Chapter VII

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As we have seen in the previous chapters Muslim politics in India underwent a dramatic change between 1928 and 1940. In 1928 a majority of top Muslim leaders, including those from the Muslim League (Jinnah Group) were even prepared to give up separate electorates provided their other demands were met. These demands included such items as the introduction of constitutional reforms in the North-West Frontier Province and Baluchistan, separation of Sind, statutory Muslim majority in the Punjab and Bengal, a federal constitution with residuary powers vested with the provinces, and one-third Muslim representation in the central legislature. It is evident that none of these posed any threat to the unity of India. By 1940 by and large the same Muslim leaders, acting under the same leadership openly announced that the Muslims of India were a separate nation and needed their own separate homeland which could be only carved out by partitioning the country. How to account for this change?

This change cannot be explained by pointing out to an ever present antagonism between Hindus and Muslims as some scholars tend to do. There were certainly occasions when antagonism between the two communities surfaced itself, but this cannot be described as ever present. Nor can the change in the nature of Muslim politics be described as an inevitable
manifestation of a separate Muslim nationalism.

It is, of course, true that ever since organized political activity on an all-India basis began with the foundation of the Indian National Congress in 1885, a section of Muslim leadership showed a marked awareness of a separate Muslim identity and refused to co-operate with the Congress. This found expression in the activities and utterances of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and later provided the background of the Simla Deputation and the foundation of the Muslim League in 1906. The introduction of separate electorates in 1909 gave official recognition to this separate political consciousness. But such a consciousness did not always work in opposition to the mainstream of the Indian national consciousness.

Many developments in India and abroad soon brought the Congress and the League together and in 1916 they prepared a joint scheme of constitutional reforms which became famous as the Congress-League scheme. During the non-cooperation movement (1920-22) the Hindus and Muslims fought shoulder to shoulder under a common leadership and their relations were marked by unprecedented cordiality. Yet even while the movement was going on the Moplah outbreak created considerable suspicion and distrust between the two communities. After the initial suspension of that movement in 1922 and the abolition of the Caliphate in 1924 this suspicion and distrust further increased. There was now a reaction among both the Hindus and Muslims and
...communalism took the place of nationalism as the dominant feeling among them. This heightened communal consciousness resulted in the outbreak of communal riots in many parts of India which further spoiled relations between the two communities. Yet when the Gauhati Congress (1926) gave a call for renewed efforts for a settlement of the communal problem, thirty Muslim leaders met in Delhi (1927) and came forward with demands (mentioned above), which, if fulfilled, would lead them to give up separate electorates and co-operate with other leaders in taking the country further towards self-government.

The emergence of the demand for India's partition, therefore, was not inherent in the situation from the very beginning, but was primarily the result of developments between 1928 and 1940, though, of course, it cannot be fully understood without referring also to some of the development of the earlier period. The chief among the developments between 1928 and 1940 were the general Muslim dissatisfaction with the Nehru report, the failure of the efforts to settle the communal problem at the Round Table Conference, the non-fulfilment of the Muslim League's expectation regarding the establishment of coalition ministries in 1937 and Lord Linlithgow's attitude towards the Congress and the Muslim League in the context of the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939. All these have been discussed at length in the preceding chapters and need not be dealt with in any detail here. It will suffice
to point out that two things stand out as the most significant factors throughout the period between 1928 and 1940: the failure of the Congress leadership to satisfy Muslim aspirations regarding the sharing of the power and the use of the resultant dissatisfaction among the Muslims by the British to encourage them in moving further on the road of separatist politics.

The failure of the nationalist leadership began with the Nehru report. As has been shown earlier, Motilal Nehru, the chairman of the Nehru Committee, had nothing against the Muslim demands, but his attitude shows that he was more concerned with placating the Hindu Mahasabha than with giving satisfaction to the Muslims. The main reason was that the lessons of 1926 elections, when the Swaraj Party had found a serious challenge from candidates like Madan Mohan Malviya and Lajpat Rai who were sympathetic to the Mahasabha, were still fresh in his memory. He remained cautious throughout and seemed determined not to give an opportunity to the Mahasabha to increase its following at the cost of the Congress even though this meant losing a chance to satisfy a large section of Muslim leadership. The Nationalist Muslims, of course, gave their whole-hearted support to him. This led him to think that it might be possible to overcome the Muslim opposition by continuing to maintain a stiff attitude. Another reason why he did not take Muslim opposition seriously was because no single
Muslim organization in the country could speak in the name of Indian Muslims as a whole and take decisions which might be acceptable to the entire Muslim community.

There is no doubt that Motilal Nehru's handling of the communal problem in 1928 proved harmful to the national cause. After their failure to get their demands accepted by national convention in Calcutta, the majority of the Muslim leaders not only felt bitter, but also became conscious of the fact that they must bridge the divisions inside their own ranks so that other parties could take them seriously. One result of this was the formation of an All Parties Muslim Conference. Despite Jinnah's initial reluctance to participate in it, the Shafi section succeeded in amalgamating itself with the majority group of the League. Jinnah now came out with his Fourteen Points, which began to be generally considered the charter of the Muslims. To the British the failure of the national convention and its aftermath exposed the hollowness of the Congress claim to speak on behalf of the entire Indian people.

The refusal of the Congress to participate in the first session of the Round Table Conference (1930) consequent on its involvement with the civil disobedience movement strengthened the position of the Hindu Mahasabha there and gave it a further opportunity to maintain its intransigence on the communal problem. Despite the willingness of those Hindu representatives
who belonged to the Liberal Federation to satisfy some of the demands of the Muslims, it stuck to its guns and no progress could be made towards resolving the communal deadlock.

As a result of the Gandhi-Irwin truce, Gandhi attended the second session of the Round Table Conference (1931) but his presence failed to bring about any change in the situation so far as the solution of the communal problem was concerned. Gandhi, of course, worked most sincerely towards that end, but like the Liberals, he too found it impossible to surmount the opposition of the Hindu Mahasabha leaders. As, however, expectations for a settlement were higher now because of Gandhi's presence, the failure to have it created a much greater reaction among Muslim leadership and made them look to the Government for the satisfaction of their demands.

The government for its part was not unwilling to oblige the Muslim leadership. The eagerness of Willingdon to get the communal question decided in favour of the Muslims led to the satisfaction of all their demands by the Communal Award (1932). Once they got the Award, they were determined to adhere to it and resisted any negotiations which might diminish the solid advantages obtained through it. They were not prepared to surrender anything until they were assured of something in return.

The urgent necessity of solving the communal problem was felt by the Congress leadership only after the Communal Award had been announced by the Government. It now abandoned
its adherence to unqualified joint electorates, which was
the main plank of its political programme since 1928, and also
agreed to statutory reservation of seats for Muslims in the
legislatures of Muslim majority provinces like the Punjab and
Bengal. Now the Congress did not mind men like Malaviya and Aney
seceding from its Parliamentary Board as it had decided to win
over the confidence of the Muslims. The provisions of the
Communal Award were incorporated in the Government of India Act
1935 and the Muslims had no grievance against the Congress as
far as safeguarding of their interests was concerned. There
was also a good deal of similarity in the election manifestoes
of the Congress and the League and the elections of 1937 were
held against this background of mutual trust.

Yet the sequel proved disastrous to Congress-League
relations. While the former had done reasonably well in the
relations the latter had made a poor showing. This was the most
important factor which shaped the attitude of the Congress to-
wards the question of setting up Congress-League coalition
ministries in U.P. and Bombay, the only two provinces where the
League had acquired any appreciable strength in the legislatures.
There is no documentary evidence to prove that there was a
prior understanding between the two parties that coalition
ministries would be formed after the elections. But the Congress
had been unable to win even a single seat on its own ticket in
U.P. and Bombay and at that time it would not have been difficult
for the Congress to find men amongst the Muslim League who were prepared to work whole-heartedly with the Congress. Khaliquzzaman broached the question of coalition ministry in U.P. on his own initiative and in Bombay it was Jinnah who did the spade work. But the Congress was prepared to go in for coalition ministries only on its own terms and these included the dissolution of the Muslim League Party in the legislature and an agreement on the part of the League not to set up candidates in elections on its own. This attitude of the Congress marked a turning point in the history of its relationship with the League. An impression was created that the Congress was trying to annihilate the League. Moreover the Congress move to win over the Muslim masses by appealing directly to them created further bitterness among a wider circle of Muslim elite than just the League's leadership. This brought other important Muslim leaders like Sikandar Hyat Khan and Fazlul Huq of the Muslim majority provinces of the Punjab and Bengal respectively into the League's fold under the leadership of Jinnah.

Thus strengthened the Muslim League now retaliated by raising the slogan of Islam in danger and by its open opposition to the federal part of the Government of India Act of 1935. No doubt the accusations of the League against the Congress ministries for committing "atrocities" on Muslims were exaggerated, but they were not totally unfounded. This is borne out by the remarks contained in the letters of such Congress leaders as
Jawaharlal Nehru, Rajendra Prasad, Maulana Azad and Syed Mahmud as well as that of the comparatively detached Liberal leader, Tej Bahadur Sapru. The vocal section of the Muslims was never so bitter against the Congress as it was now.

Yet for some time the Congress leadership did precious little to retrieve the situation. Nehru maintained a self-complacent attitude for a long time. It is to be noted that he was not unaware of the Muslim grievances and at times, when he needed Muslim support, as in course of his effort to forge a united front with the Muslim League to persuade the government to declare its war aims and recognize India's independence, he confessed to Jinnah that the solution of the communal problem had been neglected by the Congress. But otherwise for him the governing factors were the international situation the impending war and alleviation of the economic conditions of the Indian masses. The solution of the communal problem did not receive the top priority that it demanded. It can be safely asserted that his views were far ahead of the times.

There was no dearth of Congress leaders (Maulana Azad and Rajendra Prasad may particularly be mentioned here) who were troubled by the widening gulf between the two communities and wanted immediate action to be taken to resolve the communal deadlock. But Nehru retorted that he would not allow anyone to fall into a trap by opening negotiations with Jinnah at that time.
Once again the Muslim League leadership turned to the Government. As Jinnah saw that like Willingdon, Linlithgow was also contemptuous of the Congress and was not interested in any significant constitutional advance in India, he started cooperating with him and seeking his cooperation in return in order to strengthen the position of the Muslim League. He now had no qualms about denouncing the democratic system of government for which he had laboured so hard and confessed to Linlithgow that earlier he had been misled by his patriotic fervour. The latter wanted to use the Muslim League as an effective barrier against the Congress. As the Congress went on declaring that if its demand for independence was not fulfilled, it might launch a campaign of civil disobedience, the value of Jinnah's cooperation for the British further increased. Linlithgow now encouraged him to come out with some positive alternative to the federal principle which might free the Muslims from the prospect of a Hindu majority rule in India.

The Muslim League had, of course, been already considering such an alternative. Even schemes of partition were already in the air. One such scheme, for instance, had been suggested by Rahmat Ali as early as 1933. But the League's leadership was moving cautiously and did not associate itself with any partition scheme until it had some assurance of British sympathetic interest in it. Even before the outbreak of the Second World War, Khaliquzzaman and Abdur Rahman Siddiqui's
visit to London in 1939 and their conversations with the Secretary of State for India had given them some hope of it. Linlithgow's attitude after the outbreak of the war further confirmed this hope. This was the background of the adoption of what has become famous as the Pakistan resolution by the League though the word Pakistan was not actually used in the resolution.

Linlithgow was jubilant at the adoption of the Partition Resolution. Obviously he thought that he could use it as a handy tool against the Congress demand for independence. He had succeeded in his strategy of projecting the widening gulf between the Hindus and the Muslims as the chief hurdle in the way of constitutional advance. He gave his support to Jinnah and his demand for partition by remaining silent and not saying anything against it formally and advised Zetland also to do the same. His chief concern now was to see to it that the Muslim League was not alienated at a time when its support was most essential to the Government. This is corroborated by Linlithgow's remarks in his letter to Zetland after the adoption of the Pakistan resolution by the League.

"My first reaction is, I confess," he wrote, "that silly as the Muslim scheme for partition is, it would be a pity to throw too much cold water on it at the moment, though clearly we cannot accept it or associate ourselves with it". In his letter

1 Linlithgow to Zetland, 6 April 1940, Linlithgow Papers.
to the King-Emperor a little later, Linlithgow was much more positive in his support to the partition scheme and strongly justified it from the Muslim point of view:

This plan has been adopted by the leaders of the League because it offered the sole means of escape from the dilemma in which the Muslim minority finds itself in face of the introduction of democratic institutions. ... They refuse to contemplate a future in which they would be in constant subordination to the Hindu majority. They are therefore constrained to suggest the constitutional severance of the country in such a manner as to secure to them political control in those areas in which the Muslim population exceeds the Hindus. 2

Thus did the mistakes of the Congress leadership, the frustration and bitterness of the League's leadership, and the defensive diplomacy of a British viceroy lead to the adoption of the demand for India's partition by an organization whose spokesmen had only a few years earlier described it as a students' scheme and a chimera. That indeed was a fateful moment in India's history.

2 Linlithgow to King-Emperor, 4 June 1940, Linlithgow Papers.