

August 1, 2023

Pakistan: Learning from Looking Within

By: Nirupama Subramanian

In a work of deep introspection that is free of rhetoric, well-known Pakistani nuclear physicist and essayist, Pervez Hoodbhoy re-examines the history of his country, asking how it got to where it is now. He also seeks to provide a new framework for a more viable Pakistan.

In the prolonged battle in Pakistan since April 2022 between three rival groups of political elites, the army has won a pyrrhic victory. As the remains emerge, one question is being asked inside and outside the country—how did the dream that was held out to the Muslims of undivided India, a dream in which more than 70 million Muslims invested in 1947, go so terribly wrong?

In the 75 years of its existence, the country’s cycles of crises have grown shorter, bringing it to a state of perma-crisis, and the question has come up again and again. The adoption of the Objectives Resolution by the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan on 12 March 1949, the failure of West Pakistan’s political elites to recognise the demographic reality of East Pakistan, and the Army’s entry into politics had begun the process of undoing Muhammed Ali Jinnah’s creation soon after his death in 1948.

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After the “western unit” was swept away by the style over substance of General Ayub Khan and the benefits that seemingly flowed from the military pacts with the United States, the breakup of the country in 1971 provided the answer once again in dramatic terms. But at each point when structural faultlines became clear, Pakistani political elites chose to console themselves with self-serving justifications and feed half-truths or plain lies to those who did not know better.

So it is fitting that a newly published book is re-examining the history of Pakistan to provide substantive answers to how Pakistan got here. It also seeks, bravely, to provide a framework for a viable Pakistan. Pakistani nuclear physicist and activist Pervez Hoodbhoy’s tome could not have had a more timely arrival.

“In Pakistan, histories related to the ideological make-up of the country have been gradually mutated; a process in which, over the decades, every major political debacle has seen the insertion of a series of brand new half-truths in school textbooks. This has entailed the ‘extraction’ of those truths that might contradict the state’s rationale in explaining these debacles,” wrote *Dawn* columnist Nadeem F. Paracha in 2014.

The first comprehensive work in this genre of “truth extraction” to rescue history from Pakistan Studies, a compulsory subject that all school students must learn, was the *Murder of History in Pakistan – A Critique of History Textbooks Used in Pakistan* by K.K. Aziz. It was published in 1993 by journalist Najam Sethi’s Vanguard Books. Growing out of a series of columns in the *Frontier Post*, Aziz described it as a compilation of “the major inaccuracies, distortions, exaggerations and slants to be found in each officially prepared and prescribed textbook and in a representative selection of private commercial publications which are in wide use as textbooks”.

Aziz scrutinised 66 textbooks officially prescribed for Pakistan Studies, Social Studies, and History for his 275-page book. In doing so, he literally wrote a well-referenced, non-imaginary history of Pakistan. Though his book did not do well immediately, it was a rage in the 2000s, in the years after 9/11 when soul searching among Pakistanis began anew. It continues to be in demand.

Earlier, Hoodbhoy and another Pakistani physicist of renown, Abdul Hameed Nayyar, had co-authored a chapter titled “[Rewriting the History of Pakistan](#)” in *Islam, Politics and the State: The Pakistan Experience*, which was edited by Asghar Khan (Zed Books, 1985). In 2005, the Islamabad-based Sustainable Development Policy Institute published *The Subtle Subversion: The State of Curricula and Textbooks in Pakistan* compiled by Nayyar and Ahmad Salim, a well-known writer and archivist. The same year saw the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace bring out journalist and diplomat Hussain Haqqani’s *Pakistan: Between Mosque and Military*, which detailed the unholy “mullah-military” nexus in the country.

In the new millennium, especially after 9/11 triggered close international scrutiny of their country, many Pakistanis were very aware that they had been brought up on what Aziz called ‘indigestible historical pap’.

Eminent Pakistani-American historian Ayesha Jalal writes that history textbook writing in Pakistan is “among the best available sources for assessing the nexus between power and bigotry in creative imaginings of a national past” (“Conjuring Pakistan: History as Official Imagining”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 1, pp. 73–89). With the origin of the idea of Pakistan traced to “half a dozen different dates and places” in official history, she says, “The range of assorted imaginings that serve as official discourse on the past are priceless examples of the narrative confusions flowing from tensions between the ideology of Muslim nationalism and the geographical limitations of the Pakistani nation-state.”

In the new millennium, especially after 9/11 triggered close international scrutiny of their country, many Pakistanis have been very aware that they had been brought up on what Aziz called “indigestible historical pap”. After all, in this age of information excess, when a click of a mouse can call up everything anyone wants to know about a subject, Pakistanis could not have failed to realise that Bangladesh was not the creation of “scheming Hindu collaborators” in East Pakistan, or that Jinnah was not the pious Muslim that he was made out to be.

Hoodbhoy’s new book *Pakistan – Origins, Identity and Future* is a merciless, no holds barred examination of Pakistan—not just a certain aspect of it, but all of it. What it does is akin to dismantling a car and then attempting to put it back together, only to discover that some parts need to be replaced with entirely new ones.

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In its ambitious sweep, it goes back to pre-history, beyond the official fiction of Arab military commander Mohammed bin Qasim’s conquest of Sind in 712 CE being the year when Pakistan came into existence. It then works its way right up to the present, including the spectacular failure of the army’s experiment with Imran Khan.

The author makes clear from the get-go that he has no sacred cows. Hoodbhoy questions every assertion in Pakistan’s official history, every contradiction, and every leader of the Pakistan movement, including Quaid-e-Azam Jinnah. He interrogates the sanctity Pakistan accords to the two-nation theory. He delves deep into each question in an effort to find answers.

It can be safely said that there has been no attempt at exploring the history of Pakistan quite like this. In appearance, the 454-page book is forbidding but it is quite a page turner, engaging the reader with its clarity of purpose, empirical method, and the author’s personal reminiscences of growing up in a blindfolded country.

The primary thesis of the book is that the two-nation theory (the author uses the abbreviation TNT) had no basis, that it was untenable, and that it has brought Pakistan to ruin. To begin with, it existed only in the political ambitions of the Ashrafiya class of Muslims disempowered by the end of Mughal rule in 1857. They made the deliberately lazy choice of shunning the modernity that came with the British, including education and English. They could not accept that were no longer rulers, and resentful that some day they would be ordinary subjects in a Hindu-majority nation.

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In examining the Pakistan movement’s TNT, which still enjoys deep respect in the country despite the body blow of Bangladesh, Hoodbhoy also dismantles Hindutva’s TNT that is equally in denial about the origins of the people in what is now South Asia. He points out that most Pakistanis, who have never encountered M.S. Golwalkar or Vinayak Damodar Savarkar in their textbooks, would be surprised to know that some in India have their own version of the TNT. He shows up Hindutva’s myth of an indigenous Aryanism and a glorious past before the arrival of Muslim invaders 1,300 years ago for the fiction that it is.

Hoodbhoy proceeds to build on this thesis in a chronological but non-linear way, with rich references throughout. He also examines all the possible arguments against his own thesis in clinical detail, arriving at what he calls the “five big questions”. These could well

have been called the five tough questions. They are,

- 1) Was Partition worth the price?
- 2) What is the ideology of Pakistan and does it matter?
- 3) Why could not Pakistan become an Islamic state?
- 4) Why is Pakistan a praetorian state?
- 5) What is a Pakistani's true identity?

For Hoodbhoy, the answer to the first question is straightforward enough. On the whole, it was too heavy a price to pay for a confusion that continues to persist. The TNT is inadequate to explain why an equal number of Muslims chose to stay on in India as those that went to the new country, and why the Bengali Muslims broke away in less than 25 years. Neither did Partition eliminate divisions among the Muslims on the Pakistani side.

In the author's balance sheet, the "winners" from Partition on the Pakistani side were the landlords, the Pakistan military, the salaried class, and the mid-level peasantry who gained from the land left behind by Hindus. The "losers" were the Bengali Muslims, the Biharis of East Pakistan, the Muslims of Balochistan and Kashmir, the Ahmadis, communists and leftists, and the Muslims who stayed on in India. He observes the "worst nightmares" of the last category "are coming true as never before" with Narendra Modi's rise to power.

The most befuddling of these five questions is perhaps that of ideology. The idea of an "ideology of Pakistan" was the contribution of the Jamaat-e-Islami, which ironically enough was opposed to the creation of Pakistan. The words first appeared in an amendment to the Political Parties Bill in 1962 proposed by the sole Jamaat-e-Islami member of the National Assembly. When Deputy Opposition Leader Chaudhary Fazal Elahi objected, asking for a definition, the member's response was that the ideology of Pakistan is Islam.

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Hoodbhoy points out that no one asked the next question: what is Islam? Any answer to that would have been fraught, as he proceeds to lay out later on in the chapter.

Still, the matter got no traction until military dictator Zia ul Haq grabbed power, when Islam became "foundational". The reasons for this, says Hoodbhoy, were three. First, Islam was weaponsied to deal with Baloch, Sindhi, Pashtun, and Gilgit-Baltistani nationalisms. Second, it was an instrument of total control over citizens, as sovereignty lay not with them but with Allah. And, third, it helped the Pakistan army retain its supremacy in national affairs.

Hoodbhoy could have also added that it was necessary for renting Pakistan out to the US as a frontier state against the godless Soviet invaders of Afghanistan. Islam was the key element in the war unleashed from Pakistan against the Soviet army with US guns and money and with religious indoctrination from Saudi Wahhabism.

The book quotes from a paper authored by a former chief secretary of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province as recently as 2010. "De-ideologization of Pakistan must be treated as intellectual subversion," he writes, seeing this as the main reason for East Pakistan's secession. "The phenomenon is again on the rise; it should be understood and guarded against. Textbooks should be reinforced and not diluted, in their ideological and normative content."

Hoodbhoy's argument is that the reason it was missing from Pakistan's political lexicon till then—from Jinnah to Zulfikar Ali Bhutto—was because the country had no "business model". Though the TNT was based on a purported religious incompatibility, Islam as an ideological basis for the new country would not have cut much ice because there were plenty of Muslim states other than Pakistan. Nor did Jinnah want to be trapped into committing himself on the exact nature of the Pakistani state.

That question continues to haunt Pakistan—did Jinnah simply want to create a Muslim-majority state where non-Muslims would be free to live, or did he have an Islamic state in mind? The Governor-General of Pakistan deliberately used Muslim state, Islamic state, and just state interchangeably and loosely, Hoodbhoy points out, sometimes using all three in the same speech.

The author goes on to examine the third question of why Pakistan could not become an Islamic state even after Zia's rigorous Islamisation drive. Even though the Quran has no views on a "state", the word being absent in 7th century Arabic, the insistence on an Islamic government, Hoodbhoy explains, comes from the belief that unlike other religions, Islam is a "complete code" that has to be applied to everything. Therefore, the state is required to enforce an "Islamic way of life".

But how do we square an Islamic state and its national boundaries with the collective community of Islamic people, or the concept of Ummah, which has no boundaries? And who gets to be the caliph of such a state, and who succeeds him?

From Pakistan's struggle with whether it is a state for Muslims or an Islamic state flows the struggle with identity, the hankering after an Arab origin or claiming Persian descent while denying its sub-continental roots.

Hoodbhoy examines three models of the Islamic state. The first is Medina in the time of the Prophet, which had no geographical boundaries and no specifics on which territories constituted *dar ul-Islam* (abode of Islam). Jamaat-e-Islami founder Sayyid Abul A'la al-Maududi's Islamic state is the second, where the state is central to Islam and in which "Allah purchases the believer's life for which he will be reimbursed once he enters paradise". The third model is that of the Taliban.

Pakistan is not ready for any of the three, Hoodbhoy warns. "At the very outset ... one would be confronted with the deceptively simple question of who is a Muslim and who is not," he points out. If the country becomes a sharia state, "at best, the caliphate would be a brief, bloody moment in Pakistan's history before some cataclysmic implosion. Any serious move in the direction of a sharia state could lead to civil war".

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With the aid of Philip Oldenburg's 2010 book *India, Pakistan and Democracy: Solving the Puzzle of Divergent Paths* (London: Routledge), Hoodbhoy sums up why India's civilian leadership managed to retain control of the army. Among the reasons was a nationalist movement older and more participatory than the movement for Pakistan and the legitimacy that M.K. Gandhi bestowed on civilian political leadership. More important, there was a political society with a "thick layer of institutions and leaders" who could forge their own identities and were thus "able to maintain and develop the citizen-politician link". This was absent in Pakistan, where the military had effectively broken it.

Hoodbhoy devotes a section of the book to mini biographies of three "founder-heroes" of the Pakistan movement—Syed Ahmad Khan; Muhammed Iqbal, better known as Allama Iqbal; and Jinnah. And there are accounts of three others who challenged Jinnah and the TNT—al-Maududi, Maulana Azad, and Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan.

These chapter-length narratives are riveting. Hoodbhoy is hardly a hagiographical writer. In his words, he tries to "unwrap" these icons from the stories that have been spun around them.

Hoodbhoy is perhaps the kindest to Syed Ahmad, the "lonely moderniser" who traversed the path from Wahhabism to being "the foremost—and most radical—of all subcontinental leaders" to argue for the need to reinterpret Islamic theology in the light of science and modern knowledge. He founded the Scientific Society in an effort to popularise science and instil a scientific temperament among Muslims. He argued for reason over tradition, and was secular.

But over time, Syed Ahmad began to fear Hindu domination over Muslims. He surrendered to communalism and also gave up on the project to reform Islam. He made compromises with the ulema, and the educational institution he had founded for Muslims, the Mohammedan Anglo Oriental College (which later became Aligarh Muslim University), became a hub for the Pakistan movement. He was also not enthusiastic about women's education.

Hoodbhoy offers a manifesto for change, which includes ending legalised discrimination in Pakistan and bringing in secularism. He also suggests making Pakistan a welfare state to end the embarrassing economic inequality there.

Jinnah, Hoodbhoy concludes, was "a pragmatic political leader and a brilliant tactician. But he was not a visionary or a deep thinker ... As a politician he was like a juggler throwing up many balls simultaneously, concentrating upon those still up there and ignoring those he had dropped. To save Muslims from the tyranny of the Hindu majority's domination was Jinnah's one and only clear purpose. As

for what the new country would be, he simply assumed—wrongly as it turned out—that time would sort things out.”

At the end of the book is an appeal to replace the TNT with an SNT (a single-nation theory; abbreviation mine), in which Pakistan does not define itself through the prism of another. Hoodbhoy offers a manifesto for change, which includes ending legalised discrimination in Pakistan and bringing in secularism. He suggests making Pakistan a welfare state to end the embarrassing economic inequality there, and also making it more federal and less Punjab-centric. The other changes are unshackling women; providing the youth with skills instead of state propaganda; coming to terms with the reality of the Line of Control in Jammu and Kashmir; and, of course, ensuring the army remains in the barracks.

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Is all this possible? His compatriots may or may not agree. Nonetheless, 75 years is a good milestone in the life of a nation to reflect on what has gone by, to take stock, and prepare for the future. In this spirit, Hoodbhoy’s book is a work of deep introspection and a critique of Pakistan. Its main strength is that it is free of rhetoric. The author brings together a mass of research by others in support of his thesis.

In the preface to *Murder of History in Pakistan*, Aziz writes,

History ought to be above the laws of government and the whims of paid scholars. It should present facts as if they were divine edicts beyond cavil, clear as crystal, the voice of ultimate authority, ineradicable, immovable, irresistible, hewn in granite. Even when the ashes of controversy are still hot the icy brilliance of the historian’s reason should explain the conflict with humour, serenity and balance. Interpretations should be models of rational thinking with an array of arguments sound and stout, building up an edifice of thought and analysis which has the harmony of an ancient Greek monument, the symmetry of the Taj Mahal, and the strength of a Roman column. The various considerations should be balanced with a hand unshaken by prejudice, and into the play of ideas should be injected the vigour of intellect and through all the writings should ring the bell of justice.

Even without the hyperbole, the book meets the parameters of solid history writing. Hoodbhoy is not a historian; he is a physicist. As befits his stature as a scientist of international repute, one of his biggest achievements in writing this book is demonstrating that the writing of history requires as much scientific rigour, temperament, and discipline as anything demanded by the “pure sciences”.

That is also a lesson that Indian readers can take away from the book in the midst of our own controversies over history. Even otherwise, there is much for Indians to learn from it. Hoodbhoy could not have sent out a starker message about the havoc religion can cause when it is crossed with nation-state building.

Nirupama Subramanian is an independent journalist.