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“ONE reason so many adults become fanatics is that, as children, they are taught a history distorted by parochial obsession.” This is not an observation made by our Prof K.K. Aziz or Dr Mubarak Ali; this is an observation made by a Georgetown University professor who went on to become US secretary of state — Madeleine Albright (Memo to the President-Elect).

In her own country, Madeleine Albright saw publications like Michael Beschloss’ Presidents at War,and even in a more radical vein, Oliver Stone’s and Peter Kuznick’s The Untold History of the United States, publishedbyGallery Books. Gallery Books are an imprint of Simon & Schuster, so this alternative history is not a fringe publication. Madeleine Albright adds here: “As they grow up among the like-minded, they have no incentive to question what they have been taught.”

There are three strands under which history is taught in Pakistan, depending mostly on the inclination of the teacher: the empirical, the ideological, and the hostile. Of these, the second is a late entrant. As Ahmad Salim admitted: “The history books in the early years of Pakistan were fair to Indian leaders and heroes like Mr M.K. Gandhi” (Islam, Politics and State, The Pakistan Experience).

The ideological strand: It is true that the ulema, who by and large opposed the Pakistan Movement, tried to appropriate the state when it was created. But they were not successful then. Ideologically distorted textbooks proliferated in the Zia era. The prototypes were prepared in the University of Nebraska to indoctrinate jihadis countering the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, according to the Washington Post. These texts spilled over from madressahs and their content contributed to the Army Public School massacre in 2014, the assault on the Bacha Khan University in 2016 and the lynching of Mashal Khan at the Abdul Wali Khan University, 2017.

There are three strands under which history is taught here.

Apart from distorting Pakistan’s history by riding roughshod over records and documents to produce a fundamentalist rewriting, they have caused devastation in the discipline of Islamic history. It is contended that all the early works of history were written by ‘Jews’ and are hence unreliable.

The hostile strand: This is what can be called the Unionist Party version of the Pakistan Movement.The advocates of this strand want the two-nation theory deleted from our syllabi. If its protagonists were only Sir Syed or Jinnah, it would be easier to remove. The trouble is, it has been voiced by Gandhi (Young India), Lala Lajpat Rai (A Review of the History & Works of the Hindu Mahasabha and the Hindu Sanghatan Movement), Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (Verdict on India,) and Nehru (The Transfer of Power).

Meanwhile, Dr Shahid Javed Burki has held that economic reasons were behind the Pakistan Movement.

It is a fantastic argument considering that the British held that Pakistan would not be economically viable, and where a central majority could neutralise a regional majority.

Then there is the concept that Jinnah never defined Pakistan (Dawn, Jan 21, 2023). This is belied by Dawn, Nov 9, 1945, where he defined it geographically, politically and economically; naming five provinces, calling for democracy and socialism.

There is Ishtiaq Ahmed’s theory, that Partition was a British conspiracy to wea­ken India. Here is what Lord Mountbatten told Jinnah, that undivided India would play a great part in world affairs, and he must not reduce India to being a third-rate power (Freedom at Midnight). Ishtiaq Ahmed (Jinnah: His Successes, Failures & Role in History) held him responsible for the violence. In contrast, secret­a­­ry of state Lord Pethick-Lawre­n­­ce held that Gandhi preferred the death of millions rather than compromise (The Last 1,000 Days of the British Raj). Lord Wavell reported Gandhi, rather than compromise, was willing to see a bloodbath (Wavell: The Viceroy’s Journal). Many such misconceptions are taught in Pakistan.

The empirical strand: This strand holds that Congress had left no option but Partition. All is not well here too. Apart from archaeologists, we have no renowned scholars of ancient India. Pakistan is still undergoing excavations, but teaching has not been able to keep pace. Because the teaching of Persian has lapsed, mediaevalists are becoming an endangered group. Some universities have history and Pakistan Studies in the same department, with the result that ancient and mediaeval history are being pushed back. In history, scholars would train their successors like M. Habib trained K.A. Nizami; here we find this missing. Still I find the fresh batches inspiring hope.

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