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Tempest in a Teacup?

Jaswant Singh’s *Jinnah* takes up a familiar theme of late nationalist politics in India, in an attempt to ask an equally familiar question: how—or rather why—was India partitioned in 1947? If this historical terrain is well worn, then so is Singh’s historiographical approach; this is unapologetically a study of high politics. It could only be so given Singh’s description of the book as a political biography of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, a task that requires a reconsideration of the shifting relationships through the first half of the twentieth century between the All India Muslim League and the Indian National Congress (INC), on the one hand, and the colonial state and Indian nationalist leaders and political parties, on the other. These relationships, and this era of nationalist politics, have been well covered before in synthetic works on modern Indian and South Asian history, research monographs, biographies, and popular histories. One could be excused for thinking therefore that now, some sixty odd years after independence, little could be added to existing debates. Yet the publication of Singh’s *Jinnah* resulted in a political firestorm in India. Singh surely appears to have treaded onto contentious ground with this study. But has he broken new ground in his analysis of Jinnah and late nationalist politics in this book?

The release of *Jinnah* in India in August 2009 (it was officially released in Pakistan in April 2010) made headlines there almost immediately, as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) reacted by expelling Singh from the party. Had Singh been a minor player in the party, this would hardly have caused a ripple. But he was not; Singh was one of the BJP’s leading politicians. Though not an ideological hardliner, Singh played a leading role in BJP-headed governments and coalitions, serving as finance minister, external affairs minister, and defense minister, respectively. His status in the party did not insulate him from public criticism, however. Arguing that the “views expressed by Jaswant Singh in his book ... do not represent the views of the party,” the BJP dissociated itself from Singh’s book immediately upon its publication. This was apparently not strong enough censure for some, so the following day Singh was expelled from the party for his portrayal of both Jinnah and Sardar Vallabhai Patel. The latter portrayal caused Singh an additional and somewhat different problem, as it led the BJP government of Patel’s home state, Gujarat, to ban the book. All of this—the book’s release, the BJP’s disassociation from it, Singh’s expulsion from the BJP, and the banning of the book in Gujarat—took place in the span of less than one week (August 17-19, 2009).

If Singh’s expulsion garnered immense attention, then the ban on the book in Gujarat led to even more widespread notoriety. But as is often the case with such bans (even when subsequently lifted, as this one was)—including Joseph Lelyveld’s *Great Soul: Mahatma Gandhi and His Struggle with India* (2011; banned in Gujarat), Taslima Nasrin’s *Dwikhandita* (2003; banned in West Bengal), and James Laine’s *Shivaji: Hindu King in Islamic India* (2003; banned in Maharashtra)—bans produce controversy that often obscures careful analysis of the books in question on their own terms. The author’s intellec-
At the broadest level, Jinnah is about how and why India was partitioned at its independence from British rule. In this context, Singh seeks to reevaluate Jinnah’s role in order to understand “how and why this ‘ambassador of Hindu-Muslim unity’, the liberal constitutionalist, and Indian nationalist–Mohammad Ali Jinnah, become[s], in Viceroy Lord Wavell’s phrase, a ‘Frankenstein monster’, working to dismember that very world which had so generously created him?” (p. 5).

Singh neither celebrates nor demonizes Jinnah. Rather, through a painstakingly detailed analysis of high politics from World War I to independence, set out in nine of the book’s eleven chapters (2–9), Singh aims to show how Jinnah’s politics emerged in the context of, and from his interactions and exchanges with, both the INC and the British. These chapters are the scholarly heart of this book and demonstrate Singh’s considerable erudition. Singh is well versed in much of the secondary scholarship, has taken pains to examine primary sources where possible, and uses memoirs of both key and not-so-key players extensively to add depth and texture to his analysis. He revisits all of the key political events of the period–World War I to independence, the Cabinet Mission, etc.–providing more insight in some cases than in others.

The crux of Singh’s copiously detailed retelling of these events is that contrary to claims in much of the previous scholarship, Jinnah was not a separatist seeking an independent state. Rather, in the context of democratization in India, Jinnah sought protection from majoritarianism, while in the endgame of empire, he was denied this protection for India’s Muslims. Partition, Singh writes in no uncertain terms, was caused as much by the INC—which he describes in caustic terms at one point as displaying “poverty of thought, lack of statesmanship and absence of flexibility” (p. 226)—and the British. Rejecting the thesis of Jinnah as the architect of partition, Singh writes: “My own hypothesis is rather different; namely that the product-mix of British, Muslim and non-Muslim Indians (both Hindu and others), and not Jinnah alone, created Pakistan” (p. 384).

One of the more interesting aspects of Singh’s analysis of the events leading to the partition is his interpretation of the formation of INC ministries following the 1936-37 elections. He interprets the INC’s decision to “go it alone” in the United Provinces (UP) as an example of precisely the kind of majoritarianism that Jinnah feared in an independent India: “Once it [the INC] had achieved a majority on its own, it then saw no need to make any concessions to electoral allies, numerically smaller, therefore now redundant. This was unalloyed majoritarianism, arguable somewhat perhaps in theory, disastrous in consequences” (p. 195). The INC won a majority in the UP elections, but Singh suggests that it had little if any legitimacy to claim representation of Muslims since it had fared abysmally in Muslim constituencies. This is one example of Singh’s sustained criticism of the INC through this period–criticism leveled mostly at Jawaharlal Nehru (while Mahatma Gandhi is consistently praised), who Singh appears to hold in contempt. In the closing pages of the book, he charges Nehru with having exhibited at times “totally incomprehensible tactlessness … [and] childish impetuosity bordering on the naive.” Indeed, Nehru plays a central role in Singh’s account: “What certainly pushed the situation towards partition was Nehru’s inability to restrain himself, to always give his views to the press, and in a manner that almost on every occasion generated huge contention and multiple controversies, wiping out all earlier achievements. Time and again this happened prior to Independence” (p. 431). Singh is certainly not the first to voice criticism of the INC or Nehru, nor is he the first to point out the INC’s lack of legitimacy vis-à-vis the Muslim vote in the 1936–37 elections.[5] What makes these positions interesting, of course, is Singh’s subject-position as an important contemporary politician (and an eight-term member of Parliament).

Singh’s analysis of some episodes, however, is less than satisfactory. His depiction of the “great Calcutta killing” of November 1946 is a case in point. Here one sees little evidence of either a deep engagement with primary sources or current historiography. Instead, Singh provides the reader with familiar tropes: “Muslim hooligans got busy … near total chaos reigned all over the city … the only vehicles seen on the streets were the Muslim League lorries and jeeps loaded with hooligans, shouting pro-Pakistan slogans and inciting the mob to violence” (p. 331). Such a depiction is difficult to sustain in the wake of Joya Chatterjee’s reassessment of that event away from popular tropes of it as simply a blood-
letting by Muslims.[6] Other regrettable tropes emerge in the book as well, pointing to tension between its scholarly moorings (which include providing twenty-six appendices, mostly of primary source material) and its tendency toward more general political commentary. The latter emerges most clearly in the introduction and last chapter of the book, “Introduction: A Complex Beginning” and “In Retrospect.” Both employ generalizations and statements grounded more in ideology than scholarly analysis. In the introduction, for example, Singh writes that “Islam had come to India principally with the invading Islamic forces” (eliding the very different history of Muslim migration to South India) and of Muslims “who came in those centuries in a frenzy of Islamic zeal destroying whatever non-Islamic symbol, structure or image fell their way” (p. 3). Opening his historical narrative of the partition with the Prophet Muhammad in Arabia (the first sentence of the book) and medieval Muslim invasions is, perhaps, not an unrelated problem. In the final chapter, one finds a number of statements about Pakistan for which Singh marshals no evidence. He writes, for example, that “a reasoning and credible national identity eludes it [Pakistan] still,” and that “from becoming an Islamic state, Pakistan ultimately, again perhaps inevitably, had to become a ‘jihadi state’” (p. 426). Both positions have their proponents. But here we see no argument or evidence to sustain these claims; they are simply pronouncements.

This is a long and detailed book, and although it does not radically alter our understanding of how the partition came about at the level of high politics, it makes for interesting reading. Not—to my mind—because of the controversy that surrounded its publication. That the Gujarat government should be up in arms because Patel is not celebrated and the BJP leadership up in arms because Jinnah is not vilified are a footnote, at best. What is more compelling about the book is Singh’s perspective. Singh’s long-standing position close to the heart of BJP power (until this book was published, at any rate, though it should be noted that he has rejoined the party[7]) makes his perspective noteworthy and absorbing in two ways. One, he should be noted for his intellectual independence: Singh’s narrative does not dovetail neatly with any nationalism, Hindutva or otherwise, and he presents no “party line” on Indian history. And two, although Singh never lays this out explicitly, contemporary politics is latent throughout the book—whether in raising the issue of the INC’s secularism or speculating on how to accommodate minorities politically. In drawing these links, Singh provides us with insights about India’s present as much as its past.

Notes


