Nation, Reason and Religion
Punjab's Role in the Partition of India
Ayesha Jalal

The pre-eminent view of Indian nationalism has been that of an inclusionary, accommodative, consensual and popular anti-colonial struggle. This has entailed denigrating the exclusive affinities of religion as 'communal' in an imagined hierarchy of collectivities crowned by the ideal of a 'nation' unsullied by narrow-minded bigotry. By implying that religious affiliations are, if not necessarily bigoted, then certainly less worthy than identifications with the 'nation', Indian nationalism comes dangerously close to trampling over its own coattails. The cultural roots of Indian nationalism owed far more to religious ideals, reinterpreted and reconfigured in imaginative fashion, than has been acknowledged.

Continued recourse to the colonial privileging of religious distinctions thwarted many well-meaning attempts at accommodating differences within a broad framework of Indian nationalism. So long as the dominant discourse among Indians was tainted by notions of religious majoritarianism and minoritarianism, there could be no hard and fast separation between 'nationalism' and 'communalism'. Far from being an irritating side-show, the inversion of the all-India majority and minority equation in Punjab was at the centre-stage of the struggle between nationalism and imperialism.

"LET it not be forgotten", the Bengali radical M N Roy had written in 1926, "that Punjab is the centre of the Hindu-Muslim conflict that radiate from there to all other parts of India". The second half of the 1920s saw social and political currents in Punjab receding from the ideal of an inclusionary nationalism towards an apparently unbending kind of exclusionary communalism. This had encouraged at least one historian to depict the decade as a "prelude to partition". Yet Punjab in this period can just as easily be seen as providing alternative visions of nationalism which seriously challenged the notion of one nation and undivided sovereignty propagated by the Congress.

The pre-eminent view of Indian nationalism has been that of an inclusionary, accommodative, consensual and popular anti-colonial struggle. This has entailed denigrating the exclusive affinities of religion as 'communal' in an imagined hierarchy of collectivities crowned by the ideal of a 'nation' unsullied by narrow-minded bigotry. By implying that religious affiliations are, if not necessarily bigoted, then certainly less worthy than identifications with the 'nation', Indian nationalism comes dangerously close to trampling over its own coattails. The cultural roots of Indian nationalism owed far more to religious ideals, reinterpreted and reconfigured in imaginative fashion, than has been acknowledged. According to Partha Chatterjee, who takes the cultural fragment represented by certain Bengali Hindu middle class intellectuals to illuminate the consciousness of the Indian nation as a whole, religion provided the spiritual stores for resisting and negotiating the inherent materiality of both western modernity and British rule. While giving none too respectfully to religious sentiments and symbols than they have tended to enjoy in the past, Chatterjee does so by invoking a dichotomy between an autonomous inner spiritual and a dominated outer material domain. This is an ingenious way of skirting around the problem of dismantling the binary opposition between 'secular nationalism' and religious communalism on which so much of the ideological edifice of the post-colonial Indian nation-state has rested.

Engrossed with the construction of the nationalist hegemony, Chatterjee glosses over the unresolved tensions and continued contestations that marked the terrain of both region and religion. Although conceding that "the real difficulty was with Islam in India" which gave "rise to alternative hegemonic efforts than the one based on the evocation of a classical Hindu past", he stops short of considering the substance of these alternatives. Such an investigation of the cultural roots of nationalism leaves unexamined the myriad subaltern contestations of an emerging mainstream nationalism which like its adversary, colonialism, may well have only achieved dominance without hegemony.

To name this dominance hegemony is to confuse the claims of one strand of nationalist discourse with its ability to ensure cultural, not to mention, political acquiescence. It also underplays the exclusionary aspect of this nationalism which only succeeded in eliciting a stronger reaction from its skeptics and critics. This was particularly true of the Indian Muslims engaged in redefining their religiously informed cultural identity in the face of a modernity underwritten by the fact of British sovereignty. Continued recourse to the colonial privileging of religious distinctions thwarted many well-meaning attempts at accommodating differences within a broad framework of Indian nationalism. So long as the dominant discourse among Indians was tainted by notions of religious majoritarianism and minoritarianism there could be no hard and fast separation between 'nationalism' and 'communalism'. Far from being an irritating side-show, the inversion of the all-India majority and minority equation in Punjab was at the centre-stage of the struggle between nationalism and imperialism.

REGIONAL, RELIGIOUS OR NATIONAL RIGHTS?

The land of the five rivers was the locus of some of the more interesting ideas on how the rights of religious communities might be reconciled with the imperatives of Indian unity. In 1924 the solution to the problem of contested sovereignty in Punjab proposed by Lala Lajpat Rai, the pre-eminent Hindu nationalist of that region, was to partition the province in order to make the principle of majority rule effective. This might in turn open the way to a possible federalization of Hindu and Muslim states in Bengal. Rai's proposal for a division of the two main Muslim-dominated provinces was not a prelude to a partition of India; it was a laboured attempt to forestall such an eventuality. A partitioned Punjab and Bengal were to remain part of an undivided India under Hindu majority rule.

Championing the regional rights of
Punjabi Hindus. Rai drew comfort from the fact of a Hindu majority at the all-India centre guaranteeing their national rights. Religion was the premise of both the regional and national rights of the Hindu community in Punjab. And yet Lajpat Rai, proclaimed himself to be an opponent of mixing religion with politics. His recipe for settling the problem of difference through division was anathema to many Punjabi Muslims. But they were equally averse to the ideas of Mohamed Ali, an Islamic universalist venturing forth as an Indian nationalist, who held that the only religious requirement of the Muslims was to ensure that 'swaraj' or independence did not undermine their religious rights. If Mohamed Ali conceded the possibility of Muslim citizenship in a non-Muslim state, Muhammad Iqbal transformed the very parameters of the debate by rejecting the European born idea of the separation of the spiritual and material domains.

According to Iqbal, the spiritual and the temporal domains were not distinct in Islam since "the nature of the act, however secular in its import, is determined by the attitude of mind with which the agent does it". Rejecting the post-enlightenment misconception of the binary opposition between the spiritual and temporal as "two distinct and separate realities", Iqbal affirmed both the "unity of man" and Islam as "a single unanalysable reality" in which the religious and political aspects depended on positionally specific observations. The "working idea" of "taubid", the binding principle of a Muslim's submission to Allah, was "equality, solidarity and freedom". It was incumbent upon the state from an Islamic point of view "to endeavour to transform these ideal principles" into reality.5

"It was in this alone", the leading intellectual light in Muslim India noted, "that the State in Islam is a theocracy". This was not a form of government "headed by a representative of God on earth...screening his despotic will behind his supposed infallibility". An Islamic "theocracy" sought to "realise the spiritual in a human organisation".6 Giving a wholly different spin to what has come to be associated with the term "secular", Iqbal's philosophical vision aided by an understanding of Islam collapsed the meaning of sacred and profane. The secular was "sacred in the roots of its being". There was "no such thing as a profane world".

The over-zealousness of Turkish nationalists in embracing the European idea of the separation of the church and state bordered on profanity. "Such a thing could never happen in Islam", Iqbal assented. "For Islam was from the very beginning a civil society, having received from the Qur'an a set of simple legal principles which, like the 12 tables of the Romans, carried...great potentialities of expansion and development by interpretation". The principle of 'ijtihad' or independent judgment allowed Muslims to constantly adjust to the imperatives of social change without abandoning the Islamic path. Contrary to the view of the religious scholars, Iqbal believed that since the institution of the 'khilafa' had ceased to exist, the right of 'ijtihad' should be vested in an elected Muslim assembly which was the "only possible form Ijma could take in modern times".7 In opting for the republican form of government and collective 'ijtihad' by the Grand National Assembly, the Turks alone among the Muslims had asserted the right of intellectual freedom conferred by Islam.8

Yet on the separation of church and state they had gone too far, Iqbal alerted Muslims to the dangers of becoming overawed by the currents of western liberalisation. As he put it:

Khora na kor saka mujhe ja lwa danish-i-farrang Suonna hai meri unghoona ka khaki-Mudina we Naqf

The light of foreign wisdom does not dazzle me The kohl lining my eyelids is the dust of Mecca and Naqf.

Iqbal's principal critique of western enlightenment philosophy was that it had taken the freedom of free thinking to such extreme limits as to deny that "all human life is spiritual". Islam on the other hand was an "emotional system of unification" which "recognises the worth of the individual" and "rejects blood-relationship as a basis of human unity" and "demands loyalty to God, not to thrones".9 It followed that 'ijtihad' was meaningless if denied of religious spirit. What Iqbal's philosophical reconstructions of Islamic thought made plain was the gaping chasm between a view of Indian nationalism based on keeping religion out of politics and the normative Muslim conception of treating the spiritual and temporal domains in non-oppositional terms.

What then was the precise significance of religion in the politics of colonial India? The separation of religion and politics expounded by Congress nationalists and rejected by those branded 'communalists' took on very different connotations at the regional and the all-India levels. Religiously informed cultural differences were emphasised to claim regional rights but deemed illegitimate if insisted upon by a geographically disparate numerical minority as the criteria for the distribution of national rights. It was this contradictory logic which gave religion the handle that it came to enjoy in the politics of late colonial India. As region interacted with an emerging conception of the nation, variously appropriated by the votaries of the majoritarian community, those reduced to minority status by virtue of their religious affiliation had reasonable grounds for apprehension. Emphatic assertions of an inclusionary nationalism based on the separation of the spiritual from the material, the religious from the political and the emotional from the rational seemed to marginalise the problem of cultural difference rather than give it the centrality it had come to occupy in the discourse and politics of secularism. If fragments of the majority community could pose their demand for regional rights in the language of religiously informed cultural differences, then the members of a 'national' minority could hardly be expected to do otherwise. By clinging more obstinately to the politics of cultural difference, a statutory minority might at least extract some safeguards. After all, "the respect for cultural diversity and different ways of life finds it impossible to articulate itself in the unitary nationalism of the language of rights".10 But it had to do so on a collective basis in order to get a hearing from the colonial state whose tinted spectacles saw India in terms of essentialised but not adequately existentialised religious blocs.

Playing notes borrowed from liberal democratic theory in the communitarian key, Lajpat Rai had issued an ultimatum to Muslim Punjab that separation may have to be the price for majority rule premised on religion. He was perfectly correct that separate electorates for Muslims and the matching 'communalisation' of government through religiously defined quotas were a devastating blow to the homogenising claims of an inclusionary nationalism. But it was his equally impassioned defence of the rights of Punjabi Hindus which betrayed to many Muslims the hollowness of the nationalist discourse. The bait of equal citizenship in an independent India carried the price tag of singularity and homogeneity which was made out of secularism. The problem of minority status with no prospect of relief was the fact of their regional majority. Inequality in the terms of representation could hardly be expected to produce the conditions for equality of citizenship.
Even if the issue of cultural difference could be settled through negotiations on the quantum of state intervention in religion, there was no guaranteeing that Hindu-majority rule would not try and efface the marks of the Islamic impact on the subcontinent. Imbued with the wonder of a union of the mother Goddess with the territorial homeland, Hindu India’s vision of ‘Bharatvarsha’ was dramatically at odds with the individual and collective Muslim belief in the absolute sovereignty of a universal God. That it could give rise to a rich variety of ideas on identity and sovereignty has been amply suggested in the views of Mohamed Ali and Iqbal, two men wedded to the universalist pledge in Islam who chose initially at least to occupy different niches in the politics of Indian Muslims.

It had the added advantage of being more relevant to India’s political and intellectual legacies than a discourse on nationalism shaped by Europe’s history of the formation of nation-states. As Iqbal put it in one of his ‘zarifana’ or humorous verses:

We eastern innocents have entangled our hearts with a west
Where there are crystal chalices and here
only an old earthen pot
All will perish in this era except the one
Who is established in way and firm in conviction
Oh Sheikh and Brahman, do you hear
What the scriptural say
From what high heavens nations have fallen
Here it is either conferences on mutual love: the ways of love were established
Or disputes over Urdu and Hindi, cow sacrifice and ‘jhatka’.13

**BETWEEN REGION AND NATION: THE MISSING CENTRE**

After the late 1920s, the legitimising glory of Congress’s inclusionary nationalism rested on precisely the “unitary rationalism of the language of rights” which, according to Chatterjee, is incapable of respecting cultural difference. Appropriating the colonial state’s disputable claims of non-interference in the religious and cultural concerns of its subjects was convenient for those with an eye to power at the all-India centre. But this entailed losing sight of unfolding developments in the regions and taking refuge in a conception that came dangerously close to abolishing the fact of difference. Concerned with advancing their interests in a context where the state conferred favours to communities of religion, regional peoples were expected to readily embrace an idea of inclusionary nationalism holding out the promise of equal citizenship rights, irrespective of community, caste or class. It is precisely because they had not given up thinking of themselves as part of an Indian whole – that the idea of majoritarianism seized the imaginations of Hindus and Muslims alike.

Punjab reveals in stark fashion the importance of majorities claiming regional, religious and national rights. The connections between region and nation which Lajpat Rai had mapped out in his arguments on rights were entirely in accord with his religiously informed sense of cultural identity. Since Hindus were fortuitously in a ‘majority’ in India, a Punjabi Hindu of Lajpat Rai’s ambitions could live with the idea of separating the religious and the temporal realms. This was a formulation flatly rejected by Muslims who agreed that their communitarian rights had to be safeguarded in any future constitutional agreement. The principal obstacle to Muslim support for a future constituted was not separate electorates but the issue of provincial majorities. Having proclaimed the ‘secular’ to be sacred to the core, Muhammad Iqbal upon entering the formal arena of politics in Punjab declared that “agreement on only religious matters would not eliminate all the differences”. The ‘mantra’ of rights being chanted by the Hindus, and echoed variously by the Sikhs, touched on temporal issues that impinged on the exercise of ‘secular’ authority. While focusing on the rights of Muslims, and those of Punjab especially, Iqbal continued emphasizing the compatibility between an Indian and an Islamic identity. It was “completely wrong”, he asserted, to say that “the Muslim psyche was devoid of any spirit of love for the homeland”. Besides love of the homeland, Muslims felt passionately about Islam. It was this passion that could bring together the disparate individuals of the community. Iqbal’s 1930 presidential address to the All-India Muslim League is a key to understanding the Muslim discourse on identity, sovereignty and citizenship in late colonial India. Was it possible “to retain Islam as an ethical ideal and... reject it as a polity” in order to embrace the idea of “national politics” in which religion played no part? It was ‘unthinkable’ for Muslims to subscribe to the “construction of a polity on national lines” by abandoning “the Islamic principle of solidarity”.

Referring to Ernest Renan’s definition of a nation as the expression of a collective ‘moral consciousness’, Iqbal observed that the affinities of caste and religion in India had resisted “sinking[ing] their respective individualities in a larger whole”. Whatever their own internal divisions various groupings in India were unwilling to pay the price of fashioning a common national moral consciousness if it meant the extinction of their cultural distinctiveness. It was imperative to “recognise facts” and “not assume the existence of a state of things which does not exist”.

Yet Iqbal’s call for a Muslim state in north-western India did not envisage a severance of all ties with Hindustan. In contesting their part in relation to the whole of India, Muslims quite as much as other religious groupings were asserting rights to territories based on religiously informed cultural identities. But they were still mainly challenging the Congress’s right to indivisible sovereignty, not rejecting any sort of identification with India. Muslim schemes seeking to align notions of religiously informed cultural difference with political claims of territorial sovereignty were trying to keep alive the idea if not the reality of an India extending from the Khyber Pass in the north-western marcher regions to the Bay of Bengal in the east, and from the city of exquisite monuments to keep alive the spirit and memory of the Sultanate and the great Mughals to the southern-most tip of Kanyakumari.

**MUSLIM COMMUNITY-TURNED-NATION: THE DEMAND FOR PAKISTAN**

Conceding territorial sovereignty to a heterogeneous community turned homogeneous ‘nation’ was a more vexed issue than has been generally acknowledged by those charting the course to separate statehood by India’s Muslims. In putting forward a claim to nationhood in 1940, Indian Muslims were decidedly revolting against minoritarianism, caricatured as ‘religious communalism’. As Mohammed Ali Jinnah confessed, the idea of being a minority had been around for so long that “we have got used to it... these settled notions sometimes are very difficult to remove”. But the time had come to unsettle the notion since the “word ‘Nationalist’ has now become the play of conjurors in politics”. No less a conjurer than Lajpat Rai, Jinnah came away from the League’s Lahore session with a mixed bag of tricks.

While the insistence on national status for Indian Muslims was absolute, the demand for a separate and sovereign state and its relationship with a Hindustan containing almost as many Muslims remained open to negotiation until the late summer of 1946. The claim that Muslims constituted a ‘nation’ was not incompatible with a federal or confederal state structure covering the whole of India. But for the federal idea to be acceptable, the logic of
majoritarianism and minoritarianism had to be abandoned and the fact of contested sovereignty acknowledged. In keeping with the better part of India’s history, the overtures to shared sovereignty enunciated by Jinnah and the League seemed the best way of tackling the dilemma posed by the absence of any neat equation between Muslim identity and territory. With ‘nations’ straddling states, the boundaries between them had to be permeable and flexible, not impermeable and absolute. This is why Jinnah and the League were to remain implacably opposed to a partition of Punjab and Bengal along religious lines even while furthering the cause of a political division of India between ‘Pakistan’ and ‘Hindustan’. Nudged on by the provincial Hindu Mahasabha, the Sikh reaction to the ‘Pakistan’ demand of crucial significance in tracing the historical backdrop to the partition of the province. Together with the Congress, this combination held a key to the future of Punjab. Unless satisfied with their share of representation in a Muslim dominated province, not to mention a separate state, there could be no question of keeping non-Muslims within such an administrative unit against their will. Contestations over sovereignty in Punjab rarely conceded and usually no question of keeping non-Muslims on arguments about religious lines. This is why Jinnah and the League were to remain implacably opposed to a partition of Punjab and Bengal along religious lines even while furthering the cause of a political division of India between ‘Pakistan’ and ‘Hindustan’. Nudged on by the provincial Hindu Mahasabha, the Sikh reaction to the ‘Pakistan’ demand of crucial significance in tracing the historical backdrop to the partition of the province. Together with the Congress, this combination held a key to the future of Punjab. Unless satisfied with their share of representation in a Muslim dominated province, not to mention a separate state, there could be no question of keeping non-Muslims within such an administrative unit against their will. Contestations over sovereignty in Punjab rarely conceded and usually no question of keeping non-Muslims on arguments about religious lines. This is why Jinnah and the League were to remain implacably opposed to a partition of Punjab and Bengal along religious lines even while furthering the cause of a political division of India between ‘Pakistan’ and ‘Hindustan’. Nudged on by the provincial Hindu Mahasabha, the Sikh reaction to the ‘Pakistan’ demand of crucial significance in tracing the historical backdrop to the partition of the province. Together with the Congress, this combination held a key to the future of Punjab. Unless satisfied with their share of representation in a Muslim dominated province, not to mention a separate state, there could be no question of keeping non-Muslims within such an administrative unit against their will. Contestations over sovereignty in Punjab rarely conceded and usually no question of keeping non-Muslims on arguments about religious lines. This is why Jinnah and the League were to remain implacably opposed to a partition of Punjab and Bengal along religious lines even while furthering the cause of a political division of India between ‘Pakistan’ and ‘Hindustan’. Nudged on by the provincial Hindu Mahasabha, the Sikh reaction to the ‘Pakistan’ demand of crucial significance in tracing the historical backdrop to the partition of the province. Together with the Congress, this combination held a key to the future of Punjab. Unless satisfied with their share of representation in a Muslim dominated province, not to mention a separate state, there could be no question of keeping non-Muslims within such an administrative unit against their will. Contestations over sovereignty in Punjab rarely conceded and usually no question of keeping non-Muslims on arguments about religious lines. This is why Jinnah and the League were to remain implacably opposed to a partition of Punjab and Bengal along religious lines even while furthering the cause of a political division of India between ‘Pakistan’ and ‘Hindustan'.

The Muslim trickle to the League’s ‘Pakistan’ was partly a reaction to the activities of the Hindu Mahasabha and its para-military wing, the RSS. The Mahasabha’s charge that Congress was ‘unrepresentative of Hindu opinion’ was not a reflection of the nationalist organi-sation. There was a constant overlap between the Congress and the Mahasabha in Punjab where it was often the same individuals who voiced the Hindu-Hindustan slogan most loudly. After the announcement of Rajagopalachari’s partition formula of 1944, what collapsed all ends of the Hindu political spectrum was the discovery that, all said and done, even the apex decision-making body of the all-India Mahasabha did not really oppose Rajagopalachari’s conception of a ‘Pakistan’. This was the second instance within a span of 20 years that Punjabi Hindus had shown a willingness to concede Muslim-majority rule in Punjab. Muslims were no more prepared to countenance the partition of the province, far less discuss the geographical frontiers of a divided India. All that changed after March 1940 was that ‘Pakistan’ had become a familiar name for an intangible congeries of imaginings. Most Muslims deemed it consistent with an all-India arrangement. With many Muslims coming to subscribe in principle to ‘Pakistan’, however defined, most Hindus took their formal stand on an ‘Akhand Bharat’ or an undivided India. Sikhs under Master Tara Singh’s direction were angling for an ‘Azad Punjab’ or an independent province where they might have a controlling hand. Exclusively based on arguments about religious majorities and minorities, these narratives of communitarian identity and notions of sovereignty singularly lacked a careful spelling out of the rights of equal citizenship.

Attributing this to ‘communalism’ would be overly simplify the issue. The prospect of an independent India where numerical majorities would shape the apportionment of power and patronage gave added importance to communalist rights. Drawing upon cultural differences, the expression of these rights in the politics of Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs alike confounded spirit and matter, the religious and the secular. Shades of bigotry informed most versions of the narratives of communitarian identity and rights. But there was also a great deal in them which shed light on the problem of equitable citizenship rights in a historical context requiring accommodation of cultural differences. To dismiss both bigotry and cultural difference in the same breath as ‘communalism’ may serve the purposes of historical short-hand. It cannot go very far in explaining why an inclusory nationalism failed to excite the imaginings of so many in Punjab.

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Muslim rule in an undivided Punjab - a potential turning point in the history of a province that held the key to an united India. If it could get over the shock of being stripped in its tracts, Punjabi League might conceivably change the balance of power between region and nation. But it had somehow to satisfy non-Muslims that they would be granted equal rights of citizenship in 'Pakistan'. Class and ideological divisions among Muslims, and not simply their political and cultural differences with non-Muslims, made this a difficult objective to realise.

Stating maximum demands did not mean abandoning possibilities of accommodation. Muslim Leaguers had not given up on the prospect of an agreement with the Congress or the Akalis. Nor had the Sikhs made up their mind on either the overtly separatist or an accommodation with the Muslim League or the Congress. Hoping to replace the Union Jack over the Lahore Fort with the Sikh flag, the erstwhile sovereigns of Punjab could not be given short shrift by the departing raj. Governor Jenkins warned Wavell that ignoring the Sikhs would "seriously obstruct any agreed arrangement in Punjab", this was "not a parochial point". On the fault line of region and nation, the Sikhs were central to the all-India arrangements. At an earlier stage of his negotiations with the cabinet mission, "Jinnah had been very anxious to come to terms with the Sikhs". The chances of serious negotiations with the Akalis improved considerably after the all-India League on June 26, 1946 formally accepted the cabinet's mission's plan for a three-tiered all-India federation. Even as late as mid-July the Akali camp had not swung decisively in either the direction of the League or the Congress. Nehru's rejection of the grouping scheme in the cabinet mission plan as well as a weak centre put paid to the League's hopes of a united Punjab. Yet the new policy of supporting the Congress had 'not met with universal Sikh approval'. There were "apprehensions" about a "Congress game...to use the Sikhs as shock troops against the Muslims".

Sadly for the protagonists of a united Punjab, the logic of a Muslim-Sikh agreement was coming to prevail just when the chances of its attainment were getting overweighed by a confluence of developments at the centre, the region and within the state. Kicked out of power in the province, Punjabi Leaguers detected "a deep-laid plot between the British and the Congress" and were bitter, frightened and angry - an altogether deadly com-pound. Jenkins' grand gesture to parliamentary propriety and a delicate commu-nitarian balance - the formation of the coalition ministry - had done less for unity than division. Despite a succession of opportunities, Punjabi Leaguers more obsessed with outwitting the ministry failed to take advantage of Sikh doubts about the wisdom of an outright alliance with the Congress.

Anyone with an iota of sense could see the "danger, ever present in Punjab, of a competent ripe to League disorder from the turbulent Sikh minority". The passage of well over six months before the Sikhs erupted to avenge their marginalisation is of critical importance in an evaluation of the options open to Punjabs in the final few months of colonial rule. During the second half of 1946 an uneasy armed truce prevailed in Punjab until the crumbling of the administrative edifice turned the sword arm of India into its biggest killing field. Religion did play a part as a marker of social distinction. But religion as identity owed nothing to religion as faith. Confusing the two, as a historiography operating in a binary mode is wont to do, has ended up essentialising religion and, worse still, blurring the myriad textures of localised social violence under the grand rubric of 'communalism'. The preparations for civil war and actual outbreaks of violence highlight the precarious balance between the individual and the community quite as often as the supposed triumph of the community over the individual.

The League's 'direct action' movement against the coalition ministry drew popular Muslim support, but seriously offended non-Muslims. Yet remarkable as it seems, the decisive refusal of Punjab Hindus and Sikhs to accept a League ministry or 'Pakistan' did not make the partition of the province any more acceptable to the vast majority of Punjabs. This was true even after March 3, 1947 when the premier buckled under League pressure and resigned. In a statement on March 8, a number of Sikh and Hindu leaders, including three former ministers, made it known they were "opposed to Pakistan in any shape or form". If this was the outcome, the all-India Congress working committee provided the finale on the same day by resolving to demand the partition of Punjab. Hindus and Sikhs hailed the decision. Muslims created history by unanimously condemning the Congress's move which did more to "widen the cleavage between the communities than the violence itself.

The old and tired portrait of Punjab in the grips of an all pervasive fever, exclusively pitting Hindu against Muslim and Muslim against Sikh is accurate only to a point. The vision of religiously defined communities banding together in absolute unison explode amidst harsh criticisms of the provincial and all-India leadership, as well as anger and horror at the bankruptcy and collapse of their political will. Punjabs may have been especially unwilling to make concessions to rival communities, but the vast majority were equally averse to a partition of the province on purely religious lines. The imposition of an all-India solution on Punjab and the response generated in a society pulverised by colonial constructions is a tragic tale of woe. No one put it more poignantly than Talukhah Mahroof, Punjabi Hindu poet of Urdu who in March 1947 bemoaned the destruction of a regional ethos of which he had once been proud:

Tearing the clothing of human superiority
This frenzied dance in the joy of nudity
is destructive
You have shown such barbarity in your achievement
Reducing to dust the honour of humanity
From the high heavens the call will come night and day
Afas Punjab, pity on you and your culture!

Separating at close quarters: Punjab Partitioned

The redesigning of the spatial landscape of India by the British, the Congress and the Muslim League was accompanied by pitched battles for social space in the localities that were fought mainly, but not exclusively, along the lines of religious community. Violence intensified communal feelings, but was rarely perpetrated by collections made up of a whole. Demobilised soldiers were more often than not in the forefront of violence committed in the name of communities. Individuals, even when grouped in armed militias, could settle personal scores in the process of promoting and protecting members of their community. Keeping an eye on the balance between the individual and the community offers far more penetrating insights into the human dimension of social violence than permitted by overarching categories like Muslim, Hindu and Sikh. Barbarity attributed to entire communities has effaced the role of individuals and given far greater legitimacy to the social violence that accompanied the partition of Punjab than is warranted by the evidence.

The localised and personalised nature of the battles for social space in a province facing an impending division on the basis of religious enumeration shaped the frequency, intensity and thrust of the
violence in Punjab. Without denying the communitarian dimension of the killings, one should not discount the possibility of personalised violence passing off as ‘communal’, simply because of the presumed conveniences of the term in both colonial and nationalist discourse. Sadaat Hasan Manto in ‘Pariya Kalima’, or recite the ‘kalima’ provides a chilling account of a Hindu woman killing off her Hindu lover and acquiring a Muslim one on the condition that he help her dispense with the dead body. Taking advantage of the disturbed conditions and breaking the curfew, the new paramour placed the corpse in a garbage dump outside a mosque. That night the mosque was burned down by Hindus and the body was never found. After surviving a murderous assault by the woman, who moves on to a new lover, the Muslim ends up stabbing his replacement to death. This, as he explains in the story, had nothing whatsoever to do with ‘Pakistan’. True, his victim was Hindu. But la ilaha illa Allah, he tells the Muslim policemen, this was at best a crime of passion and at worst an act of self-defence. What it could not possibly be described as was ‘communal violence’.

Creating amorphous configurations in hotly contested space, groups of banded individuals were fighting battles for control in urban and rural localities that were as vital to them personally as they were to the purported interests of their respective communities. With entire districts being apportioned on the basis of religious affiliations recorded by censuses enumerators, violence was directed by gangs representing majorities against minorities with a view to ejecting them through fear, terror and murderous means. Religion, if it was the primary issue, had mostly profane manifestations. The banding of individuals in localities to protect their home and hearth as well as their property owed something to the discourse and politics of communitarianism, Muslim, Hindu and Sikh. But it was so variously interpreted and deployed as to thoroughly inadine the category of ‘communal violence’, within which each local incident has tended to be cast. There was nothing to prevent members of religious communities from taking advantage of an impending division of the spatio-temporal domain to advance their personal claims on public space. Outlandish territorial demands by community leaders were accompanied by strategies to appropriate the property of neighbours — the price of separating at close quarters could not have been more cruel.

Communitarian identities were throughout strained by sub-regional and class differences. The Congress’s call for a partition of Punjab had brought out the difficulties of reconciling religiously informed identities with imaginings of territorial sovereignty. If Muslims in eastern Punjab were parritized at the prospect of their homes being parcelled out to the non-Muslim areas, Hindus in western and central Punjab were quite as averse to losing their properties to ‘Pakistan’. Sikhs with commercial and industrial interests plumped in favour of a partition, leading to the creation of a new province consisting of the Ambala and Jullundur divisions as well as Delhi. But Sikh landed interests, represented by Giani Kartar Singh’s group, wanted the territory between Chenah and Sutlej where they owned large estates. Punjab Hindus and Sikhs had conceded a partition with no intention of parting with the choicest parts of the province.

By the time the June 3 plan was announced, there was organised and semi-organised incendiaryism, stabbings and bomb blasts in both Lahore and Amritsar. In an indication of the speed with which social space was falling vacant in the province, an estimated 70 to 80 thousand had fled the two cities. A rising graph of violence doomed such chances as existed for an agreed solution to the problem of power-sharing in Punjab. Yet no less significant was the relative balance between centre and region in the final negotiations which produced the June 3 partition plan. The Punjab governor thought it was ‘ridiculous’ for ‘so-called League leaders...to take orders from Bombay from a person entirely ignorant of Punjab conditions’. He was equally opposed to the Congress high command’s meddling in Punjab affairs. By wielding the partition’s axe to placate the Congress, the British would have ‘reduced what might be a powerful country to two petty states’. ‘Partition solve[d] no problem and[d] not really make sense’. The Punjab League leadership, in conjunction with the larger imperatives of Jinnah and the Congress high command, “already fooled away a kingdom”. Any conception of India’s future requiring the picture of the centre to emerge before etching one for Punjab was completely “tegpy-turty”. The “right course”, surely, was to “determine the future of the units in a way acceptable to their inhabitants and then to sketch the all-India picture.”

It was arrangements at the centre, not the problem of individuals and communities inhabiting contested space in the regions, which allowed Mountbatten to dictate the terms of the all-India settlement to Jinnah and the Congress leadership. There was “a complete absence of enthusiasm for the partition plan” in Punjab, “nobody seem[ed] pleased and nobody... want[ed] to get on with the job”. Yet the political parties for very different reasons, were ready to ‘acquiesce’ to the plan. Muslim Leaguers thought it was “a master-stroke by Jinnah” in the vain hope that he would ultimately “get them all they want”. Congressmen, for their part, thought the plan was “a master-stroke by Patel, who, having pushed the Muslims into a corner (or into two corners)” would “destroy them before very long”. As for the Sikhs, they were on red alert in districts they considered vital. Until the boundary line had been announced, they “refused to go very far with partition.”

Later reactions to the partition proposal reflected sub-regional and class considerations even more powerfully than communitarian ones. Even after the AIML’s formal acceptance of partition, the Pakistan cutting across communal divisions were jealously guarding their claims to social spaces, embodying both the material and the spiritual aspects of their individual and collective identities. The resistance to displacement was most pronounced among Sikhs and Muslims, neither of whom were “showing any sign of being willing either to give up their present abode, or to submit lightly to any kind of domination by the other”.

Unreconciled to the loss of Lahore, Hindus were relying on RSS cadres in battles for social spaces in the wards and mohallas of Lahore. The RSS was also strengthening its organisation in Jammu and Kashmir in anticipation of a Muslim bid for power.

Although the MLNG had not been nearly as conspicuous as the RSS, it was “significant that 70 per cent of the new fires in Lahore...occurred in non-Muslim houses”. Banded individuals were “creating havoc with the tacit approval of the local Muslim League leaders”. After legislators from the eastern districts of the provincial assembly formally voted on June 23 to dissolve the administrative unity of Punjab, the League seemed more “earnest in its apparent endeavours to re-create a sense of law and order” in Pakistan’s territories. Assurances of fair treatment to minorities in western Punjab were looked upon with suspicion by Hindus, most of whom were planning to migrate. Yet those who migrated were also the first ones to reaffirm the bond of familiar social space by returning home. In one of those delicious ironies, Muslims in western Punjab who had “suffered inconvenience on account of the absence of their ‘banias’” were seen...
to be capable of "cherishing them more if they...[came] back". 

If it was to be administratively viable, not "a nightmare tapestry of futurist design", Pakistan had to have a "workable" and "practicable" boundary, "not a crazy line running backwards and forwards" in and out of villages in several districts. It was impossible for the boundary commission to satisfy wildly clamouring claims to territories in Punjab. Attacks on Muslims in Amritsar by early August alarmed Sikhs and Hindus in western Punjab who feared reprisals. Exhortations by Hindu and Sikh leaders to non-Muslim minorities to remain in the districts to which they belonged and promises by Muslim League leaders of "protection and equal treatment" did nothing to "dispel the panic". Gandhi, paying a courtesy visit to Punjab on his way back from Kashmir, was greeted with posters "asking him to retire from politics". 

The disregard of the human dimension in the political bargaining at the all-India level was coming to haunt the national leadership with a vengeance. Sardar Shaukat Hayat has recalled his shock and horror at the painful discovery that Muslim men in Amritsar had abandoned their women and children for the safety of Lahore. Callowness was matched by cowardice in one village where Muslim men hid in the sugarcane fields while a band of Sikhs carried away young girls and set fire to a house where they had pushed all the old women and children. In one instance, a terrified young woman left her child on the road side when told by the driver of a bus full of Muslims that there was space for only one person. Collective memories of violence in social spaces, embodying some of the strongest identities of individuals and collectivities, have woven a dark shroud over the corpse of undivided Punjab. A scrupulous sifting of the threads, however, confirms the personalised and localised nature of the violence as well as the singular victimisation of women - Muslim, Hindu and Sikh - by men purportedly battling to safeguard their communal interests.

An analysis of the violence, perpetrated as well as suffered in Punjab, offers quite astonishing insights into the social attitudes which marked the birth of independent citizenship in south Asia. The sacred rapidly turned profane in the process of advancing the battle for sovereignty in different tehsils and districts. The award of Punjab boundary commission, whose announcement was postponed to allow for the transfer of power ceremonies to proceed, predictably "caused much dis-

appointment". Muslim suspicions of British bad faith and the influx of refugees from eastern Punjab spelled the end for non-Muslims in the western districts. The final phase of the violence saw clashes between communities and the moral and the spatial landscape of Punjab. Refugees from Amritsar incited some Muslims in West Punjab to commit arson, looting and stabbing against non-Muslims. Significantly, while the people of Lahore wanted "a quick return to normal conditions, the malevolent element from the East Punjab [we're] exploiting the discontent and advocating retaliation".

One way to minimise social dislocations was to offer allegiance to the new state. In Rawalpindi, Hindustan refugees participated in the hoisting of the Pakistan flag. In Chakwal and Jhelum, Sikh commissioners, officers presented arms to the national flag. Non-Muslims in Jhelum made donations to Muslim refugees' funds and appealed to their co-religionists in eastern Punjab to put a stop to the lawlessness. "Sober-minded Muslims" were "endeavouring to persuade non-Muslims to stay on in West Punjab". But the general clearing of social spaces had begun in the localities and districts of Punjab. Armed thugs, frequently assisted by the local MLNG and even elements in the police and the army, carried out a systematic campaign of loot.

The nexus of citizenship in Pakistan and, by extension, India, as the Congress insisted Hindustan be known, had a bloody baptism that cannot be ascribed to religion by any stretch of imagination. Muslim excesses against their Hindu neighbours in western Punjab assumed appalling proportions which no amount of nationalist self justification can wash away. This was not to be the ideal state of Islam of which the poet-philosopher of Punjabi Muslims had spoken in his reconstruction lectures. Far from providing any basis for the realisation of the spiritual in each individual, far less the collectivity, in temporal activity, this was a state born of the purely material greed which the chaos of the British departure let loose in Punjab.

The situation was much the same in India. Muslims in Delhi were attacked and their property seized. This had catalytic effects in western Punjab. There were cases of conversion, both voluntary and involuntary, especially in Jhelum, Gujarat and Sargodha. Even an unsympathetic commentator like G D Khosa believes that it was "not religious emotion or aggressive chauvinism...but the prospect of personal gain" which prompted outrages against Hindus and Sikhs. By late August a mere 60 members of the RSS remained in the district. When it came to the crunch, volunteer corps did more to shed innocent blood than protect the lives and property of co-religionists. Escaping to areas where numerical strength was on their side, the RSS quite as much as the MLNG preferred the offensive rather than the defensive path.

The material benefits of the battles for social space in both parts of Punjab accrued to individuals, not local communities. And there can certainly be no vindication of criminal actions in pursuit of 'zarin' and 'zamini', or wealth and property which, together with zarin or women were the three constitutive elements of material culture in the north-western areas constituting the territories of Pakistan. Banded individuals were amassing wealth and property at others' expense. In Campbellpur, Pathans from Mianwali and the NWPP "out for loot, more on criminal than communal lines", did not spare local Muslims. The quest for 'zar' and 'zamini' had led to unpardonable offenses against members of all three communities, the debasement of 'zar' assumed nightmarish proportions. Maulvi Maula Bakhsh, the 'khattab' of the Juma masjid in Rawalpindi told a congregation of 3,000 Muslims that 25,000 Muslim girls had been abducted by Sikhs in eastern Punjab.

The situation in Kashmir was "a permanent menace to Muslims". Doga raids on Sialkot and the abduction of Muslim women merely served to confirm the paranoia. The image of Kashmir as a powerless woman enslaved by Dogra rulers had never failed to excite Punjabi Muslims. Yet the decorum of wanting to rescue the symbol of a ravished woman married awkwardly with attitudes towards the living and the real. Unidentified Muslim men, operating as local gangs, had been abducting and raping non-Muslim women. There was nevertheless anguish upon hearing that a column of Muslim evacuees on its way to Pakistan had been mercilessly attacked by Sikh 'jathas' in Ferozepur district. But if there were only a few characters like Khuswant Singh's Jagga in the Sikh community, there were men of the Muslim community, as Manto has depicted in his classic story 'Khol Do', whom Sirajuddin's daughter Sakina was the first and foremost woman as prostitute, not ornament, irrespective of her religious identity as a Muslim.

All said and done, the commonality of masculinity was stronger than the bond of religion. Men of all three communities
delighted in their momentary sense of power over vulnerable women; such was the courage of these citizens of newly independent states. Gender eroded the barriers that religion had been forced to create. Whatever women may have accomplished by aligning their interests with nationalist organisations, it was more as abstractions appended to the religious community seeking sovereign statehood than as substantive subjects constituting the nation. Women’s meagre achievements in defence of their own interests were vividly in evidence during partition violence in which they were the main victims. Alas, Punjab had betrayed its patriarchal bent more decisively than the affective affinities of religious communities. In the memorable words of Amrita Pritam invoking the spirit of the author of the legendary ‘qisa’ or folk-tale Heer-Ranjha while composing the ultimate epitaph for undivided Punjab: 

Today I call upon Waris Shah
To rise from the grave and speak
And plead with him to open another page in the book of love
One daughter of Punjab had cried
And you were moved to write reams on her sorrow.

Today thousands of crying daughters
Call upon you, o, Waris Shah
O you, the sympathiser of the broken hearted,
Arise and see your Punjab;
Today deadbodies are brimming the forests
And the Chenab is brimming with blood
Some have mixed poison with the water of the five rivers
And that water has spread all over the land,

Notes

[The G M Trevelyan Seminar, University of Cambridge, November 27, 1967.]


4 Ibid., pp 73-74.


6 Ibid, pp 125-23.

7 Ibid, p 138.

8 Ibid, p 124.


11 Partha Chatterjee, Secularism and Toleration in Economic and Political Weekly, July 9, 1994, p 1773. Yet the notion of a blend of individual and collective rights was available in the realm of Muslim political philosophy which transcends the boundaries of a unitary communal national.

12 The attack on Urdu — a symbol of Muslim adaptation to its Indian setting — had been one of the costliest cuts inflicted by the rhetoric of Hindu, Hindi and Hindustani.


17 Enclosure to ‘Jenkins to Wavell’, ibid, March 7, 1947, p 881.


21 Ibid, p 300.


24 Secret Punjabi Police Abstract of Intelligence, NCHCR, August 1, 1947, vol ix, no 32, Lahore, Islamabad, p 407.


26 Secret Punjabi Police Abstract of Intelligence, NCHCR, August 23, 1947, vol ix, no 34, Lahore, Islamabad, p 419.


28 Khosla, Stern Reckoning, pp 120-216.


30 Gopal Das Khosla, Stern Reckoning, p 197.

31 Secret Punjabi Police Abstract of Intelligence, NCHCR, August 23, 1947, vol ix, no 34, Lahore, Islamabad, p 433.


33 Secret Punjabi Police Abstract of Intelligence, NCHCR, September 6, 1947, vol ix, no 33, Lahore, Islamabad, p 425.


