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THE BOOK REVIEW

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Bhutan

Bangladesh

Sri Lanka

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Nepal

Pakistan

Bhutan

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Pakistan

Bhutan

Bangladesh

Sri Lanka

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India

Nepal

Pakistan

Bhutan

In Search of A Shared Past and Plural Culture

Just like the challenges that confronted the world in the past, our present too is marked by cynicism and fear, glaring in widespread apathy towards the have-nots. The COVID-19 pandemic is likely to have long-lasting consequences for social rights, and has once again directed the spotlight on to deep-rooted systemic inequities in the world we inhabit, for us in South Asia.

Issues such as endemic poverty, ill health, territorial conflagrations between neighbours, internal acrimony among so always been widespread all across the region. The differences among the member states have been singularly responsible region back from realizing its true potential. There is an increased need to confront these challenges head-on; the impera the matters that divide our societies has never been more urgent. At this juncture in human history we earnestly hope th Asia special issue of *The Book Review* provides us with an opportunity to pause and reflect on our current predicament.

The bouquet of book reviews carried in this issue encompasses genre, themes, and disciplines. Though most of our cl focus exclusively on a single country, there remains an overarching theme of our shared legacy which straddles regional boundaries. The books have been carefully selected to underline our shared past, and common sensibilities. The issues c from geopolitical development, domestic politics, aesthetic, religion, to South Asian fiction.

As we in India celebrate 75 years of Independence, this is also an opportune moment to acknowledge 50 years of Bar Independence. Once described as a 'basket-case' because of its appalling socio-economic indicators, today Bangladesh is case study of a successful economic transformation to the status of a middle-income country. However, the challenges of the country: religious violence, economic inequality, horrendous standards of press freedom, are identical to the ones for countries in South Asia. These common afflictions call for introspection and a concerted effort to mitigate these challenges any time in the past.

The return of the Taliban in Afghanistan, after nearly two decades of conflict, has once again directed the world's attention to the region. Taliban 2.0, for at least us in India, also has the potential to recalibrate South-Asian geopolitics to our disadvantage. It is naïve for regional stakeholders to trust outside powers to help put our house in order. The initiative has to come from within. Stability in Afghanistan benefits the entire region.

Therefore the geopolitics of the region, which has for long dominated our attention, remains an important theme in the discussion. However, continuing the traditions of *The Book Review*, we have also consciously tried to bring in the cultural and social aspects of the discussion. Our endeavour remains to focus on our common past and the rich legacy of a plural culture. The review have tried to engage with the books by adding to the discourse their own perspectives and experiences. Yes, the old host a shadow over our present; however, one should also acknowledge the changes in the social and cultural realm. Together, they have the potential to enrich our worldview and open up new avenues for mutual comprehension and reconciliation, and perhaps solutions to our collective problems, which have always seemed insurmountable.

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Parvin Sultana	<i>The Braided River: A Journey along the Brahmaputra</i> by Samrat Choudhury
Mohan Rao	<i>Medical Innovation and Disease Burden: Conflicting Priorities and the Social Divide in India</i> by Sobin George
Nyla Ali Khan	<i>Accidental Feminism: Gender Parity and Selective Mobility among India's Professional Elite</i> by Swetha S. Balakrishnan
Krishna Menon	<i>Courting Desire: Litigating for Love in North India</i> by Rama Srinivasan
Azeemah Saleem	<i>Why Men Rape: An Indian Undercover Investigation</i> by Tara Kanwar
Simi Malhotra	<i>Shades of Black: Quilombolas' (Nuances du noir)</i> by Nathalie Ecker, translated from the original French by Simi Malhotra
Sohail Akbar	<i>Bangladesh: The Price of Freedom</i> by Raghu Rai
Aruna Roy	<i>Of Gifted Voice: The Life and Art of M.S. Subbulakshmi</i> by Kishor Deshpande
Ashwini Deshpande	<i>Musicophilia in Mumbai: Performing Subjects & the Metropolitan Unconscious</i> by Tapaswini Nandan
TCA Srinivasa-Raghavan	<i>The Light of Asia: The Poem that Defined the Buddha</i> by Jayaram Ramesh
Muneeza Shamsie	<i>Address Book: A Publishing Memoir in the Time of COVID</i> by Ratu Menon
Somdatta Mandal	<i>Rebati: Speaking in Tongues</i> by Fakir Mohan Senapati edited by Manu Dash
Sacharita Sengupta	<i>The Demoness: The Best Bangladeshi Stories, 1971-2021</i> selected and edited by Niaz Zaman
Jennifer Monaghan	<i>What We Know about Her</i> by Krupa Ge
Suman Bhattacharya	<i>Collegiality and Other Ballads: Feminist Poems by Male and Non-Binary Allies</i> introduced and edited by SI
Zeena R. Choudhury	<i>The Rana Cookbook: Recipes from the Palaces of Nepal</i> by Rohini Rana

is one of the
crises facing
ay, regardless of
boundaries.))

which along with other
man too evolved from
environment and in turn,
es of survival in order to
Interestingly, it is this
human life, namely, the
re to survive as a species
modern human being that
rent crises. In other words,
pursuit of 'good life' in
re define it that inevitably
condition of life in which
ust unfold. At stake, then,
al promise of modernity,
we pursue a path of progress
e aware that this collective
s the cause for a collective
ow understand as the crisis of
For, if histories of injustice
n the core of much of our
ught and action, as they must,
e must understand that such
io-spherical limits precisely
fundamental scalar clash of
ice.
standing this differential
al scalar nature of existence
both conceptually and
Chakrabarty explains in the
thropocene Time' and 'Toward
logical Clearing'. Often, we
ult to grasp the vastness of
d scale of the planet's history
ause we tend to translate them
specifically, moral terms.
rm Anthropocene, which
the extent of human impact
et' (p. 156), 'could never be
separated from moral concerns'
ue to this translation, the debates
Anthropocene often took the
ating moral responsibility for
among others, this led the '...
Jason Moore, who recommended
a geological epoch be given a
esive of the more immediate
his opinion brought in about
p. 160). Yet, in collapsing
and some late human time as it
undoubtedly collapse the geological
part of the human, thus leading
the tendency to view the human
of the

a politics structured around the breaking
down of distinctions between the human
and the natural world, a task that is difficult
to do when we do not fully comprehend the
vastness and depth in which the geological
scale unfolds (p. 195-196).

Thus, for Chakrabarty, the way forward
must involve recognizing the 'alterity' of
the earth, where humans see themselves
not as the dominant reason for the planet
to exist but rather as a component of the
complex multi-cellular life systems that also
exist in the planet. Only such recognition
with perhaps an idea of reverence at its
core will help in confronting the unique
challenges that climate change poses (p.
198-199). While the book does not have a
formal conclusion, readers, however, will
find a further reiteration of many of the core
messages of the book in the postscript, which
creatively presents these ideas in a dialogic
format, a reproduction of a conversation
between the author and the French
philosopher, Bruno Latour.

In sum, *The Climate of History in a
Planetary Age* is a breathtaking book.
Chakrabarty challenges us to reimagine
the human from a planetary perspective, a
deep history—an infinite horizon of human
history—in order to come to terms with
the climate crisis that human actions have
precipitated. Simply put, for a long time,
the constitution and the well-being of the
human, the Anthropos has predominantly
been at the heart of our epistemology
and action. Chakrabarty suggests that the
present crisis of climate change calls for
'de-centring' the human (p. 203). The
conceptual and political implications of this
paradigm shift for disciplines in the social
sciences and humanities are indeed ground-
breaking.

Readers will of course arrive at their own
conclusion both about the diagnoses of the
problem and the various points of inflection
that Chakrabarty offers regarding debates
around diverse aspects of the Anthropocene.
There will be disagreements, of course.
But, at its heart, everyone must answer
the question that Chakrabarty poses, a
particular formulation that in many ways
the ancient Greek philosophers would have
immediately recognized—does the era of the
Anthropocene require us to fundamentally
reexamine the way we live? I submit that in
this case, it is quite challenging to choose the
road not taken.

Arvind Elangovan is a historian of modern South
Asia at Wright State University, Dayton, Ohio. Most

Blending Travel, Memoir and History

Parvin Sultana

THE BRAIDED RIVER: A JOURNEY ALONG THE
BRAHMAPUTRA

By Samrat Choudhury

HarperCollins, 2021, pp. 409, ₹599.00

The *Braided River* is an ambitious
project, an account of the journey
that the journalist took tracing the
river Brahmaputra from its Indian origin in
Arunachal to Bangladesh where it takes a
new name and merges with the Ganga.

Divided into three broad sections, the
book gives a detailed account of not only the
route that the longest river of India follows,
but also the lives it makes and breaks. The
first part largely deals with the river's origin
in India in the State of Arunachal Pradesh.
Choudhury starts with mythical accounts
of the river along with archaeological facts
about it. Such myths cut across countries
and religions indicating the significance of
the river.

The journey starts as the author starts
to trace the origin of the river—mainly
tracing the origin of its three main tributaries
namely Dibang, Siang and Lohit. The very
beginning shows the many administrative
obstacles that the region suffers from. People
from outside Arunachal Pradesh require an
Inner Line Permit and acquiring it puts one
through a tedious bureaucratic process. After
much hassle, the author and his friend could
acquire the required permit which is given
for a limited period of time.

In Arunachal Pradesh, we get a glimpse
of a border State with scant population
and isolated villages. Owing to its strategic
importance, the State has both intelligence
bureau officials and a substantial number
of Border security and Army personnel. So
much so, that the author is stopped from
visiting villages closer to the border region.
Choudhury's experience sounds nothing less

“The book cuts across genres
and is not just a travelogue.

The *Braided River* will
familiarize readers from across
disciplines to this region
which is often denied an
adequate and rightful space