* **Journalism: an alternative history**
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* October 14, 2019

For observers and students of journalism in Pakistan, there are plenty of books available but most of them are by foreign authors who write about journalism and media in the world at large, not specifically focusing on Pakistan.

If you want to read about journalism in Pakistan, there are books that give you a long history of newspapers in the Subcontinent, such as the books by Abdus Salam Khursheed who has written dozens of them in Urdu. His two books, ‘Dastaan-e- Sahafat’ (story of journalism) and ‘Sahafat Pak-o-Hind Mein’ (Journalism in Pakistan and India) are a usual staple for most Urdu-medium journalists and students of bachelor’s and master’s degrees.

Khursheed’s PhD dissertation that I have in my collection was titled ‘Newsletters in the orient: with special reference to the Indo-Pak Subcontinent’. Unfortunately, the books by A S Khursheed and Miskeen Ali Hijazi – another prominent writer on journalism – are rich in history but they gloss over the journalists’ struggle in Pakistan for defending the freedom of expression. Among the many books by Miskeen Hijazi, his ‘Funnay Idarat’ (the art of editing) is also a bestseller but lacks a critical approach. The same applies to Dr Anwar Sadeed’s books.

Sadeed’s Urdu book ‘Pakistan Mein Adabi Rasael ki Tareekh’ (history of literary magazines in Pakistan) published by the Pakistan Academy of Letters in 1992, does not have any chapter about restrictions imposed on magazines at various times in Pakistan. Recently Dr Tauseef Ahmed Khan, a professor of journalism, has written a pretty good book, ‘Pakistan Mein Sahafat ki Mutabadil Tareekh’ (An Alternative history of journalism in Pakistan). But before discussing Dr Tauseef’s new book, I would like to talk about some other books on journalism in Pakistan that may be helpful for journalists and readers who are interested in critically analyzing this genre of writing.

For example, a book titled ‘Intikhabat aur Akhbaraat’ (elections and newspapers) compiled by Akhtar Ali Shah – editor of daily ‘Paasban’, Hyderabad, in the mid-1960s – is worth reading. The book is a fine example of how General Ayub Khan and his machinery of state institutions harnessed newspapers to write in favour of indirect elections in the country. The book is a compilation of articles, editorials, and letters to the editor, published in early 1964 to support indirect elections. General Ayub had already completed his five-years of absolute power and feared that in a direct election the people would trounce him.

Despite blatantly using newspapers in his favour, General Ayub had to resort to massive rigging to claim victory against Fatima Jinnah in the indirect presidential elections. The above-mentioned book reveals that the most common argument propounded in newspapers advocating indirect election was about the high expenses of direct elections. Pakistan, being a poor country, could hardly afford direct elections, so the argument went. You wonder at the dozens of articles and editorials clamouring for an indirect election. A much better and pioneering book was written by Mehdi Hasan – a senior journalist, teacher, and human-rights activist – about the role of media in the separation of East Pakistan.

‘Mashriquee Pakistan ki alehdgi aur zarae iblagh ka kirdar’ (The separation East Pakistan and the role of the media) was completed in 1975 but first published in 1977 by the South Asian Institute of Punjab University. This was, perhaps, the first attempt to analyze, as research, the 24-year performance of the media in Pakistan. Mehdi Hasan proved that the media – mostly controlled by the state – worked against national integration, while pretending to promote it. The peoples of East and West Pakistans were citizens of the same country but just promoting a shared past and a common religion was not good enough to keep them united.

Mehdi Hasan did his meticulous research by going through the files of newspapers from both wings of the country. He also reviewed radio and television programme sheets from the department of information. This is a 10-chapter book, reviewing not only newspapers and the restrictions imposed on them, but also analyzing radio, TV, film, and the role of the information department and how it failed in its propaganda. Arguably, Zamir Niazi did the first comprehensive work on restrictions on newspapers in Pakistan. His first English book was ‘The Press in Chains’ first published in 1986.

Zamir Niazi’s second book, ‘The Press under Siege’, was published in 1992 by Karachi Press Club, and his third was ‘The Web of Censorship’ published in 1994. They remain to date the best reference material on the subject.

‘The Press in Chains’ begins with the confrontation between the press and the government in pre-independence era, and then moves on to document the attempts to muzzle and persecute the press in Pakistan. Zamir Niazi exposed how the real powers in the country have been preoccupied in efforts to subvert democracy. ‘The Press under Siege’ is an equally – if not more – important and useful book by Zamir Niazi.

Just look at the titles of the chapters: A dangerous profession; Censorship in the streets; The carpetbaggers; The shackles of fear; and An unending siege. ‘The Press in Chains’ is about censors and scissors, whereas ‘The Press under Siege’ is about the ever-lurking shadow of violence: from open attacks by mobs to shooting by masked gunmen. Niazi records 19 deaths of journalists and press workers by violence between 1965 and 1991. Had he lived longer to see the violence against journalists in Pakistan in the 21st century, he would have penned a dozen more books.

For Urdu readers, ‘The Press in Chains’ was beautifully translated and published by Ajmal Kamal as ‘Sahafat Paband-e-Slasil’ in 1994 and then published by the Pakistan Study Centre in 2004. Rahat Saeed has compiled three of Zamir Niazi’s books in Urdu. The first was ‘Hikayat-e-Khunchkan’ (Gory tales) published in 1997, containing three essays, three interviews, and five articles about him written by writers such as Khalique Ibrahim Khalique and Dr Muhammad Ali Siddiqui. This book should not be confused with another book with the same title about Faiz Ahmed Faiz and published by Naey Ufaq (new Horizons) at Government College, Lahore.

The second Urdu book by Zamir Niazi compiled by Rahat Saeed was ‘Ungliyan figaar apni’ (My bleeding fingers) published in 2000, presenting an Urdu translation of Zamir Niazi’s English articles and essays. The third is a collection of Zamir Niazi’s interviews on the state of journalism in Pakistan titled ‘Baghbani-e-Sehra’ (Cultivating a desert) published in 2003. All these amount to an impressive array of alternative history of journalism in Pakistan and make Zamir Niazi a towering figure in this field. No journalist worth his or her salt can claim to be a professional and upholder of ethical journalism without reading Zamir Niazi and showing allegiance to his values.

Before concluding the first part of this series, I think it is pertinent to mention that two years before ‘The Press under Siege’ appeared, one of the most senior journalists in Pakistan, I A Rahman, had published a selection of his columns titled ‘Pakistan under Siege’ in 1990. This book is perhaps the best collection of columns that I have, presenting alternative history of Pakistan of the 1980s. Especially the eighth chapter, ‘The struggle for democracy’, shows how an independent journalist responds to authoritarian rule in Pakistan by exposing the attempts to change the constitution under the slogan of Islamization and stability.

To be continued

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