Book Reviews

Review Article


Suhail Zaheer Lari, the author of the present work, is the son of Z. H. Lari, Deputy Leader of the Muslim League Assembly Party in the U. P. during 1938–47. He was among the few Young Turks in the All-India Muslim League (AIML), who had the temerity, the confidence, and the expertise to raise constitutional issues at various times during the AIML Council, and other meetings. He fathered the resolution on the Planning Committee at the 31st session of the AIML at Karachi on 25 December 1943, and while presenting it for adoption, he had spelled out a radical programme, which included free and compulsory primary education, nationalization of industries, relief to the kisan, and a host of other measures for the economic and social upliftment of the proletariat. (However, Suhail Lari’s remark that “The Quaid-i-Azam opposed the resolution but was not able to persuade Z. H. Lari to withdraw it” [p. 278] does not conform to the facts of the situation — for the simple reason that under the AIML rules no resolution was permitted to be presented in the open session unless it had been duly approved of by the Subjects Committee). Even during his Pakistan phase, Z. H. Lari was bold and principled: he was a stickler for constitutional niceties and an advocate for fundamental rights. For instance, his was the first open criticism against Ayub’s Martial Law in his address to a lawyers’ moot at Karachi in the summer of 1959, long before Justice M. R. Kiyani became famous for his jibes at the Ayub regime.

What’s most remarkable about the present work is that Suhail Larhi has tried to encapsulate three thousand years of Sindh’s history in just about 350 pages, which also include 24 maps, numerous tables and 197 illustrations. (He, however, fails to list the tables in the Contents pages). Throughout the book he is concise, specific and to the point. Consider for instance the following: “Sindh was known as Meluhha during the Harapan period, Hindush under the
Achaemenians and Sassanians, Indos, Prasania and Patalene under the Greeks and the Bacterians, Shakadvipa under the Scythians. It was also called Sangama in Ramyana, Sauvira, Sudra, Barbara in Mahabharata, Prajuna and Sauvira in Kautilya’s Arthasastra, Skythia by Periplus, Indoskythia by Ptolemy, Brahmanaka and Sauvira in Panini’s Astradhyayi, etc.” (p. 10). Condensed writing is, of course, a most desirable attribute of modern English prose, but sometimes Suhail Lari tends to go a little overboard, resulting in “jerks” and a lack of continuity.

This, however, is not to underrate the prodigious amount of laborious research and hard work as well as imagination that has gone into the writing of this work, as in Suhail Lari’s previous ones. His approach is to let events and characters speak for themselves, and to leave the reader draw his own conclusions. While this approach is objective, we would still like to have the benefit of the author’s conclusions on various episodes and developments, since, after all, readers are not generally expected to have the sort of expertise on the subject that he has. At places, cross-referencing is also most desirable. For instance, if G. M. Syed’s claim that “Sindh has possessed a distinct existence and status since pre-historic times and that Raja Dahir, who had died fighting the Muslim invaders, was the hero of Sindh” (p. 322) is juxtaposed with the fact that Raja Dahir was as much an “outsider” as Muhammad ibn Qasim, the reader is in a better position to see how the Sindhi nationalists have been systematically engaged for a while in creating myths to bolster up their case for Sindhu Desh. I do hope that Suhail Lari would heed this suggestion in the next edition of his work.

In a sense, the present work seems to give point and force to G. M Syed’s description of “Sindhu Land” which he gave in his Welcome Address as Chairman, Reception Committee, at the Karachi League session on 24 December 1943. Lari mentions fifteen races, besides the Balochs, Punjabis, Pakhtuns, Mohajirs, Iranis and Afghans in modern times, Sindh has been home to, adding, “The immigrants enriched the past and will enrich the future of Sindh, its language and civilization.” In exemplification, he cites the case of Mirza Kilich Beg, an “outsider” on all counts. He had written, translated and compiled “350 works in Sindhi,” earning for himself the well-deserved honorific title of Aftab-i Adab or the “Sun of [Sindhi] literature”. Yet Mirza Kilich Beg did not have “an iota of Sindhi blood” in his veins. Nor does a grand daughter of his, whose “love for Sindh and her contribution to its culture” is indicated by “her recently published book on Sindh embroidery” (pp. 219–20). Browne’s remark in respect of non-Iranian settlers’ contribution to Persian literature — “It is a matter of common observation that settlers in a
country, often after a comparative brief residence, outdo those native to the soil”—has found exemplification in the case of the settlers in Sindh as well.

Among the settlers in the modern period, who have raised a good deal of controversy among the Sindhi nationalists, even among the pro-Pakistan Sindhis, are the “Mohajirs” who had flocked to Sindh in droves from the Muslim diaspora in the subcontinent. But the interesting part of this post-independence in-migration is that they did not come uninvited. And they were invited by G. M. Syed, himself, who has since the 1970s come to be hailed as “the sage of Sindh,” in 1943 and 1945.

Lari describes in some detail how the incoming Muslim migrants in 1947, later joined in by industrialists, entrepreneurs and businessmen of all categories on an appeal by Jinnah and the Aga Khan, sought to fill in the yawning vacuum caused by the en-masse Hindu and Sikh exodus, designed primarily to throttle Pakistan economically and otherwise. And by the early 1950s, if only because of their talent, skills, expertise, capital, and resourcefulness, the Mohajirs were able to bring about an industrial revolution in Pakistan, which in 1947 accounted for less than five per cent of the subcontinent’s total industrial units. No wonder, Shahid Javed Burki of the World Bank considers their contribution in the building of Pakistan both substantial and significant, adding that “the great in-migration of talent and skills formed the critical mass for Pakistan’s great leap forward” (Pakistan under Bhutto, 1971–77). Above all, the immigrants served as agents of modernization in the Daniel Lerner sense, causing, above all, social mobility, a lessening of stratification, an opening up of class structure, and social change.

Their contribution in building Pakistan was, however, not fully appreciated then or thereafter, especially in Sindh, because of the vested interests of those in power. Some “50,000 to one lakh people” were “lying on roads without accommodation,” complained M. H. Gazdar, a Sindhi politician, on 28 May 1948. Later Ayub launched upon a series of policies which appeared to be directed against the interests of Mohajirs, beginning with the purging of the Mohajir ICS officers, cancellation of the allotment of agricultural lands to Mohajirs from the non-East Punjab area, restrictions on the setting up of new industries in Karachi and its environs, and the shifting of the capital to Rawalpindi/Islamabad. Bhutto’s nationalization drive was in part meant to curb the urban classes’ financial and business clout, and seemed designed to hurt the Mohajirs the most since they constituted a majority of business and industrial classes. This along with the controversial urban-rural quota and one-language formula in Sindh, compounded by a lack of Mohajir representation, both at the federal and (Sindh) provincial levels, and their inaccessibility to professional colleges and technical institutes outside Karachi.
and to the Sindh University at Jamshoro caused widespread disenchantment and alienation among the Mohajirs. This led, finally, to the rise of the APMSO in 1978, which, in good time, mid-wifed the Mohajir Qaumi Movement (MQM) in 1986. Incidentally, the APMSO was the last ethnic student movement to be founded at the Karachi University, which had been home to Punjabi, Pakhtun and Baluchi student bodies, besides the Islāmī Jam‘īyyat-i Tālahab, Anjuman Tulabā’ī Islām, Muslim Students Federation, Progressive Students Federation, and the Liberals, since the 1970s. In November 1987 the MQM had made its mark on Pakistan’s electoral landscape, having swept the Karachi and Hyderabad local bodies’ polls and from 1988 to 1999, it was the third largest party at the national level and the second largest in Sindh.

Lari is the first intellectual to present a cogent case for Mohajir nationalism. (Brig. [R] A. R. Siddiqi had done a monographic study on the Mohajirs in Urdu in 1996, but Lari is more fact-oriented, having delved deep into the Sindh Assembly [1937–55] and Constituent Assembly [1947–56] debates, besides newspapers of the period, and makes out a more cogent case). His thesis may be summarized as follows: The Mohajirs had come to Pakistan as Pakistanis and called themselves as such, notes Lari. But they were pejoratively nicknamed Hinustani or Panahgir, and “were asked to declare their place of birth, and that of their father’s and grandfather’s” when they tried for government jobs. Therefore, they chose to call themselves Mohajir, because they were proud of their origin, honoured what they had opted for, sacrificed for, were persecuted and made to leave their homes for — their role in the struggle for Pakistan. The word ‘Mohajir’ for them had a noble connotation” as well (pp. 342–43). Till the late 1970s, Karachi, dominated demographically, economically and culturally by the Mohajirs, had a national, rather than an ethnic, posture, priding itself as an all-Pakistan metropolis. In the controversial 1977 elections, for instance, Karachi, staking its claim to being a “mini Pakistan,” had returned nine opposition leaders, including heads of several national parties, and candidates belonging to five racial stocks, five linguistic groups and to five political parties.

What is most refreshing about Lari is that even while arguing the case for Mohajir nationalism, he tries to be objective, pragmatic and down-to-earth. While discussing the 1981 demographic trend, he points out that the Sindhi-speaking population (50.99%) is on the way to losing its majority in the province, while the Mohajirs (Urdu-speaking) (47.69%) have already lost their majority in Karachi, unless Gujaratis (6.60%) are counted among the Mohajirs. Both have “to compromise to live in peace with one another as well as others who will continue to immigrate into Sindh,” he counsels (p. 341). To him, the general Sindhi complaint that “Sindh will cease to exist because of the influx of
people from outside” is not borne out by history. On the authority of E. H. Aitken (Gazetteer of the Province of Sindh, 1907) “there is not a single group of people in Sindh who had not, at one time or the other, claimed to have had their origin in some place outside Sindh, yet all in their turn resented the new immigrants, without appreciating that no part of India (South Asia) has a population of such mixed origin as Sindh” (p. 341). Therefore, to Lari, “if we can establish a society based on justice there is place for everyone in Sindh…. The immigrants enriched the past and will enrich the future of Sindh, its language and civilization” (p. 342).

Finally, Lari has given us a synoptic history of Sindh, without however glossing over its chequered character. All through history Sindh has been a melting pot, and not a salad plate. The economic, industrial and financial infrastructures built by the Mohajirs since Pakistan’s emergence has made it attractive to other “nationalities” in Pakistani. Imagine that the Punjabis comprised 9.39% of Sindh’s and 22.5% of Karachi’s population in 1982. Karachi and other urban areas would continue to attract non-Sindhis, if only because of the dynamics of the social process accompanying urbanization and industrialization.

Lari’s unique contribution is that he has put Sindh which has, for various reasons, become a battlefield between its Sindhi and non-Sindhi components since the Bhutto era in perspective. He does so, of course, from the Mohajir viewpoint. There may be — and, indeed, is — as well a Sindhi viewpoint on this lingering acerbic Sindhi-Mohajir tussle and controversy. But unless the Sindhis abandon their traditional litany-of-grievances approach and argue out their case in perspective and in meaningful terms, the story would remain one-sided, and the road to meaningful, if not fruitful, dialogue non-existent. And for the dialogue they should opt for either English or Urdu. Either of them because they are the main languages of communication in Pakistan, more for economic, and professional reasons and much less for “national” sensibilities. We would, of course, await the Sindhi rejoinder, or corrective, to Lari’s closely argued case, and this is bound to help resolve a festering sore in Pakistan’s body politic, or at least to cause a better understanding between the two major components of Sindh’s landscape. For the moment, though, apart from the researcher and the intelligent leader, both the Sindhi and the Mohajir ethnocentric “nationalists” would find Lari’s perusal extremely rewarding.

Sharif al Mujahid

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