



Amritsar to Lahore: A Journey Across the India-Pakistan Border

By Stephen Alter

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Amritsar to Lahore: A Journey Across the India-Pakistan Border By Stephen Alter

"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.

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Editorial Review

Review

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

About the Author

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*.

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