

An Epiphenomenal Book<sup>1</sup>

With due apology to every Pathan in the world, I must start with a “Pathan” joke. A Pathan came down into the plains to visit with a friend. The friend treated him to *qalaqand*. The Pathan loved the chunky, grey-white sweet so much that the next day he went looking for it in the market. Unfortunately he couldn’t remember the name, and so when he saw a man selling what looked like *qalaqand*, he pointed to it and bought some. As he started eating he found himself in terrible agony, for what he had bought was home-made soap. Seeing his anguished look and the foam trickling out of his mouth, a man asked, “What’s the matter, Khan? What are you eating?” Gasping for breath, the Pathan retorted, “What do you think? Khan is eating his money.”

That describes my experience with Jaswant Singh’s tome *Jinnah: India – Partition – Independence* (New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 2009). I spent 695 good rupees and therefore felt I had to get my money’s worth. However, after a couple of attempts to read the book serially, I decided to cut my losses. I began to read the book in patches—fifty pages here, ten pages there, often letting the book fall open and then reading whatever fate dictated. I feel no shame in saying that the responses I offer below are based only on a partial reading, and resolutely subjective.

My first response: it is an embarrassing book to read. I felt foolish when I found myself trudging through such awful expository prose as this:

“The League had claimed that it was the true upholder of Islam’s ideological authenticity; also of representing a substantive Muslim consensus, therefore, it demanded, rather presupposed, just a single Muslim medium – and asserting its identity as a different conceptual ‘nation’, claimed a separate land for itself which is

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<sup>1</sup> Revised and expanded version of comments made at a discussion on Jaswant Singh’s book, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, September 7, 2009.

why this agonizing question continues to grate against our sensibilities: ‘Separate’ from what?”

Yes, it actually is a single sentence on page 5. As is this on page 50:

“By this time Jinnah had been a Congressman of the Pherozeshah Mehta group, (the moderate group of the Congress, which amongst others included Dadabhai Naoroji, Gopal Krishna Gokhale and their group included Tilak, Bipin Chandra Pal and Lal (sic) Lajpat Rai, and also, secretary to Dadabhai Naoroji who was presiding over the Calcutta Congress.”

Things don’t improve as the book progresses. Here is one gem of a sentence from page 479:

“For one, such an assertion—[Muslims are a separate nation]—though entirely illogical, is fundamentally of an insatiable nature, it will always remain so, forever, as it never can be quenched being born of a peculiar Indian phenomenon ‘minoritism’, endlessly it will continue to give birth to more destructive minoritism, being politically contagious for, Pakistan is doubtless Muslim, but ‘theocentrically’, it is not a ‘theocratic’ state, indeed there is no such state other (sic) perhaps than the Vatican, but then who, other than Gandhi and a few others was to advise caution as we rushed headlong (and unheeding!) down this destructive path.”

While I prefer simplicity and lucidity in any expository prose I’m made to read, I readily confess to being a pedant when it comes to scholarly books. I expect them to fully employ standard scholarly tools and methods—in particular when quoting from other sources. For that reason I took particular interest in the book’s footnotes and endnotes, and checked the quotations included in the main text as well as elsewhere. The exercise was revealing. Mr. Singh’s research assistants apparently felt no hesitation in borrowing verbatim from other people’s writings and then presenting it to him as their own. Mr. Singh, subsequently, compounded the “lapse” by letting everything appear as the fruit of his own labours. I wrote on this matter in the *Indian Express* of September 1, 2009 (<http://www.indianexpress.com/news/jaswant-notso-original/509756/0>) and would like to share the relevant portions here:

1. On pages 481–2, there is a long (19 lines), erudite note on the Canadian scholar Wilfred Cantwell Smith. Besides being totally irrelevant, it is a verbatim copy of a

note available on the web: <http://www.as.ua.edu/rel/aboutrelbiowcsmith.html>. The site belongs to the College of Arts and Sciences, University of Alabama; the note is authored by its Department of Religious Studies.

2. On page 588, the long (34 lines), equally erudite note on Benedict Anderson and his book, *Imagined Communities*, is a meticulous copy of what is available on the web from “The Nationalism Project: [www.nationalismproject.org/what/anderson.htm](http://www.nationalismproject.org/what/anderson.htm).

3. Page 623 contains a note (20 lines) on the Muddiman Committee. It is copied word for word from the “Banglapedia,” prepared by the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh. ([http://www.banglapedia.org/httpdocs/HT/M\\_0347.HTM](http://www.banglapedia.org/httpdocs/HT/M_0347.HTM)) The note is duplicated on page 630, unnoticed by the publishers.

4. On page 633, the author includes a note on Ramsay Macdonald; it runs to 25 lines, faithfully copied from “British Friends of India,” offered on the web by the Indian National Congress: [www.congress.org.in/british-friends-of-india](http://www.congress.org.in/british-friends-of-india).

5. On pages 634–35, the author has presented a long note on A. K. Fazlul Haq. Its 38 lines were originally written by someone for the “Story of Pakistan” project. One can find it on the web at: [www.storyofpakistan.com/person.asp?perid=PO77](http://www.storyofpakistan.com/person.asp?perid=PO77)

I reiterate: none of the above carries any indication that it was not authored by Mr. Jaswant Singh or his research team. I stopped after five searches, but I’m confident that more searches of the kind I did, using key words or sentences, will turn up many more such examples.

The main text itself is full of similar lapses. Any number of quotations is utilized, but their sources are not indicated in any manner. Six lines are quoted from Al-Biruni’s book on page 16, but no reference is given. On pages 21 and 22, the author quotes from the trial record of Emperor Bahadur Shah, but fails to tell us where he found it. On page 47, Mr. Singh mentions a Syed Mohammed Zauqi and a letter he allegedly wrote to Jinnah in 1943. Mr. Singh writes, “In this (sic) a rather detailed, but retrospective account is given of the origins of the Simla Deputation and the formation of the Muslim League. This is placed in the Appendix, for interest (sic) though its authenticity cannot be vouchsafed.” The appendix runs from page 526 to page 530. Neither the Appendix nor the main text mentions Mr. Singh’s source or the reason why its authenticity cannot be vouchsafed.

I’m willing to allow that Mr. Singh or his publisher might not find anything

embarrassing in such silly passages as the following:

“[M.R.A. Baig] fell out with Jinnah over the Lahore Resolution which he felt to be communal. He, then become (sic) Jinnah’s secretary...” (p. 275)

“Suddenly, Burma (now Myanmar) was now vulnerable, as was Rangoon, and then was it to be India?” (p. 291)

Most people, however, would find it worse than embarrassing having to read a text so irresponsibly prepared. And yet the same is touted as scholarship that allegedly required five years of writing, re-writing, checking, and cross checking (p. xiii).

My second response to the book is to call it unneeded and irrelevant. It has nothing new to offer, except some rare photographs. If one is interested in Jinnah as a person, Stanley Wolpert (*Jinnah of Pakistan*) is presently our best guide. On the final years of Jinnah’s political life in undivided India, Ayesha Jalal (*The Sole Spokesman*) cannot be bettered. If one is more narrowly focused and wants to know how things went wrong in 1946, Abul Kalam Azad (*India Wins Freedom*) tells it all quite succinctly. For readable polemics, one can turn to Ram Manohar Lohia (*Guilty Men of India’s Partition*). As for finding a meticulously argued and documented single book on why the partition of India came about and who must take on what share of responsibility for it, one cannot find a better guide than H. M. Seervai (*Partition of India: Legend and Reality*). Then there are any number of review essays by that man of amazing memory and erudition, A. G. Noorani, that have appeared over the years in *Frontline* and elsewhere. Mr. Singh believes in an eternal unitary India that just happens to have the same territorial boundaries as the areas of the subcontinent over which the British held sovereignty in 1947, including Andaman Islands, Leh and Ladakh, Sikkim, and Baluchistan. He also believes that the main causes of the Partition were something called the “minority syndrome” of the Muslims and the obduracy of a man named Jawaharlal Nehru. These are good beliefs to hold for a self-defined “political figure,” but they amount to nothing more.

In his opening remarks (“Acknowledgments”), Mr. Singh states that on a flight back from Pakistan he was struck by the thought “there existed no biography of Jinnah written by a political figure from India. It was then that I decided to fill the gap.... (p. xiii)” The

logic is peculiar. His reason is not that he was personally fascinated by Jinnah and wished to write a personal account of his life, nor is it that a good biography of Jinnah did not presently exist. He simply believes that some Indian “political figure” should have written Jinnah’s biography, and since none did he must fill the gap. I’m open to correction, but no Indian “political figure” as understood by Mr. Singh has yet written a biography of Jawaharlal Nehru or Vallabhbhai Patel. Does he intend to fill those gaps too?

Next, in the Introduction, Mr. Singh poses his big question: “Why was this ancient entity [i.e. India] broken: Why? (p. 10)” Then he adds:

“... unless we ourselves almost live in that period, and breathe those contentions—[I don’t know how one breathes contentions.]—join in the great debates of those years as participants...not merely be ex post-facto narrators of events, or commentators upon past happenings—[I have no idea how one can avoid commenting upon past happenings while writing about the Partition.]—unless we do this very minimum we will fail to capture the passions of those times. (p. 11)”

I’m afraid his utterly drab, often turgid and frequently rambling narration fails to capture any passion of those times. How could it, when it is entirely focused on the so-called big events and big names? Much worse, in my view, is the absence of any sign of introspection, any attempt to relate what he might believe to be the passions of those long ago years to his own growth as a “political figure.” A more personal book would have been much shorter and of genuine interest than this depressing attempt at pseudo-scholarship.

My third and final response is to acknowledge that it is a significant book, but the significance, in my view, lies merely in its being a political epiphenomenon. It rudely and perhaps unexpectedly exposed the tussles within the top ranks of the BJP leadership. It became a handy tool for many of them to get rid of Mr. Singh. What was personal animus could now conveniently be turned into ideological difference. No history of the BJP will now be written without mentioning this book and what it immediately brought about: the expulsion of its author from the BJP.

Needless to say, the expulsion, as explained to the public, was baseless. The leopard

has not changed its spots. Mr. Singh's former aide Sudheendra Kulkarni has correctly written: "Anyone who reads the entire book with an unprejudiced mind will conclude that the charge that he went against the BJP's 'core ideology' is bunkum... Actually, it adds ballast to many of the underpinnings of the party's nationalist ideology: its total rejection of the Two-Nation theory, its rejection of 'minoritism', its concept of genuine secularism." Of course, Kulkarni does not mention that the book, while rejecting the so-called "Two-Nation" theory fails to make any mention of V. D. Savarkar, who as staunchly believed in it as Jinnah, and did so prior to the latter's conversion to it.<sup>2</sup> An introspective Jaswant Singh would have spent some time pondering over the possible reasons why Savarkar and Jinnah shared that theory. That would have been a new and valuable contribution. Mani Shankar Aiyer has pointed out this matter forcefully in a recent review article in *Outlook*. He writes, ". . . at Nagpur on August 15, 1943— . . . exactly four years before Independence Day —Savarkar enthusiastically endorsed Jinnah's claim to Two Nations. Savarkar's views spawned Hedgewar, Golwalkar and the RSS, and animated the Hindu Mahasabha (besides eventually giving us first the Jan Sangh and now the Bharatiya Janata Party). Here lie the Hindu origins of Partition. . . Clearly, Jaswant Singh the scholar embarrasses Jaswant Singh, lately of the BJP!"

Aiyer has also put his finger on what seems to be the single most powerful drive behind the book, a disdain verging on hatred for Jawaharlal Nehru. If that was deliberate —a ploy to diminish even further the mild critique of Vallabhbhai Patel—it sadly failed to save Mr. Singh's fate in the BJP. On the other hand, given the role that the RSS and its chief, Mohanrao Bhagwat, play in dictating the choices in the party's leadership, his fate in the BJP may not be quite sealed. Mr. Bhagwat might have condemned the book but his condemnation was more likely to tell Mr. Advani to make a graceful exit while he still had a chance. The loudest and most persistent criticism of the book has come from those whose own leadership position is in serious jeopardy, people like Rajnath Singh and

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<sup>2</sup> I'm not claiming that Savarkar was the first person. "Who was first?" is not the issue, unless one believes that Savarkar had no mind of his own and only "reacted" to what others wrote. As for those who mention Sir Syed and Iqbal with reference to the "Two Nation" theory, they fail to note that Sir Syed, when using the word *qaum*, did not mean a "nation-state"; for him the Muslims were a separate *qaum*, but then they too consisted of several separate *qaums*. Iqbal indeed talked in terms of nation-states, but it should be noted that in 1930 he did not include Bengali Muslims in his scheme. His vision of "a consolidated North-West Indian Muslim state" was not the same as the "separate states" of the Lahore Resolution of 1940. Please see my 1979 essay "Iqbal, Jinnah, and Pakistan: The Vision and the Reality" available on the web: <<http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00litlinks/naim/ambiguities/13iqbaljinnah.html>>

Sushma Swaraj. They were prominently not invited to the latest conclave organized by the RSS, as reported in today's papers, but their critic, Arun Shourie, was. I also find it significant that Murli Manohar Joshi and Atal Behari Vajpeyi have abstained from condemning the book and its author. I, for one, can imagine a future BJP to which Mr. Jaswant Singh would be of more relevance and acceptance than is evident presently.

I am, however, not similarly sanguine about the fate of Mr. Singh's book in Pakistan. Sure, just as he has been a hit with the 'chatterati' of Delhi so will he be—as he is now—with the English language chatterati in Karachi and Islamabad when a Pakistani edition comes out or the Indian edition becomes widely available. But I won't be surprised if a demand soon enough rises in the Urdu press to have the book banned—for it questions the concept of Pakistan and the motives of its founder. After all, there is a law on the books in Pakistan against any such "blasphemy." And many prominent Urdu journalists might be expected to retort to Mr. Singh: "Nonsense. Pakistan became inevitable the day Muhammad bin Qasim landed at Dabul." "Iqbal offered the vision of Pakistan and the Quaid transformed it into reality," that is the founding myth of Pakistan; it cannot accommodate the possibility that Jinnah could have abandoned that vision in 1946. "Congress was intransigent," many in Pakistan would gladly concede, but, disregarding the contradiction, the same will also assert in the same breath: "Pakistan was inevitable."

Some perceptive Pakistani commentators have already noted this problem. In the *Daily Times* of August 24, Ejaz Haider concluded his column on the book ("Jaswant's Art of the Impossible") by asking: "So, what are we going to do? Praise him for implying that India played a bad hand in East Pakistan and chide him for implying that Kashmir's boundaries should not be redrawn? Praise him for placing Mr Jinnah on a higher pedestal than Pandit Nehru and Sardar Patel and reject his contention that partition was bad and didn't solve anything?"

Compare it to what Muhammad Tahir wrote ("Mughalte" "False Conclusions") on September 2 in the *Nawa-i-Waqt*:

"The Brahmin mind in India, by presenting Quaid-i-Azam as a 'secular' leader desires to remove the permanent existence of Pakistan from the sacred security of the Two Nation theory. The latter is inviolably linked with the existence of Muslims. Its purpose is not to oppress or defeat some other nation but only to bring about the total

fulfillment of the religious, historical, and cultural needs of the Muslims.... [The Quaid's acceptance of the Mission plan in 1946] "was the last nail he hammered into the coffin of the permanent overlordship of the Hindus and partisanship of the British. He knew what to expect [from both]. The separate state for the Muslims was a consequence of his independent will; it is wrong to think it was a result of his disappointment."

No, I am afraid, the reception in Pakistan may not turn out to be exactly what Mr. Singh's Pakistani friends seem to anticipate.

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