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Indian Muslim Nationalism: The Case of Jam'iyyat' Ulama-I-Hind (1919)

ABSTRACT

The debate on 20th century Nationalism has often been considered specific to Euro-American academic discourse. The case of Orient, in particular of Indian Subcontinent has only recently been explored from socio-historical perspective in this regard. It is in this light that the case of Jam'iyyat 'Ulama-i Hind (est. 1919) and its proposal of 'composite nationalism' has been explored in the given article. An attempt has been made on the placement of JUH's idea in the socio-historical context thereby identifying its significance and relevance in the contemporary academic field of South-Asian Islam.

Keywords: Jam'iyyat 'Ulama-i Hind, Composite Nationalism, Islam in South Asia, Nation-State.

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Background: The context of Hindu-Muslim Coexistence in Modern State

Colonial India forms an important part of academic discourse regarding socio-historical study of Islam. From her indigenous culture to her response towards Western modernization, researchers have thoroughly dug into her history for various reasons. For some, it has brought a memory of grandeur, and at the same time, of tragedy. It is often difficult to decide which of the two won over the other in the historical context. Specifically, from the perspective of Muslims in British India (1858-1947) this piece of research discusses the problem of Hindu-Muslim coexistence in modern political context. It further takes into account at least two main reference points; (a) the historical moment which marked the end of Muslim rule (in 1857 C.E.) followed by the British Raj in 1858 C.E. and (b) the subsequent need of new Muslim intellectual discourse regarding modern sociopolitical reforms especially in the interwar period (1919-1947 C.E.). These included processes such as Nation-state formation and the rise of nationalism, democracy and minority rights, bureaucratic standardization of living and economic capitalism to name a few. Specifically, this presented the Muslim Scholars (usually termed as 'Ulama in pre-modern India) with a certain challenge of keeping up with the transition brought home with the idea of Western modernization in the given time period. They thus, grappled with questions such as, "What should be the political status of Muslims in a modern nation-state having a Hindu (Non-Muslim) majority?" and "Is there found any existing model of nationalism or political coexistence which may carry some philosophical coherence with Islamic political theology in this regard?" Questions such as these depicted that the challenge Muslim scholars, particularly those who were considered the intellectual elites were facing at the time, had underlying foundations of political reforms which required appropriation into pre-existing Islamic ethos. Currently however, their collective response towards the problems of so-called Western modernization has become a contemporary academic discourse in the field of South Asian Islam. It is within this context that this piece of research is located.

Naturally, there developed multiple arguments in response to these questions from the Muslim polity in British India, gradually metamorphosing into the ideologies behind different religious/intellectual cum political movements. For the purpose of clarity, we can

identify at least one such issue which pertained to Western modernization around which Indian Muslims developed their respective ideologies: the problem of coexisting with the religious 'other' in a modern political setup such as national or a secular state. This point is also related to the question we asked in the beginning regarding the political status of a Muslim in a majority Non-Muslim democracy/secular state.

Nationalism: a modern perspective

Since the current discussion is more or less around the topic of Nationalism, it will only be pertinent here to discuss few connotations of the term as it is perceived in European academy before we employ it in the Indian native context.

In political science, nationalism is often closely related to the problem of separatism and identity politics (Spencer, 1998).¹ Usually defined as secession of a group from a larger community on the basis of caste, creed/religion, culture or ethnicity, the ideology of separatism developed distinctly only in the modern era. From a sociological perspective, it is studied as part of a community's reflections on the status of its 'nomos' and in particular, the idea of 'anomie' as was initially described by Emile Durkheim (Marks, 1974). Primarily, it refers to the challenge posed by the conflict of interest in the interstices of a community. Durkheim proposed multiple forms of anomie at different sociological levels which included categories such as domestic and economic (occupational) anomie. His perspective of political sociology reflected a democratic relationship between state and society to counter anomic forces. Nation, according to him, is a social group on a higher level (Durkheim, 1961). Nationalism, especially when it emerges in the form of an ideology in this regard is thus rooted in the problem of developing 'anomie' or meaninglessness among various macro and micro-sociological levels. The vulnerability that arises as a result leads for the effected group of people to search for their process of finding 'nomos'. Hence politically, the problem of secession is relatively recent and is usually discussed in lieu of the process of nation-state formation which in turn, is related to the study of political geography.

¹ See 'Introduction' to (Spencer, 1998) URL:
http://mettaspencer.com/?Papers:Academic_papers:Separatism_Democracy_and_Disintegration for more information.

Insofar the problem of political geography is concerned let us consider the political interpretation of centripetal and centrifugal forces (originally proposed by Richard Hartshorne). These forces are a result of socio-economic factors which help keep a community together or apart and through which the mechanics of secession of a group can best be understood (Squires, 1978). Thus, any nationalist movement can become separatist when there is involved the mechanics of centrifugal forces, especially when they become powerful enough for a group of people to struggle for secession. Hartshorne has extensively argued on how factors both cultural and spatial have a role in it to play. He implies that for a nation to hold itself together, a sovereign state is required having shared cultural practices, most important of them being language and religion (Hartshorne, 1950). But at the same time, for it to establish the spirit of nationalism – a strong centripetal force – it should acquire economic stability that works for all and ensures acceptable standard of living among its inhabitants. Failing to do so can bring about a class revolution which can lead towards a secession of group on the political level. In this regard, Hartshorne develops an interesting perspective on defining the formation of a national, modern state.

Another perspective in this regard is that of Benedict Anderson. In 1983, Anderson proposed the idea of nation as an imagined community. According to him, the inhabitants of a nation experience an inherent relationship which is imagined because, 'the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion' (Anderson, 1983). He too has defined nationalism in modern or post-modern context which begins with industrial revolution. A study of his construction of nationalism depicts an underlying requirement of communities which can be equated with the spirit of holding themselves together in a meaningful relationship. As an example, he highlights, for example, the time of 'print capitalism' through which texts were translated in vernaculars to promote vested interests of those who stood against previously-held divine authority and empires (Anderson, 1983).

If we take these connotations of Nation and/or nationalism into perspective, we will find that all of them take sociological stance discussing human groups trying to find a common denominator to 'coexist' peacefully with each other. Especially in the modern context, they exhibit a search for identity, the absence of which can bring about

social and political chaos. This process of identity-formation, in turn, is associated with an individual's collective experience. An individual is likely to fall prey to negative peer pressure if he becomes an outcaste among his group members. The factors can range from ethnic to religious, cultural or economic disparity but the result will more or less be the same; one that may include secession or separation of one particular group from another. On the other hand, in order for such human groups to form a nation, sufficient ground would always be needed to avoid different forms of existential crises.

However, it is obvious that such a view provides a very basic structure for analyzing the deeply intertwined social and political affairs of our post-modern world. It may not do justice to the reality at hand wherein myriad forces are interacting to keep such an intricate balance. The problem of nationalism, for example, if taken from the view of a Western modernist, is closely associated to industrial revolution. It has long been treated as an ideology. However, in the post-modern world which is marked with the processes such as 'deconstruction of thought' and ultimately, denouncing ideologies, we find new structures of sociopolitical coherence which have replaced or at least weakened the national ones. The post-modern world has adopted political alliances such as European Union (EU est. 1993) and now, Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO est. 2001) which have brought in the element of 'fluidity' to the once static notion of national coordination.²

Therefore, nations are no more confined to their spatial idiosyncratic forms. In fact, they have been exposed to a global network with ever increasing cultural overlap including religious and language interaction. This implies that the problems which were considered relatively unilateral in the previous models of nation-state formation (such as the issue of minority rights) have recently acquired a 'multilateral' tendency. In a globalized world, it has truly become difficult to trace the lines which divide communities on a scale which can be seen stemming from any notion of separatism. Instead, post-modern world has witnessed a tendency of amalgamation of smaller nation-states/countries ultimately developing into kind of (pseudo) empires.

² There can be other examples as well such as United Nations (est. 1945) which was founded at the turn of the Second World War and falls into the same category. The theory of 'balance of power' by Richard Ashley (Ashley, 1980) may be cited in this regard for further reference.

Nevertheless, the accounts we have just discussed generally describe the western history of ideas. There are other examples too which need not to be mentioned at this point. But is it that, the debate around nationalism, separatism or identity politics has hitherto remained exclusive to European or Western history? If not, how has the East or the Orient tackled nationalism as part of the process of modernization and to what effect has it shaped their response towards modernity?

It is in answer to this question that we have chosen to present the viewpoint of Jam'iyat 'Ulama-i Hind, particularly in the idea of 'composite' or 'united' nationalism within the context of Islam.

Muslim response to the idea of nationalism in British India

With regards to the question of nationalism, Muslims in British India found themselves divided especially concerning the idea of coexistence with non-Muslim majority. Put simply, there rose at least two large categories of Muslim movements bearing distinct ideologies on the issue of coexistence with the Non-Muslims in an independent India. One of them held a separatist viewpoint in nationalistic debate and considered Muslims an independent nation which bore rather little affinity to coexist with the majority 'other' – the Hindus at the time. The representative movement bearing this ideology which became most powerful in 1940's was the All-India Muslim League (est. 1906). On the other hand, there was another viewpoint which advocated 'Composite Nationalism' in which multiple nations can coexist within a common geography. More than one organization/political movement supported this stance, the example of which can be traced in the Azad Muslim conference (1940). Prominent of these were, Khudai Khidmatgar (of Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan), Majlis-e-Ahrar al-Islam, All-India Momin conference and Jam'iyat 'Ulama-i Hind (Qasmi & Robb, 2017).

Hence, in the context of British India, the Muslims found themselves torn between the two ideologies which stood poles apart on the issue of coexistence with the Hindus in a modern political set-up; one proposed exclusivist existence of Indian Muslims in the form of Separate Homeland (as was envisioned in the idea of Pakistan) while the other imagined a utopia in which multiple socio-ethnic groups can coexist without compromising their respective identities.

The case of Jam'iyat 'Ulama-i Hind

As far as our research is concerned, we have handpicked the latter group and limited our discussion on the question of coexisting with non-Muslim majority in modern India, only from the perspective of Jam'iyat 'Ulama-i Hind (JUH). JUH was formed in 1919 stemming from the grand Khilafat Movement (1919-24). It was an organization of the 'Ulama belonging to diverse religious background. Many of them belonged to the famous Deoband seminary, having direct affiliation with influential figures such as Maulana Mahmud Hasan (1851-1920) who was given the title of Sheikh al-Hind at the time. Others included Maulana Kifayatullah Dehalvi (1875-1952), Maulana Husain Ahmed Madani (1879-1957) and Maulana Shabbir Ahmed Usmani (1887-1949) to mention a few. Apart from them, we also find a representative of rational school of 'Ulama in the Indian subcontinent, the Farangi Mahall in the esteemed personality of Maulana Abdul Bari Farangi Mahalli (1878-1926). Similarly there were 'Ulama from the recent Ahl-e-Hadith school of thought as well, who collectively owned the organization. The reason of them coming together on a platform was principally linked to the political disturbance at the given time period. The First World War (1914-1918) had brought an end to the Muslim Caliphate, the repercussions of which could be felt around the Muslim World. Indian subcontinent was no exception. There was a sense of general abomination and distrust among the Indian Muslim population against the British for failing to uplift their confidence regarding their religious aspirations. In simple words, they felt a need not only to be forcefully heard but make their presence count in Indian cultural context (Manglori, 2001).³

However, that formed only one side of the story. There were problems at home too, bearing intra-faith context and coming from within their own Muslim community. As can be historically observed, with the looming idea of Indian independence, there were candidates apart from the 'Ulama' who felt entitled enough to reconstruct Muslim ideology while responding to modernity. Most of them had witnessed the Western model directly (examples include Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938) and Muhammad Ali Jinnah (1876-1948)) and although they are

³ Muhammad Mian (1903-1975) once the general secretary of JUH had extensively written on the reason behind the foundation of the organization. See, (Mian, 2010)226-9 and (Manglori, 2001)398-400.

bear a common recognition as Muslim modernists, yet on the problem of Muslim coexistence with the Non-Muslim majority in independent India, they held strong reservations. On the other hand, there was the case of 'Ulama' in JUH who were proposing the idea of composite nationalism under the leadership of Maulana Hussain Ahmed Madani, who was considerably orthodox and yet seemed to have accommodated the idea of modern in the vogue at the time. This has been evaluated by Yohannan Friedmann (Friedmann, 1971) in the following words:

[...] when the 'ulamā' wished to lay the ideological foundation for their participation in the struggle against the British in the special circumstances of India, they had to consider another factor. The 'ulamā' and their Muslim followers were not the only fighters against the British, and, in fact, they were not even the main element in this struggle. They were a factor of secondary importance in the Indian national movement, and they supported the Congress party. Participation in the national movement of a nation which was primarily composed of infidels raised many questions among the pious Muslims, particularly as a result of the energetic propaganda of the Muslim League against co-operation with the Hindus. The 'ulamā' were therefore forced to justify their political stand and to explain how their support of the Indian national movement agrees with the Islamic principles [...] (p.162)

Furthermore and apart from the above, JUH held following significance;

- a. It was essentially a religious organization belonging to the class of 'Ulama in the Indian subcontinent which played a distinctive role in presenting a revised version of Islamic political theology while debating on the concept of composite nationalism.
- b. While the idea of composite nationalism had also been advocated by other religious groups in modern India (sometimes by the name of composite patriotism), in particular from Indian Muslims' perspective, it was only JUH who brought forward an argument of its authenticity from within the orthodox sources of Islam such as Qur'an and Sunnah (Madani, 2006)⁴ The example of this can be found in the

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Hence, in the example of JUH lies a representation of Muslim scholars' (the Ulama's) response on the pressing issues of Western modernization in British India. The study at hand is undertaken in the spirit of unfolding these hitherto little explored areas in modern Muslim discourse on politics and theology especially in the context of Indian subcontinent.

Composite Nationalism: the proposal of JUH

Native to Indian subcontinent, the theory of composite nationalism generally suggested that the Indian population was comprised of multiple nations who had been peacefully coexisting and were bounded together by India's geography for centuries. Thus religious pluralism can easily be discussed within the context of Indian subcontinent at least before the arrival of British as Imperial/Colonial masters. It is interesting to note here that the idea is not exclusive to JUH or Maulana Husain Ahmed Madani, as is sometimes perceived. Rather, it was coined and used much earlier by people such as Bipin Chandra Pal (1858-1932) who extended the Hindu philosophy of *adhikar-bheda* to non-Hindu patriots of the country. This was endorsed by Annie Besant (1847-1933) (Hardiman, 2003)⁵ too who was an Irish socialist but vehemently supported Indian self-rule against the British imperialism. Both of them belonged to non-Muslim Indian communities who were allies in propagating the sentiment of national independence among the inhabitants of India regardless of their religion or creed.

It is thus evident that the modern debate on nationalism in the Indian context took a central position from the beginning of the 20th century C.E. which was the time of intense political collaboration of native Indians. Beginning from the inception of Indian National Congress in 1885, the first half of the 20th century saw the formation of various new political parties belonging to different religious/ethnic groups in British

⁵ Pal was a Bengali nationalist and proposed the idea of 'composite patriotism' deriving it from Hindu philosophy which tended to preserve different sects of Hindus while making them inclusive to the larger Hindu whole. The idea of composite patriotism was used interchangeably with composite nationalism in the years after. For further reference, see (Hardiman, 2003)22.

India. Soon after and particularly in the aftermath of the First World War, the region witnessed movements led by iconoclasts such as B.G. Tilak (1856-1920), M.K. Gandhi (1869-1948), Ubaidullah Sindhi (1872-1944) and Maulana Madani, who staged political protests against the British Raj and the socio-economic human rights violation of Indian population on the part of the latter. Up till this time period (circa 1920), Hindu-Muslim unity could easily be witnessed on the political platforms. However, it was short-lived given the emergence of proselytizing groups from both the communities (the Hindus and the Muslims) which heavily increased the polarization between the two (Thursby, 1975) Riots emerged, the details of which can easily be found in academic discourse on Indian history. What is important to mention here for the purposes of our research however is the question of how JUH proposed the possibility of political coexistence with the non-Muslim Hindu majority in Independent India which will be free from British Imperial power?

As has been mentioned earlier, composite nationalism was nothing new in the context of British India. In fact, many before Maulana Madani (as representative of JUH) had proposed a similar idea but they belonged to an altogether different religious tradition (Hinduism for example). On the other hand, for a Muslim scholar to substantiate his version of political theology, it was obvious that a thorough investigation of classical Islamic thought on the subject was needed. This was brought forth in a much controversial Madani's book, *Muttahidda Qawmiyyat aur Islam* (composite nationalism and Islam) in response to the allegations made upon him by Muhammad Iqbal of the AIML. Against the concept of Muslim *millat*, Madani emphasized that the issue at hand was about the word '*Qawm*' and not the former *millat*. It is '*Qawm*' which forms the center of discussion in modern state construction. *Qawm* in his view was the closest translation of 'nation' as it could be defined in any sociological context. *Millat* might have had religious underpinnings but *Qawm* on the other hand is least associated to religion which forms only a part of a culture of any given community (Madani, 2006). Thus, for Madani, what forms a nation is basically the common habitat, the cultural linkages and overlaps of the population which shares a common territory. In this sense, the subcontinent of India is host not only to one but multiple nations, the examples of which can be Sindhis, Balochis and Panjabis instead of differential groups based on religion and identified as Hindus or Muslims.

In this context thus, a Muslim in India was as much an Indian as that of his counterpart Hindu. To validate his account, he took examples from the Qur'an in which the accounts of Prophets have been mentioned where they have addressed their audiences as their '*Qawm*' which was not in any case related to their common religious affiliation; in fact, it was based on geography and territorial boundaries. The view, if studied in retrospect seems rather simplistic but in the given time period, it stirred heated debate from within the Muslim polity, especially the intellectual elites who challenged JUH's stance of composite nationalism and considered it quite problematic. What had thus been the main point or underlying problem of their contention?

To answer this question, we will take recourse to the problem of 'anomie' as was described in the beginning of the article. In our view, it was not JUH who felt a blow of existential crisis in the face of the development of new modern state; by the sound of it, it was exactly the other, the leftists and the 'modern-educated' class who felt most vulnerable with the question of their identity in a modern political set up. In a way thus, JUH's stance depicted a sense of accommodation to the 'new' modern. Maulana Madani, for instance, objected that the earlier models of political system in Islam could barely survive in the modern world. In fact, there was a need to formulate new legal discourse in Muslim theological circles regarding the issue of coexistence with the Non-Muslim majority in a modern nation-state. A thorough analysis of his stance is elaborated by Barbara D. Metcalf in one of her articles titled, "Maulana Husain Ahmad Madani and the Jami'at 'Ulama-i-Hind: Against Pakistan, against the Muslim League" (Metcalf, 2017) She writes,

"What is important about the Jami'at 'Ulama-i-Hind proposal, [...] was a commitment to a modern nation-state that would *be*, whatever the ultimate shape of its components, secular, federal, and democratic." (Emphasis added) (p.42)

It seems therefore, that in the proposal of JUH, an inherent acceptance of the 'modern' was already present. That the Western sociopolitical and economic reforms were there to stay formed no ambiguity in their idea of future. Their contestation was rather confined only to the British colonization of India and her idea of subjugating the masses at the time when colonized countries were gaining independence, formulating their own laws and entering the new era of

nationalism and democracy. It is for this reason that they advocated communal harmony and Hindu-Muslim unity (which formed the two majorities of India at the time) and collaborated with other Nationalist parties such as Indian National Congress (INC) to support full independence. In other words, it was JUH's idea of survival in the modern world especially on the behalf a Muslim community who had long been struggling with the process of identity-formation especially after the fall of Muslim Caliphate.

Conclusion

Whatever has thus been discussed bring us to following concluding observations/remarks:

- a. Nationalism as was perceived in the West in the modern era was based on territorial boundaries which needed interpretation in the Indian context especially at the time when nation-states were being constructed. JUH's idea of composite nationalism within Islamic context should be explored within this contemporary academic discourse bearing cultural and ideational implications ((Metcalf, 2017).⁶
- b. While perceived somewhat differently among many Muslim intellectuals, it should also be noted JUH had attempted to superimpose the western idea of Nationalism upon Islamic political theology thereby giving rise to the debate on the question of Islamic modernity among the 'Ulama and which needs contemporary academic consideration.
- c. That Muslims were coexisting with non-Muslims in India before British colonization and could still do so through proper legislation in the modern nation-state setup, is a claim which, albeit possessing enormous amount of controversy, holds contemporary significance given the post-modern studies of multiculturalism and socio-religious harmony.

⁶ In the words of Barbara D. Metcalf, 'Madani thus cultivated a historicized territorial vision for the nation-state.' See (Metcalf, 2017) 54.

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