

MUSLIM COMMUNAL POLITICS AND PARTITION OF INDIA: IMPERIALIST AND CAMBRIDGE HISTORIOGRAPHY

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Abstract:

The Imperialist and Cambridge historiography on the Muslim Communal politics and partition of India and on the political changes among the Muslims of colonial India tend to fall into five separate categories. The historians of the first category are of the opinion that the omissions, tactical errors and diplomatic blunders on the part of the Indian National Congress changed the Muslim politics and led to the growth of the Muslim Communal politics subsequently resulting in the form of the partition of India. The second category of these historians are of the opinion that the forces of the colonial policy and the constitutional measures adopted by the colonial state helped to the emergence and growth of the Muslim communal politics and led to the partition of India. It has been suggested by the third category of these scholars that the growth of the Muslim separatism in India was manipulated and determined by the Muslim elites at the national and provincial level whose propaganda based on communal identification was responded to the Muslims of colonial India. The historians of the fourth category have argued that although the colonial policy and its evolution of the representative from of the government led to the emergence and consolidation of the Muslim communal politics but the demand of a separate Muslim state was not the design of Muslims of India. It has been viewed by the scholars of the fifth category that the Muslim separatism in colonial India and the partition of India was the result of the interplay between the three major political players i.e., the British, the Indian National Congress and the All India Muslim League and that the partition of India was a first major act of decolonization.

Key Words: Muslims, Politics, India

Main Text

The partition of India and the foundation of Pakistan on August 15, 1947 was an event of significant historical importance with far reaching consequences for India and Pakistan. It has thus attracted the attention of historical writings. However, to begin with, the political and social climate of India and Pakistan was not conducive enough to undertake an analytical and scholarly work on the subject. Lack of access to primary sources and cross-references and loss of several important sources in the wake of partition also contributed to it. It was much later that the works of scholarly value and historical importance began appearing. With the passage of time, new sources, new facts and new view-points came along and spurred the historians to ask new questions and look back with a fresh perspective on the history of the partition of India. The historical research on partition of India, as a result, emerges richer out of this ongoing process.

The Imperialist and Cambridge historiography on Muslim communal politics and partition of India constitutes a significant and voluminous part of the study of the history of partition of India. To begin with the Imperialist historiography on the partition of India was represented by H.V. Hodson, Penderel Moon, Nicholas Mansergh, Hector Bolitho and C.H. Philips.¹ It is generally believed that the writings of the early Imperialist historians on the partition of India were by the large a reflection of their purely colonial interests and colonial attitude. Later on the professional historians of the Cambridge school took over the mantle from the Imperialist scholars and they have further enriched the historiography on the Muslim communal politics and the partition of India during the last six decades. Among the Cambridge historians the writings of David Page, Peter Hardy, R.J. Moore, Farzana Shaikh, Paul Brass, Stanley Wolpert, Ian Talbot, David Gilmartin, Ayesha Jalal, Asim Roy, Ian B. Wells, Anita Inder Singh, Yashmin Khan and Narender Singh Serila may be termed as

significant perspectives on the study of the partition of India with the help of new found sources and fresh view points.²

The Imperialist and Cambridge historiography on the Muslim communal politics and partition of India unlikely to the popular historiography of India and Pakistan have not studied the partition of India on the bases of the two nation theory. These historians have not studied the Indian Muslims as a separate religious community who were maintaining their separate homogeneous identity as distinct from the Hindus since the medieval times rather they have studied the Muslims of colonial India simply as more Indians than Muslims.³ Although the Imperialist and Cambridge historians have studied the emergence and growth of the Muslim separatism during the colonial India only in terms of the political developments that was taking shape during the colonial India its, however, the author of the present paper is of the opinion that even than the above said historiography may not be placed in one compartment and it may not be treated on one platform. The author of this paper is of the opinion that the Imperialist and Cambridge historiography on the Muslim communal politics and partition of India and on the political changes among the Muslims of colonial India tend to fall into live separate categories.

The writings of Hector Bolitho, Penderel Moon, C.H. Philips and Nicholas Mansergh fall into the first category. These historians are of the opinion that the omissions, tactical errors and diplomatic blunders on the part of the Indian National Congress changed the Muslim politics and led to the growth of the Muslim communal politics which subsequently resulted in the partition of India.⁴ Hector Bolitho has focused on the events of 1928 and in his study he has asserted that M.A. Jinnah did his best to maintain Hindu-Muslim unity at the All-Parties Conference of Calcutta in December, 1928 but it was the Indian National Congress which made a tactical error at this Conference and the Congress had to suffer the loss of Jinnah's support who was a great man of the Muslims of India. Hector Bolitho has described this event as a parting of the ways between the Congress and the League which subsequently led to the partition of India.⁵

Penderel Moon in his interpretation has dwelt upon the issue of the Congress-League coalition ministry formation in the United Provinces after the Provincial Legislative Elections of 1937. It has been suggested by this scholar that the Congress refusal to share power with the Muslim League in 1937 deeply offended the Muslims and Jinnah and widened the breach between the Congress and the Muslim League. Penderel Moon is of the opinion that the events of 1937 were fatal error on the part of the Congress which became the prime cause of the creation of Pakistan.⁶ Henceforth, the Muslims began to rally behind the Muslim League and the League gained strength to strength. This historian has further recorded that a general lack of wisdom and statesmanship on the part of the Congress during the years 1937-1992, made Pakistan unavoidable. Thereafter, the British efforts to preserve the unity of India were sincere and well conceived – it is difficult to see what more they could have done – but passions had been so deeply aroused for human reason to control the course of events.⁷

C.H. Philips in his study has focused on the issue of the Second World War and the Congress and he is of the view that the Congress showed a fundamental lack of appreciation of the realistic of power by the withdrawal of all Congress ministries from office in reaction to the decision of the British Viceroy in 1939. According to C.H. Philips this was the tactical blunder on the part of the Indian National Congress and it was this breakdown of Congress which opened the way for the Muslim League and Pakistan.⁸ Nicholas Mansergh has primarily traced the events leading to the partition of India from 1942 and has said that the half - hearted attempt of the Indian National Congress in 1942 to try by rebellion to force the embattled British to quit India was a blunder of magnitude. This blunder, it has been suggested by this historian, had further communalized the relationship between the Hindus and the Muslims. Once domestic politics had become communal, Gandhi's bewildering fertility of ideas and arguments had disrupting effects on the Congressmen, confusing their sense of strategy and seemingly paralyzing their will to reach decision. Such a political crisis helped the Muslim League to reach upto its goal of the Pakistan.⁹

No doubt the above said Imperialist historians have very vividly examined the history of the Muslim communal politics and partition of India on the bases of the available primary sources at that particular period. These scholars have in fact laid the foundation of not only of the Cambridge historiography on this subject but have also assisted the Nationalist and Marxist historians on the

partition of India to further sharpen their arguments and their view-points. However, the author of this research paper, herewith, wishes to raise two significant issues which have been ignored by these well-known and reputed historians. Firstly these important historians had very simply absolved the British from the responsibility of the partition of India whereas the author of the present paper is of the opinion that it was only with the help of the British that the All-India Muslim League under the leadership of Muhammad Ali Jinnah consolidated its demand for Pakistan which subsequently led to the partition of India. No doubt the tactical errors of the Congress also proved beneficial to the success of the Muslim League.¹⁰

Secondly, the author of the present paper is of the opinion that in 1937 the Muslim League and Jinnah were neither defeated by and nor betrayed by the Congress. Muslim League and Jinnah, in fact, were defeated and challenged in their own constituencies. Muslims of India did not accept the Muslim League as their representative body and at the same time provincial Muslim leaders also refused to support or collaborate with the Muslim League. The author of this paper is of the view that the Muslim psyche and Jinnah was not offended with the attitude of the Congress because of the events of the 1937 but it was the attitude and behaviour of the Muslims of India towards Muslim League itself which led to a change in the politics of the Muslim League. Once defeated Jinnah and Muslim League realized the need to transform the nature, programmes, methods and tactics of the Muslim League, in order to project the League as the sole representative body of the Muslims of India.¹¹

The interpretations of David Page, Peter Hardy, R.J. Moore and Farzana Shaikh on the Muslim Communal Politics and partition of India, according to the present author, may be placed into the second category. The historians of this category are of the opinion that whatever assumptions of politics and political identity of Muslims of colonial India were, that were directed by the forces of colonial policy and constitutional measures which led to the emergence and growth of the Muslim communal politics and subsequently resulted in the partition of India.

R.J. Moore provides useful and important insights regarding the British policy and strategy towards Independence and partition of India. According to his opinion the British constitutional strategies helped to shape both the forces of the Muslim separatism and of the Indian nationalism. It was on the basis of the Government of India Act of 1935 that the Congress adopted the authoritarian attitude, and it was this Congress authoritarianism which in turn, shaped the response of the Muslim League. The Congress provincial ministries began to operate as the autonomous governments with in a federal structure, they accepted the Congress Working Committee as the legitimate directorate of a unitary government. The monolithic Congress stood in the place that the unitary Raj had vacated. This was the beginning of a new unitarism in the Congress which seriously affected its relations with the Muslims.¹²

R.J. Moore further argues that the emergence of powerful provincial interests in the Muslim majority provinces was a stepping stone to Pakistan. The Government of India Act of 1935 created autonomous Muslim provinces which encouraged the Muslim League to convert the process of provincialization into the process of the establishment of separate sovereign state of the Muslims. This was Jinnah's tyrannical idea formulated to prevail over the Congress totalitarian claim to be the Indian nation in microcosm.¹³

David Page examines the period from 1920 to 1932 when political interests were consolidated around communal issues and the Muslim attitude were consolidated towards the eventual withdrawal of imperial control. David Page is of the view that in the consolidation of political interests around communal issues, the imperial power played an important role. By treating the Muslims as a separate group, it divided them from other Indians. By granting them separate electorates, it institutionalized that division. This was one of the most crucial factors in the developments of communal politics. The Muslim politicians did not have to appeal to the non-Muslims and the non-Muslims did not have to appeal to the Muslims. This made it very difficult for a genuine Indian nationalism to emerge and after the introduction of Dyarchy Communal antagonism became a permanent feature of provincial politics. David Page further argues that the increased Muslim belligerence during the early 1930s forced the government to make the Communal Award, which in turn made Muslim Raj in Punjab and Bengal a real possibility and set the scene for the emergence of the Pakistan movement.¹⁴

Farzana Shaikh in her study has dwelt upon the issue of the quest for community among the Colonial Muslims. She argued that the Community consciousness among the Muslims of Colonial India led to the demand for separate electorate. The British conceded to the demand and the representation of the Muslims under the colonial government led to the logic of the parity and subsequently the partition of India. Farzana Shaikh has further asserted that the notion that Muslim representation was a trust, delegated exclusively to Muslim, was critical to the political consolidation of the League as the authoritative spokesman for Muslims in India and this political position of the Muslims of colonial India resulted in the demand and establishment of the sovereign state of Pakistan.¹⁵

Peter Hardy was the first historian of the Cambridge School who has discussed at length the issue of the constitutional measures and the emergence and growth of the Muslim communal politics during the Colonial India. He has argued that the Muslims during the 1920s acquire a constitutional identity and enter into all India politics. Peter Hardy has suggested that the constitutional measures not only strengthened the demand of partition in the Muslim majority provinces but also its demand was consolidated among the Muslims of the Muslim minority provinces. Interestingly, Peter Hardy has asserted that the establishment of Pakistan and the partition of India was not only the territorial partition of India but it was also the partition of the Muslims of Colonial India.¹⁶

The issues of the colonial policy and the constitutional measures during the Colonial India have been well examined by the above said Cambridge historians. These scholars have dwelt upon in length the evolution of the constitutional institutions and how these institutions were responded to by the Muslims of the Muslim majority provinces and the Muslims of the Muslim minority provinces. The author of the present paper, however, realize that these significant studies have focused only a little on the nature, character, ideology and programmes of the All-India Muslim League itself which of course is an important aspect of the study of the Muslim communal politics and partition of India.¹⁷

The interpretations of Paul Brass, Stanley Wolpert, Ian Talbot and David Gilmartin may be placed in the third category. These historians have explained the emergence and growth of the Muslim Communal politics and Muslim separatism during the Colonial India in terms of the adoption of religious values, religious symbols and Islamic idioms by the Muslim political elites. Paul Brass has suggested that the growth of the Muslim separatism in India was determined and manipulated by the Muslim elite whose propaganda based on communal identification was responded to by the Muslims of India. Paul Brass further argues that the Ideology of the Muslim separateness did not flow out of the objective differences between the Hindus and the Muslims but out of the use made of those differences through a conscious process of symbol selection. Nor was it the consequences of the objective circumstances of the Muslims in United Provinces, who were better placed than the Hindus in urbanization, literacy, English education, social communications and government employment. Paul Brass took the view that the Muslims political elite played a significant role in wining support for separatism, and he provides less importance to the part played by the religious institutions in arousing the thought of separatism.¹⁸

Stanley Wolpert, the biographer of Jinnah, has added new dimensions to the study on the Muslim communal politics and partition of India. His study revolved around the activities and leadership of Muhammad Ali Jinnah and he has credited Jinnah with the alteration of the course of Indian history. Stanley Wolpert is of the view that Jinnah and Muslim League was serious about the establishment of a sovereign state of Pakistan as early as in March 1940.¹⁹ Through the biographical discourses of Jinnah, Stanley Wolpert has argued that the Muslim elite under the leadership of Jinnah, at the national and provincial level, made a cynical misuse of the Islam and of the religious symbols. The tactical measures and the leadership strategies of the Muslim league and Jinnah, based on the religious mediums, culminated in the formation of the separate State of Pakistan.²⁰

The interpretations of Ian Talbot and David Gilmartin have dealt with the Muslim politics of the Colonial Punjab and the emergence of Pakistan. Both these scholars have argued that the Muslim elite of the Punjab, collaborated with the British and established the Muslim political hegemony in the Punjab before the Second World War. The cynical misuse of the religion by this elite led to the emergence of Pakistan and the partition of India. Ian Talbot and David Gilmartin have further suggested that Jinnah and the Muslim League had been successful enough in mobilizing strong support of the rural landed elite, clan leaders, *Pirs*, *Sufis* and *Sajjada-Nashins* who subsequently won

over the Muslim of Punjab for the cause of the Muslim League and Pakistan. The Punjabi Muslims were exhorted to support Pakistan, identifying themselves with the Prophet and Quran, and the *Pirs* and *Sufis* played a vital role in this process.²¹

The author of the present paper, now, wish to add one more aspect to the interpretations of this category of the Cambridge historiography on the Muslim Communal politics and partition of India. The present author is of the view that the growth of the Muslim communal politics, Muslim League and the demand of Pakistant was not only strengthened from above but also from below. The Muslim League's brand of puritan pristine and Arab-inspired Islam marginalized the rural landed elites, clan leaders, *Pirs*, *Sufis* and the *Sajjada-Nashins* and it had also eroded the social bases of the Muslim elite, thus these classes had no other option but to join the cause of Pakistan. The extensive use of the religious symbols and Islamic appeals aroused the common Muslims-rural and urban-to participated in a powerful mass movement for the demand of Pakistan.²²

The studies of Ayesha Jalal, Asim Roy, Ajeet Jawed and Ian B. Wells may be placed in the fourth category of those Cambridge historians who have focused on the Muslim Communal politics and the partition of India. By focusing on the role played by M.A. Jinnah, the scholars of this category have traced the development leading to the Muslim Communal politics and the demand of Pakistan. However, these scholars are of the view that the establishment of the separate state was not the goal of the Muslim League and of M.A. Jinnah. According to Ayesha Jalal and other scholars of this category the Lahore Resolution of March 1940 was a bargaining counter, which had the merit of being acceptable to the majority provinces of the Muslims and of being totally unacceptable to the Congress and in the last resort to the British also. Contrary to the conventional historiography on the partition of India these historians have suggested that the demand of Pakistan, for the Muslim League and Jinnah, was only a bargaining counter till as late as in 1947.²³

Ayesha Jalal has further argued that Jinnah's Pakistan did not entail the partition of India, rather it meant its regeneration into a union where Pakistan and Hindustan would join to stand together proudly against the hostile world without. This was not clarion call of pan-Islam, this was not pitting Muslim India against Hindustan, rather it was a secular vision where there was real political choice and safeguards, the India of Jinnah's dreams, a vision unfulfilled but noble nonetheless. Ayesha Jalal has asserted that Jinnah did not want Pakistan nor did he will it, however, lastly he had to yield to it because he had no control on the other forces, thus the creation of Pakistan was the tragic collapse of Jinnah's strategy²⁴ Asim Roy in his scholarly essay has followed the historiography of Ayesha Jalal and he has termed it as a revisionist historiography on the Muslim Communal politics and the partition of India²⁵.

It appears that the historians of this category of the Cambridge school have taken up the task of historical reconstruction by taking upon themselves the challenge of demolishing the interpretations on the role of Jinnah and the Muslim League for the partition of India or the making of Pakistan. The author of this paper is of the view that the historians of this category have very forcefully told their readers what Jinnah and Muslim League did not want but these scholars have not told their readers what Jinnah and Muslim League did want? If Jinnah and Muslim League were not serious about the foundation of a Sovereign state of Pakistan then why did Jinnah and the Muslim League muster the immense popularity of the demand of Pakistan among the Muslims of Punjab, Bengal, Sindh and North-West Frontier Province?

The writings of Anita Inder Singh, Yashmin Khan and Narender Singh Sarila can be placed in the fifty category. The historians of this category have discussed two issues. Firstly, the Muslim separatism in colonial India and the partition of India was the interplay between the three major political players i.e. the British, the Indian National Congress and the All-India Muslim League²⁶. Anita Inder Singh has discussed at length the relationship which existed between the Congress, Muslim League and the British. She has also discussed the growth of the Muslim League in the Muslim Majority provinces and the role played by M.A. Jinnah in the foundation of a Sovereign state of Pakistan. Anita Inder Singh has argued that the Mulsim League and Jinnah were serious about the demand for Pakistan and she has also apportioned the responsibility for partition on the role played by the Congress and the British Raj²⁷.

The Second issue which has been raised by this category of historians is regarding the beginning of the process of decolonization with the partition of India. Anita Inder Singh has suggested

that the partition of India and the transfer of power to India and Pakistan in August 1947 was the first major act of decolonization by the British with far reaching consequences on their international status²⁸. Yashmin Khan has also argued that the partition of India has been celebrated, in the British thinking at least, a successful act of British decolonization in comparison to the complications that bogged down other European powers in South East Asia and Africa²⁹. Similarly Narendra Singh Sarila has also made an attempt to study the crucial link between India's partition and British fear about the USSR gaining control over the oil wells of the West Asia - the wells of power. Once the British leaders realized that the Congress would not join them to play the great game against the Soviet Union, they settled for those willing to do so. In the process they did not hesitate to use Islam as a political tool to fulfill their objective and thus landed full support to the Muslim League. This study also dwelt upon the issue of pressure from the USA exerted on Britain in favour of India's independence in the hope to evolve a new post-colonial interest³⁰.

The inter-play between the Congress, Muslim League and the British and the issue of the decolonization have been well examined by this category of the Cambridge historians. However, these scholars have left certain issues/questions unanswered and unattended to. Was it only the activities and leadership of Muslim League and Jinnah which led to the partition of India and the establishment of the Sovereign state of Pakistan? Was it only the high politics of the Congress, Muslim League and the British which subsequently led to the partition of India? What about the results of the struggle between the powerful national movement under the leadership of the Congress and the Muslim mass politics under the leadership of the Muslim League ?

It is obvious from the foregone discussions that a lot have been written on the Muslim Communal politics and the partition of India by the imperialist and Cambridge historians and scholars. Needless to say that these scholars have produced a very valuable and voluminous literature of ever lasting historical significance. However as is the case with every aspect in the study of history, here too there is a room for further analysis. The availability of new sources, access to more private papers, ever evolving tools of historical research and the applications of the interdisciplinary approach will help the Cambridge historiography to further enrich its study on this significant and crucial subject of the modern Indian History.

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