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FATIMA ANWAR IN CONVERSATION WITH ALI RAZA.
For this conversation, Funambulist commissioned regular Funambulist contributor Fatima Anwar to speak with Ali Raza about ways through which we may deconstruct the idea of Pakistan as the political monolith it claims to be. Looking back and ahead at the many movements that break with such a uniformity—the establishment of the Bangladeshi state in 1971 surely being the most striking one—they offer us a heterogeneous vision that strongly differs from nationalist narratives. copied from funambulistmag to south asian anarchist library.

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Making and Unmaking Pakistani Nationalisms

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The man who talked until he disappeared by Bani Abidi (2019-2021). The picking up and "disappearing" of journalists, political activists, and dissenters of all kinds has become common fare in recent years in Pakistan. A development in the political machinations of a newly emboldened state that was "authorized" twenty years ago to pick up and provide people to the U.S. to be sent on to Guantanamo Bay, all without due process. These drawings are part of an ongoing set of portraits of men who are a threat to the Pakistani state, who have either been picked up in the past or are in the danger of "disappearing." They were painted at different moments along a video timeline, as the artist listened to their interviews online. Many of the recordings are no longer available.

more rigor to what we understand to be "us." Even if they are stories that may not always align with the way we understand who we are and what makes us Pakistani. This is why I said that I consider Bengali independence a national liberation struggle. Because it's important to acknowledge the truth that for Bangladeshis it was an anti-colonial struggle, it was the struggle for national liberation.

> As Pakistanis, I don't think we do ourselves any favors by denying that truth: especially as the aggressor, especially as a power that was primarily responsible for bringing things to a point where our eastern half wanted to secede from us.

And so I think there is an added responsibility on us to acknowledge that truth. One can still acknowledge that truth without imagining that it weakens us in any way, or that it makes us any worse off. In fact, it actually makes us stronger. And it makes us more willing and accepting of those other stories, all those other peoples that populate this immense land, all 220 million of them. I sometimes think that the poverty of our democracy and the poverty of our republic is directly tied to the poverty of our histories. And that's not a coincidence. Perhaps we could be a stronger republic and a stronger democracy if we would allow for more plural histories, more pluralistic histories, that don't reduce us to a singular definition of what it means to be Pakistani. Instead, we can try to open up the possibilities of the many ways in which one can be a Pakistani. I think that could bring us closer to this horizon of freedom that we've been speaking about.

FA: Reflecting further on these marginalized histories, what would it look like to write a history of Pakistan as a history of the varying, and at times contradictory, experiences and dreams of its peoples? And, moving this conversation closer to the theme of this issue of *The Funambulist*—the many simultaneously differing, yet connected regional histories of the Subcontinent—is "Pakistan" a useful frame within which to be asking this question?

AR: I think it is, but only partly. Let me begin by addressing your second question for I think it is partly a framework through which to ask those questions—except that, if one projects it back into time, you're losing out on much of regional history, of those other imaginations, of those other ways in which people understood themselves and lived their lives, and organized socially, politically, and culturally.

> When viewed in that frame, Pakistan becomes a very small moment in time.

It'll truly be a misfortune to actually pick up on that moment and project that back into the ancient past. I think part of what it means to be a historian is to think about all those histories in interconnected ways, in ways that don't always align with, or sympathize even, with the story that we are brought up with—ways that actually emphasize the richness and the complexity, and indeed, the diversity of our stories, and where we all come from, which, I think, is the task of any committed historian.

The same goes for Pakistan, the nation-state, which I think was the first part of your question. I believe that part of the task that confronts historians of Pakistan is to think about those many stories that actually constitute Pakistan. I'm not saying that we should not study Pakistani nationalism. Of course we should be studying Pakistani nationalism, because this means also studying the workings of power. And yet, I think that it's also important to think about those many other stories, those many other histories, those many other regions, those many other peoples, that also make up Pakistan, that also *are* Pakistan. One of the things that we have to get over, on a societal level, is the deep suspicion of those other truths, of those other stories. If I can now speak in the plural "us," a plurality of stories doesn't weaken us. I think they simply add more color, more strength, and

Fatima Anwar: Let's start by talking about the ideas that the Pakistani state—however we want to define it—has about itself. What is the story of Pakistan that a dominant state narrative would want us to believe, and where does it fail to contend with the realities of the people who inhabit the borders of Pakistan? Can you talk about some political movements or moments that challenge the construction of Pakistan as a monolithic nation-state?

Ali Raza: I like how you started off by complicating the state itself, and by disaggregating it, raising a question mark over what exactly "the state" of Pakistan is. I suppose a good way to begin might be with what we are taught in schools. The fundamental idea of Pakistan that comes forth from official state textbooks is a claim of civilizational difference from Hindus. This year, 2022, marks the 75th year of independence for Pakistan and India. Both were born out of the British empire through an immensely violent process. And the dominant account of Pakistani nationalism, or the struggle for Pakistan, to be more accurate, is premised on the notion that Muslims and Hindus could not possibly live in a situation where Muslims were relegated to the status of a perpetual and permanent minority. It is important to note here that the categories of religious minority and majority are constructions of colonial rule on the Subcontinent. Those categories also became the basis of politics in India. So Pakistan is a response—a refusal actually—to accept the status of a minority people, which is why this idea of civilizational difference grew to be immensely popular, especially in the years leading up to Pakistan's birth.

There are, of course, challenges to this idea. All nation-states are works in progress. All self-proclaimed nations are in a process of becoming—they never quite arrive. There are attempts to continually refashion and further strengthen our ideas of belonging, nationhood, identity, and so on. Pakistani nationalism, and the idea of what it means to be a Muslim, as opposed to Hindu or other kinds of identities, is also something that is a work in progress.

In fact, the idea of Pakistan has already been challenged quite successfully; specifically, the idea that was based on the two-nation theory, popularized by Muhammad Ali Jinnah and the Muslim League as the theoretical and ideological foundation for a separate state for the Subcontinent's Muslim population. This idea was a response to Hindu majoritarianism and to the deepening communal divides be-

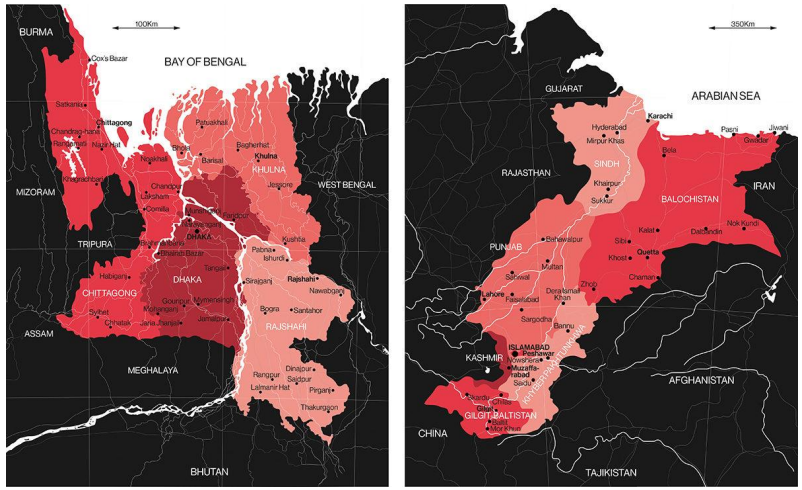
tween Hindus and Muslims on the Subcontinent. It was also a catalyst for worsening that divide. And the end result was a country that was partitioned from India and split apart into two wings, one called "West Pakistan," the other called "East Pakistan." East Pakistan broke away from the West in 1971, in the 25th year of independence from colonial rule, which to me signifies the final nail in the coffin for the two-nation theory.

> The independence of Bangladesh, then, represents the most significant challenge to Pakistani nationalism to date.

Other challenges include movements that have sprung up relatively recently. In the past decade or so, in what used to be called the "North-West Frontier Province," now called "Khyber Pakhtunkhwa" (KPK), where a political movement, the PTM, led by ethnic Pashtuns straddles, or rather transcends, the Afghan-Pakistan boundary. That is another story in its own right—that boundary has never really been fully accepted by many groups in both Pakistan and Afghanistan. And there are other movements, in Balochistan, in Sindh, and South Punjab, for example, that are based on language, on ethnicity, on a sense of regional cultural distinctiveness, which continually pose questions of Pakistani nationalism.

I suppose one could add other movements to that. I'm thinking of feminist movements; I'm thinking of workers movements; I'm thinking of peasants movements, all of which have questioned whether this framework of being Muslim is sufficient as a way of belonging to this space called "Pakistan." Their questions have continually challenged this dominant mode of identifying oneself, and have pushed the inquiry of what freedom ought to be and what the relationship between the citizen and the state ought to be. To cut it really short, the idea as we are taught in textbooks is of a singular, Subcontinental Muslim identity that is culturally and civilizationally distinct from non-Muslims. And that idea has continually been under pressure and distressed by multiple movements across the length and breadth of the country.

FA: I want to talk a bit more about Muslimness as a unifying national framework. As you mentioned, the 1971 creation of Bangladesh, the breaking apart of East and West Pakistan, should have been a



Map of Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan) and Pakistan (formerly West Pakistan) depicting part of the regional complexity described in the conversation. / Map by Léopold Lambert (2022).

essarily because I have some kind of a deep sympathy or fidelity to orthodox communism (especially in its Stalinist/totalitarian guises). Instead, what was interesting to me were the many horizons of freedom that colonial subjects dreamt of. In other words, what did it mean to be free? I suspect it may well be the most frequently asked question of the 20th century! These are people, these are colonial subjects who tie themselves to the project of communist internationalism that envisages an internationalist solidarity and an internationalist community based on opposition to capital *and* empire. This is a project with a radically different conception of freedom—a conception quite different from the kind of freedom that both India and Pakistan inherited. Freedom and independence are thought to be a triumph, as it was without a shadow of a doubt, but it's also important to think of freedom as betrayal. Betrayal to the many millions who dreamt of other things that ought to come with freedom, but didn't. That is also why those stories you mentioned are erased from official history writing. Those stories are always a reminder of how freedom is still incomplete; that we may have a long way to go *still*, before we can say that we are truly free. And those stories are always obviously inconvenient to nationalist narratives. It's also worthwhile to remember who invokes stories of revolution and rebellion that are otherwise ignored in textbooks, that are otherwise expunged from nationalist accounts: rather frequently it is those who still consider themselves to be oppressed under this "freedom." So, this becomes a clash of memories—those memories that are considered to be official, to be national, and those memories that are marginal and pose inconvenient questions of the dominant story. And the inconvenient question that they continue to pose is: are we really free? I think that's a worthwhile question to keep asking.

death knell for this idea that Pakistan is a state for the Muslims of the Subcontinent. Here we have an almost entirely Muslim population separating from the Muslim state. The framework is further complicated by the sheer number of Muslims that remained in India by virtue of the very geography where Pakistan was carved out (today Pakistan hosts approximately 200 million Muslims, compared to India's 195 million and Bangladesh's 154 million). And yet it retains its potency as a compelling unifying story! Why is that? It's still taught in schools, and right-wing movements are gaining electoral and political popularity utilizing this project of merging Pakistaniness and Muslimness. Could you speak to the power and violence of this particular conception of Pakistani nationalism?

AR: Right, that's a great question. And a big one, too. But first, I'm not sure how potent this idea really is. I think that one has to complicate the idea to begin with: one has to ask, where is this idea most potent? What is its geography? What kind of groups are we talking about? Is it the same across gender? Is it the same across classes? Is it the same across disparate regions, cities, and villages? And there, I suspect, one will find a varied kind of picture.

And yet, you're also right, this is much of what the Pakistani state has sought to do over the past 75 years. There have been some quite astounding successes to my mind. For example, the dominance of the Urdu language. Despite Urdu being considered the "mother tongue"—a term that I'm not entirely comfortable with—of a small minority of Pakistan's population, it has been identified as the language for Muslims.

> Despite the dozens of languages that Muslims spoke across the Subcontinent, Urdu, as a part of the state's project to create a unifying identity, was imposed as the official national language.

This was often an incredibly violent process, suppressing regional linguistic movements by force and limiting access to education and employment on the basis of fluency in Urdu. The attempted imposition of Urdu on East Pakistan, for example, was a violent process that directly led to the Bengali struggle to separate from West Pakistan. In fact, February 21, which is International Mother Language Day, commemorates the martyrdom of nearly thirty Bengali students

(numbers vary) in Dhaka who were fired upon by the Pakistani military and police forces, as they were demanding autonomy and recognition for their language: Bangla.

There is no corner of the country where Urdu has not gone to and, roughly speaking, Urdu is the language of the public sphere with, of course, some exceptions. So that's a good example of just how successful Urdu's spread has been, which in turn has been a key part of the Pakistani nationalist project. In terms of whether it has really succeeded in overcoming every other identity, at the expense of the sole and singular identity of being Muslim? The answer, I suspect, is conclusively no. I think that, as many movements testify across the history of this country, that project is still incomplete. All of that is to say that it's a mixed bag. There have been some successes, and there have been some distinct failures. But the failures actually haven't taken away from the idea at all. That is not really something that is uniquely Pakistani. That is something that you may find in other nationalisms too. Contradictions are not always inconvenient. Contradictions can be explained away. Failures can, at times, further strengthen nationalism and national belonging. In fact, one obvious lesson that some took from 1971 was that we were not Muslim *enough*. That failure has now been co-opted and appropriated into further strengthening, further reifying, and further legitimating this project of making all of us better Muslims. And so what 1971 taught the national security establishment was that we really needed to be *better* (and uniformly) Muslims. We needed to forget what made us distinctive in terms of our languages, in terms of our cultures, and ethnicities, if you were to avoid a repeat of 1971. That's the power of any hegemonic idea. First, it can pretend that the failure never really happened—and there's a section of the Pakistani intelligentsia that subscribes to that, which claims that "India caused 1971, so it's not really a failure. We made some mistakes, but they weren't big enough to merit Bengali independence." So failures can be ignored or manipulated in a way that doesn't destroy the overall larger idea. Secondly, you can use what appears to be a failure to strengthen that hegemonic idea in the first place. In that sense, what seems to be a failure to you and I, actually doesn't necessarily have to disrupt the dominant idea of Muslimness (as the marker of Pakistaniness) at all.

FA: I find it really interesting that after I asked you about Muslimness, you went straight to language. I think the fact that the state

had to tie Muslimness to a language speaks to the way that language, particularly in Pakistan and on the broader Subcontinent, has been very difficult for state projects. The European idea of the nation-state presumes (and violently establishes) linguistic homogeneity as one of the primary markers of national identity. And on the Subcontinent you are confronted by this immense diversity that doesn't fit within borders, is interwoven, and not discrete. Part of the violence against the ethno-nationalist movements we have been speaking of comes from a deep suspicion of allegiances to identities that defy or go past the borders of the nation-state. The Baloch, as an ethno-linguistic group, are not confined to Pakistan, and the region that is Balochistan spills over the border into a chunk of Iran and a bit of Afghanistan. Similarly, a larger part of Afghanistan hosts the Pashtun population than KPK does in Pakistan. So, it seems as though language is a fracture that shows up again and again, when it comes to this idea of Pakistan.

I'm going to take a bit of an abrupt turn, and return to something that you were saying about how our entire discussion has to be thought of in the history and context of colonialism and the colonial project in South Asia. In reflecting on Pakistan's foundational myths, I also returned to your 2020 book, *Revolutionary Pasts: Communist Internationalism in Colonial India*, where you follow the stories of anti-colonial communist revolutionary figures from the Subcontinent who are entirely absent from our national story. Some of these figures align themselves with the idea of the need for Pakistan, and they have their own hopes and dreams for what a state like Pakistan would be like. Yet, they are not part of our story—even more popular revolutionary figures like Bhagat Singh are missing. So from the very beginning, the way that we think about Pakistan—is it independence from colonial rule or is it separation from the Hindus of India—has framed the way that we think about what it means to *be* Pakistani. So I'd like you to talk about why these histories, these figures, which were integral to the struggle against colonialism, without whom we would not have a Pakistan, are marginalized and even erased in the national story.

AR: I think it may be better to begin with a crucial caveat: the fact that what it meant to be Indian, or later on Pakistani, meant an incredible variety of things to an incredible variety of people. That is where I became interested in these revolutionary figures. Not nec-