

Winner

Poulomi Saha (UC Berkeley)

Title

An Empire of Touch: Women's Political Labor and the Fabrication of East Bengal (Columbia University Press, 2019).

Citation

A meticulously researched, carefully argued, and intellectually ambitious study, *An Empire of Touch* proposes an unusual constellation of objects—fabric, text, archive, and art—which illuminate new pathways of literary comparison. With the partition of Bengal in 1905 as its point of departure, the monograph examines the symbolic and material labor of women in order to produce a rearrangement of knowledge about colonial governance and postcolonial polities. Saha's book boldly asks us to reconsider the archives of our understanding of national histories, the very sources and objects through which epistemic narratives are created. The book begins with revisiting the question of "Virgin Suicides," with which Spivak ends her landmark essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" The chapters that follow read Tagore with thinkers such as Gandhi and Rolland; Swami Vivekananda's theological writings against Freud and Nandy; the documentary film-maker Yasemin Kabir through records of colonial and post-partition epistemic violence in Bangladeshi archives, among others. Shifting focus from India to Bangladesh in post-colonial studies, Saha's book provides a complex—and yet immensely accessible—narrative of gendered subaltern experience.