

A Free India (August 14, 1947)

Abstract

As this article mentions, part of the British strategy for ruling India was a “divide and conquer” strategy—in other words, they stoked already-existing tension between Hindus and Muslims in order to prevent the growth of any kind of unified Indian nationalism – or as this article puts it, they exploited weaknesses in the local population through divergences in race, religion, language, and social structure. As those tensions grew, so did tensions between the three men who would determine the future of India and Pakistan. Though Mahatma Gandhi, Jawarhalal Nehru, and Muhammad Ali Jinnah were all Anglicized lawyers who had received at least part of their education in Britain, by the 1940s relations between them were so tense that they could barely stand to be in the same room. Though initially Jinnah attempted to bridge the divide between the Muslim League and the National Party, after the First World War he felt eclipsed by Gandhi and Nehru’s rise. During the 1920s and 1930s, a mutual dislike bloomed; by 1940, Jinnah was insisting on a separate homeland for Muslims (though he guaranteed that Pakistan would have religious freedom of expression). Strong personalities on the subcontinent, combined with British stoking of religious tensions, were part of the reason for Partition, and the violence that followed.

Source

At the stroke of the midnight hour between the 14th and the 15th of August 1947, an ancient chapter in world history will come to an end and a new story will begin. India will cease to be a crown colony of the king of England and will join the British Commonwealth of Nations with dominion status.

Over the course of its eventful, often blood-soaked history, India was obliged to make acquaintance with all the imperialist nations of Europe. Nowhere else on earth have mercantilism and imperialism erected starker monuments to their splendor and misery than in India. The Portuguese, the Dutch, and even the Danes made a start in the coastal areas. The French colonial regime in Bengal and the Deccan plateau embodied on a grand scale the basic idea of the mercantilist era, namely, the flag follows trade, or, in other words, the soldier conquers what the merchant has made accessible. The English, usurping the French legacy, eventually extended their rule over the whole of India. The year 1876 saw the emblematic climax of this development with the coronation of the queen as the empress of India. Her great-grandson King George VI will be the last Kaiser-i-Hind.

Under British rule, India was also perceived almost exclusively as an object of exploitation for as long as trade and power were united in the hands of the East India Company. For those interested in knowing how this policy was implemented and its terrible effects on conditions in the country, Macaulay’s biographical essays on Robert Clive and Warren Hastings provide material that is both comprehensive and chilling. Yet, even the most ruthless exploitative instincts could not prevent this land, so lavishly blessed by the gods, from developing its inherent powers over the centuries under the careful guidance and nurture of British viceroys and native leaders to the point where it would gradually surpass the so-called mother country. India, which formerly had a negative trade balance of 25 million pounds sterling, now enjoys a positive trade balance of 8 to 9 million pounds. India therefore begins its new chapter in freedom as a dominion and as an economic powerhouse with vast opportunities for development.

India will now lose its constitutional designation as a crown colony, and the crown of England forfeits its most precious pearl. However, India remains a member of the Commonwealth of Nations, the community of states that has emerged as a successor to the empire. Following in the footsteps of Ireland,

Canada, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand, the former crown colony will become the sixth and seventh dominions—Hindustan, which outwardly appears to enjoy a preferential position on account of its official name of India, and Pakistan, together affiliated with certain princely states. Perhaps, as well, there is a special group of other princely states that prefer some sort of independence to annexation.

For centuries, European imperialists ruled India through the Indians themselves, namely by exploiting weaknesses in the local populations arising from divergences in race, religion, language, and social structure. England could structure and maintain its rule with only a handful of British nationals—some 50,000 soldiers and 3000 civil servants. Had the Indian parties agreed in 1942 to the proposal of Sir Stafford Cripps, who, on behalf of the War Cabinet and under the pressure of the wartime situation, sought to make India a unified dominion, then India might have become a threat to the continued existence of the British Empire. The current partition of the territory into two or three—in accordance with the old Roman-British motto of divide and conquer—substantially ensures the preservation of British influence. Without a doubt, England will continue with its policy of maintaining good relations with the Muslims and it will also find useful and convenient support among both independent and affiliated princes. Even the leaders of Hindustan have not yet made any statements that would suggest they will soon turn their backs on the empire. Even such an enthusiastic champion of Indian independence as Pandit Nehru confessed in his autobiography that he owed England too much to ever feel alienated from the country. With the exception of politics, all of his inclinations were in favor of England and the English people.

For the foreseeable future, neither of the two dominions is likely to exercise the right possessed by every dominion to choose to leave the Commonwealth, least of all Pakistan. The appointment of Jinnah to the post of governor-general is already seen as proof of Britain's loyalty to the country. Both new dominions recognize the opportunities of maintaining constitutional and economic relations with the Empire and are determined to utilize these to the fullest.

As of August 15, 1947, both Indian dominions will determine their own domestic and foreign policies. Pakistan must focus its efforts on economic development, as its entire future will depend on progress in this area. Without improving the dire economic conditions of its citizens, Pakistan will not enjoy cultural progress or political power. The political victory that Jinnah achieved for Pakistan with his tenacious struggle for freedom will only be complete when the majority of its citizens are liberated from their oppressive state of poverty. And as for the Hindu dominion of India, in spite of all its opulent speeches and the riches of its upper social classes, the country will never be able to secure its desired resurgence without solving the social dilemma posed by the ossified caste system. The decision to emancipate the untouchables from their millennia-old social standing as pariahs is at present nothing more than a rallying cry. Only a radical break with the caste system can unleash the popular might necessary to achieve progress. And yet, that which has been maintained for over a thousand years cannot simply disappear overnight and, even less so, be erased from the minds of men.

It should not be forgotten, even in India's hour of destiny, that the course of the new dominions of India and Pakistan will most certainly be influenced over the coming decades by whatever benefits the peoples of Asia derive from the ideal of Pan-Asianism. Yet, for the moment and for the next phase of Indian history, the community of nations that made up the empire will endure, thereby maintaining a bond. Its strongest guarantors are the two governors-general appointed by the king of England and the joint British commander-in-chief of the army, which is divided between India and Pakistan.

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Translation: Pam Selwyn

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