

Jinnah, Rohingyas and Pakistan

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69 years ago today Jinnah the founder of Pakistan passed away. His legacy is bitterly contested both in Pakistan and India. What we should be able agree on is that whatever good or bad he did, he died almost seven decades ago. It is, therefore, amusing to see some commentators still blaming him for some misfortune or the other, in Pakistan and India.

A couple of years ago another Pakistani newspaper published an op-ed by a writer named Kunwar Khuldune Shahid which, taking considerable liberties with history, painted the plight of Rohingyas as being the making of one man and one man alone, Jinnah. The chain of events according to this shoddy and immature piece of writing was as follows: around the time of partition members of the Rohingya community visited Jinnah and asked him to include Rakhine region of Burma in Pakistan. Jinnah refused leaving the Rohingya no option but to resort to militancy, which in turn caused their misfortune today. This article has resurfaced recently, promoted by ultra nationalist Burmese Buddhist websites as reasons why the persecution of Rohingyas today is justified.

Here are the facts for those actually interested in them: The Lahore Resolution and the Pakistan demand embodied the provinces of British India. A short time before Major General Aung San, the father of Aung San Suu Kyi, was tragically assassinated in July 1947, he had met Jinnah in Delhi. Jinnah had assured him that whatever the solution to British India's communal problem, Pakistan would not stake claim to any territory in Burma. The British colony of Burma had been a separate entity from British India since 1937 and its separate status had been article of faith for the British rulers as well as Indian politicians of every party including the Congress.



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The demand for Pakistan for Jinnah, in my opinion, was a bargaining counter. He demanded Pakistan loudly and vociferously because he calculated or miscalculated that Congress would refuse to partition the country and instead give Muslims a sweet deal and share power with their representative organisation, the Muslim League, at the centre. He made it clear repeatedly that the Pakistan demand was not a Pan-Islamic demand and when certain Muslim leaders approached him to 'liberate' Rakhine region from Burmese rule, he refused, advising them instead to live as loyal citizens of Burma. The Rohingya Muslims numbered less than one million. Pakistan demand had been made on behalf of 90 million Muslims of the subcontinent. There was no parallel.

The case of the Rohingya has always been that they should be given equal rights as citizens of Burma. To suggest that they might have exercised their right to self determination in 1947 along with Pakistan is an absurd claim. If some members of the Rohingya community had raised this possibility, it was promptly shot down and rightly so by Jinnah and the All India Muslim League. And it certainly cannot be held against the Rohingya that some of their forbears might have wanted such a solution. Rohingya are the most oppressed minority community in the world, rendered stateless through pressure of the ultra conservative Buddhist monks who think that if Muslims are allowed to exist as part of modern day Myanmar, they would make it an Islamic country. Given that the Rohingya make up less than 5 percent of the population of that country, this is an absurd fear. The only solution for the problem in Myanmar is for the state to restore the citizenship rights of Rohingya citizens and stop their persecution forthwith.

This attempt to colour the Rohingya as Bengali Muslims or to claim that they were disloyal in the past is not going to help Myanmar's cause. Most Muslims in Myanmar are of Bengali descent but they have been living there for centuries. They cannot be thrown out of their homes arbitrarily.

Of course it is heartening to see Pakistanis taking a stand on the issue. Injustice anywhere must be condemned. However, Pakistan too has many skeletons in its closet. Perhaps not as blatantly as Myanmar but certainly as effectively, the Pakistani state has progressively since 1974 disenfranchised its hapless Ahmadi community. The difference here of course is that Ahmadis have not resorted to any agitation but if they were to agitate, I am sure, they would be subjected to nothing less than a genocide by Pakistan's extremely radicalized Muslim majority. Instead Ahmadis are being dispatched in Pakistan through slow burn and churn. Persecuted by unfair laws such as the anti-Ahmadi Ordinance XX of 1984, a significantly large part of their population lives in exile today, just like Rohingyas. Almost every other month, some Ahmadi or the other is killed by religious fanatics who are just as bloodthirsty as the Buddhist monks in Myanmar.

Of course Ahmadis are not the only community suffering in Pakistan. Shias, and let us not forget that Jinnah and his sister were both Shias, are subjected to horrific massacres, especially in Quetta by militants who have been sheltered by the deep state. The situation is not better for Christians or Hindus either. Christians live in perpetual fear of being lynched by Muslim mobs. Hindus, well let us not forget that our Chief Justice doesn't even want to name them! With such a situation at home, how can we protest the treatment of Rohingyas in Myanmar or the lynching of Muslims in India by the Hindutvists?



So on this death anniversary of Quaid-e-Azam, let us at least reflect on what we have done to minorities who were so dear to Jinnah's heart that he reminded Muslims of Pakistan of their sacred obligation to protect them and give them equal rights not once but 33 different times in 1947-1948. At least then we can point fingers at others without the fear of being hypocritical.

Finally I wish to make a correction. In my article "The White Part in Our Flag" I claimed that Liaquat Ali Khan had not responded to Jogindranath Mandal's letter of resignation. Dr Neeti Nair, a leading historian of South Asia in the US, sent me Liaquat Ali Khan's speech in response to Mandal's letter and therefore I stand corrected on that count. As for the speech, it contains typical bald denials and ends with an accusation that Mandal is a traitor to Pakistan. This is how we treated Pakistan's first law minister and the man who had been entrusted to represent the Muslim League in the interim government before partition.

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