

BOOK REVIEW

**PARALLEL PATHWAYS: ESSAYS ON HINDU
MUSLIM RELATIONS (1707-1857)**

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Review by Chander Pal Singh

True purpose of history is to know the truth about the past. But history is seldom written that way. In reality, history is often written to present the past in a particular way to suit the needs of a particular ideology or politics. Accordingly, myths about history are created and some of them are repeated so many times that they become known as 'facts'. History becomes interpretations from cocooned perspective. Ideology, hermeneutics and rhetoric rob history from unraveling the 'authentic' story. Perpetrators of such myths, however noble their intentions might be, have done more harm than the good they might claim, because they hide the truth and any solution of the present problems can only be based on correct diagnosis based on the right understanding of history.

One of the myths about Indian history is that communal tension between Hindus and Muslims is entirely a product of the British colonial rule. Supporters of this theory emphasize the 'fact' that Hindus and Muslims fought together against the British in the Great Revolt of 1857 which is also viewed by nationalist historians as the First War of Independence. After the revolt was crushed, colonial administrators vigorously took up the policy of *divide et impera* and made Hindus and Muslims bitter rivals leading to many communal riots ultimately culminating into partition of India on religious grounds.

In a larger perspective, the thesis of composite culture i.e. that over the centuries of living together there has been a synthesis of world views and living habits of Hindus and Muslims, is a product of modern politics. It was first used by Indian National Congress to counter the demand for Pakistan by the Muslim League and after the independence it was used for the purpose of vote bank politics. First major works on the issue -*The Indian Heritage* by Humayun Kabir and *The Discovery of India* by Jawaharlal Nehru – appeared as late as in 1946 in the wake of the demand for Pakistan. The debate was revived in 1960s and it was marked by another landmark work, *Influence of Islam on Indian Culture* by Tara Chand (published in 1963). After that there has been a plethora of works on this line and it has become almost a 'settled fact' so much so, that any historian questioning the approach is immediately branded communal.

Given this background, *Parallel Pathways* by Meenakshi Jain is a path breaking work in the sense that it examines the state of Hindu -Muslim relations from 1707A.D. to 1857A.D., i.e. the death of the last great Mughal emperor Aurangzeb, to the Great Revolt of 1857. As we have seen the period in question is vital to understand the pre-British state of relations among the two communities. Meenakshi Jain argues that there were fundamental differences between the two communities which aggravated during Mughal decline and resurgence of Hindu and Sikh powers. Major factor behind this development, she articulates, was the rise of Muslim orthodoxy which became more and more gloomy regarding the future in a land where Muslims were in minority without political power in their hand.

The work begins with the description of encounter between India and Islam with the Arab conquest of Sindh in 712 A.D. The author calls it a meeting '*between a self contained, assimilative, decentralized civilization and an exclusivist and expansionist faith*'. Islam laid emphasis on political power, pan-Islamism, pull of extraterritoriality, and primacy to religious identity. Throughout the period, the Muslim elite tried to maintain a different identity, failing to connect with the conquered land and on the other hand retaining their links with the Ummah. The author also notes that in the mainstream

Muslim society, liberal voices in Islam like Akbar and Dara Shikoh were bitterly criticized while fundamentalists like Aurangzeb were lauded.

Second essay surveys the political scenario of the 18th century India as a period of Mughal decline; emergence of successor states in Awadh, Bengal and Hyderabad with a formal but nominal alliance to Mughal emperor; establishment of Afghan principalities; breaking down of Mughal-Rajput alliance; rise of Jats and Sikhs; Marathas under the Peshwas; and finally the rise of English Company as the paramount power. The author is able to present historical evidence which shows that Muslim circles of India invited Nadir Shah and Ahmad Shah Abdali to invade, both acting as saviors of Islam.

Next, the political culture in Mughal successor and Muslim conquest states has been discussed. Foreign element remained dominant throughout the Muslim rule. Akbar was not an exception as 70% of nobility in his court consisted of immigrants. But post-Akbar period saw a steady decline in Hindu/Rajput influence in Mughal court and Jiziya became an instrument of the ascendancy of the Muslim orthodoxy which was commanded by the foreign elements.

In 1582, Persian, a foreign language, became the official language under Akbar. Akbar made efforts to ensure that Persian remain pure and Hindi and other vernacular words did not pollute it.

Meenakshi Jain has also made case studies of Awadh, Hyderabad, Bengal and Mysore in her work. She concludes that emerging regional identities around regional languages and regional religious traditions, and widening of regional caste identities were not espoused by Mughal successor states and mostly developed outside court circles. She is able to show that no shared ideological affinities between the ruler and ruled existed in case of these states.

Islam dominated the architecture in towns, except the religious centers and the extreme South. Sacred structures of other faiths were edged out of the view.

During the decline of Mughal empire, rulers like Marathas and Sikh ruler Ranjit Singh tried to redeem and restore the Hindu heritage. New shrines came up in North India. Marathas were keen to liberate sacred places like Prayag and Banaras from Muslim control. They banned cow slaughter but towards their Muslim subjects, their approach was more or less secular. Sawai Jai Singh (1700-1743) of Jaipur also deserves a special mention. He promoted Hindu learning, performed Vedic sacrifices and yagnas, and revived Bhakti orders. British dominions also witnessed a Hindu cultural upsurge. New temples and shrines came up and there was a remarkable increase in showy display during religious processions and festivals. Open veneration for cow also began to be displayed.

Meenakshi Jain has not toed the widely accepted line on the roots of nationalism in India. The dominant school of Indian historiography claim that Indian nationalism is a product of British connection and was almost absent prior to the advent of the western forces. She is not hesitant in stating that consciousness of a nation has been present in India since Vedic times. Throughout the ages, there has been a deep veneration among Hindus for their sacred land and various cultural symbols. Antiquity of nationalism in India emphasized in the writings of Rajnarian Basu, Nabgopal Mitra, Bankim Chatterji, Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo and Mahatma Gandhi has been quoted amply to buttress this point.

National sentiment did not diminish even during the medieval times. Meenakshi Jain gives the example of Maharashtra Dharma which produced 250 saints in five centuries. But as far as the modern nationalism is concerned, it first appeared in the province of Bengal.

A separate chapter has been devoted to the question of language during the 18th and 19th centuries; and how it led to a calculated rupture between the two communities. In Muslim India, Persian, the language of the ruling class, was an alien import containing images and illusions from abroad. The naturally evolving native Hindavi, drawing on speech from various *bolis* in the vicinity besides absorbing from Arabic and Persian, became the language of significant section of society. Consequent to Mughal decline, when it became necessary to replace Persian, Hindavi was the natural substitute. But Muslim elite, anxious to preserve its separate identity radically transformed the language by eliminating a large number of Hindi words of Sanskritic origins and substituting them with Persian and Arabic vocabulary. This led to the birth of Urdu. Several observers linked this development to decline of Mughal power and Muslim elite's resolve to create an exclusive cultural zone. In the process of Persianization, Urdu became wholly identified as the language of Muslims. Meenakshi Jain quotes Abdul Haq, a prominent leader of the Urdu movement that Pakistan was not created by Iqbal or Jinnah but by Urdu as two nation theory and all other differences of that nature arose directly from that language. She has also absolved the British of the charge of dividing Hindavi into two separate languages of modern Hindi and modern

Urdu . Fort William College, the alleged centre of this activity was established in Calcutta only in 1800 A.D. almost a century after the drive had commenced in India.

In the final essay, Meenakshi Jain concludes that the decline of the Mughal state provided one of the strongest boosts to strengthen the hold of orthodoxy and hastening the pace of Islamization. In this context she discusses the role of Shah Waliullah Khan, Syed Ahmed Bareilvi and revivalists of eastern India like Maulana Karamat Ali, Titu Mir and Dadu Miyan to rid Islam of much it acquired with interaction with other cultures.

The author discusses in details the Revolt of 1857. She quotes several micro studies to state that 1857 revolt cannot be termed as a unified attempt of Hindus and Muslims to liberate India from the British rule. Contrary to popular perception distinctions between Hindus and Muslims remained during the 1857. In Rohilkhand it was a Mohammedan rebellion with serious divisions between Hindus and Muslims. There were cow killings and Hindus prayed for the British victory. In Hyderabad, Muslims viewed with dismay the prospect of Maratha success in 1857. In Delhi and Bareilly, cow slaughter was banned to unite Hindus and Muslims. During the Revolt, British regarded upheaval as a Muslim conspiracy to regain their empire. But later, Muslims were projected as the most loyal subjects.

In the post-revolt Islamic revival, institutions like Firangi Mahal (older), Deoband (1867), and Nadwah Dar ul Ulum (1891) advocated abandonment of customary practices shared with Hindus. They aimed for consolidation and leadership of Muslim community in the absence of an Islamic state. Deoband issued 269,215 *fatwas* in first 100 years mainly focusing on removing unIslamic practices. From 1880s, *fatwas* were issued to discourage social and business relations with Hindus. The process of Islamization continued to gather speed with large scale translation of Islamic works such as Quran in regional languages especially the Urdu.

Meenakshi Jain has also devoted some pages to Sir Syed Ahmed Khan's efforts for Muslim political revival contingent with friendly relations with the British. He advised Muslims to stay aloof from Ilbert Bill agitation (1883) and Indian National Congress (1885). Sir Syed laid foundations of Muslim opposition to representative institutions. He demanded separate constituencies and representation for Muslims in excess of their population ratio. He was convinced that Hindus and Muslims could never cooperate politically and that a civil war would ensue in case British moved out of the picture.

Summing up, Meenakshi Jain has successfully questioned the existing paradigms about the Hindu – Muslim relations during the 18th and 19th century India. Her resources are micro studies of the period and thus she is able to bring to light numerous lesser known studies conducted in India and abroad related with the issue providing the future researchers with very valuable sources. At the same time, it appears that she has avoided the primary sources to such an extent that even easily available sources like writings of Swami Vivekananda, Aurobindo Ghosh and Mahatma Gandhi (p.149) have been cited from secondary sources. Also, the value of this superbly researched work would have further increased if there had been an additional essay on the historiography of the Hindu- Muslim relation itself.