
Book Reviews

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N. Ali, V.S. Kalra and S. Sayyid (eds). 2008. *A Postcolonial People: South Asians in Britain*. New York, USA: Columbia University Press. 448 pp. \$32.50. ISBN 0231700121 (PB).

This book is a collection of essays that describe how South Asians in Britain, or BrAsians, have been conceptualised and treated in the Western imagery from the turn of the eighteenth century to the twenty-first century and examines the experiences and struggles of BrAsians to be identified more accurately. The overall approach is two-fold: to deconstruct the theoretical tropes in understanding BrAsian identity founded on centuries of racism and political and media discourses describing South Asian experiences; and to identify in the three different parts of the collections, namely frames, portraits and signatures, how BrAsians have challenged these discourses and identity constructions in politics, economy, family life and fine arts.

The essays are accompanied by a series of short essays based on highlights of the BrAsian culture. Some *Did you know* pieces on South Asian recipes, masalas, football playing and the magnificent sculptures of the BrAsian artist Anish Kapoor, provide relief from the otherwise grave theoretical arguments on BrAsian experiences of racism and cultural survival. Other interlude essays add particular dimensions of BrAsian imprint in places such as Newham, London Borough, East London with the most ethnically diverse non-white population; another on the 'Curry Mile' in Rusholme that attracts 15,000 diners visit every weekend; and a more intense one on drug use amongst British minorities.

The essays revisit how the colonial gaze towards BrAsians selectively described their actions in comparison to how BrAsians actually made themselves visible in the political, social and economic landscape of the country. In the 1950s, linear and evolutionary conceptualisation of culture assumed that BrAsians, the new blacks, will end their social problems when they learn and reach the zenith of civilisation symbolised by white Britain. Virinder S. Kalra further highlights that BrAsians' resistance during encounters with police force where they were the primary targets were not noticed by the government because there was no separate category except black to describe them, including in jail records where British minorities and foreign nationals are put under the same ethnic category, or else categorised on the basis of religion.

In his theory, Al Qaeda—like Gandhi, again—has the power to forgive, even if they belong to America which is waging war against it. He quotes from an interview of Ayman al-Zawahiri, the lieutenant of Osama Bin Laden (pp. 30–1):

I invite all of America's victims to Islam, the religion which rejects injustice and treachery. If they don't convert to Islam, then they should at least take advantage of Muslims' defensive campaign to repel America's aggression against them and overcome them, each under his own banner, and with whatever is at his disposal.

And what meaning does Devji see in this? He writes: 'This is a novel interpretation of Islam's universality, and one that has transformed the language of religious conversion itself' (p. 31).

Some may view Devji's book as a strange but novel interpretation of violence by Islamist terrorists. However, at the level of the layperson, it comes through merely as an attempt to give a new, humane meaning to Islamist terrorism as the means adopted by the terrorists to strip the west of its morality and make it aware of suffering—that they think Muslims all over the world are experiencing—through acts of violence.

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Urs Geiser and Stephan Rist (eds). 2009. *Decentralisation Meets Local Complexity Local Struggles, State Decentralisation and Access to Natural Resources in South Asia and Latin America Perspectives Volume 4*. Bern, Switzerland: NCCR North-South. 275 pp. ISBN 978-3-905835-10-6 (HB).

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The book deals with the analytical concept of decentralisation. The very first chapter lays down the outline of the book to be unfolded further. The authors have examined eight case studies based on empirical work in two parts of the world—Latin America and South Asia. In South Asia, two case studies have been taken from India and one each from Nepal and Pakistan. Among the Latin American countries, two have been taken from Bolivia and one each from Mexico and Argentina.

The book deals with issues ranging from decentralisation of water management to forest management. The common thread running through all the eight case studies is to understand the basis of decision-making by involving specific set of stakeholders in relation to specific topics which are designed to achieve the assigned social goals and sustainable management of nature.

The chapter 'Decentralisation and the Search for Sustainable Water Management in the Municipality of El Grullo, Western Mexico' by Cheryl Andre de la Porte, Luis M. Martinez R. and Peter R.W. Gerritsen explores the extent to which such decentralisation processes have led to a more sustainable management of natural resources, with a particular focus on water. The authors have gone deep into the study of the issues which impede the functioning of decentralisation at the ground level as in the case of Mexico.

In Mexico, water decentralisation has taken place in a gradual manner. In response to the emerging situation, a Watershed Commission was set up. This addressed water planning especially for irrigation purposes but ignored water supply and wastewater treatment. Interestingly, the authors have identified the reasons for Mexican municipalities not functioning properly as the following—short tenure of three years; political leaders have control over municipalities and because of this, they are not able to raise fees for electoral backlash.

The authors observed that though decentralisation efforts have given the drinking water and sanitation responsibilities to Mexican municipalities, the funding provisions have remained with the administrative sections of the government. Gradually, the municipality got the responsibility of spending money on water and sanitation. In the end, the authors suggest that decentralisation has taken place mainly at an administrative levels and less in the political sphere.

Another issue highlighted in the book related to decentralisation is that of governance. The authors Cecilia Cross and Ada Freytes Frey in the chapter 'The Social and Ecological Dimensions of a Decentralisation Process: Participation by Social Movements in the Sustainable Management of Urban Solid Waste in Buenos Aires', have studied the governance issues involved in a decentralisation policy. This has been done in the context of environmental, economic and social problems linked to waste treatment in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires City. The central objective behind initiating the *Sin Desperdicios* programme is social management of waste treatment.

With the introduction of decentralisation in Bolivia, this has led to a stream of negotiations for management of social plants. The article written by Fernando Antezana and Manuel de la Fuente underlines the process of negotiation and decision-making related to the setting up of one of these social plants. Interestingly, the authors have studied that the nature of decentralisation and Peasant Municipality Management in Bolivia is different for indigenous and town people. Not only this, domination of indigenous versus town people and generation of resources and funds by various municipalities is different in all regions.

The authors further underline that in spite of decentralisation efforts by the government, some groups of people intend to manipulate decentralised bodies to their own advantage by exploiting local complexities in the area.

The authors have described how the government introduced the Popular Participation Law which outlined many new mechanisms of citizen-state interactions where the local people were entrusted with the responsibility of organising

themselves according to local customs. But another organisation, the Municipal Oversight Committee, scrutinises the development plans submitted by the elected municipal authorities. Again in 1999, local groups were made more powerful by strengthening them by making participatory planning compulsory.

The 1994 law gave a tremendous opportunity to indigenous groups to participate in municipal elections by taking into account local conditions and groups. The indigenous groups began appointing their own candidates. All these changes at the local level radically changed the landscape of relationships between state, citizen and indigenous community.

Another important dimension in the decentralisation study in Bolivia has been on the varied nature of the state decentralisation efforts in Bolivia. The author Patrick Bottazzi has studied decentralisation efforts in Bolivia at all levels—local, regional, national and international—which have helped in the decentralisation trajectory. He has analysed delicately the tensions generated by these efforts made by the indigenous groups for more control over resources. Thus, the authors' strides favour municipal system without causing ethnic segregation.

Bishnu Raj Upreti has studied decentralisation in relation to participatory nature of conservation by taking the case study of the Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve (KTWR) in Nepal's Eastern Terai. Upreti has analysed the present difficulties in implementation of participatory nature of conservation by understanding historical developments. By following the Western model of development, the Koshi Tappu reserve was established in 1976. This led to shifting of indigenous groups from the newly developed park area. Along with this, many people migrated from Nepal's hill region to their present locations. The authorities were ruthless in not allowing indigenous people to reclaim the land in the park. By applying the analytical concept of legal pluralism, Upreti describes the ongoing situation as a conflict between customary rights of resource access and newly introduced state regulations.

With the introduction of democracy in 1990, the process of strengthening local government got streamlined. Further in this effort, the 1994 legislation allowed the establishment of buffer zones around parks that were to be managed through participatory procedures. This was aimed at reducing indigenous people's dependence on park areas. This led to the formation of user groups. But this did not lead to complete peace. Infact numerous conflicts occur between users and park authorities. The author maintains that though decentralised procedures in nature conservation is encouraging, however, the implementation of decentralised measures did not take into account core concerns of indigenous groups that suffered from the establishment of the park.

Babar Shahbaz and Tanvir Ali have analysed Pakistan's attempt at decentralisation in the forestry sector. The authors illustrate that there is a vast gap between policy declarations and actual decentralisation of forest management at the ground. Like any other place, Pakistan's decentralisation process started with donor-supported projects, particularly of the Asian Development Bank.

The JFMCs (Joint Forest Management Committees), sometimes called Village Development Committee were designed to address two issues—local people's livelihood concerns and to introduce more sustainable forest use practices. The authors have pointed out a trust deficit, for not having participatory forest management. As in Nepal's case, here also there is lack of respect for customary rules and procedures governing access to forests. Because of this mistrust, customary laws continue to structure local practices, even though this has been declared illegal by the state. But these new measures would not work unless local complexities are taken into account.

Another attempt to study conflict in Assam in the north-east of India has been made by Sanjay Barbora. This chapter gives details of the implementation of the constitutional Sixth Schedule provisions and local conflicts. He also presents the anthropological details of land distribution pattern. Loopholes in the legal provisions are exploited by the bureaucracy and political establishment to favour some group over other and as a tool for political largesse for electoral gains.

Another study on decentralisation has been undertaken by R. Ramakumar and K.N.Nair in Kerala. The authors have studied the competitive interpretations of local representation by state and non-state groups in Kerala. They specifically address the issue of relationships between those elected local bodies and non-state groups that are involved in local development. The authors have undertaken case studies in the hilly regions of Kerala to understand the effectiveness of interventions for the provision of drinking water and related watersheds. Earlier this used to be done by NGOs, but decentralisation has led to implementation of such schemes to elected bodies. The authors conclude in the end that the scheme implementation has become more transparent.

The important merit of the book is that it is reader friendly, giving detailed notes and references at the end of all chapters. More case studies would have further enriched the book. This book will be helpful for all those who are interested in studying decentralisation, natural resource management and intend to gain a comparative experience of decentralisation from empirical work.

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Ellen L. Frost. 2008. *Asia's New Regionalism*. London, UK: Lynne Rienner Publishers. 293 pp. \$25. ISBN 978-1-58826-554-8.

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Today, Asia faces various non-traditional and traditional threats, such as transnational crimes, corruption, intra-state conflicts, religious extremism, deforestation, pollution and so on, and realistically, multilateral forums provide opportunities to deal such challenges. The author of the book under review, Ellen L. Frost, expertly