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Revisiting Partition Debates

The Global Connections

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Partition debates in India drew on the League of Nations' discussions on minorities in the nation-states created after World War I. The League's legacy persisted beyond Partition, even making a ghost appearance in the controversy over Assam's NRC.

When the port city of Thessaloniki in Greece received the European Capital of Culture designation in 1997, Mark Mazower, a noted historian of Greece and the Balkans, wrote the following about the city's extraordinary cultural diversity at an earlier historical moment:

> A century ago, it was known as Selanik, one of the most fascinating cities in the Ottoman Empire. Roughly half its 150,000 inhabitants then were Jews, as many as lived in the whole of France. In addition to Turks and Greeks, there were also Armenians, Bulgarians, Vlachs, Circassians, Albanians, and the secretive Dönme—the crypto-Jews who had followed Sabbatai Zevi, their false Messiah, into Islam in the late seventeenth century. Foreign visitors were astonished to find boot blacks and porters on the docks who spoke six or seven languages.

One might reasonably argue that the city had stronger claims to recognition as a capital of culture at that time than in 1997. Over just three or four generations, polyglot Selanik became Thessaloniki, a city that belonged firmly to the nation-state of Greece, with "more than one million Greeks, virtually no Turks, and fewer than two thousand Jews."

Selanik's incorporation into the Kingdom of Greece in 1912 is how the history of this transformation begins. But this history also includes the population transfers—both forced and supposedly voluntary—that took place after the Ottoman Empire disintegrated, and the deportation and extermination of the city's large Jewish community during Nazi occupation.

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Those familiar with certain metropolitan spaces in India and Pakistan may not find it difficult to relate to such changes in cityscapes over short spans of time. India's capital city of Delhi and the port city of Karachi in Pakistan changed dramatically following decolonisation and partition, in population composition and in regard to their cultural and even culinary landscapes. In a memoir of her childhood, chef and culinary author Madhur Jaffrey writes poignantly about the dramatic transformation of Delhi she witnessed:

> Delhi's Muslims began disappearing, making their way to Pakistan. . . Delhi as we knew it ceased to exist. Its vibrant Hindu-Muslim culture, its nuanced rules of etiquette, its unfailing politeness, and its unique sense of hospitality began to fade away. Urdu, the language it had given birth to, went into a fatal decline. . . Delhi began filling up with new citizens, refugees from the Punjab.

Many Punjabi Hindu refugees fleeing areas that became Pakistan carried with them a few of their possessions including their household tandoors. Some of the humble eating places started by refugee entrepreneurs featured tandoori food from the north-western areas of Pakistan bordering Afghanistan. That was how the cuisine was introduced to Delhi, where it quickly took off before it became iconic of Indian restaurant food globally.

Creating and Managing Minorities

These changes in the landscapes of cities located in two different continents were no mere coincidence. They were taking place in the context of a global transition from empire to nation-state, which in the subcontinent, of course, came only at the cost of a violent partition. Following the collapse of the former Habsburg, Ottoman, and Russian empires during or after the First World War, the newly created League of Nations played an important role in the reorganisation of their territories into new states. A number of these successor states signed minority protection treaties that were guaranteed by the League of Nations.

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In Mazower's words, the League stood "for a system that, on the one hand, accepted the nation-state as the norm in international relations and, on the other, made a considered effort to tackle the minority issues that were thus created." The League's operations, a major focus of international diplomacy during the interwar years, were an important source of ideas for India's partition debates.

Indian academics, newspaper columnists, and statesmen took keen interest in interwar developments in Europe and the League's mandated territories of the Levant. Key politicians on both sides of the partition debate drew ideas and inspiration from the politics of nationalism and of minority protection unfolding in those areas.

The demands and grievances of Muslims against Hindus, observed Beni Prasad in a 1941 book *The Hindu-Muslim Question*, paralleled those made by "Christians and the Shia Muslims against the Sunni majority in Syria in 1938-39." He wrote in detail about the broad similarities between arguments made in support of partition in India and the demands of the Sudeten German minority in inter-war Czechoslovakia. The German-Czechoslovak confrontation over Sudetenland in 1938 even served as a proxy debate on partition among contemporary commentators in India.

The Irish partition of 1921 and the subsequent civil war drew particular interest in India, thanks to Ireland's location within the same British imperial space. The Congress and the Muslim League repeatedly invoked the Irish example in their arguments. While Congress leaders warned about creating "Ulsters" on the subcontinent, the Muslim League's M A Jinnah freely acknowledged that his position paralleled that of the Ulster Unionists.

Historian T G Fraser cites Jinnah's reconstruction of a meeting between the Irish nationalist leader John Redmond and the Unionist leader Edward Carson, where Redmond reportedly said, "Look here, can't we come to some settlement? Why do you want to separate from Ireland? Mind you, there isn't one-millionth part of a differences between the people of Ulster and Ireland." In response, Carson is supposed to have said, "I do not want to be ruled by you." Jinnah said that his reply to Gandhi on the question of partition would be the same: "I do not want to be ruled by you."

The two-nation theory behind the idea of Pakistan may have been initially premised on "a fundamentally nonterritorial vision of nationality," as historian David Gilmartin puts it. But the crucial influence of the League of Nations' guarantees of minority rights on the political thinking and practice of the Muslim League, the Congress, and other Indian political organisations of the time cannot be overestimated.

The Ghosts of the League

The League of Nations did not oversee a generalised system of protecting minorities everywhere. Only certain states were obligated by treaty to respect the rights of their minorities. The perception that those states were being treated as somewhat less than full-fledged sovereign states had adverse effects on its legitimacy and effectiveness. This minority regime came under increasingly critical scrutiny as the Second World War unfolded, and came to be widely seen as a failure.

But as Beni Prasad lamented, while the failure of the League's system of minority guarantees led to its widespread repudiation, "the deeper cause of the tragedy, a false idea of nationality and a falser equation of nationality with statehood, was not understood in India and elsewhere."

It is important to remember that the Nazi pursuit of a 'racially pure' organic German nation-state, purged of all 'impure' elements, was but an extreme and pathological variant of policies of 'ethnic unmixing'. These were policies designed to create putatively homogenous nation-states that were seen as an effective means of reducing international tensions and the basis for a stable post-First World War order.

> The charter of the League's successor, the United Nations, carefully avoided any mention of minorities. Its commitment was to human rights, understood as the rights of individuals.

Yet, as political theorist Hannah Arendt, herself a refugee from Nazi Germany, reflected in her 1951 book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*: "since the Peace Treaties of 1919 and 1920 the refugees and the stateless have attached themselves like a curse to all

the newly established states on earth which were created in the image of the nation-state."

The charter of the United Nations, the League's successor, carefully avoided any mention of minorities. Its commitment was to human rights, understood as the rights of individuals. Interestingly enough, even after the system was abandoned and the League of Nations itself was dissolved, the language and practices of the League's minority regime continued to guide policies in the two post-Partition states in South Asia, at least for a brief period.

As diplomatic historian Pallavi Raghavan shows, these models influenced the manner in which Indian and Pakistani officials conceived of the idea of minority protection through bilateral agreements as they negotiated the Nehru-Liaquat Pact of March 1950.

The pact was signed when the two leaders met in Delhi following the first major flare-up of Hindu-Muslim violence in the two new states since the bloodshed of Partition. It sought to create a bilateral institutional framework between the two governments to restore confidence among minorities, specifically in East Pakistan and in the Indian states of West Bengal and Assam. The immediate situation did improve. But the institutions that were put in place were inherently fragile. They were unworkable in the long run since they lacked a crucial element: the monitoring and oversight authority of an international organisation like the League of Nations.

It is a matter of some curiosity that in October 2019, when a number of the independent experts of the UN Human Rights Council expressed concerns that the National Register of Citizens process in Assam might make a large number of people stateless, India took particular umbrage at the connection they made with the issue of minority rights. "The issue of National Register of Citizens in the state of Assam in India," said a diplomat at India's Permanent Mission to the UN, "is not an issue of rights of minorities." She expressed disappointment that the process was being "wrongly linked with the issue of minority rights." She assured the UN body that minorities in India had constitutional safeguards and that they enjoyed legally enforceable fundamental rights.

In invoking minority rights, were the UN human rights experts relying on the organisation's institutional memory extending back into its predecessor institution? Were Indian officials spooked by the ghosts of the League's minority regime?