



Communal Politics and the Road to Partition: A Historical Analysis (1900–1947).

Md. Bakul Biswas, Ex- Student, Calcutta University.

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Abstract

The Partition of India in 1947 remains one of the most defining and tragic events in South Asian history. This research paper examines the rise and consolidation of communal politics between 1900 and 1947 and analyzes how religious identities were politicized, ultimately culminating in the division of British India into India and Pakistan. It explores the role of colonial policies, the emergence of political organizations such as the Indian National Congress and the All-India Muslim League, the ideological divergences between leaders, and the socio-political developments that intensified Hindu-Muslim divisions. By tracing key events such as the Partition of Bengal, the Lucknow Pact, the Khilafat Movement, and the Lahore Resolution, the study argues that communalism was not an inevitable outcome but rather a historically constructed phenomenon shaped by colonial strategies, elite politics, and mass mobilization. The paper concludes by highlighting the complex interplay of political ambition, identity formation, and colonial governance that led to the eventual partition.

1. Introduction

The Partition of India in 1947 marked the end of British colonial rule and the birth of two independent nation-states—India and Pakistan. However, this political transition was accompanied by widespread violence, mass displacement, and communal hatred. The roots of Partition lie deeply embedded in the rise of communal politics in the early twentieth century.

Communalism, in the Indian context, refers to the political mobilization of religious identities, primarily between Hindus and Muslims. While religious diversity had long existed in India, the politicization of these identities intensified during British rule. This paper seeks to analyze how communal politics developed over time and contributed to the eventual division of the subcontinent.



The central research questions guiding this study are:

- How did communal politics emerge and evolve between 1900 and 1947?
- What role did British colonial policies play in fostering communal divisions?
- How did Indian political organizations contribute to or resist communalism?
- Was Partition inevitable, or could it have been avoided?

2. Conceptual Framework: Understanding Communalism

Communalism is often understood as an ideology that emphasizes the interests of a particular religious community over others. Scholars such as Bipan Chandra have argued that communalism is not merely a reflection of religious differences but a modern political construct.

Communalism can be categorized into three stages:

1. **Communal Consciousness** – Awareness of religious identity.
2. **Communalism Proper** – Political mobilization based on religion.
3. **Extreme Communalism** – Viewing other communities as antagonistic.

This framework helps in understanding how Hindu-Muslim relations transformed from coexistence to conflict over time.

3. Colonial Policies and the Seeds of Division

3.1 Divide and Rule Strategy

British colonial administrators often adopted a “divide and rule” policy to maintain control over India. By emphasizing religious differences, they prevented the emergence of a unified nationalist movement.

3.2 Census and Classification

The colonial census categorized people based on religion, caste, and community, reinforcing rigid identities. This classification transformed fluid social identities into fixed political categories.

3.3 Separate Electorates (1909)

The introduction of separate electorates under the Morley-Minto Reforms (1909) was a turning point. It allowed Muslims to elect their own representatives, institutionalizing communal divisions in politics.

4. Partition of Bengal (1905) and Its Aftermath

The Partition of Bengal stands as one of the earliest and most significant turning points in the evolution of communal politics in colonial India. Implemented by Lord Curzon, the partition divided the large Bengal Presidency into two provinces—Eastern Bengal and Assam (with a Muslim majority) and Western Bengal (with a Hindu majority). Although officially justified on administrative grounds, the move was widely perceived as a deliberate attempt by the British to weaken the growing nationalist movement by dividing Hindus and Muslims.

The immediate response to the partition was intense and widespread, particularly among the Hindu middle classes in Bengal. The Indian National Congress and other nationalist groups launched the Swadeshi and Boycott movements, urging people to reject British goods and promote indigenous industries.



This marked a new phase of mass political mobilization and nationalist awakening. However, the movement remained largely urban and Hindu-dominated, which limited its appeal among Muslim communities.

In contrast, many Muslim elites initially supported the partition, as it created a separate province where they would have greater political representation and administrative opportunities. This divergence in responses contributed to the early politicization of religious identities. The British administration further encouraged this division by presenting itself as a protector of Muslim interests, thereby deepening communal consciousness.

The aftermath of the partition witnessed the gradual emergence of organized communal politics. In 1906, the All-India Muslim League was established in Dhaka, partly in response to Muslim political aspirations shaped by the new provincial arrangement. The League initially sought to safeguard Muslim interests within the colonial framework but later evolved into a central force in the demand for Pakistan.

The growing intensity of nationalist opposition eventually forced the British to annul the partition in 1911. While this decision was celebrated by many nationalist leaders, it also generated resentment among sections of the Muslim population who felt that their political gains had been reversed under pressure from Hindu-dominated movements. This sense of grievance contributed to the widening gap between the two communities.

Thus, the Partition of Bengal and its aftermath played a crucial role in shaping the trajectory of communal politics in India. It marked the beginning of a pattern in which political developments increasingly took on communal dimensions, setting the stage for future conflicts. The episode demonstrated how colonial policies, combined with differing community responses, could transform administrative decisions into enduring sources of political division.

5. Emergence of the Muslim League and Communal Representation

The All-India Muslim League was founded in 1906 to safeguard Muslim political interests. Initially loyal to the British, the League gradually evolved into a significant political force.

The Indian National Congress, on the other hand, claimed to represent all Indians but was often perceived as Hindu-dominated. This perception contributed to the growth of communal politics.

6. The Lucknow Pact (1916): A Moment of Unity

The Lucknow Pact marked a rare moment of cooperation between Congress and the Muslim League. Both organizations agreed on constitutional reforms and joint demands.

However, the pact also accepted separate electorates, thereby reinforcing communal divisions in the political structure.

7. The Khilafat and Non-Cooperation Movements (1919–1922)

The Khilafat Movement sought to protect the Ottoman Caliphate and gained support from Indian Muslims. Mahatma Gandhi supported the movement as part of the Non-Cooperation Movement, aiming to unite Hindus and Muslims against British rule.

Although initially successful, the alliance eventually collapsed due to internal contradictions and the failure of the Khilafat cause. This led to disillusionment and renewed communal tensions.



8. Rise of Communal Organizations in the 1920s and 1930s

The interwar period saw the growth of communal organizations such as the Hindu Mahasabha and the strengthening of the Muslim League.

Communal riots became more frequent, and political discourse increasingly revolved around religious identity. Economic competition, social tensions, and political rivalries contributed to this trend.

9. The Government of India Act (1935) and Provincial Elections (1937)

The Government of India Act (1935) introduced provincial autonomy and expanded electoral participation. In the 1937 elections, the Congress won a majority in several provinces, while the Muslim League performed poorly.

The Congress's refusal to form coalition governments with the League intensified Muslim fears of political marginalization. This marked a turning point in the League's strategy.

10. The Two-Nation Theory and the Lahore Resolution (1940)

The Two-Nation Theory, articulated by Muhammad Ali Jinnah, argued that Hindus and Muslims were distinct nations with separate identities and interests.

The Lahore Resolution of 1940 called for the creation of "independent states" for Muslims in the northwestern and eastern regions of India. This laid the foundation for the demand for Pakistan.

11. World War II and Political Deadlock

The outbreak of the World War II marked a crucial turning point in the final phase of British rule in India, intensifying political tensions and contributing significantly to the deadlock between major political forces. The war not only strained the British Empire economically and militarily but also exposed the fragility of colonial authority, thereby accelerating India's path toward independence while simultaneously deepening communal divisions.

A major source of conflict emerged when the British government unilaterally declared India a participant in the war in 1939 without consulting Indian political leaders. This decision provoked strong اعتراض from the Indian National Congress, which viewed it as a denial of Indian autonomy. In protest, Congress ministries resigned from provincial governments, creating a political vacuum in several regions. In contrast, the All-India Muslim League, under the leadership of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, chose to support the British war effort. This strategic alignment strengthened the League's political position and widened the gap between the two organizations.

The war years also witnessed several failed attempts at constitutional compromise. The British government sent the Cripps Mission to negotiate with Indian leaders, offering dominion status after the war and the possibility for provinces to opt out of a future Indian union. However, the proposal was rejected by both Congress and the Muslim League—Congress opposed the lack of immediate independence, while the League was dissatisfied with the absence of a clear commitment to Pakistan. This failure further entrenched political divisions.

In response to British intransigence, Congress launched the Quit India Movement under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. The movement demanded an immediate end to British rule but was met with severe repression, including mass arrests of leaders and activists. During this period, Congress leadership was largely sidelined, allowing the Muslim League to expand its organizational base and consolidate support among Muslims.



The wartime context also altered the political balance of power. The British increasingly relied on the Muslim League for support, which enhanced its legitimacy as the representative of Muslim interests. Meanwhile, the absence of Congress from active governance created an opportunity for the League to propagate its demand for Pakistan more effectively.

By the end of the war in 1945, the political landscape had become deeply polarized. The failure of negotiations, combined with the strengthening of communal identities, resulted in a complete deadlock between Congress and the Muslim League. Each organization held fundamentally incompatible visions for India's future—Congress advocating a united nation, and the League insisting on a separate Muslim homeland.

In conclusion, World War II significantly intensified political deadlock in India by disrupting existing political arrangements, deepening divisions between major parties, and weakening British authority. The inability to reconcile competing demands during this period played a critical role in paving the way for Partition, as the prospect of a unified political settlement became increasingly unattainable in the post-war environment.

12. Direct Action Day and Communal Violence (1946)

The events surrounding Direct Action Day in 1946 marked a turning point in the escalation of communal tensions in India and significantly hastened the course toward Partition. Declared by the All-India Muslim League under the leadership of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Direct Action Day was observed on 16 August 1946 as a demonstration of Muslim political resolve to secure the demand for Pakistan after the failure of constitutional negotiations, particularly the Cabinet Mission Plan.

The call for Direct Action was intended as a show of strength; however, it quickly descended into widespread violence, most notably in Calcutta (now Kolkata). The city became the epicenter of what came to be known as the "Great Calcutta Killings." Over the course of several days, communal riots erupted between Hindus and Muslims, resulting in thousands of deaths, injuries, and large-scale destruction of property. The violence was brutal and indiscriminate, targeting civilians and creating an atmosphere of fear and chaos.

Several factors contributed to the intensity of the violence. Political mobilization along communal lines had already heightened tensions, and inflammatory rhetoric from various leaders exacerbated the situation. Administrative failures also played a critical role; the provincial government, led by the Muslim League, was criticized for its inability to maintain law and order during the crisis. The delayed response of law enforcement agencies allowed the violence to spiral out of control.

The repercussions of Direct Action Day were not confined to Calcutta. Communal violence soon spread to other regions, including Noakhali, Bihar, Punjab, and the United Provinces. These outbreaks further deepened mistrust between communities and reinforced the perception that coexistence within a single political framework was becoming increasingly untenable. The cycle of retaliatory violence created a dangerous momentum that was difficult to contain.

Direct Action Day also had significant political implications. It demonstrated the growing polarization between the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League and highlighted the limitations of constitutional negotiations in resolving their differences. For many observers, the scale and intensity of the violence underscored the urgency of finding a political solution, even if it meant accepting Partition.

Moreover, the events of 1946 exposed the weakening authority of the British colonial administration. Their inability to effectively manage the crisis further eroded confidence in a peaceful transition of power and contributed to the decision to expedite British withdrawal from India.



In conclusion, Direct Action Day and the subsequent communal violence represented a critical juncture in the final phase of British rule in India. It transformed political conflict into widespread social unrest and made the prospect of Partition appear, to many, as the only viable solution to an increasingly volatile situation. The tragic events of 1946 thus played a pivotal role in shaping the final outcome of India's struggle for independence, leaving a lasting legacy of division and trauma.

.13. The Role of British Policies in Final Partition

British colonial policies played a decisive role in shaping the circumstances that ultimately led to the Partition of India in 1947. While communal tensions between Hindus and Muslims had been intensifying over several decades, the administrative strategies, political decisions, and hurried withdrawal of the British significantly accelerated the process and limited the possibilities of a united transfer of power.

One of the most influential aspects of British rule was the long-standing policy of **“divide and rule.”** By emphasizing religious, social, and cultural differences, colonial authorities sought to weaken the emergence of a unified nationalist movement. Measures such as the introduction of **separate electorates under the Morley-Minto Reforms (1909)** institutionalized communal representation and legitimized the idea that Hindus and Muslims were distinct political entities with separate interests. This system was further reinforced in subsequent constitutional reforms, embedding communal divisions within the framework of governance.

The British also played a critical role in shaping political negotiations during the final phase of colonial rule. Throughout the 1940s, they engaged separately with major political actors, particularly the Indian National Congress and the All-India Muslim League, often failing to create a common platform for dialogue. Initiatives such as the **Cripps Mission (1942)** and the **Cabinet Mission Plan (1946)** attempted to find a constitutional solution, but their ambiguous proposals and lack of firm commitment contributed to mistrust among Indian leaders. The inability or unwillingness of the British to enforce a viable compromise allowed political polarization to deepen.

Another key factor was the British response to escalating communal violence. As tensions intensified in the mid-1940s, especially after events like Direct Action Day in 1946, the colonial administration appeared increasingly incapable of maintaining law and order. Their failure to effectively control violence weakened confidence in a peaceful transition and reinforced the perception that coexistence within a single state was no longer feasible.

The most decisive British intervention came with the decision to **expedite the transfer of power.** Under Lord Mountbatten, the timeline for independence was drastically shortened, leaving little room for careful planning or negotiation. The announcement of Partition as the chosen solution was made with remarkable speed, reflecting both administrative urgency and a desire to withdraw from India without prolonged conflict.

The drawing of the **Radcliffe Line** further exemplified the hurried nature of British decision-making. The boundary commission, led by Sir Cyril Radcliffe, was given only a few weeks to demarcate borders between India and Pakistan. The lack of adequate data, consultation, and preparation resulted in arbitrary divisions that split communities, disrupted economic networks, and contributed directly to the outbreak of violence and mass migration.

Moreover, British policies during the final phase were influenced by broader geopolitical considerations, including the desire to maintain strategic interests in the region after withdrawal. Ensuring a quick exit while preserving influence may have taken precedence over securing a stable and peaceful transition.



In conclusion, while communal politics and internal divisions among Indian leaders were significant factors, British policies created the structural conditions and immediate context for Partition. Through decades of institutionalizing communal identities and the ultimately hasty and poorly managed transfer of power, the British colonial state played a central role in transforming political conflict into territorial division. The final Partition, therefore, cannot be understood without recognizing the profound impact of British governance on the course of India's history.

14. Consequences of Partition

The Partition of India in 1947 had far-reaching and multidimensional consequences that profoundly shaped the political, social, economic, and psychological landscape of South Asia. It was not merely a territorial division but a transformative event that left enduring scars on millions of lives and redefined the future trajectories of the newly formed nations of India and Pakistan.

One of the most immediate and devastating consequences was the **massive human displacement**. Partition triggered one of the largest forced migrations in world history, with nearly 14–15 million people crossing borders in search of safety. Hindus and Sikhs migrated from regions that became Pakistan to India, while Muslims moved in the opposite direction. This migration was accompanied by unprecedented violence, resulting in the deaths of over a million people. Families were uprooted, properties abandoned, and entire communities shattered, leading to long-term refugee crises in both countries.

Another significant consequence was the outbreak of **communal violence and deep-seated mistrust**. The violence during Partition was brutal and widespread, involving massacres, abductions, and atrocities against women. These events intensified communal hatred and left a legacy of suspicion between religious communities that continues to influence social relations and political discourse in the region.

Economically, Partition caused severe **disruptions and dislocation**. The division of resources, industries, and infrastructure created immediate challenges for both India and Pakistan. Agricultural lands, irrigation systems, and trade networks were divided abruptly, affecting production and livelihoods. Refugee rehabilitation placed immense pressure on the economies of both nations, requiring large-scale government intervention and resource allocation.

Politically, Partition led to the creation of two sovereign states with contrasting national identities—India as a secular republic and Pakistan as a state founded on the basis of Muslim identity. This division laid the foundation for **long-term geopolitical tensions**, including disputes over territories such as Kashmir. These tensions have resulted in multiple wars and ongoing conflict, significantly impacting regional stability and development.

The Partition also had profound **psychological and cultural consequences**. The trauma of violence, loss, and displacement deeply affected individuals and communities. Memories of Partition have been passed down through generations, shaping collective identities and historical narratives. Cultural ties that once connected people across regions were severed, leading to a sense of loss and fragmentation.

Furthermore, Partition influenced the **politics of identity and nationalism** in both countries. In India, it reinforced the commitment to secularism, though communal tensions have persisted. In Pakistan, it strengthened the role of religion in state formation and governance. The legacy of Partition continues to affect minority rights, political debates, and nation-building processes in both nations.

In conclusion, the consequences of Partition were not confined to 1947 but have had a lasting impact on South Asia's history and development. It stands as a stark reminder of the human cost of political division based on identity and highlights the urgent need for tolerance, coexistence, and dialogue in diverse societies.



15. Was Partition Inevitable?

Historians remain divided on whether Partition was inevitable. Some argue that communal divisions had become too deep, while others believe that alternative political arrangements could have prevented it.

Factors such as leadership failures, colonial policies, and the absence of trust played crucial roles.

16. Conclusion

The Partition of India was not an inevitable outcome of ancient religious differences but a result of complex historical processes shaped by colonial policies, political strategies, and socio-economic factors. Communal politics emerged gradually, fueled by institutional mechanisms such as separate electorates, the politicization of religious identities, and competitive nationalism.

While leaders on both sides sought to protect their communities' interests, their actions often deepened divisions rather than fostering unity. The British colonial state, through its divide-and-rule policies, created conditions that encouraged communalism.

The trajectory of communal politics in India between 1900 and 1947 reveals a complex and deeply layered historical process rather than a simple or inevitable outcome. The emergence of communalism was not rooted in timeless religious antagonism but was shaped by modern political developments under colonial rule. British administrative strategies—particularly the institutionalization of separate electorates and the reinforcement of rigid community identities—played a decisive role in transforming religious differences into political divisions. These policies, combined with socio-economic changes and the pressures of representative politics, created fertile ground for the growth of communal ideologies.

At the same time, Indian political leadership contributed, both consciously and inadvertently, to the deepening of these divisions. While efforts at unity—such as the Lucknow Pact and the cooperation during the Khilafat–Non-Cooperation Movement—demonstrated the possibility of inter-communal solidarity, they proved to be fragile and short-lived. The increasing competition for political power, the failure to build enduring trust, and the divergent visions of nationhood advanced by major political organizations gradually eroded the foundations of a unified nationalist movement.

By the 1940s, communal identities had become firmly entrenched in political discourse, and the demand for separate nationhood gained unprecedented momentum. The escalation of communal violence, particularly in the final years before independence, further hardened attitudes and narrowed the scope for compromise. In this context, Partition emerged not as a sudden rupture but as the culmination of decades of political polarization, strategic miscalculations, and colonial disengagement.

In retrospect, the Partition of India stands as both a moment of political liberation and a profound human tragedy. It underscores the dangers of identity-based politics and the far-reaching consequences of failing to accommodate diversity within a shared national framework. A critical understanding of the historical roots of communalism is therefore essential—not only for interpreting the past but also for fostering a more inclusive and pluralistic future in South Asia.



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