

1947

# The Birth of India & Pakistan

Mohandas Gandhi led India to independence 65 years ago, with Muslims breaking away to form Pakistan. Today, the region is one of the most dynamic—and dangerous—in the world.

BY PETER EDIDIN

**W**hen Mohandas Gandhi was 24, in 1893, he left India to practice law in South Africa. Riding the train there one day with a first-class ticket in hand, he was asked to move to a third-class car to make room for a white passenger. When he refused, he was thrown off the train.

Gandhi would later describe that encounter as his “moment of truth,” when he decided he would dedicate his life to fighting injustice. He went on to stage many other acts of civil disobedience (all nonviolent) in India to protest British colonial rule. His efforts eventually helped force the British to give up their prized colony, which gained its independence and was partitioned into India and Pakistan in August 1947.

“It was a moment of celebration,” says Akbar Ahmed of American University in Washington, D.C., even if today, “many of the hopes and aspirations that many people had in the subcontinent have not been fulfilled.”

The beginning of British rule in India is usually dated to 1757, when an army assembled by the British East India Company (British investors who wanted to trade with India) defeated the governor of Bengal in a battle near Calcutta.

This private company, with its own troops and powers of taxation, soon became the dominant force on a subcontinent of 400 million people. (The company did so well that its money, some historians have argued, financed the Industrial Revolution in England.)

The East India Company was a brutal

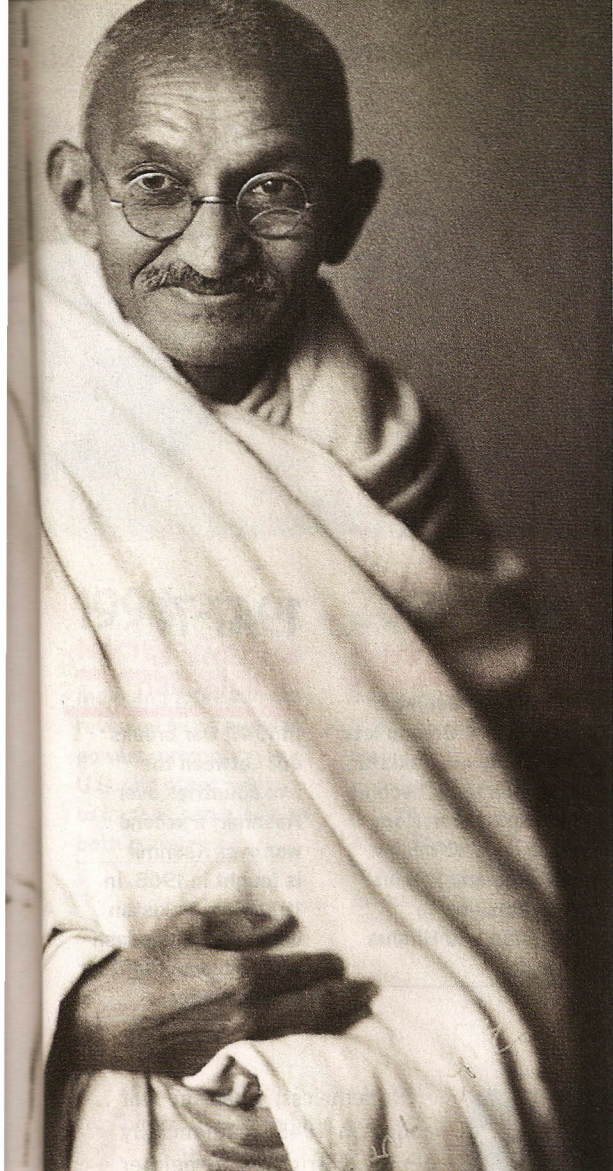
and often racist overseer whose indifference helped create and exacerbate famines in India in the 1770s and '80s.

## British India

But colonial rule also brought benefits, especially after the East India Company was pushed aside and India became an official British colony in 1858. The British introduced not only the railroad and the telegraph, but also the English language, which gave educated Indians, who spoke many different languages, a common means of communication.

Equally significant, the British legal tradition introduced Western ideas of individual and social rights. In fact, the leaders of Indian independence—Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru (India’s first prime minister) and Mohammad

**Mohandas Gandhi**  
(1869-1948), India's revolutionary leader; (top, right) Muslims fleeing India for Pakistan, Sept. 1947



Ali Jinnah (Pakistan's first leader)—all trained as lawyers in London.

Although there had been periodic rebellions against British rule, it was not till after World War I (1914-18) that the drive for independence gained traction. During the war, more than a million Indians served the British as soldiers or laborers, and the Raj (as the British administration in India was known) promised self-government after the war.

But in 1919, Britain adopted the Rowlatt Acts, giving the government emergency powers to quell public unrest, including the right to imprison anyone deemed suspicious. It seemed to be a betrayal of promises of self-rule, and protests broke out.

This was the moment when Gandhi, who had returned from South Africa in

1914, emerged as a national figure. After 21 years in South Africa fighting prejudice against Indian workers there, he founded a religious commune near Ahmedabad.

### 'Non-cooperation'

Gandhi was unlike any political leader India had ever seen. He looked like a simple Hindu holy man in his white loincloth and shawl of homespun cotton; he was a vegetarian and espoused nonviolence. But he was a powerful speaker whose quiet delivery before even the biggest crowds made people feel he was addressing them individually. It was Gandhi who transformed the drive for Indian independence into a mass movement.

In response to the Rowlatt Acts, he called for a day of protest in which businesses shut down throughout the country.

The British arrested Gandhi and other protest leaders, leading to more demonstrations. At one, on April 13, 1919, in Amritsar, British forces fired on the unarmed crowd, killing more than 400.

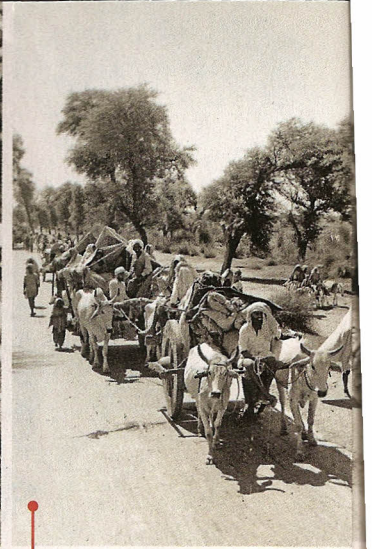
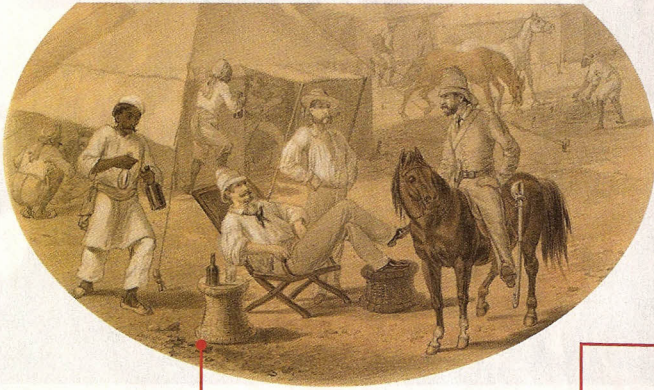
The massacre galvanized Indians, and the leader they rallied around was Gandhi. They began to call him Mahatma ("great soul" in Sanskrit).

Gandhi called for a campaign of "non-cooperation" with the British. Indian children were withdrawn from school, Indians in public office resigned, and Indians boycotted the legal system. Seated crowds, refusing to budge even when beaten by police, made streets impassable. (Blacks in the American

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INDIA PHOTOGRAPHY IMAGES (GANDHI), AP IMAGES (TRAIN)

# TIMELINE India & Pakistan



## 1858 British Colony

The India Act transfers power from the British East India Company—a private company that became a dominant force in India after 1757—to the British government.

## 1919-30 Gandhi's Rise

After Britain's 1919 violent crackdown on protesters, Gandhi launches a nonviolent campaign that includes sit-ins and boycotts. In 1930, his National Congress party declares independence the goal.

## 1940 Muslims v. Hindus

Amid growing tensions between Muslims and Hindus, Muslim leader Mohammad Ali Jinnah calls for the partition of British India into two nations: a Hindu India and a Muslim Pakistan.

## 1947 Independence

Financially depleted after WWII, Britain lets its colony go; Pakistan and then India become independent nations. More than 10 million Muslims and Hindus flee, Muslims to Pakistan and Hindus to India.

## 1947-71 Kashmir & Bangladesh

In 1947, war breaks out between the two countries over Kashmir; a second war over Kashmir is fought in 1965. In 1971, East Pakistan becomes Bangladesh after a bloody fight for independence.

South would later copy Gandhi's methods of nonviolent protest during the civil rights movement.)

In 1930, the National Congress (Gandhi's political party) declared the goal of independence from Britain. Gandhi called upon people to refuse to pay the taxes that funded the colonial administration—including the tax on the production and sale of salt, which led to the Great Salt March, a 240-mile march to the sea, ending with Indians producing their own salt to avoid paying tax.

Again Gandhi was arrested, but tens of thousands of Indians followed his example, making salt at the seaside and submitting to beatings and arrests. The mass demonstrations that followed were a public relations nightmare for the British, who were



**President Obama** with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh of India at a Southeast Asia summit in Indonesia last November

forced to release Gandhi in 1931. When World War II began, Gandhi and Nehru, his longtime political ally, decided not to support the war unless India was granted immediate independence. Britain refused, and Gandhi began a "Quit India" campaign. He was quickly arrested along with as many as 100,000 others, short-circuiting the protests.

Nonetheless, when the war ended in 1945, a financially depleted Britain had neither the resources nor the will to maintain rule over India.

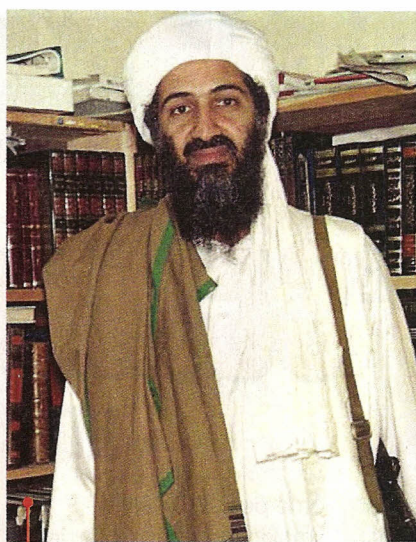
### Partition

But what would take Britain's place? In addition to 240 million Hindus, India had 90 million Muslims who felt ignored by the Hindu-dominated political leadership. Mohammad Ali Jinnah, who headed the Muslim League, threatened insurrection if Muslims were denied their own state, but Gandhi adamantly opposed partition.

The British established an interim government in 1946, with Nehru as prime minister, but throughout that year, events on the ground pushed Muslims and Hindus apart. They had lived together for centuries, but now,

SAUL LOEB/AFP/GETTY IMAGES (OBAMA); HUI/TON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES (TIMELINE: 1858); NY DAILY NEWS ARCHIVE VIA GETTY IMAGES (TIMELINE: 1919-30)

MARGARET BOURKE-WHITE/TIME & LIFE PICTURES/GETTY IMAGES (TIMELINE: 1947); AP/WIDEWORLD IMAGES (TIMELINE: 1947)



## 1998 Nuclear Powers

India and Pakistan are revealed to be nuclear powers, prompting the U.S. and other nations to impose sanctions on both countries.

## 2001 9/11 Attacks

After the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the U.S., Pakistan agrees to help the U.S. fight Al Qaeda and dismantle the Taliban in neighboring Afghanistan.

## 2008 Suicide Attack

India blames Pakistani militants for a suicide bombing in Mumbai that kills 174 people.

## 2011 Bin Laden Killed

Relations between the U.S. and Pakistan hit a low point in May, when American Special Forces kill Osama bin Laden, the mastermind of the 9/11 attacks. He was found hiding not far from Pakistan's capital, Islamabad.

## 2012 Booming India

India, a key U.S. trading partner, is emerging as a global power with one of the fastest-growing economies in the world.

often egged on by their leaders, they began to riot and kill each other.

In 1947, Lord Mountbatten, the last British viceroy (the top official in India) pushed for immediate independence and partition. In July, the British Parliament agreed, and on Aug. 14 and 15, 1947, Pakistan and then India became independent nations.

Despite Gandhi's vision of peace, things didn't work out that way. Millions of Hindus immediately fled Pakistan for India, as millions of Muslims fled India for Pakistan (though many more stayed and remain today). More than 10 million people became refugees, and a brutal cycle of killing and revenge-killing claimed as many as 1 million lives. On Jan. 30, 1948, the violence claimed Gandhi, who was shot to death by a Hindu fanatic upset by Gandhi's tolerance of Muslims.

In the years since partition, the two countries have faced different

challenges. Though India, with a population of 1.2 billion people, has transformed itself into a major economic power, millions still live in poverty and religious violence continues. Pakistan, which became a Muslim state, has been wracked by political instability and Islamic extremism.

### The U.S. & the Region

Relations between the two countries—both U.S. allies—have been marked by hostility, leading many world leaders, including President Obama, to describe the region as the most dangerous place in the world. India and Pakistan have fought three wars, two over the disputed region of Kashmir, which both claim. Both countries are nuclear-armed and have come close to a nuclear confrontation. After a period of calm, tensions between the two countries have run high since 2008, when terrorist attacks linked to a Pakistani militant

group killed 150 people in Mumbai, India's most populous city.

To understand why this region is so important to the U.S., just take a look at the map on p. 17: The U.S. has been relying on Pakistan to help in the war in Afghanistan next door, and has been keeping a close eye on Iran, which has become a nuclear threat in recent years. The U.S. also has vital economic interests in India, a key trading partner and one of the fastest-growing economies, and also in neighboring China, now the world's second-largest economy.

President Obama summed up America's stake in the region, and Asia in general, during a recent trip to Australia.

"With most of the world's nuclear powers and some half of humanity," he said, "Asia will largely define whether the century ahead will be marked by conflict or cooperation, needless suffering or human progress." ●