

Book Review

The Shi'as of Pakistan - An Assertive and Beleaguered Minority by Andreas Rieck, 2016, Hurst & Co Publishers (London), UK edition, 288 pp., ISBN 978-1-78738-151-3 (pbk).

India—a country embracing minorities (including Muslims), has now become a dangerous place for them. It was the first and, so far, only state which has constitutionally declared the Ahmadiyya community a 'non-Muslim' sect. Since the 1947 partition, the Ahmadis have been subjected to violence and subsequently they have been ghettoised to a small city, Rabwah, in Punjab. On the other hand, Shi'as—a significant minority constituting 20 per cent of the population—have also been victims of both non-state actors and state-sponsored violence. I will not discuss here who has suffered the most violence between the two communities but Shi'as, despite being an influential minority, are victims of systematic and more importantly, an organised violence. In his column for BBC Urdu, Pakistan's renowned journalist and author, Muhammad Hanif has satirically argued that by showing organised killings of Shi'as, even the Ahmadis would say that "thank God, we are 'infidels', not Shi'as". Indeed, no other minority has witnessed selective and highly organised killings of doctors, professors, lawyers, intellectuals and activists. As a result, some—among whom are political activists—refer to this as a 'slow genocide' or identify it as a 'violence with genocidal proportions'. In his profound research *The Shi'as of Pakistan: An Assertive and Beleaguered Minority*, Andreas Rieck has produced an important volume and has covered the historical evolution of Shi'as in Pakistan.

This nine-chapter long book comprehensively covers different facets of Shi'a politics in the subcontinent. It starts with an in-depth introduction on the emergence of Shi'as dating back to 16th century with the arrival of Shi'a preachers from Iran. More importantly, the first two chapters discuss the emergence of Shi'as' struggle and resistance to protect the Azadari from the Sunni majority within United India, sometimes siding with Mughal Emperors, joining the camps of Congress and the Muslim League in pre- and post- partition settings. The third chapter

discusses the historical shift Shi'a politics after 1947 as partition brought unexpected challenges for the minority. New organisations were formed such as All Pakistan Shi'a Conference (APSC) and Idarat-i-Tahaffuz-i-Huquq-i-Shi'a Pakistan (ITHS) to meet challenges and again, protect the Azadari. The fourth, fifth and sixth chapters primarily discuss Shi'a politics under three dictatorships and brief democratic regimes. These three chapters highlight the emergence of more recent Shi'a movements such as the Shi'a Mutalbat Committee (SMC) and the Tehrik-i-Nifazi-Fiqah-i-Jafariya (TNFJ), the internal split over nature of Azadari and also, efforts to incorporate Shi'a fiqh in the Pakistani constitution and demands for a separate syllabus for Shi'a students in schools and colleges. Furthermore, these chapters also highlight that Shi'as had been successful to achieve their goals (politically), arguably, in all the regimes except under Zia-ul-Haq who marginalised them through his 'Islamisation' process. As a result of Islamisation, chapters seven and eight highlight the transformation of the Pakistani state into a more Sunni state and the labelling of Shi'as as 'Iranian agents' or a suspicious community. Both chapters also discuss the rise of sectarian violence by Sipah-i-Sahaba (SSP) and Sipah-i-Muhammad (SMP) and terrorist incidents targeting minorities such as Shi'as and Christians. The book concludes that despite a recent spate of attacks on Shi'as, they have historically been an assertive entity; challenging and influencing the state and waging violence against the Sunni majority such as SMP. Thus, they could be seen as victims of violence while not qualifying as an 'oppressed' community.

The book offers some important and thought-provoking points. First, it opens further space for research on Shi'a politics in general and on Pakistan, in particular. Though limited but his sources, specifically Razakar, the author sheds light on different aspects of Shi'a activism. For instance, the interplay between azadari and Shi'a identity demands re-examination of the very concept of azadari and its theological and epistemological challenges. From 19th to 20th century, Shi'a politics was surrounded and, to some extent, limited to the protection of the Azadari community which makes azadari a signifier for Shi'a identity and politics. It reignites the debate whether azadari is a political idea or solely a spiritual movement as Rieck mentions when Shi'as debated over the misuse of the term azadari, by corrupting it and making it overly religious (128).

Rieck brilliantly documents historical events which help to understand the ontological (in-) security of Shi'as. Being a minority, Shi'as have sided and applauded those who were in power even Zia-ul-Haq (198-9) who later turned against Shi'as. Historical events, such as Shi'as' loyalty to British colonialists (9), their support for Congress before partition (42). Shi'a support for ruling parties, including dictators except for the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) because of its evident support to Sunni (sectarian) militant organisations (262)—suggests that fear of Sunnis has shaped Shi'a politics in the subcontinent. Although there are cases of Shi'as-Sunni collective politics such as Shi'a support for the Khilafat Movement (37) and Mutehidda Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) during Pervaiz Muharrar era but by and large Shi'as had always feared that if hardliner Sunnis come into power, they would curb their freedom especially for the azadari. Arguably, this sense of constant ontological insecurity has left only two options i.e. a Sunni majority or an elite power. And Shi'as have always chosen the latter as evidenced in this book.

Furthermore, the book challenges the general narrative about the Shi'as-Sunni divide in Pakistan which is mostly traced from the time of Zia-ul-Haq. Many liberals and progressives blame Zia-ul-Haq's 'Afghan jihad' policy for ongoing terrorism and the rise of extremism in society. Similarly, Zia is also held responsible for the Shi'a-Sunni schism in Pakistan. For example, opposing the Azadari and emergence of takfir (calling another Muslim apostate) are ascribed to him. There is no doubt that Zia's policies brought about a major shift in almost all structures and institutions and that intolerance increased due to the indoctrination of Wahhabi thought. But at the same time, while analysing sectarian violence, it would be intellectually ingenuous if we did not scrutinise and go beyond Zia's era. Rieck has comprehensively traced the marginalisation of Shi'as from 18th century (18). onwards: such phenomena i.e. ban on azadari (21, 64, 97), takfir against Shi'as (14, 51) and intolerance for Shi'as (88, 91) are as old as Shi'a's historical presence in the region.

Nevertheless, the book has some problematic aspects as well. For example, the title Shi'as of Pakistan seems too general as the author discusses mainly West Pakistan after partition and focuses almost exclusively on Punjab and Karachi. Furthermore, surprisingly, he completely misses the role of Shi'as in two important elements: secular/progressive politics and literature, and portrayed Shi'as as an exclusively

sectarian entity. I understand his limitation to Punjab and Karachi as he relied on Urdu sources but again, the title gives an overall impression of the community which Rieck does not cover. Nevertheless, these points could be overlooked but others require serious attention.

In his analysis of events in post-partition, specifically dictatorial regimes, the author seems to lack understanding of Pakistan's politics especially its military or he is being uncritical. Rieck defines history uncritically ignoring the background of events, the actors involved, and the role of bureaucracy and the military. For example, he analyses that soon after lifting of martial law, anti-Shi'a propaganda erupted (109). Knowing Ayub's regime who cracked down on socialists and had strict control over society, the question is how did anti-Shi'a propaganda emerge? Was it just a coincidence or a planned event which gave more supremacy and excuses to the dictator to get more control over society? For instance, Rangers, a paramilitary force, was deployed for over 30 years in Karachi for maintaining law and order. In the past eight years, Rangers has been operating under special police powers i.e. raids and snap-checking. But interestingly, many have observed that whenever its special-power tenure is about to end, violence and sectarian killings suddenly erupt. The point I am making here is that when one sees events in isolation such as Rieck's analysis on the eruption of sectarian violence, one may overlook the political economy of violence that shapes politics and policies.

How Rieck deals with sectarian proxy in post-Islamic revolution seems imbalanced. He overly emphasises Iran and discusses its rising political and cultural influence in Pakistan (216). The important actor, which he missed, of that particular epoch during 1979-80, was Saudi Arabia. The book fails to discuss who was funding Sunni extremist organisations. How and why only Wahhabism became dominant in opposition to Shi'a Islam? How did the leader of Sipah-i-Sahaba, who was anti-Ahmadiyya initially (232), become the leading anti-Shi'a activist overnight? It might sound rather unconventional but Iran's role in the post-revolution was less sectarian than Saudi Arabia. Khomeini in Iran and Arif Hussaini in Pakistan were both pan-Islamists and anti-imperialists (223) and in addition, the Iranian consulate in those years propagated or promoted the 'Islamic revolution' rather than anti-Sunni or Saudi propaganda. More importantly, it has still not been established

that Iran funded Shi'as militias after 1979. Nevertheless, the absence of Saudi Arabia's role in financing Sunni militant organisations could become misleading for those who do not know about Pakistan and how the nexus between Zia-ul-Haq and Saudi Arabia paved the way for anti-Shi'a violence.

I find his usage of terminology inconsistent and problematic as well. He used the word 'terrorist' for both 'alleged' Shi'a militants (281) and SSP/LeJ militants. Although in one instance he used the word 'gunmen' for LeJ militants (279), his usage brings to mind a growing phenomenon among Pakistan's intellectuals who create binaries and equate them with sectarian violence. For instance, often on social media or during academic discussions on the Shi'a-Sunni conflict in the country, if one criticises Saudi Arabia for fuelling and funding Sunni extremists, then, in order to prove intellectual 'impartiality', it becomes almost compulsory to criticise Iran at the same time despite how incommensurable they are. Similarly, one needs to criticise both SSP and SMP at the same time despite significant differences between the two as the former believes in indiscriminate killings of Shi'as and the latter is a reactionary and defensive force which targets selected figures. I am nowhere defending violence but what I am trying to say that one should avoid putting different organisations in one shoe when their proportion and purpose of violence are different. One may not conflate Peshmerga with Afghan Taliban. At the same time, one should draw a line between those who perpetuate violence and who act in defence, and then use terminology accordingly.

There is a minor confusion and misrepresentation of sources. For example, Rieck quoted an incident in Parachinar where eleven Sunnis were killed and claims that it was committed by Shi'as (305). But the source he mentioned didn't establish that it was committed by Shi'as. In fact, in that same source, Turi (Shi'a) tribal leader condemned the terror attack. Most importantly his conclusion where he claims that Shi'as are 'far from being an oppressed minority' (337) is questionable and problematic. First, it would have been better if he had further explained this claim and discussed how he defines an 'oppressed minority'. This claim could have been ignored and it would make sense if he had said this, 'before 1980, Shi'as were far from being an oppressed minority'. Indeed, Shi'as were organised, politically active and assertive. But this

claim does not apply or seems invalid in post-1980 settings as things became worse for Shi'as after 2001. Arguably, Shi'as have been the main victims of terrorism and faced highly organised violence which targeted Shi'a doctors, lawyers, activists, women and children. A simple indicator of oppression is when one is fearful, uncomfortable and targeted for practising his/her fundamental right; freedom of belief.

In addition, few argue that it would be unwise to call Shi'as an oppressed community as their community members are influential and sitting in high positions in the army, bureaucracy, media and business. I think this argument needs to be revisited. One needs to understand the role of power and organisational structures. For example, when a Shi'a is in the military, he should follow his General's command as he is trained to follow the chain of command. This could be understood when Rieck mentioned that when Ali Khan Qizilbash became CM of West Pakistan in 1958—despite being a prominent and proactive Shi'as—he put restrictions on new processions (97). One needs to look at the complexities within institutions which bar many Shi'as to stand with their own community. Similarly, in the media, Shi'as are present but the problem is fear. When they speak on Shi'a marginalisation, they often become a target of Sunni militants.

Despite some issues, I believe that this book comprehensively covers the history of Shi'as, helps to trace the genealogy of their activism and brings some surprising and interesting historical facts which, I think, are unbeknown to some people including Shi'as.

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