

The Two-Nation Theory: A Failed Solution to the Religious Divide in British India

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ABSTRACT

The Indian Partition in 1947 split India into two independent nations: post-partition India was required to remain secular with a Hindu majority and post-partition Pakistan was required to remain secular with a Muslim majority. Unavoidably, the partition uprooted fifteen million people from their homes; Indians and Pakistanis scrambled to live with their respective religious groups. Although politicians intended for the split of pre-partition India to exterminate religious hatred, violence continued. Between one and two million people died – preceding and following the partition -- due to widespread religious violence, disease, and starvation. This essay will examine the progression of the Two-Nation Theory, and how it contributed to the Indian Partition. Understanding one of the main causes of partition will help to provide historical context for the everlasting religious division between Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs.

Introduction

On August 15, 1947, British India was partitioned into two independent nations: India and Pakistan. Yet, Saadat Hasan Manto explains, “man was still slave in both these countries -- slave of prejudice ... slave of religious fanaticism ... slave of barbarity and inhumanity.”¹ As Partition approached, the country was in a state of utter disarray; the British Raj, along with the Indian National Congress (INC) and the All-India Muslim League (AIML), were unable to control the increasing acts of violence between neighbors, all of which were motivated by their religious differences. Brutal attacks flooded the country, making Indian daily life a nightmare.

When answering the question, “What caused the British Indian Partition?”, one must consider the universal dissatisfaction with the British Raj. Particularly, Indian civilians became unhappy with British exploitation of the Indian economy. Ironically, India’s united effort towards freedom from this regime ended up escalating religious tensions between the Muslim minority and the non-Muslim majority. The Muslim minority feared that the end of British rule would enable the Hindu majority to take advantage of their numbers in a democratic government. Considering this fear, the AIML brought the Two-Nation Theory into play. According to this hypothesis, the cultural and religious differences between Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs would ruin any chance of social, economic, or political equality in an independent India. Consequently, the AIML called for a solution: a separatist Pakistan. While the British policy of divide and rule had exacerbated religious tensions in India, the AIML’s promotion of the Two Nation Theory created an unbridgeable divide between the Muslims and the Sikhs and Hindus. This religious divide gave rise to the Pakistan Movement, which hindered the British government’s ability to manage India and instigated extreme violence, leaving Partition as the only viable plan to eliminate social unrest throughout the nation.²

¹ Divya Goyal, “On 107th birth anniversary, a ‘homecoming’ for Saadat Hasan Manto.” *The Indian Express* (Ludhiana: May 14th, 2019).

² Nisid Hajari, *Midnight’s Furies: The Deadly Legacy of India’s Partition* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015), 38.

British Policy and Religious Division

Prefacing the religious violence and political instability that caused the Partition, the British Government used the Hindu caste system to solidify the policy of divide and rule, which intensified the differences between Hinduism, Islam, and Sikhism. Under a divide and rule policy, an imperial government encourages its subjects to identify by smaller categories (ethnic, linguistic, religious, etc.) to encourage rivalries and minimize the odds of united rebellion. In order to implement this policy into British India's infrastructure, the government began by taking account of India's religious makeup. In 1881, the British government enacted the Decennial Census, where they recorded each individual's caste and religion. Since the caste system was a staple of Hindu belief, Muslims and Sikhs did not have caste status. The formalization of the caste system in British-India represented the British Government's efforts to legitimize religious differences throughout the nation and diminish the importance of Islamic and Sikh values.³

Additionally, the census was used to place people into local "communities" based on their religion.⁴ Accordingly, the British Parliament passed the Government of India Act in 1935. This act established provincial governments for different regions using the data provided by the Decennial Census. Within these provincial governments, the British Raj gave Muslims a separate electorate, in which they voted for their own set of representatives. By doing so, the British Raj not only dismissed the Sikhs as a separate religious group in India, but they also illuminated the differences between Islamic and Hindu values in politics.⁵ With this political division, the British Raj encouraged the idea that Muslims and Hindus were incompatible with one another and attempted to eliminate any feeling of unity that had once existed in India. By taking away any chance at Muslim and Hindu political alliance, the Raj could reduce any chance of a successful rebellion against their regime, while enforcing their agenda of divide and rule. The longer these policies remained intact, the Muslim population began to recognize that they would remain a political minority within India. So, they felt the need to take action to protect their own rights. To that end, the Lahore resolution was enacted on March 23, 1940, at the annual AIML meeting. This resolution declared the Muslim desire for multiple sovereign and autonomous states. Thus, the idea of a separatist Pakistan began to stir.

Alongside the beginnings of religious opposition, the economic detriment that came from World War II left Britain bankrupt, impeding their ability to control India indefinitely. This inability, along with the pre-existing Indian dissatisfaction with British rule, acted as the final push for India to gain Independence from the British Raj. From the beginnings of British Rule, the oppressive imperial government took advantage of thriving Indian industries, such as textiles, iron and steel goods, machinery, and the abundance of raw materials.⁶ The Raj inflicted heavy taxes on the Indian consumer, empowering the government to unfairly capitalize on the growing market in India. Despite the religious tensions that the British regime had set in motion, Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims were united in one respect: their desire for independence. Mahatma Gandhi, one of the leaders of the INC, organized passive resistance campaigns during World War II to push against British rule, which included members of all religious groups. Chiefly, the Quit India Movement, launched on August 8, 1942, demanded India's independence from British rule and disapproved of the involvement of Indian soldiers in World War II.⁷ The day after launching this movement, Gandhi and his fellow Congressmen were arrested. Their arrest spurred a series of nationwide protests, as civilians all over fought for these

³ Barbara D. Metcalf and Thomas R. Metcalf., *A Concise History of Modern India* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 138.

⁴ William Dalrymple, "The Great Divide: The violent legacy of Indian Partition." *The New Yorker*, (June 29th, 2015).

⁵ Metcalf and Metcalf, *A Concise History of Modern India*, 195.

⁶ *Ibid*, 125.

⁷ *Ibid*, 205.

political leaders, and by extension, their independence.⁸ Through these protests, Indian civilians of all religions united to demonstrate their dissatisfaction with British policies and government mismanagement.

The Growing Support for the Two-Nation Theory

As if the state of Indian society could not get any worse, the Bengal Famine of 1943 wreaked havoc, bringing starvation, a rapid increase in disease caused by unsanitary conditions, and population displacement to India. The British government completely dismissed the gravity of this crisis, as there was no formal declaration of famine.

British efforts at humanitarian relief were ineffective, leaving Indian civilians to handle the emergency on their own. As the famine worsened, approximately 2 million Indian civilians died.⁹ The absolute failure of British policy and lack of British efforts to save lives further empowered the Quit India Movement, causing another outbreak of protests and riots against the British regime.

Since the British Raj could no longer fairly and effectively run India, a transfer of power to local leaders had become inevitable in 1945. The implications of a new government provoked curiosity and uncertainty regarding the AIML and INC's contrary plans for India's future. As mentioned earlier, after the Lahore Resolution in 1940, the Two-Nation Theory began to gain support. Meanwhile, the INC maintained a large group of constituents, which granted them substantial power in relation to the AIML. The ample support for the INC made them one of the only practical candidates to take control of India after the departure of the British Government. In turn, the Muslim population began to question whether or not INC rule would be compatible with the protection of their rights and their views for India's future.¹⁰

Towards the end of 1945, the leaders of the INC, Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, promulgated their vision for a united India under a democratic government. Concurrently, Malcolm Darling, a retired Indian civil servant, examined the views of Indian peasants and how their beliefs were impacted by the concept of *azadi*, or freedom, from colonial rule. During his journey, one of his Muslim interviewees accurately expressed the fear of most Muslim civilians: "If there were no League, the Hindus would get the government and take away our land."¹¹ Primarily, the civilian stressed the need for an authoritative organization that advocated for the Muslim minority in India. Moreover, if the Hindu population were to take control of the government, the Muslim population would be stripped of their "land". This "land" symbolized their power, stability, and the birthplace of Islamic values. To uproot them, the Hindu majority would be taking over the territory in which Islam was built, which was especially meaningful to the Muslim population. In order to preserve this power, stability, and their religious homeland, the AIML proposed a complete separation from the Hindu population, resulting in the formation of the Pakistan Movement and the correlated promotion of the Two-Nation Theory.

Furthermore, the religious divide between the INC and the AIML became more evident because INC officials began to combine politics and religion. For example, they worked with *sadhus* [Hindu Holy Men] in making decisions for the government. Even Gandhi himself focused on *dharma* [duty in Hindu religion] in politics¹². Since the INC seemingly favored Hinduism over universal equality, the Muslim population increasingly relied on the AIML to fight for their own political representation. As a result, AIML membership increased by almost two million by 1944.¹⁰ Rumors of a separatist Pakistan started to circulate around AIML members, despite the ambiguity of how Indian territories would be distributed. The conflicting desires of the Muslim minority and non-Muslim majority for India's

⁸ Hajari, *Midnight's Furies: The Deadly Legacy of India's Partition*, 40.

⁹ Metcalf and Metcalf, *A Concise History of Modern India*, 209.

¹⁰ Hajari, *Midnight's Furies: The Deadly Legacy of India's Partition*, 13.

¹¹ Yasmin Khan, *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 11. ¹² *Ibid*, 37. ¹⁰ *Ibid*, 43.

future became ever more apparent, creating a clear disagreement between these religious groups regarding whether or not India should be split into two independent nations.¹²

Early in 1946, as Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the leader of the AIML, promoted the Two-Nation Theory, the Pakistan Movement developed, allowing the AIML to contest INC rule for political power within India. Principally, the AIML's increase in support advanced its political power within society. Parallel to the rise in AIML membership, the Muslim public demonstrated their approval of Jinnah and his campaign for a separatist 'Pakistan'. Namely, Jinnah was revered by his followers; he received fan mail, cards, and letters of congratulations.¹³ Furthermore, the sizeable Aligarh Muslim University student body became very involved in promoting pro-Pakistan thinking nationwide.¹⁴ They organized protests and spread word of the Pakistan movement. Aligarh female students also organized pro-League meetings and collected donations towards the AIML's causes. The development of public involvement in the Pakistan movement granted the AIML an almost equivalent political influence to the INC. The resulting competition between the AIML and the INC compelled the British Raj to seriously consider the Muslim population's advocacy for a separatist 'Pakistan' when deciding upon India's future government system.

Violence and Nationalism

Unfortunately, the rise in competition between the AIML and the INC caused an unintended increase in religious hostility and nationalism throughout British-India. This increase in nationalism solidified the irreparable divide between the Muslim minority and the non-Muslim majority. Inter-group violence enveloped the nation. The non-Muslim population, both Hindu and Sikh, viewed the Pakistan movement as a threat. They believed that dividing India would give rise to religious branding, which was the concept of characterizing an individual solely by their religion. If religious branding were to gain any more significance, it would ruin any chance at a future with a united, peaceful India.¹⁵ As religious branding did indeed spread, Gandhi's focus shifted to pacifying mixed-religion regions like Delhi, in which opposing religious groups purposelessly started to fight with one another.¹⁶ Muslim fear of underrepresentation created a growing expectation for the AIML to take action to support the Two-Nation Theory. In response, Jinnah officially began to use the idea of Pakistan as a "bargaining chip", which prevented the British Raj from handing over power to the INC and Nehru.¹⁹

Religious antipathy gradually intensified violence between Muslim and non-Muslim populations.¹⁷ Communities that had co-existed for almost 1,000 years formed separate religious mobs which attacked one another. This was labeled as an "outbreak of sectarian violence."¹⁸ In particular, death rates were especially high in the provinces of Punjab and Bengal. On Direct Action Day, in 1946, a nationwide series of protests and riots disseminated throughout India. The worst of the violence took place in the Calcutta Killings.¹⁹ Massacres, arson, forced religious conversion, mass abductions, and sexual violence overtook entire villages in Bengal.

Local leaders of the powerful political parties motivated this violence. For example, H.S. Suhrawardy,

¹² Ibid, 44.

¹³ Ibid, 43.

¹⁴ Ibid, 40.

¹⁵ Ibid, 134.

¹⁶ Hajari, *Midnight's Furies: The Deadly Legacy of India's Partition*, 156. ¹⁹ Ibid, 37.

¹⁷ Dalrymple, "The Great Divide: The violent legacy of Indian Partition."

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Hajari, *Midnight's Furies: The Deadly Legacy of India's Partition*, 16. ¹⁸

Dalrymple, "The Great Divide: The violent legacy of Indian Partition."

Muslim League Chief Minister of Bengal, remarked, “bloodshed and disorder are not necessarily evil in themselves, if resorted to for a noble cause.”¹⁸ As political leaders justified this violence, civilians attacked their religious opposition in the most cruel, inhumane ways possible, seemingly without any purpose. Writer and historian Nirad C.

Chaudhuri described “a man tied to the connector box of the tramlines with a small hole drilled in his skull, so that he would bleed to death as slowly as possible.”²⁰ These acts of violence were unforgettable, making sectarian nationalism and religious branding in India permanent. Progressively, Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims’ hatred towards one another had reached its climax. This violence compromised the reliability of both the INC and the AIML, as these parties no longer made decisions for the benefit of their entire country, but instead focused primarily on tearing at their opposing political party.

Eventually, nationalism held such a strong influence among Hindus and Muslims to the point where violence seemed the only possible course of action among civilians. As a result, around 75,000 women were raped, and many of them were “disfigured or dismembered.”²¹ Between one and two million people died in the daily violence that was increasingly making India unlivable.²² Hindu militias were created to support the possibility of a united India, but they ended up pointless. Indian leaders lost control of their provinces.²³ All in all, the country could not function.

Partition

Religious violence had put India in cataclysmic shape, leaving Partition as the only possible solution. For starters, Gandhi and Nehru agreed that conflict took away any chance at a united India. Besides, both INC political leaders had developed a mutual hatred towards Jinnah, forcing them to accept Partition as the only solution to push him out of their country.²¹ British leaders also immediately recognized that India was in a downward spiral, and were eager to pass on responsibility to the national leaders as soon as possible. The nation’s economic state and incessant rioting had become far too great for Britain to handle, so Partition appeared to be the most efficient solution to rid themselves of these dire conditions. On February 20, 1947, British Prime Minister, Clement Atlee, announced that British rule would come to an end “not later than June, 1948.”²⁴ However, this plan was modified when Lord Louis Mountbatten was appointed Britain’s last viceroy in March, 1947. He expedited the plan for Partition, putting Britain on track to leave India in August of 1947. Since Muslim and Hindu leaders wanted freedom from the British along with an end to the violence, there was no pushback against the Mountbatten Partition Plan.

Despite the agreement regarding Partition in March, 1947, many Indian civilians had become fixated on the concept of “ethnic cleansing.”²⁵ Combined with the lack of clarity in Mountbatten’s partition plan, the absence of government intervention allowed civilians to continue mindlessly attacking one another. Violence was prolonged throughout the nation because nationalistic ideologies had become engraved in the minds of almost all Indian civilians. At this point, it was becoming evident that the inter-religious fighting had no purpose other than to unleash the participants’ pure hatred of the other opposing religions.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Khan, *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan*, 65. ²¹

Dalrymple, “The Great Divide: The violent legacy of Indian Partition.”

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Khan, *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan*, 136.

In retrospect, historian and reporter Alex Von Tunzelmann argues that the British policy of divide and rule directly caused the disagreement between the INC and the AIML.²⁶ However, this policy and the British government's abuse of its power had no correlation to the disagreement between the Muslim minority and the non-Muslim majority, as it was an entirely separate issue. In actuality, civilians of all religions were united in ridding themselves of British rule. The increasing Muslim support and Hindu discontent for the Pakistan movement was the sole source of disagreement between both religious groups. In that respect, the Muslim minority's promotion of the Two-Nation Theory, prompted by their valid concerns of under-representation in an independent India, truly caused the intense divide between Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs. Therefore, the political turmoil and violent disagreement that caused Partition stemmed from the Two-Nation Theory, which contradicts the common misconception that British rule directly caused British-India's Partition.

Conclusion

After Partition, India and Pakistan suffered economic, political, and social repercussions. The most immediate effect was the Refugee Crisis of 1947, in which ten million civilians were displaced, and one million were killed while migrating to their *respective* new countries. Despite its best efforts, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees was unable to resolve this crisis.²⁷ Additionally, both countries have continued to go to war with one another post-Partition. For example, in 1947, Kashmir had agreed to join India with its own political and economic sovereignty. Meanwhile, Pakistan declared that Kashmir's predominantly Muslim territories should not be considered a part of India. This disagreement led to the first Kashmir War in 1947, which was followed by two more Kashmir Wars in 1965 and 1999.²⁸ These wars, along with the modern stereotypes between opposing religions in India and Pakistan demonstrate the enduring effects of Partition and religious hatred. We must acknowledge the destruction that nationalism has caused in both India and Pakistan; both countries are still in a social and political plight, which has prevented true recovery and healing from the extreme religious hatred that had developed. As long as Kashmir is contested and Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs reside on both sides of the border, Indians and Pakistanis may never be able to live peacefully together. This unsalvageable relationship stems from what was supposedly a solution to the disorder that had once consumed British-India: the Two-Nation Theory. Yet, this very *solution* has ironically eternized the same violence and hatred that it was created to solve.

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²⁶ Alex von Tunzelmann, "Who Is to Blame for Partition? Above All, Imperial Britain." (*The New York Times*, August 18th), 2017.

²⁷ Khan, *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan*, 169.

²⁸ Metcalf and Metcalf, *A Concise History of Modern India*, 224.