

Why Partition Occurred: An Understanding

Sarat Bose Memorial Lecture by Rajmohan Gandhi

Netaji Bhawan, Kolkata, 6.30 pm, Saturday 6 March 2010

His Excellency Governor M.K. Narayanan, Professor Krishna Bose, Professor Sugata Bose, members of the audience:

The invitation to deliver this year's Sarat Bose Lecture, and to deliver it in this spot that pulsates with history and before a distinguished audience that includes the Governor of West Bengal, is a high honour for me, for which I deeply thank Professor Krishna Bose, Professor Sugata Bose, and all the others associated with the invitation.

As a boy, like so many others born in the thirties or forties of the last century, I lived in imagination with the Bose brothers. In subsequent decades, as I became a life-long student of the independence movement, the Bose brothers have remained a continuing presence in my thought-world. I have also had the privilege and pleasure of knowing a few of the wonderful descendants, all blessed with remarkable qualities.

My father Devadas, the Mahatma's youngest son and editor from the 1930s to the 1950s of the Hindustan Times, spoke to me of Netaji's handsome appearance and dramatic life, and I recall my father's pleasure in obtaining for his paper the publication rights of perhaps the first story about Netaji as Ziauddin that I think someone called Girdharilal Puri of the Frontier Province had written. This must have been in the late 1940s.

And I have always remembered what in 1956 and 1957 Keizo Shibusawa-san, a major figure in Japan during and after the Pacific War, and his son Masahide Shibusawa-san, a good friend of mine, told me about Netaji's impact when he stayed, I don't know for how long, in the Shibusawa home in Tokyo. "Chandra Bose" (as he is remembered in Japan) was gracious and magnetic, they said, adding that servants in the Shibusawa household were bowled over by him.

It was in the Shibusawa home in Tokyo that the sword I saw here yesterday -- the sword that was the emblem of Netaji's command of the INA and of the Azad Hind Government, this priceless piece of history -- remained for a few years.

The older brother I was privileged to meet in New Delhi. This must have been in late 1946 or early 1947, while Sarat Babu was a Minister in the Interim Cabinet, the first government of about-to-be independent India. I was 11 and had won a Sanskrit recitation prize at an inter-school event at the Ramakrishna Mission off Panchkuiyan Road, a prize I received at the hands of Sarat Babu, who was the chief guest. In his speech, Sarat Babu referred to a book called "Ideas Have Legs". Because the title was unusual, I remembered Sarat Babu's reference to it. Curiously enough, ten years later I would start a friendship with the author of "Ideas Have Legs", a brilliant Englishman called Peter Howard.

This evening I offer my deepest and most respectful tribute to the memory of the great and noble Older Brother, and also to the amazing younger brother, who continues to stir and inspire lovers of India and lovers of liberty, yet who would not have been who he was but for Sarat Babu. This man with an imposing presence who always carried himself with a commanding air -- such a man totally effaced himself in order to strengthen the younger brother, not only out of love but because he had sensed the younger brother's destiny. It is a powerfully moving story. To me, this chance to tender humble pranams to the deathless memory of the Bose Brothers is more important than what I say in this lecture.

The 1947 Partition remains a large and emotional issue for many, though there are some today who instead of asking why Partition occurred would rather express gladness that it occurred. Such persons point out that the Muslim percentage would have been larger had India remained united, and also that terrorist sites now located in Pakistan would have belonged to India. This sort of thinking does not merely smear a portion of humanity, it assumes that because of Partition Lahore and Rawalpindi have somehow been pushed farther in distance from Delhi; it also assumes that terrorism would have flourished just as well in a united India; and it assumes, further, that the possibility of a nuclear clash between India and Pakistan, or the consequences for India of a possible implosion inside Pakistan, should not worry us. All these are shaky

assumptions. But I will not take anyone's time this evening in seeking to knock them down, for my purpose in this lecture is to share my understanding of why the division occurred, rather than to show that it should not have occurred.

Why Partition occurred and why great violence surrounded it are linked questions, and I will touch on the latter as well.

But first a word of caution. Writing in the year 1868 – 142 years ago, that is -- about *War and Peace*, his recently-published novel on a war between Russia and Napoleon's France that had been fought more than fifty years earlier, Leo Tolstoy had said the following:

Studying so tragic an epoch, so rich in the importance of its events, so near to our own time, and regarding which so many varied traditions survive, I arrived at the evident fact that the causes of historical events when they take place cannot be grasped by our intelligence.

Added Tolstoy: To say (which seems to everyone so simple) that the causes of the events of 1812 lay in Napoleon's domineering disposition and the patriotic firmness of the Emperor Alexander I is as meaningless as to say that the causes of the fall of the Roman Empire were that a certain barbarian led his people westward and a certain Roman emperor ruled his state badly. [It is like saying] that an immense hill that was being levelled toppled over because the last labourer struck it with his spade.¹

I want to ask everyone to remember these words from Tolstoy on the difficulty of grasping the causes of historical events. Having uttered this caveat, I would still like to offer my understanding of why Partition happened. Obvious as some of the explanations may seem, they are often overlooked.

The first point: The people, leaders and led, who in the 1940s addressed the Partition question were, you might say, travelling on a moving train on a rough track, or on a ship in rough waters, with independence as their destination. They lacked the luxury of being able to resolve the matter in a quiet, calm, stationary spot. It was on the hectic path to independence, amidst a hard fight against the British, in a dynamic rather than a static setting, that the question had to be decided.

Some eighty or ninety years earlier in another part of the world, as the American population moved westward in the 1850s and 1860s and new states like Kansas and Nebraska came into being, it was the question of whether or not these new states would be slave states or free states that triggered the civil war. As with America's *movement* westward, which brought the question of slavery and of the oneness of America to the forefront, it was India's *movement* towards independence that brought to a head the question of a single versus a divided India, as also the question of the status of Dalits in a free India.

If the people of India had felt no urge for independence, the position of Muslims in an independent Hindu-majority India, or the Hindu-Muslim equation in a free India, would not have arisen as a question. Hindus and Muslims would have continued to focus, as they had done since the suppression of the 1857 Revolt, on the Hindu position under British rule, or the Muslim position under British rule. Similarly, if America had not moved westward, the North-South Compromise over slavery that for years had held the ground, a compromise that interestingly enough included an agreement not to talk about slavery, would have been left undisturbed.

But in both cases movement was taking place, and movement produced clash. If the British leave, who would rule whom? This became the burning question in India, and Indian history tells us that right from the 18th century there was always an Indian section, whether large or small, that feared or opposed the possible replacement of British rule by a dominant Indian group.

In the 18th century, Hindus in Bengal did not want Muslim rule to return, replacing British rule. The 1857 Revolt was followed by rival Hindu and Muslim efforts to prove loyalty to the Queen. In the 1880s, the formation of the Indian National Congress, and its appeals for a modest Indian say in India's governance, saw Sir Sayyid Ahmed Khan warning Muslims against the Congress. During the joint Hindu-Muslim struggle between 1919 and 1922, the questions of free speech, Khilafat, the Punjab wrongs including the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, and Swaraj were common issues for many Indians; but the end of that struggle saw an increase in Hindu-Muslim mistrust that paralleled what had happened after 1857. The great independence campaigns of the 1930s

and 1942, including the Salt Marches and Quit India, were likewise followed by a lack of Hindu-Muslim trust at some important levels and finally by Partition and its tragic killings.

Thus every step towards independence seems also to have been, from today's perspective, a step towards division. In retrospect we can indeed say, given the existence of Muslim-majority provinces, that a journey towards independence that did not remove Muslim anxieties was bound to lead to Partition. I believe this conclusion to be valid irrespective of whether or not these Muslim anxieties were justified. This awkward truth may be more important for understanding Partition than identifying blunders or master strokes from main actors in the Partition drama, whether Gandhi, the Bose brothers, Nehru, Patel, Jinnah, Mountbatten, Churchill, or Wavell.

If the Indian National Congress desired an undivided India, there were four possible ways before it. One, coerce Muslim-majority provinces into a single India. Two, give up the freedom demand and accept permanent tutelage. Three, persuade the British to hand over power to you as the country's majority party. Four, win over the Muslims or their chief political body, the Muslim League.

Options one and two – coercing Muslim regions and suppressing the freedom urge -- were out of the question. Options three and four were tried by the INC but its attempts failed. Whether or how the INC could have done better at pursuing these two options – persuading the British to transfer power over the whole of India to it, and/or enlisting the partnership of the Muslim League -- are legitimate questions for discussion.

To make a second broad point, not just India but the world was in movement, and in the 1930s and 1940s a major international change that influenced our subcontinent as well was the emergence of Hitler and Nazi Germany.

The second half of the 1930s had seen an interesting and in some ways promising relationship between the INC and the British. Each side hoped to use the partnership for its goal or goals, yet provincial self-government was being exercised by the INC and it looked possible that self-government would grow into something like independence. Except in two provinces, the Muslim

League seemed out of the picture; and India's unity did not seem threatened. But the start of World War II upset everything. The British became more cautious about granting power to Indians, with Churchill declaring that unlike the countries of Europe India was not entitled to independence, while Indians on their part became more eager and impatient for independence.

Needing a ground for rejecting the independence demand, the British looked for an organization that could challenge the INC's claim of representing India. To their relief, they found the Muslim League and its leader, Jinnah. Viceroy Linlithgow's letter to the King in October 1939 was candid: "As soon as I realized," he wrote, "that I was to be subjected to heavy and sustained pressure designed to force from us major political concessions as the price of Congress's cooperation in the war effort, I summoned representatives of all the more important interests and communities in India, including the Chancellor of the Chamber of Princes and Mr Jinnah." Linlithgow added that it had been decided not to "give to the Congress what they are asking for, which is an understanding... that India will be given political independence at the conclusion of the war."²

Not asking for immediate steps towards independence, Jinnah told the Viceroy who had invited him that the League would support the war effort if the League's demands were incorporated in any future Indian constitution. Of this interview Jinnah would soon say: "Up to the time of the declaration of war, the Viceroy never thought of an important party... The Viceroy never thought of me."³ Hitler had given Jinnah his opportunity.

Also in 1939, the RSS chief, M.S Golwalkar, lent some justification to Jinnah's new line. In *We, or Our Nationhood Defined*, Golwalkar said: "Germany has... shown how well nigh impossible it is for races and cultures having differences going to the root to be assimilated into one united whole... The foreign races in Hindusthan... must lose their separate existence to merge in the Hindu race or they may stay... wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation."⁴

In March 1940 – only a few months after the start of World War II --, the Muslim League asked in Lahore for the creation of sovereign Muslim-majority states on the subcontinent, a resolution that was soon called the Pakistan demand. Five months later, in August 1940, a formal statement

from the British government assured Muslims and other minority “elements in India’s national life” that Britain would never allow “their coercion into submission” to a majority government. Indeed, Britain would not permit a government “whose authority is denied by large and powerful elements in India’s national life.” (“The August Offer”; 79: 466-8) The League had been given a veto.

Three: Another large factor usually ignored in Partition discussions is the absence during the freedom movement of any Hindu-Muslim or Congress-League agreement regarding the constitution of a free India. In America, Lincoln, who waged a war to preserve the Union, could cite in defence of his step the Declaration of Independence, the US Constitution and other documents. The INC or other bodies could not cite a comparable document that rendered the 1940 Partition call a violation of a previous pact. A constitutional agreement was not part either of the 1916 Lucknow Pact between the Congress and the League (for which Tilak, Jinnah, Annie Besant and Surendranath Bannerjea, among others, had worked, and which, it is worth remembering, committed the Congress to separate Muslim electorates) or of the 1919-1922 alliance between the Congress and most Muslim organizations including the League that fought the Raj over Khilafat and the Punjab.

Successive attempts were undoubtedly made to find agreed principles for a united, federated or confederated India, including, for example, by the Motilal Nehru Committee in 1928, and in the fourteen Gandhi-Jinnah talks of September 1944, but these were unsuccessful. Coalition-building and power-sharing exercises failed, at times because numerous local, provincial and sectional elements successfully opposed an all-India understanding between the INC and the League. In any case, when in 1940 the Pakistan demand was voiced, it was not possible to characterize it as the breaking of an earlier contract.

Four: On the eve of August 15, 1947, no Indian organization, whether the INC, the Hindu Mahasabha, or any other, had the wish-plus-ability to compel Muslim-majority areas to remain in India. Right after independence, the Indian state did not have the desire or capacity to absorb Muslim-majority areas.

The INC's unwillingness to try to coerce Muslim-majority areas into remaining in a single India had a broad basis and an interesting history. It was not a result of Gandhi's nonviolence. As far as the INC was concerned, non-coercion was enshrined in a resolution passed by its working committee in April 1942, when it rejected the proposals that Stafford Cripps had brought, which among other things offered every province the right to secede from India.

While rejecting the Cripps scheme with its potential for balkanization, the INC nonetheless clarified that it could not "think in terms of compelling the people of any territorial unit to remain in an Indian Union against their declared and established will." The INC said simultaneously that non-coercion would also rule out "compulsion being exercised on other substantial groups within that area." The meaning of the two sentences, which were coupled with each other, was clear. Bengal and the Punjab, both Muslim-majority provinces, were free to decide their future. Likewise, the Sikhs of the Punjab and the people of western Bengal, eastern Punjab and Assam, regions where non-Muslims were a majority, were also free to decide their future.

By the 1930s and even earlier, Muslim groups in the Punjab were asserting their autonomy and their right to reject all-India proposals they did not like. In taking this stand they could claim some support from history, for the Punjab had become part of British India not because Delhi had fallen to the British in 1803, but because in 1849 -- 46 years after the fall of Delhi -- British forces had defeated the armies of the independent Sikh kingdom of the Punjab that Ranjit Singh, who died in 1839, had built.

Since the British had conquered India bit by bit and not by defeating a single ruler of the whole of India, it became possible, as British rule neared its end, for some to speak of the right of a province to independence. Accordingly, leading Muslims in the Punjab made it plain from the 1920s that they did not want Punjab "to be subjected to a national government at the Centre", to quote from David Page's *Prelude to Partition*.⁵ In January 1947, Khizr Hyat Tiwana, the Unionist Premier backed by the Congress and the Sikhs toyed for a brief while with the idea of an independent, multi-faith Punjab, separate from both India and from the Pakistan that was being demanded ever more passionately.⁶

It is in this perspective that we should view Sarat Babu's effort for an autonomous or independent United Bengal in April & May 1947, a bid in which he was joined by, among others, H.S. Suhrawardy. As all know, in the climate of suspicion in which India was enveloped in 1947, that bold venture failed. Jinnah, and many Muslim League elements in Bengal, feared that a United Bengal might end up being aligned with India, while many in the INC, at the national and provincial level, feared its link-up with Pakistan.

Though the bid for a United Bengal failed, the fact that it was made showed that an undivided India was not seen as the inevitable consequence of British exit, whenever that exit came. A united India would be the result of persuading different parties, communities and provinces to remain committed or become committed to the goal of an undivided India. Such a result could be produced by the momentum of the freedom movement, joined to the experience of being part of British India for a century or more, provided that momentum was accompanied by a Congress-League understanding.

That understanding was never reached, and Partition occurred. Yet it is by no means clear that the principle of non-coercion was wrong. No doubt there are some who do not subscribe to it. "We gave them Pakistan, and now they want Kashmir as well," an American of Indian origin said not so long ago to me. That Kashmir should be a part of Pakistan because it has a Muslim majority is certainly not obvious, yet I do not see the logic or principle by which my Indian-American acquaintance had concluded that she and her ilk – the unexplained "we" to whom she evidently belonged – had "given" Pakistan to those who today reside there.

Five: Since India's Partition was above all and in its essence the partition of two provinces, Bengal and the Punjab, the story or stories of these provinces can instruct us about the Partition and also about the clash between liberty and unity.

Few provinces displayed greater passion for liberty than Bengal or the Punjab – one only has to think of the Bose Brothers or Jatin Das or Bhagat Singh. On the other hand, it should be acknowledged that the INC in these two large and utterly crucial provinces, each containing a

clear Muslim majority, was mainly a Hindu organization that, moreover, only rarely enjoyed an alliance with a Muslim political party. It is true that for short spells, figures like Saifuddin Kitchlew or Mian Iftikharuddin led the INC in the Punjab, but the vast majority of the Punjab's Muslims were more attracted either by the loyalist Unionist Party or by the Muslim League, and the vast majority of Sikhs by Sikh political parties.

In 1946, a post-election agreement between the Unionist Party, the INC, and the Sikhs prevented the Muslim League, the largest single party, from forming the Punjab government, and the Unionist leader, Khizr Hayat Tiwana, became the Punjab Premier with Congress and Sikh support and remained in office for a year. Yet for long years previously the INC had fought the pro-Raj Unionist party, and the 1946 alliance did not represent a genuine coming together of the INC and the Unionist Party's Muslim following.

Likewise, in the equally critical Bengal Presidency, the INC attracted, in the 1930s and 1940s, only a limited Muslim following. Gallant attempts to forge an alliance between the INC and Muslim-majority peasant parties did not bear fruit.

Although the North-West Frontier Province with its Khudai Khidmatgars and the Khan brothers provided a remarkable contrast to this picture of a shortage of Muslim support or Muslim allies for the INC, this shortage in both Bengal and the Punjab was a major factor in producing the Partition outcome.

In the Punjab, it was not easy for the INC to fight the British and the landlords and simultaneously cultivate an alliance with the pro-landlord and pro-Raj Unionists. It was not easy for the INC to champion Hindu and Sikh rights and yet forge an alliance with Muslim parties who felt frightened by the educational and financial strength of the Punjab's non-Muslims and who therefore demanded mandatory Muslim-led governments for their Muslim-majority province.

In Bengal likewise, many of the Hindus who supported the INC and formed its base differed sharply in social or economic background from the Muslims who supported either the League or

the largely-Muslim peasant parties. Those wanting to build bridges or alliances with Muslim parties risked losing their base in face of hostile propaganda from Hindu extremists.

Mobilizing your base for the freedom struggle thus often seemed to clash with the goal of winning allies from other bases. Liberty, that is, clashed with unity. Suppressing the freedom call seemed unnatural and impossible, yet going ahead with campaigns for freedom in the absence of a Hindu-Muslim alliance produced suspicion, alienation and in the end Partition.

Six: Another way of understanding the process that led to the Partition of Bengal, the Punjab and India as a whole is to recognize that voices asking for cooperation between Hindus and Muslims for the sake of independence were not the only sounds the people of India heard. They also heard Hindu voices insisting that the Muslim, not the white man, was the real foe, and they heard Muslim voices declaring that the Hindu, not the white man, was the real danger.

Muslims were told they were India's natural and rightful rulers, the people from whom the British had wrested power and to whom power had to be returned, apart from also being the people with a superior religion. Hindus were told that India and its soil were theirs from pre-history; unlike Muslims and Christians, Hindus were Indians by blood. Moreover, their genes were purer. "Our throne" clashed with "Our soil", a "superior" religion with a "purer" race.

The unsuccessful Hindu-Muslim or INC-League talks of the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s may have owed some of their failure to weaknesses or mistakes in negotiations, but part of the failure can be traced to aggressive propaganda by extremists on both sides who fuelled fear and prejudice at the grassroots and made statesmanship an act of political suicide.

These extremists from both sides also helped produce the killings of 1946 and 1947. The peculiar argument, sometimes advanced with a veneer of psychological insight, that it was "unnatural" ahimsa that in the end provoked long-suppressed himsa seems to go against both logic and fact. There is little evidence that advocacy of himsa between Hindu and Muslim was ever long-suppressed – in the Punjab and in Bengal violence was freely and full-throatedly preached in 1946 and 1947 and earlier. And those who in 1946 and 1947 used knives, daggers, clubs,

kerosene, petrol and matchsticks to kill innocent children, women and men in Calcutta, Noakhali, Bihar, UP, Punjab and Delhi were not satyagrahis previously sworn to ahimsa. In the Punjab, the killers were men from self-styled militias that Muslim, Sikh and Hindu groups had formed. There and in Bengal, Bihar and elsewhere, the killers were addicts of hate tempted by murder and also by greed for the victims' land and property. No doubt the killers were often inflamed by true or exaggerated stories of what the other side had done.

Seven: The violence in Bengal in 1946 and in the Punjab in March 1947 was a large factor in persuading the INC leadership and the Sikh leadership in March and April 1947 to contemplate the division of the two provinces and thus the Partition of India. This is well recorded. What is less known is the impact of the Bihar killings of November 1946 on the minds of Muslims in the Punjab and the Frontier province. Because they were a clear majority in the Punjab and an overwhelming majority in the Frontier, Muslims in these provinces did not fear Hindu dominance and were therefore less inclined to demand Pakistan.

However, reports of large-scale killings of Muslims in Bihar in November 1946, which Hindu extremists had defended as a fitting response to the attacks on Hindus in Noakhali, turned Muslim opinion in the Punjab and in the Frontier province against a united India. As London's *Daily Telegraph* reported at the time, pro-League elements deliberately stirred feelings in the Frontier by "displaying the photographs of skulls and torn fragments from the Koran from Bihar".⁷ In the Punjab, Khizr Hyat Tiwana's coalition ministry of Muslim, Sikh and Hindu legislators, which tried to preserve a united Punjab, was put on the defensive by the reports from Bihar.

Eight: Eighteen years after India's independence and Partition, Britain adopted in respect of Rhodesia a policy known as NIBMAR, or no independence before majority rule. Had such a policy been applied to India, the INC would have been in power over the whole of India before independence, and division would have been averted.

For India, however, Britain favoured division before independence -- for two main reasons. One was a British assessment that a pro-West Pakistan would be useful geopolitically vis-à-vis the

Soviet Union. The other reason, no less influential, was British annoyance at Gandhi, the Bose brothers and all Indians who had the gall to reject tutelage and demand independence. Wavell's diary and Churchill's recorded remarks show that offence at the Indian stand prodded key British leaders into a wish to divide India before quitting it, even though the British knew that by dividing India they would undo their historic achievement of uniting India politically. Such no doubt are the ironies of history.

On 29 March 1945 in London, Churchill asked Viceroy Wavell, who went to Britain for instructions, to ensure that India was divided into "Hindustan, Pakistan, Princistan etc."⁸ And Wavell himself admitted in 1946, in a letter to King George VI, that his memories from 1942, when he was commander-in-chief, of what Quit India had done to the war effort was something "he could never rid his mind of".⁹

Clearly the British contributed in a major way to Partition. This inclination to divide India was evident from 1939, well before Mountbatten's energetic and successful implementation of *his* Partition plan. Yet for us to insist that the British should have acted wisely and farsightedly, from the point of view of their own interest and that of the subcontinent, is perhaps to expect too much from human nature. We asked the British to quit. In the end, after much resistance, they did, but while doing so they helped ensure our division. That unfortunately is the sort of thing annoyed human beings do.

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Let me now take up a couple of the "what if" or "if only" questions regarding Partition. Thus it has been said that if the INC had accepted the Cabinet Mission Plan of 16 May 1946 promptly and unreservedly rather than qualifiedly and after several weeks, Partition would have been averted, since the League had accepted it quickly though with reservations.

This Plan of 16 May 1946, envisaging a three-tier India of provinces, groups of provinces, and the centre, offered to the League a large "Pakistan" grouping – the Pakistani provinces that emerged on 14 Aug 1947 plus West Bengal, Assam and East Punjab (including today's Punjab and Haryana) – but, in a parallel gesture towards the INC, it also provided for an Indian Union. Yet a fatal ambiguity destroyed this ingenious and potentially promising Plan, for its sponsors --

three Cabinet ministers from the UK plus Wavell, the Viceroy -- gave the League the impression that after five years this large Pakistan area could walk out of the Union and become an independent Pakistan, while the Congress was told that it might be possible for provinces like Assam and the NWFP to stay out of the "Pakistan" area even at the outset.

The League thought it could bypass the Union; the Congress thought it could eliminate the groups. This double-meaning retained at the heart of the 16 May plan led to the Direct Action launched by the Muslim League on 16 August 1946, which sparked off the tragic sequence of violence in Bengal, Bihar, and the Punjab, culminating in the Punjab killings of August-September 1947.

The Mission offered contradictory explanations of its Plan's ambiguous clauses to the INC and the League. An indiscreet statement by Jawaharlal Nehru in July 1946 triggered an uproar and the League's Direct Action followed, but the double-speak which from the start marked the 16 May plan was the true cause of the turmoil.

The Cabinet Mission could have asked both parties to agree plainly and explicitly either to a small independent Pakistan (the Pakistan that was accepted in the summer of 1947) or to a large Pakistan area within a firm and undisputed Indian Union. The principle of self-determination might favour the first option: small Pakistan. If Muslim-majority areas like West Punjab and East Bengal were to have the right to choose their future, how could that choice be denied to West Bengal and East Punjab? The principle of Indian unity, on the other hand, might support the second option: a large Pakistan area within an unchallenged Indian Union. By yielding on sovereignty, the Muslim-majority provinces would have a stronger case for remaining undivided.

This clear choice was never presented by the Cabinet Mission to the two principal parties, possibly because of an assessment that the INC *and* the League would reject both options.

Not willing to announce failure after spending three hot months in India, the three ministers, Pethick-Lawrence, Cripps and Alexander, declared success through the simple expedient of separately agreeing to different interpretations of their scheme by the INC and the League, and

left for home. Following their departure and the inevitable discovery of contradictory assurances, both the League and the Congress alleged betrayal, and India's climate was fouled.

Two years earlier, during their talks in Bombay in September 1944, Gandhi had found Jinnah showing little interest in a compromise based on a small Pakistan. Since this lack of interest had persisted until 1947, Gandhi concluded that between playing a leading role in an undivided India *and* heading a small Pakistan, Jinnah might prefer the former. Gandhi seems to have felt, moreover, that Jinnah assuming such a role might arrest the polarization and violence that by the end of March 1947 was sweeping across the land, *and* lead possibly to the disbanding of the Punjab's ominous private militias, Muslim, Sikh and Hindu.

Hence Gandhi's suggestion on 1 April 1947 that Mountbatten and the Congress should offer Jinnah the Prime Ministership of undivided India.

Though the story of how this plan was scotched has been well documented, it is not sufficiently known. Alarmed at the possibility that Jinnah might accept such an offer, Mountbatten worked on Nehru, who soon resisted Gandhi's idea. Patel, Rajagopalachari and Prasad opposed it too. However, on 2 April Azad told Mountbatten, much to the Viceroy's disquiet, that the scheme could work and bring violence to an end.¹⁰

On 9 April something interesting happened in a private interview between Mountbatten and Jinnah. Wanting to test the waters but not wanting to name the source of the idea, Mountbatten said to the League leader that it had been *his* daydream to see Jinnah as India's Prime Minister. After ignoring the bait, Jinnah returned to it 35 minutes later, referring "out of the blue" to the remark. From Mountbatten's notes (which are our source for Azad's remarks and for details of the Jinnah-Mountbatten interview), we find a perturbed Viceroy feeling, to quote his words, that "Mr Gandhi's famous scheme may yet go through..."¹¹

The scheme was famous only among Gandhi's close colleagues and the Viceroy's staff. Nobody else knew of it. Moreover, the Viceroy's staff was busily engaged in scuttling it, with one of his

closest and brightest aides, V.P. Menon, writing a paper entitled, “Tactics to be adopted with Gandhi as regards his scheme.”

On 11 April Mountbatten’s anxiety ended, for he received a letter from Gandhi informing him that with the exception of Badshah Khan the Congress leadership was opposed to his Jinnah idea, which therefore stood withdrawn.

It is not easy to assess the extent to which the Congress leaders’ opposition was influenced by Mountbatten and his team, and we do not of course know whether or not Jinnah would have accepted the offer, which was never put to him. What we do know is that in 1942, when Gandhi had publicly said that if the British were unwilling to transfer power to the INC, they could pass it on instead to the League, Jinnah had responded as follows:

If the British government accepts the solemn declaration of Mr. Gandhi and by an arrangement hands over the government of the country to the Muslim League, I am sure that.... non-Muslims would be treated fairly, justly, nay generously...¹²

Translation of this 1942 remark: “I would be willing.”

But in April 1947 the last word did not belong to Jinnah, or to Gandhi. In the final act of the story of independence and partition, Gandhi remained isolated at one end, while the guardians and officers of the British Raj, the leaders of the Indian National Congress, and much of the country’s articulate public, all stood together at the opposite end. Yet even this powerful grouping, which believed it had found in Partition the “solution” and the key to peace, did not have the last word. That last word was grabbed, on both sides of a new border, by the killers of August and September 1947.

Mercifully for the subcontinent, the story did not stop there. It continues. Mercifully for the audience, this lecture ends!

End

¹Leo Tolstoy, *War & Peace*, tr. by Aylmer Maude (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), pp. 1371-72.

²Letter of 19 October 1939 to George V, Linlithgow Papers, IOL, London.

³J. Ahmad, *Documents of the Muslim Freedom Movement*, p. 372

⁴Quoted in Virendra Prakash, *Hindutva Demystified* (New Delhi: Virgo, 2002), p. 72.

⁵See p. 181 and preceding and following pages of David Page, *Prelude to Partition*, in Mushirul Hasan (comp.) *The Partition Omnibus* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002)

⁶Talbot, *Khizr Tiwana: The Punjab Unionist Party and the Partition of India* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 204.

⁷Quoted in Tendulkar, *Faith Is a Battle* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1967), pp. 406-7.

⁸Penderel Moon (ed.), *Wavell: The Viceroy's Journal* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 120.

⁹Moon (ed.), *Wavell*, p. 494.

¹⁰*TOP (The Transfer of Power volumes*, London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office), volume 10, p. 86.

¹¹*TOP*, 10: 104.

¹²Philips & Wainwright, *The Partition of India* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1970), p. 185.