The Identity Crisis in Pakistan: From Sapt Sindhu to a Global Centre of Terrorism

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	This research paper analyses Pakistan's ongoing identity crisis, arguing that the nation's political and security instability originates from a deliberate break with its indigenous historical and geographical foundations. The study traces the region's transformation from SaptSindhu, the cradle of the Indus Valley Civilisation and the Vedic era, which together form the civilizational basis of *Akhand Bharat* (Undivided India). These traditions established a pluralistic cultural and philosophical ethos that has shaped the region's social continuity for millennia. The study contends that following 1947, the adoption of the "Two-Nation Theory," which defined nationhood solely by religion, led Pakistan to reject its composite heritage in favour of an externally imposed Arab-Persian-Islamic identity. This shift erased local histories, languages, and cultural memory, hindering the formation of a territorially grounded national consciousness. The resulting ideological void was filled by state-sponsored Islamization and the strategic use of jihad to achieve internal cohesion and external policy objectives. The paper further explores how this trajectory gradually transformed a region with a significant civilizational legacy into one characterised by persistent instability, thereby creating conditions conducive to militancy, radicalisation, and the emergence of Pakistan as a central actor within the global network of terrorism (Pervez, 2021).

1. Introduction

The Islamic Republic of Pakistan exemplifies a unique geopolitical and sociological paradox, resulting from tensions among geography, history, and contemporary ideology. Geographically, Pakistan lies within the Indus River basin, historically known as *SaptSindhu*, and is widely recognised as one of the earliest centres of human civilisation (Kumar, 2024). This region provided the material and cultural foundations for early urban development, trade networks, and social organisation in South Asia. Culturally, Pakistan inherits a complex civilizational legacy, including the Indus Valley Civilisation, the Gandhara Buddhist tradition, and the Vedic heritage, all of which collectively underpin the concept of *Akhand Bharat* or civilizational India (Singh, 2023). In contrast, the modern Pakistani state has intentionally constructed its political and ideological identity in opposition to its inherited past. Since 1947, Pakistan has struggled to reconcile its historically Indian, territorially based, and pluralistic geography with an exclusivist ideological framework centred on the "Two-Nation Theory" (Cohen, 2004). This contradiction has generated persistent anxieties regarding nationhood and legitimacy (Iqbal, 2023). Mubarak Ali (n.d.) notes that Pakistan experiences a "persistent crisis of identity," as both the state and segments of the intelligentsia have systematically marginalised or erased the land's pre-Islamic history to retrospectively justify the partition of the subcontinent (Zaman, n.d.).

This analysis argues that the rejection of the *SaptSindhu* identity deprived Pakistan of a stable historical foundation. Consequently, the state adopted a security-centric approach, utilising radical Islam for national integration and foreign policy, particularly concerning India (Racine, 2010). This strategy resulted in unintended consequences, including societal radicalisation, the "Talibanization" of domestic spaces, and Pakistan's reputation as a global centre of terrorism (Talbot, 1998).

2. *The Sapt Sindhu*: The Civilizational Bedrock

2.1. Geography and Significance

The region comprising modern-day Pakistan was historically defined not by religious borders but by the Indus civilisation. In ancient Vedic texts, this region is revered as *Sapta Sindhva* or *SaptSindhu*, the "Land of Seven Rivers" (Aslam Khan, 1996). These rivers—identified as the Sindhu (Indus), Vitasta (Jhelum), *Asikini* (Chenab), *Parushini* (Ravi), *Vipac* (Beas), *Cutudri* (Sutlej), and the Sarasvati (Ghaggar)—formed a unified geographical and cultural (Saraswati River, 2024) entity (Kumar, 2024; Singh, 2023).

Sociologically, this region was the centre of the Indus Valley Civilisation (Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro), known for advanced urban planning and trade as early as 2600 B.C.E. (Malik, 2008). The Rigveda, the oldest Hindu scripture, was composed here, celebrating the geography of Punjab and the Indus (Singh, 2023). Thus, Pakistan's territory forms the foundational geography of *Akhand Bharat* or the Indian civilizational sphere (Midha, 2023).

2.2. A Pluralistic Heritage

Historically, the *SaptSindhu* region functioned as a conduit for the movement of peoples, ideas, and cultures across South Asia and beyond (Namboodiri, 2023). It was home to the Gandhara civilisation, which integrated Greek, Persian, and Buddhist traditions, demonstrating the region's receptiveness to external influences (Ancient Pakistan, 1964). Archaeological sites such as Taxila and Shaikhhan Dheri reveal a highly developed society where diverse philosophies and artistic styles converged (Dani, 1965–66). The region was also central to the Mauryan and Gupta empires, which unified much of South Asia under a shared civilisation. After the advent of Islam, the *SaptSindhu* region maintained a pronounced syncretic character rather than experiencing a cultural rupture. Islam in the subcontinent was shaped by Sufi traditions that emphasised spiritual devotion, tolerance, and coexistence over doctrinal rigidity (Prakash, 2013, pp. 1–20). Sufi influences fostered social connections between Muslim and Hindu communities, enabling shared worship, cultural exchange, and daily interaction (Talbot, 1998). This composite ethos was deeply rooted in local traditions. However, the rise of modern separatist politics led to the systematic denial and erasure of this heritage to establish rigid ideological boundaries and justify political division (Kubota et al., 2024). In 1947, British India was fundamentally shaped by the Two-Nation Theory, articulated and promoted by the All-India Muslim League. This theory asserted that Muslims and Hindus were not merely followers of different faiths but constituted two separate nations, possessing irreconcilable cultures, historical trajectories, and political destinies (Dawn, 2013). Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the principal architect and founder of Pakistan, strategically employed this ideological framework to mobilise political support and justify the demand for a separate Muslim homeland. Although Jinnah, in his 11 August 1947 address to the Constituent Assembly, articulated a vision of a secular state in which religion would have "nothing to do with (Jinnah's vision, 2011) the business of the State," the ideological momentum generated by years of communal mobilization rendered the realization of a genuinely secular Pakistan structurally untenable (Ahmed, 1997).

Partition led to the fragmentation of *Akhand Bharat*, dividing a civilizational space that had developed over millennia. The Two-Nation Theory soon faced a logical and empirical crisis: the presence of millions of Muslims in independent India undermined its core premise (Malhotra & Baker, 2021). This exposed the limitations of defining nationhood solely in terms of religion. The secession of East Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh in 1971 further weakened the theory, showing that shared religion could not overcome linguistic, cultural, economic, and regional differences (Faruqui, 2013). These events highlighted the fragility of building a nation-state on an exclusively religious foundation.

3.2. Erasure of History

To sustain the narrative that Pakistan was fundamentally distinct from India, the postcolonial state undertook what scholars have described as a systematic "murder of history." Official Pakistani historiography increasingly asserted that the region's meaningful past began not with the Indus Valley Civilisation or the broader *SaptSindhu* continuum, but with the Arab conquest of Sindh by Muhammad bin Qasim in 711 A.D. (Ali, n.d.). This deliberate temporal rupture recast centuries of pre-Islamic history as irrelevant or illegitimate. By categorising the ancient past as *Jahiliyya* (an age of ignorance) (Pakistan, 1977–1997: Islamization and Restoration of State Power, 2001) or dismissing it as merely "Hindu history," the state effectively severed the population's psychological and cultural links to the land's indigenous civilizational heritage (Dawn, 2022).

This erasure was institutionalised through extensive revisions of educational curricula, textbooks, and public narratives. School histories were redesigned to portray Hindus as perpetual civilizational adversaries and to frame the creation of Pakistan as the inevitable culmination of a religious struggle, rather than the result of complex political negotiations under colonial rule (Ali, n.d.). Such representations oversimplified historical realities and reinforced a binary worldview rooted in religious antagonism. Over time, this revisionism (Riaz, 2010) produced a deeply ambiguous and fragmented national identity. The inhabitants of the Indus region were subtly encouraged to identify more closely with external conquerors and imperial elites such as Arabs, Turks, and Mughals, rather than with their own indigenous ancestors who had shaped the region for millennia (Ali, n.d.). This historical dislocation not only weakened a sense of territorial belonging but also entrenched a dependence on borrowed identities to legitimise the modern state (Faheem et al., 2023, pp. 123-134).

4. Identity Crisis and Internal Fragmentation

4.1. The Failure of Religion as Glue
Relying exclusively on Islam as a unifying force proved inadequate for maintaining cohesion within Pakistan's ethnically and linguistically diverse population. The secession of East Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh in 1971 demonstrated that shared religion could not overcome deep ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and economic divisions (Talbot, 1998). This rupture exposed the limitations of defining nationhood solely in terms of religion while neglecting regional and historical context. After 1971, instead of reassessing foundational premises, Pakistan intensified its commitment to the so-called "Pakistan Ideology." This rigid framework equated patriotism with adherence to a singular, state-sanctioned Islamic identity, leaving little space for pluralism or regional diversity. Expressions of sub-national identity—whether Bengali, Sindhi, Baloch, or Pashtun—were increasingly depicted as threats to national unity and labelled as acts of disloyalty or separatism (Ali, n.d.). This securitised conception of identity further marginalised peripheral communities, deepened centre–periphery tensions, and reinforced an exclusionary nationhood that prioritised ideological conformity over social cohesion. Socially, the integration of religion into national identity has led to significant polarisation within Pakistani society. The emphasis on a singular religious identity has often marginalised minority communities and exacerbated sectarian conflicts. The anti-secular narrative promoted by Islamist groups has created an environment in which moderate and liberal viewpoints are suppressed, sometimes violently. This dynamic has contributed to increased sectarian violence and hindered efforts to create a more inclusive and tolerant society (2024, pp. 642-650).

4.2. Ethnic Fault Lines
Abandoning the territorial *SaptSindhu* identity contributed to the political and cultural alienation of indigenous populations in Pakistan's smaller provinces. In Sindh, this marginalisation led to the Sindhudesh movement, led by G. M. Syed, who argued that Sindh had a distinct 5,000-year-old civilizational identity suppressed by a "Muhajir–Punjabi" ruling establishment under the guise of Islam (Shahid & Qurban, 2023). Syed rejected the Two-Nation Theory, emphasising that land, history, and culture—not religion—form the true basis of national identity and legitimacy (Syed, 1974).
A similar pattern of alienation has characterised Balochistan, where recurring insurgencies have been driven by longstanding grievances against the central government. These grievances include perceptions that the federal government disproportionately exploits the province's natural resources while neglecting its socio-economic development and disregarding its distinct tribal structures, language, and cultural traditions (Talbot, 1998). The ongoing denial of territorial and cultural identities in favour of imposed ideological uniformity has intensified centre–periphery tensions, reinforcing cycles of resistance, repression, and political instability within the Pakistani state (Waseem, 2022)

5. The Descent into Theocracy and Radicalisation

5.1. State-Sponsored Islamization
The ongoing identity crisis enabled increased militarisation and Islamisation within the state (Shaikh, 2009; Sajid & Iqbal, 2021, pp. 45-67). Without historical legitimacy rooted in the land, leaders like Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto and General Zia-ul-Haq used religion to strengthen their political authority (Talbot, 1998). In 1974, Bhutto declared the Ahmadiyya community non-Muslim, a major concession to religious hardliners (Cohen, 2004).
General Zia-ul-Haq (1977–1988) institutionalised this trend, positioning the military as the "guardians of the ideological frontiers." He introduced Sharia courts, *Hudood* ordinances, and curricula that glorified jihad (Talbot, 1998; Ali, n.d.). The army began to see itself as an Islamic force, strengthening ties between the military and religious leaders (Racine, 2010).

5.2. The Strategic Use of Jihad
The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 presented the Pakistani state with a strategic opportunity to operationalise its Islamic identity for geopolitical advantage. Acting as a key ally of the United States and Saudi Arabia, Pakistan assumed the role of a frontline state in the anti-Soviet jihad. Substantial financial and military assistance flowed through Pakistan, enabling the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) to cultivate and arm radical Islamist groups to wage a prolonged proxy war against Soviet forces in Afghanistan (Cohen, 2004). This strategy had profound domestic repercussions, as it led to the large-scale militarisation of madrasas, the normalisation of armed militancy, and the diffusion of what came to be described as "Kalashnikov culture" within Pakistani society (Talbot, 1998).
The same strategic logic was subsequently applied to Pakistan's policy toward India. Viewing India as an existential "Hindu" adversary, in line with the assumptions of the Two-Nation Theory, the Pakistani military establishment extended ideological, logistical, and material support to terrorist groups operating in Jammu and Kashmir, including Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammad (Racine, 2010). This approach sought to internationalise the Kashmir issue and secure the region, symbolically represented as the "K" in Pakistan, as

part of the unfinished agenda of Partition and the realisation of Pakistan's foundational ideological objectives (Cohen, 2004).

6. From *SaptSindhu* to Global Centre of Terrorism

6.1. The Fallout

The state's continued reliance on non-state terrorist actors ultimately led to a significant erosion of strategic control (Fair, 2014). Over time, the artificial distinction between "good jihadis," deployed against India and in Afghanistan, and "bad jihadis," who challenged the authority of the Pakistani state, became increasingly unsustainable and analytically incoherent (Haider, 2017). Terrorist networks developed autonomous agendas, ideological rigidity, and transnational connections that eluded effective state regulation (Blair & Potter, 2023). Following the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, Pakistan, under General Pervez Musharraf, formally aligned itself with the United States in the Global War on Terror. However, this alignment was marked by deep contradictions. While publicly committing to counterterrorism cooperation, the state continued to maintain selective relationships with the Afghan Taliban and India-focused militant organisations as instruments of regional strategy (Racine, 2010). This dual-track policy undermined counterterrorism efforts and emboldened extremist actors. This ambiguity had severe consequences. The spread of militancy and fragmentation of jihadist groups led to the rise of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which turned violence inward against the state. The TTP carried out sustained attacks on civilians, security forces, and institutions, resulting in tens of thousands of deaths and highlighting the long-term costs of using militancy as state policy (Racine, 2010).

6.2. The Perception of a "Rogue State"

Pakistan's identity has become intrinsically linked to global terrorism in the perception of the international community. High-profile episodes, most notably the discovery of Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad, coupled with the recurrent involvement of Pakistani nationals and networks in transnational terror plots, have reinforced the image of the country as a global "terror hub" rather than a responsible security actor (Racine, 2010). This perception has not emerged in isolation but is the cumulative outcome of decades of policies that normalised militancy as an instrument of statecraft. (Kapur, 2018) The identity crisis confronting Pakistan has thus come full circle: conceived as a sanctuary for Muslims of the subcontinent, the state has paradoxically evolved into a space where Muslims themselves are increasingly insecure due to endemic sectarian violence, radicalisation, and militant contestation (Ali, n.d.).

The rejection of the pluralistic *SaptSindhu* heritage has resulted in a narrow, exclusionary nationalism that lacks a constructive, territorially grounded self-definition (Faiz, 2021). Instead of fostering internal unity through shared heritage, this nationalism relies on the continual reproduction of conflict with perceived external adversaries, particularly India and Western countries, to maintain internal cohesion and ideological legitimacy (Cohen, 2004). Cohen (2004) further notes that Pakistan's interactions with the international community are increasingly defined by a strategic emphasis on its own fragility, implicitly suggesting that state failure or collapse would have significant consequences for regional and global security.

7. Conclusion

Pakistan's transition from being part of the *SaptSindhu* civilisation to a state identified as a "global centre of terrorism" illustrates the long-term consequences of constructing a national identity detached from geography and history (Ahmed, 2021, pp. 63-73). *Akhand Bharat* represents a civilizational unity in which diverse faiths, ethnicities, and cultures developed within a shared territorial context. This unity was grounded in coexistence shaped by geography, trade, and social interaction, rather than religious uniformity. By rejecting this foundation in favour of an abstract, exclusivist religious nationalism, Pakistan severed itself from its historical roots. This ideology has failed to provide a sustainable basis for nation-building. Rather than fostering cohesion, it has relied on distorting history, marginalising diversity, and employing religious extremism to maintain internal control and pursue external strategy (Long et al., 2016). These dynamics have produced chronic insecurity, rigidity, and cycles of violence. Scholars argue that Pakistan must re-engage with its authentic past by emphasising the Indus Valley's deep history rather than privileging a narrative beginning in 711 *A.D.* Reclaiming the *SaptSindhu* identity, which acknowledges the subcontinent's shared civilizational heritage, could provide a path away from radicalisation and toward a more stable, territorially grounded national consciousness (Ali, n.d.; Shah, 2010). Unless Pakistan reconciles the tension between its geography and constructed ideology, it is likely to remain a source of instability for itself and the broader South Asian region.

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