

# Jinnah-Gandhi Talks and The Causes For Their Failure

## Introduction:

By the autumn of the year 1944 the situation in British India had reached to a critical level. The Second World War was raging full tilt in most parts of the world. India was itself in real peril of an invasion by imperialist Japan. By that time the war had caused a debilitating strain on Great Britain's resources and her financial reserves were all but depleted. Indian natives belonging to all communities and groups viewed the unfolding historical drama with increasing anxiety that arose from their feelings of uncertainty for their future. Fate had placed their imperial masters in the very discomfiting position of asking their subjects for help in routing another imperial adversary. However, time and circumstances could not allow an indulgent reflection on this historical irony for the colonial subjects of India. Especially for the Indian leaders time was of the essence as here was an opportunity to strike while the iron was hot. But just as England needed the Indians, so the Indians needed England, which despite its indisposition was nevertheless the only empire left which could bring some semblance of order to the global upheaval that threatened to lead to total destruction. Now this equilibrium of need allowed for negotiations between Indian politicians and the British as to the future of India. By this time Indian leaders throughout the political spectrum were demanding complete self-rule. Indian society was fast agitating against the patronizing and condescending hegemony of their colonial masters and ached to break free from the shackles of foreign subjugation. But the fate of India could not be decided by one community or social group alone. India was home to the world's most diverse ethnic, linguistic and religious population. Indeed it was the British who had united this land through a long and usually violent process of consolidation. In the century since the complete conquest of India by England, nationalist feelings had started to take shape among the natives which was encouraged by the British for very pragmatic reasons. The territorial consolidation of India however favoured some more than others. In the new colonial India, Hindus found themselves in the enviable position of being the community having the biggest strength in sheer numbers. In contrast Muslim nationalism arose from feelings of shared loss and fall from grace they enjoyed as the ruling culture in the lands now occupied by the British. Thus two distinct nationalist currents dominated the intellectual climate in India and both were simultaneously shaping the consciousness of Hindu and Muslim communities.

Now that India seemed to be slipping fast from the grasp of the British Raj, the leaders of both Hindu and Muslim communities, each of which by that time had clear visions of the aspirations and goals of their respective constituencies, needed to find a common-ground so that freedom from colonial rule could finally be achieved. To clarify the picture let us examine the positions of the parties that held the keys to India's destiny. There were three prime stake-holders in the political landscape of India. These were the principal parties that had the most to gain or lose from the critical decisions that would shape the course of India's history. A brief summary of their position and concerns is outlined below.

### **His Majesty's Government (H.M.G):**

Besieged on all fronts and running fast towards bankruptcy, the British position in India was further complicated by growing resentment among the native population. Lord Wavell, the viceroy in India, in a letter to the Secretary of State for India, summarized the British position in this way "With a lost and hostile India, we are likely to be reduced in the east to the position of commercial bag-man."<sup>1</sup> He went on to write "The Congress and the League are the dominant parties in Hindu and Muslim India, and will remain so... We cannot by-pass them, and shall be compelled in the end to negotiate with them along with representatives of the less important parties."<sup>1</sup>

### **Indian National Congress (I.N.C):**

Nothing brings a moment to its crisis quite the same way as a world war. The I.N.C was host to the largest and most diverse array of politicians compared to any other political party in India. It was the party most uniquely and favourably placed to carry through and benefit from the great British plan of granting gradual self-rule to Indians. But the War had led to what seemed like an abortion of the political process as the government had tightened its grip on India and was not ready to suffer any dissent. This had caused a reaction from the I.N.C and the party had called for civil disobedience and non-cooperation with the British in its war efforts. This in turn provoked the government to arrest the I.N.C leadership. M. K Gandhi was among those arrested but he was later released due to his frail health. Once out of prison Gandhiji started to work actively towards a negotiated final settlement about the future of India with all political stake-holders in the Indian polity. This included the British government and the Muslim League which was the erstwhile chief antagonist to Gandhiji's I.N.C.

### **All-India Muslim League (A.I.M.L):**

The A.I.M.L was the party claiming to be the sole representative of Muslim interests in India. In 1940 it had passed a resolution which unequivocally demanded self-determination for the Muslim majority provinces of India. Its aim was independence

from both the prevailing British rule and also the seemingly imminent Hindu majority dominance of India after the departure of the British. It considered the Muslims of India to be not a minority but in fact a “nation within a nation” which was waging a struggle for its right to a nation of its own. M. A. Jinnah was the undisputed leader of A.I.M.L and since the party had garnered massive grassroots support through intense political mobilization, Jinnah emerged as the Quaid-e-Azam of the Indian Muslims.<sup>2</sup>

### **C.R ( Chakravorti Rajagopalachari) Formula:**

“If the Muslims really want to go, well, let them go and take all that belongs to them”. These were the words of Chakravorti Rajagopalachari, the seasoned Madrassi chief minister who was the first top-tier Congress leader to publicly declare the inevitability of partition.<sup>4</sup> But being the first, Rajagopalachari was also quite alone in seeking a compromise with A.I.M.L over the final settlement. These views and others, like his advocacy of cooperation with the British in its war efforts, had made him unpopular in the I.N.C. To bridge the gap in the Indian polity and present a unified front to gain independence from the British, Rajaji was prepared to contemplate partition of India and in keeping with this; he presented his formula for an agreement between Congress and the Muslim League. This formula called on both parties to accept points which could then help them formulate a plan for independence. The Rajaji formula consisted of the following points.

- The League was to endorse the Indian demand for independence and to cooperate with the Congress in formation of Provisional Interim Government for a transitional period.
- At the end of the War, a commission would be appointed to demarcate the districts having a Muslim population in absolute majority and in those areas plebiscite to be conducted on all inhabitants (including the non-Muslims) on basis of adult suffrage.
- All parties would be allowed to express their stance on the partition and their views before the plebiscite.
- In the event of separation, a mutual agreement would be entered into for safeguarding essential matters such as defence, communication and commerce and for other essential services.
- The transfer of population, if any would be absolutely on a voluntary basis.
- The terms of the binding will be applicable only in case of full transfer of power by Britain to Government of India.

After his release Gandhi proposed talks with Jinnah on his two-nation theory and negotiating on issue of partition. The C.R Formula acted as the basis for the negotiations. Gandhi and Jinnah met in September 1944 to ease the deadlock. Gandhi

placed the CR formula as his proposal to Jinnah. Both leaders deliberated at length and in hair-splitting detail their respective positions and possibilities of finding any common ground. In the end though, the talks broke down and no solution to the Hindu-Muslim question could be formulated. These negotiations shed great light on the political climate in India and the correspondence between Jinnah and Gandhi, which was exchanged in the duration of the talks remains an invaluable resource for those who wish to understand what the state of affairs were at the time.

“An ocean between you and me” M.K Gandhi.

By 1944 Gandhi and Jinnah had reached the status of icons in the minds of the people that they led. They were the leaders of leaders. Gandhi was not just Gandhi; he was Mahatamaji. Similarly, Jinnah was the Quaid e Azam of Muslims. Both were trusted almost absolutely by their followers but both carried the baggage of mistrust of each other. Gandhiji was a populist whereas Jinnah was the quintessential constitutionalist.<sup>6</sup> Gandhi was a publicly religious man promoting a secular agenda. Jinnah was a stoic pragmatist and kept his religion to himself, but yet here he was, spearheading a movement based on a religious conception of nationhood. They were poles apart. So much was admitted by Gandhi when they met for talks. The talks took place nevertheless because circumstances dictated the usefulness of a compromise. In the correspondence that accompanied these talks, Gandhi and Jinnah come across as political gladiators with each one attempting to expose the mental and political weakness of the other.

### **Fire and Water:**

To be fair to Gandhi, his task was much harder. He had taken upon himself to persuade and convert to his thinking someone who's intellectual individualism and sharpness of focus had become legendary in Indian politics. But this is not meant to take anything away from Jinnah himself. Here was a man who had seen the limits of appeasement to Congress and to the British. The Muslims enjoyed neither strength of arms nor any real demographic advantage in a united India. By electing to lead them, Jinnah had put in his lot with the political underdog. Gandhi could afford to appear generous and flexible. Jinnah on the other hand was convinced that complete independence of Muslim majority zones of India in the north-west and east was the only way to deliver Muslims from what he feared was Hindu-Raj and its resultant reaction in the shape of civil war in India. And so, the summit that had captured the expectations of so many in India and the whole world, failed to reach mutually acceptable terms. In the end, opposites could not be reconciled.

### **Reasons for failure:**

Jinnah differed with Gandhi on all points of the C.R Formula. But more significant was the fact that from the outset Jinnah was doubtful of Gandhi's sincerity. When both leaders had understood each other's intentions they became aware of how antithetical their stances were. Gandhi, though he was presenting the Rajaji formula, himself expressed dissatisfaction with Rajaji's prescription. Gandhi was a politician sans portfolio at that time. He was not an office bearer of I.N.C. His assertion was that he was, in spite of his non-official status, an influential leader of Indians and could carry through implementation of any agreement reached between him and Quaid-e-Azam. Never one to mince words, Jinnah openly expressed his discomfort with this arrangement. Jinnah was the President of A.I.M.L and in that capacity his decisions shaped his party's policies. This policy was founded on the Muslim League's Resolution of 1940 which called for granting of total independence and secession of Muslim majority zones of India. Acceptance of any idea conflicting with this policy would have led to an abortion of the only course of action that India's Muslim leaders had resolved to pursue. Lord Wavell's assessment of the failure of talks presents another point of view. In his letter to Leopold Amery, the Secretary of State for India, the Viceroy wrote "Jinnah wants Pakistan first and independence afterwards, while Gandhi wants independence first with some kind of self-determination for Muslims to be granted by a provisional Government which would be predominantly Hindu."<sup>7</sup> Throughout his negotiations with Jinnah, Gandhi continued to view the Muslim question as a communal issue. This was reflected in the formula's point which called upon adult franchise of all inhabitants in Muslim majority areas. Had Gandhi believed in the Two-Nation theory then he would have viewed this as unnecessary. But just to extract political mileage and pressure Jinnah into accepting his terms, Gandhi pretended to sympathise with the League's demands as declared in the Lahore Resolution. As Jinnah said later, "In one breath Mr. Gandhi agrees to the principle of division and in the next he makes proposals which go to destroy the very foundations on which the division is claimed by Muslim India."<sup>8</sup> Naturally Jinnah viewed Gandhi's overture as a trap.<sup>9</sup> Gandhi offered nothing but vague assurances and these too were offered without conviction.

#### Aftermath:

The Jinnah-Gandhi Talks ended by reinforcing the deadlock that existed between I.N.C and the League. The British government now felt that it was entitled to dictate its terms to a divided Indian polity. Lord Wavell in a letter to Prime Minister Churchill wrote so much saying "I think the failure of the Gandhi-Jinnah talks has created a favourable moment for a move by H.M.G."<sup>10</sup>