

Let us look at the final phase of National Movement and try to understand the situation that led to the partition of India. The people of the country faced very difficult questions and had to accept very difficult answers as the years unfolded.

### Should the War be supported by Indians? 1939-42

You have read about the Second World War already. When the war started in 1939, most of the provinces of India were governed by Congress ministries. The British government had accepted the principle that the right to rule themselves must be given to Indians to an extent. The Government of India Act was passed in 1935 by the British parliament. According to this, elections may be held in provinces and governments may be formed by parties that won in the elections. However, the right to vote was given to a small section of the population - about 12 % for provincial assemblies and about 1 % for the Central assembly. When elections were held to the assemblies of the 11 provinces of British India in 1937, Congress won a comprehensive victory. Eight out of 11 provinces had a Congress “Prime Minister”, working under the supervision of a British Governor.

A difficult question arose before the Congress leaders. Should they help the British in fighting the war against Germany, Japan, Italy and other Axis forces? Britain had not even consulted them before deciding that India will participate in the war. There were reasons both for and against supporting the war.

The Congress was torn in its mind over the question. Most Congress leaders were opposed to Hitler, Mussolini and the ideology of fascism. They were determined to resist the Fascist drive to conquer other sovereign nations. The Congress expected that the British would see their double standards in the expectation that India should support them in fighting the fascists but not giving (or at least promising) India full freedom. The British realised this but, at the same

- Do you think Indians should have felt grateful to the British government for the powers given by the Act of 1935?
- Do you think the rise of Hitler was such a big threat to the freedom of humanity that Indians should have set aside their fight for freedom from the British and concentrated on the fight for a free world?
- According to you, what would be the reasons for and against supporting the British in the World War II?

## LETTER TO ADOLF HITLER

HERR HITLER  
BERLIN  
GERMANY  
DEAR FRIEND,

*Friends have been urging me to write to you for the sake of humanity. But I have resisted their request, because of the feeling that any letter from me would be an impertinence. Something tells me that I must not calculate and that I must make my appeal for whatever it may be worth.*

*It is quite clear that you are today the one person in the world who can prevent a war which may reduce humanity to the savage state.*

*Must you pay that price for an object however worthy it may appear to you to be? Will you listen to the appeal of one who has deliberately shunned the method of war not without considerable success?*

*Anyway I anticipate your forgiveness, if I have erred in writing to you.*

I remain,

*Your sincere friend,  
M. K. GANDHI*

**Source:** The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Vol. 76 : 31 May, 1939 - 15 October, 1939.

- Do you think the Congress could have taken some other step to protest against the attitude of the British?
- Why did the British not make the promise and win the support of the Indians? After all, in 1939 only a promise was being asked for? Discuss together in class.
- When ministers resign, who continues to conduct the day to day affairs of governance?

time, it was hard for them to accept that they will really have to dismantle the empire they had built. There were different political parties in Britain. At the time of the War, Britain had an all-party government headed by Prime Minister Winston Churchill of the Conservative party. The Conservatives were keen to retain the empire for as long as was possible. In comparison to the Conservatives, the Labour party was more willing to help Indians attain freedom.

The British were willing to give India Dominion Status under the British Crown some time after the War but the Congress wanted a promise of full freedom. The Congress also demanded that an immediate national government should be set up at the Centre. The British

objected to this by saying that they have to also protect the interests of several other communities in India. With this they implied that Congress did not represent all Indians, like Muslims. They also implied that Congress may be ignoring the interests of many Indians and the British were required to protect these interests.

The Congress was upset at the obstinacy of the British and decided to walk out of the provincial governments. All Congress ministries resigned in October 1939 after having come to power in 1937.

The government had given itself special war time powers to maintain law and order to be able to focus on winning the war. Anyone who opposed the government could be jailed without much delay and kept imprisoned for a long time without going to court. Freedom of speech was also curtailed. Through 1940 and 1941, the Congress organised a series of individual satyagrahas to pressure the rulers to promise freedom once the war had ended. No major mass protest was launched.

- Imagine what would happen if Congress leaders stepped up protests against the British government at this point of time? Would it make the fight for freedom stronger?

### Who represents the people of the country?

The British were desperate with the Indian people revolting against their rule. They looked for ways to punish the Congress and weaken its hold over the people. The British actively raised doubts about the right of the Congress to represent the people of the country. Now, they followed the 'Divide and Rule Policy' more vigorously.

Towards this end, the British government supported and encouraged the plans of the Muslim League and downplayed the importance of the Congress. It is in these years that the Muslim League and its leaders like M A Jinnah became more active in mass politics.



*Fig 16.1 : Crossing Irawady river in 1945, Royal Indian Army*



*Fig 16.2 : Elephants Loading Supplies in C-46 Planes during Second World War in India*

### The Muslim League

This was a party formed in 1906. Till the 1930s it mainly represented the interests of Muslim landlords of UP and did not have much mass support. It had demanded that the British should create separate seats in all councils for which only Muslims would vote. It had argued that since the majority people in many areas were Hindus, more Hindus are likely to get elected to councils and Muslims will find it difficult to protect their interests in government. But, if a certain number

of seats were reserved for Muslims for which only the Muslim population of an area would vote, the Muslim members reaching the councils will be able to raise the concerns of Muslims. The Congress had accepted this logic and separate electorates were implemented from 1909. When provincial governments were elected in 1937, the League won 102 of the 482 Muslim seats in the country. However, the Congress had also fought elections on the Muslim seats because it believed it was a national party and not a party of only Hindus. The Congress won 26 out of the 58 Muslim seats it contested.

In 1937 the Muslim League got only 4.4 percent of the total Muslim vote cast in the elections. The Muslim League was popular in the United Provinces, Bombay and Madras. However, it was quite weak in the three provinces from which Pakistan was to be carved out just ten years later, viz. Bengal, the NWFP and the Punjab. Even in Sind it failed to form a government. But the situation changed in the next 10 years. In 1946, when elections were held again for the provincial and central assemblies, the League succeeded in winning the Muslim seats decisively.

- Discuss the importance of addressing the concerns of minorities. Why is it felt that majority based elections are not enough to help minorities?
- Separate electorate was one method to protect minority interests. Can you think of some other methods that can be helpful for this purpose? For example, would it help if there was a rule that a non Muslim member of a council must consult the Muslim population of his/ her constituency before voting on an issue that concerned them? When would such a method work and under what conditions would it fail to be effective?

What happened to Muslim consciousness in the years between 1937 and 1947? The League pointed out many issues and blamed Congress of insensitivity. For example, the Congress refused to form a coalition government with the League in the United Provinces where it too had won many seats. The Congress had banned its members from taking membership of the League. Congress members could be members of the Hindu Mahasabha before. But this was also banned from 1938, only after objections were raised by Muslim Congressmen like Maulana Azad. The League could thus create the impression that the Congress was basically a Hindu party and did not want to share power with the Muslims.

### **The Hindu Mahasabha and the RSS**

This was the time when the Hindu Mahasabha and the Rashtriya Swayam Sewak (RSS) Sangh were engaged in active mobilisation. These organisations wished to unite all Hindus, overcome the divisions of caste and sect and reform their social

life. They also gave out the message that India was the land of the Hindus who were in a majority. Many Congressmen were also impressed with the activities of these organisations.

Congress tried hard to build a secular understanding among its members. It also tried to contact the Muslim masses and make them feel secure and remove the wrong impression that was being created in their minds by the messages and activities of organisations like the Muslim League, the Hindu Mahasabha and the RSS. Congress argued that Hindus and Muslims were not people of two different nations, but part and parcel of one Indian nation. However, the British were eagerly listening to the fears of the League about Hindu domination and suggesting ways to make the Muslims secure.

### The “Pakistan” Resolution

The need to make special arrangements for governing regions where Muslims were in a majority was being felt by many people. For example, the Urdu poet Mohammad Iqbal, the writer of “*Sare Jahan Se Achha Hindustan Hamara*” spoke of a need for a “North- West Indian Muslim state” in his presidential address to the Muslim League in 1930.

The name Pakistan or Pak-stan (from Punjab, Afghan, Kashmir, Sind and Baluchistan) was coined by a Punjabi Muslim student at Cambridge, Choudhry Rehmat Ali. In pamphlets written in 1933 and 1935, this young student desired a separate national status for this new entity. No one took Rehmat Ali seriously in the 1930s, least of all the League and other Muslim leaders who dismissed his idea merely as a student’s dream.

As noted before, the failure of Congress to address the fears of domination fanned by Muslim League and the policy of ‘Divide and Rule’ followed by the British changed the political climate. On 23 March 1940, the League moved a resolution demanding a measure of autonomy for the Muslim majority areas of the subcontinent. This ambiguous resolution never mentioned partition or Pakistan. However, in later years it came to be called the Pakistan resolution. It must be noted that many alternatives were being considered by the people to solve the issues raised by the League and a new nation state of Pakistan was one among these alternatives. As discussions and negotiations started and stopped, the idea of opting for a separate nation state of Pakistan started gaining ground. The Congress also found it difficult to accommodate the demands of M A Jinnah, leader of the Muslim League.

#### Dr BR Ambedkar, Pakistan or the Partition of India “Introduction” 1940

It is beyond question that Pakistan is a scheme which will have to be taken into account. The Muslims will insist upon the scheme being considered... The British cannot consent to settle power upon an aggressive Hindu majority and make it its heir, leaving it to deal with the minorities at its sweet pleasure. That would not be ending imperialism. It would be creating another imperialism.

From 1940 to 1946, the League was able to convince Muslim masses of the benefits and need for a separate nation. Peasants could think of a state where Hindu zamindars and moneylenders did not exploit them. Traders, businessmen and job

- How would people assess the possible benefits from the politics of Muslim League? Would they have any doubts? What kind of questions will they have? Discuss.

seekers could think of a state where competition from Hindu traders, businessmen and job seekers would not be there. There would be greater religious freedom. There would be freedom for the Muslim elite to run the government the way they wanted. From 1942 to 1945, with most Congress leaders in jail, the League made use of the time to build its mass base.

### Who Will Make the British Quit India?

By 1941 Japan had begun expanding into South East Asia and there was clear threat to Indian territories as well. The British had to get Indian people to back the war against Japan etc. In the spring of 1942, Prime Minister Churchill was persuaded to send one of his ministers, Sir Stafford Cripps, to India to try and forge a compromise with Gandhiji and the Congress. Talks broke down, however, after the Congress insisted that the Viceroy should first appoint an Indian as the Defence Member of his Executive Council.

After the failure of the Cripps Mission, Mahatma Gandhi decided to launch his third major movement against British rule. This was the “Quit India” campaign, which began in August 1942. Although Gandhiji was jailed at once, younger activists organised strikes and acts of sabotage all over the country. The young in very large numbers, left their colleges to go to jail. Particularly active in the underground resistance were socialist members of the Congress, such as Jayaprakash Narayan. In several districts, such as Satara in the west and Medinipur in the east, “independent” governments were proclaimed. The British responded with much force, yet it took more than a year to suppress the rebellion.

The Communist Party of India, in the meanwhile, decided to support the British war effort. It was alarmed at the attack on the Soviet Union by the Nazis. Realising the danger at a world level, it called the war a People’s War. On the contrary, Gandhiji felt that Indians would be able to handle Japan on their own after the British leave India.

The initial victories of Japan against the Americans and Europeans created a strong impression on the people in India. Firstly, it seemed that the European colonialists would get defeated very soon. Secondly, Japan was an Asian country and could stand up against the European colonialists. Indians felt that they too can stand up and fight against Britain decisively. The myth of the racist superiority of the British was smashed.

Subhash Chandra Bose looked at the opportunity made available by the difficulties of the British. He said that India's independence was of utmost importance and we should take the help of the Japanese to throw out the British. He went secretly to Germany and then to Japan and raised an army of Indian soldiers in 1942. Who were these soldiers? In the beginning they were soldiers in the British army and had been captured by the Japanese when the British were defeated in Burma and Malaya. They were POWs (prisoners of war). Bose recruited them in his army which he called the Indian National Army (INA). Later, other Indians also joined the army including many women. However, Gandhi did not agree with the plans of Bose and felt that the Japanese cannot be the liberators of India. But Subhash persisted in his chosen path and led an army of Indian soldiers to fight alongside the Imperial Army of Japan against the British for almost three years.



Fig 16.3 : Subhash Chandra Bose

Those were daring, dramatic and difficult times indeed. At one point it had seemed that the Allied powers were losing the war. But Russia checked the Nazi forces with the decisive victory in Stalingrad. The Allied powers regained control and eventually won the Second World War. Subhash Bose's INA was defeated by the British army. In the aftermath of this, it is not certain whether Bose disappeared or died.

In June 1944, when the war was nearing its end, the British government released Gandhiji from prison. The time was set for another round of negotiations on the question of Indian independence.

- Why did the Japanese allow Bose to recruit soldiers whom they had imprisoned?
- Why did the Indian soldiers join INA?
- Why were Indian soldiers not scared of losing the war and falling into the hands of the British? What would the British do to them?

- Review the period 1942-45. How can you say that the resistance of Indian people to British rule had become more powerful than ever before?

## The popular Upsurge -1946-48

The soldiers of INA were imprisoned and the British decided to punish them. A trial of INA soldiers was begun- to court martial them for being traitors to the army and hanging them to death in punishment.

- Imagine the tragic turn of events and how these must have affected the lives of these people?
- What horror would the other Indians have felt at the thought that the INA soldiers who were like heroes to them were being tried and hanged as traitors by the British?

Unrest and unhappiness and discontent kept erupting in different parts of India as the INA trials proceeded. In this popular upsurge of nationalist consciousness, the issue of Hindu- Muslim identity and separatist politics often became unimportant. For example, many of the INA soldiers who were being tried for treason were Muslims, yet the popular anger and sympathy gave no thought to the religion of the soldiers.

If you place yourself in the years after the War ended, it will be easy to understand the situation in the country. People were restless with food shortages, rationing of food, high prices, black marketeering and hoarding. Workers were angry about low wages. Railway and postal employees and other government employees were planning to go on India wide strike against prices.



*Fig 16.4 : Memorial for the Naval guards who revolted for India's freedom in 1946*

On 18th February 1946, the guards or Ratings of the Royal Indian Navy in Bombay harbour came out on hunger strike to protest against bad food and behaviour of their British officers. The strike rapidly spread to other naval men on the Bombay shore and to all the naval bases in India. The rebelling men put up the tricolour, the crescent and the hammer and sickle flags jointly on the mast of the ship. A Naval Central Strike committee was elected with M S Khan at its head. The strike committee demanded better food, equal pay for white and Indian sailors, release of INA and other political prisoners, withdrawal of Indian troops from Indonesia.

78 ships, 20 shore establishments, and 20,000 Ratings took part in the strike. Hundreds of students, both Hindus and Muslims, came out on the streets of Bombay to support the cause and clashed with the police and the army. On February 22, 3 lakh mill workers put down their tools in Bombay and fought for 2 days violently on the streets with the police and the army.



The year 1946 was a year of strikes and work stoppages in factories and mills in many parts of the country. CPI and the Socialist parties were active in these movements. The countryside was also on the boil.

An agitation was started in Bengal by small and poor peasants who took land of the bigger landowners to cultivate. They demanded that their share of harvest should be increased to two portions out of three instead of half or even less, that was given to them at that time. This was called the *Tebhaga* movement and was led by the Provincial Kisan Sabha.

In Hyderabad, the Communist party led a massive movement of farmers of Telangana region. The Telangana farmers came out to oppose the large land owners and demanded that debts of farmers be written off, bonded labour be stopped and land be distributed to those who tilled it. The peasants took up arms to resist the rulers and their armies. Almost 3000 villages were part of the movement. Another armed revolt of peasants took place in Travancore in Punnapra-Vayalar.

- Review the actions of ordinary masses in the country. What were they demanding?
- It was noted that religious divisions were not important in many of these mass movements mentioned above. What could be the reason for the unity of the people in these movements?

### **Muslim League and Congress - negotiation for transfer of power**

When political negotiations between top leaders began again in 1945, the British agreed to create an entirely Indian central Executive Council, except for the Viceroy and the Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces, as a preliminary step towards full independence. Discussions about the transfer of power broke down due to Jinnah's unrelenting demand that the League should have an absolute right to choose all the Muslim members of the Executive Council. This demand was not acceptable to others. The Congress Party had the support of most nationalist Muslims. The Unionist Party of Punjab, which had a large number of Muslim members, did not endorse Muslim League's demand. In fact Maulana Azad led the Congress Party delegation for these discussions as he was President of this party!

In 1946, elections were held for the Provincial Governments. The Muslim League won all 30 reserved constituencies in the Centre and 442 out of 509 seats in the provinces. Only as late as 1946, therefore, did the League establish itself as the dominant party among Muslim voters, seeking to vindicate its claim to be the "sole spokesperson" of India's Muslims. It had got more than 86% of the Muslim votes. In 1946, the Congress swept the general constituencies, capturing over 91 per cent of the non-Muslim vote.

- What were the demands of the Muslim League that were not acceptable to the Congress? Do you agree with the reasons of the Congress?
- According to you, what did the election results of 1946 indicate about public mood?

## A possible alternative to Partition

In March 1946 the British Cabinet sent a three member mission to Delhi to examine the League's demand and to suggest a suitable political framework for a free India. This Cabinet Mission toured the country for three months and recommended a loose three-tier confederation but India was to remain united.



Fig 16.5 : Jawaharlal Nehru at Independence declaration

Initially, all the major parties accepted this plan. But the agreement was short-lived because it was based on mutually opposed interpretations of the plan. Ultimately, therefore, neither the League nor the Congress agreed to the Cabinet Mission's proposal.

The Muslim League decided that its demands cannot be met through discussions and it must ask people to come out on the streets. It decided on

“Direct Action” for winning its Pakistan demand and announced 16 August 1946 as “Direct Action Day”. On this day, riots broke out in Calcutta, lasting several days and leaving several thousand people dead. By March 1947, violence spread to many parts of northern India.

It was in the background of this mass violence in March 1947, the Congress high command agreed for dividing the Punjab into two halves. One half was to be with Muslim majority and the other with Hindu/ Sikh majority. Congress also agreed for the application of a similar principle to Bengal.

In February 1947, Wavell was replaced as Viceroy by Mountbatten. Mountbatten called one last round of talks to move ahead. When these too proved inconclusive he announced that British India would be freed but also divided. Muslim majority areas of Punjab, NWFP, Sind, Baluchistan and East Bengal would be made part of a new state of Pakistan. The formal transfer of power from British Government to Pakistan would be done on 14th and to India it would be done on the 15th of August, 1947. This solution was the only workable solution to end the year of riots, bloodshed and hatred that was engulfing the people.



## Partition and migrations

With the creation of a Muslim nation, Pakistan, a painful and unimaginable situation arose before many people. Most Hindus living on one side of the newly drawn border became insecure and felt forced to leave. So did many Muslims living on the other side of this newly drawn border. Not all may have wanted this, not all may have understood why this was happening. They felt anger and hatred against each other for being forced to move out of their homes, villages and cities. Around 1.5 crore people, both Hindu and Muslim, were displaced. They killed, looted and burnt. Between two to five lakh people, both Muslim and Hindu, were killed. They became refugees, lived in relief camps, moved out on trains to find new homes. Gandhiji moved amongst riot-hit people, in camps and hospitals, spreading the message of peace and brotherhood. This was not the freedom and Swaraj he had worked so hard to achieve. The Father of the Nation fasted and did not celebrate on the first Independence Day.

At the initiative of Gandhiji and Nehru, the Congress now passed a resolution on “the rights of minorities”. The party had never accepted the “two-nation theory”; forced against its will to accept Partition, it still believed that “India is a land of many religions and many races, and must remain so”. Whatever be the situation in Pakistan, India would be “a democratic secular State” where all citizens enjoy full

rights and are equally entitled to the protection of the State, irrespective of the religion to which they belong.



*Fig 16.7 : Various scenes of partition.  
Photographs published in LIFE magazine.  
Photographs by Margaret Bourke-White.*

## Assassination of Gandhiji

Gandhiji, the Father of this nation, was trying to bring peace to strife-torn Noakhali (in Bengal) on 15th August, 1947. He came to its capital, Delhi, only on 9 September, 1947. The old man was unhappy with the massive communal frenzy in north-western India and tried to calm fears. Yet, sections of the people were annoyed with Gandhi and his role in Indian politics then. They disturbed his all-religion prayer meetings many times. An unsuccessful attempt on his life was made two days before his actual assassination. It was on 28 January, 1948 that Gandhi said, "If I am to die by the bullet of a mad man, I must do so smiling. There must be no anger within me. God must be in my heart and on my lips."

Finally, less than six months after Independence, the Father of the Nation fell to three bullets while going out for his all-religion prayer in the evening of 30 January, 1948. As desired by him, before dying, Gandhi reportedly said, 'Hey, Ram'. His assassin, Nathuram Godse fled the scene of crime and was later apprehended at Bombay. He was once a member of Hindu Mahasabha and this led to a wave of antipathy against this organisation. Consequently, on 14th February, 1948, All India Hindu Mahasabha decided to 'suspend its political work and concentrate on real organisational work' instead. A fanatic Godse had thereby hurt his own friends and harmed his own mission.



*Fig 16.8 : The Last Journey of Mahatma Gandhi*

## Integration of States

There existed around 550 Princely states which enjoyed different levels of sovereignty but were under British paramount power. As the British were to withdraw from India, these princely states were to become independent. They were asked to decide if they wanted to join India, Pakistan or remain independent. The ordinary people of the princely states had become aware of democratic rights through participation in Praja Mandal movements. They did not want the princely families to continue to rule over them. In Travancore and Hyderabad peasants were revolting with arms against the ruling zamindars.

The Congress supported the movements of the people of the princely states and declared that they should join India in making the new Constitution of the country. Sardar Patel was given charge of this matter in July 1947. He began discussing with the princes the necessity to join India. He even made it clear that if they did not do so, the army would have to be sent to complete the process of unification. By 15th August 1947, all states except Kashmir, Hyderabad and Junagadh had agreed to sign the Instrument of Accession with India. These three states were also made to join in the next two years.

The government of the princely states was taken over and the princes were given pension funds called privy-purse to meet their personal expenses. New administrative units were created by merging territories. The first phase of this process of creating the new states of India went on till 1956. Interestingly, in 1971, the government of India abolished the privy purses and titles used by the former princely families.

The modern India you know thus came into being. In 1947, it was a poor nation with low human development indicators and bad infrastructural facilities. Colonialism had in two centuries blocked the development of the country and tried to devastate the self-confidence of its people. Building a modern self-dependent and equitable nation in India was both a challenge and an opportunity.

### Key words

Dominion status

Divide and rule

Separate electorate

### Improve your learning

1. Make a table and show how different groups, and individuals in India responded to World War II. What dilemmas were faced by these groups?
2. Given the brutal manner in which particular communities like Jews and others were treated in Germany, do you think it would have been morally right to support Germany or Japan?
3. Make a list of various reasons for the Partition of the country.
4. What were the different ways in which power sharing among different communities was organised before Partition?
5. How did British colonialists practice their 'divide and rule' policy in India? How was it similar or different from what you have studied about Nigeria?
6. What were the different ways in which religion was used in politics before Partition?
7. How were workers and peasants mobilised during the last years of freedom struggle?
8. How did Partition affect the lives of ordinary people? What was the political response to mass migration following Partition?
9. Integration of various princely states into the new Indian nation was a challenging