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Historical Debates on the Independence and Partition of India

The seventy fifth year after achieving independence is an appropriate moment to pause and assess the direction in which historical writing on Independence and Partition has been moving.¹ An earlier round of stocktaking was on the observance of the fiftieth anniversary of the event.² If, at fifty years, Ashis Nandy could ask why the best creative minds had maintained an ‘almost cultivated silence’ on Partition,³ the wheel has turned in twenty years. Partition now precedes Independence even in titles of articles and books.⁴ On the eve of India turning 75, I find myself lost in a thicket of Partition studies. I peer around hoping to find a path to Independence among the many pathways to Partition.

In the present preoccupation with Partition, we often forget its twin—Independence. In my book, *Independence and Partition*,⁵ I had argued that the two reflected respectively the success and failure of the national movement. While social groups and communities came together to make the nation, which achieved independence from the colonial power, a weakness of the national movement was that the relative small number of Muslims behind it. Consequently, Independence came, but with it Partition too.

There is no one answer to the question, amongst historians, as to who is responsible for Partition. For imperialist historians, Partition could not be averted despite the efforts of the British to bridge the supposed centuries old Hindu-Muslim divide. The nationalist historians fixed responsibility on the imperialists who divided and ruled and on the communal forces they patronized before they divided and quit. Some left writers saw Independence as a compromise between the imperialist and nationalist ruling classes, with Partition being the price paid by the people.

I have argued elsewhere that Partition was, all said and done, the consequence of the divide and rule policy pursued by the colonial government to contain the challenge of nationalism. The government had developed the Muslim League as a counterpoise to the Congress over the years. When it was time to quit, the retreating colonial power chose to concede the League’s demand for a homeland for the Muslims. The Congress had few options left when confronted with Pakistan, propped up by the British power. Though Congress leaders, especially Nehru and Gandhi, realized its necessity, an

¹ Revised version of Presidential Address to Modern India Section to the 77th Session of the Indian History, Thiruvananthapuram, 2016. I am indebted to Bodh Prakash and Mridula and Aditya Mukherjee for their incisive critique of the draft of this essay. I wish to acknowledge the editorial assistance of Antony Thomas, the assistance of my research students, especially Shubhneet Kaushik, Subir Dey, Ranjana Das, Gagan Preet Singh, Saurabh Bajpai, Sudha Tiwari, Anshu Saluja, Divyani Motla and the untiring editorial assistance and technical support by Varun, Srikant and Viktoriya. My colleagues and students at the Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University will recognise many of the ideas and themes from classroom discussions and seminars. My thanks to all of them for their conversations and more.

² Mushirul Hasan, ‘Memories of a Fragmented Nation: Rewriting the Histories of India’s Partition’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 10-16 October 1998.

³ Ashis Nandy, ‘Too Painful for Words’, *The Times of India*, 20 July 1997.

⁴ For instance, Gyanendra Pandey, ‘Partition and Independence in Delhi: 1947-48’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 32, No. 36, Sep. 6-12 1997, pp. 2261-2272.

⁵ Sucheta Mahajan, *Independence and Partition, Erosion of Colonial Power in India*, Sage Series in Modern Indian History, Delhi, 2000.

effective ideological struggle against communalism was not waged.⁶

By the spring of 1947, the Congress leaders were willing to accept Partition as a temporary measure, which would control the civil war many regions of the country had been thrown into. Nehru pointed to the days ahead, after the present storm was over: 'But of one thing I am convinced that ultimately there will be a strong and united India. We have often to go through the valley of the shadow before we reach the sunlit mountain tops.'⁷ Gandhi was confident that if the people did not accept Partition in their hearts, 'in the end we have to become one.'⁸ The double tragedy was that partition became a reality and Gandhi was assassinated by Hindu communal forces, angered that Gandhi was allegedly appeasing Muslims.

The early writings on Independence and Partition were participant accounts. Political leaders, B. R. Ambedkar⁹ and Rajendra Prasad,¹⁰ analysed the demand for Pakistan.¹¹ Maulana Azad wrote *India Wins Freedom*¹² in 1959, by when, it would appear, he was cynical and critical of his comrades. Rammanohar Lohia wrote *Guilty Men of India's Partition*¹³ after he left the Congress to become a sharp Congress baiter.¹⁴ From the official side, V.P. Menon, a senior civil servant, wrote *The Transfer of Power in India*¹⁵ in 1957; Mountbatten's chief of staff, Lord Ismay, wrote his *Memoirs*¹⁶ in 1960, while Penderel Moon wrote *Divide and Quit* in 1964.¹⁷

⁶ See Mahajan, *Independence and Partition*, pp. 388-89.

⁷ Nehru to Cariappa, 29 April 1947, Jawaharlal Nehru, *Selected Works*, (hereafter *JNSW*) ed. Sarvepalli Gopal, *2nd Series, Vol. 2*, p. 377.

⁸ Speech at prayer meeting, 12 June 1947, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, (hereafter *CWMG*) 1884-1948, New Delhi, first edition, 1960-1994, *Vol. 88*, pp.138-39.

⁹ B. R. Ambedkar, *Pakistan or the Partition of India*, Bombay, 1946.

¹⁰ Rajendra Prasad, *India Divided*, Bombay, 1946.

¹¹ Another early account was G.D. Khosla, *Stern Reckoning: A Survey of the Events Leading up to and Following the Partition of India*, New Delhi, first published 1949, paperback 1990.

¹² Maulana Azad, *India Wins Freedom: The Complete Version*, New Delhi, 1988 (First Edition 1959).

¹³ Rammanohar Lohia, *Guilty Men of India's Partition*, Kitabistan, Allahabad, 1960. He was in the Congress when India became independent and advised the Socialist Party to dissolve itself so that the Congress could then become the Indian Socialist Congress. See 'Fifteen-Point Note on Congress and the Socialist Party' by Ram Manohar Lohia, 23 May 1947, *AICC Papers*, G-27/1947, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML).

¹⁴ Lohia left the Congress in 1948 to emerge as the most outspoken critic of the Congress and Nehru by 1952 and later theorized what came to be known as anti-Congressism.

¹⁵ V.P. Menon, *The Transfer of Power in India*, New Delhi, 1957.

¹⁶ Lord Ismay, *Memoirs*, London, 1960.

¹⁷ Penderel Moon, *Divide and Quit*, London, 1964.

Serious academic works appeared with the opening of the official archives and private collections.¹⁸ The *Transfer of Power*¹⁹ volumes published the official documents covering the period 1942 to 1947. The private papers of the important Congress and Muslim League leaders began to be published, including those of Jinnah,²⁰ Patel,²¹ Nehru,²² Gandhi,²³ Rajendra Prasad²⁴ and Jayaprakash Narayan.²⁵

In the 1980s the focus of scholars was on the why and how of Independence. The title of R.J. Moore's book, *Escape from Empire*,²⁶ suggests that by the end of World War II, the colony had become a liability rather than an asset. British withdrawal from India was worked out in this context. I have suggested a different approach to the central question, as to why the British decided to quit.²⁷ The answers to this question, I believe, are not to be found in the immediate context of 1947. These answers are best located in the long years of mass struggle against colonial rule. By 1945-46, the only issue left was to whom and how power was to be transferred.

By the end of World War II, the national movement had established its hegemony over the Indian people. Nationalist sentiment was at a high pitch and had reached sections of society and areas hitherto outside the pale. The armed forces and civil services were weary from wartime service and handling nationalist protest. Colonial officials as well as the people realized that the authority of the colonial power had suffered an irreversible decline.

The strategy followed by the main nationalist party to undermine colonial authority has been termed by Bipan Chandra as Struggle-Truce-Struggle.²⁸ In this mode of resistance, phases of struggle were followed by phases of truce, which in turn paved the way for the next round of struggle, in an upward moving spiral. Repression of non-violent movements exposed the naked power behind the government. On the other hand, when the government went in for a truce, it was perceived as too weak. While loyalist groups underwent a crisis of faith, the dilemma of the services was one of action. The same set of officials found it very demoralising to implement both poles of policy—repression and

¹⁸ H.V. Hodson, *The Great Divide: Britain, India, Pakistan*, London, 1969 was one such work, highlighting Mountbatten's role.

¹⁹ Mansergh, Lumby and Moon eds., *Constitutional Relations between Great Britain and India, Transfer of Power*, (hereafter *TOP*), 1942-1947, Vols.1-12, London, 1970-82.

²⁰ Z.H. Zaidi, *Qaid-e-Azam Mahomed Ali Jinnah Papers*, Vols 1- , Islamabad, 1993-.

²¹ Durga Das (ed)., *Sardar Patel's Correspondence*, Ahmedabad, 1971-74.

²² *JNSW*, first series, Vols. 1-15, second series, Vols. 1-, New Delhi, 1972-

²³ *CWVG*, op.cit.

²⁴ Rajendra Prasad, *Correspondence and Select Documents*, ed. Valmiki Choudhary, Vol. 1-, Bombay, 1984-

²⁵ Jayaprakash Narayan, *Selected Works*, ed. Bimal Prasad, Vols. 1-, New Delhi, 2000-

²⁶ R. J Moore, *Escape from Empire, The Attlee Government and the Indian Problem*, Oxford, 1983.

²⁷ Mahajan, *Independence and Partition*, Chapter 5.

²⁸ Bipan Chandra, *Indian National Movement: Long Term Dynamics*, New Delhi, 1988. Professor Bipan Chandra first presented this framework in his Presidential Address to the Indian History Congress at Amritsar in 1985. It evolved in the course of a research project on the history of the Indian national movement (based extensively on oral testimonies of hundreds of freedom fighters and contemporaries) conducted by a team of scholars led by Prof. Bipan Chandra. I was the junior-most member of this team.

conciliation.²⁹

By mid-1946, a point had been reached where the perception of the government was that it had the responsibility to keep the peace but little power to do so. The Viceroy commented on the prospect of a revolt by the Congress, this time assisted by its own governments in power in the provinces: 'We could still probably suppress such a revolt' but 'have nothing to put in its place and should be driven to an almost entirely official rule, for which the necessary numbers of efficient officials do not exist.'³⁰ As colonial rule could not survive on the old basis for long, a withdrawal from India became the overarching aim of policy makers.

If R.J. Moore examined the run up to Independence, David Page discussed the *Prelude to Partition*³¹ in the years 1920 to 1932. Anita Inder Singh's book³² on the last decade of colonial rule, when communalism entered its mass phase, contradicted some popular myths about Partition, especially the one that the formation by the Congress of a coalition government with the Muslim League in U.P. could have averted Partition. Singh also categorically pointed out that the Lahore resolution of the League was not ambiguous on whether Pakistan would be a sovereign state, as claimed by Ayesha Jalal³³ and others, contradicting Jalal's assertion that the Pakistan demand was kept vague as it was merely a bargaining counter. Later, Salil Misra,³⁴ in an important book on the politics of the key province of United Provinces during the phase of mass communalism, showed why the coalition in U.P. was a non-starter, given Jinnah's disapproval of it, and given the divergent political and class interests of the two parties.³⁵

The provocative statement in Ayesha Jalal's *The Sole Spokesman*³⁶—that Jinnah did not want Partition, and that Congress wanted it—stood conventional wisdom on its head.³⁷ Jalal would have it that Jinnah used the demand for Pakistan as a bargaining lever to get a share of power at the Centre. However, Congress and the Hindu Mahasabha refused to share power and preferred to let Muslim majority provinces like Punjab and Bengal go out of India. Jalal goes on to argue that Congress demand for division of the provinces of Punjab and Bengal shows that Congress was in favour of Partition. In this, Jalal equates the partition of the country with the partition of the provinces. She quotes Nehru's statement to Mountbatten, 'Mr. Jinnah was much opposed to Partition,' but forgets to mention that the partition of Punjab

²⁹ Mahajan, *Independence and Partition*, Chapter 5, Imperial Hegemony and Colonial Policy.

³⁰ 27 December 1945, Wavell to Pethick Lawrence in *Transfer of Power*, Vol. VI, London, p. 688.

³¹ David Page, *The Indian Muslims and the Imperial System of Control 1920-1932*, Oxford, 1982.

³² Anita Inder Singh, *The Origins of the Partition of India, 1936-1947*, Delhi, 1987.

³³ See below for details.

³⁴ Salil Misra, *A Narrative of Communal Politics: Uttar Pradesh, 1937-39*, Sage Series in Modern Indian History, New Delhi, 2001.

³⁵ The argument that a coalition would have averted partition is to be found in Hasan, *India's Partition: Process, Strategy and Mobilisation*, New Delhi, 1993.

³⁶ *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League and the Demand for Pakistan*, Cambridge, 1985.

³⁷ It is not surprising that the book was welcomed in India, where there was a ready soil of anti-Congressism. It is also not surprising that readers in Pakistan were not enthused by Jalal's thesis that 'the most striking fact about Pakistan is how it failed to satisfy the interests of the very Muslims who are supposed to have demanded its creation.' *The Sole Spokesman*, p.2. See Jonathan Mahler, *Taking On Pakistan's Hero, Then Taking the Heat*, *New York Times*, Dec.26, 1998, for the reception of her work.

was being discussed, not that of the country.³⁸ She ignores the distinction that Congress was committed to the unity of the country and reluctantly supported the demand of the minorities of Punjab and Bengal for a division of their provinces in the event of partition of the country.³⁹ By placing responsibility for Partition on the Congress, she absolves the British.

Taking Jalal's thesis to the provinces, Joya Chatterji argued that Bengali Hindus,⁴⁰ specifically the *bhadralok*, pitched for Partition.⁴¹ Her books on the Bengal partition,⁴² and its aftermath,⁴³ make a case for a 'parallel separatism' of the Hindus. Chatterji's perspective of 'bhadralok politics' (30) would seem to ditto Anil Seal's⁴⁴ model of elite struggle for power, with nationalism being only a veneer. Chatterji also uses Seal's⁴⁵ later model of the locality, with the faction as the operative unit. If Chatterji's use of the term 'Hindu satraps' (65) for leaders of Bengal is reminiscent of Judith Brown's 'sub contractors',⁴⁶ there is a strong sense of Seal's 'Dassehra duels' and 'faction' in Chatterji's dismissive characterization of Bengal provincial politics as 'factional dogfights' (213). The title of the second book is, significantly, 'Spoils of Partition'.

Chatterji would have it that Partition came about from two ends, Congress initiative at the centre responded to by Bengali Hindus at the provincial end. On 8 March 1947, the Congress Working Committee, based on their experience with the League in the Interim Government and imminent British departure, demanded 'limited partition', that is, partition of the provinces of Punjab and Bengal, in the event of partition of the country (15). This interpretation is erroneous. On the contrary, Nehru explained the stand of the Congress Working Committee to Gandhi thus: 'we must press for immediate division so that reality might be brought into the picture. This is the only answer to Pakistan as demanded by Jinnah.'⁴⁷ The hope was that Jinnah would realize that if the logic of Partition was applied to the provinces, 'the truncated Pakistan

³⁸ I had termed this an intellectual sleight of hand. See Mahajan, *Independence and Partition*, p.276.

³⁹ Nehru's address to the All India State People's Conference at Gwalior, 18 April 1947, *JNSW*, Second series, Vol. 2, p. 270.

⁴⁰ Bengali Hindus is an inadequate analytical category to understand the politics of Bengal. It blurs, more than it illumines. Neeti Nair similarly used the basket category of Punjabi Hindus. Neeti Nair, *Changing Homelands: Hindu Politics and the Partition of India*, Cambridge, 2011.

⁴¹ Pandey seems to accept Chatterjee's thesis of Hindu support for Partition, commenting that this was rather ironic. Gyanendra Pandey, *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India*. Cambridge, 2001, p.33

⁴² Joya Chatterji, *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition*, Cambridge, 2002.

⁴³ Joya Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947-1967*, Cambridge, 2007.

⁴⁴ Seal, who can rightly be described as a founder of the neo-imperialist Cambridge School of historiography, characterised the Indian struggle for independence as 'mimic warfare' and 'a Dassehra duel between two hollow statues, locked in motiveless and simulated combat.' Anil Seal, *The Emergence of Indian Nationalism*, Cambridge, 1968, p 351.

⁴⁵ John Gallagher, Gordon Johnson, Anil Seal (eds), *Locality, Province and Nation*, London, 1973. In an essay in this volume Seal modified his earlier model based on the upper caste Hindu elites to accommodate the era of mass politics and the diversity of provincial elites that many of his students were now studying.

⁴⁶ Judith Brown, *Gandhi's Rise to Power, Indian Politics, 1915-1922*, Cambridge, 1972.

⁴⁷ 25 March 1947, *JNSW*, second series, Vol. II, p.77-78.

that remains would hardly be worth having.⁴⁸ Throwing consistency to the winds, Chatterji offers another explanation for why the Congress had pressed for a limited Partition in 1947— this was *precisely in order to* (emphasis mine) achieve a unitary state with a powerful central authority, a legacy they wished to inherit from the Raj (61), a ‘vigorous centre’ with powers sufficiently strong to hold together a ‘fissiparous and disparate nation.’ (63) So strong centre becomes a colonial legacy and disunity a legacy from India’s past, both unsubstantiated assumptions shared with other imperialist school scholars, as we shall see later.

Interestingly, in Chatterji’s framework, the Bengali *bhadralok* Hindus not only demanded Bengal, they preferred to ‘carve up’ Bengal. The colonial state and the imperial regime which demitted empire through division of the colony, leaving behind a legacy of conflict ridden divided states, does not figure anywhere in Chatterji’s list of those who were behind Partition and who could be deemed responsible for it. Here she surpasses other apologists for imperialism, who at least hold Mountbatten, Radcliffe, Rees and those who executed the division responsible for the messy way in which the decisions were taken and implemented.

A student of Jalal, Neeti Nair,⁴⁹ made a similar argument to those of Jalal and Chatterji, in a book titled *Changing Homelands*. She would have it that Punjabi Hindus demanded partition of their province ‘in concert with the Congress High Command’.(256) Nair goes back to Lajpat Rai, who, after the Kohat riots in 1924 , ‘advocated ...Partition into a Hindu and Muslim India’, (257) severed ties with the Congress and became President of the Hindu Mahasabha.⁵⁰

Another mode by which nationalism was undermined, albeit in an indirect way, was by a shift of focus from all India to the region. Seal had spelt out this agenda in ‘Locality, Province and Nation’.⁵¹ Chatterji worked out the model for Bengal and Nair for Punjab, the two main constituent provinces of Pakistan. Jalal, having herself advanced the thesis of the sole spokesman and his bargaining counter at the all India level,⁵² urged Mushirul Hasan to go beyond the all India nature of Muslim politics and recognize its regional diversity.⁵³ Yasmin Khan, despite the title of her book, *The Great Partition*,⁵⁴ extolled local and regional stories as more complex than nationalist histories and narratives. Of course, one must distinguish between the above kind of undermining of the ‘all India’ and those by focus on the region and those histories, which mine the richness of the region, but do not necessarily set themselves up against the nation.⁵⁵

Another shift in historiography was from elite history towards subaltern history, from ‘history from above’ to ‘history

⁴⁸ Nehru to Krishna Menon, 23 February 1947, *Ibid.*,p.45.

⁴⁹ Neeti Nair, *Changing Homelands: Hindu Politics and the Partition of India*, Cambridge, 2011.

⁵⁰ Nair does concede that Lajpat Rai stood for unity of Hindus and Muslims at other times.

⁵¹ Johnson, Gallagher, Seal (eds), *Locality, Province and Nation*, London, 1973,

⁵² ‘This is principally a work on politics at the all-India level,’ was how Jalal introduced her book, *Sole Spokesman*, p.5

⁵³ Ayesha Jalal, ‘Secularists, Subalterns and the Stigma of ‘Communalism’: Partition Historiography Revisited’, in *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 30, No.3 p.682.

⁵⁴ Yasmin Khan, *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan*, New Haven and London, 2007.

⁵⁵ Examples of this are Misra, *A Narrative of Communal Politics: Uttar Pradesh, 1937-39*, Sage Series in Modern Indian History, New Delhi, 2001; Batabyal, *Communalism in Bengal: From Famine to Noakhali*, Sage Series in Modern Indian History, New Delhi, 2005; Rita Kothari, *The Burden of Refuge: The Sindhi Hindus of Gujarat*, Delhi, 2007; Papiya Ghosh, *Muhajirs and the Nation: Bihar in the 1940s*, Delhi, 2010 and *Partition and the South Asian Diaspora: Extending the Subcontinent*, London and Delhi, 2007; Sayed Wiqar Ali Shah, *Ethnicity, Islam and Nationalism: Muslim Politics in the North West Frontier Province, 1937-47*, Karachi, 1999. These works merit detailed analysis, which I have not taken up, as here the focus is on the colonial and anti-secular.

from below'. Mushirul Hasan was one of those who claimed to move away from the 'grand narratives' of imperialism, nationalism and communalism.⁵⁶ According to Gyanendra Pandey,⁵⁷ the writings on 1947 highlighted India's struggle for freedom, while rendering Partition subordinate. The preoccupation with nation and class led to neglect of the community. He attributed this to historians working within 'the constraints of this obligation to demonstrate oneness.' (48)

In *Remembering Partition*, Pandey dubs the nationalism of Congress leaders as communalism, misrepresenting their actions and stances in the days before and after Independence. Nehru is depicted as insensitive to the suffering of the Muslim victims of the riots at Garhmukteshwar in U.P., notwithstanding his well-known defence of the rights of Muslims, for which he regularly faced threats to his life and for which Gandhi paid with his life.⁵⁸ In Pandey's account, Vallabhbhai Patel demands that Muslims be loyal to the state, something he does not expect of Hindus. This is partial representation of Patel's position. The memoirs of H. M. Patel,⁵⁹ senior civil servant, relate a different story in which nationalist leaders, Patel and Nehru, and civil servants worked together to restore peace in Delhi in September 1947, when the very state was under threat from organised Hindu and Sikh communal groups.⁶⁰

More generally, Pandey privileges memory over history, seeing recollections of survivors as holding up a truer mirror than 'disciplinary history', which he sees as tired, flawed and complicit in the agenda of the state: 'there is a wide chasm between the historians' apprehension of 1947 and what we might call a more popular, survivors' account of it – between history and memory, as it were.' (6) Here I would only like to emphasise that the imperative of remembering, adopted from the Holocaust, is simplistically counterposed to silence. Where Butalia evokes the 'Other Side of Silence', Pandey speaks of an imposed need to forget. I have elsewhere pointed to the dialectic between memory and forgetting.⁶¹ Silence and forgetting are often individual strategies of coping and surviving. Veena Das reminds us: 'But let us not forget that before monuments of memory were built to the Shoah, a long period of silence about it had to be gone through: debate over its historical significance and its place in the heritage of the West developed very slowly.'⁶²

Pandey would have it that in the 'historians' history', Partition was only seen as a constitutional arrangement and violence is said to accompany Partition; whereas in his history, Partition is constituted by violence.⁶³ The Holocaust is taken as a reference point to understand violence on this scale, with Pierre Nora's *lieux de memoire* invoked for good measure. Pandey would do well to recall Das' cautionary words: 'the model of trauma and witnessing that has been

⁵⁶ 'Memories of a Fragmented Nation.' However this 'rewriting' was not enough for Jalal, who would have him move beyond the all India to the region and transcend his location in secular nationalism. 'Secularists', p.683

⁵⁷ Gyanendra Pandey, *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India*, Cambridge, 2001.

⁵⁸ Mahajan, *Independence and Partition*, pp.315-16.

⁵⁹ Sucheta Mahajan edited, *H.M. Patel: Rites of Passage, A Civil Servant Remembers*, New Delhi, 2005. See Mahajan, 'Upholding the Empire to Building the Nation: H.M. Patel of the Indian Civil Service', unpublished paper presented at the International Conference on 'A Definitive Decade': India In the 1950s', organised by National Archives of India, New Delhi, 24 to 26 February 2012,

⁶⁰ Nehru to Patel, 30th September 1947, JNSW, 2nd Series, Vol. 4, p. 114

⁶¹ See Sucheta Mahajan, 'Beyond the Archives: Doing Oral History in Contemporary India', *Studies in History*, 2012, 27(2) 281–298.

⁶² Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary*, Berkeley, 2007, p.242.

⁶³ This is a different formulation from Paul Brass' terming violence as the 'principal mechanism' which 'created the conditions' for Partition. 'The Partition of India and Retributive Genocide in the Punjab, 1946-47: Means, Methods, and Purposes', *Journal of Genocide Research*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 2003, pp. 71-101.

bequeathed to us from Holocaust studies cannot be simply transported to other contexts in which violence is embedded into different patterns of sociality.’⁶⁴ The concept of ‘popular genocide’ advanced by Mahmood Mamdani to understand the complex violence in Rwanda could well be a more useful analytical tool for the study of the Indian Partition than the Holocaust.⁶⁵

Moreover, the histories of Partition that Pandey dismisses as elitist have attempted to understand the larger historical processes at work. It is possible that some histories may not have focused on Partition as much as on Independence. However, there is hardly any serious academic writing that treats history of Independence as ‘the real thing’ and Partition as ‘ephemeral’, as he alleges, (48) or which treats communalism and nationalism as separate histories, the first leading to Partition. My book, for instance, sees Independence and Partition as a dyad and explores how a mass movement for Independence achieved its objective of freedom from colonial rule though it could not fully realize the unity of the people, which was reflected in the Partition.⁶⁶

Perry Anderson is the latest in this line of scholars who denigrate the nationalist, anti-colonial credentials of the Congress. His essay, ‘The Indian Ideology’,⁶⁷ published in 2013, the first by him on India, far from breaking new ground in the historiography of the nineteen thirties and forties, as one would expect from a Marxist historian of his eminence,⁶⁸ combines an intellectual critique of nationalism and secularism with the political invective against Nehru and the Congress.

While the personal, scurrilous attack that Anderson makes against Nehru is of a kind with social media platforms devoted to vilifying Nehru and does not merit discussion; there are some positions that he takes on the Partition and the principal actors that need to be questioned from a serious academic perspective. Anderson endorses the imperialist Cambridge school that consistently blamed the Congress for the Partition. If Jalal described Congress nationalism as singular and exclusionary,⁶⁹ Anderson harks upon the ‘confessionalist’ Hindu character of the Congress. The denigration of the Congress as a Hindu party and the link that is sought to be established between its Hindu credentials and the Partition is a narrative that is common to Anderson, the imperialist school, the subalterns and the orthodox leftist historians.

As seen above, Cambridge scholars such as Jalal picked on what they considered the obstructionist position taken by the Congress to justify the stand of Jinnah and the Muslim League during the period 1937 to 1947. The crux of the argument made by Jalal, and other apologists for the British and the League, is based on the alleged intransigence of the Hindu Congress in its refusal to accept the Muslim League as the pre-eminent representative of the Muslims since 1937. In this narrative all responsibility for Partition lies with the Congress. It allegedly preferred a strong centre to the weak federation offered by the Cabinet Mission. It supposedly wanted Partition to get rid of the troublesome Muslim

⁶⁴ Veena Das, *Life and Words*, p. 205.

⁶⁵ Mahmood Mamdani, *When Victims become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda*, Princeton and Oxford, 2001.

⁶⁶ Mahajan, *Independence and Partition*, pp. 391-92

⁶⁷ Perry Anderson, *The Indian Ideology*, Verso, London, 2013.

⁶⁸ His works, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* and *Lineages of the Absolutist State* are classics.

⁶⁹ Jalal, ‘Secularists’, fn. 83, p. 683.

community. Furthermore, as Congress leaders were in a hurry to achieve power,⁷⁰ the party was allegedly responsible for the massacres that ensued. To quote Anderson, ‘The avidity of Congress for the prize money of an instant division was the local motive of the disaster.’ (66) British responsibility for massacres is conveniently negated.

The inversion of the characterization (communal Congress, secular League) serves another extremely important function. It denies the legitimacy of the secular nationalist anti-colonial movement and provides ammunition to the position of the imperialist school that India was granted independence by the British and that Partition was the unavoidable consequence of a primordial Hindu-Muslim enmity, eliding the British policy of creating divisions to curb the strong nationalist sentiment. Hence the apologists for the Muslim League are deeply complicit with the imperialist school, a convergence that was fashioned in the haloed halls of Cambridge and Oxford but could also be traced back to the close relationship that had existed between the Muslim League and the colonial rulers in the pre-independence period.

Indian nationalism and the Congress are also the target of the subaltern scholarship. In the subaltern narrative, the history of the national movement is essentially a history from above, in which the only players are the political elites who decide the fate of the subalterns without any reference to them. In this too the Congress is singled out for its failure to represent the interests of the underclasses, the marginalized, the lower castes and minority groups; it is believed to represent the interests of caste Hindus alone.

For Anderson, the Indian National Movement is no longer about class, imperialism, capitalism, colonialism and nationalism, but about competing claims of religion and caste, with close personal ties between the Mountbattens and Nehru thrown in for good measure. (58) Casting aside any Marxist conceptual frameworks, Anderson allies with the imperialist school that has held the Congress culpable for the Partition and all that went with it. The irreconcilable differences between Hindus and Muslims is an old colonial argument and Anderson’s critique follows the script faithfully. It is interesting that Lohia talks of estrangement between Hindus and Muslims since the last eight centuries leading to Partition.⁷¹ Ambedkar concurs, ‘The political and religious antagonisms divide the Hindus and the Musalmans far more deeply than the so-called common things are able to bind them together.’ He wondered ‘how the Hindus can object to the severance of an area like Pakistan, which, to repeat, is politically detachable from, socially hostile and spiritually alien to, the rest of India.’⁷²

Anderson claims that India had never been a unified political and cultural entity before the coming of the British. ‘The subcontinent as we know it today never formed a single political or cultural unit in premodern times. (14). The ‘idea of India’ was a European not a local invention, as the name itself makes clear. No such term, or equivalent, as ‘India’ existed in any indigenous language.’ He credits the British for uniting a dispersed subcontinent into ‘a single political realm for the first time in its history’.(57) The argument is further buttressed by the claim that in fact the British never wanted Partition because that would have undermined their finest achievement.

Anderson echoes Pandey who is critical of the concern of historians for the unity of the country, and the attendant ‘need to forget’ in the interests of that unity (60). Anderson charges those who extol the ‘ethos of pluralism’ as ‘the distinctive nature of our civilizational ground’, with merely repeating ‘the well-worked nationalist theme of the exceptionalism of India – an exceptionalism which was once called “spiritualism”.’ (60)

The running down of this ‘exceptionalism’, of the pluralist ethos and syncretic nature of society and the valorisation of the role of the colonial state in the unification of India (one of the many *Angrezi Sarkar ki barkatein*, ‘blessings of British government’) is essentially a colonial argument that was used by the British to justify their presence in India. As

⁷⁰ Lohia makes a similar charge: ‘... no shadow of doubt need obscure the simple proposition that a decaying leadership operating in a riotous situation produced Partition and that a purposive and a more youthful people may have avoided the division of Hindustan into India and Pakistan. Lohia, *Guilty Men*, p. 37

⁷¹ Lohia, *Guilty Men*, p.10.

⁷² Ambedkar, *Pakistan or the Partition of India*, Chapters 2 & 4.

Irfan Habib has said,⁷³ the conception of Hind as a political and cultural entity predates the coming of the British by a few centuries. The Persians coined the term and the famous 13th century poet Amir Khusro lavished abundant praise on the land of Hind in his well known *masnavi*, 'Nuh-e-Siphir'.

Anderson particularly singles out Gandhi for 'Hinduising' the Congress. 'What remained was Gandhi's transformation of Congress from an elite into a mass organisation by saturating its appeal with a Hindu imaginary. Here, unambiguously, was the origin of the political process that would eventually lead to Partition.'⁷⁴ What is interesting is that Anderson is actually restating the position taken by Aijaz Ahmad in 1997. According to Ahmad, the Congress under Gandhi was deeply 'complicit in a transactional mode of politics which involved bargaining among the elites and a conception of secularism which was little more than an accommodation of the self-enclosed orthodoxies. Given the immensity of this historical weight, the wonder is not that there was a Partition but that there was one.'⁷⁴

While earlier Marxist scholars had pointed out that Gandhi's Hindu idiom (*Ramrajya*, for example) had made Muslims uncomfortable, Anderson and Aijaz Ahmad have questioned his ideology. It seems inexplicable how a 'Hindu' Gandhi could become the target of a Hindu communal organisation like the Hindu Mahasabha, the political face of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, and why Gandhi's assassin, Nathuram Godse was absolutely convinced about him being inimical to Hindu interests.⁷⁵

Anderson's painting of Gandhi in Hindu colours is in contrast to Irfan Habib's,⁷⁶ who has discussed how Gandhi's profession and practice of Hinduism was not simplistically fired by a 'Hindu imaginary'. Habib points out that while 'he always described himself as a Sanatani Hindu; yet he did not pray in a temple. (6)...., Gandhi's Ram was God, and his Ram Rajya did not relate to something that was remotely sectarian.Gandhi's religiosity is based on an extension of humanitarian values and their application to perhaps the most ancient of all surviving religions, resulting in a vast transformation of its beliefs.'⁷⁸

In his reconstruction of the processes of the last decade of colonial rule, Anderson identifies moments from the Cripps Mission to the Cabinet Mission to show up Congress as the main stumbling block to the federal unity (allegedly the cherished goal of the Muslim League) that could have prevented Partition. Nehru is painted as the villain who stymied the Cabinet Mission Plan and paved the way for Partition. Here again, Anderson, as on so many other issues, does not depart from the imperialist school. I would argue that Nehru's stand is much misrepresented. One, Nehru's statement, 'We are not bound by a single thing except that we have decided to go into the Constituent Assembly'⁷⁷ may have been a tad tactless but it echoed Gandhi's comment in the *Harijan* editorial of 26 May 1946, that the Constituent Assembly would decide its own procedure and the Mission Plan was not binding⁷⁸ and was in fact, a correct interpretation, as the constitution making body was indeed sovereign.

Second, the Muslim League, too, had taken a similar but identically opposite position, namely that it accepted the Cabinet Mission Plan 'in as much as the basis and foundation of Pakistan are inherent in the Mission Plan by virtue of the

⁷³ Irfan Habib, *Building the Idea of India*, lecture at Aligarh Muslim University, 7th October 2015, p.6.

⁷⁴ Aijaz Ahmed, 'Tryst with destiny': free but divided', in *Lineages of the Present: Ideology and Politics in Contemporary South Asia*, Verso, New York, London, 2000, pp. 3-16.

⁷⁵ See Aditya Mukherjee, Mridula Mukherjee and Sucheta Mahajan, *RSS, School Texts and the Murder of the Mahatma Gandhi- The Hindu Communal Project*, New Delhi, 2007.

⁷⁶ Irfan Habib, 'Gandhi and the National Movement', *Social Scientist*, Vol. 23, No. 4/6 (Apr. - Jun., 1995), pp. 3-15; Bipan Chandra, 'Gandhiji, Secularism and Communalism', *Social Scientist*, Vol. 32, No. 1/2 (2004)

⁷⁷ 7 July 1946, *JNSW*, Vol. 15, p. 236.

⁷⁸ 25 May 1946, *CWMG*, Vol. 84, p.170.

compulsory grouping of the six Muslim provinces.⁷⁹ While Nehru is held responsible for the breakdown of the Plan, what is elided is the British assurances to both sides that allowed both parties to interpret the Plan in their own way. The Muslim League was assured that grouping of provinces was compulsory and this for them meant the creation of Pakistan at a later date while the Congress was simultaneously told that grouping was not compulsory, which held out the possibility of the unity of India.⁸⁰ British duplicity is rarely acknowledged in writings like Anderson's that tend to overwhelmingly lay the blame for Partition at the door of the Congress.⁸¹

Anderson rehashes the old argument made by sections of Gandhians and Marxists and often advanced at the level of a popular myth, that during the negotiations of 1946-47, Gandhi was isolated by Congress leaders, his was a voice in the wilderness.⁸² I have pointed out elsewhere that Gandhi's relationship with the Congress and his colleagues was marked by differences of opinion on political matters at times, but did not constitute forced isolation or an unbridgeable divide, as is insinuated. In fact, the Congress leaders made it a point to consult Gandhi on important political matters, travelling to where Gandhi was, be it distant Noakhali, for the purpose.⁸³

In an about-turn, the same Gandhi who had Hinduised the Congress and the National Movement, suddenly becomes a messiah when, as Anderson says, 'Gandhi, who had made it [Congress] the mass force it became, called at Independence for its dissolution. He was right.' (145)

This is a familiar tack, shared by scholars of diverse persuasions,⁸⁴ but not supported by a closer look at the documents. In a note dated 27 January 1948,⁸⁵ three days before he was assassinated, Gandhi wrote that Congress has 'outlived its use' in its present form, should be disbanded and 'flower into a Lok Sevak Sangh'. This appeared as an article in *Harijan*⁸⁶ titled 'His Last Will and Testament', a phrase added by his associates. This title and its posthumous publication endowed Gandhi's note with a significance greater than he intended, for what he had penned was a draft constitution, not a last will and testament. Gandhi's comments were part of a continuing intra-party debate on the

⁷⁹ 6 June Resolution, forwarded to Viceroy, TOP, Vol.7, p. 836.

⁸⁰ See section 'How to be Pro-Congress Without Being Anti-League', Mahajan, *Independence and Partition*, pp. 151-158.

⁸¹ See Asoka Mehta and Achyut Patwardhan's work *The Communal Triangle in India*, Allahabad, 1942.

⁸² Sumit Sarkar writes, 'Gandhi had increasingly taken a backseat in the tortuous negotiations going on since 1945.' *Modern India*, p. 437; Yasmin Khan refers to the decline of Gandhi's influence after WWII. Yasmin Khan, *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan*, New Haven and London, 2007.

⁸³ Mahajan, *Independence and Partition*, pp.369-79.

⁸⁴ Rudolphs wrote, 'twenty four hours before his death on 30 January 1948 at the hands of Nathu Godse, Gandhi proposed in his 'last will and testament' that the Indian National Congress be dissolved and be replaced by a Lok Sevak Sangh, a people's service organisation.' Lloyd and Susan Rudolph, *Postmodern Gandhi and other Essays, Gandhi in the World and at Home*, Oxford, Delhi, 2006, p.140. Rajmohan Gandhi wrote, 'For several hours on the evening before his assassination and before dawn on the following day, the author of Congress's 1920 constitution would work on a proposal for changing the body's goal or character.' *The Good Boatman: A Portrait of Gandhi*, Viking, New Delhi, 1995, p.424.

⁸⁵ New Delhi, January 29, 1948, CWMG, Vol. 98, p.335 (CD version)

⁸⁶ *Harijan*, 2 February 1948, CWMG, Vol. 98, p. 306.

reorganization of Congress.⁸⁷ Also, the ‘last will and testament’ should be read along with another statement also carried in the *Harijan* the same day: ‘Indian National Congress which is the oldest national political organization and which has after many battles fought her non-violent way to freedom cannot be allowed to die. It can only die with the nation.’

In Anderson’s words, ‘The moment of achieving freedom was characterized by Hindu ethos: To hallow the solemn occasion, Nehru and his colleagues sat cross-legged around a sacred fire in Delhi while Hindu priests – arrived post-haste from Tanjore for the ritual – chanted hymns and sprinkled holy water over them, while women imprinted their foreheads with vermilion.’⁸⁸ Curiously, Anderson’s characterisation of the ‘moment of achieving freedom’ as having a Hindu ethos refers only to a private ceremony allegedly held at Rajendra Prasad’s residence. One wonders how he missed the public ceremonies in non-denominational sites such as the Constituent Assembly, the Red Fort and the lawns of New Delhi, where multitudes of Indians (not only Hindus!) surged in joy.

Further half truths and untruths find their way into Anderson’s diatribe. Anderson goes on to suggest how ‘...within a couple of years, it [the state] was rebuilding with much pomp the famous Hindu temple in Somnath, ravaged by Muslim invaders, and authorizing the installation of Hindu idols in the famous mosque at Ayodhya.’ (116) Historical records present a somewhat different picture. In his letter to the Chief Ministers, dated 2 May 1951, Nehru states categorically: ‘it should be clearly understood that this function is not governmental and the Government of India as such has nothing to do with it. ... We have to remember that we must not do anything which comes in the way of our State being secular. That is the basis of our Constitution.’⁸⁹

As regards the charge that the state authorised the installation of the idols at Ayodhya in December 1949, a ‘communal-minded’ district magistrate looked away when some Hindus installed idols of Sita and Ram in the mosque. Both Patel and Jawaharlal Nehru, condemned the district magistrate’s action.⁹⁰ In fact, after the assassination of the Mahatma, Nehru came down very heavily on the Hindu Mahasabha and the RSS, because he believed that Hindu communalism was a serious threat to the secular fabric of the nascent Indian nation.⁹¹ Anderson also does not spare Sardar Patel, the favourite whipping boy of many Congress detractors. Instead of questioning the BJP’s appropriation of one of the tallest nationalist leaders of the freedom struggle, he lends credence to the myth of Patel’s Hindu bias. ‘Today, the largest statue in the world is being erected in Gujarat. The government commissioning it is BJP. But the giant it honours is a Congress leader, who wanted the RSS to join his party.’ (146) This is a complete distortion of Patel’s position. As Home Minister, Patel wholeheartedly went along with Nehru and banned RSS and Hindu Mahasabha after Gandhi’s assassination. Far from wanting the RSS to ‘join’ the Congress, Patel wanted, what he considered misguided youth in RSS to join Congress in an attempt to reorient them towards national values.⁹²

A curious convergence exists between Cambridge scholarship, subalterns and some Marxists on the elision of the difference between secular nationalism and communalism. This convergence between communalism and nationalism both feeds into and is fed by the myth of there being no difference between the Congress and the BJP and its predecessors.

⁸⁷ See ‘A Secular Party in a Fractured Polity: Congress in Transition, 1947’, unpublished paper presented at a panel on Nehru at the Indian History Congress session, New Delhi, 2014.

⁸⁸ Tai Yong Tan and Gyanesh Kudaisya, *The Aftermath of Partition in South Asia*, London and New York, 2000, pp. 50-51.

⁸⁹ Sarvepalli Gopal ed., *JNSW*, XVI, 1, p.559, cited in Romila Thapar, *Somanatha: The Many Voices of a History*, Viking, 2004, p.198.

⁹⁰ Bipan Chandra, Mridula Mukherjee, Aditya Mukherjee, *India Since Independence*, Delhi, 1999, p.609.

⁹¹ See section on ‘Aftermath of Gandhi’s Murder’, Mahajan, *Independence and Partition*, chapter 11, pp. 319-321.

⁹² Patel’s address to Punjab University, Ambala, 5 March 1949, Nandurkar, *In Tune with the Millions* Vol. II, p.254. Letter to Gangadhar Rao, 21 December 1947, *Patel Papers*, Sardar Patel National Museum, Ahmedabad. I am indebted to Dr. Neerja Singh for the references.

According to Anderson, 'Culturally, they [BJP and Congress] now bathe in a common atmosphere in which religious insignia, symbols, idols and anthems are taken for granted in commercial and official spaces alike.Practically, the differences are less. Where communalism suits them, there is little to choose between the two'.(129)

Some scholars like Jaffrelot, Gilmartin, Hasan and Ahmad,⁹³ have talked about Muslim and Hindu nationalisms. These are extremely problematic categories because, one, they privilege community over nation and two, because they legitimise communalism by yoking it to nationalism.⁹⁴ From a different perspective, to use categories like Hindu and Muslim nationalisms is to collapse secular nationalism and communalism.

But the underlying ideological assumptions of such arguments are even more problematic. If communalism and secular nationalism are collapsed, the idea of a pluralist, syncretic culture and society is dismissed and community, as constituted through violence, is offered as the only reality, then only nihilism remains. It is also an intellectually indefensible position for any but the armchair intellectual who can distance herself from the vicissitudes of such violence. Scorning secularism is perhaps easier in first world academic climes. We cannot do without the intellectual resources of secularism when confronted with horrific communal violence, or, with what is worse, the brazen parade of communalism masked as development. Ideology is certainly the terrain on which historical debate is mounted.

* * *

The possibility of writing a different kind of history has opened up with the publication of the documents on the independence struggle in the Towards Freedom series. Originally intended as a counterpoint to the British official story told by the Transfer of Power volumes, the Towards Freedom series, under the able stewardship of the eminent historians, Sarvepalli Gopal and Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, have made available a trove of historical sources.⁹⁵ As editor of the volume on 1947,⁹⁶ over the last decade I have plumbed dusty depositories, private archives and newspapers to collect a vast array of documents, which make up two published tomes, with the third awaiting publication. The volumes cover a range of themes, from political processes, aspirations of the states' peoples, workers' and peasants' struggles, boundaries and refugees, economic consequences of partition, foreign relations to the celebrations of 15 August 1947.

India on the cusp of 75 years is time enough to look at 1947 from a vantage point beyond the intertwined history of Independence and Partition. This is the perspective of Transition, within which the churning, as the new emerged from the old, can be comprehended. The making of a new polity, economy and society involved both fashioning of new structures and restructuring old institutions. This paradigm of Transition, from colonial to post-independence, is informed by a concern with issues of citizenship, aspirations for democracy, inclusion and discrimination, identity, gender, caste and language. This perspective informs some of the research and writing in recent years. The hope is that we may move away from the jaded frameworks of continuity and change and transfer of power and recognise the revolutionary transformation marked by 15 August 1947.

⁹³ Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement in India*, New York, 1998; David Gilmartin, 'A Magnificent Gift: Muslim Nationalism and the Election Process in Colonial Punjab.' *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 40, no. 3, 1998, pp. 415-436, Mushirul Hasan (ed), *Inventing Boundaries: Gender, Politics and the Partition of India: Prologue*, Delhi, 2000; Aijaz Ahmad, 'Frontier Gandhi: Reflections on Muslim Nationalism in India', *Social Scientist*, vol. 33, no. 1/2, 2005, pp. 22-39.

⁹⁴ Mahajan, *Independence and Partition*, Introduction.

⁹⁵ The Indian Council of Historical Research's Towards Freedom series cover the last decade of the freedom movement. *Towards Freedom, Documents on the Independence of India*, General Editors., S. Gopal and S. Bhattacharya, New Delhi, 1986-2016.

⁹⁶ Sucheta Mahajan edited, *Towards Freedom: Documents on the Independence of India, 1947*, Parts I & 2, New Delhi, 2013 & 2015. The volume is in three parts, part 3 is forthcoming.

