

Chapter 4: Colonialism, Independence, and Partition

Summary

Between 1757 and 1947, Britain went from running a trading company in Bengal to ruling most of South Asia. This chapter follows that story: the battle that gave the East India Company its first big territory, the revolt of 1857, the British Raj and the princely states, and the freedom movements that pushed Britain out. It then explains the Partition of 1947, which created India and Pakistan and forced millions of people from their homes, and the events that led to Sri Lanka's independence in 1948 and Bangladesh's in 1971. By the end you'll be able to explain how one colonial territory became several nations in separate steps, and why families on different sides of those borders remember the same years so differently.

Concepts Covered

1. Battle of Plassey
2. Revolt of 1857
3. British Raj
4. Princely States
5. Anglo-Afghan Wars
6. Bengal Famine of 1943
7. Indian National Congress

8. All-India Muslim League
9. Mahatma Gandhi
10. Satyagraha
11. B. R. Ambedkar
12. Muhammad Ali Jinnah
13. Partition of 1947
14. Radcliffe Line
15. Partition Migration
16. Kashmir Dispute
17. Sri Lankan Independence
18. Language Movement of 1952
19. Bangladesh Liberation War

Prerequisites

- **Chapter 1: What Is South Asia?** for the eight countries, the rivers and the Bay of Bengal.
- **Chapter 3: Empires and Encounters**, especially the Mughal Empire, the European traders and the East India Company.

A hard chapter, and an important one



Hi, I'm Mora! The years in this chapter, 1947 and 1971 most of all, still shape where many South Asian families live, which flag they salute and which stories they tell at dinner. Some of what you'll read is painful, so go slowly, and remember that real people lived every line of it. Every tradition has a story. Let's find it!

4.1 Three Countries, One House

It's a snowy Sunday, and Zara Hossain is helping her Nanu (her mother's mother) sort a box of old photographs for the South Asian Student Association's first "Family History Night." Ben Lindqvist, her best friend, is sitting on the floor of the Hossains' living room, carefully flattening a photo of a tin-roofed house surrounded by banana trees.

"That's my mother's house," Nanu says in Bangla, tapping the picture. "Near Chattogram. She was born there, she grew up there, and she died there." Then she switches to English, for Ben. "She was born in India. She grew up in Pakistan. And she died in Bangladesh."

Ben looks up. "So she moved a lot?"

"Never," says Nanu. "Not once. The countries moved around her."

Zara laughs, then stops. She knows Bangladesh became independent in 1971. She has heard her parents talk about "1947." But she can't explain how one woman could live in three countries without ever leaving her house. Who drew the lines, when, and why did they keep changing?

4.2 When the Map Changes Around You

Ben has a version of this in his own family history. For most of the 1800s, Norway was joined to Sweden under the Swedish king. In 1905 the union ended peacefully and Norway became fully independent. A Norwegian farmer who never left his farm went from one country to another without packing a bag.

South Asia's borders changed in a similar way, but on a much larger scale and, in 1947 and 1971, with terrible violence. Here is the short version of what happened to the land around Nanu's mother's house:

Year	What the area near Chattogram was part of
Before 1947	British India (the province of Bengal)
1947 to 1971	Pakistan (first called East Bengal, later East Pakistan)
1971 onward	Bangladesh

To see how that happened, we have to start almost two hundred years earlier, with a trading company that became a government.

4.3 From Traders to Rulers

In **Chapter 3**, you met the East India Company, a private English (later British) business that came to South Asia in the 1600s to buy cotton cloth, spices, indigo and tea. For more than a century it was one of many foreign trading companies, working with the permission of Mughal emperors and regional rulers. That changed in Bengal.

The Battle of Plassey, 1757

The **Battle of Plassey** was the battle on 23 June 1757, near the village of Plassey (Palashi) in Bengal, in which the East India Company's forces, led by Robert Clive, defeated Siraj-ud-Daulah, the Nawab (ruler) of Bengal. The Company won mostly because the Nawab's own commander, Mir Jafar, made a secret deal with the British and kept his troops out of the fight. Afterward, the Company made Mir Jafar the new Nawab.

Plassey matters because of what came next. Bengal was one of the richest provinces in South Asia, and after Plassey the Company dominated its

government and used its tax revenue for its own purposes. From this base the Company fought, signed treaties with, and took over one region after another for the next hundred years. Many historians treat 1757 as the start of British rule in South Asia, even though most of the region was not yet under British control.

The Revolt of 1857

By the 1850s, the Company ruled large parts of the subcontinent and had a huge army made up mostly of Indian soldiers, called sepoy. Anger had been building for years: about land taxes, about the Company taking over kingdoms whose rulers died without a son, and about new rules in the army. The spark was a new rifle cartridge that soldiers believed was greased with cow and pig fat, which would offend both Hindu and Muslim soldiers.

The **Revolt of 1857** was a large uprising against Company rule that began on 10 May 1857, when sepoy at Meerut, a town about 64 km (40 miles) northeast of Delhi, mutinied and marched to Delhi. There they declared the elderly Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar, their leader. The revolt spread across much of northern and central India. Soldiers, peasants, landlords and some rulers joined, including Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi, a queen who fought on horseback and is still remembered as a hero in India. Both sides committed massacres. By 1858, British forces had crushed the revolt, often with brutal reprisals against whole villages.

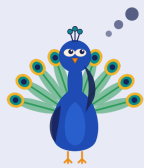
Even its name is debated. British writers long called it the "Sepoy Mutiny," a soldiers' revolt. Many Indians call it the "First War of Independence," the start of a national struggle, though some historians question that label because the rebels did not share one plan. This book uses the neutral name "Revolt of 1857."

The British Raj

The revolt convinced the British Parliament that a private company should not govern millions of people. The Government of India Act, passed on 2 August 1858, ended Company rule and transferred its territory and army to the British Crown.

The **British Raj** (*Raj* means "rule" in Hindi-Urdu) is the name for direct rule of South Asia by the British Crown, from 1858 to 1947. A Viceroy, appointed in London, governed from Calcutta (now Kolkata) and later from New Delhi. In 1876, Queen Victoria was given the title "Empress of India." A small number of British officials ran it, relying on huge numbers of Indian clerks, police and soldiers.

Same company, two chapters



Notice the hand-off: from 1757 to 1858 a company ruled, and from 1858 to 1947 a government did. When your family says "the British," which of those two do you think they mean, and does it change the story?

4.4 A Patchwork, Not a Single Colony

On a map of "British India" from 1900, it can look like one solid block of British pink. It wasn't. The Raj was really a patchwork.

The princely states

Princely States were the hundreds of kingdoms inside British-controlled South Asia that kept their own Indian rulers (called maharajas, nawabs, nizams and other titles) but accepted British control over their defense and foreign relations through treaties. At the time Britain left, there were officially about 565 of them. Some were tiny, a few villages. Others were huge:

Hyderabad, ruled by a Nizam, and Jammu and Kashmir, ruled by a Maharaja, were each larger than many European countries. In 1947, princely states covered about 40 percent of the land of pre-independence India and held about 23 percent of its people.

That detail becomes very important in 1947, when every one of those princes had to decide what to do.

The neighbors Britain never fully ruled

Several of today's South Asian countries were never formally colonized, though Britain still shaped their history.

- **Afghanistan.** Britain feared that the Russian Empire, expanding in Central Asia, would use Afghanistan as a route to India. This rivalry led to the **Anglo-Afghan Wars**, three wars Britain fought in Afghanistan: 1839 to 1842, 1878 to 1880, and 1919. In the first, a British army was destroyed during its retreat from Kabul. After the second, Britain controlled Afghanistan's foreign affairs, though not its internal government. After the third war in 1919, the Treaty of Rawalpindi recognized Afghanistan's full independence in foreign affairs. Afghans remember 1919 as the year they won back control of their own foreign relations.
- **Nepal.** After a war with the Company, Nepal signed the Treaty of Sugauli in 1816 and gave up some territory, but it remained an independent kingdom.
- **Bhutan.** Under the Treaty of Punakha in 1910, Bhutan agreed to be guided by Britain in its foreign relations, while keeping its own king and internal rule.
- **Ceylon** (today's Sri Lanka) was a British colony, but it was run separately from British India, with its own governor.

- **The Maldives** became a British protectorate in 1887. It kept its own sultan, and Britain handled its defense and foreign affairs.

4.5 Life Under the Raj and the Bengal Famine of 1943

What did British rule mean for ordinary people? Historians still argue about the balance. The Raj built railways, universities and courts, but decisions were made in London, most people had no vote, and many historians argue that colonial policies drained wealth from the region and weakened older industries such as handloom weaving.

One of the worst disasters of colonial rule was the famine in Bengal during the Second World War.

The **Bengal Famine of 1943** was a famine in the province of Bengal (today's Bangladesh and the Indian state of West Bengal) and parts of neighboring Orissa (now Odisha) during the Second World War, when a very large number of people died of starvation and of diseases such as malaria that spread among people weakened by hunger. Estimates of the death toll vary widely, from about 800,000 to as many as 3.8 million. The economic historian Cormac Ó Gráda describes the scholarly consensus as about 2.1 million deaths.

Several causes came together:

- Japan had occupied Burma (now Myanmar) in 1942, cutting off rice imports that Bengal depended on.
- War spending caused prices to rise sharply, and farm workers' wages did not keep up, so poor families could not afford rice even where it existed.
- Fearing a Japanese invasion, the government removed or destroyed boats and rice stocks in coastal areas, a "denial policy" that hurt local fishermen and traders.

- Officials were slow to declare a famine, and wartime priorities, including the use of ships for war supplies rather than food, slowed relief.

Historians weigh these causes differently, but most agree that government decisions, in London and in Bengal, made the disaster far worse. For many people in Bengal, it showed why they wanted to govern themselves.

4.6 Organizing for Freedom

The movement to end British rule lasted about sixty years and took many forms, including petitions, marches, strikes and armed revolt. These were the main organizations and leaders.

Two political parties

The **Indian National Congress** is a political party founded on 28 December 1885, at a meeting in Bombay (now Mumbai), that became the largest organization in the movement for independence from Britain. It grew from a small group of professionals into a mass movement. It wanted a single, independent India for people of all religions, and many of its leaders, such as Jawaharlal Nehru, became leaders of independent India. The Congress still exists today as a political party in India.

The **All-India Muslim League** was a political party founded in 1906 in Dhaka to represent the political interests of Muslims in British India. Muslims were about a quarter of British India's population, and many Muslim leaders worried that in a democracy with a large Hindu majority, their community's rights, jobs and culture would not be protected. For decades the League asked for safeguards inside a united India. In 1940, at a meeting in Lahore, it adopted the Lahore Resolution (later called the Pakistan Resolution), which called for independent states in the Muslim-majority areas of the northwest

and the east. Pakistan marks 23 March each year as Pakistan Day in memory of that resolution.

Mahatma Gandhi and satyagraha

Mahatma Gandhi (Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, 1869 to 1948) was a lawyer from Porbandar, in present-day Gujarat, who became the most famous leader of the Indian independence movement by leading mass campaigns of nonviolent resistance. *Mahatma* is an honorific from Sanskrit meaning "great soul." Gandhi first developed his methods in South Africa, where he lived from 1893 and fought discrimination against Indians there. He returned to India in 1915 and soon became the leading figure in the Congress.

Gandhi called his method **Satyagraha** (सत्याग्रह, *SUT-yaa-gruh*), "holding firmly to truth" or "truth force": nonviolent resistance in which people openly refuse to obey unjust laws, accept the punishment, and try to win over their opponents rather than defeat them. The word comes from Gujarati, Gandhi's first language, combining *satya* (truth) and *agraha* (insistence).

The most famous example is the Salt March. The British government held a monopoly on salt and taxed it, which hit the poorest people hardest. On 12 March 1930, Gandhi and 78 followers set out from his ashram near Ahmedabad and walked about 387 km (240 miles) to the seaside village of Dandi. Crowds joined along the way. On 6 April 1930, Gandhi picked up natural salt from the shore, breaking the law. Across India, people began making and selling salt, and tens of thousands were arrested.

In August 1942, during the Second World War, Gandhi and the Congress launched the Quit India Movement, demanding that Britain leave immediately. Its main leaders were arrested almost at once.

Gandhi's ideas later inspired civil rights movements around the world, and Martin Luther King Jr. in the United States drew on them. Gandhi also

opposed Partition. On 30 January 1948, a few months after independence, he was shot and killed at a prayer meeting in Delhi by Nathuram Godse, a Hindu nationalist.

Not only nonviolence



Gandhi's campaigns were huge, but freedom did not come only from nonviolence. Revolutionaries such as Bhagat Singh, the Indian National Army led by Subhas Chandra Bose, strikes, elections, and Britain's exhaustion after the Second World War all played a part, and historians still debate how much each mattered.

B. R. Ambedkar: whose freedom?

B. R. Ambedkar (Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, 1891 to 1956) was a lawyer, economist and political leader, born into a Dalit family (a community that faced "untouchability," the most severe form of caste discrimination), who fought for the rights of Dalits and chaired the committee that drafted India's Constitution. As a boy he was segregated from other students at school. He went on to earn doctorates from Columbia University and the London School of Economics.

Ambedkar asked a question many other leaders preferred to skip: if India became free of Britain, would Dalits become free inside India? He clashed with Gandhi in 1932 over whether Dalits should elect their own representatives separately. Gandhi went on a fast against the idea, and the two men reached a compromise, the Poona Pact, which reserved seats for Dalits instead.

After independence, Ambedkar became India's first law minister and chaired the Constitution's Drafting Committee. The Constitution, which came into effect on 26 January 1950, includes Article 17, which abolished "untouchability"

and made its practice a crime. In 1956, shortly before his death, Ambedkar and a very large number of his followers converted to Buddhism, which he saw as a path free of caste. Today he is honored across India, and especially by Dalit communities, often as "Babasaheb." You'll read more about caste in [Chapter 13](#).

Muhammad Ali Jinnah

Muhammad Ali Jinnah (1876 to 1948) was a lawyer from Karachi who led the All-India Muslim League and became the founder and first Governor-General of Pakistan. Early in his career Jinnah was a member of the Congress and worked for Hindu-Muslim cooperation. Over time he concluded that Muslims needed their own homeland to protect their political future. His argument, often called the "two-nation theory," was that Muslims and Hindus in South Asia were two nations with their own religions, cultures and histories. In Pakistan he is honored as *Quaid-e-Azam*, "the Great Leader." He died on 11 September 1948, about a year after Pakistan's creation.

Leader	Organization	What he wanted for South Asia
Mahatma Gandhi	Indian National Congress	A free, united India, won through nonviolent mass action
Muhammad Ali Jinnah	All-India Muslim League	By 1940, a separate homeland for Muslims in the Muslim-majority regions
B. R. Ambedkar	Dalit political organizations; later chaired the	Freedom from Britain together with equal

Leader	Organization	What he wanted for South Asia
	Constitution's Drafting Committee	rights and protections for Dalits

4.7 The Partition of 1947

By the end of the Second World War, Britain was exhausted and in debt, and its government had decided to leave South Asia. The question was no longer *whether* Britain would go, but what it would leave behind: one country or more than one.

The road to Partition

In 1946, a British Cabinet Mission tried to design a loose federation that would keep India united while protecting Muslim-majority provinces. The plan fell apart because the Congress and the Muslim League didn't trust each other. Jinnah called for 16 August 1946 to be "Direct Action Day," to press the demand for Pakistan. That day, riots broke out in Calcutta, and over the following days large numbers of people, Hindus and Muslims both, were killed. The violence spread: to Noakhali in eastern Bengal, where Muslims attacked Hindus; to Bihar, where Hindus attacked Muslims; and in March 1947 to Rawalpindi in the Punjab, where Hindus and Sikhs were attacked.

In March 1947, Lord Louis Mountbatten arrived as the last Viceroy. On 3 June 1947, he announced the plan: British India would be divided into two independent countries, and power would be handed over in August, much earlier than expected.

What Partition was

The **Partition of 1947** was the division of British India into two independent countries, India and Pakistan, in August 1947, largely along religious lines: Muslim-majority areas became Pakistan and the rest became India. The British Parliament passed the Indian Independence Act on 18 July 1947. Pakistan celebrates its independence on 14 August, and India celebrates on 15 August.

Pakistan was created in two parts, with India in between:

- **West Pakistan**, made up of Sindh, Baluchistan, the North-West Frontier Province and the western half of Punjab.
- **East Pakistan** (first called East Bengal), made up of the eastern half of Bengal and the Sylhet district of Assam. It had more people than the western wing: about 44 million of Pakistan's 69 million people lived there, and most of them spoke Bangla.

India was not created as a "Hindu country." Its leaders built a secular state, meaning it would not have an official religion, and many millions of Muslims stayed in India.

Two provinces, Punjab in the northwest and Bengal in the east, had populations that were roughly half Muslim and half non-Muslim. They could not simply be handed to one side. They had to be cut in two.

Whose Story?

The same August is remembered very differently. In Pakistan, 14 August is above all a day of celebration: the birth of a homeland, achieved under Jinnah's leadership. In India, 15 August is Independence Day, the end of colonial rule won by a long freedom struggle, and Partition is often remembered as the price of that freedom. For millions of Punjabi and Bengali families on both sides, especially Sikh and Hindu families who left West Punjab and Muslim families who left East Punjab, 1947 is remembered first as the year they lost their homes. Many British accounts once focused on the "transfer of power" and Mountbatten's speed, while more recent historians, on all sides, have centered the voices of ordinary survivors, including women, whose stories were missing from the official record.

The Radcliffe Line

Someone had to decide where the new borders would run through Punjab and Bengal. The British appointed Sir Cyril Radcliffe, a London lawyer who, according to many accounts, had never visited India before. He arrived on 8 July 1947 and had about five weeks to divide two provinces home to tens of millions of people. He chaired two boundary commissions, each with members chosen by the Congress and the Muslim League, who usually disagreed, leaving the final decisions to him.

The **Radcliffe Line** is the boundary Radcliffe drew to divide the provinces of Punjab and Bengal between India and Pakistan in 1947. It was based mainly on which districts had Muslim or non-Muslim majorities, though Radcliffe could also weigh "other factors" such as canals, railways and roads. No line could separate the communities neatly. The Punjab was home to many Sikhs, whose holiest sites and farmland lay on both sides.

The Line was published on 17 August 1947, two days *after* independence. That meant many people celebrated freedom without knowing which country

their village was in. Today the Punjab part of the Radcliffe Line is part of the India-Pakistan border, and the Bengal part is the India-Bangladesh border.

Partition migration

As the new borders became known and violence spread, huge numbers of people began to move.

Partition Migration is the movement of millions of people across the new India-Pakistan borders in 1947 and the years after: Hindus and Sikhs moving into India, and Muslims moving into Pakistan. In Punjab, the migration was concentrated into a few terrible months. People traveled on foot in columns many kilometers long, on bullock carts and on overcrowded trains. In Bengal, the movement was slower and continued for years and even decades.

Historians don't know the exact numbers, and the estimates differ. Here's what the sources say:

- **People displaced:** Stanford Libraries' Partition guide gives about 14 million refugees. A study based on census records (Bharadwaj, Khwaja and Mian, 2008) estimated about 14.5 million people arriving in the new countries and about 17.9 million leaving, which leaves about 3.4 million people unaccounted for. So a fair range is **about 14 million to 18 million people displaced**.
- **Deaths:** Estimates range from **about 200,000 to 2 million** people killed. No one counted at the time, and many deaths were never recorded.

People were killed in every community. Hindus and Sikhs were attacked in areas that became Pakistan, and Muslims were attacked in areas that became India. Trains arrived carrying people who had been killed on the way. Tens of thousands of women were kidnapped and assaulted. After Partition, India and Pakistan each claimed that tens of thousands of women from their communities had been abducted and agreed to try to return

them. There were also many acts of courage: neighbors who hid families of another faith, and villages that protected their minorities.

Survivors rebuilt their lives in new cities. Refugees from West Punjab helped reshape Delhi, and refugees from East Punjab helped reshape Lahore and Karachi, while Bengali Hindu refugees settled in and around Kolkata. Many never saw their childhood homes again. Today the [1947 Partition Archive](#) and other projects record survivors' memories before they are lost.

If this feels heavy



It's okay if these numbers feel hard to hold. Historians use ranges here because every number stands for people who were never counted, and it's fine to take a break before reading on.

The princely states choose

When Britain left, its treaties with the princes ended. In theory each prince could join India, join Pakistan, or stay independent. In practice, leaders on both sides, especially India's Vallabhbhai Patel, pressed them to join, and most did so by August 1947, largely based on geography.

A few did not. Hyderabad, the largest princely state, had a Muslim ruler, the Nizam, and a mostly Hindu population, and it was surrounded by Indian territory. The Nizam wanted to remain independent. In September 1948, Indian troops entered Hyderabad in a military operation and the state became part of India.

4.8 The Kashmir Dispute

The hardest case of all was Jammu and Kashmir, a large princely state in the far north, touching both India and Pakistan. Its population was mostly Muslim, but its ruler, Maharaja Hari Singh, was Hindu. He delayed choosing a side.

In October 1947, armed tribesmen from Pakistan's northwest, supported by Pakistan, entered Kashmir. The Maharaja asked India for military help and, in late October 1947, signed an Instrument of Accession joining India. Indian troops arrived, and the first war between India and Pakistan followed. A ceasefire arranged by the United Nations took effect on 1 January 1949. The ceasefire line became, after another war and the 1972 Simla Agreement, the **Line of Control** that still divides the region.

The **Kashmir Dispute** is the continuing disagreement, mainly between India and Pakistan, over who should control the former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir. Each side states its position this way:

- **India's position:** the Maharaja's Instrument of Accession was legal and final, so the whole former state is part of India.
- **Pakistan's position:** the accession was not valid, the region's Muslim majority should have joined Pakistan, and the people of Kashmir should decide their future through a vote, as early United Nations resolutions called for.
- **Many Kashmiris** have their own views, which differ from region to region and person to person: some favor India, some Pakistan, and some want independence or more self-rule.

China also controls part of the wider Kashmir region, including Aksai Chin, which India claims. Today India controls roughly 55 percent of the region's land, Pakistan about 30 percent, and China about 15 percent. The dispute has led to several wars and much loss of life, and as of 2026 it remains unresolved. This book describes Kashmir as disputed and does not take a side, which is also why its maps never draw official borders.

4.9 Sri Lankan Independence

Sri Lankan Independence is the peaceful transfer of power from Britain to the island then called Ceylon, which became an independent country on 4 February 1948. Britain granted it under the Ceylon Independence Act of 1947, after years of negotiation, with no partition and none of the mass violence seen in Punjab and Bengal. Don Stephen Senanayake became the first prime minister. For its first years, the country stayed closely tied to Britain, which kept military bases there, and the British monarch remained head of state. In 1972, Ceylon became a republic and changed its name to Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka's later history had its own deep conflicts, including a long civil war covered in [Chapter 19](#), but independence itself was quiet. Sri Lankans celebrate 4 February as Independence Day.

The Maldives followed a different path again. It had been a British protectorate, not a colony, and became fully independent on 26 July 1965.

4.10 From the Language Movement to Bangladesh

Now we come back to Nanu's mother's house near Chattogram. In 1947 it became part of East Pakistan. Why did East Pakistan become a separate country only 24 years later?

The Language Movement of 1952

Pakistan's two wings shared a religion, Islam, but differed in language, food, dress and history. In 1948, Pakistan's government announced that Urdu, a language most people in East Bengal did not speak at home, would be the only national language. Bengalis protested, because most of Pakistan's people spoke Bangla.

The **Language Movement of 1952** was a protest movement in East Bengal demanding that Bangla be recognized as a national language of Pakistan, which reached its peak on 21 February 1952, when police in Dhaka opened fire on student protesters and killed several of them. Those killed are honored in Bangladesh as Language Martyrs, and the Shaheed Minar (Martyrs' Monument) in Dhaka stands in their memory. In 1956, Pakistan's first constitution recognized Bangla as an official language alongside Urdu.

In Bangladesh, 21 February, often called *Ekushey* ("the twenty-first"), is a national day of mourning and pride. In 1999, UNESCO declared 21 February International Mother Language Day, an idea that came from Bangladesh, and it has been observed around the world since 2000.

The Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971

That didn't solve the deeper problem. Many East Pakistanis felt that the western wing controlled the government, the army and much of the money, though the east had more people. The Awami League, led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, demanded much more self-government for the east.

In the December 1970 national elections, the Awami League won 167 of East Pakistan's 169 seats, which gave it a majority in Pakistan's whole National Assembly. Pakistan's military government did not hand over power, and talks failed. On the night of 25 March 1971, the Pakistani army launched a military crackdown, called Operation Searchlight, in Dhaka and across the east.

The **Bangladesh Liberation War** was the 1971 war in which East Pakistan fought for and won independence from Pakistan, becoming Bangladesh. In Bangla it is called মুক্তিযুদ্ধ (*MOOK-tee-jud-dho*), *Muktijuddho*, "liberation war." Bangladesh's independence was declared on 26 March 1971, which Bangladesh celebrates as Independence Day. Bengali fighters, called the Mukti Bahini ("liberation force"), fought a guerrilla war. About 10 million refugees fled to India. On 3 December 1971, war broke out openly between

India and Pakistan, and India's army joined the fight in the east. The Pakistani army in the east surrendered in Dhaka on 16 December 1971, which Bangladesh celebrates as Victory Day.

The human cost was enormous, and the numbers are disputed:

- **Deaths:** most estimates range from about **300,000 to 3 million**. Bangladesh's official figure is 3 million. Some researchers give lower figures, and there is no complete count.
- **Refugees:** about 10 million people fled to India, where crowded camps had high death rates of their own.
- Pakistani soldiers and allied militias killed large numbers of civilians, including students, teachers and the Hindu minority, and committed widespread sexual violence against women. Many Bangladeshis and many scholars describe these killings as a genocide.
- There was also violence against Urdu-speaking Biharis (Muslims who had moved from India to East Pakistan around 1947), many of whom were seen as supporting Pakistan and were killed or driven from their homes by Bengali fighters and crowds.

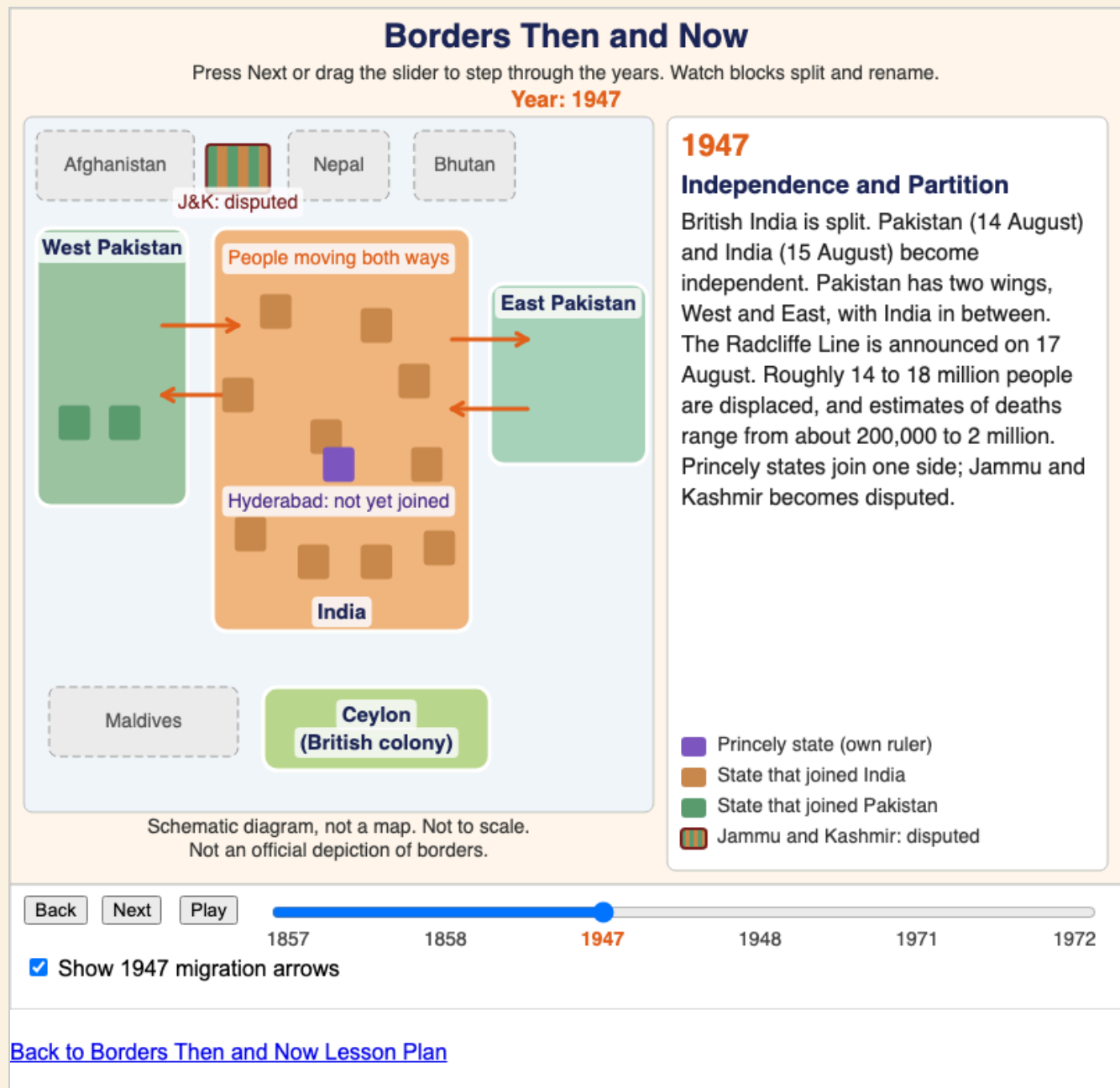
So the answer to Zara's puzzle is that Bangladesh was **not** created by Partition. It was created in a second, separate event in 1971. Partition made the area part of Pakistan, and the Liberation War made it Bangladesh.

Two events, not one



Try saying the whole sequence out loud: British India in 1946, East Pakistan in 1947, Bangladesh in 1971. Which step was decided by a line drawn in an office, and which was decided by the people living there?

Diagram: Borders Then and Now



Interactive simulation: <https://aaryavvatts-lab.github.io/south-asian-culture-textbook/sims/ch04-borders-then-and-now/main.html>

Open the Borders Then and Now fullscreen

MicroSim specification: Borders Then and Now

sim-id: ch04-borders-then-and-now

Library: p5.js

Status: Implemented

Bloom Level: Understand

Bloom Verb: explain

Learning Objective: The learner will explain how one colonial territory, British India, became several nations in separate steps (1947 and 1971), and how Ceylon and the princely states fit into that story.

Canvas: responsive width; 630 px drawing area plus 90 px control area.

Controls: Back and Next buttons, Play/Pause (starts paused), a stage slider (1857, 1858, 1947, 1948, 1971, 1972), a "Show 1947 migration arrows" checkbox; tapping the diagram also advances one step.

Behavior: A schematic block diagram, not a map. In 1857 and 1858 one large block (East India Company territory, then British India) holds small purple tiles for princely states, with Ceylon below and Afghanistan, Nepal, Bhutan and the Maldives as gray outside blocks. In 1947 the block splits into West Pakistan, India and East Pakistan; tiles change color as they join India or Pakistan, Hyderabad stays purple until 1948, and Jammu and Kashmir becomes a striped "disputed" tile. In 1948 Ceylon is labeled independent; in 1971 East Pakistan becomes Bangladesh; in 1972 Ceylon becomes Sri Lanka. A panel gives the dates and sourced ranges for each event. The caption says the diagram is schematic, not to scale and not an official depiction of borders.

Start at 1857 and press **Next** one step at a time. At each step, read the panel, then ask: what split, what joined, and what only changed its name? Watch the jump from 1858 to 1947, when the big block breaks into three and the princely-state tiles change color as they join a side.

Then go from 1947 to 1971 and watch East Pakistan. Its block doesn't move at all. Only its name changes. That's Nanu's point: the land and people stayed put while the country changed around them. Finally, compare Ceylon's single peaceful step with Bangladesh's two steps.

Ask Your Elders

Your interview for this chapter

Talk with a parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle, family friend or community elder about what your family remembers or was told about independence, 1947, 1971 or 1948, and how those years are talked about at home. If you don't have a South Asian elder to ask, interview a club advisor, a local temple, mosque, gurdwara or cultural center volunteer, or a classmate's family (with permission). Ten minutes is enough.

Before you start: Some memories of 1947 and 1971 are painful. Ask first whether they want to talk about those years at all, let them choose what to share, and never push for details. Ask if it's okay to take notes.

Questions to ask

1. When you were young, how did your family celebrate Independence Day (14 August, 15 August, 4 February or 26 March), or Victory Day? What do you remember about it?
2. Where was our family living in 1947, or in 1971? Did anyone have to move?
3. Were there stories in the family about neighbors, friends or places left behind? You only need to share what you're comfortable with.
4. What did people call these events at home? For example, "Partition," "independence," "the liberation war," or something else?

5. How do you think people talk about these years now, compared with when you were young, or compared with how people talk about them here in the United States?
6. What is one thing about our family's history in those years that you hope I remember and pass on?

Listen for: whether the story centers the Partition of 1947, Partition Migration or the Bangladesh Liberation War; places on either side of the Radcliffe Line; and how the memory compares with the "Whose Story?" box above.

Save it: Write down one quote or story in their words, with their permission. If they agree, you can share it with the [Roots & Rivers Story Archive](#).

? Your turn: compare two answers



Compare your elder's account with a friend's interview from a family with roots in a different country, such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh or Sri Lanka. Did they use the same name for the events? Did one family remember celebration and the other loss? Write two sentences on why both memories can be true at once.

"Every family does it a little differently, and there is no wrong answer here."

Common Misconceptions

Myth: Partition in 1947 created Bangladesh.

Reality: Partition created India and Pakistan. The area that is now Bangladesh became East Pakistan in 1947. Bangladesh was created in a separate event, the Liberation War of 1971.

Myth: India won independence through nonviolence alone.

Reality: Gandhi's nonviolent campaigns were central, but independence also

came from elections and political bargaining, armed revolutionaries, the Indian National Army, strikes and protests, and Britain's weakness after the Second World War. Historians still debate how much each mattered.

Myth: The violence of Partition happened on one side.

Reality: People of every community were killed, attacked and forced from their homes: Hindus and Sikhs in areas that became Pakistan, and Muslims in areas that became India. Survivors on both sides carry the memory.

Myth: Britain ruled every part of South Asia directly.

Reality: About 565 princely states kept their own rulers under British control. Afghanistan, Nepal and Bhutan were never British colonies, though Britain influenced their foreign affairs, and the Maldives was a protectorate. Ceylon was a colony governed separately from British India.

Myth: Pakistan was always one block of land.

Reality: From 1947 to 1971 Pakistan had two wings, West and East, with India in between. Most of its people lived in the eastern wing and spoke Bangla.

Check Yourself

? 1. What happened at the Battle of Plassey, and why does it matter? ✓

On 23 June 1757, the East India Company under Robert Clive defeated the Nawab of Bengal, helped by the betrayal of the Nawab's commander, Mir Jafar. It gave the Company control of Bengal's wealth, the base from which it expanded across South Asia.

? 2. What changed in 1858? ✓

After the Revolt of 1857, the Government of India Act of 1858 ended East India Company rule and placed its territories under the British Crown. That began the British Raj, which lasted until 1947.

? 3. What was the Radcliffe Line, and why did its timing cause problems? ✓

It was the boundary drawn through Punjab and Bengal to divide them between India and Pakistan. It was published on 17 August 1947, two days after independence, so many people did not know which country they were in when independence came.

? 4. About how many people were displaced by Partition, and why do historians give a range? ✓

About 14 million to 18 million people. No one kept a full count in the chaos, and different methods, such as refugee records and census comparisons, give different totals.

? 5. Why is 21 February important in Bangladesh and around the world? ✓

On 21 February 1952, police killed student protesters in Dhaka who were demanding recognition for Bangla. Bangladesh honors them on that day, and since 1999 UNESCO has marked it as International Mother Language Day.

Exercises

Remember

1. Give the independence dates of Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka (Ceylon) and Bangladesh.

 Answer

Pakistan: 14 August 1947. India: 15 August 1947. Ceylon (Sri Lanka): 4 February 1948. Bangladesh declared independence on 26 March 1971, and the war ended on 16 December 1971.

2. Name the leaders most closely linked to the Indian National Congress, the All-India Muslim League, and the drafting of India's Constitution.

 Answer

Mahatma Gandhi (with Jawaharlal Nehru) led the Congress. Muhammad Ali Jinnah led the Muslim League. B. R. Ambedkar chaired the Constitution's Drafting Committee.

Understand

1. Explain in your own words what satyagraha means and give one example of it.

 Answer

Satyagraha means "holding firmly to truth": openly and nonviolently refusing to obey an unjust law and accepting the punishment. The Salt March of 1930, when Gandhi walked to Dandi and made salt in defiance of the British salt law, is the best-known example.

2. Explain why the Kashmir Dispute began in 1947.

Answer

Jammu and Kashmir was a princely state with a Muslim-majority population and a Hindu ruler. After armed tribesmen from Pakistan entered in October 1947, the Maharaja joined India in return for military help. Pakistan disputed the accession, war followed, and both countries have claimed the region ever since.

Apply

1. Use the Borders Then and Now MicroSim. Step from 1858 to 1972 and, for each step, write one sentence saying which blocks split, joined or only changed their names. *Hint: notice which step changes only a label.*
2. A classmate says her grandfather was "born in Pakistan" in 1950 in Sylhet. Using this chapter, explain which country Sylhet is in today and why her statement is still correct. *Hint: Sylhet was part of East Pakistan.*

Analyze

1. Compare the Partition of 1947 with Sri Lankan Independence in 1948. Identify two reasons one was so much more violent than the other. *Hint: think about how the land and its people were divided, and how fast it happened.*
2. Analyze the causes of the Bengal Famine of 1943. Which causes came from the war, and which came from government decisions? *Hint: sort the four causes in section 4.5 into two groups.*

Evaluate

1. The 1857 uprising has been called the "Sepoy Mutiny" and the "First War of Independence." Evaluate both names. Which would you use in a club presentation, and why? *Hint: what does each name assume about who rebelled and why?*
2. Some people say Radcliffe should not be blamed for Partition violence because he was given an impossible task. Evaluate this claim using evidence from the chapter. *Hint: consider the five-week timeline, the mixed populations and who decided the timing.*

Create

1. Create a timeline poster with six dates from this chapter, from 1757 to 1972. For each date, write one sentence and a symbol, and include at least one event from Sri Lanka and one from Bangladesh. *Hint: the MicroSim stages can be your starting points.*
2. Write a short letter (150 to 200 words) from a fictional teenager in Lahore, Delhi or Dhaka in 1947 or 1971 to a friend on the other side of a new border. Show the friendship and the fear, without graphic detail. *Hint: use at least two concept words from this chapter.*

Key Takeaways

- British rule began with the East India Company's victory at the Battle of Plassey in 1757. After the Revolt of 1857, the British Crown ruled directly as the British Raj from 1858 to 1947.
- British India was a patchwork: about 565 princely states kept their own rulers, and Afghanistan, Nepal and Bhutan were never British colonies.

- Freedom came through many paths: the Indian National Congress, the All-India Muslim League, Gandhi's satyagraha, Ambedkar's fight for Dalit rights, Jinnah's call for Pakistan, revolutionaries and Britain's postwar weakness.
- The Partition of 1947 split British India into India and a two-winged Pakistan along the Radcliffe Line; about 14 to 18 million people were displaced and between about 200,000 and 2 million were killed, in every community.
- The Kashmir Dispute began in 1947 and remains unresolved, with India, Pakistan and many Kashmiris holding different positions.
- Ceylon became independent peacefully on 4 February 1948 and was renamed Sri Lanka in 1972.
- Bangladesh was not created by Partition: the Language Movement of 1952 and the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 turned East Pakistan into an independent country.

You untangled the map!



You can now explain how a woman could live in three countries without leaving home. Next, in Chapter 5, we visit the mosques, mandirs, gurdwaras, temples and churches where so many South Asian families find meaning.

Quiz: Colonialism, Independence, and Partition

Test your understanding of Chapter 4. Choose the best answer, then click **Show Answer** to check.

Question 1

What happened at the Battle of Plassey in 1757?

- A. The East India Company defeated the Nawab of Bengal, helped by the betrayal of the Nawab's commander
- B. Indian soldiers at Meerut rose up against the East India Company
- C. The British Crown took over the government of India from the East India Company
- D. Britain fought its first war in Afghanistan

 **Show Answer**



The correct answer is **A**. At Plassey, Robert Clive's Company forces defeated Siraj-ud-Daulah after Mir Jafar kept his troops out of the fight, giving the Company control of Bengal. The Meerut uprising (B) was the start of the Revolt of 1857, a century later.

Concept Tested: Battle of Plassey **Bloom's Level:** Remember

Question 2

Which statement best describes the princely states?

- A. Provinces governed directly by British governors
- B. Independent countries outside the British Empire, like Nepal
- C. Kingdoms with their own Indian rulers who accepted British control of defense and foreign affairs
- D. Territories created by the Radcliffe Line in 1947

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **C**. About 565 princely states kept their own rulers but were tied to Britain by treaties. They were not directly ruled provinces (A), and unlike Nepal they were inside the British system (B).

Concept Tested: Princely States **Bloom's Level:** Remember

Question 3

Why is the Revolt of 1857 called by different names, such as the "Sepoy Mutiny" and the "First War of Independence"?

- A. Because historians disagree about the year it took place
- B. Because each name reflects a different view of who rebelled and why
- C. Because it happened in two separate countries
- D. Because the British Crown renamed it in 1858

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **B**. "Sepoy Mutiny" treats it as a soldiers' revolt, while "First War of Independence" treats it as the start of a national struggle. The date (A) is not in dispute: it began on 10 May 1857.

Concept Tested: Revolt of 1857 **Bloom's Level:** Understand

Question 4

Which pair of dates gives Pakistan's and India's independence days?

- A. 26 January 1950 and 15 August 1947
- B. 4 February 1948 and 14 August 1947
- C. 23 March 1940 and 26 March 1971
- D. 14 August 1947 and 15 August 1947

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **D**. Pakistan celebrates 14 August and India 15 August 1947. 26 January 1950 (A) is when India's Constitution took effect, and 4 February 1948 (B) is Sri Lanka's independence day.

Concept Tested: Partition of 1947 **Bloom's Level:** Remember

Question 5

What made satyagraha different from other ways of resisting British rule?

- A. It relied on secret armed attacks against officials

- B. People openly and nonviolently broke unjust laws and accepted the punishment
- C. It asked Britain to divide India into two countries
- D. It was a petition sent only by lawyers to Parliament

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **B**. Satyagraha, "holding firmly to truth," meant open, nonviolent refusal to obey unjust laws, as in the Salt March. Armed attacks (A) were the path of some revolutionaries, not Gandhi.

Concept Tested: Satyagraha **Bloom's Level:** Understand

Question 6

Why did the timing of the Radcliffe Line's publication add to the confusion of 1947?

- A. It was published two days after independence, so many people did not yet know which country they were in
- B. It was published a year before independence, giving people too long to argue
- C. It was never published, so the border was decided by the armies
- D. It was published only in English newspapers in London

? Show Answer



The correct answer is **A**. The Line was announced on 17 August 1947, after both countries had become independent, so many people celebrated without knowing where the border would fall. It was published (C), and it came after independence, not before (B).

Concept Tested: Radcliffe Line **Bloom's Level:** Understand

Question 7

Zara's Nanu says, "I was born in Pakistan in 1960, near Chattogram." Which explanation is correct?

- A. She is mistaken, because Chattogram has always been in India
- B. She is mistaken, because Bangladesh was created by Partition in 1947
- C. She is right only if she later moved to Lahore
- D. She is right, because from 1947 to 1971 Chattogram was in East Pakistan

? Show Answer



The correct answer is **D**. Chattogram was in East Pakistan from 1947 until Bangladesh's independence in 1971. Option B repeats a common myth: Partition created India and Pakistan, and Bangladesh came later, in 1971.

Concept Tested: Bangladesh Liberation War **Bloom's Level:** Apply

Question 8

A student uses the MicroSim and notices that between 1948 and 1971 one block only changes its name. Which block is it, and what does that show?

- A. India; it shows India changed its borders in 1971
- B. Ceylon; it shows Sri Lanka was partitioned
- C. East Pakistan becoming Bangladesh; it shows a new country can form while the land and people stay in place
- D. West Pakistan becoming Afghanistan; it shows the Anglo-Afghan Wars changed borders

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **C**. The East Pakistan block keeps its size and place and becomes Bangladesh, showing that the country changed around people who never moved. Ceylon (B) was never partitioned. It changed its name to Sri Lanka in 1972.

Concept Tested: Bangladesh Liberation War **Bloom's Level:** Apply

Question 9

Compare the Partition of 1947 with Sri Lankan Independence in 1948. Which is the best explanation of why Partition was far more violent?

- A. Partition divided mixed provinces like Punjab and Bengal in a few weeks, while Ceylon became independent as one unit after years of negotiation
- B. Ceylon had no British officials, so there was nothing to fight over
- C. Partition happened during the Second World War, while Sri Lanka's independence came after it
- D. Sri Lanka was a princely state, so its ruler kept order

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **A**. Splitting mixed provinces at high speed, with borders announced after independence, set off mass migration and violence, while Ceylon was handed over whole. Option C is wrong because Partition took place in 1947, after the war had ended.

Concept Tested: Sri Lankan Independence **Bloom's Level:** Analyze

Question 10

Why do historians give Partition migration as a range, about 14 million to 18 million people, instead of one exact number?

- A. Because the British government kept exact records but has not released them
- B. Because only people who crossed by train were counted
- C. Because Pakistan and India agreed to use different numbers
- D. Because no one kept a full count, and different methods, such as refugee records and census comparisons, give different totals

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **D**. Refugee counts and census-based estimates produce different totals, and a census study found about 3.4 million people unaccounted for. There is no hidden exact record (A). The gaps come from the chaos of 1947.

Concept Tested: Partition Migration **Bloom's Level:** Analyze