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The Expression of Muslim Identity in South Asia Since 1947: Political, Social, and Religious Outlets

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Since 1947, the Muslim community of South Asia has been struggling over how their identity should be expressed. In Bangladesh, India and Pakistan it is impossible to look at religion or politics in isolation. The two are intrinsically linked and both play huge roles in influencing their societies. The issue of Muslim identity is complex. Since 1947 Muslims have been portrayed in an array of conflicting images; they have been seen as both the victims and the perpetrators of violence, as the pampered elite and the persecuted poor. Obviously the Muslim identity in South Asia has religious origins in Islam, but it has crossed from religious and social domains into the political sector through both colonial “divide and rule” tactics and the 1947 partition, which used religion as a demarcator. The event of partition threw Muslim identity into question as issues such as national loyalty and cultural unity arose. Politicians were quick to shape the image of Muslims to fit their agendas, and even now the idea of Muslim self-identification in South Asia remains hazy. According to Ali Riaz, “The quest for identity got entangled with power politics and political mobilisation and finally led down a blind alley” (43).

The categorization of society along the lines of religion is a legacy of colonialism which continues to play a role in the lives of Muslims today and influences how their identity is expressed. As a minority alongside Hindus in India, Muslims struggle to assert their identity within the discourse of Hindu nationalism, which is attempting to purge India of anything that is not Hindu. In Bangladesh Muslims make up the majority of the population, and Hindus are subjected to treatment similar to that of Muslims in India. The case is different in Pakistan, where Islam and politics have become inextricably entwined. Religion is used as a political tool, causing positioning within the religious sphere to reflect political positioning as well. In this essay I intend to examine how these issues have influenced the various social, religious, and political outlets through which Muslim identity has been expressed since 1947. I will begin by giving a brief summary of the historical reasons as to why identity is such a problem for Muslims in South Asia before exploring the difficulties Muslim identity faces against the In-

dian nation state. I will then look at communalism in India and Bangladesh between Hindus and Muslims after the events in Ayodhya in 1992, and conclude by exploring the social consequences of the entanglement of religion and politics in Pakistan. I will argue throughout this essay that many of the problems for Muslims in terms of their identity arise from the fact that social, religious and political issues in South Asia are inexplicitly linked.

The quest for Muslim identity in the Indian subcontinent can be traced back to the nineteenth century, when Muslims began to mourn the disintegration of the Mughal Empire. With the arrival of the British, Muslims had to find new ways to assert their identity in India. Colonial authorities tried to segregate society along the lines of caste and religion, ignoring the fact that Muslims and Hindus shared many cultural and ethnic similarities. In the lead-up to independence, the Indian Nationalist Movement had a secular agenda which the Muslim population felt went against their fundamental beliefs (i.e., living in accordance with *Sharia* Law). This led to the theory that Muslims and Hindus were unable to coexist peacefully alongside each other in one nation, and resulted in India being carved into two states at Independence. Thus, Pakistan was created in 1947 “fostering its Islamic image” as the homeland for Muslims (Husan 818). However, 35 million Muslims remained in post-partitioned India, and as the leading industrial families, traders or professionals left for Pakistan, a “socially fragmented and economically depressed” community was left behind (Husan 819). This community was relatively powerless and felt increasingly marginalized as Indian Nationalism transformed into Hindu Nationalism after independence. It is important to note that Muslims in South Asia “do not constitute a single, homogenous and monolithic entity,” as the many ethnic variations found across the sub-continent are found within the Muslim community as well (Husan 818). Pakistan is far from having a unified national identity, despite being created in the name of Islam. There are many different ethnic regions within the state as well as subdivisions within Islam, resulting in the individual being exposed to “competing ideologies that differ in their authority, authoritativeness and power to convince”

(Pratt-Ewing 93), for example the conflict between reform movements and traditional Sufism. In India, many of the caste differences that apply to Hindus also apply to Muslims, which makes asserting one's Muslim identity as separate from the rest of India a problematic and possibly unnecessary process. Nevertheless, there are many different social, religious and political outlets through which Muslim identity can be expressed.

If we look first at the 1947 partition, it could be interpreted as a Muslim victory and means of identification, but in reality it was quite the opposite. In many ways the creation of Pakistan only complicated the issue of identity. Riaz describes the Muslim attitude in India towards partition: "What the Indian Muslims asked for was an affirmation of their difference and recognition of their nationhood, what they got was a geographical partition and a division of their own nation." The Muslims of India had wanted to be made distinct and recognized as according to their religion legally and politically in a united India. Jalal, in his essay on Muslim identity indicates that an essential part of Muslim self-identity comes from being different (98). Van der Veer notes that, while Hinduism is seen as the "natural" religion of India, the foreignness of Islam is seen to be an indicator that "confers status within the Muslim community" (Van der Veer 8).

The partition left many Muslims with a sense of exile from India. They were left in a quandary, either to leave India for Pakistan and embrace a new nationality, or to remain in India where their loyalty to their country was questioned by Indian Hindus, and their loyalty to Islam was questioned by those who left for Islamic Pakistan. Jalal describes the situation: "imperatives of citizenship in mutually hostile nation-states meant that Muslims were no longer simply a divided community but declared enemies of co-religionists beyond the nearest international checkpoint" (126). Pakistan may not have been their native land, but in their actual native land, Indian Muslims were often viewed as problematical as to where their true allegiance lay.

To complicate the identity dilemma came the political/religious shift. The move to become a secular state in India further alienated Muslims from their homeland, as their ability to exercise their "difference" and "distinctness" came to be interpreted as Muslim "communalism." The Muslim League was no longer a voice for Islam in government, thus allowing the



Syed Sadequain, "Bol," illustrating the verses of Faiz Ahmed Faiz. expression of Muslim identity to be managed largely by Hindu government officials. In using secularism to create a view by which a Muslim speaking out on issues related to Islam was a feature of a "Muslim's communal nature," Hindu right-wing parties could dismiss Muslim issues in the name of secularism and further estrange the Muslim people.

The radicalisation of Hindu communalism via the Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) and Rashtriya Sevhic Sineh (RSS), "fuelled by the stereotype of an aggressive Islam," effectively alienated Muslims and built up a negative image of Muslims as violent aggressors and enemies of Hindus. As the popularity of these parties increased in the 1960s so did communal violence. The "increased polarization of Indian society" during the rule of Indira Gandhi in the 1980s saw 4,000 people killed in communal riots.

An image of Muslims as perpetrators of communal violence has appeared since partition. An image of Muslims as violent aggressors emerged in India following the 1980 Moradabad riots and the violence subsequent to the destruction of the Babri Mosque in 1992, the Gujarat riots in 2002 and the Mumbai attack in 2008. But such violence was not one-sided. After the demolition of the Babri Mosque in 1992, Hindus in Pakistan and Bangladesh suffered at the hands of Muslims seeking retribution for the event. The image portrayed in Taslima Nasrin's novel *Shame* shows Muslims as the perpetrators of violence and oppressors of Hindus in Bangladesh. The rapid success and fame of the novel has been manipulated as a propaganda tool by Hindus to mobilize the masses and demonize Islam. The placating of this image has not been helped internationally by the fascination of the international media with Islamic extremism, especially surrounding recent terrorist acts such as 9/11 in the U.S. and 7/7 in the U.K. Muslims, to some extent, have become infamous worldwide as prone to violence and extremism.

On the flip side there exists the image of Muslims as victims of the Hindu majority in India. In the eyes of many Muslims they are undoubtedly the victims, while Hindus see Muslims as threatening their Hindu way of life. Bilgrami sees the image of victim as central to how Muslims identify themselves. Their history as rulers of the Mughal Empire lingers in their consciousness as they see themselves as victims of persecution, initially under British colonialism, and now under a majoritarian Hindu political system. He describes it as the "defensive function" of their faith which through their struggle allows them to "achieve a sense of identity and self-respect" (279).

The image of Muslims as victims is supported by evidence that the Indian state not only failed to protect Muslims against Hindu attacks, but actually encouraged and coerced such action. During the Gujarat riots of February 2002, 2,000 Muslims were killed, hundreds of women raped, and thousands made homeless. According to Van der Veer, media reports suggested that the government and law enforcement agencies were actually "complicit" in these crimes. He goes on to describe the events as "very much consistent with the dominant discourse of Indian politics." A decade earlier, during the demolition of the Babri Mosque, again Muslims can be seen as victims of India's po-

litical system. The act of demolition was only made possible by Hindu-right parties mobilizing people through the "demonizing of Muslim difference" and the "peripheralization of Muslim voices" (Van Der Veer 8).

One of the main obstacles that Muslims in India have to negotiate in order to assert their identity is the *Hindutva* ideology of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). *Hindutva* equates Indian national identity in general with a Hindu religious identity, an equation that automatically puts other religious groups, such as Muslims, "outside the nation" (Van Der Veer 1). Muslims have found, to their horror, that being born and raised in India is "no longer sufficient evidence of their Indianness" (Jalal 105), and they are expected to give "real proofs" of their loyalty to India at the expense of their Islamic identity (Riaz 55). This is one of the legacies of partition which has left feelings of distrust between the two communities. The unfriendly relations between India and Pakistan since 1947 has kept these feelings alive within India, and the Muslims who remained after partition are portrayed as weakening India from the inside (Van Der Veer 10). There is a common misconception that Muslims are a homogenous group because they often vote in elections as a bloc, and the assertion of Islamic identity in neighbouring countries makes many Hindu politicians fearful of their own Muslim citizens (Van Der Veer 11). However, the majority of Muslims have no such intentions or interest in destabilizing Indian society, and are just trying to go about their daily lives.

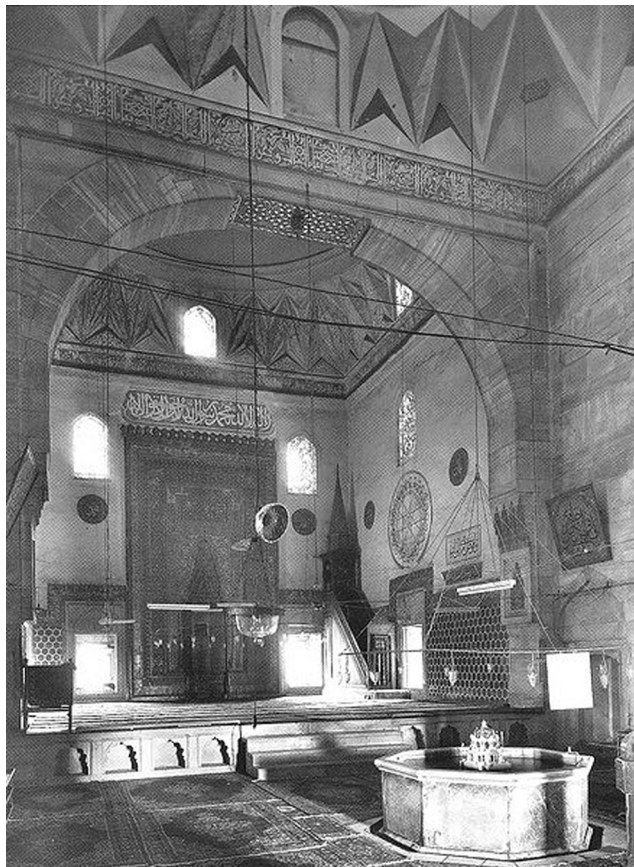
Within the moderate Muslim community, extremism is an "internal conflict" between whether they should follow the Qur'an and *Sharia* Law, or the secular policies of the Indian state (Bilgrani 275). The *Shah Bano* case in 1985 is an example of such a conflict. The Supreme Court granted maintenance payments to a seventy-three year old woman who was divorced by her husband. This was considered a criticism of the Qur'an and *Sharia* Law, which states that women are only entitled to maintenance payments during *iddat*, the three month period after divorce, and since her husband had paid this, she was, in the eyes of Islamic law, not entitled to any further payments (Mody 936). Although the decision by the secular government to grant her extra payments was based on a universal civil code that treats everyone the same regardless of their religion, Muslims felt that Personal Law, where

Muslims would have separate laws according to their beliefs, was the only “permanent guarantee” for the preservation of Muslim self-identity (Ziya 840). In theory, a universal secular law that treats everyone equally regardless of their religion is often the best option, but this case exposes the failure of Indian’s “secular nationalism” to accommodate ethnic diversity and protect the identity of minority groups (Riaz 55). Thus the social and political outlets through which Muslim identity can be expressed are limited by the Indian government.

Moreover, the demolition of the Babri Mosque highlights the influential role which religion plays in Indian politics, for the controversy has become a focus of conflict between Muslim and Hindu identity in India. The mosque was said to be built on the birthplace of the Hindu god Rama, and Hindu nationalists wanted to reclaim the site for a Hindu temple, despite the fact that Hindus and Muslims had worshipped peacefully alongside each other in Ayodhya for centuries. The mosque was transformed from a local shrine into a symbol of the “threatened Hindu majority” at the hands of the Muslim minority, and was used by the

BJP as an “instrument in the homogenisation of a ‘national Hinduism’” (Van Der Veer 7).

In order to understand the events of December 1992 and the riots that followed, one must also consider the historical background to the event. The *Hindutva* idea that India was a nation for Hindus only was not a new one, and can be traced back to the beginnings of Indian nationalism in the nineteenth century. The whole concept of the Indian nation has been constructed around antagonisms between Hindus and Muslims, and this antagonism led to the creation of Pakistan in 1947 as a homeland for Muslims (Van Der Veer 2). However, as events since 1947 have shown, the creation of Pakistan has not resolved the differences between Muslims and Hindus in India. In 1990 two political developments influenced the outcome of the events in Ayodhya: first, further violence over the continuing Kashmir issue led to the BJP taking a strong anti-Pakistan stance, which was translated as anti-Muslim sentiment; and second, VP Singh’s government proposed to increase the number of reservations for backward castes, which included Muslims, in educational institutions and government services (Van Der Veer 4). This move was unpopular among Hindus, who felt that Muslims were receiving special treatment from the government, yet Muslims felt increasingly victimized by the attitudes of the BJP toward their community. The eventual destruction of the Babri Mosque in 1992 unleashed a “reign of terror and a series of bloodbaths” in cities across India, spreading to Pakistan and Bangladesh, and even into diaspora communities, with Muslims setting fire to Hindu temples in Britain (Riaz 53). More than 1,000 people were killed in riots in Bombay alone, the majority of whom were Muslims, and police actively participated in the violence (Van Der Veer 7). Thus, these events pose a further challenge to the secularism of the Indian state and again show how the government fails to protect the minorities. There is little doubt that the BJP was behind the demolition of the Mosque, as it was part of their quest to make India a homeland for Hindus. Such demands and actions by Hindu nationalists justify feelings that the Muslim community is an “endangered minority” (Van Der Veer 10) and raises questions of how Muslims can assert their identity in the face of such a political discourse without further worsening their position.



Babri Mosque interior, before the demolition

Putting aside the topic of communal violence, the image of Muslims as victims has also been reinforced in the social context. Surveys by charities and outsiders show the social inequality in India, with huge disparities in socio-economic status between Hindus and Muslims. In a study of Muslim women in India, Hasan and Menon find that three fifths of Muslims belong to the low- and middle-class categories; most work in positions of unskilled labor and cannot afford to lift themselves out of poverty. There are huge gaps in education, particularly among Muslim women, of which 59% are illiterate. Behind these figures is the reasoning that Muslims are being oppressed by the Hindu majority, as Muslims are made to occupy the bottom rung of society.

Evidence to support this idea of Hindu oppression can be found in Part XVII of the Constitution of India, enacted in 1950, making Hindi India's official language. This instantly alienated the many Muslims of who spoke Urdu and highlighted the historical and religious divisions which situated "Hindi as a Hindu language and Urdu as a Muslim language" (Van Der Veer xiii). Van Der Veer describes the significance of this by positioning language as one of the "main aspects of national identity" (xiii). From this perspective, Muslims were made to feel less "Indian" as Urdu became a "victim of communal bigotry" (Hasan 820).

The language shift also made it more difficult for Muslims in the education and career sectors, which in turn had economic consequences. Educational opportunities were curbed as the most prominent national examinations were written in Hindi. The implications of this became crucial for employment and job opportunities. The difficulties faced by Urdu-speaking Muslims at every stage of education inhibits their ability to pull themselves out of poverty or into positions in government where they could speak out about Muslim interests. Hasan describes how Muslims feel anger because, "the systematic neglect of their interests has contributed to their economic decline" (Hasan 828). This in turn led to the economic disparity between the Hindu and Muslim populations in India. This again puts Muslims in the image of the victim, oppressed by the Hindu majority and as foreigners in their homeland.

There were other actions by the government that caused Muslims to appear the victims of Hindu majoritarianism, such as their exclusion from the reserva-

tion system. Dalits, tribals, and backward classes still received reservations; but Muslim reservations were abandoned under the principle of creating a secular nation. Although the removal of reservations on religious grounds could be seen as lessening the religious consciousness of the state, in reality the prejudices between the communities still existed; therefore while Hindus were a majority, Muslims had to struggle for employment. This resulted in further alienation of Muslims and a hazier distinction around their religious identity.

The social difficulties faced by many Muslims prompted a political shift which attempted to address the issue of under-representation on a national level. Riaz explores how Muslims have allied with the marginalized subaltern sections of Indian society. He characterizes Yoginder Sikand's 2004 study of Dalit-Muslim relations thus: "the Dalit voice has become a vehicle for expressing the dissent of the marginalized Muslim community" (56). The strategy has seen success and even brought about the occasional electoral defeat of the Hindu-right BJP party, as happened in the 1993 election of Uttar Pradesh. This alliance has given the Muslims a distinct political identity and voice in the Indian body politic but one that is "free from the trappings of so-called 'communalism'" (Riaz 56). It brings forth an evolution of Muslim identity into the mainstream and breaks down the traditional image of Muslim involvement in politics as communal and aggressive against all that is Hindu.

To add to the complexity of Muslim identity there is the issue of division within the Muslim community. In a country as vast as India, it is unsurprising that there should be regional religious differentiation as well as class stratification and varying educational standards. Due to the events which occurred during partition, India was left with a gross class disparity in the Muslim community when most of the "middle class" industrial and professional Muslims left for Pakistan. The result was "a socially fragmented and economically depressed Muslim community" (Hasan 831). Jalal describes the increasing separation as the Muslim elite saw the political advantages "in distancing themselves from the more controversial symbols of their religiously informed cultural identity" while the poor and illiterate masses had no such motivation (213). At such opposite ends of the social spectrum and with such different interests politically, the rich and poor

Muslim communities have little common ground on which to build a cultural identity following partition.

Divisions within the Muslim community also appeared between those seen as “moderate” and those considered “absolutist” in the practice of their faith. In her analysis of Muslim communalism, Jalal describes the dilemma of moderate Muslims who are left to debate how to follow religious and political aspirations in a secular and democratic India: the “conflict is one that arises because of moderate Muslims’ fundamental commitment to a doctrine which contains features that are often effectively invoked by the absolutists whom moderate Muslims fundamentally oppose” (520). The disengagement from politics of most Muslims—such as those following the *Deobandi*, *Tablighi Jama’at* and the *Baralvi* strands of Islam—lies in sharp contrast to the absolutist *Jama’at-i-Islami* and their aim to establish an Islamic state. This contradiction in attitudes towards politics means that on an international level it is only the political voice of the absolutist Muslims that largely shape external perceptions of Muslims. This conveys part of the complexity in putting together an image of Muslim identity. The community is not only disunited, but groups are often diametrically opposed to each other.

However, it is important to note that even in Pakistan and Bangladesh, where Muslims are the majority, there are still struggles over identity. It must not be forgotten that until 1971 Bangladesh was part of Pakistan. Bengali Muslims have had their own struggle between Islamic and Bengali identity since 1947, and the problem has yet to be fully resolved (Ahmed 234). The creation of Pakistan in two halves, East and West, assumed that a common Muslim identity could overcome cultural and ethnic differences, but this naive assumption was quickly shattered. The decision to make Urdu the state language of Pakistan was met with “stout resistance” from Bengalis in the Eastern wing as they felt it was an “encroachment on their cultural autonomy” (Jalal 570). Never before had a common religious identity required cultural differences to be completely denied (Jalal 571). Finally, in 1971, Bengal gained independence from Pakistan with the formation of Bangladesh. However, while Pakistan has only a very small Hindu population, twenty percent of the Bangladeshi population are Hindu, making relations with India strained, particularly during times of communal violence (Ahmed 234). When violence

breaks out in India it usually spreads to Bangladesh, with devastating consequences for the Hindu minority. Nasrin’s *Shame* follows a Hindu family in Bangladesh after the events in Ayodhya in 1992 and reveals how Hindus became enemies in their own country because of the actions of other Hindus in India which had no relation to Bangladesh at all. Suddenly Muslims were walking the streets chanting that they wanted to eat Hindus for breakfast, when only yesterday they were friends (Nasrin 36). Hindus became the “targets of Muslim fanatics” in a protest against the demolition of the mosque in India “as if it were the Hindus of Bangladesh who were responsible” (Nasrin 9). Nasrin argues that it is one of the continuing legacies of partition that a religious riot in India also means a religious riot in Bangladesh and Pakistan (9) and her novel asks why both Hindus and Muslims should be penalised for crimes to which they are not even remotely connected (Nasrin 13). Both Hindus and Muslims alike across South Asia have been forced into asserting their religious identity even if it has little significance to them personally, and this has changed the character of the ways in which their social and political identity is expressed as well.

Furthermore, variations within Islam have an impact on the social, religious and political outlets of identity for Muslims across South Asia, raising questions of what it actually means to be Muslim. During the colonial period, Sufism was denounced in an attempt to define the political boundaries between Muslims and Hindus and to reinforce the social and cultural exclusiveness of the Muslim community, to support claims that they could not live alongside Hindus for they had very different values. Post-colonial Pakistan has become important in the continued debate between modern reformist Islam and traditional Sufism (Van Der Veer 62). Despite efforts to unite Pakistan in the name of religion, there are varying opinions concerning what practices fall inside and outside of true Islam. The reform movement rejects traditional Sufism because it is seen as superstitious and some leaders have “taken an extreme position and attempted to weed out nearly all of what they perceive as local practices” (Pratt-Ewing 94). The main exponent of political anti-Sufism is the *Jama’at-i-Islami*, founded by Syed Abul-Aala-Maududi. He argued that the state and society should be subordinate to the “authority of the Qur’an and the example of the prophet” (Van Der Veer 63). After partition, the *Jama’at* became a political party,



Noor Ali Chagani, "Calligrafitti Wall"

and although it was never successful in elections (with the exception of their victory in 2002 elections), it has nonetheless had considerable influence in Pakistani politics, especially in campaigns for laws banning un-Islamic practices and the promotion of an Islamic constitution. Many in Pakistan are self-conscious about their Muslim identity and they are careful about how they express their identity in different contexts, as "taking a particular ideological stance also means asserting one's social and even political position" to neighbours and the wider society (Pratt-Ewing 125). Thus, social, political, and religious outlets of identity have become inextricably linked in Pakistan, as one's religious beliefs also indicate one's social and political standing in society as well.

Conclusions

The expression of Muslim identity in South Asia since 1947 has been a complex issue. The legacy of partition remains, and Muslims in India no longer feel at home within the Hindu nationalist discourse. Muslims are portrayed as a foreign element that should be

removed from India to make the state a homeland for Hindus. Instead of being a homogenous community, there are different opinions within Islam about the different outlets through which their identity can be expressed. Muslims are faced with the choice between following the secularism of the nation state or keeping to their traditional *Sharia* Law. Communal violence frequently erupts between Muslims and Hindus across the sub-continent and spreads from one state to another, as the violence in Bangladesh after the demolition of the Ayodhya mosque illustrates. Within Islam itself ideologies compete for the identity of the individual, and the particular stance one chooses also reflects their social and political position. It is no longer possible to separate religious, political and social outlets of identity as the three have become interwoven and confused meaning that to assert one's identity as Muslim goes a lot further than a proclamation of religious faith.

The question of Muslim identity has no clean cut or definitive answer. The regional and linguistic variations as well as the differences in social and economic positions mean that "there can [NOT?] be one single voice of the Muslim of India." The rivalry between Hindus and Muslims constantly fuels contradictory images; they cannot be seen as simply the persecuted or the persecutor as it largely depends on whether they are of the minority or the majority and the specific circumstances, the same is to be said of Hindus. The question over the nationality and loyalty of an Indian Muslim is intertwined in the events of partition which are still fresh in the minds of many Indians. Such tumultuous events as those of 1947 causing a million deaths, 8 million Hindu, Muslim and Sikh refugees; are sure to leave a population in some amount of chaos. The result is that the expression of Muslim identity on the subcontinent cannot form a single picture but rather a catalogue; the politically active and the passive; the religious absolutist and the moderate; the privileged elite and the impoverished. The one consistent feature is that they continuously appear at the extremes of the religious, political and social levels of the subcontinent.

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