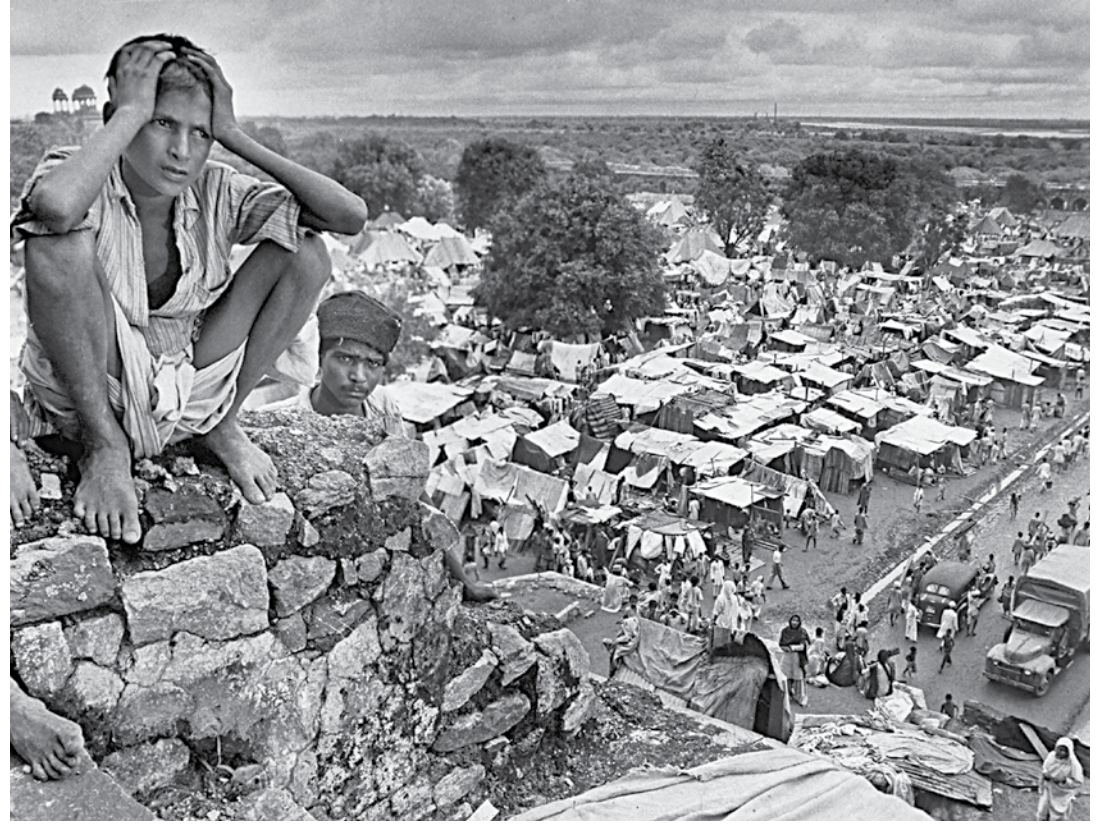




Overcrowded train transferring refugees during the partition of India, 1947. This was considered to be the largest migration in human history.



A young boy sits on the walls of Purana Qila in New Delhi. The 16th century fortress turned into one of Delhi's biggest refugee camps as the capital struggled with a refugee crisis amid spurts of communal rioting.
(PHOTO BY MARGARET BOURKE-WHITE/THE LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION)

UNDERSTANDING THE COMMUNAL DIVIDE

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Theories abound. Bizarre rumours run wild. Apart from extremists on both ends of the spectrum, all rational minds with a heart condemn the divide; yet, it refuses to go away. It's complex -- at times it gets ugly but, most of the time, a simmering tension over numerous petty differences regarding faith, culture and inexplicable prejudices run deep. A century ago, Tagore wrote, "...it's no use pretending, a real divide exists between Hindus and Muslims" (*C Works*, Vol. Nine, page 605). This is an effort to understand why. This issue is so delicate and tricky that even an unintended slip may be accused of being partisan or astute objectivity of being insensitive. Despite the risk of walking on thin ice, running away from an issue so immensely important is no answer.

Contrary to popular opinion, the rift between Hindus and Muslims is not a British creation. They merely sensed it early on and cunningly used it to their advantage, further widening the gap. The rift existed all along, through centuries of the Muslim rule. The death, destruction, and pillage caused by their early assaults slowly receded to make way for often tense, but mostly peaceful, coexistence. Assimilation, however, proved difficult. While interfaith marriage and cultural interaction did take place, they were more exceptions than the rule. Again, Tagore observed, "...they met, but didn't mingle; remained insulated in confines of their formidable religio-cultural structures" (*C Works*, Vol. 12, page 537). Such an iron curtain cannot be denied as the imagination of fertile minds or the dirty work of goons. Inquiring the root causes requires flipping through the pages of ancient India, even if briefly.

Indian history can certainly claim continuity over a few millennia. In this long trek, it's quite natural to develop distinct but constant currents in its flow. In India's case, three such main currents can be identified: 1) Brahminism and its counter currents, 2) A centre-region tussle and, 3) The peasant misery. These deep currents appear and disappear as prime movers of Indian history, with major twists and turns of countless events in different guises. Without a comprehensive look at all three, discerning Indian history will be incomplete. However, we will focus on the contours of only the first current below.

Rise of Brahminism
Despite mythical claims on the contrary, the recent Genomic study of South Asians published in 2018 re-established the Aryan invasion/migration theory. From here on, the ensuing Indian historiography is easier to trace, based partly on archaeology and ancient texts, and partly on logical conjectures. The more the fair-skinned Aryans spread across the rest of India from the entry point in the north-west, the more they faced stiff resistance from the dark-skinned native tribes like the Dasyu, Rakshasa, Nishada, or others, broadly called Dravidians or 'frends' as cited in Rig Veda (Hymn 21, verse five or Hymn 33, verse 15). However, they were defeated by skilled horse-riding Aryan warriors. Invasion or mass migration is never peaceful, whether in ancient times or modern.

The entire project probably looked quite like the European colonisation of America a few millennia later. But there were also two major differences. Firstly, the Europeans slaughtered

entire tribes of the Native Americans, sparing just a few. This proved quite impossible in India because of the sheer numbers of native tribes. Secondly, what the Europeans did in just two to three centuries with the help of gunpowder, the Aryans needed far more than millennia. As they were nomadic, they required the conquered lands to be farmed. So, they devised a scheme. The entire populace was categorised into four main occupational groups or castes: the Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya, and Sudras. There was another group, the Mlechchhas or outcastes.

The Brahmin, as priest/teacher, provided moral guidance. The Kshatriya provided security as warriors. The Vaisya were the traders, and the Sudra were the farmers and artisans or were assigned other menial tasks. The Mlechchhas, i.e., the aborigines or forest dwellers, were branded as cleaners and scavengers and considered outcastes, outside the pail of society. The Aryan aristocracy belonged to the first two castes, the common Aryans to the third, while the entirety of the native people belonged to the fourth. Thus, began a new chapter in Indian history. After prolonged friction and turmoil between the new arrivals and the locals, this division of labour possibly provided stability and was considered efficient in the ancient world. Other regions in the contemporary world weren't much different. History is aware of a degraded status of the black-headed people in China (J Keay, *China a history*, page 94), or the slaves in the Fertile Crescent. But, there was a key difference. While the slaves or others in the lower ranks in those places could escape, buy freedom, or were lifted by the state, the fate of the lower castes, mostly the Sudras and untouchables, was sealed in perpetuity right to the present. How could it have survived while others faded?

The key is India's productive relation; once the caste order was set up, it barely changed over a few millennia. Power changed hands at the top frequently, but it didn't bring any major changes at the grassroots. Feudal practice in different forms remained constant. There was always a raja/king/lord at the local, regional, and central level. Under this chain of command grew countless isolated, self-governing, and insulated villages. The upper castes controlled most of the means of production, exercised full political power, and dictated all religious narratives. The entire lower castes, exploited economically and abused racially, had no choice but to submit and behave accordingly; thus, class and caste became identical. All the sacred texts stated that the main task of the Sudras was to serve the upper castes (Apastamba Dharma Sutra 1.1.1.7-8; Mahabharata, Shanti Parva 60.28). Any transgression was met with severe punishment, both by violent means and through social exclusion. A peaceful and stable society functioned, but at the cost of numerous divides at every level of society and governance. India remained divided and moribund ever since. While the top few thrived, the rest struggled to survive.

Between the early Aryan arrivals and the rise of the Mauryan Empire in the third century BCE, India must have gone through a series of turmoil glimpses which can be traced in the epics but eventually reached an equilibrium point during the Vedic age. This was a period of collective rule of the upper castes/class, i.e., the

Brahmin and Kshatriya were firmly established. Their cosmic views and socio-religious customs are called Brahminism. It prevailed for a few centuries, attained a high level of learning compiled in multiple sacred texts, and peaked in the Upanishads, an illuminating philosophical treatise. Dissent/diversity was accepted so long the Brahminic supremacy was recognised. But this otherwise calm Brahminic order held an economically exploitative and socially racist relation with the lower castes. This gave rise to resentment, fatalism, and tension just below the surface. Any unearned privilege taken for granted by dint of birth alone over generations' will, at some point, invites decedance beyond remedy and triggers

was an alternative for the subaltern. The trading caste, though of Aryan descent and was also maligned by the two higher castes, joined ranks. By the second century BCE, Buddhism with a wide following became a counter-current to Brahminism for the next several centuries.

Panini isn't the only ancient Indian scholar who noticed such toxic relations. In the fourth century CE, when the Buddhists had lost much of their socio-political power, the poet laureate of Hindu classical age Kalidasa had no qualm in denigrating Buddhist nuns in one of his plays *Malavikagnimitra* (Kanai Lal, *Rise and decline of Buddhism in India*, page-386). Finally, the famous Hindu philosopher/reformer Samkaracarya, in eighth century CE,

Buddhism nearly eclipsed in India, it spread to the rest of Asia. India, over the next many centuries, relapsed into political and social disunity.

New alternative appears

Invading neighbouring lands for primitive accumulation is a civilisational trait present from its dawn, often followed by mass migration. India was always a lucrative destination for its riches, moderate climate, and proximity to the cradle of civilisation in the Fertile Crescent. After the first journey from Africa, lost in the mists of time, the Aryan arrival in large numbers can be traced back to around 2000 BCE. From third till fifth century CE, a series of raiders, namely Greeks, Bactrians, Scythians, and Huns were the new-comers. Except for the Greeks, the rest settled and slowly assimilated with the locals. Then again, between the eighth and 16th century CE, a series of central and west Asian people who by then were Muslims, invaded India first intermittently then settled permanently from 12th century onward. The British refused to settle and returned after roughly two centuries.

All invaders were violent; Muslims were no exception. They too faced stiff resistance, but because of fighting among Indian kingdoms, they prevailed. Back then, their ethnic identity of Yavanas, Shakas, and Turushkas was far more notorious than their Muslim identity. As iconoclasts, they were prone to temple desecration. But they weren't alone in such vicious behaviour; the regional Hindu states in the Middle Ages were equally destructive when seizing each other's land. Temples were inseparable from the state, so desecrating the temples of the enemy monarch was a necessity (Wendy Doniger, *The Hindus...* page 366). "The Kashmiri King Harsha even raised the plundering of temples to an institutionalised activity; in the late 12th and early 13th century, while the Turkish rulers were asserting themselves in north India, kings of the Paramara line attacked and plundered Jain temples in Gujarat." (R. Thapar, H. Mukhia, & B. Chandra in '*Communalism and the writing of Indian History*' Delhi; People's Publishing House, 1969 page 14, 31). There are many such references in Richard M. Eaton's *Essays on Islam & Indian History*.

Imperial expansion was not a Muslim trait only; all the Christian or Hindu monarchies in the medieval times, both in Europe and India, were equally violent. When Sultan of Gazni was raiding north India, South Indian Chola king was raiding the Southeast Asian ports. It's a monarchy trait -- during peacetime, it extorts its peasantry, and in wartime, peasants work under the enemy monarch.

Once the conquest phase was over, the Muslims settled in India as rulers and found the Hindu civilisation as formidable as theirs. After the Mauryan Empire collapsed, many central Asian people had invaded and settled in India; they adopted the Brahminic or Buddhist hierarchy and got a new caste status. They too were called Mlechchhas, i.e., untouchables, but having no civilisation of their own, blended slowly with the locals. Muslims, however, had a civilisation and were unwilling to cave in as a new caste under Brahminic supremacy. This became and remained a bone of contention ever since.

Besides, as conquerors, they suffered a fake sense of superiority. For the first few centuries, they remained an

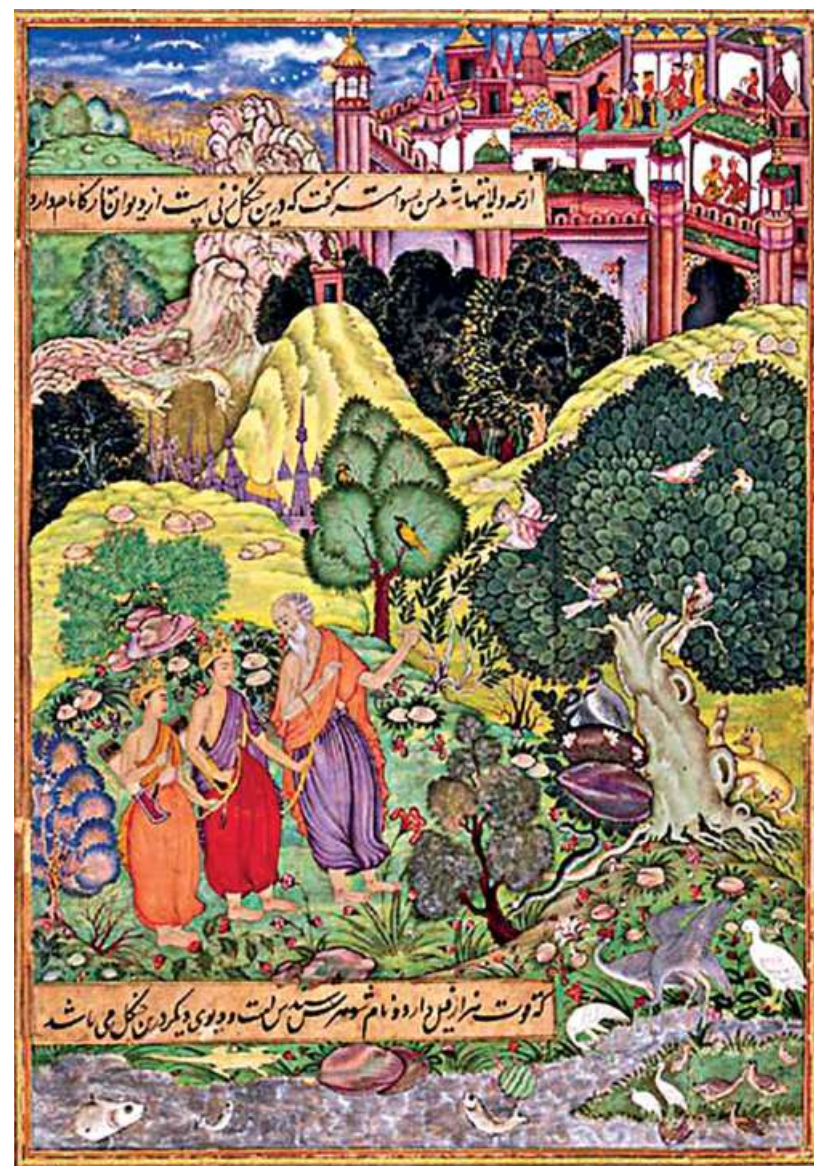
alien minority amidst a sea of hostile populace with a different religio-cultural structure. Mingling of diverse people is never easy. Eventually, many generations later, they gave birth to a mixed cultural milieu that was called "Hindustani"; a blend of Indian, west and central Asian cultural streaks. Gradually, it spilt over from the courts and became the culture of the elites across all divides.

There was cultural exchange between the communities, and also some intermarriages, but these were not common. Some religious conversions did take place; however, rarely forcibly, and rather by the agencies of the Sufis spread across India. It's the inclusive world view and their ascetic life that drew a cross-section of people to Islam, not the tyranny of the rulers or the preaching of the clerics. If the Bhakti movement offered a counter-culture to the lower castes not comfortable with the Brahminic hold, the Sufi shrines had become a refuge to both the Hindu Muslim plebeians. Mogul court's multiculturalism couldn't reach the wider society beyond the elites. Besides, they didn't bring any significant reform in the feudal structure except making rent collection more efficient. The two communities largely remained apart. If the Buddhists were the hated "other" to the Brahminic hierarchy, Muslims were "Mlech" and a hated adversary. To the Muslims, elite Hindus were "Kafirs," i.e., infidels.

Fast forward to the national movement. The earlier refusal of the Muslims to cave in as a new caste under Brahminic hierarchy resurfaced in a different guise. The main flow of nationalist historiography considered Muslim invasion of India as a stain; a sure recipe for a communal discord. Muslims naturally found this demeaning and worrisome. So when such thinking imagined a future Indian nation, it smelled of Hindu nationalism (Partha Chatterjee, *Itihasher Uttaradhihar*, page 131). Sensing trouble in the future, Indian Muslims asked for a constitutional recognition as a large minority of a different faith, but were refused. Muslim nationalism was the reaction to this refusal, having no merit of its own. If the Hindus suffered from a majoritarian chauvinism, Muslims suffered from the Mogul syndrome. They cherished its grandeur without realising the awful price tag; the steady peasant extortion and rebellion (I. Habib, *Essays in Indian History*, page 155-60, 239-44). The Muslims refused to accept that the sun had set in the millennia-old Islamic world system. Intransigence from both the Congress and the League eventually made partition inescapable; communal rift got constitutional legality. Seven decades onward, the entire subcontinent has turned into a volatile powder keg.

Where to?
Until leadership across all divides discerns the futility of a nuclear arms race for supremacy, the curse of poverty will keep gnawing at all development efforts in the whole region. While it is true that old prejudices die hard, pumping new life into it can only expedite mutual destruction, either by intent or accident. Indian civilisation is a collective of Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, and European civilisations. Trying to erase either of them would invariably weaken the whole.

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Vishwamitra brings Rama and Lakshmana to his hermitage. This exquisite miniature of the Ramayana was commissioned by Emperor Akbar.

CREDIT: MUSEUM 'RIETBERG.

reaction. This universal law of nature was in display in ancient India.

Rise & fall of the resistance

The acclaimed historian Romila Thapar notes, "...as anti-thesis to Vedic Brahmanism there grew the Shramanic sects that included the Buddhists, Jains, Ajivikas, and Charvakas; called "Nastikas" or non-believers by the Brahminic establishment...no matter how much we insist Buddhism and Jainism have always been a part of Hinduism, their teachings were distinctly different as were their social institutions...their mutual hostility was noticed by the great linguist Panini in the fourth century BCE; he compared the relation of Brahman and Shramanic dharmas to that of snake and mongoose." The opposing views had rejected caste, the bastion of Brahminic supremacy that had incensed the latter. At last, here

wrote, "The Buddha was an enemy of the people and taught contradictory and confusing things," in his *Brahmasutra-Samkara-Bhasya* (ibid). These observations cover more than a thousand years and indicate the rise and decline of Buddhism in India. It had its fair share of negativities and lost much of its emancipating teachings, and eventually caved within the Brahminic canopy.

Once the Buddhists lost political power, the Brahminic hierarchy reasserted with new vigour. It reformed itself, adopted some of the lower caste cosmic ideas, and relaxed the caste divide slightly. It purged all Buddhist teachings and institutions. Persecution of all kinds, ranging from social exclusion to forcible conversion to desecration of Buddhist monasteries, is in record. Top Indian historians like Kosambi, Niharjanjan, Basam, and Romila have concurred. Even as