

# HISTORY OF BANGLADESH

1905-2005

Milton Kumar Dev  
Md. Abdus Samad





of Bengal should be divided so that East Bengal and Assam, where Muslims were preponderant becomes on province with its capital in Dhaka. In a speech at Dhaka on 18 February 1905, Lord Curzon said: "Partition would make Dacca the centre and possibly the capital of a new and self-suffering administration which must give to the people of these districts by reason of their numerical strength and their superior culture the preponderating voice in the province so created, which would invest the Mohammedans of Eastern Bengal with a unity which they had not enjoyed since the days of the old Musalman Viceroys and kings."

### Reasons of the Partition

In the Bengal delta, the shape of things to come was prefigured by an administrative change. In 1905 the British divided the huge province of Bengal into a Western part (Bengal) and an Eastern part (Eastern Bengal and Assam). This decision led to a sharp division of minds all over Bengal (and indeed all over India). Many saw the Bengal partition of 1905 as a calculated move to break the anti-colonial movement, which was particularly strong in Bengal, and to divide and rule the Bengali-speaking population. It was from December, 1903 to 19 July, 1905 that the transfer plan was transformed into full scale partition. The political motive was to divide the Hindus of the Eastern and Western Bengal. Fraser wrote for the first time that the primary motive behind Bengal Partition was to make political gains in his letter of 28 March, 1903. Most of the Bangladeshi historians maintain that political reasons were, in fact, the decisive factors behind the partition of Bengal in 1905. Many factors both directly and indirectly had actively caused the partition. Administrative, political, economic, social, religious, cultural and British policies were involved for the partition of Bengal.

### Administrative Causes

Partition was promoted for administrative reasons: Bengal was as large as France but with a significantly larger population. Curzon stated the Eastern region was neglected and under-governed. By splitting the province, an improved administration could be established in the East, where subsequently, the population would benefit from new schools and employment opportunities. Sumit Sarkar believes that till 1903 the need for administrative changes was the deciding factor behind the 1905 Bengal Partition. 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, such a vast region was impossible to be administered properly. Proposals were being made primarily for this reason for the last fifty years before the actual partition took place in order to curtail the territorial boundary of Bengal. It was also possibly under consideration that East Bengal and Assam would be developed in that case. Andrew Fraser held such an opinion.



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 understaffed. 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 19<sup>th</sup> century. Organized piracy in the waterways had existed for at least a century.

In connection to the opinion of Sumit Sarkara, a British official Mr. McLane writes that until 1905 the reasons for partition of Bengal were latently administrative. In reality, along with administrative difficulties, there were so many problems of famine, of defense, or of linguistics those 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. For the administrative benefits in 1854, the Governor General was relieved of the direct administration of Bengal which was placed under a lieutenant governor.

In reality 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. Curzon explained the reason for partition as an administrative improvement while he visited the Eastern Bengal in the year before partition.

### **Political Causes**

A very vocal opposition developed, especially among the middle and upper classes in Kolkata. The British Government had divided Bengal to take political advantage. Motive for political gains behind partition is the predominant reason and this opinion has been held in recent times. Amallesh



Tripathi and Sumit Sarker had reached to a similar conclusion who think that certainly the plan for Bengal Partition was not just born out of the extreme desire to destroy the Congress which was anti-British but from the extreme hatred of the English Civilians towards the Bengalis and the need to solve the problems arising out of the hazards of administering a vast territorial expanse and the rise of the population in the province. With the extremist movement getting momentum the perception of anti-Congress feeling was added to it. He then pointed out how the hatred of the English bureaucrats towards the Bengalis had reached to an extreme point. It may be described as a psychological background to partition. Amallesh Tripathi clearly opined that the partition of Bengal got political shape originated from the British divide and rule policy. He strongly argued that to minimize and weaken the nationalistic spirit of the Bengal Curzon took the very stern action o partitioning Bengal.

The successor of Lord Curzon, Lord Minto who used to criticize him vehemently also believed that from a political point of view alone, partition to have been very necessary. The government officially published the idea in January 1904, and in February, Lord Curzon the Governor-General of India made an official tour to Eastern districts of Bengal to assess public opinion on the partition. He consulted with leading personalities and delivered speeches at Dhaka, Chittagong and Mymensingh, explaining the government's stand on partition. Under the British the province of Bengal was as large as France, with a population of seventy-eight and a half million, nearly as populous as contemporary France and Great Britain combined. The province included Bihar and Orissa and the Eastern region was notoriously under-governed. Curzon did not intend to divide Hindus, who were the majority in the West, from Muslims, the majority in the East but only Bengalis.

The idea of the partition of Bengal originated from political reasons alone is difficult to accept. Rather political advantage which emanated from a territorial re-adjustment and the contemporary administrative situation were more acceptable reasons for the partition. The letters which have been exchanged between Curzon and Fraser in the years between 1903 and 1905 signifies the political motive behind the partition of Bengal in 1905.

### **British Divide and Rule Policy**

Curzon commented on 24 May 1905 that, the best guarantee of the political advantage of their was its disliked by the Congress party. So this is obvious that Curzon didn't like the policies taken by the Indian National Congress till 1905. Craig Baxter suggests that the "divide and rule" policy was the real reason for partition. We can say that there were others, of course, in East Bengal who was a silent mass and Curzon took the political advantage of that. The policy of 'Divide and Rule' which the British had so often



## Bengal from Partition, 1905 to Provincial Election, 1937

applied in their administration was also used in this case. The political reason for the partition of Bengal was the most important although the Civilians were alert in keeping it a secret. In this context the ever growing British divide and rule policy played a pivotal role for the partition of Bengal. The leadership of the Indian National Congress also viewed the partition as an attempt to 'divide and rule' and as a proof of the government's vindictive antipathy towards the outspoken *Bhadralok* intellectuals. When the British government was thinking of the administrative advantages, the political advantages were also becoming clear and a political dimension was added to it and of course, in East Bengal Curzon took the political advantage of that.)

### Partition

The government announced the idea for partition in January 1904. Administrators and officers exchanged too many...



of Bengal as the Motherland and this conception offered a solid basis for the support of political objectives stimulated by religious excitement. Such a religious flavor gave the movement a widespread appeal among the Hindu masses.

### **Muslims Response**

The Muslims in East Bengal after initial opposition tended to be much more positive about the arrangement, believing that a separate region would give them more opportunity for education, employment, and so on. The partition became effective, was probably "the first attempt to consolidate Muslims of Bengal on a political platform. They found the partition effective for them. Before the partition it was West Bengal, mainly Calcutta and its adjacent area came under the British influence and enjoyed the facility of education, development and industrialization. The traditional and reformist Muslim groups - the Faraizi, Wahabi and Taiyuni - supported the partition. The Eastern part of Bengal due to lack of communication could not have the benefits of development. The socio-economic condition of the Muslim population was poor and they suffered further under the rule of Hindu Zaminders and Landlords. The rivers were full of pirates and a minimum amount was funded for education. The Muslim populations outnumbered the Hindu population in Eastern Bengal. Muslims had feelings of alleviation in the partitioning of Bengal as they thought that they would enjoy more freedom and opportunity for education, employment, politics and economy etc. The partition caused a boost in Bengali Literature and language and Muslim society underwent a social, economic and educational uplift.

Sir Bampfylde Fuller, became the first Lieutenant-Governor of the new province of East Bengal and Assam on 16 October 1905. When he arrived at Dacca, the Muslims accorded him a rousing reception. On 16 October 1905, Mohammedan Provincial Union was founded with Nawab Sir Salimullah as its patron. The All India Muslim League founded in 1906 supported the partition. Even though Fuller openly expressed favoritism towards Muslims on the ground of the partition.

Following the partition of Bengal, Dacca was reincarnated as the provincial capital of the newly constituted Muslim-majority province of Eastern Bengal and Assam. Dhaka's profile was raised in several spheres. The pulse of the public activities quickened too, and in 1906 the All India Muslim League was founded there at the initiative of the Nawab of Dacca. The British set about developing its infrastructure by laying out a 'formal' city adjacent to Old Dacca. A civil line type administrative quarter was developed around the Ramna area North of the railway line which served Old Dacca from the new enclave. Big colonial-style bungalows and several important administrative buildings were constructed, interspersed with open spaces which were criss-crossed by straight roads and winding avenues.



Among the other important buildings constructed in this period were Curzon Hall, the High Court Building, Secretariat, Government Press and the Museum. However, this expansion came to a frustrating halt in 1911 when, in the face of growing Bengali nationalism, the partition was annulled and the provincial capital moved to Kolkata. Dacca once again relegated to the obscure position of a mere divisional headquarters. Its population which between 1901 and 1911 had increased by 21 percent saw its growth halved after the capital was removed.

The people of the Eastern Bengal got an immediate result for the partition. In the new province of East Bengal and Assam, the Bengali Muslims were given preference in government service as they held only 15.5 government service while they represented 41.13 percent of the literate population. Muslim education started to be highly elevated. There was prospect of more government money for Muslim education. Between 1906 and 1911, with increased grants-in-aid, the number of Muslims in high schools in the new province rose from 8,869 to 20,729 and in Middle English schools from 14,100 to 38,702 which reflected the development in education sector of the newly formed province.

The chanting of *Bande Mataram* -Hail to the Motherland (a cry taken from a novel written by Bengali Hindu nationalist novelist Bankim Chatterjee) was seriously disliked by the Muslims, as it was associated with Hindu goddess Kali. Henceforth, Muslim League seriously objected to the use of *Bande Mataram*, the party anthem of Congress as the official anthem of government, whenever provincial Congress government was formed.

There were some exceptions also in case of supporting or protesting the partition of Bengal among the Muslim leaders and organizations. The Central National Muhammedan Association, an organization of the Muslims, protested against partition of Bengal. Syed Ameer Hossain, the Secretary of the Association wrote to the Chief Secretary in a memorandum that the Bangla speaking nation should not be divided and it was a plan which was unnecessary. Many influential Muslims who were landlords and many were associated with Congress politics residing in Kolkata objected to the partition of Bengal. Abul Kasem, Abdul Halim Ghuznavi, Abdur Rasul, Liaquat Hossain, Ismail Hossain Shiraji are noteworthy among them.

### **Hindus Response**

The partition met great opposition mainly from the influential educated middle-class Hindus. The educated Bengali Hindus of Bengal felt the partition a blow on them. The territorial adjustment touched their interest. They controlled most of Bengal's commerce and different professions. Calcutta lawyers apprehended that establishment of a Court of Appeal at Dhaka (Dacca) would diminish importance of their own High Court at Calcutta. Journalists feared that appearance of local newspapers would



## Formation of Muslim League, 1906

Formation of Muslim League is one of the remarkable events in the political history of Indian Sub-continent. It created a new chapter as well as paradigm in the political landscape of modern Indian history. After the creation of the Indian National Congress and its time as a representative party for the people of the Indian Sub-continent, there was felt a need to reassess its claims at unbiased representation. From the very start of its existence the Congress had shown clear its interest to safeguard the rights of Hindus, alone. Some of the Congress leaders adopted a revolutionary policy to establish Hindu Raj in the sub-continent under the guise of a national movement. Even most of the Muslim leaders didn't join in the Indian National Congress because of its biasness. Muslim leaders as well as the common Muslims got a platform to raise their voice and demands through Muslim League. Finally under the leadership of the All Indian Muslim League the state Pakistan came into existence in 1947.