

“As we witness growing chauvinism and violence toward minorities in India and Pakistan alike, we must ask what price we are willing to pay for the homogenizing wrath of Partition’s nation-states.”

# South Asia in Dark Times: Homogenizing Nation-States and the Problem of Minorities

VAZIRA ZAMINDAR

**I**t is a map etched with deep, angry black lines, agitated and pulsating. The line of the border between India and Pakistan is enlarged and reimposed to exceed and disrupt the recognizable lineaments of the two nation-states. This woodcut print lies at the center of the New York–based Indian artist Zarina’s *Atlas of My World* (2001), and as with many of her other mappings of this divided region, the inside and outside of the lines drawn between India and Pakistan are interchangeable and unstable.

## Resurgent Nationalism

Seventh in a series

It is from these unstable spaces in between that I want to return to a founding moment for these border lines. It has been 75 years since the All India Muslim League (AIML) passed the Lahore Resolution in March 1940, calling for the partitioning of the Indian subcontinent—and a seminal, but once forgotten, commentary on the resolution is now making a comeback. The formidable leader of the dalits (the group at the bottom of India’s caste system), Bhimrao Ambedkar, wrote a book called *Pakistan or The Partition of India* within months of the Lahore Resolution. (He would later go on to lead the drafting of India’s constitution.)

Ambedkar’s book has lately been hailed by Partha Chatterjee, one of the founding members of the influential Subaltern Studies collective of South Asian historians and a major theorist of nationalism, as a work of “truly astonishing prescience.” Just a year ago, a militant Hindu nation-

alist magazine, *Jana Sangh Today*, announced that “no Hindu scholar, leader, statesman since has surpassed Ambedkar’s intellectual achievement on this subject,” and reprinted large excerpts from his text. Then, two months ago, Pranab Bhanu Mehta, the head of the Center for Policy Research, a leading think tank in New Delhi, described Ambedkar’s text as the “single best thing ever written on Partition.”

What is the significance of Ambedkar’s commentary and why do the left, right, and center of Indian political opinion have such a positive consensus on this text today? What does it reveal about the nature of postcolonial nationalism in South Asia and the spaces in between, in a period that has witnessed the rise to power of Narendra Modi and the Hindu right in India, the deadly struggle with the Taliban in Pakistan, and growing violence against religious minorities in both countries?

## AMBIGUOUS VISION

The AIML’s Lahore Resolution quickly came to be known as the Pakistan Resolution, even though the word “Pakistan” did not appear in the document, since diverse ideas and imaginary maps of the future country were already in circulation. It is considered a landmark statement because it marked a substantive shift in the AIML’s politics, from fighting for minority rights in colonial India to making a claim to national self-determination. It argued that Muslims in India were no longer to be considered a numerical minority forming a third of India’s population, for they were in fact a separate nation.

But because this “nation” was dispersed differentially across the subcontinent, the Lahore Resolution’s claim to a territorial “Muslim home-

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land” was formulated in two parts. With census logic, the resolution addressed regions where Muslims formed a majority of the population distinctly from regions where they formed a minority. For the former, it demanded that “geographically contiguous units” be merged, “with such territorial adjustments as may be necessary,” into “Independent States in which the constituent units shall be autonomous and sovereign.” The resolution also demanded “adequate, effective, and mandatory safeguards” both for non-Muslim minorities that would form a part of these “Independent States” as well as for the Muslim minority that would remain within India.

The Lahore Resolution created quite a stir in Indian politics, of course, but it was its ambiguities that became the subject of much political debate at the time and fodder for historians thereafter. What did “Muslim homeland” mean? Did “independent states” refer to a plurality of Muslim-majority states? What kinds of “territorial adjustments” were being proposed? What constituted “adequate safeguards” for minorities? These ambiguities can be understood as reflecting a lack of clarity in the minds of the drafters themselves, or as a strategy to appeal to diverse interest groups, including among Muslims, while maintaining some room for maneuver.

## SURGICAL OPERATIONS

Ambedkar’s analysis of the Lahore Resolution, or what he called his “Indian Political What is What,” is incisive in examining many of these ambiguities. His analysis takes the form of arguments that are presented first from a Muslim point of view and then from a Hindu perspective, as if Ambedkar, as a dalit thinker, stands outside the fray—and he comes out forcefully in favor of partition. However, the partition Ambedkar doggedly advocates is different from what the Lahore Resolution envisions. He can be understood as bringing a certain kind of precision to the ambiguities of the resolution. But given the extent to which the historical outcome resembled Ambedkar’s partition, his text must be read as an intervention that actively participated in shaping that outcome in the years that followed.

The Lahore Resolution proposed the creation of multireligious states in which, according to Ambedkar’s reading, there would be “the rule of the Hindu minorities by the Muslim majorities and the rule of the Muslim minorities by

the Hindu majorities.” He argued that this was an unacceptable political solution: “Under no circumstances can they be allowed to carve out mixed states composed of Muslims opposed to Hindus, with the former superior in number to the latter.” Since the very existence of majorities and minorities had caused the “crying evils of the present situation,” for Ambedkar the only reasonable solution was the creation of homogeneous nation-states. Thus Ambedkar insisted that Pakistan must be “an ethnic state composed of one homogeneous community, namely Muslims.”

How was this homogeneous Muslim state to be created, given the realities of a multireligious society in 1940? Ambedkar took a dispassionate view—the problem was not the “Pakistan” scheme itself, but the ambiguity around the boundaries, and resolving this amounted to “a mere question of changing the boundaries” of Punjab, Bengal, and Assam so that substantial Hindu populations could be simply surgically removed from the planned territory of “Pakistan.” Thus Ambedkar became one of the first to propose dividing the large Muslim-majority provinces of Punjab and Bengal—along what would eventually become the Radcliffe Line of 1947.

However, such a line-drawing exercise on a map could not entirely separate religious communities that had lived together for centuries, and thus Ambedkar proposed a second surgical operation that was called at the time a “transfer of populations.” Ambedkar advocated a complete transfer of Hindu populations that might remain in a territorially modified “Pakistan,” creating a homogeneous Muslim state. With regard to the Muslim minority in divided India, he recommended a similar transfer of populations to remake India into a homogeneous Hindu state, but suggested that this would be a decision for the Muslim leadership to make. However, he argued that even without the total exodus of the Muslim minority, if India remained “a composite state,” the sheer reduction in the number of Muslims within the country would reduce the “communal problem” and force the Muslim minority to align with other social groups, while keeping a reactionary Hindu nationalism at bay.

## THE MINORITY PROBLEM

Ambedkar’s advocacy for engineering homogeneous nation-states—possibly involving the displacement of up to 50 million people—today would simply be called incitement to ethnic cleansing on

a catastrophic scale. But in 1940, Ambedkar was drawing on the experiences of interwar Europe and the political science of his time. The League of Nations Minority Treaties, which underpinned the formation of new European nation-states out of old multiethnic empires, were deemed a total failure. As Ambedkar noted, “safeguards did not save the minorities,” and minority rights came to be seen instead as exacerbating conflicts. On the other hand, internationally sanctioned, planned exchanges of populations among Bulgaria, Greece, and Turkey, under the Treaties of Neuilly and Lausanne in 1919 and 1923, were deemed by most international observers a success, despite the uprooting of more than two million people.

Among the authors Ambedkar cited was C. A. Macartney, a historian of Central Europe and the secretary of the Minorities Committee of the British League of Nations Union, whose encyclopedic and influential 1934 book *National States and National Minorities* proposed two solutions to the “minority problem” in the age of nationalism. One of Macartney’s solutions was the same as Ambedkar’s partition plan—achieving the total elimination of minorities by redrawing boundaries to coincide with ethnic or national groups and resorting to the transfer of populations to finish the job.

But the other solution that Macartney proposed—which he believed had been implemented successfully in the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, and Switzerland—was the creation of an “un-national state.” For Macartney, an “un-national” state was not based on a single ethnic identity; it would not insist on the dominance of one group over another, and therefore it would satisfy the demands of minorities through “necessary good will.” The “un-national state” would have been an alternative to partition—but when Ambedkar considered such options, he raised the ghastly specter of communal strife.

It is here that it becomes clear that Ambedkar’s position was not a neutral one. In an important sense, his book was addressed to Hindus in the Indian National Congress, with the aim of making them see the utter futility of Hindu-Muslim unity, and the strategic advantages of partition. But in order to do so, not only did Ambedkar argue that Muslims were “detachable” and “spiritually alien” to India; he listed every Muslim invader from the

eight century onward and insisted that “they were all united by one common objective and that was to destroy the Hindu faith.” There was no room in his account for any positive contribution that Muslims may have made over the centuries on the Indian subcontinent.

To this long Orientalist history of exclusively Muslim violence in India, Ambedkar added a catalogue of “communal conflict” under colonial rule, and raised unfounded fears concerning the loyalty of Muslims in the Indian army. This leads the historian Faisal Devji, in his 2013 book *Muslim Zion: Pakistan as a Political Idea*, to rightly argue that Ambedkar’s *Pakistan* is a “paradoxically anti-Muslim” text. It is meant primarily to frighten Hindus into agreeing to the Pakistan demand by playing on every stereotype and fear associated with Muslims’ supposed unpredictable political greed and the perpetual threat of communal violence and disharmony—thus making it impossible for the two religious communities to live together or reach a common political settlement.

Why would Ambedkar go to such lengths to make such a clear-cut case for partition? Perhaps the book was designed to help him “find his feet in Indian politics,” as Devji suggests: “One reason

why Ambedkar was so keen on supporting the Pakistan Movement had to do with the fact that he seems to have recognized that the destruction of Muslim politics in India would finally give him the opportunity to insert Dalits into the space it would vacate. . . .”

## NECESSARY EVIL?

In Ambedkar’s defense, the full violence of totalitarian population transfers to make ethnically cleansed nation-states during the Second World War had not yet unfolded. The Zionist writer Joseph Schechtman published a substantial study of these forced displacements in 1947; perhaps driven by an interest in creating a Jewish-only state, he ended up justifying population transfers as a necessary evil. Mark Vishniak, who had earlier written a study of the “successful” population transfers in the Balkans for the Yiddish Scientific Institute, criticized Schechtman’s position, arguing that population transfers only complicated “the national problem” and “exacerbate[d] hate.”

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Schechtman's second book on the subject, *Population Transfers in Asia* (1949), began with a study of the Partition of 1947, based largely on *New York Times* reportage, in order to explicitly make his case for an "Arab-Jewish transfer of populations." Clearly unaware of Ambedkar's text, which was in its second edition by 1946, Schechtman argued that Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the leader of AIML, was the only Indian leader who had proposed a transfer of populations along religious lines.

Indeed, Jinnah was repeatedly called on to clarify his position regarding the Muslim minority that would remain in India. In a statement on April 1, 1940, although he noted that an "exchange of populations . . . as far as practicable, will have to be considered," he was insistent that Muslims would not have "to migrate en bloc and wholesale." Accordingly, he proposed the formation of two Indian states that would place "a great responsibility upon the majority in its respective zones to create a real sense of security amongst minorities and win their complete trust and confidence." Jinnah's statements thus both suggest a possible exchange of populations and argue for ensuring the security of minorities that would remain an integral part of all "zones" of a divided India.

Given the ambiguities of the Lahore Resolution and all the political negotiations that ensued between British and Indian leaders, it is difficult to construct any straightforward narrative leading to the political denouement of Partition. There is still debate on whether the sequence of events was determined by contingency or inevitability, and on who is to blame for the catastrophic violence in the Punjab that left a million dead and 12 million refugees.

In terms of what happened on the ground in 1947, Schechtman faulted the nascent states of India and Pakistan for not formally agreeing to and organizing a complete transfer of populations along religious lines (as once proposed by Ambedkar); yet he argued that as a result of this omission, violence and disorder had nonetheless resulted in just such a total "transfer." But Schechtman was somewhat wrong in this regard. Amid violence in the Punjab, the two states did agree to a transfer of populations, albeit only for divided

Punjab and a few other "agreed areas," and large numbers of minority religious communities were pulled and pushed out, both encouraged to leave and dispossessed, by other means in the years that followed. The two states were involved in shaping the final outcome—it was not just mad spontaneous violence—which resulted in an "an ethnic state composed of one homogeneous community, namely Muslims" and "a composite state" with a substantially reduced Muslim population, exactly as Ambedkar had advocated.

However, to judge whether Ambedkar's text was truly prescient we must also consider whether this outcome really solved the "minority problem" on the subcontinent. If it had done so, one would assume that Zarina's map would not be as agitated or unstable as she renders it.

### POLITICAL OUTCASTS

The case of Pakistan reveals the utterly elusive character of homogeneity. In census terms the distinction between Hindu and Muslim may seem obvious, but Muslims did not form a homogeneous community. This became evident in the problems of self-definition that beset Pakistan from the very start, and which eventually erupted in a bloody civil war that led to the "liberation" of Bangladesh in 1971. Instead, one could argue that in the face of crisis minorities continue to play an extremely important role, not as a problem of numbers but rather as outcasts used to contest and shape a political order within the nation-state itself.

Even though Pakistan has minuscule Hindu and Christian minority populations, systemic violence against these minorities and new ones—Ahmadis, a Muslim sect turned into a non-Muslim one through legislation, as well as Shias, targeted as a Muslim minority over the past decade—has become critical to struggles with the Taliban and over how to define the nation's self-identity in the future. Just in the past few months, a poor Christian couple was beaten and burned to death in Kot Radha Kishan after a local cleric accused them of desecrating the Koran; 125 houses in Joseph Colony, a Christian neighborhood in Karachi, were burned down and churches were bombed in Peshawar and Lahore; 22 people were killed in a bomb attack

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on a bus full of Shia pilgrims; and, as if to remind us of how words can kill, after a cleric appeared on a popular television show and denounced Ahmadis as “the enemy of all Pakistan,” a young Ahmadi man was killed.

In India, simply reducing the size of the minority has not solved the “minority problem” as Ambedkar claimed it would, at least not from the point of view of the Muslim community, which now makes up 14 percent of the population. Even as the partition was justified in their name, Indian Muslims were excluded from the Muslim homeland that quickly closed its borders to them, and yet they became suspect Indian citizens, forever bearing the stigma of Pakistan. Instead of being able to forge alliances with the lower castes, which were differentially enfranchised by the affirmative action reservations policy designed by Ambedkar himself, the Muslim minority became political outcasts. The government-sponsored Rajinder Sachar Committee Report of 2006, for instance, revealed that years of systemic ghettoization and discrimination had made Muslims worse off than dalits in contemporary India.

And Hindu nationalism, instead of withering away without a large internal archenemy, appears to be growing and thriving just as well with the foil of a smaller Muslim minority. Since the demolition of the Ayodhya mosque in 1992 and the Gujarat pogroms in 2002, the political wing of Hindu nationalism has only gained in electoral strength, culminating in 2014 with the victory of Modi, who was groomed by the Hindu-right organization Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). The head of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (an RSS affiliate) can still stir an audience with hair-raising stories of a thousand years of Muslim plunder and rape, while RSS foot soldiers are mobilized to fight against the “Love Jihad”—a supposed conspiracy by Muslim men to seduce Hindu women. A *ghar wapsi* or “return home” program attempts to convert Christians and Muslims “back” to Hinduism, while in January 40 Muslim houses were looted and burned

in Bihar in revenge killings over a Hindu-Muslim love affair gone awry.

## UNEXAMINED HATREDS

So what of the Lahore Resolution and Ambedkar’s reading of it? In some sense, the Indian consensus around Ambedkar’s book can be understood as a desire to accept the inevitability of Partition’s mapping—to naturalize it—as nationalist historiography has been attempting to do in different ways in both India and Pakistan. However, Mehta draws a lesson from Ambedkar’s text that cuts deeper than the belief that a “partition of the minds” had preceded the political partition of 1947. Mehta says that Ambedkar, relentless in his arguments, “pointed out to Hindus that they overestimated their own capacity to live with difference.” This remark about how we understand and live with differences goes to the heart of how we build our social and political worlds. If we capitulate to this position—to the idea that we cannot live with some diversity—without attempting a critique of how prejudice and fear are constructed and deployed to produce irreconcilable difference, then we are left with lines drawn by unexamined hatreds. Do we want to surrender to such hatreds?

These are dark times in South Asia. The philosopher Hannah Arendt, seeking to make sense of the cataclysms of the Second World War in her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), described an era when hatred could go public, and minorities, refugees, and the stateless came to form a continuum in those anxious spaces in between that are found within the order of nation-states. Partial insiders and outsiders at the same time, minorities continue to represent both the enemy within and the different stages of being cast out, as Arendt put it, without “a right to have rights,” and without “a right to belong.” As we witness growing chauvinism and violence toward minorities in India and Pakistan alike, we must ask what price we are willing to pay for the homogenizing wrath of Partition’s nation-states. ■