

Lines in the sand

This book explores the many ways in which the Partition continues to resonate to this day

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As a historical event, the Partition of 1947, which was accompanied by the Independence of India and Pakistan, has few equals. Trauma for millions of people; spectacular demographic realignments in a crucial part of the world; a cautionary tale of what often accompanies the complex processes of decolonisation — all these and more make Partition an event that continues to resonate. The decades accumulate — next year will mark the passage of 70 years — and we move farther and farther away from the generation that experienced Partition first-hand. But the need for continued critical exploration does not diminish.

The collection of essays titled *Revisiting India's Partition: New Essays on Memory, Culture, and Politics*, edited by Amritjit Singh, Nalini Iyer and Rahul Gairola, is a fine addition to the corpus of Partition scholarship. In the introduction, the editors draw on the concept of the 'long Partition', borrowed from Vazira Zamindar, to suggest that the very notion of Partition should be extended far beyond 1947. The event is important not only because of its legacy but because, in a certain sense, it cannot simply be confined to 1947. Drawing on the power of this idea, the book significantly expands our understanding of this pivotal event.

Certainly, there are through lines from earlier scholarship to the book, for example in the way the collection attends to the impact of Partition on women (see the essays by Radhika Mohanram, Debali Mookerjea-Leonard and Parvinder Mehta). Similarly, the evocative essay by Tasneem Shahnaz and Amritjit Singh on the Pakistani writer Intizar Husain amply indicates just why representations of Partition in literature have proven so irresistible to generations of scholars.

Of Husain, Shahnaz and Singh write, "his writings testify to his ability to perceive things steadily and clearly, not merely as binary oppositions but as discrete and dis-jointed, elusive and connected". The passions unleashed by Partition tempt a kind of polemical reduction that the best literary works on the subject avoid. Perhaps this is why literature has provided such a fertile archive for scholarship on Partition, as indeed various essays in this collection demonstrate.

The collection also ventures in some new directions, and in so doing proves itself a welcome portent of the scholarship likely to

emerge as scholarly attention mutates and new nuances are introduced.

Worth mentioning here is the sustained attention devoted to Pakistani and Bangladeshi experiences and representations. Essays on Partition and South India, generally considered distant from a direct experience of the traumatic event (Nalini Iyer and Nazia Akhtar), and another essay considering Partition in the context of the digital humanities (Rahul Gairola) are also exemplary in this regard. Iyer's essay illustrates that South Indian writers recognised the significance of Partition and wrestled with its import in their works; at the same time, Iyer rightly notes that Tamils were more enraged by the treatment of their ethnic kinfolk in Sri Lanka. Yes, Partition did not leave South India untouched but, no, it was not felt the same way that it was in Punjab or Bengal. Different essays in this collection repeatedly and persuasively advance the thesis that nationhood and citizenship in parts of South Asia

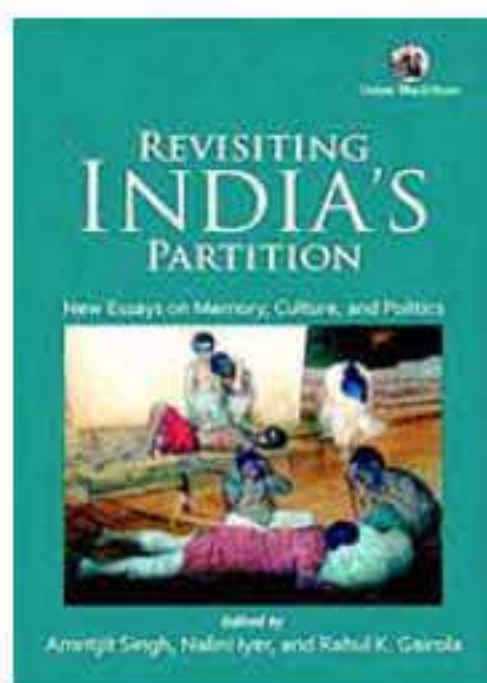
continue to be foundationally linked to Partition. India, Pakistan and Bangladesh all experienced the long Partition as a violence that was constitutive of national identity.

Since this is undoubtedly the case, can these nations hope to escape the religious and other forms of violence that seem so endemic to them until the ghosts of the long Partition have been successfully exorcised? Will these nations manage to come to terms with the ways in which forms of national belonging are made and unmade by acts of mournful remembering? And what of those, like Tamils, who were not directly affected? Can they ever fully belong to a nation

that continues to link its identity to the trauma of Partition?

These and other vexing but generative questions are posed by this collection. Certainly there are gaps. I wish that the editors had chosen, for example, to explore more systematically how Partition has been represented in a variety of media — film, television, oral histories, textbooks, etc. But these are quibbles; one collection cannot do everything, and what *Revisiting India's Partition* manages to do certainly merits serious attention from readers.

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Revisiting India's Partition: New Essays on Memory, Culture, and Politics; ed Amritjit Singh, Nalini Iyer and Rahul Gairola. Orient BlackSwan, Rs. 1,100.