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A thrice-partitioned history

The partition of a nation is generally accompanied by the simultaneous evocation of notions of identity as the basis of its separate components, and of difference to rationalise their separation

BENGALI Muslims have been through three partitions since the start of this century. Not all have been equally traumatic but each has in turn illustrated the shifting definitions of interests which bring about partitions and the shifting notions of identity and difference through which they are expressed.

The Bengali Muslim experience also bears witness to the fact that the mobilisation of identity as the basis of community can be as violent, as bloody and ultimately as lethal as the establishment of difference for the basis of separation.

The first partition of Bengal took place in 1905 under British rule and resulted in the amalgamation of East Bengal and Assam into a separate Muslim-dominated province. It was justified by the imperial powers on grounds of both administrative convenience and the separate interests of Bengal's Muslims from those of its Hindus, but it has also been interpreted as another example of British divide-and-rule tactics in India. It was opposed by a combination of high-caste Bengali Hindus whose landed interests in East Bengal were directly undermined by the partition as well as by prominent Muslims who responded to appeals to unity on the basis of a common Bengali language, literature, history, tradition and way of life. It was annulled in 1911.

The second partition took place in 1947 when India itself was divid-

ed at the moment of its independence from British rule. The new state of Pakistan was set up as a homeland for the Muslims on the subcontinent. East Pakistan – Muslim-dominated East Bengal – was separated by over 1,000 miles of hostile Indian territory from West Pakistan which consisted of Baluchistan, Sind, North-West Frontier Province and Muslim-dominated West Punjab. Thus, what is generally referred to as the Partition of 1947 was in fact two geographically separated partitions:



'Sonar Bangla': the free and 'golden' Bengal of poets and people – Credit: Heldur Netocny/Panos

the partition of Punjab and the partition of Bengal.

The partition of Punjab was characterised by massive migrations of Hindus and Sikhs into India and of Muslims into the new state of Pakistan within a very short period of time. One of the most enduring and potent symbols of the 1947 Partition are the trainloads of the dead which travelled in both directions, migrants massacred as they made their way to a refuge on the 'right' side of the Punjab border. After this single convulsive moment of exchange, all movements appeared to grind to a halt for the next half century as the borders were effectively sealed off between the two Punjab.

The Bengal partition of 1947, as Joya Chatterjee has pointed out, was both different and perceived as so by the Indian authorities. In Bengal, the worst communal massacres occurred in 1946, the year before, but Partition itself did not result in the cataclysmic violence, rapes, abductions, forced conversions and trainloads of dead which feature in descriptions of the Punjab partition. There were no massive movements across the Bengal border in 1947 and no forced conversions. The Bengali Hindus who did migrate to India, both in 1947 and since then, were not perceived by the Indian authorities to be fleeing from the same levels of religious intolerance in Muslim Bengal as those from Muslim Punjab, and hence were not received by the authorities as casualties of Partition in the same way. The borders of partitioned Bengal, although policed on both sides, have remained more or less open since Partition. I know because I crossed them every year between 1956 and 1965 on my way to and from boarding school in an Indian hill-station.

Whatever the truth of the two partitions, differences between Muslim Punjab and Muslim Bengal introduced a fundamental cultural bifurcation into the identity of an already physically bifurcated new state. West Pakistan had rid itself of its religious minorities in one convulsive moment in 1947 and now constituted an almost purely Muslim community. In contrast, a sizeable minority of Bengali Hindus lived and continued to live in East Pakistan – around 15 per cent of its population – and there appeared to be a great deal of overlap between the cultures of Bengali Hindus and Muslims, breeding suspicion about the authenticity of Bengali Islam among West Pakistanis.

As a nation that had come into existence as a homeland for the Muslims of the subcontinent, Pakistan was bound to justify its existence in terms of its separate Muslim identity and hence needed to purge itself

of any Hinduised remnants from its past. With the increasing dominance of Punjabis in the ruling apparatus of the new state, it became clear that it would be *their* version of Islam and hence *their* version of Pakistan that would dominate.

The first evidence of this came in the early attempt to impose Urdu, a language widely spoken in West Pakistan, as the official language of the new state and, when this failed, to introduce the Urdu script for the Bengali language. The defence of Bengali became the rallying cause for Bengali nationalist sentiment: within a year of partition, East Pakistan had an active Language Movement and, within five years, its first martyrs as the police opened fire on students demonstrating in defence of their language.

In 1954, the Muslim League, the party that had fought for Pakistan before Partition, was resoundingly defeated in East Pakistan and never had a presence there again. The elections were won by the Bengali Muslim Awami League who dropped the epithet 'Muslim' and henceforth became the voice of the disenfranchised Bengali middle classes. To ensure that the Bengali population could not gain a political majority in government by virtue of its numerical majority in the country, the four provinces of West Pakistan were reconstituted as 'One Unit' in 1956 and given parity of electoral representation with East Pakistan. Along with the introduction of indirect forms of electoral representations to keep Bengalis out of political power, fiscal and monetary measures were introduced to transfer the economic surplus out of East Pakistan to finance industrialisation in West Pakistan.

Although East Pakistan won the language issue, the drive by central government in the western wing to forge a national identity as different as possible from its past continued. A Bureau for National Reconstruction was set up to purge the Bengali language of Sanskrit (read Hindu) elements and to purify it with apparently more authentically Islamic words from Arabic, Persian and Urdu. The songs of Tagore, much loved by Muslim and Hindu Bengalis alike, were banned from state-controlled radio and television, restrictions imposed on the dissemination of Bengali literature and grants offered to artists and literati who were prepared to work for 'national integration'. A policy of assimilation-through-miscegenation was adopted in the 1960s in the system of incentives offered to inter-wing marriages.

In the face of this depiction of their 'Bengaliness' as somehow not

quite Islamic enough, Bengalis began to assert their cultural differences from West Pakistan, a process which led to the politicisation of normally uncontroversial aspects of everyday middle-class life. The right to sing the songs of Tagore, to wear the saree and the *bindi* (the red mark on the forehead indicating a married woman) customary among Bengali women, the more relaxed attitude to the idea of the daughters of the middle classes singing and performing in public, all activities which had once appeared commonplace, became acts of dissent in a context in which they were regarded as evidence of the 'Hindu aberrations' of Bengalis.

In fact, the dress and deportment of Bengali women took on increasing symbolic value in the struggle to assert cultural difference. One of the most powerfully remembered images in Bangladesh today of its struggle for national autonomy is that of the thousands of women wearing the yellow sarees with red borders associated with celebration, wearing *bindis* and singing songs of Bengali nationalism – including the banned songs of Tagore – who were in the vanguard of the massive demonstrations which began to take place in Dhaka in the final years of East Pakistan.

The break-up of Pakistan is easy for later generations of Bengalis to understand, but not why the country ever existed in the form it did. Was it a breathtaking leap of the imagination, or a devastating failure, to believe that that two peoples, separated from each other literally by over 1,000 miles of enemy territory and symbolically by culture, language, history, apparel, diet, calender and even by standard time, could ever constitute a single nation simply on the grounds that they shared a common religion? The policy of attempting to redefine one wing in the image of the other was one way to bridge this divide but it was doomed to failure. When the 'One Unit' federation of West Pakistan was finally dismantled in 1970 and direct elections held, it looked like the inevitable fears of the ruling elite were about to come true. As they did when the Awami League swept most of the seats in East Pakistan and won an overall majority in the country.

But the inevitable was not allowed to happen. Instead, in March 1971, the Pakistan army moved into East Pakistan and unleashed nine months of genocide and rape on its people in the apparent belief that this would rid them of their nationalist aspirations. We are, of course, more aware now how often rape is used as a weapon of war. Some femi-

nists see it as the logical expression of men's inherent violence towards women. Some scholars see it as an attempt by one group of men to dishonour another group of men by highlighting their failure to protect their women. The Pakistan army brought a unique additional element of 'holy war' to its acts of rape against over 30,000 Bengali women: it saw it as part of its mission to populate the region with 'pure' Muslims. The terrible inner logic which had driven the earlier policy of assimilation-by-miscegenation was laid bare by the war. A third partition, this time of Pakistan, was inevitable and Bangladesh declared its independence, choosing as its national anthem a much loved song by Tagore, '*Sonar Bangla*'.

The truncated Pakistan that remains continued to struggle with notions of identity as other cultural aspirations that had been suppressed in its struggle to dominate its eastern wing came to the fore. Aside from the older struggles of the different provinces in the face of Punjabi hegemony, new divisions have arisen. One such is with the *Mohajirs*, those who migrated, mainly in 1947, from all over the subcontinent as refugees to Pakistan, and who eventually began to coalesce around their own political interests within the country. Anwar Iqbal, a journalist whose family had migrated from India first to East Pakistan in 1947 and then to West Pakistan in 1970 as a gulf began to open up between the Bengali and non-Bengali population, writes about the confusing politics of what it means to be a Pakistani today: 'Although dozens of ethnic and racial groups live in Karachi, the main division is between *them* and *us*. The definition of *them* and *us* varies from group to group. If you are a *Mohajir*, a Muslim immigrant from India, for you all non-*Mohajirs* are *them*. If you are old Pakistanis, then the *Mohajirs* are *them*. But sometimes even that is not clear. One group of *Mohajir* can become the real *us* and another the real *them* for each other, depending on their party loyalties. Similarly, the older Pakistanis can divide themselves into various ethnic groups such as the Punjabis, the Sindhis, the Pashtoon and the Baluch and treat each other as *them*.'

A drive towards further Islamisation has been the most striking feature of post-1971 Pakistan. A variety of new religious ordinances were brought in, many of which discriminated explicitly against women and minorities. The Ahmediya minority was constitutionally declared non-Muslim in 1974 and a number of religious ordinances, drawn from the *sharia*, over-ride rights given to women under civil law. Today, with

increasing violence between Shia and Sunni Muslims, Pakistan is distinguished as the only place in the subcontinent where Muslims kill Muslims, even within the sanctuary of the mosque, *because* they are Muslims or, more accurately, because they are the *wrong sort* of Muslims.

For Bangladesh itself, the main problems since 1971 have related to economic hardship and political stability; poverty and the defence of democracy. However, questions of identity appear sporadically on the political agenda, if only because successive military rulers turned politicians have resorted periodically to Islam and to appeals to anti-Indian sentiment to shore up their political support. Indeed, it seems to be indelibly imprinted in the imagination of this breed of rulers that to be Muslim necessarily means to be anti-Indian, and often, by extension, pro-Pakistani.

At the same time, however, Bangladesh has managed to avoid declaring itself an Islamic Republic and enshrining *sharia* law in its legal system. Consequently, the rights of women and of minorities have been safeguarded and, while there are episodic and often terrible violations of both, they are not sanctioned by the state; and the state can, and has been mobilised to deal with them. Family courts have been set up all over the country to ensure that women have quicker recourse to justice than would be the case if they were required to go through the main legal system. Women are emerging from the home to take up factory work in cities, sometimes out of poverty and sometimes in search of economic independence. Bangladesh's Grameen Bank has innovated the practice of lending without collateral to the assetless, particularly women, and has been emulated as a model for the reduction of poverty in countries of the North as well as the South. Primary and secondary schooling have been free for girls since 1992, something which may explain a remarkable closing of the gender gap in education. Finally, not only has the country had two women prime ministers in quick succession but the present one appears to be performing the extraordinary feat of being simultaneously pro-Indian and pro-Pakistani.

Partitions lead nations to re-invent their histories so that their stories of the past can be brought into line with their sense of the present. Many Pakistanis would prefer to deal with their past by simply blotting out any memory of the events of 1971 because those events undermined the very principle on which Pakistan was founded: as a place of safety for the Muslims of the subcontinent. And many of those who do remember

choose to remember the creation of Bangladesh as a product of Indian machinations to dismember and thereby weaken its old enemy, Pakistan.

However, as long as successive generations of Pakistanis continue to accept this selective reading of their past, rather than trying to learn from it, their country will continue to be torn apart by the violent politics of identity. They need to remember that far from being 'not-good enough' Pakistanis, the Muslims of Bengal were in the forefront of the movement for Pakistan. The Muslim League was founded in East Bengal in 1906 with Bengali Muslims playing a dominant role; it was the Bengali Muslims who gave the Muslim League its first and only electoral victory in the provincial elections of 1937 and its first opportunity to form a Cabinet; the Muslim League won again in Bengal in 1946; the 1940 Lahore resolution which called for the setting up of Pakistan was moved in the Muslim League by a Bengali Muslim, one of the leading members of the Muslim community in India at that time.

Just as important, is the need for them to remember the role West Pakistan played in the processes which led to the creation of Bangladesh. India may have had its own reasons for supporting the aspirations of the Bengali Muslims for national autonomy in 1971, but those aspirations were called into being by the bigoted, bungling and, in the end, murderous elites of Pakistan. □

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