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Book Review:

Recognising the survival of marginal lives nearby Bengal borderlands

Nasrin Siraj*

Land, Life, Emotional Landscapes at the Margins of Bangladesh by Eva Rozalia Holze, 2022, Amsterdam University Press.

Bangladesh is a land of many ethnicities. However, when Bangladesh came into being as a nation-state in 1971, its political elites, like their counterparts in other post-colonial South Asian countries, adopted the idea of a 'nation' from the French model of nationhood. Consequently, they aimed to establish a state with a culturally homogenous population, denying the country's actual heterogeneity. Officially, Bangladesh is recognised as a state for Bengalis, the largest and the most dominant ethnic community, marginalising 50 other non-Bengali communities.

In her book 'Land, Life and and Emotional Landscape at the Margins of Bangladesh', Eva Rozalia Holze focuses on the country's marginal communities living in the eastern borderlands and examines their narratives regarding land loss. In particular, she explores their emotional and imaginative stories. Throughout the book the author argues that "land dispossession is more of a practice of closing the national frontiers and eliminating differences, either through absorption or rejection of undesired minorities from the political body by creating conditions under which survival according to their own terms becomes difficult to sustain" (p.192).

The book is composed of seven chapters. The empirical materials are mainly concentrated in chapters three, four, five and six, while the first chapter serves as an introduction, the seventh chapter serves as a conclusion and the second chapter deals with the regional background and the history of land use in the region.

In chapter three, the author demonstrates her analysis of the co-existence of fear and hope among the villagers residing near the Bangladesh-Assam border. Their fear, on the one hand, arises from potential land loss due to the proposed border realignment and their interactions with Indian border force, which limits their mobility. A glimmer of hope, on the other hand, stems from the uncertainty surrounding the actualisation of the border realignment. Through a nuanced examination of these sentiments, the author suggests that they reveal contradictions in state practices that are not exceptional but the norm in modern Bangladesh. The state contradictions are manifested through the state's alternating use of power, sometimes in repressive and other times in protective forms. These practices are connected with the political dynamics that are "concerned not only with state formation through the management and regulation of existences, but also with contestations about the meanings and values of life" (p.51).

Under the circumstances of the border village depicted in this chapter, violence appears in the form of the threat of future land loss. However, it signifies more than just the fear of possible dislocation and disintegration. It signifies a shift in the perception of time, where the past fades into obscurity, and the present loses its appeal. The constant fear of forthcoming turmoil transports the dangers of the future into the present moment. Future violence remains covert, yet its existence is felt in the present as an ever-looming possibility, continuously capable of reshaping daily life.

In chapter four, the author deals with collective anxiety, exhaustion, boredom, and estrangement as expressed through the Khasi vernacular term *de-kot*. These sentiments arise in response to

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the circumstances of a village near the Bangladesh-Assam border, where villagers grapple with ambiguous state practices involved in slowly expanding a government-initiated ecotourism park. While the state practices appear to be successful in taming the villagers' anti-eco-park movement through a convoluted and prolonged process, the author pays attention to the emotional reactions of the villagers to recognise their agency. The author argues that amidst the bureaucratic prolongation, their decision to wait can be interpreted as a strategic response to an uncertain future. Conversely, their choice to move forward can be interpreted as an effort to avoid being absorbed into the ecotourism park project, thus asserting their independence from state control. Moreover, their decision to maintain secrecy regarding internal conflicts stemming from participation in the state project suggests the villagers are aware and ashamed regarding their deviation from tradition and opposition to the anti-eco-park movement. This collective secrecy also signifies the creation of a distinct 'moral community' amidst conflicting allegiances.

Violence is practiced in the village through bureaucratic prolongation and the protracted expansion of the eco-tourism park as they stretch time. This subtle form of violence, occurring gradually and often unnoticed, proves challenging for those directly impacted to articulate. The central characteristic of this slow violence lies in its lack of certainty, as its gradual nature obscures concrete evidence and facts, leaving those affected doubly invisible.

Chapter five examines how villagers near the Bangladesh-Meghalaya border assert their agency in forest protection programmes, exposing a flawed development paradigm and a punitive state. The chapter argues that despite an inclusive rhetoric, the forest act, especially through 'forest cases', criminalises minority farmers for merely existing. Villagers wittingly criticise government practices, driven by a sense of injustice that fuels their *akrosh* or wrath and revenge. Trapped in a penal system, they cannot openly resist but emotionally negotiate disruptions that reshape their lives, fracture ties, and compel some to flee their homes. The case highlights the reciprocity and continuity of violence: the actions of the forest department intensify the villagers' thirst for vengeance, trapping them in a cycle of destruction that damages both the forest and community bonds. It also reveals the temporal dimension of violence, where seeking vengeance distorts time, suggesting destruction can somehow compensate for the lost years spent evading arrest and living in fear.

Chapter six examines the agency of villagers near the Bangladesh-Meghalaya border facing displacement from their farmlands due to the establishment and expansion of a proximate cantonment. Their stories reveal deep sorrow and a longing for stability, transcending mere material loss. In addition, they regret missed opportunities and struggles to find avenues for justice. Marginalised and lacking social support, they navigate a blurred distinction between government and army dominance, underscoring the enduring influence of the military on Bangladeshi politics. The case exemplifies continuous violence, where loss reverberates across time, affecting both the present and future, and hindering the villagers' ability to move beyond the past.

Overall, the book focuses on the kind of survival that indigenous minorities in border-villages suggest when they discuss the vulnerabilities associated with land loss. The author delves into the concept of survival, emphasising the importance of understanding the political, cultural and social intricacies that define the relationship between land and life. This focus on survival marks a departure from the conventional political economic framework which often highlights materialistic and economic aspects while overlooking the profound symbolic significance individuals place on land and life. Moreover, this approach moves beyond the binaries of domination and resistance or state versus people within the political economy approach, acknowledging its inadequacy in apprehending the agency of marginalised peoples in shaping their own histories amidst large events.

In the book the author challenges Western notions of agency, highlighting a nuanced perspective that transcends dichotomies. Through empirical evidence, the author reveals that indigenous minority farmers, despite enduring violence, seldom exhibit agency through conventional political mobilisation or transgression. Their responses defy simple categorisation as they navigate between planned actions and improvised strategies to expand possibilities for everyday survival amidst the

existing political and social context. In this approach to agency, context is highly important, as it not only facilitates change but also serves the means for potential transformation. This perspective on agency facilitates a better understanding of life as a continual process of emergence and becoming, rather than one predetermined.

The author concentrates in the book on the emotional expressions that unveil the respondents' relationship with the world when they invoke particular emotional idioms. Through this exploration the author discovers that marginal farmers assert their demand for recognition and stress an active subjective stance through emotional utterances. However, this stance is often disrupted due to the dehumanising violent forces inherent in the process of land dispossession. Here, the author recognises that violence extends beyond physical acts and the expressions of individuals penetrating broader societal dynamics.

To summarise, this book offers an engaging exploration for students interested in the intersection of the anthropology of life and violence advocating for a theoretical approach that embraces a holistic approach to life. Such an approach illuminates the intricate interplay of social, political, economic and cultural practices surrounding the diverse aspects and meanings of life. I also recommend the book to students studying state dynamics, particularly in border regions, as it provides insights into the diverse strategies and rhetoric employed to undermine the existence of indigenous minorities. It sheds light on how state officials challenge the territorial rights cultivated by these communities over generations, both through the settings they create and the means they employ.

Nasrin Siraj is an independent anthropologist based in Bangladesh. She obtained her PhD from the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam in 2022. Her PhD research focused on the majority-minority relations in the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh.