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POSTSCRIPT



Changing Places: Religion and Minority in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This postscript to a special section of *South Asia* titled 'Religious Minorities in Pakistan: Identities, Citizenship and Social Belonging' explores the different ways in which the demographic categories of minority and majority came to define identity in colonial India through religion but not through caste, ethnicity or region. It argues that the violence associated with these categories derives from their interchangeability and lack of integrity, and makes a case for recovering a negative history of identification in South Asia.

KEYWORDS

Caste; Christianity; Hinduism; Islam; majority; minority; Pakistan; religion

It has become almost impossible to conceive of social difference without demography and statistics. Whether referring to one's own identity or another's, number plays a crucial role in defining all groups as minorities or majorities, leaving even the most powerful metaphysical conceptions of belonging struggling for autonomy. This way of thinking about social identity, of course, is a product of the modern state, and what the historian Michel Foucault called its technologies of disciplining and regulating populations with a view to securing their biological security, economic productivity and political pacification.¹ The very social 'problems' that the state has to deal with, in other words, now emerge from its own categories and render them suddenly ambiguous because they have come to define both sides of any conflict.

Before number came to dominate the social imagination with its prose of statistical exactitude, majority and minority were not demographic categories so much as relative figures in a hierarchical vision where the latter always possessed greater value than the former. Aristocrats, priests, saints and philosophers invariably represented a favoured few with the responsibility to lead a lowly but frequently dangerous multitude. The inheritance of this hierarchical conception of the social world continues in the democratic context of modernity, not only in the suspicion of apparently meritocratic elites but in the condemnation even of disadvantaged ethnic, religious and ideological minorities for their allegedly 'exclusive' or 'secretive' and, by implication, aristocratic

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1. Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976*, David Macey (trans.) (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2004), chaps. 3–6, pp. 43–140.

character. It is as if the figure of the aristocrat continues to haunt the statistical minority and so to threaten modern democratic majorities as a ghost.

Simon Wolfgang Fuchs' essay in this special section of *South Asia*, titled 'Reclaiming the Citizen: Christian and Shi'i Engagements with the Pakistani State',² explores the other side of this suspicion. He describes how both Christians and Shias in Pakistan, despite their very different sociological character, nevertheless conceive of themselves as spiritual elites in the country's making and future. But rather than seeing it as a survival from some premodern past, we might consider the problem posed by this notion of minority privilege in the impossibility of distinguishing it from a majority. Foucault had already noted how demographic ideas about national and racial majorities drew upon the aristocratic language of blood, which allowed them to become exclusive minorities at a global level.³ And I would like to suggest here that the anxiety built into the statistical categories of majority and minority, which provides narrative cover for the violence exercised in their names, derives precisely from this inability to distinguish them one from the other.

In his book, *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger*, the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai describes the ways in which minorities are converted into majorities and vice versa.⁴ On the one hand, then, a small and even insignificant minority can give rise to more anger than a threatening one because it inspires the genocidal fantasy of finally closing the gap between the majority and its utopia. But on the other hand, this same minority might represent greater numbers abroad, thus reducing the national majority itself to a global minority. While his chief example is provided by the relations between Hindu nationalism and India's Muslim minority, Appadurai's argument has a more general analytical value, and indeed a specific history in the region.

In South Asia's modern history, Muslims have played a similarly dual role, though with some significant differences given their more internationalist vision of Islam. Already in the 1930s, the poet and philosopher Muhammad Iqbal, who would go on to become one of Pakistan's national icons, claimed that colonial India represented the greatest redoubt of Islam globally despite possessing a Muslim minority.⁵ This was because India contained the world's largest Muslim population, whose diversity allowed it to manifest a non-national and thus potentially global form of solidarity. Following Iqbal's statement about India representing Asia in miniature, the historian of Islam, Marshall Hodgson, argued that independent India's Muslim minority was a microcosm of its global fellowship, which also constituted a minority along with every other religious community.⁶

2. Simon Wolfgang Fuchs, 'Reclaiming the Citizen: Christian and Shi'i Engagements with the Pakistani State', in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 43, no. 1 (2020), DOI: [10.1080/00856401.2020.1689616](https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2020.1689616).

3. Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended.*, chap. 11, pp. 239–64.

4. Arjun Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

5. Muhammad Iqbal, 'Presidential Address to the 25th Session of the All-India Muslim League, Allahabad, 29 December 1930', in Latif Ahmed Sherwani (ed.), *Speeches, Writings and Statements of Iqbal* (Lahore: Iqbal Academy, 1977), pp. 3–26.

6. See Faisal Devji, 'The Problem of Muslim Universality', in E. Burke III and Robert Mankin (eds), *Islam and World History: The Ventures of Marshall Hodgson* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2018), pp. 145–62.

The inability to clearly distinguish between majorities and minorities is not simply a matter of contrasting the national to a global arena, since fears about a majority's internal fragmentation and a minority's growth rate also lend this impossible distinction its aporetic meaning. But this makes for another kind of division, between those minorities that have the potential to overwhelm a majority by their superior birth rate or efforts at proselytism and those that do not. In Pakistan, for instance, Ahmadis, Shias and Christians can be seen as threatening the national and sometimes even global Sunni majority by their biological or theological reproduction, just as Muslims and Christians do for Hindu nationalism if only at the level of the state. But as Anushay Malik points out in her essay, 'Narrating Christians in Pakistan through Times of War and Conflict',⁷ such majoritarian narratives are not repeated by minorities, who, like the Christians she describes, tended not to think of themselves as a minority in Pakistan's early years.

What distinguishes Christians from Ahmadis and Shias in the narrative of Sunni sectarianism is the latter two's supposedly seductive power. Christian missionising is understood as being confined largely to lower castes, appealing to their desire for material goods like housing and education as well as dignity and self-respect. But Shias and Ahmadis are seen as corrupting middle-class and elite Islam from within. These groups are threatening, in other words, not because of their differences but similarities with Sunni orthodoxy. This is especially true for the Ahmadis, whose legal proscription in Pakistan drew upon the law of copyright and patent rather than theological principle. They are forbidden from confusing 'true' with 'false' Islam by the illegitimate use of its name, appearances and practice.⁸

The lack of any properly theological reasoning in this case was not confined to the Pakistani courts but has characterised anti-Ahmadi feeling for many decades. Apart from the initial and easily contestable claim that they accept a prophet after Muhammad, sectarian polemics rely upon Iqbal's philosophical and colonial-era objections to the Ahmadis. These are paradoxically 'secular', interpreting the Ahmadi repudiation of Muhammad's prophetic finality as a refusal to accept man's freedom from religious tutelage. And this refusal of human freedom also entailed the Ahmadi justification of British rule, with Iqbal targeting the Ahmadis not merely in their own right but as an example of Muslim fanaticism, or 'ignorant mullaism' as he put it, more generally.⁹

Just as the bureaucratic prose of statistics and demography dominates all metaphysical conceptions of identification, then, so too does its style of secular reasoning define debates about heresy in Pakistan. Anti-Shia polemics possess a much older pedigree, but it has also come to be marked by a secular logic in places. Here, too, the emphasis is on seduction, often represented by the physical attractiveness of Shias and the

7. Anushay Malik, 'Narrating Christians in Pakistan through Times of War and Conflict', in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 43, no. 1 (2020), DOI: 10.1080/00856401.2020.1685204.

8. On this, see Naveeda Khan, *Muslim Becoming: Aspiration and Skepticism in Pakistan* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), pp. 114–6; and Sadia Saeed, *Politics of Desecularization: Law and the Minority Question in Pakistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

9. Muhammad Iqbal, 'Qadianis and Orthodox Muslims', in Syed Abdul Wahid (ed.), *Thoughts and Reflections of Iqbal* (Lahore: S. Muhammad Ashraf, 1992), pp. 247–56. See also Faisal Devji, 'Secular Islam', in *Political Theology*, Vol. 19, no. 8 (2018), pp. 704–18.

aesthetic dimension of their rituals, neither being characteristic of the austere Ahmadi practices that are, if anything, far too close to Sunni orthodoxy. While the Shia are also accused of turning their imams into deities, for Islamism's strongly republican narrative, it is their undemocratic faith in hereditary authority that is sinful because it challenges the sovereignty of God.

Yet efforts by Sunni sectarians to separate their version of Islam from the threatening intimacy of Ahmadi and Shia religiosity tend to be contradictory. Simon Wolfgang Fuchs, for example, has described how Iran's Islamic Revolution, which was initially, if cautiously, welcomed by a number of Sunni groups in Pakistan, soon came to constitute a narrative more than a political threat for them. While criticising Iran's institutionalisation of a supreme leader together with the longstanding Shia devotion to a line of imams as claims to divine authority, sectarian polemics also set up mirror images of both in the resurrection of the idea of a caliphate as well as in the novel prominence and devotion given the *sahaba* or companions of Muhammad, many of whom are execrated by the Shia.¹⁰ All of which demonstrates that religious identification and conflict in Pakistan are marked by the failure of estrangement.

Unlike Shias and Ahmadis, to say nothing of Christians, the small and regionally focussed populations of Pakistani Hindus and Sikhs do not pose any demographic risk, despite their large numbers across the border, and in this sense, they play a role different from the one Muslims do in India. Where the two countries come together is in the 'geography of anger' that Appadurai identifies with the desire to close the gap between a majority and its absolute fulfilment. But insofar as Hindus and Sikhs, while being discriminated against in Pakistan, are relatively occluded in the occasional moral panics about the threat posed by Muslim sectarian and Christian minorities at the national level, they represent a certain success in the state's efforts to establish a national sensibility delinked from the colonial past.

It is this that allows some Muslims, for instance, to despise Pakistan's own Hindu and Sikh minorities while welcoming the latter's Indian coreligionists as well as Indian cultural products like cinema and music that are marked as 'Hindu' or 'Sikh'. For however culturally and linguistically familiar they might be, the latter have now become foreign and so acceptable, providing in this way the proof of the Muslim League's arguments justifying India's partition. The fact that religion continues to define the categories of majority and minority in both India and Pakistan, of course, is an apparently unchanging inheritance from the colonial past that has been overcome in other respects. Yet, in spite of its monumentality, religion remains a remarkably fluid category, not least because the 'community' which embodies it has never been defined in territorial terms.

This is an extraordinary situation, given the territorial form that both Hindu and Muslim nationalism took in India and Pakistan, though it is of course minority communities that are more likely to be seen as de-territorialised in nation-states defined by majority religions. Regionally distributed as they may in fact be, then, such communities are defined by law and in popular imagination as purely demographic entities, something which no doubt colours majoritarian anxieties about minorities that seem

10. Simon Wolfgang Fuchs, *In a Pure Muslim Land: Shi'ism between Pakistan and the Middle East* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019).

to have no place of their own but are everywhere, like Jews or gypsies in pre-War and sometimes even contemporary Europe. In this way, the purely demographic character of religious identification serves to displace more territorially grounded social forms like caste, class and region as sites of belonging.

Until the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, East Pakistan's electoral 'majority', for example, could barely be named as such, and had to be balanced if not quite displaced by the so-called 'one-unit' scheme in which West Pakistan was deprived of its own ethnic and linguistic diversity to counter Bengal's demographic superiority, itself understood as a monolith to be divided only by religious differences between Hindus and Muslims. Similar is the case of other regional groups, whether the Punjabi 'majority' or Sindhi, Baluchi and other 'minorities', which must be deprived of these religiously marked categories. They can only constitute electoral majorities and minorities in territorial rather than ethnic or ideological terms, the very opposite of the way in which religious communities are viewed.

Caste, too, threatens to undo the dominance of religiously defined majorities and minorities, even when it is deliberately confined to Hinduism as a sign of that religion's inferiority as contrasted with Islam's alleged egalitarianism. As Ghazal Asif demonstrates in her essay, 'Jogendranath Mandal and the Politics of Dalit Recognition in Pakistan',¹¹ the caste differences that the colonial Muslim League used to emphasise to reduce India's Hindu majority tended after Pakistan's independence to be subordinated to that country's new Hindu minority. Like religion, however, caste too can but is not always seen as a demographic rather than territorial phenomenon. In India the demographic imperative of Hindu nationalism means that low castes and heterodox sects are all sought to be absorbed within a single religious community in however hierarchical a manner. But in Pakistan, the reverse is true, with Ahmadis and sometimes Shias, to say nothing of other mutually antipathetic groups such as the Barelwis, Deobandis and Ahl-e Hadith, sought to be expelled from the Islamic fold and made minorities.

Clearly the demographic imperative is different for Hindu and Muslim majorities, with purity being more important for the latter in a curious reversal of their stereotyped characters. Of course, the purity of caste Hinduism is hereditary and ritual, while that of Muslim sectarianism is doctrinal and ritual. Nevertheless, there is something to be said about the way in which the two communities switch places, just as they exchanged each other's roles as majority and minority with the partition of India. Yet Hindu nationalism's anxiety about its reduction to a minority by demographic change, for instance, and its narrative of being condemned to represent secular values while Muslims and Christians exulted in their religious identities, betrays an uneasy mixture of fear and desire to become like them.

More than this, Hindu nationalist violence against minorities often seems to enact the bloodthirsty scripts that are attributed to Muslim invaders historically. This imitative logic has been examined by the anthropologist Parvis Ghassem-Fachandi in his book on the Gujarat riots of 2002.¹² Alike is the case of Muslim violence in Pakistan,

11. Ghazal Asif, 'Jogendranath Mandal and the Politics of Dalit Recognition in Pakistan', in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 43, no. 1 (2020), DOI: 10.1080/00856401.2020.1689472.

12. Parvis Ghassem-Fachandi, *Pogrom in Gujarat: Hindu Nationalism and Anti-Muslim Violence in India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

which frequently mimics the actions of Hindu enemies in India, for instance when temples were defaced and demolished in places like Multan following the 1992 destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in India. And while this form of reciprocity has been familiar since colonial times, representing a kind of moral economy in which violence can either be ratcheted up or wound down, its cross-border occurrence after Independence suggests not revenge but the paradoxical intimacy with an old foe.

This identification with the ‘other’ reduces violence to a kind of play-acting in the name of one’s rival and therefore perhaps even makes its brutality psychologically bearable. But, as Jürgen Schaflechner argues in his essay, ‘Betwixt and Between: Hindu Identity in Pakistan and “Wary and Aware” Public Performances’,¹³ such play-acting might be a majoritarian fantasy, with Pakistani Hindus compelled to perform their minority character. Similarly, in his essay, ‘Pride and Abstinence: National Identity, Uncritical Patriotism and Political Engagement among Christian Students in Pakistan’,¹⁴ Ryan Brasher describes how Christians perform hyper-nationalism not only for Muslims, but for themselves. Such performances do not always occur in a direct and transparent way. Given the reduction of caste to Hinduism in Pakistan, and so the impossibility of lending its name to any Islamic deed, the Muslim identification with caste has to be disavowed in a psychic as much as politically instrumental way. Violence against low-caste converts to Christianity in the Punjab, for instance, often in explicitly caste-defined ways like denying them the use of wells and common vessels for eating, is routinely defined as religious conflict.

As already mentioned in the introduction to this Special Section, this was the case with Asia Bibi, a Christian woman from a low-caste background castigated in 2009 for taking water from a well that her Muslim fellow labourers used, and later accused of blasphemy, a crime that carries the death sentence. In this way, a minor dispute became a national controversy that led to Asia Bibi’s imprisonment, the assassination of Punjab’s governor, Salman Taseer, who had taken up her cause, and, finally, her acquittal and surreptitious exit from the country. In all this time, the caste-defined nature of the original conflict was erased. If, as is likely, the Muslim women who fought with her at the well were themselves from low-caste backgrounds, then they were in effect taking on the caste identity of their Muslim superiors and even more that of the Hindus who had departed for India with Pakistan’s creation.¹⁵ In their essay, ‘Democracy and Discrimination: Comparing Caste-Based Politics in Indian and Pakistani Punjab’,¹⁶ Hassan Javid and Nicolas Martin also point out how the rendering invisible of caste in Pakistan entails the marginalisation of any politics founded upon it there.

13. Jürgen Schaflechner, ‘Betwixt and Between: Hindu Identity in Pakistan and “Wary and Aware” Public Performances’, in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 43, no. 1 (2020), DOI: 10.1080/00856401.2020.1692277.

14. Ryan Brasher, ‘Pride and Abstinence: National Identity, Uncritical Patriotism and Political Engagement among Christian Students in Pakistan’, in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 43, no. 1 (2020), DOI: 10.1080/00856401.2020.1689459.

15. On this, see Faisal Devji, ‘How Caste Underpins the Blasphemy Crisis in Pakistan’, *The New York Times* (18 Oct. 2018) [<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/18/opinion/caste-blasphemy-pakistan.html>, accessed 31 Oct. 2019].

16. Hassan Javid and Nicolas Martin, ‘Democracy and Discrimination: Comparing Caste-Based Politics in Indian and Pakistani Punjab’, in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 43, no. 1 (2020), DOI: 10.1080/00856401.2020.1691831.

In both India and Pakistan, the disempowering term minority, long rejected by all those who could do so, has come to define religious communities specifically. Muslims, as the principal such minority in colonial India, served to shape this term and provide a precedent for all the others defined by it. For the first few decades of the twentieth century, their chief political body, the Muslim League, sought to claim minority rights as they were being defined in Europe both before and after World War I. But at the same time, its leaders tried to augment Muslim numbers by identifying with their coreligionists outside India and arguing for Hinduism's fragmentation along caste lines. With the rise of fascism and the collapse of the League of Nations' minority protections in the 1930s, however, the Muslim League abandoned the category altogether and claimed to represent a nation instead.¹⁷

Apart from leading in a far from direct way to the creation of Pakistan as a state founded for this Muslim nation, the League's move destroyed a vibrant minority politics in India that encompassed both caste and religious groups. The low-caste leader B.R. Ambedkar, for example, also had to repudiate the status of minority that he had been seeking along Muslim lines for so long. And although he made sure that in independent India, it would be his Dalits rather than Muslims who would inherit the system of separate representation and reserved places that had been pioneered country-wide by the League, Ambedkar left the term minority for his former allies and rivals.¹⁸ Even when, in the 1950s, he encouraged the conversion of Dalits to Buddhism to found a new community unmarked by caste, Ambedkar did not take recourse to minority politics.

In many ways, therefore, caste in independent India was able to escape the religiously defined category of minority, though without necessarily taking on a positive identity of its own. Temporary as they notionally were, reservations for low castes made for a curiously transitional identification, and, indeed, a negative one, given that it was determined by the inherited consequences of an abolished past, marking Dalits as ex-untouchables. This is an interesting development, which suggests that it is only in such negative and transitional ways that the hegemony of a statistical conception of social difference can be surmounted. And while reservations were initially given to castes who did form a demographic minority, though not as much as the highest caste of Brahmans, today they cover a majority of Hindus and so fall outside the logic of majority and minority altogether.

Modern South Asia has seen an extraordinary range of negative or transitional categories of identification, including Mohammad Ali Jinnah's idea of a Muslim nation, which I have argued elsewhere was an empty and purely juridical term lacking existential depth.¹⁹ To this we might add Gandhi's equally negative notions of non-violence, non-cooperation and, indeed, nationality, which for him was not empty but rather contingent and made up of the past, present and future experience of shared struggle.²⁰ These ways of thinking and being set limits to the apparently unassailable hegemony of

17. For this history, see Faisal Devji, *Muslim Zion: Pakistan as a Political Idea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), chap. 2, pp. 49–88.

18. *Ibid.*, chap. 5, pp. 163–200.

19. *Ibid.*, chap. 3, pp. 89–122.

20. See Faisal Devji, *The Impossible Indian: Gandhi and the Temptation of Violence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), chap. 2, pp. 41–66.

demographic identification, whose majorities and minorities are in any case riven from within by the anxiety of their own interchangeability. The problem with such categories is thus not their excess but lack of integrity.

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