

Modern South Asia: History, Culture, Political Economy

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In the last twenty years or so there have been great transformations in the historiography of modern South Asia. It would not be too crude an exaggeration to say that no western historian of much intellectual ambition engaged with the subject from James Mill in the early nineteenth century until after the second world war, while Indian historians were little known outside the subcontinent. All that has changed. Highly innovative work that commands the attention of all historians, not merely of regional specialists, is now done on modern South Asia. This work comes out of Indian and western universities, where scholars from South Asia, like Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal, play a very prominent role.

Works of synthesis on modern South Asia have not kept up with the flow of monographs, the installments of *Subaltern Studies* or the articles that appear in profusion in *The Indian Journal of Economic and Social History* or in *Modern Asian Studies*. The late Percy Spear and Stanley Wolpert, the two authors who have commanded the field in Britain for so long in introducing general readers or undergraduates to South Asian history, now look distinctly dated. A new and authoritative synthesis like this one is therefore very welcome.

Modern South Asia introduces the reader not merely to new interpretations of topics such as the rise of British power, nationalism and partition, but to new perspectives on the subject as a whole. The traditional historiography of British India tended to be very much history from above. British Governor Generals were placed in the centre of the stage and judged as good, bad or indifferent by whatever criteria were currently deemed appropriate. In later and more liberal treatments, such as those of Spear and Wolpert, prominent Indians who engaged with the Raj, Rammohan Roy, the early nationalists and the great protagonists in the end of empire - Gandhi, Nehru and Jinnah, were also given full treatment. Popular accounts published in this country remain obsessed with personalities, above all with Mountbatten, Wavell and the leadership of Congress and the League. 'Ordinary' Indians were reduced to abstract Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs or in books with any pretensions to scholarship to statistics in the perennial debates as to whether India got richer or poorer under the British.

Bose and Jalal try to write history from below. They are of course interested in Gandhi, Nehru and Jinnah and have important things to say about them, which lay readers may well find surprising and challenging. The British, however, are not personalised. Wavell does not appear in the index and the only reference to Warren Hastings tells the reader that he was impeached. There is no room for cultural brokers like William Carey. Instead, the British presence in India is depicted as a colonial state, taking forms that varied with its underlying economic rationale. In the early nineteenth century that rationale shifted from oceanic trade to the extraction of land revenue; in the later nineteenth century priorities changed to the generation of an export surplus and the stimulation of rural purchasing power for British imports. Something is of course lost in such a synoptic view. The Raj may well seem to be a much more unified, calculating and rational institution than was actually the case, and the diversity of the British presence is inevitably telescoped. Nevertheless Bose and Jalal could well reply that there are enough books of *The Men who Ruled India* genre for those who wish to recapture that diversity and they have other purposes to fulfil.

They wish attention to be paid not to the British, except as a source of some of the pressures that shaped Indian society, or to the Indian elite, but to what they term 'intermediate social groups', such as merchants and traders and those who filled minor offices, and the 'subaltern groups', peasants, the urban poor and the 'tribals', at the bottom of society. They are concerned with women as well as with men. They recognise the crucial importance of labels such as Hindu or Muslim in the twentieth century, but insist that these are not immutable distinctions that have endured for centuries; they have a relatively recent history. 'The undue and ahistorical privileging of religion in the periodization of Indian history' must be discarded. 'There are no grounds for branding the ancient, medieval and modern periods of the subcontinent's long and complex history as Hindu, Muslim and British' (p. 13). Bose and Jalal urge historians to concern themselves with smaller entities, those that they call 'communitarian' rather than with the 'communal' labels attached to supposedly monolithic religions. As with all the other concepts that the authors use, the uninitiated probably require much more explanation of community' than is offered to them, but the issue is summarised on p. 108: 'What needs emphasizing is that there were multiple and competing narratives informed by religious and linguistic cultural identities seeking to contribute to the emerging discourse on the Indian nation.' These voices were eventually drowned by the assertion of religion in the making of Pakistan and by the counter-assertion, at least for a time, of secular nationalism's right to inherit the centralised state created by the British and to call it 'India'. It has been the ultimate fate of the communities, except in Bangladesh, to be subordinated to one or other of these leviathans.

There is a strong ideological commitment behind this interpretation of South Asia's history, as there is behind any historical interpretation of any interest. Its assumptions are very different from those embodied in recent western attempts at synthesis, such as those of Spear or Wolpert. Both of them seem to have believed in an essential Indianness and to have understood its history as a series of interchanges between that essence and outside influences, most obviously Muslim and British ones. This for Spear was 'the inner meaning of modern Indian history, culminating in Gandhi and the national movement, independence and the reign of Nehru'. In brief sections at the end of their books he and Wolpert assessed the state of contemporary India, noting the extent of western influence and the survival of 'traditions'. For Wolpert, 'The more India changes, the more Indian it remains'. Significantly, neither of them wrote anything about post-1947 Pakistan, let alone

Bangladesh. For them, partition was a disaster and the criterion for judging the success of independence was the survival of India as a unitary, secular state.

Neither intellectual trends nor recent events have been kind to such interpretations. Concepts of an essential, timeless India have been subjected to withering analysis. They are emphatically rejected as western constructions, designed to emphasise India's difference and therefore its inferiority. Indian nationalism as it emerged at the end of the nineteenth century is not generally seen as any kind of fulfilment of India's history, but rather as a colonial legacy. A narrow elite were able to use western concepts of nation and state as the means to obtain power over the rest of the population and to perpetuate the subordination of the 'subalterns'. Bose and Jalal are more sympathetic to nationalist aspirations than it is currently fashionable to be, arguing that discriminating nationalists were capable of recognising the claims of linguistic and regional diversity to be embodied in the new Indian nation. Nevertheless, the heroes of the nationalist pantheon are left badly scarred. Congress under Gandhi 'more often than not represented the class interests of the middle to richer peasantry and industrial capitalists in the urban sector'. For the poor, the Mahatma offered only "the palliative remedy of trusteeship" (p. 144). Nehru is portrayed as the exponent of a unitary nationalism that took over and operated the colonial centralised state. His claims to have founded a democratic new India are called into question. Of the great leaders, only Jinnah, so often reviled in conventional historiography, emerges largely unscathed. It is argued that a separate Pakistan based on religion was not at all what he intended. He had a vision of a pluralistic India in which a Muslim 'nation' would co-exist with other nations and be able to exercise 'an equitable share of power' in the centre (p. 193).

What many recent historians have seen as a flawed nationalism inevitably, in their eyes, produced flawed states after independence. Bose and Jalal do not endorse the respect, if often tempered with anxiety for the future, accorded in most western accounts to Indian 'democracy', let alone to the workings of the states of Pakistan or Bangladesh. They dislike the centralisation of power which, they believe, Nehru perpetuated from the past. Expectations that a strong state might be an effective agent for driving through 'modernity' are now often looked at with as much scepticism as is accorded to the concept of 'modernity' itself, taken to be another western construct. On the role of the Indian state as a promoter of economic or social development, Bose and Jalal are a little ambiguous. They recognise that the economic liberalisation of the early 1990s removed 'the more stifling bureaucratic controls on industry', but insist that 'state and public action' have an important role in remedying deficiencies in health and education (p. 229). The political failures of India seem glaring to them. The narrow basis of the Nehru regime could not be sustained. As subsequent leaders, notably Indira Gandhi, endeavoured to become more populist they were forced to invoke Hindu 'majoritarianism' as a counter to regional challenges. The legacies of military rule in Pakistan have been 'a parallel arms and drugs economy, administrative paralysis, and violent social conflict' (p. 230).

In the last chapter of the book, reflections on fifty years of independence, Bose and Jalal offer their alternative scenario for the evolution of modern South Asia. Instead of a transfer of 'colonial structures of state and ideologies of sovereignty' to 'mainstream nationalist elites' (pp. 239-40), they would have preferred the survival of pre-colonial ideals and practices, whether under the Mughals or their eighteenth-century successors, of 'flexible, nuanced, and overarching suzerainties', which observed both individual and communitarian rights' and had no 'notion of absolute sovereignty' or 'singular allegiance' (p. 240). There must be a return to 'a political and state system based on layered and shared sovereignties' (p. 243).

Assuming that the pre-colonial order had some of the characteristics attributed to it by Bose and Jalal, how did the shift come about some hundred and fifty years later to two and subsequently to three sovereign successor states, one overtly based on religion and the others to a considerable degree dominated by parties organised according to religious allegiance? The attempt to answer this question is the book's major theme.

Bose and Jalal attribute much to the nature of colonial rule. They rightly point out that the British had a strong concept of a sovereign state from the eighteenth century onwards and that nationalists were more inclined to try to capture this powerful state for themselves than to dismantle it. Bose and Jalal are, however, also critical of what might seem to be opposite trends in colonial rule, a willingness to devolve authority to regions within a nominally federal structure and to assure separate rights to what the British identified as

minorities. The situation created by the 1935 Government of India Act with its carefully rigged provisions that no Indian group should be able to exercise absolute power at the centre and with its provinces based on historical evolution rather than on religion does not look all that different from Bose's and Jalal's ideal, except of course for the survival of a sovereign imperial presence.

The British are also held responsible, in part at least, for the consolidation of more or less unified Hindu or Muslim religious entities. British views that India was so divided go back to the early days of their rule and the British had something to do with the process of defining the orthodoxies to which Hindus and Muslims increasingly adhered. In the south, the East India Company 'sponsored a somewhat spurious neo-Brahmanical ruling ideology' based on a rigid definition of caste, while British scholars 'gave far greater importance to doctrinal Islam or the sharia as propagated by the ulema' than to the 'eclectic religion shot through with local customary practices which was followed by the vast majority of Indian Muslims' (p. 74). The late nineteenth-century censuses embodied British notions of clear-cut religious divisions and electoral constituencies were eventually demarcated on religious lines. Yet Bose and Jalal stop well short of divide and rule as a full explanation for the hardening of the Hindu/Muslim divide, let alone for partition in 1947. They see the emergence of a variety of Muslim identities, 'linked to the fact of British colonial rule without being wholly shaped by it' (p.167). The creation of a Pakistan consisting of no more than parts of the Muslim majority provinces of the old British India was the outcome of a whole series of contingent events, carefully analysed in this book. The partition of the areas where Muslims lived between Pakistan and India, far from being the fulfilment of the idea an Islamic nation, was 'its most decisive political abortion' (p. 188).

This review has tried to indicate something of the richness of this book and of the intellectual excitement that it generates. Will it succeed in displacing other introductory accounts to provide 'the multi-dimensional, high definition overview of modern South Asian history' (p. 5) which the authors, with justification, find lacking elsewhere? There can be not the slightest doubt that it addresses the issues which currently dominate a highly creative body of historical writing, that this writing has been comprehensively mastered and that persuasive interpretations of it are offered. The book is a manifesto as well as an historical account, but readers will have no difficulty in identifying the authors' ideological agenda and in making up their own minds about it. Total success seems, however, to require a little more than these admirable attributes. It requires a high quality of exposition if an audience without prior knowledge is to be caught and held. That quality is lacking.

Whatever their level of intellectual aspiration, Spear's books were, as the authors generously acknowledge, 'elegantly written'. What he meant was always abundantly clear and he carried his readers along with him with ease. The same cannot be said for this book, except where the authors resort to some splendidly apposite poetic quotations.

The introductory chapter embodies what the uninitiated will surely find to be a major defect in the book. The later pages of that chapter become hopelessly over-allusive. The authors clearly wish to establish their position in relation to their peers, but that is surely not the purpose of a book such as this. Instead, they are likely to baffle, and one fears to irritate and put off, the serious inquirer who might like to know what 'subalternity' is or what is the difference between 'dissonance or polyvalence' and might well welcome 'a much-needed decentred balance in our current, disoriented scholarly predicament' (p. 11) if she knew what any of that meant or if the authors would condescend to tell her. The issues raised in the introduction are serious ones but it is self-indulgent to write in that way in a book like this.

The other main problem that the lay reader is likely to face is the denseness of the exposition in many places. The authors set out to cover a great deal in a relatively short space and this inevitably means cutting corners rather than offering full explanations. For instance, in a section on the emergence of successor states to the Mughal empire the reader is told about 'a transition from prebendal to patrimonial land holdings' (pp. 52-3), but the following sentences do not seem to explain or to illustrate what that might mean. In short, one feels that what this book desperately needed was an aggressive copy editor prepared to say over and over again: 'Stop, I do not know what that means; please explain it to me.' *Modern South Asia* would have benefited greatly from that salutary discipline. As it is, it is certainly a work that professionals and the initiated will

greatly admire but it is one whose wider impact may be more limited than it deserves to be.

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