

WHY THIS SPECIAL ISSUE ON PARTITION?

Is history too much with us? In some sense, yes, but in its broader and deeper sense, no.

To the extent that history is a political weapon, it has been very much with us and we can claim to have made very effective use of it. The moment Pakistan's founder Muhammad Ali Jinnah declared that Urdu will be the only state language of Pakistan, we were immediately able to plunge ourselves into a protest movement simply because history gave us a solid sense of our linguistic and cultural past, and armed with that, we were able to confidently march forward and establish our right to Bangla as a national language of Pakistan.

It was again our keen sense of history that made us conscious of our past economic prosperity, our natural resources, and the subsequent deprivation during the Pakistan period that fuelled our struggle for regional autonomy and the movement for the six-points, formulated by Bangabandhu.

Finally, it was our firmly rooted sense of history that ignited our dream of fighting for freedom and establishing an independent and sovereign country—our beloved Bangladesh.

However glorious and effective our focus on history has been, it has been of a limited scope. For us the history of our Liberation of 1971 appears to have completely overwhelmed our memory of 1947. Since Pakistan was an outcome of communal politics and Bangladesh that of nationalistic values, our feeling has been that there is very little for us to learn from the experiences of Partition. Since liberation, we have hardly ever reflected, as an organised intellectual pursuit, on the causes of the anti-colonial struggle and the reasons behind one of the greatest tragedies in human history—the communal riots and the consequent deaths of millions of Hindus and Muslims during Partition. What should have been the most celebrated moment of South Asia's

history—freedom from colonialism—became a moment that brought death and tragedy to millions and uprooted millions others, changing forever the economic and cultural landscape of one of the most successful regions of the world in history.

The reason for *Star Weekend's* special issue on the Partition, the idea for which originated from a suggestion by Professor Ali Reaz of Illinois University (one of our regular columnists) to commemorate the 70th anniversary, is to revive our interest in the history of Partition. In popular memory, the Partition is mostly, and justly, remembered for the tragedy that it represents, and not for the failure—of heritage, commonality, and a thousand years of living side by side—of the politics of the day. Why did one stream of events become so inexorable that it overwhelmed all others and turned neighbours into killers?

In that sense, Partition, most significantly, is a lesson in abject failure of understanding between two very large communities—Hindus and Muslims. Unbelievable as it may sound now, the Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, and other communities lived side by side for hundreds of years, mostly in peace, at times in conflict, but not along the rigid communal divides that British rulers formulated to suit their divide and rule policy.

It started with the British desire to know the mix of the population that they were ruling. The 1871 census gave rise to an emerging sense of separate identities among the cultural, ethnic, and religious groups. This census attempted to list every Indian according to language, caste, religion, etc. As it happened, religious identities were attributed to groups when census takers were unsure because of the diverse and extremely intermingled nature of the religious practices that were being recorded. So suddenly one became a member of this or the other group or even religion, as labelled by the census official, without being personally aware of his or her transformation. But historically, religious and cultural practices had overlapped and gotten entwined between groups of people and it would be quite common that one village or groups of villages took up certain religious practices of another.

Now, belonging to a particular group became crucial not only to an individual's identity but far more importantly for his future political and economic prospects. This made it almost mandatory that individuals identify themselves as members of a particular community.

The numbers made 'identities' strong or weak, and as such, getting the numbers together—mobilising the masses—became a part of self-assertion and acquiring influence in the

power game. As majorities emerged with their inbuilt confidence, so did the minorities with their fears, and the British played on both, especially the latter. And as it became more and more evident that due to the changing power dynamics and the rising consciousness of the Indian population there was likely to be, in however limited a scale, more power-sharing in the coming days, 'identities' and the 'numbers' each group represented became vital. Thus, a very powerful incentive for identity-based politics became internalised as greater autonomy was being envisaged for the Indian population.

There was no stopping the identity-based politics from then on, and its Hindu-Muslim manifestation ultimately led to the Partition. Unfortunately, the identity politics, to which the Partition was seen as a solution in 1947, still haunts the subcontinent and create ever-new divisions among the communities that call it home. And for this, discussions of Partition are not only relevant today, but of crucial importance. Especially so, because scholarship on the Partition had been largely limited to Punjab and the West Bengal, and accounts relating to what is now Bangladesh had not received the proper attention they deserve. Another lacking was that the focus on the politics of the Partition overshadowed the narratives of how individuals on the peripheries—such as women, Dalits and subalterns—experienced the event.

In this special issue, commemorating the 70th anniversary of the Partition, we bring together a set of writers from Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan, who in their respective fields—from academics to arts—have contributed to a deeper understanding of the fateful events of Partition and its continued repercussions. We have also included oral histories, collected by the 1947 Partition Archive, of individuals who witnessed and survived events pre- and post-1947. These articles seek to see the Partition from new perspectives, with a specific focus on the erstwhile East Bengal.

We express our heartfelt gratitude to all of them for their invaluable contributions and the perspectives they provide which will surely help us look at the Partition, not as something fixed in time, but as an event that still shape politics and everyday existence(s) lived in geographical divisions resulting from 1947.

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Note: Throughout the magazine, Partition has been spelled both with an uppercase and with a lowercase 'p' in order to accommodate the preferences of the respective authors of each article.