

Book Review

Notes from the ‘Other’ Side

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Reporting Pakistan

By Meena Menon;

Penguin Random House,

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When it comes to discussing Pakistan, the mood in India seems to be on two extremes of the spectrum. Sometimes, the country and its people are discussed nostalgically, as lost cousins who were separated from us by colonial rulers. At other times, they are our worst enemy, the ones who stabbed us in the back.

In Meena Menon’s book “Reporting Pakistan”, we get a fair reportage of both these moods. Through interesting stories and snippets, Menon manages to portray how stark the similarities and also the differences between the people of the two countries are. Whether it is the stories of shopkeepers in Karachi giving her extra discount when they discovered that she was from the other side of the border, or the government spooks who always followed her every step, the book captures life of an Indian reporter in Pakistan perfectly. Her memoirs of a nine month stint as The Hindu’s foreign correspondent in Pakistan is eye-opening but also leaves the reader with a sense of déjà vu.

Over the past few months, voices in the media, especially the ones on television, have aided the polarization of attitudes towards Indian Muslims. Sectarianism is rapidly on the rise, with protection of cows taking importance over protection of citizens. In such divisive times, Menon’s book is a reminder of the path that India wisely avoided after achieving independence. Surrounded by theocratic or quasi-theocratic neighbours like Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bangladesh, India has always been the template for a secular republic in South Asia. However, as dark clouds hover above the country, Menon’s retelling of the persecution faced by Hindus and non-Sunni Muslims such as Ahmadis and Shias in Pakistan is deeply foreshadowing. As one journalist put it recently, these seem to India’s “Zia years” and could determine the very fabric of our society.

In the introduction, Menon tells of an incident in the early 1990’s Mumbai, which has particularly resonated with me. When about to enter a Muslim majority area in the city,

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she was warned by a Shiv Sainik that it was a “mini-Pakistan”. The use of this term is a testament to the otherization of the Indian Muslim community, which Menon says has been stereotyped as a back-stabber. In June 2017, not even a few hours had passed since my arrival in Mumbai before someone told me, “*Woh Kurla mein mini-Pakistan hai*” (There’s a mini-Pakistan in Kurla).

Of course, no book on India-Pakistan relations is complete without taking on the Kashmiri question. Here, Menon tries to cover the issue in all its complexity. She says that while the Pakistani government is adamant that Kashmir is the burning issue between the two countries, the popular feeling among Pakistanis is that the neighbours can still have a peaceful relationship, even if the Kashmiri issue is not resolved. While this might seem to be an optimistic outlook, what is lost here is that between the assertions of Pakistan and India, it is the Kashmiris who are quashed. Their voices silenced, their opinions invalid and the violence they face normalized. The solution - Kashmir’s right to self-determination - is there for all to see. But, as Menon says, “Kashmir hangs like an unused curtain in the background of our two countries, gathering dust. Everyone knows it’s there, but you can sneeze it away.”

On the other side of Pakistan, sharing a border with Iran and Afghanistan lies another contested state. Comparisons between Balochistan and Kashmir are inevitable, one that even Menon alludes to. While those seeking *azadi* in Kashmir are alleged by Indian government to be on the payroll of Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), those in Balochistan demanding freedom from Pakistan are said to be agents of India’s Research and Analysis Wing (RAW).

Menon’s interview with Balochi rights activist Mama Qadeer lands her in a spot of bother with the Pakistani government. Subjected to intense grilling and scrutiny, she says that she got the feeling that Indian correspondents needed to be “harmless plugs”. Even her Pakistani friends felt that there was no need to highlight the problems faced by Balochis, she reports. While Menon expresses surprise at this, it is yet another eerie parallel to Kashmir. One can imagine that if the roles were reversed, the response would largely be the same. The situation of the Balochis seems only too familiar for those aware of Kashmir. In both states, the voice of the people has been drowned out in the quest for political assertion.

The escalation of tensions between the two countries saw a consistent reduction in the number of foreign correspondents posted on the other side of the border. It culminated when Menon and PTI’s Snehash Philip, the last two Indian reporters, were ordered to

leave Pakistan. Menon suspects that her interview with Mama Qadeer played a role in her ejection. Presently, there is no Indian journalist reporting from Pakistan, and vice-versa.

Such a move is counter-intuitive. In his book *Mass Communication and Journalism in India*, D S Mehta, talks about the importance of foreign correspondents. Speaking out against reliance on news agencies, he says that “foreign correspondents, therefore, constitute the best channel through which a balanced picture of India can be projected.” He argues that foreign correspondents should be supported in observing and understanding a country, after which, they should be allowed to write whatever they want, even if that might be a “slanted view”.

Though it is perhaps easier said than done, it is only through such reportage that any prejudices or biases can be filtered out. The theatrics of war have sown seeds of distrust about the “enemy”. If reporters from the other country had access to issues, problems and stories of the people, it could go a long way towards building some bridges and setting right our misconceptions.