

HIS-103: Emergence of Bangladesh

Lecture 05 Partition of India 1947



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Partition of Bengal, 1947

- Within 36 years from the annulment of the first partition of Bengal, in the year 1947 the province came to be divided into two halves along the same geographical lines mainly on communal consideration. The carving up of India in line with Jinnah's two-nation theory effected the second partition of Bengal.
- The Hindu-majority West Bengal became a part of the Indian Union, with the Muslim-majority East Bengal a part of Pakistan. It may be noted that the Hindus by and large opposed the 1905-partition and most Muslims rendered their support to it; but it was the Hindus, especially the Hindu Mahasabha, who proposed the partition of Bengal in 1947 and Muslim leadership first opposed and later accepted the proposal sullenly.
- The rapid change in the political mood of the Hindus and Muslims of the province ought to be measured by the complex politics of communalities, communalism, and imperialism of the time. HS Suhrawardy, chief minister of Bengal, made a last moment attempt to transcend the limits and keep Bengal united with the status of an independent state. However, his move for a United Independent Bengal failed.

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- Indeed there was increased Hindu alienation under Muslim dominated coalition rule in Bengal in the years between 1937 and 1947. The resultant Hindu fear of Muslim domination in undivided Bengal outside the Indian Union whether a third Dominion or a part of Pakistan, and the Indian Muslim fear of perpetual Hindu domination over them in an Akhanda (united) India might explain the 1947 communal divide including the partition of Bengal.
- The British Cabinet Mission Plan (May 1946) that envisaged a loose Indian federation under the three-tier A, B, C formula is generally perceived as the best device to avoid the disastrous consequences of partition through keeping India together, but the prospect was swamped by the waves of communalism.
- At the 2 June (1947) Leaders' Conference, the partition plan as presented by Lord Mountbatten was agreed on by the 'seven big', namely Nehru, Patel and Kripalani (Congress), Jinnah, Liaquat and Abdur Rob Nishtar (Muslim League) and Baldev Singh (Sikh).

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- Published on 3 June, thus known as the Third June plan, it laid down elaborate procedures for partition and transfer of power. These included, among other things,
 - (a) holding of notional system of voting by the members of the Hindu-majority and Muslim-majority areas of the Bengal Legislative Assembly sitting separately (similar procedure to be followed in the case of the Punjab);
 - (b) referendum in the Surma Valley of Assam i.e., the Sylhet district in the North-East and the North West Frontier Province in the North-West to determine their future;
 - (c) and a Boundary Commission to demarcate the adjoining areas between the proposed states.
- As per the plan, on 20 June the issue of Bengal partition was decided upon by the members of the Assembly. Several rounds of voting were held. On the question of joining the 'present constituent Assembly' (i.e., the Indian Union), the division of the joint session of the House stood at 126 votes against the move and 90 votes in favor.

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- Then the members of the Muslim-majority areas (East Bengal) in a separate session passed a motion by 106-35 votes against partitioning Bengal and for joining a new Constituent Assembly (i.e., Pakistan) as a whole.
- This was followed by the separate meeting of the members of the non-Muslim-majority areas (West Bengal) who by a division of 58-21 voted for partition of the province.
- In a referendum held on 7 July, the electorate of Sylhet by a majority of 55,578 votes (2,39,619 voted for joining East Bengal as against 1,84,041 for remaining in Assam) gave the verdict in favor of Pakistan.
- On 15 July 1947, the Indian Independence Act of the British Parliament stipulated that the British rule in India would come to an end on 15 August 1947. It also stipulated that the partition of India into two sovereign dominions would be known as the Hindu majority state of Indian Union and Muslim majority state of Pakistan.