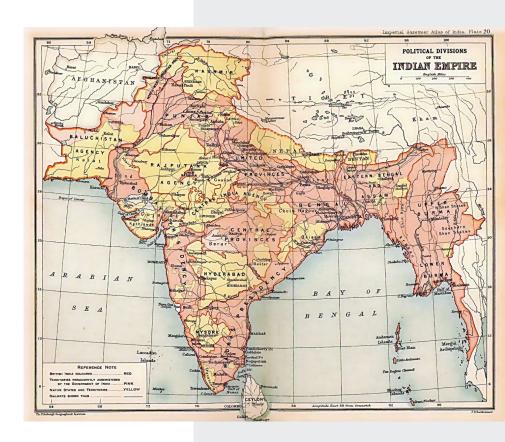
Primary Sources: The Partition of Bengal



Introduction

Below are two sources: The first comes from George Curzon, the British Viceroy of India who promoted the partition of Bengal. It includes two speeches he gave attempting to assuage fears and convince Bengali Muslims of the benefits of the partition.

The second is an excerpt from the autobiography *A Nation in the Making* by Surendranath Banerjee, an Indian nationalist and political leader. The book was published in 1925, after the partition of 1905 and its reversal in 1911.

As you read each source, consider the context for each author, and how that might shape the ways they characterize the partition and the motivations of British officials (including Curzon himself). Consider also how they view the Bengali public, including their role in the partition and how they would be, or were impacted by it.

PRIMARY SOURCES

INTRODUCTION

CURZON'S CASE FOR THE PARTITION OF BENGAL, 1904

BANERJEE, REMEMBERING THE PARTITION OF BENGAL

Primary Source 1: Curzon's Case for the Partition of Bengal

The partition of the Bengal Presidency of British India between its majority Hindu west and its mostly Muslim east had first been proposed by colonial officials in 1903. Initially, Bengali-speaking leaders in both areas – and of both religions – denounced the proposal. In 1904, Viceroy of India George Curzon travelled to eastern Bengal to drum up support among Bengali Muslim leaders for the proposal through a series of speeches. What follows are excerpts from two of these orations. On February 18, 1904, he spoke at the palace of the most powerful zamindar (wealthy landowners who managed plantations in colonial India) in Dhaka (Dacca) to a



George Curzon

large gathering of Bengali Muslim leaders. Two days later, he also spoke at Mymensingh, about 75 miles (120 kilometers) to the north to another such group. While once skeptical, Muslim leaders later embraced the idea of a partition, as leading Bengali Hindus worried it would divide and weaken Bengalis. In the face of continued opposition, Curzon stopped working to build consensus on the matter. The following year, in July 1905, his government implemented the partition anyway in a surprise announcement that sparked mistrust and violence between Bengali Muslims and Hindus.

Source: Speeches by Lord Curzon of Kedleston, Viceroy and Governor-General of India, vol. 3: 1902-1905 (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, India, 1905), 301-303, 318-19.

From Curzon's Speech in Dacca, February 18, 1904

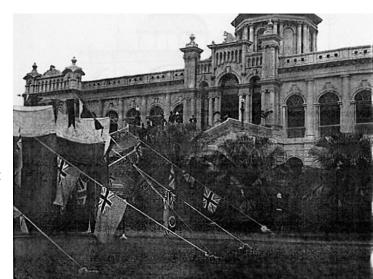
I have ... seen in papers or addresses the phrase that you are about to be ceded or annexed to Assam But even supposing that the fear were well-founded, does it not argue the most extraordinary lack of self-confidence to urge that these enlightened districts, priding themselves as they do on their culture, their education, and their advancement, and counting millions of people, are going to be annexed by a province which is like an infant to them in respect of development and stature? Gentlemen, the population of the entire area in Bengal which it has been proposed to transfer amounts to 11 ½ millions of people. The entire population of Assam is only 6 millions as it is, and of these, nearly 3 millions are Bengalis already. Do you mean to tell me that these 14 ½ millions of Bengalis, representing as you tell me the flower of the race, are going to be absorbed, obliterated, and destroyed, because it is proposed to amalgamate with them, for administrative purposes only, less than 1 ½ millions of a race, i.e., the Assamese, whom you declare to be in every way inferior to your own? Such an apprehension would be the most lamentable confession of weakness in the future of the Bengal race which it is possible to conceive. If I were an Assamese, I could understand his saying that he dreaded being annexed and swamped by Bengal. But why Bengal should say that it is about to be swallowed up by Assam, I am wholly at a loss to imagine. It is a part of the same unreasoning fear that is responsible for the argument that the Bengalis will cease to be Bengalis and become Assamese, or that they will cease to speak the Bengali language. Gentlemen, as I travelled in the railway train yesterday, I saw batches of well-organised schoolboys holding up placards, on which were written, "Do not turn us into Assamese."



Arrival of Curzon at Fulbaria Railway Station in February, 1904

Surely, I need not point out to an intelligent audience that no administrative rearrangement can possibly turn one people into another, or make 14 ½ millions of people speak any language but their own; and really the alarms that I am describing seem almost too childish to deserve notice, were it not that I have found them to be seriously stated, and apparently genuinely entertained. Let me put before you for a moment another aspect of the case. Much use has been made in this controversy of history, and of all that it is supposed to teach.

I also in a small way am a student of history: and if it has taught me anything of these parts, the lesson has been that under the present system of administration, Dacca, which was once the capital of Bengal, has steadily declined in numbers and influence, and that not until the jute* trade was introduced some thirty years ago did it begin to revive. In 1800 Dacca was a city of 200,000 people. In 1870 it had sunk to 69,000. Since then it has risen, owing to the circumstances that I have mentioned, to 90,000 in the last census: but whereas the increase was 10,000 between 1870 and 1880, it has only been 11,000 in the ensuing 20 years. Will anyone here pretend that, even after this advance, Dacca is anything but a shadow of its former self? Is it not notorious that for years it has been lamenting its downfall, as compared with the past?



Lord Curzon in Ahsan Manzil, 1904

When then a proposal is put forward which would make Dacca the centre, and possibly the capital, of a new and self-sufficing administration, which must give to the people of these districts, by reason of their numerical strength and their superior culture, the preponderating voice in the province so created, which would invest the Mahomedans in Eastern Bengal with a unity which they have not enjoyed since the days of the old Musulman Viceroys and Kings,** which must develop local interests and trade to a degree that is impossible so long as you remain, to use your own words, the appanage of another administration, and which would go far to revive the traditions which the historical students assure us once attached to the Kingdom of Eastern Bengal can it be that the people of these districts are to be advised by their leaders to sacrifice all these great and incontestable advantages, from fear of being tied on to the tail of the humble and backward Assam? Is it not transparent, Gentlemen, that you must be the head and heart of any such new organism, instead of the extremities, and do you really mean to be so blind to your own future as to repudiate the offer?...

^{*} Jute in a fiber commonly used to make rope and burlap bags. Most just was (and is) grown in South Asia.

^{**} Curzon is referring to the period before direct British colonial role in India (which started in 1858), when the East India Company ruled through alliances of princely states, including Muslim princes in the Muslims-majority areas of eastern Bengal (largely present-day Bangladesh). Mahomedan and Musulman are antiquated terms for Muslim.



Hooghly River, Port of Calcutta, c. 1903

From Curzon's Speech in Mymensingh, February 20, 1904

Finally, I come to the sentimental objections, which is based upon the conception of nationality, and which expresses dismay at the partition of what is called the Bengali nation. I found the streets of Dacca placarded with mottoes, expressly sent for the purpose from Calcutta, containing the words, "Pray do not sever Bengalis." As the people of Dacca do not, with very few exceptions, understand English, I am afraid that they did not fully comprehend what the placards meant that they had instructed to put up. This morning also, upon my arrival here, I saw crowds of men holding up placards - also sent from Calcutta and also written in English with the inscription "Divide us not." - I should like, therefore, for a moment to discuss this question. Pray do not think that I wish to disparage in the smallest degree the force of sentiment in human affairs, and still less that particular form of sentiment that springs from the pride of race. On the contrary, it has spurred mankind to some of the noblest and purest deeds; and the man who is not attached to his country and his race is not fit to exist at all. There is no reason why Bengalis should entertain this sentiment one whit less warmly than any other people. But I cannot see how the argument applies to the present case. If a Scotchman crosses the Tweed*** and comes into England, he does not cease to be a Scotchman. If a Sikh comes to Bengal, he does not cease to be a Sikh.† But here the case is not even one of crossing a border. For, so far from a single Bengali being taken away from his present place, or town, or district, or division, he would remain there precisely as before, with the sole difference that the Bengali people, instead of being the predominant element in one local administration, would in future become the predominant element in two. We offer to the Bengali nation the opportunity of forming a second unit round a second centre - and if a reduplication of its political existence is to be regarded as injurious to its future, Bengal nationality must, I think, be very distrustful of its own powers. It is curious that among the appeals that have been addressed to me, frequent allusion is made to the fact that Eastern Bengal once constituted an independent kingdom, the people of which, I believe, still call themselves Bengals, and not Bengalis. And yet, when the offer is made of a resurrection of that unit, the objection is raised that history and nationality are both being flouted and ignored.

^{***} The River Tweed forms part of the border between Scotland and England.

[†] The Sikh faith originated in the Punjab region of northern India, where they formed a minority alongside Muslims and Hindus.

Primary Source 2: Banerjee, Remembering the Partition of Bengal

Surendranath Banerjee (or Banerjee, 1848-1925) was an Indian nationalist leader from Calcutta (present-day Kolkata), the capital of Bengal Province. For forty years, he worked as the editor of the Calcutta-based English-language newspaper, The Bengalee, while also engaged as a leading advocate of self-determination of Indians, which he felt could best be achieved with dialogue with the British. In 1905, he was among the most important Bengali Hindu opponents of advoked by Mahatma Gandhi, Banerjea's political career was



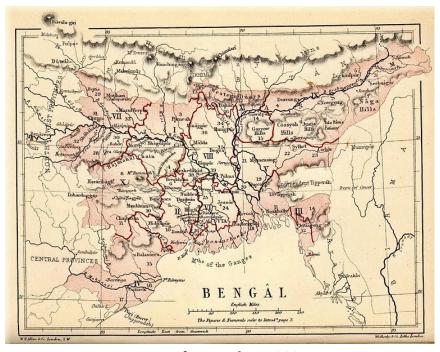
Surendranath Banerjee

effectively over. In his last days, he published By the Partition of Bengal. 1923, as his brand of moderation was losing out to the non-violent civil disobedience his autobiography, titled A Nation in Making. In this excerpt, he described the importance of the Partition of Bengal and his role in opposing it.

Source: Surendranath Banerjea, A Nation in the Making (Oxford: Humphrey Milford, 1925), 184-89, 195-96.

The year 1905 is one of the most memorable in the history of Bengal. It would be no exaggeration so say that it was an epoch-making year, leaving a profound and far-reaching influence on the public life of Bengal and the future of the country. It was the year of the Partition of Bengal.

There had been for some time a general feeling in official quarters that Bengal was too large a charge for a single ruler, and that the partition of the province was necessary in the interests of administrative efficiency. It was in pursuance of this idea that the province of Assam was separated from Bengal in 1874, and made a separate administrative unity under a Chief Commissioner.



The separation did not, at the time, excite much criticism, although in the province thus separated from Bengal there were three Bengalee-speaking districts... Public opinion was not then much of a power, and the solidarity of the Bengaleespeaking people and their growing sense of unity had not become so pronounced a factor in the public life of the province. The change was acquiesced in without demure; possibly it was welcomed by the people of Assam, who hoped that special attention would be paid to their interests.

Map of "Bengal" c. 1800

... Soon the bureaucracy discovered that a further expansion of the scheme of partition was required, in the interests of efficiency as well as the Service. Assam had no cadre of its own. The Civil Service appointments for the province were too few to justify the special cadre. Civil servants from Bengal and sometimes from the United Provinces* took up appointments in Assam, but after a term reverted to their provinces, the high appointments being few and the prospects limited. The interests of the Civil Service ... demanded that Assam should be a self-contained province.

The idea of a further partition of the creation of a greater Assam loomed large in the official view. The proposal was made, that the Chittagong Division** ... should be withdrawn from Bengal and tacked on to the Province of Assam. The proposal elicited a strong protest from the people of the Chittagong Division, supported by the public opinion of Bengal.... Public opinion was becoming a growing power and could no longer be altogether ignored. The proposal was dropped in view of the strong public protest; but it was never complexly shelved. It lingered in subterranean depths of the official consciousness, to emerge into view in more propitious circumstances.



Village in Assam, c. 1900-1920

Lord Curzon was now at the head of affairs. His energy was feverish. He was upsetting and unsettling things. The question of boundaries attracted his attention. The map of India was to be recast, but by pacific methods and with the impress of his genius and superior personality stamped thereon. Here was this unsettled question. It was taken up and its scope further expanded. The proposal now assumed the form of the separation from Bengal of the whole of the Chittagong Division ... and this area was to be incorporated into Assam.

It was in this form that the proposal ... roused strong opposition among all sections of the community - Hindus and Mohamadans*** alike. It was an opposition that the Government could not ignore. The Government sought to persuade and to conciliate by conferences with the leaders of East Bengal. These conferences were held at 'Belvedere' under the presidency of the Lieutenant-Governor, Sir Andrew Fraser.† They were organized by the newly-formed Landholders' Association, of which the life and soul at the time was Mr. (afterwards Sir A.) Chaudhuri.‡ I was asked by Mr. Chaudhuri to attend these conferences. I said it was not necessary, as the arrangements were in such excellent hands. I watched the proceedings as an interested spectator, eager to know and to help, but took no personal part or share in them.

^{*} Officially called the United Province of Agra and Oudh, this province in northern colonial India was created in 1902 and today largely corresponds to the state of Uttar Pradesh.

^{**} A region in the southeastern part of Bengal Province, in present-day Bangladesh.

^{***} An antiquated term for Muslims, today considered offensive.

[†] Andrews Henderson Leith Fraser (1848–1919) served as Lieutenant-General of Bengal from 1903 and helped plan the Partition. Belvedere Estate was his residence in Calcutta.

[‡] This is Ashutosh Chaudhuri (1860–1924), a prominent Bengali lawyer and leader of a political organization for Indian zamindars, wealthy landowners who managed plantations, collecting rents from peasant farmers, and paying a portion of their profits as taxes to British government. Zamandaris often received royal tiles (like Sir) or noble titles (like maharaja) from the imperial administration.

I was under the impression, wholly unfounded, as the sequel proved, that the Government, as the result of these conferences, would bow to public opinion, and withdraw from an untenable position. But this was not to be. Lord Curzon visited East Bengal, ostensibly with the object of ascertaining public opinion, but really to overawe it. He was so hopelessly out of touch with the new spirit that his own reactionary policy had helped to foster, that he thought that his presence would serve to bring the leaders of East Bengal round to his views. He was greatly mistaken. At Mymensingh he was the guest of the Maharaja Surya Kanto Acharya.§ Among the Zemindars of Bengal there never was a finer or stronger personality. He received Lord Curzon with all the honours of princely hospitality; but he told him with quiet and dignified firmness that we would regard the Partition of Bengal as a grave disaster, and that he was opposed to it; and throughout the remained a prominent leader of the anti-Partition agitation.



Lord Curzon at Shahbag Dhaka, c. 1904

It was in the course of this tour that the scheme of Partition underwent a further expansion. It was now proposed, and for the first time, to include the whole of North Bengal and the districts of Faridpore and Barisal in East Bengal, in the new and expanded project. The revised scheme was conceived in secret, discussed in secret, and settled in secret, without the slightest hint to the public. The idea of submitting it to a representative conference was no longer followed.... What become of that pretended deference to public opinion, of the solicitude to consult it, so conspicuous in the early stages of the discussion, when the East Bengal leaders were invited to conferences at 'Belvedere' under the presidency of the Lieutenant-Governor?

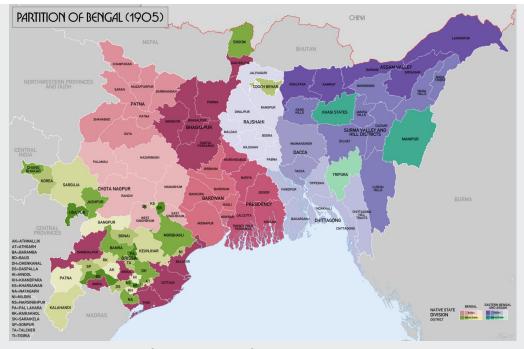
The truth is that there never was any real desire to defer to public opinion and abide by its decision. Lord Curzon and Sir Andrew Fraser had hoped to persuade the leaders to acquiesce to their views; when they failed, they set public opinion at defiance, but not with the inborn courage of real statesmanship. For the scheme, as finally settle, was embodied in a secret dispatch of which the public knew nothing. Indeed, so complete was the lull before Lord Curzon's visit to East Bengal and before the storm actually burst, that the idea gained ground that the project of a partition had been abandoned. Had we the faintest idea of what had been secretly decided, a deputation would have gone to England along with a despatch, which a view of procuring the annulment of its recommendations. I would have gladly joined such a deputation....

[§] A Bengali maharaja and zamandar who opposed the Partition of Bengal.



On July 20, 1905, the announcement was made that Bengal was to be partitioned, and the public was informed of the details of the Partition. For the first time they learned that North Bengal with all its historical association was to be separated from the old province. The announcement fell like a bomb-shell upon an astonished public. But in our bewilderment we did not lose our heads. We made up our minds to do all that lay in our power, with the aid of the constitutional means at our disposal, to reverse, or at any rate to obtain a modification of, the Partition.

We felt that we had been insulted, humiliated, and tricked. We felt that the whole of our future was at stake, and that it was a deliberate blow aimed at the growing solidarity and self-consciousness of the Bengalee-speaking population. Originally intended to meet administrative requirements, we felt that it had drawn to itself a political flavour and complexion, and, if allowed to be passed, it would be fatal to our political progress and to that close union between Hindus and Mohamedans upon which the prospects of Indian advancement so largely depended. For it was openly and officially given out that Eastern Bengal and Assam was to be a Mohamadan province, and that credal distinctions were to be recognized as the basis of the new policy to be adopted in the new province.



Map showing the results of the partition of 1905, with Bengal to the west, and Eastern
Bengal and Assam to the east



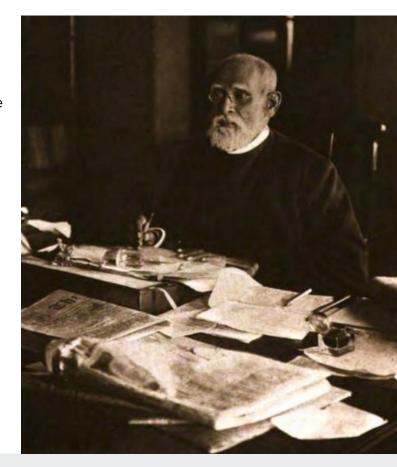
Jotindramohan Tagore (Jotindra Mohon Tagore), at whose palace anti-Partition activists met in 1905

We lost no time in taking action. We held a conference at Maharaja Jotindra Mohon Tagore's palace at Pathuriaghatta. The Maharaja was present and took an active part in the deliberations. Among those who attended was Mr. H. E. A. Cotton, then practising as a barrister in Calcutta, and now president of the Bengal Legislative Council. He was in the deepest sympathy with the movement for the reversal of the Partition: so was Mr. Ratlcliffe. Editor of the Statesman, and so was Mr. Fraser Blair, then Editor of the Englishman.^{††} Anglo-Indian^{‡‡} opinion, which generally supports the official view of things, condemned the partition through its accredited organs. The attitude, however, did not long continue; but that was the view of the Anglo-Indian Press in the early days of the anti-Partition agitation.

At the conference, it was decided that the Maharaja should send a telegram to the Viceroy praying for a reconsideration of the orders passed, and urging that, if the partition were unavoidable, owing to administrative reasons, the Bengalee-speaking population should form part and parcel of the same administration. It is significant that the form of partition that was subsequently adopted by Lord Hardinge's Government^{§§} was definitely foreshadowed at this conference, and was embodied in the telegram despatched to the Viceroy.

To have divided Bengal into two provinces, keeping the Bengalee-speaking population together in one province, and the rest in the other, would have removed all administrative inconveniences, whatever they were, and gratified public opinion. But this would not suit Lord Curzon and his Government....

Surendranath Banjerjea, from 1925 memoirs, A Nation in making



^{II} Jatindramohan Tagore (1831-1908) was a maharaja from a powerful zamindar in Calcutta.

^{††} This is Harry Evan Auguste Cotton, or Evan Cotton (1868-1939) a British colonial administrator, lawyer, and journalists who had been born in India. Samual K. Ratcliffe was an English journalist who served as editor of *The Statesman*, an English-language newspaper published in Calcutta. A. J. Frasier Blair was a Scottish journalists who served as editor of The Englishman, another English-language newspaper published in Calcutta.

^{‡‡} This term refers to people from British families who had been born or had lived for a long time in India.

^{§§} Under the Viceroy of India from 1910 to 1916, Charles Hardinge, Bengal was reunited in 1911.

The Conference at the Maharaja's palace was followed by almost daily conferences held in the Indian Association Rooms^{III} or at the house of the Maharaja Surya Kanto Acharya of Mymensingh. It was resolved to hold a public meeting at the Town Hall on August 7, a day that was destined to become famous in the history of the anti-Partition controversy....

The resolutions to be adopted at the meeting of August 7 were the subject of anxious and prolonged discussion at the various conferences, which were attended by leading men from East and North Bengal. It was felt that mere public meetings would be of no use. Lord Curzon's Government had sown a systematic disregard of public feeling, and had treated public demonstrations with undisguised contempt. Something more was necessary - something that would be a fitting embodiment of the intense feeling that lay behind the whole movement. I remember that various suggestions made at the meeting held almost daily in the rooms of the Indian Association. One of them was that we should resign all our honorary appointments, such those of Honorary Magistrate, and membership of district boards and municipalities. The obvious objection to the resignation of our seats ... was that they afforded an opportunity of serving our countrymen, and that they were a source of local influence which would be useful in the coming struggle. Further, it was doubtful whether the whole country would be with us, in such a view. A partial failure on the threshold of a great controversy would be disastrous, and the idea was therefore abandoned....



Banerjee on a 1983 stamp of India

PUBLIC MEETING

Bonfire of **Foreign** Clothes

Will take place at the Markan near Elphinstone Mills
Opp. Elphinstone Road Station

On SUNDAY the 9th Inst. at 6-30 P.M.

When the Resolution of the Karachi Khilafat Conference and another Congratulating Ali Brothers and others will be passed.

All are requested to attend in Swadeshi Clothes of Khadi. Those who have not yet given away their Foreign Clothes are requested to send them to their respective Ward Congress Committees for inclusion in the GREAT BONFIRE.

Poster advertising a boycott and burning of foreign goods in 1921, continuing the boycott movement established in 1905

A boycott movement in India had never before been thought of or attempted. It was a bold conception; and the first impulse of all spectators, as in the case of the Statesman, was to treat it with ridicule. But the success that it soon attained disclosed the volume of public sentiment that was behind it. Without a more or less universal feeling supporting it, the boycott was bound to fail. Its success was a revelation to all; it outstripped the anticipations of its inaugurators. But the bureaucracy in those days would learn nothing that was not in its files and was not consecrated by the dust of the Secretariat shelves. It was amazed at the ebullition of public feelings - it was indignant - it lost all self-control; it sought to repress where tactful handling and conciliatory measures would have been more effective, and thus it added to the intensity of the flame.

The Indian Association was founded by Bangerjea and his colleague Ananda Mohan Bose in 1876 to promote Indian self-governance.



The course of events during the whole of the controversy in connection with the Partition of Bengal bears would what I have just observed. There was throughout a persistent attempt to suppress the expression of public feeling in the name of law and order; and, as always happens in such cases, the attempt at repression recoiled upon its authors. More repressive measures were requisitioned; and the more signally they did fail; and the public excitement and unrest grew apace.

Undoubtedly the student community were deeply moved, and in the exuberance of their zeal they sometimes betrayed into excesses. When a great impulse stirs the heart of a community it is the young and impressionable who feel the full impact of the rising tide. At all times and in all ages it is to the young that the preachers of new movements have addressed themselves. 'Suffer little children to come until me' were the words of the divinely-inspired Founder of Christianity. In Greece, in Italy, in America, in Germany, all over the world, when a new gospel was preached, charged with the message of a new hope, it was the young who enthusiastically responded to the call.

I appealed to the young to help us in the great national movement. I knew how deeply they were stirred when I was sent to prison for contempt of court, and I felt that they would help to create a body of public opinion without which we could not hope to succeed. I addressed them at numerous public meetings, and warm was the response. It had its roots in economic rather than in political causes. The Partition had indeed moved their deepest feelings....



Statue of Surendranath Baneriee

Image Citations:

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Jotindramohan Tagore, 1908, Public Domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jotindramohan_Tagore.jpg

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1921 poster advertising a Congress non-cooperation public meeting and bonfire of foreign clothes in Bombay, Public Domain, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Noncooperation_khilafat1921.gif

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Bourne and Shepherd, Bathing Ghat, Calcutta, c. 1880, Public Domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bathing ghat in Calcutta,%22 by Bourne and Shepherd, c.1880's.jpg
Statue of Surendranath Banerjee, 2017, CC BY-SA 4.0, Pinaki1983, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Statue_of_Surendranath_Banerjee.jpg