A Partition of India Book Shelf

The volumes under review represent the latest research on the never-ending debate on the partition of India—actually the partition of the two provinces of Bengal and Punjab. For many scholars, partition may be a tired old subject, but as a matter of fact academic research is now only beginning—facilitated by the opening of classified papers in the archives of Britain, India and Pakistan. Bimal Prasad’s *Pathway to India’s Partition*, to be completed in a third volume, rejects the popular notion that partition was the result mainly of British manipulation and the "mistakes" or intransigence of certain Congress and Muslim League leaders; the author asserts that it was actually the outcome of a powerful movement of Muslim nationalism. The first volume deals with the legacy of the medieval past, in which the author disputes the theory of a perpetual, centuries-old conflict between two antagonistic civilizations in the political arena. At the same time, Prasad shows how both upper-caste Hindu and Muslim elites had, by the mid-nineteenth century, already become conscious of their separate identities, before the era of modern political awakening began in the last decades of the century. He then moves on to discuss the nature of the economic divide between the two communities and the intellectual as well as the emotional environment of the Muslim elite. At the end of the volume the focus turns to upper-caste Hindu nationalism and British policy, both of which in varying degrees worked as props for Muslim nationalism. There are four appendices which reproduce the critical speeches and writings of four Muslim leaders. In this volume the chapter on economic divide is the most original, as previous authors on partition tended to pay much less attention to the differential modern educational and economic development of the two groups. The other chapters necessary for the coherence of the book are much less original.

In the second volume Prasad seeks to analyse the evolution of Muslim nationalism from 1877 to 1937. This exercise has resulted in highlighting certain trends which have been so far ignored or underplayed in India but not in Pakistan or in the writings of foreign authors. It
shows that the two-nation theory was as old as the movement for Muslim awakening in much of the subcontinent. Similarly the author demonstrates that the idea of Pakistan was circulating as early as the 1920s in Punjab, at least a decade before its clearly dated formulation by Chaudhri Rahmat Ali in 1933. Prasad shows that, contrary to academic as well as journalistic perceptions, both Muhammad Iqbal and Muhammad Ali Jinnah were converted to the idea of Pakistan as early as June 1937—much before the negotiations between the Congress and the League on the coalition government in the United Provinces. To complete the picture of two competing nationalisms, Prasad reveals the strength of the growing sentiment of upper-caste Hindu nationalism within and outside Congress in the crucial provinces of Bengal and Punjab in the 1920s. The charged environment created by the juxtaposition of the two nationalisms is underlined by Lala Lajpat Rai’s declaration in 1924 that in view of the general Muslim attitude, a divided India might provide the only solution to the communal problem. Equally significant was Gandhi’s assertion in 1924-1925 that he saw no solution of that problem except through prayer.

Sho Kuwajima’s Muslims, Nationalism and the Partition: 1946 Provincial Elections in India focuses on the election that decided the political destiny of British India. The election results not only provided a constitutional answer to the question of Partition or division of India, but also hinted at the problems that the people of the region had to face after independence. It left behind the critical question of the fate of people in the princely states, a significant percentage of the national population in 1947. The election was held under limited franchise: women and lower caste Hindus had no voting rights. Nonetheless, it is significant that in many parts of the world, political systems which were formed after 1945 collapsed in the 1990s and even before. India, but not Pakistan or Bangladesh, is one of the few countries in Asia where parliamentary democracy has survived despite occasional threats, such as the Emergency nightmare of 1975-77. This work tries to grasp the meaning of the 1946 Provincial elections and considers their relevance to the present time.

Unlike Prasad’s and Kuwajima’s books, Pangs of Partition, vol. 1, The Parting of the Ways, edited by S. Settar and Indira B. Gupta, is a collection of essays by various authors. Like most books of this genre, the quality of the essays is uneven. I will focus on those who either introduce new topics within the overall subject of partition or use hitherto unpublished materials or newly released archival papers. Thus the following essays are most original: Paroshotam Mehra on the partition question in North West Frontier Province, pp. 165-180; Kan-chamoy Mojumdar on “Communal Politics in the Central Provinces and Berar,” pp. 181-212; Bir Good Gill on the Azad Punjab scheme, pp. 243-258; and K. S. Singh on “Tribes, Partition, and Independence,” pp. 259-276. Few writers have dealt with the consequences of partition for the world of Indian business. Therefore Dwijendra Tripathi’s “Partition and Indian Business,” pp. 277-298, and Shri Prakash’s “Economic Irrationality of the Partition of India” represent new dimensions of research.

Volume 2 of this book takes us away from the history of the official records to the domain of tragedy, to the human drama of partition. It is a people’s history, based on experiences, recollections and memoirs in the form of eyewitness accounts, testimonies and oral narratives. These are occasionally supplemented by official documentation. The human dimension of the division of both Bengal and Punjab is well-represented in the twenty-three articles of this volume, which bring out a slice of human experience often missed by the historian. The contributions show us that despite the bitterness of partition and the subsequent creation of three states—not nations—there is a human bond and some nostalgia for an undivided South Asia. Various creative genres, such as film, TV serials, painting, folk dramas, and most significantly literature and poetry, show how the pain and anguish of partition is universally shared by all the people involved in it.

I found the articles on topics such as the differing textbook coverage of Partition in the Indian and Pakistani school textbooks; the Hindi-Urdu controversy, a personal account by artist Satish Gujral; and Partition-related films of Ritwik Ghatak and Bhisham Sahni most interesting. Of those focusing on literary representations of partition, the articles by Naresh Jain on Attia Hossain’s Sunlight on a Broken Column, by Ameena K. Ansari on Ashfaq Ahmad’s Gadariya, and by Shikoh Mohsin Mirza on Khushwant Singh’s Train to Pakistan extremely enjoyable reading. Urvashi Butalia’s “Listening for a Change: Narratives of Partition,” is clearly the most original of all essays noted here.

Nicely supplementing the volumes published by Manohar is The Partitions of Memory: The Afterlife of the Division of India, edited by Suvir Kaul and published by Permanent Black. There are eight essays of varying length in this collection. These focus on the memories of Khudai Khidmatgars in North West Frontier Province; debate over relief and rehabilitation in West Bengal; Par-
Partition politics and the Dalits in UP during 1946-48; Partition letters of ordinary citizens in both Pakistan and India; children and Partition; literary representations of Partition such as that by Saadat Hasan Manto; and critics and supporters of the Basant celebration in Lahore and its implications for Hindu-Muslim homogenization and difference. The most welcome and unusual topic covered in this volume is by Sunil Kumar’s “Qutb and Modern Memory,” in which he discusses the varying interpretations of medieval Indian history in twenty-first-century India in the context of Qutb Minar and the adjoining Quwwat al-Islam mosque. These essays on seemingly divergent topics within the theme of the post-partition era are united by the overarching question: What has happened since Partition that inescapably refers back to, or perhaps is shaped by that event?

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