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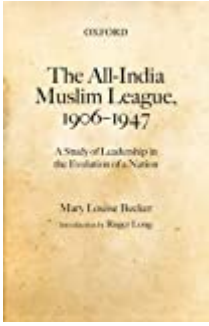

Mary Louise Becker. *The All-India Muslim League, 1906-1947: A Study of Leadership in the Evolution of a Nation.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. xlii + 295 pp. GBP 16.99 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-906014-6.

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Muslim League leaders before 1947

Mary Louise Beckerâs *The All-India Muslim League 1906-1947: A Study of Leadership in the Evolution of a Nation* was initially submitted as a doctoral dissertation in 1957 to Radcliffe College, Cambridge, Massachusetts. After attaining her degree she proceeded to work for the United States Department of State. She served as advisor to the US delegation to the United Nations Development Programme. This book thus benefits not just from her field work on Pakistan in 1953-54 but from her continued professional and personal relationship with prominent Pakistanis. Though Becker waited a long time to convert her dissertation into this book, she remained engaged with the research on the region and has written surveys on Pakistan. This book therefore is a culmination of well-considered opinions on one of the most fascinating movements in South Asian history, as also the modern world.

In this âpilot studyâ of the national movement that led to the formation of Pakistan in 1947, Becker explores the understudied âprimary ingredientsâ of the movement (p. vii). At the very outset Becker argues that âeffective, purposeful leadershipâ acted as a âa sine qua nonâ for the modern Pakistani nation (p. vii). This leadership, one of the ingredients, coordinated the other two, an integrated community and a peculiar set of circumstances, to make their successful bid for Pakistan. Through the course of eight chronologically arranged chapters, Becker maps the transition of the Indian Muslim community to a self-conscious nation.

In this study of leadership and the All-India Muslim League as the leadershipâs anchor, Becker devotes the first two chapters to pre-1906 events. In the Mughal times the Muslims developed âvisible elements of exclusivenessâ (p. 9) which continued to act as raw material for later development of Muslim nationalism. Their âcontinued position of political dominanceâ intensified the âoutward characteristics of nationalityâ by the time the British came to power (p. 9). However, in chapter 2, âPre-League Leadership of Muslim India,â Becker writes, âunder British impact; and in every sphere the Muslims steadily lost ground while the Hindus gained in power and prestigeâ (pp. 23-24). Becker notes the fall in the

status of the Muslim community under the British but does not explain how this change came about.

In these two chapters Becker discusses the leadership qualities of the well-known Syed Ahmad Khan and the lesser known (at least to nonspecialists) Chiragh Ali, Professor Salal al Din Khuda Bakhsh, Mohsin ul-Mulk, and Altaf Hussain Hali. Mohsin ul-Mulk worked to protect Urdu, and Haliâs poem *Musaddas* (written in simplified Urdu in 1879) brought the community together. While these discussions are fascinating, they do not add to the larger picture of Muslim leadership. Also, considering that the âpeasants knew nothing ofâ (p. 48) the better known S. A. Khan, Beckerâs account lacks a clear definition of what exactly she means by âleaderâ and âleadership.â

The first two chapters suffer from two other burdens. First, Becker consistently seeks to convince her readers that although the Pakistani national movement was clothed in âwestern terminology,â it was more âindigenousâ than the âhumanistic doctrine of national self determinationâ (p. vii). She would have succeeded more if her discussions on Islamic law (*sharia*) and the *ulema* or traditional Islamic scholars in the first four chapters, were more rooted in Indian society. As it stands, they have a generic quality. Second, Becker writes, referring to the grant of separate electorates in the Act of 1909, âthese Muslim leaders now felt … that they needed their own political society to express their communal policyâ (p. 57). Historically, the grant of separate electorates was a response to the Muslim demand for political representation, and to not explain how the Muslim leadership achieved this feat is a critical drawback in Beckerâs book.

From the third chapter, Becker gets into the heart of her argument. She starts with the founding of the Muslim League in Dacca in 1906, a year after Lord Curzon, viceroy of India, partitioned Bengal into two provinces. Becker demonstrates well how the Muslim Leagueâs popularity was hindered by the fact that it was deemed âtoo unorthodox for religious conservativesâ and âtoo conservative for young progressivesâ (p. 67). What served the Muslim League well later was its insistence from its early years, to demand Muslim participation in the government, and as Becker underscores, not just Indian participation. The author also prepares for Mohammad Ali Jinnahâs entry into politics by commenting on the âsignificant absenceâ in the Leagueâs early activities of the man âdestined to be the future Qaid-e-Azamâ (p. 65). In doing so, however, Becker commits a teleological blunder, one she does not correct in later chapters. This line of thought impacts the work in that the study of leadership, except for Jinnahâs, does not evolve into anything more than a recounting of key historical events that Muslim âleadersâ were involved in, be it Nawab Saleemullah, Fazl-i-Hussain, or the Ali brothers of the Khilafat movement fame.

The fourth chapter, âSome Political Experiments,â starts at 1913 and analyzes the Muslim communityâs disenchantment with the British annulment of the administrative separation of West and East Bengal in 1911. It surveys the period until 1929, tracing what Becker sees as an experimental phase in the Muslim Leagueâs history. The first experiment was the coming together of Congress and the League to sign the Lucknow Pact of 1916. This was a âpersonal triumphâ for Jinnah (p. 89). While the Muslim League acquiesced in standing up for patriotic efforts and self-government for India, it did not compromise on its demand for greater political safeguards as a minority community. This experiment had its merits because the British were then fighting a world war and Congress and the Muslim League could hope to get their demands addressed. In yet another experiment, Hindus and Muslims came together again. Two brothers, Mohammad and Shaukat Ali, and Gandhi were the leaders of the Khilafat movement (1920-22). Beckerâs examination of the subtle differences in goals and objectives of these leaders is sharp. Gandhiâs association with the movement was meant only to further his national and political goal of independence for India. But, âMohammad Ali was concentrating on a side issue which was in essence neither political nor nationalâ (p. 102). His main goal was to improve the power of the Ottoman caliphate (the *khilafat*). When Gandhi called off the movement in 1922, the Muslims naturally felt betrayed. This was followed by the tragic parting of ways between Hindus and Muslims, increasingly being represented by the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League respectively. Becker shows her analytical skills best in discussing how Jinnah, keen on Hindu-Muslim unity even in 1926, was skeptical about convincing âfanatic elements in his own communityâ to work with Congress again (p. 121).

The fifth chapter looks at the years between 1930 and 1935. Becker discusses the Round Table Conferences here and how Muslim leaders, including Jinnah, were gradually marginalized. The Muslim League was not even officially represented. Jinnahâs thinking, his politics, and his absence from Muslim League are not discussed. This ten-page chapter called âCritical Yearsâ is the shortest of all chapters and it fails to explain what was critical about these years in how they shaped the Muslim League party

and the Muslim community.

Becker moves to the last decade before independence/partition in the sixth and seventh chapters. Here she argues that even in 1936, three decades after its founding, the Muslim League was still a âmiddle of the roadâ organization, neither very religiously conservative nor very politically progressive (p. 147). In 1936 Jinnah also came back to the League on a permanent basis and found it to be âtoo pro-British and anti-nationalist for his tasteâ (p. 146). But he was in charge and he molded the League to suit himself. It was during this process that the fundamental question of the Muslim Leagueâs relationship with Islam had to be deciphered. The poet Muhammad Iqbal asked: âIs it possible to retain Islam as an ethical idea and to reject it as a polity in favor of national polities, in which religious attitude is not permitted to play any part?â (p. 134). Becker explains how Jinnah would have liked to keep Islam at armâs length but eventually it became the means to gain political weight, in the eyes of the British, the Congress, as also Muslims. Beckerâs discerning statement on Jinnahâs âdictatorial methodsâ and how the Muslim communityâs transition to a nation was not âorganic or democraticâ but imposed from above, establishes that despite the existence of many competent works on Jinnah, there is still scope for fresh assessment (p. 152).

This transition in the Muslim Leagueâs role is explained through key events such as the 1937 elections, the Lahore Resolution of 1940, the Cabinet Mission Plan of 1946, and eventually the Mountbatten Plan for the partition of British India. Becker shows how this decade was not just about striking bargains at the level of high politics, but also bringing into the Muslim League âfoldâ provincial figures such as Sikandar Hayat Khan and Fazlul Huq (p. 176). Her discussion on Jinnahâs personal reorientation and Iqbalâs role in forming Jinnahâs political opinions and her close reading of the development of the Pakistan idea are revealing and engaging. In the eighth and last chapter, Becker ends by giving Jinnah his fair share of credit for the creation of Pakistan, while also acknowledging how both the Muslim League and Jinnah were the âend product of twelve centuries of Islamâs internal religious, social and political development in Indiaâ (p. 267).

Jinnah has been the subject of great biographies and monographs.[1] Becker makes a commendable effort at studying Muslim leadership from pre-League times to Jinnah. But she has operated under a great disadvantage because she wrote without consulting archival sources. She has consulted some primary sources but the bulk of her citations and quotations, which she has used very liberally, come from secondary sources. Her interviews with prominent Pakistani politicians, namely Fatima Jinnah, Jinnahâs sister, are insightful but they do not play a role in shaping the main arguments made in this book.

Also, readers who are familiar with works on the Muslim League and Jinnah produced from within academia will find the book lacking in a consistent analysis of Muslim âleadership,â especially in how the âthree ingredients,â of which only one is leadership, worked and reacted to each other to bring about Pakistan. Their interest will be aroused but not satisfied. Beckerâs book may not be the best introductory book for a student of history interested in the Muslim League or Jinnah, but it is vital for an understanding of the important role of leadership for the Muslim League organization. This is a well-written book (albeit sprinkled with typos) that explores the understudied theme of Muslim leadership in South Asian history.

Note

[1]. Hector Bolitho, *Jinnah: Creator of Pakistan* (London: John Murray, 1954); Stanley Wolpert, *Jinnah of Pakistan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League, and the Demand for Pakistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); and Jaswant Singh, *Jinnah: IndiaâPartitionâIndependence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

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