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Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar, *The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia: Refugees, Boundaries, Histories*

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**Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar, *'The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia: Refugees, Boundaries, Histories'*,
New York: Columbia University Press, 2007, xiv + 288 pages**

William Gould

[1] In 2007 the 60th anniversary of Indian and Pakistani independence was celebrated by the inhabitants of both states and in the homes of their widespread diasporas. Yet as in 1997, the celebrations were tempered with a sense of the tragedy that had befallen so many families dispersed by the violence of partition. It is only in the last 15 years or so that historians have really started to ask more searching questions about the realities of the quotidian violence of partition which as well as being symbolic in its brutality, also created lasting fractures and ambiguities about citizenship rights and notions of 'home'. The work, in particular, of Mushirul Hasan and Ian Talbot has uncovered new accounts of partition experiences. In a different vein, the writings of Urvashi Butalia and Rita Menon/Kamla Basin, have provided material unravelling the specific experiences of women, and the restricted agency with which they managed their predicament. Vazira Zamindar's highly readable and creatively researched book takes this historiography further, and addresses other lacunae in studies of Indian independence, by moving beyond preoccupation with places and events and by opening up new multi-layered fields of historical enquiry. On the one hand, *The Long Partition* moves us away from the 'high politics' of 1947, in a similar manner to the recent work of Joya Chatterji, to look at the experiences of refugees and the response of the state. Like Chatterji's *Spoils of Partition* and to some extent, Yasmin Khan's *The Great Partition*, Zamindar examines the effects of policy decisions and everyday state actions for people 'on the ground'. But unlike other works on partition, Zamindar radically reconfigures the historical significance of space and time as an element of Indian/Pakistani identity.

[2] In January 1950, Mohammad Ismail, the Pakistani High Commissioner for India, made a statement, reproduced in the Lucknow newspaper *Tanvir*, that he was not actually a Pakistani national and had no intention of becoming one. Mohammad Ismail, a UP Muslim, had not physically migrated to Pakistan but believed that he could nevertheless represent the Pakistani state. This controversy was one of the key points of discussion in the Pakistan Constituent Assembly as it debated the Citizenship Bill for the fixing of the definition of citizenship for government servants (pp. 176-7). These discussions encapsulated in a single moment some of the ambiguities and contradictions surrounding citizenship that are so well captured by *The Long Partition*. On the one hand, Zamindar deliberately uses the term 'displacement' rather than 'migration' (p. 7), to stress the ways in which her subjects were at once neither 'insiders' or 'outsiders' in a process in which national belonging was incomplete, contingent and ambivalent. *The Long Partition* really does 'write on the border', exploring the unevenness of research in two nation-states, by focussing on the cities of Karachi and Delhi. On the other hand, Zamindar upsets the idea of 1947 as a specific moment of transition in which the relations between the two states were decided, and more importantly when political freedom and the rights of citizens were theoretically determined. Instead, Zamindar takes the life histories of her subjects further into the early 1950s, to suggest that the process of partition and the displacements it entailed extended well beyond the boundaries of state crisis hitherto set out by scholars.

[3] Chapters 1 and 2 examine the personal and family histories of the displaced in Delhi and Karachi around 1947 itself, and explore the ways in which both states created the category of 'refugee'. The book weaves the narratives of displaced families into a discussion of the changing logic of 'refugee' policy, which juxtaposed rehabilitation of one community with the exodus of another and thereby reinscribed new forms of community identity. Immediately the style is readable and addictive, although in the first chapter more engagement with the literature on violence around partition and approaches to 'communal' violence would have added depth. Nevertheless, the main concern of the author is elsewhere and the research here on the exodus from Delhi, and the meanings surrounding the idea of 'evacuee' property provides a unique insight into the multi-positional history of human displacement. Multiple agencies, including police and 'relief and rehabilitation' officers were directly implicated in the quotidian events which created the need for mass movement across hastily constructed borders, allowing Zamindar to create a series of narratives which shed a very different light on the overall significance of refugee 'rehabilitation'.

[4] Across and around her local and individual stories, Zamindar also uncovers official policy, revealing in particularly interesting and unique passages, the simultaneous positioning of Pakistan and India on the 'refugee crisis'. Chapter 2 looks at the category of *muhajir* - a term denoting a migrant who may return to India, and whose position was ambiguous compared to the Indian Hindu 'refugee' migrant (p. 53). This nuanced chapter describes the hierarchical gradations of *muhajir* seeking accommodation in a Karachi housing crisis and explores the response of the state to 'evacuee' properties. In Pakistan the work of the Rent Controller's office in identifying 'vacant' properties was made more difficult by the ambiguities surrounding possession. In this atmosphere, *muhajir* publications demonized the migrant Sindhi Hindus as being allegedly culpable in taking advantage of vacant properties in India, and in holding onto homes in Karachi. Cutting across this, Zamindar explores the media and government debates about 'hostage theory', in which the minorities of each state could be seen as balanced, and expertly navigates the complex arguments of those in Pakistan calling for Sindhi Hindu return. In places, it would have been useful to see how far the issue of the 'legibility' of refugees of either community was disturbed or altered by the actions of local administrators, rather than national/state governments. But Zamindar has packed a lot of cross-cutting voices into these chapters, writing at once a social history of the displaced, and an analysis of state policy.

[5] Chapters 3 and 4 look in more detail at permit regulations and the effects of evacuee property legislation on displaced individuals and families. Importantly, these chapters allow Zamindar to explore how the outcomes of partition extended well beyond the first movements of 1947 and early 1948: the Indian government introduced the permit system, which set limits on return in the early 1950s, to prevent the reflux of returning Muslims attempting to take back their original homes. Perhaps most fascinating of all in Chapter 4 is the exploration of the category of 'intending evacuee' as a designation of a north Indian Muslim and his or her property (pp. 144-6). Here, Zamindar touches on the manifold ways in which citizenship was made ambiguous for those whose families might have moved for any reason to the other state. This is done by moving beyond the representation of life stories as mere 'history', and the experiences of Zamindar's many interviewees are beautifully narrated and sensitively treated. Instead, the voices of those such as Rafi Bhai are presented as personal experiences, which defied the very efforts of state driven 'legibility' designed to contain them (pp. 79-82).

[6] In reflecting on these experiences though, Zamindar suggests that we need to shift our view of the real 'partition' to the several years after 1947, and with the introduction of the

permit system, the final settlement of those who might have intended to return to their original homes was again ambiguously determined. For these people, there were many different kinds of 'partition' working below the initial great divide. Those Muslims who did return to India were, for example, the subject of intense surveillance and media attention as potential fifth columnists or 'belligerent agents' of the Pakistani state in some cases (p. 94). But the system completely cut across the national ideologies of both states, in prioritising security and economic development over the accommodation of new or returning refugees. These unique restrictions on movement were circumvented in quite creative ways (pp. 105-6; 142-3), and deals were made, involving forms of illegal gratification for the settling of 'vacant' properties into refugee possession. In the state's prosecution of those individuals and families caught up in 'illegal' activity and/or movement, Zamindar shows how the determination of citizenship was legally defined, but along the lines of somewhat arbitrary decisions about the meaning of 'migration'.

[7] Chapters 5 and 6 cover the shift from the permit system to the use of passports, as a technological marker of citizenship. Crucially, Zamindar shows how these measures created individuals and families who were caught between states, in a 'limin' of dispossession and homelessness. Specifically, the passport system was introduced in 1952 on the insistence of the Pakistan government as it attempted to stem the flow of UP Muslims into Pakistan. In Chapter 5 then, Zamindar explores the 'indeterminate relationships between passports and citizenship', and opens up the policy debates and grassroots realities for 'returning' migrants following the Nehru-Liaquat pact (pp. 164-170). The central part of this chapter is the discussion of the inter-dominion manoeuvring which once again often tended to prioritise economic considerations over issues of political identity and longer term national ideologies.

[8] The final chapter examines in more detail the significance of the passport as a technology for marking national identity. But it looks at how that marker was made highly ambiguous for an important section of both India's and Pakistan's populations caught between two different states, or resident in a state that they did not consider to be their home. In unravelling the personal histories involved in this process, Zamindar explores the system in terms of the 'phantasm' of passports. Many threw away documents as a means of avoiding the gaze of the state, but were presumed (for example by the Indian government) to be holders of Pakistani passports. But in this exercise, Hindu minorities from Pakistan were given relatively privileged access to Indian citizenship. In contrast, Indian Muslims returning after a period of time in Pakistan were not so easily granted the necessary Indian passport (pp. 198-200). It was in this

final state distinction between different categories of 'migrant' or displaced persons, that the Indian state ostensibly used the official language of secularism (such Muslim returnees were described as 'Pakistanis') but in reality paid lip service to religious markers of difference.

[9] Herein lies one of the most profound messages of the book: On the one hand, the state of Pakistan was founded on the idea of a Muslim homeland, which nevertheless respected the religious rights of its minorities. Yet not only was it largely denuded of those religious minorities, but it was resistant to the later influx of those very Muslim communities from UP who had most enthusiastically bought into the project of 'Pakistan'. On the other hand, the dominant party of consensus in India, the Congress, had more or less consistently (up to the March 1947, when it reluctantly acquiesced in the partition of India) fought for the notion of a united secular India against the demands of the League in the early to mid 1940s. Yet the secular ideals of the Indian state were immediately compromised by the distinction it made in its technologies of citizenship markers, between Hindus and Muslims. It is at this point, near the end of the book, that Zamindar hammers this point home, again by exploring its implications for ordinary Indians: Bihari miners who had neither a Pakistani nor an Indian passport, but who were associated with a 'phantasmic' Pakistani national identity (pp. 200-2); a millworker from Kanpur without a passport in 1954, who wished to visit his ailing daughter in Pakistan but who would be unable to return without having a Pakistani passport in his possession, and was subsequently arrested under the Foreigners Act (pp. 206-7); and the predicament of women who were not entitled to independent citizenship and independent movement (pp. 209-13).

[10] Without doubt, Vazira Zamindar has written a book which will probably be one of the definitive and defining works on the history of not only India's partition but any other work looking at how national identity is used by states to control the meaning of citizenship. In places, the book leaves the reader with the feeling of the vastness of the project's research material that in some cases is not fully digested, or in which the full implications of the details are not fully played out. This is partly down to the scattered nature of Zamindar's material – a predicament that she generally turns to her benefit, but which confronts any historian of the late 1940s. With the exception of Chapter 6, the individual interviews serve as tasters to what appears to be the real business of digging up the archive and tracing the actions of the state(s), but of course this again is a device used by the author to use what might otherwise present itself as disparate and somewhat tangentially connected material. Overall, this is one of the finest books to have

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appeared on the history of 20th Century India in the last decade or so, and certainly the most intriguing study of early independent India and Pakistan to have appeared for a long time.