
Research article

Framing Partition in English teaching resources: empire, British values and the politics of curriculum

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Abstract

This article examines teaching resources addressing the Partition of India, exploring how Partition is framed through supplementary teaching resources developed by government and non-governmental organisations in England. Using critical discourse analysis, the study investigates the National Archives teaching resources on Partition and other educational initiatives led by non-governmental organisations called the Partition History Project and the White Line Project. Drawing on McQuaid and Gensburger's concepts of the administration of memory and Bernstein's regulative discourse, the analysis reveals how Partition is often presented within a framework of British values, transforming a complex episode of imperial violence and migration into a moral lesson on tolerance and social harmony. Despite growing calls for decolonisation, the Partition teaching materials in England reflect an institutional preference for national coherence over critical historical inquiry, aligning with a broader tendency to marginalise colonial histories or recast them as narratives of shared heritage. By examining how Partition is selectively remembered and pedagogically framed, this article argues for a more critical, inclusive and historically grounded approach to teaching materials addressing the British Empire in English schools

Keywords Partition of India; history education; decolonisation; British Empire; curriculum reform; imperialism; community cohesion; critical discourse analysis

Introduction

The Partition of India in 1947 has garnered increasing public and scholarly interest in the UK since its 70th anniversary in 2017. Examples include the BBC launching a season of programmes '70 Years On: Partition Stories', while a South Asian Heritage Month was set up, and a Partition Education Group was established to include Partition in the UK's National Curriculum. Partition marked the end of British colonial rule in the subcontinent and resulted in the creation of India and Pakistan. It involved the displacement of more than 10 million people and the deaths of hundreds of thousands (Talbot and Singh, 2009). While the event remains central to national histories in India and Pakistan, in England it has until recently received limited attention, both in the public discourse and in history education. This neglect has become increasingly apparent in the context of broader debates over the decolonisation of the curriculum, the representation of empire and the place of migration histories in British education (Khan, 2017; Sabaratnam, 2017; Satia, 2020). These debates gained further traction in Britain with the toppling of the statue of Edward Colston in Bristol by anti-racism protestors in 2020, which resulted in tense debate over the ongoing legacies of the British Empire in Britain in public space, museums and education. These debates have challenged the narrow, often celebratory, narratives of British history that dominate the curriculum (Alexander et al., 2015; McDermid and Foster, 2024), highlighting the need for a more critical engagement with imperial history, including Partition.

The British education system has long grappled with how to present the nation's imperial past. Carretero et al. (2012) have highlighted how curriculum design in England has historically emphasised national coherence and moral development over critical engagement with complex histories. On the contrary, Foster et al. (2008) found that students in the UK view history more as a disconnected catalogue of events rather than as a coherent narrative. History education is often framed around a narrative of national progress, where the British Empire is either marginalised or presented as a benevolent force. This tendency is reinforced by a broader policy framework that emphasises social cohesion, multicultural harmony and British values, transforming imperial history into a narrative of shared heritage rather than of contested memory (Tomlinson, 2019). As a result, histories of empire are frequently presented as distant episodes, disconnected from the nation's present. This aligns with narrow interpretations of decolonisation that tend to understand decolonisation as concluding with the transfer of colonial administration to newly independent nations (see, for example, Stockwell, 2018). This framing locates decolonisation in formerly colonised nations instead of understanding decolonisation also to include addressing the ongoing legacies of colonialism in formerly colonising nations, such as England. The Royal Historical Society's (2018) review of how race and ethnicity are represented in UK history education found significant gaps in diversity and inclusivity across curricula, textbooks and teaching practice. It highlighted persistent under-representation of the histories of people from ethnic minorities, calling for comprehensive curriculum reform and improved teacher training to address structural inequities. Similar recommendations have been articulated by McIntosh et al. (2019). In this article, I propose such curriculum reform and evaluate already existing teaching materials, while identifying possible risks of emphasising cohesion as educational policy.

Recent studies have further documented how colonial history is marginalised in English textbooks, which often downplay the brutality of imperial rule or frame it as a civilising mission (Alexander et al., 2015; McDermid and Foster, 2024). These textbooks rarely engage with the violence of empire or the agency of colonised peoples, instead offering a simplified narrative of progress and benevolence. Although recent textbooks do not employ celebratory patriotic narratives typical of traditional textbooks, there continue to be echoes of previous assumptions about empire, for example, reproducing notions of good intentions (McDermid and Foster, 2024). The teaching of Partition is particularly challenging within this context. As a moment of both colonial withdrawal and mass violence, Partition resists simple narratives of either imperial benevolence or postcolonial progress. Its inclusion in the curriculum requires not only factual knowledge, but also an engagement with the ethical and historiographical debates surrounding decolonisation, migration and identity.

In this article, I investigate how Partition is represented in England's secondary history education and how this representation is shaped by broader political and policy discourses. I focus on the ways in which the event is taught through the National Curriculum and supplementary resources, with particular attention to three educational initiatives: the National Archives resource, the Partition History Project and the White Line Project. Drawing on the notion of the administration of memory (McQuaid and Gensburger, 2019), the article explores how institutional frameworks – particularly those emphasising diversity, integration and 'British values' – influence the Partition teaching materials. The study also engages Bernstein's (2000) theory of regulative and instructional discourse to examine how moral imperatives such as community cohesion, religious harmony and liberty subtly steer the content and pedagogical framing of Partition.

Partition, as both a colonial outcome and a deeply human tragedy, offers a unique case for understanding how national identity and inclusion are constructed through curriculum. The ways in which young people in England encounter – or fail to encounter – Partition in school shape their understandings of Britain's imperial past and its contemporary multicultural present. As I will illustrate in this article, teaching contested histories such as Partition is often constrained by the tendency to transform them into lessons in tolerance or diversity, rather than opportunities for critical inquiry.

The article is organised in six sections. After outlining the relevant literature and conceptual frameworks, I explain the methodological approach of critical discourse analysis. I then explore the treatment of Partition in England's National Curriculum and policy documents, followed by a close analysis of three educational initiatives. The discussion synthesises these findings to interrogate the tensions between historical complexity and policy imperatives. Finally, the conclusion sums up the argument and offers recommendations for more inclusive and critical approaches to teaching Partition in English schools.

The Partition of India: a concise background

For the sake of clarity, I first provide a brief background to Partition, the contestations in its historiography and its relevance to English history and society. The Partition of India in 1947 was one of the most consequential and violent episodes in the end of the British Empire, leading to the creation of the nation states of India and Pakistan – and, later, the emergence of Bangladesh in 1971. While traditionally taught as a South Asian event, Partition must also be understood as an integral part of British history: it was the culmination of decades of colonial governance, and its legacies are deeply embedded in Britain's post-war society, particularly through migration, identity politics and intercommunal relations.

Partition followed Britain's hurried withdrawal from the subcontinent, and it was officially enacted through the Indian Independence Act of 1947. The logic of Partition rested on the two-nation theory – the idea that Hindus and Muslims constituted distinct nations requiring separate homelands (Talbot and Singh, 2009). In practice, this theory was negotiated and contested by multiple actors, including British officials, Indian National Congress leaders Jawaharlal Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi (both initially opposed Partition), and Muslim League leader Muhammad Ali Jinnah, who would become the first Governor-General of Pakistan. While elites in regions such as Punjab and Bengal at times supported Partition to safeguard political power (Chatterji, 2007), the final borders were drawn by Sir Cyril Radcliffe, a British civil servant unfamiliar with India, who was under immense time pressure and did not adequately consult with local people.

The consequences were catastrophic. Between 10 and 12 million people were displaced in one of the largest mass migrations in history, and between 200,000 and 360,000 people were killed in communal violence (Brass, 2003). The provinces of Punjab in the west and Bengal in the east bore the brunt of the upheaval. Entire communities who had coexisted across religious and linguistic lines were torn apart. Muslims fled newly created India for Pakistan, while Hindus and Sikhs crossed in the opposite direction. Partition not only created national borders, but also recast identities, drawing rigid lines of belonging based on religious affiliation. As Shodhan (2017) argues, Partition was not merely a rupture but also a moment of continuity: the administrative logics and communal divisions cultivated under colonial rule persisted in the post-Partition states of India and Pakistan.

The historiography of Partition is diverse and contested. Early accounts often emphasised the inevitability of religious division or the failure of Indian political leadership. Revisionist scholars have since challenged this view. Some, such as Talbot and Singh (2009), have highlighted the administrative failures and colonial culpability in fomenting communalism. Others, such as Pandey (2001), have explored

how the violence of Partition was narrated and silenced in both official and popular histories in India. More recent works by [Khan \(2017\)](#) and [Satia \(2020\)](#) critique the moral distancing that marks British accounts of Partition, calling for greater acknowledgement of imperial responsibility. These competing interpretations underscore the need for critical historical inquiry, especially in educational contexts where Partition is still often treated as a peripheral or optional topic.

Importantly, Partition must also be seen as a British story. It marked the final act of imperial retreat, and it shaped the demographic and cultural landscape of post-war Britain. The decades that followed saw significant migration from South Asia to the UK, particularly from regions most affected by Partition ([Visram, 2002](#)). For second- and third-generation Britons of South Asian heritage, Partition often features as a key point of historical and personal reference, structuring how identities such as 'Indian', 'Pakistani', 'Muslim', 'Hindu' or 'Sikh' are understood and negotiated in British society ([Puri, 2019](#)). As such, Partition has relevance not only to heritage and diaspora communities, but also to the broader question of how Britain remembers its imperial past.

Recent anniversaries – the 70th in 2017 and the 75th in 2022 – have reinvigorated public debate around Partition, especially in Britain. These moments coincided with a broader resurgence of interest in history, debates over the legacy of the empire and the urgency of capturing oral testimonies from the last surviving witnesses (see, for example, [Puri, 2019](#)). In this context, Partition has gained prominence in both public discourse and pedagogical initiatives. However, the way it is framed in educational resources – and whether it is presented as a British, South Asian or shared history – remains a matter of ongoing negotiation.

Literature review and theoretical framework

To understand how teaching packages addressing the Partition of India are discursively framing the event, this section brings together three key strands of scholarship: research on the representation of the British Empire in school curricula, debates on decolonising education and theories of how states manage historical memory through curriculum and policy. Together, these frameworks illuminate how and why Partition is framed in particular ways. By situating Partition within these overlapping fields, the analysis reveals how historical content, political values and institutional constraints converge to shape the pedagogical treatment of Britain's imperial past.

Teaching empire and contested histories in England

The representation of the British Empire in English education has been the subject of extensive scholarly debate. Scholars such as [Cannadine et al. \(2011\)](#) argue that history education in England has historically emphasised a patriotic, celebratory narrative of the nation, in which imperial history is either sanitised or marginalised. This is reinforced by the National Curriculum's emphasis on continuity, coherence and shared values, which leaves little room for critical engagement with the violence and exploitation of empire ([Tomlinson, 2019](#)). Even when empire is included, it is often presented as a story of progress and civilisation, avoiding questions of colonial oppression or resistance ([McDermid and Foster, 2024](#)). Furthermore, [Alexander and Weekes-Bernard \(2017\)](#) analyse how the 2014 National History Curriculum both opened up opportunities and imposed constraints for teaching diverse British histories in increasingly multicultural classrooms across England and Wales. Although I focus on curriculum development, [Alexander and Weekes-Bernard \(2017\)](#) make the important point that the challenge for history education lies not only in curriculum content, but also in ensuring that teachers are supported to deliver inclusive historical materials effectively and confidently.

The dominance of the celebratory narrative around the British Empire in history education is not accidental, but a result of interpretations, values and assumptions ([Satia, 2020](#)). These are in turn reflected in the wider policy landscape and its logics. Furthermore, as [Osler \(2005\)](#) has shown, history education is frequently instrumentalised to promote social cohesion, with controversial or divisive topics either avoided or reframed as lessons in tolerance. [Van Straaten et al. \(2016\)](#) argue that students often perceive history as irrelevant because classroom instruction typically focuses on past events in isolation, without drawing explicit connections to current and future contexts. This is an important point, but it raises difficult questions about how these connections are to be made and how to avoid anachronistic history. [Carretero et al. \(2012\)](#) further argue that the design of history curricula in England is shaped by the tension between promoting national identity and engaging with complex, contested histories. The tendency to

present the British Empire as a benign force is not simply a matter of omission but a result of deliberate curricular choices that reflect the political and ideological priorities of the state. As [Foster \(2005\)](#) and [McDermid and Foster \(2024\)](#) demonstrate, even where imperial history is included, textbooks tend to present a narrow, Eurocentric view that downplays colonial resistance, Indigenous perspectives and the violence of imperial governance.

Decolonising the curriculum: theoretical debates

The concept of decolonisation has gained prominence in recent educational discourse, but its meaning remains contested. For [Sabaratnam \(2017\)](#), decolonising education requires more than adding diverse content; it demands a fundamental shift in epistemic authority and the recognition of colonial legacies in contemporary structures. In this sense, decolonisation is not simply about inclusion, it is also about confronting the ways in which knowledge has been historically produced, validated and transmitted within a colonial framework. Instead, decolonisation in education must involve a critical examination of whose knowledge is valued, whose histories are told and whose perspectives are marginalised. Rather than being a matter of simply diversifying the curriculum, decolonisation calls for a fundamental interrogation of the assumptions, values and narratives that underpin historical education.

[Satia \(2020\)](#) highlights the importance of confronting the moral legacies of empire, arguing that teaching imperial history should not simply celebrate diversity, but should also engage with the ethical questions raised by colonialism. In her view, the reluctance to confront the darker aspects of British imperial history – such as exploitation, violence and racial hierarchy – is not merely a pedagogical issue but a reflection of a broader cultural and political reluctance to engage with Britain's imperial legacy. This reluctance is institutionalised in educational policy frameworks that emphasise social cohesion, national unity and 'British values', which often transform histories of conflict and oppression into narratives of harmony and tolerance (see, for example, [Elahi, 2017](#)). As a result, the teaching of Partition in England is frequently framed not as a story of colonial power and anti-colonial resistance, but as a moral lesson about the dangers of division (see both the [White Line Project \(2018\)](#) and the Partition Education project, discussed in more detail in the analysis).

[Khan \(2017\)](#) emphasises that the Partition of India provides a particularly powerful case for a decolonising approach to education. As both a colonial outcome and a deeply traumatic event, Partition exposes the intersections of race, religion and empire in both South Asian and British history. Yet, in the English curriculum, Partition is often presented in a manner that minimises these complexities, focusing instead on narratives of national independence ([McDermid and Foster, 2024](#)). By contrast, a decolonial approach would involve exploring how British colonial policies – such as the use of religious categories in governance, the manipulation of political divisions and the strategic withdrawal of British power – directly contributed to the violence of Partition. It would also require examining the ways in which Partition has continued to shape British society, through migration, diaspora communities and the ongoing legacies of empire.

Decolonisation must involve a process of epistemic disobedience – challenging not only the content of the curriculum, but also the authority structures that determine what is taught and how it is taught ([Sabaratnam, 2017](#)). This perspective is particularly relevant to the teaching of Partition, where the dominance of British perspectives in textbooks and teaching materials often obscures the voices of South Asian communities and the structural realities of colonial violence.

A critical, decolonising approach to Partition would therefore involve not only including multiple perspectives, but also rethinking the very purpose of history education. Rather than using history to promote social cohesion or national identity, a decolonial approach would position history as a space for critical inquiry, ethical reflection and the recognition of historical injustice. It would empower students to question dominant narratives, critically engage with primary sources and understand how the past continues to shape the present. In the context of Partition, this means not only teaching students about the events of 1947, but also helping them to understand how those events were shaped by British colonial policy, how they were experienced by ordinary people and how they continue to resonate in contemporary British society.

Administration of memory and the curriculum

This article also draws on the notion of the administration of memory (McQuaid and Gensburger, 2019) to explore how state institutions manage public remembrance through educational policy. Administration of memory refers to the processes through which states and bureaucratic apparatuses regulate collective memory by determining which histories are included in official narratives, how they are framed and for what purposes they are mobilised. In educational contexts, this is particularly evident in curriculum frameworks, statutory guidance and classroom expectations – all of which shape how historical knowledge is communicated to students. Memory, in this sense, is not only transmitted, but also governed.

In the case of English education, administration of memory operates through both curricular design and broader policy infrastructures. The decision to make the Partition of India a non-statutory example under the umbrella of ‘Indian independence and the end of empire’ in the Key Stage 3 History curriculum exemplifies this logic. While Partition is nominally present, its optional status allows it to be bypassed entirely in most schools, particularly in the absence of institutional support or curricular incentive. This marginal positioning reflects wider patterns in how colonial history is treated within the national narrative – acknowledged but depoliticised, present but peripheral.

Importantly, the management of historical memory in schools is not confined to the curriculum alone. It is also shaped by the legal obligation placed on English schools to promote ‘fundamental British values’, as outlined in the 2014 Department for Education guidance. These values – defined as democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs – are framed as universal civic principles. Teachers are required to embed these values across all subjects, including history, meaning that lessons on events such as Partition are often filtered through the lens of cohesion, tolerance and interfaith respect.

This pedagogical framing is further reinforced by the Prevent strategy, part of the UK government’s counter-terrorism framework. The Prevent strategy is a UK government initiative focused on preventing individuals from becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism. Prevent directs schools and teachers to identify and mitigate the risk of radicalisation. The strategy has been widely criticised for encouraging surveillance and for stifling open debate about political and historical topics – particularly those related to race, empire and foreign policy. As Jerome et al. (2019) argue, the intersection of Prevent and British values has created a climate in which sensitive historical subjects are approached with caution, if at all.

In this context, teaching materials addressing the Partition of India are shaped not only by historiographical or curricular considerations, but also by broader institutional mandates to promote harmony, prevent offence and uphold state-defined civic ideals. This has a profound effect on how Partition is framed. Rather than being presented as a product of colonial governance and imperial division, it is often positioned as a moral parable about religious conflict, with emphasis placed on reconciliation, empathy and shared human experience. While such framings can be pedagogically powerful, they also risk obscuring the structural and political dimensions of Partition, including Britain’s own role in engineering division and overseeing a hasty and violent withdrawal.

As such, the state’s administration of memory – through curriculum policy, civic obligations and counter-extremism legislation – constructs the epistemic boundaries within which Partition can be taught. These frameworks prioritise community cohesion and multicultural harmony, often at the expense of historical complexity and imperial accountability. Partition becomes a tool for affirming shared values, rather than an opportunity for critically engaging with the legacies of empire. This tension is central to understanding why, despite increasing public interest in Partition, Partition teaching materials remain cautious, moralised and structurally constrained.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design informed by critical discourse analysis to examine how the Partition of India is represented in educational materials and policy discourse in England. Critical discourse analysis, as articulated by Fairclough (2013), focuses on the analysis of language as a social practice shaped by and contributing to relations of power. It is particularly suited to interrogating how institutional texts such as curricula and teaching resources reflect ideological assumptions, especially in areas of contested history such as colonialism and migration. This research is further informed by Bernstein’s (2000) theory of educational discourse, which distinguishes between regulative discourse –

that is, the moral and ideological messages embedded within education – and instructional discourse, which relates to the transmission of subject-specific knowledge and skills. In this context, the study explores how moral imperatives such as social cohesion, diversity and ‘British values’ influence Partition teaching materials.

The central research question guiding this study is how the Partition of India is framed within English educational resources and policy discourse, and what this reveals about broader political objectives regarding national identity and historical responsibility. I explore the assumptions embedded in the selected texts, the influence of policy imperatives on the framing of Partition, and the extent to which colonial responsibility is acknowledged or evaded. The empirical material for this study consists of a combination of policy documents and educational resources. The main policy document for history education is the *National Curriculum in England: History Programmes of Study* (Department for Education, 2013b), including the associated *Citizenship Programmes of Study* (Department for Education, 2013a), while the relevant overarching policy documents relating to diversity, social cohesion and British values are the UK government’s *Integrated Communities Action Plan* (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2019) and *Prevent* (HM Government, 2011), the UK Government’s main counter-terrorism framework, which includes the demand that schools teach British values. I further assess several educational resources. These include an official teaching resource produced by the UK National Archives, titled *The British Empire and the Partition of India* (The National Archives, n.d.). The National Archives is a non-ministerial department of the UK government, and it is the official archive and publisher for the UK government, and for England and Wales. The study further analyses Partition teaching packages led by two non-governmental organisations (NGOs), namely the Partition History Project (Historical Association, 2017), evaluated by the Runnymede Trust (2017), and the White Line Heritage Project (2018), a locally produced initiative based in Huddersfield. In terms of the wider educational landscape, there are relatively few teaching resources in England that focus specifically on Partition. While Partition is listed as a non-statutory example under ‘Indian independence’ in the Key Stage 3 History curriculum, most textbooks treat it briefly. Considering the limited teaching materials available that explicitly address Partition, these materials were selected for their relevance to secondary education, their public accessibility and their contrasting institutional origins. In the analysis of the Partition History Project, the focus is primarily on the evaluation of the package by the Runnymede Trust. This evaluation assesses the effectiveness of the package in aligning with wider policy concerns, especially to what extent it addresses community cohesion and interfaith relations. While the two NGO-led teaching packages are not widely adopted at the national level, because the White Line Project was developed for use in Huddersfield and the Partition History Project was a pilot project, they serve as representative examples of the limited grass-roots and heritage-sector efforts to include Partition in English history education. The National Archives resource reflects a government-authorised approach, and it occupies a more formal position in the educational landscape. All three teaching resources were created over the past decade because their makers identified that there were insufficient teaching materials available for teaching Partition in English schools. The National Archives resource was selected as a state-sanctioned teaching tool that exemplifies how Partition is officially framed through governmental heritage platforms. The Partition History Project, developed by the Runnymede Trust and community educators, offers insight into how NGOs promote empathetic engagement and social cohesion through Partition education. The White Line Project was included as a local, community-led initiative commemorating Partition through public history and arts-based learning, thus illustrating how history education intersects with activism and counter-memory in informal pedagogical spaces.

The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, each text was subject to close reading to identify the language, structure and framing devices used to represent Partition, including explicit references to community cohesion, diversity or British values. Second, an interdiscursive analysis was conducted to trace how the texts draw upon, reproduce or challenge wider discourses about migration, empire and national identity, including those circulating in political debates, media narratives and public commemorations. Third, the findings were interpreted using Bernstein’s (2000) framework, distinguishing between the moral-political objectives embedded in the materials (regulative discourse) and the presentation of historical knowledge (instructional discourse). Instructional discourse refers to the explicit content being taught – facts, concepts, historical narratives and skills. In this study, this includes how Partition is described, what causes and consequences are emphasised, whose perspectives are presented, and what knowledge is treated as authoritative or contestable. Regulative discourse involves the social and moral norms embedded in teaching materials – what kinds of values, behaviours and

attitudes are promoted as desirable. This includes implicit messages about national identity, tolerance, reconciliation, and how diversity and conflict are to be understood in a British civic context. For each resource, I examined: what historical information (instructional content) is presented about Partition – for example, focus on political leaders versus mass displacement, British withdrawal versus communal violence; how Partition is framed morally or civically (regulative framing) – for example, as a lesson in multicultural harmony, a warning against religious division or a call for empathy; what language, activities or learning outcomes encourage students to adopt particular civic dispositions, such as tolerance or pride in shared British values; how each resource aligns or conflicts with broader educational policy objectives, especially those linked to community cohesion, British values and Prevent. This helped me demonstrate that while some resources may offer rich historical content, their delivery is often structured by strong regulative discourses that limit opportunities for critical engagement with imperial responsibility, structural violence or contested memory.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this methodology. The analysis is restricted to formal and semi-formal textual materials, and it does not include classroom observations, interviews with teachers or students, or assessments of pedagogical practice. Consequently, this study does not make claims about how these materials are used in practice or received by learners. For work on reception by learners see, for example, [Burns \(2016\)](#), who explores how UK secondary school students interpret the British Empire. Moreover, the inclusion of only three educational resources means that the findings are illustrative rather than generalisable. Nonetheless, the selected texts provide a meaningful cross-section of current approaches to Partition in English education, and they offer insights into how historical narratives are shaped by contemporary political and institutional imperatives. Future research might extend this work by exploring how these materials are enacted in diverse school settings, and how educators navigate the tensions between curricular mandates and historical complexity.

While this article uses the term 'British' to describe empire, its focus is specifically on history teaching materials for English schools. This is due to devolution in the UK, which has resulted in distinct curricula for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The teaching packages analysed here are all designed for use in England, and their framing of Partition must be understood within that national context.

Partition, the national curriculum and policy discourse

The inclusion of the British Empire and its dissolution, including the Partition of India, within the National Curriculum in England reflects both historical selectivity and political negotiation. While Partition is one of the most significant outcomes of Britain's imperial retreat, its representation in the curriculum is peripheral at best. In the current National Curriculum in England: *History Programmes of Study* ([Department for Education, 2013b](#)), Partition is not mentioned explicitly as a required topic. Instead, it appears only as a non-statutory example under Key Stage 3 in the phrase: 'Indian independence and end of Empire'. This vague reference – alongside optional figures such as Gandhi and Jinnah in earlier drafts of the 2013 curriculum – leaves its inclusion at the discretion of individual schools and teachers. Such discretionary status is significant, especially in the context of an education system where over 80 per cent of secondary schools are academies or free schools that are not required to follow the national curriculum ([Department for Education, 2023](#)).

The minimal reference to Partition must be situated within broader trends in curriculum development and political discourse. As [Tomlinson \(2019\)](#) has noted, recent Conservative-led reforms to history education have sought to promote a cohesive and linear narrative of the British nation, often framed around 'Our Island Story'. In this vision, the story of Britain is one of internal continuity and progress, occasionally influenced by external events, but rarely shaped by its own imperial entanglements. Such portrayals of British history, and especially of the British Empire, have a longer history in British secondary school textbooks (see, for example, [Foster, 2005](#)). As a result, colonial histories – including Partition – are positioned as supplementary, rather than as foundational. This marginalisation, while subtle, reinforces a Eurocentric understanding of national identity, in which colonial events are treated as peripheral rather than as constitutive of the British state and society.

These curricular omissions are mirrored by a broader policy framework centred on the notion of *community cohesion*. The [UK Government's \(2019\)](#) Integrated Communities Action Plan, for instance, frames education as a key site for fostering national integration and promoting 'British values'. The document calls for support for teachers to promote British values across the curriculum, with values defined as 'democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance of those

with different faiths and beliefs' (UK Government, 2019: 10). While this emphasis on values and respect appears inclusive, its deployment often imposes a narrow vision of civic identity that presumes a shared national story and common moral foundation. The effect is to recast diversity as a problem to be managed, rather than as a history to be understood.

Crucially, the concept of community cohesion has become a dominant regulative discourse within education policy, particularly since the early 2000s. Its vague and depoliticised language masks the normative assumptions it embeds – namely, that Britain's diverse communities must be integrated into a cohesive national whole, and that schools are responsible for facilitating this process. While cohesion as a goal may appear benign, its application in educational policy has led to a framing of historical education that privileges harmony over conflict, consensus over critique. As Grindel (2013) argues, such framings 'haunt' the ways in which empire is remembered, creating silences or deflections that inhibit critical engagement with Britain's imperial past.

Partition teaching packages and their policy evaluation

The National Archives – critical historical thinking and civic imperatives

The National Archives' (n.d.) teaching resource, titled *Partition of British India*, is a digital educational package aimed at Key Stage 3, 4, and 5 students. It is part of a wider series on Britain's imperial past, and it is hosted on the UK Government's official archival education platform. The resource presents a curated set of digitised primary sources – including government correspondence, maps and photographs – accompanied by guiding questions and contextual explanations. Structured around an inquiry-based approach, it invites students to investigate the causes and consequences of Partition through selected archival evidence. Among the limited state-sponsored educational resources explicitly addressing the Partition of India, the British Empire and the Partition of India resource from The National Archives stands out as a rare official intervention into this historical terrain. Its inclusion of primary sources, contextual commentaries and inquiry-based questions appears to align with pedagogical best practices that emphasise historical thinking and critical engagement (The National Archives, n.d.). However, closer scrutiny reveals that the narrative framing of Partition and the selection of materials subtly reinforce the tendency, widely documented in the literature, to depoliticise the history of empire in English education.

Cannadine et al. (2011) have argued that British school history has often functioned to cultivate national identity through carefully curated content, with empire taught either as a civilising project or relegated to marginal, optional topics. In line with this, the National Archives resource frames Partition largely as a result of Indian religious tensions, with British administrators portrayed as well-meaning but overwhelmed. Although the resource does include discussion of Mountbatten's role – as the last Viceroy of British India – who is presented as a central political actor in the final stages of imperial withdrawal and the drawing of the Radcliffe Line, it offers little critical interrogation of Britain's decades-long use of divide-and-rule tactics, the bureaucratic violence of imperial withdrawal, or the structural racism underpinning colonial governance. This aligns with observations by Osler (2005) and the Royal Historical Society (2018) that imperial history in schools often omits uncomfortable or controversial aspects, especially those that may challenge Britain's self-image as a liberal, tolerant democracy.

What is most striking about the resource is its reliance on official British documents – speeches, letters and memos by colonial officials – as the primary evidence base, despite the inclusion of oral history interviews. The resource's emphasis on an inquiry-based approach – encouraging students to 'examine sources, weigh evidence' and 'draw their own conclusions' – masks the ideological work performed by the selection of sources and the framing of questions. As Harris et al. (2012) warn, promoting 'balanced' views without addressing power asymmetries or historical injustice risks reinforcing dominant narratives under the guise of impartiality. Bernstein's (2000) concept of regulative discourse is useful here: the moral imperative to teach tolerance and cohesion structures the instructional content, limiting the interpretive space available for critique.

In this context, Partition is not framed as an integral part of British history or as a consequence of imperial policy, but rather as a cautionary tale of division – a moral episode used to support present-day values of coexistence. This aligns with the broader policy framework of 'community cohesion' discussed earlier, in which history education is instrumentalised to foster national unity rather than critical engagement. As Starkey and Osler (2009) have noted, even well-intentioned attempts to

diversify history and citizenship education can be absorbed into a moralised multiculturalism that leaves foundational questions about colonialism and race unexamined.

The National Archives resource thus reflects broader systemic issues in the teaching of empire in English schools: neutrality over accountability and cohesion over confrontation. While it may offer an accessible entry point for students, its framing ultimately reaffirms the logics of much of Britain's post-imperial educational memory.

The Partition History Project: empathy, heritage and the limits of decolonisation

The Partition History Project is a civil society-led educational initiative launched in 2017 by a coalition of historians, educators and community organisations, in partnership with the Runnymede Trust. It was launched in response to the 70th anniversary of Partition in 2017 and growing calls to diversify the English curriculum. Designed as a multidisciplinary educational initiative, the project combined historical background material, creative writing activities and the performance of *Child of the Divide* (Bhuchar Boulevard, 2025), a play dramatising a boy's experience of Partition. It was piloted in four schools in Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire, and it aimed explicitly to promote 'interfaith understanding', 'British values' and 'community cohesion' through engagement with Partition (Elahi, 2017). It further aimed to 'transform historical sensitivities and suspicions into something much more positive and less divisive, with resonance for young people from a range of backgrounds in the UK today' (Historical Association, 2017, para. 3). The Runnymede report about the project was presented in the House of Lords to a packed council chamber in 2017, signalling the increased attention given to Partition considering the 70th anniversary, as well as the increasing interest in teaching the end of Empire and British values in British politics. The Partition History Project positions itself as a decolonising intervention that makes Partition accessible and relevant to students, especially those from South Asian heritage communities. However, the project's pedagogical and discursive framing also reveals significant tensions between the goals of decolonisation and the institutional imperatives of moral regulation.

On one level, the project is laudable in its ambition to introduce Partition into the school environment through humanising narratives, including oral histories and dramatic storytelling. The teaching pack 'Child of the Divide' (Bhuchar Boulevard, 2025) presents Partition as a deeply emotional and traumatic event, inviting students to reflect on empathy, loss and cultural identity. In doing so, it aligns with pedagogies of affect and remembrance that have become popular in multicultural educational contexts. However, as Harris and Burn (2016) caution, the use of empathy-based methods – while powerful – can sometimes displace structural analysis. When deployed without paying attention to historical power relations, such methods risk substituting emotional identification for critical interrogation.

This dynamic is clearly visible in the Partition History Project. While the teaching pack offers a brief historical overview and references key political figures such as Gandhi and Jinnah, the emphasis is placed on interpersonal reconciliation, interfaith harmony and cultural pluralism. The culminating task asks students to reflect on similarities and differences among peers, and to write creative responses exploring tolerance and understanding. There is minimal engagement with the role of British colonial administration in engineering communal divisions, nor with the broader geopolitical logic of imperial partitioning as a technique of withdrawal and control. In this regard, the Partition History Project reflects what Osler (2005) has called 'safe multiculturalism': a pedagogical strategy that promotes surface-level diversity while eliding deeper questions about historical injustice and national complicity.

The project's close alignment with the policy discourse of 'community cohesion' further complicates its status as a decolonising intervention. As Elahi (2017) notes in the evaluation of the project, the Partition History Project was explicitly designed to address 'the hidden legacy of grief and distrust between people of different faith communities and backgrounds in Britain' (p. 5). Teachers were encouraged to draw connections between Partition and contemporary British society, particularly in relation to integration and religious pluralism. While this pedagogical move seeks to render Partition relevant to students' lived realities, it also reinforces the instrumentalisation of history for present-day social engineering. As Tomlinson (2019) argues, such moves are not new; they echo the long-standing use of history education to shape the moral character of citizens, often through a selective reading of the past.

This instrumentalisation is evident in the tension between the project's stated goals and its evaluative findings. The Runnymede Trust's assessment of the pilot reported that students 'felt they knew more about Partition', but struggled to understand how it related to contemporary Britain (Elahi,

2017: 13). Teachers similarly found it difficult to bridge the gap between the historical material and the policy objective of fostering community cohesion. As one teacher put it, 'The weakest area in their understanding was the link between what happened then and what's happening now. I don't think the lesson plans properly addressed that' (Elahi, 2017: 13). This gap reveals a fundamental flaw in how the project deploys Partition: rather than being treated as a historical event with enduring structural implications, it becomes a symbolic narrative used to advance emotional or civic competencies.

Such framing is consistent with the critiques offered by Hall (1998) and Khan (2017), who argue that Britain's institutional memory of empire is shaped less by confrontation with past wrongdoing than by efforts to preserve moral self-image. The Partition History Project, despite its progressive veneer, participates in this dynamic by shifting the focus away from Britain's imperial actions and towards interpersonal morality. In doing so, it limits students' ability to critically examine how colonial policies – such as census-based religious categorisation, separate electorates and communal representation – contributed to the divisions that ultimately underpinned Partition (Chatterji, 2007; Shodhan, 2017).

From the perspective of Bernstein's (2000) framework, the Partition History Project illustrates the dominance of regulative discourse over instructional discourse. While the project seeks to transmit historical knowledge, it is ultimately shaped by a moral-political agenda that prioritises cohesion, tolerance and shared values. This limits the space for exploring the complex, contested and often violent legacies of British colonialism. The Partition History Project thus reflects the paradox of contemporary curriculum reform in England: even as initiatives seek to diversify historical narratives, they often remain circumscribed by the very policy logics they aim to challenge.

In summary, the Partition History Project represents a hybrid model of curricular innovation: one that attempts to introduce marginalised histories into the classroom, but does so within a framework that privileges affect, civility and cohesion over structural critique. Its failure to fully confront British imperial responsibility renders it illustrative of the limits of multicultural history – a pedagogy that invites recognition but not reckoning. As I turn to the White Line Project, we will see how community-led commemorative efforts engage similar tensions, while introducing different forms of testimony and authority into the educational space.

The White Line Project: counter-memory and the politics of local commemoration

Launched in 2018 in Huddersfield with support from the Heritage Lottery Fund, the White Line Project represents a grass-roots intervention into the pedagogical and commemorative silences surrounding the Partition of India. Developed by local community activists, educators and artists, the project sought to mark the 70th anniversary of Partition through a combination of oral history interviews, film screenings, school visits and public art. Central to the White Line Project was the assertion that Partition was not only a South Asian or colonial event, but also a British one – with consequences that resonate in the postcolonial urban spaces of northern England. As a community-based educational and memorial initiative, the White Line Project explicitly positioned itself as a corrective to the absence of Partition in the English curriculum and public discourse more broadly.

Unlike state-sanctioned materials or NGO-led programmes such as the Partition History Project, the White Line Project emerged from within minoritised communities themselves, foregrounding lived experience and intergenerational memory. At its core was the act of testimony: local residents, many of them second- or third-generation descendants of Partition survivors, shared stories of migration, trauma and cultural continuity. These oral histories were compiled into a short film and a series of public exhibitions, and they were also incorporated into teaching sessions with local secondary school students. In doing so, the project exemplifies what Hall (1998) termed 'the politics of representation' – an effort not only to tell different stories, but to tell them from different epistemological positions.

As a teaching resource, however, the White Line Project presents an ambiguous relationship to the curriculum. While the project engages schools, it does not offer a structured curriculum or formal lesson plans, nor does it articulate clear learning objectives beyond raising awareness. This ambiguity reflects both its strengths and its limitations. On the one hand, it allows trauma and ambiguity to remain present, unassimilated into a national narrative. Despite its radical potential, the White Line Project is not entirely free from the pressures of the dominant regulative discourse identified by Bernstein (2000). The project frames itself as a 'celebration of heritage', and it was partly funded under public commemorative schemes that emphasise cohesion, remembrance and community engagement. These discursive constraints shape how far the project can push against institutional norms. These constraints

are reflected in the videos of oral history interviews in the teaching source, in which every participant is apparently asked to address communal harmony, which leads to statements such as 'everyone had been very close before Partition' (White Line Project, 2018: 23), 'Everyone lived amicable as friends' (The White Line Project, 2018: 23) and 'I can't remember any tension at all between the different communities' (The White Line Project, 2018: 32). Here pre-Partition, colonial India is held up as a beacon of harmonious coexistence and inter-communal relations.

As Hall (1998) warned, attempts at counter memory take place within and on the terms of the dominant culture – a space where resistance is always at risk of recuperation. Nevertheless, the White Line Project introduces several elements largely absent from more formal educational resources: intergenerational memory, spatial locality and racialised embodiment. By situating Partition not in abstract geopolitical terms but in the lived geography of English towns, it makes visible the imperial entanglements of local spaces. In doing so, it challenges the geographical distancing of empire in school curricula – a strategy that positions colonial history as external to Britain's present. The project's film and interviews show that the legacies of Partition are not merely historical but continue to shape identity, belonging and inter-communal relations in contemporary England.

However, the White Line Project's limited pedagogical structure makes it difficult to integrate into classroom settings where teachers are constrained by time, resources and assessment frameworks. Teachers involved in the project, as reported in internal documentation and community reflection pieces, often lacked the historical background or training to contextualise the testimonies. This reflects a broader issue noted by the Royal Historical Society (2018) and Alexander et al. (2015): the lack of professional development and institutional support for teaching imperial and postcolonial histories in England. Without adequate scaffolding, the rich material provided by the White Line Project risks being reduced to emotional vignettes or disconnected case studies, rather than being used to challenge dominant historical narratives.

The White Line Project offers a powerful model of community-led historical education that foregrounds affect, locality and testimony. Yet it also illustrates the difficulties of sustaining a critical, decolonial pedagogy within the structural and discursive constraints of the English educational system. Unlike state resources, which depoliticise Partition, or NGO interventions, which moralise it, the White Line Project holds open the possibility of a pedagogy rooted in witness, discomfort and historical complexity. Its partial marginalisation within formal education, however, reveals the continuing challenge of integrating counter-histories into the national narrative.

Discussion: Partition, curriculum politics and the constraints of community cohesion

In teaching materials, Partition is often not presented as a consequence of British colonial policy or the logic of imperial governance, but rather as an episode of unfortunate religious division or communal breakdown. This depoliticised framing aligns with the community cohesion agenda by turning Partition into a moral lesson about the importance of tolerance and coexistence, rather than an opportunity to examine imperial responsibility, racial governance or the structural consequences of empire. In effect, the regulative discourse of community cohesion constrains the instructional discourse of history education, shaping what can be taught and how it can be framed.

In this policy context, any teaching resource that addresses Partition enters a pedagogical field already shaped by ideological expectations. As I have demonstrated, even resources developed with the intent to diversify or decolonise the curriculum are often structured – explicitly or implicitly – by the need to align with prevailing norms of cohesion, identity and moral instruction. This tension is especially evident in the case of the Partition History Project and the White Line Project, which aim to enhance awareness of Partition, but which must navigate the regulatory frameworks established by state policy.

Central to this discussion is the concept of community cohesion, which functions as a dominant regulative discourse in English education (Bernstein, 2000). As I have illustrated in the analysis, this discourse shapes the moral purposes of schooling by framing history as a vehicle for promoting tolerance, unity and shared values. Within this framework, Partition is not presented as a site of imperial violence or structural division, but as a moral lesson in multiculturalism – a narrative that reinforces interpersonal empathy while avoiding systemic critique. This is most evident in the Partition History Project, where the traumatic legacies of Partition are framed primarily through the lens of interfaith dialogue and emotional

understanding. Although such approaches may offer entry points for students, they risk obscuring the imperial structures that produced Partition in the first place.

This dynamic is further reinforced by the administration of memory (McQuaid and Gensburger, 2019) embedded within state-endorsed resources such as those of The National Archives. These materials present Partition through a narrow evidentiary frame – primarily British governmental sources. As Hall (1998) has argued, national memory in Britain is structured not only by what is remembered but by what is actively forgotten. The portrayal of Partition as a tragic but distant event, disconnected from Britain's present or its culpability, reflects this selective amnesia.

At the same time, the White Line Project illustrates both the possibilities and limitations of counter-memory in a neoliberal commemorative landscape. Its emphasis on oral history and local testimony challenges dominant narratives and recentres minoritised voices. Yet its partial integration into formal schooling – and its entanglement with public funding schemes that prioritise 'celebration' and 'heritage' – illustrates how even radical pedagogies can be domesticated. These findings underscore the broader concerns raised by scholars such as Tomlinson (2019), Cannadine et al. (2011) and Osler (2005): that English history education remains resistant to systemic engagement with Britain's imperial past. The curriculum continues to privilege national coherence and cultural literacy over critical inquiry and historical justice. While initiatives such as the Partition History Project and the White Line Project attempt to intervene in this landscape, they often do so from marginal positions and within restrictive frameworks. Moreover, the dominance of White national identity as the silent norm in English curricular design means that any attempt to introduce postcolonial histories must contend with powerful affective and political investments in Britain's self-image. As the Royal Historical Society (2018) report makes clear, teachers are often underprepared and under-supported in addressing these histories, which further limits the transformative potential of curricular reform. Without structural change to training, assessment and policy priorities, the inclusion of Partition – and of empire more broadly – risks remaining symbolic rather than substantive.

Finally, the analysis reveals a broader paradox at the heart of current efforts to teach Partition in England. The growing public interest in the topic, especially among South Asian diaspora communities, reflects a desire for recognition, belonging and historical reckoning. Yet the educational responses to this demand often translate historical violence into pedagogical virtue, neutralising critique through appeals to cohesion and shared values. This aligns with Hall's (1998) observation that historical episodes can be settled without unsettling the structure in which this happens – a memory project that commemorates without confronting.

In order to move beyond these constraints, history education must be reimagined not only as a space for inclusion, but also as a site of structural analysis and political agency. Partition should be taught not merely as a distant conflict, but as a formative episode in Britain's imperial withdrawal, one that continues to shape migration, identity and inequality in contemporary society. Doing so requires educators, policymakers and communities to confront the uncomfortable truths of empire – not to divide the nation, but to understand how it was made.

Conclusion: towards a critical and inclusive curriculum on Partition

In this article, I have examined how the Partition of India is framed in English educational resources and curricula, focusing on the ways that broader political discourses – particularly community cohesion and British values – influence how the event is taught. Drawing on a critical discourse analysis of three educational resources – the National Archives website, the Partition History Project and the White Line Project – I argue that while each initiative seeks to address historical marginalisation, they are constrained by structural pressures that limit critical engagement with Britain's imperial past.

A key finding is that the teaching of Partition in England is often shaped by contemporary policy imperatives. Whether positioned as a lesson in multicultural tolerance, a heritage celebration or a case study in postcolonial diplomacy, Partition is rarely presented as a moment of imperial responsibility or colonial violence. Instead, it is frequently framed in ways that promote cohesion and shared identity, aligning with a broader regulative discourse in education that privileges moral consensus over historical complexity.

Partition must be taught not as a foreign or diasporic issue, but as part of Britain's own historical narrative. Teaching resources should link Partition to Britain's colonial governance, withdrawal strategies, and the ways in which empire shaped the demographic, cultural and political landscape of post-war Britain. Doing so situates Partition within the national story and counters the tendency to treat it as peripheral. Future teaching resources should reflect the full range of historiographical debates about Partition. These include political, social and gendered perspectives; South Asian as well as British sources; and a balance between governmental and lived experiences. Oral histories, literary narratives and visual sources can be powerful tools, but they should be contextualised with clear historical framing. Resources should also be co-produced with communities, historians and curriculum experts to ensure accuracy, inclusivity and pedagogical coherence. To facilitate critical and confident teaching, education authorities and school leadership should ensure that teachers have access to well-supported professional development on imperial history and Partition. This includes not only historical content knowledge, but also frameworks for handling sensitive topics, engaging with migration histories and addressing diverse student backgrounds. High-quality, open-access resources developed in consultation with educators can serve as an essential support.

Finally, teaching Partition – and the British Empire more broadly – should be guided by critical inquiry rather than by consensus-driven narratives. Students should be encouraged to ask difficult questions, explore contested interpretations and understand history as a site of power and debate. This approach does not threaten social cohesion; rather, it strengthens it by building informed, reflective and historically literate citizens.

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Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

Consent for publication statement

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Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

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