

Nisid Hajari: *Midnight's Furies: The Deadly Legacy of India's Partition*

(Penguin Viking, 2015)

Nisid Hajari, the Asia editor of *Bloomberg View*, has written a dramatic and fast paced account of developments in India in 1947 and 1948, concentrating on the Partition riots, the process and personalities involved in Partition, and the mayhem that accompanied that separation. Hajari also describes events related to the more complex and disputed episodes of Partition — the accession of Junagadh, Jammu and Kashmir and Hyderabad and the use of force by both Pakistan and India. He has a riveting story to tell and he tells it well.

The book is an impressive work in many respects, with deft touches showing the nature and character of the leaders involved and of how they appeared to their contemporaries. At a time when anyone in either India or Pakistan with memories of Partition is already seventy years old or more, a narrative like this is useful to inform subsequent generations, who are now the overwhelming majority of Indians and Pakistanis, of the facts of the past, — a past that has been so heavily and contradictorily mythologised in both countries. The strength of this book is in its narrative strength, its marshalling of facts, and its objectivity in presenting them. It even manages to maintain, for the most part, a conversational tone despite the grimness of much of what it describes. For those of us born after those events, it goes some way to set the basic narrative straight. And Hajari's fine ear for dialogue seldom lets him down: "You are heading for disaster, I wish you Godspeed!" shouted Jinnah to Khizar, while slamming the phone down on the disobedient Punjab Chief Minister.

It is also an accessible reminder of how confused and bewildering the march of events that led to and resulted from Partition were to all concerned, whether ordinary people or their leaders, and of the speed and simultaneity of major developments. The story is clearly and well told of how Partition related communal riots spread west — from the organised violence in Bengal of the Muslim League's 16 August 1946 Direct Action Day to the Punjab to Delhi in September 1947. It is a useful reminder of what communal passions once aroused can do to society and to people's lives, and of how the instigators of communal violence and hatred have no control over the course of events and their outcomes. This is a lesson that each generation in India seems to have to learn for itself, even though the searing experience of Partition should have sufficed for several generations.

If anything the story is almost too coldly told, for it hard to read of such brutality by all the communities involved without moral outrage. Hajari has made a tremendous effort to be even-handed in his treatment of Muslim, Sikh and Hindu leaders and groups involved in the violence. No one comes out well in this story of brutality and violence. It may well be too soon to come to definite historical judgements on the events of Partition which are still playing themselves out. But it seems unlikely to me that even-handedness is an accurate reflection of the reality of those troubled times. While a journalist tells all sides of a story, without judging them, a historian should go further. For instance, it is one thing to describe the violence, But I have yet to see a satisfactory answer to how order returned after such carnage and mayhem in both Punjab and Bengal, or in Lahore and Delhi.

Hajari chooses to tell the political story of Partition primarily as a quarrel between Jinnah and Nehru. He ends his narration by saying that Nehru's long battle with Jinnah had ended with Jinnah's death and the action in Hyderabad. Indeed, personalities are given free and full rein in this telling of events. This has the advantage of heightening dramatic effect by bringing two very different but commanding figures to centre stage in the story. Hajari is also often critical of Gandhiji and Nehru and seems to consider them as responsible as Jinnah for Partition even though he never actually says so. Here again the moral equivalence that Hajari establishes between these leaders is something that will irk many. He has managed to do so even though we live in a time when the legacies and consequences of Partition are still with us in so many ways.

Interestingly, the British come out relatively unscathed in Hajari's account, with little mention of their agency or responsibility, probably because most of his sources are British. For instance, Olaf Caroe as Governor of NWFP had a direct hand in the demonstrations and attacks on Nehru during his visit, and in ensuring that Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan's ANP lost the referendum and power, thus making possible Pakistan's creation. But these facts find no mention in the book. There are good reasons for the British version of events to prevail in collective memory. Indians involved in significant events have not recorded them with the same meticulous care and detail or flair as even minor British officials, the archival practices (or lack thereof) of both the Indian and Pakistani governments have been limited and sporadic, and leaders have been routinely deified in the sub-continent. Unless this changes, we must be prepared for widespread illiteracy about our own history even among the educated, and what they know will be what outsiders write about our history. Which is one more reason to be grateful to Hajari for his book.

Hajari has done us all a service by reminding us of how deeply the roots of so many of our present preoccupations, particularly in Pakistan, go back to the formative period of Partition. Pakistan's paranoia that India is determined to eliminate her, the dysfunctional nature of Pakistan's politics, the outsize political role of the Pakistan Army, Pakistan's use of insurgents and jihadis and tribesmen as state policy, the use and abuse of religion in politics, and her active seeking out of external powers as patrons for her anti-Indian obsession, can all be traced directly back to Partition. Even today, as in 1947, it is in Pakistan's interest to argue, as Jinnah did in letters to Attlee, that the subcontinent is the most dangerous place on earth and a threat to international peace and security that requires intervention by the big powers. Well before Pakistan is formed Jinnah is offering Pakistan to the Viceroy as a permanent foothold for Britain in the subcontinent, and a way of keeping the Hindus from meddling in the Middle East.

For India as well, the ever-present risk and the dangerous consequences of communal polarisation, the hostile relationship with Pakistan, the long running distraction of the Kashmir issue in international fora, the wars with Pakistan, cross border terrorism from Pakistan, the encouragement of the Khalistan movement by Pakistan — (what would Master Tara Singh have thought of that?) — all are foreshadowed or have their origins in the events surrounding Partition.

The seeds planted then have borne deadly fruit for decades, and show no signs of dying out. Hajari's account of the seminal period from 1946 to 1948 is therefore redolent with resonances when read today.

One would have wished for more analysis after the ten narrative chapters, though Hajari does weave his own analysis into the narrative. Hajari does draw some conclusions in an Epilogue. One is left hoping for more, that the conclusions that he alludes to in the Epilogue would be spelt out in detail. But perhaps that is another book, for a less fevered time.

All in all this is a book that I would recommend as a good, readable introduction to a critical period on our history, well written and with enough colour to interest a new and younger generation of Indians and Pakistanis who need to get away from the myths that they have been fed about Partition. This book could help to start that process.

Shivshankar Menon
11 July 2015