Introduction

In 1972, I accompanied my mother and sister to Afghanistan. I was just five or six years old at the time. My father—a journalist and a passionate supporter of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP) that had come to power in December 1971—had been posted as a Press Attaché at the Pakistan Embassy in Kabul. We were on our way to join him there. We travelled from Karachi to Peshawar by train and from Peshawar we took a bus from the famous Khyber Pass beyond which lay Afghan territory. I don't remember how many hours it took for the bus to reach Kabul, but I do remember travelling on a whirling road that was hundreds of metres above ground. It was a most fascinating journey.

Just as the bus was about to begin the journey from Khyber Pass, my mother told me that many warriors, kings and traders had entered the area (which became Pakistan) from the Khyber Pass. 'To conquer us?' I had asked. 'Some, but not all,' my mother had replied. 'But many of them stayed here as well,' she had added. I remember asking her, 'Did they become Pakistani?' She smiled and told me, 'No, all this happened before Pakistan was created.'

For years after that trip to Kabul and before I entered my teens in the 1980s, the Khyber Pass stuck in my mind

as a point of entry from where everyone wanting to enter Pakistan, came in. As I grew older and began to understand Pakistan beyond the monolithic manner it was taught to us at school, I realised there were so many other points of entry as well in the country (both physical and otherwise) from where numerous peoples and influences from varied regions and cultures had poured in and been absorbed.

Pakistan was created in 1947 as an independent Muslim-majority country. Quite like its larger neighbour India, Pakistan too is a land of some stunning geographical and cultural diversities. The country's state institutions and Constitution encourage the harnessing of cultural, religious and sectarian diversities to create a single sovereign unit based on certain historical commonalities. Or at least now that intent is there. Till the framing of the country's third Constitution in 1973, the state was rather apprehensive to officially recognise (let alone celebrate) this diversity. It felt that highlighting Pakistan's ethnic, religious and sectarian diversity would somehow negate the theory that had rationalised the emergence of a separate Muslim-majority country that broke away from the rest of India in August 1947. This apprehension remained despite the fact that the country's founder, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, had described the new country as a Muslim-majority entity whose polity and state would be inspired and driven by a progressive, multicultural, modernist and democratic interpretation and understanding of Islam.

Jinnah passed away in 1948 and the state's idea of Pakistan shrunk in such a manner that when the country's eastern wing, East Pakistan, plunged into a vicious civil war and separated to become Bangladesh, in 1971, many Pakistanis had already begun to ask, 'What does it mean

to be a Pakistani?' A single, immovable idea of nationhood had been constructed by the state and then an attempt was made to impose it upon a diverse population without a democratically achieved consensus.

Thus, the 1973 Constitution—authored by the country's first popularly elected Parliament—provided space to the land's various ethnic groups to democratically contribute to the process of state-building according to their own distinct cultural and ethnic mores. Over the decades, various democratic experiments have been rather successful in at least initiating the importance of yoking together a consensual concept of nationhood built from the unique economic, cultural and political genius derived from the country's various groups. This should have always been the case.

The last manifesto of Pakistan's founding party, the All India Muslim League (AIML), had claimed that a Muslim-majority state (or a state constructed by a minority community in India) was inherently more equipped to appreciate religious plurality, harmony and diversity than a state dominated by an existing large (read: Hindu) majority. The manifesto laid out AIML's idea of the state as something that had a soul. According to the manifesto, the state in the proposed Muslim-majority country would 'be the alter-ego of the national being, and in good time the two would merge to form an ordered and conflict-free society.'

So in all likelihood, Jinnah was already anticipating a diverse country where interaction and engagement between a Muslim majority and other faiths in various economic, political and cultural spheres would be able to construct a dynamic society and state. But, of course,

once the minority became the majority in the new country, sectarian, sub-sectarian and ethnic differences came to the fore. And the intensity of these divisions was such that the nascent and inexperienced state of Pakistan fumbled badly in trying to address the issue. It attempted to hastily create a national identity based entirely on a synthetic and monolithic paradigm of nationhood which ended up creating further fissures based on ethnicity and Muslim sects and sub-sects. Unable to appreciate its many diversities, the new majority turned on itself.

The idea of imposing a monolithic notion of nationhood and the state was a cosmetic solution and the results were drastic. Indeed, the country had to be kept intact as a single nation, but the state's idea of this singularity only managed to offend and alienate various distinct ethnic groups, many of who claimed that their histories not only pre-dated Pakistan, but Islam as well! This resulted in episodes such as the 1971 break-up of the country when the Bengali-majority East Pakistan rose up in revolt, and the eventual emergence of religious militancy, which, from the 1980s onwards, hijacked the faith-based dimensions of Pakistan's nationalism and moulded them into meaning a land which was to be forcibly dominated by a very narrow idea of Pakistan's majority faith.

But despite the fact that the country lost its eastern wing in 1971 and then became extremely introverted and even myopic about how it saw itself as a Muslim-majority state, things in this respect eventually began to straighten themselves out. More and more Pakistanis of different ethnicities have become conscious of their communities' histories and many diverse political, religious and social elements have continued to inform and find their voice

in what one can now define as 'the culture of Pakistan'. And this did not break the country up. Quite the contrary.

From the mid-2000s the state and government began to gradually return to the narrative of the 'modernist Islam' of the founders that had begun to erode in the 1970s and had been replaced by an entirely reactive one from the 1980s onward. But the new narrative is more pragmatic than ideological. And it has to be, to avoid the more monolithic and cosmetic aspects of the previous strand (of Muslim modernism). It is still very much a work-in-progress. It maintains that to make Pakistan an important economic player in the world, certain radical steps are necessary. These steps include the proliferation of free market enterprise and foreign investment, which, in turn, requires Pakistan to change its internal and external policies and crack down on anything threatening the erosion of local and international economic confidence.

Optimists have already predicted that Pakistan is well on its way to pulling itself out of the quicksand which it created and then fell into; whereas the sceptics advise caution. They say it is just too early to predict anything conclusive because the mountain through which the country is now trying to drill a tunnel, has been piling upwards for over thirty years now. Because despite the 1973 Constitution, the monolithic idea of Muslim modernism has been replaced by an equally monolithic idea of a more belligerent Muslim state.

After years of withstanding religious extremism and militancy (which began to emerge from the 1980s), the new narrative includes a new-found angle on how Pakistan's diversity is to be viewed. Instead of clubbing the country's various ethnic, sectarian and religious groups into a

cosmetic nationalistic whole designed by the state, the state is now interacting with Pakistan's latest experiments with civilian democracy and constitutionalism to construct a nation where every group is encouraged to participate in the nation-building process.

This will make the state and government of the country to draw brain and manpower from across Pakistan, giving a majority of Pakistanis a sense of participation and belonging in the state and nation-building process. The hope is that a future Pakistan is not going to be a discordant, alienated and demonised entity rampant with ethnic and religious violence. It will become the Pakistan Jinnah had in mind: a diverse and progressive society driven by a robust economy and a cohesive nationalist impulse built from the unique genius of every ethnic culture and faith that resides here.

My attempt in this book is to fling open the points of entry from where all those people and influences have come in for thousands of years, to help answer that puzzling question which still haunts the country: what exactly does it mean to be a Pakistani?

1

A Past in Ruins

Mohenjo-daro was one of the oldest settlements in the Indus Valley Civilisation.[1] Believed to have been built 5,000 years ago in an area which is today in the Sindh province of Pakistan, most historians suggest that it was abandoned some 3,000 years ago.[2] It remained buried beneath thousands of years of dust, sand and stone until it was rediscovered in 1920 by an Indian archaeologist, R. D. Banerji. Subsequent studies of the site reveal that Mohenjo-daro was a sophisticated settlement of traders, fishermen and farmers. It had a written language (which is yet to be deciphered) and complex religious cults. It was given its name by Banerji. In Sindhi, Mohenjo-daro means, 'the mound of dead men'. The site is located west of the Indus river in Sindh's present-day Larkana district. The Indus Valley Civilisation spanned much of what today is Pakistan, and Mohenjo-daro was one of its largest cities.

In the 1960s, archaeologists who took part in some of the last major excavation works on the site claimed that Mohenjo-daro as a city declined due to the invasions of warrior-nomads of Central Asia (the 'Aryans') who subdued the people of the Civilisation. However, many later-day

archaeologists and historians (especially from India) have refuted the Aryan invasion theory. They now believe that the cities of the Indus Valley Civilisation such as Mohenjo-daro began to decline and had to be abandoned due to the river Indus changing its course. They also add that the impact of climate change in the area curtailed rainfall during the monsoon seasons.

I first visited the ruins of Mohenjo-daro in 1974. I was just seven years old and a Grade III student at a school in Karachi. My visit was part of a 'class away day', during which students from Grades III and IV were flown on a Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) flight to Mohenjo-daro in the morning, and then flown back to Karachi in the evening. Then, the PIA used to operate regular flights to Mohenjo-daro (mainly from Karachi) and to enable this, a special (albeit tiny) airport had been constructed near the site. The site was hugely popular with historians, archaeologists and foreign tourists who in those days used to visit Pakistan in fairly large numbers.

I don't remember much about the visit, but I do recall strolling with classmates and teachers on a sprawling site, surrounded by men and women most of whom were quite clearly not Pakistani. I had believed that the tale of this ancient land which we were being taught in class was just another fairytale; but there I was, standing in the middle of the story, clomping my feet on its rough ground, seeing in front of my eyes its buildings and monuments and now I believed the story. I remember concluding that which one can physically feel is the truth; and that which one can't, is a fairytale. Or something of the sort.

The second time I visited Mohenjo-daro was twelve years later, in 1986. By then, I was a second-year student

at a state-run college in Karachi. Between 1983 and 1986, I often travelled deep inside the Sindh province, mainly for political reasons. I was a member of a progressive student outfit, and, since in the 1980s the interior of Sindh had become a hotbed of agitation against the Zia-ul-Haq dictatorship (1977-88), members of the student outfit I was a part of frequently travelled to various cities and towns in central and northern Sindh.

In November 1986, I accompanied four other members of the student outfit on a trip to the ancient city of Sehwan Sharif in Sindh's Jamshoro district. Our plan was to join anti-Zia protests being planned by the country's main opposition party, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and some small far-left groups and Sindhi nationalist outfits. We travelled by bus to Hyderabad and from there we were to take another bus which would have taken us directly to Sehwan Sharif. Sehwan is best known for its beautiful shrine of the Sufi saint Lal Shahbaz Qalandar. The protests were being planned around the shrine during the colourful and boisterous annual festivities which take place there to mark the saint's mystical enjoinment with the Almighty.

In Hyderabad, some of our comrades warned us that there were rumours that the Zia regime had sent 'hundreds of plain-clothed policemen' to Sehwan who were to begin arresting possible agitators a day or two before the protests. We were advised to stay put until the rumours were confirmed or proven wrong. But, instead of staying in Hyderabad, we decided to travel to Larkana and stay with a friend there. We reached Larkana by bus but couldn't locate my friend. One of his brothers told us that he might have been arrested in a nearby village where he had gone a few days before our arrival.

We ended up staying the night at a cheap, rundown hotel, four of us sharing a room which had just one rickety charpoy, but lots of bedbugs! So we decided to sleep on the cold floor. What helped us sleep better (in fact, sleep at all), were neat swigs from a bottle of the very strong and entirely unsmooth *Lion's Whisky* which we had bought for Rs. 60 from a 'licensed wine shop'[3] situated just behind our Hotel Chaand. The next morning, one of the guys, Rehan AKA *Roosi Sundi* or Russian Insect—because he always claimed to be a better Marxist and 'more *surkh* (red)' than any one of us—rented a motorbike (Honda 70) from a rental-cum-tyre-shop to ride to the village from where our Larkana buddy was supposedly arrested. I accompanied him. We failed to locate the village and were making our way back to Larkana when I saw a board that read 'Mohenjo-daro 20 KM.'

Soon, instead of Larkana, we were riding towards Mohenjo-daro. We reached the site late afternoon. It was breathtaking. Vast and very still. As we made our way towards the ruins, I somehow remembered the spot where I had stood and clomped my feet on the ground twelve years ago. There was hardly anybody there. There were just two gentlemen in the distance standing on a heap of ancient bricks. They were intensely studying what looked like a large map. I think one of them was Japanese. Or he may have been Chinese, I am not sure. Nearer to where we were was a man sitting on a crumbling wall. He was smoking a cigarette and looking straight ahead. His was a rather vacant gaze.

Roosi began walking towards the two map men who were about hundred metres ahead of us, as I made my way to the nearby spot where I had stood as a seven-year-old

schoolboy. I stood on that spot and began to gently clomp on it with my feet. This made me smile and chuckle. This was when I heard a voice (in Urdu) from behind where I was standing say, '*Sain,*[4] are you trying to look for oil?' I turned and saw the gazing man now gazing at me. I smiled at him and took out my pack of Gold Flake cigarettes and lit one. I then began to walk towards the crumbling old wall he was sitting on. '*Assalam alaikum,*' I greeted him, shaking his hand. He must have been in his sixties, but his moustache was jet-black, most probably dyed. He was wearing a grey turban and a traditional blue Sindhi *kameez-shalwar* (long and loose shirt and loose, baggy trousers).

He responded to my greeting with a slight nod of his head even as he closely studied me. My longish, unruly hair blowing left to right, my four-day-old stubble, my rimmed glasses, my faded Lou Reed T-shirt over which I wore an equally faded denim jacket; my dusty blue jeans and my beige 'Peshawari chappals'.[5]

'Are you from Karachi?' he asked in his heavily accented Urdu. 'Yes,' I responded. 'Is it that obvious?' I chuckled. He remained deadpan and then began to gaze in the distance once again as he lit himself another cigarette—King Stroke, or 'Bagla Brand' as it used to be known in those parts then—a filterless blast of unadulterated tobacco smoke.

'Are you from around here?' I asked.

He slowly turned his head towards me: 'I used to be a guide here …' he said. 'Nowadays there are more guides here than visitors.'

I nodded my head: 'Yes, looks that way. I first came here as a child in 1974. Were you a guide in those days?'

He softly shrugged his shoulders: 'My memory is not

very good these days. My father was a guide here as well. Many people used to visit this place then.'

'Are you still a guide here?' I asked.

His face lit up with a half-smile. 'I can be if you want me to,' he said.

'I don't have much money,' I said in a rather apologetic tone. This made him laugh: 'Hahahaha … Sain, who asked for money? This is our motherland.'

I nodded in agreement.

He then added: '*Kya samjhe*, Sain?' What did you understand?

'Pakistan?' I replied.

He began to laugh again: 'Hahahaha … no, Sain, birthplace of Pakistan.'

'India?' I asked, now a bit more assertively.

He politely shook his head: 'Sain, birthplace of India too. All this …,' he gestured with a jerk of his head and eyes to me to look at the ruins around us. 'Land of Sindhu.'[6]

'River Indus …' I replied. 'Yes,' he agreed finally. 'Sindhu gave birth to this place—Mohenjo-daro—which gave birth to India and then Pakistan. Kya samjhe, Sain?'

'What about the Arabs?' I just had to ask this.

'Qasim?'[7] He enquired.

'Yes.'

'He was our guest,' he said, proudly.

'But he invaded Sindh (in the eighth century CE) and defeated Sindh's Hindu ruler, Raja Daher. What do you think of that?' I asked.

He replied with a rather remarkable tale. He said back in 1979, when one of his younger brothers travelled to Oman as an electrician, he was once badly insulted by his

Arab employer. He said his brother scoffed at the Arab by telling him that he (the brother) came from the land of Sindhu which had taught the Arabs many things that they did not know.

'So what did the Arab say?' I asked.

'He actually began to respect my brother! He started to call him Raja Daher.' He laughed.

'Wasn't your brother insulted?' I probed.

The man stared at me with a completely unconcealed what-the-hell expression, 'Sain, why would he be insulted?'

'Well, your brother is Muslim and …'

Another burst of laughter cut me off. 'Sain, he (Daher) was here before them (the Arabs). He was here before you, who came from so many places in India.' He assumed I was from an Urdu-speaking family which had migrated to Pakistan (specifically to Karachi) from various Indian cities and towns after the creation of Pakistan in 1947.

'Sain,' said I defensively, 'My father is from north Punjab. So I am basically Punjabi. But, yes, my mother migrated from Delhi in India and is Urdu-speaking.'

He jiggled his head a bit: 'Daher's ancestors were from here (Mohenjo-daro). And so were the ancestors of you and me. We all are older than the Arabs. Kya samjhe, Sain?'

I nodded and offered him a cigarette from my pack. He took one and I lit it for him. 'Where have all the tourists gone?' I asked.

He took an intense drag from the cigarette and then exhaled just as intensely. 'Good,' he said, praising the cigarette.

'Gold Flake,' I said.

He nodded and then began to gaze at the sun which was about to set behind the ruins.

'You know what my brother began to call his boss?' he asked. 'Camel driver!'

I laughed. 'Really? And the Arab did not mind?'

'I don't know. I haven't seen my brother for the past three years,' he said, matter-of-factly.

'Why?' I enquired.

'He called his wife and children to Oman and then never came back. He thought this was not a suitable place anymore for his children.'

'How come?'

He shrugged his shoulders. 'Allah knows. My brother began to look at us as if we were from some other land. He also stopped coming here to Mohenjo-daro, even though he once used to love this place. He went away and so did the visitors. Maybe they, too, began to see this place as some other land.'

This made me chuckle. But he remained serious. 'Your friend is a Sindhi?' he asked, watching Roosi walking towards us.

'Yes,' I said. 'He is from Khairpur but studies with me at a college in Karachi'

Addressing the approaching Roosi, he loudly asked him (in Sindhi), 'Sain, what did you learn?'

'I learnt that there is not a single cigarette shop here, Sain!' replied Roosi, equally loudly.

I laughed. So did Roosi. But the man remained serious. 'It's not good to smoke in the presence of one's ancestors,' he said to Roosi, who was now with us.

'But you were smoking,' I said.

'I have lost the respect of our ancestors.' Then pointing towards Roosi, he said, 'But he is a young Sindhi. He should not lose what we have lost.'

In a blink of an eye, Roosi swooped down and touched the man's feet and then his own heart. '*Bhali,* Sain (Sure, Sir),' he said in Sindhi and then softly reminded me that it was getting late. We bid farewell to the man and headed back to Larkana.

From that day onwards, till I last met him sometime in the early 1990s, I never saw Roosi smoke another cigarette again. He quit. Just like that.

Kya samjhe, Sain!