

9-1998

The Tear That Does Not Mend: A Review of 'Freedom, Trauma, Continuities: Northern India and Independence'

Haimanti Roy

University of Dayton, hroy01@udayton.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.udayton.edu/hst_fac_pub



Part of the [Asian History Commons](#), [Cultural History Commons](#), [Diplomatic History Commons](#), and the [Islamic World and Near East History Commons](#)

eCommons Citation

Roy, Haimanti, "The Tear That Does Not Mend: A Review of 'Freedom, Trauma, Continuities: Northern India and Independence'" (1998). *History Faculty Publications*. 23.

https://ecommons.udayton.edu/hst_fac_pub/23

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of History at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of eCommons. For more information, please contact frice1@udayton.edu, mschlangen1@udayton.edu.

The tear that does not mend

Freedom, Trauma, Continuities: Northern India and Independence

Editors: D. A. Low and Howard Brasted

Studies on Contemporary South Asia No. 2, Sage Publications,
1998, 237 pp., Rs 350
ISBN 81-7036-680-1

HAIMANTI ROY

Academic attention on Indian Independence and Partition has hitherto been focused mainly on the political and the "sheer teleology to the climax in August 1947 when British power was formally transferred". *Freedom, Trauma, Continuities: Northern India and Independence*, in the view of its editors as well as its contributors, is an attempt to examine other developments, no less momentous, during this period. The book, which is a collection of 12 essays by different authors dealing with various aspects of the Partition of 1947, attempts, as the title suggests, to document the "trauma" and find the "continuities" following "freedom".

The introductory article by D.A. Low provides a window as well as the context to the succeeding essays. It gives an eclectic overview of the events of the 1940s, from the Quit India Movement in 1942 to the riots in Bengal and Bihar in 1946, ultimately culminating in the partition of the country. The subsequent essays are more specific in nature though they fall under the overarching theme of 'Partition.' They can be grouped for convenience into a few sub-themes like massacres, migration, memory and continuities.

The two regions, Punjab and Bengal, which were most directly affected by Partition are naturally the main areas of study in the book. The traumatic experience of the communal killings and the mass migrations which followed are recurrent features in the essays that deal with the sub-theme of massacres. Punjab in August 1947 was caught in a maelstrom of unprecedented violence which, by its very brutal and widespread nature, posed a challenge to the authority and legitimacy of the state.

Swarna Aiyar in her essay 'August Anarchy: The Partition Massacres in Punjab, 1947' has tried to document the sequence of killings in Punjab by examining in detail the planning and the execution of the massacres which occurred in trains. The trains carrying the refugees were the target of wholesale slaughter by groups of the opposing communities, and Aiyar, here, focuses on similar incidents on both sides of the newly demarcated border. While charting out the nature of these attacks, the author attempts to point out the high degree of organization and planning which she attributes to the military traditions of Punjabi society and the presence of ex-army men recently demobilized after World War II.

Continuing on a similar vein, Andrew J. Major in his essay, looks at the abduction of women in Punjab, whom he believes to be the "chief sufferers" because of the perception of women as a 'territory' to be 'occupied' in such a war-like situation. The efforts made by the Indian and Pakistani governments to recover and resettle them were often hindered by the rivalry and mutual mistrust of the two dominions, as well as the refusal of the women themselves to be officially rehabilitated for fear of rejection by their families.

Partition was accompanied by mass migration on both sides of the border which involved large-scale dislocation of families and property and created a new category of the homeless—the

refugee. This put tremendous pressure on both the governments to rehabilitate and resettle these refugees with adequate compensation. Gyanesh Kudaisya's two essays in this volume have detailed the different approaches to the rehabilitation programme adopted by the Punjab and the West Bengal governments. In his essay, 'Divided Landscapes, Fragmented Identities', he negates the ethnic stereotyping in the official discourse of the Bengali refugee as "rebellious and obstructive" and that of the Punjabi refugee as having "qualities of enterprise, resilience and self esteem", as a possible reason for the failure of the resettlement program in Bengal in contrast to Punjab. A probably unintended consequence of the redistribution of land to the refugees was effective land reforms in the Punjab countryside, which Kudaisya argues in his other essay, 'From Displacement to Development', in the long run, allowed Punjab to make optimum use of the government's efforts to usher in the Green Revolution.

On the other hand, the West Bengal government's failure to resettle the refugees from East Bengal, in the nearly uninhabited region of Dandakaranya, reflected the failure of the state in understanding the needs of the refugees. However Kudaisya's conclusions about the ineffectiveness of the Bengali refugee rehabilitation program may not be so unequivocal since his period of reference extends till the late 1970's which witnessed a renewed refugee influx in the wake of the liberation war in East Bengal.

Still within this sub-theme of migration and rehabilitation of refugees, Sara Ansari's essay provides a glimpse into the issues involved in and arising out of the Muslim refugee migration from India into Pakistan and in particular to Sindh. In the post Partition days, the term 'muhajir' came to denote solely Urdu-speaking Pakistanis, to the exclusion of other ethnic groups who were also uprooted during 1947, thus distinguishing the refugees from East Punjab and those who came from other parts of India in the later years. Provincialism and ethnic issues were brought to the forefront with the dominance of the 'Punjabi' refugee in Pakistan politics and the consequent political marginalization of Sindh, an outcome, which in Ansari's view, is still very

much in evidence in the present-day politics of that nation.

Among the major fallouts of the horrific brutality perpetrated by both the communities on each other and the traumatic upheavals which occurred have been the unnatural silence and the dogged refusal on the part of the victims to speak about their experiences. In the absence of oral history on this subject (which is only now being attempted—*The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*, by Urvashi Butalia, Viking

Penguin, 1998) Ian Talbot in his essay, 'Literature and the Human Drama in the 1947 Partition', looks at the literature on Partition as a source to document the physical and psychological impact of 'violence, abduction, migration, and resettlement'. The fictionalized narrative, he finds, was often a vicarious medium through which personal memories were represented.

Dipesh Chakrabarty's essay 'Remembered Villages: Representations of Hindu-Bengali Memories in the Aftermath of Partition' is an attempt of a similar kind. His article uses a collection of essays by writers reminiscing about the homeland they left behind, later compiled into the book, *Chhera Asha Gram (The Abandoned Village)*, to demonstrate the dichotomy between history and memory. The inexplicability of Partition in the minds of these authors remains, Chakrabarty says, because their "traumatized memory has a narrative structure which works on a principle opposite to that of any historical narrative. Their narrative structure was designed to create sympathy for the refugee in a new and hostile milieu and not to explain the Partition which, for the success of their venture, had to remain inexplicable. It created a structure of Bengali nationality that was recognizably Hindu, and in which the memory of a past of Hindu-Muslim amity did not always square up to actual events.

New from Oxford

The Origins and Development of Classical Hinduism

A.L. Basham & Kenneth G. Zysk
0 19 563085 8 196 pp. Rs 225



In the Name of the Secular
Contemporary Cultural Activism in India
Rustom Bharucha
0 19 564222 8 212 pp. Rs 395

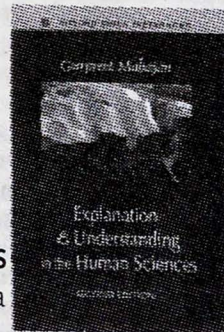
A Weaver Named Kabir

Selected Verses with a Detailed Biographical and Historical Introduction
Charlotte Vaudeville
0 19 563933 2 400 pp. Rs 250



Sahibs, Nabobs and Boxwallahs
A Dictionary of the words of Anglo-India
Ivor Lewis
0 19 564223 6 280 pp. Rs 275

Explanation & Understanding in the Human Sciences, 2/e
Gurpreet Mahajan
0 19 564396 8 160 pp. Rs 175



Oxford University Press

Calcutta: 5 Lala Lajpat Rai Sarani, Calcutta 700020
Chennai: Oxford House, 219 Anna Salai, Chennai 600006
Delhi: 2/11 Ansari Road, Daryaganj, New Delhi 110002
Mumbai: Oxford House, Apollo Bunder, Mumbai 400001