



# The Cartographic Construction of Pakistan



*An Atlas*

Shaheer Tarar

On June 3rd, 1947, the news that the British Indian empire would be partitioned into two countries was broadcast across the colony. Cyril Radcliffe, a British barrister who had never before set foot in India, was invited to lead the boundary commissions that would determine the borders of these new states, and was given only six weeks to complete this task (Lapierre & Collins, 1999, p. 226). The border he designed came into effect on August 17th of that year. Between June 3rd and August 17th, over a period of seventy-six days, India and Pakistan transformed from loose ideological conceptions to two separate states with clearly defined national borders. Faced with the physical reality of partition, India's many nationalist and religious groups assigned territorial forms to their ideologies in a bid to influence the shape of their country. At the same time, British imperial agencies, led by Radcliffe, drew their own spatial demarcations along India's ideological divides to help them partition the colony. The geographical boundaries of political and religious ideas were developed, disseminated and popularized through maps drawn in the lead up to Partition (Khan, 2017, p. 43). The product of this process, the India-Pakistan border, is today one of the most militarized and surveilled spaces on Earth. Thousands of floodlights installed along its perimeter render it visible from space, underscoring the power of pencil lines drawn decades ago.

The Indian subcontinent in 1947—simultaneously being decolonized and partitioned while facing immense nationalist and religious upheaval—serves as a rich frame to study how the processes of nation-building and state-making are linked to territorial imaginaries. Many scholars have interrogated how states engage in the consolidation of a group of people into a nation to solidify their territorial holdings (Sparke, 1998, p. 467; Dunkerley, Hodgson, Konopacki, Spybey, & Thompson, 2002, p. 27) or how emergent nations make territorial claims to aid in their struggle towards realizing themselves as states (Storey, 2012). With the pulling together of India's Muslims into a nation, and then the development of this nation into an independent state, this latter process can be observed at incredible speed. The idea that India's Muslims should be considered a nation apart from followers of other religions

was first recorded in 1888; this nation was first attached to territory in 1930; and the first call to create an independent state for this nation was put forward in 1933. Twelve years later, in 1947, the nation-state of Pakistan was carved out of the British Indian Empire. What is remarkable here is that India's Muslim leaders didn't just imbue an existing nationalism with aspirations towards statehood—they actually defined and oversaw the production of this nationalism, mapped its claim to territory and then roused its development into a state. This entire process took just fifty-nine years, and maps didn't just document this transformation, they functioned as a key technology used to enable it.

#### THE MAP

There is increasing scholarship by historians and geographers who explore an understanding of maps as expressions of power and knowledge, vested with political and social agency (Craib, 2017; Nelson, 2017; Ramaswamy, 2010; Winichakul, 1994). Much of this work has been placed under the umbrella of critical cartography. The methodological conceit of critical cartography is summarized by J.B. Harley in his influential polemic, *Deconstructing the Map*, as seeking “metaphor and rhetoric in maps where previously scholars had found only measurement and topography” (Harley, 1992, p. 233). In another essay, *Maps, knowledge, and power*, Harley offers a crash course on the ways cartographic documents act upon lands and the people who occupy them. Across history, he traces cartography's inextricable link to power: from the role of maps in the 18th and 19th centuries as anticipators, enactors and then preservers of empire, to their 20th century function as constructors and validators of the nation-state fiction. In this essay, Harley makes the troubling point that the history of cartography is thin with examples of the subversion and resistance of power. “Maps are preeminently a language of power, not of protest” he argues (Harley, 2009, p. 142).

Maribel Casas-Cortés and Sebastian Cobbarubias offer a partial corrective to this history by putting forward cases of contemporary counter-cartography in *Drawing Escape Tunnels through Borders*. Though these examples are successful in illustrating some of the policies, agencies and geographies that construct borders, they do not offer much in the way of resisting,

circumventing or demolishing them. The ability of these maps to affect the features they depict seems limited, at least compared to some of the powerful cartographic documents mobilized to exert control over people and places, outlined by Harley. This brings me back to his point that the history of cartography points to maps primarily being an instrument of power, not of protest. As someone seeking to understand the use of maps as tools of both colonial intervention and decolonial struggle, this notion is fascinating to me and central to my own research. In line with one of the central points of Priyamvada Gopal's book *Insurgent Empire* (Gopal, 2020), that resistance in the colony shaped metropolitan thought in varying, often overlooked ways, I believe the measure of success for the cartographies of resistance should not just be that they “won”, but the extent to which they influenced the cartographies of power. Though it was British lines that ultimately “landed” on Indian soil, the borders and identities developed on maps drawn by local political, religious and civilian interests continue to be taken up across South Asia today.

#### THE ARCHIVE

The origin of the word archive can be traced to the Greek *arkheion*, which means, the residence of the archons, the chief magistrates, the commanders or the rulers. In ancient Greece, the archons oversaw city-states, and all official documents were kept in their homes (Steyerl, 2008). Those with political power were also the keepers of memory. The task of keeping memories can extend beyond the walls of a building. Through the national archive, the state offers its subjects a selected vocabulary of histories and memories. A vocabulary which then determines the stories told by the state's subjects about themselves and the place they live. In this way, the national archive can be understood as the state sanctioned memory of a nation.

Most of the maps digitized and analyzed here were accessed at the British Library in London, where they are held as part of the India Office Records. The bulk of this archive consists of documents produced by the vast bureaucracy of British India, which were brought over to Britain after Partition in 1947. These records were later supplemented with documents produced by the Pakistan Movement, which were sent over by the National Archive of

Pakistan. Conspicuously, the final partition map produced by the Cyril Radcliffe, which dictates the present-day border between India and Pakistan, is missing (or inaccessible) from the archive. The fact that the most important document pertaining to Partition is not held in the archive, but that the many maps produced by Indian nationalists are, speaks to what the British national archive wants to remember about its empire, and on whom it wants to assign blame for the bloodshed which followed Partition.

#### THE GLITCH

To create this atlas, I scanned, edited and georeferenced the maps I found at the British Library. Georeferencing involves connecting points on paper maps with their references in real-world space. For example, to digitize a paper map of a river, unique features of the river are first identified on the paper map, and then found on a digital map in GIS software. A digital link is then created between the points, such that the geographical coordinates of the river are synced with its representation on paper. This allows the paper maps to be displayed and analyzed in context within the broader geometries and geographies of the earth. Seeing these maps aligned with the contours of the earth reveals geographical glitches embedded into the maps.

As discussed earlier, maps are a composite of the many choices about content and design that prefigure their production: decisions about projection, scale, colour and typography; about inclusions and omissions; and about the distortion of geometries and the creation of hierarchies. Maps are thereby subject to the interests, beliefs and biases of the individuals which produce them, the political systems they represent, the historical moment they occupy, and the geographical context they operate in. As eloquently put by Matthew H. Edney “meaning is invested in all aspects of cartography: in the instrumentation and technologies wielded by the geographer; in the social relations within which maps are made and used; and, in the cultural expectations which define, and which are defined by, the map image” (Edney, 1997, p. 2). Many maps are thus geographically distorted, both deliberately and subconsciously, to suit the author’s agenda or align with their worldview. When such maps are forced to conform to real-world coordinates through

geo-referencing, they appear stretched and shrunken, distorted and contorted, with their labels pixelating beyond legibility, and their features bending in strange ways. In other words, the process of geo-referencing illuminates some of the biases embedded in these maps, which manifest as glitches in the final georeferenced image.

The reading of these maps as glitched is an extension of the definition of a glitch put forward by Lauren Berlant. A glitch, she writes, “is an interruption within a transition, a troubled transmission. A glitch is also the revelation of an infrastructural failure” (Berlant, 2016, p. 393). Pushing this definition forward, a glitch doesn’t just reveal infrastructural failure, but can be a moment of infrastructural revelation itself. A glitch can serve as a thread which can be pulled to reveal more of the systems or ideologies which produced it, to see their shape or shadow, in sharper relief against a wildly complicated and inter-relational world. Another reading of these distorted and pixelated maps can be gleaned from Hito Steyerl’s *In Defence of the Poor Image*. In this essay, she calls on us to embrace low-quality, poor images, to learn to read between the pixels, for there is a story about politics, economics and technology behind the transformation of a high-quality image into a poor image. Poor images, she writes, “are the contemporary Wretched of the Screen, the debris of audiovisual production, the trash that washes up on the digital economies’ shores ... Poor images show the rare, the obvious, and the unbelievable—that is, if we can still manage to decipher it” (Steyerl, 2009, p. 1). The distorted, glitchy maps in this atlas too tell a story, of how Indian nationalists and British colonialists wished to partition lands they did not fully understand, and organize the people who lived on these lands into narrow categories along religious lines.

#### THE ATLAS

Though I have written at length elsewhere about the politics and aesthetics of the maps produced in the lead up to Partition, this atlas and the glitchy maps it showcases are my first attempt at visualizing the distorted and broken geographies embedded in the maps which conjured the borders lining South Asia today. In this atlas, both the original and georeferenced versions of these maps are presented side by side. My goal in producing any work

of art has always been to produce a generative space, in which an individual arrives with their own thoughts and concerns, and leaves with perhaps just one new provocation. However, one overt objective I do have with this atlas is to illustrate the absurdity of governing (and partitioning) vast swaths of land just using pieces of paper, and bring into sharper relief the cruelty of the imperial logics under which paper can hold hegemony over millions of people.

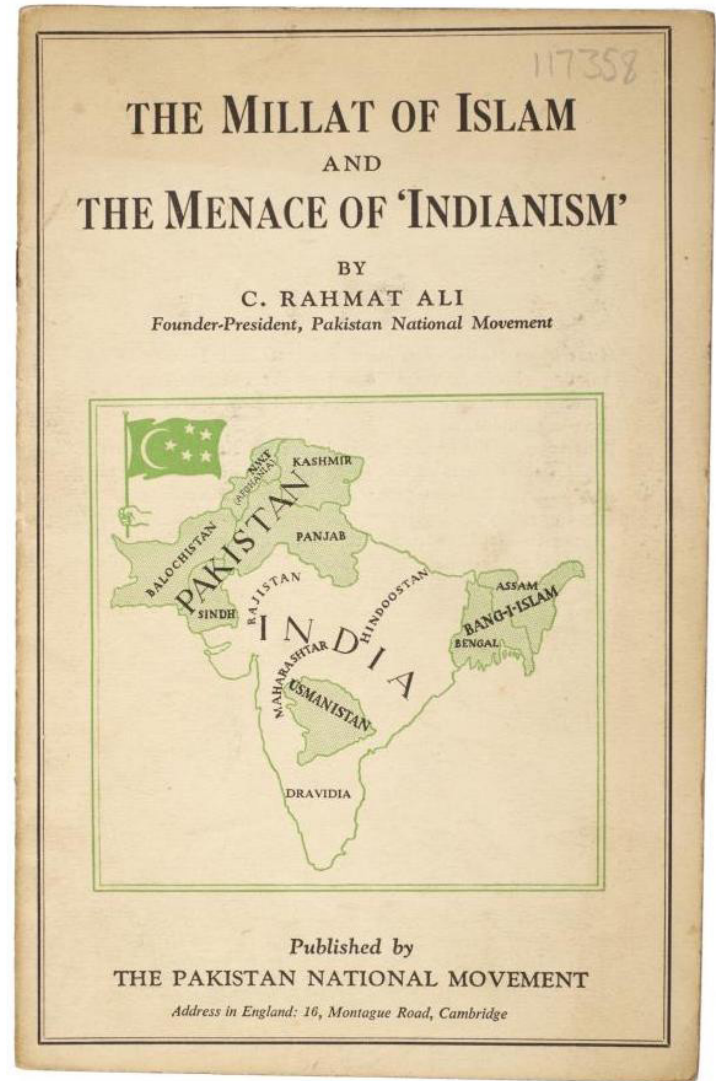
Though much is made of decolonization, the contemporary Pakistani state functions in ways startlingly similar to the British colonial government preceding it. Large-scale infrastructures are constructed and securitized at the expense of local ecologies and economies, the construction of the port of Gwadar, and the anti-encroachment drive in Karachi being two recent examples. Movements of resistance against the state in Pakistan also share many organizational and ontological similarities with Indigenous resistance movements against settler-colonial states. The Pashtun Protection Movement is a fledgling campaign against the Pakistani state for its role in and disregard towards the disappearance of thousands of ethnic Pashtuns in northern Pakistan. All this to say, though the British Raj is over, the nation-states which emerged from its wake seem to have absorbed the empire's extractive, possessive and flattening logics. The government of Pakistan continues to publish maps which distort the earth, and erase entire populations, in alignment with these colonial-era logics. This year, publishing maps which do not conform to the state version became punishable by heavy fines and jail time, following a similar law which was passed in India in 2016. These states now force their entire populations to bend the earth with them, and seeking out the glitches in their "official" maps is perhaps one avenue of resistance against their hegemony.

#### REFERENCES

- Berlant, L. (2016). The commons: Infrastructures for troubling times. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 34(3), 393-419.
- Cobarrubias, S., & Casas-Cortes, M. (2007). Drawing Escape Tunnels through Borders: Cartographic Research Experiments by European Social Movements. In L. Mogel & A. Bhagat (Eds.), *An Atlas of Radical Cartography* (pp. 51-66). Los Angeles: Journal of Aesthetics and Protest Press.
- Craib, R. B. (2017). Cartography and Decolonization. In J. R. Akerman (Ed.), *Decolonizing the Map: Cartography from Colony to Nation* (pp. 11-71). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Dunkerley, D., Hodgson, L., Konopacki, S., Spybey, T., & Thompson, A. (2002). *Changing Europe: Identities, Nations and Citizens*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Edney, M. H. (1997). *Mapping an Empire: the geographical construction of British India, 1765-1843*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Gopal, P. (2020). *Insurgent Empire: Anticolonial Resistance and British Dissent*. Verso.
- Harley, J. B. (1992). Deconstructing the Map. In T. J. Barnes & J. S. Duncan (Eds.), *Writing Worlds: Discourse, Text and Metaphor in the Representation of Landscape* (pp. 231-247). London, UK: Routledge.
- Harley, J. B. (2009). Maps, knowledge, and power. In G. L. Henderson & M. Waterstone (Eds.), *Geographic Thought: A Praxis Perspective* (pp. 129-148). Abingdon: Routledge.
- Khan, Y. (2017). *The Great Partition*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Lapierre, D., & Collins, L. (1999). *Freedom at Midnight*. New Delhi, India: Vikas Publishing House.
- Nelson, C. A. (2017). Interrogating the Colonial Cartographical Imagination. *American Art*, 31(2), 51-53.
- Ramaswamy, S. (2010). *The Goddess and the Nation: Mapping Mother India*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Sparke, M. (1998). A Map that Roared and an Original Atlas: Canada, Cartography, and the Narration of Nation. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 88(3), 463-495.
- Steyerl, H. (2009). In Defense of the Poor Image. *Artists Space*.
- Steyerl, H. (2008). Politics of the archive: Translations in film. *Artists Space* <https://texts.artistspace.org/d0t7noga>.
- Storey, D. (2012). *Territories: The Claiming of Space*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.
- Winichakul, T. (1994). *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press.



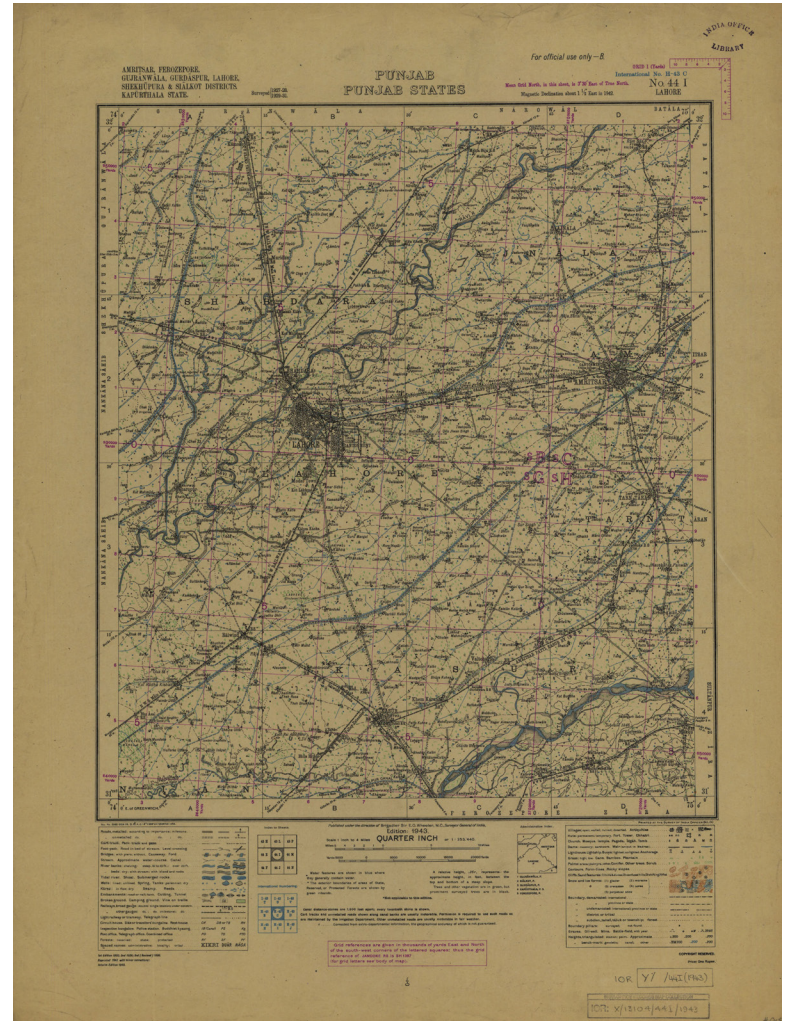
1000 km



A proposed division of South Asia on the cover of Choudhary Rahmat Ali's pamphlet, *The Millat of Islam and the Menace of 'Indianism'*, 1942. From India Office Records and Private Papers (Mss Eur F158/615). British Library, London, UK.

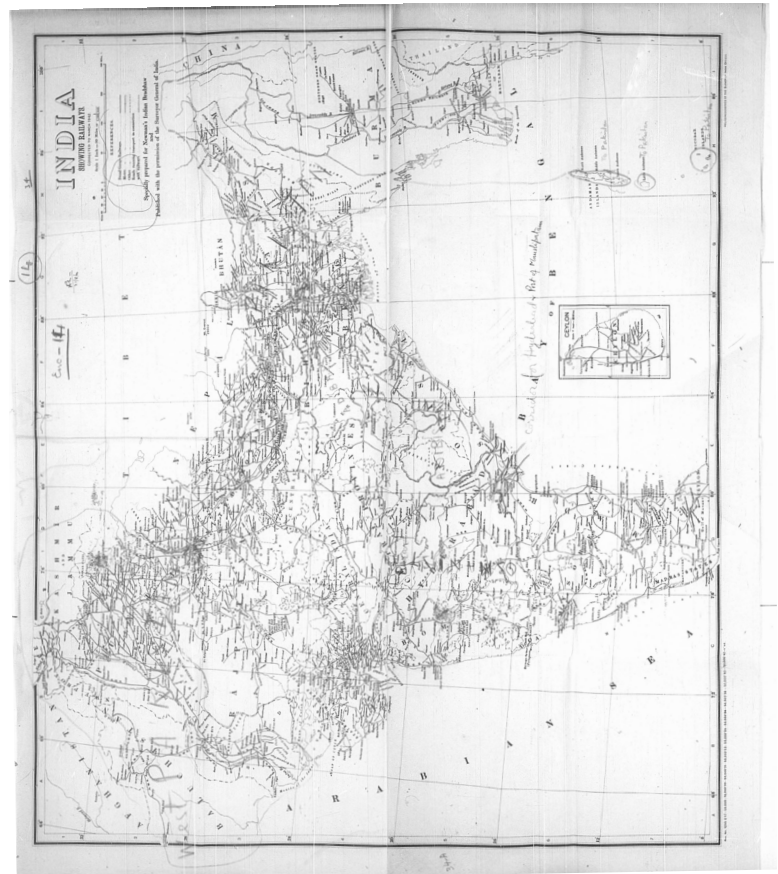


SURVEY OF INDIA, QUARTER INCH, NO. 441, LAHORE  
 Surveyor General of India, 1943



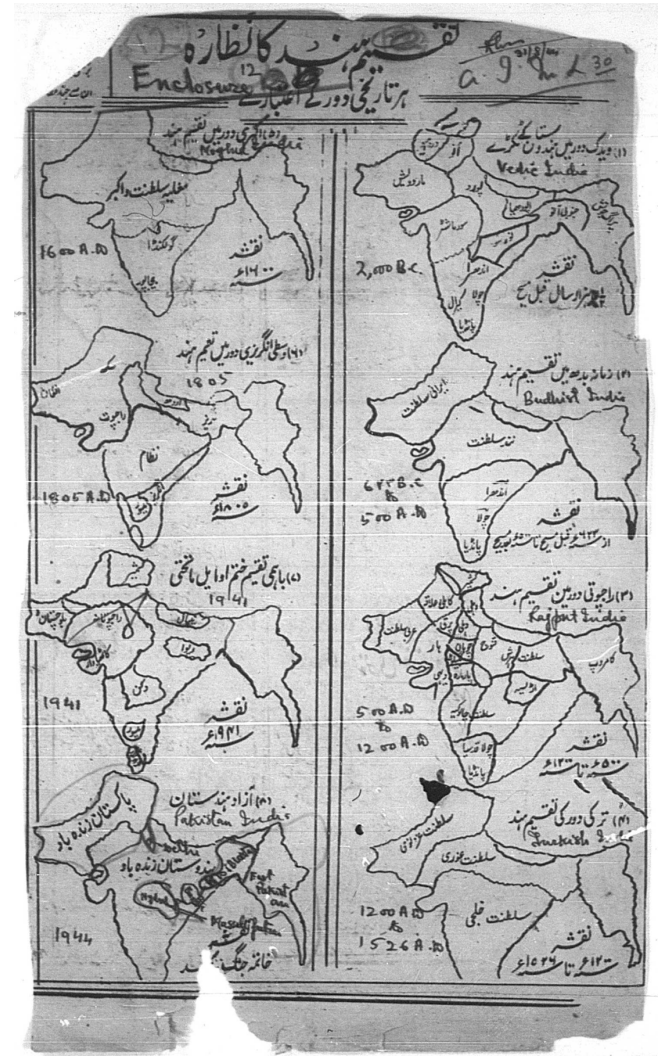
One of nine Survey of India maps that Radcliffe cut up and taped together to produce the Punjab Boundary Award. Survey of India Quarter Inch Series, Punjab, No. 441, Lahore, From India Office Records and Private Papers (IOR/X/13104/441/1943), British Library, London, UK.

MAP OF INDIA WITH PENCILLED ANNOTATIONS  
Maulana Haik Rauf (Presumed), September 1944



Map of South Asia showing borders presumably hand-drawn by Maulana Haik Rauf. Included in a parcel sent to Jinnah in September 1944 by Maulana Hakim Abdul Rauf, the president of the Calcutta branch of the Muslim League. From India Office Records and Private Papers (IOR Neg 10760/1), British Library, London, UK.

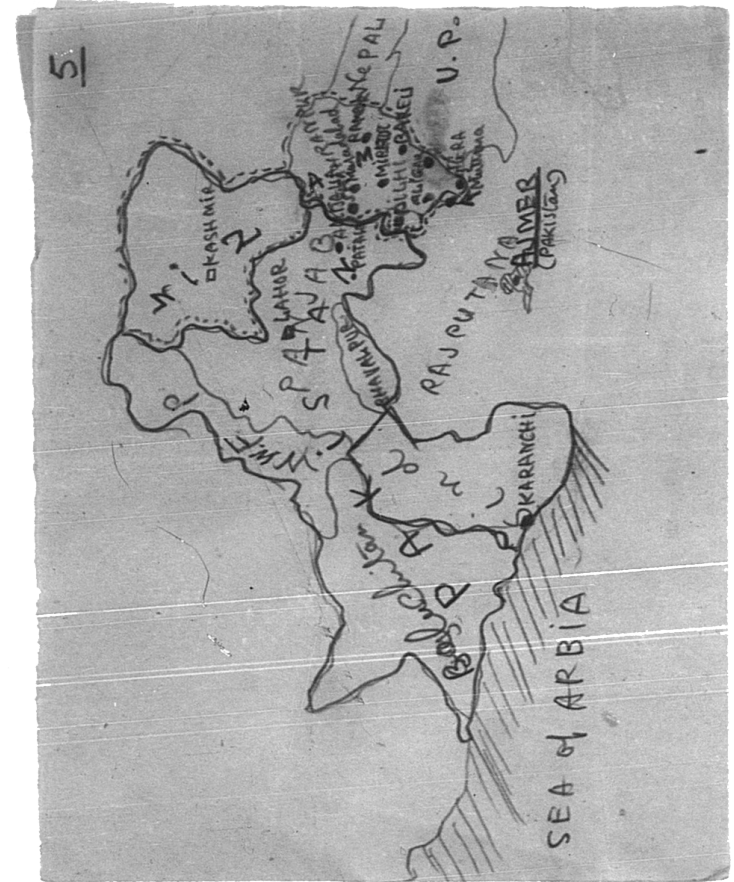




Taqseem-e-Hind Ka Nazara (A look at the divisions of India), clipped from a newspaper or magazine. Included in a parcel sent to Jinnah in September 1944 by Maulana Hakim Abdul Rauf, the president of the Calcutta branch of the Muslim League. From India Office Records and Private Papers (IOR Neg 10760/1), British Library, London, UK.

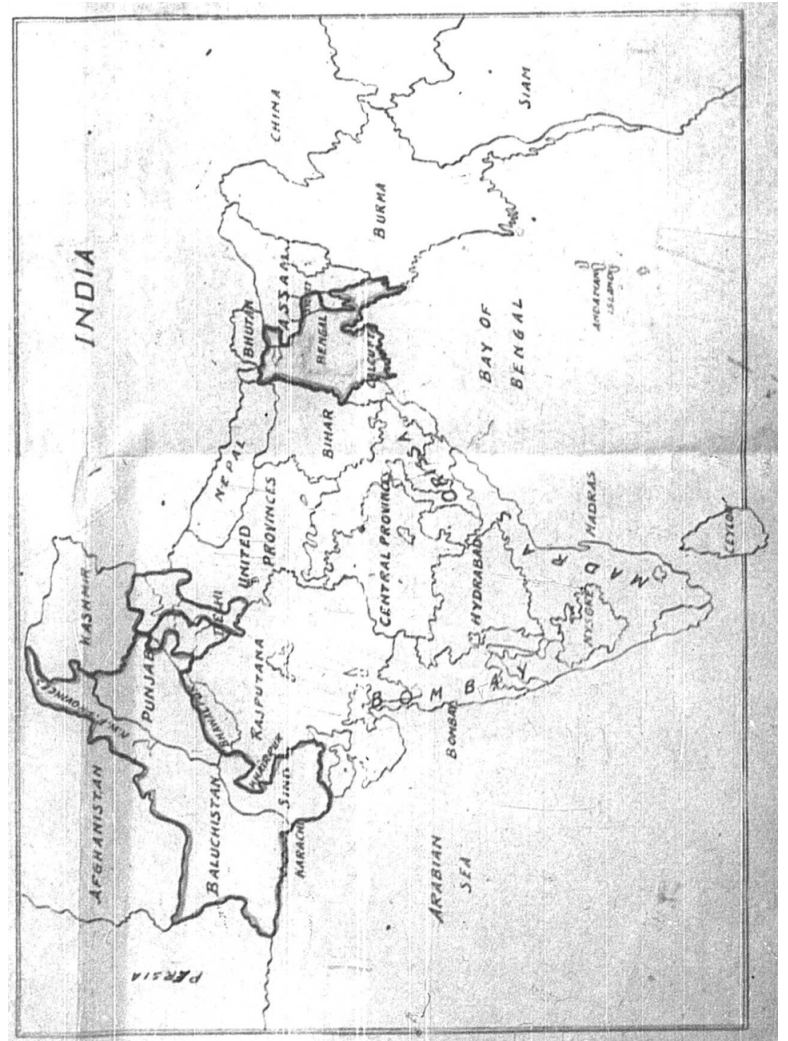
1000 km

SKETCH OF PAKISTAN IN THE JINNAH PAPERS  
Author unknown, Date unknown (Pre-Partition)



A sketch of Pakistan held in Muhammad Ali Jinnah's private papers. From India Office Records and Private Papers (IOR Neg 10811/41), British Library, London, UK.

HAND-DRAWN MAP OF PAKISTAN IN THE JINNAH PAPERS  
Author unknown, Date unknown (Pre-Partition)

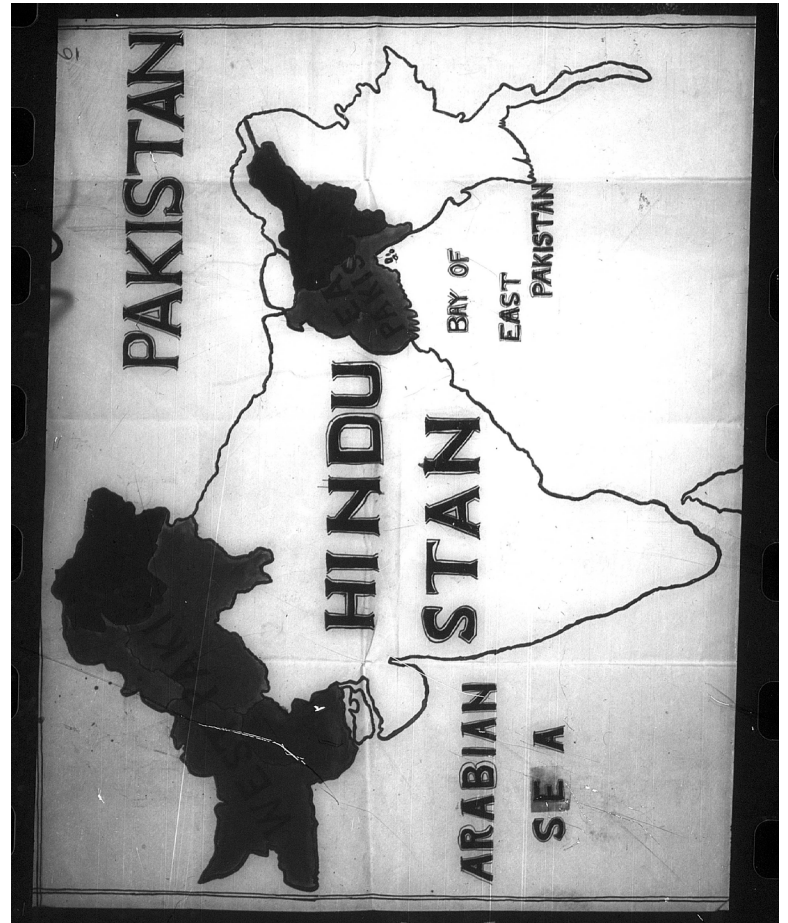


A map in the Jinnah Papers showing hand-drawn proposed borders for Pakistan. From India Office Records and Private Papers (IOR Neg 10811/41), British Library, London, UK.

BLACK AND WHITE MAP THE JINNAH PAPERS  
Author unknown, Date unknown (Pre-Partition)



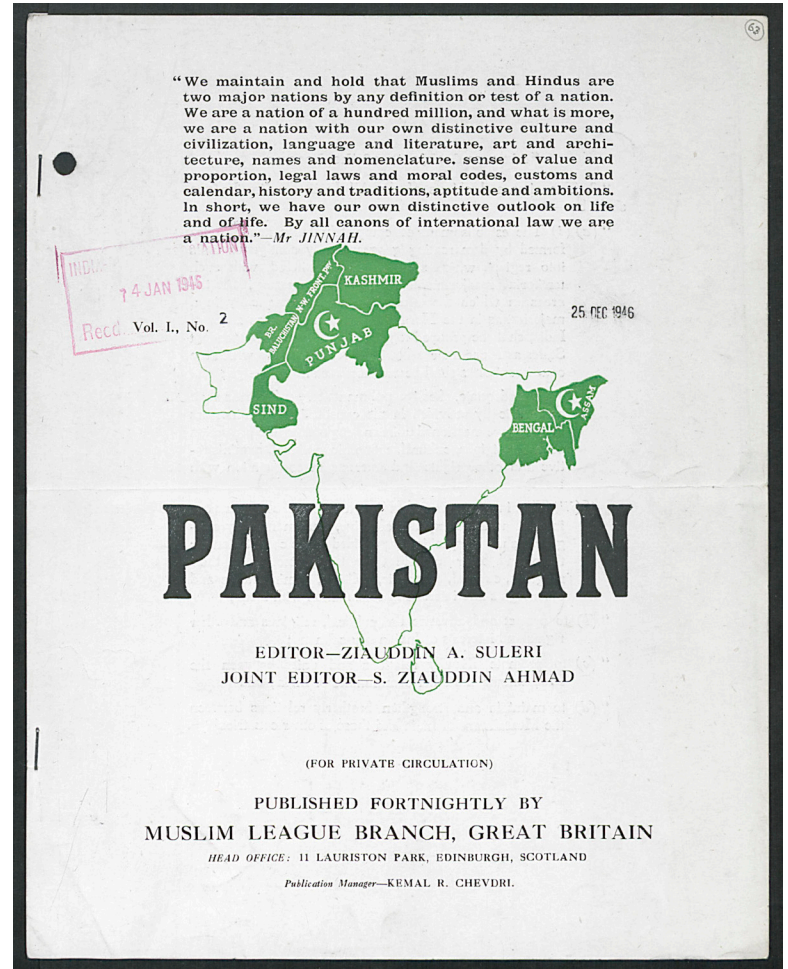
1000 km



A starkly colored map of South Asia held in Muhammad Ali Jinnah's private papers. From India Office Records and Private Papers (IOR Neg 10811/41), British Library, London, UK.



MAP OF PAKISTAN ON MUSLIM LEAGUE PAMPHLET  
Muslim League (Great Britain Branch), January 1946



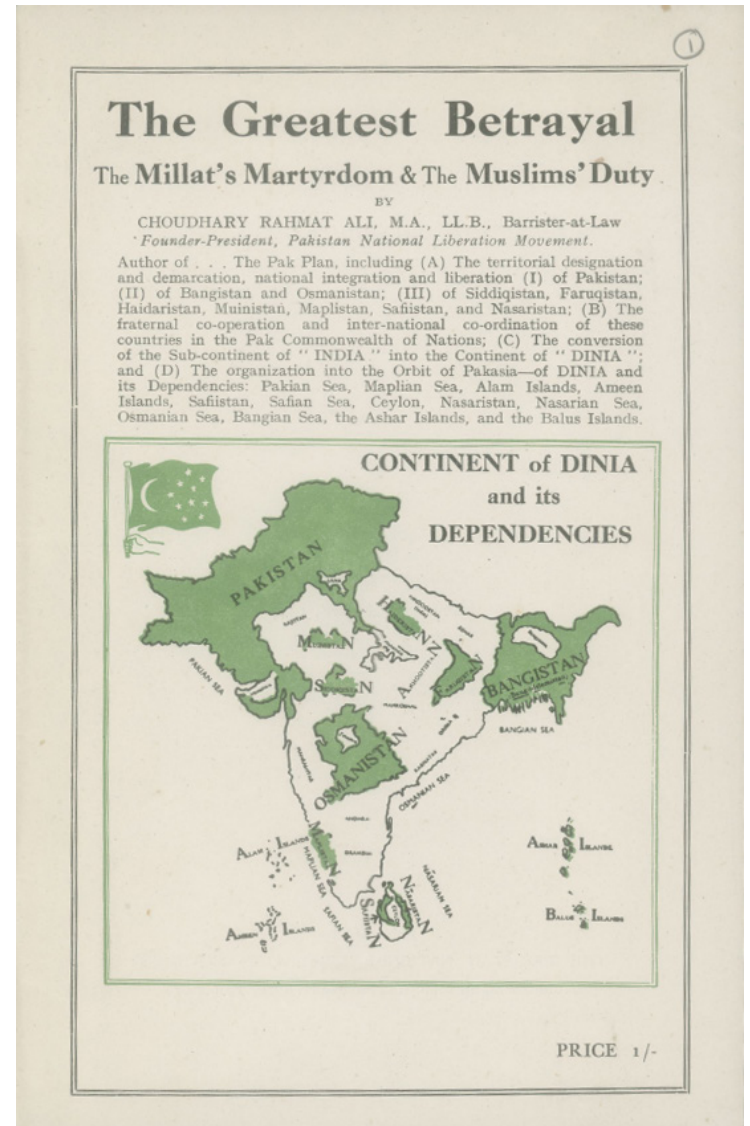
Proposed map of Pakistan on a pamphlet produced by the Great Britain branch of the Muslim League, ca. 1946. From India Office Records and Private Papers (IOR Neg 10821/38), British Library, London, UK.

MAP OF PAKISTAN AT CALCUTTA RALLY  
Author unknown (Muslim League Rally), March 1946



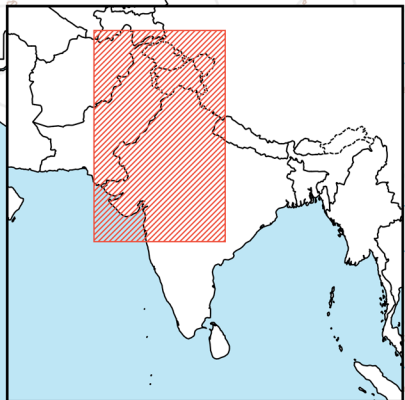
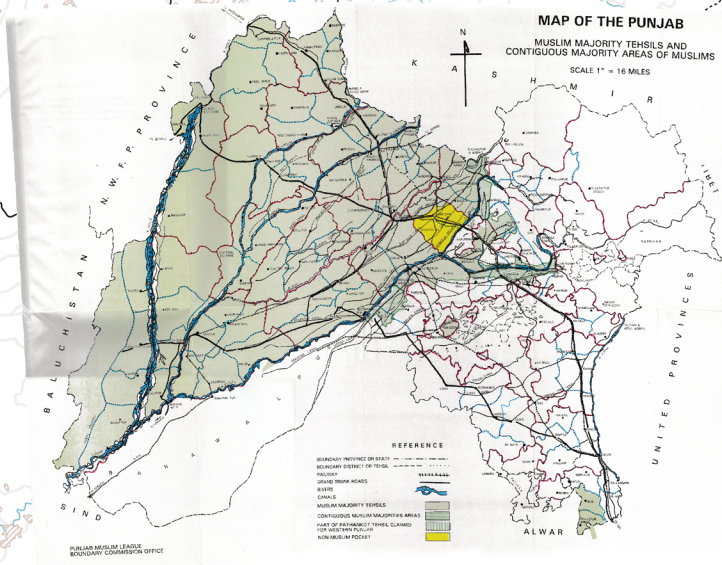
Photo of a banner showing proposed borders for Pakistan, at a Muslim League rally in Calcutta, held on 23 March, 1946. From India Office Records and Private Papers (IOR Neg 10821/38), British Library, London, UK.

1000 km

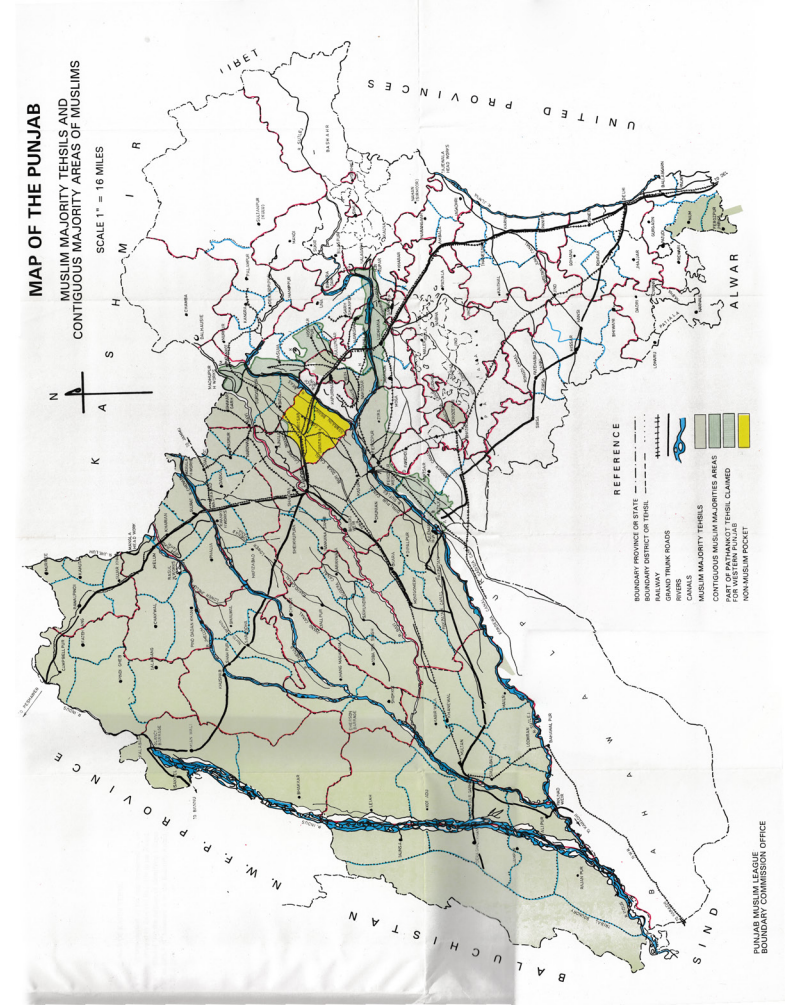


A proposed division of South Asia on the cover of Choudhary Rahmat Ali's pamphlet, *The Greatest Betrayal*, 1947. From the Centre of South Asian Studies, University of Cambridge, UK.

MUSLIM LEAGUE'S PUNJAB BOUNDARY PROPOSAL  
Muslim League, July 1947

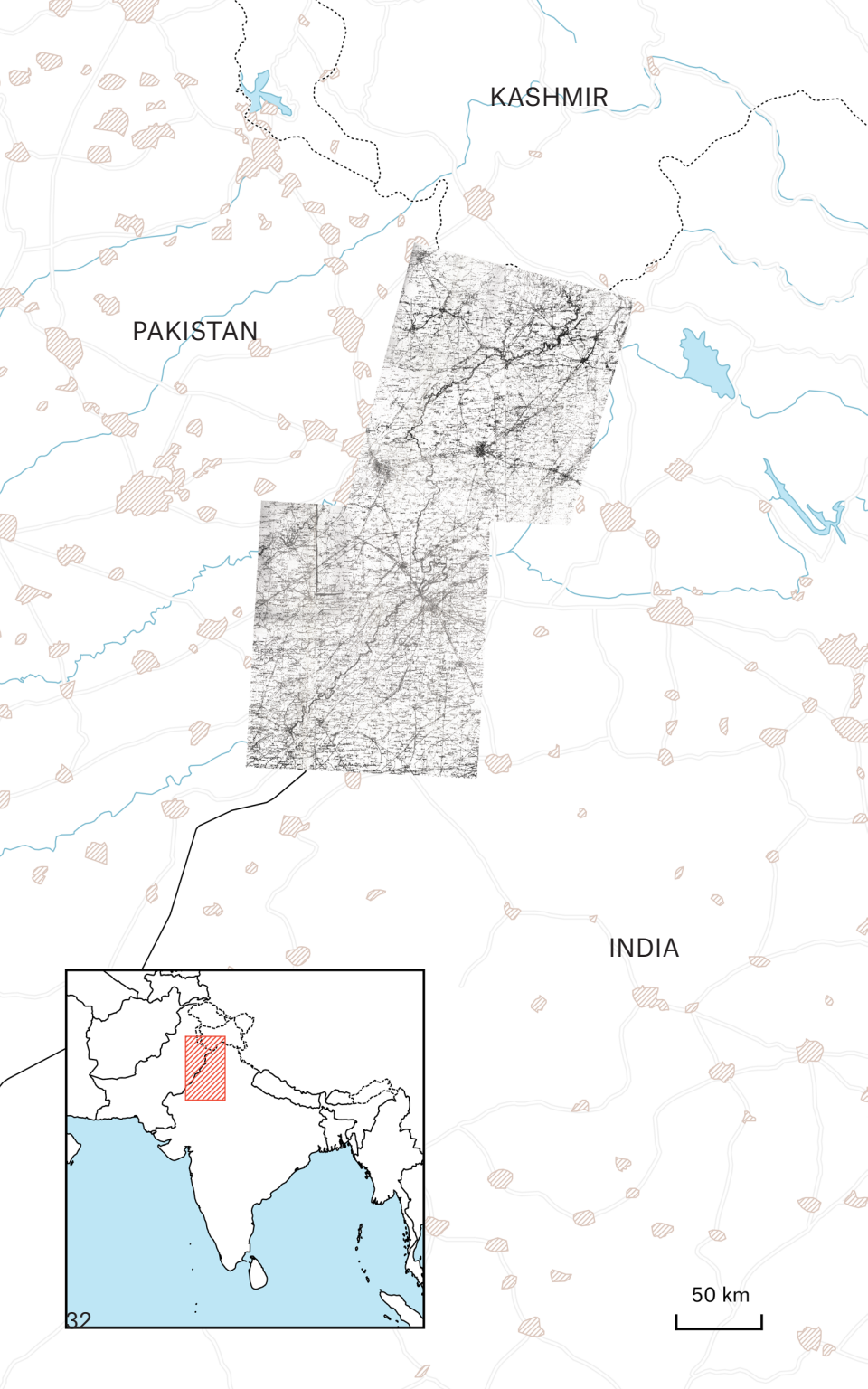


200 km

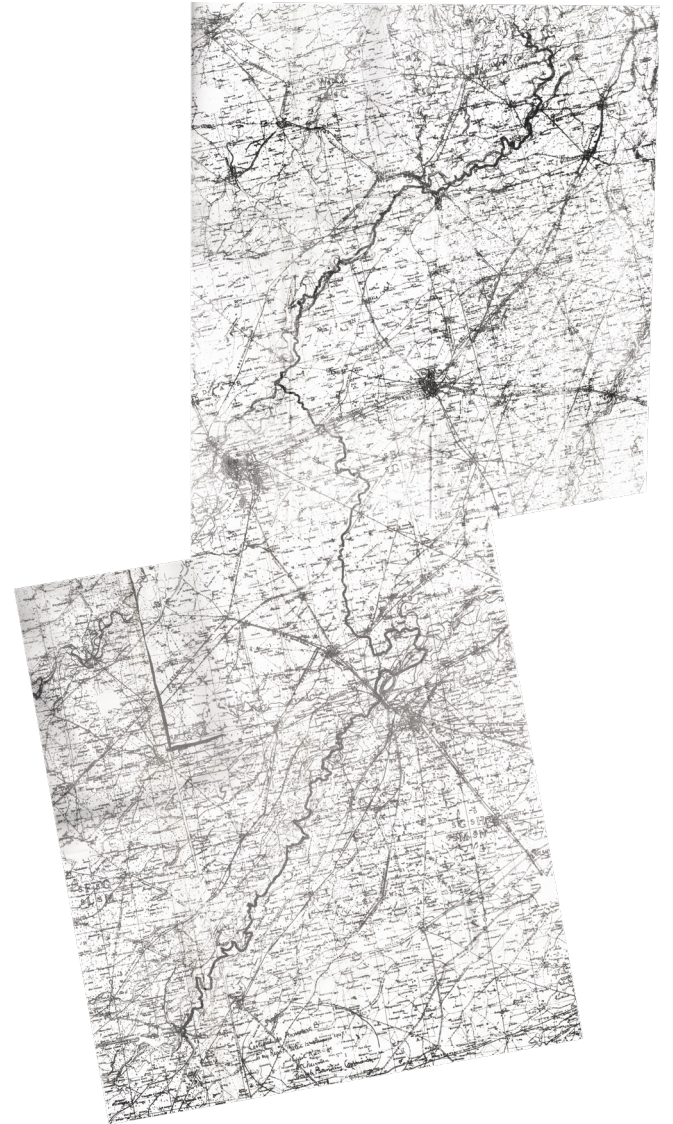


The Muslim League's proposed partition plan for the Punjab, submitted to the Punjab Boundary Commission on 20 July, 1947. Reproduced from Mian Muhammad Sadullah's *The Partition of the Punjab*, 1993.





PUNJAB BOUNDARY AWARD (ANNEXURE B)  
Cyril Radcliffe, August 1947



A section of the map (Annexure B) attached to the Punjab Boundary Award in 1947. Reproduced and combined from multiple sheets in Mian Muhammad Sadullah's *The Partition of the Punjab*, 1993.

THE CARTOGRAPHIC  
CONSTRUCTION OF PAKISTAN  
Shaheer Tarar, 2020, Public Domain.