



Haimanti Roy. *Partitioned Lives: Migrants, Refugees, Citizens in India and Pakistan, 1947-65*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012. xii + 254 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-808177-7.

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Aftermath of Partition

The partition of British India to form independent India and Pakistan resulted in cross-border migration of nearly nine million Hindus and Sikhs into India and approximately five million Muslims into Pakistan. Partition in the west (Punjab), which was marked by horrific violence and the rapid establishment of a closed border that severely curtailed further migration, has been seen as paradigmatic of the process, and has received far more scholarly attention than the partition of Bengal in the east, which is the subject of this book. Using official sources like legislation, memos, directives by ministries in India and East Pakistan, local police records, private papers of leading political parties, and parliamentary debates, as well as “unofficial” voices, of ordinary people who sent in letters, memoranda, and petitions to their official and political representatives demanding amelioration of their particular grievances” (p. 19), Haimanti Roy attempts to reconstruct not only the more prolonged and complex ways in which the border between India and East Pakistan was established but also what it meant for those who were directly affected.

Chapter 1 describes the process by which the boundaries in the west and east were drawn. In June 1947, Punjab and Bengal Boundary Commissions were established to demarcate the new boundaries, with four Indian members in each; former director-general of the British Ministry of Information Cyril Radcliffe was brought in to chair and have the deciding vote in both. It was an impossible task, made even more difficult by outdated maps and a time frame of less than six weeks: “The task of creating a border based on religious demography was bound to fail and in the end, pleased no one” (p. 51).

Some of the negative consequences described by Roy would have resulted regardless of the basis on which the partition was made. For example, rivers that were used as boundaries changed course over time, or flooding during monsoons obscured the border, and alluvial plains in

the middle of large rivers—some large enough for whole villages to be built on them—were often claimed by both countries. Cattle and sheep crossed borders while grazing, and were sometimes seized by people on the other side. Seasonal laborers from East Bengal who came to work on tea gardens in West Bengal, and in pre-partition days tended to settle in places where they worked, now became foreigners who were not allowed to settle. However, the free movement of people and goods across the border continued for a while. Border dwellers who lived on one side of it but worked on the other were allowed to cross the eastern border daily, although they sometimes faced harassment in the process, as did villagers who had been separated by the border from the markets that served their daily needs. Even after a document regime of passports and visas was introduced, requiring border dwellers to identify themselves clearly as Indian or Pakistani, “the border citizens often had ambivalent attitudes about such impositions,” and “the illegal movement of goods and continuous flow of people without appropriate documents” continued (p. 81).

The disruption that would have accompanied the inauguration of any new international border was multiplied many times over by the ethno-nationalist rationale of the India-Pakistan partition. The new Pakistani state was explicitly Islamic while the new Indian state was overtly secular, but the very act of partition redefined Muslims in India and non-Muslims in Pakistan as “minorities,” whose “residence and national identity now were at odds with each other.... Both India and Pakistan, in their initial policies, implicitly assumed that religion would be the primary motivator in the decisions of these minorities as they debated whether to stay or leave” (p. 90). Yet this assumption was challenged by many Hindus and Muslims, who chose to remain in their ancestral homes in the country where they were now a “minority.” Perhaps the most bizarre consequence of the

way in which the partition was carried out was the creation of enclave territories. “After 1947, India had 130 enclaves within East Pakistan and Pakistan claimed ninety-five territories within Indian territory. The inhabitants of these enclaves became ‘stateless’ people as neither states made efforts to claim them as their own” (p. 48). The problem persisted after East Pakistan became Bangladesh in 1971, and was ultimately resolved only in 2015, when the enclaves became part of the countries in which they were located.

Despite pledges by both governments to protect their minorities, these hapless people became the target of all manner of harassment, both official and unofficial. For example, Roy describes how Muslims from India who had crossed over to Pakistan and Hindus from Pakistan who had crossed over to India temporarily—due to fear of violence, or even for medical treatment or to attend the marriage of a relative on the other side—were treated as “evacuees” whose property could be requisitioned by the state, and often found themselves homeless when they tried to return. In a few cases, such property was derequisitioned when the decision to seize it was challenged legally, but far more often, it was used to house refugees and offices of the new state and thus became impossible for the original owners to reclaim. At the same time, both states treated refugees from across the border as an unwanted problem, grudging the resources needed to rehabilitate them, and put bureaucratic hurdles in the way of their claiming citizenship in the country where they had been forced to resettle. Thus the minorities created by partition were faced with an unenviable choice: either to remain in their homes, where their loyalty to the nation was constantly under suspicion—a situation that obtains even today—or to migrate to a country that was not their home and where they were not wanted.

The insecurity suffered by minorities was exacerbated immensely by incidents of violence organized by right-wing Hindu and Muslim extremist organizations, which often also managed to mobilize local members of the “majority” community. Much of it was “small-scale” and “sporadic” and threatened the “psyche rather than the body. Such *routine* violence was mediated by: actual singular incidents of petty theft, loot, kidnapping of women, and murders; destruction and/or defacement of religious icons; by verbal threats, rumours aimed at maximising minority insecurities; and through embellished representation of communal incidents in the public media, political speeches, and thinly veiled state propaganda. Together they created a continuous ecology of fear and acted as catalysts for minorities to abandon their homes and cross the border” (p. 148). Perversely, the

flight of some members of the minority community catalyzed by fear of violence was interpreted by majoritarian organizations as proof of their disloyalty.

The much larger riots of 1950 broke this pattern. Paradoxically, they started as an attempt by East Bengal’s security forces to apprehend communists active among Scheduled Caste villagers. When the police tried to rape some women, the villagers reacted by attacking the police party, killing one member and injuring others. In a similar incident a few weeks later, Santhal (tribal) villagers killed all the members of a police party. These incidents were quickly interpreted in communal terms, even though the villagers were outside the caste Hindu hierarchy and were in fact engaged in a class struggle. Villages were looted and torched and their inhabitants fled across the border to India, where their stories of brutality were likewise interpreted in communal terms and followed by retaliatory violence against local Muslim minorities. Roy’s cross-border sources and perspective allow her to track this tit-for-tat violence as it spread in both East and West Bengal, engulfing even Calcutta and Dacca. “The riots of 1950 witnessed the highest peak in post-Partition migration and involved the movement of minority Hindus from *East Bengal* into India, and of minority Muslims from Bihar and West Bengal into *East Bengal*” (p. 185).

Women were doubly victimized in the partition process. Women were seen as receptacles of the “honour” of their menfolk as well as the communities that claimed them; “nowhere was the confluence of violence and identity formation more crucial than for abducted women and their forcible recovery by the Indian and Pakistani states. In Bengal, the intertwining of violence and women’s sexuality was manifested through abduction, conversion and physical molestation during the riots of 1946, 1950, and 1964” (p. 154). While some women committed suicide to escape sexual assault or abduction, there were cases where a Hindu woman preferred married life with her abductor to “recovery” by her original community, given the stigma that would be attached to “the abducted woman in Hindu society if she chose to denounce and leave her abductor, now husband” (p. 163). In yet other cases, patriarchal assumptions created problems for women’s national identity, domicile, and citizenship. Thus Laila Ahmed, with whose story Roy begins her book, was born in Calcutta and married to a naval officer who opted to serve in Pakistan, where she followed him. When she got divorced in 1951 and returned to Calcutta, Indian officials determined that she was a citizen of Pakistan by virtue of living with her husband there until the last date of their marriage, and would have to reacquire

Indian citizenship; but at that time, the only ways of acquiring Indian citizenship were by birth or by marriage, leaving Laila in “identity limbo.”

The process by which the border between India and East Pakistan was established was thus far more protracted—taking place over almost two decades—than the establishment of the border between India and West Pakistan. Even physical demarcation took years to accomplish, while the acquisition of citizenship in the two states (and later Bangladesh) remains incomplete even in 2015. This leads Roy to question the popular perception “that in August 1947, the Partition generated automatically and fully formed nation-states, albeit under short-term chaos and violence” (p. 220). Instead, she argues, “popular and personal memories of the event contradict nationalist narratives. Memories of migrants, refugees and new citizens of India and Pakistan highlight their uncertainties, the contingent, messy, and protracted nature of the event which continued to impact their lives and ... their families for decades to come. In such narratives, Partition is significant in generating large-scale uprooting, exile, violence and victimhood and the search for security and belonging in a *foreign land*” (pp. 220-221). The evidence marshalled in *Partitioned Lives* strongly supports her argument.

There is a widespread assumption that a common

culture is necessary to create a nation-state and keep it united and strong. The evidence gathered by Roy suggests the opposite: that any attempt to define a nation-state in terms of a dominant culture can shatter a society by creating the problem of “minorities” who are less equal than the “majority.” *Partitioned Lives* provides a striking example of the irrationality—one might even call it madness—of linking territory to any aspect of ethnicity (language, religion or sect, physical appearance, ancestry, tribe, and so on). South Asia as a region has been especially plagued by the violence resulting from such an endeavor, but it is by no means the only part of the world where persecution of minorities, ethnic cleansing, and even genocide have resulted from attempts to establish ethnically defined nation-states or subnational territories.

My main quarrel with the book is that it is littered with grammatical and typographical errors, which good copyediting should have eliminated. This is a pity, because it is otherwise an eminently readable text. It would be worthwhile for Oxford University Press to bring out a paperback edition with these errors corrected, because apart from being a valuable resource to historians of South Asia, it is a case study that would be of interest to both scholars and general readers in other parts of the world who are grappling with the problems created by ethnically defined states or would-be states.

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