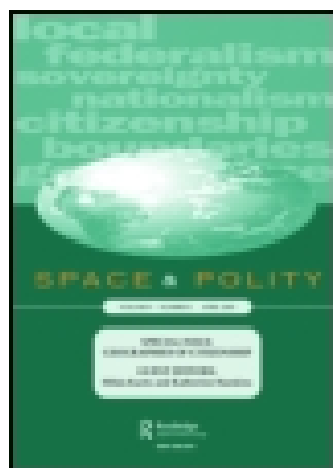


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Publisher: Routledge

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Space and Polity

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cspp20>

The false premise of partition

Reece Jones^a

^a Department of Geography, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, 2424 Maile Way, Honolulu, HI 96822, USA

Published online: 12 Aug 2014.

To cite this article: Reece Jones (2014): The false premise of partition, Space and Polity, DOI: [10.1080/13562576.2014.932154](https://doi.org/10.1080/13562576.2014.932154)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13562576.2014.932154>

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The false premise of partition

Reece Jones*

Department of Geography, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, 2424 Maile Way, Honolulu, HI 96822, USA

(Received 27 September 2013; accepted 2 June 2014)

Partitions are based on two fundamental assumptions: identity groups exist that can be located, named and categorized, and these categories are attached to distinct territories. Drawing on the Partition of British India, this paper analyses how the differences between the categories “Hindu” and “Muslim” were developed through narratives and events such as the creation of maps and censuses, the emergence of religious revivalist movements, and the use of violence. The article argues that the perception of sharp boundaries between what are termed “territorial groups of meaning” is the result of these events and narratives, not the cause of them.

Keywords: partition; borders; nations; India; Bangladesh

1. Why partitions fail

The late 1940s were the pinnacle of high modernist optimism (Scott, 1998). World War II was over, Nazism was defeated and the world community founded the United Nations as a triumph of peace over war. Colonialism had fallen out of favour and it was clear that the vast majority of the world's population would soon be living in independent countries with indigenous leaders. In the previous 75 years, humans had invented electricity, radio, television, skyscrapers, cars, aeroplanes, penicillin and atomic bombs. It seemed that anything was possible through the application of technology and human ingenuity. The scientific method was straightforward: gather data about a problem, organize and analyse it and then make a decision about how to solve it.

The task of creating new states after colonialism seemed to follow this model. Look at a map, determine which group belongs where and draw a line dividing them. In most places, colonial boundaries were kept as the borders of new states due to the convenience of maintaining already existing government structures and the lack of other plausible options. The decision to keep colonial borders still has ramifications today, particularly in Africa where multiple languages and ethnic categories are joined in single states that are plagued by conflict and independence movements. In a few places, it was already evident in the 1940s that the colonial boundaries would not work due to recent population movements or emerging territorial claims. In Palestine, the *Aliyahs* and the Holocaust displacements changed the demographics of the land and resulted in the formation of Israel in part of the former British Mandate territory (Shafir, 1989). In India, the demand for Pakistan as a separate homeland for Muslim populations challenged the Indian National Congress' claim to represent all of India (Jalal, 1994). In both cases, the authorities

*Email: reecej@hawaii.edu

decided to draw new boundaries to divide up the land between these groups. The plan to partition India assumed that the categories “Hindu” and “Muslim” were stable, fixed identities that fundamentally defined the group membership of individuals. Once that assumption was made, the task of drawing new boundaries was relatively simple – gather census data and place areas with a majority of one group on one side and members of the other group on the other.

The problem with partition is that it is built on a series of faulty assumptions about people and their links to territory. A world political map conveys the allure of borders with its clean lines and different colours for different countries. In that version of the world, everyone has an allegiance to one state and that state has clear, unambiguous authority over that territory. It takes the complexity of the world and simplifies it. It makes sense. However, maps and censuses are not the world. A map is simply a drawing of what someone wants the world to be (Harley, 2001; Winichakul, 1994; Wood, 1992). It is a jumble of lines and colours that our minds interpret as the world. The map gives the impression of the god’s eye view, and often intoxicates political leaders into acting as if they are god.

The British tasked this duty to Sir Cyril Radcliffe, a lawyer who had never visited India and who was not familiar with the territorial and political debates, although he did have judges named by the Muslim League and Indian National Congress to assist him (Chatterjee, 1999; Chatterji, 1994; Chester, 2008). Given the complexities on the ground in 1947, the quick and clean work of partition perhaps seemed like the only option. Had the assumption of groups and censuses been correct, this would have been a fine choice. However, they were not and the Partition of India resulted in an unmitigated disaster. Estimates vary, but it is likely that over one million people died in the violence in the immediate aftermath. Fourteen million people fled their homes in search of refuge on the other side of the new lines, an eventuality that seems utterly predictable now but the leaders then had not fully considered. For decades after, the minority populations on both sides of the borders were persecuted and people have continued to cross the border in search of safety and a better life (Chatterji, 1994; Kamra, 2000; Zamindar, 2007). The partition also created Pakistan – one of the strangest countries ever conceived. To his credit, after seeing the results of his work Radcliffe refused to be compensated.

The failure of the Partition of India is not simply due to the way the British conducted the division. It would not have been improved if they had better maps or better data. It is also not due to the alleged historical animosity between Hindus and Muslims. The problem is not even specific to the Partition of India, although certainly the particular facts of each case do matter. The problem with all partitions is that they are based on a false premise that ethnic or religious “nations” exist, that these categories have links to particular territories, and that they can serve as the legitimate basis for political divisions. These categories are not essential and eternal identities that mark permanent distinctions between people, but rather are territorial groups of meaning that crystallize at particular moments as part of narratives and events.

Scholarship on the political geography of borders in South Asia has expanded dramatically in the past five years. Rather than treating Bangladesh, India and Pakistan as finalized and separate containers of each population’s social, economic and political life, van Schendel (2005) and Ranabir Sammadar (1999) shifted the focus of study in the east to look at the cross-border connections between Bangladesh and West Bengal (Baud & van Schendel, 1997). Following their lead, there has been a series of important cross-border articles focusing on the enclaves (Cons, 2008, 2012; Jones, 2009; Shewly, 2013), on border fencing and security (Cons, 2013; Hussain, 2013; Jones, 2012; McDuie-Ra, 2012; Sur, 2013) and on immigration and refugees (Sanyal, 2009). These new directions are summarized and expanded in a recent special issue of *Political Geography* (Cons & Sanyal, 2013, p. 6) that argues that legacies of colonialism, partition, cross-border movement and connections and violence make South Asia a “particularly productive place to engage questions of borders and margins”.

In Bengal, the categories “Hindu” and “Muslim”, as we conceive them today, did not exist prior to the twentieth century (Ahmed, 1981, 2001). This article traces the group making processes through which affiliation with idealized versions of these group categories was developed through encounters and events such as the creation of maps and censuses, the emergence of religious revivalist movements, the development of religion-based political systems and the use of violence and riots to instil fear. The article argues that the sharp boundaries between the categories “Hindu” and “Muslim” were the result of these events, not the cause of them. By combining an analysis of historical events with the recollections of residents of Bangladesh and West Bengal, the article questions the idea of separate groups or nations, in the years leading up to the partition and in the present day.

Sack (1986, p. 64) writes that “[a] place is an encounter with events”. The Partition of India is more than 60 years in the past, but the governments and the people of South Asia continue to narrate the event and live in the bounded places that encounter left behind. The next section makes the case for considering the partition of India as a complete failure. The third section theorizes the emergence of the idea of nations as modern social constructions, not eternal markers of identity, by drawing on Brubaker’s (2002) work on the relationship between narratives, events and identity categories. The fourth section uses historical documents and contemporary interviews in order to demonstrate the shifting “groupness” of identity categories in Bengal before and after Partition.¹

2. The aftermath of partition

In hindsight, it seems a foregone conclusion that the state of Pakistan as it was conceived in 1947 was doomed to fail. In Bangladesh and West Bengal it is a common belief that this was the British plan all along. A 57-year-old Hindu male photographer in Bangladesh explains:

Why did they do it? ... Look, this was long term thinking. Very difficult. They were in power for two hundred years and now they have us fighting between each other. The British have really annoyed the people of these three areas. ... Look, when two parts of the country are divided by 1100 miles how long can they stay together? Is it possible to stay? The British were calculating this. One branch is west Pakistan, one is East. How long can this last? They know not long. The British government knows it will not last. They are very clever.

A 38-year-old Muslim male businessman concurs:

The British had a devious plan to divide it and cause problems for decades to come. Partition did not happen for what the people wanted but rather for the wish of the British.

Chester (2008) demonstrates that the British were keenly aware of the threat to their influence and used the boundary commission as means to protect their interests.

From 1947 to 1971 Pakistan consisted of two halves divided by 1000 miles of Indian territory. The partition linked these territories together because they were Muslim majority areas – a point that is questioned below – but they had almost nothing else in common. East Pakistan had a population that shared a linguistic and ethnic connection but was diverse in terms of religion. According to the 1941 census, the entire undivided Bengal Presidency had 61 million people. In the census, 54% were classified as Muslim, 42% were classified as Hindu and 3% were classified as tribal. Even in the parts of Bengal that became East Pakistan, there were large Hindu and tribal populations (Chatterjee, 1947). In Khulna, Hindu was the majority category at just over 50%. In Dinajpur, which was divided between India and Pakistan, there was also a 50–50 split, with a slight Muslim majority. Even the most heavily Muslim area of Noakhali, 20% of

the population was still classified as Hindu. The Islam that was practiced in Bengal was moderate and in 1947 maintained many Hindu influences even after decades of reform movements.

During the colonial period, the Bengal Presidency was often described as a cohesive economic unit with the farmlands of Eastern Bengal relying on the mills, port and urban infrastructure of Calcutta. The population had even resisted a previous effort at partition in 1905 (Sarkar, 1973). The British had tried to partition Bengal in order to weaken a burgeoning independence movement in Calcutta. H.H. Risley, the Home Secretary at the time, wrote in 1904 that “Bengal United is a power, Bengal divided will pull in several different ways”. The first partition of Bengal was eventually reversed in 1911 for a series of reasons including the work of the Swadeshi movement that protested the division based on the cultural, economic and historical connections in Bengal (Sarkar, 1973).

West Pakistan [modern-day Pakistan] is also not a historical entity but a political invention that joined together diverse populations that had tenuous allegiances to the new state (see Figure 1). The vast majority of the population in West Pakistan practiced a more conservative version of Islam but was divided between a wide range of languages and ethnic categories. Pakistan is an acronym that links together the different linguistic and cultural traditions including Punjabi, Pashto, Sindhi and Urdu. The acronym did not include a “b” for Bengal or Bangladesh.

Almost from the beginning, there were disputes in Pakistan about the national language as well as power sharing between the two disparate and distant halves. While the majority of the

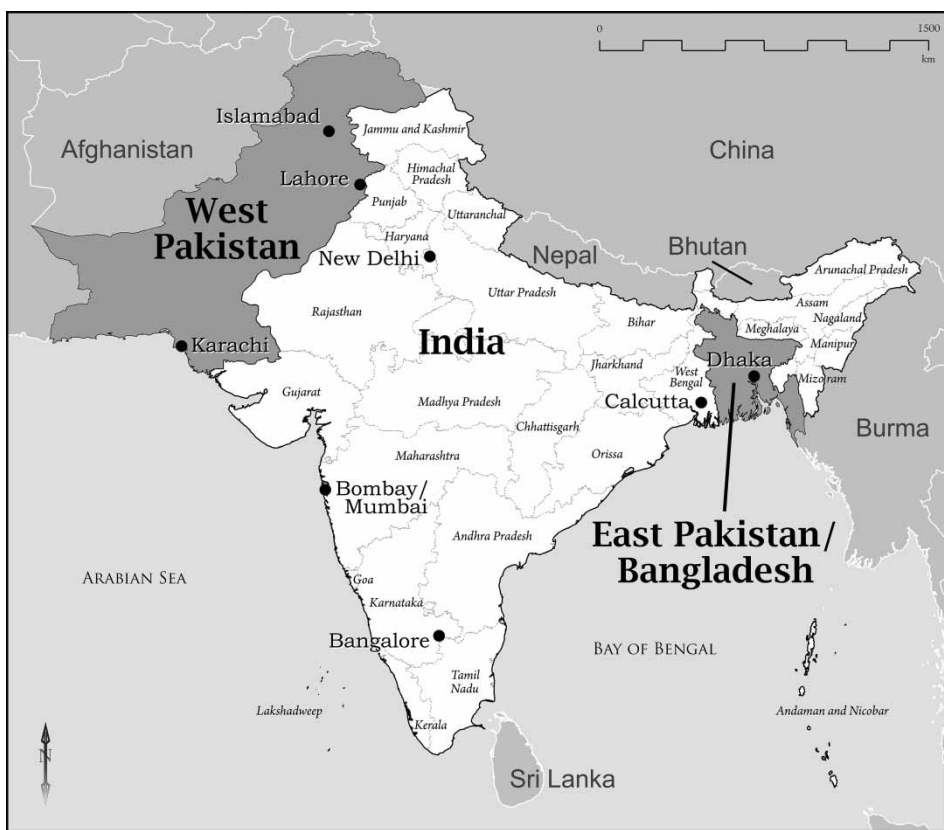


Figure 1. A map of political divisions in South Asia. From 1947 until 1971 East Pakistan was part of Pakistan after which it became the independent country of Bangladesh (Map by Julius Paulo).

population resided in the East and Bengali was the most widely spoken language in the new country, the political and military power was in the West. Elections produced results favourable to the East, which were followed by coups by military leaders in the West and Pakistan was under martial law from 1958 to 1971 (Jahan, 1972). Despite Bengali being the most widely spoken language, Urdu was chosen as the official language of Pakistan. In 1952, police killed several Dhaka University students who were protesting the imposition of Urdu as the national language, which sparked the movement that eventually led to the independence of Bangladesh in 1971. Before Pakistan relinquished Bangladesh, however, the army killed hundreds of thousands of people in what some people consider to be genocide.

The Bangladesh that emerged was, in Henry Kissinger's famous words, a basket case. However, over 40 years after the split, contemporary Pakistan is perhaps worse off than Bangladesh. Its government is consistently on the brink of collapsing, it does not control large tribal areas along the border with Afghanistan, militant organizations operate freely in many areas and Pakistan's sovereignty is regularly violated by the USA when it bombs militants. The country has still not solved the issue of diverse linguistic and ethnic affiliations over 60 years after partition.

Along the northern part of the India–Bangladesh border, the remnants of partition include almost 200 enclaves, where one country's territory is completely surrounded by the other (Cons, 2013; Van Schendel, 2002). The situation is devastating for the over 100,000 residents of the enclaves, who live in limbo without proper documents for land or citizenship, without basic infrastructure like roads and sewers and without police or judges to protect them from violence. The enclaves are an accident of history, but one that is still not solved over 60 years later despite agreements to trade them in 1958 between India and Pakistan and in 1974 between India and Bangladesh.

India, Pakistan and Bangladesh combined spend billions of dollars on military and security apparatuses. India and Pakistan have had four wars since partition that have killed millions of people (Ganguly, 2001). Almost the entire length of the Pakistan–India border and Bangladesh–India borders are fenced and fortified. Although it is a myth that you can see the Great Wall of China from the moon, the Pakistan–India border is visible from the International Space Station due to the thousands of miles of floodlights that shine into Pakistan all night long. On the Bangladesh border, the Indian Border Security Forces kill, on average, 150 Bangladeshis per year (Jones, 2012; Kabir, 2005). These are not militants but rather farmers, smugglers and in 2011 even a 15-year-old girl named Felani whose clothing got stuck in the barbed wire.

And for what? In an interview, a 30-year-old primary school teacher in Bangladesh asked rhetorically about the decision to partition Bengal, “Why did they do this? Maybe those who did it know clearly”.

3. The idea of nations and groups

Those who did it were thinking in terms of nations and states. The contemporary sovereign state system is predicated on the idea of the nation-state, in which each nation of people has its own state in their homeland. Nation is the standard term used to describe the people who live in a particular state and also refers to the state as if it was one and the same as the people. In the UN Charter, the purpose of the institution is “To develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples, and to take other appropriate measures to strengthen universal peace” (United Nations Charter, 1945). In this view, a nation is an identifiable group of people who share some set of characteristics that makes them a member of a nation. Kedourie (1993, p. 1) defines nationalism as “The doctrine [that] holds that humanity is naturally divided into nations, that nations are known by certain

characteristics that can be ascertained, and that the only legitimate government is national self-government”.

Although the current political system is based on the existence of nations, the primordial view has little currency in the academic literature. Instead, most scholars think of nations as “imagined communities” that are not based on any essential connections among people but rather belief (Anderson, 2006). Calhoun (1997, p. 5) writes

nations are constituted largely by the claims themselves, by the way of talking and thinking and acting that relies on these sorts of claims to produce collective identity, to mobilize people for collective projects, and to evaluate peoples and practices.

Modern states, by contrast, try to imagine themselves as ethnic, cultural, political and economic islands, as lands that are homogenous within their borders and sharply different from the lands on the other side (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983). Borders on maps are effective in creating this image because they seem to represent the clean lines and sharp differences between the inside and the outside of state territories (Sack, 1986). The use of territorial strategies to establish political power is not new; the Great Wall of China or medieval city walls attest to this fact. What are new are the technologies to monitor and control activities within a large space and the ability to depict an idealized version of homogenous state space on a map. Because these large territorial states did not exist previously, the on-the-ground reality never lives up to the purity of the idealized state on the map and requires remaking populations and their collective memories into a single nation.

Part of the problem with categories like nation, race and ethnicity is that they are assumed to be representative of a cohesive group. Some of those groupings are by choice when an individual identifies with a particular set of characteristics and wants to be included in it. Others are imposed as an individual is categorized as something whether or not they identify with it. Some group identity categories can be beneficial, such as citizenship when members are willing to contribute to the well-being of other members through building common infrastructure like roads and schools. Some other group identity categories can have pernicious consequences, such as when race is used to exclude people based on the colour of their skin. Nations play both roles as a common bond that promotes shared sacrifice but also a mark of exclusion as other non-members are denied the same rights in those places.

Just as there are many problems with understanding history through the lens of bordered states and nations, there are also many questions about whether we should understand identity categories as groups. Brubaker (2002, p. 164) calls this groupism, “the tendency to take discrete, sharply differentiated, internally homogeneous and externally bounded groups as basic constituents of social life, chief protagonists of social conflicts, and fundamental units of social analysis”. Brubaker suggests that because exclusion based on a perceived group membership is similar for many categories – race “racism”, nation “nationalism”, sex “sexism”, country “patriotism” and tribe “tribalism” – it makes sense to think of all these as variations of the same process: groupism.

His concern is not that people come together around a set of beliefs in order to pursue collective action. Instead, he is critical of the assumption that when people do coalesce, that it means they are a homogenous block with shared beliefs, histories and goals. The focus should be on how that feeling of group membership was created, why it resonated and how it is maintained. Scholars should explain why so many people understand “the social and cultural world as a multi-chrome mosaic of monochrome ethnic, racial or cultural blocks” (Brubaker, 2002, p. 164). They should not uncritically reproduce that world in their work.

Much of what we perceive as group activities is more often a narrative created by individuals or organizations that want to use the idea of the group to pursue a political goal. Brubaker (2002, p. 166) argues that “By *invoking* groups, they seek to *evoke* them, summon them, call them into being. Their categories are *for doing* – designed to stir, summon, justify, mobilize, kindle and energize”. This does not mean that the categories and ideas for mobilization are invented out of thin air but rather that their significance is reiterated and emphasized to increase feelings of connection to them. Events like riots, attacks or adverse political decisions can be very effective for building these feelings of group membership because they create the feeling that the individual might be targeted based on their group identity. These threats can increase the level of identification with the group category and the likelihood of participating in actions in the name of the group.

The flip side of this is that because the affinity towards these categories is not essential or eternal but rather is produced through narratives and events – as big as the 9/11 attacks or as small as a researcher putting test subjects into red and blue groups – they can also be undone or redone again. The affiliation with a group category is not a finalized identity but rather is a momentary crystallization in response to narratives and events. They are a way of organizing people, claiming territory and creating meanings; and only that: a territorial group of meaning.

4. Partition in Bengal

When the British gained their initial foothold in the eighteenth century in what is today contemporary West Bengal, the Mogul Empire was the dominant power in South Asia, but most people lived in small rural communities that each had their own sets of distinct customs, traditions and dialects. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, there was a transition from these localized ways of life to larger modern political communities. This is not to suggest that identities were frozen in some idealized past; they were not. It is also not to suggest a smooth or direct path to one group identity or another. Instead it was a process of events, narratives and rising and falling levels of affiliation with a particular category, what Brubaker terms “groupness”. At particular moments, popular sentiments coalesced around an identity category and territory, at other moments these feelings of group connection faded away. What emerges is a contingent, multifaceted and eventful process of imagining new territorial groups of meaning in order to fit into the state system based on nations.

After establishing the context of life in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Bengal, this section analyses a series of encounters and events that altered the group identity affiliations of the population. There is a close relationship between particular events and the longer-term processes of social change (Moore, 2011). Indeed, social reproduction is an eventful process that continues through time but is punctuated by specific incidents (Kaiser, 2012). For example, within “the war on terror”, there were particular significant events that contributed to the discourse including the 11 September attacks and the start of the Iraq war, but also smaller incidents such as the implementation of a colour coded alert system at airports or a particular battle in Iraq. In my view, these are all events, both large and small, that contribute to the discursive process of social reproduction. In Bengal, some significant events were the use of censuses and maps, the work of religious revivalist movements, the creation of religion-based electorates in British India and the idea of communal riots in the years before partition. Each of these events, and particularly the way that they were narrated and remembered in the aftermath, ratcheted up feelings of connection to a particular group identity category while emphasizing differences with the other.

Calcutta was the main base for the British colonial government for over a century until the capital was moved to Delhi in 1911. The British established state structures in many areas, but also ruled by delegation through local intermediaries and princely states (Legg, 2006). In Calcutta, their primary contact was with wealthy elite Bengali-speaking Hindus, although there

were also Muslim merchants who hailed from Central and West Asia and spoke Urdu or Persian. Sartori (2008, p. 8, emphasis in original) points out,

Of course, we should be careful here from the start: the name *Bengal* is a regional signifier, but it also condenses an entire set of assumptions about who is Bengali. Used without qualifiers, the term *Bengali* refers not, it turns out on closer inspection, to the inhabitants of Bengal generally (including Muslim peasants or the low-caste laborers who numerically predominated) but rather to the Bengali *Bhadralok* – the respectable classes that spanned the range of social positions from lowly clerks and village priests through intermediate tenure holders and professionals to magnates and quasi-aristocrats like the Tagores.

The British assumed based on their experiences in Calcutta that the vast majority of people in Bengal were also Hindu and during the 1800s the term “Bengali” referred only to Hindus (Ahmed, 1981, 2001). Muslims were called simply “Musalmans” because it was thought that, like the Persian merchants in Calcutta, they were not indigenous to Bengal. It was not until the first census of India in 1872 that it became clear that over half the population in Bengal identified as Muslim (Ahmed, 2001). The finding surprised and worried the British because it came on the heels of William Wilson Hunter’s sensationalist book published in 1871 *The Indian Musalmans: Are they Duty Bound to Rebel Against the Queen?*

The 1872 census findings are a perfect example of the clash between rigid categorical approaches to knowledge and the messy reality of lived experience. The British utilized classification systems in which everyone was either a member of one group or another. In addition to mapping their colonial holdings to make the territory legible to governance, they also engaged in exhaustive anthropological surveys in order to know the characteristics of the population (Cohn, 1996; Edney, 1999; Risley, 1893). On a census form this is straightforward: every respondent is male or female, Indian or British, Hindu or Muslim. However, the categorical systems of the census did not match the reality of syncretistic traditions on the ground.

The categories “Hindu” and “Muslim”, as they are conceived today, did not exist. In Bengal, Islam grew during the 1400s and 1500s as travelling preachers passed through the area. Richard Eaton suggests the spread of Islam into Bengal should not be understood as a conversion to a separate religion but rather an addition to the beliefs already present. Rather than supplanting Hinduism, Islam was incorporated into it (Eaton, 1993). Over the intervening centuries, the converted populations were visited occasionally by travelling preachers, but also went for long periods without formal instruction. By the nineteenth century, in many places local customs held sway and some “Muslims” neither practiced nor knew about the most of the teachings of Islam. In daily life they lived similarly to their Hindu neighbours, who also did not have doctrinal knowledge of Hinduism. In many villages, everyone ate the same foods, worked similar jobs and participated in the same festivals.² They also spoke the same dialects of Bengali, not one of the more “Islamic” languages like Urdu or Persian.

The syncretism was frustrating for British census takers, who explained their difficulties in the notes that accompanied each publication. In the 1901 census, a British official lamented the lack of religious knowledge on the part of Muslims, stating they were “deeply infected with Hindu superstitions and their knowledge of the faith seldom extends beyond the three cardinal doctrines of the unity of God, the mission of Muhammad, and the truth of the Koran” (O’Malley, 1917, p. 212). In 1911, a census taker noted a similar difficulty with finding a meaning for the categories Hindu (Pennington, 2005) and Muslim writing:

The Musulmans are descendants of Hindu converts, whose Hinduism was little more than Animism. Even after conversion they maintain their primitive beliefs and continue to observe the same ceremonies as their Hindu neighbors.

Since the first census of 1872 attempts have been made by the census authorities in Bengal to evolve a definition of Hinduism without much success. ... No answer, in fact, exists; for the term in its modern acceptance denotes neither a creed nor race, neither church nor people, but is a general expression devoid of precision. (O'Malley, 1917, pp. 226–227)

The problem these census officials encountered is not purely the result of their colonial arrogance and ignorance. Instead, it is emblematic of the mismatch between one worldview and another. It is the moment of interaction between the universal and categorical view with the traditional and local reality of most people's lives. The British were expecting to find singular categorical answers but instead were experiencing the diversity of local practices. Due to the limitations of transportation and communication, these daily experiences varied dramatically spatially which results in the literally thousands of different versions of "Hinduism" and the diversity of languages and dialects in South Asia.

Censuses and maps can be normative, creating a world of groups and territories rather than simply representing one that already exists. The process follows a pattern of event–narrative–group (Moore, 2011). An event occurs, in this case the deployment of a census with binary categories. While the notes for the censuses emphasize the incoherence of the categories, the data were still reported in binaries with $x\%$ Muslim and $y\%$ Hindu. The complex reality in which "no answer, in fact, exists" for the definition of Hinduism is replaced by the unambiguous categories of Hindu and Muslim. The significance of the event is solidified by narratives that contextualize and interpret it. In the case of the census, the Queen of England was told these binary numbers. The governor of British India used these numbers. Newspapers in India and England reported the shocking findings with sensational headlines. The nuance of the report was overshadowed by the simple facts of the statistics.

In the late nineteenth century in Bengal, Hindu and Muslim revivalist organizations were established to go into rural communities and purify religious customs (Banu, 1992). These activists, following on previous revivalist efforts, worked to eliminate syncretistic beliefs and teach the proper way to practice each religion. In the late nineteenth century, Muslim organizations built mosques, taught people the tenets of Islam and encouraged cow slaughter at religious festivals like Eid. Hindu organizations built temples, encouraged more public celebrations of festivals including loud parades and petitioned the British authorities to codify bans on cow slaughter. These efforts led to competing zones of tradition where the practices of one religion were institutionalized at the expense of the other by inscribing a particular set of beliefs in the landscape through building mosques and temples or establishing rules about which practices were allowed in the area (Jones, 2007). Over time, the blurred and shared traditions were removed and inchoate boundaries between the dress, food, worship and daily life of Hindus and Muslims emerged.

A 35-year-old Hindu male secondary school teacher in Bangladesh explained where he sees the differences between Hindus and Muslims:

The main thing was culture. First, the Hindu zamindars [large landowners] used their power and then Muslim activists such as Sufis and Maulanas came here. The zamindars did not like the lower class Hindus. The Zamindars tried to keep them in lower positions. The Muslim activists came and saw the situation. Islam is a simple religion, not like Hinduism. It does not have much superstition. Because of that many lower caste Hindus converted to Islam at that time. In this way the number of Muslims increased in this area. This increased their power.

A 52-year-old Muslim male businessman in Bangladesh sees the lack of mutual understanding as a source of conflict:

There is no understanding between Hindus and Muslims. There is a conflict between the groups. Durga puja is coming and Muslims may not respect them. They might say “you are making a statue from mud, why? Now you will take in a pond and sink it with a kick. This is not religion.” These sorts of things divide people. Perhaps they will say bad things about Islam as well. The conflict is based on these misunderstandings.

These perspectives illustrate that process of bounding social categories is still ongoing with particular moments reproduced in the collective memory and particular events re-enacted through festivals and ceremonies that continue to sediment and unsettle the boundaries between categorical identities.

By the first few decades of the twentieth century, the binary categories of Hindu and Muslim were legally codified – although still in the process of becoming on the ground – and used as the key categories for political seats by the British colonial authorities. The Indian Councils Act of 1909 that reserved seats on various boards for Muslims and the Communal Award of 1932 created separate electorates for each religious category (Roy, 2009). Once political representation was linked to religious categories, various organizations and political parties worked to establish constituencies to support their election to these newly created communal seats.

The 1930s and 1940s were a violent period in Bengal and British India, as the anti-colonial movement gained strength and the jockeying for power, which had developed for several decades, accelerated. The violence of the pre-partition years is often described as riots between Hindus and Muslims that demonstrated these populations had centuries-old hatred for each other and could never reside in the same country (Das, 1991; Pandey, 1990). Brubaker, however, asks us to think of events like these as the *precursor* to the feeling of group membership, not the result of it. Brubaker (2002, p. 165) argues “Ethnic conflict – or what might better be called ethicized or ethnically framed conflict – need not, and should not, be understood as conflict *between ethnic groups*”. The representation of the event and the way it is reiterated and imbedded into the collective memory transform it into an ethnic riot (Amin, 1995; Barbour & Jones, 2013).

Gossman (1999) documents this event–narrative–group process in the 1930s and 1940s in Bengal. She argues that many, if not most, of these “spontaneous riots” were pre-planned by organizations and activists and often instigated against their co-religionists (e.g. Muslim organization carrying out violence directed at Muslims and vice versa for Hindus). This was done in order to argue that Muslims were under threat and needed to come together in support of the Muslim organization that could protect them. The “riots” were deliberate political actions not random events but the mythology that surrounded them became extremely powerful.

Bengal was the site of some of the most significant riots in the years before partition, including events in Noakhali and Calcutta. A 65-year-old Hindu male politician and businessman explains:

Q: Why did the riots happen in Noakhali and Calcutta?

My thinking is that the target was a separate state, not with India or Pakistan. If the riots did not occur, then Mountbatten will not believe this. In order to show him the riots occurred. Pakistan was formed because an inequality was created between Hindus and Muslims. This inequality was for showing Mountbatten that we need a separate state because Hindus and Muslims cannot live together.

A 73-year-old Muslim male businessman concurs:

Why did riots happen? I don’t know. Hindus and Muslims on that subject, maybe, the riots were constructed. In my opinion riots were made. They were made.

Q: Who made them?

At that time there were many types of leaders. Those Muslims did not like that Gandhi said “those in India are one. Hindus and Muslims were one and the same. India will be independent and it will be one state.” Muslims said “no” because their [Hindu] literature, culture and other things are all different so they demanded two states. At that time for these reasons we demanded Pakistan. But Gandhi said “no. We are two peoples but we live in one India. There will be one state.” For rejecting this, I think, riots started between Muslims and Hindus.

Regardless of the source of the conflict, by 1947 the categories Hindu and Muslim had crystallized for some as a place of belonging and safety from the threat posed by the other side.

But even in 1947, when this religious groupism was at its height, it was not a universal feeling. Roy (2009) analysed newspaper editorials and letters-to-the-editor in the year before Partition and found a range of opinions about the impending event in Bengal. There were both letters arguing for division and those that advocated a united Bengal. Roy writes (2009, p. 1375):

The historiography on Muslim politics has convincingly shown that in Bengal, the Pakistan idea had moved away from its central focus on religion as the basis of unity and had metamorphosed into a more socio-democratic ideal resulting in a myriad of “Pakistans”.

Even in 1947, Hindu and Muslim populations were not monolithic blocs, but rather there were a multitude of individuals with varying degrees of affiliation with the categories India, Pakistan and Bengal, as well as Muslim, Hindu and Bengali – among many others.

One example is the United Bengal Scheme proposed in April 1947 by Huseyn Suhrawardy who was the Chief Minister of Bengal at the time and would later become the Defence Minister and the Prime Minister of Pakistan. He brought together a coalition of other leaders in Bengal including Sarat Chandra Bose, an Indian National Congress leader, to propose the alternative of a United Bengal (Chakrabarty, 2003). Suhrawardy was concerned that the eastern sections of Bengal would suffer under the Partition plan because it had neither a major port nor the manufacturing facilities to process its agricultural production. Furthermore, Suhrawardy was born in Midnapur, which is in contemporary West Bengal, and he was educated and resided in Calcutta. It must have been hard for him to imagine joining a political entity that did not include his homes or the region’s major city. Despite the local political coalition, the plan did not gain the support of the major national parties and failed. In a letter dated 27 May 1947 that Bose wrote to Sardar Patel, another Congress leader who would become the first Deputy Prime Minister of India, Bose lamented that “Future generations will, I am afraid, condemn us for conceding the division of India and supporting the partition of Bengal and Punjab” (Das, 1972, pp. 45–46).

Many current residents of Bangladesh and West Bengal share this sadness. A 35-year-old Muslim female school headmistress says: “In Bangladesh many people have regrets about it. When it was divided, what they did was not good.”

A 90-year-old Hindu male farmer who lives by the border, and witnessed the partition as a 30-year-old, reflects on his experiences:

Q: When you heard that this area was inside Pakistan and that was India, how did you feel?

I was very sad.

Q: What is your feeling today?

There is still the same sorrow today.

As he looked out over his land and the Indian border fence in the distance, a tear ran down his cheek.

Others, however, argue that the Partition definitely benefited some. For example, if the partition had not occurred in 1947, then Bangladesh would have never been an independent

country, it would be a province in India like Hyderabad. Additionally, some current residents credit the partition with allowing them to have the opportunities they do. A 73-year-old Muslim male politician explains:

Q: What do you think of the 1947 partition?

In my view, Muslims profited from the division. I am talking about Birampur and Dinajpur, in those places there was nowhere that was controlled by Muslims [before partition]. In our district all of the businessmen, all of the businessmen, were Hindus. They were the zamindars, they controlled the rice mills, they were the jotedar [local landowner, foreman]. ... After partition, then Muslims came here and started businesses. Over time, Hindu people, because of fear, left the area. They exchanged their land [with Muslims in India]. They went to live in India. When I was studying in school only one teacher was Muslim, he was the Islamic studies teacher. All of the rest were Hindus. Our headmaster was a Brahmin Hindu. And the postmaster was a Hindu man. The station master was a Hindu man. At the time [in his town], out of all of the businessmen there was only one Muslim, and he was in the leather business [a job a Hindu would not do]. We called him a merchant because it was only the leather business. There were not any Muslim businessmen.

Although the case can be made that residents who identify as Muslim Bengalis benefited from the Partition in the long run, in 1947 their political leaders did not support it.

In the Bengal provincial assembly there were three votes about Partition in June 1947. The entire assembly voted 126 to 90 against joining India. Then, in a sleight of hand, the assembly broke up into Muslim and Hindu caucuses. The Muslim caucus voted against Mountbatten's Partition plan, which was the one implemented, by a vote of 106 to 35. Then they voted by the same margin for a non-existent plan for an undivided province of Bengal to join Pakistan. The Hindu caucus voted 58 to 21 in favour of Mountbatten's partition plan to divide Bengal. The rules set out that there only needed to be one positive vote, so it was recorded that Bengal supported the partition. The move to divide the caucuses was clever because if the entire assembly's vote was counted, it would have failed 127–93 (Chatterji, 1994; Roy, 2009).

Just as there was ambivalence in Bengal in the lead-up to the 1947 partition, the feeling of pan-Islamic groupism faded quickly for most residents of East Pakistan in the years after and was replaced by a different event–narrative–groupness process based on a Bengali ethnic category. The killings at Dhaka University on 21 February 1952 became the new event that was memorialized and sedimented into the collective memory of the population. One of the slogans of the Bangladeshi independence movement was “Hindus of Bengal, Christians of Bengal, Buddhists of Bengal, Muslims of Bengal, We are all Bengali”. When it gained its independence in 1971, the country was named Bangladesh, which means “country of the Bengalis”. Many of the symbols of the state were chosen to emphasize the cultural and linguistic characteristics of the population. In Bangladesh there are language martyr memorials at virtually every school in the country and UNESCO designated February 21st International Mother Language Day (Anisuzzaman, 1993).

Each of these group identity categories is based on real antecedents in the history of the area. There were local religious and cultural practices in Bengal that made it distinct from other places and created constituencies for narratives about Hindu, Muslim, Bengali, Indian and Pakistani identity categories. What did not exist were sharp boundaries between these various identity categories. Instead, there were mixed, blurred and partial practices that varied from village to village and family to family. As modern states and polities were established, larger groups of people were necessary to organize the population into the nations that define the nation-state. The Hindu–Muslim division that was proposed for the 1947 partition was not any less authentic than the Bengali ethnic division that led to the 1971 independence of Bangladesh. Both were based on aspects of local practices that were re-imaged and redeployed on a larger scale.

5. Conclusion

The problem with the Partition of India is not that they drew the line in the wrong place; the problem is drawing lines in the first place. While this conclusion may seem evident to scholars that study partition and nationalism, contemporary events suggest that these implications are not yet widely known. In July 2011, Sudan was partitioned to create two separate countries based on ethnic and religious categories; however “ethnic conflict” has continued and perhaps intensified in the newly independent state (Kushkush, 2013). The consequences of the partitioning of the former Yugoslavia continue to impact many peoples’ lives with violence in Bosnia and the still unrecognized status of Kosovo. On 6 March 2014, after the Russian invasion of the Crimea, the Crimean parliament prepared to vote to partition Ukraine (Hersenhorn & Cowell, 2014).

The failure of partition as a modernist approach to the problem of political territories is evident in South Asia where there continue to be violence, war and security spending in order to defend lines drawn on a map over a brief period in the summer of 1947 (Jones, 2012). Even though the ill-conceived Pakistan did fall apart, the remnants of partition in Bengal leave the odd situation in which approximately one-third of the Bengali-speaking population lives in India in the state of West Bengal and two-third in Bangladesh. Calcutta, the historical, cultural, political and economic centre of Bengal is not in “the country of the Bengalis”, a fact that is as nonsensical as Paris not being in France. Not only is there a line on a map, but the borderlands are violent and militarized to an extent that would have been hard to imagine even 15 years ago.

In contemporary Bangladesh and West Bengal, many people still wonder about why the division happened. A 63-year-old Muslim male middle school teacher says:

Q: Why was Bengal divided and not Orissa or Bihar?

Yes, why was Bengal divided. [*in English*] *It is a very critical question.* Bengal ... the division was not based on language. It was divided based only on religion. The majority of this area was Muslim and the majority of that area was Hindu, even though they speak Bangla. Now we are aware that dividing it in this way was wrong. A singular Bengal should exist.

A 38-year-old Muslim male businessman in India says:

Q: Is there any difference between West Bengali culture and Bangladeshi culture?

No, there is no difference. There is only partition. In culture, in songs, in religious practices, there is no difference at all. Only our country is different.

The partition was based on the false assumption that people can be logically divided up into groups based on identity categories and territorial maps. The point is not that “Bengali” would have been a better category on which to base the partition. The crystallization of religious nations was momentary and fragile even at the time of partition, but so is the crystallization of a pan-Bengali allegiance, which is stronger in Bangladesh than in West Bengal. Neither ethnic nor religious affiliations are permanent and essential identities. They are territorial groups of meaning that coalesce in response to events and narratives about land, identity and belonging.

The first false assumption is that identity categories are coherent, cohesive groups. In Bengal the boundaries between the categories “Hindu” and “Muslim” were blurry, overlapping and incipient. However, through the use of the binary categories in censuses, political appropriations and media reports about violence, affiliations with these categories coalesced in the years before partition. The mistake was assuming a momentary feeling of groupness was the same as an eternal and essential group identity. These categories are not “a thing *in* the world, they a perspective *on* the world” (Brubaker, Loveman, & Stamatov, 2004, p. 32, emphasis in the original).

The second false assumption of Partition was that these inchoate boundaries between categories corresponded to the lines and names drawn on maps. Maps also do not represent a thing in the world but rather a perspective on the world. They are a drawing (or today an array of coloured pixels) based on a series of decisions about what to depict, what scale to use, what projection to use and, crucially, what to exclude. Territories on the ground only come into being when an individual or organization marks them off and limits access to them. They are always in a process of becoming and need to be reiterated in order to retain their effectiveness. Territories like Bengal, Bangladesh, India and Pakistan do not exist until people name them, give meaning to them and bound them. In Bengal, Radcliffe's line on the map was not marked in any way on the ground until the 1950s when border stones were laid. For many years after the Partition, people continued to cross over the imaginary line to visit relatives, go to the market, attend festivals or help their neighbours in the fields. The line came into full force only very recently when India fenced it and placed a large deployment of Border Security Force agents there.

The materialization of the line on the map does have normative consequences as events are narrated and placed into the collective memory of the population. Over time, a generation of school children in Bangladesh grows up learning they are Bangladeshi and have a history tied to that territory. A generation of children in India grows up learning they are Indian and have a history tied to that territory. The process of bounding a territory is a powerful way to create a container for the sets of emotions linked to identity categories and to make sense of the complexity of the world. The categories and territories are real, but only to the extent that people believe they are and use them as the basis for decisions and actions. Consequently, the false premise of partition is increasingly actualized – at least momentarily – on the ground through boundary narratives, bordering practices and the passage of time.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Ned Bertz for comments on an earlier version of this paper. The paper was originally presented at the "Partitions: Towards Transnational History of Twentieth Century Territorial Separatism" workshop at Stanford University. Thanks to the organizers and participants for useful comments. The findings are based in part on work supported by the US National Science Foundation under Grant No. 0602206, the American Institute of Bangladesh Studies, and the Political Geography Specialty Group of the American Association of Geographers. Any errors that remain are mine.

Notes

1. The interview data were collected in 2006 and 2007 in Bangladesh and India. One hundred and one interviews and fifteen focus groups were held in Dhaka, Calcutta and along the border in Dinajpur, Bangladesh and Dakshin Dinajpur, India. The majority of the interviews were conducted in Bengali and translated by the author in collaboration with a research assistant in Bangladesh. The historical documents are drawn from British government documents and census reports.
2. Rafiuddin Ahmed writes that,

At the level of the masses, the social difference between the two communities was not so obvious; they were both part of the same agricultural community and generally followed the same professions. They both shared a common pattern of rural life, spoke the same language (perhaps with minor variations in vocabulary) and even participated in the same rituals.

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