

The Origin of the Partition of Indian: Provincial Autonomy and the Ministry of Organisation Condition

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Abstract

In 1937, elections were held for provincial legislatures under the Reforms Act 1935. Earlier the Congress had decided that it would fight the elections though it called a hartal on 1st April "to mark the country's protest against the imposition of the new Constitution". "Jinnah too was in a belligerent anti-British mood. He told me he was looking forward to co-operation with the Congress in fighting the elections under the Reforms Act. With the death of Fazli the field was clear, he said, for imparting new life to the League. He undertook an extensive tour of the provincial capitals-a novel experience for an "arm-chair" politician. The election results took even Congressmen by surprise, for, despite the franchise being limited to a bare twenty-seven per cent of the adult population, they won clear majorities in six of eleven provinces, namely Bombay, Bihar, the Central Provinces, Madras, Orissa and the United Provinces, and emerged as the single largest party in Assam. Their most outstanding success was in Madras, where the Non-Brahmin Party, which had ruled uninterruptedly since 1921, was routed, securing only twenty-one seats in the Lower House in the provincial legislature against 159 for the Congress.

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Introduction

Gandhi kept totally aloof from the election campaign, whereas Jawaharlal threw himself heart and soul into it. It was in this campaign that he arrived politically. He drew crowds everywhere and became the idol of the masses, not in the sense Gandhi was but as his glamorous and noble disciple. When I congratulated Nehru on his triumphant tour, he said: "Make no mistake. I was greeted everywhere with 'Mahatma Gandhi ki jai'. It was Bapu's spell that gave us the vote." The League did well only in the U.P. and Bombay and made little impact on the Muslim-majority provinces. Fazli's plan had succeeded even though he was no more, for the League candidates did not poll more than four and a half per cent of the total Muslim vote."¹

"In 1937, I severed my link with Reuter and Associated Press of India, for which I had worked for eighteen years. The story of my break with the two agencies throws light on the political strains and stresses of the time. The Briton's wholesome respect for the Fourth Estate was being overlaid by the urge to make the journalist a sort of public relations man for the Raj.." Durga Das writes that James Grigg the Finance Minister dreaded budget leakages to the press and set out to devise a "foolproof" system for handling the budget. When an annual report on the use of the government's rural uplift budget was to be tabled in the Central Legislature-"Contrary to established practice in regard to official documents, the Finance Minister[James Grigg] did not send an advance copy of the first annual report to A.P.I for putting out its own summary. Instead, the Information Bureau prepared a summary and had it endorsed by Grigg. No sooner had the Finance Minister

placed the report on the table of the House than the Bureau Chief slipped into the seat next to mine in the Press Gallery and handed over his own summary with a polite request that it be used exactly as it stood.

With a smile, I picked up an address slip, scribbled a dozen-word introduction, signed the message and passed it on to my assistant for despatch to the telegraph office. The official gave me a friendly grin, as much as to say: "I shall tell the boss that you obliged.". Next morning however, the fat was in the fire. The "intro" proclaimed that the summary of the White Paper had been supplied officially. Grigg exploded: "We have been---(the oath was vivid, but unprintable)."² Since the A.P.I disowned responsibility for the summary, it lost a great part of its value. Grigg was thereafter on the warpath. Fortunately for us, we were well insulated against local dangers. We had access to the Viceroy and maintained excellent relations with the Home Member and the Leader of the Assembly.

Grigg therefore mounted an attack on us in London while back home on mid-term leave. He complained against our using the agency network to put out nationalist propaganda and allegedly threatened to withdraw the Government subscription unless the "twins"(Iyengar and myself) were packed off from our Simla-Delhi preserve. Not long afterwards, Reuter's General Manager in Bombay put forward a scheme under which both of us were to be moved out of Delhi" Durga Das and his colleague Iyengar decided to resign rather than accept reassignment.

"Both of us were then earning higher emoluments than any Indian editor and many perquisites, including a free first class railway pass. I had six children, the eldest only 15. Our refusal to compromise won appreciation in nationalist circles. "Never put money above honour," Jinnah exhorted us. Sir Chimanlal Setalvad's support was qualified by a characteristic warning Don't fall into Congress hands either. "First April 1937, a red letter day in India's political calendar because it marked the inception of provincial autonomy, also marked a turning point in my career." On this day Durga Das and Iyengar started their own "news-cum-feature service.. My own plan was to develop this ultimately into the kind of all-India organisation I was to embark upon some twenty-three years later."³

Meanwhile in 1937 "I tore myself away at the end of six months from the exhilaration of the Delhi-Simla round to take up [a previously offered] The Statesman assignment in Lucknow. What awaited me in the new milieu was a rich experience, a grandstand view of provincial autonomy at work - indeed a preview of Swaraj." U.P and Jinnah's break with the Congress. If Punjab gave birth to communalism which vitiated the working of the Montford Reforms, the U.P. sparked off a controversy which culminated in the country's partition.

Rafi Ahmed Kidwai was the operator of the [Congress Party's] machine in the UP. He had been Motilal Nehru's private secretary and one of the Swarajist Whips in the Central Assembly under him. After the elder Nehru's death, he became the son's principal aide. Known to his friends as Rafi, he organised the Congress campaign for elections to the U.P. legislature in 1937. It was not easy to divine how Muslim electors would

vote and they formed an influential section of a majority of urban constituencies. The Muslim League, too, was not sure if its appeal could outdo the feudal influence of the powerful landed aristocracy, which had a party of its own and which consisted of both Hindus and Muslims. Rafi as a matter of electoral tactics persuaded Chaudhuri Khaliq-uz-Zaman and Nawab Mohammed Ismail and other Muslim Congressmen to contest the elections in the ticket of the Muslim League. The Congress, unsure of sweeping the polls, was willing to go into partnership with Congress-minded Leaguers.⁴

But the overwhelming Congress electoral victory in U.P. and six other provinces altered the picture radically as the Congress Party suddenly found it could form Ministries without the aid of the Leaguers.. "Gandhi, Patel, Azad and Pant were agreeable to enlisting the League's cooperation in a coalition as envisaged originally." Rafi made Nehru parley with Khaliq-uz-Zaman and his followers and suggest they rejoin the Congress or at least endorse the Congress election platform. Jinnah was counting on establishing the League's identity by a Congress-League coalition in U.P. and Bombay. He quickly sensed that the Rafi-Nehru move would leave him high and dry and launched a bitter attack on Nehru.

Interviewed on 26th July, 1937, he said: "What can I say to the busybody President of the Congress? He(Nehru) seems to carry the responsibility of the whole world on his shoulders and must poke his nose into everything except minding his own business." Nehru reacted equally sharply and opposed a coalition with the League. The terms proposed by Rafi were acceptable to Khaliq-uz-Zaman but not to Jinnah, who considered them an affront to his prestige. The opportunity for a Congress-League entente was thrown to the winds. Rafi made matters worse by encouraging defections from the ranks of the League.⁵ The Congress ministry was formed and the League assumed the role of a militant opposition in combination with the party of the landlords.

I was still in Simla preparing for a move to Lucknow for my new assignment. Jinnah told me: "This is war to the knife." The break thus caused by Nehru's impetuosity and Jinnah's arrogance was never repaired. In the autumn of 1937, Jinnah proclaimed that his enemy was the Congress, and his words implied that his enemy's enemy was his friend. He fired the first shot of his campaign at the Lucknow session of the League in October, declaring that the Congress was a Hindu body championing the cause of "Hindustan for Hindus" and that it called for the liquidation of the League as the price for collective responsibility. This broadside concluded with a reminder that the blank cheque Gandhi had offered to write on Jinnah's terms for a Hindu-Muslim settlement had remained unsigned.

The controversy was embittered by the Jinnah-Nehru correspondence in April 1938. Nehru spoke of Congress willingness, in the light of the critical international situation, to work with any organisation or individual in furtherance of its policy of attaining independence. But, to Jinnah's mortification, he characterised the League as "an important communal organisation," not as "the one and only organisation of Indian Muslims." Jinnah's reply marked the final break with the Congress. Nehru's mind, "obsessed with the international situation," he said, was entirely divorced "from the realities which face us in India." He resented

Nehru's "arrogance and militancy of spirit." He urged the Congress not to act as if it were the "sovereign power" but to deal with the League on a footing of complete equality. Now on the warpath, in his presidential address to the League session in December 1938, Jinnah challenged Nehru's theory that there were only two forces at play, the British and the Congress. He said there were four: the British Raj, the Princes, the Hindus and the Muslims. He inveighed against the Wardha scheme of education and the Nai Talim Sangh (New Education Organisation) set up to implement it as "worked out behind the back of the Muslims," as "Hindi-Hindustani" intended "to stifle and suppress Urdu." He called the Congress fascist and its executive a "fascist Grand Council."⁶

When I found Britons in glee over such denunciation of their principal enemy, I met Jinnah and remonstrated with him that this attack would hurt Gandhi and stiffen the attitude of the Congress. He agitatedly replied: "Durga, this is the only language Gandhi understands." As for the charge about the Wardha scheme, I told him that it was unfair and recalled what Madam Cram Cook, an American who had lived in Gandhi's ashram had told me "...Gandhi above all wants to make use of what India's own life has evolved for the language. He feels Hindustani has come to fill a need and indeed told me over and over again: 'Learn Hindustani as the Muslims speak it if you want to be understood from end to end of India.' Gandhiji considers Hindustani a uniting element, and in the bargain a tonic to the Muslims, a way of utilising all they have done in art, in eclecticism, in culture, for the unity of India in the greater sense. The wonderful scientific vocabulary being developed in Hindi is the gift of Sanskrit, and every Indian language can have the same. Gandhiji told me he longed to have the right Muslim emerge to be the President of free India."⁷

This plea left Jinnah cold. I further mentioned that Dr. Zakir Husain was the Chairman of the Committee which had prepared the Wardha scheme. But he emphatically asserted he knew one thing: Gandhi stood for Hindu revivalism." A Congress ministry with Gobind Vallabh Pant as Chief Minister had taken office in U.P. "Jinnah now proceeded to gather evidence of the "atrocities" committed on the Muslims under Congress rule in the U.P. He set up a committee under a Muslim landlord, the Raja of Pirpur, to prove the matter. The committee produced a report which came in handy to Jinnah and all those who wanted to blast the Congress as an "oppressive Hindu tyrant." The report raised many questions, including one about the Governor's role. I asked Sir Harry Haig, a highly conscientious civilian, whether he had failed to exercise his overriding powers as Governor to protect the minorities as alleged. He categorically denied the charges levelled against the Congress in the report.

That, however made little difference to Jinnah when I mentioned this to him. A skilful lawyer, he went ahead to use the Pirpur report to strike a new note. The safeguards provided in the Act of 1935, he contended, had proved inadequate in protecting the interests of the Muslims." The Congress was at that time contending with a struggle between Subhas Chandra Bose and Jawaharlal Nehru for leadership. When World War II broke out in 1939, their struggle came to the forefront. Nehru said about the war while in transit in Rangoon "This

is not the time to bargain. We are against the rising imperialism of Germany, Italy and Japan and for the decaying imperialisms of Europe." On return to Calcutta, he was confronted with a demonstration organised by Bose displaying placards demanding firm action against Britain and proclaiming: "British adversity is India's opportunity."⁸

Gandhi "nipped the controversy in the bud by demanding a definition of Britain's war aims and ruling that the Congress would finalise its stand" only thereafter. Ultimately, the Congress Working Committee took strong exception to the failure of the British Government to include India's freedom among its war aims and called upon the Ministries to resign in protest. "This the Congress Ministeries did in October[1939] and Jinnah imaginatively used this psychological moment for a call to the Muslims to observe "Deliverance Day." He cleverly fixed this demonstration for Friday(2 December, 1939), when Muslims normally close their businesses and hold congregational prayers in their mosques. He could now assert that 10,000 meetings had been held all over the country to celebrate the deliverance from "Hindu tyranny.". Incidentally, for Britons too the exit of the Congress Ministeries was a deliverance from the handicap of subjection to popular Ministers. They could now go full steam ahead in organising the war effort."⁹

Closeup observations about the short-lived provincial governance experiments in UP, Bombay and Madras make for fascinating reading. I cannot say that the preview of Swaraj gave me a thrill. The Pant team was undoubtedly talented. But each Minister ran his Ministry as his or her special preserve. Pant loved to wrestle with files, his appetite for notes and memoranda was insatiable. He prided himself on the fact that his notes were longer, better written and meatier than those of the civilians. Pant was apparently seeking to establish his authority by proving himself a super Civil Servant. Ridiculing Pant's methods, Rafi[Ahmed Kidwai] said to me in those early days:"I have to give decisions, not to write notes to convince myself. I read notes put up by the Secretariat, weigh issues in my mind and write orders."¹⁰

The Government front bench was more than a match for the Opposition in parliamentary skill. Dr Kailash Nath Katju, who rose to be Defence Minister and later Home Minister in the Nehru Government at the Centre, was an efficient administrator and skilful debater. Hafiz Mohammad Ibrahim, who resigned from the Muslim League to join the Pant Cabinet and successfully contested a by-election on the Congress ticket, represented the enlightened social conscience of his community. Mrs [Vijayalakshmi] Pandit made her mark as a Minister who had a mind of her own, was articulate and had a gift for the rough and tumble of parliamentary life.

Lal Bahadur Shastri was then Parliamentary Secretary to Pant and Ajit Prasad Jain to Rafi. Shastri was hardly noticed since he concentrated on handling unobtrusively numerous petitioners and party men who sought the Chief Minister's intervention- a role that endeared him later to Nehru.." One rewarding aspect of my duties as The Statesman's representative in Lucknow was the opportunity to tour various parts of the province. I discovered that the Muslims enjoyed a special position and represented a vital force. There was

communal tension in the western districts of the province, it is true, but there was some kind of fusion of Hindu and Muslim cultures in the towns, where the spoken language was Hindustani mixed intermixed with Persian.

The peasantry had been indifferent to politics before the advent of Gandhi. The Muslim masses had hardly been touched by Islamic fervour until the Khilafat movement awakened them. It was in the interests of both Hindu and Muslim landlords to see that communal harmony was preserved in the countryside. Communalism was an urban excrescence. The district administration in the U.P. was highly centralised. The landlords kept the peace in the countryside. The British encouraged Muslims of talent and sixty per cent of the junior executive posts under the Raj were held by Muslims although they constituted only fourteen per cent of the population. Young Hindus, who were denied opportunities for employment in Government service, were drawn towards the Congress movement. So also were the millions of tenants to whom the Congress held out the promise of hereditary tenancy and abolition of feudal landlordism. Indeed, it was this platform which contributed largely to the Congress success at the polls. The Pant Ministry's outlook was genuinely secular. However, in fulfilling its pledge to the tenantry it unwittingly drove a further wedge between the Congress and the Muslims. Rafi's Tenancy Reforms Bill encountered stiff resistance from the League landlords, the only propertied class among the Muslims. In a bitterly fought passage through the Assembly, the Bill was described as destructive of the culture of the minority community, sustained by the patronage of the Muslim landed aristocracy.

Nawabzada Liaquat Ali Khan (who became the first Prime Minister of Pakistan), was the chief exponent of this charge as a spokesman of the Opposition. The Nawabzada was of course playing politics. Nevertheless the fact is that that Congress regime did make the urban Muslim feel that he had lost the pre-eminence he had enjoyed under the Nawabs and their British successors. In a piece I wrote for *The Statesman* headed "U.P in Travail" and published on 5th May, 1939, I summed up the situation at the end of two years of Congress rule thus: The Congress Party, on assuming office, proceeded to translate its pledges into legislative and administrative acts. At once rose the cry: "This is the revolution.". The intellectual classes found themselves put on the shelf. The stakeholders asked themselves whether they had supported and financed the Congress for the purpose of promoting their own ruin. The masses inquired if the Congress really intended to play a revolutionary role.

The public servants wondered whether the administration would be run on idealistic lines and at the same time avert chaos. Legislators rubbed their eyes at the disregard shown to the "non-official" opinion voiced by them. The spokesman of the minorities complained that they had asked for liberty, not communal raj. The Ministers were overworked. Unemployed Congress legislators were getting on the nerves of the Ministers and a desperate Opposition sacrificed for party exigencies the larger issues of a constitutional and financial nature which should be above party politics.. I visited Bombay and Madras to make a study of the Congress regime in these provinces. The Bombay Ministry improved the administration and won laurels for

the efficient way K. M. Munshi, the Home Minister handled a Hindu-Muslim riot within three months of assumption of office. C. Rajagopalachari, who headed the Congress Ministry in Madras, was so dominant a figure that his Ministry came to be known as a one-man show. Madras was fortunate in possessing a cadre of experienced civilians, both British and Indians who served the Ministers with conspicuous loyalty and co-operation.

The three Ministries, indeed, set separate patterns of political management. In the U.P, the Cabinet responsibility was a facade. Each Ministry worked as a separate empire, subject to the overriding vigilance of the Chief Minister. The Bombay set-up was an example of collective responsibility and cohesive team work. While Ministers were encouraged to express their view frankly at a Cabinet meeting, they backed the final decision both in their public statements and private talk. Madras set the pattern for a compact Ministry under the father figure whose word was law." Jinnah gets the veto World War II had broken out in 1939 and Viceroy Linlithgow had invited Gandhi, Jinnah and the Chancellor of the Chamber of Princes for talks and sought their cooperation in the war effort. "Linlithgow's action in inviting not only Gandhi(as was the case in the past) but also Jinnah.. had the effect of greatly inflating Jinnah's stature politically. The League leader had been equated with Gandhi for the first time and, what is more, the Viceroy's decision eloquently confirmed the basic contention made by Jinnah in his correspondence with Nehru that the power struggle in India was between four parties, namely the British, the Hindus, the Muslims and the Princes, and not between the British and the Congress only as Nehru asserted.

The fact of the matter was that the invitation to Jinnah was not extended without reason. Over the preceding two years he had emerged as the tallest among the Muslim politicians and as an uncompromising critic of the Congress. In doing so, he created a favourable impression both on the Princes and on the British bureaucracy." The India Office and the Viceroy were now agreed on building up Jinnah as their Crescent Card to neutralise the Congress challenge. This was manifest from Sikander Hayat Khan's disclosure to me that the Viceroy, on instructions from the Secretary of State, had enjoined upon him and Fazlul Haque[of Bengal] not to undermine Jinnah's position as "leader of the Muslim community.". This happened towards the end of 1939, when Jinnah had taken up an uncompromising attitude and the Muslim Premiers of Punjab and Bengal were under pressure from some of their followers "to disown Jinnah or cut him down to size".¹¹

But Jinnah was still a nationalist at heart. He tried to cash in on his new status and made another effort in January, 1940, to persuade the Congress to accept him as the sole spokesman of the Muslims. "That is all that I seek," he told me. But he was again rebuffed. He took further offence when the Congress elected Azad as its President for their annual session in March at Ramgarh to demonstrate to the world that Jinnah was not the sole spokesman of the Muslims. "They have now added insult to injury by selecting that showboy," he bitterly remarked. I pleaded with him that the moment the Congress recognised the League as the sole Muslim spokesman the British would organise another Aga Khan show as a challenge. But he was in no mood to argue.

"No, Durga," he replied, "if only Gandhi would join hands with me, the British game of divide and rule would be frustrated." Linlithgow made another effort to persuade the Congress to co-operate in the war effort and invited Gandhi in February[1940] for talks. He assured him that a new constitution would be drawn up after the war in consultation with the Indian leaders. But the deadlock continued, and the Viceroy thereupon decided to seek the League's co-operation both to counter the Congress and fight the war.

Jinnah was invited for a talk on 13th March, and he used the occasion to assure the Viceroy that the Muslims would not retard the war effort if an undertaking was given to them that no settlement would be reached with the Congress without the previous consent of the Muslims. The Viceroy, according to Jinnah, reacted favourably and said he would communicate his views. Gandhi was quick to sense the significance of the Viceroy's move and realised that the British were now boosting Jinnah to create a roadblock to ride out the period of the war...Addressing the Subjects Committee and the delegates[of Congress's annual session in March 1940], he put forward the proposal for a Constituent Assembly as a solution to the Hindu-Muslim problem. Under his proposal, as Gandhi explained to me earlier, the eighty million Muslims of India would be conceded the right of self-determination provided their representatives were elected to the Constituent Assembly on adult franchise[as quoted in a later chapter, he felt polls held on a narrow franchise would not meet the tests he had laid down]. They could then decide whether they wanted independence for India as a joint family, with the right to claim a division if they wanted... Jinnah, now after a bigger prize, was unmoved and four days later, at the League session at Lahore, he made this next shrewd move in the wartime game of political chess in India.

He got the session to declare in a resolution that no constitutional plan would be acceptable to the Muslims unless designed on the following basic principle "that geographically contiguous units are demarcated into regions which should be so constituted with such territorial adjustments 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 to constitute 'independent States' in which the constituent units shall be autonomous and sovereign." The resolution did not employ the word Pakistan, although in his presidential speech Jinnah specifically asserted that the Hindus and the Muslims represented different and distinct social orders and could not therefore evolve a common nationality. A Hindu correspondent asked him whether the resolution "meant a demand for Pakistan?" Jinnah still avoided using the word Pakistan and replied that it was open to him to think so and that he was prepared to accept his interpretation. (The resolution was eventually publicised as demanding Pakistan.). When I met Jinnah after the session and pointed out that Sikander Hayat Khan had categorically told me that the resolution was essentially a bargaining counter, Jinnah replied: "A bargain, my friend, is struck between two parties. Let the Congress first accept the League as the other party."¹²

Now that the two parties had made their pronouncements, it was clear that the Congress was on the warpath and that the League would co-operate at a price in fighting the war, made grim by the blitzkrieg Hitler

suddenly launched to end months of phoney confrontation. The Viceroy accordingly invited Jinnah to another talk on 27th June, and this proved most rewarding to the League leader. In a statement on 8th August, 1940, Linlithgow placed in the hands of Jinnah a veto on constitutional progress by declaring that the British government would not contemplate the transfer of power "to any system of government whose authority is directly denied by large and powerful elements in India's national life. Nor could they be parties to the coercion of such elements into submission to such a government." Jinnah was on top and when I saw him he disclosed in confidence that the League owed this concession to Leopold Amery, the Secretary of State. (The India Office had once again played the Crescent Card). Jinnah was remarkably relaxed and, leaning back in his chair added: "All I have to do now is to wait for the next Congress move and to counter it. I have no doubt that Nehru will play into my hands."

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