

The Evolution of the British Indian Muslims' National Identity

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Abstract

After the partition in 1947, Pakistan had to face social problems resulted from national identity differences and conflict, which threaten the national unity, social stability and prosperity seriously. The origin and development of this problem were not so much due to historical roots as due to an evil fruit of colonialism. Muslims in British India had to confront with different ideological and organizational challenges of colonialism and nationalism in the colonial institutions. How their national identities exactly originated and evolved? And what was their national identities' influence? This academic paper intends to explore the causes, processes and impacts of the national identity evolution of the British Indian Muslims.

Key words: The British India; Muslim; National identity; Evolution

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INTRODUCTION

National identity was really an awkward vocabulary. It was ubiquitous but vague, enigmatic (Huntington, 2005, p.20). The psychological research showed that identity was one of the basic characteristics of human beings and profound, fundamental and lasting or anything at

all, which distinguished from ego external, accidental, variable contents and representation. Professor Qian Xuemei considered that the identity had five fundamental characteristics: firstly, the identity wasn't exactly equal to the concept object (cognitive objects); secondly, the personal identity was a product of social experience and multiple; thirdly, the self-identification of individual had the directed relation with the collective and collective identity; fourthly, the identify means to comply with rules and practices of the collective; lastly, self-identification was a kind of ideology, which could become the direct or potential driver of social actions (Qian, 2006).

However, Professor Qian Xuemei attempts to prove that "identity" is, to some extent, the result of individual identity and social interaction, a collective phenomenon which could be volatile and easily changed. Due to the intensified turmoil and changes of the total social environment, the personal self-awareness and identity were bound to change. At least, the dominant label of identification might temporarily be changed. In other words, individuals usually were with multiple identities and belong to different sectors and groups, such as race, origin, language, region, religion, etc.. Yet on different occasions, there was always a certain identity which might dominate and temporarily weaken or even cover up or deny the other identity (Qian, 2002)

1. THE IDENTITY CRISIS OF MUSLIMS IN THE BRITISH INDIA

Ten years after suppressing the "Mutiny" of 1857 in north India, and ending the Mughal empire, for all even as a legal fiction, the British government completed the construction of a new imperial seat, located on King Charles Street, Whitehall (Ibid.). When the Indian regime began to transform from the Mughal dynasty to British colonial system, these were the moments when

the state bureaucracy and moral traditions were in crisis; but also an era of the globalization of trade, a time of drug trafficking profits, an era of rapid industrialization spreading throughout the globe, an era of missionaries and poor peasants, the shaky time of families and communities, an era of local bandits and international forces tyrannizing, an era of uncertainty and hopelessness, a time of identity crisis (Castells, 2003, p.2).

The British India Muslims got into the identity crisis, and they were carried forward by the identity conflict. "It is a basic property of society to seek solace and asylum in religion. I dare say if there is the so-called human nature, it must be one of human being's instincts." (Ibid., p.10)

Just as Muslims in the British India, the Islamic identity occupied the core of multiple identity labels. The Ummah was the ideal Muslim community regardless of skin color, ethnic group, and across geographic boundaries. Muslims must abide and perform the Holy Koran and the other codes of conduct and public commitments which were established by the Prophet Mohammed. Ever since the 7th century, Muslims had intruded into the South Asia subcontinent. During the period of Muslims' rule, teachings and customs of Hinduism and Islam vary wildly while religious tolerance and various sects living in harmony, or at least tolerating each other, had occupied the mainstream. Although the South Asia subcontinent was ruled by Muslims, Muslims had never ruled India. In other words, Islam was assimilated into existing society while the two cultures of Hinduism and Islam had collided, confronted and integrated with each other over centuries.

The initial differences in both were slowly fading. In the 1870s, with Dr James Wise's researches on the Muslims and Indians in eastern Bengal, he concluded that: "If we examine one type of Bengali villagers at the present-day, one, and only one type of features, of complexion, and of physique pervades them all, the only difference was in dress, hair style, and beards" (Lelyweld, 2003, p.13).

However, the western colonists had followed and caused a great disturbance when the collision was becoming more peaceful, slowly merging between the Islamic and Hindu culture. There were a variety of British interpretations of the political significance of the term "Muslim". One strain of official thinking saw Muslims as a united body permanently was part of a consistent pattern of Muslim subversion aimed at restoring Mughal rule. Some suspected that the assassination of the Viceroy in 1871 by a Muslim was part of a widespread underground movement; Muslims might someday rise against British rule under "a Mussulman Cromwell." In London, Lord Salisbury subscribed to a domino theory of Muslim expansion throughout the world: Not only Kabul but also Constantinople and Cairo were bound up with the political ambitions of the Indian Muslims. And all these were none

other than a continuation of the age-old struggle between Christianity and Islam (Aziz, 1963, pp.24-25).

Therefore, British colonizers had always pursued a policy of "divide and rule" by fostering Hindu and suppressing Muslims to maintain its rule before the 1870s. Muslims were purged from different departments of the British Colonial Government. All channels of their employment had been blocked. From 1852 to 1862, only one Muslim among 240 High Court judges was appointed. In 1871, there were 681 Hindus while only 92 Muslims in administration, health, police and other departments (Lin, 1984, p.222).

Hindus had quickly transformed role and met the United Kingdom Colonial System. Hindus had begun an enlightenment and reform campaign in the early 19th century. In 1817, Ram Mohan Roy had founded the Indian College in Calcutta. On the contrary, the British-Indian Muslim had no similar efforts at that time. Muslims in British-India had a strong anti-British feeling, especially the feudal of Muslim and religious upper classes. They had contradicted with Western education, being afraid of Western education corrupting Muslim and jeopardizing Islam. Muslims had still labeled Western style schools as heresies, neither did they establish such institutions, was not willing to send their children to such schools until the 1850s. They had to stick to convention and continued to implement the old monastic education system, being increasingly blind (Ibid.).

In 1883, the British India Board of Education claimed that the number of Muslim college students was less than 4% in all colleges while Muslims constituted 22.4% of the Indian population in 1865-1866 and 1881-1882 (Antonova, 1978, p.730). In 1837, the British colonial authority declared that English replaced Persian as the official language. In 1844, the offices adopted a policy of preference for English speaking for civil servants posts. (Lin, 2004, p.247)

Therefore, Muslims in the British India were almost deprived of all chances of being official. W. W. Hunter, the India's first Director General of Statistics, portrayed Muslims in the British India as a community of former rulers now fallen on evil days, and especially deprived in education and government employment. Muslims now were laggards, all sulking in their tents, dreaming of lost empires and reciting decadent poetry. In fact, Muslims had been falling into the abyss of poverty as the Muslims' rule in the South Asia Subcontinent went into a slow decline. However, the decline of the political status, education and economy of Muslims of British India had added to distress from British colonial rule. They were deprived of their basic rights and became a community needed to relocate (Malik, 2010, p.117).

It would be a mistake to take up a given identity tag, such as "Muslim", and treat it as a "thing" in itself without regard to the total social map that guided people's

perceptions at a given time or place. Instead, it was more useful to ask how a particular concept was learned, at what point in a person's life, and in the history of a society (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, p.2).

Muslims of British India were beset with identity crises established and hurt, humiliation and despair gradually raised Muslims introspection so as to seek new approval. They adopted some reforms, rejecting and recovery strategies in search of self identity. These cultures and ideologies had sprung up in the political forms in the 20th century, just as All India Muslim League expressed: Request to establish an independent Muslim country to address the plight of Muslims (Malik, 2010, p.94).

Muslim elites were the first group to form national identity in the process of the Muslims identity evolution in the British India, and they were through top-down political mobilization, had given it in recognition of the Muslim community, so far most of the British Indian Muslim constructed the National identity of Pakistan. It was thought to be the result of a combination of multitude reasons, such as the British colonial policy, Hindu-Muslim relation, the interaction between the India National Congress Party and the All India Muslim League, the international environment as well as other factors etc..

2. THE GERMINATION OF NATIONAL IDENTITY OF MUSLIM ELITES IN THE BRITISH INDIA

The British India poet Mirza Ghalib had said: "As if in a cage a captive bird still gathered twigs for its nest". Half of the 19th century, Muslim elites in the British India was actively seeking to new ways for the future and improve Muslim people living environment, so they raised a great enlightenment and Muslim elites formed national identity firstly. Sir Syed Ahmed Khan (1817-1898) was a pioneer and leader of Islamic modernism. The Islamic modernism and the modern Islamism had many differences. The Islamic modernism emphasized the modernism, which emerged in 1960s and 1970s. Islamic modernists insisted on reinterpreting Islam outmoded practices, absorbing advanced science and culture of various countries, including Western countries to adapt to the new trend of time and social development. The modern Islamism also known as Islamic fundamentalism was a contemporary, robust social reform on the religious and political thought which shook the world. Scholars argue that the modern Islamism was for the return of Islam in the case that the foreign ideas about nationalism, socialism, capitalism of Muslim world had failed, which was a negation of Islamic nationalism, even anti-nationalist (Qian, 2002).

Sir Syed Ahmed Khan was born in a noble family in Delhi. His mother was the daughter of one Prime Minister in Mughal Dynasty. He studied law and served as a judicial document to enter Delhi courts at the age

of 30. Since 1860s, he devoted Muslim Renaissance and made great achievements in the educational, religious and political aspects (Lin, 2012, pp.261-262). Sir Syed Ahmed Khan claimed that: "The fault was not basic, in religion or in human potential". In 1863, he established Muslim Literary Society in Calcutta, which was the first Muslim organization, and the purpose clearly stated it would be interested in politics, understand modern thought and knowledge (Rahim et al., 1976, p.249). In 1864, he founded the Science Society, which translated some books about Western natural sciences and social sciences into Urdu, also published bilingual magazines to introduce western sciences (Lin, 2012, p.262).

In 1869-1870, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan's younger son Mahmud had won a government scholarship for study in England—he was one of the first North Indians to do so—and the old man Sir Syed Ahmed Khan seized the opportunity to go with him. His project was not only consulted books and manuscripts not available in India to prepare a refutation of British attacks on the history of Islam by using the wide range of sources available to his adversaries. More importantly, he claimed it was to obtain an insight into the English system of education.

Overwhelmed by the accomplishments of British technology, the general level of literacy, the self-confident sense of achievement that encountered, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan was struck for a long time with a feeling of powerlessness. But he was not a man easily immobilized; he had the ability to turn his inner conflicts into public energies, and to use the nightmare images of his private despondency to startle and awaken an Indian public into action. Sir Syed Ahmed Khan often encountered with criticism and revile from the pious Muslims and was seen as a Muslim traitor. The Aligarh College he founded provoked dissatisfaction with the conservative who asserted that such behavior was giving the wrong kind of education to the wrong kind of people (Lelyweld, 2003, pp.105-106)

Sir Syed Ahmed Khan founded the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College in 1875, which was known as "Muslim Cambridge". The college required students to wear uniforms: Black Turkey shirt. Religious class was arranged as a required course for all Muslim students: "Just as the students of Oxford and Cambridge have to visit the Church and attend the prayers regularly. Students in the Aligarh College will have to offer the congregational prayer five times a day." Inaugurating the Union Club in August 1884, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan had included a debating society in his earliest "dream". The most important of these Cambridge-like institutions was the Union Club. The debate would proceed entirely in English, and topics had penetrated into every aspect, such as politics, economy, literature, history, philosophy etc.. However, some subjects would not be open for debate—British rule in India and religious principles was not permitted except when those principles came

under non-Muslim auspices. But its influence had already been beyond school walls. Muslim students had not only accepted modern science and technology education, and because of their common culture and beliefs, they established the concept of the Muslim community here (Rahim et al., 1976, p.255)

Muhammad Ali Jinnah called the Aligarh College as “India Muslim Arsenal”. The Aligarh College was beginning to be the centre of the enlightenment campaign of the British Indian Muslims, even bred the Pakistan in the late 19th century and the middle 20th century. These activities of Islamic modernist pioneers like Sir Syed Ahmed Khan smashed the isolate of Muslims of the British India, which exposed elites to new thought and made their national identity sprout firstly.

It was worth mentioning that Sir Syed Ahmed Khan was the first one who explicitly proposed the “Muslim nation” term because of the Britain colonial policy of “divide and rule” and Hindus-Muslim sectarian strife growingly. The first clear blow-to-blow between Hindus and Muslims was created for the Urdu-Hindi controversy. In 1867, Kishan Prasad of the Benares Prince and other Hindus launched a campaign to advocate replacing the Persian written in Urdu with the Denagri written in Hindi as the court language of the northwestern provinces. Sir Syed Ahmed Khan was disappointed with the debate and realized that “the two communities were not likely to work together to accomplish anything for the first time. The hostility between them was especially not significant, but the rift began to deepen because of Hindus intellectuals agitating as time went by” (Rahim et al., 1976, p.252). In 1882, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan formally proposed “the two Nations” in a rally: “All people who believed in Islam constitute a Muslim nation; we become a nation because of Islam.” (Arana, 1983, pp.250-251)

The first National Conference of the India National Congress was held in Mumbai and declared that the India National Congress Party was born on December 28, 1885. The main objective was to establish representative government. At this point, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan had soberly realized “Even if all Muslims were to cast their denominational votes, we could prove the ballots were 4 Hindus to one Muslim according to the math, so how to defend their own interests now?” (Lin, 2012, p.263) “If Hindus took power, they are not going to let Muslims live in this country, even living a humble life.” (Rahim et al., 1976, p.267) So far, the linguistic division had unfortunately turned out to be communal division. But such identity difference only existed between the ruling classes and social elites. The general public still fused and infiltrated into each other and the religions did not seem to make them produce identify deviations, especially in towns and large rural areas.

Meanwhile, the national identity of Muslim elites had no territorial claim in the period. Although Sir Syed Ahmed Khan rose “the two Nations” and advocated to

establish a good rapport with British Government, he just wanted to protect Muslims’ position and interests. In reality, he had always been an advocate of the great unity of all ethnic groups and religions in the British India. Even in the same year when he came up with “the two nations”, he also stressed that “Hindus and Muslim are brothers and breathe Indian common air, drink the common water of the Ganges and the Yamuna River, share Indian food output. Hindus and Muslims belong to a nation”. He also said:

Hindus and Muslims live in the same land, are ruled by the same rulers, we should share weal and woe with each other. We must pull together and act in unity. And if joint, we could support one another; otherwise we would be dying together. (Lin, 1984, pp.224-225)

There were both Muslims and Hindus members where he founded the Science Society and the British Indian Defense Association. The Aligarh College established by him also transcended religious prejudices, not only recruited Muslims, also received Hindus, Sikhs, and even once the number of Hindu students was over Muslim. The “Muslim nation” concept of elites was just on a response to the negative social and political change, not a territorial claim of nationalists at beginning (Qian, 2010, p.12).

3. THE FORMATION OF NATIONAL IDENTITY OF ORDINARY MUSLIMS IN THE BRITISH INDIA

Muslim elites were gradually recognized the importance of winning the general Muslims’ support so that they began to use “the Islamic label” to enlighten the Muslim masses, making them more widely involved in political campaigns with the colonial authority changeable in the first half of 20th century. Thus, the “Muslim nation” had been recognized by most Muslims, and gradually became a benchmark of Muslims’ nationalism, promoted territorial nationalism and the Pakistan movement and resulted in the formation of Muslims’ national identity, eventually led to the India-Pakistan partition (Ibid., p.13).

In 1905, the British Government announced the partition of the Bengal Province since it was difficult to control. The East Bengal and Assam were merged into “East Bengal and Assam province”, and the capital was set up in Dhaka; the West Bengal was merged with Bihar, Orissa, which was still called “Bengal”. Muslims had an overwhelming advantage in the East Bengal, where they felt they would have a promising future. In contrast, Hindus held the view that this change did not accord with their economic and political interests, thus launching a fierce campaign. The opposition of Hindus assigned this day as “the national mourning day” and took economic measures against the United Kingdom goods. The activities of the opposition quickly evolved into a social and political movement, thus the conflict intensifying

between Hindus and Muslims. It was in this context that the "All Indian Muslim League" was formally established on December 30, 1906 in Dhaka. It was considered an organization who led these movements to strive for the Muslims' benefits in the British India before 1940 and advocated the establishment of a Muslim state (Malik, 2010, p.129).

The British colonial authority who still treated the policy of "divide and rule" as the fundamental principle of ruling in the British India, appeared in time and enacted "the Mollay-Minto Reforms" so that Indian members increased in the Central and local councils on May 25, 1909. Meanwhile, the Reform Commission established separate constituencies for Muslims. The separate electorate system confirmed Muslims' status as a distinct entity in the South Asia subcontinent in the form of law and these periodic democratic elections repeatedly strengthened the structure and border of the Muslim community, thus creating the image and identity of a true "Muslim community" which transcend regional, linguistic and ethnic distinctions (Qian, 2010, p.12).

But it was counterproductive as "the Partition of Bengal Province" was case out in 1911. Muslims believed they were fooled by the government and anti-British feeling was breeding so that the ethnic identity of Muslim elites and the general public was disillusioned further. The goal of the All India Muslim League had taken an important turn and "they adopted the modified new Constitution which ruled to build Indian autonomous system and fought for greater interests of Muslim ethnical groups by constitutional means on March 22, 1913" (Lin, 2012, p.284).

All in all, the formation of Muslim community consciousness was the result of interaction between the Britain "the Partition of Bengal" and "the Constitutional Reform" for the purpose of "divide and rule" and Hindu-Muslim sectarian conflict aggravating, which laid the people foundation for Muslim nationalist movement during this period.

If Hindu and Muslim elites took a fresh look at the world and era, were anxious and struggled for their future as a result of the national enlightenment, it was for World War I that the ordinary Indian people just were getting started to receive education about world affairs and national consciousness so that people really had a clear understanding on the world and themselves (Ibid., p.288).

However, the Caliphate Movement made Muslims of the British India achieve unprecedented unity and consciousness of ethnic groups awaken further in 1918-1924. After World War I, Turkey was defeated and the Allied forced Turkey to sign armistice agreements, including the United Kingdom, and France, and Italy etc. Turkey was faced with being dismembered; the Holy Land was dying; the Caliph's status was threatened. Modern Muslim and traditionalists were working together

and quickly merged into a powerful force and they held the flags of defending the Islam, the Caliph and the Holy Land.

Robinson, Professor of Cambridge University commented: "This was an unprecedented alliance between the Aligarh best sons and the most exploitative God adores of Lucknow, and they fought side by side with the present-day affairs." Most leaders of the Khalifa movement were increasingly in conflict with the British Colonial Government and they had mobilized the masses, thus political campaigns forming a new momentum. However, the Lahore meeting held by the All India Muslim League marked a complete break of relations between Hindu and Muslim and the Caliph Movement eventually ended in failure in late 1924. But religious and political passions of the majority of Muslims in the British India had been completely inspired at this time. Meanwhile, the Caliph Movement let Muslims grow mature in ideology, organization and leadership candidates (Ibid., p.319).

From the late 1920s to the outbreak of World War II, there were emerging three political forces through the separation and unification on the political scene of the South Asia, namely the British India Government, the Congress and the Muslim forces, any one of whom had taken the key step to determine the future of India. Hindu-Muslim sectarian strife had taken an ugly turn, and the relation with the Congress and the All India Muslim League had been being gradually deteriorated after the Caliph movement failed. Moreover, the British rulers had always pursued the "divide and rule" policy, thus the partition between India and Pakistan being irreversible after all.

In 1930, Muhammad Iqbal, who proposed the scenario of the establishment of "the Muslim State" earliest, declared on the annual meeting of the All India Muslim League in Allahabad: "If the Indian Constitution was set out in the light of the principle of the single national or the British democracy, it was inevitable to nurture a civil war in India." Therefore, he claimed that:

I'd like to see the separate country which would be constituted with the Punjab, NWFP, Sindh and Baluchistan regardless of the self-government within the British Empire or the independence outside of the British Empire. I think it is the only destination to establish a consolidated Northwest Muslim country, at least for the northwest Muslims. (Rahim et al., 1976, p.340)

In 1933, Rachmat Ali firstly raised the specific Muslim country program that the "Pakistan" term was comprised of letters in the names of Muslims' hometowns to express their shared political ambitions, namely the "P" of Punjab, the "A" of Afghanistan and the "K" of Kashmir, the "S" of Sindh as well as the "Stan" of Baluchistan's suffix. The conception of Muslim country of Muhammad Iqbal was with the territorial attribute as one of the state elements when compared with the "Muslim nation theory" of Sir Syed Ahmed Khan and it marked the start of the Pakistan

movement officially (Wang, 2011, p.34). It was only seen as “a philosopher’s dream” when Muhammad Iqbal brought up the idea of “Muslim State” at first, but the idea had been accepted and spread by Muslims with the relationship deteriorating between the All India Muslim League and the Indian Congress Party (Liu, 2004, p.527).

As such, Muhammad Iqbal was known as the “Architect of the Pakistan”. Nehru considered triumphantly that the India only had two main forces at this time, namely the Congress Party and the British force when the Congress Party won most of provinces in late 1936 and early 1937 election. The All India Muslim League suffered a setback in the election, but Muhammad Ali Jinnah hoped to be involved in the management as an independent third party: “We are looking forward to working with the progressive and independent groups for the Indian interests” (Lin, 2012, p.319). However, the Indian Congress Party rose harsh conditions to eradicate and annex the All India Muslim League, thus resulting in a clean break between two party and Muslims’ sense of separation deepening.

The British Government had drawn upper figures of the All India Muslim League further to blunt the pressure from the Congress Party so that the gulf was widening between the both during World War II (Lin, 2004, p.364). Muhammad Ali Jinnah bought up the theoretical base timely, which was the “two Nations Theory”. He claimed that: “The Muslim is a people on whatever the national theory is and they must have their own homes, own territory and state.” (Ahmad, 1952, pp.129-131) He also pointed out:

The only way we can accept is to allow main ethnic groups to build the separate state, and the India should be divided into several autonomous nation states. Only in this way could these nation states be no longer antagonistic towards each other. (Ibid., pp.177-180)

The annual meeting of the All India Muslim League was held in Lahore in March 1940 and the number of delegates was up to more than 100,000. The meeting formally adopted the resolution on building separate Muslim country, namely the known “Lahore resolution”. The enactment of this decision indicated that the Muslims’ orientation had radically changed in solving “Indian problem”. Muslims had been asking to Muslim self-governing regions within the United India earlier, but where most Muslims were now convinced that they would be nowhere. Hence, the goal of Muslims in the British India had been completely transformed into struggling for an independent Muslim State: “All other goals are being relegated to a secondary position.” (Chen, 1988, p.62)

In the 1940s, the All India Muslim League advocated such concepts as “we can not safeguard Muslims’ lifestyle and personal safety without the regime at all.” “Pakistan is equal to the security of Muslims in the British India.” On various occasions, which made a multitude of Muslims

more firmly believe that no other measures can ensure the security of Muslim ethnic groups except the new Pakistan (Qian, 2010, p.17).

In early 1947, the large-scale sectarian conflicts frequently burst out as the state identity of most Muslims were growing a construction around the British India. At this point, the India-Pakistan partition is a foregone conclusion but just a matter of time. Mountbatten formally announced the Partition Plan (“Mountbatten Plan”) on June 3, 1947. The Pakistan and India proclaimed their independence successively at midnight on August 14, 1947.

CONCLUSION

More generally, the identity evolution of Muslims in the British India had been a long and complex process from British-India Muslims into the identity crisis to the germination of the national identity of Muslim elites firstly, then to the formation of state identity of general Muslims in the British India. And yet the importance of identify was self-evident, which was not only the core strength to unite its members, also is a basis to prove own legitimacy to a social organization (Qian, 2006). Therefore, it was the formation of state identity of general Muslims in the British India that provided legitimacy for the founding of the Pakistan to some extent. However, Muslims themselves had multiple identities and Muslims’ national identity came into being and was temporarily dominant during the British India period, which had been based on the Islam; the differences and contradictions weakened or obscured before were highlighted and magnified, such as sectarian clashes, class contradictions, political disputes etc. after Pakistan was created. Owing to various ideological differences, the identity divergence and collide has been the Pakistan’s aeipathia even today, just as the partition of Bangladesh had already proved in 1971.

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