

# Book Review

Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar, *The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia: Refugees, Boundaries, Histories*, Penguin Viking, New Delhi, 2008

Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar's work has brought into focus a constellation of concepts that she has firmly contextualised in order to give shape to the idea of 'border making practices'. This constellation of concepts, broadly include property, territory, law and citizenship. In a moment of historic dissolution and reconstitution of South Asian territorial units; she situates her story of dislocations and relocations. The central concern and the resultant argument of the book cannot be stated more emphatically or eloquently than the author's own words, "It was through the making of refugees as a governmental category, through refugee rehabilitation as a tool of planning, that new nations and the borders between them were made, and people, including families, were divided." (p.3)

The above statement structures as much the enquiry as the insights of the research presented in the book under review. This reshaping is distributed across three distinct thematic couplings in the book; refugee/government, people/property and limits/nations. The author distributes the first six chapters under these couplings in order to bind them within a narrative structure of 'state making'. It is necessary to mention here the other coupling that underlies the entirety of the narrative and structures its progression though not explicitly stated by the author; namely, law/territory. It is a coupling that increasingly comes to the fore as the descriptions of competitive legislative interventions in terms of stringent 'Evacuee Property' laws become a central component of the history presented by the book. It is therefore in this measure and conceptual rhythm that one must begin to read this 'remarkable history' that the author begins to 'recover'.

The definition of the word 'long' in the title of the work comes from the argument that state practices has to be understood as a long duree process, and not a single event bound in time and space. Partitions continue, they precipitate and create sedimentations that both hide and shape the underlying social configurations. The property relations and the communities of the pre-partition period, secure in their non-descript

'everydayness' of as yet untransformed villages, and not yet separated by no man's land and barbed wire, were not erased overnight. The declaration of the boundaries did not materialise them. The tortuous process of boundary making first necessitated the production of the 'subject' of those boundaries. This was where the theatre of territory was occupied by the first great performance, the first task of 'State management', namely, the production of the refugee as both an object of rehabilitation and the subject of the national territorial integrity. This was also a question of management of multiple flows through balancing mechanism. The systematic bureaucratic delineation of the refugee flows inevitably took shape as an imagined circularity of 'Hindu and Sikh refugees' migrating towards the territories of the nascent Indian territory and the 'Muslim' refugees migrating towards East or West Pakistan. The construction of this cycle was initiated by the arrival of large displaced groups from both sides of the border into cities that suddenly found themselves in the middle of a housing crisis.

The author chooses to lay the ground of her narrative in the two cities of Karachi and Delhi. This ground was perhaps chosen for her by the fact of the centrality of these two cities in the collective memories of the displaced and their gravitation towards these spaces of ambiguous prosperity and political foment. The arrival of the displaced Hindus in Delhi and the displaced *Muhajirs* in Karachi started off a series of contestations over the newly produced minority communities and their property in these cities. The displaced persons and their assertion of belonging often came to mean the forcible dispossession of the Hindu families in Sind and the Muslim families in Delhi. Allotment of 'abandoned' property in Karachi and the allotment of 'Evacuee' property in Delhi assumed significance by these early and chaotic clashes between the displaced communities and the minority groups in these two cities. The author argues that the 'ambiguous' treatment of the *Muhajir* population by the Sind government produced a complex discourse on belonging to be offered to the displaced population at the place of arrival. In contesting the ambiguous stand of the Sind government the *Muhajirs* had argued that the 'North Indian' Muslims had sacrificed greatly for the Pakistan movement and therefore should be entitled to full rehabilitation in Pakistan. Against this the state had floated the argument that the fair treatment of the Hindu minority community was paramount in assuring the safety and wellbeing of the Muslim minority community in India. The author's reading of the situation is startling when she constructs this condition of 'uncertainty' and movement as a "shared landscape" (pp.19-76), which shifted and changed with the daily movement of population. It was a state when the strange uncertainties and ambiguities of the dissolution and partition of existing state machinery and the various markers of belonging had not yet congealed in the form of a final legal/territorial structure. The families faced an illusion of 'choice' which the book aims at complicating by introducing the notion of a long and unstable bureaucratic process of identification and the tenuous differentiations made between 'visit' and 'migration'. This distinction became increasingly important with the

stringent application of the 'Evacuee Property' laws that allowed for the occupation or seizure of Muslim houses left empty by the original residents due while visiting family and friends in Pakistan. The families tried to creatively define and contest the making of individuals or families as evacuee in order to retain such property. It is in relation to these practices that we have to understand the salience of the author's idea of 'moving boundaries that approximates the possibility of living borders and osmotic diffusion of populations across these boundaries.

The next stage of the narrative discusses the constitution of property and related legislation as 'internal boundary-making device' (p. 128). This part of the work goes into a detailed account of the various shifts and turns in the making of the 'evacuee property' legislations. The generalisation of these laws to encompass the entire minority community through the use of such ambiguous phrasings as 'intending evacuee' added to the conundrum and intensified the situation of 'uncertainty' or contingency as the author prefers to call it. The founding relation for this cycle of legislation was the relation between rehabilitation and exodus. The vast populations that the states had to manage exerted a vast pressure on their housing capacity and the apparent public and state consensus on the question of 'refugee rehabilitation' legitimised the fixation of minority identities as suspect identities while solidifying the identity content of the notion of citizenship. The author here draws a succinct parallel between the legal regime concerning 'enemy properties' in Europe during World War and the 'Evacuee property' legislations in the subcontinent. The author locates the process of promulgation of these laws within a framework of competitive retaliations by two nation states targeting their respective minority communities while emulating their stringent enforcement. This may also be extended probably to an older structural formulation concerning the 'Nation form' – the famous phrase of Etienne Balibar - and its relation to both territory and population. The chaotic situation and the retaliatory function of law; perceptively brought forth by Zamindar seems to keep in a provocative yet suspended animation this older question of the structural or systemic necessities of the coupling of Nation and State and the relation of this coupling with Law beyond the accidental or the purely situational.

The last section of this historical study addresses the foundational processes of documentation or the 'passport regime' that completes, in the author's view, the boundary making process in South Asia. The completion of this cycle, however, marks the beginning of a new kind of family formation where fragments of the split families of Muslims and various registers of nuclear family connections became vastly useful in founding claims to citizenship. This strategisation by the population was followed by the State's policy of registering and documenting the Pakistan visits and the family fragments of the government officials living in Pakistan. With this the procedural placement of the markers of legitimate and illegitimate border crossing was finally placed in perspective. This is a 'local history' as the

author will time and again emphasize. She places the project in perspective when she clarifies that the recovery of this history is a necessary act in the face the loss of the possibility of such movements and the solidification of the modern boundaries. The long duree local history becomes for the author the place for certain now invisible possibilities of both community and politics.

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