

Jason Cons, *Sensitive Space: Fragmented Territory at the India-Bangladesh Border*,
Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016. ISBN: 9780295995526 (cloth)

Sensitive Space by Jason Cons offers a distinctive and imaginative account of the peculiar and often mystified enclaves or “fragmented territories” on the border between India and Bangladesh. Focusing solely on Dahagram, the largest Bangladeshi enclave in the archipelago surrounded by Indian territory, Cons offers the notion of “sensitive space” to examine the relationship between territorial anxiety, the postcolonial nation-state, and the border. The timing of this book is illustrative of the mercurial nature of South Asia’s postcolonial borders as Cons reveals in the preface that its completion coincided with the passing of the historic Land Boundary Agreement between India and Bangladesh. This agreement, which came into force in May 2015, led to redrawing parts of the border and exchange of the 111 Indian and 51 Bangladeshi enclaves dispersed between the two countries. While the empirical issue that *Sensitive Space* explores seemingly comes to a climax, Cons predicts that concerns of political belonging will persist.¹ Rather than allowing the Land Boundary Agreement to diminish the value of his endeavours in the following 200+ pages, Cons heralds this as a “rarity in social science, a story with a happy ending” (p.viii).

Locating his work at the intersections of political geography and anthropology, Cons offers a rich and nuanced ethnography of multiple dimensions of everyday struggles, contestations, and opportunities in Dahagram. Although Cons admits to his initial curiosity and fascination by the “oddity, persistence, and strangeness” of the enclaves, he notably refrains from exoticising them (p.ix). This restraint underpins the

¹ For instance, see 101 India’s short documentary “No Man’s Land” that visits the enclaves a year after the passing of the Land Boundary Agreement: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4taOXaSwjLY> (last accessed 7 December 2016).

study and pushes Cons to go beyond understanding enclaves as merely accidental geography. What grounds his investigation is the disproportionate relationship between the size of the enclaves and their significance in nationalist imaginations of territory as “blood and soil”. He is bewildered by how the enclaves have come to symbolise and represent far more than their material space, size, and strategic importance. Through Cons’ vivid descriptions, conversations, and reflections, the reader gains both insights into enclave life and learns about the author’s positionality as an outsider within enclave dynamics.

Cons introduces his book with a promise: “let me take you on a journey into ‘sensitive’ space” (p.5). In the first of the book’s three sections, titled “Entering Sensitive Space”, Cons acquaints the reader with the landscape, specificity, and context of Dahagram. By describing prosaic yet important issues like access and the journey to the enclave itself Cons’ book—unlike some of the existing literature on the enclaves—renders the enclaves explainable. He also expounds upon the origins of the concept of “sensitive space” that he derived through his experience, and recurring encounters with the term “sensitive”, in the field and archives. Not only are borders and enclaves politically sensitive—uncertain, unstable, and unsettled—but the use of the term by officials and border guards also acted as a barrier to accessing information and invited suspicion. Cons defines sensitive space in Chapter 1 as “animated by anxieties, characterized by uncertainties over the ontological status of land and territory” (p.25). Sensitive space or unstable zones are both a product and characteristic of an acute territorial anxiety. Sharing parallels with Sankaran Krishna’s (1994) notion of “cartographic anxiety”, Cons suggests it is ethnography that animates territorial anxiety (p.26). To illustrate the anxieties of everyday enclave life, Cons uses the example of rumours about the erasure of Dahagram to give the reader a sense of the uncertainty, ambiguity, and precarity that plagues life in sensitive space.

In the second section, titled “Sensitive Histories”, Cons explores on history, particularly post-Partition history, the issue of the enclaves as “odd bits”, in the words of India’s first Prime Minister Nehru, and the postcolonial Westphalian imagination of territorially-bound states. Historical evidence like the 1958 Nehru-Noon Accord and parliamentary debates construct the enclaves as both spaces of crime and danger but also essential to national belonging and territory. Cons’ marshals it explain the origins of perspectives and narratives that render territory into a form of currency that can be exchanged between states in postcolonial South Asia. He demonstrates how historically enclaves have been *made* sensitive episodically, defining the outcome of this process as “amplified territory”, i.e. spaces magnified disproportionately into territorial symbols central to nationalist imaginings.

Moving forward from the “official” macro history in Chapter 2, the third chapter focuses on Dahagram’s political community and narratives of belonging. Here, Cons engages Donald Moore’s (2005) idea of “suffering for territory” to trace the micro, lived experiences of the peoples and their history within the enclave (p.70). The enclave residents’ narratives of contestation, dis/possession, struggles for access and mobility, but also of political agency and resistance, are foundational in unpacking the multiple and ambiguous layers of political belonging in sensitive space. Moreover, this chapter is particularly valuable and instructive for two reasons: firstly, because these historical narratives of national belonging, as told by residents, challenge narratives of their supposed statelessness; and secondly, because it debunks the common misconceptions of marginal spaces as lacking political power and agency.

This segues into Cons’ most original contribution, Chapter 4, “Contesting Boundaries, Claiming Territory: Counter-Narratives of Belonging, Identity, and Power”, wherein he explores the “improper” tactics of residents to manage the enclaves themselves. This challenges perceptions of the enclave as a space of mere suffering and

as a moral community that deserves to be a part of Bangladesh. He uses the example of a nomadic marginal group in Dahagram, the Bhatiyas in Pagaltari (or “Crazytown”), to draw attention towards the salient Bangal-Bhatiya fractures within the enclave as well as to illuminate hierarchical power relations even within what would be considered “marginal”, “stateless”, and “oppressed” peoples. These counter-narratives, or “hidden transcripts” (see Scott 1990), are important because they alter perceptions of Dahagram’s residents as victims or long-suffering citizens who are often feminized by scholars of exception (p.94). Instead, it portrays citizens as overtly masculine, active, and opportunistic individuals ready to violently defend territory and their interests using deplorable means like sexual violence (p.94). Additionally, Cons’ deliberate departure from the common analysis of the Indo-Bangladeshi borders/sensitive spaces in Agambenian frameworks of exception and “bare life” is what fuels this original, messy yet complex analysis.

The book is dotted with several ingenious and rare moments in border-making and life that mark the uniqueness of this ethnographic contribution to border studies. For instance, in the third section, “Life and Rule in Sensitive Space”, Chapter 5, “Territorial Corrosion”, describes the disjuncture between the science and politics of border drawing and marking on the ground. This first-hand account of the negotiations, manipulations, and processes of moving border pillars between the residents, Border Security Force, and Joint Border Survey Committee pose questions about the inherent inconsistency and fluidity of this supposedly fixed, material, and violent reality. Far from static, the transformation of sensitive space is captured in the final chapter, where Cons revisits the enclave in 2013. This visit was two years after Dahagram residents’ 37-year-long struggle had ended and the Tin Bigha Corridor that connected the enclave to Bangladesh was left unlocked for 24 hours. Dahagram transformed from the “anxious area” Cons remembered into a “frontier boomtown” (p.132). Access, mobility, and connectivity not

only turned sufferings into fortunes but also made residents feel “truly, fully, and irrevocably part of Bangladeshi territory and nation” (p.132). Despite these changes, Cons uses the case of land registration, sales, and dispute to demonstrate how sensitivity persists. For Cons, the historical, economic, and political changes simply “alter the meaning of sensitivity, restructure the ways it is deployed as a category of rule, and open spaces within which profits and exclusions might again be reshuffled” (p.148).

In the conclusion, Cons suggests the applicability of the idea of sensitive space beyond the “political oddities at the edge of the nation state” to different spaces like urban slums, refugee camps, and post-conflict spaces (p.153). He argues that sensitive space could be used to examine the anxieties, uncertainties, and ambiguities that undergird territorial rule. Not only does this appear to exaggerate the versatility of sensitive space, but it also begs the question of *how*. Anxieties, uncertainties, and ambiguities are all contextually defined, specific, and thus difficult to compare. In Cons’ own words, “[s]ensitivity, as such, is not so much a measurable condition but a set of simultaneously mystifying and generative relationships between nation and national territory” (p.148). Under this rubric, what sensitive space means remains opaque to the reader. After the early establishment of this concept, Cons’ usage of “sensitive space” or “sensitivity” throughout the book does not develop. Whether sensitive space is a starting point, i.e. a form of contextualisation as articulated early in the book, or whether it is an analytical contribution remains vague. Despite its novelty and potential, sensitive space remains a characteristic rather than a fully fleshed out concept. Since the origin of this concept is contingent on the historical and geographical specificities of Dahagram, its usage and applicability in further work remains to be tested.

Overall, *Sensitive Space* opens new conceptual avenues for analyses on the Indo-Bangladeshi border as well as border studies more generally. The use of the idea of sensitive space to capture and explain the politically sensitive border between India and

Bangladesh is both novel and apt. It also presents several innovative analytical concepts to interpret territorial practices and spaces. The book's strength lies within its originality and its attempt to not only demystify territorial fetishes but also to humanise them—present their messiness rather than erase them. Throughout the book, Cons draws on silences, discomfort, and anxiety in the field to present a lived, tangled, and intellectually-stimulating account of sensitive space.

References

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January 2017