

## Two-Nation Theory — Before and After Partition

*Prof. Sharif al Mujahid, SI*

Higher Education Commission, Distinguished National Professor

The two-nation theory meant that under *pax Britannica* during the first half of the twentieth century, the Indian subcontinent was home to two major nations — Hindus and Muslims. And given the numerical dominance of the two nations in certain specific areas/regions, it also meant that India was merely a “geographical expression”, to borrow Metternich’s (1809-48) picturesque phrase about the Italian peninsula during the first half of the nineteenth century, and that, if only as a corollary, India was also home to two polities, not one. In its final, crystalline format, the two-nation theory was most eloquently propounded and most cogently argued by none other than Quaid-i-Azam Jinnah himself, in his seminal Lahore (1940) address. And that, for sure, was the basis on which the demand for Pakistan was put forward, garnered massive support and acquired unchallengeable political clout.

In his *Thoughts on Pakistan* (1940), Dr. Ambedkar, the Scheduled Caste leader, had argued its validity from an academic and historical angle while in the *Verdict on India* (1944). Beverly Nichols, a British journalist and author, from a contemporary political ground realities perspective — to name only the two most notable authors of the period. Since then the theory has been taken for granted, with even some enlightened Indian authors (e.g., Panikkar, Bannerjee, Bimal Prasad, and Sachin Sen, among others) acknowledging the prime rationale of the theory.

As Professor Wilfred Cantwell Smith, a perceptive observer of developments in Indian Islam and the Muslim world, has pointed out in his insightful analysis in 1969, the Indian Muslims became a self-defined, formalized, systematized, structured, reified, boundary-bound, and crystallized “religious

community", as a result of "a broad socio-ideological transformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> and especially 17<sup>th</sup> centuries".

And by about the middle of the eighteenth century the "religious" community of the seventeenth century seems to have assumed the role of a pro-active political community as well. Although by no means a consequence of it, this assumption coincided with the earliest major Western encroachments in the coastal regions, as underscored by Plassey (1757). Interestingly, Veer Damodar Savarkar (1883-1966), the foremost spokesman of *Hindutva* (Hindu supremacy) during the last phase of British raj in India, traces the birth of a Hindu "political community" to the day when, as he perceives it, the erstwhile "subjugated" Hindus got even with their erstwhile Muslim "conquerors" — that is, to "the day that witnessed the forces of 'Haribhaktas' of Hindudom, enter Delhi in triumph and the Moslem throne and crown and standard lay hammered and rolling in dust at the feet of [General Sadashi] Bhau and Vishvas [the Maratha Peshwa's eldest son] in 1761 [24 July 1760] ... For, that day the Hindus won their freedom back, proved even their physical fitness to survive on equal and honourable terms in this world", asserts Savarkar (in his *Hindu-Pad-Padshahi or A Review of the Hindu Empire of Maharashtra*).

Lor Bryce defines nationality "as an aggregate of men drawn together and linked together by certain sentiments", chief among them being "Racial sentiment and Religious sentiment", buttressed by "linking" sentiments such as "a common language, the possession of a common literature, the recollection of common achievements and sufferings in the past, the existence of common customs and habits of thought, common ideals and aspirations". Sebastian de Garcia lists "religious and political beliefs" as the criteria for transforming "a group of people" into "a community". Thus, by about the middle of the eighteenth century, the Muslims, characterized by a set of overarching religious and political values, had become a political community.

But the evolution did not “stop there”, as Professor Smith contends; it culminates “in the 20<sup>th</sup> century”. And an integrative process over the centuries had seen to it that they got evolved, to quote Robert Jackson and Michael Stein (*Issues in Comparative Politics*), into “a population or a segment of population living within a geographic territory ... that share a common set of symbols, historical experience, and, particularly, subjective feelings which bind its members to one another”. That is how a pan-Indian Muslim community consciousness came to be engendered, and the erstwhile political community progressively developed the *will* to live as a nation. And with their sentiments of nationality, having been charged with the perquisites and prerequisites of nationalism over long decades, they had flamed into nationalism.

The transformation of a political community into a nation is, however, never a one-go affair. As Ambedkar points out on the authority of Professors Toynbee and Barker, “it is possible for nations to exist ... even for centuries, in unreflective silence, although there exists that spiritual essence of national life of which many of its members are not aware”. As Disraeli once said, a nation is a work of art and a work of time. Thus, by the late 1930s the Muslims had acquired (what Lord Bryce calls) “a sentiment of intellectual or moral unity”, and had developed a “consciousness of kind”, a collective ego, indeed a national consciousness of their own which, to quote F.K. Khan Durrani (*The Meaning of Pakistan*), forthwith sought “to assert its sovereign self ... The birth of national consciousness and the desire to live an independent sovereign life are really concomitant .... For a nation is a body ‘corporate’, ..., it has a soul, a will, of its own, and this collective soul reacts almost in the same manner as the individual soul: it refuses to coalesce with any other”.

Yet, the year 1940 becomes a turning point, a monumental watershed – if only because the self-perceived nationhood and the self-developed will to live as a nation were first proclaimed in that

year, and the political expression to that will was, moreover, given in the Lahore Resolution. To borrow Lord Acton's words:

Thenceforward there was a nation demanding to be united in a State — a soul, as it were, wandering in search of a body in which to begin life again; and, for the first time, a cry was heard that the arrangement of States was unjust — that their limits were unnatural, and that a whole people was deprived of its right to constitute an independent community.

Fortunately for Muslims nature had provided them with a territory which they could occupy and transform into a state as well as a cultural home for the newly proclaimed nation. Without such a territory, nationalism, to use Lord Acton's phrase, would have been "a soul, as it were, wandering in search of a body in which to begin life over again and dies out finding none".

All told, it were these two prerequisites — the will to live as a nation and a territory where they were demographically dominant —, as laid down by Ernest Renan, that had provided the intellectual justification for the Muslim claim to distinct nationalism of their own. In consequence, when, finally, they broke their unreflective silence and gave meticulous articulation to their demands, they spoke in terms of a separate Muslim nationhood. Hence Jinnah could claim in the 1940s that "by all canons of international law, we are a nation".

However, contrary what is usually assumed, Jinnah's two-nation theory was not based on religion, pure and simple, although it does figure as one of the critical attributes in his definition of separate Muslim nationhood. For instance, in his epochal 22 March 1940 Lahore address, he chose to spell it out in sociological and political terms, and argue it out on the cultural and civilizational dimensions:

Islam and Hinduism ... are not religions in the strict sense of the word, but are ... different and distinct social orders; [that] the Hindus and Muslim belong to two different religious

philosophies, social customs, literature, to two different civilizations, [that they] derive their inspiration from different sources of history ... [with] different epics, different heroes and different episodes. We wish our people [he declared], to develop to the fullest our spiritual, cultural, economic, social and political life in a way that we think best *in consonance with our own ideals* and according to the genius of our people. (italics added).

Likewise, in his letter to Gandhiji on 16 September 1944, he stressed the civilizational aspect:

We are a nation with our own distinctive culture and civilization, language and literature, names and nomenclature, sense of values and proportion, legal laws and moral code, customs and calendar, history and tradition, aptitudes and ambitions; in short, we have our own distinctive outlook on life and of life. By all canons of international law, was a nation.

A mere political community, placed as the Muslims were within India's body politic, could not claim an equitable share in power, as a matter of right, especially because the Westphalian model (1648) of sovereignty of "nations" and "sanctity" of borders, still dominant in the international system (e.g., consider Eriteria being tagged on to Ethiopia in the postwar settlement of the former Italian colonies in Africa under the UN auspices), had not come to be eroded as it has since 1990 (e.g., in the case of Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia). In contrast, a "nation", if also dominant in a specified territory, as the Muslims were in northeastern and northwestern India, can. Thus, the nationhood claim gave the Muslim quest for an equitable share in power a shot in the arm; it made the quest meaningful; it endowed it with a chance of success.

The Pakistan demand was raised on the premise that Hindus and Muslims were two separate nations. More specifically,

that Muslims were a separate nation in their own right in the subcontinental context, and were, therefore, entitled to the right of self-determination. Raised in ideological and political terms for the most part, the demand was argued at the macro level, with Islam as the cultural metaphor.

For Muslims in preparation India, with their deep horizontal, vertical, regional and linguistic cleavages, Islam alone could serve as a broad political platform *a la* Karl Deutsch (*Nationalism and Social Communication*)'s typology. A comprehensive, all-inclusive framework, a broad-based platform, so that all the ninety million Muslims in the subcontinent could be gathered incrementally under the all-embracing Pakistan canopy. Moreover, a platform not only transcending effectively their intracommunal cleavages, but also enshrining a cluster of shared beliefs, ideals and concepts that had lain deeply ingrained in their social consciousness over time, that had become enmeshed with the subterranean vagaries of their ancestral heritage and ethos, and that, moreover, was charged and saturated with emotions. Hence the choices of Islam as the rallying cry.

Jinnah's choice of this metaphor was also determined by the overriding fact that Islam, to quote Iqbal, had not only furnished the Indian Muslims with "those basic emotions and loyalties which gradually unify scattered individuals and groups", but had also worked as "a people-building force", transforming them progressively into "a well-defined people". The unity of Indian Islam, so far as it had achieved unity, may first and foremost be attributed to (what Montgomery Watt calls) "a dynamic image, the image or idea of ... the charismatic community". This explains how, scattered though they were across the length and breadth of the subcontinent in varying proportions, they had yet developed the will to live as a nation, and this on the basis of their "social heritage", to borrow a Toynbeean concept. This "national will" in turn provided the Indian Muslims with the intellectual justification and the political rationale for claiming a

distinct nationalism (apart from the pseudo-Indian or Hindu nationalism) for themselves.

Thus, the demand for Pakistan was entwined with the two-nation theory. Without that theory, the Pakistan demand would have been bereft of any intellectual base and political clout, nor justified on those grounds.

Even so, the two-nation theory was a paradigm, a conceptual framework, and a political construct, although bristling with ideological overtones, relevant only to the pre-1947 subcontinental context, in which the Muslims were denied an equitable share in power. The rise to statehood of the pre-1947, Muslim nation, in August 1947 has changed the *substratum* in Renan's nationality framework — that is, the field of battle and the field of work, which were provided by geography and the political developments over the previous six decades. And with this change, the geo-political context, in which the two-nation theory was propounded, in which it had become functional and had, moreover, held forth the promise of a Muslim homeland, had obviously been rendered a little irrelevant and obsolete. And this for the obvious reason that the Muslims had acquired a homeland of their own and had attained nationhood. Hence, given the shift in the *substratum*, the two-nation theory had also undergone a paradigm shift. Since August 14-15, 1947, therefore, it has been replaced by a new, post-partition, India-Pakistan paradigm.

This basic change in the loyalties and emotional attachment of the erstwhile Indian Muslim nation was, first, recognized, and called attention to, by Jinnah himself, a statesman that he was, while most other top Indian leaders (including Gandhiji) were calling on the Muslim minority in India to make the "loyalty" tests. On the eve of his departure from New Delhi on 7 August 1947, Jinnah gave the call for forgetting the (immediate) past, burying the hatchet, and starting "afresh as two independent sovereign States of Hindustan and Pakistan". The same message was

repeated in his August 11, 1947 address to the Pakistan Constituent Assembly. He also called upon both the Muslims in post-partition India and the Hindus in Pakistan to give unreserved loyalty to their respective dominions.

And, for now, the major premise is that with partition and independence, the two nations, encapsulated in the two-nation theory, have attained statehood, transforming themselves into Indian and Pakistani nations. And with reference to their respective countries and nations, their prime identification in the post-partition period is Indians and Pakistanis, and not Hindus and Muslims. Thus, in the new geo-political context, the two nations are India and Pakistan, and not Hindus and Muslim. (The author has recently published the only oral history on Jinnah — *In quest of Jinnah* [OUP, 2007]).