Reimagining Muslim Agency and Identity in Post-Independence India

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Abstract

This review essay examines three recent scholarly works that explore the evolving relationship between India's Muslim minority and the nation-state in post-Independence India: *Another India* by Pratinav Anil; *The Muslim Secular* by Amar Sohal; and *A Brief History of the Present: Muslims in New India* by Hilal Ahmed. Collectively, these books challenge conventional academic narratives by placing Muslim agency at the centre of their analyses, portraying Muslims as active protagonists rather than passive victims in India's national story. Anil provides a revisionist account of Muslim elites navigating a post-colonial state rife with suspicion toward Muslim mobilization, while Sohal delves into the intellectual history of three prominent anti-partition leaders who re-conceptualized nationalism and secularism. Ahmed offers a sociopolitical analysis of contemporary Muslim behaviour in "New India," examining the historical lineages of the present regime, and emphasizing adaptive strategies amid growing political hostility. Through their various perspectives, these works detail how our present representations of the features of Muslim identity and their relationship to the Indian nation-state are shaped by contingent historical legacies of path dependence which were set during the early post-Independence decades. The review highlights how these works collectively address themes of identity, marginalization, and political negotiation, marking a significant re-conceptualization of the Muslim experience in India.

Keywords: Indian Muslims, Muslim agency, post-colonial India, nationalism, secularism, Congress system, Partition, identity politics, New India, Muslim elite

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Reimaginando la agencia y la identidad musulmanas en la India posindependencia

Resumen

Este ensayo de revisión examina tres trabajos académicos recientes que exploran la evolución de la relación entre la minoría musulmana de la India y el Estado-nación en la India posterior a la independencia: "Otra India", de Pratinav Anil; "El musulmán secular", de Amar Sohal; y "Una breve historia del presente: musulmanes en la Nueva India", de Hilal Ahmed. En conjunto, estos libros desafían las narrativas académicas convencionales al situar la agencia musulmana en el centro de sus análisis, presentándolos como protagonistas activos en lugar de víctimas pasivas en la historia nacional de la India. Anil ofrece un relato revisionista de las élites musulmanas que navegan en un estado poscolonial plagado de sospechas hacia la movilización musulmana, mientras que Sohal profundiza en la historia intelectual de tres destacados líderes antipartición que reconceptualizaron el nacionalismo y el secularismo. Ahmed ofrece un análisis sociopolítico del comportamiento musulmán contemporáneo en "Nueva India", examinando los linajes históricos del régimen actual y haciendo hincapié en las estrategias de adaptación en medio de la creciente hostilidad política. A través de sus diversas perspectivas, estas obras detallan cómo nuestras representaciones actuales de los rasgos de la identidad musulmana y su relación con el Estado-nación indio están condicionadas por los legados históricos contingentes de la dependencia de la trayectoria que se establecieron durante las primeras décadas posteriores a la independencia. La reseña destaca cómo estas obras abordan colectivamente temas de identidad, marginación y negociación política, marcando una importante reconceptualización de la experiencia musulmana en la India.

Palabras clave: Musulmanes indios, agencia musulmana, India poscolonial, nacionalismo, secularismo, sistema del Congreso, Partición, política de identidad, Nueva India, élite musulmana

重新构想印度独立后的穆斯林能力与身份

摘要

本篇述评文章分析了最近的三部学术著作，这些著作探讨了印度独立后穆斯林少数民族与民族国家之间不断变化的

关系，它们分别为：Pratinav Anil撰写的《另一个印度》(Another India)；Amar Sohal撰写的《世俗穆斯林》(The Muslim Secular)；以及 Hilal Ahmed撰写的《当代简史：新印度的穆斯林》(A Brief History of the Present: Muslims in New India)。总体而言，这些著作将穆斯林能力置于分析中心，将穆斯林描绘成印度国家故事中的积极主角而不是被动的受害者，从而挑战了传统的学术叙事。Anil对“穆斯林精英如何在充满穆斯林动员怀疑情绪的后殖民国家中生存”进行了修正主义描述，而Sohal则研究了三位对民族主义和世俗主义进行再概念化的著名反分治领导人的思想史。Ahmed对“新印度”中当代穆斯林的行为进行了社会政治分析，研究了当前政权的历史渊源，并强调了在日益增长的政治敌意中采取适应性策略。这些著作通过不同的视角，详细描述了我们目前对穆斯林身份特征的表述及其与印度民族国家的关系是如何受到独立后时代初期路径依赖的历史遗产的影响的。本文强调了这些著作如何共同探讨身份、边缘化、政治谈判等主题，标志着对印度穆斯林经历的重大再概念化。

关键词：印度穆斯林，穆斯林能力，后殖民印度，民族主义，世俗主义，印度国大党体制，分治，身份政治，新印度，穆斯林精英

Books Reviewed

Pratinav Anil. 2023. *Another India: The Making of the World's Largest Muslim Minority, 1947–77*. London: Hurst Publishers.

Amar Sohal. 2023. *The Muslim Secular: Parity and the Politics of India's Partition*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Hilal Ahmed. 2024. *A Brief History of the Present: Muslims in New India*. Delhi: Penguin.

Introduction

In the academic presentation of the Indian Muslim experience, a significant oversight has been the under acknowledgment of the critical juncture posed by early post-Independence decades. This period, marked by the aftermath of Partition, the consolidation of the nation-state, and the negotiation of citizenship and identity, fundamentally shaped the trajectory of Muslim inclusion or exclusion—in India's polity. Despite its transformative importance, this era has often been

relegated to the margins of scholarly discourse, overshadowed by later developments or reduced to simplistic narratives centred on "Hindu-Muslim relations." Such omissions have left gaps in understanding the institutional legacies and ideological frameworks which serve to "naturalize" a partial and contingent representation of "Muslim identity" and its relationship to the Indian nation-state.

There has, of course, been a wide range of important academic work on how the legacy of the initial conditions, framed by colonialism and Partition, embedded an underlying tension between "Muslim identity" and the Indian nation-state. But initial conditions are not prefigured destinies. As historical sociologists such as Goldstone (1998) and Mahoney (2000) have argued, we must make a crucial distinction between initial conditions and the causal political action/process which follows and responds to those conditions. As they describe, critical junctures are periods when a particular path is chosen among a range of alternatives, thereby channelling future developments in a specific direction. Through such a channelling process, critical junctures narrow the range of possible future outcomes. For example, as the work of Collier and Collier (1991) demonstrated, it was the specific ways in which different Latin American governments chose to pursue the political incorporation of labour, in the chaotic critical juncture from the 1930s through the 1960s, which shaped the character of their respective national politics for many decades to come.

The books under review—*Another India* by Pratinav Anil, *The Muslim Secular* by Amar Sohal, and *A Brief History of the Present* by Hilal Ahmed—are all united in the grounding belief that the political and ideological resolutions made towards incorporating Muslims within the structures of the nation-state in the early post-independent decades matter in more profound ways than usually acknowledged. This is perhaps true both of our present academic and media representations of "Muslim identity," "Muslim demands" and "Muslim politics." Each work engages deeply with the historical contingencies marking this critical period, from various angles, recognizing it as a foundational moment that set the terms for negotiating Muslim agency and shaped the process of Muslim integration/marginalization within the nation-state.

Anil's *Another India* revisits the Nehruvian era to illuminate how Muslim elites navigated the spectres of Partition, communal violence, and shifting political landscapes. By foregrounding this period, Anil underscores the lasting impact of decisions made—or avoided—during these formative years. Similarly, Sohal's intellectual history of figures like Abul Kalam Azad, Sheikh Abdullah, and Abdul Ghaffar Khan situates their visions of nationalism and secularism within the context of this critical juncture, revealing how their efforts to foster inclusive paradigms were thwarted by dominant ideologies. Ahmed's analysis extends this focus into the present, demonstrating how the unresolved tensions of the early decades continue to shape Muslim polit-

ical behavior and societal positioning in "New India." Another virtue shared by all the books under consideration is their ambition to break new ground towards understanding the evolving relationship of the Muslim minority to the Indian nation-state. Alongside, they also place the concept of "Muslim agency" at the centre of their analysis, treating Muslims as multi-vocal protagonists in the larger national story, not mere silent victims.

By situating the understanding of Muslim identity within a proper historical context, and presenting a sociologically rich analysis of Muslim agency, these works not only deepen our understanding of the past but also provide essential tools for interpreting the lineages of the present debates around the nature of "Muslim identity" and its relationship to Indian nationhood. They remind us that the path dependence of political and ideological choices made during foundational moments—whether in constructing legal frameworks, defining cultural identities, or shaping state policies—have enduring consequences.

Muslim Identity and Agency in Nehruvian India

It might be remembered that the Indian nation was born (and the state perhaps "reborn") into a world soaked in the horrors of Partition violence. The proportions of mass violence during the Partition have been captured in terms like "mutual genocide" and the "Partition holocaust." In post-partition India, not only were Muslims exclusively blamed for the Partition, but the prevailing discourse also saddled them with a sense of "collective guilt," whether or not they had participated in the Pakistan movement. In his 1999 essay, historian Gyanendra Pandey wrote a provocative piece titled "Can a Muslim Be an Indian?" Reflecting on the early years of the republic, Pandey noted that "a particular conception of the Indian nation emerged, in which the Muslims had an unenviable place" (Pandey, 1999, p. 625). While the core of the Indian nation came to be embedded within the Hindu majority, and particularly its upper caste segments, which embodied the "national interest," the choice of the "religious minorities and marginal nationalities" lay somewhere between "collaboration" with, or "subordination" to, this predefined core of nationalism. How did Muslims elites then negotiate with the nation-state given these highly constrained choices?

Another India, by the historian Pratinav Anil, is a revisionist account on the place of Muslims in Nehruvian India. In his typical brisk, irreverent style, Anil revels in caustically slaying quite a few "secular myths." But the importance of his project lies in fleshing out a wide-ranging account of the many ways in which Muslim elites navigated with a post-colonial state that had a built-in suspicion of any shade of autonomous Muslim politics. "There was never a good time to be a Muslim in postcolonial India—not unless one was the right kind of Muslim," Anil writes (p. 267). In the account of Anil, the agency of Muslims (or the "Ashraf" Muslim elite) coalesced around three objects: one, "negotiating the spectres of the past" (the

legacy of the Partition); two, dealing with the "changing circumstances of the present" (communal riots and the burgeoning subaltern politics); three, protecting the "Islamic desiderata for the future" (ensuring continuation of personal laws and public representation) (p. 13). The principal actor here were the "nationalist Muslims" or Congress Muslims. As Anil writes, the uprooting of the Muslim League post-Partition meant that these "nationalist Muslims came to achieve complete hegemony as representatives of Muslim India." This did not mean, however, that they possessed any independent base of power. Instead, these Congress Muslims (primarily from the professional or landed upper classes) became toothless dependents of a powerful Congress regime, to which they provided the mildest of resistance.

Indeed, the narrative of the nationalist Muslims drawn in Anil's book is a tragic one, which ends in either disillusionment or opportunistic collaboration. The case of Syed Mahmud (1889–1971), a senior Congress leader from Bihar, who had played a significant role in the party since the period of the Lucknow Pact (1916) and the Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–22), is quite instructive. After Partition, figures like Mahmud appeared to have very little leverage within the party, except personal bonds with Nehru, which could be mined for the sinecures of office. Anil reproduces passages of letters where even mild suggestions of Mahmud regarding the party's functioning is met with dismissive, even scolding, responses from the younger Nehru. Such a positional asymmetry often turned leaders into lackeys. In a rather unfortunate, but quaintly humorous letter, Mahmud wishes Nehru on his birthday and offers his "life-long devotion" to Nehru, and proceeds further for emphasis: "I am painfully conscious of the worthlessness of my devotion, but then, my boy, just like a dog I have nothing else or better in my possession to give to my master—a thought that makes me bitter and sad" (p. 121). Upon hearing that Mahmud had named his son "Jawaharlal" after him, an embarrassed Nehru replied: "For heaven's sake, don't call your son Jawaharlal" (p. 121).

In the book, Anil blames the Congress' "Ashraf" elite, quite justifiably, for eschewing the agitational politics of popular mobilization, and remaining yoked to a politics of "depoliticization and juridification" (p. 112). In the Indian subcontinent, the term Ashraf refers to the upper echelons of the Muslim social hierarchy, traditionally comprising elites such as Sayyids, Shaikhs, and Pathans, who claim foreign ancestry and hold privileged positions within the community. The "blue-blooded" families of this socio-political elite have long played the role of important cultural and political intermediaries, spanning an unbroken historical arc from Muslim sultanates and dynasties, to British India and princely states, and subsequently post-Independence India. Their predilection for a "depoliticized" stance of petitioning and bargaining, instead of an agitational politics of mass mobilization stemmed not just from their sense of powerlessness. It also flowed from an intrinsic cultural elitism that removed

them from the lifeworld of the vast majority of working castes and classes (both Muslims and Hindus).

Similarly, their preference for a "juridical" politics, lobbying for protections of legal/constitutional claims, usually dealing with *cultural* rights (the personal law, the status of Urdu or Aligarh Muslim University) also owed itself to their elite backgrounds, many of them being lawyers. Moreover, given their predominant fecklessness, their limited legitimacy in front of their constituents rested only on the protection of cultural safeguards like the personal law, to which they became zealously devoted. The Congress, meanwhile, tolerated their interventions on such matters because they were relatively cost-less, compared to, for example, measures promoting greater representation in police/bureaucracy, curbing communal riots, and supportive resources for working class artisans. It is in this milieu, as previously demonstrated by Hilal Ahmed in *Siyasi Muslims*, the issue of "personal laws" came to be discursively constructed (in a top-down manner) as a "primary concern" of unique importance, for the Muslim community at large (Ahmed, 2019). That is perhaps why, as Anil suggests, the reform of Muslim personal law (an arbitrary colonial-era amalgamation) was held back for many decades in India, but was executed relatively smoothly in the vast majority of Muslim-majority countries (p. 115).

The figure of the loyal nationalist Muslim, celebrated by liberal Muslim intellectuals, as a bulwark against fundamentalism and communal polarisation, is here cut down to size. As the book states at the outset, such a historiography of post-colonial Muslim elites tended to be overly concerned at taking an activist stance against the tide of Hindu nationalism. In this respect, the book does well in steering clear of the "good Muslim" versus "bad Muslim" binary, a rhetorical device, employed by privileged Muslim academics and journalists, for policing and gatekeeping their less "enlightened" (or properly loyal?) brethren.

What then of the "agency" of the Indian Muslim elite? In northern India, the emergence of the All India Muslim Majlis-e-Mushawarat (AIMMM), a lobbying group composed of nationalist Muslims and the ulema, marked a turning point. While their own successes were rather limited, they made a lasting impact on the politics of states like Uttar Pradesh by their partial backing of non-Congress parties, helping the opposition break away Muslim support, and contributing to an end to Congress hegemony. And they managed to put forth an autonomous agenda (dealing, among other things, the surge of communal riots and concerns over representation in public office). Thus, they helped transcend the era where Muslim leaders were complacently seen as toothless and replaceable components of the "Congress system." Hence, the Majlis opened up the political horizons (and political choices) of Muslim citizens in the Gangetic belt, even if themselves could not exploit the shift.

An important contribution of Anil's book is that it departs from the conventional north-centric commen-

taries of the Indian Muslim community. In turning to southern India, it traces the successes of the refurbished Muslim League in states like Kerala and Tamil Nadu, and of IUML (Indian Union Muslim League) in Hyderabad. The rump Muslim League in places like Kerala turned themselves into "good nationalists," keeping away from mass protests and ever-ready with demonstrations of loyalty. The IUML weathered a phase of splits and breakaways, and subsequently gathered their forces to take advantage of a new conjuncture—the arrival of regional parties. "The Southern context, of course, was different, because the CPI in Kerala and the DMK in Tamil Nadu had no Northern equivalents" (p. 148). The ascendance of a two-party system gave the Muslim league much-needed leverage, especially in Kerala. And they played their cards well, switching between the CPI-led and the Congress-led alliances, based on their strategic position. The spoils of office afforded them with considerable patronage-dispensing power to build a party machine and enhance their popular legitimacy with their constituents.

Another India is a timely and valuable work which grounds the emerging practices of "Muslim politics" in post-colonial India in their proper contexts. The account is carefully attuned to the constraints and opportunities which shaped the choices of the Muslim elite, as they accommodated themselves to a mainstream nationalism while seeking to carve out their own space.

Nevertheless, one finds a crucial shortcoming in the interpretive framework of Anil. One, at several points in the book, one feels there is too much of a short-shrift given to the domain of ideology. At one point, Anil explicitly offers an "injunction against the temptation of reading too deeply into ideology in the Indian setting" (p. 128). Such a Eurocentric view of the "Indian setting" limits the book from delving into the generative power of ideas in shaping affective identities, framing modes of recognition, and constructing legitimacy. Sure, the practice of politics, everywhere, is prone to the opportunistic use of ideas. This does not however take away from the importance of ideology in Indian politics. As Pradeep Chhibber and Rahul Verma had argued in their illuminating book on the Indian ideology, political contestations in India are indeed as much rooted in ideological contestation, as elsewhere (Chhibber and Verma, 2018, pp. 10-11). The difference is that the axes of ideological contestation tend to follow specific logics, which they capture using scales of recognition and statism. Furthermore, in the concluding chapter, where the author forays into a sweeping commentary on "Islamic ideals" and "global Muslim communities," the engagement surprisingly comes across as thin and outdated. Indeed, at one point, the author quotes the Orientalist Bernard Lewis as an authority on Islam, whose works were used by Edward Said in his book, *Orientalism*, to exemplify the ways in which imperialistic accounts misrepresent Islam and flatten the complex realities of Muslim societies (Said, 1978).

Re-conceptualizing Nationalism and Secularism

And, thus we turn to *The Muslim Secular*, Amar Sohal's original and thought-provoking intellectual history dealing with the political ideas, and *praxes*, of three leading figures of the era—Abul Kalam Azad (1888–1958), Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah (1905–1982), and Abdul Ghaffar Khan (1890–1988). The thesis of the book is that these activist politicians, in their own different ways, exemplified a distinctive re-conceptualization of both nationalism and secularism. They fervently resisted the Pakistan demand and remained within the umbrella of the Congress. With equal passion, they also opposed the partition of a united India, which ultimately proved to be, as they had clearly anticipated, a fatal body-blow to their distinctive projects.

While Sohal seeks to recover a distinctive "Muslim" or "Islamic" element in their varied political projects, he does not reduce these figures to exemplars of Muslim identity politics. Their imaginative ambitions were in fact much broader. All of their distinctive political models (Azad for India, Abdullah for Kashmir, and Ghaffar Khan for the Pashtun regions) sought to resolve the modern problem of negotiating cultural-religious diversity through a transcendental framework. They imagined a new paradigm of governance which could integrate: one, a capacious secular nationalism that allows a wide-berth to cultural/religious autonomy; and two, an active, interactionist public sphere which encourages a mutual blending of cultures, and manages conflicts without the need for the policing of a centralized state. Furthermore, they proposed treating nationalism and secularism as concepts emerging from these cultural interactions, based on mutual accommodation and recognition, rather than prior categories imposed upon a diverse population by the state. As Sohal writes, such an interactionist process of accommodation had previously facilitated the blending of Muslim and Hindu cultures, and it could do so again. This model of nationalism might have reconciled the demands of a secular republic with demands of socio-cultural parity. Indeed, they staked their opposition to Jinnah's Pakistan on their belief that such a vision could be realized in independent India. As Sohal ably demonstrates, these leaders were not disinterested theorists but activist-politicians who sought to turn their distinctive vision into reality. For Sohal, the fact that they might have failed in realizing this vision is not a reason to dismiss it as misguided idealism (pp. 17-26).

We might place this work within a new wave of scholarship on the global South that looks afresh at the period of decolonization and retrieves a valuable trove of "political imaginations" which had been effaced over time. The world, as it is now, seems to be cracking open under the weight of its contradictions. In Europe, surging ethno-nationalism amidst growing inequality and a "crisis of immigration"; in the Middle East and Africa, a return to a gloomy phase of wars and state-failures, and in South Asia, a steady erosion of democratic

norms, religious-nationalism, and violent insurgencies. Genocidal attacks on common people continue apace, from Pakistan and Myanmar to Manipur in India's northeast. It is in this context that younger scholars, with considerable creative vigour, have immersed themselves in studying the leading figures of decolonization movement of the mid-20th century. These range from intellectuals such as Aimé Césaire (1913–2008), C.L.R. James (1901–1989), and Ghassan Kanafani (1936–1972), and works and thoughts of leaders, such as Kwame Nkrumah (1909–1972) and Julius Nyerere (1922–1999).

Aimé Césaire, through his concept of *négritude*, reclaimed Black identity and culture as sources of pride and resistance against colonial ideologies, critiquing the dehumanizing effects of imperialism. C.L.R. James, in works like *The Black Jacobins* (1938), highlighted the agency of enslaved people in shaping history, emphasizing that freedom struggles were not merely derivative of European ideals but had their own revolutionary momentum. Similarly, Ghassan Kanafani, a Palestinian writer and activist, used literature to articulate the struggles of dispossession and displacement, bringing attention to the ongoing legacies of colonialism in the Middle East.

Leaders like Kwame Nkrumah and Julius Nyerere contributed to decolonization by envisioning postcolonial nation-building strategies that sought to reclaim sovereignty and cultural dignity. Nkrumah's advocacy for Pan-Africanism and Nyerere's vision of Ujamaa (African socialism) both emphasized self-reliance, collective progress, and the rejection of neocolonial economic structures. By centering indigenous philosophies and practices, these figures have inspired scholars to rethink global histories, dismantle hegemonic narratives, and foreground marginalized voices in the pursuit of a more equitable and inclusive intellectual landscape.

Drawing on the above thread, we can say that the strength of Sohal's book lies in its disavowal of Euro-centric approaches towards concepts like secularism and nationalism. These concepts—inadequate even in European contexts of cultural diversity and conflict—certainly need to be reinterpreted in the contexts of Asia and Africa whose cultural traditions and social norms embody distinct histories and struggles. The nationalism championed by the Congress in post-independence India, or indeed the Muslim League/armed forces in Pakistan, borrowed the same thrust for unrelenting domination and violent assimilation that had bedevilled Europe in the first half of the 20th century. In both of our countries, we still struggle to integrate the same Kashmiri and Pashtun communities that these leaders had represented. The distinguishing facet of these leaders was their commitment to draw upon the accommodative pluralism of early India rather than the European conception of secularism. The latter framework was undesirable in their view because it embodied a drive towards enforcing uniformity based on dominant cultural norms.

Recently, the political activist Yogendra Yadav wrote a trenchant critique

of contemporary Indian academia. Yadav compared the present generation of scholars unfavourably to their intellectual forebears, owing to their inability to come up with path-breaking theoretical ideas.[1] To the extent that the charge is fair, perhaps our flattened intellectual imagination derives from the lack of culturally-rooted frameworks that capture the flow of political contestations. This observation derives from my experience as a student of one of India's premier social science institutes, TISS Bombay. The comprehensive course of development studies covered everything from political science to sociology to economics. Yet for the most part, it followed a standard Eurocentric epistemology. England provided the model for understanding the emergence of capitalism; France for the processes of social-revolution, and the turn towards post-modernism; Italy for the prototypical analysis of "passive revolution" and fascism. The thoughts of Gramsci, Foucault, and Marx peppered most discussions. Of course, all of these frameworks of understanding and analysis are eminently valuable. Yet as Ludwig Wittgenstein would proclaim, "the limits of my language are the limits of my imagination."

Are the limits of our intellectual imagination adequate to understand the fast-paced and multi-dimensional changes taking place in India? This question seems more urgent when faced with contemporary India's dominant political force—the Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)— as it seeks to transform the underlying ground of Indian politics. Indeed, to a certain extent, the BJP has already succeeded in reconfiguring our historical imaginations, cultural sensibilities, and sociological ties. How do we then make sense of the "new reality" we are living in?

Muslims in Contemporary India

The book *A Brief History of the Present: Muslims in New India*, by the political sociologist Hilal Ahmed is a sophisticated engagement with the totality of all these questions. The intellectual breadth of the framework—cutting across thematic concerns of history, heritage, society, culture, and electoral politics—bracingly matches the hydra-headed phenomenon under study. Through a kaleidoscopic interrogation of contemporary Muslim behaviour, the book advances a fresh understanding of New India.

The German sociologist Norbert Elias had based his theory of the "Civilizing Process" on the notion that all social actors constrain themselves to adapt to (or reshape) their given sociological environment. In a somewhat similar vein, Ahmed argues, the environment of New India presents certain daunting challenges to Muslims, and they are creatively moulding themselves to survive in it. He frames the participation of Muslims in the CAA protests as a form of "participation as instrumental action," highlighting that Muslims have not shirked away from active political participation despite the growing hostility of their political environment. Rather, they are eking out their own political space, something he also alludes to in an example on the rise of the

AIMIM (All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen) in the Seemanchal region of Bihar. Ahmed notes how the media portrayal of the event focused on ideological issues, such as the rise of autonomous Muslim politics in the wake of Hindu-Muslim polarisation brought on by issues such as the CAA amendment and Ram Temple. Yet this portrayal was far removed from reality, which should have taken into account the relative material backwardness of the Seemanchal region, and the AIMIM's deft positioning within locally preponderant castes such as Surajpuri Shaikhs (an intermediate caste group which claims Ashraf ancestry) and the "Extremely Backward Caste" (EBC) Kulhaiya Muslim community.

Political theorists studying identity politics often come across the "recognition versus redistribution" debate. Generally, these two approaches are seen to be in tension, separated by three crucial differences. One, recognition deals with the cultural sphere, and redistribution with material sphere. Two, recognition evokes the primacy of the concept of human dignity, and redistribution of the concept of human needs. Three, recognition privileges the struggle for individual and cultural "rights," and redistribution of social and economic "justice." This book by Ahmed, follows the line taken by the philosopher Nancy Fraser, that the claims for recognition and claims for redistribution cannot be decoupled, as they are both part of a shared, underlying desire for justice.

Thus, while the focus of scholarly attention coalesces towards issues of recognition (CAA, Gyanvapi mosque),[2] Ahmed refuses to yield to a lens of Muslim exceptionalism. As he notes: "Muslims, like other social groups, take part in political processes, especially in elections, as stakeholders to secure certain material benefits" (pp. 138-140). The rise of the politics of "labharthis" (welfare recipients of cash transfers) has also not left Muslims untouched as they "behave like consumers/clients and respond to welfare packages" offered by different political parties. With the aid of survey datasets, he similarly holds that the electoral choices of Muslim voters "cannot be reduced either to communal polarization or identity-specific considerations" since "everyday life issues" tend to trump "any imaginary anti-BJP-ism" (pp. 153-155)

Similarly, he charts out the multi-vocality of Muslim politics (*pasmanda* [backward or oppressed Muslims], women, liberals), without losing sight of how these voices tune themselves to fit the structure of constraints and opportunities provided by the evolving nation-state. Ahmed also wades into the "memory-wars" taking place around the places of worship (Gyanvapi, Ayodhya) and historical figures (such as Aurangzeb). Characteristically, he advocates a dose of caution in political engagement with these topics, arguing against ideological reactionism to the right-wing. For instance, he notes: "Our public discourse ... relies on a strong assumption that Muslims admire Aurangzeb as a respectable Islamic figure and that any attempt to defame him would eventually upset them. ...

The secular reception of Aurangzeb is equally one-sided. A section of scholars wants to destroy the communal 'myths' to discover a 'tolerant and secular Aurangzeb'" (pp. 80-82). As a matter of political praxis, Ahmed recommends a sort of democratizing engagement with our historical heritage, treating monuments as part of everyday lived culture rather than props for grand ideological contestation.

Conclusion

The works reviewed here are all engaged in a parallel quest of uncovering the dialectic between nation-building and Muslim identity in post-Independence India. While all three books delve into the complexities of the "Indian Muslim experience" through different methodological frameworks and scholarly perspectives—Anil's historical narrative, Sohal's ideological critique, and Ahmed's socio-political analysis—they share common ground in their attempts to challenge dominant academic narratives of the past.

Both Pratinav Anil and Amar Sohal revisit the vaguely remembered early Nehruvian decades to highlight voices and stories that have been systematically overshadowed in mainstream historiography. However, the thrusts of their accounts diverge markedly, particularly on the vexed question of apportioning "blame" for the steady marginalization of Muslims in the polity. For Anil, it was the joint venture of the Congress leadership and an Ashraf elite collective who bore main responsibility for consciously side-lining relevant socio-economic issues of Muslim masses from the political agenda. Meanwhile, Sohal highlights the importance of the dominant nation-state ideology in constraining the space for, what might have been, an enriching communal reconciliation through mutual cultural recognition. The failure to proactively come to terms with the ghosts of Partition would then inevitably strait-jacket Muslims into a subordinated and segregated role. Hilal Ahmed's arguments implicitly draw on both of these explicatory frames, while also drawing out the differential nature of the regime dynamics of the past and present, and emphasizing the unique challenges being faced now by Indian Muslims.

The above books have produced remarkable re-evaluations of postcolonial India, traced through the trials and tribulations, intellectual thought and political behaviour, of its Muslim minority. The shared approach of placing Muslims at the centre of the story of the evolution of the nation-state marks a belated and welcome shift. As Ahmed perceptively observes, the BJP has ingeniously reinterpreted the meaning of secularism, social justice, constitutionalism and nationalism, thus re-shaping the popular "common sense."

All three studies, which approach the beating heart of Indian politics through the pulsating rhythm of its margins have made valuable contributions in making sense of our dizzying times.

Notes

1 See, Yogendra Yadav, "Where are our political thinkers?" 18 August, 2024; and "A vacuum waiting to be filled", *The Indian Express,* 25 August, 2024.

2 The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) protests, which began in December 2019, were a widespread response to a legislation amending citizenship laws, meant to incorporate "refugees" from neighbouring countries, seen as discriminatory against Muslims, with demonstrators asserting that it undermined India's secular fabric and constitutional values. The Gyanvapi Mosque dispute centers on claims of a Hindu temple's existence beneath the mosque in Varanasi which has, particularly over the last decade, sparked tensions over religious heritage and communal identity. Legal petitions and court interventions have fuelled debates about historical memory, cultural rights, and the politicization of sacred spaces.

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