



**Research Article**

## **GANDHI'S VIEWS ON PARTITION: AN EVALUATION**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The Indian freedom struggle was perhaps the greatest mass movement in the world history. The idea was built around 1919 that the people had to and could play an active role in politics and in their own liberation. This idea succeeded in politicizing and drawing into political action a large part of the Indian people. As on 15<sup>th</sup> August, 1947, the British rule came to an end and the two dominions-India and Pakistan took shape. With this there was large scale migration of population with untold violence, murder, looting, rape etc. Gandhi considered division of India by the British a disaster. He warned the nation about ruin of the country would have to face if they allowed the British to divide India on communal lines before handing over the power. Gandhi accepted partition, but deeply deplored the communal violence that was taking place at that time. This paper is an attempt to explore Gandhi's ideas on partition.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

India had always remained the land of migrants since ancient time. The Aryans came from central Europe and then came the Persians, Iranians and Parsis and settled down in India. Moghuls were next to them to settle down permanently in India. The great Mongol invader, Chengis Khan, invaded and looted India many times. Alexander the great wanted to conquer India but went back after a battle with Porus. Similarly, Chinese visitor was Hieun Tsang. He visited ancient Indian universities of Nalanda and Takshila in pursuit of knowledge. Columbus landed America in his pursuit of India. Similarly Vasco da Gama from Portugal came to trade his country's goods in return for Indian species. The French also established their colonies in India. Next were Britishers and after the battle of Plassey in 1757, they ruled over India for nearly 200 years. The mutiny of 1857 began with a revolt of the military soldiers at Meerut. The mutiny is essentially regarded as the first war of independence. On 15 August 1947, a hard earned, prized freedom was won after long, glorious years of struggle. The Indian freedom struggle was perhaps the greatest mass movement in the world history. After 1919, it was built around the basic notion that the people had to and could play an active role in politics and in their own liberation, and it succeeded in politicizing and drawing into political action a large part of the Indian people.<sup>1</sup>

On 15<sup>th</sup> August, 1947, the British rule came to an end and the two dominions-India and Pakistan took shape.

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There was large scale migration of population with untold violence, murder, looting, rape etc. The sufferings of the refugees presented a sorry sight. India was to be divided but partition was not being imposed. It had been accepted by Nehru, Patel and a majority of the Congress leaders. Gandhi had serious doubts on the wisdom of this decision. The very violence, which in the opinion of his Congress colleagues and that of the British Government provided a compelling motive for partition was, for him an irresistible argument against it, to accept partition because of the fear of civil war was to acknowledge that 'everything was to be got if mad violence was perpetrated in sufficient manner.'<sup>2</sup> Soon after the Gandhi's rejection of communal award in 1932, Jinnah returned from self-imposed exile in London in 1934 to take over the leadership of the Muslim League. However, the leader was very different from the Jinnah who warned Gandhi about the dangers of mixing religion with politics in 1920. He now decided to emulate Gandhi. The Qaid-e-Azam (Great leader), as he came to be known among his followers, eventually outdid the Mahatma in his use of religion for political purposes. Jinnah argued that Hindus and Muslims were not just a majority and a minority community but two distinct nations.

Gandhi considered division of India by the British a disaster. He warned the nation about ruin the country would have to face if they allowed the British to divide India on communal lines before handing over the power. Congress abandoned its age-long stand against division of the country on communal and religious lines by partition of the Punjab into Hindu and Muslim majority areas without consulting Gandhi. However, the decision of the Congress made Gandhi more determined to

fight to prevent the country from the disaster of division at British hands. Gandhi outlined the proposal as the solution of the Indian problem that he wanted Mountbatten to adopt to prevent partition of the country before transfer of power and British withdrawal by June 1948. Mountbatten told her advisors about "Mr. Gandhi's amazing personal influence which might induce Congress to accept" his plan and that "it would not be very easy for Mr. Jinnah to refuse Mr. Gandhi's offer". The assessment that he gave to his advisors was that "basically, Mr. Gandhi's object was to retain the unity of India" and that "Mr. Gandhi honestly felt... that Muslim's fear must be removed before it could be made to work better. Once the British had handed over to a unified India, Mr. Gandhi doubtless thought that the Indians themselves would be able to adjust matters and setup some sort of Pakistan if necessary."<sup>3</sup>

According to Prof. Stanley Wolpert, "Gandhi's offer would never be conveyed to Jinnah", writes Prof. Wolpert. "Mountbatten opted first to discuss the matter with Nehru, whose reaction was totally negative. Nehru was shocked to learn that his Mahatma was quite ready to replace him as premier with Jinnah. After telling Mountbatten how 'unrealistic' Gandhi's solution was, Jawaharlal said, he was anxious for Gandhi to stay a few days longer in Delhi" as he had been away for several months and "was rapidly getting out of touch with events at the centre." Prof. Wolpert further added that, "There was a chance that the Mahatma's solution may have worked and saved the country", wrote Prof. Wolpert, "Perhaps even if Jinnah was offered the entire central government on a platter with the whole cabinet under his personal control, he might have dismissed it with a negative wave of his long fingered hand. Yet it was an exquisite temptation to place before him. It was a brilliant solution to India's oldest, toughest, greatest political problem. The Mahatma alone was capable of such absolute abnegation, such instant reversal of political position. Gandhi understood Jinnah well enough, moreover, to know just how potent an appeal to his ego that sort of singularly generous offer would have been. It might just have worked; surely this was a King Solomon solution. But Nehru had tasted the cup of power too long to offer its nectar to anyone else, least of all to Quide-Ajam (Jinnah)."<sup>4</sup>

Gandhi accepted partition, but deeply deplored the communal violence that was taking place at that time. In fact, Gandhi had been scheduled to leave for a peace march to Lahore from Delhi, but was killed just four days before he could begin the march. Gandhi had also pleaded before the government of India to try and maintain friendly relations with the government of Pakistan. It can be argued that Gandhi was as vehemently opposed to partition as it is generally believed. However, had the partition plan not had Gandhi's passive support, it would surely have been vetoed by congress, since Gandhi was still its unquestionable leader. It appears that he acquiesced to the partition plan only to avoid communal tension.<sup>5</sup>

Gandhi had started this mission from South Africa. He had forged unity among the Indian communities in his fight against racial discrimination in South Africa. On his return to India, Gandhi tried to unite Hindus and Muslims with each other. Gandhi had begun to think of the deteriorating relations

between the communities in 1924. He never viewed the Hindu Muslim problem as a question of bargaining. He wanted Hindus to adopt an attitude of self surrender and that they should be ready for any sacrifice. He asserted that expectations for the return actions should not be there.<sup>6</sup> He was deeply hurt by the spread of communal violence and he pleaded people to find out an effective remedy for that. Gandhi alluded to the connection between the awakening among the slumbering masses and communal disturbances in his presidential speech at the Belgaum Congress in 1924. He said, "Interested persons who were disappointed during the palmy days of non-cooperation, now that it has lost the charm of novelty, have found their opportunity and are trading upon the religious bigotry and/or the selfishness of both communities... religion has been travestied... trifles have been dignified by the name of religious tenets which, the fanatics claim, must be observed at any cost. Economic and political causes have been brought into play for the sake of fomenting trouble. The culminating point was reached in Kahat."<sup>7</sup>

After the adoption by the Muslim League of the Pakistan resolution at Lahore in March 1940, the communal tension, this had been building up since 1937, increased rapidly. There were serious communal outbreaks in Ahmedabad, Bihar, Bombay, Amraoti, Dacca and other places in 1941. The occasion for rioting in some places was provided by the celebration of Pakistan day and anti Pakistan day. Gandhi said, "I cannot think in terms of narrow Hinduism or narrow Islam. I am wholly uninterested in patch work solution. India is a big country, a big nation composed of different cultures, which are tending to blend with one another, each complementing the rest. If I must wait for the completion of the process, I must wait. It may not be completed in my day. I shall love to die in the faith that it must come in the fullness of time. I should be happy to think that I had done nothing to hamper the process. Subject to this condition, I would do anything to bring about harmony... The partition proposed has altered the face of the Hindu-Muslim problem. I have called it an untruth. There can be no compromise with it. At the same time I have said that, if the eight crores of Muslims desire it no power on earth can prevent it, notwithstanding opposition, violent or non violent."<sup>8</sup>

Another aspect of Gandhi's teachings which the moderates' leaders abhorred was his equating of morality with religion and stressed that religion was bound to degenerate into religiosity and fostered fanaticism and frenzy which nowadays is called religious fundamentalism. They feared that fanaticism would produce hatred, and this would, in turn, lead to violence again and again. The situation in Calcutta had been going out of hand even before the communal holocaust of August 16, 1946. Gandhi had written many months before this gruesome tragedy, "Calcutta has earned a bad repute of late. It has seen too many wild demonstrations during the last few months. If the evil reputation is sustained for some time longer, it will cease to be the city of palaces, it will become the city of dead."<sup>9</sup> Similarly the situation in western India was not free from worry.

The repudiation by the Muslim League of the Cabinet Mission Plan towards the end of July 1946 proved to be a signal for large scale rioting. Though Jinnah had not spelt out the

character of his direct action, however, it was clear that action would not remain peaceful.

The League's chief concern currently was the installation of the Muslim League Government in Pakistan Province and declared that under no circumstances the authority of new government would be accepted. Bengal was already a League province. The League Direct Action Programme was gradually expanded and intensified after the formation of the interim government in September. It spread to Noakhali and Tippera in East Bengal and then to Assam and finally the North-Western provinces. The entry of the Muslim League into the interim government did nothing to abate the fury of the riots. The approach of the top congress leadership to the question of communal riots was not the same as Gandhi's. After the great Calcutta killing these leaders had demanded that the Bengal Ministry should be superseded on the ground of dereliction by it of its basic duty to maintain order and that the governor should be asked to go into section 93. This demand they had renewed after they heard about fresh outbreaks in Noakhali and Tippera in Bengal. Gandhi did not favour this course. He held that the responsibility to maintain order was that of the ministry and above all, the people and the majority community.

Another issue on which Gandhi differed from Jawaharlal and Vallabhbhai was the role of state power, of police forces and the Army in suppressing riots. Jawaharlal was keen on quelling the riots by force no matter what the cost. On arrival in Calcutta he burst out in anger and said, "I have never been so silent for so long when I felt as strongly as I have been during the last few days. If anybody has mistaken my silence, he does not know me. What has happened in other parts of India and more so in Eastern Bengal has been so ghastly that it is even sufficient to wake up the dead. I am not dead, I am very much alive."<sup>10</sup> From Calcutta he went to Patna. During his stay in Bihar, he addressed large meetings. He told public meeting at Fatwa on 4 November, "It is shameful that Hindus should try to kill a handful of Muslims who are living as their neighbours in the province...I warn you that police will come and shoot you if you do not stop the murder, arson and loot that has been going on. I have dropped all my Delhi engagements till peace is restored in Bihar."<sup>11</sup>

According to Gandhi, "For me the only question for immediate solution before the country is the Hindu-Mussalman question. I agree with Mr. Jinnah that Hindu-Muslim unity means swaraj. I see no way of achieving anything in this affiliated country without a lasting heart unity between Hindus and Mussalmans of India. I believe in the immediate possibility of achieving it, because it is so natural, so necessary for both, and because I believe in human nature."<sup>12</sup>

India became independent in 1947. Though the kind of freedom was not the same for which generations of Indian people had fought. It is argued that Congress leadership was equally guilty for the partition of India along with Jinnah, the leader of the Muslim League. Gandhi had opposed the division till the last. However, he was perceived by a group of misguided people as the person responsible for the division of India.

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