Gandhi’s Role In the Partition of India

When the All-India Muslim League was established in Dhaka in 1906 by leading Muslim figures from around the country, India had just begun to slowly transition to self-rule from the British Raj. From the outset, the political party’s primary goal was to protect the interests of India’s large Muslim minority, especially its elite. Its initial strategy was to use the demographic weight of the Muslim-majority provinces in northwestern and eastern India, particularly the two large provinces of Punjab and Bengal, to secure larger Muslim representation in the legislature, in the executive branch, and in public services in minority provinces, where Muslims were most in need of protection.

In the end, the 1947 partition of India, which the Muslim League later advocated, accomplished exactly the opposite. The separation cut away the Muslim-majority provinces from the rest of India, leaving Muslims in the minority provinces far more vulnerable to the will of the Hindu majority. The division of the subcontinent reduced Muslims’ share of the population from over a quarter in British India to just ten percent in independent India, allowing Hindu chauvinists to openly equate Indian nationalism with Hindu nationalism.

Mohammed Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan and the leader of the Muslim League in its final phase, is often assumed to have been the one who brought about partition. But some leading scholars, such as Ayesha Jalal, contend that Jinnah never wanted it. According to Jalal, the demand for Pakistan was a bargaining chip for Jinnah that unfortunately took on a momentum of its own, leading not only to the division of India but also to the partition of its largest Muslim-majority provinces, Punjab and Bengal, into two parts. Partition left Jinnah, in his own words, with a “truncated or mutilated moth-eaten” Pakistan.

Partition, however, cannot be blamed on the Muslim League and Jinnah alone. There had always been an explicitly Hindu majoritarian streak in Indian nationalism that equated Indian identity with Hinduism and defined India in Hindu terms, for example as a mother goddess akin to Kali and Durga. The literature that this strand of thinking produced was explicitly anti-Muslim in character. Organizationally it took the form of the Hindu Mahasabha, an exclusivist Hindu party set up to defend the rights and privileges of the Hindu majority, and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a proto-fascist paramilitary group that spawned a number of other organizations, including the Bharatiya Janata Party in power in India today. The RSS propagated a militant Hindu supremacist ideology that defined the Muslim Indian as the other. M. S. Golwalkar, the leader of the RSS from 1940 to 1973, openly declared that “in this land Hindus have been the owners, Parsis and Jews the guests, and Muslims and Christians the dacoits [band of armed robbers].”

Explicit Hindu chauvinism was only of secondary importance during the independence movement. The predominant strand of Hindu nationalism, in contrast, blended Hindu nationalism with Indian nationalism far more subtly—by adopting Hindu symbols, for example—but without explicitly denouncing Muslims as outsiders. This predominant strand of Hindu nationalism was always a part of the mainstream Indian National Congress (known...
simply as the Congress) and was exemplified by nationalist stalwarts such as the activists Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Lala Lajpat Rai in the earlier phase and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, India’s first deputy prime minister, at the time of independence.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, the leading figure of the nationalist movement from 1920 until independence, professed that above all his mission was to bridge the gap between Hindus and Muslims; yet large segments of the Muslim elite consistently considered him to belong to the implicit Hindu nationalist tradition. In their view, Gandhi imperceptibly equated Hinduness with Indianness by his dress, vocabulary, and demeanor and his obsession with the protection of cows, considered sacred by Hindus. Consequently, the Muslim elite felt their identity under greater threat with Gandhi at the helm of the Congress than they had before he became the undisputed leader of the party.

HINDU NATIONALISM AND THE MUSLIM ELITE

The politics of Indian independence was above all elite politics; the masses had only instrumental value. Even in the last elections held in India under the Raj in 1946, only 13 percent of the adult population had the right to vote based on property and income criteria. In the run-up to Indian independence, the Muslim elite harbored a sense of great insecurity connected to history, demography, lack of progress in English education, and other factors. Before the Raj, the center of gravity of Indian politics was the heartland of northern and central India, where much of the Muslim elite was concentrated. When control began to shift to the hands of the East India Company, power shifted as well to the coastal cities of Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay, where the trading company had established its bases. These coastal cities and their hinterlands were dominated by an emerging English-educated, predominantly Hindu elite who made up the bulk of Indian administrators in subordinate positions in the Raj as well as spokespersons for self-government in India.

Whether Muslims’ insecurities at the time of independence were warranted is beside the point. They pervaded the psyche of the Muslim elite and had to be addressed in a manner acceptable to community leaders if India was to remain united. As Gandhi’s grandson and leading public intellectual Rajmohan Gandhi has succinctly stated, “A journey towards independence that did not remove Muslim anxieties was bound to lead to Partition.”

Gandhi’s appearance on the scene changed the character of the national movement from a constitutionalist to a populist one. As a leader interested in mobilizing the masses, Gandhi couched part of his political terminology in Hindu religious idioms. He used the term *ram rajya* (governance by the Hindu deity Ram), for example, to signify that a just order would prevail after independence. But that alienated much of the Muslim elite because it alluded to a mythical Hindu golden age before the advent of Islam in India. Gandhi’s deliberate adoption of the attire of a Hindu holy man, or *sant*, also repelled large segments of Muslims. The use of the term *mahatma*—great soul—by Gandhi’s acolytes as his title introduced Hindu spiritual terminology into the political arena and further increased Muslim alienation.

In 1920, Jinnah, then a senior and thoroughly secular leader of the Congress, strongly opposed Gandhi’s use of religious idioms in politics and warned that “it was a crime to mix up politics and religion the way he had done.” Jinnah believed that doing so contributed to communal polarization. He was also staunchly against Gandhi’s support for the antediluvian Khilafat movement, which sought a restoration of the Ottoman caliphate after its defeat in World War I. Gandhi joined the Khilafat movement to draw the support of the Muslim masses for his noncooperation movement, aimed at boycotting all British-created institutions in India in an effort to gain independence for the country.
For Jinnah, reference to a backward-looking golden age specific to the Hindu or Muslim communities from which the other was excluded was a recipe for division. Jinnah had been the principal architect of the Lucknow Pact of 1916 between the Congress and the Muslim League, for which he was called the “ambassador of Hindu-Muslim unity.” He left the Congress in 1920 in disgust after he was hooted down at the Nagpur session of the party for not referring to Gandhi as “Mahatma” and for refusing to endorse the noncooperation policy because of his commitment to constitutionalist means for gaining independence.

Muslim suspicion of Gandhi increased in 1932 after his stubborn opposition to the Communal Award of British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald. The award granted separate electorates, or reserved legislative seats, to India’s depressed classes, a euphemism for the untouchables of the Hindu caste system, now known as Dalits. The Dalits were given the same privilege the Muslims had enjoyed of choosing their own representatives to the legislature in future elections. The Muslim League accepted the award, but the Congress rejected it. Gandhi considered the award a device meant to divide Hindu society and pledged a fast unto death to persuade the British to repeal it. This hunger strike forced B. R. Ambedkar, the leader of the Dalits, to drop his demand for separate electorates for his people, a decision he publicly regretted in an interview to the BBC in 1955. In the same interview, Ambedkar disparaged Gandhi for his unwavering commitment to the caste system, implying that his concern for the untouchables was a sham.

Gandhi’s rejection of the Communal Award seemed to send a message to the Muslim leaders that he and the Congress were more interested in promoting a monolithic Hindu bloc under upper-caste control than in nurturing Hindu-Muslim unity and allowing Muslims their fair share of power in independent India. The logic was simple: if implemented, the award would have led to parity between Muslim and upper-caste Hindu representatives in the legislatures; Dalit representatives elected through separate Dalit electorates would have held the balance. The Muslim elite did not find the Dalits threatening. In fact, they saw them as potential allies against upper-caste Hindus who had mistreated the Dalits for centuries and, according to many Muslims, were now bent on dominating the Muslims in a similar manner.

THE PATH TO PARTITION

Soon after Gandhi’s rejection of the Communal Award in 1932, Jinnah returned from self-imposed exile in London in 1934 to take over the leadership of the Muslim League. The leader who returned, however, was very different from the Jinnah who warned Gandhi about the dangers of mixing religion with politics in 1920. He now decided to emulate Gandhi. The Qaid-e-Azam (Great Leader), as he came to be known among his followers, eventually outdid the Mahatma in his use of religion for political purposes. He argued that Hindus and Muslims were not just a majority and a minority community but two distinct nations. This formula became the steppingstone for the demand for Pakistan first put forward, although in rather vague terms, at the Lahore session of the Muslim League in 1940.

Simultaneously, the Congress, which claimed to represent all Indians, became increasingly Hindu in its composition under Gandhi’s leadership, which continued unofficially even after he resigned from party membership in 1934. Although the Muslim vote at the time was divided among the Muslim League and numerous regional Muslim parties, the Muslim League nevertheless won four times the number of seats reserved for Muslims—106 to 25—as did the Congress in the 1937 provincial elections.
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The December 1945 election to the Central Assembly was a major victory for the Muslim League, which won all 30 seats allocated to the Muslims. In the subsequent provincial elections held in 1946, it won an overwhelming majority of 425 out of 476 seats reserved for the Muslim community, thus demonstrating that it was well on its way to becoming the sole representative of the Muslims of India, or at least of its elite.

A partial explanation for this shift is that in Muslim perceptions, the Congress governments in power in most provinces between 1937 and 1939 treated the community unfairly. Congress President Jawaharlal Nehru’s disdain for Jinnah and the Muslim League and his refusal to accommodate the league in the provincial government in the United Provinces after the 1937 elections, for example, contributed to the Muslim disenchantment with the Congress. Gandhi, with his immense influence over the Congress leadership, could have overruled Nehru but decided not to do so. That he had the power to override the Congress leadership was demonstrated two years later when he forced Subhas Chandra Bose out of his elected position as president of the Congress because Gandhi found him insufficiently pliable and too radical for his taste.

Throughout this period, Gandhi remained the unofficial but undisputed leader of the Congress. He attended all Congress Working Committee meetings; no member could be appointed to the CWC and no decisions could be taken by the Congress High Command without his approval. This continued until the spring of 1947, when Nehru and Patel broke with him, for different reasons, on the question of accepting the idea of partition.

Gandhi opposed partition to the very end. Despite his opposition, Gandhi’s earlier alienation of the Muslim elite through his deliberate adoption of Hindu garb and vocabulary as well as through some of his political decisions that they considered pro-Hindu and anti-Muslim means that he cannot be absolved from at least partial responsibility for what came to pass.

In the light of historical evidence, only some of which has been presented here with specific reference to Gandhi, it would be a mistake to attribute partition solely to the machinations of Jinnah and the Muslim League. From the late nineteenth century onward, one cannot deny the existence of a strong streak among the Muslim elite that emphasized the distinct identity of Indian Muslims. This streak of thought resisted unconditional amalgamation into the national mainstream, which the Muslim elite perceived could become a vehicle for Hindu domination because the latter composed about 65 percent of the population in preindependence India. (The Aligarh Movement founded by Sir Syed Ahmed Khan bears testimony to this fact.)

This feeling among the Muslim elite was augmented, however, by a similarly strong streak of Hindu nationalism evident from the same period both within and outside the Congress. The difference between the two was that emphasis on Muslim identity, because it was a minority phenomenon, could be easily labeled separatism, while Hindu nationalism—especially of the implicit and subtle variety—could easily pass off as Indian nationalism because it represented the nationalism of the majority. Unfortunately, this was a conundrum that the Indian national movement and its leaders, including Gandhi, could not resolve. Partition was the result of the cumulative failure of the Hindu and Muslim elites to find a satisfactory solution to this dilemma.
Mohammed Ayoob is a Senior Fellow at the Center for Global Policy. He also is a University Distinguished Professor Emeritus of International Relations and Political Science at Michigan State University (MSU). The views expressed herein are the author’s and do not necessarily reflect those of CGP. Originally published in Foreign Affairs.

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