

Curzon's Big Scissors ✂



Lord Curzon looked at a map of Bengal in 1905 and said,

"Too big! Too messy! Needs a cut!"

So he pulled out a pair of giant British scissors, closed one eye, and snipped Bengal into two:

- Eastern Bengal (with Muslim majority and Assam stitched on)
- Bengal (with Hindu majority and Bihar and Orissa retained)

He called it "administrative tailoring."

But the stitch did not match. The fabric tore. The people started wearing hand-spun cloth instead, no foreign clothes, no foreign tailors.

Curzon's 1905 cut was stitched back in 1911, but the idea returned in 1947.

2. The Partition of Bengal (1905)

Divide and Rule in Action

Introduction: Division That Sparked National Awakening

At the start of the 20th century, **Bengal** was the **largest province** in **British India**, covering present-day West Bengal, Bangladesh, Bihar, and Odisha combined. It was also the **nerve centre of Indian politics and culture**. On **16 October 1905**, Lord Curzon implemented the **Partition of Bengal**, citing administrative convenience. In reality, it was a **political move to weaken the rising nationalist movement**. The partition ignited widespread protests and became a turning point in India's struggle for freedom.

Background: Reasons for Partition

- **Initial Proposal (1903):** The idea of partitioning Bengal was first put forward in **1903** by **Lord Curzon**, the Viceroy of India.
- **Administrative Justification:** Curzon claimed Bengal's size (about **80 million** people) made administration unworkable. The plan created:
 - **Eastern Bengal and Assam** with **Dhaka** as capital (generally **Muslim-majority**)
 - A reorganised **Bengal Province** with **Calcutta** as capital, which at that time also included **Bihar and Orissa** (generally **Hindu-majority**)
- **Divide and Rule Policy:** Beyond administration, Curzon's real motive was to **dilute the rising tide of Bengali nationalism**, led largely by the educated Hindu middle class.
- **Religious and Political Reactions:** Elite Muslims, including **Nawab Salimullah of Dhaka**, initially welcomed the partition for better opportunities under the new province. However, the broader nationalist view saw it as a **colonial ploy to sow communal division**.

Announcement of Partition & Early Opposition (1905)

- **Announcement:** The Government of India took the key decision on **19 July 1905**, and the detailed scheme was publicly announced on **20 July 1905**. The partition was implemented on **16 October 1905**.

2. The Partition of Bengal (1905)

- **Formal Launch of Agitation:** The first major organised protest meeting was held at **Calcutta Town Hall on 7 August 1905**, which is widely treated as the formal start of the anti-partition agitation and boycott programme.
- **Public Outrage:** Leaders like **Surendranath Banerjea** organised massive meetings and processions in Calcutta. Other key leaders included Pherozeshah Mehta, Anand Mohan Bose, and Krishnakumar Mitra, who mobilised petitions, meetings, and press campaigns against the partition.
- **Mass Response:** The day of implementation saw **hartals, rallies, and patriotic songs**, with people tying rakhis to symbolise unity.

Cultural Resistance and Unity Efforts

- **Tagore's Cultural Leadership:** Rabindranath Tagore composed patriotic songs like *Amar Sonar Bangla* to inspire unity. The slogan "*Bande Mataram*" became the emotional cry of anti-partition unity.
- **Symbol of Rakhi:** On 16 October 1905, Tagore organised a **Rakhi-bandhan ceremony** in which Hindus and Muslims tied rakhis on each other's wrists as a political symbol of unity.

Impact on Hindu-Muslim Relations

- **Muslim Response:** Muslim responses were not uniform. While some Muslim elites, especially in East Bengal, initially welcomed the new province, others remained cautious or later came to see the wider political intent behind the move.
- **Rise of Communal Politics:** The partition sharpened communal divisions and indirectly paved the way for the **formation of the All-India Muslim League in December 1906 at Dhaka**.
- **Temporary Unity:** Despite communal undertones, protests initially brought Hindus and Muslims together in opposing colonial interference.

Political Impact and Legacy

- **Political Awakening:** The Partition of Bengal transformed Bengal into the epicentre of political consciousness, igniting large-scale protests and processions across the province.
- **Congress Opposition (Benares Session, 1905):** Under Gokhale's leadership, the Indian National Congress officially condemned the partition, supported Swadeshi, and demanded its reversal. This was the first nationwide political endorsement of the anti-partition agitation.

- **Birth of the Swadeshi Movement:** The anti-partition agitation gave rise to the Swadeshi and Boycott Movement, which promoted indigenous industries and economic self-reliance.
- **Mass Participation:** For the first time, students, women, and peasants actively participated in political activity, transforming nationalism from an elite pursuit into a popular movement.

Rise of Assertive Nationalism & Revolutionary Activities

- **Rise of Assertive Nationalism:** Leaders like Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Bipin Chandra Pal, and Lala Lajpat Rai emerged as symbols of assertive nationalism, advocating stronger methods of resistance.
- **Revolutionary Upsurge:** Groups like **Anushilan Samiti** and **Jugantar** expanded rapidly during this period, drawing inspiration from the Swadeshi spirit. They carried out secret recruitment, military training, and acts of political resistance against British rule.
- **Administrative Reversal:** Continued agitation forced the British to annul the partition in 1911, though they simultaneously shifted the imperial capital from Calcutta to Delhi to weaken Bengal's political dominance.
- **British Motives Exposed:** The supposed administrative reason was exposed as **political manipulation**, eroding the **moral legitimacy of British rule**.

Conclusion: Division That Forged Unity

The Partition of Bengal (1905) was intended to weaken Indian nationalism, but it **backfired**, uniting people against colonial rule and giving rise to the **Swadeshi Movement**. It became a turning point, marking the shift from **moderate petitions to mass political action**, and showing both the strength of Indian unity and the divisive nature of colonial policy.

Timeline

- **1899–1903: Lord Curzon's Bengal reorganisation** proposed due to size and governance issues.
- **1903: Partition plan proposed** to create **Eastern Bengal & Assam** and a **reorganised Bengal Province**.
- **Jul 20, 1905: Partition announced**, sparking objections over religious division.

2. The Partition of Bengal (1905)

- **Oct 16, 1905: Partition implemented**, creating Bengal (Bihar & Orissa) and Eastern Bengal & Assam (capital: Dhaka).
- **Oct–Nov 1905: Swadeshi Movement** begins with mass protests, boycotts, and self-reliance campaigns.
- **1906–1908:** Swadeshi intensifies, with rallies, bonfires of British goods, and rising revolutionary activity.
- **1911: Partition annulled;** Bengal reunited, and capital shifted from Calcutta to Delhi.

🔑 Key Exam Points (Quick Revision)

- **Announced By:** Lord Curzon in **Jul 1905**, citing the need for “administrative efficiency” in an overpopulated Bengal.
- **Came into Effect:** **16 Oct 1905**, dividing Bengal into **Eastern Bengal & Assam** (capital: **Dhaka**) and **Bengal** (which retained Bihar and Orissa under its administration).
- **Real Motive:** Aimed to **weaken Bengali** nationalism and implement the “**Divide and Rule**” policy by separating Hindus and Muslims.
- **Immediate Outcome:** Triggered massive protests and the **Swadeshi and Boycott Movement**, marking the rise of assertive nationalism.
- **Most-Asked in Exams:** The **Partition of Bengal** was announced by **Lord Curzon in Jul 1905** and implemented on **16 Oct 1905**.

🧠 Mnemonic

Curzon Cut Bengal in Zero Five, Swadeshi Roared, Lal-Bal-Pal Arrive.

Curzon Cut Bengal in Zero Five → Lord Curzon partitioned Bengal in **1905**.

Swadeshi Roared → The **Swadeshi Movement** erupted in protest.

Lal-Bal-Pal Arrive → **Lal, Bal, Pal** emerged as key leaders.

💡 **Memory Trick:** Imagine **Curzon** slicing Bengal with a giant “**05**” scissor, and the moment he cuts, a roaring **Swadeshi tiger** leaps out as **Lal, Bal, Pal** rush in like a superhero trio.

Focus Points

Lord Curzon (Viceroy of India, 1899–Nov 1905)

An authoritarian Viceroy whose most controversial policy was the **Partition of Bengal (1905)**. He also pushed measures to tighten colonial control, including the **Universities Act (1904)** and changes to Calcutta's municipal administration that reduced elected Indian influence, along with the **Ancient Monuments Preservation Act (1904)**. Though he carried out some administrative reforms, his rule is remembered for centralisation and a harder line against Indian political aspirations.

Curzon–Kitchener Conflict (1905)

A sharp dispute arose between Viceroy **Lord Curzon** and Commander-in-Chief **Lord Kitchener** over the **control and structure of the Indian Army's top administration** (especially Curzon's insistence on maintaining a separate military member system versus Kitchener's reorganisation plan). The issue went to **London**, which **backed Kitchener** and overruled Curzon's position. Curzon then offered to resign, and his resignation was **accepted on 16 August 1905**. He stayed briefly to complete the handover, and his viceregal tenure effectively ended when he **left India in November 1905**.

Divide and Rule

A British **governing strategy** that exploited religious, regional, and social differences so Indians identified as separate groups rather than one nation. Key examples include the **Partition of Bengal (1905)** and **separate electorates introduced under the Indian Councils Act, 1909 (Morley–Minto Reforms)**. It strengthened colonial control and deepened communal politics over time.

Rabindranath Tagore

A great poet-philosopher and nationalist thinker who shaped India's cultural voice. He later won the **Nobel Prize (1913)** for *Gitanjali* and wrote "**Jana Gana Mana**." In the **Partition of Bengal (1905)** context, Tagore used culture as protest, promoting unity through **Rakhi Bandhan** and composing "**Amar Sonar Bangla**" (1905) to inspire resistance and Swadeshi feeling.

Did You Know?

A Protest Song Became a National Anthem

Rabindranath Tagore wrote *Amar Sonar Bangla* in 1905 to oppose Curzon's partition. In 1971, Bangladesh adopted it as its national anthem, the rarest case of a protest song becoming a nation's voice.

Bengal Was United, Then Divided Again

The 1905 partition was annulled in 1911, but Bengal was partitioned again in 1947 on religious lines. East Pakistan later became Bangladesh in 1971, echoing the same divide Curzon attempted decades earlier.

The Original “Surrender-not” of Bengal

Surendranath Banerjea earned the nickname “**Surrender-not**” for his bold refusal to yield to British authority, a title that echoed again during the anti-Partition protests.

What If

Bengal Had Not Been Partitioned? (1905)

- **1905 without a headline event:** Bengal stays intact, so there is no single dramatic issue to unite anger quickly.
- **Nationalism stays in the drawing room longer:** More petitions, speeches, and meetings, fewer mass campaigns.
- **Swadeshi spreads, but less like a wave:** Boycott and swadeshi still grow, but slower and more uneven without the Bengal trigger.
- **The radical turn gets postponed:** Extremist politics may rise later, because early mass support is weaker.
- **The Raj faces fewer early jolts:** Less immediate disruption in schools, markets, and public spaces.
- **But the story does not end:** Grievances keep building, and another policy mistake could become the next big catalyst.

🗨️ **Bottom Line:** No Partition of Bengal would mean a slower rise of mass politics, but Curzon’s decision actually accelerated mobilisation and radicalisation.

? Practice Questions

1. In **which year** was the Partition of Bengal carried out?
2. Who was the **Viceroy of India** at the time of the Partition of Bengal?
3. What was the **official reason** given by the British for partitioning Bengal?
4. What was the **real political motive** behind the partition?
5. On **what date** did the Partition of Bengal come into effect?
6. **Which patriotic song** did Rabindranath Tagore compose to inspire unity among Bengalis?

7. Which **two new provinces** were created after the partition?
8. **Who led** the political campaign against the Partition of Bengal?
9. **Which movement** started as a reaction to the Partition of Bengal?
10. The **annulment** of Bengal's partition was announced in which year?

Answers

1. 1905
2. Lord Curzon
3. **Administrative efficiency due to the large size of Bengal**
4. **To weaken the nationalist movement by dividing Hindus and Muslims**
5. 16 October 1905
6. *Amar Sonar Bangla*
7. Bengal (western part with Bihar & Orissa) and Eastern Bengal & Assam
8. Surendranath Banerjea
9. Swadeshi and Boycott Movement
10. 1911