

## SOUTH ASIA

*The Afterlives of Partition*

*Partition: The Long Shadow*. Edited by URVASHI BUTALIA. New Delhi: Zubaan Books, 2015. 272 pp. ISBN: 9789383074778 (cloth, also available as e-book).

*Home, Uprooted: Oral Histories of India's Partition*. By DEVIKA CHAWLA. New York: Fordham University Press, 2014. 288 pp. ISBN: 9780823256433 (cloth, also available in paper and as e-book).

*Partitioned Lives: Migrants, Refugees, Citizens in India and Pakistan, 1947–1965*. By HAIMANTI ROY. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013. 256 pp. ISBN: 9780198081777 (cloth).  
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Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai, when asked in 1972 about the historical impact of the French Revolution, supposedly quipped that it was “too early to say.” Zhou’s reminder that the legacies of large historical events unfold not over years or decades but centuries is astute and timely. The partition of the Indian subcontinent may have occurred in mid-August 1947, but the ramifications of that decision continue to profoundly affect the lives of millions of people now divided among three nation-states. While an aging generation still has memories of childhoods spent across the border, millions have been rendered suspect “minorities” in lands their ancestors have lived in for millennia. Still others migrated across borders only to realize assimilation or acceptance was neither easy nor guaranteed. Tens of thousands have spent lifetimes trapped in litigation over citizenship and property. Political parties continue to make capital out of the blame-game for the events of that time, and the rising tide of majoritarian religious nationalisms across the subcontinent seem continuously energized by contentious narratives about the event.

If, in the initial decades, partition was the silent and repressed twin of a celebratory independence, a burgeoning literature has more than made up for that reticence in more recent times, and the surge of scholarship on an ever-widening range of issues shows no signs of abating.<sup>1</sup> The three works under review are useful additions to this corpus, and their contributions merit closer attention. Urvashi Butalia’s edited volume *Partition: The*

<sup>1</sup>Readers desirous of getting up to speed on this literature may want to consult two recent bibliographic essays that are remarkable for their combination of encyclopedic coverage and brevity: Joya Chatterji, “Partition Studies: Prospects and Pitfalls,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 73, no. 2 (2014): 309–12, and David Gilmartin, “The Historiography of India’s Partition: Between Civilization and Modernity,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 74, no. 1 (2015): 23–41. Also very useful in this regard is the preface by Yasmin Khan to the new edition of her *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2017). Khan’s point that all too much of the partition oeuvre is claustrophobically South Asian and would benefit from comparisons to other contemporary contexts is worth underlining. After all, the first half of the twentieth century was rife with attempts to construct “homogenous” nation-states out of polyglot empires and colonies, producing mass migrations, ethnic cleansing, partitions, and conquests all over Europe and Asia.

*Long Shadow* comprises essays that range over its impact on hitherto under-researched areas (Ladakh, for instance) and themes (ways in which mental health professionals comprehend trauma associated with communal conflicts), to the contrast between Sindhi and Punjabi migration on the western flank or the significance of the fact that partition violence was not one-sided but rather perpetrators and victims were distributed across all three communities—Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim. While all of the essays make substantive contributions, two stand out for the acuity with which they delineate the continued salience of partition—the “long shadow” of the book’s subtitle, as it were.

Sanjib Baruah’s “Partition and the Politics of Citizenship in Assam” details the waves of state-sponsored migration, refugees, “illegal” immigrants, and outsiders, from the period of colonial rule to the most recent times, that have beset Assam. From the perspective of the indigenous Assamese, it would seem their interests were invariably displaced to first accommodate East Bengali agriculturalists during the colonial period, then East Pakistani Hindu refugees in the aftermath of partition and again after 1971, and the steady influx of economic migrants—both Hindu and Muslim and from East and West Bengal—for decades now. Electoral politics, vote banks, and one-upmanship on national security keep issues of insiders and outsiders constantly on the boil in this state. There can be no “cut-off” point to determine Assamese citizenship that does not also disenfranchise millions who have inhabited that region for a long time and are, in addition, by now near-native speakers of the language. Yet it is undeniable that indigenous Assamese have received a raw deal in their own home. Baruah is rightly skeptical of hard borders and violent efforts to align territory with identity; he demonstrates that partition was not so much the resolution of that matter as it was yet another milestone in an impossible journey.

Jhuma Sen’s “Remembering Marichjhapi” highlights the extent to which caste, class, and status continue to determine whose lives become memorialized as history, and which deaths are neither to be grieved nor remembered. While upper-caste Bhadrakol from East Bengal largely settled in and around Calcutta during partition, the poorer and lower-caste refugees were scattered into camps across rural West Bengal and still others relocated farther afield—to Dandakaranya (comprising the districts of Koraput and Kalahandi in Orissa and Bastar in Madhya Pradesh, in all about 77,000 square kilometers of some of the most barren and inhospitable terrain imaginable) and even the Andaman islands. Such forced relocation was met with resistance—both violent and in its everyday forms—on the part of the refugees over the decades. The Left opposition in West Bengal promised to find an alternative site for those relocated to Dandakaranya if it came to power. By the mid-1970s, Marichjhapi island in the Sundarbans emerged as the solution to the problem, as about 30,000 erstwhile refugees had set up home on the island and by some accounts had established a viable, even thriving, community there. In 1978–79, the now-ruling Left Front government essentially reneged on its earlier promise and, through blockades and violence, proceeded to destroy the settlement and scatter its residents yet again. Estimates of those killed in the Marichjhapi massacre range between the state’s claim of two casualties to as many as one thousand, while at least four thousand were missing or unaccounted for.

Marichjhapi received barely any attention at all in the national media or in academic work on Bengal. Yet, in the aftermath of the violence in Singur and Nandigram in 2007–8, as the Left Front government sought to clear small farmers off the land in favor of export-processing zones and Tata’s Nano car project, its significance is now being reassessed. Just as the anti-Sikh pogrom in Delhi in the aftermath of Indira Gandhi’s assassination in October 1984 led to a resurgence of interest in and research on partition, Singur and Nandigram have brought a measure of attention to the plight of the poorest of the refugees from East Pakistan—displaced multiple times over generations, always at the mercy of those higher than them in caste and class status, and consigned to a life of

destitution and forced mobility. Baruah's and Sen's chapters epitomize the contemporaneity of partition: it was not so much a discrete event as it is both a mnemonic and an energizer of contemporary debates over insiders and aliens.

Haimanti Roy's *Partitioned Lives* looks at the relatively less-studied eastern flank from 1947 to 1965. Roy argues that two significant differences with the western (Punjab) partition proved important in Bengal: (1) the violence in the east was less annihilating (estimates of those killed in the west in a matter of a few weeks go up to one million), and, related to this, (2) the eastern border remained open all the way until 1952, and there was nothing compared to the rapid and wholesale exchange of populations (anywhere up to ten million) in a matter of months as had happened in the west. As a result, refugees in the east were seen as less deserving of aid and sympathy, regarded more as economic migrants rather than fleeing danger and therefore not genuine aspirants for or deserving of citizenship, and thought of as less dynamic and entrepreneurial than their western counterparts who (allegedly) recovered their stride more quickly. In other words, the Bengali refugee—especially from the lower classes—was seen *ab initio* as a part of the “undeserving poor,” an unwelcome burden on an already beleaguered region,<sup>2</sup> and unworthy of state-aided rehabilitation.

Roy offers persuasive evidence that the slow violence in the east—social ostracism by the majority community, losing one's property on suspicion of being an evacuee, being regarded as someone who was merely biding their time before emigrating out, the continuous threat of physical danger at times of riots—was at least as damaging to the psyches and lives of these populations as of their western counterparts. More importantly, she argues, it was the very fuzziness and protracted character of the eastern partition that forced both the Indian and the Pakistani governments down a paper trail that would concretely separate out the two nations, whereas the rapid and violent ethnic cleansing of the west produced a clarity that did not necessitate the evolution of such rules.

Roy's focus on the operationalization of a passport and visa scheme commencing in October 1952, on the (Indian) Citizenship Act of 1955, and on the requisition of the property of minorities under the Evacuees Act gives her work a fine-grained empirical traction that is commendable. Situated between the oral and testimonial histories of survivors on the one hand and the high politics of partition's decision makers on the other, her work shows how the everyday politics of governance and administration at the intermediate level worked inexorably to transform the lives of “minorities” into undesirable aliens or national outsiders. One is better able to comprehend the gradual separation of a formerly conjoined space into discrete nation-states, and the choices that people are forced to make under these new regimes of governmentality.<sup>3</sup> For example: prior to 1947, it was commonplace for a middle-aged Hindu male to be a small property-holder in East Bengal while maintaining a residence and family in, say, Calcutta in West Bengal. Conversely, it may have been equally common for a young Muslim man from a village in East Bengal to be a student in one of Calcutta's universities or an employee in a firm there, and to return home over the holidays and summer recess. In the years after partition, such fluidity between profession, property, place of residence, and identity became more and more difficult to sustain. Individuals and families were forced to choose either

<sup>2</sup>West Bengal has the highest population density of any state within India, and Bangladesh is among the top nations in the world on a similar count.

<sup>3</sup>This focus on an intermediate level of governmentality as the critical means by which partition's working out fractures the psychic and demographic landscape of the subcontinent evokes the work of Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar in *The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia: Refugees, Boundaries, Histories* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

an “Indian” or a “Pakistani” identity knowing that either choice would entail serious losses in material or psychic terms—or both.

Once again, partition is not the culmination of a process of vivisection but rather the beginning of one. Roy’s delineation of the process is worth reproducing:

That the Bengal Partition engendered a chronic refugee migration lasting nearly two decades was a response to official state policies *after* the Partition. Changing patterns of border control, introduction of new systems of surveillance such as the passport and visa scheme, and the arbitrary requisitioning of property emphasized, especially to the minorities on both sides of the border, that these restrictions would cease only with migration. Paradoxically, although prominent leaders in both countries urged each other to create conditions of safety and security in the minds of their minorities, their efforts at nation building were counterproductive to such rhetoric. (p. 112, emphasis in original)

In 1951, 22 percent of East Pakistan’s population was Hindu, whereas in 2011, the figure had dropped to just 9 percent. Despite initial commitments to secular notions of national belonging by leaders on both sides, over the longer run, for minorities the everyday acts of routine violence punctuated by periodic bouts of large-scale communal violence rendered a highly uncertain migration preferable to living within an ecology of fear. Though Roy’s work stops with the war of 1965, it is obvious by then that the politics of nation-building begun with partition would come at the diminution of other ways of being in this world.

By the 1980s, faced with a never-ending surfeit of memoirs, oral histories, documentaries, and fictional works about the horrors of the Holocaust, many Israelis had reached a point of compassion-fatigue and cynically coined the term “Shoah Business” to refer to the commodification of the politics of memory. In a related vein, one has to wonder whether one more book about the recollections of middle-class and upper-caste Sikh and Punjabi Hindu families really adds much to our knowledge about partition—especially when we still know so little about the experiences of Dalits or those still trapped in places like Dandakaranya or those displaced yet again after the massacre at Marichjhapi. Devika Chawla’s *Home, Uprooted* is largely based on “collect(ing) cross-generational oral histories from ten middle-class Sikh and Hindu Delhi refugee families to understand how ordinary people organize their lives and families—and therefore their identities—as a consequence of politically and communally motivated displacements” (p. 22). Unfortunately for Chawla, the stories of her interlocutors are, to put it bluntly, unexceptional and her efforts to theorize their recollections and the idea of home through invocations of Bachelard or Heidegger sound forced and undigested.

At a later point, Chawla explains her decision to forego visiting Pakistan by saying, “My own desire to see the old country in the course of this fieldwork is curtailed. Since the 2008 attacks, and Osama Bin Laden’s assassination in 2011, my family will not hear of my going to Pakistan because it is too dangerous there for both Indians and for me, the Indian-born naturalized American citizen. I don’t resist: maybe I am just not so brave” (p. 92). Although some may be sympathetic to her predicament, to this reviewer at any rate this book exemplifies the limits of a certain form of partition narrative: it really is time to move beyond ethnographies of a “middle class” that is also (in an indicator of the unconscionable destitution of most in South Asia) in the top 5 percent of society in terms of economic wealth and symbolic capital. Their interests and preoccupations can no longer claim to stand in for the nation when so many other stories remain unheard and unwritten.

“Having made Italy, now we must make Italians,” went a famous phrase from the mid-nineteenth century commonly attributed to Massimo D’Azeglio. It reminds us that the modern state, far from being the expression of an already extant or imagined community, is often a precursor to and the instrument of the violent effort to pulverize multiple and recalcitrant identities into that of the modern national citizen, usually along the vector of majoritarian principles. Partition created India and Pakistan (and later Bangladesh), and the postcolonial history of the subcontinent has been the effort to get the reality on the ground to live up to the ideal of the map. For all the force of the ideas of secular nationhood in the immediate aftermath of independence, majoritarian nationalism made strong headway first in Pakistan and Bangladesh, and now threatens to engulf India. Minorities have been made to feel like lesser beings, as people out of place and time, in each of these three countries. Modi’s Bharatiya Janata Party, despite one economic and political debacle after another, continues to win elections and is now making inroads in areas where its Hindutva-based pitch had never found much purchase before: the northeast and the south. A one-time Nehruvian and secularist like Shashi Tharoor now finds it necessary or expedient to write a book titled *Why I Am a Hindu*, signaling the rightward shift in India’s political spectrum: accepting a soft majoritarian ethos is an entrance requirement to be a credible (i.e., one capable of winning elections) politician.<sup>4</sup>

In 1947, it may still have been plausible to argue that national citizenship ought to be unrelated to religious belief, that one should be able to be Indian or Pakistani in the fullest sense while being a Muslim or a Christian or a Hindu or an atheist in one’s private life. Seven decades later, it seems as if partition more likely inaugurated the inexorable process of dividing the subcontinent into nation-states populated by majoritarian citizens and lesser beings. It is a history that is still unfolding, and both events on the ground and the works reviewed in this essay give us much reason to be cautious and fearful, rather than optimistic.

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### *The Past and Present of Hindi Cinema*

*Dream Machine: Realism and Fantasy in Hindi Cinema*. By SAMIR DAYAL. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015. xi, 304 pp. ISBN: 9781439910641 (paper, also available in cloth and as e-book).

*Twenty-First Century Bollywood*. By AJAY GEHLAWAT. London: Routledge, 2015. xiv, 156 pp. ISBN: 9781138793606 (cloth, also available in paper and as e-book). doi:10.1017/S0021911818001249

Of all the popular regional cinemas of India, Hindi or Bollywood film continues to dominate in India and beyond, as Samir Dayal’s *Dream Machine* and Ajay Gehlawat’s *Twenty-First Century Bollywood* illustrate. Since the late twentieth century, analyses of Hindi cinema have been the focus of numerous fine academic books by Madhava Prasad, Ravi

<sup>4</sup>Shashi Tharoor, *Why I Am a Hindu* (London: Hurst & Company, 2018).