

Notes

Professor Syed Razi Wasti (1929-1999): A Memoir

*Sharif al Mujahid**

In the death of Prof. Syed Razi Wasti, Pakistan had lost a most productive historian of the modern period. Dr Wasti died in Lahore on 22 November 1999, after a brief illness.

Wasti has had an excellent academic, teaching and publication record. He studied at the Punjab and London universities, specializing in mediaeval and modern history, and earning B. A. (Honours) and a doctorate from London. His teaching career, spanning some thirty-eight years, chiefly encompassed Government College, Lahore, and Columbia University, New York. He was the second Quaid-i-Azam Distinguished Professor at the Southern Asian Institute, Columbia University, for five years (1983-88), and Visiting Professor at its Summer School during 1991-99. As Visiting Asian Professor, he also lectured in several colleges and universities in the U. S. during 1969-70. After retirement in 1989 he became Visiting/Adjutant Professor at Government College, and was elevated as Professor Emeritus in 1999, shortly before his death.

Wasti's stint as an administrator was equally distinguished. He was Head, Department of History, and, later, Dean of Arts at the Government College for some sixteen years; Chairman, Board of Intermediate and Secondary Education, Gujranwala, for one year; and Director of Public Instruction (Colleges), Punjab, for sometime in 1989.

Wasti's penchant for research was widely recognized, both in Pakistan and abroad. While still in his middle thirties, he was appointed Director, Historical Research Institute, Punjab University, in 1965, soon after his return from England; this post he held for some four years. Wasti was also much in demand as subject specialist at various institutions of higher learning and at various research and training institutes. He was a fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society, London (1960-70); and of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, U. K. (1962-70); he served on the Board of Governors and Executive Committee of several academic

* HEC Distinguished National Professor and Founder-Director, Quaid-i-Azam Academy, Karachi (1976-89).

and research bodies; he also served on the editorial boards of several journals. He attended a large number of conferences/seminars in places as far afield as Colombo, Istanbul, Paris, Lund, Dublin, New York, Chicago and San Francisco. He had authored five books and fifteen research papers, edited and co-edited three other works, besides numerous journal articles. He had also contributed to *The Encyclopaedia of Asian History*.

Wasti came to prominence when his first work, *Lord Minto and the Indian Nationalist Movement* (1964), was published by a reputed publisher – the Clarendon Press, Oxford. Based on his doctoral research at the University of London, it carried a Foreword by Earl Attlee. Not only this but, also, because of far more weighty reasons, his scholarly work was an instant success. It was acclaimed as a significant contribution to modern Indian historiography, and has since been indispensable read for students of the period.

All told, his major contribution lay in providing a new perspective to Lord Minto's viceroyalty (1905-10). It outshone a contemporary work on the period by an Indian scholar – M. N. Das's *India Under Morley and Minto* (1964). 'His [Wasti's] careful examination', to quote Attlee, 'confirmed that the senior partner in the Morley-Minto reforms was Minto not Morley, the Conservative Viceroy not the liberal Minister'. This first analytical study of Lord Minto's attitude towards Indian nationalism broke new ground. It showed how he was the first Governor-General to consider the Indian National Congress as 'an important factor' in India's political life, thus reversing the erstwhile government policy to ignore the Congress, in part or altogether. It argued how Minto's recognition of the Muslim demand for separate representation (1906) was by no means a departure from the government's studied policy over the years, which had laid down in unequivocal terms that the only suitable system of representation in India was the representation of various interests. The recognition and the subsequent incorporation of the Muslim demand in the Reforms of 1909 would prove extremely consequential some four decades later. Wasti also delineated how, while sympathizing with the genuine aspirations of the educated Indians for reforms, Minto took stringent measures to counter the terrorist movement.

In particular, Wasti's research helped to change the historiography in respect of the evolution of the Muslim demand for separate electorates. Hitherto, the initiation of the demand and the idea of a Muslim deputation waiting on the Viceroy to present that demand were attributed to W.A. J. Archbold, Principal of the Aligarh College. Archbold, it was claimed, took the initiative under official inspiration.

He was also generally credited with having penned the address to the Viceroy. Ashok Mehta and Achyut Patwardan, two well-known young Congress activists, adumbrated the above thesis in some detail in *The Communal Triangle in India* (1942) (pp.62-63), their premise being Archbold's letter dated 10 August 1906, wherein he informs Nawab Mohsinul Mulk on the strength of the Private Secretary to the Viceroy's assurance that he was 'agreeable to receive the Muslim deputation' (p.62). The authors had taken the letter, almost verbatim, from Tufail Ahmad Mangalori who had published its gist (*kulasa*) earlier in his *Mussalmanon ka Roshan Mustaqil* (1938). Supremely confident of their source and the interpretation they had ingeniously foisted on Archbold's letter, the duo went to the extent of asserting that 'It is now well known that Lord Minto was the real author of the scheme of Separate Electorates' (p.66).

Not only in the 1940s, but also from the very beginning, this had been the Congress (or Hindu) version of the Muslim demand for separate representation. And it had gained credibility to a point that even Mawlana Mohamed Ali was induced to describe the Simla Deputation as a 'command performance', in his presidential address at the Coconada (1923) Congress. Indeed, it became the standard version, finding its way into almost all publications till the early 1960s – for instance, in C. Y. Chintamani, *Indian Politics Since the Mutiny* (1940); B. M. Chaudhri, *Muslim Politics* (1946); G. N. Singh, *Landmarks in Indian Constitutional and National Development* (1950); Lal Bahadur, *The Muslim League* (1954); Ram Gopal, *Indian Muslims* (1959); and *Cambridge History of India* (1958 vol.).

What made the Mehta-Patwardan thesis click, though, was the timing of its publication. It provided grist to the Congress propaganda mills, which were then (the early 1940s) actively engaged in branding Jinnah as an 'agent' of imperialism, and the burgeoning Pakistan movement as 'officially' inspired. Nothing could be more damning than this piece of 'solid evidence' (viz., Archbold's letter) to argue conclusively that the separate electorates demand and the formation of the Muslim League were *ab initio* an imperialist card – to boost and institutionalize the government's traditional *divide et impa* policy, and to have themselves catapulted from that launching pad to the self-serving conclusion that Jinnah and the Muslim League, in putting forth the Pakistan demand, were only repeating the past, to have that policy further crystallized in the explosive situation of the 1940s. In immediate terms, the thesis paid huge dividends, while on a long term basis it hurt the Muslim cause a good deal, stigmatized the Muslims and the Muslim League savagely, and put them on the defensive all the while.

And it is to Wasti's eternal credit that his research finally laid that canard to the counter. He traced, and published for the first time, Muhsinul Mulk's letter of 04 August 1906, from Bombay, to which Archbold's letter of 10 August (on which the Mehta-Patwardan thesis was based) was the response. Thus, Wasti conclusively proved that both the separate-electorates demand and the idea of Muslim deputation originated from the Muslims themselves, and not from official quarters, as had been routinely propagated by the Congress's publicist's *ad nauseum* for some fifty-five years. Wasti also showed that the memorial was not penned by Archbold, but that a draft was prepared by Nawab Imadul Mulk, and was discussed and finalized at a meeting at Lucknow on 16 September 1906. (The draft Memorial, which is available in the All India Muslim League papers at the University of Karachi [Archives of Freedom Movement] is included in Sharif al Mujahid's *Muslim League Documents, 1900-1947*, vol. I: 1900-1908 [Karachi, 1990], pp. 90-95.) The Memorial itself was presented to Lord Minto at Simla on 01 October 1906. The Deputation, led by the Aga Khan, comprised 35 prominent Muslim leaders from various provinces; six other leaders had also intended to, but could not, join it for some reason or another (see the two lists in *ibid.*, pp. 101-02, 136).

To quote *The Times Literary Supplement* (18 June 1964, p. 522), Wasti represented 'The complete, once and for all, demolition of the Fantasy, still firmly cherished in India today that the Muslim deputation which approached Minto on 1 October 1906, and paved the way for separate electorates, was stage-managed by Britain'. In other words, Wasti had put the Muslim demand in perspective. This, in sum, was Wasti's singular contribution to modern Indian historiography, and to Muslim India's in particular.

Wasti had reached 'the plateau' quite early in his career, but, for various reasons, he failed to capitalize on his early success. His Historical Research Institute years were, in a sense, barren because he could not see his project of getting a collaborative volume on the freedom movement (1858-1947) through. His Government College job, though a prestigious one in terms of Lahore's, indeed Punjab's, educational landscape, was still a constricting one in terms of academic attainments and research. Meantime, in 1975, his penchant for research came to be fatally smothered by the avalanche of sweeping criticism mounted by Z. A. Suleri, a former editor and a leading, but explosive, columnist, in the *Nawa-i-Waqt* (Lahore), who considered himself the sole custodian of Jinnah's legacy and heritage. Suleri was often pugnacious in his comments, and would also devastatingly hurl the anti-Jinnah stuff missive at me six years later. This he did in a series of

articles in *The Pakistan Times*, of which he was then the editor, on the publication of *Quaid-i-Azam Jinnah: Studies in Interpretation* (1981). Meem Sheen (Muhammad Shafi) in the *Nawa-i-Waqt* and a famous columnist in the *Jang* also called for banning the work. Of course, for the moment I was down, with a nervous breakdown and a high-profile official inquiry instituted; but somehow, ere long, I took it in stride and survived this dastardly stab. Syed Sharifuddin Pirzada, who, as Chairman of the Committee on Quaid-i-Azam's Biography, did a Foreword to the work, did a good deal to help me out. (For details, see Akbar S. Ahmed, *Jinnah, Pakistan and Islamic identity: The Search for Saladin* [1997], p. 28; and Sharif al Mujahid, *In Quest of Jinnah* [2007], p. ix). Gen. Ziaul Haq, obviously, couldn't afford to ban it without, of course, slapping his Attorney General and Law Minister.

To return to Wasti. He had circulated amongst the CSS probationers a discussion paper containing certain passages included in *Mohammad Ali Jinnah: Maker of Modern Pakistan* (1970), edited by Sheila McDonough, my class fellow at the Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University, in the early 1950s. Along with some quotes from admirers and neutral observers, the paper had also included some passages from critics such as Nehru, Louis Fischer and Gankovsky. Suleri seized upon the latter category of passages to mount a virulent, if not malicious, attack on Wasti, charging that he was trying to indoctrinate the young (still immature?) minds with anti-Jinnah and anti-Pakistan stuff. Of course, as in my case later, none rose to Wasti's defence. Not even the professional press freedom-wallas who frequently adorn our newspapers with strident calls for freedom of expression because – if only because – while they are simply devoid of the breadth of vision to consider 'freedom of research' as a sibling to freedom of expression, they, if only because of their obsessive, inward-looking trade unionism, religiously follow the Orwellian dictum that 'all animals are equal but some animals are more equal'. On his part, Wasti was simply shattered. He also remained under the cloud for a long while, and was denied his well-deserved promotion for six long years.

Meantime, I had seen to it that he continued to serve as member on both the Executive Committee and the Board of Governors of the Quaid-i-Azam Academy, of which I was Founder-Director (1976-89). And I used my position to send in a petition to the Governor of the Punjab in 1981, pleading that Wasti be cleared of the alleged 'misdemeanour' he had been wrongly charged with, on the basis of Suleri's diatribes, and arguing that were Wasti guilty of damning and demonizing Jinnah, he wouldn't have been retained as a member on the high-profile Academy's Executive Committee and Board of Governors.

That argument finally clinched: the ‘adverse’ remarks in his ACR were expunged, and Wasti finally cleared for promotion, early in 1982.

This Suleri episode had, nevertheless, jolted Wasti beyond repair – and that to a point that henceforth he became much too cautious and circumspect in what he said and what he wrote. Thus he was precluded from producing anything first rate, although he wrote till the end. *At Quaid’s Service* (1996), a slim biography of ‘an outstanding banker-cum industrialist’, Mohammad Rafi Butt (d. 1948), was Wasti’s last flicker. Butt, ‘a staunch supporter of the Pakistan movement’ and an associate of Jinnah, had died in an air crash in the prime of his illustrious career, while 39. Here Wasti tried his hand at descriptive writing, and quite successfully. It’s a pity that Imtiaz Rafi Butt, Chairman of the Jinnah Rafi Foundation, hasn’t found it opportune as yet to release the work, though already printed and published.

It’s also a pity that Wasti failed to take the Suleri missive in stride. From that point on, retention of the Government College job became his chief concern. In the circumstances, it doesn’t seem inexplicable. But, then, the College itself was too constricted a venue for any extensive and serious interaction, and for further actualizing his potential. His decision not to join the Punjab University in the middle 1960s would deny him opportunities that an institution of higher learning offers. Thus the Punjab University did not feel obliged to nominate him for the Quaid-i-Azam Distinguished Professor slot at the Columbia University, although he was among the leading historians in the country at the time. And but for his nomination by the Quaid-i-Azam Academy at my instance, he wouldn’t have been even considered for the post.

It’s, however, to Wasti’s lasting credit that till the end he continued to be a conscientious and dedicated teacher. At Columbia, he would be at his desk, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., five days a week, and available to students all the time. He would also attend and participate in the academic activities of kindred institutes and departments. That’s what had induced Columbia to invite him for the summer school all through the 1990s. He was also popular with the students, though not with his colleagues in the same measure. In a sense, his early success was a mixed blessing. Besides making him academically a bit complacent, it caused a good deal of envy, even jealousy. A good man of his colleagues and contemporaries had often wondered how I could establish such a high measure of rapport with him. I could because though researching and working on the same period, we didn’t consider ourselves as rivals, and instead discussed our respective works and welcomed suggestions from each other. I have reviewed most of his works, and I have been critical as I have always been since I started reviewing for *Dawn* since

the late 1950s, but he found in me a sympathetic reviewer. (*Inter alia*, it may be mentioned that both Dr. Z. H. Zaidi and Dr. Akbar S. Ahmed, after they took some time to swallow the bitter pill I had presented, did acknowledge that mine was the best review on their respective works – *Jinnah Papers* and *Pakistan Society* [1988]).

The years (1956-62) Wasti had spent in England during the formative period of his life, however, left their impact till the fag end. The greatest gift of that stint, besides his doctorate, was his getting married to Helen, a librarian by profession and a woman of great charm. Predictably, she adjusted herself remarkably to the not too comfortable a life as a college professor's wife in Lahore, for some two decades when the pay and perks were so uninviting and unenviable. She stood by him through thick and thin, worked full time as librarian in the American School throughout her married life, contributed to the frugal family budget, lived in the Government College residential quarters, and raised two sons, now both married and settled in the U.S. She was devoted to Wasti all the time, and cheerful. To both Hasan-Askari Rizvi and myself, she had expressed her gratitude to the Government College authorities for the assistance extended to her in winding up Wasti's affairs after his death. Having accomplished that chore, Helen shifted herself to the U.S., for obvious reasons.

Wasti was well read, suave, polished, and urbane; he had also a knack for making friends; he showed his mettle at parties and at reparteeing. But he was also averse to making adjustments. For some thirty years till his death, whenever I visited Lahore Wasti was my first port of call. I would be greeted by a grin, so characteristic of him, followed by engaging conversation for hours on end. His death was mourned by a wide circle of friends across three continents, but, for me, it was shattering. To Elliot, everyone dies a little each day he passes, but that bleak November day I had died a good deal more.