On the Quest for Pakistan

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Debates about Pakistan's creation have the distinct air of conducting an autopsy—the causes for its decline are also implicitly sought while locating the reasons behind its creation. In a sense, this is what Venkat Dhulipala recognises in Creating a New Medina: State Power, Islam, and the Quest for Pakistan in Late Colonial North India. Much of the literature on the partition is premised on the argument that subsequent weaknesses in Pakistan's polity could somehow be predicted because of the diverging ideological arguments in support of the Pakistan movement.

Arguing the reverse, Dhulipala suggests that the faults in Pakistan's political structures are not that it was “insufficiently imagined,” or inadequately prepared for, but rather, the consequence of a vision which had, in fact, been imagined in great detail at the time of its creation. Dhulipala argues that the ambiguities confronting the nature of the Pakistan state or the clashes between its institutions were not shaped by the unanticipated consequences of the derailment of the Pakistan dream at all: this was precisely what the Muslim League was struggling for, since at least the 1920s.

New Orthodoxy

Dhulipala argues that partition historiography needs to move beyond Ayesha Jalal’s “high politics” thesis, which makes Pakistan look as if it was suddenly cobbled together because Jinnah’s secretive “bargaining chip” gambit fell apart. This theory, he says, suggests that politicians seemed to have “slept-walked into the Partition,” and that there is an urgent need to revisit the argument that Pakistan was made in a “fit of South Asian absent-mindedness.” Such thinking, Dhulipala charges, constitutes the “new orthodoxy” in South Asia’s partition studies, swallowed in its entirety by generations of scholars.

This is partially true; the broad outlines of the debates about the run-up to the partition need no repeating to the average South Asian reader. The assumption that the partition could somehow have been avoided if one or more of these steps had played out differently, or if the magnitude of the Pakistan demand had been adequately comprehended beforehand, was certainly a common theme engaged within several eminent works in partition studies (see also, for instance, Hasan 1993 and Page 1982).

Instead, Dhulipala argues that the analysis of the Pakistan movement needs to be both elongated and deepened. Not only were there serious discussions about the implications of the movement for much longer than many scholars have acknowledged, it was also engaged with at far more localised, popular, and effectively politicised levels than is generally understood, for a far longer period than is often acknowledged. There was widespread support for a partition amongst powerful sections of the Ulama in the United Provinces (UP), who understood full well, advocated, and embraced the prospect of the separation of the Bengal and Punjab provinces, and the creation of an Islamic state.

He examines the careers of a variety of figures associated with the Pakistan movement. These include Shabbir Ahmad Usmani, a founder of the Jamait ul-Ulama-i-Islam (JUI) and a member of the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan, Ashraf Ali Thanwi, a prominent cleric of the Deobandi school, who supported the Muslim League’s demands, and I H Qureshi, Minister of Education in Pakistan in 1949. These were figures who had been prominent as intellectuals, religious leaders and opinion makers in the decades before, and who subsequently participated in the shaping of a theocratic state.

Clarity on Demands

Dhulipala demonstrates how there was an extraordinary—and so far, underappreciated—richness to the debates about Pakistan. They were by no means a product of a sudden decision, the precise contours of which became mercilessly clear only in the terrible summer of 1947.
Arguments, Dhulipala demonstrates, in favour of Pakistan were not “fuzzy” at all, and in the United Provinces by the 1930s there was a fairly clear, and strong sense of the necessity of agitating for a separated state, whose outlines were already understood.

To establish this, Dhulipala draws on a rich, dense and complicated body of sources, around the debates about Pakistan in UP after the passing of the Lahore Resolution in 1940. In doing so, he provides what are often fascinating insights into the characters of the Pakistan movement, the nature of upper politics, as well as the minutiae of the shaping of a political consciousness using religiously informed arguments. Furthermore, Dhulipala argues that portraying Jinnah as being merely contemptuously tolerant of the sideshow of the debates in the Deobandi Ulama in the United Provinces, while he got on with the real business of finding a voice for the Muslim League at the centre, is not accurate.

Dhulipala’s attempt is to co-opt Jinnah into the centre of the process of grubby politicking for separatist votes that led the Muslim League to be able to convincingly claim a mandate for partition. Jinnah, in this view, actively encouraged, organised and appropriated their methods in his quest to find a voice for the Muslim League, as well as for the creation of Pakistan. Jinnah was not using the Ulama for political expediency—they were using him, and he was an acquiescent, and active beneficiary to this process.

All this, then leads us to the question of what props up the intellectual firmaments of a nation; what gives the call for a separated nationhood its tintinnabulation, its resonance. After all, nations, Dhulipala argues convincingly enough, do not just happen, they have to be fought for, often using brutal tactics. Dhulipala points out, for instance, that given that the Congress won such a large mandate from UP in the 1937 elections, the question of how the Muslim League managed to overcome these odds and win a bigger mandate from its base after these elections merits further consideration.

This did not happen because Jinnah managed to single-handedly turn around the fortunes of this party in this complicated province in a secretive bid to win parity at the centre. Instead, the localised machinery of the UP Muslim League organised a concerted—and ultimately persuasive—strategy to win over their electorate by unveiling a clear picture of what the state of Pakistan would look like. One significant consequence of its redoubled efforts at mobilisation was the support of a faction of the Deobandi Ulama, led by Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanwi, who became a close adviser of the Muslim League.

**Religion and Power**

The question of how a decidedly unwieldy instrument—religion—could be, and was used to fashion a neatly encompassable state-based ideology has been the subject of a great deal of scholarship, even predating the “bargaining counter” theory, and Dhulipala is by no means the first to engage with these questions. In the same decade that Jalal’s *Sole Spokesman* was published, Francis Robinson, for instance, had also explored “the deep cultural transformation brought about by the shift in Muslim piety firmly towards this-worldly religion [from other-worldly religion]” over the 19th, and early 20th centuries (Robinson 1997). That the concept of Pakistan represented a debate about nationhood and belonging, and embodied an almost missionary belief in the pursuit of a homeland that provided security for South Asia’s Muslims, which far predated the Lahore resolution is now generally accepted in partition historiography.

These questions touch at the heart of the matter for many debates about Pakistan: was its creation accompanied by a sense of confusion about exactly what it was for? Farzana Sheikh (2009) points out that the doctrinal diversity about the role of Islam in the making of the state was, inimitably, part of the Pakistani struggle. The ensuing sense of contradiction built into the Pakistani state-building enterprise was also, she argues, prompted by their own (often ill-advised) secular leanings, they chose to reconcile their quest for a modern constitutional framework based on religion by claiming that Islam was not a mere religion but the blueprint for a comprehensive social and political order capable of adapting to the modernity of nationalism.

More recently, Faisal Devji, has also shown that the Pakistan demand was far more pervasive than a bargaining chip and is best understood as a language that voiced concerns about self-empowerment. The movement, he shows, was shaped by “Shia Muslim early nationalists [who] were responsible for turning Islam into an ecumenical category, one that could become politically effective, by uniting a number of disparate groups of believers under it...” (Devji 2013: 215). This language, Devji thus shows, was far more complicated, more elaborate than simply a clumsy attempt at clutching at any unifying religious identity in order to fashion a state, despite having tried to surmount it for decades, the language of minority politics and protection continues to inform Pakistani debates, with fundamentalists in particular setting themselves against a heedless Muslim majority that has taken the place of its erstwhile Hindu foe... (Devji 2013: 239).

This theme is also echoed, interestingly enough, in Aatish Taseer’s travelogue, *Stranger to History*, when a character asserts that a proper evaluation of the nature of the Pakistani state can only come with an adequate understanding of the allegiances a “cultural Muslim” requires, and can be enacted into a set of allegiances to a state.

**Stretching the Argument**

What several of these works have also shown is that there is no easy line to be drawn between the consciousness of a separate political identity, and how this could be transcribed onto the creation of the state structure of Pakistan. By 1940 or so, the outlines of a proposed map of Pakistan were not difficult to find: it pulsed, in incomplete concentric circles in the outlines of the subcontinent. In Bareilly, a scholar named Anis-al-Din Ahmad Rizvi called for a Pakistan consisting of the provinces where Muslims were in a majority: namely, Punjab, Sind, Baluchistan, North West Frontier Province, Kashmir, East Bengal, Assam, as well as Hyderabad (Dhulipala: 202). Rizvi argued that Muslims had always been a separate nation in the subcontinent, and that it was high time for Muslims to
establish their own nation in the subcontinent, “When the lamp is burning brightly why would you need to go to the hut of the indigent faqir and look for his flickering lamp?” (p 198).

But there are dangers in taking this argument too far. For one thing, all the detailed territorial plans in the world are insufficient in actually making for a state. In fact, it is also important to gauge how much these attempts were, to use a popular phrase in today’s political lexicon, so much kite-flying. In the case of Bengal, for instance, Joya Chatterji has also shown that when it came down to it, the Radcliffe Commission essentially presided over two sides whose legal gambits boiled down to coaxing as many more inches from the map-makers’ pen as possible (Chatterji 1999).

While Dhulipala is correct in arguing that there was a great deal of debate about nation, religion, and their corresponding recognition in territoriality during the 1940s, this is not the same as arguing that this necessarily represented the causal factor—that these were considered to be the strongest hinges of the arguments in favour of a separated Pakistan. To draw an overstretched analogy, if tomorrow, India were to be suddenly joined with the Hindu and Buddhist populations in South East Asia, it may not be directly attributable to pamphlets published by the Vishva Hindu Parishad that might call for such an amalgamation. As any number of political decisions in the South Asian subcontinent can testify to, enthusiasm and support do not necessarily constitute the basis of the decision to act.

Other Actors

But a more important problem with this book is that it gives too much importance to the actions of one set of actors in the shaping of the Pakistan movement, at the expense of others. One example of this could be Choudhary Rahmat Ali, another determined proponent of the Pakistan Movement, and who had voiced his espousal of a separated nationhood several years prior to Jinnah: “The Indo-Pakistani problem is not an inter-communal issue and will never be solved on inter-communal lines...” (K K Aziz 1987: 136). Ali was largely side-lined by the government of Pakistan, and died, as is widely known, in Cambridge within three years of its creation. But his own arguments had also included the creation of an overarching Muslim federation that included Hyderabad and Kashmir.

Both these states had had fairly determined initiatives to accede to Pakistan, and were recipients of support from the Government of Pakistan. In 1948, the Nizam of Hyderabad had in fact presented his case to the United Nations, with the aid of Shah Nawaz Bhutto, heir, subsequently to the major political dynasty in Pakistan. While Dhulipala is correct in ascribing to the UP Muslim League enormous significance in the shaping of the state of Pakistan, the book does prop up their visions of what the state ought to become, at the expense of other, equally valid arguments which may have been considered equally viable at the time. The Pakistan dream, its aspirations for territory, as well as its world views and ideology, therefore, may be broader, more capacious, than the subjects of Dhulipala’s study allow for.

In fact, what is less satisfactorily explained in Dhulipala’s book is the precise implications of his interpretation of the Pakistani movement on the making of the nation. Suppose we accept—and, on the basis of this book, we can—that there was an articulate demand for a future Pakistan emanating from the United Provinces in the 1930s. Is Dhulipala suggesting that this was the only determinant of the making of the nature of the Pakistani state? Contrary to what Dhulipala’s argument about a “too imaginatively constructed” nation might suggest, it is worth noting that the promulgators of a determined fight of a Muslim homeland, for all their hectic pamphleteering in UP in the 1930s, did not always have a smooth rise within Pakistan’s politics. Indeed, the making of Pakistan’s first constitution took a full 10 years to complete, precisely because of a determined resistance against the implications of being declared a homogenised—which in this case meant a Punjabi dominated, Urdu-speaking, Sunni—state.

Furthermore, relations between the founder of the Jamaat-e Islami, Abul Al’a Maududi, another prominent leader in the agitation for the creation of an Islamic state, and the Government of Pakistan, were by no means smooth. Maududi, for instance, was thrown into jail by an irritated Government of Punjab in 1948 for disrupting the peace because of his insistence on potentially polarising expressions of religiosity from the state (Vali Nasr 1994: 122–9). The point worth underlying here is that, for all the influence that Thanwi’s and Usmani’s ideas had in the early days of Pakistan, there was also opposition, which voiced itself, again and again, to the implications of this vision—and with not negligible rates of success.

The line between Dhulipala’s representations of the intentions of the UP Muslim League with the broader characteristics of the state of Pakistan, therefore, might be questioned further. Other—less insistently divisive—versions of the legitimacy of an Islamic state, its responsibilities and behaviour, might be equally strong candidates for locating the intellectual origins of the Pakistan movement.

The 1940s were clearly a decade in flux. This was a time of world war, which saw enormous transfers of population across the world, and the most intensive questions ever, perhaps, of just what the responsibilities of the state towards its citizens ought to constitute. It is worth pointing out, as Dhulipala rightly does, that debates on the Pakistan movement were also informed by the fact that this was a time when the drawing of boundary lines on the basis of ethnic, linguistic, or religious differences were relatively frequent. The decade—and the one that succeeded—had witnessed a relatively large number of territorial partitions around the globe on the basis of ethnic, linguistic and religious divisions in, for instance, Greece, Ireland, Korea, as well as Palestine.

Many participants of the debate, such as the Raja of Mahmudabad, Thanwi, as well as Jinnah, looked across the world to bolster their claims of how and why Pakistan ought to be created. Ambedkar, in his own book about the Pakistan...
demand, had also focused on the parallel of population exchanges in Bulgaria, Turkey and Greece during the interwar period (Dhulipala: 143).

In Conclusion
What Dhulipala succeeds in showing is that, at that time the creation of a separate state reflecting a territorialised partition was considered quite feasible: indeed, rather than be seen as the work of a few cranky, feudal landlords, it was successfully packaged as an entirely reasonable demand.

Dhulipala’s book warrants a respected space in the long bookshelf of South Asia’s partition, if for no other reason than it does simply make for very compelling, and archivally rich, reading. It also serves to reveal again the always useful precept of historians about territoriality and the nation state: so many national boundaries are the product of contingency, of political accident, a matter of chance, that to completely buy into the subsequently crafted philosophy of the everlasting nature of the borders and their absolute sanctity is, to say the least, short-sighted. This is not a novel conclusion, but Dhulipala’s work does serve to illustrate this argument better, more solidly, and with more archival ammunition. But to ask the question “who created Pakistan, and what did they want,” might also open a different can of worms.

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REFERENCES