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Since 1947: Partition Narratives among Punjabi Migrants of Delhi

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Stanley Wolpert. *Shameful Flight: The Last Years of the British Empire in India.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. 256 pp. \$17.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-539394-1.

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Partition 1947

Six decades later, the 1947 Partition of the Indian subcontinent continues to form the focus of scholarly analysis and debate. Indeed, so many works have now appeared on this subject that one could almost consider Partition studies as forming a genre of modern South Asian history. The contemporary thrust of scholarship is to disrupt master narratives of the causes and consequences of Partition with emphasis on the locality and the subaltern experience of the great divide of 1947. This “new history” of Partition was pioneered by feminist writers and activists who emerged from the early 1980s political milieu of increasing communal violence in India and who were intellectually influenced by the currents of postmodernism and postcolonialism.

One of the works under review, by the up-and-coming scholar Ravinder Kaur, fits firmly in this new approach to Partition. It examines its “human face” through a narrative of the experiences of Punjabi Hindu and Sikh migrants from Pakistan who resettled in Delhi. Kaur provides detailed studies of refugee lives in both the new purpose built localities, such as Lajpat Nagar, and in areas that had been former Muslim localities, such as Karol Bagh. She brings out well the internalization of Punjabi notions of self-reliance and reluctance to accept “charity,” which inform both official accounts of resettlement and the firsthand accounts of migrants. Moreover, she is not content to establish an elite narrative of Punjabi migration and resettlement, but turns to the neglected experience of Untouchables who, despite Urvashi Butalia’s pioneering efforts in *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (1998), remain largely hidden from the Partition discourse.

The seasoned American scholar Stanley Wolpert, in contrast, swims against the new academic tide in providing an account that focuses on the constitutional developments which culminated in Partition. The phrase the “high politics” of Partition has become shorthand for this type of focus. A common theme of Indian works of this genre is to apportion “blame” for the Partition. This is either heaped on a demonized Muslim League movement under the “intransigent” leadership of Mohammad Ali Jinnah, or blame for the “tragedy” of Partition is attributed to British divide and rule policies designed to weaken struggle against imperial rule by encouraging Muslim separatism. In contrast, the traditional Pakistani approach to the “high politics” of independence is to stress the inevitability of Partition given the profound gulf between Indian Muslims and Hindus. Such accounts can topple over into hagiographies of those leaders, especially Jinnah who enabled Muslims to achieve their “destiny” of a separate state. Another element of Pakistan nationalist historiography is bitterness about the alleged British “unfair” treatment of Muslim League interests. Wolpert, like many writers from the subcontinent, also seeks to attach blame for the disruption brought by partition. Interestingly, given his own writing on Jinnah, he shares the bitterness of many Pakistani authors to Lord Mountbatten, the final viceroy of India. What emerges from his book, *Shameful Flight*, is a damning indictment of how the British handled the transfer of power. Mountbatten is excoriated by Wolpert for his impetuosity and ignorance of Indian affairs.

Kaur’s text builds on her earlier doctoral work to bring out the lived refugee experience. She utilizes

both documentary records and firsthand testimonies to accomplish this end. *Since 1947* reveals the variety of journeys refugees made from the Pakistan Punjab and the North West Frontier Province to India. It demonstrates that Partition did not end in August 1947 as is implied in some “high politics” accounts, but that it took many years for the migrants to adjust to their new lifestyles in Delhi. The book uncovers previously unexplored topics, such as the treatment of Untouchable refugees and widows. Perhaps its greatest strength is the way in which it points to the highly differentiated refugee experience resulting from social status and gender. The work thus interrogates the Indian state’s master narrative of a common refugee experience as presented in such key texts as *Millions on the Move* (Ministry of Information, 1948) and *The Story of Rehabilitation* (Department of Rehabilitation, 1967). These accounts seldom mention, for example, the anticipatory migration by wealthy Punjabi Hindus that Kaur reveals by means of private letters written to the All-India Congress Committee (pp. 67-68). She also reveals that political connections along with wealth not only could secure a safe migration passage, sometimes even by air, but as in the case of the Lahore High Court Judge G. D. Khosla could also enable return visits to secure personal belongings. “Those who flew to safety had a different view of Partition,” she declares. “They could witness the murderous events from safe distances, and if cornered, could, more often than not, fly away without ever having to face the mob” (p. 79).

These insights break down the master narrative account of a universal refugee resettlement experience. Ironically this was constructed by “spokesmen” from the communities who seldom shared the dangers faced by their poorer brethren. Differences attended not just the flight from Pakistan, but the reception arrangements for the refugees in Delhi and elsewhere in North India. Whether refugees could afford their own food rations, for example, determined if they would be directed to a life under canvas in the Edward and Outram Lines of the Kingsway camp, or would be accommodated in concrete barracks in the Hudson and Reeds Lines (p. 99). The satellite towns and refugee housing colonies provided different amenities for the various classes of refugee. “The class differences visible during the population movement,” Kaur asserts, “became further entrenched when permanent housing projects were undertaken on such basis. This ensured that refugees were reinvented in their old class of social stratification” (p. 166). Kaur provides the most

compelling evidence yet to help us understand how the social dislocation of Partition-related migration was limited by the state to ensure that social hierarchies remained more or less intact.

The Indian and Pakistan states also attempted to bolster patriarchy in the wake of partition. Kaur reveals that a separate refugee colony for young widows was established in Lajpat Nagar in which the state closely monitored its inhabitants’ social behavior. The women were not allowed to go outside its boundaries without the permission of the female social workers. “The state,” she declares, “reproduced (family) notions of honour through abstinence and seclusion by fulfilling the role of the patriarch. The honour at stake was no longer that of an individual or family, but rather that of the Indian nation ... the state had to restore ‘normalcy’ by reproducing familiar practices. Thus the state attempted restoration of all that was lost during Partition, including the restoration of the social landscape” (p. 252). Research on refugee resettlement in Lahore (Ian Talbot, *Divided Cities: Partition and Its Aftermath in Lahore and Amritsar 1947-1957* [2006]) reveals a similar guardianship role, with the state like a family patriarch controlling female sexuality through arranging early marriages for young female orphans.

Kaur does not draw as much as she might from the comparative insights provided by other locality based accounts of refugee resettlement. Her work is thus best appreciated if it is read alongside them. She has nonetheless added immeasurably both to the empirical depth of knowledge regarding Partition and its aftermath as well as shed light on its differential consequences. For this reason the work is one of a number of key texts in the new history approach to Partition, as such it is deserving of a wide readership.

Wolpert’s work takes us back from the human consequences of Partition to its political causes. From the outset, he acknowledges that this is a well-trodden theme. Nevertheless, he explains that he has chosen to write on this in the belief that the malodorous legacies of Partition “might well have been avoided, or at least mitigated, but for the arrogance and ignorance of a handful of British and Indian leaders” (p. 2). While Nehru comes in for criticism, this is primarily because he had been “blinded” by Mountbatten “to the wretched realities of Partition’s monstrous problems” (p. 192). It is the last viceroy who is cast as the villain of the piece. Wolpert seeks

to demonstrate his culpability, not least to “counter the many laudatory, fawning accounts” of his viceroyalty (p. 2). There is little, however, that is new in his analysis, which relies heavily on earlier criticisms of Mountbatten (see, for example, Leonard Moseley, *Last Days of the Raj* [1961]); earlier works link the Partition massacres and migrations and their haunting legacies to the viceroy’s impetuosity. He similarly reiterates the long-held view in Pakistan (Latif Ahmed Sherwani, *The Partition of India and Mountbatten* [1968]) that Mountbatten’s animosity to Jinnah affected the evenhandedness of the arrangements for the transfer of power, especially with respect to the Radcliffe Boundary Award. Wolpert’s stereotypical understanding of the Boundary Commission and its award needs to be read alongside the more nuanced view of his young compatriot, Lucy Chester (*Borders and Conflict in South Asia: The Radcliffe Boundary Commission and the Partition of the Punjab* [2009]).

Wolpert’s personality driven interpretation overlooks the extent to which Mountbatten was simply executing rather than implementing British policy. This is a similar failing as in Akbar S. Ahmed’s personality driven account of the closing period of British rule (*Jinnah, Pakistan and Islamic Identity: The Search for Saladin* [1997]). *Shameful Flight* also occludes the impact of the deteriorating law and order situation in the Punjab on his policymaking. From late 1946 onward, Congress and Muslim League politicians had used the threat of violence to suit their purpose. The war years had left a legacy of a militarized Punjab with large numbers of ex-servicemen and caches of weapons. This situation meant that political leaderships could not turn violence on and off

like a tap to suit their purpose. It also left the British with the alternative of a politically impossible massive deployment of force, or a speedy exit. Mountbatten’s predecessor Lord Wavell had astutely summed up this dilemma before it was acknowledged by the Attlee government. Mountbatten’s task as the final viceroy was to ensure that British lives and honor were not imperiled when power was transferred to Indian hands. What flowed from this was the need to ensure a community of interest between the British and their erstwhile Congress opponents. This explains Mountbatten’s prickly relationship with Jinnah far more profoundly than concern with the final viceroy’s well-known personality traits.

Serious question marks surround Wolpert’s contention that a rapid transfer of power was foisted on the Congress. It bought into the need for a speedy British departure not only to prevent the prospect of a communal civil war, but also to suppress the possibility of a social revolution. Congress also shared with the British the fear of the “balkanization” of the subcontinent and thus the need to cut Pakistan down to size. These common political interests, far more than Nehru’s being taken in by Mountbatten’s “charm offensive” as Wolpert would have us believe, explain the agreement for a swift British exit.

Shameful Flight is thus a lively, but polemical account of the end of the British Raj. The text is well crafted, but cannot be regarded as a definitive study because of its partisan approach. Readers who want a recent “high politics” account of Partition would be advised to read it alongside Yasmin Khan’s balanced study, *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan* (2007)

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