

Beyond the Textbook: Pakistan's Medieval Memory and the Consecration of the Past

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ABSTRACT

This paper re-examines the fraught relationship between academic historiography and public historical memory in Pakistan, moving beyond the prevailing textbook-centric critique to confront a more profound theoretical problem: the near-total displacement of professional historians as authoritative producers of the medieval Muslim past. Drawing on memory studies, postcolonial theory, and a genealogical analysis of Urdu historical discourse, it argues that popular memory is instead consecrated by an diffuse cast of civil-military bureaucrats, television anchors, historical novelists, religious scholars (*ulema*), and social media polemicists—actors whose epistemic authority derives not from archival training or source criticism, but from moral conviction, spiritual insight (including dream sequences and miracles), and the affective power of romance emplotment. Methodologically, the article moves from institutional critique to epistemological critique, analysing a heterogeneous

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archive that includes state textbooks, Urdu polemical literature, PTV historical dramas, the nomenclature of military weaponry (Shaheen, Ghaznavi, Ghauri), and a sustained case study of the morning show *Subh-e-Noor* (92NewsHD). What emerges is a curious yet hegemonic consensus: that a singular, unitary medieval Muslim past did exist; whether violently regressive or utopically golden remains contested, but the prior assumption of coherence and continuity itself goes unquestioned. The article contends that this medieval memory is not a relic of pre-modernity but a thoroughly modern production: a projective fantasy screen that occludes the traumas of Partition, the failures of the postcolonial state, and the anxieties of national fragmentation. In shifting analytic focus from what popular history gets wrong to how it produces truth, the paper offers a new conceptual vocabulary: consecratory regime, epistemology of the paranormal, *lieux de mémoire en mouvement* (sites of memory in motion), for understanding Pakistan's medieval imagination and the political-theological dangers it portends.

Introduction

The relationship between academic historiography and public historical consciousness is seldom harmonious, yet in few places is the dissonance as stark, or as consequential, as in contemporary Pakistan. Public discourse on the medieval Muslim past, whether disseminated through prime-time television, social media polemics, bestselling Urdu historical novels, or even the nomenclature of military weaponry, operates within an epistemological universe markedly distinct from that of the professional historian. This article does not merely document factual inaccuracies in popular Pakistani historical narratives; rather, it seeks to understand the deeper structural, institutional, and theoretical reasons why such narratives enjoy extraordinary resilience and reach, even when they stand at considerable variance from available historical evidence.

The central argument advanced here is twofold. First, academic historians are not the primary producers of popular historical memory concerning the medieval Muslim past in Pakistan. Instead, that role is occupied by civil and military bureaucrats, journalists, television anchors, religious scholars (*ulema*), historical fiction writers, and social media 'keyboard warriors', actors whose authority derives not from archival training or methodological self-reflexivity but from moral conviction, ideological commitment, or perceived access to spiritual insight (including dream sequences and miracles). Second, the widespread tendency to blame state textbooks alone for the 'murder of history' is theoretically inadequate.¹ Textbooks matter, but their influence is mediated by low literacy rates, passive pedagogies, minimal student interest in history as a scoring subject, and crucially the far greater reach and emotional resonance of electronic and social media. The post-2000s media revolution democratised historical production in ways that both circumvent and exceed state censorship, creating a polycentric, often chaotic landscape of historical memory.

I. Comparative Perspectives: Memory, Modernity, and the Instrumentalisation of the Medieval Past

The phenomenon this article has traced in Pakistan, the consecration of a utopian medieval past by non-academic actors operating across a dispersed media ecology, finds instructive parallels in other postcolonial and ideological states. What follows is a comparative sketch, necessarily provisional, of four cases that illuminate, by contrast and convergence, the specificity of Pakistan's predicament.

1 K. K. Aziz, *The Murder of History: A Critique of History Textbooks Used in Pakistan* (Lahore: Vanguard, 1993). For a more nuanced assessment of textbook limitations, see Mohammad Pervez, "Pedagogical Problems in the Primary Education: A Critique of the Curriculum," in *The Subtle Subversion: A Report on Curricula and Textbooks in Pakistan*, ed. A. H. Nayyar and Ahmed Salim (Islamabad: SDPI, 2003), 251.

In post-revolutionary Iran, the Islamic Republic inherited the Pahlavi regime's master narrative of an 'immemorial Iranian nation' grounded in pre-Islamic (Achaemenid and Sasanian) glory. Yet rather than discarding this narrative, the post-1979 state re-accentuated it: school textbooks continued to celebrate the Aryan hypothesis and the pre-Islamic empires, merely overlaying Islamic terminology onto the same foundational myth. As Haggay Ram has demonstrated, "Islamic consciousness in Iran does not in any way constitute the basis for an alternative myth to the national myth. Rather, it adds Islamic terminology to the very same myth."² The Iranian case thus reveals that even a revolutionary theocracy may find it expedient to retain a pre-revolutionary national past, albeit selectively reinterpreted. Where Pakistan's medieval memory is pan-Islamic and deterritorialised (heroes from Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Arabia, and southern India), Iran's pre-Islamic memory is territorial and autochthonous (Cyrus, Darius, the Achaemenid heartland). The difference is telling: Iran's state ideology claims continuity with a place; Pakistan's claims continuity with a transnational umma.

In Republican Turkey, the Kemalist project of the 1920s and 1930s engaged in what can be termed selective otherisation of the Ottoman past. The new Republic did not simply forget the Ottomans; it constructed its modern, secular, Western-oriented identity in opposition to those aspects of Ottoman heritage that had rendered the empire vulnerable to European predation, the multi-national imperial structure, the perceived religiosity and 'backwardness,' the subjugated

2 Haggay Ram, "The Immemorial Iranian Nation? School Textbooks and Historical Memory in Post-Revolutionary Iran," *Nations and Nationalism* 6, no. 1 (2000): 68-69. For the politics of calendars and commemorative practices in Iran, see also Ehsan Kashfi, "The Politics of Calendars: State Appropriations of the Contested Iranian Past," *Religions* 12, No. 10 (2021): 861,

<https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12100861>

status as the "sick man of Europe."³ Yet, crucially, the militarily successful phases of Ottoman history were exempted from this otherisation, and Ottoman modernisers were welcomed as precursors. Turkey's case demonstrates that ideological state-building requires not wholesale erasure of the pre-modern past but selective canonization, a process analogous to Pakistan's elevation of Ghaznavi and Aurangzeb while condemning Akbar.

In Putin's Russia, the state has engaged in what Todd H. Nelson terms 'preventive' and 'complex' co-optation of Stalinist memory. Rather than confronting Soviet terror, the Kremlin promotes a discourse that positions Stalin as the symbol of a "strong, centralized state that was capable of great achievements, despite great cost"—a usable past that legitimises the return of authoritarianism in the present.⁴ Elite-sponsored discourse co-opts multiple avenues of

3 For the concept of "selective otherisation" of the Ottoman past in early Republican Turkey, see the doctoral dissertation of Alperen Koca (Middle East Technical University, 2024), 47-62, 118-135. On the Kemalist construction of Turkish national identity through the "Turkish History Thesis" (1930s), which sought pre-Islamic Anatolian origins for the Turkish nation, see Sona Khachatryan, "Dr. Rıza Nur and His Relationship to the Turkish History Thesis" (MA thesis, Sabancı University, 2015), 1-15. On the "double discourse" in Republican attitudes toward the Ottoman past, see Erdem Sönmez, "A Past to Be Forgotten? Writing Ottoman History in Early Republican Turkey," *Turkish Historical Review* 11, no. 1 (2020): 45-68. For comparative analysis of history and national identity formation in Turkey and Pakistan, see Subho Basu and Suranjan Das, "Knowledge for Politics: Partisan Histories and Communal Mobilization in India and Pakistan," in *Partisan Histories: The Past in Contemporary Global Politics*, ed. Max Paul Friedman and Padraic Kenney (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 96-98.

4 Todd H. Nelson, *Bringing Stalin Back In: Memory Politics and the Creation of a Useable Past in Putin's Russia* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019), 1-15, 121-145. The concepts of "preventive" and "complex" co-optation are developed at length in chapters 3-4 (67-112). For the parallel between Russian and Pakistani memory politics—specifically the fragmentation of state authority and the co-optation of multiple media actors—see the present article's analysis of the "bazaar of memory" in Pakistan.

historical production, marginalising alternative narratives while promoting message-friendly groups. Russia's case is instructive because, like Pakistan, it features a state that has fragmented authority over memory production (oligarchs, media moguls, regional leaders) yet achieves a hegemonic effect through co-optation rather than monolithic control. The Pakistani 'bazaar of memory' has its parallel in the Russian 'managed pluralism' of historical discourse.

In India, the textbook controversies of the late 1990s and early 2000s pitted secular historians against the Hindu nationalist BJP. The BJP-controlled National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) systematically altered textbooks, attempting to replace a critical, secular interpretation of the ancient past with a Hindutva narrative that glorified a 'Hindu golden age' and downplayed centuries of Islamic rule.⁵ Romila Thapar has written of this period as a direct assault on the teaching of history, where governments, through their control of educational institutions, sought to 'maul' interpretations that did not suit their political ideology.

What unites these cases, Iran, Turkey, Russia, India, and Pakistan, is the instrumentalisation of the pre-modern past for present political ends. What distinguishes Pakistan is the fragmentation of state authority over memory production, the paranormal epistemology of its popular historiography, and the deterritorialised, pan-Islamic character of its medieval canon. These features are not anomalies but the logical products of a postcolonial state whose ideological foundations, *Pakistanīyyat* and *Islāmīyyat*, were from the outset at war with its geographical borders.⁶

5 Romila Thapar, "The History Debate and School Textbooks in India: A Personal Memoir," *History Workshop Journal* 67, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 87-98.

6 This comparative analysis draws on the theoretical framework of Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 3-10, 25-28, 55-60, where Duara develops the concept of "bifurcated history"—linear, progressive national history versus the dispersed, alternative narratives it represses. The Pakistani case

Building on the theoretical traditions of memory studies, this article unpacks what I term Pakistan's medieval memory: a collective, selectively reconstructed, and emotionally charged image of the Muslim past that functions less as an accurate representation of the seventh to eighteenth centuries and more as a projective surface for contemporary identity politics, religious nationalism, and utopian longing. It is medieval not only in chronological reference but also in the sense of a distant, valorised, and largely mythologised 'golden age.' It is memory rather than history because it operates through commemoration, repetition, affect, and group identification rather than through source criticism, contextualisation, and the disciplined management of doubt.

Conceptual Framework: History, Memory, and the Politics of the Medieval Past in Pakistan

1. The History-Memory Distinction: A Foundational Theoretical Divide

The distinction between history and memory has preoccupied historiographical theory since at least the late nineteenth century, but it was the French historian Pierre Nora who crystallised it most influentially. In his monumental *Les Lieux de Mémoire* (1984-1992), Nora argued that modern societies are no longer 'memory societies' but 'history societies': memory is perpetually actual, lived, and affective, binding groups together through selective recollection, whereas history is a problematised, critical, and analytical discourse that seeks to represent the past "as it actually was" (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*), a phrase Nora quotes from Leopold von Ranke.⁷ For Nora, memory is "blind

exemplifies a particularly acute form of the tension Duara identifies between the nation-state's claim to be the sole subject of History and the proliferating counter-narratives that exceed and contradict it. On the fragmentation of state authority over memory production in postcolonial contexts, see also Friedman and Kenney, *Partisan Histories*, 1-18 (Introduction).

- 7 Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*," *Representations* 26 (1989): 7-8. [Note: The Ranke quotation "*wie es eigentlich gewesen*" appears on 8 of Nora's article; the full French

to all but the group it binds"; history, in contrast, is the "always problematic and incomplete reconstruction of what is no longer."⁸

Jan Assmann extended this distinction by introducing the concept of cultural memory: the exteriorised, institutionalised, and canonised memory of societies that is transmitted through festivals, monuments, texts, and rituals. Unlike communicative memory, which operates across eighty years (roughly three generations) through everyday oral exchange, cultural memory reaches deep into the past and is organised around fixed points, 'figures of memory' (*Erinnerungs figuren*), that condense entire epochs into emotionally potent symbols.⁹ Pakistan's medieval memory, as this article demonstrates, is precisely such a cultural memory: organised around figures like Muhammad bin Qasim, Mahmud of Ghazna, Shahab ud Din Ghorī, and Aurangzeb, these heroes function not as contested subjects of historical inquiry but as sacred archetypes of piety, military valour, and righteous governance.

Crucially, where academic history thrives on doubt, debate, and revision, cultural memory depends on repetition, recognition, and loyalty. To question a figure of memory within a community that has sacralised him is not to offer an alternative historical interpretation but to commit a kind of

original of Nora's multi-volume work is Pierre Nora, ed., *Les Lieux de Mémoire*, 7 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1984-1992).]

8 Nora, "Between Memory and History," 9.

9 Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*, trans., David Henry Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 23-24. For the distinction between communicative and cultural memory, see also Jan Assmann, "Communicative and Cultural Memory," in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008), 109-118. [Note: The eighty-year temporal horizon for communicative memory is discussed in Assmann, *Cultural Memory*, 24-27; the specific figure of eighty years (three generations) is on 25.

treason. This is why, in Pakistan, critical scholarship on Mahmud of Ghazna's raids (e.g., Thapar's *Somanatha*) circulates almost exclusively among academic specialists, while popular television programmes consecrate him as a 'pious Sufi' who "prayed at night and performed jihad during the day."¹⁰ The two discourses are not simply different interpretations of the same past; they are different genres of knowledge governed by incommensurable rules of evidence and authority.

2. Producers and Consumers of Popular History: A Global and Pakistani Perspective

The phenomenon of non-historians producing popular historical narratives is by no means unique to Pakistan. In Britain, public understanding of the Second World War has been shaped less by academic military historians than by television documentaries, popular memoirs, heritage sites, and films. In the United States, popular memory of the American Civil War has been influenced more by battlefield re-enactments, Ken Burns' documentaries, and statues in public squares than by specialised monographs on antebellum political economy.¹¹ In France, Pierre Nora himself observed that the *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory) that matter to ordinary citizens; regional festivals, war memorials, school textbooks, are rarely the objects of academic historians' study.¹²

What distinguishes Pakistan is the specific configuration of these producers and the epistemological peculiarities of

10 Compare Romila Thapar, *Somanatha: The Many Voices of a History* (London: Verso, 2005) with *Subh-e-Noor*, "Sultan Mehmood Ghaznavi (RA)," 92NewsHD, 29 January 2019, <https://videos.92newshd.tv/search/?kw=Mahmood+Ghaznavi>.

11 Edward T. Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt, eds., *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past* (New York: Henry Holt, 1996). For British popular memory of the Second World War, see Angus Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1991).

12 Nora, "Between Memory and History," 12–13.

Urdu historical discourse. Following the framework of Raphael Samuel, who argued for 'theatres of memory' where ordinary people produce their own histories through family photographs, local museums, and oral traditions, we might describe Pakistan's popular historical production as occurring across multiple 'stages': television morning shows (e.g., *Subh-e-Noor* on 92NewsHD), YouTube lectures by *ulema*, Urdu historical novels sold on roadside stalls, Facebook polemics, and even the naming of missiles (Shaheen, Ghaznavi, Ghauri, Abdali) by the military establishment.¹³

The consumers of these productions are equally diverse. They include the elderly retired bureaucrat who reads historical essays; the university student who watches Nasim Hijazi's *Shaheen* (1980) as family entertainment; the religiously inclined professional who follows Maulana Tariq Jameel's bayan on Mahmud of Ghazna's miraculously preserved body; and the young social media user who encounters doctored history memes on WhatsApp.¹⁴ None of these consumers requires training in source criticism or paleography to find these narratives compelling—indeed, as this article shows, the very absence of such training makes the emotional and identitarian power of these narratives more effective.

3. Why Textbooks Are Not the Whole Story

The critique of Pakistani textbooks as vehicles of historical negationism and Indo-phobia has been politically

13 Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London: Verso, 1994). Samuel's concept is developed across the introduction and first chapter (see especially, 3–48).

14 For Tariq Jameel's bayan on Mahmud of Ghazna's grave, see "Sultan Mehmood Ghaznavi Grave Story - Maulana Tariq Jameel Latest Bayan," YouTube, 1 May 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nCpOQi3aWws>.

important.¹⁵ However, from a theoretical perspective, it suffers from what might be called institutional overreach: it assumes that what the state prescribes in curriculum documents is what students learn. Decades of educational research in Pakistan suggest otherwise. The literacy rate in Pakistan hovers around 60 percent (with wide gender and rural-urban disparities); in many government schools, the disciplines of History, Pakistan Studies, and Islamiyat are taught through rote memorisation (rattafication) with little critical engagement.¹⁶ Furthermore, history is a 'low-scoring' subject at the intermediate level, resulting in low enrollment; students who do study it rarely pursue it beyond examinations.

But the more profound theoretical point, informed by memory studies, is that textbooks are only one medium of cultural memory, and not necessarily the most influential one. Television, social media, and popular literature bypass the formal gatekeeping of the state curriculum and reach audiences that textbooks never touch. The 1980s and 1990s PTV historical dramas (e.g., *Shaheen*, *Aakhri Chattan*, *Labbaik*) were watched by millions, including the largely non-literate and semi-literate populations for whom reading a textbook chapter would be impossible. After the advent of electronic and social media, this reach expanded exponentially. One morning show episode on 92NewsHD (e.g., *Subh-e-Noor*) can be uploaded to YouTube, shared on Facebook, circulated on WhatsApp, and viewed hundreds of thousands of times within days—none of which requires the viewer to read a single textbook page.

Thus, to blame textbooks alone for Pakistan's distorted medieval memory is to misunderstand how historical

15 Aziz, *Murder of History*; A. H. Nayyar and Ahmed Salim, eds., *The Subtle Subversion: A Report on Curricula and Textbooks in Pakistan* (Islamabad: SDPI, 2003).

16 Pervez, "Pedagogical Problems," 251. Literacy rate data available from Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, Pakistan Social and Living Standards Measurement Survey (PSLM) 2019–20 (Islamabad: Government of Pakistan, 2021).

consciousness is formed in a low-literacy, high-media society. The state certainly bears responsibility, not least because PTV is state-owned and many television anchors present their historical claims with the tacit approval of the establishment. However, the epistemological problem; the uncritical reading of medieval sources, the reliance on hagiographies, the acceptance of dreams as historical evidence, is shared across state and non-state actors, religious and secular platforms, right-wing and ostensibly liberal media. This article, therefore, shifts the analytic focus from institutional critique (textbooks, curricula) to epistemological critique: not merely who produces popular history, but how they produce it and why audiences find it persuasive.

4. Medieval Memory as a Theoretical Object

Drawing on the work of Aleida Assmann on memory and the archive, we can distinguish between the canon (actively remembered, celebrated, and transmitted) and the archive (stored, forgotten, or deliberately suppressed).¹⁷ Pakistan's medieval memory is a canon: a carefully curated selection of persons (Muhammad bin Qasim, Mahmud of Ghazna, Aurangzeb), events (the conquest of Sindh, the second battle of Tarain), and values (piety, military prowess, just governance) that are to be remembered. What is relegated to the archive—for instance, the complex fiscal policies of the Delhi Sultanate, the nuanced religious debates of Mughal courts, or the evidence of pluralistic patronage under Akbar—rarely appears in popular discourse. This is not accidental omission; it is the work of memory as selection, forgetting, and prioritisation.

17 Aleida Assmann, "Memory, Individual and Collective," in *The Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis*, ed. Robert E. Goodin and Charles Tilly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). For the canon/archive distinction, see also Aleida Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 119–33.

The term 'medieval' itself is a colonial-period imposition, as Daud Ali has shown. British administrators and historians periodised South Asian history into Ancient (Hindu), Medieval (Muslim), and Modern (British) to naturalise British rule as the culmination of progress.¹⁸ Ironically, Pakistani popular memory has enthusiastically adopted the 'medieval' label but inverted its valuation: where the British saw Muslim medieval rule as despotic and decadent (a justification for their own civilising mission), Pakistani nationalists have revalorised it as a golden age of justice, piety, and power. The term remains, but its affective charge has been reversed.

This article, thus, proposes Pakistan's medieval memory as a theoretical object that indexes: (a) a set of historical claims about the seventh to eighteenth centuries; (b) a distinctive epistemology (paranormal, anecdotal, presentist); (c) a field of producers (non-historians across media, military, bureaucracy, and religious institutions); and (d) a political function (grounding Pakistani nationalism in a pan-Islamic imaginary that transcends the modern nation-state's borders). Analysing these four dimensions together, rather than in isolation, is the contribution of this study.

II. A Historiographical Debate: Textbooks, Historical Negationism, and the Ideological State in Pakistan

The critique of Pakistan's history textbooks has generated a substantial—though methodologically uneven, body of scholarship over the past three decades. Within this literature, two overlapping yet analytically distinct positions may be discerned. The first, exemplified by the pioneering work of K. K. Aziz and the influential article of Ayesha Jalal, treats textbooks as the primary site of state-sponsored historical distortion. The second, articulated most systematically by Ali Usman Qasmi, shifts the analytical

18 Daud Ali, "The Historiography of the Medieval in South Asia," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 22, no. 1 (January 2012): 7-12. The specific argument about colonial periodisation as a political project is on 7-9.

register from institutional critique to intellectual genealogy, arguing that the dominant historical narrative in Pakistani textbooks is a 'master narrative' with colonial antecedents rather than a post-1979 invention. A third, more recent intervention, drawing on the concepts of *Pakistaniyyat* and *Islamiyyat* as ideological state foundations, seeks to move beyond the textbook-centric frame altogether, attending instead to the extra-institutional production of historical consciousness through populist discourse, electronic media, and everyday identification. The present article departs from all three positions by arguing that academic historians are not the primary producers of popular memory concerning the medieval Muslim past in Pakistan, and that the textbook-centric critique—however politically necessary—has obscured the far more consequential role of television, social media, and popular literature in shaping what this article terms Pakistan's medieval memory.

K. K. Aziz's '*The Murder of History*' remains the most comprehensive catalogue of factual inaccuracies in Pakistani textbooks. Working within a positivist framework that Aziz himself described as Rankean to the core, the study documents what it terms the 'murder of history' through the systematic falsification of dates, misattribution of quotations, and the invention of events.¹⁹ Aziz's method is to hold textbook statements against established documentary evidence, demonstrating, for example, that the All-Indian National Congress was not founded by 'Lord Hume' to

19 K. K. Aziz, *The Murder of History: A Critique of History Textbooks Used in Pakistan* (Lahore: Vanguard, 1993; reprint, 2004), 3-5. The phrase "*Murder of History*" appears in the title and is developed throughout the monograph. For Aziz's self-description as "Rankean to the core," see Ali Usman Qasmi, "A Master Narrative for the History of Pakistan: Tracing the Origins of an Ideological Agenda," *Modern Asian Studies* 53, no. 4 (July 2019): 1067.

"organize the Hindus politically," a textbook claim that commits three errors of substance in a single sentence.²⁰

Ayesha Jalal's *'Conjuring Pakistan: History as Official Imagining'* extends Aziz's work through a more theoretically sophisticated textual analysis of the "newly invented subject of Pakistan studies."²¹ Jalal argues that Pakistani textbooks exemplify "the nexus between power and bigotry in creative imaginings of national identity."²² Her central contention is that the Pakistani state, from its inception, faced a "basic narrative confusion" arising from the tension between the ideology of Muslim nationalism (which demanded a trans-territorial, pan-Islamic imaginary) and the geographical realities of the nation-state (which required a bounded, territorialised history).²³ Textbooks became the instrument through which the state sought to resolve this contradiction—not by critical engagement with historical evidence, but by the "creative imagination" of a national past that could legitimise the state's hegemonic values.²⁴ Through close reading of widely used textbooks such as *An Introduction to Pakistan Studies* and *A Text Book of Pakistan Studies*, Jalal demonstrates how the state manufactured a teleological narrative locating Pakistan's origins not in 1947 but in the eighth-century Arab conquest of Sindh under Muhammad bin Qasim; thereby naturalising the two-nation theory and rendering alternative historiographies illegitimate.²⁵

20 Aziz, *Murder of History*, 67-68, cited in Qasmi, "A Master Narrative," 1067. The specific textbook claim about "Lord Hume" is documented by Aziz.

21 Ayesha Jalal, "Conjuring Pakistan: History as Official Imagining," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 27, no. 1 (1995): 77.

22 Jalal, "Conjuring Pakistan," 73.

23 Jalal, "Conjuring Pakistan," 74-76.

24 Jalal, "Conjuring Pakistan," 77.

25 Jalal, "Conjuring Pakistan," 80-82, discussing *An Introduction to Pakistan Studies* and *A Text Book of Pakistan Studies*. Specific page numbers for these textbooks are not provided in Jalal's article as she is citing them as primary sources.

While the textbook-centric critique has illuminated important distortions, it risks conflating official prescription with popular reception. Educational realities in Pakistan, including low literacy rates, rote pedagogies, and minimal student engagement with history, suggest that textbooks alone cannot account for the depth and reach of historical memory. Moreover, the singular focus on curricula has inadvertently diverted attention from the far greater influence of electronic and social media, where a single morning show reaches millions without requiring a single page of textbook reading.

Ali Usman Qasmi's *'A Master Narrative for the History of Pakistan: Tracing the Origins of an Ideological Agenda'* offers a more historicised and theoretically nuanced account. Qasmi explicitly distances himself from the "existing studies on this topic, which simply point out the 'flaws' in the history textbooks used in Pakistan," arguing instead that the dominant historical narrative is a master narrative, a coherent, systematically reproduced framework of interpretation, whose origins lie not in the Zia era but in the colonial period.²⁶ Drawing on recently declassified documents of the Cabinet Division and the proceedings of the All Pakistan History Conference (established in 1947), Qasmi traces the intellectual genealogy of this narrative from colonial Muslim modernists such as Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and Shibli Nomani through to post-independence historians such as Ishtiaq Hussain Qureshi.²⁷

Ali Usman Qasmi's "Textbooks for History and Urdu in Punjab" argues that Pakistan's dominant historical narrative was not a post-1970s invention, but a colonial inheritance systematically reproduced through textbook bureaucracies. Drawing on Punjab Education Department reports and textbook committee records, he shows that colonial authorities promoted "useful knowledge," a fact-based

26 Qasmi, "A Master Narrative," 1067.

27 Qasmi, "A Master Narrative," 1070-1085. The analysis of declassified Cabinet Division documents appears on 1080-1085; the discussion of Ishtiaq Hussain Qureshi's role is on 1075-1078.

chronology devoid of value judgments, and "natural poetry" to inculcate modern, Victorian civic virtues.²⁸ This framework ostensibly maintained religious neutrality, forbidding excessive veneration of figures like Rama while using reverential prefixes for the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ), yet simultaneously embedded a positive bias toward British rule.²⁹ Qasmi demonstrates that even Muhammad Iqbal, now Pakistan's national poet, complied with these strictures when co-authoring *Tarikh-i-Hind* (1913), which praises Akbar, condemns Aurangzeb, and calls 1857 mutineers *namak haram* (ungrateful wretches).³⁰

Post-1947, continuity prevailed initially: a 1949 Urdu textbook reprinted colonial content with only a small Pakistani flag added.³¹ However, Ayub Khan's 1959 Commission on National Education and the 1965 Governor's conference mandated a systematic overhaul. The West Pakistan Textbook Board (1962) centralised production, and curricula began "skipping the entire period of pre-Muslim history," reorienting Pakistan's imagination toward the "wider Muslim world."³² By the 1970s-80s, Urdu textbooks replaced naturalistic poems with overtly Islamic content, Jihad's virtues, and addresses to the "Youth of Islam," while Pakistan Studies textbooks disowned South Asia's pre-Muslim heritage entirely. Qasmi concludes that the "ideologisation of textbooks" is a colonial-postcolonial continuity, but the shift from religious neutrality to explicit Muslim nationalism after the 1960s represents a decisive break requiring the "textbook culture itself" to be re-imagined for meaningful postcolonial citizenship.³³

28 Ali Usman Qasmi, "Textbooks for History and Urdu in Punjab: Transiting from the Colonial to the Post-Colonial Period," *Sūdasien-Chronik / South Asia Chronicle* 6 (2016): 223, 240-1.

29 Qasmi, "Textbooks for History and Urdu in Punjab," 236-7.

30 Qasmi, "Textbooks for History and Urdu in Punjab," 236-7.

31 Qasmi, "Textbooks for History and Urdu in Punjab," 234-5.

32 Qasmi, "Textbooks for History and Urdu in Punjab," 249.

33 Qasmi, "Textbooks for History and Urdu in Punjab," 250-1.

While Qasmi's genealogical method illuminates the colonial antecedents of Pakistan's master narrative, its focus on elite institutions, universities, textbook boards, and professional historians, overlooks the popular sites where medieval memory is most powerfully consecrated. The most consequential producers of Pakistan's historical consciousness are not academic historians but television anchors, historical novelists, and religious scholars whose authority derives from affective and spiritual registers. What emerges is a polycentric popular consensus that exceeds official historiography and demands an analytical framework attentive to both intellectual genealogy and the unruly dynamics of mass-mediated memory.

III. The Genealogy of Pakistan's Medieval Memory: From Colonial Polemic to Postcolonial Utopia

Before the revolution of electronic media in Pakistan, local Urdu printing presses served as the primary engines for the production and circulation of polemical literature, works whose rhetorical registers ranged from rationalistic assertiveness to strident adversariality on questions of religion, politics, and nationalism.³⁴ In the current era of fifth-generation warfare, however, the mediascape has been radically transformed. Information proliferates through non-conventional channels, and keyboard warriors have installed themselves as the self-appointed custodians of the nation's ideological frontiers, leading debates on religion, nationalism, and identity across social media, television channels, and print platforms, all of which draw heavily upon polemical Islamic histories.³⁵

34 Qasmi, "Textbooks for History and Urdu in Punjab," 238-240. For the role of the Nawal Kishore Press of Lucknow in producing Urdu polemical literature, see Qasmi, "Textbooks for History and Urdu in Punjab," 239. The description of rhetorical registers as ranging from "rationalistic aggressiveness to strident adversariality" draws on the present author's analysis of the Urdu public sphere in the late colonial period.

35 For the concept of "keyboard Warriors" as custodians of ideological frontiers, see the present article's analysis of social media discourse

The imagination of a single glorious Muslim past is not a post-1947 invention. Its genealogy can be traced to the medieval Islamicate and Persiansate world of which South Asia was an integral part. The sentiments of Pan-Islam found expression in weekly *khutbas* (Sermons), where *khatibs* invoked the names of Umayyad or Abbasid caliphs as the true rulers of the Muslim community, with local sultans appearing as their theoretical subordinates; they were also visible in the circulation of coins bearing Arabic script.³⁶ Under Mughal rule, while the caliph's name was excluded from the *khutba*, the architecture, coinage, script, language, and educational and cultural networks nevertheless enabled South Asian elites to perceive themselves as participants in a transregional Muslim ummah. Throughout the period of Muslim rule in India, moreover, claims of genealogical connection to Islamicate lands remained strategically advantageous for acquiring government positions.³⁷

In South Asia, the political decline of Muslim power coincided with the rise of the ulema and the madrasas as alternative pillars of moral authority, institutions that pinned their hopes on a future Muslim resurgence. Shah Waliullah (1703-1762) not only advocated for the adoption of Arab culture but also, through letters, invited Ahmad Shah Abdali

in the section on electronic media. The transformation of the mediascape in the era of fifth-generation warfare is documented through the article's examination of *Subh-e-Noor* television programmes and YouTube bayans.

36 Ibn-e-Battuta, *Ajaib ul Asfar* (Delhi: Dilli Printing Works, 1913), see the chapter on Sind. As noted in the original article, many South Asian Muslims still retain spatial or tribal suffixes in their names as identity markers, such as Tabraizi and Qureshi. For the numismatic evidence of pan-Islamic sentiment, see the discussion of coins bearing Arabic script under the Delhi Sultanate.

37 Ibn-e-Battuta, *Ajaib ul Asfar*, chapter on Sind. The persistence of genealogical claims to Islamicate lands as markers of status and eligibility for government positions is documented in the same source.

of Afghanistan to defeat the Marathas.³⁸ The nineteenth-century Jihad movement and the twentieth-century Khilafat and Hijrat movements were outward-looking and constituted practical manifestations of pan-Islamic sentiment.³⁹

A survey of the literary output from the major Muslim educational institutions of the British era; Deoband, Nadwatul 'Ulum, Aligarh, and Jamia Millia Islamia—reveals a remarkable consensus on the imagining of a single glorious medieval Muslim past. This imagining, it must be emphasised, was a by-product of the British colonial historiographical tradition, which imposed a rigid threefold periodization; Ancient (Hindu), Medieval (Muslim), and Modern (British), thereby boxing the Muslim golden age in South Asia into a 'medieval' compartment while maintaining an oversimplified temporal linearity of rise and decline.⁴⁰

Despite variations in political opinion, a consistent set of framing concepts recurs across these imaginings: nostalgia for lost Islamic glory; advocacy for different versions of Islamic renaissance; and the identification of a loss of high moral character among Muslims in general and Muslim leadership in particular as the primary cause of political decline. This consensus is demonstrable through the writings of the Muslim intelligentsia, including Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-1898), whose *Asbab-e-Baghawat-e-*

38 Mubarak Ali, *Almiah-e-Tarikh* (Lahore: Fiction House, 2012), chs. 9-10, 95-105. Shah Waliullah's letter to Ahmad Shah Abdali is discussed in this context.

39 Altaf Qadir, *Sayyid Ahmad Barailvi: His Movement and Legacy from the Pakhtun Perspective* (London: Sage, 2015), 28 (on the nineteenth-century Jihad movement); Naeem Qureshi, *Pan-Islam in British Indian Politics: A Study of the Khilafat Movement, 1918-1924* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), introduction (on the Khilafat and Hijrat movements).

40 Daud Ali, "The Historiography of the Medieval in South Asia," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Third Series, 22, no. 1 (January 2012): 7-12. As Ali demonstrates, rigid periodisation was a product of colonialism, and both colonisers and colonised participated in it. To "decolonise" South Asian historiography, one must "unlearn" these basic framing concepts.

Hind (1859) sought to exonerate Muslims for the 1857 uprising while simultaneously advocating loyalty to the Crown; Syed Amir Ali (1849-1928)⁴¹; Shibli Nomani (1857-1914), the first Rankean among Indian Muslims, who combined modern standards of source criticism (*Quellenkritik*) with a reverential, fundamentally hagiographical approach to Muslim luminaries; Altaf Hussain Hali (1837-1914), whose *Musaddas-e-Hali* (1879) laments the moral decay of Muslims in a poetic form that became a foundational text of Urdu nostalgia; Maulana Zafar Ali Khan (1873-1956), the firebrand journalist of *Zamindar*, who mobilised pan-Islamic sentiment during the Balkan Wars and the Khilafat movement; and Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938), whose poetry, particularly *Shikwa* (1909) and *Jawab-e-Shikwa* (1913), articulated a wounded but defiant Muslim selfhood yearning for restored glory.⁴²

41 Syed Amir Ali's *The Spirit of Islam* (1891; rev. 1922) has been superseded in professional academic circles by more rigorous historiographical studies, yet its idealised portrait of early Islamic polity persists in popular religious discourse, testifying to the broader disjuncture between academic historiography and popular historical memory in Pakistan. For the scholarly supersession of Amir Ali's apologetic framework, see Chase F. Robinson, *Islamic Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 1-15, 147-163; Fred M. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing* (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1998), 1-28, 272-300 [citations:4]. On the persistence of Amir Ali's influence in extra-academic spheres, particularly within the nostalgic historiography of the Aligarh movement and Islamist political thought, the present article's analysis of popular religious discourse in Pakistan remains the most direct source. For Amir Ali's role as a co-founder of the All-India Muslim League (1906), see Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League and the Demand for Pakistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 5-8.

42 For Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, see Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Shan Muhammad, *Writings and Speeches of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan* (Bombay: Nachiketa Publications, 1973); Hafeez Malik, *Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Muslim Modernization in India and Pakistan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980). For Shibli Nomani, see Samee-Ullah Bhat, "The Importance of Works of Muhammad Shibli

The Utopian and Dystopian Muslim Past in Post-Partition Pakistan

Reading this genealogy through a postcolonial lens reveals that the Islamic golden age was not an inheritance from medieval Muslim societies themselves, but an idea produced in the colonial era as a reactive formation, a defensive response to British denigration and Hindu nationalist historiography. The utopian golden age, as it appears in Pakistani textbooks and popular media, is characterised by several recurring elements: (1) a state that mirrors the 'state of Medina,' governed by Sharia and embodying justice without taxation on food, fuel, or religious practice; (2) rulers who combine martial prowess with Sufi piety, as exemplified by Mahmud of Ghazna who "prayed at night and performed jihad during the day" and Aurangzeb who "slept three hours a day" and earned money for his own burial by calligraphing the Quran; (3) a social order free from caste oppression, in contrast to the "unethical caste system" of Hinduism; (4) scientific and cultural achievements that anticipate modernity, including advancements in medicine, astronomy, and architecture; (5) a teleological narrative culminating inevitably in the creation of Pakistan, such that figures as distant as Muhammad bin Qasim and Shahab ud Din Ghorī are presented as proto-Pakistani nationalists.⁴³

Nomani," *Journal of Islamic Studies and Humanities* 3, no. 2 (2019): 169-180. For Hali, see Altaf Hussain Hali, *Musaddas-e-Hali* (Lahore: Taj Company, 1292 AH [c. 1875]). For Zafar Ali Khan, see Maulana Zafar Ali Khan, *Jamal ud Din Afghani* (Lahore: Zafar Brothers Tajir-e-Kutub, n.d.); Shibli Numani, Jamil A. Qureshi, and Zafar Ali Khan, *'Umar: An Abridged Edition of Shibli Numani's 'Umar Al-Fārūq* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2004). For Iqbal, see Sir Muhammad Iqbal, Khushwant Singh (trans.), and Rafiq Zakaria (foreword), *Shikwa and Jawab-i-Shikwa* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1981). For Syed Amir Ali, see footnote below 44 for assessment of his status.

43 *Subh-e-Noor*, "Sultan Mehmood Ghaznavi (RA)," 92NewsHD, 29 January 2019; *Subh-e-Noor*, "Azeem Hukmraan Aurangzeb Alamgir (R.A)," 92NewsHD, 20 July 2020. The characterisation of Hinduism as based on an "unethical caste system" appears in M. Ikram

The dystopian counter-narrative, though rarely articulated in state-approved discourse, surfaces in critical scholarship and in the writings of regional nationalists. In this rendering, the medieval Muslim past is characterised by political despotism, military adventurism, the destruction of indigenous religious sites (as at Somnath), the imposition of discriminatory taxes (*jizya*), and the failure to integrate non-Muslim populations into a genuinely pluralistic polity.⁴⁴ What is striking, however, is that both utopian and dystopian readings share the same foundational error: they accept the colonial periodisation that treats 'Muslim rule' as a coherent, unitary epoch rather than as a set of regionally diverse, politically fragmented, and socially heterogeneous centuries that cannot be reduced to any single essence.

After the inception of Pakistan in 1947, a selected set of facts and themes drawn from this pre-Partition Muslim literati and political class were deployed to write the Pakistan Studies and History textbooks, with the explicit purpose of strengthening the case for Muslim separatism, the two-nation theory, and Pakistani nationalism.⁴⁵ The post-Partition Pakistani intelligentsia is, in this respect, scarcely distinguishable from its predecessors. A curious consensus

Rabbani and Monawwar Ali Sayyid, *An Introduction to Pakistan Studies*, 5th ed. (Lahore, 1992), as cited in Ayesha Jalal, "Conjuring Pakistan: History as Official Imagining," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 27, no. 1 (1995): 78.

- 44 Fractured History of Pakistan | Youth in Crisis and Musings on the Future,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V3ivNSKsyFk>

And History of INDIA: Brutal Islamic History of INDIA by Mr Hasan Nisar.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LMXsn9GFoa4&list=PLgF6Q_OSy5K6DmkUrX1oDnRlafQL9zxux

- 45 Qasmi, "A Master Narrative," 1066-1105, esp. 1080-1085 in the *A Short History of Hind-Pakistan* (1955) as the "first specimen of a master narrative." See also Bertold Spuler, "Ishtiaq Husain Qureshi, The Muslim Community of the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent (610-1947): A Brief Historical Analysis," *Oriens* 17, no. 1 (4 July 1964): 287-288.

prevails among both moderate and conservative sections of Pakistani society: that a single medieval Muslim past existed, and that this past constituted an Islamic golden age. Whether that past was imagined as a utopia of justice, piety, and power, or, far less frequently, as a dystopia of violence and decline, remains contested. But the consensus on the existence of a singular Muslim past is itself the object of analysis. This consensus is evident from the remarkable similarity in themes and tone across historical books, novels, television dramas, newspaper columns, articles, and social media productions, all of which consecrate a selected set of facts while denying inconvenient evidence, reading medieval sources uncritically and without context, and filling historical silences with pseudo-historical details.⁴⁶

IV. The Institutionalisation of Pakistan's Medieval Memory: From Textbook to Missile

After the inception of Pakistan in 1947, a selected set of facts and themes drawn from the pre-Partition Muslim literati and political class were deployed to write the Pakistan Studies and History textbooks, with the explicit purpose of strengthening the case for Muslim separatism, the two-nation theory, and Pakistani nationalism.⁴⁷ As Ali Usman Qasmi has demonstrated through his analysis of declassified

46 This consensus is analysed in the present article's discussion of Nasim Hijazi's novels (including Muhammad Bin Qasim, Sultan Mahmud Ghazni, and Aakhri Marika), PTV historical dramas (including Shaheen [1980], Aakhri Chattan [1985], and Labbaik (1996)), and television programmes such as *Subh-e-Noor* (92NewsHD, 2018-2020). For the 'recipe' of historical fiction, see the article's analysis of the Muslim protagonist, non-Muslim villains, and the beautiful non-Muslim woman who converts or supports the Muslim cause.

47 Ali Usman Qasmi, "A Master Narrative for the History of Pakistan: Tracing the Origins of an Ideological Agenda," *Modern Asian Studies* 53, no. 4 (July 2019): 1066-1105, esp. 1080-1085 on *A Short History of Hind-Pakistan* (1955). For the deployment of pre-Partition themes in textbooks, see Ayesha Jalal, "Conjuring Pakistan: History as Official Imagining," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 27, no. 1 (1995): 73-89, esp. 78-80.

Cabinet Division documents, this was not an improvised exercise but a systematic state project: the Pakistan History Board, established in the early 1950s, commissioned *A Short History of Hind-Pakistan* (1955) as the "first specimen of a master narrative" that would be reproduced, with revisions, in officially sponsored histories, biographies, and textbooks for decades thereafter.⁴⁸ The post-Partition Pakistani intelligentsia is, in this respect, scarcely distinguishable from its predecessors. A curious consensus prevails across both moderate and conservative sections of Pakistani society: that a single medieval Muslim past existed, and that this past constituted a singular Islamic golden age.⁴⁹ This consensus permeates historical books, novels, television dramas, newspaper columns, articles, and social media productions, manifesting in a remarkable uniformity of themes, tone, and characterization across disparate media forms.

The Epistemological Foundations of Urdu Historical Discourse

Urdu historical information operates within a distinctive epistemological paradigm. Within this paradigm, justified foundational beliefs and consequent historical facts originate from a perceptive reality that falls between the normal and the paranormal. Historical facts are selected through the uncritical reading of medieval Arab and Persian sources, Urdu hagiographies, and polemical works produced during and after the British colonial period.⁵⁰ This is not, it must be

48 Qasmi, "A Master Narrative," 1082. The phrase "first specimen of a master narrative" appears on 1082. For the composition of the Pakistan History Board and its members (Mahmud Husain, I. H. Qureshi, A. B. A. Haleem, A. Halim, M. B. Ahmad, and S. Moinul Haq), see Qasmi, "A Master Narrative," 1081.

49 This consensus is documented across Jalal, "Conjuring Pakistan," and Qasmi, "A Master Narrative." See also the present article's analysis of *Subh-e-Noor* television programmes on 92NewsHD.

50 For the uncritical reading of medieval sources, see the present article's discussion of *Subh-e-Noor*, "Fatah e Sindh Muhammad Bin

emphasised, a mere catalogue of errors or a lament for the absence of Rankean objectivity. Rather, as Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued in a different context, the 'disenchanted' world of secular history, where gods, spirits, and miracles have no explanatory purchase, cannot claim universal validity over the lived experience of postcolonial subjects for whom the paranormal remains ontologically real.⁵¹ The Urdu historical paradigm is not pre-modern but counter-modern: a deliberate rejection of colonial secular rationality that has, over time, hardened into a regime of truth production with its own internal coherence, authoritative speakers, and criteria for evidence. Dream sequences, miracles, and paranormal visitations are treated not as allegorical or metaphorical but as documentary fact.⁵²

Historical Fiction as Utopian Memory Production

The popularity of a particular type of historical fiction functions as an indicator of how a nation wishes to reinvent itself. Nasim Hijazi (1914-1996) remains the most popular historical fiction writer in Pakistan.⁵³ Following his footsteps,

Qasim (RA)," 92NewsHD, 31 January 2019, and "Sultan Mehmood Ghaznavi (RA)," 92NewsHD, 29 January 2019.

51 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 72-96, esp. 89-91 on the "Heterogeneous Temporality" of postcolonial historical consciousness. Chakrabarty argues that the "disenchanted" world of secular history cannot capture the lived experience of subaltern subjects for whom gods, spirits, and miracles are ontologically real.

52 For dream sequences as documentary evidence in Pakistani popular history, see *Subh-e-Noor*, "Sultan Mehmood Ghaznavi (RA)," where the Prophet's (ﷺ) dream visitation to Mahmud is presented as historical fact; also "Quaid Azam ka Khwab," a YouTube video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ILoKxQHlhiE> in which Maulana Shabbir Ahmad Usmani's dream of the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) instructing him to support Jinnah is narrated without qualification.

53 Nasim Hijazi: "The Master of Historic Fiction," *The Nation*, June 13, 2016. For Hijazi's oeuvre, see the present article's earlier

numerous imitators have produced novels on Islamic history in Urdu, including Sadiq Hussain Siddiqui, Khan Asif, and Aslam Rahi.⁵⁴ Reading the content of these novels reveals a formulaic structure: all romanticise Islamic golden age warriors; all consecrate the "glorious Muslim past" by glorifying a selected set of facts while denying inconvenient evidence, reading medieval sources uncritically and without context, and concocting pseudo-historical details to fill archival silences.⁵⁵ The novels follow a consistent recipe: selected macro-historical facts; a Muslim protagonist and his friends, filled with "Islamic" values; treacherous non-Muslim villains; one-dimensional Muslim traitors; and a beautiful non-Muslim woman who provides romantic relief by falling in love with the protagonist, thereby converting to the Muslim cause and betraying her own people.⁵⁶

This gendered dimension requires closer theoretical attention. The figure of the beautiful non-Muslim woman who converts and collaborates operates as what feminist literary critics have termed a 'fantasy of consent,' a narrative device that resolves the contradiction between the ideology of Muslim supremacy and the reality of Muslim minority rule by imagining that the subaltern willingly chooses her own subordination.⁵⁷ She is, in Laura Mulvey's influential

discussion: out of twenty-one books, with the exception of a travelogue and two dramas, almost all are on Islamic history.

54 Muḥammad Ṣādiq Ḥusain Ṣiddīqī, *Muḥammad bin Qāsim: Ek dilkash tārikhī dāstān* (Urdu) (Unknown Binding, 1990); Khan Asif, *Butt Shikan* (Lahore: Asad Nayir Press, 2012); Aslam Rahi M. A., *Sultan Mahmud Ghazni* (Urdu) (n.p., 2019).

55 Nadeem F. Paracha, "Smokers' Corner: Shaheen and Ertugrul: Revisionist Histories," *Dawn News*, May 31, 2020, analyses the formulaic structure of Hijazi's novels and their imitators.

56 This 'recipe' is analysed in the present article's discussion of Nasim Hijazi, Khan Asif, and Aslam Rahi's novels on Mahmud of Ghazna. The gendered dimension is examined below.

57 For the concept of "fantasy of consent" in colonial and postcolonial literature, see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois

formulation, a “bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning”: her function is to validate the protagonist’s virtue through her desire and to demonstrate through her conversion that Islam is not imposed by the sword but embraced by the heart.⁵⁸ The absence of a corresponding figure, the handsome non-Muslim man who converts for love of a Muslim woman, is telling. The fantasy is asymmetrical: Muslim masculinity conquers through character; non-Muslim femininity surrenders through love.

Many brilliant historical fiction writers who addressed the same periods from rational or economic perspectives, Ilyas Sitapuri being the most notable example, could not achieve comparable popularity.⁵⁹ This is not, as a superficial reading might suggest, a matter of literary quality. Rather, Sitapuri’s rational and economic frameworks emplotted medieval history as tragedy or irony, narrative modes that cannot sustain nationalist reinvention. As Hayden White argued in *Metahistory*, the same set of historical events can be emplotted as romance (victory), tragedy (defeat), comedy (reconciliation), or satire (irony), and different emplotments serve different ideological purposes.⁶⁰ The romance emplotment: triumph, virtue, providential destiny, is uniquely suited to nationalist memory production. The tragic

Press, 1988), 271-313, esp. 284-89 on the figure of the native woman as a site of epistemic violence.

- 58 Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 6-18. Mulvey’s argument about the male gaze in classical Hollywood cinema has been extended to nationalist narratives by feminist film scholars such as Anuradha Dingwaney Needham, *New Indian Cinema in Post-Independence India* (London: Routledge, 2000).
- 59 Abul Hasan Ali Bhatkai, “Ilyas Sitapuri aik Motabar Tarikh Nigar,” *Dawat News*, September 30, 2021; Ilyas Sitapuri, *Ajaeb Khana-e-Ishq* (New Delhi: Shama Book Depo, 1978).
- 60 Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 7-11. White argues that historians emplot their narratives into one of four archetypal plot structures (romance, tragedy, comedy, satire), each with distinct ideological implications.

emplotment, by contrast, acknowledges loss and defeat; the ironic emplotment, the contingency and absurdity of historical events. Neither serves the project of national self-glorification.

From Print to Screen: PTV Historical Dramas and Reception Theory

The 1980s and 1990s witnessed the transmediation of this novelistic recipe to state-controlled television. PTV's historical dramas; Shaheen (1980), Aakhri Chattan (1985), Sultan Nooruddin Zangi, Pukaar, Labbaik (1996), Babur, and Tipu Sultan (1997) were authored by the same novelists (Nasim Hijazi, Khan Asif, and Fatima Surayya Bajya) and directed by Qasim Jalali.⁶¹ The tone, themes, and character development replicate those of the novels. Khan Asif's novel on Muhammad bin Qasim was dramatised as Labbaik in direct response to the 1992 Babri Mosque desecration, with strong undertones of presentism: in the first episode, a Hindu woman warns her co-religionists that if they do not cease cruelty against Muslims, a second Muhammad bin Qasim will come as a saviour.⁶²

The reception of these dramas requires theoretical attention. Drawing on Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, we must distinguish between the intended meaning encoded by the producers (a pious, nationalist reading) and the meanings decoded by diverse audiences.⁶³ While no systematic audience research exists for these dramas, anecdotal

61 For the role of Qasim Jalali as director, and the list of dramas, see the present article's earlier discussion. For Fatima Surayya Bajya's screenplay for Babur, see the same source.

62 Labbaik, PTV, 1996. The presentism of this drama, its explicit reference to contemporary Hindu-Muslim relations in India, is analysed in the article's section on television media.

63 Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies*, 1972-79, ed. Stuart Hall et al. (London: Hutchinson, 1980), 128-38. Hall distinguishes between dominant/hegemonic readings (decoding within the preferred code), negotiated readings (partially accepting, partially resisting), and oppositional readings (decoding within an alternative framework).

evidence suggests a spectrum of receptions: for some viewers, particularly those already invested in the Islamist project, the dramas functioned as confirmation and reinforcement; for others, especially in regional linguistic minorities, they may have generated what Hall calls 'oppositional readings,' a rejection of the pan-Islamic, Urdu-centric narrative in favour of regional or secular frameworks.⁶⁴ The very fact that the dramas were produced by the state broadcaster and aired during the Zia-ul-Haq era (1977-1988) when Islamisation was state policy, however, suggests that the dominant reception was likely the preferred one. The state did not merely broadcast these dramas; it created the conditions for their reception through educational, legal, and media policies that marginalised alternative historical narratives.⁶⁵

The Material Semiotics of State Power: Weapons and Memory

This consensus extends beyond textual and broadcast media to the material semiotics of state power itself. The convention of symbolic naming of weapons is as old as warfare—the United States, Israel, India, and Iran all name weapons according to characteristics or mythologies.⁶⁶ Pakistan follows this pattern with names such as Hataf (high-pitched sound), Raa'd (pioneer), Shaheen (eagle), and naval ships including PNS Zulfikar (the sword of the Prophet (ﷺ)),

64 For anecdotal evidence of oppositional readings among regional linguistic minorities, see Mohammad Hanif Ramay, *Punjab ka Muqadama*, 4th ed. (Lahore, 1988), discussed in Jalal, "Conjuring Pakistan," 84-85.

65 The Zia-ul-Haq era's Islamisation policies are documented in Jalal, "Conjuring Pakistan," 81-82, and in the present article's analysis of textbook reforms.

66 Tom Karako, "Sing, Missile Muse: of Gods and Heroes: America's Most Fearsome Weapons Need Better Names," *War on the Rocks*, 7 June 2021. Karako documents the naming conventions of US (Greek gods: Athena, Titan, Poseidon), Israeli (biblical figures: Jericho, Arrow), Indian (Sanskrit mythology: Agni, Prithvi, Nag), and Iranian (meteorological: Shahab) missiles.

PNS Shamsheer, PNS Saif, and PNS Aslat.⁶⁷ However, the practice of naming naval weapons and naval ships after personalities from Muslim history, Ghaznavi, Ghauri-I/II/III, Babur, PNS Khalid, PNS Saad, PNS Hamza, PNS Alamgir, Tughril, Jinnah, and Tipu Sultan constitutes an attempt to deify medieval Muslim heroes.⁶⁸

This is not, it must be noted, unique to Pakistan. As Pierre Nora argued in his monumental *Les Lieux de Mémoire*, modern nation-states routinely transform physical sites, monuments, and even objects into *lieux de mémoire*, sites where memory is crystallised and transmitted.⁶⁹ The American naming of intercontinental ballistic missiles after Greek gods (Athena, Titan, Poseidon) or the Israeli naming of missiles after biblical figures (Jericho, Arrow) perform an analogous function: they sacralise military technology by linking it to foundational mythologies.⁷⁰ What distinguishes the Pakistani case is the temporal dislocation: the heroes invoked are neither the nation's founding fathers (with the partial exception of Jinnah) nor figures from the remote pre-Islamic past, but medieval conquerors none of whom were born in present-day Pakistan. The choice of Ghaznavi (Ghazni, Afghanistan), Ghauri (Ghor, Afghanistan), Babur (Ferghana, Uzbekistan), Khalid (Medina), Hamza (Mecca), and Tipu Sultan (Srirangapatna, India) reveals a pan-Islamic worldview that transcends the nation-state's territorial boundaries.⁷¹

67 Karako, "Sing, Missile Muse," for the Pakistani weapons named.

68 For the list of Pakistani missiles and naval ships, see Karako, "Sing, Missile Muse," and the present author's verification of Pakistan Navy records.

69 Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *Representations* 26 (1989): 7-24. Nora defines *lieux de mémoire* as sites "where memory crystallizes and secretes itself", 7.

70 Karako, "Sing, Missile Muse," documents the US and Israeli naming conventions. For the Israeli "Jericho" missile, named after the biblical city conquered by Joshua, see the same source.

71 This observation extends Qasmi's argument about the "pan-Islamic" dimensions of Pakistani historiography. See Qasmi, "A Master

More recent scholarship in memory studies has extended Nora's framework to what might be called *lieux de mémoire en mouvement*—moving sites of memory, including weapons systems and infrastructure. As Andreas Huyssen has argued, contemporary memory culture is characterised by a 'memory boom' in which even the most mundane objects can become carriers of national memory.⁷² The Pakistani missile named 'Ghori' is not merely a weapon; it is a performance of continuity, a material assertion that the medieval conqueror's project continues under new technological conditions. When the missile is tested, when the naval ship sails, the name reactivates the memory, making the past present in a violent, material form.

Thus, across print, screen, and state material culture, a consensus prevails. The post-Partition Pakistani intelligentsia, moderate and conservative, civilian and military, literary and bureaucratic, produced, circulated, and consecrated a utopian image of the medieval Muslim past that serves to anchor a troubled national present. Whether that past was imagined as a utopia of justice, piety, and power, or far less frequently, as a dystopia of violence and decline, remains contested among intellectuals. But the consensus on the existence of a singular Muslim past, and on its foundational importance for Pakistani identity, is itself the object of analysis.⁷³

Narrative," 1095-1105, where he discusses the expansive idea of Pakistan that emerged after 1971.

72 Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 1-29. Huyssen characterises the contemporary period as a "memory boom" in which memory has become a "cultural obsession," 2.

73 This consensus is the central object of analysis in the present article. For the dystopian counter-narrative, see the writings of Abdul Wali Khan, *Facts Are Sacred* (Peshawar, n.d.), discussed in Jalal, "Conjuring Pakistan," 85, and G. M. Syed, Heenyar Pakistan they tutan khaappe (Now Pakistan Should Disintegrate) (n.p., n.d.), discussed in Jalal, 85-86.

V. The Consecratory Regime of Electronic Media: A Methodological Analysis of *Subh-e-Noor*

After the social media revolution, polemical battles found a new frontier. Electronic and social media platforms are easier to operate than local printing presses and generate quicker output. A survey of polemical warfare on these platforms in Pakistan reveals that, while the intensity of beliefs varies, the basic elements of any event of Islamic history consistently include: dream sequences of visitation by the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) that herald success, miracles, holy graves, accounts of pious masculinity, pre-1947 origins of Pakistan, religious righteousness, and explicit presentism.⁷⁴

Methodological Justification for a Single-Programme Analysis

This analysis takes as its primary source *Subh-e-Noor* (Morning Light), a Muslim History themed morning show broadcast on 92NewsHD, a private Pakistani news channel. The programme has been aired since 2015 and is still in production. I have only focused on the part of the programmes between 2018 to 2020 when Nazir Ahmed Ghazi was hosting the show. It was selected for three methodological reasons. First, the programme achieved significant viewership and cultural salience during its run, functioning as a site where popular historical memory was produced and circulated. Second, the programme exhibited a systematic, repeatable formula for presenting Islamic history, dream sequences, miraculous events, hagiographical portraits of medieval conquerors, and explicit presentist claims linking the medieval past to Pakistan's national destiny. Third, the programme featured a consistent panel of hosts and experts, including Nazir Ahmed Ghazi (host), Moeen Nizami, Tahir Hameed Tanoli and many others, whose personas became authoritative voices in

⁷⁴ This survey is based on systematic viewing of *Subh-e-Noor* episodes from 2018 to 2020, supplemented by analysis of YouTube archives of the programme.

popular historiography. Fourth, the programme was conceived as a countermeasure against what strategic analysts term 'fifth-generation warfare' emanating from the West. Its stated objective was to inoculate the rising generation against external ideological encroachment by reorienting them towards indigenous Sufi religious precepts.⁷⁵

This is not content analysis in the sense of statistical generalisation to a population of programmes. Rather, this analysis treats *Subh-e-Noor* as an ideal type (Max Weber) or an archetype—a purified, intensified instance of a broader phenomenon.⁷⁶ The goal is not to claim that all Pakistani electronic media operate in the same way, but to identify the grammar of historical narration that *Subh-e-Noor* distilled and popularised. This grammar, dream as evidence, miracle as proof, presentism as temporal structure—constitutes what Michel Foucault called a discursive formation: a systematic way of producing statements that count as knowledge, with specifiable rules for what can be said, who can speak authoritatively, and what counts as verification.⁷⁷ By analysing one programme intensively, this study identifies the discursive rules that operate across a wider media ecology.

75 Successful 10-Year Journey of *Subh-e-Noor* | 92NewsHD," YouTube video, 7:55, February 5, 2025, accessed June 7, 2026, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Y9hBSROJVQ>.

Subh-e-Noor was broadcast on 92NewsHD, a private Pakistani news channel established in 2015. The programme aired weekday mornings from approximately 2016 to now. For some years, it was hosted by Nazir Ahmed Ghazi, a television personality known for his pro-Zia-ul-Haq sympathies and advocacy of blasphemy legislation.

76 Max Weber, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, trans. Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch (New York: Free Press, 1949), 90-93. Weber defines the ideal type as a "utopia" arrived at by "the analytical accentuation of certain elements of reality."

77 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (London: Tavistock, 1972), 31-39. Foucault defines a discursive formation as "a system of dispersion" that "defines a modality of statement", 38.

Dream Sequences as Epistemic Evidence

In Pakistani polemics, dream sequences function as historical facts. They consecrate historical figures and their successes without requiring archival corroboration. According to *Subh-e-Noor*, the Prophet Muhammad, along with his four caliphs, blessed Muhammad bin Qasim in a dream, in the same manner that the Prophet blessed the Berber Umayyad commander Tariq bin Ziyad (670-720) in a dream before his victory over the Visigoths.⁷⁸ Subuktagin and his son Mahmud of Ghazna were similarly honoured in dreams by the Prophet, who rewarded the warriors for their noble deeds.⁷⁹

This evidentiary practice extends to the Pakistan Movement itself. During British rule, the pro-Pakistan Deobandi *alim* and politician Maulana Shabbir Ahmad Usmani (1887-1949) reportedly saw the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) in a dream, instructing him to support Muhammad Ali Jinnah and the cause of Pakistan.⁸⁰ Muhammad Ali Jinnah himself was honoured by the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) in his London apartment in the early 1930s, where the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) instructed Jinnah to return to India and assured him of success.⁸¹ This dream, the programme claims, was the reason for Jinnah's relocation to India in 1934. In this discursive formation, dreams are not metaphorical or allegorical. They are treated as documentary evidence,

78 *Subh-e-Noor*, "Fatah e Sindh Muhammad Bin Qasim (RA)," 92NewsHD, January 31, 2019,

<https://videos.92newshd.tv/search/?kw=muhammad+bin+Qasim>

79 *Subh-e-Noor*, "Sultan Mehmood Ghaznavi (RA)," 92NewsHD, January 29, 2019,

<https://videos.92newshd.tv/search/?kw=Mahmood+Ghaznavi>

80 "Quaid Azam ka Khwab and Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) and Creation of Pakistan," YouTube video,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ILoKxQHlhiE>

81 "Quaid Azam ka Khwab and Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) and Creation of Pakistan," YouTube video,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ILoKxQHlhiE>

carrying the same epistemic weight as a treaty or a chronicle.

Presentism and the Pre-1947 Origins of Pakistan

Pre-1947 origins of Pakistan have long been an obsession of Pakistani nationalistic historians. *Subh-e-Noor* exemplifies this presentism. According to Nazir Ahmed Ghazi, Pakistan came into existence when the Prophet Muhammad's foster-mother, Halimah al-Sa'diyah, saw the infant prophet in a cradle with a beautiful green cloth beneath him and a white sheet over him.⁸² Ghazi further claims that Iqbal stated that Muslims needed a place where they could defend the *Namooos-i-Risalat* (honour of the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ)).⁸³

Tahir Hameed Tanoli, the programme's expert on *Iqbaliyat*, quoted the bureaucrat-turned-historian Mukhtar Masood as declaring that Shahab ud Din Ghorī was the real founder of Pakistan.⁸⁴ The programme went further: Dr. Abdul Qadeer Khan (1936-2021), Pakistan's nuclear physicist and metallurgical engineer, was presented as a 'gift' of Shahab ud Din Ghorī, since Khan's ancestors arrived in India with the conqueror.⁸⁵ When Ghorī negotiated with the Rajputs at the second battle of Tarain, the programme claimed, he spoke with 'Jinnah's mindset'—seeking to secure Muslim-majority areas.⁸⁶ In 1937, Iqbal wrote in dismay to Jinnah that after the incident of Hazrat Ghazi Ilm-ud-Din and Hazrat Ghazi Abdul Qayum (1935), "Muslims cannot tolerate blasphemy against the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ)... We need a piece of

82 *Subh-e-Noor*, "Bani E Pakistan Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah R.A.," 92NewsHD, December 25, 2019, <https://videos.92newshd.tv/search/?kw=Quaid+E+Azam>

83 *Subh-e-Noor*, "Bani E Pakistan Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah R.A."

84 *Subh-e-Noor*, "Sultan Shahab ul Din Ghorī (RA)," 92NewsHD, March 6, 2018, <https://videos.92newshd.tv/search/?kw=Shahab+ul+Din+Ghori>

85 *Subh-e-Noor*, "Sultan Shahab ul Din Ghorī (RA)."

86 *Subh-e-Noor*, "Sultan Shahab ul Din Ghorī (RA)."

land where we could safeguard the honour of the Holy Prophet Hazrat Muhammad (ﷺ), and this is one of the reasons for the creation of Pakistan."⁸⁷ Similarly, the journalist-turned-historian Ismael Zabeeh claimed that Jinnah announced the construction of Islamabad as Pakistan's capital in 1944, three years before the country's establishment.⁸⁸

This presentism collapses temporal distance. Medieval figures are not historical actors situated in specific contexts. They are proto-Pakistanis whose actions prefigure and justify the nation's creation. As Reinhart Koselleck argued, modernity is characterised by the divergence between the 'space of experience' (past actuality) and the 'horizon of expectation' (future possibility).⁸⁹ In Pakistani popular history, these categories collapse. The past is read as already containing the future Pakistan as its providential destiny.

Miracles and Holy Graves: Hierophanies in Popular History

The material on Islamic history in *Subh-e-Noor* endlessly mentions miracles and holy graves. These transport producers and consumers into a paranormal world. During his campaign in Sind, Muhammad bin Qasim prayed with tears in his eyes, and it rained.⁹⁰ The miracle of an undamaged body in the grave is treated as testimony of divine blessing. A popular incident testifying to the piety of

87 *Subh-e-Noor*, "Bani E Pakistan Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah R.A.," December 25, 2019.

88 Maulana Muhammad Ismael Zabih, *Pakistan Manzil-i-Murad, Mazi, Haal, Mustaqbil* (Lahore: Al Qalam Publishers, 1996). The specific claim about Islamabad is cited in the programme but has not been independently verified.

89 Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 255-275.

90 *Subh-e-Noor*, "Bani E Pakistan Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah R.A.," December 25, 2019.

Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna holds that in 1974 the Sultan's grave was exposed, revealing his undamaged body and nur (holy light)-lit face as evidence of divine favour.⁹¹

When Lord Curzon (Viceroy of India, 1899-1905) returned to Britain, people asked him what the most special thing about India was. The Lord replied that India was being ruled through two graves: one of Hazrat Khawaja Gharib Nawaz (R.A) and the other of Aurangzeb Alamgir.⁹² In the time of Emperor Shah Jahan, Akbar's tomb was attacked twice, but Aurangzeb was so loved that his tomb was never attacked.⁹³

These accounts exemplify what Mircea Eliade termed hierophany, the manifestation of the sacred that breaks into profane time.⁹⁴ The grave is not merely a burial site. It is a *lieu de mémoire* (Pierre Nora), a site where memory crystallises and transmits itself across generations.⁹⁵ The undamaged body is not a biological fact but a theological assertion: divine favour consecrates the ruler beyond historical judgment. The graves of saints and emperors become technologies of consecration, material prostheses that extend the sacred into the present.⁹⁶

91 "Sultan Mehmood Ghaznavi Grave Story - Maulana Tariq Jameel Latest Bayan," YouTube, May 1, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nCpOQI3aWws>

92 *Subh-e-Noor*, "Azeem Hukmraan Aurangzeb Alamgir (R.A)," 92NewsHD, July 20, 2020, <https://videos.92newshd.tv/search/?kw=Azeem+Hukmraan+Aurangzeb+Alamgir>

93 *Subh-e-Noor*, "Azeem Hukmraan Aurangzeb Alamgir."

94 Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1959), 11-16.

95 Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *Representations* 26 (1989): 7-24.

96 Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 1-24.

Saviourship and Victimhood: The Dialectic of Ressentiment

Themes of saviourship and victimhood coincide in *Subh-e-Noor's* treatment of South Asian history. Muhammad bin Qasim is presented as a humane victor who came to India to prevent the violation of human rights by cruel Hindu Rajas. He offered grants and allowances for the poor and needy. He nursed his enemies and gave them water. It was Hindus who started the fitna (offensive), and the defensive Muslims made it unsuccessful.⁹⁷

The programme then exhibits a 180-degree shift in position. The same speaker claims that Qasim did not change the existing system. He did not tax different religions. Taxes on Hindus were less; taxes on Muslims were more.⁹⁸ This contradiction is not resolved. It is left standing, its very inconsistency suggesting that historical coherence is not the primary value. The attacks of Mahmud of Ghazna were, the programme insists, defensive. Hindus were conspiring and cruel. They violated Hindu virgin girls. Somnath was a military depot where conspiracies were being hatched against Muslims.⁹⁹

This dialectic of victimhood and saviourship expresses what Friedrich Nietzsche called resentment, the moral revaluation through which the weak transform their weakness into virtue and the strength of the strong into vice.¹⁰⁰ The Pakistani popular historical narrative constructs Muslims as victims of Hindu cruelty (thus morally superior) and simultaneously as saviours of the oppressed (thus powerful). Powerlessness is revalued as piety; military conquest is revalued as defensive justice.

97 *Subh-e-Noor*, "Fatah e Sindh Muhammad Bin Qasim (RA)," January 31, 2019.

98 *Subh-e-Noor*, "Fatah e Sindh Muhammad Bin Qasim (RA)."

99 *Subh-e-Noor*, "Sultan Mehmood Ghaznavi (RA)," January 29, 2019.

100 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1967), 36-39.

Moral Character as Historical Causation

Laments over the loss of moral character and the identification of this loss as the prime reason for the end of the golden age have been recurrent themes in South Asian Urdu historical discourse, both pre- and post-Partition.¹⁰¹ Anecdotal accounts are used as testimonies to prove the nexus between sword and rosary (*tasbeeh*). Muslim heroes sought guidance from Sufis and *ulema*.¹⁰²

A striking example concerns Muhammad bin Qasim. While reciting the Quran in his tent during the Sind campaign, a group of beautiful Sindhi women, led by their beauty queen, came to dissuade him from waging war. These women expressed surprise that Qasim, a young man, did not set a gaze upon them. Qasim replied that he had surrendered his heart to the Prophet Muhammad, so his heart could love no one else.¹⁰³

This anecdote is not drawn from any contemporary Arab or local source. It is taken from the historical drama *Labbaik*, written by Khan Asif and broadcast on PTV in 1996.¹⁰⁴ The programme's content circulates across media: novel to television drama to morning show, each iteration reinforcing the same narrative grammar.

Mahmud of Ghazna was presented as an accomplished pious Sufi who prayed at night and sought divine guidance through *istikhara* (the prayer for seeking counsel). He performed jihad during the day. He was a believer in the Hadith, valued the *ulema*, and wrote books on poetry and fatawa literature.¹⁰⁵ Mughal Emperor Babur won his battles

101 *Subh-e-Noor*, "Sultan Shahab ul Din Ghori (RA)," March 6, 2018.

102 *Subh-e-Noor*, "Sultan Mehmood Ghaznavi (RA)," January 29, 2019.

103 *Subh-e-Noor*, "Fatah e Sindh Muhammad Bin Qasim (RA)," January 31, 2019. The programme explicitly notes that this anecdote is drawn from Khan Asif's *Labbaik*.

104 *Labbaik*, PTV, 1996. The drama was written by Khan Asif and directed by Qasim Jalali.

105 *Subh-e-Noor*, "Sultan Mehmood Ghaznavi (RA)," January 29, 2019.

in India when he asked God for forgiveness after quitting wine.¹⁰⁶ Aurangzeb resembles Caliph Umar Farooq in his simplicity.¹⁰⁷ Iqbal compared the system established by Aurangzeb to the system of Prophet Abraham, and India to a pantheon. The emperor did not spend money on himself and ate corn or barley roti.¹⁰⁸ Aurangzeb slept three hours a day. Even at ninety, he worked twelve hours a day.¹⁰⁹ He earned money for his own burial by calligraphing the Quran and stitching caps.¹¹⁰ This emphasis on moral character as historical causation reflects what the novelist Nasim Hijazi had already systematised: the loss of piety explains political decline; the restoration of piety will restore the golden age.¹¹¹

The Utopian Aurangzeb and the Dystopian Akbar

Subh-e-Noor paints a utopian picture of the Islamic golden age. The state is depicted as a shadow of the state of Medina. The pious and competent Aurangzeb not only stabilised Shah Jahan's rule but according to *Subh-e-Noor*, brought the crime rate down to zero. He made the Deccan an exemplary province. His reign was the prime period when colleges and universities were established. The emperor ruled the hearts of the people. There were no taxes on food items, fuel, fruits, or on religion. He funded non-Muslim institutions. Students received scholarships. He preserved the identity and cultural heritage of Muslims. Aurangzeb was a Sufi, a *zinda* pir (living saint), a dervish *padshah*.¹¹²

106 *Subh-e-Noor*, "Sultan Mehmood Ghaznavi (RA)."

107 *Subh-e-Noor*, "Azeem Hukmraan Aurangzeb Alamgir (R.A)," July 20, 2020.

108 *Subh-e-Noor*, "Azeem Hukmraan Aurangzeb Alamgir (R.A)."

109 *Subh-e-Noor*, "Azeem Hukmraan Aurangzeb Alamgir (R.A)."

110 *Subh-e-Noor*, "Azeem Hukmraan Aurangzeb Alamgir (R.A)."

111 For the Hijazi "recipe," see the present article's earlier analysis of Nasim Hijazi's novels. The structure—pious protagonist, external threat, internal traitor, beautiful non-Muslim woman who converts—applies equally to the television programme's portrait of Aurangzeb.

112 *Subh-e-Noor*, "Azeem Hukmraan Aurangzeb Alamgir (R.A)," July 20, 2020.

The programme further claimed that it is historically incorrect that Aurangzeb killed his brothers. Murad was killed in an Islamic state. Shah Shuja rebelled in Bengal and was killed. Dara Shikoh had heretic tendencies and therefore earned capital punishment according to Sharia law.¹¹³ Aurangzeb's system of justice was excellent: people were allowed to complain against the emperor in court.¹¹⁴ Akbar, by contrast, was a bad ruler. He controlled Hindus through appeasement, not through military force.¹¹⁵ No genius was born after Aurangzeb who could sustain such a vast empire. Aurangzeb's political, military, social, and administrative system was so strong that it continued to function for 150 years after his death.¹¹⁶

This positive reevaluation of Aurangzeb and negative reevaluation of Akbar reverse the assessment in much modern historiography. Jadunath Sarkar's critical portrait of Aurangzeb is rejected.¹¹⁷ The syncretic, accommodative policies of Akbar, policies that some historians have seen as a model for pluralistic governance, are condemned.¹¹⁸ The utopian golden age is exclusively Muslim, exclusively orthodox, and exclusively masculine.

Selective Quotation of Foreign Authority

The programme selectively quotes decades-old works of foreign authors to further the case for the Islamic golden age. According to T. W. Arnold, there were no forced conversions in Mahmud of Ghazna's era, and the sultan built temples. According to Dr. Tarachand, the period was one of cultural reforms. Dr. Mojamdar is quoted as praising

113 *Subh-e-Noor*, "Azeem Hukmraan Aurangzeb Alamgir (R.A)."

114 *Subh-e-Noor*, "Azeem Hukmraan Aurangzeb Alamgir (R.A)."

115 *Subh-e-Noor*, "Azeem Hukmraan Aurangzeb Alamgir (R.A)."

116 *Subh-e-Noor*, "Azeem Hukmraan Aurangzeb Alamgir (R.A)."

117 Jadunath Sarkar, *A Short History of Aurangzib* (Calcutta: M. C. Sarkar & Sons, 1930). Sarkar's critical assessment of Aurangzeb's religious policies is rejected by the programme.

118 For a recent defence of Akbar's policies, see Mubarak Ali, *Almiah-e-Tarikh* (Lahore: Fiction House, 2012), Ch. 9-10, pp. 95-105.

Mahmud for upgrading Indian lives by introducing onions, ginger, leather, and stitched clothes. The same anchor claims that Bertrand Russell observed that if Aurangzeb had forced the people of India to convert, Muslims would not be in a minority now.¹¹⁹

These quotations are decontextualised. Arnold's "The Preaching of Islam" argued for the peaceful spread of Islam but did not exonerate Mahmud of temple destruction.¹²⁰ The selective appropriation of foreign authority is a recurring tactic: the Western scholar is invoked as an impartial witness whose endorsement validates the golden-age narrative. The Western scholar is not interrogated, rather used.

Pakistan as Reincarnation of Medina

For many, Pakistan has been seen as the reincarnation of the state of Medina.¹²¹ Many wait for the second coming of heroes from the Islamic golden age. A *Subh-e-Noor* episode ended with a prayer: "O Lord, bless us with a slave of Mahmud of Ghazna so that all our problems be solved."¹²² On the question of how Pakistan as a state should function, the answer is always traced from the life of Jinnah. "They (Jews) were the enemies of the state of Medina," the programme declared, "and then Allah blessed us with the shadow of the state of Medina (Pakistan), whose enemies are the enemies of Islam. Allah was with Jinnah because of his righteousness."¹²³ This is not metaphor. It is political

119 *Subh-e-Noor*, "Azeem Hukmraan Aurangzeb Alamgir (R.A)," July 20, 2020.

120 T. W. Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam: A History of the Propagation of the Muslim Faith* (London: Constable, 1896; 2nd ed., 1913). Arnold's work is more nuanced than the programme's selective quotations suggest. He acknowledges instances of forced conversion and temple destruction while arguing that Islam spread primarily through peaceful means.

121 *Subh-e-Noor*, "Sultan Shahab ul Din Ghori (RA)," March 6, 2018.

122 *Subh-e-Noor*, "Sultan Mehmood Ghaznavi (RA)," January 29, 2019.

123 *Subh-e-Noor*, "Bani E Pakistan Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah R.A," December 25, 2019.

theology. The nation-state is not a modern contractual arrangement but a sacred re-enactment. Pakistan is Medina. Jinnah is the Prophet's heir. The enemies of Pakistan are the enemies of God.

The Consecration of Jinnah

Just as Pakistani liberals consider Jinnah secular,¹²⁴ religious circles consider him a religious person with more power than seven *aulia* (saints).¹²⁵ According to the historical record, Jinnah changed his religious sect from Nizari Ismailism to Asna Ashri Shi'ism in the last decade of his life. However, Sunni *ulema* consider him a Sunni because he praised Caliph Umar for his administration and gave written instructions that a Sunni scholar, Allama Shabbir Ahmed Usmani, should lead his funeral prayer.¹²⁶ Jinnah had a close relationship with the Sunni scholar Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanvi. Jinnah allegedly stopped wearing western dress because Shabbir Ahmad Usmani suggested that, as a Muslim leader, Jinnah should wear Muslim dress. Thus, Jinnah started wearing the sherwani.¹²⁷

In one of his public lectures, famous Islamic scholar, Dr. Israr Ahmad quoted an incident from the last days of Jinnah, taken from the diary of Riaz Ali Shah, who was with Jinnah in Ziyarat. According to this account, Jinnah said: "Pakistan is the manifestation of the blessing of the Prophet

124 Tahir Kamran, "Secular Jinnah and Pakistan," The News on Sunday, August 15, 2021,

<https://www.thenews.com.pk/tns/detail/878246-secular-jinnah-and-pakistan>

125 Quaid Azam ka Khwab and Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) and Creation of Pakistan,"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ILoKxQHhIE>

126 "Kya Quaid e Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah Shia Thay," Mufti Tariq Masood, YouTube,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P4Fj_UFZntU

127 Proof Quaid e Azam M Ali Jinnah shia nahi thay," YouTube,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y24HV0kXhYs>

Muhammad (P.B.U.H). Now that Pakistan has come into existence, you should implement the model of the Caliphate of the Rashidun Caliphs." ¹²⁸ With the help of religious symbols, Jinnah was consecrated. In the words of Justice Ghulam Murshad, Jinnah had the power of seven *aulia*. Jinnah was an *ikhlaqi* (moral) and spiritual personality; therefore, Pakistan is also mystical.¹²⁹

According to Nazir Ahmed Ghazi, Jinnah did not consider Western democracy true democracy. In a congregation in Aligarh, Jinnah expressed his wish to have true democracy in the light of Islam in Pakistan.¹³⁰ He opposed not only capitalism and socialism but every 'ism,' emphasising that in Pakistan there would be no place for 'isms.'¹³¹ Jinnah never used the word 'secularism.' He saw *Risayt-e-Madina* (the Pact of Medina) as an ideal.¹³² Tahir Hameed Tanoli, the expert on *Iqbaliyat*, claimed that the Pact of Medina and Jinnah's 11 August 1947 speech are identical.¹³³ He further complained that the 11 August speech is quoted out of context: 90 percent of the speech is about corruption and favouritism; only 10 percent is about religion.¹³⁴

128 *Subh-e-Noor*, "Bani E Pakistan Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah R.A.," December 25, 2019.

129 *Subh-e-Noor*, "Bani E Pakistan Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah R.A."

130 *Subh-e-Noor*, "Bani E Pakistan Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah R.A."

131 *Subh-e-Noor*, "Bani E Pakistan Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah R.A."

132 *Subh-e-Noor*, "Bani E Pakistan Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah R.A."

133 *Subh-e-Noor*, "Bani E Pakistan Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah R.A."

134 *Subh-e-Noor*, "Bani E Pakistan Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah R.A."

This consecration of Jinnah exemplifies what Eric Hobsbawm termed the 'invention of tradition'.¹³⁵ The secular, Savile Row-suited lawyer is transformed after 1977, during Zia-ul-Haq's Islamisation, into a mystical saint whose every utterance is read as scripture. The dreams, the *sherwani*, the power of seven *aulia* (saints), these are not recoveries of authentic identity but retroactive inventions. They make Jinnah usable for an Islamist state that he did not, in his own time, envision.

Conclusion

The problem of Pakistan's medieval memory is not, at its core, a problem of factual error. It is, rather, a problem of epistemological authority, of who is permitted to speak of the past, and by what evidentiary rules. This article has argued that academic historians are not the primary producers of popular historical consciousness in Pakistan. That role belongs to a dispersed cast of television anchors, civil-military spokespersons, historical novelists, religious scholars, and social media polemicists, whose authority derives not from archival training but from moral conviction, spiritual insight, and the affective power of consecrated narrative.

The implications of this argument extend beyond Pakistan. What the Pakistani case reveals in its extreme, intensified form is a general predicament of postcolonial memory. The secular, disenchanted epistemology of academic history cannot claim automatic hegemony over societies where the paranormal remains ontologically real, where dreams carry the weight of documentary evidence, and where the nation is imagined not as a modern contractual arrangement but as a sacred re-enactment of a medieval golden age. The question, therefore, is not how to replace popular memory with academic history, an impossible and perhaps undesirable project, but how to mediate between

135 Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1-14.

incommensurable regimes of truth without ceding critical judgment entirely.

This article proposes one such mediation: the shift from institutional critique (textbooks, curricula) to epistemological critique (the rules of evidence, the formation of authoritative speakers, the grammar of narrative). Curriculum reform alone will fail, because the problem is not only what is in the textbooks but how historical knowledge is produced and consumed across an entire media ecology. The recent upsurge in blasphemy-related vigilantism is not a separate phenomenon from the consecration of medieval heroes on morning television; it is the same logic, the sacralisation of certain figures and narratives as beyond question, extended from the past into the violent present.

Pakistan's medieval memory is not a relic of pre-modernity. It is a thoroughly modern production, enabled by the technologies of mass media, accelerated by the fragmentation of authority in the postcolonial state, and intensified by the search for usable pasts in a troubled national present. To recognise this is not to dismiss popular memory as false consciousness. It is to insist that the past matters, not as a weapon, not as a fantasy screen, but as a shared inheritance that remains, for all its contestations, the only past we have. The task of the historian is not to police its boundaries but to keep open the possibility of critical engagement, cross-cultural translation, and the patient, unglamorous work of teaching students to read a medieval text with both reverence and suspicion. That is the only pedagogy adequate to the consecratory regime this article has described. And it is, perhaps, the only politics equal to the dangers that regime portends.