# ‘Looking Back’: Filling in the gaps of Partition

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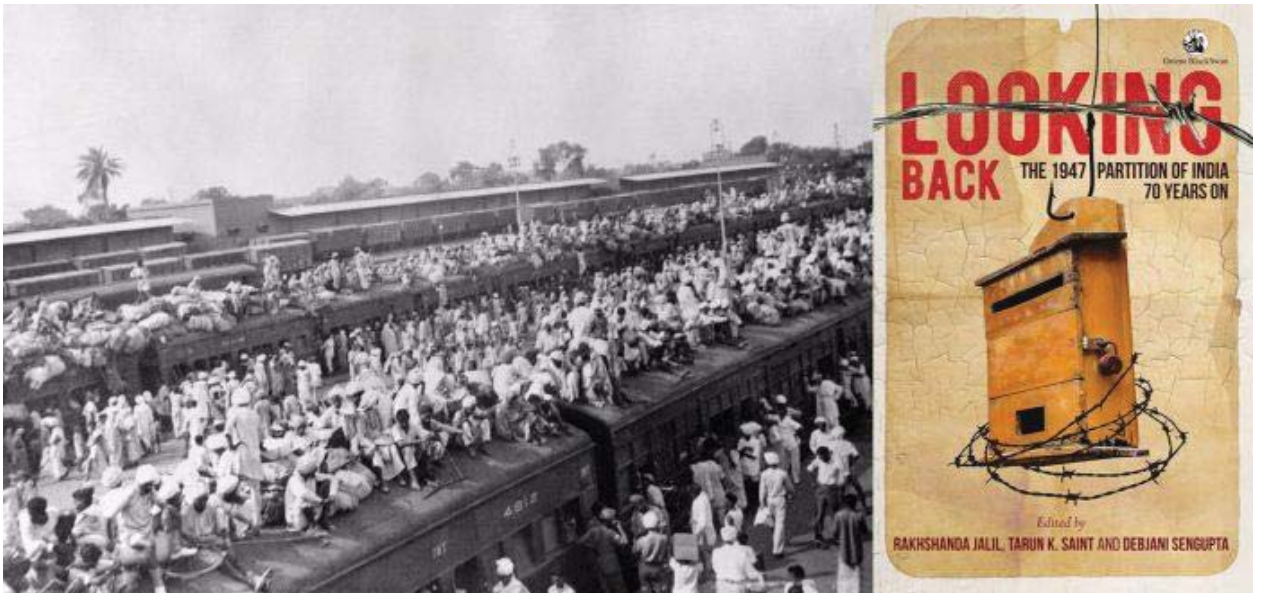


Imagery of partition along with the book cover | Source: Wikipedia Commons

The editors of ‘Looking Back, the 1947 Partition of India, 70 Years On’ (Orient BlackSwan, 2017) have presented a multi-genre and cross-subcontinental volume on Partition.

It includes some brilliant short stories translated from Bangla, hitherto unavailable to the English-speaking world.

Many of the contributions ‘fill in the gaps’, presenting us snippets of new research that scholars can find in fuller form elsewhere.

## Cultural flows and linguistic habits

Anwesha Sengupta, a JNU historian, presents a history of Dalit politics in Bengal through the figure of Jogendranath Mandal. She considers the attitude of the Muslim League towards Dalits, and believes that Dalits were kept separated from the upper castes to keep the opposition in check, especially during the language controversy in East Pakistan. It is unclear, however, if she is arguing that Dalits were not in favour of having Bangla as one of Pakistan’s official languages.

In Ravikant's 'Undoing Partition: Flight of Utopian Fantasies across Borders', there are the plots of two films: 'Chacha Zindabad' by J. Om Prakash, India, 1959, and 'Mousiqar' by Qadeer Ghori, Pakistan, 1962. Ravikant translates lyrics from Avadhi, Brajbhasha, Hindi and Urdu, and shows that long-standing "cultural flows and linguistic habits... cannot suddenly be destroyed by arbitrary strokes of the pen or unilateral official fiats". These are words that must remain in focus in these dire times.

Singer and scholar Vidya Rao contrasts the style of two qawwals – Fariduddin Ayaz of Pakistan and the late Jafar Husain Badayuni of India – to ask if music, too, was changed by Partition. She notes Ayaz's surprisingly frequent use of the nom-tom alaap, "a certain very conscious classicizing of his opening phrases" in his qawwali, and his repeated claim that he is the true heir of the Dilli gharana. She attributes these to "a certain anxiety about musical identity", in the face of lack of sustained patronage in Pakistan.

She recalls Badayuni's singing the paidaish 'Baro ghee ke diye na', and reminds us of numerous khayal bandishes that speak of Islamic traditions and that are no longer performed or taught to the next generation in India today: "after all, where was the audience who wished to listen to them anymore?"

On Ayaz and Badayuni's singing styles, Rao writes with such feeling that one wishes the book came with a CD.

However, the book fails to address the '70 years on' part: how does the next generation feel about Partition? This is barely explored, except in one incredibly self-indulgent essay which refers repeatedly, and fittingly, to a "literature of incoherence". 'Looking Back' is largely nostalgic, and contains memories of the older generation, not newer relationships forged by growing interactions across the border, in cyberspace or otherwise.

Here, Vishwajyoti Ghosh's marvelous graphic narrative 'Lahore Reporting' is an exception, and a much-needed light read. The antics of Pakistan's intelligence services and the counter-tactics of her progressive youth sound terribly familiar.

## Searing fiction

Fiction is the most searing part of the book. Selina Hossain's novel, 'Bhumi O Kusum' (2010), ably analysed by Debjani Sengupta, tells us of the everyday torments and trials of people living in enclaves on the Indo-Bangladesh border, those "deaf-mute children" of India, Pakistan, and now Bangladesh, who lacked even identity cards for so many decades.

'Border Stories' by Sunanda Bhattacharya gives us a local perspective on smuggling across this border: "Everyone knew who went smuggling in the dead of night across the border. No one gave a hoot about it; after all they never created the border. If there was an epidemic of cholera on the other side, people's lives were saved with the medicines from this side; the hilsa fish from that side decorated the dinner plates of people from this side."

In Joya Mitra's 'A Face to Hate', we get a glimpse of the new India in the belligerence of younger employees in an LIC office in Kolkata facing our mild-tempered protagonist: "Don't you ever notice the unity of the people in the other religion? The whole sect will stand by whatever their leader says. And look at us – no love for our own country. No faith in our own religion." Published in Bangla in 1990, and set in the 1960s, the story is a reminder that this belligerence is, after all, not so new.

The longer-term consequences of the partition are also hinted at in the stories 'The Other Shore' by Syed Muhammad Ashraf and 'The Echo' by Zakia Mashhadi. The continuing ghettoisation of Muslims in post-Babri India and the yawning gulf that separates Indian and Pakistani Muslims are poignantly alluded to in these stories.

## Revisiting the past

Do erstwhile refugees still remember their past and wish it were different?

Aanchal Malhotra's octogenarian interviewee says "now we do not think about it ever" and reminds her that they were forced to rebuild their lives in independent India.

Journalist Maya Mirchandani traces the successful migrations of her Sindhi ancestors across the world, and writes eloquently of resilience, here conceived as a Sindhi trait.

That the statelessness and exile produced by Partition can mean very different things to refugees is evident in the journeys of affluent Sindhis across international borders, of enclave-dwellers locked into their islands, and of smugglers across the India-Bangladesh border.

But the juxtaposition of literature with literary criticism in one volume shows that the practitioners of the latter have much to learn. What can be said in two pages need not be said in six.

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