

Michael Hughes

Hassan Abbas

The U.S. & the Muslim World

15 March 2007

Promised Land or Nation of Last Resort?

A Contextual Analysis of Pakistan's Tumultuous Birth

When Pakistan finally broke free from the British Empire and achieved its independence in 1947, it was hailed as a nation-state established for Muslims, by Muslims. Its creation was framed in religious dialogue which highlighted the spiritual unity of its people and celebrated their seemingly inevitable separation from the ideologically incompatible Hindu community which dominated neighboring India. For many, the birth of this new state finally gave millions of South Asian Muslims a homeland to call their own and govern as they please. Even the name of Pakistan, arguably derived from an Urdu word meaning "pure," suggests that the nation should be viewed through a non-secular lens as a Muslim promised land. However, to state that theological differences between British India's two most prominent communities were the sole cause of their proverbial parting of the ways represents an egregious oversimplification of history which neglects a nuanced, contextual analysis of the social and political movements of the time. Indeed, despite his repeated characterization as the leader of Pakistan's independence movement and the "Father of the Nation," Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the nation's first Governor-General, actually spent much of his time diligently pursuing compromises to keep the two communities united. For him, the partition of the subcontinent was an avenue of last resort pursued because of political failures rather than an inevitable outcome of a deep-seated ideological conflict. As a whole, the division of Pakistan and India, although influenced by theological differences, was actually more rooted in historical political conflicts and contemporary world crises than theological clashes. Ultimately, secular power struggles between the Hindu and Muslim communities, heavily influenced by British colonial hegemony and two world wars, destroyed the dream of a United India and gave way to the creation of two nations whose rivalry can still be felt today.

The historical interactions of Hindu and Muslims in India show a long-standing tradition of political rather than religious conflict amongst the two communities. The first Muslim tribes to conquer South Asia from the north during the Middle Ages focused primarily on plunder and

military conquest rather than the expansion of Islam. The Sufi brand of Islam which came to India with them advocated a spiritual rather than dogmatic approach to faith and was largely tolerant of the polytheistic Hindu people (Abbas 3). Despite their differences of belief, the two communities actually shared much in terms of culture throughout the period of Muslim rule. This intermingling is still evident in some shared or similar rituals today. If any religious conflicts arose between the groups, they were most likely outnumbered by disagreements about some perceived injustice in a Muslim leader's policies. Indeed, various Mughal kings and princes ruled large parts of the subcontinent from the eleventh century through the start of British colonial influence in the nineteenth century, and their status as "outsiders" and "occupiers" in the collective Hindu conscience, however faint, would never truly be erased.

With this history of power imbalance in mind, when Britain claimed colonial authority over India it is no surprise that they found more support among the majority Hindu community who wished to wrest power from the oligarchy of Mughal princes. The political rivalry between both communities was further exacerbated by the British colonial strategies of "divide and rule," which partitioned communities largely along ethnic and religious lines. One such implementation of this policy occurred in the colonial province of Bengal in 1905, when the British split the region into a majority Hindu western half and a majority Muslim eastern half (Story of Pakistan). Because of segregation into largely homogenous local communities, interaction between Hindus and Muslims was minimized. This provided much more fertile ground for intolerant and polarizing dialogue, whether religious or secular.

Perhaps more influential in driving a wedge between the two communities was their widening disparity in educational and economic power at this time. Hindus, largely inspired by a chance to improve upon previous misfortunes which had occurred under Muslim rule, embraced Western knowledge and technology. In contrast, Muslims in South Asia at this time had transitioned from the spiritual Islam of their forefathers to a more orthodox religion led by conservative *mullahs* who forbid their followers from being too heavily educated by the English (Abbas 5). This gap in the acceptance of Westernization had three major effects. First, it increased the general cultural and social divide between the groups, making it more difficult for them to find common ground. Next, the increase in Hindu education taught the community a valuable lesson: that throughout its history India was largely controlled by foreign occupiers rather than the Hindu people. This knowledge inspired a newfound sense of Hindu patriotism

and motivated early yearnings for independence from colonial rule (Abbas 5). Finally, the receptivity of Hindus to Western-style industrialization meant that while Muslim economies remained largely agrarian in nature, processing plants and factories were springing up throughout Hindu-dominated regions. Indeed, by the time of independence in 1947, despite raising one-third the cotton of India, Pakistan had only one-thirtieth of the cotton mills (Bourke-White). The concentration of economic power in the hands of Hindu community members cannot be disregarded as a source of contention between the two communities.

When the Hindu-led Indian National Congress met with the All-India Muslim League in 1916 to jointly pressure the British to allow Indians more autonomy in government, they found this widening gap caused a substantial difference in their motivations. While Hindu leaders advocated a strong central government to more properly harness their rising power, the Muslim League hoped for a more diversified, provincial system which would prevent the few areas in which they held majority from falling under Hindu rule. Faced with these competing interests, the two groups reached a compromise thanks largely to the diplomacy of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, a member of both organizations. This 1916 Lucknow Pact assured that one-third of the proposed central government would be comprised of Muslims, concentrated much authority at a provincial level, and provided each community with veto power over any future legislation which was deemed unfavorable to three-fourths of its members (Project South Asia). This compromise earned Jinnah the title “Ambassador of Hindu-Muslim Unity” and provided a glimpse of hope that the two communities might be able to cooperate in self-governance despite substantial cultural, social, and economic differences.

The tumultuous events of World War I and its aftermath, however, largely dispelled this hope of sustained collaboration. Support for the British resulted in massive Hindu participation in the war efforts, with about 800,000 Indian troops seeing combat action on behalf of the Crown (Trueman). Yet their expectations to be rewarded by the British with an increased level of autonomy were largely unrealized. Furthermore, the passage of the Rowlett Acts, which gave the British expanded ability to apprehend and punish those who publicly demonstrated for independence, only served to feed the resentment of British rule in Hindu communities. While the popular Hindu perception of the British was undergoing this fateful transition, the Muslim community of India simultaneously became united under the pan-Islamic Khalifat movement. Seeking to establish a central religious authority for Islam in Turkey, this social movement

invigorated many Indian Muslims' sense of Islamic brotherhood and caused them to support the Turkish cause in the war against Britain and its allies. While the dream of a new Caliphate died with Turkey's defeat and poor post-war treaty negotiations, the sense of Muslim unity remained with many in South Asia. This increased their desire for self-government and led to a brief cooperation with similarly-minded Hindus under the direction of Mohandas Gandhi. However, this grassroots collaboration was short-lived as it could not overcome the widening power gap between the two societies. Tensions arose in the 1921 Moplah Uprising, in which Muslim farmers invigorated by their newfound Islamic unity revolted against their oppressive Hindu landlords (Story of Pakistan). Over the next few years, the two communities clashed violently on numerous occasions and were afterwards unable to build any long-term sense of unity. Thus, the events on the international stage in World War One and its aftermath served to increase both a mutual desire for independence and a mutual distrust within the Muslim and Hindu communities of India.

These trends continued throughout the next decade as British, Hindu, and Muslim interests failed to reach common ground in achieving a greater autonomy in the subcontinent. In the late 1920s, British authorities attempted to reevaluate their post-war decisions regarding increased self-government for the citizens of India. However, the 1927 Simon Commission charged with this reconsideration failed to solicit participation from any Indians, whether Hindu or Muslim, in the decision-making process (Story of Pakistan). Offended by this slight, the Indian Congress issued their own recommendations about self-government in their 1928 Nehru Report. Reneging on the Lucknow Pact and similar promises made to the Muslim League in the 1927 Delhi Muslim Proposals, the Hindu proposal defined in the Nehru Report called for a strong central government which made no guarantees of Muslim representation. This plan worried Jinnah and his colleagues, who feared that despite their considerable majority in some areas, Muslims would nevertheless fail to be adequately represented as a whole in a strongly concentrated and undoubtedly Hindu-dominated government. When the Muslim League failed to reconcile these differences at the 1929 All-Parties Conference in Calcutta, Jinnah presented his famous "Fourteen Points" proclamation, which outlined fourteen conditions which the Muslim League required to be satisfied before agreeing to any method of collaborative self-government. These conditions largely echoed previous demands for a provincially distributed authority and guaranteed Muslim representation in the central government, and thus fell on deaf

Hindu ears. Attempting to compensate for previous failures of inclusion, the British held a series of Roundtable Conferences from 1930-1933 in which they invited leaders of prominent Indian political groups, including the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League as well as some Sikh and other minority groups, to discuss a future constitution for the nation. However, the discussions were unable to resolve the recurring division of power and guaranteed representation disputes. This failure can perhaps be attributed to the fact that prominent Indian leaders like Gandhi and Nehru were at that time frequently in jail for their independence activism while Jinnah had taken a hiatus in his political career to pursue a London-based law practice (Story of Pakistan). With the figureheads of both Hindu and Muslim causes absent from a bulk of the negotiations, the roundtable discussions failed to reach a workable consensus and left the major powers of the subcontinent more divided than ever before.

With dialogue and diplomacy failing to resolve the situation, the British colonial authority in India resorted to its own solution. The 1932 Communal Award was the British Viceroy's attempt at suppressing Indian demands for independence by providing an increase in local autonomy. However, his plan to guarantee an increased minority representation in provincial governance only succeeded in aggravating both Muslim and Hindu communities and increasing sectarianism. As a result of the Viceroy's Award, Muslims actually lost seats in the Punjab province to Sikhs and other local minorities, and the policy's call for mandatory representation of the Untouchable social caste in local government angered traditionalists in the Hindu community (Story of Pakistan). Thus, these two communities were driven even further from the middle ground necessary for pursuing a peaceful, united self-government.

After the succession of failures they had experienced in the decade following World War One, Jinnah and his colleagues in the Muslim League began to believe that the creation of an independent state for India's Muslims might provide the best solution. Such a concept was first proposed by Dr. Muhammad Iqbal, a respected Muslim poet and philosopher, in a 1930 meeting of the All-India Muslim League. At the time of this proposal, Jinnah regarded the idea as unfavorable and still optimistically believed a compromise between Hindus and Muslims could be achieved (Abbas 7). Yet the combined disappointments of the Roundtable Conferences and the Communal Award undoubtedly contributed to his disillusionment and encouraged him to reconsider the separation of the two communities as an unwelcome but perhaps necessary outcome of the quest for self-government on the subcontinent. By the time he had abandoned his

London law practice and rejoined the Muslim League's political discourse later in the 1930s, the tone of the organization had experienced a marked shift toward favoring independence. This change in attitude was made clear in the group's 1940 Lahore Resolution, which stated in absolutist language the conditions under which the League would agree to participate in a united self-government with the Hindu community and provided the first public acknowledgement that the formation of a separate nation for India's Muslim community was a serious consideration for the League. Thus, the once bright possibility of a united, self-governing India stood at the brink of collapse. The groups were nearly prepared to separate for good, and they did not falter at the edge for long.

The onset of the Second World War and its accompanying turmoil provided the final impetus for the division of India's Hindu and Muslim communities. Faced with the fearful power of the Nazi army's march across Europe, the British government wasted no time in declaring war against the Axis powers in 1939 on behalf of all its territories, including India. Needless to say, Britain's failure to include provincial representatives in this declaration angered many Indians and encouraged increasingly outspoken Hindu leaders to attempt to disrupt the British war effort however possible. Many of these leaders hoped to use the much-needed Hindu cooperation in the war effort as a bargaining chip for future guarantees of absolute independence from British rule. This outbreak of political activism led to the imprisonment of many on the top-tier of Hindu leadership and thus further polarized the lower ranks of leaders who would take their places (Abbas 8). Meanwhile, Jinnah led the Muslim League toward stalwart support of Britain during its difficult battle with Nazi Germany. This cooperation likely stemmed both from an altruistic view that India's people would be better served by the survival of democratic superpowers than tyrannical ones as well as the self-serving idea that Britain would be more likely to heed Muslim voices after the war's end if the community rallied around the Crown in its time of need. The mutually conflicting positions of the Muslim League and Indian Congress during this time undoubtedly provided even more cause for disagreement and mistrust between the two communities. In 1942, Britain sent Sir Stafford Cripps to meet with local leaders in an attempt to reconcile these differences and rally support for its military operations. However, this effort as well as the last-ditch 1946 Cabinet Mission plan failed to inspire any workable unity between two groups so divided along economic, political, and cultural lines and so embittered by colonial authority's neglect for their own desires. Britain emerged from World War II with only

a fraction of its former strength and could no longer retain its colonial domination of the Indian subcontinent. Thus, in 1947, the release of British control saw the birth of not one, but two independent nations.

Many observers may argue that Jinnah and his colleagues in the Muslim League were motivated to partition India based on theological and religious reasoning. There may be some truth in this, as many statements released by these leaders during and after the time of the Lahore Resolution frame the issue as an insoluble conflict between two drastically different religions which can only end with separation. Jinnah himself wrote in 1940 that “Hindus and the Muslims belong to two different religions ... They neither inter-marry nor inter-dine and, indeed, they belong to two different civilizations that are based mainly on conflicting ideas and conceptions.” (Story of Pakistan). However, these statements of ideological incompatibility clearly conflict with Jinnah’s vigorous earlier efforts first in the 1916 Lucknow Pact and again in Delhi and Calcutta in the late 1920s to inspire Hindu-Muslim unity and cooperative self-governance. His seemingly theological motivations also conflict with his later work in establishing religious tolerance and secularism as explicit policies in the Pakistani system of government. With these contradictions in mind, it seems more likely that the religious dialogue espoused by Muslim leaders during the creation of Pakistan was more an effort to solicit the cooperation of Islamic conservatives in the process of nation-building. Increasingly disillusioned by his endless conflicts with the leadership of the Indian National Congress, Jinnah may have wished to avoid similar power struggles within the Muslim community as he agreed to press for the partition of India. Without popular backing from the entire Muslim community, especially prominent Islamic clerics, the movement for the creation of an independent nation for the Muslims of South Asia could have died as easily as the dream of a united India. Thus, the seemingly religious motivation for independence, at least for Jinnah and his fellow leaders of the movement, was likely driven underneath by political considerations.

The story of Pakistan is a story of diverse communities with divergent and often contradictory motivations. It is a nation born of conflict. But this conflict was more political than ideological, with Muslims and Hindus struggling for power rather than clashing over religious beliefs. Decades of this struggle saw the once grand dream of a unified India enjoyed by both Hindus and Muslims crumble amidst irrecoverable historical grudges, a widening power gap, and a bumbling colonial authority which was inconsiderate of both parties in the best cases

and actually fueling tension in the worst. The divisive nature of all these factors was further magnified by the powerful political and social currents of the two great wars. Disillusioned by these seemingly insurmountable roadblocks, Jinnah and his allies were ultimately forced to give up their attempts at compromise and pursue the partition of India, using religious dialogue to encourage the entire Muslim community's participation in the birth of this new nation. Thus, a close inspection of the historical events leading up to Pakistan's birth reveals that the cause of its formation runs much deeper than simple religious differences with Hindu dominated India. Indeed, to characterize the interaction between these two peoples as simply a spiritual conflict ignores the rich diversity of social, political, economic, and international factors which motivated these communities to collaborate and eventually part ways in their quest for independence and recognition on the world stage.

Works Cited

- Abbas, Hassan. Pakistan's Drift into Extremism: Allah, the Army, and America's War on Terror. Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2005.
- Bourke-White, Margaret. Halfway to Freedom: A Report on the New India. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1949. Excerpts accessed online: <http://iref.homestead.com/Messiah.html>
- "Lucknow Pact, December 1916." Project South Asia. Missouri Southern State University. 2000. Accessed online: http://www.mssu.edu/projectsouthasia/history/primarydocs/political_history/ABKeithDoc040.htm
- Various Articles. "Story of Pakistan: A Multimedia Journey." 2003 Edition. Originally edited by Prof. Fateh Muhammad Malik. Accessed online: <http://www.storyofpakistan.com/default.asp>
- Trueman, Chris. "India and World War One." The History Learning Site. 2000-2007. Accessed online: http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/india_and_world_war_one.htm