Jinnah – The Harbinger of Partition

What is the issue?

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- The portrait of Pakistan's founder Muhammad Ali Jinnah on the wall of the Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) has created controversy.
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- After more than 7 decades of partition, Jinnah continues to be a controversial and polarising figure – which calls for a nuanced debate.
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How did Jinnah's role complicate the Indian Nationalist landscape?

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- **Mainstream Idea -** The mainstream Indian nationalism that started developing from the end of the 19th century was civic and territorial.
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- It was based on the idea that all Indians, irrespective of their language, religion and culture, were part of the single Indian nation.
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- At this point in time, nationalist sentiments were uneven in its spread and it did not reach all groups, communities and regions in a uniform manner.
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- But these initial blossoms provided the broad template for mainstream nationalism, and was pioneered by leaders like - Naoroji, and Gokhale.
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- **Radicals -** Jinnah's rise from the 1940s onward represented an emphatic and categorical denial of the idea of a single Indian nation.
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- He advanced the idea that Indian people were not one, but two nations (Hindu and Muslim) and propagated with conviction that both can't live together.
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- Jinnah's voice changed nationalism from being a territorial imagination to one based on religious affiliation – thereby provoking animosity.
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Was Jinnah the first proponent of the two-nation theory?

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- Jinnah stated his separatist project only in later 1930s, but some vague ideas of political separation had begun as early as the late 19th century.
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- In the early 20th century, with the growth of active Hindu and Muslims communalism, these ideas began to gather momentum.
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- In 1930, Sir Muhammad Iqbal said at the Muslim League session in Allahabad that all Muslims of North-West India could be organised into a separate polity.
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- In 1937, V D Savarkar declared from the platform of the Hindu Mahasabha that Hindus constituted a nation in themselves.
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How did the early phase of Jinnah’s politics look?

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- Jinnah began his political career in the Congress, and was a votary of united territorial Indian nationalism.
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- He disapproved when the Muslim League was formed in 1906, frowning at its pro-British and elitist orientation.
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- It was only in 1913 that he joined the League, when its politics began to turn against the British (dual party membership was allowed then).
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- It is speculated that Jinnah’s joining of the league was probably on persuation by his congress colleagues – to facilitate greater Hindu-Muslim unity.
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- Significantly, Jinnah was instrumental in effecting a pact between the Congress and the League in 1916.
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- Jinnah left the Congress in 1920, when the influence of Gandhi was rising and the party was moving towards a phase of mass mobilisations and protests.

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- As a leader within the Muslim League he started galvanising the Muslim masses towards the nationalist cause – but things got separatist eventually.
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How did Jinnah rise as the most powerful Muslim leader?

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- Until at least 1937, Jinnah was only one among the several important Muslim leaders, many of whom were congressmen.
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- In the early 1930s, there were hardly any takers for Jinnah's religious nationalism among the Muslims of Punjab, Bengal and Sind.
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- After taking over the leadership of the Muslim League in 1937, Jinnah launched a powerful campaign to dub the Congress as a Hindu party.
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- He preached that there was a political separation between Hindus and Muslims and that a 'Congress Raj' would mean a 'Hindu Raj'.
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- He managed to sell the notion that Muslims might get discriminated against in a united India, which sowed the seeds of insecurity in the minds of Muslims.
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- At the end of this coercive campaign in 1940, Jinnah had clearly managed to emerge as the most influencial Muslim leader.
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What is the current relevance of Jinnah to India's polity?

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- Since the 1980s, a particularly aggressive strand of Hindu communalism has come to masquerade as "real nationalism".
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- This has debunked the inclusive and plural idea of Indian nationalism as "pseudo secularism" and propounds India as a Hindu Rashtra.
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- This brand of majoritarian politics has created its own heroes and villains for the “historical wrongs” done to Indian society.
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- In this context of Hindu-rightist assertiveness, Jinnah emerges as the main villain, for reasons that are obvious (the other’s voice).
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What are the other significant aspects in the partition binary?

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- British Pandering - The two-nation theory in no small means was aided by conscious British policy of political communalisation of Indian masses.
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- The granting of communcal electorate in 1909 for Muslims and its extention to other groups in 1919 were clear cases of partitioning the masses.
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- As Muslims were grouped as separate constituencies, a clear incentive was provided for championing communally polarising issues (on both sides).
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- Additionally, Hindu right wing’s historical narrative of other-ing the Muslims was also proving problematic for secularists to knit a cohesive polity.
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Does Jinnah alone deserve the blame for partition?

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- Some leading Indian politicians have called Jinnah a constitutionalist, mainly deriving from his speech in Pakistan’s Constituent Assembly.
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- But it isn’t prudent to analyse history from just 1 statement while ignoring the larger context and dynamics that drove partition.
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- It wouldn’t be a stretch to say that it was majorly the extremely corrosive communal campaign of Jinnah that precipitated partition.
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- Any intention to exonerate him and shift the blame of partition on the others like Nehru, and Vallabhai Patel would amount to distorting history.
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Source: Indian Express

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