admittance of Sufi networks and warrior prototypes, the book offers a very distinctive slant on the interface between Islam and colonialism. It catalogues an incisive example of Sufi asceticism being reconstituted in a colonial context, and presents a powerful rejoinder to the presumption that traditions of Islamic militarism always had an inherent predilection towards working against the institutions of European imperialism.

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The Partition of India


With six chapters on Partition historiography, the road to 1947, Partition violence, migration and resettlement, legacies of ethnic and religious nationalism, and India and Pakistan since 1947, this book works well as a ‘portal’ into the history and politics of the subcontinent. Written by eminent scholars who have published major works on both pre-Partition Punjab and on Pakistan and east Punjab, the book also contains these authors’ earlier arguments, especially as they pertain to the events leading up to 1947 and the Sikh insurgency in post-independent Indian Punjab.

In the opening chapter on historiography, Talbot and Singh rightly assert that grappling with the broader developments that framed the Partition is necessary to comprehend recent writings that focus on gender, subaltern, and other perspectives. The authors finely pull together the major arguments of historians who have focused on the mobilization of Muslim minority consciousness especially in the key United Provinces. However, they are less just in dealing with the historiography on minority Hindu consciousness either in Bengal or in the Punjab and Sind. Also useful is the authors’ subtle critique of some of the newer histories that rely entirely on oral histories and memories that can be ‘strongly mediated by community and national consciousness’ (p. 19). However, both authors are quick to dismiss the idea that the British played a major role as the ‘final arbiter’ during the transfer of power. This reviewer believes it somewhat disingenuous to suggest that Mountbatten was ‘carrying out policy, rather than making it’ (p. 13).

Chapter 2 on ‘The road to 1947’ is arguably the most controversial. Conceding that it is difficult to suggest that the granting of separate electorates to Muslims in 1909 led to the creation of Pakistan almost four decades later, the authors do ascribe singular meanings to the notion of Pakistan as early as the Lahore Resolution of 1940. Hence their statement: ‘the Congress ministries [of 1937–39] had inadvertently put Chaudhary Rahmat Ali’s call [of 1933] for a
separate Muslim homeland firmly on the political agenda.’ To say so is to collapse the multiple imaginings that attached themselves to the concept of Pakistan in Rahmat Ali’s chosen mould. It is teleological. Again, although one would agree with the authors that passage of the Lahore resolution of 1940 was a crucial landmark in the movement for Pakistan, that ‘the Muslim League still had an uphill task in order to convince the British and the Congress that its demand was credible’ (p. 33–4) is to buy into the official Pakistani nationalist position on the inevitability of the creation of Pakistan. Furthermore, reading the debates in this hectic decade, it appears extremely unlikely to this reviewer that the Muslim League imagined and understood its demand in a singular way. Was the League at this point demanding to be taken as representative of all Muslims, or to seek a separate, sovereign Pakistan?

This chapter on the crucial decade before Partition ascribes to Gandhi, Nehru, the Shiromani Akali Dal, and a host of others, an element of planning and strategizing that was sadly not part of the politics of the day. Hence the authors are able to fit events as disparate as Gandhi’s conversations with Jinnah in 1944 on the Rajagopalachari formula, prior plans to partition the Punjab in 1909 and 1920 (attributed to Punjabi Hindus Bhai Parmanand and Lajpat Rai respectively) and the infamous unsheathing of a sword by Master Tara Singh in March 1947 as leading to the creation of Pakistan. Gone are details that do not fit into a clear roadmap such as the interpretation of Mian Iftikharuddin, a prominent Muslim Congressman who later switched over to the Muslim League, that the Gandhi–Jinnah talks based on the Rajagopalachari formula could lead to a more effectively united India. Or the fact that the Shiromani Akali Dal actually distanced itself from the Congress when it signed a pact with the Unionist leader Sikander Hyat Khan in the middle of the Second World War. Incidentally, it is also factually incorrect to state that Muslims in the North West Frontier Province voted overwhelmingly for inclusion in Pakistan in the June 1947 referendum. A history untrammeled by contrary views, and sanitized of the ambiguity that characterized Partition, might well be a good read for the non-specialist, but it is sorry recompense for the complexity that was Partition, and indeed, any major historical event.

The third chapter on Partition violence is distinguished by Talbot and Singh’s careful attention to detail: episodes of Partition violence are studied separately with attention to scale and intensity. In the final analysis, however, they club together episodes of communal violence from 1946 to 1950 as imbued with ‘genocidal tendencies’. Their desire to move away from standard explanations of such violence that link it to the collapse of state power is undercut by their own multiple footnotes that attribute the rise in violence to situations characterized by a shift in power, and an unduly hasty transfer of power. Furthermore First Information Reports recorded by victims of Partition violence often insisted on a return to their original homes, making Talbot and Singh’s claim that Partition violence precipitated Partition less easy to accept. For all the self-consciousness that attends the deployment of multiple archives by historians these days, it is also surprising to find Talbot and Singh’s uncritical use of one Voice of India publication while elaborating on instances of communal conflict in east Bengal.
The fourth chapter on migration and resettlement seeks to restore an imbalance in existing works that focus unduly on Punjab. Here Talbot and Singh draw the reader’s attention to the slower, and in some ways, failed process of refugee resettlement in Bengal. Another useful addition to refugee literature that provides an alternative to the trauma narratives of both Punjab and Bengal is by Rita Kothari: *The Burden of Refuge: Partition Experiences of the Sindhis of Gujarat* (Orient Blackswan, 2007).

In the chapter on legacies, the authors make two valuable points: the migration of millions led to various kinds of ethnic consolidation and rivalry, and Partition foisted on the peoples of India and Pakistan an unduly strong unitary centre. Along with the more predictable case-studies of the Muhajir–Sindhi conflict in Pakistan, the authors discuss refugee flows and subsequent rivalries in India’s north-east. While discussing the contribution of Punjabi Hindu refugees to Delhi, however, the authors’ state that refugees’ personal hardships nurtured ‘right-wing’ visions of the nation’ as well as supported a ‘strong secular state that would deal firmly with minority communalisms’ (p. 129). Perhaps Talbot and Singh are suggesting that Indian secularism is right-wing. If so, this needs to be stated and elaborated clearly.

The authors also provide us with the vital detail that Muslim refugees from east Punjab assimilated quite easily into west Punjab. However their ‘revanchist outlook’ is believed to have made them a ‘safe constituency for martial law governments, or as a lobby for right wing parties in pursuit of anti-India or Pan-Islamic parties.’ Talbot and Singh argue that their experiences during Partition make these erstwhile refugees particularly sympathetic to the cause of Kashmir (p. 143). This is an interesting point that requires further elucidation. This chapter on Partition legacies does not, however, deal with problems of ethnic and religious mobilization in the key provinces of Baluchistan and the North West Frontier Province.

On post-Partition India, the authors make the critical point that the actual contexts in which the new religious nationalisms have emerged are very different from the pre-colonial period. Briefly discussing the Indian state’s mismanagement of Jammu and Kashmir since 1947, they proceed boldly to state that, during communal riots in India, including the very recent 2002 violence in Gujarat, popular media are, more often than not, ‘inclined to regress into the repertoire of Partition-style discourses’ (p. 151). On the contrary, independent news channels and the English language print media were critical in registering their horror and exposing details of a practically state-sponsored pogrom.

The final chapter on ‘An enduring rivalry’ lists the many wars and tensions that have plagued India and Pakistan but ends on an optimistic note: initiatives since the Kargil war of 2001 are believed to have created ‘a new sense of confidence’ and a belief that the peace process is now ‘irreversible’. The authors suggest that these trends might ‘call into question…the legitimacy of the Partition itself’ (pp. 170–5). This chapter was clearly written before the Mumbai carnage of November 2008. It is valuable because it reminds us of how much hope was destroyed because of that attack and its consequences, and how little progress has been made since then.
Finally, while alluding to the Pakistani military’s fears with regard to India, Talbot and Singh argue that ‘India’s national identity construction has derided the exclusivist idea of Pakistan based on Islam’ (p. 155). This is true, but it must be conceded that there is a lot more to India’s national identity, especially now in the twenty-first century. Not all of India was as deeply affected by Partition as all of, significantly smaller, Pakistan. Especially since November 2008, there are powerful spokespersons in India who seek to de-hyphenate India from an Indo-Pak equation. These people might not have a strong sense of history, and they might be deluded in even conceiving of such a possibility. On the other hand, they might have a point.

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Making Sense of Pakistan

There are numerous explanations for Pakistan’s troubled and unstable history. Some writers link this with the country’s ethnic divisions; others with its over-developed military establishment, and subsequent foreign policies. Farzana Shaikh, however, interprets these as symptoms of Pakistan’s underlying uncertainties about its identity rather than as causes of ‘its fragility as a nation-state’ (p. 9). She argues that at the heart of the state’s failure to establish a coherent identity lies the issue of conflicting visions of the role of Islam in public life. This has made it impossible to produce a consensus on the following questions: What is Pakistan for? Who is a Pakistani?

Farzana Shaikh traces the post-independence confusion over Pakistan’s identity to the differing responses of Indian Muslim leaders to the decline of Mughal authority. Colonial rule intensified the search for answers as to how the community could safeguard its identity and culture without political power. Modernists, Pan-Islamists, traditionalists and Islamists all provided different answers. Here of course Shaikh is returning to her earlier work on the role of Islam in shaping the demand for Pakistan. The Pakistan movement was dominated by modernists who were committed to Muslim nationalism rather than Islamic universalism. Yet in order to overcome ethnic, tribal, linguistic and feudal allegiances which threatened the rhetoric of Muslim nationhood, Jinnah, despite his ‘secularism’ used the language of Islamic universalism during the course of the freedom movement. This was from the outset to create ambiguities around such issues as to where political sovereignty was to lie in the Pakistan national project (pp. 43–4). The unprecedented and unforeseen dislocation which accompanied independence further complicated Pakistan’s incipient identity crisis, as migrants and natives competed over the claim ‘to be the true