

Of Men and Things: The Administrative Consequences of Partition of British India

By

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Sometime in 1946, the department of agriculture under the Bengal government ordered 60 ducks from England. Bengal's Muslim League cabinet led by H.S. Suhrawardy sanctioned this order and a poultry farm in London was asked to deliver the birds. The birds reached Calcutta in July 1947 along with a bill for £250 through a Calcutta bank for payment. This was perhaps the worst time to ask the Bengal government for money. By then, the Congress and the Muslim League had agreed to divide British India, and as part of the exercise, Bengal (and Punjab) was to be divided as well. Dividing Bengal and India meant demarcation of boundaries, splitting up the armed forces, dividing the staff, organization and records of the civil departments, financial settlements, marking the jurisdiction of the high court's and federal courts, charting out domicile policies and, of course, dividing the assets and liabilities of the imperial government. The process of separating the administrative, financial and judicial structures had to be concluded at two different levels: in the central departments and in the departments of the provinces that were to be divided. This was a gigantic and chaotic task. Amidst this chaos, the finance secretary refused to pay for the ducks, questioning whether such a transaction should take place at that moment, when the Bengal secretariat was trying to settle the financial arrangements and other intricacies between the future governments of East Bengal and West Bengal. Who would get the ducks: the government of West Bengal or that of East Bengal? Or, would the ducks be divided between the two, and both paying for their respective portions? It was a complex calculation. The bizarreness of the moment was well captured by a correspondent of *The Statesman* as he wrote: 'While protracted departmental inquiries continue, the neglected ducks await the result in a city warehouse.'¹

This was a minor incident, but it captured the madness of the moment. The anecdote, however, also brings out the minute calculations

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and the detailed stocktaking that was part and parcel of splitting British India. The partition of India has received much attention from historians, feminist scholars, literary theorists, political scientists and sociologists. They have asked why did partition happen, what was its impact on people, how do people remember partition. However, the *actual* process of dividing the country, except for the process of border making,² has remained outside the purview of partition studies. This paper tries to address this gap. Or, to put it differently, this paper tries to explore if there was some method in the madness of partition.

Divided into six sections, it climbs down the various layers of administration, bureaucracy and governance to show the process of coming to a decision – the debates, arguments and discussions behind it and the processes and politics of implementing them on the ground. It argues that apparently contradictory tendencies constituted the actual process of partition: cooperation and non-cooperation, mutual trust and suspicion, order and anarchy shaped the transition from the colonial regime to the post-colonial but partitioned phase.

On 3 June 1947, at a meeting with the Indian leaders, Lord Mountbatten circulated copies of a paper entitled ‘The Administrative Consequences of Partition’.³ By then the partition of British India was almost certain. The paper highlighted the technicalities of dividing a country. As they found the note prepared by Mountbatten’s staff on the table, the leaders realized for the first time the material implications of dividing a country. As Lord Mountbatten writes, ‘The severe shock that this gave to everyone present would have been amusing if it was not rather tragic.’⁴

As the administrative consequences of partition became clear, a Partition Committee was formed on 12 June with Lord Mountbatten as the chairman. Sardar Patel and Rajendra Prasad represented the Congress. From the League, Liaquat Ali Khan and Abdur Rab Nishtar were chosen as members. The Partition Committee was literally in charge of splitting the country. However, they were the leaders. They did not have the time, training or the inclination to participate in the everyday nitty-gritty of administration. So, 10 expert committees consisting of senior bureaucrats were formed to take care of the details. These committees had an equal number of Muslim and non-Muslim officers representing the interests of the two future governments. The bridge between the expert committee and the partition committee was a steering committee, comprising two senior bureaucrats – H.M. Patel and Muhammad Ali. Following the logic of partition, Muslim officers were chosen to look after Pakistan’s interest and non-Muslim civil servants represented the Indian side. The officers, too, in their job of dividing the country, conformed more or less to the politics of the time and imagined India and Pakistan as custodians of Hindu and Muslim interests respectively. At the provincial level, similar mechanisms were put in place. As partition became certain, the Partition Committee was replaced by the Partition Council with two new members: Muhammad Ali Jinnah and C. Rajagopalachari.⁵ An Arbitral Tribunal was also set up

anticipating disputes between the two sides. The aggressive nationalism of the time and the communal violence that accompanied it, made the context extremely sensitive. Conflict was almost inevitable in such a situation. However, the individuals representing the opposite sides in Partition Council and the Steering Committee were surprisingly restrained and cooperative to each other in their attempt to divide the 'men and things'. In the words of H.M. Patel:

...the two countries [should] thank their stars, for a vast area of potential conflict and dissatisfaction was removed from the potential arena of disputes and confrontations by discussion...to the satisfaction of both the countries.⁶

Indeed, in a moment of extreme and violent religious nationalism, this was almost a miraculous achievement. H.M. Patel gave the principal credit behind this miracle to Lord Mountbatten for being 'a genuine neutral chairman'⁷ of the council and praised Jinnah and Sardar Patel for being 'big men, men with vision'.⁸ Moreover, the men who were actually given the task to divide India were all senior bureaucrats, who had been colleagues for a number of years. They knew each other and 'had generally been on friendly terms'.⁹ Also, they knew that any lack of coordination among them would further complicate the already messy situation and would only increase their own workloads. As H.M. Patel wrote, he and his colleagues were convinced that they had 'no alternative but to succeed'.¹⁰ The Partition Council was able to decide almost on every matter within the allotted time and very few matters were left unresolved. Even these, on which no agreement could be reached, were not referred to the Arbitral Tribunal as the representatives of India and Pakistan were able to sort them out by December, 1947.

The members of the Expert Committees had less than 70 days for dividing the country. They also had to ensure that the necessary infrastructure was in place in both Karachi and Delhi, as well as in the provincial capitals, to run the governments. Delhi was the capital of undivided India and there was a system in place. Similarly, Calcutta too had the necessary set-up. However, the scene was very different in Karachi or in Dhaka. Karachi had been the capital of Sindh. But 'in comparison to Delhi, Karachi had been a small, sleepy port city that served the Sindh hinterland, and was largely tied to Bombay and the Malabar coast for its mercantile links'.¹¹ The city was not equipped to become the capital of a country all of a sudden. Karachi would need houses to accommodate government employees and their families, buildings for government offices, furniture for offices and residences, typewriters, telephones, stationery, suitable accommodation facilities for the members of the Pakistan Constituent Assembly and so on. The Partition Council realized that various departments under the Government of India would have to assist the Pakistan Government to establish its headquarters in Karachi. Lists were prepared indicating the number of furniture, mechanical equipments and various stationeries required for various government offices in Pakistan and in Delhi. Existing government properties were divided as far as possible, keeping relevant requirements in mind. For example, the External Affairs

and Commonwealth Relations Department in undivided India had 203 typewriters. It was estimated that after partition, the workload of the Delhi office would reduce and 182 typewriters would then be sufficient.¹² The rest could be sent to Pakistan. Similar lists were also prepared by the representatives of the Pakistan side. For the office of the Ministry of External Affairs and Commonwealth Relations, it was estimated that 15 soap cases, 23 doormats, 7 carpets, 35 almirahs, 121 clerk tables, among many other things, would be required.¹³ This is just one random example. But this illustrates how immensely difficult the job was. The officers involved in partitioning India had to take into account every record and every file, meticulously evaluate whatever financial or other assets the department had, take a stock of everything from a ceiling fan to a board pin, and then had to determine what should go to which side.

It was not possible to divide everything though in such a precise manner. Institutions like the Central Quinine Office in Calcutta, which was meant for storing and issuing quinine, was a one of its kind institution. To divide the assets of this would mean division of the specialized instruments and life-saving medicines. In all probability, the highly sophisticated equipments were seldom in duplicates. Therefore, dividing the properties of this institution would mean compromising with its efficiency. Also, with their portion of the assets, it would be impossible for Pakistan to build a self-sufficient institute immediately. It would only hamper the research and treatment of malaria. From the very beginning, the Partition Committee recognized that in some cases division might be impracticable.¹⁴ This was one such case. There were many other research and training institutions and manufacturing centres too where dividing assets would create similar complications. In a meeting of the Partition Council, Lord Mountbatten brought up the issue of these 'unique' institutions 'which were to be found in one of the two Dominions only and which could not be readily duplicated'.¹⁵ He suggested that India and Pakistan be given access to the facilities they offered for a stipulated period of time. The Partition Council agreed to this proposal. A list of such institutions was prepared and these institutes were divided into four categories: a) training and higher education institutions like the Nursing College, Delhi, or the All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health; b) research institutions like Indian Forest Research Institute; c) institutions that manufacture specialized commodities like the Central Research Institute in Kasauli where vaccines were manufactured; and d) institutions that provided essential services like the Imperial Serologist Department where blood was tested. It was decided that both India and Pakistan would have an access to the facilities offered by these institutions for at least three years which could be extended up to five years, provided both governments agreed to it. Another very tricky area was the financial arrangements that were associated with the partition. Did partition mean different currencies for India and Pakistan? What would be the exchange rate between an Indian Rupee and its Pakistani counterpart? With such a long and open land border between the two countries, was it

feasible for the two countries to maintain their separate currency zones? These, among many other questions, had to be settled as part and parcel of partition.

There were some apprehensions that if India and Pakistan were to have separate currencies and customs frontiers, it would adversely affect the existing trading networks of this region. In a note prepared by the Expert Committee on finance, it was suggested that

An examination could be made of how the Customs organizations operate over other land frontiers particularly where the raw materials of an industry are on a different side of the border to the factories which use them, such as in the case of the coal and iron industries of the Saar and Alsace Lorraine. The position there must have been very similar to the one that will arise in respect of Calcutta and its supplies of jute, and its methods of dealing with the problems might be adopted.¹⁶

It was also almost certain that in both the countries there would be a considerable section of people who would be earning in one place but would have their families on the other side of the border. 'The industries of Calcutta and Bombay are sure to draw on labour recruited from East Bengal, the North West Frontier and Punjab,' noted the Expert Committee.¹⁷ No longer could they be allowed to send money without any limit, nor was it possible to impose much restriction as that would bring unnecessary hardship for people. Keeping these issues in mind, one opinion was to continue with the common currency system for both countries. Also, along with the same currency, it was suggested that both countries should have a joint administration of foreign exchange assets, no internal customs regulation and a unified export-import licensing system.¹⁸ This was perhaps a little too much to expect from India and Pakistan. If they were willing to go for a joint currency system, they might as well have accepted the Cabinet Mission Proposal and let go of their demands for partition. But they realized that it was impossible to introduce separate coinage and currency immediately. The Expert Committee decided to continue with the existing coinage and currency for both India and Pakistan till 31 March, 1948. The period between April 1 to September 30 (1948) was to be considered the 'transitional' phase when new coins and notes would be introduced in Pakistan, though the Indian rupee and paisa would also remain valid. However, during this transitional phase, the issue of Indian coins in Pakistan territory would be very restricted and Indian currency notes would not be newly issued.¹⁹ The idea was to phase out the common currency and replace it with the new currencies. Parallely, the Expert Committee appointed to deal with the matters regarding all trade and movement between the territories of the two successor governments, decided to maintain the status quo regarding all matters related to trade until February 29, 1948. This meant that there would be free movement of goods and capital and no customs barrier between India and Pakistan.²⁰

In spite of all the awareness about the economic fall-out of the partition and all the precautionary measures proposed by the Expert Committees, the creation of India and Pakistan disrupted the existing

trading networks. The impact of partition, for instance, was disastrous for the jute industry. The Radcliffe Line segregated the jute-producing areas (largely in East Pakistan) from the jute mills and the Calcutta port and no longer was the journey from the fields to the mills of Howrah, Hooghly and 24 Parganas (West Bengal) easy as there were many restrictions and regulations. However, theoretically at least, both the sides in the Partition Council accepted the 'greatest good for both the countries' as the guiding principle while dividing the imperial assets.²¹ This was indeed an exception amidst all the bitterness and violence that accompanied the partition of British India.

The principle for dividing government properties and the people who worked for the government could not be similar, as the latter had their own will and ideas about their national belonging. It was decided in the Partition Council that government employees would be given the option to serve either the Indian government or the government of Pakistan. At the provincial level of Bengal and Punjab, too, employees were given similar choices. The council also recognized that for many employees it would be rather difficult to make the final decision immediately. They were given the right to change their options within six months of partition, provided they had categorically mentioned in their option forms that their decisions were provisional. It was also decided that the actual transfer of the staff according to their options 'would be arranged over a period of time and in the meanwhile a standstill agreement should be arranged so that efficiency of the organization may be preserved'.²² Very clearly, the Partition Council was eager to split the country in a systematic and orderly way. For instance, it was decided that those who among the staff of the Hajj Office in the Ministry of External Affairs had opted for Pakistan, would be released only after February 1948. The Hajj season was on. To avoid confusion, the current season of Hajj was to be administered by the Government of India.²³ They knew that without some coordination untangling India and Pakistan would be impossible.

Though, partition was based on a communal logic, government employees were theoretically free to decide whether they wanted to serve India or Pakistan, irrespective of their religion. Choices were mostly determined by the religious identities of the individuals. But there were some exceptions as well. Some Hindus did opt for Pakistan and some Muslims opted for India as they did not want to leave their homes and familiar surroundings. Perhaps they did not feel unsafe in their locality or in the office space. For some others it was a political decision. Annadashankar Roy, an I.C.S officer at the time of partition and also a noted Bengali literary figure, wrote about two such Muslim government employees in his reminiscence of the time, *Juktobanger Smriti*. One of them was in the police department and the other was an I.C.S. officer; both of them opted for service under the Indian government. It is important to note that the I.C.S officer was originally from East Bengal. It was not religion or territorial belonging that made him opt for India. He did not support partition and this

was a political decision.²⁴ The politics of partition or the 'partitioned times' did not or could not appropriate every social, political, cultural or emotional space.²⁵ People experienced it in diverse ways and negotiated it differently. Accepting the logic of the division and migrating to another country or advocating a total transfer of population was one among many reactions. There was, thus, scope for exercising individual agency as well in deciding whether to leave or not to leave a country where they would be in a religious minority.

Interestingly, those who were in the Indian defence forces had less scope for exercising their choices. The Partition Council took the following decision in this regard:

That all personnel now serving in the Armed Forces would be entitled to elect the dominion they wished to serve in subject to the condition that, a Muslim from Pakistan serving in the Armed Forces would not have the option to join the Armed Forces in the Indian Dominion and a non-Muslim from the rest of the India now serving in the Armed Forces would not have the option to join the Armed Forces of Pakistan.²⁶

Thus, if a Muslim army man from Lahore wanted to serve the Indian forces he did not have the option. But what if there was a Muslim army officer from Dhaka, who had always been a supporter of Congress and imagined himself as an Indian? No longer would the Indian Army have a place for him. Loyalty of the armed forces had always been very crucial for any nation state. Armed forces are directly responsible for 'protecting' the physical space of a nation-state. The very possibility of a lack of loyalty among the soldiers was, therefore, seen as a direct threat to national security and integrity. To serve the armed forces, some very tangible proof of loyalty to the nation was required. The logic of partition made the Muslims 'naturally' loyal to Pakistan and non-Muslims loyal to India in the eyes of the people and their leaders. The men in charge of dividing the country were also willing to be sympathetic towards a very territorial notion of belongingness (a Hindu from Dhaka could theoretically join the Pakistan Army). But, in spite of all the liberal rhetoric, the other, more political, modes of imagining national belongings were not recognized by the Partition Council when it came to the division of the armed forces.²⁷

The fact that there was coordination among the representatives of India and Pakistan at the highest level, and that the Partition Council ultimately reached to an agreement in almost every matter did not necessarily mean that bureaucrats were unanimous in each and every instance. They often bargained hard. More often than not, however, they agreed to disagree and the case was referred to the Steering Committee and the Partition Council for the final decision. The terms of their debates reflect their understanding of partition and their ways of imagining the nations. For instance, D.M Sen and K.M. Asadullah, two high-ranking bureaucrats of the Education Department of the Government of India, fought passionately over the collection of the Imperial Library, known today as the National Library of India. Sen argued that the library could not be categorized as an 'asset' for the purpose of division.²⁸ According to the

Government of India Notification No 201/207 of 30.1.1903, the Imperial Library was a 'library of reference, a working place for students, and a repository of material for the future historians of *India*, in which, so far as possible, every work written *about India* at any time could be seen and read'.²⁹ Sen argued that the purpose of the library would be lost if the collection could not be retained intact for the use of historians and research scholars. Since the collection was "*about India*", it had to remain in India – that was Sen's argument. However, the Imperial Library obviously had books that were relevant for studying the territories that were to go to Pakistan after the partition. Therefore, Pakistan could have a claim on it arguing that they were necessary for understanding "Pakistan". Also, the library certainly had books on Islam and Islamic history which, in accordance to the logic of partition, Pakistan could claim. In other words, Asadullah could have argued that the library belonged as much to Pakistan nation as to India. And Asadullah in his note rightly mentioned that Pakistan needed a 'well equipped and up-to-date library' as much as India did.³⁰

But Sen had a legal angle to his argument as well. The Metcalfe Hall, which housed the Imperial Library till independence, was purchased from two societies: the Agricultural and Horticultural Society of India and the Calcutta Public Library. The entire collection of the Calcutta Public Library too was handed over to the Imperial Library. Sen pointed out that 'the indenture of 20th December 1901 executed by the Calcutta Public Library in favour of Government confers rights regarding the portion of the library taken over from that society...on the Proprietors of the Society'.³¹ Thus the Government of India had no right to transfer the collection from Calcutta. Moreover, according to an agreement dated 22 August 1904, a certain Bohar family had donated a collection of 'oriental books and manuscripts' to the library on the condition that their collection would never be taken out of Calcutta. These agreements would be violated if the collection was divided, argued Sen. Asadullah, on the other hand, pointed out that ever since the capital of British India shifted from Calcutta to Delhi, the Government of India had frequently considered the question of transferring the library to the new capital city. Legally too, he pointed out, there was no difficulty in shifting the collection or some part of it from Calcutta. He showed that according to the agreement with the Calcutta Public Library, it was obligatory to retain the library in Calcutta as long as any of the society members of the Calcutta Public Library was alive and in Calcutta. However, 'It is unlikely that any of the said members would be alive now,' wrote Asadullah in his report.³² Therefore 'moving the library from Calcutta as a whole or in part' should not be a problem. Ultimately, however, Asadullah's demands were not satisfied in the case of the Imperial Library and the library remained in Calcutta with its entire collection. It is difficult to say why the decision went in favour of Sen. Whether the government at all had the legal right to divide the Imperial Library or not perhaps became the deciding factor.³³ It is possible to argue that partition has fundamentally shaped the politics of history-writing in India, Pakistan and also in

Bangladesh as it has determined which library, what institute and which documents are important for understanding 'India' and what is 'relevant' for Pakistan. Sen thought that the collection of the Imperial Library was all about India. He did not probably realize that partition would redraw the boundaries and alter the cartographic understanding of India. Or, to him, the idea of India was perhaps over and above the actual nation-space. But, when it came to the Calcutta Madrasah Library, the attitude of the members of the Separation Council was different.³⁴ They decided to transfer all the moveable properties of Calcutta Madrasah including the books and the manuscripts of the Madrasah Library to Dacca. The Bengal Madrasah Education Board also shifted to Dacca, leaving behind a number of high madrasahs and the Hooghly Islamic Intermediate College without any central organization for their control and coordination. Apart from two professors, the entire faculty of Calcutta Madrasah too opted for service under the East Bengal government.³⁵ Thus, partition had a drastic impact on this premier institution of Islamic education. It survived, but became a shadow of the past. When I went to the Calcutta Madrasah in search of documents related to the transfer of its collection, the librarian showed me a catalogue of the books that had been available in the library back in 1927 and lamented that not a single book mentioned in the catalogue was now there in the library. 'Pakistan took it all. They forgot that Islam does not allow its followers to collect booty after any war,' said Md. Kased Ali, the present librarian. 'People who ruled Pakistan never thought of us, who stayed on in India,' said the librarian. 'Who knows whether the books reached Dacca Madrasah or not? We have heard that they carried the books and the manuscripts in open trucks. It was the rainy season. Many books were probably destroyed due to the rain, people say so.'³⁶ The frustration of being a minority in 'partitioned times' was apparent in his tone. However, little did he realize that division of assets was a part and parcel of breaking and making nations. Since the madrasah was an Islamic institution, its shift from Calcutta to Dacca was probably less contested by the Indian side. Religion, in this case, following the grand logic of partition, became the determinant.

Partition also reconfigured the archives. It was decided that all the records of the civil departments would be classified into three categories: 'A' files, which were relevant to Pakistan only, 'B' files, which were exclusively of interest to India, and 'C' files, which were of common interest. The major determinants were territory and religion in this classificatory process. However, it is impossible to understand the classificatory logic entirely. I have no idea, for instance, why a file on the 'Supply of United States watches and fountain pens to P.O. Sikkim' was marked 'B' and a file on 'Supply of Umbrellas to Sikkim State' was marked 'C'.³⁷ Also, the people in charge of dividing the records, did it according to the way they imagined their nations. But not everyone had the same notion of India or of Pakistan, even if they were on the same side of the table. Therefore, they proposed different schemes. While 14 files of the Ministry of External Affairs and

Commonwealth Relations (Central Asia branch) relating to Kashmir and Gilgit were marked 'A', by a department staff, which was approved by the deputy secretary of the external affairs branch of the department,³⁸ at the last moment they were reclassified as 'C', as a senior departmental officer gave the following note:

As Kashmir administration have not yet decided as to which dominion they are finally to join, files referred to 'A' alone should be classified as 'C'... in any case India should be interested in the Gilgit Affairs as three frontiers (Afghanistan, Russia and China) meet there...³⁹

Kashmir, at that moment, was yet to join India or Pakistan. The officers who classified these files as 'A', perhaps assumed that being a Muslim majority state, Kashmir would join Pakistan.

This was indeed a moment of profound anxiety for many. What belonged to India's past, how would future India or future Pakistan look, what was 'national' and what was 'foreign': these questions were constantly raised. Sindh was going to Pakistan; did that mean India would no longer have any claim over Mohenjodaro? There were rumours that Pakistan was going to claim all the relics excavated from Mohenjodaro from the national museum in Calcutta. Similar concerns were raised about Taxila in one hand and the Taj Mahal on the other. In an editorial published in the *Amrita Bazaar Patrika*, Satish Chandra Kala advocated forming a joint archaeological board under the supervision of both India and Pakistan. The imperial government had no interest in India's past and did not encourage archaeological research in India, wrote Kala. But in independent India, too, archaeology would not have much of a future, as the major sites of India's prehistoric past would not be included within Indian national-space, he noted.⁴⁰ In the early 1920s, the Indus Valley Civilization had been excavated. Since then India's past had been traced back to the Indus Valley Civilization. Nehru wrote in the early 1940s:

I stood on a mound of Mohenjo-daro in the Indus Valley...and all around me lay the houses and streets of this ancient city that is said to have existed over five thousand years ago; and even then it [India] was an old and well developed civilization...Astonishing thought: that any culture or civilization should have this continuity for five or six thousand years or more.⁴¹

Partition troubled this imagination. Not surprisingly, there was an organized attempt to discover Indus Valley Civilization sites on the Indian side of the border, immediately after partition.⁴² The Archaeological Survey of India tried to compensate for the 'loss' of the 'original' sites, Harappa and Mohenjodaro, to Pakistan, with new discoveries within India. The 17-minute black-and-white film, *A Century of Indian Archaeology* (1961), produced by Film Division of India, for instance, tried to locate the Indus Valley Civilization within the limits of post-colonial national space of India. As Sraman Mukherjee writes, "The moving footage from excavations at Ropar and Kalibangan fades into a post-1947 territorial map of India to narrate how the Indus civilization extended beyond the territorial limits of West Pakistan to the Gangetic heartland – the territorial core of the postcolonial

nation.⁴³ It will be interesting to study how historians and archaeologists of India and Pakistan dealt with these anxieties and the tropes of nationalist histories that were written after partition. However, that is a different project and this paper does not have the space or scope to address these concerns.

If coming to decisions was difficult for the bureaucrats, the attempt to execute them often gave rise to further conflict and confusion. There was lack of coordination between different departments of the government, communication gaps between the officers and all sorts of unintended human errors. These lapses complicated the implementation process and made the involved individuals suffer. Take the case of Gulam Kibria for instance. Kibria was an employee of the Publicity Department of Bengal Government who opted for Pakistan. He was given a posting in Khulna. However, as he reached Khulna, he was told that there was no vacancy there. Mehboob Hussain, the operator from Murshidabad, who had also opted for Pakistan, had already joined there.⁴⁴ By mistake, both of them were given the same posting. Kibria then was sent to the Dhaka office. There he was told that since he had been posted in Khulna, he had to go back to Khulna. They assured him that Mehboob Hussain would be shifted to Chittagong. Gulam Kibria's travails did not end there. He went to Khulna to learn that not Mehboob Hussain, but he himself would be going to Chittagong office. Finally, on 5 March 1948 he joined the Chittagong office. As he was unable to join duty, he could not draw his salary for these six months.⁴⁵ One can easily imagine the anxiety and the financial difficulties of Kibria during his initial stay in Pakistan.

'Partitioned times' made people suspicious of the 'Other'. Most newspapers had their party and national loyalties fixed. Constructing a negative image of the 'Other' was the single point agenda for most of the leading newspapers during and after the partition.⁴⁶ If on 15 June, the *Morning News* described the process of partitioning the assets and liabilities of the Bengal Government as 'curious and fantastically absurd' where 'Muslim representation appears to be nil',⁴⁷ a week later the *Hindustan Times* complained that the 'Muslim members in the Expert Committees are trying to get as much as they can'.⁴⁸ If the readers of Calcutta-based periodicals were regularly fed on 'authentic' reports about Hindus being tortured,⁴⁹ women being molested⁵⁰ and cows being slaughtered in the Hindu localities⁵¹ of East Pakistan, the Muslims sitting in Dacca too had their routine dose of news of Muslims being oppressed and tortured in West Bengal and India.⁵² The memories of the Great Calcutta Killing, the Noakhali riots and the Bihar massacre were still fresh. Punjab and Delhi were still burning. People suspected the other side to be unfair and greedy. Obstructing the implementation of the Partition Council's or Separation Council's decisions was one way of expressing their patriotic concerns.

Often political leaders and government officers themselves tried to delay the process on some pretext. The story of Joymani, an elephant, which belonged to the forest department of colonial Bengal, is an interesting example in this context. In the process of asset division, the value of

Joymani was determined as equivalent to a station wagon used by the director of Land Records and Surveys.⁵³ West Bengal got the vehicle and East Bengal got the animal. However, at the moment of independence, Joymani was in Malda town, which was in West Bengal. Therefore, the elephant had to be taken to the other side of the border. The problem arose when Joymani's attendant and the *mabout* refused to leave India.⁵⁴ The reason for their decisions is not clear from the official files. Most likely they were Hindus and like the majority of their coreligionists felt safer in India. Or, they were Muslims but their friends and family were in Malda. The idea of going to a foreign land did not sound like a good plan to them. Since they refused to go, the conservator of forest, East Bengal, decided to send a forest guard, a *mabout* and an attendant to take the elephant to East Pakistan. They came to Malda in June 1948.⁵⁵ But the issue did not end there; rather, a new dimension was added: who would pay for Joymani's maintenance between 15 August 1947 and June 1948? The East Bengal government should arrange the money as Joymani was *their* property throughout this period, argued the collector of Malda. A sum of Rs. 1,900 was claimed from the government of East Bengal and the forest department staff sent by the conservator to escort the elephant was detained in Malda. The district authorities of Malda had used the elephant throughout this period and, therefore, they should bear the expenditure, was the riposte. The official archives are silent about the ultimate fate of Joymani.⁵⁶ The dispute moved to the diplomatic circle and was probably resolved at the level of the chief secretaries.

More striking was the case of the Dow Hill Forest School in Kurseong, West Bengal. This was recognized as a 'unique' institution. For four years, it was decided that the school would be open to the students of both East and West Bengal since East Bengal had no similar institution. In October, 1947, 19 students from East Pakistan joined the institution. However, soon problem arose between the two governments about the disbursement of monthly allowances to the students from East Bengal. Also, differential treatment of the administration and the faculty towards them made their stay in the hostel very difficult. In the first week of December 1947, these students left the hostel and the institute and went back to East Pakistan. Obviously, it was clear that the attempt to maintain Dow Hill as a 'unique' institution had failed. The lack of cooperation among the two governments and the attitude of the staff and the teachers were to be blamed. Naturally, the East Bengal government demanded the physical division of the assets after this fall-out. The assets included library books, laboratory instruments and the botanical and entomological specimens in the possession of the institute.⁵⁷

It is clear that during implementing the partition, on the ground there was much bad blood and lack of cooperation among the two sides. Though H.M. Patel has claimed that the bureaucrats had cooperated with each other and followed the principle of 'greatest good for two countries', that spirit was not always reflected among the common people, many

government officers or the media. The bureaucrats, in their sanitized environment, formulated the policies. The general atmosphere that was shaped by mutual suspicion, communal hatred and aggressive nationalism, affected them less than the men closer to the 'ground'. The execution phase involved numerous individuals who had their own opinions and preferences. They witnessed more closely the unfolding of partition politics. There, what can be called vernacular everyday discourses was shaped by the popular aggressive logic of rightwing nationalism.⁵⁸ Their own imaginations and passionate ideas about nation and nation-state at times made it difficult to put into practice the decisions of the Partition Council or the Separation Council. It will, however, be a gross mistake to assume that the lack of cooperation was necessarily a problem among officers in the lower or middle rung in both India and Pakistan. With time, the spirit of cooperation and cordiality that was reflected in the Partition Council's meetings faded away. Indo-Pakistani relations were increasingly marked by mutual hostility: they blamed each other of being non-cooperative, communal and aggressive. They frequently obstructed the movement of whatever assets that were left to be transferred to blackmail each other. It was nothing short of blackmail when the Congress cabinet decided to withhold the payment to Pakistan of its share of the cash balances of undivided India (amounting to Rs. 55 crore) to force Karachi to come to heel on the Kashmir issue. Gandhi found this action morally unjust. Mountbatten described it as the 'first dishonorable act' of the Indian Government. It was Gandhi's final and in his own words the 'greatest fast' that pressured the Nehru Government to pay Pakistan the due amount.⁵⁹ Gandhi's fast had twin objectives – it forced the Indian government to pay the due amount to Pakistan and it put an end to the ongoing violence on Muslims in Delhi and beyond. A fast for the Muslims and Pakistan did not go well with the dominant political discourse of the time. Mohandas Gandhi became 'Mohammad' Gandhi – someone who was to be despised by numerous Hindus.⁶⁰ Categories like patriotism, communalism, and jingoism overlapped in the popular understanding of partition and decolonization.

There are some deep-seated images associated with the partition of the subcontinent: the image of trains carrying thousands of refugees huddled together, that of foot convoys with young and old people carrying whatever little belonging they had, of the crowded Sealdah station and refugee camps that were worse than slums, of slogans like '*Amra Kara, Bastubara*'⁶¹ and so on. These impressions tell us a story of a very messy affair, with inhuman violence, immense confusion during the transfer of population, and the tragic plight of the refugees. Existing historiography too argues that the transition from the colonial to the post-colonial was 'necessarily clumsy, complicated, and inherently incomplete'.⁶² The received historiographical wisdom and the popular understanding of partition point to, or hint at, a lack of proper governmental control and the absence of ways of handling the situation in an efficient manner. However, when it came to dividing assets, there *was* an attempt to put an ordered structure in place. Also, there

was an air of certainty and finality to the whole business of dividing the properties and liabilities of British India. The division of assets was done in a calculated manner, taking decisions through discussions, demarcating 'national' properties after much deliberation among the members of the committees. During implementation of the proposed plans there was some chaos and confusion. But it did not mean the breakdown of the whole system. Plans often met with difficulties at the ground level, but even then there was a legal vocabulary and certain structural limits set to the dispute, so that there was no absolute deviation from the plan chalked out at the higher levels. Both order and the lack of it constituted the 'partitioned times'. How, one may ask, is it possible to read these two contradictory images of partition? It has been argued that neither Nehru nor Jinnah perhaps expected the immense migration that accompanied partition. As one scholar writes, '...the scale of disaster appears to have been foreseen by few. Certainly the new governments of India and Pakistan were initially unprepared for the vast humanitarian crisis with which they were faced in the immediate aftermath of Independence.'⁶³ They did not have the time to make an orderly arrangement to tackle the situation. But when it came to the division of the properties, the future ruling elites had some time, however little, to proceed in some systematic manner. Thus the bureaucratic and political will of systematically dealing with the situation was there, but the time was short. But then, were the sovereign governments able to 'manage' the refugees, minorities and migrants as the years passed after partition? Did they get a complete grip on the situation? The answers would obviously be in negative.⁶⁴ One wonders whether the priority was to provide the new nation-states with strong 'material' foundations. So when it came to the asset and resource division, the bureaucrats and the politicians proceeded in an orderly way. The new states did require assets to move along, and this division, if not done in an orderly manner would jeopardize any future ambitions. Both the order and the anarchy must have had their own politics. To make some sense of it, it is important for the historians of partition to engage in a dialogue with the other possible histories/experiences of freedom, decolonization, state and nation-building in post-colonial times and see how the experiences of the partition shaped them and vice versa. ⁶⁵

Notes

¹ Partition Round-Up No 12, August 2, 1947, F. No 15(106A) FI/47, Year 1947, National Archives of India (N.A.I)

² See Joya Chatterjee, 'The Fashioning of a Frontier: The Radcliffe Line and Bengal's Border Landscape, 1947–52' in *Modern Asian Studies*, 33, 1999

³ 'Minutes of the Meeting of the Viceroy with the Indian Leaders', Second Day, L/P &J/10/81: ff 379-85, Nicholas Mansergh (Editor in Chief), *The Transfer of Power 1942-47*, Volume XI, Her Majesty's Stationary Office, London, p-75

⁴ Viceroy's Personal Report No 8, L/PO/ 6/ 123: ff 114-21, *ibid*, p-163

⁵ Partition Council came into existence on 26 June, 1947

⁶ H.M. Patel, *Rites of Passage: A Civil Servant Remembers*, Rupa, Delhi, 2005, p-123

⁷ *ibid*, p-128

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ *ibid*

¹⁰ *ibid*, p-186

¹¹ Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar, *The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia: Refugees, Boundaries, Histories*, Penguin-Viking, Delhi, 2008, p-6

¹² File No: 435 – AD/1947; 1947, Min of E.A. and CR., NAI

¹³ *ibid*

¹⁴ Press Note, dated 17.6.1947, *ibid*

¹⁵ Document titled 'Unique Establishment', File No 315 – AD/ 47, No 1-68, Min of E.A and C.R., 'AD' Branch, N.A.I.

¹⁶ File No 315 76(73) F1/47, Ministry of Finance, N.A.I

¹⁷ *ibid*

¹⁸ *ibid*

¹⁹ H.M. Patel. *op.cit*, p. 208

²⁰ *ibid*, p. 221

²¹ File No 15(106A) FI/47, Year 1947, Min of E.A. and CR., NAI

²² File No 435 – AD/1947; 1947, Min of E.A. and CR., NAI

²³ *ibid*

²⁴ Annoda Shankar Roy, *Juktobanger Smriti*, Mitra & Ghosh Publishers, Kolkata, 1990, P-109

²⁵ The phrase 'partitioned times' is coined by Ranabir Samaddar. See Samaddar, 'The Last Hurrah that Continues' in Ghislaine Glasson Deshaumes and Rada Ivekovic, *Divided Countries, Separated Cities: The Modern Legacy of Partition*, OUP, Delhi, 2003

²⁶ H.M. Patel, *op.cit*, p. 235

²⁷ For a brief discussion on the division of the army, see Yasmin Khan, *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2007, pp 113-117

²⁸ Annexure No I, 'A Note on Imperial Library', F. No 15 -48/48-A3, 1948, Branch A3, Department of Education, NAI

²⁹ *Ibid*

³⁰ *Ibid*

³¹ *Ibid*

³² Annexure II, *ibid*

³³ P.T. Nair's lecture in National Library, dated 11/3/2012

³⁴ For the states that were to be divided (Bengal and Punjab) as a part of partition, councils similar to Partition Council were formed. It seems that these councils were called Separation Council. Separation Council in Bengal supervised the division of the assets of the Government of Bengal.

³⁵ Md. Maniruzzaman, 'kolkata Madrasah-er 205 bachhor' in *Madrasah College: Bicentenary Celebration Souvenir*, February 1985 (No Publication details available. However, the volume is there in the Calcutta Madrasah Library)

³⁶ Interview with Kased Ali, February 10, 2012

³⁷ F. No -12(3) –NEF/47, year 1947, Min of E.A. & C.R., N.A.I

³⁸ F. No 693-CA/47, 1947, Min of E.A and C.R., C.J.K. Branch, N.A.I.

³⁹ *Ibid*, note dated 5/8/47

⁴⁰ *Amritabazaar*, July 11, 1947

⁴¹ J. Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, 1989 (reprint), p-50

⁴² Romila Thapar, 'The History Debate in School Textbooks in India: A Personal Memoir' in *History Workshop Journal*, Volume 67, No 1

⁴³ Sraman Mukherjee, 'Being and Becoming Indian: The Nation in Archaeology', *South Asian Studies*, 26:2, p- 224

⁴⁴ Letter from Gulam Kibria, Dated 14/10/47; F.No –Pub 11T/4/ 47, Home (Political), Branch – Publicity, Bundle No 18, List No -42, April 1945- Nov 1948, Archives and National Library (ANL), Dhaka, Bangladesh

⁴⁵ Letter from Gulam Kibria, dated 8/3/48; *ibid*

⁴⁶ See for instance *Dawn*, *Amritabazaar*, *Jugantar* for an idea about how the newspapers constructed the image of the 'other'.

⁴⁷ F. No 15(106A) FI/47, Year 1947, National Archives of India (N.A.I)

⁴⁸ *Ibid*. June 22, 1947

⁴⁹ *Hindustan Times*, 15 October, 1948; Clippings available in File No F.9 -10/48- Pak I, Min of E.A and C.R, N.A.I

⁵⁰ See *Statesman*, 31 October, 1948, *ibid*

⁵¹ *Hindustan Standard*, September 17, 1950; A copy of this report is kept in the File No- 3R- 52/50; Department – Political, Branch Political, 'B' Proceedings, Bundle No 60, List 118, ANL, Dhaka, Bangladesh

⁵² See for instance *Insaf*, October 20, 1951, clippings available in F.No P- III/52/55616/2 –Volume 1, Min of E.A and C.R., 1952, N.A.I

⁵³ F. No. 3c1-6/1949; Department –Political (C.R.); 'B' Proceedings, Bundle No 2; Nov-Nov 1950, List No- 119; ANL, Dhaka, Bangladesh

⁵⁴ The Government of East Bengal was informed by a memo dated March 3, 1948. *ibid*.

⁵⁵ According to the memo dated 23.6.1948; *ibid*.

⁵⁶ I must confess that it is possible that further information about this case is there in some file or the other in Bangladesh National Archives but, if so, it has escaped my notice.

⁵⁷ F. No 3C1-4/51,'B' Proceedings, Political, CR, List No 119, Bundle No 5, ANL, Dhaka

⁵⁸ C.J. Fuller and John Harriss, 'For an anthropology of the modern Indian State' in Fuller and V. Benei (eds), *The Everyday State and Society in Modern India*, p- 8

⁵⁹ Krishna Kripalini, *Gandhi: A Life*, National Book Trust, New Delhi, 2003, pp 187-191

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, p-191

⁶¹ Literally it meant 'Who are we, we are refugees' (translation mine)

⁶² 'Introduction', Dipesh Chakraborty, Rochona Majumdar, Andrew Sartori (eds), *From the Colonial to the Postcolonial: India and Pakistan in Transition*, OUP, New Delhi, 2007, p- 3

⁶³ Pia Oberoi, *Exile and Belonging: Refugees and State Policy in South Asia*, OUP, 2006, p-44

⁶⁴ At least when one studies the refugee rehabilitation programme in eastern India, she sees an absolute failure of the state to 'handle' the situation. West Bengal continued to receive massive flow of refugees from East Bengal in 1960s and 1970s. Most of the projects to rehabilitate them, including the ambitious Dandakaranya Project, failed. The Congress Government was much criticized for their failure to deal with the refugees. The Communist Government too did not do what they had promised to the refugees while coming to power. There are many works on the plights of the refugees in West Bengal. For instance, see P. K. Bose (ed), *Refugee in West Bengal*, CRG, Kolkata, 2000;