What was the partition of India?

KS3 Ages 11-14 ⏰ 2 min read

Imagine if someone drew a line down the middle of your country and said half the people had to move to one side and half to the other, based on their religion. That's essentially what happened to India in 1947, when the British Empire decided it was time to leave after ruling for nearly 200 years.

Why Split India Apart?

For decades, two main groups had been fighting for independence from Britain: the Indian National Congress (mostly Hindu) and the Muslim League. The Muslim League, led by Muhammad Ali Jinnah, worried that Muslims would be treated unfairly in a Hindu-majority independent India. They demanded their own separate country called **Pakistan**, meaning 'land of the pure' in Urdu.

The British, exhausted after World War II and facing mounting pressure, agreed to independence but couldn't get the two sides to agree on staying together. So they decided to partition—or split—India into two nations.

Think of partition like dividing a massive shared bedroom between two siblings who can't get along—except the 'room' was home to 400 million people, and the dividing line cut through communities, families, and even individual farms.

Drawing Lines on Maps

A British lawyer named Sir Cyril Radcliffe was given just five weeks to draw new borders. He'd never even been to India before! He used outdated maps and census data to create two new countries: India (for Hindus and other minorities) and Pakistan, which was split into two parts—West Pakistan (now Pakistan) and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh)—with India in between.

The borders were announced on August 17, 1947, two days after both countries celebrated independence. Many people woke up to discover they were now living in the 'wrong' country.

The Great Migration

What followed was chaos. Around 14 million people packed up their lives and moved—Muslims heading to Pakistan, Hindus and Sikhs moving to India. Trains packed with refugees crossed the new borders, often attacked along the way. Between 200,000 and 2 million people died in the violence that followed.

Families were separated, businesses destroyed, and ancient communities scattered. The partition created wounds that still affect relationships between India and Pakistan today, showing how quickly political decisions can transform millions of ordinary lives.

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