

ANANTAM IAS · OPTIONAL NOTES

History Optional Politics of Separatism

Paper 2 · Unit 12

The Muslim League, the two-nation theory and the road to partition: 20 marks in four years, and the unit that most rewards careful, non-partisan handling.

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UPSC SYLLABUS

Politics of separatism: the Muslim League; the Hindu Mahasabha; communalism and the politics of partition; transfer of power; Indian independence.

The making of communal politics

Communalism has a history and a set of causes, and any answer that treats it as an eternal antagonism will be marked down.

- **Bipan Chandra** defines communalism as the belief that people of the same religion have common secular political and economic interests, and that these differ from those of other religions, and that formulation is the standard starting point.
- **Colonial policy** contributed through the census which counted and fixed religious communities, through the communal periodisation of Indian history in James Mill, and through separate electorates from 1909.
- **Economic competition** among the emerging middle classes for government jobs and professional openings gave the ideology a material base, particularly in Bengal and the United Provinces.
- **Socio-religious reform** hardened boundaries unintentionally, since shuddhi, tabligh, cow protection and Urdu-Hindi controversy all defined communities against one another.
- **Nationalist idiom** contributed, since Tilak's Ganapati and Shivaji festivals, Bankim's Anandamath and the imagery of Bharat Mata drew on Hindu symbols that Muslims could not share.
- **Regional variation** is essential to any honest answer, since Muslim politics in Punjab under the Unionist Party, in Bengal under Fazlul Huq, and in the United Provinces differed sharply, and the League only captured all three late.
- **Uneven development** mattered, since Muslims were under-represented in English education and government service in Bengal and the United Provinces, which made proportional safeguards attractive.

The Muslim League and the Hindu Mahasabha

Both organisations are named in the syllabus, and treating only one produces an unbalanced answer.

- **Simla Deputation of October 1906** to Minto sought separate representation, and the **All India Muslim League** was founded at Dacca in December 1906.
- **Lucknow Pact of 1916** between Congress and the League, negotiated with Tilak and Jinnah prominent, accepted separate electorates in exchange for joint political action, and it is the high point of cooperation.
- **Jinnah's trajectory** is the unit's most examinable individual story, moving from ambassador of Hindu-Muslim unity in Gokhale's description, through resignation from Congress in 1920, to the demand for Pakistan.
- **Lahore Resolution of 1940** demanded independent states in the Muslim-majority regions, and the plural word states in the original text is a detail worth knowing.
- **Hindu Mahasabha**, founded in 1915 and led by **Savarkar** from 1937, propounded **Hindutva** as defined in Savarkar's 1923 text, resting on pitrubhumi and punyabhumi.

- **Cow protection** movements from the 1880s and the **Hindi-Urdu controversy** over the script of government business in the United Provinces are the two earliest sustained communal mobilisations, and both predate either organisation.
- **RSS**, founded by Hedgewar in 1925, developed as a cultural organisation outside electoral politics, and both bodies opposed Congress secular nationalism from the other side.
- **Two-nation theory** was articulated from both directions, by Savarkar in 1937 and by Jinnah in 1940, which is a point that a balanced answer should make explicitly.
- **Congress ministries of 1937 to 1939** are the hinge in most accounts, since the refusal of coalition with the League in the United Provinces convinced Jinnah that Muslims could expect no share of power in a Congress-majority India, and the League's subsequent growth dates from that decision.
- **Muslim opposition to partition** was substantial and is routinely omitted, including the Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind, the Khudai Khidmatgar under Ghaffar Khan, and Maulana Azad as Congress president.

The road to partition

Six years from the Lahore Resolution to independence. The sequence of failed settlements is the substance.

- **Cripps Mission of 1942** offered post-war dominion status with a right of provinces to opt out, which conceded the principle of partition in embryo.
- **Quit India** and the arrest of the Congress leadership left the League free to organise for three years, and its growth between 1942 and 1945 is the decisive political fact of the period.
- **1945 to 1946 elections** gave the League roughly ninety per cent of Muslim seats, which converted its claim to represent Muslims from an assertion into an electoral fact.
- **Cabinet Mission of 1946** proposed a three-tier federation with grouping of provinces, rejecting Pakistan while conceding substantial autonomy, and both parties accepted it before disputing what grouping meant.
- **Direct Action Day, 16 August 1946**, and the Calcutta killings began a cycle of violence through Noakhali, Bihar and Punjab that made continued coexistence in one state politically unsustainable.
- **Mountbatten Plan of 3 June 1947** provided for partition, and the **Indian Independence Act** passed in July with the transfer set for 15 August.
- **Radcliffe** was given five weeks to draw the boundary with no prior knowledge of India, and the awards were published after independence, which contributed directly to the scale of the violence.
- **Consequences** were the deaths of perhaps a million people, the displacement of ten to fifteen million, and the Kashmir dispute, all within months.

Transfer of power and independence

Named in the syllabus alongside separatism, and the mechanics of the final year are examinable in their own right.

- **Wavell Plan and the Simla Conference of 1945** failed over Jinnah's insistence that only the League could nominate Muslim members of the proposed executive council.

- **Attlee's statement of February 1947** fixed a deadline of June 1948 for transfer, which introduced urgency and, in the view of many historians, made a negotiated settlement less rather than more likely.
- **Mountbatten** arrived in March 1947, concluded within weeks that partition was unavoidable, and advanced the date to August 1947, cutting fifteen months from the timetable.
- **Indian Independence Act 1947**, passed in July, created two dominions, provided for the partition of Bengal and Punjab, and lapsed paramountcy over the princely states.
- **Boundary Commissions** under **Cyril Radcliffe** worked from outdated maps and census data in about five weeks, and the awards were withheld until after 15 August to avoid the administrative burden of the consequences.
- **Violence** in Punjab was the worst, with organised killing, mass displacement and abduction of women on both sides, and the state's capacity to prevent it had already been divided.
- **Recovery of abducted women** through the Inter-Dominion agreement and the Abducted Persons Act of 1949 is a dimension that historians including **Urvashi Butalia** and **Ritu Menon** brought into the record, and it is worth citing.
- **Assessment** of the haste is the standard question, and the balance of scholarly opinion holds that the compressed timetable increased casualties without altering the political outcome.

The historiographical debate

Partition is the most contested question in modern Indian history, and naming the positions is the safest way to handle it.

- **Nationalist school**, including Bipan Chandra, attributes partition chiefly to colonial divide and rule and to the League's communalism, treating it as avoidable.
- **Ayesha Jalal** in *The Sole Spokesman* of 1985 argued that Jinnah used the Pakistan demand as a **bargaining counter** for parity within a united India, and that Congress's refusal of that parity produced the actual partition.
- Jalal's thesis is contested but it must be named, since it is the single most influential revisionist work on the subject.
- **Congress responsibility** is argued by others, pointing to the rejection of coalition in the United Provinces in 1937, the refusal of the Cabinet Mission's grouping, and the leadership's acceptance of partition in 1947 to obtain a strong centre.
- **British responsibility** rests on separate electorates, on the calculated use of communal balance, and on the haste of the final transfer under Mountbatten.
- The position to write: partition had **multiple and interacting causes**, no single actor determined it, and an answer that blames one party exclusively will read as partisan rather than historical.
- **Consequences beyond 1947** include the Kashmir dispute, the position of minorities in both states, three subsequent wars and the further partition of Pakistan in 1971, so the settlement of 1947 did not settle the questions it was meant to.
- **Tone** matters more here than anywhere else in the paper, and a measured, evidence-led treatment is what examiners reward.

- Simla Deputation October 1906, League founded Dacca December 1906, Lucknow Pact 1916, Jinnah leaves Congress 1920, Lahore Resolution 1940 with states in the plural.
- Hindu Mahasabha 1915 and Savarkar's Hindutva 1923; RSS 1925; two-nation theory from both directions.
- Cripps 1942, League growth 1942-45, 1945-46 elections give the League about 90 per cent of Muslim seats, Cabinet Mission 1946, Direct Action Day 16 August 1946, Mountbatten Plan 3 June 1947, Radcliffe's five weeks.
- Jalal 1985 on the bargaining counter; nationalist school on divide and rule; Congress responsibility over 1937 UP and Cabinet Mission grouping.

Common errors to avoid

- Treating Hindu-Muslim antagonism as ancient. Communalism is a modern political ideology with datable causes.
- Discussing the League without the Hindu Mahasabha, when the syllabus names both and the two-nation theory came from both directions.
- Omitting Muslim opposition to partition, including the Jamiat, Ghaffar Khan and Azad.
- Ignoring Ayesha Jalal's thesis, which is contested but is the most influential revisionist account.
- Writing partisan history. This is the unit where a measured evidence-led tone matters most.

Mains Practice

The strength of the Pakistan programme was its vagueness. It meant everything to everyone.

10 marks · 150 words · 2024

“If abdication of British responsibility at the time of transfer of power was callous, the speed with which it was done made it worse.”

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