

## An EAA Interview with the 2014 Franklin R. Buchanan Prize Winners for *Indian Independence and the Question of Partition*



Leah Elliott

Maya Lindberg

Tanya Waldburger

This is our eighteenth consecutive interview with the recipients of the AAS Franklin Buchanan Prize. This year's winners are Leah Elliott (writer), Maya Lindberg (writer), and Tanya Waldburger (videographer), who developed the curriculum unit *Indian Independence and the Question of Partition*, published by The Choices Program, a national education initiative at Brown University's Watson Institute for International Studies. Choices Program curriculum developers also won the Buchanan Prize in 2012 for their curriculum unit "The United States in Afghanistan."

Leah Elliott holds a BA in Public Policy and Political Science from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and was a program associate at The Choices Program from 2012–2014. She is currently a Master's candidate in Public Policy at Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy in Durham, North Carolina. Maya Lindberg is a Writer and Associate Editor for Teaching Tolerance, and a program associate at The Choices Program from 2012–2014. She holds a BA in History and a minor in Political Science from Macalester College. Tanya Waldburger is the video and new media producer for The Choices Program. Prior to joining Choices in 2009, Tanya worked for seven years as a Producer and Editor for a commercial production company in New York. She holds a BA in Modern Culture and Media from Brown University. A review essay of this award-winning program accompanies this interview.

**Lucien:** *Congratulations on winning the Buchanan Prize for the creation of a comprehensive, multimedia curricular treatment of Indian Independence and the 1947 Partition. What are key factors that motivated Choices Program staff members to create an instructional package based upon this particular topic?*

Thank you! We are honored to receive the Buchanan Prize. Choices decided to take on the project that culminated in *Indian Independence and the Question of Partition* for a number of reasons. First, we saw a need for educational materials that present the history of the Indian subcontinent as a cohesive story. We wanted to show students, and educators, how British colonial rule; the struggle for independence; the Partition in 1947; and the state of politics in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh today are all interconnected.

Second, we saw an opportunity in this history to touch upon major themes of the twentieth century: imperialism and colonialism, independence movements, nation building, and forced migration. These themes run throughout *Indian Independence and the Question of Partition* and offer students a lens to examine the global dynamics that shaped the world as we know it today.

Last, once we began our research, we felt that too many educational resources on this topic generalize the history of the subcontinent. But the experiences of people living in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh are so diverse! We knew once we began the project that we needed to provide regional and local histories where possible, while still covering overarching themes.

**Lucien:** *I reviewed your print materials, watched all of the short videos, and also noticed that in 2003 you published a curriculum unit titled Indian Independence and the Question of Pakistan. What are a few of the major differences between the earlier Choices offering and your latest treat-*

*ment of the historical events that led to the creation of both nations and some of the effects of independence and partition?*

One of the best parts of our jobs as curriculum writers with The Choices Program is that we have the opportunity to revise our materials as new scholarship becomes available. In the case of the 2003 curriculum unit, we recognized that its content and narrative could not be categorized as "a people's history"—a perspective that is important to The Choices Program's current work. We decided that the new edition should privilege the voices of everyday people and put them alongside the perspectives of political and social leaders. Moreover, our research and conversations with scholars emphasized that the new unit needed to present three crucial ideas: the colonization of the subcontinent did not happen overnight, the struggle for independence was not a singular campaign, and partition was not inevitable. With these objectives in mind, we fully revised the student text and accompanying teacher resource book.

Where the previous edition focused more on high-level decision-making among the British and Indian politicians, the new unit discusses what daily life was like under British colonial rule, during the years leading up to partition, and in the aftermath of 1947. The lessons and activities in the teacher resource book reflect our focus on diverse perspectives and a local understanding of this history. For example, the culminating activity asks students to weigh the diverse perspectives and beliefs about partition held by people in the province of Bengal. In contrast, the culminating activity in the 2003 unit engages students with the plans presented to the British by political elites on the eve of partition. The departure from strictly high-level politics allowed us to recast the narrative entirely and underscore that partition was a protracted process that had—and still has—far-reaching and devastating effects on communities across the subcontinent.

## We found that the majority of teachers use the *Scholars Online* videos with their students as a way to either reinforce the concepts covered in our curricula or introduce new concepts.

**Lucien:** *In my opinion, the Scholars Online Videos (approximately two minute clips), a feature common to your current Choices curricular guides in which experts on a given topic give precise answers to specific questions about the topic, are a quite interesting feature. How do teachers indicate they use this form of video in teaching either this guide or other curricular guides you have developed?*

We recently conducted a survey of over 950 teachers to better understand how they use video in their classrooms. We found that the majority of teachers use the *Scholars Online* videos with their students as a way to either reinforce the concepts covered in our curricula or introduce new concepts. The videos are designed to be used with the Choices curricula in this way, but some teachers also use them as a stand-alone resource. About 50 percent of the teachers surveyed said they use them as a jumping-off point for class discussion. The short question-and-answer format was designed in part to give teachers the flexibility to incorporate the videos into their classrooms in different ways. Interestingly, we also learned (both through

this survey and through our conversations with teachers) that teachers use *Scholars Online* as a learning resource for themselves. Whatever their use, there is no denying that video is becoming an increasingly common part of the classroom—97 percent of the teachers we surveyed said they use video either a lot or occasionally as part of their course materials.

**Lucien:** *What did you learn in developing the guide about the events leading up to the partition and the creation of India and Pakistan that challenged your own stereotypes about independence, and partition?*

As we mentioned earlier, from the beginning of the writing process, we were overwhelmed by how diverse the experiences were of people living in different provinces at the time of independence and partition. The commonly held image of Gandhi leading the Salt March and all of India joining in *satyagraha* was far from true. This was also the case for Jinnah and the creation of Pakistan; Muslim support for East and West Pakistan was largely based on regional resources and politics as opposed to an overarching ideology or uniform goal.

We wanted to offer students the opportunity to discover some of these same nuances in the history of the subcontinent. The student text accomplishes this as does the teacher resource book. In the activity “Mapping Religion in Bengal,” students zero in on the religious dimensions of one province and question how religious labels influenced politics at the time. The activity “Partition Stories” gives students access to diverse first hand accounts of the events in 1947.

**Lucien:** *Put yourself in the place of a teacher who is about to introduce Indian independence and the partition to a class of twenty-five high school sophomores in world history (using your material of course!). How would you answer the proverbial adolescent question, “Why do we need to know about all this?”*

The answer to that is straightforward, but whether students are convinced by it is less certain. We would love to say that students are immediately drawn to learn about colonialism, independence struggles, and nation-state formation, but we know this is probably not the case—at least at the start. The ongoing challenge for any teacher is to engage students with the material in a meaningful way so that their interest can become more self-sustaining.

One strategy to convince students of the importance of this topic would be to begin by highlighting the relevance of Indian independence and partition to the students’ lives today. Pakistan and India have nuclear weapons and have come closer to nuclear war than most realize. Of course, it’s also an often-untold story of one of the most catastrophic events of the twentieth century: partition involved a million deaths and the creation of millions of refugees. It is also part of another important, but often-underexamined, era of history—the period of decolonization and independence movements. The themes of injustice, oppression, and rebellion are also ones that can engage high school students.

After a teacher answers the question, “Why do we need to know about all this?” a bigger issue remains. The challenge for teachers is to continuously engage the students by giving them the skills to uncover ideas, wrestle with real historical controversies, and discover new areas of their own interest. We were mindful of these challenges for teachers when we designed the lessons and activities for use with *Indian Independence and the Question of Partition*. The lessons are diverse, build skills, and are meant to help teachers nurture students’ interest in this topic and in history in general.

**Lucien:** *Thank you for the interview and for the great work!* ■

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