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## Legacy of Partition: Lines that Divide and Scars that Rankle

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### Abstract

*The Partition of 1947 was a culmination of nearly two centuries of colonial subjugation of the Indian subcontinent. This watershed event in the history of South Asian geopolitics marked the violent birth of twin nations that were very similar to each another, but their differences spiralled to such an extent that they consumed all the shared memories, cultures, and literatures in one blow. The religion-based division fostered by the British imperialistic powers led to a massive exodus, displacing millions, making them refugees in their own country. The aftermath saw such brutal and beastly violence, abductions, gang-rapes, and massacres resorted to by either side that the streets were filled with blood and gore. It was the most compelling and heart-wrenching period ever witnessed post the Jewish genocide by the Nazi army. Was this the prize for freedom? What went wrong and why? How could their Ganga-Jamuni Tahzeeb collapse so horribly? The cross-border skirmishes, communal tensions, insurgencies, random acts of terrorism, militarization still shape contemporary South Asian politics despite the passage of seventy-eight long years. The trauma of being torn apart still rankles and finds expression in cinema, literature, and oral histories, contributing to the collective memory and shared grief. Through this paper, we intend to explore the factors leading to the division of the country and the lasting legacy of distrust and scepticism that has been bestowed willy-nilly on its citizens.*

### Keywords

Homelessness, Communal violence, Trauma of partition, Territorial reorganization, Massacres.

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## **Legacy of Partition: Lines that Divide and Scars that Rankle**

### **1. Introduction**

15<sup>th</sup> August, 1947, is a watershed moment that altered the life of the people of Indian subcontinent forever. For some, it was a synonym of independence, for others partition and the darkest period in Indian history. It was a birth that forcibly tore apart mono-ovular twins out of the same womb and condemned them to an existence wherein they became sworn enemies of each other. What could not be separated were their shared histories, and memories that ran deep. In his seminal novel, *The Shadow Lines*, Amitav Ghosh talks about the looking glass borders between the two states, saying, "The simple fact that there had never been a moment in the four thousand year old history of that map, when the places we know as Dhaka and Calcutta were more closely bound to each other than after they had drawn their lines-so closely bound to each other, that I in Calcutta had only to look into the mirror to be in Dhaka: a moment when each city was the inverted image of the other, locked into an irreversible symmetry by the line that was to set us free-our looking glass border" (Ghosh, 1988: 233). Despite 78 years of separation till date, the mirrored borders between India and Pakistan are more reflective of the interconnectedness of the two communities rather than difference and alienation.

The Indian Independence Act was passed by the British Parliament on 18<sup>th</sup> July, 1947, and it was set to come into effect at midnight of 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> August, 1947, dividing the subcontinent into two religion-based nations, India and Pakistan. The transfer of power to Pakistan culminated on 14<sup>th</sup> August and to India on 15<sup>th</sup> August 1947, enabling the then Viceroy, Lord Mountbatten, to attend both the ceremonies. The British relinquished their imperialistic and exploitative powers on a country which they had dominated for nearly two centuries on 15<sup>th</sup> of August, but announced the formal borders to come into effect from 17<sup>th</sup> August i.e., two days later, unleashing an unprecedented spate of horror which charred the national consciousness for all times to come. The massive exodus left

the two communities wallowing in the vortex of communal hatred, thirsting for each other's blood even before the division was complete. The vitriolic violence that erupted affected millions of people. The number who faced the brunt of partition ranged from 200,000 to 2,000,000. The newly-demarcated borders forced the Sikhs, Hindus, and Muslims to flee to their respective sides, hoping to find a safe haven, but instead they found themselves ambushed, caught, and massacred in cold blood by the communal forces of the 'other'. "Britain's precipitous and ill-planned disengagement from India in 1947-condemned as a 'shameful flight' by Winston Churchill-had a truly catastrophic effect on South Asia, leaving hundreds of thousands of people dead in its wake and creating a legacy of chaos, hatred, and war that has lasted over half a century" (Wolpert, Introduction).

## 2. Timeline of Key Events Leading to Partition

Timeline of key events leading to partition are shown in the following table:

Year	Event
1905	Partition of Bengal by the British (later reversed)
1906	Formation of the Muslim League
1909	Morley-Minto Reforms: separate electorates for Muslims
1915	Formation of Hindu Mahasabha
1920s	Intensification of communal violence
1925	Formation of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangha (RSS)
1928	Simon Commission and Jinnah's Fourteen Points
1930	Jinnah's first articulation of Muslim nationhood
1935	Government of India Act: Provincial autonomy - separate electorates for Hindus and Muslims
1940	Lahore Resolution (the demand for Pakistan)
1942	Quit India Movement
1944	End of World War II, British in economic and political crisis
1945	Victory of the Labour Party in England, pledge to end colonial rule
1946	Elections Muslim League wins Muslim seats
August 16, 1946	Direct Action Day, Calcutta violence and massacre on a massive scale

June 3, 1947	Lord Mountbatten arrives, Partition inevitable, Dominion of India and Pakistan announced w.e.f. 15 <sup>th</sup> August 1947
June 8, 1947	Cyril Radcliffe arrives to draw the borders dividing United India into two nations
July 18, 1947	The Indian Independence Act was passed; the British announced the plan of withdrawal
August 14-15, 1947	Partition of India and creation of Pakistan. Massive bloodshed and violence
August 17, 1947	Border lines drawn between India and Pakistan come into effect

### 3. Factors leading to the Partition

There is a complex interplay of historical, social, religious, and political factors that have resulted in the fragmentation of the Indian subcontinent. It is not a single cause that can be held responsible but rather a culmination of years of tensions, apprehensions, hostilities, and mistrust that resulted in massive communal violence, mass displacements and unprecedented genocide.

#### 3.1 The Religious Divide

Although the Hindus and Muslims had co-existed peacefully and lived amicably for centuries, they had their own cultural and ideological differences, the advantage of which was taken by the British who created a deliberate rift between them through their divisive politics. The religion-based division of Bengal in 1905 is a glaring example of their policies. The British Census and the separate electorate system introduced by them from 1909 onwards (Morley-Minto Reforms) institutionalized these differences and deepened the religious identities further. Religious affinity and affiliation became the cornerstone of voting rather than the national good. India witnessed innumerable instances of communal violence and riots in the second and third decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was particularly pronounced in regions with mixed populations like Punjab and Bengal.

#### 3.2 Proposal for a Two-Nation Theory

Muhammad Ali Jinnah and his Muslim League vociferously asserted that Hindus and Muslims were not merely two religious communities but two distinct nations that deserved their own sovereign power (Jinnah). They weren't the only ones to propagate the

two-nation theory. In the year 1876, Syed Ahmad Khan, the founder of Aligarh Muslim University had also expressed his reservations about Hindus and Muslims ever becoming one nation. In his speech in Meerut in the year 1888, he said, "I am convinced that these two nations [Hindus and Muslims] will not join whole- heartedly in anything. At present there is no hostility between the two communities, but no one can predict when the situation may change" (Muhammad, 1969: 179). In the New-York Daily Tribune of 15<sup>th</sup> April 1854, Karl Marx had stated that "the Muslim legislation reduces the geography and the ethnography of various people into the simple and convenient distinction of two nations and two countries, the believers, and the non-believers" (Marx). Ambedkar also accepted the demand of a separate Muslim nation for he was sceptical whether the two communities could coexist peacefully in free India (Ambedkar, 1945: 156). With the rise of Hindu nationalist organizations like the Hindu Mahasabha and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the Muslims felt threatened that their identity, culture, and rights would get compromised in a Hindu-majority state, paving the way for a formal demand for Pakistan in the Lahore Resolution in the year 1940, propagating the Two-Nation Theory to justify the division based on irreconcilable religious differences (Bhatti, 2015: xxxi).

### **3-3 The Divide and Rule Policy**

The British adopted the Roman maxim, "Divide et impera". The 'Divide and Rule' policy of the 'whites' always played native communities against each other in matters of employments, services, and education, and took advantage of their differences and mistrust to maintain their own supremacy over the 'brown skin'. The introduction of discriminatory policies like separate electorates, differential recruitments in the armed forces, differential access to education only led to widespread resentment, competition, and long-term fragmentations between the two communities, fracturing the socio-political fabric of the nation forever. Privileging one religion over the other destroyed the Indian polity, creating caste divides that ran very deep. Expressing his views on the British policy of Divide and Rule, in an article for Aljazeera on 10th August 2017, Shashi Tharoor wrote, "The British imperialistic policy fomented religious antagonisms to facilitate continued imperial rule that reached its tragic culmination in 1947" (Tharoor).

### **3.4 Failed Efforts at Sharing Power**

The differences between the Muslim League and the Indian National Congress over issues of federalism and minority rights had fructified to such an extent that reconciliation of any sort looked impossible. The Nehru Report of 1928 sought no separate electorates which was countered by Jinnah with his Fourteen Points in 1929, ("Jinnah's Fourteen Points") insisting on religious autonomy, separate electorates, adequate representation, federal governance, and cultural protection. The Cripps Mission of 1942 was also unacceptable to both, making the shared vision of United India even more elusive.

### **3.5 Communal Violence and Weakened British Control**

World War II on one hand and civil unrest, Quit India Movement (1942), Naval Mutinies (1946), communal violence on the other, had drained the Raj economically and politically too. The extent of violence and hatred that followed the Direct Action Day (1946), killing approximately 4,000 people, wherein Jinnah's proclamation, "We do not want war. If you want war we accept your offer unhesitatingly. We will either have a divided India or a destroyed 'India'" (Bourke-White, 1949: 15) made even the staunchest supporter of united India consider the division of the country favourably. Partition seemed to be a lesser evil to prevent the civil war. Moreover, the Labour Government that came to power in 1945 was also committed to decolonization, which further expedited their political withdrawal from India as it was seen as a practical remedy with minimal damage (Kaul). Lord Mountbatten, thus preponed the transfer of power from June 1948 to August 1947, stating, "We have to get out quickly. The longer we stay, the worse it will be" (Panigrahi, 2004: 57).

### **3.6 Absence of Shared National Consciousness**

Gradually things came to such a pass that the religious identities and affiliations took full precedence over the collective Indian identity and gave in to sectarian politics. Many historians are of the opinion that warped-up negotiation strategies, personal rivalries and mistrust between Gandhi, Nehru, and Jinnah played a major role in the partition of the country. Gandhi's vision of unity and communal harmony was too idealistic to be practical and Nehru's leadership alienated Jinnah who felt that Muslim interests were being sidelined by majoritarian Hindus.

Thus, it was decades of diabolic colonial policies and practices, competing nationalisms, deep religious divide, fanned communal passions, mutual distrust, and narrow self-centredness which led to the traumatic birth of two nations from the same womb.

#### **4. The Impact of Partition on Contemporary India**

The year 1947 heralded the end of the colonial era, but it remained central to India's collective consciousness and political rhetoric, initiating simultaneously an era of communal hatred, identity crises, fanatic nationalism, cross-border skirmishes, and tensions in its wake. It continues to shape contemporary India across social, political, religious, cultural, and gendered lines. Below are enumerated some ramifications on present day India:

##### **4.1 Religious Polarization**

"Partition bequeathed India not just memories of loss but also structures of suspicion that define Hindu-Muslim interactions" (Pandey, 1990: 12). William Dalrymple, in his 22 June, 2015 article, 'The Great Divide' quotes Yasmin Khan's acclaimed work of history, *The Great Partition: The making of India and Pakistan*, where she states that partition "... stands testament to the follies of empire, which ruptures community evolution, distorts historical trajectories and forces violent state formation from societies that would otherwise have taken different-and unknowable-paths" (Dalrymple). The extreme fanaticism and communal distrust that led to the breaking away of a nation-state in 1947 is still very much entrenched in the socio-political fabric of the nation. Religious passions are often manipulated and fanned for political gains by political parties. There has been a significant increase in religious polarization since the 1990s with the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), and National Register of Citizens (NRC). The Indian society has witnessed a significant upsurge in Hindu nationalism with the Bhartiya Janta Party coming to power at the centre in 2014 apparently to counter the Muslim appeasement policy adopted by the earlier Congress government. Vote bank politics plays crucial role in fanning religious polarization.

##### **4.2 Resettlement of Refugees**

Mass movement of people from either side rendered them homeless and at state mercy. The demographic landscape underwent a massive transformation with the influx of refugees from West

Punjab and East Bengal who needed to be resettled (Butalia). In Delhi, “Punjabi refugees redefined the city’s economy, culture, and political clout within a generation” (Malhotra, 2019: 214). Although they carried a huge psychological baggage yet they also brought their own entrepreneurial drive and vigour with them to survive the harsh realities. In Pakistan, for example, the refugees were derogatorily referred to as Muhazirs, and had to face marginalization at the hands of their own communities when they succeeded in rebuilding their shattered lives.

### **4.3 Cross-Border Terrorism**

The unresolved territorial claims of Jammu and Kashmir and East Pakistan at the time of partition has led to three major wars in 1965, 1971 and more recently, in 1999 in Kargil. Besides, there have been Phulwama and Balakot strikes, countless conflicts, rampant acts of terrorism, insurgencies and military stand-offs between India and Pakistan. Since Jammu and Kashmir has been a contentious issue between the two nations, it was accorded a special status through Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, the abrogation of which in 2019 resulted in widespread violence and terrorist attacks. The 1990 exodus of the Kashmiri Pandits, who had a long history in the Kashmir valley dating back thousands of years, also has been a consequence of the militancy and terror mechanisms used by Pakistan against India.

### **4.4 Genre of Trauma Literature**

Literature, art, cinema, paintings, etc. are idioms of loss, longing, and nostalgia that not only provide an escape from the harsher realities of life, but also provide a valuable insight into the nuanced experiences of people. The psychological and emotional trauma of partition has been vividly captured and documented through the heart-wrenching literature penned by writers like Saadat Hasan Manto, Bhisham Sahni, Amrita Pritam, Khushwant Singh, Intizar Hussain, Chaman Nahal and others in many languages. Many of the works have been given an added visual dimension through the potent medium of cinema as they highlight the horrendous impact of fracturing not just nations, but people and memories too. “Partition was not just a political event but a rupture of human consciousness” (Menon and Bhasin, 1998: 32). This excessively horrific period has been etched forever in the national memory through endless stories, anecdotes, plays, novels, excerpts, experiences, autobiographies,

poems. The shared experiences of the trauma, with all its entailing horror, have been documented, adapted, and readapted repeatedly in various languages across the length and breadth of both the nations, India and Pakistan. The visuals of trains filled with massacred bodies of women, children, young and old, eerily rumbling down the stations still send a shiver down our spines. Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1956), Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar* (1950), Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Ice Candy Man* (1988), Bhisham Sahni's *Tamas* (1974), Manto's *Toba Tek Singh* (1955), Manohar Malgonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges* (1965), Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1980) and the list is endless. Films like *Garam Hawa* (1973), *Gandhi*, *Jinnah*, *Lahore*, *Earth* (1998), bring to light some extremely gut-wrenching tales of partition horror.

#### **4.5 Gendered Trauma of Partition**

Women were the worst sufferers; they paid an extremely heavy price for partition as they were used as 'weapons of war' (Kelly Oliver) by the countless un-named perpetrators of violence from either community to inflict humiliation upon their rivals and discredit their masculinity. More than 100,000 women were abducted, gang-raped, mutilated during the violence of partition (Menon and Bhasin). This extreme form of hatred on the female bodies of the 'other' community was appallingly brutal. The Inter-Dominion Conference on December 1947, in Lahore began the recovery and search operation for all such women to be returned to their respective homes. The operation lasted for many months, by which time, many violated women had compromised with their fate and found new homes with their abductors. Some who could finally manage to return, were tainted as 'polluted' and were no longer acceptable to their own kith and kin as they prioritized honour over emotions, thereby killing or abandoning the 'dead' all over again.

#### **4.6 Regional Impact in Bengal and Northeast India**

Although Punjab and Bengal faced the maximum brunt of partition, the partition of the north-east India was an even more complicated process since linguistic antagonism and ethnicity of various communities living in the plains and hills was also involved. It led to a massive disruption of the socio-economic and personal lives of people as they found their region inundated with check-posts and barriers instead of inter-community connects. It physically separated the north-east region from the rest of the mainland save a

narrow stretch of 22 kilometres, known as the chicken's neck in popular parlance. The demography went through a big change with issues of immigrations, both legal and illegal, from within and from across the newly formed borders too.

#### **4.7 Economic and Strategic Consequences**

Partition disrupted agricultural production, trade routes, and industries. Post the partition of the country, a large region of the fertile Indus basin went over to Pakistan which necessitated the Indus Waters Treaty (Gilmartin, 1999: 1068-1095). The migrant movement and refugee resettlement required a restructuring of a different kind. Smuggling and cross-border illicit trade flourished along the borders with the complicity of locals on either side. There was, and is, human trafficking of women and children, too.

#### **4.8 Administrative and Bureaucratic Challenges**

The postcolonial Indian bureaucracy had to face administrative challenges as it was a bifurcation of its workforce as well. The Europeans and most Muslims civil servants had moved to their chosen countries. There was shortage of foodgrains, coupled with price rise, which brought its own challenges as the rationing system had to be introduced. There was an urgent need for the recruitment and training of public personnel quickly. Managing millions of displaced, homeless people required creation of rehabilitation departments and refugee commissions and manpower.

#### **4.9 Loss of Linguistic Identity**

The linguistic identities of people were reshaped by partition. Urdu became the language of Pakistan and Hindi/Devanagari of India. Punjabi language suffered, as did other diverse languages of the Punjab. Both East Pakistan, later Bangladesh, and West Bengal shared linguistic and cultural roots, but political lines divided them.

#### **4.10 History of Partition and Memory Politics**

The history of partition and the narratives attached to it are portrayed differently across various states, with some emphasizing the trauma and reconciliation and others focussing on religious fanaticism and antagonism. Some promote national integration by underplaying the gendered and communal violence. The 1947 Partition Archives preserve the oral history of partition in the Partition Museum in Amritsar. Many of the traumatic experiences

are thrown into the chasm of silence as the victims of violence do not want to talk about the agonizing memories. There are many second and third generation Indians who have inherited anxieties of the painful past of their forefathers.

#### **4.11 Vote Banks and Electoral Demographics**

The electoral map of India has been shaped by refugees, displaced communities, and legal as well as illegal immigrants. Partition passions are fanned time and again to consolidate religious vote banks and electoral appeasement by political parties has become a norm.

The cultural landscape of art, music, painting, cuisine has also found itself fractured between the two countries. Music Gharanas have split. There is nostalgia about the 'lost ancestral homes' in Pakistan and Bangladesh. The 'Samjhauta Express', and 'The Thar Express' are the two trains that have been providing the rail links between India and Pakistan as per the Shimla Agreement but due to the strained relations, the services often get suspended.

### **5. Conclusion**

"To talk of despair is to conquer it", says the French philosopher, Albert Camus in his 1951 book-length essay, *The Rebel* (Camus, 1991: 263). Although it has been 78 years since the nation was fractured into two, harmony and peace are still elusive. The ghosts of partition are yet to be exorcized, the problems and issues remain the same, and both the countries are familiar with each other's pulse just like two blood brothers. They continue to irk, antagonize and run down each other endlessly ever since they have submitted to their shared historical, socio-cultural, and linguistic legacy being divided by the colonial power.

The divisive lines have penetrated so deep that people feel that peace and solace can only be found in the proximity of co-religious groups. The myopic vision persists and is visible in hate speeches, inter-religious clashes, cross-border skirmishes, and wanton acts of terrorism. It has been 78 years since the two nations parted ways, but the otherization continues. The scars still rankle. The relationship between India, Pakistan and Bangladesh is still fraught with a deep sense of mistrust and scepticism. The countries have seen an unprecedented rise in religious militant nationalism where 'Being Human' holds no value as nations continue to fight the ghosts from the past.

The entire ecosystem of painful memories, unexpressed silences, fragmented identities, institutionalized violence, cultural transformations that partition has left behind in its wake, has reshaped the destiny of the subcontinent for all times to come. The seeds of distrust that were sown then still get reflected in instances of insurgencies and acts of cross-border terrorisms. This is a hard reality that is in no hurry to make its departure anytime soon. The crucial questions that arise are: What is the way forward? Would mankind ever rise above these differences and embrace universalism? In which direction are we all headed? It is imperative to introspect and deliberate upon ways for garnering greater inclusivity.

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