



Ian Talbot, Gurharpal Singh. *The Partition of India.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009. 206 pp. \$29.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-67256-6.

Reviewed by Andrew Major (Zayed University)

Published on H-Asia (December, 2010)

Commissioned by Sumit Guha

Understanding the Partition of India

This volume—which comes with an arresting cover illustration showing Indian Border Security Force personnel and Pakistani Rangers at the daily flag-lowering ceremony at the India-Pakistan joint border at Wagah—is an important contribution to our understanding of the multiple meanings of the Partition of India in August 1947. That momentous upheaval not only tore through the social fabric of northern India, uprooting millions amid horrific violence, but left behind important legacies such as the emergence of highly centralized—yet very different—state systems in India and Pakistan and the creation of an “enduring rivalry” (p. 154) between the two nuclear-armed nations. Drawing upon their own major works on pre-Partition Punjab and post-independence India and Pakistan as well as the new Partition historiography that has emerged in recent years, Talbot and Singh set out to explore not just the causes and immediate and long-term consequences of that fateful event but also the kaleidoscopic historical interpretations that 1947 is open to: as the authors note, the Partition is so rich as an ideological resource that in both India and Pakistan “its possibilities are continuously reconstructed at both state and community level” (p. 4) to shore up state legitimacy and community self-identity.

It is therefore fitting that the volume opens with a survey of Partition historiography. The authors correctly maintain that no single interpretation can adequately explain the complexity surrounding 1947, and that all interpretations have their individual shortcomings. Reflecting the shifts that have occurred in academic writing on the Partition over the past few decades, the chapter opens with a survey of the literature on the “high politics” that led to the transfer of power, before moving on to review recent provincial-level studies and writings on the “human dimension”

of the division of the subcontinent (p. 24). What is particularly pleasing about this chapter—and of the volume as a whole in this respect—is that, despite their expertise in Punjab history and culture, the authors are at pains to direct the reader beyond the “over-generalized” Indian Punjab story of the Partition to studies of other provinces and the Princely States, and of variations within those regions as well as between different sections of their populations. The chapter is a very useful review of Partition historiography indeed.

The second chapter reviews the events that led to 1947. Its principal argument is that the Partition was neither the inescapable consequence of irreconcilable Muslim-Hindu differences (the position, broadly, of Pakistani nationalists) nor the inevitable “parting gift” of the British Raj (the position adopted by many Indian nationalists). Instead, the authors maintain that the Partition is best explained in terms of the complex interplay of rising communal tensions in the 1930s, the impact of the Second World War, the political choices made by the British and by India’s elites at both the national and provincial levels, and the widespread breakdown of law and order following the Great Calcutta Killing of August 1946. It was only after the latter event that independence accompanied by division became in any real sense unavoidable. Not all readers, to be sure, will be satisfied with the authors’ apportionment of responsibility for the Partition, but few would question their contention that it needs to be understood in terms of “multi-layered narratives and developments” (p. 25).

In the third chapter the authors take us deeper into an understanding of the violence that accompanied the Partition. Whereas standard accounts present the mass killings and abduction and raping of women as spontaneous and irrational reflexes at a

time of paralysis of state power as empire gave way to two new nation-states, Talbot and Singh present revisionist interpretations of the timing and character of the violence. They see the violence of August 1947, of which Punjab was the epicenter, not as a unique occurrence but rather as the sharpest spike in a cycle of violence that they trace from the Great Calcutta Killing of August 1946 up to communal violence in East (Pakistani) and West (Indian) Bengal in early 1950. They are thus inclined to follow Vazira Zamindar in conceptualizing India's division in terms of a "Long Partition."^[1] And, by comparing Partition violence with post-1947 communal violence in India, which frequently displays high levels of political and paramilitary leadership, planning, and organization, they are able to show that the former was qualitatively different from earlier communal riots: precisely, they locate the transition from the "traditional" communal riot (with its "public" contest between men over sacred space of religious processions and places of worship) to modern "communal" violence (with its genocidal invasion of the "private sphere" and its deliberate signaling out of women of the "other" community for ritualized violation) to the time of the Great Calcutta Killing (p. 65). This new type of communal violence, they maintain, could thrive in regions where the temporary breakdown in state authority was almost complete; equally, however, it could thrive in regions where there were functioning administrations but those chose to stand by or became implicated in it (p. 89).

Chapter 4 examines the issues of migration (the Partition created the biggest number of refugees in the twentieth century) and resettlement. Once again the authors maintain that the standard accounts of these processes have tended to universalize the Punjab experience, which was itself "highly distorted by official constructions" (p. 125), and have tended to ignore their protracted nature, especially in the case of East and West Bengal, where it is possible to see Partition migration going on well into the 1950s. They offer instead an analysis that seeks to highlight the significant differences in the migration and resettlement patterns in Punjab and Bengal, which were the two provinces of British India that were subjected to internal partition. More than that, however, they demonstrate how new archival research in recent years, supported by the oral testimonies of refugees, has revealed the differentiated experiences of different social groupings within those two regions. The influx of many millions of Hindus and Sikhs into In-

dia, and of an equal number of Muslims into Pakistan, presented the two new nation-states with formidable administrative challenges, which were not always met successfully, official claims notwithstanding. The major cities of the subcontinent that bore the brunt of these migrations also faced tremendous challenges, and had their landscapes changed forever as a result. Through cameo sketches of Calcutta, Dacca, Delhi, Karachi, and Lahore during and after Partition, the authors demonstrate how local organizations played crucial roles in the rehabilitation of these many newcomers, transforming their cities into "ethnic enclaves" (p. 126) in the process.

The fifth chapter deals with the legacies of Partition, specifically with how the "new ethnic landscapes" and "troublesome borderlands" (p. 153) created in 1947 shaped nation- and state-building projects in independent India and Pakistan (and later Bangladesh as well) and fostered the emergence of new ethnic and religious nationalisms that both challenged the ability of the new nation-states to manage internal political unrest and helped define their relations with each other. The authors argue that in both India and Pakistan a direct consequence of the Partition was the drive to create highly centralized state systems that would ensure that there would be no more partitions. Among the political elites in both countries Partition was given an "almost incontestable, meta-narrative status": 1947 became, in that sense, "the end of history" (pp. 131,153). In India the perceived need to protect "national unity" and "secularism" from the forces of "secessionism" and "communalism" led to the construction of a democratic political system that, though federal in shape, concentrated enormous powers at the center. Successive New Delhi governments have dealt firmly—sometimes violently—with ethnic-religious nationalisms at the periphery, as in Punjab, Jammu, and Kashmir, and the northeastern states. In Pakistan, on the other hand, the many crises that attended the nation's birth (for example, the dislocation caused by massive population exchanges, and the stand-off with India on the status of Jammu and Kashmir) hastened the creation of an authoritarian, Punjab-dominated military-bureaucratic polity that has struggled to maintain the relevance of the two-nation theory that, ideologically speaking, brought the nation into existence. Pakistan's inability to integrate local and refugee populations was exposed by *mohajir* ethnic assertion in Sindh in the 1970s and 1980s, while West Pakistan's failure to deal with opposition to exploita-

tion and marginalization in East Pakistan (East Bengal) other than militarily culminated in a war with India and the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. The chapter ends with a perceptive explanation of the persistence of religious nationalism in both India (the Hindutva movement) and Pakistan (the various *jihadi* groups) since the 1980s in terms of the Partition's reenactment in everyday "imaginings"—the imagined threat of further partitions in India and the perceived threats to Islamic sovereignty and national cohesion in Pakistan (p. 149).

In their final chapter the authors survey the "enduring rivalry" that Partition bequeathed to independent India and Pakistan. This rivalry was, and continues to be, founded on competing national ideologies (Indian secularism and pluralism versus Pakistani Islamization), the "messiness" of the division of the British Raj's territory and assets, the Jammu and Kashmir dispute (which the authors note is often called the "unfinished business of Partition"), and Pakistan's emergence as an "insecurity state" which feels permanently threatened by its much larger and more powerful neighbor and therefore justified in maintaining an institutionalized predominance of the military over the feeble organs of civilian democracy. In the aftermath of the creation of Bangladesh both India and Pakistan, already members of opposite Cold War camps, raced to develop nuclear weapons. As the authors remind us, the two nations came perilously close to full-scale war in 1990, following the rise of militancy in Kashmir; in 1999, following Pakistani army activity in Kashmir; and in the summer of 2002, following an attack on the Indian parliament several months earlier by Pakistani militants based in Kashmir. Any nuclear war between the two nations would, as the authors dryly observe, "make the Partition violence but a mere footnote" (p. 154). Since 2002 the two nations have stepped

back from the brink of catastrophe and have engaged in a "composite dialogue" designed to normalize relations. Although the Jammu and Kashmir issue appears intractable, Talbot and Singh do find several reasons for thinking that India and Pakistan might yet put an end to their long rivalry. The recent forging of closer ties between India and the United States (Pakistan's patron throughout the Cold War), which presents opportunities for a greater moderating role for the U.S. in the subcontinent, deepening economic ties between India and Pakistan, and growing cross-border "people-to-people" contacts below the level of official dialogue are three such reasons for optimism. The authors also observe that, despite the pursuit of highly centralized nation- and state-building goals in both India and Pakistan after 1947, the regions have not been fully subordinated to the centers. If, as they suspect, current trends point to the future preeminence of the regions, the legitimacy of not just the centralized state but the Partition itself might be called into question, and in that way India and Pakistan could both escape from the "trap of history" that Partition created (p. 175).

In sum, this is a sophisticated work by two eminent scholars that greatly widens and deepens our understanding of India's division in 1947 and of its lasting legacies and significance for the people of India and Pakistan. With its attention to recent advances in Partition historiography, and with the provision of maps, photographs, a glossary, and a chronology of main events from 1937 to 1947, this volume will be appreciated by all teachers and students of modern South Asia.

Note

[1]. Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar, *The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia: Refugees, Boundaries, Histories* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

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Citation: Andrew Major. Review of Talbot, Ian; Singh, Gurharpal, *The Partition of India*. H-Asia, H-Net Reviews. December, 2010.

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