

Alternative to Partition: Muslim Politics between the Wars

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Alternative to Partition: Muslim Politics Between the Wars

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WHEN the British came to power in India, it was certainly not in the face of the organized resistance of Islam. Yet the British Raj came to its end among political and social convulsions in which Hindus and Muslims cut each other's throats and large populations were shunted across the new frontiers of a sub-continent, now divided into two nations on the basis of religion. Events of such magnitude have encouraged historians to seek explanations of matching significance which may account for the growth of Muslim separatism. This article is concerned with the period of the nineteen-twenties and -thirties, before the onset of the end game when the communal quarrel burst out in deadly earnest. Explicit rivalries between the communities tended to exist at two main levels, the level of organized politics at the top where Hindu and Muslim élites were rivals for influence with government and eventually for the control of government itself, and the level of mob violence in the streets. This article is concerned with organized politics at the top, although it does not deny the existence and importance of tensions at the base. Its main emphasis will be upon the provincial stage, in particular the Muslim majority province of the Punjab. In the period before 1919 the development of Muslim politics suggested that a specifically Muslim separatism orchestrated by the United Provinces had emerged upon the all-India stage. But the coming of the reforms reversed the situation of the preceding decades, and there was less incentive for Muslim politicians in the United Provinces to claim to be the spokesmen of Muslims in the nation. The article will seek to demonstrate the rise of an alternative strategy for Muslim politics which developed in the Punjab, a strategy which qualifies any notion that the rivalries of Muslims and Hindus can

The authors wish to acknowledge their debt to John Gallagher, whose unpublished paper 'From Civil Disobedience to Communalism' was the first to stress the importance of the Punjab alternative; and to David Page, whose research he supervised. Page's doctoral dissertation, 'Prelude to Partition: All India Moslem Politics, 1920–1932', 1974, is due to be published in the Oxford University South Asian Studies Series.

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be simply explained as the clash between separate but homogeneous political communities.

Inevitably, the argument will be grounded upon a number of assumptions about the nature of the Muslim community and its politics. The premise that Indian society as a whole was cast into two distinct communities, let alone two nations, will not be taken for granted; nor will it assume that communalism was a fundamental organizing principle of Indian political society, and that Indian Muslims have always seen themselves as a clearly identifiable and separate community, with a distinct set of political interests of their own. Since time immemorial, a great deal of Indian political life was organized in ways which cut across community, so that political choices, particularly in the localities, were determined by solidarities and interests other than those of a specifically religious sort.¹ No doubt the role the British played in the process was important but the main purpose of this article is not to investigate the inwardness of British policy. By coming to recognize community as the organizing principle of the greatest importance, the British themselves contributed to the distortion of social fact. Whatever may have been their experience in Europe, or in the colonies of white settlement, or of Islam in other parts of the world, there was no obvious reason why these experiences were relevant to India, where the religious affiliations of the people tended to be bounded by innumerable small localities and the scramble for resources within them. The communities which the British were supposed to have divided and ruled were at least in part the invention of the rulers.

I

Surveying Muslim politics in the nineteen-twenties, Choudhry Khaliquzzaman commented:

The history . . . of Muslim India is a mass of confusion and a chapter of political benightedness. . . . To try to find any consistency, sound reasoning or logical method in Muslim politics during that period, would be utterly futile.²

¹ This is not to deny that the hold of traditional Islam was powerful, particularly at the level of popular religion. But Hindus and Muslims had frequently to co-operate with each other in the affairs of local society, and networks of patron and client, and their factions often cut across the apparent solidarities of religious affiliation. However much of it may have been susceptible at the base to the cruder appeals of religion, Indian Islam had made its accommodations with the local environment.

² Choudhry Khaliquzzaman, *Pathway to Pakistan* (Lahore, 1961), p. 74.

Here was a striking contrast to the record of the previous decades in which organized Muslim opinion seemed to have achieved substantial gains. In 1906 Minto accepted the claim of the organizers of the Muslim League to speak for the community as a whole, and the Morley-Minto reforms had taken the momentous step of giving separate representation to Muslims in the provincial legislative councils, not simply in accordance with their numbers but also in line with their 'political importance'. In 1916 these advantages were hammered home in the Lucknow pact between the Muslim League and the Indian National Congress, the terms of which were to have a large impact on the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms. Since 1919 the Khilafat movement had swamped the politics of the Muslim League. Religion had overwhelmed politics, and the alliance of priest and politician had smashed the moderate line of the League and had given Gandhi support which was powerful, and possibly crucial, in his bid for leadership over the Congress at Calcutta in September 1920. During the non-cooperation, the Khilafatists, spurred on by the ulema, were in the van and until 1923 their influence continued to grow.³ But once Gandhi called off non-cooperation and the Treaty of Lausanne in July 1923 settled the fate of the Holy Places, the Khilafatists lost the main justification for their cause and a general movement inside which to place it. Everyone was now ready to cut the ulema down to size, and by the end of 1923 not only had the Khilafat movement begun to collapse, but also the alliance between priest and politician which had given the Muslims in Congress their particular leverage. With the Khilafatists now rebels without a cause, Congress Muslims in disarray, and the Muslim League moribund, the method in Muslim confusion during the nineteen-twenties is to be found not in all-India organizations, but in the manoeuvrings of Muslim politicians in the provinces.

The Montagu-Chelmsford reforms swung the political pendulum back into the provincial arena, just as their authors intended. The Government of India Act of 1919 had given the provinces a much larger measure of autonomy, legislative, administrative and financial. It divided the business of government in the provinces into reserved subjects, which continued to be controlled by the Governor and his official executives, and transferred subjects which were now run by ministers responsible to elected majorities in the Legislative Council. This was the famous principle of dyarchy, the brainchild of the Indian Study Group

³ See F. C. R. Robinson, *Separatism among Indian Muslims: The Politics of the United Provinces, 1860–1923* (Cambridge, 1974), chs 8 and 9.

of the Round Table, elaborated by Lionel Curtis, adopted by Montagu and eventually incorporated into the Government of India Act. So it is in the provinces that the key to the apparent disintegration of an overall Muslim strategy can be discovered. The reforms had given politicians some power in the provinces; it gave them nothing at the centre. So all-India organizations, critically important when the new constitution was being negotiated with the Raj, were less relevant once it was a question of working the concessions. Not surprisingly, in the nineteen-twenties there were few issues of any sort to breathe life into such organizations. The debacle of non-cooperation had persuaded many Indian politicians, Muslim as well as Hindu, that Gandhi and his Muslim allies had been using the wrong instrument for the wrong programme. Instead of tightly controlled all-India parties, with agitational programmes, they would substitute looser groups which would allow the provinces to go their own way, extracting what they could from the concessions that had already been won. So not only Jinnah and his handful of Independents but also Motilal Nehru were unable to make a unified movement against the resistance of the political bosses in the provinces. For most of the nineteen-twenties, the British saw little reason to take either the Indian National Congress, and much less the Muslim League, seriously. They had succeeded in locking politics out of the centre; and in their new constitutional arrangements, by ensuring wherever possible that no community had an unquestioned majority in the provincial councils, they took some of the sting out of communalism in organized politics at the top. To achieve ministries with working majorities, politicians in the reformed councils had to rediscover the traditional arts of wheeling and dealing, of making alliances which cut across community and learning to work with government in a more formal manner. Rooted in actual local conditions, the issues which now dominated provincial politics did not pour easily into a communal mould. Moreover, these trends altered the balance inside the embryonic Muslim community. Since the later nineteenth century Muslim politics had been dominated by men from the United Provinces. But after the 1919 reforms they had less incentive to pursue a separatist line, and they lost the solid base upon which to place it.

Since the time of the Muslim invasions, the centre of Muslim power and opulence had been in Hindustan, the great tract of territory in North India from the eastern bounds of the Punjab to the western borders of Bihar, the provinces of Agra and Oudh which came to be known as the United Provinces. Here the Muslim population was a small minority, but in some districts, the home counties of the old

Mughal empire, they were more than a third of the population.⁴ Here many Muslims lived in towns; and the higher orders, the *ashraf*, were a much larger proportion of the Muslim population than in other parts of India. In upper India, much of the old order had survived the vicissitudes of British rule, and not only did Muslims continue to have a large share of government posts but many of the big landowners in the region were Muslims.⁵ Despite their successful propaganda to the contrary, Muslims enjoyed a solid educational base both in the old learning and in the new secular instruction. But these notables of north India belonged to an élite which by tradition was not exclusively Muslim. In the heartland of the Muslim dynasties, the Faithful lived among a sea of unbelievers, who were not to be converted by persuasion or by the sword. Accordingly, their systems of rule had to be tempered to fit the necessities of peoples beyond the range of Muslim doctrine, whether at the summit of society or at its base. The ruling groups around the courts of northern India embraced a striking medley of peoples, Muslim as well as Hindu, for the most part more committed to their own fortunes than to the integrity of their creeds. Muslim rule had always depended critically upon the collaboration of Hindu service groups ready to work for any government. From these accommodations, there emerged an Urdu-speaking élite with its famous syncretic culture, neither wholly Muslim nor Hindu, but a creative combination of influences from both, confined to the happy few, recruited from several communities, floating upon society like an oilslick upon the water, but destined to be broken in modern times by the waves of populism from below.⁶ In the later nineteenth century, it was still the case that the most impressive unities in upper India were not those which flowed along the lines of religion but those which cut across them, the unity of men of whatever religious persuasion who saw themselves as the leaders of society and the guardians of its traditions.

Yet once the British had elevated the category of Muslims into a factor which was bound to influence the distribution of its patronage and favour, it was natural enough that those members of this Urdu-speaking élite, who happened to be Muslims, could see advantages in stepping forward as representatives of the communal interests which the British

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 11–15; in 1921 there were 6,481,032 Muslims in the U.P. in a total population of more than 45 millions, or 14.28 per cent, *Census of India, 1921*, Pt II (Calcutta, 1923), pp. 40–3.

⁵ See Robinson, *Separatism among Indian Muslims*, pp. 15–23.

⁶ This is not to deny that the hold of traditional Islam was strong, particularly at the level of popular religion, among men of a lesser sort, the artisans of the townships of northern India.

believed to exist.⁷ But there were also tactical advantages for the Raj to be derived from this development. By the later nineteenth century, when the most vocal critics of the Raj were literate Hindus from the maritime Presidencies, the Guardians found it convenient to counter their claims by pointing to the loyal Muslims of northern India and the well-advertised decision of Syed Ahmed Khan and his Aligarh coterie to break away from the Indian National Congress. In 1906 when Minto listened to the Muslim delegation, he was in fact accepting the dubious claims of a small group of Muslim notables, mainly from the United Provinces, to speak for the community throughout India. It was these Muslim leaders who gained most from separate representation and weightage in the provincial councils which the Morley-Minto reforms gave them. They consolidated these advantages in their localities by negotiating favourable terms in the U.P. Municipal Act; and the Lucknow Pact, concluded in 1916 between the Muslim League and the Congress, was unashamedly pitched in the interest of U.P. Muslims.⁸ In all these measures, the men purporting to speak for Muslims throughout India, including the large communities in Bengal and the Punjab, designed their programme specifically to the advantage of the Muslim members of the Urdu-speaking élite of north India.

Yet even in the United Provinces themselves, which dominated Muslim affairs until the nineteen-twenties, there was no recognizably separate, and certainly no solid, political community of Muslims. Paradoxically, the genuine communal awareness which existed in the less rarified levels of ward and mohalla, was not faithfully reflected at the top. Quarrels over the killing of cows and music before the mosque, battles for the control of lesser neighbourhoods and resistance to militant Hindu revivalism, all suggest the importance of religious issues at these lower levels. As the Cawnpore mosque incident and the Khilafat agitation showed, a formidable religious frenzy could be unleashed, whether to protest against the demolition of a lavatory attached to a mosque or to rise in defence of the Holy Places of Islam. But inevitably, communalism at the base tended to throw effective control of the neighbourhood into

⁷ Treating religious communities as separate political interests followed naturally from the British view of the Indian past. When the passion for social enumeration was exported to India, the censuses came to lump together, into artificially broad categories, people who often had next to nothing in common. But once the category of being a Muslim (or indeed any other category such as a landlord) had been raised to importance in the distribution of government favour and patronage, it was natural enough for men to step forward to claim to represent the interests the British believed to exist.

⁸ See F. C. R. Robinson, 'Municipal Government and Muslim Separatism in the United Provinces 1883 to 1916', in John Gallagher, Gordon Johnson and Anil Seal (eds), *Locality, Province and Nation* (Cambridge, 1973), pp. 69–121.

the hands of rather more uncompromising men of religion, their opportunist political allies and footloose agitators. So far from welcoming these intrusions of populist religion into politics, most Muslim notables, just as many of their Hindu counterparts, actively deplored them, because these strident communal passions undermined their fragile hold over their rank and file, as well as endangered the cross-communal understandings in day-to-day matters which were the necessary complement to their separatist and mendicant stance towards their rulers. However much the U.P. Muslim leadership may have had to pretend to be heart-broken about the fate of the Khalifa, this specifically religious agitation led by alims and freebooting opportunists had undermined its expedient separatism and, by one of those quirks of Indian history, had put the Mahatma into the saddle of the Indian National Congress. In the circumstances of the United Provinces, communalism was a high card in the safe game the Muslim members of the élite played with their rulers in government house and council chamber, but was a wild card when placed on the mat in the dangerous realities of the base.

After the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms had come into effect, U.P. Muslim politicians had reason to alter their tactics which had stressed an apparently separatist line. In the United Provinces the reforms had given the vote to a broad range of substantial rural interests and had tilted the political balance back towards the countryside. The urban politician received much less than he had asked for. Under the new constitution, twenty-five out of twenty-nine Muslim members were returned by rural electorates, and, much as had been expected, the voters tended to choose the big landowners, the zamindars and talukdars who had been wooed by British policy ever since the Mutiny.⁹

In the United Provinces, land tended to be held by large holders.¹⁰ In Oudh the great barons, with their huge incomes and control over the tenantry, were both Hindu and Muslim, and their common interests cut across communal divisions.¹¹ So Muslim landlords now had good reason

⁹ Muslim landlords, men such as Kunwar Jamshed Ali Khan, the Nawabs of Baghpur, and of Chhatari, Khan Bahadur Kunwar Inayat Ali Khan, Fazlur Rahman Khan, and from the Eastern Divisions and Oudh, Talukdars, such as Nawab Mohamed Yusuf and the Rajas of Salempur and Pirpur and Jehangirabad were elected throughout the twenties and early thirties. See Page, 'Prelude to Partition', unpublished Oxford D.Phil dissertation, 1974, pp. 8–10.

¹⁰ In Oudh, for example, there were only about 268 Talukdari estates, but they covered two-thirds of the area of Oudh, and paid about one-sixth of the total revenue of the United Provinces, i.e., more than a crore or ten million rupees.

¹¹ See *Report of the Indian Statutory Commission, Vol. 1, Survey* (London, 1930), p. 64, The Zamindars of Agra were less well organized, and there were fewer Muslims among their ranks, but they too began to organize, specifically as landlords, and since 1914 they had

to stress their landlord interests and to underplay their specifically Muslim status in the council and in their dealings with the Government. Their Agriculturist Party, which was in a majority, formed the ministries. But the Government, troubled by the agrarian disturbances in these provinces through the nineteen-twenties decided to try to do something for the protected tenantry, particularly in Oudh.¹² The result was the Oudh Rent Bill, the Agra Tenancy Bill and the District Boards Bill, all of which threatened landlord interests. Hindu and Muslim landlords alike were anxious to join together to protect their privileges. Consequently, many who had been specifically Muslim politicians during the first two decades of the century became landlord politicians in the third, sometimes with remarkable consequences.¹³ Indeed, there was only one occasion when Muslim landlords voted as a communal bloc in the early nineteen-twenties. Since their community was a minority in the United Provinces, Muslim landlords had little hope of achieving power in the reformed council as leaders of a specifically communal party. To gain office, as they successfully did in this period, they had to ally with Hindu landed interests and this meant playing down their communal affiliations. This they successfully managed to do throughout the period.¹⁴ But the conditions for doing well in the province disqualified the Muslim politician from the U.P. from claiming, as in the past he had sometimes done, the leadership of Muslims in India as a whole. The coming of the reforms in the nineteen-twenties had reversed the situation of the preceding decade.¹⁵ In the changed circumstances of the nineteen-twenties, such spokesmen as

an Agra Zamindars' Association, with headquarters in Allahabad. But Peter Musgrave's work suggests that historians need to be as critically alert about the category of 'landlords' in discussing U.P. politics as they are beginning to be about the category of Muslims.

¹² See G. Pandey, *The Ascendancy of the Congress in the Uttar Pradesh, 1926–34* (Delhi, 1978) ch. 2, for a general survey of conditions in the U.P.

¹³ During non-cooperation, the Raja of Mahmudabad as Home Member had the job of jailing many of his former Young Party associates. Jehangirabad helped Government to rally opposition to Abdul Bari, his wife's spiritual leader or pir. Many Muslim magnates in the U.P. threw their weight behind the Aman Sabhas or security leagues to combat non-cooperation; and many of the big landlords devoted themselves to organizing a landlord's lobby.

¹⁴ So Chhatari became a minister from 1923; was Home Member in 1926 and in fact acted as Governor of the Province in 1928. Another leading Muslim landlord, Nawab Yusuf was a minister without a break from 1926 until the election of 1937. See Page, 'Prelude to Partition', p. 12, fn. 1.

¹⁵ In the latter nineteen-thirties Jinnah and the Muslim League attempted, by other means, to return to the position that had existed before the reforms of 1919, when U.P. Muslims had successfully pretended to speak for Muslims in India as a whole. Jinnah's strategy between 1939 and 1947 will be studied in Ayesha Jalal's forthcoming work.

there were for Muslim interests had to come from provinces where politicians did not need to play down their communal stance to such an extent. Naturally this swung the emphasis away from the United Provinces to the Muslim majority provinces, particularly to the Punjab.

The Punjab, the other great base of Muslim populations in India, had never been a centre of Muslim imperial rule or civilization in the same way as the Muslim heartlands of upper India. In the districts west of Lahore where the Muslims were more than three-quarters of the population, the pattern was quite different from the centres of Muslim imperial power. Since the time of the Ghaznavids, Muslim settlement in the west had come from migration of Muslims from outside India, whether Turkish Afghans, Iranians, Arab fugitives from the Mongols, or the Afghans themselves who entered this frontier zone during its chequered past. These patterns of settlement and rule were in marked contrast to the central and eastern districts of the Punjab, which had been tenuously held as outposts of the Delhi Sultanate and more strongly controlled in Akbar and Jahangir's time, and which more closely resembled the western districts of the United Provinces.¹⁶ Hence there were more Muslims in the towns and they had a less massive presence in the rural localities than in the western Punjab.

In the fluid conditions of this marcher region, no single religion, whether Islam, Hinduism or the militant syncretic creed of the Sikhs, had been able to impress its unchallenged stamp. Yet in the Punjab as a whole the position of the Muslim notables had stood up well against the pressures not only of the kingdom of Ranjit Singh but also of the British annexation. Its rural notables, especially powerful in the western districts, had prospered from the British connection. So, too, in their way did Muslims of the lower sort, whether by farming or joining the British Indian Army with the same enthusiasm as they had responded to the call to arms from Ranjit Singh, that Sikh leader with a popular touch. For the most part Punjab Muslims were not urban men, and the province as a whole was not noted for its letters. It was slow to come under the influence of western education, and according to the powerful tradition of the Punjab School of Administration, character, not erudition, was required of its notables, as was appropriate in the land of Ranjit Singh who ruled it without knowing how to read or write. Anxious to keep this province as a powerful buffer against threats from the north-west, British policy sought to insulate the Punjab from some of

¹⁶ Under these Mughal emperors, Lahore for a time was the capital of the empire and the base from which the Mughal armies looked towards central Asia. See P. Hardy, *The Muslims of British India* (Cambridge, 1972), p. 4.

the centralizing and unifying trends of Victorian India. After its annexation, not only did the Punjab escape many of the uniformities of the Regulation Provinces, it also benefited from the self-denying ordinance, by which the British kept the pitch of the taxation low in a province, to begin with a poor cousin but later the beneficiary of a growing market for its agricultural produce.

There were three main communities in the Punjab,¹⁷ but they had little tradition of internal unity, even in relation to their rivals. Rather, the Punjab had for long been marked by a powerful tradition of local particularism which inevitably cut across the grain of communal solidarity. Even in the supposed Sikh nation, devoted to Guru Nanak and the Khalsa, Ranjit Singh had smacked down rival Sikh chieftains, disciplined the Akalis and come to terms with some Muslims as well as Hindus, who not only helped him rule his kingdom, but also afforded the Sikh contingents in the army which was the foundation of his power. Just as there was no Sikh nation, so also it would be anachronistic to suppose that before the British annexation the Punjab had developed a nationalism based upon a territorial principle. In fact, Ranjit Singh's kingdom was built around the army, and the army was built around small platoons, or *deras*, recruited from separate villages and led by local bosses or *deradars*.¹⁸ None of this suggests that the factions at the apex of Punjab society, or the British after them, had to face in the Punjab a polity characterized either by the principle of territorial nationality which cut across its three communities, or, conversely, by the rivalries of these embattled communities whose differences they sought to exploit to their own advantage. What distinguished the Punjab was the atomized and localized nature of its political concerns, a tradition insulated in the nineteenth century from the interventions of Calcutta, and one which in great measure survived and prospered into the twentieth century. Not surprisingly, the debates about Indian Muslims and the right political strategy for them in the later nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, took hardly any account of the province which was to assert itself between the two world wars, and was to be the main victim of the partition of India.

In the Punjab, the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms of 1919 had been

¹⁷ In 1921, Punjab's 20.6 million people were divided into 11.4 million Muslims, 6.5 million Hindus, 2.3 million Sikhs, *Census of India, 1921*, Pt I, Vol. II, pp. 40–3.

¹⁸ Indeed it was the failure of Ranjit Singh's successors in the Lahore Durbar to keep control over an army, popularly recruited, democratically run, and powerfully rooted in the rural localities, which was the main reason why the British reluctantly were forced to fight and beat this army and to annex the Punjab—at least in part at the invitation of its notables.

consciously used by the Government to call in the old world to redress the balance of the new, to shift the political centre of gravity away from the towns back to the rural areas, especially to those districts of the western Punjab where Muslims happened to be in a strong majority and where Muslims owned many of the larger estates. Urban politicians from Lahore, Jullundur and Ambala, who had begun to be a thorn in the side of an administration which, in the Punjab tradition, preferred rural simplicity, were given only four seats on the reformed council. Twenty-nine seats went to the rural areas and of these twenty-three were in the Muslim-majority districts, west of Lahore. The Punjab tradition had been to rely upon the landed interest; the British Army recruited many of its troops, whether Punjab-Muslims, Jats or Sikhs, from the countryside. So the 1919 reforms were unashamedly pitched against the urban politician and in favour of the rural vote.¹⁹ At the same time, urban qualifications were pitched high and men from the towns had to prove a residence of four years in a rural constituency before being admitted to stand for election there. Those who did well out of the reforms were landlords and the agriculturalists; and this meant the dominance of the Rawalpindi–Multan tracts, where Muslims were most powerful. The result was that politics in the reformed councils of the Punjab tended now to divide along the lines of interest, not simply those of community. Urban interests, whether Muslim or Hindu were left in the cold, and the Sikh and Hindu Jat landed interests, represented by the Punjab Zamindar Central Association, found common ground with the big landed interests represented by the Punjab Muslim Association, so Hindu Jats from the Ambala Division²⁰ co-operated closely with Muslim zamindars.²¹

The architect and leader of this agriculturalist interest, which came to be known as the Punjab National Unionist Party, was a Muslim politician, Fazl-i-Husain, whose urban and rather humble origins and record

¹⁹ Those who paid Rs 25 or more land revenue had been enfranchised and so also were the officially appointed *Lambardars* which added some 58,000 to the Punjab rural vote; the veteran sepoy, that most loyal of collaborators, was also given the vote and this added another 160,000 to the electorate.

²⁰ Men such as Chaudhuri Lal Chand who was Minister of Agriculture in 1924, and Chaudhuri Chothu Ram who replaced him in the post.

²¹ Men such as Umar Hayat Khan Tiwana whose son was to become prime minister of the Punjab in 1942; Feroz Khan Noon, who was educated at Wadham, later married a young Australian, and was successively minister for local self-government in 1927, for education in 1931, Indian high commissioner in London in 1936, and chief minister for the Punjab after Partition in 1953, and Sikander Hayat Khan, revenue member in 1929, acting governor in 1932 and the first premier of a self-governing Punjab in 1937. This survey of Punjab after the 1919 Act is based on Page, 'Prelude to Partition', ch. I.

of sympathy with the Congress made him an unlikely person for this role. Yet urban Muslim politicians, whether they belonged to Husain's breakaway Muslim League or to Mahomed Shafi's branch, had no political future in the Punjab after the reforms, except as spokesmen for the dominant agriculturalist interest. Fazl-i-Husain seized on the chance of becoming a minister in 1921 to consolidate his personal position. He became the leader of the Muslim bloc and managed to get himself re-appointed as minister for education and local self-government in 1924. The legislation he introduced, which cut down the official control of district and municipal boards, was in line with what the Jat Zamindar Association had demanded. When he told the Punjab council in March 1923 that he stood for 'the principle of helping the backward community, irrespective of their religion, be they Muslim, Hindu or Sikh,'²² he may have exaggerated the backwardness of the community he was supporting but it was not mere propaganda. Fazl-i-Husain was able to point to the introduction of compulsory primary education and the building of schools and dispensaries in rural areas as evidence of his supra-communal record. But since the Muslims were the majority in the Punjab, and had most of the votes, it made good political sense for the Unionists to find ways of consolidating their support. This they did by giving them a protected quota in the educational and medical services, where they had few jobs, but by leaving alone the police where they already had most of the places. Also the terms of the Municipal Amendment Act of 1923 were tilted to Muslim advantage.²³ In the last resort there was merit in the Statutory commission's argument that 'The most striking feature of the [Punjab] Council remains . . . its deep communal cleavages'.²⁴ In the nineteen-twenties, the Unionist Party must be seen not merely as a successful party of agriculturalists in the Punjab, but also as the single most powerful Muslim constitutional party in British India.

In Bengal, the other main Muslim-majority province, the situation was in stark contrast to that of the Punjab. In some ways, it was a mirror of the United Provinces, with the Hindus of Bengal in the dominant position of the Muslims in northern India. Here, most of the Muslims were poor peasants; nearly all of them were descended from converts,

²² *Punjab Legislative Council Debates*, IV, 15 March 1923, p. 1318, quoted in Page, 'Prelude to Partition', p. 43.

²³ When Fazl-i-Husain's policies were censured in council in 1923 the vote split, uncharacteristically, on communal lines, with Muslims and officials supporting Fazl-i-Husain, and the Hindu Jats who usually worked with him joining the Hindu and Sikh members in voting against him. see Page, 'Prelude to Partition', pp. 46–7.

²⁴ *Statutory Commission, Vol. I, Survey*, p. 208.

contemptuously dismissed as 'little better than a mongrel breed of circumcised low-caste Hindus'. The educated Muslims, belonging to the élite, had always been a mere handful in Bengal, where most of the land and jobs in government or the professions were increasingly held by the Hindu *bhadralok*. In Bengal, as in no other part of India, it can fairly be asserted that the Muslims as a whole were a backward community. But they had always been so.²⁵

In 1911, the reversal of the 1905 partition of Bengal had kept together in one province regions and peoples whose interests were hard to reconcile. In the east, Muslims were a majority; in the west, Hindus. Overall the Muslims had a bare but clear preponderance upon numbers, but in both east and west the socially dominant were Hindus. But of course the Muslims of Bengal were in no sense a homogeneous community; the interests of a handful of influential Muslim zamindars in the east were diametrically opposed to those of the mass of their Muslim tenantry; and the interests of the small number of Muslim-educated in Calcutta were not the same as those of either group. Yet in Bengal, the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms were less an insurance policy for the dominant than an invitation to the aggrieved to challenge that dominance. Before 1919, there had been only five Muslims among the twenty-eight elected members of the Legislative Council, chosen by a mere 6,346 voters. After 1919 Muslims had thirty-nine out of eighty-five territorial constituencies. Thirty-three of these seats were for rural areas, mainly in the eastern districts of Bengal. Of the million and a quarter new voters in the provinces, more than four hundred thousand were in the Muslim rural constituencies. Having forty-five per cent of the territorial constituencies, the Muslims of Bengal now had the means, if they were minded to deploy them, to promote their interests in the districts.²⁶ But the Muslim members of the council, described by one historian as clumsy, naive and self-seeking²⁷ and as they themselves admitted, torn by 'personal jealousies and rivalries [which] bulk largely in Bengal Moslem Society',²⁸ were easily split by the leaders of the Bengal Congress.

Yet Chittaranjan Das, 'the most brilliant opportunist in Indian

²⁵ It was an error for W. W. Hunter to argue in his account of *The Indian Musalmans of 1871* that Muslim backwardness was a consequence of British rule, and that the condition of the Bengali Muslims applied equally to Muslims in other parts of India.

²⁶ John Gallagher, 'Congress in Decline', *Locality, Province and Nation*, p. 280.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Central National Mahomedan Association, Octennial Report, 1917–1924*, p. 61, quoted in J. H. Broomfield, *Elite Conflict in a Plural Society: Twentieth-century Bengal* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1968), p. 255.

politics, virtuoso of agitation, broker between irreconcilables, gambler for glittering stakes',²⁹ saw that the future of the Bengal Congress, of the Bengal Hindu *bhadralok* and indeed of Bengal itself, depended critically on the success with which the divisions among the Muslims of Bengal could be exploited and on the support that could be won from some of them. So Das offered them a deal, and showed that he was ready to pay a high price to get it.³⁰ Here was a breathtakingly audacious piece of opportunism. It was not the last chance of the old system but proof rather that the days of the old system were numbered. Das' alliance with the Muslims, with its high promise of arresting the decline of Congress in Bengal, and preventing the growth of communal politics, which in the end was bound to break the pre-eminence of the Bengali Hindus in their undivided province, was inherently unstable. Many of his Hindu supporters short-sightedly felt that Das had paid too high a price for this vital Muslim alliance. To attract Muslim support, he was giving away jobs which his Hindu constituents presently occupied, and to keep that support he would have had to make concessions to pressures for tenancy legislation which would have been regarded by his Hindu supporters in the east Bengal districts as anathema. There were problems also of reconciling the interests of the Swarajya Party as a legislative group with its interests as spokesmen for the districts, or the interest of Hindus in eastern Bengal who did not relish the prospect of becoming a permanent minority with the interests of Muslims, not to mention the problem of reconciling the interests of Bengal with those of all-India. Congressmen in other provinces were not prepared to give all-India's blessing to a Pact which made sense for the Bengal Hindus, but little sense for those in Hindu majority provinces.

So it is not surprising that this effort at a communal accord which seemed to have revived an alliance between the communities, did not long survive C. R. Das' death. In a combined operation, Government and a number of wily Muslim politicians, notably Sir Abdur Rahim,

²⁹ Gallagher, 'Congress in Decline', *Locality, Province and Nation*, p. 275.

³⁰ According to the agreement, known as the Bengal Pact, Muslims would be represented in the legislative council; they would keep their separate electorates and get representation in line with their population, which was more than the Lucknow Pact had given them. Muslims had less than a third of the appointments in the public services. So Das promised them that when Congress ruled Bengal they would get more than half—fifty-five per cent—of the jobs and up to eighty per cent until they had reached that level. In local bodies, Muslims would get sixty per cent of the seats, they would be allowed to kill cows, and they would not have to put up with Hindus playing music outside their mosques. The Bengal Pact of 1923 won Das and his Swarajists twenty-one Muslim seats when they entered the second council, enough reinforcements to make dyarchy unworkable.

began to build up a communal Muslim party in time for the 1926 elections. Relations between Hindus and Muslims rapidly deteriorated, with the impetus coming from politicians at the top, and the fire and the fury from below. In any event the result was the collapse of the alliance between Muslim factions and the Swarajists, who did not even bother to put up Muslim candidates in the 1926 elections. All the thirty-nine Muslims except one were returned on communal tickets, pledged now to work in the communal interest. From January 1927 until December 1936 there were six ministries in Bengal, all led by Muslims, and all dependent on the Muslim vote, supported by Europeans and the nominated official members. Politicians in Bengal now were taking office and holding it by a double policy of stressing their Muslim affiliations and at the same time of setting up as the defenders of peasant rights, both Muslim and lower-caste Hindu, against landlords.³¹ The lines of communal division in Bengal were now being drawn over divisions by class. In the U.P. and in the Punjab the old social order had been bolstered by the Muslims who took charge; in Bengal it was being challenged and changed. This was one factor which militated against an alliance between the politicians of Bengal and their counterparts in the U.P. and the Punjab, whether at this time or later on when an all-Muslim strategy became more urgent.

So in the nineteen-twenties there was no longer any all-India party whose leaders could define Muslim demands at a national level. Under Gandhi's prompting, the Congress clung to the view that it was a party of the Hindus and Muslims alike and it exaggerated both the greatness and the goodness of the few surviving Muslims in the Congress ranks although by this time, after the failure of non-cooperation and the collapse of the Khilafat, they represented no Muslims but themselves. As for the Muslim League, it seemed now at death's door. Jinnah, that ambassador of Hindu-Muslim unity, that nationalist anxious to win a say at the centre by constitutional means, tried to resuscitate the League in 1923 when Nehru and Das plumped for council entry, but his non-cooperating enemies blocked his efforts. Jinnah's only base was now in the central legislative council, as the leader of a small body of Independents who, after 1923, held the balance between the Govern-

³¹ In its turn the Swarajist Party in Bengal not only took on a more Hindu but also a more aristocratic, high caste, zamindari colouring: big zamindars now rallied in force to the Congress to meet the threat of an amendment of the Bengal Tenancy Act which would have given occupancy rights to their tenants. In contrast the Muslim ministries forced through a Rural Primary Education Bill in 1930; they brought in communal reservation of seats on local bodies and introduced legislation to relieve peasant indebtedness.

ment and the Swarajists. But the Independents were in no sense a Muslim party, since only three of its members happened to be Muslims. In 1924 Jinnah again attempted to revive the League but the resolutions passed at the 1924 session show where Muslim leadership had now come to lie. Under the overweening influence of the Punjabi Muslims, the League resolved that India's future lay with a federal form of government, in which the centre's function would be restricted 'to such matters as are of general or common concern'; it also resolved to protect the Muslim majorities in the Punjab, in Bengal and in the Frontier Province, demanding that neither territorial adjustment nor representation for minorities in these provinces should be allowed to affect them. This was the Punjabi view of Muslim interests with a vengeance. With no all-India Muslim party to act as a counter, the politicians of the Muslim majority-provinces could now step forward. Since the Muslim masses of Bengal were no more organized than they were advanced, and their politicians no more irreplaceable than they were incorruptible, in practice the leadership fell to the Muslims of the Punjab who inspired a ministry which ruled continuously and successfully at Lahore throughout the nineteen-twenties in contrast to most of the gimcrack experiments in dyarchy which were going on in British India throughout that decade.

II

In November 1927, the Simon commission was appointed to look into the workings of the reforms. The prospect of further reforms swung the pendulum of Muslim politics away from the provinces, where they had been firmly placed during the nineteen-twenties, and back to the centre. By the later nineteen-twenties it was clear that whatever Lord Birkenhead and the Old India Hands might proclaim, constitutional change was on its way. By announcing that the constitution would be reviewed, at a stroke Birkenhead had jerked up the carpet under which the all-India questions had so conveniently been swept since dyarchy had begun. Intended by the Conservatives as a pre-emptive strike against more radical reform by its Labour successors, the Statutory Commission inevitably raised the very aspirations and fears which it had hoped to damp down, by bringing the prospect of full provincial self-government closer. When it reported in 1930, the Simon Commission spoke of

the anxieties and ambitions aroused in both communities by the prospect of India's political future. So long as authority was firmly established in British

hands, and self-government was not thought of, Hindu–Moslem rivalry was confined within a narrower field. . . . But the coming of the Reforms and the anticipation of what may follow them have given new point to Hindu–Moslem competition.³²

London was ready to give more responsible government to the provinces, while hanging on to the vital attributes of sovereignty at the centre. But the biggest stumbling block to constitutional advance, whether in the provinces or the centre, seemed to be the communal problem. So it became urgent again for politicians of all colours, Hindu and Muslim alike, to think of coming to terms at a national level. But the fate of Jinnah's efforts to unite Muslims behind a League and then to negotiate with the Congress, as well as the fate of the All-Parties Conference and of the Nehru Report, show how intractable the communal problem had become in all-India terms.³³ In particular, they show how the interests of the Muslim majority provinces, and of the Punjab in particular, worked against Muslims coming to terms with the Congress at an all-India level.

As soon as the Simon Commission had been set up, Jinnah set to work to produce a united national front. Earlier in March 1927 his proposals had shown the lines of his strategy. In return for the creation of a separate Muslim province of Sind, raising the status of the North West Frontier Province and Baluchistan and winning representation on the basis of population for Bengal and the Punjab, as well as a guaranteed one-third of the seats in the central legislature for Muslims, Jinnah was ready to give up separate electorates, for so long the ark of the Muslim covenant. But this was clearly a strategy which appealed mainly to Muslims who had little chance of winning power in their own provinces. But Muslims with a stronger position in their own provinces soon vetoed these all-India initiatives by Jinnah. Certainly the lukewarm response from the Congress was not enough to keep his proposals alive. Once the Commission had been announced, Jinnah was given another chance but it was clear that the Punjab leaders were wholly opposed to his plans. Although Jinnah managed to secure that the League's session in 1927 be held in Calcutta (where the climate was mildly more favourable to his point of view than in Lahore) it was an unreal victory, since the Punjab Muslims held a rival League meeting of their own in December under Muhammed Shafi's presidentship, and attracted to it some of the important Muslims from the United Provinces, foreshadowing the

³² *Report of the Indian Statutory Commission, Vol. I, Survey*, p. 29.

³³ See Mushirul Hasan, *Nationalism and Communal Politics in India, 1916–1928* (New Delhi, 1979), ch. 8.

powerful alliance which was to emerge as the All-India Muslim Conference.

This initiative by Muslims of the Punjab showed that they were already beginning to hammer out a distinctive strategy of their own for the coming reforms. As Sir Malcolm Hailey, who knew his Punjab well, wrote in December 1927, the Punjab Muslims

see that they can never quite the same interest as the Moslems in the provinces with large Hindu majorities and they seriously think of breaking away from the All India Moslem League and starting a Federation of their own. This will seek to embrace the Punjab, part of the U.P., the North West Frontier, Baluchistan and Sind, . . .³⁴

Interestingly enough, Hailey added that the Punjabi expected little from the Muslims of the other main majority province, Bengal:

. . . the dream of the future to which I had alluded does not include Bengal. For the moment, the North India Moslem has given up his co-religionist in Bengal as hopeless and seems to expect no assistance from Bengal in the cause of Islam.³⁵

But all this was for the future; here and now the Punjabi Muslim saw that his best course was to stand pat on what he had and to co-operate with the government, much as the Old Punjab Hands had predicted to Irwin and Birkenhead that he would.

For another year, Jinnah tried to patch together a working Hindu-Muslim alliance on the all-India stage. But by May 1928 Jinnah had failed to persuade anyone, whether the viceroy, the Congress or Muslims who mattered, to move in his direction. With his influence rapidly and visibly collapsing, Jinnah pulled the League out of the All-Parties Conference in Delhi and retreated to London. In the end, it was the Congress which attempted to sketch out a solution. The Nehru Report of 1928 dealt with the thorny communal problem by driving a coach and horses through the difficulties, but it paid scant regard to Muslim opinion, even the opinion of the hand-picked Muslim members who joined with Nehru in producing this Report. The Report advocated a unitary government at the centre, and called for all the departments of the central Government, including defence, finance and relations with the Indian States, to be made responsible to Indian legislatures. Separate electorates, weightages for minorities, the Muslim demand for a protected status for minorities, and for a guaranteed one-third share of power at the centre were all to go. However, Sind was to be made into a

³⁴ Sir Malcolm Hailey to Sir Arthur Hirtzel, 15 December 1927, Hailey Papers, 118 quoted in Page, 'Prelude to Partition', p. 148.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

separate province, and the North West Frontier was to be given full provincial status. This was clearly unacceptable to Muslim opinion of all colours. Even that old Khilafat stalwart, Shaukat Ali, denounced it and attacked those Congress Muslims who supported the Report as Hindu stooges. But since the Report was ratified by a carefully selected All-Parties Conference, and since the Congress now nailed its colours to the Report, an accord between the Congress and Muslims became improbable. Once Muslim politicians in the provinces and Congressmen at the centre had reached this parting of the ways, the entire Jinnah strategy of pressing for Nationalist advance at the centre, backed by a large body of Muslim opinion whose interests had been duly safeguarded, collapsed. Since Jinnah possessed no solid political base of his own, his effectiveness depended upon his ability to act as a broker between Muslim interests in the provinces and the rival Congress politicians at the centre. So Jinnah now was banished into a political wilderness. His career in the nineteen-twenties shows that at every step he had been forced to bend his policies, and alter his objectives, to try to suit the dominant provincial Muslim demand; but that his efforts, even at the cost of bending over backwards, had failed to succeed.

The dominant Muslim provincial demand found its spokesman not in Jinnah, nor in the League, but in Fazl-i-Husain and the All-India Muslim Conference which he organized. By the end of the nineteen-twenties Fazl-i-Husain was no longer merely a provincial politician but had become a leader with an Indian standing. In 1929 he organized the Muslim Conference; in 1930 he was appointed a member of the viceroy's executive council and he used this position to become the informal strategist and director of Muslim policy during the great constitutional reappraisals of these years. While Congress launched civil disobedience, boycotted the councils and kept away from the First Round Table Conference, Fazl-i-Husain called upon his followers to co-operate, pushed forward the Muslim Conference to represent the Muslim interest, and worked effectively from behind the scenes on the viceroy's council for a policy which was clearly stamped with the Punjab Muslims' construct of their particular interest.

The Nehru Report had tried to win the support of Punjab Muslims for a unitary central government by offering them a secure majority on the basis of joint electorates and an adult suffrage. But whatever the attractions of this bait for some of the Punjab's urban-based Muslims, Fazl-i-Husain wrote:

The Nehru Report is nothing else but a make-belief and flashes the Indian autonomy before the applauding Swarajists, while it takes no account of the

real India which lives in the provinces and has its hopes, aspirations, difficulties and troubles. What does the Imperialist in charge of the Indian Empire care how the constituent provinces with their parochial interests get on. He is after the big game. The mere trifles of duck shooting or fishing have no attraction for him.³⁶

So he encouraged the Muslim Council members in the Punjab to formulate their own proposals for the next stage of political advance. The proposals built upon what the Punjab Muslims had already achieved. The distinction between urban and rural constituencies would have to remain; and so would separate electorates for Muslims. There were, no doubt, some attractions in an adult franchise for a majority community, but here and now the Muslim members were content for the franchise merely to be extended. As for joint electorates, these were dismissed for the time being as impracticable. Provincial autonomy was what they wanted; they were ready to think of responsibility at the centre only after the provinces had been given a full autonomy, and then they preferred responsibility at the centre in the form of a weak federation of autonomous provinces rather than a strong unitary centre.³⁷

At each stage of the constitutional negotiations as the reforms were slowly hammered out, British proposals bore the stamp of this Punjab construct of Muslim interests. In the Simon Commission's Report, published in May 1930, the provinces were to have full responsible government. But they were not as yet to be brought under a responsible (and so probably a Congress-dominated) centre. An all-India federation of British India and the native States put the prospect of changes at the centre into the indefinite future. Fazl-i-Husain liked some of the Statutory Commission's recommendations. Provincial autonomy was good for the Muslims in the Punjab, provided there was no question of the provinces being subjected to a non-British centre, and the Commission was obviously minded to uphold British control in Delhi. The Report had doubts about setting up Sind as a separate province, and giving the somewhat unreconstructed region of the North West Frontier Province the benefit of the reforms. But most serious of all, from Fazl-i-Husain's point of view, were the Simon Commission's doubts about retaining separate representation, particularly in the Muslim majority provinces. What the Report offered Muslims was the choice between

³⁶ Fazl-i-Husain to Sir Malcolm Hailey, 22 September 1928, Hailey Collection, MSS. EUR. E220/23, I.O.L., and quoted in Waheed Ahmad (ed.), *Letters of Mian Fazl-i-Husain* (Lahore, 1976), p. 57 (henceforth: *Letters*).

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 56–9.

separate electorates everywhere on a population basis or general electorates in the Punjab and in Bengal, with separate electorates and weightage in the minority provinces.

This was less than the Punjab Muslims wanted and so Fazl-i-Husain took a hand; his intervention was decisive. In the majority provinces, Muslims had reason to be satisfied with the electoral provisions as they stood. The Simon Commission's proposals would make things worse; once the officials lost their votes, Muslims would no longer have a safe preponderance in their majority provinces. So Fazl-i-Husain's response was to advise Muslims to hold firmly on to their percentages and reservations in the majority provinces of Punjab and Bengal. As he bluntly stated in August 1930, Indian Muslims 'prefer the present position and no political advance to the political advance outlined in the Simon Report'.³⁸ He told the viceroy that the British could count upon Muslim co-operation in the constitutional negotiations on the condition that Muslims were given secure majorities in the Punjab and Bengal, Sind was separated from the Bombay Presidency and the North West Frontier Province was elevated to the status of a Governor's province.³⁹

From behind the scenes, Fazl-i-Husain in Delhi directed the Muslim delegates at the First Round Table Conference to hold tightly on to their existing constitutional safeguards. As one commentator lamented, 'The real control rests with the younger section' who were 'understood to be in close touch with the Muslim Member of the Viceroy's Council'.⁴⁰ The Conference was a strange affair; it was rather like *Hamlet* without the Prince—indeed it was *Hamlet* not only without the Prince but also without the ghost of Hamlet's father. There were no Congress spokesmen at the Conference and the officials were told by the prime minister

³⁸ Note by Fazl-i-Husain, enclosed in Irwin to Wedgwood Benn, 28 August 1930, Halifax Papers 6, quoted in Page, 'Prelude to Partition', p. 203.

³⁹ Fazl-i-Husain's influence over Irwin is shown by the tenor of the Government of India's Reform Despatch of September 1930. It conceded much more of the Punjab's demand than Simon had. It proposed to retain separate electorates and weightage for Muslims in the Hindu majority-provinces, but also to give the Bengali and Punjabi Muslims the majorities to which their population entitled them. It did not recommend outright statutory majorities, but favoured a scheme by which the Muslims would get a predominance in line with their numbers, if not an actual majority of the seats. Muslims should be encouraged to secure their majorities by winning some of the special seats allotted to such interests as labour, the universities and the landholders. Here was Delhi's attempt to rescue some of the benefits of a supra-communal stance which had worked so well in the Punjab and elsewhere during the nineteen-twenties.

⁴⁰ Note by Gilbert Laithwaite, 6 November 1931, Templewood Collection, MSS. EUR. E240/65, I.O.L. Among these 'younger section' were such men as Mian Mohammed Shafi, Shafaat Ahmad Khan, and the Aga Khan, all leading lights of the All-India Moslem Conference.

to sit as 'judges', to find the facts rather than enunciate policy. This was just as well because London at this time had no clear policy at all. In the circumstances, it is not wholly surprising that this Conference came out with a curious brainchild of its own. This was the notion that there should be a federal solution to the Indian problem. The princes have been credited with the notion—it bears all the marks of their powerful constitutional intelligence. But the idea of a federation did have some attractions from the British point of view. It gave them the chance of creating the semblance of a 'safer' form of central government which would mollify opposition in Parliament and in India. Moreover, the complications of Dominion Status could conveniently be forgotten with this new alternative before them. It also had some attractions for the Muslims. But the warmest support for the federal idea came from that group, beloved of constitutional historians and of the policy-makers, the Indian Liberals led by Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru, who saw in the federal idea a possible way of patching together an alliance with the Muslims and the princes.⁴¹ But the Indian Liberals suffered from the minor inconvenience of representing no-one but themselves. Impressed by their sincerity (and their elegant constitutional patter) some of the Muslim delegates, the Aga Khan, Jinnah and Muhammed Shafi among them, agreed in November 1930 at least to consider the federal idea and leave the question of safeguards for their community until later. Here were shades of the standard nationalist line which was 'First settle swaraj, then settle the communal issue'. But for the communities, the Indian minorities, and the Muslims in particular, the correct strategy was quite different. If they were to become citizens of self-governing provinces, then it was obviously prudent to get guarantees of fair treatment from the majority before the constitutional bargain was signed, sealed and delivered. Therefore, according to the Muslim Conference, the priorities have to be the other way round: 'First settle the communal issue, then settle swaraj'. So Fazl-i-Husain brought his dogs to heel, back to the narrow path of the Conference's established policy. He directed the Muslim delegates at the Round Table Conference to hold firm:

Now what is it the Labour people [*sc.* the Second MacDonald Government] offer? 'We give you responsibility at the Centre if you settle your communal

⁴¹ The Hindu Mahasabha and the 'tyrannical method' of the Congress during the civil disobedience movement had led Sapru to doubt whether there was any 'true Nationalism in India', and whether India was ready yet 'for the rule of numbers'. Sapru to Iswar Saran, 12 November 1930, Sapru Collection, I, S.18, quoted in R. J. Moore, *The Crisis of Indian Unity 1917–1940* (Oxford, 1974), p. 146.

disputes'. Now who will benefit more by responsibility being introduced at the Centre at this stage? Undoubtedly the Hindus. Therefore who should be anxious to settle communal differences in order to secure the promised gain? Naturally the Hindus. Then why should Muslims, who are politically, educationally and economically weaker in the country, pretend that by ousting the British power from India and by introducing responsibility they stand to gain so much that, for it, they are prepared to sacrifice communal interests.⁴²

The message from their leader was clear. The delegates were to stick to the communal safeguards and to leave the initiative at the centre to others. After all, the Simon Commission, the governors and the Government of India had all agreed on separate electorates for Muslims as well as the amount of Muslim representation both in the central legislature and in six provinces other than Punjab and Bengal. Agreement was now needed only on the critical question of Muslim representation in the Punjab and Bengal and even here promising signs could be read in the Government of India's despatch of September 1930 which came out in favour of giving the Muslims in both the Punjab and Bengal a majority representation of not less than 51 per cent.⁴³ What lay behind this were Fazl-i-Husain's largely successful efforts inside the executive council to improve the Muslim position, mainly by securing the interests of the Muslim majority provinces, first by pressing for as much provincial autonomy as was compatible with retaining firm Muslim control, and secondly for a central government with as little power over the provinces as possible. Significantly, the only real bone of contention between the rulers of India and the Punjab Muslims was the future relationship between centre and provinces.

Indeed, by the end of the First Round Table Conference, Fazl-i-Husain had reason to be satisfied with the results. His views had prevailed. The Muslim delegates had decided not to co-operate with any move towards responsibility at the centre until their safeguards had been assured. Indeed, the Round Table Conference itself had begun to move away from the traditional commitment to a strong unitary centre for British India, the big prize for which the Congress was playing. Instead there was talk of a federation, with two chambers, in which provinces and princes would have a say. This was much closer to what the Muslim majority provinces wanted; their aim in the long term was to get away from a strong unitary centre. Their strategy was to consolidate their position in the majority provinces and then, perhaps voluntarily,

⁴² Fazl-i-Husain to Shafaat Ahmad Khan, 22 December 1930, Fazl-i-Husain Papers (Shafaat File). The authors wish to acknowledge the courtesy of Mr Azim Husain who gave access to these papers. Also quoted in *Letters*, p. 116.

⁴³ See note 39.

enter into a more equal partnership with the Hindu majority provinces in a loose federation. In preparation for the next round of negotiations, the All-India Muslim Conference which met in April 1931 worked out its strategy along these lines: it decided to press for the fullest autonomy of the constituent units of the federation. The provinces were to be given all the residuary powers, and they were to be on an equal footing with other units in the federation, the Indian States. No subject should be given to the federal centre without the prior consent of all the federating units. And as a further safeguard, the provinces would have the right of secession at all times. Not only would they be able to play states rights against the centre, like the once solid South in the United States of America, but they would have the right to secede without suffering the inconvenience of a civil war. This was the provincial thesis with a vengeance, and it meant putting back the historical clock to pre-British times.

Now of course such a plan cut across the grain of British imperial interests. By devolving power to the provinces, the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms had successfully postponed for the time being the nationalist challenge at the centre. But if the provinces were to be given autonomy, and little change was made at the centre, as both the Simon Commission's Report and the Government of India's Despatch seemed to propose, then the danger was that Delhi's powers would have to fall increasingly to the provinces. As the Reforms Commissioner could see, what was at stake was not simply the question of who should control the central government in the future, but whether there should be a strong central government at all. An irresponsible centre, with no concessions made to the nationalist demand, would find it increasingly more difficult to control provinces that had been granted full responsibility, and who could claim to have a mandate from their electors. If Muslim fears were appeased by accepting their extreme demands, this inevitably would lead either to an impossibly weak federal centre, presiding over almost wholly autonomous provinces, or to a strong centre still under British control which might find it difficult to rule provinces which were dominated by politicians not as committed as the Muslim majority provinces to the British cause. This is why the British in India could not go all the way with their Muslim collaborators in backing the Punjab strategy of 'standing fast at the Centre'. This policy, later to be described by the Aga Khan, as making India 'what she really is, i.e. a United States of Southern Asia', was one where the Muslims would work the state rights of their majority provinces for all they were worth against an emasculated federal centre. This is why the British could not simply

leave the communal question in the state of satisfactory deadlock produced by the First Round Table Conference, satisfactory at least from the Punjab Muslim point of view. This is why London pressed New Delhi to come to terms with Gandhi. This is why a pact was made between Irwin and Gandhi in 1931, which offered the chance of another Round Table Conference, this time with the Congress represented. It was this which enabled the Second Round Table Conference to come seriously to grips with the issue of communalism.

Fazl-i-Husain and the All-India Muslim Conference may have been the dominant Muslim voice in India at this time, but they were not the only one. In readiness for the next, and possibly the decisive, stage in the negotiations, all manner of strategies were being put forward in Muslim circles. The only thing these schemes, some more colourful than others, had in common was that they were all trying to counter the potential threat of a permanent Hindu majority at the centre, whether unitary or federal. Best known was the strategy of Sir Muhammed Iqbal, Fazl-i-Husain's most vocal opponent in the Punjab.⁴⁴ Time and again in Indian politics, men defeated on their local or provincial arenas, sought to hoist their efforts upon a larger stage. In much the same way, the non-Unionist Muslims in the Punjab, making no headway against the stranglehold of the Unionists, now attacked them for their parochialism and 'narrow-visioned sacrifice of Islamic solidarity in the interest of what may be called "Punjab Ruralism" resulting in a proposal which virtually reduced the Punjab Muslims to a position of minority'.⁴⁵

In his efforts to rally Muslims from other parts of India, Iqbal called, in his 1930 presidential address to the All-India Muslim League, for nothing less than the creation of a Muslim India, a state in the northwest which would consist of the Muslim majority regions of the Punjab, Sind, the North West Frontier Province and Baluchistan. This was not the first statement of the demand for Pakistan, or for the division of India since the proposal was firmly placed within the context of an all-India

⁴⁴ Sir Muhammed Iqbal, the famous poet-philosopher turned politician, spoke for the urban Punjabi Muslims who had been given short shrift under the régime of the agricultural oligarchs of the Unionist persuasion. The All-India Muslim League, of which he was the president, was as yet not in a position to press its own independent line. To maintain the semblance of Muslim unity, throughout the late nineteen-twenties and the early nineteen-thirties, the League's sole contribution to Muslim politics appears to have been its reluctant endorsement of resolutions passed by the Muslim Conference. However, it was already becoming the organ of those discontented with the Muslim conference, a trend which Iqbal hoped to encourage.

⁴⁵ See Sir Muhammed Iqbal's speech at the Twenty-first Session of the All-India Muslim League, 29 December 1930 in Jamil-ud-Din Ahmad (ed.), *Historic Documents of the Muslim Freedom Movement* (Lahore, 1970), p. 132.

federation. Indeed, Iqbal sought to reassure not only the British but also the Hindus that the 'life of Islam as a cultural force in this country very largely depends on its centralisation in a specified territory'. He went on to argue that by bringing together into one political unit the 'living portion of the Muslims of India whose military and political service has, notwithstanding unfair treatment from the British, made the British rule possible in this country', would 'eventually solve the problem of India as well as of Asia'. Moreover, only by recognizing the requirements of communal solidarity, would a true patriotism emerge in India.⁴⁶ Once Muslims had been given the opportunity to develop 'within the body-politic of India, the North-West Indian Muslims will prove the best defenders [of] India against a foreign invasion, be that invasion one of ideas or of bayonets'.⁴⁷ So there was something in this for the Hindus. But what about the Muslims in the minority provinces? Here Iqbal maintained that Muslims in the Hindu majority provinces would be assured of fair treatment because there would be Hindu and Sikh 'hostages' in plenty in the Muslim areas, a thesis which was to have a lively future for the next seventeen years until partition exploded its credibility.⁴⁸

Fazl-i-Husain was not impressed by this 'epidemic of confusion' in which everyone seemed to be interested in finding difficulties to every solution. By difficulties, Fazl-i-Husain of course meant challenges to his own particular strategy. Hindu and Muslim differences, he argued, had never been worse, and Gandhi was mainly to blame.⁴⁹ Yet the problem was simple enough; reiterating his particular thesis, Fazl-i-Husain maintained that the real crux of the problem was the amount of repre-

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 127. Iqbal maintained that only by conceding the importance of communalism could Muslims get a proper sense of responsibility, and this would help 'deepen the patriotic feeling'.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Iqbal's speech tended to be ignored by the Muslim politicians, but it did inspire a student at Cambridge to coin the word 'Pakistan'. The student, Chaudhri Rahmat Ali, yet another Punjabi Muslim, sketched out a scheme for an independent Muslim State in north-western India to the Muslim delegates at the Round Table Conference. Capital 'P' for the Punjab: 'A' for Afghanistan or for those whose interest in Afghan was understandably weak, 'A' stood for the Indian Afghans, in other words the North Western Frontier Province; 'K' for Kashmir. Others thought of it as a land of the pure or the holy. The University of Cambridge in its time has produced many peculiar theoretical concepts, ranging from Cranmer's Theology of the English Reformation to the Jesus style of rowing; among its concepts is the idea of Pakistan. But not surprisingly Chaudhri Rahmat Ali, who is buried in an unmarked grave on the Newmarket Road, was brushed aside and his scheme dismissed as a 'student's scheme' which was 'chimerical' and 'impractical'.

⁴⁹ Fazl-i-Husain to Irwin, 6 July 1931, *Letters*, p. 159.

sentation for Muslims to the provincial and central legislatures. In the six minority provinces, Muslims already had an assured representation; but since the officials were to be deprived of their vote, the Muslim position was going to be weakened. As for Bengal, Fazl-i-Husain had little time for the problems of his co-religionist on the other side of India. In Bengal, European interests were so large that the balance of power must, Fazl-i-Husain conceded, remain in their hands. However keen the Bengali Muslims might be to have an overall majority, 'they might be made to reconcile themselves to the inevitable' provided they were given the lesser advantage of a majority over the at least all other Indian representatives in the legislature. But in the Punjab, which was nearer to home, Fazl-i-Husain wanted Muslim representation on the basis of their population, even if Muslims were not actually given an overall majority. By getting some of the seats in the special constituencies under joint electorates, the Punjab Muslims were bound to improve their position.⁵⁰ But time was of the essence; delay would lead to complications. So he urged government to shoot from the hip, and make an award on its own terms. 'Personally I see no difficulty why Government should not decide straight away'.⁵¹ A government award was more likely to favour Punjabi Muslims than a settlement negotiated between the communities. And this is the way it was to be. Despite efforts by Congress Muslims to negotiate a settlement in 1931 and despite Gandhi's apparent willingness to go to some lengths to gain Muslim support, the Second Round Table Conference made no headway on the communal question.

Before the Communal Award of 1932, a number of interesting proposals were made to settle the question. From the Sikhs came the idea of dividing the Punjab. This Fazl-i-Husain immediately repudiated as 'monstrous' an ironic comment in the light of what was to happen in 1947. Another idea was to bundle the Punjab into a union with some districts of the North West Frontier Province. But since the British would never have agreed to put the clock back to the situation before 1901 when the troublesome border had been the Punjab's responsibility, Fazl-i-Husain did not have to chase this hare. A more ominous suggestion was to add Sind to the Punjab, while taking away the Ambala Division where Hindus and Sikhs were more numerous than Muslims.

⁵⁰ Even though this did not meet the full Punjab Muslim claim, and although it was likely to be condemned by other interests, this, after all, Fazl-i-Husain philosophically commented, was the 'fate of all efforts at a fair settlement'. Fazl-i-Husain to Irwin, 24 August 1931, *ibid.*, p. 185.

⁵¹ Fazl-i-Husain to Nawab Sir Muhammed Ahmad Said Khan of Chhatari, 2 November 1931, *ibid.*, p. 199.

This suggestion, Fazl-i-Husain reluctantly conceded, had some merit, but no Punjab Muslim, whatever his colour, would be prepared to accept it. Indeed, Punjab Muslims were 'satisfied with the Punjab as it is'. If Ambala was to be taken away and Sind was to be given to the Punjab in its stead, Punjab Muslims might reluctantly put up with it, 'but they have not asked, and will not ask, for it'.⁵²

But the idea of amalgamating the Punjab with Sind had several attractions. It would be, Lord Lothian, the Liberal delegate at the Round Table Conference, argued, a 'permanent solution' to the difficulty in the Punjab of keeping the Hindus and Sikhs happy at the same time as giving Punjabi Muslims a decisive majority in their province. What was more, the two provinces together made up a natural unit since their populations had much in common, their territories were traversed by the waters of the Indus, and were welded together by rail and canal. But Lothian, who was learning something about India, and about its Muslims, recognized that the 'Sindhis are jealous and afraid of the Punjabis and are attracted by the "izzat" of being an independent Province.' More importantly, Sind was bestially poor; its finances were always in deficit; the Punjab on the other hand was comparatively rich and it did not want to take on the liability of its poor cousins to the west.⁵³ Fazl-i-Husain rejected this solution since he denied that the union with Sind would resolve the communal problem in the Punjab, at least not to the advantage of his constituents. It was more likely to make the problem worse since 'in these days of economic depression and financial bankruptcy, one cannot afford to be generous even to a starving relation or friend'. Moreover the Sindhis were 'very touchy' on this point and would see 'some Machiavellian device on my part to make the Punjab extremely strong'; and would suspect that this was a piece of Punjab imperialism, an effort to create a new 'Muslim Empire' of the Punjab all the way from the borders of Russia to Karachi and on to Lahore.⁵⁴ As usual, Fazl-i-Husain had a cannier view of the realities of Muslim politics; the Muslims of western India, the nucleus of modern Pakistan, were hardly a nest of singing birds, or a band of brothers, wanting to live in an ecstasy of Islamic solidarity and egalitarianism.

Brushing aside these alternatives, Fazl-i-Husain returned to the scarcely veiled threat that if the British did not give their friends and allies, the Punjab Muslims, the majority they demanded 'they may rest

⁵² Fazl-i-Husain to Dr Alma Latifi, 14 October 1931, *ibid.*, p. 194.

⁵³ Lothian to Fazl-i-Husain, 27 May 1932, *ibid.*, pp. 222–4.

⁵⁴ Fazl-i-Husain to Lord Lothian, 6 June 1932, *ibid.*, p. 226.

assured that in the political struggle that was to follow the Muslim support will not be forthcoming'.⁵⁵ By sticking to the Punjab line at the Second Round Table Conference, the Muslim delegates managed to secure a complete deadlock. Afraid of losing the support of their Muslim allies, and mindful that the Hindu moderates were rapidly losing all credibility, London decided to make its communal award.

The 1932 Communal Award, delivered by MacDonald, was every much Fazl-i-Husain's creation. It left the Muslims of the Punjab and Bengal in a strong position.⁵⁶ Not only did they receive more seats in their provincial council than any other community, but they kept their separate electorates as well. In the Punjab, the Muslims had forty-nine per cent of the reserved seats; in Bengal, forty-eight.⁵⁷ So Fazl-i-Husain's strategy to secure the dominance of the Punjab Muslims had been outstandingly successful; and he had achieved this not by negotiating with the Congress but by making the British pay the price for his support. Even the Sikhs, so important an element in the British Indian Army, and thirteen per cent of the population of the Punjab, were given only 18.3 per cent of the seats, although they had demanded between twenty-four and thirty per cent. The Secretary of State would have liked to give the Sikhs more, but it is easy to see why he could not do so. The Muslims wanted an absolute majority; they had been given one per cent short of this and would hardly have accepted any further reduction. The Hindus of the Punjab with their thirty per cent would be bitter enough. Therefore there was no room to give extra to the Sikhs. With eighty-six seats in a house of 175, and with the expectation of winning at least three seats reserved for the landholders and one labour seat, the Punjab Muslims had got their majority. With the Communal Award out of the way, the reforms which were finally to emerge as the Government of India Act 1935 promised self-government to the provinces, a pleasing prospect for the Muslims in provinces where they had hopeful majorities, in the Punjab, in Bengal, in Sind and the North West Frontier Province.

This seemed the triumphant conclusion of the Punjab strategy. In

⁵⁵ Fazl-i-Husain to Shafaat Ahmad Khan, 2 November 1931, *ibid.*, pp. 202–3.

⁵⁶ See *Communal Decision 1931–2* (Cmnd 4147 of 1931–2), p. 7, reproduced in B. R. Tomlinson, *The Indian National Congress and the Raj, 1929–1942, The Penultimate Phase* (London, 1976), p. 19.

⁵⁷ London had wanted to give the Bengali Muslims less than the Award actually gave them, and the Governor of Bengal had agreed. But the Viceroy had told the Secretary of State that all-India interests demanded that the majority-province Muslims, even those of Bengal, be appeased. If they were not satisfied, he feared the spectre of non-cooperation by Muslims would be added to the threat of civil disobedience by Congress.

part it had been achieved by the convenient symbiosis of interest between the British on the one hand and the Punjab leadership on the other. But of course what was a pleasing prospect for Muslims in provinces where they had hopeful majorities was a gloomier prospect for Muslims in provinces where they had hopeless minorities. So there were dangers of dissension in the Muslim ranks here. At best, Muslim political unity at an all-India level was a new and fragile development, painfully brought about by the constitutional discussions since 1929. Now that these were giving more to those provinces which had much, and less to those which had little, how was this unity to be preserved? The Aga Khan, chief Muslim spokesman in London, and architect of this unity, was haunted by the fear that the grievances of the Muslim minority provinces against the Award might now wreck the whole Bill and the shaky unity of Indian Islam.

The most striking proof that Fazl-i-Husain's real interests were not these uncertain unities among Indian Muslims, or indeed the future of the Government of India Bill, but in strengthening the position of the Unionists in their own back yard, can be seen by his manoeuvrings after the Award had been made. London had stated that it would not itself make any changes or variations in the Award; nor would it take part in any negotiations to change it; but it would accept changes in the Award agreed to by the various Indian communities themselves. Fazl-i-Husain wanted icing on his cake. Stripped of its threadbare all-India weeds, the Muslim conference revealed the nakedness of its Punjab provincialism. For the time had come, Fazl-i-Husain decided, to reassure the Hindus and Sikhs in the Punjab that the door was not closed to cross-communal agreements which had served the Unionist Party so well. If the Award was to work satisfactorily in the Punjab, without being wrecked by the opposition, not only of Fazl-i-Husain's own dissidents but, more importantly, of his traditional allies among Hindus and Sikhs, an accommodation with them had to be reached. Hindus and Sikhs were naturally incensed by the provisions of the Award. So when in 1933 some leaders of the Hindu and Sikh communities made tentative moves to come to terms with the Muslims on joint electorates, the Unionists were ready to meet them half way, and they did so with Fazl-i-Husain's blessing. Writing to Jogendra Singh the Sikh leader, Fazl-i-Husain hinted that, despite Muslim prejudice against joint electorates, he was willing to consider the notion if the Punjab Hindus and Sikhs gave it their support. In an elegant variation of a tactic that had worked so well with the British, he now told the simple Sikh, 'The Punjab Muslims are quite satisfied with the existing position and, therefore, proposals for

change must emanate from Hindus and Sikhs . . . '⁵⁸ In the event, these efforts in 1933 to make a pact between the communities, a striking reversal in the Muslim Conference's policy, but clearly in the Unionist interest, came to nothing. It broke on the opposition of urban Muslims and the Hindus and Sikhs.

But the most telling commentary on Fazl-i-Husain's provincial tactics came from the Aga Khan, who had been struggling to create a common Muslim policy to press the reforms forward. A deal in the Punjab with the Hindus and Sikhs would be flagrant departure from the 'Principles we have been fighting for in the last four years'; Muslims in the minority provinces, already aggrieved by the terms of the settlement, might now withdraw their support from the Muslim Conference which would

. . . break up the solidarity of Muslims in India. It is only after a great deal of work that we have been able to build up a united program for Muslims which is supported by every Province throughout India. Our community will then be disorganised and split into innumerable fragments. . . . It will be difficult to prevent every part of the Communal Award being topsy turvy [*sic*], and Muslims in minority provinces will be dragged into discussions of percentages to which they would be entitled as a result of this Pact. . . . The Punjab question does not and cannot stand alone, it is a part of the all-India question and however strongly and persistently we may try to localise this issue it will be found that the whole question of communal proportion throughout India will be re-opened for discussion.⁵⁹

Fazl-i-Husain's reactions to these criticisms from his old friend and supporter merely underly the fact that the Aga Khan had uncovered the inwardness of his tactics. The flurry of excuses that Fazl-i-Husain now put forward,⁶⁰ were all part of the smoke-screen that he laid around his real purpose. That came out clearly enough when he wrote to Shafat Ahmad Khan, that he could not see 'how Punjab Muslims can be deprived of the chance of improving their position by accepting this proposal.' In Punjab terms, it would clearly be a 'great mistake' for the Muslims there to 'miss the chance of establishing their position, for such a chance is not likely to recur'.⁶¹

And of course Fazl-i-Husain knew his Punjab. As far as the Punjab Muslims were concerned, the majority community could only secure its future by maintaining some semblance of co-operation with Hindus and

⁵⁸ Fazl-i-Husain to Jogendra Singh, 8 May 1933, *Letters*, p. 284.

⁵⁹ The Aga Khan to Fazl-i-Husain, 10 May 1933, *ibid.*, pp. 285–6.

⁶⁰ In fact he was trying to safeguard the Communal Award by allowing negotiations with the Hindus and Sikhs to go forward, much as the Award had hoped; he thought a communal agreement in the Punjab was in line with Muslim Conference policy.

⁶¹ Fazl-i-Husain to Shafat Ahmad Khan, 19 June 1933, *ibid.*, p. 305.

Sikhs. Fazl-i-Husain argued that the all-India Muslim Conference had left the majority provinces entirely free to improve their position; he restated the Punjab thesis:

The Punjab has stood by the minority provinces. . . . It will be a very poor return indeed of Punjab's courageous stand by the minority provinces, for you people now in your own interest to stand in the way of Punjab improving its position. If the All-India Muslim Conference takes up that attitude, then it will be doing what the Congress was not able to do—effecting disruption of united Muslim India.⁶²

Fazl-i-Husain was now ready to discipline his own creature, the Muslim Conference, in the interests of a powerful Punjabi particularism.⁶³ Musing in the privacy of his Diary, Fazl-i-Husain could see the advantages of the abortive pact:

Indian Nationalism or Punjab Nationalism? For the present Punjab Nationalism, Hindu and Sikh threat regarding Reforms and communal Award. If Punjab Hindus and Sikhs persist in not playing the game—Punjab Muslims should not insist, but let the Reforms be the establishment of autocracy and make sure that this happens all over India—Long-live John Bull!⁶⁴

In other words if his arrangements were put at risk by a failure to keep the Punjab communities in working harmony, Fazl-i-Husain would have preferred to ditch the reforms and to invite the British to continue to rule in India, because in this way his party would remain the real governors of a united Punjab. His entire strategy was based on the view that the Punjab Muslims' position was 'sound' and 'safe if not impregnable', ingenious devices by 'keen witted politicians' such as Iqbal were liable to bamboozle the unsuspecting Punjabi.⁶⁵ The Aga Khan learnt to his cost that the Punjab Unionists were simply interested in getting

⁶² Fazl-i-Husain to Shafaat Ahmad Khan, 28 June 1933, *ibid.*, 312.

⁶³ Treated in a favoured and distinct way by the British, the Punjab had maintained a strong sense of identity throughout the century of British rule. This emerged clearly in the policy of the Unionist Party, in Fazl-i-Husain's attitude in the critical constitutional negotiations of the nineteen-thirties; it was to appear again in the attitude of the Punjab political leaders towards Jinnah and the League; and it is clear that this distinctive and strongly particularist attitude had dominated the politics of Pakistan since its creation.

⁶⁴ Fazl-i-Husain, 30 August 1935, in Waheed Ahmed (ed.), *Diary and Notes of Mian Fazl-i-Husain* (Lahore, 1976), pp. 168–9.

⁶⁵ Fazl-i-Husain to Aga Khan, 16 December 1933, *Letters*, pp. 331–2. Nor was Fazl-i-Husain impressed by the Aga Khan's warning that the Conservatives in Britain, particularly the Diehards such as Churchill and Salisbury, would welcome signs of Muslim discontent with the Award and that Samuel Hoare 'would be disgusted at us for letting him down by our incompetence and inability to leave well alone'. Aga Khan to Fazl-i-Husain, 21 January 1934, *ibid.*, p. 342.

power in their own province, and then going their own sweet particularist way.

But the Punjab strategy had inherent flaws which its architect and his British allies had failed to realize. They underestimated the strength of the opposition from the Muslims in the minority provinces, especially those of the United Provinces who had carried the baton of Muslim leadership before Fazl-i-Husain had snatched it away and locked it up in the Punjab. Moreover, the strategy which had been safe in the nineteen-twenties was unlikely to be safe in the later thirties once power at the centre was seriously at risk. The Punjab wanted nothing to happen at the centre, and to let sleeping safeguards lie in British hands. But of course the Punjab was not alone in India; and the Congress, admittedly negligible in the Punjab and absent from the critical negotiations in London, had seemed to be a less formidable factor in Indian politics at this time than they soon were to prove to be. But this was evidence of the provincial myopia which may have been Fazl-i-Husain's great strength inside his own region, but which the British could not afford to share in the broader perspectives of all-India.

During the long negotiations in London, the Muslim Conference improvised by Fazl-i-Husain in 1929, had proved an excellent instrument for his stone-walling tactics which proved so effective against the Congress and the British alike. But the Punjab provincialism of Fazl-i-Husain and his All-India Muslim Conference had serious weaknesses. The Conference itself was an oligarchical body, bristling with knights and nawabs. Its take-over bid for the Muslim League had failed, and the very unevenness of the Muslim gains under the Award and the new reforms left plenty of scope for provincial grievances to be exploited. What would happen to the Muslims in the minority provinces? Again, the Government of India Bill intended to federate India. What would happen to the Muslims even in the majority provinces, on the day when the larger Hindu community captured the centre? And how appropriate an organization was the Muslim Conference to steer the community through the elections under the new Act and to orchestrate its policies thereafter?

The year 1935 saw the Act on the statute book at last. But all these other questions still needed urgent attention from Fazl-i-Husain and the Aga Khan, the leaders of the Muslim Conference. It was plain to the Aga Khan at least that Indian Muslim politics would need to be reshaped to suit the new electorate of thirty millions, and that merely clinging to the letter of the 1935 Act would not suffice. Its constitutional safeguards were: '... all too unnatural and artificial; besides they

weaken our natural strength in the North and in Bengal while they give us no advantage where we are in a minority.' The Aga Khan could see that 'the kind of politics that we have been thinking of in the past will not need the circumstances of the future'. This raised the question of 'what should be the future policy of the Moslems of India?'⁶⁶ Shafaat Ahmad Khan, the Muslim Conference leader from the western United Provinces, had immediately realized the dangers of 'isolation and provincialism', he feared that the Muslim majority provinces beguiled by the provincial autonomy they had gained, would forget about the feelings of all-India solidarity and unity which had 'inspired all of us for four long years'.⁶⁷ The Conference now needed a general policy and a common ideal, at once 'practicable and inspirational', to prevent Muslims getting lost in the 'internecine struggle for power, ministerships, jobs and leadership'. But while Shafaat Ahmad Khan could see the need for such a policy and ideal, he admitted that he had been like 'a blind man groping in the dark' in his search during the past two years for such a programme. He called upon Fazl-i-Husain to 'serve as a beacon of light to all of us'.⁶⁸ But Fazl-i-Husain felt that he had done what he could for the Muslims, losing in the process 'what little was left to me of health'. 'Neither Islam nor my principles approve of suicide', he bluntly told Abdullah Khan. Taking on the mantle of leadership of Indian Muslims throughout the sub-continent was 'tantamount to committing suicide'. He encouraged the United Provinces, 'rich in leaders' to find its own helmsmen.⁶⁹ The appeal to Fazl-i-Husain to work out a new all-India programme to keep the Muslims from being 'smothered up by provincialism' fell upon deaf ears.⁷⁰ By now Fazl-i-Husain had served his province's interests well at Delhi and felt he could return to the Punjab, where he continued to manage the Unionist affairs until his death in 1936.

From his London home at the Ritz, the Aga Khan thought he could see a way forward. The Muslim strategy should now be to take advantage of their 'impregnable position' in the north-western tracts and in Bengal; at the centre, the Muslims should be 'out and out Federalists'.⁷¹

⁶⁶ Aga Khan to Fazl-i-Husain, 13 August 1935, Fazl-i-Husain Papers (Aga Khan File); also quoted in *Letters*, pp. 429–30.

⁶⁷ Shafaat Ahmad Khan to Fazl-i-Husain, 7 November 1935, *Letters*, p. 470.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Fazl-i-Husain to Abdullah Khan, 23 September 1935, *ibid.*, p. 467.

⁷⁰ Shafaat Ahmad Khan to Fazl-i-Husain, 30 November 1935, *ibid.*, p. 474.

⁷¹ This meant demanding a status for the Muslim majority provinces at least as autonomous as the Indian States would have under a federation; and the Indian Army should be changed from an all-Indian to a territorial force.

But there remained the problem of hitting upon a rallying cry for the vastly increased Muslim electorate. The Aga Khan believed that

In self-interest . . . our attitude should be hardest possible political work on the lines of moderate State Socialism, a policy that will get for us the sympathy of many depressed and poor Hindus. . . . Our members in all the provinces (and especially in Bengal) should always be on the side of putting as many taxation burdens as possible on the upper and middle classes and reducing as much as they can indirect taxes, which fall generally on the poor. . . . With the realization of our policy in Pakistan and Bengal we could do away with all our props in a few years, and we would be in a strong position because in Pakistan we would only have to whistle and rule, and in Bengal (if this policy is carried out with adult or manhood suffrage and moderate State socialism—by the State here meaning the provincial resources to be used for the benefit of the poor and the public)—with such a policy even Bengal would become a second Pakistan.⁷²

At first sight, this seems to point to 1947 and partition. But this was not the connotation of 'Pakistan' in the nineteen-thirties. For the Aga Khan and Fazl-i-Husain the plan involved not separate sovereign states, but rather to 'make India what she is, i.e. a United States of Southern Asia', where the Muslims would work for all they were worth the majority provinces against the new federal centre. But 'our Indian patriotism, of course, should never leave any doubt and our Hindu countrymen must realise that the welfare of India as a whole . . . is as dear to us as it is to them. . . .'⁷³

It was all very well for the Aga Khan to doodle at these federal blueprints and to advocate state socialism at the expense of the well-to-do in Bengal. Applying these ideas to the harsh complexities of India was a different matter. That Muslim pirs and zamindars, nawabs and talukdas would rush cheerfully into a future glowering with supertax and socialism, was not especially plausible; and in any case the Muslim Conference with its provincial counterparts, whether in Bengal or the U.P., was too stiff, too oligarchical, too reliant on influence and deference for the mass electoral campaigning, called for by the wider franchise. Under the old state of things, the Unionist Party of the Punjab had been a sort of Oriental Whiggery:

People who had to make up their minds to support one or other of the candidates were influenced by personnel or tribal considerations, and were not at all swayed by the consideration to which Party the candidate belonged. To what extent these conditions will continue to operate under the new Constitu-

⁷² Aga Khan to Fazl-i-Husain, 13 August 1935, Fazl-i-Husain Papers (Aga Khan File), and *Letters*, pp. 431–5.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

tion and under a better-defined party system, it is not possible to determine at this stage.⁷⁴

Some of the urban discontents among the Muslims had urged Fazl-i-Husain to call in the real Muslim talent of the province, who were ‘engaged in gathering wool’ and who were ‘passing their time in the wilderness’. Malik Barkat Ali wanted Fazl-i-Husain to ditch his oligarchs and to call in the young and the able who were pining ‘at the meagreness of the opportunity to serve and advance [their] province under the awful conditions that your leadership have brought about’.⁷⁵ But Fazl-i-Husain, the ‘prop and mainstay’ of the rural notables, ‘the favourites of the bureaucracy’ was unwilling to drop them through the trap-door of history.⁷⁶

And yet the question of how the old politics of deference would fare under the new electoral conditions, had to be determined. If the leaders of the old oligarchical system were unsure of their way, there was a newcomer who was not. In 1930 Mohamed Ali Jinnah had left India, supposedly forever. But four years later he was induced to come back, for the purpose of resurrecting the Muslim League to face the new electoral system and the new structure of politics. To the old guard of Muslim leaders, these innovations came as threats, but to Jinnah who had failed badly in the old-style politics, they came as opportunities. In 1936 he organized a parliamentary board designed for the central control of Muslim candidates throughout India, instead of leaving their selection to the whims of provincial bodies; and to emphasize this control he decided that these candidates should run on entirely communal tickets, thus cutting themselves adrift from the old parties of Muslim landowners such as the Punjab Unionists and the Agriculturists of the United Provinces, which had always found it tactically expedient to include Hindu members. Such a programme was anathema to the Muslim provincial oligarchs and they set to work to fend off the intruder. Significantly, they achieved this both in Bengal and in the Punjab, and the latter case illustrates how they did it.

Fazl-i-Husain was determined to keep his province as a private empire, insulated from central control. With funds provided by the Aga Khan⁷⁷ he wished to dislodge Jinnah, who then came to Lahore, saying

⁷⁴ Sir Zafrullah Khan to Fazl-i-Husain, 15 April 1936, *Fazl-i-Husain Papers* (Zafrullah File).

⁷⁵ Malik Barkat Ali to Fazl-i-Husain, 4 April 1936, *Letters*, pp. 509–10.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ ‘Your know perfectly well that the Punjab is the key of the Indian Muslim politics’, Fazl-i-Husain told the Aga Khan; ‘[H]ence the importance of strengthening the Punjab

he was going to smash Fazl-i-Husain. But he found the Punjab organization too strong for him, and while he sat in Lahore waiting for visitors, no one of consequence dared to call. Sikander Hayat had warned Jinnah of ‘keeping his finger out of the Punjab pie’; ‘we cannot possibly allow “provincial autonomy” to be tampered with in any sphere, and by anybody be he a nominee of the powers who have given us this autonomy or a President of the Muslim League’⁷⁸ ‘I shall never come to the Punjab again’ Jinnah said as he was leaving in a rage, ‘it is such a hopeless place’.⁷⁹

Jinnah was to do better in the United Provinces. Slow to be caught up in the national movement, these provinces had more and more come to dominate it. The size of the provinces, the political potential of their peasant unrest, the strong Congress machines in Allahabad and Benares, the central position of the U.P. in the Hindu-speaking regions of the country: all these factors had led to the United Provinces’ predominance, and this meant that Congress, the Muslims and the British alike all strove hard to control their politics. Here the Montagu-Chelmsford constitution had been worked by coalitions of landowners, organized into the Agriculturist Party by a succession of governors, Harcourt, Butler, Muddiaman, and Malcolm Hailey. With the prospect of a new constitution and a wider franchise, the British interests had everything to gain by keeping this group together. Since it was conservative, it would not exploit provincial autonomy. Since it was made up of notables, it could control the new electorate—or so it was hoped. Since it was inter-communal, it might steer clear of religious politics. But the obstruction of the Bill in London worked against the calculations of Government House in Lucknow. Already in 1933, Hailey foresaw what was to follow:

At one time I hoped that the early institution of provincial autonomy would monopolise public attention. But if we are not to have the Report of the Select Committee till February or March, it is not likely that we may see a Bill passed during 1935, and there will be a period of stagnation during which all sorts of

with a view to give a lead to Muslim India’; to break Jinnah’s parliamentary board, Fazl-i-Husain needed election funds; and the Aga Khan, who had recently had some winnings at Ascot, immediately sent money to his old Unionist ally. See Fazl-i-Husain to the Aga Khan, 22 June 1936, *Letters*, pp. 596–7.

⁷⁸ Sikander Hayat Khan to Fazl-i-Husain, 1 May 1936, *Letters*, p. 528. Although Fazl-i-Husain feared that Jinnah had ‘blundered into the [Punjab] arena very much to our prejudice’ in fact, Jinnah failed to get any support from any section of the Unionists and even the discontents in the Ittihad-I-Millat, refused to co-operate with him and in fact withdrew from the League’s parliamentary board.

⁷⁹ Quoted in Azim Husain, *Mian Fazl-i-Husain: A Political Biography*, 1966, p. 311.

issues may be taken up, and during which efforts made to consolidate a stable party will lose interest.⁸⁰

In fact the time was lost, and the ‘stable party’ turned out to be a wasting asset. This harmed the British and the old leadership, and since the only beneficiaries turned out to be the new Muslim leadership of Jinnah, in time it was to harm the Congress, as well. Since the Agriculturist Party was so loosely organized and since it had marked time in the early nineteen-thirties, Jinnah’s foray into the U.P. found all manner of dissident landowners waiting to be comforted and ex-Congress Muslims to be recruited.⁸¹ More important than that, the United Provinces contained the ablest, the best educated, the most ambitious Muslims in India, socially superior to those in Bengal, educationally superior to those in the Punjab. But only one Indian in seven in the United Provinces was a Muslim, and so they had little to gain and much to fear from the coming of provincial self-government with a wider franchise. There was nothing for them in the Punjab programme of Fazl-i-Husain. Such people were ready to give sympathy to a party promising them a full-blooded communal programme and which could offer them national, and not merely provincial support. So it was in the United Provinces that the new type of mass politics, based on bitter excoriation of the Hindus, began to emerge. The contempt of the old Muslim politicians for this new movement and its new leader was pungently expressed by Sir Shafaat Ahmad Khan, the Conference’s man in the United Provinces: He described Jinnah’s parliamentary board as ‘fantastic’; here was Jinnah’s first attempt to organize Muslims outside the legislature and it would be his last. His tactics were characterized by ‘a crudity which would do credit to the President of [a] school debating society’;

... Jinnah has never done a solid day’s political work in his life and ‘organisation’ is foreign to him. . . . This is an example of his pyrotechnics and inordinate desire for stunts. Hollywood atmosphere and methods, graceful poses and elaborate gestures are all right for boys of 18, but Jinnah’s sole contribution to the present controversy, is an attack on ‘reactionaries’.⁸²

⁸⁰ Hailey to Jagdish Prasad, 12 September 1933, Jagdish Prasad Papers, New Delhi, quoted in Gallagher, ‘From Civil Disobedience to Communism’.

⁸¹ As one influential U.P. Muslim had written to Fazl-i-Husain in 1931, the impact of the civil disobedience movement and the increasing politicization of the U.P. peasantry, had shown that the old policy of relying upon Government to protect Muslim property was no longer enough, ‘so even those Muslims who have so far been with the Government will go against it or lose all influence with the public.’ (Mushir Husain Kidwai to Fazl-i-Husain, 3 April 1931, *Letters*, p. 129.)

⁸² Shafaat Ahmad Khan, Fazl-i-Husain, 15 June 1936, Fazl-i-Husain Papers (Shafaat File); also in *Letters*, pp. 586–7.

Somehow or the other the Agriculturist Party would have to be raised up to crush the League, but Shafaat himself went on: ‘. . . the Agriculturist Party, it must be confessed, cannot command the allegiance of the Muslim electorate’.⁸³ Even though the Aga Khan consoled himself that he had never ‘looked upon Aligarh or U.P. as the leadership of Islam’, the United Provinces, standing as they did between the north-west and Bengal made it vital that the Congress (and equally the League) ‘should not capture our “Centre”’.⁸⁴

And there was the rub. When the last elections came in 1937, the Muslim majority provinces stayed loyal to their old leaders. Fazl-i-Husain had died the previous year, but his successor, Sir Shikander Hayat Khan, brought the Unionists to power in the Punjab and became chief minister. Out of eighty-four seats, the League won only one in the Punjab. In Bengal, Fazl-ul-Huq formed a coalition ministry and in Sind and in the North West Frontier Province, the other Muslim majority provinces, the League won no seats at all. But in the United Provinces, the Agriculturists did badly and the League did well, and it was noticeable that in other Muslim minority provinces they made advances too.⁸⁵ This was to become the pattern. The League was to spread outwards from the United Provinces where most of its political talent was bunched; and one by one the Muslim parties in the minority provinces were to fall under Jinnah’s control. But he did not win the leadership of Bengal Muslims until 1943 and of the Punjab Muslims until 1946.⁸⁶ The last two provinces to fall to the Muslim League were the two where Muslims were most powerful. They were also the two which were partitioned.

By now Jinnah’s strategy was becoming a little clearer. It did not augur well for the provincialism of the Punjab. At the Round Table Conferences, Jinnah had been impressed by how powerfully Congress had been able to deploy its claim to speak with one voice for the nation. He also had seen how effectively the Congress High Command imposed its choices and its disciplines over the heterogeneous groups that had fought the 1937 elections under its flag. The contempt with which the Congress dealt with the Muslim League’s hopes of a share of office in the Hindu majority provinces where the League had scored its only electoral successes rammed home these lessons. Congress, flushed with their

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Aga Khan to Fazl-i-Husain, 14 January 1936, *Letters*, p. 481.

⁸⁵ In the U.P. the League won twenty-seven seats; in Bombay it won twenty and in Madras, ten.

⁸⁶ Even then, Jinnah had far less control over these provinces than is usually assumed—a theme to be developed in Ayesha Jalal’s forthcoming work.

success at the polls, decided to launch a bold attack upon the Muslim problem and encouraged the League to disband and be absorbed in its ranks. By its programme of mass contacts and policy of agrarian and social reform, the Congress hoped to bring the Muslim villager into its fold. So Jinnah had now to rally support for the League and, under his unquestioned leadership, make it the only voice of Muslim India, and get the British to accept his claim; he had to counter the Congress mass contact campaign in the rural areas and he had to find a programme by which he could try to bring to heel the leaders of the Muslim provincial parties.

In 1936, Fazl-i-Husain had sent one of his followers to warn Jinnah to keep out of the Punjab. The messenger reported the failure to keep his mission and he added, 'my prayer is that those who have made efforts to raise Mr. Jinnah in the Punjab's estimation may not be placed in a position where they may have to repent'.⁸⁷ Perhaps there were some repented in the summer of 1947, when nearly 200,000 Hindus and Muslims were slaughtered and nine million refugees stumbled fearfully across the burning plains of the Punjab.

⁸⁷ Ahmad Yar Khan Daultana to Fazl-i-Husain, 13 April 1936, Fazl-i-Husain Papers (Daultana File).