

# The re-unification of India

Cha-am Jamal, 2005

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Prior to gaining independence from British rule, India had in place a parliamentary form of government with an All-India Constituent Assembly in Delhi and Legislative Assemblies in the provinces. The Congress Party and the Muslim League were the two major political parties. The Congress Party was non-sectarian but its membership and its leadership were mostly Hindu although it did have some significant leaders who were Muslim. The Muslim League was a political party in theory but a religious organization in terms of its membership, philosophy, and party platform.

Independence from Britain posed a unique problem to the extant and entrenched political hierarchy in India. It was clear that after independence the Congress Party with 207 out of 280 seats in the Constituent Assembly would form the government and the Muslim League with only 71 seats would be marginalized. As the Thai Rak Thai Party has demonstrated in Thailand, democratic principles including human rights and the protection of minorities may become compromised in the parliamentary system of government if a single political party garners an overwhelming majority of the seats in Parliament. Jinnah, the Muslim League's leader, refused to accept this scenario and wanted safeguards to protect the rights of the Muslims of India after independence.

Two plans were proposed to address Jinnah's concerns. Plan-A was to weaken the power of the central government in Delhi. Independent India was envisaged as a loose confederation of provinces. The rationale for the plan was that it effectively disemboweled the lopsided Constituent Assembly than Jinnah feared. The Muslim League controlled many of the Legislative Assemblies in the provinces. Most were controlled by the Congress Party. Some hung in the balance with no clear control by either party. A key feature of Plan-A was that the provinces would be organized into groups. The three-way negotiations among the British, the Congress Party, and the Muslim League centered on the structure and membership of the groups and whether provinces could later secede from their group or from the union or whether a group itself could decide to secede from the union. These negotiations were carried out right up the eleventh hour but they failed. Plan-B was ultimately put into effect.

Plan-B was the dreaded option of Partition, that is, to divide India into two countries along religious lines. It is a matter of historical record that none of the negotiating parties, not even Jinnah, wanted Partition. Jinnah preached the so-called Two-Nation Theory and supported the Lahore Resolution for the creation of Pakistan but at the same time he was negotiating hard for the implementation of Plan-A on his terms. It is possible that Jinnah used his Two-Nation Theory as a bargaining tool and that in the end Nehru simply called his bluff.

For his part, Gandhi offered Jinnah the Prime Minister's office of the new independent India if he would accept the proposed structure of the new confederation of provinces. Jinnah refused and pushed for his version of Plan-A. The impasse was not overcome. The creation of Pakistan was thus not a victory but a failure. The failure of diplomacy, the incredible stubbornness of Jinnah, and a rush to independence left India with no choice but to fall back on Plan-B. And so it was that a new country to be called Pakistan was carved out of India in 1947. The folklore that the British, known for their divide-and-conquer stratagem, purposely eviscerated India with Partition upon their departure is not consistent with their great effort to implement Plan-A. The surgery was more of a do-it-yourself variety.

The Solomon-like justice was a great loss for all Indians, Hindus and Muslims alike. Their leaders had failed them. In the short term, Partition plunged the sub-continent into anarchy. A civil war broke out between the two great religions of the sub-continent that had coexisted peacefully for the most part until then. Over a million Indians died in the mindless and wanton savagery. Another twenty million, that included the parents of President Musharraf and Prime Minister Singh, were made refugees in a chaotic cross migration across the new religion boundaries. The infrastructure of the country was ravaged. India was emasculated. The dreamers who had been fighting for independence from Britain were left still dreaming of what might have been.

The long run catastrophe was even worse. Having just emerged from the colonial yoke, Indians immediately found themselves at war with each other over the issue of whether Kashmir should join Pakistan or India. The issue remains unsettled to this day and has been the source of great acrimony and the cause of three wars between these countries. Both countries have built huge armies and they maintain tense and scary borders. They have spent the savings of some of the poorest people on earth on an colossal amount of weaponry. India and Pakistan are paralyzed by rivalry. Each has demonized the other and each country has raised generations of children on a steady dose of a form of patriotism that presents the other country as the enemy. They have made a mess of India. The time has come to put things right.

There is no solution to the Kashmir problem in the current context. It is the context that has to change. Recent developments have produced encouraging signs that perhaps the context can indeed be changed. The Muslim nation that was Pakistan has split into two. The three nations; India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, are not unlike the three groups of provinces that the British had proposed as Plan-A. The cold war between India and Pakistan has thawed. One can now envisage that maybe, just maybe, the clock can be turned back.

Incremental changes to the status quo can reverse the disaster produced by Plan-B and achieve something akin to Plan-A. By undoing in stages what Partition has wrought the two countries as partners rather than adversaries can quite likely achieve peace, prosperity, and increased leverage in global affairs. The cooperation will yield synergistic gains to both parties. It is a win-win proposition.

These changes might begin with relaxation of travel restrictions. Pakistan and India might consider liberalizing and simplifying their bilateral passport and visa regulations with the objective of encouraging cross-border tourism; something that has already been achieved by India and Bangladesh. Once travel is re-started, it will be necessary to provide the travelers with the ways and means of travel. The transport infrastructure that was willfully destroyed for the sake of Partition and in the name of patriotism must now be rebuilt. Railways and highways that had been severed must now be re-connected. Blocked waterways must be re-opened. Travel services by train, bus, car, riverboat, and air may then be re-established.

Once people-to-people contact is achieved the cold war propaganda machine can be turned off or even reversed. Cultural exchanges and sporting events will re-establish forgotten bonds between old friends and lay the groundwork for real economic integration and political alignment along the lines of Plan-A. Integration begins with trade. Relaxation of Draconian restrictions on international trade between them will allow India and Pakistan to reach a level of trade that India now enjoys with Bangladesh. To enhance their gains from trade the three countries may choose to enter into a three-way free trade agreement or FTA. Once that is achieved, every productive economic unit in the sub-continent will have the entire sub-continent as its market and the sub-continent will begin to achieve the kind of economic power conceived in Plan-A.

The recent announcement by Tata Industries of India of their intent to invest \$2 billion USD in Bangladesh is indicative of a significant capital flow potential among these countries that is waiting for the right conditions. Reform and liberalization of laws governing cross-border capital and labor mobility along with an FTA will create a single economic entity of over 1.5 billion people. At that point it would serve their best interests for these countries to enter into a multilateral defense treaty. They may elect to hold joint military exercises and form joint rapid action battalions to defend the sub-continent from international crime and terrorism.

Once military integration is achieved, India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh may elect to enter into a loose confederation along the lines of the European Union. If that happens the clock will have been turned back. In spite of the failings of their leaders at the inception of their freedom from colonialism, the people of the sub-continent will finally have been freed from the curse of Partition. Kashmir will be a non-issue as its place in the confederation may take one of many forms.

As the largest population in the world, the largest democracy in the world, and also the largest group of Muslims in the world, the confederation will be able to leverage a more advantageous position for all the people of the subcontinent in the global arena.