

Between the Lines

MANAN AHMED ASIF

EXCAVATING THE MANY HISTORIES OF PARTITION

AS I WRITE THIS, on a boat, in the middle of the sea, are Muslims who belong neither in Burma, nor in East Pakistan, nor India, Bangladesh, Indonesia or Malaysia. In a forgotten past, they were part of the kingdom of Arakan, or Rohang—hence, they are Rohingya. They have a narrative of their origins which asserts that they are descendants of Arab sailors or traders from the ninth century, that they have lived for centuries on the eastern shores of the Bay of Bengal, that they have forever moved between Chittagong in present-day Bangladesh and Pathein in present-day Burma. The kingdom of Arakan, which flourished from the fifteenth century along the northeastern Bay until it was subsumed by Burma in 1785, was acquired by the British in the First Anglo-Burmese War, which ran from 1824 to 1826. The Japanese occupation of Burma in the Second World War caused hundreds of thousands of Arakanese to flee towards Chittagong, but this was a short migration in their telling.

As India moved towards independence, Arakanese Muslims attempted to join the new Pakistan. Some migrated to East Bengal—later named East Pakistan—in 1947; some followed in 1952, some in 1965—as riots, persecution and famine created more and more displacements. As they crossed from Burma to Pakistan, each country accused the other of perfidy and dissidence. After the bloody war of 1971, when East Pakistan became Bangladesh, Burma claimed that the Rohingya were Bengalis fleeing into its territory from the Chittagong hills and that Bangladesh should take them back. In 1978, Burma launched a major military action to eradicate these Muslims, called the King Dragon Opera-



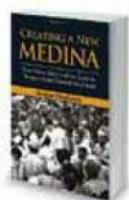
Partition: The Long Shadow
EDITED BY URVASHI BUTALIA
ZUBAAN BOOKS
270 PAGES, ₹599



The Footprints of Partition
Narratives of Four Generations of Pakistanis and Indians
ANAM ZAKARIA
HARPERCOLLINS, 264 PAGES, ₹350



Midnight's Furies
The Deadly Legacy of India's Partition
NISID HAJARI
PENGUIN BOOKS
352 PAGES, ₹599



Creating a New Medina
State Power, Islam and the Quest for Pakistan in Late Colonial North India
VENKAT DHULIPALA
CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
544 PAGES, ₹995



KEystone Features / Getty Images

In August 1947, 30 special trains left New Delhi Station to take the staff of the Pakistan government to Karachi. The tendency to think of India and (West) Pakistan as the sole agents in a 70-year-history has dominated many studies of Partition.

tion. Over 200,000 fled from Burma to Bangladesh. They were asked to go back.

The Rohingyas live at the edge of a post-Partition sub-continent, where an endless partition has been playing out for nearly a century. They are imagined to be citizens of the other half of a partitioned polity: they belong not here, but there. Hence, their presence here is illegal, and they are immoral, bereft of citizenship or even humanity. Their story is not unique in the subcontinent. Similar histories can be seen elsewhere—in Marichjhapi, Sylhet, Assam, Ladakh, Baltistan, Baluchistan, Sind. In these varied political spaces, there are constant forced migrations of communities by

the state, efforts to settle or to expel them, as well as indigenous claims for re-partitioning the land. What we consider to be frontiers or borderlands are spaces where partition is continually enacted, or, at the least, imagined.

Why the Rohingya, and others, are missing from the histories of Partition is a question that can only be answered by looking at the ways in which that history has been told until now. The historiography of Partition can be divided into three phases: the first phase until 1979 or 1984—until, that is, Zia-ul-Haq's military dictatorship in Pakistan, and the assassination of Indira Gandhi and the anti-Sikh riots in India; the second phase until the mid 2000s—that is, the

// **Butalia's volume opens up the archive of partitions other than those in Punjab and Bengal, as well as concerns that still need untangling such as the histories of refugee camps.** //

end of the first Bharatiya Janata Party-led government in India and the re-opening of US aid to Pakistan after 2001; and the current phase over this last decade, where new archival work is emerging after a long gap.

The first phase was dominated by scholarship from the United States and England—with prominent work from Ian Talbot, Lawrence Ziring, Roger Long, Paul Brass, Wayne Ayres Wilcox, Craig Baxter and Peter Hardy. Their efforts concentrated on linking modernisation theory—developed at Harvard this theory held that postcolonial states can be made “modern” with the help of, usually dictatorial, strongmen and Western funding from bodies such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund—and its antecedent fascination with elite politics to the years leading up to Partition, and since. They produced biographies of key figures, and examined the exigencies of politics from a highly structured perspective. The social and cultural aspects of Partition were absent, since community as such was not within the purview of their analysis. Typically, a generic note was made of the tragedy of the violence, and the “holocaust” was invoked, but the event itself was not studied.

In the second phase, historians looked directly at happenings during and around Partition and excavated new archives by engaging deeply with oral histories, personal memoirs, and colonial records. The works of Urvashi Butalia, Joya Chatterji, Mushirul Hasan, Ayesha Jalal, Ritu Menon, David Gilmartin and Gyanendra Pandey were also a response to the zeitgeist of the 1980s and 1990s, when communal differences were seen as irreconcilable and majoritarian politics relied on violence as a tool for eradicating the other. The Hindu-Muslim and Sikh riots not only impacted the personal lives of many scholars, this violence also became the framework within which to study the medieval or colonial past. These historians focused on telling gendered histories and histories of regions—even if mainly of Bengal and Punjab—rather than histories of a monolithic Partition.

The current phase—in the last decade, Vazira FY Zamindar, Farzana Shaikh, Neeti Nair, Yasmin Khan and Faisal Devji have all written important books on Partition—has led to the opening of new archives and the introduction of new analytical questions. These scholars have argued that Partition is best understood as a process that unfolds slowly, unevenly, and at different costs for different communities. It is only now that histories of Swat, Sind, Baltistan, Assam and Sylhet are being incorporated into the histories of Partition.

The four books under review here extend and combat these historiographies. Two are academic works, and two meant for the general public—but this is a distinction that obscures more than it reveals. We have yet to understand what Partition, and the study of Partition, means for us as citizens, or for our nation states. The invisibility of the Rohingya—stranded between states but also absent from histories of South Asia—is an acute reminder of this unfinished task.

PARTITION: THE LONG SHADOW, an excellent new volume edited by Urvashi Butalia, is a critically important contribution to this task. In the book’s first essay, Siddiq Wahid provides a history of Partition in Ladakh, and demonstrates how the north-western princely states were swallowed and then forgotten by either India or Pakistan. Here, as in other essays in the volume, there is a critical effort to move away from the centres of Partition studies so far—the Punjab and Bengal. Rita Kothari, Kavita Panjab, Sanjib Baruah and Jhuma Sen’s essays on Sind, Gujarat, Assam and the Sundarbans respectively—all concern geographies of Partition that have remained hidden from view. They show how these spaces remained “under Partition” for decades after 1947, with refugee camps and statelessness persisting. The essays show how disenchanted groups raised anti-state flags when their marginalisation morphed into outright exploitation of their lands. They also reveal a tension that goes unnoticed by Butalia in her deft introduction. Wahid concludes his essay with a declaration that “what is done is done,” and that we should move away from any notion to “roll back history.” Yet what Wahid and the other writers in the volume demonstrate is that we are nowhere near “done” in either the unfolding of historical action or in our capacity to understand it. Butalia’s volume opens up the archive of partitions other than the ones in Punjab and Bengal, as well as institutional and structural concerns that still require untangling—the histories of refugee camps foremost among them.

The Footprints of Partition: Narratives of Four Generations of Pakistanis and Indians, a new volume from Anam Zakaria, a development professional from Lahore, also pushes back against the idea of being done with the past. Zakaria strives to recuperate histories from prior to Partition, to contest the view presented to her generation by the Pakistani state and so to imagine a different future for the country. Zakaria argues that memories of co-habitation and friendship between people now defined antagonistically as either Indian or Pakistani are just as valid as memories of Partition violence—especially since the newest generation is “at risk of absorbing an increasingly rigid and myopic narrative of Partition in its entirety.” So Zakaria speaks to retired military officers, old cricketers and businessmen, and to members of the Shia, Ahmadi and Parsi communities. Her narrative foregrounds her interviews, and her



KEystone / GETTY IMAGES

Lord Mountbatten disclosed Britain's partition plan for India in Delhi in June 1947, with Jawaharlal Nehru and Muhammed Ali Jinnah in attendance. Nisid Hajari's *Midnight's Furies* is a somewhat fanciful history centred on the two South Asian leaders.

writing aptly conveys the emotional registers of the speakers. For her generation, Partition is a Punjab-centered story and a middle class one at that—the loss of home and habitat in Muslim United Provinces and nostalgia for it dominates the discourse. Hence she makes only passing references to East Pakistan, Baluchistan or Sindh. She does not linger on the ways 1971 shapes the memory of 1947 for Pakistan, though it was the war against East Pakistan that created the new Pakistan to which Zakaria belongs. The state histories she rightfully criticises for constructing a demonic Hindu “other” also erased this second partition, of 1971, from Pakistan’s textbooks and cultural memory. Hence, new archives on Partition being created by the new generation of Pakistanis focus narrowly on middle-class lives in Lahore and Karachi; Bengal, whether in 1947 or in 1971, is

invisible, as are the citizens of that other Pakistan. The conversation about a possible future, for Zakaria, is a conversation only between India and Pakistan.

This dynamic of India and (West) Pakistan as sole agents in a 70-year-old history also dominates Nisid Hajari’s *Midnight’s Furies*, a dramatically told history centred on Jawaharlal Nehru and Muhammad Ali Jinnah. Its florid prose wishes to give readers an intimate glance into the minds of these larger-than-life figures, down even to their sartorial choices and petty quibbles. Hajari’s writing jars with its clichés. “Where Gandhi’s loin cloth and incense-wreathed chanting sessions evoked India’s long past,” he says, “Nehru symbolized its future.” Ayub Khan, the military ruler of Pakistan from 1958 to 1969, Hajari holds, was “embarrassed on the battlefield,” and he and “subsequent secular

dictators needed some other appeal with which to unite their populace behind junta rule. They settled on Islam.” Everywhere, Hajari’s impulse is to portray dramatically what surely cannot be evident from the archives. When Nehru and Jinnah share a flight, he describes Jinnah burying “his hawk-like nose in a new screed about Pakistan, entitled *A Nation Betrayed*” and Nehru reading Sinclair Lewis’s *Cass Timberlane*. He then writes that “if the book reminded Jawaharlal of Jinnah and Ruttie’s tragic romance,”—Rattanbai “Ruttie” Petit was Jinnah’s estranged wife—“he did not let on.” Maybe it did, and maybe it did not, but there is little to gain from this exercise in recreating the past. Hajari shows little sophistication in his understanding of India’s pre-colonial past: “Jinnah knew the tension between the subcontinent’s two great communities had deep roots, of course,” he writes. The “of course” spirals out into a history lesson not provided by Jinnah:

Several of the Muslim conquerors who had dominated India before the British had brutalized their defeated Hindu foes, massacring thousands and demolishing their flower-strewn temples. That history often got mixed up with current economic tensions—where Hindu peasants continued to struggle under oppressive Muslim landlords, for instance.

The “for instance” provides no actual “instance,” and unknowing readers may not realise that this is a communal and sectarian understanding of India’s past, where Hindus and Muslims are posited as always being in violent conflict. As a narrative account of the events leading up to Partition, *Midnight’s Furies* moves briskly, and it re-packages known prejudices for a new audience. While Hajari is writing to explain present “furies”—the Pakistani Taliban, the conflicts in Afghanistan and Kashmir, the lack of trade between India and Pakistan—his text gives weight to the same misunderstandings that drive this present.

Venkat Dhulipala’s *Creating a New Medina: State Power, Islam and the Quest for Pakistan in Late Colonial North India* takes as its central concern the differences between Hindus and Muslims. Dhulipala argues for a new understanding of 1947: he posits that Muslim theologians in the erstwhile United Provinces—the Deobandis—helped popularise a notion of an Islamic utopia—a New Medina—in Pakistan. He suggests that the Deobandis gave coherence to a separatist idea that had been waxing and waning in different forms since the 1910s. The result, he contends, is that the Muslim League in the United Provinces was able to emerge, at a very late stage, as a party capable of creating Pakistan. In the author’s formulation, Deobandi theologians were guided by the vision of a faith resistant to modernity, one that needed a geographically distinct land to flourish—hence Pakistan. This vision of Pakistan was debated, discussed, imagined and put into reality by the mass politics of the 1940s, and it had the full support, and guidance, of Muhammad Ali Jin-

// Venkat Dhulipala foregrounds the supposed “foreignness” of Muslim thought, and how this helped the community naturalise the distinction between Jinnah on one side and Nehru and Gandhi on the other. //

nah. The book covers the years from 1937 to 1945, with an epilogue set in post-1947 Pakistan. It is a forceful rejoinder to the claims of earlier historians, most significantly Ayesha Jalal, who argued that Partition was not a necessary result of the anti-colonial struggle. Against them, Dhulipala writes that “Pakistan was not insufficiently imagined, but plentifully and with ambition.”

Like Hajari, Dhulipala foregrounds the supposed “foreignness” of Muslim thought, and the ways in which this helped the community naturalise the distinction in the anti-colonial struggle between Jinnah on one side and Nehru and Gandhi on the other. Dhulipala all but ignores the long-articulated understanding in progressive scholarship on Pakistan that the history of the country’s nationalist struggle cannot be reduced to religious actors or to religious sentiment. The archive Dhulipala utilises contains the boastful accounts of contending theologians and reports from colonial police surveillance—which he then reads uncritically, at face value.

A key part of Dhulipala’s case rests on the collected writings of Shabbir Ahmad Usmani, a Deobandi scholar who joined the Muslim League’s effort against his fellow Deobandis, who remained close to the Congress. Dhulipala charts Usmani’s creation of the Jamaat Ulema-i Islam, or JUI, which broke away from the Deobandi Jamaat Ulema-i Hind, or JUH, in 1945. He argues that we should see Usmani as a figure “closer to Khomeini” in his ideological call for supremacy of the religious elite in the political world, and for the importance of his thought to Pakistan. This is a tough case to make, and is largely unprecedented in historiography—especially given that Abul Ala Maududi, the figure most closely identified with such a framework, is strikingly absent from the book. However, Dhulipala does so via a close reading of a single pamphlet—*Hamara Pakistan*, published in 1942—and the speeches Usmani delivered in the United Provinces. In all of this, Dhulipala relies exclusively on Usmani’s published archive, which was released in 1972, by which time the theologian held a very different place in the Pakistani imagination from the one he did at the country’s birth. After a 30-page reading of Usmani, Dhulipala asserts that he will present how “the JUH ulama stepped up to push back against Usmani’s espousal of Pakistan during the 1945-46 elections that became a referendum on Pakistan.” Yet in his section on the JUH, Dhulipala does not cite a single JUH counter-debate that either addresses

Usmani or talks about his invocation of the New Medina. The distance between Dhulipala's source texts and their reception is particularly acute when he analyses a pamphlet on Pakistan by "one Anis al Din Ahmad Rizvi," which allows him to assert that "Pakistan was being sold in the localities of U.P. as an Islamic state" without demonstrating any evidence for the circulation or impact of such a notion at the time, or any textual references. The gap is similarly yawning when Dhulipala reads a Muslim League report on a possible Islamic constitution, which was not circulated or published until 1957, as evidence of the hold the idea of such a constitution had on Muslim League leaders.

There are other concerns. In his third chapter, Dhulipala provides a reading of BR Ambedkar's *Thoughts on Pakistan*, first published in 1941. While there is no doubt that Ambedkar's text is often overlooked in debates on Pakistan's formation, this does not warrant that we take on Ambedkar's claim, as Dhulipala does, that he was "the philosopher of Pakistan." Ambedkar's text did not circulate among Muslim voters or thinkers on any remarkable scale—and Dhulipala does not claim or show that it was. He does not pause to think about the biases in Ambedkar's reading of Muslim subjectivity or the Muslim past. He quotes with aplomb Ambedkar's comparison of Muslims in India to Nazi fascists and militant jihadis.

Dhulipala's language betrays his own biases: Ambedkar "demolished the argument," he writes, "clearly demonstrated," "elaborated," "elucidated," "adduced" and "prophesized." "For Ambedkar, in the ultimate analysis, the few superficial commonalities between Hindus and Muslims were ultimately the 'result of a dead past that had no present and no future,'" Dhulipala argues, quoting Ambedkar's work. Ambedkar's original is worth looking at here: "Partly are these common features to be explained as the remnants of a period of religious amalgamation between the Hindus and the Muslims inaugurated by the Emperor Akbar, the result of a dead past which has no present and no future." It is striking that, in a 30-plus-page excursus on Ambedkar, Dhulipala never considers how Ambedkar's reading of the past was itself constructed—that his antagonistic view of Hindu-Muslim history derived from colonial historiography, with its own biases and prejudices. For Dhulipala, without critical questioning, Ambedkar "had addressed in impressive detail how Hindustan would benefit economically, politically, militarily, and socially" from the creation of Pakistan.

Throughout the book, Dhulipala produces or reproduces the perspective that an irrevocable break—both communal and sectarian—had already formed between communities in India before Partition. That his historical subjects held this view is beyond debate, but the book should have helped us understand the construction of their position. That was the project of historians such as Gyanendra Pandey and Shahid Amin, whose books appear in the bibliography but cast no shadow over the text.

WHAT IS AT STAKE IN ARGUING for the inevitability of Partition? Were the imaginations of Jinnah, Ambedkar, Iqbal, Usmani or even the JUH scholars the "plentifully imagined" that we seek? At the heart of the imaginations invoked by these leaders and intellectuals was the understanding of Muslim "foreignness" to India, and of Islam as having its "origins" in Arabia. This claim was first articulated by British Orientalists in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century and by the time of early twentieth century, it was a naturalised story. It was not, however, unchallenged. One particular voice against it was that of the medievalist historian Mohammad Habib. His keynote address at the annual Indian History Congress in December of 1947 in Bombay is a critical text that shows how historians could, and did, formulate critiques of colonialism during British rule. Habib proclaimed:

The breaking up of India into two separate states, or lawmaking organisations with exclusive citizenship, which creates a spirit of hostility, and in any case of independence and separateness, not only between the governments but also between the people, and the establishment of one of these states upon a purely religious and communal basis—this sort of monstrosity has never been known to the history of our land.

This is strong language, and we should acknowledge this historian's use of it. Habib reminded his audience that the Muslims of India, like the Hindus of India, were the farmers, the workers, the powerless. They all belonged to the "sacred land where the black gazelles graze and the *munja* grass grows and the pan-leaf is eaten, and where the material and the spiritual are organically interwoven." However, 200 years of British rule "completely altered their basic character," and the Indic whole fractured into "communities" which focus only on materialism, on "gangsterism." "There is, I believe, at present no graveyard in the land to which an Indian could lay claim merely on the basis of his Indian citizenship," Habib lamented. The Indian's connection to the land was no longer valid—having been superseded by claims of religion.

Habib's historical research looked at the origins of India's Muslims. He was one among a whole host of Muslim intellectuals at the turn of the twentieth century who were inspired by or trained with historians and educationists Shibli Nomani and Syed Ahmad Khan. This generation of scholars emphasised Islam's history in Arabia, the connections between Arabia and India during the eighth and ninth centuries, and the spiritual genealogy of Indic thought. Between 1927 and 1930, Habib published seminal papers on the Arab general Muhammad bin Qasim, who campaigned in Sind in the early eighth century—who "alone had a conscience, the instincts and feelings of a gentleman"; on Mahmud of Ghazni, the Central Asian ruler of the late tenth century—



DARIO MITTIDIERI / GETTY IMAGES

Thousands of Rohingyas, members of a persecuted Muslim minority, live in Bangladesh as refugees from Burma. The Rohingya are one of the many communities displaced by colonialism and Partition who continue to reel from their effects today.

who “morally disgraced” Islam; and on Shahabuddin Ghur, the founder of the Afghan kingdom in the early thirteenth century—“a man of unexpansive nature.” His work underlined, again and again, that Muslim “rule” in India was a misnomer: the Muslim kingships were ecumenical, and Muslims got no special favour. For Habib, as for Nomani, the past was excavated not to fuel sectarian or communitarian difference in the present, but to assert a historically sound vision of the Indic Muslim past to counter the British take on India’s history. Habib directly critiqued the works of HM Elliot, WW Hunter and Vincent A Smith, which detailed floridly the insidiousness of the Muslim character and Muslim imperial history in India.

Habib examined historical fact, the ways it was written about, and what political purposes its narration served. That task was also taken up by his son Irfan Habib, Romila Thapar, and many other historians who wrote against a communal understanding of history, who deconstructed the myths of origin that fuelled communal violence, such as in Gujarat in 2002. Their scholarship is a shadow his-

tory of the Partition, and driving it is a clear awareness that Partition was no singular event, and cannot be claimed for any dead past.

The histories and memories in the new books considered here are in tension with one another. They open up new archives, methods and understandings, just they continue to naturalise the incommensurability of the Muslim with India. It is evident in reading them that our need to understand the deep history of Partition is acute. Just as graveyards are segregated by communities, so are histories. In partitioned South Asia, the Shia, Sunni, Muslim, Hindu, or Assamese, Sindi, Baluchi pasts are also constructed to be separate. The histories we produce must acknowledge the burden of recognising difference and parsing it. For the subalterns, those adrift among borders, the fuller history of Partition remains unwritten. The Rohingya floating at sea are also part of the forgotten stories of Partition. They who once were Indian or Burmese or Pakistani or Bangladeshi are now of nowhere. Without land, they are also without history. ■