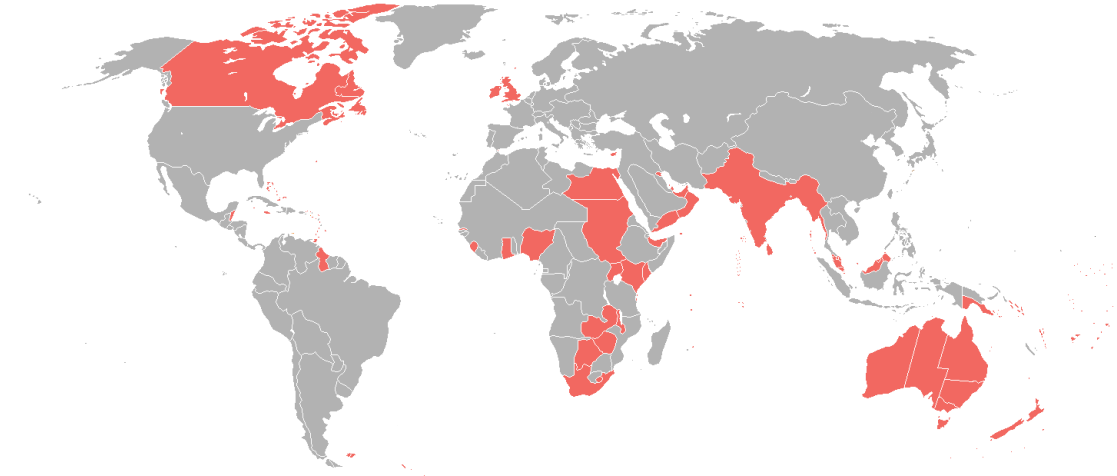


The Partition of Bengal



Introduction

The British Empire was at its peak at the turn of the 20th century. Its colony of India (today's India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka) was the largest part of a globe-spanning collection of dominions and colonies overseen by the king/emperor and his government in London. In 1905, George Curzon was the viceroy and governor-general of India, based in Calcutta. Curzon oversaw a complex administrative machinery by which a couple of thousand British civil servants oversaw the lives, safety, and finances of almost 300 million people of wide religious, ethnic, and linguistic diversity.

Bengal was the largest province in the British Raj (imperial India). Its population of 79 million was larger than the United States. A separate sultanate starting in the 14th century, Bengal was swallowed up by the expansion of the Mughal Empire in the 16th century. As the British expanded their power in India in the 18th century, much of this territory was designated a separate administrative unit: The Bengal Presidency.

Late in 1905, after years of discussion, the British rearranged the regional governmental structure in eastern India and split Bengal into two provinces. This decision was the product of a particular administrative perspective that reflected both global and local influences. Six years later, the British would reverse their decision. This series of events had profound (and unexpected) consequences that affected the British Empire, the course of India's history, and the development of nationalisms across the 20th century.

THE PARTITION OF BENGAL

INTRODUCTION

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Context of British India

Since the early 17th century, Britain had been active in India as a political, economic, and cultural power through a semi-private corporation: the East India Company. The EIC gradually took on the characteristics of a government, overseeing vast swaths of greater India as both ruler and merchant trading house. In addition to establishing deals and agreements with local leaders, it gradually established its own army staffed with British officers and local soldiers, who launched an uprising in 1857. During the uprising, the British government intervened, and following its suppression assumed direct rule over much of the territory. To manage such a large and distant territory, the British ruled some territories directly, and others indirectly, through regional Muslim and Hindu princes. The leading imperial official was the viceroy and governor-general, based in Calcutta who oversaw this complex structure of directly-ruled provinces and provincial clusters, as well as the various indirectly-ruled princely states.

British India was managed primarily for the benefit of British commercial interests. Unlike the parts of the empire dominated by British emigrants (e.g., Canada, Australia, like New Zealand), the British government did not promote local self-rule. Rather, as with other European colonies populated by indigenous people of color, British officials treated India's indigenous populations as subservient sources of commodities and as purchasers of British products.

Still, as a matter of public order, the British sought efficient administration of these vast territories. The configuration of the huge Bengal Presidency, comprising dozens of districts and several large cities had been seen as problematic for much of the late 19th century. Britain ruled its Indian provinces using a variety of administrative structures below the viceroy. Power was delegated to different levels of administrative officers, judges, revenue collectors, and police.

Key Terms:

Bengal

British Raj

George Curzon

Partition of Bengal

Hindus and Muslims

George V

Nationalism



Map of the British Raj, 1860



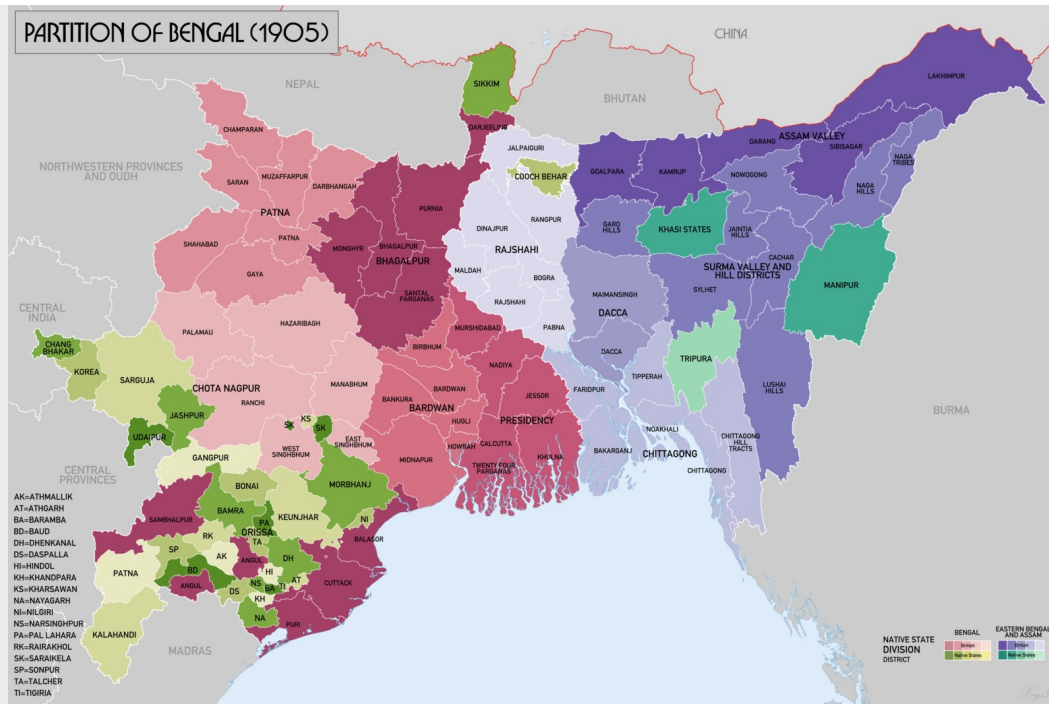
Lord George Curzon, 1910

The Partition of Bengal

After consulting with many local leaders across Bengal and adjacent areas, George Curzon determined to proceed with a Partition. His decision was announced on 19 July 1905 and took effect on 16 October, when Sir Bampfylde Fuller assumed his new post as lieutenant governor of a new province that had formerly been the eastern half of the Bengal Presidency. The new province, which was majority Muslim, was called Eastern Bengal and Assam. The majority-Hindu province in the west was governed separately by Lieutenant Governor Andrew Fraser. A month later, Curzon resigned his viceroyalty and returned to Britain.

The analysis of the Partition contained in the internal imperial memoranda, as well as the public statements of Curzon and others are striking for their administrative rigidity and lack of adaptive solutions to the problem of the overwhelming size of Bengal. Rather than design a governmental structure to fit the needs of the people and territories involved, Curzon's government prioritized administrative regularity and imperial structures. Most of official explanation for the partition was devoted to allocating blocks of population to geographic units, primarily to reduce the administrative burdens. In this sense, it was reminiscent of territorial deals which had characterized European empires for centuries. However, in terms of the rationale—with its focus on administration—it was entirely modern, using statistical analysis to bolster its case and dismissing potential cultural and social concerns among the people of Bengal. Many have argued that, in fact, the 'administrative' rationale for Partition was a cover for a standard imperial strategy of "divide-and-conquer." They suggest that the main goal was to reduce the influence of Hindu elites centered in Calcutta.

The most vigorous protests petered out after a while, although Indians in Calcutta continued to express their unhappiness to the British Administration. But many British administrators thought that over time, people would grow used to the new structure.



Map of the partition of 1905

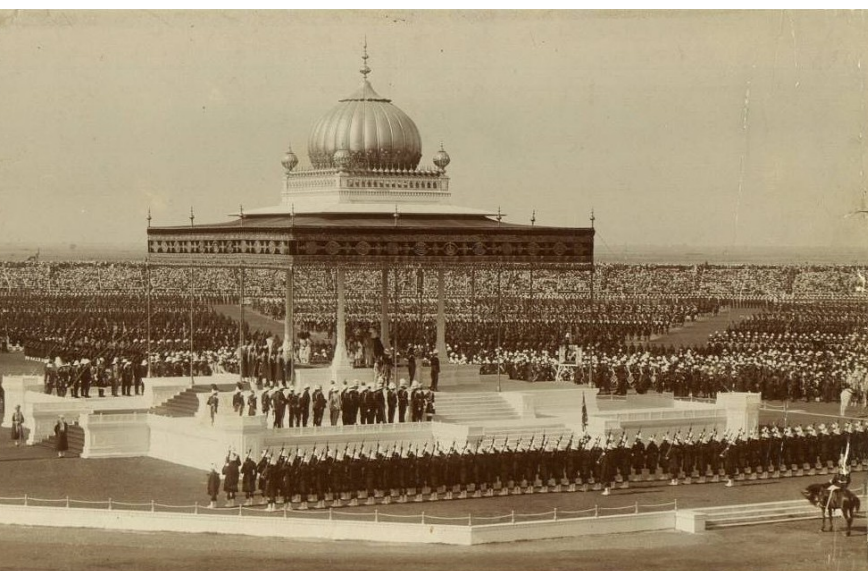


Royal Attendants (Chobdars) to King George V during his visit to Delhi

After a few years, all this was changed by an apparently unrelated event: for the first time ever, the king/emperor was coming to India. George V had visited India as a prince, but neither his grandmother (Victoria) nor his father (Edward VII) had ever been there. The formal ceremony, scheduled in Delhi on December 12, 1911, was a grand pageant called a Durbar (from the Mughal term for "Court") at which all the Indian princes and elites, as well as the leading members of the British community in India, would gather to honor their emperor. It was customary for the emperor to grant gifts at such an occasion and the British imperial leadership also wanted to make major announcements to commemorate the event. They determined that the Durbar would be a good opportunity to announce the creation of a new modern capital for the British Raj in India, which had been based in Calcutta for well over a hundred years.



Portrait of King George V, c. 1911

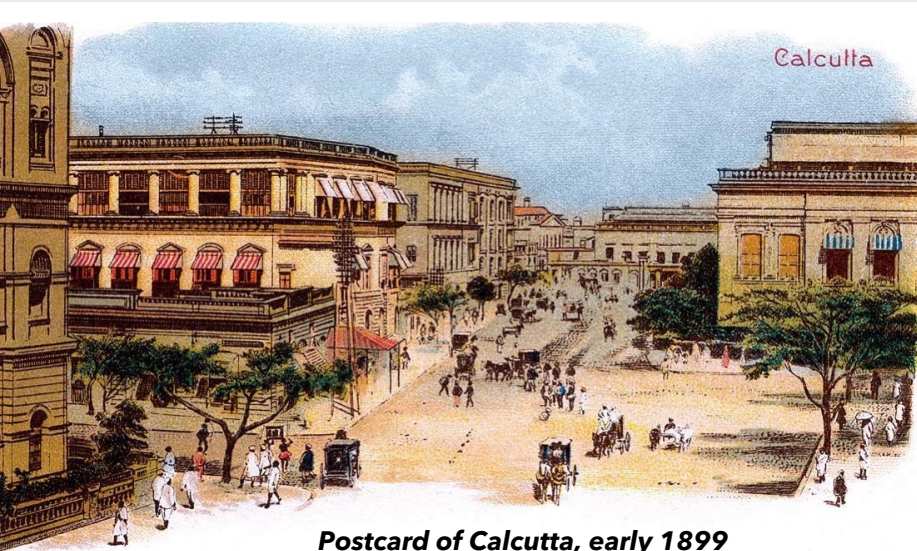


The Delhi Durbar of King George V, 1911

The emperor announced at the Durbar that the capital would be established just outside the ancient city of Delhi, in an area to be called "New Delhi." As part of this arrangement, in order to 'compensate' Indian and British interests in Calcutta, he also announced that the Partition of Bengal would be reversed, thus restoring the huge Hindu-dominated state based across all of Bengal, pretty much as it had been before 1905. To appease the sure-to-be-disappointed Muslims, the British promised to construct a university in Dacca.

Impacts of the Partition of Bengal

One of the most significant results of the disputes and protests over the Partition of Bengal was the intensification of feelings of distinctiveness between Hindu and Muslim peoples all across India. These religious-cultural communities had lived intertwined for centuries, but as people increasingly demanded participation in the political process and had access to news through new forms of mass media, disappointment with the British policies in Bengal increased animosities. There is no neat narrative to describe these sets of feelings or perspectives. For some, there were inter-communal animosities and feelings of distinction, manifested in cultural, linguistic, and economic rifts. For others, there was a sense (at least regionally) of desire to protect the coherence of Bengal. There was also a shared desire to oust the British and have Indians determine their own government and shape their own future, whatever that might ultimately mean.



Postcard of Calcutta, early 1899

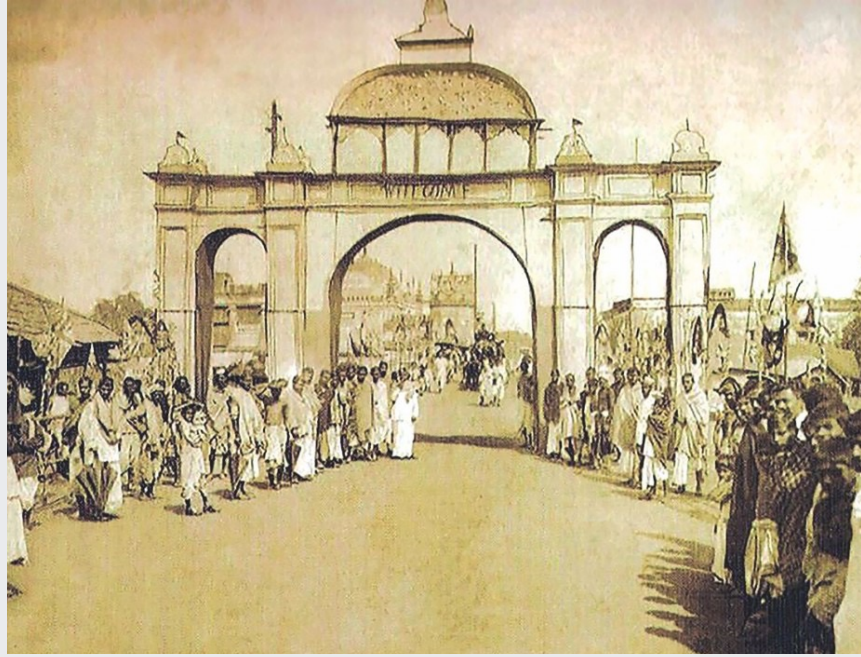
The Partition heightened awareness of the degree to which the structure of India was being determined by non-Indians, and in particular by a few Europeans whose power was clear, but whose claim to moral and cultural superiority many Indians questioned. Indeed, European political superiority itself was cast into doubt by the military triumphs of the Japanese over Russia in 1904–05, and British officials themselves were growing increasingly concerned by rising Indian activism and self-assertion.

The 1905 Partition plan provided Indians, particularly Hindu residents of Bengal, with a focal-point for their frustrations with the British Raj. Meanwhile, as the majority in East Bengal and Assam Province, many Muslim Bengalis felt recognized in a way they had not prior. They also saw an opportunity for economic development in the far eastern region of India without feeling preempted by the majority Hindus. One reflection of these sentiments was the establishment of the Muslim League in 1906, which went on to be the focal point of Muslim identity for decades. The Hindu protest movement naturally stirred up counter-protests and newspapers (in different languages and with antagonistic perspectives) that often exacerbated the tensions and communal sensibilities.

The reversal of the Partition in 1911 did not make these tensions disappear. Rather, many Muslims believed the British were caving to Hindu pressure and relegating the Muslims to subservience under Hindu domination. The reversal of the Partition undermined their trust in the British administration and increased their determination to become more self-reliant, and heightened resentment of both the British and Hindus. From the Hindu perspective, the reversal was a validation of their protests, including boycotts and more violent tactics. However, their commercial and communal interests in Calcutta were now outweighed by the shift of the British capital across the country to Delhi. Both Hindus and Muslims would remember these lessons.

Nationalisms

The reaction of the various communities in India to the Partition and its revocation illustrate the difficulties of using the term “nationalism” to describe the political aspirations of ethnic, language, religious, and ideologically defined groups. This phenomenon intensified in the 19th century as many groups in Europe sought political power by either coming together with others in their groups (e.g. Italians in 1850s/1860s, Germans in 1860s/1870s) or escaping the imperial domination of European empires (e.g. Austro-Hungarian, Russian, Ottoman).



People of Dhaka alongside Islampur Road, waiting to welcome Sir Fuller, the new Lieutenant Governor of Eastern Bengal and Assam, 1905

In the 20th century, nationalism reached its most extensive range, as the driving force behind the creation of new states out of the ruins of World War I in Europe and, later, in the disassembly of British, French, and other global empires in the middle of the 20th century. As a foundation of how we think of the world today—a world comprised of “nation-states”—nationalism is a key component of modernity. The essential premise of nationalism is the “nation;” a group of people who—with varying degrees of consciousness, intent, and effort—desire to live together and govern themselves. In the American experience, this premise is reflected in the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution, which begins: “We the people...” So, who are these “people”? Who’s in and who’s out? The answers across the history of nationalism are messy and complicated.

The varied responses to the Partition of Bengal highlight the complexity of these questions. Did “nationalism” mean a cohesive and unified Bengal (i.e., anti-Partition)? Did it mean communal cohesion and exclusivity (i.e., Hindus versus Muslims)? Was it all about “India,” and, if so, who was part of this great amalgam of peoples and beliefs? Or, was it essentially negative in character, i.e. unity around feelings of anti-British imperialism? The answer is, of course, “all of the above.” But where did these models leave those who were neither Hindu nor Muslim? Or those who were part of the broad scope of British rule, but who did not identify as Indian (e.g. Burmese, or Afghani?).

Moreover, the answer changed over time. As increasing efforts were made to assert the rights and powers of Indians across the first half of the 20th century, these complexities regularly arose in terms of the nature and direction of the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League, and whether these were “national” or “religious” in scope.



The 1906 All India Muhammadan Educational Conference in Dhaka laid the foundations of the Muslim League, established the same year 6

Beyond the question of how individuals and groups identified themselves and define their political landscape, another aspect of the Partition partakes of the modern mindset: the dominance of territoriality. Since the 18th century, the British had extended their map making and geographic analytics of their imperial holdings in India. This shift was part of a larger change which entailed governments moving from thinking of a country in terms of the people to one based on territory and lines on a map. The abstract nature of cartography avoided human and social complexity and fostered an administrative order which was (or, at least, seemed) easier to manage. In this context, the disruption of cultural connections was inherently downplayed in favor of imperial line-drawing. There are many comparable examples from the British and French Empires in Africa, the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement dividing their imperial interests in the post-Ottoman Middle East, as well as the new European states created at the end of World War I.

There are many aspects to the later story of Indian independence, which occurred in 1947: long-standing political and economic resentments, demands for independence among various groups in India, British weariness over the economic and moral costs of colonialism, and the complexities of its huge global empire in the aftermath of two World Wars. Still, we can draw a direct line from the Partition of 1905 to the Partition of 1947, in which Britain pulled out of India and split the country into two: a Hindu-majority India and a Muslim-dominated Pakistan (which initially included eastern

Bengal, until it, too, separated from Pakistan as the independent Bangladesh in 1972). The Partition of Bengal energized both anti-British sentiments and a sense of separateness between Hindus and Muslims. The Partition and its reversal showed the limits of the British ability to manage, as imperial masters, a huge and complex country, with its own complex ancient traditions. It also illustrated the limits of British ability to navigate the forces of modernity, including calls for ordinary people to participate in their own governing.

Conclusion

The Partition of Bengal is a classic example of what historian James Scott has called "seeing like a state." Large bureaucratic organizations, particularly empires, tend to categorize and force groups of people they rule into 'legible' units. These tendencies (for example, drawing lines on maps, categorizing people through census, or creating schemes for economic development) rely on gathering, organizing, and analyzing data, in order to make large territories and populations more easily managed by administrators.

***Curzon Hall at the University of Dhaka,
founded during his visit in 1904***



At first blush, these tendencies may seem sensible. How else could states manage such huge territories, populations, and systems? However, as this happens, the complexities of the human beings living in those places disappear, to be replaced by numbers, accounts, and simplified categorizations. Taking such of a perspective of the world is made easier when bolstered by naïve self-confidence. Such arrogance allows people to dehumanize others, fitting them into what Scott calls “the rational design of social order commensurate with scientific understanding of natural laws.” What Scott means is that dominant groups treat such dehumanizing simplifications as expression of the natural order of the world, which justifies their continued domination.



March of the Indian National Congress in new Delhi, 1937

In this case, the British fixation on retaining their model of governance and managing what could be easily counted (i.e., large groups of population) drove an administrative change (new lines on the map) with profound social consequences, both immediate and long-term. The disruption caused by the Partition was made worse a few years later when the British reversed their decision. For many living in India, these changes only confirmed that 1) British policies in India were arbitrary, 2) long-term protests could be effective, and 3) such protests had to be rooted in a coherent community.

We may debate whether the communities involved (Hindu, Muslim, Bengali, ‘East Bengali/West Bengali,’ or even Indian) were “national” at the time of Partition. Yet, it is clear that peoples’ desires to participate in the political process were certainly intensifying. Some of the energy that emerged as Indians responded to the Partition may also have been inspired by Japanese victory against Russia in 1905. These new energies were channeled into new protest movements that acquired coherence and momentum that continued to expand over the following decades, and ultimately resulted in the partition between India and Pakistan that marked the withdraw of British imperial rule in 1947.

Chowringhee Road, Calcutta, c. 1905



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