

# Culture, nationality and religion

ECONOMIC INTEREST HAS A MAJOR influence on what we do. Culture, nationality and religion are often impediments in the way.

This is a provocative thesis and not necessarily one I subscribe to in its entirety. I take it on in the spirit of a challenge faced by a participant in an extempore debate or by a lawyer arguing the best case for his client. In that spirit, I would be more than happy to argue the exact opposite case after a good night's sleep.

The drive for upward mobility in British India dealt a mortal blow to many aspects of our culture. Gone are our modes of dress, our ways of eating, and our postures for relieving ourselves. Gone is our familiarity with Persian and Urdu itself is reduced to a medium for transacting goods and services with those unfamiliar with English. For a long period the Punjabi elite banished their language from their homes and the Kashmiri diaspora forgot its language altogether.

What is it that remains of our culture? The need for Arab benevolence put paid to everything that pre-dated Mohammad bin Qasim and the need to maintain a distance from India took care of the Taj Mahal, Tansen and Wajid Ali Shah. Gone is the dancing girl of Mohenjodaro and gone is our music with the pride of our classical artists surviving by singing pop tunes.

Suffice it to say that if my promotion depends on doffing my fez, it is a good bet the fez will be gone.

As for nationality, the queues outside the US, British, Canadian and Australian

## VIEW



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embassies more than tell the story. A telling remark by Bapsi Sidhwa comes to mind. Asked when she became an American, she told

a story of how she was awarded a literary prize which could not be conferred on her because it transpired she was not an American at that time. That was enough motivation for her to change citizenship.

More power to Bapsi Sidhwa. The point is that nationality is an accident of birth and most people are quite happy to switch if that enlarges their set of economic opportunities. In fact, people are more than willing to pay substantial amounts of money to dispense with less advantageous nationalities. Often just the prospect of better education and careers for their children is sufficient motivation.

This brings us to religion, the most emotive of our possessions. Here again the facts speak for themselves. People seem to feel a need to claim that they are descendants of migrants from Arabia when it really cannot be denied that the vast majority is descended from locals who converted from Hinduism. These conversions liberated the bulk of the converts from the economic and social deprivations that came from being at the bottom of the Hindu hierarchy. They were no doubt wrenching but rational decisions.

A more recent example pertains to the imposition of the zakat deduction from bank accounts from which *Asna Ashri* depositors were exempted. While no official statistics are available, many insiders have remarked privately on the disproportionate surge in the number of account holders who filed zakat exemption certificates.

I am told that during the rise of the Sikh

religion in the Punjab, many Hindu households raised one of their sons as a Sikh in order to hedge their bets. This is quite akin to a lot of political families today that have a representative in every major party that is likely to be in the seat of power. In fact, one may quite easily add ideology to culture, nationality and religion as a characteristic expendable in the pursuit of economic gain.

Nevertheless, people are not easily convinced of the tenuous links to religion. I can think of a hypothetical experiment that might encourage some soul-searching in this regard. Suppose, just suppose, the Canadian government were to announce today that anyone who became an Episcopalian would be entitled to an immediate grant of citizenship for his family, a benefit transfer of \$10,000, and school tuition for children. Readers can speculate on what proportion of households below and above the poverty line in the different provinces would accept such an offer. Personally, I would be surprised if there are very few takers.

The point I wish to make is that people are often overly emotional about culture, nationality and religion. If they were to look more closely and more objectively they would find that we have already given up and exchanged many aspects of these for the sake of economic well-being. And there is really no need to look at these exchanges in an exclusively negative perspective.

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