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Tolerance of People on Trial: Indo-Pak Future

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One of the most important questions for the students of history and politics, whether Indian or Pakistani, is: how did politicians succeed in building bridges or creating gulfs between district and district, province and province, races and races, and men and men. In other words, is there a functional explanation for the growth of national consciousness?, if one merely looks at the map of India and mediates on the variety of races, castes, and customs, the disparities of social and economic development, not to mention the huge physical distances which separated one Indian from another, the question seems impossible to answer. What had the Parsee businessman in common with the Jat farmer? the Allahabad Brahmin with the untouchable of Nagpur, the Moplah with the Pathan? Apparently nothing. But there is an answer. What they all had in common was that they were living peacefully in the same territory since ages and were a part of the composite culture of India. Long before the foundation of the Indian National Congress or the All India Muslim League, there existed in India an organisation whose ramifications extended into the remotest village—the Imperial power itself which did whatever it could to create gulf between the different communities races, religions, and provinces. "Divide and rule" was their sole mantra. Rather than asking, therefore, what it was that bound together men of different races, languages, and customs, and created Indian or Pakistani nationalism, the historian might more profitably ask in what ways the Imperial power itself contributed to the disintegration of the composite culture of India.

The decade preceding the Partition frequently escapes historical scrutiny. Part of the reason is that the genesis of Pakistan is traced, to the activities of Syed Ahmad Khan and his comrades at the M.A.O. College in Aligarh. They are identified as the only vocal group which raised the spectre of Hindu domination, the first to introduce the language and vocabulary of minorityism. They were backed by the "elites" of Upper India who turned to "separatist" politics to safeguard their "interests," which were under threat from British educational policies, bureaucratic reforms, and powerful Hindu revivalist campaigns. Muslim government servants and landowners, in particular, whose power was most obviously reduced by the pressure of change in the late nineteenth century, organized the

Simla Deputation and founded the Muslim League.[1] Their insistence on separate electorates and reservations, coupled with the concern to defend deeply - cherished religio-cultural symbols which were being gradually drawn into the public arena and contested by Arya Samajists and Hindu Mahasabhities, was designed to create the space for a distinct Muslim identity in politics. Colonial policies, which began to tilt in favour of the Muslims from the days of Mayo and Dufferin, legitimized such initiatives through an accommodation of sectional interests in the power structures created by legislative enactments in 1909 and thereafter.[2]

This is in some ways a familiar story told in several different ways — the story of the pressure placed on the "Islamic gentry" by the rise of monied men and the resurgence of Hindu landholding communities;[3] the dreaded fear of elective, representative government and majority rule, vividly described by Syed Ahmad Khan in his 1883 speech on a local self-government bill for the Central provinces; and the grave apprehensions caused by Hindu revivalism and its stridently Muslim Posture.[4] These factors, together with the theories and institutions for "separatism" developed by the religious and political leadership in the last decade of the nineteenth century, point to the heightening of communitarian consciousness.

But the process until the Muslim League burst on the political scene in the 1940s was a slow and tardy one. It was impeded by the differentiated structure of the "community," its regional and local diversities, and by deep-rooted sectarian and doctrinal disputes. It was by no means easy to remove these constraints, without which there was no hope of even nursing the vision of a closely-knit and unified community of Islam. No amount of pious exhortation could bridge the wide gulf separating, say, a Muslim peasant in Mymensingh from a Muslim taluqdar in Awadh. Nor could religious leaders from Deoband or Nadwat alulama, who began to play an important role in public affairs from the early decade of the twentieth century, settle their theological differences with other "schools." The Barelwis and the Deobandsis had little in common. The Ahmadiyas and the Ahl-i-Hadith had a running battle over this or that doctrinal matter. And the Shias and the Sunnis were estranged, especially in Lucknow, with separate mosques, religious endowments, and educational establishments.[5]

Inter-community relations too were not greatly strained until the post-Khilafat and Non-Cooperation days. If anything, the lines of cleavage in north India were more sharply drawn between the Sunnis and the Shias than between Hindus and Muslims.

Thus the initiative towards the creation of a separate Muslim homeland, though spurred by political rumblings from the days of Syed Ahmad Khan, had its own contextual and ideological specificity. It was the outcome of a particular scenario on the eve of and during the Second World War which altered the tenor of political discourse in India and created, much to Jinnah's relief, the space for his manoeuvrings. A beleaguered wartime government, which had in the past refused to deal with Jinnah, now turned to him for political and moral support and, in the process, legitimized his critique of the Congress claim to represent all the communities of India.[6] The inglorious breakdown of cross-community alliances and the accompanying, though expected, collapse of the coalition governments in Punjab and Bengal, which were the last bastions of resistance to the Muslim League, helped turn Jinnah's dream into reality. That this would happen on the midnight of 14 August 1947 was unthinkable a decade before that date.

There was, after all, no blueprint of a future Pakistan in the 1930s, no Islamic flag, no visible symbol, no common platform, no shared goals and objectives. Rehmat Ali's scheme, nurtured in Cambridge, was an illustration of obscurantist political eccentricity. It caused much political embarrassment back home and was dismissed as "chimerical" and "impracticable."[7] Mohammad lqbal's blueprint, outlined three years earlier, did not envisage a separate Muslim state. He merely made out a case for provincial autonomy in Punjab, the North-West Frontier Province, Sindh and Baluchistan within the body politic of India for much the same reason that prompted the Motilal Nehru Committee of August 1928 to recommend the separation of Sindh from the Bombay Presidency and to constitute the North-West Frontier Province into an "independent" administrative unit. In the same speech, Iqbal, whose vibrant patriotic poems continued to be sung in schools and colleges all over India, referred to autonomous states being formed, obviously not all-Muslim, based on the unity of languages, race, history, religion, and identity of common interests. He did so in the context of "India where we are destined to live."[8] This was surely not the swan song of the Pakistan movement.

If Pakistan was still a pipe-dream, the Muslim League was a little more than a paper organization. Having been in the wilderness during the agitation over the Khilafat, its membership had plummeted to 1,330 in 1927. The branch in Bombay, the home ground of Jinnah, could only boast of 71 members.[9] The 1929 session was adjourned for lack of quorum. When lqbal presented his address in Allahabad in 1930, the meeting failed to muster the required quorum of 75 members. It was a pathetic sight for an organization that made such tall

claims on behalf of the Muslims. The organizers of the 1933 session in Delhi had a busy time filling up the hall with students of the Anglo—Arabic—College. The League's income that year was Rs. 1,1318, with 92 out of the 300 council members under notice to pay their arrears of membership.[10]

Jinnah's own Political conduct was above reproach. He was liberal, electric, and secular to the core in private and public life. As a legislator, a role suited to his style and temperament, he generally acted in unison with the Congress. As leader of the League, which was still gasping for breath, he initiated and backed proposals to break the communal impasse. "If out of 80 million Muslims," he observed on 20 October 1936, "I can produce a patriotic and liberal—minded nationalist bloc, who will be able to march hand in hand with the progressive elements in other communities, I will have rendered great service to my community."[11] What India required, he stated a year later, was a United front. "And then by whatever name you call your government is a matter of no consequence so long as it is a government of the people, by the people, for the people."[12] This was not the language of a religious leader but a reaffirmation of Congress' political creed. That should explain why the Viceroy thought of Jinnah as 'more Congress than the Congress' and while others regarded him as an "arch enemy" of colonialism and a rallying symbol of secular forces.[13] Nobody expected to create fissures in the liberation movement or foist the flag of Islam on an area supposedly defined by lqbal and Rehmat Ali. India's unity was an ideal he still cherished.

In the face of such evidence, it is hard to make sense of Jinnah's subsequent crusade against the Congress and his repudiation of the principles he himself espoused with much eloquence and tenacity for nearly three decades. It is much less easy to explain why, in the mid—1930s, the League was seen in some quarters as a political adversary out on a mission to destroy India's liberation struggle. It was right to expose, as Nehru did, the League's predominantly feudal character, its link with government and the obscurantist and reactionary social classes. But it was equally important to marry this perspective with the fact that not everybody in the League was cast in the same mould. People like Liaquat Ali Khan, the Raja of Mahmudabad and Khaliquzzaman, for whom Nehru had a "warm corner" in his heart, were constantly "torn between two loyalties" but not necessarily imbued with an anti—Congress spirit or swayed by the Leauge's communal claptrap.[14]

The two—nation theory is grounded in the mistaken belief that Hindus and Muslims constitute exclusive, autonomous entities, with no common points of contact and association, and

that religious loyalty takes precedence over ties and bonds of relationship based on tangible inter—social connections, cross—cultural exchange, and shared material interest. A corrective to this approach, which asserts the primacy of religion, is required so that the movement towards Partition is understood in its specific context and not viewed as a "logical" sequel to developments dating back to the pre—colonial era.

It needs to be reiterated that "communalism" or "separatism," both in their latent and overt forms, did not always embrace large segments of society: they only touched limited groups in certain areas. Their impact was transient as groups embroiled in inter—religious feuds at a given moment could be seen living harmoniously at other times. The Governor of Bengal, where Hindu—Muslim conflicts were almost endemic, commented on how the rank and file of the two communities co—existed peacefully, and that it was "only at rare intervals, when religious feelings became inflamed, that they treat each other as enemies and clashes occur."[15] Recent studies reveal the fusion of Hindu and Muslim "folk" worship with the practice and teachings of the high or orthodox Islamic traditions and the participation, as in case of the Muslim weavers of Banaras, in public ceremonial relating to particular Hindu figures.[16] There are also instances, such as the one from Bahraich in Uttar Pradesh where the outbreak of cholera in 1930 prompted Muslims to join in great force to worship the goddess Bhawani to induce her to remove the pestilence,—which illustrates the extent to which religious barrier could be transcended and strict court of behaviour transgressed.[17] Or the way Islamic ceremonies relating to birth, marriage, and death were observed in many areas, though the outer labels were sometime discarded as a concession to the reformist movements to make the rituals and practices look Islamic.[18] "The rigidity of intolerance in view," remarked the author of 1921 Census Report, "which is the marked feature of the religion of Islam in its purer form, does not extend to the masses, who are quite willing to recognize and assist the efforts of their neighbours to keep on peaceful terms with unknown powers."[19]

In much a condition, understandably India in general and Hindus in particular on their part objected to the division of the country on the basis of religion. Gandhi was so against this that he used to say that the partition of the country would be possible only over his deadbody. Imagine how the Mahatma was torn apart when the line of partition was drawn straight from his heart. He bleeded profusely. Marks can be traced from his statement to Lord Mountbatten, the last British Viceroy, when he explained that he did everything in his power to "keep India united.

After the acceptance of the partition by the All-India Congress Committee, it did not remain a live issue with Gandhi in the political sense. Being a follower of Nonviolence and Satyagraha, he assumed the role of a saintly prophet and set out on his lonely mission to alleviate the sufferings of the people and to reduce to the minimum the feelings of hatred between the two communities. Allen Hayes Merriam has characterised these visits as "another individual attempt" to prevent the division of India.[20] He still hoped that before the Englishmen finally August 1947, he would bring the two parties together.[21]

Pakistan was a divided nation at birth. Islam provided it with its life force but it could not promote national solidarity. This is the central paradox in Pakistan's story and it holds as much significance today, as it did decades ago. The "Islam in danger" galvanized an ethically diverse and otherwise desperate people into a massive demand for national self-determination. Fear, however, is a negative force and has little value in the building of a community, let alone a nation. None expressed this thought better than Jinnah who once having achieved Pakistan, was burdened with the awesome task of reducing those suspicions which he so artfully exploited in the struggle for independent statehood.

Having established Pakistan on the basis of the two nation theory, Jinnah himself discarded it. He announced in the Constituent Assembly that Hindus and Muslims were not two nations but were two communities. While inaugurating the first session of the Pakistan Constituent Assembly on 11 August 1947, he firmly declared:

"You are free; you are free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosques or any other place of worship in this State of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion or caste or creed—that has nothing to do with the fundamental principle that we are all citizens and equal citizens of one state.... Now I think, we should keep that in front of us as our ideal and you will find that in course of time, Hindus would cease to be Hindus and Muslims would cease to be Muslims, not in the religious sense, because, that is the personal faith of each individual but in the political sense of the citizens of the state."[22]

Jinnah's appeal for tolerance was made in English and not in Urdu to seventy million people of whom merely ten per cent were literate even in their own language.[23] He told the Indian Muslim Leaguers headed by Mohd. Ismail, "It is the duty of the Indian Muslims to be loyal to their county."[24]

In 1948 in Dacca Jinnah assured categorically a fair deal to the minorities. While talking to the leader of the opposition in the Constituent Assembly and the Veteran Congress leader Sris Chandra Chattopadhyaya, Jinnah said: "You will tell these two things to your people; (1) not to be afraid, and (2) not to leave Pakistan because Pakistan will be a democratic state and the Hindus will have the same rights as the Muslims."[25]

While addressing a public meeting at Dacca on 21 March 1948, Jinnah reiterated: "We shall treat the minorities in Pakistan fairly and justly. Their lives and properties in Pakistan are far more secure and protected than in India. We shall maintain peace, law and order, and protect and safeguard fully every citizen of Pakistan without distinction of caste, creed, or community."[26]

Before his death, he had openly acknowledged that the job of holding Pakistan would be far more difficult than the one that made independence possible. And the events followed proved that he was right. Naturally the Muslim League became the dominant power in the new state. The League had hardly been left with any member who had fought for the independence of the country. They had neither made any sacrifice nor gone through the discipline of a struggle. They were either retired officials or men who had been brought into public life under British patronage. The result was that power came into the hands of people who had no record of service or sacrifice. There was a gulf between the ruler and the ruled. These self-appointed rulers feared that if free and fair elections were held, most of them had very little chance of even being returned. Their aim therefore was to postpone the elections as long as possible and build up their fortunes and their power in the country.[27]

War - conventional, nuclear, or even proxy—is no option for India and Pakistan. For Pakistan it is just not winnable in military terms and for India it is simply not affordable in economic terms.Pakistani generals of today are no longer of Yahya mould. They are sound professional and hard-headed realists. The military reality could not be lost on them, as it not lost to the rest of world. The US could conceivably tilt the balance somewhat in their favour, but unless India is caught totally unawares, it can never be sufficiently tilted to cause a serious military reverse. Again, there is a major shift in US policies. Its relations with Pakistan are not as warn as they use to be. Pakistan is also aware of it.

Having realised a long time ago that a conventional or nuclear war against India was unwinnable, the Pakistani strategists embarked upon covert war. After nearly two decades, the so-

called low cost option too seems to be losing its relevance. The peace in Punjab must have conveyed those strategists the futility of their option. A strategy remains viable if the damage to the opponent is substantially higher than the cost of oneself.

Just as war is not an option for Pakistan it is no longer an option for India. An average person in both the countries is ready for a change having realized the futility of prolonged hostility which never seems to bring tangible results but add only more misery. At the ordinary level of existence the vast majority of the people of India and Pakistan blame the politicians, diplomats and, defence planners of both the countries for this problem. If the impasse has got prolonged beyond its natural life span, the Indian leadership is as much to blame. If Pakistan has artificially stunted its growth by remaining in India's shadow for a century, the Indian leadership too has become ostrich like by adopting a Pak-tinted worldview. Whatever the sins of omission or commission in the past, the Indian leadership must appreciate the altered ground realities. To day India and Pakistan are seen to be the most painful squabbler of the second half of the twentieth century.

But enough is enough. Much water has flown in the Ganga and the Ravi since then. The tolerance of people of both the sides is on trial. We will have to stop it. Otherwise we will become a victim of laughing stock before the world. It is heartening to note that most of the top intellectuals and right thinking persons of both the countrieds have started thinking positively in this direction.

Of late there has been a growing realisation that the barriers which manipulative politics had erected need to be demolished if the two major communities have to live in amity. Jinnah's basis of the two nation theory has crumbled fast not only in India and Bangladesh but also in Pakistan; proof of which came in the early seventies when a Bangladesh librated itself and founded its own state on the basis of language as against religion. As for the situation in India, the atmosphere at present is very cordial and has dramatically improved. In such a situation the famous words of Sahir Ludhianvi loom large in the mind

Wo waqt gaya, wo daur gaya
Jab do quomon ka naara tha
Wo loge gaye is dharti se
Jinka maqsad batwara tha

Can't we see the vision of a Friendly and cooperative India and Pakistan,A Union of Hearts? The models are before us. The world is shrinking. Globalisation is the creed now. In recent years we have seen the union of Vietnams, the collapse of the Berlin wall, and the disappearance of communism. The sworn enemies of yesterday have become bossom friends, rather brothers. The same can happen here also. "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" is an old adage here and is a part of India's global vision.

I do not foresee this union today or tomorrow or in the near future. But this can be a reality, say after 10 or 20 years, or even after 50 years. But this will be possible only if we see this vision today and pave the way for it. There is no dispute in the world which cannot be solved. Particularly family disputes can not linger on forever. We have close cultural, emotional, and family relations with the common people of Pakistan.

In this direction some beginning has already been made. Let us not touch the disputed issues. Bilateral cultural and educational exchange should get precedence over the political matters. Let there be heart—to—heart talk between the people of both the countries. Visa and other travelling facilities should be provided easily. This can create a lot of goodwill. Mistrust can be replaced by trust and once it is done most of the problems will evaporate. This was also what was visualised by Mahatma Gandhi decades ago. "It is open to both the new states (India and Pakistan) to aim at.... a family of independent world states. If by our efforts such a world federation of free and independent states is brought into being, the hope of the Kingdom of God, otherwise called Ramarajya, may legitimately be entertained.

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