

India's Independence from Colonial Britain and the Partition of India

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Today marks the 70th anniversary of India's independence from colonial Britain. Flags in both India and Pakistan fly high to commemorate the end of colonial rule. But in talking about India's independence we need to rid ourselves of some [historical amnesia](#). The partition of northern India that was drawn up by the British at the same time meant that independence was a mixed blessing, offering freedom from imperialism on the one hand and some inherited imperial power struggles on the other. The rivalry and political tensions between the two countries continue as a result. That's something which took me over a decade to figure out.

A story of heroes and villains?

This was the story of partition recited to me as a child at school.

1885 saw the birth of the Indian National Congress, the first nationalist political party and movement under the British Empire. Its most recognised Hindu leader, Gandhi, pushed for complete independence from British rule as a unified country. Muhammed Ali Jinnah, a Muslim and former Congress member, wanted to divide India by religious lines and remain loyal to colonial Britain. With no truce between factitious religious sides, securing a united and peaceful India under British rule was impossible. The British Raj recognised its loss of control in the region and India was divided into India, home of Hindus and Sikhs, and Pakistan for Muslims. Independence was won.

This account is biased, naively straightforward and historically inaccurate, but I never questioned it. Not only are the 'heroes and villains' of partition nuanced and complex, Britain's role in an imperial controlled independence is still underplayed in schools and history books.

If you can't rule you can still divide

In 1857 the Great Rebellion saw Muslim and Hindu soldiers and civilians standing side by side in revolt against the East India Company that was ruthlessly exploiting the sub-continent. That contradicted the familial narrative recounted to me at home that Hindus and Muslims just never got on – it had always been that way.

It took some time to piece together how the exploitation of religious division through partition helped shape my family's perceptions.

Religious chasms were undeniably real at the time, and sometimes violent. In India representation in government was largely in favour of the Hindu majority. But, it is equally true that British colonial powers systematically exploited and stimulated political divisions along religious lines to its own advantage.

Prior to WWII, Britain opposed demands for independence. British viceroys had previously used allies in the Muslim League and their plans for partition as a threat and leverage over Hindu nationalists who wanted a united, independent India. But it became clear during the war that a lack of resources back in the UK and the growing clamour for independence in India meant that relinquishing (some) imperial control was inevitable.

A united independent India would withdraw from the Commonwealth under the Congress and British military influence would be denied. The creation of Pakistan through the Muslim League was now no longer leverage; it was a strategic policy to maintain some amount of British power and continued colonial control in India.

The Radcliffe line was drawn within five weeks and in August 1947 India quickly became two separate states divided by a religious border.

A violent aftermath which isn't over

As religious divides heightened in the days following the announcement of partition, millions fled their homes to reach safety in the newly created Hindu and Sikh India and Muslim Pakistan. This remains the single largest mass migration of people in all history. Tragically, massive violence erupted in border areas, especially in Punjab. Women in particular were targeted and nearly one million people were killed as communal violence spread. 15 million people were displaced and remnants of that [statelessness still affect thousands in both countries today](#).

The battle for disputed Kashmir and the [buried roots of Islamic radicalism](#), the violent formation of Bangladesh, and a right-wing government in India which privileges Hindu nationalism, are all indicators that the legacy of 1947 isn't over. There is still a deeply ingrained rivalry between India and Pakistan and it's time we understood why. Those stories told to me as a child missed something. Not all stories have a hero and villain. Some stories are complex. Some stories require an understanding of power. And in the UK we have a tendency to downplay the impact of the political machinations of the Empire.

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