

Ecological Neglect and Partition's Legacy: Environmental Disparities between East and West Pakistan (1947-1971)

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Abstract

This study examines the environmental aspects of the disparity between East and West Pakistan between 1947 and 1971, establishing that ecological neglect was inherently linked to the political and economic divides brought about by the partition of India in 1947 rather than a natural occurrence. Pakistan was created as one nation, but its two wings were administratively, physically, and environmentally distinct. East Pakistan's deltaic ecology was characterized by floods, cyclones, and riverine instability, which was often ignored. West Pakistan received steady governmental investment in irrigation, industry, and water management through projects like the Indus Basin system. This paper examines how disparate development approaches increased ecological vulnerability in East Pakistan, influencing patterns of migration, agricultural stress, and resource exploitation. It does this by focusing on environmental, economic, and political history. The Bhola Cyclone of 1970, the Kaptai Hydroelectric Dam and the displacement of indigenous communities, the Sundarbans mangrove forest, and the Royal Bengal Tiger, disturbances to the jute, tea, and river systems are a few examples of case studies in this paper that show how environmental catastrophes exposed more profound regional exploitation structures. Secondary literature, oral histories, economic statistics, and archival sources are used to show economic marginalization. Salinization, river erosion, and increased susceptibility to disasters are all consequences of this negligence that still exist in modern-day Bangladesh. This study reframes partition as both an ecological and political crisis with long-term implications for postcolonial development and environmental justice in South Asia by emphasizing the environment as a historical actor.

Keywords: *Environmental Disparities, East and West Pakistan, Partition of India, Political Ecology*

Introduction

"Bangladesh's series win in Pakistan is a victory over history as much as cricket" (Indian Express, August 28; Menon, 2024). This headline editorial is from the Indian Express about the cricket test series victory of Bangladesh over Pakistan in 2024. The victory is more than just a sport; it expresses sentiments rooted in the partition of the Indian Sub-continent. The anguish and vengeance for the disparity between West Pakistan and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) still runs deep in politics, culture, society, and even sports. This long-standing conflict, stemming from decades of political neglect, cultural repression, and economic exploitation, is felt beyond the cricket field in the same environments that once united these two wings under one flag. This research paper examines the environmental inequality that defined East and West Pakistan's relations between 1947 and 1971,

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and persists to this day. This division permanently altered natural environments. This unplanned partition and its disparities gave birth to Bangladesh in 1971. To this day, Bangladesh's inherited challenges include silted rivers, eroded farmlands and high vulnerability to natural disasters. This historical neglect continues to obstruct sustainable development and the past disparities can be connected to current environmental issues.

All India Muslim League's 'Two-Nation Theory,' which was formalized through the 1940 Lahore Resolution, gave birth to India and Pakistan. However, it planted the seeds of an internal split within Pakistan. West Pakistan, which included the mountains and arid plains of the northwest, and East Pakistan, which included the fertile deltas of Bengal, separated by thousands of miles of Indian territory, were worlds apart, in geography and politics, but united in name. The socio-political division between the two wings was equally evident as the environmental difference. Surrounded by the Ganges-Brahmaputra river system, East Pakistan was a land of plenty and perils. Its low-lying plains were constantly exposed to floods and cyclones, but its rich soils and monsoon rains yielded agricultural abundance. The 1970 Bhola Cyclone, which killed over 300,000 people, exposed the effects of the ignorance of this disparity: poor infrastructure, a slow response to aid, and a central government in West Pakistan that seemed unconcerned about the situation in the East. On the other hand, costly projects like the Indus Basin irrigation system, financed by both domestic and foreign aid, were implemented to address the environmental issues facing West Pakistan, such as droughts, desertification, and water scarcity. The West's arid landscapes were made productive, while the lush deltas in the East vanished due to inadequate management. This uneven treatment of the environment was a reflection of the larger story of exploitation, in which the resources of East Pakistan drove the development of West Pakistan while East Pakistan's environmental problems went unchecked. The partition altered the geography and use of land, fostering border shifts and migrations, which led to over farming, deforestation, and urban strain in recently established settlement areas.

The Royal Bengal Tiger, which is only found in the Sundarbans, saw a decline in population as a result of human settlements in the forest brought about by this partition. Additionally, the forest's natural resources, like its woods and honey, were diminished. The production and manufacturing of the three main cash crops in East Pakistan, rice, tea, and jute, show the discrepancy. Raw materials were stolen from the East without adequate compensation, and the majority of the factories and mills were constructed in West Pakistan (Islam, 1963, p. 3). Moreover, the construction of the Kaptai Hydroelectric Dam in Chittagong constitutes one of the long-lasting environmental effects of the West Pakistani government's decision on East Pakistan (Chakma, 2021).

The environmental and spatial differences were fueled by mostly economic disparities. For example, in 1960 the per capita income difference between West and East was nearly one-third. The investment patterns also showed inequality where The Second Five Years Plan (1960-1965) aimed to spend Rs. 13,500 million in West Pakistan and Rs. 9,500 million in East Pakistan (Sobhan, 1962). This paper aims to explore this extensive and vice versa relationship between economy and the environment of the partition. It shall focus on how the environment and geography were ignored and its repercussions for the future of East Pakistan, later Bangladesh, where people are still suffering environmentally from geographic disasters.

Research Methods and Data Sources

This paper uses a qualitative historical research approach focusing on political ecology, comparative history, and environmental history. By how political decisions, economic strategies, and colonial legacies influenced ecological results in the two wings, it takes a transnational and comparative approach to investigate the environmental differences between East and West Pakistan (1947–1971). The study sees the environment as an active historical actor that both impacted and was influenced by human actions and the spatial aspects of partition, rather than just as a passive backdrop. In order to show how political marginalization and ecological sensitivity are interconnected, data analysis involves analyzing multiple sources by cross-referencing economic statistics with environmental narratives, oral testimonies, and disaster reports. This approach shows how Bangladesh's environmental problems are still shaped by the legacy of partition by combining political, economic,

and environmental history. The framework for this paper to understand the environmental strain would explore transnational, comparative, spatial, social and migration history. But, mostly it would delve into the depths of economic and political history. Some major and recent pieces of secondary scholarship in environmental history, economic history, and related fields like postcolonial and disaster studies inform this project. In doing so, it works to include environmental, economic, and political transformations of partition. This method not only puts this work in context, but it also emphasizes how important it is to larger scholarly discussions. The primary sources at the heart of this project include videos, maps, newspaper editorials, government websites, international organizations' reports etc. For example, the video interview of Kazi Shamsuzzaman (Kazi Shamsuzzaman, 2013) depicts his experience and emotions of the partition and his migration. Other similar videos and oral narratives are also found in the '1947 Partition Archive' (The 1947 Partition Archive, n.d.). The Archive is a non-profit initiative that collected over 11,500 video and audio interviews from survivors across 14 countries, including India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, to illuminate the human and ecological dimensions of the 1947 partition and its aftermath, offering a unique lens into the two wings of Pakistan. The sources in the Archive show migration trends and environmental inequalities, emphasizing how environmental stresses contributed to the political and economic instability of East Pakistan. Historians like Yasmin Khan (Khan, 2007) and Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar (Zamindar, 2007) challenge state-centric narratives using oral histories, while environmental historians like Iftexhar Iqbal explore the Bengal Delta's ecological history by using this archive.

Literature Review

This study looks at the environmental differences between East and West Pakistan (1947–1971) as a direct result of partition, asserting that political and economic exploitation were closely linked to ecological neglect. Important foundations in environmental history, economic inequality, partition politics, disaster studies, and human-environment relations in the Bengal Delta are provided by existing work. Few studies, however, systematically link these aspects to demonstrate how partition led to long-term ecological vulnerability in East Pakistan (modern-day Bangladesh).

Fisher (2018) in an *Environmental History of India* provides a comprehensive summary of human-environment interactions throughout the subcontinent, including post-1947 changes in Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India. Fisher highlights how postcolonial regimes inherited and frequently made ecological problems worse, as well as how colonial power transformed landscapes. Although this book is useful for placing regional differences in context, it only briefly discusses the contrasts between East and West Pakistan and does not go into great length about indigenous perspectives, or the economic implications of environmental policy. The necessity for more in-depth research on how partition especially altered ecological management in Pakistan's two wings is highlighted by this broad framework.

The structural disparities between East and West Pakistan have been extensively studied by economic research. In his 1962 analysis of the unequal distribution of investment and resources under centralized planning, Rehman Sobhan (Sobhan, 1962) showed how post-Partition policies and colonial legacy benefitted West Pakistan. In a similar way, (Islam, 1963) studied terms of trade and inter-wing trade, showing how West Pakistan's industrialization was supported by East Pakistan's agricultural resources, particularly jute, while receiving little industrial investment. These studies offer quantitative evidence that this study directly links to environmental effects, such as inadequate river management, salinization, and flood control in the East, such as differences in Five-Year Plans and industrial output. Although primarily economic, they supply the structural context for understanding ecological injustice.

(Chatterji, 1994, 2007) in her two works *Bengal Divided*, and *The Spoils of Partition*, challenge mainstream narratives By emphasizing how Bengal's Hindu bhadralok elite drove partition and resulting refugee crisis and economic reconfiguration in West Bengal. Although these studies shed light on the social and political aspects of Bengal's separation, they primarily focus on the Indian side

and pay little attention to the ecological implications or the similar experiences of East Bengal/East Pakistan. This gap in comparative analysis between the two Bengals and between East and West Pakistan leaves room for research that integrates environmental dimensions into partition historiography.

Analysis has shown that the 1970 Bhola Cyclone was a pivotal political event. Using newspaper stories, survivor testimony, and electoral statistics (Biswas & Daly, 2020) shows how the Pakistani government's poor response to the cyclone was caused by political indifference rather than a simple natural calamity. Their disaster-studies methodology connects environmental occurrences to political activism and Bangladesh's eventual formation.

The environmental and social implications of centralized development can be best seen by the construction of Kaptai Dam (1957–1962). According to Chakma (2021), the dam caused significant cultural and ecological damage and uprooted over 100,000 Jumma people in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. This work, which is based on political ecology and indigenous studies, emphasizes how state policies and foreign aid promote marginalization in East Pakistan. It is one of the sources that clearly links development initiatives to both ethnic dispossession and environmental degradation.

The Sundarbans habitat is ethnographically explored in Annu Jalais's *Forest of Tigers* (Jalais, 2010), which examines the intricate relationships between local communities, the Royal Bengal Tiger, and conservation ideologies. Jalais demonstrates the connection between ecological change and human settlement by tying together post-Partition migration, resource use, and cultural narratives. Although it does enhance economic and political analysis, the influence of national development strategies on the mangrove ecology and broader inter-wing inequities is not adequately addressed from this book's viewpoint.

While these works collectively address important aspects of partition, economic inequality, environmental history, and specific ecological events, they remain largely isolated. These works are still mostly isolated, even though they jointly explore significant facets of partition, economic inequality, environmental history, and particular ecological catastrophes. partition study frequently ignores ecological aspects, environmental histories often concentrate on East-West Pakistan differences, and economic studies hardly take environmental implications into account. An integrated study that views the environment as an active historical actor influenced by the political economics of partition is needed. This article links all those by analyzing how economic exploitation, centralized planning, and political negligence created long-lasting ecological vulnerabilities in East Pakistan, vulnerabilities that still influence Bangladesh's environmental problems.

This paper addresses the question of how environmental inequality defined East and West Pakistan's relations between 1947 and 1971, which persists to today. How this division permanently altered natural environments, and this unplanned partition and its disparities gave birth to Bangladesh in 1971. Bangladesh's inherited challenges include silted rivers, eroded farmlands, and high vulnerability to natural disasters. This historical neglect continues to obstruct sustainable development, and the past disparities can be connected to current environmental issues. The main thesis is that Environmental mismanagement fostered economic disparities and reinforced geopolitical divisions, exacerbated by natural disasters, socio-political conflict, and economic inequalities of partition.

Background of Partition

After ruling the Indian sub-continent for almost 200 years, the British colonial rulers were ready to leave. At the end of their ruling, they had to deal with mutiny and rebellion all the time, on top of the stress of World War 2. They granted the sub-continent its independence before departing. Louis Mountbatten, the final viceroy of the British Empire, landed in India in March 1947. He had the responsibility to oversee the decolonization of the country. Due to the dangers of a civil war or mutiny among Indian troops, the colonial power thought that the only practical means of achieving independence was through partition. The partition was carried out by Cyril Radcliffe, a British official who had never visited India before. Without prior knowledge about the geography and ecology of the sub-continent, Radcliffe made the final decision regarding the borders. Finally, Pakistan and India

were born on 14th and 15th August 1947, respectively. Pakistan was further divided into two wings, West Pakistan and East Pakistan. The division of Bengal and Punjab, two provinces with a small Muslim majority, created significant issues because of their diverse and heterogeneous demographic distributions. The new borders passed through fields, towns, villages, and more. Civilians literally woke up in the 'wrong' country the next morning of partition. Hindus found themselves on the Muslim land and vice versa, which caused mass migration. East and West Pakistan were separated by roughly 1,600 km at the time of Pakistan's creation. Approximately 15,000,000 Sikhs, Muslims, and Hindus escaped from their homes on one side of the newly drawn borders to what they believed to be "shelter" on the other as soon as the new borders were announced. In 1971, a devastating war broke out between the eastern and western provinces of Pakistan due to the divisions caused by the country's rushed creation, and East Pakistan gained its independence as Bangladesh. The partition was more complex than it seems. East Pakistan, formed from eastern Bengal, was separated from West Bengal, India, in 1947. Despite linguistic and ethnic differences, East Pakistan was united under a single nation, despite being geographically and culturally different from West Pakistan. Bengal was divided along religious lines, becoming East Pakistan and West Bengal; the latter became part of India. West Pakistan's political and economic domination increased tensions, leading to East Pakistan's 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, reclaiming its Bengali identity. So, there was dual separation, which overlapped boundaries (Chatterji, 1994).

In Pakistan, Radcliffe's political line split districts into areas with a majority of Muslims, disturbing economies, infrastructure, and ecosystems. His random border distinctions, which included river crossings, caused issues over waterways and had an impact on important infrastructures. He created upper versus lower riverbanks conflicts where he drew the boundary across a river or canal which sometimes crossed the line more than once. New governments claimed lands, wildlife, and resources belonging to India or Pakistan, using them for their own advancement. River systems like Indus, Ganges, and Brahmaputra crossed international borders, with each imposing its rule (Fisher, 2018). The environmental and ecological strains were impactful for both countries, yet ignored.

Divided Wings, Fractured Earth: Environmental Disparities, Migration, and the Agricultural Legacy of Pakistan's Partition

Migration is linked to environmental crises, particularly in developing nations like Bangladesh, due to population growth, unequal resource distribution, and environmental change, including floods, droughts, pollution, and soil erosion. As a result of environmental deprivation and resource holding, resource scarcity caused socioeconomic stress. Poverty and environmental damage were made worse by population growth and unequal access to resources. Pakistan's two largest resource centers, Punjab and Bengal, were home to over three-quarters of its population. However, the eastern wing, which constituted 15% of Pakistan's land, experienced significant emigration, with up to 2 million deaths and thousands of women abducted. The Chittagong Hill Tracts in East Pakistan experienced a population surge from 26,000 in 1951 to 119,000 in 1961 due to government incentives for lowland Bangla speakers' migration (Fisher, 2018).

Bengal was the largest province of united India. It was divided based on Hindu and Muslim majority areas at the time of partition. The new province of West Bengal, which emerged as part of India, had 21 million people, in which 25% or 5.3 million were Muslims. However, East Bengal had 39 million people, of whom 11 million were Hindus and the rest were Muslims. The disparity of the partition of East and West Pakistan brought sudden and irreversible changes in the lives of five million Muslims who were left behind in West Bengal (India). A high cost had been paid by the Muslims on both sides, whether they migrated to Pakistan or not (Chatterji, 2007). In Bangladesh, where many people are compelled to migrate, this, along with increased vulnerability to natural disasters, leads to migration and disaster susceptibility. With particular reference to the transformation of East Pakistan, Joya Chatterji relates the chaos of migration across the new Bengal border. She points out how the influx of Muslim refugees from West Bengal and Bihar increased the population of East Pakistan and put a strain on available resources (Chatterji, 1994). According to Hazarika, "hundreds of thousands" of people entered East Pakistan, putting additional strain on the region's already delicate deltaic

ecosystem. As a result of overcrowding in a flood-prone area, which led to long-term ecological degradation and increased environmental stress in East Pakistan (Hazarika, 2000) during the last 60 years (1901-61), the population of East Pakistan grew by 73 percent.

Table 1. Variation in population in the decades 1901-61

Year	Population in thousands	Annual rate of increase in %
1901	29,397	-
1911	31,925	+ .8
1921	33,647	+ .5
1931	36,039	+ .6
1941	42,277	+1.6
1951	42,062	- .01
1961	50,844	+2.0

Source: (Ahmed, 1958, p. 289)

A small number of East Pakistani farmers were relocated to Sind as part of the Thal Development Authority, a large-scale land reclamation project. Government employees and business leaders from East Pakistan travelled to Karachi and Rawalpindi, the opposite flow was not significantly higher. In order to bridge the technical and commercial expertise gap in the East Pakistani economy, West Pakistani technicians and businessmen had temporarily relocated there; but overall labor mobility was limited and not expected to increase (Sobhan, 1962).

Agricultural Disparities and Land Inequity in the Partition of Pakistan

Due to the massive migration and taking up of lands to shelter those migrants, Bangladesh faces a severe shortage of productive agricultural land due to rapid population growth, land degradation, uneven distribution, and land use conflicts, resulting in a man-land ratio of 0.15 acres per capita, hindering sustainable food grain production. Eight million hectares face declining fertility, with salinity-affected districts growing significantly. Landlessness increased to 28.06% in 1996. Economic disparities favored West Pakistan, impacting agriculture in East Pakistan and leading to regional tensions and unequal resource distribution (Hays, 2023). Human activity and nature are intertwined, influencing both the environment and society through feedback loops. Allocations of government funding in West Pakistan projects made East Pakistan more vulnerable to its already disastrous climate. Moreover, this disparity also affected the preparedness of East Pakistan to face environmental disasters like floods and river erosion. Migration caused over-farming of agricultural lands in East Pakistan, and with little government support, it led to inevitable calamities.

The following table, which is taken from a World Bank report from 1994, shows how wider disparities influenced agricultural policy and growth during this time.

Table 2. Allocations for Agricultural Development (public sector) 1955-60 (in million rupees)

Sector	East Pakistan	West Pakistan
Plant Breeding	3.21	5.00
Seed Multiplication	32.22	31.43
Manures and Fertilizers	-	-
Plant protection	10.30	22.41
Additional research projects	1.41	2.39
Mechanization	23.40	25.26
Marketing and storage	2.94	.77
Fisheries	7.20	4.79
Animal Husbandry	35.99	49.75
Range Management	.60	9.71
Forestry	33.62	39.89
Soil conservation	-	3.20
Soil survey	.54	.56
Colonization	1.27	113.60

Farm management	.20	.20
Agriculture statistics	1.00	2.30
Training and employment	13.59	36.91
Underdeveloped area	-	4.78
Reserves	190	-
Co-operative and rural credit	57.12	50
Land reforms	-	9.50
Village AID and rural development	143.90	144.10

Source: (World Bank, 1994)

This table shows the data on inequality in receiving aid for East Pakistan. It was very little and sometimes absent in various sectors. This absence of training, equipment, adequate credit, and proper management pushed East Pakistan towards more environmental calamities.

Jute

Bangladesh, the largest jute producer, faced an economic imbalance after East Pakistan separated from West Bengal, disrupting trade with Calcutta. Despite East Bengal supplying significant raw jute, West Bengal controlled all jute mills. This division led to shortages, higher prices, and reduced profitability for the jute industry (Chatterji, 2007). "Retting" is vital for jute production, requiring access to water bodies in East Bengal. Farmers in East Pakistan faced challenges due to disrupted river flows and poor infrastructure, complicating the retting process. Following the partition in 1947, East Pakistan lost its connection to Calcutta's jute mills, facing trade obstacles and limited resources for local production (Heitzman & Worden, 1989).

Tea

The partition severely disrupted Bengal's tea economy by splitting railway networks, isolating Chittagong from Assam tea exports. Instead of shorter routes, tea had to travel longer, costlier paths to Calcutta, plagued by congestion and reliance on Pakistani railways. The 1947 Sylhet referendum fragmented the region, undermining Sylhet's tea industry's profitability and competitiveness in foreign markets due to increased logistical challenges and tariffs (Chatterji, 2007).

Forest resources

Sundarbans is shared with West Bengal, and other woodlands that supply raw materials, fuel, and lumber were among East Bengal's abundant forest resources. Additionally, the rural economy and the jute industry, such as retting tools or boat wood, were indirectly supported by these forests. Its administration was split by partition, with East Pakistan receiving the remainder and West Bengal (India) receiving a portion. Unified conservation and exploitation efforts were hampered by this division. Prior to 1947, East Pakistan had direct access to forests in West Bengal and other Indian regions, which helped to meet its needs. Timber and forest products which once freely flowed across Bengal were now subject to tariffs, border restrictions, or complete loss. West Pakistan's emphasis on industrialization resulted in limited money for East Pakistan's forest management and planting initiatives. Without sustainable planning, forests were overused, causing resources to be drained more quickly than they could be renewed. In addition to dividing common ecosystems like the Sundarbans and cutting off East Pakistan from certain forest resources, partition also accelerated deforestation as a result of neglect and population growth. Local economies and businesses that indirectly depended on forest products, like jute, were harmed by this loss. Forest resources and the jute industry were intertwined; jute retting was harmed by disturbed waterways, and rural communities relied on declining forests for the tools and fuel necessary to continue jute farming. Both problems resulted from the turmoil caused by partition: East Pakistan struggled to preserve its economic advantages due to new borders, severed trade connections, and a lack of coordinated resource management.

These economic and agricultural difficulties, caused by the partition's interference with trade, land utilization, and forest resources such as the Sundarbans, were made worse by the environmental pressure on East Pakistan's river systems, essential for supporting its farming economy

Divided Rivers: Environmental Disparities, Riverine Challenges, Flooding, and Agricultural Instability

The partition's effects went beyond land and economic differences to East Pakistan's river landscape, where impaired water management and flooding worsened agricultural instability and intensified regional inequalities. East Pakistan's distinctive feature is its extensive river network, including Ganges, Meghan-Surma and Brahmaputra systems, which serves as drainage channels, transport routes and fertilizer. Colonial railways disrupted natural water flow, increasing flooding and waterlogging, harming fertile land (Iqbal, 2010, p. 268). By 1947, ecological balance in the Bengal delta began to deteriorate and due to the partition, these living river network was cut, upstream control by India and neglect by West Pakistan turned seasonal floods into disasters and with no water management coordination among the shared countries, it impacted water management and trade, leading to disputes over resources and diminished access for East Pakistan's agricultural needs. Indo-Pakistani water disputes continue despite treaties and agreements. Particularly in Bengal, partition disrupted ecological systems and agricultural livelihoods significantly. Hazarika states that East Pakistan is susceptible to problems with water management because "the boundary cut through a living system". (Hazarika, 2000, p. 199) As a result, East Pakistan had to deal with immediate difficulties in maintaining its agrarian economy because the production of jute, which was the foundation of its economy, was dependent on water systems that India now partially controlled. The Indus Treaty benefited West Pakistan's water projects, causing ecological changes and tensions, while East Pakistan felt neglected due to ignored flooding issues (Indus Waters Treaty, 1960). The Centralization neglected East Pakistan's water issues, deepening resentment and marginalization compared to West Pakistan's projects (Jalal, 1990).

Sundarban (The largest mangrove forest and Royal Bengal Tiger)

This legacy of partition-induced disparities extended to the Sundarbans, an UNESCO site, the world's largest mangrove forest, where the division of its deltaic ecosystem between India and East Pakistan disrupted resource management and intensified economic inequities for East Pakistan's agrarian communities. The *Sundarbans* is located primarily in East Pakistan, it is located in the delta of the Ganges, Brahmaputra, and Meghna rivers. Most of the forest lies in southwestern Bangladesh, with the remainder extending into the Indian state of West Bengal. It covers over 10,000 km² of deltaic floodplains in Bangladesh and India, and is home to the world's largest mangrove ecosystem. It balances freshwater flows from the Ganges-Brahmaputra riverine system and saline waters of the Bay of Bengal, attracting a high biodiversity of mangrove flora and fauna. The region covers 10,200 sq. km, 60% in Bangladesh and the rest in India (Nishat et al., 2017). This mangrove forest is a timber source, a profitable semiwild honey industry, and the home of the Royal Bengal Tiger. Partition led to uncoordinated fishing and logging in the Sundarbans region, with East Pakistan's share suffering from a lack of funding and infrastructure (Heitzman & Worden, 1989). This mangrove forest, the rivers and canals, and the Sundarban ecosystem as a whole are separated by the international border and are frequently regarded as two distinct ecosystems. Early British accounts from the 18th century described it indifferently as a grim, muddy "jungle" of tangled vegetation, dangerous wildlife, and disease. By the 19th century, however, it became a focal point for colonial curiosity, scientific study, and power displays, with naturalists documenting its tropical uniqueness. Travelers like William Huggins (1824) and William W. Hunter (1875) portrayed it as a wild, swampy wilderness, full of tigers, crocodiles, and malaria ripe for "improvement" through clearing and reclamation. The British cleared the Sundarbans for agriculture, causing strain on the ecosystem. This led to habitat loss for species like tigers and crocodiles, altering the alluvial land-formation process. Tigers, a major environmental and economic issue, were hunted to reduce threats. The fascination with tigers also fueled trophy hunting, further straining their numbers. Tigers were labeled as 'Vermin' by the locals. The 1947 partition led to the split of the Sundarbans too between India and East Pakistan. It disrupted unified forest management, leading to uncoordinated resource use and strain on the ecosystem. Population shifts, migration, and deforestation accelerated deforestation, reducing tiger habitats and increasing human-wildlife conflict. Tigers, known as "man-eaters," attacked workers clearing land, disrupting reclamation. This conflict put tigers against colonial expansion, making them targets for elimination rather than coexistence.

In 1883, the government offered rewards for killing tigers, starting at Rs. 50 for an adult tiger and Rs. 10 for a cub (Calcutta Gazette, 16 November 1883). By 1906, the rewards had increased to Rs. 100/Rs. 20 and Rs. 200 by 1909, following large human casualties. Tigers' habitats were diminished by reclamation, which led to their concentration in dwindling forests and an increase in human interactions. Tigers' status as "man-eaters" was reinforced when they were forced to target livestock and humans due to the probable reduction in prey such as deer and boar caused by clearing for cultivation. Sundarbans experienced influxes of tens of thousands of people after 1947, acting as a "safety valve". Tiger territories were reduced as a result of increased land clearing. By cutting down trees for cash and farmland, the British turned the Sundarbans into a cash cow. Workers were harmed by tigers, so they paid hunters to kill them. Between 1881 and 1912, over 2,400 tigers perished, and as the number of deaths increased (500 in 1906–1909), the rewards increased from Rs. 50 to Rs. 200. They were forced closer to extinction as a result of the destruction of their homes and food (Chakrabarti, 2009).

Table 3. Death or killing of tigers in the Sundarban Tiger Reserve from 1990 to 1999

No. of tigers	Date of Death	Remarks
1	12.06.1990	At Dayapur, killed by villagers
1	23.01.1993	At Hemnagar, killed by villagers
1	25.01.1994	Detected by private launch floating on Sudhanyakhali
1	26.09.1994	Dead tiger found in paddy field at Hemnagar
1	05.11.1994	Dead tiger found in paddy field at Jesuspur
1	03.03.1995	Killed by villagers near central Satjelia school
1	29.08.1998	Killed by villager at Kalitala village
1	06.03.1999	Detected by fisherman in Raimangal river

Source- (Bhattacharya, n.d., p. 50)

When an ecosystem crosses a border, administrative and political boundaries lead to disorganized management and reduce the effectiveness of a shared strategy. The Sundarban biosphere reserve in India experienced a significant decrease in mangrove-covered areas between 1873 and 1968 due to the conversion of forests to agricultural land and settlements. Major human interventions, such as embankments, barrages, dams, and polders, have affected the freshwater flow of the Sundarbans. The Farakka barrage was the earliest devastating blow, reducing seasonal water gain for the Gorai system. In Bangladesh, over 129 polders were constructed to protect land from saline water and increase crop production. These interventions have also resulted in the silting up of rivers, increasing salinity and causing inland salinity limits. (Nishat et al., 2017)

The Morichjhapi massacre was a violent eviction of Dalit Hindu refugees from the Sundarbans island of Morichjhapi between 1978 and 1979. This massacre changed the relationship of settlers with tigers. Initially seeking a return to their ancestral deltaic roots, the state viewed this as a violation of the Sundarbans' protected status, part of a post-colonial push to preserve forests and tigers. According to locals, tiger behavior was changed by the widespread disposal of corpses in the Sundarbans' waterways, either from drownings or from unburied bodies floating downstream. According to a villager, "Morichjhapi gave the tigers a taste for human flesh—those bodies in the water changed them" (Jalais, 2010, p. 127). This narrative suggests that tigers became "man-eaters" due to habitat loss and human actions, reflecting a "moral ecology" where islanders view tigers as avenging spirits or judges of state injustice. The similarities between the islanders' own history and the tigers' migration history made the narration more engaging. Moreover, financial occupations such as prawn collectors, forest fishers, and wood, honey gatherers could be linked to agrarian relations and hunting. These peoples' lives are shaped by their cultural ties to the forest—through deities like Kali (violent) and Bonbibibi (peaceful). Tigers were historically hunted as symbols of power under colonial rule. Colonial perspectives of tigers as huntable obstacles or conservation icons contrast with local people's tiger perceptions. Tigers may be seen as symbols of wildness by elites, but they are viewed with fear, respect, and spiritual kinship by forest workers and fishermen. These objectives went against to British colonial

policies, which portrayed the Sundarbans and their tigers as barriers to economic exploitation. It is observed in colonial narratives which portrayed tigers as dangerous vermin. Their systematic eradication was justified by policies such as rewards for kills. The term "man-eaters" was used to further colonial objectives of land clearance for financial gain, not just for safety.

Kaptai Hydropwer and Environment-

Exacerbating the economic marginalization of East Pakistan, the Kaptai Dam project in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, driven by centralized priorities, unleashed profound environmental and social consequences that underscored the partition's legacy of unequal development. In 1962, when the Pakistani government built the Kaptai Dam, it flooded 1,036 sq km in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, displacing 100,000 Jumma people and affecting over 1.325 million residents (Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti [PCJSS], n.d.). The project, financed by USAID, prioritized development over indigenous rights, displacing 70% of the Jumma peoples from the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Tufan Chakma's artwork "Great Exodus" (Bor Porong) reflects their trauma, while forced migration and inadequate rehabilitation efforts led to ecological destruction and long-term climate change (Chakma, 2021). The Kaptai dam aimed to enhance resources but displaced 100,000 tribal people, primarily Chakma, flooding their homes. The relocation efforts were insufficient, causing societal disruption for the Jumma and benefiting incoming Bengali Muslims instead.

The Kaptai Dam's devastating displacement and environmental toll on East Pakistan's indigenous communities foreshadowed further regional neglect, as the central government's failures became starkly evident in the aftermath of the Bhola Cyclone.

The Bhola Cyclone and Environmental Disparities

Exacerbating the environmental and economic issues from initiatives such as the Kaptai Dam, the Bhola Cyclone of 1970 highlighted the significant inequalities in governance and resource distribution that sidelined East Pakistan during the partition period. On November 12, 1970, Bangladesh was devastated by the Bhola Cyclone, resulting in 500,000 deaths and nearly \$90 million in damages (National Weather Service, n.d.). However, previous recommendations for better warning systems and evacuations were ignored. The central government's response was seen by many in East Pakistan as being weak, unresponsive, and delayed. In a matter of days, international assistance flights arrived. But during the critical first week, relief from West Pakistan, the center of political and military power, was either delayed or nonexistent in many areas. Some of the most severely affected coastal areas did not receive fuel, food, medication, or shelter. These caused many to believe in East Pakistan that they were ruled by a remote elite that took advantage of them without providing any protection (Mobarak & Mehmood, 2025).

Moulana Bhashani, a prominent political leader, protested against the central government's response to the cyclone in a rally in Dhaka. Bhasani said:-

"About ten to twelve hundred thousand men, women and children have perished in the disaster. But even after ten days of the catastrophic occurrence bodies await burial. There has been no measure on the part of government to bury the dead. The stench of decomposing bodies of humans and cattle has left the region absolutely uninhabitable" (Biswas & Daly, 2021, p. 1395) Moulana Bhashani criticizes the central government for suppressing cyclone news and calls for East Pakistan's independence.

Environmental legacy left behind in East Pakistan by the partition

Flooding and salinization of land are pretty common issues which Bangladesh has to face each year. Every year thousands of people lose their houses, lands and lives due to river erosion. These are just some of the consequences that Bangladesh face still after 80 years. The importance of this research is that it shows how partition or migration is not just a political decision, rather nature and environment is also linked and involved in this. The environmental legacy proves political powers can be asserted through nature and geography like that of controlling dams, and stream, rivers movements. Most importantly this research and the present condition of Bangladesh shows that no reparation was given by the British colonial rulers or the West Pakistan Government towards the East. The environmental

vulnerability like tornadoes, flooding and river erosions which haunts Bangladesh to this day, puts emphasis on the environmental disparity of partition itself.

Conclusion

Once a prosperous area of South Asia, East Bengal asserted abundant natural resources like fruit and fish, a healthy climate, and fertile land. It was a prosperous agricultural region for centuries, producing crops like rice and jute. Dhaka, the Mughal Empire's capital, developed into a significant trading hub. When the British arrived in the 1600s, however, they prioritized the development of Calcutta (in present-day India) over East Bengal. East Bengal was thus forced to remain a farming region, providing Calcutta with raw materials while being excluded from larger development. Following the 1947 separation of India and Pakistan, East Bengal became East Pakistan. This further upset its economy; it no longer had its main market in Calcutta, which was now on the other side of the border, and it lacked the resources and industries needed to sustain itself on its own. While East Pakistan's requests for equal investment in environmental management or economic diversification were ignored, the Pakistani government focused on the development of West Pakistan, allocating funds to Punjab's agriculture and Karachi's ports, leaving East Pakistan struggling and impoverished. The 1950s and 1960s witnessed major differences: East Pakistan's deltaic terrain experienced frequent floods and salinization with little government assistance, while West Pakistan's arid climate and irrigation initiatives like the Indus Basin system were given priority. East Pakistan became Bangladesh in 1971 after a war for independence that was partly triggered by the destruction caused by the Bhola Cyclone in 1970 and the insufficient response from the central government. However, it was challenged by serious issues, such as a weakened economy, a large population, food shortage, and millions of displaced people, many of whom had been uprooted by natural disasters as well as conflict. Partition, geography, neglect, and colonial priorities caused East Bengal to go from prosperity to hardship. The problems were made worse by floods, cyclones, and river erosion—disasters that were more severe in the low-lying, monsoon-soaked east than in the more arid and elevated west—as well as by population growth and Pakistan's neglect, which left East Pakistan undeveloped and vulnerable to environmental threats. The economic harm was made worse by this difference in environmental resilience, with West Pakistan experiencing fewer natural disasters and obtaining greater state assistance, including financial and military support from allies like the United States. With silted rivers, eroded farmland, and one of the highest population densities in the world, Bangladesh inherited a landscape scarred by centuries of exploitation, trapping it in a cycle of vulnerability and recovery that continues to this day.

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