

Book Review

Ravinder Kaur, *Since 1947: Partition Narratives among Punjabi Migrants of Delhi*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2007. p. 16

The violent territorial rupture of 1947 and its legacy are central not only to the state formation in India and Pakistan but also in shaping the very contours of South Asia. The violence and bitterness that characterized the drawing of the fault line across a land which had for centuries remained one has been documented in a series of works. Ravinder Kaur's 'Since 1947' has focused on the twin processes of transformation that turned the ordinary people into refugees and then the refugees into citizens and then further to locals. The themes of displacement, belonging and re-association are explored through the unfolding of the various chapters of the book. The book seeks to trace the movement from North West Frontier Province and West Punjab to Delhi. However the movement she seeks to explore is not only at the level of physical displacement but also that of mental disruption. Following that displacement she further delves into the processes of integration through which these people re-adjusted their lives to the vastly changed conditions of their existence. Kaur is conscious of the fact that this movement cannot be mapped in a unilinear way, rather it is a multi-layered process shaped by class, caste and gender experiences. She points out in the very first chapter how the past encounters are routinely remodeled as present and how the present circumstances reshape the remembrance of the past. The narratives documented she holds would challenge the absolute understanding of the past and the present.

The main focus is on the period between 1947 to 1965 spanning from the Partition itself to the official closure of resettlement work in 1965. The study is based on three resettlement colonies built by the government to house the refugees. She explores how the narration of a local event, namely the demolitions carried out by the municipality, is connected to their original displacement from Pakistan at the time of the Partition. Ironically, many of the present residents had not even witnessed the trauma themselves, but through repeated narratives the events of Partition had become an integral part of their psyche. Thus the past rather than remaining locked as a moment in time continues to reappear in their everyday life shaping responses, strategies and even emotions. The present then is contextualized and often made comprehensible through the prism of the past. It is from this observation that she derives the methodology of the book. She documents the work through oral narratives using memory or more precisely collective memory as a tool. She is aware that venturing into the planes of memory would open to her hitherto unmarked paths between the past and present. This is all the more when the subject for the collection of

memory are persons rather than documents. By becoming a link between their past events and public recitals the study followed “sort of ethnographic journey into historic spaces, giving rise to disciplinary breaches.” Another very interesting tool she uses to unravel the multi layered movement and consequent re- settlement is the examination of the ingredients used in the pickles typically made in the Punjabi household as an indicator of the family’s location in the class structure.

The other salient aspect that she deals with is the refugee’s relation with the state. The moment of Partition and its consequence was not only the focal point in the lives of those affected by it but it was central to the formation of the post colonial state in India. It would be inadequate to portray the period of the Partition merely as a dichotomy between Hindus and Muslims, Congress and Muslim League, India and Pakistan. It is a period that signifies the coming of the Indian state on its own. The task of distributing emergency relief and then resettling refugees permanently provided the newly formed state with both a challenge and an opportunity. Kaur seeks to examine the constant negotiation between the state and the refugees in a quest to define their roles and opportunities in the new vastly changed circumstances. She unravels from the master narrative of Partition migration not only what is revealed but also that which is suppressed. Taking cue from this theme she has tried to organize her study through two trajectories—the state as the central organizing agency in the wake of the post –Partition reality and the noticeable absence of the state in the accounts of the survivors.

In the second chapter she introduces the additional theme of state/society split in the analytical frame and delineates the key concepts used in the book. The third chapter explores how the partition narratives are shaped. The images that the partition evokes tend to revolve around the experiences of the urban poor and rural folk. This meta narrative of partition masks the complexity and the multiple levels within the population movement. She delineates the multiple strands of the movement by separating out the various clusters of the movement—foot columns, railway journeys, military truck and finally air travel. Through the use of this innovative indicator she shows how with the differing mode of travel varying class position can be accurately inferred. With that their experience of Partition was also different. In the next chapter she traces the class divisions apparent in the journey to the transit refugee camps etc. In this chapter her focus is on examining state participation. The theme she touched upon in her introductory chapter is examined in greater details—the state striving to authenticate its legitimacy and the refugees by actively defining their role and space in this exercise seeking to gain leverage for collective bargaining. The postcolonial state in its splintered form alternated between an active organizer, a partially functioning structure of authority and even as a mere bystander in the entire process. The Partition involved loss for the victims both at the material and the emotive level. The policies and strategies of the state towards resettlement is in the final analysis an

attempt to restore these losses. Through Chapter 5 Kaur aims to demonstrate how in spite of the continuous presence of the state agencies, the power relation of the former with the refugee communities differ considerably in relation to the familial structure. By taking up three studies she shows that though on a superficial level the narratives sound quite similar but at a deeper level they appear very different from each other in their circumstances and outcomes. Chapter 6 touches upon a largely ignored theme of the Partition narrative—the untouchables. They remain unrepresented in the nationalist historiography right from the time of nation formation. Through the narratives she had gathered in her study she challenges the prevailing notion that because of the fear of pollution the untouchables were unscathed by the turmoil. For their varying realities it was seen that the members of this class were not critical of the state the way the others were. Kaur focuses on the process of integration in the following chapter. She points out that a fruitful integration process involves not only settling down and creating a space for themselves in their new world but the more complex process of actually obliterating their original homeland which in this case was also denoted as the 'enemy' state. In Delhi the migrants not only created a niche for themselves but also successfully edged out the local residents. It is the local-refugee dialectic and the entire process of refugees successfully claiming the locality, which form the core of this chapter. Here she introduces a new analytical tool. The use of letters written by people containing their personal accounts, comments on political situation, stories of individual support form a rich source through which the personal side of Partition can be explored. Moreover being unpolished accounts, written without the advantage of hindsight makes them especially interesting. The discussions also capture the resentment of original Delhi residents at the changing physical and cultural contours of the city. However she observes that this feeling remained simmering below the surface and did not really develop into a hostile conflict as the migrants in course of time developed into a successful group poised to take over the city. In the next chapter she delves into the debates surrounding the primordial identities of religion, language or region, that remained unresolved even after the refugees physically settled down in Delhi. She seeks not only to unearth how certain identities are pursued but also how some others are subsumed or suppressed and remain unarticulated.

The grand narrative of Partition, she points out, is characterized by two types of absences. In the first place there is a marked absence of untouchables and women in the Partition accounts. In the Partition narratives monopolized by the middle class these two sections never appear to tell their own story. Their experiences are subsumed within the main structure of the Partition narrative. The second type of absence is that of the Indian state in the master version of Partition migration and resettlement. There remains a large gap between the personal narratives and the evidence of state involvement in resettlement gathered from an array of documentary evidence. While she seeks to address the second lacuna throughout the

book, in the former case her efforts are largely limited to a chapter assigned to each section. Unlike the second theme she does not weave this so effortlessly into the main body of the book.

The book, in the final analysis, compresses the experience of 60 years of uprooting, migration and resettlement into the length of a book encompassing not only the events since 1947 but also the different communities and agencies playing a role in it. She also brings out how the events of the Partition have become a continuous point of reference for the residents to Delhi even when it comes to defining an event of local occurrence bearing little or no connection with the Partition. The master narrative recreates the events of Partition and the personal stories in a practiced seamless manner that glosses over any evidence to the contrary. This narrative of destruction followed by resurrection is a theme that seems concurrent to the very theme of Indian national movement. The hour of independence was marred by territorial partition, movement of population and internecine communal violence. This was a shared experience of the nascent nation and those rendered homeless by the process. The path followed by the nation and its migrants was concurrent and therefore its intricacies were appreciated by both.

By **Suparna Banerjee** *

*

Refugee Watch, 34, December 2009