Quaid-i-Azam and the Demand for Partition

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In this paper it is argued that Jinnah's career as the leader of Indian Muslims spread over half a century during which momentous changes took place both in Indian politics and in Britain's attitude towards India and therefore, it would be somewhat simple-minded to expect a single and consistent policy from Jinnah. Jinnah was, as his biographer points out, a supreme strategist who 'probed first at the weak points of one opponent, then rushed to the opposite side's exposed flank, always seeking as he shifted his ground to rally his former "enemy" to his side, It invariably follows that Jinnah was not wedded to any particular policy but responded to the circumstances depending on the attitude of the Congress and the disposition of the British. The only consistency in Jinnah's policy was his commitment to ensure that Muslims were treated fairly and that their distinctive cultural and religious identities were not impaired. Whether Muslim interests could be best safeguarded within a composite Indian polity or in a separate Muslim homeland was a matter of tactics.

Up until the late 1930s there can be no doubts as to Jinnah's preferred option. When the poetess Sarojini Naidu dubbed Jinnah as the 'ambassador of

Hindu-Muslim unity', she was articulating a widespread perception of Jinnah as the bridge-builder between the two communities. Jinnah, more than any of his other illustrious contemporaries, worked towards a composite Indian nationalism which would be capable of accommodating the diverse and particularist demands of the different religious, linguistic and ethnic groups. He was essentially a rational, secular constitutionalist who was at home in the politics of consensus. He was aware of the apprehensions of the various minorities and the need to safeguard their special interests but did not view these as so irreconcilable as not to be capable of rational resolution through a process of give and take. The Lucknow Pact of 1916 which has been hailed as the 'beacon of Hindu-Muslim relationship' was Jinnah's handiwork and an evidence of what could be achieved through goodwill. So why did Jinnah change his stance in the 1920s?

It was not so much a change in Jinnah's attitude; rather a qualitative and radical transformation in Indian politics after the end of the First World War which destroyed many of the assumptions on which politics was conducted. The rise of Mahatma Gandhi to the supreme leadership of the Congress and his consequent attempts to mobilize the masses to bring pressure on the British invariably heightened the tensions inherent in a plural society. As the Congress sought to broaden its support base it naturally used Hindu symbols and slogans which would appeal to the majority of the Hindus. Not surprisingly the period of mass mobilization also corresponded with religious revivalism and thus injected into politics the venom of sectarianism. Moreover, since the overwhelming majority of the Congress supporters were Hindus, its ability to accommodate the demands of the Muslims through generous concessions became difficult. The process of quiet bargaining in the board-room made way for mass campaign, Khilafat

agitation, non-cooperation and civil disobedience. The old constitutional approach of balancing different interest groups, separate electorates, safeguards and weighted political representation for the minorities, became the casualties of mass politics. Jinnah was quick to recognize the dangers of mass mobilization in a plural society, but was unable to convince Gandhi of the dangers until it was too late.

The Montagu-Chelmsford reforms introduced in 1919 altered the political arithmetic and thereby made the Hindu-Muslim relationship even more complicated. So long as Muslims were simply a minority the solution to Muslim demands might have been found through separate electorate and weighted representation. But with the devolution of limited power in the provinces to elected representatives it became clear that Muslims were not uniformly a minority throughout India. Indeed in the Punjab and Bengal (and subsequently in Sind and the North-Western Frontier Province) the Muslims were actually a majority and capable of controlling political power. This posed a serious problem for Jinnah since he would no longer be able to articulate a demand which would commend itself both to Muslims of the minority and the majority provinces: political weightage which was essential to reassure the Muslims in Bombay, the United Provinces or Bihar would have no appeal to the Muslims in Bengal or the Punjab. Nor could the demand for a strong centre (in which autonomy of the Muslims would play a moderating role) by the minority Muslims be easily squared with the search for greater provincial autonomy of the majority Muslim provinces. The Nehru Report of 1928 which was Congress's authoritative response to Muslim demands showed both its insensitivity and the constraints within which it had to operate: the report rejected both separate electorate and autonomous provinces and thereby ensured that Muslims in both minority and the majority provinces were alienated.

Jinnah's response was his 'Fourteen Points' but in an environment of intensified intolerance and heightened tensions his was a voice in the wilderness. It was clear to Jinnah that in the new milieu of mass movement, civil disobedience and religious fanaticism there was little room for the politics of accommodation that he espoused. Politics had polarized and composite Hindu-Muslim nationalism had few supporters. A disappointed and dispirited Jinnah turned his back on India and returned to the familiar surroundings of Hampstead Heath and the Chambers of Inner Temple.

The enactment of the Government of India Act of 1935 appeared to offer Jinnah a glimmer of hope. After years of agitation a period of constitutional activities was on the horizon. Jinnah had condemned the federal part of the new constitution as 'thoroughly bad and rotten to the core' but he had recognized the possibilities offered by the new constitution. The provinces were autonomous and with certain modification the federal government could be made workable and the Muslims could play an effective balancing role. Jinnah therefore did not need much persuasion to return to India and take up the leadership of the Muslim League. Despite the bitter disappointments of the 1920s, Jinnah once again looked to forging an alliance between the Hindus and the Muslims. With the provincial elections impending in the winter of 1936-37, Jinnah renewed his offer of League-Congress cooperation. His message was unaltered:

> Muslims are in no way behind any other community in their demand for national self-government. The crux of the whole issue, therefore, is: can we completely assure Muslims that the safeguards to which they attach vital importance will be embodied in the future constitution of India?

But the League's poor performance in the elections precluded any positive response from the Congress. Out

of 489 Muslim seats, the League captured only 105. Less than five per cent of the Muslims who went to the polls voted for it. It won a substantial number of seats in the Hindu majority provinces of the United Provinces and Bombay, but in the Muslim majority provinces it did not create much of an impression. It failed to secure a single seat in Bihar, Orissa and the NWFP, the latter a predominantly Muslim area. Its performances in the Punjab and Sind, both Muslim majority provinces, were equally dismal, its gain being a single seat in the former and none in the latter. In Bengal the League won only 37 out of 119 Muslim seats. Its performance in Bombay and the UP, where it won 20 out of 39 and 27 out of 64 Muslim seats respectively, were impressive. In Madras it obtained 11 out of 28 Muslim seats. These were significant figures which confirmed for the Congress the irrelevance of the League. Not surprisingly the Congress refused to accept the League's offer of coalition in the UP and Bombay and thus buried the hope of any cooperation between the two parties.

For Jinnah the humiliation in the provincial elections was a chastising experience. It brought home to him rather belatedly that the politics of compromise and consensus was no longer in vogue, and that if he was to be taken seriously he must speak from a position of strength. Translated into real terms this meant that Jinnah would have to make good his claim that the Muslim League represented the majority of the Muslims. Second, and more crucially, Jinnah recognized that in the fatal game of head counting the Muslims would always remain a minority, a fact which no amount of weightage or separate electorate could hope to alter. It was only by forcing the British and the Congress to recognize the Muslims as a separate community with a claim to its own government and state that the Muslims would be able to obtain parity with Hindus. But it was easier said than done.

Jinnah's efforts to mobilize the Muslims under the

banner of the Muslim League bore only limited success: he remodelled the party along the lines of the Congress, went into a membership drive and created a volunteer cadre to mobilize the rural areas. But significant as these were they brought little dividends. The League made little headway in the Muslim majority provinces and the Muslim premiers of those provinces ensured that Jinnah was not welcome there. In the Muslim minority provinces where the Congress controlled the governments Jinnah had greater success. He encouraged the publication of a series of rather intemperate reports into the Congress government's discrimination against the Muslims. Much of the allegations were probably untrue or exaggerated but it alarmed the Muslims into believing that their religion was in danger. Muslims began to flock to the League.

Help also came from an unexpected quarter. In September 1939, Britain declared war against Germany. The entire resources of the British Empire, both men and material, had to be mobilized if Britain were to succeed in stemming the tide of Nazism. India, with its vast manpower and raw material, was understandably expected to play its role in the Allied war effort. The Congress with its avowed anti-fascist ideology was ready to play its role. However, the manner in which India was dragged into the war without even the courtesy of consultation not only piqued the Indian leaders but also showed that India was expected to fight for the freedom of the Europeans while that very freedom was itself being denied to India. Nor could they forget that reward for support in the First World War had been the Rowlatt Bills and the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. Not surprisingly the Congress insisted on a definition of Britain's war aims in relation to India before committing its support. The British, of course, had no intention of gratuitously hastening India's independence. The 1935 Act reflected the limits of British constitutional concession· any

further concessions would irreversibly damage Britain's dominion over India. But at the same time the British could not simply ignore the Congress. At the same time, of course, Congress's non-cooperation would both impair India's war effort and embarrass Britain internationally, especially in the United States. Moreover, the memory of the Khilafat agitation when the Hindus and the Muslims joined forces against the British was a sufficient reminder that the Muslims had to be kept aloof from the Congress.

The outbreak of the war and the subsequent resignation of the Congress ministries introduced a new element in Indian politics: the Congress lost its bargaining power. As long as its ministries were in office, the British could not ignore the Congress. It was responsible for the government of eight provinces and had it within its power to impair the government's war efforts. But once they resigned the British attitude changed. In order to offset Congress hostility the British sought to encourage the Muslim League as a counterpoise. The Muslim ministries were functioning in five provinces which kept alive India's democratic experiment and, no less significantly, the Indian Muslims made up for nearly 40 per cent of the Indian armed forces. In turning to Jinnah the British government was aware of Jinnah's frustration with the Congress and therefore, his willingness to collaborate with the British to further the cause of the Muslims. In fact as early as August 1938 Jinnah had privately informed the British of the possibility of a mutually beneficial relationship between the Muslims and the British. But the British, engrossed in winning over the Congress, paid no heed to it. A year later, with a crisis looming, Jinnah's offer became more appealing to Britain.

The outbreak of the war opened up new opportunities for Jinnah. Jinnah, too, was quick to recognize the changed situation. 'After the war began', Jinnah confessed, 'I was treated on the same basis as Mr.

Gandhi. I was wonderstruck why all of a sudden I was promoted and given a place side by side with Mr.Gandhi'. He had carefully assessed Britain's dilemma and recognized the opportunity of exacting concessions for his own community. He understood the benefits of collaborating with the British but was careful not to antagonize the British by trying to extract too many concessions or by adopting the opposite course of offering unconditional support in the war effort. As a shrewd negotiator he never rejected a British offer outright but no sooner had one of his demands been complied with than he came back with another. By playing his cards close to his chest, he was able to secure for the League a status equal to that of the Congress.

While it is true that the League benefited from collaborating with the British, the British probably needed the League more than the League needed the British. Since the Congress was non-cooperating, the British had little option but to retain the goodwill of the League. And in order to undermine Congress ' authority the government was willing to make concessions to the Muslims which a few months prior to the war would have been considered inconceivable. In order to put a brake on the Congress insistence on Indian independence, the British were willing to give the Muslims the power to determine the nature of constitutional changes. Having obtained the power to veto any constitutional proposal, Jinnah began to stonewall attempts by the Congress to persuade the League to join forces against the British. The Viceroy acknowledged with gratitude Jinnah's help:

> Jinnah had given me very valuable help by standing against the Congress claim and I was duly grateful. It was clear that if he, Mr. Jinnah, had supported the Congress demand and confronted me with a joint demand, the strain upon me and His Majesty's Government would have been very great indeed. I thought, therefore, I could claim to have a vested interest in his position.

This is a crucial document. It explains in plain terms the reasons behind the British effort to encourage

Jinnah. The British were not pro-Muslim, nor did they entirely sympathize with their apprehension of Hindu domination. But they were engaged in a life and death struggle. The Muslims were an invaluable ally and had to be kept away from the clutches of the Congress. It was clear to the British that if the Muslims threw in their lot with the Congress in demanding Indian independence, Britain's ability to resist that demand would be most questionable. The League and the Congress had to be kept apart. The alliance between Jinnah and the Viceroy was therefore one of convenience and expedience: the one needed the other with neither in any way committed to the cause of the other.

Jinnah had obtained a veto over the constitutional process but it was clear that his popular credibility could not be sustained merely by a negative insistence that the Muslims could not be a party to self-government in India on the principle of unqualified majority. Both the League and the Congress had rejected the British scheme, embodied in the 1935 Act, to establish an all-India federation. The Congress had countered it with its alternative plan of a constitution framed by a constituent assembly. The League, while opposing both the British and the Congress, had no plan of its own. Previously it had nominally subscribed to the idea of a loose federation for India.

The results of the 1937 elections had, however, clearly shown that despite separate electorates and reservation of seats, the League could not hope to play a decisive role. Adherence to the concept of an all-India federation would be a mistake. There was a growing pressure on Jinnah amongst his own supporters to come forward with a more concrete proposal indicating the terms and conditions on which the Muslims would be prepared to accept self-government. The Viceroy also exerted considerable pressure on Jinnah to come out with a well thought out proposal. He was particularly

concerned about the need to educate public opinion in Britain and 'more particularly the 600-odd representatives in the House of Commons by a submission of a formal memorandum to the British Government'. He emphasized that if Jinnah did not wish to let the Muslim case go by default, it was essential that the League should formulate its plans immediately.

Jinnah was in a dilemma. To articulate a proposal would tie his hand, and limit the freedom of manoeuvre. But on the other hand, he could not afford to sit idle. Not only would the British goodwill be frittered away but his own credibility be questioned. He began to grope his way forward but slowly. The way Jinnah's mind was working at this time is revealed in an article published in January 1940. He pointed out that the League was irrevocably opposed to any federal objectives because it would bring about a Hindu majority rule. He suggested that the British government should revise India's constitution *de novo*. 'To conclude, a constitution must be evolved that recognizes that there are in India two nations who both must share the governance of their common motherland'. There was as yet no hint of a partition and Jinnah still spoke of a 'common motherland'.

The idea of partition was first mooted by the League Working Committee in February 1940, precisely at the same time as the Viceroy had begun to insist that the League should formulate a 'constructive' plan to counter the Congress demand for a constitutional assembly. In the third week of March at the Lahore session of the League the resolution demanding the partition of India with separate states for Muslims and Hindus was formally adopted. The Pakistan Resolution, as it came to be dubbed in the Congress press, radically altered the dimensions of the communal problem. All solutions hitherto thought of separate electorates, composite cabinets, reservation of seats–suddenly became obsolete.

The demand for a separate Muslim state had its advantages. The Congress call for the British to quit was

now complicated by the Muslim insistence on the division of India. The British could now sit back as the Congress demand for a declaration of Indian independence was lost sight of in a welter of acrimonious accusations between the two communities. The British had no sympathy for the Muslim demand but expedience demanded that the demand was not scotched. Indeed in August 1940 – exactly five months after the adoption of the resolution – a guarantee was given to the Muslims that the British Government would not contemplate transferring power to any system of government in India the authority of which was denied 'by large and powerful elements in India's national life'. And when in April 1942 Sir Stafford Cripps came to India to offer self-government after the end of the war, the right of the Muslim majority provinces to secede from the Indian Union was firmly enshrined in the declarations.

The Lahore Resolution, which electrified the imagination of the Indian Muslims and subsequently provided a powerful ideology for a separate Muslim homeland, was a tactical move in response to peculiar circumstances of Indian politics following the outbreak of the war. Jinnah had rejected the Congress demand for a constituent assembly based on majority vote because it would not safeguard the aspiration of the Muslims. With the help of the British – who were beholden to the Muslims for their support in the war effort – Jinnah had secured a virtual veto over the constitutional process. But he could not go on temporizing. He was under tremendous pressure both from the Muslims and the British to come forward with a 'concrete' proposal embodying the aspirations of the Muslims and not merely harp on its opposition to the Congress' scheme. Jinnah's scheme for creating separate Muslim states made up of Muslim majorities was vague but proved to be a remarkable catchall. Jinnah was shrewd enough to recognize that to spell out the scheme in any detail would divide his followers – precision and unanimity seldom go

together – and therefore left it to the imagination of his followers to make of the scheme what they liked. And not least it gave the British the pretext for stonewalling the Congress demand for independence in the absence of an agreement between the two communities.

As a bargaining counter the Lahore Resolution had one cardinal merit: in the game of head counting the Muslims would forever remain a minority, but by asserting the logic of being a separate state, the Muslims could avoid the fatal disadvantage of their numerical inferiority. The British viewed the Muslim demand as preposterous but found its acceptance less painful than conceding to the Congress demand for independence in the middle of the war. The Congress vowed to prevent a division of India but, by the time the war ended and negotiations for transfer of power began in earnest, they were in no position to resist. The logic of a separate state for the Muslims had served its purpose: twenty-three per cent of India's Muslims had secured parity with nearly seventy-five per cent of the Hindus.

However, it is doubtful if Jinnah had ever intended to press the logic of the Lahore Resolution to its full conclusion. Jinnah remained ambivalent, recognizing better than anyone else that a separate Muslim was only a partial answer to the problem. The Muslims in India were not all confined to a geographically contiguous territory as claimed in the Lahore Resolution, nor were they a minority in all the provinces. He had the unenviable task of walking a tight-rope so as not to offend the divided constituency on whose behalf he was purporting to speak. He had to reconcile the conflicting demands of the Muslims in the provinces where they were a minority with those of the Muslims in the provinces where they were in a majority. Understandably enough the 'majority provinces' Muslims wanted autonomous provinces with a minimal or no control by the central government. While it is doubtful if a separate Muslim

state would confer any advantage which they did not already enjoy, partitioned Bengal and Punjab would certainly be unwelcome. By contrast the Muslims in the 'minority provinces' could have no hope of becoming a part of the new homeland for the Muslims: their main concern was the fear of being overwhelmed by the Hindus and therefore they looked to Muslim influence in a strong centre to protect their interest.

The demand for partition had given Jinnah a formidable weapon for bargaining but it also had serious limitations. Once the war was over, and the British had made up their mind to quit India, the Muslims ceased to be important. The new Viceroy's main concern was to placate the Congress so as to enable the British to withdraw without too much loss of face. In the expedience of post-war politics Jinnah had become expendable. In the circumstances it was remarkable that Jinnah was at all able to wrest any concessions for the Muslims.