

**Dr M wrong on choice between Indian and Muslim**  
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Former premier Dr Mahathir Mohamad's advice to Malaysia's Indian Muslims to choose between their Muslim and their Indian identities puts one in mind of a resonant episode in the immediate prelude to the partition of India in mid-1947.

A delegation of Indian Muslims, contemplating abandoning their homes in India for the new entity called Pakistan, went to see Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, the highest ranked Muslim in the Congress Party and a strong foe of partition.

Islamic scholar Azad, who was born in Mecca, was renowned for the battles he had waged for communal unity in India, for its freedom from Britain, and for secularism.

His visitors were in no doubt about where Azad stood on the matter of partition: he was unalterably opposed and an arch critic of Mohammed Ali Jinnah, head of the Muslim League and fervent proponent of separation.

The delegation just wanted to see for themselves if Azad would waver from his resolute anti-partition stance at a perilous time.

June 1947 comprised an exaggerated moment in Indian history. It is just such moments of extremity that best reveal the essence of things. And Azad demonstrated the seer-like qualities of his stature as a leader when he posed this question to the delegation: "Where will you go should you discover that Pakistan is not your home?"

Of course, none of his visitors could countenance the notion that their anticipated new abode could turn out to be forbidding.

Many of those who went to see Azad settled in the Sind region of newly-formed Pakistan, of which Karachi is the metropolis.

Fast forward 40 years to the late 1980s: The city becomes a maelstrom of communal violence between the muhajirs (Indian Muslims from India who moved to Sind and west Punjab after partition) and the indigenes.

The bursts of violence were frequent, horrific and sustained, and were caused by muhajir resentment at being marginalised by the indigenes of Sind.

Two decades before the muhajir-inspired convulsions in the Sind of the late 1980s and after, the world had already witnessed the animosity between Muslim Bengalis and the Punjabi Muslim-dominated Pakistan army that led to the war of secession in East Pakistan, which then became Bangladesh.

A notable feature of this war in 1971 was that here the muhajirs (Bihar Muslims who had immigrated at the time of partition to East Bengal/East Pakistan) backed the elitist Punjabi soldiers of the Pakistani army in the battle against indigenous Bengali Muslims.

From not only these facets of subcontinent history but from several others the world over in the last century, particularly if you take the flux and flow of sectarian allegiances in Lebanon, it is not hard to conclude that parochially-constituted identities provide no lasting

solder by which to glue a national identity.

### **One can be both Indian and Muslim**

Mahathir's positing of a dichotomy – either you are Indian or you are Muslim (and therefore Malay) – to Muslim Indians in Malaysia has been proven by recent history to be a delusive conceit.

Maulana Azad espoused a composite view of national identity to partition-leaning Muslims of the Indian subcontinent six decades ago: He held you could be Indian and Muslim at the same time, in contradistinction to the great Indian poet Mohamed Iqbal, who in a famous disquisition in 1930 argued that the Muslim identity would fade in an independent India. Hence a separate homeland for Muslim Indians was imperative.

Admittedly, it is a long way from Maulana Azad to Gerald Manley Hopkins, a 19th century English poet, of special resonance in these ecologically fraught times.

Hopkins loved nature in which he saw a “dappled” and “pied” quality of contrasting elements forming the same pattern which he tried to reproduce in his poems.

“Glory to God for dappled things,” he rhapsodised in one of his best poems, a cosmic plea for seeing things as nature would have us - as “both/and” and not as “either/or”.

Muslim Indians in Malaysia can be Malaysian, Muslim and Indian at the same time, a triple and sustainable (nice ecologically friendly word that!) identity that betters Azad, and tributes Hopkins.

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