

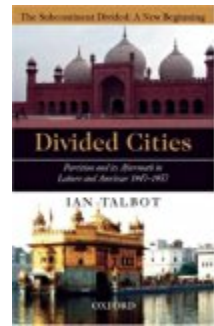
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Ian Talbot. *Divided Cities: Partition and Its Aftermath in Lahore and Amritsar, 1947-1957*. Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2006. xxxiv + 224 pp. \$13.85 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-547226-4.

Reviewed by Usha Gandhi (International Programs and Studies, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)

Published on H-Urban (June, 2007)



Lahore, Amritsar, and Partition

Only thirty-two miles separate Amritsar in India from Lahore in Pakistan, but the cities are worlds apart. This was not always the case. Before the 1947 partition, when Amritsar and Lahore were both in the Indian state of Punjab, there were Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs who had links with both cities. Some even had a home in one and business in the other.

In *Divided Cities*, Ian Talbot explores anew a region with which he has been deeply engaged.[1] This pioneering study provides fresh insights and interpretations, and perhaps opens the window to other comparative studies. Talbot recounts the changing equation between Lahore and Amritsar, and traces the traumatic and dramatic changes in the two cities in 1947, their sudden transformation from heartland centers into border cities, and, later, their contrasting evolution. The author's long lens takes in the pre-1947 history and the decade after partition.

All cities have their periods of glory and importance, and of decline. Lahore became part of the Mughal empire in 1536, and was next only to Delhi and Agra in imperial prominence. For brief periods (during the reigns of Emperors Akbar and Shah Jahan in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries), it functioned as the empire's capital. The still-extant Shalimar Gardens, the Fort (built by Shah Jahan), Badshahi Mosque (Aurangzeb's creation), and the tombs of Jahangir and his queen Nur Jahan are reminders of the Mughal era. There is also an ancient Ramayana connection that links Lahore to

Rama's son Lav.

A key year in the story of Amritsar is 1604, when the Adi Granth, the Sikh scripture, was installed at the site of the Harmandir Sahib, which would become Sikhism's holiest shrine. But it was during the forty years (1799-1839) that the Sikh chieftain Ranjit Singh ruled over the Punjab and territories beyond that Amritsar found pre-eminence. The Harmandir Sahib was gilded with gold during this time, and was to be known thereafter as the Swaran Mandir, or Golden Temple. The city prospered and bustled, trade expanded. Though Lahore was Ranjit Singh's capital, it declined.

Ranjit Singh's successors squabbled even as a new power, Britain, extended its control across the subcontinent. In the 1840s the Punjab's Sikh rulers lost out to the British, who proceeded to develop Lahore as their Indian empire's chief city to the north of Delhi. In 1947 (the year of independence, partition, violence, and migrations), Lahore's 240,000 Hindus and Sikhs constituted about a third of the city's population. They migrated to different parts of East Punjab, Delhi, and elsewhere in India. On the other hand, Amritsar's Muslims, who formed half of its total population of around 400,000, went chiefly to Lahore, taking skills and talents. Lahore lost all its Hindus and Sikhs, Amritsar, all its Muslims. After 1947 Lahore grew at a much faster rate. The 1991 census had Lahore's population as seven million, while Amritsar's was less than a million.

In all, between half a million and a million lost their

lives in the 1947 violence. Talbot notes that “there are no wayside memorials to provide clues to the Amritsar-Lahore road’s dark history in August-November 1947. Huge caravans of refugees ... traversed this route as part of the mass exodus of 4.6 million Muslims from East Punjab and reverse migrations of West Punjab Hindus and Sikhs to India” (p. xxxii). Rejecting an explanation that many still offer for India in 1947 and for similar traumas elsewhere, Talbot argues in *Divided Cities* that “the 1947 violence in Lahore and Amritsar was not the outcome of primordial religious differences which culminated in a spontaneous outburst of irrational passion and ferocity” (p. xxv). A modern state (or states) that no longer functioned by the rule of law, and individuals and communal groups seeking to grab the power of a departing empire provided a combustible mix.

The author divides his study into six parts: (1) the colonial period and its impact on the development of Lahore and Amritsar; (2) events in the two cities from March to August 1947; (3) post-partition between 1947 and 1957; (4) the challenges posed by destruction and demographic changes; (5) recovered memories of Lahore and Amritsar; and (6) how refugees influenced the two cities and related to local residents.

The British annexed the Punjab in the mid-nineteenth century. Urban development of the two cities followed a set pattern for colonial civilian settlements, with tree-shaded roads and large bungalows, cantonments, and a Mall Road in each, but the scales tilted in Lahore’s favor as the provincial capital. Lahore saw its engineering, textile, and leather industries grow during the Second World War. Colonial architecture in Lahore sought to blend with the city’s Mughal heritage, and it became an educational center with impressive schools and colleges that competed with Delhi’s. Hindus resided in distinct enclaves. Its larger student and European population gave Lahore a cosmopolitan feel that Amritsar could not match.

Amritsar’s markets, factories, and mills grew rapidly, however, with trade links extending to Europe and Central Asia in cotton and woolen textiles, raw silk, cattle, and horses. The wheat market for the Punjab—the granary of India—was situated in Amritsar. Flour mills were mostly owned by Hindus from the bania, or trading castes. Kashmiri artisans who had fled a drought in their region in 1833, enriched Amritsar with their skills in manufacturing silk and pashmina shawls, switching later to employment in the growing carpet industry. Lahore’s intellectual life was clearly richer, yet two of Pakistan’s

(and the subcontinent’s) best-regarded intellectuals, Faiz Ahmad Faiz (1911-1984) and Saadat Hasan Manto (1912-1955), spent their formative years in Amritsar.

Talbot writes of the “religious revivalism” that from the 1920s gradually “sharpened communal identities” (p. 27). The climax was the March 1940 resolution of the Muslim League, passed in Lahore, for a separate Pakistan. The author says, however, that “even the politicization of religious identity did not make partition and its associated violence inevitable” (p. 19). What then necessitated the division? Talbot raises this tantalizing question but does not pursue the inquiry.

In the section on the 1947 violence, Talbot reports on the conflagrations in Lahore and Amritsar, and the attacks on refugee trains. “In riot-torn Lahore and Amritsar in 1947, identity was reduced to the physical signs of religious affiliation. A brutal death could follow from being identified as being of the ‘wrong religion’” (p. 24). Talbot recounts the conflicting interpretations, written and oral, harbored by the different communities—each portraying the “other” as the main instigator and culprit. He presents the trajectory of this violence: the contest for power in March 1946 in the provincial elections; the Muslim League’s civil disobedience campaign early in 1947 against the Unionist-Akali-Congress government led by Khizr Hayat Tiwana; and the resignation of this coalition ministry on March 2, 1947. The Muslim League had hoped to include all of the Punjab in Pakistan, but the destruction in Lahore (March 4, 1947) and Amritsar (March 5) ” made it impossible for the Muslim League to achieve Pakistan without the Punjab’s partition” (p. 41).

The threads of violence are traced through localities in the two cities. As word traveled to Lahore of large numbers of Muslims killed in Amritsar and surrounding villages, the cry for revenge went up. Lahore’s Hindus and Sikhs, who had hoped that the Boundary Commission would award the city to India, faced not only bitter disappointment but also mobs maddened by the arrival of trainloads of corpses from East Punjab. Likewise, Muslims, convinced of Pakistan’s claim on Amritsar, found themselves at the losing end in that city. Using evidence from both cities, Talbot disputes the claims that the partition violence was spontaneous, unplanned, or a result just of mass frenzy or just a “temporary madness” (p. 53). He asks: “Would the violence of August 1947 have gone so unchecked if adequate punishment had been meted out to those apprehended in the wake of the March disturbances? How culpable is the colonial administration in this respect?” (p. 56).

One wishes the author had probed this question at greater length. Could a resolute state not have nipped in the bud, in Lahore and Amritsar in March 1947, the fire that in August and September would devastate the whole of the Punjab? There is resignation in Talbot's tone as he accepts the contention of the Punjab Governor, Sir Evan Jenkins, that "the troubles are due not to 'British rule' but to the fact that what remains of 'British rule' is now ending" (p. 56).

Flooded with refugees, the two post-partition cities were transformed from major economic centers into border cities, with torn social fabric and broken familial links. Other networks were formed—those of criminals and of cross-border smugglers. Insecurity, threats of war, and calls for civilians to be armed increased.

With the exodus of its Muslim population, Amritsar had lost a large pool of skilled labor. Its "border" position contributed to its marginalization and to its difficulty obtaining raw materials and markets. Inadequate transport links with the rest of the country did not help. Lahore too faced similar handicaps. It had lost 73 percent of its industrial labor force and 60 percent of its working capital. Its banks, printing presses, textile and engineering factories, and transport companies were crippled. But its role as an administrative hub enabled it to regain its prominence. Skilled Muslim artisans, weavers, and other workers arriving from Amritsar and other cities in India helped this process. The government gave support for new ventures using a refugee tax and private donations.

Partition violence had gutted 4,000 houses in Lahore and most of the 6,000 houses in the walled city were badly damaged. Amritsar was the worst affected of any city in the Punjab with almost 10,000 buildings burnt down. City improvement trusts that had been set up during the colonial era (modeled on British town planning and not necessarily suited to local conditions and lifestyle) became responsible for post-partition reconstruction. That considerable evacuee property had become available eased the situation in both Lahore and Amritsar. Compounded with issues of refugee housing and employment was the need to overcome trauma.

Expressions of nostalgia are heard on both sides of the border, from Hindu and Sikh refugees from Lahore, and apparently to a lesser extent from those who fled Amritsar. Talbot presents voices of Hindus such as Pran Nevile, Som Anand, Sahdev Vohra, and Santosh Kumar

who loved their Lahore, but suggests that in elite narratives communal tensions are glossed over, whereas the gaze of the poorer classes is not so rosy.

Talbot sees nationalist discourses in both India and Pakistan that stress the struggle for and achievement of independence—and in the case of the latter the additional gain of separate nationhood—and relegate the violence of partition to a subtext. Thus in Pakistan's standard narrative, Lahore emerges primarily as the site for the passage of the 1940 Pakistan resolution. The pre-1947 communal harmony recalled by better-off Hindu and Sikh refugees from Lahore is not part of this narrative, for it conflicts with official ideology.

Partition's migrations transformed the ethnicity, culture, and politics of Karachi, Delhi and Calcutta. From a Sindhi city, Karachi became an Urdu-speaking one. In culture, Delhi became a quasi-Punjabi city. Calcutta's leftward turn was in part a result of refugees from East Bengal. Talbot notes that changes in Lahore and Amritsar seemed less fundamental, and also that post-1947 Karachi's acute ethnic tensions were largely absent in Lahore. Although both Lahore and Amritsar lost their religious minorities, their Punjabi-ness was intact. The refugees settling in the two cities were, like the locals, Punjabi-speaking. Yet there was competition in Lahore between refugees and locals for abandoned Hindu and Sikh property, and there were cases of sexual exploitation of vulnerable refugees in both Lahore and Amritsar.

By looking jointly and objectively at Lahore and Amritsar and at the two Punjabs, Talbot has enhanced our understanding of the India-Pakistan story. His study is instructive because it is comparative and because it is detailed, providing close-ups of Lahore and Amritsar, at times locality by locality, community by community, and trade by trade. One hopes for more studies of this kind, including perhaps a comparison of the impact of 1947 on Delhi and Karachi.

Note

[1]. Ian Talbot, *Khizr Tiwana: The Punjab Unionist Party and the Partition of India* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2002); Ian Talbot, *Punjab and the Raj, 1849-1947*, (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1988); Ian Talbot and Darshan Singh Tatla, eds., *Epicentre of Violence: Partition Voices and Memories from Amritsar* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2006).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-urban>

Citation: Usha Gandhi. Review of Talbot, Ian, *Divided Cities: Partition and Its Aftermath in Lahore and Amritsar, 1947-1957*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. June, 2007.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13329>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.