

Prakash, Gyan; Menon, Nikhil; Laffan, Michael (Hrsg.): *The Postcolonial Moment in South and Southeast Asia*. London: Bloomsbury 2018. ISBN: 9781350038639; X, 297 S.

Rezensiert von: Clemens Six, Department of History, Groningen University

Compared to the rich and diverse research field of colonial and imperial history, the historiography on postcolonial societies is still in an early stage. There are multiple reasons that explain this pattern, but one of the most important ones is methodology. Primary evidence on postcolonial histories is often difficult to access due to classification or loss. This edited volume on the complex and often disruptive transition from the colonial era to postcolonial orders in South and Southeast Asia is a welcome and in many respects illuminating contribution about a historical era, which urgently requires more historiographical attention. A significant number of dynamics, hostilities, and structural challenges tormenting contemporary societies in these regions have their origin in the multi-layered processes of (incomplete) decolonisation and conflictual postcolonial state-building.

This book assembles the contribution of well-established scholars, among them some leading voices in their field of expertise, and of scholars, who are comparatively young but have already contributed to international debates on Asian history. The collection goes back to a conference on „The Postcolonial Moment“ held at the History Department at Princeton University in 2015 and contains many innovative chapters both in terms of archival research as well as topics and perspectives. From the title, I expected a – more or less – even distribution of case studies across the regions of South and Southeast Asia, a geographical focus that, for various historical reasons, makes indeed good sense. In fact, though, among the 14 chapters nine cover either exclusively or mainly India, one is on Muslims in South Asia, one on Pakistan, one on Burma, and two on Indonesia. In other words, this is a book about the (post)colonial history of (former) British-Indian territories plus two case studies on Indonesia.

The editors explain in the introduction that

the main focus in this collection is on postcolonial futures, i.e. on the ideas, desires, and plans anti-colonial leaders drafted and were hoping to make come true. Consequently, the book concentrates for most of its parts on male political elites. There are some notable exceptions of case studies on migrants or refugees. However, in how far the postcolonial moment was also a moment of and for women is not among the prior concerns in this book. Furthermore, the editors emphasise that their collection demonstrates the anxieties, doubts, and overall fragility many witnesses experienced during the passage from the colonial era to postcolonial statehood. The chapters indeed provide ample evidence for these sensitivities. Unfortunately, though, the very short volume introduction does not further explain what the book's „narrative“ (p. 6) more in detail actually is, and shows some lengthy overlaps with Gyan Prakash's chapter on Indian constitution making. As the book does not have a separate conclusion, some more thoughts from the editors on how this collection relates to and is complementary to the growing body of literature on postcolonial history would have been helpful.¹ In my view, the chapters also recommend a number of comparative perspectives the introduction could have explored at least to some extent.

The case studies cover a wider range of topics including developmental issues, images of the past, constitution making, struggles around (democratic) citizenship, or communism. Generally, the chapters are studies of national histories or, more precisely, studies on the evolution of postcolonial nationhood. However, there are two notable exceptions. Sunil Amrith and Bhavani Raman take a closer look at the Bay of Bengal as a space of inter-regional mobility for Indian/Tamil communities in Southeast Asia. The long-term migration patterns between South and

¹ For the regions covered in this edited volume standard-setting works on postcolonial history are: Ramachandra Guha, *India after Gandhi. the history of the world's largest democracy*, New York 2007; Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India*, London 2012 [1997]; Ian Talbot, *Pakistan. A Modern History*, London 2009; Michael W. Charney, *A History of Modern Burma*, Cambridge 2009; T.N. Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya*, Cambridge 2010; Cheah Boon Kheng, *Malaysia. The Making of a Nation*, Singapore 2002; Adrian Vickers, *A History of Modern Indonesia*, Cambridge 2013.

Southeast Asia, particularly British-Malaya, changed in quality and quantity around the First World War, went through a turbulent era of travel restrictions in the aftermath of the Great Depression, and became a complex political puzzle after independence, when postcolonial (Indian) authorities sought to clarify the citizenship status of „returnees“. These two chapters stand out in this volume as they try to understand dynamics of postcolonial governmentality in the context of much older inter-regional and trans-imperial mobility patterns. This sheds new light on the (frequently) repressive efforts undertaken by postcolonial elites to define and implement new national border regimes at the costs of much more fluid and entangled social realities on the ground.

Other chapters, written as national histories, provide opportunities to undertake some illustrative comparative considerations. In contrast to what the general title of Gyan Prakash's chapter on „Anxious Constitution-Making“ connotes, his contribution is actually about India and the question why democratically minded elites sustained such a high degree of authoritarianism within India's political system. Prakash's explanation is the need for national integration. However, the legacy of colonial emergency regulations, the „anxiety“ of constitution-making, and the underlying struggle between democratic inclusion and elitist patronage also characterised other postcolonial societies in the region. In particular, a comparison with Indonesia, covered by two chapters in this volume, would be an obvious field for further discussions.

Another important focus in the case studies is the question of remembering and the construction of an unitary past. Through sources of fiction (Rotem Geva) or the historic works of Islamic scholars (Michael Laffan), these chapters illustrate the contested nature but also the importance of a shared notion of the past around the postcolonial moment. What happens if this moment is denied altogether to a society is discussed by Many Sadan with regard to Burma, where the early murders of leading anti-colonialists and decades of repressive military dictatorship conquered public memory. A different form of forgetting is the subject of Kamran Asdar Ali's chap-

ter. The history of Pakistan's communist party and state-sponsored repressions against leftist forms of organised labour is not only a grossly under-acknowledged facet of Pakistan's early postcolonial history, but it also contradicts the idea that the Mohajirs, i.e. Muslims who migrated to Pakistan around the partition of British India, were a politically homogenous group.

In spite of its somewhat unreconciled diversity, this collection is a valuable contribution to the historiography of postcolonial societies, which will hopefully inspire more research in this field.

HistLit 2019-3-001 / Clemens Six über Prakash, Gyan; Menon, Nikhil; Laffan, Michael (Hrsg.): *The Postcolonial Moment in South and Southeast Asia*. London 2018, in: H-Soz-Kult 01.07.2019.