**The India-Pakistan Conundrum**

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The modern Indian writer commenting on affairs between India and Pakistan has an acute dilemma: every time he or she is objective about Pakistan, his compatriots tend to see him as soft on the enemy and may direct suspicion and accusations towards him. Any hint of empathy challenges the “us” versus “them” paradigm. An Indian Muslim author has the same problem, except it is even more exaggerated. In the present climate, anything that any Muslim does is easily misunderstood. Prominent actors, superstars in their contributions to Indian cinema, who mildly commented that their community felt threatened with the widespread religious violence, were attacked for being anti-Indian. Believing that discretion is the better part of valor, most Indian Muslims either stay away from commenting on their community and its problems or are aggressively chauvinistic and show their loyalty to the Indian state over the problems of their own community. An example is Fareed Zakaria, who, with his CNN platform, is in a position to improve relations and understanding between India and Pakistan, yet hefeels compelled to slight Pakistan or invite guests on his show who do it for him. I enjoy his programs and his commentary as he is an outstanding intellectual. But I deplore his moral ambiguity in avoiding a role that he could potentially play.

This is where Sameer Arshad Khatlani deserves credit for his recent book, The Other Side of the Divide: A Journey into the Heart of Pakistan. As a loyal Indian and a Muslim, he has written an objective and penetrating account of Pakistan after visiting the country. He has not shied away from describing what he sees as the warts and all. He has also not shied away from praising what is to be praised. For example, he speaks highly of the contributions and role of the Christian Pakistanis to the building of the nation. He mentions the heroic deeds of Christian leaders in the defense of Pakistan in the wars against India: “Christian officers have made their mark the most in Pakistan Air force (PAF); many of them feature in the galaxy of the country’s celebrated war heroes. Group Captain Cecil Chaudhry, a Catholic, remains at the top of this pile” (p. 152). The author points out that in spite of being a Pakistani war hero, Cecil Chaudhry’s promotion was blocked by Zia ul-Haq which left him disillusioned.

There are some marvelous vignettes in Khatlani’s book. He writes of Ayub Khan inviting Jacqueline Kennedy to Pakistan and the warm reception she received throughout the country. He points out that Ayub gifted her the Karakuli cap after she complimented him for it. He also gifted her a horse, Sardar, which was shipped to the US. Jacqueline called her visit to Pakistan “a great success” where she spent some of her “happiest days” (p. 186).

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Khatlani describes a visit to the Dera Sahib Gurdwara, dedicated to the fifth Guru Arjan Dev, in Lahore’s walled city. The Gurdwara stands juxtaposed alongside the Badshahi Mosque. He points to the history that is associated with the killing of the Sikh Guru by the Emperor Jahangir for supporting Prince Khusrau. That event led to the open conflict between Sikhs and Mughals. Khatlani points out that the Gurdwara survived intact in the destruction that accompanied the Partition in 1947. He ends on a hopeful note: “Its presence next to the Badshahi Mosque is a symbol of hope for a better future of coexistence” (p. 89).

It is a pity that this kind of analysis which underlines the contributions of the Indian Muslims is not made prominent by Indian authors. These are complicated subjects made more complicated by the Hindu-Muslim rivalries and their passions. But the widespread hatred in his land which has created lynch mobs and daylight mob murders of Muslims-and other minorities-is against the very spirit of Shanti and Ahimsa that are at the heart of the great Hindu religion. The Indian state at some stage soon must decide that enough is enough and step in to stop the victimization of the minorities. It is a good time to step back and attempt to re-create the great idealism and hopes that accompanied the formation of the Indian nation when it gave to the world a genuine pluralist vision of what was possible in a newly independent state. In the process they are in danger of abandoning what was their greatest achievement and the envy of the developing world in the 1950s-the idea of a liberal, inclusive state that was made up of diverse castes, religions and communities. That part of Indian history is being recklessly rewritten, and those seen to be promoting friendship, dialogue or understanding with the minorities are viewed with suspicion. We know that the great Mahatma Gandhi was shot dead because his critics saw him as too sympathetic to the Muslims. The writing about the “other” in India can be not only an exercise in academic understanding but actually dangerous to the health. That is why the Indian “liberal,” mostly Hindus, are heroic in their efforts to preserve something of the inclusive legacy of India. Khatlani deserves to be recognized in their ranks.

The so-called Indian liberal and so-called right-wing individual both react in the same way to the Muslim/Pakistan test. Just mention Muslim/Pakistan or Kashmir and even the most charming, amiable and genuine intellectual individual will likely become a fire-breathing, narrow-minded Islamophobe. This mental block against Muslim/Pakistan is an intellectual tragedy that most Indian authors find difficult to overcome. Hatred is never a good prism through which to look at any subject. It ends up compromising the writer as much as it does the reader.

In his attempt to understand Pakistan, Khatlani ends the book by quoting a Pakistani bureaucrat who described the Taliban as “Kharijites.” Not many Pakistani bureaucrats are known for their scholarship nor their grasp of Muslim history. By describing the Taliban as warriors who are continuing the Muslim battles of early seventh century Islam the bureaucrat is echoing theories that circulate in the think-tanks of Washington and London. As I have explained in my book, The Thistle and the Drone: How America’s War on Terror Became a Global War on Tribal Islam (2013), the Taliban represented tribal societies and the tribal code of behavior. Their cruel actions such as the killing of over a hundred students in the Peshawar Army Public School had more to do with the tribal codes of revenge than Islamic theology: the Prophet of Islam had admonished his followers to show mercy at all times and avoid tribalism with its notions of revenge.

Khatlani has a sharp eye for detail, a pen that can turn neat phrases and a heart that yearns for peace in the subcontinent. Khatlani has a role to play in bringing peace and understanding to South Asia. The book is dedicated to Khatlani’s young son Orhan and the young generation: “For my son, Orhan Ahmed Khatlani, and his generation. May they grow up to live in a peaceful and prosperous South Asia free of bigotry and conflict.” To this sentiment I would say Ameen.

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