



Partitioning the Intelligence Branch: Problems of the Intelligence officials of West Bengal

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Abstract

The division of the Intelligence Branch (IB) between East Bengal and West Bengal, due to the British partition of Bengal in 1947, adversely affected the operations of IB officials. From the division of intelligence records to the division of officials, the problems faced by the IB of West Bengal were tremendous. Unfortunately, the problems encountered by the IB officials due to partition have received little historical attention. This paper, therefore, using declassified data from the West Bengal State Archives and a few other memoirs, will showcase the problems arising from the partition of the Intelligence Branch. By highlighting the challenges, the paper will underscore that a disarrayed intelligence system resulting from partition was a reason behind the lawlessness in post-independent West Bengal. Besides the organization problem, the paper will also highlight the challenges faced by the intelligence officials at a personal level.

Keywords: Partition; West Bengal; East Bengal; Intelligence Branch; Post-independence

Introduction

The “standard history” (Kamtekar, 2017 : 1064) of the Intelligence Branch (IB) of West Bengal ends in 1947, the year of India’s partition and independence from British rule. After this, the agency has not been mentioned by historians anywhere. Like Punjab, Bengal – the Indian province – bore the brunt of partition and was divided into West Bengal, which remained within India, and East Bengal, which went to Pakistan. As a result of this division, the IB of Bengal was also split, creating chaos within the agency. However, no piece of literature describes the ordeal of the IB officials that followed the split.

The division of the IB between West Bengal and East Bengal led to the division of its records, vehicles and, most importantly, its officials. As a result, it reduced IB West Bengal’s capacity to operate and restrained it from functioning against threats. Unfortunately, the issues arising from the division of a premier security agency like the IB have gained little attention from historians. Instead, the partition literature, as argued by Sekhar Bandyopadhyay (2009 : 2), is dominated by the narratives of refugees and borderland inhabitants. Though we find a few pieces of literature on the partition’s impact on government agencies and institutions, the impact on the IB has received little attention. As a result, the problems encountered by the IB officials from the partition remain obscure.



Drawing on declassified data from the West Bengal State Archives and a few memoirs, this paper examines the impact of partition on the Intelligence Branch of West Bengal. An analysis of the constraints arising from the split will reveal the chaos within the agency that prevented its officers from seamless functioning against lawlessness in post-independent West Bengal. It will also reveal the crisis faced by IB officials, despite their status as government servants, at a personal level. Before showcasing these problems, the paper will provide a brief overview of the Intelligence Branch's colonial origins. This is because without understanding the IB's background, it will be difficult to understand the problems faced by IB officials in the aftermath of partition.

Origin of the Intelligence Branch

Formed in 1908, in the aftermath of the British partition of Bengal in 1906, the Intelligence Branch was headed by a Deputy Inspector General of Police (DIG) (Silvestri, 2019: 42). With CWC Plowden as the first DIG, the IB's role was to gather intelligence for the British government in Bengal (Ibid). Since Lord Curzon's decision to partition Bengal led to the assassinations of the colonial officers by the Indian revolutionaries, the colonial state established this secret organization within the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) to gather intelligence on political crime. Led by British Imperial Police officers, the IB was part of the Bengal Police force, whose subordinate ranks were occupied by Indian police officers. Headquartered at 13, Lord Sinha Road, Calcutta, the IB used to gather intelligence from the District Intelligence Branches (DIBs), which were stationed in every district headquarters under a Superintendent of Police (SP) or an Additional Superintendent of Police (ASP). The task of the DIBs, through the District Intelligence officers, who in turn depended on police officers at local police stations, was to gather intelligence through a network of agents and informers, and transmit it to the IB headquarters, where, after analysis, the intelligence was presented to the government for guiding its strategic actions (Silvestri, 2019: 78). In 1947, this secret organization was split between West Bengal and East Bengal, leading to serious repercussions. At the same time, its management passed into the hands of Indian police officers, and Hirendranath Sircar became the first IB chief of post-independent West Bengal.

Partitioning the Intelligence Branch

On June 3, 1947, when Lord Mountbatten announced the decision to partition India, a Partition Committee comprising leaders of the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League was formed under his leadership (Sengupta, 2014: 530). While the Congress in this committee was represented by Sardar Patel and Rajendra Prasad, the League was represented by Liaquat Ali Khan and Abdur Rishab Nishtar (Ibid.). Aided by an Expert Committee of senior bureaucrats, the Partition Committee was responsible for overseeing matters of division (Ibid). To bridge the gap between the Partition Committee and the Expert Committee, a Steering Committee was established, headed by H.M. Patel and Muhammad Ali (Ibid). While this was the setup at the central level, partitioned provinces like Punjab and Bengal also had a similar one.

Since Bengal was to be partitioned, its administrative assets and liabilities had to be divided between East Bengal and West Bengal (Chatterjee, 2007: 21). To achieve these monumental tasks, Bengal was to set up a Separation Council chaired by the governor, Sir Fredrick Burrows, and assisted by four members, two nominated by the Congress and two by the Muslim League (Ibid). From 26th June 1947, the council began dividing Bengal into two (Ibid). However, there were pressures from all around to get everything done by 21st



July, but later, a few more days were given (Ibid.22). A Steering Committee, composed of Police personnel from both East Bengal and West Bengal, was established to oversee police-related matters (Ibid). As the IB was part of the police force, its division rested on the Steering Committee's decision. Dividing the IB meant dividing its records, vehicles and officials – a complex process that caused diverse problems.

Division of Records

The Steering Committee's decision to divide the intelligence records was the beginning of all the problems. The records covered the Communist Party, labour unrest, IB appointments and training, Congress affairs, interceptions, political suspects, agrarian situations, terrorist societies, foreign countries, legislation, and other miscellaneous matters (Archives, File: 594-47 (3)). The plan was to duplicate these records and then divide them proportionately. But as the records were bulky, duplication was protracted, which delayed the process. The longer the delay, the greater the problem. These records, which contained information about the past, were vital for post-independent intelligence operations. And so, delays in their division and exchange meant delayed intelligence response against lawlessness. Therefore, the pressure on the IB officials to work without records was immense, as evidenced by the steps taken by the DIGs, IB, of West Bengal and East Bengal to hire more typewriters to expedite the process (Ibid).

In addition to the delays, the problem was with records that went missing due to their transfer and destruction by the British before the transfer of power. Known as Operation Legacy, the British, prior to their departure from the country, destroyed voluminous records and transferred them in bulk to London to erase their dirty secrets and conceal the truth, thereby protecting their image (Milmo, 2013). Since these records were databases, their destruction and transfer meant the loss of information, and, as a result, IB of West Bengal faced an enormous challenge. For instance, when districts like Malda and Jalpaiguri were partitioned, East Bengal received no intelligence records of the areas under its jurisdiction from the Steering Committee, as the British had destroyed them before the partition (Archives, File: 594-47 (3)). Without these records, intelligence and policing operations were impossible, which may have allowed criminals and miscreants of those areas to enter West Bengal by infiltrating the border and engage in illicit activities. Thus, the inability of IB, East Bengal, to contain them was not only a problem for East Bengal but also for West Bengal's law and order. Without surveillance and intelligence sharing from the other side, keeping the criminals and miscreants at bay by the IB officials of West Bengal was indeed difficult.

The delays in duplication and problems emerging from the destruction and transfer of records, therefore, played a significant role in preventing the IB of West Bengal from seamless operations.

Division of vehicles

Next to the records, the problem of the IB officials was with the vehicles. Before partition, the IB of undivided Bengal had one motor car, one of which was found to be unserviceable (Archives, File: 840/47). Subsequently, one of the remaining two vehicles was taken to East Bengal, disregarding the Police subcommittee's decision, whose mandate was not to divide the vehicles but to retain them in favour of West Bengal (Ibid). When it



came to light, it caused resentment within IB, West Bengal, as becomes evident from the following note of a senior IB officer:

No order was issued from this office regarding the division of IB's cars.... It is not understood under what authority one of the vehicles was handed over to East Bengal (Ibid).

The tone with which this IB officer wrote the above letter underscores the importance of those vehicles whose division was unacceptable. Vehicles were useful for various security functions, viz., interviewing agents at all hours, carrying important postal letters to guard against tampering, transporting arms and ammunition, and carrying out searches and raids for office purposes (Ibid). However, the resentment was not just for losing such a valuable asset from a security aspect, but also for the economic burden created to purchase a new vehicle, which becomes apparent from the following letter of the same IB officer:

Two Fords would have been adequate for the IB had one not been taken away by East Bengal (Ibid).

Therefore, discontent with the disproportionate allocation of vehicles is evident, underscoring their importance for intelligence operations and the economic burden of purchasing new vehicles to address the resulting deficit. Without sufficient vehicles, it was indeed difficult for IB officials in West Bengal to conduct security functions.

Division of officials

In the wake of the partition, the IB officials, like the other government servants, were given six months to choose either the Government of East Bengal or the Government of West Bengal for service. While the Muslim IB officers opted to serve in East Bengal, their Hindu counterparts chose to remain in West Bengal. The latter's decision was influenced by two factors: (i) moving to East Bengal meant jeopardising their religion and severance of ties with family and friends, and (ii) the Congress party's highhandedness proved far from reality. Although the first one is understandable, the second one needs a detailed analysis. Initially, the Hindu IB officials were highly anxious about the Congress Party's formation of the government in post-independent West Bengal. Since the IB officers had repressed the Congress during the colonial rule, there was a widespread fear that it would launch a drive against them after forming the government. As Joya Chatterji (2007: 37) has said, initially, Congress was apathetic towards the "colonial bureaucrats", for it used to view them as "quislings working for imperial overlords". And so, because of their past actions, the intelligence officials remained sceptical of the Congress government. Such worries were natural given the views of Congress giants like Jawaharlal Nehru— independent India's first Prime Minister—for having had an apparent distaste towards the intelligence agencies, for they during the colonial period kept him "under constant surveillance" (Chaya, 2022: 103). However, this didn't translate into reality, as the Congress's realisation of the necessity of the intelligence service for successful statecraft and diplomacy restrained its leadership from taking a hard stance against it.



Instead, the problem was with the Hindu IB officials of East Bengal who opted to serve in West Bengal. Their influx was so massive that it exceeded the vacancies, creating a barrier to optimisation. Upananda Mukherjee, a former IB chief of West Bengal, has best described the situation in his memoir:

The Hindu police officers came in large numbers from East Bengal. But where were we to keep them? What work should we give them? These were our biggest concerns (Mukherjee, 1987:66). [Translation mine from Bengali to English]

Initially, the plan before partition was to induct East Bengal officials who opted for positions in West Bengal into the vacancies left by West Bengal officials who opted for service in East Bengal. The decision was then to grant special leave to the surplus officers and, later, to appoint them to temporary or permanent vacancies (Archives, File: 594/47 (1)), which did not do any good. Surprisingly, when the division of officials should have reduced the workforce, it did the reverse by augmenting it to an unbearable extent. The situation became so tumultuous that assigning jobs and giving postings to those coming from East Bengal became a strenuous task. Besides, the problem was whether to trust the officials from East Bengal. It was because the influx was so massive that it prevented background checks of these people. Without prior details, it wasn't easy to ascertain their merits before inducting them into the service.

As Sukumar Sen, the then Chief Secretary of West Bengal, noted:

With a tremendous number of surplus employees, the government is experiencing and will experience great difficulties in finding out for all government servants who have opted out of East Bengal for service. The question was...about the efficiency of men taking intrastate transfer whose merits couldn't be ascertained in partition days (Ibid).

Sen's letter suggests the devaluation of the intelligence service due to a lack of vetting of the East Bengalee officials before their induction into the service. Moreover, their untimely promotion to senior positions, along with that of West Bengalee officials, led to some disorganisation in the intelligence service. This became evident when Dr Bidhan Chandra Roy, the Chief Minister of West Bengal, admitted in the legislative assembly that the incompetence of IB officers, due to poor vetting and untimely promotion, reduced the quality of the intelligence service (Secretariat, 2022: 632). One can, therefore, gauge one of the many reasons for IB's inability to repress the increase in lawlessness in post-independent West Bengal. Furthermore, the apathy of a few IB officials, especially those from East Bengal, in joining the DIBs exacerbated the problems. With a reduced workforce, the DIBs of West Dinajpur, Malda, Nadia, Murshidabad, Jalpaiguri, Midnapur, and Darjeeling found it increasingly difficult to sustain intelligence operations. For instance, the situation of DIB West Dinajpur, a district bordering East Bengal, escalated to such an extent that the SP considered taking strict actions by writing to the IB headquarters against the officer who did not join the office:

One assistant, Babu Ajit Kumar Banerji has joined this office, but Phanindranath Ganguly seems to be avoiding this district. Necessary steps may please be taken to ensure that he joins his place of posting without any further delay (Archives, File: 594/47 (1)).

Although we do not have any account of Phanindranath Ganguly, who was from Tippera, East Bengal, to examine his reasons for “avoiding” the district, it is clear from the above text that he was “avoiding” the district. Alongside DIB West Dinajpur, the condition of DIB Malda was so horrible that the district’s SP asked for immediate reinforcements from the IB headquarters (Ibid). But of all, the case of DIB Midnapur was more alarming, as is revealed by the letter of the ASP to the headquarters:

This DIB is having a very hard time, and it will be impossible to manage with the present working staff...if the deficits are not replaced immediately (Ibid).

The cases outlined above illustrate the strain on DIBs in intelligence gathering. As the DIBs were the fulcrum of intelligence collection, any deficit in their workforce meant the IB was unable to engage in surveillance and other covert activities. With work falling in arrears, the pressure on the SPs and the ASPs of the districts mentioned above was tremendous, as is evident from their aforementioned letters, to keep sustaining the DIB operations. But why were officers like Phanindranath Ganguly reluctant to join these DIBs? There were two reasons: first, having come from the eastern part of Bengal during turbulent times, they were unwilling to join the DIBs of remote and border districts where the communal situation was at stake. Given West Dinajpur’s border location with East Bengal and communal composition, Phanindranath Ganguly, as a Hindu, didn’t want to risk himself by joining the DIB of a Muslim-dominated district, and two, they didn’t want to compromise their livelihood by moving to a remote interior district. Staying in Calcutta was safer and more comfortable, as the city offered urban amenities and other lucrative opportunities. Although we do not have any account of Ganguly to examine the actual causes, Sailesh Chandra Sengupta's letter testifies to it.

An IB assistant of DIB Rangpur of East Bengal, Sailesh Chandra Sengupta, during partition had opted for service in West Bengal (Archives, File: 594/47 (5)). When transferred to Murshidabad, a remote, border and Muslim-dominated district, Sengupta refused to join, leaving his family alone in Calcutta. Instead, he pleaded for a posting near his home to be with them in those turbulent times:

...with great difficulty I booked my furniture and other personal things from Rangpur to Ballygunje...undergoing terrible hardship all throughout the journey.... I now find that I have been transferred to Murshidabad DIB. In this connection, I beg to state...I cast my choice for Calcutta because I have a house in Calcutta to live in...you can very well imagine how difficult it is for me in these hard and abnormal days to maintain two establishments in two different places. Unfortunately, I have no parents and I am the guardian of my...brothers.... Now the problem of housing accommodation is very acute everywhere and...no sustainable habitation can be secured at an offer of three times the usual rent. Besides, my wife and daughter are suffering badly from various ailments...and I wish to make proper arrangements for their treatment...and this will not be possible unless I stay here (Ibid).

Having suffered “terrible hardship” during his journey from Rangpur to Ballygunge, Sengupta was unwilling to face any further “hardship” by moving to Murshidabad. Instead, staying with “wife, daughter, and brothers” was safer and the only way to avoid the “hard and abnormal days.” By moving to this remote Muslim-dominated district, Sengupta, as a Hindu, did not want to jeopardize himself and also did not want to lose the health care facilities in Calcutta for his “wife and daughter”. At the same time, it reflects his



willingness to stay with them and provide emotional support during chaotic times. Although the headquarters conceded Sengupta's request, we do not know whether similar requests by other officers were accepted.

While the story of Sailesh Chandra Sengupta demonstrates the problems encountered by the IB at an organisational level, that of Jitendranath Roy and Paresh Chandra Chakravarti reveals the problems faced by IB officials at a personal level. When Jitendranath Roy, an IB assistant, asked his landlord to let his family members from East Bengal stay in the house, the request was turned down. The reason for the decline was their East Bengalee connection, which the landlord feared would lead him into unnecessary trouble. By letting them stay in the house, the landlord feared overcrowding and higher utility consumption, which would cause wear and tear of his property. We do not know whether Roy was from East Bengal or West Bengal. Irrespective of his place of belonging, it is apparent that, in an age of flux, staying with the household is imperative, and Roy was thus no exception. Had the partition not happened, family members from East Bengal would not have come, and Roy would not have faced the problem. His agony becomes evident from his letter to the IB headquarters:

I need a government quarter for my family accommodation as my house owner is not willing to let out any portion of her house, as the family members of my house came down from East Bengal. I pray that you please accommodate me a government quarter (Archives, File: 1011-47).

The aforementioned letter depicts the crisis that men like Jitendranath Roy faced at a personal level due to the partition. This becomes further evident from the case of Paresh Chandra Chakravarti, an IB assistant, who pleaded to the IB headquarters for accommodation in the government quarters:

The houseowner has asked me to vacate the house as he will reconstruct within a very short time. If I am to leave the house, there will be no other alternative but to stand on the street with my family. Please accommodate me in government quarters with my family in these days of crisis (Ibid).

Unlike Chakravarti, Roy's reason for giving up tenancy was different; yet the problem they faced in seeking shelter was the same. Surge in population and lack of housing because of the refugee influx had made accommodation an acute crisis. With no reliable connections or place to stay, Paresh Chandra Chakravarti feared to "stand on the street" if the state didn't provide any shelter. Although both Jitendranath Roy and Paresh Chandra Chakravarti received accommodation in government quarters, the stress they endured reveals the agony they had at a personal level in seeking safe shelter as government servants.

Thus, the division of officials led to a massive influx from East Bengal, which lowered the quality of the intelligence service, as officials from that dominion were inducted without adequate vetting. Furthermore, their untimely elevation, along with the officers who chose to remain in West Bengal to senior positions, also downgraded the operational quality of the intelligence agency. The problem was compounded by the reluctance of a few IB officials from East Bengal to join the DIBs in remote districts, hindering the agency's ability to collect intelligence and conduct covert operations. While this was an organizational problem, the IB officials also faced personal constraints, the most prominent of which was the accommodation problem.



Conclusion

The division of the IB in 1947, due to the partition of Bengal, created intense turmoil within the agency. Problems arising from the division of records, vehicles, and officials disarrayed the intelligence system, preventing swift responses of the IB to threats and violence. After all, the role of the intelligence system is to gather intelligence to prevent, pre-empt, and disrupt threats. And so, the breakdown in such machinery inevitably leads to lawlessness within the state. Historians, therefore, assessing the reason behind the surge in lawlessness in post-independent West Bengal must take into account the fragility of the intelligence machinery, which was the most fundamental reason. With limited resources in hand, the task of the intelligence officials of West Bengal was undoubtedly daunting. At the same time, the stress the IB officials faced at a personal level due to the partition cannot be brushed aside. It reveals their mental agony despite belonging to the government service.

This paper, therefore, by bringing to the fore the problems of the Intelligence Branch of West Bengal in the aftermath of partition, has established its presence in West Bengal's partition historiography. By highlighting their challenges, this paper has given voice to the intelligence officials who always operate in secrecy. Finally, this paper, as the first major study on the Intelligence Branch of post-independent West Bengal, has made a significant contribution to the emerging discipline of India's intelligence history.

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