

Partition of Bengal in 1905

Partition of Bengal in 1905 effected on 16 October during the viceroyalty of Lord Curzon (1899-1905), proved to be a momentous event in the history of modern Bengal. The idea of partitioning Bengal did not originate with Curzon. 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 reorganisation 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 impaired. The administrative machinery of the province was under-staffed. Especially in east Bengal, in countryside so cut off by rivers and creeks, no special attention had been paid to the peculiar difficulties of police work till the last decade of the 19th century. Organised piracy in the waterways had existed for at least a century.

Along with administrative difficulties, the problems of famine, of defence, 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. In 1836, the upper provinces were sliced off from Bengal and placed under a lieutenant governor. In 1854, the Governor-General-in-Council was relieved of the direct administration of Bengal which was placed under a lieutenant governor. In 1874 Assam (along with Sylhet) was severed 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. Curzon's original scheme was based on grounds of administrative efficiency. It was probably during the vociferous protests and adverse reaction against the original plan, that the officials first envisaged the possible advantages of a divided Bengal. Originally, the division was made on geographical rather than on an avowedly communal basis. 'Political Considerations' in this respect seemed to have been 'an afterthought'.

The government contention 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.

The government's proposals were officially published in January 1904. In February 1904, Curzon made an official tour of the districts of eastern Bengal with a view to assessing public opinion on the government proposals. He consulted the leading personalities of the different districts and delivered speeches at Dhaka, Chittagong and Mymensingh explaining the government's stand on partition. It was during this visit that the decision to push through an expanded scheme took hold of his mind. This would involve the creation of a self-contained new province under a Lieutenant Governor with a Legislative Council, an independent revenue authority and transfer of so much territory as would justify a fully equipped administration.

The enlarged scheme received the assent of the governments of Assam and Bengal. The new province would consist of the state of Hill Tripura, the Divisions of Chittagong, Dhaka and Rajshahi (excluding Darjeeling) and the district of Malda amalgamated with Assam. Bengal was to surrender not only these large territories on the east but also to cede to the Central Provinces the five Hindi-speaking states. On the west it would gain Sambalpur and a minor tract of five Uriya-speaking states from the Central Provinces. Bengal would be left with an area of 141,580 sq. miles and a population of 54 million, of which 42 million would be Hindus and 9 million Muslims.

The new province was to be called 'Eastern Bengal and Assam' with its capital at Dhaka and subsidiary headquarters at Chittagong. It would cover an area of 106,540 sq. miles with a population of 31 million comprising 18 million Muslims and 12 million Hindus. Its administration would consist of a Legislative Council, a Board of Revenue of two members, and the jurisdiction of the Calcutta High Court would be left undisturbed. The government pointed out that the new province would have a clearly demarcated western boundary and well defined geographical, ethnological, linguistic and social characteristics. The most striking feature of the new province was that it would concentrate within its own bounds the hitherto ignored and neglected typical homogenous Muslim population of

Bengal. Besides, the whole of the tea industry (except Darjeeling), and the greater portion of the jute growing area would be brought under a single administration. The government of India promulgated their final decision in a Resolution dated 19 July 1905 and the Partition of Bengal was effected on 16 October of the same year.

The publication of the original proposals towards the end of 1903 had aroused 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 staunch opposition. 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 visualised 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.

The educated Bengali Hindus felt that it was a deliberate blow inflicted by 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 Bengalee 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 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 together to intensify the opposition against the partition measure.

The Indian and specially the Bengali press opposed the partition move from the very beginning. The British press, the Anglo-Indian press and even some administrators also opposed the intended measure. The partition evoked fierce protest in west Bengal, especially in Calcutta and gave a new fillip to Indian nationalism. Henceforth, the Indian National Congress was destined to become the main platform of the Indian nationalist movement. It exhibited unusual strength and vigour and shifted from a middle-class pressure group to a nation-wide mass organisation.

The leadership of the Indian National Congress viewed the partition as an attempt to 'divide and rule' and as a proof of the government's vindictive antipathy towards the outspoken Bhadrakol intellectuals. Mother-goddess worshipping Bengali Hindus believed that the partition was tantamount to the vivisection of their 'Mother province'. 'Bande-Mataram' (Hail Motherland) almost became the national anthem of the Indian National Congress. Defeat of the partition became the immediate target of Bengalee nationalism. Agitation against the partition manifested itself in the form of mass meetings, rural unrest and a Swadeshi Movement to boycott the import of British manufactured goods. Swadeshi and Boycott were the twin weapons of this nationalism and Swaraj (self-government) its main objective. Swaraj was first mentioned in the presidential address of Dadabhai Naoroji as the Congress goal at its Calcutta session in 1906.

Leaders like Surendranath Banerji along with journalists like Krishna Kumar Mitra, editor of the *Sanjivani* (13 July 1905) urged the people to boycott British goods, observe mourning and sever 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 acclaim.

The Hindu religious fervour reached its peak on 28 September 1905, the day of the *Mahalaya*, the new-moon day before the *pūja*, and thousands of Hindus gathered at the Kali temple in Calcutta. In Bengal the worship of Kali, wife of Shiva, had always been very popular. She possessed a two-dimensional character with mingled attributes both generative and destructive. Simultaneously she took great pleasure in bloody sacrifices but she was also venerated as the great Mother associated with the conception of Bengal as the Motherland. This conception offered a solid basis for the support of political objectives stimulated by religious excitement. Kali was accepted as a symbol of the Motherland, and the priest administered the Swadeshi vow. Such a religious flavour could and did give the movement a widespread appeal among the Hindu masses, but by the same token that flavour aroused hostility in average Muslim minds. Huge protest rallies before and after Bengal's division on 16 October 1905 attracted millions of people heretofore not involved in politics.

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 colouring added to it, it antagonised Muslim minds.

The new tide of national sentiment in Bengal against the Partition spilled over into different regions in India- Punjab, Central Provinces, Poona, Madras, Bombay and other cities. Instead of wearing foreign made outfits, the Indians

vowed to use only *swadeshi* (indigenous) cottons and other clothing materials made in India. Foreign garments were viewed as hateful imports. The Swadeshi Movement soon stimulated local enterprise 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 movement for national education spread throughout Bengal and reached even as far as Benaras where Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya founded his private Benaras Hindu University in 1910.

The student community of Bengal responded with great enthusiasm to the call of nationalism. Students including schoolboys participated en masse in the campaigns of Swadeshi and Boycott. The government retaliated with the notorious Carlyle Circular that aimed to crush students' participation in the Swadeshi and Boycott movements. Both students and teachers strongly reacted against this repressive measure and the protest was almost universal. In fact, through this protest movement the first organised student movement was born in Bengal. Along with this the 'Anti-Circular Society', a militant student organisation, also came into being.

The anti-partition agitation was peaceful and constitutional at the initial stage, but when it appeared that it was not yielding the desired results the protest movement inevitably passed into the hands of more militant leaders. Two techniques of boycott and terrorism were to be applied to make their mission successful. Consequently the younger generation, who were drawn into politics, adopted terrorist methods by using firearms, pistols and bombs indiscriminately. The agitation soon took a turn towards anarchy and disorder.

The new militant spirit was reflected in the columns of the nationalist newspapers, notably the *Bande Mataram*, *Sandhya* and *Jugantar*. The press assisted a great deal to disseminate revolutionary ideas. In 1907, the Indian National Congress at its annual session in Surat split into two groups - one being moderate, liberal, and evolutionary; and the other extremist, militant and revolutionary. The young militants of Bal Gangadhar Tilak's extremist party supported the 'cult of the bomb and the gun' while the moderate leaders like Gopal Krishna Gokhale and Surendranath Banerjea cautioned against such extremist actions fearing it might lead to anarchy and uncontrollable violence. Surendranath Banerjea, though one of the front-rank leaders of the anti-Partition agitation, was not in favour of terrorist activities.

When the proposal for partition was first published in 1903 there was expression of Muslim opposition to the scheme. In the beginning the main criticism from the Muslim side was against any part of an enlightened and advanced province of Bengal passing under the rule of a chief commissioner. They felt that thereby their educational, social and other interests would suffer, however to the contrary, some amongst them felt that the proposed measure would threaten Bengali solidarity. The Muslim intelligentsia, however, criticised the ideas of extremist militant nationalism as being against the spirit of Islam. The Muslim press urged its educated co-religionists to remain faithful to the government. On the whole the Swadeshi preachers were not able to influence and arouse the predominantly Muslim masses in east Bengal. The anti-partition trend in the thought process of the Muslims did not continue for long. When the wider scheme of a self contained separate province was known to the educated section of the Muslims most of them soon changed their views. They realised that the partition would be a boon to them and that their special difficulties would receive greater attention from the new administration.

The Muslims accorded a warm welcome to the new Lieutenant-Governor Bampfylde Fuller. Even the Moslem Chronicle soon changed its attitude in favour of partition. Some Muslims in Calcutta also welcomed the creation of the new province.

The economic aspect of the movement was partly responsible for encouraging separatist forces within the Muslim society. The superiority of the Hindus in the sphere of trade and industry alarmed the Muslims. Fear of socio-economic domination by the Hindus made them alert to safeguard their own interests. These apprehensions brought about a rift in Hindu-Muslims relations. In order to avoid economic exploitation by the Hindus, some wealthy Muslim entrepreneurs came forward to launch new commercial ventures. One such attempt was the founding of steamer companies operating between Chittagong and Rangoon in 1906.

In the context of the partition the pattern of the land system in Bengal played a major role to influence the Muslim mind. The absentee Hindu zamindars made no attempt to improve the lot of the Raiyats who were mostly Muslims. The agrarian disputes (between landlords and tenants) already in existence in the province also appeared to take a communal colour. It was alleged that the Hindu landlords had been attempting to enforce Swadeshi ideas on the tenants and induce them to join the anti-partition movement.

In 1906, the Muslims organised an Islamic conference at Keraniganj in Dhaka as a move to emphasise their separate identity as a community. The Swadeshi Movement with its Hindu religious flavour fomented aggressive reaction

from the other community. A red pamphlet of a highly inflammatory nature was circulated among the Muslim masses of Eastern Bengal and Assam urging them completely to dissociate from the Hindus.

The early administrators of the new province from the lieutenant governor down to the junior-most officials in general were enthusiastic in carrying out the development works. Bampfylde Fuller was accused by the anti-Partition movement leaders as being extremely partial to Muslims. He, because of a difference with the Government of India, resigned in August 1906. His resignation and its prompt acceptance were considered by the Muslims to be a solid political victory for the Hindus. The general Muslim feeling was that in yielding to the pressure of the anti-Partition agitators the government had revealed its weakness and had overlooked the loyal adherence of the Muslims to the government.

Consequently, the antagonism between the Hindus and Muslims became very acute in the new province. The Muslim leaders, now more conscious of their separate communal identity, directed their attention in uniting the different sections of their community to the creation of a counter movement against that of the Hindus. They keenly felt the need for unity and believed that the Hindu agitation against the Partition was in fact a communal movement and as such a threat to the Muslims as a separate community. They decided to faithfully follow the directions of leaders like Salimullah and Nawab Ali Chowdhury and formed organisations like the Mohammedan Provincial Union.

Though communalism had reached its peak in the new province by 1907, there is evidence of a sensible and sincere desire among some of the educated and upper class Muslims and Hindus to put an end to these religious antagonisms. A group of prominent members of both communities met the Viceroy Lord Minto on 15 March 1907 with suggestions to put an end to communal violence and promote religious harmony between the two communities.

The landlord-tenant relationship in the new province had deteriorated and took a communal turn. The Hindu landlords felt alarmed at the acts of terrorism committed by the anti-partition agitators. To prove their unswerving loyalty to the government and give evidence of their negative attitude towards the agitation, they offered their hands of friendship and co-operation to their Muslim counterparts to the effect that they would take a non-communal stand and work unitedly against the anti-government revolutionary movements.

Though several factors were responsible for the formation of All-India Muslim League, the Partition of Bengal and the threat to it was, perhaps, the most important factor that hastened its birth. At its very first sitting at Dacca the Muslim League, in one of its resolutions, said: 'That this meeting in view of the clear interest of the Muhammadans of Eastern Bengal consider that Partition is sure to prove beneficial to the Muhammadan community which constitute the vast majority of the populations of the new province and that all such methods of agitation such as boycotting should be strongly condemned and discouraged'.

To assuage the resentment of the assertive Bengali Hindus, the British government decided to annul the Partition of Bengal. As regards the Muslims of Eastern Bengal the government stated that in the new province the Muslims were in an overwhelming majority in point of population, under the new arrangement also they would still be in a position of approximate numerical equality or possibly of small superiority over the Hindus. The interests of the Muslims would be safeguarded by special representation in the Legislative Councils and the local bodies.

Lord Charles Hardinge succeeded Minto in 1910 and on 25 August 1911 in a secret despatch the government of India recommended certain changes in the administration of India. According to the suggestion of the Governor-General-in-Council, 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 placate Bengal's Muslim community now aggrieved at the loss of provincial power and privilege in eastern Bengal. Secondly, the five Bengali speaking Divisions viz 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 revert back 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.

The Partition of Bengal of 1905 left a profound impact on the political history of India. From a political angle the measure accentuated 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 subtle manner tried to neutralise 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 perpetuate its long term interest through what came to be widely know as a policy of ‘divide and rule’.

The Partition of Bengal indeed marks a turning point in the history of nationalism in India. It may be said that it was out of the travails of Bengal that Indian nationalism was born. By the same token the agitation against the partition and the terrorism that it generated were considered to be one of the leading factors that contributed to Muslim nationalism and encouraged them to engage in separatist politics. The birth of the Muslim League in 1906 at Dacca (Dhaka) bears testimony to this.