

Facts, Feelings and Finding Identity

An informative and thought-provoking book that examines the journeys of India's marginalised through the country's history



Where the Madness Lies: Citizen Accounts of Identity and Nationalism

By: Kishalay Bhattacharjee
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By MADHULIKA LIDDLE

Kishalay Bhattacharjee's *Where the Madness Lies: Citizen Accounts of Identity and Nationalism* is dedicated to 'the millions of people around the world displaced, killed, maimed, incarcerated, intimidated for being who they are'. Unusual, but a fitting description of the people whose accounts the book covers: Dalits, Adivasis, Muslims, people from the Northeast and Jammu and Kashmir, and others who find themselves marginalised, victimised and deprived of their rights. What do they have to say about community, citizenship, nationhood and patriotism? How do they identify themselves?

The author sets out to examine these questions, and more, in the book, which he divides into four chapters, and an equally important appendix and annexure. In the prologue, the author traces the idea of identity, and how—in what terms and against which references—Indians have perceived

themselves since ancient times. It is where some of the more incendiary issues that have shaken the country over the past few years are introduced: the National Register of Citizens (NRC), the question of Kashmir, the touchy topic of nationalism and being anti-national.

The first chapter, 'The I of Identity', is subtitled 'Genealogies from Sialkot, Sylhet, Mithila, Cannanore and Shillong'. Bhattacharjee brings in a good deal of his own experiences. He describes his growing years in Shillong, his Bengali-origin family's antecedents and how they migrated, finding home many miles from where they began. Woven in are stories of others, who also made Shillong their home, but were originally from as far as Sialkot (now in Pakistan) to Cannanore (Kannur, in Kerala).

The lives of people and the cities they regard as home continues into the following chapter, 'The City in Citizenship'. Beginning with a compelling glimpse of Harappa, it extends the

idea of people and their corresponding cities to others: a Dalit journalist in Jalandhar; an exponent of the lineage of temple dancers in Hyderabad; a Muslim farmer in Hampi, and more, all of who are in some way spurned, but whose sense of belonging comes through forcefully in their narratives.

A series of case studies of migrants and refugees takes centre stage in 'Where the

Madness Actually Lies'. It looks at some of India's most often overlooked injustices towards 'outsiders'—Kayas (Marwaris) in Assam, Gorkhas in Manipur, and the Indian Chinese, who were bundled off to PoW camps in Deoli, in the madness of the Indo-China War of 1962.

The final chapter, 'The Notion of a Nation', looks at how people perceive nationality. It is followed by a timeline of major events in

2020-21—the Shaheen Bagh and farmers' protests, and the migrant exodus during Covid lockdown—in the annexure that exposes the Indian state's treatment of its 'citizens'. The appendix is a sampling of surveys, with answers from various respondents, regarding all the ideas explored through the book.

The cover image of a seemingly irate man standing before a crowd, beating a drum, and possibly shouting, is disturbing. The book itself, however, manages to take a serious, level-headed look at the issues it takes up; there is no bluster here, no whipping up of sentiment. The facts are put out fair and square. Bhattacharjee's research into history, sociology and related fields is precise, and he is able to make his point with clarity. The 'facts' are made more impactful by the 'feelings' that come through in the interviews with common people—memories that reinforce the revelations, making them more personal.

Where the Madness Lies is a distressing book, but it is also informative and thought-provoking. It is a work of literature that should be required reading, if only to sensitise people to concepts we are either ignorant of or choose to ignore.

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NRC protests in Delhi