

# Book Reviews

## South Asia

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### **Muslim Zion: Pakistan as a Political Idea**

Faisal Devji. London: Hurst, 2013. £16.95. 287 pp.

Those who study Pakistan have wrestled for decades with the vexed question of the country's national identity and national idea. All agree that Islam is a very important part of it, but there is no consensus – not among Pakistanis and not among their outside friends – on what that means.

Normally, the identity debate pits proponents of an Islamic state against those who take as their model Muhammad Ali Jinnah's speech to the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan, just four days before partition, arguing that religious observance by Pakistan's Muslims – and for that matter Christians and Hindus – 'has nothing to do with the business of the state'. Faisal Devji approaches his subject from a different angle: from the perspective of the history of political ideas. He is looking, he writes, for the 'abstract idea at the heart of Muslim nationalism, one created by the exclusion of blood and soil in the making of the new homeland for India's diverse and scattered Muslims' (p. 9). He regards religious nationalism – both Pakistan's and the other major example, Zionism – not as an expression of religious fundamentalism but as a modern political form, an expression of loyalty distinct from the ethnic and territorial bonds that had been the basis of state formation at least since Westphalia and even before.

In support of his thesis, he underlines a number of characteristics of the 'Pakistan idea' as it was expressed by its earliest adherents. He notes, as others have before him, that Jinnah and Pakistan's other founders came from parts of

India where Muslims were not in the majority, and which thus had no prospect of joining Pakistan. Similarly, Jinnah's choice of national language, Urdu, was the lingua franca only in those non-Pakistani areas. Thus Jinnah was more or less forced into a definition of self-determination that was distinct from territory. Interestingly, Jinnah also rejected the idea that Muslims were a 'minority' – this sounded too meagre for a community of their size.

As an analysis of the idea that launched the partition of the subcontinent, this book is fascinating. Devji situates the Pakistan idea in the more complex mosaic of communities that made up India during the pre-independence years. He traces the complex relations among the Sunni and Shia communities, as well as the implicit competition between Muslims and Hindu communities, like the Dalits, who were looking for special protections. He draws a parallel between the embrace of Buddhism by B.R. Ambedkar, the Dalit leader, and Jinnah's embrace of Muslim politics.

But the book does not really explain what makes contemporary Pakistan tick. The ideological guardians of Pakistan, six decades after partition, are more likely to hew to the army's intensely nationalistic view, with its stout defence of territory, or to the philosophy embodied by the Pakistani Taliban, who seek a Sharia-compliant state. Faisal Devji has often written in ways that turn conventional wisdom on its head (see, for example, his writing on Gandhi's attitude toward violence). This book is in that tradition, and is a useful reminder of how the prevailing spirit in Pakistan has been shaped by that country's stormy history.

**From the Ruins of Empire: The Intellectuals Who Remade Asia**

Pankaj Mishra. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012.

\$18.00. 356 pp.

Pankaj Mishra's study focuses on three men who created and popularised an Asian intellectual and political heritage that was distinct from, and in some senses opposed to, the Eurocentric framework that reigned in the countries dominated by Western colonial powers.

Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838–97) came originally from northwest Persia, but lived at various times in Afghanistan, Egypt, Ottoman Turkey, India and France. In the turbulent politics of the age, he became an activist and polemicist, and a would-be spokesman for the 'natives' in each place. Not surprisingly, he came to the unfavourable attention of the rulers and their foreign backers. He is regarded today as one of the ancestors of the Iranian revolution. This is a curious distinction: the modernisation and education that he advocated were both relentlessly non-European and at variance with traditional Islamic orthodoxy. Liang Qichao (1873–1929) had his political awakening with China's military defeat by Japan.

He too was a votary of education and popular political participation, and sought even to reform Confucian tradition. Exiled to Japan, he imbibed and nurtured the idea of pan-Asianism, and became interested in the 'lost country' of India that had been subjugated by the British. A visit to the United States exposed him to the good and the bad: on the one hand, democracy; on the other, robber baron capitalism. His efforts to re-engage in post-Qing Chinese politics crashed and burned, but his intellectual lantern burned brightly around the region.

Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) was the towering intellect of the three, with a literary standing that spanned the world. (Long before children in America learned poetry from countries outside the European tradition, I remember memorising one of his poems in elementary school.) He also has the rare distinction of being the author of the national anthems of two countries – India and Bangladesh. His own education encompassed both English and Bengali ingredients, and he did not fit neatly into any religious categories. His 1913 Nobel Prize in Literature was the pinnacle of his international recognition; his political activism was arguably less prescient and less successful than that of the other two.

Mishra weaves together his subjects' personal histories with the broader story of Asia and its relations with the rest of the world. If anyone was disposed to argue that Asia was an intellectual offshoot of the colonial powers during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this book would certainly set them straight. This is a fascinating and important story that tells us a great deal about the generation that brought the big countries of Asia to independence. Viewed from the vantage point of the twenty-first century, however, I came away with the feeling that the subjects' anti-Western edge, however understandable in the context of their experience, seemed to have rubbed off on the author.

**Aspiration and Ambivalence: Strategies and Realities of Counterinsurgency and State-Building in Afghanistan**

Vanda Felbab-Brown. Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2013. \$32.95. 358 pp.

Vanda Felbab-Brown's book begins with the author unexpectedly finding herself in the middle of a fierce firefight in downtown Kabul, and closes with a scene in a restaurant whose Afghan manager had initially refused admission to her Afghan translator. The ensuing row between the two Afghans, laced with appeals to Koranic authority and human dignity, concludes with one point on which the two agree: the outrageously extortionate behaviour of the Afghan government.

There are other gripping, frightening and funny vignettes in between these two, and it is a good read, but don't be deceived: this is a work of serious analysis. Felbab-Brown argues that a lack of success in establishing decent governance

is the major failure of the United States and Afghanistan's other donors, and that they still have a chance to set things right.

Felbab-Brown notes early on in the book that the governance Afghans care about differs from what Westerners would normally put into this category, which is chiefly narcotics eradication and corruption. What she heard about from Afghans, and what other surveys and polls also cite as their main concerns, starts with physical insecurity, the absence of the rule of law and the inability to adjudicate disputes. Crime is high on the list of complaints – either winked at or committed by police. Corruption is a problem, but not the 'fee for service' type of corruption that is endemic in many countries. Afghans resent the kinds of corruption that prevent public goods from being distributed, marginalise large parts of the national or local population, or paralyse the government. She describes the mafia-like local government set-up in some parts of Afghanistan, which creates an ideal environment for precisely these ills. She considers poppy eradication a disaster. Perversely, it does almost nothing to reduce the size of the harvest, but in the process pauperises rural households that lack alternative ways to earn a living. Far better, she argues, to go selectively after the major traffickers.

In her final chapter, she urges that governance be given 'the same level of importance as security, or nearly so' (p. 274). She calls for anti-crime training for the police, together with eliminating the many rogue elements of the Afghan Local Police. She proposes a highly differentiated approach to corruption, a careful move toward better ethnic balancing in the military and police officer corps, and an international effort to distance donors from the more toxic warlords. The watchword here is selectivity: picking out the aspects of each of these areas of governance that spill over into the government's broader ability to deliver services the Afghan people value. To give these carefully nuanced recommendations visibility, she urges donor governments to focus their efforts at first on one or two areas where enough progress could be made to create a demonstration effect.

Felbab-Brown argues that the United States and other donors can still make a contribution to this process, especially if they take a long-term perspective. This is the part of her argument that I find least compelling: if the United States and other donor governments could not influence the Afghan government at a time when their resources were rising, it is hard to believe that they will do so when funding is going down. Her analysis makes riveting reading; her diagnosis is compelling and important. But to believe that it will change Afghanistan's future requires something of an act of faith.

### **Samudra Manthan: Sino–Indian Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific**

C. Raja Mohan. Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2012. \$45.00. 329 pp.

Raja Mohan nests his masterful study of the Indo-Pacific strategic triangle in the Hindu fable of *Samudra Manthan*, in which angels and demons churn the ocean in search of immortality, with Vishnu tilting the contest toward the angels. Mohan's thesis is that the India–China rivalry that has emerged as one of the defining features of the Indo-Pacific strategic environment will be influenced decisively 'by the kind of policies that the United States, as the leading maritime power in the Indo-Pacific, might adopt' (p. 236). At the same time, China and India will transform global maritime norms, with important consequences for US maritime primacy.

Mohan builds his argument carefully. Both China and India have been primarily land powers for several centuries; both are rediscovering the importance of the sea both for their growing economies and for their strategic posture, and both are rediscovering their pre-modern maritime strategic heritage in the process. The underlying Sino–Indian rivalry, as Mohan describes it, is a blend of legitimate security requirements and incompatible concepts about territoriality, particularly regarding Tibet. India is expanding its relationships in Asia, especially in Southeast Asia, in search of a Pacific role; China has been expanding both its economic role and its military presence in the Indian Ocean. India has the more favourable strategic location, athwart the sea lanes on which both countries' energy supply depends; China has been quicker to expand its armed forces.

Mohan describes the policies both countries have used to limit outsiders' role in the waters they care most about. 'India's Monroe Doctrine' has become a less prominent feature of Indian strategic thinking as its relations with the United States have expanded. China's view of the South China Sea as internal space, on the other hand, has only grown stronger in the past decade. Both countries have expanded their connections with the nations of the Indian Ocean littoral. Mohan provides a compelling picture here – but even his account does not do justice to the rapidity with which China has increased its economic footprint along the Indian Ocean coastline.

The heart of the argument, and Mohan's policy recommendations, appear in the final chapter. The three 'triangle' countries face a security dilemma, in which each one's efforts to defend against security vulnerabilities risks provoking an arms race with at least one of the others. In principle, one could address this dilemma in one of three ways: multilaterally, through cooperative security arrangements; through a compact among great powers active in the region;

or through a balance of power. He argues that India, China and the United States are in practice using elements of all three – but that this is still a work in progress. China’s confident rise, even as it worries about its vulnerable energy supply, India’s quest for ‘strategic autonomy’, despite being the weakest of the three countries in this triangle, and the United States’ fiscal challenges will put pressure on strategic relationships in the region. Mohan has long been a proponent of closer strategic linkages between India and the United States, and he makes a good case for them here, even as he acknowledges the difficulty of implementing them against the background of independent India’s philosophical heritage.

There are many new books on the Indo-Pacific region. This one stands out, both for its perceptive argumentation and for being a good read.

**Transforming India: Challenges to the World’s Largest Democracy**

Sumantra Bose. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013. \$35.00. £25.00. 332 pp.

Sumantra Bose has a long history of writing carefully researched and sometimes contrarian analyses of post-conflict situations, covering such widely dispersed areas as Kashmir, Sri Lanka, the Balkans and Palestine. His current book includes some similar material, but views it through a different lens, focusing on the pressures facing India’s democracy, especially in the past quarter-century. Bose’s central argument is that local and regional identities and leaders are increasingly prominent in India’s democratic system, and that it is struggling to reconcile this new regionalism with the strong central government that its founding generation sought to create.

Bose starts with two chapters tracing the political development of India in the years since independence. He takes the year 1989 as a watershed, the point from which India’s pattern of coalition governments began, the Hindu nationalist party now known as the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) changed from a bit player in Indian politics to one of two parties with national ambitions, the Kashmir issue re-emerged on both the local and international scene, and two of the drivers of India’s current social and economic transformation – the ‘caste reservation’ issue and the market-oriented economic reforms that unleashed rapid economic growth – became important features of the scene.

He then looks in greater depth at three issues that he believes illustrate the nature of the challenges facing contemporary India: the politics of West Bengal, where the feisty Mamata Banerjee, a woman from a modest background but with huge political passion and energy, managed to unseat the long-regnant

communist government in an epic contest between two icons of Bengali sub-nationalism; the Maoist insurgencies that have convulsed much of east and central India in the past 20 years; and the tangled history of misrule and insurgency in Kashmir.

The strongest part of the book is the general history, which weaves together the complexity of Indian political history in ways that will be arresting both for the experienced India hand and for newcomers to the region. The case studies are fascinating and include a wealth of detail. He makes a good case that regionalism is one of the driving features of all three. But, as his detailed accounts make clear, these same cases would also support a conclusion that governmental ineptitude, or the hangover of caste relationships from the past, or the ethno-linguistic differences that are particularly marked in the tribal parts of India (where 'Indian-ness' is perhaps less instinctively obvious), or a number of other challenges, contributed as much as regionalism to the difficulty of governing this sprawling country. It was disappointing that Bose chose not to discuss his family relationships with some of the major figures of the West Bengal story. He is the great nephew of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, the still iconic founder of the Second-World-War-era Indian National Army that sought Japanese support for India's independence struggle, and son of Krishna Bose, one of Mamata Banerjee's political supporters.

The book's argument is an important one. The main story about India for the past 20 years has been economic growth – or, more recently, the slowdown. Economics are hugely important, but Bose's book reminds us of all the other things that go into the complicated business of governing India.