

The last days of two Titans

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THE founding fathers of India and Pakistan have been transfixed in the invective, abuse, distortion, selective memory and benign neglect of our times. Practically every ideal that they stood for has been subverted as if by design by the power wielders in the evolving histories of their respective countries.

It is not difficult to extrapolate that they would most probably be the severest critics of the government policies that followed their demise. Both were Titans in their hey day and now suffer the ignominy of having their images and words stuck up on the walls and chambers of all the great offices of the state, mouthed on the TV and Radio followed by banal bazaar ads and the rituals of their birth and death anniversaries observed in a repetitive ritualistic, wooden manner.

'To call a spade a spade', to use a favourite phrase of plain Mr. Jinnah, no two men could have been more different than the Mahatma and the Quaid. Indeed, they were antagonists, each with a different dream. But, we need not get into the ancient cobwebs of their differences. Their legacies have to be determined by the thoughts and actions of their final days. The last days of life given to us are like a filter that ejects the unwanted and retains the quintessence of our enduring beliefs.

Let us examine the actions and final thoughts of this charismatic duo in their last days for such impact as it may have on present times.

Of the many opinion wielders that I met in India during recent visits, I met only one, the redoubtable Kuldeep Nayar, who was aware of the Quaid's final testament of August 11, 1947. Most Indians consider the Quaid as the "wrecker of Indian unity and the father of Islamic fanaticism". But the historical fact is that in the teeth of opposition from his own supporters, the Quaid accepted the British imposed confederation idea, known as the "grouping scheme". It was Pandit Nehru as the newly elected Congress president in 1946 who unilaterally changed the terms and conditions of the settlement that had been agreed upon by the Congress and the Muslim League.

And no charge could be more ill-founded than the accusation of the Quaid spawning Islamic fanaticism. It betrays either deep bias or profound ignorance. The Quaid as we well know was opposed to a theocratic state. He would certainly not have suffered a mulah-interpreted political Islam which is currently the fulcrum of our muddled up polity

prime minister of Pakistan) Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy begged Gandhi to remain in Calcutta, to protect the Muslims. Gandhi agreed provided Suhrawardy moved in with him at Hyderi House situated in the Muslim district of Calcutta. Gandhiji vowed to fast unto death unless he received assurances of communal tolerance from the leaders of both communities.

For nine days there was communal peace in Calcutta after Gandhiji-Suhrawardy began their satyagrah in Calcutta. But, on August 31, a Hindu crowd broke into Hyderi House accusing Gandhiji of his failure to protect the Hindus in Noakhali and elsewhere where fresh outbursts of frenzy had occurred; Hyderi House was wrecked and Gandhiji was almost overrun himself. On September 1, he announced a fast unto death unless the carnage was stopped.

Gandhiji's legacy provides the format of a unifying bond between India and Pakistan. He was no doubt opposed to the creation of Pakistan, but once it became a reality he wished India to embrace it in friendship and fairness. Revenge was never a Gandhian trait — as he famously declared, "An eye for an eye leaves the whole world blind".

By September 4, he received written assurances of communal harmony from every political leader of Calcutta and people in the thousands gathered to give this assurance. Calcutta was relatively free of communal madness thereafter. The Muslims of Calcutta are ever grateful for Gandhiji's choosing to protect the Calcutta Muslims when his destination was Noakhali. Gandhiji then decided to move onto the Punjab, which was in the grip of even worse horrors.

He never reached Punjab. At Delhi he was detained by communal fires that raged in the city and the incessant of quarrels between his proteges, Nehru and Vallabhbhai Patel. There were two other matters that deeply troubled him, namely the failure of the Indian government to remit 550 million rupees of Pakistan's share of the sterling assets (this would be worth probably 55 billion rupees in today's money) and, the emerging Kashmir dispute with Pakistan. On both these issues Gandhiji was totally opposed to the policies of Nehru.

Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan visited New Delhi in November but failed to yank Pakistan's sterling assets from the Nehru government. The funds were held in hostage till Pakistan withdrew the Pathan "raiders" that had entered Kashmir. For Gandhiji, the

and let India and Pakistan deliberate over the matter... If they want an arbitrator they can appoint one.

And on December 29 he declared at an open meeting:

"I have been severely reprimanded for what I said concerning Kashmir," Gandhiji confided to the attendees at Birla House a few days later. "The advice I gave is the kind of advice the humblest man may give. Occasionally it becomes one's duty to offer such advice... Kashmir is a Hindu state, the majority of its people being Muslims. The raiders... say that the Muslims of Kashmir are being ground down under the tyranny of Hindu raj and that they have come for their succour... It seems obvious to me, as it should seem obvious to others... that if Sheikh Abdullah cannot carry with him the minority as well as the majority, Kashmir cannot be saved by military might alone..."

On January 12 he told his friends: "I yearn for a heart friendship between Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims... Today it is non-existent... Fasting is a satyagrahi's last resort." He resolved to start his "indefinite" fast the next day. At the top of his protest agenda was the return of Pakistan's assets. On January 15 India decided to repatriate Pakistan's sterling assets. Gandhiji declared: "Our cabinet... deserves the warmest thanks," he said for having agreed that day to

transfer to Pakistan the unpaid partition funds. "this is no policy of appeasement of the Muslims... The present gesture on the part of the Government of India... ought to lead to an honourable settlement not only of the Kashmir question but of all the differences between the two Dominions. Friendship should replace the present enmity."

On January 18 he terminated fasting after he received a written pledge from over a hundred leaders including the heads of all the parties "that we shall protect life, property and faith of the Muslims."

On January 30, 1948 at 5-17 p.m. Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated by a hate-crazed RSS man by the name of Nathuram Godse in the grounds of Birla House in New Delhi. The assassin's concluding speech in the High Court of India reads in part as follows: -

"My provocation was his constant and consistent pandering to the Muslims... I declare here before man and God that in putting an end to Gandhiji's life I have removed one who was a curse to India, a force of evil, and who had, during thirty years of... hare-brained policy, brought nothing but misery and unhappiness... I do not doubt that history will give me justice."

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lah-interpreted political Islam which is currently the fulcrum of our muddled up polity consisting of theocracy, hypocrisy and pseudo democracy. Quaid's Pakistan was a homeland for the Muslims of India imbued by modern democratic statecraft and inspired by the glorious ideals of Islam.

The Pakistani public, and by this I mean the wielders of public opinion, is equally ignorant or biased in evaluating the role of Gandhiji in the short life granted to him after partition. No doubt, our school and college books on so-called "Pakistan Studies" are largely responsible for the current climate of bias and distortion.

In August 1947, Punjab, Bihar and Bengal, the three provinces on the Hindu/Muslim religious fault-lines, were burning. Human life had lost all sanctity in Gandhiji's words: "people had gone mad". In remote Noakhali in East Bengal, Muslim mobs in retaliation to the massacre of the Muslims in Bihar went on a rampage against the minority Hindus. The Mahatma agreed to go to Noakhali to cool tempers.

On August 10, 1947, he arrived in Calcutta en'route to Noakhali, where the Muslims (less than 25 per cent of the population) were trembling for their lives fearing retribution. The British army had moved out and the law-enforcement agencies were paralyzed. Bengal Chief Minister (and later

till Pakistan withdrew the Pathan "raiders" that had entered Kashmir. For Gandhiji, the repatriation of Pakistan's sterling assets was a moral issue and the last act of his life which occurred a few days before his assassination in January 1948 literally forced the Indian government to surrender to Pakistan its due and legitimate property.

Gandhiji's views on the Kashmir dispute are not too widely known. He was no chauvinist on Kashmir. At a prayer meeting on October 19, 1947 he declared:

"The real sovereign of the state are the people of the state. If the ruler is not a servant of the people then he is not the ruler." Gandhiji's conviction was that "now the power belongs to the people," and therefore, "the people of Kashmir should be asked whether they want to join Pakistan or India. Let them do as they want. The ruler is nothing. The people are everything."

The above quote and those that follow have been taken from the eminent biography of Gandhi by Stanley Wolpert.

On Christmas day 1947 Gandhi declared:

"Can we not settle the issue between ourselves?... One should always admit one's mistakes. The Hindus and Sikhs of Jammu or those who had gone there from outside killed Muslims there... I shall advise Pakistan and India to sit together and decide the matter... The Maharaja can step aside

ry will give me justice."

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Quaid's enduring legacy is best summed up in his own words:-

"...I cannot emphasize it too much. We should begin to work in that spirit and in course of time all these angularities of the majority and minority communities,... will vanish... You are free; you are free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosques or to any other place of worship in this state of Pakistan... You may belong to any religion or caste or creed — that has nothing to do with the business of the state... We are starting in the days when there is no discrimination, no distinction between one community and another, no discrimination between one caste or creed and another. We are starting with this fundamental principle that we are all citizens and equal citizens of one state..."

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