

# The disintegrative forces in the Indian subcontinent

By Milton Israel

There have always been regions in the Indian subcontinent which have commanded a sense of loyalty among their peoples at the expense of any national identity. Geographical, historical, linguistic, and cultural differences among the vast population set this primary problem for those who held imperial power here in the past. For those who hold power today, the essential question remains the same: to what extent are regional identity and differentiation acceptable within the context of a viable central authority?

The issue has been joined in generation after generation throughout the millenia of India's history. While the ancient Aryan built his empire in the north, his legends and scripture described an empire and culture which encompassed all the land to the southern sea. The Mughal emperors who ruled in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries controlled what they considered to be a subcontinental empire, but their hold was dependent on the strategic placement of their armies, always too few to possess all the land at one time. The British inherited both the power and the problem of empire in India. Far more than any of their predecessors, they achieved success. By a combination of indirect control and direct administration, their empire did, in fact, spread from the Himalayas in the north to Cape Comorin at the southern tip of the subcontinent. Their policy regarding the whole of India and its various regions remained, however, full of inconsistency.

The British argued against the reality of a unitary India, but created a common

administrative and educational system to bind the parts closer together. They declared a united and free India to be their goal, but supported those elements in the country that resisted this conclusion. Having stimulated the growth of an all-India nationalist movement which looked forward to inheriting power throughout the subcontinent, they supported and were in turn supported by conservative interests whose sense of "nationality" had far more limited bounds. They supported unity. They stimulated division.

Opportunities for implementation of ideas that challenged central authority were precisely defined and limited by British authorities during the days of their rule. Similarly, there was little room for such deviation within the mainstream of the nationalist movement as the anticipated goal appeared imminent in the decade before the Second World War. The goal was the attainment of freedom and a unitary national state in which differences would be blended and melted to the degree necessary to achieve a single Indian identity and nationality. Western political theory, classical Indian myth, and centuries of imperial dreaming and achievement had combined to underwrite the commitment. Wholeness had been achieved in an imperial context and wholeness in a national context was to be the successor.

## Problem transferred

The result, however, was not to fulfill the dream — ancient or modern. Power was transferred to two successor states. The problem of national versus regional loyalty was transferred as well, on both sides of the partition line. In both India and Pakistan, the new governments moved quickly to declare their national boundaries, forced backsliders into line among the princes and tribesmen and, where the problem resisted peaceful solution, sent their respective armies to the task, as in Kashmir. The arrival of two new inde-

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