

Jinnah: The Name

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(In this version that has been made available on the Internet, a minor typo has been corrected.)

Introduction

Mohammed Ali Jinnah was the founder of Pakistan, which along with India, emerged in 1947, as a successor state to British India. At the time of its birth, Pakistan was the largest Islamic state in the world. As the leader of the most populous Muslim country in the world, Jinnah commanded great prestige in the Islamic world. One of Jinnah's biographers highlights his enormous influence in history in the opening lines of his book:

Few individuals significantly alter the course of history. Fewer still modify the map of the world. Hardly anyone can be credited with creating a nation-state. Mohammad Ali Jinnah did all three.¹

Strangely, despite Jinnah's great importance on the world stage, very few biographers have so far chosen to write about his momentous lifetime. Popular rumour mills based on hearsay, and political slants on the part of government-sponsored historians, have together contributed to a situation in which historical facts have yielded ground to speculations about such matters as Jinnah's early life, his joint membership in the Indian National Congress and the Indian Union Muslim League, his earlier positions favouring Hindu-Muslim cooperation and his later uncompromising demand for a Muslim state. Two biographies of Jinnah by Western scholars – one by Hector Bolitho² and one by Stanley Wolpert already mentioned above – have shed some light on Jinnah's life and deeds, but have not completely succeeded in ending the speculations about them.

Controversies surrounding the name Jinnah

In this article, we attempt to resolve only one of the many controversies centered round Muhammad Ali Jinnah – one involving his last name. The name Jinnah is certainly very rare. It is not a patronymic, such as *Jamalzadeh* or *Daoudpour*, which are common in Iran, but not in India. 'Jinnah' is not a name derived from a place name (such as *Barelwi* or *Poonawala*). Neither is it a title (such as *Khan* or *Mirza*), nor a caste/tribe

¹ *Jinnah of Pakistan*, Wolpert, Stanley, Oxford University Press (1984), p. vii.

² *Jinnah: Creator of Pakistan*, Bolitho, Hector, John Murray, 1954. This biography was commissioned by the Government of Pakistan (*Jinnah, Pakistan and Islamic Identity: The Search for Saladin*, Akbar S. Ahmed, 1997, p. 29).

name (such as *Bugti* or *Soomro*). It is not based on a profession, such as *Engineer*, or even *Lokhandwala*, which are common in some Muslim communities in India. Neither is it one of the many names taken from Islamic history as it unfolded in West and Central Asia, and later in India (such as the Persian name *Jahangir* or the Arabic name *Akbar*). More importantly, ‘Jinnah’ is not named for any of the personalities from early Islamic history, such as the names of the Prophet’s Companions. Nor is his name one of the many popular names involving an attribute of the Creator, such as ‘Abd-ul-Rahim’ (‘Servant of the Merciful One), or ‘Mazhar-ul-Haq’ (‘Manifestation of the Truth’).³

The striking fact about the modern spelling of Jinnah’s name in Urdu is that it is جناح (= Jinnāḥ), and not جنّاه (= Jinnāh). This is because the letter ح (*heḥ*) represents a sound peculiar to Arabic, which does not exist in Persian or Indian languages. When Arabic words are borrowed into Persian or Urdu, usually the Arabic spelling is retained, but the pronunciations of some Arabic letters are changed to the nearest Persian sounds. Thus the letters ض, ذ, ز, and ظ, which represent different sounds in Arabic are all pronounced as ‘z’ in Persian and hence in Urdu. Similarly ح and ه are different in Arabic, but pronounced identically as ‘h’ in Persian and Urdu. The sound ‘h’ in native Persian or Urdu words could only be represented by ه (which is written as و when it occurs at the end of a word). The occurrence of the letter ح in an Urdu word thus indicates a definite Arabic origin for the word. But the name Jinnah is uncommon in Arabic – in fact, the author of this article has not found it in any Arabic dictionary he has consulted. Also, Urdu books written before partition often spell Jinnah’s name as “Jīnā” (جینا)⁴. The spelling seems to have changed in later times. The new spelling جناح (= Jinnāḥ) does not have the vowel ‘i’ (because short vowels are not written in Urdu), and has a final ‘h’.

The uniqueness of the name seems to have puzzled many people, and various explanations have been offered, which often contradict each other at least partly. That the very name of the founder of a nation would be so complicated is surprising. It is so, because Jinnah’s family was Gujarati-speaking, and did not know Urdu, but later works on Jinnah in Urdu often use English language materials as primary sources, or are based on verbal reminiscences directly transcribed into Urdu. There is a loss of accuracy in going from English to Urdu, because English spelling does not distinguish between the two kinds of ‘h’ used in Arabic. Gujarati also does not make a distinction between the two kinds of ‘h’. Thus, there is the possibility of a spurious distinction being introduced in the secondary Urdu literature.

The name as explained in the secondary literature

Riaz Ahmad, a historian from the National Institute of Historical and Cultural Research at Islamabad, informs us that:

Our sources about the early life of the Quaid-i-Azam are limited mainly to the memories of his two sisters – Fatima Jinnah (1893-1967) and Shirin Jinnah (1894-1980). The latter has been collected by Rizwan Ahmad in his Urdu work *Quaid-i-*

³ See, for instance, *A Dictionary of Muslim Names*, Salahuddin Ahmed, London, 1999.

⁴ For example, in the Introduction to the book *Maqālāt-e-Shiblī*, Volume 7, (dated 31 October 1938), Syed Sulaiman Nadwi spells the name Jinnah as Jīnā. (*Maqālāt-e-Shiblī*, Volume 7, Azamgarh, page 2.)

Azam – Ibtada’i Tees Sal 1876-1906 (Karachi: 1976), while the former is preserved in a manuscript, called “My Brother”, carefully put together by G. Allana.⁵

These two main sources disagree on some details. One such issue is whether it was Jinnah’s father or his grandfather who moved from the ancestral village in Gujarat to Karachi. This has some bearing on this discussion, because it indicates a difference of opinion in the pattern of naming children in Jinnah’s family. Some facts about Jinnah’s life are well-known, and not questioned by anybody. Bolitho clearly points out that Jinnah’s family, though Muslim, was descended from Hindus.⁶ The family’s ancestral home was in Paneli, a village in the small princely state of Gondal, in the Kathiawar region of Gujarat (which is a state on the western coast of India.) The names of Jinnah’s immediate ancestors on his father’s side clearly had Hindu names.

Jinnah’s grandfather’s name was Poonja Meghji, and his father’s name was Jinnahbhai Poonja. (Riaz Ahmad spells the name Poonja with an ‘h’, as Poonjah, but Fatima Jinnah does not – she leaves it as Poonja. Riaz Ahmad’s English book draws upon a late Urdu work *Jinnāh Pūnjāh*⁷ by Rizwan Ahmad, and the ‘h’ in the name is dubious.) Poonja Meghji’s brother had been named Hirji. Jinnahbhai Poonja’s two brothers were named Valjibhai and Nathoobhai, and his sister was Manbai. These names were clearly Hindu in origin. We also see a pattern in the names of Jinnah’s immediate elders – each man took the name of his father as a last name. The suffix ‘-bhai’ (meaning ‘brother’) was usually attached to the men’s names, as an honorific. The ladies had an honorific ‘-bai’, ‘lady’, attached to their names.

Jinnahbhai Poonja was married to a lady named Mithibai, who was from a village named Dhaffa which was a few miles away from Paneli. Mithibai was from the same Ismaili Khoja community to which Jinnah’s family belonged. The couple settled down in Karachi (Sind), where their first son was born. Fatima Jinnah tells us the reason for the couple’s choice of name for their son, which broke with the earlier family tradition:

There arose the question of naming the child. So far, living in Kathiawar, names of the male members of our family had been so much akin to Hindu names. But Sind was a Muslim province, and the children of their neighbours had Muslim names. The two were agreed that Mohamed Ali would be an auspicious name for their first born, and this was the name they gave him.⁸

Basing himself on the Urdu account of Rizwan Ahmad, Riaz Ahmad suggests that “it is the maternal uncle Qasim Musa who proposed the name “Mahomedalli Jinnahbhai” for the child.”⁹

⁵ *Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah: The Formative Years, 1892-1920*, Riaz Ahmad, Islamabad, 1986, p. 19. (Allana and Fatima Jinnah had some disagreements, and Allana published her memoirs only after her death. This again raises a question-mark as to the reliability of the memoirs.) It has been republished in 1987 under the editorship of Prof. Sharif Al Mujahid by Quaid-e-Azam Academy, Karachi.

⁶ Bolitho, *op. cit.*, page 4.

⁷ (Qā’id-e ‘Āzam kē Vālid) *Jinnāh Pūnjāh*, Rizwān Ahmad, Pakistan International Publications, Karachi, 1979

⁸ *My Brother*, Fatima Jinnah, (Sharif Al Mujahid, ed.), Karachi, 1987, p. 50.

⁹ Riaz Ahmad, *op. cit.*, pp. 22-23.

The suffix *-bhai* was dropped by Jinnah himself. In 1896, he petitioned the Bar Council in London to change his name from “Mahomedalli Jinnahbhai” to “Mahomed Alli Jinnah”.¹⁰

Since the name “Jinnah” dates back to the times when the family had not yet begun to give the children Islamic names, we may surmise that Jinnah is a Gujarati Hindu name. However Riaz Ahmad writes:

Jinnah may be derived from any of the two Arabic words – “Junnah” and “Junaha” plural “Ajnaha” (wings) – both occur in the Quran.¹¹

Ahmad’s claim is not bolstered with any more evidence. The similarity between the name ‘Jinnah’ and the two Arabic words are all he provides by way of proof. This hypothesis does not explain why Jinnah’s name used to be spelled in Urdu earlier as “Jīnā”.

An Urdu biographer of Jinnah’s, Hamidullah Shah Hashemi, offers some explanation:

“Jinnāḥ” originally was “Jīnā”. It is a Gujarati word meaning “thin”. Qā’id-e ‘Āzam’s father and grandfather were very thin, and so they were nicknamed “Jīnā”,¹² and this became a part of their name. According to a widespread belief, Jīnābhā’ī began to write his name as “Jinnāḥ” in the Roman script. In the beginning, Qā’id-e ‘Āzam was also called “Jīnā” by most people. In 1916, when Qā’id-e ‘Āzam came to Lucknow as president of the Muslim League, the late Sayyid Jalib, editor of *Hamdard*, changed it to “Jinnāḥ”, which means “strength of the arms”. Qā’id-e ‘Āzam himself accepted this name, on account of its significance, and added only the letter “h” to his name, as written in English.¹³

This explains the original Urdu spelling Jīnā (which lacks both the double n, and the final, vexatious ‘ḥ’). It also suggests that the English spelling “Jinnah” was merely the name Jīnā spelled (imperfectly) in the Roman script. If that is the case, the double ‘n’ ensured that the ‘i’ would not be pronounced as ‘-igh/-eye’, and the final ‘h’ was only to ensure that the ‘a’ was pronounced as a long vowel. ‘Jina’ could have been misread in English as ‘Jigh-ner’, but Jinnah would have been less ambiguous. If Hashemi’s claim is true, it would mean that

- The Arabic ‘ḥ’ in the name *Jinnāḥ* must be spurious, and that

¹⁰ *Jinnah: The Founder of Pakistan*, Saleem Qureishi (ed.), Oxford University Press, Karachi, 1998, pp. 73-74.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹² Names based on such nick-names are not uncommon, though they may seem improbable to English-language readers.

¹³ *Bābā-e Qaum: Qā’id-e ‘Āzam Muḥammad ‘Alī Jinnāḥ*, Hamidullah Shah Hashemi, Istiqlal Press, Lahore, 1976, pp. 14-15. The original text is given below:

Jinnāḥ dar aṣāl “Jīnā” hai. “Jīnā” Gujarātī zabān ka lafz hai. Jiskē ma’anī “dublā patlā” hai. Qā’id-e ‘Āzam kē vālid aur dādā bahut dublē patlē the. Is li’ē unkā laqab “Jīnā” par gayā. Jō unkē nām kā juzv hī ban gayā. Ēk rivāyat kē muṭābiq Jīnābhā’ī roman ṭarz-e tahrīr mēñ Jīnā kō Jinnāḥ likhnē lagē. Qā’id-e ‘Āzam kō bhī ba’az lōg shurū’ mēñ Jīnā hī kahtē thē. 1916 mēñ jab Qā’id-e ‘Āzam Lakhna’ū mēñ Muslim Līg kē ṣadr kī ḥaisiyat sē ā’ē tō sayyid jālib marḥūm, ēdīṭar “hamdard” Lakhna’ū nē us ko “Jinnāḥ” banā diyā, jiskē ma’anī “quwwat-e bāzū” haiñ. Khud Qā’id-e ‘Āzam nē is lafz kī ma’anāvīyat kō dēkh kar qabūl kar liyā. Aur angrezī mēñ širf “h” kā izāfa kar liyā.

- the spelling “Jinnāḥ”, though accepted (in Urdu) in 1916, did not immediately become current, for, as late as 1938, the spelling “Jīnā” was still in vogue. (See footnote 4).

Attempts at rationalizing the Arabicized spelling of Jinnah’s name

The inconsistencies in the Urdu spelling of the name Jinnah have provoked much commentary. The example of the English commentary of Riaz Ahmad has been mentioned above, but it seems to be based on the Urdu writings of Rizwan Ahmad, who has tried to rationalize the Arabizing spelling ‘Jinnāḥ’:

Jīnā Pūnjāḥ was of slight build. He was also short of stature. For this reason, he was known as Jīnā, but he had started to write his name as Jinnāḥ Pūnjāḥ. Whether Jīnā Pūnjāḥ changed this form of his name, or whether his Persian-speaking in-laws changed it, a change did take place. In Gujarati, “jīnā” or “jīṇā” means “thin”, and in Arabic “jinnā” means “arm”. Jīnā Pūnjāḥ’s wife Shīrīn Bī and brother-in-law Qāsim Mūsā, and other in-laws who had come from Iran, as part of the Agha Khan’s group, were Persian speakers. “Jīnā Pūnjāḥ” must have made their mind think of the word “jinnāḥ” from the Holy Qur’ān, and they must have discussed this in many ways. Jīnā Pūnjāḥ himself was an educated man. There were Makranis and Baluchis settled in Karachi, and their language was, and even today is, Persian, which has a big store of Arabic words in it. Besides, Karachi had trade links with Malabar, Muscat, Zanzibar and Bandar Abbas, and there was a constant traffic of merchants. This would also naturally have influenced words and phrases and their meanings. Whatever the reason, Jīnā Pūnjāḥ accepted the pronunciation “Jinnāḥ” for his name, so much so that he even began to spell “Pūnjāḥ” as “Pūnjāḥ” [sic]. His signature in *English* [emphasis added] can be seen in many documents.¹⁴

¹⁴ (*Qā'id-e 'Āzam kē Vālid*) *Jinnāḥ Pūnjāḥ*, Rizwān Ahmad, Pakistan International Publications, Karachi, 1979, pp. 23-24.

The Urdu text is as follows:

Jīnā Pūnjāḥ charērē [?] badan kē thē. Unkā qad chōṭa thā. Is li'ē Jīnā kahlātē thē magar vah apnā nām Jinnāḥ Pūnjāḥ likhnē lagē thē. Jīnā Pūnjāḥ nē apnē nām kī yah sūrat khud badlī yā unkē sasurāl kē fārsīdānōñ nē is mēñ taṣarruf kiyā, magar taṣarruf biharḥāl hu'ā. Gujrātī zabān mēñ “jīnā” yā “jīṇā” kē ma'anē “dublē patlē” kē haiñ, aur 'arabī zabān mēñ “jinnā” kē ma'anē “bāzū” kē haiñ. Jīnā Pūnjāḥ kī ahliya Shīrīn Bī aur barādar-e nisbatī Qāsim Mūsā aur sasurālī rishtē kē dūsrē afrād nīz Āghā Khān kē ḥalqē kē īrān sē a'ē hu'ē lōg, sab veh haiñ jinkī zabān qadīm fārsī thī. Un sab kā zahan “Jīnā Pūnjāḥ” kē nām sē Qur'ān Majīd kē lafz “jinnāḥ” kī ṭaraf gayā hōgā aur is par ṭarah ṭarah sē guftagū hōtī hōgī. Khud Jīnā Pūnjāḥ parḥē likhē admī thē. Karāchī mēñ bhī makrāniyōñ aur balūciyōñ kī ābādī maujūd thī aur unkī zabān fārsī thī aur āj bhī hai jis mēñ 'arabī aur us sē kam fārsī alfāz ka barā zakhīra hai. Mazīd bar ān Karāchī kā tijrātī ta'alluq Mālābar sē, mascat sē, zanjbar sē, aur Bandar abbās sē jāri thā aur tājirōñ kī āmad-o-raft kā silsila bhī qā'im rahtā thā. Us kē bhī āsarāt alfāz aur iṣṭilāḥāt aur unkē mafḥūm-o-ma'ani kē lēn-dēn aur radd-o-badal par fiṭratān hōngē. Biharḥāl sabab kuch bhī ho, “Jīnā Pūnjāḥ” nē apnē nām kā talaffuz “Jinnāḥ” ikhtiyār kar liyā, yahāñ tak kih “Pūnjāḥ” kō bhī veh “Pūnjāḥ” likhnē lagē. Dastāvēzāt mēñ unkē angrēzī dastkhaṭ dēkhē jā saktē haiñ.

From this excerpt we can see that

- the writer is acutely conscious that the name “Jīnā” is a Gujarati word meaning “thin”, and that this was the original name which was later to become famous as “Jinnah”. He admits that there was a deliberate change in the spelling of the name.
- However, he argues that Poonja accepted the pronunciation “Jinnāḥ” for his name, and claims that his *English* signatures confirm this fact. But, as we have seen before, without diacritical marks, it is impossible to represent the two kinds of ‘h’ in English.
- Besides, if Poonja had indeed changed his first name to Jinnāḥ, early Urdu documents would not have spelled Jinnah’s name as “Jīnā” (جینا). This is also unlikely because the name “Jinnāḥ” is not a common first name.
- Also, while Jinnah Poonja’s wife and in-laws may have been able to speak Persian, they were Gujaratis. (Even Fatima Jinnah refers to her mother not by her (later) Persian name Shirin Bi, but by her Gujarati name Mithibai.¹⁵) It is hard to imagine that their pronunciation of words from their own native language could change, for their having picked up a foreign language.

Evidence from publications in Gujarati

Finally, we have a bit of clinching information from a Gujarati language source, excerpts of which are quoted in the book “*Rare Speeches and Documents of Quaid-e-Azam*”:

A list of 8 questions was placed before the Quaid by a Gujarati monthly “Vismi Sadi” published from Bombay. The Quaid gave answers in his own handwriting and with his signature in Gujarati as under, which was published in the “VISMI SADI” issue of May, 1916.¹⁶

The accompanying photograph shows Jinnah’s handwritten signature in Gujarati, which shows that his name was જીનુ. In the phonetic Gujarati spelling, it is impossible not to notice that there is no final ‘h’, and no double n. The original form of the name Jinnah was clearly “jīṇā”, which a long ‘ī’. The retroflex “ṇ” is a sound missing in Arabic, and this rules out an Arabic origin for the name.

Conclusions

- The original form of the name Jinnah originally was “jīṇā”. This is admitted by Urdu scholars and confirmed through Gujarati sources.
- But in transcriptions in English, the retroflex “ṇ” could not be captured, and in transcriptions in Urdu, it was often ignored. Early Urdu spellings of the name changed it to “Jīnā” (جینا).
- However, Jinnah himself seems to have used English more than Urdu, and to have spelled his name as ‘Jinnah’. This English form of the name was later literally transcribed into Urdu, adding a double ‘n’, and a guttural ‘ḥ’ which were both absent from the original Gujarati name. Since short vowels are not written in Urdu

¹⁵ *My Brother*, Fatima Jinnah, (Sharif Al Mujahid, ed.), Karachi, 1987, p. 46.

¹⁶ *Rare Speeches and Documents of Quaid-e-Azam*, Compiled by Yahya Hashim Bawany, First Edition, 1987, Karachi, pp. 39-40.

- (or Arabic), the ‘i’ from the English form of the name was dropped. (This may have begun in 1916, with a suggestion by Sayyid Jalib, editor of *Hamdard*.)
- Finally, over time, the spelling (جناح) seems to have become current, in a faux-Arabic form, which obscures the Indian origin of the name.

Transliteration Scheme

The transliteration convention used in this paper is not standard. We have tried to avoid using the usual double underdots needed to transliterate Arabic sounds without ambiguity, since this feature is not available in standard fonts such as Times New Roman. Our transliteration scheme is given below:

Urdu symbol	ح	ھ	ص	ث	س	ٹ	ط	ت	ز	ذ	ض	ظ
Transliteration	ḥ	h	ṣ	ṯ	s	ṭ	ṭ	t	z	ẓ	ẓ	ẓ

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