

Comment

History and Historiography of South Asia: A Perspective from Pakistan *

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We all know that those people who are not alive to what history tells, are likely to repeat it. It is not that the historians are always right. Historians are also fallible, but it is the collective wisdom that emerges from the multiple shades of history that can guide a people towards better options and destinies. It is this quality of history that compelled certain writers to conclude that the politicians should at some point of time in their career take courses on history. Sir Ernest Barker, for example, had suggested that members of parliament, 'would be all the better if they took refresher courses in history at one of the residential universities'.¹ One would not like to go to that extent here but one can take the liberty of suggesting that are parliamentary decisions should in some way benefit from judgments made in the historical can text. Public policy decisions informed by historical wisdom are likely to respond more adequately to the needs of a society at a given period of time.

South Asia is not only home to almost one-fifth of the world population, it also commands attention of the world for being the cradle of some of the oldest civilizations. The diversity of South Asia, its cultural mosaic, and the multifaceted historical experiences of its people, provide a great assortment to build historical narratives which can depict the individuality of each aspect as well as shed light on the commonalities and common experiences of its people. Our historians have in the past significantly made use of the opportunities provided by this wide panorama and rich landscape. However, what could have

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¹ Harold Wheeler, *This Thing Called History* (London: Macdonald & Co. publishers Ltd., n.d), p.vii.

actually been done was more than what has been done. One needs to look why the optimum results could not be obtained despite the availability of such a big reservoir of resources.

Zooming in from South Asia to Pakistan, one can talk a lot, for one is more used to what one is surrounded with. The last sixty seven years of Pakistan's history show an admixture of both successes and failures in the domain of history-writing and production of good history. Perhaps in the first two or three decades, we had a relatively more active and dynamic contingent of historians who carried the professional traditions of the pre-partition India and wrote history more systematically, though, mostly, with the more traditional ideological positions. In the later decades, the universities gradually got weakened with respect to the production of original research due to a number of reasons. Not only the universities progressively became the extension of colleges, while the colleges were becoming the extension of the schools, but with the passage of time the history departments also started shrinking. In 2001, only 12 public sector universities of the country had departments of history with a total of 75 teachers of history. Of these 75, only 22 had the PhD degree. Moreover, of these 75, only 13 had a degree from abroad and only 4 obtained PhD degree from a foreign university. According to the data collected by the Council of Social Sciences, Islamabad, six public sector universities of Pakistan (i.e. the Universities of Karachi, Sindh, Punjab, Peshawar, Islamabad, and Multan), had produced 43 PhDs and 83 M.Phils during the period from 1947 to 2001.² This was a dismal picture which certainly had its reasons. Fortunately, things have relatively improved since then.

In order to capture the causative factors, the most important has been the overall priorities of the successive governments. In the first place, education, and for that matter, the entire social sector was never the first priority of policy makers. Education with its low priority was accredited insignificant budget allocations with the result that it never attained the importance that is due to it. Then, within the education sector, social sciences were paid less attention as compared to the natural sciences and technical and vocational subjects. It may not be surprising why other fields of social sciences present the similar record as had been that of the discipline of history. Not only the little premium put on social

² See: Annex 1: 'The Quantitative Data on Development of the Discipline of History in Pakistan', Mubarak Ali, 'Development of the Discipline of History in Pakistan', in Inayatullah, Rubina Saigol and Pervez Tahir (eds.) *Social Sciences in Pakistan: A Profile* (Islamabad: Council of Social Sciences [COSS], 2005), pp.250-51.

sciences caused deterioration, but overall policies of the governments with respect to the fundamental right of expression also took its toll. Of the 67 years of its history, Pakistan has lived under military rules for about 32 years. The military rulers' policies had their impact even on the periods when the civilian regimes were in office. The authoritarian and particularly the military regimes do not get along with the concept of diversity. A military mind is cultivated in the ethos which puts greatest premium to the oneness of two very different concepts i.e. the concepts of 'unity' and 'uniformity'. For a military mind it is quite perfect to assume the two to be the same but what is a virtue to it, is not at all a virtue in the civilian life. A civilian life flourishes in diversity and for it, diversity is an asset. Here, unity is not imposed through uniformity but evolves from the diverse traits. These civilian values also get expression in the creative works of the society. Historians subscribe to them.

The nature of the interface of a historian and the state, therefore, is crucially important for the work done by him. Authoritarian states do not allow diversity of opinion, or in the case of historiography, the multiple histories. Here, there is only one history and that is based on official historiography. And if this historiography is enforced by the sheer power of the state it leaves no space for other historians to exercise their right of expression and produce objective and good histories. Unfortunately, our country has been victim of this. It is only gradually that things are moving towards betterment. Even if in the absence of a culture of objective research, certain historians of Pakistan succeeded in producing better works, this goes to their credit. It also explains why a number of our historians excelled and attracted attention through their works while being associated with the western universities.

This overall situation impacted almost all areas of history writing. In the early 1960s, the American Harvard Group of advisors came to advise us that history should be replaced by social studies in our schools. Adhering to this, we did away with our tradition of history teaching without pondering on the fact that we had had a much older history than the Americans. Moreover, they could perhaps overlook their past woven around the aborigines; but our Indus Valley Civilization was quite dear to us. It carried multitude of information and gave us insight into the creative skills of the people more than three thousand years back.

The next attack came in the 1980s. Now a selective and largely distorted history was made part of Pakistan Studies, a subject that was introduced as a compulsory undertaking for every student. This overshadowed the prospects of Pakistan Studies itself, which could have been a very enlightening and liberating subject, had it focused on the real

life issues of Pakistan, the achievements of Pakistani people and their struggle for survival.³

While history was being neglected as a discipline, another dimension of it fast went into oblivion. The progressive neglect of the teaching of Persian and its almost withering away from the universities foreclosed further research on the medieval period. This was appended with the bifurcation of history departments in general history and Islamic history, with the former gradually fading out at least from the colleges. The picture in the city of Karachi, where I come from, may be quite illustrative of this fact. The mega-polis of Karachi, with about 15 million people, has more than 160 public sector colleges, in which not more than only four have history departments, and in these none has more than one teacher.

Against this background, one sees some signs of hope. In the last few years, interest in history, at least at the level of the university faculty, has made itself noted. In the last few years a number of conferences have been held in which the young faculty members have interacted with foreign historians. Moreover, Higher Education Commission has also facilitated the research work in numerous ways. Faculty members are sent abroad to participate in conferences. Quite a few get foreign scholarships to pursue higher education. Research journals have been activated and incentives are being given to those who achieve significant targets. Though, what has been done is not all that could be done, and also not all resources have been put to the optimum use; there has also been reports of loopholes and misuse of the opportunities, yet the overall impact has been something which cannot be ignored easily. So, one can hope that with the passage of time, and good inputs both financial and administrative, and also with increasing commitment on the part of the teachers and researchers, things would move in the right direction.

Reverting to the South Asian context, the discipline of history can improve in the respective countries through interaction between the universities and the faculty. Regular conferences and visits of historians from one country to another, their making use of the archives and libraries of other countries, joint moots facilitated with modern technology like skype, can further the cause of history-writing in South Asia. Then, the South Asian historians can consider joint projects. They can think about the issues of common interest in the resolution of which collective intellectual input may be of some significance. The exchange visits of students of history departments can further expand the horizon

³ See for a detailed discussion of this point, Syed Jaffar Ahmed, 'Pakistan Studies: A Subject of the State and the State of the Subject', in *ibid.*, pp.305-41.

of the younger generation and would help create better understanding about each other, gradually overcoming the contradiction of the 'us' and 'them', or 'we' and 'they', that has distorted our histories to large extent. Equally important is the exchange of research journals, books, and other research material between the countries of South Asia. For this, collective voices should be raised and the governments should be asked to come forward and enable a more research-friendly environment to take roots.

Finally, one may refer to the fundamental question as to for whom we are writing history. Is it for the consumption of the governments, do we labour to simply enrich our policy makers or do we have some responsibility towards our people at large too. After centuries of hard labour, historians have now begun to learn that the ordinary people not only constitute the major subject matter of history but they are also the major recipients of it. Therefore, we see growing interest in the people's history. The trend has made inroads in South Asia also. People's history is being written in India, in Bangladesh and also in Pakistan. We in Pakistan may not have had our Howard Zinns, or Chris Harman, so far; our subalterns have also not yet come forward, yet interest in people's history has made itself known through the acceptance and popularity of the works of people like Mubarak Ali.⁴

Historians always work on well-defined and microscopic themes, yet they do so with a long-term vision. South Asia needs to benefit from the vision of historians whose research of the past can help in sorting out numerous contemporary issues. In an environment of politically cultivated animosity, they can bring to the limelight the past traits of cohabitation. In the growing madness of religious extremism, they can demonstrate the strong tradition of *Sulh-e Kul* as exhibited in our medieval past. In a political and economic milieu in which the South Asian countries' mutual trade account for not more than 2 per cent of their total trade, our historians can highlight through historical data the significance of the proximity of different lands, and the similarity of their physical features, and their benefit for all. In making South Asia a land of peace everyone belonging to any profession has some responsibility. Historians' responsibility is not less than that of anyone else.

⁴ For Mubarak Ali's contribution to the discipline of history and his efforts in popularizing history among the common people, see Syed Jaffar Ahmed, 'Mubarak Ali and his Work', in Syed Jaffar Ahmed (ed.), *Challenges of History Writing in South Asia* (Special Volume in Honour of Dr. Mubarak Ali) (Karachi: Pakistan Study Centre, University of Karachi & Pakistan Labour Trust, Karachi, 2013), pp.21-49.