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**Forging the Nation: The Congress Demand for
Representative Bodies and Elite Muslim Anxieties**

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Forging the Nation: The Congress Demand for Representative Bodies and Elite Muslim Anxieties 1885-1892¹

Abstract

This paper argues that the early Congress drew opposition from the Muslim elite due to its contradictory imagination of Indian nationhood and demand for representative bodies. The Congress not only imagined the Indian nation in civic terms but also viewed it as a federation of internally sovereign religious groups. So, one could refuse to be counted into it as a member of a religious unit. The Muslim elite did the same since they felt that representative bodies in an Indian context will be majoritarian. This fear perhaps derived from the reality of cultural contestations breaking out in the urban spaces as the democratic principle was introduced into municipal administration. In response, the Congress variously tried to reassure its Muslim opposition. Badruddin Tyabji, onetime Congress President, engaged in a debate with Syed Ahmed Khan and unsuccessfully tried to win him over. To attract Muslim support, the Congress even passed a resolution in 1888 pledging not to discuss an issue to which the Muslim delegates object. In 1889, it also promised proportional representation of various religious communities in the future legislative bodies. Soon after, however, as the Indian Councils' Act of 1892 was passed, we see the Congress giving up these attempts of disarming its Muslim opposition. As the 1890s wore on, the Congress's Muslim opponents ignored it. The Congress, on its part, unilaterally declared itself the sole representative of the Indian nation it was forging.

Keywords: Congress, Muslims, representation, nation, nineteenth century, India

¹ This paper is an expanded version of a talk delivered on 14 June 2018 at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library.

Prologue

The paper begins with a hoary question, one that appears to have been done to death – why did the Muslim elite begin to be politically organized as Muslims in late nineteenth century India? In other words, why did their politics become an extension of their religious identity? This question has been dealt with and sought to be answered by several scholars in the past. Let us briefly take up the more famous names and the answers they provide before we look for our own.

Peter Hardy appears to suggest that the colonial state's attitude towards the Indian Muslims played a determining role in shaping their distinct political identity. As the British intervened as “a colonial power in the center of the Muslim world”, they became particularly conscious of their Indian Muslim subjects “sometimes as a ghoul, sometimes as a phantom, sometimes as a Frankenstein's monster, but always as a bogey.”² Simply put, Indian Muslims attained importance in the eyes of the colonial state since it was apprehensive of their extra-territorial loyalties. Secondly, the colonial state came to see the Indian Muslims as “an educationally deprived community, needing protection and patronage.”³ As it sought to come to their aid, it endowed “the Muslims with a separate social as well as religious personality.”⁴ The Muslim elite, on their part, responded to the colonial state's willingness to accommodate Muslim interests. As Hardy writes,

A perceptive Muslim of the educated classes could see in the eighteenth-seventies and early eighties that the British were ready to treat Muslims as a distinct political interest in India.⁵

Apparently, that is why a “revival in Muslim self-confidence” and a “Muslim search for self-expression”⁶ appeared very soon. However, it is curious that this “search for self-expression”, when confronted with the Congress, so frequently spoke the language of cultural anxiety and almost never evoked the colonial state (it was not to do so until the Shimla Deputation). Why was it so?

²Hardy, Peter, 1998, *The Muslims of British India*, CUP, p.118.

³Ibid., p.120.

⁴Ibid., p.122.

⁵Ibid., p.125.

⁶Ibid., p.126.

The colonial state figures in Mushirul Hasan's schema as well when he provides an explanation of the emergence of a "separate and distinct political consciousness" among Muslims. It was, according to him, caused by their placement "in the political and economic structures and their access to the levers of power, authority and influence under colonial rule." That is why, he says, "communal antipathy" was the greatest in Bengal since "Muslims had virtually no access to the resources of the province."⁷ But, as we know, what we identify as 'Muslim politics' primarily emerged in the UP among Muslims who were not quite backward. Also, Syed Amir Ali, the chief antagonist of the Congress in Bengal was very much a well placed and connected Muslim. In Hasan's narrative, a distinct 'Muslim politics' also seems have been shaped by Congressmen's display of Hindu "revivalist tendencies" and the Congress's "insistence on treating Muslims as a distinct religious community and a homogenous entity."⁸ But why didn't Muslims seek to steer the Congress away from revivalism by simply joining it in large numbers? Why also did they not emphasize their internal differences and diversity (if they were important enough to matter) in response to the Congress's habit of treating them as a homogenous lot?

'Muslim politics' did not emerge because Muslims were uniformly 'backward' on a pan-Indian scale. Francis Robinson, studying the UP Muslim elite, ascribes their formation as a distinct interest group in the colonial polity to the *erosion* of the status they had hitherto enjoyed. In his narrative, the Muslim elite do not come across as being especially influential with the colonial state. Its attempts to introduce western learning and promote vernaculars "threatened" their "religious beliefs, social customs and political position." Simultaneously, bureaucratic reforms eroded this elite's power and the introduction of elective principle in local government "undermined its influence."⁹ Robinson's, at least in part, is a (confessedly) primordialist position. He is clear in stating that when we seek to understand the power of Islamic ideas upon the Muslim elites "the balance of argument should shift more towards the position of the primordialists."¹⁰ Hence, as viewed by him, these elite seem not to have had a choice

⁷Hasan, Mushirul, 2000, *Nationalism and Communal Politics in India, 1885-1930*, New Delhi: Manohar, p.13.

⁸Ibid., p.24.

⁹Robinson, Francis, 1994 (Second Impression), *Separatism Among Indian Muslims. The Politics of the United Provinces' Muslims. 1860-1923*, New Delhi: OUP, p.34.

¹⁰Robinson, Francis, 2000, 'Islam and Muslim Separatism' in *Islam and Muslim History in South Asia*, New Delhi: OUP, p.205.

in the selection of symbols while politically mobilizing – they had to be Islamic in character. We find Robinson taking this position while responding to the ‘Brass thesis’¹¹ – he appears to rule out that Islamic cultural symbols were cynically employed by the Muslim elites. Instead, they emphasized them “as conscious members of the world of Islam” and also “because they sometimes followed rather than led their community.”¹² More than choosing, it looks like the Muslim elite had Islamic symbols imposed upon them – nothing else would have resonated with the constituency they were addressing. But why did the broader community begin to matter to the Muslim elite only at a particular juncture – the last decades of the nineteenth century?

Another primordialist position is Farzana Sheikh’s. The Muslim elites in colonial India spoke as Muslims since the “idiom of race and religion” was what the colonial state understood.¹³ But they also did so due to cultural reasons peculiar to them. First, they had once formed the apex of the “ruling class structure” which had made some ‘Mongol-Mughal’ ideas a part of their political thinking. Secondly, some of their political psychology was ‘Islamically-derived’ and drew upon “assumptions familiar to Muslim political discourse since the consolidation of Islam as a world religion.”¹⁴ The ‘Mongol-Mughal’ heritage, forming the heart of the *sharif* culture, “was grounded primarily in the premise that an essential part of being a Muslim consisted of belonging to, and identifying with, the ruling power”¹⁵ (the reason why the Muslim elite sought the good graces of the colonial state?). The Muslim elite’s faith, on the other hand, “had led them to presuppose that men’s political loyalties were an extension of their religious commitments.”¹⁶ That is why, presumably, they based their politics on their religious identity. But isn’t it legitimate to ask as to why the Muslim elite brought their traditional psychologies into politics only at a certain point

¹¹ According to Paul R. Brass, “The ideology of Muslim separateness did not flow necessarily and inexorably out of the objective differences between Hindus and Muslims, but of the uses which were made of those differences through the manipulation of symbols of Muslim unity and Hindu-Muslim separateness by an elite concerned to preserve its political privileges.” (See Brass, Paul R., 1975, *Language, Religion and Politics in North India*, Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, p.120).

¹² See ‘Nation-formation: The Brass Thesis and Muslim Separatism’ in *Islam and Muslim History in South Asia*, p.169.

¹³ Sheikh, Farzana, 1989, *Community and Consensus in Islam. Muslim representation in Colonial India. 1860-1947*, CUP, p.78.

¹⁴ Ibid. p.79.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., p.80.

of time, that is, the late nineteenth century? What was so special about it? Why did this not happen later, in the twentieth century, when institutional politics was more developed?

We find that the above studies treat the Muslim elite's response towards the Indian National Congress (one of antipathy) as an *outcome* of its political consciousness, once it had begun to form or had formed. Mainly studying the opposition to the Congress that emanated from Aligarh, this paper would suggest that the Muslim elite's political psychology, and its eventual 'separatist' bent, was *primarily* shaped by the *emergence* of the Congress and its early programme. In response to them, the Muslim elite found it expedient to adopt a communitarian political language and developed a distinct political psychology.

Primarily two aspects of the early Congress's programme elicited and consolidated the 'Muslim opposition'. To begin with, there was Indian nationhood as conceptualized by the Congress. It not only imagined the Indian nation in 'civic' terms but also viewed it as a federation of religious and normative groups which will be internally sovereign. This made the Muslim opposition to it as Muslims legitimate. Why was this opposition? It was since the Congress was demanding Indian involvement in the running of the colonial state through the establishment of representative institutions. It is likely that the Muslim elite found this a gravely threatening demand since it was made against a backdrop of cultural contestations. These contestations (caused by the advocacy of Hindi or 'cow protection') were playing out in a way as to culturally recast the North Indian *qasbas*—the large villages and small towns. Their "clear Indo-Persian identity"¹⁷, which must have lent the Muslim elite a sense of cultural power, was no more secure. This must have caused them anxiety, since, as Razak Khan writes, "there is a tangled relationship between space and emotions."¹⁸ Further, the introduction of the elective principle into municipal administration had served to intensify the cultural contestations. Francis Robinson does observe this fact but appears to fail in realizing its full import in the

¹⁷ See Hasan, Mushirul 2012 (Second Impression), *From Pluralism to Separatism. Qasbas in Colonial Awadh*, New Delhi: OUP, p.16. Mushirul Hasan calls the *qasba* "less of a 'geographical expression' and more of a cultural and religious unit with a clear Indo-Persian identity."

¹⁸ See 'The Social Production of Space and Emotions in South Asia', *Journal of Economic and Social History of the Orient*, volume 58, issue 5, 2015, p.616.

formation of the Muslim elite's political psychology. It is this reality that was making cultural anxieties and hostilities (commonly termed 'communalism') infiltrate elite politics and breaking down the linkages between the Muslim and Hindu elites. Robinson, for example, notices how the Nagri agitation "hard pressed" the Muslim elite and weakened its links with their Hindu counterparts.¹⁹ That is why, the Congress's demand for democracy, however limited, seems to have made the Muslim elite acutely culturally conscious and they sought to cohere with the average Muslim masses. This paper thus, disagrees with Faisal Devji who has argued that an attempt to imagine a Muslim *qawm* "dominated by the *shurafa* as a unified entity"²⁰ was made at Aligarh merely because India emerged as a "geographical state" under British rule wherein Muslims were "trapped" and "juxtaposed with other communities."²¹

Some conscious choices made by the Congress also seem to have abetted the consolidation of a distinct 'Muslim interest' in Indian politics. For example, in 1888, the Congress declared that its Subjects' Committee will not clear for discussion any topic to which Muslim (or Hindu) delegates object. Again, in 1889, the Congress conceded the principle of proportional representation in the legislative bodies. Interestingly, the primary sources that this paper uses appear to indicate that a certain group of (apparently elite) Muslims who functioned within the Congress shared a psychology of anxiety with its elite Muslim opposition.

Building Bonds and Mending Cleavages

On 28 December 1885, seventy two delegates gathered "timidly and unobtrusibly"²² in the hall of the Gokuldas Tejpal Sanskrit College in Bombay and formed the Indian National Congress. In both scope and ambition, the Congress was unprecedented. The

¹⁹ *Separatism Among Indian Muslims*, p.83.

²⁰ 'A Shadow Nation: The Making of Muslim India' in Grant, Kevin, Levine, Phillipa and Trentmann, Frant (eds.), 2007, *Beyond Sovereignty. Britain, Empire and Transnationalism*, c. 1880-1950, Palgrave Macmillan, p.130. Elsewhere, Devji seems to recognize that the political context played a role in Sir Syed re-imagining Muslims as another Indian people rather than a supra-territorial one. "After 1886", he writes, "when the autonomy of the Muslim community was threatened by the representative claims of the Indian National Congress, it was easy for Sir Sayyid to discard the notion of belonging as *qawm* altogether, retaining only that of India as a site of habitation." (See 'India in the Muslim Imagination: Cartography and Landscape in 19th Century Urdu Literature', *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* [Online], URL: <http://samaj.revues.org/3751>, p.2)

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.133.

²² Mody, Homy, 1963, *Sir Pherozeshah Mehta: A Political Biography*, Delhi: Asia Publishing House, p. 100.

organizations that had preceded the Congress were either strictly regional or class centric in character.²³ Only Surendranath Bannerjee's Indian Association, founded in 1876, had seemingly attempted to be an exception to the rule.²⁴ The founding of the Congress, thus, was the beginning of a concerted "movement to build a national political community in British India."²⁵ Apparently, the seeds of such a movement had been imbedding in the Indian milieu for a while. As John R. McLane observes, western educated Indians had been forming "local political associations in the major cities beginning in the middle of the century." The establishment of the Congress was but a continuation of these "local efforts to influence government policy." Besides, the formation of local level political bodies and then the Congress, according to McLane, was an exercise in "building bonds between members of traditional ethnic groups where they were absent, and mending cleavages when new ones appeared."²⁶ Apparently, the ultimate object of this effort was to forge the discrete ethnic, religious and linguistic groups that inhabited the Indian Subcontinent into a political nation.

It appears that the Congress took the role of "building bonds" and "mending cleavages" quite seriously. As envisioned by W.C. Bonnerji, the first President of the Congress, its aims were, among other things, the "promotion of personal intimacy and friendship" amongst those who seek to work for the country and the abolition of "all possible race, creed, or provincial prejudices."²⁷ The objectives that were enunciated by Bonnerji in 1885, were reaffirmed the next year by Dr. Rajendralal Mitra, the Chairman of the Reception Committee. Dr. Mitra wanted the "scattered units" of "his

²³ The earlier organizations were not of a pronouncedly political nature and promoted the interests of the colonial landed elite. For example, the Landholders' Society, founded in 1837, was an association of the landholders of Bengal, Bihar and Odisha. The Bengal British India Society, formed in 1843, was similarly an organization of the Bengal landlords. In 1851, it merged with the Landholders' Society and became the British Indian Association. There were similar bodies in other Presidencies, like the Bombay Association and the Madras Native Association (both established in 1852). Both were dominated by the landed gentry. Other, smaller, organizations like the Poona Sarvajanic Sabha (1867) and the Madras Mahajana Sabha (1884) were of a similar nature.

²⁴ Its 'national' aspirations showed in the fact that, besides Calcutta, the Indian Association had branches in Kanpur, Allahabad and Lahore. But, as S.R. Mehrotra tells us, these were controlled mostly by expatriate Bengalis, while the organization at large was "dominated by a few young and ambitious men with advanced views on the political and social questions of the day." (See Mehrotra, S.R., 1995, *A History of the Indian National Congress, Vol. I, 1885-1918*, Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, p. 3.)

²⁵ McLane, John R., 1977, *Indian Nationalism and the Early Congress, Vol. I, 1885-1918*, Princeton University Press, p. 3.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Zaidi, A.M. and Zaidi, S. (eds.), 1976, *The Encyclopedia of the Indian National Congress, Vol. I, 1885-1900, The Founding Fathers*, New Delhi: S. Chand, p. 46.

race” to “coalesce and come together” so that they may “live as a nation.”²⁸ He saw in the Congress the “commencement of such a coalescence.”²⁹ In 1890, the President elect of the year Pherozeshah Mehta again affirmed that the “members of the Congress meet together as men on the common basis of nationality...”³⁰

The “common basis of nationality” that had cohered the Congress was most eloquently expounded in 1891 by P. Ananda Charlu, the President elect of the year. He, during his address, berated the detractors of the Congress. Their intention, Mr. Charlu believed, was “to detract from the worth and significance of the well-knit, ever expanding phalanx known as the National Congress.”³¹ They were doing this disingenuously, he believed, by contriving a “desultory controversy”³² on what makes a nation. Sometimes they proposed that “a common religion” is the “differentia” of a nation along with “a common language; proved or provable common extraction.”³³ Some of these controversialists also added to the list “the presence of the privileges of commensality and inter-conjugal kinship.”³⁴ For a people to be regarded a nation, they suggested, they must dine together and intermarry. Charlu dismissed these arguments emphatically. For Charlu, a nation was nothing but,

the aggregate of those that are (to adopt and adapt the words of a writer in the *National Review*) – Citizens of one country, subordinate to one power, subject to one supreme legislature, taxed by one authority, influenced, for weal or woe, by one system of administration, urged by like impulses to secure like rights and to be relieved of like burdens.³⁵

The Congress’s conception of nationhood was, one can suggest in the light of the remarks made by Charlu, purely civic. It was not language or a common extraction that made a nation but subordination to the same political dispensation, taxation regime, administration and one ‘supreme legislature.’ But a certain contradiction

²⁸ *Detailed Report of the Proceedings of the Second Indian National Congress Held at Calcutta on the 27th, 28th, 29th and 30th of December, 1886*, p.47, National Archives of India, Indian National Congress Proceedings’ Microfilm Roll No. 1433.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Detailed Report of the Proceedings of the Sixth Indian National Congress Held at Calcutta on the 26th, 27th, 29th and 30th of December, 1890*, p.6, National Archives of India, Indian National Congress Proceedings’ Microfilm Roll No. 1433.

³¹ *Detailed Report of the Proceedings of the Seventh Indian National Congress Held at Nagpur on the 28th, 29th and 30th of December, 1891*, p.6, National Archives of India, Indian National Congress Proceedings’ Microfilm Roll No. 1433.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

inherited in this imagination of the nation and made it vulnerable. This is revealed by the Congress's stand on the issue of social reform.

When presiding over the second annual session of the Congress in 1886, Dadabhai Naoroji had expressed strong impatience with those demanding that the Congress should take up social reform. For Naoroji, the Congress was a political body seeking to represent “political aspirations.”³⁶ Blaming the Congress for not discussing social reform, he argued, was like blaming “the House of Commons for not discussing the abstruser (sic.) problems on mathematics or metaphysics.”³⁷ Besides, there was another impediment to the Congress taking up social reform. Naoroji pointed out that in the Congress are “Hindus of every caste, amongst whom, even in the same province, customs and social arrangements differs widely – there are Mohammedans and Christians of various denominations, Parsis, Sikhs, Brahmos and what not...”³⁸ “How can this gathering”, he asked the audience,

of all classes discuss the social reforms needed in each individual class?
...Only the members of that class can effectively deal with the reforms therein needed. A national Congress must confine itself to questions in which the entire nation has a direct participation....³⁹

The same sentiments were reiterated the next year by Badruddin Tyabji, the President elect. Tyabji urged those who demanded that the Congress should take up social reform to see that it is composed of “the representatives of, not of any class or community, not of one part of India, but of all the different parts, and of all the different classes, and of all the different communities of India.”⁴⁰ Since each of these different communities had “social problems” unique to them, Tyabji stressed that their removal is “best dealt with by the leaders of the particular community....” He, thus, thought that the,

only wise and, indeed, the only possible course [the Congress] can adopt is to confine [its] discussions to such questions that affect the whole of India at large, and to abstain from the discussion of questions that effect a particular part or a particular community only.⁴¹

³⁶ *Detailed Report of the Proceedings of the Second Indian National Congress Held at Calcutta on the 27th, 28th, 29th and 30th of December, 1886*, p.54, National Archives of India, Indian National Congress Proceedings' Microfilm Roll No. 1433.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Detailed Report of the Proceedings of the Third Indian National Congress Held at Madras on the 27th, 28th, 29th and 30th of December, 1887*, p.75, National Archives of India, Indian National Congress Proceedings' Microfilm Roll No. 1433.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

In 1892, W.C. Bonnerji too sought to clarify as to why the Congress must keep from meddling in social reform. Slightly brusquer than Tyabji, he confessed that he is “one of those who have very little faith in the public discussion of social matters.”⁴² It was because, for him, social reform was something that “ought to be left to the individuals of a community who belong to the same social organisation.”⁴³ This was because, he asked,

How is it possible for a Hindu gentleman to discuss with a Parsi or a Mohamedan gentleman matters connected with Hindu social questions? How is it possible for a Mohamedan gentleman to discuss with Hindu or Parsi gentlemen matters connected with Mohamedan social questions? And how is it possible for a Parsi gentleman to discuss with Hindu and Mohamedan gentlemen matters connected with Parsi social customs?⁴⁴

The contradiction that lay at the core of the Congress’s conception of Indian nationhood was thus this – though it had been imagined in purely ‘civic’ terms, it was not constituted by individuals but religious and normative groups. Further, these constituent units of the gestating Indian nation were granted something akin to an ‘internal sovereignty.’ Their inner spaces were sacrosanct and they were not to be breached. Apparently, as the Congress saw it, there was to be no better way of ensuring this than following a strictly hands-off policy towards social reform. As a result, political reform was assigned “to the national arena for public discussion and recommendation, and social reform to the local arena for private action.”⁴⁵

An Experiment Full of Doubt and Disaster

Due to the incongruity inherent in it, the Indian nation of Congress’s conception was somewhat vulnerable. Its legitimacy could be easily challenged if sufficient numbers of the representatives of one of its religious or normative constituents did not join the Congress, its ‘embodiment’. Or, individuals could refuse to be counted into this nation as representatives of religious or normative groups.

As it turned out, the nation that the Congress was trying to forge soon had a missing bit pointed out. It was quickly noticed that the Congress is failing to draw the

⁴²*Detailed Report of the Proceedings of the Eighth Indian National Congress Held at Allahabad on the 28th, 29th and 30th of December, 1892*, p.12, National Archives of India, Indian National Congress Proceedings’ Microfilm Roll No. 1433.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Heimsath, Charles H., 1964, *Indian Nationalism and Hindu Social Reform*, OUP, p. 205.

adherents of a certain religion in sufficient numbers. Commenting on the relatively inconspicuous attendance of the Muslims in the first Congress, the Bombay correspondent of the *Times* said that “they remained steadfast in their habitual separation.”⁴⁶ In the light of numbers the accusation does not seem unfounded; the first Congress was graced by no more than two Muslim delegates.⁴⁷

Nevertheless, every annual Congress session witnessed loud denials, both by Muslim and non-Muslim delegates, of any alleged Muslim apathy towards the body. For example, Munshi Syed Abdul Aziz, a delegate from Nagpur, fulminated in the 1886 session of the Congress that “it is ridiculous to pretend that the Mahomedans who have any sort of education are wanting in interest in this Congress....”⁴⁸

Malik Bhagwan Das from Dera Ismail Khan, Punjab, chimed in -

...And what is this that I see in one of the English papers that calls this a Hindu Congress? Why Hindu? Why not Mahomedan? Does it follow because a man is Hindu he does not represent Mahomedans as well as Hindus? (*Loud Cheers*).⁴⁹

Next year, in Madras, Badruddin Tyabji too vehemently denied that the Muslims have not taken kindly to the Congress. He said the following during his Presidential address Gentlemen, it has been urged in derogation of our character, as a representative national gathering, that one great and important community – the Musalman community – has kept aloof from the proceedings of the last two Congresses. Now, Gentlemen, in the first place this is only partially true and applies only to one part of India, and is moreover due to certain special, local and temporary causes.....

...so far as general political questions affecting the whole of India – such as those which alone are discussed by this Congress – are concerned, I, for one, am utterly at a loss to understand why Musalmans should not work shoulder with their fellow countrymen of other races and creeds...⁵⁰

The *Tamil Catechism* issued by the Congress in 1887 also tried to prove that the Muslims of India are in perfect concord with it. At one point in the text the following question is posed to someone who is obviously meant to be a votary of the Congress:

⁴⁶ Chopra, P.N., Gopal, Ram and Bhargava, M.L. 1986, *A Century of the Indian National Congress. 1885-1985*, Delhi: Agam Prakashan, p. 30.

⁴⁷ One of the two was R.M. Sayani who later went on to become the Congress President.

⁴⁸ *Detailed Report of the Proceedings of the Second Indian National Congress Held at Calcutta on the 27th, 28th, 29th and 30th of December, 1886*, p.109, National Archives of India, Indian National Congress Proceedings' Microfilm Roll No. 1433.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.106.

⁵⁰ *Detailed Report of the Proceedings of the Third Indian National Congress Held at Madras on the 27th, 28th, 29th and 30th of December, 1887*, p.72, National Archives of India, Indian National Congress Proceedings' Microfilm Roll No. 1433.

Q: What Mahomedans? Why, somebody said that the Mahomedans had not joined the Congress. I did not know what the Congress was, and so I did not trouble myself about it, but certainly I heard this.

A: Well, eighty-three Mahomedans⁵¹ came as delegates, and amongst them there were men like the Hon'ble Mr. Jah Bahadur, the head of the great Mysore family, and Mr. Badruddin Tyabji, till recently a member of the Bombay Council, who was a President of the third Congress, and many other distinguished and learned Mussalmans. The fact is that one eminent Mahomedan, Sir Syed Ahmed, did not choose to join, for reasons known to himself, and he and his immediate following having been foolish enough to abuse the Congress, having tried to set it about that the Mahomedans generally did not join, whereas the bulk of the intelligent Mahomedans all over the country did join and join heartily.⁵²

However, despite the Congress resorting to the printing of catechisms, it seems that the specter of 'Muslim indifference' haunting it was rather stubborn; it was refusing to be exorcised. Almost a decade later, we find that the Congress was still seeking acquittal from the charge of not representing India's Muslims. R.M. Sayani, elected the Congress President in 1896, argued that it was a myth that the Muslims are against the Congress, for "by far the largest part do not know what the Congress movement is." According to Sayani, the Muslims opposed to the Congress formed only an "infinitely small class of persons"⁵³ When we compare what Tyabji and Sayani had to say on the Muslims' attitude towards the Congress, we find that they both concede that at least a section of them were rather unenthusiastic about it. What could be the reason behind their lack of ardor for the Congress? As it appears to us, they failed to be keen about the Congress because of the kind of political reforms demanded by it.

In its very first session, the Congress had passed a resolution demanding legislative bodies on the elective principle for India⁵⁴ and it remained for many years the

⁵¹ I counted sixty-five obviously Muslim names in the delegate list of the year. That means that Muslim delegates made up 10.72 percent of the total number of delegates (606). Even if I assume that I made a mistake, the share of Muslim delegates won't be more than 13.69 percent of the total.

⁵² *Detailed Report of the Proceedings of the Third Indian National Congress Held at Madras on the 27th, 28th, 29th and 30th of December, 1887*, 'Appendix II, English Translation of the Tamil Catechism of the Indian National Congress by M. Viraraghava Chariar, B.A.,' p.203, National Archives of India, Indian National Congress Proceedings' Microfilm Roll No. 1433.

⁵³ *Detailed Report of the Proceedings of the Twelfth Indian National Congress Held at Calcutta on the 28th, 29th, 30th and 31st of December, 1896*, p.34, National Archives of India, Indian National Congress Proceedings' Microfilm Roll No. 1433.

⁵⁴ That this Congress considers the reform and expansion of the Supreme and existing Local Legislative Councils, by the admission of a considerable number of elected members and the creation of similar Councils for the North Western Provinces and Oudh, and also for the Punjab essential; and holds that all Budgets should be referred to these Councils for consideration, their members being, moreover, empowered to interpellate the Executive in regard to all branches of the administration; and that a standing committee of the House of Commons should be constituted to receive and consider any formal protests that may be recorded by majorities of such Councils against the executive of the power, which would be vested in it, of overruling the decision of such majorities. (*Detailed Report of the*

foremost demand of the organization. The existing Councils⁵⁵ were seen to be but shams, dominated by nominated members. One gathers the impression from the eloquent pleas made for representation in the annual Congress sessions that it was seen as almost a panacea for all ills. Addressing the 1886 Congress Dr. Rajendralal Mitra termed representation the “cornerstone of all the topics of political discussion.”⁵⁶ Mr. Surendranath Bannerji, never too far from hyperbole, went on to term representative self-government the “ordering of nature, the will of divine providence.”⁵⁷ Not to be left behind, in the same session, Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya stressed the “utility, the expediency, the necessity” of the introduction of representative bodies in India since he thought them to be the “fundamental characteristic of a free government.”⁵⁸

Nevertheless, there were a few who chose to differ. Representation was the issue on which Syed Amir Ali’s Central National Mohammedan Association (hereafter CNMA) decided to part ways with the Congress in 1886, immediately prior to its Calcutta Session. This was despite the fact that Ali had supported the Congress when it was launched in 1885. In 1888, the CNMA’s annual report clarified as to why it had severed ties with the Congress. The CNMA had chosen not to support the Congress anymore, the report explained, because it was “firmly convinced that the unqualified adoption of the programme of the Congress will lead to the political extinction of the Mohammedans.”⁵⁹ The CNMA, it said, was “willing to concede that the system of nomination by which the Councils of the Government are recruited is not always happy in its results.”⁶⁰ But it feared that in a country like India “voting must take place by nationalities and creeds.”⁶¹ Hence, the CNMA, said the report, “cannot believe that the introduction of representative institutions in this country in their

Proceedings of the Fourth Indian National Congress Held at Allahabad on the 26th, 27th, 28th and 29th of December, 1888, p.203, ‘Appendix II, Summary of the Resolutions Passed at the First, Second and Third Congresses’, National Archives of India, Indian National Congress Proceedings’ Microfilm Roll No. 1433.)

⁵⁵ The Indian Councils Act of 1861 had established Imperial and Provincial Councils but all their Indian members then were nominated by the Viceroy and the British Crown.

⁵⁶ *Detailed Report of the Proceedings of the Second Indian National Congress Held at Calcutta on the 27th, 28th, 29th and 30th of December, 1886*, p.49, National Archives of India, Indian National Congress Proceedings’ Microfilm Roll No. 1433.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.98.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p.108.

⁵⁹ Gopal,Ram, 1964,*Indian Musalmans. A Political History (1885-1947)*, Delhi: Asia Publishing House, p. 76.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

entirety will be of advantage to the Mahommedans.”⁶²We also see Nawab Abdul Latif, founder of the Mahomedan Literary Society, expressing his displeasure with the Congress’ attempts to “bring about changes that are novel” in a letter addressed to its Reception Committee.⁶³

The strongest objection to the Congress’s agenda was issued from Aligarh. We see it being articulated very unambiguously in an unsigned article published in the *Aligarh Institute Gazette* on 23 November 1886. The first objection that the anonymous article raised was that “India at present is very poor compared with European countries in the possession of highly educated classes.”⁶⁴ So, men qualified to people the proposed representative bodies were simply not to be found. But the bigger fear was of another calamity. In a parliament, very likely, the will of the more numerous was to find expression and the author feared that “probably the uneducated Hindu majority will forbid the killing of cow, reintroduce Sati and employ public money in building temples, higher education will cease, and the progress of the country will come to an end.”⁶⁵ It is also natural for a parliament to have conflicting parties. The article feared that unlike England, the mother of parliamentary democracy, in India such parties are most likely to form along the lines of religious solidarities. “In India,” it argued, “two sections of people are ready to hand, and two sections whose interests and prejudices constantly clash, and which differ in a far more radical way than any two parties in England...”⁶⁶ This made our incognito author fear that representative bodies are never going to work in an Indian situation. They will only heighten entrenched prejudices

...if at any future time there should be Parliaments with Hindus and Mohammedans sitting on two sides of the house, it is probable that the animosity which would ensure (sic) would far exceed anything that can be witnessed in England.⁶⁷

Syed Ahmed Khan vented similar fears in a speech he delivered in Kaisarbagh, Lucknow, on 28 December 1887. He said, “they (the Congress) want to copy the English House of Lords and the House of Commons.”⁶⁸ He made it known to his

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Quoted in the *Bengalee*, 25 December 1886. Nehru Memorial Museum and Library.

⁶⁴ See Mohammad, Shan (ed.), 1978, *The Aligarh Movement: Basic Documents. 1864-1898*, Meerut: Meenakshi Prakashan, p. 997.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ 2006, *Political Profile of Sir Syed Ahmed Khan. A Documentary Record*, Adam Publishers & Distributors, p. 348.

audience in no uncertain terms that this is a most unsavory project. Muslims, being hugely outnumbered by the Hindus, are going to be seriously disadvantaged in an arrangement in which Indians elect members to representative bodies. He further added that “It would be like a game of dice in which one man has four dice and the other only one.”⁶⁹ As a result, he regarded the Congress demand for representative bodies “an experiment full of doubt and disaster to all the nationalities of India, including the Mohammedans.”⁷⁰

How valid were the fears of Syed Amir Ali and Syed Ahmed Khan? In the light of the municipal politics of the times, it seems like his apprehensions were not entirely illegitimate. The colonial state had introduced local self-government on the electoral principle on a limited scale in 1882. There is evidence that this had triggered cultural contestations and religious polarization in the urban spaces. Religion, for example, Francis Robinson says, was one aspect of life which local self-government “particular affected.”⁷¹ Since now,

under the guise of the hygienic management of slaughter houses and kebab shops, Hindus could defend the cow and impose their standards on Muslims, while, for Muslims, the maintenance of their right to slaughter cows and eat them could become a symbol of their ability to protect their religion and culture.⁷²

Francis Robinson also observes Hindu religiosity becoming more publicly assertive in the wake of the introduction of local self-government. In Agra, for example, when the 1883 Municipalities Act produced a Hindu dominated municipal board, “Hindus began to celebrate with greater vigour the festivals that clashed with Mohurram.”⁷³ Inevitably, “the result of this vigorous assertion of religious interests was a tendency for the parties of municipal politics to become increasingly religious parties.”⁷⁴ The same trend has been noticed in the Punjab by Kenneth Jones. Like Robinson, she too suggests that the politicization of the Punjabi elite and the creation of “an arena for communal competition” occurred due to the introduction of local self-government in the province. As a consequence, the religious communities of the Punjab—Sikhs,

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ *Separatism Among Indian Muslims*, p.56.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid., pp.79-80.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p.80.

Hindus and Muslims—now “fought for the control of the new structures”⁷⁵ of local representation and governance. It does appear like “the indigenous religious communities were now thrown into the turmoil of re-negotiating the power relations between themselves.”⁷⁶ This contest, we suggest, was now unavoidable as, in however limited a way, the cultural character of the state and public spaces could now be influenced through the force of numbers. The latter, especially, was the route to influence the former – “it is in this intermediary realm between the individual and the citizen, in which the polity brings pressure to bear on the state, that most of the current debates are located.”⁷⁷ It was the site of “conundrums” such as “how citizens help shape the values of the state; the extent to which the state is seen to be obliged to protect the beliefs and values of the various citizens; and the ability of citizens to integrate or reconcile their competing national and subnational identities.”⁷⁸

Apparently, the developments in the contemporary public sphere had a singular impact on the attitude of the Muslim leadership towards the politics of the times and the Indian National Congress. Mohammad Yusuf Abbasi thinks on a similar line— “When the elective principle was introduced in local self government, albeit on a limited scale,” he says,

a profound change had occurred in the outlook of the major communities. Questions arose as to how the elective principle should be applied in the particular circumstances of the Subcontinent. Should the interests of the Muslim minority be subordinated to the general will of the majority, without any reservation; or should the elective principle be re-adjusted to safeguard Muslim minority *vis-à-vis* the Hindu majority? In this, priorities of a fundamental nature were involved, what came first: Indian nationalism or Muslim nationalism? For Sir Syed, Muslims came first.⁷⁹

Thus, the apprehensions that the Muslims had derived from their “local experience rapidly came to be projected into the provincial and all India arenas of politics.”⁸⁰ It is these apprehensions that the Congress had to address perforce when it set out to “build bonds and mend cleavages.” The task of addressing them was made difficult by

⁷⁵Jones, Kenneth, 1989, *Arya Dharma: Hindu Consciousness in 19th-Century Punjab*, New Delhi: Manohar, p.63.

⁷⁶Joshi, Shashi and Josh, Bhagwan, 1994, *Struggle for Hegemony in India. 1920-47. Culture, Community and Power. Volume III. 1941-47*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, p.193.

⁷⁷Freitag, Sandria, ‘Contesting in Public: Colonial Legacy and Contemporary Communalism’ in Ludden, David (Ed.), 1996, *Contesting the Nation: Religion, Community, and the Politics of Democracy in India*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, p.212.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹Abbasi, Mohammad Yusuf, 1987, *The Genesis of Muslim Fundamentalism in British India*, Publication Department: Indian Institute of Applied Political Research, p.73.

⁸⁰ See Brown, Judith M., 1994, *Modern India: The Origins of an Asian Democracy*, OUP, p.168.

cogent, politicized communitarian identities combating in the public sphere. This reality was undermining the contradictory nation that the Congress had been trying to realize, it was civic in its imagining and yet was a federation of religious and normative groups.

Partly, the Congress sought to disarm the Muslim opposition with platitudes. It reasoned that franchise belonged purely to the domain of the civic and was unlikely to breach the inner sovereignty of the constituent units of the Indian nation. In the 1887 Congress, Mr. Eardley Norton, an Anglo-Indian delegate from Madras, said,

We have been told, again, that in this matter (representation) you are purely Hindu and Mahomedan. What can you conceive, gentlemen, more false than that? Have our critics forgotten that we, as Europeans, even for the limited portion of our sojourn in India, are as deeply affected by questions of taxation and of legislation as any of yourselves, Mahomedan or Hindu?⁸¹

Pandit Bishan Narain Dhar, a delegate from Oudh, found it unconvincing that “the introduction of representative Government in India will place the Mahomedans at the mercy of the Hindus, as the latter will form a great majority...”⁸² Mr. Dhar drew his optimism from the European example. “In Europe there may be Catholic interests and Protestant interests,” he pointed out, “...yet the existence of such interests has not prevented the success of representative institutions.”⁸³ Contending group loyalties, thus, as Pandit Dhar saw, were not going to encroach upon the domain of representation. Moreover, according to him, representation could actually serve as a potent means of reconciling them. “It is said,” he averred,

that there is such hostility between Hinduism and Mahomedans as to render it (representative bodies) impossible...I say if this terrible antagonism did exist, even the representative institutions would do more than anything else to remove it.⁸⁴

Airing of such sentiments was not uncommon even on the part of the Muslim delegates. For example, in the Allahabad Congress of 1888, Oomrao Mirza Hajrat, a delegate from Delhi, urged the Muslim delegates of the Congress to expect that

⁸¹ *Detailed Report of the Proceedings of the Third Indian National Congress Held at Madras on the 27th, 28th, 29th and 30th of December, 1887*, p.90, National Archives of India, Indian National Congress Proceedings' Microfilm Roll No. 1433.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

“Members elected [to the representative bodies] would carefully avoid anything that would create religious or caste prejudices....”⁸⁵

The Congress, however, was not all platitudes. There is evidence that it was also contemplating some concrete action to ease the fears of the Muslim opposition. After having served as the Congress president, Badruddin Tyabji wrote a letter to the editor of the *Pioneer* in which he owned up to the chief reason behind Muslim anxieties and suggested a means of assuaging them. He said that some of his coreligionists felt

some anxiety lest at future Congresses resolutions that could not commend themselves to the Mussalmans as a body, might in virtue of the greater numerical strength of the Hindus be passed....

Thus,

in order to convince them, and others who share doubts...[he had] requested the General Secretary⁸⁶ to address all the standing Congress Committees whether they were willing that a rule should be passed, that in case of the Mahomedan delegates unanimously objecting to the introduction of our subjects or the passing of any resolutions, such subjects or resolutions should be thereupon dropped.⁸⁷

Syed Ahmed, however, was still not convinced. In a letter to the same newspaper he argued that “the mere fact of any resolution being carried unanimously does not make the Congress a “national” one.”⁸⁸ He refused to accept that the Congress is a ‘national’ political forum and warned that if Muslims joined the organization “they will suffer great misfortunes....”⁸⁹

Khan elaborated his stand further in a letter he addressed to Tyabji on 24 January, 1888. “We [the opponents of the Congress] do not mean”, he wrote, “to retard the general progress of India or to prevent other people from enjoying rights for which they are qualified, even if we try to do so we cannot hope to succeed, but at the same time it is not obligatory on our part to run a race with persons with whom we have no chance of success.”⁹⁰ Along with the Congress’s program, we again find the Syed questioning the ‘national’ credentials of the organization. The Congress could not be

⁸⁵ *Detailed Report of the Proceedings of the Fourth Indian National Congress Held at Allahabad on the 26th, 27th, 28th and 29th of December, 1888*, p.91, National Archives of India, Indian National Congress Proceedings’ Microfilm Roll No. 1433.

⁸⁶ A.O. Hume.

⁸⁷ *Badruddin Tyabji Papers*, National Archives of India, Microfilm Roll Nos. 1333. No date was mentioned in the text, but, presumably, the letter was written in early 1888, soon after the 1887 Congress session over which Tyabji presided.

⁸⁸ *Political Profile of Syed Ahmed Khan*, p.375

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p.379.

⁹⁰ *Badruddin Tyabji Papers*, National Archives of India, Microfilm Roll No. 1335.

‘national’ and represent an Indian nation due to the plain reason that no such thing existed

... I do not understand what the words ‘National Congress’ mean. Is it supposed that the different castes and creeds living in India belong to one nation, and their aims and aspirations be one and same?...I object to every Congress in any shape or form whatever which regards India as one nation on account of its being based on wrong principles, viz, that it regards the whole of India as one nation.⁹¹

What made the Syed deny Indian nationhood? We suggest that it was because the Congress wanted this nation to be represented in legislative bodies in which, the Syed feared, the Muslims, being a minority, will be permanently disadvantaged. The Syed’s opposition of Congress and his denial of Indian nationhood seem to stem from the same fear – the future (however unlikely) prospect of representative bodies being introduced in India.

Tyabji tried to reason with the Syed in a reply he wrote on February 18, 1888. He sought to allay the Aligarh patriarch’s disapproval of the Congress by stressing that its existence is a mere practical requirement. “In my view,” he wrote,

the Congress is nothing more and should be nothing more than an assembly of educated people from all parts of India and representing all races and creeds met together for the discussion of only such questions as may be generally admitted to concern the whole of India at large.⁹²

“It seems to me, therefore,” Tyabji concluded, “that no one can object to a Congress of this kind, unless he is of opinion that that there are no questions at all which concern the natives of India at large.”⁹³ Having said this, the lawyer from Bombay assured the Syed (it seems to us rather disingenuously) that even the Congress does not quite regard India as a ‘nation’ -

Your objection to the Congress is that “it regards the whole of India as one nation.” Now I am not aware of anyone regarding the whole of India as one nation and if you read my inaugural address, you will find it distinctly stated that there are numerous communities or nations in India which had their peculiar problems of their own to solve, but that there were some questions which touched all those common unities and that it is for the discussion of these questions only that the Congress was assembled.⁹⁴

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² *Badruddin Tyabji Papers*, National Archives of India, Microfilm Roll No. 1333.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

Tyabji then proposed that if Syed Ahmed at all wanted to cancel the brute logic of numbers, participation rather than separatism was the solution. Muslims must bring to the Congress their unique point of view

But it is in our power with firm and resolute action to direct the course the Congress shall take, and my strong conviction is that the Mussulmans can by unified action confine the Congress to such topics only as they may deem desirable or safe for discussion. Take for instance the question of the Legislative Councils—if the Mussulmans as a body do not like that the members should be elected they could easily modify the propositions so as to suit their own interests. My policy, therefore, would be to act from *within* rather than from *without*.⁹⁵

Interestingly, Tyabji had tendered Ameer Ali the same suggestion a few weeks ago. On 3 November 1887, Ali had written to Tyabji inviting him to a proposed conference of “Mahomedan gentlemen of light and leading to discuss questions of importance really affecting the general interests of the Mahomedan community.”⁹⁶ Tyabji was not enthused by the proposal. In his reply of 3 December 1887, Tyabji said that he was all for the “moral, social and political advancement of the Mussulman community.”⁹⁷ But he believed that “in regard to political questions at large the Mussulmans should make a common cause with their fellow countrymen of other creeds and persuasions.”⁹⁸ Tyabji ended the letter proffering the following suggestion to Ameer Ali - “....it seems to me that our proper course is to join the Congress at Madras and to take a part in its deliberations *from our peculiar standpoint*.”⁹⁹

While Tyabji was confabulating with the Muslim opposition, there are indications that anxiety was building in the Congress camp as well. On 22 January 1888, A.O. Hume beseechingly wrote to Tyabji asking him to preside over the Congress once again. Hume conveyed to Tyabji that he has “had letters on the Congress during the last few days” which said that if the Congress were to succeed it “must again have a Mahomedan President” and that President must be Tyabji.¹⁰⁰ Hume thought that this was the only way to disarm the Muslim opponents of the Congress. He reasoned with Tyabji that if he once again presides over the Congress as its President “Syed

⁹⁵ Ibid. The italicized words were underlined in the handwritten text.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid. Italics added.

¹⁰⁰ *Badruddin Tyabji Papers*, National Archives of India, Microfilm Roll No. 1334.

Ahmed's tirades will have no effect on the north of India's Mahomedans...."¹⁰¹History, however, tells us that Tyabji did not oblige Hume.

Hume wrote to Tyabji again on 20 October 1888, entreating him to attend the impending Congress. This was absolutely necessary, Hume told Tyabji, "Because your defection would, no matter what the cause, cause us most serious discouragement."¹⁰²Tyabji himself was not free from trepidation. Indeed, it seems that he was feeling quite a bit of it. This is evident from the reply he sent to Hume on 27 October 1888. "You have no doubt", Tyabji wrote, "been watching the movement of the Mahomedans but still you are not so well acquainted with their feelings as I am."¹⁰³ Tyabji had bad news for Hume. The Congress, Tyabji told Hume, was inspiring the "hostile attitude of the Mahomedans, which is daily becoming more pronounced and apparent..." In Tyabji's view things had come to such a pass that the cons of continuing with the Congress outweighed the pros. He, thus, wondered "whether under present circumstance it is, or not, wise for us to continue holding the Congress meeting *every year*."¹⁰⁴

Also, the opponents of the Congress were growing in numbers since the "Nizam...Salar Jung, Munir-ul-Mulk, Fateh Nawaz Jung and, above all, Syed Husain Bilgrami [had] joined the opposition led by Syed Amir Ali and Abdul Latif."¹⁰⁵ This made Tyabji to conclude that "an overwhelming majority of Mahomedans are against the movement"¹⁰⁶that the Congress represents. The lawyer from Bombay concluded that this took away from the Congress its very *raison d'être*. "If", he reasoned with Hume, "then, the Mussulman community as a whole is against the Congress—rightly or wrongly—does not matter – it follows that the movement ipso facto ceases to be *general* or *national* Congress."¹⁰⁷ Further, Tyabji observed that the Congress was causing "bitterness between the Hindus and Mussalmans..." In view of this uninspiring reality, Tyabji felt that it would be good for "the Congress to be

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

prorogued, say for at least five years.”¹⁰⁸ He concluded the letter with the following suggestion

If at the end of the five years our prospects improve we can renew our Congress. If not we can drop it with dignity, conscious of having done our utmost for the progress of India and the fusion of different races into one.¹⁰⁹

Hume replied to Tyabji on 5 November 1888 and tried to allay his fears. We find him conceding in his epistle that there are indeed parts of the country where the Congress is rather unpopular with the Muslims. “All through Oudh and N.W.P,” Hume wrote, “we have ten Mahomedans to one that is against us...”¹¹⁰ He, however, assured Tyabji that the situation elsewhere is a lot worthier of cheer. “In the Punjab,” for example, he found the Congress “sweeping Syed Ahmed away.”¹¹¹ Hume was confident that “within the next two or three years”, the Congress will have “every single mauvi”¹¹² on its side. But before that could happen, the Congress was expected to take a significant initiative by the pontiffs. They demanded, informed Hume, that the Congress pass “some rule to the effect...that Government should always so arrange the nominations...as to equalise as nearly as possible the number of Mahomedan to Hindu members in the Councils.”¹¹³ It looks like elements in the Muslim clergy already wanted Muslims to have political parity with the Hindus. As we shall see below, certain Congress Muslims too were to soon express this wish. Hume concluded by urging Tyabji to cease imagining that “a large number of Mahomedans” are opposed to the Congress.¹¹⁴

In retrospect, it seems that Tyabji’s fears were not put to rest. After 1888, the gentleman practically retired from the Congress. It is possible that, besides his failing health and demands of the legal profession, his despondence might have been a reason why he chose to do so.

They are not our Enemies in the Least

The Congress, apparently, was trying its best to accommodate Muslim anxieties and to circumscribe, somehow, the inexorable logic of numbers. Months before engaging

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. The italicised words were underlined in the handwritten text.

¹¹⁰ *Badruddin Tyabji Papers*, National Archives of India, Microfilm Roll No. 1333.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

in correspondence with Tyabji, we find Hume attempting to devise effective means of winning over the Congress's Muslim opposition. Seeking to institutionalize the rule Tyabji had suggested in his letter to the *Pioneer*, and, perhaps, to garner the support of "every single Maulvi", Hume dispatched the following missive to all the Standing Congress Committees on 5 January 1888,

In the course of his conversations with numerous Mahomedan gentlemen, our late honoured President discovered that in the minds of those who have been holding aloof from the Congress movement, an apprehension lurked that the Hindus, being numerically strongest, might at some time press and carry in the Congress some resolution hostile to the Mahomedan interests.

..... Now it is extremely desirable to render all such misconceptions impossible, by a definite rule on the subject...such a rule, if accepted, would completely obviate all remaining difficulties in the way of their [Muslims'] hearty cooperation in the [Congress] movement.¹¹⁵

'The rule' surfaced in the 1888 Congress in the form of the following resolution which was unanimously adopted

that no subject shall be passed for discussion by the Subjects Committee or allowed to be discussed at any Congress by the President thereof, to the introduction of which Hindu or Mahomedan delegates, as a body, are unanimously, or nearly unanimously, opposed...thereon such resolution shall be dropped; provided that the rule shall refer only to subjects in regard to which the Congress has not already pronounced an opinion.¹¹⁶

In 1889 Congress took a further step to ensure that the Muslims were not overwhelmed by the religious majority of the land in the representative bodies of the future. Eardley Norton, an Anglo-Indian delegate from Madras, tabled a "skeleton scheme" for council reform which demanded that no less than half the members of the Imperial or Provincial Legislative Councils comprise of elected members and that voters in each district elect members to one or more electoral bodies "according to the circumstance." The resolution also contained the following caveat,

All representatives thus elected by all the districts included in the jurisdiction of each electoral body, to elect members to the Imperial Legislature at the rate of one per five million of the total population of the electoral jurisdiction and to their own Provincial Legislature at the rate of one per million of the said total population, in such wise that whenever the Parsis, Christians, Muhammedans or Hindus, as the case might be, elected to the Provincial Legislature, would not, so far as possible, bear a less proportion to the total number of members elected thereto, than the total number of Parsis, Christians, Hindus or Muhammedans, as the case might

¹¹⁵*Badruddin Tyabji Papers*, National Archives of India, Microfilm Roll No. 1334.

¹¹⁶*Detailed Report of the Proceedings of the Fourth Indian National Congress Held at Allahabad on the 26th, 27th, 28th and 29th of December, 1888*, p.171, National Archives of India, Indian National Congress Proceedings' Microfilm Roll No. 1433.

be, in such electoral jurisdiction, bore to its total population. Members of both Legislatures to possess certain qualifications and not to be subject to certain disqualifications.¹¹⁷

The clause was important, for, as Norton explained, India is a collection of “vast varieties of creeds and men of different races” and a scheme must be submitted to the government to “provide for the absolute protection of the minorities of this country.”¹¹⁸ Affirming Norton’s observation, Lala Lajpat Rai added that “minorities, in whom...feeling of Indian brotherhood is not yet as fully developed” now ought not to have “doubts and think themselves unrepresented.”¹¹⁹ Unfortunately, the debate that followed the tabling of the clause turned somewhat unseemly. Munshi Hidayat Rasul, a delegate from Oudh, rose and obliquely spoke of the Aligarh based opponents of the Congress,

...when we duly consider the views of our opponents we find that they are not our enemies in the least...should we look upon them as our enemies and should we so behave towards them as to make them our enemies in reality? Nay, instead of widening the gulf of separation it is advisable for us to show them, nay, the whole world, we are not the people to agree to anything without proper consideration, as some persons have thought us to be.¹²⁰

He went on to claim that in the previous Congress, Pundit Ajudianath, a fellow Congressman from his province had assured him that Muslims will have parity in representation. He went on to demand that the Congress conceded this principle of communal parity. Once it did so, Mr. Rasul promised the Congress sanguine prospects among the Muslims,

I assure that if you accept the principle of equality you will have on your side ninety percent of Mussulmans from tomorrow and the remaining ten percent from the day after tomorrow.¹²¹

A far more radical proposal came from Syed Wahid Ali Rizvi from the North West Provinces. He demanded that

...if India is to be represented by her best and not by her inferior races, and in accordance with these views and out of regard to the past glories of...[an] ancient race, I call upon the Congress to rule, not that there shall be as many

¹¹⁷*Detailed Report of the Proceedings of the Fifth Indian National Congress Held at Bombay on the 26th, 27th and 28th of December, 1889*, p.12, National Archives of India, Indian National Congress Proceedings’ Microfilm Roll No. 1433.

¹¹⁸*Ibid.*, p.14.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.19

¹²⁰*Ibid.*, p.27.

¹²¹*Ibid.*, p.28.

Mahomedans as Hindus in the councils but that there shall always be three times as many Musalman as Hindu members.¹²²

After Mr. Rizvi finished his impassioned speech, he was followed by Mr. Ali Mohamed Bhimjee from Bombay. On behalf of Mr. Rizvi, he tabled an amendment to Mr. Norton's resolution. Mr. Bhimjee said,

The speaker who preceded me has proposed an amendment... – "Provided that the number of Mahomedan members shall always be equal to that of the Hindus, in both the Imperial and Provincial Councils."¹²³

Bhimjee assured the Congress that the "demand has not been proposed with any distrust towards the Hindu majority" but that it has been made relying on its "spirit of tolerance."¹²⁴

There were, of course, Muslim delegates who provided saner counsel. Mr. Hamid Ali Khan from Oudh warned his coreligionists that they must not "spread disunion and disagreement" as "no good can come out of demanding, or even obtaining, an equal number of Mussulman members on the Legislative Councils."¹²⁵ By broadcasting such ambitions, Mr. Khan thought, Muslims would only "rouse suspicion" regarding their "relations with and intentions towards" their "Hindu brethren."¹²⁶ Mr. Mir-uddin Ahmed Balkhi from Bihar reminded his fellow Muslim Congressmen that they have assembled "for one common object, and that object is a secular and not religious one."¹²⁷

Apparently, despite the pleadings of Mr. Hamid Ali Khan and Mr. Mir-uddin Ahmed Balkhi, there were still Muslim delegates who thought that demanding parity in representation is not a wholly absurd idea. Thus, Munshi Nasiruddin Ahmed, a delegate from Banaras, rose in the wake of the two gentlemen to make the same demand as Munshi Hidayat Rasul but in a significantly more moderate language,

...we Mussalmans shall rejoice if, as a mark of your confidence in and love for us, you were to concede to us an equal number of representatives in the Councils. But none of us, at least none who are sane and in the possession of our full senses, are going to pretend that we have any right to this.¹²⁸

¹²²Ibid., p.29.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid., p.30

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

An amendment to Norton's resolution, a clause that would have given Muslims parity in representation with non-Muslims, was now put to vote, first only among the Muslim delegates. Interestingly, an overwhelmingly large number abstained from voting. This was because, the nameless compiler of the *Detailed Report of the Proceedings of the Fifth Indian National Congress* tells us, they "could not vote for what they felt to be unreasonable, neither did they like to oppose what was so vehemently urged by several of their co-religionists, and what was, if could be conceded, so manifestly complementary to their community."¹²⁹ Eventually, only thirty-nine Muslim delegates out of the two hundred and thirty odd present voted and the amendment was defeated twenty-three votes to sixteen. Following this, it was unanimously defeated by the non-Muslim delegates.

In 1890, when the rudiments of the second Indian Councils' Act had begun to take shape, the Congress evoked the government to dissuade the Muslim leadership from nurturing any apprehension towards representative bodies. Lal Mohan Ghose, a delegate from Calcutta, stated that "the leaders of those communities as have been sounding the note of alarm" must not expect "dangers from a scheme to be drawn up by the Government of India itself."¹³⁰ Ghose asked these sceptics to trust the government "to safeguard to the fullest extent the legitimate rights and interests of all the minorities of this country."¹³¹

Pherozeshah Mehta, on the other hand, rested his hopes on the good sense of those wielding the franchise. He claimed during his Presidential speech that,

experience has shown that in a preponderating Hindu electorate it does not happen that Hindus are elected; as so many other, besides racial forces and interests concur in influencing the selection.¹³²

¹²⁹Ibid., p.32.

¹³⁰*Detailed reports of the Proceedings of the Sixth Indian National Congress Held at Calcutta on the 26th, 27th, 29th and 30th of December, 1890*, p.15, National Archives of India, Indian National Congress Proceedings' Microfilm Roll No. 1433. Ghose had risen to propose the following resolution - That the Congress, having considered the draft bill recently introduced in to Parliament by Mr. Charles Bradlough, entitled 'An Act to Amend the Indian Councils Act of 1861', approves the same as calculated to secure a substantial installment of that reform in the administration of India, for which it has been agitating, and humbly prays the Houses of Parliament of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland to pass the same into law; and further that its President, Mr. Pherozeshah Mehta, is hereby empowered to draw up and sign on behalf of this assembly, a petition to the House of Commons to the foregoing effect, and to transmit the same to Mr. Charles Bradlough for presentation thereto, in due course. (Ibid., p.14)

¹³¹Ibid.

¹³²Ibid., p.7.

It seems that the Congress was by now getting somewhat chary of discussing the fraught issue of communitarian representation. The resolution tabled by Ghose, for example, while urging the British parliament to expedite political reform, had not made even an indirect reference to the issue. This was much to the liking of Pandit Bishan Narayan Dhar, who thought that the Congress ought to leave “these matters of detail in the hands of Government.”¹³³ Such an attitude, he thought, will “save the Congress from a good deal of odium and throw upon the government the entire responsibility of adjusting the conflicting interests, so called, of the Hindu and Muhammadan communities.”¹³⁴

In its 1891 session, the Congress once again passed a resolution demanding representative bodies¹³⁵ but continued its studious silence upon its Muslim opposition’s disapproval of them. The Congress broke its silence the next year. In the 1892 Annual Session, Pandit Bishumbhar Nath, a delegate from Allahabad and the Chairman of the Reception Committee, briefly and mockingly alluded to the opposition to representative bodies, emanating from Aligarh. Sir Auckland Colvin, the Lieutenant-Governor of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh had recently stopped by at the Mohammedan Anglo Oriental College and had delivered a speech countenancing the Aligarh leadership’s disapproval of representative bodies. Suspecting that Sir Colvin has borrowed “a great deal of his politics from the political teachings of the venerable sage there” (presumably Sir Syed Ahmad Khan), Pandit Nath declared rather peremptorily that the Congress “need not now care much for such imbecile platitudes.”¹³⁶ Aware that the Indian Councils’ Act is in the offing, later in the same session, the Congress unanimously adopted a resolution expressing regret that it does not concede the electoral principle in the administration of India.¹³⁷

¹³³Ibid., p.20.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵That this Congress reaffirms the conclusion arrived at by all the previous Congresses, viz., that India can never be well or justly governed, nor her people be prosperous or contented, until they are allowed, through their elected representatives, a potential voice in the Legislature of their own country, and respectfully urges the people of Great Britain and Ireland, whose good-will towards India it gratefully recognizes, to permit no further delay in the concession of this just and necessary reform. (*Detailed report of the Proceedings of the Seventh Indian National Congress Held at Nagpur, on the 28th, 29th, and 30th December 1891*, pp.16-17, National Archives of India, Indian National Congress Proceedings’ Microfilm No. 1433.)

¹³⁶*Detailed report of the Proceedings of the Seventh Indian National Congress Held at Allahabad, on the 28th, 29th, and 30th December 1892*, p.8, National Archives of India, Indian National Congress Proceedings’ Microfilm No. 1433.

¹³⁷That the Congress, while accepting in a loyal spirit the Indian Councils Act recently enacted by the Parliament of Great Britain, as explained by the present Prime Minister, with the assent of the then

When the Congress assembled again the next year, the Indian Councils' Act had been adopted by the British parliament. R.N. Modholkar, seemingly, spoke on behalf of the Congress when he summed up the Act in the following words,

It did not give to us exactly what we wanted, but it gave us this much. In the Act there is permission, so to say, granted to the viceroy to select or elect persons for nomination to his Council. By the Act there is no right of election as such granted, but in the nominations the Viceroy has to make, he is empowered to make rules with the sanction of the Secretary of State, and in making those rules a wide discretion is left to him.¹³⁸

Modholkar remained loyal to the trend that had been set in the annual Congresses by now and did not at all dwell on the fact that certain groups of Indians were staunchly opposed to the introduction of the “right of election” in India, if that is what he meant by the Viceroy using his “wide discretion.”

The Congress was now giving up even alluding to the Muslim opposition, leave alone engage with it.

Epilogue

What happened over the remainder of the 1890s? Unfortunately, what we witness is a lull. The period does not seem to be privy to the intense debates that characterized the 1880s when Tyabji and Hume attempted to engage the Muslim opposition. May be, that is why we notice a steep decline in the level of Muslim participation in the Congress. But for one exceptional year, it settled down to being about half of what it was in the 1880s.¹³⁹ Curiously, also, as the *Detailed Reports of the Proceedings* reveal, the Annual Congress Sessions in the 1890s discussed representation far less than they had in the previous decade.

Under-secretary of State for India, that it is intended by it to give the people of India *a real living representation* in the Legislative Councils, regrets that the Act does not, in terms, concede to the people the right of electing their own representative to the Council, and hopes and expects that the rules now being prepared under the Act, will be framed on the lines of Mr. Gladstone's declaration in the House of Commons, and will do adequate justice to the people of this country; further, that it prays that these rules may be published in the official Gazettes, like other proposed legislative measures, before being finally adopted. (Ibid., p.27.)

¹³⁸ *Report of the Ninth Indian National Congress Held at Lahore on the 27th, 28th, 29th and 30th of December, 1893*, p.45, National Archives of India, Indian National Congress Proceedings' Microfilm No. 1433. The Indian Councils Act of 1892 merely increased the size of the existing councils and allowed certain interests groups such as chambers of commerce *orzamindars*, along with district boards and municipalities, to recommend members to the provincial councils.

¹³⁹ See Appendix.

Both in 1893 and 94, the Congress discussed at length the minutiae of the 1892 Act but without ever venturing into the fraught territory of its Muslim opposition's disapproval of the introduction of the electoral principle in India. The Congress, as a matter of fact, stubbornly refused to venture into this territory for the remainder of the 1890s. As we saw above, Sayani did allude to the 'Muslim question' during his Presidential address in 1896, but it was only to admonish the Muslim opponents of the Congress, not to engage with them. It almost appears that the Congress was abandoning any serious attempts at dealing with the issue that impaired its relations with a section of the Muslim leadership.¹⁴⁰ This lot too, on its part, cold shouldered the Congress. The Congress, as a matter of fact, seems to have unilaterally assumed by now that it was the sole representative of the Indian nation. For example, Kali Prasanna Ray, Chairman of the Reception Committee in 1900, smugly termed the Congress "the only true interpreter between the ruler and the ruled."¹⁴¹ The Congress had found the line to which it was to tenaciously cling right up to the partition of the Indian Subcontinent in 1947. Perhaps now it sought to "build bonds and mend cleavages" by simply ignoring them or pretending that they did not exist. This attitude, along with the expectation that fine tuning the communitarian details of representation was the responsibility of the colonial government, only seems to have further buttressed its Muslim opposition as a distinct interest group in colonial politics. It could now bypass the Congress and legitimately approach the colonial government to secure its political interests. That is what it eventually did in 1906 when it called on the Viceroy, Lord Minto, at Shimla and demanded separate electorates for Muslims.

¹⁴⁰ John R. McLane seems to agree with us. "Between 1889 and the Muslim delegation's request at Simla in 1906 for separate electorates," he says, "the Congress made no major attempts to attract or open discussion with the Aligarh Muslims, who continued to be the best organized Muslim opposition to the Congress." (*Indian Nationalism and the Early Congress*, p. 112)

¹⁴¹ *Detailed Report of the Proceedings of the Sixteenth Indian National Congress Held at Lahore on the 27th, 28th and 29th of December, 1900*, p.6, National Archives of India, Indian National Congress Proceedings' Microfilm No. 1434.

Appendix

Muslim Participation in the Congress: 1885-1900

Year	Total Number of Delegates	Number of Muslim Delegates*	Percentage of Muslim Delegates
1885	72	2	2.77
1886	434	32	7.37
1887	606	65	10.72
1888	1248	209	16.74
1889	1889	237	12.54
1890	677	116	17.13
1891*	-	-	-
1892	625	75	12.0
1893	867	59	6.80
1894	1163	22	1.89
1895	1584	20	1.26
1896	784	53	6.76
1897	692	47	6.69
1898	611	6	0.98

1899	789	306	38.78
1900	567	50	8.81

*I counted the obviously Muslim sounding names in the delegate lists to arrive at the figure of Muslim delegates for a year.

*The delegate list of the year was illegible due to bad microfilming.

Source: *Indian National Congress Proceedings, National Archives of India, Microfilm Roll Nos. 1433-34.*

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