Farhana Ibrahim. *From Family to Police Force: Security and Belonging on a South Asian Border*

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Policing and surveillance have more often than not been associated with the larger institutional framework of the state. It needs no reiteration that the state, being its most “vulnerable” at the margins, tries to police and control the borders under its piercing gaze. In this way, the borders become sites of ample securitization and surveillance. Moving away from the statist understanding of policing and migration (Sadiq 2008; Baruah 1999), Farhana Ibrahim’s recent work *From Family to Police Force: Security and Belonging on a South Asian Border* is an engaging anthropological take on policing and its everyday reflections on a South Asian borderland. Being a social anthropologist, she takes a keen interest in issues concerning borders, policing, migration and ethnographic perspectives on the state. Her latest book draws upon almost two decades of ethnographic work in Kutch, Gujarat. Farhana Ibrahim argues that policing is more of an embodied social practice than merely a state institution (p. 3). It is within this larger framework that the layers of policing as deployed by the state are exposed. Her quintessential argument throughout the book is that institutional practices of policing are continually replicated and reproduced across social sites (or institutions) such as family and marriage where the precise distinction between the public and the private tends to fade away (p. 4). Her book is an addition to the existing borderland literature albeit distinct in its own way as she explores the sociality of policing as an institutional practice in the everyday lives of the people inhabiting the India-Pakistan border in the west.

In the western Indian borderland, Kutch in Gujarat is separated from Sindh in Pakistan by a national border that is heavily patrolled and monitored by the civil and border police, the air wing of the armed forces, paramilitary forces and even officers deputed by central intelligence agencies. Farhana Ibrahim draws upon her microscopic interactions with the borderland residents and outlines the position of the Muslims living in the region. There is a long history of differentiating between migrants on the basis of religious identities and the Muslims have always been at the receiving end. (p. 5). Moving beyond viewing them as an object of policing, the author remarks that Muslims are as much a subject of policing. She substantiates her claims by focusing on everyday interactions between the family, the religious community and the individual (p. 4). Key to the expansion of policing in maintaining peace beyond the state is the idea that domains of family and kinship also possess the ability to produce and police the sociomoral order (p. 8). Policing practices evidently bind the state and the family together.

Farhana Ibrahim has not only methodologically looked into governmental archives and newspapers as sources but also explored more personal accounts of her field subjects as
recorded in visitors’ books, photographs, letters and even personal diaries. These personal details bring more clarity to the insider’s perspective across time. From 2002–2017, Farhana Ibrahim conducted extensive and expansive ethnographic fieldwork primarily in Hindi and Kutchi. Not only did she develop close ties with the borderland residents, but also networks with NGOs shaped her fieldwork over this period. During the course of her ethnographic fieldwork, she was subjected to constant suspicion by her respondents as well as by the policing arms of the state. Thus, she also notes how her position as an anthropologist was questioned in the sociality and forms of policing practiced by the state and the family as distinct axes of policing.

The book is divided crisply into two sections—the first part (chapters 1 and 2) deals with the landscapes of policing on the border between Kutch and Sindh and the second part (chapters 3 to 5) explores newer contours of policing that are forged outside of the conventionally understood practices of policing.

Chapter 1 traces the history of policing and border management in Kutch. Within the institutional apparatus of the state, there are varied ways of looking at the practice of border management. While one view on border management considers cross-border kinship as a deterrent to violence, the other view argues for the stringent protection of national security which is not entirely possible for the local residents to attain. Emphasizing the latter, professionalization and upgradation of borderland infrastructure was considered of the utmost priority during 1947 to 1949 (p. 39). The chapter further carves out the contours of policing as the author explores the life of Gulbeg, a border resident and an informer, who shared an affective relationship with the policing arms of the state, the military—a relationship that was essentially based on a common ethos of masculinity, friendship and camaraderie. Farhana Ibrahim details how the conventional policing of the civil-military terrain was, in practice, negotiated by Gulbeg and shows how important delegates and officers were dependent on him for information rather than the other way round, thereby formulating the concept of “adjacent sovereignty” that suggests that forms of policing that are elaborated through state institutions, in fact, derive much of their force through forms of local, even familial, sovereignty that operate in this borderland” (p. 42). While Gulbeg was not unaware that the state was keeping an eye on him, he made sure to watch out for the state as well “as he meticulously documented every discussion and visit to him by tourists, police and security officers, and other officials” (p. 43). Chapter 2 looks into policing as a form of labor performed under conditions of great physical and infrastructural duress (p. 62) and traces the history of shared wartime labor as a foundation for a particular kind of civil-military intimacy (p. 63). Further, it delineates the ethnographic nuance of the “militarywala” (military man) as the omnipresence of the military in everyday life on this national border as one notices routine drills of the IAF in Bhuj or the piercing sound of the aircraft during the day (p. 66). Sent to practically “man” the border, the image of the military man is often used to promote him as a superhero on posters along with militant-nationalist slogans glorifying military masculinity and essentially projecting policing as masculine work. The labor of the women indulging in military work during 1971 was memorialized and dedicated to the “viranganas” (brave women) or the valiant Patidar women who had come together to repair a bombed-up airstrip. However, there is a considerable objection by these women regarding the political appropriation of “virangana” and transforming them into a symbol of Hindu nationalist pride (p. 73). They not only rejected this misappropriation but wanted their everyday labor to be recognized and not just during
an extraordinary event like war (p. 75). Women’s participation in wartime services has been strenuous but has opened up newer arenas of civil-military relations between the military and the Patidar women. However, their wartime labor and services have not been duly credited as opposed to the heroic masculine military labor (p. 86).

Chapter 3 focuses on the identity of the “Bengali Muslim wife” as a subject of policing for the border forces. Often, Bengali brides are “bought” from the east by the husband who travels all the way to bring her back but the family remains worried that the state will detect her as an illegal immigrant. As a result, the Bengali Muslim wife is compelled to hide her identity and claim to be from some western state (p. 93). Further, the “Bangalan” (Bengali woman) exhibits certain performative acts that are directly associated with her belonging to the new region (like speaking a non-native language or appearing “shy”) and can help her escape scrutiny. The family very carefully tries to hide the “bangalan” from the public. Her desirability is enhanced due to her Islamic civility which she can disseminate in her new environment. Chapter 4 delves deep into how the “Bangalan” is actually a desirable wife or daughter-in-law within the family. Farhana Ibrahim also looks into match-making practices and close-kin marriages among Muslims. Knowledge of romantic relationships between cousins and “illicit” communication between cousins who were betrothed to other cousins became sources of information that could be deployed to maintain various forms of order within the family. These knowledge trails operated as a means of “lateral surveillance” among cousins (p. 124). Such surveillance also extended to relatively personal choices like plucking eyebrows, being waxed or wearing lipstick which were indicators of “wayward behaviour” (p. 130). The reasons for preferring a Bengali woman as a wife or daughter-in-law are located in the heteronormative lens of viewing her as someone who is accommodating and docile, capable of providing seva (care work) and at the same time attractive because of her pliancy, in spite of being denigrated by the state as an “infiltrator” (p. 125).

Chapter 5 deals with the border crossing narratives of Hindu men who left their homes in Sindh and crossed over to India in 1971, almost two decades after partition. These migrations forged new relationships of kinship as well as nationality. Farhana Ibrahim takes into consideration the narratives of three men who crossed over to India from Sindh at different times and claim that they belong on the other side of the border. The state is ready to welcome them as always-already citizens but the reception within the family is dubious because it is their mother’s side of the family who lives in India and the mother’s kin is not the source of one’s political or social capital in patrivirilocal forms of kinship (p. 139). As a result, they are viewed with considerable suspicion as a “deshdrohi” (traitor) or informers or double agents by their family. The chapter argues through these narratives that the political claims of belonging and social capital are hardly ever congruent, neither for the Bengali Muslim wife nor for these Hindu men. While the Bengali Muslim wife had become a subject of immense suspicion with her identity and political belonging in question, being a stranger has allowed her to gain social capital as the desired wife within a Muslim family (p. 139). On the other hand, the Hindu men who aspired for Indian citizenship and came from Pakistan, gained citizenship status although it never really translated into the social capital that they left behind in Sindh (p. 157). In conclusion, Farhana Ibrahim reiterates her position on policing as a form of social practice, going beyond the police as an institution of the state and identifying newer sites for an anthropology of policing. Further, she argues how “border work” is constitutive of the “various ways in which the circulation of trust
and friendship, deception and detection, suspicion and surveillance become forms of capital that are deployed in the management of the legal and the illegal—in the perpetuation of those forms of sociality that are desirable and the disciplining of those that are not” (p. 164).

From Family to Police Force is an extremely evocative work that creatively brings narratives from the field to the fore. Farhana Ibrahim explores a varied range of themes ranging from policing to kinship and familial ties, all interconnected with each other, thereby primarily producing an enriching ethnographic account of Muslim life on the western India-Pakistan border, but also taking into consideration Hindu narratives of belonging of people crossing over to Kutch from Pakistan. She departs from the conventional way of reducing the Muslim to the other and grants considerable agency to the Muslims who become subjects and agents of policing on this borderland and not simply targets of the state’s policing practices. It is also a significant reminder that policing is not confined to boundaries that are territorial in nature. Her book will serve as an important resource for scholars interested in borderland studies in South Asia and beyond, anthropology of marriage and kinship and anthropology of policing.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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