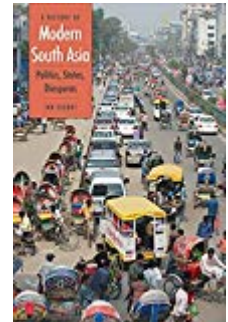


Ian Talbot. *A History of Modern South Asia: Politics, States, Diasporas*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016. 368 pp. \$34.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-300-19694-8.



Reviewed by Rohit Wanchoo

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Commissioned by Sumit Guha (The University of Texas at Austin)

Ian Talbot's book is a highly informative introduction to South Asia. Historical and contemporary developments are judiciously handled although political scientists and economists would probably address these issues differently. The strength of this book lies in providing a historical context which deepens our understanding of contemporary South Asia.

The first two chapters highlight the newness of the boundaries between the nation-states of South Asia as well as the impact of the environment on the common people. Talbot's strength lies in linking changing river flows and sea-level rise caused by global climate change with migrations and porosity of borders. Alluvial sandbanks, or *chars*, in the Ganges delta led to frequent clashes between India and East Pakistan and persist as disputes with Bangladesh after the Padma River shifted its course. Bangladesh is affected not only by the flow of water from countries upstream like India and China but also by rising sea levels, which threaten its coastal districts. Talbot hints darkly that South Asia could become "a region of

climate change refugee" (p. 46). Although he highlights the implications of Chinese dams for countries downstream towards the end of his book, a more elaborate discussion of the impact of the environment on the economy and society of South Asia would have enhanced the novelty of this book.

Talbot provides a good, crisp survey of the various boundary disputes between states, but readers are likely to prefer more detailed accounts by other authors. Many scholars have analyzed the impact these disputes have had on farmers in border districts of Punjab; fishermen from Gujarat, Sri Lanka and Pakistan; apple growers and exporters in Kashmir; and working people and migrants from Bangladesh. Talbot's emphasis is on how the idea of security of the nation leads to the neglect of human security. Common people are caught in the territorial disputes between sovereign states. Although localities have some autonomy, yet borders in South Asia are "sites of 'violence' and 'resentment'" (p. 15). On the other hand movements for autonomy and self-determi-

nation have bedeviled all the countries of this region and have received support from regional rivals or enemies.

Talbot claims that he is among the handful who have tried to “bring together histories of overseas South Asians and their homelands” (p. 3). He rightly points out that though 90 percent of the migrants from India went to Burma, Ceylon, and Malaya most work has focused on North American, Caribbean, and African experiences. There is not much that Talbot does—or possibly could do—to remedy this. His observations on the political activism of Mirpuri Jats in Birmingham, the concentration of Bangladeshis from Sylhet in parts of East London, and the role of Sikhs and Gujaratis in funding charities and political agendas in their homelands are valuable. Recruiting practices and linkages led to migrations from sub-regional catchment areas like Mirpur, Sylhet, and Trichinopoly. Three-quarters of “all the Indian tea-worker migrants” to Ceylon came from districts around Trichinopoly (p. 52). There is little detail, however, about migrants from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar in Mauritius and Surinam; or Gujaratis in Fiji and Uganda; or Sikhs in Canada and Britain. The immense variation in the experiences of overseas Indians, the value of their remittances in recent years, and their impact on their homelands are effectively conveyed.

The next three chapters provide a broad overview of how the British established their rule in India and the role of groups that collaborated with them. He points out that the evolutionary view of the creation of the colonial state has been questioned by those who saw it as a violent and intrusive force from the very beginning. He does not want to identify “winners and losers” produced by imperial rule (p. 98). Although he makes a passing reference to the argument that the cash crop production that the railways promoted led to widespread famine in late nineteenth-century India, he mainly dwells on the rise of the indigenous capitalist class. He wants to trace the rise of this

class, with its significant role in the “political economy of independence and partition,” because of its “commitment to a strong state to oversee economic growth” (p. 98). He also believes that “big business’s support for state-led capitalist development” and the partition narrowed a transnational anticolonial struggle into a more narrowly territorialized one (p. 107).

The author questions the stereotypes arising from “common colonial inheritance” and post-colonial perceptions about India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh (p. 5). Most students of history know that the overwhelming recruitment of soldiers from the Punjab created the context for the domination of Pakistan by the army after the partition of India; many would know how Gorkha troops have influenced the history of Nepal; but very few know that the Kachins who have fought the post-colonial Burmese state were among the favored recruits of the British, together with the Karens. These are some of the “long-term consequences” of British policies that get sidelined by nation specific histories (p. 83). Further, a tradition of “bureaucratic authoritarianism was deeply rooted” in the areas that came to constitute Pakistan (p. 167).

According to Talbot, “the triumph of territorial nationalism overshadowed the long history of transnational revolt” (p. 118). The activities of the Ghadar party, the Indian National Congress’s support for rights of Indians in Mauritius and South Africa, Pan-Islamism, and the Khilafat movement gave the freedom struggle an international flavor. As independence approached the conception of nationalism narrowed because of the preoccupation with creating a strong nation-state based on territory. This partly explains the reluctance of the Congress to acknowledge the “intensely transnational struggle for freedom of Subhas Chandra Bose” (p. 118). The point that late colonial India cannot be understood in terms of a “linear” narrative of the successful mobilization of people by the Congress and the Muslim League is well taken (p. 129). Nevertheless, it is debatable

whether the Indian National Army had a sufficiently large following to call into question the power of territorially based nationalism in India in the postwar period.

Talbot's narrative of the partition of British India synthesizes the revisionist views of scholars like Ayesha Jalal and Joya Chatterjee. Although Mohandes Gandhi was opposed to partition, other Congress leaders, "in a mixture of pragmatism and cynicism," accepted partition to end the rising tide of communal violence (p. 139). They also were afraid of communist revolution and the break-up of the country. Although the division of Bengal was seen as arbitrary earlier it is now known that local *bhadralok* Congress leaders wanted a small, Hindu-dominated Bengal for themselves. Drawing on his own research Talbot argues that the weak organizational base of the League in the areas that went to Pakistan did not augur well for democracy in that country. Opportunistic elites who joined the League were responsible for factional infighting and parochialism in the party. In Bengal, where the League did have organizational strength and popular support, it was undermined by the recapture of the party by the "conservative old guard who opposed agrarian transformation" and promoted an Urdu-based Pakistani identity (p. 169).

On the Indian side of the border, although the key ideas of Jawharlal Nehru were not challenged before the rise of Hindu nationalism in the 1980s, many politicians in his own party, at both the national and regional levels, did not endorse his ideals about socialism and secularism. Nehru's commitment to democracy meant that he could not "force through major agrarian reforms" (p. 154). The emphasis on planning did achieve self-reliance but also created a bureaucratic stranglehold termed the Licence, or Permit, Raj. Population growth, neglect of agriculture, and the inefficiency of state enterprises led to low rates of economic growth. Talbot neither endorses the social-

ist vision of Nehru nor takes a pro-market liberal standpoint.

The author points out that Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri favored private capital and foreign investment. His initiatives were aborted after his early death, but they "presaged a number of the post 1991 economic reforms" (p. 182). Talbot sketches how Indira Gandhi swept to power in 1971, how agitations intensified against her because of inflation and corruption, and how she responded by declaring a state of emergency in 1975. The excesses of this period of emergency and the political trends thereafter lead Talbot to question Indian democratic exceptionalism. Parties appealing to caste, religion, and region began to grow after the Emergency was lifted and the Congress lost much of its support base in crucial states of North India. After the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984 and the anti-Sikh violence it was clear that India too, like Pakistan and Bangladesh, "relied on a similar mix of populism, nationalization and charismatic power" leading to authoritarianism (p. 195).

Talbot then turns to Bangladesh. He attributes its emergence to alienation caused by the neglect of the language, culture, and the economic interests of Bengal within Pakistan. Pakistanis have blamed Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's obstinacy and drive for power, General Yahya Khan's incompetence, and Indian machinations and military intervention for the break-up of Pakistan. In Talbot's considered view the crisis which resulted in the creation of Bangladesh was "homemade" (p. 209). The nationalist leader Sheikh Mujibur Rehman, too, imposed emergency in Bangladesh after mounting protests against his government. Unlike Gandhi he changed the constitution to introduce the presidential system and gave himself a term of five years. A period of military rule followed the coup against Mujib. Although Bangladeshi military rulers, like those in Pakistan, relied on Islam to legitimize their regimes, the economy in Bengal has prospered. Micro-finance, particularly

by Grameen Bank and the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee, has empowered women. Levels of literacy in Bangladesh are higher than in Pakistan despite the considerably higher per capita income in the latter. The author finds it surprising that women empowered by these processes “seek to reclaim and reshape, rather than reject, their faith” (p. 223).

The final chapters sketch the changes that have taken place in the subcontinent. The importance of Punjab in Pakistan increased after 1971 as did the political use of Islam under Zia-ul-Haq during the 1980s. Despite the populist rhetoric, Bhutto’s 1972 land reforms had “released just 1 percent of cultivable land to the tenants” (p. 230). The paradoxes in Pakistan’s history are well delineated. In India the greater participation of the Other Backward Castes grew steadily after the 1980s and contributed to the deepening of democracy. Economic reforms from the 1980s onwards have been endorsed by both the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party, with some variations in emphasis. The growth of a strong middle class has enlarged the market but the agricultural sector is slowing down the economy and causing great distress in the countryside. In South Asia regional conflicts and distrust have hampered a strong multilateral basis for tackling issues of trade, energy, and water. The “emergence of a Chinese colossus” has made the situation more complex (p. 268).

Diasporic South Asians, unfamiliar with their homelands, are most likely to enjoy this book. Those living in the region might prefer the more detailed histories within established national frameworks that are already available. But even those unwilling to go beyond their comfort zones will gain by reading this book. It will help them get acquainted with their neighbors even if they cannot always get along with them.

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