

# Anthropology Book Forum

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Alimia, Sanaa. 2022. *Refugee Cities: How Afghans Changed Urban Pakistan*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 248pp. ISBN: 9781512822793

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Alimia has provided a book that is long overdue, on a topic that has been chronically understudied. *Refugee Cities: How Afghans Changed Urban Pakistan* provides detailed ethnographic accounts of Afghans living in the coastal mega city of Karachi and the border city of Peshawar to construct how their lives have been shaped – and more importantly are shaping – urban Pakistan today. The author frames these as “micro histories” (xv) and follows the lives of key contributors to construct Afghan narratives.

The book is divided into three parts. The first details the history of British colonial policies bleeding into the Pakistani state, the second provides ethnographic accounts of Afghan lives in Karachi and Peshawar, and the third is a continuation of the author’s previous work on the mobility of the border through the United Nations-funded Proof of Registration (POR) cards issued to Afghans in Pakistan (Alimia 2019).

The first chapter detailing the background and history of Pak-Afghan relations dating to colonial times – though very well done – is the buffer before the more exciting ethnographic work that follows. The author does not bring anything entirely new to that discussion, and most readers familiar on the topic will already be quite aware of colonial policies shaping current Pakistani laws. There could have been a more direct linkage to how the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR) of 1901 shaped exclusion of Pakhtuns in the border area, or how the Durand line is a meaningless border for the Afghan government. This chapter could have further benefitted from an ethnographic entry about how interlocutors felt about the Durand Line and movement across it, rather than summarising official government policies that are more readily accessible online.

However, as Alimia points out, "...borders are not just 'there' as premade lines on a map, rather borders (and thereby sovereignty) get made through acts of "border performativity." (30). Border performativity is brilliantly exemplified through POR cards discussed in-depth in Chapter 5.

Chapters 2 and 3 focus on Karachi, with the second chapter discussing the settlement of "Camp-e-Marwarid" and its issues with water. Camp-e-Marwarid is on the far outskirts of the city on the Super Highway, another 21 kilometres further beyond the major area and transit point of Sohrab Goth, which for most Karachiites lies at the city limits. The chapter explicates quite well Karachi's status as a city with a phenomenally high inflow of migrants, following all the way from the British Raj's expansion of the city as a seaport, the creation of Pakistan, and the waves of Afghan migrations that occurred after political strife in Afghanistan in the 1970s and later 80s. It also demonstrates how successive governments have been unable to solve ethnic strife in the city – and have instead instigated them for political gain. As one of Alimia's interlocutors mentions, it was after the 1985 and 1986 riots that Afghans were further pushed out of Sohrab Goth to Camp-e-Marwarid. In fact, we learn that Camp-e-Marwarid was set aside for Afghans in the 1980s, and Pakistanis came later (44). Alimia posits as well then that the building of Camp-e-Marwarid is the "...evidence of an early, purposeful attempt to spatially separate noncitizen refugees from citizens and enact a form of social exclusion" (44), keeping separate Afghans from Pakistani Pakhtuns. Camp-e-Marwarid for most of its existence has received little to no infrastructural support from the government, and hence basic services are virtually non-existent.

Chapter 3 is similar to the earlier chapter in terms of the lack of state planning leading to residents to fend entirely for themselves. It also touches upon how both Afghans and Pakistanis in this area embark upon the process of "place-making in the city" (81) together. Focusing on the informal settlement of "Ishtiaq Goth," it narrates the story of how a few residents of influence (through some political capital) acting as landlords were focused on and brought into a formal urban governance structure. It also demonstrates the value to the same residents of influence in keeping such settlements entirely informal. This is first done through giving pieces of land and basic structures for free for a fixed period of time, and then encouraging residents to improve and expand the structure. After that capital investment by incumbent residents, the landlords would begin charging rent. The continuation of such informal settlements ultimately were favourable for

landlords, who have now entrapped residents. Hence, exploitation of Afghans happens not only by the Pakistani state, but by citizens as well. As Alimia notes, “[B]oth citizens and noncitizens rely on similar horizontal social networks, vertical patronage networks, and piecemeal forms of community mobilization to survive and improve their lives” (80).

A central argument of the book is in the fourth chapter on Peshawar, which says that “...the state is effectively relying on the informal sphere for managing populations it does not want to directly govern” (108). Alimia writes that this is true for both Karachi and Peshawar, with the only difference being between the power brokers in the two cities due to “historical differences in land ownership and governance practices” (ibid). Chapter 4 is an excellent read in terms of the Hayatabad - Gul Kalay comparison, two settlements located on the outskirts of the main city and both built in the 1970s. Hayatabad is a planned neighbourhood in Peshawar that has benefited tremendously from cheap Afghan labour, and is home to some of the wealthiest residents of the city. Gul Kalay is an informal settlement that faces problems similar to Camp-e-Marwarid and Ishtiaq Goth, with the added focus that local law-enforcement believes that the settlement harbours terrorists and conduct raids after a terrorist attack in Peshawar. These raids result in young men being picked up, and residents living under a constant state of surveillance.

At some points in the ethnographic work in Karachi and Peshawar, it feels more so that Afghans are adjusting themselves to the two cities, instead of moulding it. Where this becomes an imposed reality versus fashioning new lives is a tension that the text takes note of as well. Alimia writes that she, “was struck by the similarities in ‘Afghan’ and ‘Pakistani’ neighbourhoods. [...] In most aspects of everyday life, there appeared to be a shared precarious existence for those of comparable class standings; and it was this class status that determined the conditions of life for citizens and refugees alike” (66). What is important perhaps is keeping in mind that Afghan lives in Pakistan are socially (if not politically as well) a fluid and reciprocal relationship, given the changing frames of migrants and refugees imposed upon them. As the book illustrates, they are both those categories and neither, and this constant limbo should make readers and policymakers appreciate the complex continuation of the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan and the Global War on Terror (GWOT).

There is a bit more detail to the colonial and contemporary history of Peshawar than there is for Karachi, and readers could have benefitted from having more background to the political and social background of the city. Surprisingly as well, there is no fieldwork conducted in Quetta, which after Peshawar has the largest Afghan population in Pakistan.

In the third section the monograph shifts its focus towards the building of the modern nation state and Pakistan's attempts at pushing out Afghans. Following Torpey (2000), the author notes that the modern nation state is built on having control over mobility and keeping its borders in check, managed by documents and surveillance. Afghans in Pakistan have been given a plethora of documents by Pakistan to account for this control, as the opening vignette of this chapter demonstrates. The latest in this series is the POR, which in theory allows Afghans to legally reside temporarily in Pakistan. However, Alimia demonstrates that the POR has become a border that has followed Afghans in Pakistan, and possession of the card leads to active discrimination at the hands of locals and law enforcement, including cases for deportation.

In the conclusion and epilogue there is a good overview of international and national policies on the status of refugees and migrants. In some ways this is well-placed, given how the majority of the text speaks to the fragmented and difficult existence of Afghans in Pakistan and therefore the reader can see the disjuncture between policy and deliverance. However, bringing back a discussion of the policies seems futile, given the disjuncture that remains.

The monograph is sublime in how it works from the ground up to create a picture of the functioning of the Pakistani state, and any stakeholder who works in or around the status of Afghans in Pakistan would greatly benefit from it. The language is quite accessible, and this would also be an excellent text to incorporate in a political science and anthropology of development or migration class at any stage of an undergraduate or graduate-level course. Beyond the academy and stakeholders, this book will be quite contently read, and would be a wonderful entry-point to more anthropological studies.

## **Citations**

Sanaa Alimia. 2019. “Performing the Afghanistan-Pakistan Border Through Refugee ID Cards,” in *Geopolitics*, 24(2), 391–425.

Torpey, John. 2000. *The Invention of the Passport: Surveillance, Citizenship, and the State*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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