

After 200 years of British rule, India became independent in August of 1947. The country was split in two, partitioned along religious lines.

On August 15, 1947, India (with a Hindu majority) was free. The day before, Pakistan (with a Muslim majority) became its own nation.

Leaders, like Mahatma Gandhi, had long urged Britain to "quit India." He believed that British control of his country was immoral:

There is therefore no way open to the people save to end a system whose very foundations are immoral. Let us therefore pray and work for the destruction of this demonstrably immoral system and for ending it take the boldest risks consistently with the national creed or policy (as the case may be) of non-violence. (Gandhi, from "The Immoral Foundation," quoted in Appendix C of *The Penguin Gandhi Reader* (paperback edition), page 287.).

Unwavering in his belief that India should be a free and democratic nation, Gandhi also advocated non-violent resistance, even to the point of death. In *My Picture of Free India*, he observed:

You may treat what I say as a cry in the wilderness and not listen to me. There are people who abuse me to-day and call me a mad man.
I cannot teach you violence, as I do not myself believe in it. I can only teach you not to bow your heads before any one even at the cost of your life. (Gandhi, *My Picture of Free India*, Volume 8 of Gandhi Series, page 26, published by Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1965.)

Not everyone agreed that the solution was a partitioned India. Gandhi, for example, wanted a united (not a divided) country when British rule would end.

Politicians who believed that it was right to partition the subcontinent into two separate countries—Pakistan and India—drew the dividing lines in secret. The BBC provides some details:

Under pressure to reach a deal nationalist leaders including Nehru, on behalf of the Hindu Congress, and Jinnah, representing the Muslim League, agreed to a partition of the country along religious lines - in opposition to the views of Gandhi, who wanted the country to be united.
The line deciding the new countries was drawn by Sir Cyril Radcliffe and, to avoid disputes and delays, it was done in secret and not published until two days after the actual partition had occurred.

The impact of that forced partition is still being felt today (as these stories, recorded by the BBC, reveal). And ... seven decades later, new investigations suggest that political decision-makers may have had motives at-odds with the united country's best interests.

At the time, partition of the Indian subcontinent meant uprooting people whose families had lived in various areas for many generations. One can only imagine the nightmare of "waking up on the wrong side of the border."

The largest forced migration in history, not caused by war or famine, directly led to massive chaos and many deaths. About a million people died and 15 million were displaced.

Muslims were forced to live in a new country, called Pakistan, while Hindus and Sikhs were forced to live within the newly drawn boundaries of India. The newly created border remains a contentious place.

The video clip at the top of this page, profiling India's Independence Day—August 15, 1947—is from "Greatest Headlines of the Century."

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