

EDITORIAL

What is a Critical Pakistan Studies, and Why is it Essential?

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Aims and Scope of a Critical Pakistan Studies

A critical Pakistan Studies is not “your father’s” Pakistan Studies. It is a more contemporary and interdisciplinary approach aiming to reevaluate Pakistan Studies. It brings together varied methods and practices, including comparative and trans-regional perspectives. Unlike standard Pakistan Studies (and Area Studies), a critical Pakistan Studies does not “silo” subject areas or topics. Rather than employ a post-1947 and nation-state-centered framework, it advocates interlinking Pakistan with South Asia and other regions. It expands Pakistan Studies’ conventional scope, borders, and periods. By adopting an interdisciplinary view that is critical and “at large,” it looks to broaden analytic frames.

A critical Pakistan Studies seeks to capture Pakistan’s diversity. Pakistan has multiple regions with distinctive ethnicities and cultures with centuries-long histories. Yet, even after 75 years of independence, many publications predominantly focus on the narrative of a unified (Muslim) nation with scant attention to the diversity that constitutes life in Pakistan. In addition to this focus, security, geopolitics, and development are dominant research areas. Much of this scholarship defines how the rest of the world views and imagines Pakistan. For example, religious radicalism, domestic insurgencies, socioeconomic crises, democratic instability, and stereotypical engagements with Islam are common in international narratives about Pakistan and its creation.

In contrast, a critical Pakistan Studies emphasizes research from the humanities and social sciences (e.g., anthropology, art history, cultural studies, gender studies, geography, history, literature, religious studies, sociology, visual studies, etc.). It offers alternatives to conventional paradigms by addressing issues and debates about

urban life, ethnic conflict, queer studies, environmental studies, rural studies, social movements, feminist politics, literature, labor politics, medical humanities, and more. Such alternatives seek to overcome the hurdles of understanding Pakistan within disciplinary lines and standard tropes. A critical Pakistan Studies addresses this challenge by promoting interdisciplinary practices that reclaim the study of Pakistan from the nation-state and narrowly defined Area Studies.

A critical Pakistan Studies casts light on the Pakistani “experience” across disciplines. It draws on cutting-edge research from diverse fields and prioritizes critical perspectives that expand conventional Pakistan Studies. It also attracts a range of perspectives into a single analytic environment to discuss and understand the varied and multilayered contexts that constitute Pakistan and its people (both past and present and in South Asia and the wider world). The approach also addresses questions about the human condition and generates a better general and comparative understanding of the world through a Pakistan Studies prism. It emphasizes primary source research that, in addition to Pakistan and Pakistanis, tackles broader issues (e.g., colonialism, nationalism, integration, marginalization, devotion, institutionalization, vernacularism, cosmopolitanism, development, environment, diaspora, gender, and others).

A Critical Pakistan Studies Is an Essential Pakistan Studies

Until recently, Pakistan Studies was a small interdisciplinary research area. However, it is expanding rapidly. In the United States, it is no longer a research area of a few specialists. In the past, it was sometimes hard for the American Institute of Pakistan Studies (AIPS) to give out its annual book prize, but this is no longer the case. Finding qualified projects to award AIPS fellowships was also hit and miss, but not anymore. AIPS now gets more qualified fellowship applications than it has funds to award. Reflecting a rising academic interest in Pakistan, AIPS’s institutional, individual, and student memberships have significantly grown over the past 20 years. An increasing number of humanities and social science Ph.D. students help account for an expanding AIPS. Many of these students are now tenured professors recruiting graduate students who concentrate on Pakistan and Pakistanis. They are part of an emergent wave of scholarship focused on critically rethinking the conventional paradigms of Pakistan Studies (and Area Studies). Considering this wave and greater interest, there is an essential, or critical, need to foster new approaches to studying Pakistan.

This need is not exclusive to the United States. It is also present in other countries. In the United Kingdom, the Pakistani diaspora is the second-largest ethnic minority group. It is prominent in political representation, notably the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, who has served two terms in office. The diaspora community has been at the heart of controversies over secular and religious practices, such as the Salman Rushdie affair. It has also experienced a long history of systemic disadvantages due to inequalities. Additionally, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, Pakistan’s founder, lived and received his law education in London. Writers and intellectuals such as Muhammad Iqbal and Fahmida Riaz have lived and trained in the United Kingdom. It is home to prominent women from Pakistan, including the Nobel laureate Malala Yousafzai. It is also home to the Bradford Literature Festival, co-founded by two Pakistani women

(Syima Aslam and Irna Qureshi). Urdu (the national language of Pakistan) is an A-level and General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) subject at multiple schools. The University of Manchester and the University of Oxford also offer courses in it. Established and emerging scholars from universities throughout the United Kingdom and abroad frequently visit the British Library's rich multilingual archives to undertake cross-disciplinary research about Pakistan. In France, studying the languages of Pakistan has a long history. The National Institute of Oriental Languages in Paris established a chair in Hindustani, the forerunner to Urdu, in the nineteenth century. The establishment of the Centre d'Études de l'Inde in 1955 (now called the Centre d'Études Sud-Asiatiques et Himalayennes) is also a significant benchmark—it hosts scholars and students of Pakistan from multiple French higher education institutions. The need for a critical Pakistan Studies also extends to Pakistan itself. Pakistan's Higher Education Commission (HEC) is quadrupling the Ph.D. degrees it certifies. This quadrupling includes original research dissertations that critically rethink the study of Pakistan.

Form(s) of a Critical Pakistan Studies

Beyond Pakistanis, a critical Pakistan Studies strives to interest a diversity of scholars and lay readers by promoting the study of the precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial periods, Pakistan's various regions (i.e., Balochistan, Gilgit-Baltistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Punjab, and Sindh), and Pakistan "at large." In addition to cultivating a more critically comprehensive grasp of Pakistan and Pakistanis, the approach encourages different formats and writing conventions. This attentiveness to form includes a focus on structure and narrative style to help identify different interpretations. In addition to its academic appeal, critical Pakistan Studies aspires to attract and impact, through various forms of writing and communication (e.g., visual, video, and multi-media essays), global and local audiences interested in understanding the diverse human tapestry that constitutes the Pakistan experience.

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