

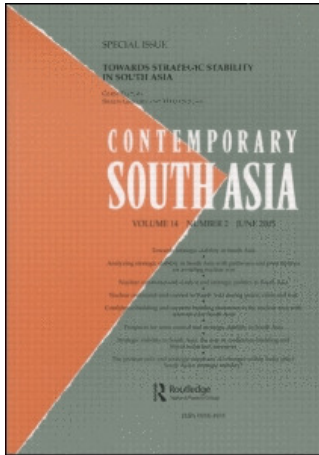
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Book reviews

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bringing 'women's issues' to the fore and the politics at play in the state are not discussed at all. Although one chapter is dedicated to the specific problems tribal women are facing, the many Muslim women and non-Bengali women in the state are not represented separately, no doubt a political decision on the side of the editors. Some chapters would have benefited from a more differentiated picture in terms of class, ethnic origin, and rural–urban residence, as the contributors tend to overgeneralise, for instance in the chapters on nutrition, work and on culture, with the former two focusing almost exclusively on poor and marginalised women, whereas the latter highlights solely urban high-brow Bengali productions.

Overall, the volume highlights that women in West Bengal, in all their diversity, are benefiting from new opportunities and services, educational institutions and political platforms, but that West Bengal is a state in transition, whose development is characterised by enormous and often new inequalities and gender-specific exclusions.

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Rabba hun kee kariye: thus departed our neighbours, a film by Ajay Bhardwaj, Mainstay Productions, 2007, Punjabi with English subtitles, 65 minutes

Like an intricate vine, the documentary *Rabba Hun Kee Kariye (O Divine One! Tell Me, What Shall I Do Now?)* wraps itself around the cultural lives and memories of Punjabi men old enough to remember the traumas of India's Partition in 1947. Professor Karam Singh Chauhan, a charismatic lecturer of Persian, recalls how, if it was not for the kind help of a childless woman, Shams-ul-Nisa-Begum Chughtai, who taught him the Urdu alphabet 'Standard II texts and tables up to 10', he may well have remained uneducated – the nearest school was too far away for him to attend. For Chauhan, the most depressing aspect of Partition was that he was 'separated from beautiful people like her'. His one remaining wish was to meet her after all these years or at least to visit her grave so as to pay his respects 'to whom I owe my education'. The theme tune sung by the mellifluous voice of Puran Shahkoti, 'O divine one! Tell me, what shall I do now? Now that soul-mates of my neighbourhood have departed forever', resounds with poignant force as they intersperse such personal memories.

The personal is no stranger to the political: one of Udam Singh's relatives, Gadri Baba Bhagat Singh Bilga, listens to letters being read out from the revolutionary when he was imprisoned in Brixton Jail in 1940. Singh was adamant that his new name encompassing Muslim, Sikh and Hindu referents, Mohamed Singh Azad, was the only name to which he would answer. We are then introduced to a fragile copy of the folktale, *Heer Ranjha*, Singh's very own that he used to scrutinise intensely, particularly the discussions between Heer and the Qazi, the judge who pronounced a fatwa on Heer for not relinquishing her love for the cow-herder, Ranjha. Such revelations on the freedom fighter's empathy for the rights of women are rare indeed.

Repeatedly, we learn about the cultural bonds between Sikhs and Muslims in Punjab, held together by folktales such as *Heer Ranjha*, *Sohni Mahiwal*, *Mirza Sahib*,

ballads, rites, the traditions of Sufism and *qawwali* – that is, the *rasam rawaaz* (the tastes and customs) of Punjabi culture. The blows of Partition were at the level of displacement, murders, rapes and abductions, but strikingly were not enough to create a schism in its cultural fabric.

Whilst the vine of the film entwines itself through this intricate mish-mash of shared traditions, it also reveals the blood-soaked memories of those who saw the atrocities carried out in the name of vengeance for those Sikhs and Hindus killed ‘on the wrong side’ of this newly created border. As Hanif Mohammad recalls, when he was a child of five he was sent to his aunt’s place, where his father thought he would be safer: ‘Such were the times that mothers would even desert their sons’. Nonetheless, in the heat after Partition, 10–15 men came to his aunt’s home with ‘swords dripping with blood’. His cousins had hid in the cow dung storage room and had told Mohammad to get out for fear that his childish behaviour may reveal their hiding place. The killers found his cousins, beheaded them one by one in front of the ‘shocked and numbed’ boy, and then asked him for some water. Later he tried to help a woman who was about to give birth but could not find the midwife, his aunt, also in hiding, due to the many corpses on the tracks in front of him. Whilst Mohammad recalls the details of those turbulent times in a down-to-earth manner characteristic of Punjabi village banter, one cannot but note that his survival was either a quirk of fate or truly a miracle.

Such documentaries are a very useful audio-visual complement to the literature on oral histories of Partition. Urvashi Butalia has provided an excellent account of oral memories of women and children who were affected by Partition in her book, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000). The memories of ordinary men have been less forthcoming. There is the volume edited by Frank Stewart and Sukrita Paul Kumar, *Crossing Over: Stories of Partition from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007), which goes some way to making up for this shortcoming. Nonetheless, it pales next to the intricacy of this documentary that encompasses the extraordinary and horrific as well as the enduring commonalities in cultural practices.

Notably, there are no women who speak in this film, most probably down to the gender of the director playing a determining influence. However, stories about them are told: Jaswinder Singh Dhaliwal, who lived on a main thoroughfare that led to the newly designated Pakistan, recalls how, as a child of 10, he saw a woman being chased by a local man known to him as Thakra. She threw her trunk away in her efforts to flee, and then eventually had to drop her baby. Whilst she managed to escape to the other side, she had to watch Thakra take her baby and fling her into the trees. For this act of murder, he was rewarded by a glass of milk to celebrate this ‘great deed’ of killing a Muslim child.

Much thought has gone into the editing of scenes. The above recollection is deftly followed by a folk lullaby sung by Shahkoti almost as a dedication to the murdered child; and interspersed with the memory of Mohammad’s aunt helping a woman give birth to a baby boy shortly after the massacre of her boys in her house. In the end, the spirit of life prevails.

Whilst murders are recalled, the men also point out that there was ‘payback’ for those who committed the atrocities. Thakra’s mental and physical state deteriorated so badly that his head became infested by worms, which he would try to flatten with his shoe. One man turned into a ‘fanatic’ and was badly mutilated in the end,

another was admitted to an asylum, whilst another roamed the streets in a crazed condition, even ending up eating his own excreta. The stories they tell make those characters in the fictional stories by Sadaat Hasan Manto thoroughly believable. But rather than just leaving a bitter sweet taste of despair and pathos, these stories are also testament to the human spirit of conviviality that lives on in the shrines and verses of Sufi saints and in the fabric of Punjabi folktales and songs that defied all the odds of geo-political division. In the documentary, they act as a soothing balm to the wounds of Partition.

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The politics of self-expression: the Urdu middle-class milieu in mid-twentieth century India and Pakistan, by Markus Daechsel, London, Routledge, 2006, 272 pp., ISBN 0-41-531214-0

The history of the Indian subcontinent and its politics during colonial times has often been written and analysed from the perspective of mainstream politics and political leaders including Gandhi, Jinnah and Nehru. Not readily documented is an alternative politics that took shape during the late colonial period. This politics, effectively labelled by the author as the ‘politics of self-expression’, stood in stark contrast to the politics of interest, which was the preserve of Congress and the Muslim League. The latter entailed compromise and negotiation with the colonial masters and depended on political patronage as an effective mechanism to bind varying social groups together. The politics of self-expression, alternatively, negated the politics of interest by bordering on the imaginative and evoking an emotional (as opposed to rational) impulse amongst its adherents. This entailed a rejection of the mundane and banal existence of individuals’ everyday life-world, and in the process elevating the individual to the point where the personal became the political and the political personal.

Daechsel’s theoretical framework is embedded in a ‘sociology of knowledge’ paradigm that privileges cultural and material existence of social groups as its basis for analysis. The politics of self-expression and its origins are explained with reference to ‘consumerism’, which had a propensity to alienate the individual from his social setting. In such a scenario, the debate on the authenticity and purity of an earlier epoch was reconstructed as an effective tool to guide people towards a fictive destination where all social contradictions would be resolved and a religious and cultural purity would be achieved. The discourse of self-expressionism sought to empower the individual albeit the empowerment existed not in concrete socio-political structures; rather, it was manifested in the realm of ideas. This might be construed as fantastical, at best. The author has no qualms when he labels the politics of self-expression as ‘anti-societal form of politics’ (p. 18).

The empirical focus of the book relates to the middle class of Punjab, specifically Lahore, which boasted the largest number of Urdu speakers (both Hindus and Muslims), more so than in the United Provinces where in the twentieth century Urdu became a minority language. The three prophets of self-expressionism taken up are