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Partition of India: Causes, Communal Politics, Refugee Rehabilitation, and Long-Term Impacts

Dr. Chandan Kumar

Ph.D. (History), UGC–NET, MBA (HR & IT), Swami Vivekanand Subharti
University, Meerut (India)

Email id- drchandanresearch@gmail.com

Abstract:

Tracing the causes, course, and consequences of the 1947 Partition of India, the paper argues that division emerged from the interaction of colonial divide-and-rule, constitutionally entrenched communal electorates, and competitive strategies pursued by the Congress and the Muslim League amid Britain's postwar retrenchment. Key milestones included the Lahore Resolution (1940), failure of the Cabinet Mission Plan (1946), Direct Action Day violence, and the Mountbatten Plan incorporated into the Indian Independence Act (18 July 1947). The process quickly reconfigured administrative, military, and civil institutions and culminated on 15 August 1947 with the creation of India and Pakistan and the partition of Punjab and Bengal. Immediate outcomes were catastrophic: one to two million deaths, mass sexual violence, and the forced migration of roughly fifteen million people, reshaping demography, property regimes, and urban space. Government rehabilitation—land allotments, credit, and employment—varied by region; migrant skills sometimes catalyzed sectoral shifts, as in the expansion of jute cultivation near Calcutta. Refugee entrepreneurship reconfigured labor markets in several cities. Long-term effects include hardened religious identities, recurrent communal riots, border insecurities, and durable shocks to trade, finance, and transport networks that encouraged state-led industrialization. The political legacy persists in debates on minority protections, federal design, and citizenship. Integrating political, social, and economic perspectives, the study shows how contingent colonial decisions, institutional incentives, and mass mobilizations produced irreversible outcomes whose afterlives continue to shape South Asia's states and societies.

Keywords: Partition of India; communal politics; refugee rehabilitation; mass migration; economic disruption; long-term impacts.

Introduction

Partition continues to be the most important event in the political history of India, as it was the culmination of the freedom struggle of the Indian people. The British government, having greatly weakened after World War II, sought to confine its economic and military

resources within European territories and immediately declared its intention to grant independence to India. The Indian National Congress accepted this offer; however, the Muslim League under Muhammad Ali Jinnah rejected the Congress proposal of an Interim Government of India and demanded the creation of a separate Muslim state of Pakistan. Jinnah mobilized the Muslim masses on communalist lines, worsening the communal conflict. Historians argue that British policy likened the British Empire to a commercial company and Liberation to a profitable trade-out, putting British democracy to shame. Following World War II, they sought to recoup the war costs rather than speed up Independence, permanently tying the Muslims to Pakistan and involvement in the Second World War on the Allied side. The system of Divide and Rule, that prevented Indians from establishing a united front against British rule and introduced a communal bias into Indian politics and society, helped bring about Independence and Partition. The system of autonomous apartness, turned a predominantly socio-cultural difference into a political and constitutional adjective. Independence and Partition became the dead-ends of the colonial policy and struggle for Independence.

Historical Context of the Partition

Ethnic and religious conflict have long been central in South Asian politics, and the most salient example occurred when, on 15 August 1947, British India was partitioned into two dominions, India and Pakistan. The partition created independent countries for Muslims and Hindus and resulted in the largest mass migration in human history, involving approximately 17 million people fleeing across the new boundaries to join their chosen religious majority. As a process of post-colonization, the partition was at least as much a transfer of power along communal lines as it was a transfer of sovereignty. The dynamics leading to the division reflected the hegemonic influence of a particular communal political discourse achieved by the Muslim League in the 1930s. The Islamic demand for protection of Muslim communal interests was realized, but only through the formation of a separate Muslim-majority polity. While it is sometimes viewed merely as an 'ethnic cleansing', the potential plurality of religious identities and social forms preceding the formation of Pakistan is difficult to trace and the social processes of Partition defy such a simple explanation. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Muslim population of Punjab stagnated at about 54%, while the Hindu population rose slightly, leading to increasingly intense politics of religious identities and power, as well as confrontation between the communal parties of the Congress and the Muslim League. The communal party system refused to make space for other possibilities and the colonial authorities proved willing to concede communal power to the Muslim League, despite the minority status of the party among Muslim voters.

Causes of the Partition

Partition of India along religious lines resulted from various factors, and it is useful to analyze these before exploring subsequent issues. Indian nationalism was pluralistic, incorporating a range of political perspectives. The largest nationalist organization, the Indian National Congress, was mostly secular and had significant Muslim representation. Some leaders advocated Hindu-Muslim unity, but others sought greater Islamization of the Muslim community. Muslim separatism developed in competition with this outlook and became identified with the Muslim League. British imperial policy and the constitutional system encouraged Muslim separatism and communal division. Punjabi and Bengal Muslims supported Pakistan because Partition would preserve their dominant positions in those provinces. Other Muslims generally opposed Partition but preferred it to the Indian National Congress. The British proved indispensable to the creation of Pakistan. India was decolonized through a series of political measures that the imperial government negotiated with and largely controlled, maintaining influence over the south Asian subcontinent.

Communal Politics in Pre-Partition India

Communal tensions plagued India's nationalist movement during the 1930s and 1940s.

The Muslim League capitalized on religious identity as a political tool to further its agenda, wielding party membership and voter rolls to deny Muslims access to land and water. The aristocratic bhadralok leadership of the Congress also viewed election results and party memberships through a communal lens and aimed to secure seats and offices for Hindus. British rule played a crucial role in perpetuating and exacerbating communal divisions by granting Indians select political rights and recognizing certain communities as more significant than others. Although Muslims formed approximately one-quarter of India's population, the government granted them roughly half of the seats on the Central Legislative Assembly after the 1935 Government of India Act. Individuals of each religious group were classified as members of separate communities, ultimately fostering antagonism. The rejection of an Indian nationalist approach served as further justification for separate electorates, reserved seats, and ultimately – a separate nation.

Role of Political Parties: From colonial to post-colonial history, the construction of political community was both sticky and fraught. The contestations associated with this construction were often violent. MEA's proposal, reviewed in the context of Patel's argument, suggests that some of the unrest in 1946 could have been avoided if no elections had been held. Even the civil disobedience campaign of the Khilafat and Non-Cooperation Movements did not create the fissures that emerged between 1937–40 or after the 1946 elections. The groundwork for Partition was laid when neither civil disobedience nor the promise of Swaraj prevented a state of informality and illegality from engulfing the elites. The Congress-Muslim League equation was the principal interaction in nationalist politics. Without it, nationalist unity would have been beyond reach, but it placed a large premium on crutches and fixes, the demands of which continually increased during the 1920s. Colonialism was the principal structuring force, and three major political parties—the Indian National Congress, the Muslim League, and the Unionists—emerged to parcel out leadership. Each responded to colonial rule in its own way to deliver constituents from economic insecurity. In the process, yet more complexity was introduced into pre-existing fragmentation.

Influence of Colonial Rule: Conceived through a Protestant theological outlook, British colonial rule (1858-1947) implied superiority and finality of its power, regarding Indians as less than fully sovereign subjects who should be governed for their own benefit. Colonized societies often become arenas for anxieties and desires of their colonizers, spilling over into divisive social cleavages. Sequestration, or governance at a difference, aimed to maintain colonial stability by separating colonizers' sole sovereignty from the governed. Establishing native agents and populations as less than sovereign colonial subjects and policing such difference turns a space into a colony. Further, the creation of spatial and social distance facilitates forms of separation complementary with governmental regimes, popularly known as divide and rule. The continuance of intertwined relations among nation states indicates that artificial separation—partition or bisection—is at work when an established interrelatedness is interrupted. This naturally raises questions about the bisection of South Asia and, more broadly, of the divide-and-rule strategy employed by the British to strengthen colonial rule and serve imperial interests.

The exercise of power employed various means and methods but the provision of political legitimacy with new governmental norms governed the relationship between the colonizers and the colonized. Colonial power specifically provides justice determining the order of things, which enabled the colonized to perform all things in contrast with the colonizers. The intensification of Social Darwinism led to the rise of the radical Hegelian argument of historical inevitability and helps explain the endorsement of colonialism. The exercise of force at the point of contact becomes a constitutive element of colonial and imperial governance but the history of European colonization must be seen in the larger context of global capitalism. The articulation of rule as the duty of civilization offered protection and reorganization at the point of contact between colonizer and colonized and, most importantly, established political

legitimacy for colonial power with new governmental arrangements ranging from municipal administration to economic intervention and popular sovereignty. The limitation of political authority, determining the leadership of the colonizers and the position of the colonized, divides the apparent unity of sovereignty into two domains through the colonial process of separation. The refusal to acknowledge any alternative properties of political power provides the ultimate ground for the continuing justification of the superiority and the finality of the power of the European sovereigns.

The Process of Partition

The process of Partition was characterized by several critical events encompassing political negotiations, mass mobilizations, widespread communal violence, large-scale migrations, and administrative measures. These events transpired abruptly over a span of a few months following the second World War, culminating in the Independence Act of March 1947, which enacted the partition of colonial British India. The consequent transfer of sovereignty to two separate states—India and Pakistan—became operative on 15 August 1947, with Punjab and Bengal scheduled for division in subsequent months. Several major incidents marked the partition process. The Cabinet Mission of 1946, assembled to devise a framework for the transfer of power, was disbanded when its proposals were rejected, eliminating a conceivable compromise. The ensuing failure of talks between the British, the Indian National Congress (INC), the All-India Muslim League, and the Sikh political organizations rendered partition and the creation of Pakistan an inevitable outcome. The Lahore Resolution of 1940 further consolidated the League's demand for a separate state. Prior to the Partition, the Communal Award of 1932, which extended separate electorates to minorities, and the Government of India Act of 1935 dictated the formation of the Constituent Assembly for independent India, also set the stage for the ensuing process.

Key Events Leading to Partition: Key events shaping the course of Partition reflected a series of decisions and developments, greatly influenced by historical conditions set by the colonial government. The outbreak of communal riots during the Direct Action Day in Bombay on 16 August 1946 incited violence. The Viceroy promulgated Communal Award, 1932 that introduced separate electorates for Scheduled castes, Muslims, and Sikhs, the latter two only in provinces where they were found in substantial numbers. The Brown Ironstone Committee, 1829 recommended broad scale reforms after the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 in an attempt to ensure greater compliance from the native Indian states towards the colonizers, including the introduction of Western education in India, which led to the development of Indian Nationalism.

The 1937 elections provided a boost for Congress, and a kind of a phantom victory for the Muslim League. At this time, the League was weak and almost dormant in the major areas of North India, but every Muslim voter felt the need to identify with the only viable alternative – the League – as political power now devolved heavily on the Government's standards. Jinnah's insistence on a weekly deadline in the Broadcasting house for his speeches hampered the possibility of a rapprochement with Nehru. The Election of the Working Committee caused a lot of consternation among the ranks. Attlee's government mooted the idea of an Elections to Constituent Assembly, and for the first time, also a sagacious idea of the balance between Congress and the Muslim League in the House.

The Mountbatten Plan: The simultaneous creation of India and Pakistan, executed within a remarkably brief period, culminated in an extensive reorganization of administrative, military, and civilian frameworks that had long been integral to the British Indian Empire. The principal determinations concerning the Partition, encompassing operational modalities and associated arrangements, were encapsulated in the Mountbatten Plan. Initially formulated as a strategy for the immediate withdrawal of British forces from India, the proposal rapidly expanded to encompass the terms of Hindu-Muslim disengagement, provisions for the protection of minority rights, and criteria for the future delineation of borders.

The trajectory from the Cabinet Mission Plan to the enactment of Partition legislation further diminished the perceived viability of a federated solution. Under the Cabinet Mission's arrangement, the Constituent Assembly of a residual India was expected to function, yet the willingness of the Indian National Congress to engage with this assembly sharply declined. The principles of the Mountbatten Plan were incorporated with only nominal alterations into the Indian Independence Act Legislation enacted on 18 July 1947. The majority communities within various provinces predominantly accepted the conclusions of the Plan.

Immediate Consequences of Partition

The Partition of India resulted in massive violence, displacement, and widespread refugee migration. The immediate aftermath saw Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim refugees streaming in across the new borders, making it one of the largest involuntary mass migrations in history. With approximately 14 million people displaced and property lost or abandoned, the social fabric of rural India acquired a deeply bifurcated communal character, and new frontier towns such as Dehradun, Jalandhar, Moga, Fazilka, and Muktsar were confronted with an unprecedented challenge. As the number of refugees fluctuated, responsibility for their rehabilitation was increasingly taken up by the Indian government, which provided land and financial aid. Numerous positive outcomes emerged from this mass displacement, and efforts of the governments of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh sought to address these realities with varying degrees of intensity and effectiveness.

Violence and Displacement: The Partition of British India in 1947 provoked horrific communal violence, the worst human massacre of the twentieth century. An estimated one million people were killed and twenty million became refugees as the partition process created enormous voluntary and forcible population displacements. East Pakistan became a separate country in 1971, which complicated the partition process further and led to the migration of many refugees, mostly to the West Bengal region of India. This generation subsequently defined the relationship between religious and regional identities in an independent India. Minorities in each nation faced questions about their supranational identities and had to justify remaining in their ancestral localities. Religious identity collided with national identity, as minorities in India and Pakistan became trans-territorial citizens residing in one nation but professing loyalty to another. This was manifested through routine, small-scale violence targeting minorities. After 1947 violence continued on a daily basis, often taking the form of psychological threats, and migrants continued to move across the border for decades after the partition. The displaced migrated either voluntarily or were forcibly evicted. Classified as refugees and displaced persons, those living in Bengal faced particular challenges since the Indian State in Calcutta believed that migration from East Pakistan would be temporary and therefore instituted limited and ad hoc economic rehabilitation policies. The paradoxical character of colonial refugee populations became an enduring theme of postpartition South Asia. Refugees were lazy yet pioneering, without agency yet subversive, claiming a marginal, disposable social identity but demanding active citizenship rights.

Mass Migration of Refugees: The partition of India led to the migration of an estimated 14 million people along religious lines between the newly created nations of India and Pakistan. The 1941 Census of India had calculated the total Muslim population at approximately 329 million, 23.38% of the total population. India had an estimated Muslim population of 333 million in 1947. During the partition, more than 12 million Muslims, primarily from India, moved to Pakistan. Nearly 7.2266 million Muslims out of the estimated 33.7 million in Eastern Punjab migrated to West Punjab. Additionally, 3.4485 million Muslims out of the estimated 18.6 million in Bombay and Sindh migrated to Sindh Province and Karachi. Between April and December 1947, around 7.2 million Muslims from East Punjab moved to West Punjab and Jammu & Kashmir in Pakistan, while 4.4 million Hindus and Sikhs from West Punjab and Haryana migrated to East Punjab, Delhi, and Himachal Pradesh in India. Religious riots and violence during this period resulted in the deaths of one to two million individuals.

Long-Term Impacts of the Partition

The Partition of India had far-reaching effects on the political culture and social geography of South Asia. The crisis of Partition not only shaped politics in the initial years of independence but also imposed long-term consequences that continue to resonate in the contemporary world. The politics of Partition fostered an insular notion of the national community and intensified the politicization of religious identities, which can be traced back to the pre-Partition era when communal politics emerged as a defining feature of Indian political culture. In the Partition scenario, fundamental differences were emphasized and oppositional identities reinforced to such an extent that no future reconciliation appeared tenable. Extensive examples of this process are found in the pre-Partition negotiations, with the constitutional crisis of the 1940s and the spectacular rift between Gandhi and Jinnah standing out. The political agendas of Mandal and Manto illustrate that the crisis of Partition extended into the post-Partition scenario and remained unresolved.

Political Ramifications: The Partition of India (1947) set an enduring prism through which to view communal relations, minority questions, and the political fortunes of competing ethno-religious groups. As the Single-Biggest political watershed after Independence, it reshaped the social world in ways that left an imprint to this day, among both those who fell on the 'right' and 'wrong' sides of the newly carved border. The continued predominance of partition-askance perspectives over the Great Divide illustrates the amplitude and limit of the Partition's political effects.

Social and Cultural Changes: Major societal and cultural changes related to the Partition of India included the resurgence of Hindu and Sikh identities in Punjab and Sikh claims to distinctiveness in Bengal. Muslims arriving in Delhi were culturally and linguistically distinct from the local population, which exacerbated animosity. Migration accelerated national integration. Distinct regional identities of Punjabi and Bengali Muslims were weakened by migration and communal violence inflight, as survivors embraced a greater Indian Muslim identification. The migration of refugee Muslims from East Pakistan and religious devotion served to forge solidarity among West Bengal's Muslim community.

Economic Consequences of Partition

Partition disrupted the economic linkages linking the regions constituting India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, endangering the functioning and development of the irrigation system, railways, road transport, communications and policing and causing a mass exodus of trading, commercial and industrial communities whose displacement added to economic shock. Its long-term effects on the Indian economy included the disruption of agricultural and industrial production and trade, alterations to money markets, population changes and general economic disorganisation.

Impact on Trade and Industry: Partition had a deleterious impact on trade and industry. An important nerve centre of trade and industry was lost suddenly and the process of establishing new trade centres and beginning new industrial production was long and slow. Large sums of money had also to be paid for wages and salaries to the employees who were displaced. The agitation raised by the displaced persons and also the loss of market and raw materials for industrial production caused many a closure and large scale unemployment. Both the Dominion of India and the Dominion of Pakistan faced excessive liquid currency crisis which severely stunted trade and industrial activity. Agricultural production was also seriously affected. In addition to the financial and population crisis, loss of industrial centres and disruption of trade routes further contributed to the economic crisis of the subcontinent.

Changes in Agricultural Patterns: The partition of India induced extensive trade disruption through the transfer of districts and provinces from one dominion to another. The key partition event affecting India's economy was the separation of Calcutta from East Bengal; the loss of Chittagong further weakened Calcutta's position as a trading port. Trade levels between India

and Pakistan recommenced at a fraction of pre-partition levels. Refugees played a positive role in receiving economies, particularly in rural India. Three million refugees moved into eastern India and, as a result, the jute fields of East Pakistan were completely separated from Calcutta's mills. The returning migrants brought jute-specific skills to India and, together with the surge in local production and demand for jute gave rise to a sustained expansion of jute cultivation. Districts that received more migrants experienced greater increases in jute acreage and output and yields also rose. Migrants did not depress yields, wages, or the price of jute in the districts where they settled. The partition of India provides a remarkable example of a migration-induced technological and production shift. The economic effects of partition on the Indian economy were profound and long lasting. New trade barriers raised prices and discouraged Indian exports, such as jute goods. The potential loss of Northeast India (Assam) concerned New Delhi, since it provided a large proportion of tea, oil, and other raw materials to the Indian economy. Partition increased the distance between Calcutta and Assam and introduced the need for transit clearances by the eastern dominion (East Pakistan). SPLIT up to partition had led to growth, but partition generated structural obstacles to growth. The growth-reducing changes in trade policy and increased transportation cost were considerable when India was already weak and in transition. The country's inability to offset partition's adverse impact prompted major policy change. Industrial and agricultural development through publicly funded investment became national priorities to provide the necessary base for sustainable growth. Local jute demand and migrant skills can fully explain the increase in jute cultivation. An instrumental-variables approach shows that districts most severely affected by migrant flows extensively expanded jute cultivation after partition. Migration did not depress yields, wages, or jute prices in the districts where migrants settled. Refugees can play positive roles in receiving economies, and the partition of India provides a marked example.

Legacy of the Partition in Contemporary India

Towards the north, the presence of the Punjab had radiating effects on the landlocked province of Bengal. In the case of Partition, the Punjab became uniquely significant because it was the only neighbouring province of the new Muslim state of Pakistan which was not itself Muslim majority. Bengal too was divided but it shared two long borders with East Pakistan. The dirigiste and militant character of the League leaders in that province and the deeply immiserated class-structure signified a landlocked and vulnerable society. Communal politics, constructive programmes, and a clear trading and revenue strategy become thus all the more significant in this province to transform a dire economic and geo-political predicament. However, the Muslim League's failure to satisfactorily address a number of important issues at the national level remained a hurdle to mass reach.

On the whole therefore, it turns out that Partition was neither necessary nor inevitable. The secession of the Muslim-majority areas of Punjab and Bengal became exacerbated and eventually crystallised by the communalisation of politics arising from the discretionary collaboration of Congress and the Muslim League with the British government during the interwar period. Both parties were well aware of the history of upheaval and crisis in their midst and were cautious of communitisation. However, the colonial government, since the political upsurge of the Khilafat-Congress Movement, sought regime security through the preservation of separate electorates and the channelisation of unrest along communal lines. It did so through the retrospective revision of vows (in the case of Congress) and the protective pacification of minorities (in the case of the League). It was the engagement with the British administration that transformed originally economic and cultural identities into fully-fledged communitised political ones. The colonial state's action therefore constituted the structural and circumstantial imperative, which made the formation and empowerment of a communal revolutionary leadership possible. India became the Britannic Balkan in the years before the Second World War and Partition the inevitable consequence within this

historical setting.

The period after the Partition saw repeated outbreaks of communal violence, accompanied inter alia by large-scale displacements and the pressing challenge of refugee rehabilitation. The memory of Partition and its patterns of collective violence remain potent, with minor skirmishes frequently descending into communal riots and long-standing peaceful neighbours becoming hostile. Delhi and Meerut witnessed outbreaks of communal killing in 1973, 1981 and, following the 1984 massacres of Sikhs, in 1987. The demolition of the Babri Masjid and the judgement of the Special CBI Judge in the 1984 anti-Sikh riots brought them again to the boil in 1990 and 2001 respectively. Other areas witnessed similar patterns of intermittent communal tension, and the question of political patronage invariably remains a decisive factor in determining the severity of violence and the speed of restoration of peace on each occasion.

Conclusion

The Partition of India remains an indelible tragedy in modern South Asian history. In view of its momentous and long-lasting consequences for the entire Indian subcontinent, an attempt has been made to examine its causes, the part played by communal politics, the problems connected with refugee rehabilitation, and its long-term impact, interspersed with occasional reference to the subsequent partition of Bengal in 1947 and the effect of the Partition treaty on the future history of the two parts of India. Partition was the outcome of an attempt that began with the foundation of the Muslim League to carve out for Muslims a separate homeland on the frontiers of India. It involved a settlement between the two major communities in India, the Hindus and the Muslims, in advance before the final negotiations about the transfer of power, for the provincial units, especially those of Punjab and Bengal, did not present the least justification for any such settlement. The chief reason for the acceptance of the partition was the fear that the Muslim League would defeat the Congress in the central government and exclude Hindus and Sikhs from power.

Consequently the partition of India was not simply a change in the map of India but a change in Indian history. It involved the destruction of the ancient traditions and life of two cultures. Religious feelings intensified by the provincial ego and competition for power between the two communal organizations were laid to cause the partition. It marked the coming-of-age of communalism. A sense of concerted action forged for securing full self-government impressed upon the constituents of the Government of India Act of 1935 the principle of separate religious electorates with the object of ensuring the representation of the minorities. The relation of religion and politics when subjected to the test of experience during communal riots between the two world wars demonstrated that the division of the Indians into religious groups for electoral purposes, causes of communal riots and real rivalry between the groups in elections. All this sets a dangerous precedent for future history.

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