

Book Review

Jinnah, Pakistan and Islamic Identity

by Akbar S. Ahmed,

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Dr Akbar S. Ahmed is probably the most published author in Pakistan. His published works make a formidable list, some of them issued from reputed publishers such as Oxford University Press, Cambridge University Press, and Rutledge. Some have also earned excellent reviews, denoting a measure of considerable achievement. In his own specialized field, Ahmed is probably the best-known Muslim anthropologist. The key to his accomplishments is his commitment to the discipline, despite his avocation of being an administrator.

What sets Akbar S. Ahmed apart from most Pakistani authors is that his writings are informed by theoretical considerations and anchored in empirical data. He evinces easy familiarity with methodology; he is creative and imaginative in his approach; he could conceptualize; above all, he could intellectualize problems and issues. As his earlier writings, his present work is marked by these characteristics.

The work is structured around one major theme (Jinnah), and several sub-themes: the nature of nationhood, Islam, ethnic and religious identity, the problem of minorities, the pervasive and ubiquitous influence of the media, race, empire, etc. Utilizing the methodology of cultural anthropology, semiotics and media studies, Ahmed seeks to explore old ground with new insights and new interpretations. Thus what we have here is neither biography nor traditional history *per se*; it is part biography, part history of partition, of Muslim nationhood and of Pakistani statehood, and

part the Muslim search for identity, a quest that had not only inspired the Muslim struggle for Pakistan during the 1940s but which is still relevant in several regions of the Muslim world (e.g. north Cyprus, Bosnia, Chechnya, Kashmir, Kosovo, Mindanao [Philippines], Patani [Thailand], and even for the Turkish minority in Bulgaria. "At the heart of contemporary Islamic revivalism is a search for identity in the modern world", says J.L. Esposito. To him, "This concern for identity or authenticity has motivated a broad spectrum of Muslims to look to their Islamic heritage in order to establish more firmly some continuity between their past history and values and their future direction."

All said and done, it was this critical problem of identity that Jinnah had addressed himself to in the Indian context during the late 1930s and 1940s. Thus, he represents not only Pakistan but a manifestation of the very search for identity in the present day larger Muslim world context. His solution to the problem of marginalization, alienation and even exclusion of Muslims from the corridors of power serves as a beacon light to Muslim communities struggling for identity, for self-expression and for self-realization in various regions. Hence the relevance of Jinnah to the modern Muslim world.

Ahmed organizes his somewhat disjointed material and manages to weave together the disparate topics in eight chapters, besides an Introduction and an Epilogue; they are spread over 300 pages. The Introduction argues the case of Saladin as an ideal Muslim hero, asserting that "contemporary Muslims everywhere look for Saladin" (p.xvii). Ahmed uses Saladin as "a metaphor, a cultural context", and goes on to draw up "an analogy... between Saladin and Jinnah". Chapter 1 discusses the people who mattered to Jinnah while the second chapter attempts an outline of the subcontinent's history, focusing on the developments that made Jinnah's movement possible. Jinnah's conversion from an "ambassador of Hindu-Muslim unity" to the fiercest advocate of Hindu-Muslim separation, which was, of course, "a slow, if inevitable, process" is discussed in chapters 3 and 4. Next comes Mountbatten's role as the last Viceroy and the "first Paki-basher", constricting, thwarting and disabling Pakistan from becoming a viable, going concern at the time of its emergence in August 1947.

Chapter 6 focuses upon Lord and Lady Mountbatten's relationship with Nehru and its bearing on both Mountbatten's policies and predilections, and on Jinnah. Here, for the first time, is discussed, rather explicitly a topic that, although crucial for understanding the Viceroy's moves and motives and the somersaults he enacted during the critical partition period, has long lain neglected and ignored – viz., the long drawn-out, intense love affair between Edwina and Nehru, its wide-ranging political ramifications and its possible effects, direct or indirect, on decision making in the summer of 1947. Chapter 7 and 8 discusses the creation of Pakistan and its subsequent history, the sort of Islamic destiny that Jinnah had envisaged for the fledgling state, his relevance to modern day Pakistan, the bleak Muslim situation in India (from Anandmath, [1882] to Ayodhya [1992]), and the struggle for identity in Bangladesh.

Finally, the Epilogue stresses the urgent need for dialogue, for reassessment, for greater harmony between India and Pakistan and between Hindus and Muslims – “if you are not to be locked in eternal confrontation”. Also suggested are steps for improving understanding and facilitating dialogue. Reconciliation, understanding and sorting out of differences and strengthening of common ground are commended.

What sets Ahmed apart from most of Jinnah's biographers is the historical perspective and the human angle he brings to his discussion. Wolpert, says Ahmed, fails to explore “Jinnah's rediscovery of his own roots, his own sense of identity, of culture, and history, which would come increasingly to the fore in the last few years of his life” (pp.24-25). “Ayesha Jalal's portrayal of Jinnah is ... half machine, half man. Jalal's Jinnah is a robot, programmed to play poker for high stakes... and win in small committee rooms; and like a machine he does not even appear to believe in what he is doing...” She also fails to “explain how he linked up intellectually with Sir Sayyed and Iqbal in the quest for Muslim destiny” (p.30). In contrast Ahmed's main contribution lies in his focusing on the cultural transformation that Jinnah underwent in 1937, a transformation that other Muslim leaders (e.g. Sir Sayyed, Iqbal and Hasrat Mohani, among others) had as well gone through earlier, indeed, 1937 represented a watershed in

Jinnah's public life. Hence, argues Ahmed, Jinnah's "genius was, apart from his recognized talents as a political strategist and constitutional lawyer, to encourage the development of a modern Muslim persona, one which would represent a modern Muslim nation and reflects in spirit while providing identity and unity" (p.71).

As against the standard Pakistani portrayal of Jinnah as a cardboard character, projecting him as a "stiff formal lawyer..., stuck to his Western dress and Western ways", shunning mass rallies, stern, unfeeling and unemotional, Ahmed reveals the human face of Jinnah. Interestingly, he is the only author to have talked to his daughter, Dina Wadia.

To Ahmed, Jinnah is not the "secular" leader to the first avowedly Muslim nation-state but he universal symbol of Muslim identity. Along with Sharif al Mujahid (*Jinnah: Studies in Interpretation, 1981*), Ahmed is the only major author to stress the fact that foremost in Jinnah's vision was "the unequivocal Islamic nature of Pakistan, drawing its inspiration from the Qur'an and the Holy Prophet (PBUH). This is the vision of an Islamic society which would be equitable and compassionate and tolerant..."(p.177). In his reply to Mountbatten's address during the transfer-of-power ceremony on 14 August 1947 Jinnah underlined his preference for the Islamic model when he told Mountbatten that the Holy Prophet was a more permanent and more inspiring model to follow, rather than Emperor Akbar whom Mountbatten had commended.

As in the case of his other publications, Ahmed displays certain chinks in his armour of these two major lapses may be mentioned here. First, the subtitle ("The Search for Saladin") is rather misplaced. For one thing, it does not conform to the ground reality in terms of Muslim India's national consciousness during the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s. For a generation, fed incessantly on Mustafa Kemal's (1881-1938) exploits from Galilee (1916) to the battle of Sakarya (1921) on the road to Ankara (which ensured the eviction of the invading Greek from the Turkish homelands), and enthralled by his stout defiance of the West and his singular success in tearing to shreds the iniquitous Treaty of Sevres (1921) and replacing it successfully with Lusanne (1923), negotiated with

the principal allied power on a footing of equality, Kemal, not Saladin, was the hero. To this generation Kemal had aborted Allied long term plans for the partition of Asia Minor, to push the frontiers of Europe into the Middle East and to recreate the Mediterranean as a European *Mare Nostrum*. Jerusalem had been re-occupied by Lord Allenby's forces in 1916, due in part to the Arab Rebellion (1916) against the Ottomans, and the legendary Saladin was a rather hazy figure, much too distant in the past. In contrast, the Sublime Porte represented Islam's mundane strength and glory in immediate terms, and Kemal who saved it for Islam adorned the front pages of Muslim papers throughout the subcontinent since the Turkish "war of liberation" (1919-22). A good deal of literature, especially in Urdu and Punjabi, was produced on him, and most Muslim petty shops in towns, big and small, displayed his portrait till it was replaced by the new, emerging "saviour", Mohammad Ali Jinnah, in the late 1930s. Kemal was, therefore, more real, more inspiring, and more relevant in early twentieth century subcontinent Muslim consciousness and setting. Despite his abolition of caliphate (1924), despite his opting for laicism and wholesale Westernization, despite his turning his back on the Muslim East, Kemal was still hailed as *ghazi* and *Saiful Islam* ("the sword of Islam"). Above all, he was considered the chief propelling force towards "the development of a modern Muslim persona, one which would represent a modern Muslim nation and reflect its spirit while providing identity and security". The national flag and the national anthem represent the most emotive and most telling symbols of a nation's persona, and though both were Islamic orientated (especially the anthem composed by the Islamicist Mahmet Akif), Kemal retained them, acknowledging in a sense the Islamic legacy the modern Turkish nation was heir to; (compare this to what Nasser (d.1970) and Kassem (1914-63) did in Egypt and Iraq respectively in the 1950s). Jinnah himself was a great admirer of Kemal whom he considered "a great hero" and "an inspiration... [for] the Muslims of India". Jinnah had reportedly commended his daughter to read Armstrong's *Grey Wolf*, while at Hampstead in the early 1930s. And as one who had grown up in a politically orientated family during the 1930s, I know for sure that the model was Kemal, not Saladin, that the search was for a Kemal, and not Saladin. And in

the reviewer's view, both the sub-title and the cultural-metaphor matrix are extraneous, and the work could easily do without them.

Second, Ahmed's portrayal of Iqbal-Jinnah relationship is, of course, good copy, but bad history. Ahmed would have Jinnah "acknowledge Iqbal as his mentor" (p.73 ff). In his Foreword to *Letters of Iqbal to Jinnah* (1943), Jinnah did acknowledge Iqbal's contribution, saying "His views were substantially in consonance with my own and had finally led me to the same conclusion as *a result of* careful examination and study of the constitutional problems facing India, and found expression in due course in the united will of Muslim India as adumbrated in the Lahore resolution..." (p.5, italics added). This acknowledgment does by no means make Iqbal his mentor, but popular Pakistani *bazaar* version does. Iqbal was a poet and visionary, given to flights of imagination, and Jinnah a born pragmatist, a seasoned and practical politician, who would like to keep his feet firmly on the ground all the time. Thus, Jinnah, in one of his letters to Iqbal, had reportedly countered his suggestion to declare immediately and unequivocally Muslim India's political objective, saying, "I want to pull them [Muslims] up step by step and before making them run I want to be sure that they are capable of standing on their own legs" (*Pakistan Times*, 25 December 1955). The spectre of "the passing of the flame from one to the other", depicted by Ahmed, is also not grounded in history, but is the handiwork of the author's fertile imagination. It is rather intriguing that Ahmed should have succumbed, though unwittingly, to a simplistic approach, an approach be so rightly accuses most Pakistani authors of.

In terms of format the author characteristically goes in for the "big picture", a large landscape; and for generalizations galore; they do provide breadth, but unless handled dextrously, not without costs — in terms of depth and a slide towards a procrustean-bed approach. The work explodes with an array of provocative ideas, but, though not inexplicably, without adequate linkages at places. A plethora of sub-themes does make the work multi-dimensional; but, then, an omnibus approach may also tend to make it somewhat disjointed, fragmented and repetitious (e.g., pp.71, 98). The work also features some errors of facts and dates (e.g., pp.103, 111, 113). Clearly, it should have been edited more

meticulously, to make the narrative more compact, more consistent and more coherent.

Despite these serpentine trees, despite a dense and entangled foliage, the grand view is simply fantastic. And this is what should one really look for in a bench-mark work like this. Indeed, in terms of the much needed reassessment of Jinnah's work and significance, Ahmed does represent a singular contribution. And in "revealing Jinnah's human face alongside his heroic achievement", as Professor Francis Robinson says, the present work makes Jinnah "accessible to the current age and renders his greatness even clearer than before". And it is a work that would be read and commented upon for a long while, that would inspire a fresh look at Jinnah, especially in terms of his significance in the modern Muslim world context.

Prof. Sharif al Mujahid