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Can a Muslim Be an Indian?¹

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I want to begin this paper with two simple points. One is that nations are established by constructing a core or mainstream—the essential, natural, soul of the nation, as it is claimed. The other is that minorities are constituted along with the nation—for they are the means of constituting national majorities or mainstreams. Nations, and nationalisms, are established by defining boundaries. However, these are not always—or perhaps, ever—sharply or easily defined. Nationalisms have therefore commonly moved along the path of identifying the core or mainstream of the nation. Alongside this emerge notions of minorities, marginal communities, or elements,² the fuzzy edges and grey areas around which the question of boundaries—geographical, social, and cultural—will be negotiated or fought over.

What I seek to investigate in the following pages is the process by which this nationalist core is established: invisibly, non-politically, or “naturally,” as nationalists frequently suggest. I also explore the clamour that arises at the same time for loyalty, for proof of genuine belonging from those who do not inhabit this core: the minorities and marginal groups who might be allowed to be part of the nation, but “never quite.” I wish to analyze the construction of the unhyphenated national, the real, obvious, axiomatically natural citizen—Indian, Nigerian, Australian, American, British, whatever—and the simultaneous construction of the hyphenated one—Indian Muslims, Indian Christians, Indian Jews, or African-Americans, Mexican-Americans and indigenous Americans, for example—the latter having lived so often, in our nationalist age, under the sign of a question mark. I shall pursue this task here through an examination of the assertions of citizenship, and demands for proof of loyalty, that were made

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at seminars organized by the anthropology departments of Johns Hopkins University, Harvard University, and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York; the Committee on South Asian Studies, University of Chicago; the School of Social Sciences, Curtin University of Technology, Perth, Western Australia; and the Subaltern Studies conference on “Fractured Societies, Fractured Histories” held in Lucknow in January 1997. I am grateful to the participants in all these meetings for their comments and questions.

² Brackette F. Williams makes the point as follows in her discussion of ethnicity in the context of territorial and cultural nationalism. Like tribe, race, or barbarian, she notes, the label ethnicity identifies those who are at the borders of empire or nation. “Within putatively homogenous nation-states, this border is an ideologically produced boundary between ‘mainstream’ and peripheral categorical units of this kind of ‘imagined’ social order.” Williams, ‘A Class Act: Anthropology and the Race to Nation across Ethnic Terrain,’ *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 18 (1989), 439.

in India at the time of the transfer of power and the partition of the subcontinent in 1947.

I

Two terms that have gained common currency in the discourse on the “Muslim question,” as it is called in India, may provide a useful starting point for my discussion. Though both date to before 1947, they came to acquire a new urgency—even a new meaning—with the Partition and Independence of that year. The first is the figure of the “Nationalist Muslim,” the second the notion of “minority” and “majority.”

Perhaps the first point to be made about the category of the Nationalist Muslim is that there is no equivalent category for the Hindus, or for that matter any of the other religious groupings in India. Interestingly, in speaking of the politics of Hindus, the term is frequently reversed to read “Hindu nationalists.” The reversal is of course not coincidental. What does the term “Hindu nationalists” signify? It does not refer simply to nationalists who happen to be Hindus. It is, rather, an indication of their brand of nationalism, a brand in which the “Hindu” moment has considerable weight. It is a nationalism in which Hindu culture, Hindu traditions, and the Hindu community are given pride of place.

Alongside the rise of this Hindu nationalism, and much more emphatically in the course of time, another more inclusive kind of nationalism had developed, which emphasized the composite character of Indian society and refused to give the same sort of primacy to the Hindu element in India’s history and self-consciousness. This is what would later come to be called “secular” nationalism, “real” or “Indian” nationalism as Jawaharlal Nehru had called it, “something quite apart from . . . [the] religious and communal varieties of nationalism and strictly speaking . . . the only form which can be called nationalism in the modern sense of the word.”³ This was the Indian nationalism of the Indian constitution—“nationalism,” pure and simple, in Nehru’s phrase. Given the existence of both these brands of nationalism from the later nineteenth century onwards, and so evidently in the 1940s and again in the 1980s and 1990s, politically conscious Hindus have readily been divided into “Hindu nationalists” and “secular (or Indian) nationalists.”

There were of course signs of a growing “Muslim” nationalism over the same period. Like Hindu nationalism, this Muslim variant developed side by side with the broader “Indian” nationalist movement, in which large numbers of Muslims were also involved (from Badruddin Tyabji and Maulana Mohamed Ali to Mohammad Ali Jinnah and Fazl-ul-Haq, not to mention the likes of Mukhtar Ahmad Ansari, Abul Kalam Azad, Zakir Husain, and Sheikh Abdullah). However, politically active Muslims were not divided into “Muslim nationalists” and “secular nationalists.” They were divided instead into “Nation-

³ J. Nehru. *Glimpses of World History*. (1934; 2nd edition, Asia Publishing House, Bombay 1961), vol. II, 1129–30.

alist Muslims” and “Muslims”—and here the proposition extended of course to more than just those who were politically involved.

The Hindus—or the majority of politically conscious Hindus, for there were in this view many who formed part of a large inert mass, and at least a few who were loyalists—were, in other words, nationalists first and foremost. Whether they were Hindu nationalists or secular nationalists was a subsidiary question. All Muslims were, however, *Muslims*. And the matter of political inactivity or inertia made little difference in this instance. Some Muslims were advocates of “Indian” nationalism, and hence “Nationalist Muslims.” The remainder of that community, however, in town and country, north and south, handloom workshop or building site, modest hut or railway quarters—were not likely to be supporters of Indian nationalism on account of their being Muslim. The peculiar history of Hindu-Muslim political differences from the later nineteenth century onwards, and British efforts to keep the Muslims on their side against the rising tide of what they saw as *babu*—Hindu nationalism—had contributed to the development of this view. But the years immediately preceding Partition and Independence, Partition itself, and the very fact of agitation for separate Muslim rights, clearly had more than a little to do with its wide acceptance as axiomatic truth.

The other terms of Indian political discourse that require some attention are “minority” and “majority.” When used in conjunction with “religion” or “ethnicity” or “culture,” these terms result in a curious ambiguity, as Talal Asad has reminded us. For whereas majority and minority belong primarily to a vocabulary of electoral and parliamentary politics, and the shifting terrain upon which these politics are supposed to be carried out, culture (like religion, race, and so on) is “virtually coterminous with the social life of particular populations, including habits and beliefs conveyed across generations.” To speak of cultural, ethnic or religious minorities is therefore to posit what Asad calls “ideological hybrids.” It is “to make the implicit claim that members of some cultures truly belong to a particular politically defined place, but those of others (minority cultures) do not—either because of recency (immigrants) or of archaicism (aborigines).”⁴ Or, one might add, simply because of unspecified, but (as it is asserted) fundamental, “difference”—as in the case of the Indian Muslims.

What Partition and Independence did was to fix these terms in a national, country-wide sense for Indian society and politics. The Muslims were now the minority, as of course were Sikhs, Anglo-Indians, Indian Christians, Parsis, and Jains, although all these did not matter as much, on account of their much smaller numbers. The Muslims were now the “minority” even in districts, cities, or towns where they were a numerical majority: the latter term applied only in a descriptive sense. They were the minority that had fought for, or wanted, Pakistan, and they now had not only to choose where they belonged, but also to

⁴ Talal Asad. *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 257.

demonstrate the sincerity of their choice: they had to prove that they were loyal to India and, hence, worthy of Indian citizenship.

The Hindus were the “majority,” even if substantial numbers of those designated or claimed as Hindus had little to gain from the appellation, were denied access to sacred Hindu sites and texts, or (in some cases) even moved to discard the denomination of “Hindu” altogether. In the tumult of Partition and Independence, however, the “Hindus” (sometimes including Hindus and Sikhs) were spoken of as a unity, one that was ranged for the most part against “the Muslims.” The search was on for the genuine, unambiguously loyal citizen. And since, it was said, the Hindus had no other country (save Nepal, which was seen in this perspective as something of an adjunct to India), their attachment to the Indian nation was beyond doubt. “Hindu” or “Indian” was an irrelevant distinction; the terms were practically interchangeable. The question boiled down, instead, to an inquiry into the appropriate place and appropriate status of the “minorities.”

Before I turn to the details of this nationalist inquiry and its implications, there is one other general point about nationalism that needs to be made. This may apply especially to the anti-colonial nationalisms of the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which struggled to form a unity of “the people” in the effort to stake a claim to independent statehood, but I think it also has a wider resonance. Everywhere, we would argue, the nation/people has historically come into being through struggles to define and advance a national interest. Everywhere, however, there is a simultaneous—and, as it seems, almost necessary—desire to present the nation as given, an already formed totality, even a spirit or essence. Everywhere, moreover, once the nation comes to have a state of its own or (in nationalist parlance) to be realised in the nation-state, this essence, this totality, comes to be concretized in the state and its territory, and the national interest comes to be equated with the integrity of the state and its boundaries.

All over the world, then, there has been a tendency for the equation “the nation = the people” to give way to the assertion that “the nation = the state.” Loyalty to the nation—the most generally touted test of true, unquestioned citizenship—becomes loyalty to an already existing state and the interests of that state (all that it stands for and even, literally, where it stands!). There is, however, generally a catch: the test of loyalty is in fact required only of those who are not “real,” “natural” citizens. Neither of these concepts—that of the real citizen, nor that of loyalty to the nation-state—is as neutral as it appears. Neither is admissible, in this abstract form, in anything that pretends to be a democratic politics, as I hope the following discussion of debates and arguments among Indian nationalists in 1947 and after will show.

II

The point I want to begin with is the simple one of the unrealizable quality of the nationalist search for clarity, uniformity, and “purity” in the midst of man-

ifest uncertainty, fluidity and inequality—which is of course the actually existing condition of all nations and nationalisms. “Are we entitled to claim the status of true citizens, who have sacrificed family, caste, community, and religion in the name of the nation?” Indian nationalists repeatedly asked in 1947. Are *all* citizens asked to sacrifice the claims of family, caste, community and religion? we might ask in turn.

Partition and Independence—15 August 1947—was the moment of establishment of the two new nation-states of India and Pakistan. But it was also—and here the date becomes less clear-cut—the moment of the congealing of new identities, relations, and histories, or of their being thrown into question once again. The particular circumstances attending this birth scarcely require restatement. Practically the entire “minority” population of certain areas was driven out: Hindus and Sikhs from the West Pakistan territories, and Muslims from East Punjab and several neighbouring tracts in India. While the figures will never be established with certainty, it is likely that half a million or more people lost their lives; incalculable numbers were maimed, looted and raped; and some fourteen million were uprooted and turned into refugees for a long time to come. All of the erstwhile “northern India” (including both the eastern and western wings of Pakistan), and many of the central and southern states (among them Hyderabad in southern India) were more or less seriously affected.

What made the moment of independence particularly bitter was that neither of the two new states turned out to be quite what its proponents had hoped for. Pakistan has perhaps had the more anguished history in this respect. It had been proposed as a Muslim homeland, the country of the Muslim nation of the subcontinent. There was never any question, however, that the ninety million Muslims of undivided India—spread out all over that territory, with Muslim-majority regions existing in northwestern and northeastern India and in pockets (towns and subdistricts) elsewhere—would all be accommodated, or even wish to migrate, to the areas that became Pakistan.

To complicate matters further, the political leaders who founded the state of Pakistan seemed, at the moment of its foundation, to turn away from the proposition of an Islamic nation-state to the conception of a secular, multireligious Pakistan. This is what Mohammad Ali Jinnah had to say in his famous speech at the opening session of the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan, on 11 August 1947: “You may belong to any religion or caste or creed—that has nothing to do with the business of the state. . . . We are all citizens and equal citizens of one state. . . . You will find that in the course of time Hindus would cease to be Hindus and Muslims would cease to be Muslims, not in the religious sense, because that is the personal faith of each individual but in the political sense as citizens of the state.”

This new tone produced considerable bewilderment among followers of the Muslim League, as well as a heated counter-attack. “How could Muslims cease to be Muslims and Hindus cease to be Hindus in the political sense when the

religions . . . were, in Jinnah's passionately held belief, so utterly different from one another? Was Jinnah giving up the two-nation theory?" one Pakistani commentator subsequently asked. In a letter to the *Civil and Military Gazette* of 21 October 1947, Muhammad Sa'adat Ali of Lahore protested against a Pakistan minister's statement that Pakistan was "a secular, democratic and not a theocratic state." Such a statement "has absolutely no support of the Muslims," he wrote. "Ever since Mr. Jinnah undertook to fight our case, he has, on occasions without number, proclaimed emphatically that Muslims were determined to set up a state organised and run in accordance with the irresistible dictates of the Islamic Shariat. . . . If secularization were our sole aim, India need not have been partitioned. . . . We raised this storm for partition because we wanted to live as free Muslims and organise a state on Islamic principles."

On the Indian side, too, this confusion, and the ongoing transfer of populations in the midst of unimaginable violence and bloodshed, provoked angry questions. The Muslims had fairly widely supported the movement for Pakistan—though, as was already becoming evident, few had clear ideas about what that goal meant. Be that as it may, opponents of the Pakistan scheme now declared that the Muslims had after all got a state of their own, as they wanted. Large numbers of Muslims had migrated to the new state. Others were fleeing. Those that remained still harboured sympathies for Pakistan, it was widely rumoured, and many of them were gathering and storing arms. Was this just for self-defense, the question was asked again and again, and were they entitled in any case to take the question of such defense into their own hands, instead of putting their faith in the governmental authorities? Did these suspect people, open supporters of Pakistan until yesterday, and potential fifth columnists, have any right to remain in India?

Partition and Independence thus gave rise to an intense debate about what the character of the new nation-states should be: secular (which was to say multi-community, with equal rights for all)? socialist? Hindu? Muslim? Pakistan emerged, after the long drawn out moment of Partition, with its communal holocaust and forced migrations as an overwhelmingly Muslim country, especially in its western half. As they saw this happening, sections of the Hindu nationalist press in India observed that Pakistan was on its way to establishing an "*ekjatiya rashtra*" (literally, a one-nation nation, or a homogenous, one-people nation), and lamented that India might never be able to achieve the same kind of unity (or homogeneity?). Substantial sections of the north Indian population, especially Hindu and Sikh refugees from West Pakistan and those most directly affected by their influx, and sections of the political leadership, especially the Hindu right wing and leaders of the Sikh community, also demanded that India (or at least some parts of it, like East Punjab, Delhi, and the neighbouring districts of western Uttar Pradesh—earlier known as the United Provinces of Agra and Awadh; hereafter, U.P.—where Hindu and Sikh refugees had flooded in in the weeks before and after 15 August 1947), should

be cleared of Muslims: the latter should be sent to Pakistan, and the territory handed over to the Sikhs and Hindus.

Could any substantial body of Indian Muslims stay on in India in these conditions? The answer to this question was perhaps provided in the end by sheer exhaustion, by the recognition that killing and counterkilling, massacre and countermassacre could not go on endlessly without destroying everything and everybody, by the fact that in some areas there was no one left to kill (except in fairly well-guarded refugee camps), and the awareness that the entire body of Muslims in India could not be driven out anyway. This growing exhaustion and awareness, however dim, was aided by the combined efforts of the governments on both sides to provide safe passage to all those who wished to migrate, especially from the two Punjabs; by the determination of a large section of India's nationalist (and left wing) leaders and workers to stand by the goals of the Indian freedom struggle and fight for a secular republic where all of India's inhabitants were entitled to live, irrespective of religious denomination; and by the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi in January 1948 at the hands of a Hindu extremist, which seems to have brought a good deal of northern India back to its senses and marked a turning point in the debate between "secular nation" and "Hindu nation."

The Muslims stayed, constituting ten percent of the new nation-state's population.⁵ But the question remained: can a Muslim really be an Indian? This is one of the enduring legacies of Partition in India, and it has more than a little to do with the way in which Indian nationalism and the Indian state have gone about the task of managing "difference" from that day to this.

III

Which were the Muslims who had the right to stay on in India? Gandhi and Nehru and other major nationalist leaders answered the question categorically in 1947 and 1948: all those who wished to. But there were doubts even in the minds of many who espoused this policy, and more than a little resistance from other quarters. The recriminations, calculations, bitterness, and violence of the preceding year showed no signs of abating after 15 August 1947. Large numbers of politically conscious and mobilized Hindus felt betrayed, and openly moved to right wing positions. The Sikhs, split down the middle by the partition of Punjab, were angry and bewildered almost as a community.⁶ Muslim Leaguers in those provinces that remained in India, where Muslims were a minority—having obtained a partition which they had probably never expected, and about the practical implications of which they had certainly thought little—were at a loss.⁷

Few people now cared to differentiate carefully among the Muslims of India. The regional, caste and occupational markers by which generations of Mus-

⁵ The same held true in East Pakistan, which was to become Bangladesh in 1971, where the Hindu population has remained as high as ten percent of the total.

lims had been known—and privileged, denigrated, or even declared to be only “half-Muslims”—seemed to lose much of their significance. The Muslims were now, more and more—in official documents, in journalism, and in common conversation—simply “Muslims,” and all of them were suspect as open or closet Pakistanis. When Gandhi declared it the duty of the central government and all provincial governments in India to ensure that “full justice” was done to the Muslims, there were many outraged protests. The comments of a Kanpur nationalist daily on 19 June 1947 provide an indication of the tone of much of this reaction. “We are prepared to deny our instinctive feelings,” the editors wrote, “and go along with Mahatma Gandhi to the extent that we accept the good faith not only of Congress members but of all nationalist Muslims [though their numbers are “steadily declining,” the same paper would observe a couple of months later], and give to them the rights of Indian citizens. . . . But it would be a political blunder of a high order if we were to give these privileges to every Muslim living in India.”⁸ The “Muslims”—that blanket, undifferentiated category—had been too much involved in the Muslim League demand for Pakistan: their sympathies were not likely to change overnight, and their loyalty could not be counted upon.

The same suspicion spread, where it did not already exist, among the ranks of the senior Congress leadership. An article published by Babu Sampurnanand, then Education Minister in the Congress Government of U.P., two weeks before official Partition and Independence, illustrates the point very well indeed.⁹ Sampurnanand looked forward to the 15th of August with the mixture of excitement and sadness that was the common lot of thinking nationalists at this time. He spelled out the reasons for the sadness as follows: “In earlier times too, India has for centuries been divided into small independent states, but overriding these political boundaries a cultural uniformity held these provinces together in a common bond. Today, this bond is breaking: the culture that the leaders [of Pakistan]

⁶ See, for example, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, AICC Papers, G-34/1947, Resolutions from several villages of Ferozepur and ‘Hindu and Sikh Public of Campbellpur,’ sent to President, Indian National Congress, 9 July 1947; also (India Office Records, London) T. W. Rees Collection (uncatalogued at the time I saw it), “A Note on the Communal and Political Situation in the Punjab” (Appendix A to Lahore Area Op. Instr. No. 6, dated 23 July 1947); “Punjab Boundary Force Intelligence Summary No. 1,” 6 August 1947; and “Report of the Punjab Boundary Force, 1 August–1st/2nd September 1947” (New Delhi, 15 November 1947), ch. 2 and *passim*. (I am grateful to Professor Robin Jeffrey for first drawing my attention to these papers, which have now been acquired by the India Office Library and Records.)

⁷ See the U.P. Governor’s report to the viceroy in early June, after the public announcement that India was to be partitioned into the two new states of India and Pakistan. The Muslim League legislators in U.P. are “coo[ing] like doves,” he reported, now that a “national home” for the Muslims has been conceded: “the whole attitude now is that in the U.P. we must forget the past and become all brothers together.” (India Office Records, London) Mss. Eur. F200/168, Wylie-Mountbatten, 9 June 1947.

⁸ *Vartman*, 19 June 1947. (I am grateful to Saumya Gupta for giving me access to her photocopies of the files of this newspaper.)

⁹ *Ibid.* 30 July 1947.

have promised to develop for the provinces that are breaking away is utterly un-Indian." Sampurnanand still expressed the hope that the "two halves" would come together again, but when or how this might happen, he could not say.

In spite of this sorrow, *swa-raj* (self-rule, independence) was to be welcomed. India was losing something, wrote Sampurnanand, but what she was gaining was greater by far: "we are going to recover that [precious] thing that we lost a thousand years ago." Note how easily, not to say naturally, the "we" is constructed as "Hindu": today "we" (Hindus/Indians) are going to recover that freedom which we lost with the coming of "Muslim" power. The Congress leader says this explicitly in his next sentence: "With the defeat of Prithviraj [at the hands of Mohammad Ghori] at the battle of Thanesar, Bharat [India] lost its *swa* [one's own, or self]. Look at the history of *our* science and *our* philosophy. Over the last one thousand years there has *not been even one development* [*aavishkar*, literally, invention] which has contributed a mite to the sum of human knowledge." [emphasis added]

Finally, Sampurnanand mentioned a lurking fear about the potential loyalties of Muslims in independent India. To put this in context it is necessary to reiterate that the theme of "the defense of our borders" is a crucial ingredient of modern states and their nationalisms. Sampurnanand's article was full of it too. The northwestern frontier of India was at the Khyber Pass. This was no political fantasy, it was "nature's arrangement," he wrote. Now unfortunately the burden of the defense of this frontier would fall on the young and inexperienced shoulders of Pakistan.

"Non-violence is of no use under the present circumstances in India," Major-General K. M. Cariappa, deputy chief of the Indian Army Staff, was to say shortly; only a strong army could make India "one of the greatest nations in the world."¹⁰ Durga Das, a young correspondent of the pro-Congress *Hindustan Times*, went further and demanded the building of a strong state by liquidating enemy pockets, and of a strong army on the Nazi model.¹¹ Nathuram Godse, Gandhi's assassin, put it no less plainly in explaining his opposition to Gandhi: India needed to become a "modern" nation, "practical, able to retaliate, and . . . powerful with the armed forces,"¹² For this purpose Gandhian notions of non-violence and turning the other cheek were simply of no use.

In the midst of this rising feeling, Sampurnanand wrote of the need for a militant, modern nationalism. If, "God forbid," there was ever a war between India and Pakistan, "*our* worries will be greatly increased, for it is not impossible that the sympathies of our Muslim population will veer towards Pakistan." The fear expressed here grew in strength in the weeks and months that followed, as Partition worked itself out and large numbers of Indian Muslims were pushed

¹⁰ *Statesman*, 29 October 1947.

¹¹ *Hindustan Times*, 28 September 1947, cited in *People's Age*, 12 October 1947.

¹² Cited in Ashish Nandy. *At the Edge of Psychology: Essays in Politics and Culture*. (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1980), 91.

into a corner. Indeed the political history of India for some time afterwards, and some might say until today, has in no small part been the history of a struggle to control this fear.

In the later months of 1947, a wide range of India's nationalist leaders began to focus on the issues that Sampurnanand had raised—war, and loyalty in war. The renowned Socialist leader Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia, speaking at a public meeting in Delhi on 11 October 1947, urged the people to “rally round the Nehru Government and make it strong enough to take, when necessary, effective measures against the Pakistan Government.” This was an appeal to all communal forces, Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh, and to those who harboured doubts about the government's declared secular platform. But three days earlier, at another rally in Delhi, Lohia had pointedly asked India's Muslims to “surrender arms and . . . be loyal citizens of India, ready to fight, if need be, against Pakistan or any other country.”¹³

At the same time, Govind Ballabh Pant, Congress Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh—accomplished parliamentarian, able administrator, and a man of large, secular, human sympathies—was driving home the same point. Every Indian Muslim should “realize clearly” what loyalty to the nation would mean if Pakistan invaded India, he declared. “Every Muslim in India would be required to shed his blood fighting the Pakistani hordes, and each one should search his heart now, and decide whether he should migrate to Pakistan or not.”¹⁴

Muslim leaders who stayed on in India were also under some pressure to express themselves in these terms. The Raja of Mahmudabad, Secretary of the All-India Muslim League and Jinnah's right-hand man for much of the decade before 1947, provides a striking illustration. As with so many other Muslim League leaders of U.P. and Bihar, Mahmudabad had never contemplated leaving his native land. Broken by the experience that Partition turned out to be, he resigned from the Muslim League in September 1947. The party had committed hara-kiri, he said. To keep it alive in India now was a cruel joke. Most of its leaders—Mahmudabad actually said “all”—had run away from India, leaving the Indian Muslims to their fate. These opportunists should now be clear in their minds that they would never be able to mislead the Muslim masses again. “All Indian Muslims would go to war for India, even if they had to go to war against Pakistan.”¹⁵ Taking a similar tack, M. A. Salam, a member of the Madras Legislative Assembly and of the All-India Muslim League Council, declared that his community of Andhra Muslims was loyal to the Indian Union and “shall defend it against anybody to the last drop of their blood.”¹⁶ That last contention

¹³ *The Statesman*, 9 October and 12 October 1947. At the end of September, at a public meeting of prominent citizens addressed by Gandhi, one person declared that “the citizens of Delhi [sic] were ready to live in peace with the Muslims provided they were loyal to the Union and surrendered all arms and ammunition which they possessed without a license.” *The Statesman*, 2 October 1947.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* See *Aj*, 22 September 1947 for report of another, very similar speech by Pant.

¹⁵ *Aj*, 7 October 1947. ¹⁶ *Pakistan Times*, 8 October 1947.

had become a password to citizenship, as it were: it is a password that has been demanded of Muslims in India, in one form or another, ever since.

Partition produced a plethora of ideas on the question of what would constitute an adequate proof of loyalty to India on the part of the Indian Muslims. Many called for the disbanding of the Muslim League, and the giving up of any demand that smacked even remotely of “separatism”—such as appeals for separate electorates, or an assured quota of legislative seats for Muslims. As the deputy Prime Minister of India, Vallabhbhai Patel, put it in the Constituent Assembly debate on minority rights, these were the measures that had resulted in “the separation of the country”: “Those who want that kind of thing have a place in Pakistan, not here (*applause*) . . . we are laying the foundations of One Nation, and those who choose to divide again [*sic*] and sow the seeds of disruption will have no place, no quarter here . . . (*Hear, hear!*).”¹⁷ Today, a whole host of other groups have demanded, and obtained, “reservations” of various kinds to enable them to compete more equally in the administrative and political processes of India, and it is just possible that sections of the Muslim community will also be allowed to espouse similar demands. But that was a very different moment, fifty years ago.

The “Muslim League mentality” was by that time pronounced as being completely unacceptable. As part of this pronouncement, many nationalist observers declared that Muslim government officials in India, who had joined Muslim professionals and educated urban youth in generating enthusiasm for the Pakistan idea, and who had opted for Pakistan in substantial numbers where the option was available (at different levels of the bureaucracy), needed watching. Those who reversed an earlier option in favor of working in Pakistan, and decided to stay on in India, needed to be watched even more carefully, for this reversal might well be part of a plot hatched by the Muslim League and the leaders of Pakistan to plant spies in the corridors of power in India.

In support of this theory, the nationalist press gave much prominence to reports of documents recovered from passengers departing to or returning from Pakistan, of arms and machinery found on the persons or in the baggage of Muslim officials in transit, and of the inefficient implementation of government orders by subordinate Muslim officials (as if they alone were guilty of inefficiency!). In one instance the incriminating “documents” seized at Lucknow airport appear to have been handwritten letters sent by refugees in Pakistan to their relatives in India, urging them to come away as soon as possible because conditions in India were (from all reports) very bad and the future was unpredictable. Among reports of “arms” seizures, it is no surprise to find mention of electric batteries, kerosene oil, bales of cloth, and air guns, along with swords, daggers, spears, guns and more serious weapons. A Delhi paper reported in September 1947 that a “large number” of Muslim police officers were found try-

¹⁷ *Constituent Assembly Debates: Official Report*. vol. V, 271.

ing to leave for Pakistan “without notice,” taking with them their “uniforms and weapons!”¹⁸

Muslim Leaguers and Muslim bureaucrats who remained in India amidst all these accusations and suspicions, scarcely proved their loyalty in the eyes of their interrogators by taking that difficult decision to stay on. They were called upon, of course, to swear oaths of loyalty to the new state, which they did. However, a demonstration of Muslim loyalty to the nation now forbade any assertion of separate Muslim needs or of a “Muslim” perspective. Thus the *Aj* of Banaras, perhaps the most important Congress paper in the Hindi belt, welcomed the pledge of loyalty to the constitution taken by the Muslim League members of the Constituent Assembly, but asked on 20 August 1947 why the same people had absented themselves at the time of the singing of “*Bande Mataram*,” the “national song” (as *Aj* called it) composed by Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, with its fairly pronounced Hindu overtones. The Muslim legislators had explained that they had abstained on grounds of religious sensibility. The editors of the Banaras daily shot back that while this anthem, unlike the flag, had not so far been ratified by the Constituent Assembly, it nevertheless had the stamp of “historical legitimacy.”

As we have noted, some Muslim leaders in India demanded the disbanding of the League and the strengthening of the “secular,” “democratic” Indian National Congress, as the one party that could guarantee the safety and rights of Muslims. Others argued that the League should continue, but as an unambiguously secular party, working with other secular parties in India for the common advancement of the masses. The Muslim League leaders in India had readily sworn an oath of loyalty to the Indian flag and constitution. Yet many continued—as they had to, because of troubled conditions—to meet relatives and associates, and for political negotiations—to go and come between India and Pakistan, and a few still looked to Jinnah for guidance on how the Indian Muslims should be led.¹⁹ Their supporters, and large numbers of other ordinary, “non-political” Muslims hoisted the Indian tricolor and joined enthusiastically in the Independence Day celebrations on 15 August. Yet, in the prevailing circumstances, some prepared to defend themselves in case of attack, while many others sat in readiness to flee, should developments make it even more dangerous to stay.

The swearing of oaths was scarcely going to be seen as an adequate proof of loyalty in this context. “Loyalty is not established by mere verbal protestation,” declared the *Vartman* on 27 September 1947, “how do we have any demonstration of it without deeds [*amal*]?” The proofs called for were curious and varied. Muslims alone could stop the killings in Punjab and other parts of north-

¹⁸ *Tej* (Urdu), 18 September 1947.

¹⁹ Cf. Choudhry Khaliqzaman’s *Pathway to Pakistan*. (London: Longman’s, 1961), 411, on his reasons for resigning from the leadership of the Muslim League in the Indian Constituent Assembly.

ern India, it was said: all those who had any links with the Muslim League should urge “their Pakistani brethren” to put an end to the violence. Leaguers must make an unqualified denunciation of the two-nation theory and campaign actively for reunification. Muslims generally must step forward to help Hindu and Sikh refugees, and thereby demonstrate their patriotism. They should report fellow Muslims who collected arms or otherwise created trouble. They should be prepared to go to West Punjab and “take up the cudgels against their Pakistani brothers for their misdeeds.” Indian Muslims would of course have to be prepared to lay down their lives for the country, as we have noted, but even before war broke out, they could prove their loyalty by taking up arms against “their Pakistani brothers!”²⁰

Two comments made during the debate on minority rights in the Constituent Assembly sum up the position of the Indian Muslims in the aftermath of Partition. One came from Mahavir Tyagi, a prominent Congressman of western U.P., when the debate was being wound up on 26 May 1949: “The Muslims already know that they will not be returned [in elections to the various legislatures] for some time to come, so long as they do not rehabilitate themselves among the masses and assure the rest of the people that they are one with them. They have been separate in every matter for a long time past and in a day you can’t switch over from Communalism to Nationalism.”²¹ The other was a straightforward statement from Vallabhbhai Patel to the Muslims, made in the course of the speech quoted earlier in this paper: “*you* must change your attitude, adapt yourself to the changed conditions . . . don’t pretend to say ‘Oh, our affection is great for you.’ We have seen your affection. Let us forget the affection. Let us face the realities. Ask yourself whether you really want to stand here and cooperate with *us* or you want to play disruptive tactics.”²²

IV

It remains for us to examine how the (supposedly natural) “we”/“us” of Indian nationalism was constructed at the moment of Partition and Independence. The suspicion that came to be attached to a section of Muslims is not altogether surprising, given the confusion attending the establishment of Pakistan, although the extension of the argument to encompass all Muslims as potential fifth columnists was patently unjust and loaded with dangerous implications. However, it was the manner in which the four accepted columns—the “we” of Indian nationalism—came to be presented at this juncture that was particularly insidious, because it proceeded without the need for any argument, axiomatically as it were. The “we” just happened to be that: the real, essential nation. In adopting this view, I am suggesting, Indian nationalism was by no means exceptional.

²⁰ See the comments of the U.P. Congress leaders A. P. Jain and Charan Singh, as reported in *Aj*, 26 September, and *Pakistan Times*, 11 October 1947, respectively; also other reports in *Aj*, 7 October, and *Vartman*, 27 September 1947.

²¹ *Constituent Assembly Debates*. Vol. VIII, 346. ²² *Ibid.* Vol. V, 271. (Emphasis added).

Many elaborations of the “us” and “them” of Indian nationalism during the late 1940s served to reinforce the conceptual split between the Hindu/Indian on the one hand, and the Muslim/foreigner on the other. Occasionally, this was presented as a division between the “majority” and the “minorities,” as in numerous Constituent Assembly speeches on the “generosity” of the majority towards the minorities. The easy, almost invisible, construction of the Hindus as the real Indians, and the others—especially the Muslims, who, as we have seen, stood particularly under the sign of a question mark—as communities on trial, is to be found in other kinds of nationalist statement as well. The vernacular press, speaking for the non-metropolitan intelligentsia—provincial notables, small town professionals, teachers, journalists, traders and clerks, who lent a great deal of the most vocal support to the nationalism of this period—provides numerous excellent illustrations.

Let me cite only one such example, from an editorial published in the Kanpur Hindi daily *Vartman* of 12 October 1947, which asks the question “Whose country is this?” in its first line. The answer is given at once: “All those who can call India their native land [*swadesh*] in the real sense of the term, this country is theirs.” The editors then proceed to spell out how the Buddhists and Jains, Sikhs, Christians, Anglo-Indians, and Parsis all belong here, because they think of India as their native land. Persecuted in early times, some Hindus became Buddhist and Jains. “However, they did not change their nationality [sic]. They did not leave the country. They did not start calling themselves Chinese or Japanese.” Similarly, a Sikh *panth* (community or tradition) arose. “This Sikh community also recognizes India as their *janmabhumi* [land of their birth] and therefore their country.”

The analysis so far is simple. The Buddhists (even though they have practically disappeared from the land of the Buddha), Jains, and Sikhs treated India as the land of their birth because this is where they and their religious traditions were born. They are, in that sense, “original”, “natural” Indians. The argument in the case of the other small religious (and racial) groupings—the Christians, Anglo-Indians, and Parsis—is not quite so straightforward. Many of the lowest castes and classes had embraced Christianity in recent times, the editorial noted, to escape the worst oppressions of untouchability, as much as anything else. “Yet they did not forget that they could never go and settle in Europe; [they knew that] India would always be their country.”

The Anglo-Indians had, on the other hand, remained ambivalent for some time. They were after all Eurasian, both English and Indian by blood, and many of them had sought to migrate (as they would continue to do during the 1950s, and to some extent later). But there were two points which went in their favour, as *Vartman* saw it. First, their numbers were never very great: they could never match those of the Muslims. Secondly, the departing British had left them to fend for themselves: “they came to their senses as soon as the British left” and recognized India as their native land.

The propositions here are patronizing, and full of paradoxes. The Indian

Christians could not dream of settling in Europe. The Anglo-Indians did dream of it, but were left high and dry by the departing colonial rulers. In any case, the two communities were numerically small and quite widely dispersed. They had no other country to go to, and they constituted no threat to the nation or its culture. India could therefore be treated as their native land.

The argument was different again in the case of the Parsis. They came to the country from Iran, but as refugees, fleeing to save their lives, not as aggressors or missionaries. Nor did they give up their religion, culture, or language on settling here. “Nevertheless, many of them have contributed to the economic, intellectual, social, and political development of India like true citizens.” This is a line of reasoning with which we are not unfamiliar. Wealthy Japanese business people and Arab sheikhs are welcome in England, the United States, and Australia because they contribute to the “economic” and “intellectual” development of these areas: not so the Bradford Muslims or Sikhs of Southall, the Mexican casual labourers or Vietnamese boat-people. That was what went in favour of the Parsis in India: they were a small, almost a microscopic minority, and because of the fairly privileged economic and social position they enjoyed in places like Bombay, many of them had—“like true citizens,” as it was said—contributed to the economic, intellectual, social, and political development of India.

The case of the Muslims of India was another matter altogether. Conversions to Islam had taken place on a very large scale, so that there were now ninety million Muslims in India, twenty-five percent of the total population of undivided India. The majority of these Muslims had come from the depressed classes of the Hindu population, the paper acknowledged: they had become Muslims to escape from the extreme sanctions and disabilities of the caste system. However, resisting the oppressiveness of the Hindu caste system was one thing, and shedding one’s “national” culture, religion, language, and dress another. “Flesh and blood of the Hindus though they were, these Hindavi Muslims came to think of themselves as belonging to the Arab and Mughal communities [or nations, since the term *jati* can refer to either] . . . Rulers like Aurangzeb, and later on the British, never tired of preaching that they [the Muslims] have been the governors of this country, and that their direct links are with Arabia, Persia, and Turkey. Their language, appearance, religion, and practices are all different from those of the Hindus.”

The *Vartman* editorial refers to the tyranny and destructiveness of the Muslim invaders. It adds that the local converts have been even more tyrannical and destructive, attacking Hindu temples, images, and religious processions, and making a point of sacrificing the cow at the Baqr Id precisely because the cow was sacred to the Hindus. But these sweeping and astonishing generalizations are by way of rhetorical flourish: “well known” propositions, we are told, that serve only to underline the basic argument that the Muslims of India are (or may be suspected of being) alien because “when they changed their religion, they

also dreamt up schemes of changing their country.” “They did not think of the [other] people living in India as their own. They thought of the local language [as if there were only one!] as foreign. They cut themselves off from Indian civilization and culture.”

In the course of the anti-colonial struggle, the argument goes on, when people of every other community joined in a common fight for freedom, the Muslims stood in the way. They made separatist demands, played into the hands of the British, and were rewarded, finally, with the prize of Pakistan—from where Hindus were now being driven out. Many Indian Muslims had earlier tried to migrate to Persia, Arabia, Mesopotamia, and Turkey, only to return disappointed. Today, “if there was place in Pakistan, if there were agricultural lands, jobs, and if they had their way, [these Muslims] would undoubtedly go and settle there.” On other occasions, the editors of *Vartman* had declared that Pakistan was like Mecca, like paradise even, for every Indian Muslim, and Jinnah was like their Prophet.

Now, on 12 October 1947, the editorial continued: large numbers of Muslims had already gone to settle in Pakistan, and many more sat waiting to go. As for the rest, who had decided to stay back, did they show signs of willingness to live in peace with the other communities of India—“Sikh, Jain, Buddhists, Christians, Parsis and Anglo-Indians?” “These machine-guns, mortars, rifles, pistols, bombs, dynamite, swords, spears and daggers, that are being discovered daily [in Muslim houses and localities], are all these being collected for the defense of India?” The problem, in the editors’ view, was that there was just not enough place for all of these Muslims in Pakistan. But the fact that so many stayed on in India was no reason to think of them automatically as Indian. There was need for greater discrimination than that.

It would perhaps be a waste of time to point out all the errors of fact and the blatant half-truths that pepper *Vartman*’s analysis of the Muslim condition.²³ There is one feature of the statement, however, that requires special emphasis. At some stage in this articulation of the conditions of citizenship, an argument about culture gives way almost imperceptibly to an argument about politics—or, more precisely, about political power. The Anglo-Indians, unable to attain the numerical strength of the Muslims, never constituted a threat. The Parsis remained different in religion, culture, and “language”, as the Hindi paper had it,

²³ In connection with the proposition that the “language, appearance, religion, and practices” of the Muslims were “all different” from those of the Hindus, I might note only that all the Indian Muslims I know or have heard of speak the Bengali, Gujarati, Marathi, Malayalam, Punjabi, Hindi, Urdu (or to break the vernaculars down further, the Awadhi, Bhojpuri, Magahi, etc.) of their regions. I should add that Urdu—designated the language of the Indian Muslims, which is also my language, and the language of very large numbers of Hindus and Sikhs of my parents’ and grandparents’ generation—whatever else it might be, is not a foreign language, but distinctively Indian (or, now, subcontinental). And just as Indian intellectuals claim, with considerable justification, that English is now one of the languages of India, one would also have to assert that Islam is now (and has long been) one of the religions of India.

but they had contributed significantly to “our” political, economic, intellectual, and social development. The Muslims had, on the other hand, put forward their own, separatist demands, and had stood in the way of the united struggle against the British. They had not accepted “our” conception of India: they were therefore not Indians.

There is another important aspect of this articulation. It is noteworthy that in the entire analysis the Hindus appear only a couple of times, in passing, as the people from whom the Muslims sought to differentiate themselves. An editorial that elaborates the character and place of the different religious communities of India in answer to the question, “Whose country is this?,” does not even feel the need to mention the Hindu community as a separate constituent of the nation. For the Hindus are not a constituent. They *are* the nation, the “we” who demand cooperation from the minorities, the “us” that the Muslims have to learn to live with. Like the land and the trees, the rivers and mountains, these invisible Hindus are the nation’s natural condition, its essence and spirit. Their culture is the nation’s culture, their history its history. This needs no stating.

There was a poignant moment in the Constituent Assembly debates on the question of minority rights when Frank Anthony, the leader of the Anglo-Indians, referred to a comment sometimes made to him that he should drop the prefix “Anglo” from his description of his community if he was as strongly committed to India as he claimed. Anthony’s response was that, “good or bad”, “rightly or wrongly”, the word “Anglo-Indian” “connotes to me many things which I hold dear.” He went further, however: “I will drop it readily, as soon as you drop your label. . . . The day you drop the label of ‘Hindu,’ the day you forget that you are a Hindu, that day—no, two days before that—I will drop by deed poll, by beat of drum if necessary, the prefix ‘Anglo.’” That day, he added, “will be welcome first and foremost to the minorities of India.”²⁴

The Anglo-Indian leader’s argument was logical, but misplaced. It would have appeared meaningless to many Hindus, who did not have to use the designation “Hindu” in any case. At Partition and for a long time afterwards, they were the silent majority. They did not need to advertise the fact that they were Hindus: for some time after the assassination of Gandhi by a Hindu extremist, it was even a little difficult for the more militant among them to do so. Inasmuch as they were Hindu, they were automatically Indian. It was enough in this age of high nationalism to claim the latter designation. The question of what it meant to be a Hindu, what advantages such a classification brought to the lower castes and classes, and whether the Hindus as a whole were disprivileged, was not to be taken up in a sustained way until the 1980s or 90s.²⁵

To have given greater political visibility to the category of the Hindus at the moment of nationalist triumph in the 1940s would perhaps have meant running

²⁴ *Constituent Assembly Debates*. Vol. VIII, 329.

²⁵ Ambedkar and other Dalit leaders had of course already initiated a significant debate about the relevance of the category “Hindu” for their followers, and similar questions had been raised in connection with the *adivasis* in the work of anthropologists like G. S. Ghurye and Verrier Elwin.

the risk of differentiating and problematizing it, and of having to recognize that history and culture and naturalness are not uncontested. This may also be the reason why the argument about whose country this is could not be acknowledged as a *political* argument. For to concede that the nation was a political project, first and foremost, would be to concede its historicity. To acknowledge that the nationalist struggle was a struggle for political power would be to open up the question of who should wield that power and to what end—for the progress of the nation could not mean exactly the same thing to all parts of that imagined community.

There was a tacit agreement (as it seemed) that, while these political questions would certainly be tackled in the constitution-making body and elsewhere, they must be kept separate from the sacred and natural history of nationalism. This set of questions therefore remained suspended in the nationalist debates at the moment of Partition and Independence. Thus, a particular conception of the Indian nation emerged, in which the Muslims had an unenviable place, the Dalits and other oppressed castes and classes were invisible or only symbolically present (as the “backward” parts of the nation, to be lifted up by those who ruled in the “general interest,” for the advancement of the nation as a whole), and other religious minorities and marginal nationalities had to work in collaboration with, and willy-nilly in subordination to, that other invisible category, the “mainstream, Hindu majority.”

v

It may be said that my analysis of nationalist discourse in India is skewed by the fact that I have investigated it at an exceptional time, amidst all the extraordinary pressures and demands of Independence and, especially, Partition. My response is simply this: all nations, all nationalisms and nationalist discourses, are made in exceptional (that is to say, particular, if not unique) historical circumstances. It was in the particular context of 1947—building on more than a century of colonial governance premised on the division between Hindus and Muslims, and on an extended (and oft-retold) history of Muslim adventurers raiding the land, settling, and setting up towns and kingdoms in which the question of religious and ethnic identities became important political issues—that the “we” of Indian nationalism came to be elaborated, and the Muslims came to be marked out as a minority.

It was whiteness that came to be constructed as the core of American, or Australian, nationhood, and Englishness that became the core of the British nation, though, in all of these cases, the demographic and political changes brought by a more recent history of substantial colored immigration (at times actively encouraged for economic reasons, at other times severely discouraged) have pushed the “mainstream” into other channels or, at least, different debates. In other circumstances—such as those of the subcontinent, where diverse regions have fought to retain a greater degree of autonomy and political power—national cores have crystallized very differently. Indeed, even within one given

set of historical circumstances, there remains the distinct possibility of national identities and boundaries and “mainstreams” crystallizing in different ways. Surely the India of 1947 provides striking testimony to this.

Partition and Independence (not only in the form of divisions on the map, but of divisions on the ground and in the mind—the uprooting and looting, the rape and the recovery operations) marked a moment of enormous uncertainty in the political and social life of the people of the subcontinent. There was no knowing in 1947, nor for some time afterwards, who would belong where when things “finally” settled down. There was the redesignation of local castes and communities: those who had long adhered somewhat loosely to the label of Muslim, Hindu, or Sikh were now categorically named as one or the other. The Meos of Mewat, the Momins of U.P. and Bihar, the Mapillas of Malabar—all became simply “Muslims,” and for a while nothing else. There was, as we have noted, confusion about the meaning of Pakistan: was it to be a Muslim nation or a secular nation? What were the minorities to do there? Could any Muslim from any part of the subcontinent go and settle in that country? (Of course, some of the same questions applied in the new India, too.) There was uncertainty about the future of the Princely States, about national boundaries (would Gurdaspur, or Khulna, or particular tahsils and even villages in those districts be in India or Pakistan? Where would Kashmir go?), and about whether people would be free to come and go between Karachi and Bombay, Dacca and Calcutta and Hyderabad, as they had so long done, and continued to do for years after the official partition.

A few concrete examples will help to clarify the point. In July 1947, Vallabh-bhai Patel, Home Member in the Interim Government and acclaimed “strong man” of the Congress party, wrote to an anxious Hindu correspondent from West Punjab that the matter of citizenship was under the consideration of the Indian Constituent Assembly at that moment, but “whatever the definition may be, you can rest assured that the Hindus and Sikhs of Pakistan cannot be considered as aliens in India [sic].”²⁶ This is a particularly remarkable comment in light of all the charges that were to be leveled within the next few weeks and months against Muslims living in India.

In September 1947 Pakistani Army Headquarters approached the authorities at Aligarh Muslim University, 80 miles east of Delhi—practically in the heart of the political and sectarian upheaval in India at the time—to provide appropriate candidates for the university for recruitment to regular commissions in the Pakistan army. That request, and the university authorities’ innocent response—“Those interested in the above [call for applications] should see me in the Geography Department with a written application giving full particulars”²⁷—indicates how little the idea had sunk in, even for people in Government, that these were now separate countries, and that existing

²⁶ Patel’s letter of 16 July 1947 to Parmanand Trehan, in Durga Das, ed, *Sardar Patel’s Correspondence, 1945–50*. Vol. V (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1973), 289.

²⁷ *Ibid.* Vol. IV (1972), 426–7.

lines of communication and supply would therefore have to be reconsidered, if not cut off.

Indeed it was in December 1947 that the government of India declared Pakistan to be “foreign territory” for the purpose—and for this restricted purpose alone—of levying duties on raw jute and jute manufactures exported from India.²⁸ Exit permits, passports, and visas for travel between India and Pakistan—a special “Pakistan passport” first, and only later the standard passport needed for international travel—were still some time in the future. On the Indian side, in 1947–48, there was continued talk of possible reunification, and many, even in high political circles, thought that Pakistan simply would not last.

Yet, virtually from 15 August 1947, when India and Pakistan were constitutionally established as independent states, in the midst of this unparalleled uncertainty, the Muslims of India were asked to make a categorical declaration of the nation they belonged to: India or Pakistan. Towards the end of September 1947 even Jawaharlal Nehru was constrained to remark that only those men and women, Hindus or Muslims, were welcome to live in India who considered it their own nation, gave it their undivided loyalty, and refused to look to any outside agency for help. Removed from the confusion, suspicions, and violence of the time, this was an unexceptionable statement. But as the Calcutta daily, *The Statesman*, commented editorially on 5 October of that year, how were the Muslims of India to prove their loyalty when the very act of fleeing in fear from their homes was interpreted as a sign of disloyalty and extra-territorial attachment?

The consequences were hard, even for the more privileged among the Muslims living in Indian territory. In October 1947, Choudhry Khaliqzaman—high-profile leader of the Muslim League in the Indian Constituent Assembly, long time ally of Nehru and other Congress leaders in U.P. and subsequently a vocal champion of the rights of India’s Muslims—unexpectedly and abruptly migrated to Pakistan, leaving a bewildered Muslim League party behind. No one knew quite why he had suddenly made this decision, and his own explanations—that he wanted to make way for younger blood, that he could not reconcile himself to learning Hindi (which had been made the official language of U.P., and (in his autobiography, ten years later) that he felt someone who had Jinnah’s continued confidence should replace him and serve as the leader of the Indian Muslims—did not set the controversy at rest.

Somewhat later, in 1949, Z. H. Lari, the deputy leader of the Muslim League in the U.P. legislature, also left for Pakistan, although he had by then spoken out strongly against the “two-nation” theory, “separate electorates,” “reservations” and the accompanying baggage. It was, as many who lived through those times recall, primarily a question of where one could live in relative mental, and physical, peace.

Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan, the doyen of the Patiala *gharana* (school) of

²⁸ *Hindustan Times*, 23 December 1947; see Ganda Singh’s “Diary of Partition Days,” cited in Mushirul Hasan, ed. *India Partitioned: The Other Face of Freedom*. (Delhi: Roli Books, 1995), vol. 2, 87.

Hindustani music, moved to Pakistan, to live there in obscurity for five years, and then returned to India before his death. Josh Malihabadi, the great Urdu poet from Malihabad, near Lucknow, who had declared along with a host of other progressive writers that “we cannot partition Urdu,”²⁹ went and came and went again, several times over, unhappy in that he had no nation, no home now, and probably unclear to the end whether Urdu had been partitioned and what its fate would be in the two countries.

The fact is that the choice between India and Pakistan could have no clear meaning for Muslims living in what were called the “Muslim-minority provinces” of British India, especially in the immediate aftermath of Partition and Independence. The individuals mentioned in the preceding paragraphs were part of an elite, and possessed the resources, as well as the bureaucratic and political contacts, that enabled them to move to and fro, at least for a time. There were innumerable others who did not have the luxury of such trial periods—or the chance of an appeal to Jawaharlal Nehru—yet moved one way and then the other in search of security and peace.³⁰ In November 1947, for instance, it was reported that nearly five thousand Muslim railwaymen who had earlier opted for service in Pakistan, had now “set the authorities a serious problem” by withdrawing their preference for Pakistan and refusing to leave India. They were of course, by this change of decision, laying themselves open to the charge of being Pakistani agents engaged in a conspiracy, though their motives were almost certainly more mundane, the result of news of troubles on that side of the border too, and of the fact that working in Pakistan would create its own set of problems. Even their co-workers in U.P. were not inclined to be so generous, however. Hindu railwaymen in Lucknow threatened to go on strike if the “Pakistan personnel” (sic) were allowed to stay, and the railway authorities insisted that those who had opted for service in Pakistan must now go.³¹

A letter from one such railway worker, and the Indian government’s response to it, may serve as an appropriate conclusion to this paper. The letter was written in September 1947 by Safdar Ali Khan, “Guard, Moradabad,” to the Secretary, “Partition Department,” Government of India. Headed “Permission to revise my decision ‘to serve in India,’ it said: “I had submitted my final choice to serve in

²⁹ *People’s Age*, 7 September 1947.

³⁰ Thus a member of the staff of the British High Commission in Delhi, on tour on 17 November 1947, learned of a convoy of eighty thousand Meo peasants on their way to Pakistan along the Alwar road, which was likely to delay his motor car by several hours between Sohna and Gurgaon. On his homeward journey the next day, he saw that “the return movement of refugees had greatly increased,” the returnees including a group of some ten thousand Meos at Sohna who had decided against going to Pakistan after all, judging that the dangers of going forward were greater than those of turning back. (India Office Records, London) L/P & J/7/12589, R. C. Hadow’s report on his visit to Alwar.

³¹ *Statesman*, 23 November 1947. Cf. *Statesman*, 15 October 1947, in which their Lucknow correspondent reports that “By an interesting unanimity of purpose, backed, no doubt, by a firm administration of law and order, [the Muslims of U.P., who, he notes, form the largest concentration of Muslims outside the “Pakistan areas”] have been determined hitherto to stay put.”

Pakistan. . . . The persuasions of my fellow-workers and friends favoured [forced?] me to come to this decision at which I am rubbing my hands now [sic]. . . . My old mother is lying very seriously ill and she is not in a mood to allow me to go to Pakistan as she has no hope to survive her illness. . . . I have blundered in favour of Pakistan. Really speaking, as I have stated above, the decision was not my own but . . . made under compulsion. I am an Indian first and an Indian last. I want to live in India and die in India. . . . Hence I humbly request your honour to permit me to revise my decision and allow me to serve in India.”³²

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, the Education Minister of India, forwarded this letter to the Home Minister, Vallabhbhai Patel, who responded briefly: “The Partition Council decision has been that once a final choice is made it should be adhered to. I [can] see no prospect, therefore, of the gentleman, whose application you have sent me, being allowed to change his option now.”³³

There is a bureaucratic imperative at work here: two new state administrations are being set up, rules have to be made and followed. But there is a nationalist imperative as well. People simply have to decide where they stand and who they are, once and for all: and this is a demand, as we have observed, that is made insistently of *one* part of the nation’s inhabitants.

There were perhaps two voices of nationalism that could be heard in the above exchange, but it was the second that won out, as it has so often done in our times, asserting certainty even in the midst of the wholly uncertain. Nationalist thought has, indeed, always tended towards this end: by its separation of the public from the private—of the citizen from the merchant, from the day-laborer, the landowner, the religious person, and the Jew, as Marx noted famously in his “On the Jewish Question.”³⁴

Yet these private selves necessarily intrude upon the public. The corruptions that nationalists decry go to make up history and the concrete conditions in which we live. History, one might say, is nothing if it is not a process of contamination (to use a nationalist term): and a visionary politics has to be a continual process of negotiating new beginnings.

No nation, no state is natural; no people as chosen or pure as they might pretend. This is as true of Germany in the 1930s as it is of Germany today; as it is of Israel or Japan or any other modern nation-state. And it is—one might say fortunately—manifestly true in the Indian case. No citizen of India can avoid being Hindu/Muslim, Bengali/Kannadiga, shopkeeper/laborer, man/woman, father/mother, lower caste/upper caste, at the same time. It is tyrannical, in my view, to suggest that this is somehow traitorous.

³² Das. *Patel’s Correspondence*. Vol. IV, 421.

³³ *Ibid.* 422.

³⁴ “The difference between the religious man and the citizen is the [same as the] difference between the merchant and the citizen, between the day-labourer and the citizen, between the landowner and the citizen, between the *living individual* and the *citizen*.” Karl Marx. “On the Jewish Question,” in Karl Marx, *Early Writings* (London: Penguin Books, 1975), 220–221 (emphasis Marx’s).