

Book Review

Samir Kumar Das, Migrations, Identities and Democratic Practices in India, New Delhi: Routledge, 2018, Hardcover, ISBN: 9781138597402, Price INR 995, pp 231.

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Abstract

This book explores the politics of identity in general and North Bengal in particular. The people of North Bengal and North East India have continuously demanded autonomy and “separate statehood” that is not only based on underdevelopment but also their subjective experience of “citizenship”, “nomadic”, cultural roots, and even geopolitical importance. At present the political distress that one region controls the other for the sake of their own makes a narrative of “Uttarbanga banchita”. This book explores the reason behind this political expression, which has now become noticed.

Keywords: identities, democracy, body politic, statehood, citizenship, ethnic

The vogue of people from one space to another and searching for identity has always impacted their civic and political lives. In North Bengal and North East of India, a large population strives to attain their identity within a given space through lived experience. The stories of ‘Lack’, ‘absence’, and ‘incompleteness’ are part of the lived experience of the people of this region. The politics of North Bengal or even Northeast, in general, is an example of an imaginary land of different tribes, religions, sects, and communities who lived in irresolvable binaries of home and homelessness. This space is strategically important for citizens' security and for Democratic means to achieve development. This book attempts to understand democracy in an unsettled, unterritorialized, mobile way.

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This book also answers the questions about the unstable region of North Bengal where different ethnic groups, which he called absentee settlers, perform democratic practices through their identity and body politics. Here Author repudiated that democracy has fit in the given territorial unit, whether it is a borough, district, province, or nation. Democracy thus needs to develop theoretical ethics in a mobile way.

The chapter of the first part of this book discusses a migrant city of North Bengal where different identities have claimed their demand for homeland and were involved in violent practices. Siliguri, thus a migrant town in North Bengal and Assam as India's Northeast state has witnessed many riots and hordes of people in this city engaged in the construction industry, sex work, child trafficking, etc. A term for them he used is new nomads (p. 31), who are the imaginaries of their homeland, having demand for linguistic, cultural, economic, and political rights that are necessary for the survival of a body of people as a community with an identity of its own. To put it his way, "The importance of homeland as a passport to the enjoyment of these rights seems undeniable" (p. 32). Northeast India may have roots in a "deeply historical context of ethnonationalism" (Baruah, 2020, p.25), like North Bengal, which is a gateway of many historical ethnic groups, has been affected by globalization and Forced Migration, called *permanent nomads* (p. 35). Here, the author argued by giving an instance of Bodo people, who are living in penury under semi-nomadic conditions in Assam, engaged in violent practices by attacking Muslims and Bengalis who migrated from East Pakistan during the liberation war of Bangladesh. Their main motive is to follow the dominant cultural rules of Assamese nationalism and to demand political representation in the legislative assemblies. One of their powerful plea for assimilation is expressed through complete deculturation by compelling the Bengali-speaking girls and women to wear *mekhla*. The compulsion of assimilation and expulsion is not an individual choice; instead, it is an act of disidentifying a body of people in their "body politic". A community that exercises ethnic cleansing as an option to create a majoritarian ethnic logic on its head (p. 43). Communal riots in "lived space" are lost living character and the political economy of that space. This is almost a historical trend that whenever violence occurs in lower Assam, thousands of people are forced to leave the state and take shelter in the Neighbouring districts of North Bengal (p.56). So whenever one lived in that space often turned into Permanent nomads and

engaged relentlessly in the politics of homeland, which turned out ultimately violent.

The second chapter of this part is based upon the ethnographic work that traces the transformation of Siliguri (North Bengal) from a city of migrants into a transit town, where he argued a space is conterminous and urbanization does not necessarily need corresponding industrialization (p. 72). Siliguri emerged as a migrant town since the impact of partition, which is now the most populous density city in West Bengal. The reason for migration is not always political unrest but also economic rummage. Although tea, as an industry faces a crisis over the years by fraudulent activities of investors, it become the realty of land sharks, land dealers, promoters, and developers; who were the actors behind the transformation of 'Chadmoni Capitalism' from lack of possible industrial fundamentals. As a result, labor market workers primarily belonged to alienated tea labor, whose work was spatially and ethnically segregated by 'new labor' and regulated by strong kinship networks among them (pp. 75-78). Thus, Siliguri developed a new type of city where new immigrants settle and own the landed property without being part of the urban social milieu (p. 79). This settlement's roots drew the cultured life of urban citizens as *absentee* settlers, who lost the potential of being anyone's home. It has cut off the continuity of the global city by entering into the international political economy of sex trade, and Cross border criminal networks. Siliguri has become passing through fast social mobility city of hope to distress among homeland imaginaries, like both traditional and postmodern cities.

Part II of this book has divided into two chapters where the first chapter enquires about the rhetoric of citizenship and the fourth is about the identity question of that citizenship. The modern idea of citizenship lies behind constitutional definitions like '*Jus soli*, '*Jus sanguinis*', and sometimes goes beyond that premise and claims of having 'familial, tribal, ethnic and racial identities and affiliations' (p. 96). Citizenship in the modern sense bestowed on the notion of equality and doesn't transcend one's individual or social identity. Although in this chapter author analyzed the racial or ethnic identity inhabited in the modern globalized nation-state by continuous fear of others, having largely depended on Government recognition of their language, territory, and culture. Nepali and Gorkha identities simultaneously posit as a stateless object and their demand for citizenship rights is included in their single identity consolidation by ignoring the

sentiments of other minorities in the region. As a result of unmitigable ethnic divide in the region. The second chapter of this part discusses the Rajbanshi and their current departure from the Ethnic/Caste (Kshatriya) to *Bagharu*, which Panchanan Barma earlier led for disciplining caste society for the Kshatriya body and now *Bagharu's* body implies caste-less, voiceless, distinct, and free from all type of Government identification. The author traced it as a mobility of character that refuses the given protocols of identification and differentiation.

Part III of this book is divided into two chapters, the first chapter comprises the homeland imaginary's demand for separate statehood igniting violence among different ethnic, tribes, and caste brethren, a recent type of phenomenon aftermath of partition that does not seem earlier in the colonial period, whereas the second chapter deals with democratic politics in relations to the nomadic life of people. The contending homeland claims depend on the relationship not only with the family principles as Engels eloquently refers to as love but also the spatial location where principles are based on rights and claims. Although there are different ambits of practices reconfiguring homeland as a socially and culturally continuous space in which the actual location of one's home is incidental, there are other activities of groups and communities which represent politics not in the form of identity, nation, ethnicity but "the continual deferral of plentitude" (pp. 177-186). According to him the politics of homeland is not essentially exhausting the physical body to the call of death rather it transcends all types of barriers (identity, ethnicity, and class) by concerning life. The last chapter explores the nature of Democracy which largely inflicts dis-identification, violence, and practices of dis-appearance. These practices are identified as an unusual site of Democracy that unsettles the three founding pillars of Sovereignty (Popular Sovereignty), Identity, and Freedom. In popular Sovereignty, where people are seldom counted as right-bearing bodies but in states like Mumbai the *new nomads* are unwilling to franchise. Rajbanshi like Roma, Gypsies, and Jews counted as democratic subjects, marking their presence not as a presence but as an absence (p. 195).

This book gives us a new impetus to think about the Space, Identity, and Politics of North Bengal in particular and the Indian State in general in the age of globalization. The significant methodological orientation is beyond the meta-narratives of Democracy confined to a territorial, citizenship orientation. The idea of a *new nomad*, *Unhomely*, and *dis-identification* leads us to think us

Democracy is inadequate and in the process of becoming. This book does not only discuss the fact of ethnic violence which has become apparent in majoritarian democracy but also reactionary politics like boundless nomads, the enigma of identity, narratives of pain, and memories of dislocation in modern democracy inflict the very idea of sovereignty, freedom, and identity. Though this book writes down ethnographic pieces of evidence and engages with pertinent questions, it ignores the question of the Political economy of the nomads in making the practice of democracy. This book lacks a systematic emphasis on the role of state policies in shaping identities, which requires further investigation. Although it touches on the rhetoric of citizenship and identity particularly in North Bengal, a more nuanced analysis is required in terms of different ethnic groups negotiating their citizenship status and rights. The current political situation in West Bengal raises the geographical identity into a political one, where a vast political claim for autonomy accelerated North Bengal into “body-politic”.