

Article on the Partition of India (October 4, 1947)

Abstract

In August 1947, India was partitioned into two nations: India and Pakistan. Partition arose out of Muslim fears of Hindu domination in a new Indian state, and the Muslim League's insistence that Muslims in India needed their own state. Partition touched off a massive flare of sectarian violence, as well as a huge population exchange: between 14 and 16 million people were displaced, and between 200,000 to 2 million people died as a result of Partition. The enormous scale of migration, as well as the horrifying violence that occurred as a result of Partition, took many by surprise; this article in the West German magazine *Der Spiegel* describes the unrest and bloodshed as India's "Road through Hell." Few people really understood how Partition would be implemented, and watched in horror as hundreds of thousands of people were killed (often at the hands of other members of their community) or displaced. The poisonous fallout of Partition affects the relationship between Pakistan and India until today, with animosity and distrust running deep between the two countries.

Source

"Call of Distress from the Great Soul: India's Road through Hell" (October 4, 1947)

Mahatma Gandhi's birthday was not a time for celebration. On October 2, his 78th birthday, the wave of unrest in India was still ongoing. Although the authorities have declared that the worst of the unrest and bloodletting is over, calm has yet to return to India, whose recently gained freedom has been accompanied by such difficult birth pangs.

The partition of India has provoked unrelenting religious rioting that has been fueled by the most extreme fanaticism. The governments of Pakistan and India believed it would be possible to prevent a bloody conflict through an exchange of minorities. In theory, everything was settled. The exchange of four million Hindus and Muslims was optimally planned. But then religious fanaticism flared up twice and all expectations were thrown overboard.

The main battleground of this tragedy has been the northwest province of Punjab. Convoys of refugees attempting to escape from this volcano were attacked by hordes of fanatics, often numbering in the thousands. Frenzied mobs of both religions murdered men, women, and children without distinction.

The attempt to evacuate minorities by rail also failed dismally. An overcrowded train to Pakistan filled with 4,500 Muslim refugees was attacked by armed Sikhs near Amritsar and the passengers were slaughtered. Muslim troops, who had to remove the thousands of corpses from the train, took revenge on an outgoing train to India. Some 340 Hindu refugees were murdered and 400 left wounded.

This time, Mahatma Gandhi, that regular old patron of conflict, was compelled to raise his voice against his own people. He warned that a war between India and Pakistan would be inevitable should it prove impossible to resolve the religious antagonisms. His words created a stir. Everything that Gandhi says is treated as a revelation by the Indian people. One often hears people saying, "Gandhi is the truth."

Gandhi's pronouncements are taken seriously in the rest of the world, as well. In this case, however, confidence in his judgement is misplaced. The *Great Soul* (the translation of the word Mahatma), so it has been said, has called for war. The Mahatma had only uttered his admonition in a conciliatory role.

Similarly, the government in New Delhi has raised its voice. The British government has received requests to help the new dominion of Pakistan. And, indeed, as *The Observer* comments, this refers to more than just military aid.

The attacks on groups of refugees have stopped. However, the latest calamity to face the Punjab is massive flooding. Further thousands are fleeing the hellish conditions of what should have been the long-desired paradise of freedom. According to official sources, more than 8 million souls have been affected by the resettlement action in the Punjab.

At the same time, there are fears of an economic crisis of the greatest possible magnitude. The business community has estimated that some 1 billion rupees (300 million dollars) of capital has already left Pakistan and flooded into the Indian dominion.

Source of original German text: “Notruf der großen Seele: Indiens Weg durch die Hölle,” *Der Spiegel*, October 4, 1947, p. 10. Accessible online at: <https://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-41122103.html>

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