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The Neglected Hindu Period of Pakistani History

by Dileep Karanth

Abstract:

The Islamic Republic of Pakistan is the second largest Muslim country by population (next to Indonesia), but for the larger part of its history it has been inhabited by Hindus and Buddhists. When India was partitioned in 1947, into a residual India (with a Hindu majority) and Pakistan (with a Muslim majority), the fate of the minorities in the two countries took very different turns. India turned into a secular democracy, with a Muslim population that has increased in percentage. The population of Hindus in Pakistan, however, declined precipitously, and has now reached demographically insignificant proportions.

With the physical disappearance of the Hindus in Pakistan, the memory of their residence as autochthons throughout the length and breadth of Pakistan has also begun to fade. This process has been consciously accentuated by the educational policies of the establishment, and even the work of otherwise responsible historians. Unlike the situation in neighbouring India, the voices of the minorities are not heard clearly, even in the rare cases when they are not actively suppressed. This paper is a study of the difficulties that bedevil the historiography of the Hindu period of Pakistani history.

About the Author:

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The states of India and Pakistan emerged out of British India in August 1947. At the time of its birth Pakistan was the world's largest Muslim nation. However, it still was the homeland of a sizeable Hindu minority. India, the world's second most populous country, was a Hindu-majority land, but which housed an enormous Muslim minority.

The two states embraced different political ideologies right from the outset. The immediate reason for this was the policies adopted by the two political parties that were at the forefront of Indian politics in the years that led to the independence and the Partition. Pakistan had been carved out of India explicitly as a Muslim homeland, in acquiescence to the demands raised by the Muslim League. On the Indian side of the divide, the Congress stuck to its policy of secularism and commitment to religious plurality. Despite this crucial difference, minorities on both sides of the new international border suffered immensely during the tortuous process of the determination of this border, and its

actual creation.

Pakistan's former President, General Musharraf sums up his view of the situation in his personal memoir, *In the Line of Fire*ⁱ:

Thousands of Muslim families left their homes and hearths in India that August, taking only the barest of necessities with them. Train after train transported them into the unknown. Many did not make it – they were tortured, raped, and killed along the way by vengeful Sikhs and Hindus. Many Hindus and Sikhs heading in the opposite direction, leaving Pakistan for India, were butchered in turn by Muslims. Many a train left India swarming with passengers only to arrive in Pakistan carrying nothing but the deafening silence of death. All those who made this journey and lived have a tale to tell.

However, the situations on the two sides of the newly-demarcated border were not exactly symmetrical, as an American observer notes:

On the whole, India quickly recognized that this terrifying situation was equally damaging to both sides. Its public leaders and private citizens soon saw the outburst in human terms, and expressed penitence on "... the blackest chapter in the history of India," Pakistan, on the other hand, seems not to have had the freedom from prejudice and the moral sensitivity and courage to acknowledge its roughly equal guilt.ⁱⁱ

In this paper we will not attempt a quantitative analysis of the fate of the minorities in India and Pakistan. This is because the process of collecting hard facts and statistics is hampered by the fact that, at least in Pakistan, the very disappearance of the minorities has led to an absence of spokesmen speaking on behalf of the vanishing minorities. The past existence of the minorities is attested to by mute witnesses, such as epigraphical and monumental remains, and ancient practices that survive in the cultural life of the people today.

In the absence of Hindus writing about Hinduism in Pakistan, the official histories of Pakistan have no checks or balances. The past is interpreted by people who may not necessarily have the expertise to comment about the fields they study. While Pakistani Islamic scholars are able to correspond with scholars on the Indian side, and Pakistani leftist or communist scholars have their Indian counterparts, there is no tradition of Hindu scholarship in Pakistan for the simple reason that the Hindu community itself has reached demographically insignificant proportions.

Jameel Jalibi,ⁱⁱⁱ Vice-Chancellor of Karachi University, talks about a "duality of Pakistan's history", and the resultant "psychological contradiction":

The nature of Pakistan's history is an interesting subject for study. On the one hand, it is a history based on geography, according to which it includes the five-thousand years old civilization of Moenjodaro and the Buddhist remains at Harappa, Taxila and Gandhara. On the other hand, it has a history whose traditions span the thousand years of Muslim rule and culture in India and also the two-hundred years of British rule.^{iv}

Thus he acknowledges the pre-Islamic past as being only "geographical", and its history as being coeval only with the millennium of Muslim rule. (The reader will also notice that Jalibi's story begins with the five-thousand year-old civilization at Mohenjo-daro, and then it is fast-forwarded to the Buddhist period without a discussion of the intervening Hindu period. Also, the entire legacy of the thousand years of Muslim rule in the *whole* of India is claimed for Pakistan, but, as will show later, there is a very substantial Hindu contribution to this legacy which is overlooked or devalued.)

In an attempt to dismiss the Hindu cultural past of Pakistan, while still accounting for the

obviously Indic past of Pakistan, an attempt has been made to argue that the immediate pre-Islamic past of Pakistan was mostly Buddhist. This claim can partly be bolstered by an emphasis on the Gandhara culture that flourished in what is now North-West Pakistan in the early centuries of the common era. However, already by the time of the early Islamic invasions in the northwest, the region had relapsed into Hinduism, and invading Muslim armies (such as those of Mahmud of Ghazni) found themselves ranged not against Buddhist kingdoms (as in Central Asia) but the Hindu Shahiya kings. Only in the far south, in Sindh, can the claim be made with a little more credibility. The earliest Persian source on the history of Sindh, the *Chachnama*, makes references to a Buddhist temple, and to monks, who might be Buddhists. One of the doyens of the Pakistani school of historians, S.M. Ikram, uses these references to argue that the Buddhists offered their allegiance to the invading Arabs, as a way of escaping oppression on the part of the Hindus.^v

It has been demonstrated by the present author that the conclusions of the Pakistani historians is untenable. The few natives who are depicted in the *Chachnama* as negotiating with the invading Arabs, do so in the hope of safeguarding their property. They make no mention of the alleged oppression of the Buddhists by the Hindus. The *Chachnama* indiscriminately uses the word *barahman* to refer to anybody from the priesthood of the Sindhis, and does not really distinguish between Hindu and Buddhist. It refers to the destruction of temples housing idols of a deity riding a horse, which rules out the possibility of a reference to the Buddha. In addition to this attestation to the destruction of Hindu places of worship, the *Chachnama* claims that the Arabs also destroyed a Buddhist temple.^{vi}

It is not surprising that the establishment historians choose to cast India, Hinduism and Hindu society as “The Other”, and are reluctant to acknowledge Hindu cultural contributions to Pakistani culture. But such views are equally current among members of the so-called “left” such as Faiz Ahmad Faiz, the well-known Urdu and Punjabi poet. Faiz follows an idiosyncratic chronology of his own devising. He writes about the decline of the civilization of Harappa (the Indus Valley Civilization) around 2500 BC, and mentions a 1000-year hiatus in this region (which would eventually become Pakistan): “What happened in these 1,000 years we know very little of except that in Harappa we do find trace[s] of inferior settlements and inferior civilization superimposed on the original planned cities of the Indus civilization.^{vii}” He continues:

“... around 1,500 BC the Aryans came and founded another civilization. But the centre of this civilization was not in this area which is now in West Pakistan but in much to the East, in the plains of the Ganges where they cut down forests, founded cities – cities like Benaras and Patliputra and Hastinapur, and so on. There they founded their great cities and there the great Hindu legends of Ram and Krishna arose. Then, from the Gangetic Plains this civilization, founded by the successors to the Aryan invaders, namely the Brahmanic civilization, traveled both to the west, in what is now called West Pakistan, and to the east, to what is now called East Pakistan. But there are very few traces of this particular period; this Brahmanic or what you might call the Hindu period. There are hardly any traces of this period today and probably the contribution of this particular civilization was not very great.”

We see now that Faiz argues that few remnants of the Hindu period – inferior settlements and inferior civilization – in his words, survive in Pakistan, and that the Hindu contribution was quite minimal. From this point of departure, he then argues:

“The next period of civilization-the next great period-begins around 500 BC, that is, after another 1,000 years. This is perhaps the richest and most fruitful period-culturally speaking-of this particular area. Now it begins with the conquest of the Punjab by the Persians.”

Faiz's contentions can be easily dismissed. There are plenty of epigraphic and monumental remains from the Hindu period in Pakistan. The *Rg-Veda*, the earliest and holiest of the Vedas, makes

many references to the land of the *Sapta-Sindhu* (the Punjab-Haryana region). The temples of the Salt Range mountains, and the famous Prahlad temple in Multan can hardly be ascribed to the Persians, though it is certain that Persian influence on what is now Pakistan must have been immense.

The idea that the pre-Islamic inhabitants of Pakistan were mostly Buddhist is also contradicted by the historically attested fact that Islamic missionaries often used Hindu ideas and motifs as a way of facilitating conversion. For instance, Ismaili missionaries in Sind successfully effected conversions by presenting the prophet's son-in-law 'Ali as an incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu.^{viii} This indicates that the majority of the population must have been Hindu, rather than Buddhist.

The Pakistani Interlude of East Bengal (Bangladesh)

For 24 years after the partition of India into successor states, Pakistan was constituted of two wings: a western wing (comprising the states of Punjab, Sindh, Baluchistan and the North-West Frontier Province), and an eastern wing – East Bengal (the eastern part of the erstwhile province of Bengal, to which some parts of Assam were added.) In 1971, the eastern wing would break away from Pakistan after a civil war and form the independent state of Bangladesh.

The cultural links of the people of Bangladesh and their fellow-Bengali speakers in India are very deep indeed.

The President of Pakistan, Mohammed Ayub Khan, spoke plainly.

The people of Pakistan consist of a variety of races each with its own historical background and culture. East Bengalis, who constitute the bulk of the population, probably belong to the very original Indian races. It would be no exaggeration to say that up to the creation of Pakistan, they had not known any real freedom or sovereignty. They have been in turn ruled either by the caste Hindus, Moghuls, Pathans, or the British. *In addition, they have been and still are under considerable Hindu cultural and linguistic influence.* [Emphasis Added] As such they have all the inhibitions of down-trodden races and have not yet found it possible to adjust psychologically to the requirements of the new-born freedom. Their popular complexes, exclusiveness, suspicion and a sort of defensive aggressiveness probably emerge from this historical background. Prudence, therefore, demands that these factors should be recognized and catered for and they be helped so as to feel equal partners and prove an asset. That can be done only if they are given a considerable measure of partnership.^{ix}

While Ayub Khan's patronising attitude towards the Bengalis in “*catering for them*” and giving them “*a certain measure of partnership*” may have rankled and left a bad feeling in the mouths of self-respecting Bengalis in his time, it was still quite benign compared to the opinions rife among the rank and file of the Pakistani military – which was almost exclusively West Pakistani, and which entertained far more vulgar and crass stereotypes regarding the Bengalis.

The results of this indoctrination of West Pakistanis were reflected in the vengeance, pride, and venom with which West Pakistani military officers carried out the carnage in East Bengal after 25 March 1971. Particularly illuminating were the remarks of one Major Kamal, who told an American construction worker, interviewed on CBS television, that once the West Pakistanis had conquered East Bengal each of his soldiers would have a Bengali mistress and neither dogs nor Bengalis would be allowed in the exclusive Chittagong Club. As a member of the West Pakistani ‘educated class,’ I can testify that is by no means an isolated case. Anti-Bengali and anti-Hindu bigotry is rampant in West Pakistan and has now been adopted as the official doctrine of the regime.^x

Cultural Consequences of the Demise of Hindu Society in Pakistan

The devaluation of the Hindu heritage sometimes can be detrimental to vital aspects of Pakistani culture itself. A Pakistani scholar laments the denigration of the native languages of Pakistan:

After the decline of Muslim political power in the sub-continent while Urdu became the darling of the British and made rapid strides with their backing during the course of 150 years, Bengali, Sindhi, Punjabi, Pushto, Baluchi which were the choice of the sufis and served them well for the propagation of Islam, languished and began to be considered un-Islamic ! It is indeed an irony of fate that those very languages which played a magnificent role in the propagation of Islam and were extensively used by the Sufis should be regarded as *un-Islamic and languages of Hindus* [emphasis added]; while Urdu, whose contribution in this respect is dismal, is considered the champion of Islam. I am emphasising this important aspect to instill respect for local languages in the minds of the Urdu-speaking Muslims settled in Pakistan who are labouring under erroneous notions about their own language and its past.^{xi}

One of the domains in which the effects of the Partition are most clearly visible is that of music, a field in which the Muslim contribution in India has historically been so prominent that an influential historians calls it “perhaps the only art in which something like a synthesis between the Muslim and the Hindu artistic traditions was achieved, though not without a series of tensions”^{xii}

The experience of the legendary vocalist Bade Ghulam Ali Khan illustrates the effect of Partition, which ^{xiii}

“... must have been a painful time for Ghulam Ali, for his ancestral home in Lahore was subsumed into Pakistan, while his audiences remained in India. All his brothers remained in Pakistan, but after several years in Pakistan, Ghulam Ali chose to take Indian citizenship. ‘When everyone left Lahore it became a cultural desert. And when life is unquiet, people do not want to listen to music’, explained Ghulam Ali’s son Munnawar Ali.” ‘It was difficult for Indians to settle in Pakistan but easy for Pakistanis to settle in North India’ (Interview: 1978).”

The musicologist Harold Powers elucidates:

In the years immediately after independence in 1947 most of the many Muslim musicians originally from Lahore elected to go back there and be Pakistanis – and most of them soon returned to India, the great Bade Ghulam Ali Khan among them, since the climate for music in Pakistan was initially rather austere.^{xiv}

Powers points out that it is in secular North India, not in Pakistan, that even Muslim musicians have found a favourable environment for their art. Other musicologists, such as Regula Qureishi have also commented on the decline of art music in Pakistan:

“without the outside ideological support provided by the Hindu socio-cultural tradition, art music remains locked into the limited social realm of feudal culture and its patronage of the hereditary professional.”^{xv}

Conclusions:

The demise of the Hindu community in Pakistan is a tragedy not only to the Hindu victims of the Partition of India and its aftermath. It has also led to cultural and social impoverishment of Pakistani society as a whole. The deliberate policies of effacing the Hindu past on the part of Pakistani historians

and scholars has led to a situation in which the Hindus' long residence in the territory of Pakistan, and their profound contribution to its culture, are being gradually forgotten.

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- iii A distinguished linguist and literary critic, he later headed the Muqtdara Quami Zaban (National Language Authority).
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- vi Hindu-Buddhist Conflict in the Chachnama: Fact or Fiction?, Dileep Karanth, *History Today*.
- vii *Culture and Identity: Selected English Writings of Faiz*, Sheema Majeed (ed.), Oxford University Press, Karachi, 2005, pp. 70-71.
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- xiv *Classical Music, Cultural Roots, and Colonial Rule: An Indic Musicologist looks at the Muslim World*, Harold S. Powers, *Asian Music*, Volume XII-1, p. 20.
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