



70th anniversary of the Partition of India marks independence but also tragedy

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Indian Muslim refugees attempting board a train bound for newly created Pakistan, August 1947.

This August will mark the 70th Anniversary of the Partition of British India, which left Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan as two independent states. This anniversary will include independence celebrations for both India and Pakistan, but will also serve as a time for both countries to remember the incredible violence that was unleashed during the Partition.

At the time of Partition, millions of Indian Muslims fled toward the new boundaries of Pakistan, while millions of Hindus and Sikhs went in the opposite direction. These two groups often competed for space on roads and on trains, which led to an outbreak of sectarian violence. The fighting was especially intense along the border of East Pakistan, which saw massacres, arson, forced conversions, mass abductions, sexual violence, and dismemberment. British soldiers attempting to stop the violence found themselves overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of refugees, and several British journalists at the time commented that the brutalities of Partition were worse than any violence during the Second World War.

By the end of the Partition migration, more than 15 million people had been displaced, and almost 2 million people were dead. As Pakistani historian Ayesha Jalal has written, the Partition is “the central historical event in twentieth century South Asia...A defining moment that is neither beginning nor end, partition continues to influence how the peoples and states of postcolonial South Asia envisage their past, present and future.”

Officials in both Pakistan and India worry that the legacy of this violence may lead to renewed sectarian violence at anniversary celebrations throughout both countries. Additionally, Indian officials worry that the anniversary may be used as an excuse for a terrorist attack by Muslim groups such as the Hizbul Mujahideen.