

PARTITION REVISITED

K Gajendra Singh

Ever since 18 August following the release of Jaswant Singh's book— "Jinnah : India-Partition-Independence", there has been a turmoil among politicians, specially in his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), historians and in the Indian media. Singh, a former Finance, Defense and External Affairs Minister in Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee cabinet was summarily expelled from the party in a graceless manner. BJP leaders are publicly decrying each other and ranged on two sides, those of Hindu hardline organization Rashtriya Sayamsevak Sangh (RSS) antecedents, with hard exclusive Hindutva ideology, and the others, moderate.

The chief of RSS Mohan Bhagwat, who controls the BJP, came over to Delhi from the Sangh's headquarters in Nagpur in central India and to stop the internecine squabbling and party's bleeding credibility. But the theatre and the spilling out of the differences and quarrels have cast a shadow on the credibility on BJP stalwart and former deputy Prime Minister L K Advani who in spite of direct attacks has maintained a stoic silence. A new and younger leadership is likely to be installed by the RSS bosses in the near future.

BJP acquired power mainly through Advani's divisive and Hindu-Muslim polarizing Rathyatras (chariot rides), demolition of Babri Mosque in Ayodhya and subsequent Hindu Muslim riots, pogrom against Muslims in Gujarat under BJP Chief Minister Narendra Modi and other anti-national acts. Perhaps realizing that the people cannot be misled any more, Advani used his 'discovery' of a secular Jinnah while visiting Pakistan to attract Muslim votes in India, who are now determinedly opposed to BJP and its policies. One can never put anything beyond a politician's quest for power. One of the main thrusts of the book appears to be that late Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, along with conservative Congress leader Sardar Patel, were equally responsible for the partition of Hindustan along with Mohammed Ali Jinnah, the main protagonist for Pakistan. Jinnah, an anathema to BJP and its Hindutva philosophy, in fact comes in for praise in the book, for his secular credentials, perhaps with the aim of also undermining Nehru's mystique and the Congress party.

During his 2005 Karachi visit, Advani told a Pak TV channel that "Pakistan would have been a secular nation if Jinnah's speech of 1947 was implemented. It was pushed beneath the carpet. Pakistan would have been a different country had Jinnah's views been understood." His praise for Jinnah raised a storm in his party. He received fierce criticism from RSS and had to step down from BJP president's post. He was, however, rescued from the isolation by Atal Behari Vajpayee.

Of course none of Sangh Parivar leaders attended the book release and the panel discussion after which the controversy erupted. BJP's lackluster President Rajnath Singh stated that Jaswant Singh's views in the book "do not represent the views of the party". "In fact, the party completely disassociates itself from the contents of the book", he added. After the book release, when asked if the RSS agreed with Singh's view that Jinnah has been "demonized" in India, Ram

Madhav, an RSS leader said, " I have only read excerpts of the book. But I am constrained to say that it is far from the truth to state that Jinnah was not responsible for the Partition."

BJP spokesperson Prakash Javadekar refused to make any direct comment on Singh's book, but made it clear that the party did not agree with the contention that Jinnah was not responsible for partition and said the party stood by its June 2005 resolution on Jinnah, which holds him as one of the most important politicians responsible for the partition of India. Narendra Modi's BJP government in Gujarat banned the book. Jaswant Singh has petitioned the Supreme Court to lift the ban. India like many other nations, even democracies is showing Orwellian tendencies.

In a panel discussion after the book release, maverick Lawyer Ram Jethmalani, inimical to Nehru-Gandhi family, described Jinnah as a true secularist and blamed the partition on Nehru. He said Jinnah had been a great collaborator of Gandhi in achieving freedom for India and regretted he had been demonized by a people who idolized Nehru.

A British citizen Lord Meghnand Desai exposed his ignorance of history by declaring that "the division of the country became inevitable around April, 1947 and not before that". He termed Lord Mountbatten the "father of Pakistan" and added that Jinnah had been turned into a villain through complete fabrication of facts, and claimed the Partition happened because of Nehru's individualism and crude Marxism. He said the Congress had no right to represent Muslims and accused Nehru of mindlessly rejecting Jinnah's genuine demand for a guarantee about Muslim rights.

It is irritating that a British loyalist and proxy like Desai is given undue importance in India, his vacuous articles and chatter fill Indian media and corporate channels. It may be recalled that Prime Minister Tony Blair was accused of selling knighthoods to some shady characters in exchange for money for his Labour Party. Desai is doing a pretty good job at defending the British in India.

Noted journalist M J Akbar did not agree with Jaswant apportioning blame on Nehru for the Partition. "It was the Congress Working Committee which accepted the Cabinet (Mission) Plan... Nehru was not the dictator of the Congress," he said, adding, "while Gandhi wanted a secular nation with a Hindu majority, Jinnah wanted a secular nation with a Muslim majority." Akbar derided the claims that Nehru was responsible for the partition and that Jinnah was secular. But he praised Jaswant for lifting history from the trap of passion.

Senior journalist B G Verghese questioned the premise that Jinnah was secular. He likened Jinnah's threat of direct action with the tactics of the Taliban and accused the then Muslim League of communal blackmail. He defended Nehru and the Congress for rejecting Jinnah's two-nation theory.

CEO of Pakistan's 'The Dawn' newspaper Hameed Haroon said "Jinnah's image remains wrongly portrayed and unexplored in that country. He said Jinnah's pictures wearing Western dresses and smoking cigarettes were suppressed in Pakistan ...and he became a two dimensional cardboard of (General) Zia's ideals." According to Haroon, Jinnah's speech on religious

freedom was "censored by the information hierarchy of Pakistan before even the slate came into being."

Haroon, wondered why India did not explore the true Jinnah. Pakistan, he said, avoided doing it because Jinnah was too liberal and progressive for the bigoted rulers who succeeded him. It was left to a long time Delhi resident senior British journalist Mark Tully to say there were "no saints and all are, in a sense, sinners...everyone, made mistakes." This included both Nehru and Jinnah as well as the British.

"Unless we understand Mohammed Ali Jinnah as a man and as a statesman, we cannot understand Bangladesh, Pakistan and our relations with the two countries. Nobody has written about Jinnah—whom Mahatma Gandhi described as a great man—the way I have," Singh told a packed audience comprising writers, journalists, publishers and bureaucrats at the Pragati Maidan on the inaugural day of the Delhi Book Fair on 29 August.

"Partition has been the most damaging event in modern India. Though I was born in a village, far away from Lahore and Sindh, I always wondered how could they ever become foreign lands... and (how) the man (Jinnah) who had so assiduously worked for the 1916 Lucknow Pact could divide the country," he said. [The 1916 Lucknow Pact between the Muslim League and the Indian National Congress had pressured the British government to give Indians more authority to run the country.]

"The takeoff point for my research was 1857—the mutiny which brought the Hindus and Muslims in the subcontinent together and finally uprooted the British after 90 years, in 1947. The 1857 revolt continued to haunt the British," Singh said.

"Jinnah set another milestone in communal amity in 1916 with the Lucknow Pact. A man who had lived all his life in India barring the last 13 months and who had been insulted by the British did not have to be demonized by us," he said. "India cannot be shackled by its neighbors and unless we become one country, it will be difficult to realize our dreams. We have to cultivate a mindset that allows us to think freely", he added.

Incidentally, another instance of the Congress Muslim-League amity, the Khilafat movement (1919-1924), although mainly a Muslim religious movement, to protect the Caliphate when the British troops occupied Istanbul, became a part of the wider Indian Independence movement. The Caliphate was abolished by Kemal Ataturk, founder of the staunchly secular republic of Turkey in 1923, fashioned out of the ashes of the Ottoman empire. So when Indian leaders visiting Turkey talked of the Khilafat movement, it made little impact during the secular regimes in Ankara. The money to fight occupation forces sent from India to Ankara was used later by Ataturk to build a Parliament house and a Bank.

Writing about the politics of Partition with entrenched ideological commitments and the desire for explanations and the need to apportion blame, makes it almost impossible to do so. Commented an Indian scholar, Pratap Bhanu Mehta:

"It is a prodigious work of scholarship, wide-ranging in its references and well documented. It has its own historical judgments to make and sometimes they are too swift. But there is no doubt that the book opens up serious and interesting

questions, it has a narrative of its own. Partition was not the result of an irrevocable religious cleavage between Hindus and Muslims. It was squarely a product of politics".

Professor Irfan Habib, a noted historian, commented, "One must remember that the priority before them was Independence. The partition was a secondary concern. They probably felt that once the British were out of the way, differences could be resolved, that Pakistan would not be a sustainable entity. There was a bit of misreading of the British imperialist agenda. Also, people forget that, over the years, the wars and wrangling over Kashmir has re-imposed the divide rather than dissolve it."

Writing in "The Tribune" of 19 August, 2009, that "Jinnah pursued Pakistan for power; Jaswant disappoints; ignores British designs," retired Indian diplomat, Narendra Singh Sarila, who was ADC to Lord Mountbatten and wrote a few years ago "The Shadow of the Great Game; The Untold Story of India's Partition," said ;

"I am disappointed with Jaswant Singh's 660-page book on Jinnah and Partition, released earlier this week." At the end he says : "I still fail to understand why India was partitioned in 1947? Or the manner in which it was done." If even after his massive research and hard work, he did not get to the bottom of his subject, there is a reason for it. It is because he has ignored the most important element that was responsible for Partition, namely British strategic interests that required the creation of Pakistan. The British top secret documents on Partition have now been unsealed and there was no excuse for ignoring them. The whole story is there in those documents.

"The Labour government that came to power in Britain in mid-1945 was willing to grant independence to India but was worried about losing its 60-year-old military base here from which the British controlled the whole Indian Ocean area, including the eastern Middle-East that contained oil wells—The Wells of Power—of increasing importance in war and peace and which Stalin, with his rising ambition after his victory over Germany, the British feared, might seize. In the last two great wars it was from their Indian base that the British deployed Indian and British forces in Iran and Iraq and the British Chiefs of Staff were adamant on keeping a foothold in India. But Atlee, the British Prime Minister, knew that the government of a free India under the Congress party's rule would neither give them a military base nor join their team against the Soviet Union in the fresh Great Game. What were they to do?

"Towards the end of 1945, Field Marshal Wavell, the Viceroy of India, came up with a possible way out of their quandary. After the Congress party had refused to cooperate in the war effort in 1939, unless Britain announced that it would give freedom to India after the war, Wavell's predecessor, Lord Linlithgow, had encouraged Jinnah to formulate the Pakistan scheme, informing London that Jinnah was in his pocket. He represents a minority and a minority can only hold its own with our assistance," the Viceroy told London.

"Wavell now suggested that they use Jinnah's demand to create a separate state in the north-west—not give him all he wanted in the west but territories along Iran, Afghanistan and Sinkiang with the port of Karachi and Pakistan would cooperate with them on defence matters. On being asked by London to

give them a clear picture of the areas that could go to Pakistan. Wavell in a historic dispatch on February 6, 1946, sent a map delineating the boundaries of Pakistan he had in mind, which were exactly the boundaries that Radcliff drew 18 months later.

"So, what Pakistan was going to be was already decided in early 1946 and the time between then and August 15 was used by Atlee, Cripps and Wavell and later Mountbatten to make Jinnah accept the smaller Pakistan and the Congress party to accept Partition, while Atlee kept proclaiming from housetops that they were working to preserve India's unity. All the British maneuvering can be discerned by studying the British top secret files. It is a myth that Jinnah founded Pakistan. President Roosevelt had posted his representative in Delhi after 1942 and his dispatches in the US archives also tell us much.

"Some of the assessments in the book are also mistaken. To believe that the Cabinet Mission Plan would have resulted in a united India is moonshine. After 10 years Punjab, Sindh and the NWFP had the option to break away on one side and Bengal and Assam on the other side. That would give the League a much larger Pakistan after 10 years and certainly, in the meanwhile, it would fan the flames of communalism to prepare the ground for the above. And what about the princely states? They had the option to break away too. So, possibly Hyderabad would join Pakistan and would help reach Tripura and Manipur, which would be swallowed up. The Plan would have balkanized India and Nehru, despite the many mistakes he made, was correct in striking it down.

[As for an Indian federation, look at what has happened in Christian-Muslim Cyprus or divided Palestine—author]

"The Congress made many mistakes in the struggle, but Gandhiji united a heterogeneous and largely uneducated people, without which Independence was not possible.

"I agree with Jaswant Singh that Jinnah at heart was a nationalist and a secularist. And he remained so for the first 60 years of his life—a long time. Jinnah opposed satyagrah calling it an extreme programme that would lead to disaster. He was shunned by Gandhiji. And Motilal Nehru feared that this brilliant man would eclipse his son, Jawaharlal. In 1928 Jinnah proposed to convince the Muslims to give up separate electorates that were preventing Hindu-Muslim political interdependence and unity suggesting in return that Muslim representation in the Central Assembly be raised from 27 percent to 33 percent, a very minor concession compared to the possibility of ending the pernicious separate electorates. But he was pooh-poohed, and virtually driven out from the Congress party.

"After the Congress refused to cooperate in the war effort in 1939, the Viceroy sought out Jinnah. The doctors had earlier the same year told him that he had terminal TB. Jinnah had always wanted to be the first in everything. There are many instances in history of people abandoning their principles to achieve power and glory. So, for him it was now or never. His Pakistan scheme, launching Direct Action—the precursor of today's terrorism—and mobilizing Muslims against the Hindus, were all in the pursuit of power and glory. He did not believe in what he was doing. After Pakistan had been achieved, he spoke in Karachi advocating secularism. But he quickly retreated when opposed by his followers." □□□

