

1947: Partition in the Army



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The fact that the Indian Army also influenced the decision on Partition needs to be taken into account. After their experience with Cromwell's military dictatorship, the British ardently nurtured the concept of an apolitical army. It suited them to transplant that concept in the Indian Army that they raised. While this concept continues to hold good in India, it was thrown overboard in Pakistan. After 1857, the British decided not to have one-class regiments except for Gorkhas and Garhwalis. All other combat units were composed of 50 per cent Muslims and 50 per cent non-Muslims. Different communities living together in war and peace and encouraged to remain apolitical developed a regimental ethos that held them together.

I was commissioned in the Jat Regiment, which had two companies of Jat Hindus and two of Muslims. I served with a Punjabi Muslim company. I found the regimental spirit among the men strong. There was no communal divide. This continued in the Army till the end of 1946 but started cracking in 1947, reaching breaking point by August 1947. Yet I saw that when the Muslim companies of the Jat Regiment were going to Pakistan, tears were shed on both sides. This happened in other regiments as well.

Indian officers during British rule hardly ever discussed political matters among themselves. I recall that in Rangoon, soon after the end of World War II, one junior British officer referred to the INA as traitors and used vulgar epithets. There was no senior officer present in the Mess. This led to a heated discussion between the British and Indian officers, both Hindus and Muslims.

The Indian Army then got involved in a strange war in Indonesia. It had been sent there primarily to take the surrender of the Japanese. The Dutch had been driven out and accompanied the Indian Army to re-establish colonial rule. But the Indonesians had declared independence and had their own army. The Indian Army got involved in fighting the Indonesians. The Indonesians would tell us that we were ourselves not free and yet we were fighting against their becoming independent. This was embarrassing to hear. When the Indonesians raised the banner of Islam in their appeal to Indian soldiers, I was told that about a thousand or more of our Muslim soldiers deserted and joined them. They were left behind

when we came out from Indonesia. I mention this because this was the first time that I saw the virus of communalism affecting the Army.

Notwithstanding the early signs in Indonesia, it is remarkable that during the outbreak of communal violence in August 1946 and till well after 1947 had set in, the Indian soldier, Hindu and Muslim, showed remarkable impartiality when dealing with communal violence. This was so in Kolkata in August 1946, in Bihar in October 1946 and in Garhmukteshwar (Uttar Pradesh) in November 1946. Two or three battalions of the Bihar Regiment, which had Hindus and Muslims in equal number, had operated in Bihar during the communal riots with complete impartiality. At the time of those riots, Col. Naser Ali Khan, who later went to the Pakistan Army, and I were serving at General Headquarters in Delhi. He was many years senior and always very kind. One morning at breakfast, after having read a newspaper report about the Bihar riots, he told me excitedly that his blood boiled when he remembered that I was Bihari. I told him I condemned what was happening in Bihar more than him. He was not the only Muslim officer I interacted with in Delhi who was so worked up over the terrible rioting in Bihar. I mention these incidents to show how circumstances were forcing the communal virus to spread in the Army. Till March 1947, things appeared under control. Localised communal riots took place in different places and the Army, deployed to maintain order, remained disciplined and impartial. Wavell, in his farewell address on March 21, 1947, said, "I believe that the stability of the Indian Army may perhaps be the deciding factor in the future of India".

With Muslim League ministries coming to power both in Punjab and the North-West Frontier Province, communal passions were sought to be aroused in a planned manner. Widespread communal riots erupted in Peshawar and Rawalpindi. Soon entire North India was on fire. The strain on the soldiers started showing. Most of the soldiers, both Muslim and non-Muslim, were from the north. Their homeland was being ravaged and, in several cases, their families had become victims. It was becoming increasingly difficult for them to remain impartial. The downslide became more perceptible after Partition was announced. The day after that announcement I met two officers in Delhi with strange shoulder titles — RPE and RPASC. In those days officers from Engineers and Army Service Corps wore the shoulder titles RIE (Royal Indian Engineers) and RIASC (Royal Indian Army Service Corps). Some officers had begun to wear Pakistan shoulder titles within hours of the Partition announcement and much before Pakistan was born. There were reports of senior Muslim officers going to meet Jinnah, who then lived at 10, Aurangzeb Road in Delhi.

On the morrow of Independence in August 1947 the Gilgit Scouts staged a coup, arresting Brigadier Ghansara Singh of the Kashmir Army who had been sent there as governor by the Maharaja. This was the first military coup in the Pakistan Army. More would follow.

The Punjab Boundary Force, comprising in equal measure units earmarked for the Indian and Pakistan Armies, was set up under a British commander in late July 1947. It was hoped that it would help maintain order on both sides of the border at a time when communal violence and migration were peaking. The experiment failed because the impartiality of the soldier had been eroded and there were several instances of soldiers taking sides. Large-scale violence again erupted in Kolkata, prompting Mahatma Gandhi to fast with dramatic effect. It was then that Mountbatten remarked that a one-man boundary force had succeeded in Kolkata while the 50,000-strong Punjab Boundary Force had failed in the north. The Punjab Boundary Force was disbanded and the two Dominions assumed responsibility for maintaining order on their side of the border.

In mid-1947, Sardar Patel, based on his experience in the Interim Government when the Muslim League had brought government functioning to a halt, the peaking of communal violence and the Army getting contaminated combating communal violence for nearly a year, realised there was now no alternative to Partition. His decision to salvage the wreck in 1947 was an act of statesmanship. Otherwise, things would have become much worse. We could have had a civil war with the Army broken up and participating from both sides. India may have broken up into several independent states, like the erstwhile Yugoslavia, or could have become a much larger version of today's Lebanon. ❖

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