

# Culture wars in Pakistan

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## **The struggle for a better Pakistan is also a struggle against forgetting, against falsification of history, against misuse of religion and manipulation of identity**

Since the 1980s, the classical divide between the Left and the Right over questions such as resource distribution and class antagonism are no longer politically central. In a world in which the profit motive became the central principle for organising economic life, the category of 'culture' has been elevated as the principal site for ideological battles.

From the US to Europe to India, the political Right has turned questions of national purity into major electoral concerns by proposing a pristine identity perpetually threatened by foreign elements within the nation.

A couple of events last week in Pakistan highlight the importance of cultural tropes and identitarian markers in Pakistan's political discourse. The first was a Pakhtun Culture Day event, organised by the Pashtun Student Council, at Punjab University. The event was disrupted by a brutal attack by members of the Islami Jamiat-e-Talaba, who claimed that Pashto music and the traditional 'attan' dance were against "our culture" and hence, could not be tolerated. A senior leader of the Jamaat-e-Islami, Liaqat Baloch, defended the IJT's actions, suggesting that a violent response is natural if there is dancing on campuses. This is a chilling statement, considering the similar line of reasoning used by those justifying the attacks at Sehwan Sharif only a month ago.

In an unrelated but similar incident, a PTI MNA recently asserted that, since Pakistan was created on the basis of Islam, all "secularists" should migrate from the country to foreign lands. To emphasise that his statement represented his core beliefs and was not merely a slip of tongue, the honourable member of the house repeated his claims on social media by quoting Jinnah, winning praise from the self-proclaimed guardians of the 'Pakistan ideology'.

Now, there is nothing inherently wrong with disliking musical events (except perhaps poor taste) or with viewing the history of the Pakistan Movement as having been intertwined with the popular desire for Islamic law. One can discuss the merits of cultural activities on campuses or the nuances of Colonial India's history – but neither justify nor explain the kind of violent outbursts witnessed in each case.

Why would a dance by some 20-year-olds lead to clashes that end with the use of tear-gas by the police and heightened security on campuses? Similarly, why would a law-maker suggest that those who disagree with him on history should leave the country (perhaps not realising how the business of expelling individuals and communities from the national body led to some of the worst tragedies in modern history, including the rise of fascism in Europe)?

Such reactions are manifestations not of religious or national zeal, but stem from a deep sense of fear and insecurity. And it this fear, and the fragility from which it stems, that we must question if we are to understand such outbursts and think of ways of overcoming them.

Psychoanalysis informs us that human personality, and the consequent individual and collective

identities, are neither inherent nor fixed, but are constructed through social interaction that allows us to identify with a particular set of identitarian markers. Such a process necessarily entails repressing certain features of the past and the present to give coherence and stability to our identity. Yet, we can never be fully identical to a given identity, since we always contain multiple histories and cultures within our unconscious, even if we never fully acknowledge their existence.

When we confront those repressed elements in the form of the presence or actions of others, they appear as attempts to disrupt, if not annihilate, the identity we have formed through the stories we tell ourselves about who we are. This leads to what is known as “narcissistic mortification”, an intense feeling of terror when faced with elements that threaten not because they are foreign, but because they are too intimate and internal to our psyche, producing a split within ourselves. This feeling of fragility and fear often leads to the desire of violently removing such images and practices in a desperate attempt to safeguard the identity that anchors our personality.

We then begin an endless process of purging and purification that is simultaneously aimed at others and oneself, since the horror induced by their presence stems from their ability to remind us of a truth within ourselves that we would like to repress. In other words, when we punish others in the name of a pristine culture, we are simply punishing ourselves, and the violence directed at these others is nothing but violence on the self.

Consider the rather pathetic demand recently made by a BJP leader to demolish Jinnah’s house in Mumbai since it “reminds” him of Partition. Whether he remembers or forgets Partition is inconsequential to the fact that it did take place, and no amount of violence and destruction of symbols will change the course of history. Since the inability to deal with the traumas of the past only results in an impossible desire to purge the present of that past, it does not take long to start equating all Indian Muslims as reminders/remnants of that past. This then leads to the rise of fascist forces and the concomitant communal tensions that have plagued India’s recent history.

Pakistan’s tense relationship with cultural diversity, and the insistence on a homogenous, monolithic cultural ‘essence’, has also resulted in this endless search for purity that is easily proclaimed but hard to find and impossible to inhabit. The end result is that cultural events invoke not mere criticism but brute violence, since they pose a challenge to a fragile identity based on a flight from history. Similarly, since the story of our independence, with all its messiness, is now frozen in a neat and simplistic history of good versus evil (with ‘secularists’ signifying the latter camp), one can expel evil since it undermines the purity of the *raison d’être* of our existence.

What this manifests is our failure to adequately deal with the primary wound of our collective identity – our own past. We have thus far failed to acknowledge that no matter what ideological goal we set out for ourselves (whether conservative, liberal, leftist, etc), there will always remain residues from the past within the social world we inhabit. An inability to deal with the presence of residual elements does not obliterate them, but turns it into an element that haunts our psyche by disrupting our process of self-identification.

The good news, however, is that one need not always have such a pathological relationship with one’s own past. We can accept that certain events that had a momentous impact on the course of history did occur, and there is no ‘going back’ to a pristine ‘Indian’, ‘Pakistani’, ‘Pakhtun’ or ‘Punjabi’ culture. Instead, one must recognise oneself and the social world we inhabit as a product of a long history of encounters that happened, missed encounters that could have happened but didn’t, and encounters that are yet to happen in the future.

Thus, rather than a wound that paralyses us, the presence of these multiple histories within ourselves can become a source of regeneration. Instead of viewing the lack of correspondence

between society and our sense of self as a source of embarrassment, it will allow us to recognise that we are always more than what we think we are, overcoming the limits imposed by rigid cultural boundaries through our personal and collective will.

In a world plagued by monstrous inequalities, wars, and a looming environmental catastrophe that threatens to send human beings into oblivion, engaging in an endless and meaningless fight over our 'true identity' is not only naive, it is criminal. What we need today is a certain modesty towards the existence of a past, but an uncompromising boldness towards the future. Only then will we overcome the fear of our own history and finally come together, in all our personal and collective diversity, to face the challenges that threaten the very survival of the human species.

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**P.S.**

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