

Pakistan affairs

Discuss the political challenges faced by Pakistan from 1947 to 1971. How did leadership crisis, regional disparities, and Political Instability contribute to the Separation of East Pakistan?

Pakistan emerged as a new state in August 1947, carved out of British India with two wings, East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and West Pakistan, separated by 1600km of Indian territory. Despite the promise of unity under the Two-Nation theory, political mismanagement, weak leadership, economic disparities and authoritarianism gradually eroded the bond between the two wings. These issues culminated in the tragic separation of East Pakistan in December 1971.

- The political system in Pakistan was destroyed not by the indiscipline of politicians alone, but by the collision of generals, judges, and bureaucrats who abandoned the democratic path for the sake of expediency.

- Ayesha Jalal, The State of Martial Rule

Political challenges:- (1947- 1971)

a) Leadership crisis:

As Pakistan's founding father, Jinnah provided ideological and political direction. But after his death, it created leadership vacuum at a critical time when Pakistan was struggling with refugee crisis, economic stability and ~~leadership~~ the Kashmir conflict and the need for institutional development. The assassination of Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan in 1951 removed the last unifying figure of early Pakistan, further destabilizing political structure. The period witnessed frequent leadership changes, with seven Prime Ministers and four Governor Generals in just eleven years, resulting in administrative paralysis and policy inconsistency. This institutional failure to assert authority, leading to authoritarian governance trends that marginalized democratic process.

b) Weak Constitutional Development:-

Pakistan's constitutional journey reflected persistent delays and instability, aggravating political divisions. For nine years, the country operated under the Government of India Act 1935, lacking a constitutional development framework to define federal relations and provincial autonomy. The 1956 constitution introduced a parliamentary system ~~that~~ but was short lived as General Ayub Khan imposed martial law in 1958, dissolving it and establishing 1962 constitution, which created a presidential system that centralized power and diminished East Pakistan's representation. The controversial one unit scheme of 1955, which merged the four western provinces into a single administrative unit to balance East Pakistan's demographic majority (56%), further deepened resentment. This constitutional inconsistency weakened national integration and reinforced feelings of political alienation, particularly

In East Pakistan.

52 Regional disparities:-

East Pakistan consistently faced economic and political neglect from 1947 to 1971, which fueled secessionist sentiments. In the First Five-year plan, only 28% (Rs 254 crore) of the total Rs 1,160 crore investment was allocated to East Pakistan, despite it housing the larger population. By 1964-65, per capita income was Rs 281 in East Pakistan compared to Rs 412 in West Pakistan, and by 1969, the income gap had widened by 47%. Industrial ownership was also skewed, with Bengalis owning only 11% of industrial assets by 1959, despite contributing around 70% of Pakistan's export earnings through jute production.

Additionally, the Language Controversy of 1948-52, where Urdu was imposed as the sole national language, led to the deaths of Bengali protestors and deep cultural alienation until Bengali was

recognized in 1956. Furthermore, Bengalis were severely underrepresented in state structures, forming only 6% of the armed forces and holding minimal positions in the central bureaucracy.

4) Political Instability:-

Frequent dismissals of Govt and centralization of power contributed significantly to national disunity. Throughout the 1950's, Prime ministers were removed arbitrarily using the Governor-General's reserve powers, undermining democratic institutions. The imposition of Ayub Khan's martial law (1958-1969) banned political parties, stifled dissent, and centralized decision making in West-Pakistan, exacerbating East Pakistan's grievances. The 1965 war with India further alienated the eastern wing, as West Pakistan dominated defence policy, leaving East Pakistan militarily vulnerable and economically neglected. The situation worsened with the 'Agartala conspiracy case (1968)' in which Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and others were accused of plotting East Pakistan's secession,

Intensifying Bengali mistrust towards the central government and paving the way for political polarisation.

Road to Separation of East Pakistan:

1. Rise of Bengali Nationalism:

The Pakistan's future was marred by internal divisions, particularly ~~by~~ between its East and West wings. This eventually led to the catastrophic civil war of 1971, resulting in the secession of East Pakistan and the birth of new nation of Bangladesh.

A poignant quote from 'The Blood Telegram: Nixon Kissinger and a Forgotten Genocide' by Garry J. Bass captures the essence of the tragic divergence:

- What happened in East Pakistan in 1971 is a tragedy, the kind of tragedy that grows from a mixture of imperial neglect, national ambition and a failure of understanding of local realities.

As historian 'Ayesha Jalal' argues:-

- The Two Nation Theory was not invalidated in 1971, but it was tested and fractured by the inability to translate ideology into equitable governance.

a) Rise of ^{Bengali} Nationalism.

The Rise of Bengali Nationalism in East Pakistan stemmed from the deep-rooted political, economic, and cultural disparities between East and West Pakistan. Despite constituting a majority of the population, Bengalis were underrepresented in civil services, military and political decision-making. Linguistic controversies, such as the imposition of Urdu as sole language, fueled resentment and led to the language movement of 1952, where students sacrificed their lives demanding recognition of Bengali. Economic exploitation further aggravated grievances, as East Pakistan generated the bulk of foreign exchange through jute exports but received disproportionately

low federal investment. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman emerged as key leader advocating for autonomy, culminating his 'Six-Point Program' of 1966, which demanded control over trade, taxation and foreign exchange by East Pakistan. These points became the manifesto of Bengali nationalism, signaling a clear shift toward self-rule and eventual secession if demands were ignored.

b) 1970 General Elections and Power Crisis:

The 1970 General Elections were a turning point in Pakistan's political history and a direct prelude to the separation of East Pakistan. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's Awami League won 167 out of 169 East Pakistani seats in the National Assembly, securing an overall majority with 167 out of 300 seats. This gave Mujibur Rahman the constitutional rights to form the federal government. However, the West Pakistan leaders, particularly

president

Yahya Khan and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, resisted transferring power, fearing loss of political dominance and disintegration of state.

Bhutto famously declared 'udhar tum, idhar ham' (you rule there, we rule here), indicating his unwillingness to accept Mujib as prime minister.

The resulting political deadlock, compounded by Yahya Khan's mishandling and military suppression, triggered massive unrest in East Pakistan,

culminating in the launch of 'Operation Searchlight' in March 1971 and eventually leading to the Bangladesh Liberation War.

c) Military operation and Operation Searchlight:

On March 25, 1971, the Pakistan Army launched Operation Searchlight, a large-scale military operation aimed at suppressing Bengali nationalist movements. The operation targeted Dhaka University political activists and pro-independence groups, resulting in mass killings, widespread destruction, and human rights abuses. Estimates suggest

that over 500,000 people were killed, while 10 million refugees fled to India, creating one of the largest humanitarian crises in South Asian history. The military crackdown was intended to restore Pakistan's authority but instead deepened resentment and intensified the demand for independence. The violent suppression drew global criticism, with Western media referring to it as 'genocide', further isolating Pakistan diplomatically.

d) Indian Intervention and Fall of Dhaka:-

India, already hosting millions of refugees, openly supported the 'Mukti Bahini', the Bengali guerilla resistance movement, through training and military assistance. By December 1971, India launched a full-scale military intervention, framing it as a humanitarian effort to end mass atrocities and stabilize the region. Within two weeks, Indian forces, in coordination of Mukti Bahini, defeated Pakistani troops. On 16, December, 1971, Lieutenant General A.A.K. Niazi signed the instrument of

the surrender in Dhaka, making the formal creation of Bangladesh. This defeat led to Pakistan's dismemberment, a severe blow to its national psyche, and a major realignment of South Asian geopolitics, with India emerging as regional power.

Critical analysis:-

The breakup of Pakistan in 1971 was not solely a geographical inevitability but the result of persistent political mismanagement and flawed statecraft. Leadership failures from 1947 to 1971 deprived nation of a clear vision and continuity, with successive regimes failing to establish ~~and~~ a representative and inclusive political framework. Economic exploitation of East Pakistan, despite it contributing the majority of export revenue through jute, reinforced feelings of alienation. Delayed constitutionalism and authoritarian rule weakened democratic mechanisms, preventing dialogue-based solutions to emerging

Grievances.

Military suspension in Operation Searchlight transformed what was initially a political movement into a violent liberation struggle. Negotiations could have preserved national unity had early concerns such as equitable economic distribution, fair political representation, and language recognition been addressed. Sarmila Bose's book *Dead Reckoning: Memories of the 1971 Bangladesh War* challenges dominant narratives, arguing that the war's history is complex and that atrocities were committed by both sides, not solely the Pakistan Army. Her research suggests that politicized and exaggerated casualty figures shaped global perceptions, further complicating a balanced understanding of the crisis. Nevertheless, the fundamental cause of disintegration remains systemic governance failure rather than mere propaganda or historical misrepresentation.

Conclusion:-

The Separation of East Pakistan was a tragic culmination of weak leadership, economic exploitation, delayed constitution making and Political suppression. It highlights the consequences of ignoring regional grievances and the dangers of authoritarian approaches to national unity. The inclusion of perspectives like Bose's adds nuance to historical understanding but does not ~~absolve~~ absolve systemic governance failures, recognition of cultural and linguistic diversity, and a robust democratic culture to maintain national cohesion and prevent similar crisis in the future.