

Citizens on the margins

Kishalay Bhattacharjee's book has to be read twice, first as an act of memory recollecting one's own biography as a citizen, second as a narrative of populist politics that shows how weak citizenship is as a guarantee of dignity, justice, and democracy. **SHIV VISVANATHAN**

This is a disturbing book on marginals, migrants, and the fate of citizenship. What adds to the surrealism of fear and anxiety is the sheer sanity of narrative, the rigorous mapping of the fate of a word. The word "citizenship", often connected to the nation state, sounds like a domesticated term. Yet it pertains more to the rules of exclusion rather than inclusion.

Kishalay Bhattacharjee examines the contextual insanity of citizenship as a concept and as an initiation rite. A former editor of NDTV and currently Dean at Jindal School of Journalism and Communication, Bhattacharjee uses the margins and the frontier as a lens and theatre to confront democracy and governance.

Bhattacharjee's exploration of citizenship begins with two initial chapters reflecting on method, one on concepts and the other on autobiography. He explores citizenship and identity as terms and then describes his family encounters with citizenship. He emphasises the ethical duty of a journalist as a trustee of frontiers and marginals. He adds that listening is vital to any act that demands the trusteeship of the vulnerable.

As a listener, an analyst, and a storyteller of the fate of citizenship in India, Bhattacharjee is outstanding. He demonstrates how the pathologies of governance collide with electoral democracy to create an everydayness around violence, holocaust, and genocide.

In exploring the clerical fate of governance, the book has a touch of Kafka to it. Yet it is not just a local study but an overall history of migration and its impact on the social imagination. As Bhattacharjee puts it, the world we inhabit is a result of continuous migration. The

Where the Madness Lies

Citizen Accounts of Identity and Nationalism



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dialectic of stranger and citizen, migrant and marginal, creates the enzymatic power of the book. Bhattacharjee unfolds the backstage of each story from Bodoland to Kashmir, showing how governance and violence share an intimate relationship.

THE ANECDOTES ARE overpowering but a review is no place to recite them. One wishes that this book inaugurates the beginning of an archive of oral and written memory showing how mass violence haunts a word like citizenship. Each case study adds to a sense of despair, until the reader realises that in memory and storytelling lie the ritual beginnings of hope. Bhattacharjee emphasises that in linking individual biography to social history lies the beginnings of a sociological imagination as a way to redeem the Frankensteinian nature of citizenship.

For Bhattacharjee, citizenship begins like an Alice in Wonderland term that enters the world of Kafka. He lists out the ways in which citizens can be deported even when they have no country to return to. The detention camp as an institution becomes a permanent necessity, playing at the temporariness of identity. He emphasises the brittleness of citizenship, when 16 years of residence and belonging can be blunted with one rumour of suspicion, jealousy, or rage.

The book begins with the fate of the tribal individual; Bhattacharjee shows that the word "tribal" is not a simple construct. The "tribal" is hardly indigenous, but a composite word for migrants of every shade and kind. The relationship is based on a combination of record and memory, where folklore competes with an erratic social science. Bhattacharjee shows how the words "tribal" and "citizen" are pro-



blematic words. The word “tribe”, for all its claim to the forest and indigeneity, often refers to migrants over the ages.

The Nagas only arrived from Tibet in the first millennium, the Mizos in the 16th century, and the Kukis much later. Bhattacharjee adds that tribal identity is not one vector but a composite of identities that one must unravel. He demands an exorcism of politics to create a new sanity of terms around language and myth. One needs a pluralistic framework to challenge the genocidal fundamentals around which current history is built.

A CERTAIN POWER OF literature and a literary imagination haunts the book. It is almost as if Cervantes and Kafka were companions to Bhattacharjee in his efforts to recite the social construction of citizenship, the making of homecoming, and the prospect of homelessness. The author becomes the chartered accountant of genocide through the litany of numbers, and the storyteller of homelessness. He moves from tribe to city, identifying the marginals of the city, showing how most civics is a violation of rights and citizenship. The city, like the frontier, produces its own genre of tragedy.

Bhattacharjee is at his best providing a quick ethnography of cities. From Jalandhar to Hyderabad, he captures the fact that migration is a remapping of cities; each city becomes a fable of entry and exit, as refugees move across ci-

▼ **The inhabitants** of a slum in Bengaluru, on May 2, 2020. During the pandemic, tiny rooms and overcrowding made a mockery of physical distancing rules in places like these that exist on the margins of a city. *AJIAZ RAHI/AP*

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ties. His narrative of Banaras as a historic city follows his story of Jalandhar almost like an epic urban poem. The urban phenomenology of the outsider is played out in full. Sadly, the detention camp becomes the double of the city, hollowing out the idea of citizenship.

Bhattacharjee captures the migrant as marginal man in poignant ways. His writing is crisp and immediate. One wishes the book were longer, so one could chew over it like the ingredients of a *paan*. Memory needs time to grasp and savour. Migrants, like dirt, become matter out of place as they seek a place in the hierarchical order of the city. The dynamics of the social order are played around the migrant as subject and object of urban life.

T HIS BOOK IS divided into four parts. As Bhattacharjee moves from tribal to city to margin, one realises the arbitrariness of law as one confronts the Chakma, the Kuki, and the Gurkha. The Gurkha might be a legendary figure in film but has almost disappeared as a person in the north-east.

Citizenship emerges as an act of classification, a construct involving a rite of passage full of uncertainty, marginality, and liminality. The migrant perpetually confronts the prospect of surveillance and the panopticon. He seeks freedom but confronts the enclosure. In chronicling these travails, the journalist be-

comes witness to the everyday hypocrisy of democracy. Democracy or majoritarianism has little place for a world of citizenship that provides both dignity and grace. Bhattacharjee moves from storytelling to an analysis of the nation state as a concept. He shows the nation state as an alien concept that has only created a costume ball of violent politics. More than the tribal person, it is the nation state that needs to be domesticated, translated, and made indigenous. Bhattacharjee warns that concepts can be genocidal if they do not receive the required exegesis.

This book might be about insanity, but it

shows pathways to sanity. It has to be read twice, first as an act of memory recollecting one's own biography as a citizen, second as a narrative of populist politics, which shows how weak citizenship is as a guarantee of dignity, justice, and democracy. One of the outstanding monographs on politics in the last decade, it needs to be debated and welcomed by the *addas* of civil society to create a new gossip for democracy. ■

Shiv Visvanathan is a sociologist associated with the Compost Heap, a network of academics exploring alternative imaginations.