Muhammad Iqbal: Presidential Address to the 25th Annual Session of the All-India Muslim League at Allahabad (India, 1930)

Introduction

The first three decades of the twentieth century witnessed revival and reassertion of various concepts of identities amongst Hindus and Muslims in British India. Religious identities existed at a social and economic level but had not yet sought expression in the political parlance. The political organisations were dominated by the ‘liberals’ who were struggling to unite the Hindus and Muslims against the colonial invective of ‘Divide and Rule’ that had created distrust and confusion to the benefit of the British Imperialists. The Lucknow Pact (1916) brought the two main political parties of Hindus and Muslims—the All India National Congress and the All India Muslim League—on a common platform to demand Dominion Status for India. This session was convened by Muhammad Ali Jinnah (Muḥammad ʿAlī Jinnāḥ, 1876–1948). This achievement was hailed by both communities and Jinnah earned the title of ‘The Ambassador of Hindu-Muslim Unity.’ The end of the First World War, however, turned this tide of ‘unity’ into a mass movement commonly known as the Khilafat Movement—an attempt to save the institution of Ottoman Caliphate.

The Indian Muslims were neither under the religious tutelage of the Ottoman caliph nor were they going to achieve any significant political benefits even if the Caliphate would survive. It was nothing more than an emotional outburst against the policies of the Allies who had appropriated the Middle Eastern territories of the Ottoman Empire. Nonetheless, the Khilafat Movement had tremendous impact on the paradigms of Indian politics. Mahatma Gandhi’s (1869–1948) arrival from South Africa in 1915 changed the whole spectrum of the Hindu-Muslim question. He championed the cause of Khilafat, even though it was a purely Muslim concern, and introduced religious idiom into politics. During this movement, Muslims invited Hindu leaders to mosques to address the religious congregations and Muslim leaders paid homage to the Hindu deities in temples and many enthusiasts named their children by combining

1 Arabic, khilāfu.
popular Hindu and Muslim names. This movement continued until 1924 when Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938) abolished the institution of Caliphate and established the Turkish Republic. However, it bequeathed two legacies that were to shape the future dimensions of Indian politics. Firstly, religion emerged as the most powerful vehicle of organised politics; and secondly, it exposed the transient state of Hindu-Muslim unity. The next five years displayed the reverse side of Hindu-Muslim relations. Hindu-Muslim riots took place over such issues as playing music before the mosques during the prayer times and slaughtering cows on special religious occasions. Moreover, organised groups from both sides attempted to convert and reconvert Hindus and Muslims to their respective faiths.

Most of these developments were explained in the light of the differences between Islam and Hinduism and hence their respective followers. But these differences had a long history and there is hardly any evidence that these two communities fought over these issues during their history of many centuries. Was it the result of the ‘divide and rule’ policies of the British whose imperial interests could not be served if these two communities jointly struggled against their presence in South Asia? Or was it because of the newly-acquired consciousness of their respective identities which were deemed mutually exclusive? Or still, was it under the spell of the idea of ‘nationalism’ that the lines were drawn between ‘us’ and ‘they’? These were some of the questions that sought answers from thinkers and leaders of Hindus and Muslims.

The British decided to settle ‘the communal’ problem. They termed the Hindu-Muslim issues as the ‘communal’ without taking into consideration the ground realities. While the British were searching for a viable formula that could keep their subjects united, the Indian leaders and thinkers were reflecting over the concept of nationalism. What should be the basis of Indian nationalism: Ethnicity, language, history, geography, or religion? None of these had the potential of giving Indian peoples one identity. For many Hindu leaders, it was Indian civilisation before the arrival of Islam that could be used as the binding force. That would indeed exclude the Muslims. What would be their fate in an independent India? Would they be looked upon as equal citizens despite their history which had become an irritant to many Indian nationalists? Was it

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