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## Review of Neeti Nair's Changing Homelands: Hindu Politics and the Partition of India

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**Neeti Nair. *Changing Homelands: Hindu Politics and the Partition of India*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: Harvard University Press, 2011. 343 pp. Maps. \$55.00 (hardcover).**

As Neeti Nair concludes chapter 5 of her extremely impressive study of the Partition of India, *Changing Homelands*, she argues against the pat inclusion of Partition on a “trans-national” list of “genocidal conflicts” (218). Partition resists such a monolithic characterization, she argues, because of a highly complex mix of particular circumstances that defined the varying degrees of violence in particular places. Further, numerous individual Punjabi Hindu and Sikh accounts of their desire to return to what became Pakistan or to stay on in Pakistan “cannot be squared” with blanket characterizations of genocide, and these accounts are likewise part of a mix of narratives that includes a chaotic tangle of personal desires to flee or stay, to kill or to protect as an older order passed away, and a new order was ushered in.

Nair’s accomplishment in *Changing Homelands* is, above all else, her meticulously close attention to detail as she patiently unravels a number of vital strands in this larger tangle. She delivers a necessarily dense and complex, but very readable, narrative of what transpired in the Punjab (her focus), primarily over roughly a half century. She unveils a web of mixed, sometimes ambiguous and seemingly contradictory steadfast attachments to the ideals of both “the community” and “the nation” as Indians grappled with the question of exactly what it meant to be “patriotic” during this turbulent era. Through her extensive research into archives—memos, letters, private papers, official documents, newspaper accounts—in India, as well as in the U.K., along with a large number of personal interviews conducted 2002–2003 in Delhi with Partition refugees, Nair elucidates the then-contemporary descriptions of forces leading to Partition—some high-profile but others now mostly forgotten or disregarded—and sets them against the backdrop, late in her book (Chapter 6, “Memory and the Search for Meaning in Post-Partition Delhi”), of events viewed through memory, sometimes as though through a glass, darkly. Strikingly, the oral histories reveal, still, an almost uniform disbelief over the nightmarish levels of violence unleashed around Partition, and disbelief, too, that the “troubles” of the time would necessitate communal evacuations, especially permanently.

The Partition story in the Punjab centers, not surprisingly, on the growing concerns of minority communities regarding their political representation in an India struggling to emerge from British control. In the early stages of her text, Nair traces the impact of such legal

measures as the Land Alienation Act and the Morley-Minto reforms of 1909, which served to heighten division and adjust degrees of power between Hindus and Muslims. Nair closely develops a range of issues and follows major players in the growing communal consciousness within the Punjab, the religious/community associations that grew increasingly inextricable from questions of political protection and representation for minorities. In India as a whole, Hindus enjoyed majority status, while in the Punjab (especially in West Punjab), Hindus were decidedly in the minority. How to square majority status nationally with minority status provincially? If Muslims were to be guaranteed certain rights in India as a whole, would comparable minority rights be extended to Hindus and Sikhs at the provincial level(s)?

The wrangling over such issues (and more) of course draws into the center of the tale the goliath figures of Jinnah, Gandhi, and Nehru, but the earlier stages of Nair's account focuses far more on the important roles played in Punjab by Lajpat Rai and Swami Shradanand. The anti-colonial passion that drew Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs together, was espoused and vehemently defended by such leaders as Rai and Shradanand, while they also emphasized a stronger Hindu cohesiveness (*sangathan*) and purity, which also then helped feed a stronger identification of Hindu/India; such ambiguity defines for Nair the complex tension between the Community and the Nation that eventually found its articulation in a recognized need to divide the Punjab, though for a long time, Nair makes clear, a divided Punjab was clearly conceived in political circles as existing *within* one India.

Nair explores in some detail the ways in which various parties perceived the *Pakistan* that Jinnah and the Muslim League worked toward, and in Chapter 5, titled "Partition Violence and the Question of Responsibility," she also exposes the failings of leadership all-around (Congress Party, British, Muslim League) to prepare on either side of the border for divided military and police, along with anything approaching adequate planning for or protection and accommodation of refugees when the violence of Partition rose to furious pitch.

In her Introduction, Nair poses the question that largely propels the narrative of *Changing Homelands*:

Unlike the Hindus of the neighboring province of Sind, or those of Bengal, most Hindus were forced to leave a hastily carved up West Punjab in 1947. Did this unity in adversity forge a shared and common understanding of Partition? Had a unified politics led to their sudden migration? (5)

Nair's response to this is clearly "no," and it is a response carefully established, with a conscientious historian's thorough care and attention

to nuance, one that ultimately invites us to avoid the broad brush (*please*), to turn away from formulaic explanations of Partition as simply “communal violence” or “genocide,” and shows all of us how the patterns of history involve a host of mixed motives, ambiguities, contingencies, layers of division, and conflicting memories.

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