



## **Two-Nation Theory and division of the Indian Subcontinent: analysing the idealist and revisionist perspectives**

Hafiz Muhammad Abdul Samad Khan<sup>1</sup> | Sarosh Khan\*<sup>2</sup> | Syeda Hira Mobashir<sup>3</sup>

1. Department of Public Administration, University of Karachi, Karachi, Pakistan.
2. Department of Political Science, University of Lakki Marwat, Lakki Marwat, Pakistan.
3. Department of Business Administration, California State University, California, United States.

\*Corresponding Author Email: [sarosh\\_kh@yahoo.com](mailto:sarosh_kh@yahoo.com)

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### **Abstract:**

Two-Nation Theory, long regarded as the linchpin of the partition of the Indian Subcontinent in 1947, has come under scrutiny by revisionist scholars who seek to challenge and question the prevailing idealism surrounding this historical division. Revisionist perspectives offer a critical analysis of the Two-Nation Theory by contesting its oversimplified portrayal of Muslims in the Subcontinent. These scholars assert that the theory, which framed the partition because of irreconcilable religious differences, neglects the intricate tapestry of cultural, linguistic, and regional identities among Muslims. Moreover, revisionists delve into the multifaceted causes of partition, asserting that it cannot be solely attributed to religious disparities. They emphasise the role of political manoeuvring, economic inequalities, power dynamics, and the shortcomings of leadership in shaping this historical event. Revisionist arguments also suggest that political leaders, such as Muhammad Ali Jinnah and the All-India Muslim League, may have strategically employed the Two-Nation Theory to secure advantages during negotiations with the British colonial administration. This challenges the prevailing notion that the demand for a separate Muslim state primarily reflects religious sentiment. This research attempts to contemplate the revisionist perspectives on the Two-Nation Theory, which ultimately led to the division of the Subcontinent.

**Keywords:** British colonialism, British India, Partition of India, Indian Muslims, Indo-Pak hostilities, Religious differences, Muslim state, Division of Subcontinent.

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## **1. Introduction**

The division of the Indian Subcontinent in 1947 was a historic and one of the most significant events in human history. This partition witnessed the largest human migration in recorded history and mass violence and killings. There are diversified viewpoints and perspectives on this historic event. It has remained a topic of controversy and heated debate. To understand its complex nature, historians have tried to identify and analyse the multiple factors, events, circumstances, and long-term reasons that led to and contributed to the partition of British India. Most historians and academicians have focused on the reasoning behind the partition and the roles involved in the critical events of the major stakeholders, including Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the All-India Muslim League, the Congress Party, Congress leaders, and the British government. Some have tried to prove the authenticity of the two-nation theory, while some have presented a revisionist perspective, i.e., questioning the two-nation theory and the role of Jinnah. Few authors, including Indian ones, have also thoroughly criticised Jinnah, terming him merely responsible for dismantling hundreds of years old Hindu Muslim unity and causing violent partition. All the historians have presented their viewpoints and perspectives, keeping in view their state affiliations and biases. However, most had valid reasons based on concrete and unbiased research.

This study adopts a qualitative research method, specifically focused on conducting a comprehensive literature review and critical analysis of existing scholarship on this topic. The primary data source for this research is scholarly literature. Relevant academic articles, books, reports, and publications related to the Two-nation theory, partition of the Indian Subcontinent, and revisionist perspectives will be systematically identified and collected.

## **2. Literature review**

Joya Chatterji provides an anthropological and relativist perspective. She states that the violence involved in this process has been contained within an “acceptable, comprehensible, and even meaningful surgical metaphor, arguing that: “Partition was a necessary part of a process of healing: that it was a surgical solution to the communal disease” (Chatterji, 2007).

Masood Ashraf Raja, in his writing, describes that the initiative of Muslim nationalism separation took shape in the work of writers, poets, academicians and political leaders instantly after the War of Independence in 1857 and long before party politics became a customary trend, especially the emergence of Muslim League. Raja thoroughly discusses the role of Allama Muhammad Iqbal and Maulana Maududi in the creation of Pakistan. He terms Iqbal "the first scholar and politician to delineate the physical boundaries of a future nation-state in India" and the political philosophy of the Islamic State by Maulana Maududi. For both, Islam should form the practicalities of daily life in an Islamic state and not be abbreviated to an individual's business. According to the author, both personalities were conscious of the drawbacks of Western secular nationalism and had apprehensions regarding them (Raja, 2010).

### **2.1. Revisionist perspectives: questioning the idealism**

In her book, Ayesha Jalal focuses on significant issues related to Pakistan's demand. She points out that Jinnah's demand for the Subcontinent was not communal but simply a matter of the right to self-determination. Countering the myth of a country achieved in the name of Islam,

she argues that the dynamics of the struggle of Pakistan were based on the fundamental international rights according to which a nation (Muslims) wanted to have a separate state. This argument reasoned that a majority group (Hindus) in a democratic framework were dominant Muslims, so on political grounds, Muslims wanted a separate nation where they could enjoy political freedom.

Jalal also highlights the ambiguity in the demand for an independent state or states, as mentioned in Lahore Resolution 1940. It was to be noted that the Muslim League, claiming to be the representative party of subcontinent Muslims, demanded a separate state, leaving many Muslims out of the ambit of the proposed Muslim state. She reveals that Jinnah never mentioned "Pakistan" in the Lahore Resolution and Chaudhry Rehmat Ali. She also poses her disagreement with the fact that Sir Syed Ahmed Khan is acclaimed as the Father of the Two-nation Theory, arguing that Khan never termed Muslims as a separate nation from Hindus. However, he pointed out Muslims as a community. She also identifies a very eye-opening fact regarding the partition. She highlights that the leaders of the Congress Party, particularly Jawaharlal Nehru, were in favour of a strong state, which was not possible in the shape of United India having its borders from Khyber to Bengal and a sizeable Muslim minority; therefore, they also agreed with the idea of a separate Pakistan to get a strong India (Jalal, 1994).

Stanley Wolpert writes that Sir Syed Ahmed Khan was not the propagator of a separate Muslim state but was dedicated to Muslim modernisation and pan-Islamic identity (Wolpert, 1984). He also discussed that many notable and distinguished Muslim politicians, mainly Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Zakir Hussain and Badr-ud-Din Tyabji, rejected the idea of Pakistan while remaining a staunch member of Congress. A critical point Wolpert writes in his book is that because Jinnah had to weld together disparate elements of the Indian Muslim community, Jinnah's argument was vague. This vagueness brought strengths and weaknesses to the Pakistan movement, enabling it to muster support for independence and opposition to Hindu domination but not to build a consensus on the kind of state Pakistan was to become. In addition, Jinnah's dominance left little room for second-tier leadership, which was to prove disastrous when he died shortly after independence. These words meant that Jinnah did not present a post-independence state structure, which led to political fights in the early years of Pakistan since no other leader of the Independence movement or Muslim League was at par with Jinnah's charisma and authority.

Wolpert also highlighted an interesting historical interpretation of the division of the Subcontinent and the creation of Pakistan, which is challenging to reject. He maintains that Nehru's leftist designs were a threat to imperial and capitalist Britain, and a united India under the leadership of Nehru, having a leftist mindset, could have fallen under Soviet influence and proved to be a nightmare for Western capitalist powers. He further writes that an independent Pakistan having Western tutelage was an attractive idea for Britain. Pakistan would have been a strong foothold with its loyal army and Western-leaning Muslim League leadership. However, he mentions that the historical record regarding these theories is very complex and rich enough to support both arguments, whether Pakistan came into being due to a legitimate demand or British imperial strategy (Wolpert, 1984).

Muhammad Reza Kazimi criticises the role of Congress and somehow seconded Wolpert's argument that Congress bears significant responsibility for creating Pakistan by not accepting

a united India. Kazimi mentions that the Cabinet Mission Plan was the last effort to keep India united, and even the Muslim League accepted the Cabinet Mission Plan, which was to keep India united under groupings of provinces to decide their future after ten years. Many scholars considered this an excellent opportunity to keep India united since the Muslim League had also announced acceptance of the plan. Interestingly, being the staunch propagator of United India, Congress rejected the Cabinet Mission Plan, which proved to be the last nail in the coffin of United India. Seeing the uncompromising attitude of Congress, the Muslim League also rejected the Cabinet Mission Plan and called for direct action to achieve the goal of a separate homeland, i.e., Pakistan.

Kazimi also questioned Jinnah's use of the two-nation theory. According to him, Jinnah himself dismantled the two-nation theory after achieving the end objective of the two-nation theory on 11<sup>th</sup> August 1947 in such words: "You may belong to any religion or caste or creed, that has nothing to do with the business of the State, we all are starting with the fundamental principle that we all are citizens and equal citizens of one state". In Kazimi's words, Jinnah formulated the two-nation theory in 1940 and discarded it in 1947. He also highlights the ambiguity in the text of the Lahore Resolution, mentioning that the word Pakistan was not mentioned in the whole resolution. He points out that significant architects of the Lahore Resolution, Fazlul Haq and Khaliqzaman, later expressed their reservations about the creation of Pakistan as a state and as a solution to the communal problem in India (Kazimi, 2009).

Sudhir Chandra, cited in a book entitled "Challenges of History Writing in South Asia", written by a noted academician and former director of Pakistan Study Center, University of Karachi, Syed Jaffar Ahmed, discusses the role of Gandhi and Jinnah in the partition. He maintains that the Indian nation felt betrayed by the role of Gandhi in the partition. Once Gandhi announced that Pakistan would come into being over his dead body, but he is famous for his fast unto death, he did not bother to undertake the said fast to stop the partition. Chandra claimed the Indian nation felt betrayed by the attitude of Gandhi (Chandra, 2013, p. 360)

Chandra further explains that Gandhi accepted the emergence of Pakistan to prevent hostility between the two states. Gandhi wanted to see both the nation's friends, not enemies, and the resettlements of refugees on both sides peacefully. Chandra claims that Gandhi wanted to see the minorities protected in both countries, but he lost his life due to these "Pro-Pakistan" initiatives. He discusses Gandhi's efforts to restore peace in areas of violence during the partition, including the Calcutta Hindu Muslim riots. Chandra quoted Muslim League leader Suharwardy in a discussion with Gandhi, describing Gandhi as a friend to the Muslims of the Subcontinent. Now, he also quotes Congress leader Rajagopalachari in such words which show his admiration towards Gandhi but the ignorance of the Indian nation towards a peace-loving leader: "I would say that he (Gandhi) is safer today in the hand of Muslims than those of Hindus" (Chandra, 2013).

Rafiq Zakaria's book contains accusations and Jinnah's alleged negative role in the Subcontinent's division. Zakaria claims that Jinnah exploited the favours of the British on him to create rifts among Hindus and Muslims, in which he was successful. He termed the designs of Jinnah "mischievous" and "poisonous" (p. 81). Zakaria discusses the role of Congress, which tried to counter Jinnah's moves by electing Maulana Abul Kalam Azad as the President of Congress. Azad tried very hard to counter Jinnah's arguments and theory of two-nations theory by his writings and public speeches. However, according to Zakaria, Congress failed to

promote Hindu-Muslim unity due to a lack of conviction and vigour among Muslims (p. 83). He claims that Congress leaders failed to convince the Muslims that division of the Subcontinent would prove to be fatal for their existence and identity. Zakaria also rejected Sir Syed Ahmed Khan's role as the founder of the two-nation theory and described him as a supporter of Hindu-Muslim unity (p. 226). He also rejected the perception that Pakistan was the vision of Allama Iqbal, and Jinnah carried forward his vision to turn it into a reality.

Zakaria points out that Iqbal did not want a separate Muslim state but just a redistribution of Indian provinces within India. According to Zakaria, Jinnah used Islam to achieve Pakistan and, in his first address after independence, called for having a secular state on modern Western lines. Zakaria later also admits that apart from Jinnah, some aggressive anti-Muslim campaigns were terming them traitors of India, even by some senior Congress leaders (p. 228). Zakaria termed these fanatic anti-Muslim campaigns as a significant reason why Jinnah succeeded with his weak Two-nation theory and convincing Muslims that they were not safe in United India in the presence of such Hindu extremists. To conclude Zakaria's arguments, Zakaria again termed the partition decision a significant blunder since, according to him, Pakistan brought no relief to Muslims. Pakistanis were the losers since they were deprived of some fundamental human rights and democratic freedom. He also criticises the extremism in Pakistan and the dismal state of Muslims who migrated to Pakistan from India since they were harassed and never accepted as "True Pakistanis" but still termed as "Mohajirs" (Zakaria, 2004).

Khalid Bin Sayeed's book "Pakistan: The Formative Phase 1857-1958" thoroughly discusses the background of the Indian partition and Independence Movement (Sayeed, 1996). He challenges a widely prevalent view that Pakistan was achieved by Jinnah's brilliant strategy and efforts alone. He maintains that Jinnah did play a decisive role in achieving the goal of independence. However, it was not possible due to the efforts of Khilafat leaders like Maulana Muhammad Ali and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad and poets like Iqbal and Akbar Allahabadi, who contributed to developing a sense of realisation among Muslims of their separate religious and cultural identity. When the message of Pakistan was presented to the masses, it fell on fertile soil.

Saeed also describes Muslim separatism as a significant cause of partition rather than Hindu extremism. He maintains that after 1940, Muslims were no longer interested in constitutional safeguards but were religiously motivated to achieve a separate homeland. The Two-nation theory of the All-India Muslim League was constantly preached in the Friday Prayer sermons, which made the Muslims embrace the two-nation theory (p. 10). Saeed also discusses Maulana Abul Kalam Azad's claims that communal leaders of Congress, including Jawaharlal Nehru and Sardar Patel, were majorly responsible for the division of the Subcontinent. He reiterates Azad's claim that Pakistan would not have been created without the Congress's tolerance and farsightedness (p. 9). Sayeed also mentions that the West needed help understanding the concept of the emergence of Pakistan based on religion. Nationality based on religion was new for the West since religion did not play a significant role in European nation-building (Sayeed, 1996).

## **2.2. Imperialist historiography**

Most British scholars have written the history of partition with an imperialistic mindset, having an appreciation of the British government, and did not give adequate and just importance to the

nationalist movements in India, majorly by the Congress party and the All-India Muslim League. Moon (1962) praises the British government and its services under the "White Man's Burden" theory in his writing. According to him, the British government was on a civilising mission. He presents a sophisticated version of the white man's burden theory by justifying the British conquest and continuing their rule in the Subcontinent. He terms the Indian National Congress as a Hindu party and rejected Congress's claim of being secular.

Moon pointed out the cultural and social differences among Hindus and Muslims while terming partition as inevitable on various accounts. He describes it as: "Though the groups lived side by side, the rigour of religious institutions had kept even neighbours apart with the result that Hindus and Muslims constituted two distinct and often antagonist communities". Moon describes Sir Syed Ahmed Khan's contribution to Muslims as pioneering towards establishing Pakistan. He argues that Sir Syed Ahmad Khan thought that if a democratic system ruled India, the Muslims would be entirely out of power, and Congress would outnumber them in everything. Therefore, according to him, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan came forward with the two-nation theory.

Ted Syensson, unlike many British historians, presents a distinct perspective on the Indian partition, which seems quite evident and true. He argues that there are certain idealism and state narratives in India and Pakistan regarding partition and whosoever tend to differ from those who receive great public rage. For example, he mentions that Altaf Hussain, leader of a leading political party in Pakistan, namely MQM, visited India and termed the division of the Subcontinent as the biggest blunder in the history of humankind. These remarks drew great public and political outrage, especially since he led a political party representing most people who migrated from India to the newly born state, i.e., Pakistan, at the time of partition. The same was the case of famous Indian Congress leader L. K. Advani; he almost lost his Congress presidency over his remarks of calling Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, a secular leader when Advani visited Karachi, his birthplace. He rightly points out that those who try to challenge or question these narratives face severe criticism and controversy from those who favour them. Therefore, it is an uphill task to question such idealism and narratives in Indian partition historiography (Moon, 1962).

Bishwa Mohan Pandey gives a comprehensive review of the imperialist historiography of the Indian partition, which, according to him, was highly biased. He maintains that British historians hold the Congress Party responsible for the partition and equate them with Indian nationalism. British historians have thoroughly criticised Indian nationalist leaders, including Gandhi and Nehru, in even abusive language. According to Pandey, most British historians defend the stance of the Muslim League and highly regard Jinnah's struggle for independence. Pandey argues that British historians tried to show the validity of the "White Man's burden" theory and pointed out that the British left India since they trained Indians in the art of governance, i.e., the representative democracy. British historians had this primary objective of blaming the Indian population for this divide and praising the leadership and governance of the British government.

Pandey termed the historiography of Partition by British historians as highly biased. He says: "No doubt the communalism and its fulfilment into the partition was one of the worst legacies of the colonial regime. The history they (British historians) have constructed is biased, prejudiced, and devoid of professed objectivity. They have overemphasised the inter-

community differences and overlooked the intra-community differences and inter-community similarities". Pandey thoroughly criticises the British historians in such words: "The imperial ideologues have been conscious of the blunders committed by the British policymakers. Therefore, they have been busy in the "face-saving and whitewashing exercise".

Discussing a dire need for a fresh and focused history writing on the role of communalism of Hindu, Muslim and Sikh communities, Pandey terms almost complete literature on Indian partition as biased with very few exceptions. He maintains that nationalist historians have blamed the British government for its policies in creating a divide between Hindus and Muslims. In contrast, Imperial historians blame the Indian socio-cultural orientation and intercultural differences in this regard. According to him, all segments distorted history and ignored genuine issues (Pandey, 2003).

### **3. Findings**

#### **3.1. Complexity of Identity**

Revisionist perspectives emphasise that the Two-nation theory's portrayal of Muslims in the Indian Subcontinent oversimplifies their identity. Muslims were characterised by diverse cultural, linguistic, and regional identities, challenging the idea of a monolithic religious community.

#### **3.2. Multifaceted causes of partition**

Revisionists argue that partition cannot be solely attributed to religious differences. Political manoeuvring, economic disparities, power dynamics, and leadership failures significantly shaped this historical event. This complexity defies a single causal explanation.

#### **3.3. Political manipulation**

Revisionists suggest that political leaders, including Muhammad Ali Jinnah and the All-India Muslim League, strategically employed the Two-nation theory for political gain. This implies that political considerations and religious sentiment influenced the demand for a separate Muslim state.

#### **3.4. Role of regional identities**

Revisionist perspectives underscore the importance of regional identities and secession movements, such as the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. Regional aspirations and grievances significantly influenced the partition narrative alongside religious factors.

#### **3.5. Contemporary implications**

Revisiting the Two-Nation Theory through revisionist perspectives has contemporary implications for researchers and scholars. It challenges established narratives and encourages a more nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics that continue to influence the Indian Subcontinent.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In conclusion, revisionist perspectives on the Two-nation theory offer a compelling re-examination of the partition of the Indian Subcontinent. These perspectives enrich our understanding of this pivotal historical moment by questioning established idealism about religious disparities, highlighting multifaceted causes, exploring political manipulation, proposing an alternative vision of unity, and emphasising regional identities. The findings from revisionist perspectives challenge the traditional narrative surrounding the partition and invite scholars, historians, and the broader public to engage in critical discourse. While the conventional narrative remains essential to the historical record, revisionism adds depth and complexity to our understanding, shedding light on the complex interplay of factors that shaped this historic event. Furthermore, these revisionist viewpoints emphasise the need for a more inclusive and equitable approach to understanding the diverse identities and aspirations of the people of the Indian Subcontinent, both in the past and present.

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