

The British Empire and Muslim Identity in South Asia

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British Empire in India saw major transformations in the identities of its Indian subjects. The growth of the modern state, the introduction of new systems of knowledge, the expansion of capitalist modes of production, and the spread of communications of all forms - railway, telegraph, post, press - made possible the fashioning of all kinds of new identities at local, regional and supra-regional levels. One of the identities which developed most strikingly was the Muslim. Indeed, at independence in 1947 it gained the particular accolade of embracing its own modern state in the shape of Pakistan. This political outcome, however, was just part of an extraordinary series of developments in Muslim identities under British rule which shed light not just on the nature of British rule but also on major changes at work in Muslim society.

That Muslim identity would become a prime theatre of activity did not seem likely in the eighteenth century. Amongst Muslims who were descended from, or who liked to claim that they were descended from, those who had migrated to India to seek service at its many Muslim courts - Turks, Persians, Arabs, Afghans - their Muslim identity was not a matter of overriding concern. At the courts of the Mughals they divided not into Hindu and Muslim factions but into Turkish and Persian ones. They shared their Persian high culture with Hindus, including their poetry which rejected Indian life and landscape as fit subjects

for poetic response and found its imaginative horizons in Iran and Central Asia. Family was an important source identity zealously maintained in family histories, most especially if claiming descent from the Prophet. Place of settlement was also a source of identity exemplified by the custom which grew upon in the eighteenth century of scholars, poets and administrators, as they travelled in search of patronage, adopting the names of their home *qasbah*, hence 'Bilgrami', 'Mohani' or 'Rudaulwi'. As the eighteenth century progressed, and Shias came to assert themselves notably in the Mughal successor states of Murshidabad and Awadh, Shia and Sunni came to be, from time to time, significant badges of difference amongst Muslims. Amongst these, and other possibilities, the category Muslim was not of overriding importance. Learned men (*`ulama*), whose job it was to police the boundaries of community behaviour, would make a point of drawing a distinction between what was Muslim religious practice and that of non-Muslims, but this for the most part was as far as things went.

Amongst Muslims who were descended from converts to Islam, that is the vast majority of Muslims who expressed themselves through the regional cultures and languages of India - Bengali, Tamil, Malayalam, Gujarati, Sindhi, Punjabi and so on - the distinctions of language, metaphor and behaviour between Muslims and the wider society in which they moved have seemed so slight to some that they have referred to an Islamic syncretistic tradition in Bengal(1) or one Indian religion expressed through different religious idioms in the Tamil country of the south.(2) Scholars differ as to precisely what meaning should be attributed

to the forms of religious expression of Muslim convert populations. What is clear, however, is that their's was a piety of local Sufi cults in which, more often than not, people of all faiths might participate and which might be expressed as much through regional `Hindu' idioms as through those classically understood to be Muslim. Such was the nature of Muslim identities in the eighteenth century that many have been able to see them as part of a working `composite culture'.(3) Such an understanding, nevertheless, should always be qualified by noting that some Muslims had a cultural and imaginative reach that went well beyond the borders of South Asia and that the leading Muslim scholar of the first half of the eighteenth century, Shah Wali Allah of Delhi (d. 1762), was able to declare that `we are an Arab people whose fathers have fallen in exile in the country of Hindustan, and Arabic genealogy and Arabic language are our pride.'(4)

The period of British rule, which eventually became British empire, brought distinct new strands, indeed firmer edges, to Muslim identities. There was a sharpening of the distinction between Muslim and non-Muslim, which was in part an outcome of the impact of British understandings of India and in part that of religious revivalism. There was also the development of a separate Muslim political identity against the claims of an all-inclusive Indian national identity. Parallel with this last process a pan-Islamic dimension to Indo-Muslim consciousness emerged, which for a time between 1919 and 1924 threatened to engulf Muslim politics. The gendering of Muslim identity was a feature as women became a key part of the battlefield across

which the discourse of Muslim progress was fought. Finally, there were trends towards individualism, towards asserting individual fulfilment against community obligation, which were arguably part of a process of secularising Muslim identity and the emergence of Muslims who were purely Muslim by culture.

That such remarkable developments took place in the nature of Muslim identities during the period of British empire might suggest that the British presence had a powerful role to play. Certainly it was influential. But it is crucial not to ignore the powerful element of Muslim agency at work. Each new strand that went to shape Muslim identities under British rule will be examined bearing in mind the questions why did they emerge and what do they mean.

1. The sharpening of the distinction between Muslim and non-Muslim

It has long been part of Indian nationalist historiographical tradition that the British privileged religious identities in India over other possibilities, which inevitably helped to sharpen distinctions between Muslim and non-Muslim. An important part of this process has come to be seen to be the British construction of knowledge about India, and the ways in which this construction not only influenced British governance but also Indian ideas about themselves. From the very beginning of the serious study of India in the eighteenth century, Warren Hastings and the orientalist around him - Jones, Halhed, Wilkins - thought of India in terms of Hindus and Muslims. The former were seen to have enjoyed a great classical civilisation to 1200

AD while the latter were interlopers in the subcontinent whose empire from the thirteenth century coincided with decline of classical Indian civilisation. The orientalist sought classical texts to guide them in government and the administration of justice, for instance Halhed's *Code of Gentoo Laws* derived from the Sanskrit *sastras* of the Brahmins or Burhan al-Din Marghinani's *Hidaya* compiled in Central Asia in the twelfth century, rather than grappling with the complexities of the Indian present. When the British came to place a framework of interpretation over India's past, they divided it into Hindu, Muslim and British periods. When from 1871 they began their decennial census of their Indian empire, they tabulated its peoples under religious headings. When they described their empire in imperial and provincial gazetteers, they gave substantial consideration to their Indian peoples as religious groupings down to the level of district and small town.(5) For much of the nineteenth century, moreover, this tendency to interpret Indian society in terms of religion was reinforced by the committed Christian beliefs of a good number of administrators and the presence of many missionary organisations.

In this context the category Muslim became a major part of the discourse of the colonial state, both within itself and with society at large. Much social action, whether it be competition for jobs in government offices or riots in town and countryside, was interpreted in terms of Muslim and Hindu rivalry. While Muslims, themselves, when they came face to face with the state more often than not had to define themselves primarily as Muslims. They did so to the census enumerator or when they signed

up to join the army; they did so when they went to school or hospital; they did so when they came to vote. The outcome was that men and women, whose Muslimness might not have been prominent in their consciousness of themselves, came to find it increasingly to be so. In the process they became more aware of what might distinguish them from non-Muslims, as for instance those Bengali Muslims of the late nineteenth century who stopped invoking God as Sri Sri Iswar in favour of Allaho Akbar and who dropped their Hindu surnames (Chand, Pal, Dutt) in favour of Muslim ones (Siddiqui, Yusufzai, Qureshi). (6)

It would, however, be wrong to regard the British as playing the only role in privileging the Muslim category and in sharpening distinctions between Muslim and non-Muslim. Of great importance was the movement of revival and reform which has in various ways striven to vitalise Muslim life on the subcontinent from the early nineteenth century to the present. This was not just an Indian phenomenon but an Islam-wide one, as Muslims strove in various ways to find answers to their loss of power in the world, but it did achieve a particular force and variety of expression in British India. Among the manifestations of the movement were: the jihad movement of the *mujahidin* of Sayyid Ahmad Barelwi (d.1831) in northern India, (7) that of Sayyid Fadl Alawi in Malabar, (8) and that of Hajji Shari`at Allah (d.1838) in Bengal; (9) there were the movements of Deoband and the Ahl-i Hadith in the later nineteenth century; (10) and those of the Tablighi Jama`at and the Jama`at-i Islami in the twentieth. (11) Common to all these movements was an attack on all religious practices, which could be conceived of as having a Hindu element,

and a concern to assert their understanding of 'pure' Islamic practice. The records of India's learned and holy families speak of the passing of this spirit through the towns and villages of the land, of the debates that were held and of the compromises that were made to accommodate the new boundaries of acceptable 'Islamic' behaviour. (12)

Side by side with the attack on Hindu practices there was also an assault on all behaviour at saints' shrines which suggested that the believer sought the saint's intercession for him with God. At its conception Islam had been profoundly this-worldly, but with the development of its mystical dimensions it had acquired a substantial other-worldly focus. Now, with the assault on intercession, there was to be a profound shift back towards this-worldly piety. Salvation was to be achieved only by action on earth. Particular force was given to this requirement by the colonial context. In the absence of Muslim power to enforce the holy law, Muslims had to use their individual conscience and will to ensure that the law was observed. To achieve this there was a new emphasis on literacy, on the translation of basic works of scholarship on guidance from Arabic and Persian into Indian languages, and on the making of them widely available through the use of the printing press. There began the era of chapbooks and how-to-be-Muslim guides, which can be found down to the present in the bazaars and bookshops of India and the wider Muslim world. (13) When the time came in the early twentieth century to reach beyond the literate, the Tablighi Jama'at or Preaching Society sprang up with the mission to transmit orally its essential Islamic message and to exemplify

in the dress and activities of its missionaries the basic standards of 'Islamic' behaviour. (14)

The new 'willed' or quasi-protestant Islam did much to sharpen the distinctions between Muslim and non-Muslim. But for one Muslim, Sayyid Abul A`la Mawdudi, who is arguably the most influential Islamic thinker of the twentieth century, it did not go nearly far enough. Responding, as Syed Vali Nasr has recently shown, to threats in the 1920s and 1930s which Hindu assertiveness seemed to represent to Indian Muslims, he created his vision of a hermetically sealed Islamic world in which all human understanding and all human activity would be subject to revelation. State power, moreover, would be used to put into effect the law derived from revelation. (15)

Of course, the Muslim movement of revival and reform and British rule interacted with each other in shaping definitions of Muslim distinctiveness. Muslim jihad movements and fears of the implacable opposition of so-called Wahhabis were sources of constant concern to the British down to World War One. 'Fanatical' was the epithet most commonly applied to Muslims, and it was one which only gained force in the late nineteenth century as information flowed into India of British encounters with Muslims elsewhere in the empire, say in the Sudan or Somaliland. (16) Aspects of Muslim revivalism certainly helped to underpin the British construction of India in religious terms. On the other hand, British rule and the cultural challenges it brought also contributed to sharpening Muslim senses of difference. Not only was there a concern to police the boundaries between Muslim and Hindu behaviour but also those between Muslim



and European behaviour. The fatwa literature, the writings of the `ulama, and the guidance of Sufi pirs were full of responses to society's anxieties as to what European customs and innovations it might be permissible to adopt. Could electric light be used in a mosque? Could European customs of eating at table with knives, forks and spoons be followed? Could European dress be worn? How far could women be permitted the freedom of their European cousins? The presence of the British and the stream of changes they brought stimulated a continuing debate about where the boundaries of proper Muslim conduct might be. (17)

## 2. The development of a Muslim political identity

If for the Indian nationalist historian the British privileged religious identities in general and the Muslim identity in particular, they are regarded as being even more responsible for the emergence and continuance of a Muslim political identity. The case might begin by showing how the colonial construction of knowledge helped to establish religious categories of thought in the mind of the Raj and then show how setting these groupings against each other was a policy some had very much in mind. ` "Divide et impera" was the old Roman motto', declared Elphinstone, the distinguished early nineteenth century governor of Bombay, `and it should be ours'. (18) And, if such views were thought to be an aberration, they remained very much in the minds of late-nineteenth century administrators, whether it was the vigorous denial of Sir John Strachey in the 1880s that `nothing could be more opposed to the policy and universal practice of our Government in India than the old maxim of divide

and rule...' (19) or Sir Antony Macdonnell's open consideration of the possibilities, 'we are far more interested in [encouraging] a Hindu predominance', he wrote to Curzon in the 1890s, 'than in [encouraging] a Mahomedan predominance, which, in the nature of things must be hostile to us.' (20)

Most scholars reject a crude 'divide and rule' analysis in favour of noting British concerns to attract powerful allies to their side. Here the focus comes to rest on a particular dynamic which led to the establishment of a Muslim political identity in the developing democratic framework of the Raj. In the 1860s and 1870s the British were particularly concerned about their failure to attract Muslims to their rule; it was a concern summed up in the title of W.W. Hunter's notorious tract *The Indian Musalmans* (1871), which was written in response to Viceroy Mayo's question 'are the Indian Musalmans bound by their Religion to rebel against the Queen'. This meant that, when a group of north Indian Muslims, led by the gifted and energetic Sayyid Ahmad Khan, strove to build bridges between Islam and modern science and between Indian Muslims and the colonial state, they were looked upon with approval. When this group went on to found MAO College Aligarh in 1877 and the All-India Muhammadan Educational Conference in 1886 to carry the process forward, it received moral and material support from government. When this group, known as the Aligarh movement, made a point of not supporting the Indian national Congress, the organisation of Indian nationalism, the British were not displeased. Moreover, when representatives of this movement went in deputation to the Viceroy in 1906 to ask for special representation for Muslims and recognition of their

`political importance' in the new legislative councils announced by the Secretary of State, they were received with sympathy. Furthermore, when they applied enormous pressure as they Morley-Minto Council reforms were going through Parliament, they were granted separate electorates for Muslims with extra seats, over and above their proportions of the population, in those provinces where they were `politically important'.(21)

British understandings of Indian society, British fears and British styles of rule all played their part in making possible the formal recognition of a Muslim political identity in the developing constitution of their Indian empire. Thus Muslims all over India were given a political identity which had been the concern mainly of the Muslims from the north. Separate electorates, moreover, were to remain a feature of the two subsequent devolutions of power in 1919 and 1935. While no direct line should be drawn between the establishment of a Muslim political identity in the constitution in 1909 and the emergence of Pakistan in 1947, it was one of many enabling developments.

The responsibility for the emergence of a Muslim political identity, however, cannot entirely be laid at the feet of the British. Significant attention needs to be given to processes within Indian society. There was the Hindu movement of revival and reform which, like that of the Muslims, was powered forward by the need to confront colonial rule and Western knowledge. A great ferment of activity was stimulated which in northern India led to the promotion of distinctive Hindu symbols such as the Nagri script (of Sanskrit) as against the Muslim Persian script then used in government, the increasing sanskritisation of Hindi

so as to differentiate it from Urdu, and the assertion of Hindu preferences in many localities with regard to cows or religious processions as against those of Muslims. Agitation for Hindi led Sayyid Ahmad Khan in 1869 to talk for the first time of working just for Muslims. (22) Recent attempts to make Nagri the script of government, which would put Muslims out of work, and bruising battles over religious preferences on municipal boards were part of the backdrop to the Muslim deputation to the Viceroy and its requests for privileges and protection. Indeed, the often close relationship between Hindu revivalism and the Congress was always going to make for a difficult relationship between Muslims and Indian nationalism. (23)

There was also the Muslim movement of revival and reform. Sayyid Ahmad Khan had his intellectual roots deep in the traditions of the Muslim revival. His Aligarh movement is the expression of that revival that has come to be known as Islamic modernism [which achieved its culmination in British India in the thought of Muhammad Iqbal who succeeded in building a bridge between Islam and the idea of progress, not least in the organisation of a modern state. It was suffused with memories of past Muslim glory and the need to restore that glory in the present. The classic statement of its mood was Hali's *Musaddas* an elegy on the rise and fall of Islam composed in the 1870s at Sayyid Ahmad Khan's request. Readings from the poem would often be used to introduce educational and political meetings and with verses such as the following leave audiences in tears:

There is meanness in everything we do. Our ways are worse  
than those of the most base.  
Our forefathers' reputation has been eaten away by us. Our  
step makes our countrymen ashamed.

We have thrown away our ancestors' credit, and sunk the nobility of the Arabs. (24)

Aligarh was designed to deal with this situation. Its alumni were to be the new Muslim elites of British India. They were to form the All-India Muslim League in 1906 which fought for separate electorates and special privileges for Muslims in the Morley-Minto Council reforms. They were the key supporters of the League as it strove in subsequent years to preserve the Muslim political identity. Nevertheless, the vicissitudes in the support for this identity must be recorded. In the second decade of the twentieth century the young Muslim elites of northern India were firmly behind it. But in the 1920s support drained away: Muslim landlords joining landlord parties, young professionals joining the nationalist movement, and some leaving politics altogether. In the 1930s it virtually disappeared; only once between 1931 and 1936 did the Muslim League meet in full session, between 1931 and 1935 Jinnah, the League's key figure, had his main residence in London, while in the first general election after the 1935 Government of India Act it won only twenty-two per cent of the seats reserved for Muslims. It was only in the special circumstances of the 1940s that the League was able to give the Muslim political identity the broad appeal that enabled it to win over ninety per cent of the reserved Muslim seats in the elections of 1945-46. (25)

### 3. British empire and the Pan-Islamic strand

Muslims have always had a special feeling for the idea of their community, their *umma*. At one level this might be acknowledged in the *salam* to neighbours during the act of prayer

or in the particular rites performed at a saint's shrine. An another level community might be understood in the fact that all Muslims belong to a community created by God's grace; they gave alms each year for the support of the community; they endured the privations of the Ramadan fast as one; and that they looked forward to the ultimate celebration of the community in the company of Muslims from all parts of the world during the annual pilgrimage to Mecca.

A feature of the Muslim world over the past century has been that more and more Muslims have developed a Pan-Islamic dimension to their consciousness; more and more have engaged imaginatively and emotionally with the fate of Muslims in faraway lands. In India this development was given a particular intensity, in part because the British empire played such a considerable role in the conquest of Muslim peoples and the decline of Muslim power, and in part because Indian Muslim themselves felt especially insecure. (26)

One development which expanded horizons was the increasing ease of travel that owed much to the shipping routes and railway lines that underpinned the trading and communications network of the empire. From the 1860s increasing numbers of Muslims went to Britain and to Europe to absorb Western learning or to train as lawyers and doctors. Others went to Cairo or Istanbul to pick up the latest in Muslim ideas. Many seized the opportunities created by empire to expand their trading communities around the Indian Ocean shore from Malaysia and Burma through the Gulf to East Africa. Many, too, as they formed half of the Indian army, found themselves fighting the empire's wars in South Africa or on the

Western Front, but also against Muslims in Mesopotamia or on the North-West Frontier. But most important was the way in which improvements in sea travel enabled increasing numbers to perform the pilgrimage to Mecca. In good years tens of thousands performed their holy duty, some coming to settle in the Hijaz as scholars or traders. (27)

A second development of particular note was the construction of the Indo-European Telegraph line by a British government which had been made powerfully aware of the strategic benefits of the telegraph in the Mutiny Uprising. From 1865 this made possible the rapid transmission of news to and from the subcontinent and gave a massive stimulus to the growth of the Muslim press. Indeed, there was a symbiotic relationship between the growth of pan-Islamic consciousness and the growth of the press which bears comparison with the relationship which Benedict Anderson has noted between the rapid march of print capitalism and the emergence of national consciousness in early modern Europe. The more Indian Muslims discovered about the fate of their brethren elsewhere in the Islamic world, the more they wished to know. When Russia and the Ottoman Empire went to war in the late 1870s, the press boomed. When the British invaded Egypt in 1882, it boomed again. When the Ottoman Empire entered its terminal stages from 1911 onwards, the press boomed as never before. Great newspapers flourished - Abul Kalam Azad's *al-Hilal*, Muhammad `Ali's *Comrade*, Zafar `Ali Khan's *Zamindar*. (28)

The new mental horizons were not expressed just in a thirst for news of the Muslim world. They were also expressed in the themes of some of the most successful novels of the time: Sarshar's (1845-1903) *Fasana-yi Azad*, written against the background of the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-78 in which the eponymous hero goes off to the Crimean War to fight alongside the

British and Muslims against the Russians, (29) or the many historical romances of `Abd al-Halim Sharar (1860-1926), (30) which were set in all parts of the Muslim world. The leading Muslim historian of the day, Shibli Nu`mani (1857-1914) devoted his energies to reawakening interest in past Muslim lives and culture, especially the achievements of Arabs and Persians. (31) It was symptomatic that much of the more successful poetry had pan-Islamic themes; Hali's *Musaddas*, for instance, took the world by storm after its publication in 1879 going quickly through six editions. (32) While a vaunting Islam-wide vision pervades the poetry of Muhammad Iqbal. When he wanted to emphasise the decline of Islam, he wrote a tearful poem about the end of Arab rule in Sicily; when he wanted to reflect on human creativity, he wrote his great poem on the mosque at Cordoba; moreover, he

wrote much of his verse in Persian so as to reach an audience beyond the confines of India. (33)

Pan-Islamic concerns were also expressed in dress. The Turkish fez was part of the early uniform of Aligarh, as the movement identified with the Ottoman reformers. Muslim scholars in Lucknow followed clothing fashions in Egypt, Syria and Iran. (34) While at the height of pan-Islamist activism in the second and third decades of the twentieth century Western-educated Muslims made a point of shedding Western dress in favour of Muslim dress bearing distinctive Islamic symbols. Such was the level of identification with the wider Muslim world that men and women were willing to spend huge resources in time and money to further pan-Islamic causes. One, at least, was driven to contemplating suicide when he heard in 1912 that the Bulgarians had advanced to just twenty-five miles from Istanbul. (35)

The most powerful expression of the pan-Islamic dimension to Muslim identity came with the period which stretched from the Balkan Wars in 1911 through to the abolition of the Turkish caliphate in 1924. Great organisations were founded to carry forward pan-Islamic purposes: there was the Red Crescent Mission in 1912 of Indian Muslim volunteers to provide medical services



to Turkish troops; there was the Anjuman-Khuddam-i Ka`aba founded in 1913 to protect and otherwise serve the holy places of Islam; there was the Indo-Ottoman Colonisation Society of 1914 which aimed to establish a pan-islamic settlement at Adana; and there was the Central Khilafat Committee founded in 1919 to protect the temporal and spiritual power of the Turkish caliphs. This last organisation swept aside the Muslim League and for two years dominated the Indian National Congress, playing the key role in enabling Gandhi to persuade it to adopt policies of non-co-operation with government. The Khilafat movement, as it came to be known had mass appeal attracting not only the Western educated, traditionally educated, but also women and large numbers from the small towns and even the countryside. The movement went into decline from 1922, as the British arrested its leaders and the Turks moved towards abolishing the caliphate. Nevertheless, it was the most substantial mass movement in India since the Mutiny Uprising. And, even though it was profoundly bound up with Muslim unease about their position in India as well as being an expression of their opposition to British rule, it was also remarkable witness to their sensitivities to the Muslim world beyond the subcontinent. (36)

The failure of the Khilafat movement led to a reassessment of the pan-Islamic dimension of Muslim identity. Realising that there was no political salvation to be found in the wider Muslim world, Muslims made their pan-Islamic identity subordinate to a Muslim national identity, or an Indian National identity, or a socialist or even a communist one. Nevertheless, pan-Islam remained an important sub-strand in thought and action. It was

expressed in their concern over the future of Arabia in the 1920s, in their support for the Muslim Congress movement - the forerunner of the Islamic Conference Organisation, in their ambitions to create a pan-Islamic university, and in their enormous interest in the fate of the Arabs under the Palestine mandate. It was also expressed in the pan-Islamic missions of Indian Muslim organisations, whether the unorthodox Ahmadiyya or the orthodox Tablighi Jama`at. (37)

#### 4. British empire and the gendering of Muslim identity

One of the more striking developments in Muslim identity under British rule is its acquisition of a female dimension. Traditionally, if we can risk a brief flirtation with essentialism, Islamic law divided society into public and private realms. The public realm was the key realm. This was the world of the adult man, the place where Islamic social action took place and where the community visibly existed. It was to be distinguished from the domestic world wherein existed the weak - women, children and slaves. Women in particular were seen as sources of *fitna*, social chaos, a threat to the moral order. The man's world was, therefore, the arena of Muslim identity. Here were the distinctive symbols of Muslim identity - mosque, madrasa and Sufi shrine. Men, too, as Barbara Metcalf tells us, 'learned Arabic and conventionally carried distinctive Islamic names; women knew the regional languages and their names often evoked only beautiful qualities or flowers.' (38) But under British rule women both become guardians of the shrine of Islam in domestic space and move into public space. Talk about women, indeed their

talk about themselves, increasingly fills public space, and their behaviour and deportment come to range amongst the most potent signifiers of Islamicity. This was a consequence, in part of the new ideas of womanhood and the status of women which were carried to India by official and non-official Britons, and in part of the way in which women became the prime site at which the intersecting discourses of colonialism and modernity (at the social level) took place. The role of women became a key issue for Muslims as they considered how they should progress in the world. (39)

From the early nineteenth century the British brought issues regarding women into the public arena with their campaigns against the burning of widows, female infanticide, child marriage and female seclusion. Once the issues of sati and female infanticide had been addressed by the state, missionaries made much of the running. In the case of Muslims their particular concerns were bringing education to women, attacking seclusion, and improving knowledge about health and provision for it. There were zenana missions, zenana clubs, and even magazines especially for women. The twentieth century saw the state increasingly concerned to create greater opportunities for women. By the 1930s there were 2.5m girls in schools of which 0.5m were Muslims. Substantial attention was being paid to women's health issues, in particular maternity. Muslim women, moreover, were gaining specific state recognition in the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929, the Shariat Application Act of 1937 and the Dissolution of Muslim Marriages Act of 1939. In the Government of India Act of 1935, furthermore, they were acknowledged as having political

rights in seats specifically reserved for them. By the 1940s the public existence of Muslim women was widely acknowledged and the business of enlarging the space they occupied was now in the main the task of Muslims themselves.(40)

More important than the ideas that came to India from without in developing a female dimension to Muslim identity was the response of Muslim society to colonial rule. Reformist `ulama, confronted with the power of non-Muslims in public space, transform their womenfolk from being threats to the proper conduct of Islamic society to being central transmitters of Islamic values and symbols of Islamic identity. The classic statement of this new position is Mawlana Ashraf `Ali Thanwi's *Bihishti Zewar*, written in the first decade of the twentieth century, whose volume sales since are probably second only to the Quran. Thanwi's Muslim woman was to be able to read and write Urdu, perhaps to read Arabic, to fulfil her religious obligations, to keep her house in order, to bring up her children with due care, and to be able to sustain appropriate relations with those outside the household. She was regarded in being equal in responsibility and in human potential to men. But in a world in which the Muslim male might well be sullied by the compromises necessary to successful operation under colonial rule, she and her sisters became key sustainers of Islamic values.(41)

In the 1930s Mawlana Mawdudi, the founder of Islamism in India, gave a new twist to the central role of Muslim women. Whereas the reformist `ulama had generated their new role for Muslim women, as far as can be ascertained without reference to Western models, Mawdudi, as the classic statement of his position

*Purdah and the Status of Women in Islam* reveals, was obsessed by the freedoms permitted to women in the West.(42) He emphasises the natural superiority he saw Islam giving men over women. The task of women was to run the home and their education should be limited to what was necessary to enable them to do so; they should not think of leaving it very much. This home, moreover, in the context of British rule and the films, dress, music and morals that came with it, had a very special part to play: 'the *harim*', he declared, 'is the strongest fortress of the Islamic civilization, which was built for the reason that, if it ever suffered a reverse, it may then take refuge in it.'(43)

While for the reforming `ulama and for Mawdudi women and their world became fortress Islam, for those Muslims who made Western standards a key criterion of progress, the 'Western' education of their women and their entry into public space became increasingly a measure of their progress and modernity. This was very much part of the thinking of the Aligarh movement as it developed. If Sayyid Ahmed Khan, himself, thought that men deserved priority, this was less the concern of his followers. Nazir Ahmad, Hali, Shaykh `Abd Allah and Begum Shah Jahan of Bhopal. Their efforts led to the foundation of the Aligarh Girls School in 1906 which grew by 1937 to a College offering degree classes. Women in this circle and others carved out for themselves a literary space for themselves in short stories, novels and magazines such as *Khatun*, *Ismat* and *Tehzib-un-Niswan*. They also began to organise in public. In 1914 the All-India Muslim Ladies Conference was founded. Then for two decades Muslim identities tended to be subsumed within the larger female

identities of the leading women's organisations: the All-India Women's Conference, the Women's India Association and the National Council of Women of India. In the late 1930s, however, the common feminist front was destroyed by the communalisation of politics. In the campaign for Pakistan women played an active role on the streets.(44)

Colonial rule both brought Muslim women into public space and led to some Muslims elevating them into the bulwark of their capacity to defend their civilisation. One way or another women came to represent a substantial part of the Muslim identity. For Muslims and for Westerners the different roles which women filled in their social orders became prime markers of the differences between them. Equally for Muslims the different freedoms they gave their women became key markers of the differences amongst themselves. Of course, this is not a situation confined to British India, but one experienced in societies throughout the Muslim world. It is one, however, which has come to bear particularly heavily on Muslim women in the independent states of India and Pakistan. In the former women have had to suffer, as in the Shah Bano case of 1986, because to subordinate Muslim personal law to the common civil code would mean an assault on Muslim identity. Indeed, for Hindu revivalists they have become the very epitome of what is wrong and bad about Muslim society.(45) In the latter women have had their freedoms sacrificed on the altar of the state's 'Islamic identity'.(46)

##### 5. British empire and a new sense of individualism

A further development of no little interest was the

emergence of a new sense of self, of growing individualism. Of course, this development was in very large part restricted to a small elite literate, for the most part, either in English or in Urdu, but it is nonetheless observable. Paradoxically, British rule and the Muslim movement of revival and reform both served to heighten forms of Islamic\Muslim identification, which in principle should have meant heightened willingness to subordinate individual will to that of the community, but they also created the conditions in which some Muslims increasingly came to assert their desire for individual fulfilment as against the broader claims of the Muslim community and its law. We see these developments in the emergence of Muslims who assert their right to interpret Islam for themselves, as opposed to accepting the interpretations of the `ulama, through to the emergence of growing numbers of those who were Muslims merely by culture. In the later years of British rule such Muslims often held leftist views as progressive writers, socialists or communists. Amongst them there were also women concerned to raise and discuss in public issues which Muslims had traditionally kept concealed.(47)

In a broad sense the contributions of British rule to this development are not hard to discern. It was, of course, the prime channel through which the post-Enlightenment ideas of the West reached India - ideas of the rights of man and of personal fulfilment, vindications of earthly existence and earthly pleasures, and growing tendencies to celebrate not model lives but lives of all kinds. Such ideas were instinct in much Western literature and some of the institutions exported to South Asia. They were also represented in the behaviour and the attitudes of

a good number, though certainly not all, of the colonial British. These, however, were not the only sources of incipient Indian Muslim individualism. There was the spread of capitalist modes of production with their erosion of old communal loyalties and their empowerment of individuals. There was the emergence of the modern state with its growing capacity to reach down to each individual citizen. There was also the changes in the technology of communication, in particular the adoption of print, which enabled Muslims to command knowledge as never before and also to begin, as never before, the exploration of their inner selves. (48)

It would be simple to see the emergence of individualism as the outcome of the projection of British power into India. But it is also the outcome of major changes in Islamic culture, which we have already characterised as the shift from `other-worldly` to `this-worldly` Islam. The willed or `protestant' Islam, which was the central feature of `this-worldly' religion required Muslims to take action for Islam on earth if they were to achieved salvation. The link between salvation and work for Islam on earth, with no chance whatsoever of intercession, helped to set in motion processes that might underpin the development of a more individualistic Muslim self. Many of these processes bear comparison with those that led in the direction of individualism from the Reformation of Christian Europe.

Muslims were empowered by the thought that they and only they were responsible for shaping the earthly world. God gave his guidance, but they were the actors. The overwhelming responsibility placed on Muslims to act on earth runs through all manifestations of their movement of revival and reform. It is



well-expressed in the challenge which Iqbal makes man throw at God:

You created the night - I lit the lamp.  
 You created the clay - I moulded the cup.  
 You made the wilderness, mountains and forests  
 I cultivated the flowerbeds, parks and gardens. (49)

Muslims who will their religion make their own choices. The more they do so the more they affirm their own autonomy, their own individuality. Once Muslims move down this path, there must always be the possibility that they will choose to express their individuality by choosing not to believe. With the affirmation of the self, however achieved, there also comes the affirmation of the ordinary things of the self. A striking feature of twentieth-century Indo-Muslim culture has been the increasing valuing of ordinary human things: biographies of the Prophet talk about Him no longer as the Perfect Man but as the perfect family man; women have moved out of seclusion to demand that they and all things to do with them are given respect; even religious philosophers talk of finding God in all the mundane things of life. Then a willed religion had to be a self-conscious one. Muslims had to ask themselves regularly whether they had done all in their power to submit to God and carry out His will in the world. The ground was thus prepared for the 'inward turn'; the self's inner landscape increasingly lay open for exploration.

'This-worldly' Islam made man the chief actor on earth, made his life the prime centre of meaning, and made it clear that he chose whether to enjoin the good and forbid the evil or not. Although designed to reinforce Islam, it also underpinned a valuing of individual desire which might run counter to community requirement. The tension, potential or actual, between individual

and community is acknowledged in much twentieth-century Muslim writing. Indeed, the tension is notably expressed in the stridency of some women's writing. It is a tension, moreover, which is broken as from time to time some Muslims burst through the bounds of community to embrace the world of unbelief and other beliefs that lies beyond. In such ways the long term and unintended outcomes of Islamic reform might work together with influences channelled by the British from the West to bring various 'secular' strands to Indo-Muslim identities.(50)

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The period of British rule saw the emergence of new strands of identity among Indian Muslims. For many their religious identity became their prime identity. For a good number, too, their religious identity became their political identity. Muslim imagination expanded to embrace the lives and fate of Muslims elsewhere in the world; for some this became an all-absorbing concern. Increasingly Muslim identity in public space acquired a feminine dimension. Moreover, individuals were beginning to emerge who wished to be treated as individuals; they rejected the demands made upon them by their 'community' and resisted all stereotyping from without. It should be clear that not all Muslims were affected by all of these processes, and some by none of them. In sum the period of British rule saw a particular privileging of the religious dimension of Muslim identities, but at the same time it also saw other strands emerged which Muslims might choose to emphasise.

In each of the new strands of Muslim identity we have identified, we have discovered processes set going both by British rule and by religious and cultural change within Muslim society. These processes have both been independent of each other and have interacted with each other. Thus the sharpening of the distinction between Muslim and non-Muslim was both a consequence of British views of Indian society and of the impact of the Muslim movement of revival and reform; the development of a Muslim political identity was both a consequence of British policies towards Indian society and the fears of the north Indian Muslim elite; the emergence of a pan-Islamic dimension to Muslim identity was in part the outcome of the new world of Muslim communication enabled by British empire but in part too of the values and fears of Indian Muslims; the gendering of Muslim identity owed its development in part to new ideas of women's rights brought to India from the West but also to the new and special role given to women as Muslims sought to respond to British rule; and the new individualism (of at this stage but a few) certainly derived some impetus from the manifold impact of British empire on Indian society but also was instinct in the path of individual responsibility which 'this-worldly' Islam set out for Muslims. Finally, it may be instructive to place the Indo-Muslim experience in the wider context of British interactions with Muslims elsewhere in the empire. It is arguable that India's Muslims were unique in the intensity of their self-conscious identity as Muslims. They were notable in their development of a Muslim political identity. They were notable, certainly for a short period, in the intensity and

impact of their pan-Islamic identity. On the other hand, they were less notable in the gendering of their identity and in the emergence of claims to individual expression as against community obligation. This said, India appears unusual in the extent to which these latter two processes were also underpinned by developments within Muslim society itself.

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