

PAPER 1 DSE-A-1 SEM -5: HISTORY OF BENGAL (c.1757-1905)

VII. PARTITION OF BENGAL 1905: CURZON AND THE ADMINISTRATIVE BLUEPRINT

NOTE -1

Lord Curzon's administration has remained famous-and notorious-for its intense activity and veritable cult of efficiency. The net result was the beginning of quite a new phase in the history of Indian nationalism with the struggle against the Partition of Bengal.

Curzon's most unpopular measure-the Partition of Bengal-has also aroused the most controversy among historians, with apologists tending to emphasize administrative convenience as its prime motive against contemporary and later nationalist charges of deliberate 'divide and rule'. Down to 1903, administrative considerations were certainly predominant in official circles. The size of the Bengal Presidency had worried many at various times (hence the stray proposals to reduce it going back to the 1860s, the separation of Assam and Sylhet in 1874, and the Assam Chief Commissioner William Ward's proposal in 1896-97 to attach Chittagong Division, Dacca and Mymensingh to his province), and there was an increasing interest in the development of Assam into a more viable province. Ward's proposal was revived by Bengal's new Lt. Governor Andrew Fraser in a note of 28 March 1903, accepted by Curzon in a minute on territorial redistribution in India (1 June 1903), and, suitably edited for public consumption, and announced for the first time in Home Secretary Risley's letter of 3 December 1903. Relief of Bengal and improvement of Assam were the two grounds Offered by Risley in support of the transfer plan. It needs to be pointed out, however, that 'administrative convenience' was not something abstract or impartial but often closely related to the convenience of

British officials and British businessmen. Thus, an expansion of Assam was needed, argued and provide 'a maritime outlet in order to develop its industries in tea, ai and coal (all dominated by whites, it may be added).

Between December 1903 and the formal announcement of 19 July 1905 a transfer plan was transformed into a full-scale Partition by Fraser, Risley and Curzon, with the new province of 'East Bengal and Assam' eventually including Chittagong, Dacca and Rajshahi divisions. Hill Tippera and Malda apart from Assam. Secret official minutes, comments and private papers make the public denial of political motives difficult to maintain, particularly during this second phase. The contemporary and later nationalist charge of deliberate encouragement of Hind-Muslim tensions finds some support in Curzon's much-quoted speech at Dacca in February 1904 offering east Bengal Muslims the prospect of 'unity which they have not enjoyed since the days of the old Mussulman viceroys and kings'. But the really important political motive at this time was a division among the predominantly Hindu politicians of West and East Bengal. Home Secretary H.H. Risley summed it all up with clarity and frankness in two notes dated 7 February and 6 December 1904 while analysing the arguments of the critics of the Partition: Bengal united is a power; Bengal divided will pull in several different ways. That is perfectly true and is one of the merits of the scheme.... It is not altogether easy to reply in a despatch which is sure to be published without disclosing the fact that in this scheme as in the matter of the amalgamation of Berar to the Central Provinces one of our main objects is to split up and thereby weaken a solid body of opponents to our rule. Marathi-speaking Berar newly acquired on perpetual lease from the Nizam in 1902, had not been attached to Bombay since, as Curzon said, We hear quite enough of Sivaji as it is. Alternative plans to relieve Bengal administration by setting up an executive council or by detaching linguistically-distinct Bihar and Orissa (the ultimate 1911 solution) were repeatedly dismissed by Curzon on

political grounds the latter proposal, he argued in a telegram to the Secretary or State who had been toying with the idea, 'would tend to consolidate the Bengali element by detaching it from outside factors, and would produce the very effect that we desire to avoid. The best guarantee of the political advantage of our proposal is its dislike by the Congress Party.

Bureaucrats like Risley anticipated present-day Cambridge historians in their fondness for interpreting opposition to Partition entirely in terms of elitist interest-groups. Vikrampur babus were worried about their clerical jobs, zamindars with estates in both Bengals disliked having to appoint two sets of agents and pleaders, the Bhagyakul Roy family with raw jute and rice trading interests near Calcutta were jealous of a possible rise of Chittagong, and Calcutta lawyers were afraid that a new province would ultimately mean a new High Court cutting into their practice. In addition, the east Bengal political elite felt its chance of sitting in legislative council slipping away (this was in the earlier phase, when parts of Bengal were being sought to be transferred to the Chief Commissioner's province of Assam which had no elected legislatures), and Calcutta politicians would find their influence gravely curtailed. None of the factors listed by Risley in his note of 7 February 1904 were invented by him all of them in fact repeatedly appear in early pamphlets on the subject like *An Open Letter to Lord Curzon* (Dacca, April 1904), *The Case Against the Break-up of Bengal* and *All About Partition* (Calcutta, September 1905). But the related bureaucratic expectation that protests would die down quickly, and in any case would never leave the beaten track of meetings and petitions, was soon totally belied by events in Bengal and some other provinces. With startling rapidity, after July 1905, the movement broke away from traditional moorings, developed a variety of new and militant techniques, attracted larger numbers than before, and broadened into a struggle for Swaraj.

(TO BE CONTINUED IN NOTE 2)

NOTES AND REFERENCE

Sarkar Sumit, Modern India 1885-1947