



Saga of Bengal partition

Rakesh Kumar

M.Phil Scholar, Department of History, MDU, Rohtak, Haryana, India

Abstract

The partition of Bengal and subsequent *Swadeshi* and *Boycott* movement opened a new episode in the history of freedom movement of India. Though the movement started in Bengal it spread all over India. Starting from Bengal the agitation spread like wild fire in cities, towns and even villages where housewives, students and people of every corner in life participated to protest against the divisive policy of the Raj which was unprecedented in Indian history. A remarkable aspect of the movement was the widespread student participation all over Bengal, and in several other parts of India. The students showed the greatest enthusiasm and created *Swadeshi* spirit in Bengal and also India. This movement had left a deep impact on literature, music, art, science and education of Bengal as well as India. The patriotism, sacrifice and courage of the students earned great respect from the common people.

Keywords: British rule, partition, patriotism, sacrifice, swadeshi

Introduction

One of the most unpopular and terrible measure of the British Indian Government was the Partition of Bengal in 1905. Lord Curzon came to India (1899-1905) with a strong determination to curtail the rising tide of nationalism. *The Calcutta Corporation Act (1899)*, *The Indian Universities Act (1904)* and *The Official Secrets Act (1904)* were some of the measures through which Curzon sought to curb the growing nationalistic and patriotic spirit. One of the main objects of the partition of Bengal was to break up the unity of the people of Bengal. Lord Curzon divided the territories of Bengal in such a way that the western part of Bengal including Bihar, Chhota Nagpur and Orissa formed the Hindu majority and the eastern part of Bengal including North Bengal and Assam formed the Muslim majority area. The plan of partition announced in newspapers on 20th July 1905, and finally became operational on 16th October 1905. The partition of Bengal produced tremendous anti-British reaction among the Bengalis. The partition of Bengal and subsequent *Swadeshi* movement opened a new episode in the history of freedom movement of India. Though the movement started in Bengal it spread all over India. Starting from Bengal the agitation spread like wild fire in cities, towns and even villages where housewives, students and people of every corner in life participated to protest against the divisive policy of the Raj with zeal quite unprecedented in Indian history. A remarkable aspect of the movement was the widespread student participation all over Bengal, and in several other parts of India^[1]. The students showed the greatest enthusiasm and created *Swadeshi* spirit in Bengal and also India during the agitation.

Hindu-Muslim relation in Bengal before 1900

Before 1906 Hindu-Muslim conflict in Bengal was rarely seen as compared to the other states of India. There were reports of stray incidents regarding cow-slaughter, religious and social

festivals, representation on consultative and legislative organisations, education and government employment but they remained only small frictions but never caused any great communal disharmony. The Muslim society in general before 1906 was a backward one, full of discriminations among themselves, divided in classes based on social and economic stand-points. The lower class Muslims were looked down upon by the elite Muslims and social contact was avoided as much as possible. In retrospect, the elite Muslims had more in common with the moneyed Hindu upper class than with Muslim lower class.

In spite of the day-to-day contacts, there was almost no way of integration between Hindus and Muslims. Therefore, ignorance and indifference prevailed. No conscious effort was made by any of the two communities to understand and sympathise with each other's inherent lifestyle, traits and cultures. Moreover, the attitudes of many religious and communal Hindus as well as of Muslims made any way of communication between the two impossible. Perhaps the greatest discrimination lied in the field of government jobs, educational opportunities and in agrarian opportunities. Although no obvious hostility was in view for any particular person, a general dislike for Muslims always brewed in the minds of the Hindus, as they were the one-time rulers. Stories were heard and spread about Muslim domination and oppression on one hand, and heroic Hindu rebellion against them on the other. As a result, such a passive hostility is natural. But whatever was the situation, a more or less peaceful co-existence between Hindus and Muslims was always witnessed in Bengal prior to the partition.

Towards partition

Lord Curzon became the viceroy of India in 1899. He was an able and efficient administrator. Finding Bengal Presidency equivalent to France with significantly a large population for

one governor to administer, the then Viceroy of India, Lord Curzon got it split into two, East and West Bengal, apparently to promote effective administration. Over the years the eastern region remained neglected and under-governed. The split was aimed at an improved administration to subsequently benefit the population in east Bengal with new schools and employment opportunities. The province of Bengal had an area of 489,500 sq. km. and a population of over 80 million. Eastern Bengal was almost isolated from the western part by geography and poor communications. In 1874 Assam, including Sylhet, was severed from Bengal to form a Chiefvalen Bengal with this large population the new province named Eastern Bengal and Assam with Dhaka as its capital and subsidiary headquarters at Chittagong. Its area would be '106,540 sq. miles with a population of 31 million, where 18 million would be Muslims and 12 million Hindus ^[2]'.

Administration would consist of a Legislative Council, a Board of Revenue of two members, and the jurisdiction of the Calcutta High Court would be left undisturbed. The government pointed out that Eastern Bengal and Assam would have a clearly demarcated western boundary and well defined geographical, ethnological, linguistic and social characteristics. The government of India promulgated their final decision in a resolution dated July 19, 1905.

After the announcement of partition of Bengal, the Dawn Society convened a meeting in which Satish Chandra Mukherjee, Rabindranath Tagore and Hirendranath Datta were present. Satish Chandra urged the students to sever connection with the official university and boycott its exams. They demanded the immediate establishment of a National University to promote national education³. And the partition of Bengal was affected on October 16 of the same year. The province of Bengal and Assam came into being on October 16, 1905 through a Proclamation. Incidentally, the partition went in favor of the Muslims. Before the partition, West Bengal, being the first area to come under western influence, was developed and industrialized. It was a striking contrast to the eastern part where the Muslim peasantry was crushed under the Hindu landlords, the river system was infested with pirates, and very few funds were allocated for education. It was dreaded as a place of banishment. The partition helped boost Bengali literature and language; efforts were also made towards the social, economic and educational uplift of the Muslims. The Muslims outnumbered the Hindus in East Bengal and this alleviated the Bengali Muslims politically and economically.

The Muslims of India welcomed the partition of Bengal, but the Hindu community strongly opposed it. Hindu protagonists alleged that the partition was affected on linguistic, rather than religious, grounds followed, with the Hindi, Oriya and Assamese areas separated to form separate administrative units later. They thought the Muslims were favored with the creation of a new province, where they were in a clear majority. Lord Curzon intentionally had struck a deadly blow to what they claimed Bengali nationality. They branded him upholder of the devilish policy of 'Divide and Rule'. Bengali Hindus spearheading a political agitation for greater participation in governance thought their position would be weakened. Since Muslims would now dominate in East Bengal. They choreographed country-wide anti-British violent

protests, boycotts and even an assassination attempt against the Governor of the new province of West Bengal. They launched a mass agitation, declaring October 16 as a day of mourning in Calcutta and patterned the 'Swadeshi Movement ^[4]' against the British as the Chinese once boycotted American goods. 'Band-i-Mataram' was raised to charge the Hindu sentiment to protect worship of lord Shivaji as a national hero. This organized anarchist movement took a terrorist turn resulting in political sabotage and communal riots across the country. In 1906, Rabindranath Tagore wrote "Amar Shonar Bangla" (Golden Bengal) as a rallying mantra for proponents of annulment of partition, which, much later, in 1972, ironically became the national anthem of Bangladesh. Partition barely lasted half a decade, before it was annulled in 1911.

Turmoil during partition

The peaceful anti-partition demonstration at the very beginning was joined by the Hindus and Muslims alike and in vast proportions. It started two main types of movements side by side. The first one called for an absolute boycott of using foreign goods and the other promoted the production and use of things made in the country. Both were welcomed with an overwhelming response. The "Swadeshi" and the "Boycott" movements inspired the Muslims and Hindus alike and they took part in it in large numbers. On 23 September, 1905 in a Muslim meeting three resolutions were taken: i) offering their support to the Hindus against partition, ii) joining the Hindus also in matters other than the partition, iii) strong support for the use of swadeshi goods. Even a particular Muslim landlord asked his Muslim subjects not to believe the Government promise of benefits for their support in the new Province.

On the day of the partition, a *Rakhi Bandhan* ceremony was observed all over Bengal as suggested by Rabindranath Tagore. It stood for the symbol of the unity of the Bengali people. There was no cooking in any house of Bengal. People practised abstinence as that day was marked as a day of mourning. From early morning huge processions marched on the roads of Calcutta. The high nationalist sentiments that it evoked, made the British afraid of a possible uprising against their rule.

Precautionary measure was to be taken against the Swadeshi Movement and soon. Besides using the police to terrorize the demonstrators, special measures were taken to teach the students, the majority among the agitators, a lesson. Educational institutions were inflicted with circulars with orders of preventing the students either from joining the movement or to punish them. Along with the persecution of the convicted students their families were also been harassed by the police. The other method was directed towards the local landlords. Orders were given out to them to check the spread of the movement in their respective areas. Processions and meeting, which echoed any nationalist sentiment, were banned in public places. Most of the influential local leaders were imprisoned. There were some Muslims, who were not against the very idea of having a Province of their own at all. These loyal Muslims were induced with a separatist sentiment and were chosen to be used against the disobedient Hindus. Nawab Salimullah of Dhaka though at first sympathetic to the anti-partition movement, became the leader of the new

Muslim opposition to the anti-partition movement. It was said that the British Government lend him huge amount of money at a very low interest to save him from his debt. Muslims were repeatedly being explained about the unsympathetic treatment they would likely get from the Hindus and the privileges waiting for them in the new Province.

Lord Curzon's visit to East Bengal and his provocative Dhaka Address shows to which extent the British Government made no stones unturned for dividing Hindus and Muslims into two different political camps with undying hostility for each other. Within no time, a split became very much evident between the two communities due to this shrewd British policy of divide-and-rule. It was the Government who appealed to the Muslims to support the partition stressing how much fruitful would be the advantages of partition for them. The Dhaka address of Lord Curzon in February 1904 stated that Dhaka was only "a shadow of its former self" and that the partition "would invest Ma-homedans in Eastern Bengal with a unity which they have not enjoyed since the days of the old Mussalman Viceroy and Kings....." This attitude clearly echoed the Government hope of creating trouble between Hindus and Muslims.

The British role in controlling the Hindu-Muslim tension after it broke out during and after the partition, was also not entirely impartial. In fact the wrong Government policy in many cases fanned the communal flames and at the same time inspired the demand of Muslim separatism. As a result of the newfound Muslim aggressiveness, there was increasing tension between the two communities. Gradually, Muslims started their pro-partition demonstration at the very same places where the anti-partition demonstrations were being held. The atmosphere of mutual hostility loomed large. The clashes between the two were now only a matter of time.

Impact of partition

The people participation and their active involvement in the anti-partition or *Swadeshi and Boycott* movement had left a deep impact in a number of ways. Its impact was felt at every stage in the life of Bengal and also of India in the arena of literature, music, art, science and education. The patriotism, sacrifice and courage of the students earned great respect from the common people. Influence of the student movements have been perhaps most pronounced in the literary and cultural life of the state. In literature, writers and poets have introduced a new tone and outlook^[5]. The agitating students habitually recite their poems in the various meetings and demonstrations. In the public meetings, rallies and demonstrations the agitating students staged dramas, which helped to create a new outlook. In addition to these, the students brought out many leaflets, booklets, *Chharas* or rhymes which also influenced the common masses of Bengal.

The famous song of Rabindranath Tagore '*Banglar Mati, Banglar Jal*' i.e. soil and climate of Bengal was composed in the light of *Swadeshi* movement. On the other hand, political leaflets were extensively circulated amongst the students. Political songs of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Anandamath* were memorized by the students. The students were also used to held exhibition where paintings of Lala Lajpat Rai, Aurobindo Ghosh, Bipin Chandra Pal were displayed.⁶ The agitating students spread the anti-partition movement from Bengal to other parts of the country especially

South India. Bipin Chandra Pal took the leading role to spread the movement in south. In 1907, He visited Vizagapatnam, Madras, Rajahmundry etc. for delivering lectures on the movement and got a tremendous response from the students of south. Even the student of Madras bears the expenses of his visit.⁷

The Muslim community was well aware about their lack of development, but it had no separate organisation of their own to voice their plea to the people as well as to the Government. Political activities of the eastern Bengal Muslims were almost ignorable in the national political scenario. They felt the need of founding such an institution that would be able to convey their own views and needs to the Government. So they put their hopes on the Nawab of Dhaka, Nawab Salimullah, who was nothing but only a puppet in the hands of the British Government. He had neither the knowledge nor the talent for political leadership. In fact, the Government's efforts in saving him from his financial crisis itself speak for his loyalty to the British.

Also, the important changes in the Government of India's policies in 1906 had its influence on the communal tension between the two communities. When the resignation of Lieutenant-Governor Fuller, the more sympathetic one for the cause of Muslims, was promptly accepted by both Morley and Minto, Muslim leaders became very much unsure of their position. It started a general Muslim awakening for the need of having a legitimate organisation for themselves. The possible expansion of the Legislative Council as proposed by Morley and Minto increased the Muslim wish of receiving more consideration through direct representation.

The Simla Deputation in October 1 1906, stressed the importance of safeguarding the Muslim interests as separate from those of other Indians. The deputation had three grounds for such a special consideration. Firstly, the Muslims were numerically the majority and they constituted more of the population than the Hindus in Bengal. Secondly, it stated that besides their numerical strength, their political importance should also be considered, as one of every three men in India's armed forces was a Muslim. Thirdly, it expressed the hope that Muslim representatives in the representative institutions should be chosen not by the 'unsympathetic' Hindus but by Muslims themselves and in sufficient numbers so that they will never be sidelined into an "in-effective minority". Lord Minto's sympathy and agreement with the Deputation inspired the Muslims to start an all India Muslim political party. After the Educational Conference in Dhaka in July 1906, the Delegates and members of the Simla Deputation met on December 30 to announce the formation of the All-Indian Muslim League.

Conclusion

As the partition agitation, both pro- and anti-, condensed, the Simla Deputation and the founding of the Muslim League marked an undeniable change in the Indian Politics. The Muslim League, from its very birth, made it absolutely clear that its interests were separate from that of the other Indians. Although several times attempts were made for a peaceful reconciliation between the League and Congress over many arguments, the basic difference laid in the mentality was hard to overcome. This separatist attitude was the memorable

standpoint in the history of India as it ultimately resulted in the 1947 partition exactly almost at the same places where the line was drawn in 1905. In a way, the Bengal partition fired the spirit of a country-wide nationalism through which gradually the freedom became a reality, it also sowed the seed of the birth of Pakistan and Bangladesh. After the turbulent years of early 1900's, life ceased to be the same peaceful one in the Indian subcontinent. The communal harmony was destroyed and for ever. Now even after 70 years, the hatred is there for all to see. The journey through what Nevinson described as the 'dangerous road' began in 1905 by the British, and still no end seems to be in sight.

Reference

1. Rajimwale, Anil: History of Student Movement in India: Origins and Development 1920-1947, Manak Publications Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 2001, 44.
1. Syed Ali Ashraf, Ed. Begnali Literary Review, (Karachi: University of Karachi, 1973, 14.
2. Majumdar Ramesh Chandra: History of the Freedom Movement in India, Firma K. L. M., Calcutta, 1963; 2:75-76.
3. Syed Ali Ashraf: op. cit. 16
4. Ray, Sudhir: Marxist Parties of West Bengal: 1947-2001, Progressive Publisher, Kolkata, 2001, 253-255.
5. Rajimwale, Anil: op. cit. 49.
6. Sankaran Nair V. Swadeshi Movement. The Beginnings of Student Unrest in South India, Mittal Publications, Delhi, 1985, 43-45.