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Book Review

Rimple Mehta (2018) *Women, Mobility and Incarceration: Love and Recasting of Self Across the Bangladesh-India Border*. Abingdon: Routledge

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In December 2019, the government of India passed the *Citizenship Amendment Act 2019* (CAA) and in doing so, changed the 64-year-old law prohibiting 'illegal' migrants from becoming citizens. A provision of the CAA created a category of 'persecuted minorities' that included six religious communities (i.e., Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi and Christian), who had migrated from the neighbouring Muslim countries of Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan. The CAA was strongly criticised by non-government organisations, lawyers, activists and academics for excluding Muslims and other minorities. The CAA was deemed unconstitutional and discriminatory. Further, these changes to the law occurred at a time at which anti-Muslim hate was at an all-time high and politicians belonging to the hard-right Hindu nationalist government (led by the *Bhartiya Janata Party* [BJP]) were engaging in aggressive dog-whistle tactics to incite communal violence (Human Rights Watch, 2019). The language of 'infiltrators' was increasingly used to garner public support to broaden practices and delegitimise Muslim citizenship. Following the enactment of the CAA, a wave of protests occurred across Indian cities in which people from all faiths participated. Stories of deaths, police brutality and arrests became the main feature of every news outlet. It was during this period, while still deeply upset at the situation in my birth country, that I began to reflect on the toxic residues of colonialism and ponder complex questions related to citizenship, identity and belonging. In doing so, I stumbled upon this monograph.

Needless to say, this book was published at a critical moment in time. It details the experiences of Bangladeshi women trapped in Indian correctional facilities in Kolkata, West Bengal. The author sheds light on the ways in which women negotiate honour and violence. Mehta is the first scholar to examine the lives of incarcerated women in the Indian context. Thus, her research makes a unique contribution to (and cuts across) feminist, borders and prison literature. In addition to the introduction and reflection, the book comprises of four chapters. The opening chapter outlines the complex history of the Indo-Bangladesh border and explains how the lines, which were drawn in haste during partition by colonisers, have caused (and continue to cause) havoc. The Hindu Bangladeshis migrating to India are viewed as victims of the Muslim majority country. Conversely, the Muslim Bangladeshis are viewed as 'infiltrators' and 'illegals' (Mehta 2018, pp. 11–19). As South Asian countries share the same languages, culture, 'race' and ethnicity, it is difficult to prove 'illegality' with any degree of certainty. Indeed, some individuals who do not have documents may get wrongly categorised as 'illegals' and thus be held to be in violation of the *Foreigners Act 1946* (Mehta 2018, p. 29). Those who are found to have violated the *Foreigners Act 1946* are punished and deported (Mehta 2018, pp. 19–24).

Ever since the partition, people have casually crossed the borders to meet relatives and family members. Women cross the borders seeking employment and to escape poverty, oppressive marriages or traditional patriarchal subjugation. Some of these women become victims of trafficking. In the chapter entitled '*Researching within Prisons*', the author notes that many of the women who she spoke to as part of her research were arrested on arrival or while attempting to return to Bangladesh. Some of the women were unaware that they were being taken out of the country for employment purposes, a few were caught at a brothel and none had any knowledge of the legal implications of crossing the borders clandestinely (Mehta 2018, pp. p. 41). The chapter presents a rich account of the author's experience of interviewing and connecting with participants and also navigating the prison space. I was struck by how changing the location of the interviews from a prison school space to under a mango tree in the prison courtyard led to a shift in the women's narratives. The author wanted to understand the women's experiences of violence, but as they sat under the mango tree the discussion shifted from violence to love (Mehta 2018, pp. pp. 34–40). The author captures all the nuances and minor details in the women's experiences and is deeply reflective. Despite the fact that they are central to understanding how knowledge is produced, in many monographs, research journeys are often not presented or are relegated to the appendix. Thus, this chapter represents a bold move and leaves a blueprint for early career/doctoral candidates embarking on their ethnographic journeys.

Chapter 2, entitled '*Bhool to Aporadh*' (i.e., '*From Mistake to Crime*'), begins by explaining the women's (lack of) understanding of borders. For example, a large number of the women interviewed stated that they assumed that India and Bangladesh were one country, some had never even heard the name 'India' (but had some knowledge of the terms 'Bharat' or 'Hindustan') and a few were unsure whether Kolkata, Delhi and Mumbai were the names of cities or countries. The shared histories of the two nations, the porousness of the Indo-Bangladesh border, the absence of spectacle and the ease with which people can move across the borders, combined with lack of education, often meant that the women had little or no awareness of borders and border regimes. Thus, this chapter raises questions about the purpose of punishment. In their narratives, women highlighted the mistakes that led to their entrapment in the criminal justice system. However, they viewed the process of punishment as a learning curve that taught them about borders and how to avoid making mistakes and getting caught by crossing the borders clandestinely. In the second half of the chapter, the author outlines women's experiences of the Indian criminal justice system and the treatment that they received at the hands of the police, the courts and the prisons. It also discusses the complex prison hierarchies involving caste, class, religion and nationality. The dangerous and divisive politics of 'us' versus 'them' is played out in the prisons and prevents any feelings of solidarity from developing among those incarcerated.

Chapter 3, entitled '*(Dis)honouring Criminality and Shame*', explains how existing belief systems and norms regarding honour are translated into women's lives and how societal codes of behaviour are internalised. The women view their prison sanctions and deportations as dishonourable and shameful and also expressed fear and concern that society would view them as immoral beings and impure. The women discussed the effects and consequences of their imprisonments on themselves and their families. A few women, who had been victims of sex trafficking, viewed prison as a place in which they were protected or in which their honour and dignity were preserved. They stated that they felt safe in the carceral spaces and drew comparisons of their experiences in prison to the violence they endured in the outside world. The chapter highlights the continuum of violence, the strength and courage of the women and how the women negotiated the moral and territorial spaces to make a space for the survival of the self (Mehta 2018, pp .114).

In the final chapter, entitled '*From Violence to Prem (Love)*', the author explores survival and love within carceral spaces. The very expression of love made the women's desires visible and allowed them to oppose the gendered roles and expectations imposed on them by society. Mehta identifies and powerfully presents women as resisters (and not as simply oppressed) and should be commended for doing justice to these women's narratives and experiences.

In sum, this book is powerful, written in an accessible language and will appeal to students, researchers and activists alike and to those teaching criminology, sociology, gender and South Asian studies. Sadly, it is likely to be the last piece of critical prison scholarship emerging from India. Following the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) scandal, which arose when Leslee Udwin entered the Tihar Jail and interviewed a convicted rapist for a documentary without the full consent of the government, measures were introduced to restrict entry to carceral institutions (and subjected to numerous conditions), unless, of course, the proposed research relates to prison reforms that are in line with the Indian government's policies.

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