

Introduction

Increased ethnic and religious violence in post-Cold War Europe, the Horn of Africa and the Middle East has rekindled academic and policy interest in partitions. Until recently, territorial divisions, either in the context of war or to regulate ethnic and communal conflict, were considered a mid-century relic of decolonisation. By the 1990s, however, there was renewed interest in the phenomenon, though some have argued that the late-twentieth-century ‘partitions’ affecting Yugoslavia, the USSR, Czechoslovakia and Ethiopia are best understood as ‘secessions’ because they did not involve ‘fresh border cuts across a national homeland’.¹ Partitions, it has been persuasively argued, have traditionally involved imperial or external organisations (such as the UN) along with collaborationist insiders, and are distinguished from other kinds of territorial change by the fact that they involve the modification and transformation of borders rather than just their adjustment. Strictly speaking, modern incidences of ‘pure’ partitions are few and far between.²

In this volume we examine one of the leading twentieth-century examples of partition. Indeed, for many the Indian subcontinent’s division in August 1947 is seen as a unique event which defies comparative historical and conceptual analysis. It is thus like the Holocaust, similarly capitalised in its rendering. The British transfer of power to the two dominions of India and Pakistan, like the earlier division of Ireland, was a response of imperial statecraft to intractable religious conflict. The carving of a Muslim homeland out of India also involved the partition of the provinces of Punjab and Bengal along Muslim and non-Muslim lines. In addition, Pakistan also received the undivided, Muslim-majority provinces of Sindh, Balochistan and the North West Frontier Province.

¹ Brendan O’Leary, ‘Analysing Partition: Definition, Classification and Explanation’, *Political Geography* 26, 8 (2007), pp. 886–908.

² O’Leary gives the following six examples which fit his definition: Ireland (1920); Hungary (1920); Kurdistan (1920–1923); India (1947); Palestine (1948); Cyprus (1974).

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Although this strategy appears to have been followed contemporaneously in Palestine, leading some to argue that it was a peculiarly British practice at the time of imperial withdrawal,³ documentary evidence overwhelmingly suggests an official reluctance to divide and quit India. Given that the British were 'reluctant partitionists', what impelled them to pursue this course of action? Was it because they not only had begun the democratisation of India from the early twentieth century onwards, but had also ruled indirectly and thereby, unintentionally, strengthened ethnic and communal cleavages? Was democratisation in a plural ethnic and communal setting a cause of Indian and later post-Cold War European 'partitions'? This volume through its detailed case study of the background to the causes and consequences of the 1947 division of the sub-continent aims to shed more light on these questions than hitherto.

Partitions in the name of conflict resolution have often been accompanied by heightened levels of violence that they sought to eliminate. As well as the social dislocation attendant on partition-related ethnic cleansing,⁴ the divided states, as in the case of North and South Korea and India and Pakistan, can be locked into unremitting enmity or 'enduring conflicts' as they translate their internal differences into inter-state rivalries. Significantly, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, the fears of nuclear conflict are most pronounced in two regions: Korea and the Indian sub-continent. This study with its focus on India and Pakistan provides opportunities for appraising the aftermath of partition as a policy option in situations of ethnic and communal conflict. The sheer magnitude of the territorial division and the accompanying demographic transformation that took place dwarfs all other historical precedents.

Clearly the British had reluctantly conceded India's Partition to avoid civil war. Yet Pakistan's birth coincided with the intensification of the violence which had wracked north India during the final year of colonial rule. Its epicentre lay in the Punjab, but the shock waves were felt across the subcontinent. Communal massacres sparked a chaotic two-way flight of Hindus and Sikhs from Pakistan and Muslims from India. In all an estimated 15 million people were displaced in what became the largest forced migration in the twentieth century. The death toll remains disputed to this day, with figures ranging from 200,000 to 2 million. Families were separated and nearly 100,000 women were kidnapped on both sides

³ C. Hitchens, 'The Perils of Partition', *Atlantic Monthly* (March 2003), pp. 99–107.

⁴ Partitions are regularly accompanied by exchange of populations. This often involves: (i) voluntary (anticipatory) migration; (ii) forced migration; (iii) ethnic cleansing; or (iv) genocide. In the Indian case, as we shall see in chapters three and four, the historiography often uses these terms interchangeably.

of the border. Women were especially victimised because they symbolised community 'honour'.

Over sixty years on, the effects of 1947 continue to impact on both state and society. India and Pakistan, two nuclear-armed states, remain in uneasy dialogue, and the 'unfinished businesses of partition', the Jammu and Kashmir dispute, still makes them 'distant neighbours'. Millions of families still carry the psychological and physical scars of uprooting. All major cities in the north of the subcontinent still possess their clearly demarcated refugee quarters. The volume will explore the political geographies arising from this refugee population and the extent to which refugees and their descendents have retained a distinctive cultural and political presence.

Partitions have seldom been reversed, whatever new difficulties they have brought in their wake. Of course, in the post-Cold War world, Germany was reunited in 1989, and Korea and Ireland may also go the same way as a 'hard' partition gives way increasingly to a 'soft' association. Nonetheless statecraft, geopolitics and demography all provide high thresholds to the reversal of partition. We will consider how significant these factors have been in the context of the subcontinent and the extent to which India and Pakistan have moved further apart from each other in the years since Independence.

Importantly both states have been internally shaped more by the division of 1947 than is publicly acknowledged. As Paul Brass has shown, a legacy of partition was the unwritten 'informal rule' that political demands based on religion were impermissible for the Indian state.⁵ Within Pakistan, any pretensions to provincial autonomy were abandoned almost on the achievement of independence. Centralisation was accompanied by a homogenising response to national identity which regarded pluralism as a threat. Pakistan's national ideology was constructed around Urdu as the official language and an increasing attachment to Islam. Yet neither provided the necessary cohesion. The growing identification of Punjab with the interests of the Army further alienated the smaller 'nationalities'. There has been a tendency in both India and Pakistan to de-legitimise demands for greater autonomy and treat them as a law-and-order issue. Both states have thus used heavy-handed repression especially when sub-nationalist demands have been raised in the sensitive border areas. Some writers have gone so far as to speak of a 'fearful state' in South Asia.⁶

⁵ See P. Brass, *Language, Religion and Politics in North India* (Cambridge University Press, 1974).

⁶ S. Mahmud Ali, *The Fearful State: Power, People and Internal Wars in South Asia* (London: Zed Books, 1993).

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This volume also examines how ideas as well as policies have flowed from the effects of the 1947 division. It seeks to assess the extent to which the partition experience strengthened the ideologies of secularism and the two-nation theory on which the two states had been founded. The 1947 disturbances revealed the dangers of communalism and thereby strengthened the claims of secularism within the Congress. At the same time, the violence reinforced the claims of the two-nation theory that there were irreconcilable differences between Hindus and Muslims. As Partition replaced the abstract imagery of an Indian Muslim nation with the harsh reality of a territorially limited state of Pakistan, it created the paradox that a homeland made in the name of all Indian Muslims was incapable of accommodating all those who wanted to migrate to the new state. Ironically, this state could only fulfil its 'duty' to Muslims in India if it treated its own minorities well.⁷ Hence repeated appeals were made in the early months of Independence for the Hindu and Sikh population of Sindh to continue living in the new Muslim state.⁸

So rich is partition as an ideological resource that its possibilities are continuously reconstructed at both state and community level. For the Sikh community, for example, it has become a source of reaffirmation of its self-identity in which violence, valour and martyrdom take a central place with episodes of female suicide to protect family and community *izzat* (honour) valorised as the ultimate sacrifice. For post-Independence states, the project of 'rehabilitating' the millions of refugees became inextricably bound up with cultivating new sources of legitimacy when the very premises of new nation-statehood stood on extremely insecure foundations. Both the Indian and Pakistan states went into overdrive to highlight the heroic and improvised efforts to feed, clothe and house the unintended victims of independence. Subsequently, notwithstanding the generally unfavourable assessment of these efforts by their recipients, the post-colonial nation-state in India and Pakistan was to invest a great deal of energy into carefully reconstructing the official record and embedding it in the conscious design of nation- and state-building.

One of the major shortcomings of existing research on partition is that it is overwhelmingly Indian Punjab-centric. This pattern was first established in the 1950s with official and semi-official publications that had

⁷ This was the so-called hostage theory. It was initially undermined by the mass exchange of population in Punjab. The exodus of Hindus and Sikhs from Sindh from January 1948 onwards dealt it a further blow. A large Hindu population remained in East Pakistan.

⁸ There were also good economic reasons for encouraging this population to remain. In addition Sindhi Muslim politicians such as M. A. Khuhro saw the retention of Sindhi Hindus as important for the cultural life of the province which was endangered by the influx of Urdu- or Punjabi-speaking Muslim refugees.

their own particular motives. Although the state was undoubtedly a key player in the resettlement process, the same however cannot be said in West Bengal. In this book we will consider why the Bengal experience did not lend itself to official construction in the same way as that of Punjab. Central to this understanding is the fact that migration in Bengal came in waves after 1947 right until the mid-1950s. Thereafter migrants continued to be uprooted whenever there were serious communal riots elsewhere in India or when the cold war between India and Pakistan threatened to heat up. We also, where possible, aim to evaluate the contribution of West and East Pakistan authorities in dealing with equally, if not more, onerous tasks of rehabilitating refugees in what were near-chaotic conditions for the then-fledgling state.

This study will thus attempt to broaden the understanding of the subcontinent's division by looking *beyond* Indian Punjab by drawing on literature on regional developments in West Punjab, East and West Bengal, Jammu and Kashmir, Sindh, the princely states, and the north-eastern states of India. As well as broadening the regional coverage, we will examine how the experiences of violence, migration and resettlement were mediated by gender, existing structures of power and accepted norms and conventions about caste and community. These mediations, as we shall see in subsequent chapters, were to be crucial in shaping the development of resettled communities.

Central to our approach is to recognise the seismic shift that has taken place in the historiography of the Partition in the last three decades from 'high politics', with its emphasis on the causes of the division, to its 'human consequences' in which there is a greater reliance on subjective individual and collective experiences drawn from oral testimonies and personal memories. In many ways this new emphasis has been a necessary corrective to the fixation with power politics, and brings into sharp focus previously neglected and unproblematised groups and perspectives – gender, subaltern groups, marginalised regions and the need for greater reflectivity of the sources and their reading. Yet these innovations, we contend, only become meaningful if they retain some measure of understanding of the broader developments that have framed the Partition and the post-Partition processes. Such recognition, we believe, will enable a more comprehensive evaluation of the Partition as an historical event as well as a living reality for the contemporary subcontinent.

Accordingly, the structure of the volume reflects these concerns. The opening chapter reviews the partition historiography and outlines the major developments that have taken place in scholarship since the early 1980s in changing our understanding of the reading of 1947 of its causes and consequences, as well as the new approaches for re-examining the

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human consequences that centre on gender and subaltern studies. In chapter two we return to the historical background to the emergence of Pakistan and the partition of Punjab and Bengal, evaluating critically the ‘inevitability’ of division and the contribution of Indian as well as British actors in the *dénouement* of the Raj. The violence and the turmoil which accompanied 1947 is the subject of the next chapter. Here we explore the arguments as to whether the violence was spontaneous or planned, and in particular the utility of such concepts as ‘genocide’ and ‘ethnic cleansing’ to understand what happened. The chapter also brings to our attention the contemporaneous nature of partition violence by drawing out the remarkable similarities in the post-1947 Indian experience of managing communal riots. Large-scale violence was, of course, followed by the mass transfers of Hindu, Sikh and Muslim populations. Chapter four explores in detail the different patterns of migration histories of refugee resettlement and rehabilitation, examining the contrast between East Punjab and West Bengal. But the impact of migration and violence was more enduring than in 1947: it was to leave a lasting imprint on post-1947 nation- and state-building projects in India and Pakistan, and create new forms of ethnic consolidation among the migrants, as well as to reinvent old religious nationalism among the heartlands. These processes are assessed in chapter five where we examine why the Partition created centralised states against further partitions, especially in the border provinces that were often reluctant or hostile bedfellows of Indian and Pakistani nationalisms. Finally, chapter six examines the legacy of 1947 for Indo-Pakistan relations. It looks both at the central Jammu and Kashmir dispute and at a wider range of influences which have determined the relations between the two successor states to the Raj and the prospects for overcoming the troubled legacy since decolonisation. The volume concludes by reflecting on the broader partition literature and the implications of the Indian case-study for the wider understanding of partitions and their aftermath in situations of intense ethnic and communal conflict.

1 Understanding the Partition historiography

The final period of colonial rule in India from 1945 onwards was dominated by one consideration: the manner and the timing of the British departure. A key thought for imperial statecraft was to protect economic and strategic interests in the transition to independence while negotiating a settlement with the Congress and Muslim League leaders. In some measure the dangers of a disorderly British withdrawal were mitigated by the success of the Labour Party, which possessed good lines of communication with the Congress leadership. At the same time, there was a pressing need to politically accommodate the growing influence of the Muslim League that posed a basic threat to the idea of a united, post-colonial India with its demand for a separate Muslim homeland of Pakistan. In the event, the endgame of the empire was conducted against a crescendo of violence that began with the Great Calcutta Killing of August 1946 and climaxed in the genocidal violence after 15 August 1947. This violence was orchestrated with political purpose and organisation resulting in near civil war conditions in north India where religion alone defined the basis of political identity. And in these circumstances, partition emerged as a practical solution which the Indian political elites accepted reluctantly with the 3 June 1947 Plan that agreed to transfer power to two dominions: India and the Muslim-majority provinces (Punjab, Sindh, Bengal, Baluchistan and North West Frontier Province). The glow of freedom arrived but at the cost of division. The partition of India was accompanied by the partition of Bengal and Punjab into their Muslim and non-Muslim majority areas. Muslims established a territorial homeland, but it was a truncated, ‘moth-eaten’ Pakistan. Indeed, the conflicting claims surrounding the demarcation of the new international boundary in Bengal and Punjab, along with tussles over the division of assets between the two states, meant that the 3 June Plan ushered in a new period of uncertainty and hostility, rather than a dampening of the embers of religious hatred. Thus when the British finally ‘divided and quit’ after 15 August 1947, their departure was accompanied by large-scale disturbances in the Punjab for which the newly independent Indian and Pakistan states were totally unprepared – violence that resulted

in mass migrations and a total exchange of population along religious lines in the Punjab region. Partition produced the largest migration in the twentieth century that continued unabated in Bengal well into the mid-1950s and beyond. It was to leave a legacy of bitter hatred and resentment among the people and states of India and Pakistan alike.

Naturally, given the foundational nature of 1947 for the states of India and Pakistan and its immediate and long-term consequences, the events culminating in the division have produced a highly contested scholarship in which heroes and villains are all too obvious. In this study our aim is to bring together much of the recent literature on the background to Partition, its accompanying violence and the implications of the mass migrations for both individuals and the governance of post-Independence India and Pakistan. We argue that Partition was not the ‘parting gift’ of an outgoing imperial rule: rather the Congress and Muslim League leaders, both nationally and regionally, were heavily implicated in the outcome, especially in Bengal and Punjab. It is important when addressing the growing and bewildering body of work on the subject to keep in mind that compulsions of nation-building or community assertion have shaped historical writings, thereby producing selective histories and fragmented memories. Partition was more than a mere territorial division; it was foremost accompanied by a division of minds.

In this chapter, we assess the conflicting historical interpretations surrounding the British transfer of power and argue that no single interpretation can fully explain the complex developments surrounding Independence. We then move on to examine the increasing attention devoted to the ‘human dimension’ of partition – the new research arising from the turn to feminist history, psychologies of violence and the use of deconstructionist methodologies that have placed subjective experiences at the centre of their analysis. These approaches, as we shall note, have provided fascinating new departures from which to re-examine the event of 1947, but at the expense of encouraging fragmentation, particularism and localism that eschews the overarching reading of events. Our approach, in contrast, recognises these developments, but aims to synthesise the evidence from the new research into a broader understanding of the narrative around Partition.¹

The historiography of the ‘high politics’ of Partition

The phrase the ‘high politics’ of Partition has become shorthand for the constitutional negotiations between the British and Indian leaders during

¹ For a recent example of a return to the narrative approach, see Yasmin Khan, *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007).

the 1940s, and is normally contrasted with the term ‘history from below’ which reflects a focus on the human consequences of partition. Students of high politics, in contrast, are especially distinguished by their efforts to ‘blame’ individuals, parties and states. Take Bahadur’s volume on the subject, for instance. It has as its subtitle the ‘Tragedy of the Triumph of Muslim Communalism in India, 1906–1947’.² From the 1940s onwards, Congress authors maintained that Muslim communalism – a form of identity politics based on religion³ – was a British creation designed to weaken nationalist struggle against imperial rule.⁴ The road to 1947, they insist, was laid in 1909 when the colonial state succumbed to the Muslim League’s lobbying for separate electorates based on religious lines to the newly introduced representative institutions.

The thesis that the Muslim League’s intransigence forced the Congress to accept the division of the country in 1947 was restated in 2000 in Sucheta Mahajan’s *Independence and Partition*⁵ in which she boldly claims that

Congress had regretfully accepted Partition as unavoidable [this] was only the final act of a process of step-by-step concession of the League’s intransigent championing of a sovereign Muslim state ... If Partition was the most traumatic event of the century, then independence was surely the most significant turning point.⁶

Mahajan replays the nationalist lament of Muslim League stubbornness, the regrettable character of partition and the need to emphasise the greater

² See Lal Bahadur, *Struggle for Pakistan: Tragedy of the Triumph of Muslim Communalism in India, 1906–1947* (New Delhi: Sterling, 1988).

³ There is a vast literature on communalism. This is variously seen as a creation of deliberate British ‘divide and rule’ strategies, or of the unintentional consequences of a modernising state that organised political representation from 1909 onwards around notions of a distinctive religious identity as enumerated in the census surveys. Officials argued that, as representation was extended, the ‘backward’ Muslim community needed separate electorates to safeguard its interests. While it is facile to argue that the introduction of separate electorates made Pakistan inevitable, it lent credence to the premise that people following a particular religion naturally shared common interests from which ‘others’ were excluded. The other side of the coin of separate electorates is the idea that the British not only created new political arenas for competition along religious lines, but by withdrawing patronage from public religious ceremonial in an attempt to demonstrate religious neutrality, created a space for competing groups drawn from the rising Hindu merchant classes to sponsor public ritual to enhance their ‘social dignity’. Public ritual not only helped create a supra-local Hindu community identity but was a factor in rising tension between ‘Hindus’ and ‘Muslims’.

⁴ See Rajendra Prasad, *India Divided*, 3rd edn (Bombay: Hind Kitabs, 1947); Humayn Kabir, *Muslim Politics, 1906–1942* (Calcutta: Gupta, Rahman, Gupta, 1943); Asoka Mehta and Achut Patwardhan, *The Communal Triangle in India* (Allahabad: Kitabistan, 1942).

⁵ Sucheta Mahajan, *Independence and Partition: The Erosion of Colonial Power in India* (New Delhi: Sage, 2000).

⁶ Mahajan, *Independence and Partition*, pp. 393 and 391.

achievement of Indian independence – all familiar themes in Indian nationalist accounts.⁷

In contrast, the traditional Pakistani approach to the ‘high politics’ of Independence is to eschew the term ‘partition’ because it is viewed as a politically loaded concept which echoes the Hindu Right’s preoccupation with the ‘loss’ of national unity. Moreover to say that India was partitioned is to acknowledge the fact that Pakistan was a *seceding* power from an Indian state that had inherited sovereignty from British India. Official histories therefore focus on the achievement of Pakistan in which its birth is thus generally explained in terms of the Muslim League’s historic creed of the two-nation theory that maintained that the Indian Muslims’ identity was defined by religion rather than language or ethnicity. Islam, these accounts always insist, had given birth to a distinctive social order that was fundamentally at odds with Hindu society. The demand for a separate state was thus a ‘natural’ expression of this reality.⁸ The doyen of this understanding was Ishtiaq Hussain Qureshi of Karachi University,⁹ though more sophisticated works within this genre have emerged among Pakistani scholars resident in the west.¹⁰ K. bin Sayeed has perhaps provided the clearest exposition of this thesis. ‘There has never taken place’, according to him,

[a] confluence of the two civilisations in India – the Hindu and the Muslim. They may have meandered towards each other here and there, but on the whole the two have flowed their separate courses – sometimes parallel and sometimes contrary to one another.¹¹

Beyond stating the inevitability of Pakistan as the realisation of Muslim destiny, many studies find it sufficient merely to list the documents around the Pakistan idea, or to provide potted biographies of eminent nationalist leaders¹² that chronicle the struggle to achieve a separate state against overwhelming odds in which Muslim League leaders were

⁷ See for example, Bimal Prasad, ‘Jawaharlal Nehru and Partition’, in Amrik Singh (ed.), *The Partition in Retrospect* (New Delhi: Animika Publishers, 2000) pp. 27–47.

⁸ For an understanding of how this ‘communal’ historical consciousness was constructed see the following works: S. Rahman, *Why Pakistan?* (Lahore: Islamic Book Service, 1946); F. K. Durrani, *The Meaning of Pakistan* (Lahore: Muhammad Ashraf, 1944).

⁹ See for example his book, *The Muslim Community of the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent (610–1947): A Brief Historical Analysis*, 2nd edn (Karachi: Ma’aref, 1977)

¹⁰ See Hafeez Malik, *Moslem Nationalism in India and Pakistan* (Washington, DC: Public Affairs Press, 1963); Khalid bin Sayeed, *Pakistan: The Formative Phase, 1857–1948* (Oxford University Press, 1968)

¹¹ Sayeed, *The Formative Phase*, p. 12.

¹² Typical of this approach is A. H. Albiruni, *Makers of Pakistan and Modern Muslim India* (Lahore: Muhammad Ashraf, 1950).