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India v. Pakistan
Paul Flesher

The dispute between India and Pakistan over Kashmir provides a strong example of the power and animosity that political ambition can cause when coupled with religion. This is because religion, in this situation, functions like a tribe. It identifies a social group, people who share the same views about the moral rules that govern life -- especially with regard to the big issues such as the birth and raising of children, marriage and the nature of the family, death and the character of the afterlife.

Prior to 1100, two religions, of India, Hinduism and Buddhism, were predominate. Starting in the 12th century, Moslem armies began invading India, first in the north and then in the south, attempting to conquer and hold large territories. The generals who were successful became rulers. Over the following centuries, they used their Islamic followers to govern their non-Moslem populations.

Unlike the Moslem expansion westward into Africa and the Mediterranean region, the Moslem rulers in India did not emphasize conversion. Instead, their policies ranged from repression to cautious acceptance, to even one or two instances of cooperation and promotion. Even in the best of times, however, animosity built up between the ruling Moslems and the Hindus who were ruled.

Furthermore, Hindu leaders made repeated attempts to overthrow their Moslem rulers. These attempts, both successful and unsuccessful, also deepened the divisions between the two communities by emphasizing the alignment between political sovereignty and religion adherence.

When Great Britain took over India starting in the 17th century, the friction between Moslems and Hindus receded, to be replaced by a mutual antipathy to the British. Thus an uneasy truce reigned between the two antagonists until the British began to make moves to leave the country in the 1940s. Then, as it became apparent that political power was about to be restored, the friction between the Hindus and the Moslems erupted in riots and violence. It got so bad that the British gave up any hope of leaving a single, united country and instead worked to arrange a mutually-agreeable partition into two countries, one Moslem and the other Hindu.

When the British left in 1947 and the partition plan came into effect, millions of Hindus and Moslems rushed with their families to resettle in the country of their religion -- not trusting their political future with people of another religion. The Moslems went to Pakistan and the Hindus ran to India. Each person wished to dwell among members of their own religious social group, those who lived their lives according to the same moral guidelines.

The disagreement between the two countries over Kashmir is thus only the most recent clash in a centuries-long history of political conflict between Moslems and the Hindus. While the quick resolution of the Kashmir problem is certainly in the best interests of everyone concerned, resolving the powerful animosity of the two religious communities will be much longer in coming.