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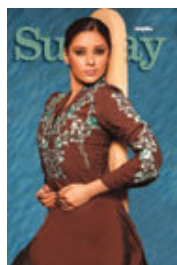


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Op-ed: Pakistan and South Asian Muslims



Ishtiaq Ahmed

The Muslims of South Asia do not have any automatic right to enter Pakistan as the Jews have to enter Israel under the so-called Law of Return. Is this consistent with the founding ideology of Pakistan, the two-nation theory?

Among the various tragedies attendant upon the break-up of Pakistan in 1971, when East Pakistan became Bangladesh, is the unresolved status of some 250,000 Biharis stranded in Bangladeshi refugee camps. The Biharis, an Urdu-speaking people originally from the north-eastern Indian state of Bihar, migrated to East Pakistan when the subcontinent was partitioned in 1947 between Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan.

Most of the Biharis sided with Pakistan during the 1971 Bengali uprising. That made them a pariah group in Bangladesh. Most of them want to immigrate to Pakistan and have refused to acquire Bangladeshi citizenship, claiming that they are Pakistanis and therefore entitled to set up hearth and home in Pakistan. Under international law, if the Biharis wish to remain Pakistanis there is no reason to refuse them permission to settle in Pakistan. Some Bihari families have been allowed to join their kin in Pakistan but the bulk has been denied this birthright.

Does this make sense? No. We have brought Pakistan almost to the point of veritable economic ruination by our uncompromising support for the Kashmiris' right of self-determination but we do not give most of our bona fide citizens their basic right to clean water, education and a meal because our priority is 'defence spending' for an inevitable war with arch-enemy India.

But letting Biharis relocate in Pakistan would surely not cost dearly. They are only 250,000 altogether. Thanks to lack of education about family planning we are adding 250,000 babies every week if not every day to our burgeoning population, so why not let the Biharis who fought alongside our glorious army to save Pakistan, become Pakistanis in the proper sense? There is no reasonable answer. There cannot be one.

From what I have gathered listening to well-informed Pakistanis the implicit understanding is that since Bangladesh is a Muslim country the Biharis should seek Bangladeshi citizenship and try becoming a part of that nation –which would mean learning Bengali and assimilating into that culture. This is perfectly reasonable advice and the Biharis must consider it seriously.

But we don't give a similar advice to the Kashmiri Muslims to seek a future within the Indian union. The reason ostensibly is that India is not a Muslim state and therefore the situation of Biharis is not comparable. Granted that is true, but what about Indian Muslims wanting to come to Pakistan? Well, they did not do that in 1947 and now it is too late. Moreover, they are 140 million and that is too many!

The only conclusion we can draw from such evasive gibberish is that the Muslims of South Asia do not have any automatic right to enter Pakistan as the Jews have to enter Israel under the so-called Law of Return. Is this consistent with the founding ideology of Pakistan, the two-nation

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theory?

When Iqbal in 1930 presented his idea of a Muslim state (confined only to north-western India, excluding the Muslims of Bengal and the Hindu-majority provinces) at the annual session of the All-India Muslim League in Allahabad the quorum of 70 members was not complete. Hafeez Jalladhari had to keep on reciting his 'Shah Nama' while the organisers frantically searched for individuals to fill the quorum so that the resolution could be passed.

Chowdhari Rahmat Ali coined the name PAKISTAN in 1933. His idea was dismissed as a student's wild dream. That did not discourage Rahmat Ali who developed a whole range of pious names — Siddiqistan, Farooqistan, Hyderastan, Osmanistan and so on — for independent Muslim enclaves in Hindu majority areas. He even proposed a Guruistan for Sikhs and some name for a state for the Dravidian peoples of South India. The Muslim League leaders dismissed him as an eccentric and a charlatan and he in turn never forgave Jinnah for accepting a Pakistan consisting only of the north-eastern and north-western zones of India.

With the wisdom of the hindsight we can argue that Jinnah's Pakistan was more realistic even though its realisation resulted in a huge loss of life and the biggest forced migration in history. Rahmat Ali's scheme of mini Muslim states amid predominantly Hindu-majority regions would certainly have multiplied communal killings and magnified the scale of ethnic cleansing. Such a scheme would have surely hurt Muslims the most since they were surrounded by Hindu majorities.

That did not deter Rahmat Ali. He wrote letter after letter to conservative British lords pleading for their support and patronage for his idea of several Muslim states. Why he should have hoped for the support of arch imperialists is a mystery which has never been clarified. Some people allege that Rahmat Ali was in the pay of the colonial office which used him from time to time to say things that would keep Hindus and Muslims at loggerheads. However, there is no solid evidence to prove this.

Apart from East Punjab where ethnic cleansing was almost complete, several of the staunchest protagonists of the Pakistan demand, among them Raja Sahib Mahmudabad, Hasrat Mohani, Begum Aizaz Rasul, Nawab Mohammad Ismail Khan, Raja of Pirpur (author of the Pirpur Report of 1937) and Mohammad Asadullah of Assam, chose to stay in India. Some left for Pakistan later but others who had gone to Pakistan returned to India. Why? I don't know, but it is something on which more research needs to be done. On the whole it was primarily the upper middle-class and the salariat that immigrated to Pakistan.

Pakistan came into being in those areas where Muslims were in a majority. Such areas did not need as much protection from Hindu Raj as those in which Muslims were in a minority. Most of them were converts from Dalit and other depressed sections of society. They needed more help than anyone else in coming to Pakistan, but they were advised to become good and loyal Indians. I am sure the Biharis stranded in Bangladesh also come from the poorest sections of society and therefore they too have no takers in Pakistan.

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