COMMUNITY, NATION AND POLITICS IN COLONIAL BIHAR (1920-47)

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Abstract

The paper is an attempt to explore, primarily, the nationalist Muslims and their activities in Bihar, since 1937 till 1947. The work, by and large, will discuss the Muslim personalities and institutions which were essentially against the Muslim League and its ideology. This paper will be elaborating many issues related to the Muslims of Bihar during 1920s, 1930s and 1940s such as the Muslim organizations’ and personalities’ fight for the nation and against the League, their contribution in bridging the gulf between Hindus and Muslims and bringing communal harmony in Bihar and others. Moreover, apart from this, the paper will be focusing upon the three core issues of the era, the 1946 elections, the growth of communalism and the exodus of the Bihari Muslims to Dhaka following the elections. The paper seems quite interesting in terms of exploring some of the less or underexplored themes and sub-themes on colonial Bihar and will certainly be a great contribution to the academia. Therefore, surely, it will get its due attention as other provinces of colonial India such as U. P., Bengal, and Punjab.

Introduction

Most of the writings on India’s partition are mainly focused on the three provinces of British India namely Punjab, Bengal and U. P. Based on these provinces, the writings on the idea of partition and separatism has been generalized with the misperception that partition was essentially a Muslim affair rather a Muslim League affair. Nonetheless, this has been proved by recent studies that the policies and programmes of the Muslim League alone might have not led the divisive political attitude of the Muslim League rather it was also because of the failure of the major political parties such as Congress who were not able to provide sufficient amount of faith and cooperation among the Muslims. The other communal organizations such as the Hindu Mahasabha’s role was also very much crucial in creating the communal tensions and infusing the majoritarian communalism. Therefore, all the political organizations and an inclusive study in terms of partition should be studies and analyzed with equal attention and care. Additionally, prior to partition the establishments of a few Muslim political institutions which were organized in 1930s and 1940s, were essentially against the League, its ideology and propaganda, has been a less explored and underrated theme in historical studies and therefore must be emphasized upon. In pre-independent Bihar, the role of the communal organizations such as the Hindu Mahasabha and its subsequent branches such as Suddhi movement and Sangathan, the Muslim League and its subsequent propaganda with the Khaksar movement and Muslim League National Guards played crucial role in the growth of communalism and therefore should be studied adequately.
In the early twentieth century Bihar and in pre-independent India when the communal tension between Hindus and Muslims were at peak and intensified day by day, there were a few Muslim Personalities who did every possible effort in bridging the gulf between Hindus and Muslims, is an explorable subject and therefore should be discussed with a great detail. The 1946 riot and particularly the exodus of the Bihari Muslims to Dhaka, following the 1946 election is a well known fact, however, the remarkable work done on that was only by Papiya Ghosh and hence should be equally studied compared to U.P., Bengal and Punjab. The nationalist Madaris of Bihar whose contribution in the nationalist struggle had been no less than others is also an under-explored theme and less studied area, needs equal attention and scholarships.

The creation of Bihar out of Bengal in 1912 was the first movement when the educated middle class Muslims along with their Kayastha Hindu counterpart organized themselves in their resistance against the Bengali hegemony. In the subsequent years, the congress rise and the Gandhiji’s led movements in Champaran and khilafat-Non-cooperation movements proved a turning point in Bihar where they started to organize themselves in order to fight the colonial state and their policies once again after the rebellion of 1857. In most of these movements, including the movements or initiatives for modern education in the nineteenth century, the Muslims of Bihar had equal considerable share.

Reviews of the literatures

The historiographical accounts on India’s partition and more specifically on the Muslim resistance of the partition are mainly confined to three provinces, U.P., Bengal and Punjab and generalizations have also been made based on these studies. The recent study of colonial Bihar by Mohammad Sajjad offers a different perspective where he, by and large, argues the fact that the Muslims of Bihar were different from that of Bengal, U.P. and Punjab in a sense that they were the momins, pasmanda and razils and so economically backward except some upper class Muslims compared to U.P. However, despite being under communal and ideological pressure, they remained consistently against the idea of politically separatist and socially divisive politics of the Muslim league. Therefore, he argues, that within the Muslim intelligentsia, the clergy, the vernacular educated along with the modern educated came on the same platform to encourage the modern education without neglecting the traditional learning and stood against the two-nation theory of the Muslim League. Salil Mishra’s book, A Narrative of Communal Politics: Uttar Pradesh, 1937-39, is a great attempt in filling the gap but his time period of the study is for two years and till 1939 when the reach of both the communal organizations, the Muslim League and Hindu Mahasabha, was far more rooted and expanded.

Papiya Ghosh refers a number of vernacular papers which routinely included reckless and venomous writes up that helped to stoke the communal fire, and thus separatism as well such as Darbhanga Gazette, Mithila Mihir, Dharambiri etc. There were some newspapers in which most of the matters related to communal solidarity and harmony is reported, were the Leader, The Express, The Mithila Mihir, The Biharee, and The Bihar Herald. Some of the social and educational organizations such as the Bihar Literary Society, the Bihar Associations, Bihar Upkar Sabha, Anjuman-e-Tahzeeb brought a number of Urdu newspapers which consistently reported the political affairs of the state of the time such as Naqueeb (Patna), Imarat (Patna), Ittihad (Patna), Anis (Patna), Nurul Anwar (Arrah), National Akhbar (Mongher), Raftar-e-Zamanah (Patna), Al-Hadi (Patna), Sada-e-Aam (Patna), Qasid (Patna), Al-Panch (Patna) etc. Two leading provincial newspapers which oftenly reacted in political affairs and began to be quite popular in reporting, were the Searchlight and Indian Nation. Naqueeb which was referred and primarily interpreted by Papiya Ghosh in her writings, was the institutional publication of the Imarat-e-Shariah.
All the writings of Muslim separatism in colonial India have debated and discussed the ‘primordialist’ and ‘Instrumentalist’ theories where major Imperialist writers argue that Muslims have certain primordial instincts which direct them towards separatism by believing that they are innately separate political entity. Thus, Robinson gives the example of Jinnah and Moulana Mohammad Ali Jouhar saying that despite having western education they were drifted towards the religious nationalism. However, Mohammad Sajjad proves Robinson’s argument incorrect by substantiating the fact that Robinson completely ignores the stratifications of South Asian Islam based on class, region, language, sect, caste, biradari etc. Arguing further, Sajjad substantiates in his book that even if we do not take into account the stratifications and see in the late nineteenth century Bihar to scrutinize Robinson’s thesis, we find his thesis fails to hold ground specifically in Bihar. Farzana Shaikh’s theory on Muslim Separatism is based on the Islamic ideology where she argues that the communal separatist demand came up from the Islamic ideology for not accepting to be ruled or represented by non-Muslims along with a sense of historical superiority ‘grounded in Mughal rule’.

The theory of ‘Elite Manipulation’ by Paul Brass, is a different interpretation of Muslim separatism where he precisely argues that the demand of Muslim separatism was an idea of the elites, basically the landlords, lawyers, politicians to preserve their social privileges from the Hindus. About the ulma, Brass argues that their religious orientation tended towards traditionalism and revivalism rather than rationalism and modernism...Culturally, they were oriented towards traditional education through the medium of Urdu, rather than towards modern education through the medium of English. Mohammad Sajjad in his study proved this theory incorrect in the case of Bihar where he argues that the education movement in Bihar was one arena where the Muslims did not show any particularistic, separatist or exclusivist orientation and contrary to Brass formulation the education in Bihar was modern without neglecting the traditional learning as already been discussed. There were many learning centers and maktabs where both the communities got education equally and most of the them were funded by the Hindus. The main point, here, is to discuss the issue of the inclusive and secular learning trend in colonial Bihar. Even it was made clear by the study that it is very difficult to make a distinction between the traditionalists and modernists because the Muslim leaders of Bihar maintained a more syncretic approach and so we find the legends such as Noorul Hooda and Khuda Bakhs Khan. Interestingly, these institutions produced many leaders such as Shri Krishna Sahay (first Indian member of the Governor’s Executive Council of Bihar), Dr. Sachidanand Sinha, (1871-1950), Dr. Rajendra Prasad, Alakh Kumar Sinha, Narayan Babu (First inspector General of Police of Bihar), and many other luminaries who got their primary education from such Anglo-Urdu/Persian madrasas and maktabs.

Nationalist Muslim Political Institutions and the Muslim League

Jamiyat-ul-ulama-e-Hind

Jamiyat-ul-ulama Hind, founded in 1919, worked out a theory of Islamic nationalism, grounded in the basic tenets of Islam that deployed against imperialism and subsequently the Muslim League’s communalism. Thus an important section of the ulama did not perceive their role only in relation to the community. They developed a theory of composite nationalism and intervened in politics through an integrated alliance with other groups and communities. Thus, it was Moulana Abul Kalam Azad’s view that the prophet’s covenant with the people of Madinah, which included the Jews and pagans, was valid as a precedent for other situations and in other lands in the subsequent history of Islam and was, in particular, pertinent in India.

The aims of the Jamiyat-ul-Ulema, which was the first political party of Ulema were quite common. Perhaps, the main idea of this particular organization was to bring the ulemas in a common platform by infusing a sense of unity among them. Most of the unequivocal aims in the list were related to their own religious rights such as the protection of the holy places, distinguished Islamic courts for hearings based on shariah for the Indian Muslims and independence for India are said to be of a later date. In the post-Khilafat years, it was not the Muslim League but JUH that survived well into the 1930s with its ‘elan as a national entity intact’.
Nevertheless, the reactions of the ulama towards the freedom movement led by the Congress remained rather ambivalent for a while. The JUH’s meeting of May 1930 held at Amroha, it was decided that the Indian Muslims will follow the Gandhi’s lead in the civil disobedience movement. However, it consistently asserted that organizationally, the JUH has not merged with the Congress. In the Civil Disobedience Movement, their participation was remarkable and not only Moulana Sajjad, a leading member of the JUH was imprisoned rather many members of the Imarat Election Board such as and Shaikh Adalat Hussain of Bettiah and Hafiz Mohammad Sani.

In post election year, especially in 1938, the president of JUH, Husain Ahmad Madani, put forward his theory of composite nationalism in Muttahidah Qaumiya aur Islam. Explaining the original meaning of the word Qaum he said it denotes any collective group regardless of whether its common characteristics were religion, habitat, race, colour or craft. It was seperated from millat, which was a collectivity based on shariah and din (faith). He wrote that the Indian Muslims were fellow nationals of other communities and groups in India, irrespective of their religion and faith and nations were always constituted by homelands. England, for example, is one nation in which many people of different faiths and believed lived together simultaneously. His emphasis of the discussion was that independence from British rule was a prerequisite for the adequate functioning of Islamic principles. The Muslims needed the help of other communities to win independence for themselves because of their weak situation and fragmented unity at the time. Therefore, Collaboration with the Congress was grounded in Islamic principles and the dictates of “wisdom and foresight”. Thus unpacking the history of the Jamiat-ul-ulama will, therefore, certainly be a great clue in order to comprehend the Muslim political institution in colonial Bihar especially 1930s and 1940s.

Jamiat-ul-Ulam-e-Hind, founded by a group of leading Muslim scholars which included Moulana Mahmud Hasan Deobandi, Moulana Syed Husain Ahmad Madani, Ahmad Saeed Dehlavi, Mufti Kifayatullah Dehlavi, Mufti Mohammad Naem Ludhianavi, Moulana Abdul Bai Firangi Mehli and many more, was the biggest Indian Muslim organization which opposed the two-nation theory and scheme of partition propagated by the Muslim League. It was a mass based organization whose organizational structure was spread to almost all parts of the country. Though it was an organization of Islamic scholars, it had the capacity to mobilize large sections of Muslims on its calls. This opposition often led to street fight with Muslim Leaguers.

One of its founders and head of Darul-Uloom (House of Knowledge), Moulana Hussain Ahmad Madani (1879-1957), was a great Islamic scholar, freedom fighter and supporter of composite nationalism. The commitment of Indian nationalism of Hussain Ahmad Madani was the outcome of his interpretation of Islam as a religion of freedom and equality, of justice, of cooperation with, and respect for all mankind. He was not only a great organizer and a sharp polemicist but also a prolific author who produced some of the finest literature in defence of composite nationalism and against the two-nation theory in Urdu, the lingua franca of North India. His most significant book Muttahidah Qaumiya aur Islam on the issue of composite nationalism published in 1938 seemed to be the work more of a political scientist than an Islamic scholar. According to Madani, composite nationalism was practised by Prophet Mohammad in Madina. The same is applicable to the Indian situation also, the people of India as Indians as a nation united, despite religious and cultural diversity, should become one solid nation and should wage war against the alien power that has usurped their natural rights. For Madani, composite nationalism was the greatest tool in the hands of Indians to fight against a barbaric regime and throw of the shackles of slavery. The Jamiat-ul-Ulama took lead in ideologically challenging the scheme of Pakistan by producing mass literature in Urdu in order to educate common Muslims against its pitfalls. This literature was written in polemical style and countered arguments, both religious and political, put forward by Muslim League in favour of having a separate homeland for Muslims. The scheme of Pakistan was opposed for religious as well as practical reasons. This literature challenged two-nation theory of ML by putting forward the concept of composite nationalism.
Imarat-e-Shariah

The establishment of the Imarat-e-Shariah in 1921 is considered one of the major events in colonial Bihar because of its anti-colonial thrust and for the fight against their policies. The Imarat-e-Shariah, the Jamiat-ul-Ulema Bihar, the Deoband movement were all the ideological offshoots of the Wahabi movement in India which played certainly a crucial role among Muslim masses in infusing the anti-colonial and pro-Congress sentiments. The outreach of this particular organization was not merely limited to the cities rather it went out deep down to the remotest villages. It got popularity because of its rendered social and religious services to the people of Bihar and hence its religious and political credibility accelerated with the faith of the masses in pre-independent Bihar. The 1937 election is considered a great event in Indian history and there was a sheer demand of the nationalist Muslim organization for contesting the election against the League. Interestingly, there was no other core nationalist Muslim party like the Imarat-e-Shariah. At the same time it was thought that the Muslims of Bihar should be led by Imarat-e-Shariah and thus the Muslim Independent Party was formed more specifically to contest the election against the League.

The Imarat-e-Shariah (office for the governance of Islamic principles and ideology), a legal-spiritual institution was a part of Moulana Azad’s Amir-e-Hind Scheme in a meeting of the Jamiat-ul-Ulema. Projected as a necessity for the guidance of Muslims in non-Islamic states, the Imarat was to owe allegiance to the Khilafat.12 In the mid thirties there was a tussle between the Ulema and western educated Muslims over providing electoral leadership to the Bihari Muslims. In September 1936, the Jamait-ul-Ulema and Imarat-e-Shariah supported the floating of the Bihar Muslim Independent Party. Working in the tandem with Congress, the MIP aimed at securing a guarantee from the Congress that ‘Muslim religion and culture be preserved and protected in the future constitution of India. In the 1937 election the MIP won the largest number of Muslim seats (15/40) in the Bihar legislature.13

Muslim Independent Party (MIP)

Muslim Independent Party was an extension of the Imarat-e-Sahriah and Jamait-ul-Ulema Bihar. It came into being in September 1936 as an anti-colonial, anti-League and pro-Congress Muslim political party. Initially, the emphasis of the party was on the agrarian issues and later on apart from championing the religio-cultural issues, its main commitment been against the colonialism and separatism. This particular party came into being by the joint efforts of the modern educated as well as the traditional clergy of Bihar. The MIP had the full support of the Jamiat-ul-Ulema Bihar and Imarat-e-Shariah to contest the provincial election of 1937. However, Congress refused to provide sufficient amount of support into the coalition Ministry of 1937 which has its own repercussions in the subsequent politics in colonial Bihar. The Muslim League after knowing the fact that Congress refused to form the Ministry with the MIP which was essentially the voice of the Muslims of Bihar, played its own politics and started spreading the sense of majoritarian communalism upon the minorities.

All India Momin Conference (AIMC)

Another significant Muslim political party whose ideology had been remarkably against the League was the All India Momin Conference. The Momin conference has a long history to explore such as its foundation was led in Calcutta in 1914, even prior to the establishment of the Jamiat-ul-Ulema Bihar, it was known as Falah-ul-Momineen and the people associated with this Conference were primarily the Momins/weaver community of Bihar. The Conference had many branches in the provinces in all over the colonial India. One of the founders of this Conference, Abdul Qayyum Ansari had a say in the Conference where he breaks the myth of Islam in danger by the Muslim League and propels to remain nationalist as per to the Islamic faith and ideology. He said,
“It is blasphemy to say that Islam is in danger here. It is a tragedy to place orders for Pakistan for the segregation of Islam. It is a defeat of Islam to run away from the battle of life in search of a privilege. It is a fantastic wavering of a fevered mind.”

The All India Momin Conference (first conference held at Calcutta in 1928) was one of the largest representative bodies of northern and eastern Indian Muslims in pre-partitioned India. It mainly represented backward sections of Muslim artisans, specially weavers. Momin Conference represented the voice of the oppressed and the downtrodden amongst the Muslim masses. It was the organization of artisans and craftsmen, people who were at the lower rung of Muslim society. They were at the receiving end from the British Empire as well as from the high caste fellow Muslims. The east India Company in quest to sell its products from Manchester and Liverpool was determined to destroy the Indian cloth industry. As a result, the ones who were at the backbone of this industry were feeling the wrath. It also challenged casteism within Muslim society which was divided on Asraf-Arza (noble-labour class) lines. It protested against the oppression which was meted out to them by the so-called upper Caste Muslims. The speeches made in its sessions and resolutions passed constitute a highly vocal set of documents demanding annihilation of caste among Muslims in India. The Momin Conference tried to unify other Muslim laboring classes or lower castes like Rayeen (vegetable growers and sellers), Mansoori (cotton traders), Idris (tailors) and Quraishies (butchers).

Momin Gazette, organ of All India Momin Conference played a significant role in propagating against the two-nation theory. It continued publishing articles against Muslim league. Momin Conference held the firm opinion that Muslim League as an organization was based on faulty principles, its circle was limited and by nature it was coward so it was not possible for it to unite Muslims. The party All India Momin Conference has been opposed to the League, to Jinnah and to Pakistan. It has felt that the League would have little sympathy for backward sections of the Muslim community. The working committee of All India Momin Conference decided to jointly call All India Independent Muslims’ Conference at Delhi to consider the question of Pakistan.

All-Parties Shia Conference

All-Parties Shia Conference also known as All India Shia Political Conference was another important Muslim organization which repudiated the claim of the Muslim League that the latter was the sole guardian of interests of Indian Muslims. Shia Conference mainly represented Shias of India, who were generally well off so far education, wealth and social status was concerned. It took principled stand against two-nation theory propagated by Muslim League. It entered into a united front against the scheme of Pakistan with Sunni organizations thus heralding an era of cooperation with leading sunning organizations. In fact most Shias had allegiance to Shia Political Conference. Shia Conference was described as a Constituent Assembly of Indian Shia Muslims and it was open to all shades of opinion among the Shias. Shia Conference was one of the conveners of Azad Muslim conference at Delhi in 1940 which was held by patriotic Muslims to challenge the scheme of Pakistan propagated by the Muslim League. Shia Conference stood for Hindu-Muslim unity. Shia Conference remained totally committed to a composite and united India. Shia Conference entered into interesting correspondence with Jinnah, demanding clarifications about the status of Shias in the scheme of Pakistan. Nevertheless, it is true that there were prominent Shia personalities with Muslim League but the issues raised by the Shia Conference about security of religious rights of Shias were critical. The Shia Conference had the foresight to demand assurances on these issues and the later happenings in Pakistan proved its fear true.

Rayeen and Mansoori Organizations

The All India Momin Conference was primarily organized by the momins of Bihar to fight against the separatist politics of the Muslim League and to liberate India from the clutches of British rule and its policies. Apart from momins of Bihar there were non-momin backward Muslim biradaris which later on became as much organized and active as of the Momin Conference. Interestingly, the foundation of the organizations was based in Punjab by some affluent families and later on it shifted to Bihar. According to the journalistic accounts and newspapers
such as Searchlight and the Indian Nation, the intensity of Rayeen and Mansoori organization’s opposition against the League were very much similar to that of the Momin Conference specifically in 1940s. Like the Mominis, they were too very much critical and against the shareef politics of the Muslim League where razeels were always dominated by the shareefs. In order to reveal the shareef politics and the reality of the Muslim League, Abdul Qayyum Ansari reiterated time and again that the Muslim League had miserably failed to ameliorate the conditions of the Muslims because its leadership is in the hands of selfish people whose prime interest lie in grabbing the power and to preserve their own interests.

**All India Jamhoor Muslim League (AIJML)**

All India Jamhoor League was formed in April 1940 in the district of Muzaffarpur in Bihar by Maghoor Ahmad Aijazi precisely against Muslim League’s idea of separate nationhood. Maghoor Ahmed Aijazi along with his companions did each possible effort to mobilize people against the idea of separatism and what it meant for the Muslims of Bihar. They went door to door campaign and travelled even to the remotest villages on bicycles spreading the message of being with Congress and the inherent flaws in Jinnah’s League Resolution. They even tried to persuade Muslims about the implications of the two nation theory of the Muslim league by saying the fact that Pakistan would not have another god to save their life, property and honour. The study, therefore, of these Muslim political institutions is imperative to comprehend the situations and circumstances of the Muslims in colonial Bihar as well as their reactions about the idea of separatism, is a worth exploring theme.

4. Ziya ul Salam Faruqi, *The Deoband School and the Demand for Pakistan*, Bombay, 1963, p.67 mentions that while the JUH started as a body of Muslim religious leaders belonging to different schools, from around the mid- 1920s it came to be dominated by the Deoband Ulama. The aims of the JUH included the defence of Islam and Islamic nationalism achieving and protecting the general religious rights fighting for the freedom of the country, safeguarding the shariat and propagating Islam by missionary activity within and outside India.
5. Mushirul Hasan, *Nationalism and Communal Politics in India, 1885-1930*, New Delhi, 1991, p. 292. It was only in 1930s that the Muslim League was reactivated.


