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Imagining an Undivided Subcontinent: A Counterfactual Analysis of the Gains and Losses from the Partition of British India

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ABSTRACT

The 20th-century partition of British India was a watershed moment that radically reconfigured the geopolitical landscape of South Asia. This article conducts a counterfactual analysis to explore the potential outcomes of a hypothetical "undivided India," comprising modern-day India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. By synthesizing historical data, contemporary economic indicators, and social analyses, the study assesses the synergistic advantages a unified subcontinent might have possessed and, conversely, the enduring costs imposed by its fragmentation. The analysis posits that a unified state, with a combined 2024 population of approximately 1.93 billion and a GDP of \$4.8 trillion, could have emerged as a premier global economic and political power. Key potential advantages include a seamlessly integrated single market, optimized infrastructure and resource management (particularly transboundary water resources), pooled human capital, and substantially greater international influence. In contrast, the actual partitions are shown to have inflicted deep and lasting wounds, including catastrophic human displacement and violence, chronic economic disruption, severed supply chains, and the creation of persistent geopolitical rivalries that divert crucial resources from development to defense. While acknowledging the immense complexities of governing such a diverse entity, this paper concludes that understanding the scale of these lost opportunities underscores the critical importance of fostering greater economic integration and peaceful cooperation among the subcontinent's successor states today.

Keywords: Partition of India, Economic Integration, South Asian Development, Counterfactual History, United India, Geopolitics, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Myanmar.

1. Introduction

The partition of British India in 1947 was a monumental event that reshaped South Asia, creating the new nations of India and Pakistan and triggering one of history's most extensive and violent migrations, displacing 15–20 million people and causing an estimated 200,000 to 2 million deaths. The region's political geography continued to fragment with the separation of Burma (now Myanmar) in 1937 and the subsequent secession of East Pakistan to form Bangladesh in 1971.

These divisions carved a single political and economic entity into multiple states, creating new borders, governments, and deep-seated conflicts. This article explores a compelling counterfactual scenario: what might have been the trajectory of the subcontinent had it remained unified? It seeks to provide a balanced assessment of the potential positive outcomes of a "united India" and the profound costs that each successor state has borne due to the partitions. By synthesizing historical records, economic data, and geopolitical analysis, this paper aims to illuminate how a unified subcontinent could have leveraged its combined resources for collective prosperity and how fragmentation has created lasting inefficiencies in trade, security, and social development.

2. Historical Background: A Legacy of Multiple Partitions

Before 1947, the territory of British India encompassed the modern states of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, with Burma administered as a province until 1937. The 1947 Partition formally divided British India into two independent dominions: India and Pakistan. This act, based on religious-majority lines, split the culturally and economically integrated provinces of Bengal and Punjab and divided colonial assets, including the army, civil service, and railways. The immediate aftermath was a humanitarian catastrophe, as 12–20 million Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims migrated across newly drawn borders amidst horrific communal violence.

It is crucial to understand that the term "Partition of India" specifically refers to the 1947 division. However, this was not the only separation. Burma's administrative separation in 1937 and Bangladesh's war of independence from Pakistan in 1971 were also pivotal moments of fragmentation. Consequently, three sovereign states—Pakistan (1947), Bangladesh (1971), and Myanmar (1937)—emerged from the former British Indian administration, fundamentally altering what was once a unified market and polity.

3. The Potential of a Unified "Greater India"

An undivided subcontinent would have represented a formidable demographic, economic, and geopolitical entity on the world stage.

3.1 An Economic Superpower

Had the subcontinent remained unified, its economic and demographic scale would be immense. Combining the 2024 statistics of India (population ~1.45 billion, GDP ~\$3.91 trillion), Pakistan (~251 million, ~\$0.37 trillion), Bangladesh (~174 million, ~\$0.45 trillion), and Myanmar (~54 million, ~\$0.07 trillion) creates a hypothetical superstate. This "Greater India" would boast a **population nearing 1.93 billion and a combined nominal GDP of approximately \$4.8 trillion**, making it the world's third-largest economy by purchasing power parity and one of the largest by nominal GDP.

Such a vast, integrated market would have eliminated the internal trade barriers that currently stifle regional commerce. South Asia is one of the world's least economically integrated regions, with intra-regional trade accounting for a mere 5% of its potential. In a unified scenario, industries could achieve enormous economies of scale, serving a consumer base of nearly two billion people. The partition-induced disruption of supply chains, such as the Bengal jute industry where cultivation areas (East Pakistan) were separated from processing mills (West Bengal), would have been avoided, ensuring industrial efficiency and stability.

3.2 Integrated Infrastructure and Resource Management

Unified governance would have enabled integrated and far more efficient management of the subcontinent's vast natural resources and infrastructure. The great river systems—the Indus, Ganges, and Brahmaputra—which flow across modern international borders, could have been developed holistically for irrigation, power generation, and transport. For example, the Indus River basin, which supports 300 million people in India and Pakistan, is currently governed by the contentious 1960 Indus Waters Treaty. A single political authority could have optimized water management across the entire basin without the constraints of international treaties. Similarly, national energy grids, pipelines, and transportation networks (road and rail) could have been planned for maximum efficiency, boosting trade and lowering costs for the entire region.

3.3 Pooled Human Capital and Social Cohesion

A unified nation would have created a single, vast pool of human capital. While the 1947 migration led to a slight increase in literacy in parts of India due to the influx of educated communities, it overwhelmingly represented a net loss by uprooting skilled populations everywhere. In an undivided state, talent could have moved freely, with universities, research centers, and industries serving all regions without a cross-border "brain drain". This would have facilitated the uniform spread of best practices in social development. For instance, Bangladesh's modern success in public health, reflected in its higher life expectancy (~75 years) compared to India (72) or Pakistan (68), could have been scaled across the entire subcontinent. Furthermore, shared cultural institutions in cinema, literature, and sport would have fostered a pan-sub continental identity, promoting social unity amidst diversity.

3.4 A Dominant Geopolitical Actor

Combined, the subcontinent would wield immense geopolitical power, far exceeding that of present-day India alone. With a single foreign policy and a unified military, it could project strength and stability across Asia. The perennial, resource-draining hostility between India and Pakistan, which has resulted in four major wars, would have been an internal matter, if it existed at all. The vast sums spent on defense—Pakistan's military budget alone consumes around 3% of its GDP—could have been redirected toward development priorities like education, healthcare, and infrastructure. With a population of 1.9 billion, this unified India would command unparalleled influence in global institutions like the United Nations and the G20, shaping international policy on trade, security, and climate change.

4. The Enduring Costs of Division

The actual historical path of partition imposed staggering and persistent losses on all successor states, creating scars that have yet to heal.

4.1 The Human Catastrophe and Social Scars

The immediate human cost of the 1947 partition was immense, defined by mass displacement and slaughter that tore apart the social fabric of regions like Punjab and Bengal. Beyond the immediate trauma, partition sowed seeds of perpetual suspicion and hostility, particularly between India and Pakistan. This legacy of distrust continues to poison bilateral relations, diverting national energy toward security and propaganda rather than public welfare and creating a rigid division of communities along religious lines.

4.2 Economic Fragmentation and Lost Synergies

Partition abruptly shattered a deeply integrated colonial economy. Industries were cut off from their markets and raw material suppliers, as exemplified by the jute and textile industries of Bengal and Punjab. The imposition of borders, tariffs, and customs checks choked regional trade and dismantled efficient transportation networks. Every resulting country was left with a smaller, less diversified economic base, missing out on the economies of scale that a unified market would have provided. The combined GDP of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh today is significantly lower than what a fully integrated economy of its size might have achieved.

4.3 The Strategic Burden of Perennial Conflict

Perhaps the most damaging legacy of partition is the strategic rivalry it created, primarily between India and Pakistan. The nations have fought multiple wars since 1947, largely over disputed territories like Kashmir. This conflict has fueled a costly and destabilizing arms race, culminating in the development of nuclear weapons, and has locked both nations in a security dilemma that consumes massive financial resources. A united India would have had no such internal military rivalry, allowing its economic output to be channeled into productive investments.

5. A Counter-Narrative: The Inherent Challenges of Unity

While the benefits of a unified subcontinent are compelling, a balanced analysis must also acknowledge the immense challenges such a state would have faced. Governing a nation of nearly two billion people with staggering linguistic, ethnic, and religious diversity would have been an unprecedented test of political statecraft. Internal fault lines, which partition tragically exacerbated, would still have existed.

Regionalism and demands for autonomy from groups in Bengal, the Pashtun lands, Sindh, and the Tamil-speaking south might have posed severe threats to central authority. The "two-nation theory," which fueled the demand for Pakistan, was a powerful political force that would not have simply vanished. Managing these deep-seated identity-based tensions within a single democratic framework could have led to chronic political instability or even civil war. Furthermore, vast economic disparities between the more industrialized regions and the agrarian hinterlands could have fueled social unrest. The hypothetical "Greater India," while powerful, would have been a deeply complex and potentially fragile state, presenting governance challenges on a scale never before seen in human history.

6. Conclusion

This counterfactual exploration reveals the profound and multifaceted consequences of the partitions of British India. A unified subcontinent held the potential to become an economic, political, and cultural superpower, leveraging its enormous demographic weight, integrated market, and pooled resources to achieve unparalleled growth and global influence. The benefits of seamless infrastructure, shared human capital, and internal peace stand in stark contrast to the historical reality.

Conversely, the actual path of fragmentation has inflicted deep and enduring costs on all successor nations: India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. The legacy of partition includes shattered economies, persistent military conflicts, and social divisions that continue to hinder regional progress. South Asia remains one of the world's least integrated regions, a direct consequence of the borders drawn in the 20th century.

While history cannot be rewritten, understanding the scale of these missed opportunities provides a powerful lesson for the present and future. It highlights the immense value of economic integration, open borders, and peaceful cooperation. By working to improve regional trade, resolve conflicts, and build connectivity, the leaders of South Asia can begin to reclaim a fraction of the synergistic potential that was lost to partition, honoring their shared heritage by building a more prosperous and peaceful future.

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Authors' Contributions

Tayabur Rahman Laskar conceived and designed the study, conducted the research, performed the analysis, and wrote the manuscript.

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Data availability

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Ethics approval and consent to participate

The author(s) declare that it is not applicable.

(As this study did not involve human subjects or animal experiments.)

Consent for publication

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Appendix:-

Table 1. Estimated Population and GDP of Select South Asian Nations (2024) and Hypothetical Unified Totals.

Region/Country	Population (2024 Estimate)	GDP (2024 Estimate, Nominal US\$)
India	1,45,00,00,000	\$3,912,690,000,000
Pakistan	25,12,69,164	\$373,070,000,000
Bangladesh	17,35,62,364	\$450,120,000,000
Myanmar	5,45,00,000	\$74,080,000,000
Combined "Greater India"	~1,929,331,528	~\$4,809,960,000,000

Note: Figures are approximate 2024 values, rounded for illustrative purposes, to demonstrate the scale of a hypothetical undivided subcontinent.

Sources: World Bank (2024) data; World meter; tradingeconomics.com.

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