

★ As you read: In each section, underline or circle the most important words (about 10 per section).

The New Yorker: The Great Divide

The violent legacy of Indian Partition. By William Dalrymple June 29, 2015 Issue

In August, 1947, when, after three hundred years in India, the British finally left, the subcontinent was partitioned into two independent nation states: Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan. Immediately, there began one of the greatest migrations in human history, as millions of Muslims trekked to West and East Pakistan (the latter now known as Bangladesh) while millions of Hindus and Sikhs headed in the opposite direction. Many hundreds of thousands never made it.

Across the Indian subcontinent, communities that had coexisted for almost a millennium attacked each other in a terrifying outbreak of sectarian violence, with Hindus and Sikhs on one side and Muslims on the other—a mutual genocide as unexpected as it was unprecedented. In Punjab and Bengal—provinces abutting India’s borders with West and East Pakistan, respectively—the carnage was especially intense, with massacres, arson, forced conversions, mass abductions, and savage sexual violence. Some seventy-five thousand women were raped, and many of them were then disfigured or dismembered.

Nisid Hajari, in “Midnight’s Furies” (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt), his fast-paced new narrative history of Partition and its aftermath, writes, “Gangs of killers set whole villages aflame, hacking to death men and children and the aged while carrying off young women to be raped. Some British soldiers and journalists who had witnessed the Nazi death camps claimed Partition’s brutalities were worse: pregnant women had their breasts cut off and babies hacked out of their bellies; infants were found literally roasted on spits.”

By 1948, as the great migration drew to a close, more than fifteen million people had been uprooted, and between one and two million were dead. The comparison with the death camps is not so far-fetched as it may seem. Partition is central to modern identity in the Indian subcontinent, as the Holocaust is to identity among Jews, branded painfully onto the regional consciousness by memories of almost unimaginable violence. The acclaimed Pakistani historian Ayesha Jalal has called Partition “the central historical event in twentieth century South Asia.” She writes, “A defining moment that is neither beginning nor end, partition continues to influence how the peoples and states of postcolonial South Asia envisage their past, present and future.”

After the Second World War, Britain simply no longer had the resources with which to control its greatest imperial asset, and its exit from India was messy, hasty, and clumsily improvised. From the vantage point of the retreating colonizers, however, it was in one way fairly successful. Whereas British rule in India had long been marked by violent revolts and brutal suppressions, the British Army was able to march out of the country with barely a shot fired and only seven casualties. Equally unexpected was the ferocity of the ensuing bloodbath.

The question of how India’s deeply intermixed and profoundly syncretic culture unravelled so quickly has spawned a vast literature. The polarization of Hindus and Muslims occurred during just a couple of decades of the twentieth century, but by the middle of the century it was so complete that many on both sides believed that it was impossible for adherents of the two religions to live together peacefully. Recently, a spate of new work has challenged seventy years of nationalist mythmaking. There has also been a widespread attempt to record oral memories of Partition before the dwindling generation that experienced it takes its memories to the grave.

The first Islamic conquests of India happened in the eleventh century, with the capture of Lahore, in 1021. Persianized Turks from what is now central Afghanistan seized Delhi from its Hindu rulers in 1192. By 1323, they had established a sultanate as far south as Madurai, toward the tip of the peninsula, and there were other sultanates all the way from Gujarat, in the west, to Bengal, in the east.

Today, these conquests are usually perceived as having been made by “Muslims,” but medieval Sanskrit inscriptions don’t identify the Central Asian invaders by that term. Instead, the newcomers are identified by linguistic and ethnic affiliation, most typically as Turushka—Turks—which suggests that they were not seen primarily in terms of their religious identity. Similarly, although the conquests themselves were marked by carnage and by the destruction of Hindu and Buddhist sites, India soon embraced and transformed the new arrivals. Within a few centuries, a hybrid Indo-Islamic civilization emerged, along with hybrid languages—notably Deccani and Urdu—which mixed the Sanskrit-derived vernaculars of India with Turkish, Persian, and Arabic words.

Eventually, around a fifth of South Asia’s population came to identify itself as Muslim. The Sufi mystics associated with the spread of Islam often regarded the Hindu scriptures as divinely inspired. Some even took on the yogic practices of Hindu sadhus, rubbing their bodies with ashes, or hanging upside down while praying. In village folk traditions, the practice of the two faiths came close to blending into one. Hindus would visit the graves of Sufi masters and Muslims would leave offerings at Hindu shrines. Sufis were especially numerous in Punjab and Bengal—the same regions that, centuries later, saw the worst of the violence—and there were mass conversions among the peasants there.

The cultural mixing took place throughout the subcontinent. In medieval Hindu texts from South India, the Sultan of Delhi is sometimes talked about as the incarnation of the god Vishnu. In the seventeenth century, the Mughal crown prince Dara Shikoh had the Bhagavad Gita, perhaps the central text of Hinduism, translated into Persian, and composed a study of Hinduism and Islam, “The Mingling of Two Oceans,” which stressed the affinities of the two faiths. Not all Mughal rulers were so open-minded. The atrocities wrought by Dara’s bigoted and puritanical brother Aurangzeb have not been forgotten by Hindus. But the last Mughal emperor, enthroned in 1837, wrote that Hinduism and Islam “share the same essence,” and his court lived out this ideal at every level.

*

*

*

At the center of the debates lies the personality of Jinnah, the man most responsible for the creation of Pakistan. In Indian-nationalist accounts, he appears as the villain of the story; for Pakistanis, he is the Father of the Nation. As French points out, “Neither side seems especially keen to claim him as a real human being, the Pakistanis restricting him to an appearance on banknotes in demure Islamic costume.” One of the virtues of Hajari’s new history is its more balanced portrait of Jinnah. He was certainly a tough, determined negotiator and a chilly personality; the Congress Party politician Sarojini Naidu joked that she needed to put on a fur coat in his presence. Yet Jinnah was in many ways a surprising architect for the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. A staunch secularist, he drank whiskey, rarely went to a mosque, and was clean-shaven and stylish, favoring beautifully cut Savile Row suits and silk ties. Significantly, he chose to marry a non-Muslim woman, the glamorous daughter of a Parsi businessman. She was famous for her revealing saris and for once bringing her husband ham sandwiches on voting day.

Jinnah, far from wishing to introduce religion into South Asian politics, deeply resented the way Gandhi brought spiritual sensibilities into the political discussion, and once told him, as recorded by one colonial governor, that “it was a crime to mix up politics and religion the way he had done.” He believed that doing so emboldened religious chauvinists on all sides. Indeed, he had spent the early part of his political career, around the time of the First World War, striving to bring together the Muslim League and the Congress Party. “I say to my Musalman friends: Fear not!” he said, and he described the idea of Hindu domination as

“a bogey, put before you by your enemies to frighten you, to scare you away from cooperation and unity, which are essential for the establishment of self-government.” In 1916, Jinnah, who, at the time, belonged to both parties, even succeeded in getting them to present the British with a common set of demands, the Lucknow Pact. He was hailed as “the Ambassador of Hindu-Muslim Unity.”

But Jinnah felt eclipsed by the rise of Gandhi and Nehru, after the First World War. In December, 1920, he was booed off a Congress Party stage when he insisted on calling his rival “Mr. Gandhi” rather than referring to him by his spiritual title, Mahatma—Great Soul. Throughout the nineteen-twenties and thirties, the mutual dislike grew, and by 1940 Jinnah had steered the Muslim League toward demanding a separate homeland for the Muslim minority of South Asia. This was a position that he had previously opposed, and, according to Hajari, he privately “reassured skeptical colleagues that Partition was only a bargaining chip.” Even after his demands for the creation of Pakistan were met, he insisted that his new country would guarantee freedom of religious expression. In August, 1947, in his first address to the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan, he said, “You may belong to any religion, or caste, or creed—that has nothing to do with the business of the State.” But it was too late: by the time the speech was delivered, violence between Hindus and Muslims had spiralled beyond anyone’s ability to control it.

Hindus and Muslims had begun to turn on each other during the chaos unleashed by the Second World War. In 1942, as the Japanese seized Singapore and Rangoon and advanced rapidly through Burma toward India, the Congress Party began a campaign of civil disobedience, the Quit India Movement, and its leaders, including Gandhi and Nehru, were arrested. While they were in prison, Jinnah, who had billed himself as a loyal ally of the British, consolidated opinion behind him as the best protection of Muslim interests against Hindu dominance. By the time the war was over and the Congress Party leaders were released, Nehru thought that Jinnah represented “an obvious example of the utter lack of the civilised mind,” and Gandhi was calling him a “maniac” and “an evil genius.”

*

*

*

In early June, Mountbatten stunned everyone by announcing August 15, 1947, as the date for the transfer of power—ten months earlier than expected. The reasons for this haste are still the subject of debate, but it is probable that Mountbatten wanted to shock the quarrelling parties into realizing that they were hurtling toward a sectarian precipice. However, the rush only exacerbated the chaos. Cyril Radcliffe, a British judge assigned to draw the borders of the two new states, was given barely forty days to remake the map of South Asia. The borders were finally announced two days *after* India’s Independence.

None of the disputants were happy with the compromise that Mountbatten had forced on them. Jinnah, who had succeeded in creating a new country, regarded the truncated state he was given—a slice of India’s eastern and western extremities, separated by a thousand miles of Indian territory—as “a maimed, mutilated and moth-eaten” travesty of the land he had fought for. He warned that the partition of Punjab and Bengal “will be sowing the seeds of future serious trouble.”

On the evening of August 14, 1947, in the Viceroy’s House in New Delhi, Mountbatten and his wife settled down to watch a Bob Hope movie, “My Favorite Brunette.” A short distance away, at the bottom of Raisina Hill, in India’s Constituent Assembly, Nehru rose to his feet to make his most famous speech. “Long years ago, we made a tryst with destiny,” he declaimed. “At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom.”

But outside the well-guarded enclaves of New Delhi the horror was well under way. That same evening, as the remaining British officials in Lahore set off for the railway station, they had to pick their way through streets littered with dead bodies. On the platforms, they found the railway staff hosing down pools of blood. Hours earlier, a group of Hindus fleeing the city had been massacred by a Muslim mob as they sat waiting

for a train. As the Bombay Express pulled out of Lahore and began its journey south, the officials could see that Punjab was ablaze, with flames rising from village after village.

What followed, especially in Punjab, the principal center of the violence, was one of the great human tragedies of the twentieth century. As Nisid Hajari writes, “Foot caravans of destitute refugees fleeing the violence stretched for 50 miles and more. As the peasants trudged along wearily, mounted guerrillas burst out of the tall crops that lined the road and culled them like sheep. Special refugee trains, filled to bursting when they set out, suffered repeated ambushes along the way. All too often they crossed the border in funereal silence, blood seeping from under their carriage doors.”

Within a few months, the landscape of South Asia had changed irrevocably. In 1941, Karachi, designated the first capital of Pakistan, was 47.6 per cent Hindu. Delhi, the capital of independent India, was one-third Muslim. By the end of the decade, almost all the Hindus of Karachi had fled, while two hundred thousand Muslims had been forced out of Delhi. The changes made in a matter of months remain indelible seventy years later.

* * *

Ever since 1947, India and Pakistan have nourished a deep-rooted mutual antipathy. They have fought two inconclusive wars over the disputed region of Kashmir—the only Muslim-majority area to remain within India. In 1971, they fought over the secession of East Pakistan, which became Bangladesh. In 1999, after Pakistani troops crossed into an area of Kashmir called Kargil, the two countries came alarmingly close to a nuclear exchange. Despite periodic gestures toward peace negotiations and moments of rapprochement, the Indo-Pak conflict remains the dominant geopolitical reality of the region. In Kashmir, a prolonged insurgency against Indian rule has left thousands dead and still gives rise to intermittent violence. Meanwhile, in Pakistan, where half the female population remains illiterate, defense eats up a fifth of the budget, dwarfing the money available for health, education, infrastructure, and development.

It is easy to understand why Pakistan might feel insecure: India’s population, its defense budget, and its economy are seven times as large as Pakistan’s. But the route that Pakistan has taken to defend itself against Indian demographic and military superiority has been disastrous for both countries. For more than thirty years, Pakistan’s Army and its secret service, the I.S.I., have relied on jihadi proxies to carry out their aims. These groups have been creating as much—if not more—trouble for Pakistan as they have for the neighbors the I.S.I. hopes to undermine: Afghanistan and India.

Today, both India and Pakistan remain crippled by the narratives built around memories of the crimes of Partition, as politicians (particularly in India) and the military (particularly in Pakistan) continue to stoke the hatreds of 1947 for their own ends. Nisid Hajari ends his book by pointing out that the rivalry between India and Pakistan “is getting more, rather than less, dangerous: the two countries’ nuclear arsenals are growing, militant groups are becoming more capable, and rabid media outlets on both sides are shrinking the scope for moderate voices.” Moreover, Pakistan, nuclear-armed and deeply unstable, is not a threat only to India; it is now the world’s problem, the epicenter of many of today’s most alarming security risks. It was out of madrassas in Pakistan that the Taliban emerged. That regime, which was then the most retrograde in modern Islamic history, provided sanctuary to Al Qaeda’s leadership even after 9/11.

It is difficult to disagree with Hajari’s conclusion: “It is well past time that the heirs to Nehru and Jinnah finally put 1947’s furies to rest.” But the current picture is not encouraging. In Delhi, a hard-line right-wing government rejects dialogue with Islamabad. Both countries find themselves more vulnerable than ever to religious extremism. In a sense, 1947 has yet to come to an end. ♦

★ **After you read, summarize the big idea of each section: Introduction, Islamic Conquests, Jinnah, Partition, Modern History**