

## A Nation Divided Or A People United? Paradoxes Of Pakistani Identity<sup>1</sup>

by  
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**Keywords:** cultural evolution, Indus Valley Civilization , population genetics, Two Nation Theory, muhajir, Muslim nationalists , Mohammad Ali Jinnah, Riyasat-e-Medina, blasphemy law, abaya, Al-Bakistan, Al-Bunjab, Al-Huda, Allah hafiz, Benedict Anderson, Arab Wannabe Syndrome, burqa, cultural nostalgia , Ismailis, Masood Khadarposh, Imran Khan, World Punjabi Congress, ethnicity, Haya Brigade

**Biography:** Pervez Amirali Hoodbhoy, born in Karachi (1950), is an Islamabad based physicist, writer, and activist. He taught physics for 47 years at Quaid-e-Azam University and for short periods was visiting professor at MIT, Carnegie Mellon University, the University of Maryland, and a post-doctoral researcher at the University of Washington. In 2022 he founded The Black Hole, a community space in Islamabad dedicated to the pursuit of science, art, culture.

**Abstract:** Conceived as a state for Muslims, the founders of Pakistan insisted a Pakistani identity was possible only through Islam and hence the principal tenet of nationhood became centralization and ideologically driven unit. Now that well over seven decades have passed, how well has this panned out? Is there an emergent Pakistani identity or, instead, a rejection of the fundamental tenet that led to a new nation state? This article also examines the proposition that that Pakistani nationalism was an expression of the political will of a distinct identity and contrasts it with the counter proposition that identities are manufactured by the state and political actors.

The officially promoted narrative of Pakistan's identity says the new nation born in 1947 was the culmination of a natural historical process that began in 712 AD with the arrival of Muslims in Sind. Driven by virtuosity and the need to spread their faith, the visitors eventually became conquerors who convinced the locals to abandon the caste system and voluntarily convert to Islam. This contends that Pakistan emerged naturally because from the very earliest times there had been only two nations in India – Hindu and Muslim – who could never live together in peace. Suffering discrimination at the hands of the Hindu majority, those who converted to Islam finally won the land where they could freely be Muslim. As a corollary, to be a full-blooded Pakistani you need not belong to its soil. Instead you must be Muslim.

Fear of Hindu hegemony after Britain's retreat created Pakistan. But the Two Nation Theory of Allama Iqbal and Mohammed Ali Jinnah is irrelevant in a Pakistan that is today 97% Muslim. This leads anxious Pakistanis to ask what defines them as a people. The more worried ones insist on seeking ancestral roots in Arabia, Afghanistan and Central Asia. They hope to find a closer connection with the invaders of centuries past and would like to be known as Syed, Qureshi, Baqri, Usmani, Mir, Turani, Khurasani, Hashimi, etc. All this is driven by the dominant Punjabi-Muhajir official narrative,

hammered into young ones through their school curricula and textbooks, and energetically reinforced on days of national celebration. In recent years there has also appeared a strong yearning for finding Turkish roots. In 2025, as per an agreement signed between Turkey and Pakistan, Pakistan Television will broadcast yet another series of massively popular fictional Turkish dramas extolling Islamic greatness spread by the sword.<sup>2</sup>

The majority narrative does not work very well for the country's other fifty percent which is less willing to embrace nationalism steeped in religious idiom. So, if told that he is a Muslim with Arab or Turkish roots, the average Punjabi or Muhajir will likely nod his head in vigorous agreement. But a Pathan might stay impassive, a Sindhi would likely wince, while a Baloch – provided no one was watching – might vigorously shake his head in denial. Speakers of the Shina, Balti, Wakhi, Domaki, Khowar, Burushaski and Gojri languages in Gilgit-Baltistan would likely not bother to respond. They are so visibly indigenous and so genetically different from people in the plains that pretending an Arab connection is not possible. Sindhis, Pukhtoons, the Baloch, or the people of Pakistan's (still to be officially declared) newest province, Gilgit-Baltistan, are indignant that their rich cultures and history have been subsumed into a single national identity defined by religion alone.

This can be understood in broader terms. For people with strong tribal roots it is common belief that their tribal connections stretched without limit into the past. In fact most find it hard to conceive that some ancestor long ago did not belong to the same tribe. How could someone so venerated have broken the family line? A father of someone belonging to the Gujjar or Bhutto tribe simply had to be a Gujjar or Bhutto, just as his father had to be one, and so on without limit. It appears impossible to them that marriage had occurred within a much broader set of people. That tribes had crystallized much later will not be admitted by many. India is scarcely different: Hindu castes such as Brahmins believe they belong to a chain that had never been broken and stretches into the infinite past.

Pakistan's desire to seek Arab roots by emulating Arab culture had one irritated observer call it as the Arab Wannabe Syndrome (AWS). He defines this affliction to be “an uncontrollable urge to pretend to be, or to behave like, an Arab, when in fact the patient is not an Arab”.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, a good number of Muslims of the Indian subcontinent revere the invaders as their forefathers. They cling to the notion of foreign roots because admitting local origins would cause them to lose self-esteem and perhaps make them feel inauthentic and impure. Islam, as they see it, is fundamentally Arabian and hence geographically foreign to India. Some claim descent from Iranian or Central Asian stock. This view makes its adherents of the faith outsiders as well and causes people to dig under family trees in the hope of finding Arab roots. Names beginning with Syed, Sayyid, or Sayyed are status marks because these are implicit claims of descent from Prophet Mohammed through his grandsons. Whether such a connection exists, the extent to which it has been diluted or weakened by marriages, or has been invented must perforce be left unexamined. Cultural critic Nadeem Paracha humorously relates how awe of Arabs can mislead the naive among Pakistanis.<sup>4</sup>

Pakistan's official narrative would have been far more acceptable if Hindus and subcontinental Muslims had noticeably different ethnicities. But modern laboratory tools are dispensing with dearly held myths of racial purity. A study published in 2006 concluded that a Pakistani Muslim and a North Indian Hindu are not just indistinguishable in appearance but also genetically:

We find that the Muslim populations in general are genetically closer to their non-Muslim geographical neighbors than to other Muslims in India, and that there is a highly significant correlation between genetics and geography (but not religion). Our findings indicate that, despite the documented practice of marriage between Muslim men and Hindu women, Islamization in India did not involve large-scale replacement of Hindu Y chromosomes. The Muslim expansion in India was predominantly a cultural change and was not accompanied by significant gene flow, as seen in other places, such as China and Central Asia.<sup>5</sup>

Said more plainly, run-of-the mill commercial gene testing companies can tell a lot about an Indian or Pakistani's ancestry but if you send them a piece of your genetic material none can determine your religion. At best they can make an educated guess. Presently, genetic marker studies suggest that most Indian Muslims are descended primarily from local Hindu converts. Studies using the Y chromosome are particularly significant since this is passed only from father to son. North Indian Muslims exhibit the highest affinity to local Indian regional populations. There are also studies that have detected genetic signatures characteristic of populations of the Middle East in some of the contemporary Indian Muslim populations. This is unsurprising because the Indian subcontinent has been exposed to several waves of human migrations from the Arabian Peninsula and Iran, the homelands of Indian Muslim rulers.

Another study also finds that most of the Indian Muslim populations received their major genetic input from geographically close non-Muslim populations. However, admixtures were also present in those surveyed:

Low levels of likely sub-Saharan African, Arabian and West Asian admixture were also observed among Indian Muslims...Overall, our results support a model according to which the spread of Islam in India was predominantly cultural conversion associated with minor but still detectable levels of gene flow from outside, primarily from Iran and Central Asia, rather than directly from the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>6</sup>

Religious conversion characterized the last few centuries of expansion of Muslim populations into India. Cultural diffusion of Muslim traditions among the ethnic Indian populations was a consequence of sharing the same land for a sufficiently long time. Muslim immigrants from Iran and Central Asia married local Hindu females, generating a new admixed genetic pool. For both Muslim and Hindu nationalists – particularly the latter – lack of racial purity is a surely a bitter pill to swallow. It has inspired programs such as *ghar wapsi*, a call for India's Muslims to return to their Hindu roots.<sup>7</sup> The difficulty of separating populations on the basis of race and religion is leading the state machinery in both India and Pakistan to seek other means as each attempts to build a nation on the basis of religious purity.

### **Imagined nations**

In seeking to understand who a Pakistani really is, let us begin by recognizing that in the 21st century everyone lives in some nation-state to which are usually attached powerful feelings and emotions of loyalty very similar to the emotions felt by our tribal ancestors. People identify with a nation, their “own nation”. Many people are therefore quite shocked when told that the very idea of a nation is pure subjectivity, a myth devoid of real existence. How can something so sacred be a mere figment of the

imagination? India and Pakistan bristle with nuclear weapons that can annihilate each other and so no one can doubt that nation-states are very real and physical.

But wait! Almost by definition a nation is something non-material, an abstraction existing only in your mind and nowhere else. You cannot ever *discover* an abstraction, you must invent it! This is just like in pure mathematics – ordinary numbers or perfectly straight lines or non-commuting numbers don't exist anywhere; your mind is what gives them life. Or take physics where every beginning student is told to first deal with a particle that is free from every kind of push or pull. No such situation exists and so it must necessarily be imagined. Similarly, nationalism doesn't exist or suddenly wake up to some self-realization of its existence – it too has to be imagined.

Because it is so fundamental, we shall need to take a short theoretical detour before returning to the issue: what is it that makes a nation? This will be followed by its application in the context of Pakistan and Pakistani identity.

One of the most influential books written on the birth of nations and nationalism is Benedict Anderson's "Imagined Communities – Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism". In his magisterial work, Anderson comes up with a succinct definition:

In an anthropological spirit, then, I propose the following definition of the nation: it is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion....In fact, all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.<sup>8</sup>

A nation, Anderson goes on to say, is a *community* because, "regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship".<sup>9</sup> Here I think we can get additional insight into the nature of nationalism from Plato's classical theory of forms so let's imagine looking at the natural landscape. We see there many different trees where some are short, others tall, some leafy and yet others coniferous. Our brains nevertheless abstract a kind of "treeness". This creation of the mind simplifies communication by creating a category, hence allowing us to use symbols and a common language. Intriguingly, that's how the neural networks used in computer artificial intelligence programs can be made to work. Our inbuilt neural networks enable us to have a sense of nationhood and nation.

Nations can be as old as a few thousand years ago but the nation-state with defined geographical boundaries is rather recent. The ones that we might be able to recognize date to the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia, i.e. barely five centuries ago. And yet, "the nations to which they give political expression always loom out of an immemorial past, and, still more important, glide into a limitless future. It is the magic of nationalism to turn chance into destiny."<sup>10</sup> Crosscutting allowed individuals to have multiple identities: you can belong to a different tribe, ethnic or linguistic group, or religion and yet identify with a particular nationality. The process is open-ended. When Mars is colonized a few centuries from now

and develops a significant population we might become comfortable with still broader identities as Martians and Earthlings while still retaining some sub-identities.

Being capable of retaining more than one identity has profound political ramifications. For example, after the failed uprising of 1857, upper class Muslims in British India formed an economic and political class that was fighting to preserve and enhance its interests. There was near zero regard for the general welfare of lower class Muslims which the Muslim “ashrafiyya” saw as being barely human. And yet the ordinary Muslim peasant or manual laborer – once he was convinced into believing that he belonged to the Muslim nation – could readily be made to fantasize that Muslim political leaders were actually fighting for his independence.

Once nationalism captures the imagination, all barriers are crossed and it stands ready for transplantation across a great variety of social terrains. At some point it becomes so fundamental that people are willing to die and kill for their nation. The Dalit in today’s India is oppressed by the Hindu majority but can still be made to believe he is part of the Indian nation and will therefore willingly pick up the gun to fight against Pakistan.

### **Manufacturing cultural nostalgia**

Given sufficient tools and time, the power brokers within every nation can persuade it to reimagine its past and to place there what never existed. Such distortions are becoming more common rather than less as wave after wave of collective narcissism crashes across the globe, facilitated by the machinery of nation states having populists at their helms. Across Pakistan’s borders, Indian nationalism is dying and resurgent saffronized Hindu nationalism claiming a mythical past is replacing it. Shivaji sword replicas are now popular in India. This warlord is lionized as the perfect heroic leader – brave, wise, and just.

How odd! Country after country is placing its spacecraft on or around Mars and helicopters are flying on a distant planet. To the mind of every thinking person comes the question of why political cultures are regressing towards primal values even as we leap from one achievement to the next. What in the human condition makes possible the conjoining of space-age science with stone-age politics?

It appears to me that this phenomenon might be usefully described as cultural nostalgia. The word “nostalgia” originated from the medical literature and was first seen in the 17<sup>th</sup> century as a psychological condition found among certain Swiss soldiers who had become inordinately attached to past memories because of long absences from home. In modern times, psychologists have observed that individuals suffering from dementia and Alzheimer's disease suddenly burst into tears, applause, or expressions of pleasure upon encountering some blast from the past – a picture, song, or even a smell.

For a more precise description, let us define cultural nostalgia as collective, societal nostalgia and, in excess, also a disease. In her book, *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001), Svetlana Boym lays out two main plots – the return to origins, and conspiracy.<sup>11</sup> So, on the one hand, there is deep longing for a pure unsullied past which lies in the twilight zone between history and memory. On the other, that utopia is thought to be spoiled by schemers and plotters who conspire because of their own selfish motives. Scientific progress hasn’t cured nostalgia, it has exacerbated it. Boym says that nostalgia “inevitably reappears as a defense mechanism in a time of accelerated rhythms and historical upheavals”. So, even though it was initially understood as a longing for a lost place, she proposes that nostalgia should instead be seen as “a longing for a different time” that results from being unable to cope with progress. And so

we are led to reinvent a past. It may be one that was never actually there but might still make us sigh and wish for those days again.

Nationalistic Punjabi politicians and scholars exhibit this kind of nostalgia as they make claims to an Pakistan that exists only within their minds. A newly opened museum in Lahore has a section on ancient and pre-colonial history. It is titled “Ancient Pakistan”.<sup>12</sup> The exhibit refers to the Indus Valley civilization, the Mauryan Empire, the Kushan dynasty and even the Khalsa Empire of Ranjit Singh. There is no reference to ancient India. One infers that Pakistan had existed forever, India came later!

An interesting – but ultimately unconvincing – narrative that belongs to the same genre has been invented by one of Pakistan’s better known liberals. Senator Aitzaz Ahsan, a prominent Punjabi member of the Pakistan People’s Party and a former minister in the federal government, invented a teleological argument purporting to give meaning to Pakistan other than it being simply not-India. He hopes to somehow explain the subcontinent’s divide in 1947 and make an argument for Pakistan’s “naturalness”.

The Indus region, comprising the northwestern part of the Indian subcontinent (now Pakistan), has always had its distinct identity – racially, ethnically, linguistically and culturally. In the last five thousand years, this region has been a part of India, politically, for only five hundred years. Pakistan, then, is no “artificial” state conjured up by the disaffected Muslim elite of British India.

– *The Indus Saga: From Pataliputra to Partition, by Aitzaz Ahsan*<sup>13</sup>

Ahsan’s 600 page book begins with the frank admission: “The Pakistani is still in search of an answer to the question: what, in essence, is the Pakistani’s identity? This effort to create an alternate reality relies on assertions quite breathtaking in their naiveté and will not be further discussed here<sup>14</sup>. Nevertheless one notes that even a strong ruling class Punjabi nationalist yearns for a rationale for Pakistan as a natural, organic entity rather than being merely non-India.

### **State imposed identity**

Identity is a subjective sense as well as an observable quality of personal sameness and continuity, paired with some belief in the sameness and continuity of some shared world image. As a quality of unself-conscious living, this can be gloriously obvious in a young person who has found himself as he has found his communality.<sup>15</sup>

- Erik Erikson, developmental psychologist

National identity doesn’t emerge from the mother’s womb. As argued earlier it is a social construct designed to fulfil some political purpose. Nation-states deliberately create this identity using national paraphernalia such as national insignia, cricket teams, national holidays, anthems and music, flag carrying airlines, drama and fiction, and, of course, the display of military might. Success means achieving a clear separation of “us” from “them”. This is what schooling in many countries seeks to achieve. While Pakistani Punjab may have found what it wants to teach in its schools, for other provinces the choice is less clear.

Keep Erikson in mind as quoted above – “a young person who has found himself as he has found his communality” – if some day at the usual time of morning assembly you happen to walk by a school in a

middle-class or lower middle-class neighborhood anywhere in Punjab. After the national anthem is played you will likely hear chanting which goes like this:

**Teacher:** *hum kon hain?* (who are we?)

**Children:** hum sub Pakistani hain! (we are all Pakistani!)

**Teacher:** *hum kya hain?* (what are we?)

**Children:** hum sub mussulman hain! (we are all Muslims!)

**Teacher** (repeats): *hum kya hain?*

**Children:** hum sub mussulman hain!

The message: your national identity is Pakistani-Muslim. The late Khaled Ahmed, a journalist who hosted a TV series in Islamabad in 2006, recalled in one such program a large interactive audience of students was confronted with this very question: are you Pakistani first or Muslim first. Those saying they were Muslim first won by 90% in a hand-count.<sup>16</sup> Said one student, we've been Pakistanis for seventy years but Muslims for a thousand. A survey conducted by Express Tribune found that a majority of Pakistan's internet users say they consider themselves 'Muslim first' (49%), 'Pakistani' second (28%) while 23% voted 'Other'.<sup>17</sup> A Pew Global Survey in 2013 found that most Pakistanis believe sharia is the revealed word of God rather than a body of law developed by men based on the word of God and 82% want it to be the law of the land.<sup>18</sup> Drawing conclusions from a British Council survey conducted in 2009, The Telegraph says:

The report found that three-quarters of respondents identified themselves foremost as Muslims, with just 14 per cent describing themselves primarily as a citizen of Pakistan. Only 10 per cent have a great deal of confidence in national or local government, the courts or the police and just one third advocate democracy for the country.<sup>19</sup>

How different is it in India? Reportedly about two-thirds of Hindus (64%) said it was very important to be Hindu in order to be "truly Indian".<sup>20</sup> Several Indian states have introduced laws criminalizing interfaith love and interfaith marriages. Indian religious nationalism, deepened and widened by deliberate state intervention, is producing generations reared on the basis of otherness. However, it would be out of place to dwell here on this phenomenon and we limit our discussion to Pakistan here.

Punjab, the power center, is the spearhead of Pakistan's religious nationalism. The revolutionary Punjab-born Bhagat Singh, executed by the British in Lahore, is an Indian hero but not a Pakistan hero – efforts by the leftwing activists to rename a road in Lahore after him received a fierce pushback from the religious right wing. But perhaps paradoxically this religious nationalism has come at the cost of the Punjabi language. Urban Pakistani Punjabis have largely abandoned their mother tongue in favor of Urdu, telling their children that speaking Punjabi marks one as belonging to the lower classes and that it is a base *gunwaar* language suitable for coarse talk only. The language is not taught in schools, no Punjabi newspaper is published and there is no satisfactory script for writing Punjabi. This also helps increase further the distance from Sikhs, a stone's throw from the Wagah border where the commitment to Punjabi is intense.

Sikhism came to Punjab in the 16th century. This was a synthesis of Islam and Hinduism, drawing upon both the Sufi tradition of Islam and the reformist Bhakti movement of Hinduism. As a result, the body of

Guru Nanak, founder of Sikhism, was claimed by both Hindus and Muslims after his death. This bit of history informs us of the reluctance of the Pakistani state to encourage a secular basis for Punjabi nationalism. Using the Gurmukhi script, Indian Punjabi is vibrant and alive with newspapers and books. It is unusual for Sikhs to speak to their children in Hindi; Punjabi is their preferred choice. But, as we have noted earlier, on the Pakistani side the state actively discourages Punjabi. And yet there can be no doubt that this language is intensely alive. When temperatures rise during a TV discussion, guests and hosts speaking in Urdu freely break out into Punjabi and appear as though they were released from a prison. As for the quality of Urdu spoken by most Punjabis: this brings an involuntarily groan from those who speak proper Urdu, i.e. that which was once spoken in Delhi, Lucknow, or Hyderabad.

Seeing a loss of the collective self, many stalwarts have sallied off into the battle seeking to reclaim the Punjabi language. During the 1950's the late Masood Khadarposh sought to have the *namaz* in Punjabi instead of Arabic but ran into strong religious opposition. Alyssa Ayres describes several ethno-literary efforts in the 1980's and 90's.<sup>21</sup> In 1986 the World Punjabi Congress, spearheaded by Fakhar Zaman, convened its first World Congress. There was a recognition that the center had dictated a similar loss of identity to Pakistan's other nationalities as well with tragic consequences there. In *Panjābī Zabān Nahīn Maregi*, the Punjabi nationalist Farani wrote:

For the sake of murderous Urdu, first they slit the throat of our Punjab and murdered hundreds of thousands of Punjabis. Then, for this man-eating language, [they] wanted to make the Bengalis slaves. They tried to rob them of their freedom. And having become the spokesmen of the other brothers, they spilled the blood of Bengalis... And not just Bengalis, but for this murderous language they also fired bullets upon Sindhis, the next door neighbors for thousands of years.<sup>22</sup>

Such romances with Punjabi revivalism, however, have been sporadic and limited. The choice of Urdu over Punjabi is ideologically based. From Zia-ul-Haq to Imran Khan and beyond, governments in Punjab have done far more to promote religious nationalism than governments in Sind and Balochistan. Under Khan's dispensation it was declared that all university degrees awarded in Punjab would henceforth be contingent upon passing Qur'anic recitation together with translation. But before the law could be enforced, Khan had been ousted over the personal differences he had developed with the army chief, General Bajwa. Significantly, no other province passed such a law.

### **The first Pakistani?**

The Pakistan Movement started when the first Muslim put his foot on the soil of Sindh, the gateway of Islam in India.

- Class VI – Pakistan Studies textbook, Sind Textbook Board (2006).

Beginning in 1979, the above view of Pakistan's origin was inserted into school textbooks. This was done in various subjects, and in all provinces. For example in another Class VI Social Studies textbook there is a chapter titled "First Citizen" from which one learns that "Yusuf sent Muhammad bin Qasim to conquer Sind. This was the foundation of Pakistan."<sup>23</sup>

By this account the righteous 17-year old Mohammed bin Qasim (695-715 AD), an Arab general who barely lived to be twenty, was the very first Pakistani. Somehow this pious young man had heard the distress calls of innocent young Muslim girls who were accosted by pirates near the port of Debal (near

modern Karachi) while on the way from Ceylon to Arabia. In 712 AD he rescued them after defeating the allegedly cruel, psychotic Hindu ruler Raja Dahir. This story is derived from the *Chachnama*, the story of the Brahmin King Chach and his death at the hands of bin Qasim.

Authored about 400 years after bin Qasim's death, Chachnama was suitably embellished with such tales of bravery and cowardice as per popular tradition in times where documentation and authentication counted for little. Nevertheless, parts of it were presented as solid fact by Urdu novelist Nasim Hijazi (1914-1996) who turned it into a cartoon version of history.

The notion of bin Qasim as the first Pakistani may fit the Pakistani's state's ideological need but it leaves countless questions hanging. Why does the Pakistan founded by bin Qasim not include Afghanistan and Iran, as well as the geographically contiguous Central Asian Republics of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, etc.? If Islam is the real glue, then why does Pakistan's establishment not welcome staunch Muslims on both sides of the so-called Durand Line uniting with each other? Should Bangladesh, once East Pakistan, also pay homage to bin Qasim?

The notion of a damsel-in-distress bringing bin Qasim to Sind is hugely attractive for those who contend that Islam was spread not through the sword but by its manifest righteousness. That the valorous Muslim is one who protects his womenfolk has never lost its appeal. "Where is our Muhammad bin Qasim?"<sup>24</sup> asked an anguished Fouzia Siddiqui, sister of Aafia Siddiqui, the MIT and Brandeis educated neuroscientist who joined Al-Qaida and is now serving an 86-year sentence in a Texas jail. In a clear reference to General Musharraf, the incarcerated woman's sister bitterly criticized him for having had her arrested: "from the very soil where General Muhammad Bin Qasim liberated our sisters and declared dignity and honor for all, another general started selling our brothers and sister to a foreign master."<sup>25</sup>

### **My name is Ertugrul**

In 2020 a Turkish drama series brimming with tribal intrigues, blood, murder, and conquest – all wrapped in pious religious idiom – took Pakistan by storm. Filmed in Anatolia and produced by Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT), *Dirilis Ertugrul* is a 150-episode fictional extravaganza of Ertugrul Ghazi, father of the Ottoman Empire's founder. This brave 13<sup>th</sup> century warrior faces vicious infidels in the form of Byzantines, Crusaders, and Mongols all of whom he manages to defeat with courage and intelligence and thus clearly shows the superiority of Islam over others.

Here's a typical scene of what the drama series has inspired. Using the internet you will easily find videos made using a smartphone such as the following: 7-10 year old kids are playing in some dusty, Seraiki speaking village of South Punjab. Each boy has fashioned for himself a crude wood and tin sword, ensconced in a scabbard tied to his shalwar's *narra*. What's it for, asks the off-camera interviewer, who seems to be enjoying himself. I'm a Muslim, says one proudly, pulling out his sword and waving it in the air. It's for cutting off the heads of *kafirs*. Your name? Ertugrul, he replies. Many such videos can be found by the reader using Google. A Pashto version<sup>26</sup> of Ertugrul has been produced by a group of young men in Swat, once the hotbed of Taliban insurgency.

The first scene of the first (Turkish original) episode begins with sword-making and sword-sharpening in the background of nomadic tents. The tribe's adversaries are Christians and Byzantines whose bloodied bodies lie scattered here and there after every fight. The hero, Ertugrul Ghazi, not only beheads several Knight Templars but also former associates from his tribe, such as Kurdoglu Bey, who he

suspects of disloyalty. *Dirilis* seeks both to idealize Islam and to vent Turkish nostalgia for a long-lost empire. It feeds into the naïve belief that victory comes from the Muslim warrior's unflinching faith and brave arm, with intrigue and betrayal explaining away any setback. The sound of galloping horses brings back the glory days of Salahuddin Ayubi and a tear drops from many an eye. In many ways *Ertugrul* brings to memory King Richard-I, who led the third crusade against the Muslim defenders of Jerusalem. One thousand years ago every boy and man in England had dreamed of following their valiant king into battle and cutting off a Muslim's head. Although Richard-I ultimately failed in his crusade, he too was mythologized and earned the title Richard the Lionheart. Like *Ertugrul*, he was the ultimate leader: brave, wise, and just.

Production of this intricate drama series demanded massive funding by the Turkish state. A horse farm was created, together with a special zoo-like area for the sheep, goats, nightingales and partridges that appear on the show. A Hollywood stunt team was hired to train actors for the movie's staged fights. President Erdogan and his family are reported to have repeatedly visited the filming site.

That this drama reflects authentic Islamic history is doubtful. Rather, this is a free-wheeling caricature of 13<sup>th</sup> century Anatolia of which we know next to nothing. Facts are not important, says Mehmet Bozdog, the man who wrote and produced the series. To quote:

There is very little information about the period we are presenting – not exceeding 4-5 pages. Even the names are different in every source. The first works written about the establishment of the Ottoman State were about 100-150 years later. There is no certainty in this historical data...we are shaping a story by dreaming.<sup>27</sup>

Nevertheless, Prime Minister Imran Khan publicly urged the youth to watch the show and learn about the 'true' Islamic culture, values and history. In a Tweet that made historians roll their eyes, he proudly said that Turks had ruled India for 600 years. Depending upon how charitable one feels, this is no more than between quarter-true to half-true only. But it must be rare for a prime minister to hail imperial rule over his country. Upon the prime-minister's orders the state-run Pakistan Television aired a continuous dubbed translation of the series in Urdu that left *Dirilis*'s makers astonished and thrilled at its tumultuous welcome. Some Pakistanis were appalled that Khan chose to meet with the *Dirilis* team in Islamabad in preference to meeting with the survivors and families of a dozen coal miners belonging to the embattled Hazara community who had had their throats slit by Da'esh militants in Mach, Balochistan.<sup>28</sup>

One might not expect tribal Turkmen fighting for a homeland to capture the imagination of millions in some far off country. But Pakistan is different. Transfixed, entire families spent evenings watching it together, thinking it to be wholesome entertainment and imagining this to be genuine Islamic history. So deep is the nostalgia that *Ertugrul* statues have been erected in Punjab's cities.<sup>29</sup> For some he is Pakistan's newly dreamed messiah, a leader who will restore Islam's glories and liberate Kashmir and Palestine from infidels. Reportedly some newborns are being named after characters in the drama series. I wonder what the little boys with little swords in the videos I saw will grow up to be.

It is unclear whether the shift away from Arabism towards Turkism will be long lasting or deep. One can readily discern the political reasons behind it. Saudi Arabia is disinclined to support Pakistan on Kashmir and because of its business interests it is leaning more towards India. The tendency toward

social liberalization under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Sultan creates uneasiness. But because of Pakistan's dependence upon Saudi Arabia as employment for its manpower and for financial assistance, it cannot voice its disappointment except in carefully couched words. On the other hand, Turkey under Erdogan has been proactive on both Kashmir and Palestine, and his Islamist agenda – including his decision to turn the iconic Hagia Sophia cathedral-museum into a mosque – has received huge plaudits in Pakistan.<sup>30</sup>

The Turks being a more modern people than Pakistanis do not attract to themselves the conservative elements of Pakistani society. So, for example, in spite of the adulation showered upon the Ertugrul series, there was much heart burning at the role played by the actresses. The actress Esra Bilgiç who plays Halima Sultan, dresses as a modern Turkish woman and has for that reason drawn remarks like “For what reason are some Turkish and Pakistani on-screen characters following Western culture?” and “I loathe you in the wake of seeing this image Halima Sultan.”<sup>31</sup>

### **Citizens and subjects**

If you are Muslim you can be a full citizen of Pakistan. It does not matter if you or your parents were born here or somewhere on the Indian side – Bihar, UP, or Hyderabad. But what if you are not Muslim and your family has lived on this land for as far back as can be traced? In that case you simply happen to live in Pakistan.

In Volume II of *Mein Kampf*, Adolf Hitler declared the future Third Reich would classify its population into three groups: citizens, subjects of the state, and aliens. Citizens would enjoy all the legal rights and privileges granted by the state; the subject must obey the law but could not enjoy rights or privileges unless granted citizenship; and the alien – citizen of another state – would also have no rights. Citizenship was open only to those whose racial origins were purely Germanic. Women were subjects at birth but those of proper race could become citizens by marrying a true German.

With the defeat of Germany a revulsion against racial politics occurred worldwide together with a consensus on the ideal of universal citizenship. This meant that citizen and subject should be inseparable and that citizenship and nationality implied equality before the law. Correspondingly the law must guarantee that no individual or group of individuals be privileged or discriminated against by the government. This core principle of liberalism is enshrined in Article 7 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) which states: “All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law”.

A non-Muslim living in Pakistan is a subject, not a citizen. Formally, as per Pakistan's Constitution, a non-Muslim citizen of Pakistan can be half-Pakistani or two-thirds Pakistani but never a full Pakistani. But in real terms the price is in terms of constant fear, denied employment opportunities, discrimination at the workplace and socially, and restricted mobility. Non-Muslims hope to be less noticeable and name their children appropriately but back in the 1950's the names of Karachi's Christians were usually biblically derived. Boys could be Jacob, Joseph, Michael, Paul, Peter, Robert, etc. Girls were often Mary, Pauline, Rachel, Rita, Ruth, etc. Changed circumstances have led to safer names: Emaan, Hina, Iqbal, Maryum, Naveed, Saima, Shafqat, Shahbaz etc. Survival in a hostile milieu demands camouflaging. Today even a 13 year-old (or younger) Hindu or Christian girl can be kidnapped and legally converted to Islam. A parliamentary committee rejected the anti-forced conversion bill.<sup>32</sup>

Religious minorities did not expect to get a good deal once Partition took place, and that expectation was borne out. The number of Hindus and Sikhs left behind in Pakistani Punjab is miniscule, and the only sizeable Hindu population is in Sind. Many are anxious to leave.<sup>33</sup> At the instant of Pakistan's birth one could have argued that pluralism would arrive by slow degrees. Well into the early sixties the English speaking native elite from the Raj days was still firmly in command. Religious right-wing parties in Pakistan that opposed equal citizenship rights, in particular Jamaat-e-Islami and Deobandis, did not as yet have enough members with sufficient education or skills to be significant players in governing the new country. This fact allowed many non-Muslims to continue with their pre-partition positions in the civil service and armed forces.

Although a movement centered on Muslim identity had created Pakistan, non-Muslims took heart from Jinnah's celebrated 11 August 1947 speech assuring them that they "may belong to any religion or caste or creed; that has nothing to do with the business of the State". Jinnah's appointment of Jogendra Nath Mandal, a Hindu, as Pakistan's first law minister made it seem serious. By choosing Chaudhry Zafarullah Khan, an Ahmadi, as the first foreign minister of Pakistan Jinnah sent a strong message of reassurance to Ahmadis. They were then, of course, legally Muslims and many were well placed in official positions. Only a few of Jinnah's close associates disagreed, and that too in private

The unraveling of pluralism happened in slow motion. The first hint that Pakistan would be not just a Muslim state but a Sunni Muslim state came when Jinnah's state funeral was not led by a Shia *alim*, as is the Shia custom. Instead a Sunni Deobandi *alim*, Shabbir Ahmed Usmani, was selected for the task. The Objectives Resolution, passed by the Constituent Assembly in 1949, was a sure indication that pluralism was headed for the rocks. This legislation introduced the term "religious minority" into the constitutional lexicon, making explicit that Pakistan would henceforth officially differentiate between its citizens on the basis of their held religion. It was supported by Shia members of the Assembly, as well as those who were Ahmadis.

The first large scale religious violence happened in 1953 when Lahore was engulfed in anti-Ahmadi riots leaving hundreds dead. The Ahmadis had supported Jinnah's Two Nation Theory believing that they would be better off in an Islamic Pakistan than a secular India. In 1956 Pakistan underwent a name change and became the Islamic Republic of Pakistan with Islam now formally the religion of the state. Minorities could practice their religions but only if the practices were allowed by the principles of "of democracy, freedom, equality, tolerance and social justice as enunciated by Islam". Constitutionally no non-Muslim could become head of state or army chief.

Although these changes had occurred at a high political level, society remained open and liberal. Karachi, Lahore, and Quetta were culturally diverse metropolises with wine shops, women in fashionable clothes, and cinema houses showing the latest movies. Several Christians, like Flight Commander Cecil Chaudhury and Wing Commander Mervyn Leslie Middlecoat, were prominent in the list of war heroes of the 1965 war. It was sometime in the 1970's that this relative open-mindedness began to fade. Large sections of Pakistan's Christian, Hindu, and Parsi communities saw the writing on the wall. Many chose to emigrate rather than continue living their lives on the margins. The West had an open immigration policy at the time. Since non-Muslims were among the best educated and skilled, the loss of human capital was large. One talked about "brain drain" in those days.

In earlier years the definition of religious minority encompassed Hindus, Christians and Parsis. But in 1974 there was an addition – the Ahmadis. By an act of parliament they were formally declared non-Muslims. Emboldened, elements in the religious establishment demanded that smaller Muslim communities, such as the Ismailis and Zikris, should also be expelled from Islam. Shias and Ahmadis had both been enthusiastic about Pakistan but were now being forced to reassess. Chaudhri Zafarullah Khan, commended by Jinnah for eloquently arguing the Two-Nation Theory, lived long enough to see disillusionment. So did the physics Nobel Prize winner, Professor Abdus Salam, who was also a vociferous supporter of the idea of Pakistan. Ahmadis held senior positions in the armed forces, and some were celebrated as war heroes in having fought against India in the 1947 and 1965 wars.

Nevertheless, the inevitable happened: once religion was placed at the very center of state and governance, the question of which version of Islam was correct became bitterly contentious. The Two Nation Theory was falling victim to its own contradictions. Ironically, Ahmadis were among the strongest proponents of the division of India. But today they are undoubtedly the most fearful, and the most strongly discriminated against. Those who remain are fearful, conscious that any dispute with “real” Muslims could instantly result in their being falsely accused of blasphemy.

Until Zia-ul-Haq’s Islamization Pakistan’s Shias did not have the self-image of a religious minority. In fact they had joined Sunnis in supporting Mr. Bhutto’s 1974 decision to declare Ahmadis as non-Muslim. They too paid a price. In the years after 9/11, tribal areas were convulsed in sectarian warfare: Kurram, Parachinar, and Hangu became killing grounds for both Sunni and Shia, but with most casualties being Shia. In 2024, after a relative lull, sectarian war took a particularly bloody turn in Parachinar.<sup>34</sup>

That Shias are deviants from the Islamic faith was certainly whispered in pre-Partition days although, unlike today, this was never broadcast from minarets as is done today.<sup>35</sup> In 2020, huge crowds estimated at 100,000 or more gathered in Karachi chanting the slogan *shia-kafir* and 42 cases of blasphemy were recorded against Shias for allegedly slandering the companions of the Holy Prophet.<sup>36</sup> Government representatives such as the chairman of the Ruet-e-Hilal Committee, Mufti Muneebur Rahman, were present in the crowd that held aloft banners Ameer Yazid Zindabad – the ultimate provocation for Shias.<sup>37</sup> This mufti was the key mediator that restored the extremist TLP into Pakistan’s political mainstream in 2021.<sup>38</sup>

Every applicant for a Pakistani passport must declare his faith. Choosing the non-Muslim option comes with a cost. The only Pakistani government that sought to remove the religion entry in passports was that of General Pervez Musharraf. In October 2004, as a new system for issuing machine readable passports was being installed, the word was let out that passports would be issued without applicants having to specify their religion. The reaction was fierce. Islamic parties denounced this as a grand conspiracy aimed at secularizing Pakistan and destroying its Islamic character. But even before they actually took to the streets, the government lost nerve and the volte-face was announced on 24 March 2005 by Information Minister Sheikh Rashid who said the decision to revive the religion column was made else, “Qadianis and other apostates would be able to pose as Muslims and perform pilgrimage in Saudi Arabia”.<sup>39</sup>

As Pakistan careens from Al-Bakistan to Turko-Pakistan in search of identity, its minorities live in the shadow of fear. They know that their departure would be welcomed by the country’s majority but,

should they insist upon staying, they will have to agree to behave as the majority wants them to. The demands of survival require that the non-Muslim be as unobtrusive as possible and conceal his identity. Unequal treatment is to be expected and they should not expect support from more than a handful of Muslims. In 2020, when religious zealots blocked the construction of the officially sanctioned Shri Krishna Mandir in Islamabad, most citizens applauded. This would have been first new place of worship for the 3,000 Hindus residing in the country's capital.<sup>40</sup> The year 2020 ended with a mob looting and then setting fire to a Hindu temple in Karak, KPK.<sup>41</sup>

### **Price of prejudice**

Hindu revivalists get upset at scientific evidence that points at an Aryan invasion which brought foreigners to Indian soil and even more upset when presented by evidence that the liturgical language of the Vedas actually originated from outside India. But on the whole the Hindus of India are happy with their identity because they like to think they are people of the soil. Soon after Partition, India under Nehru had rapidly embraced its racially and ethnically diverse population. With 22 constitutionally recognized different languages and 800 dialects, what could be the basis of unity? In his book *The Discovery of India* which was written while in jail, Nehru saw India emerging from a teleological principle – multiculturalism and an abstract national spirit. He fired a warning shot at Hindutva – then a weak force – which sought to create an identity around India as a mother:

It was absurd, of course, to think of India or any country as a kind of anthropomorphic entity. I did not do so. I was also fully aware of the diversities and divisions of Indian life, of classes, castes, religions, races, different degrees of cultural development. Yet I think that a country with a long cultural background and a common outlook on life develops a spirit that is peculiar to it and that is impressed on all its children, however much they may differ among themselves. Can anyone fail to see this in China, whether he meets an old-fashioned mandarin or a Communist who has apparently broken with the past? It was this spirit of India that I was after, not through idle curiosity, though I was curious enough, but because I felt that it might give me some key to the understanding of my country and people, some guidance to thought and action. Politics and elections were day to day affairs when we grew excited over trumpery matters. But if we were going to build the house of India's future, strong and secure and beautiful, we would have to dig deep for the foundations.<sup>42</sup>

Nehru overtly privileged cultural diversity and tolerance. And so until Hindutva emerged as the dominant political force, Muslims, Sikhs, and Christians were proud to declare themselves Indian.

For Pakistanis, cultural identification worked differently. Jinnah and the Muslim League, fearing diversity and difference, insisted a Pakistani identity could only be achieved through Islam. Centralization and ideologically driven unity was the principal tenet of nationhood. The insistence then – as it is today – was that Islam would provide a broad set of values acceptable to all citizens. Yet that set of values could not be agreed upon. With the exception of Punjab, cultural identification has not happened.

Excluding non-Muslims from full citizenship has come at great cost to Pakistan, a cost that it does not want to acknowledge or recognize but which makes entering the competitive modern world difficult. Pakistan's Muslim dominated elite chose to deprive itself even of the best and brightest non-Muslims in

the years after Partition. This had a devastating effect upon institutional and organizational culture. Although very few non-Muslims were left after Partition, the psychological consequence of excluding the remaining ones from high positions was huge. Once it is accepted that merit is insufficient to land you the position or job that you are suited for, cracks widen until the structure starts creaking and ultimately collapses. Over the decades Pakistan's universities have been reduced to academic wastelands. Except perhaps for agricultural and biotechnology laboratories, closing down the rest would go unnoticed by the world of science. Because no real skills are imparted except by a few universities for the superrich, the economy would not notice the change.

Religious prejudice led to Pakistan's most famous scientist and sole Nobel Prize winner – Abdus Salam – being an outcast in the land of his birth. From the mid 1960's he had been very influential in creating scientific infrastructure in a country which had barely any at the time. But in 1974 his Ahmadiyya community was declared non-Muslim after which his acceptability and influence vanished. No road in any city bears his name and the sole institution in Pakistan that bears his name – the Abdus Salam School for Mathematical Studies (Lahore) – is too afraid to either display his name on the signboard or on official stationery. Others of the same city who have accomplished magnificent feats also remain unrecognized. Har Gobind Khorana (1922-2011) was born in Multan, earned his MSc degree from Government College Lahore in 1946 and went on to earn the Nobel Prize in Physiology in 1968 for his work in protein synthesis via nucleotides. In 1983 another son of Lahore, Subrahmanyan Chandrasekhar (1910-1995), became a Nobel Laureate in Physics after his definitive work on the death of stars. NASA's satellite, named Chandra, searches the skies for black holes and other unusual astronomical objects. As with Salam, no signboard in Lahore acknowledges the existence of either Khorana or Chandrasekhar. Nevertheless they must still be considered fortunate at being spared the vilification that Salam must endure.

### **The Overseas Pakistani**

*dhobi ka kutta, na ghar ka na ghat ka*

(Urdu/Hindi proverb: The washerman's dog has no hearth nor home)

ABCD is an acronym for American Born Confused Desi. Since millions of South Asians live in traditionally white countries, its inventor could have been either Indian or Pakistani. Distinct by color of skin and facial features, their search for identity and social meaning – collective or individual, ascribed or constructed – is intense for many. The tension between religious, national, and ethno-linguistic identities is sometimes wrenching. Perhaps more than other Muslims, immigrants from Pakistan to the West feel at sea when asked by their children: What is our culture? Where do we really belong to? A few parents respond by identifying themselves through their ethnic origins. Most simply say: we are Muslims.

Of course, people have been crossing borders and settling in distant lands for thousands of years but there is something distinct and unique about the present globalized era where people, goods and ideas freely move from one area to another. Television, followed by the internet, have made instant communication possible and allowed many different kinds of imagined communities to coexist.

Unlike many Pakistanis born in Pakistan, second generation Pakistanis born in western societies do not ache for Arab or Turkish roots. They search for their identity in the country to which their parents belong. In that sense they are similar to Indians born overseas. But, when compared to Indian second

generationers, Pakistanis belonging to the same cohort have done far less well in academia, business, and the professions. Most Pakistani communities, particularly in Britain and Canada, are tightly bound and introverted. They emphasize clan loyalty, give jobs to family members and friends, marriages within the family is strongly encouraged, and honor killings happen from time to time. Urdu is spoken at home, with family evenings spent watching television programs broadcast from Pakistan. Calls are made from time to time by various groups that western societies would be better off having sharia and that, at least for Muslims, should become the law of the land.

Palpable fear of losing or diluting one's original identity has become still more evident in recent times because religion has trumped nationalism as a marker of identity. In western cities such as Toronto, Sunnis and Shias live in separate communities while Ahmadis – who have a large presence – are shunned by both. Imams who have never lived in a western society and who do not approve of its norms are imported from abroad, either Pakistan or Saudi Arabia. Religious education and homeschooling causes Pakistanis in cities such as Bradford, Birmingham, and Manchester to underachieve. Much of this comes from an insistence on children learning Arabic verses by rote and through deliberately dulling the child's natural propensity to ask questions.

The embrace of Islam as their identity marker, and a rejection of values espoused by the host society, has led to migration becoming the biggest political issue within Europe in recent times. It has also led to a deep alienation of the Muslim youth. On the one hand they do not fit into western society but, on the other, they cannot relate to life back in Pakistan. Some visit relatives only to find Pakistani society too ridden with problems of lawlessness and corruption to be attractive. Disaffected ones take a third route – political Islam. Da'esh has benefited from the angst and frustration from such individuals.

### **Pakistani Identity: Could One Emerge?**

Pretending to be what you are not can result in strange, bizarre behavior. As with other types of disorders, this kind of delusion can be passed on from parents to their children, which makes it more dangerous. It is surely time for the peoples of Pakistan to come to terms with what they really are. In the age of globalization and of the ever-accelerating intermingling of elements in which we are all caught up, a new concept of identity is urgently needed. This is as true for Pakistanis within Pakistan as for those who born outside its border and living outside but who still have a vicarious relationship.

A rational approach to the identity question must disavow parochial identities in favour of a global identity. There can, of course, be any number of other subsidiary identities – religious, ethnic, linguistic, national, or gender – but a rationalist sees them as add-ons.

Pakistan seeks the very opposite. Its ruling establishment has goaded society into inventing nostalgia for cultures that it never knew and which have never been its own. An infatuation first with Arab culture, and then Turkish culture, is being encouraged. More worrying is the evident desire of culture managers to form a self-image of Pakistan as a warrior nation besieged by hostile forces. Only war is admired – not music, art, or science. So, even though Arab or Turkish culture are considered superior and worthy of emulation, nothing is being copied from their scholarly and intellectual traditions. This has led to enormous confusion and nervousness: what am I and where do I come from?

Here is a simple proposition for every Muslim Pakistani: instead of imagining India arbitrarily divided into Indus and Ganga civilizations some arbitrary number of millennia ago, or thrilling to the clatter of

hooves bringing your ancestors here from Central Asia or Turkey, simply try accepting that it was the force of history and circumstance that brought you to South Asia or wherever you were born. You could have been born in Birmingham or New York to parents from Mirpur or Sukkur. Study after study has established the scientific fact that your genes are no different from that of a Hindu, Sikh, or Christian. That's because somewhere along your family tree when someone changed religion, his or her genes stayed put.

The evolutionary needs of humans have changed and will continue to change beyond what you and I can presently imagine. Just a century or two ago it made a lot of sense to identify with those from your village and to be able to tell the difference between them and those from the next village. We know that this kind of identification made possible the emergence of a species that ended up controlling the earth and all that live upon it.

### **Can Pakistan Ever Become A Nation?**

Partition did not serve the interests of either the Muslims or Hindus of the subcontinent. But now that it is irreversible, there is excellent reason for Pakistan to be: *it must be because it is!* The cost of disappearance or destruction of this nuclear weapon state would have globally cataclysmic consequences. While Pakistan was not a nation at its inception, it could possibly become one in the decades ahead. For this to happen it must seek new roots lying within its present social reality rather than religion. This does not negate the fact that religion will remain an important part of Pakistani society for the foreseeable future.

Look at it this way: rain inevitably grinds down stony mountains over centuries and ultimately creates fertile soil. Similarly, nations are inevitably formed when people experience a common environment and live together for long enough. How long is long? In Pakistan's case the time scale could be fairly short. Its people are diverse but almost all understand Urdu. They watch the same television programs, hear the same radio stations, deal with the same irritating and inefficient bureaucracy, use the same badly written textbooks, buy similar products, and despise the same set of rulers. Slowly but surely, a Pakistani culture is emerging. But nationhood is still not guaranteed in autocratic states that have some ideology forcibly imposed upon it. Both the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia broke apart after seventy years. Whether Pakistan's self-seeking rulers are willing to learn from this sober fact is unclear.

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