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# UNIT 36 COMMUNALISM AND THE PARTITION OF INDIA

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## Structure

- 36.0 Objectives
- 36.1 Introduction
- 36.2 Background to Pakistan
  - 36.2.1 Transformation of the Muslim League
  - 36.2.2 Extremist Phase of Hindu Communalism
  - 36.2.3 The British Policy
- 36.3 Post-War Developments
  - 36.3.1 Simla Conference and Elections
  - 36.3.2 The Cabinet Mission
  - 36.3.3 Formation of Interim Government
  - 36.3.4 Fixing of a Time Limit for British Withdrawal
  - 36.3.5 The Third June Plan and its Outcome
- 36.4 Congress and Partition
- 36.5 Congress's Handling of the Communal Problems
  - 36.5.1 Pitfalls of Conciliation
  - 36.5.2 The Basic Failure
- 36.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 36.7 Key Words
- 36.8 Answer to Check Your Progress Exercises

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## 36.0 OBJECTIVES

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After reading this Unit you will be able to:

- explain the nature of communalism in the last decade of British rule,
- get an idea of the background to the demand for Pakistan,
- trace the political developments leading upto the partition of India,
- assess the role played by Muslim League, the British and the Congress in the creation of Pakistan.

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## 36.1 INTRODUCTION

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In Unit 14 of Block IV you learnt about the various forces which led to the emergence and growth of communalism in modern India. You have already become familiar with the major developments related to communalism upto 1940. However, the 1940s represent the most crucial and decisive phase of communalism. It was in this period that the biggest communal demand — the demand for Pakistan—was put forward, and popularised by the Muslim League. This period also witnessed the actual coming into being of Pakistan in 1947. This Unit attempts to explain the process of the formation of Pakistan, and gives you a summary of the major events which led to it.

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## 36.2 BACKGROUND TO PAKISTAN

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The demand for Pakistan did not arise in a vacuum. It was a product of certain political developments which took place after 1937. The period after 1937 witnessed serious changes in the politics of both the Hindu communal and the Muslim communal forces. In the popularisation of the Pakistan demand the British Policy also played a very active role, by giving it acknowledgement and credibility. Let us look at their role separately.

### 36.2.1 Transformation of the Muslim League

The year 1937 was a turning point in the history of Muslim communalism. In the elections held for the Provincial Legislative Assemblies that year, the League won only 109 out of

492 reserved Muslim seats and only 18% of the total Muslim votes. The poor election results showed the League that it must expand its popular base among different sections of the Muslim population, particularly among the urban lower middle classes. A radical socio-economic and political programme was ruled out for achieving the purpose, as the existing social base of the League was among the landlords and loyalist elements. Therefore the League raised the cry of "Islam in danger" and threat from the impending "Hindu Raj". To appeal to save one's religion from the threats being forced upon it soon turned into a campaign of hatred against the followers of other religions. According to W.C. Smith, communal propaganda was full of "fervour, fear, contempt and bitter hatred". Jinnah and other League leaders declared that the real aim of the Congress was not independence but a Hindu Raj which would enable them to fulfil their basic motive — the domination of Muslims and extermination of their faith. Once the prospect of a Hindu Raj became a deep-seated fear in the Muslim psyche it was easy to drive home the need for a separate homeland where the Muslims could live and practise their faith in freedom. The demand for Pakistan inevitably flowed from the politics of fear and hatred adopted by the League after 1937. At its Lahore session in March 1940, the League passed the famous "Lahore resolution" demanding a sovereign state for the Muslims on the ground that Hindus and Muslims were two nations.

### 36.2.2 Extremist Phase of Hindu Communalism

The Hindu communalists on the other hand had fared even worse than their Muslim counterparts in the 1937 election. The same choice faced them, they had either to obtain the support of the masses or face extinction. Their predicament was aggravated in 1938 when Congress disallowed communalists from working within the Congress organisation. They needed a new basis and a new programme and resorted to appeals to religion and the whipping up of fear and hatred, like the Muslim League had done.

Madan Mohan Malaviya's place was now taken by leaders who were willing to take their parties in a 'fascist' direction — V.K. Savarkar of the Hindu Mahasabha, and M.S. Golwalkar of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. Golwalkar's book, *We*, became the manifesto of Hindu communalism. The Muslims were vilified and Congressmen were condemned for supporting "our most inveterate enemies". The Muslims were told that they could stay on in India with respect if they ceased to be foreigners, i.e. become Hindus. Otherwise they would not be given citizen's rights, let alone any privileges or special treatment as minorities. Asserting that the Hindus were the only nation living in India and that Muslims should either leave or live as second class citizens was the Hindu communalists' version of the two nation theory and the demand for a "separate homeland".

The language of Hindu communalism became extremely vicious by 1946-47. As communal riots spread and Congress was unable to stall them, or stem the drift towards Pakistan, Hindu communalists expanded their influence by posing as the saviours of Hindus. They accused the Congress leaders of emulating the Hindus by their talk of non-violence and communal unity and exhorted Hindus to retaliate and teach a lesson to the Muslims. Their stance became even more aggressive after partition as the communalised atmosphere provided fertile soil for their growth. The demand was raised that since Pakistan was an Islamic state, India should be declared a Hindu Raj. When their hope of overthrowing the government (by creating a state of general disorder by fomenting riots) was not realised they turned to slander of Congress leaders. Even Gandhiji was not spared of the charge of treason to the Hindu nation (because of his alleged softness to Muslims and Pakistan) — cries of "Death to Gandhi" were raised at R.S.S. and Mahasabha meetings and Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated on 30 January 1948. The killing of Gandhi clearly showed that communalism and communal forces had reached their most aggressive phase. It was precisely this transformation of communalism — of which Gandhiji's assassination was a manifestation — which provided a hostile climate for the creation of Pakistan.

### 36.2.3 The British Policy

The growth of Muslim communalism was considerably aided by the whole-hearted official backing given to it by the British Government. By 1937 the policy of divide and rule really amounted to keeping the Hindu-Muslim divide unbridgeable. All other divisive techniques had virtually become non-viable at that particular juncture. Earlier the colonial authorities had pitted the landlords and the backward and schedule castes against the National Movement and tried to split the Congress into Right and Left wings, but without

success. The elections of 1937 showed that the only weapon left in the armoury of the British to devide Indian nationalism was communalism.

After the outbreak of the Second World War the Muslim League was assiduously fostered by Viceroy Linlithgow. The Pakistan demand was used to counter the demand of the Congress that the British should promise that India would be free after the War and as proof of their sincerity, transfer actual control of the government to Indians immediately. The British pointed out that Hindus and Muslims must come to an agreement on how power was to be transferred before the process could begin. The League was officially recognised as the representative voice of Muslims (even though its performance in the last elections hardly substantiated this claim) and promised that no political settlement would be made unless it was acceptable to the League. This was a blanket power of veto, which Jinnah was to use to good effect after the War had ended.

**The Cripps Mission: March-April 1942**

In March 1942 Stafford Cripps, (a Labour Party leader with friendly links with many leaders of the Congress) headed a mission to India whose declared intention was “the earliest possible realisation of self-government in India”. However, the actual provisions of the offer belied this declaration by Cripps. Dominion status, not full independence was promised and that too after the War, and the people of the princely states were to be represented in the proposed Constituent Assembly by nominees of the princes.

It was clear that the British would retain control over defence in the new Executive Council. The Congress could hardly have accepted what was, according to the Secretary of State, Amery, a conservative, reactionary and limited offer. But above all the Cripps; proposals brought in ‘Pakistan’ through the backdoor via the “local option” clause. Provinces were given the right to sign individual agreements with Britain about their future status should they choose to reject the new constitution that would be framed.

Though the Cripps Mission failed, Cripps’ proposals gave a fillip to the activities of the Muslim League and provided legitimacy to the Pakistan demand by accommodating it in their provision for provincial autonomy. At a time when the demand had hardly been taken seriously by Indians, its sympathetic consideration by officialdom was a great service to the cause of Pakistan.

**Check Your Progress 1**

1) Why did the Muslim League raise the cry of Islam in danger? Answer in ten lines.

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- 2) Read the following statements and mark right ( ✓ ) or wrong (x)
- i) Hindu communalism took a ‘fascist’ turn after 1937-38.
  - ii) The Cripps proposals were a milestone on the pathway to Pakistan.
  - iii) The British Government tried to check the growth of Muslim communalism after 1940.

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**36.3 POST-WAR DEVELOPMENTS**

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making of Pakistan. The conditions of partition and the ultimate shape of Pakistan depended almost entirely on developments in these two years.

### 36.3.1 Simla Conference and Elections

At the end of World War II, at the initiative of the Viceroy, Wavell, the Congress leaders were released from jail in mid June 1945 and invited to Simla to work out an interim political agreement under which Indians would be responsible for running the country. The Congress was willing to cooperate and gave in its list of nominees but Jinnah decided to test the power of veto given to him by the British. He insisted that the League alone had the right to nominate Muslims to the Executive Council. This was embarrassing for the government as this denied representation to the Muslims of the Unionist Party of Punjab, which had supported the British staunchly through out the War. But the present and future interests were considered more important than past loyalty and Wavell preferred to announce the breakdown of the Conference rather than bypass the League. Jinnah's power to veto the constitutional progress had been upheld.



19. Nehru and Jinnah at Simla.

#### Elections — The Watershed

The elections held in the winter of 1945-46 to the Central and Provincial Legislative Assemblies were fought by the League with a straight forward communal slogan— “A vote for the League and Pakistan was a vote for Islam”. Mosques were used for election meetings and *pirs* (holy men) persuaded to issue *fatwas* (directives) that Muslims must vote for the League. The choice between Congress and the League was portrayed as a choice between the *Gita* and the *Koran*. It was small wonder then, that the League made a clean sweep of the Muslim seats.

### 36.3.2 The Cabinet Mission

By early 1946 the British authorities had come to the conclusion that a graceful withdrawal from India was the best option for them. The Cabinet Mission was sent to India in March 1946 to establish a national government and work out a constitutional arrangement for transfer of power. Now when the British had decided to leave it was believed that the old policy of divide and rule would no longer be suitable. British strategies in the Indian subcontinent after independence, it could be argued, would be better served if India was united. It was believed that a united India, which was friendly with Britain, could be an active partner in the defence of the Commonwealth, whereas a divided India's defence potential would be weak and conflict between India and Pakistan would frustrate the joint defence plans.

The change, in the British attitude towards the Congress and the League around this time reflects this understanding. The British Prime Minister, Attlee, declared on 15th March 1946 that "a minority will not be allowed to place a veto on the progress of the majority". This was in sharp contrast to the Viceroy Wavell's attitude during the Simla Conference in June-July 1945 when Jinnah had been allowed to wreck the Conference by his insistence on nominating all Muslims. The Cabinet Mission also believed that Pakistan would not be viable as a separate entity. Therefore the plan that was drawn up by the Mission was to safeguard the interests of the Muslim minority within the overall framework of unity of the country. Three sections were planned which would have separate meetings to work out their constitutions. The Congress provinces like Madras, Bombay, U.P., Bihar, Central Provinces and Orissa, would form group A; Punjab, N.W.F.P and Sind would go into Group B and Bengal and Assam would make up Group C. The common centre would look after defence, foreign affairs and communications. A province could leave the group to which it was assigned after the first general elections and after ten years it could demand modification of both the group and union constitutions.

#### Ambivalence over Grouping

Disagreement arose between the Congress and the League over the issue of grouping. The Congress demand was that provinces should have the option *not* to join a group at a very beginning, rather than wait till general elections were held. The Congress raised this objection keeping in mind the Congress ruled provinces of Assam and N.W.F.P., which had been placed in sections C and B. The League demanded that provinces be given the right to modify the Union Constitution immediately and not wait for ten years. Thus, the basic problem was that the Cabinet Mission Plan was not clear about whether grouping was compulsory or optional. In fact the Cabinet Mission deliberately refused to clarify its stand, even when asked to do so. This was because of the hope that their ambivalence might reconcile the irreconcilable position of the Congress and the League, but in effect, it only complicated matters.

Soon it was obvious that the League and the Congress were at cross-purposes in their interpretation of the Mission Plan. Both parties saw it as a confirmation of their stand. Sardar Patel drew satisfaction from the fact that Pakistan was now out of the picture and the League's power of veto had been withdrawn. The League made it clear (in the 6th June 1946 statement) that it accepted the Plan in so far as the basis of Pakistan was implied by the clause of compulsory grouping. Nehru explained in his speech to the A.I.C.C. (on 7th June 1946) that the Congress Working Committee had only decided that the Congress would participate in the Constituent Assembly. Since the Assembly was a sovereign body, it would formulate the rules of procedure. The implication was that the rules laid down by the Mission could be amended. The League, whose acceptance of the Plan had in any case, been qualified, quickly took advantage of Nehru's speech to withdraw its acceptance of the Mission Plan on 29th July 1946.

### 36.3.3 Formation of Interim Government

The British Government was now placed in a dilemma — should it wait till the League came around or should it implement the short-term aspect of the plan, and set up an Interim Government with the Congress alone? Wavell's preference was for the first option but His Majesty's Government was of the opinion that Congress cooperation was absolutely necessary for their long-term interests. Accordingly the Congress was invited to form an Interim Government which came into being on 2nd September 1946 with Jawaharlal Nehru functioning as its *de facto* head. This was a sharp departure from earlier British practice, as, for this first time, the British were willing to defy Jinnah's stand that no constitutional settlement be made unless it was acceptable to the League.



20. Members of Interim Government.

#### League launches Direct Action

Jinnah, however, was determined to ensure that the British continue with their old policy. He warned the British Prime Minister, Attlee, that a surrender to the Congress by the British would compel the Muslims to shed their blood. This was no empty threat as the league had already accepted the programme of Direct Action. The call for Direct Action was given in Calcutta on 16th August 1946 and the new slogan was *Larke Lenge Pakistan* (we will fight and get Pakistan). Communal frenzy was provoked by Muslim communal groups with the league's Bengal ministry headed by Suhrawardy looking on passively, if not actively abetting it. Hindu communal elements retaliated, perhaps with equal brutality, and 5000 people were killed in what is come to be known as the 'Great Calcutta killings'. The trouble broke out in Noakhali in East Bengal in early October 1946 and Noakhali sparked off widespread attacks on Muslims in Bihar in late October 1946. The following months saw riots everywhere in U.P., Bombay, Punjab and N.W.F.P. The tide could not be stemmed.

#### British revert to Conciliating the League

Jinnah's ability to unleash civil war sent the British authorities back to their old policy of placating the Muslims. They realised that though the league was their creation, it had now assumed the shape of a "communal monster which could not be tamed". Wavell had kept up his effort to bring the league into the Government and now the Secretary of State, Pethick-Lawrence, supported him on the ground that civil war would become inevitable if the league stayed out. On 26th October 1946 the league joined the Interim Government.

#### Interim Government — Another Arena of Struggle

However, the League's entry into the Interim Government did not end conflict, it only opened up another arena of struggle. The League was allowed to join the Interim Government without forsaking the idea of Pakistan or the plan of Direct Action. Furthermore, it did not accept the short term or the long term aspects of the Cabinet Mission Plan. League leaders, including Jinnah, publicly said that the Interim Government was merely the continuation of civil war by other means. Jinnah's assessment was that the exclusive control over administration by the Congress was not in the League's interest and therefore he was keen that the League share power. The Interim Government was seen as a foothold which would help the League to advance towards its goal of Pakistan.

Conflict between Congress and League members in the Interim Government erupted very soon. The choice of second-rung League leaders as League nominees (except Liaquat Ali Khan) clearly indicated that the League had no intention to share with Congress the

responsibility for running the Government. On the other hand, the intention apparently was to demonstrate that cooperation between the two was impossible. The League ministers made it a point to disagree with actions taken by their Congress colleagues. They refused to attend the parties at which Congress members would arrive at decisions before the formal meeting of the Executive Council so as to sideline Wavell.

#### **Interim Government—Threat of Breakdown**

The Congress leaders had raised the objection (right after the League members were sworn in) that the League could not join the Interim Government without accepting the Cabinet Mission Plan.

Later, when non-cooperation of the League both inside and outside the Government became clear, the Congress members demanded that the League either give up Direct Action or leave the government. Further, the League refused to participate in the Constituent Assembly which met on 9th December 1946 even though the statement made by His Majesty's Government (on 6th December 1946) upheld the League's stand on grouping. The breaking point came when the League demanded that the Constituent Assembly be dissolved because it was unrepresentative. On 5th February 1947 the Congress members of the Interim Government sent a letter to Wavell with the demand that the League members should be asked to resign. A crisis was imminent.

#### **36.3.4 Fixing of a Time-Limit for British Withdrawal**

The situation was saved by Attlee's announcement in Parliament on 20th February 1947 that the British would withdraw from India by 30th June 1948 and that Lord Mountbatten would replace Wavell as Viceroy. This was no answer to the constitutional crisis that was at hand but it showed that the British decision about leaving India remained unchanged. The Congress responded with a gesture of cooperation to the League. Nehru appealed to Liaquat Ali Khan:

The British are fading out of the picture and the burden of this decision must rest on all of us here. It seems desirable that we should face this question squarely and not speak to each other from a distance.

But Jinnah's reaction to Attlee's statement was entirely different. He was confident that now he only needed to stick firmly to his position in order to achieve his goal of Pakistan. After all, the declaration made it clear that power would be transferred to more than one authority if the Constituent Assembly did not become a fully representative body, i.e. if the Muslim majority provinces did not join it.

The Governor of Punjab had warned in this regard that "the statement will be regarded as the prelude to the final showdown", with every one out to "seize as much power as they can, if necessary by force". He was soon proved right. The League began a civil disobedience campaign in Punjab which brought about the collapse of the coalition ministry headed by Khizr Hayat Khan of the Unionist Party.

Thus the situation which Mountbatten found on his arrival in India was a fairly intractable one. The League was on the war path, as Punjab showed, and Jinnah was obdurate that he would accept nothing less than a sovereign Pakistan. The Cabinet Mission Plan had clearly become defunct and there was no point in persisting with it. The only way the British could maintain unity was by throwing all their weight behind it. The role of mediators between the Congress and League had to be discarded. Those who opposed unity had to be put down firmly and those who wanted unity had to be openly supported. Despite Attlee's claim years later — "we would have preferred a united India. We couldn't get it, though we tried hard", the truth was that the British chose to play safe and take both sides along without exercising any check or restraint even when the situation demanded this type of assertion of authority.

#### **36.3.5 The 3rd June Plan and its Outcome**

This was done by making concessions to both the Congress and the League. India would be divided but in a manner that maximum unity was retained. The League's demand would be accommodated by creating Pakistan, but it would be made as small as possible in order to accommodate the Congress stand on unity. Since Congress was making the bigger concession i.e. it was giving up its ideal of a united India, all its other stands were to be upheld by the British. For example, Mountbatten supported the Congress stand that princely states must not be given the option of independence. Mountbatten realised that it



21. Nehru welcoming Mountbatten on Arrival (March 1947).

was vital to retain the goodwill of the Congress if he hoped to persuade India to remain in the Commonwealth. Dominion status offered a chance of keeping India in the Commonwealth, even if for a while, and hence the 3rd June Plan declared that power would be handed over by 15th August 1947 on the basis of dominion status to India and Pakistan.

The Congress was willing to accept dominion status because it was the only way of assuming complete power immediately and taking the communally explosive situation in hand. British officials were half-hearted about preventing the communal situation from deteriorating further. Sardar Patel summed up the situation in his statement to the Viceroy: "You won't govern yourself, and yet you won't let us govern". The British had abdicated responsibility and the advancing of the date for withdrawal to 15th August 1947 made this more apparent.

The speed with which the country was partitioned was disastrous from the Indian point of view, although it suited the British and enabled them to forsake responsibility for the worsening communal situation. Both transfer of power and division of the country, equally complicated processes, were hurried through in seventy two days from 3rd June to 15th August 1947. Some senior British officials like the Commander-in-Chief and the Punjab Governor were of the opinion that a minimum period of a few years was necessary to effect a peaceful division. Jinnah complicated matters further by refusing to let Mountbatten be a common Governor-General of India and Pakistan. There was no institutional structure to which problems arising from division could be referred and even the joint defence machinery broke down in December 1947 as a fall-out of the hostilities in Kashmir.

#### **Massacres that accompanied Partition**

The speed with which division was effected and the delay in announcing the awards of the Boundary Commission aggravated the tragedy of partition. These were Mountbatten's



decisions. Mountbatten delayed the announcement of the Boundary Commission Award (even though it was ready by 12th August 1947) to disown responsibility for further complications. This created confusion for ordinary citizens as well as the officials. People living in the villages between Lahore and Amritsar stayed on in their homes in the belief that they were on the right side of the border. Migrations necessarily became a frenzied affair, often culminating in massacres.

The officials were busy arranging their own transfers rather than using their authority to maintain law and order. This was conceded by none other than Lackhart, who was Commander-in-Chief of the Indian Army from 15th August to 3rd December 1947:

Had officials in every grade in the civil services, and all the personnel of the armed services, been in position in their respective new countries before independence Day, it seems there would have been a better chance of preventing widespread disorder.

### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Read the following statements and mark right ( ✓ ) or wrong (X).
- i) Muslim League contested the elections on the basis of a socio-economic programme.
  - ii) The Interim Government could not work because the Congress workers were unwilling to cooperate.
  - iii) Jinnah wanted Mountbatten to become the Common Governor General of India and Pakistan.

2) What were the basic merits and flaws in the Cabinet Mission Plan? Write in five lines.

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## 36.4 CONGRESS AND PARTITION

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Why did the Congress accept Partition? It was one thing for the League to demand Pakistan and the British to concede it because it was in harmony with the politics they had pursued in the part. But why did the Congress, which had fought for unity for long years, give up its ideal of an united India. One view is that the Congress leaders succumbed to the temptation of power and struck a deal with the British by which they got quick power while the nation paid the price of partition. This view is both simplistic and incorrect. What was involved was not the personal failings of the top leaders but a basic failure of the entire organisation.

The Congress acceptance of Partition was the consequence of its failure over the years to bring the Muslim masses into the nationalist mainstream and since 1937, to stem the advancing tide of Muslim communalism. By 1946 it was clear to the Congress leaders that the Muslims were behind the League as it had won 80 per cent Muslim seats in the elections. However, the point of no return was reached a year later when the battle for Pakistan was no longer confined to the ballot box but came to be fought on the streets. communal riots engulfed the country and the Congress leaders concluded that Partition was a lesser evil than a civil war.

The breakdown of the Interim Government only confirmed the inevitability of Pakistan. Nehru remarked that the Interim Government was an arena of struggle and Sardar Patel, in his speech at the AICC meeting on 14th June 1947, drew attention to the fact that Pakistan was actually functioning not only in Punjab and Bengal but also in the Interim Government! Moreover, the Interim Government had no power to intervene in the provinces (even when the League ministry in Bengal was guilty not only of inaction but complicity in the riots in Calcutta and Noakhali). Nehru realised that there was no point in holding office when "murder stalks the streets and the most amazing cruelties are indulged in by both the individual and the mob." Immediate transfer of power would at least bring about a government that would have the power to fulfil its responsibilities.



Another consideration in accepting partition was that it firmly ruled out the specter of the 'balkanisation' of the country. The Congress had the support of the Viceroy, and behind him His Majesty's Government, in refusing the option of independence to the princely states. Through persuasion or force, they were made to join either the Union of India or Pakistan.

### Gandhi and Partition

It is common knowledge that Gandhi was so distressed when partition became an imminent reality that he no longer wished to live for 125 years, as he had stated earlier. One popular interpretation is that Gandhi's advice was ignored by his disciples, Nehru and Patel, who wanted power at any cost and though he felt this betrayal acutely, he did not wish to condemn them publicly because they had been his faithful followers.

Gandhi's own statements, however, suggest that the main reason for his helplessness lay in the communalisation of the masses. The Muslims began distrusting the Hindus and then the Hindu and Sikhs also got convinced that mutual co-existence was impossible. It was the Hindus' and Sikhs' desire for Partition that made him a mass leader without any masses behind him in his struggle for unity. The Muslims had already declared him to be their enemy. When different segments of people wanted partition, what could be or the Congress do but to accept it? At his daily prayer meeting on 4th June 1947 Gandhi said:

"The demand has been granted because you asked for it. The Congress never asked for it .... But the Congress can feel the pulse of the people. It realised that the Khalsa as also the Hindus desired it".

Socialists and Gandhians appealed to Gandhi to launch a struggle for unity bypassing the Congress leaders. Gandhi pointed out that the problem was not that he was unwilling to go ahead without the Congress leaders. After all, few had agreed with his assessment in 1942 that the time was right for a struggle of the Quit India type, and yet he had defied their counsels and he had been proved right. The crucial lacuna in 1947 was that there were no "forces of good" upon which he could "build up a programme". He confessed — "Today I see no sign of such a healthy feeling. And, therefore, I shall have to wait until the time comes".

The time never came, for political developments were moving at too fast a pace. Partition was announced on 3rd June and implemented on 15th August 1947. Gandhi's advice to Congressmen, conveyed in his speech to the AICC meeting on 14th June 1947, was to accept Partition as an unavoidable necessity for the present, but not accept it in their hearts and fight to reverse it later, when passions would subside.

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## 36.5 CONGRESS' HANDLING OF THE COMMUNAL PROBLEMS

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It is often argued that partition could have been avoided if the Congress had been willing to conciliate Jinnah, not only before he came up with the demand for a separate state in 1940, but also in 1942 at the time of the Cripps Mission or even in 1946 when the Cabinet Mission Plan was put forward. Maulana Azad in his autobiography *India Wins Freedom* has supported this position. This view ignores the fact that Jinnah laid down the impossible condition that he was willing to negotiate with the Congress only if it declared itself a Hindu body and accepted the Muslim League as the sole representative of the Muslims. Had the Congress accepted this demand, it would have had to give up its secular character. This would not only have meant betrayal of the nationalist Muslims who had resolutely stood behind the Congress at great personal cost, but betrayal of the Indian people and their future. The logical culmination of accepting Jinnah's demand would have been the creation of a Hindu fascist state, from a Hindu body to a Hindu state being a logical next step. In Rajendra Prasad's words, the Congress "would be denying its own past, falsifying its history, and betraying its future".

### 36.5.1 Pitfalls of Conciliation

In fact, though the Congress refused to negotiate with Jinnah on his terms, it made unilateral concessions to Muslim demands despite Jinnah's intransigence. The Congress accepted the autonomy of Muslim majority provinces during the negotiations with the



Maulana Azad

Cripps Mission in 1942. In his talks with Jinnah in 1944 Gandhi recognised that Muslim majority provinces would have the right of self-determination. When the Cabinet Mission Plan proposed that Muslim majority provinces (groups B and C) would set up a separate Constituent Assembly if they wished, the Congress did not oppose this. Congress opposed compulsory grouping (because it would force N.W.F.P. and Assam into groups they may not wish to join) but by the end of 1944 Nehru declared that his party would accept the interpretation of the Federal Court on whether grouping was compulsory or optional. Accordingly, when the British Cabinet clarified in its 6th December 1946 statement that grouping would be compulsory, the Congress quietly accepted the new interpretation. As we have pointed out, earlier, Nehru appealed to Liaquat Ali Khan for cooperation when His Majesty's Government announced a time limit for their withdrawal on 20th February 1947. So when the Congress finally accepted the 3rd June Plan and Partition — this was only the final act of surrender to the League's demand. It was the culmination of a process of reconciliation to the harsh realities of a situation created by the League's intransigent championing of the demand of a sovereign Muslim majority state.

Thus, the policy of concessions, intended to reassure Muslims that their interests would be protected, ended up as a surrender to extreme communal demands. For example, The Congress conceded the right of secession in the hope that "the Muslims would not exercise it but rather use it to shed their fears". This was wishful thinking as by the 1940s Muslims communalism was no longer based on the assiduous fanning of minority fears, but on an assertive "Muslims nation" determined to a separate sovereign state. Consequently, every time the Congress made a concession, Jinnah pegged his demand a notch higher, seeing that Congress was yielding. Far from cutting the ground from under the communalists feet, every round of concessions strengthened their foothold as more and more Muslims joined their ranks, impressed by their success. Along with Muslim communalism, Hindu communalism also registered rapid growth as the Hindu communalists projected themselves as the only champions of Hindu interests, which, they charged, the Congress was betraying in the hope of winning over Muslims.

### 36.5.2 The Basic Failure

This lack of understanding of the logic of communalism in the 1940s was only symptomatic of the general failure of the Congress in contending with communalism.

Though the Congress was committed to secularism and though Gandhi staked his life for Hindu Muslim unity, the Congress was not able to formulate a long term strategy to fight communalism in its different forms at the level of both politics and ideology. The Congress leaders naively believed that reassurances, generous concessions and willingness to reach a compromise would solve the communal problem. As Prof. Bipan Chandra has said:

“The fact is that communalism is basically an ideology which could not have been, and cannot be, appeared; it had to be confronted and opposed ... The failure to do so was the real weakness of the Congress and the national movement. (India’s Struggle for Independence).

### Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Read the following statements and mark right ( ✓ ) or wrong ( x ).
  - i) Congress accepted partition because the congress leaders succumbed to the temptation of power.
  - ii) British Government accepted partition because it was in keeping with its policies pursued in the past.
  - iii) The Congress policies of concessions and conciliations contributed in the making of Pakistan.
  - iv) The real failure of the Congress lay in not being able to evolve a long term strategy to fight communalism.

- 2) Why did Gandhi feel so helpless regarding the partition of India? Write in five lines.

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## 36.6 LET US SUM UP

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The partition of India was primarily the result of the persistent efforts of the Muslim League from 1940 onwards to obtain a separate homeland for the Muslims. Through an astute combination of constitutional methods and direct actions, the League, under Jinnah’s stewardship, consolidated its position and forced the political situation into a deadlock, from which partition was the only escape. But Pakistan could not have been created without the help given by the British. British authorities used the communal card in their moves to counter the national movement which was growing from strength to strength. They gave credibility to the Pakistan demand, recognised the League as the sole representative of Muslims and gave the League the power to veto progress in political settlements. Even when their own interests inclined them towards leaving behind a United India, they proved incapable of standing up to Jinnah and tamely surrendered to the blackmail of direct action. Official inaction in checking the rapidly deteriorating communal situation reached a point from which partition appeared preferable to civil war. The Congress for its part, failed to prevent the partition despite its long-standing commitment to a United India. Its weakness lay on two fronts. It failed to draw the Muslim masses into the national movement and was not able to evolve a strategy to successfully fight communalism.

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## 36.7 KEY WORDS

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**Divide and Rule** : a term which refers to the British policy of creating divisions in the Indian society so as to perpetuate their rule in India.

**‘Local Option’ Clause**: a clause in the Cripps Proposal, which recognised the right of any part of the Indian Dominion, to refuse to join it. This clause provided the much needed legitimacy to the demand for Pakistan.



24. Nehru consoling Partition Victims.

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## 36.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

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### Check Your Progress 1

- 1 Your answer should include i) the performance of the Muslim League in the elections of 1937, ii) the need to expand its base iii) the utility of religious slogans in consolidating Muslims of different backgrounds and turning them against Hindus; and iv) to drive home the need for a separate homeland for Muslims.

See Sub-sec. 36.2.1

- 2 i) (✓) ii) (✓) iii) (x)

### Check Your Progress 2

- 1 i) (x) ii) (x) iii) (x)
- 2 The *merit* was that it accepted the principle of Indian Unity. The *flaw* was a lack of clarity regarding the grouping of provinces to be compulsory or optional. See Sub-sec. 36.3.2

### Check Your Progress 3

- 1 i) (x) ii) (✓) iii) (✓) iv) (✓)
- 2 Gandhi's helplessness was because of i) a growing communalisation of the masses; ii) his inability to carry them with him in his struggle for unity; and iii) the acceptance of the spirit of partition by the Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs alike.