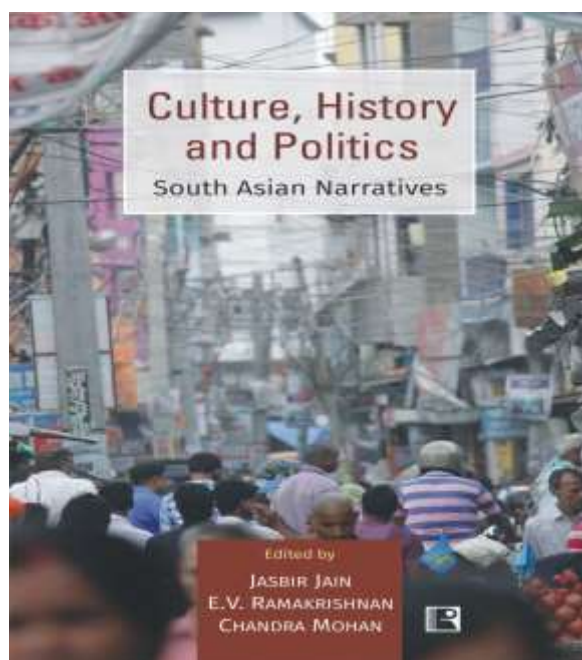


Jasbir Jain, E.V. Ramakrishnan and Chandra Mohan, *Culture, History and Politics: South Asian Narratives*. New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2019. 241+X pp. ISBN 978-81-316-1061-9.



The emergence of South Asian Studies as a distinctly interdisciplinary arena of study allows researchers and scholars hailing from different disciplines to examine and re-examine how socio-cultural, historical and political terrains of South Asians are time and again shaped and reshaped by contemporary politico-cultural occurrences including colonialism, postcolonialism, neocolonialism, postmodernism and globalisation, to name only a few. Annihilation of grand narratives forged through colonial epistemological strands is followed by the celebration of “mini-narratives” conditioned by the steady escalation in counter-resistive movement to conventional epistemological frameworks. The gradual proclivity to refashion South Asia in terms of digging out rich socio-cultural, historical and political customs spanning across centuries is a new area of research.

Pitted against this backdrop, Jasbir Jain, E.V. Ramakrishnan and Chandra Mohan, all well-known and reputed Indian academics, have edited the critical anthology under review, *Culture, History and Politics: South Asian Narratives*, to bring out fresh and innovative perspectives on South Asian narratives. Its objective is to reflect on the nuanced understanding of South Asia from several theoretical

standpoints and to allow contributors to engage in polyvalent interpretations of South Asian socio-cultural plurality. The Introduction titled “South Asia: Imagined and Real” by E.V. Ramakrishnan sets the tone of the book and orients readers to come to terms with new insights.

This anthology contains insightful articles which are aptly put under definite categories. For instance, under the category “Shared Inheritance,” five articles succinctly encapsulate socio-cultural, political and historical inheritances which have been prevailing in several indigenous epistemological traditions. In “The One, the one, the ones: *Advaita* and Select South Asian Poetics,” Mashrur Shahid Hossain engages in exploring the influence of the philosophical notion of *advaita* on the refashioning of three South Asian poetic traditions – Sanskrit *advaita*, Tamil *attutvita* and Bangla *dvatadvaita*, to study inter-literary convergences and divergences. In “South Asian Politics and Tibetan Buddhism: Changing Perceptions and Global Ramifications,” Neekee Chaturvedi seeks to unearth diverse hermeneutical traditions through which Tibetan Buddhism could be comprehended by taking recourse to select literary and cultural narratives. Chaturvedi brings out how the representations of Tibet and varied interpretations of Buddhism in select narratives have been influenced by shifting socio-political configurations in the South Asian context. Krishna Gopal Sharma concentrates on Sufi and Bhakti Movements and tries to reinforce the relevance of these religious movements in the advancement of South Asian socio-cultural terrain. While both Chaturvedi and Sharma bring out disparate and complex religiosities practised and preached in different locales in South Asia, Abhimanyu Singh Arha takes into consideration two travelogues written by Pietro Della Valle and Mountstuart Elphinstone to provide alternative hermeneutical models to construe political and cultural diversities embedded in the histories of South Asia. Unlike the previous critical investigations, Ameena Kazi Ansari has attempted to figure out how political speeches replete with rhetorical flourishes and delivered by noted politicians redounded to the birth and development of two South Asian nations in 1947. In other words, Ansari explores how political discourses during the pre-Independence were shaped up by fiery and fervent political speeches.

South Asia has a long standing history of political and cultural resistance which has been discursively configured over time. Archival documentations of socio-cultural diversities found in South Asia are often corroborated by means of referring to official historical narratives and are frequently contested taking resort to alternative unofficial and undocumented narratives. For instance, in “The Dialectics of History: Narratives of the Subcontinent’s Participation in the Empire’s Wars,” Jasbir Jain intends to problematise “the concept of nationhood and its territorial affiliations” (83) by exploring the “interweaving of past histories and present political realities” (83) represented in some post-Independence fictional narratives. In another interesting article titled “Competing Narratives of Partition: Voices from India and Pakistan,” Sangeeta Sharma engages the two-

nation theory to study “the responses of the migrants in the two countries towards the loss of emotional, cultural and physical space as a result of migration, whether forced or voluntary” (93).

Unlike Jain and Sharma, Chandra Mohan has dexterously brought out socio-political subversion in the tribal narratives of North-East India and North-West Pakistan. He delves deep into select literary works on Nagas and Pashtuns to underpin the subversive and counter-resistive nature of those writings to identity politics and colonial hangover. Urmil Talwar has examined the rhetoric of resistance reflected in select political autobiographies, namely, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman’s *The Unfinished Memoirs* (2012) and Benazir Bhutto’s *Daughter of the East* (2007). Talwar uncovers strategies of political resistance resorted to taking on the political fight at different socio-cultural contexts. This article also focuses on the “culture of violence” which has been at work and how it is dealt with in terms of linguistic and cultural resistances. The next article, “Myths of Redemption Across Faith and Culture: Sri Lanka and Pakistan,” deals with religious and political intolerances across South Asia and proceeds to underpin the need for redemption found across religions and cultures to put curbs on cultural violence and religious intolerance. Manorama Trikha focuses on the need to rewrite the “Nation” by taking recourse to dramas from both India and Pakistan. She has chosen to investigate Karnad’s *Tughlaq* and Shahid Nadeem’s *Dara* since these plays shed light on Mughal history, culture, politics, religion and ideologies. Having studied these plays, she contends that the notion of “nation” has undergone many changes and thus rewriting the “nation” will uncover new socio-cultural parameters. Unlike others, Senath Walter Perera engages in exploring the strong influence of the Sri Lankan Civil War on innocent common people in general and particularly on the protagonist of Romesh Guneseckera’s novel *Noontide Toll*. He considers this fictional work to divulge how the protagonist strives to exploit the culture of tourism to make a future out of it.

The issue of gender has been instrumental in constructing the terrain of South Asia. Problematic dimensions of gender coupled with other identity markers including religion, ethnicity, class and territory, to name only a few, have been explored by several researchers in this anthology. For instance, in “Religion, Ritual, Identity: Treatment of Gender Conflict in South Asian Fiction,” E.V. Ramakrishnan brings out the oppressive and subversive impinges of religion as a ritual in the context of gender. With reference to select fictional works, he focuses on how religious restrictions regulate the movements of women in certain conditions. Devika Khanna Narula has explored resistance and resilience in the novels of select South Asian women writers. The centrality of gender in a socio-political context coupled with power dynamics play an instrumental role in leading the resistance to get engaged in loggerheads with resilience. While Narula concentrates on the tension between resistance and resilience in select South Asian novels, Rachel Bari intends to re-contextualise “self” and “language” with

particular references to women poets of South Asia. Bari contends that “self/the body” needs to be situated in the context of gender politics to underpin the need for re-contextualisation of “self” and “language.” Unlike the other contributors, Tutun Mukherjee’s article centres on cinematic representations of multi-layered realities with special focus on gender. She holds that cinematic representations need to be studied to know about diverse realities about the construction of gender identity. In “The Confines of Creativity in the Subcontinent: Religion, Culture and Respectability,” Bandana Chakrabarty goes on to argue that gendered conceptualisation of self needs to be questioned to liberate women from the confines of religious rigidity and cultural constraints.

Selection of articles in this book deserves critical acclaim because they bear fresh insights which shall open up further debates and discussions germane to South Asia. In addition to the topics covered in this anthology, the editors could have incorporated exclusive articles about the porosity of border, trauma, neo-orientalism, green criminality, eco-feminism, diasporic dislocations, to name a few, to widen the scope of the book. Nonetheless, this critical anthology is worth reading.

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