Local Cultural Nationalism as Anti-Fundamentalist Strategy in Pakistan

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National identity would seem to be an unavoidable issue in world political culture in the late 20th century. Every nation-state functions as an absolute sovereign unit, its borders defined with mathematical precision, its administrative and military units laid out in full bureaucratic complexity, and equipped with the full regalia of symbolic authority, down to flag, currency, and stamps. All these prerogatives are guarded with special zeal in states that formerly were colonies. The glory of independence did not guarantee a clear sense of national identity, however. The massive experience of 19th-century European colonialism in Asia and Africa left in place institutions created along European lines, staffed by native bureaucracies trained by colonial administrators. Recreating historical and cultural links with the pre-colonial past was a task taken with utmost seriousness by nationalist theorists the world over. In this quest to define national identity, the most problematic issues have typically revolved around questions of language, ethnicity and religion.

Ever since the creation of Pakistan in 1947, one of the most hotly debated questions there has been that of Pakistan's national identity. Was the nation founded as the ideal Islamic state, or was it to be a modern secular state where the destinies of Muslims could be worked out without oppression by a Hindu majority? Islamic fundamentalist thinkers like Maududi were theoretically opposed to nationalism as a divisive force within the global Muslim ummah, and they accordingly criticized the establishment of the Pakistani state. Nonetheless, once Pakistani independence was achieved, they were gradually drawn to the prospect of fully Islamizing the state. The increasing strength of ideological formulations of Islamic identity has been evident in Pakistan over the last two decades. Landmark concessions were granted to Islamists by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in the 1970s, while a major program of Islamization was announced by General Zia ul-Haq. In the post-Zia period the mantle of Islamization has fallen to the Islami Junhuri Ittihad (IJI) led by Nawaz Sharif, and there have been a number of vocal proponents of implementation of Islamic legal systems designed to attain the objective of a nation with a fully Islamic identity. The attempt to create an Islamic "official nationalism" for Pakistan through history textbooks has been critically analyzed in a recent study by Ayesha Jalal.2

In this paper I do not propose to relate a detailed history or analyze the particular features of Islamic fundamentalist movements in Pakistan. I wish simply to note that this is a critical on-going issue in Pakistan as well as in other formerly colonized nation-states with majority Muslim populations. The fact that this category includes the majority of Muslim countries means that the question of national identity in all these cases has similar issue parameters of language, ethnicity, and religion. That is also one of the reasons that the topic of Muslim fundamentalism looms large in the fears of Euro-American journalists and foreign policy strategists. On a comparative level, one can also extend the analysis to states where fundamentalist versions of other religions have attempted to exert control by ideologically redefining the role of the state and national identity.3

The arena of choice for staking out claims of national identity is history. For Pakistan, the debate most frequently takes the form of argument about the true intentions of the founding father, Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah. The letters to the editor columns of Pakistani newspapers are frequently filled with salvos citing chapter and verse from various documents, resolutions, and speeches of Jinnah to shore up a particular interpretation of the true nature...
of the Pakistani state. The historical thinness of the dossier makes this material difficult to use as a satisfactory basis for national identity. How can the separate ethnic groups of Sind, Punjab, Baluchistan, and North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) be made to feel that their ambitions and identities are perfectly enfolded by the formulations of a leader who died shortly after the birth of the nation? Jinnah’s distinct secular upbringing and his ambiguous statements about religion make it even more difficult to accommodate his vision to any form of Islamic identity. In government-sponsored rallies in Pakistan, it is common to see banners bearing the Urdu slogan, Pakistan ka ma’ni kya? La illa illa allah, Muhammad rasul allah: “What is the meaning of Pakistan? There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God.” As a sentiment asserting the identity of Pakistan with Islam it may seem admirable, but the slogan leaves out any reference to the culture or history of the region, which would differentiate Pakistan from Algeria or Egypt. In fact the only thing about this slogan that is particularly Pakistani is the Urdu question that raises its identity; the Arabic answer that asserts this to be universal Islam is poignant in its transcendence of the actual situation of Pakistan. This kind of abstraction may have occasioned the dry remark attributed to Pathan leader Wali Khan, who put national identity into the longer-term perspective of religion and ethnicity: “We have been Pakistanis for forty years, we have been Muslims for fourteen hundred years, but we have been Pathans for four thousand years.”

For this discussion I would like to comment on a highly interesting recent attempt to recover Pakistani national identity. This was presented in a series of newspaper articles published in the fall of 1993 on “The Cultural History of the Indus Basin,” written by prominent Pakistani People’s Party leader and constitutional lawyer Aitzaz Ahsan; Ahsan has revised and expanded the articles for forthcoming publication as a book.4 The author has had a fairly long career in Pakistani politics, acting as a provincial minister in Punjab during the period of Zulfikar ‘Ali Bhutto (probably the youngest provincial minister in Pakistan’s history), and he joined the Tahrik-i Istiqlal party for a brief time in the late 1970s. He attained prominence over the long term while acting as chief legal counsel for current Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, particularly during her legal battles with General Zia ul-Haq, and he has also acted as Minister of the Interior on a federal level. Ahsan won a legislative position from Punjab in the 1990 elections, when the People’s Party suffered a general electoral setback, but he lost a bid for election in the 1994 elections. He was then appointed by Benazir Bhutto to a four-year term as Senator. His theoretical exposition of Pakistani identity thus emanates from the highest political circles of the current government.5

The general project that Ahsan proposed in his series of articles is to retrieve Pakistani identity from a historical continuum 6000 years old, stretching from Mohenjo-Daro to the eve of the colonial period. The forthcoming book will bring the argument up to the present day. Ahsan maintains that a series of figures both Muslim and non-Muslim, including Mauryan Buddhists, Raja Rasalu, the Tughluqs, Hindu Bhaktas, Sikh Gurus, and Punjabi Sufis all have contributed to an enduring folk culture that has survived wave after wave of invasion and central government oppression. These points were presented in a series of 20 articles, with separate titles, published in a recently-founded English-language daily in Lahore, The News.6 The main thesis, which I would like to explore in some detail, is that the Indus basin culture is ultimately separate from both the Indian subcontinent and the Arab region, having its most important links instead with Central Asia. Using a modified Marxist socio-economic analysis, Ahsan argues from this position that the basic character of Pakistani identity is incompatible with religious fundamentalism. His historical survey proposes that resistance to tyranny is the fundamental characteristic of the Indus culture, and as an important related theme he stresses the independent and leading role of women. Borrowing an analysis of nationalism from Benedict Anderson, I would like to characterize this effort as a classic example of the formation of an “imagined community” through print journalism in the language of power, in this case consciously modeled on the well-known example of Jawaharlal Nehru’s The Discovery of India.7 It appeals to local cultural identity as a strategy to oppose Islamic fundamentalism in Pakistan, which is assisted by Ahsan’s portrayal of his study as a Nehruvian prison project, positioning him as the champion of liberation from imperialist authority. Questions remain, however, as the issue of multiple ethnic and linguistic particularity in Pakistan is glossed over by a Punjab-centered narrative.

The first essay’s title, “The Twain,” immediately suggests a dyad of opposites, like Kipling’s “East and West,” which shall never meet; these of course are Pakistan and India, poised forever in a balancing act. In his preface to this essay, Ahsan speaks of several months spent in New Central Jail, when he was troubled by doubts about the fragility of Pakistan, and the danger that it would revert to India one day. His thoughts turned to the inviolable oneness that Nehru had discovered in India, expressed in The Discovery of
India, a book written in the Ahmednagar Fort prison in the early 1940s. Ahsan’s own “journey” through the contemplation made possible by imprisonment would continue, he notes, in the jails of Sahiwal, Faisalabad, and Mianwali. He writes of the vision that unfolded to him “of myself as part of a magnificent continuum,” something destined as an inheritance. He began to explore this vision through history and myth, writing the entire study during his jail terms. Disarmingly, he makes no claim as an historian, but presents his conclusions as the results of a journey of self-discovery. Although the primary importance of the parallel with Nehru is symbolic, The Discovery of India has been clearly on Ahsan’s mind, and he quotes directly and indirectly from the book on more than one occasion.8

Where Ahsan disagrees with Nehru is in the conclusions that the two theorists draw from epic materials in their quest for a national identity, as in their discussions of Mahmud of Ghazna’s (d. 1030) raid on the famous Hindu temple of Somnath. Here Ahsan takes certain selective elements from Nehru, but with an opposite interpretation.9 The debate concerns Nehru’s account of a military defeat suffered by Mahmud in Rajputana after the raid on Somnath. Nehru based his account on an obscure and very late source, a 19th-century Persian history of Junagarh and Saurashtra, the Tarikh-i Sorath.10 This text, drawing upon Rajput bardic materials, relates that the victorious Hindu armies divided their Afghan, Turk, and Mughal prisoners according to status and enrolled them into appropriate Hindu castes and tribes. What is odd about Ahsan’s quotation from Nehru’s summary is that he only cites the portion that relates how the female prisoners were treated: the virgins among the Afghans, Turks, and Mughals were married by Indian soldiers, but others (probably meaning women of lower rank) were given purges and emetics to cleanse their bowels (a euphemism for abortifacients?) before being married to men of low rank. Ahsan views these as “morbid procedures” that “provide the clearest picture of the divide” between Hindu and Muslim. Nehru, on the contrary, in quoting the incident of the captured members of Mahmud’s army, was primarily interested in “the way foreigners are said to have been absorbed into the Rajput clans,” and he remarks of the “cleansing process” that it was merely “novel.” Nehru thus in general downplays the religious significance of Mahmud’s invasions, arguing that “the whole of central, eastern and south India escaped from him completely.” Unlike historian Romila Thapar, whom Ahsan relies upon elsewhere, Nehru regards Mahmud in an almost entirely secular light, as one who “used and exploited the name of religion for his conquests.” In this early (1966) book, Thapar still speaks of the temple raids as being partially motivated by “religious motivation, iconoclasm being a meritorious activity among the more orthodox followers of the Islamic faith.”11 Here Ahsan chooses Thapar’s narrative as a better fit than Nehru’s for his argument.

In its present form, Ahsan’s study is much shorter, and unlike Nehru’s book it does not yet contain any discussion of the British colonial period of history. It appears from Ahsan’s projection of the forthcoming revision in book form that it will have a much more comprehensive scope, again possibly with an eye to Nehru. Ahsan’s choice of Nehru as a foil was perhaps a natural one, given the anti-fundamentalist tone of this series; Nehru’s secularist position and reservations about the public role of religion are remarkably close to Ahsan’s views.12 The real difference between the two obviously lies in the precise nature of the national identity that may be “discovered” through a study of history.

The problem, then, is the myth of Indian unity, to which the existence of Pakistan is the primary challenge. Ahsan observes that this Indian unity is assumed “with an arrogance entirely Indian” in the epic Mahabharata; it is suggested even by the geographical map, and it is argued in Hindu religious thought from Shankaracarya (ninth century) to Vivekananda (the spokesman for Hinduism at the 1893 World Parliament of Religions in Chicago). Ahsan notes that this unified concept of India was given particular force by the British Raj. The only alternative offered to the Pakistani has been that of Arab identity, which came with the Islamic religion. But Ahsan argues that the culture of the Indus has little to do with either Indian or Arab (1). Only rarely has an Indian empire like that of the Mauryas held the Indus; contact with the Arabs was brief, and it was limited mostly to portions of Sind. Insofar as the Pakistan region is connected with another area, it is Central Asia that has greatest importance, particularly in terms of economic relations (“the means of production”); the Indus basin forms in effect a shifting and semi-porous dividing line between the Central Asian and Indian civilizations.

A review of the social patterns, of economic activities, of the political movements, of culture, of the religions and rituals, throughout the history of this area, in comparison with those of other areas will establish its distinctiveness and uniqueness. It will point to the need to discard either the defensive approach towards the Indian society and culture, or the obscurantist leap towards the Arab. It will hopefully reassure the Pakistani in the pride that he must take in what he is: a Pakistani, a citizen of the Indus valley, with a richer;
more glorious history and past than any other area in
the region (2).

The historical argument for the separate character
of the Indus points to the Persian and Greek con-
quests (7) as evidence of an early Central Asian con-
nection. After the brief Mauryan ascendancy, the rise
of the Bactrian Greeks was further evidence.
“Historical gravity has always pulled the Perso-
Afghan areas of Central Asia and the Indus towards
each other” (9). The overseas trade in the Arabian
Sea, and the monsoon-driven boats from the Persian
Gulf, bypassed the Indus and went straight to the
coast of Gujarat (10). In terms of trade, a constant
factor over the years since Bactrian and Kushan times
was the import of horses from Central Asia, since the
hot Indian climate was inimical to horse-breeding.
The military superiority of Central Asian nomads
consequently made raiding a favorite activity. “To the
Central Asian soldier-kings, the Indus was their lawful
and natural domain, the inheritance, so to say, of
their forefathers” (14).

The realm of religion and culture also demon-
strates the distinctiveness of the Indus region. Islam
came to the Indus primarily through Sufi missionaries
from Iran and Central Asia. Ahsan observes a curi-
ous point about the spread of Islam in the region.
Because of the raiding proclivities of the Central
Asians, with slaves a frequent object, Indian converts
to Islam always changed their names to Muslim
names, to escape the potential danger of enslavement;
this absence of pre-Islamic names, he maintains, is a
feature unique to this area. When speaking of the
ephemeral nature of Arab control over the lower In-
dus, Ahsan seems to justify Mahmud of Ghazna’s
overthrow of the Isma’ili kingdoms of Multan and
Mansura, not because they were heretics, but on the
grounds that they owed allegiance to foreign Arab
rulers (14). Although the Delhi Sultanate established
in 1192 (and often in fact ruled from Lahore) did
create a genuine “Indian-Muslim” empire, Ahsan
plays down its pretensions to be a truly great empire,
and he notes that Turkish, Afghan, and Mughal rulers
all cherished in vain the dream to establish a great
empire in Central Asia (15). The Indus region, he
observes, differed from the south of India in every
important respect, although Rajasthan and the
Gangetic plain shared characteristics of both regions.
The north he characterizes as militarized, puritanical
but tolerant, and feudal, while the south was tribal,
pastoral, and pacifist, with a strong tendency toward
the erotic esthetic of tantra and temple dance. The
militaristic tendency worked to the impoverishment
of the feudal north in wasteful warfare, while the south
grew rich from ocean trade (16). Ultimately, all efforts
at cultural synthesis between these diverse regions
failed. Ahsan acknowledges that the poet Amir Khus-
rav’s (d. 1325) delight in things Indian made him “the
first nationalist,” only to be matched later on by Sufis
like Bullhe Shah (d. 1752), Sultan Bahu (d. 1691),
and Shah Latif (d. 1752). But these efforts, along with
those of the bhakta reformers Ramanand and Kabir,
Akbar’s (d. 1605) eclectic religion, and royal mar-
rriages between Mughals and Rajputs, all failed to
bridge the civilizational gap (19). It is here that we see
the greatest contradiction between Ahsan’s vision and
that of Nehru, who remarked, “Akbar’s success is as-
tonishing, for he created a sense of oneness among
the diverse elements of north and central India.”

Meditation on the distinctive character of the In-
dus region produces the first clues to the anti-
fundamentalist thesis. In searching back through the
mists of earliest history, Ahsan comes up with what is
undoubtedly the best line of the series, in the title of
the third essay, “The Mullahs of Mohenjo-Daro.” This
was, as he later acknowledges (20), the most contro-
versial thesis in his entire presentation, and it would
be interesting to see the resulting letters to the editor.
Scanning the ruins of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa,
Ahsan notes their relatively high technological level in
construction and flood control, combined with a lack
of any palace structure. The prominent water tanks
and other features suggest a rule by priesthood, to
which Ahsan attributes the stagnation and decline of
this otherwise impressive civilization.

Priests, not kings, thus governed the Indus cities.
Dogma (Mullaism), not monarchy ruled. Religious
doctrine, not the force of arms, expropriated the
product and crops from the primary producers. The
food surplus was yielded not out of fear of the sword,
but by the fear of divine retribution. A minimum of
violence was involved....The clergy was characteristi-
cally conservative and opposed to development and
change....Development and innovation were anath-
ema, as these have the natural potential of weakening
the hold of obscurantists....But for the twentieth-
century archeologists, there may still have been no
trace or evidence whatsoever of the great and rich
civilisation that had atrophied and disappeared under
the dead weight of the Indus sands and the orthodox,
debilitating dogma of the conservative priesthood (3).

This richly rhetorical passage was undoubtedly
meant to target not only the ancient inhabitants of
Mohenjo-Daro, but also the mullahs who lead funda-
mentalist groups in Pakistan today.

In his attack on fundamentalism, unlike many lib-
eral apologists for Islam, Ahsan does not argue that
Islam offered equality, in contrast to the Hindu caste
system. He sees Arab Islam as temperamentally un-
suited to the Indus region. “Arabs were brutally patri-
archal. The Indus civilisation was tempered by the soft strains of matriarchalism" (13). Arab Islam developed in a tribal patriarchy, and it did not at first deal with the kinds of family structure possible in agrarian regions; therefore Islam caught on more readily in the Indus region when it was imported from civilized Iraq and Persia rather than directly from Arabia. In any case, Ahsan feels that religion is only part of the picture. "To restrict the differences to merely those of religion, is to refuse to comprehend the issue. Fundamentalists on both sides of the Indo-Pakistan border are doing just that. Of such all-pervading differences, the religious difference is only one aspect. It is not the whole." With this understanding, peaceful coexistence like that between Germany and France should be possible between India and Pakistan. He stresses that the Sufis, whom he regards as the real bearers of Islam, were non-dogmatic. The popular Sufi poems in folk idioms, he feels, were a direct response to the zealously dogmatic authoritarianism of Aurangzeb (d. 1707). "The Sufi's message rejected orthodoxy outright, both Muslim and Hindu." By retelling of the folk tales of the region, they "took the opportunity to preach the lessons of love and tolerance, and to denounce rigid social customs and the intolerance of the rulers and the clergy." Their poems with heroines like Heer and Sohni reveal the true role of women. "The woman in the Indus region has always had a leading role, whether our fundamentalists like it or not. The rejects of the cultural tradition of the progressive Indus region cannot change those traditions, howsoever they try" (19).

These last forceful points should emphasize the remarkable importance of the status of women in Ahsan's argument. It seems reasonable to suggest that this argument has special political significance for the legal counsel to Pakistan's first woman president. After all, one of the most frequent jibes of Benazir Bhutto's Islamist opponents was the assertion that Islam requires women to avoid the public and political sphere. Ahsan, as just mentioned, finds evidence for a matriarchal society in the pre-Islamic Indus society, as witnessed in the myths of Krishna and his multiple marriages; these assume "widespread assimilation of countless matriarchal and matrilineal aboriginal tribes with the patriarchal and patrilineal Aryans" (6). Epic literature and bardic tales furnish further important evidence. The popular tales of Raja Rasalu and Dulla Bhatti indicate that "women enjoyed substantial importance and equality....Most were free to make their own choices" (11). The heroines Heer and Sohni, among others, further bear out this contention, as mentioned above. This argument seems all the more significant when we consider that a patriarchal leadership is one of the most common indexes of fundamentalist movements worldwide.16

Another theme that echoes throughout the series is that of resistance to tyranny as the characteristic attitude of the Indus region.17 This is first brought out in an ingenious revision of the standard account of Alexander's invasion of the Punjab and his defeat of King Porus. Porus, whom Ahsan describes as "a jat raja" from Gujrat, is mentioned by Alexander's biographer Arrian as a brave and bold captain whom Alexander captured and ultimately let go. Ahsan suggests that this story is a cover-up for Alexander's defeat by Porus, which he commemorates by composing some appropriate Urdu verses (7).18

A new concept of political order emerges from scrutiny of the epic of Puran Bhagat.19 Noticing that the hero's companions are a goldsmith's son and carpenter's son, Ahsan concludes, "a republican order prevailed in most of the Punjab and Indus states of that era. In the kingdoms too, the republican tradition was strong, and the authority of the king was neither absolute nor autocratic. That is, indeed the tradition of the Indus. (That, surely, must be the tradition of Pakistan)" (11).

The anti-authoritarian tradition is then measured by the standard of imprisonment, and here Ahsan looks back to his many distinguished predecessors, such as the early Persian poet of Lahore, Mas'ud Sa'di Salman (d. 1131), who was renowned for his prison poems. He was just "the first in Lahore's rich line of poets of resistance. His spirit was to live on for centuries through Shah Hussain to the modern-day poets like Iqbal, Faiz, Jalib, Kishwar Naheed, Salim Shahid, and Javed Shaheen" (15). Most notably, the tradition of resistance manifested itself in a long series of revolts against centralized authority that was imposed over Punjab and Sind from elsewhere. Ahsan notes the failed imperial ambitions of the Tughluqs, which faltered due especially to the rebellion of Sheikh Ghakhar in the Salt Range and Taghi in Sind. Sheikh Ghakhar took Lahore in 1394, and both he and his son dared to confront the conqueror Timur. Another figure was Sarang Khan, who raised a peasant revolt in 1419 (15). "The Indus region remained a hotbed of revolt. Almost every Sultan was preoccupied with quelling rebellion in the Punjab" (16). Likewise the Lodis remained stable until they "began to arrogate absolute power with scant consideration for the norms and traditions of tribal counsel and participation," at which point tribal leaders looked again to Central Asia "for their redemption." Babur (d. 1530) would be the answer. Ahsan observes that historical references to Akbar's architectural activities
in Lahore fail to mention that the real reason for his presence was to suppress revolts of Punjabi peasantry. The outrage of corvée labor and overtaxation to support courtly extravagance led to the rise of "that brave Robin Hood of the Punjab, Abdullah, of Pindi Bhattian...[a.k.a.] Dulla Bhatti...who roasted the rich to feed the poor." While both Central Asia and India have attempted to control the dwellers on the Indus, "They stoically, but actively, resisted the force of both sides" (18). In this connection, Ahsan also points out the coincidence of the ten Sikh Gurus (ca. 1510-1709) overlapping almost exactly in time with the great Mughal emperors (1526-1707). Since the Sikh movement was a response to "the conflict, war, intolerance and anarchy of the times," their movement appears here as another local resistance movement (18). This trend includes the peasant revolt of the Sikh leader Banda Bairagi (executed 1716), which also happens to be a favorite moment in history for leading Sikh author Khushwant Singh.

The historical legacy is mixed, however. The repeated irruption of war and conquest has taken its toll on the psyche of the Indus valley dweller. One unfortunate effect has been a tendency toward "the belief in the futility of savings, and in the advantages of instant consumption [which] seems a permanent cultural imprint, one of the dominant traits of the Indus region." This is explained as the result of the rapacious invasions of Ahmad Shah Durrani (d. 1773), and it is summarized in proverbial form: "Whatever you spend is yours, as Ahmad Shah will take all that you have saved." Thus one may explain the custom of extravagant weddings that bankrupt families. Another effect was lowered expectations of the people regarding administrators, "the threshold of tolerance that we have displayed towards oppressive and cruel rulers. [Ahsan then observes sardonically, with a nod to Bangladesh:] The Bengalis did not have the same tolerance threshold as those on the Indus. And they separated." Finally, political culture was infected with a rootless disposition to form factions and betray allegiances at the drop of a hat, a recognition of "the ease with which governors could switch loyalties to retain their titles." This was a success ethic based on opportunism rather than loyalty. "Of course, in those uncertain times, the penalty for steadfastness was death, often of the most brutal and painful variety. Today’s opportunists have much less at stake, but follow a cultural trait with the facility of an easy conscience" (18).

A constant sub-theme in Ahsan’s analysis is an economic approach colored by Marxism. This is not presented intrusively as a strong ideological slant, but as a general "scientific" tendency to look for economic determinants for historical change, and a somewhat rigid progressivist view of social structures. The absence of iron in the Indus area, and its presence in eastern India, looms as a fatal though enigmatic historical factor in several discussions (5, 6, 7, 9, 11). Sometimes pastoralism is opposed to agriculturalism, while on other occasions it is contrasted with feudalism. The role of craft guilds is discussed in relation to the rise of the Hindu caste system. The theory of matriarchal societies mentioned by Ahsan (6), first elaborated by 19th-century writers such as Bachofen and Engels, is no longer accepted today by most anthropologists, except for classical Marxists and some feminist authors. Soviet scholar Y. Gankovsky is quoted on the Gupta empire as "vast slave-owning state" (10), and Romila Thapar’s well-known economically-oriented history of India is cited occasionally. Religion is often analyzed from this perspective. The Buddha is seen primarily as a critic of an unjust social system (6), while the Buddhist policies of Ashoka (d. 232 B.C.E.) are evaluated primarily in terms of their beneficial impact on private property ownership and business (8). The overall effect of this kind of analysis is to reinforce the view that religion is just one aspect of culture that needs to be put in perspective with other concerns; it is not the universal solvent claimed by fundamentalists.

How should we understand the symbolic nature of the Pakistani national identity recovered by Ahsan? Ahsan contrasts cultural history with the clear beginnings and endings of dynastic history, thus making a methodological principle out of the tradition of resistance to authority. Instead he sees his task as one of finding, discovering, and constructing the national character.

Whosoever attempts to write about the cultural history of any people does, in fact, venture upon an attempt to discover each element that makes the contemporary individual. He, in other words, endeavours to "assemble" the man. In doing so the historian aspires to discover his natural and acquired impulses, emotions, responses, habits, fears, delights, and predilections. Going into his roots, he seeks to identify him as an individual apart from all other nations, but as a part of his own people (18).

Ahsan judges his effort to have been successful. The goal has been to demonstrate the existence of a separate cultural heritage for Pakistan. "This is a distinct heritage, of a distinct and separate nation. There is, thus, no fear of any other country devouring us....From pre-history to the 19th century, the Indus region has been Pakistan. 1947 was only a reassertion of that same reality. As such, "Pakistan’ preceded even the advent of Islam in the Sub-Continent" (18). The problem raised by Nehru’s theory of a unitary
subcontinent has evidently been solved. The method has been heuristic, looking for elements that can fit the theoretical needs of the situation.

Quite frankly the purpose of the present discourse is only to select facts and circumstances that help to highlight the dichotomy between the Indus region and the rest of the sub-continent. These will show, therefore, the almost unbroken continuity of a distinct social and political order, even within the expanse of a vast and universal empire that spanned the whole of India…. It will thus bear testimony to the primordial and restless impulse of the Indus region (Pakistan), to be a distinct and independent “nation state” (17).

Q.E.D.

The project of Ahsan, which is still in the process of formation, can best be understood in terms of the general phenomenon of nationalism and culture that has been fully active at least since the early 19th century. Its local coloring is, moreover, framed in terms of the universal norms of the Enlightenment. Nationalism, anti-clericalism, the equality of women, republicanism, resistance to tyranny, and a penchant for economic causality—these are all the hallmarks of the age of modernity. Ahsan’s national narrative exhibits the paradoxical characteristics of simultaneous novelty and antiquity to which Anderson has drawn attention. It is as if the very novelty of a political concept such as Pakistan at some point requires for its legitimation a historical reach to the furthest accessible depth of history. The same has certainly been true of other recent nations such as Israel, with its Biblical identification. What should never be surprising is the ease with which the search for identity through antiquity inevitably finds that which is most present. It can be compared with similar projects of recovering pre-Islamic antiquity in other Muslim countries, although they had different goals and operated from different positions of strength; such efforts would include the Phoenicianism promoted by the Druze and Maronites in Lebanon, the Pharaonicism popular among certain intellectuals in Egypt, and the extravagant attempts of the last Shah of Iran to connect his regime with that of Cyrus the Great. What is distinctive about Ahsan’s interpretation of the ancient past of the Indus is that he identifies its ruins with his opponents. The somewhat playful and speculative tone of his proposal acts as a rhetorical tonic, to which fundamentalists can only reply by overly serious refutations. Ahsan’s light touch should not be mistaken for tongue-in-cheek humor, however; his political intentions are quite serious.

In terms of technique, Ahsan’s articles also exploit resources that typically make possible the extension of nationalism as an “imagined community.” The newspaper format, and the later book, make this detailed presentation available on a mass basis. It is especially noteworthy that this has been carried out in English, the language of the former colonial administration, which is still favored by the administrative elite that represents Pakistan internationally. Despite their smaller circulation compared to the Urdu press, the English-language newspapers are the medium of authority. To be sure, Ahsan bows to local languages with occasional quotations of verses in Urdu and Punjabi. In terms of education, bureaucratic administration, and journalism, however, English is still tremendously important in Pakistan, despite attempts to foster Urdu (a language born far away in Awadh and the Deccan) as a Pakistani “national” language on top of the regional languages of Punjabi, Sindhi, Baloch, and Pashtu.

Ahsan’s complicated relation with Nehru reminds us of Anderson’s dictum that nationalism is a modular phenomenon. As Anderson points out, “It is difficult today to recreate in the imagination a condition of life in which the nation was felt to be something utterly new.” Yet once articulated, nationalism provides a ready-made model, which can be modified and cut to fit, and then copied at will. It is clear that in striving to articulate a separate destiny for Pakistan, Ahsan was still wedded to a model earlier developed by Nehru. In creating a separate identity, Pakistan had to start in this case from an Indian model.

Some obscurities remain. It may be possible and even desirable to define Pakistani negatively with respect to Arabia and India. The identification with Central Asia is problematic, however, in terms of its policy implications. Despite its rich emotional appeal, the dream of return to the ancestral roots in Bukhara and Samarqand may founder on the first visits to the disappointing new cities that bear those names in the post-Soviet era. Constructing Central Asia as an imaginative homeland still leaves considerable practical difficulties to solve on levels such as trade, that could perhaps be solved more easily with India if the symbolic barriers of negativity could be avoided. Within Pakistan, one wonders if the Punjab-centered narrative will be equally accepted on all sides, despite the occasional nod to a Sindhi figure. If Ahsan’s present version were to be adopted, would that lead to policies of “official nationalism,” which identified the Punjab as the true Indus society and penalized other languages and ethnic groups? Does the nominally liberal feminist reading of Indus history act as the excuse for defense of a dynasty led by a woman Prime Minister? These readings would probably be too negative. The real catalyst for this exercise has been the attempt of fundamentalist parties to use religion
as an ideology to gain control of the state. In resisting this effort, Ahsan wishes to foreclose the fundamentalists’ attempt to hijack the nation-state, by defining it in terms that transcend their historical grasp. Although they will doubtless contest his right to do so, he still has the opportunity through this exposition to ring changes on themes that have a strong claim on the sensibilities of Pakistani intellectuals.

The priests that first debilitated, and then brought down that rich and vigorous civilisation [of Mohenjo-Daro], would have us today put yokes around the necks of the better half (and more) of our population. Yet when I ventured upon the discovery of my own roots I found that that is not natural to the Indus man. Nor to the Indus woman. And therefore not to the Pakistani person. There is strong and primordial tradition of liberalism and tolerance in the Indus valley. It allows women the freedom of learning, education, pursuit of the arts, travel, and even of a choice of her life partner. The deviants from this tradition of liberalism and tolerance, be they emperors, priests, or dictators, have always paid a heavy price for the transgression. No wonder religious parties perform so miserably in every successive general election in Pakistan. They will have to discover the Pakistani person before they can hope to win his support. In the event they may of course be forced to discard their fundamentalism (20).

Is this empty rhetoric, or will the phrases conjured by Ahsan succeed in constructing a new identity for Pakistan, based on his discovery of ancient traditions of anti-clericalism, women’s rights, and resistance to tyranny? What is especially striking about Ahsan’s effort is that he mostly refrains from using the typical metaphor of “awakening” to true national identity, with all its unspoken assumptions about nationalism as a natural state; instead, he is fairly straightforward about the creative nature of his project. Nonetheless, Ahsan’s position is not an isolated instance, but part of a larger project proposed by other writers such as Hanif Ramay and Fateh Mohammad Khan. As David Gilmartin has pointed out, “The attempt to reclaim this culture as a foundation for a new, politicized Punjabi identity defining a popular claim on the state remains, despite its vicissitudes, one of the most important cultural agendas in Pakistan.”

In any event, Aitzaz Ahsan has drawn the lines of the contest, and has entered into battle for the soul of Pakistan with “the mullas of Mohenjo-Daro.”

Notes
1. An earlier version of this article was presented at a panel on “Islamic Resurgence: The Case of Pakistan” at the Middle East Studies Association conference held at Phoenix in November 1994.
5. I owe this summary of Ahsan’s career to my friend Tahir An- drabi of Pomona College, who generously supplied me with copies of Aitzaz Ahsan’s articles and suggested the topic for this paper.
6. When quoting Ahsan, my parenthetic references cite the numbered essays according to this list:

1. (Aug. 13). The Twain—Patliputra to Pakistan
2. (Aug. 20). The Historical Divide
3. (Aug. 27). The Mullahs of Mohenjodaro
4. (Sept. 3). The Man on Horseback
5. (Sept. 10). The Iron Grip of the Iron Hand
6. (Sept. 17). Buddha and Iron Destroy the Tribe
7. (Sept. 24). Porus: The True Story
8. (Oct. 1). Pax Mauryana: The First Universal State
9. (Oct. 8). The Oxus and the Indus
10. (Oct. 15). The Indus in the Medieval Period
11. (Oct. 22). The Romance of Raja Rasilu
12. (Oct. 29). Prelude to Islamic Conquests
13. (Nov. 5). The Arab Invasion
14. (Nov. 12). More Men on Horseback
15. (Nov. 19). The First Feudal State
16. (Nov. 26). Turbulent North, Peaceful South, and Panipat
17. (Dec. 3). The Second Universal State
18. (Dec. 10). Resistance, Opportunism and Consumerism
19. (Dec. 17). The Bhaktis, Nanak and the Sufis
20. (Dec. 24). Coming to Some Conclusions

8. E.g., the account of Porus and Alexander (7) seems to be borrowed from Nehru, The Discovery of India, p. 69.
14. Although some scholars have used Muslim names as an evidence of conversion to Islam, in Iran and in the Punjab, it is worth noting that biographical dictionaries of medieval Indian Sufis record the persistence of Indian names such as Manu, Adhan, Babun, Budhan, Dawal, Jiv, Kalu, Mungar, Piyare, Raji, Sidu, and Manjhle.
16. Lawrence, Defenders of God, pp. 100-1.
18. Cf. the similar but more nuanced interpretation by a Hindu


