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# **Pakistan as a topic in French academia: Challenges and resistance**

\_\_\_\_\_ Michel Boivin<sup>1</sup>  
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Abroad, most of the research works on Pakistan are published in English. In other words, the use of English is the better way if a scholar wishes to be read all over the world. In a number of countries, scholars are not appreciated since they do not use English as academic language. I am therefore grateful that the Department of History, University of Punjab, provides me an opportunity to give a survey of French scholarly work related to Pakistan. My content is to propose an overview of how French scholars address the conference topic, namely the challenges faced by Pakistan in terms of Democracy, Governance and National unity. First, I shall give a survey on the French discovery of Pakistan. In the first years of the country, Pakistan was mainly the concern of archaeologists. The second part will provide the challenges faced by Pakistan as understood by French scholars. It mainly focuses on the concept of nation, arguing for instance that Pakistan nationalism is without a nation.

Finally, in the third part, I shall try to establish that a field of research did not attract enough interest yet: popular culture. Based on a case study, the Sufi town of Sehwan Sharif, I shall provide clues for giving evidence that integrative process are still

at work which can be understood as resistance strategies to various religious radicalizations of the country.

### Discovering Pakistan through the lens of Archaeology

Before turning to the recent spread of Pakistan studies in France, it is important to remind ourselves that several pioneers of the study of Indian Islam were French. It is said that the first grammar of Urdu was written by a French missionary named Francisoin Maine de Tours (d. c.1680). The manuscript which was copied by Anquetil-Duperron is still held by the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. But the real beginning of Indian Islam Studies in France was given official acceptance when Joseph Héliodore Garcin de Tassy (1794-1878) became the first professor and chair of Hindustani in 1830 at the École Nationale des Langues Orientales, better known as Langues O. The chair shifted to "Hindustani and Tamil languages" in 1886 when Julien Vinson became Garcin's successor. Later in 1920, the chair was named "Modern Indian Languages" and it is not until 1963 that we see the renaissance of a chair of Urdu, with André Guimbretière as Professor. Guimbretière, who was for some years director of the French Cultural Centre in Karachi (AFK), devoted his Ph. D. to the *wahdat-e shuhud* in Muhammad Iqbal's work. Unfortunately, it was not published.

Finally, one can follow the permanence of the study of Hindustani and Urdu in France for almost two centuries. Despite this solid foundation for future Pakistan studies, it is the field of archaeology which first attracted many French scholars. Their interest was due to the existence of the French Archaeological Mission in Afghanistan which was established in 1922, after the king of Afghanistan Amanullah visited Paris and asked the French government to launch an archaeological institute in Kabul<sup>2</sup>. Interestingly, it was same the same year 1922 that the Archaeological Survey of India started to excavate Mohenjo-daro.

Jean-Marie Casal (1905-1977) was a DAFA member and he was interested by the relations between Afghanistan and Indian

archaeology, and as soon as 1956 he published a paper on the topic<sup>3</sup>. Casal thus decided to pay a visit to the Southern Indus Valley, and he turned to different sites located in the Indus valley, especially Mundigak and Amri. Finally, his work on Pakistan was synthesised in a book devoted to the Indus civilisation. In 1958, Jean-Marie Casal founded the Archaeological Mission of the Indus. *Excavations at Amri* (Paris, Klincksieck, 1964), and *The Indus Civilization and its Enigma* (Paris, Fayard, 1969) are among his major publications.

Casal's work attracted other French archaeologists to Pakistan. The most important was undoubtedly Jean-François Jarrige, MAI member in 1963. In 1975, Jarrige was director of the newly created Centre off Archaeological Research Indus-Balochistan, C.N.R.S. In 1986, he is chief-curator of the National Museum of Asiatic Arts-Guimet. His extensive fieldwork on the site of Mehrgarh was given in a publication sponsored by both the government of Sindh and the French ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1997. Even if there are many other French archaeologists working in Pakistan, it is noteworthy to mention Roland Besenval, who worked for many years in Makran (Baluchistan), and moreover Monique Kervran. Besenval was the successor of Jarrige, and he was also director of DAFA, the French Institute of Afghanistan.

Monique Kervran was trained in archaeological fieldwork first in Iran. She reached some fame in the 1970s when she discovered a main statue of Darius in Persepolis. After working in Bahrein for a number of years, she finally decided in 1989 to work in Pakistan: her main purpose was to understand why she has found so many ceramics from the Indus Valley. She thus came to the Indus delta, and planned to excavate in Bhanbore. Unfortunately, she could not get the permit. She therefore devoted seven years to the study of the monuments of the deltaic part of Sindh<sup>4</sup>. She published a very comprehensive study of the Islamic mausoleums in Sindh and Punjab and a number of papers devoted to the "vanishing cities of the Indus delta"<sup>5</sup>. While working in the delta,

she nevertheless faced a main challenge: to find the right dating of the monuments she was working on. She thus decided to shift to Sehwan Sharif, where she was to excavate from 1996 to 2002.

Sehwan had the advantage of having a tell overlooking the city and separated from it by a ditch. The site had never been excavated and archaeological layers were clearly visible. The first sounding, from the top of the tell (hill) up to the initial layer, that is more than twenty meters sounding, delivered vital information. Seven phases of cultural occupation of the city were made clear and were easily interpretable, from the 4th century BC until the 16th century AD. Finally, Monique Kervran was able to draw up the necessary stratigraphic reference for dating the sites discovered in the Indus delta. This has also delivered a number of clues allowing a better understanding of the history of the city and the region. After 7 years of research, Monique Kervran is currently writing a main publication on the tell in Sehwan Sharif, usually known as Alexander's fort.

### Challenges to Pakistan as represented by French research

This research group created by Marc Gaborieau in 1997 was headed by himself and a young political scientist, Christophe Jaffrelot. The beginning of this spread of Pakistan studies in French research was also due to the efforts of the French cultural consul of the Embassy in Islamabad, Patrick Deseix, and another scholar from the CEIAS, Jean-Luc Racine. In 1998, Jean-Luc Racine organized a conference with Sofia Mumtaz and Imran Anwar Ali on Pakistan in Paris, at the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme. The proceedings were recently published by Oxford University Press, Karachi in 2003.

Among the books on Pakistan edited by Jaffrelot, one which is to be a classic was recently translated last November into English. Interestingly, while in French it is simply called *Pakistan* – without any subtitle – the English translation is *History of Pakistan and Its Origin*, for the same contents. Published in 2000, in any case, this is an important book and the first published in French which

proposes a comprehensive study of the country. The book is divided into four parts: 1. A nation in search of its identity, 2. Foreign politics of Pakistan, 3. Economic and social structures and 4. A plural culture? It is written in a very pleasant style as well as accessible to the French "honnête homme."

The scholars who contributed to the volume are mainly involved in political science. This can explain the perspective adopted by the editor. Because the book is mainly an attempt to give answers to political events which occurred in Afghanistan and in other parts of the world because of the growth of radical Islamism, there is a lack of contextualization. For instance, the first chapter of the first part is devoted to "Islamic identity and ethnic tensions." In that, for instance, Christophe Jaffrelot did not refer to the broad subject of Sindhi nationalism. Pierre Lafrance, ex-French ambassador to Pakistan, wrote the ninth chapter entitled "Between caste and tribe." This title is reminiscent of the British Gazetteers during the colonial period. More recent works such as Nicholas Dirks' *Castes of Mind* gave evidence of the part of ideological reconstruction included in these representations<sup>6</sup>. Nevertheless, this chapter gives useful insight on the structure of society in Pakistan.

The fourth part is devoted to the plural culture of Pakistan, within which is a chapter on Islam. It is interesting to note the distribution of these 25 pages: 8 pages for the Sunnis, 5 for the Shiites, 2 for the Ahmadis, 1 for Sufism and 10 for the relations between the State and the religious groups, which are mainly the Islamist and radical groups. This distribution is surprising in some ways in that it mainly focuses on the Islamist uprising which echoes international events and internal frustrations. But there is almost nothing on popular religion, especially on the cult of the saints. It is indeed difficult to understand this choice. Nevertheless, Jaffrelot's book fills a gap in Pakistan studies in France, and gives evidence of the takeoff of this new discipline.

In 2002, he edited a book on the consequences on the 9/11 attacks for the Muslims of the Indian subcontinent. Two other French scholars published books on Pakistan: Max-Jean Zins gave a very comprehensive analysis on Pakistan in a book published in 2002 and Jean-Luc Racine, after organizing a conference on Pakistan in Paris, published another book on Kashmir. These books, even if they are less ambitious than Jaffrelot's, are important because they propose a contextualization of the problems faced by Pakistan. Also in 2002, Jaffrelot edited a new book with the provocative title: *Pakistan, Nationalism without a Nation?* This book includes contributions of Pakistani as well as French and British scholars. It is important to mention a noteworthy paper by Mariam Abou Zahab, a scholar who devoted many years to the study of the Pakistani Shiites in Punjab. She has also recently published a book with Olivier Roy on the role played by the Pakistan Islamist groups in Afghanistan.

French scholars thus highlighted the challenges faced by Pakistan, especially after 9/11. The classic book edited by Jaffrelot in 2000 interestingly devotes only three pages, on a 503 pages book, to Sufism and Sufi culture. The distribution of the different chapters is quite interesting: Politics: 280 p.; Geography: 20 p.; Economy: 30 p.; Sociology and anthropology: 50; Religion: 20; Languages: 10.

### Last trends in French Research

The challenges faced by Pakistan were therefore mainly addressed in terms of political perspective. The politics were studied at the national level, as well at a micro level. Laurent Gayer devoted many fieldworks to the urban governance of Karachi in its relation with the role played by violence in the city.

Popular culture as a resistance bastion to the spread of radicalism was at the core of a research project focusing on the town of Sehwan Sharif. Headed by the author, the project known as MIFS (French Interdisciplinary Group on Sindh) started in 2008 for four years. It included a dozen of scholars from Pakistan,

France, and also the USA. The interdisciplinary approach answers the complexity of the 'Sehwan system' at work in Sehwan<sup>7</sup>. Such a system was based on an integrative process which allows different social classes, ethnics, and religions to participate in the celebration of a Sufi, Lal Shahbaz Qalandar, and to share a popular culture.

Most of the academic fields were like geography, history, ethnology, sociology, topography, epigraphy and architecture<sup>8</sup>. Four fieldworks were conducted in 2008, 2009, 2010 and finally 2010. In Sehwan, the liturgical year is highlighted by two main functions performed for the *urs* and Moharram. The display of procession is a key tool for analyzing the agreement reached by the different layers of local societies. It is noteworthy that except observations and interviews, the access to certain kinds of sources were uneasy, if not impossible. One can quote the archives related to court cases confronting different key actors of the Sehwan scene.

Although the integrative process at work is still dominating in Sehwan, the impact of religious radicalization is also noticeable. Some symbols tagged as 'Hindu' were suppressed. Despite this change, the Hindu still play a key role in the functions related to the *mendi*. They have left Sehwan in 1947 onwards but they have managed to transfer Sufi cults from Sehwan across the border up to India. There are today a number of places in India where the cult of Mulchand Faqir (1883-1962) is celebrated. Mulchand Faqir was a Hindu Sufi from Sehwan who had always refused to migrate to India despite the numerous requests expressed by his followers. Nowadays, Mulchand is celebrated in various cities of India, including Delhi, Haridwar and Mumbai. Paradoxically, and although there is a 'Mulchand kafi'<sup>9</sup> in Sehwan, his memory is lost in his native town.

The MIFS project is now in the process of working on the publication of a book. The main issue will be to show that the popular culture at work in Sehwan a resistance to the

radicalization of religion in Pakistan. Popular culture is also shown as being a product of local agreement between local elites. It thus gives a new perspective in how popular culture is constructed far from the influence of imperial centers, like Lahore or Delhi, be it during the Delhi sultanate or the Mughal empire. This does not mean that the imperial culture produced in the courts had no impact on local culture. But such a court culture was incorporated in local features, and re-expressed in a local 'discourse'. The town of Sehwan can be understood as a sample of a local culture based on an integrative process where the main layers of local society are included as actors.

## Conclusion

French scholars took interest at an early stage of the history of the newly born Pakistan. First attracted by the archeological treasures of the country, their work gave evidence that Pakistan was rooted in a very old civilization, and that a culture at the crossroads of different empires located in the Indian Subcontinent and Central Asia. From centuries, Pakistan has integrated numerous cultures as the work completed by Monique Kervran give evidence.

In the contemporary period, French research focus on the challenges faced by Pakistan. Such an issue was mainly addressed through the lens of politics, mainly through the topic of nation. The relation between the challenges faced by Pakistan and its capacity to build, or not, a nation, dominates the issue. Simultaneously, popular culture as a resistance to the radicalization of the country, especially in the religious field, was studied through the interdisciplinary project devote to Sehwan Sharif.

French research is well known throughout the world through a number of theoreticians in Social Sciences like Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida or Pierre Bourdieu. French academia also took interest in the field as the many books published on Pakistan attest. The main issue is nevertheless that French scholars mainly



published their work in French. It would quite interesting to launch a translation project into English so that students and scholars of Pakistan could have some taste of the 'French Touch' in the field of Social Sciences.

## Notes and References

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- 1 Centre for Asian Studies (EHESS/CNRS), University of Paris (FRANCE) Centre for Social Sciences in Karachi
- 2 See Françoise Olivier-Utard (1997), *L'histoire de la Délégation Archéologique Française en Afghanistan*, Editions Recherche sur les Civilisations, Paris.
- 3 L'Afghanistan et les problèmes de l'archéologie indienne », *Artibus Asiae*, tome 19, pp. 213-20.
- 4 See for example Monique Kervran (1992), "The fortress of Ratto Kot at the mouth of the Banbhore River (Indus delta, Sindh, Pakistan)", *Pakistan Archaeology*, 27, pp. 143-170.
- 5 Monique Kervran (1993) "Vanishing medieval cities of the northwest Indus delta", *Pakistan Archaeology*, 28, pp. 3-54.
- 6 See the careful analysis by Nicholas Dirks (2001), *Castes of Mind. Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press.
- 7 The interdisciplinary method implemented in Sehwan by the MIFS was the topic of an academic work. See Sohail Amirali Bawani, *Integrating Interdisciplinary in research and teaching at higher educational level in*

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*Pakistan: A case study from the Sehwan Interdisciplinary Project*, M. A. Thesis, Department of Sociology, University of Karachi, 2010.

- 8 Michel Boivin, *Artefacts of Devotion. A Sufi Repertoire of the Qalandariyya in Sehwan Sharif, Sindh (Pakistan)*, Karachi, OUP, 2011.
- 9 In Sehwan, the place where the Sufis stay is known as 'kafi'. Usually the word *khanqah* is employed.