

## Catastrophic impact of 1947 partition of India on people's health

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### ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** The partition of India on the dissolution of British Raj into two dominions is known to have been violent, polarizing and caused large-scale loss of life (about two million) and an unprecedented migration of 14 million people between the two dominions, India and Pakistan. It is not known how well the then scientific community covered this man-made disaster, and the response of the international community with aid. **Methodology:** A systematic review was conducted using different electronic databases of PubMed, Econlit, United Nations resolutions, Government of India websites, and Google Scholar for the period January 1947 to December 1951 on the impact of the partition of the Indian sub-continent, and to identify the international response toward this humanitarian crisis. **Result:** We could locate only twenty-four publications. Partition not only caused monumental humanitarian suffering, but also contributed to food deficits, adverse impact on trade and industries, national income and harmed public health. In contrast, no significant attention was expressed by the international scientific community or the United Nations, or aid provided during this catastrophic event. **Conclusion:** The review demonstrates the apathy by the contemporary international scientific research community on the social as well as economic damage caused by the partition of India. We suggest that the international scientific and research community should play the role of vigilante and fact finder to unearth the facets of mass human tragedy and its long-term consequences so that global consciousness is awakened, and help and aid flows when it is most needed.

**Keywords:** Catastrophe, health, India, international scientific community, partition, socio-economic impact, United Nations

### Introduction

India and Pakistan's 76<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Independence in August 2023 brings to mind the traumatic human migration, ethnic riots, and inhumane atrocities of the partition in 1947. The partition, rooted in the "two religions, two nations" theory, fostered distrust and intolerance. While there have been significant social and economic advancements, the people of India and Pakistan still suffer the enduring effects of the partition. Britain sent Lord Mountbatten as the last Viceroy of India in February 1947 to manage the final

move to grant independence to the undivided India. The communal violence in Punjab and Bengal undermined Mountbatten's initial plan to maintain a United India. Sir Cyril Radcliffe, who had no experience with India, was brought in and given five weeks to lead committees to decide on the exact borders between Pakistan and India. The rushed and faulty process led to a deadlock between the Muslim League and the Indian National Congress, which left most decisions to Radcliffe. The Indian Independence Act was passed on July 18, 1947. This set the stage for British withdrawal within months. It also included partition, rather than a united India. By August, Radcliffe had finished his plan for the partition of India. The plan was deeply ignorant of local conditions, thereby triggering migration and a colossal refugee crisis.<sup>[1]</sup>

Pakistan was established on August 14, 1947, while India became independent the next day. India transitioned to the "Republic of

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India” in 1950, while Pakistan was divided into West Pakistan and East Pakistan and became the “Islamic Republic of Pakistan” in 1956. In 1971, East Pakistan seceded from Pakistan and became Bangladesh.<sup>[2]</sup>

During this partition, fourteen million people or more were displaced and became refugees while two million people died or went missing indicating an event more tragic than the holocaust.<sup>[3,4]</sup>

Around 75,000 women were raped and abducted.<sup>[5]</sup> People from all backgrounds fled their homes and became refugees, starting their lives anew. The partition resulted in a human rights disaster, causing widespread devastation in all sectors on both sides of the newly formed India-Pakistan border.<sup>[6]</sup> Despite the existence of a significant amount of non-academic literature on the partition of the Indian subcontinent, there is limited information regarding its coverage by the academic community and the interventions made by the international community to support relief and reconstruction efforts after this major humanitarian crisis. This study aims to shed light on the immediate consequences of the partition as documented and the attention it received from the international scientific community and aid agencies.

## Materials and Methods

We conducted a systematic review according to PRISMA guide lines to identify documents that reported the impact of the 1947 Partition of India [Figure 1].<sup>[7]</sup> We searched the electronic databases of PubMed, Econlit, United Nations resolutions, Government of India websites, and Google Scholar on the “1947 Partition of Indian sub-continent” published in English during the period January 1947 to December 1951 using the following term sequence: Refugee AND India or Pakistan AND 1947; Partition AND India AND Pakistan AND 1947 AND Impact; Partition AND India AND Pakistan AND 1947 AND Migration; Partition AND India AND Pakistan AND 1947 AND Socio-economic AND Impact AND Migration; Partition AND (India OR Pakistan) AND 1947 AND Socio-economic AND Impact, etc., and found 1600 articles. Additional Google search on the international response to the partition of the Indian sub-continent was also done.

Out of 1600 studies, 1410 were excluded based on their title and abstracts, as they were not relevant to the impact of the 1947 Partition of the Indian Subcontinent. The excluded articles covered various topics such as the Indo-Pakistan Federal Union, the international position of raw materials in World War 2, pre-partition politics, Indian National Congress history, post-war conflicts and the government of India, the Kashmir issue and United Nations, religious development in India, current trade and industries, Pakistan and the Middle East, and issues of India and Pakistan.

As a result, a total of 190 relevant studies were identified, but 99 of them were duplicates and were therefore excluded. Out

of the remaining 91 studies, 67 focused solely on the partition events, Pakistan’s industrial development and economy, and post-partition politics in India, and were subsequently excluded from the study.

## Results

Our review identified twenty-four articles published from 1947 to 1951 on the impact of the partition of the Indian Subcontinent. Six articles highlighted the effect of the catastrophe on the people in the aftermath of the partition.<sup>[8-13]</sup> Eighteen articles analyzed the repercussions of partition on migration, agriculture, food, trade, industries, connectivity, and logistics. Among them, seven articles specifically explored the effects of forced, large-scale migrations on the demographics of both sending and receiving communities.<sup>[8,12-17]</sup> Five out of eighteen articles reflected on the impact on agriculture.<sup>[18-22]</sup> The food crisis induced due to partition was examined in eight articles,<sup>[12,18-21,23-25]</sup> seven articles were on the decline in industries and trade due to division of the land.<sup>[17-19,24-27]</sup> The impact on Connectivity and Logistics Infrastructure was noted in one article.<sup>[28]</sup> Five articles clearly mentioned about the strained economy of India due to partition.<sup>[8,23,24,29,30]</sup> One article reflected the international aid given to refugees of countries other than India.<sup>[31]</sup> We describe them below.

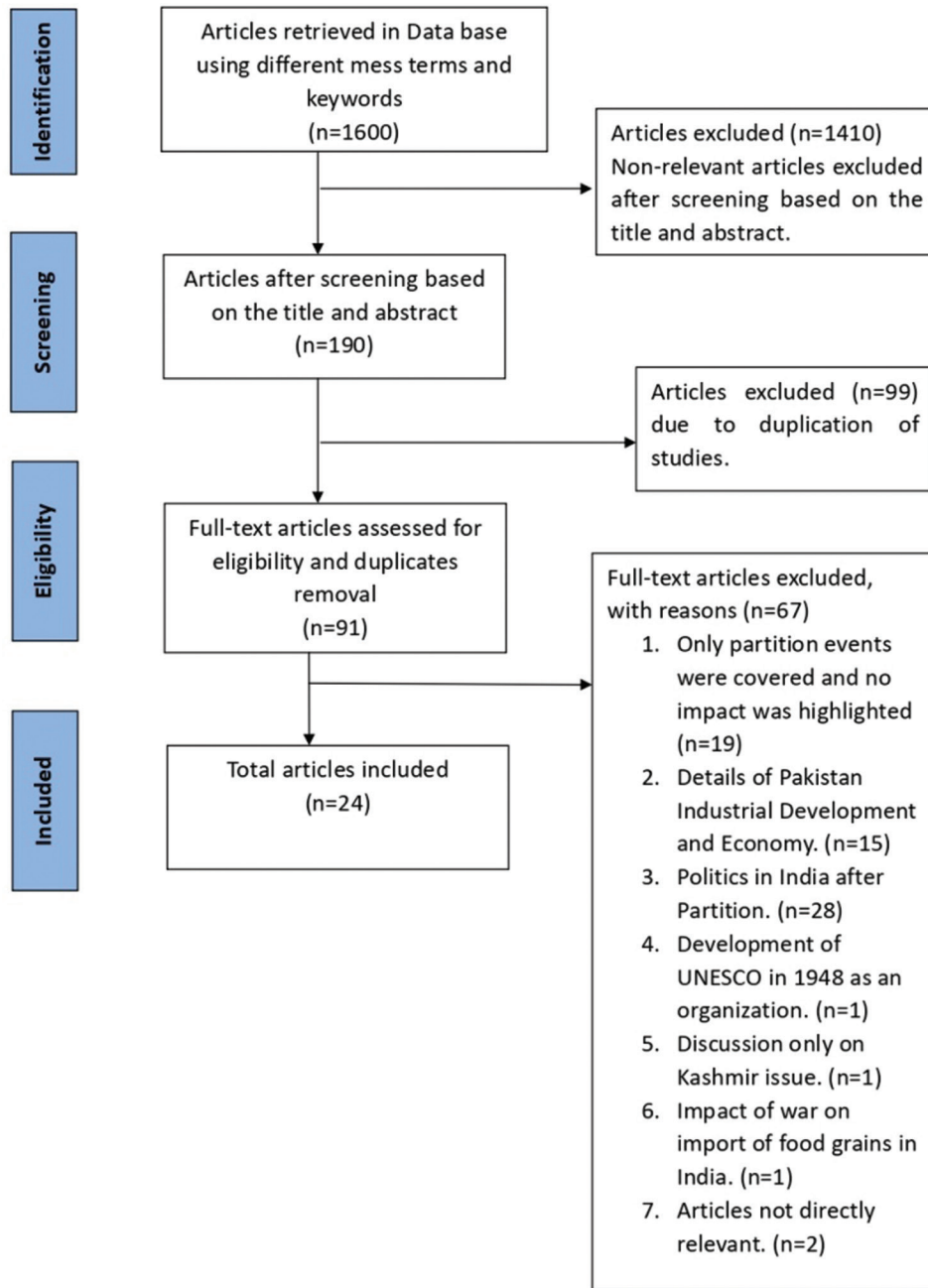
### Catastrophic consequence of the partition

Soon after the partition, Winston in November 1947 wrote in *The Journal of Politics* that partition had triggered the worst communal riots in human history. He estimated the killing of at least 0.1 million people in the first month of Independence. He reported a mass panic causing the migration of 0.4 million Indians, the greatest single migration of human beings in world history.<sup>[8]</sup> Robert Holland in his article mentioned about the intense communal feelings and devastation of complete towns and villages.<sup>[9]</sup> Lambert’s article in the *Middle East Journal* echoed with the findings of Robert Holland (1947) on communal conflicts and displacement of population.<sup>[17]</sup> Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel branded the partition as a symbol of inhumanity and barbarity.<sup>[12]</sup> KC Raja’s literature in the *British Medical Journal* pointed out the rampant communal riots resulting from the massive population exchange.<sup>[13]</sup> Reiya Bhat’s thesis highlighted the historical narrative of that time in South Asia, surpassing even World War II and the Holocaust in significance.<sup>[32]</sup>

The Western world overlooked the partition as a humanitarian crisis, ignoring the millions killed on both sides. Urvashi Butalia’s book, “*Other Side of Silence*,” highlights the forgotten massacre.<sup>[33]</sup>

### Impact on population

In his article in “*India International Centre*,” Dr. S Radha Gautam reflected that despite the inter and intra clashes among people during the partition, the interpersonal relationships, understanding, and trust were superior to the imposed orders



**Figure 1:** Process of Retrieved Articles

by the state agencies.<sup>[14]</sup> Yet, the people had to migrate against their own will, leaving their homelands.<sup>[15]</sup> The migration had a distorting impact on the population of the two countries as compared to their area. The population of India and Pakistan was estimated to be of 336 and 71 million, respectively, in 1947, while their areas were 12,46,880 and 3,70,311 sq miles, respectively; thus, while India occupied 77% of the sub-continent, it housed 83% of the population.<sup>[16,18]</sup> While the population density of pre-partition India was 252 persons per sq mile, the post-partition estimated population density of India became 269 persons per sq. mile and that of Pakistan as only 192 persons per sq. mile. Thus, relatively more people remained in India per unit of

area. The population migration had serious repercussions in triggering communal clashes.<sup>[8,12,13,17]</sup> The division of the Indian sub-continent worsened the existing ill-feelings and religious strife among the people.<sup>[10,11]</sup> The refugees found themselves aliens in their new surroundings. Feelings of frustration and discontentment erupted among the refugees.<sup>[25]</sup>

### Impact on agriculture

Post-partition, India and Pakistan were divided with a large, disproportionate distribution of population to land. In lieu of partition, India received 82.55% of the total population and 77.10% of the land whereas Pakistan got 17.44% of the

population and 22.89% of the land.<sup>[18]</sup> A major shortage of raw jute and raw cotton producing land in India was one of the serious consequences of partition.<sup>[19]</sup> Before partition, cotton was the primary agricultural product for export, but post-partition the irrigated lands of canal colonies producing American cotton were no longer a part of India and consequently cotton had to be imported.<sup>[18]</sup> There was an increase in demand for cash crops, thereby, putting pressure on land and aggravating the imbalance between the availability of cultivable land and the demand for food and commercial crops in India.<sup>[19]</sup> Kosambi and Raghavachari in their article stated the unlikelihood of growing sufficient food in India after its separation from Pakistan.<sup>[21]</sup> Post-partition, water distribution issues arose as Pakistan accused India of taking excessive water.<sup>[22]</sup> While crop production was already declining due to World War II, it further dropped from 53 million tonnes per year in Pre-World War II period to 46 million tonnes in 1946.<sup>[25]</sup> The loss of Punjab and Sind to Pakistan, which were prime food grain-producing regions, coupled with India's high population density lead to the food deficit in India, necessitating reliance on, food imports to alleviate the shortage.<sup>[20,21,25,29]</sup> Thus, food deficit was aggravated by partition.<sup>[25]</sup>

### Impact on food

Sardar Patel discussed the plight of the refugees who dealt with the elements of hunger and maltreatment due to partition. He laid attention to the shortage of food in India as a result of which India had to pay a hefty price for imports to make up for the deficiency.<sup>[12]</sup> Likewise, Cohen discovered that India had to import substantially larger quantities of grains due to a lack of cultivation of desired crops.<sup>[23]</sup> Jakhede in his article in the Indian Journal of Agricultural Economics stressed on the deterioration in the food situation in the country in 1947.<sup>[19]</sup> The partition gave away the areas that produced exportable products and food processing plants to the Dominion of Pakistan creating a food deficit in India.<sup>[18]</sup> The Royal Institute of International Affairs published an article sharing the inability of India to feed its population and to pay for its food through the export of raw materials as a serious weakness.<sup>[24]</sup>

### Impact on industries and trade

India had jute mills but no raw jute, while Pakistan had the opposite that led to an imbalance in producing areas and processing facilities<sup>[13]</sup> East Bengal, now part of Pakistan, supplied most of the world's raw jute.<sup>[18]</sup> In 1948, jute manufacture alone formed 36% of its total export value<sup>[18]</sup> In December 1947, India deregulated prices of cereals and pulses, except rice, wheat, maize, and millet. However, hasty deregulation led to a sharp increase in prices of agricultural commodities and raw materials like cotton and jute.<sup>[19,27]</sup> Despite the sincerest attempts in 1949, the Government of India was not successful in countering inflation. There was a considerable rise in the prices of cotton and jute.<sup>[24]</sup> Goerge E. Jones in his article, "India Today," highlighted the significant downfall in the cloth industry in 1947 wherein cloth production fell from six billion yards to five billion in the same year.<sup>[25]</sup> During the partition year, cotton acreage witnessed a

drop. Thereafter the pickup was slow. This may have impacted the recovery of the cloth industry in India.<sup>[26]</sup> All this in-turn impacted the economy of the country, thereby leading to limited investment and spending on social sectors like healthcare.

### Impact on the economy

Winston analyzed the adverse impact of the cotton textile industry on the Indian economy.<sup>[8]</sup> The partition disrupted the normal trade channels aggravating the economic problems of the nation.<sup>[24]</sup> It was apparent in the article "India: The Trail Balance" by T. Walter that the mass migration badly deranged the economy of Punjab, which was once one of the most prosperous provinces of India.<sup>[30]</sup> India, burdened with the task of feeding a rapidly increasing population of 350 million people after partition,<sup>[29]</sup> faced a strained economy. The country lacked the necessary foreign exchange to import essential capital equipment,<sup>[23]</sup> due to a significant expenditure on food imports. Data from later decades revealed a decline in India's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita from \$1058 in 1945 to \$987 in 1950 [Table 1] (adjusted for inflation in constant 2011 international dollars).<sup>[34]</sup> Significantly, India's share in the global economy was about 24.5% before the British rule in the 1700s, but by 1950, after the exit of the British, it had plummeted to only 4.17%. During the period 1946 to 1948, India's GDP witnessed a fractional decrease of about 16.36%<sup>[35]</sup> plunging the country into poverty and debt.<sup>[36,37]</sup> A disturbed economy would have led to reduced investment in healthcare, thereby limiting access to already over-stretched healthcare services, especially in under served or rural areas. This would have extenuated health disparities.

### Impact on connectivity and logistics infrastructure

The partition affected the railway system, especially the movement of freight and people over long distances. The main lines serving Pakistan were badly truncated, with disruption on the two most important lines between Delhi and Lahore. It is important to note that Pakistan lost control of most of its railway workshops and junctions. A limited rail infrastructure would have also impacted accessibility to healthcare facilities.<sup>[28]</sup>

### Impact on health

During the partition, the country's economy was struggling, and as a result, people's health deteriorated. Medical assistance from international agencies like the British Red Cross was insufficient to meet India's primary healthcare needs. The simultaneous emergence of medical emergencies in refugee camps, coupled with injuries from communal clashes, overwhelmed the country's

**Table 1: Decline in GDP per capita of India from 1945 to 1948**

Year	GDP* per Capita (in dollars)
1945	1058
1946	991
1947	985
1948	983

\*GDP=Gross domestic product

healthcare services.<sup>[13]</sup> The infants and children under 5 years of age equally experienced the trauma of the partition. The data showcased a 10.36% increase in Infant mortality rate (IMR) in India post-partition in the 1950s (From 164 per 1000 live births in 1950 to 181 per 1000 live births in 1955). It is important to note that infant mortality in India was stagnant during the period 1935–45. It was in 1960–65 that IMR regained the pre-partition levels, and ever since then to date it had been declining.<sup>[38]</sup> Similar is the case with Under-five mortality, which was also declining from 1920 to 1950, but increased by 4.8% from 1950 to 1955 (from 258 to 271 per 1000 live births). And it was only in the 1960s that the pre-partition levels of under-5 mortality were regained.<sup>[39]</sup> Life expectancy was only 32 years at the time of partition. Though the country was experiencing a constant increment in the life expectancy, data clearly depicts a de-acceleration in the post-partition period (1925–25.75 years, 1930–27.98 years, 1935–29.9 years, 1940–31.6 years, 1945–32.7 years, 1950–33.9 years) [Figures 2-4].<sup>[40]</sup> We can conjecture that had there been no partition, the declining trend of infant and under five mortality would have continued.

As per estimates by WHO, Primary Health Care can cater to the maximum of health care needs of a society. The partition of India in 1947 exacerbated the fragility of the primary healthcare system. The poor economic state of affairs and communal clashes led to a shortage of healthcare professionals and equipment, which made it difficult to prevent and control diseases.

The cumulative mental trauma on the health of the individual and the collective health of the population was calamitous. Migration and refugee crisis would have limited the extent of community participation for health promotion at that time, thereby impacting public health.

### International response to the partition of the Indian sub-continent

This review noted the cataclysmic consequences of the partition on the people due to migration and the associated violence. Despite the widespread communal violence and high death toll reaching millions, there was minimal support from international agencies for such a significant humanitarian crisis. The Indian sub continent received little solidarity or support from world leaders in the aftermath of the partition. In contrast, an Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees (IGCR or ICR) was established in 1938 under the initiative of U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt to coordinate efforts in resettling refugees from Nazi Germany and preparing for the resettlement of future German emigrants.<sup>[41]</sup> A United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Refugee Organization was established in 1943 to provide assistance to the World War II refugees and financial support to the countries in poor economic shape affected due to the war.<sup>[42]</sup>

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was established in 1950 to aid European war refugees.<sup>[43]</sup> While there was international solidarity for the victims of the

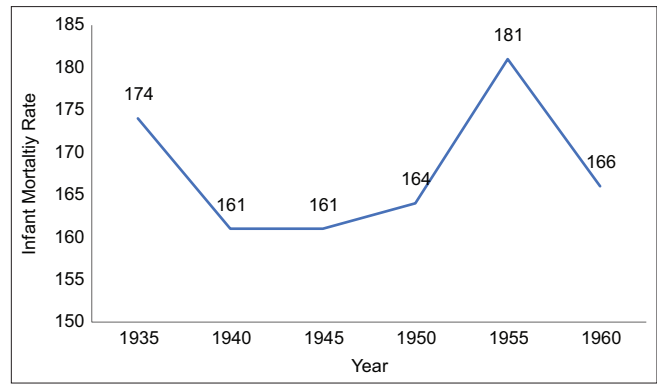


Figure 2: Infant Mortality Rate in India

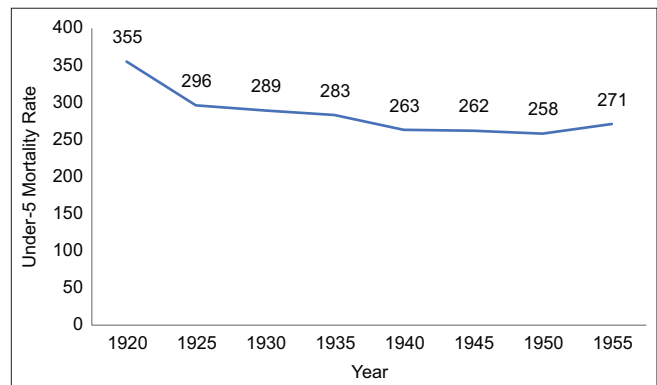


Figure 3: Under-5 Mortality Rate of India

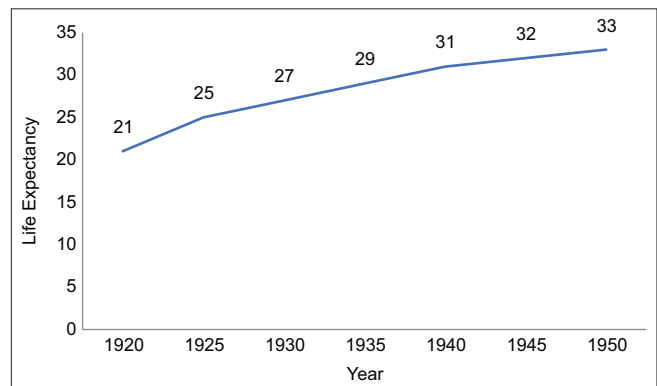


Figure 4: Life Expectancy in India

Palestinian war in 1947, the suffering of the Indian subcontinent during independence went unnoticed, with little assistance provided.<sup>[31]</sup> Yet, the British Red Cross did provide some medical support to address the refugee crisis.<sup>[44]</sup> Further, ICRC being a neutral organization also addressed the Kashmir refugee crisis. Infact, it conducted a detailed survey of Kashmir refugees, and their needs to bring attention toward their plight.<sup>[45]</sup> However, the United Nations focused on the Kashmir issue alone, neglecting the devastation in the subcontinent caused by the partition in India.<sup>[46]</sup>

Our review included 24 articles from the period of 1947 to 1951. Focus of articles had been on political division and its aftermath.

Most of these articles emphasized the effects on demographics, agriculture, food shortages, trade, industrial damage, connectivity, and logistics. The academic community failed to bring to light the impact of partition of Indian subcontinent on health and economic status of the population which was evident by the fact that only one among the reviewed articles reflected on the impact of partition on health. Inter-alia 10.36% rise in IMR in India during 1950-55 and 16.36% decrease in GDP of India during 1946-48 was not highlighted in the literature of the time.

It was also apparent that international organizations and aid agencies failed to provide adequate support to people affected by 1947 partition. British Red Cross provided some medical support while UN focused only on the Kashmir issue. On the other hand international community had been supporting people affected by various other crisis such as holocaust, World war II, Palestinian war. Rebuilding and rehabilitation plans such as Marshall plan were announced for post war recovery in Europe. Our review highlights the apathy of this international community when the Indian subcontinent witnessed the 1947 crisis.

## Discussion

Partition of the Indian sub-continent altered national boundaries permanently along divisive fault lines, leaving a lasting impact on both countries. The refugees of the partition were neglected by international agencies, highlighting a significant oversight in their rehabilitation. Socio-economic condition of the people of the Indian subcontinent during the partition was not addressed adequately by the international agencies. In contrast to most humanitarian crises, there has been neglect in this case. For example, the European Commission has provided over €852 million to the Palestinians since 2000, and NATO was established in 1949 to rebuild economies and ensure security in Europe after World War II.<sup>[47,48]</sup> A program of large-scale economic aid was proposed by the United States secretary of state, George Marshall which facilitated European Economic Integration resulting in a massive influx of aid to help to the war-torn areas, rebuild industries, and produce food.<sup>[49]</sup> The United Nations has always, since its inception expressed its concern against racial discrimination. The United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution in November 1946 during its first session to end racial discrimination.<sup>[50]</sup> United Nations again in 1960s launched an international campaign against apartheid to encourage committed governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and individuals to support South Africa and assist the freedom movement.<sup>[51]</sup> In the recent Russia and Ukraine War, in 2022, the US committed \$50bn (£41bn) of humanitarian, financial, and security assistance—far more than any other country.<sup>[52]</sup> No such attention or assistance was given during the partition of India in 1947.

The international scientific community generally extends support in humanitarian crises caused by war or natural disasters like earthquakes and climate change. Their support not only helps raise awareness about the situation but also provides valuable

human resources for the reconstruction of affected regions. The partition was a momentous tragedy of the Indian subcontinent that caused irreparable harm to the people of the two nations. The human devastation was violent with mass abductions, massacres, and savage sexual atrocities causing displacement and loss of human resources as well as immense damage to the economy and infrastructure.

## Conclusion

The international scientific research community overlooked the social and economic damage caused by the partition. International organizations failed to acknowledge this significant man-made disaster or provide necessary support or aid. It is crucial for the scientific community to act as vigilant fact-finders, uncovering the dimensions of this human tragedy and its long-term consequences. This raises global awareness and ensures timely assistance and support in times of need. Moreover, partition stimulated a discussion among the civic society on the impact of colonial rule in incapacitating India, and on building a unified healthcare system. Here a Unified healthcare system refers to a healthcare system that connects the primary to tertiary healthcare to meet all the requirements of the individual and undertakes preventive care and treatment in a holistic manner with the aim of the overall well-being of the person. The chaos of migration silenced the demands of medical care for old age, children, women, and the disabled alike.

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## Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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