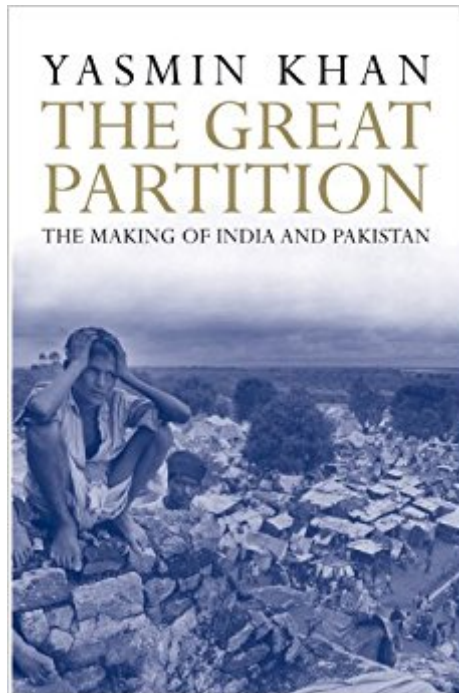




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The Great Partition



Synopsis

The Partition of India in 1947 promised its people both political and religious freedom through the liberation of India from British rule, and the creation of the Muslim state of Pakistan. Instead, the geographical divide brought displacement and death, and it benefited the few at the expense of the very many. Thousands of women were raped, at least one million people were killed, and ten to fifteen million were forced to leave their homes as refugees. One of the first events of decolonization in the twentieth century, Partition was also one of the most bloody. In this book Yasmin Khan examines the context, execution, and aftermath of Partition, weaving together local politics and ordinary lives with the larger political forces at play. She exposes the widespread obliviousness to what Partition would entail in practice and how it would affect the populace. Drawing together fresh information from an array of sources, Khan underscores the catastrophic human cost and shows why the repercussions of Partition resound even now, some sixty years later. The book is an intelligent and timely analysis of Partition, the haste and recklessness with which it was completed, and the damaging legacy left in its wake.

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Customer Reviews

A well written book on the whole. This book takes a relatively unusual tack, in that it does not focus very much on the 'great leaders' of those times, but focusses a bit more on what happened on the ground, so to speak. It is the telling of an awful tale, a tale in which hundreds of thousands were killed and mutilated; a tale of the times when millions were displaced. People do not often think that freedom can sometimes be an awful thing, and this is exactly what it must have been for many. What could have made the book stand out, for me, is if she had analysed the factors - and the effects - of the social transformation of the time. People identified themselves with their region, and not so much along religious lines. This changed. There are lessons in this, which we would do well to remember.

One of the more sizeable holes in my knowledge of twentieth-century history concerns the partitioning of the British Raj -- the dividing up of the British colonial territory on the Indian subcontinent into two countries, Pakistan and India (and, later, yet a third, Bangladesh). To address my ignorance, I turned to this book, *THE GREAT PARTITION: THE MAKING OF INDIA AND PAKISTAN*, written by a professor at Oxford. I learned a lot, but can't say that I am wholly satisfied with the book. *THE GREAT PARTITION* contains the basic facts: In 1946 and 1947, Great Britain, worn out and broke after World War II, abandoned the Raj; it cut its losses and ran. On June 3, 1947, it announced that the Raj would be partitioned and the constituent parts would be given their independence ten weeks hence, on August 15, 1947. As matters developed the lines of partition were not released until August 17, two days after the independence (and simultaneous birth) of India and Pakistan. Before partition, there had been widespread violence, primarily Muslims against Hindus and vice versa, but some of it involved Sikhs. That violence intensified after August 15th, and ethnic cleansing was conducted in many areas. One of the largest migrations in history ensued -- Muslims within the territory of India fleeing to East or West Pakistan, and Hindus fleeing from the two areas of Pakistan to India. About twelve million people were displaced. Hundreds of thousands died, in some accounts as many as a million. Britain's drawing of national boundaries, on both the east and west of what became India (a total of 3,800 miles of border determination), was hasty and arbitrary. The imperial mapmaker, Cyril Radcliffe, had never been to India before he arrived on July 8th, and in six weeks he and his assistants had finished the job. Their line drawing was done remotely, working with maps and dubious census figures. It seems farcical. One might naturally wonder whether an alternative to Partition was ever explored. The answer, as I learned from the book, is yes. In May 1946, a high-level British "Cabinet Mission" presented a plan that would have

devolved power to Muslims within a united India. There would have been a central government to handle matters of foreign affairs and defense, but otherwise individual provinces would have enjoyed considerable autonomy, including the ability to join together on certain matters, thereby allowing large Muslim blocs to act in concert within the Indian Union. But diehards and extremists on both sides of the Muslim/Hindi religious divide rejected the plan, after which the more moderate leaders didn't fight against partition. As Nehru later admitted: "The truth is that we were tired men and we were getting on in years . . . The plan for partition offered a way out and we took it." The book covers all the above and considerably more factual territory. In a way, it packs quite a bit of history into its 210 pages of text. Supplementing that text are a glossary, a timeline, four maps, and about two dozen photographs. Nonetheless, I am not enthusiastic about the book. First, there are problems with the written presentation. Khan's prose is very smooth, but the text seems to have been written in discrete paragraphs, almost as if each was envisioned to stand alone. As a result, there is a choppiness to the presentation and, worse, considerable repetition of many points. Second, I would like to have been given some idea of how things might have been handled differently. Near the end of the book, Khan writes that "[t]here was nothing inevitable * * * about the way that Partition unfolded." But never in the course of the book does she discuss how the former Raj could have become self-governing without hundreds of thousands of deaths, millions of people transplanted, and a continuing state of religiously-based tension and hostility between abutting nations.

Although I'm not qualified to speak with authority on the subject of this book, I have read fairly extensively in Indian history, and I've traveled widely in Pakistan. This is the only book devoted solely to the Partition that I've read, so I can't make comparisons offered by other reviewers; I will simply note that I found Khan's book to be informative and devoid of nationalist, religious, or racial biases. Long before the British Raj, the Indian Subcontinent had been an ever-changing map of conquest and cobbled empires. A single India has never existed on the multi-ethnic, polyglot Subcontinent, save in the superficial sense of evanescent lines on maps. Nor did Partition succeed in creating more-natural polities: witness the departure of Bangladesh from Pakistan, and great internal discords bounded by the arbitrary Durand and Radcliffe lines.

Having read Patrick French's historical narrative of Indian Independence, I was interested in something a little more balanced to tell both sides of the story. Yasmin has done a good job of rendering this rather complex and heartbreaking time of political and sectarian violence -- renting

the map left a large historical scar that still plays highly in international politics. This book is a good place to start to understand the difference in national identity when aspirations divide and become fault lines for violence. Unfortunately I think that this study could have been a whole lot better if she had expanded the text about 1/3 its present size. Many aspects, although well described are dealt with in rather superficial terms... but keeping in mind that this is an introduction and geared for the general reader, it is an extremely well written piece.

The author has looked very hard at the happenings on the ground in India leading up to the division in 1947 of former India into India and Pakistan--an eminently avoidable tragedy for the subcontinent, especially Pakistan. Her point is that nobody really knew what "partition" meant, and most of them, Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs alike, both intellectuals and political leaders as well as businessmen and peasants, were shocked to find out what it would really mean: physical division of the country into two states, and not for a few years but apparently forever. A fine book, well researched and thought out. The writing is superb most of the time, but there are stylistic infelicities.

An excellent book. It covers all the aspects of the politics that lead up to the Partition in a very readable way; and it is also very even handed in its treatment of those parties involved.

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