
UNIT 12 PARTITION OF INDIA

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12.1 INTRODUCTION

The British conquered India and gave it a political unity that it had enjoyed only for short periods of time in its long history. This political unification based on imperialist expansion quickened the pace of political change in India in conjunction with the spread of modern education and the growth of modern forms of transport and communications. Yet, when the British left India in 1947, the country was divided along religious lines into India and Pakistan. This has been attributed to a policy of divide and rule that the British followed. That Britain was responsible in the break-up of British India was believed by all the Indian nationalists including Gandhi; he believed that both Hindus and Muslims ought to strive for communal harmony, which was consciously damaged by the 'third party' i.e. the British rulers. During the period of World War II, Gandhi even said that the communal problem would never be resolved until the British left India. Since the British deliberately encouraged the League and its demand for Pakistan after March 1940, Gandhi argued that Hindu-Muslim unity was a pre-requisite for fighting the British and for freedom around 1942, and also argued that the communal problem would never be settled until the British left India.

The partition of India was the product of complex processes and was the outcome of several factors and the role of the British, the Muslim League and the Indian National Congress for the division of the subcontinent. Partition was neither inevitable nor the product of sheer chance. It was not the fulfillment of destiny or the logical outcome of the two nation theory; nor was it simply an accident that was produced by a single wrong decision or failure of judgment. It was the period 1937-1947 that saw the quickening of

the pace of political developments, but there were underlying differences in the levels of economic and social development of the Hindu and Muslim communities of the subcontinent that played a role. Conflicts based on class and culture got intertwined with new forms of politics and concepts of democracy and nation-states during the closing years of colonial rule.

Aims and Objectives

After reading this Unit, you would be able to understand

- The socio-economic and political background to the partition of India
- The role of the Congress and Muslim League in the process and
- The 1946 popular opinion that also played a role in the partition

12.2 BRITISH POLICIES AND PARTITION

The British's purpose of the policy of divide and rule, for deliberately favouring one community and then the other, is to prevent the coming together of Indians against the British. The acceptance of the Muslim League demand for separate electorates in 1909 was a major divisive move that vitiated the political culture of India until independence in 1947. Some argue that the Muslim League deputation to the Viceroy in 1906 itself was a command performance and the League was set up soon after by an elite group trying to promote its interest. The British extended it to the Sikhs as well. Gandhi and B.R. Ambedkar, through a compromise in 1932 thwarted a British attempt to drive a wedge between the Depressed classes and the upper caste Hindus by offering separate electorates to the former. The argument is no longer confined to the institutional mechanisms of representative government that were slowly being introduced by the British in India. Historians and anthropologists now argue that the British classification practices encouraged the representation as well as the self-representation of Indians according to caste and religion.

The Census listed various castes and communities in India, and also counted them. The colonial practice of census and surveys thus encouraged the idea of 'enumerated communities' and led to the concept of majority and minority in different parts of the country. Fuzzy identities were replaced by hard and singular identities often forcing groups with complex and multiple identities to choose one (Cohn, Appadurai, Kaviraj). The British Orientalist scholarship played a role in the development of ideas about the peculiarities of Indian society. The codification of the laws of the Hindus led to the freezing of the dynamic nature of traditional society and culture and valorised a primarily textual and elitist upper caste conception of Hindu law and practices. The codification of Muslim Law also led to the rigid interpretation of law and reduced the role of interpretation that had been important in Muslim jurisprudence. The writing of history also shaped ideas of community that soon became the commonsense of the time. The British perception of Indian society in terms of religious and cultural differences led to the exaggeration of religious and cultural conflict (Mushirul Hasan, Gyan Pandey).

As Gandhi had observed in *Hind Swaraj*, the Hindus and Muslims had learned to live with each other before the British established their rule in India. It was British rule that produced greater differences between the two communities. The historians focused only on the periods of conflict ignoring the much longer periods of harmony between

communities. The colonial construction of the notion of communities grew more elaborate with time and the introduction of representative government and separate electorates gave the government ample opportunity to heighten this process of community formation. The logic of competition then took over and stronger notions of the boundaries of communities developed by the early twentieth century. The British were willing to go to any length to prolong their rule in India; they deliberately encouraged Jinnah's Muslim League after 1940 to weaken the national movement and thwart Congress participation in government during the war. They were willing to consider not only the partition of India but also the balkanisation of India. Their attitude towards the Indian problem was shaped by Britain's role in Asia after World War II and the emerging Cold War (Bayly and Harper).

12.3 MUSLIM LEAGUE AND JINNAH

In the nationalist accounts of the partition of India, Mohammad Ali Jinnah played a prominent role in the partition process. Other nationalist historians have argued that he was alienated by the transformation of the Congress after mass mobilisation began under Gandhi after 1920. This made Jinnah the moderate nationalist and constitutionalist less relevant in national politics although he remained opposed to the hardline communal politics. Gradually the ambassador of Hindu-Muslim unity turned hostile and became an implacable foe of the Congress. He had opposed the Nehru report of 1928 that had advocated a unitary form of government and representation to minorities on the basis of numerical importance in different regions. There is a difference between Jinnah's Fourteen points and the demand for Pakistan; Jinnah, as a liberal Muslim, was not averse to negotiations with the Congress. It was the poor performance of the Muslim League in the elections to the Provincial assemblies in 1937 that compelled him to rethink his strategy. Rejection of a coalition government with the League in Uttar Pradesh by the Congress after the former's poor showing in the elections led to a strong reaction from the League. Outright condemnation of the Congress Ministries was orchestrated by the League and the party decided to reject the notion that the Muslims could live as a minority under 'Hindu' Congress domination.

In 1940 the League declared the right of self determination of Muslim majorities in the North West and East of India. The demand for separate states within a common framework even if it meant statehood without a demand for a separate nation, as argued by Ayesha Jalal and the revisionists, fanned communal fears and animosities in the years after (Ayesha Jalal). If Jinnah did not want to divide the subcontinent, he chose an unwise policy. The communal polarisation that resulted from enthusiastic responses to the Pakistan idea undermined the cross communal alliances that were crucial to retain the Punjab and Bengal in the 'autonomous' Pakistan zones of an All India government. The virulent campaign for Pakistan got intertwined with various communal, linguistic and cultural anxieties and acquired a momentum of its own. Even if Jinnah did not want to create a separate nation state, his campaign for seven long years made it possible. The idea of using the power of the Muslim majority provinces to protect the interests of the Muslims in the Muslim minority provinces by creating a common government at the Centre was undermined by the unrestrained propaganda in the campaign for Pakistan. It is arguable that Muslim interests would have been far better served by emphasising the rights of provinces within a loose federation rather than the chimerical ideal of Pakistan. In any case Jinnah's strategy and Muslim League propaganda rather than his hidden objectives influenced Indian political developments and led to the partition of India.

12.4 CONGRESS AND PARTITION

The early nationalist accounts apportioned the blame for partition exclusively between the British and the Muslim League. The Congress tried to bring under its umbrella all sections of Indian society, but separate electorates, British policy of divide and rule, the intransigence of Jinnah and the communal and reactionary grip over the League led to the partition of the subcontinent. The Congress was unable to reach out to the Muslim masses and therefore reluctantly accepted the wishes of the majority of the Indian Muslims to carve a nation for themselves. This account has been challenged by two strands in Indian history. Bipan Chandra argues that there was a Hindu tinge in the Congress and that Hindu liberal communalists like Lala Lajpat Rai and Madan Mohan Malaviya were able to create doubts about the inclusive nationalist credentials of the Congress party. However, he believes that extreme communalism was promoted by the League and that Congress failed to handle the problem (Bipan Chandra). This was both because of pressure from Hindu communalists and insufficient mass mobilisation.

A second strand argues that the Congress was substantially to blame for the partition of the country. The Congress did not have a sufficiently inclusive approach towards Muslim communities in India. The culture and ideology of the Congress party was majoritarian—the belief that the view of the majority party must prevail. It wanted to dominate public life because it was the largest party. The other argument was that even Congress's inclusive nationalism entailed the denial of Muslim identity and that any signs of Muslimness were regarded as separatist or communal. Ayesha Jalal is unwilling to accept the binary opposition between Congress secular nationalism and Muslim communalism. In her *Self and Sovereignty*, however, the distinction between a political and religious notion of majoritarianism often gets blurred and the basis for characterising individuals and political demands or movements as acceptably communitarian or unacceptably communal is often unclear. The Congress was not a party that wanted to establish Hindu majority rule and a policy of safeguards for minorities, emphasis on fundamental rights and federalism could have taken care of the dangers of religious majoritarianism.

The argument has also been made that the Congress, particularly Jawaharlal Nehru and Vallabhbhai Patel, were supporters of a strong state and therefore preferred to have a smaller and more centralised state than a united but confederal India with the Muslim League. This was why they rejected the Confederation that was recommended by the Cabinet Mission that came to India in 1946. It is argued that the partition of the subcontinent was imposed by the central leaders of the Congress who favoured a tighter grip over the provinces and a unitary conception of nationalism (A. Jalal). Patel wanted a strong state because of the need to create a unified nation and Nehru because he favoured a policy of state backed economic growth. Although the Congress leaders did favour the strong state this was not the view of the two leaders alone. A considerable number of Congressmen and nationalists favoured a strong government for various reasons (A. I. Singh, R.J. Moore).

It has been argued that many Indian Muslims did not accept the principles of liberal individualism and believed that their representatives should belong to the Muslim community and share their values and concerns. It was not enough to represent them and their secular interests (Farzana Shaikh). In the perception of many Congressmen and Hindu nationalists, a weak centre in India had been responsible for repeated invasions and British conquest and therefore the post independence state had to be strong enough to

protect its citizens and provide for their well-being. The beliefs of the leaders of the Congress and the League were not those of a handful of leaders even if there is no way of knowing how many shared such views. If indeed Jinnah and the Muslim League did not want a separate state of Pakistan the leaders of the Congress could not have forced it upon eighty million Muslims against their will (Asim Roy).

12.5 GANDHI AND PARTITION

The partition of India was a severe blow to the leaders of the Indian National Congress who tried to avert it till the terms for preserving unity seemed unacceptable to them. The strongest reaction to partition came from Gandhi who had worked for communal harmony for decades. He had brought a large number of Indian Muslims into the national movement by linking grievances about the treatment of the Khalifa and the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire with the nationalist outrage following the Jallianwala Bagh massacre at Amritsar in April 1919 and the imposition of martial law in Punjab. The Khilafat and Non-Cooperation movement brought forth Muslim participation on a scale which the Congress never managed to achieve after this. The withdrawal of the movement in early 1922 was followed by the outbreak of communal conflicts in many parts of north India stretching from Kohat to Calcutta between 1922 and 1926. The critics of Gandhi think that the use of a religious issue like Khilafat was dangerous since it encouraged extra-territorial loyalties and Pan-Islamic tendencies among Indian Muslims (B.R. Nanda). It has also been argued that Gandhi's collaboration with the Ali brothers led to Muslim mass mobilisation within India for achieving objectives within India (Gail Minault). Secular and Marxist historians consider the use of religion in politics a 'double-edged weapon' and therefore have regarded this strategy as fraught with dangerous consequences (Bipan Chandra, Sumit Sarkar).

Gandhi believed in spiritualising politics and did not consider it essential to separate religion and politics as in the western conception of secularism. He believed in communal harmony and in Hindu-Muslim unity. His ideas and personality appealed to Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, who began as a radical Pan-Islamist and became a supporter of composite nationalism. Azad was a devout Muslim who believed in communal harmony and the need to preserve the unity of the country. His role and personality is frequently contrasted with that of the westernised Jinnah who was an unconventional Muslim fighting for the rights of Muslims and a separate state using appeals to religion (Aijaz Ahmad, T.N. Madan). The argument has been advanced that it was the emphasis on secularism and modernity that led to the failure to deal with the specific grievances of the Muslim community. It is difficult to accept this in so far as the problem was really about uneven development, economic grievances and sharing of power rather than hard secularism or communitarian identities. In so far as communitarian identities are concerned the Gandhian emphasis on Hindustani in the Devanagari script had very little impact on the cultural politics of the Hindi speaking states. This was not a matter that could be understood primarily in terms of the secular-religious divide or the modernity and tradition distinction. The politics of language did play a role in the alienation of the Muslims of North India. Gandhi, Nehru and Bose despite their differences as well as moderate nationalists and progressive writers were all in favour of Hindustani but could not make much headway (Francis Robinson, F. Orsini).

The ideas of Gandhi were misunderstood by many and the message of communal harmony and removal of untouchability were also regarded with suspicion by orthodox

and even moderate Muslims. Some Muslims felt this was a subtle way of consolidating the Hindu vote bank and reducing the bargaining power of the Muslim community (William Gould). There was some recrimination after the Khilafat-Non-Cooperation movement was withdrawn and the Ali brothers were upset by Gandhi's withdrawal of the movement. The concept of *Ramrajya* was not a Hindu ideal as far as Gandhi was concerned though it might have sprung from within the Hindu tradition. Many orthodox Muslims regarded this as an unacceptable ideal and preferred to express themselves in an Islamic idiom. The existence of separate electorates and fears of Hindu consolidation ensured that the Muslims never supported the Congress in sufficient numbers during the period that led up to independence and partition. After the Gandhi-Ambedkar pact of 1932 the reserved seats for the depressed Classes led moderate nationalists and Hindu nationalists to enhance their influence among the depressed classes and thus to work for Hindu consolidation especially in Bengal (Joya Chatterjee). To those who did not dwell deeply on the matter, the Gandhian and Hindu nationalist concern with Harijan uplift would appear as part of the same agenda.

The essentialist understanding is that Pakistan was the product of a longstanding difference between Hindus and Muslims in the subcontinent. The historicists have rightly focused on the changes during the last decade of colonial rule. Historians disagree on the precise reasons for the partition of the subcontinent but agree that it came about towards the end of colonial rule because of the failure of the Congress and the League to come to a settlement. The British policy of encouraging Muslim separatism and eagerness to withdraw from India after the Second World War made the partition more likely. There is a sense in which the economic and political consequences of World War II had an impact on political developments that could not be foreseen. Likewise the consequences of the demand for partition and the jostling for power in the localities speeded up the process of communal polarisation that influenced the decisions of the principal protagonists in the story of partition. In the final analysis the postwar crisis and the polarisation in society during the last few years of colonial rule contributed to the climate in which the decision was taken in 1946-47.

12.6 THE 1946 ELECTIONS AND POPULAR OPINION

The League was able to use the British compulsion to justify a constitutional deadlock in India to build a substantial following during the period 1940-1946. The election results of 1946 gave the Muslim League the authoritative position to represent Indian Muslims that Jinnah had long wanted. The poor performance in the 1937 elections was a thing of the past and the League was in a position to drive a hard bargain. In 1937 the League was unable to gain acceptance as a coalition partner in the United Provinces but in 1946 it was able to speak for the majority of Muslims who had the right to vote at that time. The Congress too had won the majority of votes from among the non-Muslims eligible to vote- about one-tenth of the total population. The election results of 1946 surely indicated the strength of the Muslim League, reasons for the League's victory being the use of populist slogans and not merely religious appeals by the League. Fear of Hindu majority rule and the Congress also played a part in ensuring the victory of the League (David Gilmartin, Ian Talbot). The Communal polarisation had grown although the violence was to become significant only in 1946. It was the growth in the electoral strength of the League and the popularity of the notion of Pakistan that compelled the Congress to take the demands of the League seriously. The demand for Pakistan was no longer seen as a bargaining counter but a serious demand, while the supporters of the two-nation theory

regarded the verdict of 1946 as a vindication of their stand. Even if Congressmen were reluctant to accept Pakistan as a demand of Muslim nationalism they were aware of the popularity of the idea. Even Gandhi felt that the demand was granted by the Congress "because you asked for it. The Congress never asked for it.... But the Congress can feel the pulse of the people. It realized that the Khalsa as also the Hindu desires it. We do not wish to force anyone. We tried hard." (Gandhi's address to the prayer meeting, 11th June 47, CWMG, vol 88, pp. 73-75, cited in S.Mahajan, p. 335). Gandhi was eager to avoid the division of the country and did not participate in all the discussions of the Congress about these developments during 1946. He was in Noakhali in East Bengal trying to restore harmony. He was kept informed by the Congress leaders and he did participate in some of the discussions leading upto partition.

On 14th June, 1947 Gandhi told the delegates to the AICC session that they could remove the members of the Working Committee if they believed they were acting wrongly. He did not think they were in a position to challenge and replace them and Gandhi himself did not feel that the conditions were appropriate for him to 'take up the flag of revolt' (Prayer meeting, 5th June 1947, CWMG, Vol 88, p.154 cited in S Mahajan, p.371). Gandhi was against the partition of the country but he did not want to rebel against the Congress because it had to reluctantly accept the partition of the country. He was not in favour of a mass movement against the decision to partition the country because the conditions were not conducive for such a movement and because he was not sure whether he could secure the support of the people in such an endeavour.

12.6.1 Cabinet Mission Plan and a Strong State

In 'Sole Spokesman', Ayesha Jalal had suggested that the Cabinet Mission Plan of 1946 was the one that came closest to what Jinnah really wanted but the Congress leadership had other plans based on the preference for a strong centre. In Self and Sovereignty, the communitarian perspective is used to understand the alienation of the Muslims from the Congress as well as the multiple identities that unitarian or singular conceptions of nationalism sought to control or delegitimise in the name of nationalism. It is important to highlight that if there had been no demand for Pakistan, no matter what the demand meant to different groups, the federal character of the polity would have been easier to preserve. Even if the Muslims of Punjab and Bengal were to demand substantial autonomy within a federation, based on the self-confidence of Muslim elite about being able to wield power at the provincial level because of their numerical preponderance, it would have been on a less communal basis. Muslim communitarian identities, as well as the multiplicity of other identities, would not have been adversely affected if a demand for provincial autonomy within a federation had been advocated by the League.

The communitarian anxieties of the Sikhs of the Punjab too contributed to communal tensions and the demand for Pakistan created higher levels of polarisation in a region that was an important contributor of manpower to the British Army in India. The tensions were more likely to spin out of control in this region where there were so many volunteer organisations and demobilised soldiers after the war ended. In the eastern region, there was communal polarisation but fewer demobilised soldiers and a weaker 'martial' tradition. The fear of living under a majority community was not confined to the Muslim community alone. Hindus and Sikhs in the Punjab too began to worry about their fate in a future Pakistan and a Muslim majority group in the North West was also a cause for concern. Some Sikhs demanded a separate homeland and adequate safeguards for their community.

The opposition to the division of the province on religious lines was stronger in Bengal than in the Punjab. The British had deliberately promoted Jinnah's League during the war but were reluctant to support his claim for a separate state. Their reluctance to prevent the spread of virulent propaganda helped the League gain adherents. The British also preferred the League and Wavell's Breakdown Plan indicated a withdrawal to the North West of India away from Congress controlled areas. It is another matter that the decision to withdraw announced in 1947 and the advancement of Indian independence compelled Indians to come to a decision sooner than they would have liked and probably made partition and the violence that accompanied it more likely. Some historians believe that the British wanted to retain influence in the region after they left and therefore promoted a smaller and more pliable country like Pakistan.

The Cabinet Mission Plan was not accepted by the Congress because it gave very limited powers to a common central government for the whole subcontinent. It also created three Groups of provinces, two groups with Muslim majority provinces in the North West and North East of India. It was grouping that was a source of difficulty for the Congress. Initially the Congress was willing to accept the Cabinet Mission proposals. When it was clarified that the scheme for Groups of provinces could not be modified, Sardar Patel decided to oppose it (Nandurkar). Gandhi wanted a duly constituted court to pronounce its judgement on the different interpretations of the proposals by the Congress, the League and the Cabinet Mission itself (Interview to Preston Grover, October 21, 1946. CWMG, Vol LXXXVI, p.10). Though Gandhi was opposed to the idea of the partition of India, he also opposed the compulsory inclusion of Assam, North West Frontier Province and the Sikhs of the Punjab in the Groups that would be dominated by the Muslim League under the Cabinet Mission Plan (Instructions for Congress Working Committee, 28/30 December, 1946. CWMG, Vol- LXXXVI, pp.285-286).

Nehru argued that a central government was bound to increase its powers and that a future Constituent Assembly would be free to determine the future of India. Maulana Azad felt that this was a blunder since the acceptance of the Cabinet Mission proposals could have preserved the unity of India (M. Azad).

In order to preserve the unity of the country and restore communal harmony, Gandhi proposed that Muhammad Ali Jinnah be made the Prime Minister of India. This was a proposal he made twice- once in 1946 and the second time in April 1947. In May 1947 he wrote to Lord Mountbatten that the British should "leave the Government of the whole of India, including the States to one party" (CWMG, Vol. LXXXVII, p. 436). Mountbatten should hand over power to either the Muslim League or the Congress, grant Dominion Status, remain as Governor-General for the next thirteen months and "then leave them to their own devices" (Interview with Lord Mountbatten, May 4, 1947. CWMG, Vol-LXXXVII, Appendix. XV, pp. 549-550). These proposals were not accepted by the Congress leaders. This has been interpreted as the rejection of Gandhi's vision or the clinching evidence for the political ambitions of the top leaders of the Congress.

It is arguable that the gestures of goodwill that Gandhi made would not have resolved the problem of sharing power between two major political parties representing two different ideologies. In any case Gandhi did not feel he could confront the Congress leaders on this question because he was not sure whether even the Hindus would be willing to follow his advice. Gandhi did not accept the idea of partition and thought that the partition should not divide the hearts of people even if the boundaries were redrawn. It was a fait

accomplish but should not be allowed to influence the ordinary people. Gandhi was “as much against forced partition as against forced unity” (CWMG, Vol-LXXXVII, p.30). Although he could not resolve the dispute between the Congress and the League or launch a mass movement, Gandhi worked for communal harmony in the riot affected areas. Even those scholars like Sumit Sarkar who believe that a mass movement against the British was possible during the last two years of colonial rule, during the winter of 1946-47, believe that Gandhi’s struggle against the blazing fires of communalism in Bengal, Bihar and Delhi was of immense significance and constituted his ‘finest hour’ (Sumit Sarkar).

12.7 SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC BACKGROUND

The discussion of the partition of India cannot be reduced to the intentions or decisions of a few top leaders, no matter how significant their role might have been in the closing years of colonial rule. Moreover, the notion of inflexible forces in history leading to communal polarisation and partition are also untenable. The argument of the Indian communists that there are many nations in India and that the demand for Pakistan was a nationality demand is logically consistent but does not tell us how and why it emerged during the last decade of colonial rule. Yet there is a middle level formulation about the growing support for a separate state of Pakistan or partition of Punjab and Bengal during the last few years of colonial rule. The inchoate demand for Pakistan stirred poets and propagandists who influenced the popular mood and fuelled communal tensions and anxieties. Several scholars like Mushirul Hasan, who do not subscribe to the binary opposition between Indian nationalism and Muslim communalism and separatism, believe that the propaganda of the League had a deep impact on several sections of society (Mushirul Hasan). This helped to create not only support for a separate state in the Muslim majority regions like Punjab and Bengal but also fuelled anxieties among the minorities in these regions.

The Sikhs had created their own reform movement and the Singh Sabha movement strengthened the communitarian identities of the Sikhs in the Punjab. The fear of being left defenceless, especially after the community had played a vital role in the agricultural colonisation and military service, created a vital unsettling factor. The growth of various volunteer organisations and communal polarisation undermined the cross-communal alliance created by the Unionist Party of the Punjab under Fazli Husain and Sir Sikandar Hyat Khan. The politics of the Punjab was heavily influenced by certain forms of communitarian identities – based on caste, language and religion but these were often competing and overlapping identities. Nevertheless the propaganda of the League upset this alliance and compelled those Muslims like Sikandar Hyat Khan, who believed in provincial autonomy, to accept the ideological preeminence of the League leadership. The support for Jinnah and the Muslim League may not bring back memories of the legendary Islamic hero Saladin, but the Pakistan idea had acquired considerable support in the North West of India (Akbar Ahmad and Ian Talbot). The attitude of the Muslim landlords of Punjab was of crucial importance in the creation of Pakistan (Hamza Alavi).

Ayesha Jalal has argued that although Punjabis were “especially unwilling to make concessions to rival communities” the majority of Punjabis were opposed to the partition of their province on religious lines in March 1947 (Jalal, EPW, August 8, 1998). She argues that Hindus had indicated their unwillingness to accept Muslim domination at the provincial level twice before; this was reflected in their response to Lala Lajpat Rai’s

proposals in 1924 and C. Rajagopalachari's formula of 1944 calling for the separation of Hindu majority regions in Punjab and Bengal. Jalal argues that sub-regional and class factors influenced the behaviour of individuals more than communitarian identities, but the central leadership imposed the partition of the Punjab from above. It is arguable that rival communitarian and 'nationalist' or communal perspectives led to a paralysis of political will or the unwillingness to come to a compromise that enabled the British government and the central leaderships of the League and the Congress to impose their will on the Punjab. This failure to come to an agreement was not the failure of a few leaders in the Punjab but of the clash of economic interests of social groups that underpinned communitarian identities and of widespread and extreme distrust of the other.

Communitarian differences were sustained by economic and legal-constitutional arrangements like the Punjab Land Alienation Act of 1900 and the district-wise enumeration of agricultural castes whose lands could not be taken away by urban moneylenders. Marxist formulations about the economic basis of communalism or the communalisation of the class struggle may seem overstated or too general but communitarian identities have always been underpinned and qualified by economic and class differences. The opposition to Hindu merchant-moneylender domination brought together the Hindu, Sikh and Muslim agrarian interests in the Punjab in the Unionist party. The Congress led popular and peasant movements but its mass base was limited. The Congress in the Punjab was weaker than in the United Provinces because it was perceived as a representative of urban Hindu groups and its Hindu Mahasabha rivals often stole the support that the Congress sought in the crucial years before partition. The Muslim League was able to destroy the support for the Unionist party by winning the support of the landowners of western Punjab, forging an alliance with the *pirs* and *sajjda nashins*, a network that had been used by the British and the Unionist party earlier (David Gilmartin).

The partition of Bengal has been regarded as a tragedy that could have been averted but for the imposition from above. Sarat Bose argued for a united autonomous Socialist Republic of Bengal and the idea also appealed to Suhrawardy who felt that the loss of Calcutta would weaken the economy of East Pakistan (Sugato Bose, Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper, pp. 292-301). Gandhi himself offered to act as Suhrawardy's honorary private secretary in May 1947 if he worked to retain Bengal for the Bengalis by non-violent means (CWMG, Vol-LXXXVII, p. 460). Joya Chatterjee has argued that the *bhadralok* of Bengal had turned to a more Hindu nationalist position after the Communal Award of 1932 and weakened the social dominance of the upper castes in Bengal. In order to bolster their position, the *bhadralok* turned to the Depressed Castes to maintain their hold on the province. Sarat Chandra and the Hindu Mahasabha played an active role in creating a Hindu nationalist tendency. There was a strong movement by Hindus and a section of the Congress to call for the partition of Bengal in the late 1940s. This movement was popular in the eight Hindu majority districts of south-central Bengal (Joya Chatterjee, 1994). It was not the only trend in Bengal politics, but secular nationalism and socialist radicalism were not as robust as believed earlier (Pradip Datta).

Although there was the growth of a radical peasant movement in East Bengal, it had acquired a religious or communitarian perspective. Whether the peasants who supported the Krishak Praja party during the 1930s and 1940s were communal or not, they were no supporters of the Hindu landlords and the *bhadralok* (Tajul Hashmi). Some historians have argued that Muslim rent receivers were considered part of the peasant community but not Hindus in a similar economic position because of acceptance of insider exploitation

(Partha Chatterjee). Anti-landlord and anti-moneylender legislation supported by the Krishak Praja party was viewed by Hindu bhadralok as anti-Hindu and communal. Radical initiatives were often seen in terms of their impact on specific communities. Advocates of Pakistan advised Muslim peasants during the Tebhaga movement: 'why agitate for a larger share of the crop when under Pakistan you would have it all?' For their part, the Hindu communalists reminded peasants of the plight of their co-religionists in Noakhali. The call for Direct Action by the League led to a bloodbath in Calcutta in 1946 and killings in East Bengal strengthened fears of Muslim majority rule in a united Bengal.

There is a persistent belief that a mass movement in 1946-47 could have dissolved the communal tensions and a last anti-imperialist struggle could have helped to bring about national unity. Officers and soldiers of the Indian National Army created by Subhas Chandra Bose inspired Indians from all regions and communities, particularly in Punjab and Bengal. The postwar discontent was leading to peasant movements and protests in Bengal, Andhra and elsewhere. The grievances of the soldiers in the British Indian Army posted overseas and the mutiny of the naval ratings in 1946 led to hopes of a popular struggle against an emasculated British government in India. Although there were mass demonstrations in support of the INA officers and soldiers, the communal polarisation had also grown quite substantial. Some historians have noted the tendency of some peasant radicals to participate in communal movements. Others have observed that supporters of the INA, and some soldiers as well, were involved in communal violence during August 1946 in Calcutta (Suranjan Das).

The social discontent of the post-war period in combination with the communal polarisation did not bode well for an anti-imperialist struggle to combat the idea of Pakistan. Muslim mass contact had not worked well in the 1930s before the Muslim League had demonstrated its electoral strength. Any movement launched in a period of social tensions of the post-war years was bound to exceed the limits of non-violence prescribed by Gandhi. Therefore the option of a mass movement was not accepted by Gandhi. A movement launched by the left nationalists, with or without the support of the Congress, was unlikely to break the communal impasse produced by the fear of Hindu and Muslim majority rule. Members of the Muslim middle class and the capitalists had realised that a separate state was bound to give them a distinct advantage and they were unlikely to forego it. In Bengal not only did Muslim merchants like Ispahani favour Pakistan but the Marwaris of Calcutta also wanted to be free of Muslim domination (Claude Markovits). The left wing nationalists were too weak to influence the outcome of any mass movement and there were clear material and cultural rewards that members of the Muslim elite of Punjab and Bengal were unwilling to forego. The East Bengal assembly, however, voted against the partition of Bengal.

According to Joya Chatterjee, a section of the Hindu elite and the Congress were willing to go to any extent to escape the Muslim majority rule. They wanted to remain in power in the newly carved Hindu majority state of Bengal. At the time of the drawing up of the boundary of West Bengal, the Congress wanted to create a state "with an unequivocal Hindu majority, containing as few Muslims as possible" (J. Chatterjee, 2008, p39). In Punjab the problem of settling the demobilised soldiers would have posed a problem for peace as well as communal harmony if there was a confrontation between rival communities for dominance after the rout of the Unionist party. Therefore, the chances of a mass movement overcoming the problems posed by the demand for Pakistan were rather

limited, but cannot be completely ruled out. The differences between him and the radicals and the left were too substantial for Gandhi to overlook when he suggested to the AICC that the Congress Working Committee leadership should be opposed and removed.

12.8 OVERVIEW

Gandhi was not in favour of partition and he was willing to go further than all the prominent members of the Congress to avert it. He had been willing to offer the primeministership to Jinnah if that could avert partition. Yet he was aware that he had lost the support of large numbers of Hindus and that the Muslims no longer trusted him. The Muslim voters had not reposed any faith in the Congress even during the heyday of the Gandhian leadership of the Congress and it was unlikely that in a period of great communal polarization, they would listen to him. The Muslim mass contact movements had not succeeded because of the conservative social base of the local Congress party and its members (Gyan Pandey, Sumit Sarkar). If Gandhi could not get the Muslims to join the Congress during the 1930s, then there was little chance that any gesture of goodwill or any mass movement could have brought a sizable Muslim following in 1946-47.

This was the logic not only of communal politics but also of electoral politics based on a limited franchise and separate electorates. The problem was not so much the denial of the religiously informed identities of Indian Muslims as the Muslim perception, and the League propaganda, that their economic and political rights were threatened by a monolithic Hindu community and an overbearing Congress party. Uneven development and struggle for dominance led to the growing polarisation; the real distribution of power and resources created mutual rivalry and distrust, not so much differences about religion. These factors explain why the unorthodox Jinnah was able to become the leader of Indian Muslims and a devout Muslim and an avowed nationalist like Maulana Azad had very little support within his community during 1946-47. Even with adult franchise, the problems associated with religiously determined majorities and power sharing was not likely to disappear. This might have been a factor in the acceptance of partition as a resolution of the communal problem. The scale of the violence during partition was unforeseen and the migrations were on a much larger scale than anyone had imagined but it resolved the question of power sharing with religiously defined minorities in both India and Pakistan.

Many Gandhians believe that Gandhi's friends and supporters abandoned him and his ideals even before he was assassinated. This has been termed a betrayal of Gandhian ideals. Liberals see a departure from Gandhian ideals but not a complete break (Anthony Parel). Marxists have called the transition to power that his leadership of the Congress helped to bring about as a passive revolution (Partha Chatterjee). Yet the fact remains that he was unable to carry forward his agenda on a range of issues because of his pivotal role in India's freedom struggle. Gandhi was not able to promote Hindu-Muslim unity despite the great emphasis he placed on communal harmony. The left nationalists and Marxists believe that his methods of struggle, howsoever laudable, were unable to produce a radical transformation of the national movement. Therefore the possibility of reducing the influence of the conservative Hindu and Muslim elites, who were locked in a struggle for power and dominance, by mass mobilisation, could not be realised.

12.9 SUMMARY

Gandhi struggled valiantly, but could not preserve the unity of India. It was not something even a leader as great as he was could have handled by himself. Powerful economic and political forces were at play and eventually prevailed. Gandhi did not know how to cope with the constitutional problems and alternatives that were discussed before the final partition of the country; he was not too old and marginalised to offer his views. Therefore he did not offer his views forcefully on a constitutional solution to the communal deadlock in 1946-47, although the idea of the 'oceanic circle' gives us a glimpse of his vision for India. Probably he immersed himself in fighting communalism by touring the riot-affected regions because that was something he could do without any help from others. The satyagrahi who believed in non-violence and a decentralised government was unable to give detailed advice on how competing notions of nationalism and nationalist projects for modernisation could be best tackled. He was unhappy with partition but he was not willing to fight the party he had led for nearly three decades. The partition of India was the outcome of several factors that have been dealt with so far. No single individual brought it about or could have averted it. This holds true for Gandhi as well.

12.10 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

1. Enumerate the Socio-economic reasons behind partition.
2. What was the role of the League and the congress regarding partition?
3. Do you think Gandhi was responsible for partition? Give reasons.

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