



Partitioned Lands, Partitioned Histories

Defining the post-1947 relationship between India and Pakistan, and given that seventy years have lapsed, the partition of British India in August 1947 remains a watershed in the subcontinent's history. Underlying this is the juxtaposition of Jawaharlal Nehru's famous 'Tryst with Destiny' speech on the eve of independence, and the millions of people in Punjab who woke up not knowing which country they belonged to. The jubilation of independence was simultaneously marked by carnage, and so the memory of decolonisation/independence/partition varies greatly, depending on which side of the border you were, where you were within that, and who you were as an individual. How have historians captured these experiences and voices?

The actual event or process was marked by one of the greatest migrations in the twentieth century,¹ resulting in approximately 14.5 million people being forced to cross the newly created borders of India and Pakistan.² The majority of these people came from Punjab, Sind, North-West Frontier Province and Bahawalpur state on the Pakistani side and from East Punjab, the East Punjab princely states, Delhi and United Provinces on the Indian side. Migration in Bengal was on a much smaller scale in August 1947, although, unlike in Punjab, it was drawn out for many years.³ The communal violence, which prompted this mass movement, resulted in an estimated death of one million people. This figure continues to be a contentious issue and will be examined in greater detail in chapter four. The migrants experienced intense trauma arising from the loss of property and family members, and, as a result, of being forcibly exiled from their ancestral homes

- 1 Gyanendra Pandey, *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
- 2 For a detailed discussion, see Prashant Bharadwaj, Asim Ijaz Khwaja and Atif Mian, 'The Big March: Migratory Flows after the Partition of India,' *HKS Faculty Research Working Paper Series* RWP08-029, June 2008, www.hks.harvard.edu.
- 3 On the Bengal experience see Ian Talbot and Gurharpal Singh, eds., *Region and Partition: Bengal, Punjab and the Partition of the Subcontinent* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1999); Joya Chatterji, *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-1947* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

and lands. Sadly, even today, families bear the physical and psychological scars of this forced migration that was accompanied by reprehensible violence and crimes that, as a society, we have not been able to fathom.

Writing Partition History

The celebratory spirit of hard-fought freedom has largely defined much of the official histories produced in India, Pakistan and Britain,⁴ and at the same time they have played down the disruption, dislocation and ordeals inflicted on ordinary people effected by Partition. The colonial interpretation is generally viewed through the successful transfer of power rather than the success of the freedom movement. Certainly, H. V. Hodson's account, which utilised the Mountbatten Papers, is an early account examining both the role (and glorification) of the last Viceroy and the success of the British Raj while absolving the corrosive impact of colonial policies.⁵ The Indian nationalists, on the other hand, saw partition as the net result of years of divisive policies adopted by the colonial power. These undermined pre-existing cultural unities and social interaction, which cut across religious identity. Pakistani writers understandably focus on the creation of a separate homeland, which arose from the desire to safeguard their community from the 'tyrannical' Hindu majority rule. The ideologically incompatible discourses arising from 'divide and rule' and 'two-nation theory' understandings of partition that followed from independence have been the framework upon which the relationship between India and Pakistan has evolved in the independent history of both nations.⁶

Both India and Pakistan have produced documentation, which despite its biases, is useful to the historian in understanding the communal violence of August 1947. Chaudhry Khaliquzzaman attacked the Congress leadership and Mountbatten for this biased approach and blamed both for contributing to the disorder that resulted in an inevitable partition. Chaudhri Muhammad Ali, in *The Emergence of Pakistan*, offered another Pakistani view of events leading to partition. Central to Pakistani official history is Muhammad

4 See further, P. N. Chopra, ed., *Towards Freedom: Documents on the Movement for Independence in India, 1937* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986); P. S. Gupta, ed., *Towards Freedom: Documents on the Movement for Independence in India, 1942–1944* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997).

5 H. V. Hodson, *The Great Divide: Britain–India–Pakistan* (Hutchinson, 1969).

6 S. Settari and I. B. Gupta, eds., *Pangs of Partition, Vol. II: The Human Dimension* (Delhi: Manohar, 2002), 12.

Ali Jinnah's inspirational role in the freedom movement. Among western scholars, Stanley Wolpert provided a sympathetic biography of Jinnah, which attributed him with the single-mindedness and drive to achieve a separate homeland. Yet, Ayesha Jalal, in her revisionist approach, has challenged that very idea and contended that Jinnah's call for a Pakistan was more ambiguous than has been presented.⁷

One of the best-known attempts to document the violence is G. D. Khosla's account which is based on many first-hand accounts of people. It also provides details of atrocities and violent episodes, though largely in West Punjab. J. Nanda also provides a survey of riots that occurred in Punjab and the subsequent rehabilitation of refugees.⁸ In Pakistan, there have been a number of government publications that understand the violence against Muslims in East Punjab in terms of a so-called 'Sikh plan'.⁹ Saleem Ullah Khan, meanwhile, provides an insightful piece, detailing first-hand accounts of Pakistani refugees.¹⁰ Though this publication, like that of Khosla, has many biases, the combined effect of the two publications at least provides some insight into localised and personal experiences of the frenzied months following partition.

Comparatively, there is much less nationalist writing on the issues of partition's aftermath. Mohinder Singh Randhawa and Bhaskar Rao focus on the epic story of rehabilitation; both were official documents, which portrayed the Indian government's stance and relayed their agenda. Satya Rai in her volume examines the longer term impact of partition, focusing

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- 7 C. Khaliqzaman, *Pathway to Pakistan* (Lahore: Longmans, 1961); C. M. Ali, *The Emergence of Pakistan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967); Akbar S. Ahmed, 'The Hero in History: Myth, Media and Realities,' *History Today*, March 1996; Akbar S. Ahmed, *Jinnah, Pakistan and Islamic Identity: The Search for Saladin* (London: Routledge, 1997); Stanley Wolpert, *Jinnah of Pakistan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984); and Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
 - 8 G. D. Khosla, *Stern Reckoning: A Survey of Events Leading Up to and Following the Partition of India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1949, reprint 1989); J. Nanda, *Punjab Uprooted: A Survey of the Punjab Riots and Rehabilitation Problems* (Bombay: Hind Kitab, 1948).
 - 9 Government of Pakistan, *Note on the Sikh Plan, The Sikhs in Action, and Rashtriya Swayam Sewak Sangh in the Punjab* (Lahore: Government Printing Press, 1948).
 - 10 Saleem Ullah Khan, *The Journey to Pakistan: A Documentation on Refugees of 1947* (Islamabad: National Documentation Centre, 1993).

on the administrative problems encountered in the rehabilitation of displaced persons. The economic consequences of partition have in comparison received little attention, although C. N. Vakil has made a major contribution in this area. More recently, Tan Tai Yong and Gyanesh Kudaisya have attempted to examine the aftermath of partition in their expansive study, which covers India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Moreover, they examine the transformation of the urban landscapes such as the capital cities.¹¹

There have also been a number of personal accounts by British officials. These predominantly focus on the role of figures such as Nehru, Gandhi and Jinnah. A notable exception is provided by the work *At Freedom's Door* by the Indian civil servant Malcolm Darling. He travelled through northern Punjab during 1947, spoke to many villagers and highlighted the anxiety felt by all communities over the imminent departure of British and the ensuing communal carnage that would follow.¹² In the frontline of violence, General Francis Tuker in *While Memory Serves* provided a graphic account of the communal violence during the Bihar riots.¹³ Other notable accounts have included Alan Campbell-Johnson's attempt to redeem Mountbatten's role during the events leading to partition. Penderel Moon produced his classic study, *Divide and Quit*, based on his postings in Punjab; in it he questioned whether it was too late for a united India by the time Mountbatten arrived. Sir Conrad Corfield, who was a political advisor to the Viceroy, provided an insider's view of how the princely states responded to British rule and struggled to maintain their individuality. Richard Symonds, who was engaged in relief work in Punjab during the 1947 disturbances, provides a personal account,

- 11 M. S. Randhawa, *Out of the Ashes – An Account of the Rehabilitation of Refugees from West Pakistan in Rural Areas of East Punjab* (Chandigarh: Public Relations Department Punjab, 1954); Bhaskar U. Rao, *The Story of Rehabilitation* (Delhi: Ministry of Labour, Employment and Rehabilitation, 1967); Satya Rai, *Partition of the Punjab: A Study of Its Effects on the Politics and Administration of the Punjab 1947–56* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1965); C. N. Vakil, *Economic Consequences of Divided India: A Study of the Economy of India and Pakistan* (Bombay: Vora & Co. Publishers, 1950); and Tan Tai Yong and Gyanesh Kudaisya, *The Aftermath of Partition in South Asia* (London: Routledge, 2000).
- 12 Malcolm Darling, *At Freedom's Door* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), first published 1949, 300–5.
- 13 General Sir Francis Tuker, *While Memory Serves* (London: Cassell & Co, 1950). Tuker was chief of the Eastern Command at the time of partition. His troops were involved in controlling the riots in Bihar and Calcutta.

which combines insights from ‘high politics’ with what would now be termed a ‘history from beneath’ approach.¹⁴

The main protagonists of independence and mainstay of those focusing on the ‘high politics’ have also increasingly questioned the role of the leadership. Jalal’s ‘revisionist’ approach examining Jinnah’s role has already been mentioned, but ironically, this radical history is now increasingly considered an ‘orthodox’ account on Jinnah. Mountbatten has also been the subject of debate and controversy. This has arisen from his alleged interference in the partition plan. His influence, which led to the princely state of Kashmir (a Muslim majority state) acceding to India, has also received much attention.¹⁵ Mountbatten’s rushed approach to exit India, his bias towards Nehru and his apparent dislike of Jinnah have also been debated.¹⁶ While his supporters see him as someone who was able to overcome constitutional deadlock and oversee the swift transfer of power, his critics hold him responsible for the Punjab massacres.¹⁷ Increasingly over the past seventy years, Indian writers are now much more critical of the founding fathers, Gandhi and Nehru, and more broadly of the Indian independence movement. Following the emergence and the increasing legitimacy of *Hindutva* ideology, Nehru is now openly held responsible for Partition. Writers such as Sucheta Mahajan, however, are more sympathetic and defend Gandhi’s and Nehru’s position in terms of the limited options that they faced in 1947.¹⁸

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- 14 Alan Campbell-Johnson, *Mission with Mountbatten* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1985), first published 1951; Penderel Moon, *Divide and Quit* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), first published 1961; Conrad Corfield, *The Princely India I Knew: From Reading to Mountbatten* (Madras: Indo British Historical Society, 1975), 15–16; and Richard Symonds, *The Making of Pakistan* (London: Faber and Faber, 1950). Also see further, Richard Symonds, *In the Margins of Independence: A Relief Worker in India and Pakistan, 1942–1949* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2001). Symonds also served with the United Nations Commission for India and Pakistan.
 - 15 See further, Shereen Ilahi, ‘The Radcliffe Boundary Commission and the Fate of Kashmir,’ *India Review* 2, no. 1 (2003): 77–102.
 - 16 Ahmed, *History Today*.
 - 17 Ian Talbot, ‘The Mountbatten Viceroyalty Revisited: Themes and Controversies,’ in *Mountbatten on the Record*, ed. C. M. Woolgar (Hartley Institute, University of Southampton, 1997), 53–74. Also see Philip Zeigler, *Mountbatten: The Official Biography* (London: Phoenix, 2001).
 - 18 Sucheta Mahajan, *Independence and Partition: The Erosion of Colonial Power in India* (New Delhi: Sage, 2001).

The opening up of the archives was paved by the release of the twelve-volume series, *The Transfer of Power*, which was pivotal for historians to understand the closing chapter of the British in India. The British Prime Minister appointed Nicholas Mansergh the editor-in-chief to oversee the documents from the India Office pertaining to the constitutional transfer of power in India; the twelve volumes remain a treasure of 'high politics'.¹⁹ The availability of Governors' fortnightly reports further encouraged academic attention to shift from the all-India to the provincial level of politics. This coincided with the emergence of the so-called Cambridge School of Indian historiography. They focused on material interests rather than ideas as driving forward politics. Mobilisation was understood in terms of patron-client relations.²⁰ At the forefront of this shift towards regional politics in the case of Punjab were historians such as Ian Talbot and David Gilmartin.²¹ Talbot has highlighted the transformation in the Punjab Muslim League's fortunes in the period from the 1937 to the 1946 provincial elections.²² This breakthrough was essential for the creation of Pakistan. Other writers more recently, such as Sarah Ansari, have provided valuable insights into political developments in other Muslim majority provinces, in her case Sind, while Joya Chatterji, H. Bhattacharyya, and Taj-ul-Islam Hashmi provide a Bengali perspective.²³

- 19 Nicholas Mansergh (editor-in-chief), E. W. R. Lumby and P. Moon, (asst. eds.), *Constitutional Relations Between Britain and India: The Transfer of Power 1942–47*, 12 Volumes (London: HMSO, 1970–83).
- 20 See John Gallagher, Gordon Johnson and Anil Seal, eds., *Locality, Province and Nation: Essays in Indian Politics 1870–1947* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).
- 21 Ian Talbot, *Punjab and the Raj* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1988); David Gilmartin, *Empire and Islam: Punjab and the Making of Pakistan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).
- 22 Ian Talbot, *Provincial Politics and the Pakistan Movement* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1988). Also see by the same author, *Khizr Tiwana: The Punjab Unionist Party and Partition of India* (London: Curzon, 1996).
- 23 Sarah Ansari, *Sufi Saints and State Power: The Pirs of Sind, 1843–1947* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) and 'Partition, Migration and Refugees: Responses to the Arrival of Mohajirs in Sind 1947–8,' *South Asia XVIII* (1995): 95–108; H. Bhattacharyya, 'Post-partition Refugees and the Communists: A Comparative Study of West Bengal and Tripura'; Joya Chatterji, 'The Making of a Borderline: The Radcliffe Award for Bengal'; and Taj-ul-Islam Hashmi, 'Peasant Nationalism and the Politics of Partition: The Class-Communal Symbiosis in East Bengal 1940–7' in Talbot and Singh, *Region and Partition*.

More recently though, scholarly discussion is beginning to explore what may be considered the peripheries but were nevertheless impacted by the events of 1947. Thus, there is some interesting work on Assam and the Andaman Islands.²⁴

For both India and Pakistan, it was important to establish an independent national identity; re-imagining the past and creating a new national history allowed this new identity to emerge and to reinforce and justify the nascent nation-state. Thus, the dominance and glorification of the ‘great men’ such as Jinnah, Gandhi and Nehru is palpable in the post-independent histories of India and Pakistan. Despite some important advances in regional studies as mentioned above, the emphasis has predominately been on why partition happened, rather than on how it impacted and transformed the lives of ordinary citizens. Gyanendra Pandey has been particularly critical of this neglect in historical writing in India, where the ‘great man’ approach is still dominant. The blindness to the horrors of partition has also been at the expense of marginalising these ordinary voices in mainstream history, in which partition is seen as an event rather than questioning the enormity and widespread impact this had on the nation-state.²⁵ The pervasive hold of the national leadership in shaping perceptions of partition and the relationship between the British, the Congress and the Muslim League have all contributed to an obsession with what happened at the top echelons. Moreover, this imbalance is reflected in the history books,²⁶ which have for a long time neglected the heavy price paid by the citizens of the two new nations. This ‘curriculum of hatred’ continues to feed religious bigotry on both sides of the border, placing Hindus and Muslims against each other. Yet, as Mushirul Hasan notes, ‘never before, in South Asian history did so few decide the fate of so many’. For this reason alone, Nehru, Gandhi, Jinnah and Mountbatten are worthy of historical interrogation, but conversely, as Hasan continues, ‘rarely did so few

24 Anindita Dasgupta, ‘Remembering Sylhet: A Forgotten Story of India’s 1947 Partition,’ *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2 August 2008, 18–22; and Udit Sen, ‘Dissident Memories: Exploring Bengali Refugee Narratives in the Andaman Islands,’ in *Refugees and the End of Empire: Imperial Collapse and Forced Migration during the Twentieth Century*, eds. Panikos Panayi and Pippa Virdee (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

25 Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), E-book version, 18.

26 Krishna Kumar, ‘Partition in School Textbooks: A Comparative Look at India and Pakistan,’ in Settar and Gupta, *Pangs of Partition*, 17–28.

ignore the sentiments of so many in the subcontinent...never before in South Asian history did so few divide so many, so needlessly'.²⁷ Hasan, in this quote, evidently places the burden of responsibility for partition on the 'great men', who needlessly decided to partition India, but in the process it was not just a territorial partition, but also the division of people, emotions and memories.

Writing Fiction

The glaring omission of ordinary voices was filled with the imagination of literature and film. It was fiction that, very early on, provided an outlet to express and share those emotive, traumatic and religiously sensitive subjects that Jalal labels as 'the pity of partition', but too peripheral for mainstream history. Yet, it was the ideal medium for capturing the ambiguities and the shades of grey that could not fit into the overly nationalistic tones. Writers such as Intizar Hussain, Bhisham Sahni, Saadat Hasan Manto, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Balraj Sahni, Khushwant Singh and Amrita Pritam were writing from their own personal experiences of dislocation and captured the human drama of partition. Manto never shied away from writing about the true depravity of people and he fully exposed the sexual violence associated with partition. As Kamla Bhasin and Ritu Menon argue, 'Partition fiction (and some non-fiction) is almost the only social history we have of this time...it is in fiction, rather than any other genre, that we find an attempt to assimilate the full impact of what Partition meant'.²⁸ Moreover, they suggest that 'nowhere in the thousands of pages of fiction and poetry do we find even a glimmer of endorsement for the price paid for freedom, or admission that his "*qurbani*" (sacrifice) was necessary for the birth of two nations'.²⁹

Although much of fictional writing was done in months and years following partition, it was limited largely within literary circles until writers such as Alok Bhalla published the anthology of partition stories.³⁰ Bhalla's three-volume anthology has remarkably gathered short stories on partition,

27 Mushirul Hasan, ed., *India's Partition: Process, Strategy, Mobilisation* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), 42–3.

28 Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition*, (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 22.

29 Bhasin and Menon, *Borders and Boundaries*, 7.

30 Alok Bhalla, ed., *Stories about the Partition of India*, Volume I–III (Delhi: Indus, HarperCollins, 1994).

bringing together writers from different languages to present work which encapsulates and exposes the anger and confusion, the hypocrisy and tragedy of partition.³¹ Subsequently, there has been a plethora of translated work in English and also from Urdu to make it accessible in India.³² There is also now more of an appetite among Punjabi writers to make their work available across the border by publishing in the Gurmukhi/Shahmukhi script.³³

The universal suffering, the physical and psychological scars, the violent realities, the painful misery of brutalising women's bodies and the disillusionment of the new states are themes which could be explored through fiction without directly challenging the fragile new states. The trauma associated with the partition and displacement is something that both the states of India and Pakistan have shied away from, because this became the necessary price of freedom and separation. For historians, such as Hasan, it is important to emphasise 'the centrality of literary narratives and the role of memory in a historian's attempts to write partition's history from the margins'.³⁴ Hasan's work, *India Partitioned: The Other Face of Freedom*, published in 1995 remains an important volume in bringing to the fore the literature that has come to be associated with Partition Studies.

Writing New Histories

During the 1980s, a new historiographical school had started to emerge, focusing primarily on narratives that were previously unheard of and silenced. Influenced by Marxism, writers such as Ranajit Guha pioneered the study of Indian history 'from below'.³⁵ The Subaltern Studies School, as they came to be known, sought to provide an 'alternative' history, away from the populist

31 See further, Jason Francisco and Alok Bhalla, "Stories on the Partition of India" – A Review Essay, *Annual of Urdu Studies* X (1995): 208–17.

32 To read further see, for example, Ian Talbot, 'Literature and the Human Drama of the 1947 Partition,' in *Freedom, Trauma, Continuities: Northern India and Independence*, eds. D. A. Low and Howard Brasted (Delhi: Sage Publications, 1998), 39–55.

33 Nirupama Dutt, ed. and translation, *Stories of the Soil: Classic Punjabi Stories* (India: Penguin, 2010).

34 Sudha Tiwari, 'Memories of Partition: Revisiting Saadat Hasan Manto,' *Economic and Political Weekly* XLVIII, no 25 (2013): 50–1.

35 Ranajit Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies 1: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982).

nationalist struggle that was being depicted.³⁶ They highlighted the role played by popular peasant movements in contrast to the nationalist struggle, which they argued touched only the middle classes and those with political influence. The Subaltern School historians essentially sought to redress the imbalance present in nationalist historiography. Their attempts represented a return to the grass roots and the depiction of politics of the people, who were neither distinguished public figures nor acclaimed freedom fighters, but who did, nevertheless, make a contribution to the nationalist struggle. Most of this writing, however, was limited to the 1920s and 1930s and was criticised for its reliance on the same ‘colonialist’ sources as those deployed by the ‘elitist’ nationalist accounts.

By the early 1990s, the impact of this approach started to permeate Partition Studies and resulted in a shift away from the ‘great men of history’ approach towards a ‘history from below’; Regional Studies had already shifted the focus from national to regional politics.³⁷ Crucially, this approach towards cities has disrupted the concern with the centrality of the nation-state. Works such as Zamindar’s,³⁸ which bring together through personal narratives the story of families divided by partition in Delhi and Karachi, or Talbot’s work on the divided twin cities of Amritsar and Lahore travel across and bypass the territorial borders. Similarly, Ravinder Kaur’s work on Delhi, my work on Ludhiana and Lyallpur, and Ilyas Chattha’s work on Gujranwala and Sialkot

36 The term ‘subaltern’ has been adapted by post-colonial studies from the work originally done by Antonio Gramsci. The Subaltern Studies group were interested in exploring themes such as class, caste and gender. The group was started by Ranajit Guha and at inception included other historians such as Shahid Amin, Gyanendra Pandey, David Arnold, David Hardiman and Partha Chatterjee. Several influential volumes emerged during the 1980s covering inter-disciplinary themes. The following is a small selection of subaltern literature: Ranajit Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies* (5 vols.) (New Delhi: Oxford University Press); Shahid Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura, 1922–1992* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995); David Arnold, ‘Gramsci and Peasant Subalternity in India,’ *Journal of Peasant Studies* 11, no. 4 (1984): 155–77; David Hardiman, “Subaltern Studies” at Crossroads,’ *Economic and Political Weekly*, 15 February 1986, 288–90; and Partha Chatterjee and Gyanendra Pandey, eds., *Subaltern Studies VII* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992).

37 For example, see Ian Talbot, *Divided Cities: Partition and Its Aftermath in Lahore and Amritsar 1947–1957* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2006).

38 Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar, *The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia: Refugees, Boundaries, Histories* (India: Penguin, 2007).