

# The Pakistan experiment

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**We recently witnessed the country celebrating its 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of independence. Until a day before, there was fury at the corruption of the elites and the impending clash between national institutions. On the 14<sup>th</sup> of August, the language of doom and gloom was abruptly replaced with 'positive' words such as resilience, unity, love etc, highlighting the power of rituals to suspend the normal flow of events.**

Yet, rituals also possess the power to remove us from the dizzying pace of contemporary events and apply a critical gaze over our past to in order to learn from it. In Pakistan, however, this opportunity is almost always missed, with media houses, academics and even ordinary citizens competing to outdo each other in showering praise on the nation. Even when discussions do take place, they continue to operate within old binaries, showing the shackles placed on political imagination in the country.

Consider, for example, the endless (but stale) debate over what kind of a vision Jinnah proposed for Pakistan. Those who are concerned about locating Pakistan's essence in religious difference emphasise a rigid version of the Two-Nation Theory, where Hindus and Muslims represent two exclusive communities, with little or nothing in common. The more enthusiastic proponents of this theory argue that Pakistan's genesis can be traced from the early Muslim conquests in the Subcontinent. In other words, conquerors such as Mohammad Bin Qasim and Mahmud of Ghazni were Pakistanis well before there was a state that could issue them a national passport, and history is a mere excuse for revealing this essential truth.

On the other hand, the more liberally-inclined commentators often repeat Jinnah's 11<sup>th</sup> August speech (as well as invoking his liberal lifestyle) in which he called not only for religious freedom, but also proclaimed the state's neutrality in terms of religion. This is taken as proof of the decidedly 'secular' future envisioned Jinnah before the country was hijacked by Islamists.

The problem arises from the fact, however, that both these points of view can justify themselves using the writings, speeches and actions of Jinnah. This is not to suggest that Jinnah was purposely trying to mislead the population. Instead, it simply draws attention to the complex political terrain of the 1940s in colonial India, both in terms of immediate political concerns and the long-term prospects of establishing nation-states in the Subcontinent.

We know how Jinnah's political views were influenced by Western legal reasoning, something that can be discerned from his efforts during the Lucknow Pact of 1916, or the 14 points he delivered as a possible resolution of Hindu-Muslim tensions. However, to be accepted as a legitimate leader of the Muslims by the National Congress and the British, he needed to demonstrate his popularity among Muslims voters. There is dissonance between the arguments used by Jinnah in his speeches during protests and electoral meetings, in which he would often emphasise the absolute differences between Hindus and Muslims, and his strictly constitutional language during correspondence with the colonial state.

Again, such apparent contradictions cannot be dismissed in simplistic terms such as 'hypocrisy' but

point to the contradictory terrain navigated by political leaders in Colonial India, particularly with regards to the exigencies of mass politics and constitutional legitimacy. This tension was especially heightened with regards to the political direction of the new nation-state, since its geographical and ideological contours remained uncertain, not least because of the hasty way in which Partition was finalised by the British.

Add to that the problem of the physical distance between West Pakistan and East Pakistan, not to mention the different ethnic groups in the former who were anxious about their own place in the polity, and one can grasp the challenges faced by the new nation-state. It is for this reason that contemporary scholars privilege the element of novelty over tradition in the formation of Pakistan, since it was based not on the traditional national elements such as race or language, but was centred around religious identity of a geographically and linguistically disparate people. Notwithstanding claims to make Pakistan conform with some pristine 'Islamic' past, the fact that no nation-state had ever been created solely for Muslims, let alone for 'Islam', explains the possibilities (and anxieties) attached to the fate of this country.

That is why Jinnah would often describe Pakistan as a "laboratory" (he used it more than just in the context of an "Islamic laboratory") and compared nation-building to an experiment. And as with all experiments, it requires massive debate, internal criticism, a challenge to each premise, and in its most radical form, even the possibility of abandonment. No matter what side of the political divide one occupies, it is difficult to deny the open-ended nature of Pakistan at its inception, contingent upon political developments and the collective wisdom of the people. This is why despite accepting the convenient term of "Pakistan ideology" as self-evident, we are always unable to come to any consensus on its meaning. The fact is that there was never such a consensus, not even inside the Muslim League led by Jinnah.

This leads us to ponder what purpose is served by an obsession with a fixed origin for the Pakistani nation, one that is so overwhelming that it seems to have determined our future as well. The obvious result of this framing has been to set a rigid boundary on political imagination in the country, with critical voices demonised for betraying the supposed 'national ideology'. Since the early 1950s, the charge of lacking patriotism, or worse still, of being Indian agents, has been liberally deployed by those in power to attack activists and intellectuals demanding a more inclusive country. The result is that the much-needed debate about the country's future has given way to loud but clichéd expressions of loyalty to the state.

The combination of ignorance of history with an arrogance of imposing a particular viewpoint on the entire population has had disastrous consequences. Already, our inability to listen and debate played a major part the dismemberment of the country in 1971. The class, ethnic and gender faultlines continue to grow, yet we keep viewing them as 'deviations' from a historically determined past, rather than provocations for rethinking the future of our polity.

We must now shun the fiction that there is (or ever was) a fixed ideology for Pakistan, and embrace the true challenge of being independent – ie that we are agents in an open-ended experiment, whose future will be decided through the force of reason and our collective wisdom. Those who stifle free speech in the name of nationalism not only indulge in tyrannical behaviour, but also betray this responsibility that freedom bestows upon us all.

Today, with the rapidly changing geopolitical realities amidst the increasing fragility of nation-states around the world, we must encourage dissent and debate on the future of the state-citizen relationship in Pakistan. Otherwise, we shall continue repeating the tragedy of sacrificing our brightest minds at the altar of an imagined and reified view of history.

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**P.S.**

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