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History, Power and Resistance: Critical Assessment of Mubarak Ali's Contribution to South Asian Historiography

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Abstract
The unequal distribution of political power, cultural legitimacy, and access to historical archives are the factors that have always influenced the writing of South Asian history. Rulers, institutions, military victories and religious affiliations have often been given preference in official and nationalist narratives to the detriment of ordinary people. In this contentious intellectual terrain, the Pakistani historian Mubarak Ali has produced a significant oeuvre of popular historical scholarship which challenges the elites' version of history and emphasizes class, caste, gender, labour and everyday life. This article aims to critically re-evaluate his contribution by interpreting and reading some of his historical, historiographical and autobiographical works qualitatively. It explores his intellectual development, his critique of colonial periodization, communal terminology, hero-worship and textbook nationalism, and his understanding of social hierarchy, synthesis of religion and politics, culture of Sindh and Pakistani identity. Ali's significance is not just in providing alternative historical interpretations, but in expanding the public's ability to challenge who is writing history, for whom, and whose history is being left out. His secular and materialist perspective, Urdu prose, and his constant focus on the marginalized segments of society make his work pedagogically and civically unique. However, his scholarship is also marked by selective use of evidence, some generalizations, inconsistent source citation, and some inconsistencies in his interpretations. It is therefore necessary to make a balanced assessment, separating the political relevance of his interventions from the evidentiary force of specific claims. The study situates Ali at the intersection of historical scholarship, public education and intellectual dissent, uncovering the possibilities and the limitations of writing history against structures of power.

Keywords: Mubarak Ali; South Asian historiography; elitism; history from below; public history; historical materialism; nationalism, social exclusion, and depressed classes.

Introduction
History does not just happen; it is made by people in society. Institutions, sources, intellectual traditions and political expectations shape the choice of subjects, the classification of periods, the evaluation of rulers, and the distribution of praise or blame. It is not as if all knowledge of the past is a statement of power. It does mean, however, that claims about the past that are made with authority must be examined both in terms of evidence and the conditions of the visibility of evidence. That scrutiny is particularly significant in South Asia, where colonial rule, Partition, state formation, competing nationalisms, and religious mobilization have had an impact on public understandings of history.

Trouillot's analysis of historical silences is relevant here, as it points to the power of the final historical narrative, but also to the production of sources, the construction of archives, and the a posteriori imbuing

of significance (Trouillot, 1995). Nationalism introduces a second layer of selection: the nation can be thought of as a community even if its members are in very unequal social positions (Anderson, 2006). Together, these insights help to explain the question posed by Ali's critique. The problem is not whether or not historians can avoid social influences, but whether they make their choices and omissions subject to critical analysis.

However, his opposition is controversial: the critics see his viewpoint as ideologically motivated or unduly venomous against prevailing religious and nationalist dogmas, while others see his work as a rejection of unquestioned orthodoxy (Ahmed, 2013, pp. 41–43; Lakho & Palli, 2023). Celebration or denunciation is not a proper scholarly reaction. His claims should be assessed against the sources he used, the analytical consistency of his work, the scope of his explanation, and his contribution to the debate on the history. The extent of his writing for the public also poses a problem of scholarly evaluation: how can historians evaluate an author who may have had a greater impact on historical consciousness than the attention given to his work in specialist academic studies (Ahmed, 2013, pp. 41–43)? This is an interesting discrepancy and one that would be worth investigating, but it would take a systematic study of readership and scholarly citations, more than is possible here, to determine the exact extent of the discrepancy.

In this article, it is argued that Ali's main contribution is to move the site of historical authority from uncritical acceptance of rulers, communities and states to the consideration of evidence, social relations and marginalised experience. It also suggests that this valuable intervention is undermined when it becomes a general condemnation of the intentions of rulers or religious actors, as a structural explanation. The conversation moves from a description of method and intellectual context to Ali's main historiographical interventions, his reconstruction of the social history of South Asia, and a critical evaluation of his successes and failures.

Methodology of the Discourse: Approach, Sources, and Analytical Framework

This study is not quantitative or a full bibliometric survey, but rather a qualitative textual analysis and critical historiographical interpretation. Its main body consists of some of Mubarak Ali's writings on the medieval and colonial history of South Asia, historiographical enterprises, Sindh, caste, gender, social organization, and Pakistani identity, along with his autobiography. The books are chosen not to be an exhaustive list of his publications but rather to highlight some of the recurring themes in his work. The article identifies three tiers of evaluation: the argument itself that Ali makes; the means by which he makes the argument; and the value of the argument to the broader field of historical scholarship.

Comparative literature is not utilized as proof of direct borrowing of their theories by Ali but rather as a set of interpretive interlocutors. The works of Kosambi, Thompson and Guha provide different ways of defining what "history from below" means in terms of social formations and material remains, and working-class self-activity (Guha, 1982, pp. 1–8; Kosambi, 1956; Thompson, 1963). These are different ways of archiving, region, and intellectual commitments; affinities do not make Ali a member of any particular school.

The relationship between historical knowledge and social power is the analytical point of departure. State-situated narratives can influence the political imagination by depicting social order as natural, inherited, or divinely ordained. Likewise, counter-narratives can be ideologically dogmatic, in that they dictate conclusions prior to examining the evidence at hand. A critical historiographical approach thus poses the questions: Whose voice is heard in a text, what other experiences are missing, how are descriptive evidence and causal explanations related, and does the historian use the same standards for the subjects he or she likes and dislikes?

Ali's work is inspired by issues related to historical materialism and history from below: property relations, labour and dependency relations, functioning of state institutions and the daily impact of social stratification. These interests intersect with wider projects which seek to replace dynastic history with ordinary actors. Nonetheless, his writing cannot simply be identified with the particular theoretical or

archival practices of the South Asian Subaltern Studies collective. His books also include moral and civic concerns: the uncovering of injustice, the rejection of communal animosity, and the promotion of critical public discussion. These are valid subjects of historical investigation, but should not be used in place of demonstrative evidence.

That difference is significant. Guha's opening statement of Subaltern Studies challenged the colonialist and nationalist narratives for their focus on the politics of anticolonialism as being driven primarily by the initiative of the elites (Guha, 1982, pp. 1–8). Subsequent evaluations highlighted that the project also challenged the categories that colonial knowledge made legible in order to account for the agency of the subordinated, rather than simply adding them to existing narratives (Chakrabarty, 2000, pp. 9–32; Prakash, 1990, pp. 383–408). Ali's more popular pieces have the same call for historical inclusion but do not always seek this more sophisticated archival and epistemological critique.

Ali's writings are cited in the editions listed, and bibliographical years are given after these editions, which may be later than the first publication. Parenthetical citations are given page numbers if they are available; conceptual comparisons to other monographs are cited at the book level if edition-specific pages are not known. The analysis separates claims based on Ali's writings from those that are based on the broader historiographical literature. It is not intended to provide readership, citation frequency, or institutional influence data in the absence of independent reception data.

Intellectual Makeup and Popularization as Public Historian

Ali's intellectual journey was influenced by his experiences in different educational, institutional and political contexts. Born in 1941 in Tonk (now in Rajasthan), he moved to Pakistan with his family after Partition. His autobiographical account throws some doubt on the apparently precise biographical record: he says that the date given for admission to school was not clearly recalled by his parents and should not be regarded as an independently established fact (Ali, 2012d, pp. 12–39). This is not a coincidence. It demonstrates the difference between the documentary certainty and the circumstances of the creation of a record.

Ali moved to Hyderabad, Sindh, and started formal education, wrote for a student magazine, and had interests outside the mainstream of the curriculum (Ali, 2012d, pp. 51–53). In the late 1950s, he went on for further studies and studied history at the University of Sindh, where he was exposed to the secular and liberal education of Ahmed Bashir, which shaped his thinking (Ali, 2012d, pp. 55–59, 68–69). His later experience shows that even a trained academic can be limited in his professional opportunity by institutional hierarchy, as was the case with his teaching at the University of Sindh.

Ali's journey to postgraduate research was not a straightforward one, nor was it financially stable. He talks about his failed attempts to get funding, working and studying in London for a while and then going to Germany for further study (Ali, 2012d, pp. 85–86). He did his doctoral studies on the Mughal court at Ruhr University Bochum and came back to Pakistan in 1972. His autobiography mentions conflicts related to his return to the university and subsequent frustrations with university progress (Ali, 2012d, pp. 124, 134–135). Such memories are important evidence of Ali's perception of his working environment and situations. Nonetheless, his autobiography is a situated narrative rather than an institutional record that might show other dimensions of his circumstances.

He eventually left the traditional academic job and turned to publishing and cultural institutions, which enabled him to shift his focus to a broader audience. In this way, Ali's career reveals a fruitful tension between the university and the public sphere. His professional training gave him disciplinary authority and his increasing use of independent publication allowed him to engage in criticism that institutional employment might have limited. But independence was not necessarily a guarantee of methodological rigor or of political neutrality.

Ali's use of Urdu is one of the unique aspects of his intellectual project. Historical debates, often expressed in specialist English, may be hard to access for readers who are nevertheless affected by the consequences of these debates in schools, political debates, and communal stories. Ali's relatively straightforward prose

renders the issues of sources, ideology, social class, and historical interpretation comprehensible to readers beyond the professional history community. A published tribute to his work, therefore, highlights the link between his writing for the people and his fame as a "people's historian" (Ahmad, 2013, pp. 7–8). That reputation is not so much a sign that he represents all subordinated groups, but that he has been doing a good job of making their historical presence a part of the public discourse.

Revisiting the Organization of Historical Knowledge

Historical knowledge can be organized in a way that reflects the current political, religious, and ideological interests. Mubarak Ali critically analyzes the impact of these influences on the choice, interpretation, and representation of historical events and personalities. He questions the traditional methods of historiography that tend to marginalize other points of view and to support the dominant narrative. His key interventions in challenging and reinterpreting dominant historical narratives are discussed under the following subheadings.

1. Colonial Periodization: The Politics of Historical Categories

Ali questions the notion that the Indian past can be neatly divided into customary periods as convenient chronological descriptions. Specifically, he challenges the notion that there are successive and coherent civilizations: an ancient Hindu period, a medieval Muslim period, and a modern British period. These types of agreements can lead to the transformation of political sovereignty into assertions about the religious nature of whole societies. They can suggest that communities had their own history, under their own cultural orders, which were antagonistic to one another, instead of their own history being experienced through overlapping economic, linguistic and institutional relationships.

It is not chronological classification per se that is under attack, but the ideological implications of classification. A backward or despotic period can lead to a liberating period, and a glorious past can lead to political claims in the present. Ali thus considers colonial and nationalist historical frameworks as topics that need to be explained, rather than as innocent containers into which historians simply place facts. This worry is part of his general attack on inherited terminology in the writing of history (Ali, 1992, pp. 1–4; Ali, 2012b, p. 218).

This critique is given flesh in the broader literature. In Chatterjee's analysis of nationalist thought, the political projects establish internal cultural spaces and legitimate some collective identities over others (Chatterjee, 1993). In a very telling example, Thapar compares the Persianate, Sanskrit, colonial, and nationalist narratives of the raid on Somanatha to show that a single event cannot be understood in one retrospective communal narrative (Thapar, 2004). These works confirm the necessity of multiple perspectives, and indicate a standard that Ali's revisionism must adhere to: competing traditions must be compared, not rearranged into another exclusive history.

The weakness of the intervention is that it is able to reveal the naturalization of retrospective communal boundaries. The problem with it is that it can easily go from the problematic use of a term to the assertion that any scholarship that uses the term must have the same political intent. When carefully defined, historically situated, and not used as a proxy for the experiences of whole populations, categories like "medieval," "Muslim," or "colonial" can be analytically useful. Where possible, critical historiography should be able to refine categories, and not prohibit them by presumption.

2. Hero-Worship, Textbooks, and Nationalist Memory

A similar issue is the building of exemplary historical figures. Ali refuses to accept any history that glorifies conquerors and rulers beyond the normal historical standards, especially when military victories are considered to be adequate evidence of religious merit or public good. He challenges the idea of simplifying complicated episodes of conquest into uncomplicated narratives of faith and heroic destiny, as in the case of Muhammad ibn Qasim (Ali, 2002, p. 114; Ali, 2012b, p. 244; Ali, 2012c, p. 18). The issue, as he sees it, is not that rulers should never be studied or admired; it is that they should not be studied or admired too much, so that they are immune to questions of violence, political interests, and the people subject to their rule.

Ali relates this type of historical storytelling to the political culture of today. If progress is seen as being solely the result of exceptional individuals, collective action, institutions, and the ability of ordinary citizens can seem secondary. Heroism is thus a central theme in his work, and his work on historical education is a central theme in civic education: the narratives a society tells about its past shape the vision of what citizens can do in their present (Ali, 2005c, pp. 87, 108; Ali, 2012j, pp. 23–34). The argument is suggestive, but the impact of specific textbooks on political behaviour would need to be examined through independent educational research. Ali's criticism can be placed institutionally in the context of the curricula in Pakistan. Aziz recorded factual distortion and omission in published history textbooks, and Nayyar and Salim's curriculum review linked selection of historical themes to the creation of religious and civic boundaries (Aziz, 1993; Nayyar & Salim, 2003). Saigol's gender-sensitive analysis of the educational discourse also shows that the construction of nationhood can normalize certain masculine and feminine roles (Saigol, 1995). These sorts of findings do lend credence to Ali's concern, but should not be taken as evidence of the direct impact of his books on individual students.

He is also sensitive to the different moral lexicon used by competing narrators. The political actors of an empire can be loyal allies, the other rebels; one community's king is courageous and pious, another's heretical and impure. In Ali's reading, such contrasts are not just stylistic differences, but are signals that get the reader ready to empathize with one side before evaluating the evidence (Ali, 1997, pp. 10–12; Ali, 1998, pp. 53–54; Ali, 2002, pp. 194–197; Ali, 2012i, p. 108). His criticism of historical sources and textbooks brings up other issues concerning the emphasis of historians (Ali, 2012k, pp. 35–37). His critique of textbook nationalism provides a helpful approach: Who is the subject of moral language, who is denied complexity, and what collective experiences are not included in the story?

But an anti-heroic history cannot be a history of reverse caricatures either. The interpretive structure is binary, even if the protagonists of choice change, as long as celebrated leaders are assumed to be self-serving and people are assumed to be good. Ali's greatest strength is that he holds reverence accountable to evidence and puts the critical historian's own categories and commitments to the test of evidence.

The Politics of Power and Resistance in South Asian Social History

The social formations and histories of South Asian communities have been deeply influenced by power relations. Mubarak Ali explores the ways in which political power, economic disparities and social stratification have helped privileged groups to remain in control and others to be marginalised. His interpretations of power, exploitation and resistance, especially in the lives of historically disadvantaged communities, are explored in the following subheadings.

1. The conquest, religious authority and communal relations

Ali's rethinking of conquest and rule in the subcontinent challenges the notion that conquest and rule can be understood simply in terms of the religious identity of conquerors. He invites historians to reflect on the system of revenue, military power, status, and resources being gained, and looks at the imbalanced relationship between the incoming elites and the indigenous people. In his account of the political power of the Muslims in India, he points out that the fruits of victory did not necessarily go to the converts or to those who shared the conquerors' religion. This interpretation calls into question a story of political control by co-religionists leading to social equality.

The intervention is significant because it makes a distinction between political, social and religious identities, and does not see them as interchangeable. Rulers might employ religious terminology to justify policy and to deal with local elites for pragmatic purposes. However, religious affiliation did not obliterate differences of status, ancestry, occupation or wealth. Ali's emphasis on the political and material dimensions of conquest opens up the possibility of considering issues of taxation, extraction, cultural hierarchies, and the mundane effects of state-making.

Comparative research also sets boundaries to a purely instrumental account of religious change. Eaton's study of Bengal does not see the spread of Islam as solely a result of political conquest, but as a result of shifting agrarian frontiers, settlement, institutions, and local religious practice (Eaton, 1993). His findings,

which are rooted in his region, reinforce Ali's emphasis on the social process and warn against making generalizations about the motives of all rulers or missionary actors. His attitude towards the ulema and the Sufi traditions also reflects his resistance to explanations which are primarily based on sanctity. In Ulema aur Siyasat, he portrays some religious scholars as upholders of orthodoxy, who wanted to influence state policy and communal boundaries (Ali, 2012, pp. 163–164). He is more ambivalent about the Sufis. He sees traditions of compassion and intercommunal sociability but doubts that their teaching had much impact on the entrenched economic inequalities. He also questions hagiographies that may have supernatural elements that could mask historically recoverable practices of religious figures (Ali, 1999, pp. 13–16; Ali, 2012b, pp. 17–19, 28, 33).

These arguments call for a more nuanced description of the role of religion in history. The religious institutions might help to stabilize hierarchies, and individual Sufis and scholars might be found in various positions throughout the centuries and regions and be able to engage in ethical criticism. Ali is right not to take anything for granted, but his constant juxtaposition of oppressive ulema and politically accommodating rulers can smooth out the differences between them. He sometimes characterizes material interests as always taking precedence over genuinely held beliefs, which would need to be compared more closely in the texts, contexts, and institutional practices.

However, his emphasis on the need for communal harmony not being solely the responsibility of celebrated saints is methodologically important. Everyday social relations between people of different languages and religions were negotiated on an ongoing basis by ordinary families, merchants, artisans and neighbours. Ali calls on historians to acknowledge this everyday work of living together, and not just to a handful of venerated middlemen (Ali, 1992, p. 80; Ali, 2012b, pp. 17–19). The argument turns historical agency to those whose actions are not easily captured by traditional biographies of great men.

2. Caste, Labour and Social Inequalities

Al''s effort to write history from below is a central theme in his work, which is defined by social hierarchy. His discourse on caste and inherited status challenges narratives that view key political shifts as emancipatory breaks. He claims that discriminatory social practices endured changes of dynasty and religious authority, and even communities with the same religious identity could create distinctions of ancestry, occupation, and social rank (Ali, 2012b, pp. 122–128, 182–185). Political change is thus not necessarily a change in the lives of the subjugated population. Ali can be read in the context of anti-caste thought and studies of colonial classification here. Ambedkar's critique of caste situates exclusion in the context of entrenched relations of social power which are not amenable to religious reform gestures (Ambedkar, 1936/1979, pp. 25–96). By contrast, Dirks focuses on the way colonial enumeration and rule reshaped a variety of identities into a more all-encompassing language of caste (Dirks, 2001). These views do not negate, but rather clarify Ali's statement that hierarchy has a longer history, but that its categories and political applications are not fixed.

Ali's Achhut Logon ka Adab is an approach to exclusion both socially and culturally. The presence of the voices of lower-caste writers indicates that the marginalized should not be portrayed as passive victims in narratives written about them. Their poems and other forms of expression can shed light on humiliation, resistance, aspiration, and notions of justice that are not often expressed in elite administrative documents. Even if the documentation collected in a specific volume is limited, the premise is valuable where the dynastic histories ignore forms of evidence that are important for the recovery of experience.

Labour has a similar position in his reconstruction of medieval society. Histories that focus on palaces and campaigns portray the wealth that was created by cultivators, artisans, servants, and commercial actors, but the prosperity of courts and ruling households depended on them. Ali thus views social production and extraction as historical relations which need to be studied in conjunction. This orientation can help to show the difference between the apparent opulence of ruling groups and the security of many who worked to support it.

His study Jagirdari focuses on the nature of land assignment and revenue administration and distinguishes between the South Asian forms and the oversimplified European concept of feudal ownership. The claims to revenue and authority were not necessarily in the nature of proprietary rights of European feudal lords as under the iqta and mansab system (Ali, 2012e, pp. 67, 76–77; Ali, 1998, pp. 149–152). Ali correlates revenue concentration and dependence with social stratification and, more ambitiously, with institutional stagnation and the decline of Mughal rule (Ali, 2012e, pp. 89–103).

There is disagreement over the term "feudalism." Mukhia raised the doubt about whether the European institutional models could be used to describe the historical landholding in India (Mukhia, 1981, pp. 273–310). Habib's detailed research on Mughal agriculture, revenue rights and peasant conditions provides the sort of documentary and fiscal detail that is needed to challenge generalizations about agrarian exploitation (Habib, 1999). Ali is at his best when he is pointing out unequal labour/revenue relations, and at his worst when "feudalism" becomes a catch-all term for period-specific differences.

Comparative insight is helpful, but conceptual caution is required in the explanation. The term "feudalism" is a controversial analytical term, and the lumping together of various institutions under a single term can mask important differences between grants, offices, legal title, obligations, and actual control over cultivation. Furthermore, the mere demonstration of the possibility of extraction through an agrarian system does not prove that it led to the decline of the empire. The regional differences, military rivalry, commercial transformation, and chance political decisions also need to be assessed. Ali's social questions are interesting, and the chain of explanation leading to them needs to be tested on a case-by-case basis.

3. Women, Patriarchy, and the Boundaries of the Historical Subject

Ali's Tarikh aur Aurat introduces gender in a field that has hitherto focused on male sovereigns and officials. He explores the role of women in family, marriage, law, culture, and thought, and attempts to retrieve their political, literary, and artistic contributions that have been ignored in the general story (Ali, 2012h, pp. 23–31, 42–51, 83–105). In this regard, the book broadens the scope of the historical question to include more than what court chroniclers deemed fit to record.

His analysis of patriarchy is especially important in the context of his analysis of class. The subordinate status of women is not only due to individual prejudice but laws, property relations, domestic duties, social status and access to education can be mutually reinforcing. This multidimensional approach allows for the consideration of questions concerning the reproduction of gendered power not only in public acts of coercion, but also in ordinary institutions. Ali also condemns those traditions of spiritual power that saw women as hindrances to men's spiritual development (Ali, 2012h, pp. 59–63).

However, a critical appraisal should not be confused with the sufficiency of the evidentiary account, but rather with the political value of focusing on women. Broad argues that the social status of women went in one direction, or that a single feudal system can account for various types of gender exclusion, can mask regional, class and temporal variations. Experiences of elite and labouring women within various caste and religious groups cannot be reduced to one. Ali points to an overlooked area and poses important questions; a more complete history would involve more systematic interaction with women's own voices, particular legal and social practices, and differences between historical contexts.

Conceptual tools for this additional research are available in feminist historiography. Scott contended that gender is not just another subject to tack on to political history but is a way of organizing meanings of power (Scott, 1986, pp. 1053–1075). Sangari and Vaid situate patriarchal relations in the context of colonial reform, law, political economy, and anticolonial politics, and Chakravarti emphasizes the inter-constitution of caste and gender (Chakravarti, 2003; Sangari & Vaid, 1989). These works are important in the context of Ali's gender history, which needs to be examined more in-depth in terms of differences among women and the institutional mechanisms that create those differences.

4 Sindh, Regional Voices, and the Colonial Archive

Ali's work on Sindh also shows that recovering marginalised histories is also a process of challenging the geography of the national narrative. His accounts focus on the region's agriculture, material culture, trade, social institutions and political changes, and not just as a place of conquest or a province of a later state. A Social and Cultural History of Sindh and Essays on the History of Sindh provide alternative ways of looking at the social history of Sindh (Ali, 2005a, 2005b, 2012g). Sindh ki Tarikh Kiya Hai? is an attempt to deal with the issue of representation of the province by various communities and historical observers (Ali, 2004).

These studies also show the potential and pitfalls of inherited archives. Travelogues, trading-company papers, administrative records and elite chronicles are essential for piecing together some of the history of Sindh. But the authors of these works were often in positions of commerce, conquest, or governance. Ali's editorial interest in the European accounts of Sindh makes them more accessible and brings attention to their perspective. The use of such material is critical and must be read both for what the author(s) wanted to record and for what he or she chose not to record because of his or her priorities.

Guha's analysis of colonial power is helpful in countering the tendency to view administrative documents as straightforward depictions of social relations; the language of such documents was involved in the political inequalities of colonial rule (Guha, 1997). Amin's reconstruction of Chauri Chaura based on judicial archives and local memory is a model for triangulating institutional accounts with testimony and remembered experience (Amin, 1995). This comparison indicates a research agenda for the history of Sindh where edited Company records are not assumed to be innocent or completely unusable, but are instead juxtaposed with vernacular chronicles, material sources and community memories.

The regional focus enhances Ali's overall historiographical programme. History that is only about the capitals of the metropolises or the ideology of the nation can be used to obscure the local continuity and the heterogeneous identities. The relationships of Sindh with commercial networks, dynastic centres, colonial agencies and migrant communities make for a more complicated periodization than the neat ones. Nevertheless, a regional counter-narrative should be mindful of its own limitations: the process of recovering Sindh from a state-centred history should not involve the idea of a homogeneous Sindh or the idea of a unified voice of the social groups of Sindh.

Political Identity and Public Historical Consciousness in Pakistan

The culmination of Alis critique of nationalist history is his questioning of Pakistani identity. In Pakistan in Search of Identity, he interrogates the mechanisms through which religious identification became a political assertion and how leaders gained mileage from it in colonial transition. His attempts to disentangle the social history of Muslims in the subcontinent from subsequent political project of the nation-state have led him into real territory, where he points out that we should not retrospectively conflate earlier communities with nationalists of the twentieth century (Ali, 2009b, pp. 1–4).

Jalal's reframing of Muslim League bargaining in the political arena offers a crucial counterpoint to an explanation for Pakistan defined by religion: provincial interests and centre–region relations were at the core of that account (Jalal, 1985). In this light, Ali's viewpoint can be understood as a critique of teleology (read with Anderson's national imagining theory and Chatterjee on anticolonial nationalisms) rather than an argument that religious language was always disingenuous (Anderson, 2006; Chatterjee, 1993).

He focuses on the tension that exists, so to speak, between political calculation and religious rhetoric in private versus communal discourse as an avenue for further shaping concentrations of political support (Ali, 2009b, p. 13). Instead of assuming that a common religion explains political events, he investigates how players with different linguistic, regional, class, and institutional interests act collectively. Similarly, his analysis of the frictions that led to the division of East Pakistan underscores the shortcomings of viewing political conflict through religious identity exclusively. This account is useful for recovering

demands that are historically contingent from across the political spectrum, especially in a period when national narratives of retrospective justification reigned.

Ali further applies this critical approach to modern institutions of power in the Pakistani Mu'ashra, examining issues such as leadership, governance, social inequality and the dissemination of hierarchical political practices (Ali, 2012f, pp. 15–68). Similarly, his later remarks on depictions of Muhammad Ali Jinnah speak to the desire of rival ideological factions to cherry-pick incidents from a political leader's life, reinforcing their chosen narrative. Whether either interpretation is more convincing requires close analysis of contemporary evidence; the broader historiographic principle is that historical figures cannot be legitimately reconstructed to resolve current political conflicts.

Ali uses historical interpretation combined with civic purpose in his treatment of Pakistani identity. Through an analysis of the official history's manufactured certainties, he implores readers to differentiate citizenship from unaccountable belief in a monolithic authorized narrative. This represents a valuable public service in a society where claims to the past frequently surface as subjects of controversy in schools, politics, and community life. However politically beneficial a revisionist reading may be, it remains subject to academic scrutiny. Ali argues that these mainstream historians fail to pass half a dozen criteria, including contextual accuracy (the historical record), source criticism, and the proportions of explanations, but we might wind back the clock and apply those same standards to the alternative accounts Ali puts forward.

Contributions to Historiography and Historical Education

The most enduring aspect of Ali is his recoding as a permanent challenge to the view that the historian is in business primarily to memorialize "states" and "great men". His way of doing history makes historical knowledge a locus of intellectual contestation. The historian has to account not only for what happened but also why some things are repeated in commemorative rituals, and others are beyond the bounds of the authorized narrative. Ali reinvigorates the questions that can be asked of the past by putting caste, women, peasants, language, everyday practices and social exclusion into public discussion.

This breadth matters methodologically. Court chronicles are nonetheless useful but cannot be comprehensive records of the societies in which they were written. Ali's focus on material culture and social organization indicates one possible pathway through which historical questions might be productively shaped by economic history, sociology, anthropology, and still other forms of text in literary evidence. His discussion of terminology also shows that source criticism starts before the historian arrives at an archive: it continues to examine the categories given for organizing historical facts. His interpretation of colonial-era scholarship recognizes the introduction of some historical techniques, but is also a questioning of the imperial assumptions that could come to shape their use (Ali, 2002, pp. 54–60).

Also relevant is the public nature of his work. The decision to write more fluently in Urdu should not be regarded as just stylistic. He intentionally avoids such hard language and terminology that professional historians normally use, and thus make it difficult for the common people to comprehend the discourse. The educational value of this work is in its challenge to readers to assess historical assertions instead of simply taking the received wisdom. In the best of Ali's prose—as here—he offers readers uncertain access to the idea that histories are created from evidence and argument, and hence can be reinterpreted.

At long last, his writing provides a model of intellectual oppositional thought that is neither wholly trivialized within partisan politics nor completely distanced from the public sphere. Resistance, here, is defined as taking steps to undermine the monopoly of sanctioned narratives legitimizing extreme injustices in the past, exposing how historical actors have been treated differently depending on whether they are considered legitimate or illegitimate participants in history, and opening up space for alternate memories. For example, his critique of the "golden age" motif invites people to question why national communities feel compelled to retreat into idealized historical moments during periods they perceive as

decline (Ali, 2009a, pp. 12, 14). The point here is not to strip collective memory, but to avoid making it resistant to historical scrutiny

Critical Assessment: Evidentiary Limits and Interpretive Tensions

Mubarak Ali's scholarship offers valuable insights but also reveals methodological limitations. His interpretations sometimes raise concerns about selective evidence, ideological bias, and analytical consistency. The following subheadings critically examine these weaknesses and their implications for his historiographical contributions.

1 Ideological Commitment and Historical Interpretations

Ali's secular and materialist approach provides coherence to a very eclectic oeuvre. It allows him to pose questions about who owns what, who works for whom, who benefits politically, who has institutional power, and who suffers socially from the domination of others, which are often ignored in national histories. However, ideological positioning is an issue when it is used as an explanatory answer instead of an explanatory framework. Not all rulers' actions are extractive, and not all religious arguments are about the interests of the elites. The purpose of good history is to define the motives, effects, and boundaries of specific policies in contextually relevant evidence.

In some places in Ali's writings, one can find just the opposite of the kind of simplification that his historiographical programme is aimed at. His counter-nationalist narrative can make them consistently predatory, while nationalist narratives make them civilizing heroes. His critical prose sometimes gives undue credit to the conservatism of religious authorities, while his apologetic writing glorifies them. The objection is not that rulers or institutions should not be criticized. It is that a historian should recognize the possibility of divided groups, mixed motives, change over time, and results that are not the ones the actors intended. The complexity should not be suppressed; it should be explained by a historically grounded materialism.

His re-evaluation of British rule is a good example of the power and the conflicts of his approach. He does not simply write about colonialism as a continuous process of decline or colonial modernization as a process of modernization in general, but admits that some institutions, technologies, and ideas brought by the British brought about important changes. This provides an analytical separation between imperial uses of the term "exploitative" and imperial non-uses of the term "exploitative. His account of the transition from Mughal rule to other regional and colonial powers also does not fit into a neat narrative of the end of an otherwise unbroken imperial order, as the British conquest is not the sole cause of its downfall (Ali, 1998, p. 9; Ali, 2012b, p. 135). These interventions are helpful when they are framed as questions that demand comparative evidence, not as an end to the standard narrative.

2. Citation Practices and Appropriation

Another issue is Ali's transparency about his sources. A preliminary study of Jagirdari and Achhut Logon ka Adab brings up the issue of their reliance on previous historical studies and the use of literary or documentary sources. This is a provisional question that needs to be addressed through a page-by-page comparison of the texts. This is a significant difference between synthesis and original research. A work written for a general audience may summarize specialized scholarship, but it should clearly indicate the debts owed to the scholarship and the sources that support controversial interpretations, and it should make clear the author's own conclusions from those of the scholars being summarized.

The article does not consider textual dependence to be an independently substantiated wrong. A defensible judgment of unattributed borrowing would necessitate direct comparison of editions, exact passages, translation choices, and source acknowledgments. The more solid criticism is methodological: when there are few references, readers are not easily able to follow the steps of the evidence that lead to a conclusion. The problem is especially significant in polemical writing, where a difficult interpretation is not the more confident the more it is expressed, but the more it can be tested by the reader. The same

is true for the present study: the conclusions drawn in this study are limited by the material that is available for analysis.

Another drawback is Ali's speed and quantity of writing. His short essays are effective in tackling important historical debates. Their brevity, however, can sometimes preclude in-depth discussion of alternative interpretations. These constraints do not detract from the importance of public history. Instead, they point to the need to differentiate between various types of historical writing. A critical essay can ask a question that is important, but not enough evidence is given to answer the question. Scholars need to recognize this contribution and to note the differences in academic rigor.

3. Consistency, Source Criticism, and the Problem of Generalization

Some of Ali's statements on the subject of religious conversion indicate the importance of conceptual and chronological accuracy. Coercive conversions of certain populations are mentioned in passages found in his work Almiya-e-Tarikh, whereas the rulers' limited interest in systematic conversion is mentioned in others (Ali, 2012b, p. 63; Ali, 2012a, p. 25). The following propositions do not necessarily contradict each other. Patterns may vary for different rulers, regions, periods, and social categories. Nonetheless, the apparent tension should not be left to the reader to resolve those contradictions.

The same problem is present in Ali's writings on the Sufi movement. A religious person might be good at being nice to people, draw people to him, and not do organized proselytizing, and these are not mutually exclusive. The problems of analysis only occur if general statements are made as generalisations about all Sufis or all religious encounters. Ali's valuable critiques of hagiography could be accommodated alongside a more detailed description of spiritual leadership and social transformation, if the periodization were more carefully managed and if attention were paid to specific institutions.

A similar question appears about his treatment of chronicles that favour the point of view of conquerors. He is right to call historians to task for reproducing their legitimizing stories without criticism, rather than questioning the sources, like Chach Nama. But a partisan text is not for that reason devoid of evidentiary value. The claims might still shed light on the rhetoric, assumptions, institutional concerns, or self-understanding of its authors. The methodological problem is to determine what a source can substantiate, to compare it with other sources that still exist, and to declare the limits of inference. To dismiss a tradition as being "politically located" would simply be to repeat the exclusionary logic of the histories that Ali wants to critique.

There's also a conflict between his desire to bring back the oppressed and the danger of treating them as a monolithic group. Peasants, artisans, women, and the subordinated castes are not a homogeneous social class and do not necessarily have the same political interests. They can replicate as well as withstand unequal structures. It is therefore important to consider the tensions and conflicts between marginalized groups, between groups and within groups, and the unequal power dynamics at the local level in a more developed history from below. These qualifications are not intended to change Ali's agenda, but rather to strengthen it.

4. Reception, Scholarly Visibility, and the Standards of Assessment

Ali's reputation as a "dissident historian" is a phenomenon in and of itself. The frequency of his books' circulation, the social composition of his readers, and the extent of his representation in peer-reviewed literature can only be determined from the works reviewed here. His public profile seems to be bigger than his visibility in some scholarly conversations, and this should be treated as a research proposition, not as a completed measurement. A future bibliometric and reception study might compare academic citation indexes, Urdu publishing records, curriculum references, readership surveys, and the way his work is treated in disciplinary reviews.

Such an enquiry should not be a false dichotomy between academic scholarship and public intellectual work. The fact that a book has been widely read does not necessarily mean it is historically accurate, but the number of citations by specialists does not necessarily mean that a book is not important for education. In both respects, Ali's impact needs to be judged: the quality of his treatment of evidence and

the extent to which he has made historical criticism accessible to readers outside the confines of the profession. On this basis, he may be considered an important public historian without giving special arguments and rigorous critical examination.

Conclusion

Mubarak Ali is a pivotal, and contested figure in the history and public history of South Asia. His critique of colonial and nationalist categories, his rejection of religiously legitimated hero-worship and his constant focus on social inequality place him among the critics of political elites' histories. He focuses on women, the subjugated castes, labouring groups, regional society and daily culture to broaden the historical imagination beyond the state and the court. His employment of Urdu also links this important enterprise with those who are not able to participate in the specialist academic discourse.

Meanwhile, his interventions are not immune from the requirements of evidentiary accountability. His criticism is sometimes weakened by selective source use, by broad generalizations about ruling and religious groups, by unclear attributions, and by unresolved interpretive tensions. The weaknesses are important because the project of writing history from below relies on rigorously applied standards to all narratives, including those that contest dominant narratives. Neither rejecting Ali's ideas nor accepting all his conclusions because his social goals are attractive is the proper scholarly reaction.

His most important contribution has been to turn the historical record itself into a public controversy: who is constructing it, whose experiences are it legitimizing, and what possibilities are opened up when the exclusions of the historical record are explored? An evaluation of that achievement in the context of the shortcomings of individual works provides a more useful account of his intellectual legacy. The value of Ali's writings, then, is not as an alternative orthodoxy, but as a call to adopt a more open, self-reflexive, and evidence-based South Asian history.

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