

The First Steps Towards Political Organization

The failure of the struggle in 1857 ensured that the British were in no mood to forgive the Muslim community, whom they saw as mainly responsible for the attempt to expel them. It was not until the efforts of Sir Syed Ahmed Khan started to bear fruit that the British began to trust the Muslims. However, nationalism in the European sense was not present in the subcontinent and there was no concerted

effort at this time amongst any group to unite and expel the British colonizers. It is ironic that the Indian National Congress, the body which later led India to independence, was formed in 1885 by an Englishman named Sir Octavian Hume. The Congress was meant to be a forum where Indian leaders could meet British rulers and inform them of their problems. The major objective of the Congress was to develop harmony amongst all Indians and to improve understanding and friendship between the rulers and the ruled.

Even at this stage, Sir Syed realized the dangers of Muslims being seen as just another part of the fabric of Indian society and strongly warned all Muslims to beware of the Congress. Sir Syed's major objection was that as the Congress was overwhelmingly dominated by Hindus, the Muslims would not receive a fair hearing. Further, as the Hindus were more advanced than the Muslims in terms of educational and political development, the Muslims should concentrate on trying to eradicate the educational gulf rather than dabble in politics. Sir Syed had a number of clashes with the Congress which grew more serious with time and confirmed Sir Syed's earlier belief that the Hindus and Muslims were not going to agree on any major political questions.

The Congress demand for a local representative government based on a democratic vote as in Britain was firmly rejected by Sir Syed. He argued that this principle of democracy was applicable only in states with a national identity. In a subcontinent such as India, Sir Syed argued, to have a similar system would mean that the numerically larger Hindus would always dominate the elections and the minorities would be discriminated against. The other Congress demand was that there should be open competitive examinations to decide government posts. This demand was again opposed by Sir Syed who pointed out that as the Hindus had received the benefits of British education for much longer than the Muslims, the Muslims needed a fixed quota of jobs to be able to compete fairly in the long run.

In 1867, Sir Syed was shocked to discover that the Hindus were pressing for the replacement of Urdu written in the Arabic script by Hindi written in the Devanangari script. Sir Syed later recalled that this was the first occasion when he felt it was impossible for the Hindus and Muslims to pretend to be a single nation and for anyone to serve both communities. The Muslims strongly argued that Urdu was not a religious or imported language and although originally mainly spoken by Muslims in the subcontinent, it had developed as a joint effort of both the Hindus and the Muslims. The Hindus, on the other hand, claimed that Urdu

was nothing more than a legacy of the days when the Muslims ruled the subcontinent and, as Urdu's script was Arabic, it was a Muslim language. Sir Syed felt so strongly on the language issue and its consequences that he described the proposed adoption of Hindi as second only to Muslims being deprived of their religion. The Hindu demand was eventually accepted in 1900, with Hindi given equal status to Urdu in the courts.

These events convinced Sir Syed that the Hindus and the Muslims had far more differences than those relating to political thought and that they were nothing less than two different nationalities living in a subcontinent. This 'Two-Nation Theory' was the very basis of the later demand and creation of the state of Pakistan. The first time this view was expressed by Sir Syed was during a meeting with the governor of Benares in 1867. He stated this view more publicly in two famous speeches, in January 1883 and in 1887. He stated that as far as European-style elections and democracy was concerned, it was unsuitable in a country where 'different races and different creeds... and the larger community would totally override the interests of the smaller community'. Sir Syed organized the Mohammedan Anglo-Oriental Defence Association of Upper India in December 1893. Its objectives were:

- i. To protect the political interests of Muslims by representing their views before the English people and the Indian government.
- ii. To discourage popular political agitation among the Muslims.
- iii. To lend support to measures calculated to increase the stability of the British government and the security of the empire.

In 1896, Sir Syed prepared a memorandum for the Mohammedan Anglo-Oriental Association. The demands put forward were to be the basis of those put to the viceroy by the Aga Khan. Sir Syed put forward the following demands:

- i. In the north-western provinces, the Muslims should be given equal representation to the more numerous Hindus because of their historic and political importance.
- ii. The Muslims should be allowed communal electorates so only Muslims can vote for Muslim candidates.
- iii. In the allotment of seats in councils and municipal boards, Muslims should be given added weightage.

The Partition of Bengal

The first major political crisis which the British government faced after winning control of the subcontinent was over plans to partition the province of Bengal. Bengal was the most densely populated province in the British Indian empire. In the western half of Bengal, there were 54 million people, of which 42 million were Hindu and 12 million were Muslim. In eastern Bengal and Assam, there were another 31 million people, of which 18 million were Muslim and 12 million were Hindu. In trying to control such a large province, there were obviously huge administrative problems. However, when the viceroy at the time, Lord Curzon, decided to partition the province, it was instantly seen by the Hindus as a deliberate plot to divide up their most educated and politicized province. Three divisions in the old province, namely Dhaka, Chittagong and Mymensingh, were separated and were merged with Assam to create a new province called East Bengal.

Whether the British took this action for political or administrative reasons is still unclear. The immediate reaction, however, divided the Muslims and Hindus clearly along communal lines. The Muslims were delighted as they now formed the majority in the new province of East Bengal, while the Hindus viewed it as a cynical exercise in the old British policy of 'divide and rule'. The outcry by the Hindus was so great that the British seriously began to reconsider the wisdom of their decision, despite the administrative and practical expediency of the move. There was even a Hindu assassination attempt on a later viceroy, Lord Minto. Although the assassination attempt was unsuccessful, the Hindu protest movement continued, spreading into a boycott of British goods under the 'Swadeshi Movement' riots. The Hindu demonstrations and protests became larger and, while the Muslim community was pleased with the partition, they were not organized enough to counter Hindu agitation.

In June 1910, Sir John Jenkins, a member of the Viceroy's Executive Council, made a proposal for the capital of the British Indian empire to be shifted to Delhi from Calcutta and suggested that the partition of Bengal should be reversed. It was thought by Jenkins that the king of England's visit to the Indian empire would be a good time to announce these changes. Lord Minto had departed as viceroy at this time and his successor, Lord Hardinge, agreed to the ideas. The detailed proposals included:

- i. The transfer of the British capital to Delhi.
- ii. The creation of United Bengal as a presidency with a governor-general.
- iii. The creation of a province of Bihar and Orissa with a lieutenant-governor.
- iv. The restoration of the post of chief commissioner of Assam.

The Viceroy's Council agreed to all of these proposals and the viceroy had no difficulty in trying to persuade London to agree as well. These measures were, therefore, announced at the Delhi Durbar on 12 December 1911 by King George V. The partition of Bengal was now reversed. Although the king made it appear as a generous concession, there was no doubt that it was a victory for the Hindu nationalists.

The Creation of the Muslim League

It did not take the Muslims long to realize that they could not afford to be disorganized and disunited. The Indian National Congress was seen by many as too Hindu an organization for the Muslims to wish to join, and so it was inevitable that some Muslim group should be formed. The Muslims were disturbed by the Congress demand that 'India' should be treated as a cultural whole and Hindi should be declared the national language. Even more worrying for the Muslims, however, was the emergence of extreme Hindu nationalist groups, such as the Arya Samaj, who demanded that Muslims should be forcibly converted to Hinduism.

After the death of Sir Syed, Nawab Viqar-ul-Mulk, a very prominent Muslim and a close associate of Sir Syed, tried to carry on the struggle. At a meeting held in Lucknow in October 1901, Nawab Viqar-ul-Mulk outlined the need for a political group but nothing was formally concluded after the meeting. It was to take the events of Bengal to shock the Muslims into action. The Muslim fear of being sidelined was increased by the election of the Liberal Party in Britain, who stated that they were now going to increase local participation in the British government of India through elections. The Muslim leaders decided it was time to act.

On 8 October 1906, a delegation of prominent Muslim leaders led by the Aga Khan met the viceroy, Lord Minto, at Simla. This Simla Delegation, as it became known, had two fundamental demands. Firstly, that in all local and provincial elections, Muslims must be separately represented and their representatives must be elected by purely Muslim voters. The second demand was that Muslims must be given weightage in all elected bodies; in other words, have more seats than their percentage of the population. The first demand was made on the grounds that in the existing tense situation, every elected seat could lead to a communal riot and that no Muslim elected by Hindu voters would be a true representative of the Muslim community. The demand for weightage was made on the grounds that Muslims owned more land in India and they formed a large proportion of the British Indian Army. The viceroy, much to the delegation's relief and delight, accepted both demands.

The Simla Delegation represents a crucial turning point for the Muslims of British India. All the efforts of Muslims like Sir Syed now paid off in removing the bad feeling between the Muslims and the British. The acceptance of the demands shows how far the British were willing

to go to restore relations, particularly after the Bengal episode. The long-term importance of this meeting was that the underlying tensions between the two main communities in the subcontinent, the Hindus and Muslims, were now on a constitutional plane. The Muslims had made it clear that they had little faith in the Hindu majority and wished to have constitutional protection and safeguards. The idea of a single nation was implicitly rejected by the Muslims. The granting of the right of a separate electorate to as large and important a group as the Muslims has to be seen as a major step. It was the first real political step towards a separate homeland.

Only one thing was certain after the Simla Declaration: the Muslims had guaranteed themselves an independent role in the political process. There were attempts by the Muslims, even at this early stage, to pressure the Congress into accepting them as a significant group in India. However, the Congress, under Sir Pheroze Shah Mehta, refused, leading the prominent Muslims to only one logical conclusion: the Muslims needed a party of their own which would represent and protect their interests.

Influential Muslim delegates were to gather at Dhaka to attend the 20th session of the Mohammedan Educational Conference. It was decided to make use of that occasion to finalize the question of a political party, and after the educational conference had finished, a meeting was called, chaired by Nawab Viqar-ul-Mulk. The nawab of Dhaka moved a resolution calling for an organization to be established with the name of the 'All-India Muslim League'. The presidential address was read by Nawab Viqar-ul-Mulk. The League adopted as its resolutions the following points: to promote amongst the Muslims of India feelings of loyalty to the British government and to remove any misconceptions that may arise as to the intentions of the government with regard to any of its measures; to protect and advance the political rights and interests of the Muslims of India and respectfully to represent their needs and aspirations to the government; to prevent the rise, amongst the Muslims of India, of any feelings of hostility towards other communities, without prejudice to other objects of the League.

There were baseless allegations by some Hindus who claimed that the Muslim League was founded by the British themselves to try and counter the Congress. It is true that the British were not hostile to the Muslim League but that was mainly due to the modest terms in which the League had defined its activities. A party led by landlords and princes could hardly threaten the British with any physical force and was obviously going to act as a buffer

between the British and the Muslims, as well as a constant reminder to Congress that they had to take Muslim views into account. The Bengal agitation had convinced the Muslims that political differences between the two communities were immense. After the Minto acceptance of separate electorates, it became a political necessity for the Muslims to have their own party. Having won the right to a separate electorate, the Muslims had ensured that their views and feelings would be heard at the highest level of government.

The Morley-Minto Reforms

In January 1906, the Liberals won a large majority in the British elections and John Morley was appointed secretary of state for India. The new British government replaced Lord Curzon with Lord Minto as the viceroy of India in November 1905. Lord Minto was the grandson of a former governor-general of India and arrived in India at the height of agitation over Bengal, with two assassination attempts having been made on British governors. Morley was in constant touch with the viceroy, and they drew up a series of proposals together. It was not until 1909 that the reforms were passed into law as the Indian Councils Act of 1909 with some far-reaching provisions. One of the most important new provisions was the enlarging of the Imperial Council to 60 members and the Provincial Councils to 50 members in the larger states and 30 in the smaller states. The method of election was a mixture of direct and indirect voting. Only in Bengal were elected members in a majority.

In the Provincial Councils, there was an allowance for a non-official majority but in the Imperial Council, an 'official majority', i.e. British nominated, was retained. Besides the viceroy and his Executive Council, nearly 60 members were added to the Central Executive Council. Members of the Central Council were permitted to discuss the budget, raise questions regarding administration, official policies and matters of general importance. An official majority was retained, as Morley pointed out that the ultimate constitutional power lay with the British government and not with the local population.

The major point of these Councils was not so much to enact laws but to ensure that Indian legislators should be given a chance to express their opinions. They were not to be given the power to change or influence decisions. The British emphasized the fact that this was not meant to lead to a full democracy as the Indians were seen to be a long way off from that possibility. It is worth remembering that in Britain itself the universal male vote had only been granted a generation before and that women were still not allowed to vote. The Councils in India were seen as Royal Chambers, not Parliaments. Morley stated clearly that these reforms should not be seen as a step towards a Parliament in India. At the same time, the British recognized that constant reforms were necessary to prevent a political explosion in the subcontinent.

Another clause in the reforms which was to have major repercussions was the official British acceptance of the right of Muslims to have separate electorates. This has been rightly seen as the first step towards Pakistan. The Congress claimed that this concession was contrary to the principle of democracy but Morley and Minto both realized that to have the Hindus dominate the Councils would only worsen Hindu-Muslim relations. At this stage, the British government was not even pretending to be concerned about democracy; they were interested in getting a loyal and polite sample of the Indian elite to express their views respectfully in various chambers. Not

surprisingly, the reforms were widely criticized by the Hindus and the Congress Party.

In 1910, at a Congress meeting, the provision of separate electorates for the Muslims was attacked and the British were asked to remove such 'anomalies'. Between 1910 and 1935, the Congress would pass an annual resolution calling for the withdrawal of separate electorates. The only exception to this was in 1916 after the Lucknow Pact. Tension was obviously high between the Congress and the Muslim League as the League had suddenly attained a significant position within the Council Chambers and was heard with almost as much respect as the Congress, despite the much smaller overall number of Muslims.

Independently of this Act, but as part of the overall package of reforms, further nominations of Indians were made by the Secretary of State's Council; one to the Governor-General's Council and one to each of the Provincial Councils. An Indian was also made a member of the Privy Council. Although the Congress Party condemned the reforms loudly and widely, it did not refuse to work within them. Although disappointed with what they may have hoped to receive, the Congress recognized the Act for what it was: a step towards greater self-rule.