Review of “Stateless in South Asia” by Deepak K. Singh

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Book Review: Deepak K. Singh, *Stateless in South Asia: The Chakmas between Bangladesh and India (Sage Studies on India’s North East)*

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could be overcome to examine the less explored areas of ‘social history’. Even so, the book is well-researched and comprehensive, and contributes greatly in understanding the dynamics of tribal life and society in history. It is a resource for young scholars and academicians who seek to grasp the roots of conflict in tribal areas.

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In Stateless in South Asia, Deepak K. Singh acquaints the reader with the lived reality of being and becoming stateless in post-colonial South Asia. By locating stateless Buddhist Chakma refugees inhabiting the far eastern border state of Arunachal Pradesh in the discourse of statelessness, Singh reflects on both the internal as well as the external dimensions of their predicament. The book maps the impact of Partition on marginal communities like the Chakmas. The Chakma religious persecution in East Pakistan and their subsequent flight to India’s north-east in the wake of development-induced displacement in 1964, provide a background to this study.

In his appreciative foreword to the book, Ramchandra Guha writes that this study:

breaks new ground in several respects. As the first study of refugee politics in Northeast India, the book greatly illuminates our understanding of the region ignored by politicians and intellectuals alike. It contributes in an original and constructive fashion to ongoing debates about the politics of citizenship and the sustainability of present models of economic development. (p. xiii)

Another interesting departure is the incorporation of perceptions and worldviews of the Arunachalis along with the Chakmas. The indigenous Arunachalis had been hosting the Chakmas peacefully for many years before the rise of the anti-foreigners’ movement led by All Arunachal Pradesh
Students Union (AAPSU). The author has creatively domesticated oral history in the discipline of Political Science and by juxtaposing it with court cases, newspaper reports and existing scholarship in the area of refugee studies, has brought out the key paradox intrinsic to the intractable Chakma issue.

Being a scheduled area as per the Indian Constitution, Arunachal Pradesh enjoys a special status in the Indian Union, where outsiders cannot acquire properties. On the other hand, the Chakmas inhabited the same territory for the last 40 years and were demanding both citizenship and land rights. Although the indigenous people of Arunachal Pradesh are not objecting to the Chakma demand for citizenship, the issue of their land rights is firmly contested by them. Singh argues that any move towards inclusion and land rights to the Chakmas will certainly violate some specific privileges extended to the indigenous Arunachalis. On the other hand, denial of land rights to an agricultural community like the Chakmas will negate the very purpose of citizenship.

In Arunachal Pradesh, the Chakma refugees were settled in 1964 by the Indian government. The Chakmas are indigenous people who originally belonged to the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) in erstwhile East Bengal (now Bangladesh). In 1947, CHT was included in East Pakistan much against the wishes of local people. Once CHT became a part of East Pakistan, the government reorganised this Buddhist dominant region by populating the area with Bengali Muslims of the plains. In effect, this converted the Chakmas into a minority in the CHT. Due to the ongoing religious persecution and displacement caused by the construction of Kaptai hydroelectrical dam, some 60,000 Chakmas fled to India and Burma. From this stream of migrants, some were settled in Arunachal Pradesh (then known as NEFA) by the Indian government in 1964.

At present, in Arunachal Pradesh, these refugees are settled in Chowkham in Lohit district; Bordumsa, Diyun and Miao circles of Changlang district; and Balijan and Kokila in Papum Pare district. They were allotted a fixed area for their homesteads and cultivation. Gradually, their numbers spilled over into adjacent lands belonging to other indigenous people. In the wake of the anti-foreigners’ movement which swept the whole of northeast India in the 1970s, a demand for the refugee resettlement outside the state dominated both political and civil society discourse. As a response to various court judgements in favour of the Chakmas, initially, indigenous people of Arunachal and their representatives opposed even citizenship to them but later on, the discourse shifted to the land question. In May

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2004, for the first time in the history of their settlement in Arunachal, the Chakmas were given voting rights as Indian citizens. The Election Commission, after scrutinising 15,000 applications, enrolled the names of 1,497 people from the two communities in the voters’ list. This has revived the anti-Chakma movement again.

The all-pervasive national security discourse further complicates this intractable refugee issue. Singh argues that India has always dealt with the issues of refugees on a bilateral basis. Although informally, her broader policy generally conforms to the international instruments, but India has not ratified the 1951 UN Convention relating to the status of Refugees or its additional 1967 Protocol. Migration is viewed as one of the biggest problems in an international scenario. The creation of ‘right free zones’ by the United States and the anti-refugee policies of the developed world are setting a bad precedent for South Asian states. Keeping in mind India’s non-committal attitude towards the framework of rights of refugees at national, regional and international levels, Singh reiterates the need to ratify the 1951 convention and pitches for a South Asian Protocol. At this crucial disjuncture when states are becoming insensitive to refugees, Singh’s attempt to critically examine India’s refugee policy by bringing perspectives of both refugees and their host communities is a welcome intervention.

It is unfortunate though, that the book is poorly edited and littered with numerous errors. That an academic press of Sage’s repute should publish a book with factual errors like ‘Bangladesh is a nearly homogenous state in terms of its ethnic composition. Approximately 99 per cent of its population comprises of Bengali Muslims’ (p. 52), and missing references (there are quite a few, I will give only two examples: Setter and Gupta 2002, and Kamaluddin 1980: 34, cited respectively on pages 9 and 44 are missing in the list of references cited). A simple visit to Bangladesh census department’s website reveals that as per the 2001 Census, only 89.58 per cent of its population follows Islam followed by Hinduism (9.34 per cent); Buddhism (0.62 per cent); Christianity (0.31); and Others (0.15 per cent). More stringent editing would have caught these and other typos and perhaps added crispness to those portions that affect readability. Notwithstanding these facts, the book is a long-awaited addition to the area of refugee studies.

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