



Partition of India in 1947 Created a Permanent Instability in South Asia

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ABSTRACT

The forgetful event of 1947 has a far reaching consequence on the subcontinent which are visible in the present days as well. Earlier most of the scholars concentrated on examining the causes behind the partition which revolved around the policies of the colonial government and the role of political parties and their leaders. This approach undermined the repercussions of the tragic event. Lately concepts like 'the long partition' have tried to highlight the effects of partition in various domains of contemporary South Asian life. Various recent incidents and issues, whose origin could be traced back to partition, further reinforces the need to divulge in this area of study. This will broaden our understanding regarding the contemporary dynamics of the region.

Keywords- *sectarian violence, territorial tension, marginalised groups, centre-state relations.*

1. INTRODUCTION

As aptly remarked by Ayesha Jalal, partition marks 'a defining moment that is neither beginning nor end, partition continues to influence how the people and states of postcolonial South Asia envisage their past, present and future. There can be no real understanding of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh without a full grasp of the lasting impact of partition on their self-imaginings, political contestations, and National projection'¹. The repercussions of the tragic event of 1947 could be felt even to this day in various domains of South Asian life. The year 1947 marks the end of colonial rule in India as well as Pakistan and is 'supposed' to be celebrated as a beginning of new era. But what followed, is although remembered, but not in the way one wanted. 'In 1947 the raj came to its end amidst political and social convulsions in which Hindu and Muslim as well as Muslim and Sikh engaged in an orgy of murder, rape and plunder on an unprecedented scale. Some seventeen million people were shunted across frontiers of a subcontinent ostensibly divided along religious lines for the first time in history'². This left a deep impact on the region which has cultural, political, economic and psychological bearing.

A lot of scholarly work has been done on this tragedy but most of it concentrated on 'high politics of major players such as Indian National Congress, the Muslim League, Gandhi, Nehru, Jinnah, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, Master Tara Singh, and others, much else is pushed aside, silenced, and left unexamined'³. It is only recently that scholars have turned their attention towards exploring the consequences and continued influences of partition. 'In the half century that has elapsed India and Pakistan have been to war over the north Indian princely state of Kashmir on two separate occasions. A third war in 1971, preceded by the slaughter of Muslims by



Muslims, marked the breakaway of Bangladesh. In 1999 the two neighbours faced the prospect of a fourth war over the Kargil heights in Kashmir, raising the alarming prospect of a nuclear exchange. This bloody baptism of the states that replaced the British raj has wreaked havoc on interstate relations in the subcontinent. State-sponsored secular nationalism and religious majoritarianism have failed to address the challenges posed by cultural difference in complex societies. There has been a recurrence of centre-region problems in nearly all of South Asia, the denial of regional aspirations in Kashmir and elsewhere, and the ravages of an array of violent social and political conflicts. The legacy of 1947 continues to loom large, both at the domestic and the regional levels. The scars of partition have proven to be deeper than the healing touch of independence from colonial rule⁴. Several recent incidents and issues further reinforces the concept 'the long partition'⁵ which 'underscores the ongoing impact of the 1947 partition in a variety of domains'⁶. Thus there is a need to divulge in this area of study which will enlighten our understanding regarding the contemporary political and socio-economic dynamics of South Asia.

The partition resulted in a bloody division of land as well as a rupture of shared histories, cultures, and memories between Muslims, on the one hand, and Hindus and Sikhs, on the other⁷. We can trace a number of events, right from the time of partition to the present day, in various spheres of South Asian life, which are in one way or the other linked to partition of India. As already mentioned, the frequent episodes of sectarian violence, constant diplomatic and military conflicts between India and Pakistan, the territorial tensions, partition of Pakistan leading to the creation of Bangladesh trace their origin to the partition of India. Another aspect worth noting is the susceptibility of a region to get influenced by the happenings of some other region. This further highlights the porous nature of borders and defies the rigid division of land. 'Ever since 1947, regional dissent against central authority has spilled across national boundaries, keeping inter-state relations in perpetual despair. In more recent decades, the Indian state's challenges in Punjab, Assam and other north-eastern states, not to mention the perennial problem of Kashmir, the dilemmas presented by Pakistan's province of Sindh, Baluchistan and the tribal territories in the northwest, and the restiveness among *Chakma* Buddhists in Bangladesh, all in their different ways have demonstrated their extreme permeability of the borders defining nation-state in the subcontinent'⁸. These phenomenon had a far reaching effect on the region which is hindering the process of nation building.

2. SECTARIAN VIOLENCE

Communalism, in the Indian context, evolved during late 19th century, and by early 20th century terms like 'communal feeling' and 'communal representation' were used frequently in official documents. 'The communal consciousness arose as a result of the transformation of Indian society under the impact of colonialism and the need to struggle against it'⁹. It took concrete shape during the 1930s and 1940s with the emergence of new political trends in the Indian national movement. All these developments finally culminated into division of the country. But even after more than seven decades of this forgetful event, the 'wounds' have not healed completely. Recurring sectarian violence in the region continue to remind of the horrible memories of the partition. 'Every now and again trouble breaks out between Hindus and Muslims, at one place or another,



and the wounds are ripped open'¹⁰. Unending conflicts between the two major communities of the region on issues ranging from 'Personal law' to 'cricket matches' have created an environment of insecurity and mistrust in the minds of inhabitants.

Another aspect of this could be seen in the form of 'polarisation of politics' or the increasing role of religion in politics. Communalism 'derives its meaning precisely from the political discourse which arises in that particular age'¹¹. The violence against Sikhs in 1984, the demolition of *Babri masjid* (1992) and the Gujarat riots of 2002 are few examples of such polarisation. These incidents reiterate the fact that partition was ever present in our lives. It make us 'recognise that it could not be so easily put away inside the covers of history books'¹². 'Such violence continues to feed suspicion and mistrust around millions of Muslim citizens in contemporary India who had not supported the demand for separate Pakistan and/or did not choose to move there'¹³. As a consequence it has become easy to lit communal fires even in those regions which were not directly involved in partition.

3. TERRITORIAL TENSIONS

The in-congruencies in the decisions of border commission of 1947, headed by Cyril Radcliffe, are a source of regular diplomatic tussle and military conflicts. These conflicts aggravated to full-fledged wars on more than one occasion. The regular exchange of fire and insurgencies on western border and the volatile situation in Kashmir had made the region and life of its inhabitants insecure and unstable. The Kashmir issue is probably one of the most complex political problem of our times. 'Immediately following emancipation from the British Raj, India and Pakistan went to war over Kashmir, which had been an autonomous kingdom ruled by a Hindu king with a Muslim majority population. While many semi-autonomous kingdoms and principalities decided to join either India and (sic) Pakistan in the period leading up to independence, both Kashmir and Hyderabad (the latter with a strong Muslim *Nizam* at its helm) held out. When Pakistani 'irregulars' attacked Kashmir, the ruling *Dogra* Hindu Maharaja Hari Singh sought Prime Minister Nehru's military help and signed an instrument of accession to India as a condition for Indian military assistance. A promised U.N. referendum on Kashmir never took place, and the territory has become a warzone pitting rebels seeking an independent Kashmir against an occupying Indian army that claims to 'protect' the people'¹⁴.

The creation of Bangladesh is another good example of corrective action taken to remove the anomaly, to some extent, of the erratic and haphazard arrangement of division made by a person least suited for the job. The toll it took on human life and resources to correct this anomaly is a story in itself. 'Pakistan had been yoked together as a two-part nation out of the Muslim majority areas of Punjab and Bengal, along with several other areas that comprised West Pakistan'¹⁵. 'Although they shared a common religious identity, Punjabis and Bengalis had little in common with each other linguistically and culturally'¹⁶. Problems surfaced with the imposition of Urdu as official language on East Pakistan where the inhabitants felt pride of their Bengali language and culture. These fault lines led to the violence of 1971 which finally culminated into a full-fledged war leading to the creation of Bangladesh. The recent India Bangladesh Land Boundary Agreement (2015) was another effort to settle one of those old disputes. The governments of both sides felt, although after 70 years,



that this correction was indispensable for streamlining the lives of those who didn't have any identity till now. Probably it will take another 100 years, or more, for them to join the mainstream society.

4. EFFECTS ON THE LIVES OF MARGINALISED GROUPS

The main victims of most of such cases, as partition, are 'the others' or the marginalised groups. We can take up the case of *Chakmas* as an example. 'The partition of 1947 and the Radcliffe award unjustly pushed the people of Chittagong Hill Tracts out of India'¹⁷. *Chakmas*, a Buddhist community, inhabited the Chittagong hill tract (CHT). At the time of partition CHT constituted about 97% non-Muslim population but it was merged with *Sylhet*, a Muslim majority area, which later became a part of East Pakistan. Once Muslims settlers started pouring in CHT, *Chakmas* were forced to migrate to *Lushai* hill district (now Mizoram). Later they were moved to NEFA (now Arunachal Pradesh) due to their continuous conflict with *Mizo* tribes. After long sufferings a ray of hope is visible as the government is considering their demand for citizenship to end their agony.

Same is true for other groups who resided in the border areas or belonged to minority group. 'As recently as last year an article titled "No country for Pakistani Hindus" (Vij-Aurora, 2012) laid bare the persecution of 3.5 million Hindus in Pakistan. Their move to India for safety is fraught with betrayal and rejection. Instances of refugees seeking citizenship as they arrive at the borders of Bengal, Rajasthan and Kutch remind us how inconclusive the Partition event has been, and how its ramifications persist even seven decades after'¹⁸. The problems of *Sindhi* population is yet another story. The influx of Urdu speaking '*Muhajirs*' and other linguistic group, after partition, have reduced the *Sindhis* to the status of minority in their region. Violent conflicts marred the region, particularly Karachi and Hyderabad, during 1980s. 'Most inadequately represented in the non-elected institutions of the state, *Sindhis* began to take a powerful stand against *Punjabi* domination'¹⁹. On the other side of border, the Indian *Sindhi* population garner anti-Muslim sentiments and they, in return, are seen in low light by their *Gujarati* counterparts which instil a feeling of 'shame' among *Sindhis*. 'The shame or disavowal of *Sindhi* identity, I discovered, was a response to the hegemonic view among Hindu *Gujaratis* that *Sindhis* were dirty, immoral, uncouth and 'Muslim like'. The anti-Muslim sentiment was the *Sindhis* anger directed against an ethnicity they were being collapsed with and the reason why they had to come to India as penniless and stateless refugees'²⁰. These psychological effects are the remnants of partition.

5. CENTRE-STATE RELATIONS

India is a land of diversity inhabited by people belonging to different ethnic and linguistic group. These groups cherish their tradition and culture, and time and again have tried or aspired to create their own niche, sometimes within the Indian Union and sometimes outside it. The Partition of India fuelled the imagination of these groups of having their own homeland. Punjab, Bengal, North-eastern states and south India, all teemed with such aspirations. 'The most serious secessionist challenge in the early decades came from the southern state of Tamil Nadu. C.N. Annadurai, founder of the *Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam*, sought to counter balance the dominance of the Hindi speaking north by first promoting a Dravidian nationality and culture and then espousing a strident Tamil nationalism'²¹. Punjab also saw agitation for *Punjabi* speaking linguistic state while some more extreme elements demanded a separate Sikh homeland- Khalistan. 'The Sikh problem arose in 1947



and has remained a major factor in Indian politics ever since. Their homeland, Punjab, split down the middle, with a large part of their property and pilgrim sites left in West-Pakistan, the Sikhs as a political community have never been allowed to forget what they suffered at Partition²². Bengal too is facing regular strife in the form of agitation for separate Gorkhaland. The following abstract from the letter of a *Gorkha* leader addressed to the then Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, dated 22 July 1987, gives a glimpse of their resentment. The letter reads 'I would like to submit this memorandum so as to clarify the deliberate victimisation and unwanted, unconstitutional and undemocratic colonial domination of West Bengal government for the last 40 years on the said helpless *Gorkhas*. As a result, the whole settled *Gorkhas* were compelled to raise their voice for a separate state of Gorkha Land for the sake of political status and distinct Indian identity and further immediate liberation from the colonial domination of West Bengal since Bharat Independence'²³. The resentment in the North-eastern states of India can also be seen in the context of Partition. The partition of colonial Assam in 1947 also adversely affected the social and economic lives of the various tribal communities in the region. It disrupted the traditional links that the tribal communities such as the *Khasi*, *Jaintias* and the *Garos* had with the East Pakistani districts of Sylhet and Mymensingh respectively, who were internally divided into Indians and Pakistanis, depending on their habitation. The traditional linkages in the area were disrupted by closing the borders and setting up check-posts²⁴. The adverse impact of partition was observed even in the census report of 1951, which highlights the issue as, 'the far reaching effects of this loss will continue to be felt by Assam as well as India for many years to come'²⁵. ULFA and Naga insurgencies have kept the region under intense tension from long. The anti- India sentiments among these groups can also be seen in the same light. Same is true for the demand of separate state of Baluchistan in Pakistan. Although the problem in Baluchistan traces its legacy to colonial period but the situation is aggravated by later governments of Pakistan. In this case 'not only were the provincial autonomy provisions of the 1973 constitution ignored, but also no headway was made in redefining centre-province relations to better accommodate the social changes in various regions'²⁶. Also, all these regional issues and demands have given rise to powerful regional political parties with mass support which are often in conflict with central government. The deteriorated centre-state relations hinders the overall development of the region. Moreover these agitations and demands severely affect the day to day life of the people.

6. CONCLUSION

The history of partition doesn't lie only in the political developments that led to it but it also has 'human dimensions'²⁷ and this has repercussions even after seven decades of the event. There are various contemporary developments and happenings which have their roots in the partition of India, and they are difficult to comprehend when observed as isolated events. Thus rather than only concentrating on the causes of the partition of the subcontinent, its effects and consequences should also be examined. It should be viewed as a continued phenomenon which has a profound impact on various domains of South Asian life. When observed from this point of view we can have a better understanding of the happenings in the region.



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