

HIS-103: Emergence of Bangladesh

Lecture 03

Partition of Bengal 1905-1911



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Partition of Bengal

- Bengal, which included Bihar and Orissa since 1765, was admittedly much too large for a single province of British India. This premier province grew too vast for efficient administration and required reorganization and intelligent division.
- The Lieutenant Governor of Bengal had to administer an area of **189,000 sq. miles** and by 1903 the population of the province had risen to **78.50 million**. Consequently, many districts in Eastern Bengal had been practically neglected because of isolation and poor communication which made good governance almost impossible.
- Calcutta and its nearby districts attracted all the energy and attention of the government. The condition of peasants was miserable under the exaction of absentee landlords; and trade, commerce and education were being decreased.
- The administrative machinery of the province was under-staffed. Especially countryside of East Bengal was so cut off by rivers and creeks that no special attention had been paid to the peculiar difficulties of police work till the last decade of the 19th century. Organized piracy in the waterways had existed for at least a century.

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- Along with administrative difficulties, the problems of famine, of defense, or of linguistics had at one time or other prompted the government to consider the redrawing of administrative boundaries.
- Occasional efforts were made to rearrange the administrative units of Bengal. As for example, in 1836, the upper provinces were sliced off from Bengal and placed under a Lt. Governor. In 1854, the Governor-General-in-Council was relieved of the direct administration of Bengal which was placed under a Lt. Governor. In 1874 Assam (along with Sylhet) was detached from Bengal to form a Chief-Commissionership and in 1898 Lushai Hills were added to it.
- Proposals for partitioning Bengal were first considered in **1903**. Lord Curzon's original scheme was based on grounds of administrative efficiency. Originally, the division was made on geographical rather than on a self-confessedly communal basis. It was probably due to the loud protests and adverse reaction against the original plan, the British first visualized the possible advantages of a divided Bengal. 'Political Considerations' in this respect seemed to have been 'an afterthought'.

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- The government's argument was that the Partition of Bengal was purely an administrative measure with three main objectives.
 - **Firstly**, it wanted to relieve the government of Bengal of a part of the administrative burden and to ensure more efficient administration in the outlying districts.
 - **Secondly**, the government desired to promote the development of backward Assam (ruled by a Chief Commissioner) by enlarging its jurisdiction so as to provide it with an outlet to the sea.
 - **Thirdly**, the government felt the urgent necessity to unite the scattered sections of the Uriya-speaking population under a single administration.
- There were further proposals to separate Chittagong and the districts of Dhaka (then Dacca) and Mymensingh from Bengal and attach them to Assam. Similarly Chhota Nagpur was to be taken away from Bengal and incorporated with the Central Provinces.

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The government's proposals were officially published in **January 1904**. It had stimulated unprecedented opposition, especially among the influential educated middle-class Hindus. The proposed territorial adjustment seemed to touch the existing interest groups and consequently led to strong opposition from various professional groups.

- The Calcutta lawyers apprehended that the creation of a new province would mean the establishment of a Court of Appeal at Dacca and diminish the importance of their own High Court.
- Journalists feared the appearance of local newspapers, which would restrict the circulation of the Calcutta Press.
- The business community of Calcutta visualized the shift of trade from Calcutta to Chittagong, which would be nearer, and logically the cheaper port.
- The Zamindars who owned vast landed estates both in west and east Bengal foresaw the necessity of maintaining separate establishments at Dhaka that would involve extra expenditure.

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- The educated Bengali Hindus thought that it was a deliberate blow inflicted by Lord Curzon at the national consciousness and growing solidarity of the Bengali-speaking population. The Hindus of Bengal, who controlled most of Bengal's commerce and the different professions and led the rural society, opined that the Bangalee nation would be divided, making them a minority in a province including the whole of Bihar and Orissa.
- They complained that it was a veiled attempt by Lord Curzon to strangle the spirit of nationalism in Bengal. They strongly believed that it was the prime object of the government to encourage the growth of a Muslim power in eastern Bengal as a counterpoise to thwart the rapidly growing strength of the educated Hindu community.
- Economic, political and communal interests combined to intensify the opposition against the partition measure. The partition evoked fierce protest in west Bengal, especially in Calcutta and gave a new boost to Indian nationalism creating the Swadeshi Movement.
- '**Bande-Mataram**' (Hail Motherland) almost became the national anthem of the Indian National Congress.

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- Leaders like **Surendranath Banerjee** along with journalists like **Krishna Kumar Mitra**, editor of the Sanjivani (13 July 1905) urged the people to boycott British goods, observe grieving and cut all contact with official bodies. In a meeting held at Calcutta on **7 August 1905 (hailed as the birthday of Indian nationalism)** a resolution to abstain from purchases of British products so long as 'Partition resolution is not withdrawn' was accepted with commendation. This started the new phase in the Swadeshi Movement.
- This national spirit was popularized by the patriotic songs of **Dwijendralal Roy**, **Rajanikanta Sen** and **Rabindranath Tagore**. As with other political movements of the day this also took on religious overtones. Pujas were offered to emphasize the solemn nature of the occasion. Such religious flavor brought huge support among Hindu communities but had a reverse impact on Muslim community.
- The Swadeshi Movement as an economic movement would have been quite acceptable to the Muslims, but as the movement was used as a weapon against the partition (which the greater body of the Muslims supported) and as it often had a religious coloring added to it, it irritated Muslim minds.

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- The new tide of national sentiment in Bengal against the Partition spilled over into different regions in India. Instead of wearing foreign made outfits, the Indians vowed to use only *swadeshi* (local) cottons and other clothing materials made in India. Foreign garments were viewed as hateful imports. The *Swadeshi* Movement soon stimulated local enterprises in many areas; from Indian cotton mills to match factories, glassblowing shops, iron and steel foundries. The agitation also generated increased demands for national education. Bengali teachers and students extended their boycott of British goods to English schools and college classrooms.
- The anti-partition agitation was peaceful and constitutional at the initial stage, but it took a violent shape due to failure of bringing desired outcome. The agitation soon took a turn towards anarchy and disorder. Several assassinations were committed, and attempts were made on the lives of officials including Sir Andrew Fraser. The terrorist movement soon became an integral part of the *Swadeshi* agitation. Bengal terrorism reached its peak from 1908 through 1910, as did the severity of official repression and the number of 'preventive detention' arrests.

Divided Muslims in East & West Bengal

- Initially, when the proposal of partition was first surfaced in 1903, there was expression of Muslim opposition to the scheme. The Moslem Chronicle, the Central National Muhamedan Association, Kazemuddin Ahmad Siddiky and Delwar Hossain Ahmed condemned the proposal.
- Later, Muslims in East and West Bengal were divided regarding the partition. Some of them considered this as an opportunity to eradicate century-long discrimination along with the rise of Dhaka and East Bengal as a provincial capital and province while some saw it as a move to divide Bangalee. In fact, the economic side of the proposed initiative played decisive role for Muslims as the trade and commerce in Bengal were controlled by Hindus.
- Besides, most of the zamindars in Dhaka were Hindu while the raiyats were Muslims. This also influenced the relationship between Hindu and Muslim and took a communal color.
- That means instead of identifying them as Bangalee, people were considering them based on religion. It also created a hesitation among the Muslims regarding the unanimous support to Indian National Congress.

Annulment of Partition

- Later, due to widespread protest and increasing violent activities by swadeshi supporters, King George V at his Coronation Darbar in Delhi in December 1911 announced the revocation of the Partition of Bengal and of certain changes in the administration of India.
 - **Firstly**, the Government of India should have its seat at Delhi instead of Calcutta. By shifting the capital to the site of past Muslim glory, the British hoped to appease Bengal's Muslim community now aggrieved at the loss of provincial power and privilege in eastern Bengal.
 - **Secondly**, the five Bengali speaking Divisions, i.e. The Presidency, Burdwan, Dacca, Rajshahi and Chittagong were to be united and formed into a Presidency to be administered by a Governor-in-Council. The area of this province would be approximately 70,000 sq. miles with a population of 42 million.
 - **Thirdly**, a Lieutenant-Governor-in-Council with a Legislative Council was to govern the province comprising of Bihar, Chhota Nagpur and Orissa.
 - **Fourthly**, Assam was to return to the rule of a Chief Commissioner. The date chosen for the formal ending of the partition and reunification of Bengal was 1 April 1912.

Impact on Hindu-Muslim Relationship

- The Partition of Bengal of 1905 left a profound impact on the political history of India. From a political angle, the measure heightened Hindu-Muslim differences in the region.
- One point of view is that by giving the Muslim's a separate territorial identity in 1905 and a communal electorate through the Morley-Minto Reforms of 1909 the British Government in a delicate manner tried to neutralize the possibility of major Muslim participation in the Indian National Congress.
- This led many to hold the view that the partition of Bengal was effected not just on administrative ground but for creating a permanent division between the two major communities—Hindu and Muslim—by the colonial power to continue its long term interest through what came to be widely know as a policy of 'divide and rule'.