

PAKISTAN

The Daniel Pearl mystery

MB NAQVI writes from Karachi

THE MYSTERY of American journalist Daniel Pearl's abduction from Karachi remains unresolved. Pearl was the correspondent of Wali Street Journal and was working on the story of Pakistan's religious extremist groups and parties. A large number of suspects have been arrested and several investigating police teams are being assisted by American FBI experts. The investigators have still no coherent hypothesis as to who could have done it or why.

While the easiest and primary assumption would be that the various pro-Taliban religious zealots, many thousands of whom had gone to fight alongside the Taliban in Afghanistan, are likely to be bitter on their own and Taliban's defeat. They would seek, it is surmised by many western diplomats, to take their revenge by killing or abducting American and western diplomats and or journalists. The latter make good and easy targets. Such groups were seen as having been in a state of shock earlier. But they were expected to become active again after a while.

The Americans have demanded and may already have

had the custody of the chief suspect in the case, one Mubarak Ali Shah Gilani, the head of a not much known group, the Jamat al Faqara, with which group Pearl was trying to establish contact. The organisation has, apparently, been active in the US since 1980 and Gilani was receiving up to \$ 500,000 (half a million) from there. It is supposed to have supported the guerilla war in Kashmir but was not otherwise active as a militant or sectarian outfit in Pakistan. The American media has linked the Jamat al Faqara with attacks on Hare Krishna devotees in the US and elsewhere in the west. Incidentally, Mr. Gilani has extensive properties in Pakistan worth over a billion rupees.

The American State Department spokesman has said that the culprits behind the crime were not aiming at the abduction of Daniel Pearl, the journalist. Their purposes were wider and different. He did not explain further. Pakistan is understood to have agreed to extradite him "within 48 hours". Although the US government officials go on saying on the record that they are satisfied with the cooperation being extended by the Pakistani authorities, they are said to be quite frustrated at the lack of success in recovering Daniel Pearl. Everyone in

the US Administration, right up to President Bush, is deeply concerned and monitoring developments from day to day.

The affair is sure to cast a shadow on the upcoming visit of President Gen. Pervez Musharraf to Washington where he was expected to be lionised for his courageous leadership and bold decisions. If by 11th of Feb, when Musharraf will be in Washington, Peal is not recovered, theexpected American largess might get abbreviated. Kinks might develop in the PK-US friendship.Foreign Minister Abdus Sattar has found an India connection in this story as a sub plot.

There is another American journalist of Indian descent, a lady and also working for Wall Street Journal and an online magazine, who was said to have been living with Pearl in a rented house in Karachi while his wife lived separately in the city. Where does the lady comes in or gets off in the Pearl story, few know. Where she is and what have the police found from or about her is also not known. But some of it is likely to be played out in the coming days.

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INDIA

Sant yatra or election yatra

ASGHAR ALI ENGINEER

COME ELECTION and Ayodhya issue is right on agenda again. The BJP had promised its bhaktas (Ram bhakts or BJP bhakts)? to construct a grand Ram temple at the site of Babri Masjid in Ayodhya once it came to power. However, it came to power with the support of NDA (National Democratic Alliance) and had to pay the price by renouncing the Ram Mandir issue to be in power. Since BJP s main objective was to come to power and not to construct Ram Mandir, it gladly agreed to renounce the issue to the great disappointment of its bhaktas.

However, it could not wash its hands off the issue completely. Not only the RSS and VHP it has to please the Santas also who supported BJP during election campaigns from time to time in return for promise for a grand Ram temple. Even the Prime Minister Shri Vajpayee kept on obfuscating over the issue sometimes saying it is in the national spirit to construct the temple and sometimes musing that it best be forgotten in the spirit of communal harmony in the country. Shri L.K. Advani, however, persisted in his view in favour of Ram temple though, as Home Minister, he could not obviously insist on constructing it, like the VHP Santas (and notRam Santas), right away.

But whenever any election is near at hand the BJP and VHP leaders spend sleepless nights as the hard core BJP supporters demand concrete proof of BJP s sincerity to fulfil its promise to construct the promised temple. The U.P. elections were expected near about February-March and hence the VHP santas announced their intention to take out a chetawani yatra (i.e. a warning march) from Ayodhya to Delhi for expediting the construction of Ram temple in Ayodhya. And when the Election Commission announced the dates of U.P. election the VHP immediately organised the Yatra ahead of election schedule. This is to please its hard core voters. It is another story that it did not evoke any enthusiasm among those it was meant for.

There are two things that we should be mainly concerned with. Though it is true that the Yatra failed to arouse any enthusiasm (so much so that one paper editorially said that it is chtwani to santas themselves rather than to the Government that people are no more interested in such road shows ) still we, the people of India, should be warned that such gross misuse of religion for electoral purposes amounts to a corrupt practice. The BJP uses cover of VHP to raise this issue again and again for the Hindu votes as VHP is supposedly not a political party. But this is only a technical cover. The Election Commission should take note of the fact that the BJP and VHP are closely related and BJP cannot disown responsibility for what the VHP does.

The involvement of the BJP M.P. from Faizabad Mr. Vinay Katyar also shows that the BJP approves of such Sant Yatras for electoral benefits. The U.P. Chief Minister Shri Rajnath Singh also said that individual BJP M.P.s are free to take part in the Chetawani Yatra, if they so desire. How can a party M.P. take part in obviously a political move like construction of a Ram temple albeit as an individual. Will BJP allow its M.P's to vote as individuals on any important national issue? Obviously not. How can then it allow its M.P's to take part in the Chetawani Yatra of VHP Santas as individuals. After the end of the Yatra the BJP has also announced that no action will be taken against those M.Ps who participated in the Yatra.

Mr. Vinay Katyar went to the extent of saying that those who believed that the BJP had abandoned the temple issue did not understand the gravity of the matter. He said the temple was a matter of national pride and faith, and there was no question of ignoring it. Can there be greater proof of involvement of BJP or at least its approval in the matter? According to the news paper reports from Lucknow not only the RSS-VHP combine is putting in all its energies into yatra, the BJP-head quarters too indicate the level of excitement sporting banners asking people to attend the Sadhus' conference in Lucknow on Monday. The Dharam Sansad called upon the sadhus to fight for the temple.

Should Election Commission not take notice of the matter. Use of religion is obviously a corrupt practice as per the Representation of the People s Act. When the Maharashtra State Election Commissioner did not allow even the Mumbai Mayor to hoist the tricolour on 26th January on the eve of Mumbai Municipal Corporation election (though ultimately he relaxed) which is comparatively a minor matter and does not leave any impact on voters mind, should its U.P. counterpart act on such a major issue? It is strange that it has not. In the interest of free and fair election, which is a must in a democracy the Election Commission should be highly vigilant and misuse of religion cannot be condoned in any case.

The second major concern in this connection is protection and promotion of our secular democracy. Our country is united thanks to our secularism. The neighbouring Pakistan did not stay united even for 25 years despite the Islamic bond, and disintegrated in 1971. Thus it proves that religious unity is not sufficient condition to ensure political unity. Secular democracy does provide a better alternative to ensure political

unity. The Kashmiri Muslims in 1947 had also decided to throw their lot with India because it had opted for secular democracy. Kashmiri Muslims also felt alienated subsequently as we did not fulfil their aspirations as real secular democracy ought to have. Thus non-implementation of the political ideals associated with secular democracy caused discontent in Kashmir, and our constituency there was considerably weakened.

The case of Babri Masjid-Ramjanambhoomi controversy is even worse. It did bring BJP to power (though not to absolute power) but at what cost? It not only weakened our secular democracy but also spilled lot of innocent people s blood. Thousands of people died during the campaign. Religious fundamentalism or fanaticism is not healthy event or a religious society, much less for a secular democracy.

The BJP swore by patriotism and nationalism. The RSS even talks of what it calls akhand Bharat. But what it has been doing in practice? It is polarising India on communal lines and weakening its unity. How can it be construed as genuine patriotism. One must distinguish between national chauvinism and genuine patriotism. In fact the former is antidote of later. The RSS Sar - Sangchalaks right from Guru Golwalkar to Shri Sudershan idealise Hitler as the role model of true nationalism whereas whole world has rejected Hitler including Germany as an evil influence on democracy.

The post-modern west also has embraced diversity, diversity even without shared cultural past. In the western countries diversity is not rooted in history whereas in India it is firmly rooted in our long shared past. In western countries diversity is of very recent origin and is mainly due to migration of people from colonised countries after their liberation from metropolitan countries. Thus diverse people in western countries today have no cultural roots in metropolitan societies and yet western countries have given them all political rights without in anyway insisting that they adopt western culture. Interestingly in Canada while giving citizenship oath to a migrant, he or she is asked to solemnly affirm that he or she will preserve his or her language and culture.

In India ironically the RSS insists that Islam and Christianity are alien religions and doubts their patriotic credentials as they originated outside India and hence their followers, though linguistically and culturally as old as Aryans (and in some cases in South as old as Dravidians) can never be loyal to this country. It keeps on launching tirades against them and making them feel insecure. Recently the RSS has distributed more than a crore pamphlets saying that the Hindus have faced Islamic terrorism for more than a thousand years since Muslim rule was established in India.

The RSS has become much stronger today since the BJP has come to power as leading coalition partner in the NDA. Now it has both political as well as economic resources to carry on powerful propaganda against minorities, particularly targeting the Christians and Muslims. The country s political health is in danger indeed. The secular partners in the NDA have come to power at the Centre but at the cost of political health of the country.

This brings us to another grave concern and that is absolutely power-oriented democratic processes. This has led to complete fragmentation of our society along caste and communal lines. Votes are demanded and given only on the basis of caste and community. There were community-based parties since freedom struggle and now in independent India there are several caste-based parties too. It is interesting to note that the BJP had intensified its Ramjanambhoomi movement to counter the Mandal Commission reservation and it succeeded partially in doing so. But as its nemesis, it is caste factor which is weakening the BJP s hold in U.P. and elsewhere today. The people in U.P. have become indifferent to the Sangh Parivar s Ram Mandir movement as caste-based politics or empowerment is more appealing to them than the Hindutva ideology.

But both caste and community-based politics as well as religious chauvinism have done great harm to our secular democracy. The election process must be rid of such influences by reforming our electoral law suitably. One of the suggestions could be to make it obligatory for the winning candidate to obtain at least 51% votes. First past the pole was suitable for a mono-religious and mono-cultural society like that of Britain in 19th century where votes were cast on the basis of issues. In a multi-religious and multi-cultural society like that of India, this system cannot suit as it leads to caste and communal polarisation. If 51% votes for winning an election are made obligatory such sectarian appeals will be avoided as votes of all castes and communities will be needed to win.

It is argued that it will be a costly affair. Though financially more costly politically, it will be much less. It will restore the political health of the country and strengthen its unity and solidarity.

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The man in the middle

M ABDUL HAFIZ

LESS than two years ago he was a pariah because of whose usurpation of power President Bill Clinton skipped Pakistan in his high profile visit of the subcontinent in April, 2000. Only an afterthought during his return journey took him to Islamabad for a couple of hours more for dressing down the general publicly over the country's television network.

Pakistan was in a dire strait because of an economic sanction imposed a year earlier for her nuclear test. Following the October coup in 1999 by General Musharraf more stringent measures -- both political and economic - were taken against the near-bankrupt country. His role in Kargil as perceived by India and diplomatically projected made Musharraf a suspect before the world as a sponsor of terrorism and he was under constant pressure from the West to shun it or face its unsavoury consequence. The September 11 last year changed all those images of him.

Today he is catapulted on the centre-stage of world events around the war on terrorism. Musharraf, formerly spurned as a military dictator, is now a darling of the West as the head of the frontline state of the US' first war of the twenty-first century. He was turned a hero overnight and quickly became a valued friend of the West as its most compliant ally. He does not object, in his loyalty as a coalition partner, even to an awkward US demand that its special forces would operate in Pakistani territory in search of bin-Laden. But even if the West sees him as a genuine crusader against terrorism Pakistan's military ruler was still duplicitous and untrustworthy to the Indians.

Pakistan's good conduct on fighting terrorism meant little to India especially after the December 13 attack on its parliament. For years and more recently since 11 September India failed to convince the US to extend its war against terrorism to include militant activities Kashmir. All these changed on December 29. President George W Bush himself stepped into the arena to

publicly nudge Pakistan President Musharraf to crack down on Kashmir terrorists operating from Pakistan. Earlier India held Pakistan to ransom with its threat of war by amassing its huge army in the border. Bush later said of his telephone diplomacy in defusing a potential conflict between the two countries.

This is precisely the story behind Musharraf's January 12th 'historic' speech which seems to have overwhelmed the Pakistanis. The enthusiasts already started calling Musharraf the Second Jinnah and credited him with re-inventing the founding father's Pakistan of moderation, tolerance and having secular traditions. Although on first taking over the country as its chief executive his predilections were more for Kamal Atatürk as a role model. Betraying Jinnah's vision of Pakistan most of his successors lacking legitimacy found religion to be the heady brew of the country's power politics while after Atatürk's founding of a secular Westernised Turkey almost a century back few of the Muslim societies of the world emulated his model.

The religion of Islam is indeed tricky once it is mixed up with a motive. It is difficult to say if any Pakistan ruler in its 54 years of history had followed Islam totally bereft of motive. Islam had been used as a convenient tool of power play throughout its history fraught with intrigue, greed and lust for power. Even today there can be animated debate as to what the real Islam is indeed. President Musharraf might as well be absolutely right in shunning the prevailing brand of Islam in Pakistan -- extremist, intolerant, obscurantist and so on.

But the circumstances under which it has been done is intriguing. Right or wrong, it could have been a matter of his conviction had he taken Pakistan for a U-turn on its ideology without a compulsion. But he did it under the threat of India's retaliation for Pakistani terrorists' alleged attack on Indian Parliament and his speech on January 12, nominally to the nation, but in reality also to India and to the world was virtually dictated by the United States. "I urged President Musharraf to do everything he could to crack down on the terrorists network

that raided the Indian Parliament," Bush said.

So, the government of General Musharraf dutifully swooped down on the clerics, the convenient scapegoat for the country's woes, by arresting over 1900 religious activists and sealing 600 offices. The President in his 'landmark' address outlawed five organisations and the instructions were issued to the State Bank to freeze the accounts of three outfits and confiscate their literature. Not only does Musharraf want to move Pakistan (proclaimed an Islamic Republic as early as in 1956) away from a theocracy but he hopes to set an example for other Islamic countries with fundamentalist undercurrent. He announced election in October next although in an earlier pronouncement he said that he would continue to be president beyond October 2002.

Musharraf has been in power -- rather absolute power -- for over 27 months, the time considered enough for the actions that he has taken with regards to the country's religions right. Did he want to preserve it as a matter of contingency as did all other military rulers to tackle their legitimacy problems? Musharraf has been likened to Anwar Sadat, the man credited with breaking away from the Arab ranks in making peace with Israel. Musharraf is smart enough not to be entrapped that way but lie ahead of him are numerous quicksand. A false step will spell disaster. He has now been cleverly pitted against his own people and engaged in reinventing this or that Pakistan.

Under a given historical circumstances Pakistan was created on the basis of a two nation theory -- one likes it or not. Once moved away from this raison de etre Pakistan will be left with little to justify its independent existence. Instead of choosing between the brands of Islam to be best suited for his country President Musharraf would do well in reinventing the intrinsic spirit of Islam before which the empires crumbled even during Islam's infancy.

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SRI LANKA

A new expectation?

ZAGLUL A.CHOWDHURY

SRI Lanka has just celebrated its 54th Independence Day amidst hope for a settlement of the contentious civil war in the country. As President Chandrika Kumaratunga and Prime Minister Ranil Wickramasinghe watched the low-key military parade in Colombo, there was no news of any major violence.

Generally, the Tamil militants target civil and military installations on this day to protest the Lankan independence and draw attention to their armed movement for a separate home for nearly 18 percent Tamils concentrated mainly in the northern region. This time the militants are observing an unilateral ceasefire since the Christmas and evidently they made no serious bid either to break the truce or dampen the Sri Lankan independence day celebrations.

The government troops are also observing the truce although the mechanism for the ceasefire has not been fully formalised. Yet, it is a good sign. Tamil Tigers did agree to ceasefire before as well but what marked the difference with current truce is that it is being more honoured by them this time. Because the present ceasefire was initiated in a better atmosphere when the hostilities are less and the truce is being taken more seriously by both government and the militants for a chance to resolve the nearly two decade long civil war that took huge lives in both sides in addition to causing colossal losses.

The Independence Day celebrations on February 4, this year, witnessed another remarkable dimension. President Kumaratunga and her main political rival Wickramasinghe sat side by side in a co-habitation government as a different party or alliance other than the president's Peoples Alliance (PA) won the December 5 parliamentary elections and formed the government.

Chandrika's PA and Wickramsinghe's UNP are main political rivals and two have been always at loggerheads for long in the line up to gaining political ascendancy in the country. The president remains in her position regardless of the outcome of

the parliamentary polls as per the constitution in the presidential system of democracy. Only once before such a situation existed in Sri Lanka but it was for a very brief period and consequently did not affect the pattern of governance or spark much discussions. That time Chandrika Kumaratunga was the prime minister and the president belonged to the UNP. But Within months presidential eletion took place and the prime minister herself became the president and the next prime minister was from her party. This time the president, who was elected for a six year term has barely spent less than half of the term and is set to remain in the helm for rest of the tenure barring unforeseen developments. The outcome of parliamentary polls threw up this difficult situation where the president is from one political platform and the government led by the prime minister from hostile side. However, good thing is that both sides are showing signs of accommodation without going into confrontation or resorting to collision course. Obviously, both seem to be alert of the fact that confrontation would not help either side and they have to run the nation as provided by the constitution.

So far, the president and the prime minister showed this positive spirit largely belying scepticism in some quarters about their healthy co-habitation. This was once again reflected in the Independence Day celebrations.

Chances of a negotiated settlement of the civil war brightened following the victory of the opposition in the parliamentary elections as Ranil Wickramsinghe and his party are more favourably disposed to a negotiated settlement with the Tamil militants.

They are also lenient in their approach on the issue compared to the previous PA government of President Kumaratunga. Norway is seeking to broker a peace between the two sides but the effort has often run into rough weather.

However, the Norwegian mediatory effort has received a boost after Wickramsinghe became the prime minister and a recent high level visit by a team from that country to Sri Lanka and its talks with different groups concerned with the peace process was seen as productive.

The team was able to narrow the differences between the two sides despite the fact that truce was yet to be formally institutionalised and some other matters appear quite intractable. But what is encouraging the positive ambience and the eagerness by the contending parties to make progress towards the goal of a solution of the vexed conflict.

A likely lift on the ban on the Tamil militants seem in the offing and this would facilitate a dialogue since the Tigers have been insisting on the withdrawal. Besides, the government has already lifted restrictions on the supply of essentials to the militant-controlled areas while the ceasefire is being largely observed.

As the atmosphere for a political solution of the civil war is being improved, the differences in the political system in the country concerning those in power often casts a shadow since the powerful president belongs to one side and the prime minister from her opposite camp. But so far both have demonstrated laudable gestures of accommodation and cooperation.

However, it will be folly to expect that they would work in complete concert and understanding since they belong to two rival political camps. This scenario notwithstanding, the president and prime minister are working in positive approach which is needed for settlement of many problems in the island state and cessation of hostilities between the government and the militants is at the top of them.

The country badly needs to end the civil war which is retarding the progress and peace of the small but otherwise prospective state. The president and the prime minister are required to work in close cooperation to end the civil war and make a settlement through talks.

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BHUTAN

No guns, please

TWO gun shots in two Thimphu bars in December are still reverberating. They seem to have aroused more than a little concern about the safety of our towns, the legality of owning firearms, and the overall image of Bhutanese society.

It is not the first time that we have heard of gun-toting Bhutanese men showing off their hardware in public. And it is not the first time that it has worried Thimphu residents.

Not to say that the Thimphu bars are crowded with armed men or that the local night haunts see gunfights every evening. They are rare incidents magnified within our small society and we should acknowledge that they are the antics of irresponsible or immature people, not hard core criminals.

The fact is that most of the regulars at local bars are far more likely to suffer from cirrhosis of the liver than from gun wounds.

But the issues that have been raised are genuine and deserve attention. We are talking about lethal weapons being carried and fired in public, innocent bystanders being exposed to risks, and the general public feeling unsafe. We are talking about the implications of owning guns and about legislation governing firearms.

Why does someone, apart from legitimate servicemen, need to carry a gun in a public place? The only plausible answer is that the person, for whatever reason, needs to show off. Freudian theories might point to other deficiencies that the person might be suffering from. But, guns or no guns, we will always have to deal with anti

social elements.

There are no gun dealers in Bhutan. The existing firearms are legally imported and then sold, traded, or presented within the country. Guns are not rampant and are owned only by the wealthier section of society. Unfortunately the wealthy are not always the most sensible ones.

We have no reason to believe that the issue of gun permits is not carried out responsibly. It has not been a serious problem in Bhutanese society and today's problem is more a lack of social sensitivity.

The fact is that most of us, ordinary citizens, cannot afford a gun. To purchase a gun we will be spending far more than a month's salary. Then what do we do after we own one? If we do not use it, why buy it? If we use it, even in self defense, are we ready to face the implications?

Thanks to a stable system of governance and adequate law and order the average Bhutanese citizen does not need to be armed. As a society, we do not need and do not want the gun culture to develop as it has in some other countries.

Today there is no reason for panic. The problem is a handful of delinquents in our society, both juveniles and adults. That is how we should deal with the problem. Those who are not capable of responsible behaviour should learn that there is a price to be paid.

Courtesy: kuenselonline.com

New directions for South Asia

T. K. OOMMEN

THE SOUTH Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is not expected to discuss bilateral issues in its meetings. But most tensions and conflicts in the region are bilateral and their source is cultural. Of the two prominent dimensions of culture language and religion it is the latter which foments most of the persisting tensions in South Asia. Therefore, an important step to substantially reduce conflicts in the region is to de-officialise religion. Conversely, language is often a cementing force even when those of the same linguistic community are distributed across boundaries of sovereign states.

Most polities in the world today are multi-religious, the common pattern being one majority religion and a few minority ones. This holds true for South Asia too. There are three majority religions in SAARC countries Buddhism in Bhutan and Sri Lanka (70 per cent); Hinduism in India (82 per cent) and Nepal (90 per cent); Islam in Bangladesh (86 per cent), Pakistan (97 per cent) and the Maldives (100 per cent). In all the SAARC countries except India the religion of the majority is privileged. While in Sri Lanka Buddhism is declared the 'national' religion, the religion of the majority is state/official in all other SAARC countries.

Two observations are pertinent here. One, the usual tendency to perceive some religions as more accommodative, catholic and tolerant is not necessarily correct; if so, Buddhism would not have been privileged in all the Buddhist-majority countries. Two, the widely held perception that democracy is more conducive for nurturing religious pluralism is not sustainable. The first democratic nation in the world, the United Kingdom, still has an official Church. Among the SAARC countries, Sri Lanka has the best record of democracy (India's internal emergency partially tainted its record) and yet it has

privileged Buddhism as national religion.

However, among the positive features of democracy are: (a) avoiding a majoritarian hegemony, (b) providing for equal citizenship entitlements to the minorities and (c) respecting the cultural specificities, identities if you will, of the minorities. While the majority does not need state patronage and protection, the urge to sustain the cultural specificity of the majority is also natural and cannot be denied either. That is, democracy willy-nilly implies the respect for the cultural specificities of all communities, including the majority. But when the values and institutions specific to the majority are privileged as official and/or national by the state, it necessarily leads to a majoritarian hegemony and alienation of the minorities. This is the danger in officialising majority religions. Therefore, if durable peace is to prevail in the SAARC countries, the notion of state or national religion should be abandoned by the members.

If religion is to be de-linked from the polity, language should be brought to centre stage. This is so because language is an inevitable feature of all societies. Religion is an optional element in human life in that one can be an atheist, agnostic, secularist and/or rationalist. That is, while there are alternatives to religion, no one can live without language. There is yet another interesting fact to be noted here. While the possibility of alternatives exists in the case of religion, it is non-accommodative of these alternatives. No one can be a "true" Hindu and a Muslim, notwithstanding widespread religious syncretism and liminality, or an atheist and a believer, at the same time. In contrast, the space for accommodation is substantial in the case of language; one can learn several languages without necessarily diminishing the importance of one's mother tongue.

It is important to recognise here that most of the cultural attributes do not have much bearing on religion although the

tendency to link the two is perennially present. For example, literature, music, architecture, food, dress or language get 'communalised' and pose problems only when they are identified with a religious community. This happens because of the tendency to mistake the cultural attributes of the foundational community as those of the religion wherever it spreads.

Further, when religion is the basis of constituting states the cultural attributes of the dominant religion will be projected as 'national' characteristics. This necessarily alienates the minority religious communities.

To overcome these problems, South Asian polities should be visualised as multi-layered federal states, within which there would be language-based provincial states, cultural regions, zilla parishads and panchayats, each of these having a decentralised but connected system of politico-administrative arrangement.

In India, the biggest of all South Asian countries, there are only 91 regional-cultural-linguistic communities some of which are big and viable enough to have a provincial state, but others may have only cultural-regional or local self-governments (zilla or panchayat).

The point I am making is the need to arrive at a set of criteria to establish Governments at the appropriate levels, instead of falling an easy prey to the tactics and stratagems of unscrupulous politicians.

Cultural features are more common to linguistic regions than religious communities. For example, there is a greater commonality between Pakistan Punjab and Indian Punjab or Bangladesh and West Bengal in terms of food, dress, music, literature and architecture than say Pakistan Punjab and Sindh or Indian Punjab and West Bengal.

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