

Life after Partition: Migration, Community and Strife in Sindh, 1947-1962

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The dissolution of the British Raj in the Subcontinent in 1947, and the accompanying mass migration across the new borders between the newly-independent states of India and Pakistan, are certainly among the most momentous developments in recent history. Not only do these events continue to dictate Indo-Pakistani relations even after six decades, they have also been feeding into a rather turbulent and complex interface among the plural communities in one of the most populous regions of the world. As far as South Asian historiography is concerned, 1947, or Partition as it is generally known, proved to be a threshold for the further diversification of an increasingly contested debate among historians. The erstwhile broad and overarching categories of the imperial school and its nationalist counterpart (both in India and Pakistan) were soon found wanting in properly explaining issues of class, community formation, ideological fissures and cultural separatism, along with the stark absence of women, ordinary people, peasants, tribes and even the mofussil - rural/small town grassroots - from these two grand narratives.

The evolution of a plural and expansive historiography of South Asia owes itself to the reductionism of the imperial versus nationalist schools, a binary approach which was found acutely wanting when it came to offering tangible explanations for momentous and complex thematic issues. Interestingly, both these grand narratives continued to focus on 'high history', where only a select few actors at the top were seen to be deciding these fateful events, affecting hundreds of millions, without any recourse to socio-political, religious or regional complexities. Accordingly, the masses were either imagined to be simple mobs or

cheerleaders, lacking their own opinions and initiatives.

The post-1947 reincarnations of South Asian historiography, such as the Cambridge School or neo-nationalist narratives, tried to hold their ground for a while, but the leftist and liberal challenges refused to go away; instead, they continued to demand the inclusion of issues of class and people in a discourse which, to them, simply portrayed a new elite playing a pivotal and exclusive role in the political developments leading to independence. The 1960s saw fresher themes and hypotheses enriching South Asian historiography. Demolishing the monopoly of the grand narratives of 'high history', long-neglected areas like gender and subalterns entered the debate. Greater access to archives, the celebration of peoples over power and the evolution of newer paradigms involving tribes and peasants, within the context of acceptance of ideology, spawned a sustained multi-disciplinarity as well as scepticism about the hitherto so-called received truths.

Sarah Ansari's recent study is a continuation of her early work which focused on Sindh from its annexation by British India in 1843 to its inclusion in the state of Pakistan in 1947. In *Life after Partition*, she leaves her Sufis and Pirs aside and tries to come to grips with the state functionaries and policies dealing with the people, especially those who had been displaced or were voluntarily on the move in the wake of Partition. She finds interesting parallels with Punjab, where such moves led to greater dislocation amidst more bloodshed, yet the demographic transformation of Sindh following the outflow of Hindus and the influx of Muslim refugees, and the resulting, often less-regulated settlements, have left their lasting imprints on all sides. Here, an interesting and not-so-dissimilar interface between the new states can be detected as they faced similar issues. The reader also acquires in-depth knowledge of the immense speed and volume of demographic diversification within Sindh; a new province since its separation from Bombay Presidency in 1936. Ansari's research pieces together the details of refugee settlement in urban and rural Sindh under the auspices of the newly-independent government of Pakistan, which, like the provincial government, was based in Karachi.

The volume also brings out the multi-polar relationship between Pakistan, India, the refugee leadership and the indigenous Sindhi elite, as the entire political and social spectrum underwent a dramatic transformation. Newly-independent Pakistan was soon overtaken by the world's largest, and perhaps most painful, migration, which not only changed the demography of this young nation, but also reconfigured its socio-political composition. In the hot Monsoon month of August, also the month of fasting, the refugees flooded towns and cities across the Punjab and Sindh, radically transforming the ethos of a nation which for decades was destined to host refugees from the entire region - including the influx of millions of Afghans during the 1980s. The settlement of multitudes of helpless refugees--most of whom spoke Urdu or Gujarati--in a province where Sindhi was the lingua franca and where landholding patterns were also in flux, turned out to be a daunting experience. The settlement is often seen as chaotic, because of the lack of resources and proper systems, but the involvement of voluntary associations and the prompt distribution of evacuee property changed the demographic contours of Karachi, Hyderabad and Sukkur, the main provincial towns which overnight were transformed into bustling cities. As in other metropolises across the Subcontinent, the refugees - who preferred to be called Muhajireen, or immigrants - chose to settle in similar ethnic neighbourhoods (bastis) named after their own places of origin in India, and a kind of self-assumed segregation evolved as an accepted pattern. As a consequence, the local Baloch community in Malir, along with other traditional Sindhi populations, were completely outnumbered by well-organised 'colonies', which, unlike their Punjabi counterparts, assumed a type of cultural self-sufficiency. With Urdu adopted as the national tongue, these newcomers did not take any significant interest in the Sindhi language, and, in many cases, developed a degree of nonchalance towards Sindhi culture. These patterns, and the changes that came in their wake, resembled those which were happening with similar speed across the eastern borders.

Given Karachi's significance as the country's capital city, only major port and biggest financial centre, there was almost boundless potential for physical and cultural expansion. However, its development was strictly shaped around the concerns of the refugees who, in many cases, decreed that they should be called 'New Sindhis', thereby exacerbating a sense of alienation among the natives. The second wave of refugees arrived during the early 1950s, as a result of communal schisms in India, although this new influx was better

organised than before. In the first wave, except for the airlift of a small proportion of influential and affluent refugees, most of the entrants into Pakistan had used a variety of modes of transportation, including boats, trains and pedestrian caravans. It is true that, unlike in the Punjab, violence directed against both the immigrants and emigrants was quite restrained, although the moneyed Hindu families - some of them known for their international commercial enterprises - were deeply antagonistic to the idea of Pakistan. On the other hand, the refugees passing through contemporary Punjab fell victim to an organised form of collective violence that was aimed especially at women and younger people. The border population transfers between Sindh and the neighbouring parts of India were interspersed with some degree of violence but these incidents were neither particularly common nor especially serious.

Ansari locates contemporary conflictive pluralism, in Karachi in particular but also elsewhere in Pakistan, within the pre-1947 discourse and the accompanying construction of the idea of a Muslim community, which had papered over intra-communal distinctions for a time but could not subsume them. She considers Pakistan to be 'a case of exceptional interest' because of the circumstances leading to its formation and the subsequent difficulties. The problems of governance are certainly not unique to Pakistan as several post-colonial societies, including some developed countries, have found it hard to establish an all-encompassing solution. There is no doubt that Pakistan is one of the few case studies of separatism before the dissolution of the Eastern Bloc but, despite the element of violence in Karachi during the 1990s, it was not another Bangladesh in making. Even the subversive activity in some tribal regions of Balochistan is not secessionist by nature in its objectives and seeks an equitable politico-economic share within an otherwise unbalanced political set-up, which, because of the khaki dominance, tends to be centralist favouring the status quo.

Ansari's discussion of the conceptualisation of communal embodiments - Muslim, Pakistani, Sindhi and Muhajir - provides a pertinent background to this volume and attempts to trace the evolution of several parallel and equally politicised communities in the lower Indus valley. She gives due weight to traditional markers in the community formation but is equally sensitive to an instrumentalist explanation of 'artificial construction', which had optimistically suggested that eventually modernisation would have a levelling effect by easing down competitive pluralism. Accordingly, the older forms of community consciousness were expected to give way to more professional and forward looking collectivities. This argument certainly cannot explain the situation in countries like Canada, Spain or even the United Kingdom, where the sustained forces of industrialisation and urbanisation have often proven inadequate in eradicating boundaries dividing various ethno-regional communities. However, Ansari is still reluctant to fully accept the role of the colonial state in exacerbating the communal divide within South Asia, even by virtue of benign modernisation.

Partition, as Ansari observes, divided the Subcontinent into India and Pakistan along with separating it from its colonial past. Some historians may go even further and look at Partition inherently as the partition of Indian Muslims, who now remain divided in three nation-states and which ironically lack the sort of channels that might encourage crucial and substantial cross-boundary contacts. According to this view, Muslims might have been the main subjects of the processes and developments unleashed by Partition. Partition in that sense might be seen as a cut-off point for South Asian Islam, although in all other political, administrative and educational spheres, the pre-1947 antecedents and legacies persist strongly at various levels. Ansari is justified in emphasising a major historical deficit in South Asian historiography, where explanations are sought as to why Partition happened in the first place instead of what happened in its wake. The Indian Muslims seeking a new home in Pakistan preferred to be called refugees since they thought of themselves as voluntary immigrants to a place that 'belonged' to them, even though they had no other claim upon it. In a sense, they were concurrently 'outsiders' and 'insiders', in a situation which, more like Punjabis migrating into Indian Punjab and Delhi, created unique perceptions and relationships unseen in other recent migrations.

Just as Partition operated as one of the major driving forces in Indo-Pakistani relationships and underwrote the Hindu-Muslim equation in the post-1947 Subcontinent, the migrations have also left ongoing transformative imprints at the regional and national levels. The historical background to these crucial developments lies in the evolution of Sindh as a new province and the demand to join Pakistan, where many

Muslim Sindhis, from diverse social strata, saw a new beginning for themselves. Like Punjab following the irrigation schemes and resettlements, Sindh underwent an early form of agricultural revolution, whereas Karachi witnessed a manifold increase in its commercial and geopolitical significance. Railways, proximity to the Middle East and then the voluntary migrations from Punjab and Bombay into Karachi began to foster a greater sense of alienation among Sindhis in the pre-independence era. The Sindhi landlords, both from among the rural families and the descendants of the spiritual orders (pirs), were already uncomfortable with the Hindu moneyed class (banias) and the local bureaucracy known as Amils. Both of these groups belonged to the Lohana Hindu caste and were held in suspicion by the Sindhi Muslim landlords and the landless haris, who accused them of gradually gaining control of half of Sindh's arable land in lieu of unpaid loans owed by Muslim peasantry. The construction of irrigation barrages brought in Punjabis, increasing the feeling of alienation among Sindhis, and by the third decade of the last century 'the issue of who was and who was not a "Sindhi" had acquired political salience'.

Contestations over places of worship, such as the Manzilgah agitation of 1939-40, not only consolidated a stronger sense of Sindhi Muslimhood, it also highlighted the need for some trans-regional alliance, which was certainly offered by the All India Muslim League (AIML). The Manzilgah buildings in Sukkur, mostly in a state of disrepair, dated from the Mughal times and contained a mosque. There was also a Hindu temple in the vicinity and when Muslims demanded control of these buildings from the government, local influential Hindus protested. The latter formed a majority in Sukkur but, with the AIML and Sufi saints making it into an Islamic issue, the agitation spread far and wide until eventually the judges gave a verdict in favour of the Muslims. Clearly, Sindhi society was already showing fissures when the great divide and migrations happened. The exodus of Hindus from Sindh made available vast tracts of land, residential property and other local commercial enterprises to Sindhi Muslims. For instance, the rural waderos(chieftains) seized 800,000 acres out of the 1,345,000 acreage abandoned by Hindus, although the urban properties were obtained mostly by the refugees from India.

Apart from identity-related issues, the economic, political and cultural fall-out from migration was to fashion collective perceptions and official policies in Sindh anchoring the future shape of settlements as well as politicking in the province. Sindh's woes were exacerbated by a smaller degree of representation in Pakistan's first constituent assembly, alongside the transfer of Karachi to the central government as a federal territory (though the provincial government continued to operate from the same metropolis). The early settlement patterns in urban Sindh did evoke sympathy among Sindhis who had been supportive of the creation of Pakistan, and soon the towns and cities were neighboured by tented villages housing refugees. The travails of refugees in both countries were heart-rending but 'the consensus among foreign observers in Pakistan was that the treatment meted out on the Indian side of the border was worse than that experienced by people leaving Pakistan, and so Muslim refugees arrived in a poor state'.

This early sympathy, however, was soon replaced by grudge as refugees also began to arrive from Punjab, leading many Sindhi politicians such as Ayub Khuhro to claim that 'for every one Hindu that [sic] has left, two Muslims have come in'. The number of refugees arriving in Punjab was in fact larger than in Sindh, but the new demographic situation and accompanying configurations were more visible in the latter because of its smaller size and the pressure on existing urban centres. The rural population in Sindh increased by 40 per cent between 1901 and 1951 whereas in urban areas that figure was 120 per cent. The refugees, in many cases, were not skilled professionals capable of operating the factories left behind by their Hindu owners, but a gradual industrialisation of urban Sindh soon took a decisive turn following the injection of new funds. Industrialisation and urbanisation were crucially advanced because many refugees originated from urban India and, seeking official incentives, tried to establish their own manufacturing and commercial concerns. However, given the fact that the standard of living among the people who left Pakistan was higher than that of the refugees coming in, more resources and greater effort were required to build up supportive civic and economic institutions.

As the result of a large-scale refugee influx, both India and Pakistan came under severe pressure to allocate evacuee property and assets to the incomers, which led to almost identical, and often chaotic, coping mechanisms in the wake of many cases of false or exaggerated claims. The refugee issues soon began to be

politicised as their spokesmen tried to seek more incentives from the state through petitions and conventions and even by building up alliances with Punjabi politicians. In the process, Sindhi politicians such as Khuhro felt that they were being ignored by the centre. Unlike the mostly urban Muhajir politicians, their Sindhi counterparts generally represented landowning influences and accounted for a small group of families. In fact, as documented by Ansari, just five per cent of Sindh's inhabitants owned 95 per cent of agricultural land, leaving 2.6 million landless haris in a pitiable state. While the Muhajir and Sindhi politicians engaged in a power struggle, the haris were largely left on their own, although some conscientious officials such as M. A. Masud did raise strong voices on their behalf. Even the official commission to investigate the issues of landlessness and exploitation by local feudal landowners was headed by Sindhi landlords, disallowing any major land reforms. The institutionalisation of the urban refugee population through educational, media, civic and commercial forums afforded them better opportunities for lobbying, which extended to their assumption of an air of victimhood, derived from the sacrifices that they had rendered to come to Pakistan.

The intra-refugee differences and tensions among plural communities in both wings of Pakistan pushed the state, as well as the refugees, towards seeking commonalities in an overarching Islamic ethos. The 'pull' for positing Pakistan as an Islamic dispensation also came from the untiring religious scholars (ulama), who in many cases were themselves refugees and used Urdu to spearhead the case for Islamisation. Karachi was soon to become a hotbed of Islamic activism pressuring the regimes to move the country's institutions towards a strict Islamic orientation. But such pressures were only aggravating the day-to-day problems faced in East Pakistan and in plural provinces such as Sindh, pushing the Pakistani state towards further centralisation in the form of One-Unit in 1955, which did away with the existing four provinces of West Pakistan. The reshaping of Karachi occurred because of an ongoing refugee influx not only from Urdu speaking regions of India but also from other provinces. The Indo-Pakistani parleys eventually led to another spate of immigration in 1952 and, as on previous occasions, these refugees also opted to settle in the existing urban colonies of their co-ethnics, turning the Pakistani metropolis into a megalopolis of segmented, even segregated settlements. Efforts to create an encompassing sense of common identity employed markers such as Islam, migration and Urdu as shared bonds. As we saw in the 1970s and subsequent decades, these markers strengthened a sense of Muhajir separatism, which often conflicted with the state and other ethnic communities in urban Sindh.

By the time of the implementation of the One-Unit scheme for West Pakistan, there were still several thousand refugees squatting on the roads in Karachi who had only recently arrived in Pakistan through a staggered system. These urban poor were joined by a growing number of other population groups arriving from upcountry to seek a better livelihood in Pakistan's political and industrial hub. Unlike the Punjabi working class, the Punjabi domination of the civil service and military irked both the rural Sindhis and urban Muhajir, as well as antagonising the East Bengalis. The Sindhi and even traditional Balochi presence in Karachi became a minority as Muhajir dominated the local municipal corporation and controlled the English and Urdu media. These elements supported the One-Unit formula, as did the Sindhi political stalwarts including Khuhro, the Pir of Pagaro, Pir Ali Rashdi and a few others. Whereas One-Unit might have suited the Punjabi and Muhajir elite, it deeply offended Bengalis and Pushtuns who viewed it as the Punjabisation of Pakistan. Many vocal Sindhi politicians such as G. M. Syed also opposed the One-Unit scheme, although the Muhajir-Punjabi axis was to remain in place for the next fifteen years.

Suspensions between the Muhajir and Punjabi elite did not emerge more openly until the separation of East Pakistan in 1971, as earlier both felt threatened by a Bengali majority in the eastern wing. Islam, Urdu and a centralised system of government were deemed synonymous with Pakistani nationhood, and against a background of economic and political stalemate, Pakistan's already weak political culture began to see more and more interference from the civil and military wings of the bureaucracy. In 1958, Pakistani generals led by Ayub Khan declared martial law, ending eight years of political governments which, while attempting to establish governance, had failed to consolidate a politics of consensus, constitutionalism and country-wide empowerment.

In the meantime, with the weakening of the Muslim League and the emergence of several ethnic pressure groups, Jamaat-i-Islami (JI) made its entry. Established in Punjab in 1941 by Syed Mawdudi, himself an

Urdu-speaking scholar from India, the JI worked for individual and statist transformation through Islamic revolution in a revivalist mould. It found many followers among the middle-class Punjabi and Muhajir middle-class professionals and made its presence felt in the local elections for the Karachi Municipal Corporation in 1958. The JI was to remain the main force in Karachi up to 1984, when a new ethnic organisation, the Muhajir Qaumi Movement (MQM), founded by the descendants of the refugees, emerged on the political scene and took Karachi by storm. The MQM was established by second-generation Urdu-speakers and proposed to work for Muhajir groups on its own without seeking fraternity with any other ethnic community in Karachi or rural Sindh. Earlier, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP) had tried to induct a national consensus on Islamic Socialism through co-opting various sections of the society. The future politics of Sindh, and especially of Karachi, was to revolve around the MQM, Army, PPP, Sindh landlords and the JI.

Like the One-Unit scheme, martial law also received support from the Punjabi, Muhajir and rural Sindh elite, although East Pakistan and the Frontier remained wary of further centralisation, fearing consolidation of the Punjabi factor in its wake. However, the ordinary people heaved a sigh of relief as the generals made promises about the removal of poverty and socio-political injustices. Commodity prices came down for a short while and a degree of official efficiency became apparent, although Pakistan's chronic problems of governance remained and perhaps became even more acute. The military regime pursued large-scale housing schemes in Karachi for the speedy settlement of the many squatters who lived there, but it also decided to shift the capital to Islamabad, a new city in the proximity of the garrison town of Rawalpindi. Ayub Khan's military regime was under pressure to introduce land reforms in Pakistan, which were resisted even by his own ministers such as Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. However, a minor reform delineating landholdings was introduced without breaking down the powerbase of the West Pakistani feudal landowners whose support Ayub Khan needed to shore up his regime. He then promulgated a constitution in 1962 which concentrated powers in his office and allowed a very limited franchise in a country where equal political participation and decentralisation had already turned into explosive issues.

Ansari's *Life after Partition* is based on extensive archival work in Karachi - her second home - and at The National Archives in London. In addition, she has consulted the contemporary American diplomatic correspondence and has widely studied the files of *Dawn*, the main English daily in Pakistan, which often flagged the issues of the refugees, until recently with its assumption of a more liberal and mainstream national profile. She was, however, unable to consult the Sindh and Urdu newspapers which could have offered further evidence about shifting political alliances, as well as throwing a much-needed searchlight on local issues outside Karachi, which is certainly the focus of her research. The power of the vernacular press in the pre-television era cannot be underlined enough, although the enormity of literature on Pakistani politics is certainly helpful in this regard. Most of the existing scholarship on Pakistan is still preoccupied with themes such as the formation of the country, the role of Islam, geopolitical developments and the recurrent issues of governance, whereas socio-economic treatises hinging on identity politics and national integration remain few and far between. It is surprising that in a country formed through Partition and where every sixth person seeks his or her origins from somewhere else, these two themes are still waiting for some holistic studies. In the same vein, the partition of Punjab falls within the realm of regional studies and consequently its role as the powerhouse for the Pakistani state, and the parallels with Sindh in areas of refugee transfer and settlement, also remain unresearched. Following Ansari's detailed study of Sindh, there should be sufficient incentive for a similar monograph on Punjab which might further help us understand a complex and always fluid politics of identity. In addition, as was observed above, such research is needed to continue the ongoing diversification of South Asian historiography regarding state formation and the public and private perceptions of political Islam.

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