

Cultural Diversity: Essential for Peace or Root of All Conflict

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**Madeeha Gauhar
Pakistan**

I come from a country which lately has been in the eye of the storm, where the crucial battle between the forces of liberalism and extremism is being fought. A country where the “evil” Al-Qaeda leaders are hiding, where the pro-Western establishment is losing the grip in their struggle against creeping Talibanization. This is a country which started on the road to the modern democratic path 62 years ago under the leadership of an “enlightened democratic” leadership but has ended up fighting for the survival of civilized and humane society. It is a story which I would like to share with you as it may be quite relevant to this Art Summit and the topic of this session.

The new country which rose from the ashes of the colonial India in 1947 was the largest Muslim country in the world, a country based on the two-nation theory which distinguished Muslims of India from majority Hindu India on the basis of religion. The citizens of this country belonged to geographically contiguous regions in the North-West and East of the Indian Subcontinent. But Muslims of the rest of India who had no geographical or economic links with the state of Pakistan were also entitled to become citizens of this Land of the Pure, Pakistan. Culturally Pakistan was what India was not. The rationale for the creation was that Muslims of India were different from Hindu India not just because of religion but also because they were culturally, historically, economically different. Pakistan was non-India. All expressions of art and culture of united India were shunned as they were evidence that Hindus and Muslims had a shared culture, shared history. At one stroke, Muslim-dominated Pakistan disowned the rich and diverse cultural heritage of centuries. Pakistani rulers prohibited acceptance of Indian music, dance, sculpture, painting, theatre, mythology and decided to construct a new cultural identity. The new state of Pakistan had been denied its due share of military and financial resources but as far as the cultural riches were concerned, the watch-dogs of Pakistani Ideology robbed themselves of their inheritance and made themselves cultural paupers.

The slogan of the new state was “One Religion, One Language, One Country”. But the ground reality was that it was neither one religion (there was still a significant population of non-Muslims in the country), nor did it have one language (Urdu, the so-called national language, was not even the mother tongue of any component of the land named as Pakistan and the country had several well-developed national languages). It was also a country divided by a thousand miles with West Pakistan on the Western borders of India and East Pakistan on the Eastern end. The insistence on “One Language: i.e. Urdu, meant denial of old and developed languages such as Bengali, Sindhi, Punjabi, Pashto and Balochi. This irrational and forcible imposition of Urdu on East Pakistanis led to the violent and tragic events in 1971 which culminated in the break-up of Pakistan and the creation of the independent state of Bangladesh.

In the rest of Pakistan, this unitarian ideology has alienated and angered the ethnic components of Pakistan: Punjab, Sindh, Balochistan, NWFP. The State Ideology asserted that Pakistan is a country with one religion, one language, one culture. It also alienated religious minorities because of its denial of the existence of their existence. As it was claimed that religion is the sole basis of the creation of the country, it was inferred that Pakistani culture is based on Islamic identity. Urdu was presented as the language of the Muslims, the sole national language. As all indigenous art

had been disowned, there was nothing left: no music except religious music, no dancing except devotional dancing at the shrines, no performing arts except ritual performances and no fine arts except Quranic calligraphy. Our short-sighted ideologues were now looking towards the Middle East more specifically, Saudi Arabia for an alternative cultural identity for the new-born state of Pakistan.

This mono-cultural identity did not work. Ethnic groups of the country began expressing their resentment at the cultural, political and economic exploitation. They felt humiliated at the absolute rejection of their linguistic and cultural identities. All attempts at creating a concoction of Pakistani Islamic non-Indian culture with no roots in local ethnic identities, failed. Pakistan lacked a cultural policy and Pakistani artists were deprived of their rights of free and creative development.

The arrival of General Zia-ul-Haq as the fundamentalist military dictator in 1977 was a desperate attempt on the part of the Pakistani Establishment to forcefully impose a new version of the so-called Pakistan Ideology based on religious extremism of a militant and violent variety. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the American policy of using the dictator for proxy war against the Soviet forces enabled Zia-ul-Haq to put together a force of brain-washed and well-trained jihadis who fought the Russians and once they were gone, trained the guns on their hosts and trainers. These Pakistani Taliban carried on with Zia's unfinished agenda after his death and began a violent campaign to dismantle the existing socio-political system and impose a strict Sharia rule where no freedom of cultural expression was allowed, where everyone was forced to follow outdated and unworkable laws according to the whims and edicts of uneducated and blood-thirst mullahs. When the Pakistani Taliban gained temporary control of the valley of Swat in North Pakistan in early 2009, they made it clear that there was no room for any freedom of thought or expression under their rule. Girl schools were destroyed, women were flogged for daring to come out unescorted, hair saloons were closed and barbers told not to shave any beards, courts were closed and music tapes burnt in heaps.

It is only now, after the shocking pronouncements exposing the real meaning of talibanization and under intense international pressure that the Pakistani Establishment has woken up to the grave threat of the marauding tribes of militant warriors and have shown some determination to push them back. They are also getting full support from the civil society this time. Hopefully it is not too late.

In my opinion, a major factor in the present political and ideological crisis faced by Pakistan is the denial of the cultural and political rights of the people. The refusal to acknowledge their distinct ethnic identities and suppression of their cultural identities led to separatist movements, lack of trust in the centre and loss of interest in the survival and strengthening of the state. Sectarian bloodshed, religious strife and ethnic conflicts are some manifestations of this approach. It is marked by an ideology which defines culture as a product of religion and believes that the best way to peace and prosperity is through forcible imposition of a monocultural religious identity on its people. This ideology asserts that "Islam is the best religion", "Muslims are the chosen ones", "Sharia is the only way society can be ruled" and all others are immoral and untrustworthy infidels. They claim that "the human race is bound to eventually respond to the call of Allah and pray with faces towards Holy Mecca".

Now can this model be applied elsewhere? Not exactly. But replace Almighty Allah with the Almighty God of Marketing, Change Osama with Obama and you will see an oppressive capitalist juggernaut invading countries, bulldozing cultures and economies and defining

identities according to the Western materialistic Bible. The modern crusaders brandishing their Big Macs and firing their Coke cannons are conquering the uncivilised nations to fulfil their white man's burden. The declaration is the same: We are the chosen ones, our way is the best way, we have a mission to civilise the world. One Language, One Market, One World. We all pray with our faces towards Holy Washington. While the Taliban are marching through the Khyber Pass in the North, the holy warriors of the Free Economy are invading from all sides: from the West, from the Sea, from the skies, from the universities, from the space and the cyber space. The Taliban want us to stop being thinking, feeling, progressing human beings. The Americans want us to become their clones and abandon our culture, our identity. We are stuck between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea.

That is the predicament for many non-Western societies. There is the Western Cultural bulldozer on one side which espouses global culture and universal values but denies diversity and a reactionary resistance which proclaims indigenous identity and denies universal values. The Western protagonists may not openly reject diversity but in effect the momentum of the economic, ideological and military might is irresistible and unstoppable. The xenophobic fundamentalist alternative stresses tradition and faith so strongly that it throws you in a whirlpool of retrogressiveness and intolerance. There was a space between the two options but it is becoming narrower and narrower. On the one hand the fundamentalists are pulling us back into a reactionary retrogressive identity and on the other hand the Western cultural crusaders are luring us into a global culture dominated by the Western Capitalist materialist values. Many of us admire our ancient art, are proud of our cultural heritage, our creative and artistic contribution to the world and the spiritual collective wisdom of our forefathers. But we abhor the values which deny us our human rights, which justify gender violence, condone racism and persecution of minorities and prevent us from progressing in the modern world. Similarly we happily adopt Western values of democracy, human rights, freedom of thought and scientific progress but may disown the obsession with individualism, total subservience to materialism and the sad history of imperialism and racism.

What can or what should an artist or a group of artists do when faced with such a predicament? Which side to take: the side where their heritage is partially highlighted but their rights are denied or the side where their collective identity is denied but their individuality acknowledged? Can they create a space of their own in such a polarized situation? I believe they can and they should.

Old people in India and Pakistan sometimes nostalgically remember the days of the Raj and say the colonial times were peaceful times, there was law and order and the system worked. But that was a system in which basic human dignity was denied to the colonised people, they were treated as inferior human beings in their homeland, as slaves. They were used as cannon fodder in white man's wars, forced to abandon their language, their culture and learn the ways of the white races. That was not a system worth saving.

They say when the Taliban ruled Afghanistan, the country had become fairly peaceful. But during those peaceful times, women were being stoned to death, men were executed in public, Budha statues were being bombed. That was the peace of a graveyard.

Today the rule of a unified mono cultural fundamentalist society may be peaceful but a peace which is not worth keeping. Submission to a so-called global culture may be beneficial in some ways but not durable or sustainable.

Lately there has been another factor threatening the cultural identity of the people of Pakistan and so many other Muslim countries, the Saudi Threat. Using their oil money and their clout as the

custodians of the holy Islamic shrines, the Saudis have been influencing the governments and their favoured organizations to impose symbols of Saudi culture. Saudi dress is being presented as the Islamic dress, teaching of Arabic at the expense of local languages is being promoted and madrasas allied to Saudi Salafi brand of Islam lavishly funded. These seminaries are the recruiting ground for jihadi warriors. It is ironic that a government which is a close ally of the US-led coalition, is allowing this sustained campaign to impose an alien culture on other Muslim countries and assist militant ideology.

I will cite the example of a play which my group Ajoka performed in Pakistan in recent years. The play "Burqavaganza" addressed an apparently trivial but controversial issues of the "burqa". In the West, hijab or burqa-wearing Muslim women have stirred a much-publicised debate about the right of wearing an attire of choice and the gender rights and has given racist politicians and media persons a Muslim-bashing opportunity. On the other hand, in the Muslim world the burqa has become a symbol of oppression of women and fundamentalist politics. In the West, women sometimes choose to wear burqa as an identity statement or as a gesture of defiance against discriminatory treatment of Muslim communities. In the Muslim societies, most often men force their women to cover their faces, one of many brutal discriminatory practices of gender injustice. In our play, we raised all such questions through a satirical musical play in which all actors, male and female, wore burqas throughout the play. Through fun, song and dance, the play posed disturbing questions to its audience. The play also questioned the Western obsession with burqa and its fear of burqa-wearing women. The play was well-appreciated by theatre-goers but fundamentalist elements made a big issue of this by claiming that it made fun of "the Islamic dress". The matter was raised in the Parliament and the play was banned. However we carried on performing in defiance of the ban. The controversy generated a heated and prolonged debate in the media and on the internet. The questions such as "Is burqa an Islamic dress?", "should wearing of burqa be left to the woman concerned?", "Is wearing hijab or burqa in a Western country the right way to show defiance?" were discussed at length. The play was translated and published. Editorials were written and TV reports were aired ranging from Canada to Australia. In our view the purpose of the play was served. We had raised a significant issue and taken a position different from the fundamentalist as well as the racist Western view.

Peace can not be imposed by the powerful. It has to emerge through a common desire of all sides. A peace based on recognition of diverse stake-holders, based on the socio-economic interests of all and more importantly, a peace based on justice. A just world order means equitable distribution of the world's resources, equality of nations, mutual respect for other faiths, cultures. In today's world, unjust wars have to be stopped. Subjugated nations have to be freed. The market forces decimating indigenous cultures have to be reigned in. That can be the foundation of a durable meaningful peace.

Lastly I may refer to my remarks about the creation of Pakistan from the womb of a united colonial India. For over half a century, generations in Pakistan were made to believe that Indians and Pakistanis had nothing in common, they were two different nations, they had different belief systems, different values, different cultures. The borders had been closed, there was hardly any contact between the two neighbouring countries. There was no exchange of newspapers, no tourism, no letters through the post. Our older generations told us stories of atrocities during the communal riots at the time of the Partition. The text books repeated the same ideas and stories. Most of us came to believe that Indians and Pakistanis were not only enemies but they were also different nations, different species in fact. Then in 2004, our Ajoka Theatre, based in the predominantly Muslim province of Punjab, toured the predominantly Sikh state of Indian Punjab with a play on famous 18th Century Punjabi Sufi poet Bulleh Shah. We crossed the border with apprehension and curiosity. To our utter surprise we found people who spoke the same language,

laughed at the same jokes, admired the same poets and artists, sang the same songs, ate the same food, wore the same dress... and knew more of Bulleh Shah's verses than us Muslim Punjabis. As we travelled through the Indian Punjab, we discovered that the people living across the border, which we had perceived as "other" were no other than our own kith and kin. This "other" had been a creation of political vested interest. The diversity of culture fed to us was a distortion of history, told by an establishment which was fearful of its own indefensible ideology. We were inhabiting two different countries now but we were the same people, sharing our culture, enjoying our heritage, our poetry, our folk stories. We had fought three wars and the Punjabis had been the worst sufferers of the Partition and the wars. But once we crossed that border and the artificial barriers of distorted history, concocted identities and hate-filled propaganda, we had made a great stride for a durable sustainable peace. The "other" had disappeared. I wonder how many artificial boundaries vested interest may have created in other parts of the world? How many others are living in the belief that those across the cultural or religious divide are really others, different species. Let us cross the border and find out!
