Naveeda Khan (ed.), *Beyond Crisis: Re-evaluating Pakistan*

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Crisis, failure and instability are the regular tropes that seem to orient scholarship on Pakistan. Several recently published edited volumes demonstrate the broader imperative to move ‘beyond’ such iterations of crisis by cultivating alternative representations, either through political and economic commentary (Lodhi 2011), or conversely, through attention to the social and cultural aspects neglected by policy-driven analyses, such as visual culture (Zaidi 2009), literature and the arts (Freeman 2010), and urban life histories (Husain 2010). As fresh work begins to consolidate the breadth and range of Pakistan Studies through powerful teaching resources, Beyond Crisis: Re-evaluating Pakistan offers a much-needed intervention. Rather than reinforcing a dichotomy between politics and society, this volume instead demonstrates how they are intimately connected, tracing how the political is embedded in everyday life.

Edited by anthropologist Naveeda Khan, the multidisciplinary volume is the result of a 2005 workshop of the same name. It assembles sixteen article-length contributions that engage broadly with Pakistani history, politics and society through textual and ethnographic analyses. Ambitious in scope, the ‘new moment in Pakistan studies’ hailed on the book’s inside flap is situated very particularly in terms of, and in dialogue with, an Anglo-American legacy of research. Published as part of the Critical Asian Studies series by Routledge India, it intends to participate in a vibrant global community of scholarship in South Asia.

The two afterwords by David Gilmartin and Katherine Pratt Ewing are perhaps the simplest entry points to Beyond Crisis, and provide an excellent transition to the impassioned, historically and theoretically-driven introduction. In the latter, editor Naveeda Khan situates ‘crisis’ as a mode of description, delving into the history of social analyses of Pakistan to explain both the force and significance of a scholarly preoccupation with failure. To do so, she uses the key...
moment of 1971, when Bangladesh gained independence following a fraught and bloody struggle with West Pakistan, as a nodal reference point. Khan suggestively counterposes the discourses of crisis and failure in selected scholarship following 1971 (R. Jahan, P. Oldenburg, H.A. Rizvi and A. Jalal) to earlier analyses dating to the 1960s (H. Alavi, K.B. Sayeed and K.K. Aziz), which she commends for offering ‘pragmatic accounts’ of the Pakistani state and society. As such, she reminds readers that crisis is a sign that scholars must engage and situate; it is a starting point rather than a conclusion, and a tool with which to anticipate, rather than foreclose, alternate possibilities.

[4] The introduction does important theoretical labour to articulate how the assembled contributions move ‘beyond crisis.’ Most compelling are the suggestions to interpret Pakistanis’ emphases on alienation from a government apparatus as an important form of auto-critique that constitutes a form of belonging. Khan refers to this critical impetus as the ‘affect of not getting it right’ in an attempt to theorize the insistent frameworks of a failed state, failed nationalism and failed sovereignty. She develops this point by using philosopher Stanley Cavell’s notion of ‘immigrancy’, which elaborates the ordinary and yet uncanny experience of ambivalence. The concept nuances Khan’s assertion that the critical engagement mobilizing anxieties around crisis demonstrates a powerful mode of attachment to Pakistan. Her attempt to flesh out the difficult and persistent relation of an ordinary-uncanny sense of homelessness-at-home is forcefully echoed in several detailed and delicately argued contributions, notably those by Hyder, Mufti, Naqvi and Verkaaik.

[5] The breadth and diversity of the contributions are the strength of this volume. Rather than uniquely concerned with crisis events themselves, their analyses and findings expand on the contexts in which particular crises are embedded, through which they take shape, and toward which horizons they gesture. Six contributions are previously published, insightful pieces (Ali, Andrabi et. al., Hyder, Mufti, Naqvi, Verkaaik), notably the two studies of Iqbal’s writings (Mufti, Hyder) and the freshly descriptive ethnographic narrative by Verkaaik.

[6] One important theme explores the fraught assertions of hegemonic national identities, rather than the failure of a singular and unified official sphere. Through a close reading of two Urdu-language films from the 1960s and 1970s, Dadi examines the cinematic modes of melodramatic realism aligned with the changing operations of ethnic identity in Pakistani cinema, articulated in no small part through the particular Urdu accent of a purported national subject.
Saikia draws on oral histories with officers and soldiers who fought in East Pakistan in 1971 to elucidate both the silences and acknowledgements around violence committed against their fellow countrymen and fellow Muslims, the ‘Bengalis’. These pieces complement Ahmed’s contribution on the legal arguments and rulings that marginalized the Ahmediyya sect, which demonstrates the liberal logic and performative legal power that allowed Muslim identity to be configured as inalienable property subject to damage and compensation, in contrast to a model of identity constituted through practice.

[7] A number of contributions also trace the ways in which religious discourses have addressed the political over time. Iqtidar presents a fascinating genealogy of the ‘religious right’ with her account of how the influence of leftist politics in the 1950s came to shape the Jama’at-e-Islami critique of feudalism, effectively leading to an anti-socialist religious party’s moral concern, ‘however partial’, with workers and farmers. Rozehnal relates the mystical ‘power potential of Pakistan’ through which Sufi pir Wahid Baksh addressed, described and evaluated politics in writings dating from 1986. Abbas describes elite nationalist politician Imran Khan’s fascination with the orientalist conversion narratives of Muhammad Asad and Maryam Jameela, who both compare Islam to the debauched West of their personal experiences while berating Muslims for undermining their own spiritual authenticity.

[8] In the final and most overtly anthropological section on ‘the everyday,’ Bard examines how multiple voices of feminised authority invoked by a young female preacher gender ritual speech in a Shia women’s mourning assembly in Lahore. Hull’s ethnographic study of governmental urban planning in Islamabad investigates not only the informal processes within the bureaucracy, but also ‘the quiet encroachment’ of an uncivil politics that unsettles ‘authoritarianism’ by neither challenging state policy nor working through the familiar mechanisms of civil society. Finally, Khan shares a complex account of three community-built mosques in Lahore, where both discourses and local initiatives are forcibly seized, such that they are at once benign and threatening. Citing the example of an Ahl-e-Hadith family who appreciated the recitations of the same Barelvi imam who also slandered them on the mosque loudspeaker, she terms this process ‘the violence of the ordinary’.

[9] Beyond Crisis a wonderful resource on a number of levels, notably as a teaching aid through its textured analytical accounts of Pakistani politics and society, as well as through its cumulative bibliography. It will usefully serve as an introduction to contemporary social analyses.
of Pakistan through a largely American style of anthropology, mostly written by emerging scholars and based on field research methods. As such, the volume is timely both in terms of its analytical scope, as well as the selection of researchers whose voices it assembles.

References


