

## Religion and conflict: Partition and its aftermath

### WHY IS THIS RELEVANT TO *REsilience*?

The Partition of India in 1947 split colonial India into two independent countries, India and Pakistan (for a historical overview of pre and post Partition events see Appendix below). Arguably, much of the subsequent development of these countries emanated from this historical event, including several wars, riots, the nuclear armament of India and Pakistan, and the secession of Bangladesh from Pakistan in 1971. Memories of Partition and its aftermath remain vivid in the subcontinent and in expatriate communities.

Like other conflicts that mix religious identities with questions of territory and statehood (e.g. Israel/Palestine and Northern Ireland: see Gateways 4.3a and 4.3b), the problems caused by Partition have made a political settlement very difficult to achieve. Tensions between India, Pakistan and Bangladesh are expressed at the international level, while tensions between religious groups within them are multifarious and often locally specific. The importance of this topic in an RE context is that it raises questions about religion, community and identity.

Bangladesh, India and Pakistan are by no means the only places in the world where religious identity and questions of territory and statehood are fused in complex and often difficult ways. However a significant number of British people have family, religious and cultural connections to one or other of these countries and so – alongside the rich cultural and religious inheritance and positive associations – periodic tensions in the subcontinent continue to have a strong resonance for them. It is important, while affirming the positive links, also to be able to discuss the more challenging issues in a school context and, in RE particularly, the religious and cultural threads that run through them.

## KEY QUESTIONS

### How can this help teachers and students to increase their understanding of contentious issues?

Partition raises some particular questions in an RE context; many are similar to those explored in other 'Religion and Conflict' Gateways (see 4.3a and 4.3b).

- *Can one side be 'right'?* Partition was a traumatic event with a complex history. Both public memories and scholarship in India and Pakistan often absolve one side of initiating the violence of the event, and lay blame on the other. Teaching about Partition and its aftermath must be sensitive to the experience of individuals, families and communities who have suffered (or continue to do so) as a result of it on any side of the conflict. In RE, the aim will be to help students understand multiple positions without always feeling the need to judge them.
- *Who belongs?* What are the pros and cons if a sense of national identity is determined first and foremost by religion? For many people religion is one part of their identity but not the only one (e.g. in Britain today, someone may be a Muslim, Scottish, a young person, a man, a soldier, a speaker of Gujarati as his first language, East African Asian in cultural heritage and so on); different aspects of identity may come to the fore in particular situations. In the case of Pakistan, the state was created out of the areas of India that had substantial Muslim majorities before Independence (though some were not included, most notably Kashmir). Pakistan was intended as a 'homeland' for Indian Muslims, but substantial minority populations of Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims and Christians were left on both sides of the border.
- *How important is religion in this conflict?* Pakistan advertises itself as an Islamic Republic, and India and Bangladesh, while constitutionally 'secular', are dominated by Hinduism and Islam respectively. In all three countries, vocal activists urge their governments to take an aggressive stance towards the country or countries whose religious make-up they do not share. Religious minorities may face prejudice, discrimination, and even violence. Religious beliefs alone are not responsible for these problems; socio-economic and political factors play a role.
- *Is there hope for reconciliation?* Some people believe that for Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims and Christians in northern India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, there are more similarities through shared languages and cultures than differences due to religion. They liken Partition to a family feud. In general, how can people seek common ground that might bridge *religious* divides? Furthermore, the conflict in Kashmir, which derives from Partition but is still ongoing (see Appendix), has divided sections of the local population against one another. How might they begin a process to bring about peace and reconciliation?
- *Why do some people use religion to justify violence?* While the three official wars between India and Pakistan (1948, 1965, and 1999) were framed in terms of territory and national sovereignty, Partition itself and more recent attacks on minorities (such as the

riots following the destruction of an important mosque at Ayodhya in 1992) have had strong religious overtones.

- *How might some adherents of Hinduism, Islam and Sikhism find justification for violent actions within their respective religious traditions? Can the defence of one's religion ever justify violence? How do we understand the violence of Hindu militants in India in relation to the influential teachings of Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi, the hugely popular Hindu leader who preached non-violence at any cost, or the violence of Muslim militants in relation to the teachings of Abdul Ghaffar Khan?<sup>1</sup> What motivates some people within a religious tradition to choose violence, while others from the same tradition oppose it?*

## Why is this a contentious topic?

The Partition as an historical topic excites passions in South Asia because it was a defining moment in the subcontinent's development. History writing in India and Pakistan has tended to play a blame-game, identifying both the 'other' as the aggressor, and figures from one's own religious community who take a different view as traitors to the national interest.

But Partition and its aftermath continue to affect people in South Asia and beyond to this day. Many members of the 'Partition generation' are still alive, and many families have their own Partition stories. The continuing impact on new generations of South Asians, including those in the diaspora, is most likely to be apparent in classes that include students of Indian, Pakistani or Bangladeshi origin (though there will also be some who know little or nothing about it). However, Britain's key role in bringing about Partition, after two centuries of dominating South Asia, highlights the moral ambiguities in the topic. The frequent occurrence of violence around the time of Partition, usually directed against unarmed civilians, means that the issues are emotive for both sides. This violence was often sexual in nature, such as rape and abduction, and directed against women. Women remain powerful symbols of community in South Asia, and calls to arms by opposing religious communities are often expressed as a need to defend 'our' women against the other community's male aggression.

The place of religion in the Partition conflict itself, and in subsequent conflicts such as the Sikh Khalistan movement in India, is contested and often ambiguous. Religion is sometimes used in justification for violent acts that may also be motivated by social prejudice, political calculation or local rivalries. There have certainly been examples where religion was used to attempt to bring peace and understanding to those involved in the conflict. Gandhi's role is a well-known example of this.

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<sup>1</sup> Abdul Ghaffar Khan (1890-1988), was a pacifist and a passionate advocate of non-violence building a 100,000 strong army of non violent 'servants of God'.

## What classroom challenges might arise in RE?

- It is tempting, when faced with a debate dominated by two opposing sides, to form judgements and become partial. Instead, students should be encouraged to understand divergent points of view. Moreover, since Partition, and perhaps partly as a result of it, there have been many new developments relevant to the questions about identity, nationality, religion and belonging that the 1947 solution was intended to settle. These have included the secession of Bangladesh from Pakistan in 1971, and the violent Sikh separatist (Khalistan) movement that emerged in the Punjab in the 1970s and 1980s (see Appendix below). These further developments should be taken into consideration during classroom discussions.
- Many students in UK schools have an Indian, Pakistani, or Bangladeshi heritage. They may feel familial, national, or religious affiliations to one or more of the competing groups involved in Partition and its aftermath, so classroom discussions may arouse strong passions. There may be students from other countries of origin such as Serbia, Kosovo or Sri Lanka who find some of the discussions disturbing because of their own families' experiences of violence and displacement.
- Discussions of Partition may suffer Islamophobic bias. Recent international events, particularly connected with the 'war on terror' and the growth of Islamist violence in Pakistan, may cause students to have the anachronistic perception that the Pakistan movement in the 1940s was inherently connected with violent *jihād*.
- Similarly, reactions to Pakistan in the UK may be coloured by events such as the bombings on the London transport network on 07 July 2005, carried out by Islamist militants, three of whom were of Pakistani origin. This can exacerbate popular but unfounded beliefs that an international ideological conflict is in progress between 'Islam and the West'.

## How can teachers address such challenges?

- Teachers can create a safe environment within their classrooms, and within the school more widely, where pupils have an opportunity to explore and ask questions about issues that may have painful associations for some members of their families.
- Teachers will help students understand that amongst the consequences of Partition has been periodic religion-related violence involving Hindus and Sikhs as well as Muslims.
- Studying and discussing partition in classrooms in the UK may not contribute to solving the conflict in its home area but may well help some students to gain a wider perspective on what for their families continues to be a painful history. Further, framing the classroom experience as an exercise in empathy and the understanding of complexity can broaden all students' minds and equip them with skills to speak about contentious issues sensitively and effectively.

## NEXT STEPS

### Signposts for further reading

Works on Partition are usually divorced from those on its aftermath, and comparative or unified histories of the countries involved (India, Pakistan and Bangladesh) are virtually non-existent. However, for the issues likely to come up during RE teaching (e.g. violence, identity, trauma), see:

Butalia, Urvashi (UK edition, 2000) *The Other Side of Silence: voices from the partition of India*, Hurst & Co.

For a balanced and readable, though rather detailed, account of the events in 1947-1948, see:

Khan, Yasmin (2007) *The Great Partition: the making of India and Pakistan*, Yale University Press.

### Signposts for further resources

The BBC website is a good resource for news and background:

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world/south\\_asia/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world/south_asia/)

<http://www.asiasociety.org/countries-history> carries articles and blogposts on contemporary Indo-Pakistan relations, with references to past events.

Information on the Kashmir conflict, especially on the work of peace-building organisations, can be found at <http://www.insightonconflict.org/conflicts/kashmir/>

<http://www.partitionofindia.com> is an example of a Hindu nationalist take on Partition.

<http://www.schoolslinkingnetwork.org.uk> Gives schools in England opportunities to work together on issues such as the subject of this Gateway document. See website for further details, including free CPD for teachers involved in the *REsilience* project up to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2011.

### Signposts for further action

Partition and its aftermath can be used as a case study of the complex relationship between religious identity and other identities, such as national. In this sense it could be compared with the conflict between Tamils and the Sri Lankan government. Due to its Hindu and Sikh components, Partition can also be used as a case study of religious violence outside the 'Abrahamic' religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

## APPENDIX

### Historical background

Partition has a long and complex history, and left a lasting impression on South Asia. At the heart of the event was a conflict over who would obtain political control over India once the

British colonial government had withdrawn. The most effective 'all-India' groups mobilised supporters along religious lines (known as 'communalism' in South Asia) at a grass roots level, despite the professed secularism of the All-India National Congress, the largest anti-colonial organisation. The Partition itself expressed and cemented the increasing distance between the Muslim and non-Muslim religious communities in India (of non-Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists were largely grouped together as 'indigenous' religious traditions, with much in common; other communities, such as Indian Christians (as opposed to colonial British ones), Parsis and Jews, were relatively small in number in the areas most affected and had little to do with events). Since 1947, fault-lines have emerged between communities within the new nation-states: most notably between Hindus and Sikhs in India, and between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims in Pakistan.

### **Partition's pre-British roots**

Islam has a long history in South Asia, and was first introduced to India by Muslim traders and holy men (the Sufis). Following an attack on Muslim trading ships by pirates who had sailed from Debul in Sind, Muhammad bin Qasim, an Arab general, was sent by the Umayyad empire to invade Sind in revenge for the King of Sind's failure to take action against the pirates.

Muslims rose to political power in the subcontinent with the Delhi Sultanate from 1206, which was conquered and replaced by the Mughal emperors from 1526. The Mughals were also Muslims, and established their power over much of the subcontinent. Like the various dynasties of the Delhi Sultanate (which had been unrelated to one another), the Mughals were descended from Central Asian and Arab conquerors. The 'foreignness' of Islam in India is used against Muslims by Hindu nationalists, who argue that Muslims' perceived allegiance to Muslim people, places and political powers outside India means that they cannot be 'true' Indians. However a noteworthy feature of Islam in India has been its pluralist nature and its 'Indian' expression. For example, Sufi shrines attract Hindus, Christians and Sikhs, as well as Muslims for various celebrations at the shrines.

### **British rule and the politicisation of religion**

The British East India Company began trading in India in the 1600s. It maintained a large army to aid its operations, which was used, after a dispute with a Mughal governor, to conquer Bengal in 1757. Following wars with other rulers in India (Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh), the company established its rule over the majority of India, and, by the mid-nineteenth century, had made treaties with the remaining Indian rulers that kept the latter subservient to the British. The Company then governed a vast territory, populated by a variety of Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, and Parsis. After the 'Great Mutiny' of 1857, the East India Company was deprived of political control, and the British Government took up direct rule on behalf of the Crown. Colonial social and political policies encouraged middle-class Hindus and Muslims to form pressure groups along religious lines (or even in some cases, influenced by missionary activity, to convert to Christianity), in order to press for preferential treatment such as access to government service jobs.

From the late nineteenth century onwards, communal tensions crystallised around devotional and cultural issues, as well as in competition for resources. In the 1880s-1890s, a Hindu movement attempted to prevent cows (considered sacred in orthodox Brahminical Hinduism) from being slaughtered, particularly in Muslim sacrificial rites. Organisations such as the All-India Muslim League (1906) and the All-India Hindu Mahasabha (1915) were founded, with a mix of political and social/religious reform aims. As a consequence of the failure of the 'Indian Mutiny' and the pressure of Christian and Hindu missionary activities aimed at Muslims, a number of Muslim religious movements emerged during this period: Deobandi, Barelwi, Ahl al-Hadith, Tablighi Jama'at and the Ahmadiyya movement (which would be declared non-Muslim by mainstream Muslims). These movements continue to play an active role in South Asia and its diaspora communities.

By the time that post-WWI political reforms broadened Indian participation in government, religious issues were already established as politically significant at the expense of social reform issues. This was not, however, inevitable. There was no definite break between Hindu and Muslim politics during this period, and many Muslim *ulema* (scholars) were involved with the secular Indian National Congress.

### **Gandhi, Jinnah, and the Two-Nation Theory**

From the 1920s onwards, anti-colonial nationalism in India was dominated by the Congress, which had come under the influence of Mohandas K (Mahatma) Gandhi. Gandhi called on all Indians, of whatever religion, to unite against the British while respecting each other's religious traditions. In practice, however, his use of religious symbols and techniques implied that 'Hindu' was the normative category in India. During WWII, the Muslim League, rejuvenated under the leadership of Mohammed Ali Jinnah, worked closely with the British authorities. This secured Jinnah a seat at the negotiating table when it became clear that power would be transferred to Indians soon after the war's end.

Since 1941, the Muslim League had called for the creation of 'Pakistan' as a separate homeland for Indian Muslims. This was based on the 'Two-Nation Theory': the idea that Muslims historically formed a separate nation within India and should be represented territorially and constitutionally. While the actual form that this country would take and its relationship with 'Hindu' India were not made clear, this proved a powerful symbol for Muslim politics.

### **The Partition and Violence**

At midnight on 14/15 August 1947, the last Viceroy of India, Lord Mountbatten, formally handed power to the newly constituted governments of India and Pakistan. In negotiations with the Congress and the Muslim League, the British had agreed to create Pakistan as a distinct territorial entity. In the northwest, Sindh, Baluchistan, the North-West Frontier Province, and western Punjab became one part of Pakistan, while eastern Bengal (in the north-east) became another.

Jinnah may have seemed to have achieved his aims, but the transfer of power was anything

but smooth. Pakistan's two wings were separated by more than a thousand miles of Indian territory. Moreover, when the British plan to leave India was originally announced by Prime Minister Clement Attlee in February 1947, the expected date of departure had been no later than July 1948. However, because the build up of pressure in India caused Mountbatten to fear the consequences of any further delay, the date was brought forward to August 1947 at short notice, leaving only weeks rather than a period of more than a year to prepare for the handover. This change meant that preparations for the transfer were rushed and chaotic. Perhaps most importantly, the exact demarcation of Indian and Pakistani territory remained uncertain up to and even beyond the formal transfer of power. Muslim and non-Muslim populations, especially in the Punjab and to a lesser extent in Bengal and Bihar, drove out the 'other' community from locations that they expected to become part of 'their' country. These refugees joined the hundreds of thousands of people who left to cross the border in either direction, either through choice or out of fear.

Approximately 14.5m people were displaced by Partition. Estimates of the number of people killed and injured vary, but a conservative consensus suggests half a million dead. The scale of the violence and displacement had not been anticipated by any of the major players who had drawn up the Partition agreements, nor by local populations. Tragically, many refugees thought that they would be able to return to their homes once the 'madness' had died down. This was never the case.

### **Refugee resettlement**

Resettling these refugees in their new homes was a major operation. Initial sympathy from local residents often turned to resentment or hostility where large cultural differences separated local communities from refugees, or locals felt that refugees received unfairly generous treatment from the authorities. This was particularly the case in the towns of Sindh province of Pakistan, where north Indian Muslim refugees congregated after Partition. Since the 1980s, the Muhajir Quami Movement (now the Muttahida Quami Movement), an important political party with a refugee platform, has clashed violently with Sindhi and Pashtun groups in Karachi.

### **Kashmir**

One of the great outstanding issues of Partition, which has still not been resolved, was the status of Kashmir. At Partition, Kashmir was one of 562 'princely states' governed by local potentates; all these became briefly independent. It was anticipated that they would all choose to become part of either India or Pakistan. Maharajah Hari Singh, a Hindu governing a state populated mostly by Muslims, initially wanted to keep Kashmir independent but then agreed to become part of India in October 1947. This accession was accepted by India but the Kashmiri people were never consulted. The decision was contested by Pakistan and has continued to be a matter of dispute between the two countries ever since. India and Pakistan went to war in Kashmir in late 1947-1948, at the end of which a UN supervised 'line of control' was established. A UN Security Council resolution stated that the question of the accession of Jammu and Kashmir to India or Pakistan should be decided through a

plebiscite; however, this has not yet been implemented. India and Pakistan have fought in Kashmir twice since, in 1965 and 1999, without substantially altering the line of control. Indian-controlled Kashmir has also experienced a widespread, armed insurgency by Muslim residents of the area since 1989, which continues to this day.

## Religious tensions in Pakistan

While the logic of Partition suggested that Pakistan would be united by Islam, in reality this has not always been the case. Most Pakistani Muslims are Sunni, but there is a substantial Shi'a minority (around 15% of the population). It is true to say that historic differences between Shi'a and Sunnis have existed since the 7th century and have on occasions led to violence and tension. However, there have also been intermarriages and for the majority of the time relations between these communities have been harmonious and peaceful. A greatly heightened level of sectarian violence has emerged over the last thirty years due to a complex combination of factors<sup>2</sup> and to the exploitation of historic tensions between these groups.

Mainstream Sunni and Shi'a organisations in Pakistan have united to condemn all forms of sectarian violence. However, extremist elements from each of these two communities have created militant groups to further their sectarian goals. In addition, extremist Sunni groups have much in common with the literalist theology of al Qaeda and its affiliates as against the mainstream Barelwi (Sufi-shrine) movement. As a consequence these groups have increasingly begun to target their suicide bombers at Muslim worshippers at major Sufi shrines.

The non-Muslims in Pakistan have also experienced persecution. Followers of Mirza Ghulam Ahmed, a nineteenth century religious reformer, are not regarded as Muslims by mainstream followers of Islam, and are declared to be non-Muslims by the Pakistani constitution. The Ahmedi community has suffered violence, particularly in the Punjab, where major anti-Ahmedi riots took place in 1953, and attacks on Ahmedi mosques in 2010 claimed the lives of 95 people. Recently, Pakistan's small Christian and Sikh populations have come under violent attack, as when between seven and nine Christians were burned to death in Gojra, in the Punjab, after allegations of Qur'an-burning in 2009. Much of this violence has been inflicted by militant sectarian groups.

## Hindu Nationalism in India

After the death in 1964 of Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister and chief proponent of secularism, Hindu right-wingers gained increasing prominence. Most prominent among

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<sup>2</sup> These include (i) the impact of the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and its attempts to project Shi'i power globally; (ii) the role of Saudi financial support for its particular literalist brand of Islam which is both anti Shi'i and anti Sufi; (iii) the Islamisation efforts of General Zia, which resulted in support for a literalist brand of Islam and support for Sunni sectarian groups that would buttress Pakistan against Iranian/Shi'i influence; (iv) the Afghan war and the support for/training of militant sectarian groups

these are a militant organization, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS); a political party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP); and a religious organization, the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP). An associate of the RSS, Nathuran Godse, had assassinated Gandhi in 1948, claiming that the Mahatma had betrayed India and the Hindus by agreeing to Partition. Hindu-Muslim tension has existed, to varying degrees, throughout Indian independence. The most notorious recent incidence of the persecution of Muslims in India was driven by a BJP state government in Gujarat, which allowed the destruction of a mosque at Ayodhya in 1992. This mosque, some Hindus claimed, is Lord Rama's birthplace, and a temple to Ram had stood there until it was destroyed by a general of the Mughal Emperor Babur in 1528. The destruction of the mosque, and Muslim protests against it, sparked communal riots as far away as Mumbai. During the past two decades the BJP has pursued mainstream respectability, and headed a national coalition government between 1998-2004. However, persecution of religious minorities, including Christians, has continued.

## Bangladesh

Jinnah's Two-Nation Theory was sorely tested when the eastern wing of Pakistan seceded in 1971 to become Bangladesh. From Pakistan's inception, East Bengal raised constant complaints about the status of the Bengali language in relation to that of Urdu, economic disparities between East Bengal and the western wing of Pakistan, and the under-representation of Bengalis in the legislative and executive arms of government. The One Unit scheme, which designated East Bengal as East Pakistan and the other provinces collectively as West Pakistan, was put in place in 1955 to negate Bengal's demographic majority in Pakistan. Throughout the 1960s Mujibur Rehman, a most prominent Bengali nationalist leader, led protests against the central government, and open talk of secession was common by the end of the decade. After the breakdown of constitutional talks between Rehman and Pakistan's military ruler, Yahya Khan, Rehman was arrested and West Pakistani troops stationed in the East wing were ordered to disarm Bengali troops and police officers. Many Bengalis resisted violently, and a nine-month civil war ensued. India entered the war on the Bengalis' side, and the West Pakistani forces were defeated. The war was extremely bloody, with accusations of atrocities emanating from both sides.

## Khalistan

One of the reasons that many Indians so vehemently opposed Partition was that the creation of a separate sovereign nation would undermine the integrity of India, and give a fillip to future secessionist movements. This proved to be true in the case of the demand for Khalistan, a separate Sikh homeland, which was strongest during the 1970s and 1980s. Most Sikh refugees from the areas of the Punjab that became part of Pakistan in 1947 had settled in Indian East Punjab, and some in Delhi, India's capital. The remainder of East Punjab's population was largely Hindu. During the 1970s the important Sikh leader Sant (Saint) Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and his followers became militant in promoting Sikh causes. By October 1983, communal violence in the Punjab was significant enough that Indira Gandhi, India's Prime Minister, imposed President's rule in the state.

Bhindranwale and his followers occupied the Harimandir Sahib (or Golden Temple) in Amritsar in 1984. Indian troops stormed the temple, defeating the militants. Pro-Khalistanis also alleged that Sikh civilians, including a large number of pilgrims, were deliberately targeted. In October, Indira Gandhi was shot dead by Sikh security guards in New Delhi, which triggered anti-Sikh riots across north India. The substantial Sikh community in Delhi was particularly targeted. This was followed by accusations that the riots had not been spontaneous, but planned by Indira's political party.

In 1986, Sikh separatists declared an independent state of Khalistan. Over the following decade, a violent Sikh insurgency was active in the Punjab, which was met by repression and brutality by the state apparatus. After this insurgency fizzled out, the Punjab returned to normal, and is now peaceful. Sikhs, however, mostly retain a separate identity from Hindus.