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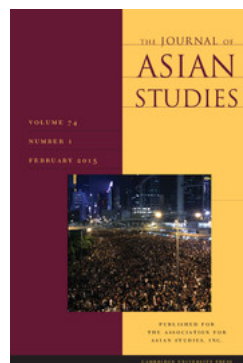
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# The Historiography of India's Partition: Between Civilization and Modernity

DAVID GILMARTIN

MORE THAN SIXTY-FIVE YEARS after the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947, controversy about partition, its causes and its effects, continues. Yet the emphases in these debates have changed over the years, and it is perhaps time, in the wake of India's recent elections, to take stock once again of how these debates have developed in the last several decades and where they are heading. What gives these controversies particular significance is that they are not just about that singular event, but about the whole trajectory of India's modern history, as interpreted through partition's lens—engaging academic historians, even as they continue to be deeply enmeshed in ongoing political conflict in South Asia, and, indeed, in the world more broadly.

That the interpretation of partition remains a touchstone for narratives of the nation was clear in the recent election of Narendra Modi as India's newest prime minister. While many in the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) (and Modi himself) sought to portray his election campaign as transcending the past, moving beyond the old Nehru-Gandhi dynasty of the Congress Party to bring to power a government committed to cutting-edge technological and free market transformations, questions about Hindu-Muslim relations in India (always inflected by understandings of partition) remained ever-present in the background. Many critics focused on Modi's role in the 2002 anti-Muslim pogroms in Gujarat to show his continued grounding in the sort of communalism that led to India's traumatic partition violence. But Modi himself responded with his own partition narrative, blaming Congress itself for the "sin" of partition, and suggesting that if Sardar Patel rather than the more secular Nehru had led the Congress at that time, then partition might not have occurred (see *Financial Express* 2013).<sup>1</sup> Even as the publicity surrounding his invitation to Pakistan's prime minister, Nawaz Sharif, to attend his inauguration signaled his desire to project a forward-looking image capable of moving beyond partition's legacies of conflict, the meanings still attached to partition in fact remain central to BJP worldviews and deeply influence most views about the place of Muslims in contemporary India.

Wars over the interpretation (and control) of history—and partition—will almost certainly continue in coming years (and probably remain the flashpoint for ongoing conflict

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<sup>1</sup>This occurred only shortly after Modi had laid the foundation stone for a huge statue of Sardar Patel in Gujarat, intended to be twice the size of the Statue of Liberty. The finance minister, P. Chidambaram, however, responded the next day that in fact Sardar Patel had agreed to the partition even before Nehru and Gandhi (*Free Press Journal* 2013).

that they were during the first BJP period of rule from 1998 to 2004).<sup>2</sup> But if politics in the subcontinent has shaped these debates, so have political developments in the world more broadly. As Richard Eaton has recently pointed out, interpretations of partition have carried their own powerful implications for popularized visions of world history, such as Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilizations,” that have powerful implications for the contemporary geopolitics of Islamophobia, not only in India but in the world more broadly. With partition sometimes portrayed as the culmination of a civilizational clash between Hinduism and Islam in South Asia dating back almost a millennium, “Islam” and “Hinduism” have themselves become political actors, shaping history as if they were independent civilizational agents. “Civilizations,” in such a vision, defined quintessentially by religion, have thus become, for many, the great actors in the partition drama (Eaton 2014).<sup>3</sup>

But there is another large-scale drama that often lies behind alternative visions of partition—and one linked to historical debates focusing on the grand, historical changes associated not with “civilization,” but with the coming of “modernity.” In this view, partition’s root causes lay precisely in the very forms of “modern” knowledge that gave license to the large-scale, “essentializing” cultural visions that led to the imagining of religions as historical actors at the core of bounded “civilizations.” Projections of “Hinduism” and “Islam” as distinct, internally coherent yet mutually opposing systems in fact themselves had their origins, as many historians have argued, in a vision of “religion” that has far less to do with the longer-term story of Hindu-Muslim relations in India than with the structures of thought brought to India by nineteenth-century European thinkers, which deeply shaped British colonial (and ultimately much Indian) thinking, defining a particular understanding of India’s distinctive religious history. And it is commonly argued that it was precisely this structure of thinking—far more than historically deep-seated civilizational structures—that ultimately lay behind the subcontinent’s religious partition in 1947.

No recent book captures more clearly the importance of modernity in transforming the understandings and meanings of religion than Peter Gottschalk’s *Religion, Science and Empire: Classifying Hinduism and Islam in British India* (2013). His is not a book about partition (which is only briefly mentioned), but a book about the ways modern structures of colonial knowledge (particularly what Gottschalk calls “scientism”) shaped new forms of religious classifications, creating visions of self-contained, bounded religions at both the imperial and local levels. Gottschalk shows the complex significance of this in transforming the meanings of religion in India on multiple levels, from the village to the institutions of the colonial state (through the census, separate electorates, etc.). Though the impact of these forms was in some ways ambiguous and partial, as Gottschalk shows, their story nevertheless provides a critical, overarching framework for the history of the religious polarities that produced partition. Indeed, even without its being

<sup>2</sup>The heightened sensitivity around these issues following Modi’s election was evident in reports less than two months after his election that Modi had ordered the destruction of a large number of files relating to Mahatma Gandhi’s assassination—an event directly linked to the aftermath of partition. The government denied that any such Gandhi files were targeted and explained the whole episode as a matter of cleaning up government offices (see *Times of India* 2014).

<sup>3</sup>Eaton’s comments were prompted by a short essay by Gerald Larson (2014) that appeared to subscribe to this “civilizational” line, and which projected a vision of partition grounded in the almost transhistorical notion that “Hindu and Muslim religious sensibilities are the antithesis of one another.” See also the commentaries on this by Peter Gottschalk (2014) and Joya Chatterji (2014).

directly discussed, the history of partition looms over the account as a product of these transformations, and their contradictions—an event that has given them lasting meaning in the subcontinent (Gottschalk 2013).

To focus on such large-scale narratives as competing frames for grounding studies of partition is hardly to suggest that most historians would—or have—cast partition's story into such bald, un-nuanced form.<sup>4</sup> Rather, it is to suggest that such large-scale historical narratives lurk behind most historical framings of partition, even some of the most nuanced and sophisticated, and are best brought to the surface. Indeed, we can find these same overarching frameworks in the opposing justifications and explanations for partition dating all the way back to the event itself. It has often been remarked that explanations for partition were, from the beginning, closely linked in India and Pakistan to narratives of nationhood, and this is undoubtedly true. But national narratives themselves drew sustenance—from the very beginning—from precisely such efforts to ground and justify the nation within these larger world-historical framings.

Indeed, these two competing narratives on South Asian history pointing toward partition can be found in their baldest form in the original arguments about partition put forward by Jinnah and Nehru in the years before and after partition. Muhammad Ali Jinnah's two-nation theory projected the argument for Pakistan as one rooted in a vision of Hinduism and Islam as embodying opposing ways of life—a clash of civilizations par excellence. Nehru, on the other hand, saw the demand for partition from a very different perspective, but one equally linked to a dynamic vision of the history of the world tied to the structure of modernity. For him, the driving forces of modern transformation were science and secularism, which were in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the most powerful forces transforming the world. But the progressive effects of these forces on India had been deformed—particularly when it came to religion—by the structure of colonialism itself, through which the British had manipulated religion and distorted India's modern development to serve their own exploitative purposes. Nehru's ultimate acquiescence in partition was in fact a product of pragmatic calculation, focused on the necessity of creating a strong secular, national state to counter these colonial legacies.

## PARTITION HISTORIOGRAPHY AND THE POSTCOLONIAL MOMENT

Such arguments thus provide a critical backdrop—even today—to partition historiography, but it is useful to begin a short review of the literature with the 1980s, a critical watershed in the development of partition historiography. This was a time, first in the

<sup>4</sup>In the case of the “civilizational” narrative, perhaps the most sophisticated and compelling framing of this argument was first put forward in Ahmad (1964). Ahmad was deeply sensitive to the complexity of relations between Hindus and Muslims, and to the fact that these relations were in no way predetermined by a unified “Hinduism” or “Islam,” or uniformly hostile. But his larger narrative was nevertheless one in which the differences were sufficiently strong that Muslims, fearing the loss of their religious identity through absorption into a deeply Hindu Indian culture, ultimately stressed their civilizational differences in ways that pointed finally toward the coming of partition. Other scholars have taken the story of “civilizational” clash in other directions, linking it, for example, to concepts of civilizational frontiers (see, e.g., Richards 1974). Thanks to Venkat Dhulipala for drawing my attention to this article.

wake of the break-up of Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh in 1971, and then in the shadow of the Iranian revolution in 1979, of Zia's attempted Islamization in Pakistan and of the Russian invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s, that thinking about the role of Islam (and Islamic civilization) in the politics of the modern world began to move in new directions. But it was also a time of internal political crisis in India. The rapid growth of Hindu nationalism in the 1980s, combined with the outbreak of India's worst communal violence since partition at the time of the anti-Sikh riots of 1984 following Indira Gandhi's assassination, had the effect of fundamentally calling into question Nehru's old vision of partition as a pathology that development and nationalism would ultimately transcend. And as historians grappled with these new political realities, new interpretations—and a new historical interest in partition—began to emerge, building on and reacting to the larger frames that had shaped views of partition.

These were the years of growing Hindu nationalism in India and the rise of the BJP, but among secular academic historians, the dominant strand in partition historiography moved at this time in a very different direction, in part in reaction to Hindu nationalism, but in part to the growing influence of the subaltern studies school of scholarship in India and to the broader influence, particularly in the 1990s, of what was called “postcolonial theory” in the wider academic world. Rejecting civilizational arguments, these historians continued to see the roots of partition in the transformations of the colonial era. But, critically, they rejected the old Nehruvian view that development and nationalism could distance India from its colonial past and from the causes of partition. To the contrary, these new historians saw nationalism *itself* as a product of the same structures of knowledge that Nehru had seen as producing partition, a far more deep-seated product of the structures of “modern” knowledge that colonialism had brought with it. Indeed, the statist legacies of Nehruvian nationalism were fully implicated in these structures; little wonder then that the religious ideas that had produced partition survived in India. On one level, this interpretation thus offered a far bleaker picture for India, and for the fate of India's huge Muslim “minority,” than that projected by Nehru. But it led to new efforts by historians, and not just those of the subaltern school, to remake the meanings of partition with narratives drawn from everyday lives. If there was an antidote to the interlinked colonial and national narratives that had produced partition's violence, this is where it lay.

The most important work on partition among the Subaltern historians in this vein was probably that produced by Gyanendra Pandey (2001), who wrote powerfully of the violence accompanying partition, trying to reclaim its meanings for the people who experienced it. The contrast between nationalist meaning-making on the one hand, and the lives of the people on the other, was thus the central trope in his writing. To recover the meaning of partition (or, at times, simply to underscore the meaninglessness of partition outside such large state-based narratives), it was necessary, Pandey argued, to recover the more “malleable, fuzzy, and contextual” forms of lived community that more fully defined the lives of the people beneath the partition drama. Given this context, Pandey stressed the responsibility of the historian to overtly challenge dominant “nationalist” visions, with their emphases on the “objectified, frozen, and enumerated communities” that the “modernizing” states of the twentieth century—colonial and national alike—had used to develop their authority (Pandey 2001, 204–5). Not surprisingly, a turn to oral history helped to expand such perspectives, as reflected most powerfully in the deeply engaged work of Urvashi Butalia (1998). In exploring both silences and

memories, Butalia showed the complexity of the actual experiences of partition, not only in its immense individual variation, but perhaps most importantly in the differences of age, gender, class, and caste. In telling the stories of women, children, and Dalits, Butalia thus probed not only partition's violence, but the violence implicit in the imposition of official narratives on partition's meanings.

Indeed, her work made clear the difficulty of reducing the experience to fixed, universal generalizations. This was central also to the pathbreaking work of Ritu Menon and Kamala Bhasin, whose *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* (1998) explored the critical role of gender not only in the structure of the partition violence, but in the reconstruction of subsequent national authority. By focusing in particular on the attempted "recovery" of women during partition, they showed not just the tensions between statist narratives and personal experience, but also the ways that the interactions between these shaped the contours of the world the partition violence created. Probably the most compelling history in this genre was Vazira Zamindar's *The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia* (2007), which recounted the deep-seated impact of partition's violence and migrations on the attempted creation of "national" citizens on both sides of the India-Pakistan border. Tracking the gradual construction of citizenship not only through the development of passes and passports, but through control over evacuee property, she shows how contested and uncertain the establishment of territorial nationality actually was. Zamindar's account in fact shows dramatically the control over people's lives that was inherent in the state rationalities (and essentializing visions of religious identity) that drove partition. Yet her account also makes clear the ongoing contingencies and tensions that shaped the process, rooted in the multiplicity of varied human experiences involved. Like Pandey, Zamindar is interested in rescuing individual experience from a nation constructed through violence and, as Pandey put it, "the eternally fixed collective subject" (Pandey 2001, 204). But she was concerned not only with the juxtaposition of experience against state-based narratives, but also with how individual and family agency—and the construction of new forms of state authority in the years after partition—were deeply intertwined.

Work on the impact of partition—a moment exemplary in twentieth-century history of the violent consequences of new, modern "borders and boundaries"—has thus made partition into a critical subject for the development of larger postcolonial theory. Given its violent place at the beginning of the era of decolonization (linked to a normative world of bounded nation-states), partition has thus come for many to exemplify the human costs of the attempted twentieth-century realization of the "national" idea, its dislocations and violence representing, in the words of one historian, an important "site of meditation in postcolonial theory" (Sivasundaram 2013, 335).<sup>5</sup> It has thus been a focus for new directions in literature, film, and art in the decades since the 1980s, and one easily linked to the larger twentieth-century history of religious conflicts, ethnic identity-making, and genocide, from the Jewish Holocaust to Rwanda to Bosnia to Palestine.<sup>6</sup> This has particularly

<sup>5</sup>Sivasundaram's context is the "partition" of Sri Lanka from India—a separate, very different, and far more long-term (though not totally unrelated) South Asian partition, which he argues did *not* become such a site.

<sup>6</sup>There is a large amount of literature here, but for a recent overview see Kabir (2014), who also links the literature on partition to the later emergence of Bangladesh in 1971. A recent work on

been the case in studies of migration, with the history of migration as a trope for the deep contradictions inherent in processes of boundary fixation that have in actual practice unmoored millions of people—and with vast human consequences.<sup>7</sup> Within India itself, the story of partition as a trauma defined precisely by its simultaneous settling and unsettling has been perhaps most clearly traced by Bhaskar Sarkar (2009) in his history of the influence of partition on film in India. Central to such stories of partition have been the deconstruction of the great narratives of nationalist becoming that had shaped earlier history, with a powerful concomitant effort to juxtapose this with history “from the margins,” from individual experience—as a counterpoint to the large narrative teleologies with which partition has continued to have such powerful associations.

### SEARCHING FOR PARTITION’S CAUSES

And yet, perhaps ironically, one result of this powerful trend in partition historiography has been to push scholars away from a larger engagement with partition’s *causes*. The projection of a vision of partition as rooted in the emergence of fixed boundaries of identity associated with modernity, in both its colonial and national forms, remains an implicit backdrop to the boundary-making and violence of partition in virtually all these narratives. But the relationship of this to popular agency has remained far more complex—and politically loaded—when it is applied to the events leading up to partition.<sup>8</sup> With the everyday agency of the people in most postcolonial literature cast as the antithesis of the statist boundary-making that produced partition’s violence, where could historians find space for popular agency in the actual *making* of partition? If subaltern historians, such as Pandey, have noted the powerful role of colonial knowledge in shaping the

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perhaps the most important literary figure who illuminated partition’s human costs, Saadat Hasan Manto, is Jalal (2013). The new importance of partition is inspiring new directions in art, is illustrated by the recent exhibit called *Lines of Control*, curated by Hammad Nasar and mounted in London and Karachi, and then in larger form in the United States with other twentieth-century partitions included (see Dadi and Nasar 2012, especially Dadi 2012 and Ramaswamy 2012).

<sup>7</sup>There are a number of important works to mention here; to cite only some of the most important: Ansari (2005), Chatterji (2007), Roy (2012), and Talbot (2006). An example of a work not focused on partition, but detailing shifting long-term patterns of migration into an era of boundary-making of which partition was a symbolic lynchpin, see Amrith (2013).

<sup>8</sup>Pandey’s far greater interest in the consequences of partition, and the varied meanings it took on in memory, than in partition’s causes, was suggested by his providing a chapter in his book effectively summarizing the complex arguments about the events leading to partition in 1947, but then adding in a footnote, “this ‘summary’ is intended for the reader who feels handicapped because of unfamiliarity with the subcontinent and subcontinental politics in the last years of British rule. Those familiar with the main lines of that history may wish to move directly to chapter 3” (Pandey 2001, 20), as if the causes of partition were totally ancillary to a discussion of its impact, which is his main concern. As Joya Chatterji put it effectively in describing such attitudes, the new works “tended to replicate, somewhat uncritically, their subjects’ representation of themselves as innocent and passive victims of events beyond their control. Never directly addressing questions of why and how partition occurred (and adding little, therefore, to our understanding of those questions),” she notes, “this school implicitly identified ‘statist’, nationalist and imperial leaders and their policies as the cause of the personal human tragedies attendant on partition” (Chatterji 2009, 215).

new forms of religious conflict, or “communalism,” that provided a critical backdrop to partition in late colonial India, they have at the same time been hesitant to buy into the common Nehruvian dismissal of such communalism as a manifestation simply of primitive passions, a colonial deformation of the progressive narrative of secular nationalism (see Pandey 1990). Yet, for obvious political reasons, they have also been extremely wary of turning the history of communalism itself into a story of popular agency, for that might simply provide fodder for right-wing Hindu nationalists with their own erasures of popular agency in the name of essentialized religious—and civilizational—identities.<sup>9</sup>

None of this is to suggest that historians have been inattentive to the actual story of shifting religious ideas under British rule at both popular *and* elite levels—and to the powerful and complex currents of religious reform and reimagining that marked the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Quite to the contrary, there is now a very large body of historical research on changing forms of religious thinking and organization in colonial India, with an emphasis both on the complex and often mediated impact of colonial knowledge structures on these processes, and on their highly contextualized character. Historians and scholars of religion in South Asia have explored with great sophistication the wide variety of religious and cultural movements shaped by the transformations experienced by India under colonial rule, tracing interactions of such movements with new systems of law; with the spread of new networks of print, publication, and travel; and with new structures of colonial politics. But, strikingly, most historians have shied away from drawing straight lines from the history of religious reform and revivalism to the grand acts of state-making that defined partition. Indeed, there has been a tendency instead among secular-minded academic historians to turn the avoidance of such “teleologies” in India’s religious history, that is, of narratives leading toward partition, into a scholarly virtue.<sup>10</sup>

If one were to characterize a dominant strand in historical writing on the immediate coming of partition it would instead focus on the politics of elite conflict in late colonial India in the 1930s and 1940s, and to the elite manipulation of religion (and popular politics) as the central key to partition’s coming. Though there have certainly been some

<sup>9</sup>One can see the dynamics here—though not directly in writing on the historical causes of partition—in the more recent controversies surrounding works that have taken seriously the agency of women associated with right-wing religious positions (see, e.g., Iqtidar 2011; Mahmood 2005). Such issues have also shaped controversies on women and Hindu nationalism, and have been explored by Amrita Basu and others (see, e.g., Jeffery and Basu 1998).

<sup>10</sup>Though speculative leaps between late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century religious conflict and the coming of partition (or the coming of Muslim “separatism”) were at one time common, more recent historical works have tended to stress contingency, and the avoidance of teleologies. Still, there is a substantial amount of literature that stresses the hardening of religious boundaries that resulted from the wide range of religious reform movements marking the last century of colonial rule, movements fed by the expanding world of polemics and print under the colonial regime. For one of the most compelling of these (on the Sikhs), see Oberoi (1994). In recent years, however, there have also been a number of important works suggesting the ways that modern print culture, rather than simply spurring bounded communal visions, could also encourage other forms of cross-cutting, non-communal (or “secular”) identities. Important works in this genre include Datla (2013), Green (2012), and Mir (2010). Green (2012) stresses the ways that modern economies of print encouraged multiple forms of religious identity, and not simply the boundary-conscious forms of reformist Islam. None of these works suggest, however (since this is not their focus), how these arguments relate to the causes of partition.



exceptions to this, particularly for writing on Bengal (see, e.g., Hashmi 1992), popular religion has generally remained in studies of partition's causes an important but little-explored backdrop to such elite maneuvering. Such an emphasis has taken many forms. Most prominently, the growth of the Muslim League has been widely projected as a vehicle of elite Muslims (both landlords and those with *sharif* background) seeking to protect their interests as colonial devolution went forward.<sup>11</sup> Whether driven by their own preoccupations with religion as a deeply held idiom of order, or by their calculated, instrumental use of religion to manipulate the masses, the movement for Pakistan in such arguments arose largely from elite political machinations, and only took on the character of a popular movement in its final, climactic stages.<sup>12</sup> Similar arguments have shaped historical discussions of the role of Hindu communalism in partition as well, often linked to the protection of high-caste interests. This has particularly marked argument on the demands by Bengali and Punjabi Hindus for the partition of those provinces once the decision to create Pakistan had been accepted, with “Hindu” unity and “Hindu” interests mobilized as a frame to protect dominant elite positions (see Chatterji 1994).<sup>13</sup>

Such historical work has been important. The emphasis on elite politics has had its own, considerable scholarly value, most particularly for moving the study of partition out of the realm of “Hindu-Muslim conflict” broadly defined, and grounding it instead in the politics of particular times and places—a critical historical agenda. A focus on elites has in fact helped to tie the politics leading to partition to analyses of the political structures of late colonial India more broadly, emphasizing the shifting structures of alliances and conflicts among local elites of different sorts, and the shifting bonds linking them, largely through patronage structures, both to the state and to networks of clients. Such networks and connections were particularly important in the context of elections, which became an important structural feature of British Indian politics in the years after 1919, and particularly after 1937. As election studies have shown, whatever the broader contexts for the religious conflicts leading to partition, structures of local politics, and the connections of local patronage, rivalry, and alliance, remained important to virtually all politics in India, even in the run-up to partition.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, this perspective

<sup>11</sup>In its most extreme form, the argument that the Muslim League and the Pakistan movement were driven by elite material interests has been used to deny any significant role for religious ideology at all (see, e.g., Alavi 1986).

<sup>12</sup>Paul Brass has written a range of books analyzing the determinative importance of elite/state structures in communal conflict and violence (e.g., Brass 2003). For the view that Muslim elites have responded to a normative moral framework in emphasizing the preeminence of Muslim community in politics, see Shaikh (1989). A few historians have seen this elite conflict in terms of the unevenness of economic development as well.

<sup>13</sup>For Punjab, see Nair (2011); for the United Provinces, see Gould (2004). The operation of caste conflicts, including questions surrounding the political affiliations and alliances of Dalits, remains a critical focus here, and is beginning to be the subject of important research. For Dalit politics in relation to partition, see, for example, Bandyopadhyay (2000), Rawat (2001), and Sen (2012b). For an overview, see also Sen (2012a).

<sup>14</sup>For election studies, see Talbot (1980), and, for a discussion of the intersection between such local rivalries and the rhetoric of religious nationalism, Gilmartin (1998).

points toward the importance of understanding the politics of elections more broadly in analyzing partition's coming.

Moreover, a focus on elite negotiations has helped to link the literature on partition to the larger, comparative literature on the worldwide transitions represented by decolonization. The comparative analysis of the roles of elites in processes of decolonization has in fact provided a critical frame for understanding how decolonization took significantly different forms in different contexts, an important element in the comparative study also of violence as a critical element in the end of empire.<sup>15</sup> Studies of the relationships of elites to the state and to networks of clients have also shaped the comparative analysis of distinctive British approaches to cultural representation, which may explain, at least in part, the particular British openness to partition as a solution to the conflicts unleashed by the coming of decolonization—and point to the importance of studying partitions as a broader phenomenon.<sup>16</sup>

But a focus on elite politics—and local and regional structures—though critically important in making clear the many, varying local contexts for the politics leading up to partition, has only very partially addressed the problem of explaining the role of *religion* as the larger catalyst—and idiom—for the partition drama. Indeed, historical emphases on elite agency have in some ways underwritten the ongoing—and still widespread—political game in South Asia of apportioning “blame” for partition among elite actors for purposes of competitive national self-definition, whether the focus is Jinnah, Nehru, Gandhi, Patel, or, indeed, Lord Mountbatten.<sup>17</sup> Particular elite leaders have thus been attacked for manipulating easily mobilized religious passions, or for failing to adequately respond, but the existence of distinct “Hindu” and “Muslim” communities is usually taken as a given. Influenced by postcolonial scholarship, historians have been deeply sensitized in recent decades to the “constructed” character of religious communities. But in much of this literature, the underlying historical *causes* of a partition based specifically on religion have nevertheless been lightly glossed, and usually assumed to relate back either to a deep-seated civilizational division between Hinduism and Islam, or to a narrative of religious boundaries hardened by colonial processes of boundary-making and divide-and-rule, with little attempt to bridge the differences between these. Popular religion is often portrayed simply as a world that slipped out of control, as the violence of late 1946 and 1947 spread.

<sup>15</sup>This is a large amount of literature, but for an old but important framing in these terms, see Smith (1981).

<sup>16</sup>Critiques of Britain's resort to partition are thus numerous; the latest stinging critique of British failures in precipitating India's partition is Wolpert (2006). For a discussion of the boundary-drawing process itself in these terms, see Chester (2009).

<sup>17</sup>A good example is the furor over the book on Jinnah published in 2010 by the BJP leader (and former foreign minister), Jaswant Singh, which led to his expulsion from the party, and, at least temporarily, a ban on the book in Gujarat, due to his relatively positive portrayal of Jinnah (see Singh 2010). This came several years after the widespread criticism of the BJP leader L. K. Advani for visiting Jinnah's tomb in Karachi in 2005 and praising his secularist approach. As Mridu Rai (2006) has suggested, the controversy this engendered must be seen against the backdrop of not only the demonizing of Jinnah in Indian school textbooks encouraged by the Hindu right, but also, and perhaps even more importantly, his demonizing in those of “secular” Congress orientation following the old Nehruvian line.

## BETWEEN CIVILIZATION AND MODERNITY

How, then, can historians develop an approach to partition that integrates causes and results, and that historicizes the operation of religion as a key force in the coming of partition, linked *both* to larger civilizational histories, *and* to the reorientations of modernity that shaped the critical decades leading to the end of British rule? And how can this help historians to bridge the continuing gap between elite and popular history? In fact, a critical pointer toward such new departures was provided many decades ago by the important re-interpretation of partition first put forward by Ayesha Jalal in her book on Jinnah, *The Sole Spokesman* (1985). This was a book very much in the mode of elite historiography. In his own discussion of partition violence, Gyan Pandey (1994) in fact dismissed Jalal's book as essentially a "Great Man" history, focused overwhelmingly on the figure of Jinnah himself, a charge to which Jalal (1996) responded by pointing out the elite bias in Pandey's own approaches to partition's causes. Yet it was quite true that her book—like most elite-oriented histories—paid little attention to religion at the popular level.

Yet for all its elite focus, Jalal's approach was critically important in pointing toward the complexity of the Pakistan vision, a vision that fit neatly into neither a frame defined by colonial knowledge (shaped by essentialized visions of the census-enumerated Muslim community), nor one defined by long-term Islamic civilizational history, as Jinnah himself sometimes framed it. Though she did not frame her own argument with this dichotomy, her book nevertheless made clear that Jinnah's struggle to project an image of a unified Muslim community (of which he could claim to be "sole spokesman")—a struggle that prompted the Pakistan demand—was part of a process aimed toward *creating* an image of united community in the face of the considerable divisions among Muslims shaped by the innumerable cross-cutting identities that defined Muslim life and Muslim politics within the structure of the British Raj. Central to the dynamics of the Pakistan movement were thus the conflicting pulls on Muslims of *multiple* identities, foremost among which were the provincial and linguistic allegiances—particularly in Punjab and Bengal—that had gained heightened meaning as the British had devolved power to the provinces after 1919. Indeed, Jalal's key insight was that Jinnah's image of a united Muslim community (with himself as "sole spokesman" and "Pakistan" as a catchword), grew out of the complex intersection of multiple, cross-cutting identities within the imperial context. If projected as a "nation," Pakistan was an idea profoundly shaped by the structure of empire and the complex framings of identity within it.<sup>18</sup>

This was hardly an idea immediately followed up on by other historians. Though Jalal's book proved influential in shaping subsequent writing on the partition negotiations, its influence on the broader contours of partition historiography was somewhat limited by the book's own framing as a study of elite negotiations, and by the consequent tendency of some historians to take it—mistakenly—as an argument simply about Jinnah's negotiating strategy, suggesting that he used the Pakistan concept as a "bargaining chip" rather than as a clear-cut demand for an independent state.<sup>19</sup> The most immediate significance

<sup>18</sup>This reflected in some ways Jalal's affinity with the so-called "Cambridge School" of historians, focusing on imperial structure, with which her mentor, Anil Seal, was closely associated.

<sup>19</sup>This distortion of Jalal's argument is evident, for example, in Devji (2013, 7). It should also be noted, however, that Jalal's own attempts to frame her arguments in terms of the larger

of Jalal's book was thus to launch a debate on the relative responsibility for partition of Jinnah versus Nehru. If Jinnah could be projected as willing to accept a vision of "Pakistan" that did not necessarily involve complete "national" independence (as was the case, for example, in his acceptance, at least temporarily, of the 1946 Cabinet Mission plan, which envisioned a multi-tiered but united India), then historians could argue that it was Nehru, with his quest for a more powerful, central, "secular" state, who was ultimately responsible for the final "national" and bounded form of the partition settlement that ultimately took place.<sup>20</sup>

But the longer-term significance of Jalal's case lay precisely in its opening up for questioning of the interconnections *between* civilizational ideas (rooted in the long-term history of "empire") and the projected "modernity" of the "nation" as a frame for making sense of Pakistan. Emerging out of the negotiation of multiple forms of difference and identity under the British regime, Pakistan could hardly be seen as a product simply of national boundary-making. And indeed, the emergence of the Pakistan idea within a complex imperial environment has pointed toward explorations of its *intellectual* roots in a far longer history of civilizational tensions between unifying ideals and the world's myriad forms of division and interest, long embedded within South Asian (and indeed, worldwide) imperial structures. Such concerns have been reflected, for example, in work on Muhammad Iqbal, as the supposed "intellectual father" of Pakistan. As Iqbal Sevea (2012) has shown in his recent study, to see Iqbal as the father of a Pakistan nation-state, in any generally recognizable sense, is a strange conceit, for he was hardly a champion of territorial nationalism (in spite of his early call for a separate state in northwest India). This was so because the power of modernity for Iqbal lay less in structures of objectified knowledge and boundary-drawing, than in the rise of active individualism, a concept that for him had deep roots also in Islam's civilizational history. As a frame for state-making, "religion" (and religious identity) thus had complex meanings, for state-making mobilized "religion" both as a frame for imagining worldly identities (through census enumeration, separate electorates, etc.), *and* as a frame for new visions of moral order and progress linked far less to communal identities than to individual aspiration and its expression through new imaginings of autonomy and sovereignty. If Iqbal was thus deeply influenced by modernity (as reflected in his strong engagement with modern European philosophy), his ideas on Pakistan were also structured by far older civilizational obsessions with the intersection of morality and power, that is, of "religion" not simply as a marker of *identity*, but as a moral frame for *ordering* worldly difference, and one intimately related at the same time to forms of individual striving and attachment—ideas that survived, as Naveeda Khan (2012) has argued, in popular conceptions of the meaning of Pakistan after 1947.<sup>21</sup>

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development of Muslim religious thinking in British India were much less successful than was her book on Jinnah (see Jalal 2000).

<sup>20</sup>Much of the controversy has focused on Jinnah's and Nehru's reactions to the Cabinet Mission Plan of 1946, and, to a lesser extent, on their responses to the United Sovereign Bengal proposal of early 1947 (see, e.g., Charkabarty 2003).

<sup>21</sup>This might also point toward the tendencies toward a utopian perfectionism in the meanings attached to the promise of Pakistan, tendencies that have divorced Pakistan's meanings from the

Perhaps most important, however, Iqbal's ideas, though in some ways grounded in the last turbulent decades of the British Raj, were also a product in a broad sense of the larger, world-wide crises of sovereignty and political order that marked the first half of the twentieth century, when Iqbal wrote. Questions about the relationship between conceptions of civilization and the structures of thinking marking modernity were not in this era in any way peculiar to India, a critical backdrop for partition historiography. A critical framing for this has been provided by Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper's (2010) recent book on the long-term, worldwide history of empires and their fates in modern times. Lying behind Burbank and Cooper's book is a reaction against the old, normalized vision of the twentieth century as the great era of transformation from "empires to nations," a narrative in which the history of decolonization (with all its varying local complications, including those leading to India's partition) is usually embedded. Here the era of the two great twentieth-century world wars is the usual turning point.<sup>22</sup> But as Burbank and Cooper make clear, whatever the ongoing challenges to empire rooted in nationalist ideologies, structures of imperial rule—and empire as a frame for managing difference—can hardly be seen as attenuated or disappearing during this time. Whatever the new "nationalist" forms of imagining linking distinctive "peoples" to distinctive territories during this era, structures of empire continued to be central not only to notions of order and individual aspiration, but also to the complex ordering of multiple, cross-cutting forms of identities. What is critical to partition's backdrop is that this was not simply a matter of power politics, but also of structures of thinking—and of the still vital meanings attached to concepts of "civilization." "Civilizing" ideals (even utopian ideals), defining the roles of intermediary elites in linking particularized local groups to exemplary centers—long central to imperial structure (as Burbank and Cooper show)—continued, in other words, to provide a worldwide backdrop to the complex conflicts of the era.

From this perspective, the story of partition must be seen in relation to the larger climate of uncertainties about new forms of community, linked *both* to new, objectifying ideas about "national" communities and territories *and* to the older structurings of difference within imperial frameworks, that marked this era. As Faisal Devji (2013) has noted, the period after World War I was one of widespread intellectual ferment in thinking on these issues in India, prompted not just by projections of the "nation" as an alternative to empire, but by the effort to reimagine empire itself as a vehicle for new forms of community and cultural difference. In the international sphere, this was the era in which both communism and fascism emerged as new (and in some ways reformulated "imperial") frames for imagining world order, ideologies that had important reverberations on thinking in India.<sup>23</sup> It was also an era in which the political and intellectual

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complex contextual realities of social life, and helped in some quarters to drive a sometimes violent strand in religious sectarianism.

<sup>22</sup>The interpretive power of this narrative was perhaps best captured in Daniel Brower's (1999) popular world history textbook.

<sup>23</sup>The relationship of communism and fascism to the forms of thinking leading to the coming of partition is only beginning to be explored as a topic in intellectual history (see, e.g., Daechsel 2006a, 2006b). For a recent exploration of the relationship of communist ideas to conceptions of

problem of the “minority”—an issue critical to the imagining of “nations”—came to take on new meanings on a global level, an issue crystallized as a (perhaps *the*) central “problem” in world order in the peace conferences after World War I. Devji (2013) provides a foundation for placing the Pakistan idea in this worldwide context.<sup>24</sup>

The importance of a worldwide framing for the Pakistan idea lies also at the heart of Aamir Mufti's (2007) important book linking the development of Muslim “minority” politics in India with the intellectual history of the Jewish “minority question” in Europe, throwing the issue onto an even broader, long-term historical canvas. Though Mufti does not directly explore the causes of partition, his work points clearly to the longer-term tensions between universality and particularism that were inherent in the concept of “minority,” thus making the concept an important touchstone for the larger problems in the reimaginings of state authority that marked this critical era generally. To delineate “minorities” was to define state authority as an edifice that stood above society's particularistic cultural divisions (in the manner of empires) and yet, at the very same time, it was to buy into the enumerated and bounded cultural divisions that defined bounded “peoples” as the inheritors of “objective” reason and the makers of nation-states. Little wonder that the definition of “minorities” was both a tool of reasoned state-making—and of claims to universal authority—even as it was at the same time a wound, an impossible challenge to the integrity of the people as the fount of sovereignty and the bearers of that universalism (Mufti 2007). In his account of the “Jewish question,” Mufti thus suggests how the meaning of “minority” as a larger, worldwide phenomenon provides a critical clue to the story of Pakistan and of partition, caught between the universalism of empire and new forms of particularism critical to the idea of the “nation.”

Perhaps the most important agendas that such worldwide perspectives have opened are those that relate to the development of a more nuanced understanding of a “civilizational” vision of Islam in shaping the coming of Pakistan. And the key to this lies not simply in perspectives that cast bounded “civilizational” visions as a product of the boundary-making structure of modern forms of knowledge, but rather in those that also analyze the reverse: the ways that “civilizational” frames of imagining have shaped the structuring of modernity. The history of the idea of the Khilafat in the twentieth century—and its relationship to the demand for Pakistan—provides a good example. The power of the idea of the Khilafat as a civilization center was dramatized by the history of the Khilafat movement in India from 1919 to 1923. Though a movement of civilizational adherence transcending colonial or national boundaries, the Khilafat cause was, in concrete terms,

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Pakistan, see Ali (2011). Central also here is Vali Nasr's (1994) study of the Jamaat-i Islami and its links to visions of the Leninist intellectual “vanguard.”

<sup>24</sup>For all its contributions, however, Devji's (2013) book also suggests the potential pitfalls in such an approach. Stressing the ways that the intellectual currents leading toward Pakistan were divorced from engagement with the realities of Indian society and politics, Devji himself adopts a style of intellectual history that also largely ignores these connections. The result is a history that, particularly in its comparisons with Jewish Zionism, emphasizes the idea of Pakistan as a projection onto a “new” homeland, while largely ignoring the critical importance to the history of the Pakistan movement of the Muslims who already lived in the areas that became Pakistan. The result, for all the book's strengths, is a deeply distorted vision of Pakistan's meanings.

seemingly eclipsed by the abolition of the Khilafat in the name of the bounded “national” ideal of Atatürk in Turkey itself (Minault 1982). But this hardly ended the widespread pull of the idea of a civilizational center that the movement embodied—even among “nationalists”—and it significantly influenced many perceptions of the meaning of Pakistan.

Indeed, the importance of such civilizational ideals in shaping the meanings attached to Pakistan has been suggested by Venkat Dhulipala’s (2014) recent book on the Pakistan movement in the United Provinces. As many historians have argued, there was a powerful millenarian current in popular support for Pakistan in the final years before the British departure. But as Dhulipala argues, this should not be seen simply as an inchoate, popular religious enthusiasm, but rather as linked to the complex intersection of older religious ideas and the powerful vision of the modern, territorially bounded nation state: an intersection explicated perhaps most clearly in the ideas of the most prominent pro-Pakistan *alim*, Maulana Shabbir Ahmad Usmani of Deoband. For Usmani, the creation of a new nation-state in the areas defined by census-based Muslim majorities in India would establish a new civilizational center for modern Muslims in all of India (and, indeed, of the world), a “new Medina,” as he put it—a beacon carrying meaning beyond the borders in which it was established. It was, in other words, a nation-state encased structurally in a broader “civilizing” vision. And this explained why Pakistan received such strong support among Muslims even in areas such as the United Provinces that would not be part of it. Usmani’s vision thus represented not the rejection of the idea of a territorial nation-state, but a framing of its meaning in broader civilizational terms (Dhulipala 2014).<sup>25</sup>

Indeed, if such civilizational perspectives on the “nation” were powerful among Muslims in the run-up to partition, similar perspectives also influenced many Hindu nationalists as well. It is here that one can see the roots of important strands of thinking among some Hindu and Muslim writers alike stressing visions of “Hinduism” and “Islam” as bounded, competing civilizations.<sup>26</sup> But—and this is critical—such ideas cannot be viewed as separate from the search in these years for larger civilizational visions—for cosmologies of order for framing human difference that transcended *all* essentialized identities, including those defined by “religion” as particularized communities. To explore this involves focusing on “civilization” not simply as another word for “identity,” but as a framework within which large, unifying cosmological visions served to order the worlds of mundane human difference. Such visions influenced, for example, the seemingly secular Nehru as he projected a moral meaning for India as a new, territorially bounded nation-state that, *at the very same time*, transcended its bounded particularity, and was intimately bound up with a simultaneously scientific

<sup>25</sup>This can also be traced at other levels, for example in the “Khilafat-i Pakistan” vision popular among some Muslim student groups in Punjab at the time of partition (see Gilmartin 1988, 208–10). Such ideas shaped some thinking among Sufi groups as well. See, for example, Rozehnal (2007, 102–25), who explores such visions of Pakistan in the post-partition writings of the Chishti Sabiri *silsilah*, particularly in the writings of Shaykh Wahid Bakhsh Sial Rabbani.

<sup>26</sup>There is a large amount of literature on Hindu nationalism and the concept of Hindutva. The distinctive roots of this as a “civilizational” concept have been explored by many; for one recent article looking at V. D. Savarkar as a revolutionary, see Chaturvedi (2013).

and spiritual universalism linked to an idealized vision of “humanity.”<sup>27</sup> This indeed is what, for him, gave India’s national independence in 1947 its worldwide significance—and it was a vision that resonated for many with universalizing projections of Hindu and Muslim civilization as well. Cast in such terms, we perhaps need to explore more fully what we might call larger “cosmologies of order” (whether in the work of intellectuals or in popular understandings), in order to understand the mid-twentieth-century pressures (linked to *both* scientific and divine cosmologies) that produced framings of legitimate sovereignty and order (simultaneously “secular” and “religious”) in the decades leading to partition.

## CONCLUSION

None of this, of course, is to pinpoint the causes of partition. Why the end of British rule produced a massive—and wrenching—division on the basis of *religion*, a division that reverberates to the present day, remains a central question to grapple with. Yet it is clear that moving beyond explanations of partition rooted simply in images of long-standing Hindu-Muslim cultural and civilizational difference, or in images of a modernity that fixed borders and identities into bounded compartments, is important—even as neither of these can be ignored. There are two ways in which the need to ground partition in its larger contexts is critical.

First, as a spectacular moment of state-making, partition must be grounded in longer histories of state construction, legitimacy, and sovereign authority in South Asia. It is for this reason that paying attention to the civilizational framings of the role of religion in partition is important, but this also requires being cognizant of the critical distinction between religion as an *identity*, and religion as a guide to the cosmological framing of sovereign order. To understand how these came together in the debates—and in the violence—of partition requires longer-term explorations of the links between these in state-making. Future interpretations of partition inevitably will be influenced by broader analyses of the breaks and continuities in ideas about order, sovereignty, and the structuring of difference marking the colonial era. But as Indrani Chatterjee (2013, 355) puts it, historians cannot be content “to see ‘locality’ and ‘nation,’ where their predecessors had seen a ‘cosmos.’” Indeed, it is already clear that a wide range of historical work that reevaluates the transformations of early modernity in India is reshaping how historians think about the longer-term trajectories of state-making and state power in South Asia. Such work cannot help but influence over the long term how historians think about partition as well.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup>For an important explication of this, particularly in relation to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, see the important book by Manu Bhagavan, *The Peacemakers: India and the Quest for One World* (2013).

<sup>28</sup>A large number of works have explored this topic, but perhaps most important and representative are the works of C. A. Bayly, most notably his *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870* (1999). Important also is Moin (2012), and works by Sheldon Pollock, Rosalind O’Hanlon, Indrani Chatterjee, and others, which point to the intersection of cosmologies of sovereignty in the late precolonial period that cannot be easily contained by visions of bounded religions.



But second, and equally important, the history of partition must also be grounded in the larger worldwide trends of the particular era in which it occurred, the decades from 1919 to 1947. The grounding of South Asian history in larger, worldwide narratives is, in fact, already an ongoing and important trend in South Asian history writing, as in historical writing more generally. But it is critically important that this was not only an era of major changes in India, with the rise of Gandhi and the nationalist movement, Jinnah, and the Muslim League, but an important era of crisis and uncertainty in the worldwide ordering of states more broadly, and one in which the nature of sovereignty and legitimate rule—and the meaning of the “nation”—were open to major debate and contestation. In a counterpoint to the longer horizons of South Asian state-making, this was an era in which the meanings of “civilization” and the “nation”—and the management of human difference—were open to contest on a worldwide scale, and the importance of this for the framing of partition is inescapable. In critical ways, partition was an event of worldwide significance, precisely because it was an event *both* with deep historical roots *and* with roots in the distinctive uncertainties of this particular era. It is little wonder that the interpretation of partition continues to evoke controversy, not only among politicians in South Asia, but among academic historians as well.

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