***The British made India the “jewel in the crown” of their empire, until successive campaigns finally led to Indian independence in 1947.***

When World War I broke out in 1914, all factions in India offered their loyalty to the British cause, including the pro-independence Congress party, whose leaders imagined their support would yield self-government. Victory over Germany, however, did not bring the expected transfer of power. On the contrary: Bengal was partitioned between the predominantly Muslim east and Hindu west – widely seen as a further enforcement of Britain’s policy of divide and rule. There were mass protests all over the country, marshalled by the Congress party and its leaders, foremost among them Mohandas Karamchand "Mahatma" Gandhi, who advocated non-violent protest to bring about the end of British rule.

The freedom struggle intensified in 1919, after British troops opened fire on a crowd of peaceful demonstrators in [Amritsar](https://www.insightguides.com/destinations/asia-pacific/india/northern-plains/overview#amritsar). Killing 400 and injuring 1,200 or more, the so-called Jallianwala Bagh massacre had far-reaching repercussions, converting millions of former supporters of British rule into committed nationalists.

The Prince of Wales’s visit to India in 1921 was greeted with the imprisonment without trial of 20,000 activists. Gandhi embarked on a new crusade in 1930 which captured the imagination of the world. Staged in opposition to Britain’s monopoly on the manu-facture of salt (which the British taxed), the Mahatma led a movement to make salt from the sea, leading to his arrest, along with that of the entire working committee of Congress.

When World War II broke out in 1939, Congress decided to oppose the war effort, and what it regarded as India’s undemocratic involvement in it, by launching the ‘Quit India’ campaign in 1942. Demonstrations and violence led to 60,000 arrests. Notwithstanding, many Indians supported the British in the war, and the Indian army grew tenfold to 2 million.

#### Freedom at midnight

A Labour government sympathetic to the cause of Indian Independence came to power after World War II. Talks to devise a constitution were held, but ended in stalemate. Jinnah, the leader of the Muslim League, felt his people were being marginalised and resorted to direct action. Muslim demonstrations in Calcutta degenerated into attacks on Hindus; the Hindus retaliated, and within three days, 5,000 had died, spreading the violence to cities across India.

The Viceroy then made the step of asking the Congress leader, Jawaharlal Nehru, to form an interim government. In February 1947, Britain announced it would hand over power by June 1948, dispatching Lord Mountbatten, a man of great charm who was related to the British royal family, as the Viceroy who would negotiate the transfer.

Thus the end of empire was accelerated beyond most of the participants’ wildest expectations – with disastrous consequences. The announcement that Partition would create two independent countries – India and Pakistan – sparked a frantic scramble as millions of Indian Muslims fled to Pakistan, and Hindus and Sikhs travelled in the opposite direction. Around half a million people died in the violence, and 10 million people changed countries.



#### The Nehru dynasty

At midnight on 14 August 1947, Nehru, India’s first prime minister, proclaimed Indian independence. A majority of the former Princely States acceded peacefully, although some were taken by force. Kashmir prevaricated longer than most, and in the end Nehru deployed the army to forestall the Pathan militiamen who’d entered the state from Pakistan. The region was eventually split in two along the ceasefire line – the roots of a bitter dispute between India and its neighbour which continues to the present day.

Gandhi, by now considered the spiritual father of Indian independence, was appalled by the attacks on Muslims breaking out across the newly independent country, and staged a hunger strike to bring the atrocities to an end. But Hindu nationalists resented the Mahatma for his liberal views and assassinated him as he walked to his prayer platform in [Delhi](https://www.insightguides.com/destinations/asia-pacific/india/delhi/overview). The shock brought the nation to its senses, allowing Nehru to act against the extremists and impose order.

Nehru’s new India was broadly Socialist, with an economy directed from the centre through a series of five-year plans. Major facilities were installed to manufacture steel, fertilisers and cement, and to build the power stations India needed.

Jawaharlal Nehru died, while still prime minister, in 1964. Millions attended his funeral and mourned the loss of probably the most powerful and most loved ruler India had ever had.