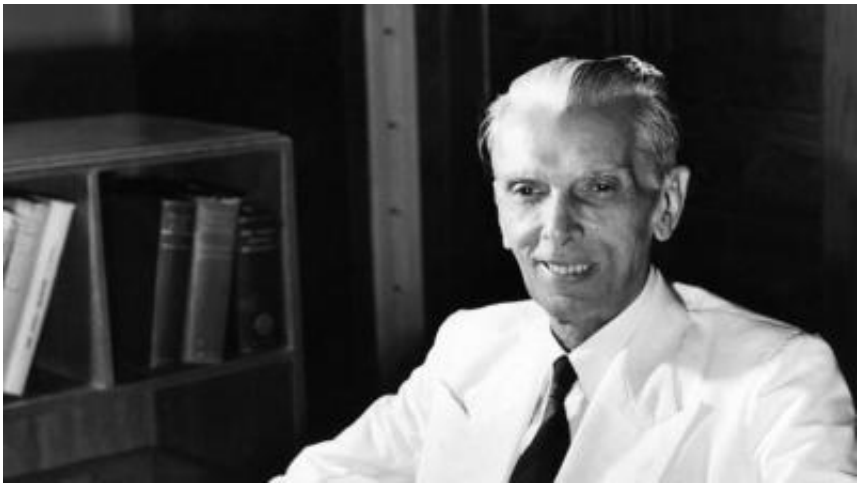
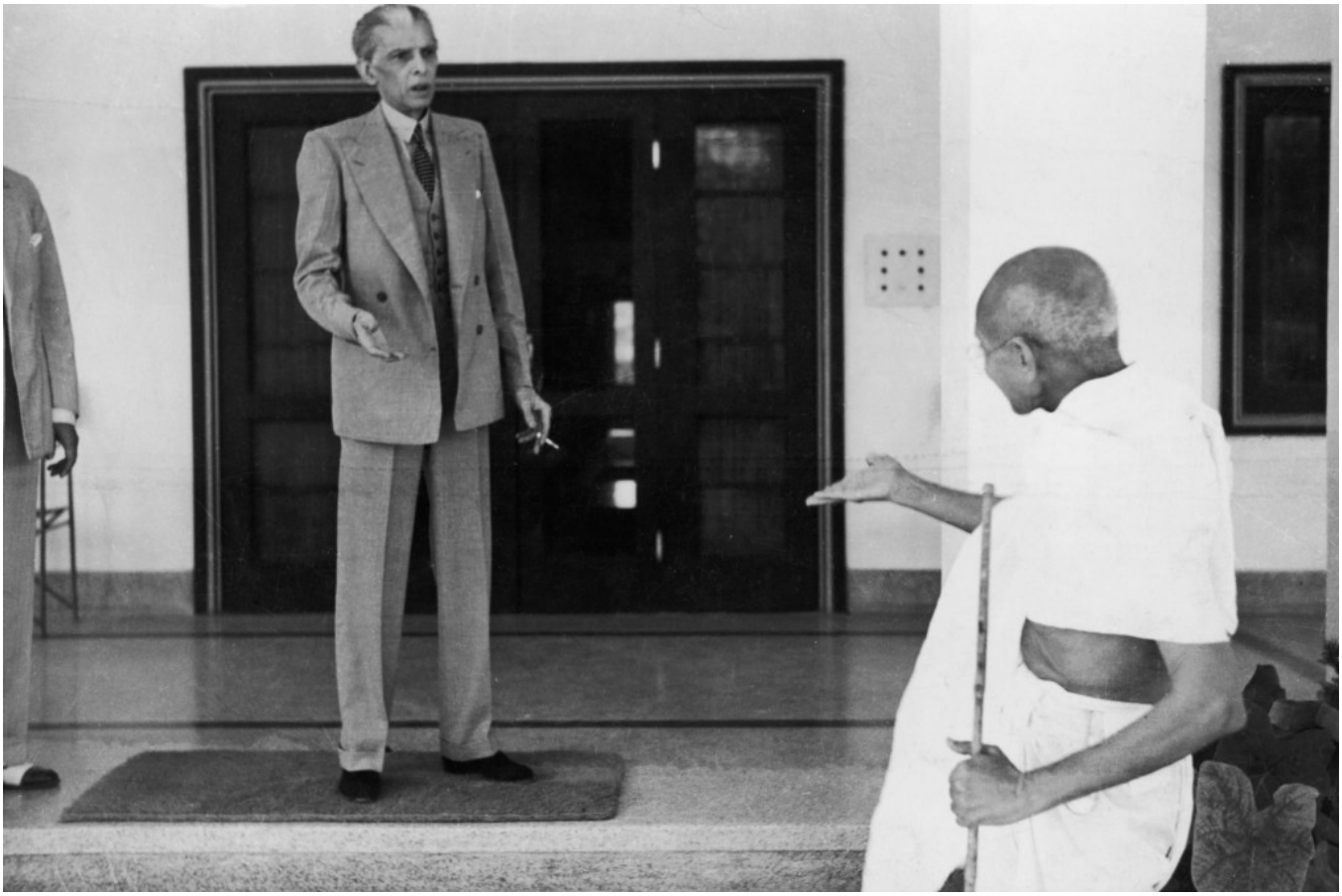
Remembering Jinnah, the Indian Nationalist

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T.N. Madan



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Jinnah and Gandhi in New Delhi, 1940.

‘Greatness’ is a value judgment, ‘influence’, an empirical one. Keeping in mind this distinction, it seems to me that one of the many tragic consequences of the partition of India in 1947 (which had by then become unstoppable) has been the thoughtless manner in which educated Indians have gifted away to Pakistan one of world literature’s greatest philosopher-poets, Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938), and one of India’s most influential public figures of modern times, Muhammad Ali Jinnah (1875/76 – 1948). Why don’t we own and celebrate them?

Iqbal was born and died in India. He did not envisage a subcontinent comprising two antagonistic states. Jinnah was born in India on October 20, 1875 (if we go by school records), or December 25, 1876, according to Pakistan’s official calendar. In either case, 2015-2016 is his 140th birth anniversary year. He died in a colonial mansion in the newly founded Pakistan’s capital city, Karachi, but would rather have died, I believe, in his magnificent Malabar Hill residence in Bombay, a city he served long with distinction and which he loved. His wife was buried there and his daughter was still living there.

More in :

When informed by Sri Prakasa, India's High Commissioner, that Jawaharlal Nehru had asked him to inform Jinnah that his Malabar Hill house would have to be requisitioned by the Government of India (he had himself sold his Delhi house to Ramkrishna Dalmia), his instant response was, "Tell Jawaharlal not to break my heart… I still look forward to going back there." This was not the triumphant Governor-General of Pakistan speaking but a defeated Indian – defeated by a destiny of which he was not the sole maker.

It has been said that it was given to Jinnah to cross swords with the greatest Indian of his time, Gandhi, and win. Was he really a winner? Did he not struggle long and consistently for a united, free India – an India in which common general interests would accommodate particular community interests, and the cultural aspirations and citizenship rights of the Muslims would be guaranteed? This was the very same aspiration as expressed by Iqbal in his much misunderstood 1930 presidential address to the Muslim League: "If an effective principle of cooperation [between communities] is discovered in India, it will bring peace and mutual goodwill to this ancient land which has suffered so long."

In 1916, Jinnah was 40, and recognised as one of India's top political leaders. Gandhi, who had only just returned from South Africa, was a novice in Indian politics. Jawaharlal Nehru was not even there yet. Together with Jawaharlal's father, Motilal, Jinnah negotiated the Lucknow Pact, which saw Congress concede separate electorates and agree to minorities' representation in legislatures in excess of their share in the population. Addressing the Muslim League later in the same year and in the very same city of Lucknow, famous for its syncretic culture, Jinnah maintained, "The Mussalmans of India would be false to themselves" if they did not share fully "the new hope that is moving India's patriotic sons today," or fail "to respond to the call of the country."

At the time, the elder Nehru considered Jinnah to be, unlike other Muslims, an Indian first and then a Muslim. The two men respected each other. As Gopal Krishna Gokhale famously said, Jinnah had emerged as "the best ambassador of Hindu-Muslim unity."

What happened to transform this ambassador of unity into an advocate of Partition in just 25 years? The major reason, it can be argued, was a radicalisation of Indian

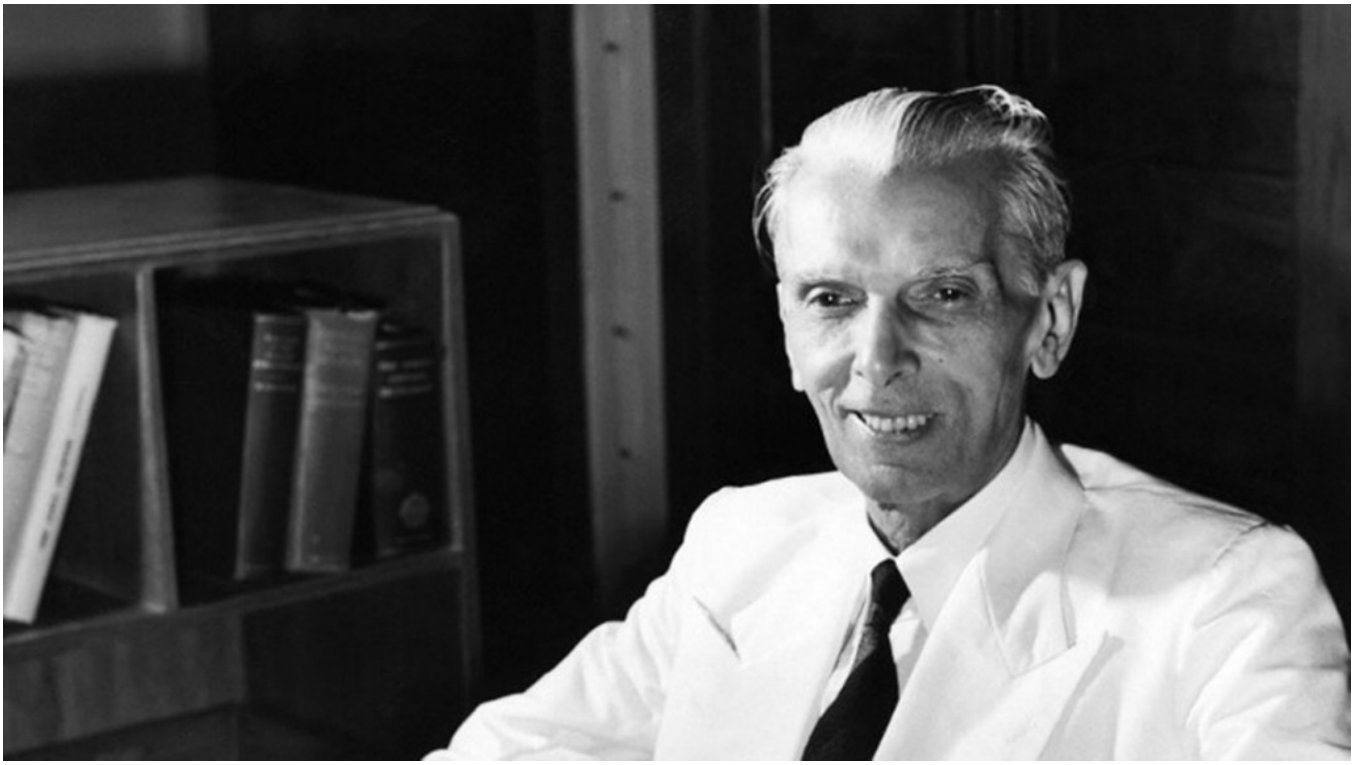
politics, the replacement of the gradual constitutional means of elite leaders who sought to realise self-rule for India within the British empire by mass movements like civil disobedience and non-cooperation.

Gandhi was the new charismatic leader of India, such as has never been seen before – the Mahatma, who preferred to walk dusty village tracks to sitting in drawing rooms, attired in minimal clothing like the masses he energised and represented. He tried to reach out to the Muslims as well as the Hindus, even embracing the reactionary Khilafat Movement from which the modernist Jinnah distanced himself. Indeed, Jinnah warned Gandhi (as Bal Gangadhar Tilak had done earlier) not to mix religion and politics.

Jawaharlal chose to be Gandhi's follower, notwithstanding serious ideological differences, and even persuaded his father to go along with them. The justification for the induction of the masses into the freedom movement was not understood in the same terms by Gandhi and Jawaharlal. For the former, it was an ethical stance, for the latter, the force of economic logic. The days of gradualist constitutionalists like Jinnah were coming to a close.

This tectonic shift in Indian politics was on show at the 1920 annual session of the Congress in Nagpur. Gandhi moved a resolution setting "the attainment of swaraj" by "all legitimate and peaceful means" as the goal, provoking dissent from Jinnah, the advocate of gradualism and constitutional politics. But he was not allowed to voice it. The delegates shouted him down, calling him a "political imposter," nothing less, and insisting that he refer to Gandhi as 'Mahatma'! And the Mahatma just kept quiet.

Rebuffed, Jinnah resigned from the Congress, but continued to negotiate for a united, pluralist India. Speaking in the Central Legislative Assembly in 1925, he declared, "I am a nationalist first, a nationalist second, and a nationalist last." Other travails and traumas, however, awaited him. A new generation of provincially rooted conservative Muslim politicians, many of them landlords, found him too haughty and remote. They spearheaded Muslim separatism in North India and elsewhere.



In the mid-1930s, Jinnah decided to leave India (he was lonely in both his public and private life), and settle down in England – a defeated man who had great abilities, high ambitions, the respect of his peers, and public recognition. Indeed as the perceptive biographer B.R. Nanda observes, "Jinnah's political career seemed star-crossed… it was a strange irony that whenever he was about to reach the top of the political ladder, events beyond his control brought him down".

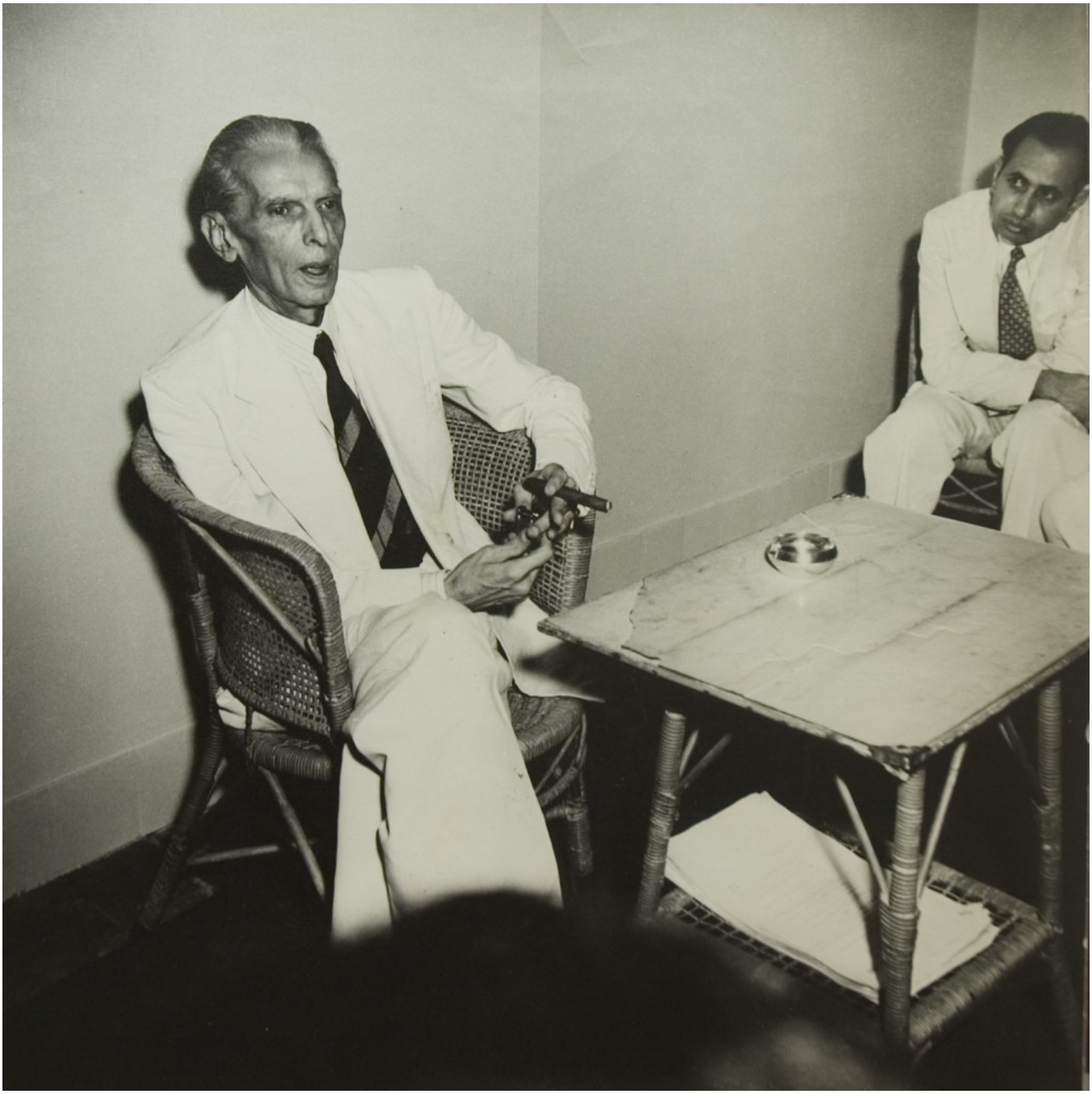
But self-chosen exile brought him no relief. Jinnah was called back to India to assume the presidentship of the Muslim League and eventually he became the Quaid-i-Azam. Even as late as September 28, 1939, he said at the annual dinner of the Old Boys of Osmania University, "I have always believed in a Hindu-Muslim pact, but not a pact that will mean a destruction of the one and a survival of the other." But it was too late. He had to compromise his ideological principles and even change his Western sartorial style! He now became the proponent of the two-nation theory: "The Mussalmans are a nation by any definition." The Pakistan resolution (so called) was adopted by the Muslim League at Lahore on March 24, 1940, demanding that "the areas in which the Muslims are numerically in a majority… should be grouped together to constitute Independent States [sic]." The name Pakistan and the idea of a single state were not mentioned.

The partition of India was announced on June 3, 1947. Gandhi and Jinnah were both defeated men, although Jinnah was deemed to be the victor. Pakistan was

born on August 14.

Did Jinnah have qualms of conscience? Even after 1940 and up to 1946 he did not quite give up his vision of a politically united, federally loose, culturally pluralist, secular, democratic India. It has been argued that he used the demand for Pakistan as a negotiating tool, but it was too late to reverse the tide of events. The demand for Pakistan had become, as the historian Farzana Shaikh put it, “the consensus of the community.”

The partition of India was announced on June 3, 1947. Gandhi and Jinnah were both defeated men, although Jinnah was deemed to be the victor. Pakistan was born on August 14. Three days earlier (August 11), Jinnah had addressed a hastily summoned Constituent Assembly (comprising members of the parent body belonging to the seceding provinces), and exhorted his audience to “forget their past,” “bury the hatchet,” and “work together in the spirit that every one of you,” irrespective of differences of various kinds, “is first, second, and last a citizen of the state with equal rights, privileges and obligations.” Divisiveness had been, he said, “the biggest hindrance in the way of India to attain freedom and independence.” The lesson to be learned was this: “You may belong to any religion, caste or creed – that has nothing to do with the business of the state.”



Jinnah at his last press conference in Delhi before leaving India for the newly created nation of Pakistan in 1947.

Death a year later put an end to Jinnah's vision of a multi-religious society and a secular state. Significantly, Maulana Maudoodi, founder of the fundamentalist Jamaat-i-Islami, refused to lead the burial rites. Soon after Jinnah's death, Pakistan became an Islamic state and Pakistani Muslims, although privileged compared to non-Muslims, splintered along sectarian lines.

Did he foresee this possibility? He was not a believer or practitioner of Islam, although his sister Fatima claimed that he died with the confession of the faith on his lips. This is rather hard to believe. Did he regret the partition of India? According to his doctor, he did, calling it "the biggest blunder" of his life. He is

said to have told Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan: “If now I get an opportunity I will go to Delhi and tell Jawaharlal to forget about the follies of the past and become friends again”. Again, not wholly believable, but plausible in view of the carnage that went hand in hand with Independence. The words may not be exactly his, but the sentiments could surely have been. That in any case is how I read the story of his remarkable but star-crossed life.

As a talented young man in London, Jinnah had had many dreams. One of them, it has been said, was a career in theatre to play the role of Shakespeare’s romantic hero Romeo at the Old Vic. In his lived life, however, like all the tragic heroes created by the bard of Stratford-on-Avon – Hamlet, Lear, Macbeth, Othello – Jinnah had a fatal flaw in his character. Was it egotism? Was it hubris? Whatever it was, he couldn’t escape the consequences.