

The Silenced Annals of Partition Historiography

Refugees, Borders and Identities: Rights and Habitat in East and Northeast India by Anindita Ghoshal. London and New York: Routledge, 2021; pp i-xxi+310, £96.00 (hardback)

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Refugees, Borders and Identities: Rights and Habitat in East and Northeast India brings together comprehensive documentation of the impact of Partition on refugees in eastern and northeastern India and the struggle for identity, space and political rights that followed Partition in 1947. Drawing upon an interplay between extensive archival research and in-depth fieldwork, Ghoshal depicts the struggles of the refugees in their refusal to be pigeonholed as passive victims of the political and historical forces surrounding Partition. Also revealed is their concomitant desire to be the agents of their own destiny by moulding the subsequent contours of politics in West Bengal, Assam and Tripura. The analysis encompasses the lived realities of these refugees, the ‘illegitimate children of modernity’ (62), who sought to chisel an identity that countered the narratives of the host community of the new nation-state—narratives based on systematically manufactured claims of historical truth. The glaring lacuna in Partition studies in South Asia regarding the refugee struggles in the northeastern part of India is duly addressed in this study both in terms of new archival registers and newer theoretical positions that factor in the issues of identity politics and questions of being and becoming of the refugees in the geopolitically volatile northeastern region of India.

The book, which probes the historical tensions between studies of migration, borders and the arduous task of rehabilitation, examines the raucous reaction to the contentious anti-Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), 2019, in India’s northeastern borderlands. Taking a self-reflexive turn, it explores how India’s approach to the settlement of refugees in this region played out to the other less privileged Bengalis of northeast India and gave birth to refugee colonies that exist beyond the democratic spaces of the modern nation-state. These refugee colonies become sites that rethink the contours of the modern nation-state and provide crucial resistance points that gesture towards the need to rethink borders and sovereign nation-state territories.

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Organised into five engaging chapters, the book examines the struggle of Bengal middle-class and lower-middle-class refugees driven by the incessant urge to cross borders to their ‘promised utopia’ (244), recounting the ‘expectations, contradictions, undercurrents and signs of catastrophe’ (43) related to Partition in both India and erstwhile East Pakistan (including the states of Assam, Tripura and West Bengal). Building on these insights, it delves deeper into the dynamics and tensions between democratic iterations, juris-generative politics and citizenship struggles behind the ‘linguistic-cultural islands’ (122) of such refugee families and the different forms of exclusion suffered through nomenclatural otherisation through terms such as *udbastu*, *Bangal*, *bastuhara*, *sharanarathi*, *bohrgato*, *bideshi*, *malaun* (xii).

The book also deconstructs the neo-colonialist historiography of Partition that attributed the event primarily to Hindu–Muslim conflict. For instance, the communal riots during the 1940s and also during the post-Partition years are located beyond the more populist understandings peddled in traditional Partition historiography of South Asia. The book asks whether the resolution to the conflict surrounding the contemporary issues of citizenship in the northeastern part of India lies in a differential understanding of the causes and aftermath of Partition. It addresses the geontologies surrounding the conception of the homeland in the Bengali psyche and how they have no easy correspondence in the western theoretical currency of the migrating imagination. For instance, Ghoshal writes, “Being *Udbastu* (somebody who is homeless) or uprooted from the *vastu* came as a shock to those families. *Bastubhite* (in Bengali colloquial language), or ‘the site or foundation of a house’, was always integral to their identity” (35).

While the first two chapters examine the various socio-historical forces that led to the creolisation of Partition politics in terms of communal and narrow sectarian identities, the third chapter deals with the creation of a refugee domain in the border states of Assam and Tripura. The part that describes the migration influx in Tripura and the critical contribution of the refugees to the self-fashioning of the particular politics of this state in post-Independence India is particularly important. This is all the more so since it sheds light on a significant section of the Indian sovereign nation-state that remained on the margins of the nationalist historiography for a long time. Even as Partition and the resultant refugee influx of Bengalis from East Pakistan markedly changed the socio-cultural landscape of both Assam and Tripura, the repercussions of the ethnic conflict that ensued have remained fresh in the collective psyche: “eventually Tripura turned into a Bengali majoritarian state, as the Bengalis came out as the dominant group in the polity, society and economy of the state. Initially, the Assamese middle-classes were enthusiastic recipients of the Bengali culture emanating from Calcutta—but gradually, as they found that the Bengali settlers were socio-culturally dominant, politically powerful and becoming even numerically preponderant, they began to resist the dominance and presence of the Bengalis in Assam” (153).

The book also asks what are the boundaries between ‘evacuees’ and ‘infiltrators’, and are they accorded differential treatment and identities? How has the ‘decline-of-citizenship’ been contested with ‘safety, security and livelihood’ (244) by nation-states? How has the emergence of majority-minority or insider-outsider as a parameter of identity, for example, in Tripura and Assam, continued to be part of political and electoral narratives, eschewing democratic voice and territorial residence? Does ‘home’ connote a shelter for refugees, or does it involve conceptualising the human right of non-citizens to full membership in their host countries? Such elemental questions drive this comprehensive inquiry into the contextual possibilities and crises experienced by refugees in recreating their linguistic, cultural, economic and ethnic identities in the socio-cultural milieu of current politics resulting in the loss of the ‘motherland’.

The work is a worthy chronicle of a range of narrative tropes pertaining to structural exclusions. More importantly, it examines the ways in which the state and history become affective through what Michel Foucault called ‘bio-politics’ and Elizabeth Povinelli calls ‘geontologies’. The book specifically demands our critical and academic attention because of the ways it relates the more topical issues of the National Register of Citizenship (NRC) and CAA in contemporary India to the spectral hauntings of the Partition of 1947—creating an interstitial, mnemonic space that should remain intact if we are to rethink the contours and boundaries of the future modern nation-state. By drawing a clear parallel between the colonialist register of cartography and modes of political subjugation, the book spotlights how the current majoritarian state regime in India is reiterating the same ethno-political and epistemological violence upon those sections who refuse to be easily co-opted within the hegemonic registers of the nation-state and its monolithic notions of citizenship and homeland.

Works Cited

Foucault, M. 1990. *The History of Sexuality*, Volume 1. New York: Vintage Books/Random House.

Povinelli, E.A. 2016. *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.