

(*Harvard International Review*, Summer 1999, vol.xxi, no.3)

**Identity Crisis:
Rethinking the Politics of Community and Region in South Asia**

Ayesha Jalal

On the eve of the twentieth century, Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) wrote a poem called 'The Sunset of the Century':

The last sun of the century sets amidst the blood-
red clouds of the west and the whirlwind of
hatred.
The naked passion of self-love of Nations, in its
drunken delirium of greed, is dancing to the
clash of steel and the howling verses of
vengeance...
Keep watch, India...
Let your crown be of humility, your freedom the
freedom of the soul.
Build God's throne daily upon the ample bare-
ness of your poverty
And know that what is huge is not great and pride
is not ever lasting.

This poem composed on the evening of December 31, 1899 was reprinted by Tagore in his book, *Nationalism*, which appeared in 1917. As the self-love of Western nations danced to the clash of steel in the killing fields of Europe and the Middle East, the Bengali poet warned his fellow countrymen against the hubris of jingoistic pride that was embodied in the model of the modern nation-state. While Tagore's songs have become the national anthems of two of post-colonial South Asia's nation-states, India and Bangladesh, the spirit of his message has remained largely unheeded. Last summer India chose to flaunt its national pride with a series of nuclear explosions in an attempt to force its way into the exclusive club of the most powerful nation-states of this world and, in the process, making a mockery of the ample bareness of its poverty.

What India could contrive in the desert of Pokhran, Pakistan could do just as well in the hills of Chagai. Yet Muhammad Iqbal, the Punjabi poet-philosopher who wrote in Urdu in the early twentieth century, had shared many of Tagore's concerns about the dangers of worshipping the god of nationalism. India's and Pakistan's tit-for-tat nuclear brinkmanship is often explained in reductionist vein in terms of a civilizational fault line between predominantly Hindu India and Muslim Pakistan. But on the roots of conflict Iqbal had a finer insight. It was nationalism, according to him, which gave rise to the 'relativity of religions', the notion that religions were territorially specific and unsuited to the temperament of other nations. It was nationalism, therefore, and not religion which by compartmentalizing people into different nations was the source of modern conflicts.¹

Such an interpretation meshes awkwardly with common perceptions of the seemingly ubiquitous role of religion in South Asia. The image of essentialized religious communities locked in grim battle gives a very distorted perspective on the subcontinent's conflicting

politics of identity and discourses of contested sovereignty. It has generated heated controversies among scholars quite as much as practitioners of politics in the post-colonial states of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. A debate shaped in large part by the colonial encounter, the question of religion appears to be intrinsic to the social processes shaping the politics of democratization and decolonization in the region. Lying at the cutting edge of the politics of difference, religion's epistemological and historical meaning in colonial and post-colonial South Asia needs to be understood in all its multifaceted nuances and textures. The binary opposition between secular nationalism and religious communalism is singularly inadequate for such an enterprise. Turning heterogeneities into homogeneities and conflicts into unities, both terms have done more to perpetuate stereotypes than shed light on political dynamics in South Asia. It is time to go beyond the morass of the communitarian mode of analysis which has locked interpretations of the subcontinent's history and politics into a simplistic distinction between 'secular' and 'communal'. The more so since the dynamics of centre and region, as well as nationalism and religious communitarianism, in contemporary India and Pakistan are plainly defying such neat distinctions.

With the sunset of the twentieth century fast approaching, it seems more prudent to take stock of the subcontinent's past and present without making facile distinctions between the religious and the secular, the emotional and the rational, or nationalist and communalist. Once this is done, it becomes easier to assess not just the recent history but also the current political tendencies informing South Asia's trajectory into the next millennium. For purposes of conceptual clarity it is useful to note the subtle but important difference between religion as faith and religion as a social demarcator of identity. While religion as faith can be seen to be a matter of personal belief, religion as social demarcator aims specifically at establishing boundaries with other communities. Tagore's critique of the aggressive nationalisms of modern nation-states and along with his promotion of universalism was not devoid of a religious sensibility. Iqbal envisaged Islam as a universal religion which was neither national and racial, nor individual and private, but purely human. Religion as social demarcator, as both men knew from personal experience, was a mere label, not an accurate reflection of the religiosity of the individual believer, far less of the community or the 'nation'. Both men in their different ways affirmed the inextricable overlap between temporal and spiritual life. All human life is spiritual, Iqbal had argued. There was no such thing as a profane world.

In their different ways, Tagore and Iqbal had pinpointed the dangers of letting religion as social demarcator appropriate the meaning and scope of religion. The British decision to cap the welter of social identities constituting the colourful mosaic of India with the overarching category of religion had monumental consequences, particularly in regions like Bengal and the Punjab where the politics of cultural differences required imaginative accommodations. Census enumeration based on a privileging of the religious distinction foreclosed the possibility of separating the material and the spiritual domains. Demands for places in educational institutions, jobs in government and shares of representation invariably drew on the statistics compiled by colonial census enumerators. More a demarcator of social difference than a matter of faith, religion in late colonial India had manifestations that were more profane than sacred. Collapsing religion as difference with religion as faith has served to compound the ideological dilemmas of not only Islamic Pakistan but also secular democratic India.

Instead of translating Tagore's and Iqbal's ideas into practice, it has proved easier for the managers of the post-colonial states in South Asia to appropriate them for their respective national agendas. If the contrast between Mohandas Gandhi and Mohammed Ali Jinnah

gives a quintessential glimpse into the contrasts between the acknowledged fathers of independent India and Pakistan, the similarities between Tagore and Iqbal capture the yet unrealised but potentially dynamic ability of these two congenital rivals to strike at some common chords. While recording stronger successes on the democratic front than Pakistan, secular democratic India has not been able to achieve its stated goal of keeping religion out of politics. The paradox of a 'communal' party making more and more concerted bids for central power in a secular state, albeit with the backing of a string of regional allies, is inexplicable without understanding the role religion has come to play in Indian politics. A demarcator of social difference, not an accurate gauge of faith in divine doctrine, religion in South Asia as a living and vibrant historical process is a force which requires careful thought and understanding. The separation of religion from politics and the crafting of an imaginative, if ultimately flawed, vision of an inclusionary nationalism has made no attempt to resolve the contradictions that flowed from the willingness to agree to partition, not share power in an undivided India. If India's secular credentials are suspect, Pakistan's Islamic claims seem to be inherently contradictory. While successive governments have claimed a commitment to establishing an Islamic state, they have singularly failed to create the rudimentary infrastructure for the growth of civil society, far less one capable of realizing the spiritual in each individual, or the collectivity, in temporal activity.

The official claptrap and celebratory rhetoric attending the fiftieth anniversary of independence and partition in 1997 in India and Pakistan was more than countered by the voices of scepticism which look upon the past five decades as a period of opportunities lost and promises betrayed. Since the fateful summer of 1947 when the retreating colonial masters wielded the partitioner's axe to divide the subcontinent, India and Pakistan have remained at daggers' drawn. Three indecisive wars have hardly helped cool tempers kept on the boil by endless propaganda and periodic subversion by intelligence agencies. This rigid official posture assumes comical proportions when the imposing steel gates at the Amritsar border in divided Punjab are thrown open to permit citizens of both countries to cross into enemy territory to meet their loved ones. Pounding their boots on the ground both sets of security guards convey their antipathy towards each other, concluding the martial ritual by aggressively staring at each other from close range. More often than not the gates are kept closed and crowds, more caged than free, permitted to exchange glances and a few words before being hurtled away by imperious looking security guards. Where security is thin on the ground, as is the case with much of a twelve hundred mile long border, a flourishing two way flow of trade in illicit goods continues unabated. And for all the hype about the eternal divide between predominantly Hindu India and Muslim Pakistan, there is booming unauthorized commerce in cultural artefacts ranging from television soaps, music and films. The logic of the market, however, clashes loudly with the imperatives of the nation-state. Recently both India and Pakistan have vowed to fence the border. Intended to stop the stream of illegal immigrants and paid miscreants, it has accompanied tentative efforts by the two countries to establish formal economic ties under the guidelines of the World Trade Organisation.

The late February 1999 meeting in Lahore between the two prime ministers, Atal Behari Vajpayee of India and Mian Nawaz Sharif of Pakistan had raised hopes of a normalizing of relations. The two premiers showed willingness to try and come to terms despite the nuclear and missiles tests of the past one year. The warnings of the Shiv Sina in Bombay notwithstanding, the Pakistani cricket team played arch rival India amidst tight security. Stern measures were taken to counteract the Shiv Sena's threat to let poisonous snakes loose on the playing field. Showing ingenuity, the police employed thirty snake

charmiers at the Ferozshah Kotla cricket test between India and Pakistan in Delhi. The Shiv Sena's choice of symbolism was an apt statement on relations between India and Pakistan. Since the beginnings of a popular insurgency in Kashmir in late 1989, relations between the two neighbours have fluctuated between sabre rattling and nuclear missile tests. Yet the clasping of hands, instead of the ritual stomping of the boots, by the two prime ministers suggests a recognition that their coming of nuclear age also demands refining the arts of diplomatic negotiation and accommodation.

As they stand poised to enter the twenty-first century, the two newly nuclearized countries have the priceless opportunity of resolving the disputes of the twentieth century. Yet through curious twists of their respective politics, India and Pakistan have reversed the relative position of their prime ministerial offices within the last five decades. In the fifties it was Jawaharlal Nehru who had quipped that he could not solve the Kashmir dispute because there was no one he could talk to in Pakistan. Publicly lamenting the downfall of Vajpayee's eighteen party BJP led coalition government last April, Mian Nawaz Sharif rued that there was now no one he could talk to in New Delhi. The dynamics of India's electoral democracy are undoubtedly militating against stable national governments at the centre. But the new found stability of central rule in Pakistan cannot detract from the fact that none of the four governments elected since 1988 have as yet managed to complete their five-year term in office. A consequence of extended periods of military-authoritarianism, the transition to democracy in Pakistan is still in its incipient stages with far less scope for a reconstitution of centre-region relations. By contrast, India's electoral democracy, in thriving as conflict, is playing its historical role in laying bare the structural and ideational dilemmas confronting the nation-state.

The growing role of regional parties in the making or unmaking of shaky coalition governments is hinting at a dynamic new equation between centre and region in India. At the ideational level, it is offering a serious challenge to the spurious distinction between 'secularism' and 'communalism' on which so much of the nationalist rhetoric of the post-colonial state in India has rested. Structurally it is already reconfiguring relations between the all-India centre and the regional units. But India's volatile political alignments have not had salutary effects on this incipient form of democratic and cooperative federalism. While some regional parties did well by extracting important political and economic concessions from the centre, others have exploited the inability of governing configurations to sustain their claims to national power in India. Allowing national governments to be held ransom for narrow personal gains in the arenas of regional politics may not be the form of federalism India would wish to promote. Instead of consolidating on the gains of cooperative federalism, recent political developments in India have thrown into sharp relief the increasing hollowness of a national politics in India.

The idea of 'nationalist politics' has undergone a considerable transformation in the past half century. With the shrinking of the Congress's regional social bases of support, no single political combination has been able to establish its claim to be 'national' in the literal sense of the word. The BJP which led the short-lived government of 1998-99 was hardly very 'national'. With its electoral success restricted to a handful of states in northern and western India, it was alliances with regional parties which gave Vajpayee's government the necessary numbers in parliament and, thereby, its 'national' credentials. The irony of many diehard 'secular' parties not blinking an eyelid before aligning with the 'communist' BJP is perhaps the most potent comment on the bankruptcy of a national ideology resting on a stark division between the secular and the religious. Lapses in ideological credibility are unlikely to

obstruct the functioning of an electoral democracy. More ominous for the future is the volatile nature of politics between centre and region in India. These are pointing imperiously to the need for major structural changes, both at the constitutional and electoral levels, so that the relevance of a national politics in India is not lost sight of in the haze of coalition building and coalition management.

Does the triumph of regionalism necessarily entail a balkanization of India? Not if the contributions of India's electoral democracy in spelling out the ideational and structural flaws of the nation-state are recognized and concrete steps taken to rethink relations between centre and regions. In the absence of a single party capable of commanding widespread electoral support, rigid adherence to centralized unity and monolithic concepts of sovereignty could further hasten, not counteract, the growing irrelevance of a national politics in India. The objectives of a cooperative federalism may be better served by replacing the current deadlocked parliament with a grand council of regional spokespersons, supplemented by institutional mechanisms that can arbitrate issues of redistributive justice, equity and civil liberties for all the regional peoples. Insofar as the 'nation' has been the primary site of contested identities, its replacement by a looser union of differences could chart a more promising future for South Asia. Given the new-found capacity of mutually assured destruction, India and Pakistan have to renegotiate the terms of accommodation in the region. The allusion to a grand regional council in India is only suggestive of the dramatically different kind of political arrangements South Asia as a whole may need in order to bridge the precipice of differences into possible new commonalities and unities of the twenty first century.

¹A much fuller discussion of this and other related issues mentioned in this article can be found in Ayesha Jalal, *Self and Sovereignty: Individual and Community in South Asian Islam since c.1850s*, (London & New York: Routledge: and Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000)