

University of Dundee

The Partition - A Personal Reflection

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BIRTH OF INDIA'S FREEDOM



Pandit Nehru

NEW CABINET OF INDIA

Fourteen Members

PANDIT NEHRU TO BE PREMIER

NEW DELHI, August 14. The new Cabinet of India, which will function from August 15, announced tonight, will consist of the following: Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru—prime Minister, External and Common-

NATION WAKES TO NEW LIFE

Mr. Nehru Calls For Big Effort From People

"INCESSANT STRIVING TASK OF FUTURE"

Assembly Members Take Solemn Pledge

WILD SCENES OF JUBILATION IN DELHI

From Our Special Representative
NEW DELHI, AUGUST 14. ENTIRE DELHI KEPT AWAKE TO WITNESS THE HISTORIC EVENT OF USHERING IN THE FREEDOM OF INDIA AT THE HOUR OF MIDNIGHT. Unprecedented scenes of enthusiasm were witnessed both inside and outside the Constituent Assembly Chamber, where seething, swaying humanity wildly

STATE VISIT TO KARACHI



Their Excellencies Lord and Lady Mountbatten speaking to Service representatives at the Hazrat Nizamuddin Airport on their arrival in Karachi from Delhi on Wednesday.

LORD MOUNTBATTEN GREET'S PAKISTAN

Mr. Jinnah Re-Affirms Firm Friendship With Britain

FRENZIED ENTHUSIASM IN BOMBAY

Crowds In Festive Mood

THE national flag was hoisted over the 74-year-old Bombay Civil Secretariat at midnight when the citizens of Bombay greeted the dawn of independence with solemn invocation and frenzied rejoicing. "Citizens of free India—you are now free"—said the Prime Minister, Mr. B. G. Kher, in raising the flag at the midnight ceremony, which was attended by all Ministers and departmental heads and employees of the Bombay Government. His declaration was greeted with cheers from the thousands who gathered at the approaches to the Secretariat. A strong police guard kept order with the greatest difficulty till the conclusion of the ceremony when they lost control and hundreds swarmed through the building in wild enthusiasm. Their spirit was that of the hundreds of thousands who marched cheering through the illuminated streets of Bombay, uninterruptedly shouting slogans in a multitude of tongues, which turned the city at midnight into a babel. Bombay in the early hours of Friday morning was a pedestrians' paradise. Cars either drove on the pavements if they got the right of way, or were marooned there. Racing crowds held the streets and all traffic rules were ignored. Trams and buses were not only packed to doors, but carried passengers on their roofs. Everyone cheered as the spirit of the occasion spread in

"MAY BOMBAY PROSPER"

Governor's Message

GOOD WISHES TO FREE INDIA

Sir John Colville, Governor of Bombay, has sent greetings to the people of Bombay Province on the occasion of India's emergence as a full-fledged Dominion. The message says: "This is the Appointed Day. At midnight last night the Indian Independence Act came into operation and today India has freedom, full and complete."

Issue 3 September 2017, More Articles | September 1, 2017

The 70th anniversary of partition has illuminated the breathtaking events which accompanied the end of British rule in India, and the bloody emergence of India and Pakistan as independent states. In this personal essay, University of Dundee academic **Abdullah Yusuf** draws upon childhood memories and family discussions to offer a Bangladeshi perspective of partition and the subsequent events which saw East Pakistan become Bangladesh.

After partition, the long border created between India and Pakistan was not the only fault-line created in the last days of the British Raj. What is now called Bangladesh was then East Bengal which became East Pakistan, separated from the central government in West Pakistan by thousands of miles of Indian territory. On August 14th 1947, my father – then a high school kid in his teen years – spent most of the day decorating his school with little paper flags, colourful lanterns and balloons. At home, the elders in the house put a big flag, celebrating their new nationhood, on the roof. For my grandfather, this was the day when the British colonial rulers, and with them the Hindu *zamindaris* (Indian landlords who facilitated exploitation of the local population), ceased to exist. However, the story of self-determination in Bangladesh didn't end with the lowering of the Union Jack and the raising of the Crescent Moon in August 1947.

Soon the first Governor-General of Pakistan (effectively the country's president), Muhammad Ali Jinnah, began his short stint in power by consolidating the values of the nation. The national language was to be Urdu, erasing overnight the Bengali language from coins, notes and government documents. But neither Jinnah nor his successors anticipated the force of Bengali society. With the population rallied behind them, students protested for the protection of their language on February 21st 1952. My father, then a 20-year old college student, and his fellow classmates, joined protesters in towns and cities across Bangladesh in organised demonstrations with protest slogans of "*Rastro Bhasha Bangla Chai*" – "We want Bangla as the state language".

In the East Pakistan capital city, Dhaka, it was a tumultuous day. When the police started beating and arresting hundreds of protesting students a full-scale uprising began. The day climaxed with police opening fire, causing several deaths. The news of the killings spread like wildfire across the country. The violent tension was not to last long, however. By 1954, the pressure was so great that the government was forced to acknowledge Bengali as a national language in the constitution.

I still remember how my father used to let us to run our fingers across the dark marks and scars on his body, his badges of the liberation struggle which threw off its East Pakistan identity in 1971 and became an independent state - Bangladesh.

It was April 6th 1971, and my parents were part of a secret resistance movement, formed in the aftermath of the West Pakistani invasion of restive East Pakistan the month before. By now, 20 years after his student days, my father was a junior official at a national bank. Soldiers picked him up while he was coming back from work – his opposition to the regime was grounds enough for a brutal interrogation. After torturing him, they threw his body into a nearby river, believing he would drown. He lived, saved by a fisherman who had seen his body in the water; beaten and bloody, but alive. I still remember how my father used to let us run our fingers across the dark marks and scars on his body, his badges of the liberation struggle which threw off its East Pakistan identity in 1971 and became an independent state – Bangladesh.

Were these events the product of the language movement and the political drive for Bangladeshi independence alone? Or could the roots of these events be found by looking more closely to the botched partition of British India in 1947? This year marks seventy years of independence from the British Empire for Pakistan. But if the transfer of power from London to Karachi was cause for celebration, it was a fleeting one. The partition of the former Raj caused the death of between one and two million people, and countless more were displaced. In Pakistan, military coups became the routine means of gaining political control, since normal party politics had failed. It would take decades before the ballot box could challenge the bullet amidst the competing visions for Pakistan's future.

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Why didn't 1947 resolve the divisions between East and West in the new Pakistani state? The answer lies in the questions of identity that partition couldn't solve. Jinnah, and those in the power clique in (West) Pakistan, had imported their ideas and political philosophy from their education in Britain. Their 19th century liberal politics failed to unite Pakistan and the new nation's suitability for the realities of post-colonial life were left unquestioned. Their original plan to create a fairer society in an independent, homogenous Muslim nation quickly turned into contempt for the Bengalis, who demanded the recognition of their identity.

It certainly feels alien to think that Bangladesh was never meant to be sovereign. Despite attempts for a "United Bengal" in the first half of the 20th century, the Bengalis celebrated partition and their independence from British rule by decorating their streets with garlands, laughter and parties. It was a symbol to show their devotion to the idea of self-determination. This was liberation from colonial rule, and hopefully the beginning of radical change of society. Bengalis, with the wider Muslim world of the former empire, would have control over their destiny together, free of the gravitational pull of British history.

But before the end of the year, the celebrations had turned sour. In the 1940s, the Pakistan Movement's core ideology was that there were only 'two nations' in the British Raj: Hindus and Muslims. This over-simplified polarity turned a complex spectrum of ethnicities and cultures into a simple dichotomy of religion. The Muslims in East Bengal were to be a part of this new Pakistan, an exclusively Muslim nation, with a supposed shared heritage with their co-religionists to their west.

The failed attempt at nation-building had other, more measurable effects. The Bengalis were the majority of the Pakistani population, but were underrepresented in all aspects of civic and political life. At worst, the Bengalis only received around 30 of the government budget, with the West Pakistan minority receiving the rest. In politics, prime ministers from the East were ousted from power under a brutal military dictatorship, replaced with compliant and power-hungry politicians from the West.

Popular discontent was growing steadily in East Pakistan in the 1960s, but it boiled over in 1970 culminating – in 1971 – with a bloody liberation war against Pakistan. The government in Karachi was exposed as having neglected the humanitarian problems caused by Asia's deadliest cyclone, which had killed 300,000 East Pakistanis in early November 1970, and nationwide student protests erupted. But the electoral victory of the Awami League (a left-wing, secular Bengali nationalist party), under the charismatic leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in December 1970, remains the defining moment. The League won all but two of their contested seats. The government in Karachi was anxious about the influx of eastern legislators who would have an overall majority over the national Pakistani parliament.

The regime in West Pakistan attempted compromise with Rahman. But Bengalis were united behind the demand for fundamental change to the political system. The Pakistani military – frightened that their project for a unified Muslim state was collapsing – designed an operation, codenamed 'Searchlight', which used brutal violence to suppress the Bengali calls for self-determination. The invasion of Bangladesh on March 26th 1971 prompted Rahman to declare independence, propelling him towards the role of father of the new nation. Bangladesh was asserting its right to rule itself against a political power with which it had, years before, shared the euphoria of independence.

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One month after his miraculous escape from death, my father fled with his family to the countryside. He never thought such atrocities and brutality could happen to him and to his fellow Bengalis. My family went into hiding until Bangladesh's war of independence ended, in December of 1971. Each year, on the anniversary, my father would fondly retell the stories of his celebrations in August 1947 – but each year, we'd always see his laughter turn to sorrow. For Bangladesh, the partition was a distant memory. It's the enormity of the events of 1971, with their seeds in the partition of the Raj, that will always haunt its national consciousness.

My father's story is just one of millions about the consequences of partition. Independence days pepper the calendars of the Indian subcontinent. For over one-seventh of the world's population, these public holidays are an opportunity to reflect. They provide a chance to remember the sometimes desperate struggles of the independence generation and to celebrate the movements that fought for their rights as citizens, not subjects. Yet, for Bangladeshis, the history remains harrowing, raw and personal. Many, like my parents and grandparents, became spectators to the division of not only the old empire but of a country whose nationhood they had once celebrated. They became victims of the brutality that accompanied it.

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