

The Seedbed of Pakistan

Cultural Conflicts, Elite Muslim
Anxieties, and the Congress

1885-1906

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Vitasta

To

The feet of my Iṣṭa, Prabhu Anjaneya.

For the Sylheti-Hindu victims of Partition.

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INTRODUCTION

BRITISH-RULED INDIA was partitioned into the two Dominions of India and Pakistan in 1947. This cataclysm displaced enormous numbers of human beings. Millions of Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims found themselves on the wrong side of a hurriedly etched international border and trudged to safety in India or Pakistan. Simultaneously, hundreds of thousands died in the sanguinary riots that backdropped partition—old neighbours fell upon and slaughtered each other in savage, bestial fury in many cities and countless towns and villages. Although three generations have passed since this monstrous human tragedy unfolded, its traumatic memories are yet to fade. We still, as a result, look for the roots of this tragedy. We continue to search for what might have led to partition and the emergence of Pakistan in the political bedlam that characterised India in the 1930s and 40s. More specifically,

we look to pin the blame for the enormous cataclysm that was partition on some cogent reason or identifiable agency.

Now, most important scholarship agrees that the Congress stood for Indian unity throughout¹ (though one might personally want to nurture a different point of view). Scholarly speculations, thus, generally revolve around Muhammad Ali Jinnah's role and intentions in the political drama surrounding partition. Ayesha Jalal seems to think that he did not quite want Pakistan and meant it only as a 'bargaining counter'.² Anita Inder Singh, on the other hand, appears to indicate that Jinnah did after all want partition and the establishment of Pakistan.³ It is indeed tempting to engage with and contribute to these speculations and points of view, as it gives one the chance to contemplate and dilate on the sensational course of developments leading to the blood-drenched sundering of British India. This book shall, however, not do so, as is clearly indicated by the period it considers. Instead, the intention of this relatively brief narrative is to examine what might be termed the discursive foundations of the Pakistan idea in the way of certain tendencies, psychologies, perspectives, and political manoeuvres discernible over the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a nascent Congress tried to

1 Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *From Plassey to Partition and After: A History of Modern India* (Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2022 [Second Edition]), p.461.

2 See *The Sole Spokesman. Jinnah, the Muslim League and the Demand for Pakistan* (CUP, 2017).

3 See *The Origins of the Partition of India. 1936-47* (Bombay, Calcutta, Madras: OUP, 1990).

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overcome the opposition of some upper-class Muslims along with indifference from Muslims at large. This book shall survey, one might say, the seedbed of Pakistan. This is so that we may acquire a rather fresh and more nuanced understanding of the late colonial politics that eventually resulted in its creation.

An unmistakable fact about colonial India is that the elite segment of Indian Muslim society, namely, the *ashrāf*, largely chose to plough their own political furrows. Leading members of *ashrāf* society, as we shall see, staunchly opposed the Congress after it was founded in 1885. Syed Ahmed Khan, for instance, supported neither the Congress's imagination of Indian nationhood nor the political reforms demanded by it. Eventually, in 1906, a number of the *ashrāf* approached the colonial establishment and demanded that it grant the Indian Muslims proportional representation on a communal basis. In other words, these Indo-Muslim elites (as we shall term the *ashrāf*), sought to establish Indian Muslims as a distinct political interest group deserving of special consideration. Styling themselves the 'Simla Deputation', these gentlemen even termed the Indian Muslims a 'nation' as they met with Lord Minto in the summer capital of British India. Exactly three months after they did, the All-India Muslim League (AIML) was founded in Dhaka, again by prominent Indo-Muslim elites. The AIML, we might say, was but an organisational expression of the Simla Deputation's points of view in the long term. It sought to champion the ostensibly distinct political interests of Indian Muslims and eventually, in 1940, argued that they, being a nation in their own right, ought to have their

own territorial state. In little over seven years after the 'Lahore Resolution' was passed by the AIML, Pakistan was a reality.

Why did the Indo-Muslim elite keep aloof from the Congress's articulation of Indian nationhood as well as its political programme? Going by what some influential scholarship has to say, it might seem that it was largely due to how the colonial state stood in relation to a generally backward Indian Muslim society. For instance, as Peter Hardy puts it, Indian Muslims acquired a 'separate social as well as religious personality'⁴ when the British rulers sought to address their backwardness in education. Hardy suggests that they did so after becoming very conscious of the Indian Muslims, 'sometimes as a ghoul, sometimes as a phantom, sometimes as a Frankenstein's monster, but always as a bogey'.⁵ Apparently, while the British were intervening as 'a colonial power in the centre of the Muslim world',⁶ the seemingly extra-territorial loyalties of the Indian Muslims were causing them concern. The upper strata of Indian Muslims, on their part, responded to the colonial state's willingness to accommodate Muslim interests. As Hardy writes,

A perceptive Muslim of the educated classes could see in the eighteen-seventies and early eighties that the British were ready to treat Muslims as a distinct political interest in India.⁷

4 Peter Hardy, *The Muslims of British India* (CUP, 1998), p.122.

5 Ibid., p.118.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid., p.125.