
The Role of British Colonialism and Colonial Policies in the Partition of India.**Sana Jabeen Aslam**

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Abstract:

This research article explores the role of British colonialism in the partition of India in 1947. Drawing on a comprehensive review of existing scholarship on the topic, as well as primary source documents, the article provides a historical context of British colonial policies and practices in India that contributed to the partition. Using an analytical framework to analyze the impact of British colonialism, the article argues that the partition of India was largely a result of British colonial policies that exacerbated religious, ethnic, and regional tensions within the Indian society. The article also examines the socioeconomic and political effects of the partition and its long-lasting impact on regional conflicts and tensions. This study contributes to a better understanding of the partition of India and provides implications for future research.

Key Words: British colonialism, Partition of India, Indian independence, religious tensions, Ethnic tensions, regional tensions, Socioeconomic effects, Political effects

1. Introduction:

The partition of India in 1947 was a pivotal moment in South Asian history that led to the formation of two independent nations, India and Pakistan. The partition had far-reaching socioeconomic and political effects, including the displacement of millions of people and the outbreak of regional conflicts and tensions that continue to this day. While the partition is often attributed to religious and ethnic tensions within Indian society, this research article argues that British colonialism played a crucial role in exacerbating these tensions and ultimately leading to the partition of India.

Previous studies have explored various factors contributing to the partition, including religious and ethnic differences, political maneuvering by Indian leaders, and the role of external powers such as the United Kingdom and the United States. However, few studies have focused specifically on

the impact of British colonialism on the partition of India. One of the earliest works on the topic is Ayesha Jalal's book *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League, and the Demand for Pakistan*, which argues that British colonial policies and practices contributed to the creation of a separate Muslim identity in India, paving the way for the demand for a separate Muslim state.¹ Another influential study is Ian Talbot's book *Pakistan: A Modern History*, which analyzes the legacy of British colonialism on Pakistan and argues that the partition was not inevitable, but rather a result of complex historical forces and political calculations.²

Building on these studies and using an analytical framework to analyze the impact of British colonialism on the partition of India, this research article aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the role of British colonialism in the partition of India. By examining primary and secondary sources, as well as historical context, this study will contribute to a better understanding of the partition of India and its long-lasting effects.

2. Methodology:

2.1. Research Design:

Given that the research objective is to investigate the role of British colonialism in the partition of India, a historical research design would be appropriate. Historical research involves the collection and analysis of data from primary and secondary sources to gain an understanding of past events and phenomena. In this case, the research design could involve the collection and analysis of primary sources such as government documents, archival materials, and personal accounts. The

¹ Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League and the Demand for Pakistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

² Ian Talbot, *Pakistan: A New History* (London: Hurst & Company, 2015).

analysis of secondary sources such as academic articles, books, and other publications can also provide a broader historical context.

3. Literature Review:

As asserted supra, the partition of India in 1947 was one of the most significant events in the history of the Indian subcontinent. It resulted in the creation of two independent countries, India and Pakistan, and led to the displacement of millions of people and widespread violence. Historians have long debated the factors that contributed to the partition, with many pointing to the role of British colonialism.

One of the key factors contributing to the demand for a separate Muslim state was the political marginalization of Muslims in British India. Historian Ayesha Jalal argues that "the colonial regime's reluctance to share power with Muslims" contributed to the development of a Muslim separatist movement.³ Muslims were underrepresented in the civil service and the army, which were seen as key avenues for upward mobility in colonial society. This sense of political exclusion fueled demands for a separate state where Muslims could have greater representation in government.

Another factor contributing to the demand for a separate Muslim state was religious identity. The Muslim community in India saw itself as a distinct religious and cultural group, with its own customs and traditions. Historian Francis Robinson notes that "*the idea of Muslims as a separate nation had been developing in India since the nineteenth century.*"⁴ This sense of separate identity

³ See note 2, p. 25.

⁴ Spear Thomas George Percival, *The Oxford History of Modern India, 1750-1975* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011), 43.

was reinforced by British policies of divide and rule, which created separate electorates for Muslims and other minority communities.

British policies of divide and rule have been identified as a significant factor in the partition of India. Historian Ian Talbot notes that "British imperial policies of divide and rule had long exploited religious and ethnic differences in India, and these tactics eventually facilitated the partition of India in 1947.⁵

In addition to British policies of divide and rule, the colonial government's economic policies also contributed to the partition. The British government pursued a policy of commercialization in India, which had the effect of undermining traditional crafts and industries. This led to widespread poverty and unemployment, which in turn fueled communal tensions.⁶ (Chatterjee, 1986). The creation of separate electorates for different religious communities, which was introduced by the Morley-Minto Reforms of 1909, had the effect of deepening religious divisions in Indian society. The Government of India Act of 1935 extended separate electorates to other minority communities, further reinforcing communal divisions.

British policies toward the princely states, semi-autonomous territories ruled by local monarchs, also played a role in the partition of India. British officials often played different princes off against each other, reinforcing regional and ethnic divisions. When it came time to decide whether the princely states would join India or Pakistan after the partition, this policy of divide and rule created further tensions and conflicts.⁷

⁵ Ian Talbot and Gurharpal Singh, *The Partition of India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 493.

⁶ Partha Chatterjee, "The Colonial State and Peasant Resistance in Bengal 1920-1947," *Past and Present* 110 (1986): pp. 169-204.

⁷ See note 3, p 181.

While British policies of divide and rule were not the only factors contributing to the partition of India, they played a significant role in exacerbating existing religious, ethnic, and regional tensions. They also reinforced a sense of separate identity among different communities in India, which contributed to the demand for a separate Muslim state. By examining these factors, historians can gain a better understanding of the complex historical context that led to the partition of India.

4. Role of British Colonial Policies in Separation of India:

4.1. British Policy of Divide and Rule:

The British Raj policy of "Divide and Rule" refers to the strategy used by the British colonial government in India to maintain their control over the Indian population by creating divisions and conflicts between different ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups. This policy was implemented throughout the British rule in India, from the late 18th century to the mid-20th century, and had far-reaching and devastating consequences for the Indian people.

One of the earliest references to this policy can be found in the writings of the British historian and politician, James Mill, who wrote in his book *"The History of British India"* that the British had "*divided and conquered*" the Indian population by pitting different groups against each other. Mill argued that the British had exploited the existing divisions among the Indian people, such as caste and religion, to create a hierarchical and oppressive social structure that served their interests.⁸

Another notable reference to the Divide and Rule policy can be found in the memoirs of Lord Curzon, the Viceroy of India from 1899 to 1905. Curzon wrote that the British had used their

⁸ James Mill, *The History of British India* (Baldwin, Cradock and Joy, 1986).

superior military and administrative power to maintain control over India, but also acknowledged that they had “*consciously and deliberately*” created divisions between different groups to weaken their resistance to British rule.⁹

The impact of the Divide and Rule policy can be seen in the numerous instances of communal violence and conflict that occurred during the British rule in India. The most well-known example is the partition of India in 1947, which led to the displacement and deaths of millions of people as a result of the violence between Hindus and Muslims.

British policies of divide and rule, which pitted different religious and ethnic groups against each other, have been identified as a contributing factor to the fragmentation of Indian society and the demand for a separate Muslim state. For instance, historian Ayesha Jalal argues that “*the British did exploit communal differences in India to keep the subcontinent in check and that this led to the demand for Pakistan.*”¹⁰ Similarly, historian Ian Talbot has noted that “*British imperial policies of divide and rule had long exploited religious and ethnic differences in India, and these tactics eventually facilitated the partition of India in 1947.*”¹¹

One way in which British policies of divide and rule played out in India was through the creation of separate electorates for different religious communities. The Morley-Minto Reforms of 1909 introduced separate electorates for Muslims, which allowed them to vote separately from Hindus in certain elections. This policy was meant to give Muslims greater representation in government, but it also had the effect of deepening religious divisions in Indian society. The Government of

⁹ George Nathaniel Curzon and Fanny Amelia Jessie Sitwell, *The Land and the People*. (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1909).

¹⁰ See note 2, p. 37.

¹¹ See note 6.

India Act of 1935 extended separate electorates to other minority communities, including Sikhs and Christians, further reinforcing communal divisions.¹²

Another way in which British policies contributed to the fragmentation of Indian society was through their handling of princely states, which were semi-autonomous territories ruled by local monarchs. British officials often played different princes off against each other, reinforcing regional and ethnic divisions. When it came time to decide whether the princely states would join India or Pakistan after the partition, this policy of divide and rule created further tensions and conflicts.¹³

Overall, while British policies of divide and rule were not the sole cause of the partition of India, they played a significant role in exacerbating existing religious, ethnic, and regional tensions. By emphasizing communal differences and creating separate electorates and princely states, British colonial policies contributed to the demand for a separate Muslim state and the eventual partition of India.

4.2. Other British colonial policies:

British colonial policies in India can be understood as a set of administrative and legislative measures that aimed to maintain and expand British rule in India. These policies were characterized by economic exploitation, political subjugation, and cultural hegemony. Some of the key British colonial policies in India are discussed below:

1. Economic Policies:

¹² See note 6, p 494.

¹³ Ibid p. 181

The British colonial administration in India implemented several economic policies, such as the introduction of cash crops, taxation, and trade regulations that aimed to extract resources from India for the benefit of the British Empire.

It is well asserted that, “*The colonial rule of the British East India Company in India was primarily aimed at economic exploitation, which was largely achieved through land revenue, trade and commerce, and industrial production.*”¹⁴

2. Political Policies:

The British colonial administration in India implemented several political policies, such as the establishment of a centralized administration, the introduction of English as the official language, and the formation of a professional civil service that aimed to maintain political control over India.

According to historian Bipan Chandra, “*The British rule in India was an autocratic government with the Governor-General and his council exercising supreme authority over the provinces. The Indian people had no voice in the administration of their country.*”¹⁵

3. Cultural Policies:

The British colonial administration in India implemented several cultural policies, such as the introduction of Western education, the promotion of English literature and culture, and the suppression of indigenous cultures that aimed to create a cultural hegemony that would reinforce British rule in India.

¹⁴ Dietmar Rothermund, *An Economic History of India: From Pre-Colonial Times to 1991* (London u.a.: Routledge, 2003), 1.

¹⁵ Bipan Chandra, *India's Struggle for Independence* (Penguin Random House India Pvt. Ltd, 1989), 89.

According to historian Tapan Raychaudhuri, “*The British sought to transform Indian society in the image of the British, with English education as the cornerstone of their policy.*”¹⁶

4.2.1. British Economic Policies:

The British economic policies in India played a significant role in the separation of India. The economic policies were characterized by the systematic extraction of resources from India to benefit the British Empire. The policies led to the impoverishment of the Indian economy and the weakening of its social and political fabric. The following discussion explains the role of British economic policies in the separation of India in detail.¹⁷

One of the most significant British economic policies that contributed to the separation of India was the colonial exploitation of Indian resources. The British colonial government extracted resources from India, such as raw materials, agricultural products, and human labor, and exported them to Britain. The export-oriented policies resulted in the underdevelopment of the Indian economy, as the country was forced to rely on exports to generate revenue, rather than developing its own industries.¹⁸

Another economic policy that contributed to the separation of India was the land revenue system, which was introduced by the British colonial government in the 19th century. The land revenue system was a form of taxation that required Indian peasants to pay a fixed amount of revenue to the British colonial government, regardless of the number of crops they produced. The system led

¹⁶ Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Europe Reconsidered: Perceptions of the West in Nineteenth Century Bengal* (Oxford University Press, 1988).

¹⁷ Sugata Bose, *Peasant Labour and Colonial Capital: Rural Bengal since 1770* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

¹⁸ See note 7

to widespread impoverishment of Indian peasants, as they were forced to pay high taxes to the colonial government, which often resulted in the loss of their land and homes.

Furthermore, the British colonial government introduced a discriminatory tariff policy that benefited British manufacturers at the expense of Indian producers. The policy made it difficult for Indian industries to compete with British imports, which resulted in the decline of the Indian manufacturing sector. The decline of the Indian manufacturing sector led to high unemployment rates and widespread poverty, which contributed to the social and economic unrest in India.¹⁹

The British economic policies also led to the creation of a class of Indian elites who were loyal to the British colonial government. The British colonial government provided economic and political opportunities to the Indian elites, which resulted in the formation of a class of elites who were disconnected from the rest of the Indian society. The disconnection between the Indian elites and the rest of Indian society contributed to the social and political divisions in India.²⁰

In conclusion, the British economic policies played a significant role in the separation of India. The policies led to the underdevelopment of the Indian economy, the impoverishment of Indian peasants, the decline of the Indian manufacturing sector, and the creation of a class of Indian elites who were loyal to the British colonial government. These policies contributed to the social and economic unrest in India, which ultimately led to the partition of India.

4.2.2. Political Economic Policies:

The political economic policies implemented by the British colonial government played a significant role in the separation of India. The policies were characterized by the exclusion of

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India 1885-1947* (Palgrave Macmillan Ltd, 1989).

Indian people from the political and economic decision-making process, which contributed to the social and political divisions in India. The following discussion explains the role of political economic policies in the separation of India in detail;

One of the most significant political economic policies that contributed to the separation of India was the division of the Indian population based on religion. The British colonial government introduced the policy of communal representation, which divided the Indian population into religious groups and allocated political power based on religion. The policy led to the creation of separate electorates for Muslims, Sikhs, and other religious groups, which resulted in the fragmentation of the Indian political system.²¹

Another political economic policy that contributed to the separation of India was the system of indirect rule. The British colonial government used local rulers and elites to govern India, which resulted in the exclusion of the Indian people from the political decision-making process. The system of indirect rule contributed to the fragmentation of the Indian society, as the local rulers and elites were often disconnected from the rest of the Indian population.²²

Furthermore, the British colonial government introduced a policy of divide and rule, which aimed to divide the Indian population and prevent them from uniting against British rule. The policy contributed to the social and political divisions in India, as it created tensions between different religious and ethnic groups. The policy of divide and rule also contributed to the weakening of the Indian nationalist movement, as it prevented the Indian people from uniting against British rule.²³

²¹ Ibid

²² Ibid

²³ See note 20.

The political economic policies also led to the creation of a class of Indian elites who were loyal to the British colonial government. The British colonial government provided economic and political opportunities to the Indian elites, which resulted in the formation of a class of elites who were disconnected from the rest of the Indian society. The disconnection between the Indian elites and the rest of Indian society contributed to the social and political divisions in India.

In conclusion, the political economic policies implemented by the British colonial government played a significant role in the separation of India. The policies led to the division of the Indian population based on religion, the exclusion of Indian people from the political and economic decision-making process, and the creation of a class of Indian elites who were loyal to the British colonial government. These policies contributed to the social and political divisions in India, which ultimately led to the partition of India.

4.2.3. Cultural Economic Policies:

The cultural economic policies implemented by the British colonial government in India played a significant role in the separation of India. These policies were aimed at imposing British culture and values on the Indian population and suppressing the Indian cultural identity. This led to cultural and social fragmentation in India, which ultimately contributed to the partition of India. The following discussion explains the role of cultural economic policies in the separation of India in detail.

One of the most significant cultural economic policies introduced by the British colonial government was the promotion of Western education in India. The British colonial government aimed to create a class of Indians who were Western-educated and shared British cultural values. This policy led to the exclusion of Indian cultural and intellectual traditions from the educational

system. The promotion of Western education in India contributed to the cultural fragmentation of the Indian society, as it created a divide between those who were Western-educated and those who were not.²⁴

Another cultural economic policy that contributed to the separation of India was the introduction of the English language as the official language of India. The British colonial government introduced English as the language of administration and education, which led to the exclusion of Indian languages from the public sphere. This policy contributed to the cultural and linguistic fragmentation of the Indian society, as it created a divide between those who spoke English and those who did not.

Furthermore, the British colonial government imposed its cultural values on the Indian population through the legal system. The British colonial government introduced laws that suppressed Indian cultural and religious practices, such as the Sati Act of 1829, which abolished the practice of Sati. These laws were aimed at imposing British cultural values on the Indian population, which led to cultural fragmentation and contributed to the social and political divisions in India.²⁵

The cultural economic policies also led to the creation of a class of Western-educated elites who were disconnected from the rest of the Indian society. These elites were often more loyal to British cultural values than to Indian cultural traditions. The disconnection between the Western-educated elites and the rest of the Indian society contributed to the cultural and social divisions in India.²⁶

In conclusion, the cultural economic policies implemented by the British colonial government played a significant role in the separation of India. The policies were aimed at imposing British

²⁴ See note 18

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ See note 7.

cultural values on the Indian population and suppressing the Indian cultural identity. The policies led to the cultural and social fragmentation of the Indian society, which ultimately contributed to the partition of India.

5. Some Key policy driven events:

The events leading up to the partition of India were shaped by the policies of British colonialism. The following discussion highlights some of the key events caused by colonialism that led to the partition of India.

One of the major events caused by colonialism was the British policy of divide and rule. The British encouraged communalism and created divisions between Hindus and Muslims in India. This policy was aimed at maintaining British control over India by preventing the emergence of a united Indian nationalist movement. The British also introduced separate electorates for Hindus and Muslims, which further deepened the communal divide in India.²⁷

Another major event caused by colonialism was the economic policies pursued by the British. The British extracted resources from India and used them to fuel their own industrialization. This led to the impoverishment of Indian farmers and workers, who were forced to sell their products to British merchants at low prices. The British also introduced land reforms that led to the concentration of landownership in the hands of British landlords.²⁸

The impact of World War II was another event caused by colonialism that contributed to the partition of India. The British used Indian soldiers to fight in the war and promised them greater

²⁷ Bandyopādhyāya Śekhara, *From Plassey to Partition a History of Modern India* (New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2014).

²⁸ D. Gilmartin, "Partition, Pakistan, and South Asian History: In Search of a Narrative.," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 57, no. 4 (1998): pp. 1068-1095.

freedom after the war. However, the British failed to deliver on their promises, which led to a rise in nationalist sentiment in India.²⁹

The British decision to partition India was also an event caused by colonialism. The British saw partition as a way to divide and weaken Indian nationalism. The partition led to the displacement of millions of people and the deaths of hundreds of thousands of others in communal violence.

In conclusion, the events leading up to the partition of India were shaped by the policies of British colonialism. The policy of divide and rule, economic exploitation, and the impact of World War II all contributed to the partition of India.

6. Conclusion:

The partition of India had a significant impact on the Indian subcontinent. The immediate aftermath of the partition was the massive communal violence between Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs, resulting in the death of hundreds of thousands of people and the displacement of millions. The partition also led to the forced migration of people across the newly drawn borders of India and Pakistan, with an estimated 14.5 million people crossing the borders.

The partition also had long-term impacts on the politics and economy of the region. The separation of India and Pakistan resulted in the division of resources and infrastructure, leading to economic dislocation and hardship in both countries. Additionally, the partition left deep-seated religious and cultural tensions that continue to shape politics and social relations in the region.

²⁹ Barbara Daly Metcalf and Thomas R. Metcalf, *A Concise History of Modern India* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

Moreover, the partition marked the end of British colonial rule in the subcontinent and led to the emergence of independent India and Pakistan as sovereign nations. The partition also set a precedent for the decolonization of other European empires and had a profound impact on the international system.

Overall, the partition of India was a complex and multifaceted event that had far-reaching consequences for the region and beyond.

In conclusion, the partition of India was a complex and multifaceted event that was shaped by a range of factors, including British colonial policies and practices, communal tensions, and political aspirations. The British colonial policies of divide and rule, economic exploitation, and cultural imposition played a significant role in the lead-up to the partition. The impact of the partition was profound and far-reaching, with communal violence, forced migration, economic dislocation, and ongoing religious and cultural tensions shaping the politics and society of the region. Despite the challenges, India and Pakistan have made significant strides since the partition in building their economies, developing democratic institutions, and promoting regional cooperation. However, the legacy of the partition continues to influence the politics and society of the subcontinent and serves as a reminder of the complex and often painful process of decolonization.

6.1.Implications of the study:

The study on the role of British colonialism in the partition of India has several implications for understanding this significant historical event. First, it highlights the ways in which colonial policies and practices can have long-lasting and far-reaching consequences. The British divide and rule policy, economic exploitation, and cultural imposition created deep-seated tensions and divisions that contributed to the partition.

Second, the study underscores the importance of examining historical events from multiple perspectives, including those of different communities and nations. The partition of India was a complex event that affected millions of people and continues to shape the politics and society of the subcontinent. By taking into account the perspectives of diverse stakeholders, it is possible to gain a more nuanced understanding of the causes and impacts of the partition.

Finally, the study points to the ongoing relevance of the partition for contemporary politics and society in the region. The communal tensions and religious divisions that contributed to the partition continue to shape politics and society in India and Pakistan. By understanding the historical roots of these tensions, it may be possible to find ways to promote greater understanding and cooperation between different communities.

6.2.Future research directions:

There are several possible future research directions in the context of the role of British colonialism in the partition of India. Some potential areas of inquiry include:

1. The impact of partition on women and marginalized communities: While much has been written about the experiences of Hindus and Muslims during the partition, there is a need to further explore the impact of partition on women and other marginalized communities, such as Dalits and Adivasis.
2. The role of local actors in partition: While the British colonial policies and practices played a significant role in the partition, it is important to also examine the role of local actors, such as political leaders, intellectuals, and community organizers, in shaping the events leading up to the partition.

3. Comparative studies of partition: The partition of India was not an isolated event and can be compared with other historical and contemporary examples of partitions and secessions, such as the division of Korea, the disintegration of Yugoslavia, and the ongoing conflict in Syria.
4. The legacy of partition: While the partition of India occurred over seven decades ago, its legacy continues to shape politics and society in the region. Future research could explore the ongoing impact of partition on issues such as communal tensions, economic development, and regional cooperation.

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