

Introduction to the India Partition



Starting A-Level History and feeling lost about the India Partition?

This year is the 70th anniversary of the partition of India – the biggest human migration in history. This was a tragic and violent event, with lasting consequences that are still felt today. Despite this being one of the biggest events of the 20th century, it is rarely taught in schools and is frequently glossed over by the media.

Whether you are beginning your A-Levels or looking for an introduction to the India-Pakistan partition, you are in the right place! This blog will focus on the immediate events that led up to the partition and the core facts about the partition to prepare you for the start of your A-Levels. By the end of this blog, you will feel comfortable with the main causes, events and consequences of the partition, as well as learning some useful skills for your upcoming exams.

Key Dates to Know

1600s – The origins of the East India Company

1858 – Britain becomes the direct imperial power over India

1920s – Non-violent protests against British rule

1935 – Government of India Act, allowed for local leadership and elections

1942 – The Quit India Movement began

1945 – Clement Attlee becomes British Prime Minister

22 March 1947 – Lord Mountbatten arrives, the last Viceroy of India

3 June 1947 – The Mountbatten Plan is announced (involves the partition of India)

18 July 1947 – India Independence Act Passed

August 1947 – Radcliffe Line is finalised

15 August 1947 – India and Pakistan become independent

1971 – Creation of Bangladesh

[A photo of migrants boarding a train in 1947](#)



The Basics!

What we now know to be three countries: India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, used to be one huge country - India.

Prior to the partition, India was under direct British control for 89 years and was known as the 'Jewel of the Crown'.

In the process of granting India its independence, the India partition occurred. It was decided that India would be divided into two countries - India and Pakistan, one country for the Muslim population and one country for the Hindu population.

The partition line aimed to keep majority Muslim cities on one side and majority Hindu cities on another side of the line. However, many Muslims and Hindus found themselves on the 'wrong' side of the line and were forced to begin the long and dangerous journey across the partition line.

The exact numbers aren't known but between [14-18 million people](#) migrated and up to 2 million people are thought to have died.

The violent nature of the partition created hostility and suspicion that still exists between the countries today.

Partition of India in August 1947



This is a map of India that might help you to visualise the partition.

As you can see, Pakistan was created with two geographic locations that were [over 1000 miles](#) apart.

It is difficult to fathom the size of this country and the length of the journeys that many were forced upon. Present-day India is around 13 times larger than England.

People were forced to leave their homes forever at very short notice, families were divided and possessions were lost.

When studying, be aware that certain cities can be referred to by two names – their English imperial name and their 20th century name change to reflect the city's heritage.

Key Cities to know:

[Punjab](#) and [Bengal](#) were both cities that were divided by the partition line and saw extreme outbreaks of violence.

- After being divided by the partition line, effectively no Muslims survived in East Punjab and no Hindus or Sikhs remained in West Punjab.
- East Bengal became East Pakistan, and later became Bangladesh after the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971.

You may recognise Kashmir from the news. The ongoing violence that has been taking place in this area has roots in the Partition.

Map of India, from [BBC News](#)

Why did Britain want to leave India?

India was the 'Jewel of the Crown', why would Britain ever want to give it up? There are two key reasons that you should familiarise yourself with.

Economic

WW2 ended in 1945 and it left Britain in a very poor financial state.

Britain's priority was to rebuild its own nation after the war and it no longer had the money to maintain its position in India.

Political

Momentum was growing in India for Independence.

There was a growing 'Quit India Movement' led by Gandhi and there was growing resistance against British officers. This made it more difficult and expensive for Britain to govern in India. Around this time, more and more nations were gaining independence and this meant that many in India wanted self-governance as well.

The combination of these two factors caused Britain to decide to grant India its independence. But how did this decision turn into a plan to divide up the country?

Word Bank

Sectarian Violence: This term is usually used to refer to violence that occurs due to religious or political differences

Viceroy: The title given to a person that is ruling a colony, on behalf of the King/Queen.

Mountbatten Plan: This was the name given to the overarching plan to partition India into two countries

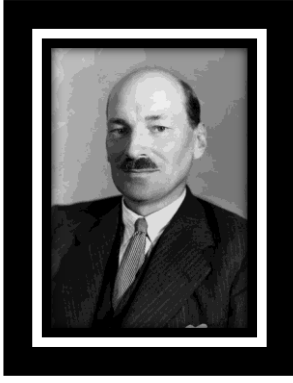
Radcliffe Line: This was the name given to the Partition line

Quit India Movement: Led by Gandhi, this was a campaign led by the Indian National Congress against British rule

Indian National Congress: Today, this is one of the main political parties in India. Established in 1885 to push reforms in India, it played a major role in achieving independence.

Muslim League: Established in 1906 to protect the interests of Indian Muslims

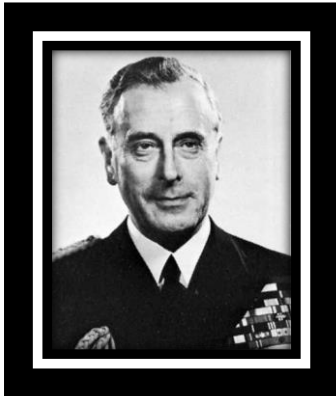
Imperialism: The policy of extending a country's power to control over other territories/people



Clement Attlee

Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from 1945-1951 (when India's independence was granted)

Prior to his election, he had shown lots of support to the Indian Independence Movement

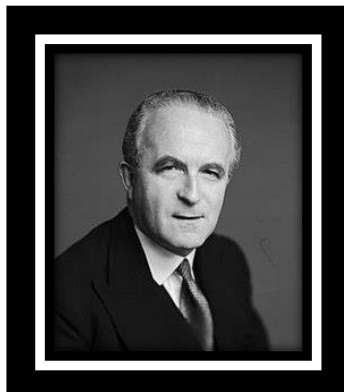


Lord Mountbatten

Appointed to be the last Viceroy of British India

In charge of navigating India's journey to independence despite knowing very little about India

Criticised for his close relationship with Nehru. Viewed as a war hero from both World Wars



Sir Cyril Radcliffe

A British lawyer who was given the task of deciding the new border between India and Pakistan.

He had never been to India before and was given 5 weeks to complete his new map.

Why did they decide to partition?

A key factor that caused the partition of India was religion.

During this time, around [one-fifth](#) of India's population was Muslim. There were concerns among the Muslim population that Hindus would dominate in the leadership of independent India and that Muslims would be targets of sectarian violence.

Mountbatten was put in charge of arranging Britain's departure from India.

[Attlee](#) told him: *"Keep India united if you can. If not, save something from the wreck. In any case, get Britain out."*

Mountbatten was given only 5 weeks to make arrangements for India's independence and made the final decision to divide the country.

Mountbatten announced that India was to be divided into two countries before the borders were finalised. This caused rising tensions due to the uncertainty and anxiety for the future.

What was the outcome?

The border dissatisfied many. Cities were divided, and the plan for Pakistan to exist in two localities that were 1000 miles apart was impractical to say the least.

Chaos and violence took place following the border announcement.

Britain had not expected a mass migration to take place, and was more focused on getting its forces out of India instead of helping these new countries to transition into independence safely.

It is predicted that as many as 18 million people died.

Gendered Violence:

Warning: This box discusses sexual violence

A complex aspect of this mass migration that is frequently overlooked is the tragedies that happened to women.

Women were subjected to violence at the hands of family members and members of opposite communities alike. With regards to the former, many women were killed to protect the honour of their families. With regards to the latter, women were viewed as objects that men from opposing communities could use for reactionary violence. It has been estimated that [75,000 women](#) were kidnapped, many suffered sexual violence, humiliation and mutilation.

Frequently when the violence of the partition is discussed, it is done so in numerical terms. It is important to reflect on the way women were viewed within the patriarchal structure and the consequential lasting traumas that they suffered.

Historical Debate: The Inevitability of Partition

Was the partition of India inevitable (due to history of Hindu-Muslim conflict) or was it a result of British imperialism?

According to [CPIM](#):

"For [imperialist historians](#), Partition could not be averted despite the efforts of the British to bridge the supposed centuries old Hindu-Muslim divide.

The [nationalist historians](#) fixed responsibility on the imperialists who divided and ruled and on the communal forces they patronized before they divided and quit."

Was the tragic violence and mass migration that occurred inevitable?

It can be argued that the violence was inevitable due to the impacts of imperialism that pitted Hindus and Muslims against each other, as well as a history of religious conflict.

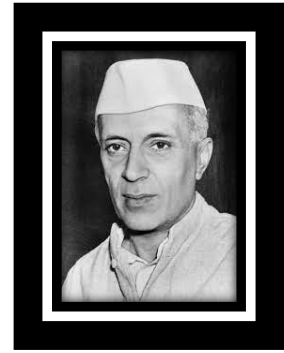
However, it can also be argued that the partition was rushed and poorly carried out by individuals that were unqualified. Perhaps if the partition was not as rushed and poorly delivered, there would have been less violence.

As can be seen above, not all historians view historical events in the same way. A new skill that you will need for A-Levels is evaluating the different perspectives of historians. If that sounds daunting, don't worry! You probably already do this without realising.

Have a think about the two main perspectives on the Indian Partition and see if you agree with one more. If so, what are your reasons for agreeing?

This is a skill that you will build upon further should you choose to study history at degree level.

PEOPLE TO KNOW

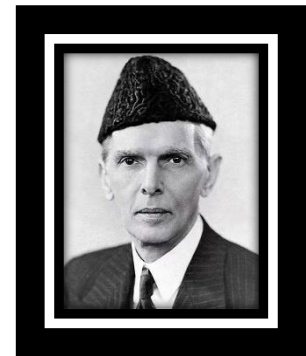


Jawaharlal Nehru

Educated in England, Nehru was the leader of the Indian National Congress.

He campaigned for India's independence, but wanted India to stay united.

He advised Mountbatten and led India once independence was achieved.



Muhammad Ali Jinnah

Led the Muslim League, represented Muslim interests when advising Mountbatten.

He wanted Muslims to have a separate country but was dissatisfied with the notion of an East and West Pakistan.

Led Pakistan once it was created.



Cartoon Corner!

A-Level history requires you to interact with a number of different primary sources, here is a chance to familiarise yourself with the hidden meanings in a newspaper cartoon.

This cartoon appeared in the [Daily Mail in 1946](#).

What can we see?

Three men in a tree, who have a sheet of paper titled 'New Constitution', and a gun. These men are meant to be Stafford Cripps, Gandhi and Jinnah.

A woman with a child (who has 'India' written on her) is being circled by a tiger (labelled 'Civil War') and a wolf (labelled 'Famine')

What is the meaning behind this?

This cartoon is arguing that key leaders are arguing over the details of the constitution from a place of safety, instead of looking after the vulnerable citizens of India.

Want to find out more?

The following websites provide more details on the India Partition:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-62467438>

<https://revisesociology.com/2017/11/25/partition-of-india/>

<https://www.pritikachowdhry.com/post/partition-of-india-timeline>

<https://theconversation.com/how-the-partition-of-india-happened-and-why-its-effects-are-still-felt-today-81766>

This website discusses the different historical debates regarding the Partition:

<https://cpim.org/content/historical-debates-independence-and-partition-india>

If you are interested in learning more about the gendered violence, this website explores it further:

<https://thewire.in/history/gendered-violence-and-the-horrors-of-partition-the-price-paid-by-women>

A useful documentary on the Partition can be found here:

<https://www.channel4.com/programmes/india-1947-partition-in-colour>

Please be aware that when you research further into the Partition, you are likely to come across descriptions of violence and some images that you may find upsetting.

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Project Audience: 16 year olds, about to begin studying the Partition of India for A-Level History