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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. O. C. as Stephen Cohen (2007) had warned: the US, in the midst of the war against terror in that region has "only a few true Pakistan 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 uncivilized administrations 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 Aza (1959) has superbly documented in the case of history writing, whatever was left of the academic façade was torn down by politicisation and interregnum struggles involving Muslim fundamentalists from the late 1980s onwards. Most Pakistani academicians who have withstood the political and military pressure, have been papered over. The authors who have published the bulk of the work of the past decades are members of the military and the civil services, who have been ideologically reformed. The new ideology has been brought to the forefront of the political and military agenda.

A study of US newspaper reporting on Pakistan (Moeller 2007) illustrates how the American press generally adopted the administration’s monolithic framing of terrorism as a problem, as well as the demonizing of an entire population: in this case Pakistani Muslim men and women.

Haemorrhaged state formation

Pakistan was a sick state to start with. At independence in 1947, all institutions had to be created. "Pakistan was not a successor state. It was a secundo state. India was the successor state" (Feroz Ahmed, 1998). It did not have an ingrained nationality and the ideology which was chosen to cement that unity - Islam - was, in practice, much weaker than the forces of regional and linguistic disunity (Khan 1986, Rahman, 1997, Talbot 1999, Jaffrelot 2004, Cohen 2004).

The unity of Pakistan, and the functioning of its state institutions, depended on two institutional forces: bureaucracy and military, and leaning on the powerful landlord class. Traders and entrepreneurs, often having migrated from British India, had to play second fiddle and share benefits with the bureaucracy. Economic power in Pakistan has remained very skewed. The nexus between the major landholding families, traders and entrepreneurs with the administration has kept the economy small and structures under semi-feudal strains (White 1974, Omar 1990, Qadir 2006, Hasan 2007).

Issue-focused studies

Scholarship in Pakistan has occasionally focused on ethno- graphy, for example Grima (2004) on north-western Pakistan, Verkaaik (2004) on the Muhajirs, and Lindholm (1995) on the Swat Patans. But recent studies have tended to focus on the one and only issue with a global concern: Muslim extremism and terrorism. Earlier, the reconstitution of the national ethos and the focus. The imposition of martial law in 1977 and the hanging of Zulfiqar Bhutto by Zia ul Haq, for more than one reason was a "redefinition of a country", as Hassan Abbas

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the venal abandon of Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, the seed of religious fanaticism sown more than two decades earlier had come to confront him as fully grown trees per- versely balanced by the empty coffers of the state" (Abbas 2007). That, in a nutshell, is the crisis which Pakistan is still confronted with in the post-Musharraf era.

Coverage

More academic interest in Pakistan would likely contribute to more clarity on many of the issues at stake in a vulner- able 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


