

# The Unionist-League Conflict and Birth of Pakistan, 1937-47

Rajni Thakur\*

Assistant Professor in History, SMDRSD College, Pathankot

**Abstract – The communal politics of the Punjab was very complicated because here lived three communities – the Hindus, the Muslims and the Sikhs. According to the census of 1941, there lived 13% Sikhs, 30% Hindus and 57% Muslims in the Punjab. In the elections of 1937, Muslim League was defeated badly. Jinnah wanted cooperation of the Punjab Muslims because they were to majority in the Punjab. For this reason he decided to make an agreement with Sikander Hayyat Khan. In Lucknow in 1937 an agreement took place between Mohammed Ali Jinnah and Sir Sikander Hayyat Khan which is known as Sikander – Jinnah Pact. The pact is considered to be the diplomatic victory of Mr. Jinnah. This pact also consolidated the position of the Muslim League and enhanced the popularity of Mr. Jinnah but still Muslim League was not content. It passed the resolution of Independent Pakistan on March 23, 1940. Cripps mission came to India but the Congress, the Muslim League and the Hindu Maha Sabha rejected its recommendation. In the assembly election of the Punjab in 1945-46, Muslim League won more seats than any other party, but it could not get absolute majority. Then a coalition government was formed in Punjab, but the Muslim League started communal riots. At last according to the recommendations of Lord Mountbatten India and Pakistan were partitioned.**

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The thirties were in a certain sense troubled years for India; its economy was in bad shape, polity was disturbed there was chaos and confusion in the social field. In one word, things had gone wrong almost everywhere. Now only some miracle could have effected improvement in this situation. Though miracles came in the form of the government of India Act, 1935, which changed life. Almost all sections of the Indian society were touched by its impact.

The Unionist Party in Punjab, with which this paper is concerned, was influenced by the 'miracle' to an extent as perhaps no other institution was influenced not only in the entire country. The story should begin with 1923 when the party was formed by Sir Fazl-i-Husain, a Muslim landlord and lawyer from West Punjab. He was a congressman but had parted on the issue of non-cooperation programme adopted by Gandhiji after the Rowlatt Act had come into being (1919). Another congressman, Sir Chhotu Ram from Haryana left the party for the same reason, joined hands with Fazl and gave a sort of secular outlook to the new outfit. Its main centre of activity was the village, especially the farming communities living there, its leadership was for the most part drawn from traditional leaders, like landlords, chaudharis, zaildars, ulema, mahants, etc.

The British government looked favourably towards the unionist party for two obvious reason: one, the party standing for constitutional means to effect any political change was a lesser evil when compared with

Congress which was in almost total revolt against it; and two, the feudal element and others who formed the social base of the unionists were the governments own men. As a result, the unionists soon assumed number one position in the province.

The Government of India Act, 1935 was a miracle of sorts. It caused a great stir in the contemporary political life everywhere. The Congress rushed in with the greatest sound and fury in the electoral battle. But, it hardly effected any improvement in its old party organisation to meet the new situation. Similarly, the Muslim League, which was in equally bad shape, also appeared to be in mood to see and conquer everything. The League Supremo, Mohammad Ali Jinnah made many wise moves. He came to Punjab. Unlike congressmen, he accepted that his means and organization were pretty weak. He approached Sir Fazl-i-Husain who was the greatest and the most powerful leader among the Muslim politicians in India at that time. Understandably, he threw his net on Fazl: offering him the presidentship of the All India Muslim League.

Fazl knew what would be the consequences of Jinnah's proposal. He did not want to take the Muslims away from the national mainstream. So he went in just the opposite direction to that of Jinnah: he carried talks with the Congress leadership at the centre through Bhulabhi Desai, and at the provincial

level through his friend Raizada Hans Raj but the Congress failed.

Inversely, Jinnah pursued, his mission with zeal. He made second bid to avail of what was missed by the congress. He formed the Muslim League Central Parliamentary Board and urged upon Fazli to fight the elections under its banner. Fazli, however negated the proposal of Jinnah once again. Joining hands with the Muslim League would mean, as already noted, taking the Muslims away from the mainstream. He told Jinnah not to meddle in the affairs not only of Punjab but of other provinces also. Let them fight their battles the way they like in view of their local conditions he advised the Muslim League leader. If he wanted to have some understanding with them, he could do that after elections. Jinnah was deeply angry.

Having showed Jinnah his way Fazli started organizing his party on Modern lines. A new programme with ample emphasis on economic problems and political stability was devised. It was a great feat indeed. But before it was turned into a reality the master-organizer passed away on 11 August 1936.

Sikander succeeded Fazli as leader, and the thread left by Fazli was taken up in right seriousness. As a result the congress, a divided house, got badly demoralized, and Muslim League turned lifeless. The election results show their positions in a better manner (Table-1).

**Table-1**

**Party-wise Position in the Punjab Legislative Assembly, 1937**

	Party	Seats Won
1.	Unionists	98
2.	Congress	18
3.	Khalsa National Party	13
4.	Hindu Maha Sabha	12
5.	Akali Party	11
6.	Ahrars	02
7.	Itihad-i-Millat	02
8.	Muslim League	02
9.	Congress Nationalists	01
10.	Independent	16
	Total Seats	175

The League, as the above table shows performed very badly. That it could won two seats in a province where Muslims were in majority. One of its two members Raja Ghazanfar Ali Khan-resigned from the party and joined the Unionists. Now League representing Muslim communalism had only one member, Malik Barkat Ali, sitting in the Assembly comprising 175 members.

Having majority, the unionists formed the ministry. It was an experiment of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs working together in a friendly spirit. After that Jinnah called a conference of the Muslim League in Lucknow

on 15-18 October, 1937, to which Sikander and his newly elected Muslim unionist members were invited. Sikander accepted the invitation, went to Lucknow, admitted the supremacy of Jinnah and signed agreement which is called Sikander 'Jinnah Pact'.

Yet Sikander went to him and signed the pact. Why? The reason was Sikander himself-his personality, his ambition and his weaknesses. He could do this to defy his leader (Fazli) and ditch his party. There is evidence to show that he had gone to Lucknow to sign the Sikander-Jinnah Pact at the bidding of the imperialists, for the revival of dead Jinnah and his league was essential for checking the congress.

After capturing two provinces, Jinnah took to strengthening his organization. He had known that middle classes would not help him. So he turned towards the Muslim masses with whom he somehow had not liked to mix with earlier. His Western suit was replaced by a Sherwani, Pyjama and a Muslim cap; the prayers and congregations began to attract him and surprisingly he preferred to be called Qaid-i-Azam. The mere talks and empty show off would not bring about the desired change this too; Jinnah knew well. He decided to change the constitution of the League.

Besides this, the Muslim League organizational wing was strengthened, funds were collected and branches opened in almost all the districts and even in some tehsils. Sir Mohammad Iqbal was given the formal charge of the Punjab League, but the real power was vested in Sikander; The League began to flourish, Jinnah gained in stature and became so strong that he even forced Sikander to resign from the membership of the viceroy war council. Sikander was unhappy with the development.

Meanwhile, the congress made the second blunder: it resigned from ministries in the seven provinces. Reading the situation correctly, Jinnah immediately relaxed his attitude towards the government and with their help he captured power in several provinces. Now Sind, the N.W.F.P. and Bluchistan were in his clutches, Punjab and Bengal were already his. Hence Pakistan proposal at the Lahore session of the League on 23 March 1940.

Sikander knew that a resolution demanding division of the country on the basis of the 'two Nation theory' was coming at the next session of the League. So he and his friend Maqbul Ahmad proposed a resolution. Sikander's resolution contained three main proposals.

- (i) Each province be a sovereign state
- (ii) The sovereign states be vested with unlimited powers, except subjects like defence communication, foreign affairs were

concerned, which were to be controlled by a central body.

- (iii) The central body would control over the subjects contained at number (ii).

The Resolution had two advantages: it would have not harmed Sikander in Punjab and unionists would have accepted it as such second, it would have reduced the central over-domination of the Hindus, a thing the Muslim feared most. But Sikander's Resolution was not passed; in its place popularly known 'Pakistan Resolution' was passed.

After a short honeymoon, the league and unionists clashed. Sikander opposed the Pakistan resolution and took several measures to check the league engulfing Punjab. But before he could mature his plans properly; he suddenly died on 26 December, 1942. This was a great blow to the unionists. They were left with no leader of stature at the moment. After the death of Sikander the party split into two factions Noon-Tiwana and Sikander-Daultana. There was a great tussle, but ultimately Sir Khizar Hayat Khan Tiwana was chosen for the job. However, the new premier started well. But he made a blunder. In order to appease his rival faction, he chose Shaukat Hayat Khan, son of Sir Sikander; to be his minister Shaukat opened up his front against Khizar. This was self-invited plague.

Shaukat's advent brought instability and factional feuds surely, this was the most opportune time for the Jinnah to meddle in the Punjab affairs. He rushed in the placed three proposals before Khizar in April 1944.

- (i) that every member of the Muslim League party in the Punjab Assembly should declare that he owes allegiance solely to the Muslim League party in the assembly and not to the Unionist or any other party.
- (ii) that the present label of the coalition, namely the unionist party, should be dropped.
- (ii) that the name of the proposed coalition should be the Muslim League coalition party.

Khizar did not accept any of the conditions put forward by Jinnah. Not only that, he insulted the Qaid by not coming to respond to his calls, and not replying to his letters, let alone obeying his commands. On 27 April 1944 the infuriated Jinnah expelled Khizar from the League and then he urging the Muslim Ministers to resign. Khizar proved too smart for his adversary and took initiative in his own hands, he got Shaukat dismissed before he could tender his resignation. The outcome was a setback to the league, his efforts for a shortcut to power were premature. Jinnah by doing what he did show lack of understanding of politics in the Punjab and spoiled his all India image.

The Punjab Muslim League had been in a bad shape until now. A small parliamentary party consisting of 23 MLA's was formed in the Assembly. The organizational wing was also taken care of, district branches were made to function, membership increased, and huge funds were collected. The propaganda wing was strengthened manifold. A very large number of young men from Muslim university Aligarh came and helped in organizing and strengthening the party a great deal on modern lines.

What was this massage? First, the masses were frightened, wrong notions about things were put into their heads, and appeals that moved their hearts were made. And then the positive side was shown in the brightest possible colours. In that Ideal State there would be no poverty, no unemployment and no exploitation by the 'Hindu Blood Suckers'. Pakistan was a strong, living issue now. In these critical circumstances came the elections of 1945-46. The Muslim League took the elections as a life and death question for it. If it won election in Punjab, Pakistan was a certainty, but if it lost then its dreams would be shattered into hundred pieces. The Pakistan had been sold so well to the Muslim Masses that they were ready to sacrifice everything for that heaven.

Some important questions arise here; Khizar in power had a Public Relation Department; his party organization was there, they had workers too. In the villages, if not in towns, people still listened to them. There was no reason why the Muslim League propaganda could not have been checked by him. But they could not do it for the following reason: First the League was a modern outfit. As opposed to it, the Unionist Party was an old, traditional organization. Second, the colonialist power, which had stood by Khizar during the war, give valuable help to the league, directly and indirectly. Thirdly, the Muslim League educated the masses, and made them realize that their future lay safe not in free 'Hindu India' but in free 'Muslim Pakistan'. As a result, the unionist party lost its ground many towering leaders left their old party to join the league.

The Muslim League contested these elections on basis of religion, due to which it got much majority. It won 73 seats out of 175 seats. The congress won only 51 seats, 11 seats were got by unionist party. In vote terms, the League got 66.4 percent of votes and the unionist, who only contested the rural seats, got 26.7 percent. In terms of seats the over-all position was as given in table-2.

Table-2

**Party-wise Position in the Punjab Legislative Assembly, 1946**

	Party	No. of Seats won
1.	Muslim League	73
2.	Congress	51
3.	Akalis	21
4.	Unionists	11
5.	Independents	19
	Total	175

The defeat of the Unionist was not only the defeat of the nationalist forces but it also paved the way for partition. Jinnah was pleased and sent a congratulatory message to Punjab Provincial Muslim League. But a question arise there If the population of the Muslims in India would have been distributed equally, not concentrated in any one region, then the demand for separate Pakistan would not have been raised at all. Because there was high concentration of Muslims in the western and eastern parts of the country, they provided a two part physical body for Pakistan. Between these two parts, the western part was by all means more important, for it was better placed to strategic, economic and political terms. If the Punjab would not have been available, the N.W.F.P. Sind and even Bluchistan would not have been ready to go for Pakistan. In the eastern sector, some second thought about partition had already started in people's mind. And this way, Punjab's role was of immense important in the scheme of Pakistan.

The Punjab Muslim League controlled and guided the affairs not only of Punjab but of entire Pakistan. The moment this traditional party was entrusted with the responsibility to handle the affairs of a modern state, it failed and collapsed under its own weight. The military took its place giving Pakistan a long spell of its dictorial regimes.

It is no doubt a sad story but every story has its minus and plus points. Even from that dark phase of history there is enough to be taught and learnt. We have to change ourselves with the changing time and if we don't change time will push us back to the dark recesses of history.

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**Corresponding Author****Rajni Thakur\***

Assistant Professor in History, SMDRSD College,  
Pathankot