

Opinion

Pakistan Facing Identity Crisis

Adnan Sattar*

**Adnan Sattar is a Journalist based in Karachi associated with The News*

The crisis of identity confronting Pakistan has taken on decisively menacing dimensions in recent years. This would sound highly preposterous to the ruling clique, ensconced as it is within the cosy ivory towers of the hill capital, hopelessly out of touch with the mood that prevails out there. They would like to delude themselves that various ethnic groups inhabiting the state of Pakistan are united under the umbrella of nuclear deterrence, having buried their cultural differences and economic disparities. Nothing can be farther from the truth.

Come August, Pakistanis are inundated with irritatingly inane (and unimaginative) national songs and equally myopic rhetoric about one nation, one language and one Pakistan. A spate of new national symbols ranging from missiles named after the Muslim rulers (read invaders) of yore to the newly discovered (destroyed) mountain peaks in Kashmir, have been added to the contemporary jingoistic lexicon of the officialdom. Trumpeting the myth of independence, churning out cliched patriotic themes, the state of Pakistan stubbornly refuses to acknowledge the potentially catastrophic crisis of identity it faces today. The magnitude of the crisis can be gleaned from the ethno-regional grievances simmering within the country as well as its complete isolation in the comity of nations.

A brutally revealing manifestation of this phenomenon could be seen in the response that last years-nuclear tests elicited in different areas of Pakistan. While it sent waves of euphoria through Punjab and some urban pockets in Sindh, the people of NWFP, Balochistan and interior Sindh remained pronouncedly unhappy with the development. Projecting nuclear technology as an almost mystical symbol of Pakistan's identity and sovereignty can by no means piece together an increasingly beleaguered federation.

Here again, the official ideology clashes with ethnic identities. The Establishment's obsession with Pakistan's Middle Eastern moorings, for example, have few takers among nationalist politicians and scholars. They often grudge the fact that the state did not concede any space to indigenous languages but went about promoting Arabic through school curricula and official media. Contrary to the official security perceptions, ethno-regional groups in Pakistan have for too long advocated a détente with India, if only implicitly. There are many among them who believe that in the subcontinent a border often signifies an end to nothing. Across the divide, people share same history, same culture and pretty similar material conditions.

Its consequences apart, the very logic behind this Middle East oriented, Muslim identity is highly questionable. In projecting India as the Hindu-only State, the Pakistani Establishment has tried to blot out the fact that India is home to what is arguably the second largest Muslim population in the world. With its India-centric defence regime and incessant communal rhetoric, Pakistan has repeatedly jeopardized the future of the Indian Muslims. And interestingly enough, India has constantly maintained far more cordial relations with Arab countries than Pakistan. So much for our historical ties with the Middle East.

Perhaps, much more crucially, the custodians of our identity have failed to grasp the fact that in the subcontinental context, religion itself is something heterogeneous. The Sufi-influenced syncretic Islam of many Sindhis, for example, is in sharp contrast with the official version of the religion. We have seen the consequences of dictator Zia's exclusive Islamic identity in the form of militant sectarian organizations that have mushroomed in the last two decades or so.

In their pathological drive to garner power, their demented urge to intervene and impose themselves on the lives of others, the self-appointed managers of Pakistan have wrenched the very fabric of the country. A narrow Pakistani-Muslim identity contrived by a minuscule ruling elite and promoted through state-controlled education system and electronic media does not hold water any more. It can, by no means, win us a respectable and credible place in the comity of nations. It can no longer be used to subsume the sense of exclusion and marginalisation afflicting the people of Pakistan.

Diversity is the spice of all life and ethnicity its political manifestation. In an environment bereft of tolerance, ethnic differences degenerate into hatred and barbarism. Diversity should not be seen as a problem to be managed. It is infact, a resource to build upon. Heterogeneity, tolerance and quest for peaceful coexistence should serve as the defining themes of a new Pakistani identity.

It is time to draw on vibrant legacies of folk, tribal and indigenous culture scattered throughout Pakistan. It is time to unlearn the ideology of communalism, militarism and jingoism and turn to the message of love, peace and co-existence taught by the sufis and saints of the subcontinent. It is time to demilitarize Pakistan. It is time to demilitarize the Pakistani mind and identity.