Siddhanta's International Journal of Advanced Research in Arts & Humanities
Vol. 4, No. 2, November-December 2026

Decolonization and the Transfer of Power: A Systematic Literature Review and Comparative Criticism of India and Other British Colonies

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Abstract

Background. *The end of British rule in India in 1947 is routinely described through the vocabulary of "transfer of power", a phrase that implies orderly constitutional hand-over between willing parties. Scholarship on Britain's other twentieth-century withdrawals, from Ceylon and Burma to Malaya, the Gold Coast, Kenya, Cyprus and Southern Rhodesia, suggests that the language of orderly transfer conceals considerable variation in coercion, contingency and consequence.*

Objective. *This paper synthesizes and critically appraises the literature on British decolonization, using India as the anchor case and a set of comparator territories, in order to test whether the transfer-of-power narrative survives comparative scrutiny.*

Methods. *A PRISMA-informed review was conducted. The identification arm comprised a supplied corpus of 117 records and purposive citation-chaining of canonical historiography (71 records). Records were screened against explicit eligibility criteria, thematically coded across six analytical domains (strategy, transition mode, violence, constitutional design, economy, and memory and knowledge), and appraised with a four-criterion qualitative framework. Ten territories were compared on date, route, disruption and early trajectory.*

Results. *One hundred and eleven records were synthesized. Five interpretive schools were identified: metropolitan-strategic, nationalist, Marxist-economic, subaltern and postcolonial, and institutionalist-quantitative. Comparative evidence shows that transition mode was strongly associated with the character of early postcolonial politics, but not deterministically so. Negotiated, constitutional transfers (Ceylon, Ghana, Jamaica) produced durable electoral institutions in some cases and fragile ones in others. Transfers compressed by metropolitan fatigue (India–Pakistan, Burma) coincided with the gravest violence or earliest state failure. Counter-insurgency-shaped transfers (Malaya, Kenya, Cyprus) bequeathed securitized states.*

Conclusions. *"Transfer of power" is better understood as a managed retreat whose terms were set by metropolitan capacity, local mobilization and international pressure, not as a gift of sovereignty. Six analytical propositions are advanced for testing. Limitations include dependence on secondary literature and the bibliographic-level appraisal of part of the supplied corpus.*

Keywords: *decolonization; transfer of power; partition; British Empire; comparative colonial legacies; postcolonial state; systematic review; India*

1. Introduction

1.1 The problem of the phrase

Few expressions in imperial historiography are as quietly consequential as "the transfer of power". It was the title of the vast documentary series compiled by Mansergh and Moon [5], and it remains the title of the principal official-minded narrative of the final years of the Raj [4]. The phrase presents the end of empire as a juridical event: a sovereign authority in London, acting by statute, passes the instruments of rule to successor authorities in Delhi and Karachi. The grammar is of agency on the metropolitan side and reception on the colonial side. Whether the grammar corresponds to the historical reality is precisely the issue that more than six decades of scholarship have contested.

The contest matters beyond academic taxonomy. The way decolonization is narrated shapes how former colonies and former metropoles remember empire, how they allocate responsibility for postcolonial difficulties, and how they imagine the possibilities of political change. A narrative of benevolent hand-over lends itself to claims that independent states inherited functioning institutions and then squandered them. A narrative of forced retreat lends itself to claims that independence was seized and that the inheritance was structurally damaged. Between these poles lies a more complicated empirical record that this paper attempts to map.

1.2 Why India, and why comparison

India is both the largest and the most symbolically loaded case. Its independence in August 1947 followed some six decades of organized nationalist politics, a world war that exhausted British finances and legitimacy, and a final eighteen months of accelerated and improvised constitutional negotiation [1–3]. It also coincided with partition, a violent territorial and demographic rupture whose death toll is disputed but unquestionably enormous, with estimates ranging from a few hundred thousand to around two million and with perhaps twelve to fifteen million people displaced [6,7]. An account of decolonization that treats the Indian case as a model for orderly transfer has to explain that fact. An account that treats it as exceptional has to explain why comparable features, such as compressed timetables, communal mobilization and disputed boundaries, recur elsewhere.

Comparison across the British Empire is therefore not an optional extension but a methodological necessity. Cooper has argued that the analytical categories we apply to colonial history are themselves historical artefacts and need to be interrogated against varied cases [8]. The multi-volume Oxford history of the twentieth-century empire demonstrates how heterogeneous British imperial governance was, across settler colonies, protectorates, mandates, dominions and princely arrangements [10]. If the empire was heterogeneous, its ending cannot sensibly be reduced to a single script.

1.3 Research gap

Existing scholarship offers rich national histories and several excellent historiographical essays [1–3], but three gaps remain. First, systematic and transparent reviewing, with explicit

eligibility criteria, documented screening and explicit appraisal, is rare in imperial history, where narrative synthesis dominates and the criteria by which sources are privileged are seldom stated. Second, comparative treatments often set India against one or two counterparts, not against a structured range of transition modes. Third, the contemporary social-science literature emerging from within India, which treats law, education, language, public health, memory and sovereignty as sites where colonial legacies are negotiated, is infrequently integrated with the historiography of decolonization proper. Recent Indian scholarship on decolonizing sociological theory and indigenous epistemologies, for example, indicates that the intellectual dimension of decolonization is regarded as unfinished [9].

1.4 Aims and research questions

The paper pursues four aims: to map the literature on British decolonization using a transparent review protocol; to compare India with other British colonies across explicit dimensions; to critically appraise the major interpretive perspectives; and to identify testable propositions. The research questions are:

- **RQ1.** What interpretive schools structure the literature on British decolonization, and what do they claim?
- **RQ2.** How did the mode of transition vary across British territories, and with what apparent consequences?
- **RQ3.** To what extent does the transfer-of-power narrative withstand comparative and evidentiary scrutiny?
- **RQ4.** How do contemporary studies of law, education, language and sovereignty bear on the question of colonial legacy?

1.5 Structure

Section 2 sets out the conceptual framework. Section 3 describes the review method. Section 4 reports the review results. Section 5 analyses related research reviews and their outputs. Section 6 presents the comparative analysis. Section 7 critically assesses competing perspectives. Section 8 discusses legacies in law, education, language, health and sovereignty. Section 9 discusses implications and limitations, and Section 10 concludes.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Decolonization as event, process and discourse

Three senses of decolonization are in circulation. In the first, decolonization is an event: the formal constitutional passage of sovereignty. In the second, it is a process: the dismantling of colonial economic, administrative, cultural and psychological structures, a process that may begin before, and continue long after, the formal event. In the third, it is a discourse and a research programme: a critique of the knowledge systems through which colonial rule was justified and through which former colonies are still studied. This paper uses all three but keeps them analytically apart, because much confusion arises when evidence about the event is used to adjudicate claims about the process.

2.2 Knowledge, power and the colonial archive

Said's analysis of orientalism argued that European representations of the East were not neutral description but a mode of authority over it [11]. Chakrabarty's later intervention asked how historical narratives of modernity relegate non-European histories to a stage of "not yet" and argued for "provincializing" Europe as the supposed universal template [12]. Fanon's work treated decolonization as a process of violent and psychological restructuring and warned against nationalist elites who simply occupy the colonial apparatus [13]. Ngũgĩ's critique of the colonial language regime and Smith's critique of research methodologies extended the argument to language and to research practice itself [14,15]. Quijano's concept of the "coloniality of power" proposed that the classificatory hierarchies of colonial rule persist after formal independence [16]. For the present paper these contributions supply a critical vocabulary but also an evidentiary caution: claims about persisting coloniality require comparative demonstration, not assertion.

A contemporary Indian instance of this intellectual current is the argument that sociological theory should be rewritten from indigenous epistemologies [9]. Whatever one's view of the empirical programme, its existence shows that decolonization is treated as a live, unfinished intellectual agenda in the successor state, not as a closed historical episode.

2.3 Nationalism, hegemony and the subaltern

Chatterjee argued that anti-colonial nationalism was a "derivative discourse" that accepted the premises of the colonial framework even as it contested colonial power [17]. Guha characterized colonial India as a regime of "dominance without hegemony", in which the colonial state ruled by coercion without securing consent [18]. Spivak's essay asked whether subordinated groups can be represented in the archives and narratives produced by elites, a question that bears directly on whose voices shape the story of independence [19]. Mehta's analysis of liberal imperialism showed that the same liberal tradition that proclaimed universal rights supplied the categories used to defer self-government for the colonized [20]. Collectively these works question the legitimacy and completeness of any narrative that locates the origin of independence in the generosity of the imperial centre.

2.4 Imperial economics and strategy

An older line of argument emphasizes the structures of imperial interest. Gallagher and Robinson contended that British expansion was driven by informal as well as formal control and that the formal map understated the empire's reach [21]. Cain and Hopkins developed the thesis of "gentlemanly capitalism", locating imperial policy in the interests of the City of London and the financial-service economy [22]. Holland's survey of European decolonization stressed the interaction of metropolitan economic recalibration, Cold War politics and colonial nationalism [23]. Louis traced how American wartime anti-colonial diplomacy pressed on British imperial planning [24], and Manela showed how Wilsonian ideas of self-determination were taken up by colonial nationalists after 1918 [25]. These approaches share the view that decolonization was shaped decisively by the shifting calculus of metropolitan power.

2.5 Connected histories and the sociology of knowledge

Bhambra's argument for "connected sociologies" insists that the histories of colonizer and colonized cannot be written separately, and that the discipline's founding categories were formed through imperial encounter [26]. The paper adopts this relational stance. The metropolitan and colonial histories are treated as one analytic field, and the comparison across colonies is treated as a comparison of different connections to the same imperial system.

2.6 Analytic framework

From these literatures the paper derives six analytic domains used to code every included source and to structure the comparison:

- **Strategy:** the metropolitan motives and capacities that shaped timing.
- **Mode of transition:** negotiated, compressed, insurgent-shaped or settler-contested.
- **Violence and disruption:** the scale and character of conflict accompanying transfer.
- **Constitutional design:** the institutional inheritance and its adaptation.
- **Political economy:** inherited structures of land, trade, finance and labour.
- **Memory and knowledge:** how the transition is remembered, taught and contested.

3. Methods

3.1 Review design and reporting standard

The review follows the logic of the PRISMA 2020 statement for reporting systematic reviews [27], which updated the earlier PRISMA statement [28]. Because the evidence base is overwhelmingly humanistic and interpretive, with monographs and historiographical essays prominent, the design is a hybrid. It combines PRISMA's transparency requirements (explicit eligibility, documented flow, recorded exclusion reasons) with the scoping-review logic of PRISMA-ScR, which is suited to mapping broad, heterogeneous literatures [29]. Methodological discussions of the PRISMA-ScR approach for emerging researchers, and of its use for mapping research landscapes, informed the protocol [30,31].

This paper does not claim the status of a database-driven meta-analysis. No quantitative pooling was attempted, because the included sources are not commensurable in design or outcome measures. The review is best described as a PRISMA-informed critical narrative synthesis with a documented identification and screening process.

3.2 Information sources and identification

Two identification arms were used.

- **Arm A, supplied corpus.** A reference corpus of 117 records was supplied for this project. All records were examined.
- **Arm B, purposive citation-chaining.** Starting from the sources that anchor the main historiographical debates, further records were identified by following citations within the principal works [1–3,8,10,22,23]. Seventy-one records were identified and retained. Because Arm B selection was purposive, driven by canonical status and coverage of the

territories compared, no screening exclusions are reported for it, and the paper makes no claim that Arm B exhausts the literature.

3.3 Eligibility criteria

Records were eligible if they:

- addressed British imperial withdrawal, the transfer of power, or its immediate constitutional, political, economic or social consequences, or;
- offered a theoretical or methodological resource directly bearing on decolonization, colonial legacies, postcolonial sovereignty, or review methodology, or;
- provided contemporary social-scientific analysis of institutions (law, education, health, language, security, sovereignty) that the decolonization literature identifies as sites of colonial legacy, in a form that allows the claim to be tested or contextualized.

Records were excluded if they were outside these domains, or if bibliographic information was insufficient to identify the source.

3.4 Screening and selection

Screening of the supplied corpus was conducted by examining bibliographic details and titles against the eligibility criteria. Of 117 records, two were excluded for insufficient bibliographic detail (no publisher or venue given, or an unidentifiable title and source). Of the remaining 115, 75 were excluded as being outside the scope of the review, principally because they addressed unrelated subject matter such as contemplative practice, clinical medicine, digital culture or organizational management. Forty records were retained. Table 1 summarizes the flow.

Table 1. Identification, screening and inclusion (PRISMA-informed flow)

Stage	Arm A: supplied corpus	Arm B: citation-chaining	Total
Records identified	117	71	188
Duplicates removed	0	0	0
Records screened	117	71	188
Excluded: insufficient bibliographic detail	2	–	2
Excluded: outside eligibility scope	75	0	75
Records included in synthesis	40	71	**111**

Notes: Arm B selection was purposive; see Section 3.2. Included records by type: historiographical monographs and essays, primary or documentary collections and legal instruments, theoretical works, review-methodology sources, and contemporary social-science articles.

3.5 Data extraction and coding

For each included record, the following were extracted: author and year, region, analytic domain(s), type of source, principal claim, and evidentiary basis. Each record was coded to one or more of the six domains in Section 2.6. Where a record spanned domains, it was assigned to the one in which its principal contribution lay.

3.6 Quality appraisal

Because the evidence is heterogeneous, a qualitative four-criterion appraisal was applied to each source type:

- **Provenance:** whether the work rests on identifiable primary records (official papers, parliamentary debates, party archives, oral testimony).
- **Transparency:** whether claims are traceable to sources and whether estimates are given with their uncertainty.
- **Comparative reach:** whether the work engages cases beyond its own.
- **Reflexivity:** whether the author acknowledges the interpretive position from which the work is written.

These are not scored numerically. They are used in Section 7 to explain why some claims, notably casualty figures and economic aggregates, are treated with explicit caution.

3.7 Originality, ethics and integrity

All analytic text is original to this paper. Quoted wording is avoided; sources are paraphrased and attributed by number. Practical approaches to originality assurance in scholarly writing, including the use of detection tools and of artificial-intelligence support, were consulted when designing the writing protocol [32–34]. Because decolonization involves mass violence, displacement and contested memory, the ethical issues raised in social-science research, including respect for affected communities, caution with casualty figures, and avoidance of sensationalism, were considered throughout [35].

4. Results of the Review

4.1 Corpus characteristics

The synthesis comprises 111 records. By function, they fall into five groups: (i) historiographical syntheses and overviews of British and European decolonization [1–3,10,22,23]; (ii) studies of the Indian transfer and partition, including documentary compilations and legal instruments [4–7,54–62]; (iii) territory studies on Ceylon, Burma, Malaya, Singapore, the Gold Coast, Nigeria, Kenya, Cyprus, Southern Rhodesia and the Caribbean [63–76]; (iv) theoretical works in postcolonial and decolonial thought [8,9,11–20,26]; and (v) contemporary Indian social-science and legal studies bearing on legacies [77–111]. Review-methodology sources [27–35] are counted separately.

4.2 Thematic distribution

Coding by analytic domain showed an uneven distribution. Strategy and mode of transition dominate the classical literature. Violence and disruption are prominent in the studies of partition, Kenya, Malaya and Cyprus. Constitutional design is concentrated in studies of India, Ceylon, Nigeria and Ghana. Political economy is the focus of the Marxist-economic and institutionalist-quantitative schools. Memory and knowledge are most developed in postcolonial theory and in the contemporary Indian sociological literature. Very few sources address all six domains for any single territory, which is an important finding in its own right: the field is structurally fragmented, and cross-domain synthesis is the exception.

4.3 Principal convergences

Four convergences emerge. First, nearly all schools accept that Second World War exhaustion constrained Britain's capacity to retain India and that this shaped the speed of withdrawal [1–3]. Second, most accept that the terms and timing of transfer were not determined solely in London; nationalist mobilization and communal politics set the constraints within which British decisions were made [36,41]. Third, there is wide agreement that the colonial state's institutional architecture was inherited, with modification, by successor states [60]. Fourth, most acknowledge that the consequences of transition mode were durable, though they disagree on mechanism.

4.4 Principal divergences

The divergences are sharper. Scholars disagree on whether British policy was a deliberate strategy of "orderly withdrawal" or an improvised retreat [2,3]. They disagree on whether the colonial economy was one of net extraction or of uneven developmental spillover [42–44]. They disagree on partition's causes, placing weight variously on British divide-and-rule, the logic of mass electoral politics, and the strategic choices of Congress and the Muslim League [41,6]. And they disagree on whether colonial institutions bequeathed advantages or pathologies, a dispute taken up in Section 5.5.

5. Related Research Reviews: Their Results and Outputs

This section analyses the principal prior reviews, syntheses and historiographical debates against which the present paper positions itself. For each, the aim, the result and the limitation are noted. This analysis is intended to establish that the paper rests on a recognized scholarly lineage and to expose where earlier reviews leave gaps.

5.1 The metropolitan-strategic review tradition

Darwin's historiographical analysis surveyed how historians have explained the end of the British Empire and organized the debate around metropolitan, colonial and international "drivers" [1]. His result was that no single cause suffices; he argued for a model in which the British "official mind" sought to manage retreat while preserving influence, and in which the pace was forced by pressures that the metropole could not fully control. His companion study traced how the post-war retreat unfolded and stressed the interplay of economic weakness, nationalist pressure and Cold War realignment [2]. Hyam's later synthesis developed the concept of a declining empire whose retreat was punctuated by attempts at reform and by

episodes of repression [3 is not applicable here; see 2]. Louis and Robinson contended that decolonization was itself a form of imperialism, in which Britain sought to convert formal into informal influence through the Commonwealth and through partnership with successor elites [3].

Output and limitation. The strength of this tradition is its command of official papers. Its limitation is that it risks privileging the metropolitan archive and thus reproducing the perspective of the decision-makers whose decisions it explains.

5.2 The Indian nationalist and modern-history reviews

Sarkar's survey of modern India integrated economic, social and political history and presented independence as the outcome of a long process of mass mobilization alongside colonial exhaustion [36]. Bayly's work on Indian society and the making of the empire showed that colonial rule depended on collaboration with indigenous intermediaries and that Indian social and commercial networks conditioned British power [37]. Brown's study of India's path to democracy emphasized the institutional and political training that Indian elites received before 1947 [38]. The Metcalfs' concise history offers a widely used synthesis of the transition and its aftermath [39], and the multi-author nationalist account by Chandra and colleagues represents the mainstream nationalist reading of the freedom struggle [40].

Output and limitation. These works converge on the idea that independence was won by, not given to, Indians. Their limitation is the risk of teleology, reading earlier events as steps toward an independence that was not inevitable in its timing or form.

5.3 Reviews of partition and the Muslim League

Jalal's study of the demand for Pakistan reinterpreted Jinnah's strategy as bargaining for parity at the centre, not as a settled separatist aim, and so challenged accounts that treated partition as the inevitable outcome of two-nation ideology [41]. Khan's history of partition, drawing on official and personal sources, emphasized the speed and improvisation of the final months and the human cost [6]. Talbot and Singh's synthesis integrated regional studies of Punjab, Bengal and Sind and demonstrated the diversity of partition experience across space and community [7]. Butalia's oral-history work recovered the testimonies of women, children and marginalized groups largely absent from official records [58].

Output and limitation. These works shifted the debate from "who caused partition" to "how did contingent decisions under extreme time pressure produce mass violence". The limitation is the difficulty of generalizing from regional and oral evidence, and persisting uncertainty over casualty figures.

5.4 The economic reviews

The question of colonial economic impact has been central. Roy's economic history reviewed the available data and argued for a differentiated assessment of colonial India's economy, noting both the commercialization of agriculture and the stagnation of per-capita incomes [42]. Tharoor's polemical account argued that British rule was extractive and harmful and that its legacy was largely negative [43]. Ferguson's opposing thesis credited the empire with propagating institutions, markets and the rule of law [44]. Maddison's long-run national-

accounts estimates, widely used in the debate, suggest that India's share of world output fell from roughly a quarter around 1700 to around four per cent by 1950, though the series rests on reconstructions that carry significant uncertainty [47]. Sen's analysis of famines reframed the 1943 Bengal catastrophe as an entitlement failure compounded by wartime policy [46], and Mukerjee's study put Churchill's wartime decisions at the centre of an indictment of imperial priorities [45]. Estimates of excess deaths in the Bengal famine are commonly placed between two and three million [45,46].

Output and limitation. The economic reviews demonstrate that headline claims, whether of ruin or of benefit, depend on baseline selection and on the quality of reconstructed series. Their limitation is that causal attribution from aggregates to colonial policy is difficult, because the counterfactual is unobserved.

5.5 Institutionalist and quantitative reviews

A distinct strand uses comparative econometrics. Acemoglu, Johnson and Robinson argued that settler mortality shaped the institutions established by colonizers and that institutional quality explains long-run income differences across former colonies [48]. Banerjee and Iyer found that districts in India under landlord-based revenue systems had inferior agricultural investment and lower public-goods provision after independence than districts under cultivator-based systems [49]. Iyer found that areas under direct British rule performed differently from former princely states on later public-goods outcomes [50]. Lange argued that the type of colonial rule, direct or indirect, helps account for differences in postcolonial state capacity across British territories [51]. Mamdani's analysis of late colonialism in Africa proposed that indirect rule bequeathed a "bifurcated state" dividing citizens from subjects [52], and Cooper's study of labour in British and French Africa emphasized how decolonization was shaped by labour movements and by imperial attempts at developmental reform [53].

Output and limitation. These studies provide the closest thing to testable evidence on legacy. Their limitations include data constraints, the contestation of identification strategies, and the difficulty of separating colonial from pre-colonial and post-colonial influences.

5.6 Postcolonial and decolonial reviews

Postcolonial theory offers critical reviews of how knowledge about empire is produced [11,12,17–20]. Smith's work reviews research practice from the standpoint of indigenous communities [15], and Bhambra's work calls for a reconstruction of social theory [26]. Such reviews do not typically adopt systematic protocols, which means that their evidentiary basis is argumentative and interpretive instead of cumulative.

5.7 What the earlier reviews leave unresolved

Three conclusions follow. First, no previous review of which the author is aware applies an explicit eligibility framework across both the classical historiography and the contemporary social-science literature. Second, the economic and institutional debates are conducted largely apart from the high-political and memory debates. Third, comparison across British territories is more often illustrative than systematic. The present paper addresses these gaps within the limits described in Section 3.

6. Comparative Analysis: India and Other British Colonies

6.1 India: the compression of a transfer

The longue durée. British authority in India had developed from commercial dominance through a crown raj in 1858 into an elaborate bureaucratic and military apparatus. The Government of India Act 1935 devolved substantial provincial authority to elected Indian ministries while reserving key powers at the centre and creating a federal scheme that was never fully implemented [55]. Elections under the 1935 framework in 1937 and 1946 sharpened the competition between the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League and ratified communal electorates as the main structure of political competition [38,41].

The war and the Cabinet Mission. The Second World War strained India's economy and society, produced the Bengal famine, and drained Britain of the financial and military capacity to retain control by force [1,2,46]. The 1946 Cabinet Mission proposed a loose federal union, which failed when Congress and the League could not agree on its interpretation; the League's call for Direct Action Day in August 1946 was followed by large-scale communal killing in Calcutta, with deaths commonly estimated in the thousands [6,54].

The compression. In February 1947 the British government announced that power would be transferred by June 1948. Mountbatten, arriving as the last Viceroy, advanced the date; the Mountbatten Plan was announced in early June, and the independence of two dominions was fixed for mid-August 1947 [54,57]. The Indian Independence Act 1947 gave statutory form to the arrangement, creating two dominions and ending paramountcy over the princely states, of which there were some 565 covering roughly two-fifths of the subcontinent's territory [56,59]. The Boundary Commission under Radcliffe had only weeks to draw lines through Punjab and Bengal; the awards were published after independence, leaving millions uncertain of which state they inhabited [58,59]. Moon's contemporaneous-to-near-contemporary account judged the haste a central cause of the catastrophe [54], and Hajari's later narrative reached a comparable conclusion by documenting the failure of the successor authorities to prepare for mass migration [58].

The human cost. Estimates of those killed range from around two hundred thousand to two million, and displacement is estimated at twelve to fifteen million [6,7]. The wide range itself is a datum: it indicates that no authority was equipped, or sufficiently motivated, to count the dead. Butalia's oral histories, and the studies of abducted women and survivors' memory, show that official statistics under-represent gendered and intimate violence [60].

The inheritance. The Indian Constituent Assembly produced a Constitution that came into force in January 1950; Austin's study documents how the Assembly adapted the structures and many of the provisions of the 1935 Act while adding fundamental rights and directive principles [62]. India has since maintained a regular electoral cycle, interrupted by the national Emergency of 1975–77 [61]. This continuity is often attributed to the elite's pre-independence political experience [38], to the Congress organization's breadth, and to deliberate constitutional design. It is also a fact that the successor state inherited a punitive and securitized apparatus, including provisions for preventive detention, which scholars of the Constitution have treated as a continuity with colonial practice [62].

The comparative lesson from India is thus double-edged. The transfer was constitutionally orderly in form and catastrophic in practice for the populations of the divided provinces. "Transfer of power" is accurate as a description of the legal sequence and misleading as a description of the lived transition.

6.2 Ceylon: negotiated continuity

Ceylon is often presented as the model of peaceful constitutional decolonization. The Donoughmore Constitution of 1931 introduced universal adult suffrage, and the Soulbury arrangements preceded independence in February 1948 [63]. The leading nationalists had cooperated with British officials, and there was no mass anti-colonial insurgency. Yet the later history shows that peaceful transfer did not prevent subsequent ethnic conflict. The Sinhala-language politics of the mid-1950s, the citizenship legislation affecting Indian-origin plantation labour, and the long civil war after 1983 trace their roots to the way colonial administration had categorized communities and to the postcolonial state's majoritarian turn [63]. Ceylon therefore illustrates that smooth transfer is not a proxy for settled legitimacy: the form of the transfer left unresolved the question of which community the state belonged to.

6.3 Burma: fragmentation and the failure of the settlement

In Burma the transfer was negotiated rapidly after the Second World War. The Aung San–Attlee agreement of January 1947 and the Panglong understanding with some frontier minorities in February 1947 laid the ground, but the assassination of Aung San in July 1947 removed the figure most capable of holding the settlement together [64,65]. Independence came in January 1948, outside the Commonwealth, followed almost immediately by communist and ethnic insurgencies [64]. Taylor's study of the state in Burma argues that colonial institutions, with their administrative divisions and military recruitment patterns, left a state with limited legitimacy and strong coercive organs, a configuration that prepared the ground for military takeover in 1962 [65]. The comparison with India is instructive: both transfers were compressed and both coincided with strains over territory and minorities, though India's party organization and administrative continuity provided greater resilience.

6.4 Malaya and Singapore: insurgency, then negotiated merdeka

Malaya was shaped by a different sequence. A communist-led insurgency prompted the declaration of an Emergency in 1948, and its counter-insurgency, including population resettlement and extensive security powers, lasted until 1960 [66,67]. Stockwell's account showed how British planners tied decolonization to the defeat of the communist threat and to the construction of a multi-ethnic moderate coalition [67]. Harper argued that the end of empire in Malaya was bound up with the making of a state and that the Alliance of ethnic parties emerged as the acceptable partner for transfer [66]. Independence came in August 1957, with Singapore later joining the wider Malaysian federation in 1963 and separating in 1965 [66,68]. Lee's memoir records the reasoning of Singapore's leadership in reshaping the political economy of a small city-state after separation [68]. The Malayan case shows how security-shaped decolonization can produce durable but restrictive political settlements: the partner to whom power was transferred was chosen for reliability as much as for representativeness.

6.5 The Gold Coast and Nigeria: mass politics and federal design

The Gold Coast became Ghana in March 1957, the first sub-Saharan colony to achieve independence. Nkrumah's Convention People's Party mobilized mass support and, after the 1951 elections, forced the pace of constitutional change from within the colonial framework [69,70]. Rathbone's study shows that the CPP's relations with chiefs shaped the transition, and that the central government's centralizing drive provoked regional opposition [69]. Nkrumah's own account presents independence as the culmination of a political strategy of positive action [70]. The subsequent one-party consolidation and the military coup of 1966 show that early political success did not guarantee institutional resilience.

Nigeria's path to independence in October 1960 involved a federal structure designed to accommodate large regional and ethnic blocs; Falola and Heaton's history shows how the colonial division of the territory into regions shaped party formation along regional lines, a configuration that proved unstable, leading to coups in 1966 and civil war from 1967 to 1970 [71]. The comparison suggests that mass-party strategies and federal designs may each carry distinct risks in the absence of a settled national political community.

6.6 Kenya: counter-insurgency as the context of transfer

In Kenya the Mau Mau uprising and the Emergency from 1952 to 1960 involved a harsh counter-insurgency, including mass detention and forced villagization. Elkins argued that Britain operated a system of detention on a very large scale and that violence was extensive and systematically concealed [72]. Anderson's work, based on extensive records of trials and executions, similarly documented a "dirty war" and the use of capital punishment on a large scale, while differing with Elkins on aspects of scale and interpretation [73]. Both accounts agree that well over a hundred thousand people were detained [72,73]. The constitutional conferences that prepared independence in December 1963 took place after a military defeat of the insurgency, and the post-independence state inherited both an authoritarian security apparatus and a settler-shaped land question [72,73]. The Kenyan case challenges the benign narrative of constitutional hand-over: here, the transfer was preceded by the use of emergency powers that the successor government kept in various forms.

6.7 Cyprus and Southern Rhodesia: guarantees and settler resistance

In Cyprus, a campaign by the EOKA movement from 1955 to 1959 for union with Greece was met by emergency measures, and the Zurich and London agreements of 1959 produced a consociational constitution with external guarantees; independence followed in August 1960 [74]. Holland's study of Britain and the revolt shows that British decisions were driven substantially by strategic considerations, including the bases and regional position, and that the settlement was designed to protect them [74]. The consociational structure collapsed into intercommunal violence in 1963–64, and the island was divided after 1974. Cyprus therefore demonstrates that externally guaranteed power-sharing, designed to serve metropolitan strategic interests, may fail to produce domestic legitimacy.

Southern Rhodesia offers the settler variant. The white minority government's unilateral declaration of independence in 1965 was followed by years of sanctions and then a protracted guerrilla war. The Lancaster House conference in 1979 and elections in early 1980 led to independence as Zimbabwe in April 1980 [75]. Stedman's study of mediation emphasizes the

role of international pressure and of military stalemate in making a settlement possible [75]. The case shows that where a settler minority held power, the "transfer" was effectively a negotiated surrender under external and military pressure.

6.8 The Caribbean: gradualism and parliamentary continuity

In the Caribbean, Jamaica provides an example of gradual constitutional development. Universal adult suffrage was introduced in 1944, internal self-government followed, and independence was achieved in August 1962 after the failure of the West Indian Federation [76]. Sherlock and Bennett's history shows that a party system developed under colonial tutelage and that independence involved little violence [76]. Jamaica's subsequent history of competitive party politics, but also of political violence linked to patronage, suggests that gradualism sustains electoral institutions without necessarily resolving social inequalities [76].

6.9 Comparative synthesis

Table 2 summarizes the cases on the dimensions of date, route, violence and early trajectory. The entries are condensed summaries of the sources cited and should be read as indicative, not definitive; casualty figures in particular are contested.

Table 2. Comparative profile of selected British territories at the transfer of power

Territory	Independence	Route to transfer	Violence / disruption	Early trajectory
India	15 Aug 1947	Compressed negotiation; partition; Indian Independence Act 1947 [54,56]	Partition violence; deaths est. ~0.2–2 million; ~12–15 million displaced [6,7]	Constitution 1950; continuous electoral politics, interrupted 1975–77 [61,62]
Pakistan	14 Aug 1947	Same Act; carved from British India [56]	As above; boundary disputes [58,59]	Constitutional instability; early reliance on bureaucracy and army [41]
Ceylon	4 Feb 1948	Negotiated, constitutional [63]	Minimal at transfer	Electoral continuity; later majoritarian turn and civil war [63]
Burma	4 Jan 1948	Rapid negotiation; left Commonwealth [64]	Leader assassinated 1947; insurgencies from 1948 [64,65]	Fragmentation; military rule from 1962 [65]
Malaya	31 Aug 1957	Negotiated after counter-insurgency [66,67]	Emergency 1948–60 [67]	Stable dominant-coalition rule; securitized state [66]

Gold Coast / Ghana	6 Mar 1957	Mass-party pressure; staged self-government [69,70]	Limited at transfer	One-party consolidation; coup 1966 [69]
Nigeria	1 Oct 1960	Federal constitutional bargaining [71]	Limited at transfer	Coups 1966; civil war 1967–70 [71]
Kenya	12 Dec 1963	Transfer after defeat of insurgency [72,73]	Mau Mau Emergency 1952–60; >100,000 detained [72,73]	Centralized, security-heavy state; unresolved land question [72]
Cyprus	16 Aug 1960	Externally guaranteed power-sharing [74]	EOKA campaign 1955–59 [74]	Consociational collapse 1963–64; division 1974 [74]
Southern Rhodesia / Zimbabwe	18 Apr 1980	Negotiated settlement after settler UDI and war [75]	Protracted guerrilla war [75]	Majority-rule state; later authoritarian consolidation [75]
Jamaica	6 Aug 1962	Gradual constitutional development [76]	Minimal at transfer	Competitive party system; later patronage violence [76]

6.10 Analytical propositions

On the basis of the comparison, six propositions are offered. They are hypotheses for further testing and not established results.

- **P1: The compression hypothesis.** Where the interval between a decision to withdraw and the date of withdrawal is short and administrative preparation is minimal, the risk of large-scale violence or early state fragmentation increases (India–Pakistan, Burma).
- **P2: The partner-selection hypothesis.** Where the metropole chose its successor partner on grounds of reliability and security alignment, the resulting state tends to be stable but restrictive (Malaya, Cyprus).
- **P3: The insurgency-legacy hypothesis.** Where transfer followed counter-insurgency, the successor state tends to inherit emergency legal powers and a securitized apparatus (Malaya, Kenya).
- **P4: The categorization hypothesis.** Where colonial administration formalized communal categories, even a peaceful transfer leaves unresolved questions about belonging that resurface as conflict (Ceylon, India–Pakistan, Cyprus, Nigeria).
- **P5: The institutional-continuity hypothesis.** Where successor elites had prior experience of electoral and administrative office, the formal institutional inheritance proved more durable (India, Jamaica), though durability coexisted with inequality.
- **P6: The narrative-gap hypothesis.** The distance between the juridical description of a transfer and the lived experience of it is greatest where violence was gendered, intimate or concentrated in borderland populations, and official statistics are correspondingly poorest.

7. Critical Assessment of Competing Perspectives

7.1 The metropolitan-strategic perspective

This perspective is strongest on timing. It demonstrates convincingly that Britain's financial exhaustion, the burden of imperial defence, American pressure and the new geopolitical order after 1945 made indefinite retention of India untenable [1–3,24]. Its weakness is explanatory asymmetry. By centring metropolitan decisions it can treat colonial actors as constraints rather than makers of history. The comparative record shows that the constraints were the product of mass mobilization, and that in Ghana, Kenya and Malaya local movements determined which transfers were possible [66,69,72].

7.2 The nationalist perspective

Nationalist narratives recover Indian and colonial agency and are essential correctives to the metropolitan story [38,40]. They are weaker on internal division. They tend to understate the extent to which nationalism was itself plural, contested and, in the case of the League's demand for a state, in direct opposition to Congress's claim to represent all Indians [41]. They also risk presenting the post-1947 state as the natural fulfilment of the movement, which Chatterjee's analysis of nationalist thought challenges by showing the derivative nature of nationalist state-building [17].

7.3 The Marxist-economic perspective

This perspective exposes the material interests behind empire and the structural continuities between formal and informal imperialism [21,22]. Its evidentiary difficulty is, as discussed above, the counterfactual problem, and the divergent readings of the same economic aggregates by Tharoor and Ferguson demonstrate that the debate remains unresolved on evidence alone [43,44]. A responsible position is that colonial policy shaped distributional outcomes, that famine and fiscal policy had grave consequences in specific episodes [45,46], and that the magnitude of net economic harm is uncertain and depends on method [42,47].

7.4 The subaltern and postcolonial perspective

Subaltern and postcolonial analyses expose whose experience is absent from the official record and how the categories of rule were also categories of knowledge [18,19,58,60]. Their contribution to the "reality-exposing" task is considerable: they show that the transfer-of-power narrative is not simply a description but a political choice about which actors count as protagonists. Their weakness is sometimes a reliance on discourse analysis that cannot adjudicate empirical disputes about causation, and a tendency to treat "colonial" as a master variable.

7.5 The institutionalist-quantitative perspective

By using systematic comparison, this strand offers the closest approximation to a test of legacy claims [48–51]. Yet it too has limits. Settler-mortality instruments have been challenged, direct-versus-indirect rule is difficult to measure cleanly, and results from one region do not automatically generalize. The most defensible reading is that the type of colonial rule left

identifiable traces, but that the magnitude and persistence of those traces vary by context and by the policies of postcolonial governments.

7.6 Cross-perspective appraisal

Applying the four appraisal criteria of Section 3.6 yields a pattern. Metropolitan-strategic work is strong on provenance and transparency but weak on reflexivity. Nationalist work is strong on provenance and variable on transparency. Marxist-economic and institutionalist studies are strong on transparency of method but constrained by data. Subaltern and postcolonial studies are strong on reflexivity and weaker on comparative reach. The perspectives are therefore complementary and the strongest conclusions are those on which they converge: that the timing of withdrawal was shaped by metropolitan weakness; that the forms of transfer were constrained by local mobilization; that the colonial state's categories and instruments persisted; and that the human costs of compressed and security-shaped transfers were severe.

7.7 What the evidence does not support

Four claims are weakly supported. The claim that the transfer was a voluntary, benevolent act does not survive the comparative evidence of Kenya, Malaya, Cyprus and Zimbabwe, where force and external pressure were central [67,72–75]. The claim that partition was inevitable is challenged by work showing that the League's demands and Congress's responses evolved with circumstance [41]. The claim that colonial rule was uniformly harmful or uniformly beneficial is not supported by methodologically careful work that finds heterogeneous effects across regions and institutions [49–51]. And the claim that colonial legacies explain all postcolonial pathologies underestimates the choices of successor governments, as the divergent trajectories of formerly similar territories show [63,69,71,76].

8. Legacies in Law, Education, Language, Health and Sovereignty

The decolonization literature insists that the transfer of power was not the end of the story. Contemporary Indian scholarship, though not always framed in explicitly postcolonial terms, offers material on the domains where legacies are negotiated. The studies below are cited as contextual and comparative resources. They are used here to indicate what themes the contemporary literature addresses, and any causal link to colonial rule is flagged as a hypothesis requiring evidence.

8.1 Education: missions, Gandhi and contemporary policy

Education was a primary site of colonial intervention. A recent study of missionary activity in Southern Travancore examines the role of missionaries in the development of Western education [77], which illustrates how nineteenth-century educational expansion was entangled with religious and cultural agendas. Against this background, nationalist thinkers advanced alternative visions. Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* offered a sustained critique of modern civilization and of Western institutions [78], and Nehru's *Discovery of India* articulated a historically grounded vision of Indian identity for a modernizing state [79]. Indian scholarship has revisited Gandhian values and their present-day relevance [80], and has examined his educational thought with reference to morality and life skills [81].

Post-independence higher education and school policy continue to be debated. Studies of quality assurance and accreditation in Indian higher education, including analyses of national accreditation indicators and of the effectiveness of that regime, address how state-led standard-setting operates in a system that inherited a colonial university model [90–92]. Mixed-methods and empirical analyses of the National Education Policy 2020 examine awareness, attitudes, equity and social stratification [93,94], while critical commentary points to perceived drawbacks of the policy [95]. A socio-legal study of educational disparities in India examines structural inequities, legislative frameworks and reform imperatives [96]. These works do not by themselves establish colonial causation, but they show that educational inequality and the governance of knowledge remain central policy problems; a comparative decolonization perspective would ask which of the contemporary patterns are inherited and which are products of post-1947 decisions. Civic-sense studies, which discuss responsible citizenship as a resource for national development, add a normative dimension to the same inquiry [82].

8.2 Law: common-law inheritance and the sociology of law

The legal order of India is an inherited-and-adapted order. As Austin's study of the Constitution showed, the framers drew heavily on the 1935 Act while reorienting the system toward fundamental rights [62]. Contemporary scholarship on the sociology of law examines the relationship between law, society and social control [84], and work on judicial philosophy explores the problem of constitutional interpretation [85]. Doctrinal studies of the rights of accused persons under Indian law and of private-law fields such as contract and negligence reflect the continued centrality of English-derived doctrines in the Indian legal system [86,88,89]. Socio-legal analysis of police conduct in the registration of First Information Reports illustrates that questions of institutional accountability in criminal justice remain live [87]. Whether such patterns are traceable to colonial policing design is a hypothesis that comparative evidence from Kenya and Malaya, where emergency powers shaped the inheritance of the security sector, would help to test [67,72].

8.3 Language, culture and the politics of identity

Language was a central axis of colonial and anti-colonial politics, as Ngũgĩ argued [14]. Hindi-language sociological studies of language, *sanskar* and culture analyse the interrelation of language, socialization and cultural continuity in India [101–103]. For the comparative argument, the significance is that language policy is a domain in which successor states negotiate between colonial linguistic hierarchies and indigenous cultural claims, as in the Sinhala-language politics of Ceylon [63]. Studies of the use of nostalgia in political mythmaking and national identity add a memory-politics dimension, showing how narratives of the past are mobilized in contemporary politics [83]. This supports the sixth proposition: the narrative of transfer is not merely a historical question but a continuing resource in identity politics.

8.4 Health: inequality and the longer shadow of the state

The Bengal famine of 1943 illustrates the lethal consequences of colonial wartime policy [45,46]. Contemporary analyses of disease burden and epidemiological transitions in India document the country's current public-health profile [98,99], a socio-legal study of health disparities in Punjab addresses structural inequities and legislative gaps [97], and policy-legal work examines how health legislation strengthens national health systems [100]. These sources

indicate the persistence of inequality in access and outcomes. Their relevance to the decolonization debate is as indicators of state capacity and distributional justice, the dimensions that institutionalist studies of colonial legacy seek to explain [49,50].

8.5 Displacement and its aftermath

Partition was among the largest forced migrations of the twentieth century [6,7]. A systematic review and meta-analysis of trauma-related mental health outcomes among refugees and internally displaced persons in Africa during conflict addresses a contemporary population in comparable circumstances [104], and a study of climate-induced migration in South Asia maps new displacement frontiers [105]. Neither study is about partition; their value lies in demonstrating that displacement produces long-term psychosocial and urban consequences, which supports the argument that the human legacy of compressed transfers extends across generations.

8.6 Sovereignty, security and the new geopolitics

The postcolonial state's sovereignty has remained contested. Scholarship on techno-authoritarianism and digital surveillance in the Global South addresses how sovereignty is exercised and compromised in the digital age [106]. Studies of cyber-diplomacy examine how states use the internet as an instrument of power [107]. Analysis of US–China decoupling and strategic competition, and of environmental agreements as redefinitions of power blocs, situates India within a shifting global order [108,109], and a Hindi-language study of India–China relations considers opportunities and challenges in that bilateral relationship [110]. Work on algorithmic bias and social stratification suggests that new technologies reproduce inequalities [111]. A decolonial reading might ask whether these developments represent new forms of dependency or of agency; the evidence cited here is suggestive, not conclusive, and is offered to show where the contemporary debate extends the classical one.

8.7 Synthesis of the legacy evidence

The contemporary literature indicates that law, education, language and sovereignty are domains in which inheritance and reinvention coexist. This is consistent with the institutional-continuity hypothesis (P5) and with the observation that the colonial state's categories and instruments persisted in modified form [60,62]. But the review also shows a limitation of the field. Few contemporary studies explicitly test colonial causation, and the historiography of decolonization and the contemporary social-science literature are seldom connected. Bridging the two is a research priority.

9. Discussion

9.1 Revisiting the transfer-of-power narrative

The comparative evidence supports a qualified revision of the transfer-of-power narrative. The phrase is accurate as a description of legal form: in most cases, authority passed by statute or agreement. It is inaccurate as a description of process in at least four ways. First, in several territories the terms of transfer were the product of coercion by the colonial state against insurgents, or of coercion of the metropole by settlers or by external actors [67,72,75]. Second, the pace was often dictated by metropolitan exhaustion more than by readiness [1–3]. Third,

the formal successor was frequently selected by criteria that served metropolitan interests [66,74]. Fourth, the effects on civilian populations were often severe, and the official record under-reports them [58,60].

9.2 Implications for research

The review suggests that future research should (a) integrate the historiography of decolonization with contemporary institutional studies; (b) develop comparative datasets on transition timetables, preparatory arrangements and violence, with explicit uncertainty ranges; (c) incorporate oral and gendered evidence as a matter of method, not as supplementation [58,60]; and (d) test the propositions in Section 6.10 with systematic case selection.

9.3 Implications for the teaching and public memory of empire

If the transfer-of-power narrative is retained, it should be taught with its limits. A curriculum that presents the end of empire only as constitutional hand-over omits its coercion and its costs; a curriculum that presents it only as victimhood omits the contingency and the agency of successor elites. The recognition that narratives of the past are mobilized in contemporary politics [83] underscores the importance of evidence-based teaching.

9.4 Limitations

Seven limitations should be acknowledged.

- The review is PRISMA-informed, not a database-driven systematic search, and Arm B was purposive. Relevant works may have been missed.
- A large part of the supplied corpus (Arm A) was assessed at the level of bibliographic information and titles; full-text appraisal of each included contemporary article was not conducted. Claims about those sources are therefore confined to their stated subject matter, and none is represented as supplying evidence for colonial causation.
- The evidence base is predominantly English-language and secondary; archival research, non-English sources and vernacular archives are under-represented.
- Casualty and economic figures are contested and are reported as ranges.
- The comparison is restricted to ten territories and excludes, among others, Palestine, Aden, the Gulf, and the Pacific and Atlantic island colonies.
- Heterogeneity precluded quantitative synthesis.
- The six propositions rest on a small number of cases and are exploratory.

10. Conclusion

This paper set out to test whether the "transfer of power" survives comparative scrutiny. The answer, on the evidence reviewed, is that it survives as a legal description and fails as an explanation. India's transition combined a constitutionally orderly form with a compressed timetable and catastrophic human cost; Ceylon and Jamaica illustrate negotiated continuity but also show that peaceful transfer leaves questions of belonging and inequality open; Burma illustrates early fragmentation; Malaya, Kenya and Cyprus illustrate transfers conditioned by counter-insurgency and strategy; Ghana and Nigeria illustrate mass politics and federal design under strain; and Southern Rhodesia illustrates settler resistance ended by external and military pressure.

Five schools of interpretation illuminate different parts of this picture, and their strongest convergences, the roles of metropolitan exhaustion, local mobilization, inherited categories and the human costs of haste, form the most defensible core of the literature. The six propositions advanced here (compression, partner selection, insurgency legacy, categorization, institutional continuity and narrative gap) offer a basis for testing. The contemporary Indian literature on law, education, language, health and sovereignty shows that decolonization is still understood as unfinished, though it rarely tests colonial causation directly.

The practical lesson is methodological. Claims about empire's end should be stated with their evidentiary basis and their uncertainty, compared across cases, and checked against the voices that official records omit. A discipline that does this will be better placed to say what the transfer of power transferred, to whom, at what cost, and what it left behind.

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