

# BORDERS AS MEMBRANES: REDEFINING BOUNDARIES THROUGH THE PARTITION OF INDIA

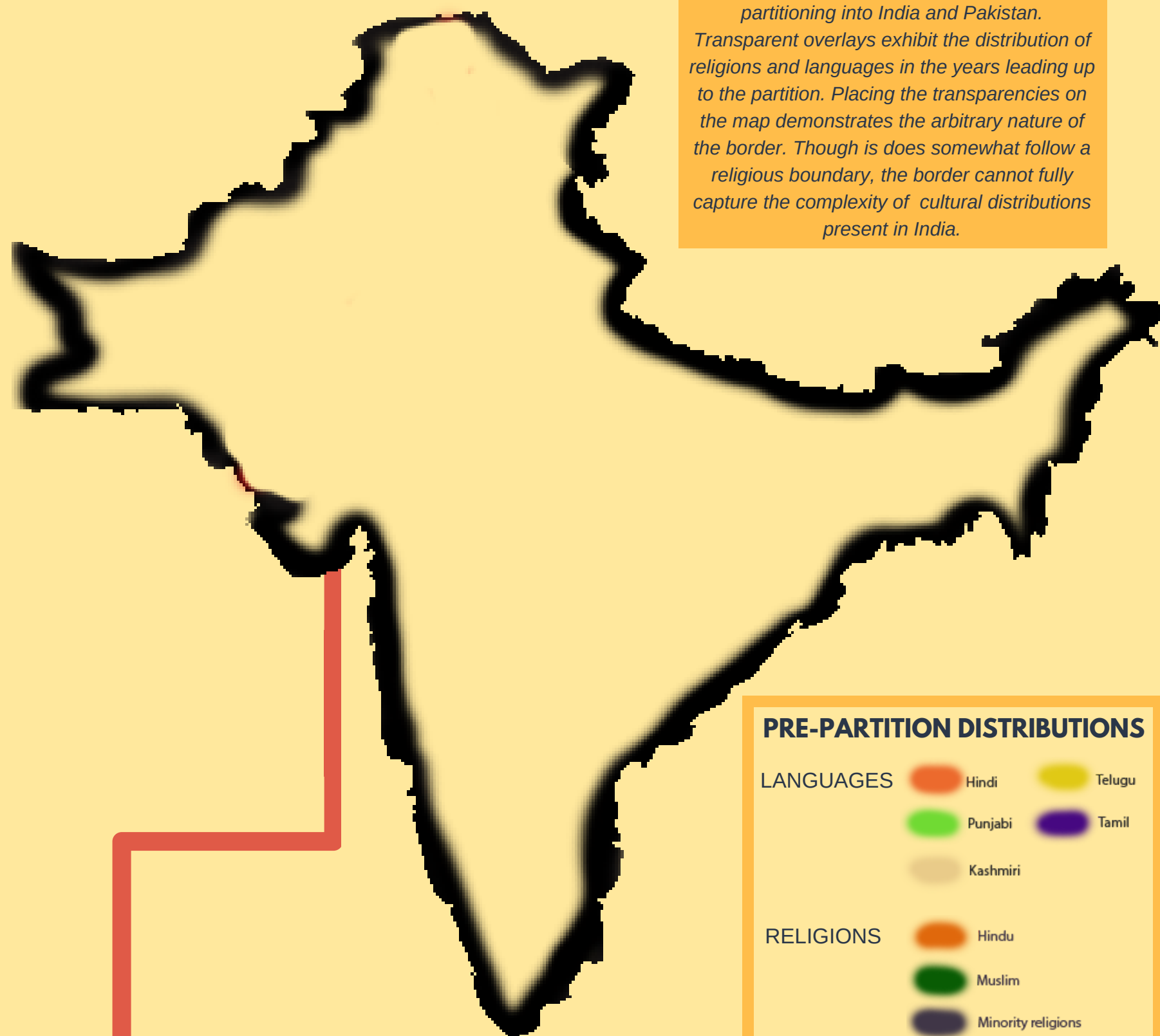
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## INTRODUCTION

In the books *Schizophrenia* and *Kith*, Bhanu Kapil and Divya Victor explore how the strict interpretation of a border as a concrete geographic and social divide is false. In order to capture how Kapil and Victor challenge the traditional connotation of a border, we came up with the representation of a border as a “membrane” due to its selectively permeable nature. Physically, borders allow some groups of people to enter the premises of a country, while simultaneously excluding other groups from doing so. Culturally, we tend to view borders as a natural barrier dividing vastly different groups; however, borders are often arbitrary lines drawn that cannot account for all of the factors that define an individual. To redefine the concept of a border, the writers focus on the tensions that emerge when immigrants are thrown into an unfamiliar culture. Thus, misinterpreting borders as concrete in nature when they are in fact more complex has severe repercussions that wreak havoc in the daily lives of those who cross them.

## BELONGING

Identity is a blurry term. A single person does not merely belong to one group, but rather associates themselves with their race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexuality, and so on. These factors often intermingle in such a way that their boundaries collide, reaping confusion into the concept of self declaration. For instance, an identifier such as race, according to writer Peter Wade, can not be tied down by one concrete definition and consequently must be grouped together by a range of varied phenomena. He says that race “first...involves some reference to the realm of nature, especially human nature and more specifically to the realm of heredity, mediated through kinship” and second includes “changing colonial history and geography.” Therefore, an individual's race is formed between the two “membranes” of biology and history. Genetics and geography combine simultaneously to create race; thus, identity is often murky. Furthermore, one's identity and sense of belonging centers upon the realm of kith. As explained by Divya Victor in *Kith*, “kith” is who and what people surround themselves with that defines their innermost workings. However, immigration takes a great toll on kith. Traveling to an unfamiliar new country skews one's habits and mindsets, and in turn alters one's sense of self. Belonging is relative, and those caught in the crossfire of borders feel the largest repercussions of identity's complexity. As Victor says, “A migrant is a disputed territory” (25), meaning a person can not belong somewhere just because they live there. Entering the borders of a country is one thing, but crossing into the boundaries of acceptance within that country is a separate, often impossible task.



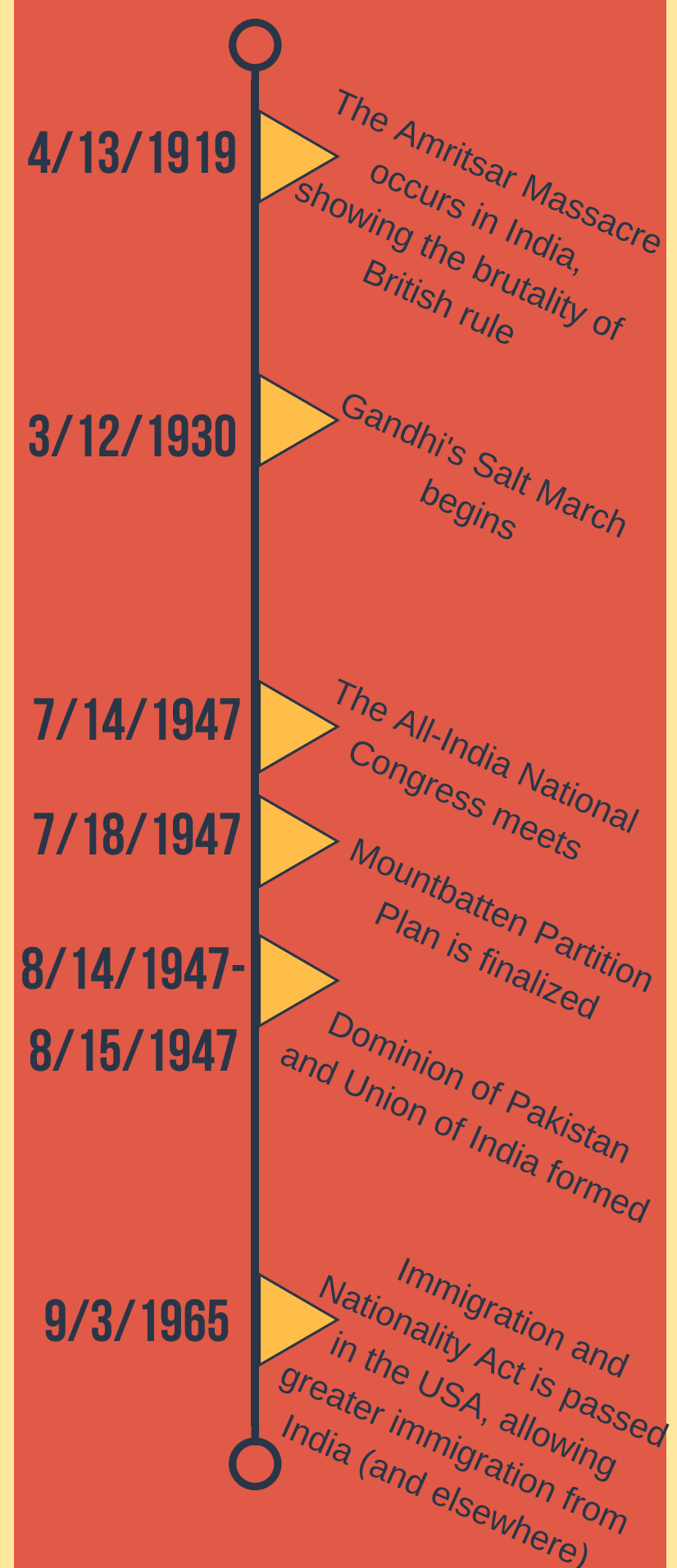
## MIGRATION & VIOLENCE

When India was granted independence in 1947, the British included the division of the country into two separate dominions based on the religious majorities, with Pakistan being mostly Muslim and India being mostly Hindu. However, in their haste, the British overlooked many other factors, including cultural and linguistic groups, concentrations of religious minorities, and the previous political districts that had made up India. These divisions exposed the border as ineffective at its designed purpose and incognizant of the fact that there is no possible border that can be drawn that would leave two peaceful and content sides. *Kith* and *Schizophrenia* both drive straight at this point by describing transgenerational memories of mass migration and violence. Kapil writes: “I saw a Muslim man on a stretcher propped up against a wall. Something vertical when it should have been sideways. His wife with his head in her hands, cupping the bones.” and “row after row of women tied to border trees. ‘Their stomachs were cut out,’ said my mother.” She details horrific violence against disadvantaged minorities by unchecked riots and mobs, all of which was caused because 14 million people were suddenly found on the wrong side of a new border.

## CONFORMITY & ASSIMILATION

*Kith* and *Schizophrenia* both challenge the notion of borders as dividing distinct cultural groups by highlighting the tension felt by immigrants when immersed in a new country that is vastly different from their home country. This tension helps to demonstrate that just because an individual crosses a geographical border does not mean that their individual identity and way of life changes; thus, the idea that borders are created to divide distinctly different groups is inherently flawed. *Schizophrenia* speaks to the dissonance between what the identity a new country tries to impose on an immigrant through assimilation and their original identity, as well as the severe impacts that this can cause on an individual's mental health. Drawing a link between the pressures of assimilation and mental illness, Kapil illustrates an impossible situation, where it is “psychotic to submit to violence in a time of great violence” but also to “leave that home or country... forever” (53). Similarly, *Kith* contributes to this redefining of borders by focusing on the pressures of conformity that ensue when an immigrant crosses a national border. Victor captures how western ideals and beauty standards can pervade the lives of those in other nations even when they have not immigrated to a western country, with the lines: “drag your mothers/ out from the roots of your hair/ with bleach & heat” (49). Later, however, she calls people who have immigrated from India to western nations to action, urging them to “unchristen” their names and essentially return to their root identities (224). In this manner, Victor helps to change our perception of borders by outlining the pressures that result from crossing them and encourage immigrants not to succumb to the push towards assimilation.

## HISTORY OF THE PARTITION



**"GEOGRAPHY AND THE MOUNTAINS AND THE SEAS FASHIONED INDIA AS SHE IS, AND NO HUMAN AGENCY CAN CHANGE THAT SHAPE OR COME IN THE WAY OF HER FINAL DESTINY..."**

from the All-India Congress Committee

