
This book is an interesting account of how nature shapes and reshapes a human society. Using philosophy and mythology as analytical tools, Khan unpacks life on the sandbars (chars) in Bangladesh’s most vulnerable river basin. The book is divided into five readable chapters with an epilogue cataloguing over a decade of research during which the author was able to observe and document the evolution of the volatility of riverine landscape and its impact on the social life of people (the chauras) and situating it between the colonial and post-colonial history of the nation. The book is largely descriptive, but as Khan underlines right at the beginning, the book is not about a ‘settled sociality’, but rather an accounting for the critical role that nature plays in shaping the ‘mode of existence’ in which she wants us to acknowledge nature both as a ‘concept’ and that which is ‘alive’ (p. xii). The study is located between the districts of Sirajganj and Tangail, to the west of Dhaka on the banks of the river Jamuna (Yamuna). Focusing on three villages—Dhokin Teguri/South Teguri, Rihayi Kawliya (Mercy on Kawliya), and Boro Gorjan (Big Roar)—all of which disappeared into the river—she delves into the ‘precarious sociality’ of the chauras who live among strangers in the hope of having their lands return (p. 6). This book is certainly about the ‘social’, however nature, history and politics are discussed along the way. She speaks of how various ‘social institutions’ have accommodated the ‘chaura mode of shifting grounds’ as they ‘sought to reinsert themselves into their physical surroundings’ instead of passively complaining about their situation (p. 8). She underlines that the traditional notions of property fail to account for the lives of the chauras, and proposes ‘that chaura efforts to maintain the status of eroded and accreted land as property be seen within a different analytic than one of owner and object, rights, or even social relations’ (p. 29), and that the ‘relationship between mind and matter is mediated by the social’ (p. 30).

In discussing the disputes and violence around property ownership, she unpacks Muslim kinship relations and suggests that in the absence of services from the state, the char-based kinship has acquired specific significance. She also notes another kind of relationship, ‘belonging to the same village’, can have ‘precedence over being uncle and nephew’ (p. 46). She also notes that women, contrary to the normative Bengali practice of kinship, are invariably the ones who not only lead their relations to their natal families, but also enable their natal families to depend on their in-laws in times of need (p.85). As such, the author underlines the broader imagery of how kin relations are shaped through their association with property.
The book also focuses on erosion rather than on floods in Bangladesh. By shifting the focus from flood to erosion caused by the river’s unpredictable behaviour, one of the interesting issues she deals with involves the status of the village at various levels of government. The author uses electoral politics in Bangladesh to ‘understand the chauras’ modes of grasping their situation’ (p. 94) and to participate in elections for non-existent villages. She deftly explores how the chauras use their participation in elections for the lost villages to re-embed themselves or ‘stich’ themselves ‘back into the landscape and ecosystem, through thinking of themselves as vital to its internal workings’ (p. 96).

As land re-emerges on the chars, it is mostly the poor who return to claim the land, but many others do not. Hindus, who once were present in large numbers, are prominent in their absence—the temple of Kali and the zamindar’s building both disappeared in the course of the erosion. In discussing the absence of the remnants of the Hindus, occupation of their lands and the gradual forgetting of them by the chauras, the author brings in an interesting theological idea that is tied to nature. She entertains the idea of nature being implicated in the forgetting of the Hindus, calling such forgetting ‘purposive forgetting’ (p. 134) and ‘purposeful amnesia’ (p. 135). She also discusses at some length the Hindu influence left behind on the lives of the chauras, such as the intermixing of Hindus and Muslims at some social level in that they both practice each other’s festivals (p. 140), observing Hindu customary practices such as oiling their bodies during festival of Eid (p. 143), engaging in ‘polemical discourse’ through musical competitions between two religious groups and so on (p. 147).

The book is well-written and her use of the philosophy of Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling to offer meaningful insights into the events that she was describing is unusual for an anthropologist, but is apt in this context of Bangladesh’s continued agony with the river ecosystem. There are many theoretically-loaded insights that scholars might pursue further—such as the theological issue of theodicy, the focus on erosion rather than flooding, syncretism, and the notion of village in South Asia. The book is very useful reading for both advanced-level scholars as well as students of South Asian history, society and politics, as well as ecology. I am delighted to have the opportunity to read it and offer this review.

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