

### Book review: Jürgen Schaflechner, Christina Oesterheld, Ayesha Asif (eds): Pakistan - Alternative Imag(in)ings of the Nation State

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## Book Reviews

JÜRGEN SCHAFLECHNER / CHRISTINA OESTERHELD / AYESHA ASIF (eds), *Pakistan: Alternative Imag(in)ings of the Nation State*. Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2020. 404 pages, PRs 1095.00. ISBN 978-0190-70131-4

Much of what is written in books on Pakistan, particularly on its contemporary politics and the like, is usually redundant and irrelevant by the time the books are published. Pakistani books are a graveyard for dealing with, and caricaturing, Pakistan as a “crisis state”, sometimes beyond the crisis state, having as many as “nine lives”, being a “hard country”, “resilient”, “apocalyptic”, “on the brink” (almost always), and a “paradox” for those who visited a few times and expected something not found during their visits.<sup>1</sup> The list is endless. Thankfully, the volume under review does not fit into this category, dealing instead with sociological, cultural and literary trends.

The ten chapters of this edited volume constitute anthropological, sociological and literary imaginations of Urdu novels and digests (three articles), three articles on Hindu-Muslim relations and on religious minorities in Pakistan, one each on student politics in Sindh, representations of images across the India-Pakistan border, and an unexpected essay on farmers’ markets in Pakistan. The outlier is the last chapter in the book on the incumbent PTI government’s *naya* (“new”) Pakistan, written in 2019 and sadly already out-of-date by the time of publication.

What binds these articles together, in some way, is that four of the authors have had some affiliation with Heidelberg University, Germany, and three have a connection to France, for the most part based or having studied in these two European countries. Additionally, another article on the Urdu novel “Ghulam Bagh” (“The Garden of Slaves”) by Mirza Athar Baig – perhaps somewhat exaggeratedly praised as “one of the most important works in the history of the Urdu novel” (p. 46) – has, as one of its main four characters and interlocutors, a German archaeologist called Hoffmann.

It is thus evident throughout the book that there is a strong Western theoretical influence on the majority of the essays but surprisingly very little theory

1 These terms appear in most titles on books about Pakistan. Some examples will suffice: Maleeha Lodhi (ed.), *Pakistan: Beyond the “Crisis State”*, Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2011. Declan Walsh, *The Nine Lives of Pakistan: Dispatches from a Divided Nation*, London: Bloomsbury, 2020. Christophe Jaffrelot (ed.), *Pakistan at the Crossroads: Domestic Dynamics and External Pressures*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2016. Anatol Lieven, *Pakistan: A Hard Country*, New York: Public Affairs, 2011. Ahmed Rashid, *Pakistan on the Brink: The Future of America, Pakistan, and Afghanistan*. New York: Penguin Group, 2012. Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Pakistan Paradox: Instability and Resilience*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. Francesca Marino / Beniamino Natale, *Apocalypse Pakistan: An Anatomy of the World’s Most Dangerous Nation*, New Delhi: Niyogi Books, 2013.

from South Asia on how South Asian scholars of literature analyse their own writings. This becomes especially obvious for the articles on Urdu literature. For example, the articles by Christina Oesterheld and Aqsa Ijaz, while looking at literature written in Urdu, examine such writing almost exclusively from European and Western sources, but do not make use of the huge Indian theoretical contributions that look at South Asian literature from a very different angle and perspective. With critical postcolonial studies and anti-orientalism having gained increasing importance in Area Studies during the last years, it is surprising to see the works of Eisenstadt, Deleuze and Guattari still being cited without comment. Moreover, Oesterheld's essay "Urdu Debates on Modernity and Modernism in Literature: Alternate Imaginings?" simply rehashes previous commentary, completely oblivious to the more recent literature in Urdu in Pakistan. Debates about what constitutes "modernism" in Urdu literature have now surpassed many of the works that Oesterheld cites, as has more recent literature, such as the work of Ali Akbar Natiq, who is recognised as one of the most articulate and creative writers in modern Urdu. Moreover, while Oesterheld is looking at a previous era, notions of Urdu and modernity and Modernism today have redefined notions of "literature", with television serials, for example, constituting new forms of literature. The ability to adapt and create new forms of literature, by writers such as Umera Ahmad, is one of the newer ways Urdu literature is being written and debated. The question itself – whether such writing is "literature" or a type of pulp fiction – is indicative of the times we live in.

This is perhaps one reason why Laurent Gayer's article "Pulp Fusion: The Art and Politics of Karachi's Urdu Digests, 1950s-70s" is excellent, and he provides a flavour of the local context in which such fiction emerged. Gayer gives a thoroughly located and rooted history of the people behind the concept and publication of the Digests and how they began to transform social and literary relations as the project developed. Since Gayer is familiar with Karachi, his understanding of Karachi's Digests is well developed within specific historical and social contexts.

Equally good are the two articles by Jürgen Schaflechner and by Syeda Quratulain Masood, on interfaith conversions and marriages between Muslims and Hindus, the latter constituting merely 1.5 per cent of the population of Pakistan. Schaflechner makes the important point that not all forced marriages due to conversion are based on threats and intimidation or kidnappings, but he also makes a point made by only a few people: that Hindu women also assert their "agency" in the matter and that a blanket condemnation of all acts of forced conversion often fails to take into account the rights of women who make clear choices. Social change and mobility even in rural areas have resulted in greater awareness and choice, as well as in the agency of actors, which gives rise to patriarchal practices where the rights of women are constantly being

denied. Quratulain Masood makes similar arguments in her examination of interfaith relationships in cosmopolitan Karachi, where many such practices are considered “dishonourable” because they disrupt existing arrangements of property and social mores that have remained unchallenged. However, both authors err in mapping India’s recent “love-jihad” onto a hugely marginalised and discriminated Hindu community in Pakistan. In contrast to its widespread use in India, from where the term emanates and where many Muslims are prominent, not least in cinema, the notion does not translate or travel unchanged to Pakistan. “Love-jihad” is a concept much used in India, particularly around Bollywood, where with the rise of Hindu right-wing political and ideological forces, interfaith marriages have been particularly targeted. The Muslims in India constitute the largest non-Hindu minority, at around 11 per cent of the population, and according to right-wing political praxis are declared a threat to India’s Hindu status and ideology. In Pakistan, with Hindus making up such a minor and extremely marginalised and ostracised share of its population, the notion of love-jihad does not translate from India as both authors imply.

The Frenchman Michel Bovin, an old Pakistani hand working on Sufi shrines and their representation, looks in his chapter at the visual representation of Jhulelal, a Hindu deity, and at how the iconography of the deity crosses the India-Pakistan border. The article makes a rather odd statement, saying that “Pakistan is a country usually depicted as a hub of terrorism and Islamicist radicalism, but except in the circle of the specialists it is less widely known that there are a number of shrines that are shared by Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs” (p. 219). While discussing this iconography, Bovin uses the term “Sindhiness”, based on the origin, as he sees it, of this deity in Sindh and how it crosses over into India’s “mainstream Hinduism”. Although he talks about the deity being revered by Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs, Bovin overlooks the important point that Sindh and Sindhiness are also constituted by a notion of Hinduness, if not “mainstream Hinduism”, and it becomes difficult to disentangle the two. The province of Sindh, particularly in the regions and histories that Bovin speaks about, has always been eclectic and inclusive, with “religious boundaries” often being blurred.

“From Student Organizations to Ethnic Parties: Sindhi Nationalism during One Unit” by Julien Levesque gives a good historical account of student organisations in Sindh in the 1950s and 1960s by providing a description of how, after Partition in 1947, students began to organise along ethnic lines based on the politics of Sindh. He makes the case that leaders such as GM Syed, the great Sindhi nationalist, who helped mould such student organisations, responded to what the students were demanding – which, according to Levesque, resulted in Syed taking his separatist cause further. The only shortcoming of this otherwise interesting article is that it downplays the Sindhi-Urdu speaking contradictions that emerged in the province after Partition, when the colonisa-

tion of Sindh by Urdu-speaking migrants from India changed Sindh considerably. The change in demography and in the control of power in Sindh, which shifted away from those who had been settled there prior to Partition in 1947, changed the province irrevocably.

Julia Porting's essay on farmers' markets ("Farmers' Markets in Pakistan: Moral Consumption for Elites?") is an outlier for its freshness, exploring a phenomenon rarely encountered in Pakistani academia. Porting examines three farmers' markets in Islamabad, Lahore and Karachi and contrasts how they operate, their clientele, the goods offered, and so forth. A key theme underlying her analysis is that it is Pakistan's "English-speaking" elite who patronise these markets and that they are enclaves of elite preferences. She is not wrong in her analysis, but it would have been more interesting to see how these globalised farmers' markets compare with the more public and middle- and lowermiddle class *juma* ("Friday") and *itvar* ("Sunday") bazars in most urban cities in Pakistan.

The two articles that I think fall short of the standards of this volume are Peter Jacob's "Religious Minorities: The Heart of An Alternative Narrative" and Ayesha Asif's "Challenging the Status Quo: Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf's Populist Politics for a *Naya* Pakistan". Jacob's essay is highly descriptive about the situation of religious minorities in Pakistan and presents a somewhat simplistic historical overview, but a certain fear and self-censorship is evident in this essay. Peter Jacob fails to make any critical new contribution to the ongoing debate or to provide fresh scholarly insight on Islam in Pakistan and its consequences on religious minorities. Finally, Ayesha Asif bases her research on speeches made by Imran Khan before he became Prime Minister in 2018 and follows the evolution of his thought and politics based on promises made in pre-electoral speeches. However, Asif completely fails to highlight the politics of the state arrangements that allowed Imran Khan to become Prime Minister. For example, there is no mention in the chapter that there was much accusation of electoral fraud, nor that the popular Nawaz Sharif, Imran Khan's main opponent, had been banned from running for public office for life, or that dubious political alliances were forged in the dark of night at the insistence of Pakistan's military just a few days before the elections. In order to gain a broader understanding of the background of the analysed speeches and the election of Imran Khan himself, it would have been very helpful for the reader to be provided with some information about how the military establishment brought Khan to power. Also the question of whether Imran Khan's longevity as Prime Minister might be grounded not mainly on his policies but on the fact that Pakistan's military has no other option available (to replace him), for now, might have been a question worth asking in this context.

Overall, *Pakistan: Alternative Imag(in)ings of the Nation State* presents a variety of issues in articles of high quality. Clearly, this edited volume will have

more longevity than many others caught up in day-to-day politics and descriptions of Pakistan, with the majority of the contributions offering alternative images of a country too often portrayed in a stereotypical way. Many of the articles will allow other scholars to build on the academic insight provided here. Interestingly, what is missing in most of the papers is the “nation state” mentioned in the book’s title. By side-stepping the debate about the “nation state”, the authors are able to focus on their specific themes and areas of interest, and to imagine the “nation state” in their own and different ways without explaining the term further. While this is perfectly acceptable, one might well ask why, then, the term appears in the title.

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RICHARD THWAITES / ROBERT FISHER / MOHAN POUDEL (eds), *Community Forestry in Nepal. Adapting to a Changing World*. London / New York: Earthscan from Routledge, 2019. 204 pages, 10 figures, 36 tables, £38.99. ISBN 978-0367-4037-20

The shift from centralised management of natural resources by government agencies to decentralised management by communities or with the participation of communities has been one of the most dramatic policy changes of the recent past. It is a global phenomenon that is, however, more pronounced in countries of the Global South. Community-Based Forest Management (CBFM), of which Community Forestry (CF) is one of several manifestations, has attracted particular attention.

The shift commenced in the 1970s in a context of increasing awareness that forest is an important asset for people in rural areas of developing countries, of global concern about deforestation, especially in the tropics, and of a reassessment of the role and capacity of farmers and communities to manage forests. Community Forestry, which can be broadly defined as community participation in forest management with at least some commitment to generating benefits for rural dwellers, started earlier and has been implemented more vigorously in Nepal than in other countries. With currently 30 per cent of its forests under CF management, Nepal is considered a success story and some elements of CF that were developed in Nepal, such as Community Forestry User Groups (CFUGs), have been adopted in other countries as well. A book on CF in Nepal is therefore of interest not only for readers with an affinity to Nepal, but also for those with a broader interest in policy changes concerning the management of natural resources, especially of forests.