

The Partition of Bengal

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The partition of Bengal was one of the most controversial decisions of Lord Curzon. His decision to partition Bengal evoked huge protests from people all over the country.

Scheme of Partition

The province of Bengal during the British rule comprised the present states of West Bengal, East Bengal (present-day Bangladesh), Bihar, Odisha, Chotanagpur area and some other regions. It had a population of over 80 million people.

In July 1905, Lord Curzon announced the division of Bengal into the following two provinces:

- West Bengal included the provinces of Bengal incorporating present-day West Bengal, Bihar and Odisha. Kolkata was declared as the capital city.
- East Bengal included the provinces of Eastern Bengal and Assam which consisted of the eastern districts of Bengal and Assam.

What was most disturbing was that while West Bengal had Hindus in majority, East Bengal had Muslims in majority. It was an attempt by the British to divide Bengal on communal lines.



Lord Curzon partitioned Bengal into West and East Bengal.

Reasons behind the Partition

The British advocated that Bengal was divided to efficiently administer the province. However, the British government had the following sinister plans behind the partition of the province:

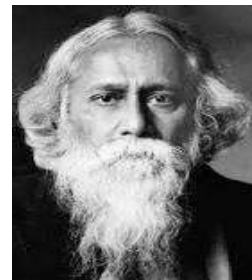
- Bengal was an important centre of Indian nationalism. The British hoped that by dividing the province on communal lines, they would be able to stop the rising wave of nationalism.
- The partition also aimed at curbing the influence of Bengal by reducing Bengalis in minority in their own home state.
- Bengal was divided in line with the policy of divide and rule followed by the British.

The people of Bengal and the Indian nationalists severely criticised the partition of Bengal. They opposed the partition on the grounds that it was a deliberate attempt by the British to divide the Bengalis on religious and territorial grounds. Soon, the government met with a strong anti-partition movement.

Anti-Partition Movement

- The government met with stiff opposition by the people on the issue of the partition of Bengal. It was opposed by Congress and the nationalists.
- Different sections of population in Bengal such as zamindars, merchants, students, women and lawyers vehemently opposed the partition of their province.
- The early and assertive nationalists cooperated with each other during the anti-partition movement.
- The day on which partition of Bengal came into effect, 16 October, was declared as a day of national mourning all over Bengal. People observed fasts and many hartals took place in Kolkata.
- People in almost every street of Kolkata sang Bande Mataram which later became an important part of the Indian National Movement.
- It was during this time that Rabindranath Tagore composed the song Amar Sonar Bangla which is the national anthem of Bangladesh.

- People held several demonstrations against the partition. Ananda Mohan Bose, a Bengali leader, laid the foundation of the Federation Hall to symbolise the unity of Bengal.



Rabindranath Tagore composed the song *Amar Sonar Bangla* during the Anti-Partition Movement of Bengal. It is now the national anthem of Bangladesh.

Impact of the Anti-Partition Movement

- The anti-partition movement of Bengal speeded the Indian national movement. People rose in opposition against the government.
- The Swadeshi and Boycott Movements took concrete shape during the anti-partition movement. People began to use goods which were produced by local industries. Bon fires of foreign clothes were organised at various places. This also strengthened the Indian National Movement.
- The people lost faith in the British sense of justice and fair play.
- The anti-partition movement gave an opportunity to the assertive nationalists to lead the national movement.

Swadeshi and Boycott Movements

The word 'Swadeshi' means 'of one's own country'. Swadeshi aimed at promoting the growth of Indian indigenous industries. According to Lala Lajpat Rai, 'The Swadeshi Movement ought to make us self-respecting, self-reliant, self-supporting'. The Boycott Movement gave impetus to the Swadeshi Movement. The Boycott Movement included the following programmes:

- Boycotting of British-made cloth and imported sugar and salt
- To give up government posts and seats in the Legislative Council
- To promote Hindi and vernacular languages
- Social boycott of people who purchased foreign goods

The Anti-Partition Movement gave impetus to the Swadeshi Movement. Even earlier, many leaders such as M. G. Ranade, Rajnarain Bose and the Tagore family of Bengal had preached the Swadeshi and Boycott Movements. Bal Gangadhar Tilak led a full-fledged boycott campaign in 1896. The assertive nationalists used the Swadeshi and Boycott Movements as tools of political agitation against imperialism and training in self-sufficiency for attaining Swaraj.

Spread of the Movement

- The call for Swadeshi and Boycott Movements was given not only in Bengal but also in major towns and cities of India.
- Bon fires of foreign clothes were organised at many places, and shops selling foreign goods were picketed.
- People were urged to use Swadeshi goods.
- The movement spread to many parts of the country. Tilak popularised the movement in Mumbai and Pune and opened many cooperative stores as the head of the 'Swadeshi Wastu Pracharini Sabha'. Lala Lajpat Rai spread it in Punjab and in other northern parts of India. Chidambaram Pillai spread it in Chennai and founded the Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company in Tuticorin in present-day Tamil Nadu.
- The movement was supported by people belonging to different sections of society. Landlords, merchants, peasants and even labourers supported the movement.
- The session of Congress held under the chairmanship of Dad Bhai Naoroji supported the Swadeshi and Boycott campaigns and declared the goal of the Congress as 'attainment of Swaraj'.
- Students participated in the movement in large numbers.

- The movement also saw women coming out to the streets and organising picketing of shops selling foreign goods.
- Many textile mills, soap and sugar factories, nationalised banks and insurance companies were set up to produce indigenous goods.
- Many national educational institutions were set up to provide literary, technical and physical education.

Repression of the Government

- The government took various steps to suppress the movement. It banned holding of rallies, taking out of processions, censored newspapers and imprisoned the leaders of the national movement.
- Students who participated in the movement were expelled from government schools, colleges and arrested.
- The government passed various Acts such as the Prevention of Seditious Meeting Act and Criminal Law Amendment Act to curb the growth of the movement.
- Many government employees who participated in the movement were dismissed and volunteers were mercilessly beaten.
- Many prominent leaders participating in the revolt were arrested. Tilak was convicted of writing seditious articles in his paper *Kesari*. He was awarded six years of rigorous imprisonment in the Mandalay jail in Myanmar.
- One of the positive impacts of the movement was that the British instituted the Morley Minto reforms to appease the early nationalist Congress leaders.



Tilak was deported to Mandalay jail in Myanmar for his writings in *Kesari*.

Reasons for the Partial Failure of the Swadeshi Movement

The Swadeshi Movement began to lose its popular mass support because of the following reasons:

- It was not able to bring the Hindus and the Muslims together.
- The Congress was split into the early nationalists and the assertive nationalists in 1907.
- The British brutally repressed the movement.
- The movement did not have leaders with huge popularity after the arrest of Tilak, Lala Lajpat Rai and Ajit Singh.

Impact of the Swadeshi and Boycott Movement

- The movement brought people belonging to different sections of society closer to each other. The movement saw the participation of students and women in large numbers. Although efforts were made by the British to keep the Muslims away from the movement, many Muslim leaders such as Abdul Rasul and Liaquat Hussain joined the movement.
- The movement gave huge impetus to the indigenous industries. Many industries ranging from textile mills, soap and match factories to large-scale enterprises were opened and there was an increase in production of indigenous goods.
- In 1907, the Tata Iron and Steel Company was founded in India. Many companies and banks were opened by Indians. Acharya P. C. Ray set up the Bengal Chemical Swadeshi Stores. Rabindranath Tagore also helped the opening of many Swadeshi stores in Bengal.
- The Swadeshi Movement gave employment opportunities to many craftsmen and weavers working in handloom and handicraft industries.
- The movement saw the flowering of nationalist poetry, prose and journalism. Poets such as Tagore and Syed Abu Mohammed wrote many inspirational poems and songs. Journals such as *Kesari*, *Mahratta* and *Yugantar* helped in fostering the spirit of nationalism and patriotism.
- Many nationalist schools were opened during this period. About 25 secondary and 300 primary national schools were established in Bengal.

- The government used repressive measures to suppress the Swadeshi Movement. This gave rise to many revolutionary groups. Many revolutionary organisations were founded in Bengal, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Punjab.
- The Swadeshi Movement drew a large number of people to the national movement and prepared them to lead the future independence struggles in the country. Gandhi wrote, 'the real awakening of people in India took place after the partition of Bengal'.

Surat Split of 1907 in Congress

- The Swadeshi Movement created a rift between early and assertive nationalists. While the assertive nationalists wanted to use the Swadeshi and Boycott Movements as a weapon to unsettle the British in India, the early nationalists did not support the Boycott Movement as it was contrary to their policy of 'petition and persuasion'.
- While the assertive nationalists wanted to spread the movement outside Bengal, the early nationalists wanted the movement to remain confined within Bengal.
- The Congress session of 1906 condemned the Partition of Bengal and declared Swaraj or self-government as the goal of the Indian National Congress (INC).
- The differences between the two sections of the INC became apparent in the 1907 session of Congress held in Surat. While the assertive nationalists proposed the name of Lala Lajpat Rai as the President of the Surat session, the early nationalists proposed the name of Rashbehari Ghosh for the chair.
- There were discussions and debates in the Surat session among both factions. However, there was no conciliation between both groups leading to the split in Congress.

The split in the INC was an unfortunate event in Indian history. The assertive nationalists remained out of the Congress for many years. It undermined the national movement in the country. The British took this opportunity and used the policy of 'concession and repression'. While they granted some concessions to the early nationalists, they repressed the activities of the assertive nationalists. Both the early and assertive nationalists were reunited in the 1916 session of Congress held at Lucknow.