

Book Review

Chattha, Ilyas. *The Punjab Borderland: Mobility, Materiality and Militancy, 1947-87*. 313pp. Cambridge University Press 2022.

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This book rightly claims to offer the first comprehensive social history (between 1947-87) of the border created in 1947 between the two parts of Punjab (p. 1), and is also the first study on the materiality of the Punjab border based on extensive archival research (p. 13). The book is organised into seven chapters in addition to an introduction and conclusion, in a combination of chronological and thematic linkages. I will first go through these chapters one by one as a way of summarising before offering my reflections on the book's strengths and limitations. This overview is aimed to highlight some of the important features of individual chapters.

Chapter One offers a refreshing take on the Punjab border. Against the conventional understanding of it as a 'hard border', and the border communities as the victims of interstate rivalries at the margin of the tense international border (p. 49), the author demonstrates that the local history of the border is shaped as much by the borderland dwellers and their actions as it is by border institutions and increased state control (p. 52).

Chapter Two delves into the "actual movement of a range of commodities, communities and contrabanders". These cross-border movements are rooted within ethnic and social affinities which facilitate, rather necessitate, cross-border interactions despite varying political ideologies at the political centres of Pakistan and India and preventive laws at the Punjab border (p. 59). The chapter demonstrates that Punjab borderland society was tied minimally to the national rhetoric and state border schemes and was constantly defying state power through its mastery of local landscapes, cross-border networks and links with border guards. The most important conclusion of this chapter is that the Punjab border was permeable and unsupervised through much of its length and people frequently crossed it for their advantage and convenience. Contrary to the standard accounts of partition that view the period following 1947 as one of closure, this chapter reveals "huge continuities" in the region long after the drawing of the Radcliffe boundary (p. 84).

Chapter Three zeroes in on the contraband trade in which Lahore and Amritsar constituted (between 1947-80s) the key nodes, spinning together a regional economy, the spatial and functional limits of which exceeded the official trade between India and Pakistan (p. 92). The political complexities of the formal trade, and the economic realities of illegal trade are documented in this chapter along with the scope and shifting patterns of contraband trade (pp. 95-103; table 3.2). The most important feature of this chapter is its explication of the linkages of borderland economy with urban economy and development and the upward social mobility that results from illegal cross-border trade (pp. 116-17). Filling a gap in studies of the partition of India and Pakistan, this exploration suggests that the political economy of smuggling played a part in the rehabilitation of refugees and urban development in the early years of Pakistan's history. The emergence of informal bazaars as a consequence of cross-border smuggling served as a space of cultural circulation, with repercussions at both the local and national level (p. 125).

The Punjab Borderland does not remain limited to local and national dimensions. In chapter four, focussing on the illicit gold trade, it widens the compass to the global, asking first what the polymorphous character of gold and its global trade can tell us about the nature of boundary and dynamics of smuggling along the Punjab border (p. 132). Presenting an interesting account of the gold trade, the chapter covers an extensive ground from haj to hawala and from local and national to cross-border and international gold trade networks (pp. 142-150). The chapter demonstrates that the transition from decolonisation to nation states not only created new forms of criminal enrichment (p. 185) but also enabled transnational flows of illegality (p. 155). Chapter Five shows how border dwellers colluded with larger-scale operatives to extract maximum material gains for their own benefit (p. 156). To this end, it first explores the social organisation of the contraband trade and the ethnic constitution of the 'smuggling community' in the Punjab borderland, followed by an examination of the individual actions and structured system of

contraband trade (p. 164). In doing so, the chapter reveals that “there were distinct advantages to the Punjab borderland communities, who exploited the border through various coping strategies” (p. 165). A striking feature of this chapter is the use of border ballads and song lyrics alongside official archival materials (pp. 162-168) to demonstrate the juxtaposition of local imaginaries of the border with its place in the state’s imagination (p. 194). The story of borderland society and its linkages to contraband trade is related to many local, national and transnational dimensions and meanings (pp. 193-94).

Contraband trade could not flourish without the patronage of state officials and institutions, and chapter six therefore details the triumphs and frustrations of the law enforcement agencies’ attempts to regulate contraband along the borderland on the ground, on the high seas, in the air and in parliament (p. 202). Among its key conclusions, the chapter fleshes out the work of analysts in Pakistan studies who have noted that authoritarian military regimes have promoted the growth of illegal forms of capitalism (p. 229). Chapter Seven shows how actors in the contraband trade were employed by the state to transport drugs and arms to India during the Sikh militancy of the 1980s (p. 229). This led, however, to the erection of a border fence, which ended the “self-proclaimed ‘golden phase’ of a 40 year old history of smuggling between India and Pakistan along the Punjab border” (p. 235).

Punjab Borderland can be praised for its multiple strengths. In addition to offering a much-needed and refreshing view from the Punjab border, its extensive coverage of contraband trade, especially the extensive treatment of the gold-trade and its role in the development of cities in the early years of Pakistan, is stimulating. Moreover, the study of the connections of the borderland economy to some of the famous marketplaces in India and Pakistan is a contribution to the underdeveloped scholarship on the informal (not in the author’s sense) marketplaces in the region. The analysis of the linkage of contraband trade across Pakistan-India border is not limited to local and regional markets, it also encompasses international markets, for instance gold smuggling’s links to international markets (pp. 226-7). The materiality of the border is meticulously articulated and extensively detailed through a broad range of material objects. Some examples of the objects involved in the “transnational illegal economics” of the Punjab borderland include fencing (p. 48), pillars (p. 46), walkie-talkies (p. 47), barbed wire (p. 50), cloth ration cards (p. 100), Haj notes (facilitating transportation of gold from Saudi Arabia to Pakistan and then to Indian markets) (p. 133), prayer rugs (p. 138), boats, vessels and engines (p. 152), trade permits (p.102), import and export licences (p. 103), aeroplanes (p. 104), paan (p. 105), trucks (p. 109), beauty cream (p. 119), train windows (p. 121), watches, tape recorders and transistor radios (p.123).

Moreover, this book’s exploration of the role of the social networks that underpin illegal smuggling across the Pakistan-India border and beyond is fascinating. Nevertheless, the archival material presented in this book does not do enough

heavy lifting to support the role of the frequently mentioned pre-partition ties and social networks in the operation of the underground economy. At places, the centrality of pre-partition networks in the operation of contraband trade is conjectural rather than obvious from the archival materials, or at least as it is articulated. Despite this limitation, the exploration of social networks and their role in contraband trade between 1947 and the 1980s is extensive and insightful.

Despite its strengths, the book suffers from some conceptual weaknesses. First, within the moral economy of a borderland (p. 169), the book is unable to situate various material objects and their differentiated social understanding. For instance, guns, drugs, liquor, gold, cattle, surgical instruments, and edibles of everyday use can be grouped together within an overarching title of ‘contraband’ (pp. 61; 205-206; 235), but how these objects are shaped by and shape meanings of the border is key to understanding the moral geography of borderland economy.

Conceptually, a more problematic aspect of this monograph for me is the use of ‘informal’ as a synonym for illegal economy (smuggling) (note 18 in the introduction). In doing so, the author slips into a binary mode of thinking which closes the analytical opportunity of looking into things that do not fall at the extreme ends of the spectrum (formal/legal and informal/illegal in the author’s usage). This conceptualisation may be rooted in the author’s understanding that what is formally permitted and documented is legal, and what is undocumented and formally prohibited is illegal. Within this frame then, what about the informal informers (p. 212) mentioned by the author, and used by borderland officials to prevent the cross-border flow of contraband and to round up goods and smugglers? Such a narrow conceptualisation /understanding is reflected in the author’s occasional confusion in deploying ‘formal and informal’ and ‘legal’ and ‘illegal’ to imply different things (p. 4). This leaves the reader to wonder whether this analysis of formal and informal (in the author’s conceptualisation) could usefully be applied to other borders of Pakistan?

The Punjab Borderland could also have been better contextualised to make a more substantial contribution to borderland studies on Pakistan. For instance, the author mentions in passing Afghanistan (p. 11) and China (p. 96) but overlooks the richness of the sources cited that could have helped provide this contextualisation (note 50 in the introduction and note 20 in chapter one). There are occasional typographical errors (both spelling and grammatical) throughout the book. For instance, pp. 5, 11, 29, 30, 46, 54, 81, 89, 153, 179, 184, 197, 222 among others. Not that they matter too much, but they disrupt the flow of reading and occasionally take away the joy of such an excellent account of the Punjab border.

Despite these limitations, *The Punjab Borderland* is an important contribution to borderland history, Pakistan Studies, black/underground economy studies, partition history and borderland materiality and commodity flows literatures.