

The Partition History Project:
reflecting on the events of August 1947 in twenty-first century Britain

Take a deep breath.

This is an excellent year to start teaching the history of India and Pakistan.

There are three reasons for this. Two are 'historical' and one 'ethical'.

One

2017 marks the 70th anniversary year of the independence of British India.

Two

It is also the 70th anniversary of the division of British India into the two separate nations of India and Pakistan.

Three

The extreme suffering that happened during this period of divorce is not widely known or publically acknowledged in Britain, but the trauma still resonates in India and Pakistan and amongst British Asians today.

Let's go back to British India in 1947.

World War 2 had been devastatingly costly, and, in Britain, Attlee's Labour government had a mandate to transform the inequalities of British society; it also initiated the lengthy process of withdrawing from the Empire. The largest, oldest, and most complex part of that Empire was India, the 'jewel in the crown'. The man appointed to oversee the process could not have been much nearer to that Crown. With his record as a military commander and close ties to the Royal Family, the dynamic Earl Mountbatten presided over the speedy winding-up of British rule. Arriving in March 1947, with a mandate to oversee a British withdrawal by June 1948 at the latest, he ended up bringing forward

independence to August 1947. However, India's vast extent, innumerable languages, many religions, and patchwork of local rulers, meant this was never going to be easy. So on 14/15 August 1947 the imperial forces and the reins of government were handed over to not one but two new nations. Gandhi's dream of a united independent India was disappointed, while Muhammad Ali Jinnah's demand for a secure 'homeland' for Muslims - Pakistan - was granted.

The end of the centuries' old British Empire in India: a footnote in the development of modern Britain? Certainly you'd get that impression about the events of 1947 from a glance at the GCSE History syllabus, or a consideration of the novels and TV series of recent decades. In these we tend to find either the Raj, or the independent modern world, while the moment that bridges the two receives little attention.

As a result, many British Asians, with family roots in the sub-continent, feel misunderstood and their histories marginalized, even though the events of Independence and Partition are just as much part of British history as they belong to South Asia.

But creating two states out of one imperial dominion was the antithesis of a clean and simple process. Borders had to be drawn where none had existed, individuals and communities had to be ruled in or out, and millions of people chose - or were made - to move to what now became 'the other side'. The birth of these two nations was marked by atrocity and counter-atrocity, the creation of 16 million refugees who crossed the new borders, and a legacy of bitterness, disputed borders, and continuing national conflict.

By any standards, the creation of India and Pakistan in 1947 was momentous. But this was also one of those post-imperial settlements whose geopolitical implications have not faded, but grown with time. Those administering Europe's empires, Britain foremost among them, had frequent recourse to

lines on the map as those empires grew or shrank, and several of the lines drawn between 1915 and 1948 continue to have strong resonance. Sykes-Picot, Northern Ireland, Palestine and Israel, India and Pakistan - these dividing lines are decades old, but the problems are present. Each has been shown to be not a simple line, but a means to, at times, almost limitless resentment and conflict.

British policy was crucial in each of these. But the Partition of 1947 has not simply left the world with two mutually hostile and nuclear-armed states. It also accelerated the creation of international diaspora from what had been British dominions in South Asia. So present-day British society, along with many others around the world, possesses many citizens whose family origins lie in what are now Pakistan, India, or Bangladesh.

Some five years ago, the Partition History Project began to grow out of a conviction that the founding narratives of these now very much British communities were neither sufficiently known nor sensitively perceived. The Project accordingly has brought together a diverse group - academics, educators, Church of England clergy, religious and community leaders, museum directors, theatrical professionals, TV producers - who share a common conviction that Partition is no mere footnote to British history, but an essential part of its story.

Consider for a moment the social analysis that has described all members of the South Asian diaspora in Britain as 'Asians' or 'minority ethnic'. This labelling ignores not only the complex distinctions of religious background and the modern states of the region, but also the long history of cross-currents between the many groups and communities involved. It is a mistake to assume that British people of South Asian heritage automatically have a shared experience and understanding. Just as many Indians, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis today retain vivid memories of family members being expelled, victimised and sometime killed by the dominant community in their place of

origin, so many Britons with these backgrounds also carry collective if deeply-buried memories of these deep scars. It became clear to members of the Partition History Project that modern Britain need to find ways of telling a common story of Partition, one that recognises the social and personal costs of Partition, and which can be understood and recognised by Britons of any background.

The ways in which the two world wars have been remembered throw an interesting sidelight here. As those searing events have receded further from living memory, the desire to remember and mark them has grown, and so Remembrance Day was more prominently remembered in 2016 than it was in the 1970s. It is reasonable to assume that, with the 70th anniversary of Partition in 2017, those events in far-off British India will not fade in importance but grow.

Over the last five years Project members have explored several avenues to remember constructively the experiences of Partition. We have encouraged the BBC to commission programmes to mark the 70th anniversary, we have engaged with British government ministers, we have pressed GCSE examination boards to include this key twentieth-century turning point in their syllabi. But the complexity of the human stories associated with Partition has led us to focus on using narrative and drama, as means of telling, in engaging ways, greater truths which stretch beyond the limitations of who did what to whom.

A grant awarded by the Kirby Laing Foundation enabled us to stage a pilot project in October 2016. A professional company performed a short play, *'Child of the Divide'*, by Sudha Bhuchar, to audiences including local schoolchildren, church and Sikh communities. The play focuses on the experience of a child separated from his Hindu parents at the point when they leave their home town in what is becoming Pakistan; he is taken in by a childless Muslim couple and brought up as their own son; years later his birth

father comes to find him, and he is taken (now a practicing Muslim) to live with his parents across the border in India. The complex and often unresolved tensions, which run through almost all the relationships in this short fictional story, are able to lay bare the real tragedies and pains experienced during Partition. This is possible in ways that normal academic historical accounts struggle to achieve, because the play draws the audience into a shared experience wherein the simplicities of a defined identity are blurred.

The production was backed up by educational materials for use by class teachers, and has been evaluated by analysis of the impact of the play in helping audiences to reflect on the experience. We hope that these materials will support future performances of the play in other parts of Britain in 2017. Interest in the Partition History Project, and in this play, has grown, not just within this country but also in India and Pakistan, where *'Child of the Divide'* may also be performed and so contribute to a healing process that is starting to take place among some communities there. Project members are hopeful that this tangential way of approaching some very painful and difficult historical truths will come to play a positive in helping our society live well with its past.

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