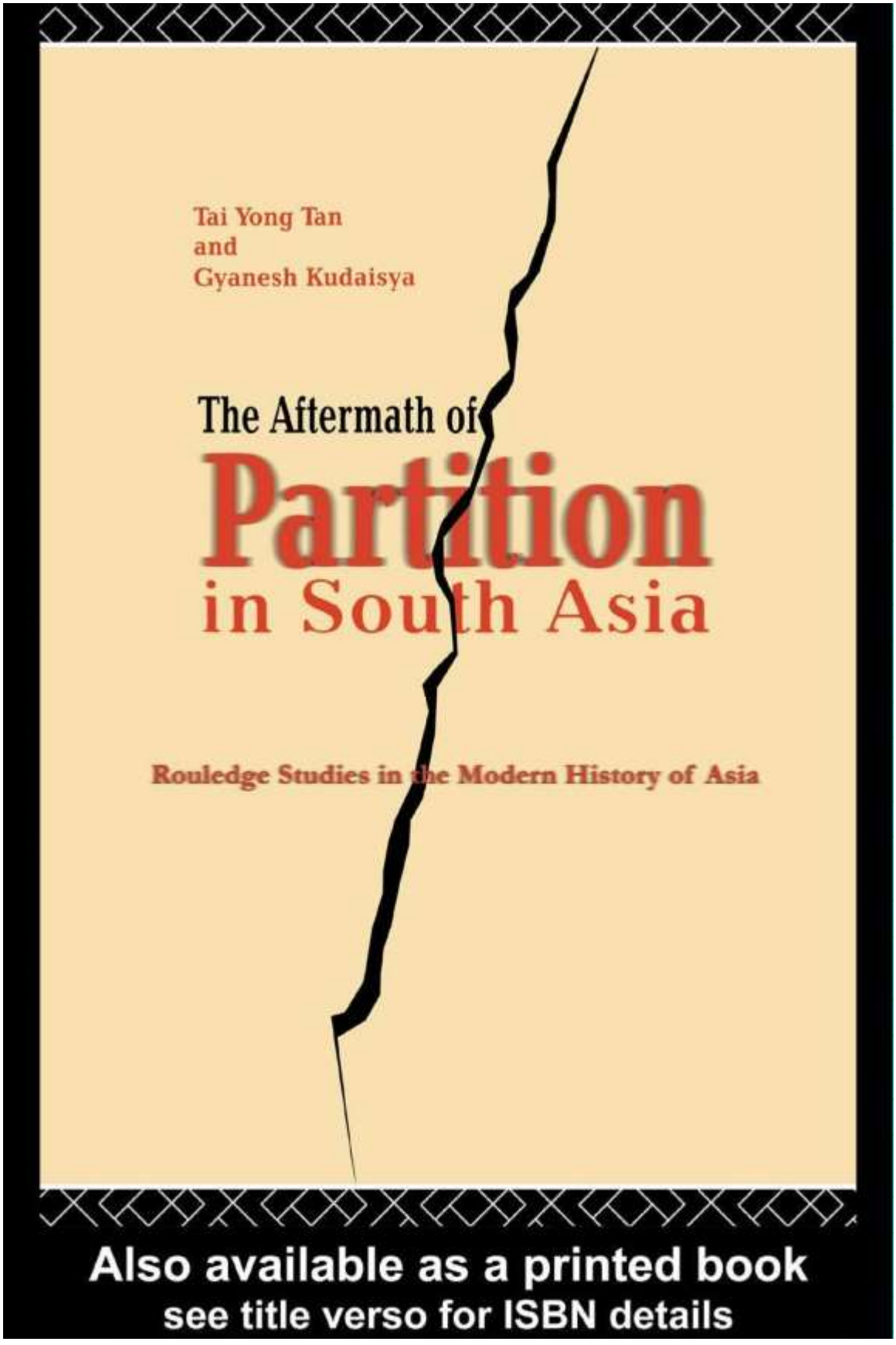
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Delhi: from Islamic city to refugees' 'wild west'

The story of the impact of partition on Delhi's landscape is many faceted and we can only focus on one or two aspects. Partition did little to diminish Delhi's pre-eminent position as a capital city. Indeed, if there was one single advantage which the government of the newly-independent dominion of India enjoyed over its counterpart in Pakistan, it was that its feet were firmly established in the city of Delhi.[124] Of all South Asian capitals, Delhi has enjoyed, except for short periods, a continuous and unbroken status as a capital city for almost a thousand years, and some historical records show it to be prominent for almost 2,000 years before that. Robert Frykenberg has remarked that Delhi is 'so inextricably bound up' with the 'political energies' of Indian civilization that it has become 'down the ages [is] the symbol of empire', of 'pan-Indian nationalization and unification.[125] Rhodes Murphy has described it as the 'the only capital in the world at once so old, so big, and so exclusively devoted to administration.[126] Historical works are replete with references to Delhi describing it as the 'Eternal Capital', whose origins go back to grey legends which identify it as Indraprastha, the capital of the Pandavas of the epic *Mahabharata,* said to have been enacted in 1400 BC.[127]

However, archaeological evidence does not support this portrayal of Delhi as a flourishing city of the so-called classical age of Hinduism. In fact, it was the coming of Islam to India which brought Delhi into history. Delhi's career as an imperial capital began with the arrival of Qutub-ud-din Aibak in the twelfth century. He built the *Quwuat-ul-Islam* ('Power of Islam') mosque—one of the earliest places of Islamic worship in India— and adjacent to it erected the *Qutub Minar*. Its subsequent rulers established their citadels successively at Kilokheri, Siri, Tughlaqabad, Jahanpanah, Firozabad, Khizrabad, Mubarakabad, Purana Qila (during Sher Shah Suri and Humanyun's times), and finally at Shahjahanabad in the seventeenth century.[128] Throughout this period Delhi enjoyed a unique status as the foremost Indo-Islamic city of the subcontinent. The establishment of their capital by the Mughals only served to enhance this status. Despite the eclipse of Mughal power, the attacks of invaders and plunderers like Nadir Shah, and British domination, Delhi's reputation as an Islamic city continued to flourish. It survived even the shock of the Mutiny of 1857 and the draconian changes imposed by the British upon its physical landscape. Although the British never forget its role as a storm centre of the Mutiny and made it a part of the Punjab, they could never disregard its lure as an imperial city. Even though Calcutta remained their capital, they staged *durbars* in Delhi in 1877 and 1903, with all the trappings of royal ceremony designed to portray to their subjects that they now carried the mantle of the Mughals. Then, in 1911 at the grand *durbar* held to mark the visit of the British monarch, King George V dramatically announced that Delhi would henceforth be the new capital of the Raj. The British were inspired by the rich symbolism which Delhi had continually evoked, as the then Viceroy Lord Hardinge explained:

> The political advantages of the transfer it is impossible to overestimate. Delhi is still a name to conjure with. It is intimately associated in the minds of the Hindus with sacred legends which go back even beyond the dawn of history…. To the Mahomedans it would be a source of unbounded gratification to see the ancient capital of the Moguls restored to its proud position as the seat of Empire. Throughout India, as far south as the Mahomedan conquest extended, every walled town has its 'Delhi Gate', and among the masses of the people it is still revered as the seat of the former Empire. The change would strike the imagination of the people of India as nothing else could do, would send a wave of enthusiasm throughout the country and would be accepted by all as the assertion of an unfaltering determination to maintain British rule in India.[129]

The British henceforth moved their headquarters to Delhi to a temporary site between 1912–29, while they constructed 'New Delhi', adjacent to the old city, which they formally inaugurated in 1931.

Given such a strongly entrenched tradition, the events of partition could not disrupt the capitol function of the city. However, there were some who in the euphoria of freedom felt that the capital of independent India should be moved away from Delhi to make a clean break from its legacy of empire. Some members of the Constituent Assembly, for instance, wanted a new capital, to be established in Central India in the vicinity of Nagpur, to be called 'Gandhipura'.[130] They based their argument on the central location of Nagpur and made much of its proximity to Wardha which Gandhi had made famous as 'the capital of nationalist India' by establishing an *ashram* and taking up residence there. Then, a rival claim was put forth by Allahabad, which lay at the core of north India's political heartland and regarded itself as a bastion of the Congress during the freedom struggle, a development which had so upset the British that they had shifted the provincial capital of Uttar Pradesh to Lucknow, a move remarkably similar in its motivations to the earlier removal of the imperial capital from Calcutta to New Delhi.[131]

The Allahabad District Congress Committee passed a resolution demanding that their city, rather than Delhi, be made 'the capital of Hindustan'.[132] As 'Delhi has been the grave of empires and Allahabad all along the seat of Hindu culture and religious unity', it was desirable, according to the Allahabad Congress, that the capitol of independent India be sited there.[133]They argued that, in view of the leading role played by the city in the freedom struggle, its importance as a religious centre of Hinduism and 'its ideal situation being equidistant from the provinces comprising the Union', it would be befitting that Allahabad be designated the capital of independent India. If Allahabad was to be chosen as the seat of the Government of India, they argued, Delhi could then be utilized as the headquarters of the East Punjab Government.[134] When this call of the Allahabad Congressmen failed to evoke support from any quarter, they shrewdly scaled down their bid, demanding that, at least, the Supreme Court of the Union be located at Allahabad,

given its reputation of producing several legal luminaries who had played a part in the country's constitutional development.[135]

However, Delhi's status as the political centre of India remained unshaken. The new leadership did not feel motivated to mark the coming of freedom with the construction of a new capital; the appropriate combination of political and financial resources necessary to do so simply did not exist. Moreover, the temptation to use and expropriate the opulent colonial edifices of power proved too strong. The capitol complex at New Delhi provided the *terra firma* in which the new regime, inaugurated amidst anarchy and disorder, found itself firmly anchored. Lutyens' monumental architecture provided the stage upon which the midnight rituals of independence were enacted, imparting dignity to the ceremonies and enhancing their historic importance. Delhi's new masters seized control over the visual and architectural symbols of power almost effortlessly; they had, after all, rightfully inherited the Citadel.

While they took charge of the Citadel effortlessly, they lost complete control over the city. Within weeks Delhi witnessed a virtual collapse owing to the strains caused by partition. It needs to be remembered that, on the eve of partition, the city had a dual character. As W.H.Morris-Jones, then a member of Mountbatten's staff recalled, Delhi

> was obviously two cities, the civil and military station of the British, on a grand imposing scale, in keeping at once with the relevance of India to Empire and the traditions of earlier Raj; and the old city built out of the local soils in materials, architecture and social structure.[136]

It might be appropriate at this stage to take a closer look at some of the specific characteristics of Delhi as they then existed. The structure of the old city was made up of elements which constituted a typical 'Islamic' city.[137] Delhi's landscape was defined by its mosques, *havelis, bazars,* and religious shrines where the routines of everyday life—both secular and religious—were carried out by its residents. The foci of the city was the Jama Masjid, the largest mosque in the country, built by Shahjahan in the seventeenth century on top of a hill to convey symbolically the exalted status of Islam over the city's landscape.[138] The Jama Masjid stood at the apex of an elaborate hierarchy of mosques which existed in the city. The royal mosques, endowed by members of the Mughal court, came next. These were constructed along the city's main boulevards—eight in number—and are collectively known as *begami* or *amiri masjid*.[139] At the lower spectrum came the neighbourhood mosques—about 200 in number—scattered all over the city. These were constructed within *mohallas* by major occupational groups or guilds each of which endowed their own mosque. For example, mosques existed for washermen, butchers, weavers and so on, where each group performed its daily worship and carried out rites of passage under the supervision of the local *alim* or the hereditary holy man.

Delhi was also a major centre of Sufi culture, full of *dargahs, khanqahs,imambaras,* and *idgahs*. Some of the holiest shrines of popular Islam lay within or around the city, widely reputed throughout the Islamic world as *Baaees Khwaja ki Chaukhat* ('the threshold of twenty-two saints'). These included the *dargah* of Shaikh Bakhtiyat al-Qaki (1325–1354) and Shaikh Nizam-ud-din Aulia (d. 1325) as well as the *Qadam Sharif* shrine, reputed to contain the footprint of Prophet Muhammad. These were religious centres of great sanctity for pious Muslims, who converged from all over north India in large numbers on the death anniversaries of their revered saints to participate in *urs,* which symbolized devotional worship and piety.[140] Jamal Malik perceptively remarks that given that, 'Indian Islam was essentially a holy-man Islam', these places of worship were 'microcosms of an indigenous Islamic culture with regular celebrations and rites'.[141] It was these religious institutions which endowed Delhi with a unique status, such that Islamic texts referred to the city as *Dar-ul-mulk* ('seat of empire') of the great Sultans and *Markaz-i-daira Islam* ('centre of the circle of Islam').[142]

In other respects too, Delhi carried the stamp of being an Indo-Islamic city *par excellence*. Its centrally located Friday mosque, its *bazars* with their highly specialized forms of commodity production, its *chowks, katras* and *kuchas* where manufacturing, retailing and living formed a close symbiosis, its walled structure, its *havelis* and socially cohesive *mohallas* which honeycombed the city, its institution of *waqf,* all these gave it a distinct character. A recent study by Eckart Ehlers and Thomas Krafft concludes that 'a formal analysis of the city and its morphology leaves no doubt' that the walled city of Delhi 'has all the elements and ingredients of a typical "Islamic city"'.[143]

The events of partition shook the city to its foundations. Even when the rituals of independence were being enacted, Muslims from Delhi's rural hinterland in the neighbouring districts of Gurgaon, Rohtak and Meerut were pouring into the city to escape the violence they had faced there. By late August 1947 the situation was aggravated as the capital came to be flooded with Hindu and Sikh refugees from Punjab, looking for safety, shelter, rehabilitation and, in many cases, revenge. Serious violence erupted in the walled city on 25 August and a curfew was promulgated.[144] The situation increasingly got out of hand as Muslims became a particular target of attack. 'Delhi became a prison for the Muslims', recalled Ishtiaq Husain Qureshi, then Dean of the Arts Faculty in Delhi University.[145] 'What was happening in the city was a nightmare', he continued, as 'the fortified mohallas (as the quarters were called) developed into arsenals. One could see that an unofficial war was in the offing.' Qureshi was anxious about his family's safety. 'Women hastily put on Hindu caste marks on their foreheads and put on Hindu clothes', and he evacuated his family to the safety of Purana Qila which had become a refugee camp for Muslims prior to their transit to Pakistan.[146] By the first week of September, the situation had become alarming. When Morris-Jones visited Old Delhi on 7 September to help rescue a Muslim friend's family which had been trapped there, he was horrified to find that 'the lanes were eerily deserted but not

completely so; corpses lay uncollected, animals roamed and little gangs of running killers played grim hide and seek with the police in the maze of alleys'.[147]

The violence that occurred in Delhi in August-September 1947 shook the Nehru government almost to its foundations as it seriously challenged its secular claims of protecting the minorities in independent India. The authorities, until then struggling to cope with the situation, took contingency measures to rescue and protect the Muslims who were fleeing the city at an alarming rate. Mountbatten, in Shimla, was urgently recalled to chair an 'Emergency Committee' set up to restore order in the capital. By a fortuitous coincidence Gandhi arrived in Delhi on 7 September *en route* to Punjab but was so shocked at the state of affairs that he cancelled his plans and stayed on to help restore peace in the capital.[148] Gandhi visited Muslim refugee camps which had sprung up in several places across the city. He was distressed to note that mob rule was dislocating everything and even distribution of food had become impossible. At Jama Masjid he found that over 30,000 Muslim refugees had huddled together in a camp, while at Purana Qila another 60,000 had taken refuge without a roof over their head. Had Delhi suddenly become the City of the Dead, Gandhi wondered?[149] He repeatedly declared at his evening prayer meetings that he had embarked upon a 'Do or Die' mission to save Delhi and the life and property of all its residents, particularly the Muslims.

While serious violence was brought under control in due course, the harm had already been done. Delhi's reputation as an Indo-Islamic city had suffered an irreparable damage. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the attacks that Muslim places of worship had faced. According to official sources, as many as 137 mosques in the city had been more or less damaged during the disturbances. Gandhi took up this issue in his prayer speeches which were broadcast nationwide on the radio. He expressed his distress that many of these mosques had been 'converted' into Hindu temples and gave the example of one near Connaught Place where idols had been installed and even the national tricolour hoisted. He denounced such desecration as 'a blot upon Hinduism' and called it 'an wholly ungodly act'. He lamented that one of the holiest of the Islamic shrines in the city—the tomb of Shaikh Bakhtiyar Qaki near the Qutub—had been desecrated and its costly marble trellis damaged. He visited the shrine and urged all concerned 'to wipe out this disgrace and reinstate the place to its original glory'. He declared repeatedly that the 'squeezing out' of the Muslims was 'crooked and ungentlemanly', rebuked the Hindu and Sikh refugees from Punjab for eyeing Muslim properties in the city, and asserted the right of the Muslims of continued residence in the capital as full citizens of independent India.

Notwithstanding Gandhi's valiant efforts to protect the Muslims for which he sacrificed himself in January 1948, the loss of Muslim life and property in Delhi had been considerable. According to unofficial estimates, about 10,000 Muslims were massacred in the capital.[150] Muslim neighbourhoods particularly in the walled city suffered a great deal of violence and about 44,000 houses occupied by Muslims in these neighbourhoods were abandoned or forcibly evacuated. A stage had come

when more Muslims lived in refugee camps in places like Idgah, Nizamuddin and Purana Qila than in the safety of their own homes.[151] In these camps they contemplated what the future held in store for them. Many frantically made arrangements for their departure to Pakistan while others wondered that, if such could be the scale of violence which could rock the capital city of the new republic, what could they expect in the future as a minority. From the adjacent Nizamuddin railway station, family after family boarded trains which took them away from the insecurity and violence which they had experienced in Delhi.[152] Almost two-thirds of Muslim inhabitants abandoned the city—an estimated 329,000 Muslims left Delhi following partition—and in 1951, when a census was taken, the city had just 99,000 Muslim residents. Delhi's Muslim population had declined from 33.22 per cent in 1941 to a negligible 5.71 per cent by 1951.

Partition brought about other transformations too which became palpable to the city's residents in diverse ways. From a centre of Indo-Islamic culture, Delhi became a city of refugees. Rajiv Kapur, chief of the United Nations' agency for refugee welfare characterizes Delhi as 'a Wild West boomtown' where 'everybody's on the make, anything goes'.[153] The city's physical boundaries, the composition of its inhabitants, their cultural preferences and spoken dialects bear this out. Delhi's population registered a dramatic 90 per cent increase as a result of the influx of Punjabi refugees displaced by partition.[154] Further, its physical boundaries expanded tremendously, as its physical urban area grew tenfold and its population density per square kilometre rose from 3,470 in 1941 to 7,169 in 1951, registering a 106 per cent growth. The boundaries of Greater Delhi expanded too, from 198 sq. km in 1951 to 323 sq. km in 1961, to envelop neighbouring towns where refugees increasingly took up residence.

With the help of government agencies Punjabi migrants (almost half a million of them) created refugee colonies through the city's municipal area. With this demographic invasion came significant alternations in cultural and political profiles too. Delhi was 'invaded' by *Punjabiyat* (Punjabi culture). As an old resident recalled:

> Every aspect of our lives became Punjabi. The food became increasingly Punjabi or Punjabi Mughlai, our cultural tastes became Punjabi, even our demeanour and values became Punjabi.[155]

Punjabi refugees, while transforming the cultural life of the city, invigo rated and energized it in commercial and economic terms. 'The hardy Panjabi, displaced from Pakistan, has made a world of difference to the development of the city', observes V.N.Datta.[156] The coming of the refugees, in his view, has made the city 'more energetic, more inventive, and more spirited than ever before', as Punjabi refugees have 'gained a commanding influence in Delhi, and are a directing force in the life of the city'.[157] Yet, there are those who lament the loss of a composite culture which had evolved for several centuries, the slow pace of life, the elegance of Urdu, the common language which cut across religious and class barriers, and

the graciousness with which old-established communities lived together and cherished many of the proud traditions of their city.[158]

Conclusion: capitol transformations

Scholars of political geography have traditionally classified capital cities into two basic types: 'natural' or 'permanent' capitals and 'introduced' or 'artificial' capitals.159 They have identified several factors as influencing the fortunes of capital cities such as centrality, nodality, portality and defensibility. However, a study of capital cities in the postcolonial world suggests the primacy of political, rather than geographical factors.[160] A survey of African capitals, for instance, concludes that 'Africa is the continent of eccentric capitals' where ever-changing political considerations, rather than geography, have powerfully shaped its capital cities.[161]

If we recognize that political factors play a vital part in the fortunes of capital cities, then the foregoing discussion convincingly shows that it has been the politics surrounding partition and 'nation-building' which has left a deep imprint on the existing landscapes of South Asian capital cities.

At the outset, there is a need to comprehend the scale of changes which the capital cities experienced following partition. There are, at least, three distinct aspects of the overall transformation which these cities underwent which warrant consideration. The most obvious aspect was physical: the expansion or contraction which the city experienced due to refugee movements and the changes imposed by the new boundaries and the manner in which these were reflected in the spatial structure, land use and built forms of the city. Equally important were the sociocultural transformations brought about by changes in the composition of the city's inhabitants. As old communities departed and new settlers arrived, the inner milieu of the city was altered and its cultural, social and religious rhythms disturbed, and these had profound implications. Finally, the city was transformed in a metaphysical sense, as people were uprooted from the places where they had been born and nurtured and where they had families, properties and associations. This uprooting and dislocation left them with remembrances and feelings of nostalgia. Cities for them now existed only in the realm of memory and, as all memory is inseparable from places, they came to be deeply embedded in the consciousness of the uprooted people and powerfully shaped their subsequent lives in assorted ways.

Having considered the scale of the transformations which they witnessed, it is interesting to note that, although divided by the bitterness and violence which had accompanied partition, these capital cities were ironically united in that they faced common situations and predicaments following partition. It is striking that a common thread seems to run through the stories of these seven capitals, and it may be worthwhile, in conclusion, to pursue this.

The first commonality to be noted is a demographic one. Except for Chandigarh and Islamabad, which did not exist at the time of partition, all the five other capital cities experienced a demographic upheaval in which their 'minority' communities

were either completely uprooted or their numbers substantially reduced. The most dramatic instances were Dhaka and Karachi which were Hindu-majority cities but following partition ironically became the capitals of East and West Pakistan respectively. The uprooting took its most violent form in Lahore and, to some extent, in Delhi. Processes of displacement were more invidious in Dhaka, Calcutta and Karachi, but the results were inevitably the same: the decimation, dissipation and displacement of the city's 'minorities'. The demographic upheaval which these cities saw also had related outcomes. With the exception of Islamabad, all South Asian capitals can be called refugee cities. The extreme cases here are Karachi and Calcutta whose populations have a preponderance of refugees. Chandigarh, Delhi, Dhaka and Lahore also have substantial communities of refugees amongst their inhabitants.

Another commonality relates to the physical expansion of the cities: new forms of mass housing, which they had to improvise to deal with the refugee influx. 'Model towns', *kacchi abadis* (slums), co-operative societies, and squatter colonies proliferated; as did 'satellite towns' built by government agencies to act as counter-magnets in their attempts to decongest the capitals. It is interesting to see that this proliferation of housing also led to a fundamental change in city form: the typical landscape of a South Asia city had originally been shaped by the old 'bazaar-style' Indian quarter and the newer, civil lines-type 'formal' city developed for administrative purposes by the colonial rulers.[162] Following partition, this 'dual' character of capital cities was altered, as newer 'informal' cities developed to provide housing to the refugees either by official agencies or by 'self-help' cooperative efforts. Much of the present landscapes of South Asian capital cities is defined by the built environment created to shelter the refugees.

A further commonality relates to the economic dislocations which several of these capital cities suffered. Perhaps the worst victim in this regard was Calcutta, as the foregoing discussion has shown; Lahore comes a close second as it became a border town and saw a major relocation of economic activity. In almost all instances, economic disruptions were accompanied by what may be called 'over-urbanization', a situation in which an increasingly large number of people flock to cities which do not see a corresponding expansion of their economic base. This kind of migration, economists have pointed out, leads to all sorts of distortions, particularly an over-supply of labour which creates heightened competition in the informal sector.[163] The net result is the 'footloose' effect, with large floating populations somehow struggling hard to survive by finding some sort of work. A typical example here is that of the rickshaw-pullers in Dhaka. It is estimated that the national capital of Bangladesh has about 150,000 rickshaws, and an estimated 1 million people are dependent, directly or indirectly, for their livelihood upon their plying, production and maintenance.

Yet another common element in the transformations brought about by partition relates to the changes in the political configuration of the capital cities. The exceptional story here is that of Calcutta, where the refugees provided a mass base for the Communists to build their ascendancy within West Bengal politics, as

Chapter Six has shown. However, a similar radicalization of politics did not take place in other cities where refugees converged in significant numbers. In other cities across South Asia refugees—in spite of their subaltern status as disadvantaged and persecuted people—have not extended support to Leftist or radical parties. The refugees have, instead, tended to support communal and fundamentalist parties. Having experienced religious persecution and intolerance, they have shown a propensity to become 'vote banks' for communal and sectarian parties. In Karachi the rise of the Mohajir Quami Mahaz (MQM) is an example of this kind of support by the refugees. In Delhi too, the Punjabi refugees have proved to be a consistently solid vote bank for Bharatiya Janata Party, a fundamentalist organization which has pursued an aggressive agenda of *Hindutva* after its top leadership was taken up in the late 1980s by individuals whose formative experiences were of being uprooted from Pakistan.[164]

Capital cities also provide us with an exceptional window into surveying the nature of power-sharing arrangements that evolved in the post-colonial states and the manner in which different regional political units came to be structured *vis-à-vis* the centre. A stroll through downtown Calcutta— marginalized both economically and politically after partition—and starved by New Delhi of vital funds for maintaining its infrastructure (especially after the Communists came to power), is an experience which gives an insight into centre-state relations post-1947 as perhaps no other encounter can. In a similar manner, the refusal of the Government of India to hand over Chandigarh to Punjab, its continued hold over it as a centrally-administered territory, and its ambiguous status as the headquarters of three different authorities (the provincial Governments of Punjab and Haryana and the Union Territory of Chandigarh) are illustrative of the complexity of power-sharing arrangements in India. Likewise, the manner in which the Pakistani leadership neglected Dhaka symbolized the subordination of Bengalis in Pakistan throughout the 1947–71 era. In a similar manner, the decay and neglect to which Karachi has been subjected after the shift of capital to Islamabad is yet another instance of how capital cities mirror the larger consensus (real, imagined or fractured) which underpins the nation-state.

Another commonality relates to the architectural symbolism of the Capitol Complexes and their imagery as citadels of power designed to impress, if not intimidate the citizenry. Lawrence Vale explains this symbolism in the following terms:

> The haughty reliance on hillside ascents, the calculated drama of long, broad axes, the fearful arrogance of protected cantonments, the coveted security of massive structures set off by water, and the hierarchical distribution of residence according to courtly rank are all too familiar features of a premodern Western urbanism which seem to linger in the designed capitals and capitols of the twentieth century.[165]

This description readily fits in with the experience of anyone who has walked through any of the Capitol Complexes located in the South Asian capitals.

Finally, it should be pointed out that this survey of capital cities could only be seen as part of the larger transformation which places experienced as a result of partition. Chapters Five and Six, in a sense, address this aspect with regard to East Punjab and West Bengal respectively, but there are other dimensions too which merit attention. For instance, cities and towns other than the capital cities were affected in the variety of roles they played as ports, transport hubs, trading marts and pilgrim centres. The processes of boundary-making, refugee resettlement and the larger restructuring of regions into the nation, and the cumulative results these produced were often on a colossal scale. They included the turning upside down of urban and settlement hierarchies, the altering of city sizes and functions, and the downsizing of hinterlands of ports and transport hubs. There was much reconstruction and development too: in India alone, at least a dozen new refugee towns were built after partition.[166] It is within this larger setting that the changing fortunes of the seven capital cities studied here must be viewed.