

Book Review of *The Shadow of the Great Game: The Untold Story of India's Partition*

by Narendra Singh Sarila (HarperCollins, 2009)

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I grew up in newly independent India and History that we were taught in our schools was a slightly modified spillover from what my parents learned as children, from British curriculum. Since then, I have been curious about the century that preceded India's declaration as a secular constitutional republic in 1950. Ram Guha's "India after Gandhi" filled some of the gap between 1947 and 1950. Narendra Singh Sarila's well-researched book, *The Shadow of the Great Game: The Untold Story of India's Partition* quenches some of my thirst, for the period between 1940 and 1948; the book recounts events from 1857 onwards but these last seven years (or so) are compelling and, sometimes, eerily chilling.

The book has more than four hundred pages of content with extensive references drawn from recently declassified documents from the UK, USA and India. The author was Aide-de-Camp (aka ADC) to Lord Mountbatten. He had first hand visibility into the manipulative machinations that preceded partition and was witness to the bloody repercussions that followed partition.

The most important take-away from the book was that the British needed to protect their Middle Eastern (oil) interests from the expanding Russian/Soviet empire and required a militarily friendly swath of land in Northwestern India to launch counter-offensives, if needed. India was partitioned because the British did not trust India's post-independence government led by the Congress Party to be friendly with Britain. From 1942 onward, the penultimate Viceroy of India, General Wavell, developed the strategy for acquiring this territory, and set its foundation, leaving the final details to Lord Mountbatten, the last viceroy, and Prime Minister Atlee.

The book reveals that American behind-the-scenes pressure, which began during FDR's presidency, contributed significantly in preventing further Balkanization of India, especially since the original intent was to create Hindustan, Pakistan and a Princestan that had direct defense ties with Britain. When Princestan did not serve Britain's interest, the concept was abandoned, with Lord Mountbatten recommending that the princely states accede.

The book reveals how the leadership of colonial India was played and manipulated by their British rulers. South Asian leaders were idealists, who had no experience in negotiations and international diplomacy. The departing colonists also controlled the armed forces. Consequently, they ran circles around the factions, playing one against another, to fulfill their ultimate territorial goal, in the shadow of The Great Game — to stop Russia/USSR from accessing Middle East oilfields and warm water ports.

The British strategy worked brilliantly in protecting the now Anglo-American interests but there were substantial gruesome and tragic side effects — partition-related displacement, migration and massacre of millions of people, and three wars between South Asian neighbors. The author hints and perhaps contends that the growth of radical Islamic fundamentalists in the region and the destruction of the World Trade Center (9/11) had its roots in the partition.

I could not put this eminently readable book down until I finished it. I recommend it to any student of South Asian and World History.