Book Review

Asif, Manan Ahmed. *Disrupted City: Walking the Pathways of Memory and History in Lahore.* 373pp. The New Press 2024.

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On one of my research trips to Pakistan, a Punjabi Catholic nun mentioned an underground passage that allegedly ran from the basement of the Sikh-era hunting palace located on her convent's compound in Gujranwala all the way to Lahore. Thrilled by this discovery, I wrote to MIT professor James Wescoat, a scholar of architecture in South Asia, who in response shared an article on popular stories and legends surrounding secret garden tunnels in Lahore. Instead of simply dismissing such stories for lack of archeological evidence, however, the authors argued that legends about garden tunnels represented "a valuable reservoir of collective landscape memory" (Wescoat, Brand & Mir, 1991, 3). While linkages below the ground remained untenable, the myths surrounding them contained memories of shared social and cultural ties between various sites in Mughal South Asia above the ground, they argued, underlining the agentive power of a collective historical memory.

Manan Ahmed Asif's most recent monograph titled Disrupted City: Walking the Pathways of Memory and History in Lahore (The New Press, 2024) revolves around similar themes. It analyses the role of collective memories of violence and the ways in which they become enshrined in the built environment of a city – in this case, Lahore. Disrupted City, a 373-pages long, semi-autobiographical narrative structured into six dense yet well-written and easily accessible chapters, presents a rich and multifaceted cultural, social and intellectual history of Lahore from the 11th century until the present day. Instead of focusing on the city's political fate, though, Asif explores themes of memory and violence and how the two come together in the cityscape of Lahore. In combining ethnography with archival research and personal memoir, the author is concerned with the special character of a postcolonial city that has gone through violent upheavals and ruptures which left their mark on its landscape. As a result, Asif argues, Lahore has become a city "partitioned from its own past", just as its current inhabitants are "themselves partitioned from their own pasts." (8)

The book's rhythm is determined by the exercise of walking. Asif interprets the thousand-year-old history of Lahore, or "reads" it, by discovering the city on foot. His walks, which were conducted over the course of multiple years and which integrate memories of the author as a young boy, college student, and eventually adult, provide the structure for most of the writing. Upon physically approaching a new landmark, building, tree, gravesite or housing complex, Asif often introduces this site to the reader by way of a personal recollection which then merges into a narrative about different ways of "seeing" a place, the political uses and abuses of history and historical monuments, nationalist reinterpretations of key events and figures, and how specific groups in the city are rendered visible or invisible by planning and development.

In order to recover Lahore's past, Asif argues, a certain way of remembering the city first needs to be "forgotten". Chapter 1, "City: Forgetting Lahore", focuses on such active ways of undoing "colonial and colonising ways" of reading the city's history, for example, by tracing the origins of popular legends back to colonial writings. British-era myths about Lahore such as the story of Anarkali, a woman allegedly immured alive as punishment for an illicit love affair, demonstrate most of all the colonisers' orientalist gaze, he argues, which judged local cultures as essentially misogynist and despotic. Yet the fact that such orientalising legends continue to be enormously popular until today contain a more subtly concealed yet cruel truth,

namely that of the misogyny and violence against women that continues in today's Pakistan, the author observes.

Having thus paved the ground for describing the city afresh, Asif then proceeds to analyse how Lahore has been written about and described over the course of the centuries. Chapter 2, "History: Writing Lahore", asks whose purposes these chronicles served, which parts of the city's past their authors emphasised and which they obscured, but also how (and why) this selection was made. From the analysis of the available historiography, the book moves towards the ways in which the city is described today as a "Muslim space" that yields to certain expectations of piety and religious belief, eliminating in its course much of Lahore's Hindu and Sikh history. Closely connected to specific ideas of religious identity which become enshrined in the city's architecture are ideas about national belonging, which are at the centre of Chapter 3, "Nation: Making the Nation." The chapter extends the argument about the rewriting of history for communalist purposes from the level of the city to the larger structure of the nation-state and demonstrates how, similar to Lahore's history being cleansed of the presence of Hindus and Sikhs, Pakistan's own history was reinvented in the service of nationalism with the goal to underscore the Two-Nation Theory. The chapter offers in-depth discussions of the biographies and ideas of a number of Lahore-based writers and intellectuals who were connected with such nationalist endeavours, including those of historians Ishtiaq Husain Qureshi and Shaikh Muhammad Ikram who helped to create the ideological foundations of Pakistan. Just as the city of Lahore and the Punjab province were at the center of the violent communal "cleansings" of 1947, both also remain a focal point for nationalist attempts at rewriting Pakistan's history until today, as the book demonstrates.

Yet, Lahore would not be Lahore if it did not at the same time also provide a space for dissidents and other intellectuals who positioned themselves against such nationalist re-readings of history, among them K. K. Aziz and Mubarak Ali. The final part of chapter 3, which is devoted to an analysis of these two historians' biographies and writings transitions into a discussion about the role of memory in reinventing "origin myths" in the service of nationalism, the core theme discussed in chapter 4, "Memory: Making Origins". The chapter underlines how Lahore as the centre of the print industry in Punjab and beyond was pivotal to the project of "forgetting and remembering" South Asian history by helping to create a sanitised, segregated, and Islamicised version of it. It focuses on how historical figures such as Muhammad bin Qasim were "plucked from history" and then revived, reinvented or reinterpreted. The chapter offers a compelling narrative for the role that Lahore-based historians and novelists played in the creation of a nationalist ideology for Pakistan. One of its main takeaways, in Asif's own words, is that a national identity is formed "through the creation of an imagined past; through myths of kingship, kinship and warrior origins; through parables of social exclusiveness; and through a recognised need for education, economic and social improvement, and the patriarchal ideas on the position of women." (212) This creation of a national identity is intrinsically connected with the veneration of the Prophet, as chapter 5 argues, a concept Asif calls "Prophetic Pakistan". The chapter, which is titled "People: Making the People", traces the ways in which citizenship has become tied to the veneration of the Prophet and the question of blasphemy, with Lahore-based journalists, ideologues and writers again playing a major role in it. Chapter 6, "Place: Walking Lahore", brings the book full circle. However, the author's walks now take us to places and people that usually remain safely stored out of sight, dwelling in areas in which walking is judged as impermissble by a strongly held "class and caste-based opprobrium", forbidden for all but the urban poor. This final chapter tells the story of a lower-class Lahore and people at the margins of society, people who cannot help but walk through filth and among fast-moving cars on concrete flyovers, simply because they have no other choice. It tells the stories of an Afghan refugee who dreams of possessing a jin, of a popular religious preacher endorsing a "prosperity Gospel", of sellers of "black magic" and pulp fiction, of working-class poets and Punjabi storytellers. Retracing walks through the city that were first described by Nur Ahmad Chishti in the 1860s, the chapter also records the enormous upheaval and changes Lahore has undergone since then and returns time and again to the theme of environmental pollution and the destruction of the natural environment. That these are particularly discernible in a city that once was eulogised as "the city of gardens", of which only fragments remain today, drives home again how much more vulnerable cities in the global South are to the disastrous effects of a mounting climate catastrophe that was mainly caused by the global North.

The result is a complex portrayal of a postcolonial city, comparable to an excavation where an archeologist uncovers layer upon layer of human existence throughout the centuries, except that Asif is excavating sediments of memory instead of material objects. His book "reads" the postcolonial city and its myths as the suppressed conscience of a society which preserves the memory of past rupture, and analyses the ways in which these ghosts from the past come back to haunt its current residents. Among such violence, it emphasises Partition as a more singular, and lasting, rupture than any destruction wrought on it before, because it altered Lahore's place as part of a wider north Indian culture beyond recognition. While a keen sense of longing for a city untouched by both the violence of 1947 as well as contemporary urban "planning" and environmental destruction runs through the entire book, I also read it as an attempt to make a step towards a healing process that can help recover from the combined traumas of colonialism and Partition. While Disrupted City is at times intensely melancholic, the book also

aims to contribute towards the city's "next flourishing". To work towards that goal, one can only hope that it will soon be translated into Urdu and become accessible to a wider audience of historically-inclined citizens, such as the retired civil servants sifting through records in public archives or the career women recording their family's history in their free time, whom I frequently met during the course of my own research. Bent on recovering theirs and their own family's roots, such community historians play an active role in an effort to remember a time when Lahore was whole, and unbroken, by violence and destruction.

References

James L. Wescoat Jr., Michael Brand and Naeem Mir, "Gardens, Roads and Legendary Tunnels: The Underground Memory of Mughal Lahore", Journal of Historical Geography, 17:1 (1991), 1-17.