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Book Review

Joya Chatterji. *Shadows at Noon: The South Asian Twentieth Century*. New Delhi: Penguin Viking, 2023. Hardcover, pp. xii+842. Price Rs. 1,299. ISBN 0670091855. Reviewed by:

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Behind the Iron Curtain of Joya Chatterji's South Asia

The history of 20th-century South Asia seems to contest the idea of South Asia. How can a region consisting of countries such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan with two violent partitions, four major wars, and several border standoffs constitute a unified region? The Hindu Right takes this question to the extreme by proposing the fundamentally rivalling identities of India and Pakistan, echoing the Two-Nation theory. Joya Chatterji seeks to tackle these claims in her heterodox work by unveiling the histories of the parallels between India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Her central argument is that India and Pakistan are not fundamentally incompatible. On the contrary, they have more points of cooperation than conflict. She traces the historical continuities through themes such as migration, household structures and food habits, allowing her to lift South Asia's 'Iron Curtain' (Introduction). The book is an unconventional historical inquiry with occasional autobiographical anecdotes and breezy, conversational prose, making it available to readership across disciplines of history, political theory and literature.

The interweaving of personal anecdotes, occasional mention of novels such as *The God of Small Things* and movie dialogues within the structure of inquiry roots the daunting chapters (most of which exceed a hundred pages) in the daily experiences of South Asia. Due to these 'informal' episodes, the book resembles the *chawls* (tenements) of colonial Bombay, where the workers used to live: chaotic, dirty and disorderly. However, a deeper engagement reveals that 'within the apparent disorder lay an order that may not … be visible to the Western gaze.' (pp. 329, Chapter 4). The chapters can be bifurcated into two broad categories. The first three chapters chronologically trace the 20th-century political history of South Asia in broad strokes by dwelling on three themes: state-building, nationalism and citizenship. Building on this foundation, Chatterji delves into the questions of migration, the structure of South Asian

households, the politics of food and caste, and the production of leisure in the next four chapters, followed by an epilogue. In addition, each chapter is thematic and chronological. For instance, the fifth chapter deals with South Asian households, intricately tracing how the multifarious, heterogeneous and web-like families were ordered, lineralised and mapped by the British Raj, leading to the emergence of the neat legal entity of the nuclear family (Chapter 5). The chronology and thematic discussions complement one another, and the chapters flow through to the epilogue, which binds the book with the author's central argument.

Chatterji genealogically breaks down nation-building projects to disturb and visualise the discourses that had etched Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi identities in stone. This exercise allows the reader to see how histories were selectively constructed, reaffirmed and erased to construct these identities. Chatterji uses museums, architecture, documentaries, and commemorations like Republic Day to make her case. In the case of museums, one comes across an episode where artefacts from Mohenjodaro and Harappa were divided between India and Pakistan by Sir Mortimer Wheeler (Chapter 2). These artefacts, which shared the same sources, were then used by the two national museums to establish civilisational histories for their respective national identities. In the Indian National Museum, Greco-Roman Buddhist architecture and Mughal paintings gave way to Gupta and Chola architecture, while the Pakistani National Museum tried to sideline Hindu artefacts by making a volume of the Quran written in the Abbasid Caliphate and the personal belongings of the Mohammad Ali Jinnah, Allama Iqbal and Liaquat Ali Khan centres of attraction.

However, the author argues that despite such attempts, Pakistan 'could not erase from Karachi its older Hindu quarters with distinctive Indo-Saracenic buildings, any more than Lahore could efface the massive the mausoleum of Raja Ranjit Singh … which abuts the Badshahi Mosque and the Lahore Fort' (p. 151). Chatterji critiques narrow nation-building projects by resurrecting histories of cultural coexistence. While critiquing Nehruvian nationalism for downgrading Greco-Buddhist art forms, Chatterji simultaneously questions the Hindu nationalist project for destroying Islamic architecture. Her critique is hopeful and poetic. She argues that it was impossible to efface the Lodi Garden or the Hauz Khas from Delhi because the Islamic architectural sites in Delhi became embedded in the daily lives of its inhabitants (Chapter 2). Writing about the Qutub Minar, which had become the site of suicides in the 1960s, Chatterji says,

> Delhi's students brought their sorrows and shame to the Qutub. They sat on its high balconies thinking of their lives, prospects and loved ones, before they jumped. *How could we forget this?* [emphasis added] (pp.151)

For Chatterji, state-building, like nation-building, never reaches finality. The East India Company could never subdue *thugee* (banditry); the mighty Empire entered India in 1858 with a proclamation of non-interference in religious matters; and none of the three

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postcolonial states bothered to quell disorder and lawlessness until it threatened their physical unity and integrity (Chapter 3). Ghettos and squatter refugee squatter colonies like the Town Hall Camp in Dacca and Azadgarh in West Bengal are examples of zones of lawlessness that the state — with knowledge of their existence — tolerates (Chapter 4).

Hope leads Chatterji to claim that at all points in history, different variants of nationalism have coexisted, like 'bickering siblings' (Chapter 2). Placing Hindutva in this context, she draws a cyclical picture of history, claiming that as Hindutva replaced its composite counterpart in the 1990s, it may be replaced by another inclusive variant in the future. What the author misses in this argument is the totalitarian hold of Hindutva, which was not present in Nehruvian nationalism. An appeal to the clichéd cyclical conception of history is not enough to predict Hindutva's decline, especially when the Hindu nationalist literature claims new legitimisation methods, such as appropriating the language of decolonisation. A case to be considered in this regard is J Sai Deepak's use of Walter Mignolo's decolonial framework to argue that Hindu nationalism is the only decolonial force which could delink the *'Bharatiya Civilization'* from the clutches of the colonial hangover. A combination of violent totalitarian politics and decolonial appeal may have transformed Hindutva from a sibling to a father, which demands deeper engagement with its politics.

Furthermore, the idea of South Asia that Chatterji opts for as her unit of analysis raises some questions. Her argument for choosing India, Pakistan and Bangladesh is that they were under the British Raj while Afghanistan and other parts were not. Does it imply that the British-ruled colonies constitute the core of South Asia? Postcolonial scholars have critiqued this construction. Sinderpal Singh argued that this conception magnifies the civilised/savage dichotomy wherein the British colonies are deemed 'civilised', hence forming the core of South Asia, while the states that stood unconquered constitute the 'savage' periphery of the region. Chatterji devotes a bulk of the latter part of the book to the subaltern world of snake charmers and prostitutes who form the margins of South Asian society and polity. Unfortunately, the margins of the Empire's South Asian imagination await critical engagement.

In tracing the soft-bellied states, competing nationalisms and turbulent households, Chatterji brings forth the complexity and tragedy of *her* South Asia. The region neither follows the path that Hegel proclaimed would lead to God, nor does it imbibe the constellations of processes that made Europe 'modern.' While modernisation theorists such as Fred Riggs and Gunnar Myrdal deem South Asia as 'prismatic' and 'soft' owing to the coexistence of traditional structures with Enlightenment ideals, Chatterji takes us through the contradictions of South Asia to reveal an underlying structure that thrives on coexistence. Chatterji peels the multitudes of South Asia while arguing that the layers — traditional, modern, tragic and peaceful — make a whole.

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Noon is the time when the Sun is at its peak. Thus, one gets the brightest light and darkest shadows. The 20th Century, argues Chatterji, was South Asia's noon. Chatterji's excuses herself from drawing a linear rise/decline picture of South Asia and I believe that her analysis presents a truism, which should punctuate future histories of South Asia's 21st Century: the region encapsulates far too many intricacies, surprises and disturbances to be metaphorised as day or night; South Asia simultaneously preserves shadows and light.

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