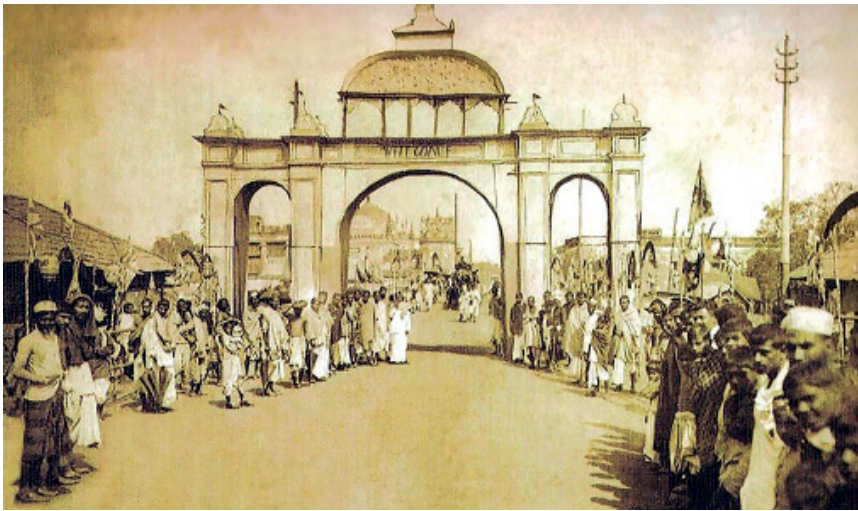




(L) A mass meeting of Muslims held at Dhaka on September 4, 1906 in favour of the partition of Bengal. The photo was published in *The Sphere* on October 27, 1906 (Courtesy: Bangladesh on Record). (R) Citizens of Dhaka waiting along Islampur Road to welcome Sir Fuller, first Lieutenant Governor of the new province of Eastern Bengal and Assam on October 16, 1905 (Photo: Fritz Kapp).



The decision to partition Bengal in 1905

On the 114th anniversary of the first partition of Bengal we are reprinting this article which attempts to assess British motives behind the partition plan.

JOHN R MCLANE

The two main objects of the partition were, “the reinvigoration of Assam and the relief of Bengal.” These were the objects stated in public, and the confidential official and private correspondence confirms that unquestionably these were the fundamental purposes. Nevertheless, the proposed partition was denounced almost immediately as “an attempt to break up our presidencies and to break up our nationalities, to divide us and rule.” The idea that Bengal was divided in order to undermine the political strength of the Bengalis has survived to the present day. But was there any justification for this belief? Was there really a hidden, political object or were the suspicions of British motives unfounded?

Proposals to partition Bengal had been discussed during different administrations since the 1860s. During Curzon’s Viceroyalty the question was brought forward again when the Nizam of Hyderabad agreed to transfer Berar to British India.

The chief advocate of a reduction in the size of Bengal seems to have been A.H.L. Fraser, who first informed Curzon of the boundary proposals. His views are of supreme interest because his intention actually was what many have suspected but never proved, namely, to divide the Bengal in order more easily to rule them. This is especially important since Curzon had great respect for Fraser’s views and appointed him Lieutenant Governor of Bengal in 1903. During his Presidency of the Indian Police Commission in 1902, Fraser, like Curzon, had been impressed by the evidence collected showing that the administration of Bengal was out of touch with the people. He urged upon Curzon that if Bengal were smaller, its Government might supply the sympathetic and efficient Govern-

off from eastern Bengal did not contain enough Muslims to give them a majority in the new province. The bulk of the Bengalis, Hindu and Muslim, would have remained under the administration of Calcutta. In the official comments on the original plans, it was not suggested that the Muslim community in particular would benefit from partition. Moreover, almost five months after the partition plan was announced, the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Bampfylde Fuller, informed Curzon confidentially that he thought Bengal could be better relieved by taking away [Muslim-dominated] Bihar than by taking away Dhaka and Mymensingh. It is not likely that Fuller would have been unaware of a plan

the agitation against the original partition plan. Critics of partition repeatedly asserted that the Bengali people were united by a common history, language, and race, and that to divide Bengal would be to divide a nation. This was what Lord Curzon termed the sentimental opposition.

The official opinions elicited by Lord Curzon’s Government in January and February 1904 on the proposal to transfer Dhaka and Mymensingh Districts, Chittagong Division, and Hill Tippera to Assam revealed that educated Bengalis were almost unanimously hostile to the partition plan and that the masses were indifferent. None of the opinions distinguished between Hindu and Muslim

was Nawab Salimullah of Dhaka. It has been pointed out that Nawab Salimullah was obliged to the Government of Bengal for past financial help, that the value of his real estate would have been increased by the establishment of a capital at Dhaka, and that after partition was effected, he was appointed to the Bengal and Indian Legislative Councils and was lent a very large sum of money by the Government of India. But it would be entirely misleading to suggest that Nawab Salimullah’s personal interests resulted in the widespread support which the larger partition scheme received from the Bengali Muslims in 1905. The Bengali Muslims had few newspapers or political organisations and they fared badly in competition with the Hindus for education and government employment.

Muslim agriculturists in the eastern districts could also expect to benefit from the partition. There had been reports that Muslims were losing in competition with the Hindus for control of the land. In 1896, the Commissioner of Chittagong Division had warned of the political danger of this process.

“For some time the Hindu minority has taken the lead in all movements,.... and the Hindu proprietary - that of the first degree or the peasant proprietary alike - is fast increasing and is taking the place of the Muhammadans as rent-receivers, but not as tillers of the soil....That the ascendancy of the Hindu minority at the expense of the Muhammadans....may be a cause for political anxiety can scarcely be doubted.”

This view was a minority one and did not weigh heavily in the considerations concerning the partition but it did exist and it influenced Government policy after 1905.

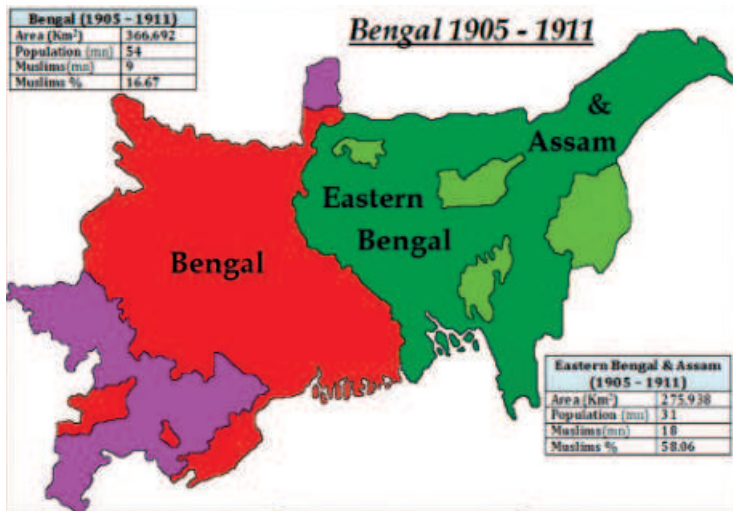
By 1911 the position of the Bengali Muslims had improved through the opening of new jobs in Eastern Bengal and Assam and the abolition of the competitive examination for the provincial civil service. Whereas in 1901 they held roughly one-eighth of the 1,235 higher appointments, in 1911 they occupied almost one-fifth of the 2,305 gazetted appointments held by Indians. Thus, while recognition of Muslim interests was an important factor in the official support for a wider scheme of partition, this recognition was not the result of an intention to alienate Hindus from Muslims. Curzon, Fraser, and other officials did not foresee the communal antagonism which they inadvertently stirred.

The political advantages to be gained by dividing the Bengalis had grown more important in the eyes of Curzon and other officials between 1903 and 1905, although they remained secondary to the administrative and economic advantages. The Government of Bengal in its letter of 6 April 1904 said that the predominance of Calcutta in Bengal’s political life was “not wholly to the advantage of the people of Eastern Bengal.” The Muslims were said generally to be unsympathetic to the political leadership of Calcutta and others felt the influence of Calcutta “to be of a somewhat tyrannical character.” The agitation against the partition was illustrative of the disadvantage “that may result from the subordination of Bengal to Calcutta.” Lord Curzon, too, during his trip to East Bengal in February 1904, had remarked on the alleged role of Calcutta in manufacturing public opinion in the *mofussil*. But the political argument was stated most fully in the Government of India’s letter of February 2, 1905 asking the Secretary of State’s approval for the final scheme. It was subsequently published in a Parliamentary Paper on the partition and it gave the nationalists their first concrete evidence that the partition had a political object. It said: “....it cannot be for the lasting good of any country or any people that public opinion or what passes for it should be manufactured by a comparatively small number of people at a single centre

and should be disseminated thence for universal adoption, all other views being discouraged or suppressed. The present agitation furnishes a notable illustration of the system under which a particular set of opinions expressed practically in the same words is sent out with a mandate from Calcutta to be echoed in the form of telegraphic protests and formal memorials from a number of different places all over Bengal. From every point of view, it appears to us desirable to encourage the growth of centres of independent opinion, local aspirations, local ideals, and to preserve the growing intelligence and enterprise of Bengal from being cramped and stunted by the process of forcing it prematurely into a mould of rigid and sterile uniformity. In course of time, if the subtle tendencies which determine social expansion and intellectual advancement are only given a fair field, it may be expected that such centres will arise among the Muhammadans at Dhaka, among the natives of Behar, and among the Uriyas at Cuttack.”

Several conclusions emerge from the preceding discussion. The British left the impression that a dark political motive lay behind the partition. In fact, the original partition plan of 1903 was conceived mainly as a means of relieving an administration with eighty million subjects, and not of weakening any political group. That there was no major political motive is clear from the official and private correspondence as well as from the limited nature of the transfer of territory first proposed. The 1903 plan would not have fulfilled a major political objective even if there had been one. Second, the 1903 plan would not have helped the administration of Bengal or Assam as much as the plan ultimately effected in 1905. The 1905 plan is logical and understandable on administrative grounds alone, and those were the grounds on which the greatest part of the discussion centred. Third, before 1903 Bengali politics were so lethargic that the British had little reason for trying to divide Bengalis politically. However, the vehemence of the agitation in 1903 and 1904 suggested there might be a political advantage to partition. Yet the political justification for partition never took on primary importance in official discussions. It was more an additional justification and an afterthought than a determining consideration. Fourth, the political motive does not seem to have been communal as many people would like to believe. The political motive was to distribute Bengali politicians, overwhelmingly Hindu, between two provinces. When Curzon emphasised the benefits likely to fall to the Muslims from partition, he was looking for their support for his policies. That the Muslims were economically weak was an obvious if lamentable fact of Bengali life. To ignore it would have been un-humanitarian and in the long run politically dangerous. To expect British officials to have avoided the use of communal categories would be to expect a vision few British or Indians possessed. Last, and most important, the actual result of the partition was the eruption of communalism. While there had been signs that politics were becoming more communal in the United Provinces with Syed Ahmed Khan and Madan Mohan Malaviya, in the Punjab with Lala Lajpat Rai, and in Bombay with Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Bengal had been relatively free of tension. The tragedy of partition was that relations between unintegrated communities should have been so needlessly disturbed.

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Map of Bengal (1905-11).

COURTESY: TARIQ AMIR

ment it then lacked. But this was not all. Fraser had a further political object in mind to which he “attaches the utmost weight, and which,” Curzon wrote, “cannot be absent from our consideration.” Fraser wanted to sever Dhaka and Mymensingh Districts from Bengal because they were: “the hot bed of the purely Bengali movement, unfriendly if not seditious in character, and dominating the whole tone of Bengali administration.” Curzon clearly agreed with this.

Thus, there definitely was an intention to “divide and rule.” But the political motive should be seen in its proper perspective. At no place in the official or private consultations does it appear to have weighed as heavily as the administrative and economic argument for the partition.

Furthermore, the original political goal was not to divide Muslims from Hindus, as some people think. Rather, it was to separate eastern Bengali Hindus from the western districts and to remove them from the influence of Calcutta. Had the Government intended to create a new Muslim majority province, its original plan would not have achieved its purpose because the area to be split

specifically to separate the Muslims had one existed.

The early protests against the partition scheme took the form of public meetings and sending of memorials and telegrams to the newspapers and the Government. Although the meetings, which began in December 1903 and were mostly in eastern Bengal, were free of incident, they were unprecedented in number. The Englishman reported that in Dhaka and Mymensingh Districts, there was “a storm of passionate protest which has surprised those who have led it.” It appeared that the Government had searched for the quickest means of “setting the province in a ferment” and had chosen partition.

It was also alleged that, with the loss of the University of Calcutta, the educational opportunities of the people in the transferred districts would suffer. Similarly, the number of available posts, Government and private, would be reduced. Calcutta firms would not hire people from the transferred area and the people from the Dhaka District, who held 1/10 of the posts in the Subordinate Judicial, and Executive Services in the 48 districts of Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa, would be limited to Government service in the transferred districts only. This anticipated loss of opportunity for Government employment was especially resented because it was alleged that limitations had recently been placed upon the employment of Bengalis in Assam and the United Provinces.

The revenues of Dhaka and Mymensingh, it was feared, would be diverted to develop Assam and the port of Chittagong. Many East Bengal zamindars and merchants had property and maintained agents and lawyers in Calcutta or other parts of Western Bengal. Partition would cause inconvenience, and in some instances, financial loss, to these persons. Others feared that the trade in jute and rice would be diverted from Calcutta to Chittagong.

Cultural, racial, and linguistic considerations also played an important role in

feeling. Generally, official opinion was in favour of a reduction in the size of Bengal but few thought that Lord Curzon’s scheme went far enough. The Government was urged to transfer a larger area of Bengal to Assam in order to give more substantial relief to the Bengal Government and, at the same time, create a new province that would be larger enough to have its own Board of Revenue and Legislative Council. The Commissioner of Dhaka Division, H. Savage, believed that “perhaps the most important reform which would follow” from a wider scheme of partition would be that the Muslims “would have education offered to them in their mother tongue, Bengali, unhampered by the Sanskrit tendencies of the Hindus, who up to now have controlled and practically monopolised education in Bengal, or by the few educated men of their own religion, who have shut their eyes to facts and persuaded or tried to persuade themselves and others that the vernacular of the Eastern Bengal Musalman is Urdu.”

The idea of a wider scheme of partition commended itself to Lord Curzon and when he made his speaking tour through Chittagong, Dhaka, and Mymensingh in February 1904, he attempted to dispel popular apprehensions by hinting broadly that a larger area than originally planned might be transferred from Bengal. He pointed out that such a scheme might enable the new province to be equipped with a Lieutenant-Governorship, a Legislative Council, and an independent revenue authority. He also said at Dhaka that that city might become the capital of a new province “which would invest the Mohamedans in Eastern Bengal with a unity which they have not enjoyed since the days of the old Musalman Viceroy and Kings.”

The first appreciable Muslim support for the partition dates from Lord Curzon’s visit to Dhaka in February 1904 and his open hints that a new province with a Muslim majority was under consideration. The central figure in this shift in Muslim public opinion in East Bengal