

***Comment***

## **South Asia? Middle East? Pakistan: Location, Identity**

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### **I**

Whenever some ministry or department of the Government of Pakistan organises an event for the benefit of foreigners – officials, tourists or investors – it publishes brochures and flyers which claim, proudly, that Pakistan is located at a particularly important and profitable geographical location, at the confluence of at least three (but occasionally four) civilisations or regional groupings. This publicity material talks about Pakistan's historic and ancestral links with the Muslim world in West Asia (or the Gulf or Middle East) as part of a larger Islamic and Muslim civilisation and identity, both historical and contemporary, and also includes a second region, that of the Central Asian Republics, many of which also have 'Islamic' or 'Muslim' markers and have belonged to a much broader Islamic civilisation of some centuries ago. The third region to which Pakistan is also claimed to belong – for which the term 'civilisation' would cause great problems for the officials who write such publicity blurbs, and hence is not used – is that of South Asia, a name primarily for a pre-partition (or, according to one view, post-independence, Greater) India, from which Pakistan was born. Both Central and West Asia have had an undeniably formative impact on this third region, now known as South Asia. Depending on the political mood of the times and on the audience, a fourth site through which an association is claimed, is that of the ancient Chinese civilisation with references to the Silk Route, and a more contemporary relationship is also invoked with western China's large Muslim population.

These references are not merely geographical or locational, but often conscious choices, which suggest that far more is at work than merely a lesson in geography. The selling point in this act of public relationing is the underlying claim that the state of Pakistan belongs to multiple and often conflicting regions and identities, but anyone who can

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pay the right price, can use this location to their advantage, to whatever purpose, ranging from those related to trade, investment, or even as bases for military exploits into neighbouring countries. As long as you pay, you get your way. While many, such as those who belong to the institutions of the state, celebrate this eclecticism which results in multi-polar identities being created for the purpose of profit, one could, in fact, argue, that this lack of rootedness causes a condition which results in uncertain, fluid and schizophrenic behaviour. To make matters more interesting, this desire *not to belong* to any one particular region – despite geography, location and history – in other words, the conscious choice to remain unrooted, may be a consequence of a very rational thought process.

Many of the questions which one can raise about the location and identity of a country, are difficult to answer. What constitutes a ‘country’? Is it merely the nation state which represents what a country is? In a country where the state is strong, over-developed, and unrepresentative, who ‘speaks for that country’? It might be possible to examine the nature of a particular state – its class and ethnic composition, its forms, institutions, politics, and the practice of power and the ability to use it to do violence – but is this the same as trying to understand the identity of a country particularly with regard to its location? Rather than try to grapple with these questions directly, this paper looks at what one can make of ‘Pakistan’s’ identity in terms of culture, politics and institutions, with regard to its location and relationship with and in the spaces surrounding it. In fact, to put it more squarely the question one can ask is: Does Pakistan ‘belong’ to South Asia?

## II

The term and notion of ‘South Asia’ replaced the older and much used ‘Indian subcontinent’, soon after being coined by the US State Department when it boxed the world into different regions so that its officials could get a quick and uncomplicated grasp of global geography. This regionalisation of many parts of the world forced the people who were being so classified, to ‘belong to’ a particular region. Perhaps in some regions there was a natural affinity and shared cultural history to want to belong, perhaps even on the basis of equal or shared power. Where many similar-sized countries were clubbed into a region, one could imagine their desire to be represented at a larger political level, so that the benefits and advantages – political and cultural – which do not accrue to one country on its own, could accrue to all or many, collectively. In some cases, despite differences of numerous kinds, trade, commerce and economic activity, helped to create easily recognisable

regions, having assumed many shared traits or identity. Yet, the idea of South Asia has been troubled from the start, and continues to cause problems of association and that of identity, for some of its constituents.

The two largest countries of South Asia differ sharply on the nature of the moment of their departure from their pasts which, I feel, is the core reason why a more meaningful notion of South Asia has not emerged. India and Indians – ranging from the more vituperative types, to the more amiable liberal and ‘progressive’ – are all agreed that Partition was a tragedy. It is their sense of loss, which accounts for this tragic mood. The loss of land, people, and for many, shared cultures and histories breaking with the past, which makes Partition a tragedy for them. Yet, this idea of loss and tragedy is specific to a particular generation and to some regional/ethnic groups of India. This idea is primarily a Punjabi, or perhaps more broadly, north Indian, view, also articulated by Hindu chauvinists and some Indian nationalists. The voices from the south of India, whether in Tamil, Malayalam or Telugu, are probably less vocal about the extent of tragedy Partition brought upon them, and may perhaps be less concerned with the issue to pass judgement. Clearly, how ‘India’ feels about the tragedy of Partition is far more complex and complicated than what one hears at Independence Day seminars at the India International Centre in Delhi.

Likewise, this birth of a country perceived as tragedy in one, is celebrated, as a moment of a birth like any other – erred, no doubt, but celebrated, nevertheless – in the country which has come into being. Two sharper and more discordant views would be difficult to find, and neither is fully aware of, or understands, how the other feels. In Pakistan too, there are those for whom this birth, the moment of independence, has little meaning, but it would be safe to say that there are many more who celebrated the coming into being of a new country, than those who were unaware of, or indifferent to, this fact. Whether this celebration leads to the need to belong to a large entity called South Asia, is a different matter.

If the Pakistani state were to accept wholeheartedly, and to embrace the idea of South Asia, the rationale for Partition and for an independent homeland for Muslims, would be undermined, or at least, questioned. If Pakistan were to accede to a request to reunite with India or to form a South Asian Federation in which the balance of power and scale would under no conditions be in the Pakistani state’s favour, it is believed that the reasons for its creation would come undone. While it is the nature of Pakistan’s birth from India which creates a hurdle for the Pakistani state to embrace the idea of a South Asia, existing imbalances

in what is known as South Asia further cause an identity crisis for Pakistan.

Another reason, perhaps now more important than the form and nature of its birth which hinders such a union, is the present domination of India in any entity which includes smaller countries and nations. This hegemonic dominance of one country over all others could be acceptable to some of the very smaller countries which form such a group – they may have no choice in the matter – but countries with pretensions of equal status are unlikely to agree to any such terms. The pride associated with being a nuclear state does not allow the leaders of a country to bow down their heads in front of others. The often repeated statement, ‘we are a nuclear power’, has given rise to illusions of grandeur in which Pakistan is seen far superior to many, and at par with, other countries. India’s huge dominance over South Asia, in every form, does not allow the nurturing of a notion in which there is one spoiler who claims to be an equal.

While the Pakistani state (the military, more correctly), is not willing to play the South Asia game and makes a conscious choice to opt out, that still does not answer the question posed earlier, whether Pakistan belongs to South Asia or not. If the ‘state’ has its problems, how do those who constitute the country known as ‘Pakistan’ fare? Here again, the desire (by Indians, largely) to create an entity called South Asia, falters, for a large part of what is today Pakistan, contests (culturally, politically, associationally) whether it actually belongs to the existing boundaries of what is South Asia.

Very much like the smaller border regions of northeast India where many tribes and communities live and contest their forceful integration into India, the major landmass of two of Pakistan’s provinces west of the Indus – NWFP and Balochistan - claim genealogical and historical cultural roots across the border, in the opposite direction to the migrants from Bihar, Hyderabad and UP, now settled in Karachi or Sukkur. These migrants, or present day ‘*muhajirs*’, brought their cultural histories from lands many hundreds and thousands of miles away to the east, Pakistani Punjabis can see their ancestral lands across the border of Partition. For the *muhajirs* and the Pakistani Punjabis, their identities are closely entwined into what is South Asia, a concept in which they can find much affinity, and an idea in which they can find much hope and promise. On being asked, ‘*aur aap kahaan say hain?*’ (and, where are you from?), many young *muhajirs*, based on where their grandparents came from, answer: ‘*hum Lukhnow say hain*’ (we [even if it is just one person answering] are from Lucknow), or wherever else their ancestors may have migrated from, not even knowing where it is on the

map. For the older generation which migrated, their *watan* or *gaon* is another country, and the hope of incorporating their own (new) country along with another older one into a far larger entity called South Asia allows them hope to return to the burial grounds of their forefathers.

However, those who live in the province still called the North West Frontier Province, and Balochistan, have very different cultural roots, and relationships with very different geographical regions. They look west and northwest rather than east, as do their Punjabi or *muhajir* countrymen. Not only do they have markedly different languages and cultures, but by being on the fringes of British India, they have remained a fair distance from the core experience of what we know as colonialism. The idea of South Asia, which is hegemonically Indian, and north Indian at that, is further away from them than is Farghana, Kabul or eastern (Baloch) Iran. Their interest in working for and promoting the idea of South Asia, can only be political, and hardly cultural. Their *watan* is a long way from Bihar Sharif.

Hence, the constituency to promote an idea called South Asia, falls by the wayside, when seen from the Pakistani side, both from the point of view of the military state's ideology, and from that of the Baloch and Pakhtuns, because of their primal identity based on their location. Perhaps the only ethnic groups who have a desire to belong to South Asia, are those who 'came from there', the *muhajirs* and the Punjabis, the largest and the most powerful of the many nationalities/ethnic groupings in Pakistan. Moreover, in terms of 'progressive' politics too, the idea of South Asia is attractive, for it undermines the domestic hegemony and power of the Pakistani military and statist establishment, but only to be replaced by a larger 'Indian' hegemony in its stead.

### III

While Pakistan's location has not shifted in the last 36 years – although the 2007 Pakistan is half of what it was in 1947 – there has been a marked shift in terms of its identity and association. If what is now Pakistan was somewhat closer to, and more part of, the larger South Asian, or better still, 'Indian subcontinental', identity in the past, it has now corrected its *qibla* – *apna qibla durust kar liya hai* (it has now corrected its direction). The numerous references to Islam and Muslim in the opening paragraph of this paper with regard to Pakistan, emphasize a relationship which has evolved over the last four decades, with an identity which is extra-locational. Despite being part of a multi-religious South Asia, Pakistan is almost entirely Muslim (97 percent), and unlike Bangladesh, is in very close geographical proximity to the many Muslims

that abound in the countries west of its border, factors that give it now a distinctively Muslim look. The Indian-ness of much of Pakistan in the early years following Independence has been replaced by a far greater Islamic/Muslim identity, Bollywood notwithstanding, than anyone could have anticipated in the 1950s and 1960s.

There are a number of reasons which account for this drift in identity, from the one earlier rooted in an undivided India, to one which emanates from the Middle East. Economics, certainly, has been a key reason following the boom in petro-dollars from the 1970s. Pakistan's labour exports to the Gulf and Arab states have accounted for a huge dependence and have been a very lucrative form of exports. This export of Pakistani labour to the oil-rich emirates and countries, has made Urdu (and its cultural links) almost the second language of many a city and town in the region. A bond has emerged between Dubai and Karachi, similar to what one hears about the one between Bombay and Karachi in the early part of the last century.

With growing communication and travel, access to places considered holy, whether in Saudi Arabia, Iraq or Iran, are far more easy than ever before. And even if many Pakistanis are unable to travel to these lands, they have enough live information about religious and political developments in the region, keeping them involved. After 9/11, this bond has been strengthened even further, as Muslims and Islam face the challenge of cultural domination, military might, and Imperialism, resulting in a global resurgence of Muslim and Islamic identity. Being at the heart of many military and political moves and developments, this identity in Pakistan has been fortified, often at the cost of other markers of identity.

The state, and particularly the government of General Zia ul Haq from 1977-88, also played a decisive role in accentuating Pakistan's Islamic identity, by building close political and religious links with the Sunni Wahabi Islam of Saudi Arabia. Awash with petro-dollars the House of Saud was willing to pay for *madrasas* in Pakistan and continues to be an active source of funds to aid and abet the spread of Islam and its institutions in Pakistan. Moreover, along with the support from the state, there has also been a rise in social conservatism across Pakistan, reflected in an acceptance and assimilation of perceived Islamic/Muslim motifs and symbols. This process of 'Islamisation' taking place in Pakistan, is quite apart from the efforts of the state. Moreover, after 9/11, the slow trend of the social conservatism amongst Pakistani Muslims, has taken a sharper, and more accentuated, Islamic turn.

In passing, one should note that this Muslim association and growing Islamic identity with other Muslim countries, has made Pakistan turn towards the Middle East, ignoring links with the two South Asian countries, India and Bangladesh, which have very large Muslim populations. The fact that the Pakistani Muslim association and identity is made with the Middle East rather than within South Asia which has three of the four largest Muslim populations, underlines the arguments made above, that Pakistan's desire to belong to South Asia, to which it belongs, in a locational and historical sense, is far weaker than it is to belong to an identity which is extra-locational.

#### IV

In some ways, the Pakistani identities of the Muslim and the South Asian/Indian, are competing identities, and in many ways, mutually exclusive. A secular India with a small Muslim population, would not wish for a Muslim South Asian identity to strengthen. A Muslim Pakistan, may not want to belong to an idea or union, in which it would be marginalised and subservient to a power which is its nemesis. Moreover, the geographical divide mentioned above, which separates different nationalities/ethnic groups with different moorings within Pakistan, also makes the Pakistani support for South Asia to look like a muhajir-Punjabi idea forced upon other groups. Yet, while country's do not choose their location, the choice of identity, is fundamentally a *political* choice.

The reason why progressives and liberals – both westernised lifestyle liberals and political liberals – would want to identify with a South Asian identity, is because they see in such an identity, the means to shed their presently repressive political, militaristic and cultural roots. Through India, they look for a more democratic, participatory, representative, and culturally liberal association than that have been currently available. They would prefer to weaken their ties with Islamic countries, because they see these countries as repressive, closed, intolerant. In contrast, those who ascribe to completely different and opposing 'Islamic' cultural values, would prefer to strengthen their ties with the Islamic 'homeland', rather than with a Hindu dominated South Asia.

The sharp, insurmountable, divide in the desire to identify with disparate and contradictory entities on a regional scale, is a reflection of the deep-rooted divisions within Pakistani society: the lifestyle 'liberals', against the defenders of Islam. Yet, unlike many other countries, much of 'what Pakistan is', has been determined by a few institutions of the Pakistani state. The absence of the practice of democratic politics, the

absence of effective civil society, and the hegemony of the military over the political settlement that is Pakistan, gives 'Pakistan' and the choices it follows, a very statist orientation. Perhaps not even that, for one military man's religious beliefs determine when the official position of Pakistan becomes *Pakistan ka matlab kiya? La ilaha il-lal-lah* (What does Pakistan mean? [replied by the Muslim *kalima*] There is no God except Allah) or when a reorientation in ideology results in 'moderate enlightenment'.

Clearly, geographical entities and regions are ideologically configured, as are national boundaries, and often both change with the times. This realisation does not lament the nation, but instead, celebrates the possibilities beyond, and outside, the nation and its state. The multiple regional inheritances of Pakistan make it possible for Pakistanis to identify themselves beyond the nation. This perhaps makes it easier for them to imagine themselves both in the nation and beyond. The state can promote its own regional identity, yet it cannot contain other regional identities from being evoked. In fact, this multiple representation *subverts* the project of the nation which has been forced upon the people, brutally and militarily, as the case of numerous nation-states including Pakistan, shows. In another sense, it is the nation-state which subverts another nation's idea of a hegemonic, imagined, geographical entity, such as South Asia. It is this dual subversion, contradictory in so many ways, which shows how borders and nations are metaphorically constituted, and why the postnational allows possibilities to construct identity very differently.