

## **Borders and Conflict in South Asia. The Radcliffe Boundary Commission and the Partition of Punjab**

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Pippa Virdee

Lucy Chester's book is a highly readable and accessible effort, which attempts to make two key assertions. Firstly, 'that the boundary commission headed by Cyril Radcliffe offers a window into the complexity of nationalist dealings with the colonial power structures' (p. 1) and secondly, that 'it was not the location of the Radcliffe boundary but the flawed process of partition that caused the terrible violence of 1947' (p. 1). Underpinning these assertions are four key themes: 'haste, a veneer of order, a concern for international reputation and a conscious presentation of the process as one for which South Asians bore primary responsibility' (p. 3). Chester therefore explores the making of the Indo-Pakistan boundary, a process that took six weeks and was headed by a British lawyer with no relevant skills in boundary-making, and how this event was interwoven in the wider political arena of British imperial decline. The book is firmly positioned within the high politics of the period, focusing primarily on the role of Radcliffe and the last Viceroy, Lord Louis Mountbatten. Central to the research is the impact the boundary line had on the Punjab province.

From the onset Chester is critical of the British departure from India, calling it 'hasty, ill-planned and extremely bloody' (p. 4). Yet they also attempted to apply 'a veneer of order' to the process, by first attempting to preserve the reputation of Viceroy Mountbatten by using Radcliffe as a suitable scapegoat, and second presenting a process in which the South Asian leadership had some agency. Britain was concerned with preserving its reputation during this vital time of handing over power. Financially broke and emotionally battered following the Second World War, this was a crucial period from which it was important that Britain emerged with its reputation in tact and to present an orderly withdrawal from India rather giving the impression that it was forced to quit India. This was after all the 'jewel in the crown' of the

British Empire and it would eventually set the pace of decolonisation in other colonies seeking independence.

What is interesting about Chester's work is that it is explored through the prism of cartography. Maps were important to the imperial power, not just for mapping the terrain they ruled but also as a means of imperial control. The discussion on the colonial maps however seems limited (pp. 18–22) and would have benefited from a more in-depth discussion on the creation of maps and its impact on religious identities, and impact that ultimately led to Muslim separatist demands and the creation of Pakistan. The colonial obsession with collecting and documenting the landscape and its people is illustrated in volumes such as, *The Imperial Gazetteer of India, Atlas* (1909 and 1931). The maps in the Gazetteers highlight the 'prevailing' races, languages and religions of India. In reality these were never fixed, but the repercussions of British rule were that these identities became increasingly defined and rigid. These debates should have been considered by Chester when examining the historical context of partition. Chester does later discuss whether better maps would have improved the partition process. This is unlikely given the time constraints and the political events unfolding at the time which ensured that this was anything but a smooth transfer of power. The British had been in power for so long that getting hold of 'neutral' maps would have been difficult, however had the process not been so rushed then perhaps it would have been possible to survey the area in more detail to aid the division process. Thus Chester argues that it was not the cartographic information that was flawed but rather the partition process itself that lacked order.

The most illuminating aspect of the book is the analysis on Radcliffe; Chester questions the perceived notions that Radcliffe was ignorant about India prior to his arrival as the Chair of the boundary commission. Radcliffe, an establishment figure, would have had some insider knowledge due to his role as Director General in the Ministry of Information during the Second World War. He also had some personal connections via his brother who died in India in 1938. So although seen as being an impartial figure, he would have had some conception of the political landscape in India, though this is not the same as actual lived experience of the land and its people. What is interesting in Chester's analysis is that Radcliffe was very much an establishment figure, committed to his sense of duty to the British Government and so in a sense he was not impartial with regard to the process of boundary-making.

Radcliffe's relationship with Mountbatten offers the most intriguing aspect in the book, raising questions over the extent to which Mountbatten influenced the boundary award. Chester suggests that Radcliffe was not as aloof as he is often portrayed, however, it is difficult to quantify the level of 'influence' Mountbatten had on the outcomes of the boundary commission. Arguably this is one of the most lingering legacies of the partition of India and there is little in the book to dispel any further controversy. Radcliffe's private secretary, Christopher Beaumont, suggests that Mountbatten did not influence the line at Gurdaspur, however, Radcliffe was certainly swayed by his opinions regarding Ferozepur. While the controversies surrounding Mountbatten's role will continue, Chester does offer an interesting insight into how Radcliffe felt when leaving India, 'I station myself firmly on the Delhi airport until an aeroplane from England comes along. Nobody in India will love me for my award about the Punjab and Bengal and there will be roughly 80 million with a grievance who will begin looking for me. I do not want them to find me. I have worked and travelled and sweated – oh I have sweated the whole time' (p. 100). This is a rare insight because the enigmatic Radcliffe ensured that his reputation survived by his obsession of destroying papers, leaving much to conjecture. There are traces here of the equally loyal General Reginald Dyer who also ensured that none of his personal papers would get into the public realm and therefore leaving the historian to speculate over his role and personal views over the Jallianwala Bagh massacre.

Chester also offers some interesting insights into the processes and events that unfolded during this short but intense period, and this is further strengthened by the use of personal interviews with the likes of Christopher Beaumont, who was with Radcliffe at most times. In chapter four Radcliffe's private deliberations are discussed and one interesting aspect that emerges is the debate over the division of the two leading cities, Lahore and Amritsar. Lahore was the leading commercial heartland of Punjab with an influential and affluent non-Muslim population, while Amritsar depended much on the Muslim artisans that contributed to the vibrancy of the city. During their deliberations, Chester asserts that they were 'driven by the need to preserve Amritsar's economic and strategic position' (p. 75), hinting that perhaps no one had anticipated the

demographic and economic consequences of partition on Amritsar city.<sup>(1)</sup> The reality was that Amritsar suffered more than Lahore due to its geographic positioning as a border city; the large Muslim artisan class had left a big void in the labour market thus leading to its decline.<sup>(2)</sup> Through this chapter the importance of infrastructure in determining the boundary line becomes clear, second only to religious considerations.

The aftermath of partition is discussed in chapter six and it is suggested that the boundary was a source of confusion and a trigger for violence but this is where there is a divergence between high politics and understanding partition and its impact through history from below. While it certainly created confusion, speaking to the victims of partition violence and migration allows them to reveal the multiple reasons for their departure. Many people resisted migration, for example in Lyallpur the sizable Sikh population were forced to leave in September after appeals made by the Sikh leader, Master Tara Singh and the West Punjab Governor, Sir Francis Mudie; others saw the migration as a temporary measure due to the uncertainty and had planned to come back to their ancestral lands. Even the leadership of the two countries had anticipated that the refugees would return to their homes once the situation had improved. Thus the newly created international border in reality meant little to the people, until it began to limit and restrict people's movement. Zamindar's work <sup>(3)</sup> has also shown how during the early years the border was quite porous and there was much more flexibility in movement of people, indeed as is noted by Chester herself, people were coming back and forth to make arrangements for their processions and properties until the permit system was introduced.

Chapter seven is based on a counterfactual argument titled, "An awful lot of thought should have gone into it": alternatives to the Radcliffe award'. Unfortunately Chester should indeed have put more thought into this chapter or omitted it altogether. It adds little to the overall argument and as a chapter it is quite short. Chester's 'what if' argument is based on what the border would have looked like had the other three main parties been successful in their submission to the boundary commission. Of course, the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs (not the only ones making submissions to the Commission) were guided by their own interests and put forward requests that would secure them the maximum territory, knowing that not all their demands would be met.

Occasionally Chester makes strong assertions such as, 'the violence that wracked Punjab in 1947 was the work of militants of all religions ...' (p. 191) this clearly exonerates the ordinary and opportunistic people who were caught up in the frenzy of violence that gripped Punjab in August 1947. Localised studies reveal how ordinary people turned to violence in a rage of vengeance or in some case merely seeing it as an opportunity to loot and plunder. Further on Chester also claims that the decision-makers 'repeatedly refused to implement plans for an orderly exchange of population ...' (p. 193), however, the idea of a planned exchange of population was not completely inconceivable because Mohammad Ali Jinnah had suggested this as early as 1945. The newly formed governments had also, once they realised the scale of the migration, set-up organisations like the Military Evacuation Organisation and the Liaison Agency to deal with the movement of people across the borders. The problem of course was that although the decision-makers had prepared themselves for partition no one had prepared themselves for the ensuing violence and mass migration that followed.

On the whole Chester's book is highly readable and should interest a wider public beyond those solely interested in the partition of India. It attempts to bring in the wider political framework regarding British imperial control and decline in India and touches upon the fascinating relationship between Radcliffe and Mountbatten. Indeed this is one of the strengths of the book. However, at times the book is overly ambitious, for example chapter eight aims to examine the development of the Indo-Pakistani borderlands in the years following partition but suffers from the plethora of material covered and thus lacks the detail. Generally the first half of the book is much stronger and more detailed, while latter half is weaker and more generalised. As the book is analysed from a high politics perspective it does at times overlook some of the more nuanced material emerging from localised case studies utilising personal narratives in understanding partition. Nevertheless Chester's account of the end of empire in India and the partition of the Punjab is a valuable contribution.

## Notes

1. See further Ian Talbot, *Divided Cities: Partition and Its Aftermath in Lahore and Amritsar 1947–57* (Oxford, 2006).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. K. L. Luthra, *Impact of Partition in Border Districts of East Punjab* (East Punjab, 1949).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar, *The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia: Refugees, Boundaries, Histories* (New York, NY, 2007).[Back to \(3\)](#)

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