



India's Partition Story: 75 Years On, Where Do the Neighboring Nations Stand?

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Rarely do nations and regions go through seminal moments in history that cast a long shadow over the present as well as the future. For the Indian subcontinent, that delightful, and yet disastrous moment arrived in August, 1947. Delightful, because India finally tasted freedom after centuries of British colonial rule. Disastrous, because India was brutally broken apart into fragments even as it became an independent nation-state. In fact, two nation-states-- India and Pakistan, with another nation Bangladesh in 1971.

Partition and Its Socio-Economic Impact

Do citizens of these “new” countries like and trust each other? What do they think of political, social and economic developments of their own and that of their neighbouring countries? What do they think about the future?

Answers to these questions become even more important and relevant as the world and South Asia struggle to cope with a series of unprecedented crisis including Covid pandemic in early 2020. The economy of Pakistan is in shambles. The export juggernaut of Bangladesh is slowing down in its tracks, throwing up enormous challenges for a successful economy.

India seems to have weathered the economic hurricane, but remains vulnerable. Are policies and actions of the individual nations over the last 75 years responsible for the situation these countries find themselves in? In an ambitious exercise, CVoter Foundation collaborated with the Centre for Policy Research (CPR) to conduct a massive survey across three countries.

Citizens in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh were asked a uniform set of questions that sought their opinion on key issues that matter. The responses are a veritable treasure trove of valuable data that will be of immense use to media commentators and analysts, researchers and policy makers in all three countries. The first-cut of the findings were released during the CPR Dialogues event on 30 September 2022.

The responses across India, Pakistan and Bangladesh reveal the opportunities policy makers have to craft meaningful measures for mutual benefits and prosperity in the entire region. At the same time, they clearly show the difficulties and roadblocks that even 'statesmen-like' initiatives will face even in the future because of a fundamental lack of trust between India and Pakistan.

In this feature, we present a summary of the major findings gleaned from the responses of Indian citizens. Subsequent features every fortnight will go into the details of individual themes and issues and also present the even more fascinating responses from Bangladesh and Pakistan. For anyone who is interested in the Indian sub-continent or South Asia, the series promises to deliver powerful insights and a glimpse of the future.

Did the Partition Create Irreversible Fault Lines?

Most “Indians” who were adults during independence and partition are now dead. An overwhelming majority of the citizens of all three countries have no personal memory of events that shaped modern South Asia 75 years ago. Of course, the creation of Bangladesh in 1971 is a relatively recent event and citizens of all three countries have living memories of the transformation of East Pakistan into Bangladesh.

There was a time when survivors of the partition were steeped in nostalgia and dreamt of a reunion. This spark of nostalgia was revived temporarily when East and West Germany reunited in 1990 to become a single country again. But such nostalgic desires have, and perhaps will remain pipe dreams. To be sure, there are some who dream of *Akhand Bharat* or *Ghazwa-E-Hind*. However, most know deep within that the partition is virtually irreversible.

What was the response of Indians on this issue during the survey? Overall, 46% of Indians think that the partition was the right decision with 36% stating it was the wrong decision. Close to 54% of Indians between the age group of 18 and 34 years feel the partition was the right decision. Clearly, new generations of Indians want to leave baggage in the past behind and move ahead.

Perceptions Around Partition Reveal The Big Picture

History, religion, culture, prejudices and insecurities may have led to a seemingly vast gulf in the opinions and attitudes of the three countries. But on one count, citizens of all three countries display remarkable similarity: their conservative and patriarchal treatment of women.

We will deal with Pakistan and Bangladesh in subsequent features as we look at the responses from Indian citizens in this one. The responses reflect the sobering reality that India remains a deeply conservative and patriarchal society even 75 years after independence. The responses perhaps also explain why India still has one of the lowest female labour force participation in the world, with the “gender dividend” still remaining a distant goal.

Gender Divide Connects the Trio

About 57% of urban Indians think women need permission from a male member of the family to go and attend a political meeting; the figure skyrockets to 67% for rural India. Similarly, 51% of urban Indians think women need permission from a male member before starting a job and 42% think prior permission is required for decisions on household savings. The figures for rural India are 65% and 61% respectively.

In a more detailed analysis in a subsequent feature, we will analyse how different regions, demographic groups and ethnic categories of India throw up startling responses on issues related to gender equality and justice.

Where Is India at Its Democratic Status?

One of the most contentious issues related to the three countries that attracts global attention is the state of their democracies. Let's start with India first. It has almost become routine for large sections of commentators, both Indian and global, to decry and call out the steady decline of democracy in India. The Economist Intelligence Unit had placed India at a respectable rank of 27 in 2014. Now, it is ranked 53 and called a “flawed” democracy.

The V-Dem Institute of Sweden describes India as an “electoral autocracy”. In the Cato Institute Human Freedom rankings, India has slipped to a surprisingly low 119. The survey sought to find out what Indians think about the state of their democracy. The results would come as a surprise to critics.

Close to 54% of Indians think that India has become more democratic in the last 10 years while about 22% feel democracy has declined. Four out of every five Indian feels that elections have been free and fair in India. But there are deep fault lines too that emerge.

The top four most serious threats to India, its future and that of its democracy singled out by Indians are: corruption (59%), poverty (56%), Dynasty politics (45%) and religious intolerance (35%). Indians are proud of their democracy but they are also aware of deep-rooted and persistent political, social and religious problems that make it vulnerable to unexpected shocks.

Findings Show Indians Trust Existing Systems

Perhaps, the most fascinating and even perplexing insights to emerge from the survey was the level of trust reposed by Indians on various institutions that enable a functional democracy to operate. The first thing to note is that Indians tend to display a robust trust in major institutions. This has been confirmed by a series of polls conducted by survey organisations like Pew Research Center and Gallup.

As expected, an overwhelming 93% of Indians said they trust the Indian Armed Forces. This was followed by the Election Commission of India with close to 70% of Indians reposing trust. Then came the Judiciary with a trust level of about 67%. The worst performer, for obvious reasons is the Bureaucracy with a trust level of less than 54%. But, the surprising result relates to media and news outlets.

This is the second insight that emerges from this survey as the media ranks neck and neck with the police with a trust level of a shade below 60%.

Mixed Views on Economy Divide Indians

One more area where Indians display a sense of optimism is their opinion on the performance of the Indian economy and its future prospects. Going by hard and credible data, the performance of the Indian economy in the last 75 years has been quite miserable compared to its peers in Asia.

For instance, China has a per capita income that is more than five times that of India while that of South Korea is more than 20 times.

The legacy of poor performance continues to haunt India as it ranks a lowly 132 in the United Nations Development Programme(UNDP) Human Development Index. Yet, 57% of the respondents in India said India's economic performance in the last 75 years has been better than expected while 33% were of the opinion that it has been worse than expected. When asked about future economic prospects of India, 49% were of the opinion that the country's economic condition will be better in the next few years while 35% felt it would be worse.

But the fault lines are clearly visible even here. About 53% of the Muslim respondents in India are of the opinion that India's economic condition will worsen in the next few years. Beneath the optimism, there are glimpses of a fractured society.

South Asians Prefer Government Services for Stability

We conclude this feature with a seemingly startling revelation from the survey. The consensus seems to be that Indians (also Pakistanis and Bangladeshis) are attracted towards government jobs because of the stability and financial security it provides. Every month or so, there is a news report about how one million people have applied for a lowly government job with 300 vacancies; the applicants being post graduates and PhDs.

In a way that is a reality and reflects the seriousness of gainful employment as a problem that India has failed to tackle. What does the survey say?

The CVoter Foundation survey in collaboration contacted 8,000 respondents in India and 4,000 each in Pakistan and Bangladesh in 15 languages. About 75 questions were asked to respondents who displayed a willingness to participate. Naturally, the wealth of data emerging from this survey is vast and this introductory feature will be followed by a series that will focus on individual themes and issues.