

Minorityism During British India

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Abstract

The politics of minorityism in India was an outcome of the British design especially thought for saving the reign of British empire. Lord Mayo, a Viceroy and W.W. Hunter, an ICS in India, were prime contributors in this deliberate and nefarious policy. The Wahabi movement among Muslims was also seen by Mayo as a threat to the Empire. The movement advocated and practiced radicalisation of Muslims and was considered an immediate danger to the political stability and civil society. Therefore, the apologists of the Empire wanted to pacify Muslims on the one hand and divert the anger of Muslims from the Empire. This was laborious and was done by inventing the majority-minority dictum and by inventing a new definition of secularism. This colonial imposed theoretical conceptualisation of secularism was perpetuated not only during the colonial period but also in the post-colonial India. This paper looks into the reasons why secularism in India faces both conceptual and empirical crisis.

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The politics of minorityism in India was an outcome of the British design especially thought for saving the reign of British empire. Lord Mayo, a Viceroy and W.W. Hunter, an ICS in India, were prime contributors in this deliberate and nefarious policy. The Wahabi movement among Muslims was also seen by Mayo as a threat to the Empire. The movement advocated and practiced radicalisation of Muslims and was considered an immediate danger to the political stability and civil society. Therefore, the apologists of the Empire

wanted to pacify Muslims on the one hand and divert the anger of Muslims from the Empire. This was laborious and was done by inventing the majority-minority dictum and by inventing a new definition of secularism. This colonial imposed theoretical conceptualisation of secularism was perpetuated not only during the colonial period but also in the post-colonial India. This is the reason why secularism in India faces both conceptual and empirical crisis. It largely remained uncontested due to lack of alternative theoretical and empirical exploration. However, it constituted centrality of all discourses on it in both, pre and post independent India. The definition of secularism does not reflect the Indian realities. Its construct and political motive were also contributed by two more factors: One, British colonialism abysmally failed to understand diversities of Indian people in the forms of culture, language, dialects, customs and social traditions. Their own European experiences of racial, communal and religious differences and conflicts for hegemony led them to define Indian cultural, social and linguistic diversities as perpetual contesting and competing identities for hegemony. Therefore, they derived a perception of 'many peoples' instead of 'one people'. They cultivated state policies and programmes and social philosophy based on such a perception. The natural corollary to this is that they conveniently assumed the state of Hindu majority vs others (religious minorities). This led them to define secularism in the context of majority-minority relationship. In the Pre-British period despite the communal and religious feuds, the game of dice (numerical division) had not been a part of the Indian discourse. Majority-minority division and such identities based on religious practices were British inventions. The second reason was Machiavellian statecraft. They were haunted by the growing nationalistic feeling and rebellions against them in different parts of the country. They used the tool of 'Divide and Rule' to stabilize the empire's control on the Indian soil. They used their understanding of the presumed dichotomous relationship between the Hindu majority and Muslim minority to institutionalize the policy and politics of divide and rule.

Insecurity after 1857

In the mid eighteenth century the British administration was perturbed and felt endangered by the first war of independence in 1857. The united battle of the Indian people against the British Empire had shaken them from top to bottom.

This led the colonial administration to think in terms of breaking the unity of the Indian people. And the conflict between the Hindus and Muslims was considered as a useful tool to avoid the repetition of 1857. They spent almost a decade to implement their agenda. But the rising nationalist fervour deterred all such efforts. The feeling of nationalism suppressed sporadic conflicts and therefore they pondered how to end the historical togetherness of the two communities. This was possible only through sowing the seeds of psychological division by convincing the Muslims that they were facing deprivation in economic and political life due to their numerical strength as a religious minority. The task before the Empire's apologists was to present this theory of deprivation in a convincing and logical manner. It led to a paradigm shift in the Empire's policy towards the question of bread and butter. Till then, economic problems were addressed as a common issue irrespective of religions and races. Now the question of bread and butter was given communal interpretations and the deprivation of people of one community or race was projected as a result of domination of one by another. In other words, poverty and unemployment were categorized as Hindu and Muslim poverty and unemployment. Manipulation of empirical statistics was a method to be adopted to disseminate message to common Muslims that there were unequal opportunities, and their space was grabbed by the Hindu majority. Thus, the concepts of majority and minority were introduced in the political and social discourse of colonial India.

The Wahabi Movement

Another vital question which was posing a serious threat to the Empire's stability in India was radicalization of a section of Indian Muslims under the impact of Wahabism which was expanding (Skrine, 1901, p. 103). They considered the British as their enemy and declared war against the empire on religious pretexts. Therefore, Lord Mayo contemplated to deradicalise and limit the expansion of Wahabism in India. He made an obvious connection between the Muslim youths' alienation from the school education of the British Government. He believed that the failure of Muslims to go to government schools in Bengal was the root cause for the spread of Wahabism in Bengal. Therefore, he maintained that it was essentially required to encourage Muslims to send their children to the schools and colleges run by the government. And their inhibition can only be removed if the government ensured their religious

rights and in a way their customs would remain undisturbed also. He then formulated a common policy for all the Muslims of India. In a resolution of August 1871, he proposed ways in which they might be encouraged to go to government schools and colleges, and instructed local governments for their opinion as to how they might be implemented “without infringing the fundamental principles of our educational system.”¹ The honorary principal of Calcutta Madarsa, W.N. Lees who had been a critic of the government education policy on the basis that it set Muslims at odds with the British rule, started a fresh campaign in 1871. He wrote three strong letters in *The London Times* on 14 October, 20 October and 2 November 1871 ridiculing the government for not giving much attention to the Muslims world view. Mayo's attention was also caught by William Wilson Hunter, an ICS and the Editor of the *Government Gazette of Bengal*, who was unwell and utilized his time in writing articles on Wahabism for the *Calcutta Englishman*. These caught Mayo's eye, and he asked Hunter to write a book on the question of the day “Are Indian Musslmans bound by their religion to rebel against the queen?” (Skrine, 1901, p. 199).

Contribution of Hunter

The objectives of Hunter were to trace the reasons for the grievances of the Muslims against the Empire on the one hand and to create a schism between the Hindus and the Muslims by establishing that Hindus caused Muslims' deprivation whether economic or political. He dealt with the subject as a part of his official duty. He was provided with all the documents concerning employment and economic status of people of Bengal belonging to Home, Foreign and Military departments. He shrewdly manipulated the data to prove the objective of the Viceroy. He was asked to prepare the report in four weeks which he did. It was duly received by Lord Mayo who gave him a 'hearty approval'. The government rewarded him by promoting him as Under Secretary in the Home department (Hunter, 1871). The report was published in 1871 with the title *Indian Musalmans*. The administration acted swiftly to legitimise and publicise it. Excellent reviews were published in the Anglo-Indian and Urdu journals.

Hunter dealt with the British administration's complicity in the negligence of the Muslim question. He had before him the vital question “Are they (Indian

Muslims) bound in conscience to rebel against the Queen?" Hunter wrote,

While the more fanatical of the Musalmans have thus engaged in overt sedition, the whole Muhammadan community has been openly deliberating on their obligation to rebel. During the past nine months, the leading newspapers of Bengal have filled their columns with discussions as to the duty of the Muhamadans to wage war against the Queen. (Hunter, 2002, p. 2)

The Wahabi movement² made its space in India and its expansion caused radicalisation of the Muslims. In the late 1860s, the Government of India faced increasing dissatisfaction among the Muslims. The government's unpreparedness to deal with recrudescence of notorious Wahabism particularly in Bengal and Bihar was clearly visible. In 1868, a military expedition was sent to crush a Wahabi centre at the North West frontier. Lord Mayo was convinced that men and money were being supplied from the Wahabi base in Patna. Many Wahabi activists were arrested in the late 1860's and in mid 70's and their trials began. Simultaneously some Muslims in Allahabad and Bareilly too stirred and showed radical traits. All these were indicatives that the British population feared another mutiny (Robinson, p. 102).

Hunter said, "The Wahabis start with the declaration that India has become a country of the enemy, and from this they deduce the obligation of the Holy war against its rulers" (p. 122). It further blamed the administration for not realising the gravity of the situation nor contemplating its resolution. He further stated that,

The truth is that, had we hastened by a single decade in our formal assumption of the sovereignty, we should have been landed in a Muhammadan rising infinitely more serious than the mutinies of 1857...The admirable moderation of the East India company's servants, and their determination to let the Muhammadan Power expire by slow natural decay, without hastening its death a single moment, averted this danger. India passed from a Country of Islam into a Country of Enemy. (p. 130)

Further, he concluded that a "Chronic sense of wrong which has grown up in the hearts of the Musalmans under British Rule" (p. 141). They also felt that the reason for anti-British feelings among the Muslims was their alienation from

the Empire and growing disbelief with them, “Musalmans of India are, and have been for many years, a source of chronic danger to the British power in India. For some reason or other they have hold aloof from our system” (p. 3). Furthermore, Hunter categorically blamed the Hindus for the deprivation and degeneration of Bengali Muslims. Hindus took advantages of the English education and thereby grabbed most of the opportunities while Muslims remained confined to their old stereotype educational systems. Hunter wrote,

The educated Muhammadan, confident in his old training, sees himself practically excluded from the share of power and of the emoluments of Government which he hitherto had almost monopolised, and sees these and all the other advantages of life passed into the hands of the hated Hindu. (p. 143)

Hunter blamed the administration for denial of due share to almost thirty million population of Indian Muslims whose capacity as rulers and conquerors was suppressed in due course in the Mughal period. Hunter wanted special treatment for the Muslims to safeguard their interests. He wrote,

a great section of the Indian population, some thirty million in number, finds itself decaying under the British Rule. They complain that they, who but yesterday were the conquerors and Governors of the land find no substance in it to-day.... Before the country passed under one rule, the Musalmans professed the same faith, ate the same food, and in all essentials lived the same lives, as they do now. To this day they exhibit their old intense feeling of nationality and capability of war like enterprise; but in all other respects they are a race ruined under the British rule. (pp. 143-44)

He finally concluded that Hindus and British administration were responsible for “Muslims' decadence and decay” in the post Mughal rule.

The Design

Hunter found that the system of education was a major reason for the Muslims to lag behind the Hindus. Muslims expected and wanted the system of education which suited their religious temperament and according to their requirements. The English education benefitted mostly to the Hindus. He wrote,

that our system of public instruction, which has awakened the Hindus from the sleep of centuries and quickened their inert masses with some of the noble impulses of a nation, is opposed to the traditions, unsuited to the requirements, and hateful to the religion, of the Musalmans. (pp. 168-9)

Besides the syllabus and subjects, the Muslims also did not prefer to be taught in English or by the Bengali or Hindus. They preferred to learn Arabic and Persian. His recommendations were in line with Mayo's resolution of 7 August 1871, that the government should temper its education system to Muslim requirements. However, measures taken by Mayo and his team could not yield immediate support to the cause he professed using Hunter's study and report. Robinson wrote,

the effect of the book was considerable, not because it was particularly well argued or well written, but because five weeks after its publication the acting CJ of Bengal was assassinated by a Muslim on the steps of the HC, and five months afterwards Mayo himself was stabbed to death by a Muslim convict. Thus, Mayo's education measures and Hunter's arguments about Muslim backwardness attained an all-India importance that they did not deserve and might not otherwise have had. (Robinson, p. 104).

The government's decision to give separate and special education based on Muslims' desire and religious needs caused consternations among officials. For instance, in the North West Frontier, the Director of Public Instruction vociferously attacked the government of India's attempt and instructions to give religion-oriented education to the Muslims³. He argued that education must be kept above religions and communal requirements. He wrote to the Government of India that "the question of Mahomedan education in India" was "unnecessarily and unfortunately hampered by political considerations."⁴ His arguments and dissent made the central government furious. He was informed by the secretary of the Local Government that,

the decadence of Mahomedan scholarship in India, and the disinclination of the Mahomedans, as a body, to fall in with our university system, and the appropriate remedy for these evils, are matters of highest importance, both socially and politically. Socially, because it is a duty incumbent on

the British government so to shape its educational measures as to make them agreeable to this large section of the people, who at present by their predilections, or it may be prejudices, are shut out from the influence of our education system. Politically because the enlightenment of Musalmans... would prove one of the surest means of attaching them to our rule.⁵

The official of the Empire considered orthodox Muslims' support for political stability essentially required and therefore they buried the rational and secular approach professed by the public instructor of the NWF and his likes. Robinson aptly said, "As far Muslims were concerned, politics now came first and administrative policy second. This was to have far reaching consequences" (p. 105).

The work proved very effective and highly influential in helping the British attitude in framing its policy towards the Indian Muslims. Moreover, it became the handiwork of the Muslim communalists, who frequently used the quotes from the book to communalise the Muslim mind. Its popularity and impact can be gauged by the fact that in the late colonial period it was reprinted in 1940s 'to meet a great demand' (from Publisher's note, Hunter. Comrade Publication Calcutta, 1945). Around the same time an Urdu edition too was published in India, *Hunter, Hamar Hindustani Musalman kya vah apne zamir ke muttabiq malikah ke khhilaf bagawat par majbur hain?* (trans. Dr Sadiq Hussain, Lahore, Milne ke Patah, Iqbal Akaidmi, 1944)

Hunter's Indian Muslims redesigned and reoriented the communal politics of the All India Muslim League (AIML). They increasingly used the arguments and content of the work to consolidate Muslim masses against the Indian National Congress. Hunter established the theory of relative deprivation and proportional disadvantage of the Muslims in Hindu majority India. When the congress formed the government in the provinces in 1937 under the Government of India Act 1935, the League used methods adopted by Hunter to discredit it as a Hindu fascism. The congress withdrew from the government against the British decision to drag India in the World War II in 1939. The League celebrated it as the day of deliverance. It published reports to falsely propagate the discriminatory treatment with Muslims by the Congress governments in the provinces. The most infamous report was known as the

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Pirpur Report. It stated, “the communal problem remains unsettled not because of the communalism of minorities, but because of the communalism of the majorities”⁶. It further stated that “the Muslims are not getting their due share in the department such as medical and engineering...the Government... prevents Muslims from getting legitimate share in the appointments”⁷. It was followed by the Shareef report (in 2 volumes) based on an enquiry into grievances of Muslims in Bihar, the Kamal Yar Jung Report showing the position of the Muslim education under Congress governments and the last Fazal Haq Report (Muslim sufferings under the Congress Rule). All such reports strengthened the arguments of the Hunter report and used similar tools to prove discrimination with deprivation and denial of Muslims. Hunter, in fact, intellectualized the policy of divide and rule and provided the basis for minorityism. His work also caused definitional deficit to secularism. The prophesy of modern education to Muslims both from inside and outside the community was given a blow by his report. The study was primarily confined to the Muslims of Bengal, but it transcended its boundaries and impacted the relationship between the Hindus and Muslims and communal discourses across the country.

The British policy of divide and rule was very much successful in India. They continued with the same till the end of their rule and the country ultimately had to bear with the partition. The Muslims were made to believe that they would always lag behind the Hindus unless they opposed them. A sense of insecurity was infused in their psyche. The underlying agenda was to strengthen the British rule in India, but it disturbed the entire social fabric of India. The politics of minorityism was pursued by the British to secure their political gains and the Muslims of India fell in their trap. The Wahabi movement was seen as anti-British and felt the brutalities of the British. The Hindus were projected as the cause of misery of Muslims. The secularism of west was not suitable for the culture of India as Indian variety of secularism was strong enough to provide enough space for all other religions on this land. The Indian as "One Indian" was deliberately misinterpreted, and the temporary dividend was received by the British, but the implications are continuing.

References

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Endnotes

¹ Extracts from Secretary, Govt of India, Home department to Officiating Secretary to Govt NWP, dated 7 August 1871, as quoted in Robinson, p 103.

² The Wahabis were the Muslim sect that followed the doctrine of Abdul Wahabi, an 18th century Arab reformer. Their chief objective was to establish an independent Muslim state in which true Islam could be practised and to establish jihad was necessary.

³ Memorandum by M Kempson, Director Public Instruction, August 1872, NWF Educ, June 1873, IOR (India Office Records)

⁴ Memorandum by M Kempson, Director Public Instruction, enclosed in Director of PI to secretary to Govt, NWF 18 August 1873, NWF Educ, November 1873, IOR (see Robinson, p 105)

⁵ Secretary to Govt NWF to Director PI, 14 November 1873, NWF educ, November 1873, IOR, Robinson, p 105

⁶ See Pirpur Report, 1939, AIML, p. 1.

⁷ See Pirpur Report 1939, AIML, pp. 92-93.