The Partition of India

Prof. Dr. Nazeer Ahmed, PhD
The Partition of India

Prof. Dr. Nazeer Ahmed, PhD

The partition of British India was an extraordinary event. It brought forth giant personalities, monumental egos, brilliant strategists, saints, scoundrels, politicians, thinkers, tinkers, stinkers, sages and sycophants. Like an angry volcano it spewed forth human passions in their ugliest form consuming oceans of humanity. In its aftermath it left more than a million dead, fifteen million refugees and tens of thousands of women abducted. Two nations inherited the Raj and were immediately locked in mortal combat. A third nation has sprung up since, while the first two, India and Pakistan, now nuclear armed, continue to stare at each other waiting to see who will blink first. The last chapter of the history of partition is yet to be written. The secret of whether it will have a tragic end with a nuclear holocaust or a happy new beginning with cooperation and brotherhood for the poverty stricken millions of the subcontinent is hidden in the womb of the future, dependent as is all human endeavor, on the wisdom of generations to come. British India was a vast tapestry woven together by a masterful balance of local powers and sustained by an unabashed strategy of divide and rule. It was a mosaic of religions, languages, races, cultures, tribes, castes, historical memories, passions and prejudices. More than five hundred princely states, satraps of the British crown, dotted the landscape, surrounded by vast stretches of territories ruled directly by the Viceroy. The
foreigners had come here in the 17th century to trade. As the Mogul empire disintegrated and India imploded, the traders moved like dexterous chessmen capturing one territory after another. From the fall of Bengal at the Battle of Plassey in 1757 to the drawing up of the Durand line in 1893-95 after the Second Anglo-Afghan war, there was a span of almost a century and a half. During this time British power moved inexorably, supplanting a divided India by force of arms as in Mysore and the Punjab or through treaties and manipulation as with the Nizam of Hyderabad and the Nawab of Arcot.

The independence movements of India and Pakistan brought forth giants on the stage of world history. Mahatma Gandhi was at once a sage in the tradition of Indian sages, a staunch advocate of non-violent political change, a masterful tactician and a politician who deciphered the key to unravel the British Empire. His legacy inspired reformers and activists as far away as the United States wherein Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement drew inspiration. Qaid e Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah was a strict constitutionalist, a brilliant strategist, a secular gentleman, a champion of minority rights and a nationalist who was pushed in the direction of separatism by Congress stonewalling and became the architect of a new nation thereby changing the map of the world. Pandit Jawarlal Nehru was an internationalist, a brilliant post-modern secularist, indeed an agnostic, whose instincts for centralized, socialist planning obscured from him the reality of communal politics in a divided subcontinent. Sardar Patel was a fierce nationalist and right wing Congressman who moved towards a sectarian anti-Muslim bias in the twilight years of the British Raj. Maulana
Abdul Kalam Azad was a scholar whom destiny thrust into politics, the only man who fought unswervingly for a united India until the last moment. All of these stalwarts operated in the 19th century paradigm of nationalism, colonial rule, parliamentary governance, and minority and majority rights. Together, they failed to foresee the horrors of partition or to muster the collective wisdom to forestall the carnage that accompanied it. The independence of India and Pakistan was their collective achievement. Partition was their collective failure.

A student of history may ask: who was the architect of partition? Iqbal? Jinnah? Gandhi? Nehru? Patel? The Congress party? The Muslim League? The Hindu Mahasabha? The Akali Dal? The British? No one person and no single party can take the credit or the blame for partition. It was a deadly serious game that had many players. The principal figures involved have acquired an iconic status in India and Pakistan. Often the hero of one is a villain for the other, so bitter was the experience of partition. Sixty years later, when one looks at them as historical figures, one finds them to be all too human, with their prides and their prejudices, their strengths and their limitations. They made choices like all humans and these choices had the human touch of triumph and tragedy. They were as much creators of history as were its victims.

Britain entered the First World War as the mistress of the world. The British navy ruled the seas. In 1914 an Englishman could boast that the sun never set on the British Empire. The array of nations beholden to the British crown included dominions such
as Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, and colonies such as India, Malaya and Nigeria. World War I was a spillover from the instability in the Balkans following the collapse of Ottoman power. It resulted from the unwillingness or the inability of the entente powers, Great Britain, France and Russia to accommodate the rising power of Germany. The Ottomans joined the war alongside Germany in the hope of recovering the East European territories they had lost in the war of 1911. It was a fateful decision which shattered the peace of the Middle East, the consequences of which are felt even today.

India was dragged into the Great War as a colony. Indian leadership, Gokhale, Tilak, Jinnah and Gandhi included, were disappointed that they were not consulted but could do nothing about it. Millions of Indian troops fought under British officers in Europe and the Middle East. In some sectors, such as Iraq, the Indian army conducted its own operations. The Indians hoped that their sacrifices would bring in a reward at the end of the war, perhaps a dominion status within the Empire, on par with Australia, South Africa and Canada. These hopes received a boost as the United States entered the war in 1917 and its idealist American President, Woodrow Wilson, proclaimed his famous 14 point plank as the basis for a general peace after the War. Included in these 14 points was the declaration that “a free, open-minded, and absolutely impartial adjustment of all colonial claims, based upon a strict observance of the principle that in determining all such questions of sovereignty the interests of the populations concerned must have equal weight with the equitable claims of the government whose title is to be determined”.
An attempt was made during World War I by the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League to present a unified demand to the imperial government in India for administrative reforms. Mohammed Ali Jinnah, who was at the time a senior member of the Congress hierarchy, worked hard to achieve a common platform for the Congress and the League. The result was the Lucknow pact of 1916 in which the Congress conceded the right of Muslims for separate electorates. The pact was the highpoint of Congress-Muslim cooperation during the long and tortuous history of these two political parties. The credit for this achievement belongs primarily to Jinnah. The pact made it possible for the Congress and the League to make a unified demand to the colonial administration that eighty percent of representatives to the provincial legislatures be elected directed by the people.

The war ended in a triumph for the allies. Russia had pulled out of the conflict after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 so it was left to Britain and France to divide up the spoils of war. The British and French war aims were different from those of the Americans and included not just the preservation of their empires but their expansion into the former Ottoman territories. The British made it clear that Wilson’s 14 point proclamation did not apply to India. Instead the colonial noose was tightened around the Indian neck. The Government of India Act of 1919, sometimes referred to as Montagu-Chelmsford Act, revealed the true British intentions. It skirted the issue of dominion status and put India on a waiting list for 10 years during which period the major Indian provinces were to be ruled
by a dual (diarchic) form of government wherein a provincial legislative council would monitor the activities of provincial ministers. This was a way of shifting the focus of national politics to the local provinces where it could be more easily contained. A separate Council of Princely states was formed to keep the major political parties in check.

The Indians were disappointed with the provisions of this Act. Protests erupted, the British responded with the repressive Rowlett Act. The demonstrations were brutally put down. It was during this period on April 13, 1919 that the infamous Jalianwala Bagh massacre took place near Amritsar wherein, under orders from the British General Dyer, hundreds of unarmed Indians, Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus included, were gunned down in cold blood during a peaceful demonstration.

Even as the Great War raged in the heart of Europe, Britain and France entered into the secret Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 partitioning the Ottoman Empire between them. Britain would secure Palestine, Jordan and Iraq, thus securing a land route from the Mediterranean to the Arabian Sea and from there to the British India Empire. France would control Syria and Southeastern Anatolia. As the Ottoman Empire collapsed (1918) and Istanbul was occupied by British troops, the scheming gathered momentum. By the Treaty of Sevres (1920), France, Britain, Greece, Italy and Armenia each claimed a piece of Ottoman territories leaving a tiny slice in Central Anatolia for the Turks. The Turkish nationalists rejected the terms of this Treaty, refusing to ratify it.
India was caught up in the turbulence created by the aftermath of the War. The British attempt to abolish the Khilafat in Istanbul dragged India into postwar politics. The Khilafat was an institution established by the companions of the Prophet Muhammed immediately after his death. It had survived fourteen centuries of Islamic history and its mantle had passed to the Turkish sultans in 1517. Although its influence had diminished in proportion to the loss of Islamic territories to European colonialism, it was still looked upon as the axis of Muslim political life, especially by the world of Sunni Islam. When the Treaty of Sevres awarded the Hejaz to Sharif Hussain as a reward for his collusion with the allies during the War, it cut the principal connection of the Caliph in Istanbul from his spiritual responsibilities as the “guardian of the two holy cities of Mecca and Medina”. This was seen as an attempt to abolish the Khilafat. The Caliph himself became a de-facto British prisoner in Istanbul and had little authority to influence post war developments either in the former Ottoman territories or in the Turkish heartland of Anatolia. The emerging nationalist movement in Anatolia disregarded the edicts of the Sultan-Caliph proclaimed under British duress.

The attempt to abolish the Khilafat created an uproar among India’s Muslim religious establishment. India had lost its independence to British intrigue in the 18th century but the Indian Muslims had taken some consolation in an independent Ottoman empire whose titular head was the Caliph for all Muslims.
The occupation of the Sultan’s territories and the removal of the sultan’s sovereignty over the holy sites in Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem meant that the sun had set on Islam’s political domains. At this time, Muslim leadership in India was divided into four categories. The first were the Nawabs and the zamindars of United Provinces (UP) and Bengal who dominated the Muslim League since its founding in 1906. In the second group were the Aligarh trained would-be bureaucrats whose career goal was to secure employment in the administrative machinery of the British Raj. The third were the elite, British educated secular nationalists such as Mohammed Ali Jinnah who were working at the time for Hindu-Muslim cooperation and a common political platform for the Congress and Muslim League. The fourth group represented the religious establishment, the Deobandis and the ulema such as Maulana Muhammed Ali and Maulana Shaukat Ali. The vast majority of Muslims, like the vast majority of Hindus, Sikhs and Christians were poor and destitute, often at the mercy of moneylenders and landlords, and had very little political involvement of any kind.

The Khilafat movement was started in 1919 by Muhammed Ali, Shaukat Ali and Hasrat Mohani at a time when the repressive Rowlett Act (1919) and the Jalianwala Bagh massacre (1919) had created a general feeling of animosity against the British. Gandhi, who was by this time emerging as the undisputed leader of the Congress party, saw in the Khilafat movement an opportunity to forge a united Hindu-Muslim stand against the British, and in combination with a peaceful non-cooperation
movement, force the British to concede India’s political demands.

The non-cooperation movement was launched on September 1, 1920 under the leadership of Gandhi with the Ali brothers playing a supporting role. It was an alliance of convenience. The goals of the protagonists were different and it soon became clear that the inherent tensions in these goals would make their achievement impossible. First, the Khilafat was an issue for the Turks to resolve. If the Turks did not wish to carry the burden of the Caliphate, the Muslims in India could not force them to do so. Second, the preservation of the Ottoman Empire required the Arabs to acquiesce to Turkish rule. The goodwill between the Turks and the Arabs had been shattered by the Arab rebellion in which the British intelligence agent Lawrence of Arabia had played a key role. Third, the Khilafat movement received only lukewarm support from the elite Muslim leadership such as Mohammed Ali Jinnah who assessed correctly that the agitation in India was unlikely to affect the geopolitics of the Middle East. Jinnah, who was a constructive constitutionalist, desired an orderly transfer of power to India and had no use for the disruptive politics of the Khilafat movement or the non-cooperation movement of Gandhi. Fourth, even though the movement was headed by Gandhi himself, right wing Hindu leaders such as Malaviya were less than enthusiastic about it. Gandhi’s objective was swaraj (self rule) and for him the Khilafat was no more than a tactical battle in that ultimate goal whereas for the right wing ulema it was an end in itself. Fifth, neither the Muslims nor the Hindus were ready as yet for the sacrifices required of a national movement
with the dual objectives of forcing the British to concede self rule and influencing international events in far away Istanbul. 

Upset over British policy after the War, some molvis from jameet-e-ulema-e Hind, a conservative association of Muslim clerics, declared India to be “darul harab” (the abode of war) and advised Muslims to migrate to a country like Afghanistan which they considered “darul Islam” (the abode of peace). In 1920, more than fifteen thousand peasants from the NW Frontier and Sindh heeded the call and did perform the hijrat (migration) to Afghanistan where they were robbed and some were killed. The protests by Kerala Muslims against the British in August 1921 got out of hand and resulted in a Hindu-Muslim riot which was exploited by British propaganda to drive a wedge between the two communities. Lastly, in February 1922, a violent mob set fire to a police station in Chari-Chaura in UP resulting in the death of dozens of people.

The Khilafat movement and the concomitant non-cooperation movement of 1921 were both political failures. Gandhi realized that the discipline required for a non-violent, non-cooperation movement was not yet inculcated in the Indian masses. He called off the agitation on February 22, 1922 leaving the Khilafat movement in the lurch. Events in Anatolia took their own turn. The Turks went on to win their War of Independence, drive out the Greek, French and Italian armies invading their homeland, and establish a republic under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal. In 1924 the Turkish National Assembly abandoned the Caliphate. The Khilafat movement in India fizzled out without a whimper.
In historical hindsight, the Khilafat movement did more harm than good. On the positive side of the ledger, this was the first and the only time when the two principal religious communities of India, the Hindus and the Muslims, conducted a mass campaign on a common platform. In the great province of Bengal, the movement was largely a success. It enabled the Bengalis to gain some experience in the politics of mass confrontation. But the price for this success was the injection of religious symbols into what had hitherto been a national, non-sectarian struggle. It was a religious movement which was grafted onto a secular national struggle for self rule. Gandhi used religious symbols to bring together Hindus and Muslims on a common platform and galvanize India towards political self awareness. The results were the opposite. The process awakened the latent communalism of both Hindus and Muslims.

The Khilafat movement thrust the molvis and the mullahs into the forefront of national politics eclipsing the role played hitherto by constitutionalists like Jinnah. Ironically it was Jinnah who saw the dangers of using religious and cultural symbols in a secular fight for independence and warned against it. But his warnings were not heeded either by the Congress or the Muslim leadership.

There were multiple ways the Indian milieu could have been sliced. The basis could have been language, region, land ownership, class conflict, wealth, poverty or historical experience. It was a fateful choice to slice it along religious lines. The leaders chose to define their identities as Hindus, Muslims
and Sikhs rather than Punjabis, Bengalis, North and South Indians, zamindars and kisans, money lenders and debtors, rich and poor, traditionalists and modernists. This choice dictated the history of South Asia.

The 1920s started as a decade of great promise for religious cooperation and national liberation. It ended with these hopes dashed, trust destroyed, suspicions enhanced and disharmony at its peak.

The political coordination between the Muslims and the Hindus, however limited its success, alarmed the British and impelled them to practice the politics of divide and rule more overtly. As long as the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs were at each other’s throats, they were unlikely to unite in common opposition to foreign rule of their native land. Britain had conquered the huge subcontinent playing off one power center against another. As early as 1861, Elphinstone, the British governor of Bombay had observed, “divide and rule was the old Roman motto, and it should be ours in India”. Now this strategy was applied with full force to tighten the British grip on the Indian empire. The Malabar uprising against the British which had spilled over into a Hindu-Muslim riot was dubbed the “Moplah uprising” and was played up as an example of Muslim aggressiveness towards non-Muslims. In retribution, the British packed up hundreds of Malabar Muslims in freight trains, like canned sardines, and sent them to far off jails. Two thirds of those transported suffocated in the railway compartments.
There was an acceleration in Hindu-Muslim polarization in the Punjab, UP and Bengal. In 1922 Shraddhanada started the Arya Samaj with the intent of converting Muslims and Christians to Hinduism. In 1923 Savarkar wrote his book on Hindutva and came up with the concept of the two-nation theory, describing the Hindus and the Muslims as two separate nations. His proposed solution to his self articulated two nation theory was to convert, expel or marginalize the Muslims and Christians. In 1925, the Hindu Mahasabha, which was conceived at the fifth Akhil Bhartiya Hindu Conference in Delhi in 1918, was organized as a political party. Between 1923 and 1925 the Arya Samaj did convert thousands of Rajput Muslims to Hinduism. They were particularly active in the provinces of the Punjab and UP. The aggressiveness of the Arya Samaj fostered a sense of fear among the Muslims. In response, they established the Tablighi Jamaat and Tanzim movements in 1923. The Darul Uloom at Deoband launched a program to train ulema in Sanskrit so that they could counteract the propaganda of the Arya Samaj. These movements were a reflection one of the other. The right wing Hindus and Muslims saw in each other a mortal enemy to their own long term survival. Forgotten in this melee was the Lucknow pact of 1916 for which Jinnah had worked so hard. The populous Indus-Gangetic belt embracing Sindh, Punjab, UP, Bihar, Bengal and Assam which was at the time 40 percent Muslim, 52 percent Hindu and 4 percent Sikh was rent asunder along communal lines.

Religious extremism was often a camouflage for the cold politics of economic exploitation. It was a great game being played by the British and a small number of British trained lawyers for the
future of one fifth of humanity. In addition to the sustained exploitation of India by British colonialism, there was rampant internal economic exploitation by Indians themselves. In Bengal, there was mass poverty and the province had experienced repeated bouts with famine and death. The peasantry was in the shackles of the money lenders. In Punjab and Sindh the big landowners were the political bosses. The politics of UP and the Central Provinces was dictated by the zamindars and nawabs. The masses were poor, indeed destitute, and had no say in the wheeling and dealing and the sloganeering going on in Delhi, Lahore, Calcutta and Bombay. The population of the princely states, numbering over 75 million, was not involved in the grand strategies worked out for them.

It is noteworthy that in the 1920s there was a Communist movement in India. The success of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia in 1917 inspired communists around the world to achieve the same in their native lands. The British, suspicious of Soviet intentions in Afghanistan and Northwest India, banned the communist party. Nonetheless many communists worked with the Congress Socialist Party, the left wing of Indian National Congress, forming a working relationship with stalwarts such as Jawaharlal Nehru. Their membership cut across religious lines. The Bengali intellectual, Muzaffar Ahmed, for instance, was one of the founders of the Communist party of India. However, except in Bengal, Communist influence on the overall flow of national politics was at best marginal. Bengal had a socio-political matrix dominated by tensions between landowners and peasants, money lenders and debtors. Here, Muzaffar Ahmed and others avoided the slogans of the Congress party
dominated by Hindu property-owning classes, shunned Muslim exclusivity advocated by the League and helped the emergence of the Krishak Praja Party (KPP) in the 1930s. The KPP represented the interests of the indebted farmers of East Bengal and the exploited workers of Calcutta. It is in this context of increasing economic tensions and communal polarization that one has to examine the attempt by India’s British educated elite to establish a constitutional framework for the subcontinent.

Historical documents capture the essence of their age. Great moments produce great men and elicit from them their visions, hopes and aspirations which are enshrined in their declarations and documents. The American constitution is an illustration. It captured a moment in the history of this continent when it threw off the yoke of a foreign power and produced a declaration which has withstood the test of time for more than two hundred years. Historical documents grow out of the internal, often tragic struggles of a people. They reflect the soul of a people at a specific moment in history.

The Nehru Report was the first Indian attempt at framing a constitution for the subcontinent. It was a historical benchmark which exposed the internal fissures in the body politic of Hindustan. In hindsight, it was a document produced in haste, by well meaning intellectuals who had an insufficient grasp of the dynamics of Indian society. It proved to be a first step on the road to partition.

In 1925 the conservative party came to power in London. The British had kept a close watch on the Indian political pulse.
Aware of the rising tide of Indian nationalism, the British government dispatched a group of seven members of the parliament to India in 1927. Headed by Sir John Simon, the mandate of the Simon commission was to draft a set of recommendations for self rule in India. However, the commission met a cold reception in India because it did not include even a single Indian member.

The central issue was the right of the Indians to draft their own constitution. The Congress led by Gandhi and the League led by Jinnah boycotted the commission.

The British Secretary of State for Indian affairs challenged the Indians to come up with a constitution that would be acceptable to a broad spectrum of communities. So confident was he of the divisions in the Indian ranks that he was certain that the Indians would fail in this effort. Mrs. Annie Besant, a British social activist and a friend of India, made an attempt to write such a constitution but her attempt received a cold reception in Indian circles.

An all-parties conference in Delhi in January 1928 failed to produce a framework for a constitution. Subsequent conferences in March and May were similarly unproductive. The main hurdle was an accommodation of the rights of the minorities and the differences on this issue between the Muslim League, the Indian National Congress, the Hindu Mahasabha and the Sikh Akali Dal.
Unable to reach a consensus in the general caucuses, the third all-party conference held in May 1928 in Bombay delegated the responsibility of drawing up a constitution to a committee headed by Motilal Nehru. The committee consisted of eleven members. Motilal Nehru was the chairman while his son Jawarlal Nehru was the secretary. There were nine other members. Motilal Nehru, descended from Kashmiri Pundits, was a respected Congress leader, a liberal nationalist with roots in the United Provinces. The eclectic Jawaharlal Nehru, the future Prime Minister of India, protégé of Mahatma Gandhi, was a brilliant man educated at Harrow and Cambridge, a post-modern secularist with a keen sense of international events. However, he was socialistic in his impulse, influenced as he was in his formative years by the socialist movements in Pre-World War I England. The other members were local leaders, including two, Syed Ali Imam and Shoaib Qureshi, who were Muslim.

The Nehru report contained the following essential provisions

- The citizens shall be protected under a Bill of Rights. All powers of the government are derived from the people.
- There shall be no state religion.
- India shall enjoy the status of a dominion within the British Empire.
- There shall be a federal from of government with residual powers vested in the center.
- There shall be a parliamentary form of government with a Prime Minister and six ministers appointed by the Governor General.
- There shall be a bicameral legislature.
• There shall be neither a separate electorate nor a proportionate weight for any community in the legislatures.
• A recommendation that the language of the federation should be Hindustani written either in the Devanagiri or the Urdu script.
• A recommendation that separate provinces be established in the Northwest Frontier, Sindh and Karnataka.
• A recommendation that the provinces should be organized on a linguistic basis.
• A recommendation that a Supreme Court be established.
• Muslims should have a twenty five percent representation in the Central Legislature. In provinces where their population was greater than ten percent, proportionate representation for Muslims should be considered.

It is not hard to see the stamp of Jawaharlal Nehru on the Nehru Report. Even though the report called for a Federal structure, the constitution it proposed was unitary with residuary powers vested in the center. The socialist strand in Jawaharlal Nehru saw a nation state as essentially unitary with centralized planning and economic control, a philosophy which he vigorously put into practice as the first Prime Minister of independent India (1947-64). He was a secularist, who saw religion as a private matter for the individual which should not be reflected in matters of state. He was also an idealist who did not see the practical reality of religious dynamics in the vast
subcontinent. Consequently, he failed to accommodate the anxieties of Muslim majority provinces in a central legislature which would be dominated, in a “one man one vote” parliamentary structure, by Hindu interests.

The Nehru Report was a step back in the Hindu-Muslim dialectic of pre-partition India. It negated the positive aspects of the Congress-League Lucknow pact of 1916 which had accepted the principle of separate electorates for the minorities. It threw open the question of minority protection in a parliamentary set up wherein the Hindus would be a majority.

The Nehru Report was accepted by the Indian National Congress but was rejected by the Muslim leadership. The main issue dividing the two was the vesting of residual powers. The Congress wanted residual powers to be with the Center. The League wanted them vested with the states. There was also the issue of separate electorates for the minorities. This issue was not a show stopper as some historians have suggested. In 1927 Jinnah had proposed to the Congress that the Muslims were willing to forego the demand for separate electorates if sufficient guarantees were instituted for the protection of minority rights.

In response to the Nehru Report, Mohammed Ali Jinnah drafted his famous 14 point proposal. The important elements of this proposal were the following

- India shall have a federal constitution with residual powers vested in the States.
• Adequate representation shall be given to the minorities in every state legislature.
• Every state shall enjoy uniform autonomy.
• Muslim representation in the Central Legislature shall be not less than one third.
• The representatives of each community shall be elected by separate electorates.
• Each community shall enjoy freedom of worship, association, propagation and education.
• Sindh shall be separated from the Bombay presidency and be made a separate province.
• Reforms should be introduced in the NW Frontier Province and Baluchistan in the same manner as all other provinces.
• Any territorial adjustments to state boundaries shall not compromise the Muslim majorities in Punjab, Bengal and NW Frontier Province.
• The minorities shall enjoy adequate representation in the services of the state and the Center.
• There shall be adequate safeguards to protect Muslim culture, language, religion and personal laws.
• The Central cabinet shall have one third Muslim representation.
• No bill shall be passed in any legislature if three fourths of the members of a community in that body oppose such a bill on the basis that it will be injurious to that community.
• No change shall be made in the constitution by the Central Legislature except with the contribution of the States.
Two significant observations are noteworthy about Jinnah’s 14 points. First, in 1929, Jinnah was still operating within a paradigm of minority rights and not “two nation theory” proposed by Savarkar five years earlier. Jinnah was still a peace maker between the Congress and the League and hoped that he could find common ground for the two. Second, the emphasis in the 14 points was on the reciprocal protection of minority rights, Hindu, Muslim, Christian and Sikh alike, and not just the rights of Muslims. Jinnah worked hard to tone down the more strident demands of the right wing Muslim constituency and obtain the concurrence of the League. Students of history may argue whether the 14 points were hard demands or were bargaining openers. The negotiations and the hard bargaining did not take place. The 14 points were rejected by the Indian National Congress.

The Nehru Report and its aftermath constitute a milestone on the road to partition. Jinnah, who had hitherto worked hard to bring about a convergence of Congress and League viewpoints, was disillusioned. He was squeezed between Congress stonewalling and marginalized by the more strident Muslim leaders who felt that Jinnah was too nationalistic in his outlook and too accommodating in his approach. Although he took part in the Round Table Conferences in London in 1931-32, his heart was no longer with Indian politics. He settled in London as a barrister. It was only in 1935 that he returned to India at the invitation of Allama Iqbal to reorganize and lead the Muslim League. The Congress leadership had lost Jinnah whom the eminent Indian social activist and poet Sarojini Naidu had called
“the ambassador of Hindu-Muslim unity”. Now they were to meet him as an advocate of the two nation theory, and finally as Qaid e Azam of a new nation, Pakistan. The wheels of fortune were turning. The march to partition had begun.

The overarching political context of the times was British imperialism, uncompromising in its determination to keep India in bondage despite the bloodletting of the First World War. As late as 1935, the Secretary of State for India, Samuel Hoare, reiterated in the British parliament that the goal of British policy was to provide for the gradual development of self-governing institutions with a view to the progressive realization of responsible government in India as an integral part of the British Empire. The declarations, conferences and commissions were all directed towards ensuring a continuance of colonial rule. The power equations in Asia changed only as a result of the Second World War. Britain, exhausted by the War realized that its imperial hold on the Indian army was slipping and it could no longer subjugate an India which had become conscious of its own self.

Imperial British aims were reflected in the Simon Commission report of 1930. As stipulated in the Government of India Act of 1916, the British promised to look into further measures towards the attainment of a dominion status for India. The Simon Commission consisted of six members of the British Parliament, including Clement Attlee who was to become the British prime minister when India finally gained its independence in 1947. Indian political opinion was outraged at the absence of even a single Indian on the Commission that was to decide the fate of
India. The Indian National Congress as well as the Muslim League boycotted the Commission. The voluminous Simon report recommended (1) the abolishment of diarchic rule, and (2) limited representative government in the Indian provinces. A separate electorate for Muslims was maintained as in the Government of India Act of 1919 but for a limited period. India was to remain a colony with the possibility of dominion status sometime in the undefined future.

It is in the context of the growing communal polarization in North India and the intransigence of Great Britain on the question of India’s independence that one has to assess the address of Allama Iqbal to the Indian Muslim League at Allahabad in 1930. It was in this historic address that he laid out his vision of an autonomous homeland for Muslims in northwestern India. Iqbal was one of the most influential Islamic thinkers of the 20th century. His rousing poetry inspired generations of Muslims in the Urdu and Farsi speaking world. In his earlier years Iqbal was a national poet. His Taran e Hind, composed in 1904, sang of the beauty of the Indian homeland and the love of its people for their country. However, in his later years he shifted his focus to Islamic civilization and was convinced that Islam held the key to the moral emancipation of humankind. His inspiring poetry held up a memory of a glorious past and the vision of a lofty future and sought to rejuvenate a sullen Islamic community. In his Allahabad address, Allama Iqbal said:

“I would like to see the Punjab, the North-West Frontier Province, Sind and Baluchistan amalgamated into a single State,
self-governing within the British Empire, or without the British Empire. The formation of a consolidated North-Western Indian Muslim State appears to me to be the final destiny of the Muslims at least of north-west India."

“We are 70 million, and far more homogenous than any other people in India. Indeed, the Muslims of India are the only Indian people who can fitly be described as a nation in the modern sense of the word.”

The address was a crystallization of Iqbal’s political thinking. Even though he was deeply influenced by the tasawwuf of Mevlana Rumi and the ego of the German philosopher Nietzsche, Iqbal stayed within the framework of his heritage as an Indian Muslim. His political thinking follows the intellectual lineage of Shaikh Ahmed Sirhindi and Shah Waliullah of Delhi. Indian Islam had turned away from its universal Sufi heritage during the reign of the Mogul emperor Aurangzeb (d 1707) and had sought its fulfillment in the extrinsic application of the Shariah. As elaborated in his book, “Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam”, Iqbal accepted the premise that jurisprudence (as opposed to spirituality and ethics) was the foundation on which the edifice of Islam was to be erected. For him, the Shariah was not just a set of static rules and regulations but a dynamic tool in an evolving, expanding universe. Ijtihad was the “principle of movement” in the structure of Islam. India, with its vast non-Muslim majority presented a special problem in the application of this principle. Iqbal wrote: “In India, however, difficulties are likely to arise; for it is doubtful whether a non-Muslim legislative assembly can exercise the power of
Ijtihad”. Hence, his deduction that only an autonomous Muslim state in northwest British India could discharge this function.

Allama Iqbal left some questions unanswered. His address called for the establishment of a state in the northwestern portion of British India consisting of Punjab, NW Frontier, Sindh and Baluchistan. In 1931 the Muslim population of these areas was only 25 million in a total Indian Muslim population of 70 million. What was to become of the other 45 million Muslims? Iqbal was silent on this issue. Noticeably, Bengal, a Muslim majority province, was absent in his address. While his prescription called for legislative autonomy for the Muslim majority areas of NW India, Iqbal offered no solution for Muslims who would stay as a minority in a non-Muslim or a secular state. He left this task to future generations of Muslim minorities in India, China, Europe and America.

The Allahabad address was a milestone on the road to partition. Iqbal gave a concrete philosophical foundation for the two-nation theory and was a source of inspiration for Jinnah. Iqbal was the principal figure who convinced Jinnah to return to India in 1935 from his retirement in England and lead the Muslim League. Upon Iqbal’s death in 1938, Jinnah eulogized him: ‘He was undoubtedly one of the greatest poets, philosophers and seers of humanity of all times...to me he was a personal friend, philosopher and guide and as such the main source of my inspiration and spiritual support’.

Meanwhile the British sponsored a series of round table conferences in London to hammer out a compromise between
the various contestants on the Indian scene. These conferences revealed how deep were the divisions between the principal religious communities on how to share power in an independent India. The first round table conference in 1930 was attended by Gandhi, Jinnah, Ambedkar, Agha Khan, Malaviya, Sarojini Naidu as well as representatives from the Akali Dal and Hindu Mahasabha. The main issues on the table were a dominion status for India, separate electorates and electoral weights for Muslims and other minorities, preservation of statutory Muslim majorities in the Punjab and Bengal, federal structure in a future constitution, and separate representation for the so called untouchables. There was no meeting of the minds on these issues and the conference broke down. Gandhi launched a civil disobedience movement and many Congress workers were arrested. A labor government came to power in London in 1931, released the Congress workers and called a second round table conference. Jinnah was by now fed up with Indian politics and he did not attend. The second conference also broke down. A third round table conference called in 1932 was boycotted by the Congress party and nothing was accomplished.

The failure of the Indian parties to come to an agreement prompted the British to advance their own ideas for self government. The communal award of 1932 accepted the principle of separate electorates for the Muslims, Sikhs and Christians. Bowing to the demand of the Muslim Leaguers from UP for greater representation, the communal award increased Muslim representation in the UP legislature to 30 percent while their population was only 20 percent. To compensate for this increase, the representation of Muslims in the Muslim majority
provinces of Punjab and Bengal was decreased. In the Punjab, Muslims constituted 60 percent of the population and their representation in the provincial legislature was decreased to 50 percent. In Bengal, the Muslims constituted 55 percent of the population and their representation was decreased to 40 percent. Muslim politics in north India was as yet immature, dominated by zamindari interests in UP. The end result of their bargaining with the British was a loss of majority in all of the erstwhile provinces. It showed the futility of political horse trading to achieve increased representation for Muslims in regions where they were a small minority. The process worked both ways. Increased power for the Muslim nawabs and zamindars of UP would mean decreased power for the Muslims of the pivotal states of Punjab and Bengal.

The communal award also accorded a minority status to the so called Untouchables and awarded them separate electorates. Gandhi saw in this a grave threat to the cohesiveness of Hindu society. If the depressed classes were classified as a separate minority, the Hindus who constituted over 65 percent of the population in British India would be reduced to 49 percent, thereby losing their electoral majority. Gandhi started a fast unto death if this stipulation was not reversed. The fast applied tremendous pressures on Dr. Ambedkar and there were threats on his life if Gandhi died. Protracted negotiations took place between Ambedkar and representatives of Gandhi and an agreement was reached whereby seats would be reserved for the Untouchables in the provincial as well as central legislatures but only as a part of the overall seats allocated to the Hindus. The Gandhi-Ambedkar pact of 1932 was a major triumph for
Gandhi. It confirmed his status as a social reformer of the first rank. The so called Untouchables stayed within the Hindu fold and in independent India have made noticeable gains in education, employment and politics.

In 1933, the British government appointed a commission under the chairmanship of Lord Linlithgow to review and recommend reforms for the administration of the British Raj. The result was the Government of India Act of 1935. The Act did not give the Indians the power to draft or enact their own constitution nor was there a Bill of Rights. It recommended the separation of Burma from British India and the establishment of Sindh and Orissa as separate states. It granted limited self government to the provinces. The elected provincial legislatures served at the pleasure of the British governors who had the authority to convene or dissolve them. The federal legislature was to be elected indirectly with substantial reservations for the princes and the viceroy’s nominees. Separate communal electorates were accepted for Hindus, Muslims and Christians.

The elections of 1937 were held under the Government of India Act of 1935. The Indian National Congress, as the oldest and best organized party, won 750 of a total of 1,771 seats. It had a majority of seats in Madras, United Provinces, Central Provinces, Bihar and Orissa and held the largest number of seats in four other provinces including Bengal and NW Frontier. But it captured only 26 of the 491 seats reserved for Muslims. The Muslim League fared no better. It captured only 106 seats out of a total of 491 reserved Muslim seats. Significantly, it failed
miserably in the Punjab where it won only two seats and 39 out of 250 seats in Bengal.

The Congress formed cabinets in the provinces where it had a clear majority. It joined coalitions in Assam and Sindh. Jinnah offered to form coalitions with the Congress in the critical UP and Bombay legislatures. But the Congress, buoyed by its success at the polls, rejected the offer. An elated Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru declared that there were only two political powers in the India, namely, the British and the Congress. He offered to cooperate with the League in UP only if it dissolved itself and joined the Congress.

In declining to cooperate with the League in 1937, the Congress missed a golden opportunity to forge a united political alliance in India. The League had cooperated with the Congress in some of the local electoral districts in UP and in return expected that the Congress would invite it to form a coalition government. Maulana Azad records in his book, “India Wins Freedom” that he had arranged for two of the senior members of the League, Chaudhari Khaliquzzaman and Nawab Ismail Khan to join the UP ministry. But the UP Congress went back on the tacit pre-election understanding for a coalition with the League. Only one ministerial seat was offered to the UP Muslims and that too if they abandoned their allegiance to the League and joined the Congress. Mohammed Mujeeb, a prominent member of the League recalls (Ref: India’s Partition, ed. by Musheerul Hasan, p. 410): “I was at home in Lucknow when the draft of the agreement proposed by Maulana Azad on behalf of the Congress was sent to Chaudhry Khaliquzzaman. My immediate
reaction on reading it was that the Muslim League was being asked to abolish itself”. Ultimately, the lone Muslim seat in the ministry was given to Jameet e ulema e Hind, a religious party which had shifted its allegiance from the League to Congress.

Nehru was consistent, but consistently unrealistic on the communal issue. He was a statesman but his statesmanship failed him at critical moments. In 1937, he tried to crush the League in UP. The result was exactly the opposite. It only crushed the pro-congress elements in the League and forced them into a communal corner. A cooperative hand extended at this critical juncture might have paid rich political dividends. His passion for secular socialism made him insensitive to the depths of communal suspicions in the subcontinent. This failure showed up repeatedly in Nehru’s political career, first in the Nehru report of 1928, then in his decisions following the 1937 elections, and finally his sabotage of the British Cabinet Mission plan in 1946. His failures had a decisive impact on the events leading to partition. He was a political giant, next only to Gandhi in stature, and the subcontinent paid a heavy price for his misjudgments. Maulana Azad observers in his book India Wins Freedom: “Jawaharlal’s action (in refusing to give two ministerial seats to the League) gave the Moslem League in the U.P. a new lease of life. All students of Indian politics know that it was from the U.P. that the League was reorganized. Mr. Jinnah took full advantage of the situation and started an offensive which ultimately led to Pakistan”.

Following the elections of 1937, the Congress formed cabinets in seven out of eleven states where it had won a majority of
Assembly seats. In addition, in Sindh and Assam it was part of the ruling coalitions. The Unionist Party, a coalition of traditional Muslim, Sikh and Hindu interests, ruled the Punjab. In Bengal the Praja Krishak Party formed the ministry. Thus in nine out of eleven provinces the Congress was either in power or part of a coalition that held power. The Muslim League was unable to command a majority in any of the provinces. This was a low point for the League. It seemed as if the League had become irrelevant to the power politics of India. It was only the singular focus and drive of Jinnah that galvanized the party and molded it into a force that was able within a decade to dictate the partition of the subcontinent.

The actions of the Congress in the two years that it was in power were perceived by the minorities to be a manifestation of a rising tide of political Hinduism. Since its electoral base in 1937 was predominantly Hindu (the Congress had won only 26 of 491 seats allocated to Muslims) it was understandably responsive to the demands of its Hindu constituency. However, it also displayed a noticeable insensitivity to the need of the Muslims in North India. First, Hindi written in the Devanagri script was introduced as the medium of instruction in schools. Urdu, which was the lingua franca of north India, and the cultural language of north Indian Muslims, was marginalized. This was seen by the Muslim elite as an attack on their culture. Second, the singing of Vande Mataram was introduced into schools. This song was written by the Bengali poet Bankim Chandra Chatterjee in 1876 as a protest against the British who had consolidated their grip on India and had made the singing of “God save the Queen” mandatory for all Indian school children. The words Vande
Mataram may mean “I worship thee” or “I salute thee” depending on the interpretation. The context of the song which was set by Bankim Chanda in an anti-Muslim novel Ananda MathTemple and its evocation of the goddess Durga made it a controversial part of the Hindu-Muslim dialectic. Some Muslims looked upon the introduction of this song as an attempt to impose Hindu culture on non-Hindus. Some Christians and Sikhs also objected to the song on the grounds that it equated the motherland with the goddess Durga.

In historical hindsight, these “excesses” of the Congress would not be considered politically significant were it not for the charged political context of the times. It is worth remembering that the large provinces of Punjab and Bengal were not ruled by the Congress and were not subject to the Congress “reforms”. Princely India, consisting of 572 autonomous kingdoms and containing almost 25 percent of India’s total population was not affected. A certain amount of cronyism and partisanship was unavoidable in any elective government. Besides, it was not just the Muslims of UP who were unhappy with Congress rule. The Scheduled Caste Federation and the Justice Party of Tamil Nadu were also unhappy. In the larger matrix of the subcontinent the Congress “excesses” would have subsided over time and replaced by the give and take inherent in a democracy. In a pluralistic, democratic India, the center of gravity of political life would have floated towards a populist mass dictated by the dual convergence of self interest and the impossibility of either of the two principal religious communities dominating the other.
Some of the reforms proposed by the Congress ministries were perceived as an attempt to impose soft Hindutva. The Congress pushed mass education but secularized the curriculum under a scheme called the Wardha Taleemi Scheme. The vast network of madrassah-based religious schools in north India felt marginalized. The tricolor flag of the Congress was given official status and pictures of Gandhi were prominently displayed in schools. The land reforms proposed by the Congress ministries hit hard the landed Muslim aristocracy of UP. It was precisely this class that was at the helm of affairs in the Muslim League and they felt threatened. The vast province of UP was the crucible of communal politics. The end game of partition was played out in the Punjab and Bengal but it was UP that witnessed the first act. There were reports of favoritism, normal in any democratic setup, but highly suspicious in the charged atmosphere of the times. Nehru’s attempts to isolate and crush the Muslim League reinforced these suspicions. However, to be fair, Pandit Nehru was under tremendous pressure from some of his colleagues including Pant, Rajendra Prasad and Rafi Ahmed Kidwai to take a hard line against the League.

This was the first taste of power for the Congress party and it missed a golden opportunity to forge a national consensus. Nehru sought to bring more Muslims into the party and initiated a campaign of mass contact. The attempt fizzled out because the dominant Hindu communities of UP, savoring their new found power, had no inclination to share it with anyone else. To cap it all, Pandit Nehru wrote to Jinnah mocking the League as an elitist organization and taunting him that there were only two political forces left in India, namely, the British and the Congress.
party. “No”, retorted Jinnah, “there is a third force, and that is the Indian Muslims”. This was the parting of the ways for the two men who maintained a cold animosity towards each other until partition.

The war in Europe cast its long shadow on India. Hitler invaded Poland on September 1, 1939. On September 3, Britain and France declared war on Germany. The Viceroy in India, Linlithgow, followed suit and declared that India was at war with Germany. Indians were outraged that they were dragged into a war that was not of their own choosing. In acting unilaterally, without even the hint of consultations, the viceroy had reminded India of her servile colonial status. Gandhi was especially in a dire predicament. He had opposed the war on moral grounds and had gone so far as to counsel the British not to fight the Nazis but to resist them non-violently. The opinion among India’s leaders was split. Within the Congress party, Nehru, Azad and Patel saw the menace of Nazism as worse than the evil of imperialism and were willing to cooperate with the British provided they gave India its freedom immediately. A free India would join the allies as an equal and willing partner in the war against the fascists. Jinnah extended his cooperation to the British in return for their backing of his demands for Muslim rights. On the other hand, Gandhi, supported by other senior Congress workers, remained adamantly opposed to the war on moral grounds.

The Congress ministries in the provinces resigned in protest against the unilateral declaration of war by the viceroy. The Muslim League, the Scheduled Caste Federation and the Justice
Party of Tamil Nadu who had perceived Congress rule as oppressive, rejoiced and observed December 22, 1939 as “youme najat” (deliverance day). The Congress party had a chance to show its metal as a national party and demonstrate its sensitivity to the minorities. In this attempt, it failed. The Muslims and the Scheduled Castes saw Congress rule as political tyranny. Even some of the British observers described the rule of Congress ministries as “a rising tide of political Hinduism”.

In a broader sense, the tug of war between the Congress and the League was a struggle between the old landed aristocracy and the emerging money lending class. The landed aristocracy had inherited their holdings as jagirs from the Moguls and the succeeding nawabs. These established land owners and the large farmers had come under pressure from the tax collectors appointed by the British East India Company under the so called reforms of 1793. Each collector was required to remit a fixed amount per acre to the British irrespective of the yield on the land. In lean times, the farmers could not pay the fixed tax and had to borrow money from the usurious money lenders to pay the tax collector. Defaults were common and the farmers and the land owners often lost their land to the tax collectors or the money lenders. A substantial percentage of land owners in UP were Muslim while the money lenders were predominantly Hindu. Some of the money lenders, the Marwaris from Gujarat, had become entrepreneurs and had joined the ranks of the emerging industrialists. The Congress party drew its financial backing from these industrialists while its voter base was primarily Hindu in spite of its broad national appeal. The Muslim League, on the other hand, represented the interest of the land
owning class, and tended to champion their cause. The voter base of the League was almost exclusively Muslim.

Just as the power struggle between the landed gentry and the emerging merchant class in Cromwell’s England determined the evolution of English politics, the struggle between the Muslim landowners and the Hindu money lenders determined the shape of politics in 20th century India. Whereas in England this struggle shifted political power from the landed class to the merchants, in India there was a divorce between the two. The landed class, the nawabs and the estate holders backed Jinnah and opted for Pakistan. The founders of the Muslim League in 1906, Nawab Viqar ul Mulk, Nawab Salimullah Khan, Sir Sultan Muhammed Shah all belonged to old, established landed aristocracy. The money lenders, merchants and the emerging industrialists such as the Birlas backed Gandhi and stayed in India.

Religion was the surface wave generated by this underlying power struggle between the old guard and new guard. The draft from this wave sucked in the masses and carried them to the holocaust accompanying partition. It is this underlying struggle that explains the opposition of the League to the land reforms introduced by the Congress party in 1937 in northern India. The land reforms hit hard at the Muslim landed gentry. The underlying struggle also explains the opposition of the Congress to the tax proposals advanced by Liaqat Ali Khan as the finance minister in the brief Congress-League coalition ministry in 1946. The taxation proposals hit hard at the Hindu merchant class and were vehemently denounced by their supporters in the
Congress party. The price for the divorce was paid by the illiterate masses of India, Hindu, Muslim and Sikh alike.

While the major political parties jockeyed for position and argued among themselves the flames of war spread to Asia and the Pacific. In December 1941, Japan bombed Pearl Harbor and declared war on the United States. Hitler formed an alliance with Japan. The United States, in turn, declared war on Japan and Germany. The Japanese made rapid advances in the Pacific, capturing the Philippines, Indonesia, Indochina and Burma. By April 1942 they were on India’s doorsteps.

The Japanese thrust left the Indian leadership in a quandary. Their responses were predictably mixed. Nehru, Patel and Azad had their sympathies with the allies. But they desired that India’s participation in the war be one of free choice, not one dictated by the British. Gandhi was against armed resistance and wanted non-violent resistance and non-cooperation to contain the Japanese thrust. Jinnah supported the British war effort in the hope that the support would pay off political dividends. With the Japanese probing Indian defenses in the eastern state of Assam, Gandhi felt it was an opportune time to force the British to concede India’s freedom. Under his direction the Congress launched the Quit India movement. The goal was a non-violent, non-cooperation confrontation with the Raj to force an immediate transfer of power from the British to the Indians. The Muslim League did not overtly endorse the Quit India movement but did passively support it.
The British were in no mood to cede power in the midst of a war which at that time was going badly for them. Their response was to arrest the Congress leaders and a large number of Congress activists. After the arrests, there were violent demonstrations in the major cities which were put down with the help of Indian police and the army which was still loyal to the British. Nehru, Azad, Patel and other senior member of the Congress leadership spent the next three and a half years in the Ahmednagar prison in the Deccan. Gandhi was interned in the Agha Khan palace in Poona. In 1944 he started a fast in prison. His health deteriorated. The British, fearful of a backlash in case he died in prison, released him in 1944.

The resignation of the Congress provincial ministries in 1939 and the arrest of Congress leadership in 1942 was a boon to the Muslim League. Jinnah supported the British war effort and used the interregnum to consolidate the mass base for the League especially in the crucial provinces of the Punjab and Bengal. When the Congress leadership finally emerged from prison in 1945, India had changed. The British were exhausted. The League had grown to be a national organization claiming to represent all the Muslims of the subcontinent. There was widespread discontent in the country fueled by wartime scarcity, famine and British arrogance.

The formation of the Indian National Army (INA) during World War II was a major event in India’s struggle for independence. Subash Chandra Bose, a senior member of the Congress party, was forced to resign as President of the party in 1939 over policy differences with Gandhi. Bose believed that only armed
resistance would compel the British to quit India while Gandhi emphasized nonviolence and non-cooperation. In 1941, when Japan entered the War, Bose made his way in disguise first to Germany where he met Hitler, and then to Japan where he formed the Indian National Army under Japanese patronage. The advancing Japanese armies overran Singapore and Malaya in March-April 1942. A large portion of the British army in the Pacific was Indian in origin. Over forty thousand Indian soldiers surrendered to the Japanese along with the British, the Australians and the New Zealanders. Of these, over thirty five thousand Indian soldiers, Muslim, Sikhs and Hindus alike, joined the Indian National Army under Bose.

The Japanese promised independence for India once the British were defeated and expelled. An Azad Hind (free India) government was set up under Subash Chandra Bose as an Indian government in exile. The INA was the vanguard of a military force spearheading an attack on India from Burma. The INA brigades did advance toward Kohima and Imphal in Assam but were stopped by allied forces. As the Japanese came under increasing pressure from the Americans in the Pacific theater, they pulled back logistic and air support from the Burma-India theater to defend their operations further east. Heavy rain and diseases took their toll. The INA was unable to advance any further than the hills of Assam. Bose died in an air crash on Taiwan in early 1945.

Even though the INA was unsuccessful in pushing the British out of India, its exploits caught the imagination of the Indian population. One may argue that it was the inspiration offered by
the INA and the armed rebellions it fostered that was responsible for the ultimate British decision to quit India. News of an Asian power defeating the entrenched Europeans in Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaya and Burma convinced many Indians that the British were not invincible after all. More than two million Indians served in the British Indian army. They fought valiantly in North Africa, southern Europe and the Far East. When the war was over they returned home to an India that was still a British colony. These soldiers had tasted victory in distant lands and were not inclined to accept a permanent colonial status for their motherland.

India was seething with resentment. The subcontinent was like a boiling pot where the steam was contained with difficulty by the Gandhian lid. The resentment did burst out soon after the war. The captured INA soldiers were put on trial in Delhi “for waging war on the King Emperor”. Among those accused of treason were Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. The trial of General Shah Nawaz Khan, Colonel Prem Sehgal and Colonel Gurbux Singh Dhillon at the Red Fort in Delhi attracted national attention. They were defended at the trial by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and Bhulabhai Desai who took the position that the INA soldiers were soldiers of the Arizi Hukumate Azad Hind or the Provisional Government of Free India and as such should be treated as citizens of a free and sovereign Indian state. Jinnah appealed to the British to treat the prisoners with leniency.

The trial caused mass uproar. In February 1946, a section of the Indian Navy based in Bombay, observed a hartal (passive non-cooperation) ostensibly over the condition of food served to
them. The hartal soon mushroomed into a full blown mutiny involving over 70 ships and 20,000 sailors stationed in Karachi, Bombay, Vishakhapatnam and Calcutta. The Congress tricolor and the League green flag were jointly hoisted over the commandeered ships. Elements of the Royal Indian Air Force joined in. The Indian army contingents based in Jabalpur were the next to defy orders from their British officers. Industrial workers from Bombay went on strike followed by workers in Ahmadabad. The situation was ominous for the colonial authorities.

The rebellion caught the attention of the British Prime Minister Clemente Attlee who ordered that it be crushed. Squadrons of the British navy surrounded the Bombay harbor. British heavy guns were trained on the Indian ships. Crack British army units were called out. Indian navy personnel in Karachi were fired upon killing and injuring dozens. British pilots of the Royal Indian Air Force flew in formation over the Bombay harbor in a show of force.

The stand of the Indian sailors attracted widespread support among the masses, seething with discontent with the apparent lack of progress towards independence by the major political parties. It caught the Indian leadership by surprise. Gandhi distanced himself from the uprising admonishing the sailors that they ought to address their grievances through established political leaderships. Jinnah urged the armed personnel to call off the strike. Nehru was equally unequivocal that the strike should be called off. Patel traveled to Bombay to ensure that the uprising ended peacefully. The apparent concern of the
Congress and League leadership was that an uprising without a leader would lead to anarchy and would draw India into the whirlpool of cold war politics emerging after the Second World War. It might have invited intervention by the United States and the Soviet Union, as happened in the Korean Peninsula and Vietnam. The Communist Party of India, never far behind whenever there was an opportunity for anarchy, fully backed the uprising and their flag was hoisted along with those of the Congress and the League.

Bereft of political backing from the national leadership, the valiant stand of the sailors ended in failure and the mutiny was put down by the force of colonial bayonets. However, it demonstrated that as far as the Indian army was concerned the communal question did not exist. This was in February 1946, at a time when the Congress and the League were deadlocked in negotiations over the constitutional future of India. Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs of the armed forces demonstrated that they were willing to stand up as one and challenge the British.

The British took the uprising more seriously than did Gandhi, Nehru, Jinnah, and Patel. An exhausted Britain, licking its wounds from a near mortal bout with Hitler’s Germany, realized that the Indian armed forces which were the mainstay of the British Raj could not be counted on to put down a mass insurrection in the subcontinent. The mutiny of 1857 had started under similar circumstances, ostensibly over Sepoy discontent over cartridge wrappings. The British barely escaped a forcible exit from India in 1857 thanks to the support of the Sikhs, the Nizam and some of the nawabs and maharajahs. The situation
in 1946 was different. India was now aware of itself. It was no longer willing to tolerate a foreign yoke under which it had toiled for over 150 years.

It was the uprising of Indian sailors, more than anything that Gandhi, Nehru or Jinnah did, which convinced the British that it was time for them to quit. They could leave in one of two ways, either through negotiations or through armed conflict. Armed conflict would drag India into the whirlpool of the emerging cold war between the United States and the Soviet Union with unpredictable consequences for post war Asia. The larger issue was the shape of the post war world and continued western dominance in the new world order. The huge British investments in India would be safeguarded only through a negotiated settlement with trusted parties. The Indian National Congress and the Muslim League were led by British trained lawyers and in spite of their bitter disagreements on power sharing, could be counted on to safeguard British interests.

Negotiations were accelerated with the Congress and the League and India’s independence was placed on fast track. The British cabinet appointed a commission in March 1946 to visit India, consult with the major political parties and recommend a constitutional framework for independence. The commission was headed by Patrick Lawrence, then Secretary of State for India. It included Stafford Cripps, President of the Board of Trade and A.V. Alexander, Secretary of the navy. The commission held intense consultations with Jinnah, the leader of the Muslim League and Azad, the President of Congress, and in May 1946 presented the so-called Cabinet Mission Plan.
The Cabinet Mission Plan envisaged a united India with a federal government consisting of three groups. Group A was the bulk of British India which had a Hindu majority. The northwestern portions of the empire consisting of the Punjab, Sindh, Baluchistan and NW Frontier constituted Group B. Bengal and Assam were grouped under Group C. Groups B and C had nominal Muslim majorities. Defense, foreign affairs and communications would be handled by the Federal Government. The residual powers vested with the three groups. Each group was free to delegate any additional powers to the federal center.

Jinnah accepted the Cabinet Mission Plan as he felt this was the best that could be achieved under the circumstances. He was assured by the British that the congress would accept it also. But Gandhi was adamantly opposed to the plan. He saw in it the genesis of a future Pakistan. He advised the chief minister of Assam, Gopinath Bordoloi, not to join Bengal in Zone C.

Despite Gandhi’s opposition, most of the senior leadership in Congress supported the Cabinet Mission Plan in the hope that India could be kept united. On July 7, 1946 the Congress did pass a resolution accepting the Plan. However, other fateful events intervened. On July 10, 1946, during a question and answer period following a news conference in Bombay, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru stated that the Congress party was not bound by the stipulations of the Cabinet Mission Plan. Nehru was the newly elected President of the Congress and his statement was the bombshell that destroyed the Cabinet Mission Plan. Jinnah called a meeting of the League working committee to discuss
the Congress rejection of the plan. Meanwhile, the Congress working committee met and issued a lengthy statement in which it said that even though they had reservations about the Plan, they would abide by its stipulations. Jinnah saw in this wavering attitude of the Congress a harbinger of things to come. If the Congress could go back on its promises even while the British were in India, he asked, how could the Muslims have faith in their promises after the departure of the British. The League working committee rescinded its earlier acceptance of the Cabinet Mission Plan.

The failure of the Cabinet Mission Plan was the single most important milestone on the road to partition. Up until August 1946 there was a possibility, however remote, that the Congress and the League would find a meeting ground to keep India united. That hope evaporated with the statement of Nehru and rescinding of the Plan by the League. The question before a student of history is: why did the leaders of the Congress and the League, in their collective wisdom, failed to foresee the consequences of their decisions?

Pakistan was conceived by Mohammed Iqbal as a Muslim majority region in northwestern British India. It would enjoy legislative autonomy within or outside the British Empire. Iqbal foresaw the future of Muslim civilization in a continuous evolution of fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence). Ijtihad, meaning a rigorous application of the Shariah, was for him a dynamic tool which man used in his unceasing struggle as the trustee of divine will to discover new vistas of fiqh. Postulating that Ijtihad could be exercised only by an elected legislative assembly of Muslims,
he argued that a non-Muslim legislature could not discharge this function. Hence, he called for the establishing of an autonomous Muslim region in parts of British India wherein the Muslims could elect their own representatives and discharge the divine mission of Ijtihad.

While Iqbal was motivated by the vision of an Islamic civilization rejuvenated through Ijtihad of the masses, Jinnah, the architect of Pakistan, was motivated by a desire to avoid Hindu hegemony over Muslim majority areas which would bottle up Muslim aspirations for generations to come. Jinnah accepted the challenge of implementing Iqbal’s concept in the matrix of a Hindu majority India which was ruled at the time by Pax Brittania. He was a secular man, a nationalist who for most of his life sought Hindu-Muslim reconciliation but was frustrated in his efforts by Congress party which was unwilling to share power with the Muslim League. Unlike Gandhi, Jinnah was against using religious symbols in the struggle for independence and believed that negotiations and constitutional means offered the best guarantee for a peaceful transfer of power from British colonial power to India. Indeed, it was the use of religious symbols by Gandhi in the non-cooperation movement of 1921 and his alliance with the Muslim religious right during the Khilafat Movement that had prompted Jinnah to quit the Congress party.

It is possible to argue that Jinnah’s goal was not partition but parity between Hindus and Muslims in a united India. In support of this thesis, one may look at the commitment of Jinnah to Hindu-Muslim amity in his early career. Jinnah was a champion
of minority rights but he advanced them within constitutional means avoiding mass agitation and anarchy. As late as 1928 when the Nehru Report was published, he sought to bridge the positions of the two communities. It was the Congress rejection of Jinnah’s 14 points that convinced him of the vulnerability of Muslims under Hindu majority rule.

The Lahore resolution of 1940 calling for the establishment of Pakistan was deliberately vague as to what Pakistan meant. Jinnah, a master tactician and a political master, knew that the moment the idea of Pakistan became concrete, it would be open to critical scrutiny and would lose some of its abstract appeal to the Muslim masses. A vaguely defined Pakistan meant different things to different people and was amorphous enough to provide at once a rallying point for Muslims and a negotiating platform for discussions with the British and the Congress party. It was Nehru’s rejection of the Cabinet Mission Plan that killed any hope of a united India. Events moved at a torrid pace thereafter. Jinnah, the constitutionalist turned Jinnah the mass leader. He called for “direct action” on August 16, 1946 which started an irrevocable slide towards partition. However, he did not foresee that the implementation of a Muslim majority Pakistan would necessarily mean the partition of the great provinces of the Punjab and Bengal. When partition did arrive, he had to accept a “moth eaten Pakistan” over no Pakistan at all.

The contribution of Gandhi to the partition of the subcontinent was more substantial than is commonly acknowledged. He was a complex man who touched India at multiple levels. First and foremost, he was a nationalist whose mission was to free India
from British colonial rule. However, what set him apart from other nationalists who were equally passionate about India’s independence were his methods. He had perfected the art of satyagraha or passive non-resistance while fighting racial prejudice in South Africa. Upon his return to India in 1916 he set out to apply these methods to force the British to concede India’s independence.

It is a tribute to the genius of Gandhi that he understood correctly the basis of British imperialism and came up with an effective political strategy to undermine this basis. India as a colony supplied raw materials to British factories. The British controlled the means of production and the Indians were the coolies and consumers. The finished goods, marked up several fold, were brought back and sold in the vast Indian market at monopoly prices. Thus India provided both the push and the pull for British imperialism, supplying raw materials at the input end and markets for finished products at the output end. In the process Britain got richer and India was poorer by the day. Cotton provides a good example for this process. Indian cotton was shipped in bales to the factories in Lancashire where it was processed into cloth, brought back to India and sold to India’s peasants. The British East India Company had killed the weaving industry in Bengal as early as 1790 with exorbitant taxation and active discouragement of the weavers. The story was the same whether one looked at salt or sewing needles.

Gandhi built a mass movement on the basis of passive non cooperation. His strategy was simple and effective. Avoid British manufactured goods. Be self sufficient. He started to spin his
own cloth and the spinning wheel became a symbol of Gandhian resistance. Khadi, or homemade cloth, became the hallmark of Congress workers. By refusing to feed Britain’s productive machine, he struck at the very roots of British imperialism. In 1930 he declared he would march to the ocean “to make salt”. The British first laughed at him. When they realized the political punch of his techniques, they arrested him. When they could no longer contain him, they negotiated with him.

The most enduring contribution of Gandhi was that he made India aware of itself. His use of Satyagraha (truth-force) was both a tactic and a moral weapon. Satyagraha had its foundation in the Buddhist doctrine of self-abnegation and self-control. The thrust of Satyagraha was at once to tap the inner reservoir of moral energy in its practitioner and to place its target on the moral defensive. However, it called for an extraordinary degree of self discipline and restraint which was in short supply among the masses. The non-cooperation movement based on Satyagraha often became disruptive and to the extent it was violent it was counter-productive.

However, it was Gandhi’s use of religious symbols that injected communalism into India’s freedom struggle. In 1921 Gandhi forged an alliance with the Muslim religious right in support of the Khilafat movement. In turn, the Muslim religious establishment backed Gandhi’s non-cooperation movement against the British. When the movement got out of hand and turned violent, Gandhi abandoned it but the seeds of religious separatism had been sown. It was soon thereafter that religious riots broke out in parts of the Punjab and UP. Savarkar
composed his book on Hindutva in 1924. In 1928 the Congress made a volte-face on the issue of separate electoral representation for Muslims. The Muslim League upped the ante in its demands. When the decade ended in 1930, India was a divided land, locked in bitter communal Hindu-Muslim rhetoric. The divisions were there for all to see at the round table conference of 1931. Ironically, it was Jinnah, who had warned the Congress and Muslim League against the injection of religion into India’s freedom struggle. Neither side listened to him then. Jinnah was so disgusted with Indian politics that he retired and settled in London after 1931. It was only 1935, with the Muslims completely demoralized that he returned to take charge of the League at the insistence of the Mohammed Ali brothers and Allama Iqbal.

Gandhi was vehemently opposed to the Cabinet Mission Plan of 1946 and actively campaigned against it. His goal in life was independence of India but he was unwilling to share power with Jinnah to achieve it. Nehru’s statement at a news conference in July 1946 that Congress had agreed only to participate in a Constituent Assembly but not the grouping of states into zones A, B and C, effectively scuttled the Plan. Two months later, partition became a certainty. When it was time to make a decision and the Congress working committee considered the proposal for partition, Gandhi, who had steadfastly maintained that he would never agree to partition, recommended that the proposal be accepted. He would rather accept partition than a federal government under the Cabinet Mission Plan. This was the ultimate contradiction in Gandhi’s political career which historians will argue about for years to come.
Looking through the prism of historical hindsight one wonders where the principal actors on the stage of India’s history stood at this critical juncture. Was Gandhi as passionate about a united India as he is made out to be? If so, why did he not negotiate on the basis of the Cabinet Mission Plan? Was Nehru under so much pressure that he lost his cool at the press conference in July 1946 where he renounced the Cabinet Mission Plan? Was it a misspoken statement, or, was a reflection of Gandhi’s opinion? Was Nehru so enamored of a socialist India with a strong center that he was willing to sacrifice the unity of the subcontinent for his ideological convictions? Was Jinnah really for partition or was it a ploy to obtain the maximum concessions from an unwilling Congress? If he was determined to have an independent Pakistan, then why did he accept the Cabinet Mission Plan for a united India? Did he realize until the eleventh hour that the partition of British India would also mean a partition of the Punjab and Bengal? Was the Congress commitment to a united India so flimsy that they were willing to risk partition rather than share power? Did Gandhi, Nehru, Jinnah, Patel consider the consequences of partition for the minorities on both sides of the border? As for the British, why were they in such hurry to pack up and leave while the Punjab was in flames? Was a divided India more in line with their long term strategic interests?

What is obvious in historical hindsight is that none of them, Gandhi, Nehru, Jinnah, Patel, Azad anticipated the holocaust that was to descend on northern India once the partition plan was announced. It left in its wake a million dead and fifteen million destitute refugees. Partition was their collective failure.
The Cabinet Mission Plan was the last hope for keeping India united, giving a chance to the two great religious communities to work together. With the failure of this plan, India took a tortuous and precipitous slide towards partition. The constituent assembly met but the League boycotted it. Weary of the mounting tensions in India and alarmed at the mutiny of the Royal Indian Navy, the British cabinet sent a new viceroy, Mountbatten to Delhi to arrange for a transfer of power. Since the League was boycotting the constituent assembly, Mountbatten invited Nehru to form a cabinet. Jinnah was furious. He saw this as proof of the duplicity of the British and connivance of the Congress. He called for “Direct Action Day” on August 16, 1946.

Until the 16th of August 1946, the leaders of the Congress and the League were in control of history. After that date it was history that was in control of them. The Direct Action day was conceived as a day of peaceful protests. But in the communally charged atmosphere of India any excuse was sufficient to start a riot. The day passed peacefully in most parts of India but Calcutta was the scene of horrific riots with 6,000 dead and more than 20,000 injured. Some chroniclers have put the number of injured at over 100,000. Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs burned each other’s homes and stabbed innocent men, women and children. For five days, Calcutta burned. The army which was still under the control of the British did not intervene until it was too late. So ferocious were the riots that they destroyed whatever hope still lingered for a negotiated settlement of the Hindu-Muslim issue.
Some historians have blamed Suhrawardy who was the Muslim League chief minister of Bengal for the riots. However, the British, after a thorough investigation concluded that this assessment was incorrect. The viceroy Wavell wrote to the British Secretary of India Patrick Lawrence in August 1946: “Last weekend has seen dreadful riots in Calcutta. The estimates of casualties are 3,000 dead and 17,000 injured. The Bengal Congress is convinced that all the trouble was deliberately engineered by the Muslim League Ministry, but no satisfactory evidence to that effect has reached me yet. It is said that the decision to have a public holiday on 16th August was the cause of trouble, but I think this is very far-fetched. There was a public holiday in Sind and there was no trouble there. At any rate, whatever the causes of the outbreak, when it started, the Hindus and Sikhs were every bit as fierce as Muslims. The present estimate is that appreciably more Muslims were killed than the Hindus”.

Jinnah realized that staying out of the cabinet would be a tactical error as it would give the Congress a free reign over policies at a time when the British were seriously contemplating a transfer of power. A coalition interim government was formed in October 1946. Pandit Nehru served as the prime minister of the interim government, Sardar Patel was the home minister, while Liaqat Ali Khan became the finance minister.

So intense was the animosity between the League and the Congress that the interim government became an arena for political one-upmanship rather than a platform for efficient
administration. There was daily acrimony between the two sides. The League and Congress ministers held separate meetings. Instead of a give and take required in a democratic set up, each side sought to curtail the activities of the other. Liaqat Ali used his position as the finance minister to subject the Congress ministries to intense scrutiny. Bitterness grew among the cabinet members. Patel in particular was so embittered that he was won over to the idea of partition.

Mountbatten was eager to finish the job of power transfer and return to London. He pushed the idea of partition, converted Nehru and Patel to his point of view and sold the project to the British cabinet. A divided India was more to the liking of Churchill who was now the opposition leader in the British parliament. Jinnah was still under the impression that partition would bring the provinces of Punjab and Bengal in their entirety into Pakistan. It came as a shock to him when the Congress advanced the position in March 1947 that partition of the subcontinent would also mean a partition of the great provinces of Punjab and Bengal. Only the Muslim majority districts would be included in Pakistan. East Punjab and West Bengal would stay in India. The 572 princely states were given the option of acceding to either India or Pakistan keeping in view their geography and the wishes of their people. Jinnah argued passionately to keep Punjab and Bengal united in Pakistan but failed to convince Mountbatten of his position. Reluctantly, he agreed to “a moth eaten Pakistan”.

Widespread riots broke out in Punjab in March 1947. Ethnic cleansing on a scale rarely witnessed in human history was
practiced on both sides of the new proposed border. No one knows how many innocent Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs perished in the riots. Estimates range from half a million to two million. Entire villages were decimated. Towns went up in flames. Thousands of women and children were abducted and abused. Fifteen million refugees crossed the border. And the new nations of India and Pakistan came into existence immersed in flames of hatred and soaked in rivers of blood. They have fought three wars and a fourth war has been narrowly avoided. Of late, there is movement towards a détente. One hopes that the process continues, leading to lasting peace in the subcontinent and prosperity for its teeming millions.