**People’s histories in Pakistan**

Dr Naazir Mahmood

Monday, Jan 13, 2025

Political power in Pakistan – or in any other country for that matter – owes much to those who have been writing history with a particular bend to shape the minds of people right from their school days.

To give legitimacy to their usurpation of political power, decision-makers and their implementers in the ministries of education use history as a tool to defend their power base. To counter this strategy, several new trends in historiography have emerged that have challenged the dominant narratives of history in societies.

In the early 20th century, the Annales School of History suggested that historians analyse the past scientifically, emphasising the study of a nation’s social structure rather than focusing on important figures. Marxist historians interpreted history through the concepts of class struggle and materialism.

History writing in Pakistan has not seen much re-evaluation of facts. Not many Pakistani historians have been able to weigh history – especially political history – in relation to other kinds of information. Questioning sources of history is not a regular practice in Pakistan’s official historiography, resulting in only a partial picture of facts and stories. Perhaps it is safe to say that nationalist history writing has remained common in Pakistan since its inception. Like in most other countries, state power has tried to control national narratives and even after the dismemberment of Pakistan in 1971, distortion of history continues unabated.

Now, Asad Ali and Kamran Asdar Ali have edited a new collection of essays, ‘Towards people’s histories in Pakistan’ that Ilqa Publications Lahore published in 2024. These essays offer multiple perspectives on popular narratives of the past, departing from the usual accounts that utilise a top-down approach. While the dominant narratives in Pakistan defend all military actions in the name of ‘national integrity’, these essays challenge the decisions that civil and military leaders at various times have imposed on the citizens of this country.

Political leadership and religious scholars have nearly always controlled the aspirations of the people in Pakistan; all struggles for people’s rights have either failed or have had negligible success. Asad Ali and Kamran Asdar have selected essays that present diverse accounts through the voices of the people who were directly involved in the events that have shaped the destiny of this country. These are the voices that have remained marginalised for long and their representation has been minimal in history’s official textbooks. Pakistan is a country of multiplicity, and this new collection takes that fully into account.

‘Towards people’s histories in Pakistan’ is a valuable contribution that gives new directions to readers, guides young scholars to dispense with old methods and encourages them to opt for people’s history as a vital new trend in historiography. Perhaps the best aspect of this collection is that it covers a wide range of topics from culture and history to society and societal issues. A majority of the essays in this collection try to decentre historiography and move it away from the state and its ideology that revolves around the two-nation theory. This shifting of focus is imperative after nearly eight decades of independence that has mostly remained elusive and imaginary.

Historiography in Pakistan must move from a political history of dynasties and empires – that ignores the existence of people – to a history that draws from multiple disciplines such as anthropology, cultural studies, and sociology shedding light on people themselves. We have had enough of grand narratives and now is perhaps the right time to assemble narratives from the people – and of the people – who matter the most but have also suffered the most. The fact that both Asad and Kamran are anthropologists makes the choice of essays even more interesting.

The introduction to the book itself is a treat to read. “The dominance of nationalism, and nationalist history, has often led to the mobilization and positioning of ‘people’s history’ in oppositional terms, as an alternative history. For example, Howard Zinn’s influential ‘A people’s history of the USA’ sought to challenge the exclusion of triumphant nationalist historiography by attending to class conflicts, racial injustices, and gender inequalities. His attention to the multiplicity of social groups and their aspirations, desires, and conflicts was salutary in foregrounding erased histories and struggles and turning both 'history’ and ‘people’ away from nationalist appropriations.”

The editors quote writers such as Walter Benjamin (1892 – 1940) and Prasenjit Duara. They also touch upon subaltern studies as follows: “Within South Asian studies, one major intervention that reoriented history away from colonial and nationalist perspectives and towards people’s histories was subaltern studies. This trend in Indian historiography was linked to the emergence of postcolonial studies as a valid space for critique and introspection about the histories of the non-West. Subaltern studies opened up the methodological arena of reading archives against the grain and paying attention to silences to bring forward subaltern voices.”

The first part of the collection is titled ‘Recalling progressive histories’. It contains three essays on the histories of the working class and communist activists. From the personal histories of some Left-wing political workers these essays present a history that has mostly remained unwritten for students in our educational institutions. The essayists have relied on archives, memoirs, and oral history to reconstruct the past. In the first essay, ‘The Left and its legacies’, Kamran Asdar Ali recounts the history of the Left in Pakistan from 1947. It is a brief introduction to the Leftist politics in Pakistan that played a significant role before being crushed by the state.

Anushey Malik and Hasan Javid in their essay, ‘South Asia’s partitions and the limiting of progressive possibilities in Pakistan’, make use of the biographies of Mir Ghaus Bakhsh Bizenjo and B M Kutty. They chart the trajectory of left politics in Pakistan with a particular reference to the National Awami Party (NAP) and its government in Balochistan followed by the dissolution of the only major left-wing party in Pakistan. There is one photo essay by Mehvish Ahmed et al that uses titles of some leftist journals and magazines from the 1970s and 1980s to enlighten the readers about how these publications tried to circumvent bans and restrictions on their printing and circulation.

The second part of the book, ‘Nationalism’s many violences’, mostly focuses on 1971 and the brutal violence by both non-state and state actors on each other and the common people – Bengalis and non-Bengalis alike. The essay by Nayanika Mookherjee, ‘1971: Pakistan’s past and knowing what not to narrate’, is an informative recounting of the horrors of the military action in East Pakistan and how even today the state of Pakistan is reluctant to allow any engaging debate on the debacle, other than the state-approved narrative that paints the largest political party in Pakistan – Awami League – black; and blames India for the dismemberment of Pakistan.

Dina Mahnaz Siddiqi takes up the cause of ‘Urdu speakers’ in Bangladesh that are mostly clubbed together under the umbrella term of ‘Biharis’. In fact, there were Urdu speakers from various parts of India who had migrated to East Pakistan at different times after the Partition in 1947. Since they were distinct from the majority Bengali-speaking people, they could not assimilate in their new country and ended up siding with the Pakistani Army that was spearheading the military action against the Awami League and its militant wing the Mukti Bahini.

Part 3 of the book is titled ‘Alternative registers, other histories’, containing essays such as ‘Unarchiving Baloch history’ by Adeem Suhail and ‘Queer in the way of history’ by Omar Kasmani. The last part of the book ‘Politics and the people’ presents essays ‘Tulaba, Mazdoor aur Kissan: The revolution made easy’ by Aasim Sajjad Akhtar, ‘The people in their difference’ by Humeira Iqtidar, Countering the production of cultural hegemony: Reflections on Women’s activism under Zia’ by Farida Shaheed, and ‘Political emotion and bodily politics: Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and the people’ by Asad Ali.

The writer holds a PhD from the University of Birmingham, UK. He tweets/posts @NaazirMahmood and can be reached at:

mnazir1964@yahoo.co.uk