* **An unclean partition**
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The British have a lot to answer for; a lot to explain, perhaps a lot to regret, if they choose to regret what happened due to British actions in the colonies they controlled.

In India, the unseemly haste with which the complex business of Partition was conducted, after last-minute plans to keep India united with some measure of autonomy for each state fell apart, has contributed to every conflict in that region to date. It could contribute to another as we witness the terrible suffering of the Kashmiris, occupied by a mounting number of Indian security personnel.

Kashmir of course is one part of the evil the British did. By fleeing India before the violent bloodshed they knew would take place could begin, they left behind an entire string of problems, many of which have yet to be resolved more than seven decades later.

In the riots that followed Partition, as people were massacred on trains and in villages where the Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims had lived together for centuries, at least a million people were killed in what is regarded as one of the largest genocides in modern history. Some 15,000 people were displaced, many to never return home again after crossing the hastily drawn up border between India and Pakistan, known as the Radcliffe Line, which was sketched out in such a rush by Sir Cyril Radcliffe, who himself admitted he had little idea of the geographical and human dimensions of the territory he was parting, many on either side of the line had no idea whether the town or city where they lived would end up in India or Pakistan. This was true of many border towns, including Ambala, Amritsar, Lahore, and other locations.

There has been an argument by academics that the mistrust that exists between people of different faiths in the Subcontinent, and which is today most visible in India, was in itself created by Partition. Because at least 34 million Muslims chose to remain in India after Partition and just over 15 million Hindus opted not to leave their homes mainly in Sindh and the then East Pakistan; that is when the idea that these persons could be traitors whose real loyalties lay with the other state was created.

The accusation that a Muslim in India is a Pakistani agent, or the other way around, is of course an exceedingly common one even today. In fact, one of the consequences of Pakistan’s failure to protect its Hindu population is that today it has been reduced to about one percent of the Pakistani population. Around 5,000 Hindus migrate from Pakistan to India each year. The killings, bloodshed and treachery of Partition remain locked in memories and act as a justification used to discriminate against religious minorities in both countries.

A British television series produced in 2017 entitled ‘My Family, Partition and Me’, traces the story of three families, all now living in Britain, including a Hindu woman from East Pakistan, a Muslim from Ambala, and a British woman whose family had once lived in luxury in colonial India, who revisit India and what was once their family’s home. Especially for the more elderly, who had been alive at Partition, the trauma is still very real.

The events of Partition, the horror of friends turning into enemies, the desperate efforts to sneak across a new border will never be forgotten. And for the British woman who saw a part of the premises where she once lived, the shock of realising what the British had done to India and the hatred they had created within it by failing to conduct independence and Partition with more caution and more thought was clearly something she had not thought about before.

Kashmir is amongst the unfinished business of Partition. The princely state, with a large Muslim majority ruled by a Hindu prince, stumbled in trying to decide which country it wished to choose. It has suffered ever since. The first war over Kashmir had occurred by 1948, when Jawaharlal Nehru moved the resolutions before the UN, seeking a plebiscite for Kashmiris, and two more wars along with at least one other more minor skirmish were to occur over the years that followed.

Even the 1971 tragedy that created East Pakistan and resulted in terrible killings in what is now Bangladesh was a consequence of the clumsy manner in which Partition was carried out. It was always unrealistic to believe an entire wing of a new country could exist on a long-term basis, thousands of miles away from the other half, divided by what had already become hostile territory. It is hardly surprising that it did not.

Of course, we should remember that learning to share, learning to live together, is a greater human achievement than dividing and killing. It is also a fact that Mr. Jinnah’s knowledge of his own ill health compelled him to move as quickly as possible, perhaps leading to decisions he would otherwise have reconsidered.

This brings us back to the question of Kashmir. In his speech to the UN General Assembly, PM Imran Khan in the last portion of that address vividly drew up the events taking place in that valley and the situation of the eight million people who call the mountain villages, cities and towns home. His words moved many. The question is what is to happen from now on.

The verdict of the Indian Supreme Court on the abrogation of Article 370 will be awaited. But both Pakistan and India need to remember that the issue of Kashmir is only indirectly about them. At its core, it involves the Kashmiri people and their decision about their own future. This is especially true given that they have lived in a kind of limbo on either side of the border for more than 70 years. It is time they were permitted to choose.

As Basharat Peer, a New York based journalist from Kashmir and author of the book ‘Curfewed Nights’, has written, “the hurried partition of India was one of the greatest imperial crimes of the British empire”. He goes on to say it has shaped societies in both countries immensely and “Kashmir carries the curse of being unfinished business of Partition. The dispute has lingered and exacted a terrible cost for the past seven decades.”

We can only hope that within our lifetimes, we see the trauma of Kashmir being solved; salve placed on the deep wounds of its people and its lakes and resorts opened up again to the tourists of the world. But the Kashmiris must decide where their land is to lie and how it is to be governed. They have been denied this right far too long. Generations have grown up as virtual prisoners. Those who are today children in Kashmir must one day enjoy true freedom.

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