Pakistan Studies in the Age of Globalization

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Pakistan Studies in the Age of Globalization

Abstract
Over the past decade it has gradually become apparent that we are living in an age that is characterized by globalization. There is no single accepted definition of this process, although the word has been in our vocabulary for forty years. Our initial efforts to make sense of it have understandably focused so far on economic and political consequences. These are the most conspicuous, but the long-term significance is deeper and more comprehensive. Globalization has been building for several decades, and may have been inevitable. It is already palpable in relatively conservative sectors of our lives, such as the academic curriculum, and our formulation of research problems. It affects the year-to-year planning of institutions like AIPS, because of changes in the priorities of funding agencies, as well as individual academic careers. Unlike other types of social and cultural change over the past generation, globalization (as the term itself implies) is essentially global, and is therefore as visible in the national culture of countries like Pakistan as much as any in OECD. Pakistan Studies is a form of cultural and intellectual dialogue between the West and Pakistan. This dialogue when it began was bilateral. In the age of globalization it has been subsumed into the larger global dialogue. What are the implications of this change?

Disciplines
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Comments
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PAKISTAN STUDIES IN THE AGE OF GLOBALIZATION

On behalf of all our member institutions and others who support the American Institute of Pakistan Studies and its programs--welcome to the new AIPS Islamabad Center!

The opening of this Center is an important milestone in the history of the dialogue between American and Pakistani scholars in both the humanities and the social sciences. It is also a landmark in the history of the Institute, which was founded in order to promote that dialogue. The Institute was founded in 1973, very close to the date of the launching of Pakistan Studies in Pakistan in the founding of the National Institute of Pakistan Studies on the Quaid-i-Azam campus in Islamabad.

The dialogue has focused primarily on the political and social history of Pakistan and its role in regional and international affairs. Pakistan holds unique interest in this regard: it was the first new country to be formed in the modern world—the post-colonial and post World War II world. It is interesting to compare the experience of Pakistan with the other new countries that were established in the following thirty years or so. Like most of them, the new state was established by peaceful agreement between representative local and foreign interests, but caused upheaval in the local population. (In some cases, and Pakistan’s in particular, this upheaval was catastrophic.) It was established with a political system that was alien to its pre-colonial heritage. And it was founded to serve the needs of a community that was defined in terms of religious affiliation. Pakistan’s history so far is the story of the working out of the tensions that were inherent in these conditions of its foundation.

We might have expected that Pakistan would therefore be a popular subject among specialists in the comparative study of new states, and from a wide range of disciplinary points of view. Paradoxically, however, Pakistan Studies has been a small and isolated academic field, slow to develop, and pursued in ways that have overlapped little with larger interests in modern history and social science. It is my fervent hope that the opening of this Center, itself overdue, will help to open up the academic dialogue, and by extension the public dialogue, on Pakistan to the greater participation and disciplinary range which it deserves. Now, especially, compared to 1973 (let alone 1947) the time is ripe for new academic initiatives. Pakistan has evolved as an academic subject. The formulation and organization of Pakistan Studies, as an academic field, have developed in new directions. The omens are good. Let me explain why.

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Institutional Development

As a field of academic specialization Pakistan Studies has been hindered in its development by a number of difficulties. The focused interdisciplinary study of particular other parts of the modern world developed originally out of classical studies in the Western curriculum. It has been characterized as Orientalism—a term whose meaning was transformed overnight in 1978 (for better or for worse) by Edward Said’s publication of the same name. This type of academic endeavor had a philological or textual base and did not begin to grow out of that tradition until well into the 19th century. By then the excitement of geographical discovery and the race to bring the whole world into the purview of knowledge, tempered by the exigencies of the colonialism, led to systematic efforts to describe and document local conditions and render them intelligible.

Universities were slow to legitimize these new studies. Although positions in anthropology began to be established in the 1880s, the subject (unlike its sister social sciences) was still understood largely in terms of the study of origins and not applied to literate societies. It was not until shortly before World War II that explicitly modern studies of non-Western literate societies began to be established. It was to take another twenty years before these programs took off under the heading of “area studies.”

Funding agencies and academic programs (influenced by the already existing framework of foreign policy) easily classified and compartmentalized the world into regions that were each assumed to have a sufficient degree of internal cultural homogeneity to be treated as a unit for purposes of curriculum development and research. This plural field of area studies was built on the textual or classical study of the civilizations of the Middle East, South Asia, and the Far East. However, despite the shared cultural heritage (which could after all be found between almost any two neighboring countries) recent historical experience often made it very difficult to combine their modern study. Scholars tend to identify with the people they study and commonly pick up local prejudices against neighboring countries. So, in East Asia Chinese Studies and Japanese Studies have often proved difficult to manage within a single program and the struggle between them for resources has left Korean Studies in the cold. For similar reasons it is not surprising that South Asian Studies programs have generally been focused on India to the disadvantage, if not the exclusion, of Pakistan. (The other large South Asian country, Bangladesh, receives even less attention, and Nepal and Sri Lanka, because of their much smaller size, are rarely planned into any program.)

This situation has been exacerbated since the 1960s by more bureaucratic considerations. Because of the obvious
link between research visas, research permission and country-to-country diplomatic relations, as the numbers of overseas projects grew in the 1960s organizations began to be formed for the purpose of interacting with particular governments in relation to the needs of scholars in particular countries. While the U.S. and the U.K have been most active in the creation of these centers, France, Italy, Germany and Japan have pursued similar strategies. The American School of Classical Research was established in Athens in 1881, the American Academy in Rome in 1894, and the American School of Oriental Research in Jerusalem in 1900—all, in accordance with the interests of the time, concerned primarily with archaeological excavation. A new series of such centers began to appear after WWII, starting with the American Research Center in Egypt in 1948. The speed picked up a decade or so later with the American Institute of Indian Studies in 1960, the American Research Institute in Turkey in 1964, the American Institute of Iranian Studies in 1967, and the American Institute of Pakistan Studies in 1973, followed by similar organizations for Yemen, Tunisia, Cyprus, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and West Africa. To begin with each of these organizations focused on services for scholars from the home country in the host country, and although the services were generally available for all disciplines funding opportunities tended to favor the social sciences. A significant advantage was that people from different disciplines had opportunities to meet in the host country and were more likely to become familiar with the full range of current research that might be relevant to their own. As a result inter-disciplinary country-oriented scholarly communities began to appear. But there were also disadvantages. Each of these country-oriented communities tended to be insulated from what was going on in neighboring countries. In the case of India this was intellectually unfortunate. In the case of Pakistan the problems were more serious: the scholarly community that developed out of the study of Pakistan lacked critical mass. The situation was of course even more serious for smaller countries like Sri Lanka or Yemen.

Although Pakistan studies as a field of study in the U.S. initially benefited greatly from the foundation of AIPS in 1973, for a while it suffered from the segregation built into the system that isolated it from what was going on in neighboring countries. There are many examples of work produced in Indian Studies that are often read by people with no special interest in India, with the result that India has become better known internationally. But work of comparable quality in Pakistan Studies has only in very rare cases made it to a larger readership (Barth’s Political Leadership among the Swat Pathans, 1959, comes to mind). Pakistan has therefore become less well known and suffered more adverse stereotyping by the same mechanism. Although the literature on Pakistan and related topics (such as the same territory in earlier periods, or South Asian Muslims in general) that has accumulated over the past fifty years is rich and detailed, it is deficient in one major respect. It does not adequately relate Pakistan to a larger context, or to other fields.

Starting in the 1970s political horizons began to open up and academic relations became more interactive. The change was slow at first. But by the time of the formal demise of the Soviet Union in 1989 international relations were being reconfigured, and we were working with very different implicit understandings of what is involved in overseas research. These understandings have become explicit over the past decade. Now it is taken for granted that the movement of scholars between, say, the U.S. and Pakistan should be two-way, and foreign scholars should where feasible work through local institutions and participate in local scholarly communities, if not actually conduct their research collaboratively. However, we have not yet arrived at the point where American Studies is so well established in Pakistan as Pakistan Studies in America, so that the results of each could be discussed and negotiated reciprocally and transculturally among specialists. However, with the advance of globalization such a dialogue begins to seem closer.

Individual Careers

So much for the institutional dimension of this process. Although institutions have their own momentum, they do not exist without the individuals that work them. Individuals are influenced by considerations of their own careers. It would be interesting to document the beginnings of the scholarly careers of Pakistanists over the past generation to see what brought them into the field. I would expect to find that most opted to specialize in Pakistan out of an initial larger focus on South Asia. There are a few who chose Pakistan out of a larger interest in Islam. I would expect that entries into the field of Pakistan Studies will now become more diverse.

Let me offer my own story as an example. I moved first from classical to modern studies, then from languages to social science, and from the Middle East to a specialization in one country, Iran. Later, now nearly twenty years ago, my linguistic background led me to define my area of interest in terms of the history of literacy in the Persian language, and the heritage of that history in modern vernacular cultures. Persian was the language of administration, belles lettres and elite communication—the koine—at various times over the past millennium as far east as the cities of the Takla Makan basin of Xinjiang, as far west as the Balkans, and...
from the cities of Central Asia to the southern fringes of the Mughal Empire in peninsular India. The center of this vast area is Pakistan. It is for that reason that building on a peripheral acquaintance beginning as far back as 1963 I moved in the mid 1980s to Pakistan as a central research focus. Let me then now summarize what seem to me from this perspective to be the significant factors in Pakistan’s current geo-historical situation.

Regional and Global History

Pakistan emerged in 1947 not as a homeland for South Asian Muslims. But undivided India before that date had been nested in a large complex of historical networks, and Pakistan like India inherited all of them. But for various reasons since 1947 some of them were emphasized at the expense of others, and as a consequence of international developments some were lost.

Pakistan represented the territorial center of the successor states of the Mughal Empire, which at its zenith reached from the Central Asian steppe to southern peninsular India. But more significant than this politico-historical context was the cultural context of Persian literacy. And the demesne of the Persian koine was of course nested in the larger universe of Islamic-Arabic cultural literacy, which extends to the Philippines and to Morocco, as well as south into Africa. Literacy constitutes a framework of cultural organization. It provides a medium for the flow of ideas. Although the literacy rate was historically much lower even that it is now, literacy created a professional and social class that was represented in all the cities of a vast culturally diverse region. Documents circulated within this region. The region owed its character to the use of Islamic law and to Muslim governments, although it was differentiated by political interests. It included both Shi`a and Sunni. This geo-historical context of Pakistan’s location has received little attention, because in 1947 the colonial aspects of Pakistan’s heritage were more influential than the pre-colonial factors.

This distinction between pre- and post-colonial is important. The more limited colonial context and the associated political interests led to the substitution of Urdu for Persian for official business as early as 1837. Persian as a result receded into the cultural background, with a role similar to that of Latin in the Christian West. Finally within two decades of independence (like Greek and Latin in the West at the same time) it finally lost any special status in the school curriculum. Nevertheless, its presence in the modern languages of the region (as is the case of course with Latin and Greek in modern Western languages) is still palpable. But since it is the national language of Iran, for political reasons its cultural importance in the other countries of the region is suppressed. Moreover, the international pretensions of the larger state, Iran, compromise its status even in the two other countries where it serves as national or official language, Afghanistan and Tajikistan, and even more so in other countries such as Uzbekistan where it is an important minority language.

The Problem of Nationhood

Nations are set on a course of development in their founding moments: the U.S. by the American Revolution, France by the French Revolution; since 1989 Russia has been groping for its pre-Soviet roots in the Orthodox Church. England has recently been through a comparable though less severe period of cultural uncertainty following the dissolution of the empire which had been so important in the formation of its modern identity. Pakistan’s founding moment defined it in Islamic terms, but in relation to India rather than more general historical relationships. Although (like Israel a year later, in 1948) it was founded as a secular state for a particular religious community, its political history has tested that founding definition. Like Israel its territorial definition led inevitably to one of the world’s major population movements, and the immigrant population has constituted a major force in its political history. The comparison with Israel soon becomes dysfunctional because Israel’s founding definition unlike Pakistan’s was overtly ethnic. But Pakistan’s political weakness arises from the founding assumption that South Asian Muslims were in some way comparable to a nation, and that Pakistan therefore would be for them the nation-state they were entitled to. This assumption arose from the colonial heritage—nation is a Western political idea (though since the end of colonialism largely assumed to be universally valid). In Pakistan’s non-colonial heritage nation-state resembles an oxymoron: nation is not an Islamic concept. Whereas Israel cannot remove the ethnic factor from its founding definition without fundamentally changing its nature, Pakistan does not need to define itself as a nation. It was founded in an era when being a nation was the only justification for having a state. This subconscious Western-cultural political philosophy has led to the global emergence in the second half of the 20th century of “minority politics.” As a result national identities now compete with the other types of identity.

Pakistan as a Model

If we can consider the Islamic context alone, suppressing for a moment the customary expectations of “national” development, Pakistan’s political and other socio-cultural problems take on a different color. No longer a problematic nation, Pakistan comes into focus as an exemplar of the post-nation state, a political unit with boundaries based (like most others) on a variety of historical rationalizations, containing diverse culturally related ethno-linguistic communities—a model for
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The modern world. Baluch, Muhajirs, Punjabis, Pushtons, Sindhis and others are even less likely to merge their identities than are English, Scots, Welsh and the various recent immigrants to the United Kingdom. But Pakistan is as important and useful a political idea for the former as British is for the latter. If the comparison with the U.K. smacks of post-colonialism, America with the diversity generated by its large recent immigrant communities provides a comparable example. It is not difficult to find other examples in different parts of the world. Although their particular political histories and current problems may be so different as to be barely comparable, they typify in different degrees the local political problems of the modern world. Further, just as Pakistan was the first new postcolonial state in the Eastern Hemisphere, it is further advanced in the experience of dealing with these problems than those that have followed it from foundation points in the 50s, 60s, and 70s. Pakistan is a model.

The Promise of Globalization

In the course of Pakistan’s brief history the constellation of international relations has undergone a major transformation. At the same time the outlook for the individual scholar interested in the Pakistani situation has also changed, as has the field of Pakistan Studies and the way that this type of academic field is conceived. These changes have all become recognized over the past decade, which is the decade in which the discourse of globalization has emerged.

The Oxford English Dictionary cites word “globalization” as appearing first in 1961. If the phenomenon that we now recognize as such is in fact qualitatively different from the (almost) global spread of Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam at earlier periods, or the expansion of trade networks, empires, war arenas more recently, I do not think it can be said to have become tangible until late in the past century. It is not just the “global village” that constructs globalization, not simply the spread of commodities and ideas and ways of doing things. Globalization is the effect of something that is newer than that, although it has been building gradually since the Industrial Revolution.

Globalization is the receding of the distance factor from human relations. This process is the result of technology. Telephone, wireless and air travel foreshadowed it. But only in the past decade, with the accelerated progress of digitization in wireless telephony and the internet, has it approached consummation.

The significance of globalization for Pakistan, and by extension Pakistan Studies—for individual states, the academic activities that relate to them and the scholarly careers they generate—is that the space or distance dimension no longer either defines or even hierarchizes their identities, their opportunities and their relationships in anything like the degree to which we are accustomed.

We always knew that American society was not spatially delimited by the geographical boundaries of the United States. But when we study Pakistan we assume that it is all inside the boundaries of Pakistani territory. The artificiality of this restricted definition is fast becoming too obvious for it to be tenable. It is no longer feasible to separate diasporas from communities of origin. Cultures and societies can no longer be conceived as bounded. Even totalitarian governments are obliged to negotiate with their citizenry. Political movements, like commercial projects, can no longer be spatially confined, whether positive like democracy or dotcoms, or negative like terrorism or drug dealing.

The nature of globalization is best illustrated by examples of change in relationships of power. The most significant point of the loss of the distance factor is that it equalizes. Globalization is not Americanization. Nor is it cultural homogenization. It simply negates as a factor of social differentiation, the distance factor.

Although it has not received very much attention in the literature on power that has developed over the past twenty years, distance is a primary factor in any situation of unequal power. This is as true in small tribal societies as it was in the colonial period and later during the Cold War. The ability to escape negates any power differential. Terrorism was one of the earliest indicators of globalization, because it strikes not only anonymously but in unpredictable locations. It will probably continue to be one of globalization’s most important negative consequences. Resistance of some kind, like suffering, is a component of all processes of evolutionary change. The interconnectedness of situations in Bosnia, Chechnya, Kashmir, Tajikistan, Hezbollah, Hamas, and among the Taliban, and the Uyghurs, and so on illustrates the globalization of resistance. On the other hand, recently the rule of law has been extended beyond national boundaries and the limitation of national legal systems. First Pinochet, then the World Trade Building in New York, then Khobar, now Milosevic have all become examples of the incipient globalization of the rule of law.

In 2001 Pakistan Studies is not the same endeavor that it was when the American Institute of Pakistan Studies and the National Institute of Pakistan Studies were founded over a quarter of a century ago. The home curriculum has changed, the academic project has changed, Pakistanis have different objectives, Pakistan’s image in the world and its significance in international relations has changed. Most importantly the nature of the trans-cultural dialogue between Pakistani and non-Pakistani scholars on Pakistan as a subject in world history is being recontextualized. I look forward to a period of close collaboration between our two institutes in association with the Council on Social Sciences in which I hope this Center will play an important role.

Brian Spooner