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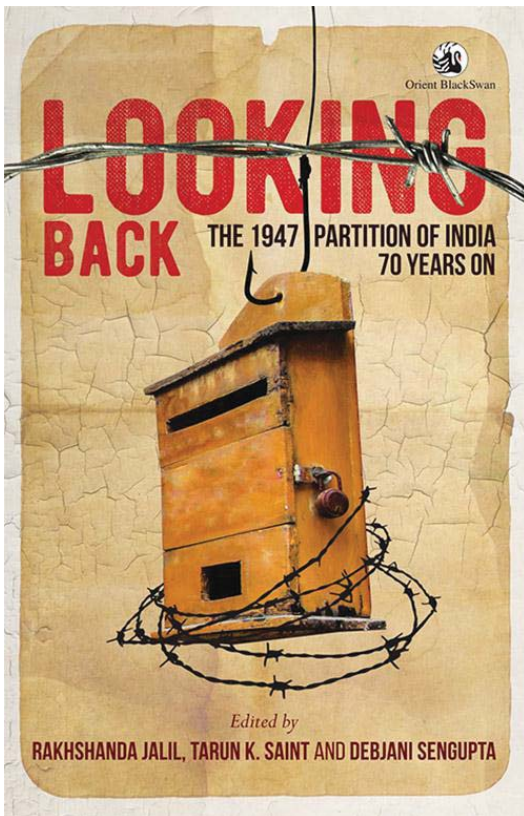
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Partition: A line that criss-crosses

This book is evidence that the study of Partition is no longer just the preserve of academics

Urvashi Butalia

Looking Back—The 1947 Partition Of India 70 Years On: Edited by Rakhshanda Jalil, Tarun K. Saint and Debjani Sengupta, Orient BlackSwan, 396 pages, Rs1,095.



The 70th anniversary of independence and Partition has provided an occasion for writers and publishers in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh to bring out books on the subject. *Looking Back: The 1947 Partition Of India, 70 Years On* is one such volume, put together by three editors, each of whom has worked independently on the subject of Partition, bringing very different perspectives to it.

The book itself, a collection of fictional writings, poems, essays and reportage, reflects this. Divided into several parts, it addresses, separately, essays, memoirs, fiction, poetry, drama, and closes with an interview, all too brief, between Intizar Hussain, the interviewer, and Nasir Kazmi, the interviewee.

Poignantly, the interview for television takes place as Kazmi lies in bed in a hospital, and is all the more touching for its truncated and interrupted nature, as Kazmi's voice fades in and out with visitors

interrupting, a fact the interviewer ruefully notes. It is perhaps fitting that this fascinating volume ends on a note of incompleteness, and with—as the reader knows from Intizar Hussain's commentary—the imminent departure of one of the survivors, something I, as a reader, took as a telling commentary on the now rapid disappearance of people with direct memories of that moment.

All anthologies are uneven, and especially when you have, as here, a mix of the academic and the activist, the journalistic and the fictional, the poetic and the descriptive. And then there is the

added dimension of translation, for many of the pieces included here are translated from Urdu, or Bengali, or Punjabi (one from Punjabi via Urdu) and Hindi. So unevenness is in many ways a given.

But that is not necessarily a negative. Indeed, Partition studies and Partition writings in recent years have been characterized by just such a mix, as the studying of this important moment in our history and its ongoing repercussions moves beyond being the preserve of academics and takes in artists, singers, food enthusiasts, writers, graphic novelists and so many others.

Thus, in many ways, this volume too is evidence of the opening up, or what I like to call the democratizing, of the study of Partition. But unlike some recent work that tends to focus on Partition histories and stories shorn of their politics, and of their historical contexts, this one thankfully retains that anchoring.

There are stories in it of course—for which volume on Partition these days would be, or could be, without stories? And here the stories touch on real lives, as in Maya Mirchandani's tale of her grandmother, or on fictionalized experiences (often based on real-life stories), such as being trafficked across borders. However, as the editors make clear in the introduction, all the stories are located within a historical context where the past stretches its long arm into the present and

the present references the past.

And then there's the attention to areas and subjects that have so far received little attention—parts of the North-East, such as Tripura, or the fate of Sylhet, a pre-Partition partition story. Or there is the story of Dandakaranya, little known in the context of Partition (despite the fact that it was home to many refugees), and the fascinating story of Jogendra Nath Mandal, a Dalit leader who was once a member of the Muslim League.

An interesting and unusual aspect is explored in Vidya Rao's study of music, focusing on the work of two musicians,

Eyes Don't Need A Visa

By Gulzar

*Eyes don't need a visa
Dreams have no borders
Eyes close, I cross the border every
day
To meet Mehdi Hasan!*

*I have heard that his voice is
injured
And the ghazal sits in front of
him, mute
Her lips tremble
When he says...
"The flowers have dried in the
pages of books
My friend Faraz too is gone, will
meet him in my dreams perhaps!"
Eyes close, I often cross the border.*

*Eyes don't need a visa
Dreams have no borders.*

*(From Footprints On Zero Line:
Writings On The Partition by
Gulzar, Translated by Rakh-
shanda Jalil, Harper Perennial,
206 pages, Rs399).*

one in India and the other in Pakistan, here the author poses the question, “can music be partitioned”?

Much more is on offer that is new and different: a take on dark humour in films of the time as opposed to the tragedy (Ravikant), a comparison of Holocaust survivors from Hungary with Partition survivors from India (Margit Koves) a detailed look at the *chitmahals*, enclaves that somehow got “left behind”, literally and metaphorically (Debjani Sengupta), an exploration of Partition in terms of the objects of memory people brought with them (Aanchal Malhotra), and a brief glance at speech and silence (Manas Ray). There’s also a graphic story about a three-week stint of learning through conversations in Lahore, and close readings of a number of textual sources, and so on.

It isn’t possible to list every contribution in a volume that has some 35 of them. Nor can such a book be read from cover to cover. But for the reader interested in Partition, it’s a book well worth dipping into, locating your particular area of interest and focusing on it.

Or perhaps trying to focus on it, for in anthologies such as this one, the overlaps and resonances between the different contributions are often so rich that they invite an exploration of the parallels—and their contradictions, complexities and nuances—in their own right.

This book will provide the reader plenty of that.