

# Noakhali Riots: This Day in History – Oct 10

On 10 October 1946, riots engulfed the Noakhali and Tipperah Districts of Bengal (in present-day Bangladesh) where the Hindu community was targeted. This is an important event in the modern history of the subcontinent, which ultimately led to partition of India. Hence, it is important to know about this tragic event for the IAS exam. In 1946, the times were tense in many parts of the subcontinent. The British had promised to grant independence to its prized colony but there was no concrete decision on how to go about the transfer of power.

- The Muslim League was demanding a separate Muslim state of Pakistan. This was not agreed upon by the Indian National Congress. Areas, where there was not a clear majority for one of the two communities, were reeling in tension as to what would happen; whether the country would be partitioned and if that took place, which side of the border would they lie. This tension was causing sporadic riots in places.
- The Muslim League called for Direct Action and August 16, 1946 was announced as the '**Direct Action Day**' to show their strength. The League leaders called for 'action' in order to get their demand for Pakistan fulfilled.
- Many provocative speeches were made and this resulted in one of the worst communal riots in history – the Great Calcutta Killings.

## Events of the Riots

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Mahatma Gandhi in Noakhali, 1946[/caption]

- In Noakhali, which was not much affected during the Calcutta killings, the violence started on 10 October.
- **Affected areas:** Noakhali District - Ramganj, Raipur, Begumganj, Chhagalnaiya, Lakshmipur and Sandwip. Tipperah District – Chandpur, Faridganj, Hajiganj, Chaudagram and Laksham.
- The perpetrators were Muslim National Guards and private militia. They targeted Bengali Hindus. Unfortunately, the Muslim League government of Bengal, headed by Huseyn

Shaheed Suhrawardy did not actively check the rioters. Some believe this was to send the message that the partition of the country was warranted. This was in line with the communal propaganda by the League leaders who had asked its supporters to 'take Pakistan by force if needed'.

- Even though the violence started on the 10th, enforcers were sent to the affected areas only on the 14th. An earlier intervention from the government might have prevented thousands of deaths.
- It is estimated that about 5000 Hindus were killed during these riots. Thousands were forcibly converted and many women were raped.
- Property was ransacked and houses and shops looted and burned. Temples were desecrated.
- Lalmohan Sen, a revolutionary leader who had participated in the Chittagong Armoury Raid and imprisoned for 16 years by the British, was killed by a mob during the riots.
- The League government tried to curb incidents of violence being reported in the newspapers. It also covered up a report on the Noakhali incidents by Edward Skinner Simpson, a retired judge.
- Many Indian social and political organisations came for relief activities. Among the organisations were Bharat Sevashram Sangha, INC, the Communist Party of India, Hindu Mahasabha, the Indian National Army of Bose, Arya Samaj, etc.
- Mahatma Gandhi visited the disturbed areas to spread his message of non-violence and request the rioters to stop. Although he largely failed in his objective, his presence did bring in some calm. He saw these riots as a test of his principle of ahimsa. When Suhrawardy tried to evade a charge of murder on his government, the normally calm Gandhi said in anger, *"Yes, you are responsible not only for that murder but for every life lost in Bengal, whether Hindu or Muslim."*

## **Aftermath of the riots**

- As a result of the riots, around 50,000 people were rendered homeless. Many fled to other areas due to the massacre and forced conversions. Refugees were sent to Calcutta. Although the migration of people stopped after relief measures were brought in, it started again after the partition of the country was announced. This time, the refugee influx was into Assam, Tripura and the areas that became West Bengal.
- Some historians opine that although the massacre and the conversions stopped in November, normalcy was never restored until the partition. After partition, Noakhali became part of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh).
- There were riots in Bihar and the United Provinces towards the end of 1946 which is seen as a reaction to the Noakhali riots.
- The events of Noakhali would pale in comparison during the carnage of the partition of India.