

# 1. The British Partition of India and Pakistan

The British East India Company was a private corporation with powerful government connections. It ruled the Indian subcontinent for about 100 years before it turned the rule over to the official British government in 1858. The official British government then ruled the Indian subcontinent until 1947, the year in which it partitioned the subcontinent into the nation states of Muslim-majority Pakistan and Hindu-majority India, making each nation independent.

The British partition of India was disastrous. It bears some significant resemblances to the British exit from its Mandatory role in Palestine, an event which took place less than a year later. It therefore can be instructive to take a brief look at what happened in India and Pakistan.

On the seventieth anniversary of the Partition, many looked back on what had taken place. The British newspaper *The Guardian* included a number of relevant articles on that day. One of the articles was by Yasmin Khan, who had previously written a book, *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan*.

In the article, he wrote that, “The north-eastern and north-western flanks of the country, made up of Muslim majorities, became Pakistan on 14 August 1947. The rest of the country, predominantly Hindu, but also with large religious minorities peppered throughout, became India. Sandwiched between these areas stood the provinces of Bengal (in the east) and Punjab (in the north-west), densely populated agricultural regions where Muslims, Hindus and Punjabi Sikhs had cultivated the land side by side for generations. The thought of segregating these two regions was so preposterous that few had ever contemplated it, so no preparations had been made for a population exchange.”

“...The borderlines, announced on 17 August – two days after independence – cut right through these two provinces and caused unforeseen turmoil. Perhaps a million people died, from ethnic violence and also from diseases rife in makeshift refugee camps.“...

“There were more than 600 refugee camps all over the subcontinent, 70,000 women had suffered sexual violence and the issue of the princely states, especially Kashmir, remained unresolved.“...

“In other places, it was a case of neighbour turning against neighbour, often in a deluded form of ‘self-defence’ or revenge, sometimes as a cover for resolving old family feuds, for getting back at a mercenary landlord or as a chance to loot. In the main, people were whipped up by demonisation of the other, encouraged by the rhetoric of politicians and a feverish media.”<sup>1</sup>

Tremendous hostility was generated along religious fault lines. Estimates for the number of people who had to leave their homes because of the Partition range up to 15 million and more. The Partition put an indisputable end to “the hybrid, Indo-Islamic world that flourished before the British began their conquest in the 18th century. The land in which vernacular Sanskrit-based languages were cross-pollinated with Turkish, Persian, and Arabic, in which Rajput princesses married Mughal rulers, and musical and artistic styles had thrived on the fusion of influences from central Asia and local courtly cultures.”<sup>2</sup>

The new state of “Pakistan,” which had never existed before, not even in name, was composed of two parts, West Pakistan and East Pakistan, which were separated by 1400 miles of Indian territory. East Pakistan, part of the former province of Bengal, was overwhelmingly Muslim, but had its own history, language, culture, and interests apart from West Pakistan. Additionally, West Pakistan, where the capital was located, began to economically exploit East Pakistan.

In 1970, the “authorities” sought to eliminate Bengali identity by persecuting and arresting all those who would not completely yield to the proclaimed “national” identity. They annulled the East Pakistani elections and arrested Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who had been elected to be Prime Minister.

The outcome of the treatment which the people of (Muslim) East Pakistan received from the (Muslim) government based in West Pakistan was the Bangladesh War of Independence in 1971. The government of Pakistan fought brutally against the people of East Pakistan. During that war, “members of the Pakistani military and [paramilitary] *Razakar* raped between 200,000 and 400,000 Bangladeshi women and girls in a systematic campaign of genocidal rape.”<sup>3</sup> The Pakistani government characterized the Bengalis as “demons,” and ordered all foreign reporters to leave the area. The army of India fought alongside the Bengalis in their struggle.

“The Bangladesh war of independence displaced 10 million Bengalis from East Pakistan to India in 1971.”<sup>4</sup> 825 refugee camps were set up to house about 7 million of the refugees. About 3 million were housed with host families.<sup>5</sup>

One of the other articles in *The Guardian* was “Partition, 70 years on: Salman Rushdie, Kamila Shamsie and other writers reflect”. Their reflections are worth considering. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not the only one there has ever been with a critically important religious component, which for some was only a means of manipulation. Europe had its religious wars for 150 years, resulting in major population displacements and migrations. (And that history has affected European attitudes to non-European conflicts.)

Pankaj Mishra said: “We persuaded ourselves that India was somehow exceptional, immune to the political pathologies that have infected almost every nation on earth, and entered its bloodstream at birth. It is frightening to contemplate on this 70th anniversary what lies ahead for nuclear-armed south Asia. No illusions of a liberation from history, of a rising or emerging India, comfort us today. And we – Indians as well as Pakistanis – are forced to acknowledge the partition as the great atrocity that decisively shapes our brutish present.”

Kamila Shamsie said: “But the complicated truth is that the entwined nature of independence and partition must be acknowledged. These were nations born as a result of a heroic opposition to imperial rule, but their birth was also marked by hatred and bloodshed. Contemporary conversations often focus on what that bloodshed means for India and Pakistan’s relationship to each other, but increasingly as I look at both nations, now so mired in violence towards their own minorities, I wonder what it means for each nation’s relationship to its own history, its own nature. There was never a reckoning for the violence of partition; that would have got in the way of the narrative of a glorious independence. Instead it became easier to blame the other side for all the violence, and pretend that at the moment of inception both India and Pakistan didn’t wrap mass murder in a flag and hope no one would notice the blood stains.”

Mohsin Hamid: “Seventy years after partition, the old hatreds are alive and well....Soldiers of both sides are firing across the line of control in Kashmir. Nuclear stockpiles grow. Rhetoric is unmeasured, indeed often unhinged.“...What a failure. A failure for all of us, who live in south Asia. And for all of you, who live abroad, in countries whose governments see only market sizes and geopolitical advantage, and turn a blind eye to the great and mounting danger your angry brothers and sisters pose to each other.

Kiran Desai: [Observing photographic evidence of what had taken place,] “I was glad to be alone for I found my face was wet with tears. But I wasn’t weeping over the past, I was grieving for the present.“...The footage of a Muslim dairy farmer... begging for his life before a Hindu mob, one of many such attacks this year – link back to these photographs as if the nation is condemned to forever return to the time of its conception.“...I remember the disabled Sikh gentleman down the road from us who was carried out of his house by a mob and never seen again.”

Siddhartha Deb: “Over a million were killed, thousands raped and abducted, and between 12 and 20 million displaced in the process. Trains criss-crossed the landscape with carriages filled with corpses. Those escaping on foot travelled in columns that were sometimes 45 miles long.”

Nayantara Sahgal: “Gandhi overturned the imperial diktat of divide and rule by creating a national movement that forged a political unity, one that rose above regions, religions and languages and recognised India’s cultural and religious diversity as the meaning of India. The demand for a separate country for Muslims was, on the other hand, in keeping with the divisions laid down by colonial rule.“...The partition was an unimaginable disaster of bloodshed and suffering that uprooted helpless millions from both sides of the border and still haunts the subcontinent’s memory.

Amit Chaudhuri: “As with Europe after the second world war, what was damaged irreparably in 1947 was a modern civility that possessed a remarkable delicacy. I encountered this civility in my parents. There will be little evidence of its legacy after those who embody it, and still live in countries across the world, have vanished.

Mirza Waheed: “In the seven decades since partition, the empire-made cataclysm that consumed millions and sowed seeds of acrimony among millions more, there’s been one source of animus between the two states that refuses to lie still. Kashmir.“...Today, as India and Pakistan celebrate their 70th, the Kashmiri people remain colonised, killed, exiled, raped, tortured, incarcerated and, in an ignominious addition to the catalogue, blinded by nasty little lead pellets sprayed on protesters crying for freedom.”<sup>6</sup>

Two weeks after Partition took place, “As reported by the *Times* of London, ‘Moslems have been murdering Hindus and Sikhs, Hindus and Sikhs have been murdering Moslems. Each side blames the other with passionate vehemence and refuses to admit that its own people are ever at fault.’”<sup>7</sup>

“‘Talk to a Sikh,’ the correspondent of the London *Times* cabled on August 24 from Lahore, ‘and he will declare that this is retaliation for what the Moslems did to the Sikhs in Rawalpindi in March – which was retaliation for the Hindu massacres of Moslems in Bihar, which was retaliation for Noakali, which was retaliation for Calcutta. So it goes back, violence begetting violence.’ Mrs. Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, Chief Indian Delegate to the United Nations, aptly said that “when elemental passions infest vast masses of men, the cycle of attack and revenge is apt to spread with lightning rapidity.”<sup>8</sup>

## **When the Solution becomes the New Problem**

In this world, there have been many conflicts with a “religious” component. We understand that sometimes the religious rhetoric is insincere and merely a cover for hatred, greed, the lust for power, and other motives which, unfortunately, characterize the species of which we are a part. Throughout human history, many solutions have been tried — sometimes not from the best of motives — solutions which failed dismally. It is not unusual for “solutions” which do not adequately address all the sources of conflict or seek to strengthen possible values which are common to the opposing sides, to increase hostility and violence.

It should be remembered that nations in general do not have peaceful origins. As Thomas Hobbes realistically observed, “there is scarce a Common-Wealth in the world whose beginnings can in conscience be justified.”<sup>9</sup> But that is precisely the purpose of his and all political theories: to justify the exercise of political power, and the institutions necessary for that exercise.

David Hume agreed with Hobbes in this negative evaluation of the origin of states: “Almost all the governments, which exist at present, or of which there remains any record in story, have been founded originally, either on usurpation or conquest, or both, without any pretence of a fair consent, or voluntary subjection of the people.... I maintain, that human affairs will never admit of this consent; seldom of the appearance of it. But that conquest or usurpation, that is, in plain terms, force, by dissolving the ancient governments, is the origin of almost all the new ones, which were ever established in the world. And that in the

few cases, where consent may seem to have taken place, it was commonly so irregular, so confined, or so much intermixed either with fraud or violence, that it cannot have any great authority.”<sup>10</sup>

Neither usurpation nor conquest provide adequate foundations for State authority. Historically they have provided the opportunity for the exercise of power, but the power to do something is not the same as the authority to do that same thing. Existing governments tend to have selective amnesia when it comes to justifying their own origins. People often have the power to pursue their desires, no matter how unjust or ungodly, but they equally as often lack the authority to pursue those same desires.

“‘Every state is founded on force,’ said Trotsky at Brest-Litovsk.... Of course, force is certainly not the normal or the only means of the state — nobody says that — but force is a means specific to the state.... Today, however, we have to say that a state is a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory.”<sup>11</sup>

Max Weber said, “Like the political institutions historically preceding it, the state is a relation of men dominating men, a relation supported by means of legitimate (i.e. considered to be legitimate) violence. If the state is to exist, the dominated must obey the authority claimed by the powers that be.”<sup>12</sup>

The world with which we, especially those in the West, are most familiar is divided into “sovereign” states, but it has not always been that way, nor is it that way everywhere today. “The state is not a fact of nature, however, but the solution to a problem — a modern and Western solution, recently generalized to the rest of the world, which is, in its turn, itself a source of problems.”<sup>13</sup> It is always worthwhile to make sure one understands a problem before seeking to solve it.

The state and the system of states developed after the Christian Reformation as a means to define the common ground of Western Europe. At best, they were built on a foundation of values and assumptions that were not and are not universally shared throughout the world. The modern secular state claims a monopoly on legitimacy, a monopoly that ignores and excludes the historical customs and beliefs of most of the world.

“A significant aspect of the post-colonial structures of knowledge in the Third World is a peculiar form of imperialism of categories. Under such imperialism, a conceptual domain is sometimes hegemonized by a concept produced and honed in the West, hegemonized so effectively that the original domain vanishes from our awareness.”<sup>14</sup>

Ashis Nandy has observed the effect on South Asia of “...the globally dominant language of the nation-state... This language, whatever may have been its positive contributions to humane governance and to religious tolerance in the past, increasingly has become a cover for the complicity of modern intellectuals and the modernizing middle classes of South Asia in the new forms of religious violence.”<sup>15</sup>

Political simplification and mythology may be comforting, but they do not provide a firm foundation on which one can build. That holds true whether the mythology is secular or religious. Neither is intrinsically more “tolerant” than the other. Unrealistic, myopic solutions will cause more division and violence. They will inflame hostilities, and make the situation much worse.

“Pakistan’s partition from India in 1947 had arisen from the ‘two-nation’ thesis that Muslims and Hindus in India were both ‘nations’ whose people could not live together. Pakistan was the first modern-state founded solely on the basis of religion, since although India had a Hindu majority its population, with Muslims, Sikhs, Jains and Christians was multi-religious and its constitution was secular.”<sup>16</sup>

“As the clock struck midnight on August 15, 1947, celebratory shouts of freedom from colonial rule were drowned out by the cries of millions frantically making their way through the corpse-littered landscape of nascent India and Pakistan. After more than one hundred years of British East India Company rule and an additional 90 years of the British Raj, the Indian subcontinent had finally achieved Independence. What should

have been a moment of crowning triumph after years of anti-colonial struggle was indelibly marred by unimaginable violence and bloodshed.

“Up to two million people lost their lives in the most horrific of manners. The darkened landscape bore silent witness to trains laden with the dead, decapitated bodies, limbs strewn along the sides of roads, and wanton rape and pillaging. There was nothing that could have prepared the approximately 14 million refugees for this nightmare. The 1947 Partition of the Indian subcontinent into the independent nations of Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan was accompanied by one of the largest mass migrations in human history and violence on a scale that had seldom been seen before. As the provinces of the Punjab and Bengal were effectively split in half approximately seven million Hindus and Sikhs and seven million Muslims found themselves in the wrong country. Believing they would return ‘home,’ many families left their valuables behind before they packed up their essential belongings and began the trek to India or West or East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). Many never made it.”<sup>17</sup>

In this case, the ‘two-nation’ thesis was false. The Partition aggravated and institutionalized the hostility it was supposed to prevent. It effectively put an end to the real peace and cooperation which had existed for centuries between some from the various identity communities. And the effects continue. “The tragedy of partition is that the stories of extreme violence in 1947 have provided fodder to opposing perspectives ever since, and myths have crystallised around the origins of India and Pakistan.”<sup>18</sup>

In creating the artificial state of Pakistan, the Partition also imposed a “national” identity on an East and a West which were very different. Bangladesh, though deeply and overwhelmingly Muslim, chose to become a “secular” state — or, perhaps more accurately, a non-sectarian state informed by religious values. It found common ground with a similarly secular Hindu India, not with the “Islamic Republic of Pakistan”.

The time before British rule was neither nirvana nor utopia. There were wars, many small wars. Where there are people, there is conflict.

There are always those who find their own meaning, importance, or pleasure in instigating or inflaming conflict. Religious and tribal identity are two distinctions that are sometimes used for conflict, even as they are sometimes used for harmony. Other distinctions are used in the same ways.

For the peaceful resolution of conflicts, it is not helpful to blanketly demonize the opposing side or a specific aspect of their identity. Even if some negative things are generally true, there are exceptions. There are rescuers as well as persecutors. “These Partition memories, as represented in ...interviews, underscore the fragility of our humanity, of the depths and heights of which we are capable of falling to and ascending.”<sup>19</sup>

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Yasmin Khan, “Why Pakistan and India remain in denial 70 years on from partition,” The Guardian, Aug. 5, 2017 [Oxford author of *The Great Partition: the making of India and Pakistan*]

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/aug/05/partition-70-years-on-india-pakistan-denial> Other estimates place the number of those who died at up to two million.

2. Ibid.

3. Sharlach, Lisa (2000). “Rape as Genocide: Bangladesh, the Former Yugoslavia, and Rwanda”. *New Political Science*. 22 (1): (89–102), 92–93. doi:10.1080/713687893. Citing also Sajjad 2012, p. 225, Ghadbian 2002, p. 111, and Mookherjee 2012, p. 68, at

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rape\\_during\\_the\\_Bangladesh\\_Liberation\\_War](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rape_during_the_Bangladesh_Liberation_War)

4. Lydia DePillis, Kulwant Saluja and Denise Lu, “A visual guide to 75 years of major refugee crises around the world,” Dec. 21, 2015. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/world/historical-migrant-crisis/>

5. <https://www.unhcr.org/3ebf9bab0.pdf>

6. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/aug/05/partition-70-years-salman-rushdie-kamila-shamsie-writers-reflect-india-pakistan>
7. The *Times* of London, August 28, 1947 Quoted in Joan Peters, *From Time Immemorial*, (Harper & Row: NY, 1984, pp.26-27
8. *Population Transfers in Asia*, Joseph B. Schechtman, Hallsby Press, NY 1949, footnote 16.  
[http://cojs.org/population\\_transfers\\_in\\_asia-joseph\\_b\\_schechtman\\_hallsby\\_press\\_ny\\_1949/](http://cojs.org/population_transfers_in_asia-joseph_b_schechtman_hallsby_press_ny_1949/)
9. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 388
10. David Hume, "On Civil Liberty," Part II, Essay XII.9, 19-20 OF THE ORIGINAL CONTRACT, Library of Economics and Liberty". Econlib.org. Retrieved 2011-01-20.
11. Max Weber, "Legitimacy, Politics, and the State," in *Legitimacy and the State*, ed. by William Connolly, (NYU Press: NY, 1984) 33
12. Ibid.
13. Mary Catherine Bateson, "Beyond Sovereignty: An Emerging Global Civilization," Walker, RBJ & Saul H. Mendlovits (editors), *Contending Sovereignties, Redefining Political Community*, ed.(Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1990) , p. 150
14. Ashis Nandy, "The Politics of Secularism," *Contending Sovereignties*, p. 125 *Hegemon* is a Greek word that means "governor, leader, or chief".
15. Ibid., 125
16. [https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Bangladesh\\_War\\_of\\_Independence](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Bangladesh_War_of_Independence)
17. "1947 Partition of India & Pakistan," C. Ryan Perkins <https://exhibits.stanford.edu/1947-partition/about/1947-partition-of-india-pakistan>
18. Yasmin Khan, "Why Pakistan and India remain in denial 70 years on from partition ," The Guardian, Aug. 5, 2017
19. "1947 Partition of India & Pakistan," C. Ryan Perkins <https://exhibits.stanford.edu/1947-partition/about/1947-partition-of-india-pakistan>