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The Tired Men of India and the Partition Massacres of 1947

Abstract

India's Partition has in the recent years conjured some major debates concerning its incidence and aftermath. The architects of this Partition in particular come under serious scrutiny of the scholar's pen for the occurrence of this momentous event, remembered as 'an intersection time' that seems to be never forgotten, moving in a circle and calling all other times "to standby as it moves in beyond time and space."¹ Not only did it mark a new beginning for the two divided nations, it made them write and re-write the biographies of their leaders in a whole new light influenced largely by socio-cultural, political and religious nuances. To account for a respectable position in the tumultuous history of Partition, the respective leaders of the communities fighting and struggling for Independence need to be evaluated in the context of their roles and impact. If taken in its entirety the British too assume a part in the discourse of leadership as they bear the responsibility of bringing down the edifice of not only a united India but also of their own grandeur. To them it was the loss of their pre-eminence, of a defining characteristic reminiscent of the Victorian and Edwardian years, of their glorified civilizing mission and perhaps of their identity and credibility as a superior people.² The fact that they tried to portray this aspect of their "national bereavement"³ by disguising the retreat as a plane of moral high ground when they bequeathed freedom on the Indian nation, has been deliberated upon already in a number of scholarly works. Whether it was an act compelled by circumstances or it was a voluntary deed of magnanimity towards the Indian cause does bring to the fore the place and part of the last Viceroy of India Lord Louis Mountbatten. His role no doubt assumes a lead in the story of India's Partition as he was the face of British administration in the final hours of its working in India, but to dwell upon him or his administrative responsibility does not fall in the ambit of this study. An understanding of the part played by Indian leaders in winning over independence would repeatedly bring his response and his governments reaction, but only as the third party on whom rested the burden of a peaceful and orderly transfer of Power.

Introduction

It all began as mistrust of the Muslims duly fueled by the Hindus. The horrific Muslim-Sikh riots claiming thousands of lives on both sides along with countless abductions, rape and arson episodes and ultimately mass exoduses could have been anticipated and prepared for. The knowledge and anticipation of it was

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there, yet nothing was done to forestall the magnitude. Why? Did Gandhi conveniently insulate himself in Bengal realizing that he would not be able to deal with the intensity of the situation in Punjab? Was Jinnah embroiled at the top, inaccessible to and aloof from the common masses, refusing to understand the Partition and migration dynamics? Could the Congress leadership have saved the situation by keeping Punjab united no matter how irrational that demand was? And above all was Mountbatten, engrossed in independence pomp and more concerned with his image to posterity, paying no heed to the ground realities of Hindu, Sikh and Muslim animosity? Were his frivolous preoccupations with fanfare and his devastating delay in announcing the Boundary Award spelled tragedy for the faceless millions? An attempt to answer these and many other similar questions would unravel new debates and might even challenge the existing narratives on leadership and Partition discourse. The present study is merely an indicator in that direction.

As a prelude, the Calcutta killings marked the onset of a long and sordid tale of misery. A city of 4.2 million saw the worst calamity of its times when the call for Direct Action Day turned sour and a Hindu-Muslim clash claimed between five to ten thousand lives with over a hundred thousand rendered homeless.⁴ They hardened the nationalist lines to the extent that neutrality or political indifference could no longer be expected or cherished.⁵ Starting from Maniktola on 16th August 1946 where Muslim mobs attacked neighbouring Hindus on the League's call for Direct Action, the killings continued for four days. The Hindus retaliated with the same fury.⁶ The violence was to claim hundreds; killed, injured and rendered homeless as a result of senseless communal slaughter. Calcutta riots were central to the Partition narrative as after them the negotiating tables became a far cry and violent street riots were to become the tone of parleys. 'Fury' was the word aptly used by *Statesman* to label the madness.⁷ The Congress blamed the Muslim League for provocation and the Viceroy for not calling out the troops. The scene had turned ugly with forewarnings of further escalation in other parts of India. Bihar was next and was engulfed in the worst rioting where daily stabbings became a regular occurrence. Nehru visited Patna, the capital of Bihar and touring the streets in an open jeep saw the worst cruelties indulged in by both the community and the mob, the once peaceful population overcome by a sudden "sadistic desire to kill."⁸ Still Gandhi objected to the police and army breaking up striking workers and protestors, as that would 'admit' Congress's 'impotence'.⁹ The prophet of non-violence was silently blessing the ongoing fury to serve the communal interests. The Viceroy of the time Lord Wavell had in the meantime offered to form a National Government with Nehru as its head. The Great killings made him nervous and his allusion of a withdrawal of that offer made the normally pacific Gandhi explode into a virtual threat. What he came up with laid to rest his non-violent stance as thumping Wavell's desk he retorted, "If India wants her bloodbath, she shall have it."¹⁰ Gandhi wanted the Indians to have their self-rule at any cost.

Nehru's stance seems to be less of non-violence and more of a straight reaction. In a letter to Kapila Chatterji dated August 30 1946, Nehru writes, "You ask me about non-violence in these circumstances. I do not know what I would do if I was there but I imagine I would react violently. I have no doubt whatever that

violence in self defence is preferable to cowardly non-violence.”¹¹ Jinnah whose call had led to the disturbances across Bengal did little to assuage the flying tempers. He did not condemn the bloodshed for a whole two weeks after the first raids were reported and when he did it was “It takes two to quarrel, it is up to the leaders of both the communities to put an end in the name of humanity.”¹²

The Calcutta massacre and later demonstrations in adjoining areas had a direct impact on the Partition riots. In fact they became the central narrative to the Partition violence. A way had been shown, a map outlaid and a track discovered. Nehru and Gandhi’s theory that communal tension existed only in the upper echelons of the two communities and that rural life was a peaceful tale of mutual coexistence, was demolished.¹³ It was a myth that came down too soon to make them realize the intensity and depth of hatred. Jinnah’s case was vindicated at least for the time being. Making the pogrom in Bihar the pretext he warned the Muslims of Bihar of a similar fate in case the majority was given the chance to rule. He would later tell the Bihari Muslims in Karachi that how Pakistan had become imperative because of the sufferings of the Muslims of Bihar.¹⁴ It was definitely a lesson that should not have been repeated in any part of India. Yet Partition witnessed greater ferocity. Instead of foreseeing a similar catastrophe, Punjab was to burn in the same fury a few months later with greater atrocities, more casualties and long-term destruction to the peace of the region. To the leaders of different political parties it came as an unforeseen and unexpected occurrence, nonetheless it was politically motivated and only highlighted their lack of vision and naivety. Apart from the tragic violence of 1947, Partition witnessed the largest transmigration of people in human history with almost 15 million moving in either directions to find a new home, and build new relationships.¹⁵ The magnitude of loss and trauma was phenomenal yet unexpected. Consequently the preparations to control the violence, support the migration and rehabilitate the refugees were ‘woefully’ inadequate.¹⁶

To the early transfer of power came the reluctant acquiescence of the Congress leaders. Gandhi, to begin with, was no doubt a leader of the masses who not only lived among them but virtually in their hearts. His charisma emitted from this proximity to the common man. A United India was his vision of independence from the ‘hated British influence’ to which he would not yield. It was the motherland whose vivisection was inconceivable. In the Partition Plan Gandhi only saw evil...“let posterity know what agony this old soul went through thinking of it. Let it not be said that Gandhi was a party to India’s vivisection.”¹⁷ He believed that India’s partition was an act of surrendering to League wishes on the pretext of avoiding a civil war. Bengal and Punjab were ablaze and more could be expected in the coming days and weeks, yet the prophet of non-violence persisted in his idealism. Surprisingly he lent a deaf ear to the magnitude of the simmering hatred. In his repeated prayer meetings he continued to preach that “violence under British aegis was pernicious _____once the British left, the people would go through the fire, nonetheless, but it would be purifying.”¹⁸ This he believed would bring the fighting leaders to sanity after a few days of blood letting in the wake of British departure.¹⁹ Secondly, claiming to be embracing the cause of all Indians he neglected the aspirations and demands of the Muslims of India for whom freedom would be a partial victory if independence came without

Partition. An India ruled by the majority led Congress was a greater menace than they had been enduring so far. And to this the Muslim League would never agree.

Gandhi's biggest mistake was his insistence on Indian nationalism as a whole and as the only reality and solution to Indian crisis. In a letter to Jinnah, dated 15 September 1944, Gandhi wrote; "I find no parallel in History for a body of converts and their descendants claiming to be a nation apart from the present stock. If India was one nation before the advent of Islam, it must remain one in spite of the change of faith of a very large number of her children."²⁰ His neglect of the crucial presence of other communal interests and their demands and apprehensions was ultimately to result in a major disaster. In 1931 he was looking for an assurance from his "Muslim and Sikh friends" to agree to "any future constitution of India being fashioned, only on the basis of Indian Nationalism unattained by any communal considerations."²¹ This approach was bound to come in conflict with interests of other communities in the years to come and particularly of the Muslim advocacy of Two Nation Theory. The 1946 Cabinet Mission Plan saw his initial excitement at a British scheme that pictured a somewhat united India. He wrote in Harijan "my conviction abides that it is the best document the British Government could have produced in the circumstances."²² But his deep lying, unspoken fear of a Pakistan that the League foresaw the Mission's Plan to be driving at, made him uncomfortable. He was also disturbed by British anxiety of not alienating Jinnah, which was visible enough in the grouping clause of the Plan. His apprehension of violence and bloodshed so loudly trumpeted seemed a half-hearted concern; for his major and overbearing worry was to maintain India's unity. To that end his non-violence remained a second fiddle. For all practical purposes the Cabinet Mission proved to be a dismal failure no matter how much it tried to bring the two main parties to a compromise. Congress wanted its majority rights and the Muslim League remained adamant on its stand. A Civil War appeared to be imminent and bloodshed, its natural corollary. Leadership had proved futile to improvise a way out and prevent their respective communities from a major calamity.

Gandhi wanted an early transfer of power once he reluctantly agreed to it. In an interview with D. Campbell, Reuter's correspondent in Delhi, he said: "It would be a good thing if the British were to go today. Thirteen months mean mischief to India."²³ Gandhi was one unique leader in the midst of many others. Partition tore his heart as it did the subcontinent. As a very unhappy man he was seeing the work of a lifetime spoiled.²⁴ It was after a long struggle for a united India that he had envisioned as a 'home of all Indians', but he finally yielded. In an attempt to preserve Indian unity he had even come close to offering Jinnah the interim government. To him once the British withdrew, the Indians themselves would be able to adjust matters.²⁵ Mountbatten though shocked at the 'bold, imaginative and splendidly far-fetched',²⁶ idea was careful to implement it. The Congress Working Committee, however, did not see the intrepid vivacity of the scheme and it was duly shelved. This marked the close of Gandhian era in politics. He moved to the margins yet continued his presence in Bengal and was successful in preventing a major breakdown of authority in that province by forestalling violence after the initial shockwave of bloody riots had swept the region.

Nehru and Patel, the two stalwarts of the Congress party were equally wary of Partition. By 1940's they had detached themselves from Gandhi. They represented a party that did not conceal an anti-Muslim bias right from its inception.²⁷ As the situation approached Partition, Nehru could not detach himself from this predisposition. His nurtured a certain disdain for Jinnah and his insistence on considering Congress as the representative of both Hindus and Muslims did not allow him a favourable stature in the eyes of the latter community. His insistence on a united India was a clear disregard of the demand of a substantial size of the Indian population. Above all his circumspect friendship with Mountbatten with whom he shared many identical constitutional and political views,²⁸ also contributed to injuring the interests of the other communities, though outwardly he and his party spared no occasion to propagate that the British were supporting the League.²⁹ It was an eyewash used as a psychological tool to keep both the Muslims and the Viceroy under constant pressure into forcing upon them Congress whims. Even if this was the case, it was harming the Congress more than the League. The image that this British-Congress Axis carried was one of "the rape of the Muslim nation in a more ruthless and criminal manner than Hitler and Mussolini dared in Europe", reported *Dawn*, the newspaper, which largely represented the Muslim League interpretation of political developments.³⁰ Nehru-Mountbatten liaison was a known fact, one which did much harm to the Muslim cause. The fate of Plan Balkan bears much truth to the verdict that even in official matters a clear preferentialism was meted out to Nehru. The Viceroy's decision to discuss and show London's approved plan to all the leaders at Simla on May 17, 1947³¹ was hijacked a day before and it was only Nehru who got to see it. The latter's response was one of outrage at the balkanization of India and on the colossal proliferation of dozens of small and potentially antagonistic states.³² The effect on Mountbatten was equally devastating leading him ultimately to get it reviewed by V.P.Menon, the Reforms Commissioner and also Patel's close associate. To appease the Congress and get Nehru's acquiescence, the Viceroy revised the plan without letting the Muslim League, the princes or anybody in India, any chance to review or even see it.³³

The Congress leadership's acceptance of the League's demand for Partition seems to have stemmed from "their lust for quick and easy power which made them betray the people."³⁴ But there was another reason to it as well. They had no option. After months of denying Partition, "calling it secession, believing it would pave the way for reunion, laying responsibility at the door of the people",³⁵ Nehru publicly admitted to the fact that, "the Congress has to agree to it because there is no other alternative."³⁶ His acceptance of Partition "with no joy in my heart"³⁷ indicates the gloomy state of mind he was in as independence drew closer and the dream of a united India fell apart. Already in 1939 Nehru was 'terribly distressed' and 'ashamed' of himself that he had been unable to 'contribute anything substantial' to the Hindu-Muslim solution, admitting to the extent that he had lost confidence in himself, feeling like an 'an outsider ... alien in spirit.'³⁸ It was perhaps a journey more of disillusionment than passion. From his fiery speeches in the thirties when the cheering, leaping crowds made 'madness enter his veins'³⁹ to the pessimism of 'We the tired men of India' in the forties, he seems to have lost the vigour to move on with the same zeal. Like others he and Patel too did not seem especially eager to prevent a civil war, which was indeed

looming large on Indian horizon.⁴⁰ Patel by some accounts the real power in the Congress party, was a “ruthless, unsentimental pragmatist and sympathetic_____ more than Nehru_____ to the Mahasabha and the Khaki clad cadres of the RSS.”⁴¹ He was also a hardliner on the issue of Partition with little or no sympathies for the Pakistan cause. His open animosity was voiced repeatedly to forestall and imperil the creation of Pakistan when he opposed the home ministry to be given to the League in the interim set up with the hope that given the finance portfolio they will fail miserably.⁴² Again his insistence on giving the government officials the option to leave their posts saying that “many Hindu officers had conscientious objection to serving in Pakistan and that he would not be party to it.”⁴³ It only meant that he wanted to see a collapse of the new state knowing well that the new state born in stern challenges would land in further crisis with the departure of experienced administrative manpower. With so much of hatred and ill-will, the dawn of freedom was bound to be eclipsed with turbulent and ferocious consequences. What these men forgot was that they had in their petty and somewhat personal hate and disgust done immeasurable wrong to millions that would always remain a blemish on the history of this region.

Among the leaders of Indian independence Muhammad Ali Jinnah’s role was central to the rise of Muslim League “whose achievement is a striking refutation of the theory that in the making of history the individual is of little or no significance.”⁴⁴ In other words Jinnah created Pakistan. As opposed to Gandhi he was remote from his people, an ‘enigma’ that was hardly understood and not accessible at all.⁴⁵ Yet he was the man and the movement whose dream was a separate state for the Muslims of India, notwithstanding the fact that it was the outcome of the dread and fear of the malicious and totalitarian rule of the Congress Ministries 1937-39. To him the sense of Muslim persecution seemed to threaten all that he had so far achieved.⁴⁶ His experience and resolve should, however, have added a foresight and a clarity; something that was starkly missing in the final estimation. The acceptance of a truncated Pakistan was never conceived when the Muslim statehood was demanded on the basis of all existing Muslim provinces whereas it was “the logical corollary of the distribution of the peoples of the two nations.”⁴⁷ His reference in October 1938 to a “further twenty-five year Imperial rule”, his acceptance of the Cabinet Mission’s scheme and the readiness to postpone “full sovereign statehood” in 1946, his trust and reliance on “British agency after 1947”⁴⁸ are all indications of a muddled up and confused state of mind that was vacillating from one to another strategy. The moth-eaten Pakistan was as much a construction of Jinnah’s lack of single-mindedness as it was a Congress doing. As late as April 1947 Jinnah expressed willingness to accept a united Bengal outside Pakistan. “What is the use of Bengal without Calcutta,” he told Mountbatten, “they had better remain united and independent; I am sure that they would be on friendly terms with us.”⁴⁹ This absence of clear judgment and focus was to become the greatest hurdle in a well-defined understanding of the planning and implementation of Partition ending up in a complete denial of the fact that there could be a large-scale population movement on the boundaries.

Jinnah’s acceptance of a ‘moth-eaten’ Pakistan was fraught with risks both to the new entity and to his personal standing. Jinnah’s strategy founded on

the “idea that the British would act as arbitrators in his favour and to the detriment of the Congress, had proved to be erroneous.”⁵⁰ In desperation he decided on a conduit of which he had no prior experience or reputation. Rejecting the May 16 1946 statement he called upon the Muslim masses to a non-constitutional act of dissent and protest. His call for a day of “direct action” on which a complete *hartal* would be observed to support the cause of Pakistan, undoubtedly triggered the violence.⁵¹ ‘Direct Action’ was a folly of Jinnah, the outcome of which he failed to anticipate, thus plunging the country, perhaps unwittingly into “the horrors of riot and massacre that were to disfigure the coming of Independence.”⁵² A constitutionalist making an unconstitutional move was to bequeath a legacy of riots and bloodshed on the face of India making its independence one of the bloodiest in the history of the world. Calcutta killings were the direct outcome of his announcement of Direct Action, soon to spread to neighbouring Bihar and then engulf the North-Western India. The horrors of migration have made Partition and freedom an unending saga of appalling misery and grief. Its impact resonated more in Calcutta where the League ruled and enjoyed greater influence over the masses. On the appointed day August 16, 1946, the streets of Calcutta “became scenes of mass murder; there were reprisals and counter reprisals.”⁵³ Jinnah’s proclamation that “we have forged a pistol and are in a position to use it”⁵⁴ was in no way an indication of peaceful agitation as claimed. Calcutta killings had set the stage for the later rioting, mass killing, rape and abduction of women, looting and arson that were to become a ghastly feature of Partition and independence. It laid down guidelines for what inhumanities could be committed in the name of religion and political manipulations. Ostensibly the leaders learnt no lessons and paying little or no heed to this aspect moved on in pursuance of their respective political ends.

B.R. Nanda in *Mahatma Gandhi: A Biography* (1958), contends that the Muslim League while campaigning for Pakistan was targeting the Congress, not the British.⁵⁵ In fact the tussle seemed mainly between the two political parties trying to settle scores and wrestling for a place of pre-eminence in the political watershed. Lord Wavell on 26 May 1946 recorded that the Congress leadership seem to be “thinking much more of Party politics and party advantage than the good of India as a whole.”⁵⁶ The British had under Attlee committed a withdrawal in February 1947 to leave India by June 1948.⁵⁷ A pledge had been made to the conflicting interests in India. A reconciliation on their part was now more important than being hostile to the ones already committed to retreat. The onus of administrative failure would undoubtedly continue to be on the British, yet the communities who were to stay on and be responsible governments of their successor independent states, could have accomplished a better feat than they ultimately did. The “stubbornly held positions”⁵⁸ of both Jinnah and Nehru left little room for their followers to opt for any other solution to the communal impasse. They agreed on nothing, and at crucial meetings immediately before partition barely spoke to each other.⁵⁹ This only added to the confusion and uncertainty that marked the birth of sovereign India and Pakistan when the fate of millions depended upon a workable if not entirely friendly collaboration. Not only this, the respective party leadership with their inflammatory speeches and writings were aggravating the communal bitterness. To this volatile situation both the

Congress and the Muslim League leaders were equally contributing, for in most cases it were trivial issues blown out of proportion that led to major incidents.

To demand the unity of Punjab and Bengal was irrational and a contradiction of Jinnah's case for the demand of Pakistan on similar grounds of communal differences. Bengal had a Hindu population of almost 56% and Punjab had nearly 55% of Muslims. If the provinces of Bengal and Assam were to be considered in their entirety, the Muslims would fall to 52% of the population.⁶⁰ A clear majority in one province and a sizeable one in the other was not sufficient to make a strong case for inclusion in Pakistan as whole provinces. In retrospect it might have saved the gruesome massacre that accompanied independence, yet it was a demand the Congress was not going to accept at any cost. The latter's concern over Calcutta in Bengal being a part of the proposed Pakistan state was voiced obstinately by Nehru. It may be recalled that in 1905 Lord Curzon's partition of the Bengal into two provincial governments _____ one comprising Assam and the eastern and northern districts of Bengal proper, and the other the remaining districts of Bengal proper, and the other remaining districts of Bengal i.e. Bihar and Orissa _____ was intensely resented by the Hindus.⁶¹ In the 1940 Resolution the area of Bengal to be separated from the rest of it, more or less corresponded with that of eastern Bengal of the 1905 Partition and the Bengali Hindus who had it annulled by the intensity of their agitation in 1911 were not likely to accept it again; much less would they acquiesce in Bengal being cut off altogether from India and form a part of Pakistan.⁶² Not only were they more vocal and politically active now, but also angered by the overall Partition scheme with the result that they were supported in this campaign more directly and openly from Hindus from other parts of India. Jinnah as the leader of the party to whom the Congress had reluctantly surrendered on the case for Pakistan should have been cognizant of this fact.

In Punjab the situation was more critical due to the presence of a large Sikh population. Though a Muslim majority province by all statistical records, its Sikh numbers were ostensibly manifest and so was their demand. Their claim to a Sikh state that spreads to the River Chenab on the west and to the Jumna on the East, to the borders of Rajputana in the South and to the state of Kashmir in the north was based on their numerical strength, their agricultural landholdings, cultural and historical ties and the presence of their holy shrines.⁶³ In the final act of Partition what happened should have been expected as an imminent and unavoidable reality. It all seems to have started with Khizar Hayat Tiwana's resignation from the premiership of Punjab on 2 March 1947. The non-Muslims of the province among whom the Sikhs were in a majority were by no means ready to accept a Muslim League majority government. Amar Singh Dosanjh, acting President of the *Akali Dal*, produced *Gurmukhi* posters declaring Pakistan 'death for the Sikhs'.⁶⁴ And this apprehension was not ill founded for it was a known fact that Pakistan would be an overwhelmingly Muslim state with no guarantees of a generous treatment of the non-Muslims. The March 1947 disturbances in Multan, Rawalpindi, Jhelum, Attock and Mianwali as a result of which forty thousand Sikhs had taken refuge in hurriedly established camps in Amritsar,⁶⁵ was proof enough for the Sikhs to panic. On the other hand attacks on Muslim villages in East Punjab, on refugee packed trains to Pakistan and Muslim neighbourhoods

elsewhere by Sikh led *shahidi jathas* rendered the violence uncontrollable. Moreover, the lurking fear that whoever ruled Punjab in the final countdown to Partition could be the likely recipient of the whole of the province made the Sikh community in particular uneasy of their future status. Tara Singh's lashing Kirpan on the steps of the Assembly Hall chanting "Pakistan Murdabad" was an outcome of that uncertainty.⁶⁶ It was a clear indication of the outrage the Sikh community was going to unleash, yet the national politicians chose to "underestimate the chaos."⁶⁷ The violence that followed stemmed largely from this neglect and was borne out by heavy Sikh assaults on Muslim villages in disputed border area of the Punjab.⁶⁸

The duration of the Congress Ministries rule 1937-39 had in a way laid down the course of future communal atmosphere. The Congress once in power in eight out of eleven provinces made the tactical blunder of adopting an authoritarian attitude thus pushing the League to the wall. If the former, considering that the Muslim League represented the majority of the Indian Muslims, had adopted a more conciliatory stance, decades of bitterness could have been translated into a strategic camaraderie. Nehru's failure to appreciate Jinnah's leadership of the Muslims and his reluctance to accept the Muslim League as a national party largely affected subsequent developments in the subcontinent.⁶⁹ The 1937-39 adventure proved this verdict. Sharing power at this stage could have saved India and its inhabitants from the needless horrors it went through later. "There was no difference in social or economic policy serious enough to make Congress-League coalitions unnatural or unworkable," making the Muslims feel that their exclusion was merely because of them being non-Hindus.⁷⁰ In March 1937 Nehru had remarked that the "Congress and the Raj were the only two parties in India".⁷¹ His refusal to form Coalition Ministries on the principle that being a majority party they were under no obligation to share power or their cabinet with any other party,⁷² was to create a resentment that was to later develop into communal animosity of the most violent kind. Jinnah's response was curt and candid. In the 1937 October session of the Muslim League, all the three Muslim premiers for the first time got united under the banner of Muslim League to protest against the autocratic 'one party' approach of the Congress.⁷³

Leaders of both the major communities failed to gauge the pulse of their members. Gandhi, Nehru, Patel and Jinnah along with many other of the leaders were embroiled in an intense but disconnected narrative. Blocking each other's paths they seemed less against the Raj they were proclaiming to fight than against the *other* community. In this embroilment they failed to address the two most critical questions of the time; was power transferred too quickly and whether adequate counter preparations were made for the division of India?⁷⁴ Jinnah naively believed that an exchange of population would not be necessary. Deploring the 'insidious propaganda' that minority provinces Muslims had been let down by the Muslim League and that Pakistan was indifferent to what may happen to them,⁷⁵ he bluntly stated;

they were fully alive to the consequences they would have to face remaining in Hindustan as minorities but not at the cost of their self-respect and honor. Nobody visualized that a powerful section in India was

bent upon ruthless extermination of Muslims and had prepared a well-organized plan to achieve the end.⁷⁶

The Congress leaders were no less gullible and advised the Hindus to hold on in Pakistani territories as no harm would come to them.⁷⁷ Such an advice was far from reality on the ground. The hatred that was there all along came out in the open with the first pangs of Partition and unleashed a terror unmatched in historical annals. Political expediencies aside, the psychological manifestations of communal relationship were absolutely ignored by the popular leaders. Raja of Mahmudabad while reminiscing his close relationship with Jinnah in the first quarter of the twentieth century believes that in those days most Indians felt that Nehru and Jinnah were just “talking at each other and there was not much substance to this personal political dialogue.”⁷⁸

The day India was to be partitioned had been enthusiastically prophesied “as the day when her leaders voluntarily agreed to divide the country and avoid bloodshed.”⁷⁹ This was not to be. Not only did they lack in planning and preparing for Partition, they unceasingly vacillated about “the future nature of a free India, and its constitutional divisions of powers.”⁸⁰ They were old, maybe weary too from decades of incessant political combat, but what emerges as deplorable in all their actions is the unpardonable confusion their contradictory behavior generated. Gandhi’s violent rhetoric of *ahimsa*, Jinnah’s demand for united Bengal and Punjab yet demanding Pakistan on the basis of two-nation theory, and Nehru and Patel’s refusal to look and think beyond the majority party syndrome created a narrative for Partition that was bound to turn nasty. On top the administrative failure of the British to control and harness the situation ultimately wreaked havoc with the dream and ideal of independence and freedom. Gandhi in retrospect seemed right when he said, that “the British would leave a legacy of War”.⁸¹ The fifty million Muslims left to fight yet another battle of survival and endurance shall become an alternative narrative of trampled dreams and silent sacrifices in the coming years and decades of Indo-Pakistan history. And for this the leaders long buried in their magnificent tombs shall not even be troubled. In the scenario that Partition had taken place, it was anybody’s guess how the Indian Muslims would be treated. The whole region had been thrown into chaos not by Partition but the manner it was done.

Looking back to 1947, the three major leaders of Indian independence Gandhi, Nehru and Jinnah, the moralist, the theoretician and the tactician respectively, were far from being in control of the chaotic situation, except perhaps for personifying the political organizations they had embodied as the forums of their respective struggle.⁸² Even the supreme visionary Nehru the could not halt the onslaught of troubled times and became embroiled in a personal bid of influence and control in the case of Kashmir, which subsequently was to become the biggest bone of contention between the two new states. If he was adamant on Kashmir, openly confessing that “Kashmir meant more to him at the moment than anything else”⁸³ it was nothing but a clear admittance of the priorities his mind had set. Maulana Abul Kalam Azad’s statement that the “division is only of the map of the country and not in the hearts of the people” which he believed was “going to

be a short-lived partition”⁸⁴ was a clear illustration of the Congress mind. With such an obvious disdain for the new neighbour, the future was quite predictable. Jinnah winning a mutilated Pakistan, Nehru’s heart devoid of any joy, Gandhi’s attribution of independence to a ‘spiritual tragedy’,⁸⁵ all coupled up to make hard earned freedom of the masses into unbridled savagery and a merciless calamity.

The leaders of Partition irrespective of their party affiliations turned a mere event into an unending process of continuously unfolding incidents with increasingly traumatic overtones. The subcontinent, being a huge entity of mixed populace, was led by equally great men who were also responsible for their fate, yet the ultimate outcome was one of violent fury, mutual hatred and unprecedented carnage. They either lacked vision, and were not cognizant of the consequence of the division of India as it transpired in the form of a bloodbath, or they were not ready to face the challenge that such a division entailed which was manifest in their complete unpreparedness to meet the circumstances as they started to unfold mainly after the announcement of the Mountbatten Plan of June 3, 1947. In all these instances they faltered and gave birth to one of the most tragic incidents ever recorded in peace-time history of the world. Some twelve million people were displaced only in divided Punjab and some twenty million in the subcontinent, making it the largest displacement in the twentieth century.⁸⁶ Why the leaders failed their masses on this account remains a morbid question mark on the face of the destiny of millions. The Punjab Governor Evan Jenkins had forewarned of a communal war of secession among competing groups, “for the power we are shortly to abandon.... Moreover, there is very little doubt the disturbances have in some degree been organized and paid for by persons or bodies directly and indirectly under the control of the Muslim League, the Congress, and the [Sikh] Akali Party.”⁸⁷ The fortnightly reports of Provincial Governors, Chief Secretaries and Police Commissioners were repeatedly warning of the likelihood of civil war, communal rioting and deterioration between the relations of the two communities.⁸⁸ Governor Jenkins counsel found no worthy ear as he continued to admonish of an intensified communal split, which as he believed was going to soon tear through the administrative offices and police force in the troubled province.⁸⁹ His alternative counsel to Mountbatten’s suggestion of declaring a martial law in the Punjab was to solicit the leaders of the Muslim League to tell their followers to stop all “burning and stabbing” and to ask the leaders of the Hindu extremist group R.S.S.S. to stop all “bombing,”⁹⁰ indicating clearly where the root cause and its cure lay.

The end came as no one desired but could foresee, as it had started brewing many months ago. And no one was clearly spelling out the guidelines or even the broad political principles behind the new India and the new Pakistan.⁹¹ The confusion had become huge by the time freedom approached. Terrified at their loss of control, the mess they were likely to inherit on independence day⁹² and the pace the situation was deteriorating, the leaders panicked and started beseeching the administration for order. Nehru told Mountbatten in the last week of June, “You gave an assurance even before 3 June and subsequently that any kind of disorder will be put down with vigour. I am afraid we are not honouring that assurance in some places at least, notably Lahore and Amritsar.”⁹³ Jinnah’s modus was a little more blunt and no less different. “ I don’t care whether you

shoot Moslems or not, it (violence) has to be stopped.”⁹⁴ The neglect and callousness of the past months and weeks, however, could not be bundled and thrown in the British camp. There is hardly any doubt that the British were abandoning India and its people in haste, and cannot by any means be exonerated of shying away from their onus of giving an orderly transfer of power. Nonetheless, the masses had been aroused and only their leaders, who by this time had turned into their liberators and redeemers, could assuage them. The lack of preparedness was a lapse indeed and it came from the inability to accept the reality that the communal tension of years could undoubtedly turn into an ugly situation once the land was divided. To be aware and cognizant of the pulse of their followers was the obligation of the leaders and not the retreating Raj.

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