

... it must really be accounted a mercy that Mountbatten did not foresee more clearly the magnitude of the calamity that threatened the Punjab. Had he done so he might have fumbled and faltered, casting about vainly for means of avoiding it while the whole country drifted into civil war. As it was, by driving ahead at top speed with his Plan for partition, he successfully divided the country and armed forces before they could be engulfed in universal strife and the Punjab alone had to pay in blood the price of freedom.

For the historic corollary is that at the last moment, and by the narrowest of margins, power was transferred by a process of peaceful change to 97 per cent of the population of the Indian subcontinent. India emerged as a secular democracy when all around large areas of Asia were about to undergo the ordeals of revolutions, dictatorships and civil wars. Once again, ironical consequences involving the mass accession of the Princely Indian States provided India with more citizens than it lost through the creation of Pakistan, while Pakistan itself in providing the Muslim world with a major new member state could only do so by the fundamental partition of the Muslim community as a whole.

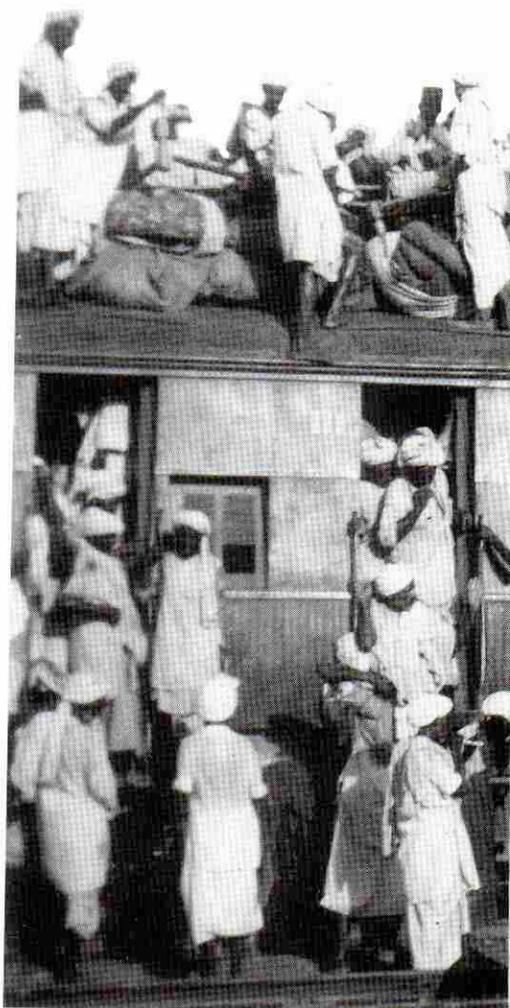
Finally, who would have dared to anticipate that for India still to be representing one fifth of the human race would mean absorbing a prodigious population explosion, a doubling from 450 to 900 million? This awesome fact alone on the fiftieth anniversary of independence is sufficient vindication of the roles played by Mountbatten and the Indian leaders who came together to implement within 144 days a unique transfer of power and thereby uphold Macaulay's guiding principle – 'Reform that you may preserve is the voice of great events'.

FOR FURTHER READING:

V.P. Menon, *The Story of the Integration of the Indian States* (Longman, 1956); *The Transfer of Power in India* (Longman, 1957); *The Memoirs of Lord Ismay* (Heinemann, 1960); Sir Penderel Moon, *Divide and Quit* (Chatto and Windus, 1961); *The British Conquest and Dominion of India* (Duckworth, 1989); H.V. Hodson, *The Great Divide* (Oxford University Press, Karachi, 1985); Philip Ziegler, *Mountbatten: The Official Biography* (Collins, 1985). For full documentation of the Mountbatten Viceroyalty: *Vols X, XI & XII India: The Transfer of Power 1942-1947* (H.M. Stationery Office, 1981).

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Francis Robinson considers what the Muslims wanted – and what they got – out of the decision to divide the subcontinent on religious lines.



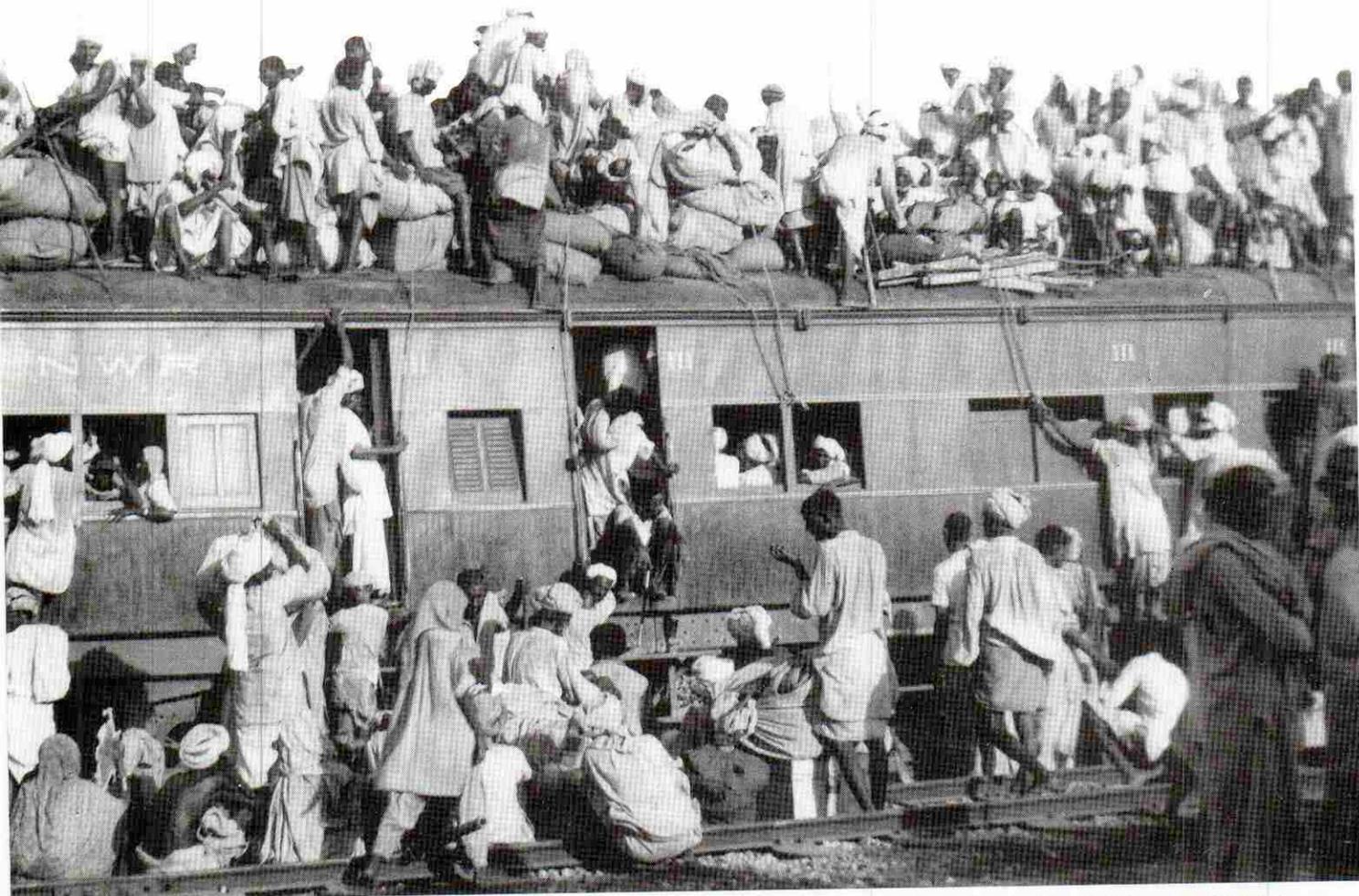
THE MUSLIMS AND

The partition of India at independence in 1947 into the sovereign states of India and Pakistan is one of the more important events of twentieth-century world history. It was a shameful end to the most important project in Britain's imperial enterprise. More important it was a tragic experience for the hundreds of thousands of Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims who were killed in the communal slaughter which accompanied the process and for the nearly 15 million who were made refugees. Over the past fifty years India and Pakistan have been in a state of constant hostility, fighting three wars in 1947-48, 1963 and 1971, and during the last decade fighting low-intensity wars over Kashmir and the drawing of boundaries in the high Himalayas.

Approaches to partition depend very much on where the individual is situated. For Indians, in the classic nationalist interpretation, partition

was the logical outcome of Britain's policies of dividing and ruling. For Pakistanis it was their founding moment, the glorious outcome of the struggle of Muslims to have their separate identity recognised by both the British and the Indian nationalist movement. For the Bangladeshis, it was a false dawn, but arguably a necessary prelude to their achievement of their own nation state in 1971. For the British it was a regrettable necessity. They did not have the power to impose a solution on their Indian empire which left it unified; partition came to be the only way in which they could extract themselves from a commitment which they could no longer afford.

When an event is bound up with the founding narratives of three of the world's more populous states and the pride in achievement of a fourth, historiographical positions are likely to be hard fought. That said, any



A subcontinent divided: Muslim refugees leaving New Delhi on overcrowded trains in the wake of the violence following partition, September 1947.

PARTITION

explanation of partition must address two issues: (1) why many Muslims were reluctant to join the Congress, the party of the Indian nationalist movement, and (2) why this fact led to a surgical division of the land.

Before addressing these issues some basic points about India's Muslims should be established. Roughly a quarter of the population, they were in no way a united group. Some were descended from, or liked to claim descent from, those who had come to India over the ages to conquer, to trade or seek their fortunes – Arabs, Persians, Turks, Afghans. But the vast majority were Indian converts to Islam. In the north-east and north-west of the subcontinent they formed majorities of the population, in Bengal being largely peasants, and in the Punjab, Sind and the Northwest Frontier Province landowners, yeoman farmers and tribesmen. In the central and southern regions Muslims were

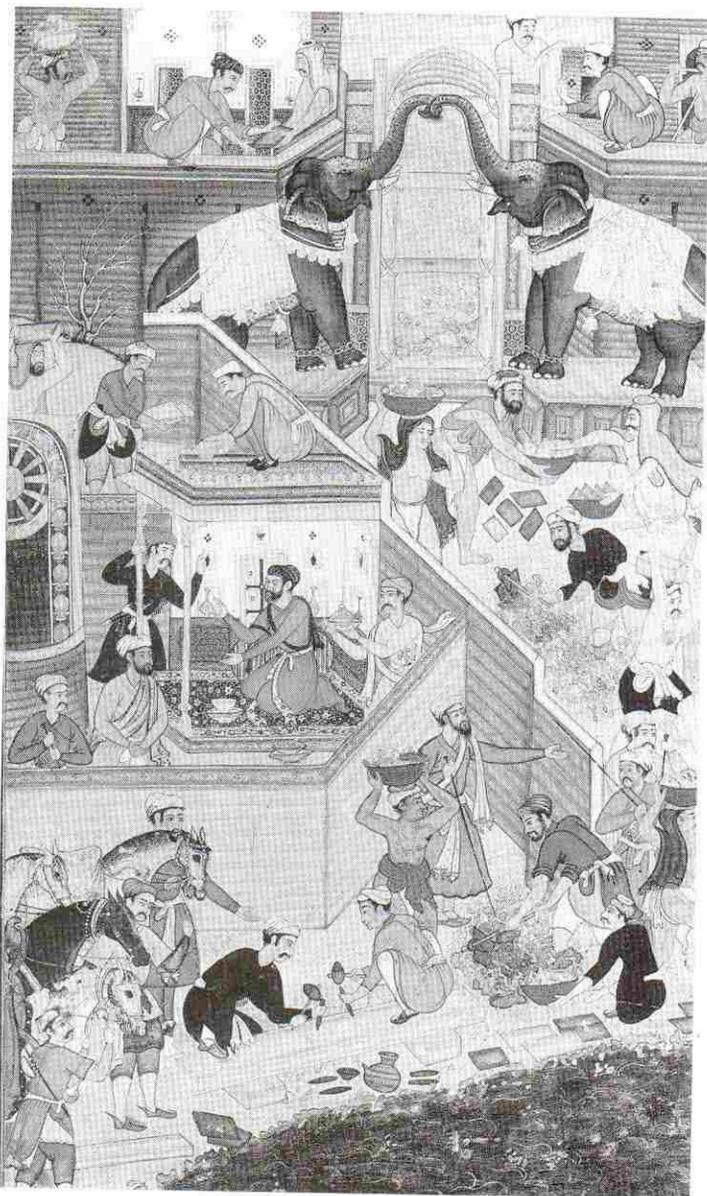
rarely more than 5 per cent of the population and often traders by occupation.

In the Gangetic plain in the north, however, especially in a region called the United Provinces (henceforth UP), matters were somewhat different. In this area, comprising many of the old centres of Muslim power – Delhi, Agra, Allahabad, Lucknow, Jaunpur – Muslims were only about 14 per cent of the population but a good half of these claimed descent from those who had come from outside India to rule. These Muslims, with their memories of power, were to play the leading role in insisting that Muslims remain separate from the mainstream of Indian nationalism.

In any explanation of 'Muslim separatism' the following elements should play a part. Some weight should be given to Islamic values. There is a tendency for some Muslims to organise

on a community basis whenever they go into politics. At the level of religious belief there are powerful drives for communal action. God told Muslims through the Prophet Mohammad that they were the 'best community raised up for mankind'. God revealed to Muslims the best way to live if they hoped for salvation, and that involved living within the community and being subject to its law. The idea of community action for community ends has a seductive resonance. However, for a good number of Muslims the idea of community was more a rhetorical flourish than a psychological fact.

Weight should certainly be given to Muslim revivalism. From the beginning of the nineteenth century Indian Muslims, in common with Muslims elsewhere in the world, were in the grip of various movements of revival and reform. These came to intersect with the problems of coping with the



Islam's Raj:
workmen building
the royal city of
Fatehpur Sikri for the
Mughal Emperor
Akbar – completed
in 1584, it was a
symbol of past
Muslim power and
prestige in India.

meaning of Western power and Western knowledge. There was considerable cultural and intellectual ferment as Muslims in different social and intellectual situations fashioned ways forward. Various movements were founded – those of the Deobandis, Bareilvis, Ahmadis, Jamaati-Islamis and Tablighi-Jamaatis – which have come to have worldwide significance. In India they tended to draw firmer distinctions between Muslim practice and that of the Hindu world around them; the outcome was to sharpen the Muslim sense of identity.

From a political point of view the most important part of this process was the attempt of the leading intellectual, Saiyid Ahmad Khan, to build a bridge between Islamic learning and Western science on the one hand, and the Muslim landed and professional classes and British rule on the other. This effort had its institutional focus in the Cambridge-style college which the Saiyid founded in 1877 in the form of the Mohammadan Anglo-

Oriental College at Aligarh, some ninety miles from Delhi. The students and supporters of this college were to play the leading role in carrying forward the cause of Muslim separatism.

But it was not just Islam which was challenged by Western power and knowledge: so was Hinduism, the faith of the great majority of Indians. Hindus also experienced a cultural and intellectual ferment, and came to have a sharper sense of their identity. Some hailed British rule for supplanting 'Muslim tyranny'. Muslims were accused of robbing Hindus of religion, wealth and women. They were the outsiders in India, not Hindustanis. The relics of Muslim power, such as mosques in Hindu holy places, were 'wounds in the heart'. In northern India Hindus and Muslims began to rub up against each other more abrasively, particularly as the former demanded an end to the slaughter of cows (cheap food for Muslims but holy for Hindus) and the replacement of the Persian script in government

by the Hindu Nagri script. The presence of Hindu revivalists tended to inhibit the nationalist movement when it sought compromise with the Muslim League.

Recent research, much influenced by Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), has focused on how the British constructed knowledge about India, and the ways in which this construction not only influenced British governance but also Indian ideas about themselves. From the very beginning of the serious study of India, Warren Hastings and the orientalist around him – Jones, Halhed, Wilkins – thought of India in terms of Hindus and Muslims, tending to seek classical texts to guide them in government and the administration of justice, rather than grappling with the complexities of the Indian present. When the British came to place a framework over India's past, they divided it into Hindu, Muslim and British periods. When from 1871 they began their decennial census of the Indian empire, they tabulated its peoples under religious headings. For much of the nineteenth century, moreover, this tendency to interpret Indian society in terms of religion was reinforced by the committed Christian beliefs of Indian administrators and the presence of many missionary organisations.

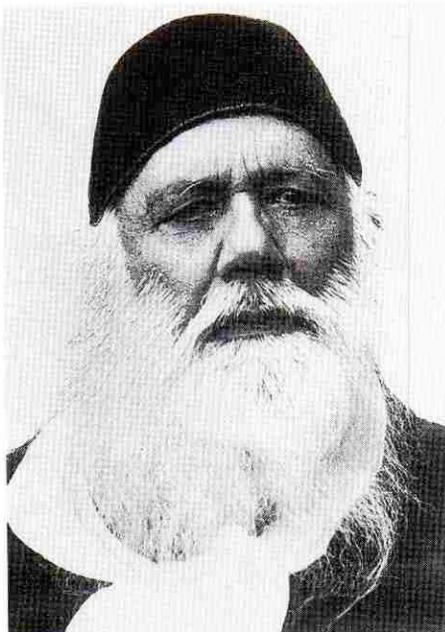
That the British understood Indian society in terms of its religious divisions was always an important prop of the nationalist accusation that Indians were divided, and India ultimately divided, by British policies of divide and rule. There is a smidgeon of truth in these accusations, although British policies are better understood as a series of pragmatic responses to a changing political environment rather than a conscious policy to divide. 'Nothing', declared one leading administrator in the late nineteenth century, 'could be more opposed to the policy and universal practice of our government in India than the old maxim of divide and rule ...'

At this time the British felt Muslims to be the greatest threat to their rule. They had failed to reconcile the former rulers of India to their government; the Mutiny uprising of 1857 was seen to confirm this. In 1870 they decided that the safety of the Raj demanded that they find ways of attaching powerful Muslims to their side. This policy was developed just at the time that Saiyid Ahmad Khan was striving to reconcile his co-religionists to Western knowledge and British rule. His initiatives received

much official encouragement. Arguably his Aligarh College would never have been founded, and may not have survived, but for government support which ranged from land made available at derisory rates to personal donations from viceroys. His All-India Muslim Educational Conference, which from 1886 drew Muslims together from all over India for the first time, operated within a framework of government approval. He himself was given the most unusual distinction, for an Indian at the time, of being knighted.

Aligarh College and the Educational Conference were the institutional bases on which the All-India Muslim League, the spearhead of Muslim separatism, was founded in 1906. The first office of the League was at Aligarh; its first secretary was the College secretary. The League's first major campaign was to demand separate electorates for Muslims, and extra representation in those areas in which they were 'politically important' such as the UP, in the new legislative councils which Viceroy Minto and Secretary of State Morley were developing for India. With some misgivings the British were persuaded and these privileges were granted in the Council reforms of 1909. Thus a separate Muslim identity was enshrined in India's growing framework of electoral politics. When in 1919 and 1935 the franchise was extended and further powers were devolved, separate electorates were continued and the principle of Muslim separatism confirmed.

Many factors – Islamic values, religious revivalism, British understandings of India and British techniques of rule – helped to establish an important step along the road towards India's partition. We should note, however, that such roads rarely run straight and that different groups of Muslims found the platform suiting



Islamic values: Saiyid Ahmed Khan, founder of the Aligarh Anglo-Oriental College in 1877. Though he believed in intellectual bridge-building with the West, the college came to advocate Muslim separatism.

their interests at different times. Initially supporters were the landed and government service classes, mainly from the UP, the supporters of Saiyid Ahmad Khan. By the First World War they were increasingly young professional men from the same province – lawyers and newspaper editors. In the 1920s the platform was virtually deserted; Muslim landlords joined landlord parties, some young professionals joined the nationalist movement, others left politics altogether. Towards the end of the 1920s as further devolution of power came to be discussed, Muslims crowded back onto the platform again. But many soon lost interest when they found it to be dominated by a view of the future favouring Muslims of the Punjab.

In December 1930 the poet-philosopher, Muhammad Iqbal,

sketched out this view when, as President of the Muslim League session at Allahabad, he proposed the creation of a Muslim state in the north-west of India. This subsequently inspired a Cambridge student, Rahmat Ali, to give it a name 'Pakistan' derived thus: 'P' stood for the Punjab, 'A' for Afghanistan or the North-West Frontier Province, 'K' for Kashmir, 'S' for Sind and 'tan' for Baluchistan. It translated as the 'land of the pure'.

At this stage, however, no practical politician imagined that it was likely to be able to create such a state either inside or outside India. Indeed, practical politicians seemed to have deserted Muslim separatism; only once between 1931 and 1936 did the Muslim League meet in full session. Between 1930 and 1935 Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the League's leading figure had his main residence in London, where he practised as a barrister and tried unsuccessfully to be adopted as a parliamentary candidate by first the Labour and then the Conservative Party. Even after Jinnah returned to India, matters did not improve. In 1937, in the first general elections held under the Government of India Act of 1935 which brought provincial autonomy, the League won only 22 per cent of the seats reserved for Muslims. Nationalist governments were formed in seven out of eleven provinces.

In 1937 the Muslim League did not appear to be a major player in Indian politics. By 1946, however, it most certainly was. In the general elections of that year it won over 90 per cent of the seats reserved for Muslims. Its President, Jinnah, now known as the Quaid-i-Azam (Great Leader), had the support of the vast majority of India's Muslims. Any explanation of the partition of India must be able to explain this transformation of the League's position.

One key factor was the impact of

Beginnings: the inaugural meeting of the All-India Muslim League in Dacca, December 1906.





Indian troops in action at Fort Dufferin, March 1945 – the War produced further leverage for the Muslim League with the British in the wake of Hindu ambiguity.

the Second World War. It meant that the British were eager to seek Muslim support, in part because half the Indian army was Muslim and in part because the nationalist movement was opposed to the war and any Indian involvement in it. The League had little political clout, yet it was the only serious All-India Muslim party, so the British turned to it.

Within a day of the declaration of war, the Viceroy invited Jinnah for talks on an equal footing with Gandhi; the war thus gave Jinnah a prominence in the high politics of the Raj that his party's strength did not merit. Seven months later he announced the League's agenda at Lahore on March 24th, first of all stating the two-nation theory, which meant that Muslims could not live together as a numerical minority in a Hindu dominated state, and then proposing what came to be called the Pakistan resolution. In the darkest days of the war in 1942, when the Japanese were bombing Calcutta, he discovered just how valuable this prominence was. Sir Stafford Cripps on his mission to India offered him a Pakistan state.

Note should be taken of the mistakes made by the Congress. After its great victories in the 1937 elections, it behaved in a triumphalist fashion, asking too high a price of League members to be included in a coalition government in the UP, hurting Muslim sensibilities by forcing Muslim children to sing the song 'Bande Mataram' with its message of hate for Muslims, and threatening Muslim culture in general. Then, it made the

further mistake of letting go the levers of power. In 1939 all the Congress governments resigned in protest against the Viceroy's declaration of war on behalf of India. In 1942 the Congress responded to the Cripps offer by launching a full-scale rebellion against the British, the Quit India movement. The outcome was that all the Congress leadership and 60,000 workers were sent to prison for the rest of the war. The League was given a free hand.

Note should also be taken of the

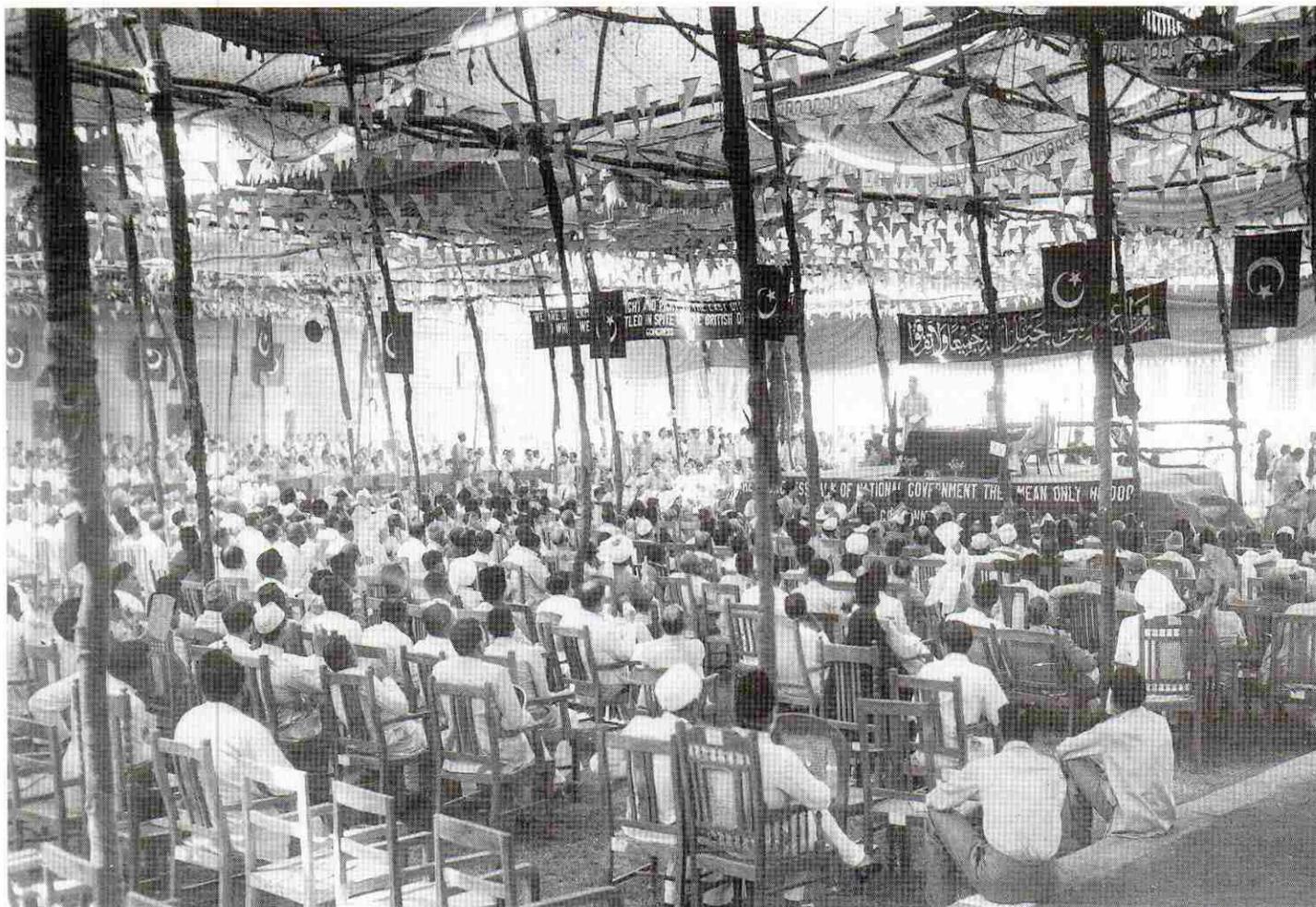
Travelling hopefully: the Cabinet mission, led by Stafford Cripps (far left), arrives in New Delhi in March 1946 with a mandate from the new Labour Government to sort out independence: but its ingenious tiered and federal plan foundered, making partition loom large as an option.



drive of Muslims from the Muslim minority provinces to build the League. In their view, if the League was to be heard, and they were to have adequate protection at independence, they had to win the support of Muslims in the majority provinces, most particularly Bengal and the Punjab. Here the cultural leadership of the UP amongst Indian Muslims had some part to play: learned and holy men from its leading traditional academies toured schools and shrines in the majority provinces to raise support, so too did students from what was now called the Aligarh Muslim University. But the main factors in its success were the League's capacity first to present a vote for the League as one for economic betterment for the Bengal peasant, and second to persuade the Punjab landlords, who controlled most Muslim votes in their province, that a vote for the League would be willy nilly a vote for their future master.

Finally, there was the outstanding leadership abilities of Jinnah. He was masterly as the builder of the League as a political organisation, masterly as a political strategist and without equal as a negotiator. Few liked him; few doubted his integrity; everyone respected him. 'Of all the statesmen I have known in my life – Clemenceau, Lloyd George, Churchill, Curzon, Mussolini, Mahatma Gandhi', declared the Aga Khan, 'Jinnah is the most remarkable'.

All these factors came together to



The Muslim League in convocation at the Anglo-Arabic College in Delhi 1947 – with Jinnah in the chair. The banner headline 'When the Hindoos talk of National Government, they mean only Hindoos' clearly identifies the central complaint of the League.

create the League landslide at the polls in early 1946. But we should not think that this made partition inevitable. In its Pakistan resolution, the League had resolved:

... that no constitutional plan would be workable in this country or acceptable to the Muslims unless it is designed on the following basic principles, viz., that geographically contiguous units are demarcated into regions which should be so constituted ... 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.

It was not clear whether these 'States' were to be separate from India or formed within a federal India. This was a lack of clarity which Jinnah found helpful and worked to maintain. In 1946 a delegation of Cabinet Ministers to India proposed an ingenious solution to the Pakistan problem. There were to be three tiers of government at independence, the first to be formed out of the existing provinces, the second to be formed out of separate Hindu and Muslim

federations of provinces (a Hindustan and Pakistan), and in the third, the central government, representatives of these federations would come together on an equal basis to deal with defence, foreign affairs and communications. On June 6th, the League accepted the plan. On June 22nd, so did the Congress but at the same time it refused to support the interim government which was to put the plan into effect.

From this point partition became increasingly inevitable. There was deadlock and growing civil disorder. A Labour Government in Britain was keen to leave India as fast as possible; every extra day that British troops remained added to British debt. In February 1947 Mountbatten was sent out as Viceroy with a brief to pressure the politicians into agreement. Mountbatten quickly saw that Britain could only withdraw by transferring power not to one government, but to two. He also saw that it would not be possible to leave the large Hindu and Sikh minorities of the Punjab and the Hindu minority of Bengal under Muslim rule. The partition of India would also mean the partition of these

provinces; thus the League had its two-nation theory played back against it. Jinnah was most unhappy to accept what he termed a 'truncated or mutilated and moth-eaten Pakistan', but eventually on June 3rd, 1947, he did, with a nod of the head. On August 14th, in Karachi, he was installed as Governor-General of the British dominion of Pakistan. Whatever his reservations, it seemed he had won a glorious victory.

There are some significant ironies in the making of partition. A common view would be that the Congress bitterly opposed the mutilation of Mother India. However, Congress did have a hand in the process itself. In the complete edition of his autobiography, *India Wins Freedom*, the Muslim member of the Congress high command, Abul Kalam Azad, makes it clear that of its other three members, Vallabhbhai Patel was positively in favour of partition before Mountbatten arrived, Nehru was quite quickly persuaded, and Gandhi accepted the inevitable. Patel and Nehru were keen to take over a strong central government and relatively weak provinces. Patel wanted strong cen-



Partners in partition? The Muslim representative of Congress, Abul Kalam Azad, in conversation with his Hindu colleague, Vallabhbhai Patel during the British Cabinet mission. 'Acceptance of the inevitable' is one theory as to why both sides of the religious divide came to a quicker acquiescence in partition than might have been expected, leaving Jinnah (seen below making his opening speech as Governor-General to the Pakistan Constituent Assembly in Karachi, August 1947) to preside over a reduced Pakistan.



tral government to hold the new state together; Nehru was keen to put Soviet style five-year plans into effect. The Cabinet Mission plan patently did not supply strong central government.

A common view of Jinnah, on the other hand, sees him trying to resolve India's Muslim problem within the framework of a united India up to the late 1930s and then, from the Lahore resolution of March 1940, working for a separate state of Pakistan and fighting his way to triumph at partition. But the more recent interpretation of Ayesha Jalal, which is based on much fresh evidence, sees no change in Jinnah's long-term objective in 1940 and only a shift in strategy. The Lahore resolution was a bargaining card to gain recognition of Indian Muslim nationhood and the right to equal treatment at India's political centre; it was also a stick to bludgeon the Muslims of the majority provinces into supporting the League. When the Cabinet delegation made known its May proposals Jinnah's plans were realised; strong Muslim provinces need not feel concerned about a weak Indian centre.

When the Congress in effect rejected the proposals, Jinnah's plans were in tatters. In the remaining thirteen months leading up to independence, he worked to minimise the consequences of his defeat. Partition happened because, in the circumstances, the Congress leaders wanted it, not because Jinnah desired it.

The final irony was that Pakistan was built on a claim for a separate nationality for Muslims. Yet Pakistan's creation left one third of the subcontinent's Muslims in India, where they would have to subsume their Muslim identity within a greater Indian identity.

FOR FURTHER READING:

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, *India Wins Freedom; the Complete Version* (Orient Longman, 1988); Mushirul Hasan, *Nationalism and Communal Politics in India, 1916-1928* (Manohar, 1979); H.V. Hodson, *The Great Divide: Britain - India - Pakistan* (Hutchinson, 1969); Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League and the Demand for Pakistan* (Cambridge University Press, 1985); V.P. Menon, *The Transfer of Power in India* (Orient Longman, 1957); David Page, *Prelude to Partition: The Indian Muslims and the Imperial System of Control 1920-1932* (Oxford University Press, 1982); Francis Robinson, *Separatism Among Indian Muslims: The Politics of the United Provinces' Muslims 1860-1923* (Cambridge University Press, 1974).

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