



Partition of Bengal 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.

The lieutenant governor of Bengal had to administer (পরিচালনা) 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 (shoshon) of absentee landlords. Trade, commerce and education were being impaired (khotigrotho). Especially in east Bengal, no special attention had been paid in countryside cut off by rivers and creeks. Organised piracy (jolodoshu) 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.

Proposals for partitioning Bengal were first considered in 1903. Curzon's original scheme was based on grounds of administrative efficiency (প্রশাসনিক দক্ষতার) . Originally, the division was made on geographical rather than on communal basis (সাম্প্রদায়িক) . 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(বিক্ষিপ্ত) 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.

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 delivered speeches at Dhaka, Chittagong and Mymensingh explaining the government's stand on partition. He explained that, 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 of Curzon received the assent(সম্মতি) 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) amalgamated with Assam.

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 18 million Muslims and 12 million Hindus. Its administration would consist of —

1. A Legislative Council
2. A Board of Revenue of two members
3. Jurisdiction of the Calcutta High Court would be left undisturbed
4. The whole of the tea industry (except Darjeeling), and the greater portion of the jute growing area would be brought under a single administration.
5. The government pointed out that the new province would have a well defined geographical, ethnological, linguistic and social characteristics.

The government of India promoted their final decision in a Resolution dated **19 July 1905** and the Partition of Bengal was effected on **16 October** of the same year.

Hindu Reaction

The publication of the original proposals towards the end of 1903 had aroused opposition among the educated middle-class Hindus.

- The Calcutta lawyers apprehended that the creation of a new province would establish 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 cost.
- 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 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 leadership of the Indian National Congress viewed the partition as an attempt to **'divide and rule'**. Mother-goddess worshipping Bengali Hindus believed that the partition was **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 Bengal nationalism.

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. This conception of Kali offered a solid basis for the support of political objectives stimulated by religious excitement. Kali was accepted as a symbol of the Motherland.. Such a religious flavour 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 .

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 opposed Muslim minds.

The Swadeshi Movement soon stimulated in many areas;

- Instead of wearing foreign made outfits, the Indians promised to use only swadeshi cottons and other clothing materials made in India. Foreign garments were viewed as hateful imports.
- From Indian cotton mills to match factories, glassblowing shops, iron and steel foundries people boycott foreign products
- 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.
- Students including schoolboys participated in the campaigns of Swadeshi and Boycott. Both students and teachers strongly reacted against this repressive measure and the protest was almost universal.

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 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 (নৈরাজ্য এবং বিশৃঙ্খলা). In 1907, the Indian National Congress at its annual session split into two

groups - one being moderate, liberal, and evolutionary(মধ্যপন্থী, উদারপন্থী এবং বিবর্তনীয়); and the other extremist, militant and revolutionary(চরমপন্থী, জঙ্গি এবং বিপ্লবী).

When the proposal for partition was first published in 1903 there was expression of Muslim opposition to the scheme. 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.

In 1906, the Muslims organised an Islamic conference at Keraniganj in Dhaka as a move to emphasise (জোর দেওয়া) their separate identity as a community. The Swadeshi Movement with its Hindu religious flavour fomented aggressive reaction from the other community. Consequently, the antagonism (শত্রুতা) between the Hindus and Muslims became very acute(tibro/probol) in the new province. The Muslim leaders, now more conscious of their separate communal identity, increased 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

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. Several factors were responsible for the formation of All-India Muslim League, the Partition of Bengal to helped the grudge of the assertive Bengali Hindus, the British government decided to cancel the Partition of Bengal.

The Partition of Bengal of 1905 left a profound impact on the political history of India. From a political angle the measure highlighted 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 . 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 maintain 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.
