

Pakistan's Endangered History

It is a great privilege for me to be speaking on this very unique occasion. It is rare among us Pakistanis to honour the Quaid-i-Azam beyond rhetoric, and in a substantive way. Professor Zaidi deserves our gratitude for compiling two volumes of the Jinnah Papers. These are but the tip of Mr. Jinnah's fragmented archives, for these 3,000-plus pages cover only four months and ten days of his eventful life, from Feb 20, 1947, to June 30. A total of 50 volumes are projected in this series to be published by the Quaid-i-Azam Papers Project.

I know Professor Zaidi to be a driven man who has devoted more than three decades of his life to gathering, restoring, compiling, and editing this national treasure. I am sure that you will join me in wishing him the good health he needs to complete this truly noble mission. I know that his spirit and dedication will not wilt as long as his body holds out. So may you live long, and remain immersed for years to come in the life and times of Pakistan's founding father.

Professor Sahib, as a historian and archivist you have reached the fulfillment of a life-long dream. You have rescued from dire neglect and the dungeons of dictatorship the private papers of Mr. Jinnah. You have been persistent in getting them preserved, catalogued, and published. And today you have the unique pleasure of seeing two of your former students - one at the helm of the state and the other a humble teacher - speak at the launching of the volumes you have compiled. Few historians and fewer teachers can hope to achieve more in lifetime. Our heartiest thanks and congratulations to you.

But before I make a final bow to a man's remarkable accomplishment, I should underline that it is shared with a woman. During the months that became years Parveen Zaidi patiently bore the burnt of professor Zaidi's highly articulated frustrations with Pakistan's versatile foot draggers. And she actually helped with the difficult task of restoring and preserving the decayed archives. In the process, she became Pakistan's first and so far only internationally recognised restorer of manuscripts. Her services have since been sought by international organisations such as UNESCO and governments as far apart as Turkey, Iran, and Malaysia. During the decades of toil with these papers she nursed the good professor through - two heart operations, and shared with him the very tragic loss of the younger of their two sons. I hope you all join me in offering them both our heartfelt thanks and deepest sympathies.

I should say a word about the quest for excellence and our people's response to it. Sadly, there is paucity of excellence in this country. It was not always so in the land of Mohammed Iqbal, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, Saadat Hasan Manto, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, and Professor Abdus Salam whom we have all but formally banished from our midst. Hence ordinary citizens are wistfully engaged when they notice someone striving for excellence with a sense of purpose other than getting rich. And they support the endeavour with an enthusiasm that defies expectation. Men like Abdul Sattar Edhi and Dr. Akhtar Hameed Khan will testify to this gratifying phenomenon of civil society in Pakistan.

I recall how anxious professor Zaidi had been about finding the people who could help him in organising, collating, and editing the enormous piles of the Quaid-i-Azam's papers. This is back-breaking work Eqbal, and it requires perseverance and skill, I recall Professor Zaidi worrying aloud soon after he had returned to Pakistan three years ago, I can teach the skill but where shall I find the people with discipline of work and the will to persist? Well, they appeared, men and women, young and old, determined to help, eager to learn. Learn they did, and help they gave with dogged determination. In the

end the Jinnah Papers is as much their achievement as it is Professor and Mrs. Zaidi's. They are here in this hall deserving of our warmest hand of appreciation.

Therein lies an insight which I should underline for the benefit of this and the future leadership of Pakistan: The heart of this country, its people, is clean like spring water, solid as rock, and poetic in its yearning for goodness, justice and enlightenment. Mohammed Ali Jinnah's greatness lay in sensing this simple truth. He led them with unassailable integrity along a path that promised economic justice, liberation from a constricting past, and an enlightened future. They followed with enthusiasm and dedication, without fear or misgiving, and conferred upon this unlikely barrister the historic honour of becoming the founder of an important state. It is a tragic fact that since his passing this great people, like the Quaid's material legacies, has suffered from negligence and breach of faith.

One price, and by no means the greatest, of this neglect is that neither Mr. Jinnah, nor the movement he led has been accorded serious scholarly attention. Of the four biographies so far published on him, only one, by Stanley Wolpert has scholarly merit and views its subject in the larger context of colonial and nationalist politics. And apart from Dr. Saleem Ahmed's book which covers the years 1906-1921, no serious work has been done on the Muslim League and the Pakistan movement.

Archives are the memory bank of a nation; and works of history articulate that memory in organised, meaningful ways. It is truly tragic that our archives suffer from neglect and fragmentation, and historians are nearly extinct in Pakistan. To make matters worse, we are bringing up ill-informed generations who are being taught in schools poisonous and ideologically loaded distortions as history. An early exposure to this phenomenon was provided in a pioneering essay entitled 'Rewriting the History of Pakistan' by Pervez Amirali Hoodbhoy and Abdul Hameed Nayyar which appears in 'Islam, Politics and the State', edited by Air Marshal Asghar Khan. A greater service was rendered later by Professor K.K. Aziz's 'The Murder of History in Pakistan.'

The process of polluting the sources of knowledge in this country had begun earlier; it climaxed in the dictatorship of Ziaul Haq who obviously perceived educational institutions as an important instrument of consolidating his tyranny in the name of Islam and an invention labeled the Ideology of Pakistan. The General declared as compulsory the teaching of Pakistan Studies in degree colleges, including engineering and medical institutions. The rewriting of history proceeded then on a grand scale. The University Grants Commission issued a directive informing prospective textbook writers that the aim of the new course is to induce pride for the nation's past, enthusiasm for the present (sic), and unshakable faith in the stability and longevity of Pakistan. Lest this leaves some ambiguity, therefore room for accommodating some canons of historiography, authors were given the following guidelines:

To demonstrate that the basis of Pakistan is not to be found in racial, linguistic or geographical factors, but, rather, in the shared experience of a common religion. To get students to know and appreciate the Ideology of Pakistan, and to popularise it with slogans. To guide students towards the ultimate goal of Pakistan - the creation of a complete Islamised state.

I do not know of any country's educational system that so explicitly subordinates knowledge to politics. Teaching and writing of history, always in jeopardy in Pakistan, has now passed from historians to hacks. They have invented a history that historians, of whom only a handful are left in Pakistan, shall not recognise. The Quaid-i-Azam was among their first victims: he underwent a metamorphosis becoming a man of orthodox religious views who sought the creation of a theocratic state and the Ulema, who with rare exceptions had opposed Jinnah and the Pakistan movement, emerged as heroes and

founding fathers of Pakistan. The Jinnah Papers are rebuke and reminder of the distortions to which our history has been subjected. They also ensure that future historians shall have easy access to the real Jinnah and the movement he led.

Professor Zaidi has ideas on how to preserve and consolidate our sorely neglected and fragmented archives. I beg for a national effort to review and revise the curricula and textbooks of history and Pakistan Studies in our schools. To not do so is to condemn future Pakistani generations to ignorance and obscurantism.

EQBAL AHMAD [Dawn: 4th June, 1995]