Introduction

In August 1947 the British quit their Indian empire, dividing it into two nations. As a part of that historic division, Bengal and the Punjab, the largest provinces of British India in which Muslims were a majority, were partitioned between the successor states of India and Pakistan. Roughly two-thirds of the territory of Bengal was carved out to create the province of East Bengal in Pakistan. Separated by more than a thousand miles from the rest of Pakistan, East Bengal later broke away from its dominant partner to become the sovereign nation of Bangladesh. The remaining third of the old Bengal, in the main territories lying to the west and north-west, became the state of West Bengal inside India.

Bengal's partition in 1947, its causes and the role of its Hindu elites in demanding and getting a homeland of their own in India are the subject of an earlier work by the author.[1] The present book considers the enormous consequences of partition for West Bengal and for independent India. In the two decades after independence – twenty years of critical importance in India's history – the impact of partition proved to be more complex and far greater than scholars have hitherto recognised. Partition transformed Bengal and India yet, for the most part, the changes which flowed from partition were as unexpected as they were far-reaching. This study will seek to explain why.

In recent times, many new states have been the product of partitions and the redrawing of frontiers, with devastating fall-outs which are still little understood. Studying the aftermath of Bengal's partition helps to answer vexed questions about the formation of such new nations in the twentieth century. Discovering how West Bengal got its particular borders challenges the assumption that the borders of these new states were arbitrary or accidental. The profound ways in which partition affected Bengal and India show how new borders help to shape the polities they circumscribe. What happened to the millions of Hindus and Muslims

[1] *Bengal divided. Hindu communalism and partition, 1932–1947*, Cambridge, 1994.

who found themselves on the wrong side of the Radcliffe Line which divided Bengal is a telling example of how partitions play havoc with divided peoples, in particular those relegated to the status of religious or ethnic minorities in new nation states.

This book is divided into three parts, all of which centre on one main theme: the vast gulf between the hopes of those who demanded Bengal's partition and what actually transpired. In part I, the first chapter scrutinises the reasons why Hindu leaders in Bengal pressed for its partition and uncovers the assumptions underlying their demand. It exposes the complex, and little-known, considerations which influenced the making of the Radcliffe Line and throws a sharp light on the arcane processes by which the new borders were settled, explaining why some areas were included in West Bengal and others were not. Were the borders imposed, as is commonly assumed, by fiat from above, or did Bengalis have some say in how their province was divided? Why did Hindu leaders in Bengal want to keep some tracts in West Bengal and why were they ready to jettison others? In making these choices, did Hindu leaders take account of the economic viability of the state they hoped to create? Chapter 1 also poses the crucial question of whether any of the partitioners realised that many Bengalis, on both sides of the border, would have to leave their homes.

Chapter 2 is about the role envisaged by the Hindu leaders for the state of West Bengal inside India after partition. It shows how partition dramatically altered the balance of power in India between the regions and how West Bengal's leaders reacted to these changes. By studying the strategy of West Bengal's spokesmen in the Constituent Assembly, which framed independent India's constitution, this chapter identifies what the new state expected of India and how little it actually got. By teasing out the inwardness of Bengal's stance on crucial clauses of India's constitution, chapter 2 seeks to discover the point its leaders wanted to reach as they sailed through the uncharted waters of independence.

Part I thus enquires how vital decisions about the size and composition of West Bengal were made. Part II considers the impact of these decisions upon the people on the ground. Partition led to huge and unexpected migrations. In the past, Hindus and Muslims had lived cheek by jowl in Bengal, in the main quite amicably. Now they were forced to go their separate ways, with deeply destabilising consequences. Between 1947 and 1967, at least 6 million Hindu refugees from East Bengal crossed into West Bengal. This mass migration and the struggles of the refugees in the new province to find shelter, jobs and security are the subject of chapter 3. Among the issues that chapter 3 addresses are where these refugees settled and why; what kind of work they wanted and were able to find; what strategies for survival they adopted; what patterns emerge

in the tangled story of their efforts at rehabilitation; and what was the extent and nature of their integration into the society of West Bengal. It also asks how West Bengal's politicians tried to manage the refugee influx, which threatened to undermine the province's systems of social control. Another central question is whether the refugees were, as frequently assumed, passive victims of political events over which they had no control or, in fact, active agents in their own rehabilitation. Answers to these questions have a relevance which reaches well beyond Bengal to many other places in the contemporary world where refugees have congregated.

The exodus of Hindus from East to West Bengal was massive. By contrast, the numbers of Muslims who left West Bengal for eastern Pakistan after partition were relatively small. Most of them stayed on. Chapter 4 considers what 'staying on' meant for these Muslims. It asks whether they carried on much as before, or whether being reduced from being part of a majority community to a small and vulnerable minority radically changed their situation and their lives. The focus is upon the processes by which the Muslims who remained in West Bengal were assimilated into, or more frequently alienated from, its social and political fabric. Here again, the findings of this enquiry are likely to have a bearing on the crucial problems of integration which minority and migrant groups the world over have had to face.

In the book's third and final part, chapters 5 and 6 look at the fascinating ups and downs of party politics and the changing structures of power in post-partition West Bengal. Partition, independence and the coming of universal franchise created in India a wholly different political context which worked under a new set of rules. Chapter 5 studies what impact these changes had on Bengal. It shows how partition affected the power bases of different political groupings, in particular those of the old Bengal Congress, the main architects of partition. It also tackles the question of how West Bengal's changed political demography altered the social and regional bases on which every new Congress ministry had to rely. It assesses how effectively Congress was able, or more often not, to protect the interests of its traditional allies and supporters. It also focuses upon how well or badly the government of West Bengal responded to new challenges in the all-India arena.

After being solidly entrenched in office for two decades after partition, the Congress in West Bengal suddenly and dramatically collapsed in 1967. The sixth and final chapter investigates why partition raised the profile of opposition parties on the left, giving them new opportunities to win support at the polls from a hugely enlarged electorate. By using previously unexploited sources and by approaching these questions from

a new perspective, the findings of this chapter help to explain the rise of communism in West Bengal and its distinctive history in that state.

This work suggests that the founding fathers of West Bengal designed partition in the hope of restoring their privileges and reasserting their dominance in a new homeland. Under their enlightened leadership, they expected Hindu West Bengal to reverse its long history of decline, survive the disruptions of partition and win back its rightful place in the all-India arena. These hopes were to be spectacularly disappointed, and this book will try to understand why. It shows how partition fundamentally altered society in West Bengal, making it more polarised and more fragmented than ever before. It reveals why its political structures were unable to contain the rising tide of unrest and to manage the large, and largely unexpected, consequences of partition. It illustrates how failures within the province were compounded by neglect from a centre which had other concerns and other priorities. For a long decade after 1967, West Bengal collapsed, in an unremitting series of crises, into social revolution and anarchy. Later, under new management, it charted a different course. The object of this book is to discover whether these momentous developments had their roots in the unfolding logic of partition.

This work is, thus, about the impact of partition upon the social and political fabric of Bengal and of India. But the notion that Bengal had a 'natural' unity or an intrinsic nationhood which partition rent asunder is no part of the thesis.[2] Nor do the arguments underpinning this work assume that Bengal was in some way an 'imagined' nation. Even in the nineteenth century, Bengal's intellectuals still had only the vaguest idea of the territorial extent of their ideal *desh*[3] or homeland, and what social groups it might

[2] Such administrative unities as Bengal had come to possess were more the product of the pragmatic imperatives of successive empire-builders. Indeed, as Ajit Kumar Neogy's *Partitions of Bengal* (Calcutta, 1987) relates, in the hundred years before the partition of 1947, Bengal's borders had been redrawn on no fewer than five occasions. In 1835, the North-Western Provinces were excised from the Presidency of Bengal, and Arakan became part of Burma. In 1874, nine districts in the east were split off from Bengal to form the province of Assam. In 1892, two more districts in the south-east, Chittagong and the Chittagong Hill Tracts, were taken from Bengal and given to Assam. In 1905, Curzon's partition went much further: it stripped away all the eastern districts of Bengal to create the short-lived province of Eastern Bengal and Assam. That partition was revoked in 1911, but Bihar and Orissa were then removed from the province, and Bengal's new frontiers remained unchanged for only three and a half decades before the major partition of 1947.

[3] The Bengali word *desh* can mean 'nation', 'country', 'homeland', 'province', 'region', 'place' or even 'village'. In the late nineteenth century, when Bengali Hindu intellectuals toyed with ideas of nationhood, these were posited on a shared world of values of a putative 'nation' whose territorial location, limits and membership had never been

include. However much solidarity of Hindu sentiment the movement against Curzon's division of the province in 1905 engendered,[4] it is debatable whether a Bengali 'national' identity emerged from that campaign.

Yet, over the centuries, accidents of human and environmental history produced a certain cohesiveness in the region. Long periods of being governed as a separate province, whether by the Mughals or by the British, and interregnums during which Bengal asserted its autonomy had given its territories a measure of administrative integrity. Geography, too, in particular the dominance of the delta by two great river systems of the Ganges and the Brahmaputra, helped to shape its distinctive character. Bounded in the south by the Bay of Bengal and by the impenetrable mangrove forests of the Sunderbans, and in the north and north-east by the foothills of the Himalayas, Bengal was criss-crossed by rivers, its terrain, in Spate's graphic description, a low-lying patchwork of 'new mud, old mud and marsh' gradually sloping eastwards into the sea.[5] Throughout recorded history, floodwaters deposited rich alluvial soil upon the plains of Bengal. Over the centuries, as its majestic waterways silted up with layer upon layer of sediment, the rivers, from time to time, broke loose from their old courses and carved out new outlets, which progressively moved their line from west to east. Human settlements tended to follow the shifting rivers, which rendered the soil of the east ever more productive, while older parts, mainly in the west, lost the fertility for which they had once been famed. As agriculture spread, population grew and trade flourished, these factors forged connections between the different parts of Bengal, knitting together their local economies into a larger whole. By modern times, the delta had come to share ways of life based on the cultivation of rice and a vernacular which, despite its local variants, was coming to be the *lingua franca* of the region as a whole.

Bengal's fabled prosperity earned it the title of 'the paradise of the Indies', but it also made it prey to the ambitions of conquerors.[6] From

precisely addressed. See Swarupa Gupta, 'Samaj and unity. The Bengali literati's discourse on nationhood', School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, doctoral dissertation, 2004.

[4] Sumit Sarkar, *The swadeshi movement in Bengal, 1903–1908*, New Delhi, 1973.

[5] O. H. K. Spate and A. T. A. Learmonth, *India and Pakistan. A general and regional geography*, Bungay, 1967, p. 557.

[6] In 1345, Ibn Battuta described 'Bengala' as 'a vast region abounding in rice . . . I have seen no country in the world where provisions are cheaper . . . But it is muggy and those who come from Khorasan call it a hell full of good things.' In 1516, Duarte Barbosa, a Portuguese official based in Cannanore, compiled for his Lusitanian monarch a remarkably accurate geography of India and points east which reported that the kingdom of 'Bangala' had 'many sea ports', a 'Moorish king with gentile subjects' and 'much trade and much shipping' (all cited in Nitish Sengupta, *History of the Bengali-speaking people*, New Delhi, 2001).

the thirteenth century onwards, invaders who swept into India from central Asia and created empires in the plains of the north cast covetous eyes eastwards to Bengal. But only intermittently did they succeed in bringing Bengal under their sway, and for long periods Bengal's rulers successfully repulsed Delhi's imperial designs. For much of its medieval history, Bengal remained a marcher region over which the empires of the north had at best an uncertain control, and culturally it retained many of the characteristics of a frontier zone, between the settled agrarian society of the Gangetic plains and the nomadic cultivators and hunters and gatherers of India's north-east. After Islam began vigorously to spread in Bengal in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the region still had little in common with the Muslim cultures of the Gangetic north or of the Deccan plateau. By the end of the nineteenth century, Muslims outnumbered Hindus in Bengal as a whole and had become overwhelmingly the majority community in its eastern tracts. But most of Bengal's Muslims were humble peasants whose beliefs and practices continued to have more in common with local cults than with the Islamic orthodoxies and courtly cultures of northern India.

Paradoxically, it was the coming of the British that broke the mould of the past and, for the first time in its history, thrust Bengal from the periphery of the sub-continent on to the centre stage. At first, the East India Company's growing trade, conducted from Fort William, fortified Bengal's autonomy against Delhi, but in time its thriving commerce and the unstable polities of its nawabs drew the British deeper into its affairs. It was here, after the historic battles of Plassey and Buxar, that the Company 'stood forth as dewan' and began its move in India from trade to dominion. As the Company and Crown-in-Parliament strove to control their Indian possessions, the governor of Bengal was given powers over his counterparts in Madras and Bombay, the other two coastal possessions from which British power had spread over southern and western India. In principle only *primus inter pares* among the three maritime presidencies, in practice Bengal came to exercise dominance over the rest of British India.

In these decades, Britain's economic relationship with India changed. The metropolis increasingly saw India as a market for its manufactures and a source of raw materials, rather than an oriental grocer and haberdasher supplying the west with the spices, handloom textiles and luxury goods of yore. But Bengal remained a vital link in that relationship: Calcutta was the entrepot for an expanding external trade, its docks exporting commodities to the wider world and importing British manufactures for the growing markets of up-country India. As Bengal's traditional handicrafts declined, they came to be replaced by new products:

jute and cotton mills sprang up along the Hooghly, plantations in the north and north-eastern districts challenged China's dominance in the tea trade, and coal and iron from the south-west fuelled India's expanding railways. Fort William grew up into Calcutta, one of the east's largest cities, swallowing up foodstuffs and raw materials from its agrarian hinterlands and supplying processed goods to the rest of Bengal and well beyond. As mills, factories and offices sprang up in the city and its suburbs, as migrants from other parts of India flocked to its shop-floors, slums and shanties, and as Scottish *boxwallahs* and English *mems* took up residence in its more salubrious enclaves, Job Charnock's foundling became the capital of British India and the second city of an empire larger than any the world had previously witnessed.

It was these coincidences of history that created in Bengal a new social group which spread its influence over other parts of India, and which, in due course, would play a key role in Bengal's partition of 1947. This was the famed Bengali *bhadralok*, the 'gentlefolk' about whom so much has been written, not least by themselves. In Bengal, as in other parts of India, those who stepped up to take advantage of the new opportunities created by British rule tended in the main to be Hindus of high caste, with traditions of literacy and service in government and the professions. But Bengal's distinctive system of land revenue gave these would-be service groups particular advantages and unusual features. In 1793, the British imposed a Permanent Settlement on Bengal which settled hereditary rights of property upon erstwhile rural magnates and revenue farmers. By fixing in perpetuity the tax demand from the landlords, the Settlement gave Hindu elites the chance to derive uncovenanted benefits from these new arrangements. Many bought their way into a complex hierarchy of tenurial rights, becoming rentiers with incomes from the land which supplemented earnings from their white-collar occupations but, significantly, without them having to play any part in agricultural production. Increasingly, they settled in Calcutta and other district towns in Bengal as absentee landlords and rent-receivers, where they became an archetypical service class which helped to man the growing bureaucracy of British India. Taking enthusiastically to English education in the middle of the nineteenth century, and setting up schools and colleges of their own in the western tradition, the bhadralok of Bengal were well placed to win a prominent role for themselves in the service of their new rulers, in particular after 1837 when English displaced Persian as the language of governance. As subordinate officials of an expanding empire, they travelled in its baggage trains into upper India, to Patna, Allahabad, Lahore and Jubbulpore, and eastwards to Assam and further afield to Rangoon, where by the late nineteenth century Bengali *babus* were an ubiquitous

presence. But the expansion of British India also thrust them deep into the backwaters of eastern Bengal as postmasters, court officials, lawyers, schoolteachers and clerks. By the early twentieth century, bhadralok Hindus were still a small minority of the population of eastern Bengal, but had come overwhelmingly to dominate its rentier economy, its centres of education, its services and its professions.

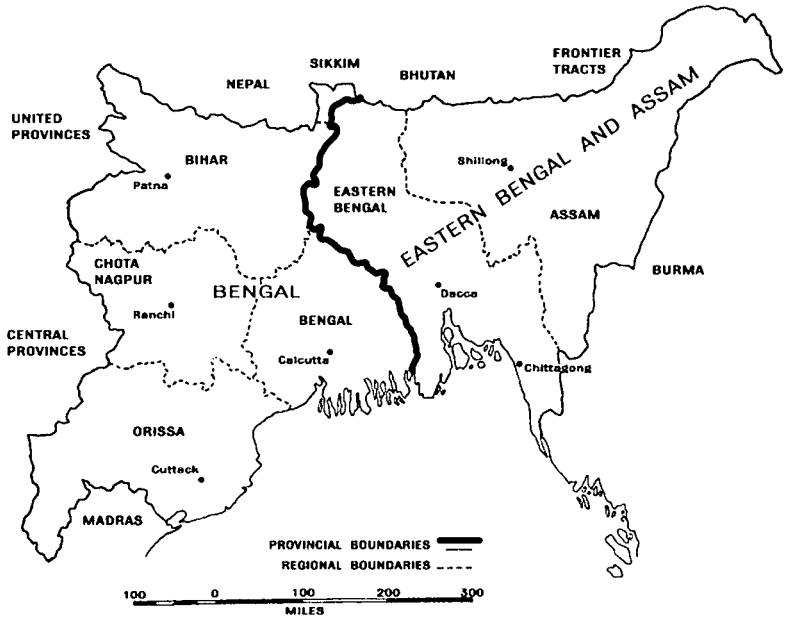
The nineteenth century was the golden age of bhadralok Bengal, which witnessed the height of their prosperity and influence and the most exuberant phase of their cultural flowering. This was when the bhadralok drank deeply at the fonts of European ideas and enthusiastically debated whether to reform their own society in a western mode. They expressed themselves volubly in unfamiliar idioms, not only in English, but in a Bengali vernacular, standardised and enriched as a vehicle for their new purposes. When north India rebelled against the British in 1857, Bengal remained quiescent. In their own politics, the bhadralok eschewed the staves and swords by which scores had been settled in times past. Instead, they propagated their ideas by modern methods, setting up printing presses and newspapers, establishing clubs and political associations which pressed for constitutional reform. They believed themselves to be the fuglemen of a new era, their proud boast being 'what Bengal thinks today, the rest of India will think tomorrow'. Much of this, of course, was froth and fantasy, since the bhadralok never spoke for more than a tiny minority in Bengal. By definition, the province's population consisted mainly not of these small Hindu elites but of much more numerous social groups, whether unlettered Muslim peasants, low castes or tribal peoples. And, of course, even at the height of their influence, such power as the bhadralok enjoyed was always circumscribed by their British overlords, giving them the characteristics and complexes typical of comprador sub-elites elsewhere in the colonial world. Nonetheless, their ambitions grew inexorably. They pressed the British for more and better jobs and a greater say in running both Bengal and India. They played a leading part in setting up the Indian National Congress. In the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Bengali bhadralok dominated the high ground of India's emerging politics across a broad spectrum of nascent nationalist opinion, whether initially as 'moderates' or later as 'extremists' and even 'terrorists'. If they had an exaggerated sense of their own importance, they could, in these halcyon years, justly claim to have influenced the course of India's history.

In the final decades of the nineteenth century, however, the climate of opinion, among both their imperial overlords and their Indian competitors, began to turn against the bhadralok and their interests. Challenges were mounted against them by government and by other

social groupings, and all manner of obstacles were put into place to block their ambitions. After the crisis of 1857, the government of British India, now directly answerable to London, sought to buttress its position. It turned to other allies, wooing in particular landed magnates and Muslim notables, some of whom had shown sympathy for the Great Rebellion. For their part, educated men from other parts of India, notably the Muslims of the United Provinces, competed vigorously with Bengalis for jobs in the public services. More worrying were signs that the Bengalis were beginning to lose favour with their British patrons. For much of the previous century, the Raj had depended on the talents of the Bengali *babus* or service groups, even while it mocked their 'effete' and imitative ways. Now it grew increasingly impatient with their political posturing and their growing demands. It had long been part of British strategy to base their rule in India on winning the collaboration of a wide range of Indian notables, rural and urban. In taking a new direction, they now began to recruit for their bureaucracies professional groups from other parts of India in growing numbers and drafted in newly defined 'martial' races to their reorganised armies. From the beginning of the twentieth century, the British actively sought to employ in their service more Muslims, in north India as well as in Bengal itself. In 1905, in a move which the bhadralok saw as a deliberate attack upon themselves, Curzon partitioned Bengal, making its predominantly Muslim eastern districts the core of the new province of Eastern Bengal and Assam (see map 0.1).

Curzon's actions provoked a furore in Bengal which in 1911 forced the viceroy of the day to rescind the partition of 1905. In a decision that would return to haunt the Hindu bhadralok who led the vociferous campaign against Curzon's partition, the eastern tracts and their Muslim majorities were restored to Bengal. But the province never recovered its previous size or the standing it had once commanded. In 1911, Bihar and Orissa were taken out of Bengal and made into a separate province in their own right. In 1912, in a move of great significance, the capital of India was transferred from Calcutta to New Delhi. This was an ominous sign that the centre of gravity in India had begun to swing back from the water's margin to the mid-Gangetic plains. Calcutta lost its status as the first city of British India and Bengal its rank as its premier presidency.

Other trends also undermined the privileged position of the bhadralok. In the first two decades of the twentieth century, the focus of imperial policy in British India changed, as did the equations of profit and power which once had made India the keystone of Britain's world empire. Even before the First World War exposed the weaknesses of Britain's industrial base and the fragility of its global dominance, the Raj in India was no



0.1 Curzon's partition of Bengal, 1905–1912.

longer the aggressive and expansive force it had been in the nineteenth century. Gradually, its emphasis shifted to hanging on to power, and this called for different, more defensive, strategies. In a bid to cut the costs of running their Indian empire, the British subcontracted the formal governance of the localities and the provinces to their Indian allies. On the local boards and municipalities, and in due course in the provincial councils too, Indians were given a greater say as the elected representatives of particular communities or interest groups. Since the late nineteenth century, India's decennial censuses had counted Britain's Indian subjects and classified them according to religion, community and caste. Now representation in local and provincial institutions came to be doled out to interest groups and communities enumerated and categorised in these novel ways. In the politics of India's localities and provinces, representative institutions now gave a prominence to communities defined by religion and assessed by their demographic weight. Bengal's Hindu leaders had in consequence to face the awkward fact that they spoke only for a minority of the population. As the Raj progressively gave Indians a greater say in running their own affairs, the Hindus of Bengal, who had fought long and hard for these political concessions, discovered that in their own