

Teaching for **SOLIDARITY**

Partition: History Matters

The Partition of India August 1947

Shobna Gulati, *Coronation Street* actress, went to India in 2007 to learn about her parents' history and understand why they came to the UK in the 1960s, "In [my son's] history class they do not learn the legacy of Empire... This history belongs to us **all**. It's not just particular to people from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh or Africa. The more migrant people come to England the more people of Britain need to understand why we're here."

Journalist and author Sarfraz Manzoor agrees. On a radio show commemorating the 60th anniversary of Partition, he said 'The Partition of India and Pakistan saw the largest migration in human history, with 12 million people relocating in a few months. One million died and tens of thousands of women were abducted or raped in the violent aftermath...60 years on, Partition is still a living history. Its survivors are still with us to share their memories.' (Sarfraz Manzoor, *Debating the Divide* 4.8.7 BBC Radio 4)

2007 marked sixty years since the Partition of India and Pakistan. Despite the fact that the region was part of the British Empire, that the British Empire made the decision to enact Partition and chose where to draw the line and the fact that thousands of people from the region now live in the UK—either because of Partition or the Empire, the topic is seldom taught in British schools.

Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jews, Christians, Baha'is, Jains, Parsees and atheists lived side by side in India in mainly peaceful coexistence for hundreds of years. Between 1600 and 1947, there was a British presence in India, first for trade, then the British took control of the government, economy and legal system. Under British rule, Indians were categorized according to religion and treated as separate from each other a policy known as 'divide and rule', which caused friction.

Some British were popular with some Indian workers because they were seen as providing work, law and order, but they also crushed uprisings against British rule. From the 1920s, Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus led movements for a free India. Gandhi believed in non-violent non-cooperation. He famously said, 'There are many causes I am willing to die for but none I'm willing to kill for'. He visited the UK five times and knowing he was very popular there, wrote an appeal "To Every Briton" to free their 'possessions' in Africa and Asia, especially India. A significant number of Muslims and Hindus believed passionately in living together. Others wanted separate Muslim and Hindu nations. Their leaders could not compromise and a climate of fear and violence developed between the communities.

Writer Pankaj Mishra describes the British role in encouraging divisions between Hindus and Muslims in India during the 1940s,

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"In a land where cultures, traditions and beliefs cut across religious communities, few people had defined themselves exclusively through their faith...The British policy of defining communities based on religious identity radically altered Indian self-perceptions. Many Indians stopped accepting the diversity of their own thoughts and began to ask themselves in which of the boxes they belonged. As late as 1940 Prime Minister Winston Churchill hoped that Hindu-Muslim antagonism would remain. [He] did not want his views on India to be 'disturbed by any bloody Indians' [and he ignored] the upsurge of nationalism in India against the British...But once such middle class nationalists as Gandhi and Nehru acquired a popular following, independence was only a matter of time." (*The New Yorker*, August 13th 2007)

At the same time, millions of Indian people fought on the side of Britain and her allies in World War II.

Millions were killed, wounded or traumatized in the war. Countries were destroyed, boundaries were unclear and being redrawn, debt was rampant, chaos reigned – after the Holocaust, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, millions of people across the world were refugees and on the move. Societies needed rebuilding.

In 1945 a Labour government was elected to power in Britain and decided that British rule in India must end. Lord Mountbatten was appointed Viceroy of India:

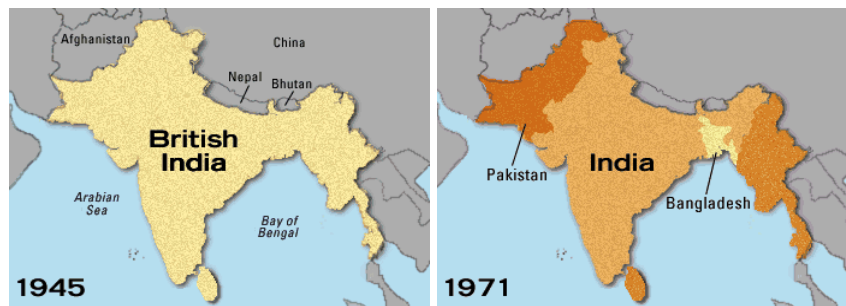
"When the improbably handsome Lord Louis Mountbatten arrived in March 1947 he did not initially seem up to the task of supervising a British withdrawal...Known in the British army as 'Master of Disaster' and 'Glamour Boy', Mountbatten nevertheless displayed enormous political maturity in the Asian countries under his command – Malaya, Burma and Indonesia. The awesome task Mountbatten faced in India may have appealed to his ego. Though he knew little of the intricacies of Indian politics, he displayed a great deal of personal charm and he had an effective ally in his estranged wife Edwina...Eventually after wrangling and recriminations, Mountbatten got Indian leaders to agree to Partition. Then, abruptly, in early June he announced August 15th 1947 as the date for transfer of power, bringing forward the British government's original plan by nine months. The reason for this is not known. Mountbatten may have wanted to inject some urgency into the tortuous negotiations about who would get what, he may have simply wanted to cut and run. In any case, his decision is partly to blame for the disasters that followed." (Pankaj Mishra)

Mountbatten ordered a London barrister, Sir Cyril Radcliffe, to create the new India and Pakistan. Radcliffe had never been to India before and after he saw the consequences of his work, he knew it would never be safe to go there again. He did not visit the border region he was dividing. He never saw the villages, communities, rivers or forests he drew lines through in his office. He created an east and west Pakistan separated by 1000 miles. It was rushed, new borders were drawn hastily and there was not enough consultation. 'It seems extraordinary today that so few among the cabal of Indian

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leaders anticipated that the drawing of boundaries along religious lines would plunge millions into bewilderment, panic and murderous rage.” (Mishra)

Britain was criticised for not making arrangements to ensure peaceful separation and for its rapid withdrawal, leaving little support for those most affected. Some British officials identified with the Indian people they 'served' and showed real concern. But events slipped out of control and Partition descended into violent murderous chaos.



The new India was formed out of majority Hindu regions and Pakistan from the majority Muslim areas. Pakistan was to be an Islamic state under Jinnah and India a secular one led by Nehru. Pakistan came into being out of two areas: East Pakistan (today Bangladesh) and West Pakistan, separated by 1,000 miles of India. 565 independent princely states were given the choice of who to join. One, Kashmir, is still the centre of conflict between Muslims and Hindus as a result. The provinces of Punjab and Bengal were divided, causing catastrophic riots. Mountbatten was congratulated for not losing any British soldiers....

Millions of Indians found themselves on the wrong side of the new line. Refugees poured across the borders to regions completely foreign to them. Millions of Sikhs and Hindus travelled to the new India and millions of Muslims travelled to the new Pakistan, though the majority stayed in India. Most travelled by train or on foot. Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs experienced violence, bravery, rape, kindness, slaughter, looting and heroism as neighbour turned on neighbour and neighbour saved neighbour. Approximately 75, 000 women were abducted.

Mandeep Singh, a Sikh, recalls, 'My mum was living in what is now Pakistan...She said it was horrible, picking up their little belongings, walking through the mud, hungry, with hardly any water. She said despite all the conflict the British caused...When they were told 'Muslims go there' and 'Hindus and Sikhs there', they hugged their Muslim neighbours and cried, 'We'll never see each other again.' She was 20 and just married...'

Shobna Gulati's auntie Shanti, a Hindu, now 80, remembers their journey from Northern Punjab to the new India, "At Kamoke station the train came to a halt...We were very

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scared... In the early morning people came out and started firing. 340 people were killed and we hid under dead bodies...After that, the army arrived and some Muslims who had calmed down took us to their houses. I found my sister and one of my brothers but I don't know what happened to my parents or my two brothers. I never saw them again...I don't have bitterness...only memories."

The refugees left homes full of possessions and memories. The poor were most often victims of violence. They couldn't move easily and were caught up in the most vulnerable areas. Some are still refugees. Rich people were the least likely to be affected by all the violence or resettlement. Many had good contacts and could move their resources fast, some even profited.

"It was an appalling outcome, misjudged to some extent by everyone concerned. Maybe different measures on the ground could have given more protection to the victims and saved some lives; but it is difficult to resist the conclusion that the Punjab massacres were unavoidable given Partition."

(Peter Clarke, The Cripps Version – The Life of Sir Stafford Cripps)

In 1971 East and West Pakistan went to war when West Pakistan tried to impose Urdu on Bengali speaking East. 300,000 to 3 million were killed during the failed attempt to suppress the people of East Pakistan. Bangladesh was born (Bangla-desh means Bengal-land). 10million Bengalis left and many came to the UK.

India and Pakistan have been at war twice since Partition and they are still deadlocked over the issue of Kashmir where tens of thousands have died since. There have been vicious outbreaks of violence between communities in the 21st century. Fear and mistrust persist, but many Indians and Pakistanis feel they are still one people. There is a longing for dialogue and contact and relations have improved in part. Akbar Ahmed is a great believer in this possibility. He says, 'When we have the mirror experience, there is a chance of overcoming issues.' Some of the grievances are alive in the UK because hundreds of thousands of people came to Britain after Partition in order to escape the disruption.

After the Second World War, the UK invited men and women from the old Empire countries (the Caribbean, India, Pakistan and Africa) to help rebuild the economy. The country was recovering from its devastated industry and the loss of so many soldiers and civilians. In the 1950s, 60s and 70s, immigrants came to cities, in search of a better life. Many settled in textile towns – Oldham, Bolton, Bradford, Manchester and Glasgow. Thousands worked in the new National Health Service, often doing jobs white Britons didn't want. Some hoped to return to Pakistan, India and Bangladesh.

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Despite the fact that Partition is part of British history and that there are so many people directly affected by it currently living in the UK, it is seldom taught or discussed in schools. DJ Bobby Friction reflects on this conflict:

“Partition is up there with Rwanda in terms of atrocities and it has left a fault line for Muslims and Sikhs. It's still part of young people's lives...I realised people here didn't really talk about it. Teachers didn't want to discuss it... It wasn't until I spoke to my dad's brother who went through it that I understood the true horror. Partition was almost like an ancestral memory. This black cloud in my head that my father had mentioned and it wasn't until I saw the film Gandhi in my teens that I started asking questions. “DJ Bobby Friction (Newsnight 15th August 2007)

Discussion:

Ken East was a British civil servant assigned to the India Office in Whitehall after World War II. He reflects on Partition and its legacies.

‘The partition of a subcontinent and all its services was a Herculean task at a time when British Ministers were loaded with an exhausted economy, an occupation zone of Germany, a collapsing mandate in Palestine, insurgencies in Malaya and Cyprus, Northern Ireland etc.

It is often said that everything that went wrong in the subcontinent was the result of undue haste, slapdash planning, Mountbatten's eagerness to get back to sea etc. More to the point is the judgement of Ismay, leader of Mountbatten's staff that if power was not transferred quickly there would have been no power left to transfer.

Among many conflicting interests the British were always accused of bias. A fundamental difficulty was that Mountbatten set out to win and enjoyed the confidence of Nehru but never got through to Jinnah. An early expectation that Mountbatten would remain for a settling down period as joint head of both governments was swept away by Jinnah.

Bitter allegations remain over the demarcation of the frontier in the Punjab and the loss of control of communal massacres there and in Bengal. The allegation is that the draft was altered crucially to Pakistan's detriment by Mountbatten leaning on Sir Radcliffe, the Boundary Commissioner. At issue is the identity of these two eminent

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officers. Who could have imagined that ordinary civilians would have engaged on such a scale in frenzied butchery of their neighbours? What possible deployment of police or soldiery and in what numbers, could have been on the spot everywhere to prevent such atrocities? How many people entered citizenship of the successor states with blood on their hands?'

The UK is not alone in shying away from difficult past events in school curricula. In the United States, for example, many schools avoid discussions of slavery or the treatment of American Indians. Scholar Donald Shriver argues that exploring morally negative events is essential for the health of a society and that the failure to formally acknowledge them encourages hostility. What are your thoughts?