

Partition of Bengal (1905): Causes, Annulment, Hindu and Muslim Reactions, and Its Role in the Formation of the All-India Muslim League

Introduction

The **Partition of Bengal**, announced by **Lord Curzon**, the Viceroy of India, came into effect on **16 October 1905**. It divided the vast Bengal Presidency into **Eastern Bengal and Assam** (with Dacca as its capital) and **Western Bengal** (with Calcutta as its capital). Officially, the British justified the partition on administrative grounds, arguing that Bengal had become too large to govern efficiently. However, many Indian nationalists believed that the move was intended to weaken the growing nationalist movement by dividing Hindus and Muslims. While the Hindu community and the Indian National Congress strongly opposed the partition, the Muslim community largely welcomed it because it promised greater political, educational, and economic opportunities. The eventual annulment of the partition in **1911** convinced many Muslims that their interests could not be protected through the Congress, leading directly to the strengthening of Muslim political consciousness and the formation of the **All-India Muslim League (1906)**.

Historical Background

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the **Bengal Presidency** was the largest administrative unit in British India.

It included present-day:

- Bangladesh
- West Bengal
- Bihar
- Odisha (Orissa)
- Parts of Assam

With a population of nearly **80 million**, Bengal was difficult to administer effectively. At the same time, Calcutta had become the centre of Indian nationalism, where educated Hindu elites increasingly criticized British rule.

Lord Curzon believed that administrative efficiency required dividing the province, while many historians also argue that the British hoped to reduce the influence of Bengali nationalism.

Why Did the Partition of Bengal Happen?

Several factors contributed to the decision.

1. Administrative Convenience

The official British explanation was that Bengal had become too large for efficient administration.

Problems included:

- Enormous population.
- Vast geographical area.
- Slow administration.
- Weak law enforcement.
- Difficulty in supervising remote districts.

By creating two provinces, the government expected to improve governance and public services.

2. Improvement of Eastern Bengal

Eastern Bengal had a Muslim-majority population but remained economically and educationally less developed than Calcutta and western districts.

The British argued that a separate province would:

- Improve education.
- Increase government investment.
- Promote agriculture.
- Expand employment opportunities.
- Accelerate regional development.

3. Containing the Nationalist Movement

Although administrative reasons were genuine, political considerations also influenced the decision.

Calcutta had become the headquarters of anti-British nationalism. By dividing Bengal, the British hoped to weaken the influence of educated Hindu political activists.

Critics described this policy as “**Divide and Rule.**”

4. Recognition of Muslim Interests

The new province of **Eastern Bengal and Assam** had a Muslim majority.

For the first time, Muslims expected:

- Greater representation in government.
- Better educational facilities.
- Increased employment opportunities.
- Enhanced political influence.

Features of the Partition

The partition created two separate provinces.

Eastern Bengal and Assam

- Capital: **Dacca (Dhaka)**
- Muslim-majority population
- Included Dacca, Chittagong, Rajshahi, Mymensingh, Assam, and surrounding districts.

Western Bengal

- Capital: **Calcutta**
- Hindu-majority population
- Included Calcutta, Bihar, Odisha, and western districts.

Hindu Reaction to the Partition

The Hindu community, especially the educated Bengali middle class, reacted with intense opposition.

Reasons for Opposition

Loss of Political Influence

Before partition, educated Hindus dominated administration, education, commerce, and politics in Bengal.

The partition reduced their political influence by separating the Muslim-majority eastern districts.

Economic Concerns

Calcutta-based businessmen feared losing markets and commercial dominance in Eastern Bengal.

Nationalist Sentiments

Many Hindu leaders believed the partition aimed to weaken Indian nationalism.

They viewed it as a deliberate British attempt to divide Indians along religious lines.

Forms of Protest

The anti-partition movement became one of the largest political agitations before the First World War.

It included:

- Public demonstrations.
- Political meetings.
- Protest marches.
- Boycott of British goods (Swadeshi Movement).
- Promotion of indigenous industries.
- Burning of foreign cloth.
- National education campaigns.

The movement significantly strengthened Indian nationalism.

Muslim Reaction to the Partition

Unlike the Congress and many Hindu leaders, the Muslim community largely welcomed the partition.

Reasons for Muslim Support

Political Empowerment

Muslims became the majority community in the new province of Eastern Bengal and Assam, giving them greater political importance.

Educational Opportunities

The new provincial government promised increased investment in:

- Schools.
- Colleges.
- Scholarships.
- Administrative institutions.

This aligned with the educational vision of the Aligarh Movement.

Better Employment

Muslims expected increased recruitment into government services and administrative positions, where they had previously been underrepresented.

Economic Development

Eastern Bengal was predominantly agricultural. Muslims hoped that a separate provincial administration would improve:

- Irrigation.
- Infrastructure.
- Trade.
- Agricultural productivity.

Muslim Leaders' Support

Prominent Muslim leaders welcomed the partition because it addressed long-standing Muslim grievances regarding political representation and regional neglect.

Many regarded it as the first significant constitutional recognition of Muslim interests.

Reaction of the Indian National Congress

The **Indian National Congress** strongly condemned the partition.

Its leaders argued that:

- The division was politically motivated.
- It violated Indian unity.
- It encouraged communal divisions.
- It represented Britain's "Divide and Rule" policy.

The Congress organized nationwide protests and transformed the anti-partition movement into a broader nationalist campaign.

The agitation also witnessed the rise of more assertive leaders who favoured mass political mobilization.

Why Was the Partition Annulled?

On **12 December 1911**, during the **Delhi Durbar**, the British Government announced the annulment of the Partition of Bengal.

Several factors contributed to this decision.

1. Persistent Hindu Agitation

Continuous protests, demonstrations, and the Swadeshi Movement created immense political pressure on the British Government.

The anti-partition campaign disrupted administration and attracted international attention.

2. Revolutionary Activities

The partition intensified revolutionary nationalism.

Several secret organizations emerged, and political violence increased, making governance more difficult.

3. Political Compromise

The British hoped that reversing the partition would reduce political unrest and improve relations with moderate Indian leaders.

4. Administrative Reorganization

Instead of restoring the old Bengal Presidency completely, the British reorganized provinces.

At the same time:

- The capital of British India was shifted from **Calcutta to Delhi**.
- Bihar and Orissa were separated into a new province.

Muslim Reaction to the Annulment

The annulment deeply disappointed Indian Muslims.

Feelings of Betrayal

Muslims believed the British had surrendered to Hindu pressure.

Many concluded that Muslim interests could easily be sacrificed for political convenience.

Political Awakening

The annulment convinced Muslims that they needed an independent political organization capable of protecting their constitutional rights.

This realization strengthened Muslim political consciousness across India.

Decline of Muslim Trust in British Policies

Although Muslims had supported the partition, the British reversed it without consulting them.

This created frustration and reinforced the belief that Muslims must organize politically rather than rely solely on British goodwill.

How the Partition Helped in the Formation of the All-India Muslim League

The Partition of Bengal became one of the most important factors behind the establishment of the **All-India Muslim League** in **1906**.

1. Development of Muslim Political Consciousness

The partition demonstrated that Muslims possessed distinct political and regional interests requiring organized representation.

2. Fear of Hindu Political Dominance

The violent Hindu opposition to the partition convinced many Muslims that Congress primarily represented Hindu political interests rather than those of all Indians.

3. Need for a Separate Political Organization

Muslim leaders realized that educational reforms alone were insufficient.

An independent political platform was necessary to:

- Protect Muslim rights.
- Present Muslim demands.
- Negotiate constitutional safeguards.
- Promote Muslim unity.

4. Simla Deputation (1906)

The political atmosphere created by the partition encouraged leading Muslims to meet **Viceroy Lord Minto** in the **Simla Deputation (1 October 1906)**.

The deputation demanded:

- Separate electorates.
- Adequate Muslim representation.
- Protection of Muslim political rights.

These demands were later accepted in principle.

5. Formation of the All-India Muslim League

On **30 December 1906**, Muslim leaders gathered at **Dacca** and established the **All-India Muslim League**.

Its objectives included:

- Protecting Muslim political rights.

- Promoting loyalty to the British Government.
- Advancing educational progress.
- Encouraging constitutional methods.
- Safeguarding Muslim identity.

Thus, the Partition of Bengal served as the immediate political background for the birth of the Muslim League.

Significance of the Partition of Bengal

The Partition of Bengal occupies a central place in the constitutional history of British India.

Its major significance includes:

- First major constitutional recognition of Muslim regional interests.
- Strengthened Muslim political identity.
- Accelerated Hindu nationalist mobilization.
- Gave rise to the Swadeshi Movement.
- Exposed deep political differences between Congress and Muslim leadership.
- Led to the Simla Deputation.
- Directly contributed to the formation of the All-India Muslim League.
- Prepared the ground for separate electorates under the Indian Councils Act (1909).
- Influenced the future constitutional development of British India.

Critical Evaluation

The Partition of Bengal was both an administrative reform and a political turning point. The province was indeed too large to govern effectively, and Eastern Bengal had long suffered from administrative neglect. However, the decision also had significant political consequences, as it intensified communal polarization and strengthened both Hindu nationalism and Muslim political consciousness. The annulment in 1911 temporarily satisfied Congress demands but deeply alienated Muslims, convincing them that their interests required independent political representation. Consequently, the partition and its reversal became decisive milestones in the constitutional evolution of British India.

Conclusion

The Partition of Bengal (1905) was one of the most consequential events in the political history of British India. Introduced by Lord Curzon primarily on administrative grounds but carrying significant political implications, it generated sharply contrasting responses from Hindus and Muslims. While the Congress and the Hindu middle class viewed it as

an attempt to divide the nationalist movement and launched a vigorous anti-partition campaign, Muslims welcomed it as an opportunity for political recognition, educational advancement, and economic development in the neglected eastern region. The British decision to annul the partition in 1911, in response to sustained opposition, profoundly disappointed Muslims and convinced many that their interests could not be safeguarded without an independent political organization. This realization directly encouraged the Simla Deputation and culminated in the establishment of the All-India Muslim League in 1906. Thus, the Partition of Bengal left a dual legacy: it intensified nationalist politics while simultaneously laying the foundations of organized Muslim political identity that eventually shaped the constitutional evolution of British India and the Pakistan Movement.

