

The Partition of the Punjab-British vis-a-vis Indian Political Parties



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Abstract

The partition of the Punjab in mid-August 1947 took place as part of a negotiated settlement brokered by the British between the Indian National Congress (INC), the All-India Muslim League (AIML) and the Sikhs of Punjab to partition India and transfer power to India and Pakistan. The Punjab was a Muslim majority province while Hindus and Sikhs together with population of about 44% to 47% formed a very large minority. The demand to partition India was made by the AIML which insisted that Indian Muslims were a separate nation by virtue of their Islamic faith and culture. The principle on which India and the Punjab were divided was that Muslim-majority areas were separated from the rest of India and given to Pakistan. When the Muslim League demanded the partition of India, the Sikhs of Punjab demanded the same principle be applied to the Punjab. The INC wanted to keep India united; but realizing that the Muslim League was insistent on the partition of India, it threw its weight behind the Sikh's demand for the partition of the Punjab. Viceroy Mountbatten came to the conclusion that the partition of India had become inevitable and the Partition Plan was announced on 3rd June 1947 which required the Punjab and Bengal assemblies to vote on whether they wanted to keep their provinces united or partitioned. Both the assemblies voted in favour of partitioning their provinces. Omissions and commissions of the Congress and the Muslim League and the strategies followed by the colonial rulers led eventually to the partition of the India.

Keywords: Indian National Congress (INC), All-India Muslim League (AIML), Unionist Party, Pakistan Resolution, Master Tara Singh, Lord Mountbatten.

Introduction

Background to Partition

The Partition of India ranks as one of the greatest tragedies in human history. Since the end of the World war-I, the idea of the right to self-determination had gripped the minds of the democrats the world over, particularly the colonies. It was the consequence of this the post-war trend in the world to solve the communal problem in the country. While Mohammed Ali Jinnah and the Muslim League bear heavy responsibility-since they demanded and pressed for Pakistan-the Congress cannot escape the blame.

When the British made an attempt to divide the state of Bengal along religious lines in 1905, the Congress led huge protests against the plan. This sparked the formation of the Muslim League, which sought to guarantee the rights of Muslims in any future independence negotiations. With the introduction of political reforms in India by the British, the Muslims realized that they would become a permanent minority in a democratic system and it would never be possible for them to protect their fundamental rights. Muhammad Iqbal, the poet philosopher in his famous Allahbad address made it clear that Islam has its own social and economic system and in order to implement it a political entity was required. When Jinnah came back to India in order to reorganize Muslim League and to make it a political party of the Muslim masses, he got the opportunity to interact with Iqbal. Iqbal through his letters tried to persuade Jinnah that the only solution available was a separate state for the Indian Muslims where they could spend their lives according to the teachings of Holy Quran. Though Jinnah was convinced by late 1930s, but being a realist he was not ready to announce the new plan until he was confident that the vast majority of the Muslims were behind him. Overwhelming support from the Muslim masses for his call to celebrate Day of Deliverance on December 22, 1939 was actually a vote of confidence given by the Muslim Community in the leadership of Jinnah, whom they by then had started considering as their Quaid-i-Azam.

Demand for Pakistan-Lahore Resolution

With the clarity of mind and backing of the Muslim community behind him, Quaid-i-Azam called for the 27th annual session of All India Muslim League to be held from March 22 to 24, 1940 at Lahore. Sir Shah Nawaz Khan of Mamdot was made the head of the reception committee and Main Bashir Ahmad was nominated as secretary of the session. The Quaid in his two hours presidential address in English narrated the events that took place in the past few months and concluded "Muslims are a nation according to any definition of nationhood. We wish our people to develop to the fullest spiritual, cultural, economic, social and political life in a way that we think best and in consonance with our own ideals and according to the genius of our people". During his speech the Quaid-i-Azam quoted the letter written by Lala Lajpat Rai in 1924 to C.R. Das in which he clearly mentioned that the Hindus and the Muslims were two separate and distinct nations which could never be merged into a single nation. Pakistan Resolution was a demand for the protection of the national identity of the Muslims.

Both the Congress and the League were opposed to the federal part of the Government of India, 1935. In October 1937, the League adopted as its objective complete independence and became a mass party. The negotiations between the Congress and the Muslim League, however, stumbled over the issue of the partition. The Viceroy, Lord Linlithgow, invited Jinnah for talks on 2nd March 1939. Jinnah, despite his opposition to federation, told the Viceroy that the only form of federation which would appeal to him would be one that contained what he described as *equipoise i.e.* an adjustment of votes and of territorial division which would give a Hindu-Muslim balance. Various variants of the Pakistan scheme were then under active consideration within the Muslim League. The Premier of Punjab Sir Sikander Hayat Khan's scheme sought the division of India into autonomous "zones" within a federal India.

The All India Muslim League Resolution of March 1940, commonly known as the Pakistan Resolution, is undoubtedly the most important event that changed the course of Indian history and left deep marks on the world history. With the passage of this Resolution, the Muslims of the sub-continent changed their demand from "separate electorates" to a "separate state." This Resolution gave new energy and courage to the Muslims of the region who gathered around Quaid-i-Azam to struggle for their freedom. The Muslim League believed that Muslims were a separate nation and the demand for Pakistan was the urge of a nation to mould its own a deals and culture which could not be satisfied without having full sovereignty. When the Muslim League demanded Muslim states, and later, just one Muslim state to emerge as a result of India being divided on a religious basis, the Sikhs of Punjab immediately said that if India is divided on a religious basis, the Punjab too should be divided on a similar basis. From 1945 onwards when the election campaign in the Punjab started, the Muslim League had no hesitation in using extremely communal slogans to mobilize support for the Pakistan project. They wanted to wrest power in the Punjab from the Punjab Unionist Party. The

Punjab already had established a model of power sharing between the three communities-Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs but then a number of incidents took place which encouraged communalism. In 1939, for example, the Congress resigned its ministries and Lord Linlithgow encouraged the Muslim League to demand Pakistan. The British wanted Congress to support them in the World War-II, and because that support was not forthcoming, they approached Mr. Jinnah who was willing to do it. In 1942, the Quit India movement virtually eliminated all opposition to the Muslim League in the Muslim majority provinces because the whole Congress leadership was in jail.

Political Dealers-Muslim League, Sikhs Unionist Party and Congress

From 1942 to 1945, the Muslim League put their energy into telling the Punjabi Muslims that their economic liberation will be guaranteed if they were to get rid of the Hindus and Sikhs (who, incidentally, were economically far more advanced than the Muslims). The British introduced a capitalist economy that was based on modern banking and investments. Traditional Islamic society bans interest and modern banking. The Muslims, rightly or wrongly, believed that they were the ruling people of this region and that the British, as also the Hindus and Sikhs, had taken power from them. This was definitely in case of Punjab since the Hindus and Sikhs were ahead of the Muslims in education, industry, and business and trade. Punjab was ruled by the Punjab Unionist Party, first under the leadership of Sir Fazal Hussain who allied with the strong and powerful Muslim landlord class of the Punjab. Sir Fazal Hussain died in 1936 before the elections. In the 1937 elections, the Muslim League won only two seats in the Punjab, of which one of its elected members then crossed the floor and joined the Punjab Unionist Party.

In August 1942, the Congress launched the Quit India Resolution which asked for drastic constitutional changes, which the British saw as the most serious threat to their rule since the Indian rebellion of 1857. With their resources and attention already spread thin by a global war, the nervous British immediately jailed the Congress leaders and kept them in jail until August 1945. The absence of the Congress party from the political scene in the country from 1942 to 1945 provided the Muslim League an opportunity to expand and to propagate its populist mission- to get rid of Hindus and Sikhs and this will be a panacea for all the Muslims as Islamic justice as practised by the Caliphs of Islam would be re-established. This proved very attractive to people, not only those who had the right to vote but even others who joined in the demonstrations. In the elections of 1946, the Muslim League got 73 seats in a house of 175, the Sikhs got all the 23 reserved seats for them, the Congress won 50 seats (the followers of Sir Chhotu Ram, after his death, voted for the Congress). It was a polarization in terms of the three major communities of the Punjab.

The Muslim League felt that it had received a massive mandate from the Muslims of Punjab and it was their rightful claim to form the government. However, it couldn't find partners from either the Sikhs or the Congress who said they would never let the Muslim League come to power in the Punjab. They

formed a coalition government with the remnants of the Punjab Unionist Party under Sir Khizr Hayat Tiwana with the Muslim League in the opposition. The Muslim League leadership came out with some bitterly offensive remarks against the coalition government and the Hindus. Their activities against the coalition ministry were intensified in January 1947 when the government of Khizr Hayat Tiwana banned the Muslim League National Guard as well as the RSS. This was followed by police raids on their offices in Lahore. This was taken as an attack on the civil liberties of the people and the Muslim League as a party. It was for the first time in the history of the Muslim League that their people came into conflict with the authorities. A large number of people were arrested and a mass movement and agitation started. The situation became so tense that the Punjab government had to lift the ban on 28th January 1947. The British government declaration on 20 February, expressing their intention to transfer power into responsible Indian hands, gave an impetus to the Muslim League to intensify their struggle in the last bid for getting their demand conceded.

Mr. Tiwana knew that his politics with his close alliance with the British had no future, therefore, he stepped back and resigned on 2nd March and this created a political crisis. The Muslim League could not succeed in forming ministry and the Governor rule was imposed. The provocative statements of the Muslim League leaders due to denial of their justifiable right to for government and the civil liberties movements started by them had a reaction on the non-Muslims, particularly Sikhs. The Sikhs consequently insisted on partition of Punjab and declared that they were determined to fight to the end to achieve their goal. On 3rd March, Master Tara Singh came out to the steps of the Punjab Assembly and waved a *kirpan* (sword) saying, "finish off the whole idea of Pakistan, we will never let Pakistan come into being". Hindu and Sikh leaders met in Purani Anarkali on that very evening and gave the call to never let the Muslim League form the government because it was they who wanted to divide India and bring Pakistan into being.

Serious riots broke out in the first week of March in almost all important cities of the Punjab – Lahore, Multan, Rawalpindi, Amritsar, Jhelum and others. The first clashes took place in Lahore and Amritsar on 4th March and gradually got out of control and the worst part of clash was that on 5th March, the Hindus and Sikhs who were a minority in Multan were killed by the Muslims in large numbers and their property destroyed. The Punjab began to descend towards a sectarian civil war. The 'ghastly' events led Congress Working Committee to the acceptance of the demand for the partition of the Punjab.

On 15th and 16th May, Mountbatten arranged for the Sikh leaders, Master Tara Singh, Giani Kartar Singh, the Maharaja of Patiala, Hardit Singh Malik and others to meet Jinnah and Liaquat Ali Khan in Delhi to assess whether the Punjab could be kept united. Jinnah tried to disrupt the Hindu-Sikh unity by making an offer of an autonomous Sikh province within the State of Pakistan. He offered that the Sikhs could write down all their demands to remain in Pakistan and he would sign it blindly. Upon this Hardit Singh

Malik remarked, "Mr. Jinnah you are being very generous. But, supposing, God forbid, you are no longer there when the time comes to implement your promises?" Jinnah replied, "My friend, my word will be like the word of God". Thereafter, the talks broke down because the Sikhs were not willing to live in Pakistan because by this time the Sikh villages in north-western Punjab were attacked in March 1947 and neither Jinnah nor any other leader of the Muslim League issued a condemnation. The Sikhs decided not to remain in Pakistan and demanded the partition of the Punjab so that the non-Muslim majority areas of East-Punjab could be separated and given to India.

Mountbatten's 3rd June Plan

In February 1947, Lord Mountbatten was appointed viceroy with specific instructions to arrange for a transfer of power by June 1948. In June 1947, the nationalist leaders, including Nehru and Patel on behalf of the Congress, Liyaqat Ali and Suhrawardhy representing the Muslim League, and Master Tara Singh representing the Sikhs (Tara Singh joined as 5th member representing Akalis later on) agreed to a partition of the country along religious lines in stark opposition to Gandhi's views. Mountbatten assessed the situation and became convinced that Congress was willing to accept partition as the price for independence, that Jinnah would accept a smaller Pakistan than the one he demanded (that is, all of Punjab and Bengal), and that Sikhs would accept a division of Punjab. Mountbatten was convinced by the rising temperature of communal emotions that the June 1948 date for partition was too distant and persuaded most Indian leaders that immediate acceptance of his plan was imperative. With the country descending further into chaos, Mountbatten then came to the conclusion that India could not be kept together and on 3rd June he announced that India would be partitioned. This plan also included the idea that the Punjab and Bengal Assemblies would be asked to give their verdict on whether they wanted to keep their provinces united or not. The procedure adopted was that the Punjab and Bengal assemblies were organized into two blocks, the Muslim block and Hindu-Sikh block, and voting took place along this line. If either voted in favour of partition, it would be carried out. The Hindus and Sikhs of Punjab voted for the partition of Punjab, and the Hindus of Bengal voted for the partition of Bengal. The Muslim League wanted the Partition of India but not the Partition of Punjab and Bengal, both provinces that they wanted. The Congress checkmated the League by threatening that if they demanded this, they would support the Sikhs who declared that "If India is divided, then the Punjab would be divided". On 8th March 1947, the Congress approved the Sikh demand for the Partition of the Punjab. It was implemented according to procedure and ceremony, with the British presiding and Mountbatten assuring people that he was confident that the transfer of power will be peaceful. The Punjab governors continuously warned that if there is a Partition of Punjab to which the three communities have not agreed, there will be a bloodbath and this came true ultimately. On 14th August 1947, the new Dominion of Pakistan came into being, with Muhammad Ali Jinnah sworn in as its first Governor General in Karachi. The following day, 15th

August 1947, India became an independent country with official ceremonies taking place in New Delhi, and with Jawaharlal Nehru assuming the office of the Prime Minister, and the viceroy, Louis Mountbatten, staying on as its first Governor General; Gandhi, however, remained in Bengal, preferring instead to work among the new refugees of the partitioned subcontinent.

Findings

The partition of the Punjab, though a natural corollary to the partition of India, could become a fact because of sharp conflict of interests on religious, economic and political grounds. These existing differences alongwith communal appeal of the sectarian leadership and the presence of the third party led to the fruition of the partition plan. The partition plan was accepted by the Congress, the Muslim League and the Akali Party.

Relevance in Today's Context

The partition of India, however, did not solve the communal problem. For it could not perform the miracle of bringing about a complete reconciliation of the old feuds. In place of consolidation of forces of unity, there has been intensification of sectarianism and development of the forces of disintegration. The carving out of Haryana out of Punjab in 1966 and the tension generated over Chandigarh and SYL canal may be quoted as an example in the support of these tendencies. The Khalistan movement in post-independent period is the result of the deepening religious divisions, economic development and prevailing political landscape. This has also led to the formation of many new states.

It needs to be mentioned that a host of political and administrative problems cropped up between India and Pakistan which have strained their relations as seen in today's context.

Conclusion

The Partition of India was the consequence of the communal problem between two communities- the Hindus and the Muslims in the country. Social ostracism of the Hindus and revivalist tendencies in the Congress accentuated separatist movements and kept Muslims, by and large, away from the national

mainstream. When the Muslim League demanded Muslim states, and later, just one Muslim state to emerge as a result of India being divided on a religious basis, the Sikhs of Punjab immediately said that if India is divided on a religious basis, the Punjab too should be divided on a similar basis. Both the Punjab and Bengal assemblies voted in favour of partitioning their provinces. The actual transfer of power to India and Pakistan proved to be bloody and bitter.

In a nut-shell, omissions and commissions of the Congress & the Muslim League and the strategies followed by the colonial rulers resulted in partition of the India. The actual transfer of power to India and Pakistan proved to be bloody and bitter.

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