

Fever: Between Past and the Future

There has existed throughout history an ironic relationship between the past and future. Those who glorify the past and seek to recreate it almost invariably fail while those who view it comprehensively and critically are able to draw on the past in meaningful and lasting ways. People who have confidence in their future approach the past with seriousness and critical reverence. They study it, try to comprehend the values, aesthetics, and style which invested an earlier civilization its greatness or caused it to decline. They preserve its remains, and enshrine relevant, enriching images and events of the past in their memories both collectively and individually.

By contrast, peoples and governments with an uncertain sense of the future manifest deeply skewed relationships to their history. They eschew lived history, shut out its lessons, shun critical inquiries into the past, neglect its remains but, at the same time, invent an imagined past -- shining and glorious, upon which are super-imposed the prejudices and hatreds of our own time. The religion-political movements of South Asia bear witness to this truth. Many Hindus and Muslims alike glorify their history -- that is what they imagine to be their history -- in ways that separate them from the other; rather, pit them against each other.

Thus for decades many Muslims viewed the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb as symbolizing the strengths and virtues of Muslim rule in India. On their part, Hindu nationalists presented the Maratha chief Sivaji as an embodiment of Hindu resistance to Muslim rule. In reality, both were tragic figures out of cinch with their own history, signalling the decline of Indian statehood, and the rise of a European empire in India. In this instance, as most recently in the Babri mosque affair, history became a casualty of communal myth making.

In the summer of 1990, I visited Ayodhya and Mathura while researching the campaign which militant Hindu movements -- BJP, VHP, RSS, and Bajrang Dal -- had launched to demolish the Babri Mosque and build a temple on the site which they claimed was the real birth place of Lord Rama two thousand years ago. I was particularly amazed at two features of this campaign. The Hindu revivalists had put out an enormous body of publications and I educational material on the alleged excesses of Muslim rule in India, and Hindu resistance to it. Apart from books, colorful posters portrayed in graphic detail the presumed atrocities and heroism of the Hindu-Muslim encounter in India. Narratives in prose and songs were also available by the dozens on audio cassettes. It seemed impossible to stem this tide of invented, poisonous history. To their lasting credit, the most eminent among India's historians openly and consistently debunked the revivalists' claims, in the short run they had little success. Subsequently, their impact was not inconsiderable, and the ire against them has risen in direct proportion to the decline of BJP and its ancillaries. "Inn historians kay liye Hindustan men koi asthan naheen hai", says a ranking BJP leader.

The phenomenon holds also in Pakistan. There are, however, underlying difference between it and India. One is that during crucial periods of our history, governments have favored the distortionists and actively discouraged historical research, instruction, and inquiry. The other significant difference is that because our institutions of higher learning rapidly deteriorated and also because our insecure rulers -- Mohammed Ziaul Haq occupies the highest place in this pantheon -- needed the crutch of inverted history, in Pakistan historians did not thrive and history ceased as a subject of serious study. Hence in Pakistan the inversions of history are greater and embraces such contemporary subjects as the birth of Pakistan and the views and personality of its founding father. But few subjects have suffered greater disfiguring as Islam and Muslim history.

On a daily basis Islam and its history have been invoked in Pakistan for more than four decades. Yet, during all these years neither religion nor history have been accorded serious attention in this country either from the state or society. I know of not a single noteworthy work on these subjects to have been published in Pakistan. The curriculum of deenayat, a compulsory subject in our schools and colleges, is almost entirely devoid of a sense of piety [taqwa] spiritualism [roohaniyat], or mysticism [tassawuf]. At best it is cast in terms of ritualistic formalism. At worst, it reduces Islam to a penal code.

As for history, any historian of Islam would shudder at what passes here for instruction in Islamic history. Three years ago, I queried an M.A. class in this subject at a major Pakistani university. None of the 25 odd students there had an inkling of the issues which defined the first major schism in Islamic history -the khawarij movement. None gave a satisfactory explanation of the Ash'arite doctrine and its place in Muslim theological development. And only one had an inkling about the Mu'tazila -- woh achay log naheen thay. Unki fikr men dahriyat ke anaasir thay (They were not good people, There were elements of atheism in their thought.) 'We are witnessing', I had then thought, 'the end of history in Pakistan.'¹ (Francis Fukuyama had not yet come out with his arcane thesis about history's end.) I was wrong of course, for this sort of ignorance, being widely cultivated in our colleges and universities, can produce a history of sorts.

The history thus produced shall bear but a remote, formalistic relationship to the past, and provide no positive links whatsoever to the future. For the past is not being viewed critically or creatively in most post-colonial societies. Take the Muslim world as a whole. For three centuries, it has been in steady decline. Yet, few Muslim intellectuals have inquired with a degree of rigour and honesty into the causes of this decline. It is only when one identifies the problem that one seeks solutions. In the 19th century, Syed Ahmed Khan inquired loudly into the causes of Muslim decline; and sought to overcome it with reformist zeal. The little that the sub-continent's Muslims accomplished in subsequent decades, they owed largely to his critical intellect. Similar efforts were made in the Ottoman empire, and among Iranian constitutionalists of the late Qajar period. The Muslim tragedy is that subsequent generations failed to build meaningfully on this reformist beginnings.

Politics are at the roots of this failure. For politics shape the intellectual environment. Isolated, illegitimate rulers no less than sectarian movements employ history and religion as ideological weapons and manipulative devices. Their appeal falls often on receptive ears. When the present is painfully replete with inequalities and frustrations, and the future holds little promise people, specially young people, turn to the past. The less they understand the past, the more they are prone to glorify, imagine, and invent it. The past then becomes the anchor of their hopes and their frustrations. The phenomenon is often, and wrongly I believe, identified as fundamentalism.

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