

August 7, 2024

## Region, Federation, Representation: Muslim Politics in India

By: Shefali Jha

*Communities with idioms of politics other than the hegemonic heartland's 'Hindu-Muslim', have been hospitable grounds for coalition-building, accommodation, and the shaping of distinctive and robust Muslim political platforms.*

Thanks to the rise of an aggressively centralised vision of the polity, the concept and practice of federalism in India has begun to be discussed seriously in the last few years. If a substantive discussion of its histories and promises still lies very much in the future, this is because the spectre of secessionism haunts all talk of devolving power in any substantive way from our *mai-baap sarkar* in Delhi; this is a phenomenon almost as old as the republic itself, if not older. Still, one hears murmurs about the 'Delhi durbar' from the most unexpected quarters – surely a sign of the times.

While this discussion proceeds, there is the Other question to be asked: what would a genuinely federal arrangement promise minorities, especially Muslims, the most beleaguered minority of all? Politics based on regional claims in India has managed a cosier co-habitation with the ghost of secessionism over the second half of the last century than attempts to bring Muslims qua minority together as a political group. But what has gone relatively unnoticed is that the evolution of a federal *modus vivendi* over the last sixty years has in fact helped Muslim political formations to take shape within regional milieus.

The relative success of political parties like the All India Majlis-e-Ittehad-ul-Muslimeen (AIMIM) of Telangana or the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) in Kerala reminds us of histories that remain just below the surface of mainstream political discourse: that the colonial trajectory of Muslim politics was also a story of the yoking together, following the ascendancy of the Congress and Hindu revivalist movements, of strong regional political formations by steadily co-opting them into a centralised, pan-Indian politics. The work of historians like Rafiuddin Ahmad for Bengal and Kenneth McPherson and Abdul Khader Fakhri for the Tamil region, for example, documents the making of Muslim politics in these regions in the formative decades of the early- to mid-20th century. From this perspective, as Ayesha Jalal and others have shown, the major political achievement of Jinnah's Muslim League lay in harnessing the strength of these platforms shaped by regional histories in colonial India – in Punjab, Bengal, Sind, the North West Frontier Province, or indeed Malabar – to the cause of what Faizal Devji's influential study has called "Muslim Zion".

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The disastrous consequences of this centralisation of Indian politics continue to hang over the subcontinent. For Muslim political parties in India, however, the all-important difference today is that the direction of mediation is reversed: they represent persecuted minorities, not a nation-in-the-making, and one precondition for their success has been the affordance of a certain distance from Delhi-centric politics. In other words, communities where horizontal ties of language, particular cultural practices of distance, accommodation – even conflict – that may be called neighbourly, and idioms of politics other than the hegemonic heartland's 'Hindu-Muslim' prevail, have been hospitable grounds for durable Muslim representation, not beholden to, though certainly shaped by, national political formations.

In this piece I demonstrate this argument and sketch its ramifications for any interpretation of our current situation by discussing the case of the AIMIM, and making some reference to the history of the IUML. Briefly, this will show how practices of coalition-building and accommodation nearly impossible at the national level have not only flourished in the case of these particular parties, but also thereby fashioned distinctive and robust Muslim political platforms in each case.

Before we proceed, it is worth noting that this is but a beginning. This is important to note because it is not accidental that the bulk of the labour for an insightful comparative study remains to be carried out by translators as much as researchers in this case: when it comes to pass, we may read that as a sign of the federal imagination of the Union of India truly coming into its own.

**Andhra Pradesh to Telangana: ends, beginnings**

The AIMIM's founding in 1958 as a political party in independent India, in the newly formed province of Andhra Pradesh, was greeted by as much trepidation as enthusiasm amongst different sections of Hyderabad Muslims.

This was exactly 10 years after the annexation of Hyderabad state and its merger with the Indian Union, effected by an invasion by the Union army, remembered today as 'Police Action'. It had also been 10 years since a leading Urdu newspaper, the *Rahbar-e-Deccan*, had editorialised the sentiments of many a persecuted and demoralised Hyderabad: "politics has become the Forbidden Tree for Muslims; they are simply not strong enough to support one side over another, since they require the support of all parties." Much of the massive audience at the AIMIM's founding *jalsa* was composed of Muslims who had either fled the violence of 1948–49, or been rendered destitute in the aftermath of the military invasion.

How was it that in the relatively short time of a decade, mass support for a revitalised and Indian nationalist Majlis could be publicly mobilised?

AIMIM lore credits the heroism of the party's leadership, vested at the time in the redoubtable Abdul Wahed Owaisi, grandfather to Asaduddin and Akbaruddin Owaisi and founding president of the AIMIM. The party's detractors saw in the revival a ploy of the Congress to channel urban Muslim support away from the Communist Party of India towards a communal platform that could never challenge the national party as the communists might – and fleetingly did – do. No doubt both factors were significant in the revival and survival of a much-maligned party, one whose ancestor in princely Hyderabad had led the armed resistance to democracy and merger with the postcolonial Indian state, under Qasim Razvi, a name that holds a secure place in the rogues gallery of Indian history, readily available for nationalist propaganda of all hues, but especially of the saffron variety.

Leaving the pleasures of Big Man history aside, one could argue that the crucial factor in the party's revival was the dynamic of regional politics.

The 1951 election campaign was a new experience for all Hyderabadis, and they packed into rallies and meetings to be wooed by would-be representatives in the aftermath of Police Action. Unsurprisingly, they voted in a strong opposition to Nehru's Congress – if the communists reaped the rewards of the Telangana Armed Struggle, the anti-Congress sentiment also benefitted socialists and independents.

The various narratives of Telangana remain to be parsed, but these regional histories and a capital shaped by them have produced in the AIMIM MP from Hyderabad a statesman-like figure, as opposed to his main opponents in the BJP, whose politics depend on the Hindu-Muslim axis of the 1940s.

Still, a few months after the elections, street agitations and strikes would break out in the *mulki* cause, releasing the simmering resentment against the influx of 'outsiders' into Hyderabad state, and expressing fears of a future *Vishalandhra* – a united state for the Telugu people, incorporating parts of Madras state – championed by the CPI and others. During the election campaign and subsequent demonstrations like these, Muslim youth began to organise and find their political voice, ignoring the sage advice of their traumatised elders. As *mulkis* shouting slogans like "idli-sambar go back" in crowds that defied trigger-happy police forces, from Warangal and Nizamabad to Hyderabad, these students forged an oppositional political subjectivity that would feed into the foundational successes of the fledgling AIMIM.

This was ironic, since the AIMIM was a child of Andhra Pradesh and would, through most of its career, be agnostic about demands for a separate Telangana, posited as the culmination of the *mulki* demand. In the 1950s the linguistic basis of the new state of AP made for a wider political field than the post-1948 geography of Telangana structured by the communal question. In the latter, Muslims would be cornered into being an erstwhile ruling group, antagonists in an everlasting drama of 'Hindu-Muslim' history – the narrative of a centrally imagined Indian nationalism, the foundation of both the BJP's and the Congress's politics. On the fresh slate of Andhra Pradesh, Muslims could be written in, eventually, as a significant minority population with demands, one interest group amongst many in the state.

The AIMIM successfully positioned itself as the spokesperson of this group, inside and outside the halls of the Legislative Assembly. Even though all the party's legislators came from one part of Hyderabad city, the outsized importance of the capital in the politics of the state, and the party leadership's active public presence combined with their bargaining abilities allowed the party to strengthen its representative status over the crucial decades of the 1960s and 1970s.

The recent formation of Telangana and the continued significance of the AIMIM, in and out of step with both the BRS and Congress, does not necessarily negate this history. For one, the AIMIM has never had the luxury of principled alliances; it has kept its platform going by allying or reaching some kind of understanding with the reigning political force at the state level.

But more to the point, the Telangana formed in 2014 was a product of half a century of intimate enmity with Andhra Pradesh. During the agitation for the separate state and after, many Telangana Telugu speakers found common ground with each other based on the Urdu and Marathi elements in their spoken language, pitched against both the chaste Telugu of the coastal Andhra region and the ridicule attached to other variants. This remains an important element in the readily available points of self-identification in the state.

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### **The (South) Indian Union Muslim League?**

A different national-regional dynamic would emerge further south, but with inevitable similarities. The Indian Union Muslim League in Madras Presidency, whose leader Mohammad Ismail had just been appointed Convenor of the party at the national level, resolved in 1948 to “devote its attention *principally* to the promotion of the religious, cultural, educational and economic interests of the Muslims of the Union” (italics in original). As in the case of its northern neighbour, however, the party would soon respond to the force of circumstance and opportunities for alliances in the new states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu, over the next twenty years. There, however, the similarities end, and difference, even disagreement, take over.

The IUML survived in Madras thanks to its distance from the heartland of the politics of Partition, as well as certain political histories which supported its existence. The League had a robust presence in the Madras Assembly, with members representing constituencies from Malabar (then part of the Presidency) to Madurai. Many of them spoke effectively on a wide range of issues, in addition to representing Muslim concerns. In the late 1940s and early 50s, the IUML was treated with suspicion, and its leaders imprisoned on occasion, but the fact remained that it was part of a political landscape moulded by Dravidian politics. As Abdul Fakhri has argued, the Dravidian movement operationalised a democratic social imaginary of “a single Dravidian nation, rather than two religious communities waiting to be united”, which would prove more durable than the short-lived “Brahmin-Muslim entente” under the Congress nationalism of the 1920s.

Equally important: these practices of politics were shaped by a productive tension between regional formations, which carried over from the 1940s to the next couple of decades. The American political scientist Theodore Wright Jr, wrote in 1966 how Mohammad Ismail, “has tried in vain to get [Abdul Wahed] Owaisi to merge his party with the Muslim League. The local League has been signally unsuccessful in its electoral ventures, possibly because of a largely non-*mulki* leadership.” Thus, the idiom of *mulki* and non-*mulki* remained salient in Hyderabad, in a way that had denied the Muslim League an independent platform in the princely state as well as in the state of Andhra Pradesh.

Regional politics allows for a reinterpretation of the past and present in unexpected, sometimes surprising ways. This, in spite of their differences, has been an enabling factor for the IUML in the South as much as the AIMIM in the Deccan.

On the other hand, the divisions and alliances between the groups known as “Tamil Muslims” and “Urdu Muslims”, but more accurately in Fakhri’s description as “Tamil,” “Dakhni,” and “Tamil Dakhni” Muslims, also signal an inter-regional dynamic of ethnic and political affiliation with the Deccan, of which we may take the erstwhile Hyderabad princely state to be a locus. These modes of linguistic and religious filiation, both linking and separating the “Tamil” with the “Dakhni,” were inflected by trade practices spanning centuries, but more recently, political categories of majority and minority which emerged as the colonial state came of age. Thus, British institutions of representation and idioms of politics came to mediate relations not just between the Muslim outfits of Madras Presidency and Hyderabad, but between ethnic groups of the same province.

The IUML’s pre-and post-1948 career, the internal struggles for leadership, alliances with the Dravidian parties, and finally their reliance on Muslim-majority Malabar highlight the importance of these historical currents in shaping the party’s representative status in the ‘South’.

In short, the weight of these histories distributes itself differently depending on the context of mobilisation and of making everyday living with others possible. With the formation of the state of Kerala in 1956, the centre of gravity of the League’s platform shifted decisively to the new state. Here too, it was strengthened by a series of unlikely alliances with both the Communist and Congress parties, which has made for lengthy stints in power at the state level and a lasting Parliamentary presence (Ismail himself, being a Tamil politician, won 3 terms as MP from Manjeri in Kerala). This was often in the teeth of opposition from the national leadership of these parties.

In Tamil politics, the League has been a longstanding ally of the DMK, often balancing rival commitments (as in 2013, when the DMK quit the Congress-led UPA at the centre; the IUML was with the Congress-led UDF in Kerala, but continued its alliance with the Dravidian party in Tamil Nadu). Could the reasons for its attenuated presence in Tamil politics stem from the transformation of Dravidianism itself? That is a question for another day. Here it suffices to observe: regional politics allows for a reinterpretation of the past and present in unexpected, sometimes surprising ways. This, in spite of their differences, has been an enabling factor for the IUML in the South as much as the AIMIM in the Deccan.

## Region and representation

One would think that the old questions are surely moot in our current political climate: do Muslims form a separate interest group? Isn’t Muslim politics by definition communal and therefore dangerous? Isn’t the MIM to Muslims what the BJP is to Hindus? Or the new iteration of these old questions: aren’t Muslim parties doing Hindutva’s work? That these questions are still being asked seriously and a trifle conspiratorially, only suggests that academic analysis as much as general political sense is rooted in Burkean ‘habits of the heart’ that are more resistant to change than actual political practice.

The transregional reification of the ‘Hindu-Muslim’ axis of politics has been foundational to Indian nationhood and state-formation; the main national parties cannot but partake of this field, whether to intensify its polarities or disavow their effects. It is at the level of the region – whether conceptualised in terms of our contemporary political units of states or older, more or less expansive imaginaries of ‘the Deccan’, or indeed a combination of the two – that the field is, and has historically been, open to redefinition and realignment.

The argument, of which I sketched the merest outlines above, requires an appreciation of the paradoxical position of the minority, a category of people who must rely on the protection of the very political terms that underwrite their subjection: democracy, that is to say, rule by the majority.

Democratic majorities, some diehard idealists may object, are not permanent majorities. Granted, the grammar of *demos* is quite different from *ethnos*, and one of the consequences of popular sovereignty is the impact of the democratic dispersal of authority on ethnic solidarities, such as those of religion and caste, which are fundamentally refashioned in the wake of democratisation. Still, it can hardly be denied that it falls to the minority to both insist on the difference and suffer from the proximities forged between the People and the Community, by electoral politics – it is minorities, in fact, that hold majorities together.

The larger, more important task that the career of these parties points us toward, is to consider the implications of the increased visibility, even viability, of the federal question, especially for minority political representation in India.

This is why, in times of violent crisis, of which Indian Muslims have seen more than their share, the counsel that the community ought to vacate the political arena altogether, given these agonistic equations that define it, has often emerged; it would be better, the argument goes, to concentrate their energies on ostensibly non-political domains, like education and livelihoods.

This is not the place to go into the inseparability of the economic and ‘social’ from the political domain. It suffices to point out that this advice has never found many takers, with the result that today we may look back at sturdy if under-discussed traditions of Muslim politics in India. The most successful of these have thrived in regions away from the north Indian heartland, and this fact introduces a mediating third into our discussion – *topos* or place. A crucial enabling factor for the sustenance of Muslim political platforms, this phenomenon deserves our attention.

Today, successive chief ministers of Telangana describe Asaduddin Owaisi of the AIMIM as representing ‘Telangana’ and ‘140 crore Indians’ (the universal category that each party’s politics— BRS and Congress— operationalises in its politics). More than half a century of working with the MIM in its various moods and the compulsions of alliance-building at the state level lie at the heart of

this rhetoric. The same holds for the IUML in Kerala, where the ‘communal’ question to invite a defensive response of this sort may not even arise, if only because of the rise of more assertive and strident forces like the Popular Front of India in the last few decades.

More, a genuine federalisation of the analytical imagination will yield better studies of how political categories travel – a quick instance being the emergent category of ‘pasmanda’ Muslims. Whether and how efficacious it becomes outside of the Persianate-Hindi heartland that has been the traditional focus of scholarship on Muslim politics remains an open question.

Certainly one must not exaggerate the possibilities or autonomy of the region, which Muslims everywhere in India will be the first to recognise as they struggle to organise behind political forces that have the best chance of defeating majoritarian Hindutva. When an Asaduddin Owaisi speaks in Parliament, he speaks for Indian Muslims, not only for Hyderabad and as a Hyderabadi. The recent bid to expand the party not just outside of its historical home in the city but also the Deccan as a region, attests to the relentless pull of the national field of polarisation. The fact remains that it is the history of the party in the region, and of contemporary Hyderabad, that has fashioned both his and his brother Akbaruddin’s now strident, now parliamentary idiom of politics – as well as the field of alliances and confrontations in which that idiom is recognisable.

It should surprise no one that the limited success of the AIMIM’s national career, has been shaped by regional dynamics, and will probably continue to be in the foreseeable future. The larger, more important task that the career of these parties points us toward, is to consider the implications of the increased visibility, even viability, of the federal question, especially for minority political representation in India.

*Shefali Jha is an anthropologist who teaches humanities and social sciences at Dhirubhai Ambani Institute of Information and Communication Technology, Gandhinagar, Gujarat.*

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