



THE GAME THEORY OR THE BLAME GAME?: AN ANALYSIS OF THE HISTORIOGRAPHICAL TRADITIONS ON BRITISH-INDIAN PARTITION

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ABSTRACT: As rightly opined by social scientists, History (with a capital ‘H’) which revolves itself within the methodological, ontological and epistemological limitations, are narrative discourses painted by its authors. Hence, many a times, the study of history becomes nothing other than that of the study of historiography itself. The entire past is encoded within these historiographical narratives; and one of the notoriously famous of those narrative exercises were the British-Indian partition historiography. It is notorious enough because of the accusations it makes against the various agents of that time. The present paper takes up the analysis of this particular historiographical tradition on Partition. It plunges into the nuances of the accusations made within those historiographical traditions (mainly against the British State, Muslim League and the Congress Movement). The paper ends up asserting that these historiographies end up being a blame-game against one another.

KEYWORDS: Historiography, Partition, Communalism, British, Muslim League, Congress

INTRODUCTION

‘..it will be over my dead body. So long as I am alive, I will never agree to partition’

-M. K. Gandhi to Azad (3rd March 1947)

‘...a shadow and a husk – a maimed, mutilated and moth-eaten Pakistan’

-Quid- i- Azam Mohammed Ali Jinnah (response to Rajaji formula)¹

¹As cited from Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesperson*, Cambridge University Press, 1994, p.121.

These were the clamouring of two main mass leaders of that time. But mysteries of history acted upon the South Asian soil- Pakistan became a historical reality; Gandhi was still alive to witness it and Jinnah accepted the same ‘mouth eaten Pakistan’.

In the global scenario itself, the 20th century can be seen as ‘a century of partition’; however British India’s Partition was unique mainly because of the migrations, violence, chaos and traumas associated with it². As it was the most cataclysmic event, it overshadowed the release of subcontinent from the colonial rule. Not only in history, in historiography too partition is important because of the huge amount of historical works happened on the theme. Politicians, Historians and People have come up with all sorts of arguments to visualise partition (as it was fascinating and challenging to see how Muslims and Hindus who fought shoulder to shoulder in 1857 changed their mind sets within a short span of time.)

The present paper ‘THE GAME THEORY OR THE BLAME GAME?’ is an analysis of the historical works on Partition. As Keith Jenkins opines, Study of history (past) is necessarily ‘a study of historiography (historians)’. Historiography (to him) actually constitutes history³. Due to the paucity of access to primary sources and cross-references, amateur readers are forced to analyse this nuanced and complex historical reality through the eyes of the professional historians. The basic aim of this paper is to analyse whether these historical writings should be considered as a ‘Game Theory⁴’ or a ‘Blame Game⁵’; i.e. to ask whether the partition historiography is a study strategic decision making or is it the accusations exchanged by historical works. I’m tended to believe that Partition historiography is a Blame Game. By and large (may not be all), pioneering and scholarly works tends to blame and criticize some or the other organizations/ events for finding reasons for Partition. This paper will be giving arguments in support of the above tentative formulation. This introduction is followed by the blame game against British, followed to Muslim League, followed to Congress and it ends with the Conclusion.

‘NATIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS TO RELIGIOUS CONSCIOUSNESS TO
POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESSES’

BLAME GAME AGAINST THE BRITISH

Traditionally it has been blamed that the British policy of ‘Divide and Rule’ created rifts between the Indian communities, which had been historically united. This acquisition against British was very prevalent during the nationalist movement.

² See Salil Misra, ‘Partition of India in Context’, *YouTube*, 2nd March 2009.
URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iBDHuMx5nGc>

³ Keith Jenkins, *Rethinking History*, Routledge Publications, 1991, P.14.

⁴ Game theory (or interactive decision theory) is the study of strategic decision making applied in economics, political science, psychology etc; It is the study of mathematical models of conflict and cooperation between ‘intelligent rational decision makers’.

⁵ ‘Blame game’ can be seen as accusations exchanged among people who refuse to accept sole responsibility for some undesirable event.

Gandhi opined that ‘even without deliberating wishing, it (the British) will not allow real unity to take place’⁶. The historians (participating in this version of blame game) are of the opinion that the political identity of Muslims of colonial India were directed by the forces of colonial policy and constitutional measures of British pushed for the emergence and growth of the Muslim communal politics, which subsequently resulted in the partition of India.

David Page opines that by treating the Muslims as a separate group, British divided them from other Indians; and by granting separate electorates, it institutionalized that division. Peter Hardy has suggested that these 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. Hence as Page opined the Muslim politicians did not have to appeal to the non-Muslims and the non-Muslims did not have to appeal to the Muslims⁷. With British policies, Indians was set against Indians, caste against caste, community against community. For Page, the ‘final act of devolution was also a final act of division’⁸.

Scholars also opine that British used Muslim league (by legitimizing and accepting league’s claims and demands) as a counter to emergent Indian nationalism, spearheaded by the Indian National Congress. To Hardy, the declaration of 8th august 1940, Cripps mission etc. are examples of the same⁹. Even Sarvepalli Gopal opines that British’s policies gave legitimacy to Muslim league that congress is a communal party (he shows Wavell’s Simla conference as an example)¹⁰.

Most of the scholars (of this version) assert that the British attitude towards independence was largely shaped by the post-colonial politico strategic interests of Britain in South Asia. As Sucheta Mahajan argues that the partition decision is to be seen both as the first act of drama of common wealth diplomacy and the closing scene of divide and rule¹¹. Narendra Singh Sarila (the ADC to Lord Mountbatten in 1947-48) reveals in his account of Partition that British attitude as a part of the ‘Great Game’. To him, While Britain publicly appeared to be doing everything to secure a united independent India, which is what the Congress Party was advocating; it was secretly in favour of the creation of Pakistan (because they did not trust a Congress government to provide a bulwark against Russian incursions into the area) in order to

⁶ Rudranghsu Mukherjee ed. *The Penguin Gandhi Reader*, Penguin Books, 1993. p.276

⁷ David Page, *Prelude to Partition*, Oxford University Press, Delhi 1999, P.260.

⁸ Ibid. 264

⁹ Peter Hardy, *The Muslims of British India*, Cambridge University Press, 1972, P.232.

¹⁰ Sarvepalli Gopal, *Jawaharlal Nehru, A Biography*, OUP, Delhi, 1989, p.151.

¹¹ Sucheta Mahajan, *Independence and Partition*, Sage Publications, Delhi, 2000, P.386.

protect its strategic and economic interests from the damaging consequences of ceding imperial power.

However historians have criticized Sarila's other arguments¹². Contrary to the Sarila argument, most of the scholars opined that British preferred a unified centre. From time to time, British tried to keep up a unified union; even British thought (as per Khalid Sayeed's narrative) that working together in interim government will recede the idea of Pakistan¹³. At the same time as Ayesha Jalal opines, London has kept a 'time bomb' with the 20th February announcement of Clement Attle (which proposed early transfer of power)¹⁴. This speeded up both the pace of both independence and partition at the same time; they became two sides of the same coin, which Mahajan calls as 'twins, contingent phenomenon'¹⁵.

It is clear that there is some amount of exaggeration of British role associated with communalism and partition. The British colonial policies should have acted a catalysing agent for communalism and partition and not the creator of the Partition. Partition could have been a process (rather than a 'project') that happened with colonial policies. With the British policies, there was a transformation of community profile from local synchronistic community to 'pan-Indian neatly demarcated communities of Hindus and Muslims. However generalizing British policies is forgetting the historical realities of that time. After all as Maulana Azad (in his Presidential address of 1940) opined 'A foreign country can never encourage internal unity in subject country...for disunity is the surest guarantee for its continuance'¹⁶.

‘THE MUSSALMANS ARE A NATION BY ANY DEFINITION’¹⁷
(BLAME GAME AGAINST THE MUSLIM LEAGUE)

Next part of the blame game is against the Muslim league and inevitably against Jinnah. The orthodox nationalistic historiography propounded the twin Partition myths in popular and academic circles: The League for Partition and the Congress for

¹²As Mahajan opines that there is nothing 'untold' (to criticise the title of his work, 'The Shadow of the Great Game: The Untold Story of India's Partition') about this partition story and criticizes Sarila for not providing evidences. See Sucheta Mahajan, 'Nothing 'untold' about this story', *The Hindu*, March 5,2006.

¹³ Khalid Sayeed, *Pakistan The Formative Phase 1857-1948*, OUP, Karachi, 1960, p.149.

¹⁴ Jalal, *The Sole Spokesperson* , p.244.

¹⁵ Mahajan, *Independence and Partition*, P.391.

¹⁶ As cited from Mushirul Hasan, *India's Partition: Process, strategy and mobilization*, OUP, Delhi,2001, p.60.

¹⁷ M.A Jinnah, Lahore Speech (1940) as cited from Salem Qureshi, ed. *Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan*, OUP, 1998, p.132.

Unity. From a traditional historical perspective, the Partition of India has been seen as inevitable in which it is seen as the obvious and eventual culmination of the logic of communalism and Muslim separatism. However revisionists like Ayesha Jalal argues that it is an 'historical error' to see 1947 partition as an ultimate goal of Muslim league¹⁸.

Like other organizations, Muslim league too had different phases; its politics started crying for 'backward Muslim' minority and emerged to the level of calling Muslims a 'nation by any definition'. The development of the ideas like 'backward Muslims' and minority danger can be largely attributed to the politics played by British (W. W. Hunter's classical work, *The Indian Mussalmans* and the religion centric census data of British can be cited as examples¹⁹). With this, Muslims developed a Perception of crisis (i.e a perception of 'Islam in danger'); and they saw themselves too in danger.

Whether this crisis was already there or was it British creation is worth investigating. For instance Peter Hardy successfully breaks up the myth of the 'backward Muslims'²⁰. The Muslims in India was by no means a uniform community, as there were significant class and regional differences. However the perception of crisis forced some of the Muslims to whisper communalist fears into the ears of Muslim majority provinces (such as Punjab and Bengal). The Muslim League hinted that only a strong nationalist Muslim movement at the centre could protect Muslim interests in the periphery. But as Maulana Azad (in INC Presidential address of 1940) opines 'Are Muslims such a minority?' in India. To him, this 'fundamental mistake' (of believing themselves to be minority) led to 'countless misunderstanding'²¹ and the foremost among them was the 'Two Nation Theory'. The blame game against League is largely structured around this communalist separation, which culminated in religious nationalism.

Paul Brass has suggested that this growth of the Muslim separatism in India was determined and manipulated by the Muslim elite. Partition was not inevitable to him; he opines 'Muslim separatism is not the ineluctable movement of events on a historically predetermined course but the process of conscious choice by which men (the Muslims elites) decide, because it suits their interests to do so²²'. Brass was criticized by Francis Robinson, who finds exaggeration of role allotted to Muslim elites. Brass' thesis gives clues about the part (or misuses of power) played by

¹⁸ See Jalal, *The Sole Spokesperson*.

¹⁹ See William Wilson Hunter, *The Indian Musalmans*, Rupa paperback, 2002.

²⁰ Hardy, *The Muslims of British India*, p.254.

²¹ Hasan, *India's Partition*, p.62.

²² Robin Jeffrey, et.al. *India: Rebellion to Republic selected writings, 1857 to 1990*, Sterling Publishers Private Limited, 1990.

leadership. It's worth noting at this juncture about the debate about Jinnah's part in Muslim separatism. Muhammad Ali Jinnah, 'the founder of Pakistan' perhaps accrues more condemnation than any other leading figure of Indian nationalism. He remained as a heated topic because: A) it seemed intriguing how the man who was hailed as the 'Ambassador of Hindu-Muslim unity' (by Sarojini Naidu) became the one to demand an Islamic state. B) Because of the transformation of league from a decayed organization (which were unable to collect annual subscriptions) to a mass movement of 1940s under his leadership.

Peter Hardy focuses on the growing influence of Jinnah in Muslim league, his confrontation with local leaguers and the way league gets changed in order to meet the ideologies of Jinnah²³. 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. He opines that Jinnah and Muslim League were serious about the establishment of a sovereign state of Pakistan as early as in March 1940. Anita Inder Singh too points out through Lahore resolution, Jinnah envisaged a sovereign Pakistan²⁴.

However some scholars are of the view that the establishment of the separate state was not the goal of the Muslim League and Jinnah. According to Jalal and other scholars of this category, the Lahore Resolution of March 1940 was a 'bargaining counter'²⁵. 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. Viceroy Mountbatten receives a poor score from Jalal for failing to understand Jinnah's complex political position, and instead ripped apart Punjab and Bengal in the drive towards Indian independence²⁶. However, lastly Jinnah had to yield to partition because he had no control on the other forces, thus the creation of Pakistan, for Jalal was the tragic collapse of Jinnah's strategy. Some Pakistani authors like Saad Khairi goes further to the extent that Jinnah even had plans to retire to Bombay after being Governor General of Pakistan²⁷.

On a closer analysis with the primary sources, I'm tended to believe that Jalal's argument doesn't ring the bell, as it is evident from Jinnah's own speech of 1940. He may have thought of Pakistan demand as a 'bargaining counter' in the initial phase; but clearly not towards the end phase. So as to quote him (Lahore Presidential address, 1940):

²³ Hardy, *The Muslims of British India*, p.235.

²⁴ Anita Inder Singh, *The Origins of the Partition of India*, OUP, 1990, P.246.

²⁵ Jalal, *The Sole Spokesperson*, P.255.

²⁶ Ibid.253.

²⁷ As cited in Page, *Prelude to Partition*, P.24.

‘The only option is to divide into autonomous national states...it is a dream that Hindus and Muslims can ever evolve a common nationality’²⁸.

But over emphasising Jinnah’s role for communalist separation should be get rid of. Jinnah, being the 'sole spokesman' of Muslims (or league?) is forced to bear the sole blame for this complex political reality. Rumours and myths don’t need citations and authenticity; and at the same time, it spreads like forest fire. The rumour- ‘Islam in danger’ did lead Muslim league and Muslims into separatist ideologies (and in some instances to loyalist ideologies to the state).The overwhelming victory of league (particularly in presidencies like Madras) can be seen as examples of the same. But condemning all Muslims for this partition is unhistorical (as it is limiting the part played by Congress, Mahasabha and British) and illogical (As there were distinction within between Muslim community which strongly condemned Jinnah and partition (ulema of deoband is an example)²⁹. The ‘IF’ theory holds importance in Historical discourses. So if Muslims understood and followed the words of Maulana Azad- ‘I’m proud of being a Muslim and I’m proud of being an Indian too; I’m part of the indivisible unity that is Indian nationality’³⁰; this communalist separation and religious nationalism could have done away with.

‘GANDHI AND CONGRESS ARE NOT FIGHTING AGAINST BRITISH, BUT FOR CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY’³¹.

(BLAME GAME AGAINST THE CONGRESS)

This part of the blame game is against Congress; Scholars argue that 'totalitarianism' of the Congress High Command together with a number of pro-Hindu measures of Congress ministries, led to a decisive alienation of the Muslims which subsequently resulted in the partition of India. Sugatha Bose argued that nationalist parties in both India and Ireland like its colonial predecessors failed to negotiate a satisfactory solution to the problem of religious differences; this political failure happened because Indian nation was permeated by a Hindu ethos. Joya Chaterjee argues that there is no distinction between Congress and Mahasabha during forties both in membership and policies³². David Page too supports this by opining that being a conciliar party, congress increasingly depended on communal Hindu support³³.

²⁸Jinnah, Lahore Presidential address of 1940 as cited from Qureshi, ‘Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan’,p.135.

²⁹ Hardy, *The Muslims of British India*, p .243.

³⁰ As cited from Hasan, *India’s Partition*, p.66.

³¹ Jinnah, Lahore Presidential address of 1940 as cited from Qureshi, ‘Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan’,p.135.

³² As cited from Mahajan, *Independence and Partition* P.20.

Jalal opines that it was Congress which actually fought for partition (especially in Bengal) and not the league or Jinnah³⁴. Joya Chatterjee too sounds similar. To Jalal, Congress was strongly in support of partition because partition will eject Jinnah from the centre and also clear 'the way for a strong unitary government wholly under Congress'³⁵. By publically declaring its readiness, Congress actually 'tossed a two-headed coin'; if Jinnah accepted partition, congress will get a strong centre and if he reject, league will be forced to be in Indian union where congress is the 'real master' and it will automatically cut out league³⁶. She further suggests that that congress promised for common wealth initiatives to British, if granted a strong centre³⁷. It was at this juncture, Mountbatten followed congress view of Partition without any change (to Jalal, he just revised the 'plan they' to 'plan we')³⁸. V. P. Menon, being the 'mouth piece'³⁹(as Jalal puts it) of Patel, was actually playing cards for Congress. Though congress didn't share power with league in 1937, to Anita Singh, it 'never turned them (league) into supporters of sovereign Pakistan'⁴⁰. To Singh, the acceptance of office by 1946 is the 'greatest tactical mistake' of congress as it made the party 'the focus of popular Muslim discontent'⁴¹.

Sucheta Mahajan opined that Congress is criticized for the wrong reasons⁴². Congress was many a times misunderstood by Muslim league. As Mahajan argue, that when congress supported partition of Bengal and Punjab province, it is misinterpreted that the congress is following the footsteps of Hindu Mahasabha. A comparison between Congress and Mahasabha is 'non-ideological and a historical'. Mahajan opines that Joya Chatterjee doesn't account for the defeat of mahasabha at congress's hand during 1945-46. She further insists opines that by 1947, congress believed that only an immediate transfer of power could prevent the riots and direct action⁴³.

There is an obvious attempt to put blame on Congress; however all allegations can't be neglected too. Because partition (through any stand point of view) portrays the failure of Congress led Indian national movement (to be specific, the National unity doctrine for which the organization was supposed to be for). As Jinnah questions,

³³ Page, *Prelude to Partition*, P.261.

³⁴ Jalal, *The Sole Spokesperson*, P.262.

³⁵ Jalal, Ayeesha. 'The Sole Spokesperson', Cambridge University Press, 1994, P.246

³⁶ Ibid.247

³⁷ Ibid.249

³⁸ Ibid.274

³⁹ Singh, *The Origins of the Partition of India*, P.268.

⁴⁰ Ibid., P.237.

⁴¹ Ibid.251.

⁴² Mahajan. *Independence and Partition*, P.391

⁴³ Ibid., P.34.

'Earlier Gandhi used to say that he enjoyed the trust of all Muslims; why is not saying it today?'⁴⁴ Doesn't this proves congress and Gandhi's losing support for Muslims; is it because of the Hindu domination of congress is worth investing. After all how do we account for the increase in leagues membership after 1937?, the changed outlook of Old Khilafat leaders like Shaukat Ali (who toured countryside campaigning against 'congress Raj') and also the overwhelming majority league got throughout India 1940s.

One thing is clear, i.e. in the shadow of perceived crisis and danger, Congress was seen as communal as Mahasabha. Even Congress movements like Quit India Movement (1942) began to be seen in that light. Khalid Sayeed opines that Jinnah always thought that congress had Quit India Movement to coerce the British to surrender power to them; he also sees 'Direct Action' as a counter movement to Quit India Movement⁴⁵. It failed to portray/ function as the representative of all Indians; hence Muslim elites and league saw a great threat in the congress ministries.⁴⁶ Juxtaposing Mahajan's and Jalal's assertions, it is clear that though, AICC accepted partition as 'final settlement'⁴⁷, and AIML saw it as 'compromise'⁴⁸.

'Thousand years of our joint life has moulded us into a common nationality; it's not artificial...we have now become an Indian nation, united and indivisible'⁴⁹.

CONCLUSION

The problem of majority- minority conflict is not solely an Indian problem. But As Nehru opined those who proposed partition is moving on 'an emotional plane' only and those who opposes it moves on 'a plane of imagination'⁵⁰. As there couldn't be any common ground for both imaginative and emotional planes; British India was partitioned. Without a chronological survey of events, it is difficult to give reasons for the beak up between the Hindus and Muslims. Superficially, partition took place because of the 'surging waves of Muslim communalism' since 1937 and mainly 'because of the long-term failure of the Congress to draw the Muslim masses into the national movement' along with British's policy of 'Divide and Rule'.

⁴⁴ Jinnah, Lahore Presidential address of 1940 as cited from Qureshi, *Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan*, p.135.

⁴⁵ Sayeed, *Pakistan The Formative Phase*, p.152.

⁴⁶ Hardy, *The Muslims of British India*, p .228.

⁴⁷ Mahajan, *Independence and Partition*, P.335.

⁴⁸ Jalal, *The Sole Spokesperson*, P.287.

⁴⁹ Maulana Azad (INC Presidential address of 1940) as cited from Hasan, *India's Partition*, p. 68.

⁵⁰ Nehru, 'Discovery of India' as cited from *ibid.*, p.78.

All scholars are on agreement regarding to the pressure given by communal riots for partition. Leaders like Nehru considered 'partition is better than murder of innocent citizens'⁵¹. Also Confronted with a choice between 'unity' and a 'strong centre', Nehru, Jinnah, Patel and other leaders was steadily beginning to favour preferred Partition and a strong centre rather than unity with weak centre; they thought it be to better than Balkanization (as Mahajan opines, they saw partition as a 'harmless cousin' to balkanization')⁵².She argues that Gandhi and the nationalist accepted partition because it seemed 'Popular will' or 'People's choice' (as it was evident from election results). Also as Gandhi (Harijan, nov.17, 1946) feared, 'If we continued quarrelling each other, independence would vanish...firmly implant the third power in India'. This fear may also have contributed.

In the above paragraphs, we have attempted to analyse some of the Scholars, Politicians and Historians narrative on Partition. As E. H. Carr opines 'no existing interpretation is wholly objective, one interpretation is as good as another';⁵³ With the passage of time, new sources, new facts and new view-points will emerge; historians will ask new questions and look back older debates with a fresh perspective. However one section/community will blame other, one historical work will criticize the other and the Blame Game will go on; similarly the historical research on partition of India, as a result, emerges richer out of this on-going process. But I guess the main question to ponder (from these historiographical studies) should be wasn't partition inevitable? The Partition of India was not inevitable. The question of majority-minority conflict is not just Indian problem and hindsight experiences shows that Partition of India never solved this conflict. As Mishra opines, on the contrary to the beliefs, partition actually intensified problems in south Asia⁵⁴. The impact left on the minds of those who lived through these traumatic times persists until this day. Even though there are separate nations, chaos still persists. Muslims were further reduced into minority (25 to 12%) in India which leading to crisis than '*perception of crisis*', India- Pakistan wars, unresolved Kashmir issue, further partition in 1971 are a few examples.

Though it doesn't seem viable in the near future, I'm hoping for a re-union, a '*ghar vapasi*' (not India going back to Pakistan or vice versa; but the real unity of minds). As Jawaharlal Nehru opined, 'The basic feeling of unity and world developments will later bring divided parts nearer to each other and result in unity'⁵⁵.

⁵¹ Nehru's Speech at AICC meet in delhi, 15th june1947.

⁵² Mahajan, *Independence and Partition*, P.351.

⁵³ E.H Carr,. *What is History*, penguin books, 1961, p.27.

⁵⁴ Salil Misra, 'Partition of India in Context', *YouTube*, 2nd March 2009.
URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iBDHuMx5nGc>

⁵⁵ Nehru, 'Discovery of India'-as cited from Hasan, *India's Partition*, P.76.

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