

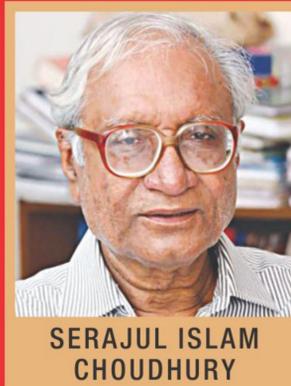
Who is to blame for the 1947 Partition of India and the large-scale violence that it triggered? There are accusations and recriminations. The Indian National Congress blamed the Muslim League, while the Muslim League blamed the Congress. It can't be said that there is no truth in these conflicting claims as both parties were responsible to some extent. Both had refused to compromise, obstinately clinging to their demands, which raised the prospect of a civil war avoidable only by partition, but the main culprit—the 'third party' as Gandhi called them—were the British. The Partition was their doing. It was their constant provocations that raised tensions between the two parties, and the inevitable happened.

That notorious imperialist strategy—'divide and rule'—was once again in action. The British,

India and Pakistan. But by then it was too late. The subcontinent could never really recover from the bloody aftermath of the Partition.

Many British individuals, however, were against the Partition of India. Lord Mountbatten, for example, at one point seemed to regret the decision to divide India. In his words, he had to give in to the demands of the 'crazy' and 'foolish' Pakistan. But the Partition was not brought forth by one man. Maybe Mountbatten wanted to bolster his credentials, which included his 'gallantry' during the Second World War, by keeping India intact as well as a part of the British Commonwealth—although for the British, an undivided India would have meant greater leverage. The Partition was a political affair and it happened as a direct result of state intervention. Congress and League were mere tools in this

# HOW A NATIONALIST MOVEMENT TURNED COMMUNAL



SERAJUL ISLAM CHOUHDURY

as part of that strategy, appeared to favour the Hindus sometimes, while other times they appeared to favour the Muslims. But in reality, they only ever cared about their own interests. So they gave them dominions through partition, instead of independence, with the power left in the hands of puppet governments that would safeguard their interests. Congress had for a while considered total independence but eventually settled for an arrangement based on the amendment of the Government of India Act, 1935, meaning India would still be a part of the British Commonwealth. The Muslim League, on the other hand, didn't care about independence. All it wanted was Pakistan, so it had no problem whatsoever with a dominion status. So these archrivals, who had never seen eye to eye about anything, finally found a common cause: India-Pakistan split, although just two days into 'independence,' both parties were shocked to see the Radcliffe Line, the boundary that demarcated

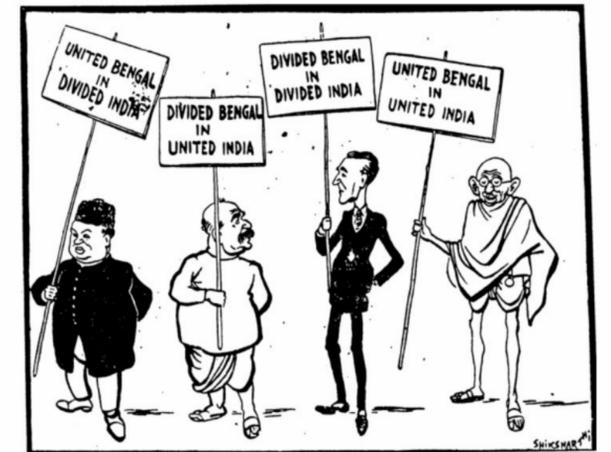
game although they didn't know it. That said, their interests were in many ways linked to that of the British, and their activities more in keeping with the British tradition than that of their own people. Both nursed an ambition to rule. For the general public, all three parties were essentially the same.

According to philosopher Friedrich Hegel, there is no history without state. There is little truth in that. But that state can wield enormous influence in political decisions, especially if that state happens to be a colony of the British Empire, was obvious in the way the Indian Partition took place.

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad argued that the idea of Partition was first conceived in 1923 when the Bengal Pact—the Chittaranjan Das-led agreement on equal power sharing between Bengal's Hindus and Muslims—was rejected by the central leadership of Congress. Azad further said, quite correctly, that had Chittaranjan Das not died prematurely, there would have been a new



The conference in New Delhi (June 7, 1947) where the partition plan was disclosed (left to right): Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, Lord Ismay, adviser to Mountbatten, Lord Louis Mountbatten, Viceroy of India, and Muhammad Ali Jinnah, President of the All-India Muslim League. (Photo by Keystone/Partition archive)



A cartoon in the Amrita Bazar Patrika published in May 1947, graphically captured the doubts about the fate of Bengal.

**It's true that British rule united India, but uniting the people of this subcontinent was never the intention of the British.**

dimension in communal harmony in India. At that time, there was no one in Congress but Das to challenge Gandhi's authority, and had he been alive, he would have tried to keep Bengal's politics away from the influence of the centre. But whether he would have succeeded to do that is difficult to say. He would have faced opposition from not only Congress and League, but also the government of British India, because all three parties were in favour of a centralised political system, and they would have resisted any attempt at keeping Bengal's politics separate.

It's true that British rule united India, but uniting the people of this subcontinent was never the intention of the British. After the First World War, Rabindranath Tagore talked about imperialism being 'the python's unification policy'—a python that, he said, 'promotes devouring as unifying.' This is exactly what the British did in India. They didn't want to make India united; they wanted to devour whatever they could squeeze out of it. But they knew from the beginning that turning its people into slaves would be impossible, so they followed the more