestige and power from his government job. For the first time Kumar started seeking mental solace in philosophical discourses of Hindu scriptures and turned more into Hindu fatalism. Nayan’s father’s second marriage started creating distance between his father and son no doubt, but five or six years from that marriage and four step-siblings later it created a permanent breach once Na-
yan learned that his father was bringing a third wife, Ruku for Ruksana, two class junior to him in school. The breach became permanent when Nayan asked his father – while looking down on the floor with no eye contact with his father – why was he marrying one of his school friends. His father angrily asked, “Were you going to marry Ruku?” In anger Nayan replied “May be.” His father exploded, and during altercation said, “Why didn’t you tell me that? It was her father who owed me money suggesting that I marry the girl instead. Even our Holy Prophet married His son’s wife. Peace be upon Him. But you were not married to Ruki anyway. So what is the problem? I have so many kids at home. Don’t you think it is good to get another woman’s help? You, your mother, and other kids never help us.” Since that incident Jahangir Nayan seems to have turned away from Monpura and towards religion, and towards mythical Arabia, away from his Bengali roots, with daily prayers, publicly avoiding Hindu festivities, and recently, changing from clean shave to Islam-inspired goatee and frequently wearing imagined Arabic outfits. Yet his friendship with Kumar has survived. During Nayan’s posting in the northern town of Rongpur he came in contact with Aurobindo, a Hindu, and developed his fondness for him. Aurobindo too was happy to be in touch with a government bureaucrat and had sent Jahangir Nayan many gifts during holy days. During Nayan’s posting in the northern town of Rongpur he came in contact with Aurobindo, a Hindu, and developed his fondness for him. Aurobindo too was happy to be in touch with a government bureaucrat and had sent Jahangir Nayan many gifts during holy days. Once Aurobindo moved to Keshtopur one of the first trips was for his family to visit the Nobel Laureate poet Rabindranath Tagore’s village estate at Shilaidaha saved as a national museum, then trips to Lalon Akhra – the grave and akhra musical-commune of 17th-18th Century baul folk singer-composer Lalan Fakir, and then further down the holy pitha site of black Mother Goddess Kali. Government officer Jahangir Nayan was planning his second trip to Aurobindo and took this opportunity to invite his old friend Kumar and his wife Arati to join in a holiday outing, and introduce them to Aurobindo. But that was not going to happen as Nayan was held back. Kumar and Arati was at first hesitant of going to stranger Aurobindo’s home – whom they had not met in person – but after Nayan’s insistence they continued the journey planned months ahead. By telephone Jahangir Nayan had already introduced Kumar to Aurobindo, so they were not completely unknown.

The bus was packed not even an inch of room left. As the bus left Dhaka City it speeded up. Assuming Kumars to be friends of the bus owner as they were sitting at the special seat the driver assured, “Sir, I will take you to Keshtopur in four to five hours,” then quickly qualified, “depending on the ferry. You will be there before dark. For strangers it is always good to reach in daylight hours, especially for Hindus and as you are traveling with your wife.” At that speed driver announced to the passengers that he will reach Ferry Ghat – ferry crossing – in 45 minutes. But no sooner than he made the announcement, the bus came to a halt, behind miles-long vehicle queue. He enquired from the slowly passing vehicles on the opposite direction about the problem ahead. They all responded, “Ferry jam.” Ferry jam happens 365 days in a year as a result of anarchy that prevails in the countryside when a single vehicle blocks the only lane for loading and unloading into ferry by breaking the queue thus leaving no space for getting off or on the ferry. The driver uttered to himself, “Shala,” bastard, “at this rate we will be praying the dawn namaz on the bus” only audible to passengers seating nearby.

Expecting them at four in the afternoon Aurobindo went to the bus stand to receive his guests. Then it was 5, and soon
it turned dark in that winter afternoon. He waited till 8 pm, a good four hours, and then returned home leaving a word with the nearby tea shop owner about his arriving guests. Bus station attendant said he too would close his office at 9 pm not knowing when the bus will arrive and then depart for the final destination of Meherpur. “Must be ferry jam. The Kushtia bus came eight hours late,” the attendant added. The bus finally arrived at Kestopur around 1 am in the middle of the night. People rarely venture out past 8 pm for fear of robbery, lawlessness and absence of policing. Although there was not a single soul on the streets, the big exception this time was that every home had lights on behind the shuttered windows as people were watching World Cup Football being played on the other side of the globe. As Sukumar and Arati Rajbangshi were planning their next move, the tea shop owner woke up as he slept inside to guard his 6’ feet by 5’ feet bamboo-mat-walled stall. There were two or three cycle rickshaws nearby where the drivers were sleeping on top of their vehicles fully wrapped in a shawl looking like mummies. One of them woke up hearing the bus arrive and approached the couple, “Where to, Sir?” Hearing no response, he added, “There is no problem tonight. Don’t you see lights in every home for football game between Brazil and Italy?” The tea shop owner immediately ordered the strangers, “Babu, Sir, this is not a time to travel for Hindus. Don’t go now. You are traveling with a Hindu woman. I am Muslim; I know it is dangerous for you. Just stay put in my shop. It has a roof so you won’t feel too cold, and if you want to stay up, I will make tea for you. After the dawn namaz call for prayer I will make nasta breakfast. Take your breakfast at 5, then head to your home when we have our first sunlight around 5:30 in the morning.” He then showed a young man, a teenager, who was dozing off at one corner, “Don’t you see that the poor Hindu boy is waiting for daybreak?” The boy murmured with the entire body wrapped in a dirty shawl, “I am waiting from 10 pm. My mother told me it is dangerous to go out after dark, especially for Hindus.”

**Breakfast at Home**

As they were finishing their first cup of tea the doorbell rang. Aurobindo said, “That must be Aunt Mashi, our helper. She will make you nice luchi-begunvaja (fried small flat white bread and deep-fried sliced eggplant) breakfast,” and opened the door. Entering Mashi announced, “Dada, Boudi,” older brother and sister-in-law, “my son Gopal is also with me. I brought him in case you need help for the guests you said will come last night.” Thus entered Gopal, a teenager, who in lightning speed entered the room then proceeded to touch the feet of all the adults saying, “Pronam Mesho, Pronam Mashi,” greetings aunt, greetings uncle, and then collected the used cups and saucers. Mashi also touched the feet of the guests, while guests resisted, “Don’t touch our feet. You are like my own aunt. It is inauspicious for older people to touch younger one’s feet.” But Mashi won’t have anything to do with that protocol. Both mother and son then headed to the small shrine puja corner bowing down in prayer before starting their chores.

Mashi wore a brown sari with red border and white blouse what was much larger for her small 5’ ft structure. Her hair was pulled back with a bun on the back that was not visible because her head was covered by sari like a married woman was supposed to do. She also wore a red teep vermilion dot on her forehead and a touch of sindur vermilion powder in her scalp giving away her married and Hindu minority status. In both hands she wore white sankha conch ban-
gles of married Hindu women, but she also had a loha iron bangle on her left wrist — also a must for married Hindu women. In the old days all Bengali married women, Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist and Christians wore those symbols of marriage, but now no Muslim wears those. Hardly anyone in Bengal knows the real names of older persons, except by a relationship — aunt, uncle, older brother, older sister, grandpa, or grandma. Aunt Mashi’s real name is Mrs. Shakuntala Mistri, with a nickname of Kuntala. Before her marriage in her ripe old age of fifteen she was known as Shakuntala Karati. In spite of financial hardship her father sent her to school till the marriage proposal came from a friend of her father. Her husband Abinash was doing okay working as a helper of a popular Hindu doctor in Keshtopur until the doctor was murdered by a Muslim gang who was ordering Hindus to leave their homeland and transfer properties free to a Muslim leader. Abinash used to repeat a sentence heard from the murdered doctor’s wife, “We live in a Hindu neighborhood still we are being killed like dogs. O Mother Goddess, our Creator, why can’t you give birth to Hindu goonda terrorists who can defend us? No one else will. Our bhadralok and privileged caste people always claim high morality and ask us to live in the land of our ancestors with Muslims, but at the first opportunity they flee to India, never helping the poor who supported them all the while preaching Hindu-Muslim brotherliness in a foreign India. O Mother Durga, O Mother Kali why can’t you come back to earth to kill demons like you killed before?” That killing ended Abinash’s livelihood. Finding no other alternative he took up driving cycle rickshaw for living, and surviving precariously with his six young kids, yet fatalistically contended. Soon he became quite good driver and taught his older teens the art of driving cycle rickshaw. While at the top of his profession one afternoon he was hit from behind by a truck breaking his leg and several ribs. Neither the truck was prosecuted nor the truck paid for any treatment of Abinash. Aunt added, “Since then we eight members of our family are barely surviving. Initially we didn’t tell my brothers in SriNagar, but soon we ran out of food. My brothers help us when we can send someone to them. We sent my teenage sons to look for job; some days he would bring 20 takas (US 30 cents) and on other days 40. Finally I started to look for a maid’s job, leaving my husband in care of my babies who are between five and fifteen. A neighbor at our NasibPara slum, DilshadDidi – Sister Dilshad, a Muslim, took me to Mrs. Sahar Apa – sister Sahar – of the wealthy Akramul family of PalPara, the former Pal (Hindu) Neighborhood. They have five maids, three servants and two drivers. Seeing me, Apa asked, ‘You are Hindu, right? I know you don’t eat beef; you won’t have any problem here. We are very liberal. My husband is a member of Radical Left Party. We like your puja and Rath Jatra chariot festivals.’ Then she asked me, ‘How’s your cooking? I know Hindus cook good vegetable dishes. Would you be able to cook vegetable dishes? Other Muslim cook Ismat cooks meat for us.’ I said, ‘Sure.’ And I was hired the next day.”

Seeing the boy Gopal, Aunt Mashi’s son, Kumar and Arati became perplexed. Are they hallucinating? Arati whispered to Kumar about Gopal, but didn’t share with the hosts. After their second cup Arati couldn’t keep quiet. She asked the boy, “Were you at the Keshtopur Bus Stand last night wrapped in shawl?” The boy just nodded yes. He didn’t utter a word. His mother overheard the conversation and added, “Notun Boudi,” New Sister-in-law referring to Arati, “he went looking for a job at SriNagar at his
MamaBari,” maternal uncle’s home, “but I asked him to return to help our Dada and Boudi” older brother and sister-in-law, “as you were coming. They have saved our family from death. This is something my husband said we must do. Gopal didn’t have money for rickshaw so he walked those five miles from the bus stop.” Aunt quickly added, “I worried all night because he was supposed to return before dark. I was so relieved seeing him this morning that I cried and cried. As I had nothing at home I offered him a glass of water and two molasses batasha candy that Aparna Boudi gave me after last evening’s puja prayer. I told Gopal that I will ask Boudi for a handful of murri puffed rice after you have finished your luchi-begunvaja breakfast.”

Hearing this Aparna exploded. She yelled at Aunt “Mashi, who asked you to feed us before Gopal? He is just a boy. This is not allowed at Hindu homes. We feed children before we eat,” and got up to go to the pantry.

Mashi said apologetically, “Boudi, please don’t rush. We are used to that. I told you before you hired me that we barely ate for previous six weeks. We’ve gotten used to hunger. It doesn’t hurt anymore.”

Guests were shocked, and thought it was aunt’s style of expression. Still guest Mrs. Arati Rajbanshi queried, “Why so Mashi?” while Aparna brought some batasha candies, shredded coconut naru marble-size balls – all saved for evening puja prayer offering to Goddess Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity – and murri puffed rice, the only dry edible items available at home to serve Gopal, his first real food in 24 hours. Mashi didn’t respond but continued to wipe the cemented floor with a wet rag squatting on floor, end of her sari tied to left front waist wrapped around the body, while her son was busy cleaning the dishes. After a pause guest Arati asked again, “Mashi, Why so?” Mashi continued wiping the floor, “New Sister-in-law, it is my fate, written in my Hindu forehead. I was happy at Mrs. Shahar Apa. I was the only breadwinner for the first time in our lives. It was hard on my husband. He cried every morning I left home. I was happy to see him getting better. After months the day he was able to stand on his feet I rushed to tell that to Mrs. Sahar Apa. I don’t know what happened to her afterwards. The very next day as soon as I entered she brought a lump of cow flesh and told me, ‘Your first task is to cut the cow meat into small pieces. I am expecting guests this afternoon.’ I was speechless. I couldn’t move. I am Hindu and she is asking me cut cow flesh? She was wearing beautiful light green silk sari with golden zari thread work, and lots of gold jewelry; a matching green dot on her forehead, looking very pretty. May be she was going somewhere in one of her new foreign cars. Before I could say anything, my neighbor from the slum DilshadDidi, sister Dilshad and other maids, all Muslim, pleaded, ‘Sister Apa, let us do that job, why ask a married Hindu woman? It will be a sin for her. You have six other Muslim servants.’ Apa got angry and said, ‘This is my order. If I hear any word again from you lowly chhoto-lök maids I will not hesitate a second to kick you out of my home.’ She then looked at me and ordered, ‘Go, get the boti curved blade.’ You won’t believe what happened to me. My legs couldn’t move, and I had no strength in my body. My head was spinning. I sat down and tears flowed through my eyes. Some whispers came out of my mouth, something like ‘Sister, you are a religious person. You are also a mother like me. I am poor, very poor, but have a religion. I worship a Mother like you every day.’

Hearing this she kicked me with her left foot as I fell down hurting my face. ‘Get out of my house right now. Right now.”
Those words do not match poor people’s mouth and especially of malaun Hindus.’ Malaun is a derogatory Arabized word for Hindus. Other maids came to my rescue which infuriated the lady. And then began our next struggle for survival. We had no money and no income. My son would go out and some day would bring a few takas home. I too would go from shop to shop offering my cleaning service bringing in a few takas, but we are eight mouths to feed, and my husband’s treatment. Here we have very few middle class Hindus who could employ us. I want to work in Muslim homes, but all my Muslim basti slum neighbors ask me not to try again after what happened to me. My husband would frequently say, ‘O Mother Goddess, why can’t you send Hindu goonda terrorists in this world? May be, they will protect us.’ When my slum neighbor Lanka Begum, a Muslim, who works as a maid in the next apartment heard that a Hindu manager has rented this place, she immediately asked me to seek work there. Hearing that news I came running for miles and waited in front of the door to meet them early in the morning. It was how Lord Arjun waited at Sri Krishna’s feet to get His first glimpse when He opened His eyes. Actually I came before sunrise, well in the darkness and waited in front of the door. I wasn’t afraid of darkness. I couldn’t dare ring the bell, so I waited in front knowing they will see me first as they came out in the morning. I missed them when they came earlier looking into the flat, but didn’t want to miss them again. As soon as Dada – older brother – opened the door in the morning he saw me, and I knelt down touched his feet and begged ‘Dada I must work for you. Please, please don’t say no. I am Hindu. I am a mother and a wife.’ I said, ‘My entire family is depending on you. I will accept whatever you offer me, just take me in, let me work for you’ and I held his legs. At first Dada was angry as a stranger woman was touching his feet. But it must have been Mother Kali’s blessing that I found this brother and sister-in-law.’ I stayed up all night so that I am the first person they see in the morning. Later Aurobindo conferred, “Frequently both mother and son will come together to work although I have hired only Aunt Mashi. I know if Gopal comes he gets to eat here and that is a big help for the family. If he does errands I pay him cash. I am trying to find a job for Gopal.” Aurobindo’s wife Aparna added, “Would you believe that Mashi only eats breakfast here, not lunch? She always says she is not hungry and will eat lunch ‘when hungry’ and carries home the rice and-curry lunch when she leaves after work around 3 pm. So I give her extra food for the family. Besides we buy them rice and lentil for the family in exchange for kids going to school for whom we also pay their tuition. I wonder what would happen when we are posted at a different town.”

Trip to Shilaidaha Museum, Rabindranath Tagore’s former rural home, was great especially because a troupe of Tagore followers from the City of Khulna came and rehearsed for their upcoming Chitrangada ballet. Then there were two visitors from overseas going through each and every corner and taking pictures of everything they saw and explaining the meaning of what they saw. Next day posed different sets of problems as their car broke down a mile down the road. This was to be a pilgrimage trip. In mid-day they would visit Sri Sri Gaudiya Mott established by Sri Chaitanya in the 15th Century, which became a center for Indian independence movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries, and in the evening they were to visit the millennium-old Sri Sri Chamundeshwari Mandir temple of black Mother Goddess Ma Kali. And because of the nature of the trip they took
Mashi along as she “always wanted to offer a prayer at Sri Sri Chamundeshwari for recovery of her husband and for blessing of her family.” After the car broke down, not far from home, Aurobindo took it upon himself to hire two “autos” or 3-wheeler gas-run auto-rickshaw taxis that hold a maximum of three persons, preferably two. For security and for guidance it was decided that each auto will have one man, and being local, Aurobindo will do the fare negotiation. To their surprise the very first auto that came by agreed to take them to their destination at a price Aurobindo offered. Then started the problem: no auto would stop as Aurobindo tried to hail them. As soon as they saw Aurobindo’s raised hand they simply speeded up or asked exorbitant fare. Frustrated, he said, “I don’t know what the matter is. Autos stop here very easily.” Finally the hired auto driver opened his mouth, “Babu, Sir, this is the problem of the Hindus. We don’t fight back in our own homeland. Our local babus (gentlemen) fight in foreign India not here in their desh home, and they do not produce goondas here but in India. I wish we had produced Hindu goondas here for our safety. When police, public, party and parliament do not protect us, it is the goonda terrorists who provide protection. Don’t you see India, Pakistan, Kashmir, Afghanistan and Iraq?”

Kumar laughingly added, “Would you believe what happened to me recently when I arrived at Chittagong International Airport from Calcutta. Our 40-minute flight was to arrive at 4 pm. The flight was late by 6 hours reaching at a godforsaken time of 10 pm at night. It was 11 pm when I cleared customs and immigration. I was figuring out my next step not seeing my friend Hazari. A lady whom I never met, appealed, “Sir, you are Hindu, right?” I was surprised as I was wearing western-style outfit and it is rude to ask religion first of a stranger, especially to Hindus. “How do you know?” “It is easy to figure that out in our country.” She replied as a matter of fact, then begged, “Sir, please, please do not to leave me alone until someone from my home is here. You are a stranger, still I feel safe with you. Namaskar. (Greetings). I am Mrs. Sanjukta Dewan, granddaughter of Mr. Raghav Tripura. Everyone knows him. He fought for independence of India before 1947 and for Bangladesh in 1971. My grandpa arranged me to be married in a Hindu family, although we are Buddhist. You may know my in-law’s as well; they live in Dewan Bazar area for over 500 years. I’ll make sure you reach your destination after my folks show up. If it is too late, you are most welcome at our home. It is very dangerous for Hindu and Buddhist women to travel alone. My grandfather says when our Mother produces goonda terrorists only then we will be safe. People, police, party, politicians and parliament do not protect us, so goonda terrorists are our last hope!”

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The Neglected Hindu Period of Pakistani History

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Abstract:
The Islamic Republic of Pakistan is the second largest Muslim country by population (next to Indonesia), but for the larger part of its history it has been inhabited by Hindus and Buddhists. When India was partitioned in 1947, into a residual India (with a Hindu majority) and Pakistan (with a Muslim majority), the fate of the minorities in the two countries took very different turns. India turned into a secular democracy, with a Muslim population that has increased in percentage. The population of Hindus in Pakistan, however, declined precipitously, and has now reached demographically insignificant proportions.

With the physical disappearance of the Hindus in Pakistan, the memory of their residence as autochthons throughout the length and breadth of Pakistan has also begun to fade. This process has been consciously accentuated by the educational policies of the establishment, and even the work of otherwise responsible historians. Unlike the situation in neighboring India, the voices of the minorities are not heard clearly, even in the rare cases when they are not actively suppressed. This paper is a study of the difficulties that bedevil the historiography of the Hindu period of Pakistani history.

The states of India and Pakistan emerged out of British India in August 1947. At the time of its birth Pakistan was the world's largest Muslim nation. However, it still was home to a sizeable indigenous Hindu minority. India, the world’s second most populous country, was a Hindu-majority land, but which housed an enormous Muslim minority.

The two states embraced different political ideologies right from the outset. The immediate reason for this was the policies adopted by the two political parties that were at the forefront of Indian politics in the years that led to the independence and the Partition. Pakistan had been carved out of India explicitly as a Muslim homeland, in acquiescence to the demands raised by the Muslim League Party. On the Indian side of the divide, the Congress Party stuck to its policy of secularism and commitment to religious plurality. Despite this crucial difference, minorities on both sides of the new international border suffered immensely during the tortuous process of the determination of this border, and its actual creation.

Pakistan’s former President, General Musharraf sums up his view of the situation in his personal memoir, In the Line of Fire: [1]

_Thousands of Muslim families left their homes and hearths in India that August, taking only the barest of necessities with them. Train after train transported them into the unknown. Many did not make it – they were tortured, raped, and killed along the way by vengeful Sikhs and Hindus. Many Hindus and Sikhs heading in the opposite direction, leaving Pakistan for India, were butchered in turn by Muslims. Many a train left India swarming with passengers only to arrive in Pakistan carrying nothing but the deafening silence of death. All those who made this journey and lived have a tale to_
However, the situations on the two sides of the newly-demarcated border were not exactly symmetrical, as an American observer notes:

On the whole, India quickly recognized that this terrifying situation was equally damaging to both sides. Its public leaders and private citizens soon saw the outburst in human terms, and expressed penitence on “... the blackest chapter in the history of India,” Pakistan, on the other hand, seems not to have had the freedom from prejudice and the moral sensitivity and courage to acknowledge its roughly equal guilt. [2]

In this paper I will not attempt a quantitative analysis of the fate of the minorities in India and Pakistan. This is partly because the process of collecting hard facts and statistics is hampered by the fact that, at least in Pakistan, the very disappearance of the minorities has led to an absence of spokesmen speaking on behalf of the vanishing minorities. The past existence of the minorities is attested to by mute witnesses, such as epigraphical and monumental remains, and ancient practices that survive in the cultural life of the people today.

In the absence of Hindus writing about Hinduism in Pakistan, the official histories of Pakistan have no checks or balances. The past is interpreted by people who may not necessarily have the expertise to comment about the fields they study. While Pakistani Islamic scholars are able to correspond with scholars on the Indian side, and Pakistani leftist or communist scholars have their Indian counterparts, there is no tradition of Hindu scholarship in Pakistan for the simple reason that the Hindu community itself has reached demographically insignificant proportions.

Jameel Jalibi [3], Vice-Chancellor of Karachi University, talks about a “duality of Pakistan's history”, and the resultant “psychological contradiction”:

The nature of Pakistan’s history is an interesting subject for study. On the one hand, it is a history based on geography, according to which it includes the five-thousand years old civilization of Moenjodaro and the Buddhist remains at Harappa, Taxila and Gandhara. On the other hand, it has a history whose traditions span the thousand years of Muslim rule and culture in India and also the two-hundred years of British rule. [4]

Thus he acknowledges the pre-Islamic past as being only “geographical”, and its history as being coeval only with the millennium of Muslim rule. (The reader will also notice that Jalibi’s story begins with the five-thousand year-old civilization at Mohenjo-daro, and then it is fast-forwarded to the Buddhist period without a discussion of the intervening Hindu period. Also the entire legacy of the thousand years of Muslim rule in the whole of India is claimed for Pakistan, but, as will show later, there is a very substantial Hindu contribution to this legacy which is overlooked or devalued.)

In an attempt to dismiss the Hindu cultural past of Pakistan, while still accounting for the obviously Indic past of Pakistan, an attempt has been made to argue that the immediate pre-Islamic past of Pakistan was mostly Buddhist. This claim can partly be bolstered by an emphasis on the Gandhara culture that flourished in what is now North-West Pakistan in the early centuries of the Common Era. However, already by the time of the early Islamic invasions in the northwest, the region had relapsed into Hinduism, and invading Muslim armies (such as those of Mahmud of Ghazni) found themselves ranged not against Buddhist
kingdoms (as in Central Asia) but the Hindu Shahiya kings. Only in the far south, in Sindh, can the claim be made with a little more credibility. The earliest Persian source on the history of Sindh, the Chachnama, makes references to a Buddhist temple, and to monks, who might be Buddhists. One of the doyens of the Pakistani school of historians, S.M. Ikram, uses these references to argue that the Buddhists offered their allegiance to the invading Arabs, as a way of escaping oppression on the part of the Hindus. [5]

It has been demonstrated by the present author that the conclusions of the Pakistani historians is untenable. The few natives who are depicted in the Chachnama as negotiating with the invading Arabs, do so in the hope of safeguarding their property. They make no mention of the alleged oppression of the Buddhists by the Hindus. The Chachnama indiscriminately uses the word barahman to refer to anybody from the priesthood of the Sindhis, and does not really distinguish between Hindu and Buddhist. It refers to the destruction of temples housing statues (murti) of a deity riding a horse, which rules out the possibility of a reference to the Buddha. In addition to this attestation to the destruction of Hindu places of worship, the Chachnama claims that the Arabs also destroyed a Buddhist temple. [6]

It is not surprising that the establishment historians choose to cast India, Hinduism and Hindu society as “The Other,” and are reluctant to acknowledge Hindu cultural contributions to Pakistani culture. But such views are equally current among members of the so-called “left” such as Faiz Ahmad Faiz, the well-known Urdu and Punjabi poet. Faiz follows an idiosyncratic chronology of his own devising. He writes about the decline of the civilization of Harappa (the Indus Valley Civilization) around 2500 BC, and mentions a 1000-year hiatus in this region (which would eventually become Pakistan): “What happened in these 1,000 years we know very little of except that in Harappa we do find trace[s] of inferior settlements and inferior civilization superimposed on the original planned cities of the Indus civilization.” [7] He continues:

“... around 1,500 BC the Aryans came and founded another civilization. But the centre of this civilization was not in this area which is now in West Pakistan but in much to the East, in the plains of the Ganges where they cut down forests, founded cities – cities like Benaras and Patliputra and Hastinapur, and so on. There they founded their great cities and there the great Hindu legends of Ram and Krishna arose. Then, from the Gangetic Plains this civilization, founded by the successors to the Aryan invaders, namely the Brahmanic civilization, traveled both to the west, in what is now called West Pakistan, and to the east, to what is now called East Pakistan. But there are very few traces of this particular period; this Brahmanic or what you might call the Hindu period. There are hardly any traces of this period today and probably the contribution of this particular civilization was not very great.”

We see now that Faiz argues that few remnants of the Hindu period – inferior settlements and inferior civilization – in his words, survive in Pakistan, and that the Hindu contribution was quite minimal. From this point of departure, he then argues:

“The next period of civilization-the next great period-begins around 500 BC, that is, after another 1,000 years. This is perhaps the richest and most fruitful period-culturally speaking–of this particular area. Now it begins with the conquest of
the Punjab by the Persians.”

Faiz's contentions can be easily dismissed. There are plenty of epigraphic and monumental remains from the Hindu period in Pakistan. The Rg-Veda, the earliest and holiest of the Vedas, makes many references to the land of the Sapta-Sindhu (the Punjab-Haryana region). The temples of the Salt Range Mountains, and the famous Prahlad temple in Multan can hardly be ascribed to the Persians, though it is certain that Persian influence on what is now Pakistan must have been immense.

The idea that the pre-Islamic inhabitants of Pakistan were mostly Buddhist is also contradicted by the historically attested fact that Islamic missionaries often used Hindu ideas and motifs as a way of facilitating conversion. For instance, Ismaili missionaries in Sind successfully effected conversions by presenting the prophet's son-in-law 'Ali as an incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu [8]. This indicates that the majority of the population must have been Hindu, rather than Buddhist.

The Pakistani Interlude of East Bengal (Bangladesh)

For 24 years after the partition of India into successor states, Pakistan was constituted of two wings: a western wing (comprising the states of Punjab, Sindh, Baluchistan and the North-West Frontier Province), and an eastern wing – East Bengal (the eastern part of the erstwhile province of Bengal, to which some parts of Assam were added.) In 1971, the eastern wing would break away from Pakistan after a civil war and form the independent state of Bangladesh.

The cultural links of the people of Bangladesh and their fellow-Bengali speakers in India are very deep indeed. While this cultural connection should have promoted friendship between India and Pakistan, it became a cause for unease in the minds of the West Pakistanis. The official Pakistani position was perhaps best stated by the President of Pakistan, Mohammed Ayub Khan, in his autobiography:

The people of Pakistan consist of a variety of races each with its own historical background and culture. East Bengalis, who constitute the bulk of the population, probably belong to the very original Indian races. It would be no exaggeration to say that up to the creation of Pakistan, they had not known any real freedom or sovereignty. They have been in turn ruled either by the caste Hindus, Moghuls, Pathans, or the British. In addition, they have been and still are under considerable Hindu cultural and linguistic influence. [Emphasis Added] As such they have all the inhibitions of downtrodden races and have not yet found it possible to adjust psychologically to the requirements of the new-born freedom. Their popular complexes, exclusiveness, suspicion and a sort of defensive aggressiveness probably emerge from this historical background. Prudence, therefore, demands that these factors should be recognized and catered for and they be helped so as to feel equal partners and prove an asset. That can be done only if they are given a considerable measure of partnership.

While Ayub Khan's patronizing attitude towards the Bengalis in “catering for them” and giving them “a certain measure of partnership” may have rankled and left a bad feeling in the mouths of self-respecting Bengalis in his time, it was still quite benign compared to the opinions rife among the rank and file of the Pakistani military – which was almost exclusively West Pakistani, and which entertained far more vulgar and crass stereotypes regarding the Bengalis.
The results of this indoctrination of West Pakistanis were reflected in the vengeance, pride, and venom with which West Pakistani military officers carried out the carnage in East Bengal (East Pakistan, later renamed Bangladesh) after 25 March 1971. Particularly illuminating were the remarks of one Major Kamal, who told an American construction worker, interviewed on CBS television, that once the West Pakistanis had conquered East Bengal each of his soldiers would have a Bengali mistress and neither dogs nor Bengalis would be allowed in the exclusive Chittagong Club. As a member of the West Pakistani ‘educated class,’ I can testify that is by no means an isolated case. Anti-Bengali and anti-Hindu bigotry is rampant in West Pakistan and has now been adopted as the official doctrine of the regime. [10]

Cultural Consequences of the Demise of Hindu Society in Pakistan

The devaluation of the Hindu heritage sometimes can be detrimental to vital aspects of Pakistani culture itself. A Pakistani scholar laments the denigration of the native languages of Pakistan:

After the decline of Muslim political power in the sub-continent while Urdu became the darling of the British and made rapid strides with their backing during the course of 150 years, Bengali, Sindhi, Punjabi, Pushto, Baluchi (Balochi) which were the choice of the sufis and served them well for the propagation of Islam, languished and began to be considered un-Islamic! It is indeed an irony of fate that those very languages which played a magnificent role in the propagation of Islam and were extensively used by the Sufis should be regarded as un-Islamic and languages of Hindus [emphasis added]; while Urdu, whose contribution in this respect is dismal, is considered the champion of Islam. I am emphasising this important aspect to instill respect for local languages in the minds of the Urdu-speaking Muslims settled in Pakistan who are labouring under erroneous notions about their own language and it’s past. [11]

One of the domains in which the effects of the Partition are most clearly visible is that of music, a field in which the Muslim contribution in India has historically been so prominent that an influential historians calls it “perhaps the only art in which something like a synthesis between the Muslim and the Hindu artistic traditions was achieved, though not without a series of tensions.” [12]

The experience of the legendary vocalist Bade Ghulam Ali Khan illustrates the effect of Partition, which [13]

“... must have been a painful time for Ghulam Ali, for his ancestral home in Lahore was subsumed into Pakistan, while his audiences remained in India. All his brothers remained in Pakistan, but after several years in Pakistan, Ghulam Ali chose to take Indian citizenship. ‘When everyone left Lahore it became a cultural desert. And when life is unquiet, people do not want to listen to music’, explained Ghulam Ali’s son Munna-war Ali.” ‘It was difficult for Indians to settle in Pakistan but easy for Pakistanis to settle in North India’ (Interview: 1978).”

The musicologist Harold Powers elucidates:

In the years immediately after independence in 1947 most of the many Muslim musicians originally from Lahore elected to go back there and be Pakistanis – and most of them soon returned to India, the great Bade Ghulam Ali Khan among them, since the climate for music in Pakistan was initially rather austere. [14] Powers points out that it is in secular
North India, not in Pakistan, that even Muslim musicians have found a favorable environment for their art. Other musicologists, such as Regula Qureishi have also commented on the decline of art music in Pakistan:

"Without the outside ideological support provided by the Hindu socio-cultural tradition, art music remains locked into the limited social realm of feudal culture and its patronage of the hereditary professional." [15]

**Conclusions:**
The demise of the Hindu community in Pakistan is a tragedy not only to the Hindu victims of the Partition of India and its aftermath. It has also led to cultural and social impoverishment of Pakistani society as a whole. The deliberate policies of effacing the Hindu past on the part of Pakistani historians and scholars has led to a situation in which the Hindus’ long residence in the territory of Pakistan, and their profound contribution to its culture, are being gradually forgotten.

**Endnotes:**

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Palestine’s Problems:
Checkpoints, Walls, Gates and Urban Planners
It takes two hours every day for Palestinians to cross the military checkpoint from Bethlehem to Jerusalem so they can get to work. Bethlehem is in the West Bank and Jerusalem, though divided, is part of Israel. The checkpoint is flanked by the giant Israeli Wall. Once they are in Israel, Palestinians are then confronted with gated communities that are off-limits to them.

The Separation Wall

The checkpoint, the Wall and the gate are the most visible signs of Israel’s control over Palestinians and their land. But the invisible weapon is urban planning. Israeli geopolitical strategy to control and occupy all of Palestine has been imbedded in its approach to housing, urban development and the location of human settlements. Behind the physical and symbolic barriers lie the invisible urban and military planners.

The Checkpoints

The Bethlehem checkpoint is one of around 500. Some divide Israel and the West Bank, like the Bethlehem checkpoint, but most are within the West Bank. To get an idea what this means to Palestinians, imagine having to pass a military checkpoint to commute between San Francisco and Oakland. Or to go from your house to your backyard orchard. The Israeli Army controls all movement between West Bank towns, within some towns and also between Israel and the West Bank. Israel doesn’t allow Jewish citizens to enter the West Bank, except for those living in illegally-built settlements in the West Bank. They take exclusive Israeli-built and -protected roads to get to and from their homes. These roads are off-limits to Palestinians. This is one of the most developed examples of apartheid urbanization in the world, with separate settlements, separate roads and separate standards of living.

Road in West Bank exclusive to Jews

The Palestinian commuters from Bethlehem to Jerusalem, mostly men over the age of thirty, are herded like cattle
through turnstiles and fences and run through metal detectors, surveillance cameras and document checks. They are the “lucky” ones—the small minority that got permission to enter Israel to work, where there are more jobs and higher pay than in the West Bank. But the commuters have to go back to Bethlehem the same day or they will be hunted down. Every worker has a magnetic card that must be swiped in the morning and again in the evening so that the Israelis will know if they miss the return trip. Palestinians are, in effect, prisoners of a powerful security state able to engineer the movement of people and their use of public space. Israel is the world’s leading innovator and producer of high-tech military and surveillance equipment, and a major contributor to the strategy and technology of the U.S. occupation of Iraq.

As an older white North American, I could avoid all this humiliation at the checkpoint and didn’t even have to stand in line or flash my passport. I fit the acceptable racial profile. On the Israeli side, I stood with two women from Women for Human Rights, an Israeli group that witnesses this daily violation of the right to the city and takes notes documenting it. Young Israeli soldiers toting rifles and machine guns swaggered and smiled at us. On the Palestinian side, there were only street vendors and taxi drivers. Paradoxically, once in the bustling streets of the West Bank town, despite the occasional bombed-out and demolished building, occasional tourist destination and the ever-present Wall, I felt free and welcomed.

The Wall

Israel started building its giant Wall enclosing the West Bank in 2002, after the launch of the second Intifida, the Palestinian uprising against the Israeli occupation. While Israel claims the purpose of the wall is defensive, a careful look at its route shows that it was planned as a land grab that would further shrink the boundaries of a future Palestinian state. Violence and attacks on Israelis have declined sharply in the last few years because of political agreements between the two sides, not the Wall, which is filled with gaps, far from complete and possible to evade with a little ingenuity.

The Wall, like the Israeli settlements—with some 300,000 settlers in the occupied territories—aims to create “facts on the ground” that would dictate the parameters of an eventual negotiated settlement. The Wall, most of it built on Palestinian land, takes huge loops that incorporate illegal Israeli settlements built on Palestinian land. If completed, the 760-kilometer Wall would effectively turn the Palestinian territory into a handful of isolated Bantustans and make a viable Palestinian state with a unified economy and infrastructure impossible. Following the example of Gaza, Israel would effectively turn Palestinian towns into prisons and be able to monitor and control all movement between them. This dark dystopia would result in one of the most technologically sophisticated apartheid in the history of cities.

The Gated Communities

The Israeli settlements in the West Bank are designed and function as exclusive gated communities. While some actually have physical gates, many do not, controlling access through other means. The “gates” are often symbolic and take the form of electronic surveillance perimeters. Israel’s Former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon engineered the location of settlements with the strategic thinking of a military planner playing the urban planning game. The settlements are placed on hilltops where they can oversee the daily life of Palestinians and, should the military need to intervene at any time,
provide them with the most strategic sites. The idea is that the architects and planners charged with developing the settlements blend military and urban planning so as to create a symbolic and real sense of superiority and control over the land and people below. Palestinians are not allowed in, though exceptions are made for some service workers. In his brilliant book, Hollow Land: Israel’s Architecture of Occupation, Eyal Weizman shows how Israel’s control of the high ground and monopoly of the underground water supply constitute a “vertical occupation” that has resulted in the destruction of Palestinian agriculture and the displacement of entire villages.

Entrance to a gated Jewish settlement

Gentrification and Ethnic Cleansing in Israel

The planning paradigm for the Israeli settlements in the West Bank has been reproduced within the state of Israel and is now deeply imbedded in the urban structure. We see it in the gated Israeli communities that have sprung up on hilltops in the mixed Arab-Israeli regions and cities. There, too, the exclusive neighborhoods seek to reinforce economic and social dominance through segregated living and work environments.

After creation of the state of Israel in 1948, most Palestinians fled or were forced out of their homes and villages and became refugees. But many stayed, and today Palestinians within the state of Israel account for about 20 percent of the population. Half of all Palestinian households are under the poverty line compared to a national average of 18 percent. They remain second-class citizens, usually living in segregated residential enclaves and often threatened by displacement and gentrification. It is here that Israel’s urban planners play their role, often unconsciously, as implementers of a broader geopolitical strategy, a land grab and ethnic cleansing of historic proportions.

The Palestinian population in Israel is concentrated in the Galilee region in the north, the Negev desert to the south, East Jerusalem and in “mixed towns” like Haifa. In all of these areas, exclusive Israeli hilltop settlements are part of a conscious policy of “Judaizing” areas with Arab populations—a concept that might also be called ethnic cleansing—through government land use and housing policy. The Israeli government owns 94 percent of the land and leases it freely for the construction of new Jewish settlements; they also provide the infrastructure and subsidize services. The Palestinian population, however, is rarely given permission to build or expand. To meet the needs of a rapidly growing population, Palestinians often build without legal approval, but they are subject to heavy fines and/or demolition orders. Over 18,000 Palestinian homes have been demolished.

Jaffa was an Arab settlement on the Mediterranean Sea that is now a neighborhood in the metropolitan region of Tel Aviv, Israel’s largest city. Palestinians there are being pushed out by real estate investment. As land values and rents go up, many Palestinians can no longer afford to stay.

Fahdi, a community organizer in Jaffa fighting gentrification, says there is a
larger significance to his struggle. “My family was from a [Palestinian] village north of here. It was confiscated by Israel. My family had papers showing they had owned the land since the Turkish period. They came to Jaffa. I am a citizen of Israel, but we can’t get our land back. Everything for me starts with that.”

Fahdi described the recent case of a Palestinian who couldn’t get permission to add rooms to his house and now faces eviction for a building violation. He has an option to buy but with current real estate prices what they are, cannot afford to. In another case, a renter facing eviction is willing to buy the property valued at approximately $160,000, but the government will only accept cash and no bank will lend the family money because they do not have sufficient income. Fahdi noted that while Palestinians struggle to hold on to their homes, gentrifiers move in with ease and have no problem getting permission. They include Jews from Europe looking for second homes by the sea, and Israeli settlers from the West Bank who bring with them both an ideological mission to separate themselves from Palestinians and guns that are publicly displayed to make sure their mission is known.

In the Galilee region, the landscape is also being transformed by Israeli hilltop settlements, while Palestinian towns are unable to get official permission to grow. According to Neighbors, a group of Israelis and Palestinians dedicated to planning with social justice, 91 percent of the land in Arab settlements is used for housing as opposed to 55 percent in Jewish settlements. This is a direct result of the official policy of limiting the growth of Palestinian towns. With so little land for expansion, there is little room left for public open space and services.

In the southern region of the Negev, 76,000 Bedouins live in settlements that the Israeli government has designated as unrecognized, illegal and subject to eviction whenever the land is needed for infrastructure or the military, or simply at the whim of the Israeli government. And in Arab East Jerusalem, which is directly administered by an Israeli civil administration, Palestinian neighborhoods get minimal services like garbage collection and street repairs while also facing incursions by both Israeli gentrifiers and religious sects seeking to Judaize the city.

Thus, urban planning throughout Israel is firmly rooted in Israel’s long-term geopolitical strategy of controlling all of the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, the dream of Israel’s Zionist founders. Its realization was interrupted by the resistance of the Palestinian people who owned, lived on and worked most of that land. Israel now directly controls 78 percent of it, and the rest is under limited Palestinian control in the West Bank and Gaza, where Israel can and does intervene militarily and take land when deemed in their interest. Incredibly, if a settlement is ever reached, Palestinians are likely to end up with no more than 15 percent of the land.

The Right to the City
Despite official policy, there are many hopeful signs of change. Resistance and struggles against displacement are widespread in Palestinian communities, which work in partnership with human rights and social justice groups in Israel. The Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions (ICAHD) organizes protests and Planners for Planning Rights (Bimkom) brings professional and legal expertise to bear to protect communities from displacement. A host of organizations continue to challenge the Israeli checkpoints and Wall.

But Israel has little incentive to change course and agree to a two-state solution and the establishment of full rights for Palestinians. It has the most powerful military and largest nuclear arsenal in the Middle East and is one of the largest recipients of U.S. military aid. And the Bush administration carried forward the U.S. tradition of tolerating the Wall, checkpoints and gradual incursion of Israeli settlements in Palestinian territory even while issuing ineffective verbal protests. While the incoming Obama administration has given no signs it will change course, there is an opportunity now for progressive people in the U.S. to raise their voices as President Obama seeks to reinvent the U.S. role in the Middle East and address continuing demands from Arab nations for a just peace in Palestine. Obama opposed a U.S. war in Iraq that mimicked Israel’s high-tech, scorched-earth strategy— the same strategy that failed miserably in Israel’s 2003 attack on Lebanon. But it will take a lot of pressure from within the U.S. to move Obama’s cautious foreign policy team past the powerful Israeli lobby. Urban planners should tell the incoming administration and Congress that the right to the city is a fundamental human right.

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Religious Discrimination in the American Workplace: What Does the Supreme Court’s Latest Decision Mean for Employers and Employees?

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Title VII of the Civil Rights Act makes it illegal for employers to discriminate against employees on the basis of religion. More specifically, it is unlawful to “refuse to hire or to discharge any individual, or otherwise to discriminate against any individual” because of that individual’s religion. [1] If, therefore, an employer fires or refuses to hire someone because the employer dislikes the person’s religion, that employer would be liable for damages under Title VII. [2] In order to avoid potential liability, a prudent employer will generally avoid asking a prospective employee to identify her religion. [3]

But what if an employee is unable to conform to the employer’s regular business practices because of the employee’s religious practices? For example, suppose an employee tells his employer that because of the employee’s religion he cannot work on Sundays. Does the employer have to accommodate the employee’s religious practice? The answer under Title VII is maybe.

Title VII defines “religion” to include “all aspects of religious ob-
servance and practice,” and requires the employer to accommodate the employee’s religion so long as the accommodation does not place an “undue burden on the conduct of the employer’s business.” [4] In the case of the hypothetical employee who needs Sundays off for religious reasons, the employer should accommodate that need if it can do so without undue burden. Whether that can be done in a particular instance will depend on the nature of the employer’s business. If, for example, the employer could only accommodate the employee’s need for Sundays off by calling in another employee on an overtime basis, the employer would not need to accommodate the employee. [5] In attempting to accommodate religious practices, the employer should consider the employee’s suggestions as to how that might be accomplished. [6]

Which leads us to Abercrombie & Fitch, and its dispute with Ms. Samantha Elauf. Abercrombie & Fitch (hereinafter, “Abercrombie”) is a clothing company which, presumably for business reasons, has a policy about how its retail store employee’s should look. In fact, according to the company’s website, in order to be cast as an Abercrombie model, a person must first be employed in one of the company’s stores. As part of its written “Look Policy,” Abercrombie prohibited employees from wearing “caps.” [7]

Ms. Elauf was interviewed for a position by Ms. Heather Cooke, an Abercrombie Store Assistant Manager. Ms. Cooke judged that Ms. Elauf was qualified for a position. There was just one problem: Ms. Elauf wore a hijab. Ms. Cooke did not ask Ms. Elauf about her religion, but correctly assumed that Ms. Elauf wore a hijab for religious reasons. She discussed the situation with her Store Manager, who decided that since the hijab would violate the Look Policy, Ms. Elauf would not be hired. [8]

Ms. Elauf complained to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, which then sued Abercrombie on Ms. Elauf’s behalf for violating Title VII. Abercrombie argued that it had no duty to accommodate Ms. Elauf’s religious practice because it had not been asked to do so. As a prudent employer aware of Title VII, Abercrombie refrained from asking Ms. Elauf about her religion. If Ms. Elauf needed a religious accommodation, the burden on her was to ask for it. The Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals agreed with Abercrombie, and awarded it summary judgment. [9]

The case then went to the United States Supreme Court, which reversed. [10] At oral argument, several Justices suggested that it was possible, consistent with Title VII, for the interviewer to ask questions about the need for a religious accommodation. For example, the interviewer could identify an employer policy and ask if the policy would present a problem for the employee. In response to Abercrombie’s contention that the burden is always on the employee to ask for a religious accommodation, Justice Alito posed the following hypothetical question about four people who interview for a job:

So the first is a Sikh man wearing a turban, the second is a Hasidic man wearing a hat, the third is a Muslim woman wearing a hijab, the fourth is a Catholic nun in a habit. Now, do you think the employer has to -- that those people have to say, we just want to tell you, we’re dressed this way for a religious reason. We’re not just trying to make a fashion statement. [11]

The answer from a nearly unanimous Supreme Court seems to be no, those four interviewees would not need to affirmatively state the religious reasons for
their apparel in order to be entitled to the protections of Title VII. Under the circumstances of Ms. Elauf’s case, a court could infer that the motive for not hiring Ms. Elauf was “avoiding the need for accommodating a religious practice.” [12] That motive was sufficient to make Abercrombie’s failure to hire Ms. Elauf a violation of Title VII.

In light of the Supreme Court’s decision, employers cannot rely on a job applicant’s silence as a shield against having to offer a religious accommodation in appropriate cases. It remains inadvisable to ask interviewees about their religious beliefs. If, however, an employer believes that an applicant may need a religious accommodation, it cannot refuse to hire the applicant because of a desire to avoid having to accommodate the individual.

Endnotes:
[8] Id.
[9] Id.
[10] Id.
Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist & Christian Unity Council (BHBCUC), USA

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