

Book Reviews

South Asia

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Pakistan Under Siege: Extremism, Society, and the State

Madiha Afzal. Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2018. \$36.99. 192 pp.

Madiha Afzal applies a political scientist's scalpel to the vexed question of Pakistan's relationship with extremism. Using survey data, she unpacks trends and current attitudes toward extremist violence, hardline Islamist organisations and the United States, and comes up with a contradictory picture. A large percentage of Pakistanis oppose extremist violence, especially following the 2014 attack on a school for military dependants in Peshawar. A large percentage are deeply suspicious of the United States and perceive elaborate conspiracies to explain their sinister view of what the US is or might be doing.

None of these findings is very surprising taken by itself. What makes Afzal's analysis stand out from the conventional wisdom is her discussion of how the state and the military have used the 'Pakistan ideology' – the phrase is in regular use in Pakistan – to create a legal and educational underpinning that excuses extremist violence and institutionalises an especially harsh interpretation of Islam. The results have been on public display on many occasions, notably the assassination of Punjab governor Salmaan Taseer by one of his bodyguards and the garlanding of the assassin by admirers in Lahore. What Afzal has now explained is the way Pakistan's legal structure and educational materials have influenced the way people think and, just as importantly, what is considered to be proper public discourse. The issue at the root of Taseer's assassination – the charge of blasphemy and consequent death sentence passed on a Pakistani Christian woman, Asia Bibi, whose innocence Taseer had defended and whose

sentence has since been overturned by Pakistan's supreme court – is still a hot-button public issue.

Pakistan was founded to provide a homeland for the subcontinent's Muslims, and Islam has always been at the heart of its collective identity. But the drive to excuse extremism results from another aspect of Pakistan's founding narrative: the fear that India is and always will be determined to undermine Pakistan. Afzal writes, 'The army justifies its wars as jihad and uses the jihadi narrative to support militants behind the scenes', which 'extends to a pass for ordinary citizens who respond violently' (p. 149). This sense of victimhood is part of the country's 'founding narrative' (p. 151).

Afzal argues that Pakistan still has time to change, to align prevailing policy views with the less extremist perspective that she believes better reflects how Pakistanis actually think. She argues for a major overhaul of educational materials and, more broadly, for a revamping of the country's official ideology.

Pakistan Under Siege is fascinating, and a tremendously valuable contribution to the literature. I would like to believe that the author's solution might work. However, as Afzal notes, the ideology that now prevails is deeply embedded in the army. More importantly, changing a guiding philosophy so tightly woven into the state is more easily said than done.

Fierce Enigmas: A History of the United States in South Asia

Srinath Raghavan. New York: Basic Books, 2018.

£30.00/\$40.00. 486 pp.

Srinath Raghavan is one of India's most prominent historians, with a gift for combining meticulous scholarship with a delightful grace of expression. He has a dazzling list of historical works to his credit, covering many facets of India's foreign and military policy. In *Fierce Enigmas*, he sets out to synthesise the American approach to South Asia, and specifically to India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. He takes the long view, and develops his story along three axes: power, both military and economic; ideology, which he defines to mean both American exceptionalism and democracy; and culture, meaning the social assumptions of racial and cultural superiority that he believes shaped the encounter in fundamental ways. This is a masterful book, though I do not altogether agree with his argument.

The cultural dimension looms largest in the period up to India's independence. His description of the role of missionaries and aid officials in laying the foundation for relations between the people of India and of the United States is a part of their shared history that is too little known. The racial attitudes he describes are certainly accurately depicted, though I believe that he gives

them more policy influence than they deserve. India became independent at about the same time that the United States was emerging as a major global power, so the power and ideological dimensions became more salient from 1947 onward.

As Raghavan recognises, US policy interest in South Asia was largely driven by the Cold War until the collapse of the Soviet Union upended the international chessboard. Because Pakistan signed on to the US-led alliance system whereas India pursued a non-aligned policy with an important relationship with the Soviet Union, Pakistan had an importance for Washington that was out of proportion to its relatively small size in the South Asian firmament. The story of the past three decades has been the growing US interest in India – and vice versa.

Raghavan considers the argument that Washington and New Delhi were brought together by their shared wariness of China insufficient to explain their rapprochement. He is right in this: important as the countries' shared security interests are, they aren't the whole story. But I believe his account gives too little weight to India's own economic expansion after 1990, and the attraction this provided to both American policymakers and US businesses.

As with Raghavan's other books, this one relies heavily on documentary evidence. Published documents from the past 20 years are scarce, which makes recent history harder to write. Despite the widely shared view that the US is now India's most important relationship, relatively few Indian scholars have immersed themselves in studying the United States the way Raghavan has. His carefully drawn account fills an important gap.

Emergency Chronicles: Indira Gandhi and Democracy's Turning Point

Gyan Prakash. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019.
£24.00/\$29.95. 439 pp.

Gyan Prakash, Dayton-Stockton Professor of History at Princeton University, has taken a deep dive into the history of Indira Gandhi's two-year 'Emergency', modern India's experiment with autocratic government. The key driver of the Emergency, in Prakash's view, was the disconnect between India's soaring promises of democracy and prosperity and the flawed results available to the country's poor. Added to this was Gandhi's determination to do anything to avoid being driven from power, and in the first instance to stamp out the protest campaign led by Jayaprakash Narayan, then in his 70s. Colonial-era laws and India's constitutional deliberations had been built into independent India's legal-structure provisions designed to give governments freedom of action during turbulent times, making possible the mechanics of the Emergency. And

with an autocratic government in place and wide powers available to the police, it was an easy step to giving extra-legal power to Gandhi's son Sanjay and his friends to implement the projects they held dear, from sterilisation campaigns to 'urban renewal'.

The themes that recur throughout Prakash's narrative are the arbitrariness of decisions during that period; the brutality visited upon those caught up in the crackdowns that punctuated the Emergency; and, especially, the toxic quality of disappointed hopes for democracy.

The Emergency ended in 1977 with a democratic election that Gandhi lost. India's battered institutions had the inner strength to run a fair election, and the circle around Gandhi seems to have told her she was sure to win. The government that followed was a hastily assembled collection of 'anything but Congress', and fell apart in two years, bringing Gandhi back to the helm. The end of the story was deeply ironic: Gandhi was assassinated in 1984; 30 years later, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the descendant of the party that had been systematically targeted during the Emergency, returned in strength under Narendra Modi, whose movement the author characterises as profoundly undemocratic.

Prakash's argument that the Emergency was above all a reflection of the Indian government's failure to live up to the promises of democracy makes this an uncomfortably timely book. India, the United States, Britain and a number of other European countries have elected leaders who want to overturn what significant numbers of voters see as a system that has let them down. In India – and potentially in those other countries as well – autocracy can slide quickly and easily into brutality and uncontrolled power. Where I think the author goes too far is in his implicit assumption that democracy has to be close to perfect in order to succeed. He is right on target, however, in the remarkable chapter on 'Freedom Behind Bars' that describes the strength of character adversity brought out in those who made it through imprisonment and other evils visited upon them.

Messengers of Hindu Nationalism: How the RSS Reshaped India

Walter Andersen and Shridhar D. Damle. London: C. Hurst & Co., 2019. £25.00. 405 pp.

Walter Andersen and Shridhar Damle wrote *The Brotherhood in Saffron*, the classic study of India's most prominent Hindu nationalist organisation, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). Thirty years after its publication, the two authors have joined forces again. Their subject is still the RSS, but the story they

tell is primarily about how that organisation has managed the transition of the Hindu nationalist movement to a dominant role in Indian politics.

This has been a surprisingly complicated transformation. Traditionally, the RSS was a movement devoted to the advancement of Hinduism and Hindu culture that was explicitly outside of the political-party framework. The BJP succeeded the Bharatiya Jana Sangh as the political party representing *Hindutva* (Hindu nationalism) in 1980. But the key event in forcing the RSS to deal with the BJP as a political party came in 2014, when Modi won a single-party majority for the BJP, the first such majority in decades, and then won an even bigger majority in 2019.

This was clearly a tremendous opportunity for the RSS, and for those who shared its view of India and of Hindu culture. The number of local RSS units, or *shakhas*, went up sharply whenever the BJP was in power. But having allies in power has also exposed the tensions within the RSS on a number of key points, and the tug of war between the RSS's view of economics and Modi's own view of how to shape the Indian economy.

Three examples illustrate the challenge. Traditionally, the RSS favoured economic self-sufficiency. The Modi government honours this tradition in its trade policy, which continues the basically cautious Indian approach to opening the country's market. But Modi has been interested in attracting foreign investment, which was more problematic to RSS economic purists. Government policy has won this competition. The second example shows a different balance. The RSS has had to accept that India has citizens of many different religions, but this has not come easily. One strand in the organisation wants to encourage those of other religions to 'come back home' to their presumed Hindu roots. The RSS has gone through its classic consultations on this issue, but it is noteworthy that Modi, while not associating himself with the 'reconversion' idea, has not publicly chastised those who lead it.

The Indian government's decision to revoke the limited autonomy enjoyed by Jammu and Kashmir provides a third example, in which Modi kept a campaign promise to erase the legal differences between India's only Muslim-majority state and the rest of the country. In the process, he opted decisively for the traditional RSS position that India was fundamentally a Hindu state. He also complicated his task of governing. The tension between those two goals is likely to endure.

This is an important and quite detailed account of how the intellectual superstructure of Modi's government works, and where one can expect tensions in the future. Andersen and Damle have organised the book by issues. This, and their practice of using the Hindi terms for many of the RSS's terms of art, mean

that the book will probably appeal more to specialists than to the general public. But it will be hard to find a better telling of this story.

Many Rivers, One Sea: Bangladesh and the Challenge of Islamist Militancy

Joseph Allchin. London: C. Hurst & Co., 2019. £17.99. 237 pp.

When Bangladesh became independent and for several decades thereafter, the country was seen as being largely free of the Islamist militancy that had become a major feature of the political landscape in so many other Muslim-majority countries. Secularism was one of the founding principles articulated by the father of the country, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and by his Awami League.

Joseph Allchin, a journalist with extensive experience in Bangladesh, traces the transformation of the Bangladeshi scene, starting earlier than many people might have expected. His take-off point is the 1977 decision of General Ziaur Rahman, who became president after Sheikh Mujibur's assassination, to remove the word 'secular' from the country's formal title. The mobilisation of the Islamist movements took place over several decades, but the seed had been planted at the heart of the country's political competition. General Ziaur's Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), inherited by his widow Khaleda Zia when he too was killed, allied itself with Jamaat-e-Islami.

The issue of militancy burst into public consciousness with two developments in 2013. The first was the establishment, at the insistence of Awami League prime minister Sheikh Hasina, Mujibur's daughter, of an International Crimes Tribunal to try those who were charged with atrocities during the country's 1971 independence war. There was a strong Islamist character to many of those accused and eventually executed. The second was the public assassination of a number of bloggers accused of being atheists. Three years later came the attack on the Holey Artisan Bakery, an upscale eatery in a Dhaka suburb where many expatriates lived. The fact that the perpetrators were upper-middle-class young men made clear beyond any doubt that violent extremism had come to Bangladesh.

Allchin argues correctly that asking whether the violence in Bangladesh came from an entrenched Islamic State (ISIS) presence or from local actors presents a false choice. Both were involved. He also notes, again correctly, that the government had ceded ground to the extremists. Sheikh Hasina, who now commands the Awami League and has alternated in power with the BNP's Khaleda Zia, continues to proclaim her adherence to secularism. But the Awami League too has sought to neutralise the religious issue by a tactical association with other Islamist organisations.

Bangladesh has known astonishing economic success, especially considering the economic collapse that attended its birth. Allchin's grippingly written account of the rise and modus operandi of its militant movements is sobering, and will add to the political challenges the country faces.