
REASSESSING RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE PARTITION OF INDIA: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF CONTINGENCY AND LEADERSHIP FAILURES

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ABSTRACT

The Partition of India in 1947 remains one of the most traumatic and consequential events of the twentieth century, resulting in unprecedented communal violence, mass migration, and the creation of two sovereign states amid deep civilizational scars. This paper reassesses the question of responsibility for the Partition by moving beyond deterministic narratives—whether the “two-nation theory,” inexorable Hindu-Muslim antagonism, or British “divide and rule”—towards a critical analysis of contingency and leadership failures. The study argues that Partition was not inevitable but emerged from a series of avoidable contingencies and critical miscalculations by Indian political leaders and the departing colonial power. The analysis highlights the pivotal role of leadership failures during the Cabinet Mission Plan (1946), formation of the Interim Government and the final months of British rule. Jawaharlal Nehru’s impulsive rejection of the Cabinet Mission’s grouping formula, Sardar Patel’s growing acceptance of Partition as a “surgical operation,” Mahatma Gandhi’s inconsistent positions, and Muhammad Ali Jinnah’s tactical rigidity all contributed to narrowing political options. Lord Mountbatten’s hasty timeline and flawed boundary decisions further exacerbated the chaos.

KEYWORDS: Muslim League, Cabinet Mission, Pakistan, Partition of India, Interim Government.

INTRODUCTION

This paper contends that Partition resulted from the complex interplay of structural communal tensions and avoidable human agency failures. By foregrounding contingency

over inevitability, it challenges both nationalist and revisionist historiographies and offers lessons on the perils of majoritarian politics, elite intransigence, and rushed decolonization. Ultimately, it suggests that the tragedy of 1947 was less the product of historical destiny than the cumulative failure of political imagination and statesmanship at a decisive historical juncture.

The Partition of India in 1947 stands as one of the most cataclysmic events of the twentieth century, marking not only the end of British colonial rule but also the violent birth of two independent nations: India and Pakistan. Accompanied by unprecedented communal violence, mass migrations involving over 14 million people, and an estimated death toll ranging from several hundred thousand to two million, the division of the subcontinent left deep scars that continue to shape South Asian geopolitics, identities, and collective memory. Traditional historiography has often framed the Partition through broad structural lenses—British “divide and rule” policies, the irreconcilable “two-nation theory,” or inexorable communal tensions dating back to the late nineteenth century. While these factors provide essential context, they risk portraying the event as largely inevitable.

This paper adopts a more nuanced approach by reassessing responsibility through the prism of contingency and leadership failures during the last decade of the freedom movement. Far from being predetermined, the Partition emerged from a series of pivotal decisions, missed opportunities, miscalculations, and personal rivalries among key political actors at a time when alternative paths toward a united or loosely federated India remained plausible.

This study critically analyzes how personal ambitions, ideological rigidities, and failures in negotiation and foresight turned contingent events into tragedy. For instance, the failure of the Cabinet Mission Plan (1946), the impact of the Great Calcutta Killings, and Mountbatten’s accelerated timeline illustrate how leadership choices amplified divisions rather than bridging them. This paper argues that while deep structural cleavages existed, the specific form and timing of Partition resulted substantially from avoidable human errors and political contingencies. Reassessing responsibility in this manner does not seek to absolve any single party but aims to move beyond nationalist blame games toward a more balanced understanding of how statesmanship, or its absence, shaped one of history’s greatest forced migrations and humanitarian crises.

Partition and Independence of India

After failing to emerge a popular and powerful party, the Muslim League played at last the religious game to polarize the Muslims in its favour. The frustration and failure goaded the

Muslim League on the path of separatism. The Congress also provided the Muslim League full opportunity by rejecting its petty demands of power share and parity. The political failure of the Muslim League and non-cooperation by the Congress from the elections of 1937 to 1946 further strengthened the demand of Pakistan and the separatist path of Muslim League. After failure to join the congress governments after the elections of 1937, the Muslim League launched a separatist movement popularly known as Pakistan Movement in 1940. However, the proposed Pakistan was not totally separate from Indian subcontinent. Muslim League demanded a region (Pakistan) within India with some administrative autonomy. Later on, the Muslim League started repeated its demand for Pakistan with more regions. In these intolerable situations, both Congress and Muslim League felt it impossible to live together with such different ideologies.

On the one hand, Mr. Jinnah wanted more power, which was not in proportion of the seats he won in the election of 1946, the majority party Congress was not ready to work under a minority party like the Muslim League on the other. Both were power hungry and none of them was ready to sacrifice for the cause of the unity of India. Actually, the situations and political developments further widened the gap between Hindus and Muslims and this rift became one of the major causes of division of the country into two nations India and Pakistan. Congress also accepted that the survival of both the parties with such different ideologies was impossible.

Congress was almost agreed that there was no solution except partition, but it had not given clear indication of partition of India or division of Punjab and Bengal. Many intellectuals of Congress and Muslim League started to search the agreeable solution. The big question that how partition would be made. Many schemes were formulated for partition of India. Many political intellectuals of India suggested the scheme of partition. Even the Aligarh intellectuals Professor Syed Zafrul Hasan and Professor Moahammad Afzal Husain Qadri also proposed a plan. They proposed the area and population wise plan to divide India into three wholly independent and sovereign states along with independent state of Hyderabad as follows:¹

(i) Pakistan- Comprising of Punjab, NWFP, Sindh, Baluchistan and the State of Kahsmir and Jammu, Mandi, Chamba, Sakit, Sumin, Kapurthala, Maler Kotla, Chitra, Dir, Kalat, Loharu, Bilaspur, Simla-Hill States, Bahawalpur, etc.

Total Population- 39274244

Muslims- 23697538 (60%)

(ii) Bengal (Excluding Howrah and Midnapur District), Purnea District (Bihar), Sylhet Division (Assam)

Total Population- 52579232

Muslims- 301118184 (57%)

(iii) Hindustan- Comprising the rest of India and Indian States (excluding Hyderabad, Pakistan, Bengal and the states included therein)

(iv) Hyderabad- Comprising Hyderabad, Berar and Karnataka (Madras & Orissa)

Total Population- 29065098

Muslims- 2144010 (7.5%)

(v) Delhi Province- Including Delhi, Meerut Division, Rohilkhand Division and the District of Aligarh (Agra Division)

Total Population- 12660000

Muslims- 3520000 (28%)

(vi) Malabar Province- Consisting of Malabar and adjoining area, i.e. Malabar and South Kanara.

Total Population- 4900000

Muslims- 1440000 (27%)

Aforesaid three states of Pakistan, Bengal and Hindustan should enter an offensive and defensive alliance on the following basis:

(i) Mutual recognition and reciprocity,

(ii) Pakistan and Bengal be recognized as the homeland of Muslims and Hindustan as the homeland of Hindus, to which they can migrate respectively, if and when they want to do so,

(iii) In Hindustan the Muslims are to be recognized as a nation in minority and part of a larger nation inhabiting Pakistan and Bengal.

(iv) The Muslims in minority in Hindustan and non-Muslim minority in Pakistan and Bengal will have (a) representation according to population, and (b) separate electorate and representation at every stage, together with effective safeguards by all the three states. Separate representation in proportion to population may be granted to all considerable minorities in the three states, e.g. Sikh non-cast Hindu, etc.

(v) An accredited Muslim political organization will be the sole official representative body of the Muslims in Hindustan.

The Aligarh intellectuals Professor Syed Zafrul Hasan and Professor Moahammad Afzal Husain Qadri also proposed that each of the three independent slates of Pakistan, Hindustan

and Bengal will have separate treaties of alliance with Great Britain and each with the separate crown representatives if any. They will have a joint court of arbitration to settle any dispute that may arise between themselves or between them and the crown. Hyderabad commanded an exclusive position. It was recognized as an ally by the British Government. In truth, it was a sovereign state by treaties. Berar and Karnataka were taken from it by the British for administrative reasons, and so they must be restored. Hyderabad with its restored territories should be recognized expressly as a sovereign state, at least as sovereign as Nepal. With Karnataka restored it will have sea coast and will naturally become southern wing of Muslim India.²

Many similar schemes were also proposed by other intellectuals of different political parties. However, the movement for separation of India and creation of Pakistan made the situation from bad to worse. Under this worsened situation, the Congress had to accept the division of Punjab and also Bengal if necessary.³

In these alarming situations, Lord Mountbatten assumed the office of Governor General on 24th March 1947. He was deeply moved by the rapid deterioration in communal relations as he was eager to solve the communal problems without any delay. He held talks with important leaders of all political parties. He knew the Mahatma Gandhi's opinion about the partition of India. Mahatma Gandhi said to him that India would be divided over his dead body. So long as he was alive, he would never agree to the partition of India. Then Mountbatten assured Mahatma Gandhi that dividing India would be the last solution for him. Mahatma Gandhi placed an alternative before Mountbatten to avoid partition, which was to give Mr. Jinnah the whole of India instead of just the part he wanted. He proposed that to let Mr. Jinnah form the government. On asking by Mountbatten that whether his own Congress party would accept his plan, Mahatma Gandhi replied that the Congress wanted above all to avoid partition, they would do anything to prevent it.⁴

However, the pupils of Mahatma Gandhi who once blindly obeyed him could hardly agree this point. They kept silent about this matter. Mahatma Gandhi unsuccessfully urged his colleagues to accept his plan to hold India together. The meeting of Congress High Command held in the evening of 1st May 1947, in which Mahatma Gandhi's plan was out rightly rejected. Mahatma Gandhi said to a friend later "they (Congressmen) call me Mahatma but tell you I am not even treated by them as a sweeper."⁵

Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru, Sardar Patel and all the other Congressmen felt that the partition was the only way to save the country. Sardar Patel was prepared to accept partition even

before Mountbatten's arrival. He argued that Jinnah should be given his state, but it would not survive anyway, within five years the Muslim League would be knocking at the door begging for India's reunification. Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru too stood out against the man (Mahatma Gandhi) he had followed so far.⁶

For the solution of partition, Lord Mountbatten also held talks with Muslim League leader Mr. Jinnah. During the first fortnight of April 1947, he held many talks with him.⁷ Mr. Jinnah also said that India had never been a true nation, it only looks that way on the map. He declared that "The cows, I want to eat, the Hindus stops me from killing. Every time a Hindu shakes hands with me, he has to go wash his hands. The only thing the Muslims has in common with the Hindus is slavery to the British."⁸

After having failed, in compromising between Congress and Muslim League, Mountbatten also felt that partition of India was the only solution of the present political crisis. On 18th May, Mountbatten proceeded to London to seek the advice of the British cabinet and after his return prepared a plan which came to be known as Mountbatten Plan of 3rd June 1947. He announced that the British Government had accepted the principle of partition, which would be effective from 15th August 1947.⁹ Both the Congress and Muslim League also accepted the plan of partition, but Sikhs were dissatisfied with this plan. Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan also showed his disagreement by putting forward the demand for independent Pakhtoonistan.¹⁰

After agreement of partition by both the major parties, a Boundary Commission under the Chairmanship of Sir Cyril Radcliff was appointed. The Commission decided that West Bengal and East Punjab would go to India and West Punjab, Sindh and Baluchistan would be part of Pakistan. The district of Sylhet also joined Pakistan.¹¹

On 15th August 1947, India became independent with a blot of partition over it. Since that very time, it has been a long controversy that why the India was divided? Why the Congress accepted the plan of partition and who was responsible for the partition, Mr. Jinnah or Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru? No doubt Mr. Jinnah and his Muslim League worked hard for a separate homeland Pakistan for the Muslims, but as the historical events witness, he used the Pakistan movement as a tool to get more power beyond the proportion of his seats. He also claimed that Muslim League would be considered sole representative body of the entire Muslim India which mere an imaginary approach and away from ground reality. The Congress also could not save itself from responsibility of partition because it was the Congress changed its policy of national aim to political gain. It was the Congress which facilitated the way for the separatist movement of Muslim League since 1937.

Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru, Sardar Patel and Mahatma Gandhi in 1947 accepted the long-term failure of the Congress to draw in the Muslim masses to the national movements launched by the Congress and stem the surging wave of Muslim communalism.¹² It must be cleared that until 1946 the Congress leaders were bitterly against the partition. In 1946 when Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru and Dr. Syed Mahmood were in Ahmadabad jail, Syed Mahmood told Jawahar Lal that if they were compelled to accept partition, they would not agree to the partition of Punjab and Bengal. Then Jawahar Lal Nehru got enraged and said, “how this idea came to your mind? I am bitterly against partition. The partition can exist only on our bones.”¹³

Here the question arises that when Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru was not ready even to listen the word ‘partition’ then what forces compelled him to accept it? No doubt Jinnah used all possible tools of the Muslim society for the propaganda of Pakistan, but he was quite sure that it was not an easy job. If we see the historical background, we can conclude that Mr. Jinnah created such a situation in order to get heavy share in the power game or wanted to hold the supreme leadership of Indian Union over and above Mahatma Gandhi and Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru. Mr. Jinnah frequently addressed Mahatma Gandhi as Mr. Gandhi not with Mahatma or any other title, while Mahatma Gandhi after 1944-45, always addressed Mr. Jinnah as “Qaid-i-Azam.”

To a great extent Pandit Nehru and Sardar Patel easily accepted the partition plan to avoid Mr. Jinnah and his associates. These Congressmen were sure that in the presence of Mr. Jinnah and his associates, it would be not easy to rule peacefully over India after independence. The Congressmen had also the threat of “Direct Action” of Muslim League and many communal riots spreading all over India. Above all, the partition was the situational mishappening which provided Mr. Jinnah a separate homeland rather than a heavy share of power within India. Mr. Jinnah, who was bent upon to get Pakistan undergone in the shocking situation when Congress accepted the Pakistan proposal. No doubt Mr. Jinnah had love for this country and wanted the leadership.

When India was partitioned and Mr. Jinnah was about to leave India, he murmured to his A.D.C. Syed Ahsan Ali, “I suppose this is the last time I shall be looking at Delhi.”¹⁴ Mr. Jinnah spent the entire flight silently and absent mindedly lost in the newspapers. Not even the slightest trace of emotion appeared on his face as he read those laudatory accounts of his achievements. Not once during his entire trip did he speak or reveal even the slightest hint of his feeling, the meagrest indication of what this flight to a realized dream meant to him.¹⁵

When Mr. Jinnah reached Karachi he whispered harshly to Syed Ahsan, “Do you know, I never expected to see Pakistan in my lifetime.”¹⁶ These words and feelings of Mr. Jinnah show that he had great love for India and wanted only power share and popularity by threatening the Congress through the weapon of Pakistan. His feelings were clearly understood by Mahatma Gandhi and he persuaded the other Congressmen to let Jinnah form the government, but his efforts were unsuccessful.

When the partition was accepted by the Congress leaders, Mahatma Gandhi commented that the leaders of the Congress were yearning for power. Even Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru confessed, “Well, I suppose it was a compulsion of events. A large India would have constant troubles, constant disintegrating pulls..... And so we accepted.” He further said, “Let us built-up strong India..... The truth is that we were tired men..... We saw the fire burning in Punjab and heard every day of the killings. The plan for partition offered a way out, and we took it.”¹⁷

There was clear intolerable bitterness between Congress and Muslim League from the 1946 elections. Over the formation of the Interim Government Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru wrote to Wavell on 22nd August 1946, “We are not going to shake hands with murderer or allow it to determine the country’s policy.”¹⁸

Over the acceptance of the partition plan Mahatma Gandhi was unhappy with Pandit Nehru, Sardar Patel, etc., but this poor fellow was helpless to do anything. His inaction has been explained in terms of his forced isolation from the Congress decision making council. His pupils, who had followed him faithfully for many years at a great personal sacrifice, were succumbed to the lust for power.¹⁹

Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre in their book *Freedom at Midnight* have stressed upon Mr. Jinnah’s illness of Tuberculosis. They opined that if the secret of illness of Mr. Jinnah were known to Mountbatten, Nehru and Gandhiji, the division of India might have been avoided. Tuberculosis had gravely invaded the lungs of Mr. Jinnah. The damage of lungs was so extensive that he had barely one or two years to live. His treatment was going on under a Bombay physician Dr. J.A.L. Patel. According to him, Mr. Jinnah had been living for the past decade on “will power, whiskey and cigarette.” The secret of illness was only known to his doctor and his sister Fatima. Liaqat Ali Khan was aware of his illness in the last six months of his life. Even his daughter Wadia could come to know of her father’s illness only after his death.²⁰

Mr. Jinnah was aware that if the Congressmen came to know that he was dying, their whole political outlook would change. They might try to wait, for the moment, of his going into the grave. Mr. Jinnah never wanted to abandon his move of ameliorating the position of the Indian Muslims. He wanted to provide the due power to the Indian Muslims even at the cost of partition. Dr. Patel suggested Mr. Jinnah for bed rest. However, he told Dr. Patel that there was no question of abandoning his life's crusade for a sanatorium bed. Nothing except the grave was going to turn him from the task he had given himself, that of leading India's Muslims at the critical juncture in their history.²¹

In the last days of united India Mr. Jinnah realized that he was the only thorn in eyes of the Congress. He maintained the secrecy of his illness in order to give the moral boost to the Muslim League leaders and Indian Muslims for their goal. Mr. Jinnah perhaps thought that if the Congress leaders had known about his illness, they would not have even talked about Pakistan and also not got agreed to give the proper share to Muslims within India. After independence, both the Congress and Aligarh came closer to each other. The Government fully satisfied the Indian Muslims to safeguard their honour and interests and provide them the power and facilities. The Aligarh and AMU changed their attitude and were bent upon the loyalty to the nation and faith in the Congress Government under the leadership of Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru.

CONCLUSIONS

The Partition of India in 1947 was not an inevitable outcome of primordial religious hatreds, but the tragic result of a complex interplay of "structural contingencies", "institutional failures", and "leadership shortcomings" between 1937 and 1947. This period marked a critical decade when political choices narrowed options dramatically, transforming a demand for safeguards and federal autonomy into the violent creation of two sovereign states.

The 1937 provincial elections proved to be a pivotal contingency. The Congress's decisive victory, followed by its reluctance to form coalition governments with the Muslim League in key provinces like the United Provinces, reinforced Jinnah's narrative of Congress majoritarianism. Whether this was arrogance, ideological rigidity, or a genuine miscalculation of Muslim political anxieties, it alienated a significant section of Muslim opinion and allowed the League to rebuild itself as the sole champion of Muslim interests. This was not destiny, but a failure of political accommodation.

The Indian National Congress, particularly under Nehru and Patel, often prioritized a strong, centralized union over genuine federal compromises that might have satisfied Muslim

aspirations within a united India. The rejection of the Cabinet Mission Plan in 1946, despite its potential for a loose federation, reflected an unwillingness to accept any dilution of central authority. On the other hand, Muhammad Ali Jinnah and the Muslim League skillfully leveraged communal anxieties but ultimately embraced a demand (Pakistan) whose territorial and demographic contradictions were never fully resolved. The “two-nation theory” proved potent as a political weapon but inadequate as a blueprint for a viable state, especially given the significant non-Muslim populations that would remain in both countries.

The British, facing imperial exhaustion after World War II, increasingly prioritized a quick exit over a responsible transfer of power. Mountbatten’s haste in advancing the deadline from June 1948 to August 1947, coupled with inadequate preparation for boundary demarcation and minority protection, turned a difficult political divorce into a humanitarian catastrophe. The Radcliffe Line’s rushed award exemplified administrative abdication dressed as decisive governance. The violence that accompanied Partition, claiming between 1 and 2 million lives and displacing over 14 million, was not the inevitable price of freedom but the avoidable cost of political failure and administrative recklessness.

Reassessing responsibility does not mean distributing guilt equally. It means recognizing that no single party held a monopoly on wisdom or virtue. The Congress bore the burden of governing a diverse, fractious society; the League articulated genuine fears of cultural and political marginalization; and the British, as departing arbiters, failed in their final duty to minimize harm. Ultimately, the tragedy of 1947 was not that India and Pakistan were born, but that they were born amid such avoidable suffering. A more imaginative, patient, and empathetic politics in the preceding decade might have preserved unity with justice, or at least achieved separation with far less blood. The responsibility lies not with any single villain, but with a collective failure of statesmanship at a decisive historical moment.

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