

Whims of History

With the coming into force of the Indian Independence Act, the Tricolour came up spontaneously across the country on the 15th August, not just on government and school buildings, but also on public places as libraries, market squares, commercial establishments, social clubs and societies. It also flew in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) as well as in the district of Khulna - but in three districts of West Bengal - Nadia, Murshidabad and Malda, it was the flag of Pakistan which was hoisted on the 14th August, (Pakistan's Independence Day) but after a series of hectic negotiations involving Sir Cyril Radcliffe, Lord Mountbatten and the Bengal leadership of the Congress and the Muslim League, the borders were redrawn and the tricolour flew in these three districts on the 18th of August.

All this, and much more has been documented in the scholarly work 'Bengal Divided: The Unmaking of a Nation (1905-1971)' by Nitish SenGupta, a distinguished civil servant, management professional and Parliamentarian. He records that in anticipation of violence in the border districts where the Hindu and Muslim populations were almost evenly divided, a joint statement was issued by the Chief Minister designates for West and East Bengal Dr PC Ghosh and Khwaja Nazimuddin on August 9:

About a week from now, transfer of power from British to Indian hands will take place. Undoubtedly, it is an event of great historical importance. By agreement between the Congress and the Muslim League, power will be transferred to the two dominions on 15 August. The boundaries are not yet fixed, and will be decided by the Boundary Commission. Both the Congress and the Muslim League have decided to abide by the decision, however unpalatable it may be to one community or the other.

They went on to appeal that the flags adopted by the respective Constituent Assemblies of India and Pakistan may be hoisted by all sections of people in both West Bengal and East Bengal.

However, there were quite a few issues which the Boundary Commission had to confront, and these become apparent from Sir Cyril Radcliffe's letter of the 12th August, 1947 to His Excellency the Governor General (for Mountbatten became Viceroy only on the 15th): 'to which state was the city of Calcutta to be assigned or should it be divided among the two states? Could the attractions of the Ganges Padma Madhumati river line displace the strong claims of the heavy concentration of Muslim majorities in the districts of Jessore and Nadia, without doing too great a violence to our Terms of Reference? Could the district of Khulna

usefully be held by a state different from that which held the district of Jessore ? Was it right to assign to East Bengal the considerable block of non-Muslims majorities to districts of Malda and Dinajpur ? Then there was the issue of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri as they are not naturally contiguous to the non-Muslim areas of Bengal. And last but not the least, there was the question of CHT in which the Muslim population was only three per cent, but which was difficult to assign to a state different from that which controlled the district of Chittagong itself?'

In giving Murshidabad to India , and Khulna to Pakistan as a compensatory measure , the navigability of Calcutta port was a major consideration, besides of course , the lobbying by Bengal Congress leader and industrialist Atulya Ghosh. Moreover Maharaja Srishachandra Nandy, the baron of Cossimbazar also put in a very strong pressure. The Hindu-majority subdivisions of Bangaon of Jessore, and Balurghat of Dinajpur district of Pakistan were also transferred to India. Bangaon was made into a subdivision of 24 -Paraganas and Balurghat became the new district of Paschim Dinajpur . The districts of Jalpaiguri, Malda and Nadia remained in India, but with substantial territories transferred to Pakistan. As per the map of 1947, Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling were physically separated from the rest of West Bengal, and this was rectified only in 1956, when Islampur sub division of Purnea was transferred from Bihar to West Bengal, thereby ending the enclave status of these two districts in North Bengal Commissioner's Division, to which Cooch Behar had been added in 1949.

However the one anomaly that remained, and one that has still not been corrected was the sacrifice of CHT by the Congress. SenGupta calls it 'the strangest, most illogical and arbitrarily drawn boundary line between the two countries'.

Incidentally the representatives of the twenty thousand strong expatriate community called on the Bengal Governor Sir Frederick Burrows and requested that Calcutta be excluded from both the Bengals and instead be administered by a Council reporting directly to White Hall. While Burrows was willing to give a positive consideration to this request , it was rejected by the Mountbatten himself , for he knew that there would be no support for this from either the Congress , or even the Muslim League. But imagine the counterfactual. Had it been a free port directly under the Crown ,could Calcutta have given a run to Singapore and Hong Kong?