

The guilty men of Partition

It is commonly recognised that by 1946, leaders of the Muslim League were enamoured of the idea of Pakistan without thinking through its negative consequences for the Muslims in the minority provinces. This was ironic both because the Muslim League was founded primarily to protect the interests of Indian Muslims where they were the most vulnerable and because many leading figures in the League, including Mohammed Ali Jinnah himself, came from Muslim minority provinces.

It is less widely understood that Partition also suited the Hindu nationalists in the Congress. Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel falls in this category as evidenced by the Bharatiya Janata Party's appropriation of his legacy. Hindu nationalists were concerned that the national persona of independent India would not be anchored in Hindu identity since Muslims would form more than a quarter of the population. Muslims would also be in a majority in half a dozen provinces, including the two large provinces of Bengal and Punjab.

The unequivocally secular Nehru eventually came to accept Partition for very different reasons. He realised that neither a strong state nor a planned economy, both dear to his heart, would be possible as long as the Muslim League was in control of Muslim majority provinces, an outcome indicated by the 1946 provincial elections. Nehru reluctantly concluded that it was better to hive off these provinces to prevent India remaining a weak state.

Initially, Jinnah wanted to use Pakistan as a bargaining counter to force the Congress to give the Indian Muslims a better deal in terms of political representation at the Centre and in the provinces. However, his two-nation theory, despite its non-congruence with India's historical record, took on a life of its own, trapping him in his rhetoric.

Jinnah was hoisted with his own petard when the Congress leadership concluded that Partition was not such a bad option after all. It was no coincidence that Nehru torpedoed the Cabinet Mission Plan, Britain's last effort to preserve a united but loosely federated India. Jinnah had to accept what he called "a mutilated and moth-eaten Pakistan" with the two largest Muslim majority provinces — Bengal and Punjab — divided at the insistence of the Congress on the basis of Muslim and non-Muslim majority districts.

The division of these two provinces on the basis of religious majorities is the conclusive evidence that, despite Mahatma Gandhi's opposition, and that of Maulana Azad and Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, the Congress Working Committee preferred Partition on communal lines to a united India. This was clear proof that despite its proclamations to the contrary the Congress accepted Jinnah's two-nation theory.

The responsibility for Partition is more widely shared than is commonly recognised. It was not, as some assert, just a British ploy to which Indian leaders succumbed.

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