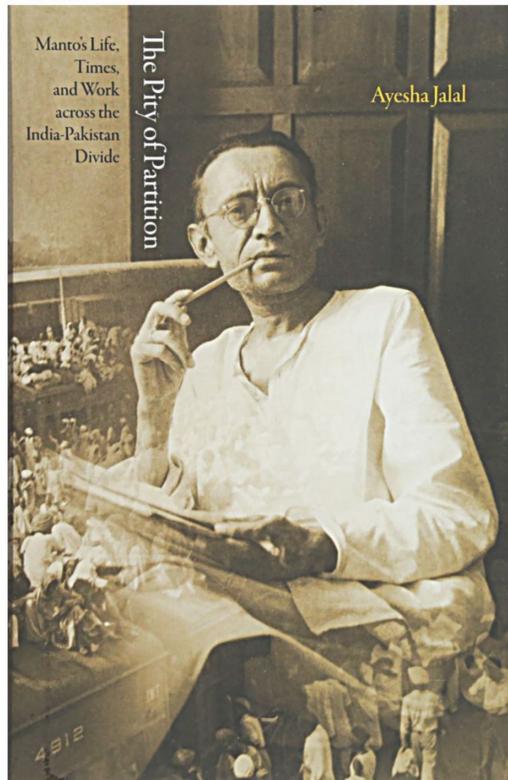


SEPARATING A ONCE HISTORICALLY INDIVISIBLE PEOPLE

In conversation with Ayesha Jalal



Historian Ayesha Jalal, the Mary Richardson Professor of History and Director of the Centre for South Asian and Indian Ocean Studies at Tufts University, is one of the most prominent partition scholars, whose work has provided new insights and perspectives on the history of the partition of the Indian subcontinent. Her work has focused on the circumstances and roles of individuals which resulted in the creation of Pakistan, especially in her acclaimed book, *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League, and the Demand for Pakistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge U Press, 1985). Other books by her include a study of her grand-uncle, acclaimed writer Saadat Hasan Manto, titled *The Pity of Partition: Manto's Life, Times, and Work Across the India-Pakistan Divide* (Princeton University Press, 2013), and *The Struggle for Pakistan: A Muslim Homeland and Global Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

The *Star Weekend* interviewed Professor Jalal over email about her work and insights on the 70th anniversary of the partition.

Do you think the partition was inevitable?
Inevitability assumes that something was unavoidable, regardless of human responsibility and actions. Apart from being untrue in the case of India's partition, this is entirely contrary to a historian's way of thinking, where attention invariably focuses on the domain of political contingency and the choices made by human beings.

The partition of India was effectively the partition of the two main Muslim-majority provinces, Punjab and Bengal. There was nothing inevitable or pre-determined about this. Until the bitter end, Mohammad Ali Jinnah insisted that it was wrong to equate the principle of Pakistan with the partition of Punjab and Bengal. The prospect of a united and independent Bengal



Ayesha Jalal

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remained a possibility and was scotched only because the Congress High Command was averse to the idea of a united Bengal outside the Indian union. Jinnah by contrast, supported a united and independent Bengal, ruefully noting that Bengal without Calcutta was like asking a man to live without his heart. Even in the case of Punjab, a partition of the province was opposed by a cross-section of Muslims. Under the provisions of the June 3 partition plan, a vote of the non-Muslim members of the assembly from the non-Muslim majority districts sealed the fate of both Punjab and Bengal in the face of opposition from those representing the Muslim-majority districts.

How do you assess the two-nation theory?

Insofar as nations are imagined communities, the two-nation theory was based on a subjective belief in the right of Muslims, regardless of their internal divisions, to acquire a substantial share of power in an independent India. Politically the 'two-nation' theory was deployed by Mohammad Ali Jinnah and the All-India Muslim League as a political tactic aimed at claiming parity with Hindus at the all-India level. Partition as it came about in 1947 was not only a political abortion of the two-nation theory, but led to the creation of two separate nation-states—Pakistan, which emerged as the largest Muslim state in the world at the time, and predominantly Hindu India containing the largest Muslim minority. The creation of Bangladesh in 1971 split the Muslims of the subcontinent into three separate nation-states. Pakistan—the much vaunted homeland of

As the founding myth of the post-colonial nation-states of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, partition is a way of seeing and being that separates what were once historically indivisible people, communities, and linguistic cultures into distinctive political entities.

British India's Muslims—today has fewer Muslims than India and Bangladesh put together. Such an eventful history of the two-nation theory underlines the extent to which there can be a sharp disjunction between the claims of nationhood and the actual achievements of statehood whenever and wherever there is a lack of a neat fit between identity and territory.