

Mapping the South-Asian Political Landscape in the Context of Migration

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Migrants, Refugees and the Stateless in South-Asia

Partha S. Ghosh;

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Given the current political climate in the world on the issue of migrants, refugees and the stateless, Partha S. Ghosh's book, '*Migrants, Refugees and the Stateless in South-Asia*' is a topical academic contribution on the same, addressing it within the context of South-Asia. In my mind, it is one of the first books in the 21st century to examine and address the complexities of the issues from a historical and contemporary point of view.

Ghosh has organised the book in a framework of seven chapters. I shall be reviewing each chapter separately and then review the book as a whole in the larger context of the global political scenario. The book opens with a brief introductory chapter which highlights the issues of contention that Ghosh will address further in the book. They include the definitions of Migrants, Refugees and the Stateless as mentioned by the United Nations (UN). It then gives the theoretical framework from which the issues will be examined. They include the World Systems, Labour Market (Push-Pull), Demographic, Political, Geographical-Ecological-Developmental, Integration-Assimilation, Feminist, Socio-Cultural, Theory of Collective Memory and Memory-Violence-Migration circle approaches.

Chapter 1, *'Mapping the South-Asian Scene'*, outlays the sample size of the study undertaken. An estimated 50 million people who are classified as either migrants, refugees or the stateless by various South-Asian states are the subject of inquiry in this chapter. Beginning with the Partition of India, Ghosh traces it through the traumas of the Partition into various other zones where the migrants flowed, such as Delhi, Bengal, Bihar, Hyderabad. This is followed by a section which critically laments the failure of Nation Building despite Constitutional provisions provided for the migrants. This section also details India's troubled relations with its neighbouring nations such as China, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Myanmar. This is followed by a section which addresses the domestic tension that India has faced while addressing the issues.

Chapter 2, *'The Political Connection'* drives home the point that there is a deep underlying political connection between migration and the politics as well as political parties and aspirations that stem out of it. Ghosh often quotes August Comte's 'demography is destiny' to highlight this connection. There are examples given of Hindu and Sikh refugees from Pakistan in Delhi, Punjabi and Muslim refugees from India in Sindh and Punjab (Pakistan side), Nepali refugees in North and North-East India, Bangladeshi refugees in West Bengal, Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in Tamil Nadu which underlines the communal and ethnic sentiment which enhances and complicates the local politics of those areas. This is manifested in the form of Hindu Nationalism in India, the growth of Leftism in West Bengal, the Politics of Urban Redevelopment in Delhi, Punjab and Sindh politics and the separatist movement of Jammu and Kashmir. This section also addresses some often overlooked dimensions of migration, i.e. the situation in the North-East. Ghosh highlights The Nellie Massacre, The Chakma Question and The Mizoram Case to address the same. Another important dimension addressed is the Nepali and Bhutanese experience in the nation building process of India.

The inter-connection between migration and security is addressed in Chapter 3, *'The Security Variable.'* Ghosh cites the example of the September 11 (2001) attacks on the World Trade Centre in America to frame this chapter. Ghosh states that in the post-Cold War situation there has been an influx of millions of migrants across the world. There are more barriers being built currently to prevent refugees to migrate to their destination of choice which gives birth to new forms of social strifes. In the case of South Asia, it has been observed that India plays a central role in the fluidity of migration to and from its neighbours. When the nationalistic definitions clash with ethnic aspirations of migrants it often leads to the birth of antagonism leading to insurgent and terrorist movements. This further cements the nationalistic goals of

states that are unwilling to accommodate ethnic aspirations in many cases leading to formation of security norms for inflowing and outgoing migrants.

Chapter 4, *'Relief and Rehabilitation'* outlines the issue of relief and rehabilitation of the refugees. Ghosh states that although most of such efforts have been state centric (in the face of limited resources and lack of any legal framework), there have been the support of private individuals and organizations for the same. An important point that Ghosh makes in this chapter is that certain undocumented citizens are indifferent to the state attitude to their illegal existence. He states that they prefer to remain faceless and gradually melt into the population and become 'paper citizens.'

The legal complications of whether or not to replace the existing system of handling the problem through legal mechanisms to making it into a regional refugee regime is addressed in Chapter 5, *'The Legal Dynamics.'* In this chapter, Ghosh explains how the various South Asian states have made their own laws to deal with the issues and why they have deliberately avoided signing the international refugee covenants of 1951 and 1967. Afghanistan is an exception in this scenario, as it has signed the documents but does not host any refugees as such.

An interesting dimension of migration is looked into in Chapter 6, *'Cultural and Psychological Dimensions.'* This is an often overlooked aspect in migration studies, as most of them tend to focus just on the economic and socio-political implications. Ghosh explains that this is a two-way interaction. As much as the host countries influence the culture of the migrants and refugees, the migrants and refugees also influence the society and culture of the place they go to. This is reflected in various art forms such as music, poetry/lyrics, painting, cinema, drama, architecture, photography and also in culinary habits. Over a period of time, the effects of earlier social tensions may be felt in either individual or in collective psychology. Ghosh also cites the examples of Bollywood films made on the subject of the Partition. Although most of them stem from an Indian nationalistic point of view, Ghosh argues that despite the actual events of death, destruction and displacement, the Partition also galvanised human creativity in the long run and often remains the source of inspiration of many sensitive artistes across the borders.

In summation, Chapter 7, *'Conclusion: Making Sense'*, Ghosh weaves together his previous arguments and states that despite the massive human flows starting from the Partition, there has been a sense of

empathy underlying the societies of South Asia due to their cultural similarities. Despite historical and contemporary political animosity between India and Pakistan, there is deep sense of mutual human and cultural co-operation from both sides. This is an important note to end the book on as it reflects upon the fact that migrants, refugees and the stateless are not just mere numbers in a census book but actual living human beings who form and mould the bloodlines of the nations that they inhabit.

Overall this book is a great and important addition to the social sciences literature on the issue of migration, refugees and the stateless. It melds comprehensive empirical data with a rigorous theoretical approach in order to understand and analyse these complex social processes. Each chapter begins with a quote which illustrates the significance and direction of the chapter. Although there are some overlapping and have repetition of certain facts in various chapters, it serves as a reminder of the connection that each chapter has with each other. As mentioned in my introduction, there is a greater need in the contemporary world to understand the nuances of these issues in order to address it properly. Given the current political hostility in many nations towards migrants, refugees and the stateless such as the Syrian crises in Europe and the Baluchistan crises in Asia, this book has arrived at a crucial moment in history. South-Asia which has increasingly been drawn into the vortex of political hostility has a lot to learn from its history of migration. If read by the policy makers of South Asia, this book will go a long way in making a difference in the societies of South Asian countries. This book will be of great value to the scholars of sociology, demography, economics, political science, political geography and development studies.