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## Competitive Exams: Understanding Partition-Politics, Memories, Experiences

We know that the joy of our country's independence from colonial rule in 1947 was tarnished by the violence and brutality of Partition. The Partition of British India into the sovereign states of India and Pakistan (with its western and eastern wings) led to many sudden developments. Thousands of lives were snuffed out, many others changed dramatically, cities changed, India changed, a new country was born, and there was unprecedented genocidal violence and migration. This chapter will examine the history of Partition: Why and how it happened as well as the harrowing experiences of ordinary people during the period 1946 – 50 and beyond. It will also discuss how the history of these experiences can be reconstructed by talking to people and interviewing them, that is, through the use of oral history. At the same time, it will point out the strengths and limitations of oral history. Interviews can tell us about certain aspects of a society's past of which we may know very little or nothing from other types of sources. But they may not reveal very much about many matters whose history we would then need to build from other materials. We will return to this issue towards the end of the chapter.

### Why and How Did Partition Happen?

Some historians, both Indian and Pakistani, suggest that Mohammad Ali Jinnah's theory that the Hindus and Muslims in colonial India constituted two separate nations can be projected back into medieval history. They emphasise that the events of 1947 were intimately connected to the long history of Hindu-Muslim conflict throughout medieval and modern times. Such an argument does not recognise that the history of conflict between communities has coexisted with a long history of sharing, and of mutual cultural exchange. It also does not take into account the changing circumstances that shape people's thinking.

Some scholars see Partition as a culmination of a communal politics that started developing in the opening decades of the twentieth century. They suggest that separate electorates for Muslims, created by the colonial government in 1909 and expanded in 1919, crucially shaped the nature of communal politics. Separate electorates meant that Muslims could now elect their own representatives in designated constituencies. This created a temptation for politicians working within this system to use sectarian slogans and gather a following by distributing favours to their own religious groups. Religious identities thus acquired a functional use within a modern political system; and the logic of electoral politics deepened and hardened these identities. Community identities no longer indicated simple difference in faith and belief; they came to mean active opposition and hostility between communities. However, while separate electorates did have a profound impact on Indian politics, we should be careful not to over-emphasise their significance or to see Partition as a logical outcome of their working. Communal

identities were consolidated by a host of other developments in the early twentieth century. During the 1920s and early 1930s tension grew around a number of issues. Muslims were angered by music-before-mosque, by the cow protection movement, and by the efforts of the Arya Samaj to bring back to the Hindu fold (shuddhi) those who had recently converted to Islam. Hindus were angered by the rapid spread of tabligh (propaganda) and tanzim (organisation) after 1923. As middle class publicists and communal activists sought to build greater solidarity within their communities, mobilising people against the other community, riots spread in different parts of the country. Every communal riot deepened differences between communities, creating disturbing memories of violence.

Yet it would be incorrect to see Partition as the outcome of a simple unfolding of communal tensions. As the protagonist of *Garm Hawa*, a film on Partition, puts it, Communal discord happened even before 1947 but it had never led to the uprooting of millions from their homes. Partition was a qualitatively different phenomenon from earlier communal politics, and to understand it we need to look carefully at the events of the last decade of British rule.

### The provincial elections of 1937 and the Congress ministries

In 1937, elections to the provincial legislatures were held for the first time. Only about 10 to 12 per cent of the population enjoyed the right to vote. The Congress did well in the elections, winning an absolute majority in five out of eleven provinces and forming governments in seven of them. It did badly in the constituencies reserved for Muslims, but the Muslim League also fared poorly, polling only 4.4 per cent of the total Muslim vote cast in this election. The League failed to win a single seat in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) and could capture only two out of 84 reserved constituencies in the Punjab and three out of 33 in Sind.

In the United Provinces, the Muslim League wanted to form a joint government with the Congress. The Congress had won an absolute majority in the province, so it rejected the offer. Some scholars argue that this rejection convinced the League that if India remained united, then Muslims would find it difficult to gain political power because they would remain a minority. The League assumed, of course, that only a Muslim party could represent Muslim interests, and that the Congress was essentially a Hindu party. But Jinnah's insistence that the League be recognised as the sole spokesman of Muslims could convince few at the time. Though popular in the United Provinces, Bombay and Madras, social support for the League was still fairly weak in three of the provinces from which Pakistan was to be carved out just ten years later Bengal, the NWFP and the Punjab. Even in Sind it failed to form a government. It was from this point onwards that the League doubled its efforts at expanding its social support.

The Congress ministries also contributed to the widening rift. In the United Provinces, the party had rejected the Muslim League proposal for a coalition government partly because the League tended to support landlordism, which the Congress wished to abolish, although the party had not yet taken any concrete steps in that direction. Nor did the Congress achieve any substantial gains in the Muslim mass contact programme it launched. In the end, the secular and radical rhetoric of the Congress merely alarmed conservative Muslims and the Muslim landed elite,

without winning over the Muslim masses. Moreover, while the leading Congress leaders in the late 1930s insisted more than ever before on the need for secularism, these ideas were by no means universally shared lower down in the party hierarchy, or even by all Congress ministers. Maulana Azad, an important Congress leader, pointed out in 1937 that members of the Congress were not allowed to join the League, yet Congressmen were active in the Hindu Mahasabha at least in the Central Provinces (present-day Madhya Pradesh). Only in December 1938 did the Congress Working Committee declare that Congress members could not be members of the Mahasabha. Incidentally, this was also the period when the Hindu Mahasabha and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) were gaining strength. The latter spread from its Nagpur base to the United Provinces, the Punjab, and other parts of the country in the 1930s. By 1940, the RSS had over 100, 000 trained and highly disciplined cadres pledged to an ideology of Hindu nationalism, convinced that India was a land of the Hindus.

## **The Pakistan Resolution**

The Pakistan demand was formalised gradually. On 23 March 1940, the League moved a resolution demanding a measure of autonomy for the Muslim-majority areas of the subcontinent. This ambiguous resolution never mentioned partition or Pakistan. In fact Sikandar Hayat Khan, Punjab Premier and leader of the Unionist Party, who had drafted the resolution, declared in a Punjab assembly speech on 1 March 1941 that he was opposed to a Pakistan that would mean Muslim Raj here and Hindu Raj elsewhere ... If Pakistan means unalloyed Muslim Raj in the Punjab then I will have nothing to do with it. He reiterated his plea for a loose (united), confederation with considerable autonomy for the confederating units.

The origins of the Pakistan demand have also been traced back to the Urdu poet Mohammad Iqbal, the writer of Sare Jahan Se Achha Hindustan Hamara. In his presidential address to the Muslim League in 1930, the poet spoke of a need for a North-West Indian Muslim state. Iqbal, however, was not visualising the emergence of a new country in that speech but a reorganisation of Muslim-majority 387 areas in north-western India into an autonomous unit within a single, loosely structured Indian federation.

## **The Suddenness of Partition**

We have seen that the League itself was vague about its demand in 1940. There was a very short time just seven years between the first formal articulation of the demand for a measure of autonomy for the Muslim-majority areas of the subcontinent and Partition. No one knew what the creation of Pakistan meant, and how it might shape people's lives in the future. Many who migrated from their homelands in 1947 thought they would return as soon as peace prevailed again.

Initially even Muslim leaders did not seriously raise the demand for Pakistan as a sovereign state. In the beginning Jinnah himself may have seen the Pakistan idea as a bargaining counter, useful for blocking possible British concessions to the Congress and gaining additional favours for the Muslims. The pressure of the Second World War on the British delayed negotiations for independence for some time. Nonetheless, it was the massive Quit India Movement which

started in 1942, and persisted despite intense repression, that brought the British Raj to its knees and compelled its officials to open a dialogue with Indian parties regarding a possible transfer of power.

### Post-War developments

When negotiations were begun again in 1945, the British agreed to create an entirely Indian central Executive Council, except for the Viceroy and the Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces, as a preliminary step towards full independence. Discussions about the transfer of power broke down due to Jinnah's unrelenting demand that the League had an absolute right to choose all the Muslim members of the Executive Council and that there should be a kind of communal veto in the Council, with decisions opposed by Muslims needing a two-thirds majority. Given the existing political situation, the League's first demand was quite extraordinary, for a large section of the nationalist Muslims supported the Congress (its delegation for these discussions was headed by Maulana Azad), and in West Punjab members of the Unionist Party were largely Muslims. The British had no intention of annoying the Unionists who still controlled the Punjab government and had been consistently loyal to the British.

Provincial elections were again held in 1946. The Congress swept the general constituencies, capturing 91.3 per cent of the non-Muslim vote. The League's success in the seats reserved for Muslims was equally spectacular: It won all 30 reserved constituencies in the Centre with 86.6 per cent of the Muslim vote and 442 out of 509 seats in the provinces. Only as late as 1946, therefore, did the League establish itself as the dominant party among Muslim voters, seeking to vindicate its claim to be the sole spokesman of India's Muslims. You will, however, recall that the franchise was extremely limited. About 10 to 12 per cent of the population enjoyed the right to vote in the provincial elections and a mere one per cent in the elections for the Central Assembly.

### **A Possible Alternative to Partition**

In March 1946 the British Cabinet sent a three member mission to Delhi to examine the League's demand and to suggest a suitable political framework for a free India. The Cabinet Mission toured the country for three months and recommended a loose three-tier confederation. India was to remain united. It was to have a weak central government controlling only foreign affairs, defence and communications with the existing provincial assemblies being grouped into three sections while electing the constituent assembly: Section A for the Hindu-majority provinces, and Sections B and C for the Muslim-majority provinces of the north-west and the north-east (including Assam) respectively. The sections or groups of provinces would comprise various regional units. They would have the power to set up intermediate-level executives and legislatures of their own.

Initially all the major parties accepted this plan. But the agreement was short-lived because it was based on mutually opposed interpretations of the plan. The League wanted the grouping to be compulsory, with Sections B and C developing into strong entities with the right to secede from the Union in the future. The Congress wanted that provinces be given the right to join a

group. It was not satisfied with the Mission's clarification that grouping would be compulsory at first, but provinces would have the right to opt out after the constitution had been finalised and new elections held in accordance with it. Ultimately, therefore, neither the League nor the Congress agreed to the Cabinet Mission's proposal. This was a most crucial juncture, because after this partition became more or less inevitable, with most of the Congress leaders agreeing to it, seeing it as tragic but unavoidable. Only Mahatma Gandhi and Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan of the NWFP continued to firmly oppose the idea of partition.

## **Towards Partition**

After withdrawing its support to the Cabinet Mission plan, the Muslim League decided on Direct Action for winning its Pakistan demand. It announced 16 August 1946 as Direct Action Day. On this day, riots broke out in Calcutta, lasting several days and leaving several thousand people dead. By March 1947 violence spread to many parts of northern India. It was in March 1947 that the Congress high command voted for dividing the Punjab into two halves, one with Muslim majority and the other with Hindu/Sikh majority; and it asked for the application of a similar principle to Bengal. By this time, given the numbers game, many Sikh leaders and Congressmen in the Punjab were convinced that Partition was a necessary evil, otherwise they would be swamped by Muslim majorities and Muslim leaders would dictate terms. In Bengal too a section of bhadralok Bengali Hindus, who wanted political power to remain with them, began to fear the permanent tutelage of Muslims (as one of their leaders put it). Since they were in a numerical minority, they felt that only a division of the province could ensure their political dominance.

## **The Withdrawal of Law and Order**

The bloodbath continued for about a year from March 1947 onwards. One main reason for this was the collapse of the institutions of governance. Penderel Moon, an administrator serving in Bahawalpur (in present-day Pakistan) at the time, noted how the police failed to fire even a single shot when arson and killings were taking place in Amritsar in March 1947.

Amritsar district became the scene of bloodshed later in the year when there was a complete breakdown of authority in the city. British officials did not know how to handle the situation: They were unwilling to take decisions, and hesitant to intervene. When panic-stricken people appealed for help, British officials asked them to contact Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Vallabh Bhai Patel or M A Jinnah. Nobody knew who could exercise authority and power. The top leadership of the Indian parties, barring Mahatma Gandhi, were involved in negotiations regarding independence while many Indian civil servants in the affected provinces feared for their own lives and property. The British were busy preparing to quit India. Problems were compounded because Indian soldiers and policemen came to act as Hindus, Muslims or Sikhs. As communal tension mounted, the professional commitment of those in uniform could not be relied upon. In many places not only did policemen help their co-religionists but they also attacked members of other communities.

The one-man army

Amidst all this turmoil, one man's valiant efforts at restoring communal harmony bore fruit. The 77-year-old Gandhiji decided to stake his all in a bid to vindicate his lifelong principle of non-violence, and his conviction that people's hearts could be changed. He moved from the villages of Noakhali in East Bengal (present-day Bangladesh) to the villages of Bihar and then to the riot-torn slums of Calcutta and Delhi, in a heroic effort to stop Hindus and Muslims kill each other, careful everywhere to reassure the minority community. In October 1946, Muslims in East Bengal targeted Hindus. Gandhiji visited the area, toured the villages on foot, and persuaded the local Muslims to guarantee the safety of Hindus. Similarly, in other places such as Delhi he tried to build a spirit of mutual trust and confidence between the two communities. A Delhi Muslim, Shahid Ahmad Dehlavi, compelled to flee to a dirty, overcrowded camp in Purana Qila, likened Gandhiji's arrival in Delhi on 9 September 1947 to the arrival of the rains after a particularly long and harsh summer. Dehlavi recalled in his memoir how Muslims said to one another: Delhi will now be saved. On 28 November 1947, on the occasion of Guru Nanak's birthday, when Gandhiji went to address a meeting of Sikhs at Gurdwara Sisganj, he noticed that there was no Muslim on the Chandni Chowk road, the heart of old Delhi. What could be more shameful for us, he asked during a speech that evening, than the fact that not a single Muslim could be found in Chandni Chowk? Gandhiji continued to be in Delhi, fighting the mentality of those who wished to drive out every Muslim from the city, seeing them as Pakistani. When he began a fast to bring about a change of heart, amazingly, many Hindu and Sikh migrants fasted with him.

The effect of the fast was electric, wrote Maulana Azad. People began realising the folly of the pogrom they had unleashed on the city's Muslims but it was only Gandhiji's martyrdom that finally ended this macabre drama of violence. The world veritably changed, many Delhi Muslims of the time recalled later.

## **Preserving Honour**

Scholars have also shown how ideas of preserving community honour came into play in this period of extreme physical and psychological danger. This notion of honour drew upon a conception of masculinity defined as ownership of zan (women) and zamin (land), a notion of considerable antiquity in North Indian peasant societies. Virility, it was believed, lay in the ability to protect your possessions zan and zamin from being appropriated by outsiders. And quite frequently, conflict ensued over these two prime possessions. Often enough, women internalised the same values.

At times, therefore, when the men feared that their women wives, daughters, sisters would be violated by the enemy, they killed the women themselves. Urvashi Butalia in her book, *The Other Side of Silence*, narrates one such gruesome incident in the village of Thoa Khalsa, Rawalpindi district. During Partition, in this Sikh village, ninety women are said to have voluntarily jumped into a well rather than fall into enemy hands. The migrant refugees from this village still commemorate the event at a gurdwara in Delhi, referring to the deaths as martyrdom, not suicide. They believe that men at that time had to courageously accept the decision of women, and in some cases even persuade the women to kill themselves. On 13

March every year, when their martyrdom is celebrated, the incident is recounted to an audience of men, women and children. Women are exhorted to remember the sacrifice and bravery of their sisters and to cast themselves in the same mould.

For the community of survivors, the remembrance ritual helps keep the memory alive. What such rituals do not seek to remember, however, are the stories of all those who did not wish to die, and had to end their lives against their will.

### Regional Variations

The experiences of ordinary people we have been discussing so far relate to the north-western part of the subcontinent. What was the Partition like in Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Central India and the Deccan? While carnages occurred in Calcutta and Noakhali in 1946, the Partition was most bloody and destructive in the Punjab. The near-total displacement of Hindus and Sikhs eastwards into India from West Punjab and of almost all Punjabi-speaking Muslims to Pakistan happened in a relatively short period of two years between 1946 and 1948. Many Muslim families of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Hyderabad in Andhra Pradesh continued to migrate to Pakistan through the 1950s and early 1960s, although many chose to remain in India. Most of these Urdu-speaking people, known as muhajirs (migrants) in Pakistan moved to the Karachi-Hyderabad region in Sind.

In Bengal the migration was even more protracted, with people moving across a porous border. This also meant that the Bengali division produced a process of suffering that may have been less concentrated but was as agonising. Furthermore, unlike the Punjab, the exchange of population in Bengal was not near-total. Many Bengali Hindus remained in East Pakistan while many Bengali Muslims continued to live in West Bengal. Finally, Bengali Muslims (East Pakistanis) rejected Jinnah's two-nation theory through political action, breaking away from Pakistan and creating Bangladesh in 1971 – 72. Religious unity could not hold East and West Pakistan together. There is, however, a huge similarity between the Punjab and Bengal experiences. In both these states, women and girls became prime targets of persecution. Attackers treated women's bodies as territory to be conquered. Dishonouring women of a community was seen as dishonouring the community itself, and a mode of taking revenge.

### **Help, Humanity, Harmony**

Buried under the debris of the violence and pain of Partition is an enormous history of help, humanity and harmony. Many narratives such as Abdul Latif's poignant testimony, with which we began, reveal this. Historians have discovered numerous stories of how people helped each other during the Partition period, stories of caring and sharing, of the opening of new opportunities, and of triumph over trauma. Consider, for instance, the work of Khushdeva Singh, a Sikh doctor specialising in the treatment of tuberculosis, posted at Dharampur in presentday Himachal Pradesh. Immersing himself in his work day and night, the doctor provided that rare healing touch, food, shelter, love and security to numerous migrants, Muslim, Sikh, Hindu alike. The residents of Dharampur developed the kind of faith and confidence in his humanity and generosity that the Delhi Muslims and others had in Gandhiji.

One of them, Muhammad Umar, wrote to Khushdeva Singh: With great humility I beg to state that I do not feel myself safe except under your protection. Therefore, in all kindness, be good enough to grant me a seat in your hospital.

We know about the gruelling relief work of this doctor from a memoir he entitled *Love is Stronger than Hate: A Remembrance of 1947*. Here, Singh describes his work as humble efforts I made to discharge my duty as a human being to fellow human beings. He speaks most warmly of two short visits to Karachi in 1949. Old friends and those whom he had helped at Dharampur spent a few memorable hours with him at Karachi airport. Six police constables, earlier acquaintances, walked him to the plane, saluting him as he entered it. I acknowledged (the salute) with folded hands and tears in my eyes.

## Oral Testimonies and History

Have you taken note of the materials from which the history of Partition has been constructed in this chapter? Oral narratives, memoirs, diaries, family histories, first-hand written accounts all these help us understand the trials and tribulations of ordinary people during the partition of the country. Millions of people viewed Partition in terms of the suffering and the challenges of the times. For them, it was no mere constitutional division or just the party politics of the Muslim League, Congress and others. For them, it meant the unexpected alterations in life as it unfolded between 1946 and 1950 and beyond, requiring psychological, emotional and social adjustments. As with the Holocaust in Germany, we should understand Partition not simply as a political event, but also through the meanings attached to it by those who lived it. Memories and experiences shape the reality of an event.

One of the strengths of personal reminiscence one type of oral source is that it helps us grasp experiences and memories in detail. It enables historians to write richly textured, vivid accounts of what happened to people during events such as Partition. It is impossible to extract this kind of information from government documents. The latter deal with policy and party matters and various state-sponsored schemes. In the case of Partition, government reports and files as well as the personal writings of its high-level functionaries throw ample light on negotiations between the British and the major political parties about the future of India or on the rehabilitation of refugees. They tell us little, however, about the day-to-day experiences of those affected by the government's decision to divide the country.

Oral history also allows historians to broaden the boundaries of their discipline by rescuing from oblivion the lived experiences of the poor and the powerless: Those of, say, Abdul Latif's father; the women of Thoa Khalsa; the refugee who retailed wheat at wholesale prices, eking out a paltry living by selling the gunny bags in which the wheat came; a middle-class Bengali widow bent double over road-laying work in Bihar; a Peshawari trader who thought it was wonderful to land a petty job in Cuttack upon migrating to India but asked: Where is Cuttack, is it on the upper side of Hindustan or the lower; we haven't quite heard of it before in Peshawar?

Thus, moving beyond the actions of the well off and the well known, the oral history of Partition has succeeded in exploring the experiences of those men and women whose existence has



hitherto been ignored, taken for granted, or mentioned only in passing in mainstream history. This is significant because the histories that we read often regard the life and work of the mass of the people in the past as inaccessible or unimportant.

Yet, many historians still remain sceptical of oral history. They dismiss it because oral data seem to lack concreteness and the chronology they yield may be imprecise. Historians argue that the uniqueness of personal experience makes generalisation difficult: a large picture cannot be built from such micro-evidence, and one witness is no witness. They also think oral accounts are concerned with tangential issues, and that the small individual experiences which remain in memory are irrelevant to the unfolding of larger processes of history. However, with regard to events such as the Partition in India and the Holocaust in Germany, there is no dearth of testimony about the different forms of distress that numerous people faced. So, there is ample evidence to figure out trends, to point out exceptions. By comparing statements, oral or written, by corroborating what they yield with findings from other sources, and by being vigilant about internal contradictions, historians can weigh the reliability of a given piece of evidence. Furthermore, if history has to accord presence to the ordinary and powerless, then the oral history of Partition is not concerned with tangential matters. The experiences it relates are central to the story, so much so that oral sources should be used to check other sources and vice versa. Different types of sources have to be tapped for answering different types of questions. Government reports, for instance, will tell us of the number of recovered women exchanged by the Indian and Pakistani states but it is the women who will tell us about their suffering.

## Timeline

- 1930-The Urdu poet Mohammad Iqbal speaks of the need for a North-West Indian Muslim state as an autonomous unit within a single, loose Indian federation
- 1933-The name Pakistan or Pak-stan is coined by a Punjabi Muslim student at Cambridge, Choudhry Rehmat Ali
- 1937 – 39-Congress ministries come to power in seven out of 11 provinces of British India
- 1940-The Muslim League moves a resolution at Lahore demanding a measure of autonomy for the Muslim-majority areas
- 1946-Elections are held in the provinces. The Congress wins massively in the general constituencies. The League's success in the Muslim seats is equally spectacular
- March to June-The British Cabinet sends a three-member Cabinet Mission to Delhi
- August-The Muslim League decides on Direct Action for winning Pakistan
- 16 August-Violence breaks out between Hindus-Sikhs and Muslims in Calcutta, lasting several days and leaving several thousand people dead
- March 1947-The Congress high command votes for dividing the Punjab into Muslim-majority and Hindu/Sikh-majority halves and asks for the application of a similar principle to Bengal;

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## the British begin to quit India

- 14 – 15 August, 1947-Pakistan is formed; India gains independence. Mahatma Gandhi tours Noakhali in East Bengal to restore communal harmony