

Memories

Remembering Partition by involving Pakistan and Bangladesh would have been more apt

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's announcement, followed by a gazette notification, to mark August 14 as "Partition Horrors Remembrance Day" 74 years later has received mixed responses. With about two million killed in the most brutal ways, an estimated 1,00,000 women kidnapped and raped, and more than 15 million men, women and children displaced, Partition, the British Raj's parting shot to India, left an indelible mark in hearts and memories across the subcontinent. For India in particular, that lost its territory and its people to the west and the east, the decision was a painful cleaving that marred much of the joy felt in gaining Independence. **The violence that was unleashed by the decision pitted Indians against Indians, Hindus and Sikhs against Muslims, with the worst of the horrors seen in Punjab and Bengal – States that were partitioned in the most mindless and thoughtless display of colonial insensitivity.** These stories have remained in public memory, as India consciously chose to set aside its pain and greet Pakistan on its birth, and attempted to carve out a distinct secular identity as it sought to develop itself. The scars were not forgotten, but borne with fortitude and a desire to move on from them. **Along the way, the two-nation theory based on religion alone – that Pakistan's founder Muhammad Ali Jinnah fought for so bitterly – disintegrated with the creation of Bangladesh in 1971.** Other developments have also helped heal the wounds of Partition, not the least, India's successes over the past three-quarters of a century, including a growing economy, its technological progress, and as a respected voice on the global stage.

There is no question that a nation cannot know itself without knowing its past, and that the horrors of Partition must be acknowledged, archived, mourned and commemorated. The concern over the naming of the day at this point, however, is that it forces the nation to look back on this traumatic time rather than looking ahead. Given that the trauma was felt not just in India but in three countries, an attempt to mark the day across the subcontinent might have been more inclusive. It is necessary too, to remember not just the violence of 1947 but also the colonial hand that wrought Partition, hold the British Empire to account, and educate successive generations on the perils of imperialism, arbitrary map-making and sowing religious divides in order to rule. The Prime Minister's **reasoning, that the nation must be reminded of the "need to remove the poison of social divisions, disharmony and further strengthen the spirit of oneness, social harmony and human empowerment",** is welcome, but this is an effort to be practised every day, not just one day in the year.