

Professor Syed Razi Wasti (1929-1999)

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In the death of Prof. Syed Razi Wasti, Pakistan has lost a most productive historian of the modern period. Dr. Wasti died in Lahore on 21st November 1999, after a brief illness.

Dr. Wasti has had an excellent academic, teaching and publication record. He studied at the Punjab and London Universities, specializing in mediaeval and modern history, and earning B.A. (Honours) and a doctorate from London. His teaching career, spanning some thirty-eight years, chiefly encompassed Government College, Lahore and Columbia University (New York). He was Quaid-i-Azam Distinguished Professor at the Southern Asian Institute, Columbia University, for five years (1983-88), and Visiting Professor at the Columbia University's Summer School during 1991-99. As Visiting Asian Professor, he also lectured in several colleges and universities in the U.S. during 1969-70. After retirement in 1989 he became Visiting/Adjutant Professor at Government College, and was elevated as Professor Emeritus in 1999.

Dr. Wasti's stint as an administrator was equally distinguished. He was Dean of Arts at Government College for sixteen years; Chairman, Board of Intermediate and Secondary Education, Gujranwala, for one year; and Director of Public Instructions (Colleges), Punjab, for sometime.

Dr. Wasti's penchant for research was widely recognized, both in Pakistan and abroad. While still in his middle thirties, he was

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appointed Director, Historical Research Institute, Punjab University, in 1965, soon after his return from England; this post he had held for five years. Dr. Wasti was much in demand as subject specialist at various institutions of higher learning and at various research and training institutes. He was a fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society, London (1960-70), and of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, U.K. (1962-70); he served on the Board of Governors and Executive Committee of several academic and research bodies; he also served on the editorial boards of several journals. He attended a large number of conferences/seminars in places as far a field as Colombo, Istanbul, Paris, Lund, Dublin, New York, Chicago and San Francisco. He had authored five books and fifteen research papers, edited and co-edited three works each, besides numerous magazine articles. He also contributed to *The Encyclopaedia of Asian History*.

Wasti came to prominence when his first work, *Lord Minto and the Indian Nationalist Movement* (1964), was published by a reputed publisher — the Clarendon Press, Oxford. It was based on his doctoral research at the University of London; it carried a Foreword by Earl Attlee. Not only this but, also, because of far more weighty reasons, his scholarly work was an instant success. It was acclaimed as a significant contribution to modern Indian historiography, and has since been indispensable reading for the students of the period.

All told, his contribution lay in providing a new perspective to Lord Minto's Viceroyalty (1905-10). It outshone a contemporary work on the period by an Indian scholar — M.N. Das's *India Under Morley and Minto* (1964). "His [Wasti's] careful examination", to quote Attlee, confirmed "that the senior partner in the Morley-Minto reforms was Minto not Morley, the Conservative Viceroy not the liberal Minister". This first analytical study of Lord Minto's attitude towards Indian nationalism broke new ground in several respects. It showed how he was the first Governor-General to consider the Indian National Congress as 'an important factor' in India's political life, thus reversing the erstwhile government policy to ignore the Congress. It argued how Minto's recognition of the Muslim demand for separate representation (1906) was by no means a departure from the

government's studied policy over the years, which had laid down in unequivocal terms that the only suitable system of representation in India was the representation of various interests. The recognition and the subsequent incorporation of the Muslim demand in the Reforms of 1909 would prove extremely consequential three decades later. Wasti also delineated how, while sympathizing with the genuine aspirations of the educated Indians for reforms, Minto took stringent measures to counter the terrorist movement.

In particular, Wasti's research helped to change the historiography in respect of the evolution of the Muslim demand for separate electorates. Hitherto, the initiation of the demand and the idea of a Muslim deputation waiting on the Viceroy, Lord Minto, to present that demand were attributed to W.A.J. Archbold, Principal of the Aligarh College. Archbold, it was claimed, took the initiative under official inspiration. He was also generally credited with having penned the address to the Viceroy. Asoka Mehta and Achyut Patwardan, two well-known young Congress activists, adumbrated the above thesis in some detail in *The Communal Triangle in India*, (1942) (pp.62-63). They based their premise on Archbold's letter dated August 10, 1906, wherein he informs Nawab Mohsinul Mulk on the strength of the Private Secretary to the Viceroy's assurance that he was "agreeable to receive the Muslim deputation" (p.62). The authors had taken the letter, almost verbatim, from Tufail Ahmad Mangalori who had published its gist (*Kulasa*) in his *Mussalmanon ka Roshan Mustaqbil* (1938). So, confident were the authors of their source and the interpretation they had foisted on Archbold's letter that they even made bold to say, "It is now well known that Lord Minto was the real author of the scheme of Separate Electorates" (p.66).

Not only in the 1940's, but also from the very beginning, this had been the Congress (or Hindu) version of the Muslim demand for separate representation. And it had gained credibility to a point that even Mawlana Mohammed Ali was induced to describe the Simla Deputation as a "command performance", in his presidential address at the Coconada (1923) Congress. Indeed, it became the standard version, finding its way into almost all publications till the early 1960s — see for instance, C.Y. Chintamani, *Indian Politics Since the Mutiny* (1940); B.M. Chaudhri, *Muslim Politics*

(1946); G.N. Singh, *Landmarks in Indian Constitutional and National Development* (1950), Lal Bahadur, *The Muslim League* (1954); Ram Gopal, *Indian Muslims* (1959); and *Cambridge History of India*, (1958, vol.).

What made the Asoka and Patwardan thesis click, though, was the timing of its publication. It provided grist to the Congress propaganda mills, which were then (the early 1940s) actively engaged in branding Jinnah as an “agent” of imperialism, and the burgeoning Pakistan movement as “officially” inspired. Nothing could be more damning than this piece of “solid evidence” (viz., Archbold’s letter) to argue conclusively that the separate electorates demand and the formation of the Muslim league were *ab initio* an imperialist card, to boost and institutionalize the government’s traditional policy of *divide et impera*, and to jump from that thesis to the conclusion that Jinnah and the Muslim League, in putting forth the Pakistan demand, were only repeating the past, to further that policy in the explosive situation of the 1940s. In immediate terms, the thesis paid huge dividends, while on a long term basis it hurt the Muslim cause a good deal, stigmatised the Muslims and the Muslim League savagely, and put them on the defensive all the while.

And it is to Wasti’s eternal credit that his research finally laid that canard to the counter. He traced, and published for the first time, Muhsinul Mulk’s letter of August 4, 1906, from Bombay, to which Archbold’s letter of August 10 (on which the Mehta and Patwardan thesis was based) was the reply. Thus, Wasti conclusively proved that both the separate-electorates and the idea of Muslim deputation originated from the Muslims themselves, and not from official quarters, as had been propagated by Congress publicist’s *ad nauseum* for some fifty-five years. Wasti also showed that the memorial was not penned by Archbold, but that a draft was prepared by Nawab Imadul Mulk, and was discussed and finalized at a meeting at Lucknow on September 16, 1906. And it was presented to Lord Minto at Simla on October 1, 1906. The Deputation comprised 35 prominent Muslim leaders from various provinces, and was led by the Aga Khan.

To quote *The Times Literary Supplement* (June 18, 1964, p.522), Wasti represented “The complete, once and for all, demolition of the fantasy, still firmly cherished in India today that the Muslim deputation which approached Minto on 1 October 1906, and paved the way for separate electorates, was stage-managed by Britain.” In other words, Wasti had put the Muslim demand in perspective. This, in sum, was Wasti’s major contribution to modern Indian historiography, and to Muslim India’s historiography.

Wasti had reached “the plateau” quite early in his career, but, for various reasons, he failed to capitalize on his early success. His Historical Research Institute years were, in a sense, barren because he could not see his project of getting a collaborative volume on the freedom movement (1858-1947) through. His Government College job, though a prestigious one in terms of Lahore’s, indeed Punjab’s, educational landscape, was still a constricting one in terms of academic attainments and research. Meantime, in 1975, his penchant for research came to be fatally smothered by the avalanche of sweeping criticism mounted by Z.A. Suleri in the *Nawa-i-Waqt* (Lahore). (Suleri was often pugnacious in his comments, and would also hurl the anti-Jinnah stuff missive at me six years later, on the publication of *Quaid-i-Azam Jinnah: Studies in Interpretation* (1981); but somehow I took it in stride and survived it).

Wasti had circulated among the CSS probationers a discussion paper containing certain passages included in *Mohammad Ali Jinnah: Maker of Modern Pakistan* (1970) edited by Sheila McDonough, my class fellow at the Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University, in the early 1950s. Along with some quotes from admirers and neutral observers, the paper had also included some passages from critics such as Nehru, Louis Fischer and Gankovsky. Suleri seized upon the latter category of passages to mount a virulent, if not malicious, attack on Wasti, charging that he was trying to indoctrinate the young (still immature?) minds with anti-Jinnah and anti-Pakistan stuff. Of course, none rose to Wasti’s defence — not even the professional press freedom-wallas because while they are simply devoid of the breadth of vision to consider “freedom of research” as a sibling to freedom of

expression, they, if only because of their intense, inward-looking trade unionism, religiously follow the Orwellian dictum that “all animals are equal but some animals are more equal.” And Wasti remained under the cloud for a long while, and was denied his well-deserved promotion for six long years.

Meantime, I had seen to it that he continued to serve as member on both the Executive Committee and the Board of Governors of the Quaid-i-Azam Academy, of which I was founder-Director (1976-89). And I used my position to send in a petition to the Governor of the Punjab in 1981, pleading that Wasti be cleared of the alleged “misdemeanour” he had been wrongly charged with, on the basis of Suleri’s diatribes, arguing that were Wasti guilty of demeaning Jinnah, he wouldn’t have been retained as member on the Academy’s Executive Committee and Board of Governors. That argument finally clinched, the “adverse” remarks in the ACR were expunged, and Wasti was cleared for promotion, early in 1982.

This Suleri episode jolted Wasti to a point that henceforth he became much too cautious and circumspect in what he said and what he wrote. Thus he was precluded from producing anything first rate, although he wrote till the end. *At Quaid’s Service* (1996), a slim biography of “an outstanding banker-cum industrialist”, Mohammad Rafi Butt (d.1948), was Wasti’s last flicker, Butt, “a staunch supporter of the Pakistan movement” and an associate of Jinnah, had died in an air crash in the prime of his illustrious career, while still 39. Here Wasti tried his hand at descriptive writing, and quite successfully. It’s a pity that Imtiaz Rafi Butt, Chairman of the Jinnah Rafi Foundation, hasn’t found it opportune to release the work as yet.

It’s also a pity that Wasti failed to take the Suleri missive in his stride. From that point on, retention of the Government College job became his chief concern. In the circumstances, it was not inexplicable; but the College itself was too constricted a venue for any extensive and serious interaction, and for actualising his potential. His decision not to join the Punjab University in the middle 1960s would deny him opportunities that an institution of higher learning offers. Thus the Punjab University did not feel

obliged to nominate him for the Quaid-i-Azam Professor at Columbia University (New York) slot, although he was among the leading historians in the country. And but for his nomination by the Quaid-i-Azam Academy, he would not have been even considered for the post.

Till the end Wasti was a conscientious and dedicated teacher. At Columbia, he would be at his desk, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., five days a week, and available to the students all the time. He would also attend and participate in other academic activities. That's what had induced Columbia to invite him for the summer school all through the 1990s. He was popular with the students, though not with his colleagues in the same measure. In a sense, his early success was a mixed blessing. It caused a good deal of envy, even jealousy; it also tended to make him a little complacent. The years (1956-62) he spent in England during the formative period of his life left their impact till the last. The greatest gift of that stint, besides his doctorate, was his getting married to Helen, a librarian by profession and a woman of great charm. Predictably she adjusted herself remarkably to the not too comfortable a life as a college professor's wife in Lahore. She stood by him through thick and thin, worked full time throughout her married life, and raised two sons, now both married and settled in the U.S.

Wasti was well read, suave, polished, and urbane. He had a knack for making friends; he showed his mettle at parties and at reparteeing; but he was averse to making adjustments. For thirty years now, whenever I visited Lahore Wasti had been my first port of call, to be greeted by a grin, so characteristic of him, followed by engaging conversation for hours and hours. His death would be mourned by a wide circle of friends across three continents.