



## Book Review

Jaswant Singh, *Jinnah: India – Partition – Independence*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010, 550 pages, ISBN 978-0-19-547927-0, Price 35.99 Euro.

In the book *Jinnah. India – Partition – Independence* Jaswant Singh analyses “Jinnah’s public life and his political journey from being the ‘ambassador of Hindu-Muslim unity’ to the Quaid-i-Azam of Pakistan” (p. xiv). So what does a high-ranking politician of the Hindu-revivalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have to say about the leader of the All India Muslim League and later the Governor General of Pakistan, Mohammad Ali Jinnah? At first sight, any relation between the two appears unthinkable. Between 1998 and 2004, while in the Union cabinet, Singh was in charge of External Affairs, Defence and the Finance Ministry of India. Following the 2004 elections the BJP was assigned the task of the opposition with Jaswant Singh as its leader. This was when he began his five year long in-depth research which ultimately culminated in this book.

Jaswant Singh attempts to investigate whether the partitioning of India in 1947 was inevitable or not. He endeavours to explain the roles Mohammad Ali Jinnah, Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, Mahatma Gandhi and Viceroy Mountbatten, just to name a few, played in the unfolding “tragedy” (p. 7). He questions the theory of Muslims being a separate nation, traces its evolution, and Jinnah’s persistent utilisation of it in order to obtain, “for the Muslims a voice in Indian politics which the straight arithmetic of numbers could have never given them” (p. 299). Jaswant Singh rejects the official Indian and Pakistani historiography and states the need to correct the Indian impression that Jinnah was the principal “villain” of partition.<sup>1</sup> It is remarkable that this new perspective comes from the right wing of the Indian political system.

Jaswant Singh’s detailed inquiry and his re-evaluation of the subject sparked a great controversy in India. One of the negative consequences was the ban of the book in Gujarat. It was launched a second time by Oxford University Press Pakistan in April 2010 after having first been



published by Rupa & Co. New Delhi in August 2009. Furthermore, Jaswant Singh was expelled from the BJP, although he rejoined on the 24th of June 2010 after the senior BJP leader L. K. Advani took the initiative to bring him back.<sup>2</sup> Many positive reactions were posted on various blogs and internet platforms.<sup>3</sup> His critics however accuse him of having ulterior motives. They claim that the reason why Jaswant Singh wrote the book was to criticise Nehru.<sup>4</sup> Bearing this in mind, the reader is filled with scepticism.

In the first chapter Singh takes the reader back in time to the initial contact between India and Islam and describes how Muslims came to be part of the country. It is obvious that it is imperative for the author's argument to take a cursory look at the history of Islam and Muslims in India. He argues that even though Islam is not an indigenous part of India, it is an inseparable layer of its foundation. So how can it be that Muslims constitute a separate nation and, "why in India alone?" asks Singh (p. 11). Hence, he clearly states his views on the Two-Nation Theory, rejecting it and supporting the unity of the Indian nation enriched by its religious diversity. The arguments presented are well structured and free of any overt religious ideology, however, they are obviously still framed within the discourse of religious categories being the sole foundation of understanding Indian society and politics. Nevertheless, this apparently objective approach convinces the reader that Singh's inquiry is worth being noted and any previous doubts are dispersed or at least softened.

In the second chapter he takes a leap through time to tracing Jinnah's emergence as a successful barrister and nationalist in pre-partition India of the 1920s. Chapters 3-10 relate a chronological account of the events leading up to 1947 and a little beyond, the Hindu-Muslim relation being a recurring theme alongside Jinnah's political evolution. He covers the principal developments such as the Lucknow Pact of 1916, the Communal Award, the elections in 1937, the Lahore Resolution of 1940, the Cripps Mission Plan of 1942, the Cabinet Mission Plan, the elections in 1946 and the 3rd June Statement of 1947. His description is not strictly chronological however as he effectively uses backdrops and foreshadows, also creating a sense of suspense to engage the reader. On page 106 the author describes Jinnah's success in uniting Hindus and Muslims in the adoption of the Lucknow Pact in 1916, but already points to what lies ahead: "This was the very same Jinnah who later got denounced as the destroyer of Hindu-Muslim unity, [...] he also became



the instigator of the 'direct action' and the destroyer of the cultural unity of India" (p. 106). This mode of writing could be challenging for readers who are not familiar with the topic, but for the informed it raises the question of why Jinnah developed in this way? It inspires the reader to be an active part of the inquiry.

Jaswant Singh explains topics thoroughly but seldom overloads his descriptions with detail. The manner in which he illustrates the "secularism debate" is representative of his approach. Singh discusses all the Indian perspectives, pointing to misinterpretations and false assumptions. He argues that the European socio-political idea of secularism is not applicable to the "Indian societal fabric" (p. 196). He clearly shows that the Indian National Congress, by imposing their ideas of secularism and majoritarian democracy in particular during their two year rule in the late 1930s, carried a "damaging message for the future of united India" (p. 198). Singh criticises the Congress for using secularism as a substitute for Muslim support and as an excuse for neglecting the empirical reality of the multi-religious Indian society.

He then demonstrates how the separate electorates failed to secure the Muslim interests and made them replace the concept of weightage with the more effective concept of parity. This caused Jinnah to claim that the Muslims of India were a separate nation, rejecting their status as a minority, and giving Jinnah a clearer task to build "up the Muslim League as the 'sole spokesman' of the Muslims" (p. 202). This in turn ended the debate on secularism, since it was no longer a question of faith but of nationhood: "Jinnah was to my mind, fundamentally in error proposing 'Muslims as a separate nation', which is why he was so profoundly wrong when he simultaneously spoke of 'lasting peace amity and accord with India after me [sic] the emergence of Pakistan' that simply could not be" (p. 425). Singh contextualises the Two-Nation doctrine as a political strategy "[...] designed to share sovereignty in a multinational Indian state" (p. 441). Ayesha Jalal too says that the partition (and Pakistan) "was the last thing he [Jinnah] wanted".<sup>5</sup> Jaswant Singh criticises and defends Jinnah as he does the British, the Congress and Nehru. By no means does he apply any double standards.

His vivid representation conveys the feelings that must have accompanied the events. He translates the mood that must have prevailed around the efforts Jinnah and Gandhi put into settling the Indian National Congress – Muslim League disagreement, and the ensuing frustration due to being rejected time and again by the opposing side. In the end



after all these years of debating, events flew by without pause, leaving no time to grasp their entire meaning: "Events now led men, not the other way around" (p. 335). The 10th chapter consists of less than ten pages. Therein Jaswant Singh only briefly clarifies that Jinnah leaves for Pakistan on the 13th of August 1947, and dies soon after in September 1948. Gandhi is assassinated in January 1948. This is an abrupt ending. India is independent, and Pakistan is born.

In the final chapter titled "In Retrospect" Singh looks back and attempts to summarise: "So in all this what have we resolved? I can't find any answer; for this entire episode of the breaking up of India in 1947 is one of those rare conundrums of history which appears to be an answer but in reality is very far from it" (p. 418). Jaswant Singh does not leave the reader with this as his last words. He proceeds to carefully identify and comment on the main factors that led to the Partition. Beginning with separate electorates and the Two-Nation theory, he moves on to the Congress' lack of realism, the British wish to escape from India, all of the parties being in a hurry, and ends by commenting on the tense relations between the main political figures demonstrating that partition was an evitable consequence. He attempts an "interpretive account" (p. 8) but in this case the author's evaluation would have been better placed if it had been interwoven with the narrative of the first ten chapters instead of being summarised at the very end.

The appendices include the main documents on which the work is based, such as the election results of 1937 and 1946 and the 3rd June 1947 Statement. The index and endnotes are elaborate, although this does not compensate for the missing bibliography. Jaswant Singh proves his arguments with a critical analysis of the original documents including political correspondence, resolutions, protocols of talks, and daily press. He seems to have studied every meeting and any substantial correspondence enabling him to present such an overarching research. He consulted the National Archives of Pakistan along with the Transfer of Power and Indian constitutional documents. The fact that Jaswant Singh could consult Indian as well as Pakistani sources is positive evidence for the development in Indo-Pakistani relations. Without this deeper insight he would not have been able to write such a differentiated record on the historical events taking place between 1915 and 1948.

Despite the author's generally very reflective analysis, he is not able to completely free himself from the official Indian historiography regarding certain points. He utilises the image of India being vivisected



without assessing it completely. He points out that Jinnah used the same analogy, but does not question it (p. 373). Joya Chatterji on the other hand argues that many of the implications that this surgical metaphor has, are misleading. It gives the impression that it was a necessary cure to the communal disease, which as we can still see today was not the case. We also know the operation was not done by a specialist. Radcliffe was a stranger to the country as well as the task. So the metaphor of vivisection goes conform with the Hindu nationalist version of partition that judges the British policy of divide and rule, as well as Jinnah's collaboration with it to be responsible for the events of 1947 (Chatterji 1999: 185ff.). This is also implied when speaking of India being the passive surgical object without any agency. But as Jaswant Singh points out in his book, the Indian (Hindu as well as Muslim) politicians share responsibility with British bureaucrats and were far from passive witnesses.

This revisionist evaluation of the events taking place around 1947, already present among scholars, is brought into the public discourse by Jaswant Singh. Ayesha Jalal in her book *The Sole Spokesman Jinnah* comes to a similar conclusion on Jinnah's position in the developments leading to partition. Her inquiry in 1985 along with Stanley Wolpert's *Jinnah of Pakistan* published in 1984 were both welcomed among scholars of India and Pakistan. Both works break with the hagiographic representation of Jinnah as well as questing accounts depicting him as the principal villain of partition. Wolpert's account is said to be an objective scholarly assessment, insightful but also, "enjoyably readable" (Minault 1987: 534) while the strength of Jalal's work is in her reinterpretation of Jinnah's aims, and "the impact of his legacy on Pakistan's later political history" (Ibid.). Jaswant Singh's portrayal enriches the scientific body of knowledge on Jinnah from the perspective of an Indian politician.

The book offers a new popular perspective on Mohammad Ali Jinnah's public life and the pre-partition era. Of course, the law jargon used to paraphrase pacts and political agreements (pp. 314-321), as well as its price of Rs.649 limits the readership.<sup>6</sup> The author assumes that the reader is well acquainted with the official Indian historiography. He tries to reach out to the political Indian elite with his appeal for more understanding in political negotiations. The book is therefore recommendable to those readers who have some basic knowledge on the topic. Readers looking for an introduction to the subject may read it, but will need to read other books alongside in order to be able to



understand some of Singh's arguments. Why he chose to write about Jinnah, India, Partition and Independence, is not answered in the book. Does he really have ulterior motives? In an interview with Karan Thapar he says, "I didn't write this book as a BJP parliamentarian or leader, which I am not. I wrote this book as an Indian" and attempted to be as objective as a person can possibly be. This corresponds with the impression I gained from his reflected and even-handed account. In the end Singh is not that far apart from Jinnah, since Jinnah was and Singh still is committed to India's development and success even though they represent different political opinions. Jaswant Singh has published an account of the events preceding partition that both Indians and Pakistanis are able to accept.

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## Endnotes

- 1 Thapar, K. Interview. Jaswant Singh on Jinnah, Partition. *IBNLive*, 19.08.2009, <http://ibnlive.in.com/news/nehru-jinnah-responsible-for-partitionjaswant/99321-37.html>
- 2 According to Phull and Iyer, his expulsion from the party was not due his "attempt to give the founder of Pakistan a flattering makeover, but for showing Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel in a poor light in the process." Phull, A. and Iyer, S. Booked and expunged. *Hindustan Times*, 19.08.2009, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/Booked-expunged/H1-Article3-444864.aspx> [retrieved 05.05.11]; Jaswant Singh back in BJP, Gadkari says "past is past". *The Times of India*, 24.01.2010, [http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2010-06-24/india/28319129\\_1\\_jaswant-singh-pakistan-founder-rss-pracharak](http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2010-06-24/india/28319129_1_jaswant-singh-pakistan-founder-rss-pracharak) [retrieved 06.05.11].
- 3 Anonymous. Jaswant Singh's book on Jinnah already tops chart. *Hindustan Times*, 20.08.2009, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/News-Feed/bestsellers/Jaswant-Singh-s-book-on-Jinnah-already-tops-chart/Article1-445226.asp> [retrieved 06.05.11].
- 4 Thapar, K. Interview. Jaswant Singh on Jinnah, Partition. *IBNLive*, 19.08.2009, <http://ibnlive.in.com/news/nehru-jinnah-responsible-for-partitionjaswant/99321-37.html> [retrieved 28.09.2011].



- 5 Lydon, C. Podcast: Ayesha Jalal on Pakistan's 'Revenge'40s, then the '80s'. *re:ASIA*, 23.08.2011, <http://asiasociety.org/blog/reasia/podcast-ayesha-jalal-pakistans-revenge-40s-then-80s> [retrieved 7.09.2011].
- 6 Abhi, Response to Jinnah – India Partition Independence Jaswant Singh Book Review. *Blog.Rinkiss.com*, 02.10.2009, <http://blog.rinkiss.com/hot-news/jinnah-india-partition-independence-jaswant-singh-book/3335> [retrieved 09.05.11].

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