

Book Review

Muslim Zion: Pakistan as a Political Idea by Faisal Devji London:

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There is no dearth of literature on the nature of Pakistan as a political idea—a subject of wide interest and disagreement. A recent addition to this academic line is South Asian historian of Oxford University’s Faisal Devji’s *Muslim Zion*. Although a strange blend and odd amalgamation of words, Devji’s book provides a very distinctive frame for thinking about the nature of “Pakistan as a Political Idea”. Devji uses ‘Zion’ for “a political form in which nationality is defined by the rejection of an old land for a new, thus attenuating the historical role that blood and soil play in the language of Old World nationalism” (p. 3). His guiding argument is that the idea of Pakistan can be compared with the idea of Israel as a type of ‘Zion’—an idealized national homeland.

The main objective of author, for writing this book, is neither to trace “causal relationships” between interests, ideas and events in some “mechanistic way”, nor to show which ideas were the most common or “influential” in Indian politics, but, to use Devji’s terminology, “to describe the lines of argument or debate that have emerged as the most

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important and productive ones in the history of Muslim nationalism”—a task that can only be fulfilled retrospectively, “not by providing a blow-by-blow account of what ‘actually’ happened in a merely belated fashion” (pp. 8-9). Not only this latter kind of history—which, in author’s opinion, is written “as a police report or judicial decision” to make someone responsible for it—is “rejected” by him. And thus, instead of focussing in good legal style on the “motives” or “intentions” of groups and individuals, Devji is interested in the forms of argumentation and lines of reasoning that both “transcend and survive such intentionality to shape the prose of history” (p.9).

Muslim Zion consists of six (6) chapters, excluding Introduction and Conclusion. In the Introduction, Devji draws the analogy between Zionism and Pakistani/ “Muslim nationalism”—which was created, as Devji notes, by the “forcible exclusion of blood and soil in the making of a new homeland for India’s diverse and scattered Muslims” (p. 9). The new political forms, such as the “religious nationalisms”, giving rise to Pakistan and Israel, took shape in an international arena and cannot be studied as part of regional histories alone. Devji highlights this in the opening chapter, and argues that Pakistan and Israel have opened up “new ways of structuring political communities whose consequences go far beyond the highly publicized travails of either one” (p.16). He thus concludes that Pakistan and Israel, the result of Muslim nationalism and Zionism respectively, constitute “ideal forms of the Enlightenment state, more so than the settler states of the New World or their imitators in the Old” (p. 48).

The description of how Indian Muslims came to see themselves as a minority, and why such a category of belonging made them turn outwards to embrace “an imperial or international identity” (p. 50)—one that had to be demolished before they could turn inwards to establish nation states—is meticulously pointed out in Chapter 2, “The Problem With Numbers”. In Chapter 3, “A People without History”, Devji argues that it had something to do with the fact that the Muslims of British India were a minority unevenly dispersed throughout the country, divided linguistically and ethnically, as well as by habit,

sect and class (p. 90). In this chapter, he tries to show how Muslim nationalists rejected history, geography and even demography as the foundations of their political life, opting instead for an abstract idea of belonging together. This is followed by Chapter 4, “The Fanatic’s Reward” wherein he explains “what could such an idea mean in the practice of Indian politics?” and reflects upon the ambiguous implications of such a practice, beginning with how this idea defined the Pakistan Movement, like Zionism or New World settlements, as in some ways a product of the Enlightenment. In brief, an exploration of the important role that negation plays within Muslim nationalism is presented.

Devji asks many critical questions throughout this book, but mostly in this and next chapter, thus forcing rethinking of Pakistan idea as it operated in the thinking of various thinkers, including Jinnah and Iqbal—the *Qaid-e-Azam* (Great Leader) and ‘Pakistan’s spiritual father’, respectively. In chapter 6, “*The Spirit of Islam*”—taking its name from Syed Ameer Ali’s book of same name (1891), in which he tried to make the connection between Islam as a system and spirit as its voice; and thus, “not only turned Islam into a system but also imagined it as producing spirit in the form of what we may describe as structural agency” (p. 212)—what Devji tries to show is “the consequences of turning Islam into a proper name”, one referring to a system lacking “traditional authority” (p.203). The main conclusions, observations and arguments put forth by Devji—many being crucial and controversial, and thus questionable and debatable are:

1. The idea of Pakistan as a “Muslim Zion” is largely abstracted from narratives of Pakistan’s history, as it tends to be “tedious” (p. 244).
2. Islam in Pakistan has become, like Judaism in Israel, a national religion in such a strong sense as to take the place of citizenship. And yet this obsession with external observance also suggests that Islam is not in fact a political entity” (p. 244).
3. Pakistan represents not only “the sepulchre of Muslim nationalism”, which has inspired only one Muslim politician outside the subcontinent, Bosnia’s first president, Alija Izetbegovic, but also signifies “the grave of Islam as an ecumenical religion with its own form of politics” (p. 248).

4. As a secular and religious ideal, Pakistan serves as an illustration of the failure to escape or transcend the problem of minority politics in India (p. 248).
5. If the role of religion in a Muslim-majority state like Pakistan is a national one, though perhaps by default rather than by design, then perhaps it is simply as a non-nation and thus a non-majority that Islam might exist as a global phenomenon (p. 248); because instead of “protecting Islam as an abstract idea, Pakistan has only *nationalized it*” (p. 250, *italics added*).

Thus, cutting to the core of geopolitical paradoxes entangling Pakistan to argue that it has never been a ‘nation state’ in the conventional sense, Devji’s *Muslim Zion* offers an exhaustive exploration of the various political and ideological forces that played an important role in Pakistan’s creation. An enthralling interpretation, with many complex and crucial insights, arguments and observations, Faisal Devji’s *Muslim Zion* is a provocative and challenging historical exploration of the idea of Pakistan.
