

THE PARTITION OF INDIA. By *Ian Talbot and Gurharpal Singh.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. xvii, 206 pp. (Tables, maps, B&W photos.) US\$85.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-85661-4; US\$29.99, paper, ISBN 978-0-521-6756-6.

In 1960, just four years before his death in office, India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, was said to have ruefully confessed: "The truth is that we were tired men ... We saw the fires burning in the Punjab and heard everyday of killings. The plan for partition [of the Indian subcontinent] offered us a way out *and we took it*" [italics added]. This shocking revelation by a key player in the events surrounding the 1947 division of the Indian subcontinent threatened to undo the labour of scores of historians working on the assumption that Partition was (at best) inevitable and (at worst) cruelly imposed by Britain in a desperate move to cut its imperial losses. Yet it is clear that today many more are prepared to entertain the claim reiterated by the authors of this new book, that "the division of the subcontinent was contingent on a range of political choices made by both the British and India's political elites" (58) and that it was "in large measure willed into existence [by Indian political leaders]" (178).

While this contention will no doubt still generate some resistance, both authors are well placed to meet the challenge. Ian Talbot is widely respected as a historian of Pakistan and is the author of a number of critically acclaimed studies of Punjab under colonial rule. Gurharpal Singh, who shares a common interest in Punjab, has made valuable contributions to the study of ethnic conflict that are key to a better understanding of Partition. Now working as a team they have skilfully synthesized a vast body of complex historiographical debates on the causes of Partition and sought at every turn to rescue its history from the political agendas of its key protagonists, namely the nation-states of India and Pakistan.

Ultimately, however, the authors are (by their own admission) less interested in *why* Partition happened than in *what* happened, where and to whom. With the use of a wide array of English and Urdu sources spanning official documents, press reports, personal memoirs and literary accounts, they bring to light the dreadful human cost of Partition. Much of it understandably centres on the violence that was, by all accounts, more brutal, widespread and co-ordinated than anything ever witnessed in India. At the same time, the authors are careful to emphasize that much of what has hitherto passed as "Partition violence" actually predated the moment of Partition. Thus while Punjab clearly bore the brunt of some of the worst atrocities in 1947, savage acts of violence bordering on the "genocidal" had already torn through Bengal in 1946 following the great Calcutta killings. The violence of Partition also varied in intensity: British administered areas, especially in the north, were more affected than many neighbouring princely states. Elsewhere, in districts across India and Pakistan, violence continued

to exact a heavy toll long after Partition.

Patterns of migration and the conditions of the resettlement of millions of refugees—the majority forced to flee—also varied. Again the authors warn against the temptation to generalize from the case of Punjab, where the deadly violence that characterized the experience of migration has long furnished *the* iconic image of Partition. The reality, they suggest, was more complex. The process of migration in Bengal and Sind was not only more drawn out compared to Punjab (refugees from India were entering Karachi as late as 1954), but also made worse in some regions by the two-way integration of “non-elite” groups in which “all the social inequalities of the South Asian formation played a critical role” (125) and whose legacies are still deeply felt.

Indeed, the authors address squarely the legacies of Partition. However, it is here that some readers may find their conclusions problematic, not least in their efforts to draw sharp parallels between the trajectories of the subcontinent’s two main successor states: India and Pakistan. For while on the face of it both countries have shown some obvious similarities—in their preference for over-centralized states and their vulnerability to ethnic and religious nationalism—their implications for state identity, legitimacy and possibly even state survival have differed significantly. In this regard the enduring pathologies of the Pakistani state are, arguably, best seen not as the legacies of Partition *per se*, but as symptomatic of the fundamental weakness of Pakistan’s founding ideology and the country’s ambiguous relation to Islam. And while it is true that ideas of the nation and the secular state are still hotly contested in India, the presence of a robust tradition of negotiating differences constitutionally, nurtured over generations by India’s political leaders, has ensured that India is today much better equipped than its hapless neighbour to escape “the trap of history that Partition has constructed” (181).

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