A BLOODY MESS

Yasmin Khan: *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007. Pp. 250. $30.00.)

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South Asia stands at crossroads today with the very future of Pakistan seemingly in peril after the tumultuous events of the past year when the nation saw the radical Islamists strengthening their hold in large swaths of the country even as the moderate center was trying desperately to hold. Former Prime Minister, Benazir Bhutto, who was assassinated in December 2007 as she was campaigning for parliamentary elections, was just the latest casualty of the turmoil that has beset the nation ever since its creation in 1947. While India continues to cherish its vibrant democratic institutions, the ghost of 1947, the year of its liberation from British rule, also continues to haunt its minorities, exemplified by occasional sectarian violence and horrifying massacres. Meanwhile, both India and Pakistan continue to view each other as the singular threat to their national survival after fighting four wars and numerous minor conflicts. The legacy of the "Great Partition" – the division of imperial India into two nations: secular, Hindu-dominated India and Muslim Pakistan – looms large over the future of the Indian subcontinent.

Great Britain's decision in 1947 to partition the country was a result of seemingly irreconcilable differences over the demand for a separate state for India's Muslims and had the consent of a majority of India's political leaders. No one had foreseen the tragedy that ensued resulting in one of the greatest and most violent upheavals of the twentieth century. Yasmin Khan has written a vivid and authoritative account of what Mahatma Gandhi described as "the vivisection of India," thereby making a significant contribution to the scholarship on the Partition of India. Her biggest achievement is in taking the study beyond the elite peacemakers and high-level politics to the impact of Partition on the ordinary lives of millions affected by it. With great empathy and sensitivity, Khan traces the bitter personal experiences of the victims of this tragedy as well as their agony, uncertainty, and fears. The turmoil, confusion, and bewilderment that followed the reckless British decision to "divide and quit" impacted the millions who had taken their country's territorial integrity for granted. The result was that the Partition of India in 1947 was one of the bloodiest tragedies to emerge as part of the process of decolonization in the twentieth century, resulting in the displacement of around 12 million people and the deaths of up to a million.

The lack of planning and concern on the part of the British government was evident in the reply of Britain's viceroy to India, Lord Mountbatten, when he was asked if he foresaw any mass transfer of population: "Personally, I don't see it. ... Some measure of transfer will come about in a natural way ... perhaps governments will transfer population." The borders of Bengal and

Punjab were drawn by Sir Cyril Radcliff on his first and only visit to the country. Khan makes her views clear about the manner in which the British left the subcontinent, "rushed and inadequately thought out." She is unequivocal in her condemnation of the decision to send British troops home and to shift responsibility for peacekeeping to the nascent governments, before they had even begun to function. The violence in the immediate aftermath of Partition was the consequence of the communal atmosphere building up since 1946 and spurred by Mohammed Ali Jinnah's two-nation theory as well as the indecent haste with which the British government decided to speed up the transfer of power. The leaders of the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League played along without any qualms, hungry as they were for power and desperate to get rid of each other.

"Violence must sit at the core of any history of Partition," Khan says. "It is the phenomenal extent of the killing during Partition which distinguishes it as an event." "Partition set in motion a train of events unforeseen by every single person who had advocated and argued for the division," Khan writes, pointing out that there was nothing "inevitable" about what happened. The Partition became such a "bloody" and "messy" affair because both the British and their Indian successors had their own agendas. Explaining the sources of partition's violence, Khan argues, "the black and white imagery of ragged refugees and bloodthirsty peasants should be replaced with a technicolor picture of modern weaponry, strategic planning and political rhetoric." No community, be it the Hindus, the Muslims, or the Sikhs, can escape the blame for this calamity. It is, therefore, not surprising that Mahatma Gandhi refused to celebrate independence, urging that the day be reserved instead "for prayer and deep heart-searching." It was his assassination on January 30, 1948 by a Hindu extremist that stemmed violence in India and shook the Indians to their core.

The book is most certainly an elegant and moving reappraisal of the Partition, the haste and callousness with which it was accomplished, and the damaging legacy left in its wake. I do, however, have a few reservations. The subtitle of the book, *The Making of India and Pakistan*, is a bit misleading, both historically and technically. As was pointed out by India's Representative, V. K. Krishna Menon, in the United Nations, "India is a residuary state" while Pakistan is the product of "the great partition." Pakistan had to be admitted to the UN while India retained its membership albeit in attenuated size and shape.

Some recent scholarship on the causes of Partition offers a counter-argument to the author's thesis that the British were in undue haste and did not plan their departure well goes unmentioned. It has been suggested by some scholars that the British were indeed determined to hold on to India as long as possible, and in the event that this became impossible, wanted to secure the northwestern portion of India to thwart any real or imagined Russian adventures. After realizing that the Indian nationalists who would rule India after its independence would deny them military cooperation under a British Commonwealth defense umbrella, the British

settled for those willing to do so by using religion for the purpose. Their problem could be solved if Jinnah, the leader of the Muslim League, would succeed in his plan to detach the northwest of India abutting Iran, Afghanistan, and Sinkiang and establish a separate state there – Pakistan. The proposition was a realizable one, as a working relationship had been established between the British authorities in India and Jinnah during the Second World War and he was willing to cooperate with Britain on defense matters if Pakistan was created. British oil interests in the wider Middle East were at stake. In the Cold War scenario, the Russian desire to expand southward was well known and the Western powers, especially Britain and the United States, were too intensely aware of the independent-minded Congress leadership, already groomed to inherit the throne in Delhi. The Partition of Punjab was essential in order to ensure a strategic military base in the northwest of the Indian subcontinent. Jinnah's Muslim homeland was to be that base. While the author may not agree with these claims, it would have strengthened her arguments had she taken them into account as there is enough primary evidence unearthed by other scholars that lend these claims some authority.

It is indeed tempting to lay the blame on Partition for the attitudes on the subcontinent today. There are, however, equally powerful other factors that have shaped the response of the two states vis-à-vis the other. Structural realities of a region where India is a behemoth trying to preserve its sovereignty over Kashmir and Pakistan is trying to protect its autonomy by covertly supporting separatist forces in Kashmir as well as by aligning itself with extra-regional powers such as the United States and China are as potent as the historical memories pertaining to the partition. The inability of Pakistan's political leadership and institutions to live up to the ideals set by Jinnah's inaugural address to the Pakistan's Constituent Assembly in which he visualized the new state in nondenominational terms (dismissed in just one sentence in the book) also deserves closer scrutiny in order to understand the morass into which Pakistan seems to be sinking today.

The author also overreaches when she tries to draw some conclusions for the present-day world from the events of 1947. Partition is a loud reminder, warns Khan, of "the dangers of colonial interventions and the profound difficulties that dog regime change." It stands as a testament "to the follies of empire, which ruptures community evolution, distorts historical trajectories and forces violent state formation from societies that would otherwise have taken different – and unknowable – paths." Iraq and Afghanistan are not mentioned but it is clear that the author is tempted to draw the seemingly obvious parallels.

These are, however, only minor quibbles with a book that covers so much ground with such dexterity and brings to the fore the human dimension of the epic tragedy that unfolded in South Asia in 1947. It has the potential to become a landmark work in the study of "the Great Partition."

–Harsh V. Pant