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Pakistan, an abundance of problems and scant knowledge

Kristoffel Lieten

I n 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; it confirmed that she had faded into 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 a clique not only with reactionary world powers but even with the Taliban.

Scant scholarship

The actual history of Pakistan does not fully concure 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. On 23 August 1947, the British foreign secretary, Sir Anthony Eden, announced the creation of Pakistan, which was to be a successor state to British India, to have 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 administrative inheritance kept the economy a struc

Issue-focused studies

Scholarship in Pakistan has occasionally focused on eth

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rapher’s Notes from North Western Pakistan. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

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Scant scholarship

Universities and research institutes have failed to function properly. Political interference and nepotism have com
ped in running down any academic quality that the insti
tutions may have had in the distant past, as Arif (1999) has superbly documented in the case of history writing. Whatever was left of the academic façade was torn down by politicisation and interec
struggles involving Mus
lim fundamentalists from the late 1980s onwards. Most Pakistani academicians who have withstood the political tur
bules and internecine struggles involving Mus
lim extremism and terrorism.

Earlier, the reconstitution of the national ethos had the focus. The imposition of martial law in 1977 and the hang
ing of Zulfikar Bhutto by Zia ul Haq, for more than one reason was a “redefinition of a country”, as Hassan Abbas argues. The state, particularly its army and secret service, were ideologically reformed. The new ideology broke with secularism and imposed one specific reading of Islam, the puritanical Wahhabism as practiced in Saudi Arabia. The new religious ideology was in contradiction with the Sufist tradition and disunited the country more than ever before: “the greatest tension of all was between the state’s legactic imposition of Islam and the humanist traditions of Sufism” (Talbot 1999; Khan 1985; Schofield 2003; see also Lau 2006 and Lau and Iram Ali in this issue). This new Pakistan, as a frontline state, played a vital role in the struggle against Soviet communism. It heralded a period of instability which lasted until Musharraf came to power in October 1999 and was confronted with a revolu
tion of the state: “through the active fostering by Zia ul Haq, the funding of Saudi Arabia, espousal by the US, and

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 2000). 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.

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