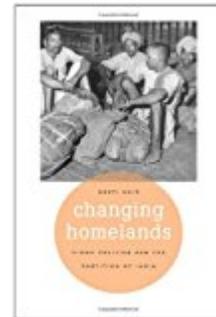




Neeti Nair. *Changing Homelands: Hindu Politics and the Partition of India*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011. 343 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-05779-1.



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Published on H-Asia (November, 2013)

Commissioned by Sumit Guha

Panjab and Partition

Neeti Nair has written a comprehensive and complex history of the Punjabi Hindus in the first half of the twentieth century. *Changing Homelands* begins by tracing the rise of communalism in the 1920s and ends with partition in the 1940s. The author has offered new insights about the role of prominent personalities, like Swami Shradhanand, Lajpat Rai, and Bhagat Singh. Her main argument is that while an earlier generation of Punjabi politicians had evolved strategies that reconciled their anxieties about being a religious minority with their Punjabi regional identity, this was lacking in the 1940s. Also, she believes that the policies of the Congress were insufficiently inclusive and leaders at the national level, like Jawaharlal Nehru, did not allow cross communal regional alliances, which could have thwarted the partition of the country. Nair's focus is on the Punjabi Hindus and the Congress. Partly because of this there is some uncertainty about the role of the Muslim League and Muslim politicians of the Punjab in her alternative narrative about partition.

In the first chapter Nair sets out her framework. The

“‘communal’ and the ‘national’ were still in the process of formation” (p. 32). She writes, “The nation was seen in a starkly Hindu idiom, as well as explicitly including members of other religious communities” (p. 49). Although Lajpat Rai began to promote Hindi because of his Hindu commitments, he also believed that Aurangzeb was not as bad as conventionally depicted. In chapter 2, the author argues that Rai wrote thirteen articles for the *Tribune* between November and December 1924 which revealed the inconsistencies in his beliefs. He proposed that Punjab be divided based on religious communities in order to “make majority rule effective,” although he also believed in and advocated Hindu-Muslim unity (p. 77). While acknowledging that Rai was a Hindu, Nair argues that he acted politically “in the wider interests of a nation in the making” (p. 93).

The author believes that “secular” and “nationalist” historians have failed to recognize the reality as well as legitimacy of “religiously informed anti-colonial protests,” (the subtitle of a section in chapter 3). Nair writes approvingly of the address by Swami Shrad-

Shraddhanand to both Hindus and Muslims from the pulpit of the Jama Masjid in Delhi in April 1919. The Swami subsequently became involved with the movement for reconversion to Hinduism but he continued to cherish this moment. Of twenty-seven editorials that he wrote between April and October 1926, shortly before he was assassinated, Shraddhanand dealt with the 1919 Satyagraha in eight. This is proof of “complex, multiple and inter-weaving strands of ‘communalism’ and anti-colonial nationalism,” not aggressive Hindu communalism (p. 111). Nair’s assessment seems lopsided because she faults Gandhi for his equivocal stance on the campaign for *shuddhi* (reconversion to Hinduism) and *sangathan* (unification of Hindus) in the town of Kohat before the riots of 1924, but Shraddhanand’s support for such activities elsewhere is not seen as so objectionable because he still cherished Hindu-Muslim unity. But if Shraddhanand had inspired Hindu-Muslim unity in Delhi in 1919, Gandhi had done so on an even bigger scale with the Khilafat movement between 1920 and 1922. Even Nair admits that Shraddhanand did not think that the Muslims could be “responding to, rather than initiating, an ethos of violence” during the 1920s (p. 109).

In recent years, historians like Bipan Chandra and scholars like S. Irfan Habib have highlighted the role of Bhagat Singh as a revolutionary who believed in peaceful mass movements. Nair has gone much further by arguing that “his incredible popularity stemmed from his tactics as a satyagrahi [peaceful protester], not terrorist” (p. 112). Nonviolent hunger strikes, while in prison in Lahore during 1929-31, in support of the rights of political prisoners were responsible for the soaring popularity of Bhagat Singh and B. Dutt. Unfortunately, Gandhi refused to engage with “the greatest critic and successful emulator of his methods” (p. 126). She argues that Gandhi sought to “retain power in the hands of an overly centralizing Congress” (p. 130). Nair seems to be overestimating the potential of Singh’s “uncommonly unifying protest.” If she agrees with Sumit Sarkar about the importance of the concrete issues raised by the bourgeoisie and “the absence of a coherent left alternative” (p. 129), the heroic and inspiring struggle of the hunger strikers would not have been able, by itself, to radically transform the nature of nationalism in Punjab, let alone India.

Many who admired the heroism and patriotism of the young revolutionaries had economic and social interests they would be loath to give up. Nair’s reference to the work of economic and social historians indicates that she does not think that communalism and nationalism were shaped just by the “moments” that she has focused on in

her book. Nevertheless, there is little effort to include issues dealing with landowner-tenant, creditor-debtor, and rural-urban differences that shaped both communalism and the nation in the making in Punjab. Communalism is not only about religious identities and sentiments. We need also to consider the shaping of religious identities by material self-interest as well. And this does not have to be crudely deterministic. The works of David Gilmartin and Ian Talbot for Punjab and of Joya Chatterjee, Tajul Hashmi, and Partha Chatterjee for Bengal come to mind.

Nair’s major argument is that, despite the existence of communalism, and the proliferation of various schemes for the partition of the Punjab during the 1930s and 1940s, the partition of India was not its logical outcome. In chapter 4, she argues that a rapprochement between the Congress and the Muslim League would have been possible if the “Nationalists” led by Madan Mohan Malaviya had not derailed the Jinnah-Rajendra Prasad negotiations in 1935 over relatively minor differences. (pp. 148-151) The electoral success of the Congress had an important role in shaping their attitudes toward the Muslim League in 1937, according to several historians. Therefore, it is uncertain whether any particular settlement made in 1935 would have worked in the changed scenario of 1937. Nair has provided evidence that calls into question the “meta-narratives of inexorably formed ‘communalism’ and ‘nationalism’” (p. 152). Undoubtedly, the Congress was insufficiently inclusionary; but no other party was more inclusionary.

Nair rightly draws attention to the inability of the Congress “to take seriously the fears of Muslim and Hindu minorities” and to “draw a clear distinction between itself and the increasingly shrill politics of the Hindu Mahasabha” (p. 159). For any all-India party trying to gain the principled support of the Hindu minority in Punjab and Bengal and of the Hindu majority in United Provinces and Bihar on the question of the Communal Award was a daunting task. This problem affected parties concerned with consistency at the national level and both the Congress and the Muslim League had to deal with it. On the one hand, in the Punjab and the United Provinces, the Muslim landlords were anti-Congress because of its propaganda in favor of land reforms. On the other hand, the East Bengal Hindu landlords and merchant-moneylenders felt threatened by the politics of agrarian reform advocated by the Krishak Praja party. The Hindu middle classes generally felt threatened by the rising claims of the Muslims and the guarantees given to the Depressed Classes after the Poona Pact of 1932. The

Congress equivocated on the Communal Award just as the Muslim League under Jinnah found it difficult to reconcile the interests of Muslims in the Muslim majority and minority provinces.

In a brisk discussion of constitutional negotiations, Nair argues that the three-tiered structure proposed by the Cabinet Mission Plan of 1946—a weak center, a strong government for three “groups” of provinces, and relatively weak provinces—was acceptable to many Punjabis. She does recognize that there were many Punjabi politicians, like G.C. Narang and G.C. Bhargava, who were unwilling to accept parity between the Congress and the Muslim League at the level of the central government. They had to choose between safeguarding their interests as a Hindu minority in Punjab and their commitment to the unity of their province. She writes, “Multiple, messy loyalties now had to be hierarchically arranged in the name of the nation” (p. 172). Perhaps because of a paucity of sources, the dilemma faced by Punjabi politicians, like Narang and Bhargava, gets much less attention than that faced by Lajpat Rai and Shradhanand in an earlier period. The argument about the role of national leaders, like Nehru and Vallabhabhai Patel, in thwarting the regional resolution of the communal problem in Punjab needs to be developed in greater detail. If the Hindu Mahasabha was significantly “raising hopes of Hindu majority rule in Muslim majority Punjab” (p. 174), the regional identity of Punjab was already in serious peril.

In chapter 5, the author tries to deal with both high politics and subaltern voices. Unimaginative leaders of the Congress and the Muslim League allowed the Hindu Mahasabha and the (Muslim) National Guards to assume leadership at local levels. As both the Congress and the Muslim League did not resolve the question of minority rights before independence, Nair notes, the political climate got vitiated. Even after the Rawalpindi riots of March 1947, Punjabi minorities sought safeguards for themselves, not migration to India. It was only after the cycle of retribution began that Punjabi Hindus and Sikhs thought of migration. Some even thought of taking over the landholdings of the departing Muslim minority from Hindu-majority East Punjab in exchange for those they were leaving in Pakistan. According to Nair, intercommunity discord was not the main cause of partition violence. The breakdown of law and order, abdication of responsibility on both sides of the newly created border, British reluctance to act decisively against

communal groups even before August 1947, and the communalization of the police and even the army were the cause of partition violence. One could, however, argue that religious polarization itself weakened the political will of various agents to suppress violence. Nair argues, “The bulk of the Partition violence occurred after the haphazard decision to evacuate minorities was conclusively taken” (p. 217). Although that is a subject for another book, one wonders why the scale of partition violence and migration in Bengal was lower than in the Punjab.

Relying on fifty semi-structured interviews in Delhi and drawing on official records, Nair explores memories about partition in the last chapter. For some, the decision to migrate took several months, for others the “moment of reckoning” came after just a few hours (p. 220). There were many Hindus who believed that even if power changed hands in Punjab they would still not need to leave their homes. Nair emphasizes that many Punjabis were taken by surprise by the fact of partition. It was not seen as inevitable and that has remained in the memory of many survivors. Those interviewed were important or interesting people, but their memories cannot be regarded as representative of those who were uprooted by partition. Official nationalist historiography and the rise of Hindu nationalism have not managed to erase the memory of partition as an unforeseen development. Moreover, academic and literary works and cinematic representations of partition have produced multiple narratives about that traumatic experience.

Nair concludes that Nehru “prevented Punjabi Hindus from forging pacts with Punjabi Muslims,” that Sikandar Hayat Khan failed to distance himself from Jinnah’s conception of Pakistan, and that most Punjabi Hindus refused to see that grouping under the Cabinet Mission Plan was “a way to avoid Partition” (pp. 258-259). These can hardly be labeled “shockingly petty political differences” (p. 260). We also need to know more about the peasants, landlords, and merchants; about the Depressed Classes and agricultural castes; and about the interaction of the three religious communities before we can capture the messy and multiple ways in which high politics and popular sentiments led to the partition of the Punjab and of India. *Changing Homelands* is, nevertheless, a valuable account of the partition of the Punjab. More important, Nair’s book is probably the most substantial and nuanced history of urban Punjabi Hindus that has been written so far. She will be widely read.

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Citation: Rohit Wanchoo. Review of Nair, Neeti, *Changing Homelands: Hindu Politics and the Partition of India*. H-Asia, H-Net Reviews. November, 2013.

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