



THE TRAUMA OF PARTITION AND ENDEAVOUR TO PRESERVE COMMUNAL AMITY: WEST BENGAL, 1947

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

Throughout Bengal's pre-independence era, particularly in the early twentieth century, communal politics became a significant concern, culminating finally in the devastating communal riots of 1946, just before partition. However, after overcoming this trauma, Bengal eventually achieved freedom but with the agony of division, making it one of the most affected regions in the country. It is important to note that contrary to all apprehensions, the new state West Bengal had an extraordinary communal unity on Independence Day that also remained afterwards. Unfortunately, the situation continued to worsen once again with the release of the Radcliffe's Boundary Commission's decision. In this critical situation, ordinary citizens, diverse leadership, and the administration attempted to re-establish unity, ultimately achieving success. It was essential to restore this equilibrium in order to tackle other pressing issues. However, West Bengal successfully established a distinctive precedence.

Keywords: *Partition, Communal Violence, West Bengal, Independence, Boundary Commission*

Introduction

After suffering through the anguish and harsh realities of partition, India attained independence on August 15, 1947. Despite having differing post-partition trajectories, Bengal and Punjab were the two provinces that suffered the most from the division decision. With particular reference to West Bengal, thousands of Bengalis were forcibly uprooted by the partition, which drastically upended their lives and means of subsistence. The fledgling state was impacted by harsh economic conditions, widespread poverty, scarcity of food, increases in prices, health problems, persistent corruption, and social unrest, in addition to the pressing challenges of a large number of refugees entering the country and forced relocation of people. These difficulties did not arise just as a result of post-partition trajectories. Rather, during the last phase of colonial rule, the state encountered several significant obstacles and the post-partition problems were very much the post-product of these pre-partition succession of hazards. The state had endured the catastrophic effects of starvation, the most severe in British India's history. It had also endured the psychologically distressing effects of the Japanese bombing. Lastly, the unapologetic act of bloodbath profoundly disturbed the state during the Great Calcutta Killings in August 1946 (Bandyopadhyay, 361-362).

Tracing the Root of Communal Carnage of 1946

Of all the events, the communal riot was the one that left people reeling. The August 1946 Great Calcutta Killings were among the most serious communal riots the Indian subcontinent has ever experienced. However, the inception of the communal tension can be traced back to the last half of the nineteenth century and it found profound expression by the first half of the twentieth century. During this crucial period, starting from the 1920s, Bengal's political landscape began to change significantly, culminating in the outbreak of communal violence during the 1940s. Further, the decade of the 1940s was characterised entirely by a period of conflict among different religious communities in the country, particularly signified as a time of communalisation of Hindu-Muslim relations. However, the communal ties between Hindus and Muslims found profound expression in various parts of Bengal as well as Calcutta. During this turbulent phase the leaders of the country accompanied by the communal frenzy with a newly developed narrow sectarian outlook, were widely preaching the gospel of hatred and were inciting innocent people to commit acts that would lead the country towards degradation. Finally, these feelings of hatred and distrust, along with communal carnage, ultimately led the country towards the partition (Majumdar 235-237).

Bengal's Efforts to Preserve Harmony: The Final Days of Colonial Rule

Tracing back to the final days of colonial rule, starting in June 1947, India swiftly proceeded to pursue a permanent settlement for its citizens. By and large, it was determined by the time that the attainment of freedom would be accompanied by the hardships of Partition. However, although widespread violence was occurring in many regions of the country, the political leaders across the nation were making efforts to establish a peaceful environment. All of them were hoping for a 'peaceful' partition by overcoming the challenges of violence, and vengeance. Significantly, just before the partition, the conditions of Calcutta and adjacent areas showed a marked deterioration accompanied by the news of more extensive use of firearms by private individuals along with the news of the re-emergence of communal disturbances in Calcutta, Howrah and, other adjacent areas of Bengal ('West Bengal...Disorders'). In Bengal, while on the one hand, the peaceful situation was deteriorating, on the other hand, different personalities of political prominence requested the common people to work out the partition of Bengal in a spirit of peace and cooperation. No political party or leader, encompassing Hindus or Muslims, desired that there should be a revival of disorder of any kind ('Partition...spirit of peace'). Even, there was a hope that the two Bengals would unite again ('Hope...United Again'). To eradicate the communal strife that had afflicted the city of Calcutta, the neighbouring city of Howrah and other associated parts of the state just before months of partition, Gandhi came to visit Calcutta for the restoration of communal amity (Bandyopadhyay 2009: 9-16). He associated with H.S. Suhrawardy and other prominent leaders of Bengal organized a joint peace mission to maintain peace in the state and to refrain the people from hostility.

Communal Harmony and The Independence Day Celebration

Regardless of prior experiences, on August 15, 1947, Calcutta was in an extraordinarily exuberant condition. There were significant indications of a restoration of communal harmony following a year of violence in Calcutta and other parts of the state. Various publications eloquently illustrated the jubilant reaction of the citizens of Calcutta, who had been perplexed by sectarian bloodshed barely a year or perhaps a month earlier. The *Amrita Bazar Patrika* reported the abrupt ending of the year-long 'fratricidal bloodbath' on the eve of independence, during which the populace felt a profound emotional impetus to celebrate freedom devoid of apprehension ('Fratricidal...Ends'). Notwithstanding the distressing experiences of division, relocation, and other complex conditions, the majority of the populace in the emerging nation also valued the feeling of freedom. Muslims and Hindus congregated on the street at midnight to commemorate independence by transcending pervasive religious discord. Numerous celebrations took place in Calcutta and its vicinity, featuring the hoisting of national flags, the singing of patriotic songs, the delivery of enthusiastic speeches, the display of tricolour flags and Gandhi caps, and the auctioning off of various new coins symbolising a newly independent nation on the city's streets. They embraced their compatriots with slogans such as '*Bande Mataram*' and '*Jai Hind*'. A letter to the editor of *The Statesman* illustrated this sense of solidarity, in which a Muslim resident of Calcutta stated: 'That night in Calcutta we ceased to be Hindus and Muslims; we became Indians.' The most notable happening among these festivities was the eradication of communal strife which afflicted the city of Calcutta and other adjacent areas in recent paths, prompted Gandhi's visit to Calcutta on an urgent basis (Bandyopadhyay 2009: 9-16). Gandhiji, who arrived in Calcutta just before the partition and undertook significant efforts to quell the communal unrest in several regions of Bengal before the division, remained in Calcutta on Independence Day. He chose to commemorate Independence Day by undertaking a 24-hour fast, spinning, and doing special prayers as an act of remorse. Suhrawardy, along with several other leaders, joined Gandhi in commemorating the day in the same manner. Significantly, many common people, including a significant number of women, also participated in the prayer. Hindus and Muslims continuously arrived from various turbulent regions of the city, presenting their problems to Gandhi and requesting his guidance. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that Gandhiji's presence was not the sole factor influencing the city's calm conditions during Independence ('Gandhi...Pray Today'). The Hindu and Muslim populations of Bengal significantly contributed to Calcutta's relative stability. This essence of collaboration was organic and impartial, arising spontaneously rather than abruptly, without the influence of any leader. Nearly all press reports indicated that there was no conflict or unrest in Calcutta that day.

Boundary Commission Decision, Re-emergence of Communal Violence and Strive for Peace

Following a brief period of tranquillity, a new challenge emerged with the proclamation of the Boundary Commission on 18th August 1947 by Sir Cyril Radcliffe. Certain aspects of the Boundary Commission award were challenged, resulting in significant public discontent. The Bengal representatives of the Constituent Assembly of India believed that the Boundary Commission's award contravened the fundamental principles outlined in the terms of reference. However, the leaders of all groups in India have pledged their commitment to accept the award, regardless of its nature, to facilitate the restructuring of the nascent nation in an environment of peace and goodwill ('Appeal...Boundaries'). It must be remembered that immediately following the announcement, the situation in Punjab significantly worsened. In addition to Punjab, Bengal was the state that came next and endured the most severe consequences of partition. In Bengal, the situation began to decline once again in late August, resulting in an abrupt cessation of the brief era of societal peace. Significantly, Calcutta experienced a complete disruption of tranquil conditions from the last phase of August to the first half of September 1947. On 1st September 1947, several miscreants attempted to incite communal conflict through nefarious acts. Despite this, comprehensive attempts to curtail violence and re-establish order led to swift control of the incident. Mahatma Gandhi resumed his fasting to restore communal harmony in Calcutta. This time he began anhydrous fasting. In a broadcast from Calcutta Station of All India Radio, Dr. P.C. Ghosh, Premier of West Bengal, urged the inhabitants of Calcutta to restore the fraternity that was vividly exhibited

on the day of independence. He urged the individuals to step up and, in a spirit of cooperation, restore the joyful ties of August 15 ('Restore...Calcutta'). Regardless of their religious affiliations, the common people and students united for peace and harmony. Students' processions traversed several streets of Calcutta to foster communal peace. Hindus and Muslims joined to oppose rioters and looters, expressing worry for Gandhi's health. People convened peace gatherings at street corners, using microphones to urge the populace to uphold tranquillity in Calcutta and to safeguard Mahatma Gandhi's life (Gandhiji's...Second Day). Peace was ultimately restored, and reports from various regions of Calcutta indicated that the city's condition was no longer alarming. Reassured by reports from various parts of the city and surrounding regions, Gandhiji concluded his fast on the night of September 4, 1947. Calcutta was grateful that Gandhiji's penance had saved them from the misery of yet another communal riot. When he decided to go to Delhi, hundreds of people, including a significant number of women, gathered at Maidan to bid him farewell. In this meeting, Gandhi emphasised that if Calcutta remained calm, the remainder of India would inevitably revert to rationality. The Governor of West Bengal expressed gratitude to the soldiers, constables, and government staff, as well as the civilians, for their service during exceptionally challenging conditions ('Gandhi...fast'). No incidents were recorded subsequently. Rigorous surveillance of military and law enforcement personnel was instituted. Ultimately, the situation was progressively normalising.

Conclusion

The collective endeavour of the administration, multiple leaders, and especially the general populace to safeguard and uphold communal peace constitutes a pivotal development in the historical narrative of post-colonial West Bengal. At this critical moment, the newly established state had to ready itself to confront many challenges simultaneously. First and foremost, the people of West Bengal became very concerned about the sizeable population that remained in East Pakistan. The continuous influx, cross-border migration and refugee resettlement issues emerged as the most pressing problems in West Bengal following the split. In the subsequent years of nation-building, these issues emerged as the prominent causes of paramount struggle between the central and state administrations, with electoral politics concentrating on it. Furthermore, the state confronted the harsh realities of post-independence, including food shortages, rising inflation rates, political rivalries, and many more. Regarding West Bengal, published sources suggested a near-total collapse of the rationing system in Calcutta and the industrial regions just after the partition. The food crisis progressively worsened in West Bengal, exacerbated by the ongoing migration of refugees ('Swadhinata...Dinalipi'; Overstreet and Windmiller 1959: 253-265; Bandyopadhyay 2009: 11-18). In this challenging context, particularly dealing with the influx of refugees, the maintenance of communal cohesion is of paramount importance. In this scenario, from 1946 onwards, particularly during partition and its immediate aftermath, there was a concerted effort to maintain unity, with everyone from the common people to the elite rising above communal colour to rescue mankind.

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