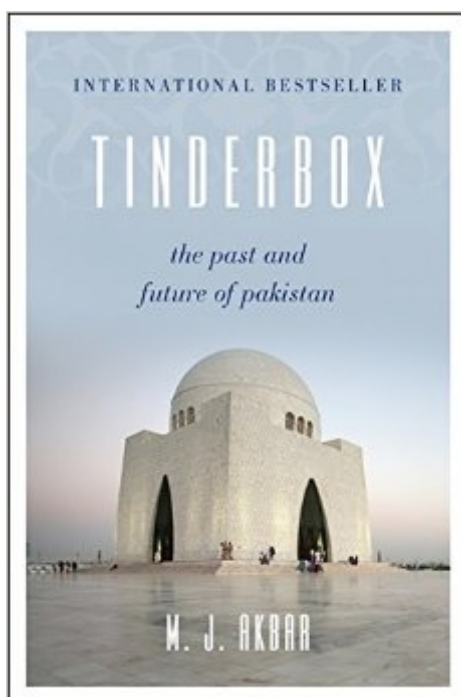


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Tinderbox: The Past And Future Of Pakistan



Synopsis

Among many recent books on Pakistan, Mr. Akbar's stands out. A fine and detailed history of Indian Muslim anger and insecurity. "The Economist" In "Tinderbox, India's leading journalist delivers a fascinating narrative history of Pakistan, chronicling the conflict between Muslim and Hindu cultures in South Asia and describing the role that their relationship has played in defining both the country and the region. Editorial director of India Today and editor of the Sunday Guardian, M. J. Akbar gives readers an unprecedented look at Pakistan past and present. Panoramic in scope but specific in detail, with rich portraits of the central figures and events that have defined the nation's history, Akbar's "Tinderbox" tells the Pakistanian story from the Middle Ages to the present, puts the Taliban and its place within modern Islam into a meaningful context, and diagnoses where the country is headed in the 21st century.

Book Information

Paperback: 400 pages

Publisher: Harper Perennial; Original edition (June 26, 2012)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0062131796

ISBN-13: 978-0062131799

Product Dimensions: 5.3 x 0.9 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 10.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.2 out of 5 stars See all reviews (23 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #949,851 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #115 in Books > History > Asia > Pakistan #1022 in Books > History > Asia > India

Customer Reviews

Recommended reading for sure, the title belies the scope of the research. This is gripping stuff capturing a strain of history about the rise of Islam in the Indian subcontinent culminating in the recent past with a bleak outlook of the future of Pakistan. What's remarkable is the length of the book is remarkably short for the scale of events captured. The book begins by capturing the roots of Muslim discontent and oddly it's traced back to the sack of Delhi by Nadir Shah (a Shia). Shah Waliullah and his more notable disciples instilled the seeds of a jihadist movement which flickered on and off (and is currently a raging inferno). The British drove the last nail on the Mughal coffin and earned the wrath of the jihadist movement. Typically they responded by playing the Hindus (who were in a majority) against the Muslims right unto 1857 when the last Mughal emperor was forced

into exile and hence feeding into a vicious cycle of suspicion between the two communities. The script changed when the British went along with a modernist thread of Muslim led by Syed Ahmed Khan and this thread carried to culmination the idea of a Pakistani nation. The narrative captures the Indian Freedom struggle from the viewpoint of the key Muslim players and there are moments when you are awestruck at how close the history of South Asia may have been radically different from the nuclear precipice whose edge we teeter on. Gandhi's letting go of the Khilafat movement, the Congress rejection of overtures from the Muslim league, Jinnah's outsized ego (though remarkably during the earlier part of the freedom struggle he outshone much of the Congress in his sagacity and vision of a united India) drove a permanent wedge between the two communities. Partition was inevitable by the late 1930s much to the dismay of Gandhi.

Short review: MJ Akbar displays an impressive grasp of history, that blends into a fast-paced account of world events that intersect with the march of the Indian subcontinent to freedom, and partition. This is however marred, repeatedly so, by the jarring interjection of incongruous paragraphs that seem to exist for little reason other than to serve as the display of an elegant train of thought's ugly derailment. Curious omissions of facts and selective interpretations should cause one to examine both the narrative and the subtext with a magnifying lens of a fact-checker. There are also more like two distinct books crammed into one, with justice done more to the first than the second. Furthermore, perhaps the part most likely to appeal to most readers is the modern history of Pakistan, especially that going back to the 1970s, when the shift to radicalization started in earnest with General Zia's dictatorship. That is given less than its deserved share of space, but should be enough for people to want to read more. Perhaps *The Duel: Pakistan on the Flight Path of American Power* does a better job of describing Pakistan's post-independence history. Long review: Pakistan, as a nation, has been one of the most fascinating, tragic, and spectacularly disastrous examples of religion as the sole basis of nationhood in the twentieth century.

This book is an investigation into the idea and creation of Pakistan as a separate state from India for Indian Muslims. The author looks into the historical roots of this idea and what it holds for Pakistan's future. M.J. Akbar, the author, identifies a 'theory of distance' amongst the Muslim elite in India in the 18th century onwards. This theory holds that Hindus and Muslims are different people and that Muslim interests and way of life in India can only be secured by Muslims living as a separate 'nation'. Interestingly, this idea was propounded not by the Deoband Dar-ul-Uloom, the primary clergy of south Asia but by the Muslim educated elite. The reasons for this primarily were the sharp

decline of Mughal power in India under the British from the 18th century onwards and the consequent rise in British India of Hindus, who embraced the English language and modernity through education in western science and values. The Muslim elite conversely stayed mostly away from English and modern education as something 'foreign and despicable'. Additionally, the decline of the Ottoman empire in Europe also contributed to the feeling amongst the Muslim elite of the erosion of power and influence. The author says that this idea of a separate nationhood has always been there in Indian Muslims since the 18th century. Then it means that it is not something new or something that happened due to the differences between the Congress party and the Muslim League in the mid 20th century or due to the purported indifference towards Jinnah shown by Nehru or other Congress leaders. Further, the author says that the Muslim League never really believed or internalised the non-violent approach of Gandhi as they only paid lip-service to the Gandhian idea of Ahimsa as a need to co-operate with the Congress party.

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