

Title—Modern South Asia: History, Culture, Political Economy

Authors—Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal

Year—1998

Categories: South Asia, Politics, Culture, Colonialism, Religion

Place: South Asia

Time: 1500-Present

Argument Synopsis:

Bose and Jalal's book is focused on the history of South Asia from 1500 through the present and is written specifically to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of Indian and Pakistani independence. They regard much established scholarship on South Asia as Eurocentric, which this book seeks to refute. They employ master narratives of the way the British took over Bengal from 1756 to 1757, the permanent settlement of Bengal, and an account of the relationship between missionaries and education in Bengal in the early nineteenth century. Bose and Jalal's central thesis is that a union of economic and political forces overtook and destroyed the Indian state system in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In terms of the British takeover of India, they note that the Mughals were not as dependent on merchant capital as the British were—this support provided to the British by merchant capitalists enabled the British to become the masters of India. They assert that not all of the current issues and discourses in modern India are attributable to the history of colonialism. The book aims to cover the broad historical spectrum of modern South Asia.

Bose and Jalal work on the historical role of communalism and nationalism in the shaping of various political trajectories within the Indian subcontinent. They characterize modern South Asia as a place within which exist contending visions of nationhood based on common but blurred boundaries, determined heavily by communitarian and religious ideologies. They argue that the idea of the 'Indian Muslim' comes from the orientalist environment. Bose and Jalal attempt to differentiate between positive orientalism and negative orientalism. Because the category of Indian Muslim was both religious and political, it encouraged them to lay emphasis on their religious identity in putting forward political claims.

The book is organized chronologically into twenty chapters. They begin with a brief survey of Indian history from the Indus civilization to 1700, in order to show how other writers have used this history and also to demonstrate successful pre-modern accommodations of difference. The dominant theme is about the efforts to accommodate difference and resolve center versus region tensions through notions and practices of layered and shared sovereignty. A major focus of the analysis is on politics, economy, and religion. Bose and Jalal seek to draw lessons from history about the dangers of the prevailing exclusionary nation state model for the future of South Asia. There is extensive discussion on the lack of accommodations of difference, which led first to partition and then to subsequent failures to implement true democracy across the subcontinent. Bose and Jalal hope to influence future generations of South Asians towards understanding how their history should lead them to greater tolerance, inclusion, and equality.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- The support that merchant capitalists provided enabled the British to become masters of India
- Not all of the political and social stirrings in modern India are attributable to the colonial history
- Cultural difference and diversity always need to be accommodated by those in power