

**BOOK REVIEW**

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## ***Delhi Reborn: Partition and Nation Building in India's Capital by Rotem Geva***

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*Reviewed by Srishti Khanna*

Rotem Geva's *Delhi Reborn* is a refreshing addition to the huge corpus of writings on partition. Her work marks a historiographical shift from the existing writings by focusing on the partition as a process, tracing its genesis and evolution from the 1940s onwards. She chooses Delhi as the epicentre of her narrative since the capital city withstood the worst of the partition crisis. Rotem Geva's work goes beyond the portrayal of the partial picture in the standard narratives of partition history that simply concentrate on either the role of the stalwart leaders (like Gandhi, Nehru, Abul Kalam Azad, Patel, Jinnah and their all-India level organizations such as Indian National Congress and Muslim League) or exclusively analyse the impact of the partition crisis on the ordinary people. Geva brings together two separately studied aspects of the partition crisis: high politics at the national level and local-level bureaucratic manoeuvring. She argues that there is a strong connection between the two and studies its impact on everyday lives. She uses a vast range of sources, such as writings and speeches of the then political leaders of the Congress, Muslim League, and other Delhi-based organisations and women-led initiatives, such as the Shanti Dal; newspapers, novels, autobiographies, and oral transcripts. The use of such a range of archival material has allowed her to explore the tumult of partition from a top-down, as well as, bottom-up perspective.

Rotem Geva's work could be situated amongst and significantly differs from existing historiography on the partition that discusses everything from high politics to harrowing

experiences and memories of the upper-caste and marginalised communities, such as Dalits, scheduled tribes, women and Muslims in the severely hit areas of India. Geva's work looks at the impact of the crisis on Delhi's Muslim community. Eminent historians of partition history, such as Gyanendra Pandey, have examined how the tragedy of partition had adversely affected the lives of Muslims in Delhi. They have shown that Delhi was engulfed by violence, with Muslims coerced to evacuate or hide their Muslim identity, before Gandhi intervened to stem the violence against them. However, Geva has been able to provide a deeper insight into the biased and anti-Muslim role of some of the top leaders and state-level bureaucrats that caused lawlessness, corruption and inefficiency. She draws upon the recent works of Vazira Zamindar and agrees that the definition of the evacuee became open-ended during the tumultuous times of partition. However, she differs from Zamindar's work in the analysis of the custodian's role in the 'Muslim zones'. According to her, custodians of evacuee property were actively involved in the evacuation or displacement of Muslims, not only in the other parts of the capital city but also in those pockets exclusively reserved for the protection and safety of the Muslims or Muslim zones. Another interesting point that Geva has highlighted in her work is the sharpening of tensions not only on religious grounds but also on class-based biases. So, it was not just Hindus who exploited Muslims; poor Muslims could be seen being oppressed by the rich Muslims, too, and such kinds of violence persisted in the post-partition period, too.

Geva's book consists of five chronologically arranged chapters that depict the process of the gradual socio-spatial segregation of Muslims, from the Second World War to the post-independence period, culminating in the formation of exclusive zones inhabited by Muslims. The author's novel way of beginning each chapter with the eyewitness accounts of prominent figures from Delhi, such as Shahid Ahmed Dehlvi, Abdul Rahman Siddiqi, Ebadat Bareilvi, etc., and corroborating their experiences with elaborate archival documentation, makes for a fascinating mix of experiential and recorded histories of this tumultuous period.

In chapter one, Geva traced the emergence of the Muslim League as a significant political body that gradually came to represent the interests of the wider sections of Muslims. She argues that the Muslims of Delhi had witnessed several shocks during and after the uprising of 1857, due to which the sense of 'Muslimness' had become dormant. In this chapter, she opines that the crisis of the Second World War, the Quit India movement, and the failure of the Cripps Mission helped in the gradual strengthening of the Muslim League. She denounced every claim that drew a connection between the Lahore resolution and the demand for Pakistan. She used extensive archival sources to demonstrate that neither Jinnah nor any Muslim Leaguer ever asked for a separate nation called Pakistan in the 1940s. They wanted a separate space or confederative political and administrative structure within Akhand (Unified) Hindustan to safeguard the interests of the Muslims. In the post-war period, streets were emptied of Congress activities and taken over by the Muslim League. Yet the Muslim League campaign shows that despite the vicious attacks on everyone who opposed it, territorial vagueness continued to underline the movement. The continued uncertainty of the Pakistan movement could be observed from the discussions of contemporaries about whether Delhi would form a part of Pakistan or India. However, the INA trials and attacks against the Muslim leader Abdul Rashid played a pivotal role in solidifying the demand for the formation of Pakistan amongst conservative sections of the Muslim League. It was in 1946, a few months before partition, on the streets of Ballimaran locality in Delhi, that the idea of

Pakistan was shaped into a violent propensity. Jamait Ulama-e-Hind practically lost its influence over the masses. Nonetheless, the demand for Pakistan was still a utopian project.

In chapter two, Geva underscores the encounter of the utopian idea of Pakistan. She initiates the chapter with her usual innovative way of using eyewitness accounts. Through the contemporary reportage of Abdul Rehman Siddiqi and Shahid Ahmed Dehlvi, she paints a gloomy picture of Delhi burning in the flames of Partition in September. She explains the historiographical conundrum of who is to be held responsible for the partition crisis. Was it spontaneous, went out of control, or pre-planned? She argues that the media of the time, *Hindustan Times*, and the Hindi newspaper *Hindustan*, both created a dominant narrative that Hindu and Sikh refugees, with their stories of killing and arson, caused ethnic violence to begin in Delhi. However, the author takes us a little back in time to November 1946, to show that communal attacks had begun much earlier with the bombardment of Fateh Puri Mosque. She demonstrates that both Hindu and Muslim communal organisations had started preparations for self-defence that included gated protection and arming themselves with weapons. Home Minister Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel began altering the composition in favour of Hindus and Sikhs. Thus, Geva believes that Partition was a combination of spontaneity as well as pre-planning going on for several months before the bloodiest violence. The Muslim League had for months instilled desires of such a utopian Pakistan that had no synchronicity with reality. With the Mountbatten announcement of speedy transfer, it became clear that Delhi would remain a part of India, and the newly created Pakistan would not be able to accommodate all Muslims. Thus, the gradual removal of Muslim presence from important positions, such as the police force and other posts, unleashed havoc on Muslims. Many influential Muslims, such as Siddiqi and Dehlvi heavy-heartedly left Delhi in October.

In the third chapter, Geva discusses the precarious condition of poor Muslims left behind in India, particularly in Delhi. Geva begins this chapter with two novels set around the partition crisis to underscore the physical and social marginalisation of Muslims in Delhi. As she elucidates through Mohan Rakesh's novel *Andhere Band Kamre* (or 'Dark Closed Rooms'), Ibadat Ali, the owner of the house in question, who lived in the central rooms, was relegated to the secluded room on the top floor, just like Muslims were marginalised in post-partition Delhi. Through Yashpal's *Jhutha Sach* (or 'The False Truth'), she not only comments on Muslim ghettoisation but also on the inter- and intra-communal class-based tussle over property. She shows that Partition violence was not limited to a short period but rather continued till the 1950s. Unlike Vazira Zamindar's analysis, she contends that custodians actively encroached on the Muslim Zone. The custodian's intrusion could be made possible due to protracted violence, and political and ideological factions within the Congress, from the topmost leadership to the bureaucrats, police force, and organisations, which in turn were responsible for the gradual shrinkage of Muslim neighbourhoods in Delhi. Apart from the bureaucratic and communal factor, she highlights class dynamics to explain how rich Muslims were involved in the eviction of the poor labouring class Muslims from the Muslim Zone through *pugree* deals (bribery), for instance, as happened in Katra Shafi locality near Phatak Habash Ganj.

Following the usual pattern of beginning her chapters by centring experiences of the eminent figures of Delhi, she focuses on Pandit Girdharilal Datta from Yashpal's novel in the fourth chapter. She explores why Yashpal's novel chose to depict the declining world of Urdu

journalism over the triumphant Hindi press. In this chapter, Geva foregrounds the vernacular space of Delhi in the post-partition period. She shows that the Urdu press thrived for decades after Independence in the capital city. She depicts the active role played by the Muslim League newspapers such as *Dawn*, *Jang*, and *Anjam*; newspapers of nationalist Muslims, *Al Jamait* and *Nayi Duniya*, which once sided with the Congress during the nationalist movement and were fiercely against the Muslim League. Geva argues that these Muslim newspapers, far from being intimidated, ferociously criticised the government's inability or unwillingness to protect Muslim minority property and life, refugees, and the Hindu attitude towards them. Geva notes that because of their shared linguistic grounds, *Al Jamait* and *Nayi Duniya* received criticism from Arya Samaj and RSS while Nehru and Abdul Kalam Azad demonstrated their indifference to them.

In the last chapter of her book, Geva examines the extent of continuity or break with the colonial past. At the beginning of the chapter, she cites the opinion of important figures of Delhi from Yashpal's novel *Jhutha Sach* (or 'The False Truth') on whether independent India broke away from the colonial authoritarian government or experienced a democratic change. She argues that India witnessed continuity in many aspects with subtle but crucial changes. She points to the domain of surveillance: the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) put in place by the British government, which was retained under the garb of a new meaning derived from the ancient Tamil *Thirukural* in Independent India. Her close study of the workings of CID enables her to see strong continuity with the colonial past, but with the scope for change in the new context. Earlier, the CID served a foreign government; after Independence, Geva says, its main targets are political rivals, communists, socialists and labour party activists.

The book tracks and spotlights the deterioration in the conditions of Muslims in the decades before and post-independent India to demonstrate that contemporary communal situations are historically rooted. Geva says the widening differences between Hindus and Muslims trace back to the mid-twentieth century, which was marked by the growing role of Hindu organisations, such as the Arya Samaj, Hindu Mahasabha, and RSS. This aggravated the marginalisation of Muslims. The process of urban segregation of Muslims in Delhi, which began from the post-revolt period, gets sharpened by the second decade of the twentieth century. This gradually leads to the formation of small pockets predominantly inhabited by poor Muslims that eventually become mini-Pakistans or Muslim zones during and after the partition crisis. The partition of the nation poisons the otherwise harmonious relationship between Hindus and Muslims before the second decade of the twentieth century. Later, the relations become fractious and riot-prone; increasingly, Muslim identities as loyal Indian citizens are questioned.

In a brief epilogue, Geva discusses the turbulent events of the twenty-first century and the violent riots of February 2020 caused by the Citizenship Amendment Act in the capital city. These events attest to the lingering legacy of the decades before partition and afterwards. Geva argues that these traumatic episodes force us to rethink the way urban spaces and claims over citizenship rights were negotiated and renegotiated on ethnic lines, rendering the positions of religious minorities precarious. But Geva notes, communities on the margins of society, Muslims, and agricultural labourers, far from accepting their victimhood, stage their protest and assert citizenship rights in the capital city of India.

One of the strengths of the book lies in keeping away from blaming or exonerating any one agent or organisation and scrutinising all players, including top Congress and Muslim League leaders like Nehru, Sardar Patel, Jinnah, the Delhi state ministers like Randhwa, Brahm Prakash and leaders of other parallel organisations, etc. Geva affixes responsibility on all for the tragic partition of the country and its aftermath.

One caveat has to do with Geva's portrayal of sweepers or Mehtars. She mentions sweepers in very few places, depicting them as perpetrators of violence against Muslims, as refusing to sweep the Turkman locality inhabited by Muslims, and as looting Muslim shops. This is a one-sided representation of sweepers as agents of radical Hindu forces or RSS who viciously attack Muslims. It is important to move away from the argument that Valmikis/ sweepers /Mehtars were necessarily Hinduised. In fact, their religious autonomy needs to be studied, and a more well-rounded understanding of their experience of Partition needs to be developed. Geva herself references Anis Kidwai, who has shown another side of the Mehtars or sweepers during partition, refusing to sweep or take orders even from Hindu pandits. This challenges the notion of sweepers' participation in the Partition violence as being exclusively anti-Muslim. It is also important to understand that the partition crisis affected and involved more than just Hindus and Muslims. The partition also encompassed the experiences and actions of the Sikhs, Christians, Sindhis, and Parsis, among others.

That said, Geva's book provides rich insight into the urban history of Delhi, the influential personalities of Delhi and the organisations working during the 1940s up until the early decades of the post-partition period. It discusses the precarious conditions of the Muslim community, including marginalisation in the aftermath of partition in the capital city. The book sheds light on the gradual sprouting and ghettoisation of Muslim neighbourhoods in the capital city. It is a brilliant work that helps us to understand communal history from the decade before partition. The book would also be of interest to researchers studying language history, as it provides an important description of the condition of Urdu, both in the decades preceding and following partition.

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