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**Religious Diversity and the Colonial State  
Hindu-Muslim Relations under British Rule**

by

Kenneth McPherson

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South Asia Institute  
Department of Political Science  
University of Heidelberg



# Religious Diversity and the Colonial State: Hindu-Muslim Relations under British Rule

KENNETH McPHERSON

*South Asia Institute, University of Heidelberg<sup>1</sup>*

The Nationalist movement was the crucible in which relations between Hindus and Muslims in British India took shape. It defined the period in which the concept of a monolithic “Muslim community” solidified and in which “Hindu” and “Muslim” interests were supposedly set in contrary positions. Any attempt to comment on the relationship between Hindus and Muslims in modern India has to take into account the history of communal relations in this period as the nationalist agitation against the British gathered force.

Recently Ashutosh Varshney published a work on Hindus and Muslims in India, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life*, that offered new insights into the nature of communal relations in modern India (Varshney 2002). Varshney analysed Hindu-Muslim riots since 1947 and proposed a series of arguments to explain the reasons behind communal conflict in modern India. I do not intend to review his work, rather I want to test his hypothesis that strong civic linkages between Hindus and Muslims are the main barriers to communal conflict and provide the best processes for the mediation of such conflict when it occurs. Varshney examined a number of Indian cities for the period 1947-1990 and combined research on communal conflict during that period with forays into the histories of the various communities concerned to substantiate his claims.

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<sup>1</sup> Prof. McPherson was Mercator Professor (2002-2003) and is now Visiting Professor, Department of Political Science, South Asia Institute, University of Heidelberg (e-mail: drkennethmcperson@yahoo.com.au). An earlier, shorter, version of this paper ‘Damned to Live Together? Hindus and Muslims in One State’, was presented at the Hans Seidel Stiftung seminar ‘Changing India’, in Wildbad Kreuth, Germany, 17-19 February 2003. My thanks to Professor Peter Reeves (National University of Singapore) and Professor Subrata Mitra, Peter Lehr, Clemens Spieß and Alexander Fischer of the South Asia Institute for their comments on drafts of this paper.

Varshney's conclusions are compelling, but he does concentrate on the present and recent past, at the expense of a more in-depth analysis of the history of the communities – especially the Muslim communities – he dealt with. By discounting history to the extent that he does he has missed arguments that would help substantiate his account of the present and explain more fully the root causes of communal discord rather than simply correlating current trends. For example, Varshney argues that “vigorous associational life” is a much more effective constraint on “the polarising strategies of political elites” and discounts the impact of “everyday forms of engagement” on lessening communal conflict (Varshney 2002: 4). There are two obvious problems with these assertions. One is that it is debateable if elites always have a free hand in shaping communal relations, viz. the ability of Jinnah to undermine regional governments in the Punjab and Bengal where there had been impressive attempts to construct inter-communal accords and political parties. Another problem with this assertion is that “everyday forms of engagement” in an historical context occur in different social and cultural environments and consequently vary enormously in strength and ability to bolster communal accord.

In this paper I will take some of the themes raised by Varshney and apply them to the two Muslim communities with which I am familiar, and with whom Varshney does not deal. In the process I hope that I can use the discipline of history as a more efficient tool than Varshney does to explain the nature of communal relations and to emphasise that historical variations in Hindu-Muslim relations (particularly in the area of everyday engagement and civic interaction) provide clues to present variations in relations between the two communities.

Many commentators on Hindu-Muslim relations have treated both communities as monolithic and homogenous in terms of their aspirations. There have been attempts in recent years to challenge this monolithic view and to argue that it is fallacious and does little to help us understand the tensions, or absence of tensions, between Hindus and Muslims across British India. Some authors have argued that communal relations across British India varied enormously as did the historical, economic, linguistic, and cultural circumstances of the many communities of Hindus and Muslims that inhabited British India. As a result there is growing recognition that Hindu-Muslim relations were not uniform and that neither community was monolithic. In both the variety of inter-communal relations and the realities of major intra-communal differences there are undoubtedly lessons for all of us who attempt to plot the current state of communal relations in India (Assayag 2004).

My introduction to the history of Islam in South Asia began with two studies of quite distinctive Muslim communities: one in southern India and the other in Calcutta (McPherson 1969, 1972). Both studies focussed on the evolution of Muslim communal consciousness and Muslim involvement in the various political movements that swept British India in the years between the First and Second World Wars.

Since then I have only occasionally revisited these communities (McPherson 1980, 1984, 1990, 2001), but Varshney's work – and an article by Amrita Basu on

communal riots in Bijnor between 1988 and 1992 (Basu 1997: 391-435) – revived my interest in the political history of Muslims in the sub-continent during the years of the nationalist struggle against the British. Varshney provided insights not only into my work but also into studies such as Basu’s in which the author based her examination of the state of communal relations in Bijnor on political and economic issues in the city to the exclusion of any analysis of the workings of inter-communal civic life.

The historical examples I will discuss operated in a different political context to that in which Varshney’s examples operated. My examples are set in the colonial environment and in a political situation shaped by separate electorates, the looming presence of a “third party” (the British), and the absence of a developed multi-party system. The political system itself was a potential source of communal conflict and rivalry. It collapsed in 1947, but arguably, despite the different political environments of pre- and post-independence India, many of the forces that shaped communal relations before 1947 are still at work. In parts of modern India Hindu-Muslim relations have been shaped – and continue to be shaped – for the worse by the absence of vigorous inter-communal associational life and everyday forms of engagement. In other parts of India, however, it can be argued that communal relations were and are based on a vigorous inter-communal associational life and everyday forms of engagement which shaped – and continue to shape – a healthy inter-communal dialogue within the world’s largest democracy.

## CALCUTTA

In 1918, Calcutta had a population over 900,000 of whom nearly 25% were Muslims. Of all the cities of British India, Calcutta was undoubtedly the most cosmopolitan and was a microcosm of the complex ethnic and linguistic tapestry that was British India. It was above all a city of migrants in which the people and language of the surrounding province of Bengal had little impact. Most Hindus and Muslims in the city were from “up country” (Bihar, the United Provinces and the Punjab) and in some ways the city was both physically and linguistically a collective of discrete villages reflecting the diverse origins of its inhabitants.

The Muslims of Calcutta were drawn from all the major Muslim communities of the sub-continent ranging from Kutchi Memons to families of Persian origin. The majority of Muslims in the city came from Bihar and the United Provinces, spoke Urdu rather than Bengali, were poor and earned their living as artisans, labourers, hawkers, jute mill workers, petty merchants and *chowkidars*. Apart from the Muslim mill workers the majority were skilled artisans and workers who practiced their traditional crafts and trades in the city where they dominated the butchering, leatherwork, cigarette manufacturing, tailoring, and fruit selling trades and provided most of the manpower for cart and river transport as well as a significant proportion of the lascars recruited out of Calcutta.

Most Muslim mill workers were seasonal visitors to the city and lived as single men but the majority of Muslims lived in discrete communities scattered through

central Calcutta, cheek by jowl with Hindus with whom they had marginal social, linguistic and economic interaction. But this exclusion of Hindus was also extended to other Muslims. The Muslims of Calcutta were not a monolithic and homogenous community and were divided into a number of self-contained communities defined by place of origin and occupation. There were for example discrete communities made up of “Peshwari” fruit sellers, Bihari butchers, “Kabuli” moneylenders and Pathan leather dealers. The poorer, and numerically less significant, Bengali Muslims were originally drawn from a variety of rural castes – the Dhuma (cotton cleaners), Kulu (oil pressers), Kunja (vegetable sellers) and Joloha (weavers) – but in the city they tended to abandon caste names in favour of the title Sheikh. Outside their traditional occupations Muslims were poorly represented in government service and the professions except for the lower ranks of the police where the authorities favoured the recruitment of “tough” Bihari Muslim constables.

The leaders of these small communities were often more prosperous merchants and up-country labour recruitment organisers, *serangs*. Pre-eminent amongst such leaders were the wealthy Urdu-speaking mercantile families of Dawoodi Bohras, Cutchi Memons, Ranki and Qaum-I-Punjabian - who dominated the hide and skin trade and some of the bazaars of central Calcutta.<sup>2</sup> Such families provided patronage for local associations of Muslims and funded the building of mosques and Urdu-medium schools. Most were Sunni Muslims and the city had few Shi'ites apart from some Bohra, Memon and Persian families.

There was no united community of Muslims in Calcutta in 1918. Muslims comprised many discrete groups, and most lived lives constrained by narrow geographic and linguistic loyalties. Even as late as 1970 it was claimed that there were more than 65 “ethnic groups” amongst the Muslims of Calcutta (Siddique 1970).

#### *Authority and power within Muslim Calcutta*

Authority and power within this fractured community was ill defined and fragmented. Some individuals exercised power because they were perceived to have the ear of the British who regarded them as the representatives of the entire Muslim community. As such they were the beneficiaries of the limited political changes introduced under the terms of the Minto-Morley reforms of 1909 which granted Muslims separate electorates. As a result of these reforms they became the spokesmen of Muslim interests in the provincial legislative council. These Muslim representatives were drawn from the Bengali-speaking *mofussil* landowning elite, and although they may have attracted the patronage of their rulers they were in fact separated from their Calcutta compatriots by a huge gulf of linguistic, historical and cultural differences that effectively circumscribed any substantial and lasting influence in the city. Associated with this group was a small but growing Western-educated body of lawyers and other professionals. Many were related to the *mofussil* elite, but their world was far wider and they interacted with their Western-

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<sup>2</sup> Hereafter Urdu-speaking Muslims are referred to as Urdu Muslims.

educated co-religionists across India and in Calcutta with Western-educated Hindu members of the professions. To a degree lifestyle, language and interests divided them from the mass of Muslims in Calcutta but they did possess a growing power and influence amongst their fellow Muslims through the exercise of their professional skills and by their increasing penetration of various organs of civil society ranging from the bureaucracy to education and India-wide political associations. Set apart from these two groups were more traditional leaders: Urdu-speaking religious scholars and more prosperous merchants and artisans who exercised a broader popular authority based on their wealth and control of many of the organizations that underpinned Muslim life in Calcutta including a number of Urdu-language newspapers. These three leadership clusters co-existed in 1918 in an uneasy relationship that was to be tested in succeeding decades as the Muslims of Calcutta entered the political arena of Bengal and British India.

The British view of the nature of the provincial Muslim community was based on the almost equal division of the indigenous Bengali population between Muslims and Hindus and their belief that outside Calcutta leadership of the community was in the hands of a Muslim landholding elite. The British discounted the fragmented migrant Muslim communities of Calcutta and promoted men they believed best represented the profile of Bengal's Muslims as the community's spokesmen. Such men were drawn from several backgrounds: some were pensioned descendants of the last king of Oudh and Tipu Sultan; some were drawn from the Muslim landholding elite of the *mofussil* (rural areas) – the so-called *ashraf* families that claimed links with the Mughal past of Bengal – and others were members of the Bengali-speaking professional elite and were related to the *ashraf* families of the *mofussil*<sup>3</sup>. Only the Bengali Muslim professional elite was firmly based in Calcutta, the rest lived in but were not part of community or professional life in the city. Indeed, the *ashraf*, with their penchant for Arabic learning and their attachment to the Bengali and Persian languages, looked down on the immigrant Urdu Muslims of Calcutta. Whilst the Bengali Muslim professional elite was an integral part of the city in a way that the *ashraf* as a group were not, they were few in number and had no links with either the mass of Urdu Muslims or the small labouring class of Bengali Muslims in the mill and dock areas of Calcutta. In contrast to these relatively weak intra-communal links this group did have links with Muslims of similar background across British India and in their professional careers and daily life interacted with the Western-educated members of the Bengali Hindu *bhadrolok*.

By the end of World War I in 1918, a new community consciousness was emerging amongst the diverse Muslim communities of Calcutta. The decline of the Ottoman Empire as a result of the Tripolitanian and Balkan Wars between 1911 and 1913, as well as the Cawnpore mosque affair, stirred Muslims across India and prompted the first signs of widespread serious criticism of British rule amongst Muslims since 1857. Following the declaration of war between Britain and the Ottoman Empire in 1914 the fissures in Muslim loyalty to the British widened, and by 1918 the old loyalist leadership was discredited. There was a major communal

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<sup>3</sup> Hereafter referred to as Bengali Muslims.

riot in 1918 but on closer analysis it is clear that it began as a Muslim protest against the British that peripherally degenerated in some bazaars into a battle between Muslims and Marwaris who had long been locked in a dispute over *korbani* (cow slaughter). Within a few months the same Marwaris and Muslims joined together to attack the British in the riots that paralysed central Calcutta at the time of the agitation against the Rowlatt Act!

### *Authority and Power Tested*

During the War leading Urdu Muslim merchants in the city gradually and uneasily drew closer to the more radical members of the Bengali Muslim professional elite in growing opposition to British rule. From 1915, the Pan-Islamist Ali brothers and Annie Besant's Home Rule League had assiduously worked to detach Muslims from their loyalty to the British. Their efforts were crowned by success when the Lucknow Pact was agreed upon in 1916. At Lucknow the Muslim League and the Indian National Congress agreed on a formula for Muslim representation in the various legislative bodies of British India. Peace in 1918, and the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire did little to reconcile Muslim with their rulers and in this period of heightened tensions and expectations Gandhi emerged to refashion and refocus Indian nationalism.

Varshney gives Gandhi due credit for creating a huge range of civic institutions that brought the masses into political life and fashioned a new Hindu-Muslim accord. Whilst it cannot be denied that Gandhi created new processes and institutions relating to civic life in India the nexus between this activity and the "vigorous associational life" linking communities that Varshney argues are the bulwark against communal conflict is not clear to me. Gandhi took advantage of a Hindu-Muslim political accord that was already in the making and reinforced it by throwing the support of Congress behind the Khilafat movement that was designed to unite Hindus and Muslims in a struggle to protect what was left of the Ottoman Empire and the role of its ruler as the *Khalif* (spiritual leader) of Islam. The movement certainly captured the imagination of many Muslims and Hindus but it also collapsed in chaos when Gandhi halted Non-Co-Operation and Kemal Attaturk abolished the office of the *Khalif*, leaving little behind except mutual recriminations and bitterness.

The Khilafat movement and Gandhi left no legacy of associational activity between Hindus and Muslims in Calcutta. But the politicisation of the Muslim masses in the city during the accord between Khilafatists and Nationalists did encourage greater internal cohesion by weakening boundaries between various Muslim groups in the city and it also shattered the old triumvirate leadership. The landowning *mofusil* Muslim elite lost much influence because of its association with the British. Communal leadership was now in the hands of an uneasy alliance between the radicalised Muslim professional elite, which threw in its lot with the Khilafat agitation and the Nationalist movement, and the fervently pro-Khilafat merchants, artisans and *ulema* who controlled the mosques and Muslim bazaars and who commanded the loyalty of the majority of Muslims in the city.

The Khilafat movement, however, was a political movement and had no parallel in the civic sphere where Muslims and Hindus in the city shared no associational activities. The failure of the Khilafat movement (and hence the failure of the Nationalist movement) to satisfy the concerns and aspirations of most of the Muslim's of Calcutta represented a failure to provide any sustainable mechanism through which Muslims could negotiate and acquire some measure of power and authority in the city in cooperation with their non-Muslim compatriots. Following the collapse of the Khilafat movement and the Hindu-Muslim struggle against the British with Gandhi's decision to end Non-Co-Operation the only point of regular contact and dialogue between leaders of the respective communities was the Calcutta Corporation. However, by the mid-1920s the Corporation had become an arena for Nationalist politics as much as for civic government limiting the ability of Muslims in Calcutta to utilise it as an effective arena in which to create a dialogue with other communities living in the city. An alternative forum was the provincial government where the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms of 1921 provided for greater representation of Indians in provincial government. But here too the Muslim representatives from Calcutta found themselves isolated by the maelstrom of nationalist in fighting. Elsewhere in business, education, welfare activity and unionism the divide between Hindu and Muslim in Calcutta was as great as ever and there existed virtually no reservoir of what Varshney calls "social familiarity" that may have helped mediate differences between the two communities (Varshney 2002: 14-15). The absence of such mediating mechanisms was highlighted by the savage communal riots of 1926 that spread over 6 months. Gangs, recruited by local politicians, and petty merchants and tradesmen (from both major communities), inaugurated horrible riots in the central bazaars of the city that buried the vestiges of any communal rapprochement. The evolution of power based on patronage made inter-community links even harder to sustain.

#### *Authority and Power Fragmented*

Between 1926 and Partition and Independence in 1947 little changed in relations between Hindus and Muslims in Calcutta. The Bengali Muslim professional elite under Faz-ul Huq did attempt to rally the Muslim and Hindu peasantry in a united front against the exactions of the landlord class. However, Congress in Bengal was dominated by the Hindu landowning elite and the attempt by Huq to create a supra communal political party – the Bengal Praja Party – to push for land ownership and tenancy reform was doomed by the opposition of the provincial Congress and the *ashraf* aristocracy in the *mofussil*, and the indifference of the Urdu Muslims of Calcutta to the issues he championed.

Within the Calcutta Muslim community the years between 1926 and 1947 were marked by petty political squabbling that masked an increasing isolation from other communities in the city. In the Corporation, thoroughly politicised by Congress from the mid 1920s - despite attempts by the local Congress leader (C. R. Das) to broker an accord in 1923 – there was little evidence of cooperation between the two communities essentially because what was ostensibly the supreme civic



organization had become a political arena devoid of politicians capable of constructing inter-communal networks.

The failure of Muslims and Hindus to cooperate in the Corporation was reflected at an organisational level elsewhere in Calcutta. In 1932, for example, Muslim merchants feeling excluded from the existing three major commercial organizations in the city formed their own association, the Muslim Chamber of Commerce. Three years later, Muslim lascars broke with the National Trade Union Federation and formed their own union. The motives behind both these moves were due to feelings of alienation and the carrot of separate political representation for Muslim commercial and lascar interests that was dangled before the community by the British in the lead up to the reformed constitution promised for 1935.

During these years, at least until the Great Killings of 1946 which preceded Partition, whilst the level of communal violence remained low it was consistent with small-scale riots, looting, petty larceny and murder in the bazaars of central Calcutta.

Calcutta prior to independence was a disaster zone for communal relations. In terms of robust inter-communal civic life and everyday association it was a desert and was a battlefield between various narratives that defined the different communities living in the city. To an extent the nature of the inter-communal dialogue was determined, as Varshney has hypothesised for the post-1947 period, by an absence of vigorous inter-communal civic and associational life. But it was also determined by the tides of the nationalist movement as it took shape in Bengal, and by events at the national level where Congress and the All India Muslim League were rivals for Muslim support. Local elites were pulled in a variety of directions dictated by local self-interest and the pressures of the wider nationalist struggle. Varshney has claimed that vigorous associational life is the best constraint on “the polarising strategies of political elites” but this claim is based on an assumption that such elites have a free hand. In Calcutta and Bengal one could argue that economic and class interests and external pressures from the national leadership of both the League and Congress constrained the freedom of movement on the part of local elites and reinforced the appeal of conflicting community narratives.

In the instance of the Muslims of Calcutta there was a master narrative based on the north Indian model of the respectable Muslim being Urdu-speaking and linked to the Mughal past that was not only in conflict with the dominant regional narrative of the Hindu landowning elite based on its position as the major landowning group, but was also initially at odds with the Muslim regional narratives. One of these narratives was that of the Bengali Muslim professional group led by men such as Fazl-ul Huq who attempted to build a political bridge between the two communities outside Calcutta based on a commonality of interests between the Hindu and Muslim peasantry and small landowner. The opposing Bengali Muslim narrative, which initially was unsympathetic to the Urdu Muslims, was the elitist narrative of the landowning Bengali *ashraf*. Originally it was not a narrative that linked the Muslims of the city with the Muslims of the *mofussil*, but as *ashraf* fears of Congress grew they made concerted attempts to build links with

the Urdu Muslims of Calcutta preaching from an overtly communalist and exclusive platform. The tragedy of the failure of Fazl-ul Huq to build a supra-communal narrative was that the failure left a vacuum which in the absence of initiatives from either community led to the eclipse of rational choice and the disastrous breakdown in communal relations resulting in the dismemberment of Bengal into Hindu and Muslim majority areas in 1947.<sup>4</sup> Bereft of any alternative courses of action the Muslims of Calcutta were fertile ground for Jinnah and his supporters from the late 1930s when they concentrated their efforts to win community-wide support for the All India Muslim League by urging the creation of separate Muslim civil society institutions. It was a campaign that helped seal the communal divide and further undermined Fazl-ul Huq's attempts to create a supra-communal political forum resulting in the tragedies of 1946 and 1947 for the Muslims of the city.

The failure of political alternatives and the equally disastrous failure to create voluntary inter-communal networks in Calcutta and between Calcutta and the *mofussil* was compounded by the absence of what Varshney has called "short term associational networks", i.e. everyday forms of engagement, between Hindus and Muslim throughout the city (Varshney 2002: x, 4,11). The end result was an almost total collapse of civil engagement from the 1930s that prefaced Partition in 1947.

Perhaps the spirit of the Calcutta in the years before (and sadly after) 1947 is in part summed up by a writer in 1966 who noted that

Calcutta does not enjoy that easy and widespread social communication necessary to foster the organization of a well-knit society of people having a civic consciousness. The lack of assimilation makes Calcutta not a melting pot but a tossed salad, and the city's life seethes with tensions between non-communicating groups [...] (Ali 1966: 18).

Undoubtedly this comment is harsh and inaccurate (and oddly "Orientalist") in that it implies a character failure not unlike the supine and effeminate character the colonial British attributed to the Hindus or their characterisation of Muslims as warlike and surly. But, Calcutta was not "a well-knit society". It was a city and society buffeted and divided by competing political, cultural and economic interests which collectively undermined all attempts between 1918 and 1947 to create mechanisms for inter-communal dialogue and cooperation.

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<sup>4</sup> For a detailed discussion of rational choice and civic life see Mitra (1999).

## MADRAS

In many ways Madras was a very different city from Calcutta. It had a smaller population and a smaller percentage of Muslims reflecting the fact that province wide Muslims formed only 7% of the population although they comprised 10% of the population of Madras city which stood at more than 520,000 in 1921. It had a major cotton textile industry, but compared with Calcutta was a much less significant commercial centre. However, in the context of southern India, Madras was the great metropolis: not only was it the administrative centre of the Madras Presidency, which included much of southern and central India, but it was also the storm centre of the nationalist movement south of Bombay. It was a city of major educational and cultural institutions, with a vibrant vernacular and English-language press and was magnet that attracted migrants from across southern and central British India.

Within the city Muslim institutions, apart from mosques and religious endowments, were neither numerous nor strong. Urdu-speaking Muslims formed the majority of the population but they were relatively impoverished comprising mostly petty merchants and artisans. Fewer in number, but wealthier and more integrated into the economic life of the city was a growing community of Tamil-speaking Muslims with strong organisational and religious links to other Tamil-speaking communities across the Tamil heartland of southeast India.<sup>5</sup>

*Authority and Power with the Madras Muslim Community*

On the eve of the First World War the profile of communal leadership was superficially similar to that of Calcutta. The British recruited scions of the old Urdu Muslim aristocracy of the Carnatic and Mysore – principally from the family of the Prince of Arcot – along with a few landowners and prominent merchants from the same linguistic and cultural milieu, as spokesmen of Muslim interests both before and after the Minto-Morley Reforms of 1909. The Muslim population of the city was also superficially similar to that of Calcutta comprising mainly Sunni Urdu-speakers who had moved south with Muslim invaders from the Deccan Sultanates and the Mughal Empire with a scattering of Gujarati and Persian Shia Muslim merchant families. Most Muslims were engaged in either trade or in small family industries and lived in a concentrated area around the Wallajah mosque and the palace of the Prince of Arcot quite separate from the Hindu heartland of the city. Wealthy merchant families provided the main source of patronage for community focal points such as mosques, schools and a small number of cultural and political organizations such various *anjumans* and the tiny local branch of the All-India Muslim League. A smaller number of Muslims were Tamil-speakers who had migrated to the city from southern Tamil-speaking districts such as Madurai, Tiruchirapali and Salem.

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<sup>5</sup> Hereafter referred to as either Urdu or Tamil Muslims.

The image of Madras as a Muslim migrant city similar to Calcutta can however be overdrawn. Below the level of elite leadership imposed by the British the community was tightly knit and led by a number of wealthy merchant families the most prosperous of whom dominated the flourishing local skin and hide trade which fed into the large European-owned tannery industry. In addition to these families there was a small coterie of Tamil Muslim merchant families, some of whom were also engaged in the skin and hide trade, who were the de facto spokesmen for that community of Muslims. Relations between Urdu and Tamil Muslims were not close. The Urdu Muslims regarded their Tamil co-religionists as somewhat heterodox, but business links did provide a nexus between the two groups as it did with Hindu business groups throughout the city.

The Tamil Muslims were an ancient community pre-dating the eleventh century Muslim invasions of northern India. They were descended from Arab and Persian merchants who intermarried locally and from converts. For a millennia or more they were merchants who created a maritime trading network linking the Tamil heartland with Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka, and socially were organised into endogamous “caste-like” groups. The Tamil Muslim leadership was essentially politically cautious and in addition readily identified with the history and language of Tamil south India. The community had strong and ancient links to their Hindu counterparts as well as a keen sense of being an organic part of the larger Tamil community. Islam had deep roots in the Tamil countryside with its own complex local sacred landscape and identity that provided a strong network of integrated religious, business and civic organizations based on endogamous groups such as the Marakayars, Labbais and Navayats (Bayly 1989). The everyday language of the community was Tamil, which along with Arabic was also the language of religion. Urdu and Persian, the languages of north Indian Muslims were not part of Tamil Muslim daily or religious life, despite attempts by some north Indian Muslim organizations to foster the spread of Urdu amongst them in the early twentieth century. Whilst the Tamil Muslims were the smallest linguistic group of Muslims in the Madras Presidency, barely 600,000 compared with more than 1,100,000 Urdu Muslims and nearly 1,000,000 Mapillas (Malayalam-speaking Muslim from what is now Kerala), they were concentrated in the Tamil-speaking *mofussil* where they formed the dominant Muslim group. In these districts they comprised 5% of the population but in urban centres such as Nagore, Nagapattinam and Kayalam they were considerably better represented.

In the years immediately preceding World War I, the Urdu Muslims of Madras like their co-religionists in Calcutta were stirred to increasing resentment against the British by events in North Africa and the Balkans from 1911, as well as by the Cawnpore Mosque affair. Urdu Muslims in Madras were active in establishing local chapters of the Red Crescent Society to assist Turks in the Balkans and there was a groundswell of anger and alienation from the British amongst them which increased in intensity following the declaration of war between the British and Ottoman empires in 1914. Their anger was harnessed by leaders of the Nationalist movement, in particular by the local Home Rule League and – in contrast to Calcutta – by all leading local Congress leaders who actively supported the

Lucknow Pact. The lead for this agitation within the Muslim community was provided by supporters of the two major communal organisations in the city – the Madras Presidency Muslim League and the Southern Indian Muhammedan Educational Association: both founded with the active encouragement of parent organizations in northern India. Both were overwhelmingly Urdu Muslim in orientation and had little impact amongst Tamil Muslims.

Initially the Tamil Muslims were largely unmoved by the rise of north Indian inspired communal organisations and agitation. But during the course of the First World War economic grievances and growing concern for the fate of the *Khalif* moved the Tamil Muslim leadership towards a more critical view of British rule and a greater intimacy with their Urdu-speaking coreligionists.

### *Authority and Power Tested*

As in Calcutta, the first leadership victims in the turmoil following the end of World War I were many of the old conservative spokesmen sponsored and trusted by the British. Most of these victims were related to either the Prince of Arcot or were descended from the few *mofussil* landowning families in the Presidency. The merchant members of this group, with their active and dominant role in community life, fared better and some reappeared as community spokesmen for various political factions in the post-War years. Overall leadership in the community immediately following the end of the War was divided between various claimants. One centre of power and authority comprised leading Urdu-speaking merchant families; another a small group of Western-educated professionals who had gained some influence in the years immediately before and during the War both as a result of patronage by leading Urdu-speaking merchant families and as a result of the links they maintained with their peers elsewhere in British India (McPherson 1970, 32-47). They were in effect the Urdu-speakers' communication link with the outside world, but they trod a difficult path caught between the innate political caution of the merchant elite and the siren call of the political storm gathering across the sub-continent. A third leadership group comprised leading Tamil Muslim merchants who whilst as politically cautious as their Urdu-speaking coreligionists had closer social and economic links with their Tamil-speaking compatriots across southern India.

Superficially there were parallels between the exercise of power and authority of the Muslim communities of Calcutta and Madras but, in stark contrast to Calcutta, not only did local Hindu Congressmen move to build political links to Muslim leadership groups, but also the Muslim mercantile elite of the city joined with their Hindu counterparts to support agitation against the British. The wealthy Muslim skin and hide traders were badly affected by wartime regulations that banned the export of skins and hides and which consequently lowered their market price. In contrast European-owned tanneries in Madras benefited from this move. In 1917, in an attempt to agitate for the reform of these regulations Muslim skin and hide traders – Urdu- and Tamil-speaking – formed their own association, the Southern Indian Skin and Hide Merchants' Association, and became even more

active in the inter-communal Southern India Chamber of Commerce (established in 1909). Both these associations threw their support behind the Home Rule League, the Lucknow Pact and later Gandhi. Such business associations provided the type of vigorous inter-communal civic organization that was so patently absent in Calcutta.

In Madras Gandhi inherited and consolidated a thriving communal accord. As in Calcutta, the accord was badly affected by the failure of the Khilafat and Non-Co-Operation movements and by the lure of the political concessions offered by the British under the terms of the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms, but the future of communal relations was markedly different.

The heightening of Muslim political consciousness led to the eclipse of the much of the old elite leadership and from 1918 the community was lead almost exclusively by groups of wealthy merchants. Like the Muslim leadership of post-War Calcutta, the Muslim leadership of Madras was factionalised. But whereas in Calcutta the factions were united in their opposition to Congress and the supra-communal politics of Faz-ul Huq, in Madras the position was far more complex.

#### *Power and Authority Divided?*

In part the complexity of Muslim political decision-making in Madras and the emergence of new leadership groups and new types of power and authority was due to the growing influence of Tamil Muslims in Madras city. In part it was also related to the particular political milieu of the Madras Presidency where the political dialogue within the Hindu community was divided between the Indian National Congress and the Justice Party with its narrative of a popular Tamil challenge to Brahmin domination. Unlike Calcutta, the post-War period in Madras provided Muslims with a number of apparently viable alternatives for dialogue with other communities and for opportunities to create new dialogues through a number of civil society institutions to protect and further their interests.

Between 1918 and 1921, when Gandhi's programme for Non-Co-Operation and the Khilafat movement collapsed, Urdu- and Tamil-speaking Muslims in Madras were active participants in these movements. Merchant caution may have tempered the support of many of the community's leaders but local Nationalist leaders were keen to retain their support and actively sought to conciliate waverers and promote local economic interests.

However, apart from the Indian National Congress and its offshoot the provincial Swaraj Party (established to contest elections under the 1921 reforms), the Justice Party provided another platform for Hindu-Muslim political cooperation particularly after the constitutional reforms that ushered in dyarchy in 1921. In the 1920s and into the mid-1930s both the Justice and Swaraj Parties were rivals for Muslim support. For many Muslims, however, the Swaraj Party was tainted with memories of the Non-Co-Operation fiasco whereas the Justice Party provided an alternative and more cautious forum in which communal concerns could be negotiated within the constitutional process. Support for the Justice Party was particularly forthcoming from Tamil Muslims who whilst critical of the British

had, for the most part, found Gandhi's brand of nationalism and agitation too extreme. Some remained in the Congress fold but others were more comfortable with the constitutionalist and anti-Brahmin approach of the non-Brahmin Justice Party which evolved out of the South Indian Liberal Federation. The Federation was formed in 1917 and was the first overt sign of the struggle between Brahmin and non-Brahmin that was to shape Tamil politics for the rest of the century. Ironically the Justice Party also attracted the support of some of the younger members of the old pro-British elite in Madras city that had been eclipsed during the war years. For them it provided a route into the constitutional political arena where they could renew their opposition to the Brahmin-dominated Nationalist movement and negotiate their interests through cooperation with non-Brahmin Hindus.

Whilst the Muslim mercantile leadership in Madras city was divided primarily between supporters of the Justice Party and Congress, links were maintained by shared business interests both with one another and through strong inter-communal business organizations. Also, the Congress-Justice Party divide did not reflect the Urdu- and Tamil-speaking divide within the Muslim community, but rather reflected the divide between politically cautious Muslims and Congress-oriented Muslim nationalists. Urdu and Tamil Muslims were found on both sides of this divide. In addition some Muslims in the city were keen supporters of the many north Indian Muslim-inspired political groups and parties that flourished in the 1920s and 1930s, but in general both Congress and the Justice party were successful in maintaining meaningful political links with the majority of Muslim leaders. The Tamil Muslim leadership in the city may have been for the most part more politically conservative than their pro-Congress co-religionists, but nevertheless they identified closely with the broad Tamil cultural and historical environment and were not alienated from the larger Hindu community as were their co-religionists in Calcutta.

Unlike Calcutta, Madras city was spared major outbreaks of communal violence although there were many instances in which Muslim spokesmen from both major political factions felt aggrieved and betrayed by their Hindu partners. To paraphrase Varshney, civic links and vigorous associational life acted as serious constraints on the polarising strategies of more intransigent communal spokesmen on both sides of the communal divide (Varshney 2002: 4).

By the 1930s, the Justice Party was in terminal decline and the Tamil Muslim leadership was increasingly politically isolated.<sup>6</sup> Some leaders drifted towards Congress whilst others adopted a middle path. All rejected the overtures of more communalist spokesmen within the south and from north India, and in the late 1930s when Jinnah courted them and revived the All India Muslim League they gave guarded support on the basis of the need for Muslims to catch up with Hindus in the areas of education and government employment. The Muslim League also courted the Urdu Muslim leadership and to an extent its efforts were successful in that a significant number of leaders from both Muslim groups gave their support to

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<sup>6</sup> For the evolution of the rump of the Justice Party into the Dravida Kazhagam (DK) and later the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and its successors see Price 1996: 359-83.

a broadly based Muslim Parliamentary Board that fought the 1937 election on purely local issues that had been the subject of keen debate for decades. Between 1937 and 1947, the Muslim leadership supported Jinnah and the Muslim League largely because the national leadership of Congress seemed set against negotiations with the Muslim League. But that support co-existed with their on-going vigorous associational and civic links with the Hindu majority and local Congress leaders such as C.R. Rajagopalachariar. Partition was not ushered in by the horrors that scarred Calcutta or by mass migration. A handful of Muslims left for Pakistan, for the rest it was essentially business as usual.

## CONCLUSION

In terms of Varshney's emphasis on vigorous associational and civic lives as the major bulwarks against communal violence and alienation Calcutta and Madras stand in stark contrast to one another.

The Hindu and Muslim communities in Calcutta shared little in terms of the daily and civic lives and were led by politicians with little will to develop links between the communities. Faz-ul Huq stands out as the outstanding exponent of inter-communal political cooperation but he had little support from either community in the city and in the *mofussil* was checkmated by the opposition of the Hindu and Muslim landowning elite. Even at the level of day-to-day links there was marginal inter-communal contact in the city given the massive social, cultural, linguistic and economic dislocation that existed between the many Muslim and Hindu communities comprising the city's population. The various narratives that defined communities in the city were essentially isolationist and exclusive, and they undermined the possibilities for rational choice in terms of communal harmony and cooperation.

In Madras on the other hand vigorous associational life flourished. At one level it was based on closely integrated business interests, on the other it derived from the historical niche that Tamil Muslims occupied in the region. Strong associational and civic links encouraged Muslim and Hindu political leaders to promote strong political links and undermined the appeal of overtly confessional political parties. Historically such links pre-dated the emergence of Gandhi in the 1920s. The inter-communal links that operated so positively in Madras were in place before Gandhi emerged to national leadership, and there is no evidence that the Nationalists created these links in either Calcutta or Madras, although in the latter city they certainly encouraged and supported them. It could even be argued that Congress in Bengal, and the Muslim rural landowning elite, acted to undermine the development of political and associational links in contrast to politicians across the broader political spectrum in Madras.

Varshney's work certainly has something to tell us about the path forward in India and the work that needs to be undertaken to ensure that both Muslims and Hindus share the benefits of Indian nationhood. But the variety of Islam in India and the close regional associations of the majority of Muslims need to be explored



further if we wish to obtain a better understanding of the integral part that Muslims have and continue to play in the life of the country and the nature of communal relations. Whilst Varshney has furthered our understanding of inter-communal relations across India I think his hypothesis essentially addresses correlations rather than causality. His short-term view underestimates the impact of the past in terms of the nature of daily interactions between the communities and the constraints imposed on followers and leaders by their economic and class interests, and by the different narratives by which they define themselves.

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