

Pakistan and India

The Great Divide

David Green, Feb 12, 2009

Pakistan and India are not two contiguous countries with a contentious history, rather they represent the religious divisions which were fuelled prior to British India's independence. Imagine what would have happened if the south had won the Civil War and seceded from the Union. The ensuing chaos, bitter divisiveness within communities and violent bickering would have continued for years. The worst quarrels are family arguments. In the 19th century the British, with their passion for scientific labelling, conducted a survey to map the different proportions of religious groups throughout British India. Thus when the Indian people started pressing for independence from the late 1920's on, the ruling British already had a method to break up the sub-continent.

Even the term British India bears no congruency to a modern map. The area now called South Asia was a hodge-podge of local states brought together in varying degrees of direct rule by first the East India Company, and, after the Great Uprising of 1857, by the British Government. British India was comprised of 8 major provinces including Burma, Bengal (incorporating what has become Bangladesh), Madras and Punjab. There were also some 'minor' provinces such as North West Frontier province and British Baluchistan. The provinces were overseen by the Council of India in England with either a governor or high-commissioner *in situ*. In addition, at the beginning of the twentieth century there were over 175 'Native States', sometimes called Princely States which had Indian rulers for local affairs and a Commissioner who dealt with foreign relations and advised the ruler. From 1858 to 1937 Aden was considered part of British India, as, at various times, were Singapore, British Somaliland and the Maldives. From this patchwork quilt four nations were to emerge.

The Indian National Congress party, along with Gandhi, were pressing for a unified, secular India to be granted independence. The Muslims in India were concerned that they would become 'second-class citizens' and formed their own political party, the All India Muslim League, to press for concessions. During the early 1930's the idea of a Muslim country was first mooted, principally as a form of leverage, the threat was if they did not gain a certain amount of autonomy in Muslim majority provinces they would form a separate state.

By 1946 the British were still dithering around and in that year sent a Cabinet Mission to India to work out a plan of independence. Their recommendation was issued on May 16th and called for a unified India with a constitution and ruled by the Constituent Assembly. The leader of the Muslim League, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, felt that Muslims would be subservient to the majority Hindus and pressured the Mission to change the plan. Amazingly they did. On June 16th they released a 2nd plan calling for the division of India. This plan was summarily rejected by the majority, Hindu led, National Congress Party. Jinnah, outraged at the dismissal of the plan, called for a general strike of all Muslims. Called Direct Action Day, the strike was called for August 16th 1946. In Calcutta the strike became violent, Muslims attacked Hindus and others who promptly formed mobs and retaliated. After 72 hours of rioting over 4000 were dead with another 100,000 homeless. The violence spread across India and cemented the antagonism between the religious groups.

The British were now expecting a full scale civil war to break out. A London lawyer Cyril Radcliffe, was designated to work out the borders, arbitrary lines on paper being a great Empire accomplishment. Independence was declared and the sovereign states of the Dominion of Pakistan (*paki* means pure in Urdu) and the Union of India were created on August 14th and 15th, respectively, in 1947. The entire process was further complicated by the fact that Britain only effectively divided the provinces of Bengal, in the east, and Punjab, in the west, some 700 principalities and enclaves were left to decide where they

would go as technically they were not under direct British rule. So, from a sub-continent, in which lived Hindus, Muslims, Jains, Sikhs, Buddhists and Christians had lived for thousands of years a Hindu majority core state was flanked by East and West Pakistan (the Western part became Bangladesh) like giant ears on Dumbo. The result was absolute chaos. Lord Mountbatten, the last Governor-General, is thought to have coined the phrase 'blood will run in the streets' as his forecast for the partition and he was right. Up to 25 million people were displaced; Muslims leaving India for Pakistan, Hindus trekking to India from the East and West and many others simply displaced, like the worst organized fire-drill in history. Nearly 4 million never made it. Cities were in a country by virtue of their percentage of a religious group and were thus sundered by administrative decisions that forever ruined a harmony built on more than a millennium of co-existence. This is the legacy that has directly led to the contention and suspicion of today.

Sources: Imperial Gazetteer of India vol. IV 1907, p. 46

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Published by David Green