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Pakistan, an abundance of problems and scant knowledge

Kristoffel Lieten

In 1988, Benazir Bhutto published her Daughter of the East, an Autobiography, which she dedicated to her three children and to all the children of Pakistan. In 2006, Pervez Musharraf published In the Line of Fire, A Memoir, written in honour of his ailing mother and for the people of Pakistan. If not their policies, their books at least were dedicated to the entire spectrum of the people of Pakistan, (although their true purpose was an effort to explain themselves to the West). Bhutto’s book was widely-liked since it heralded the dawn of progressive democracy under the leadership of a smart-looking and verbally superb young lady, Musharraf’s book received little attention, possibly because it was written by a man who had been portrayed as an unfriendly and cunning military dictator, accused of being in hand in glove not only with reactionary world powers but even with the Taliban.

Scant scholarship

The actual history of Pakistan does not fully concur with the picture which both these leaders portray in their books and speeches. Unfortunately, however, little scholarship is available to provide us with a more realistic close reading of Pakistan. Or as Stephen Cohen (2006) had warned, the US, in the midst of the war against terror in that region has “only a few true Pakistani experts and knows remarkably little about the country. Much of what has been written is palpably wrong, or at best superficial.”

Scholarship within Pakistan, despite notable exceptions, also leaves much to be desired. One possible explanation for the omission is the undemocratic style of functioning of all governments in Pakistan, the casual administration not less than the military governments led by Yahya Khan, Zia ul Haq and Musharraf.

Universities and research institutes have failed to function properly. Political interference and nepotism have competed in running down any academic quality that the institutions may have had in the distant past, As Azer (1995) has superably documented in the case of history writing. Whatever was left of the academic façade was torn down by politicisation and interecne struggles involving Muslim fundamentalists from the late 1980s onwards. Most Pakistani academicians who have withstood the political pressure and the doings of the academic institutions have done so alone.

Another explanation for the poor academic interest in Pakistan is that the country has been portrayed as a rogue state and is not high on the list of destinations for tourists or researchers. It is commonly perceived as the fount of Islamist terrorism and as a self-inclining reactionary bleakness, in sharp contrast with the attractive picture which, for good reasons, therefore, the country has been taken up for special coverage in this issue of IAS Newsletter. Five articles will cover political development, gender in the legal system, the aftermath of ethnic violence, the failing educational system and the life of Pakistan as migrants abroad.

Coverage

More academic interest in Pakistan would likely contribute to more clarity on many of the issues at stake in a vulnerable nation with many problems and which is in the midst of a political cauldron. Pakistan, on the eastern proximity of Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq, is also just on the western fringe of mainstream Asia. For good reasons, therefore, the country has been taken up for special coverage in this issue of IAS Newsletter. Five articles will cover political development, gender in the legal system, the aftermath of ethnic violence, the failing educational system and the life of Pakistan as migrants abroad.

References


