After the creation of Pakistan, ethnic conflict in Sindh has existed for many decades. After every few years, it takes a violent form in Karachi, Hyderabad and elsewhere. However, deeper ethnic divides and biases continue to persist in Sindh and the rest of Pakistan. When violent episodes occur, the public imagination is triggered for a few days, but no systematic change occurs.

Before I begin, I want to reveal that I personally have only a mild attachment to my ethnic roots, but I speak the Sindhi language when I interact with my family. I think of myself as a humanist and not a Sindhi nationalist, and plan to marry a woman who is Punjabi by ethnic origin and many people in my family have inter-ethnic marriages.

Unfortunately, the response to ethnic conflict exhibited by many educated people is also not helpful and reflects a simplistic understanding of the problems. For instance, many educated people on social media interpreted the recent conflict in Hyderabad as a matter of intolerance towards other ethnicities by the Sindhi population. It is certainly true that the circulating videos revealed behavior which must be condemned and discouraged but it was a response to a violent murder and deeper ethnic conflicts which must also not be forgotten. However, most people who claim to be critical of ethno-centric behavior are equally ethno-centric themselves, but with a different set of biases.

If I had videos from my school days as a child when I used to travel in my school bus to an elite school in Karachi, equally audacious and ethno-centric behavior could be revealed toward Sindhi speaking population. Hence, my first point is that let’s first recognize that ethnic biases and conflicts exist in Pakistan and even more so in Sindh. They exist toward all ethnicities and originate from all ethnicities. Of course, certain kind of biases would be more visible in some cities and social contexts as compared with others. For instance, the conflicts visible in Karachi may be very different from the conflicts revealed in some less developed parts of Hyderabad.

My main point is that rather than attacking or shaming any specific ethnic group, we need to understand the roots of ethnic conflict. The ethnic demography of Sindh has changed dramatically since the creation of Pakistan, and it is not possible to club all these diverse cultures into one identity. We need to swallow the reality that this cultural diversity cannot be conveniently and artificially eliminated. The scale of ethnic diversity that exists in Sindh does not exist in other provinces of Pakistan, which is why we do not observe conflicts of similar magnitudes and types elsewhere. Having said this, such ethnic diversity has its own social and economic benefits. Without this ethnic diversity, Karachi would not be a relatively open and progressive city today.

I am critical of the conventional solution proposed by some of the educated elite which is to eliminate ethnic identities and force all people to think of themselves as either merely “Pakistanis” or “Muslims”. The problem with the “Pakistani” identity is that it is simply impossible to eliminate the historical cultural heritage of all ethnicities and an attempt to artificially group people into one identity only fuels backlash. Similarly, the Muslim identity excludes not just the minority religious groups but also ignores the fact that religiosity levels vary across ethnicities and within ethnicities. Why do we need to choose a particular common identity at the cost of others? For some people, their ethnicity is an important part of their identity even if they are very religious and patriotic. Meanwhile, for others it may not be that relevant. We need to have a tolerance for this diversity of possible identities in a country of more than 200 million people.

Ultimately, we need more rule of law, inclusive economic institutions, more democratic political structures, and equal economic opportunities for all people within Sindh and Pakistan. At the same time, we need to accept that we are an ethnically, culturally, and religiously diverse group of people, who live in one large nation state.

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