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# Journal of Peace Studies

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Regd. Address:

C-11 Jangpura Extension

New Delhi – 110 014

Tel: (91-11) 49989230, +91-9810317972

<http://www.icpsnet.org>

Emails: [cpsndjps@gmail.com](mailto:cpsndjps@gmail.com);

[jps@icpsnet.org](mailto:jps@icpsnet.org)

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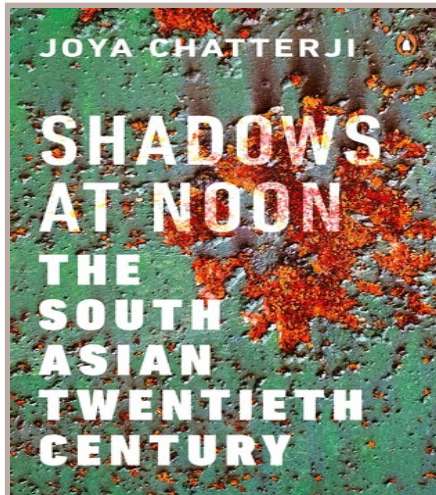
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# BOOK REVIEW



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have made their attempts to look at South Asia as one unit and what comes to mind immediately here is Ayesha Jalal and Saugata Bose's *Modern South Asia*, published in 2011. However, this particular work by Ms Chatterji has a magnified landscape, delving into the colonial legacies and their impact on modern times. From the definitional perspective, it is important to clarify here that this is not a historical account of South Asia as it is understood as a region in international politics, where states like Afghanistan, Nepal, Bhutan, and Sri Lanka are also embedded. It is a work based on the Indian subcontinent, a colonial category, which was later divided into three parts.

## Harsh Pandey\*



Joya Chatterji's *Shadows at Noon: the South Asian Twentieth Century* is another attempt by her to look at South Asian history through a different prism. Scholars

Joya Chatterji is honest in her introductory account of the access to 'knowledge' that she had from her childhood, and her personal reflections in the book make it quite exciting. The writer herself is present in the narrative she has churned. In fact, she has created a vast historical landscape through mention of

*\*Harsh Pandey is a PhD Candidate in the Centre for European Studies, SIS, JNU, New Delhi, India.*

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anecdotes of her family, friends and to people she interacted with on a daily basis. She starts the book with an eerie tone, like the start of a dystopian novel when she says that she lived in the periphery of Delhi and 'heard jackals howl at night'. It still is not uncommon for people living on the outskirts of South Asian cities to experience something like this.

She has set the stage for the book in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, tries to capture the reality of the time through various themes. Despite the dominant rhetoric produced by colonial knowledge, she says that the truth is somewhat else. For example, while talking about migration, general colonial understanding loaded with oriental bias talks argues that South Asians are, in general, 'lazy' people. However, Chatterji has shown in her work that this is not true, and has argued that in reality, after the abolition of slavery, it was South Asian bonded labour which sustained the empire in different corners of the world!

The book tries to show how the states of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh dealt with the emerging realities of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in similar ways. For example, through the 'competing' visions of the nation, all three states in their time frame have

relied on the process of othering' while defining their own 'nation'. All three states which have inherited the same colonial legacy have used force on their own population in their dealings with refugees. These three states also have the problem of peripheries where the state's control over 'legitimate means of violence' is almost absent. These states have responded to threats of secession with excessive force. Chatterji says that the three South Asian states were 'state-nations' struggling to become nation-states. She also points to differences among the three states. However, she wants to convey that these countries have more in common than is usually pointed out by observers. She says in the book, while talking about India and Pakistan, that her "aim is to challenge the myth of their incompatible personalities, their ceaseless animosity and mutual belligerence" and she would "suggest that India and Pakistan had more in common than is often understood" and "pull back South Asia's 'Iron Curtain'".

Chatterji's accounts are thematic in nature; however, they do not lose sight of chronology while providing an historical account of the subcontinent. *Shadows at Noon* also provides space for the 'subaltern' while the author discusses patterns of entertainment, leisure, migration,

## BOOK REVIEW

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eating habits, marriages and families. As she herself says: "Great men and women figure in it, as they must. But the stories of those on the wrong side of history, and on its margins, also find a place". From Bibi Ram Pyari in Delhi to Bihari Stateless campboys and Salima in Dhaka, the author has tried to give them all a voice in her book.

Chatterji's work is kaleidoscopic providing different visions of histories of South Asia in a manner that makes a reader awestruck and invites her/him to a many-layered discourse on the way the social realities of South Asia evolved over the last century. This pastness of the past, which shaped the present, has been written in such an elegant and

convincing way that it persuades the reader to have a relook at the history or histories of the region or countries in the Indian sub-continent, which the author has defined as South Asia in the book.

The work is a labour of love caulked out of the author's teachings at Cambridge and provides an alternative view of the official histories that have been produced in the three post-colonial states of the British Empire. Personal anecdotes by the author (which she mainly derives from the upper echelons of post-colonial Indian society with much awareness) make it immensely readable. It is a must read for those who want to understand South Asia better. ■

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### **Note for readers and subscribers**

*We are happy to inform you that from January 2009 we have introduced the system of peer review of articles to ensure quality of publications and improve the scholarly value of our journal. We have a renowned group of scholars and academicians associated with our Centre and they are helping us in this process. We are grateful to them for their kind support and cooperation.*

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**INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR PEACE STUDIES**

C-11, Jangpura Extension,  
New Delhi – 110 014, INDIA

Tel: (91-11) 49989230, +91-9560126157, 9810317972

Websites: <http://www.icpsnet.org> (Main),  
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