Andreas Rieck


The Pakistani Shi‘a number between 20-25 million and constitute approximately 15% of the country’s population. They are the second largest Shi‘i community in any country; surpassed only by that of Iran. Despite the group’s numerical strength, the landscape of Western scholarship on the Pakistani Shi‘a is remarkably barren. Rieck’s masterpiece _The Shias of Pakistan: An Assertive and Beleaguered Minority_ is the inaugural comprehensive study of this important community. The book charts three parallel trends: internal developments within the Shi‘a community; Shi‘a organizations’ demands from respective governments; and the Shi‘a-Sunnī conflict. The actors that lie at the heart of the work include popular preachers, the ‘ulamā’ and political organizations.

Rieck’s most important contribution is chronicling the history of the Shi‘a in the first three decades following Pakistan’s creation. This period had remained virtually un-researched in English language works until Rieck brought it to light. In presenting a history of these decades, Rieck draws very heavily on Urdu writings, particularly the weekly newspaper _Razākār_. To a lesser degree, he relies on interviews with Shi‘a community leaders and clerics. His comprehensive use of these sources enables a rich and layered presentation of the aspirations, debates, and problems of the Pakistani Shi‘a. In this regard, his work is unparalleled and a very welcome contribution. It is not, however, without its drawbacks. Prime among them is Rieck’s lack of a clearly articulated argument. Equally unsatisfactory is the absence of analysis of primary sources. And, when the reader does tease out glimmers of analysis from his writing, one is left more confused than enlightened. Below I examine Rieck’s contributions while providing several stark examples to illustrate some of my dissatisfactions with his work.

Of the three broad areas addressed by Rieck’s work, his focus on internal developments among the Shi‘as is most commendable. Arguably, the most important discussion in this area is intellectual disagreements between popular preachers and the ‘ulamā’. The manner in which these disagreements play out between the Shaykhiyya and the followers of Muhammad Husain Dhakko (b. 1932) is examined at length. Rieck’s investigation of this debate includes extensive quotations from Dhakko, making it an excellent starting point for researchers interested in further exploring this issue. Moreover, Rieck’s focus on these bitter disputes over religious doctrine and practice is particularly significant since they continue to this day.
Rieck’s examination charts historical developments but leaves several vital questions unanswered. Multiple areas of inquiry could have been fruitfully explored given the richness of the primary sources. For example, what framework should we adopt to understand the tensions between the ‘ulamā’ and popular preachers? Do these intra-Shī‘a disagreements attest to a change in the nature of Shī‘i authority in modern times, or are these tensions long-standing? Here the natural direction for a scholar familiar with the landscape of scholarship on Pakistani clerics would have been to engage with Muhammad Qasim Zaman’s work (*Modern Islamic Thought In a Radical Age* [Cambridge 2012]) on religious authority among Pakistan’s Sunni ‘ulamā’ in the era of new religious intellectuals. Scholars of the broader Islamic tradition, and South Asian Islam in particular, would likely have inquired if there was any resonance between the appeal of Sufi masters and that of the zākirs. While Rieck’s work is disappointingly void of any such analysis, his unearthing of the abovementioned tensions allows more analytical researchers to delve into these issues.

Rieck’s second line of inquiry—relations between the Pakistani state and its Shī‘i citizens—is the most problematic of his accounts. Rieck’s work is organized in a chronological manner, with approximately one chapter dedicated to each political era. This substantive study starts with Pakistan’s first decade (chapter 3) and ends with a discussion of the Musharraf and Zardari governments.

While there is some merit to Rieck’s periodization, it is also a problematic lens with which to approach the study of the Shī‘a community, and more broadly state-citizen relations. Before I delve into a critique of Rieck’s work, let me be clear about its merits. Rieck’s fine-grained historical presentation of the community’s interactions with the state is a valuable contribution. His detailed examination of issues such as Shī‘a demands for a separate dīniyyāt syllabus for their youth; a separate Shī‘a section of the Awqāf Board; and the freedom to practice ‘azādārī under state protection will serve as an excellent starting point for researchers interested in exploring these issues further. His framework for these examinations, however, is problematic.

Rieck asserts that different eras in Pakistani history are characterized by the state apparatus’ adoption of clearly distinct approaches to interactions with, and management of, the Shī‘a citizenry. For example, he describes the Ayub Khan (1958-1968) era as marked by secularism. He also applies this descriptor to Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP). Conversely he characterizes the era of the military dictator Zia ul Haq as an attempt at Islamization. But are these distinctions really as clear-cut as Rieck asserts? Was there such a marked difference between the policies of these regimes? I would answer ‘no,’ on both counts.