



Partition of India (1947): Was it inevitable?

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Abstract

The division of the Indian sub-continent in 1947 was a catastrophic event which led to untold miseries in both the successor states of India and Pakistan. Diverse forces were at play which eventually ruptured the social fabric of the region thus leading to geographical bifurcation of British-India. Some of the factors responsible for the division were intrinsic to the socio-economic condition of the region while other factors were acting from the periphery. These factors combined together gradually evolved into a phenomenon which led to the forget event of 1947. This paper attempts to examine the causes and factors which made the partition of the country inevitable.

Keywords: partition, communalism, british, congress, muslim league

Introduction

The partition of the Indian sub-continent in 1947 is among the most well-researched topics of modern Indian history ^[1]. Lately, new trends have emerged in partition historiography with the study of diverse aspects of partition other than its causes. This include concepts like 'long partition' which instead of focussing on high politics has tried to highlight the continued effects of partition in various domains of contemporary Indian life ^[2]. Also, many scholars have highlighted the trauma of marginalised sections especially women, children and the refugees during the turbulent days following the partition ^[3].

The partition of the Indian sub-continent was eventually seen by the leading lights of the contemporary Indian politics as the panacea of the communal problem in the country. However, the unprecedented level of violence and trauma of forced migration from one's homeland was far from what the political leadership had envisioned while giving their assent for the division of the country ^[4]. The failure of Pakistan as a nation-state ^[5] and the continued effects of partition on contemporary Indian life in the form of sectarian-violence and territorial-tensions raised more questions than it could answer on the wisdom of partitioning the region. Moreover, one could wonder that how can political division of the two major communities of the Indian sub-continent sort out socio-cultural differences between them? Of course, the division was not clean and a sizeable population of both the communities chose not to migrate from their homeland to their designated land. Also, while highlighting the social-separateness, the pro-partition advocates ignored the centuries of co-habitation which had evolved a distinct composite culture symbolising the unity in diversity of the Indian population. Thus, while tracing the causes behind the forgetful event of 1947, one is usually tempted to ponder over the inevitability of the partition of the country into the dominions of India and Pakistan.

Although, counterfactual questions are tough to answer and at times considered futile, but given the enormous significance attached to this single event of 1947, it is worth considering it in an effort to understand the socio-political

context of the partition of the Indian sub-continent. This paper attempts to examine the possibility of averting the partition by analysing the long term and immediate causes which ended up dividing the country. Long term factors which eventually aided separatism included the rise in religious consciousness among the communities. This was a by-product of revivalist tendency of the socio-religious reform movement of nineteenth century ^[6]. The feeling of separatism was further accentuated by the divisive policies of British government which created religious antagonism and ruptured the social fabric of the country ^[7]. The role of political parties like Indian National Congress (INC) and All-India Muslim League (AIML) and their leaders has also been examined in this context. It has been argued that because of its association with Hindu right wing, INC could not attract Muslim masses ^[8]. Similarly, the political vision of Muslim leadership made it difficult to reach any compromise with the INC ^[9]. In this regard the role of business class which supported these political parties has also been analysed ^[10]. Immediate factors behind the partition included internal as well as external events which influenced the political and economic scenario of the country. External factors affecting Indian politics were international events like the outbreak of WW2. It changed the power dynamics of the world with the rise of USA and USSR. It influenced the foreign policy of Britain and a truncated India suited its interest ^[11]. Internal forces supplementing divisive tendencies included regional politics which was working side by side of the national politics. The regional politics of United Provinces, Punjab and Bengal played its part in the division of the sub-continent ^[12]. Muslim separatism and their alienation from the mainstream Indian national movement is considered as one of the most important factor behind the partition of the Indian sub-continent. Communal animosity between the two major communities of the sub-continent turned into the 'Spanish ulcer' which hindered any constitutional progress. The socio-religious reform movement of 19th century inadvertently proved divisive in this regard. It moved towards traditionalism and Hindus started finding solace in

ancient Hindu culture thus alienating the Muslims and Muslims tried to link themselves with central Asia and Arab region. The 'revivalist' tendency of the socio-religious reform movements of nineteenth century acted as catalyst in compartmentalising the Indian society. Hindu revivalism was based on the notion of a glorious Hindu past which degenerated in due course of time especially under the Muslim rule and due to western influence^[13]. Use of Hindu religious symbols and linking Hindu ideological underpinning to Indian nationalism repelled the Muslims from the INC politics^[14]. With the progress of the Hindu mobilisation, the Muslims too started looking for a shared history. Use of religious symbols for political mobilisation was more intense in North India where the Arya Samaj started the cow-protection movement. The Muslim practice of cow slaughter at *Bakr-Id* further intensified the situation^[15]. A series of riots took place at various places throughout north India which further aggravated suspicion among different communities. The Urdu-*Devanagari* controversy is yet another chapter in this episode. A movement was initiated in Benaras, which soon spread to other areas of United Provinces. It was demanded that in government courts 'attempt should be made to replace the Urdu language and Persian script with *Devanagari* script^[16]. This controversy was revived again at the end of nineteenth century, and influenced the Government of the North-West Provinces (U.P.) to adopt, in 1900, the *Devanagari* script for official purposes, along with Urdu^[17]. This development stirred up the supporters of Urdu to intensify the defence of their language^[18]. Adoption of religious symbols and institutions for political mobilisation was also visible in Bombay where *Ganpati* fair was effectively used by Lokmanya Tilak to arouse nationalist sentiment. These events had less appeal or at times had negative influence on the Muslim minds^[19].

The role of Sir Syed and his belief in British patronage was another factor which aided in alienating Muslims from mainstream national politics. Muslims were one among many minority groups who had a different vision of nation. Muslim leaders like Sir Syed Ahmad Khan didn't agree with INC version of nation which was based on the idea of individual citizenship. His version of nation consisted of a federation of communities having privileges based on their 'historical importance'^[20]. Thus, Muslims being the ex-ruling class deserved a special position within the British Indian Empire. Introduction of representative form of government further intensified the situation as the threat of majority domination engulfed the minds of Muslim leadership. They demanded separate electorates as a protection of their political rights which was granted by the Morley-Minto reforms of 1909. Thus, a distinct political category was created which influenced the future course of nationalist politics. Eventually, the search for a distinct political identity by Muslims finally culminated into the quest for a separate homeland. However, in this regard the role of colonial government in assisting the evolution of Muslim community into a separate political category has to be emphasised.

The role of colonial government in creating fissures in India's social fabric could not be undermined^[21]. The policy of appeasement towards the Muslims and the concessions given to them by the British government formed the bone of contention between the Hindus and the Muslims^[22]. In fact, some of the British policies inadvertently created a sub-

conscious communal feeling. The British conception of the Indian society was based on the theme of differentiation^[23]. They saw the Indian society as a conglomeration of different groups and categories. Later, they started a decennial practice of officially tracing these different categories in the form of census reports. The basis of this classification was religion and each census report highlighted the numerical strength of the religious communities in the provinces as well the country as a whole^[24]. Other statistical data like details of educational and occupational condition of these communities, along with their numerical strength in the country, gave a concrete comparative analysis of material and social condition of each community^[25]. It was this colonial knowledge of differentiated Indian society which contributed to competition and conflict among different religious communities.

While talking about the partition of the Indian sub-continent it has been a tendency to concentrate mainly on high politics and see it in the light of role of important leaders like Nehru, Jinnah, Gandhi or Patel. Traditionally, it is believed that Muslim extremists led by Jinnah and his Muslim League, in coalition with the British, and the Hindu right wingers were responsible for the partition of the Indian Sub-continent^[26]. However, revisionist scholars held the Congress and its leadership more responsible for the partition. In fact, it is argued by the proponents of this view that the demand of Pakistan by Jinnah and League (Lahore Resolution) was just a 'bargaining counter'. The idea was to at least gain something like decentralisation of power with provincial autonomy through the 'bargaining counter'. It suited the interest of Muslim League which hoped to gain control of Muslim majority provinces^[27]. Likewise, the wisdom of INC leadership has also been questioned on its decision to reject the Cabinet Mission Plan of 1946^[28].

Similarly, the regional factors contributing to the division of the country had been taken up for research by the partition scholars. These scholars have tried to find the roots of partition in regional politics and social-setup rather than only concentrating on national political dynamics. It had been argued that the dialectics between the regionalism and centralism shaped the Indian history^[29]. Scholars of Bengal politics argue that the idea of united Bengal was doing rounds till 1947 and leaders like Sarat Chandra Bose, K.S. Roy and H. S. Suhrawardy supported it. United Bengal scheme suited the Muslim business interest. However, talks between Bose and Suhrawardy broke down when the latter refused to give up separate electorates^[30]. In the context of Punjab the role of local elites and traditions in the transmission of Muslim League's ideas to rural areas had been highlighted by Ian Tablot and David Gilmartin. They revealed that the call of 'Islam in danger' of the Muslim League leaders got linked to the socio-economic grievances of local Muslim population which strengthened the party's position in rural areas which otherwise had its stronghold in urban centres^[31]. Likewise, Muslim League was able to increase its influence in United Provinces through various means. Venkat Dhulipala emphasised on the fact that the issue of division of the country was a well debated topic which had engulfed the minds of the Muslims of United Provinces of Agra and Awadh. He concluded that the 'Creation of New Medina' was a well thought decision of the Muslim elite leadership as well as the masses^[32]. Similarly, Francis Robinson underlines the uniqueness of Islam which encouraged a distinct religio-political identity

for Muslims during political mobilisation. This phenomenon was instrumental in the rise of Muslim separatism in the United Provinces^[33].

If Muslim League moved towards partition by doing something, INC added to it by not doing certain things. During 1920s and 1930s the INC lacked appeal among the Muslim masses. Although, it tried to come closer to the Muslim masses through its mass contact program after the provincial elections of 1937 but unfortunately could not succeed as it only restricted itself at the level of talking with Muslim leadership^[34]. Also, INC didn't form any practical policy to counter the rise of communalism and by 1940s things were already out of hand and it became difficult to avert partition. Jinnah and AIML had reached a point of no return and from the C. Rajagopal chari formula (1944)^[35] it was evident that the INC had already accepted partition. Further, some scholars assert that Congress proved too weak in accepting partition. In fact these scholars argue that culture forms the basis of nationalism, then how could Congress divide the territory to form a nation? (i.e. it is the people and not the territory which forms the basis of a nation). In fact, by giving importance to the leadership of AIML, Congress increased their stature which strengthened their position^[36]. On the other hand, socialist scholars emphasise that the business class supported the Congress leaders who were eager to grab power and they negotiated with the British with that intent in mind. Same was true for Muslim business class who supported the AIML. It resulted in power coming into the hands of middle class. Or else there could had been a possibility that the power was transferred to the lower classes by means of a revolution and thus establishing socialism in the country^[37]. Left wing organisations too attracted Muslim intelligentsia who looked towards Moscow for political inspiration. They opposed the INC during the WW2 and the Quit India Movement of 1942 and some of these men supported the cause of Pakistan^[38].

Personal aspiration and individual acts of omission and commission further added to the already existing issues. For instance, the refusal of INC to form government in UP in coalition with the Muslim League alienated the latter. INC under GB Pant contested the provincial elections of 1937 in coalition with AIML which was led by Chowdhary Khaliqzaman. They performed well against the pro-government National Agriculturist Party under the Nawab of Chattari. But the exceptional performance of INC in the election prompted it to form government on its own and thus it refused to accept AIML demand of seats in the ministry^[39]. The attitude of INC gave opportunity to the ML to aggravate the feeling of the Muslim masses of being permanent minority in the country. In its response ML separated its way which eventually led to ML demand of a separate nation in its Lahore Resolution of 1940. In fact, even after the Cabinet Mission Plan the attitude of the INC president J. L. Nehru was adamant which proved costly to the unity and integrity of the country^[40]. At this point it could be added that the AIML leader M. A. Jinnah was too ambitious in his demands (fourteen points). Even the Hindu Mahasabha leadership was too rigid at this point to give any concession to Jinnah. The rigidity created a deadlock hindering any constitutional advance and the abrupt withdrawal of British added to the complication^[41].

Recently, other international factors which shaped the British policy in India came under the scanner. The rise of United States and the deteriorating influence of British

Empire over its periphery during the second world wars had consequences on the history of South Asia^[42]. After the WW2 the world was divided into two power blocks. The background for the cold war had already been prepared during the war. On the other hand, India had already declared that it would not align itself with any of these power blocks. This was evident from the speech of J. L. Nehru in the constituent assembly^[43]. Later, the foundation of Non-Aligned Movement in 1961 further reinforced the neutral approach of India. So in such a case, USSR was seen as a threat in the region as it could increase its influence in the India sub-continent. Thus, division of India could provide a base to repulse such initiatives of the USSR which was in larger interest of Britain and USA^[44].

It is evident from the above discussion that diverse factors were at play which resulted into division of the Indian sub-continent in 1947. Internal and external agents influencing the political and socio-economic developments in the region created a socio-political situation where partition seemed inevitable.

References

1. Major scholarly works probing into the factors responsible for the division of British-India include Bipan Chandra, *India's Struggle for Independence: 1857-1947*, New Delhi, 1988; Sucheta Mahajan, *Independence and Partition: The Erosion of Colonial Power in India*, New Delhi, 2000; Mushirul Hasan, *India's Partition: Process Strategy and Mobilisation*, OUP, 2001; Penderel Moon, *Divide and Quit*, OUP, 1998; R. J. Moore, *Churchill, Crips and India: 1939-45*, OUP, 1979; Anita Inder Singh, *Origins of the Partition of India, 1936-1947*, OUP, Delhi, 1987 etc.
2. For the long term consequences of the partition of India in 1947 see Vazira Zamindar, *The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia: Refugees, Boundaries, Histories*, New York, 2007.
3. For impact of partition on women see Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition*, Delhi, 1998; Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*, Durham, 2000.
4. This was the largest forced migration of people recorded in human history. See O. H. K Spate, *India and Pakistan: A General and Regional Geography*, London, 1954, 119.
5. Marred by conflict and chaos much of Pakistan's history after its creation is a story of political instability. Assassination of its first Prime Minister in 1951, separation of East-Pakistan in 1971 and frequent military coupes and declaration of martial law in the name of preserving the nation's unity and integrity is far from the aspiration of the countries founding fathers. For discussion on these aspects see Ayesha Jalal, *The Struggle for Pakistan: A Muslim Homeland and Global Politics*, Harvard University Press, 2017; Jaffrelot, Christopher, *Pakistan: Nationalism without a Nation*, New York, 2002; Shaikh, Farzana, *Making Sense of Pakistan*, New York, 2009.
6. See GD Khosla. 'The Parting of Ways', in Kaushik Roy (ed.), *Partition of India: Why 1947?*, OUP, 2012, 1-34.
7. For the divide and rule thesis see A. Mehta and A. Patwardhan, *The Communal Triangle in India*, Kitabistan, Allahabad, 1942.

8. This point has been highlighted in Bipan Chandra, 'Communalism and the National Movement' and Mushirul Hasan, 'Communal and revivalist Trends in Congress' in Mushirul Hasan (ed.), *Communal and Pan-Islamic Trends in Colonial India*, Manohar, New Delhi, 1981, 186-98 and 199-223.
9. For a context of this argument see Francis Robinson, 'Islam and Muslim Society in South Asia' in *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (n.s.) XVII, part 2, 1983, 185-203.
10. It had been argued that big businessmen of both the communities favoured partition.
11. See Narendra Singh Sarila, *The Shadow of the Great Game: the untold story of India's Partition*, HarperCollins Publisher, 2009.
12. For United Provinces see Venkat Dhulipala, *Creating a New Medina*, CUP, 2015, Mushirul Hasan, *Nationalism and Communal Politics in India, 1885-1930*, Manohar Publication, 2006; for Punjab see Ian Tablot, *Punjab and the Raj and Provincial Politics and the Pakistan Movement, 1849-1947*, Delhi, 1988 and David Gilmartin, *Empire and Islam: Punjab and the Making of Pakistan*, London, 1988; for Bengal see Bidyut Chakrabarty, *The Partition of Bengal and Assam: 1932-47*, London, 2004.
13. For the influence of socio-religious reform movement of nineteenth century on Indian society see G. D. Khosla, Op. cit. and Satish Saberwal, 'The Partition: Communalization, Contestation, and Interaction?' in Kaushik Roy (ed.), *Partition of India: Why 1947?*, OUP, 2012, pp. 1-34 and 35-58; C. H. Heimsath, *Indian Nationalism and Hindu Social Reforms*, Princeton University Press, 1964.
14. Bipin Chandra, *Communalism in Modern India*, Delhi, Har-Anand Publications, Reprint 2020, pp. 166-67.
15. John R. McLane, *Indian Nationalism and the Early Congress*, Princeton University Press, 1977, 309-31.
16. Syed Abid Husain, *The Destiny of Indian Muslims*, Har-Anand Publications, New Delhi, 1965, 53-4.
17. *ibid*, p. 78.
18. Christopher R. King, *One Language Two Scripts: The Hindi Movement in Nineteenth Century North India*, OUP, New Delhi, 1966.
19. However, according to Bipan Chandra, Tilak politics was far from being communal and it was rather centred around political and economic issues. See Bipan Chandra, *Communalism in Modern India*, Op. cit., pp. 168-69.
20. The Muslim's demand of separate electorates as accepted by the British government in Morley-Minto reforms of 1909 was based on the idea of 'political importance' of the Muslims. See Matiur Rahman, *From Consultation to Confrontation: A study of the Muslim League in the British Indian Politics, 1906-1912*, Luzac and Company Limited, London, 1970, 13-14.
21. Scholars examining the role of colonial government in the partition of India include R. J. Moore, Op. cit.; Penderel Moon, Op. cit.; David Page, *Prelude to Partition: The Indian Muslims and the Imperial System of Control 1920-1932*, OUP, 1982 etc.
22. The issue of separate electorates is a good example in this regard.
23. Bernard S. Cohn, The command of language and the language of command in *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, vol. 4, ed. Ranjit Guha, OUP, 276-329.
24. Kenneth W. Jones, Religious identity and the Indian census in *The Census in British India: New Perspectives*, ed. N. G. Barrier, Manohar Publications, New Delhi, 73-101.
25. Hamza Alavi had argued that the demand for Pakistan had a socio-economic basis rather than religious one. See Hamza Alavi, 'Social Forces and Ideology in the Making of Pakistan', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 37, no. 51, 2002, 5119-24.
26. Most of the nationalist scholars see British policies in India as divisive. See Bipin Chandra, *Communalism in Modern India*, Op. cit., pp. 268-69; Jawaharlal Nehru, *An Autobiography*, London, 1936, p. 136; Rajendra Prasad, *India Divided*, Bombay, 1946, p. 83. A more recent argument in this regard considers the colonial policies responsible for shaping the nationalist politics. See Anil Seal, *Imperialism and Nationalism in India in John Gallagher, Gordon Johnson and Anil Seal (ed.), Locality, Province and Nation: Essays on Indian Politics 1870-1940*, CUP, 1973, pp. 1-27. Other works exploring this theme include Mushirul Hasan (ed.), *India's Partition: Process, Strategy and Mobilisation*, Op. cit.; Anita Inder Singh, Op. cit. For the role of Hindu right wing see Christopher Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics 1925 to the 1990s*, Hurst and Company, London, 1996 and William Gould, *Hindu Nationalism and the Language of Politics*, CUP, 2004 among others.
27. Ayesha Jalal, Op. cit. Also see, Yasmin Khan, *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan*, Yale University New Delhi, 2007.
28. Abul Kalam Azad believed that the Cabinet Mission Plan was workable. See Abul Kalam Azad, *India Wins Freedom*, New Delhi, 1988 (reprint in 1995), 161-73.
29. Ayesha Jalal, 'Secularists, Subalterns and the Stigma of "Communalism": Partition Historiography Revisited', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 33, no. 1, 1996, p. 101. Major regional studies include, among others, Ian Tablot, Op. cit.; David Gilmartin, Op. cit.; Francis Robinson, *Separatism among Indian Muslims: The Politics of the United Provinces' Muslims 1860-1923*, CUP, 1974; Joya Chatterji, *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-1947*, CUP, 1995.
30. Bidyut Chakrabarty, The 1947 United Bengal Movement: A Thesis without a Synthesis in Kaushik Roy (ed.), *Partition of India: Why 1947*, OUP, 2012, 164-188.
31. See Ian Tablot, Op. cit. and David Gilmartin, Op. cit.
32. This forms the main argument of Venkat Dhulipala, Op. cit.
33. Francis Robinson, 'Islam and Muslim Separatism', in *Islam and Muslim History in South Asia*, OUP, 2000, 177-209.
34. For a discussion on contradictions and short-comings of the Muslim mass contact programme of the Congress see Bimal Prasad, *Pathway to India's Partition*, Delhi, 2000, 378-81.
35. It proposed to demarcate Muslim majority areas and hold a plebiscite in those areas to decide on the question of partition.

36. For instance the Gandhi-Jinnah talk of 1944 increased the prestige of latter. See Deepak Pandey, 'The Simla Conference and the Muslim League', *Bengal, Past and Present*, vol. XCIX, Serial no. 189, Part II, 1980, 162-76.
37. For socialist view of partition see Claude Markovits, 'Businessmen and the Partition of India', in Dwijendra Tripathi (ed.), *Business and Politics in India: A Historical Perspective*, New Delhi, 1991, pp. 284-307 and Ian Tablot, 'Planning for Pakistan: The Planning Committee of the All-India Muslim League, 1943-46', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 28, no. 4, 1994, 875-89.
38. Khizar Humayun Ansari, 'The Emergence of Muslim Socialists and their Ideas in India between 1917 and 1947' (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 1985), Chapter 4 and 5, quoted in Francis Robinson, 'The Congress and the Muslims', in *Islam and Muslim History of South Asia*, OUP, 2000, 215.
39. For a context see Choudhry Khaliqzaman, *Pathway to Pakistan*, Brothers Publishers, Lahore, 152-63.
40. Abul Kalam Azad, Op. cit., 161-73.
41. Among the numerous factors which brought sudden end to the British rule were the deterioration in the financial health of the British Empire as the drain of wealth from India to Britain was reversed during the WW2. Thus, London became a debtor of India. Also, the colonial government's grip on law and order situation in India was slackening day by day. Further, the Indianisation of the institutions like civil services, police and army further weakened British hold over India. Events like trial of INA officers at Red Fort and RIN mutiny (1946) were indicating that staying in India for long was difficult for the British.
42. Narendra Singh Sarila, Op. cit., 15-33.
43. He declared that world peace would be strengthened if India didn't align itself with any group. Krishnan Srinivasan, 'Nehru and Non-Alignment', *The Statesmen*, 13 Nov 2015.
44. Narendra Singh Sarila, Op. cit., 22.