



*Journal of Advances and
Scholarly Researches in
Allied Education*

*Vol. X, Issue No. XX,
Oct-2015, ISSN 2230-7540*

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AN
INTERNATIONALLY
INDEXED PEER
REVIEWED &
REFEREED JOURNAL

A Study on Bengal Partition

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Abstract – Bengal in ancient literatures is mentioned as a distinct region of South Asia, and throughout the first millennium A.D. it was governed by a succession of Buddhist and Hindu rulers. Muslim armies arrived in the region in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, and gradually their conquest culminated in Mogul rule after 1576. During the 1500's, British, Dutch, French, and Portuguese traders competed for control of profitable trade between the East Indies and Europe. By the 1600's, European trade settlements had cropped up in Bengal. The English government in 1600 to develop trade with India and the Far East chartered the East India Company (a mercantile company of England). By the mid-1700's, the company had become the strongest trade power in Bengal. Later, England took over Bengal Administration in 1757. At first, the Europeans met strong resistance from Nawabs who were in command of the territories. They demanded taxes in return for trade privileges. But after the Mogul Empire weakened towards 1700's, the Europeans increased their influence. Ambitious Mogul Nawabs, nobles, and generals competed for power. The Europeans took sides in many of these conflicts, offering their support in return for monopoly trade privileges and other rewards. East India succeeded in buying the Diwani (financial instrument) of huge Bengal state that comprised Bihar, Orissa and Assam from Emperor Shah Alam for Rs.26 lacks, sealing off the Muslim hold on the state for ever. Nawab Sirajudowla, (1756-1757), was the last independent Nawab of Bengal. He lost to the British Empire in the battle of Plessey, 23 June 1757. British company forces were led by Robert Clive. The Muslim rule established in Bengal by Turk soldier Ikhtiaruddin Muhammad-bin Bakhtiar 500 years ago came to a traumatic demise. The people of Bengal could not accept the British rule. 'Fakir' and 'Sanyashi' revolutions during 1760-1800, and 'Nil-Chashi' (Indigo farmers) movement challenged the British reign from the very outset. Under the leadership of Haji Shariatullah and Titumir the Bengalis kept the British niggling and at tenterhooks from 1831-1839. The Indian Soldiers, including Bengalis, revolted against the British in 1857. Karl Marx termed the revolt as the first ever movement for Independence by Indians. In May 1857 they revolted in Barackpore, West Bengal, and on 18 November in Chittagong. On 22 November the revolt spread to Dhaka. However with the machination of Khawja Abdul Ghani the British overcame the challenge. Ghani was later rewarded with the 'Nawab' title. After 1857, several secretaries of state for India as well as Lieutenant – Governors of Bengal thought of readjustment of boundaries of the Province because it was too large and actually in 1874 the creation of Assam as a Chief Commissioner's province to which were attached the Bengali – speaking districts of Sylhet, Cachar and Goalpara was intended to reduce the size of Bengal to comparatively manageable proportion.

Keywords: Vernacular Elite, Bhadraklok, Bengal Pact

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BRITISH RULE IN BENGAL: 1757-1947

The greatest discontinuity in the history of Bengal region occurred on June 23, 1757 when the East India Company became the virtual ruler of Bengal. Territorial rule by a trading company resulted in the commercialization of power. The initial effects of the British rule were highly destructive. As the historian R.C. Dutt notes, "The people of Bengal had been used to tyranny but had never lived under an oppression so far reaching in its effects, extending to every village market and every manufacturer's loom. They had been used to arbitrary acts from men in power but had never suffered from a system which touched their trades, their occupations, their lives so closely. The springs of

their industry were stopped; the sources of their wealth dried up". It was commonly alleged the plunder of Bengal directly contributed to the industrial revolution in England. The capital amassed in Bengal was invested in the nascent British industries. Lack of capital and fall of demand, on the other hand, resulted in de-industrialization in the East Bengal region. The prime and prosperous muslin industry virtually disappeared under the British rule.

However, British during its long run in South Asia contributed to the transformation of traditional society in various ways. The introduction of British law, a modern bureaucracy, new modes of communication, the English language and a modern education

system and the opening of the local market to international trade opened new horizons for development in different spheres of life. New ideas from the West during the period enthused and fermented South Asian mind to a great extent. The upshot of this ferment was streams of intellectual movements which are often compared to the Renaissance. Besides, the Pan Britannica imposed on South Asia created a universal empire that brought different areas of the sub- continent closer to each other. The British domination in Bengal promoted both the forces of unity and division in the society. The city-based Hindu middle classes became the fiery champions of all-India based nationalism. The Machiavellian rule also brought to surface the rivalry between the Hindus and Muslims, which had lain dormant during the 500 years of Muslim rule. Class conflict between Muslim peasantry and Hindu intermediaries called Boardwalks during Muslim rule was diffused by the fact that these intermediaries themselves were agents of the Muslim rulers. Besides, the scope of exploitation was limited in the subsistence economy of pre-British Bengal. The economic exploitation of the British provoked an intense reaction against the “Raj” (British regime) in Bengal. The grievances against British rule varied from community to community. The Hindu middle class, which styled itself as the Bhadrak (gentlemen), was the greatest beneficiary of British rule. The Hindu middle class primarily originated from trading classes, intermediaries of revenue administration and subordinate jobs in the imperial administration. On the contrary, the establishment of the British rule deprived the Muslim aristocracy (Ashraf)² of state patronage. The “Immigrant Muslim/Upper-Caste Hindu” coalition, which characterized Muslim rule, was replaced by a new entente of British and caste Hindus. The new land settlement policy of the British ruined the traditional Muslim landlords. The Muslim aristocracy which had hitherto been disdainful of their native co-religionists sought the political support of the downtrodden Muslim peasantry (Atraf)³ who were exploited by Hindu landlords and moneylenders. The Muslim elite in Bengal manipulated the social insecurity of the less privileged to their advantage without having to give up their exclusiveness. The conflict between Muslim peasants and Hindu landlords was reinforced by the rivalry between Hindu and Muslim middle classes for the patronage of the imperial rulers. In the 19th century, both Hindu and Muslim middle classes expanded significantly. The Muslim middle class did not remain confined to the traditional aristocracy, which consisted primarily of immigrants from other Muslim countries. The British rule of Bengal contributed to the emergence of vernacular elite from among locally converted Muslims in the second half of the 19th century. This was facilitated by a significant expansion of jute cultivation in the Eastern region of Bengal (now Bangladesh). The increase in jute exports benefited the surplus farmers (Jotedars) in lower Bengal where the Muslims were a majority. The economic affluence of surplus farmers encouraged the expansion of secular education among local Muslims. For example, the number of Muslim students

in Bengal increased by 74 percent between 1882-1883 and 1912-1913. Faced with the economic and cultural domination of the Bhadrak (Hindu intermediaries in Bengal) and the Ashraf (traditional Muslim aristocracy), the newly created Muslim Jotedars, who constituted the vernacular elite, and Muslim peasants (Atraf) closed ranks. Despite their outward unity, the coalition of various Muslim interest groups in Bengal was fragile. The interests and ideological orientations of these groups were dissimilar. Unlike the Jotedars and Atraf, the Ashraf in Bengal spoke Urdu. The vernacular Muslim elites and peasants in Bengal wanted agrarian reforms; the Ashraf was a staunch proponent of absentee landlordism. The vernacular Muslim elite and the Atraf identified themselves with the local culture and language; the Ashraf was enthralled by Islamic universalism. The internal contradictions of the Muslim society in Bengal were naturally mirrored in their political life. Initially, the leadership of the Muslim community in Bengal belonged to the Ashraf for two reasons. First, the size of the vernacular elite was too small in the beginning of the 20th century and the vernacular elite itself tried to imitate the traditional aristocracy. Secondly, because of the institutional vacuum in rural areas, it was very difficult to politically mobilise the Bengali Muslim masses. The easiest means of arousing such masses was to appeal Muslim identity. The leadership of the Muslim masses in Bengal lay with the Ashraf who monopolized the religious leadership. The political rivalry between Muslim Ashraf and Hindu Bhadrak first surfaced when the British partitioned the province of Bengal in 1905 for administrative reasons. The nascent Muslim middle class under the leadership of the Muslim Nawab of Dhaka supported the partition in the hope of gaining the patronage of British rulers. To the Hindu ‘Bhadrak’⁴ who had extensive economic interests on both sides of partitioned Bengal, the move to separate the Bengali-speaking areas in East Bengal and Assam was a big jolt. They viewed it as a sinister design to weaken Bengal which was the vanguard of the struggle for independence. The Bhadrak class idolized the idea of “Golden Bengal”. Though initially the anti-partition movement was non-violent, the dark anger of the Hindu middle class soon found its expression in terrorist activities. The emotionally charged atmosphere culminated in communal riots. The partition of Bengal ultimately turned out to be a defeat for all. The Raj had to eat humble pie and annul the partition in 1911. To the Muslims, the annulment of the partition was a major disappointment. It virtually shook their faith in the British rulers. To the Hindu Bhadrak of Bengal, the annulment was a pyrrhic victory. “The net result of these developments in Bengal during the first decade of this century, so far as the Bhadrak leadership of Bengal was concerned, lay in the exposure of its isolation, its inner contradictions and the essentially opportunistic character of its politics.” The communal politics of confrontation and violence, which erupted during the partition of Bengal, were interrupted by a brief honeymoon during the non-cooperation movement led by the Indian National Congress and the Khilafat movement of the Indian Muslims in the

second decade of 20th century. Bengal witnessed in the 1920's, the emergence of the charismatic leadership of Chitta Ranjan Das who had the foresight to appreciate the alienation of the Muslim middle classes. In 1923, Das signed a pact with Fazlul Huq, Suhrawardy and other Muslim leaders. This pact, which is known as the Bengal Pact, provided guarantees for due representation of Muslims in politics and administration. However, the spirit of Hindu-Muslim rapprochement evaporated with the death of C.R. Das in 1925. But even if Das were alive, he might not have succeeded in containing the communal backlash. The communal problem was not unique to Bengal; it became the main issue in All-India politics. As communal tensions mounted in the 1930s, the Muslim Ashraf of Bengal, which had close ties with the Muslim leadership like Sir Syed Ahmad Khan in other parts of the sub-continent, chalked out courses to confront communal policy pursued by their Hindu cohorts apparently to subdue them to submission to avenge 500 years Muslim rule in the subcontinent. Partition Finding Bengal Presidency equivalent to France with significantly a large population for one governor to administer, the then Viceroy of India, Lord Curzon got it split into two, East and West Bengal, apparently to promote effective administration. Over the years the eastern region remained neglected and under-governed. The split was aimed at an improved administration to subsequently benefit the population in east Bengal with new schools and employment opportunities. The province of Bengal had an area of 489,500 sq. km. and a population of over 80 million. Eastern Bengal was almost isolated from the western part by geography and poor communications. In 1874 Assam, including Sylhet, was severed from Bengal to form a Chief-valen Bengal with this large population The new province named Eastern Bengal and Assam with Dhaka as its capital and subsidiary headquarters at Chittagong. Its area would be '106,540 sq. miles with a population of 31 million, where 18 million would be Muslims and 12 million Hindus'5. 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 Eastern Bengal and Assam would have a clearly demarcated western boundary and well defined geographical, ethnological, linguistic and social characteristics. The government of India promulgated their final decision in a resolution dated July 19, 1905 and the partition of Bengal was affected on October 16 of the same year. The province of Bengal and Assam came into being on October 16, 1905 through a Proclamation. Incidentally, the partition went in favor of the Muslims. Before the partition, West Bengal, being the first area to come under western influence, was developed and industrialized. It was a striking contrast to the eastern part where the Muslim peasantry was crushed under the Hindu landlords, the river system was infested with pirates, and very few funds were allocated for education. It was dreaded

as a place of banishment. The partition helped boost Bengali literature and language; efforts were also made towards the social, economic and educational uplift of the Muslims. The Muslims outnumbered the Hindus in East Bengal and this alleviated the Bengali Muslims politically and economically. The Muslims of India welcomed the partition of Bengal, but the Hindu community strongly opposed it. Hindu protagonists alleged that the partition was affected on linguistic, rather than religious, grounds followed, with the Hindi, Oriya and Assamese areas separated to form separate administrative units later. The administrative capital of British India was moved from Calcutta to New Delhi as well. This resulted in a series of unprecedented agitation by Hindus. They accused Lord Curzon of deliberately dividing Hindus and Muslims by drawing a line between the two communities in Bengal. They thought the Muslims were favored with the creation of a new province, where they were in a clear majority. Lord Curzon intentionally had struck a deadly blow to what they claimed Bengali nationality. They branded him upholder of the devilish policy of 'divide and rule'. Bengali Hindus spearheading a political agitation for greater participation in governance thought their position would be weakened. Since Muslims would now dominate in East Bengal. They choreographed country-wide anti-British violent protests, boycotts and even an assassination attempt against the Governor of the new province of West Bengal. They launched a mass agitation, declaring October 16 as a day of mourning in Calcutta and patterned the 'Swadeshi Movement'6 against the British as the Chinese once boycotted American goods. Bande-Mataram was raised to charge the Hindu sentiment to protect worship of lord Shivaji as a national hero. This organized movement took a turn resulting in political sabotage and communal riots across the country. The largely Hindu populated West Bengal rose against the partition. Opposition by Indian National Congress was led by Sir Henry John Stedman Cotton, then Chief Commissioner of Assam, and a staunch opponent to Lord Curzon. Cotton, a Liberal MP for Nottingham East coordinated the successful campaign to oust the first lieutenant- governor of East Bengal, Sir Bampfylde Fuller. In 1906, Rabindranath Tagore wrote "Amar Shonar Bangla" (Golden Bengal) as a rallying mantra for proponents of annulment of partition, which, much later, in 1972, ironically became the national anthem of Bangladesh. Keeping in view the fluid political situation in India and the cult of Hindu revivalism, the British decided to undo their decision to please the Hindus. The provinces were reunited in 1911 to the great dismay of the Muslims. The act of annulling the partition under Hindu pressure created a huge political cleavage and left the Muslims saddened and disappointed. The Muslims in East Bengal became aware that the Hindu majority was hell bent upon denying them more opportunity for education, employment etc that the new province had in store for them. Partition barely

lasted half a decade before it was annulled in 1911. However, the reversal of partition decision continued to impact the political course in the province. In 1919, separate elections established Muslims and Hindus in their colour. Prior to this, many members of both communities of Bengal had advocated national solidarity. Now, distinctive communities developed, with their own political agendas. Muslims, too, dominated the Legislature, due to their overall numerical strength of roughly twenty eight to twenty two million. Nationally, Hindus and Muslims began to demand the creation of two independent states, one to be formed in majority Hindu and one in majority Muslim areas with most Bengali Hindus now supporting partitioning Bengal on this basis. Also, Muslims of India took cue from the Bengal episode and prepared themselves to struggle with Bengali cohorts for a separate homeland to salvage themselves from Hindu domination once the British quit India. British had suffered massively in devastating two World Wars that along with others it had engaged with Germany under Adolph Hitler towards the first half of the 20th century. Also, Muslims of India took cue from the Bengal episode and prepared themselves to struggle with Bengali cohorts for a separate homeland to salvage themselves from Hindu domination once the British quit India. British had suffered massively in devastating two world wars that along with others it had engaged with Germany under Adolph Hitler towards the first half of the 20th century. The divide along religious line between Hindus and Muslims in Bengal that had come to the fore in the wake of partition and its annulment under violent protest resorted by Hindu majority still remained there leading to its Partition in 1947. The law invoked in 1905 had to be implemented there more than four decades to fulfill the political needs of the parties involved. The Muslims wanted the whole province to join the Muslim state, Pakistan. In 1947, Bengal was partitioned for the second time, this time specifically on religious grounds. It became East Pakistan. However, on 20 June 1947, the members of the Bengal Legislative Assembly cast three separate votes on the proposal to partition Bengal: In the joint session of the house, comprising of all the members of the Assembly, the division of the joint session of the House stood at 126 votes against and 90 votes for joining the Indian Constituent Assembly. Then the members of the Muslim-majority areas of Bengal in a separate session passed a motion by 106-35 votes against partitioning Bengal and instead joining a new Constituent Assembly of Pakistan as a whole. This was followed by the separate meeting of the members of the non-Muslim-majority areas of Bengal who by a division of 58-21 voted for partition of the province.

Under the Mountbatten Plan, a single majority vote in favor of partition by either notionally divided half of the Assembly would have decided the division of the province, and hence the house proceedings on 20 June resulted in the decision to partition Bengal. This set the stage for the creation of West Bengal as a province of the Union of India and

East Bengal as a province of the Dominion of Pakistan. In a referendum held on 7 July, the electorate of Sylhet gave a verdict in favor of joining East Bengal.

The Boundary Commission headed by Sir Cyril Radcliff decided on the territorial demarcation between the two newly created provinces. The power was finally officially transferred to Pakistan and India on 14 and 15 August, respectively, under the Indian Independence Act, 1947. However, in 1971 East Pakistan became the independent state of Bangladesh after a failed military action. Partition may sometimes be necessary as a pragmatic strategy to avoid bloodshed but more often than not this leads to new problems that divide even more people, hurting their ethnic ethos and multiplying their emotional and economic agonies and sufferings for long. As partition always produces discontent and bickering among communities which are aspiring to attain quick prosperity and success. Bengal saw huge spill of blood in its three splits: 1905, 1947 and finally in 1971.

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