Independence Day, observed annually on 15 August, is a national holiday in India commemorating the nation’s independence from British rule on 15 August 1947. India attained freedom following an independence movement noted for largely nonviolent resistance and civil disobedience led by the Indian National Congress. Independence coincided with the partition of India, in which the British Indian Empire was divided along religious lines into the Dominions of India and the Pakistan; the partition was accompanied by violent riots and mass casualties.

The flagship event in Independence Day celebrations takes place in Delhi, where the prime minister hoists the national flag at the Red Fort and delivers from its ramparts a speech. The holiday is observed throughout India with flag-hoisting ceremonies, parades and cultural events. Indians celebrate the day by displaying the national flag on their attire, accessories, homes and vehicles; by listening to patriotic songs, watching patriotic movies; and bonding with family and friends. Books and films feature the independence and partition in their narrative. Separatist and militant organisations have often carried out terrorist attacks on and around 15 August, and others have declared strikes and used black flags to boycott the celebration.

History

European traders had established outposts on the Indian subcontinent by the 17th century. Through overwhelming military strength, the British East India company subdued local kingdoms and established themselves as the dominant force by the 18th century. Following the Rebellion of 1857, the Government of India Act 1858 led the British Crown to assume direct control of India. In the decades following, civic society gradually emerged across India, most notably the Indian National Congress, formed in 1885.[1][2]:123 The period after World War I was marked by British reforms such as the Montagu–Chelmsford Reforms, but it also witnessed the enactment of the repressive Rowlatt Act and calls for self-rule by Indian activists. The discontent of this period crystallized into nationwide non-violent movements of non-cooperation and civil disobedience, led by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi.[2]:167

At the 1929 Lahore session of the Indian National Congress, the Purna Swaraj declaration, or “Declaration of the Independence of India” was promulgated,[3] and 26 January was declared as Independence Day.[3] The Congress called on people to pledge themselves to civil disobedience and “to carry out the Congress instructions issued from time to time” until India attained complete independence.[4] Celebration of such an Independence Day was envisioned to stoke nationalistic fervour among Indian citizens, and to force the British government to consider granting independence.[5]:19

During the 1930s, reform was gradually legislated by the British; Congress won victories in the resulting elections.[2]:195–197 The next decade was beset with political turmoil: Indian participation in World War II, the Congress’s final push for non-cooperation, and an upsurge of Muslim nationalism led by the All-India Muslim League. The escalating political tension was capped by Independence in 1947. The jubila-
Immediate background

In 1946, the Labour government in Britain, its exchequer exhausted by the recently conclud-
ed World War II, realised that it had neither the mandate at home, the international support, nor the reliability of native forces for continuing to control an increasingly restless India. In February 1947, Prime Minister Clement Attlee announced that the British government would grant full self-governance to British India by June 1948 at the latest.

The new viceroy, Louis Mountbatten, advanced the date for the transfer of power, believing the continuous squabble between the Congress and the Muslim League might lead to a collapse of the interim government. He chose the second anniversary of Japan’s surrender in World War II, 15 August, as the date of power transfer. The British government announced on 3 June 1947 that it had accepted the idea of partitioning British India into two states; the successor governments would be given dominion status and would have an implicit right to secede from the British Commonwealth. The Indian Independence Act 1947 (10 & 11 Geo 6 c. 30) of the Parliament of the United Kingdom partitioned British India into the two new independent dominions of India and Pakistan (including what is now Bangladesh) with effect from 15 August 1947, and granted complete legislative authority upon the respective constituent assemblies of the new countries. The Act received royal assent on 18 July 1947.

Partition and independence

Millions of Muslim, Sikh, and Hindu refugees trekked across the newly drawn borders in the months surrounding independence. In Punjab, where the borders divided the Sikh regions in halves, massive bloodshed followed; in Bengal and Bihar, where Mahatma Gandhi’s presence assuaged communal tempers, the violence was mitigated. In all, between 250,000 and 1,000,000 people on both sides of the new borders died in the violence. While the entire nation was celebrating the Independence Day, Gandhi stayed in Calcutta in an attempt to stem the carnage. On 14 August 1947, the Independence Day of Pakistan, the new Dominion of Pakistan came into being; Muhammad Ali Jinnah was sworn in as its first Governor General in Karachi. At midnight, as India moved into 15 August 1947, Jawaharlal Nehru delivered the Tryst with Destiny speech proclaiming India’s independence.
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