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REVIEW ESSAY: Hinduism and Islam in the Indian Subcontinent

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by [Come Carpentier de Gourdon](#) on 03 Mar 2012 4 Comments

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The two books reviewed in the following could hardly be more different; the first is a scholarly historical review of the intermediate period that separates the death of the last hegemonic Mughal Emperor from the failed great rebellion that sought to end British rule over India; the second is a lavishly illustrated large sized volume which includes contributions on very diverse topics by different authors all dealing with Pakistan in the present and in its historical antecedents. However, both those works, one authored and the other edited by a woman, from India and Pakistan respectively, overlap when they analyse the various types of interaction and conflict that form the complex equation between India's indigenous religions (Hinduism, with its tribal origins and its Jain, Buddhist and Sikh offshoots) and Islam in its various forms. For that reason, a comparative reading of both works suggests interesting associations.

In seven chapters, Meenakshi Jain paints a broad picture of Islam in India from the days of the first Arab and Turkic inroads in the 8th century AD, in the northwest of the subcontinent, which was many centuries later to become Pakistan, to the first half of the nineteenth century when declining regional kingdoms were gradually falling under the sway of the British East India Company which was hence inevitably drawn into the politics and conflicts between the Hindu and Muslim communities. She points out that the advent of Islam had the effect of unifying the autochthonous population, at least from an outside perspective, into the common category eventually known as "Hindu" though it remained "a self contained, assimilative and decentralised civilization" which treated "all paths of worship as legitimate" and, by keeping them independent from the state, practiced a form of secularism.

In the Muslim perspective on the other hand all non-believers in Islam are "Kafirs", especially if they don't belong to any of the three Abrahamic "religions of the Book" and are defined as polytheists. Jain highlights the conformity and relative uniformity prescribed by the Islamic faith and code of conduct as opposed to India's ancient diversity which translated into the effective separation of spiritual practices from politics, a segregation that is unthinkable in Islam. Hence the word "Hindu", from being a geographic locator, was turned into an ethnic and later a religious category. The triad "Hindi-Hindu-Hindustan" was invoked by patriotic reformers who revived an ancient geographic and cultural nationalism without however associating it to a particular religion to the exclusion of others.

The proselytizing and missionary character of Islam led to India being designated as a land of the unbelievers ("Hindustan i Kafir" in Firdausi's Shah Nama), a target for conquest and conversion going hand in hand. For several centuries, successive armies from Central Asia, Afghanistan and Persia entered the subcontinent and established various kingdoms there by overthrowing native chiefs. Although political power and economic gain were generally the primary motivation of the invaders, they also saw it as their responsibility to bring their new

subjects into the fold of Islam.

Most of these rulers of foreign origin however had to make concessions and accommodations to the local religions in order to govern their states effectively, but they were periodically reminded by their ulema that they must seize all opportunities to turn their dominions into proper Muslim kingdoms, whether they themselves followed the majority Sunni denomination or were from the Shi'ite confession. She recalls that for centuries, the Muslim rulers of India swore allegiance to the distant and then inexistent khalif of Baghdad as being the sole source of religious and political legitimacy and that this ancestral sentiment of extraterritorial loyalty in the Indian Muslim masses breathed a new sigh in the violent agitation that followed, from 1919 to 1923, the fragmentation and abolition of the Ottoman khalifate.

Jain quotes various Indian Muslim writers, including Muhammed Iqbal, the spiritual forefather of Pakistan who saw Muslims as essentially foreign to India, "like Abraham in India's idol house". That sense of estrangement was mostly due to the precept, forcefully voiced by, among others the famous 14th century poet and mystic Amir Khusrau that Hinduism was a heresy (*shirk*) and hence an error and that all means were to be used to convert the infidels to the only true faith. Accordingly Muslim rulers were generally under pressure from their clerics to wage *Jihad fi sabil Allah* and to offer polytheists the choice between "death and Islam" which allowed no room for tolerance, The less bellicose among those ideologues promoted and practiced a form of cultural apartheid in order to protect the purity of their faith from contamination by local traditions and cults.

Jain does not fail to point out that the relatively open-minded and inclusive policies of Akbar, - whose limits she illustrates with statistics showing that even he promoted relatively few Hindus to the upper levels of the civilian and military administration -, were denounced as heretical not only by the ulema and Muslim nobles of the Empire but also, in more recent times, by Pakistani historians who held him responsible for failing to bring the majority of Indians into the Quranic faith. They are even more critical of Shah Jahan's ill fated eldest son, Prince Dara Shikoh whose proclivity for Vedantin philosophy and Upanishadic speculation was given as a reason for his execution on the orders of his younger brother Aurang Zeb. Religious eclecticism is a reviled attitude among the orthodox and most Muslims did not dare to brave the Mullahs's uncompromising rejection of it by dabbling in "pagan" mysticism and theology.

In the second chapter, Jain retraces the gradual breakdown of the Mughal empire as a result of various regional uprisings led by Hindu and Sikh chiefs. To face those threats, the Sultans in Delhi, on the advice of noted theologians such as Shah Waliullah customarily called for the help of their coreligionaries and kinsmen in Afghanistan and Iran. The book recalls that upon being reinstated as Emperor in Delhi by the invading Persian Nader Shah in 1739, the Mughal Muhammad Shah accepted his suzerainty and offered him the provinces located to the west of the Indus (from Sind to Kashmir) which were to become Pakistan two centuries later. By 1765, however, taking advantage of the political divisions the British took control of the provinces of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa and became the main power in India, gradually submitting both the resurgent Hindu princes and the decadent Mughal state.

The relative ease with which English paramountcy was accepted in the subcontinent may have been due to the fact that much of India had been for centuries under foreign rule, if we keep in mind that even at the liberal Akbar's court some 70% of the aristocracy was of Central Asian and Iranian origin and that this proportion increased under his successors. Shah Jahan, the famed builder of the Taj Mahal for one, appointed almost only Iranian Wazirs (prime ministers) and showed a similar preference in choosing his military commanders. Akbar and later emperors promoted and imposed literary Persian as the sole language of culture and administration throughout the empire, ignoring the Indian vernaculars. Likewise they patronised heavily persianised schools of

architecture, painting, music and they systematically built great mosques across their realm while curbing or sometimes actively preventing the construction of non-Islamic shrines and religious buildings.

Therefore insofar as there was cultural synthesis between imported and domestic elements, it was expressly shaped to enshrine the supremacy of the former over the latter. The religious tolerance practiced by the British Indian company, in spite of the action of Christian missionaries under its protection led many Hindus to willingly accept this new power in preference to the previous rulers who had in many ways continued to behave as colonising foreigners all along.

Meenakshi Jain dispels some common misunderstandings about the policies carried out by some of the Mughal Emperors, pointing that even the more enlightened among them worked under the imperative of affirming the primacy of the Islamic faith. The acceptance of religious plurality (*Suhl e Kull*) practiced, for pragmatic reasons by Akbar - who had to crush rebellions by his Turkic and Iranian nobles - but partly revoked by his successors Jahangir and Shah Jahan, was utterly discarded by Aurang Zeb who sponsored a revival of Sunni orthodoxy and indulged in the destruction of hundreds of Hindu, Jain and Sikh sanctuaries while reviving the *jizya* tax to be levied on "infidels".

Aurang Zeb's return to orthodoxy was one of several periodical reaffirmations of fundamentalism in the face of resurgent Hinduism and of some new local creeds, such as Sikhism which, in the view of the Muslim power elite, threatened the purity of their religion and their own preponderance.

Regional Muslim viceroys who broke away from the crumbling Mughal empire promoted Islam as a state faith, whether Shiite or Sunni according to their own denominations, and recruited their top officials mostly among their kinsmen from Iran (as in Awadh, Bengal and Tipu Sultan's Mysore whose ruler secured recognition from the Sublime Porte in Istanbul as the Khalif's representative and lieutenant), Afghanistan (as in Rohilkhand and Bhopal) and Turkestan (as in Hyderabad) while they drew to their courts scholars, poets and clerics from those same lands.

These princely states remained until Indian Independence bastions of feudalism rooted in somewhat petrified foreign traditions, with few concessions to Indian local institutions, customs, languages and religions though Muslims constituted rather small minorities of their total populations, concentrated in the major cities and military forts (*qasbas*) whereas the rural landscape remained overwhelmingly Hindu. A lasting divide was thereby created between the persianised, Islam-dominated capital cities inhabited by the high bureaucracy and the mostly absentee landed class of alien ancestry and the vernacular countryside where Hindu revivalism took off in the first part of the 18th century, followed in the early 19th by the Bengali nationalist renaissance sponsored, albeit unintendedly by British colonial administrators and orientalist scholars.

Despite the fact that Shiites were less than one per cent of its citizens, the kingdom of Awadh for instance took pride in being known as the successor state of the Safavid Persian empire and its capital Lucknow was hailed as *Dar ash Shia* (the metropolis of Shiism), developing closed links with the holy cities of Karbala and Najaf in Iraq; likewise the Nawabs of Bengal and Bihar heavily patronized Shiite Islam and built hundreds of religious monuments to their faith while the Nizams of Hyderabad on the other hand, laid claim to the spiritual succession of the dethroned Ottoman khalifs in the early twentieth century.

The author paints various vignettes of a few important post-Mughal states of that period and of their rulers, Islamic and Hindu, across India. She contrasts the imperative to enforce Islam's hegemony that with few

exceptions was abided by Muslim rulers to the tolerant attitude of Hindu princes and administrators, such as the Marathas, the Sikhs, the Rajputs, the Jats, the Bundelas and the land-owning grandees of Bengal who protected their Muslim subjects and did not interfere with their religious practices, often making gifts and donations for the construction of mosques and Sufi shrines while generally sponsoring a revival of local Hindu culture and classical learning. Those instances support her initial contention that “(Hindu) Dharma is an open-ended tradition of spiritual search that never attained a final and fixed form”, contrary to Islam’s theoretical absolutism which allows no gap between spiritual and temporal authority.

After reviewing the rich literary lore produced by the Hindu religious, cultural and scientific revival in Calcutta, Varanasi, Jaipur, Maharashtra and South India, in British India as well as in even some of the tiniest Hindu “native” states in Chapter 5, Jain portrays in the final chapter, the parallel Islamic reform movement which could be described as an involution back to its Arabic sources inspired by the Wahhabi theological school and deeply suspicious of, when not hostile to locally assimilated or syncretistic forms such as Sufism.

It may come as a surprise to many that Wahhabism, better known for its role in the overthrow of Ottoman rule in the Arabian peninsula and the foundation of the Saudi kingdom, played a major part in India where the British government saw it as a threat and a driving force behind the failed 1857 insurrection, whereby those Muslim revivalists aimed to restore an Islamic empire even though many were willing to make concessions to the Hindus in order to win their support.

Jain also retraces after 1857 the further evolution of the Islamic intellectual elite represented by eminent figures like Sir Syed Ahmed Khan who declared their loyalty to British rule, partly in fear of the political and economic rise of the Hindu majority. She points out that Muslim religious leaders, from the Barelvi, Deobandi and Ahl al Hadith traditions, all three derived from Shah Waliullah’s Wahhabi doctrine (the fundamentalist Tariqa Muhammadiya he had brought back from Mecca), tended to see the Hindus and even more the Sikhs as their enemies or at least their rivals while the British were acclaimed as allies and protectors.

Much of the educational, legislative and social action conducted by them was intended to preserve and enhance the religious, linguistic, literary and political distinctiveness of Indian Muslims as a separate nation within India whose primary loyalty was to the Islamic Ummah abroad. They bristled at any affirmation of Hindu nationalist ambitions and consistently upheld the separatist creed that Jinnah later used to call for carving out an independent Muslim nation out of united India. Naturally the British took full advantage of the Hindu-Mussalman dissensions in order to bolster and prolong their rule.

Iqbal’s opinion on nationalism that “[where it is in the majority] Islam accommodates nationalism, for there Islam and nationalism are practically identical” but that Muslims cannot put their loyalty to a non-Muslim majority country above their commitment to Islam because the latter is not only a religion but also “a community, a nation”, provides a fitting connection with the second book that gives an unusual overview of Pakistan, a home for Muslims which has gradually become less and less accommodating to non-orthodox minorities (such as Shiites, Ismailis, Ahmadiyahs, Parsees and Bahais).

Iqbal’s words also highlight the stark contrast between Islam’s faith-based “masculine” supra-nationalism and India’s ancient geographic and cultural patriotism or “matriotism”: the worship of the mother-earth goddess, in line with the definition given to “cultural nationalism” by C J H Hayes. Some scholars convincingly trace back that love of the holy soil, gods and ancestors to the Vedas and it may indeed be more deep seated and instinctive than the 19th century western juridical notion of a racial, linguistic and political nation-state that drove many

foreign students of India to claim that the latter is a subcontinent and maybe a commonwealth but not a nation since it contains diverse ethnic, cultural and religious potential nation-states within its bounds.

In its quixotic efforts to become, or appear, more Islamic, the relatively young state of Pakistan constantly wages a tournament of shadows against its own complex and multi-religious origins, trying to ignore and deny much of its ancestral identity in order to claim a semi-fictitious “pure Muslim” ideal and striving to distance itself from both Hindu India and Shiite Iran by clinging to distant Arab connections. The results of this continuous national psychodrama are deeply traumatic as some authors of *Mazaar Bazar* acknowledge. Even the Mughal past is controversial in Pakistan as it is viewed by many as being too “Indian” and not representative of the mythical persona the state wishes to nurture and project.

Pakistan has almost achieved the ideal of many Muslim conquerors and rulers of pre-British India who wished to extirpate idolatry from their kingdoms and yet the many painful consequences of its ambition to enshrine that Utopia are too well known to need recalling.

Although the founding father of Pakistan was a non-practicing Shiite, Anglophile barrister of Hindu ancestry Muhammed Ali Jinnah who had married a Parsee, equally westernised woman and wished the new country to be secular and Islam to be a private matter for its citizens, the state of Pakistan, not unlike the erstwhile Indian Turko-Persian kingdoms we have cited, soon felt the need to bolster its legitimacy by promoting Sunni Islam and an imported Urdu culture, mostly shaped by the immigrant scholarly and feudal elites from the Gangetic regions of Bihar, Awadh and Doab and unfamiliar to the overwhelming majority of its population which speaks Punjabi and Sindhi, not to mention the western Pashtoo and Baluch tribal west. Unsurprisingly the polity of Pakistan seems to be as frail as the many similar principalities that blossomed across the length and breadth of South Asia in the last many centuries.

The book edited by Saima Zaidi offers an “overview of the impact of the diverse cultures assimilated over several millennia”. It features thirty contributions from leading experts in various fields and is divided into five sections: 1-popular icons drawn from religion and mythology, 2-typography, 3-local consumer culture, 4-construction of national graphic identity and 5-an illustrated history of the region, prior to its partition from India.

The first section, including the essay by Prof. Durre Ahmed, is perhaps the most evocative of the religious culture of the country as it highlights major popular icons: Al Buraq, the winged steed of Prophet Muhammed; Jhuley Lal: an old man riding a fish over the water who is venerated as the patron saint of wayfarers; Udero Lal who is seen as a local form of Prophet Al Khizr (Elijah) and Dhuljinnah, the human-faced horse of Imam Husain at Karbala, a Shiite symbol. Pakistanis in Sindh at least honour a number of deified mythical heroes who originally were Rajput warrior kings but also mythologically prefigure the last Avatar of Vishnu, the equine Kalki. Among them are Daya Pir and Pithora Pir, an idol of the outcastes (who contrary to widespread perception endure in Pakistani Islam as they do in Indian Islam). Udero Lal, also known as Bhoj Amir Lal is Sindhu Das (Lord of the Indus or of the Ocean) whose followers are known as *DaryaPanthis*, among the few remaining Hindus of Pakistan.

Sufism, which seems in part at least to have originated in Sind at the dawn of Islam with Beyazid (Abu Yazid) Bistami, has many *tariqas* but the protector saint or Qutb (Spiritual Pole) of Pakistan is said by Sufis to be Abdel Qadir Al Gilani (*Hazrat Pir e Dastgir*) who founded the powerful Qadiriya Dervish order. The region of Punjab, the most important of the country is traditionally held to be under the protection of the Char Yar, four

medieval Sufi saints whose shrines are magnets of popular veneration and largely define the religious identity of the province.

There is also a vivid tradition of witchcraft, palmistry, astrology and divination (much of it related to Hindu lore) as in other Islamic countries despite the fact that orthodox Islam tends to frown on such beliefs. Politics sometimes becomes entwined with religion as seems increasingly to be the case for the slain leader Benazir Bhutto whose popular veneration takes the appearance of a cult in her native Sind, where she even seems to take the place of some ancient, dimly remembered pre-Islamic feminine idols.

The religious landscape is hence much more complex and confusing than the official religious profession would lead one to believe and in many areas forms of syncretism have developed between Hindu, Sikh and Islamic practices that are now under attack from the fundamentalist currents fed by Deobandi theology in concert with the Jihadi extremism directed against both India and the Western Judeo-Christian powers, partly as a reaction to the protracted international conflict in Afghanistan.

Yet, apart from the millennial legacies of Hinduism, Buddhism and Zoroastrianism left by the ancient Indus valley Civilisation and the Gandharan, Achaemenid, Graeco-Bactrian, Scythian, Kushan and Hunnic dynasties which held sway in the land, much of Pakistan was ruled by Sikh kings in the 19th century and the Sikh Gurus had a deep spiritual and cultural interaction with Islamic scholars and princes. The first of them, Guru Nanak is venerated by the Shiites in the shrine of Sheikh Bahlol, a disciple of the Imam Jafar al Sadiq in Baghdad, a city he visited in the course of his great pilgrimages.

The influence of Iranian civilization is made manifest by the enduring popularity of the Persian classics such as Nizami's *Haft Paykar* and *Khamseh*, just as memories of Alexander the Great's passage are kept in the *Iskandar Nama*. The tendency of fundamentalist Islamists to ignore the pre-Muslim ages and lump them under the dismissive term of *Jahiliyya*, (heathenism) which is how Saudi Wahhabi orthodoxy qualifies the Arab peninsula's history prior to the advent of the Prophet, is hence self-defeating for Pakistan and can only divorce its population from its real identity as the authors of some of the essays readily acknowledge.

Glancing through the book which in some parts reflects the ongoing conflict between the vision of a puritanical Pakistan "for Sunnis only" and the more pluralistic and heterodox reality, the reader will remain doubtful about the future of that tormented state, torn between the natural fissiparous tendencies in its disparate components and its grandiose dream of power projection from the Mediterranean to Central and East Asia. One cannot but be reminded of the many similar endeavours of rulers in the course of almost a thousand years in Agra, Delhi, Ahmedabad, Lucknow, Hyderabad and Mysore, who aspired or claimed to rule over all India or even the world but could not, with few exceptions, keep control of their own realms for very long.

Can Pakistan become a full fledged nation state, standing apart on its own from the rest of greater India or will it remain a turbulent Sultanate forged with the help of British colonial power and held together by a virtual dynasty which consists in the alliance between the Punjabi landed aristocracy, the conservative Ulema and the armed forces? Based on current events, the answer may be that, like the many states described by Meenakshi Jain in Pre-British India, Pakistan will disintegrate under the pressure of its inner contradictions unless it manages to remain in its present state as a de facto though unruly American protectorate.

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PARALLEL PATHWAYS – Essays on Hindu-Muslim Relations (1707-1857)**Meenakshi Jain, Konark Publishers (295 pp), 2010**

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MAZAAR BAZAAR – Design and Visual Culture in Pakistan,**Edited & designed by Saima Zaida, Oxford, Prince Claus Fund Library (347 pp), 2010**

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*The author is Convener, Editorial Board, World Affairs Journal***User Comments****Post a Comment**

In the process, India's history has become a history of foreign invaders – Aryans, Iranians, Greeks, Parthians, Scythians, Kushans, Arabs, Turks, Persians, Portuguese, Dutch, French, and British – rather than a history of the greatest civilization which the world has known, and later on of Hindu heroism which fought and ultimately frustrated all foreign invaders. India itself has become a sub-continent seething with a mass of heterogeneous humanity rather than an ancient and indivisible Hindu homeland. Indian people have become a conglomeration of nationalities, racial groups and religious communities which are finding it difficult to co-exist in peace, rather than a national society which is trying to reform itself and reclaim some of its unfortunate sections alienated from it by successive waves of Islamic, Christian and modern Western imperialism. And Indian culture has become a mechanical mixture of odds and ends, indigenous and imported, rather than a homogeneous whole created by a vast spiritual vision which is finding itself ill at ease with incompatible impositions.

It was this version of India's history which gave a good conscience to the British imperialist while he pulverised Hindu society, plundered Hindu wealth and poured undisguised contempt on Hindu culture. It was this version of India's history which emasculated Hindu society and emboldened the residues of Islamic imperialism to stage street riots and then walk away with precious parts of the Hindu homeland, thus consolidating an aggression which had not succeeded even though mounted again and again for more than a thousand years. It is this version of India's history which is being invoked by the fifth-columns of Islam, Christianity, and Communism, each of which looks forward to a final conquest of this country with the help of foreign finances and, if need be, foreign firearms. And it is this version of India's history which is being promoted by power-hungry politicians who woo the Muslim vote-bank while they divide Hindu society into mutually hostile camps.[Dr.Ram Gopal Misra, Indian Resistance to Early Muslim Invaders Upto 1206 A.D., Anu Books, Shivaji Road, Meerut city, 1983. The book has been reprinted in 1992.]

ravi

March 03, 2012

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Let us remember that India is not a small nation like Nepal or Afghanistan or Switzerland to plead that no amount of strength she builds up out of her own resources will ever have much of a meaning in the world balance of military power. Let us remember that India is the second biggest country in terms of manpower and one of the four or five foremost nations in terms of industrial and military potential. If India looks into herself, her innermost soul, and senses the sources of her own intrinsic strength, she can become a formidable power capable of preserving not only her own independence and integrity but also of contributing to the cause of world peace. But if she fails to awaken to her own innate potentialities and persists in harbouring the illusion that her own frontiers as well as world peace will be preserved automatically by the competing interests of the Big Powers, she will surely fail and betray the trust which her hoary history has laid on her shoulder.[Sita Ram Goel]

nikhil

March 03, 2012

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ravi,stop blaming "others" and start looking inwards and find the real source of problems for the failures,in my opinion its the caste system that did you in!

observer

March 04, 2012

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Made good reading.Least we are condemned to repeat it, we should not forget our history.Apologists of Islam in India and the subcontinent have tried to gloss over these painful periods in Hindu history.Hindus need not forget this nor they need to worry too much about what those few wahabis are doing or planning to do.

As very succinctly [!] put by our friend and observer from across the border, Hindus [including Hindusthanis] need to spend some tie fixing our problems.Once that is done, there may not be uch to worry except carrying our message forward.

Jitendra Desai

March 09, 2012

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