

Partition, unquestionably a pivotal event of the South Asian twentieth century, has become a subject of great significance in its own right.¹ Studies of partition began with a profound re-examination of why it happened²; they gathered momentum as scholars looked at the provincial and local roots of the drive to divide India³; and the subject took a big step forward when oral histories revealed how women and men experienced the traumas of its bloody upheavals, the violence of 'the



The links between partition and other movements after 1947 that demanded autonomy need to be identified.

burning plains of the Punjab' becoming a metaphor for partition itself⁴.

Another major advance has been characterised by a growing appreciation of just how widespread, and just how long-lasting, were the reverberations of partition. The focus was no longer on the events in the Punjab during the six months from March to December 1947. Pioneering work on Sindh⁵, East and

West Bengal⁶, both Hyderabad⁷ (in India and Pakistan respectively), Gujarat⁸, Kashmir⁹, Rajasthan¹⁰, and Delhi¹¹ has established that the Punjab—with its cataclysmic violence (three-quarters of a million killed), contained within a tight time frame (six months); its massive exchanges of population (circa ten million); and the heavy involvement of the state in the protection, evacuation, and rehabilitation of refugees—was the exception rather than the rule for the course of partition in the subcontinent. Elsewhere, partition's impact was far more drawn-out, messy, and chaotic, more a set of festering sores than a single murderous blow. Long after 1947, we now realise, refugees and displaced continued to move within and across the new borders. The state, whether India or Pakistan, set its face against them and offered them little or no support. Such rehabilitation as they achieved was by their own efforts. Often refugees occupied property by force, regardless of to whom it belonged, whether government or other citizens. This involved a great deal of localised violence, and it displaced millions of vulnerable people. Many of these unfortunates were people of a different religious persuasion, and refugees challenged their right to stay on as minorities in the 'wrong country.' In the recent scholarly literature about refugees, then, they emerge in a new light. Once seen as hapless victims of profound trauma, peripheral (if sometimes heroic) figures who were 'collateral damage' in the unstoppable process of nation-making, they are now coming to be recognised as having been critical agents of nation-creation, whose actions and demands from below often drove policy, changing the state itself in ways that could not have been predicted.¹²

Historians of post-partition migration have also begun to uncover the sheer scale of internal displacement within the territories that became 'India' and 'Pakistan.' The precise directions of displacements caused by these thousands of smaller-scale upheavals have yet to be determined, but patterns are beginning to be discerned. One is a clear trend of clustering among minority groups who stayed behind: in times of trouble, they did not usually flee across the new national borders, but instead sought shelter in nearby places where their coreligionists already lived in sizeable numbers. This created innumerable ghettos across the subcontinent, some of them close to the India-Pakistan (and now India-Bangladesh) borders.¹³

This process of the 'un-mixing' of South Asia's Muslim and non-Muslim populations, which began in 1947, continued with each new outburst of violence. Every major riot after partition generated fresh waves of refugees and internally displaced people, who left their homes to seek security amidst their coreligionists. Indeed, from this perspective, the displacements of Godhra in 2002 and Muzaffarnagar in 2014 can be seen as an inglorious epilogue to a tragedy that began long ago.

Yet the implications of this continuing 'un-mixing' are still imperfectly understood, despite their

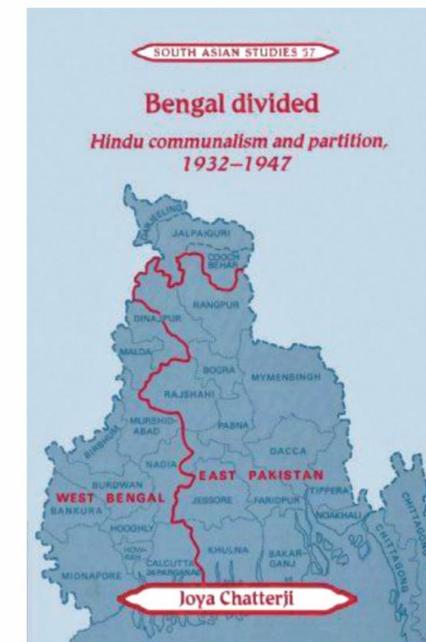


PHOTO: AFP

Every major riot after partition generated fresh waves of refugees and internally displaced people.

profound consequences for the social, cultural, and indeed political fabric of South Asia. So one imperative in taking the subject forward must be for these consequences, and the deep questions they raise, to be given sustained scholarly attention. Research on religious practices among Hindus and Sikhs after partition, largely still unpublished, reveals fascinating changes, particularly (but not only) among refugees¹⁴. This lends some support to Gerald Larson's thesis, at least in relation to its claims about partition's impact upon South Asian religions after 1947.¹⁵ But much more careful anthropological and historical research is needed before we can claim to understand these processes in all their complexity.

Another flank has been opened up, with exciting prospects, by work that shows that partition's ripples reached far beyond the subcontinent. Forms of 'partial citizenship,' pioneered in the Indian subcontinent during the aftermath of partition, appear to have travelled to many parts of the world where persons of Indian origin were found in significant numbers, complicating and compromising their status, and producing new forms of quasi-citizenship in their wake. Throughout (and indeed beyond) the erstwhile British Empire, their sudden rebranding as citizens of two different and hostile countries caused members of the Indian diaspora to grapple in new ways with questions of belonging. partition, in turn, sparked fresh migrations to distant places around the world, and members of these new diasporas engaged in significant, and novel, forms of transnational politics. This research suggests that a 'world history' approach, which traces connections in the subcontinent with coeval developments across



the globe, will yield rich rewards.¹⁶

The new research thus hints at just how critical partition has been in reshaping many aspects of South Asia, and indeed other parts of the world where South Asians have settled in significant numbers. Yet, as I see it, there remains a gaping void at the heart of the subject. We simply do not know why people who had lived cheek by jowl for so long