

Indian National Congress and the Co-constitution of Political Hinduism: A Historical Reassessment

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ABSTRACT: Identity politics is not the exclusive preserve of conservative religious movements; secular institutions deploy it equally to secure their own rule. This article examines the historical relationship between the Indian National Congress and proponents of Saffron Political Hinduism, arguing that Congress's alliances, rhetoric, and policy choices during the colonial and post-colonial periods contributed significantly to the rise of Hindu nationalism in India. Its short-term political gains from associations with Hindu revivalist organisations came at a long-term cost to Indian pluralism, contributing to communal violence, unstable secularism, and the mainstreaming of Hindutva as a governing ideology. The article explores the relationship between Congress and Sangh/Hindutva proponents, highlighting the party's use of Hindu ideological symbolism and tolerance of violence involving Hindu hardline groups. It examines the ideological connections between swarajya and purna swarajya, arguing that both contributed, in different ways, to the development of Hindu Rashtra ideology. It analyses Congress's use of language politics, particularly Hindi, to build political support through communal appeasement. The discussion considers the "Hindu Raj" that Congress sought to sustain through divide-and-rule policies, which also enabled radical Hindu ideologies to flourish within mainstream political Hinduism. Two case studies examine Congress's accountability for communal violence in modern India, focusing on Gandhi's assassination and the violence at Ayodhya. Finally, the article considers the enduring consequences of this political history, arguing that divide-and-rule strategies contributed to the construction of a Hindu state. It challenges conventional interpretations of the Two-Nation Theory by tracing Hindu nationalist origins to an ideological framework distinguishing between "Hindus and Others," highlighting tensions between secular political claims and religious nationalism in India.

KEYWORDS: Indian National Congress, Hindu Nationalism, Hindutva, Saffron Political Hinduism, Communal Violence, Two-Nation Theory

Introduction

Identity politics is a tool not merely confined to the interests of conservative religious groups; it is equally utilised by secular institutions to manipulate existing conditions to their institutional advantage, since it guarantees sustained

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rule in an otherwise anarchical order. The maintenance of rule is a defining feature of the human condition, and competence in rule is a defining feature of human political cognition. This dynamic is well suited to the identity politics of both colonial and contemporary India, where communal divisiveness was itself a product of British rule. The first native political organisation of India, the Indian National Congress, was among the earliest beneficiaries of the colonial "divide and rule" settlement. Congress bound itself into an alliance of rights and obligations with Hindu revivalist organisations in order to establish and sustain its rule over Hindu-majority India. This mutually reinforcing association served Congress's short-term interests but proved damaging to Indian pluralism by privileging the rise of Hindu nationalism, with its attendant communal conflict, violence, and the persistent instability of Indian secularism.

The Congress-Hindu Right Nexus: Symbolic Politics and Human Security Costs

Alongside the rationalised Hindu nationalism present within factions of the Congress, the party also drew on identity symbols and analogies from Hindu religious literature, the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, and the Vedas (Gould, 2004, pp. 6, 8). William Gould observes that Congress additionally sustained its alliance with Hindu revivalist organisations such as the Hindu Sabhas in order to preserve their financial and professional support for its political activities (Gould, 2004, p. 9). In *Hindu Nationalism and the Language of Politics in Late Colonial India*, Gould notes that Congress was a heterogeneous political organisation that exploited its own name to construct political norms evoking the religious and communal sentiments of India's multi-ethnic communities (Gould, 2004, p. 4).

Hindu-right Congressmen held that Indian secularism could be constructed within the confines of Indic culture. In practice, this pseudo-secularism took the form of a politics of Hindu identity that simulated a broader Hindu ethno-nationalism. To retain the Hindu vote bank, Congress leaders claimed that Indian secularism derived from ancient Hindu philosophical tradition, while simultaneously presenting the party as representative of the non-Hindu population through a politicised version of the Hindu principle of *sarva-dharma-sambhava* - the equality of all religions. Within this framework of Indian nationalism, the notion of *dharma* (righteous duty) for Hindus was singled out as "righteousness through Hinduism" alone.

Ahimsa, as a mode of living professed by Congressmen, symbolised the party's public identity. However, the inconsistency with Ahimsa was publicly demonstrated on multiple occasions, and the same prominent Congress leaders departed from the Gandhian policy of non-violence with events on record. During the Swadeshi Movement, launched in opposition to the 1905 partition of Bengal, Swadeshi leaders within Congress drew on Hinduism as an instrument of national unification and mass mobilisation. In his 1904 Swadeshi Samaj speech, Rabindranath Tagore, the Congress-supported Bengali poet, popularised the concept of *atma-shakti* (self-power) to mobilise the Bengali masses. The political deployment of Hindu identity symbols, *purna swaraj* (complete independence), the Bhagavad Gita, Shakta imagery invoking the goddess Shakti, and the organisation of *samitis* (radical Hindu committees), reflect the Congress's contribution to the rise of political Hinduism.

It is important to note the human security implications of Congress's politics of Hinduism. Despite its professed commitment to ahimsa as a defining feature of Hindu nationalism, this politics repeatedly resorted to violence as a means of political gain. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, in *Eighteen Fifty-Seven and Its Many Histories*, affirms the enduring appeal of violence within India's identity politics (Bandyopadhyay, 2008, pp. 7-10). This included violence instigated by political elites during the Swadeshi Movement and the Chauri Chaura incident, both of which resulted in humanitarian violations, the arming of identity-based agents, and loss of life. The 1947 Partition itself was a violent affair rooted in the "divide and rule" politics of Hindu-Muslim communalism (Andersen & Damle, 1987, p. 55).

The Syncretism of Congress and Hindu Nationalist Self-Rule

The doctrine of *purna swarajya*, or complete self-rule, was advanced by Gandhi in his demand for an independent, self-governed India, then under British occupation. Gandhi's conception of *purna swarajya* rested on his ideology of *ahimsa*. Yet the concept of *swarajya* itself has origins in the conservative ideology of *Hindutva*. At the nineteenth session of the Hindu Mahasabha, Savarkar conditioned the security of the Hindu nation on its capacity for self-governance, or Hindu *swarajya* (Savarkar, 2012, pp. 3-14). Though concerned with the credibility of Hindu identity and the Hindu nation, Savarkar idealised this self-rule around an exclusionary Hindu holy land, which he identified with the territory of India (Savarkar, 2012, p. 9).

The Non-Cooperation Movement inaugurated a new phase of aggressive Hindu nationalism within Congress (Gould, 2004, p. 435). K. B. Hedgewar was a prominent figure in the movement and served a year's imprisonment for his role in it. Hedgewar was associated with Congress until founding the RSS in 1925 and later maintained a liaison between the RSS and the Congress. In support of Congress's *Purna Swaraj* campaign, he explicitly affirmed the support of the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS) for Congress policy. In a letter to Congress dated 11 January 1930, Hedgewar noted that Congress had made self-rule its supreme objective, and that the Congress Working Committee had declared 26 January 1930 to be observed as "Independence Day" throughout Hindustan (Sinha, 2015, p. 66). In his reading, he described Congress's approach to self-determination as exclusionary of non-Hindus, and on that basis pledged the RSS's and the *Swayamsevaks*' support for the Congress cause, notably identifying the then-national flag as the sacrosanct saffron flag (Sinha, 2015, p. 66).

In a post-truth register, history is often constructed rather than simply recorded. The syncretism between Gandhi's ideal of *purna swaraj* and the Hindu right's ideology of Hindu *swaraj* was, in this sense, a matter of rhetoric rather than substance: the two converged in a shared strategy of self-rule, whether directed against British Christians or Indian Muslims. Dr. B. S. Moonje, a senior Congress figure, articulated this syncretism directly, stating that the *Sangh*'s supreme aim was a Hindu *Rashtra*, and *swaraj* India's proper identity, while criticising Gandhi's ideals as a passing trend of the era (Sinha, 2015, p. 67).

The *Swarajya* Party, founded in December 1922, emerged from a right-wing Hindu nationalist faction within Congress. In his account of Hedgewar's role in the freedom movement, Rakesh Sinha describes the parting of ways between senior Congress leaders, Nehru, Moonje, and others, and the Gandhian brand of secular nationalism (Sinha, 2015, p. 43), a rupture prompted by Gandhi's refusal to contest the Legislative Council elections (Sinha, 2015, p. 43). The *Swarajists* went on to play a significant role in provincial communal politics (Gordon, 1975, p. 146) and retained the support of Congress nationalists throughout (Gordon, 1975, pp. 145-203). As Richard Gordon argues in his study of the Mahasabha-Congress nexus, the majoritarian influence of Hindu nationalists within Congress suggests that the party was as much shaped by Saffron movements as were the Hindu Mahasabha, the *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* (VHP), the RSS, and the *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP) (Gordon, 1975).

The accession of Kashmir on 26 October 1947 offers a further example of this alliance, with Congress and the RSS jointly pressuring Maharaja Hari Singh, the ruler of the princely state, to accede the territory to India (Andersen & Damle, 1987, p. 87). Taken together, the Congress-*Sangh* alliance evident in the Non-Cooperation Movement, in local council elections, in Congress provincial ministries, and in the post-Partition accession of princely states, often achieved by denying their populations the right of self-determination, illustrates the extent to which political Hinduism was embedded within the ostensibly secular Congress.

Hindi, Hindustani, and the Making of Communal Identity

Language plays a central role in fixing identities, and in South Asia in particular, as argued by Ayesha Jalal (Jalal, 1995b, pp. 26-28). It occupies a focal position in the construction of communities, cultures, and ideologies. William

Gould draws attention to the multiple, often conflicting interpretations of "Hindu" identity that produced a state of political contestation exploited by Indian political actors. "Hindu" as an identity can be read in both a moderate and an exclusivist register; in India's case, it was the political manipulations and rhetoric of the Congress elite that helped construct a particular, mainstream version of "Hindu tradition." Hindu ideology, Hindu-oriented language policy, and communal politics together constituted the national project that Congress carried forward in post-colonial India.

Hindi, as a language, has itself been a source of polarisation among India's religious communities, with its official communal deployment rooted in the British legacy of divide and rule (Ranjan, 2017). The Hindi-Urdu divide, formalised through curricula prepared for trainees by John Gilchrist, the director of Fort William College, in the early 1800s, was designed to separate Indian nationhood into distinct Hindu and Muslim streams (Ranjan, 2017). Inheriting this British legacy, Congress implemented language policy to preserve its Hindu vote bank. Gandhi advocated 'Hindustani' -the hybridised form of Hindi- as India's national language, and in 1937 introduced the Wardha Scheme of Education to promote it. Fearing a loss of identity, Muslim leaders endorsed Urdu as a counter-symbolism to Hindi. Formal resistance to the Wardha Scheme was expressed by Muslim opinion through the Pirpur Report. While a genuinely secular reading of Hindustani treated it as a hybrid of Hindi and Urdu, within the ongoing Hindi-Urdu controversy Hindu nationalists instead celebrated it as a strategic step toward the state-level nationalisation of Hindi. As Granville Austin notes, Partition effectively eliminated Hindustani from serious consideration and heightened fears of the constitutional marginalisation of India's non-Hindi languages (Austin, 1999). K. Santhanam, a member of the Constituent Assembly, similarly observed that although Hindustani was never formally adopted in post-Partition India, anti-Muslim sentiment among Hindus had by then modulated into a broader anti-Urdu sentiment (Ranjan, 2017).

A Congress increasingly shaped by Hindu identity used the de jure platform of the Constituent Assembly to abandon the pluralistic ideal of a Rashtrabhasha (national language) in favour of an officially Sanskritised Hindi. This policy of Sanskritisation aligned with the Hindu Right's broader ambition of a Hindu Rashtra. Even the Munshi-Ayyangar formula, which proposed Hindi in the Devanagari script, the use of international numerals, and continued official status for English in government business as an intra-Congress compromise, can be read as a Hindu-inflected settlement. The Official Languages Act of 1965 subsequently privileged Hindi and English alone, at the expense of India's broader linguistic diversity.

In *'Language, Religion and Politics in North India'*, Paul Brass places responsibility for India's divided religio-linguistic nationalisms on identity entrepreneurs who pursued their own interests at the expense of broader social cohesion (Brass, 1974, pp. 3-4). He argues that in North India, religion, already a dominant force in everyday life, was brought into alignment with linguistic community through the deliberate efforts of political elites (Brass, 1974, p. 27).

"Hindu Raj," Divide and Rule, and the Institutionalisation of Communal Politics

The term "Hindu Raj" refers specifically to the period of Congress provincial rule between 1937 and 1939, though this section considers more broadly how Congress administrative policy became entangled with a politics of communalism functioning as a mode of redistributive advantage for Hindu majoritarianism. Several factors help explain this alignment. First, a Hindu-oriented bloc within Congress itself favoured a non-compromising "Hindu raj" over a genuinely pluralistic, democratic settlement in post-colonial India. Second, the inherited policy of divide and rule proved an effective means of shifting the balance of power in Congress's favour; but, as I. H. Qureshi observes, it also worsened communal relations by encouraging the proliferation of sectarian movements and a politics

of religious proselytism (Qureshi, 1955, pp. 43-53). Third, an often-exaggerated portrayal of the traumatic memory, real and constructed, of historical Muslim invasions allowed Congress to present itself as custodian of a Hindu-majority subcontinent, reconstructing both the past and a civilisational identity in the process (Upadhyay et al., 2012, pp. 35-57). Fourth, Muslim political leadership was itself an active participant in this contest for power; both Congress and the Muslim League drew on communal identity as an organisational strategy (Akhtar, 2013, pp. 189-208). Muslim representation within Congress's own ranks remained persistently limited, as the party prioritised its Hindu vote bank in a Hindu-majority polity. The following table illustrates the under-representation of Muslim candidates across successive eras of Congress rule.

Table 1

Under-representation of Muslim Candidates across Successive Eras of Congress Rule

State	1962-1967	1980-1983	1996-2001	2012-2016	2017-2018
Andhra Pradesh	6.3	3	2.7	3.1	-
Assam	17.5	25.7	22.2	22.9	-
Bihar	10	12.9	15.4	24.4	-
Delhi	-	5.5	8.6	8.7	-
Gujarat	5.8	8.2	5.6	4	4
Haryana	1.3	3.4	2.2	1.1	-
Karnataka	-	8.1	8.1	8.5	7.8
Kerala	-	5.7	6.8	16	-
Madhya Pradesh	3.5	3.7	2.2	1.7	1.3
Maharashtra	4.5	7	7.6	6.6	-
Odisha	NA	2	2.8	2	-
Punjab	2.6	1.7	1.9	0.9	1.7
Rajasthan	4.5	7.5	8	8	7.2
Tamil Nadu	-	4.4	0	2.5	-
Uttar Pradesh	0.23	14.1	11.1	16.3	18.4
West Bengal	11.5	13.6	26.7	32.6	-

Source: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2019).

While the Carnegie data shows the historic trend of underrepresentation of Muslim candidates, recent electoral patterns show that the pattern persists. Only 19 Muslim candidates were fielded by the Indian National Congress in the 2024 Lok Sabha election, down from 34 in 2019. Similarly, the 11 largest major political parties nominated 82 Muslim candidates in 2024, compared to 115 in 2019. Resultantly, even though Muslims make up over 14.2% of the Indian population, only 24 Muslim MPs were elected to the 542-member Lok Sabha, thereby accounting for 4.42% of the House. According to these numbers, the proportion of Muslims within the Indian legislature is still considerably lower than the entire demographic share that they deserve.

Table 2

Recent Trends in Muslim Political Representation in India (Lok Sabha Elections)

Indicator	2019	2024
Muslim candidates fielded by the Indian National Congress	34	19
Muslim candidates fielded by 11 major political parties	115	82
Muslim MPs elected to the Lok Sabha	26	24
Share of Muslim MPs in the Lok Sabha (%)	4.79	4.42

Muslim share of India's population (2011 Census)	14.2	14.2
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Literature, like speech acts more broadly, transmits identity norms and conventions, setting directive principles for identities bound within relationships of mutual right and obligation. This was precisely the function of the British policy of divide and rule, designed to hold India's development and internal cohesion at a fixed, manageable equilibrium. British historiography of the subcontinent was itself structured along communal lines and has continued to shape social relationships and practical politics in India ever since (Upadhyay et al., 2012, pp. 35-57). British periodisation cast the ancient era as 'Hindu India' and the medieval era as 'Muslim India' - a division that reinforced identity stereotypes of a "glorious [Hindu] past" (Thapar, 1990, pp. 4-20) set against a narrative of "Hindu siege." The separation of Hindu and Muslim identities, and the broader politics of divide and rule, drew directly on this colonial construction.

Neeti Nair, in *Changing Homelands: Hindu Politics and the Partition of India*, traces the native emergence of communalism in India to the 1920s (Nair, 2011, p. 7), the same decade that witnessed the rise of Hindutva ideology. Revivalist organisations entered into close collaboration with Congress during this period, producing mutually reinforcing political and religious gains. Congress meetings, for instance, were regularly held on the premises of Arya Samaj mandirs, and Congress-run "Charkha classes" at the Samaj Mandir in Faizabad became a hub for Hindu preaching and associated religious conversion. Hindu nationalists, in turn, read Congress-led initiatives such as the anti-untouchability sangathan campaigns and the civil disobedience movements as localised expressions of the conservative Hindu shuddhi (reconversion) and Swadeshi movements (Gould, 2004, pp. 6-8).

The first provincial elections held under the Government of India Act of 1935 exposed Congress's ambitions toward an exclusively Hindu raj. Congress's refusal of a joint electorate and its subsequent rejection of a coalition government with the Muslim League (Akhtar, 2013, p. 204) lent tacit support to Savarkar's vision of a Hindu state of India. Even leaders as avowedly secular as Nehru drew on RSS and Arya Samaj platforms to court Hindu voters. Gould argues that these conservative overtures by Congress in fact hardened Muslim political opinion, pushing Muslim leaders toward a more unified political narrative of their own (Gould, 2004, pp. 201-202). The Arya Samaj pledged its formal support for Congress on the occasion of Nehru's visit to the organisation on 23 November 1936, going so far as to propose its own merger into the party (Palat, 2018).

Hindu revivalism in India has never been a purely religious project; it has been a political one as well. During the 1963 centenary celebrations of Swami Vivekananda, the RSS and allied revivalist organisations undertook the construction of a memorial to Vivekananda on an island off the southern coast of India (Andersen & Damle, 1987, p. 86). As a prominent proponent of Hindu revivalism, Vivekananda's commemoration in symbolically Hindu terms provoked communal tension with the local Roman Catholic community, which regarded the site, near Kanyakumari, as significant to the missionary legacy of Saint Francis Xavier (Andersen & Damle, 1987, p. 86). The Tamil Nadu government initially refused permission for the memorial's construction out of concern for communal unrest (Andersen & Damle, 1987, p. 87), but the RSS, led by M. S. Golwalkar, ultimately secured approval through a petition signed by 323 members of parliament (Andersen & Damle, 1987, p. 88). The demolition of the Babri Masjid and the broader Ayodhya movement have likewise been linked to Rajiv Gandhi's communally inflected election campaign.

Congress therefore bears substantial responsibility for the rise of political Hinduism. Its symbiotic relationship with Hindu revivalist organisations bound the two together in a mutually reinforcing dynamic, each privileging the other's religious and political interests.

The Assassination of Gandhi: Complicity, Security, and Contested Memory

In *Hindutva or Hind Swaraj*, U. R. Ananthamurthy assesses how Savarkar's *Hindutva* influenced the nation-building approaches of Nehru and Vallabhbhai Patel (Ananthamurthy, 2016). B. R. Nanda, describing the Nehruvian imprint on Congress, argues that the party's version of secularism was substantially defined by Nehru's own politics, which remained preoccupied, to the point of near exclusivity, with national interest, understood chiefly as the sustenance of self-rule, whatever form that took, including a Hindu-inflected swarajya. In Ananthamurthy's account, Gandhi's assassination is best explained by a deeper ideological split within Indian nationalism, between Gandhi's own conception of the nation and the increasingly radical Hindu nationalism that opposed it. Gandhi's nationalism was defined by allegiance to the Indian state; Godse's, like that of contemporary Hindu nationalists more broadly, was defined instead by allegiance to Saffron nationalism. Ananthamurthy characterises this radical current as an offshoot of a Napoleonic obsession with absolute national interest, pursued at the expense of the ethics of coexistence, and proposes Gandhi's philosophy of Hind Swaraj as its most plausible antidote (Ananthamurthy, 2016, p. 6).

Ananthamurthy further contends that Congress's failure to provide Gandhi with adequate security created the conditions that made his assassination possible (Ananthamurthy, 2016, p. 6). The precise causes of Gandhi's death remain contested in Indian political history. Uma Bharti, a BJP Union Minister, has claimed that it was Congress, rather than the Sangh, that derived political benefit from Gandhi's death (Ananthamurthy, 2016, p. 19). While it is unlikely that Congress bore any direct responsibility for the assassination, the party nonetheless contributed materially to strengthening the radical ideologies, Sangh Parivar ideology among them, to which Godse, Gandhi's assassin, held allegiance. The Congress factor is, in this sense, also implicated in the broader history of communal violence carried out by Hindu majoritarianism in India (PTI, 2017).

Rajiv Gandhi's 'Ram Rajya': The Shah Bano Case and the Genesis of the Ayodhya Movement

For many Hindus in India, as Roger Friedland and Richard Hecht observe, the Ramjanmabhoomi represents the point of origin of a constructed national identity (Friedland & Hecht, 1988, pp. 101-149). For many Muslims, the same disputed site carries an equally significant historical and religious meaning. These competing identity claims produced a form of monopolistic competition within India's broader Hindu and Saffron-inflected politics. The Ayodhya Ordinance offers a revealing case study of Congress's sectarian politics in this period. In *Congress after Indira*, Zoya Hasan links Congress's handling of the Shah Bano case to the Ram Mandir movement as a coordinated exercise in communal political manoeuvring under Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi (Hasan, 2015, p. 61). Congress used the "Ayodhya card" to redirect conservative Hindu opinion back toward the party.

To appease conservative Muslim opinion, even as Hindutva politics were on the rise, Rajiv Gandhi secured passage of the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act, 1986, which effectively reversed a Supreme Court ruling mandating maintenance payments from a former husband to a divorced wife. The Court's earlier ruling, itself widely read as a step toward a uniform civil code, had provoked significant mobilisation within the conservative Muslim community, a mobilisation substantially shaped by political elites. Overturning the ruling was, in turn, an opportunity for Congress to extract further political gain from Hindu-Muslim communal politics.

The Muslim Women's Act was subsequently portrayed by Hindu nationalists, and the BJP in particular, as an incentive to a supposed Muslim fundamentalist project of demographic expansion through polygamy. The controversy over the Act coincided with the launch of the Ayodhya movement by the VHP, the Hindu right-wing organisation founded by M. S. Golwalkar on the principles of Saffron nationalism. Seeking to shed Congress' reputation as a pseudo-secular party and to reclaim the Hindu vote ahead of the 1989 general election, Rajiv Gandhi built his Faizabad campaign around the promise of Ram Rajya. He authorised the unlocking of the gates of the Babri

Masjid and permitted the shilanyas, the consecration ceremony for a proposed Ram temple, to proceed alongside the mosque.

The subsequent demolition of the Babri Masjid, standing on the site claimed by Hindu nationalists as the Ram Janmabhoomi, the birthplace of Lord Ram, by BJP-aligned actors can reasonably be understood as a downstream consequence of this earlier Congress policy. Hasan describes the demolition as "a watershed for Indian nationhood" and as the "most blatant act" exposing a broader culture of legal defiance in modern India (BBC News, 2017).

The Contested Origins of the Two-Nation Theory

The ideological fatigue that characterises Hindu nationalist politics in India is directed more consistently against Muslims than against Pakistan as such. This anti-Muslim orientation cuts across Hindu political factions, the Hindu Mahasabha, the RSS, the BJP, and Congress alike. Whether one examines the pre- or post-Partition period, or contemporary politics, traces of direct or indirect Hindu collaboration on this front can be located across multiple episodes. Notions of racial supremacy, a "supreme" Hindu nation, and a "Great Hindu civilisation" within Saffronisation have consistently functioned as dividing lines between Hinduism and "Others," primarily Muslims among them. This vision is set out at length in Vinayak Damodar Savarkar's *Hindutva*, a text held in the BJP's own archives (Savarkar, 2012, p. 9).

In his address to the nineteenth session of the Hindu Mahasabha in Ahmedabad, Savarkar rejected the Congress-favoured notion of a unified Indian nationalism, describing Hindus and Muslims as two distinct nations coexisting within India. In the same address, he called for a self-governed and independent Hindu state of Hindustan, what he termed the holyland, or Hindu Rashtra, of the Hindus (Savarkar, 2012, p. 9).

Suspicion of Muslims is a recurring feature of the Hindutva strand within Hinduism. In *Hindu Rashtra Darshan*, Savarkar identifies religion as the "mighty influence" bearing on Hindu-Muslim relations, and frames the Hindu nation as fundamentally distinct in identity and culture from all other religious traditions, a notion of civilisational and racial distinctiveness that runs throughout his writing. Savarkar's own intolerance of non-Hindu religious practice is illustrated by his order, while imprisoned in the Cellular Jail in 1911, for conch-shells to be sounded in a tit-for-tat response to the Muslim call to prayer (Veer Savarkar, 2017). Similarly, M. S. Golwalkar, Savarkar's successor as head of the RSS, argued in *We, or Our Nationhood Defined* (1939) that religious minorities on the subcontinent should be regarded as non-Indian unless they converted to Hinduism (Golwalkar, 1939, p. 5). This conversion process, known as shuddhikaran, had itself been advanced by Savarkar during his imprisonment (Veer Savarkar, 2017), and Golwalkar went further still, invoking the precedent of Nazi Germany's treatment of minorities as a warning to those refusing assimilation into Hinduism (Golwalkar, 1939, p. 77).

The roots of the Two-Nation Theory can in fact be traced to nineteenth-century upper-caste Bengali Hindu thought (Islam, 2019a). According to Shamsul Islam, Raj Narain Basu, co-founder of the Bharat Dharma Mahamandal, and Nabagopal Mitra, organiser of the annual Hindu Mela, might reasonably be regarded as early architects of the theory (Islam, 2019a). In Mitra's own formulation, Indian national integrity was conditioned exclusively on Hindu religious identity (Majumdar, 1961, p. 8).

There is further evidence of Hindu nationalist proposals for separate territorial nations dating to the early twentieth century (Islam, 2019b). Bhai Parmanand, an Arya Samajist, RSS-aligned nationalist, and father of Bhai Mahavir, later governor of Madhya Pradesh under a BJP government from 1998 to 2003, articulated an explicitly Hindu version of the Two-Nation Theory, describing Hindus as the native sons of Hindustan and Muslims as descendants of Arab outsiders (Parmanand, 1982, p. 14). In his autobiography, *The Story of My Life*, Parmanand proposed excising the territory beyond Sindh and the North-West Frontier Province to establish a separate Muslim

state, to which Indian Muslims could in principle be relocated (Parmanand, 1982, p. 36). Lala Hardayal's 1925 political testament, which outlined a scheme for the conversion of Muslims and Christians to Hinduism, similarly framed Hindus as a distinct and superior nation (Ambedkar, 1946, p. 41).

Why, then, do Hindu nationalists typically disown the Two-Nation Theory as their own legacy? While the theory is claimed as a matter of national pride within the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, it might equally be regarded as a founding achievement of Hindu nationalism. Conservative Hindu literature and, in some cases, national textbooks provide evidence for this Hindu genealogy. In a petition filed before the Madras High Court in January 2020, the advocate S. Doraisamy, vice-president of the Thanthai Periyar Dravidar Kazhagam, objected to attempts by RSS-affiliated petitioners to alter historical material in social science textbooks, specifically, to remove a passage attributing to the RSS and the Hindu Mahasabha a "pronounced anti-Muslim stance" in relation to Partition (Legal Correspondent, 2020). The Doraisamy petition argued that the RSS had itself advanced the Two-Nation Theory by asserting Hindu nationhood as distinct, and identified Savarkar as an early proponent of the theory and, notably, an ally of the Muslim League on the question of Partition (Legal Correspondent, 2020).

The precise Hindu genealogy of the Two-Nation Theory remains a live and unresolved dispute even between Hindu nationalists of the RSS and the Congress party. On 9 December 2019, while introducing the Citizenship Amendment Act in the Lok Sabha, Home Minister Amit Shah, himself affiliated with the RSS, placed responsibility for the religious-communal division of India squarely on Congress (Islam, 2019b).

The Two-Nation Theory is often associated principally with Muhammad Ali Jinnah, cast as the chief agent of Hindu-Muslim separatism on the subcontinent. Jinnah's own version of the theory was, however, considerably more moderate, resting on a claim about the distinct social orders of two religious communities rather than on any theological foundation. Ayesha Jalal, in *Conjuring Pakistan: History as Official Imagining*, cites Jinnah's own statement on the character of the state he envisioned (Jalal, 1995a, p. 79). According to that statement, the idea of Pakistan was never conceived as a theocratic one; the followers of all religions would enjoy equal standing as loyal and responsible citizens, a vision Jinnah described as consonant with the true spirit of Islam (Jinnah, 1948).

Stephen P. Cohen's account of Pakistan's development analyses the practical implementation of Jinnah's ideology as one of pluralistic coexistence among Pakistan's multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic communities, groups that formed a complex relationship with the state even as this unity in diversity has, at times, come under strain (Cohen, 2004, p. 1).

A further, complementary argument for reading Jinnah's Two-Nation Theory as fundamentally a claim about social order rather than religion lies in the 1971 disintegration of Pakistan and the emergence of independent Bangladesh. Had the original division rested on religion alone, East Pakistan would presumably have remained territorially integrated with West Pakistan. Instead, ethnic and linguistic difference, compounded by ties of Bengali kinship with neighbouring India, played the decisive role in East Pakistan's growing sense of distinctiveness from the western wing. Jinnah himself, attentive to the multi-ethnic composition of the new state, appears to have anticipated this eventual split; Jalal's account of his warning about "the greatest threat to national integrity" arising from internal, rather than external, pressures lends further weight to a reading of his Two-Nation Theory grounded in social rather than strictly religious terms.

To identify the Two-Nation Theory exclusively with Muslim separatism is, on this account, a form of historical misinformation. It is equally defensible to conclude that the theory has substantial Hindu nationalist origins, and that it too contributed to the division of the subcontinent's pluralistic society along religious lines. Hindutva or Soffronisation, from its inception, has been a complex phenomenon: political in practice even where religious in rhetoric and literature, and substantially indebted to Western models of nationalism and state-building. Hindu

nationalists made effective use of the British colonial policy of divide and rule in shaping Indian political consciousness. Since historical narrative itself is contested terrain, the precise origins of the Two-Nation Theory are likely to remain a source of both inter- and intra-communal disagreement.

Conclusion

In 1932, during his fast unto death, Gandhi wrote to Samuel Hoare on the question of the rights of the "untouchables" and religious minorities, arguing that Hinduism and Hindu nationalism, in their true spirit, were inclusive, and that both had to remain consistent with the human security and general welfare of all, regardless of any constructed exclusivity (Gould, 2005, p. 845). Contemporary India, however, no longer reflects Gandhi's pluralistic vision. The post-Partition project of nation-building for a tolerant, Hindu-majority India was compromised by the very politics of Hinduism that Congress deliberately pursued in an already divided polity. The pro-Hindu policies of Congress nationalists strengthened and mainstreamed Hindu revivalist organisations as durable agents of political rule. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that Congress' policy choices contributed substantially, alongside those of avowedly Hindu nationalist parties, to the rise of Saffron nationalism in modern India.

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