

## CHAPTER 3

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### **Provincial Autonomy and the Politicisation of Religious Identity**

The movement to separate Sindh had been an important milestone in the politicisation of religious identity in agitational politics. What originally had been a demand to demarcate a region along linguistic and ethnic lines was soon overtaken by the assertion that religious identity was the prime factor in determining whether a group was either for or against separation. Traditional holders of power had been instrumental in mobilising their constituents behind symbolic language that linked their religious identities to the elites' perspectives of whether an administrative division was a positive or negative factor for the community. Importantly, a symbolic language that had originally defined ethnicity was refashioned to promote the defining characteristics of religious 'community'. The potency of politicised religious identity proved so strong that it split the political affiliations of ethnic groups. For the rural Sindhi Hindus, their sense of identity was reconfigured to the point that they came to identify themselves more closely with non-Sindhi Hindus than with Sindhi Muslims. Prior to the 1920s, the evidence suggests that this had not been the case.

Through the institutions of communally-based electorates and the competitive electoral and Legislative Assembly processes, the introduction of provincial autonomy served to further politicise religious identity on a scale that had not previously occurred in Sindh. Since the introduction of separate electorates as the basis for categorising representation on Local Boards, the process of politicising religious identity advanced rapidly. Under the umbrella of the structures

of separate electorates and provincial autonomy, political identity became inextricably linked with religious identity.

This chapter explains how the introduction of several of the structures of representative Government by the colonial state in the mid-1930s shaped the processes of politicising religious identity in Sind. The structuring of the Communal Award, the drama of the elections, and the theatre of provincial legislature were structures imposed by the British raj as a means of extending, but also controlling, the expression of political identity by the Indian peoples.

Generally speaking, historians have focused on the question of why the democratic institutions of provincial autonomy were handed down to Indians, or they have used the 1937 general elections as a simple barometer for gauging the national strengths of the Congress and All-India Muslim League organisations. Here, however, the elections have been approached from the perspective of identifying what role the contextual structures (the Communal Award, electoral constituencies, franchise qualifications, and the provincial assemblies) performed in influencing the changes which were to affect Sind and India so profoundly in the course of the next decade.

The focus will then shift to exploring the interaction between the state structures and the redefining of identity as the province's elites searched for satisfying roles for their communities in the shifting redistribution of provincial power. An analysis of electoral data will be used to portray the extent and location of the politicisation of religious identity. It will be shown that the imposition of the new structures had the effect of reconfiguring the expression of political competitiveness between groups, regardless of whether the respective group identities were originally based in economic or social class, caste, urban, agrarian, or sectarian forms. The effect of the devolution of responsible Government in Sind

was to channel intra-community competitiveness into a framework that firstly led politics to be defined in terms of religious identity, and secondly, for the expression of intra-community politics to be acted out in a medium that triggered inter-communal competition and conflict.

I

### **The Government of India Act 1935**

The 1935 Act brought with it the introduction of provincial autonomy, a development that transformed the nature of Indian politics. In most of British India's provinces since 1921 the government had been carried out under the framework of the 1919 Government of India Act. The Act had instituted a system of government known as dyarchy, whereby certain responsibilities (such as education, health, agriculture, control of local bodies) were devolved from British control to elected ministers responsible to provincial assemblies. The Governor or his nominated representatives retained other subjects such as land revenue, irrigation, law and order.<sup>1</sup> Under the 1935 Act, these portfolios now passed into the hands of the local assemblies, giving Indians substantial control over provincial affairs.<sup>2</sup> In effect, elected non-British ministries were established at a provincial level, and at stake was nothing less than the administration of provincial government.

The Communal Award of 1932 structured the franchise and the electoral constituencies.<sup>3</sup> Through the application of the Communal Award religious community became the basis for determining who gained access to positions of

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<sup>1</sup> The British Governor of each province held reserve powers to override the provincial Government if he considered circumstances necessary. P. Spear, *The Oxford History of Modern India 1790-1975*, second edition (Delhi, O.U.P, 1978), pp. 342-44, and Sarkar, *op. cit.*, p. 165.

<sup>2</sup> Government of India Act 1935, 2 August 1935, 26 Geo V, Chapter 2.

<sup>3</sup> For a case-study discussion of the implications of the Communal Award as it affected the province of Bengal, see B. Chakravarty, 'The Communal Award of 1932 and its Implications in Bengal', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 23, no. 3 (1989).

authority. The incorporation of the Award as the basis for selected legislatures had been the by-product of the British raj's determination that the operating of the state apparatus (at the level below its own position) was to be constructed solely on the basis of its perceptions of what were the primal identifying components of the mosaic of Indian peoples. Through the conquest of India over several centuries a number of provinces had been administratively organised along linguistic (or groups of related languages) lines, and by the 1930s they projected a degree of ethnic identity (the case of Sind being a prime example). However, by operation of the Communal Award of 1932 the status of ethnicity was largely confined to the level of territorial identification. It was religious affiliation which identified how much representation (and potentially, therefore, power) was afforded to sections of the Indian populace. There was also a second conditional criterion for defining the amount of political power afforded to a religious community; that of emphasising the numeric strength of a religious community in relation to 'other' religious communities sharing the province, and so 'minority' and 'majority' status also came to determine a community's access to provincial government. The touchstone of provincial autonomy was now the identification, compartmentalisation, and quantification of apportioning spheres of political power to communities based solely on their religious identity.<sup>4</sup>

The communal implications of the 1935 Act were not readily apparent. Although establishing the criterion of religious identity as the key political identifier, the immediate implication of the introduction of provincial autonomy was to shift power from the centre to the provinces. The extension of government to the provinces was welcomed by those whose focus was concentrated on the development of their region rather than on questions of national governance. The 1935 Act had been the outcome of the involvement of a number of provincial

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<sup>4</sup> In most provinces a tiny handful of seats was allocated to spheres based upon economic activity: commerce, labour, landholders, etc.

leaders' (men such as Fazl-i-Husain of the Punjab, a principal architect), who had done much to steer the constitutional issue of deciding India's form of future governance firmly towards the centripetal arrangement where the power of the provinces would be extended at the cost of a centralised government.<sup>5</sup>

The two organisations that claimed a national focus (the Congress and the Muslim League) were unimpressed with the new Act and attacked it for failing to deliver full self-government at the centre. However, they accepted the reality of the implementation of the new constitution and, in the words of Jinnah, decided to be involved in the provincial governance aspect of the new Act 'for what it is worth'.<sup>6</sup> At the practical level, the League and Congress realised that the handing of substantial power to the provinces threatened to undermine their construction of a trans-geographic notion of 'India' in their centralised positions. The notions of an India that the Congress and League relied upon were underpinned by a rationale that transcended regional, linguistic or ethnic identity. Thus, the provincial scheme forced the Congress and the League to extend their bases into every province if they were to show that they truly represented their alleged constituents.

For Jinnah, in particular, who claimed that the Muslim League would speak 'as the unchallenged authority for Muslims in India'<sup>7</sup>, the task was a daunting one. In 1934 Jinnah had returned to India from England to resuscitate the moribund League and his own political career. His return had been at the insistence of a core of UP Muslim landlords, who were seeking a central place in the new arrangements through Jinnah's advocacy skills.

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<sup>5</sup> A key principle of the Act was its federal nature (however, that component of the Act was not to come into operation until half of the Indian States agreed to accede).

<sup>6</sup> Jinnah, 11 June 1936, announcing the League's Election Manifesto, quoted in *Bombay Chronicle* [hereafter *BC*], 12 June 1936.

<sup>7</sup> Jinnah's address to Young Muslim Brotherhood, Bombay, 24 July 1936, quoted in *BC*, 25 July 1936.

### The 1937 general elections

In the first general elections conducted in India to elect the new provincial legislatures there were 1585 constituencies: 808 General; 487 Muslim; and 290 others (e.g. land-holders, scheduled castes). The results starkly revealed the positions of the Congress and the League. Of the total of 808 General seats, Congress won 714. The results enabled Congress to form governments in Madras, Bombay, UP, Bihar, Orissa, and the Central Provinces. The success of the Congress in the Muslim-minority provinces surprised even the Congress organisation itself.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, the League won a mere 109 of the 487 seats reserved for Muslims, and it could form no governments.<sup>9</sup> The most common observation of the election results made by scholars was the apparent abject failure of the Muslim League, which won less than one-quarter of the Muslim seats. The results have been taken to show that Jinnah's League was moribund and irrelevant to 'Muslim India' outside the drawing rooms of the UP's Mughal aristocracy.<sup>10</sup>

The key to understanding Jinnah's subsequent politics, and ultimately the partition of India, lies in unravelling the developments that took place in the Muslim-majority provinces. Although the Muslim elites in these provinces lacked the ancestry of the UP Mughal aristocracy, it was to their provinces that the centre of Muslim political power shifted under the raj's democratisation of government, and it had been their provinces that had excluded the All-India Muslim League.

The Congress and the League both failed to show that they had any standing in Muslim politics *per se*. In the north-western Muslim belt (the provinces

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<sup>8</sup> G. Rivzi, *Linlithgow and India. A Study of British Policy and the Political Impasse in India, 1936-43* (London, Royal Historical Society, 1973) p. 28.

<sup>9</sup> In March, the League was able to form a coalition government in Bengal with Fazl Huq's Krishak Praja Samiti. For an history of the League in Bengal, see Sen, *op. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> Jalal, *Sole Spokesman*, p.30.

of Sind, NWFP, and the Punjab) the League won only two of the 225 seats. Congress fared only a little better with 17 seats (solely due to Abdul Ghaffer Khan's influence in affiliating the *Khudai Khitmagars* with the Congress)<sup>11</sup>. It was no coincidence that the League and the Congress had their power bases in the same provinces of the Hindu heartlands, but what is particularly important is that both organisations had largely left the Muslims in the outer provinces untouched. In doing so, the League and the Congress exposed vulnerable underbellies.

**TABLE 5: 1937 ELECTION: RESULTS FOR MUSLIM SEATS (ALL PROVINCES)**

Province	Congress	League	Other	Total
<i>Minority provinces</i>				
Madras	3	10	15	28
Bombay	0	20	9	29
U.P.	1	27	36	64
Bihar	4	0	35	39
Orissa	0	0	4	4
C.P.	0	0	14	14
Assam	0	10	24	34
<i>Majority provinces</i>				
Bengal	0	40	79	119
NWFP	15	0	21	36
Punjab	2	2	82	86
<b>Sind</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>34</b>
Total	25	109	353	487

Source: *Return Showing the Results of Elections in India 1937. Prepared by the Secretary of State for India to Parliament by Command of His Majesty, November 1937* [hereafter *Elections in India 1937*] Cmd. 5589, XXI, p. 205-32.

There are several reasons why the Congress and the Muslim League failed in the Muslim-majority provinces. It seems that the Congress had difficulties extending its base in the majority provinces beyond its urban Hindu membership.

<sup>11</sup> In the NWFP, the small Pakhtun khans supported the Khitmagars against the large, non-Pakhtun, khans in a struggle for tribal dominance of the Frontier. For details see Jansson, *Pakistan, or Pakhtunistan?*, and 'The Frontier Province: Khudai Khitmagars and the Muslim League', *op. cit.*

The landed aristocracy wielded considerable influence in the predominantly rural Muslim majority provinces, and the socialist platform of the Congress (with its advocacy of sweeping land reforms) was an anathema to their position. However, it had not merely been a matter of economic platforms that had restricted the Congress. The Congress's message had not been effectively promulgated to the Muslims of the majority provinces. In these provinces the Hindu middle-classes and peasants more readily identified with Congress' projected image. Through the combination of Gandhi's use of Hindu imagery and metaphor, and a lack of willingness and competence on the part of provincial Congress committees to extend actively into majority Muslim society, the Congress organisation largely remained an urban Hindu organisation.

On the other hand, it would appear that the Muslim League, with its objective of furthering the interests of Muslims and with the prominent role *zamindars* held in the League's executive, should have found a far more receptive audience in the Muslim-majority provinces, but it also failed there for a number of reasons. Firstly, its election manifesto differed little from that of Congress's.<sup>12</sup> However, the reality of the League's manifesto meant little in pragmatic terms, for its organisational basis in the Muslim-majority provinces was non-existent. In the absence of any semblance of party machinery operating down to at least the district level, the calls for programmes of rural uplift rang hollow. The situation was compounded by the nature of some of the manifesto's points, such as the promotion of the Urdu language - a demonstration on the League's part that it had little relevance or sensitivity to the political needs of the majority province Muslims.

It was the weak organisational basis of the League that undermined Jinnah's efforts the most. The executive body of the League primarily consisted of

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<sup>12</sup> *BC*, 12 June 1936. One important difference was that unlike the Congress, it did not countenance the appropriation of private property and so its vision for land reforms was considerably less extensive.



UP landed elites who had little taste for, or understanding of, the direction towards mass democracy. Nor did they have any desire to extend the organisation to the Muslim-majority provinces, where the inhabitants were regarded as yokels by the descendants of the sophisticated Mughal Court. The differences were emphasised by the fact that the aristocracy from the former Oudh territories were Shia, whereas the majority provinces were largely Sunni. Unlike the Congress, which over the last two decades since Gandhi's involvement had structured an organisation based upon a firm set of principles and had actively sought the involvement of the masses, the League's hierarchy had confined its agenda to serving only the interests of a much more narrowly-based membership. The reality of the situation gave Jinnah little choice but to accept the existing structure and personnel of the All-India Muslim League. He simply did not have the time before the election to restructure the League and build it into an organisation equipped for mass democracy.

All that Jinnah could do in the years 1935-36 was to try and bring existing provincial Muslim political organisations into an alliance with the League. He made no secret of the fact that he was willing to co-operate with any Muslim group provided that its objective in some way approximated his own and that it was willing to stand in the election under the banner of the Muslim League.<sup>13</sup> Despite initiating talks with Muslim groups in every province, Jinnah had been unable to convince more than a handful that the League had anything useful to offer. The leading Muslim politicians in the Punjab, NWFP, Sind, Central Provinces, Orissa, and Bihar dismissed the League and left it with its original remaining loyal supporters (such as Malik Barkat Ali in Lahore). The only notable exception had been the Muslim Unity Board in Bengal, which used the League to foil its opponents' radical programme of land redistribution.

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<sup>13</sup> BC, 26 August 1936.

The rejection of the Muslim League in the Muslim-majority provinces had been primarily due to the provincialism of the provincial leaderships. The granting of provincial autonomy had, of course, been a move away from the centralisation of government authority: few provincial leaders saw merit in giving over this newly enhanced control of their region to an organisation centred in the Muslim-minority provinces. Moreover, experiences with the Muslim League had shown them that the majority provinces were treated by the League as merely a tool for furthering the interests of the minority provinces' Muslims.<sup>14</sup>

While Jinnah had been trying to entice the majority province Muslim elites before the election, an alternate move had been under way in the north-west to form a loose alliance of the Muslim-majority provinces' would-be premiers. The Aga Khan, Fazl-i-Husain, and Abdullah Haroon floated the idea of a north-western Muslim bloc, which was designed to project the role of the Muslim-majority provinces at the centre as a counterpoise to the prominence that Congress and the League were giving to the minority provinces, a move which, had it succeeded, may have irreparably damaged the League. However, it came to nothing for the same reason that the League failed in the majority provinces; the failure by the local elites to recognise that there was need for such a bloc in a diminishing centre.<sup>15</sup> Similar to the League's difficulties, the proposal also floundered through an unwillingness of the majority of Muslim politicians in these provinces to concern themselves seriously with any affairs beyond their own province.

The elections of 1937 had important lessons for both the Congress and the League. For the Congress, it had shown the organisation to be isolated from

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<sup>14</sup> For example, the League's adoption of the Sind separation demand had been done to extract a favourable weightage and protection for the minority provinces' Muslims. Since the League's inception in 1906 there had been a series of failed attempts to establish its presence in the majority provinces.

<sup>15</sup> The death of Fazl-i-Husain in July 1930 was a serious setback to the progression of the proposal.

India's Muslims. To address the situation the Congress president, Nehru, initiated in March 1937 a 'Muslim mass contact' campaign aimed at incorporating Muslims into the Congress fold.<sup>16</sup> For the League, the lessons were more dramatic. The results showed that the League had not failed so much in the seats it contested, but rather, that its weakness lay in its inability even to contest seats. This was exposing a crucial weakness, for it undermined Jinnah's claim that he alone represented India's Muslims. The election results rammed home to Jinnah the implications of provincial autonomy; that government was being pushed out to the provinces, and without strength in the provinces, there was no place at the centre in Indian politics. Moreover, it was apparent that the League's opponents were not the Congress (it had not prevented the League from winning the Muslim seats) but the recalcitrant majority provinces' elites.

The Muslims who had prevented the Muslim League from entering the majority provinces were the traditional elites already entrenched in the colonial system of control: the khans of the north-west, the landowners of the Punjab, and the *waderos* of Sind. In the Punjab, the non-communal Unionist alliance of landowners dominated the Legislature. In the NWFP the *Khitmagars* had won the largest number of seats as a party, but collectively the large khans (who had stood as Independents) were the most successful. In Bengal the situation was similar, where influential *zamindars* won the largest grouping of seats. Again the pattern was repeated in Sind, where *waderos*, *zamindars* and *pirs* swept all of the Muslim rural seats. All of the majority provincial Muslim elites shared a commonality; they wielded economic and kinship power in their regions, and they were focused exclusively on their own provinces, not on events occurring on the centre stage of Indian politics.

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<sup>16</sup> see Hasan, 'The Muslim Mass Contact Campaign: An Attempt at Political Mobilisation', *op. cit.*

**TABLE 6: 1937 ELECTION: VOTES POLLED IN MUSLIM SEATS**

	Minority-provinces, Bengal and Assam	NW India
All-India Muslim League	32.4%	1.3%
Congress	3.3%	12.3%
Regional Parties	31.4%	69.0%
Independents	32.9%	17.4%

Source: *Elections in India 1937*, pp. 205-321.

The presentation of votes polled regionally in Table 6 clearly demonstrates that the north-western belt from Karachi to Kashmir lay beyond the influence of the centralised Indian political organisations. In a sense Jinnah's League had been defeated before the elections took place. Notwithstanding the role that religion was playing in Sind's unfolding politics, it is clear that the notion of an undifferentiated 'Muslim India' had not yet been connected to electoral politics. Muslim identity was of paramount importance (as later discussions will show), but it was an Islamic consciousness rooted in local ethnic identity.

The election results gave Jinnah much to think about. Without a strategy to overcome the existing provincial Muslim elites, his position was likely to be untenable. His immediate problem was to salvage what prestige he could for the League by demanding a coalition Government with the Congress in the UP. Jinnah based his claim on the League's winning 29 of the 64 Muslim seats (in the legislature of 228). His determination to secure a place in the UP Government reflected his commitment to upholding the prestige of the UP Muslim aristocracy. Jinnah's claim would have had the same status in Bombay, yet this was not pursued by the League.<sup>17</sup> It is often noted that the Congress's refusal to share

<sup>17</sup> See C. Khaliqzaman, *Pathway to Pakistan* (Lahore, Longmans, 1961), p. 161.

power with the League in the UP was the catalyst that triggered Jinnah's belief that the Muslims would be dominated perpetually by Hindus. Regardless of when Jinnah came to that realisation, the issue of the UP ministry served to reinforce his appreciation that the number of seats which a party could claim in the provincial assemblies was the crucial defining factor in assessing political influence. Therefore, his long-term view turned towards winning over the Muslim-majority province Muslims.

## II

While Jinnah was formulating his revised strategy, the Muslim elites in Sind were jolted from the euphoria of winning seats in the Legislative Assembly of their newly created province. The absence of Congress and the League from involvement in the Muslim constituencies had ensured the province remained under Sindhi control, but early signs of a difficult future for the Muslim legislators had come soon after the announcement that Sind was to be afforded provincial status. Once the separation of Sind from Bombay had been achieved, the unity of the Muslim elites dissolved. The elections on the horizon brought the main aspirants for the spoils of 'victory' (as provincial autonomy was viewed) into a state of heightened activity. Intense competition between elites developed as those with leadership ambitions sought to win over the largest bloc of supporters and take the ministerial positions in the new provincial administration. The cause of much of Sind's subsequent distress can be found not in the fact that the Sind Azad Conference fragmented, but rather in the rationale underlying why the leading Muslim politicians could not remain cohesive.

### **The elections in Sind**

The allocation of seats under the Communal Award produced the situation where Muslims, despite having over 70 percent of the population, were given less than

57 percent of the seats in the Assembly, while the minority communities, with one-quarter of the population of Sind held over one-third of the seats. The 34 Muslim seats were only a slight improvement on their position in the Bombay Legislative Council, but Muslim leaders were encouraged in the knowledge that they were, nonetheless, the absolute majority in the new Sind Assembly.

Abdul Majid had broken away from the Azad Conference (which had been founded by the Muslim elites to ensure that Sind's separation from Bombay was not annulled) to form the Sind Azad Party in 1935. He claimed that the Conference was not disposed towards alleviating the problems of Sind's lower agricultural classes. Majid toyed with the notion that the involvement of a national Muslim organisation would lift the profile of his party, since this strategy had succeeded in 1925 when the League had thrown its weight behind the Sind separation movement. However he rejected the League when he realised that the Muslim League label at the time no longer meant anything to Sindhi Muslims. Indicative of this was the election manifestoes of Majid and the other Sindhi Muslim parties, which were absorbed exclusively with Sindhi interests.

The second Muslim party to contest the elections in Sind was that of Abdullah Haroon and Shah Nawaz Bhutto,<sup>18</sup> who formed the Sind United Party. Under these two men the party retained many of the Azad Conference's more important members. The Party initially seemed to hold the greatest promise for the Muslim elites to consolidate their new position. It was focused on the position of the landlords and, therefore, unlikely seriously to concern itself with issues such as land reforms. Haroon had also shown a wider vision for Sind through his great interest in the Aga Khan's proposal for an alliance of the Muslim majority provinces, and to this end he was involved in negotiations with Fazl-i-Husain and

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<sup>18</sup> Shah Nawaz Bhutto (1888-1957), a long standing member of the Bombay Legislative Council and prominent member of the Sind Mohan medan Association.

the Aga Khan. Furthermore, Haroon admired the success of the Unionists' alliance under Fazli, and his vision was for the Sind United Party to follow the Punjabi Unionist model.

However, there were several factors which worked against him and eventually led to the Party being left in an awkward political limbo. Firstly, there is little evidence to suggest that other members of the United Party shared Haroon's vision of being part of a provincial Muslim bloc or that they would agree with the move to coalesce with the Hindu agriculturalists in Sind to form a non-communal party. The pursuit of both aims by Haroon sent mixed messages to the Hindu elites, who, without the level of understandings that the Unionist coalition had reached, saw the contradiction in aligning themselves with a Muslim activist organisation that was taking a leading role in establishing a specifically Muslim-majority bloc. Moreover, Haroon's urban industrialist background proved to be an obstacle to the forging of close connections with the Muslim *waderas* and *zamindars*,<sup>19</sup> since the rural lords associated the rise of urban power with the cost of their traditional roles of authority.

Secondly, the United Party proved well before the election that it was unable to contain all those with leadership aspirations. The competitiveness between Bhutto and Ghulam Hussain Hidayatullah led to the Party splitting.<sup>20</sup> Thirdly, the United party seriously floundered after the elections when both Haroon and Bhutto failed to win seats in the Assembly, effectively plunging the Party into a disastrous leadership void.

The third party of the Muslims was Hidayatullah's Sind Muslim Political Party. The catalyst for Hidayatullah's break with Bhutto had been the issue of the

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<sup>19</sup> Political observers described the Sind United Party as Haroon's 'one-man show'. *Daily Gazette*, 20 August 1936, cited in Jones, *Muslim Politics*, p. 82.

<sup>20</sup> Ghulam Husain Hidayatullah, 1869-1948, member of the Bombay Legislative Council since 1912.

distribution of the Party's executive offices. Hidayatullah, whose family origin was in Kashmir, lacked a solid district support base with kinship or tribal connections. He therefore had to rely upon his capacity to reward supporters with positions of office in exchange for their allegiance. Such a basis, completely lacking in party principles and organisational base, did not augur well for the consolidation of a stable political party.

The most important characteristic of all the Muslim parties is that they were far removed from being political parties with any real ideological or organisational basis. Except for Majid's links with the *haris* and the Jamiat, it was unlikely that the other parties had any existence in reality beyond their own committee rooms. Certainly there were no memberships or structures which attempted to link the parties with Sindhi Muslim society. They simply existed as party titles to serve the elites' need of having factional bases.

All the Muslim parties shared similar, vague platforms for improving conditions in the province, especially for agriculturalists. The three parties had not evolved through the development of differing views on the administration of Sind, but simply because the more prominent politicians had refused to co-operate with one another. Both Bhutto and Hidayatullah had been the leading Sindhi lights in the Bombay Legislative Council and subsequently in the Governor's Sind Advisory Council.<sup>21</sup> Neither would accept second place to the other. Majid had distrusted both of them and also Haroon for he considered them to be too reliant on the British and conservative in their political views. Although Majid's home base was in Karachi, he challenged Bhutto in his home district of Larkana for the sole purpose

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<sup>21</sup> The Sind Advisory Council functioned from 1 April 1936 (when Sind's provincial status came into effect) to January 1937. Its purpose was to administer the province under the Governor's direction, and its membership consisted of Sind's former Bombay Legislative Council representatives. See Mitra, *IAR*, Vol. I, January-June 1936, p. 24.



of excluding Bhutto from a place in the Assembly.<sup>22</sup>

The other parties to contest the elections in Sind were the Congress and the Hindu Party (neither competed in Muslim seats). The Congress claimed to be a non-communal, national organisation, yet it had not attempted to attract any Muslim candidates in Sind. There were no Muslims in the Sind Provincial Congress Committee, and where the organisation had members on local boards, such as the Karachi Municipal Corporation, they were without exception non-Muslims. By contesting only the General Urban, Labour, Indian Commerce, and an handful of General Rural seats, Congress revealed that it largely represented urban Hindu interests.

Challenging the Congress Party in the General Rural seats was the Hindu Party, an avowedly communal coalition of landlords with close connections to the All-India Hindu Mahasabha. Its members were drawn from the leading Hindu *zamindar* families and were associated with the village *panchayat* systems. Through the *panchayats* the Party members were in touch with localised rural Hindu sentiment. The Party was predominantly rural based, and while its strongest presence was in the city of Sukkur; it had no presence in Karachi. Its single platform was exclusively to protect and promote Hindu interests. The candidates had been prominent in the Sind Hindu Association's defence of Sind's attachment to Bombay, and several were office-holders of the All-India Hindu Mahasabha (such as Diamal Doulatram). Although it shared a Hindu commonality with most of the Sindhi Congress, it did not enjoy an amicable relationship and fought a bitter campaign against several Congressmen who stood for the rural seats. The division between the rural and urban non-Muslim political parties served to further

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<sup>22</sup> Majid succeeded in defeating Bhutto by the means of 'a particularly dirty trick.' Graham to Linlithgow, 18 February 1937, Linlithgow Mss., E.Ir.F.125, reprinted in P.N. Chopra (chief ed.), *Towards Freedom 1937-1947. Vol. 1 - Experiments with Provincial Autonomy 1st January - 31st December 1937* (New Delhi, Indian Council of Historical Research, 1985), p. 149.

the Hindu *zamindars'* sense of isolation after Sind's separation. Hence, the leading organisation contesting the General seats (accounting for one-third of the Assembly's seats) was strongly anti-Muslim.

### **The election results and insights into the politicisation of religious identity**

The election results provide important information for understanding the extent and location of the processes that were producing changes in the politics of the province. Although Jones has concluded that no clear pattern emerged to explain electoral behaviour for the whole province,<sup>23</sup> there are several important points which can be made.

The Communal Award had the effect of solidly embedding communal identity into the local and provincial structures of state power. Religious identity came to determine in which categories of electoral constituency individuals were located, and the location directly determined the amount of political power individuals' elected representatives had access to. For example, if a particular representative was located in a constituency which was constructed as a religious minority community, then access to governmental power was dependent upon the representative's membership in a successful *cross-communal* political alliance. Moreover, the structuring of constituencies based upon religious identity actively encouraged religious idiom to become the vocabulary whereby intra-community competition was expressed.

By 1937 the process of the state delineating boundaries around religious communities had the effect of channelling political representation in some sections of society so that the basis of competition for election was locked within the framework of politicised religious identity. That is, candidates in sections of the

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<sup>23</sup> Jones, *Muslim Politics*, p. 100.

Muslim, Sikh, and General electorates across India competed on the basis of how well they could act as representatives of their specific religious communities. The structuring of the allocation of elected representatives (and the consequential control of provincial administrations being largely determined by the terms of religious identity) was paramount in politicising notions of self-identity to the extent that political and religious identities were closely becoming the same.

### **The minority syndrome**

The point is more fully borne out through an assessment of statistical sampling of electoral data in several provinces where the results provide fresh insights into the redefining of political identity. The three provinces selected are: Sind (as the focus of this study); the United Provinces (where the minority/majority balance of Hindus and Muslims was the reverse to Sind's), and the Punjab (because it contained three religions which each held strong positions in different parts of the province). The three provinces provide a thorough mix of balances of the main religious communities, as well as varied political landscapes. In the UP a well-organised Congress Party existed; in the Punjab, the cross-communal alliance of the Unionists dominated; and in Sind the situation of polarised Hindu and Muslim elites characterised the political landscape.

The objective of the analysis of votes in those provinces is to establish whether any patterns existed which could shed light on the level of intra-community competition. The assumption underscoring the analysis of the 386 seats and 5.6 million votes cast, is that if the percentage difference of the total votes cast between the first and second placed candidates is narrower in some instances, then these instances indicate a more intense level of competition than in those instances where the percentage differences are significantly wider.

If there is more intra-community competition expressed in a religious idiom, according to Sandria Freitag, then there is more likely to be present conditions contributing to inter-communal conflict.<sup>24</sup> Her work illustrates that clashes between Hindus and Muslims in the early colonial era had originally arisen not from an increased awareness of Hindu identity versus Muslim identity, but had grown out of competition within the same religious communities. For example, Freitag has shown that in Agra during the 1880s communal conflict had been the result of an emphatic reassertion of traditional Hinduism against revisionist Hindu movements. Rather than locating the cause of communalism with the Hindus, Freitag explains how the dynamics of the pressures to modernise the political expressions of communities (both Hindu and Muslim) produced tensions between the reactionaries and the revisionists.

Due to the historical contexts which imperialism produced (especially the notions of self-contained Hindu and Muslim communities), appeals by competing groups to their communities were structured in a discourse that necessarily targeted the respective communities' self-consciousness of what made them a community: their religion. Through the asserting of religious symbolism in their definition of community, competing groups within a community were mobilising their communities to act out their processes of redefining identity in the public arena. Such displays triggered reactions in other religious communities, particularly actions designed to protect their own identities and institutions through a corresponding means of assertion.

The identifying and mapping of the level of intra-community competition in the 1930s is important, for it can highlight the extent and location of pressure spots in Indian communities which held the greatest potentialities for outbreaks of

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<sup>24</sup> Freitag, *Collective Action*, pp. 128-14', and 'Sacred Symbol as Mobilising Ideology: The North Indian Search for a 'Hindu Community'', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, No. 22 (1980).

communal conflict. The relevant question then with regard to the 1937 general election, is 'was there a correlation between the level of competition within a religious community and the relative numeric strength of that community to other communities?'

The analysis presented in Table 7 illustrates that in all three provinces the community that was in a minority recorded a narrower gap in the votes polled between the first and second placed candidates than that recorded by the majority community. Regardless of the state of politics in Sind, UP, and the Punjab, the minority community candidates fought closer electoral contests than those of the dominant community candidates (the pattern is hereafter expressed as the 'minority syndrome'). Put simply intra-community competition was greatest where a community was weakest.

**TABLE 7: 1937 ELECTION: DIFFERENCE OF PERCENTAGE OF VOTES POLLED BETWEEN FIRST AND SECOND CANDIDATES**

	Minority Community		Majority Community	
Punjab	Hindus	23.3%	Muslims	38.5%
	Sikhs	23.9%		
Sind	Hindus	23.0%	Muslims	27.7%
U.P	Muslims	27.5%	Hindus	39.7%

Source: calculated from data supplied in P.D Reeves, B.D Graham, and J.M Goodman, *Elections in Uttar Pradesh 1920-1951*, (Manohar, New Delhi, 1975); K.C Yadav, *Elections in Panjab 1920-1947*, (Manohar, New Delhi, 1967); and *Elections in India 1937*.

The minority syndrome pattern is even more evident when the voting behaviours within the minority communities are analysed. Here, the pattern is most pronounced in the constituencies where the minority community was at its weakest in terms of relative numerical proportion to the majority community (e.g. less than 20% of the total population).

In the Punjab, Muslims held an overall majority, but each main religion (Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindus) dominated different parts of the province (western, central, and eastern). There was a sharp difference in the percentage of votes polled between the first and second placed candidates in those parts of the Punjab where a community was at its greatest numeric strength compared with that where the community was weakest. For example, the overall difference in votes polled between the first and second placed Muslim candidates in the province was 38.5 percent, but:

where Muslims constituted 40 percent or more of the population (western and central Punjab), the difference rose to 45 percent, and where Muslims constituted 20 percent or less of the population (eastern Punjab), the difference plummeted to 11 percent.

Similarly, the difference in the votes polled between the first and second placed Sikh candidates in the province was 23.9 percent, but:

where Sikhs constituted 20 percent or more of the population (central Punjab), the difference rose to 35 percent, and where Sikhs constituted 20 percent or less of the population (western and eastern Punjab), the difference dropped to 15.7 percent.

The pattern of intensified competition occurring where a religious community was at its weakest is again apparent in Sind and the UP. Table 8 illustrates for Sind that in the region where Hindus were in the minority (the countryside) electoral contests were significantly closer than in the region where they dominated (the towns). Again, in the region where Muslims were in the minority (the towns) contests were much closer than those in the countryside where they dominated.

When one focuses on what was occurring amongst the Hindus in Sind's countryside, the 'minority syndrome' pattern is reinforced. In these seats it was not simply the closeness in contests between candidates which point to intensified levels of intra-community competition. Table 9 demonstrates that in western Sind, where Hindus constituted less than 12 percent of the population, not only were the contests closer than in the east (where rural Hindus were more than twice as populous), but there were more candidates and the electorates showed more interest in the results through higher voter turn-outs.

**TABLE 8: 1937 ELECTION: DIFFERENCE IN PERCENTAGE OF VOTES POLLED BETWEEN FIRST AND SECOND CANDIDATES IN SIND**

	General Seats	Muslim Seats
Urban Seats	31.6%	17.1%
Rural Seats	19.7%	28.4%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>23.1%</b>	<b>27.6%</b>

Source: calculated from *Elections in India 1937*, pp. 316-321.

**TABLE 9: 1937 ELECTION: GENERAL RURAL CONSTITUENCIES: INDICATORS OF COMPETITIVENESS IN SIND**

	Hindu Pop.	Difference Between 1st and 2nd Candidates	Voter Turn-out	Average Number of Candidates per seat
<b>Western Sind</b>	11.8%	11.5%	67.8%	4.2
<b>Eastern Sind</b>	28.0%	27.1%	57.2%	2.6

Source: calculated from *Elections in India 1937*, pp. 316-321, and *Census of India, 1931*, Vol. 8, pt. 2, pp. 478-485.

The earlier part of this chapter has shown that competition between Muslim elites was strong. In the Muslim rural seats, the elites had demonstrated a greater command over their localised environments than the rural Hindu elites. However, not only had many of the elites shown that they were unable to exist together in

the same parties, but even in the election the difference in votes polled between the first and second placed candidates in Sind was on average closer than their Muslim counterparts in the Punjab and UP. The closer contests suggest that the political ordering amongst the Muslim elites in Sind had not stabilised to the extent that it had in the other provinces.

The victorious rural Muslim candidates had been without exception, and irrespective of 'party' affiliation, men of prominence and note. The 34 Muslim MLAs consisted of at least 20 *zamindars* who held substantial holdings, 5 tribal *sirdars*, and 8 members of *pir* families. The rural elites had used their personal influence to draw support from their tenant cultivators, their kinsmen who owed tribal allegiance, or their spiritual disciples. Many of the *zamindars* were also tribal leaders, and this gave them considerable advantage over their rivals as they were able to draw on their economic influence over their tenants and on the customary loyalty which their kinsmen owed. Similarly, many of the *pirs* were also influential *zamindars*.

Among the Muslim elites tight battles were fought in only a few localities. These areas were the locations of *zamindars* who did not carry the stature of the *waderos*, and who were not connected to the provinces' *pir* families, and so their claims for election were hotly contested by a wider field of lesser elites. The *mirs* and the *pirs* of central Sind, and the *waderos* of the west, easily won their seats. While the Hindu *zamindars* generally defeated their opponents by an average of less than 20 percent of the vote, the Muslims elites had won by a difference of nearly 30 percent of the total votes cast. In the General Rural seats the most successful *zamindar* defeated his opponent by 86 percent (Thar West), but the next most successful candidate won with a margin of 30 percent (Sukkur Central). In the Muslim Rural seats more than half of the victors had won by a margin of over 30 percent.



This analysis shows that despite rivalry amongst Muslim elites, most of the competing elites faced little opposition in their own territories, but among the rural Hindus, especially in western Sind, the answer to the question of who provided leadership was less clear. While Muslims had the most to gain through provincial autonomy, it was the minority Hindus who had been most politically activated by the challenge its introduction presented.

In the urban Muslim seats the contests were more closely fought than in the rural Muslim seats. Significantly, the Muslims in the cities were in a minority to Hindus. The new Assembly introduced considerable opportunities for the Muslim industrial and professional classes to access political power. In the urban Sindhi business environment, the Muslims had faced tough opposition from the Sindhi, Bombay, Gujerati, and South Indian middle classes. Unlike their rural counterparts, the urban middle classes generally did not possess traditional roles of authority over Muslim constituents. The urban Muslim seats provided opportunities for the Muslim middle classes to legitimise their claim to leadership roles in Muslim society. However, they also faced the challenge from those traditional leaders who were now based in the cities. For example, in the seat of Karachi north, the contest between the industrialist Abdullah Haroon and Khan Sahib Allah Bakhsh Gabol (a Baluchi tribal *sirdar*, illustrated the clash between the modernising elements in Muslim society who sought legitimation of their roles as political leaders, and the traditional holders of authority in Sindhi Muslim society. The constituency contained the Lyari quarter, which had a very large population of Baluchis and Pathans. Although Haroon was a high profile and generous Muslim leader with a progressive vision for Sindhi Muslim society, he failed to overcome the strength of the tribal allegiances of his opponent's supporters and lost the contest.

In the non-Muslim seats, the overall results showed a clear demarcation of spheres of influence between two groups: the Congress and the Hindu Party. In the countryside the Congress possessed little support, winning only two rural seats and failed to contest any Muslim seats. Its strength was in the cities, where it won five of its eight seats (three General urban seats, the Indian Commerce, and Indian Labour seats). Of the urban seats it contested, it polled nearly two-thirds of the total votes cast, whereas in the rural areas it succeeded in obtaining only one third of the votes in the seats it contested. Congress failed in the countryside because many rural Hindus held it responsible for allowing Sind to be separated from Bombay.<sup>25</sup>

TABLE 10: 1937 ELECTION RESULTS FOR SIND

Party	General	Muslim	Comm.	Land-holders	Labour	Europn.	Total
Congress	6	0	1	0	1	0	8
Hindu Party	11	0	0	1	0	0	12
Sind Azad P.	0	3	0	0	0	0	3
Sind United P.	0	21	0	0	0	0	21
Sind Muslim P.	0	3	0	1	0	0	4
Independents	2	7	1	0	0	2	12
<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>60</b>

Source: *Elections in India, 1937*, pp. 316-321.

It was the Hindu Party which won the clear majority of the General rural seats. The Hindu Party candidates were strongest on the right bank of the Indus (Karachi, Dadu, Larkana, Upper Sind Frontier) and most of Sukkur district. These were the districts where their platform on the protection of Hindu interests was most relevant because it was here that the Hindu minority was numerically weakest. The Hindu voters in rural Sind responded not to the secular, national Congress or to independent candidates, but to the representatives of the Hindu

<sup>25</sup> B.T. Gajra, *Sind's Role in Freedom Struggle* (Bombay, Bharatvasi, 1986), p. 137.

*panchayats* who promised protection against the Muslims (the Muslim voters of these areas similarly returned men who had been instrumental in advocating the separation of Sind from Bombay).

For the rural Hindus, their fear of a Muslim return to power translated into decisions as to who could best protect their interests. They understood this to be the Hindu Party with its platform to defend Hindu cultural identities. The rural Muslims had voted for their traditional leaders to represent them as the majority in the new Assembly. These were the same leaders who had won Sind's separation with the promise of advantage for the Muslim community.

Overall, the 'minority syndrome' pattern reveals that where a community was in a position of relative numeric weakness compared with another community it was experiencing a more intense process of redefining its political identity. In a sense, the expansion of a democracy structured by the state pressured minority communities to question if their traditional political structures (modes of expression, leadership, and direction) were still relevant. In this context the general election of 1937 provided the opportunity to reconfigure leadership roles.

### III

In a sense their majority status gave the newly elected Muslim members a false sense of security, for they had believed that the awarding of provincial autonomy would bring them automatic control over the province's affairs. The distribution of seats meant there were only two realistic options for a strong government in Sind. The first option was the coalescence of the Muslim members into one party, for they were the only grouping that held a majority of seats (34 of the Assembly's 60). For this to occur, the Muslims had to unite *as Muslims*. In this sense the Muslim elites in Sind faced the same dilemma as Jinnah. Although the

Muslims shared a commonality as Muslims, it did not predispose them to unite or remain united unless there was a counterbalancing force that pushed them into unifying, but they perceived no such immediate force. Once separation and provincial autonomy had been achieved, the immediate *leitmotif* of the Muslim elites was the pursuit of individual power. While the separation movement had been driven by, and towards, communal and ethnocentric issues, its achievement was not an end in itself but simply an elimination of competitors for the opportunities to exercise control. Once provincial autonomy had come the Sindhi Muslim elites saw no answer to the question of why they should be united as Muslims.

The second option for a viable government was the formation of a stable, cross-communal coalition ministry based upon agreed principles and platforms. Haroon had seen the merits of this option as he realised that this was where Sind's best interests lay, and therefore ultimately that of the Muslims. However, he failed to persuade his rural Muslim colleagues. In spite of the obvious economic similarities between the Hindu and Muslim *zamindars*, there remained a deep underlying tension and distrust towards each other. The aggressive leaderships in the Sind separation and anti-separation movements had been drawn from the respective rural communities, and the separation movement had portrayed the antagonism between the communities' traditional leaders. Moreover, it was the rural townships, not cities, which experienced the most recent and violent modern communal riots.

### **Conclusion**

Unquestionably, the Hindu elites of Sind had considered the separation of Sind from Bombay and the creation of a provincial legislature to be detrimental to their community's interests. Hitherto, the Hindu middle-classes had made reasonably unfettered inroads into Sind's political landscape. The act of structurally limiting

their power in the Assembly (as a minority) was clearly construed by them as disadvantageous to their positions in Sind's political-economy. The provincial Assembly was about to intrude in to numerous spheres which had previously been predominantly influenced by forces of economic power and traditional status. The Assembly would now determine: who would get what (e.g. recruitment and promotion in the police, judicial and government service); who would pay and how much they would pay (e.g. revenue assessment); where money would be spent (e.g. public works projects, education); what people could do and what they must not do (e.g. laws); what controls would be imposed on what functions (e.g. regulatory Acts); and how lesser levels of authority would be distributed and accessed (e.g. Local Boards and Municipalities).

Access to these aspects of government had been a quantum leap in self-government of Sindhis. Under the administration of the Commissioner-in-Sind they had previously been excluded from the earlier reforms that brought participation in the processes of colonial responsible government. While many of the elites elected to the Provincial Assembly were traditional holders of power, the forum for exercising power was novel. The raj had designed the institution of provincial autonomy to express symbolically the connection between community and state. However, it was creating state structures that were perilously close to over-emphasising notions of religious identity to the extent that state institutions could only function when participants acted through power relationships within the paradigm of religious community rather than the bonds that the secular state envisaged.<sup>26</sup>

The contest between Hindu nationalists and secular Congressmen, and between Muslim *pirs* and *vaderos*, produced an environment where the protagonists sought ways in which to elevate their standing within their defined

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<sup>26</sup> This notion is borrowed from Freitag, *Collective Action*, p. 62.

fields of political representation. Ultimately the appeal to religious identity was becoming one of the most important benchmarks, because it was religious affiliation which constructed the electorate. The question the election results posed for Sind concerned the extent to which religious symbolism would become the formal vehicle for articulating and acting out political identity.