

Modern South Asia: History Culture, Political Economy. Second Edition.

By Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal

New York: Routledge, 2001

Big histories don't fit easily into small books. In such cases, authors most make hard choices about what they include and omit. Squeezing 300 years of South Asian history in to 206 pages requires dramatic procrustean measures; and although the title boasts a history of South Asia, the introduction betrays Jalal and Bose's vast omissions: the work is concerned not with South Asia but with India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. The title serves purposes of political correctness more than anything. Using "South Asia" is a nod to "recent and neutral parlance". Regardless, Bose and Jalal's examination of "centripetal and centrifugal tendencies" in the region since 1700 sets out to present a portrait that debunks two stereotypes: one, the Romantic imagining of India as a land of magic and mystery; and two, more recent biases that associate South Asia with violence, volatility and irrationality.

Despite their protestations against scholarly eulogizing of India's long, unbroken history for thousands of years, Bose and Jalal's first three chapters begin similarly with a brief sketch of the high points in 2000 years of Indian civilization: from Vedic religion to the advent of Buddhism, the ascendancy of Asoka, the dominance of the Guptas and Cholas, to the coming of the Mughals. Chapters Four and Five portray the Mughals, on the whole, in a rather flattering light: as open-minded, religiously tolerant, non-authoritarian patrons of culture. Of course, the preceding comments apply more to Akbar than to Aurangzeb.

The "between empire" period begins for Bose and Jalal with the death of Aurangzeb in 1707 and continues through the middle of the century. It is a period of multiple small principalities – former Mughal provinces, Sikh, Jat and Maratha warrior states, and Rajput territories. British dominance begins in earnest with the Battle of Plessey in 1757. Following this, chapters Six through Eight examine strategies and technologies used

by the British East India Company to control locals and extract profit -- from amassing mercenary "sepoys" armies, to striking up "subsidiary alliance" contracts with Indian princes.

Company exploitation moved quickly to colonial domination in the aftermath of the 1857 Mutiny. It is at this moment in history that Jalal and Bose locate the initial seeds of an "inchoate sense of patriotism" among Indians. Although they are careful to situate the Mutiny in the context of numerous resistance movements during the nineteenth century, 1857 stands as a watershed for Jalal and Bose, in its demographic, religious and geographical scope. Unlike earlier insurrections, the Mutiny mobilized people from multiple areas (rural, urban, North and South), multiple religions (Muslims, Hindus) multiple classes (peasants, urban bourgeoisie, land-owning zamindars). From a conglomeration of peoples with differing faith, class and regional loyalties, 1857 sees a burgeoning pan-Indian consciousness begin to take shape.

In examining the colonialist phase of Britain's presence in India in Chapters 10-15, Bose and Jalal pay particular attention to the rise of local and pan-Indian nationalisms, the growth of the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League, the impact of World Wars I and II and the changing British policies between 1857 and 1914 and from WWI until independence. Chapter 13, in particular, is devoted to the life and political work of Gandhi. If not thorough, Bose and Jalal are cautious in their presentation and throughout these sections to voice repeated caveats against projecting communalism onto pre-1920s India or privileging religious nationalism above other regional or class-based movements.

Chapters 16 and 17 deal with partition and its aftermath. Chapters 18 and 19, a mere 34 pages, are left to describe the history of Pakistan, Bangladesh and India from 1947 to 2003. It is in these last chapters that the book fails. While Bose and Jalal make an admirable attempt at capturing the crucial moments of history over the last 55 years, in the end the survey leaves out too much. It is a whirlwind rendering that would leave any

non-South Asianist scratching his or her head.

In the end, *Modern South Asia* succeeds on two fronts. One, it provides a concise and fluid panorama of *Indian* history from Mughal times up until partition. This includes a useful bibliography, chronology and glossary at the end of the book. Two, it gives the neophyte an introduction into contemporary issues in the study of Indian history and historiography, addressing current epistemological and methodological debates from Subaltern studies to post-colonial theory. However, one cannot overlook certain holes in the book. Most glaringly, Jalal and Bose do not even address Sri

Lanka and Nepal, even in a rudimentary way. In most maps, these countries aren't even labeled! A second shortcoming is the pitiful attention to "modern" events in South Asia. While Jalal and Bose adequately address the rise of Hindutva, they overlook other significant political, cultural and economic events from the second half of the twentieth-century: social change in Pakistan and Bangladesh, struggles over Kashmir, Tamil nationalism, etc. In the end, the book remains useful as a quick reference or general guide to milestones in Indian history. But it should be marketed and titled in a way that is more upfront about its inclusions and omissions.

Ben Schonthal

University of Chicago