

Were there any alternatives to Partition in 1947?

The idea of separate Hindu and Muslim interests in India was a commonplace for years before the eventual break-up of the British raj. Indeed, British policy-makers had taken it for granted that Muslim and Hindu interests could never be coalesced - this was the lesson of the Mutiny in 1857. Even when the Indian National Congress arose to agitate for the rights of Indians, this too never had a great appeal to the Muslim populations of India, except on rare occasions such as the Calcutta Congress of 1920 when it provided cross-community backing for the Khilafat movement. In terms of membership the Congress was a predominantly Hindu body, and Muslim membership had never risen to more than 15 per cent (or to more than 10 per cent of the Congress Committee) moreover, Gandhi's doctrine of non-violence carried a decidedly Hindu flavour. Yet the Muslim element in the Congress was consistently more numerous than in the Muslim political parties proper, and to the Congress leaders the claim to be fully representative of all communities in India seemed unchallengeable.¹ In the 1936 elections, more Muslim members of the legislative assemblies were members of Congress than any other single Muslim party. Yet Muslims also failed to take part in many of the Congress activities, such as the Civil Disobedience movement of 1930-1. This proved to be a difficult problem for an Indian National Congress which sought to claim rights to represent the whole of Indian society, fighting not communal rivalries but the appalling poverty, unemployment and indebtedness of the peasantry. 'The contest' said Nehru, 'lies between . . . the British and the Congress. . . All third parties and middle and undecided groups have no real importance.'² Indeed, Nehru's careless attitude was shared by many of the secular leaders of the nationalist movement, who simply could not conceive the fears of the Muslim minority that democracy would see their particular interests consistently outvoted. As late as February 1938 he was still publicly complaining to Jinnah: 'I am afraid I must confess that I do not yet know what the fundamental points of dispute are.'³ To reinforce the Muslim minorities fears about unitary democracy, they only needed to look at the rhetoric of the Hindu revivalist leaders, such as V D. Savarkar, who castigated Congress in his Presidential Address to the Hindu Mahasabha in 1938: 'They call themselves Indian Nationalists! But every step they take is communal. They have guaranteed special protection to minorities - Muslims, Christians, Europeans etc. Is this Indian Nationalism? A true Indian Nationalist must know nothing of Muslims and Hindus, minorities and majorities. To him all must be Indians only.'⁴

This British were endlessly creative at allowing Muslim autonomy without breaking up India. For a long time, the separate electorates guaranteed by the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms following the First World War eased Muslim tensions - but the bodies that were being elected were relatively powerless. When the British attempted a more powerful federal solution, with the Government of India Act, a continued problem of representation was proved. A pre-electoral deal in 1936 between Congress and the Muslim League offered mutual co-operation in the legislatures and coalition governments; but the Congress's strong showing meant that they were not dependent on the League for support outside the UP. Even in the UP, the terms did not amount to a coalition: the Muslim League was to cease to function in the assembly as a separate group, its members were to become part of the Congress party and to share fully its privileges and obligations; the League parliamentary board was to be dissolved in UP, and no candidates were to be put up by it at any by-elections.

¹ C. H. Philips, *The Partition of India 1947*, (Leeds, 1967), pp.7-8

² C. H. Philips, *The Partition of India*, p.14

³ C. H. Philips, *The Partition of India*, p.14

⁴ ed. CH Philips, *The Evolution of India and Pakistan: select documents*, (London, 1962), p.363

The style of Congress government in the provinces also gave causes for concern. The 1935 Act not only extended the franchise to a very large population but also failed to provide that preferential treatment for the zamindars which they had hitherto been used to.⁵ Nationalist policies aimed to build on this, and as Nehru said, 'economically and socially it must mean the ending of special class privileges and vested interests.'⁶ One of the first acts of the Congress ministry in the UP was to bring in the UP Tenancy Act which provided for greater security of tenure - a deliberate attack on the landlords, who sought the protection of political parties opposed to the Congress. Thus the Hindu landlords turned to the Hindu Mahasabha, and the Muslim landlords to the League.⁷ Gandhi's Wardha system ordered that primary education 'should centre round some form of manual and productive work, and that all the other abilities to be developed or training to be given should, as far as possibly be integrally related to the central handicraft chosen with due regard to the environment of the child.'⁸ Clearly this offended large swathes of Western-educated opinion, and especially among Muslims, who claimed that the study of the Qur'an, and therefore the sanctity of Islam would be endangered.⁹ Indeed, Jinnah commented on the whole raft of Congress governmental policies by saying, 'Is there any doubt now in the mind of anyone that the whole scheme of Hindi-Hindustani is intended to stifle and suppress Urdu? Take next the Wardha scheme of education. Were the Muslims taken into confidence when the scheme was under preparation? The whole scheme was conceived and its details worked out behind the back of the Muslims?... I have no hesitation in saying that it is Mr Gandhi who is destroying the ideal with which the Congress was started. He is the one man responsible for turning the Congress into an instrument for the revival of Hinduism. His ideal is to revive Hindu religion and establish Hindu raj in this country.'¹⁰

The experience of Congress rule convinced Jinnah that separation and partition were the only ways to further Muslim interests. Before the 1937 election he had repeatedly asserted that 'Hindus and Muslims could join hands and form one party', but after the election he concluded that 'Honourable settlements can only be achieved between equals, and unless the two parties learn to respect and fear each other, there is no solid ground for any settlement.'¹¹ This mistrust only increased as time went on. In 1939, he urged 'Musalmans all over India to observe Friday the 22nd December as the 'Day of Deliverance' and thanksgiving as a mark of relief that the Congress regime has at last ceased to function.'¹² More condemnations of Congress rule followed in 1940: 'Democracy of the kind with which the Congress High Command is enamoured would mean the complete destruction of what is most precious in Islam. We have had ample experience of the working of the provincial constitutions during the last two and a half years and any repetition of such government must lead to civil war.'¹³

Jinnah's only solution to this was to reinforce the idea of fundamental separate Muslim identity against the Hindu *kafirs*. In 1940, he urged the League in Lahore that 'The Musalmans are a nation by any definition with the need for a homeland, territory and state if we are to develop to the fullest our spiritual, cultural, economic, social and political life.'¹⁴ Later on in that session, the League passed the famous 'Pakistan' Resolution which resolved 'that no constitutional plan would be workable in this country or acceptable to the Muslims unless it is designed on the

⁵ Gowher Rizvi, *Linlithgow and India*, p.92

⁶ Gowher Rizvi, *Linlithgow and India*, p.92

⁷ Gowher Rizvi, *Linlithgow and India*, p.93

⁸ ed. CH Philips, *The Evolution of India and Pakistan: select documents*, p.338

⁹ C. H. Philips, *The Partition of India*, p.17

¹⁰ ed. CH Philips, *The Evolution of India and Pakistan: select documents*, p.351

¹¹ Gowher Rizvi, *Linlithgow and India*, p.96

¹² ed. CH Philips, *The Evolution of India and Pakistan: select documents*, p.352

¹³ ed. CH Philips, *The Evolution of India and Pakistan: select documents*, p.354

¹⁴ C. H. Philips, *The Partition of India*, p.20

following basic principle, viz that geographically-contiguous units are demarcated into regions which should be so constituted with such territorial readjustments as may be necessary that the areas in which the Muslims are numerically in a majority, as in the north-western and eastern zones of India, should be grouped so to constitute 'independent states' in which the constituent units shall be autonomous and sovereign.¹⁵ The League's resolution was put forward on behalf of 'Muslim India'; but at that time it was entirely unclear whether the demand for partition was actually supported by the Muslims. The results of the 1936 elections showed that the League at that time had only a small following among the Muslim masses: only a quarter of Muslim votes were cast for them - even before the Pakistan demand was articulated. Muslim opinion was also deeply divided about the meaning of 'Pakistan'. As Jinnah had expressed it, it had no decided territorial integrity, no proposed form of government, no policy on the role of Islam in the State, no policy regarding the position of Muslims in other provinces or of the position of non-Muslims in Pakistan. Even if answers to this were clear, which they were not, there was still a significant proportion of Muslim opinion which was definitely against. The dominant party of NWFP Province, *Khudai Khidmatgar*, was a Pathan nationalist movement, allied with Congress. The Jamiyat-ul-Ulema-i-Hind never accepted the doctrine of the two nations as propounded by the League. The Ahrar Party in the Punjab had refused to join the League and declared its determination to 'crush it because it is a party of reactionaries' - accepting instead the political and economic objectives of the Congress. In Bihar, the Momin Ansar Conference (party of Muslim weavers) remained opposed to the League. Baluchistani nationalists, organized by Allama Mashriqui, were also opposed to the division of the country. Furthermore there were in the Congress itself a large number of nationalist Muslims who were opposed to the League. Many organizations with Muslim members, such as the Shia Conference, the States Peoples Conference, Trade Unions, and Kisan Sabhas had adopted the same political platform as the Congress had done.¹⁶ Even in the Muslim majority provinces, the League initially found little support for its policies. In the Punjab, the Unionist Party was outside its control, and the Punjabi premier from 1937-42, Sir Sikander Hyat Khan, continued to voice his opposition to 'Pakistan' - as did Allah Buksh, the Prime Minister of Sind.¹⁷ The successful coalition governments in Punjab and NWFP demonstrated an admirable alternative to Partition - though not as electorally-popular.

However, the 1940s saw the Muslim League expand until virtually all Muslim interests were expressed through Jinnah. After the arrest of the Congress leaders in August 1942, Jinnah, he made the best political use of it in strengthening the hold of his party over the Muslim masses. He denounced the 'Quit India' movement as an attempt to establish the 'Hindu Raj, and to 'deal a death blow to the Muslim goal of Pakistan'. Between the years 1937 and 1943 the Muslim League grew strength to strength. Towards the end of 1938 the Madras Muslim League claimed a membership of 43,920; in 1940 it rose to 88,833.¹⁸ In the Central Provinces the membership increased from 23,000 in 1938 to 56,541 in 1943. In Sind the membership rose to over 300,000 in 1944, while in Bengal the League reached 550,000 members. The upsurge in the League's numerical strength was matched in its electoral strength. Sixty-one by-elections were held for Muslim seats in the legislatures during 1937-43, and of those 47 were won by the League, 10 by independent Muslims, and only 4 by the Congress.¹⁹ In the provincial elections of 1945-6 it took nearly 90% of the Muslim seats and - even more impressively - all of the Muslim places for the Central Legislature. The Pakistan policy and the effects of war had transformed the Muslim League from an elitist body into a mass gathering - it could not be taken off the agenda after this.

¹⁵ ed. CH Philips, *The Evolution of India and Pakistan: select documents*, pp.354-5

¹⁶ Gowher Rizvi, *Linlithgow and India*, p.122

¹⁷ Gowher Rizvi, *Linlithgow and India*, pp.122-3

¹⁸ Gowher Rizvi, *Linlithgow and India*, p.97

¹⁹ Gowher Rizvi, *Linlithgow and India*, pp.123-4

To some extent this massive growth in the League's fortunes came about due to their clear support from the British rulers - a *quid pro quo* for Jinnah's support for the war effort. The rebellious actions of the Congress encouraged the British to view the Muslim League as being a counterweight and rival of the Congress on the all India political scene.²⁰ 'That such divisions and conflicts should be used as practical aids to practical government was only to be expected', admits Linlithgow's constitutional adviser, 'for who with the daunting task of governing, with absurdly small force, an Indian district or province or all India would not use such useful means as lay to hand?'²¹ In reply to the Congress's demand for a definition of war aims, Linlithgow implicitly accepted the League's claim to speak for all the Muslims of India, while the Congress was dubbed a Hindu body. However, the latest election results from 1936 had shown this to be untrue - the League had won only 105 out of 489 Muslim seats and did not control a single government in any of the Muslim majority provinces, while the Congress formed governments in eight provinces, including the NWFP with its 95 per cent Muslim population.²² Jinnah was not slow to recognize the changed situation. He remarked: 'after the war began, I was treated on the same basis as Mr Gandhi. I was wonder-struck why all of a sudden I was promoted and given a place side by side with Mr Gandhi.'²³ From this moment onwards, Jinnah's negotiations with the Congress and British became more forceful and less flexible. From this time on, possible solution after possible solution was offered - and spurned by both sides. Jinnah concluded in January 1940 that 'a constitution must be evolved that recognises that there are in India two nations who both must share the governance of their common motherland'.²⁴ - but the actions the League performed were bitter sectarianism, such as the observance of 'Deliverance Day' 22 December 1939. Wartime negotiations between the Muslim and Hindu communities saw petty wranglings over semantics, such as the exchanges in which Jinnah rejected Gandhi's offer for a plebiscite to be held in Muslim areas since 'the right of self-determination shall not be exercised by the Muslims but by the inhabitants of these areas so demarcated.'²⁵ Both parties rejected the Cripps Offer of 1942 which offered an Indian Union which the Muslim areas may or may not join. When in 1946 the British offered a *de facto* responsible interim government and a constituent assembly, in which both sides were invited to share, Jinnah demanded long-term protection from Congress for Muslim and minority interests, leading Nehru to exclaim 'when India is free, India will do just what she likes. It is quite absurd and foolish to lay down now what she is going to do a few years hence'.²⁶

It had also always been a item of British faith that any solution to the communal problem could be achieved within the integral borders of British India without the need for a division of the country into two sovereign states - and certainly not a division of existing provinces. This remained the case even as far as Mountbatten's Viceroyalty. It also remained the position of Congress, who had consistently called for a unitary India when freed from colonial control. As late as 1942, they resolved that 'any proposal to disintegrate India by giving liberty to any component state or territorial unit to secede from the Indian Union or Federation will be detrimental to the best interests of the people of the different states, and provinces, and the country as a whole, and the Congress, therefore cannot agree to any such proposal'.²⁷ However, the sovereignty of Pakistan remained an immovable bargaining position for Jinnah, who on the

²⁰ Gowher Rizvi, *Linlithgow and India*, p.107

²¹ Gowher Rizvi, *Linlithgow and India*, p.106

²² Gowher Rizvi, *Linlithgow and India*, p.109

²³ Gowher Rizvi, *Linlithgow and India*, p.107

²⁴ Gowher Rizvi, *Linlithgow and India*, p.116

²⁵ ed. CH Philips, *The Evolution of India and Pakistan: select documents*, p.359

²⁶ C. H. Philips, *The Partition of India*, p.28

²⁷ C. H. Philips, *The Partition of India*, p.25

contrary increased the stakes by demanding the total separation in the name of Pakistan of almost the entire areas of Assam, Bengal, the Punjab, Sind, NWFP, and Baluchistan. By this point, Partition of India was inevitable - though partition of individual provinces was not.

In fact, these areas were precisely the areas which had given very little support to the Muslim League in the previous election campaigns. Punjab and NWFP had formed coalition governments very happily with the Hindus of the province, even in coalition with Congress. The Muslim peasants of Bengal were still the group which offered the least support to the League programme, and saw little interest in furthering the sectarian aims of the League's leaders. The same applied to the Hindus of Bengal with regard to the Congress High Command. As the bhadrakok Hindus had formed the most Westernised and educated sections of the Hindu population, they had been the early luminaries of Congress when it was set up. However, the rise in Hindu politics and radicalism had seen leadership pass elsewhere, while the bhadrakok busied themselves in local government according to the provisions of the 1935 Act. Separate electorates did not apply to districts and localities, where elections to local institutions - Local and District Boards, School Boards and Committees - continued to be held on the basis of joint electorates. Local politics more accurately reflected social relations of a minority but wealthy Hindu population, since the electorates for local elections, perhaps 15 per cent of the adult population, was not defined by community but by wealth and education. For bhadrakok Hindus, denied an effective role in provincial politics by the provisions of the Communal Award, local and district institutions remained one area where they could continue to exercise influence.²⁸ Until the outbreak of communal violence in Calcutta city in 1946, there had been no serious consideration of a partition of Bengal - and in most of Bengal there remained little reason to arbitrarily demand partition. A panicked reaction to urban violence, the constraints of time-pressure set by the British, and an unsympathetic treatment from Hindu and Muslim leaders from elsewhere in India, forged a division which was to many eyes made more ironic due to the nationalist efforts to unify Bengal in 1906. In Punjab, the provincial government had also been one which had seen a successful effort to maintain intercommunalism up until 1946 - crucially again, it did not rely on the Muslim League or Congress until the elections of December 1946. Even then, the Muslim League did not gain a majority of the seats, and for a short while a coalition government was possible - it was outside and all-India pressure which encouraged the communal violence while spread across the province in 1946, not a hardening of local political willingness to compromise. In both cases, partition was a solution formed at great speed, in order to prevent a civil war that had been urged by the national parties themselves. That it failed to prevent this civil war as well showed the intransigence which both sides had so assiduously cultivated over the previous few years.

²⁸ Joya Chatterji, *Bengal divided: Hindu communalism and partitions 1932-1947*, (Cambridge, 1994), p.204