In 1940, Golwalkar, the ideologue of Hindutva wrote these ominous words:

“The non-Hindu people of Hindustan must either adopt Hindu culture and languages, must learn and respect and hold in reverence the Hindu religion, must entertain no idea but of those of glorification of the Hindu race and culture ... in a word they must cease to be foreigners; or may stay in the country, wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment—not even citizens’ rights.”

“To keep up the purity of its race and culture, Germany shocked the world by her purging the country of the Semitic races—the Jews. Race pride at its highest has been manifested here, a good lesson for us in Hindustan to learn and profit by”.

How did an ancient, accommodative civilization like that of India arrive at a historical juncture when an ideologue like Golwalkar could go so far as to cite the German decimation of the Jews as an example for India to follow?

India is an ancient and complex civilization. It is like a layered geological formation built up by eons of human interactions in the vast milieu of South Asia. The emergence of Hindutva, a rightwing ideology is a recent phenomenon.

In this article, we highlight the milestones on the road to communal majoritarianism in British India. Of all the turbulent events in the modern communal history of the subcontinent, two events stand out as game changers in the Hindu-Muslim dialectic: The British India Census of 1881 and Gandhi’s masterful political stroke in sidelining Ambedkar and coopting the Dalit votes in 1931. The Muslim leaders, including the Agha Khan, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, Allama Iqbal and the Ali Brothers were all there on the historical stage but there was no ideational counter-thrust to the emergence of communal majoritarianism.

India, a Nation of Nations

3000 B.C. To Recent Centuries

Geography has molded the history of the Indian subcontinent which consists of the modern nations of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka. It is bounded to the North by the high Himalayas, the thick forests of Assam to the East and the harsh deserts of Baluchistan to the West. The Indian ocean, the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal surround it on three sides making it an insular peninsula. Invasions from the
North and East were not possible. The few mountain passes to the northwest were the only routes for ingress and egress and provided the historical routes for mass migrations.

Geography is about the only thing that the people of South Asia agree upon. Any attempt to unravel the pages of history invites the injection of politics into the discourse. It is generally agreed that the Indus Valley civilization which thrived in Pakistan and straddled parts of India and Afghanistan from 3000 BC to 1300 BC was the first urbanized civilization to grace the subcontinent. It excelled in city planning, knew the use of softer metals like gold, copper, lead and tin and carried on trade with the concomitant Sumerian civilization in Iraq.

Circa 1500 BC, cattle herders from Central Asia, known as Aryans, migrated in large numbers to the Indus valley, pushed the native Dravidians south and superimposed their language and culture on the indigenous cultures. The urban Indus Valley civilization disappeared and was replaced by small agricultural principalities throughout northern India. What emerged was a complex and heterogeneous set of beliefs, customs and a caste structure that divided the society into rigid segments. Over the centuries each caste further divided into sub-castes or even castes within sub-castes. The highest caste, the Brahmins, anointed this hierarchal structure as a divine order. The Dalits (the so-called “untouchables”) were condemned in perpetuity as outcasts.

In the sixth century BC, Buddhism appeared in this stratified society. Gautama Buddha challenged the Brahmin claims to superior birth. He taught that a person became a Brahmin through virtue and moral action, not by birth. He emphasized the middle path and advocated that there was one single moral order for all humankind rather than the Brahmin ethic of duty based upon one’s own caste.

Alexander invaded Afghanistan and Pakistan in 327-325 BCE and the subcontinent was woven into the fabric of West Asia. Vestiges of Greek influence may be found to this day in the racial makeup of people in the Nuristan region of Pakistan and in the Pashtun areas of Afghanistan.

Emperor Asoka, who ruled India during the fourth century BCE, championed the propagation of Buddhism Through his efforts most of northern India, Pakistan and Afghanistan became Buddhist. His emissaries as well as travelers carried the message of Buddha to Sri Lanka, East Asia and China.
After Asoka (3rd century BC) Buddhism spread all over Asia. In India, it displaced Brahmanism.

Over the next millennia Buddhism disappeared from India even as it spread in East Asia. Several reasons have been advanced for this decline. Brahmanism coopted many of the precepts of Buddhism and included the Buddha as an incarnation of the god Vishnu. The local rulers found Brahmanism to their liking as Buddhism forbade violence whereas Brahmanism was willing to sanction war as an instrument of imperial power. The powerful Gupta empire (300-500 CE) in northern India, was in particular a patron of Brahman culture. For Buddhist monasteries loss of court patronage meant a loss of revenue. To control the decline, Buddhist monks tried adapting to Brahman ways, namely, accepting Buddha as a God and using Sanskrit as the liturgical language. This only accelerated the decline as the common man saw Buddhism as an extension of Brahmanism.
Arrival of Judaism, Christianity and Islam

After the destruction of the second temple in 70 CE, a small group from the Jewish diaspora fled to the southwestern coast of India. At about the same time, in 54 CE, St. Thomas landed on the same coast. The Jews found refuge and Christianity found acceptance. Today, almost 20 percent of the population of the southern state of Kerala is Christian.

Islam arrived on the coast of Kerala in the seventh century. There has been a brisk trade between the southwestern coast of India and the Arabian Peninsula since ancient times. In the year 629 CE, King Cheraman of Kerala, while on a trading mission to the Hejaz, met with Prophet Muhammed and accepted Islam. Upon his return, he built the Cheraman Juma Mosque. Renovated over the years, the mosque still stands in Methala, Kerala and is one of the oldest mosques in the world, older than the oldest mosques in Cairo and Baghdad. Islam also found wide acceptance along the coast. Today, more than 27 percent of the population of the state of Kerala is Muslim.

Cheraman Juma Masjid, Kerala, India, first built in 629 CE

Just as there was a brisk, profitable and peaceful trade between the shores of southern India and the Arabian Peninsula, the shores of northwestern India, Baluchistan and the Persian Gulf were infested with piracy. It was one of these acts of piracy by subjects of Raja Dahir of Sind that brought Arab armies into southern Pakistan (711 CE). The territories of Pakistan became a part of the vast Arab empire that straddled Asia, North
Africa and Europe and stretched from the river Indus to the Pyrenees mountains in Spain and France.

For the next five hundred years there was an equilibrium between northern India and the Islamic domains in Persia and Central Asia. Rajput kingdoms rose in the Gangetic plains, often warring with each other and at other times cooperating with one another. However, India did not escape the turmoil in the Eurasian world, far away from its borders. In the tenth century, a powerful Shia dynasty, the Fatimids, arose in North Africa. It quickly overran Egypt, made Cairo its capital (969 CE) and extended its sway over Syria and the Hejaz (Mecca and Madina). Ideological differences between the Shia Fatimids based in Cairo and the Sunni Abbasids based in Baghdad spilled over into economic warfare. The Sunni sultans of the east were cut off from the profitable trade with the Italian city states of Venice and Genoa. These Sultans, therefore, turned east and raided India. Thus, the raids from Central Asia into India was for gold and not for faith.

In 1192 the Afghans captured Delhi and established the Delhi sultanate. Several dynasties rose one after the other ruling over much of northern India. The sultans were not interested in propagating their faith and were focused primarily on collecting taxes to ward off the unrelenting threat of invasions from the Mongols and the Tartars and to cope with persistent resistance from the Rajputs. The task of propagating the faith was
left to the Sufi Shaikhs. In 1947, a quarter of the population of the subcontinent was Muslim. Today, it is about one third.

The Indian Muslims are indigenous to the land. Arguably, their forefathers were at various times Hindu, Buddhist, Animist or a part of pre-Aryan Indus Valley cultures. They accepted Islam to escape the perpetual servitude that Brahmanism imposed on the lower castes. There are no significant genetic differences between the Hindus, Muslims and Christians of South India; they carry the dominant Dravidian ASI genes which was common with the people of Indus Valley Civilization. The Hindus and Muslims of north India and Pakistan carry the dominant ANI genes which they share with the people of Central Asia.

The Mogul Empire

In 1526, the Uzbek Prince Babur Shah captured Delhi and laid the foundation of the Mogul empire. Under his grandson, Akbar, the empire expanded to include all of northern India, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh. Akbar was one of the most far-sighted monarchs in world history. He married Rajput princesses, abolished discriminatory taxes on the Hindus, prohibited the burning alive of Hindu widows (sati)
on their husband's pyres, and allowed Indians, Hindus and Muslims alike to rise to the highest levels in the Mogul courts. His army chief of staff was a Hindu Rajput as was his finance minister. He surrounded himself with the most meritorious writers, administrators, musicians, men of science and religion. He established an *Ibadat Khana* or “house of worship” where he invited representatives from Hindu, Muslim, Christian and other traditions, and encouraged them to engage in discussions to forge a universal brotherhood. Indeed, it may be said that he tried to forge an Indian nation transcending the narrow boundaries of ritualistic religion.

Akbar, the Great Mogul (1556-1605), seated in his “Ibadat Khana” (House of Worship/Spiritual Discourse). He was the father of interfaith dialogue in modern times.

The Mogul empire grew in prosperity with successive monarchs. It reached the zenith of its power under his grandson, Shah Jehan who built the Taj Mahal as a monument of love to commemorate the death of his beloved wife Mumtaz Mahal.
Under the Great Moguls (1526-1707) India became the richest country in the world, accounting for 27 percent of world GDP. In the long and checkered history of India, this was a moment of peace for its people. Art, culture, music, literature, industry and agriculture thrived. The legendary wealth of Mogul India attracted the attention of European traders who vied with one another to obtain firmans (court edicts) to trade with the subcontinent.

The empire fell apart after the death of the last great Mogul emperor, Aurangzeb (d 1707). The decay of the vast Mogul empire has been a subject of a great many books. Incompetent monarchs, the Maratha insurgency in the southwest, internal ethical rot, the rise of right-wing religious fervor all played their part. The major provinces declared their autonomy from the emperor. Devastating raids by the Hindu Maratha armies as far away as Bengal in the East, Punjab in the North and Tamil Nadu to the south devastated the land. In 1739, Delhi was occupied by the Persian king Nadir Shah who carried away the jewel-studded Mogul peacock throne as war booty.

Enter the British
The Europeans were active in the Indian ocean since the sixteenth century. The first to arrive were the Portuguese who destroyed the thriving trade centers around the rim of the Indian ocean stretching from East Africa, Aden, the Persian Gulf, India and Malaysia to eastern China. Goa, on the western shores of India became a Portuguese stronghold. Reflecting the power balance in Europe, the Portuguese were displaced first by the Dutch and then by the French and the British.

By 1751 India was a patch work of independent and autonomous states. A grand contest for global power emerged, extending across the oceans from north America to India, between the British and the French. The disintegration of the Mogul
empire allowed the British and French trading companies to vie for influence with the local princes. In this contest, the British proved more resourceful and emerged victorious. By 1750 the French had all but abandoned the Indian subcontinent to British interests.

In 1757, the British won a decisive military victory over the Muslim governor of Bengal. This was a turning point not only in the history of India but in world history. Bengal was the most populous and the richest province in the Mogul empire. The British East India Company set out to loot the province. What was once the richest province in Asia was brought to its knees within a few years and famine set in. The infusion of enormous capital from Bengal fueled the Industrial Revolution in England (1758). England flexed its muscles and embarked on building a world empire.

The American War of independence (1776-83) drained British resources and provided a window of opportunity for the Indian princes. In India, Tipu Sultan of Mysore (1781-1799) fought bravely to contain the expansion of British power. He corresponded with Napoleon Bonaparte of France and with the rulers of the Ottoman empire, Oman and Afghanistan seeking military alliances. However, it was too little, too late. The Ottomans were allied with the British. Napoleon lost Egypt (1799) and retreated to France. Tipu Sultan fell in battle with the British in 1799. Subsequently resistance from Indian princes was feeble. By 1806, the British were in Delhi. The Anglo-Sikh wars of 1844-48 expanded the empire to the borders of Afghanistan.

The initial Interactions between the British and Indians were as equals. Unlike the Catholic Portuguese of the sixteenth century, the Protestant British were in India to trade and to exploit. The local rajas and nawabs (Rajput and Muslim rulers) mingled easily with the Europeans. Intermarriage was not uncommon. Racism in India was a later development. However, as the empire entrenched itself, the British became aloof and racism set in. This aloofness partly explains why Christianity did not penetrate India the way Islam did with the Sufi Shaikhs. Only 2.5 percent of the population of India in 1947 was Christian.

The Sepoy Uprising of 1857 and its Aftermath

British rule was exploitative from the outset. The East India Company had arrived in India ostensibly to trade and had shrewdly used the political vacuum created by the disintegrating of the Mogul empire to consolidate its power in the subcontinent. The initial loot from Bengal was worth billions of dollars. Heavy taxation had driven the population into penury. Indian handicrafts disappeared as cheap factory-made goods poured in from England. Local rajahs and nawabs were coerced into parting their state treasures. Religious animosity against the firangees (a derogatory Hindi word for Europeans) was not far below the surface. The resentment exploded in the uprising of 1857 which was brutally suppressed.
Two of the sons of the last Mogul emperor were hanged from these gallows after the uprising of 1857

**Expansion of British India Empire into Burma - Origins of the Rohingya Massacres (1937-2017)**

The British crown took over direct administration of India in 1858 as an imperial colony. To the east, the Anglo-Burmese wars brought Myanmar into the Indian empire. This vast empire was ruled by a Viceroy whose seat was in Calcutta in eastern India (The capital was shifted to Delhi in 1912). The map below shows the borders of British India in 1910. A large number of Bengalis migrated south along the shores of the Bay of Bengal. After all, it was one country at that time.
In 1937, when Burma (now Myanmar) was separated from British India, these Bengalis found themselves on the wrong side of the border. When Burma achieved its independence in 1948, the new Burmese government refused to recognize the Bengalis as Burmese citizens. Persecution started, later institutionalized, culminating in the massacre and genocide of the Rohingyas in 2012-17.

**Communalism and “Hindu” Majoritarianism in British India**

Communalism in India was a result of political choices made by the Indian elite between 1880 and 1940 in an overarching paradigm of British imperial divide and rule policy.

By 1870, the British were well entrenched in the subcontinent. An elaborate system of checks and balances consisting of over 500 princely states loyal to the British crown and a capable civil service backed up by a large British-India army provided stability to the empire. The Indians who had put up a modicum of resistance with the uprising of 1857 were subdued and compliant. A self-assured British bureaucracy was now free to try its hand at social engineering.

The first step was taken in this direction by the 1871 census under Viceroy Mayo with the ostensible intent of sorting out the complex demography of the Indian empire, its
population, castes and creeds. This first attempt was incomplete because of the immense task of reaching remote areas in the mountains and forests of the vast subcontinent.

These difficulties were overcome with the second Census carried out in 1881 by the then viceroy George Robinson, Marquess of Ripon. This exercise brought out into the open the unabashed British policy of divide and rule. The subcontinent of 1881 was a vast tapestry of scores of castes and creeds. Brahmins, Rajputs, Muslims and Dalits lived side by side in thousands of towns and villages scattered over an area of more than a million square miles. Some towns had a majority Muslim population while in others they were in a minority. And no one seemed to care. Each village had developed its own composite culture through centuries of mutual interaction and co-habitation.

In much of northern India, the British looked upon the Muslims as a community to watch and be wary of. They were perceived to be the former rulers and thus were not to be trusted. Muslims had played a key role in the uprising of 1857 providing leadership to local sepoys. Consequently, the revengeful British had taken their ire on the Muslim populations of northern India, perpetrating large scale atrocities against Indians in cities such as Delhi, Oudh and Kanpur. Now that the Raj had settled down, it was time to consolidate its hold and ensure that the Muslims would not raise their head again.

The British used the census of 1881 as a social engineering tool for imperial consolidation through a schema of divide and rule. For the first time in modern history, hundreds of native non-Muslim castes and tribes were bundled together and were designated as “Hindu”. The grouping included not only the four major castes (the four varanas), the Brahmins, Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (farmers) and shudras (servants) but also a host of hilly tribes as well. The Dalits were grouped as a separate category of outcastes. Given the primitive infrastructure of the time, head counting was not an exact science. Nonetheless, the census showed that the total population of India was 254 million, of whom 51 million were Muslim, 136 million were caste Hindus and 62 million were “Exterior Castes” (this term is not used in modern language. The current designation is Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes or SC/ST). The SC/ST population was to play, fifty years later, a major role in the politics of Gandhi.

This was the opening gambit in a chess game of communal politics in India. Brahmins, Rajputs, Muslims and Marathas who had fought shoulder to shoulder as comrades in the uprising of 1857 now found themselves on opposite sides of the fence as “Hindus” and “Muslims”. They had lived together for centuries as neighbors, within their caste systems, but also without it in the public space. Now, they faced each other across a dividing line of communalism, as two separate religious communities.

The British succeeded in their machination. For the first time in modern history, Indians who identified themselves as “Hindus” realized their numerical superiority over the “Muslims” and reached out for their political rights. The Indian National Congress, formed in 1885, held its first meeting in Bombay, chaired by an Englishman Allan Hume. In attendance were the Indian Hindu elite, while Muslim representation was meager.
The principle aim of the conference was to procure a greater share for Indians in government. Freedom was not yet on the horizon.

There were parallel developments in the Muslim community. The Muslims had suffered devastating losses in the uprising of 1857 and were slow to accept western education and the English language. Reform movements arose among the Muslims to close the education gap. In 1875, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan founded the Mohammedan Anglo-Oriental College at Aligarh, patterned after Oxford University. In later years the college grew into the well-known Aligarh Muslim University which was the intellectual cradle for many of the dominant political and literary personalities of India and Pakistan in the 20th century.

Aligarh Muslim University, established 1875, served as an intellectual cradle of Muslims in India and Pakistan.

Western education did not mitigate the growth of separate Hindu and Muslim consciousness; it exacerbated it. The Census of 1881, the establishment of the Indian National Congress in 1885 and the increasing assertiveness of Hindu intelligentsia only added to the insecurity of the minority Muslims. To protect their interests, the Muslim elites formed the Muslim League in 1906 and held their first meeting in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh today.

The Shifting Borders of Bengal and its consequences for Hindu-Muslim tensions

The Indian National Congress became increasingly strident in its demand for self-government. This alarmed the British and increased the insecurity of the Muslims who feared the domination of Hindus in an independent India. Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, founded of Aligarh University wrote in 1890:

“Now God has made them (the British) rulers over us. Therefore, we should cultivate friendship with them, and should adopt that method by which their rule may remain permanent and firm in India, and may not pass into the hands of the Bengalis... If we
join the political movement of the Bengalis our nation will reap a loss, for we do not want to become subjects of the Hindus instead of the subjects of the "people of the Book..."

Bengal was a large province with a population of over 70 million. Calcutta, its capital city, was a hotbed of Indian nationalism. The eastern part of the province was predominantly Muslim whereas the western part was Hindu. Ostensibly to improve the administration, the British partitioned Bengal into two in 1905. The Muslim majority areas were bundled together with Assam to create a new province of East Bengal. The partition had the political benefit of weakening the power of the elite Hindu nationalists in Calcutta who depended on large land holdings in East Bengal for their income.

The origin of the present-day crisis with the Citizenship Amendment Act 2019 is to be sought in the first partition of Bengal of 1905. Bengal (today’s Bangladesh and the Indian province of West Bengal) lies at the confluence of two major river systems in South Asia, namely, the Ganga (Ganges) and the Brahmaputra. Heavy rains in Assam (300 inches a year) cause frequent flooding in the Brahmaputra river. The shifting water of the river make and unmake small islands each year. The Bengalis, a hardy and resourceful people, have adapted to the maverick ways of the river systems and have learned to crop the islands as well as the delta systems of the rivers for jute, rice and fisheries. Population pressures have forced them to migrate time and time again. With each migration, the hardworking Bengalis turned the inundated lands of the delta into fertile lands.
So, it was, the first partition of Bengal in 1905 brought a large number of Bengalis into what is today Assam. The Bengali migrations that started during the British era altered the demography of the region and sowed the seeds of current agitations in Assam against “foreigners”. The Bengalis were both Hindu and Muslim. However, the partition of Bengal into Hindu India and Muslim Pakistan in 1947 highlighted the Muslim component of the migrants. The following map shows the areas around modern-day Bangladesh that are Muslim, as a result of the migrations during the British colonial era.

Modern day Bangladesh and the Indian states of Assam and Bengal with Muslim majority areas (shown in green) resulting from the migration of Bengalis during successive partitions of Bengal (1905, 1911, 1938, 1947, 1971)

**Gandhi’s Early Years**

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi is an enigmatic figure in world history. Acclaimed as the Father of the nation in India and as a Mahatma (great and noble soul) the world over, he has been variously called a saint, a great Hindu, a shrewd politician and an opportunist. While his non-violent methods inspired leaders like Martin Luther King in the United States, his actions in India, early in his career, contributed to the injection of religion into the independence struggle and were in part responsible for the bloody partition of British India in 1947 into India and Pakistan. His main achievements were that he made India aware of itself and he forged together a Hindu nation out of a plethora of castes. Einstein called him a saint, Jinnah called him a great Hindu leader, the Dalit leader Ambedkar termed him a shrewd politician, Nobel Laureate Naipaul called him a political failure and Professor Eqbal Ahmed called him an opportunist.
The early years of Gandhi in South Africa are shrouded in controversy. During the Second Boer War (1902), he served as a Sargent Major supporting the European settler armies against the African states (1902). In 1914, he returned to India. World War I broke out and the Indian army was coopted to serve in the Middle East and North Africa. Gandhi supported the British war effort recruiting Indians as combatants to fight the Germans. Supporting a resolution for the war effort in 1918, Gandhi wrote: "With a full sense of my responsibility, I beg to support the resolution."

Gandhi with his Indian recruits during the Second Boer War against African states in South Africa (1907)

World War 1 ended with a complete victory of the allies. Kaiser's Germany was on its knees and the Ottoman empire was dissolved with Britain, France and Italy carving out zones of influence. Under the Treaty of Sèvres (1920), Syria, Iraq and Egypt were severed from the Ottoman empire. Hejaz (Mecca and Medina) came under British influence.

In 1914, the Ottoman Empire was the only large independent state and the Sultan was the spiritual head, the Caliph of Sunni Islam. The dismemberment of the Ottoman empire and the curtailment of the powers of the Caliph were unpopular with the Indian Muslims. The Khilafat Movement (1920-22) grew as a Muslim religious mass movement in South Asia to protect the Caliphate. By this time, Gandhi had emerged as the leader of the Congress party. Seeing an opportunity for Hindu-Muslim cooperation and to force the British into granting India self-government, Gandhi threw his support behind the Khilafat movement and was selected by the Muslims to lead it. This was by far the first and the most effective cooperation between the Hindus and the Muslims of the subcontinent. Gandhi tried to forge this unity into a non-violent movement but when a
group of demonstrators were fired upon by the police in 1922, and the demonstration turned violent, Gandhi pulled out of the Khilafat movement.

The Khilafat Movement marks a watershed in the history of India and Hindu-Muslim relations. This was the first time since the uprising of 1857 that the Hindus and Muslims had worked together. But the price paid was the injection of religion into politics. Nationalists like Jinnah warned against the dangers of a marriage of religion and politics but were shunted aside in the mass hysteria of the times. The pan-Islamic tones of the Khilafat movement alarmed the Hindus. Hindu-Muslim tensions increased through the 1920s and the two great communities drifted apart.

Gandhi’s consolidation of Hindu Majoritarianism

The British were alert to the Hindu Muslim cooperation during the Khilafat movement as well as the increasing rift between the two communities after its failure. Ostensibly, under an imperial declaration to increase Indian participation in self-governance, a Central Legislative Assembly was formed, a large number of whose members would be elected by Indians. To fully exploit the growing Hindu Muslim animosities, separate electorates were introduced for Hindus and Muslims while reservations were made for the Dalits (SC/ST), the Christians, the Sikhs, the Europeans and civil servants.

The census of 1931 showed a total population of 337 million for British India, of whom 54 percent were caste Hindus, 17 percent were SC/ST and 23.4 percent were Muslim. The Indian component of the Central Legislative Assembly reflected these proportions. As demands for self-government increased under Gandhi’s leadership, the British called a series of Round Table Conferences in London to evolve a consensus between Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, the Indian princes and the SC/ST about the modalities of self-government. It was at this conference that Gandhi played a pivotal role to consolidate the SC/ST, who were hitherto outside of the caste system, under a single “Hindu” umbrella. The electoral calculus was obvious. In a united India, caste Hindus would be about 54 percent, a bare majority and would have to share power with other minorities including the Muslims, the Sikhs, the Christians and Dalits. But if the SC/ST who made up 17 percent of the population were counted as Hindus, they would enjoy a commanding majority of 71 percent.
Gandhi was the sole representative of the Congress party at the conference. The SC/ST delegation was led by Dr. Ambedkar. Gandhi insisted that he be recognized as the sole spokesman for all “Hindus” including the SC/ST. This was unacceptable to Ambedkar and the conference collapsed.

Upon his return from London, Gandhi embarked on a “fast unto death” unless Ambedkar agreed to include the SC/ST under a caste Hindu umbrella. Anti-Dalit riots broke out in several cities and multiple threats were made against the life of Ambedkar. The coercive tactics paid off. Under relentless and violent pressure, Ambedkar caved in and signed the so-called Gandhi-Ambedkar pact (1932) which recognized SC/ST as Hindus in return for reservations in jobs and political representation within the Hindu fold. Gandhi then broke his fast.

_Gandhi had succeeded in forging a Hindu nation which would politically dominate a united India once the British left. It was a major achievement for Gandhi. Hindu majoritarianism was set in concrete. It was something that had eluded the great Hindu sages and reformers of the past. Henceforth, a triumphant Gandhi would face the British and the minority Muslim community from a position of a commanding Hindu majority. For this achievement alone, Gandhi deserved to be called a great Hindu._

Even to this day, the Dalits continue to be outside the Hindu caste structure and are persecuted by upper caste Hindus but are nonetheless counted as “Hindu” for political purposes.
Armed with the mandate to speak for 70 percent of India, the Congress party under Gandhi’s leadership pressed its advantage. While the demands for independence by the Congress party were couched in nationalistic terms, it was implicit that what was to replace the British Raj was a Hindu Raj. Muslim suspicions of Hindu domination increased when the Congress party won the elections in seven of the eleven provincial elections in 1935. Instead of using the victory to bring the two communities together, the Congress demanded capitulation and complete dissolution of the Muslim League. Jinnah assumed the leadership of a demoralized Muslim League and launched his drive for Pakistan as a separate homeland for Muslims (1940).
Events moved rapidly when World War II broke out in 1939. The second Sino Japanese War had begun in 1937, but it was not officially declared until Japan entered World War II in December 1941. Japan proceeded to quickly overrun eastern China, the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia and Burma, and knocked at India's doors. Over two million Indian soldiers fought in the British India army in the Pacific, North African and South European theaters. As British garrisons in Hong Kong and Singapore fell, a large number of Indian soldiers crossed over to the Japanese and formed the Indian National Army (INA) under the leadership of Subash Chandra Bose. Bose was a popular Indian national leader. He was elected president of the Congress party in 1939 but had been forced out by Gandhi for his strident views.

Meanwhile, Gandhi started his quit India movement (1942) to force the British into granting immediate independence to India. Britain was gasping for breath under Hitler's onslaught and would have nothing of Gandhi's distractions. Gandhi and the entire Congress leadership were arrested and spent the war years in prison. By contrast, Jinnah supported the allied war effort and used the interregnum to consolidate his support among the Muslim masses.

Subash Chandra Bose, leader of the Indian National Army (INA) speaking in Tokyo in 1943.

The INA which had a large Muslim-Sikh component fought bravely in the CBI (China-Burma-India) theater but made no headway in the face of intense bombings by British and American air forces. The war ended with Hiroshima (August 1945). Britain emerged from the war exhausted and had no stomach for holding onto recalcitrant colonies.
India, the lynchpin of the British empire, loomed large in British calculations. The INA had fired up Indian national zeal. In 1946 there was an uprising involving segments of the Indian navy which was called off after some losses. The British had lost faith in the Indian army as a loyal bulwark for the empire. It was this realization that was a key factor in convincing the British to give up India.

Members of the 1946 Cabinet Mission to India meeting Muhammad Ali Jinnah

The British did make a last-ditch effort to bring together the Congress party and the Muslim League to keep India united. The Cabinet Mission Plan of 1946 proposed a federation with broad autonomy for the regions in the east and the west that included what are today Bangladesh and Pakistan. Jinnah, who had hitherto vehemently championed partition, accepted the Cabinet Mission Plan. It was sabotaged by Pandit Nehru, then president of the Congress party. Gandhi was indecisive and the plan fell through.

At the All India Congress Committee meeting of 1946, Gandhi, along with Nehru and Patel, canvassed for partition. Even so, the vote was only 25 for partition and 19 against. The heart of the people was with united India. The leadership had failed.
Gandhi with Pandit Nehru and Sardar Patel at the Congress Working Committee Meeting, 1946.

The decision to partition the subcontinent into the independent states of India and Pakistan let loose an orgy of slaughter on both sides of the border. Lord Mountbatten, the man delegated by London to oversee the transfer of power was singularly incompetent to deal with the chaos.

A grandfather and his grandchildren lie abandoned on the road during partition (1947).
Entire villages were burnt, two million Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs killed, tens of thousands of women raped. Fifteen million refugees crossed the borders, and the two nations were christened in pools of blood. That enmity persists to this day.

A train loaded with refugees. 15 million crossed the borders of India and Pakistan in 1947. Up to 2 million perished.