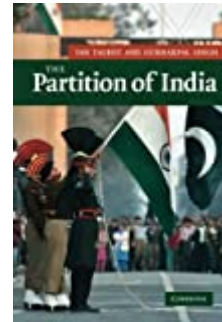


Ian Talbot, Gurharpal Singh. *The Partition of India*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009. 206 pp. \$29.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-67256-6.



Reviewed by Sadia Bajwa

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I. Talbot u.a.: The Partition of India

The publication of this well-written, concise and informative volume by two leading scholars in their field is a welcome appearance for scholars and students of South Asian studies, as well as for those interested in the study of ethnic violence, partition, forced migration and refugee resettlement in general. Especially students faced with a jungle of interpretations of the partition of India will find this volume with its excellent bibliography and declared aim of overcoming the fragmentation of writings on Partition a useful guide.

In the very first chapter this concern with the shortcomings of Partition historiography is addressed directly by giving an overview and evaluation of the wide range of literature on Partition. The 1980s saw Partition historiography turn a new leaf: shedding its old focus on high politics it instead began concentrating on understanding the human consequence of Partition through the study of subjective individual and collective experiences drawn from oral testimonies and personal memories. (p. 5) While Talbot and Singh view these innovative historiographical developments as seminal to their approach they insist that such micro-nature studies

only distract from understanding the larger picture unless they are contextually embedded in the broader developments that have framed the Partition and the post-Partition processes. (p. 5) Yasmin Khan's *The Great Partition* Yasmin Khan, *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan*, New Haven 2007. is a recent example of the narrative-approach propagated by Talbot and Singh, but in comparison, *The Partition of India* is a more clearly structured and accessible book with didactically well-formulated introductions and conclusions to each chapter.

Speaking of broader contexts they also ask the important yet all too often neglected question of the global and current relevance of the case-study of Partition for comparative studies on ethnic violence and policy option. They point to the academic treatment of Partition as a unique historical event and its near absence as a subject of wider literature on ethnic cleansing, forced migration and refugee resettlement. In highlighting the increased violence that resulted in the very efforts to counter violence in the first place, and the added aftermath of social dislocation brought about by Partition-related eth-

nic cleansing, Talbot and Singh call for a reappraisal of 'partition' as an accepted 'policy' option in situations of ethnic and communal conflict. (p. 2) A further seminal question raised in the volume concerns democratization in a plural ethnic and communal setting as a possible cause of Indian and later post-Cold War European 'partitions' (p. 2). While at all asking these questions in the context of the subcontinent's partition is a first step in the right direction, the volume does not as one is led to expect draw any detailed comparisons with partitions elsewhere in the world: the scope of the book remains strictly within the boundaries of the case-study of the Indian partition. However, this volume would serve as sound foundation for further comparative studies that aim to address these vital questions.

Chapter 2 leads us down the road to 1947, giving us an overview of the contested history of Muslim separatism and the emergence of the demand for Pakistan. Talbot and Singh point out the complexity underlying Muslims as a cultural and political category in India and the role of the colonial state in creating these categories. Partition, it is argued, was neither the inevitable result of Hindu-Muslim differences nor the outcome of any 'divide and rule' strategies on the part of the British, a point that is echoed throughout the volume. Rather, 'political separatism based on religion was an ideology which resonated only in particular contexts.' (p. 57) The chapter gives a historical background to Partition centered around questions of pluralism of community (Muslim and Hindu), political attitudes of leaders to constitutional reform and the effects of both the Congress rule in 1937-1939 and the Second World War on the Muslim League and its political standing. The reader is also given an insight into the related regional political developments in Punjab, Bengal and the princely states in the decades before partition, and how the Pakistan demand was received by regional politicians. The chapter succeeds in giving the reader a solid introduction to the multi-layered regional and all-India dimensions of the processes and developments that led to partition.

In the chapter on 'Violence and the Partition', the quality of Partition-related violence is examined. The authors argue that it was fundamentally different from earlier communal riots, not only in terms of scale and brutality, but also in that it was evidently connected to political developments; it emerged as a 'political resource' (p. 60). Talbot and Singh question the view that the violence was 'irrational' or 'spontaneous' in nature, categorically arguing that in the period 1946-1950, 'communal violence was organized with the singular objective of clearing out

minority populations.' (p. 61) They adopt instrumentalist arguments of 'functional utility' (p. 66) and state-complicity put forward by Paul Brass, Romila Thapar and Imtiaz Ahmad in their work on communalism in India and the 2001 Gujarat riots in particular. Cited p. 84, note 109: Paul Brass, *The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India*, Washington 2003; Dipanker Gupta / Romila Thapar, *Who are the Guilty? Punishment and Confidence Building in Gujarat*, in: *The Hindu* (Chennai), 2.4.2002; Imtiaz Ahmed, 'Has Communalism Changed?' in: Asghar Ali Engineer (Hrsg.), *The Gujarat Carnage*. New Delhi 2003, p. 137-141. They contend that the 'end of empire' violence characterized by 'genocidal' violence was qualitatively different from the earlier 'traditional' communal riots in a number of ways, including among other things the fact that it occurred in an end-of-empire political context and involved ethnic cleansing and exhibited a high degree of planning (pp. 66-89, here p. 89). Talbot and Singh are careful not to deny agency to the individual and concede that some of the 1946-1947 violence was retributive or motivated by 'lust for loot or women', but they nevertheless maintain that these individual rioters were acting in an atmosphere in which violence was 'socially sanctioned.' (p. 88).

A minor problem that must be pointed out in this chapter is the somewhat misleading title 'Transition from 'traditional' to 'communal' violence' of the section describing the qualitative difference between earlier and Partition violence. Firstly, it implies that there is a dichotomy between 'traditional' and 'communal' while not defining either. Furthermore, the use of term communal here is not consistent with its use elsewhere in the volume, where it is employed as a general term for inter-community conflict. Thirdly, the dichotomy is not consistent with the actual argument in the section, which opposes 'traditional' communal riots to 'end of empire violence', and not 'traditional' to 'communal' violence.

Notably, the authors expand the temporal scope of studying Partition-violence in most literature confined to August and November 1947, which is also one of the reasons for the Punjab-bias in the literature to the period between August 1946 and March 1950. This allows for a more representative picture of violence experienced across the regions and localities: the reader is shown how the intensity as well as timing of violence varied across north India. These variations in Partition-violence were accompanied by the 'differential experience of migration' (p. 89) and rehabilitation like violence, also configured by social class, ethnicity, language, caste and gen-

der. Thus, in the fourth chapter the authors set out to rectify the Punjab-bias propagated by conventional versions of Partition-related migration and rehabilitation. The universalization of the Punjab experience in Partition-historiography distracts from the very different patterns of migration in Bengal: while Punjabâs migration was by large complete by the end of December 1947, waves of migrants continued to cross the border between East Pakistan and West Bengal for several decades, the 1947 border only gradually acquiring permanence. The chapter through case-studies of Calcutta, Dacca, Delhi, Karachi and Lahore also gives the reader an insight into the transformation that the refugees/migrants (terms used interchangeably in Partition literature and adopted rightly with reservation by the authors) brought to the urban landscape of the cities they settled in.

Unlike conventional writings on the subject, this volume does not limit itself to the examination of immediate events and effects of Partition; it expands its scope to the study of Partition legacies that shaped the post-colonial states of South Asia at multiple levels. The last two chapters are devoted to a succinct discussion of how factors of geopolitics, demography and statecraft stemming from the imperatives of Partition have molded the processes of nation- and state-building in post-Independence India and Pakistan. The authors show how 1947 reshaped ethnic landscapes and brought with it challenges of ethnic

and religious nationalism for the two successor states, which had to do with two interconnected processes: a reconfiguration of ethnic consolidation as a result of the (forced) migration and the emergence of a highly centralized statecraft albeit legitimized respectively in Pakistan and India by the opposing ideologies of religious nationalism and secularism. The excellent summary of the Indian nationalist discourse that in the early decades of independence under the âCongress Systemâ and Nehruâs leadership managed to accommodate regionalism is just one instance where the authors have succeeded in explaining complex processes in a concise fashion. The final chapter discusses how the enduring Indo-Pak rivalry primarily manifested in the geo-political conflict over Kashmir has served to buttress the disparate ideological underpinnings of the respective states, the one trying to overcome its perpetual âstate of insecurityâ, while the other struggling to live up to its national ideal of secularism, pluralism and diversity.

It is a difficult task to contribute something new to the vast corpus of Partition-historiography. Talbot and Singhâs Partition of India is a valuable addition not because it has any drastically new findings or arguments, but because of its novel approach of weaving the existing and recent evidence into a coherent and concise narrative all the while historiographically contextualizing each point made.

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