# Politics and Piety in India: Re-learning Traditions of Civility

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India recently witnessed [widespread protests](#) against the passage of the *Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA)* and the associated proposal to create a National Register of Citizens (NRC), on the grounds that these laws and policies fundamentally endangered the conditions supporting civic cohabitation. These measures of the right-wing Hindu regime have been widely perceived to form a part of a larger project to exclude various *others,* especially Muslims and Dalits, from the citizenry.

These vibrant protests were accompanied by various protest slogans, poetry, and chants, memorably including public recitals of the Preamble of the Constitution of India. Some of these protest practices ended up raising the hackles of certain quarters on the charges of being seditious, anti-national, anti-Hindu, 'extremist' (Islamist extremism), and religious (anti-secular). In a thought-provoking [piece](#), Rahul Rao has suggested that the debate over the use of 'religious' chants in these political protests – such as '*Allahu akbar'* ('God is great') or *'La ilaha illallah'* ('there is no God but Allah') – have 'exposed a fault line' in the erstwhile dominant consensus over the acceptable contours of secularism. Following an analysis of some of the public debate that the chants elicited, Rao critiques this narrow concept of secularism that struggles with any expressions of piety in the public sphere. Rao also contrasts this with practices of secularism on display in these very protests that do not 'merely tolerate religious difference but exists precisely to enable the practice of piety by those who wish to

practice it'. Cross-religious solidarities ('fraternity'), Rao suggests, have the potential to contest ongoing right-wing projects of dismantling cohabitation.

In this reflection I take Rao's instructive line of enquiry further by showing how the principle of secularism that Rao critiques forms a part of a larger project of modernity. I argue that in order formulate an alternative project of enabling cohabitation, we must not only reappraise our concept of the secular, but also simultaneously reconceive the associated concepts of religion and politics, and how they all relate to one another. This constellation of concepts all form interlinked parts of the transformational project of modernity.

One pivot around which this reconfiguration of religion and politics operates in modernity's project has been articulated by modern secularists, who, in the modern national state, sought to privatise religion by confining it to autonomous forms of belief protected within the domain of the private sphere. Relatedly, in the colonial public sphere, modern secularists sought to construct religion as a marker of essentialised group identity on whose basis civic and political right could be claimed. The other pivot gets articulated by modern anti-secularists, who have sought to extend a politicised religion's autonomous obligations into the public sphere.

Pertinently, when it comes to the practice of the Hindu right in postcolonial India, we are confronted with how these two modern modes of reconfiguring politics and religion get potently combined so as to facilitate the determination of the national public sphere by one set of religious norms, while simultaneously policing the appearance of any practices of other religious communities. In fact, as Ratna Kapur shows, this paradoxical combination is achieved  by, on the one hand, construing secularism itself as representing a public norm uniquely supplied by a homogenised Hinduism and this particular religion's laudatory commitment to religious tolerance. While, on the other hand, complimentarily arguing for this doctrine to be interpreted as requiring the strict maintenance of formal equality in order to prevent any recognition of group rights or protection for the public expression of religious practices of other religious communities.

For international legal scholars, the argument put forward here might initially (and erroneously) resonate with recent critical treatments of the relationship between international law, religion, and politics. In these writings, the mainstream liberal narrative of a secular international law as the *other* of ('irrational') religion – one that enables the rational, management and/or overcoming religious practices and religious

identity within the public sphere – is contested. What then follows is an anti-secularism that instead attempts to reveal how modern international law is essentially made up of '<u>secularised theological concepts</u>', a critique that ends up universalising and anachronistically essentialising a particular conception of international law and religion. By collapsing international law and religion into one another and suggesting a certain inescapable (and ahistorical) rigidity to this formation, these critical scholars end up positing a dialectical account of politics. For them, there is a (juridical) politics that is determined by this oppressively theological (read: Catholic) international law, and a counter-politics that is antinomian, messianic, and driven by the singular demands of an interior conscience that founds justice (<u>read: Protestant</u>). This critical formulation leaves no room for a rival configuration of the relationship between international law, religion and politics, whereby <u>there might be</u> a politics that is neither fully determined by religion and international law (utopia), nor entirely bereft of an ethic (apology).

To search for alternatives, I undertake an exercise in genealogy that unpacks the colonial histories of the project of modernity in India, over the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These histories, and their legacies in contemporary times, illuminate alternative practices of living and struggling together. These alternative traditions are those of civility.

Civility here refers to those historically conjoined arts of training selves and others – such as rhetoric, ritual, and jurisprudence – that seek to cultivate cohabitation. With the emergence of the project of modernity, the twinned domains of these arts – the *psychi* and the *polis* – have been differentiated, with one considered to be the proper concern of the disciplines of moral philosophy and aesthetics (wherein politics is a 'passionate' contest of moral obligations), and the other of the social sciences (wherein politics is a 'rational' calculus of interests). Before concluding, I briefly examine specific traditions of civility being practiced in the early modern Mughal Empire.

## Iqbal and his Worlds

A key chapter in the unleashing of the project of colonial modernity in India lay in the catastrophic aftermath of the failed 1857 revolt against the colonial regime. This aftermath brought about the formal extinguishment of the Mughal Empire in North India as well as intense colonial violence, especially against Muslim inhabitants of the capital city *Dilli*, whom the colonial regime identified as the group most responsible for an uprising conceived as having been the outcome of '<u>religious grievances</u>'. While this was accompanied by renewed claims by colonial authorities that

their successes stemmed from the superiority of their civilisation, as [Mantena](#) shows, it also marked 'a definitive turning point in the transformation of British imperial ideology'. A prior imperial policy assumed the eventual disappearance of the 'backward' and 'corrupt' traditions of the colonized in the face of a beneficial English civilisation. This was displaced with a rival imperial policy that advocated studying and managing these purportedly 'recalcitrant beliefs and customs', including techniques of 'non-interference' and indirect rule, partly through creating 'native religious authorities' over the newly constructed realm of the 'personal'. This response set the terms for the British Raj's colonial governance projects, as well as the 'native' and nationalist secular '[politics of interest](#)', whereby 'religious identity' became the primary basis for both the claiming and distribution of state violence, state protection, resources, employment, education, and, over the course of time, limited representation in government.

In the wake of this crisis, many members of an emergent Muslim middle-class intelligentsia felt a need to respond to a purported 'civilisational decline' vis-à-vis the colonizing west through a reworking of their inherited Mughal Indo-Persian traditions. Investment in what got termed as 'religious revivalism' was evidenced in what were otherwise [seemingly contesting heirs](#) to the Mughal traditions: the modernising liberal educational reformist Aligarh Movement and the 'traditional revivalist' Deoband school. Both Aligarh and Deoband, by effecting a division of labour, began construing [religious education](#) as being specialised and distinctive from training for public life, thus revealing how this religious revivalism operated within the terms set by the colonial 'politics of interests'. The college at Aligarh took up the task of providing 'modern western education' to elite Muslims to take up 'secular' roles in the service of the colonial state and to participate in the colonial public sphere (for which they were in competition with members of other religious communities). The seminary at Deoband took up the task of training specialised religious scholars, teachers and jurists who did not seek any association with the colonial public sphere, and instead made the personal (civic) sphere the proper domain for the application of this specialised religious knowledge. However, by the early twentieth century, there also emerged an anticolonial anti-secular politics responding to this problematic of civilisational decline. This included Muslim theologians associated with [Deoband](#) committing to anticolonial political solidarity with other Indian religious communities.

With the famous poet and London-trained barrister, Muhmmad Iqbal, and his influential reconceptualization of religion and its expansive role in politics, we have a rival anticolonial anti-secular politics being articulated. This prominently comes across in his 1930 Madras Lectures (later published as *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*

(1932)) and his famous Presidential Address at the All India Muslim League Annual Conference in the same year. One is immediately struck by affinities between Iqbal's Islam as religion, and Reformation Protestantism, a parallel that Iqbal himself draws. Similarities include conceiving religion in terms of self-expression of an authentic interior self of the believer and its personal responsibility to a transcendental God, one that did not require any intercession by way of ritual, spiritual guides, or institutions. For Iqbal, the extant Sufi orders, and their mediative rituals, acted much as monastic orders and the Catholic Church had done to provoke the ire of Protestant reformers, on account of their alleged enchanted (ie. 'superstitious') admixture of other worldliness with life in this world. Religion, as he conceived it, was a distinct transcendental system to be kept pure of any immanent mediations, but as these universal truths ('spirit') it also provided the grounds for inspiring an individual's conduct in *all* spheres of life.

Thus, for Iqbal, religious piety takes the form of a Protestant ethic, which ultimately emphasizes the immense personal responsibility of every individual to act as God's representative (*Khalifa*) in a disenchanted world. Through their masterful actions these divine representatives must create an Islamic polity that would successfully protect their religion in this world, while expressing unshakable faith in their own personal salvation in the next. Assumed by this injunction is a reorganization of the relationship between religion and civilisation that renders them to be coeval, with civilisation (*Tahzib*) construed as the enduring (though requiring defending) worldly achievements of immanent actions. Religious civilisation (eg. Islamic Civilisation) is conceived as an actualisation of this divine man's inherent powers to act, create, and self-express, which becomes the defining quality and achievement of an exclusive community (*Umma*) within an assumed world order. For Iqbal, this 'politics of self-expression' promised to overcome the perceived 'civilisational decline' vis-à-vis the colonial Christian west, provided that the 'original spirit' of Islam could be revived (here civilisational 'originality' was strongly analogised with personal 'interiority' and 'authenticity').

## Azad's Legacy

With the jurist and theologian Abul Kalam Azad, we find one of the most developed displays of the aforementioned (and Deoband associated) anticolonial anti-secular politics, which fundamentally contested this configuration of religious groups as essentially isolated and self-contained actors (both by Iqbal and those practicing the 'politics of interest'). Here was an anti-secular politics wherein religious obligations are

taken to primarily demand fraternity with other religious groups, with the *telos* of politics being sociability. Notably, Azad displayed a more optimistic spirit that, rather than anxiously obsessing on civilisational decline, evinced confidence in the sociable creativity of Indian Muslims as part of their civilisational inheritance. Of note in this regard was his Address at the Bengal Provincial Khilafat Conference in 1920 (titled *Khilafat aur Jaziratul-Arab*), and his acclaimed Urdu translation and commentary on sections of the Quran, *Tarjuman ul-Quran* (1930-32).

This variant of politics came to the fore with the launching of the All India Khilafat and Non-Cooperation Movement in 1919, with Azad as one of its chief ideologues. This inaugural mass movement of anticolonial Indian nationalism espoused a Pan-Islamic anti-imperial solidarity. Solidarity was grounded on the preservation of an explicitly religious symbol – the office of the Ottoman Sultan as the *Amir-ul Muminin* (Commander of the Faithful) and the custodian of the sacred places of Islam, that is to say the *Khalifat* as an institution. This institution was perceived to be particularly threatened after the First World War on account of the moves by the British and allied powers to dismember the Ottoman Empire. However, Azad's articulation of Pan-Islamism was expressly linked with an anticolonial national solidarity between Hindus and Muslims in India, and Azad's speeches and writings had as their focus the creation of this plural national community. Meeting, living, and struggling together with other religious communities was expressly grounded by Azad in Quranic injunctions and narrated Prophetic *exemplum*. He argued that Indian Muslims were bound by religious law to non-cooperation with the British, and to cooperation with their Hindu allies – a community he deemed analogous to the *'umma wahida'* that Muslims, under Prophet Muhammad, had formed with allied Jewish tribes in Medina by entering into a Covenant (*ahad nama*), known as the 'Constitution of Medina' (he further developed upon these ideas in the aftermath of the *Khilafat* movement in the *Tarjuman*).

**Minority Futures**

The subsequent demise of the *Khilafat* movement did not end mass mobilization efforts by anticolonial nationalist elites. When coupled with further colonial reforms allowing for greater participatory representation in provincial governments for these parties, the overwhelming role of numerical strength in determining the outcomes of a colonial 'politics of interest' became ever more [acute]. For Muslims such a politics naturally raised the problem associated with their status as

a minority and the disadvantage this created in terms of engaging in formal representative rule. Iqbal and Azad again provided rival responses to this dilemma.

Iqbal's solution, through his 'politics of self-expression' premised upon self-contained individuals and religious communities, ultimately expressed a lack of faith in any possible future in which intercommunity cohabitation did not descend into majoritarianism. As a minority, very much divided across different possible fault lines (eg. caste, class, language, and religious practices), the only way out of this conundrum was to achieve overarching pan-Islamic unity by way of successful vertical and horizontal mobilization. This is a mode of politics that seeks to achieve such mass mobilizing unity around this abstracting category of a supranational religious identity through an exhortation of the passions which appeal to the personal responsibility of each individual to the cause of their isolated *Umma*. However, in order to achieve this, religion was sought to be stripped of all lived histories that illuminate distinctions, variations and cross-pollinations, and forcefully melded into a homogenous and disembedded abstract national community, [denying history](#) and the claims of sociability.

With Azad, both the minority problem and its solution were not formulated in such abstractive terms. He expressed an optimism in certain minority rights being duly protected in any future postcolonial state – suggesting a limited harking back to a 'politics of interests'. However, this optimism in the possibilities of cross-denominational solidarity ultimately drew succour from the lived histories of cohabitation in India. In his effort to learn, rather than abstract from, these lived histories, Azad revealed that his politics was not entirely confined to the terms set in place by the project of modernity. It is to some of these other histories of traditions of cohabitation from Mughal India to which I now turn.

**Receiving Mughal Civility**

Prominent amongst the arts associated with traditions of civility in the Mughal Empire were that of [*Siyasi Akhlaq*](#) (arts of political governance) and [*Sufi Adab*](#) (arts of religious piety).

*Siyasi Akhlaq* aimed to achieve a virtuous disposition for *both* the political governors and, relatedly, the polity. One was not achievable without the other, and both demanded a cultivation of states of moderation of extremes, and a balancing of competing desires, chiefly associated with discerning the norms of justice (*adl*'). Most

significant here is the virtue of temperance or self-limitation (with non-observance of limits considered be an attribute of the vice of tyranny). A key manifestation of this virtue was to limit the chauvinistic glorification of one's religion, including through its compulsory propagation by the ruler, as this would imperil the balance and harmony required for the peaceful cohabitation of plural denominations (*sulh-i kull*), all of whom were assumed to subscribe to ultimately irreconcilable faiths. Unlike the self-control associated with tolerance (secularism's *ur*-principle for reckoning with religious difference), the virtue of self-limitation sought by *Siyasi Akhlaq* requires a more positive limit on the self. Temperance was further extended to relativising the politico-ethical norms drawn from any single exemplary tradition, by instead eclectically drawing upon a plurality of exemplary precedents.

If self-limitation was the *telos* of the *Siyasi Akhlaq* arts, then porosity and syncretism were key features of the *Sufi Adab*. Thus, *Sufi Adab* practices of rituals, spiritual exercises, and everyday courtesies frequently drew upon other Indic religious practices and idioms of piety to achieve spiritual illumination and cultivate spiritual selves – and thus be considered truly *civilised*. This openness of *Sufi* practices of piety was itself enabled by the *Sufi* theological doctrine of *Wahdat ul-Wujud* ('Unity of Being'), which emphasized the immanent presence of the divine in all existence, and thus accommodated different interpretations of non-dualism underlying several Indic traditions of piety. Additionally, this piety of self-transformation was not one of ascetic renunciation but put emphasis on virtuous everyday worldly conduct with cohabiting others seen as being essential to acquiring spiritual character. Contrary to Iqbal's negative characterisation of this form of piety, this is not an *other worldly* ethic but a different way of being *in this world* with others. Instead of ethical practices of isolated divine representatives struggling to secure worldly success in order to *protect* their religion and to promote its glory (with faith in their personal salvation in the next world), *Sufi Adab* entails worldly training undertaken by relational beings to achieve union with the divine, both in this world, and in the next.

**Conclusion**

Religion and politics are historical concepts, formed and related by transformative reception and transmission, and not some universal timeless categories impervious to re-conception. However, in historicising religion, politics, and their relationship, the aim of this genealogy has not been to neatly periodise these concepts and practices into before and after early modern, colonial modern, and postcolonial eras. Such an exercise would commit the error of treating colonial modernity as a *period*,

instead of a *project* that is associated with the goal of creating a particular form of life. Instead, our ongoing efforts to create traditions of civility today should be mindful of this re-descriptive history. This historical illumination may make us more receptive to alternative conceptions of meeting and struggling together with others that belong to the rival project of civility. Traditions of civility such as *Akhlaq* and *Adab,* while non-hegemonic in an age divided by secularism and anti-secularism, continue to be practiced by, and associated with, other forms of life. They require cultivation, and learning from, by more of us today, so as to enable the necessary conditions for cohabitation.

For TWAIL scholars, this is a call to trouble the assumption that the *other* of a colonial international law can only ever be conceived in messianic and antinomian terms. We need to consider what international laws of civility are, and what modes of inter-national cohabitation they enable.