

Pangs of Partition

Human memory is strange. What seems of such unforgettable nature at one time becomes historiated, remembered only by historians, at others. What one generation thought would be indelibly ingrained in the psyche of the people does not evoke the same kinds of response a little later. Yet, the purveyors of memories, historians and litterateurs, seek out memories from the past, insist on special status for their recreations of the past and claim authenticity for their creations. All this would be just fine, and one could say that complex situations, like the Partition of India in 1947, leave multiple impressions, all of them authentic enough. There is the troublous fact though, that some of these memories also get embroiled in creating a zymotic political agenda, an agenda that is infectious, contagious and diseased.

When these memories have real consequences, as with the play of communalism in modern India, then one wonders at the appropriateness of such interpretations that might have the possibility of inflaming passions. Should they be stifled, for fear that they would only aggravate conflicts? Or should they be recalled, in all their gruesomeness, on the presumption that recollections would help exorcise the discord from our body politic? The matter does not have any answers. Little wonder that one whole generation of Indian historians shied from recalling those bits of history, like temple destructions and instances of communal conflict, which in their judgement strengthened communal stereotypes and exacerbated communal hostility. Correspondingly some of our best historians, paradigm-setters all, went on to argue that communalism in society was substantially a creation of the communal interpretations of history. Since that argument was first made in the 1960s it has imposed a serious constraint in the historians' writings on communalism

and associated trauma. Most good history writing in India has been watchful, sometimes even risking errors, to ensure that no leavening of anything that could be construed as the communal interpretation creeps in. Given such intellectual caution in discussing communalism it is quite commendable that the ICHR chose to bring out the present set of 40 essays on the Pangs of Partition.

These 40 essays are collected in two volumes. The first one deals primarily with the historians' interpretation of events connected with the partition. The second is based substantially on personal recollections and analysis of fiction. Some of these essays are of a high quality. In some, the authors have made serious efforts to bring forth new evidence to throw light on hitherto hidden aspects. Others try to re-interpret diplomatic and administrative events surrounding the partition to provide quaint insights into the manner that decisions of such tremendous import as the partition were being taken by a beleaguered imperial administration. Yet, others simply provide a first hand account from the perspective of those who were buffeted by the events of 1947. As with any large collection of essays there is considerable variation in the skill of various authors and the sources that they employ. Here we have the space only to discuss some of the more important essays.

I found the second volume far more interesting. Sub-titled 'the human dimension', it deals primarily with personal experiences of the partition as also the partition as reflected in literature. These essays add to the increasingly popular effort to record the human experience associated with the partition. Given the fragility of cultural and social records such an enterprise in itself is quite admirable.

The volume begins with Krishna Kumar's analysis of the partition in

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 ■ *Pangs of Partition. Vol. 1: The partition of ways.*
 ■ *Vol. 2: The Human Dimension,*
 ■ S. Settar and Indra Batista Gupta (eds.)
 ■ Indian Council of Historical Research and Manohar,
 ■ Delhi, 2002. pp. 368 and 358. Rs. 700 per volume.
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school textbooks in India and Pakistan. Both countries have created a different context for the partition. Indian textbooks recollect the episode in one way. Pakistani textbooks do it in an entirely different manner. In both cases, though, Krishna Kumar points out, history is presented to school students in the form of conclusions. As if all that is claimed to be history was always so and is completely unproblematic. Since the writing of history textbooks in both countries is tightly controlled by the state, these books end up becoming the officially authorised versions of history. That nearness to the state has consequences for the discipline at large. As the political compulsions of the state change so does its attitude towards history as a subject. In Pakistan, for example, Krishna Kumar mentions that after the dismemberment of Pakistan in 1971 the post-1947 self-image of Pakistan suffered serious damage. There was no way in which a narration of history, howsoever doctored, could repair the loss, if anything, the contrary. Correspondingly, effort was made to phase out history from the school curriculum. No point, it seems, in recalling unpleasant memories.

Krishna Kumar's essay is followed by another evocative essay by R.K. Agnihotri in which the author reminds us that even before the partition of 1947 we had already created a partition in the country between Hindi and Urdu. Agnihotri skilfully takes us through the two languages to make a simple point: that the proponents of either artificially created the distinction between them. He does not dwell too much on the motives of the two sets of champions, but he does remind us that there are enough similarities and dissimilarities between Hindus and Muslims to either create a composite culture or forge separateness with as much ease. It is for us to move in one direction or the other. Satish Gujral,

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Some of the essays on the experience of the partition in Bengal are a welcome addition to the rather meagre literature on the partition in the east. Monamayee Basu castigates the government of the day for its inadequate response to the traumatic shift of population in Bengal that continued far beyond 1947. Basu's paper is even more appreciable for documenting in empathic detail the painful memories of the women forced to become refugees. As it is, cultural and social memories are rather fragile, tend to change in shape

easily and are very personal, therefore, the kind of documentation that Basu does minimally ensures that some of them would become available to a wider readership. After all the same has already been done in considerable detail by researcher-activists like Urvashi Butalia who also has two essays here: one, which is directly by her and the other written by Mrinal Pande which is based essentially on material provided by Butalia.

Salil Mishra takes a fresh look at the debate on the possibility of a Congress-League coalition in UP in the 1930s. In his comprehensive essay, he makes it quite clear that the leaders of both the Congress and the League were playing their politics based on immediate concerns. There was little to show that either set of politicians had any idea about what the future held for them. Their experience with the increased democratisation of the political process, insofar as mass politics was possible within the limits of the India Act of 1935, pushed them all trying to figure out newer strategies to build a mass base. The Congress began to make efforts to speak out for the Muslims and thus bring them within its fold while the Muslim League tried to deny the Congress this opportunity but, and Mishra does not repeat the obvious point, without any effort to expand its reach beyond the Muslims. Salil Mishra states that "seen from the vantage point of UP in 1939, the partition of India did not seem inevitable. Even a keen observer of the UP scenario in 1939 could not have foreseen the partition a decade later".

Like Salil Mishra, Sucheta Mahajan too focuses on the position of the Congress vis-a-vis the partition. Her contention, explained in greater detail in her book, *Independence and Pakistan* though, is that while "the national movement succeeded in building up a national consciousness sufficient to wrest freedom, the process of nation building remained incomplete and the Congress, the party of the national

movement failed to keep the country united". While not a few would contest her presumption of giving such pre-eminence to the Congress as the party of the nation, many would also fully agree with her that the Congress, like Indians, in general, was itself plagued by communalism.

Here we have mentioned only some of the more important essays in this set. Other readers, using a different perspective, might find another set of essays of greater interest. Nevertheless, one thing is certain, anyone who is interested in the history of India around the period of the Partition, would find something or the other of interest in the present set of essays.

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500 YEARS OF TANTRASANGRAHA

A Landmark in the History of Astronomy

Eds.

M.S. Sriram

K. Ramasubramanian

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In March 2000, the Department of Theoretical Physics, University of Madras, organised a conference to celebrate the 500th Anniversary of *Tantrasangraha* in collaboration with Inter-University Centre, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla. The conference turned out to be an important occasion for highlighting and reviewing the recent work on the achievements in Mathematics and Astronomy of the Kerala School and new perspectives in History of Science, which are emerging from these studies. The volume is a compilation of the papers presented at this conference.

Contributors to this volume are: K.V. Sarma, M.S. Sriram, K. Ramasubramanian, M.D. Srinivas, S. Madhavan, S. Balachandra Rao, L. Satpathy, Farid Ghasemlou, S.M. Razaullah Ansari, V. Madhukar Mallayya and Jolly K. John.

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