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The tragedy of India's partition, 70 years later

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In the middle of World War II, with the US pressuring Britain to loosen its colonial grip on India, Winston Churchill issued a bitter prophecy. "Take India if that was what you want! Take it, by all means!" the British prime minister raged to a US diplomat in Washington. But, he argued, only British rule kept the subcontinent's Hindus and Muslims from each other's throats: "I warn you that if I open the door a crack, there will be the greatest bloodbath in all history; yes, bloodbath in all history."

Events would exceed Churchill's worst imaginings. Exactly 70 years ago, after nearly two centuries in power, the British divided their imperial "jewel" into two nations: India and Pakistan. Riots did indeed break out along the newly carved border, especially in the northwestern province of Punjab, the region's breadbasket. Muslims on one side, and Hindus and Sikhs on the other, laid into one another with rifles, swords, scythes and spears. Mobs roamed the Punjab's verdant fields on foot and horseback—raping women and hacking off their breasts, smashing babies against tree trunks, mutilating men and setting villages alight. As many as a million people may have been slaughtered in a matter of weeks.

What should give today's leaders pause, though, isn't that Churchill was right, but that he was wrong. Hindus and Muslims weren't destined to fight, whatever their long and bloody history on the subcontinent had been. The truth is bleaker: In the years and months before independence, a very specific and identifiable combination of forces snapped the bonds holding together India's variegated communities, shattering the equilibrium they'd carefully achieved. To varying degrees, those same forces once again threaten some of the world's most diverse, multi-ethnic societies—India among them.

While India's communities had lived together for centuries, divisions lay just below the surface—and sometimes above it. Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims rarely intermarried and often wouldn't share food. Where one community or the other dominated in wealth and resources, the other naturally seethed with resentment. Tales of the brutality of India's Mughal conquerors and the treacherousness of Hindu moneylenders were clichés. Riots broke out regularly. British efforts to *divide et impera* exacerbated tensions.

This mix grew more dangerous under pressure from rising economic anxieties. A massive famine in 1943 killed millions. After Japan's World War II defeat, demobilization and the closure of factories geared toward war production threw millions more out of work. The prices of basic goods spiked; food was rationed. The Punjab had provided a disproportionate number of the army's recruits: Those young men returned home broadened by their experiences, but also deeply frustrated by their limited prospects.

Politicians supplied the match. The campaign to create a Muslim homeland had gathered steam during the war years. Once it became clear the British were serious about leaving the subcontinent, a power vacuum loomed. Suddenly, the question of who would inherit power from the British became more than theoretical.

Muslim leaders played upon fears that their faith and community were under threat, even while reminding Muslims that they'd once ruled the subcontinent. Hindu politicians dismissed their opponents as bigoted fascists, and warned of rape and mayhem if Pakistan were to be created. Both sides condemned the "atrocities" supposedly being visited upon their co-religionists by the other.

One needn't predict another ethnic holocaust to note that all of these factors are again at play in countries with large and mixed populations. In India, which largely recaptured its communal equilibrium after the trauma of Partition, the most damaging criticism that can be levelled against Prime Minister Narendra Modi isn't that he's been too timid about economic reform, but that he's too often tolerated anti-Muslim prejudice, or been too slow to condemn it.

Under Modi's watch, and sometimes with encouragement from members of his own party, Hindu militants have targeted among others: Muslim men supposedly out to despoil Hindu girls; liberal writers and activists who have defended India's secular traditions, as well as the rights of Muslims in Indian-controlled Kashmir; and anyone involved with killing cows, held by many Hindus to be holy. At least a dozen Muslims have been lynched in the past six months for allegedly eating beef or selling cows for slaughter—many of them in Uttar Pradesh, a state controlled by a Hindu radical whom Modi personally appointed.

All this comes at a fragile moment. In north India, for instance, a population boom and sluggish manufacturing growth have combined to produce a veritable army of under- or unemployed young men. Without a true economic take-off, the rising ambitions of many young Indians are unlikely to be met. Minorities, as always, are an easy scapegoat—blamed for stealing government jobs and university spots through affirmative-action programmes, or demonized as a pro-Pakistan fifth column.

Today, younger Indians are if anything more antagonistic toward Pakistan than those who lived through Partition. Theirs are the loudest voices calling for military retaliation whenever Pakistan-linked militant groups launch an attack; they swell the ranks of the vigilante mobs hunting for beef-eating Muslims. None of this means that India—or France or Indonesia or the US—need fear another holocaust. The threat is more insidious: a social fabric that, once torn, isn't repaired easily or soon.

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