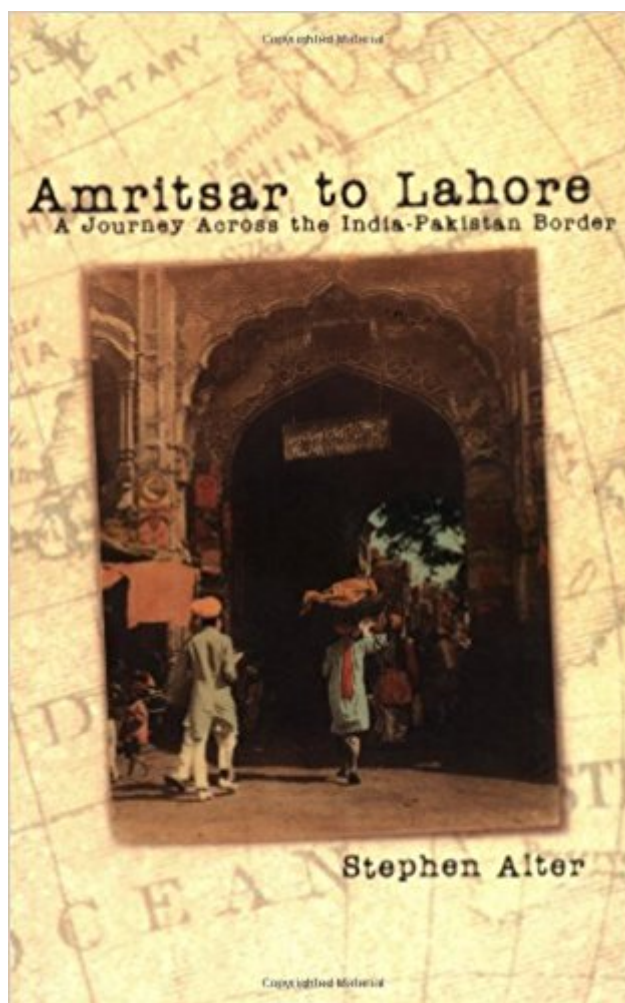


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Amritsar To Lahore: A Journey Across The India-Pakistan Border



Synopsis

"During the course of my journey, many of the people I met in Pakistan and India expressed a curious combination of affection, indifference, and animosity toward their neighbors across the border. . . . The border divides them but it is also a seam that joins the fabric of their cultures." On 15 August 1947, in what some have argued was the final, cynical act of a collapsing empire, the British left India divided. Arbitrary borders that have profoundly affected the recent history of the subcontinent were drawn upon the map of India. In the violence that accompanied Partition, it has been estimated that close to a million people were killed and more than ten million uprooted and displaced. The hatreds created by what was one of the largest mass migrations in history only exacerbated the religious tensions that originally led to Partition. Since then, India and Pakistan have fought three devastating wars, and the danger of armed conflict is constant. A sensitive and thoughtful look at the lasting effects of Partition on everyday people, *Amritsar to Lahore* describes a journey across the contested border between India and Pakistan in 1997, the fiftieth anniversary of Partition. Setting out from and then returning to New Delhi, Stephen Alter crossed the border into Pakistan, retraced the legendary route of the Frontier Mail toward the Khyber Pass, and made his return by bus along the Grand Trunk Road, stopping in major cities along the way. During this journey and another in 1998, Alter interviewed people from all classes and castes: Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs, men and women. In candid conversation, the older generation who lived through the events of 1947 shared their memories and opinions of that pivotal moment of Partition, while youths who have inherited the fragments of that past reflected upon the meaning of national identity. In an engaging account of peoples and places, Alter documents in evocative detail his meetings with varied individuals. He recalls the Muslim taxi driver who recognizes an air of confidence with which men in Pakistan walk the streets dressed in salwar kameez; the brigadier who saved the brass insignia of the British crown from Lord Mountbatten's Rolls Royce; gold merchants, customs officers, fellow travelers, musicians, and many others. Alongside these diverse and vivid interviews, chance conversations, and oral histories, Alter provides informed commentary to raise questions about national and individual identity, the territorial imperatives of history, and the insidious mythology of borders. A third-generation American in India, where he has spent much of his life, Alter reflects intimately upon India's past and present as a special observer, both insider and outsider. His meaningful encounters with people on his journey illustrate the shared culture and heritage of South Asia, as well as the hateful suspicions and intolerance that permeate throughout the India-Pakistan frontier. Also woven into the narrative are discussions of the works of South Asian novelists, poets, and filmmakers who have struggled with the issue of identity across the

borderlands. Ongoing battles in Kashmir and nuclear testing by both India and Pakistan may prove that peace in this region can be achieved only when border disputes are resolved. Offering both the perspective of hindsight and a troubling vision of the future, Amritsar to Lahore presents a compelling argument against the impenetrability of boundaries and the tragic legacy of lands divided.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"Combines evocative detail with compelling reflection." —Times Literary Supplement

Stephen Alter is Writer-in-Residence in the Program in Writing and Humanistic Studies at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. An accomplished writer in both fiction and nonfiction, he is the author of four novels and the memoir *All the Way to Heaven: An American Boyhood in the Himalayas*.

arrive on time and is a good book

well researched and written, clearly knowledge of the language and culture was essential. I went to Woodstock School also.

The author, born in the region, travels across the borders of India and Pakistan, following the traces of the partition. New Delhi, Mussoorie, Amritsar, Wagha, Lahore, Peshawar, Rawalpindi, Islamabad,

Muree and Atari, Khyber pass and Grand trunk road are his stages. He teaches a history lesson with no real new recognition, but deplorable irreversible facts. Nevertheless it is a readable book without simplifications. Partition is the traumatic event of the south asian subcontinent history, this is the major issue of this book. Partition leaves its hurting traces deep in mind and soul of the Indian and Pakistan people. India has developed to the biggest democracy in the world. And Pakistan? What is left over since the ecstatic foundation of the first muslim state on South Asian ground? More illusions than welcome realities. To be a citizen of Pakistan means still to be a Muslim, not to participate in democratic and pluralistic rights. The very concept of a modern nation-state demanded a sense of communal identity that went beyond the bonds of faith. Democracy, however ambiguously that ideal is applied, assumes both a diversity of political affiliations and a collective allegiance to the state. In theory, this duality allows a majority and minority groups within a country to participate in the national experience while preserving their own cultural and ethnic identities. The problem in Pakistan, however, is that the concept of representative democracy was never given a fair chance. "Meanwhile it is the darkest irony by that a nation founded on the concept of unity amongst Muslims in South Asia is now torn apart by sectarian strife and violence." Even though Pakistan now directs its antennas towards Arab neighbours to the west, many of the cultural influences (music, TV, movies) invading the country still come from India. During the course of his journey many people he met in Pakistan and India expressed a curious combination of affection, indifference, and animosity toward their neighbours across the border. At first this seemed to be a contradiction but more and more he began to recognize it as a symptom of the profound ambivalence that exists between the peoples of the subcontinent. The border divides them but it is also a seam that joins the fabric of their cultures. Having spent most of his life in India the author had always thought of the border as an aberration, an arbitrary line which the British drew across the map before retreating to their sovereign home. Among most Indians, especially Punjabi refugees, the author sensed a wistful hope that some day this border might be erased and people could cross back and forth unhindered. "Partition was not a solution, we should have created some sort of federation" was the common refrain, which he had come to accept as a preferable alternative. But in Pakistan his assumptions were severely tested. Virtually every person that he met asserted the importance of the border, no matter how cynical they were about the current state of affairs in their country. For the citizens of Pakistan, partition from India was a far more important event than Independence from Britain. In that division lay their identity as a nation and the border was something to be jealously guarded. Freedom in self-constraint? The justification of national boundaries, however, doesn't mean that most Pakistani refugees do not share the same sense of

loss and separation that is felt by their counterparts in India. But how to reconcile? A large part of the problem with attempts lies in conflicting perceptions on either side of the border. While most rational citizens of Pakistan would undoubtedly prefer an amicable peaceful relationship with their neighbours, they are unwilling to deny the reality of partition. On the other hand, those in India who seek to promote unity tend to express their beliefs and emotions by directly challenging the existence of the border. For this reason even in the most compassionate exchange of rhetoric, there is a fundamental dispute between coexistence and cohesion. In India the border represents a source of national regret, something to be rejected as a falsehood, a tragic mistake of history. In Pakistan it is a symbol of identity and pride, the bulwark of their republic and a cause for defiant jubilation. And the author himself? He too, wants to erase the border, turn back the clock to a time before partition. He keeps on to use terms like "South Asia" and "the subcontinent" in an effort to express that unified vision of India that still persists in his imagination. And there will be more of his kind "who choose to live neither in India nor in Pakistan but somewhere in between." Unified India - a mythical homeland! Any setbacks? Maybe trifling: I do not know what brought the author to think that all his English readers know Urdu. There are often sayings in Urdu without translation. Does he want to keep a secret for himself? Besides it is nowhere boring, rather educating without being too sophisticated.

May prove useful if my fictional heroine ends up traveling this path.

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