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Review of Rotem Geva, *Delhi Reborn:
Partition and Nation Building in India's Capital*

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ROTEM GEVA, *Delhi Reborn: Partition and Nation Building in India's Capital*, South Asia in Motion (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022), 368 pp. ISBN 978 1 503 63119 9 (hardback), \$90.00; ISBN 978 1 503 63211 0 (paperback), \$30.00

Delhi Reborn is an exceptional work of urban and local history that examines the city within larger frameworks whilst never losing sight of its purpose: to understand how the particular cultural and political histories of Delhi were transformed by the end of empire, the birth of the new nations of India and Pakistan, and the cataclysm of Partition. For the period before these events, Geva's work offers valuable insights into how imaginaries of a new city, and a new nation, were articulated in the interwar period. In particular, the first chapter captures the excitement of these possibilities for understanding and imagining Muslim selfhood. The ideas of Pakistan circulating in the 1930s, communicated in texts and maps, included the city as a place, and more significantly, as an expression of Muslim community that was simultaneously distinct and connected to the broader mores of national politics. The fixing, and restriction, of such ideas in territory came only later. This argument is, of course, a familiar one in general terms: Pakistan meant many things to many people before 1947. Geva, however, succeeds in grounding those ideas in a particular urban, intellectual, and cultural realm, connecting them to lives that belonged entirely within the domain of the city and, indeed, were constitutive of the city in a number of profound ways.

The second chapter maps the violence in Delhi in 1946—the 'abrupt and violent rending of the city's social fabric' (p. 95)—against broader waves of unrest and uncertainty across northern India, and situates the more immediate, local escalation and anticipation of violence in Delhi within a larger history. Geva argues that the violence took on new forms, paving the way for the extraordinary maelstrom of inter- and intra-community violence that accompanied the Partition in 1947. Local organizations armed and trained volunteers, creating new combatants and enabling violence in particular localities. The expansive, inclusive ideas of Pakistan that Geva describes in the first chapter were shrunk back and asserted as defensive calls to arms in the face of immediate threats to personal and collective

safety. *Delhi Reborn* describes the mechanics of the state and the political will that led to anxiety and the restrictions placed on the safety, property, and legitimacy of Muslims in the city. In particular, it traces the role of Sardar Patel, Congress home minister in the interim government which held the power abdicated by the British after mid 1946. Changes in policing and in the coordination of responses to localized violence were critical in creating the conditions for a very new format for communal violence. New Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's voice is heard as a righteous, if ineffectual, witness to the alienation of the city's Muslims.

The third chapter explores particular social and organizational histories that contributed, deliberately and otherwise, to making Muslim inhabitation of the city increasingly insecure and uncertain. Geva demonstrates the constellation of interests of those who constituted the state—politicians, bureaucrats, activists, volunteers, social workers, and the police. She offers a compelling, and unsettling, account of the tensions between Delhi as a symbolic and political centre of the new nation and as a set of inhabited localities from within which responses to the violence, fear, and opportunity were formulated. A terrifying flux was created by attempts to realize Partition, in all its absurdity, by mass migration and ill-formed legislation.

Geva's discussion of literary and journalistic print and textual cultures in the fourth chapter provides a fascinating picture of the dynamic, precarious, and fractious landscapes of identity and belonging that emerged in the years after Partition. The expansive, ambitious imaginaries of the interwar period are replaced by anxious and aggressive narrations of self and other in the new city. The chapter includes a compelling satire—penned by Gopal Mittal in the newspaper *Milap*—of a *Dilliwallah's* (a long-standing resident of the city) resentment towards people transported from Lahore to Delhi. The evocative piece maps and ridicules the resentment felt by long-term Delhi residents towards the ambitious refugees arriving from Punjab.

The book provides insight into the complexities of thought and action that informed Muslim identities in the city during Partition, including among people who had 'familial and friendly' relations with

those who had made the decision to migrate. Formerly mixed neighbourhoods became exclusionary and treacherous for Muslims, who were becoming the 'other community' within the new nation. *Delhi Reborn* moves between different scales of history, from the broadest canvases of national vision to the microhistories of the *mohalla* (community, neighbourhood). Geva also underlines the importance of class, as the situation for the poorest inhabitants was worsened by prosperous families departing the city on relatively advantageous terms, leaving the poor vulnerable to the lawmakers and enforcers, who were biased towards Hindu refugees.

Notwithstanding the physical violence and ghettoization of Delhi's Muslims, the fifth and final chapter provides perhaps the grimmest reading. It describes the ruptures, augmentation, and continuities in the institutions of policing and intelligence in Delhi between the periods of late colonialism, dominionship, and full independence. In 1951, the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) in Delhi attempted to intercept around 1,700 letters moving between India and Pakistan. Geva describes this action, along with the CID's targeted surveillance and harassment of those classified as potential or actual threats to the new, democratic political order. The lens of the state shifted to include new enemies: socialists, communists, and labour organizers.

The book ends with an epilogue, rather than a conclusion. This briefly summarizes the popular agitations against the Citizenship Amendment Act and the farmers' protests between 2019 and 2021, presenting the continuing tension between the 'authoritarian instincts and democratic aspirations' (p. 263) that are so vividly presented in the proceeding chapters.

Geva avoids shorthand simplifications, offering instead a meticulously researched history that helps us to understand the rhizomic complicity of local politics in a city that was a theatre for national politics and, perhaps, a reluctant capital. This can lead to some dense prose and occasional tangents from what had appeared to be the principal lines of argument. Nevertheless, this book richly rewards the reader with its insight, scope, and eye for detail. *Delhi Reborn* succeeds in making plain just how much was lost to the city, and in turn to both nations, in the division of India and Pakistan. The book is more,

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however, than a chronicle of loss. It is a work that articulates a passion for the city of Delhi; in its pages lie not only the history of violence, but also glimpses of a city that endures despite the inadequacies of the political and bureaucratic machinery it has long sustained.

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