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

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cademic attention on
Indian Independence and
Partition has hitherto been
located 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 as 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
effects by different authors dealing
with various aspects of the Partition of
1947, pays much attention to
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
"heroes". Traumatic experiences
prepared for convenience into a few sub-themes
such as 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
effects that deal with the sub-theme of
massacres. Punjab in August 1947 was
crushed in a maelstrom of unprecedented
violence which brought on a 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 targets 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 newly demobilized after
World War II.

Continuing on a similar vein,
Andrew J. Mayer 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
Pakistan governments to recover and
resettle them were often hindered by
the rivalry and mutual mistrust of the
two nations, 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 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. Gunjan
Kasliwal in her essay which have
detailed the different approaches to the rehabilitation
programme adopted by the Punjab and
the West Bengal governments. In this
article, 'Divided Landscapes, Fragmented Identities', he
neglects the ethnic stereotyping in the official
discourse of the Bengali refugees 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
likely 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
the government 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
effects from East Bengal, in the
nearby uninhabited region of
Dandakaranya, reflected the failure of
the state in understanding the needs
of these 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
to the late 1970's which witnessed a
new wave of refugee influx in the wake
of the liberation war in East Bengal.

Still within this sub-theme of
migration and rehabilitation of
effects, Sara Ansari's essay provides
a glimpse into the issues involved in
the arming 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
migrated during 1947, thus distinguishing
the refugees from East Punjab and
those who came from other parts of the
Partition which, for the success of
their venture, had to remain
unsusceptible. It created a structure of
Bengali nationality that was recognizable
Hindu, in which the memory of a past of Hindu-Muslim amity did not always square up to actual events.

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