

WEEKEND MAGAZINE

## Book Reviews

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An analysis under the garb of a memoir

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Book           :           'My Life My Country - Memoirs of a Pakistani

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                                  Economist'.

Author         :           Parvez Hasan

Publisher     :           Ferozsons, Ltd.

Pages         :           360

Price         :           Rs850

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Dr. Parvez Hasan, a prominent Pakistani economist, now 86, is based in the US and hardly active and working. But it is uncharacteristic of a prolific economist and social scientist of his caliber to stay completely dormant. And therefore, every now and again, Dr. Hasan rummages through his life and works from the past to create artifacts like 'My Life My Country- Memoirs of a Pakistani Economist' - which is an autobiographical account published by Ferozsons in 2011.

The book is reflective of how frequent structural changes, institutional fragmentation and political incursions in the policy space define the 70-year economic history of Pakistan. And how Dr. Hasan's career has nurtured and revolved within and around it. Infact the deep contours of his career with its recurrent highs and lows are representative of the country's economy itself that has hosted quite frequent economic and policy experiments resulting in erratic and unpredictable movements. But a critical review of the book reveals that while it brings Dr. Hasan's personal and professional experiences to life, the economic analysis it presents under the garb of a memoir is somewhat trivialized against the richness of his personal experiences.

'My Life My Country' is divided into 27 chapters with a majority of them narrating stories on his personal life while the rest divided into macroeconomic analyses of the country's various political regimes starting from the its inception in 1947 and coming all the way down to Musharraf's military rule of the 2000's. He doesn't recognize himself as an economic historian though but his book carries shades of economic history takes on the economy seem purely based on experiential learning. That is quite unlike a historian who often tends to engage in the readings and discourse analysis of works done by writers of an earlier era and therefore doesn't really get himself involved with empirics nor brings into his analysis the bias of his personal experiences.

I distinctly remember my first meeting with Dr. Hasan. It was at the Burki Institute of Public Policy (BIPP) in Garden Town, Lahore. He sat ensconced in a chair in a room whose door read his friend Shahid Javed Burki's name who happens to be the Chairman of the institute established after his name. It was a frigid Friday afternoon and Dr. Hasan was all set to leave Pakistan in the next few days. He had very little time left in Lahore and therefore was anxious to find a good marketer for the book and also a reviewer. The book has been reviewed several times over, most notably by Shahid Javed Burki and Farooq Arby, Dr. Hasan is never shy of asking for more constructive critique.

The groundwork for his chapter forthcoming in BIPP's annual report for 2016 had brought him to Pakistan. In spite of his reiterations on how he loves the country and wants to contribute to its growth and development until he lives, his resolve to never come back again seemed quite unwavering. He kept going over the fact that this was sadly his last trip to the country that he dearly loves and how travelling to and fro between the US and Pakistan is now becoming incompatible with his declining health.

I could see that that the rigors of old age had started to tell on Dr. Hasan, as he spoke in a varied tone with his speech often broken and impaired. His short-term memory also tended to fail him. Even after several emails and a mutual decision to meet, he wouldn't recall who I am and what'd brought me to his office. On a lighter note, this was an embarrassment at first, but as our conversation progressed, I could see that his oblivion isn't really going to affect what I was trying to accomplish through the meeting and therefore I continued to pose questions despite his reserved replying and looks of bewilderment. He became comfortable with my pestering in a few minutes and only then did our conversation really start.

His long-term memory though, that could have impacted the quality of the interview, especially from his days at the Planning Commission of West Pakistan where he served as the Chief Economist in the 60's and his time later at the World Bank, was infallible. Dr. Hasan had vivid recollections of that time and could narrate stories with specific timelines and names of persons involved with utmost ease and perfection.

Dr. Hasan's experiences have also reflected in his seminal work 'Pakistan Economy at the Crossroads' published in 1998. The book recalled the macroeconomic policies of Pakistan including the governance aspects and political economy of decision-making and institutions during the first 50 years 1947-1997. His recent work 'My Life My Country' is no different structurally and also in terms of the limited macro analysis that it presents. Dr. Hasan's work could best be regarded as an experiential account of Pakistan's macroeconomic history with a tinge of data and recommendations to salvage the economy.

The writing style adopted is simple and easy to understand. He's in no way a run-of-the-mill book writer who uses a linguistic mastery including the nuances of literature, symbolism and vocabulary to sound grandiose or exaggerated. He comes off as a typical economist with a profound understanding of the economic parlance, numbers and relations of economic variables interacting in a macro space. And therefore, for someone interested in the political economy of Pakistan, it is a much recommended text. One hardly finds inside details, anecdotal evidence and a precise timeline of events from the first two decades of Pakistan's existence.

Other commentaries on the first two decades from economists like Moin Baqai, Qureshi, Haq, Burki and our eminent scholars from the Harvard advisory group do exist but Dr. Hasan's opinion that is a product of his hands-on experience at the Planning Commission during the 60s could've been a credible account of Pakistan during that time. However, had his work been more on the analytical and policy side apart from just being a delineation of history, it could have really stood out amongst the existing literature for very little analytical work has been done regarding the follies committed by the Planning Commission and other bodies of the government during the first two decades. The first three five-year plans have been analyzed in great detail, however, policy-makers and commentators have often failed to look beyond the five-year planning frameworks.

In terms of contribution, also noteworthy is the fact that the anecdotes, narratives and stories from his prolific past only end up being a reiteration of the stories that have already been narrated in his previous work *Pakistan Economy at the Crossroads* and therefore, nearly forty percent of the text that is devoted to stories narrated in quite a nonchalant and candid manner, have already featured in the *Pakistan Economy at the Crossroads*.

Also, it seems that lack of clarity and ambivalence and confused objectives seem to abase an important message that the book seemingly aims to convey. With a partial emphasis on his personal and family life, the book does for a brief while look like a memoir, however sudden and often unexpected jumps to macroeconomic and political history of Pakistan keeps the reader at bay.

While the book assumes varied roles and goes through compelling modal variations in the writing style, it does present an original perspective on the changing culture, family life and consumption patterns of Pakistan and therefore is an economic work with significant sociological and anthropological undertones. From his relationship with his father to the respect that he had for his mentor and his maiden love story, Dr. Hasan puts it all together in a blend that represents the most beautiful side of the oriental culture, especially that of the 60s and the 70s. Since many of those customs and traditions don't find a space in our family interactions anymore, Dr. Hasan's memoir strikes as a greater contribution to cultural history than economics.

**(The reviewer is the Director of the Burki Institute of Public Policy (BIPP) and an Economics Instructor at a Private University.)**

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