

Book Launch

***“Punjab: A History from Aurangzeb to
Mountbatten”***

and

Seminar on

***“Understanding Modern Pakistan and
India Through the Prism of Undivided
Punjab”***

December 12, 2013



**THE INSTITUTE OF STRATEGIC STUDIES,
ISLAMABAD**

Book Launch "*Punjab: A History from Aurangzeb to Mountbatten*" and Seminar on "*Understanding Modern Pakistan and India Through the Prism of Undivided Punjab*"

The Institute of Strategic Studies organized a launch of the book "*Punjab: A History from Aurangzeb to Mountbatten*" and a Public Talk on "*Understanding Modern Pakistan and India Through the Prism of Undivided Punjab*" on December 12. The distinguished author and speaker at the occasion was Professor Rajmohan Gandhi, grandson of Mahatma Gandhi and until December 2012 a Research Professor at the Center for South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and a Scholar-in-Residence at the Indian Institute of Technology, Gandhinagar.

The Director General of ISS, Dr Rasul Bakhsh Rais in his welcome remarks said it was a proud day in the history of the Institute to welcome Professor Rajmohan Gandhi who happens to be one of the most influential mind in South Asia, and he expressed his hope that Professor Rajmohan Gandhi will continue to contribute to the larger peace, harmony and reconciliation in the Subcontinent. He said that the presence of Professor Rajmohan, the launch of his book and his talk was a point of celebration and a great joy for the Institute.

Professor Rajmohan said it was a privilege to be here in Islamabad and to be speaking about the Punjab that was, still may be in the future and about Pakistan-India relations. Talking about his latest book "*Punjab: A History from Aurangzeb to Mountbatten*" he said that it was a very provisional and interim attempt at understanding Punjab's history from 1707 to 1947. All history is interim, all history is selective, and no historian can focus on everything and all events are constantly being revised in the light of further research and new perspectives. Although he said that he was not a Punjabi, and was born and raised in Delhi which was ruled as British Punjab from 1858-1911, he felt he had to attempt this study since Delhi became almost a Punjabi city and nobody growing up in Delhi could escape the traumatic events that occurred in 1947. Moreover, he said that his grandfather's assassination in 1948 linked and connected him to the killings of hundred and thousands of people, but he was one of the people who were killed in 1947-48 carnage of the Subcontinent. And it was this that impelled him to understand the story of Punjab.

During this time he discovered that there were very few Punjab histories. Syed Mohammad Latif in 1880 had written a history of the Punjab. Then Vikram Ali Malik in the 1970s compiled some important readings on the history of Punjab covering 19th and early part of the 20th century. He said that in Indian Punjab some remarkable studies of Sikh history have emerged over the decades which are very instructive and valuable. But they are of course not histories of Punjab and they leave out the bulk of Punjabis. He said that to his great surprise and disappointment he found that even in Lahore there were not many studies of Punjabi history of 18th, 19th and 20th century.

He said he did not intend to provide any judgments on what had happened, nor the desire to prove or disprove any beliefs that people had about what had happened or did not happen in Punjab. The honest aim was to recapture what happened in Punjab in the 18th, 19th and first half of the 20th century. While there were many events that happened over these period the challenge before him was to focus on certain well-known events without going into details in order to retain a long view of what has happened in the Punjab story.

Talking about a few of the findings or conclusions that emerged in the recapturing of the story of Punjab he said that one was that when empires are in retreat, their focus is not so much on

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the people that they were ruling over, but it is on their own withdrawal which is priority number one for them. What happens to the people they rule over is not their concern. In 1947, the British Empire was in retreat, and they had created, especially in Punjab, a remarkable army which supplied more than half the soldiers of Britain’s armies recruited from the subcontinent. The British were proud of the army they had created, but when the killings of 1947 began in March, the British took the view that you Indians have asked us to quit, we are quitting, now it’s your responsibility, we are leaving. It was sad to notice that some of the demobilized soldiers of the British Indian army were involved in the killings, which extracted a large price from the Punjabi society. He said that the most empire-friendly of the British provinces should see the greatest violence was a shock for Britain. Punjab was the most pro-empire province in the entire Subcontinent. Yet the most empire-friendly of the Indian provinces saw the greatest violence. The British abandoned their moral duty to be responsible while departing that was forgotten in post-war fatigue aggravated by annoyance at what was seen as Indian ingratitude and impertinence.

Rajmohan said that although we can underline the role that Britain played or did not play, but we should also admit that the largest role in the tragedy in the killings was our own role. We the people of the Subcontinent played the largest role in that great tragedy. This, he said, was worth pondering upon in the light of the current events worldwide. The British, he said, faced their toughest fight in their Sub continental conquests in Punjab, yet they succeeded in getting the people they defeated to be their staunchest allies. This is something that possibly Americans in Iraq and Afghanistan may wish to study with some interest, that how is it that the people you wish to defeat then become your valuable and active allies? Both the governments of India and Pakistan also have to understand from this. After all, the governments in these two countries also face very difficult situations whether in Kashmir, or Northeastern part of India, or Balochistan. How do you win over the people that you are forced to suppress? This he said was a very important question of our times, and perhaps the story of Punjab may throw some light on this very pertinent question.

Another truth that emerges from this study is that even the most remarkable leaders, the most effective leaders; the most charismatic leaders; the most honest leaders; the most obeyed leaders nationally cannot by themselves solve very tough problems in different parts of the country that honours them. This is another thing that emerges from the present study – the limitations of the national leaders to solve provincial problems even if they are of very great stature. No matter how eminent the leaders are, they cannot bring about solutions to the problems unless they carry along the opposition parties, people and other regions of their country. The two leaders of India and Pakistan cannot bring solutions on their own. Even if they are locked in a comfortable room, they cannot find a solution because they have to carry others along. Prime Ministers of Pakistan and India cannot impose a solution on their people and need to learn the art of carrying others along. The people too have to realize that they demand too much from their leaders, it is impossible for them to create a solution if there is not a wide enough or broad enough consensus.

Concluding his talk, Professor Rajmohan said that even in August 1947 when the worst killings took place, Punjabis who protected other Punjabis were far more numerous than the Punjabis who killed fellow Punjabis. Even then a vast majority of Punjabis helped one another. This is the under reported story of 1947, and his latest study attempts to cover some of these brave and success full attempts by people to save threatened fellow Punjabis, compassion, he said,

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expelled fear. He said that the last thought he wanted to leave was that the hearts of the people of Punjab on both sides and the hearts of the people of the Subcontinent want a coming together of their governments and their nations.

To a question on whether his book was a message for people in India and Pakistan on creating an understanding for a greater Punjab, an undivided Punjab, Professor Rajmohan said that this is not the intention, and that his sole aim was to recapture what happened in the over 240 years.

Replying to a question on the boundaries of Punjab that ran all the way to Afghanistan in 1901, and whether it would be correct to say that Punjab lies between River Jhelum and Beas. Professor Rajmohan said that he does not take a rigid line. Until Curzon separated the Northwest Frontier, it was also treated as part of Punjab. And in the east it extended up to Delhi, and in some periods it went into Jammu and Kashmir. He said that how people understood Punjab varied from time to time, and we should not be shocked if at some point of time in history people thought of Punjab in one way, and at other time they thought of it in another way. He said that his Punjab was a kind of Punjab with flexible boundaries.

To a query on whether the nationalist leaders in Punjab should play a more active role in creating a climate where the Prime Ministers can be put in a room where they would find it easy to come to some form of a solution, and whether he would agree that once the Punjabis start moving closer it would help the two countries to get together. Professor Rajmohan said that he would absolutely agree with this, and when the time comes for people to lock these good people in a large enough room, there should be a lot of Punjabis on either side in that room. He said that the pressure for India-Pakistan reconciliation has to come from the grassroots, and it will come because there is a kind of thinking developing in both Punjabs in favour of this.

On the question whether the genesis of present day politics of ethnicity, sectarianism and terrorism lies in the decision of dividing Punjab on the basis of communalism in 1904-6, and that this division set the basis of communalism in India. Professor Rajmohan said that there was no such division because such division took place in Bengal.

To the question on the Partition Award whether it was really a Radcliff Award or a Mountbatten Award, Professor Rajmohan said that many people believe it was the Mountbatten Award and not the Radcliff Award, but no convincing proof has been offered.

Answering a question on what the British did to transform the Punjabis to favour them, Professor Rajmohan said this was a question which cannot be answered in a few sentences, but requires a whole chapter. He referred the questioner to study the book for clues. However, he was of the opinion that a very important role was played by the British civil servant, the district officer who made winning the heart and mind of the Punjabi their priority and they went about it systematically through their land revenue policies, lowering of taxes, and developing a remarkable relationship with Hindu, Muslim and Sikh peasants.

In his concluding remarks the Chairman ISS, Ambassador (Retd.) Khalid Mahmood said that the talk was highly informative and Professor Rajmohan has attempted to assist in healing the wounds inflicted in 1947. He said that presently the government in Pakistan is headed by a Prime Minister who hails from Punjab and who believes in fostering understanding and friendship between the two countries. The Chairman was of the opinion that the two countries

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had no option but to normalise relations for the sake of peace and betterment of our people, and hoped that the people and leadership in India and Pakistan will rise to the occasion. He thanked Rajmohan Gandhi for honouring the Institute by choosing to visit it and giving a highly illuminating and inspiring talk.

- *Prepared by*

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Director America / Programme Coordinator