

Newspaper as Political Instrument - The *Dawn* 1947

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Abstract: This paper looks at Muslim League newspaper *Dawn* in the year 1947 to analyze the role of the newspaper in furthering the cause of the Muslim League and the making of Pakistan. It highlights that all parts or sections of the paper were at various times used to reinforce the main message of the need for partition and the greatness of Jinnah.

Key words: Freedom, India, Jinnah, Newspaper, Pakistan, Partition.

This paper analyzes the Muslim League newspaper *Dawn* in the year 1947, and its role in presenting the case for the creation of Pakistan and representing itself as the official and only authentic voice of the Muslims in India. In doing so the paper functioned as much as a political instrument as it did as a newspaper representing events and transmitting information to the reading public. For the most part I concentrate on the first half of the year up to the period when the decision to Partition was announced, which decision marks the success of the Muslim League campaign spearheaded by the *Dawn*.

The *Dawn*, founded by Mohammed Ali Jinnah, on 26 October 1941 to counter pro-Congress coverage in most Indian newspapers, was published from New Delhi. It was positioned as the mouthpiece of the Muslim League and was initially a weekly, before turning into a daily newspaper in October 1942¹. Its general layout was not that of a broadsheet but a smaller size more like the tabloid newspapers with of 6 columns per page. Generally an 8 page edition, it cost two *annas*. In 1947, the paper was edited by Altaf Husain, who gave the newspaper an openly Muslim nationalist editorial tone and made it the champion of their struggle for an independent country. He had been appointed editor in 1945. Husain was admitted into Jinnah's close circle of advisors and after partition, he assumed the editorship of *Dawn* in Karachi until 1965.²

The Political and Muslim identity of the newspaper was not hidden or underplayed in its design etc. The newspaper left no one in doubt as to its link with the main actor who was articulating the cause of the

need for Indian Muslims to have a separate nation. Under the mast head it said in capitals: Founded By: Qaed-E-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah. On the front page alongside the date in the Gregorian calendar was also the date in the Islamic calendar. The Muslim identity of the paper was also reflected on p.4, the Editorial page. At the top left of the page was a daily column titled: *Moral Cameos for Musalmans* which had a saying from the Quran. Below that was the Editorial which usually occupied two columns. The remaining four columns could be another item and/or letters to the editor to which I will return later.

The main purpose of the paper was making the case for the creation of Pakistan and representing itself as the official and only authentic voice of the Muslims in India. Jinnah had apparently explained in the opening edition that he founded *The Dawn* "due to the constant appeals made to him to have a properly controlled and supervised English newspaper which would, "authoritatively expound the views and express the opinion and sentiments of Muslim India"³. The Mission statement declared much of the same but added that "*The Dawn will mirror faithfully the views of Hindustan's Muslims and the All Hindustan Muslim League ... it will not neglect the cause and welfare of the peoples of this sub-continent generally*".⁴

Roger D. Long aptly summarizes the impact of the paper: *The newspaper became such a symbol of identification with the League that carrying it was a statement in itself and it was used, especially by students and young people, to announce to others that they supported the demand for Pakistan. Its news pages, its editorials and its invited articles were used to publicise, to advocate and to defend the demand for Pakistan from criticism from the British, the Indian National Congress and other Muslims. It was also used to establish the figure of Jinnah as the charismatic leader of the Muslims of South Asia.*(ibid)

In 1947, the newspaper that dominated New Delhi was the 'nationalist paper' *Hindustan Times* (HT)

edited by Devdas Gandhi, Gandhi's son. *The Dawn* occasionally attacked that newspaper directly for instance in one case labeling the London correspondent of the *Hindustan Times* as a "Hindu agent". In contrast to the nationalist views in the HT, *The Dawn* didn't miss any opportunity to advocate support for the idea of the need for Pakistan as a separate state for Muslims stating consistently that India as it then stood, was not a place where Muslims had fair representation and equal status. It did so in many ways both direct and indirect and/or subtle and not so subtle. This comment in one paper on what another published was not uncommon in that time period but it was like preaching to the converted.

The paper consistently undermined both the Interim Government headed by Nehru and the Constituent Assembly – the activities of both of which were covered in some detail by other nationalist papers. In doing so it sent out a message to its constituency providing them with reasons for not supporting these institutions and not believing anything that was said in the public sphere. There was thus consistency in the messaging. Lines had been drawn and there was no crossing over for any reason. All of the "holy cows" of the nationalists were attacked and undermined.

In putting forth its case for Pakistan, it needed opponents and it was Gandhi more than Nehru who became a steady opponent, mainly because of his wider than political appeal among the populace. The *Dawn* referred to Gandhi only as Mr. Gandhi, using Mahatma in inverted commas at times when it chose to criticize or mock him. I have earlier looked at the coverage of Gandhi in *The Dawn*⁵ and will not go into details here. Briefly, Gandhi was portrayed as a cunning schemer who played to the gallery while in reality he had little ground support. In this piece however, we are looking to see all segments of the newspaper and their alignment to deliver one message allied with the wider mission of the founder.

As most people aware of modern Indian history are aware, the change in Viceroy and the arrival of Mountbatten in India at the end of March 1947, followed an announcement that British rule would end in 1948. This changed the focus of affairs to the next step that was Britain eventually leaving India. Mountbatten's invited both Jinnah and Gandhi for

talks which was widely reported. The *Dawn* reported in detail the time spent in talks between Mountbatten and Gandhi and also between Mountbatten and Jinnah so as to show that both leaders got almost equal time with the Viceroy.

Its decision to internationalize the idea of the need for the creation of Pakistan was also quite evident in the newspaper. There were news items reporting support for the idea of Pakistan in the international arena, be it someone in London or any passing mention of the idea in the Press in England. The observation of Pakistan Day in Saudi Arabia (April 2, p.1) was a case in point. The aim was to convey to the readers the wider universal international acceptance of the idea of Pakistan thus convincing them that Pakistan was becoming a reality. This international acceptance of the idea was designed to also convey the fact that the Qaed-e-Azam was a man of international standing equal to Nehru and Gandhi.

In this context the hosting in India of the first ever Asian Relations Conference, an international event unlike any before, which was boycotted by the Muslim League at the last moment, was a time of intense publicity for the League. The newspaper coverage was intended to both garner support for its cause and embarrass the hosts of the Conference which included the whole of the Congress and the Government. There was also the blatant call to brotherhood of Islam across national boundaries.

The conference lasted ten days and the delegates were in Delhi and other parts of India for many more days. During the conference, the *Dawn*, used every opportunity to run down the conference and the Congress throughout this period. It ran a headline "Nehru's Secret Deal with British Govt.; Accepts Dominion Status; Wants Britain to Hand Over Muslims to Him; Plan Under Consideration of Attlee's Cabinet"⁶. The source of the story was the diplomatic correspondent of a publication called *The People*. Nehru later dismissed this as "fantastic nonsense".

The *Dawn* further made it its business to let the delegates from Islamic countries know that a hoax had been perpetrated on them by the Hindu Congress, a message it repeated in very inventive ways⁷. In an editorial titled "A Fraud on Asia", the paper excused the delegates for not knowing Indian reality with regard to the Muslims. "Nevertheless,

the Muslim nation in this sub-continent offers them welcome—from afar. If the visitor’s grasp the terrible Indian realities of the present, they will not misunderstand Muslim non-participation in this conference.”⁸. The editorial ended with a reminder to all Islamic delegates that there “is an imperishable bond and a spiritual kinship between one Muslim and another ... which no propaganda by the enemies of Islam can sunder or alienate. We refuse to believe that there is a single Muslim among the delegates and observers ... who when put to the test of the brotherhood of Islam, will be found wanting”

Another consistent theme was rejecting all voices of nationalist Muslims as being non-representative of the Muslims of India. The prime target of course was Maulana Azad. Every time he is mentioned in the paper the words Maulana are in inverted commas – casting doubt on his learning. When the Government appointed Asaf Ali as Indian Ambassador to USA, *the Dawn* made it a point to note that he was appointed without any consultation with the Muslim League. “Mr. Asaf Ali...represents and speaks only for Hindu India. The 100 million Muslims who inhabit our sub-continent are not represented by him”⁹

The take down on Gandhi and other leaders had a correspondence with the agenda to build up the profile of Jinnah as the gentleman who was consistently wronged. He was consistently portrayed as suffering due to the propaganda of the Congress. Also, the newspaper was never critical of the British. No comments on the end of colonial rule, rather the focus was on the fulfillment of the dream of Pakistan following a struggle against the Hindus.

Apart from the columns of news, the *Dawn* also used other columns to get its message across. The use of cartoons was one such. Gandhi and the Congress Party were prime targets as were the Constituent Assembly and people like Patel - depicted in one cartoon as a donkey in lion skin. The cartoons were quite offensive and did lead to a reaction in the nationalist press for being disrespectful. Patel being Home Minister was the only leader other than Gandhi and Nehru to get any news coverage and cartoon treatment. Patel was depicted as sleeping while Punjab was burning.

The cartoonist in 1947, was none other than the 21 year old son of the Editor Altaf Husain. Ajmal

Husain had graduated from the Scottish Church College in Calcutta and is quoted as having said that he learnt journalism on the job. He worked at the *Dawn* in 1947 as columnist and cartoonist, later going to USA in 1949 to do Masters in journalism at the Columbia University¹⁰.

In addition to news items, the letters to the editor column came in handy for furthering the agenda of the paper under the guise of this being the voice of the common reader. Letters were published highlighting instances of the Muslim populace getting a raw deal in India, an analysis of Muslim versus Hindu employees in various Government departments both Central and Provincial be it electricity or banks or the CPWD. There were also letters objecting to the recitation of the Quran in Gandhi’s prayer meeting. The letters often had catchy titles such as “Ram Rajya in Reserve Bank” Letters critical of the working of Government of India and other issues were interestingly signed as - A Muslim, A Pathan, Tyrannised, Justice, An observer, A R.I.N. Muslim Officer, Victim, Pro Bono Publico (March 23, March 30); Ashe; Illegible; One Who Knows (March 26), disgusted, one concerned, One who knows, A Muslim, A frontier Muslim, Another Pakistani etc. A letter on the lack of Muslim officers in the telephone department was signed ‘Telephone’ (March 31). The Letters Column has a notice saying that all letters must bear the signature and address of the correspondent even if publication is desired over an assumed name.

The paper did occasionally have to publish clarifications such as from the Deputy commissioner Delhi which referred to a news item on lathi charge against peaceful Delhi Muslims. The letter stated that certain allegations viz. “that the Sub-Inspector was completely drunk and that children were among those arrested are totally incorrect”. The Newspaper not only published the letter but added a comment regretting the publication of the incorrect report. They probably did not want to run afoul of authorities which could have resulted in fines or bans.

There was also an occasional column titled Minorities Corner on the edit page, which had the disclaimer that views expressed by this periodical contributor are not necessarily those of *Dawn*. It was not a very regular column, but when it did appear it had the views of a Christian Minority member,

emphasizing the idea that India is uninhabitable by anyone other than caste Hindus and trying to portray that all non-Hindu minorities are together. The paper also sides with the Scheduled castes or the untouchables quoting leaders as saying that they will stay on in Pakistan since stone gods are unlikely to deliver them from Hindu atrocities. The attempt was to create a rhetoric of struggle not from British rule but from Hindu dominance.

Sticking to the agenda for the creation of Pakistan – even the children’s column: “Children’s League” was not exempt from politics. The column, published every Monday had the sign off Pakistan Zindabad by someone called Ejaz Bhai who was in-charge of the column. Ejaz Bhai was also not averse to educating the children on politics. Thus, he would ask how they planned to celebrate Pakistan Day, or would explain to them once the Punjab Government had been dislodged that the League’s struggle in the Punjab has been successful. “Let us hope that it will not be long before we see our green banner of Islam flying over the corner-stone of Pakistan”¹¹. During the same crisis, an earlier column had said that many children were writing in that due to the ban on *The Dawn* in the Punjab province saying they were missing the column and its competitions. Ejaz Bhai explained: “Perhaps you all know that Premier Khizr has banned the “Dawn” because he thinks it is a bar to the peace in the province! This reminds me of a well-known fable. Once there lived a toad in a dirty pool. One day he demanded, “Why don’t you cure yourself of your dirty warts?” Need I tell you who is the frog in this case!”¹²

In the context of events in the first half of 1947, the bringing down of the non-Muslim League Coalition Ministry in the Punjab was an essential agenda in the League controlling the province. Various strategies were employed from a civil disobedience movement which led to the banning of the Muslim League National Guard, to the league protesting the Punjab Public safety Ordinance followed by yet more arrests and protests. The ministry finally fell on March 2, 1947. *The Dawn* reported much of this news in banner headlines across the page. In the midst of this, *The Dawn* was banned in the Punjab for some time and there was also press censorship on news relating to the Province. The newspaper announced the ban on its front page¹³ with items on subsequent days testifying to the fact that the paper was so much in demand that it was selling for Rs. 20/- in Lahore¹⁴. It then also announced that the

money so earned would be used for the Bihar Relief Fund.

Of course, the agenda on securing Pakistan needed to be reinforced time and again and speeches specially by Jinnah and Liaquat Ali Khan which reiterated the case for Pakistan were reproduced prominently. The front pages almost daily carried news of disturbance in Punjab or the NWFP on the right hand side of the page. The observance of Pakistan day on March 23 resulted in a headline next morning stating “Muslim India Observes Pakistan Day”. There is some politics even in the advertisements, where, there are ads for the sale of Jinnah portraits with or without cap and other advertisements selling the Jinnah cap. There was also a pledge that every Muslim was asked to take to remember the martyrs, that was published in the paper.

There was also some selling of items that could be classed as creating the cult of Jinnah. These included the sale of the real Jinnah Cap from a shop in New Delhi, the sale of a special Jinnah lock which no one could open, sale of framed photographs of Jinnah with or without his cap and a book sold exclusively by the Dawn which explained why the League took the decision it did. There was another biography on Jinnah by A.A. Ravoof advertised with the tag line “An intimate study of the most clear-headed politician –whom corruption has not touched an whom official honours have not defiled”.

As the partition dates were finalized Altaf was sent to Karachi in early August 1947 with some senior members of his Delhi office to set up *The Dawn* office. Yusuf Haroon, a budding industrialist and an energetic member of the Muslim League Central Committee, was asked to provide necessary logistic facilities. Altaf and his team brought out the first issue of *Dawn* from Karachi on 15 August 1947 carrying the news of the birth of Pakistan. Post independence reportage continued to be biased saying for instance that Karachi had an air of excitement while Delhi had an air of frustration¹⁵. All of the celebratory news was reported in detail with an editorial item explaining that the Pakistan Constituent Assembly had adopted the resolution that Governor General Jinnah be addressed in all correspondence as Qaed-e-Azam Mohammed Ali Jinnah¹⁶.

Celebrating freedom, the children's column could not help itself taking another dig at India. Ejaz Bhai the columnist expressed his happiness that he was writing to the children for the first time "from the free State of Pakistan, for the achievement of which so many lives we had to sacrifice and so many trials we had to face. Our slogan of "Pakistan Zindabad" is now more realistic than before as now Pakistan has really come to be "zinda". Our brothers and sisters and others living in Hindustan need not be discouraged as the Qaed-e-Azam has said that door of Pakistan is always open to them."¹⁷

Later, the street in Karachi where the first office of *The Dawn* was set up is named after him. The paper was published simultaneously from both cities for a while in 1947. *The Dawn* Delhi office was burnt down in September 14, 1947 virtually bringing the paper to an end. *The Dawn* Karachi however continued to carry the inscription "published simultaneously from Karachi and Delhi" on its masthead until October 1947 when it was finally removed and Jinnah accepted the reality that the paper was dead in Delhi¹⁸. The paper as published from Karachi emerged with a new mast head the word Dawn written in simple font in a black box. It announced alongside that it had been founded by Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah. There was no name of editor on the first page any more.

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- [2] Syed Muazzem Ali, 2011. In Memoriam Altaf Husain : "The Maker and Breaker of the Governments and Powers" San Diego, CA. <https://www.pakistanlink.org/Commentary/2011/Feb11/11/03.HTMH>

Newspapers

Various issues of Dawn 1947 as listed in End Notes

END NOTES

¹ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1354278/dawn-delhi-i-genesis-of-a-newspaper>

² Syed Muazzem Ali 2011.

³ Ibid.

⁴ <https://www.slideshare.net/sandylalwani/Dawn-newspaper-term-report-84717905>

⁵ Sabharwal,2020

⁶ Dawn, 31 March 1947, p. 1, col. 1

⁷ Dawn 22 March 1947, p.4

⁸ Dawn, March 22, p.4

⁹ Dawn, January 18, 1947, p.1, col.6

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<http://archive.thedailystar.net/2005/01/02/d50102140184.htm>. He later served as Editor to some prominent magazines in Pakistan while having a parallel career as an artist. He was influenced by the Bengali artist Zainul Abedin.

¹¹ Dawn, March 23, p.8

¹² Dawn, Feb. 24, p.6

¹³ Dawn, Jan 31, 1947, p.1.

¹⁴ Dawn, Feb. 2, 1947, p.1; Feb 4, p.1.

¹⁵ Dawn, August 11 p.8

¹⁶ Dawn August 14 p.2

¹⁷ Dawn August 19 p.7

¹⁸ Last page informs us : Printed and Published by Shamsul Hasan at Dawn Press, Faiz Bazar Road, Delhi.