

Book Review

Chattah, Ilyas. *Citizens to Traitors: Bengali Internment in Pakistan, 1971-1974*. 233pp. Cambridge University Press 2025.

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For much of the period since 1971, the historiography of Bangladesh's War of Independence has been marked, particularly within Pakistan, by silence and erasure. This has been noted by scholars such as Rubina Saigol who have written about how 1971 appears in Pakistani textbooks, as well as by those examining the broader legacies of 1971, including Dina Siddiqi, Nayanika Mookherjee, Yasmin Saikia and Ali Usman Qasmi. Ilyas Chattha's work is an important intervention in this field: a rigorously researched and empirically grounded corrective to a significant lacuna in the literature. It does much more than simply recount the political breakdown between former East and West Pakistan. Instead, the book orients itself around the experiences of Bengalis who were interned in West Pakistan during and after the war. To many within Pakistan today, this is an entirely unknown part of the history of 1971. In focusing on this group, *Citizens to Traitors* illustrates how the violence of 1971 was also directed, within West Pakistan, to all Bengalis. Chattha traces in great detail the process by which all Bengalis in Pakistan became constructed as suspicious outsiders and then, in very short order, were incarcerated both because they were seen as inherently capable of siding against national interests and because they were imagined as bargaining counters. This suggests that the crisis of 1971 was as much about defining who could be Pakistani—about policing ethnonational boundaries and seeing citizens as a means to an end—as it was about suppressing Bengali nationalism.

The fate of these interned Bengalis was, as Chattha aptly terms it, a “non-event.” His focus on this period brings to light how, for nearly half a million Bengalis living in the Western Wing, a different kind of war—barely discussed openly in Pakistan—continued from 1971 to 1974. Chattha shows that this process fundamentally underlay the transformation of what Pakistani citizenship meant for different groups. In the chapter “Making of a Traitor,”

for instance, he traces this shift from 1 January 1972, when a petition submitted by 300 West Pakistani civil servants demanded the immediate removal of all Bengali officials from their positions on the grounds that they were considered suspect.

Chattha draws on detailed archival research—including government documents, newspaper reports and interviews—to bring this important history to light. The triangulation of these sources throughout the book conveys the pervasiveness of the belief that the title encapsulates: that 1971 was a moment when an entire population went from being citizens to being perceived as traitors in perpetuity. To illustrate that this was not merely a top-down imposition, Chattha includes documentation from newspapers as well as interviews with people who were children at the time but were living near the camps. These testimonies show that even though internment was barely discussed in public discourse, it was playing out in plain sight, in close proximity to ordinary Pakistani life. This section of the book is particularly effective as it interweaves Chattha's own experiences growing up near one of the colonies where Bengalis were held captive.

Chattha's archival research is formidable in demonstrating that the experience of internment was far from uniform. Drawing on previously inaccessible materials from Foreign Office files, Red Cross reports, diplomatic cables and extensive oral histories, he reconstructs an infrastructure of captivity that ranged from military cantonment camps to civilian internment facilities euphemistically termed “General Repatriation Centres.” The differentiation is important: military officers and senior civil servants were held in relatively better conditions of confinement, while dismissed factory workers and service-sector employees endured overcrowded, unsanitary conditions. In Chapter 6, Chattha similarly examines the different routes taken

by Bengalis who “escaped” the camps, drawing on scholarship that has traced analogous patterns during Partition and how those patterns shaped the migratory routes—and the violence—that individuals and families were likely to encounter. This class stratification among the internees itself highlights how social hierarchies that had existed before 1971 were not entirely flattened, even under conditions of captivity.

The human dimension of the book emerges most powerfully through the testimonies Chattha has painstakingly collected. In Chapter 3, for instance, he offers a detailed account of children’s birthday celebrations inside the camps, made possible by imprisoned Bengali families who hoarded food for days in order to mark the occasion—a small but striking act of resilience under conditions of profound loss.

Perhaps the book’s most significant contribution lies in the way it situates this internment within the geopolitics linking Pakistan, India and Bangladesh. Chattha shows how 1971 transformed people into the “stranded,” “repatriates” and, in the case of Bengali civilians held in internment camps, “bargaining leverage.” This last term refers to a 1972 government directive that explicitly described the Bengali captives as leverage to be used to secure the return of Pakistani prisoners of war held in India.

In his concluding chapter, Chattha reflects on the fact that even today the wartime captivity experiences of Bengalis are not fully remembered on their own terms. Their history—one that does not fit neatly within the nationalist narratives of either Pakistan or Bangladesh—is remembered in “partisan ways,” with neither state having made a sustained effort to acknowledge it in its full complexity. The book thereby raises a profound question: in the absence of official acknowledgement, who bears responsibility for recovering this history, and for whom is that recovery performed?

One area where further theoretical engagement might have enriched the analysis is the literature on citizenship studies. Chattha does reference Hannah Arendt’s concept of rightlessness and notes, in the final chapter, that the Bengalis occupied a status that was not quite statelessness—but a more sustained engagement with this body of work might have provided a sharper conceptual vocabulary for describing precisely what their legal and political condition was. There are also intriguing threads throughout the book that invite further elaboration. The section on Bengalis who, despite internment, later went on to achieve prominence hints that the camp experience generated forms of connection or social networks that had lasting significance when they went to Bangladesh—a hidden history that deserves fuller treatment.

Ultimately, *Citizens to Traitors* is an important book and essential reading for scholars of South Asian history, Pakistan studies and the broader literature on mass violence and partition. The book demonstrates that the violence of 1971 was bureaucratic, systemic and intimate, perpetrated through administrative orders, questionnaires and the reclassification—and thereby dehumanisation—of the Bengali population living in West Pakistan. In situating this episode within Pakistan’s contested national memory and linking it to the geopolitical manoeuvring between Pakistan, India and Bangladesh, Chattha has produced a work that demands acknowledgement and implicates both nations in their shared, unresolved past.
