

Why Was India Partitioned at Independence?

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India was partitioned at Independence on 15th August 1947 into two distinct nations: a newly-established and principally Muslim state of Pakistan, and a Hindu-dominated India. According to Howoritz, 'if it is impossible for groups to live together in a homogeneous state, perhaps it is better for them to live apart in more than one homogeneous state, even if this necessitates population transfers. Separating the antagonists – partition – is an option increasingly recommended for consideration where groups are territorially concentrated'[1].

But such a statement inevitably makes one wonder what it is that made Muslims and Hindus unable to co-exist peacefully within a single state. This essay will attempt to put light on this issue by considering the role played by certain significant factors. This essay will firstly discuss the role played by religion in making co-existence difficult between Hindus and Muslims. Then, attention will be given to the impact of British imperialism in worsening the already fragile relationship. Finally, this essay will discuss how the inability of Congress to satisfy the demands of the Muslim League helped to make partition the only viable solution for peace in the subcontinent.

First of all, the fact that such a division occurred on religious lines means that partition was the logical and inevitable outcome of the irreconcilable opposition between Hindus and Muslims. Indeed, no account of the partition of India can be full without taking into consideration the unwillingness of Hindus to accommodate to Islam and the conflicting religious outlooks of Hindus and Muslims because these features made it extremely difficult for Muslims and Hindus to live together peacefully[2]. Hinduism is a closed society with a strict hierarchical structure separated into thousands of castes which are totally isolated units[3]. Each person's caste is fixed by his/her birth and is supposed to remain loyal to it. Outsiders belong to the caste of the untouchables, the 'polluted' and are referred to as 'Malechha', barbarians[4]. Al-Beruni, a famous savant who visited India in A.D. 1001, made the following remark about Hindus:

'All their fanaticism is directed against those who do not belong to them – against all foreigners. They call them Malechha, i.e. impure and forbid having any connection with them, be it by inter-marriage or by any other kind of relationship, or by sitting, eating or drinking with them, because thereby they would be polluted. They would consider as impure anything which touches the fire and water of a foreigner... They are not allowed to receive anybody who does not belong to them even if he wished it or is inclined to their religion. This renders connection between them quite impossible'[5].

Thus, the intolerance of Hinduism to other faiths logically led to the unwillingness of Hindus to assimilate Indian Muslims and this ensured that they were always divided. In fact, ever since Islam first penetrated the Indian subcontinent, Hindus and Muslims lived as two separate nations between which there was hardly any social communication or intermingling[6]. This was mainly due to racist Hindu regulations such as not letting a Muslim touch a Hindu's glass or his utensils and strict punishments for taking a cup of tea at a beef-eater's house[7]. But what made relations worse was the fact that Islamic practices were antithetic to Hindu ones. For instance, in Hinduism, the cow is sacred: it is believed to be a giver of life, food and sacrifice and thus, it cannot be eaten[8]. Moreover, it is looked after for the whole of its natural lifespan and only those of lower castes are allowed to practice butchery and related jobs[9]. In contrast, Muslims are allowed to slaughter and eat beef and once every year, during Eid Ul Zuha celebration, all Muslims are expected to make a sacrifice in homage to Prophet Ibrahim's willingness to sacrifice his own son to Allah[10]. This Islamic practice has been and still is an issue of major dispute and directly led to the Cow

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Protection Committee of 1882 who would trial those accused of killing cows[11].

Another issue of conflict is the playing of music: in Islam, music is forbidden and thus, musical activities are not permitted. This also means that music should not be played near mosques at any time because someone could be attempting to pray. However, Hindu festivals are often celebrated by people marching through the streets and an integral part of the processions is music which is a particular aspect of Hindu tradition[12]. This difference eventually led to violent clashes as Muslims could not tolerate the beating of drums and the playing of other instruments in front of mosques and demanded that the parades amend their routes so that they did not disrupt the prayers[13]. Thus, the religious differences which separated Muslims and Hindus were fundamental and this created a basic hostility between Hindus and Muslims which on the long-term constrained the possibilities of cooperation between these two groups. This was exacerbated by the fact that Muslims shared a sense of belonging to a universal 'community of believers' called the *Umma* with their co-religionists which overrode the regional and ethnic ties that connected them to their Hindu neighbours[14]. Yet, Muslims represented a small minority in a population that was Hindu and polytheistic. After the British left, there was the fear that Muslims would be ruled by *kafirs*, non-believers which would pose great problems since Muslims had to be governed according to the *Shari' a*, the Islamic Law[15]. This fear led Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, a Muslim poet, to advocate in 1930 a separate Muslim state given the fact that Indian society was 'inhabited by two different nations' there would necessarily be a struggle of power between them if Britain were to leave India[16].

However, it should be noted that there would not have been a struggle for power between these two groups and hence no urge for Muslims to demand a separate state had Britain not colonised India. Imperialism was based on the policy of divide and rule: a divided country was a weak country which could not pose a challenge to the colonising nation[17]. Gandhi summed it up well in 1940 when he observed that:

'The British can retain their hold on India only by a policy of 'divide and rule'. A living unity between the Muslims and Hindus is fraught with danger to their rule. It would mean an end to it.'[18]

This approach can be confirmed by the partition of Bengal in 1905 which H. Risley, the Home Secretary to the government of India, said was done because:

'Bengal united is a power; Bengal divided will pull in several different ways... One of our main objects is to split up and thereby weaken a solid body of opponents to our rule...'[19]

This strategy was a direct response to the Mutiny of 1857 whereby Indians overcame their religious differences to revolt against the British administration[20]. The British were also fearful of the potential threat from the Muslims, who were the former rulers of the subcontinent for several hundred years under the Mughal Empire[21] and thus, their policies were aimed at weakening them. For example, in 1765, Lord Clive removed the Emperor Shah Alam from his position and this led Muslims, who held a majority of the posts in the revenue and judicial systems as well as in the military, to lose their jobs[22]. Additionally, Muslim *zamindars* who were powerful, were removed and reduced to poverty and in 1837, Persian was replaced by English in official jobs thereby diminishing the employment prospects of Muslims[23]. The British policy was to raise the position of the Hindus to ensure the Muslims would never pose a threat. This can be demonstrated by the permanent settlement of Bengal in 1793 which 'elevated the Hindu collectors, who up to that time had but unimportant posts, to the position of landlords, gave them a proprietary right in the soil and allowed them to accumulate wealth which would have gone to the Muslims'[24]. Another significant point was the introduction of democracy in India because it meant that the country would be governed by the majority party[25]. However, while in Britain and other democratic countries, majorities are alterable, in India, it meant the rule of a permanent and unalterable Hindu majority. This meant that the Muslims, who constituted about 25 per cent of the population, could never expect to become a majority or to have effective share in the government of the country[26].

Another important impact of British rule was the revival of Hinduism and the subsequent Hindu ambition of establishing their hegemony over the entire subcontinent. Many Hindus became convinced of the moral, material and intellectual superiority of Britain to such an extent that they began imitating British culture and civilization[27]. Some

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went as far as abandoning their religion and embracing Christianity and it was not uncommon for Hindu youths to deride his religion and ridicule the ways of his ancestors[28]. The Hindu revivalists tried to stop this swing towards 'anglicisation' and attempted to transform Hinduism from a passive way of life to an aggressive missionary religion[29]. Some of the reforms introduced by them were the replacement of Urdu by Hindi in government offices and law courts; the Suddhi movement which was designed for the reconversion of converts to Islam and Christianity back to Hinduism and the establishment of societies which sought to inhibit Muslims from killing cows[30].

But added to the problem of British rule was that of the Indian National Congress whose failure to meet the modest demands of the Muslims ultimately led to the latter group's advocacy of a separate state. Jinnah, the Muslim League leader, put forward the Delhi proposal to Congress for a Hindu-Muslim settlement which demanded the introduction of reforms in the North-West Frontier Province and Baluchistan, the reservation of seats for Muslims on a population basis in the Punjab and Bengal and the allocation of one third of the seats in the central legislature for the Muslims[31]. If these demands were met, Muslims were prepared to give up their right of separate electorates in favour of a joint electorate[32]. Yet although Congress refused, another opportunity arose for a Muslim-Hindu settlement at the Round Table conference in London in 1930 and in 1931 but once again, the Hindus refused[33]. This refusal to grant Muslims alarmed Jinnah and made him believe that the best course of action to take was to demand a separate state because according to him:

'the chief reason why the domestic political situation in India has deteriorated to a point which would have seemed almost inconceivable a few years earlier was the manifest purpose of the Congress to take over the heritage of the British Raj'[34].

In conclusion India was partitioned at Independence because of three main reasons. The first one was the very old and incurable religious and cultural division between the Hindus and the Muslims. As Jinnah once stated

'The Hindus and the Muslims belong to two different religious philosophies, social customs, and literature. They neither intermarry, nor interdine together, and indeed they belong to two different civilizations which are based mainly on conflicting ideas and conceptions. [...] To yoke together two such nations under a single State, one as a numerical minority and the other as a majority, must lead to growing discontent...'[35]

But these differences were exacerbated by the British policy in India. British rule had several effects on the Hindu-Muslim relationship. Firstly, the fact that Britain worked hard to maintain and worsen the divisions between both groups meant that hostilities would persist so as to prevent steps towards communal unity. Furthermore, the revival of Hinduism meant that the Hindu hatred towards Muslims grew in intensity with the resulting consequence of confirming the Muslims' view that under a Hindu-dominated government, they would not live in peace. Lastly, by weakening the position of Muslims and improving that of the Hindus, it led to power disparities in the economic and political fields. This ensured that Muslims would remain discontent. But this dissatisfaction could have been remediated if Congress had agreed to the demands of the Muslims to grant them more power. But since no agreement was reached between the two parties, the only viable solution to preserve the peace in the subcontinent was to partition it into a Muslim-dominated area and a Hindu-dominated one.

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