

South Asia

Teresita C. Schaffer

Pakistan: A Kaleidoscope of Islam

Mariam Abou Zahab. London: C. Hurst & Co., 2020. £20.00.

256 pp.

Mariam Abou Zahab was born in France and became fascinated by Islam as a young woman travelling in South Asia, eventually converting to Shi'ism. She plunged into life in the conflict zones of the Middle East and South Asia, working as an activist and writing extensively. She studied Urdu in France, and eventually added Persian and Pashtu to her repertoire. The obituary released upon her death in 2017 appears as the preface to this book. It paints a picture of a witty, engaging and sometimes enigmatic woman who was passionate about the causes to which she devoted her life and driven to understand deeply the cultures that animated them.

Abou Zahab examines the Islamist scene in Pakistan through several lenses: religious belief and traditions; sociology; local and regional politics; and relations with the army. The big theme running through the book is her observation that among all these perspectives, local factors were far more important than international ones, both in explaining the dynamics of individual movements and especially in driving the relations among them. She identifies the various ideological strands familiar to students of Pakistani and Indian Islam – Deobandis (including the major Sunni groups), Barelvis (the face of popular Islam), the more politically engaged Jamaat-e-Islami, Ahl-e-Hadith – but she convincingly shows that the real fault lines within the Islamist 'family' come from social class and local rivalries.

I found the chapter on Jhang most fascinating. Jhang is a region of southern Punjab, close to the Indian border, with a distinctive local language. It has produced a number of prominent national politicians. The major landholders are Shia, but those who work the land are often Sunni. Abou Zahab superimposes on this familiar landscape a few more fault lines, including commercial rivalries between urban and rural areas, 'feudal' Shi'ites versus those who migrated to the area, and different microgroups within both the Shia and Sunni communities. This area saw the birth of the Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), an anti-Shia militant group, which also had a violent rivalry with other Sunni groups. All these local rivalries carry more weight than the ideological differences that too often dominate discussions of Islam in Pakistan.

Another riveting chapter discusses the Pashtun and Punjabi Taliban. It explores the complicated relationships between these groups and Pakistan's

government and army. The author argues that former president Pervez Musharraf legitimised the SSP, allowing its leader to run for parliament. At the same time, two competing organisations, Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Muhammad, had the closest ties with the army. This is not the first time Pakistani authorities have been accused of backing both sides in an internecine quarrel, but it is an interesting setting.

Most of this book appeared in other publications between 2004 and 2013. About Zahab's perspective is unusual, but it is an important one, and having these chapters between the same covers gives those seeking a deeper understanding of Pakistan a valuable resource.

Backstage: The Story Behind India's High Growth Years

Montek Singh Ahluwalia. New Delhi: Rupa, 2020. ₹595.00.

464 pp.

Montek Singh Ahluwalia, universally known as Montek, is a name to be reckoned with on the Indian economic scene. Many people reflexively think of him as a pillar of the elite Indian Administrative Service (IAS). In fact, he started his career in the World Bank, which technically makes him an outsider who came 'inside'. As the title of the book suggests, he is best known for the three decades he spent as one of India's most senior and most powerful economic officials. This period dominates his memoir.

The beginning of his long stint in Indian government service involved not just a return home from Washington DC, but also a culture change. He arrived just as the government that followed Indira Gandhi's experiment with autocracy was falling apart, a time I remember as one of great uncertainty. Manmohan Singh, who later became finance minister and then prime minister, was then chief economic adviser to the government. He had lured Montek away from the World Bank, installed him in the economic adviser's office, and became his most important backer in the government. For Montek, the challenge was to fit into a ministry staffed overwhelmingly by IAS officers, with that service's fixed etiquette and well-established networks.

A few months later, an election brought Indira Gandhi back to power. After her assassination, her son Rajiv became prime minister. Montek credits Rajiv with seeing India's possibilities in ways that many policymakers were unable to. He started the process – the book cites in particular the telecommunications sector and the empowerment of local governments – but these were relatively small and cautious steps.

The book conveys well the drama that ensued when the reform effort began in earnest. Montek writes that he had been convinced that making bold

reforms was important. But the caution in the DNA of the Indian government was readily apparent. He depicts the struggle to change the government's rule reserving certain sectors of the economy for small industry. So many of the changes that were undertaken seemed frightening to long-time officials. The government implemented a currency devaluation in stages; liberalised foreign-investment policy amid considerable controversy; wrestled with a broadside from the politicians of the left, arguing that the government should use controls rather than market mechanisms; and put in place a complex system for gradually reducing quantitative controls on trade.

The results were dramatic. India's economic growth surged and millions were lifted out of poverty. India is now recognised as an important economic power. Montek and Manmohan Singh had good reason to be pleased with what they accomplished. But the caution that characterised each of these decisions is still an important feature of the Indian government. The success of the programme did not make successor governments confident about continuing to open the market. After the trade reforms were announced, the minister of state for commerce, P. Chidambaram, was quoted in a newspaper as having said 'we have always had wings but suffered a fear of flying' (p. 137). Reform fatigue is especially apparent now, following the dislocation caused by the pandemic. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who ran as a reformer, is now stressing the more traditional approach – 'Make in India'.

This is an engaging memoir. Even those who lived the story will find nuggets of history they probably did not know about. Montek shares his personal views on the people he worked with. Manmohan Singh and Rajiv come out as heroes. He also shares, in some detail, his economic reasoning. This part is a bit more taxing, but is certainly a critical part of the story. *Backstage* supplies not just the 'backstory', but also the human story behind the decisions that changed the face of the Indian economy.

**Fateful Triangle: How China Shaped U.S.–India Relations
During the Cold War**

Tanvi Madan. Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2020. \$35.99. 380 pp.

Tanvi Madan is a star in the rising generation of US-based scholars of Indian foreign relations. She set out to complicate the oversimplified picture of the US–China–India triangle that constitutes the conventional wisdom. In the process, she has produced an excellent account of the drivers of Indian foreign policy, showing both its ebbs and flows through the period she covers (1949–79) and its major enduring themes.

Madan argues that China shaped the context in which India operated throughout this period, and that India's ties with China and the United States pulled the centre of gravity of India's policy back and forth. She identifies four phases. The first was characterised by divergence (1949–56): the US looked on China with clear hostility; India had hopes for harmony between the two Asian giants; and India's commitment to non-alignment ensured that Delhi would not get particularly close to Washington. This was followed by a period of US–India policy convergence (1956–62), culminating in China's successful attack on India in October 1962 and the opening of a military pipeline from the US to India. This represented the zenith of Cold War-era India–US ties. In the third phase, marked by dependence and disillusionment between the US and India (1963–68), the warmth of 1962 cooled – but India began to worry that distancing itself from the US would create an uncomfortable degree of Indian dependence on Russia. Finally, the disengagement phase (1969–79) was characterised by a general decline in the priority that India and the US gave to their mutual relationship. These years included Henry Kissinger's and Richard Nixon's opening to China, India's intervention in Bangladesh's freedom war and the Indo-Soviet treaty of 1971.

A few recurring themes took on particular importance during these phases. The most striking was the argument, made by foreign-policy professionals in every US administration from Harry Truman to Nixon, that the US had a major interest in seeing India succeed as an economically successful democracy, lest China look like a better model for economic development. This is an argument that I associate particularly with Chester Bowles, who was US ambassador for two years in the 1950s and again from 1964–68, but Madan quotes a long string of others to the same effect.

A second theme was the shifting meaning of non-alignment. Jawaharlal Nehru's signature contribution to foreign policy, 'non-alignment' remains a hallowed term, and its intellectual impact on Indian foreign-policy thinking remains strong. In recent years, however, foreign-policy commentators have begun to look at the term in a different light. The phrase often used today is 'strategic autonomy'. Madan traces the concept of non-alignment through the policy debates chronicled in her book. In concluding, she argues that the real core of India's foreign policy is 'diversification'. This is the goal that the country's policymakers have pursued during the 73 years of independence.

Putting these two themes together, the Indian government's internal debates, as Madan depicts them from her archival research, are fascinating. India's foreign-policy leaders are painfully aware that they need the United States – and that once the US had normalised relations with China, Washington did not

need Delhi as much as in the past. Unfortunately, the ethos of non-alignment discouraged candid discussion between the two governments on this apparent asymmetry. The two sides might have had an easier time improving relations if they allowed more candour into the room!

My one regret is that the story stops, at least in this book, in 1979. The remarkable transformation of US–India relations did not really start until 2000. China is still important in setting the context. But the role India seeks to play, and especially its capacity to shape the international environment, have both expanded dramatically. India’s economic success is one important reason – but China’s economic success has been even more spectacular than India’s. I hope we can look forward to the next instalment.