

# WHY TEACH CRITICAL HISTORIES



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All across the world states attempt to shape nations by constructing a national history to give people the sense of a shared past which defines their national ideology and identity. Given its value to the task of nation-building, the mechanism and exercise of the state construction of history is not an uncommon practice nor does it inherently constitute a problem. However, the nature of that constructed history and its implications may often be hazardous for a country's health.

At our end, the state's designation of Pakistan Studies as a compulsory subject which has to be taught from school to university similarly encapsulates the importance of history for the project of nation-building. The Pakistani state's ideology of nation-building situates itself in an overarching official imagination of Islamic identity, the Two-Nation Theory, and Urdu. Consequently, state-sanctioned narratives of history remain tethered to this ideological vision and are cultivated to support it by excluding, erasing, and denying significant but unpalatable events or inconvenient facts which do not fit this framework. The late Iqbal Ahmad consummately captured the perils to history here when he wrote, "I do not know of any country's educational system that so explicitly subordinates knowledge to politics.

Teaching and writing of history, always in jeopardy in Pakistan, has now passed from historians to hacks.<sup>1</sup> In addition to the production of sanitised and ideologically-driven historical accounts, the Pakistani state maintains a nearly paranoid monopoly on the narration of history by surveilling, demonising, and censoring alternate narratives as 'anti-national' or 'anti-state'.

The results of this have been twofold. Firstly, the state has installed official history in Pakistan as history with a capital H: the sole, authoritative, definitive truth of the country's past. Secondly, an entire populace has been indoctrinated with ignorance, chauvinistic nationalism, and a myopic conception of nationhood which is rooted in a uniformity of identity that negates the reality of Pakistan's rich multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multi-cultural character.

While completely overhauling Pakistan Studies might not be immediately possible, there is a way to circumvent its limitations and overcome its outcomes.

<sup>1</sup>Ahmad, E. (1995, June 4). Pakistan's Endangered History. DAWN. Retrieved from <https://eacpe.org/content/uploads/2014/04/Pakistans-Endangered-History-.pdf>

This is where critical histories come in. Teaching critical histories is a pedagogical approach that interrogates the uneasy relationship between history and the writing of history. When it comes to Pakistan, this interrogation focuses on the narrative of the past and its production by the state. Rather than simply imbibing predominant historical narratives established by the state, it assumes a broader lens of analysis which seeks to identify and investigate the intersections of power and ideology involved in crafting these narratives, the assumptions that undergird them, the contradictions they give birth to, the ideas that they advance by writing history in a particular fashion, and the silences lingering within them.

This investigation is crucially guided by and geared towards ethical questions raised by historical and contemporary inequalities, injustices, and inequities of ethnicity, religion, gender, class, and postcoloniality in Pakistan. Furthermore, it challenges state control over the historical narrative by introducing a multiplicity of histories, especially subordinated histories of marginalised peoples and groups, such as women and the working class, whose voices have been subsumed or excised from the state's carefully curated chronicle of Pakistan's past. Parallel to this, it also probes why these voices have been left out or remain absent in the first place from the history written and told about the country.

However, when we speak of the word 'critical' it does not necessarily always mean critique. Instead, it refers to a critical appreciation of the past which sees it for both its strengths and its weaknesses, its triumphs and its tragedies, its pitfalls and its promises, the ones realised and the ones left behind.

The starting point for this is looking beyond the master narrative of history written by the state and to scrutinise it: what does it say, what does it not say, what is its message, and why?

A few examples may suffice in demonstrating this.

It is widely taught and believed that Pakistan was made by the Muslims of the subcontinent to be able to live peacefully and practice their faith freely. Critically teaching this would involve the knowledge that this was but one conception among countless competing and evolving ideas of what Pakistan should and would be like among different groups who supported its creation. However, since the idea of Pakistan being made in the name of Islam acquired preponderant influence in the country, the origins of the nation are stretched to Muhammad bin Qasim whose arrival in the subcontinent is asserted as the arrival of Islam and Muslim ascendancy in the region. This would warrant several strands of inspection: what connection, if any, does Muhammad bin Qasim have with the nation-state of Pakistan? Why has this connection been drawn by the state in the story about Pakistan's origins? What is this association supposed to suggest about Pakistan's foundation and identity?

While an 8th century Arab military commander has even been cited as the 'first Pakistani'<sup>2</sup> in one of our official history textbooks which was originally published in 1979, the role of individuals who were instrumental in the creation of Pakistan but were from religious minorities has been effaced. It is important to include and educate students about Jogendranath Mandal, who was Dalit and Pakistan's first Law Minister; about Zafarullah Khan, who was an Ahmadi and Pakistan's first Foreign Minister; and about Dewan Bahadur Singha, who was a Christian leader and backed the demand for Pakistan. These personalities were an integral part of the Pakistan Movement and they too are the founding fathers of the country, yet they are invisibilised as they contest the neat equation of Muslims, Islam and Pakistan which state nationalism contains and promotes in the story of the country's creation, its ideological essence, and identity.

Their erasures from the national historical narrative are harmful since they inculcate ignorance about how communities of various faiths, regions, and ethnicities have always been a part of the fabric of this land and known it as their rightful home; and how many of them made Pakistan a concrete reality in the hope that it would be an egalitarian state which would be truly free from oppression and would wholly embrace them. Coupled with the singular emphasis on the Islamic origins or Muslim leaders of the Pakistan Movement, these erasures give rise to the understanding that Pakistan was solely made by Muslims for Muslims. Not only is this characterisation of Pakistan's creation disingenuous, but it establishes a false primacy of entitlement, rights and belonging among the majority at the expense of the minorities. This is where these erasures contain potential to fuel bigotry and intolerance against religious minorities which, at worst, are weaponised for discrimination and violence.



<sup>2</sup>Ahmed, M. (2016). Introduction. *A Book of Conquest: The Chachnama and Muslim Origins in South Asia* (pp. 7). Harvard University Press.

Another example is that of the Partition which is largely presented as the dawn of freedom symbolised by Pakistan's attainment of independence. This narrative never neglects the violence unleashed on Muslims migrating to Pakistan, but what ought to be brought into this conversation is the scale of sexual violence enacted on women during the event. It is only when we study the experiences of women on both sides of the border that the convenient block-compartmentalisation of villains and victims, done by both nationalist histories in Pakistan and India, is disturbed. Women from all communities were attacked by men from other communities, including the men on this side as the mass suicides of Sikh women in Thoa Khalsa evidence. If we earnestly acknowledge the full degree of violence women had to suffer during the Partition, it would be an inescapable realisation that gender-based violence is neither new nor non-existent in Pakistan; in fact, it is implicated in the very making of the country. Considering women's experiences during the Partition also highlights how the writing of history is often prejudiced by forces such as nationalism and patriarchy. What happened to women during Partition shows that while indeed 1947 marked the inauguration of hard-fought independence, it equally marked a terrifying miscarriage of humanity. Both of these descriptions about the Partition are true and can be held together at the same time.



Besides teaching silenced histories, critical histories also vitally concern critical thinking. The state's sanitized historical narrative flattens out the complexity and layers present in the past to offer a version of it which is black and white and one-dimensional, leaving scant space for nuance. This stunts students' intellectual capabilities and skills which leads to a blinkered view of Pakistan and its past.

On the other hand, teaching history critically dismantles such dichotomous modes of understanding and opens their thinking to a greater breadth and depth. By adapting them to the concept that the monopoly of historical truths is the problem and not their multiplicity, it equips students to meaningfully question hegemonic narratives, dispassionately engage with different perspectives, grasp nuances, get comfortable with complex ideas, and discover grey areas.

But perhaps the most urgent reason for teaching critical histories in Pakistan can be found in the recent turmoil. Unvarnished histories are both a sight and an insight which enable us to identify the underlying trajectories, reasons and realities of the politics, institutions, ideas, interests, and the precedents at play in the present. They have the cardinal civic function of converting the populace from passive observers to critical thinkers and active citizens who learn from their yesterdays and push for a better tomorrow. History possesses immense power and possibility which is why states seek to command its narrative. But whether it forges or fragments a nation depends on how truthfully and faithfully it is written, read, and remembered by them.

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