

Historical Undercurrents and Theorisation of Partition of Indian Sub-Continent

Dr. Vaishali Raghuvanshi*

Assistant Professor (International Relations) School of Business Studies and Social Sciences, CHRIST, Deemed to be University, Bangalore, Karnataka, India

Abstract – International relation of South Asia is a complex and dynamic field. The equations between India and Pakistan have a conspicuous influence on the region. The two nuclear powers have had troubled relations since their inception. The friction between the two nation states is rooted in the event of partition of the Indian sub-continent in 1947. The history of South Asia has many threads. The paper aims to explore the strand of academic historiography that culminates in the event of partition. Such an exploration traces the British advent in India and their policy of divide and rule which forms the starting point of communal politics in India. These developments in turn lead to the two nation theory and the demand for Pakistan by Muslim League. The analysis of this strand of history suitably lends itself to theorisation of partition from the point of view of IR theories of constructivism and subaltern theory. This paper analyses the historical antecedents of partition and attempts to epistemologically situate it in IR theory with the help of constructivist and subaltern approaches.

Key Words- International Relations of South Asia, India, Pakistan, Partition, IR theory

-----X-----

1. INTRODUCTION

India and Pakistan are the two most important countries in South Asia. The dynamics between these two nations hold immense significance for the region. The relationship between the two countries has never been friendly. The two South Asian neighbours have fought four wars since 1947. The troubled relation of the two nations dates back to the times of partition. The Indian Subcontinent was bifurcated in 1947 and the event of partition was accompanied by communal riots and unprecedented violence. Resultantly, the developments in the bilateral relation between India and Pakistan have frequently been influenced by partition. This makes the analysis of partition a pertinent academic inquiry. There was a chain of event that took off during the British rule and culminated into division of the country. This paper sheds light on the history of Indian Subcontinent in order to better understand partition. The paper further theorises the event of partition from two different perspectives viz- Constructivist and Subaltern. The constructivist theory has been used to demonstrate how the events that led to partition were a social construction. On the other hand, the subaltern theory has been used to emphasise on the subaltern aspect of partition. The disciplinary historiography has concentrated too much on the elitist aspect and ignored the subaltern face of partition. The subaltern theory emphasizes on representing the human face of the event.

2. PARTITION: HISTORICAL UNDERCURRENTS

The history of the subcontinent reveals the chain of events and the forces that, ultimately culminated into the bifurcation of the sub-continent. The Indian Sub-Continent became home to both Hindus and Muslims since the advent of Islam in India.

“Islam came to India with Muslim invasions and Arab trade to the Malabar Coast in the 7th–8th century. Islamic expansion arrived in north India in the 12th century and Islam has since become a part of India's religious and cultural heritage” (Sharma 2004) By the time of colonization of India by the Imperialist forces Hindus and Muslims had co-existed in India for nearly five decades. The imperial policies of the British finally led to a situation where the Indian Muslims began to see themselves as a weak minority. They found themselves in a lose-lose situation in context of power sharing in a democratic setup. The British approach was grounded in the policy of divide and rule. They believed that a country divided on religious fault lines will be weak. Thus, it will not be able to pose any challenge to the colonisers. Mahatma Gandhi put it precisely in 1940 when he said “The British can retain their hold on India only by a policy of ‘divide and rule’. A living unity between the Muslims and Hindus is fraught with danger to their rule. It would mean an end to it.”

(Mehrotra 1970) The British idea of divide and rule first found manifestation in 1905 when Bengal was divided. H. Risely, the home secretary to the government of India, said about the partition that "Bengal united is a power; Bengal divided will pull in several different ways. One of our main objectives is to split up and thereby weaken a solid body of opponent to our rule." (Bose & Jalal 1997) The revolt of 1857 had made it clear to the British that a united Hindu-Muslim force can become a huge problem for the British imperialist ambitions. The British were also fearful of Muslims as they were the former rulers of the country for several decades. This propelled the British towards devising a policy for weakening the Muslim community.

The British started to weed out Muslims from important positions. This included removal of Emperor Shah Alam and other Muslims from important posts. Policies such as replacing Persian by English as the official language led to further dilution of Muslim concentration in the key administrative departments. The British further aimed at elevation of Hindus to create a potent counter against the Muslim. The Hindus were promoted to become landlords and were given the rights to collect land revenue. The Permanent Settlement of 1793 brought Hindus to important position from where they could develop and amass wealth. Also the introduction of democracy made sure that the country will be governed by the majority. The Muslims could never become a majority in the land where they were a permanent minority. This revitalised the Hindus and developed a permanent sense of insecurity in the Muslims. (Farah 2011) The Hindu revivalist movement also contributed in alienating Muslims to an inferior position. They deepened the differences between Hindus and Muslims. They were also not very appreciative of Muslims as the former rulers of India and considered them outsiders. Some of the reforms taken by Hindu revivalists were Shuddhi movement which sought to reconvert the Hindus who had adopted Islam, establishment of a society which shunned cow slaughter by Muslims and increasing the influence of Hindi over Urdu. (Farah 2011) By the decade of 1870s the British were again playing their cards to win over Muslims so as to develop this minority community into a significant "other" in the eyes of Hindus. They helped Muslim setup the Mohammedan Anglo Oriental College at Aligarh and played active part in successful conduct of All India Muslim Conference. These were the original institutions from where the leaders of the Muslim league and idea of separate Muslim state of Pakistan emerged. (Keen 1998) Further damage was done to the Hindu-Muslim equation when British came with separate electorates. "With the extension of the elective principle under Ripon's reforms of 1882-3, the British granted separate electorates to Muslims in local government bodies. Separate electorates were incorporated in the 1909 Morley-Minto reforms, which extended the links between the higher and lower councils." (Bose & Jalal, 1997) The effect of

communal electorates was even deeper in promoting communalism in India. The power dynamics at the provincial and the local level with separate electoral constituencies for Muslims made them a recognized minority. (Bose & Jalal 1997) The communal award of 1932 which was a result of, inter alia, efforts of Mian fazl-i-Hussain through All India Muslim Conference, upheld the legitimate status of communal electorates and allotted more constituencies to Muslims. The mistakes made by Congress and the nationalist forces compounded with the new born sense of Hindu superiority also added fuel in the communal fire. The congress' refusal to meet the modest demands of the Muslim League led to the latter going for demanding a separate state. "Jinnah, the Muslim League leader, put forward the Delhi proposal to Congress for a Hindu-Muslim settlement which demanded the introduction of reforms in the North-West Frontier Province and Baluchistan, the reservation of seats for Muslims on a population basis in the Punjab and Bengal and the allocation of one third of the seats in the central legislature for the Muslims" (Ispahani 1970) Congress did not agree to this which prompted the Muslim league to feel more insecure about the Muslims and demand a separate state for Muslims. The Round Table conferences of 1930 and 1931 could also have served as a patch up for Hindus and Muslims but it resulted in a deadlock because of the stubborn approach of both Hindus and Muslims.

The approach of Congress alarmed The Muslim League about the future of Muslims in India. Mohammed Ali Jinnah summed up the Muslim League's approach when he said that "The chief reason why the domestic political situation in India has deteriorated to a point which would have seemed almost inconceivable a few years earlier was the manifest purpose of the Congress to take over the heritage of British raj" (Ispahani 1970) The elections organised under the British rule also played a role in increasing the rift between The Muslim league and Congress. Before the elections of 1936-37 Jinnah and his associated did a lot of electoral campaigning in the Muslim Majority province to gain some political traction. The league also tried to strike a deal with the congress but to no avail. "Unable to prove its following in the Muslim-majority provinces, the League was spurned by the Congress at the centre. The League won an ignominious 4.4 per cent of the total Muslim vote cast". (Bose & Jalal 1997) The poor performance of the league in the electoral calculus provided a boost for the congress. However, the Muslim identity as a separate community had become very deep at that time. The last two decades had fostered an anti-congress attitude in Muslims of Bengal and Punjab. This was, up to some extent, because of the conduct of the congress government in provinces which asserted Hindu dominance.

The Muslim insecurity deepened with the arrival of the act of 1935. It was at this point of time that the Muslim League contemplated of a separate nation for Muslims. The idea of a separate Muslim state was given by Muhammad Iqbal in 1930 but his thoughts were rejected. In 1933, Chaudhary Rehmat Ali, a Cambridge student, invented the word Pakistan. Slowly and gradually the idea of Pakistan began to win the support of Muslims and the leaders of Muslim league. "So in March 1940, without specifying the exact geographical boundaries, the All-India Muslim League at its annual session in Lahore formally demanded independent Muslim states in the north-west and the north-east of India on the grounds that Indian Muslims were a nation." (Bose & Jalal 1997) The League's demand of a separate Muslim state was not seriously taken by the British or the Congress. However, Muslim League slowly hardened its stand. Jinnah became extremely stubborn regarding Pakistan and rejected all other offers which were not consistent with Muslim League's demand. The failure of Cripps's Mission, first Shimla Conference of 1945 and the Cabinet Mission plan could not budge the Muslim League. "In the 1945-46 elections Jinnah and the League won all the Muslim seats to the central assembly, and polled 75 per cent of the total Muslim vote cast in the provincial assembly elections." (Bose & Jalal 1997) The Muslim League became more and more desperate with the passage of time and the observed direct action day on 16th August 1946. The division of the country was inevitable by this time and it was during the tenure of Lord Mountbatten that India was divided between two nations.

3. CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH: THEORISING PARTITION OF INDIAN SUBCONTINENT

The constructivists have taken the scope of IR beyond the realist and rationalist approaches and have been able to explain phenomenon where these approaches have failed. "The focus of constructivism is on human awareness or consciousness and its place in world affairs. Much international relation theory, and especially neo realism, is materialist; it focuses on how the distribution of material power, such as military forces and economic capabilities define balance of power between states and explain the behaviour of states. Constructivists reject such a one sided material focus. They argue that the most important aspect of international relations is social, not material" (Jackson 2006). The partition of India was a social and political problem which can be adequately explained on the basis of tenets of constructivism. Constructivists emphasize on the role of national identities and self- concept that are formed through the social structure in the society. The constructivists have emphasized on the "social construction of identity". This process can be helpful to explain the troubled relations of the two countries.

The self- conception of a Hindu identity relating to India and a Muslim identity relating to Pakistan had started to take shape during the freedom struggle of India. There was a palpable chain of events that led to a social construction which culminated into the partition of India. With the advent of British the social construction of identities of Hindus and Muslims took a turn for the worse. The policy of divide and rule was central to the British rule in India. The British policy resulted in creation of separate identities of Hindus and Muslims whereby the Muslims began to see themselves as an insecure minority. The British encouraged the foundation of Muslim league which was the voice of Muslims of India and was founded to protect the rights of the Muslims who formed a minority community. Thus, Muslim league as a counter to the Congress tried to divide the Hindu and the Muslim interests. The Indian National Congress was built on a solid political philosophy of secularism. The secular image of Mahatma Gandhi and his fight for the cause of Muslims in movements such as Khilafat were likely to bring a positive environment of communal harmony whereby the two communities could have shunned the social idea of them being opposed to each other. However, soon after the end of the non-cooperation movement a rift between the leaders of two communities began to show. The difference was basically on the issue of power sharing. This rift was shrewdly used by the British to further their policy of divide and rule. The British policy of communal electorate added fuel to the fire. Also, the leaders of Muslim league, under the leadership of the charismatic Mohammad Ali Jinnah began to portray the Muslim community as an insecure minority which would be exploited in a democratic setup. This led to the Jinnah's Two Nation Theory which became the basis for the creation of Pakistan.

Based on these events and social idea propagated by the people associated with these events the masses began to divide. The idea of the partition of country was slowly and gradually being constructed by such events that drew a line of divide between Hindus and Muslims. The idea of the difference between Hindus and Muslims had become so deep by the decade of 1940 that once Winston Churchill wrote to Roosevelt that "he had no wish to allow Indian Muslims to be governed by congress Caucus and Hindu priesthood when 75 per cent of the Indian soldiers were Muslims" (Das 2000) In such an atmosphere when the British were convinced that the Muslim minority will not be treated fairly and when Muslim league was vociferously pushing for the creation of Pakistan, the partition was inevitable. The history of the social dynamics of India in medieval period and especially during the social struggle shows the social construction of identity and ideas that led to the partition of the country.

4. SUBALTERN THEORY: THEORISING PARTITION OF INDIAN SUBCONTINENT

The Task of history writing is an intricate one. The Indian subcontinent was divided in the year of 1947. However the same period marked the independence of India and the subsequent process of nation building. The partition was a time of suffering for the masses. However, historians have seldom focussed on the human face of partition. The nationalist theme of historiography has overshadowed the suffering of the people during partition. "Having a dissatisfaction with how the Independence and the Partition were represented in history, a group of Indian historians initiated serious debates about historiography—or the writing of history—of colonial India. Led by Ranajit Guha, this group of Indian historians, known as the Subaltern Studies group, inaugurated the Subaltern Studies project in the early 1980s in an attempt to revise elitist and nationalist historiography and promote discussion of subaltern themes in South Asian studies." (Guha & Spivak 1988) The subaltern theory concerns itself with the people who are not elite. The term was coined by Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci in his work "selections from the prison notebook." Guha took the concept of Subaltern from Gramsci's work. He expanded it and put it in Indian context. Guha referred the dominant groups as the elite group while the general masses that had to face subordination were referred as the subaltern group.

The subaltern approach to Indian history points some gaping holes in history writing. The Indian colonial history is obsessed with nationalism and has focussed on the glorification of the freedom struggle and elite leaders. In the process the common people and presentation of their lives have been ignored. This kind of depiction of history presents only a partial picture, specially, during the event of partition of Indian subcontinent. While the political side of the events during the partition was highlighted the human side was largely ignored. "The horrible side of the Partition—the violence of the Partition, together with its accompanied outcomes such as mass migration, refugee's, and rehabilitation—has been rarely mentioned." (Lee 2006) This kind of historiography presents a picture where the contribution of people in nation building takes the back seat.

Gyanendra Pandey, one of the pioneers of Subaltern approach, has written extensively on the problems with the nationalist history and the need to rewrite the History. He has mentioned why it is difficult to record the people's history. According to him, the depiction of violence in the works of history is very difficult. Pandey observes: "historical discourse has been able to capture and re-present the moment of violence only with great difficulty" (Pandey 1992) He maintains that in the present historical analysis, violence is considered to be something outside normalcy and its description is avoided. (Pandey 1992) It is a result of this approach that the accurate

description of violence is lacking in the present approach to Indian History. The specifics of violence are simply assumed in the current historical discourse. The main reason for this ignorance, Pandey describes, is the fascination of the Indian historians with nationalism." In nationalism, in this state-centred discourse, the historiography of Indian history produces history that exalts the merits of only a small portion of the society—that is, the nationalist elites." (Pandey 1992) This approach has led to undermining of the human problems and suffering during the events such as partition.

5. CONCLUSION

The history of the subcontinent makes it clear that partition was the result of different policies of British and the choices made by the Indian leaders. In the end, the stakes of Congress, Muslim League and British made partition almost inevitable. This has also been emphasised by the constructivist theory which portrays that partition was a socially constructed event. The partition of subcontinent also impacted a huge populace. Somehow their pain and suffering have gone into oblivion. The subaltern theorist have emphasised on the human face of partition. Thus different facets of the partition help us understand the entirety of the event.

REFERENCES:

- Bose, Sugata & Ayesha, Jalal (1997). *Modern South Asia: History, Culture, and Political Economy*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Das, Gurucharan (2000). *India Unbound*. New Delhi: Penguin Books
- Farah, Asma Ali (2011). 'Why Was India Partitioned at Independence?' Accessed on 24/02/2013 <http://www.e-ir.info/2011/07/09/why-was-india-partitioned-at-independence/>
- Guha, Ranajit & Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988). *Selected Subaltern Studies*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ispahani, M.A.H. (1970). 'Factors leading to the partition of British India' in C.H. Philips and M.D. Wainwright, 'The partition of India: policies and perspectives 1935 -1947' p no. 339, London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd.
- Jackson (2006). "Social Constructivism" Accessed on global.oup.com/uk/orc/bin/9780199285433/jackson_chap06.pdf
- Keen, Shirin (1998). "Partition of India". Spring. Accessed on 12-02-2013

<http://postcolonialstudies.emory.edu/partition-of-india/>

- Lee (2006). 'Silent Trauma: Representing Indian Partition in Subaltern Studies, Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India*'. Accessed on 17-02-2013 www.dengl.ndhu.edu.tw/ezfiles/43/1043/img/1487/207090697.pdf
- Mehrotra, S.R. (1970). 'The Congress and the partition of India' in C.H. Philips and M.D. Wainwright, 'The partition of India: policies and perspectives 1935-1947' p no.211, London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd.
- Pandey, Gyanendra (1992). "In Defense of the Fragment: Writing about Hindi-Muslim riots in India Today", *Representation* Vol.37:27-55
- Pandey, Gyanendra (2008). *The Gyanendra Pandey Omnibus*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Pandey, Gyanendra (2011). *Subalternity and Differences: Investigations from the North and the South*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Sharma, Usha (2004). *Cultural and Religious Heritage of India: Islam*. New Delhi: Mittal Publications.
- Zaman, Niaz (1999). *A Divided Legacy: The Partition in Selected Novel of India, Pakistan & Bangladesh*. Dhaka: University Press.

Corresponding Author

Dr. Vaishali Raghuvanshi*

Assistant Professor (International Relations) School of Business Studies and Social Sciences, CHRIST, Deemed to be University, Bangalore, Karnataka, India