

PARTISANS OF ALLAH:**JIHAD IN SOUTH ASIA**

by Ayesha Jalal

Harvard University Press,

400 pages, \$29.95

Reviewed by SADANAND DHUME

THE NOVEMBER ASSAULT on Mumbai by ten heavily-armed members of the Pakistan-based terrorist group Lashkar-e-Taiba came as a reminder, if one was needed, of South Asia's trouble with radical Islam. Home to about a third of the world's 1.2 billion Muslims, the region also houses a plethora of violent groups committed to imposing an austere interpretation of their faith on believers and non-believers alike. Many of these—including the L-e-T and its occasional partner-in arms, Jaish-e-Mohammed—sprung up only in the 1990s. But as Ayesha Jalal, a Pakistan-born historian who teaches at Tufts University in Massachusetts, points out in her new book, in South Asia the intellectual pedigree for violence committed in the name of faith stretches back not decades but centuries.

At the heart of *Partisans of Allah* is an earnest attempt to understand the concept of jihad. In common parlance it means holy war against non-Muslims, but the word itself—as Ms. Jalal takes great pains to stress—simply signifies striving for a worthy or ennobling cause. Indeed, according to Ms. Jalal, jihad is *the* core principle of Islamic ethics. At least in theory, it encompasses more than suicide attacks on Indian troops in Kashmir or truck bombs targeting luxury hotels. A student's endeavor to read a book, a patient's suffering in a hospital, or a farmer's effort to increase his crop yield may all be construed as types of jihad.

∞ Mr. Dhume is the author of *My Friend the Fanatic: Travels with an Indonesian Islamist*. His next book will examine the impact of globalization on India.

Usually, this sort of sophistry is the province of apologists for radical Islamic violence eager to explain it away as anti-theoretical to the spirit of the faith. At times Ms. Jalal tilts in this direction—the word “infidel” is used without irony, and a tinge of hagiography enters her description of a group of 19th-century jihadists who fought the Sikhs in the Northwest Frontier. However, to her credit, Ms. Jalal is not concerned with whitewashing the less savory interpretations of jihad, but with ensuring that the term is understood with all its nuance, and in a proper historical context.

Toward this effort, a parade of theologians, scholars and legists pass across the book's pages. In the 16th century, the liberal policies of the Mughal emperor Akbar—who abolished discriminatory taxes on non-Muslims and strove to treat all faiths equally—earned the ire of Ahmad Sirhindi (1564-1624). Sirhindi claimed that Islam and Hinduism were fundamentally incompatible, and that one could flourish only at the expense of the other. A prolific letter writer and a widely respected Sufi scholar, Sirhindi is credited with the revival of orthodox Islamic practice in India after Akbar's death.

Of a similar cast of mind was Delhi's Shah Waliullah (1703-62), the most influential Islamic scholar of his time. His blueprint to extend Islamic law outwards from the family to the local polity to (eventually) the world resonates with radical Muslims to this day. Waliullah shared teachers in what is today Saudi Arabia with Abdul Wahhab, the founder of the austere strain of Islam that bears his name. Waliullah believed in a vast Hindu and Shia conspiracy against Sunni orthodoxy, and sought to ban both the Hindu festival of color, Holi, and Muharram, the Shia commemoration of the martyrdom of the prophet Mohammed's grandson, Imam Hussein. Waliullah popularized a saying of the prophet according to which participating in jihad was superior to

fasting or praying for a month. In a similar vein, extrapolating from the history of seventh-century Arabia, Waliullah declared war booty legitimate for Muslims.

The cleric's influence outlived him by centuries. Between 1826 and 1831, Waliullah's most famous disciple, Sayyid Ahmad of Rae Bareilly in north India, led a bloody, though ultimately unsuccessful, jihad in the Northwest frontier against the Sikhs. Even today, Ahmad's grave is a sacred site visited regularly by modern day jihadists, who have declared war on, among other things, film, music and education for girls.

It was only under British colonial rule—under attack from both Western scholars and Christian missionaries—that prominent Indian Muslims began to reinterpret jihad in less violent terms. Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-98), the erudite founder of Aligarh's famous Mohammedan Anglo-Oriental college, argued that Muslims owed their loyalty to the Raj as long as their religious practices were not interfered with. Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1835-1908), the founder of the Ahmadiyya sect, felt that jihad as warfare against non-believers had lost its relevance in the modern world, and only contributed toward tarnishing the image of Islam. The Ahmadiyyas instead channeled their efforts toward good works, especially education.

At the outset, Ms. Jalal sets out to breach what she calls the "artificial walls" separating an academic and a general readership. In this, unfortunately, she fails. A potentially gripping read is turned into drudgery by a prose style both dry and somewhat discombobulated. The exception is Ms. Jalal's examination of the Jamaat-e-Islami's Abul Ala Maududi (1903-79), who—along with the Egyptians Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid

Qutb of the Muslim Brotherhood—is widely regarded as the 20th century's preeminent radical Islamic ideologue.

An admirer of Waliullah, Maududi too believed that warfare for Islam was an exalted form of piety—that fighting resolutely on the battlefield was superior to staying home and praying for 60 years. He saw Islam as a "revolutionary ideology," which seeks to "alter the social order of the whole world and rebuild it in conformity with its own tenets and ideals." The faith's violent history was nothing to be apologetic about.

Indeed Islam's strength lay in the sword's ability to tear away the veil of misunderstanding that characterizes non-Muslims. For Maududi, art, painting and music belong to jahiliyya, the state of barbarism Muslims ascribe to

Islamic Arabs. Apostasy from Islam was akin to treason and therefore punishable by death.

Like Islamic radicals everywhere, Maududi was obsessed with keeping women in their proper place. They were to be respected, but only in the role of nurturing mother, doting sister, devoted wife or dutiful daughter. He believed that menstruation made women physically and mentally infirm, and that they must be excluded from the public sphere altogether. Non-Muslims, inherently unreliable, had no place in the administration of the Islamic state.

In 1953, barely six years after the creation of Pakistan, Maududi joined an agitation to have Ahmadiyyas declared non-Muslim. Their alleged crimes: the veneration of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad as a prophet, albeit a lesser one than Mohammed, and the rejection of armed jihad. In 1974, five years before he died, Maududi witnessed the government of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, eager to co-opt the radical Islamic element in Pakistani

Radical Islamic violence cannot be explained entirely in the secular language of historical injustice and political aspirations.

society, finally accede to his demands.

As a work of scholarship, *Partisans of Allah* is not meant to be prescriptive, but its subject matter places it squarely at the heart of the policy debate on how best to handle the rise of radical Islam. For one, it debunks the notion—especially popular on the left—that radical Islamic violence can be explained entirely in the secular language of historical injustice, territorial boundaries and political aspirations. In fact, religious ideas, as attested to by the continuing influence of Waliullah and Maududi, matter profoundly.

Second, and again contrary to conventional wisdom, criticism and firmness will do more than praise and concessions on points of principle to ensure that a modern, good neighborly interpretation of Islam triumphs over the radical Islamic alternative. It's no coincidence that British rule fostered the relatively moderate Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, whereas 60 years of Pakistani independence have thrown up the likes of Mullah Omar of the Taliban, Hafiz Mohammed Saeed of the L-e-T and Masood Azhar of the J-e-M.