

Seventy years since the communal Partition of South Asia

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16 August 2017

Seventy years ago this week, on August 15, 1947, South Asia's British colonial overlords transferred power to an "independent" Indian government headed by the Indian National Congress of Jawaharlal Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi.

The previous day, the last Viceroy of India, Lord Mountbatten, joined Muslim League President M.A. Jinnah in Karachi to inaugurate Pakistan as an expressly Muslim state. Pakistan was carved out of the Muslim-majority areas of the northwest and northeast of Britain's Indian Empire, thus transforming the "new" India into a primarily Hindu state.

Yet, Muslims had lived in all parts of the Indian subcontinent for well over a millennium.

The communal Partition was one of the great crimes of the 20th century—a crime that has shaped, or more precisely deformed, the entire subsequent history of South Asia.

Partition precipitated months of horrific communal violence, in which as many as two million Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs perished, and provoked one of the greatest mass migrations in human history.

Within the space of the next four years, more than 15 million people, generally carrying no more than what they could hold in their hands and on their backs, migrated from one country to the other: Hindus and Sikhs fled Pakistan for India, and Muslims India for Pakistan.

Partition defied South Asia's geography, history and culture, and the logic of its economic development, including the rational use of its water resources. Seven decades on, South Asia is the world's least economically integrated region.

The architects of Partition, including Nehru, independent India's first prime minister, claimed it would attenuate communal frictions, if not lance the communal boil. In reality, it built communalism into the very state structure of South Asia, thereby entrenching and magnifying it.

The ruling elites of Muslim Pakistan and ostensibly secular India have promoted communalism and its ideological cousins, religious fundamentalism and caste-ism, as a means of channeling social anger in a reactionary direction and splitting the working class.

Partition gave rise to a reactionary military-strategic rivalry between India and Pakistan that has squandered vital resources and today threatens the people of South Asia with nuclear

annihilation. Over the past seven decades, India and Pakistan have fought three declared wars and several undeclared wars, and passed through numerous war crises.

The Congress, until recently the premier party of the Indian bourgeoisie, has always presented itself as a victim of Partition, that is of the machinations of the British imperialism and the Muslim League.

To be sure, the British practiced "divide and rule," incorporating communal categories into their system of imperial control, and the Muslim League connived with India's colonial overlords.

But there are fundamental class reasons why the Congress could not counter this communalist stratagem; why it betrayed its own program of Hindu-Muslim-Sikh unity in the struggle for a "united, democratic and secular" India, and implemented Partition. This included collaborating closely with the arch-Hindu and Sikh communalists Shyama Prasad Mukherjee and Master Tara Singh in tearing Bengal and the Punjab asunder.

The bourgeois Congress was hostile to and organically incapable of mobilizing the workers and toilers of South Asia based on an appeal to their common class interests and thereby uniting South Asia "from below."

The Congress reflected the interests of the Indian bourgeoisie, which rankled under British rule because of its own limited opportunities for exploiting the working class. Under Gandhi's leadership, it mounted a series of tightly-controlled and politically-emasculated mass mobilizations, between 1920 and 1942. But the more the masses, especially workers, emerged onto the scene, the more tenaciously the Congress sought a settlement with imperialism.

Especially after the experience of the 1942 "Quit India" movement, the Congress was deeply fearful that mass workers' and peasants' struggles would erupt outside of its control and that the struggle against the British Raj would come under the leadership of more radical forces that would threaten capitalist property.

Between 1945 and 1947, India was convulsed by struggles of a pre-revolutionary character, including mass strikes, anti-imperialist mobilizations involving direct clashes with the police and army in the proletarian centers of Calcutta and Bombay, and a mutiny of Royal Indian Navy sailors.

The more the masses came forward, the more anxious the Congress leaders became to get their hands on the repressive machinery of the colonial state, so as to stabilize capitalist rule. Toward that end, they eagerly sought a deal with the British. The latter recognized the need to change from direct to indirect imperialist rule over South Asia, but were nonetheless intent on using the communal card and their Muslim bourgeois and landlord clients to drive a hard bargain, so as to clip the wings of the Congress and the Indian bourgeoisie.

The ability of the Congress to maintain control over and ultimately suppress the mass anti-imperialist movement that convulsed South Asia in the three decades prior to August 1947 was bound up with the betrayals of the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy and their Indian acolytes, organized in the Communist Party of India (CPI).

Willfully ignoring the central lessons of the 1917 October Revolution, the Stalinists pursued a course that at every point served to reinforce the control of the national bourgeoisie over the anti-imperialist struggle and prevent the working class from challenging it for the leadership of the peasant masses. This included hailing the bourgeois Congress as a multi-class front; supporting the British Indian authorities in their repression of the 1942 Quit India movement on the grounds it was jeopardizing the Allied war effort; and supporting the Muslim League's reactionary demand for a separate Pakistan.

During the 1945-47 upsurge, the Stalinists insisted that the working class must subordinate its demands and struggles to the building of a "National Front" that would secure India's independence under the joint leadership of the Congress and Muslim League. It did not matter that these organizations were maneuvering, with daggers drawn, against each other to secure the best deal from British imperialism.

Partition was only the most immediate and striking expression of the suppression of the democratic revolution at the hands of the Indian and Pakistani bourgeoisies, which was itself a major element in the post-World War II war restabilization of world capitalism. None of the burning problems facing the peasant masses, beginning with a radical transformation in agrarian relations, and the eradication of casteism, were addressed. In both countries, the working class was condemned to eking out a living on poverty, even subsistence, wages, without basic social protections, and with its struggles threatened from the outset by state repression.

Much is made in the Western media today about India's "rise." But, if anything, the Indian bourgeoisie is even more reactionary and hostile to the interests of India's workers and toilers in 2017 than seven decades ago.

India's transformation into a cheap-labour producer for world capitalism over the past quarter century has enriched a tiny stratum. While India now boasts the world's third-largest number of billionaires, three-quarters of India's 1.3 billion people survive on less than \$US2 per day.

Just as Donald Trump personifies the criminality and brutality

of the American ruling class, so the true face of the Indian ruling class is found in its current prime minister, the Hindu-supremacist, authoritarian Narendra Modi.

Modi has been tasked with propelling the further rise of the Indian capitalism, including its great power ambitions, by accelerating pro-investor "reform" and unabashedly aligning India with US imperialism.

India is now serving as a frontline state in the US military-strategic offensive against China. That ominous development is underscored by the threat that a two-month-old Sino-Indian border standoff in the Himalayas could erupt in war and by Modi's full-throated support for Trump's threats to incinerate North Korea.

For decades, the reactionary Pakistani bourgeoisie served as a satrap for US imperialism. It remains eager to do so today. But Washington has ever-more tightly embraced its arch-rival India, despite repeated Pakistani warnings that this has dangerously destabilized South Asia and is fueling an arms and nuclear-arms race. This has caused an increasingly anxious Islamabad to tighten its longstanding ties with Beijing.

Thus the reactionary Indo-Pakistani rivalry born of the Partition has now become enmeshed with the US-China conflict, adding to each a massive new explosive charge.

The workers of South Asia must draw the lessons of the great strategic experiences of the past century, of the Russian Revolution, but also the colonial bourgeoisie's suppression of the democratic, anti-imperialist revolution in South Asia and the failure of "independent" capitalist rule.

The struggle against war must be led by the working class and based on an international socialist program. In countries of belated capitalist development, only through a socialist revolution, through the establishment of a workers' government leaning on the oppressed toilers, can freedom from imperialism be won and the legacies of colonialism and pre-capitalist forms of exploitation eradicated. To lead such a revolution, the working class must build parties based on the program of Permanent Revolution, that is, sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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