

# India and Pakistan: The Tragedy of Partition

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On 15 August 1947, Jawaharlal Nehru addressed India's Constituent Assembly in words that have become famous: "Long years ago we made a tryst with destiny, and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge, not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially. At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom."

In fact, what the people of former British India awoke to was a tragedy of horrendous proportions, unfolding right across the northern arc of the country from Sindh in the west to Bengal in the east, but with its bloodiest focus in Punjab.

A monstrous killing spree, the work of armed and merciless vigilante mobs, incited by Hindu, Muslim and Sikh communalists alike, saw at least one million perish and more than fifteen million forced from their homes, robbed and beaten during their flight. Uncounted numbers of women and young girls were raped, abducted and enslaved.

Pakistani historian Ayesha Jalal reports one such incident: "on the same evening [as Nehru's speech], as the remaining British officials in Lahore set out for the railway station, they had to pick their way through streets littered with dead bodies. On the platforms, they found the railway staff hosing down pools of blood. Hours earlier, a group of Hindus fleeing the city had been massacred by a Muslim mob as they sat waiting for a train. As the Bombay Express pulled out of Lahore and began its journey south, the officials could see that Punjab was ablaze, with flames rising from village after village."

Nisid Hajari in his book *Midnight's Furies* wrote: "Foot caravans of destitute refugees fleeing the violence stretched for 50 miles and more. As the peasants trudged along wearily, mounted guerrillas burst out of the tall crops that lined the road and culled them like sheep. Special refugee trains, filled to bursting when they set out, suffered repeated ambushes along the way. All too often they crossed the border in funereal silence, blood seeping from under their carriage doors."

Two of the British Raj's most populous, economically and culturally rich provinces, Punjab and Bengal, were horribly ravaged and split in two. Kashmir, the sub-continent's beautiful Switzerland, was invaded, beginning a war that has not ended since.

Pakistan's first capital, Karachi, had a 47.6 per cent Hindu population in 1941, and almost no Hindus after the partition. Delhi, one-third Muslim in 1941, saw 200,000 Muslims driven out.

Families now found themselves divided by a border drawn by Sir Cyril Radcliffe, a British lawyer, who had never been to India, who knew nothing of its history, social systems or cultures, and who returned home before he could see the results of his work.

While partition was meant to protect India's Muslims against Hindu domination, more Muslims remained in

India than the whole population of the new Pakistan. Moreover, Pakistan's eastern half, today's Bangladesh, was separated from West Pakistan by 1,700 kilometres of territory belonging to an India with which it now had hostile relations.

Last, but not least, all of this was done without any serious consultation of the populations involved, neither by plebiscite nor by an All-India constituent assembly. Provincial and national assemblies were elected under British rule on a franchise that denied the majority a vote. Such plebiscites as did occur (as in North-West Frontier Province) were marred by wholesale intimidation.

Responsibility for this bloody violence, at the birth of British India's successor states, lies first and foremost with the British ruling class. They had exploited, impoverished and starved the Indian masses; pursued a policy of divide and rule; formalised and inflamed both caste and religious 'identities'; and built these identities into the polity of the Raj, with separate electorates and reserved places in administrations. For the last decade of British rule, Britain alternated between repression and manipulative negotiations, playing off the Indian National Congress against the All-India Muslim League.

Britain's 'civilising mission'

British politicians are naturally embarrassed by many episodes in Britain's imperial history, among them the looting of India under the East India Company in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is instructive that 'loot' is a loan word from Hindi, meaning booty or stolen property. A fraction of this booty consists of many of the gold and jewelled artworks in the Royal Collection and in stately homes all over Britain, and the 40,000 items of stolen Indian art in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.

After Robert Clive's defeat of the last Nawab of Bengal, Siraj ud-Daulah, at the battle of Plassey in 1757, £800,000 in silver coins was sent in barges to Company headquarters in Calcutta. Clive personally looted £250,000 in precious metals and gemstones. The Company went on to conquer all of India with British-officered Indian soldiers ('sepoys'). By the time it captured Delhi in 1803, the Company had 260,000 sepoys under its command.

Even so, a remarkable number of people in Britain are ignorant of their country's shameful role in India. According to a YouGov poll in 2016, 43 per cent of British citizens think that the British Empire was a 'good thing', while only 19 per cent disagreed. After all, didn't 'we' endow the Indians with railways, the English language, the rule of law and parliamentary democracy? Didn't 'we' (as far as 'we' were able) try to stop them from murdering each other over 'ancient religious hatreds'?

Michael Gove, while he was the Tory Education Secretary, wanted to restore teaching about the Empire in British schools. Nor is this imperialist patriotism limited to Tories. In 2005, visiting a British war cemetery in Tanzania, then Labour Chancellor Gordon Brown was quoted in the Daily Mail as saying: 'I've talked to many people on my visit to Africa and the days of Britain having to apologise for its colonial history are over. We should move forward. We should celebrate much of our past rather than apologise for it.'

A crop of pro-Empire historians has been busy over the last 20 years trying to whitewash the record. Niall Ferguson, in his 2003 book, *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World*, received widespread praise from Tories, like Gove, who wanted to include this view in school curriculums. Lawrence James, the author in 1997 of *Raj: The Making and Unmaking of British India*, claims that India's colonial rulers 'were humane men and, although hampered by inadequate administrative machinery and limited resources, they made a determined effort to feed the hungry'.

But did they? In *Late Victorian Holocausts*, Mike Davis recorded in 2000 that during the 120 years or so of British rule, 31 serious famines occurred that killed up to 29 million Indians, a much larger number than

during the entire previous millennium.

Previous Indian empires and kingdoms had viewed it as essential to store rice, wheat and barley to protect against events like the failure of the monsoon. But the British, with their railways and their changes to the system of land ownership, instead made it possible to market and export food surpluses; and, as dogmatic laissez-faire economists, they refused to interfere with the market.

In the Great Famine of 1876-78 (as with the Irish Potato Famine of 1845-52) there was actually a net surplus of food grains in India. But Viceroy Robert Bulwer-Lytton insisted that nothing should be allowed to interfere with exports. Further famines, in which 15 million died, ensued in 1889, 1892, 1897 and 1900.

#### Importing modern industry

Even more destructive than the looting of jewels and precious metals was the destruction of India's huge textile industry. After the Napoleonic Wars, cloth imports from the mills of Lancashire wiped out an Indian village economy based on domestic spinning and weaving. Governor-General Lord William Bentinck commented in 1835 that, "the misery hardly finds parallel in the history of commerce. The bones of the cotton-weavers are bleaching the plains of India."

Along with the Transatlantic Slave Trade, the slave plantation economies of the Caribbean and the Americas and the transformation of Britain's peasantry into landless labourers (the "enclosures") India's despoliation is an example of what Karl Marx called the "primitive accumulation of capital". Alongside the harsh exploitation of British workers at home, this was essential to our ruling class in creating Britain's industrial, trading and naval supremacy by the middle of the nineteenth century.

The building of India's huge railway network, although aimed at pumping India's surplus product abroad, and at dispatching troops to "trouble spots" within, also had the effect of tying India together as a political and economic entity. This also created a modern bourgeoisie (albeit a small one) of native Indian capitalists. Among them were the industrialists of the Tata family, whose patriarch, Jamsetji Nusserwanji Tata, started with cotton mills in the 1870s and founded the Tata Iron and Steel Company in 1907. By 1939, its steel mill was the largest in the British Empire.

With capitalists naturally also came workers. The cotton textiles industry employed 260,000 in 1914; jute employed 200,000 in 1912; and the railways had around 600,000 workers. By 1939, about 2 million worked in manufacturing industry, 1.5 million on the railways and 1.2 million in British-owned plantations.

A European-style education system produced an Anglicised state bureaucracy and a growing modern intelligentsia of clerks, lawyers, teachers, doctors and journalists. Many of these later led India's nationalist movements, most notably Mahatma Mohandas Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Subhas Chandra Bose.

The biggest such movement, the Indian National Congress, was founded in 1885 by generally pro-British modernising lawyers and would-be politicians. They hoped to persuade Britain to transform India into a self-governing Dominion within the British Empire, as had already happened in Canada in 1867, and would later happen in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. This was a natural perspective for India's nascent bourgeoisie: that of sharing in Britain's exploitation of the world.

The men Britain sent to rule India had different ideas, however. Lord Curzon, Viceroy of India from 1899 to 1905, said that: "India is the pivot of Empire, by which I mean that outside the British Isles we could, I believe, lose any portion of the dominions of the Queen and yet survive as an Empire; while if we lost India, I maintain that our sun would sink to its setting."

Dislodging the British from the 'pomp and circumstance' of Empire, its Imperial Durbars, its King-Emperors and its Viceroy but, above all, from its profits, would require mass struggles. It would also encounter deliberate obstacles to a united Indian national struggle for freedom, placed in its way not only by the British, but also by the political rivals for the inheritance of the Raj.

In Part Two, we will look at how the Indian national movement was split along communal lines and at the role of Gandhi, Nehru and Jinnah in this and in the partition of India. We will also examine the birth of the Indian workers' movement, the role played by socialists and communists and how pre-revolutionary situations in 1943 and 1946 were squandered and betrayed.

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