

The Muslim League

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The Hindus and the Muslims had peacefully coexisted in the country since centuries. They respected the culture and traditions of each other. The Hindus and the Muslims had fought together against the British during the revolt of 1857. The British thus followed the policy of 'Divide and Rule' and tried to sow the seeds of discord between the two communities to put a check on the rising tide of nationalism in the country. The British termed the Revolt as an effort by the Hindus to establish Hindu rule in India and instigated the Muslims to establish their own political organisation. This was one of the reasons which led to the formation of the Muslim League in India.

Factors Leading to the Formation of the Muslim League

Loss of Sovereignty by Muslim Rulers

- The British established their power and rule in India after dethroning the Mughal rulers. The Muslims thus became the bitter enemies of the British.
- The British discriminated the Muslims against the Hindus as they held the Muslims responsible for the uprising of 1857.
- Later, after 1870, the British changed its attitude towards the Muslims to put a check on the rising tide of nationalism. They thus encouraged separatist and communal tendencies in the country.

Policy of Divide and Rule

The British encouraged the separatist tendencies in India and followed a policy of divide and rule. This policy was carried out in the following manner:

- In 1871, Urdu was made the medium of instruction for Muslims in primary and secondary schools. Governmental aid was also provided to educational institutions which were run by the Muslims.
- They tried to create religious hatred among the Hindus by portraying Muslim rulers as plunderers and instigated the Muslims by outlining Hindu rulers as cruel to the Muslim subjects.
- They made efforts to justify the partition of Bengal by convincing the Muslims that Hindus would not be able to economically thwart them in the Muslim majority province of East Bengal.
- Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs were treated not as one nation but as separate communities.
- The British tried to spread communal hatred through press, posters and literature.

Relative Educational and Economic Backwardness of Muslims

The Muslim society in India was economically and educationally backward because of the following reasons:

- The upper class Muslims comprising the zamindars and aristocrats were anti-British and were hostile to western education.
- The British government in India discriminated against the Muslims after the uprising of 1857 as they held Muslims responsible for the uprising. They were thus discriminated in the recruitment to civil and military services.
- The Muslims were not involved in the growth of any organised industry.
- Most of the Muslims were conservatives, and they did not readily accept western education; the Hindus, on the other hand, received modern education gaining an upper hand in civil and other government services.

Role of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan

- Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan was a great educationist and a social reformer. Earlier, he considered Hindus and Muslims to be one nation, but later, under the influence of the British policies, he declared that the Hindus and the Muslims were vastly different from each other.
- He founded the Mohammedan Anglo-Oriental College at Aligarh in 1875 which later became the Aligarh Muslim University.
- He also founded the United Indian Patriotic Association in 1888 mainly with the motive of opposing the Congress.
- He believed that since the Hindus constitute the majority in the country, they would dominate the Muslims after the British withdrawal from India. He was of the opinion that the continuation of British rule would bring education and prosperity among the Muslims.



Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan founded the famous Mohammedan Anglo Oriental College at Aligarh in 1875. It later became the Aligarh Muslim University.

Erroneous Interpretation of History

The way in which history was interrelated during the British rule also contributed to the growth of communalism.

- The British historians like James Mill divided Indian history into Hindu, Muslim and British periods. The ancient period was depicted as the Hindu period, while mediaeval India was classified as the Muslim period. This created communalism among the masses.
- The idea of composite Indian history was ignored by the British historians and there was a deliberate attempt to create a rift between the two communities.
- Communal historians stressed that Indian culture and society had reached a great height during the ancient period but began to decline during the mediaeval period. These historians ignored the scientific, technological and cultural advancement which were made during the mediaeval period.



James Mill divided Indian history into Hindu, Muslim and British periods

Rise of Assertive Nationalism

The policies and speeches of certain assertive nationalists annoyed the Muslims. For example, the propagation of Shivaji and Ganpati festivals by Tilak and Aurobindo Ghosh did not appeal to the Muslims.

Economic Backwardness of India

- The economic backwardness of the country contributed to the rise of communalism in India. As jobs were few, people demanded reservations in services on the basis of caste, class and creed.
- This demand for reservations was used by the British to adopt the policy of divide and rule.
- The unemployed youth however failed to realise that the British policies were actually responsible for the economic backwardness of the country.

Events Leading to the Formation of the Muslim League

The Hindi Urdu Controversy

- In the United Provinces, all petitions to the offices were filed and submitted in Urdu which was the court language.
- In 1900, the government instructed that all petitions were to be submitted in Hindi and the court summons and announcements would be made both in Hindi and Urdu. This move was resented by the Muslims.

Foundation of the Mohammedan Anglo-Oriental Association in 1893

- The British felt threatened by the growing popularity of the Congress. To counter the effects of the Congress, the British encouraged the formation of the Mohammedan Anglo-Oriental Defence Association in 1893.
- The principal aim of the British in setting this organisation was to prevent the participation of Muslims in the Congress and to promote loyalty among the Muslims.

Aligarh Politics

- The Aligarh Movement instilled a sense of loyalty among the Muslims towards the British. The movement was carried out by Nawab Mohsin-ul-Mulk after the death of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan.
- A great deal of resentment was expressed by the members of the Aligarh Movement when Hindi and Urdu were granted the same status in government courts. The Muslims began to feel the need to organise themselves.

Partition of Bengal

The partition of Bengal into East Bengal (Muslim majority region) and West Bengal (Hindu majority region) was an attempt by the British to create a rift between the two communities. The British were supported by the Muslims as they promised that the New Province of East Bengal would be dominated by the Muslims.

Muslim Deputation to Viceroy Minto

A Muslim deputation led by Agha Khan met the Viceroy on 1 October 1906 and presented their demands which included the following:

- Representation of Muslims in elected bodies should be made on the basis of their political importance and not on numerical strength.
- Separate electorate constituencies for the Muslims should be set up in the Provincial Council and the Imperial Legislative Assemblies.
- While nominating the members of the Viceroy's Council, preference should be given to the Muslims.
- Seats for the Muslims should be preserved in the State Services.
- The state should grant more aid to new Muslim universities.

Formation of the Muslim League

The success of the Muslim deputation motivated the Muslims to set up their own separate organisation. Nawab Salimullah of Dacca took the initiative when eminent Muslim personalities assembled at Dacca in 1906. The proposal to form a separate political organisation for Muslims was accepted and an 'All India Muslim League' was established on 30 December 1906 under the Presidentship of Nawab Salimullah. Agha Khan was elected as the permanent president of the Muslim League.



Agha Khan, the founder member of the Muslim League

Aims and Objectives of the Muslim League

- To promote the feeling of loyalty towards the British among the Muslims of India.
- To protect and advance the political rights and interests of the Muslims and to represent their needs and aspirations to the government.
- To prevent the rise of feeling of hostilities between the Muslims of India and other communities.

Impact of the League on the Indian National Movement

- The British welcomed the formation of the Muslim League as they felt that it will counter the effects of the Congress.

- The League did not participate in the national movement in the beginning. It sought greater representation of the Muslims in all services. Its policies were much directed against the Congress than the British.
- The government accepted the demands of separate electorates of the League for the Muslims in the Morley Minto reforms of 1909.
- There was a change in the attitude of the Muslims from 1910 onwards. It became friendlier towards the Congress. This was due to the following reasons:
 - The hostility of the British against Turkey in the Turko–Italian Wars in 1911–12 and the Balkan wars in 1912–13 alienated the Muslims from the British.
 - The annulment of the Partition of Bengal was seen as hurting the economic interests of the Muslims.
 - The younger generation of the Muslims disliked the loyalty of the Muslims towards the British.
 - Some young Muslims were inspired by Muslim studies at the Deoband School and were eager to participate in the national movement. Prominent Muslims among them were Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Hakim Ajmal Khan and Habibur Rahman.
- When the British fought against Ottoman Turkey, the Indian Muslims launched a Khilafat Movement against the British. The Lucknow Pact was signed between the Congress and the League in 1916.
- The communal policies of the League however continued. The League raised demands for the creation of a separate state of Pakistan in 1930. In 1940, Jinnah presented his two nation theory in which he laid down that the Congress and the League were two different nations.

On the demands of the Muslim League and the communal unrest created by it, British India was partitioned into India and Pakistan in 1947.