

# A cultural crisis

By Yasmeen Lari

In the post-9/11 scenario, Pakistan's image in the world has been painted with colours that cannot be identified with the very essence of the country. Promoting the vision of cultural Pakistan, a depository of rare cultural assets and a nation devoid of violence and extremism, is the need of the hour

**A** SUFI saint has defined culture as the fragrance left behind when the incense stick of life has burnt out. And, heritage is valued as the highly prized family silver — a loan from our ancestors to be passed on to future generations.

It is said that Pakistan has a cultural policy. But if we had an effective policy for protection and preservation of culture and heritage, we would not have been short of innumerable heritage sites disappearing without leaving a trace. Out of scores of mud forts of Cholistan, today only a handful can be counted, which themselves are in danger of collapse, while thousands of both protected and non-listed monuments are in a state of total disrepair in all provinces; hundreds of historic structures in our traditional walled cities are being pulled down indiscriminately for the sake of

tracery) of the famed Shish Mahal, the pearl of Pakistan's heritage, which was saved from collapse only through timely intervention of Unesco and the Norwegian government. We have not even maintained the 200ft peripheral buffer around historic sites, laid down by the law. Instead, the entire precincts are full of garbage and intrusive physical structures, destroying the very values for which the sites were declared national or world monuments. Even after 57 years of independence we have no comprehensive collections of oral history and folklore that used to be the pride of each region. We continue to have disdain for dialects, local languages and women's crafts, while we are still groping for a framework to promote tolerance and respect for diverse cultures and value systems of the rainbow communities that make up Pakistan.

When we discuss culture, should we only debate about how we must dress and what our social prejudices and religious taboos are? Or should we sift through elements, which are oppressive, degrading and hurtful to weaker sections of society, in order to nurture and propagate our heritage that will strengthen cultural continuity and traditional value system? Should we continue to sideline culture and heritage as if they were a luxury for the enjoyment of affluent classes and industrially developed nations? Or should we consider them a mainstream objective for effective and balanced development, its benefits reaching out to all sections of society? Should we not ensure that both tangible and intangible heritage are catalogued, protected and propagated, by undertaking activities related to heritage conservation, walled cities' rejuvenation and crafts revitalization, at the same time nurturing local languages and dialects, folklore and cuisine and cultural tourism? If the public, private and corporate sectors begin to acknowledge the importance of culture and heritage as a prerequisite for effective development, untold benefits could accrue to local communities. It will also improve their quality of life and fill them with pride as far as their identity

clear that there could be no cultural tourism unless we were able to protect our heritage and culture. A policy framework is thus essential that would recognize Pakistan's diverse culture and heritage and provide a plan of action for its protection, preservation and promotion.

It is evident that in an age when globalization is all-pervasive, it is Pakistan's ancient lineage that provides us with a distinct identity. Lest we forget — since this seems to be our best-kept secret from the outside world — Pakistan is a treasure-house of ancient heritage, spanning over scores of centuries.

Our country is home to Mehargarh, Moenjodaro and Harrappa; it is the land that beckoned Alexander to sail down river Jhelum with purple flags fluttering; it has the spectacular Gandharan civilization as the seat of Buddhism; the devotional carvings of the Hindu Shahi temples of the Salt Range and Tharparkar; the stately funerary clusters of Makli, Multan and Uch Sharif, a fusion of local trabeated and imported arcuate, representing successive Sultanate dynasties; the heart-expanding *chahar-baghs* and jewel-like edifices of the greatest kingdom in the world, established by the young ruler of Farghana; the Sikhs emulating the great Mughals, and the shared legacy of eclectic architecture with its European overtones, a bequest of the British who colonized this land.

It is not only the ancient sites and historic monuments, but equally the historic urban cores, stretched from the peaks of the Khyber in the farthest north to the southernmost edge of the mighty river Indus — Peshawar, Multan, Sibbi, Thatta and Karachi — and scores of other living cities with their historic environments, all valuable in our search for, and understanding of, our cultural diversity. There are the walled cities, a depository of irreplaceable architectural heritage, with their organic morphology and the meandering streetscapes, which need to be saved from destruction and revitalized to continue to endow our fast-growing urban centres with distinction and historical flair.

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These are the footsteps of history that we need to pass on to future generations to sustain our shared historical memory and our distinctive identity.

Pakistan is the land of Sufi mendicants and mysticism, *tasawwaf*, the great spiritual current, providing the security of the heart and generosity of the soul, spreading the consciousness of One reality in the pursuit of peace, regardless of religious orientation — the folklore, traditional and religious music, devotional, ecstatic dance emanating from the veneration and celebration of the Sufi saints who traversed this land.

As we know, it is culture that creates a bond between diverse communities, providing them with strength and vigour — woven on the loom of tradition, fashioned by the seasonal crops and verdant trees, reticent before the skies and humble before seasons, orchestrated with melody in the hearts of men and women of this country. It is this kind of culture that provides us with sustenance of the soul and the distinctive characteristics of our identity.

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pation of people and a requisite for nation building as well as being the most component of the composite image. It is ironic, that and-a-half decades later debating whether culture



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that both tangible and intangible heritage are catalogued, protected and propagated, by undertaking activities related to heritage conservation, walled cities' rejuvenation and crafts revitalization, at the same time nurturing local languages and dialects, folklore and cuisine and cultural tourism? If the public, private and corporate sectors begin to acknowledge the importance of culture and heritage as a prerequisite for effective development, untold benefits could accrue to local communities. It will also improve their quality of life and fill them with pride as far as their identity is concerned.

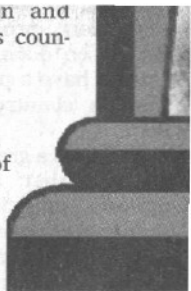
These were some of the questions that we had to grapple with while preparing the Unesco-UNDP-government of Pakistan report on cultural tourism for Lahore and Peshawar. It became quite

peaks of the Khyber in the farthest north to the southernmost edge of the mighty river Indus — Peshawar, Multan, Sibbi, Thatta and Karachi — and scores of other living cities with their historic environments, all valuable in our search for, and understanding of, our cultural diversity. There are the walled cities, a depository of irreplaceable architectural heritage, with their organic morphology and the meandering streetscapes, which need to be saved from destruction and revitalized to continue to endow our fast-growing urban centres with distinction and historical flair. These footsteps of history are a reflection of a traditional value system, tempered over centuries, but needing support to meet the demands of contemporary life without losing their inherent radiance — the traditional lifestyles determined by,

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Tangible and intangible heritage, crafts, art and performing arts, oral history, languages and dialects, our diverse communities, their celebrations and festivals, cuisine and folk art, are our cultural reserves with their cross-cutting nature, binding the communities and providing the basis for national integration and cohesion.

Already in 1968, the Faiz Ahmed Faiz report identified culture and cultural activity as a socio-political activity providing opportunity for full partici-



which is equally likely to become a century of culture and creativity.

We need to strive for an image of Pakistan that is underpinned by our cultural moorings to become a favoured destination for both culture and commerce. Let us develop a framework of human development from a cultural perspective, focusing on achieving a better quality of

life through nurturing our cultural diversity.

We need to acknowledge that to safeguard and promote our culture is not the responsibility of the government alone, but of each one of us — for each one of us carries the duty of care for the heritage that has been passed on to us from earlier generations.

Let us create a structure in which each Pakistani, regardless of gender or age, learned or illiterate, urban or rural, whether affluent or from marginalized sections of society, is able to participate in heritage and culture-related activities, thus having pride in our cultural roots.

Just as the people of Pakistan are expected — and through holding of community and youth outreach KaravanPakistan events we know that they are ready — to participate in this cultural campaign, it is equally the responsibility of a democratic government to protect the nation's cultural

country — in the remotest communities and the farthest hamlet. Let us invest in cultural workers, creative industries, local crafts and cultural institutions and in marginalized sections. The government can play a definitive role by providing access to financial and technical support to help them safeguard and celebrate the most valuable cultural assets they would have identified around them.

All cultural activities can be perpetuated through private-sector support by providing incentives and tax breaks. Let there be encouragement by the government for partnerships of commerce and culture, for promoting a positive, cultural image of Pakistan. The government needs to do a lot, but it needn't do it alone — through a strategic plan each Pakistani can be encouraged to become a cultural worker. Pakistan is today at a crossroads due to challenges posed in the post 9/11 world — the world of so-called clash of civilizations — with an increasing polarization between the Muslims and the Western world. The affect of negative images flashed around the world can only be counter-acted through a cultural offensive. To achieve our objective of becoming a favoured country for investment, culture will need to be placed at the core of our development policies and propagated with every possible means.

It is not only political and diplomatic strategies that will create a better image for our country, but equally the propagation of our cultural agenda that is likely to pay dividends. Let us promote our vision of a cultural Pakistan, *Saqafati* Pakistan, to provide another window to our country, a world removed from violence and negativism, promoting instead an image of a pluralistic Muslim country, a depository of rare cultural assets, along with historical memories and spiritual orientation of its people. Each public sector organization and private sector, too, can be engaged in promoting our cultural resources, through even simple means of films, posters, images and leaflets: PIA within aeroplanes and national and international offices, Pakistan Railways by utilizing its countrywide stations, Pakistan Post Office through its innumerable outlets, the technological gateways and countless websites, to name a few.

Culture  
Dawn  
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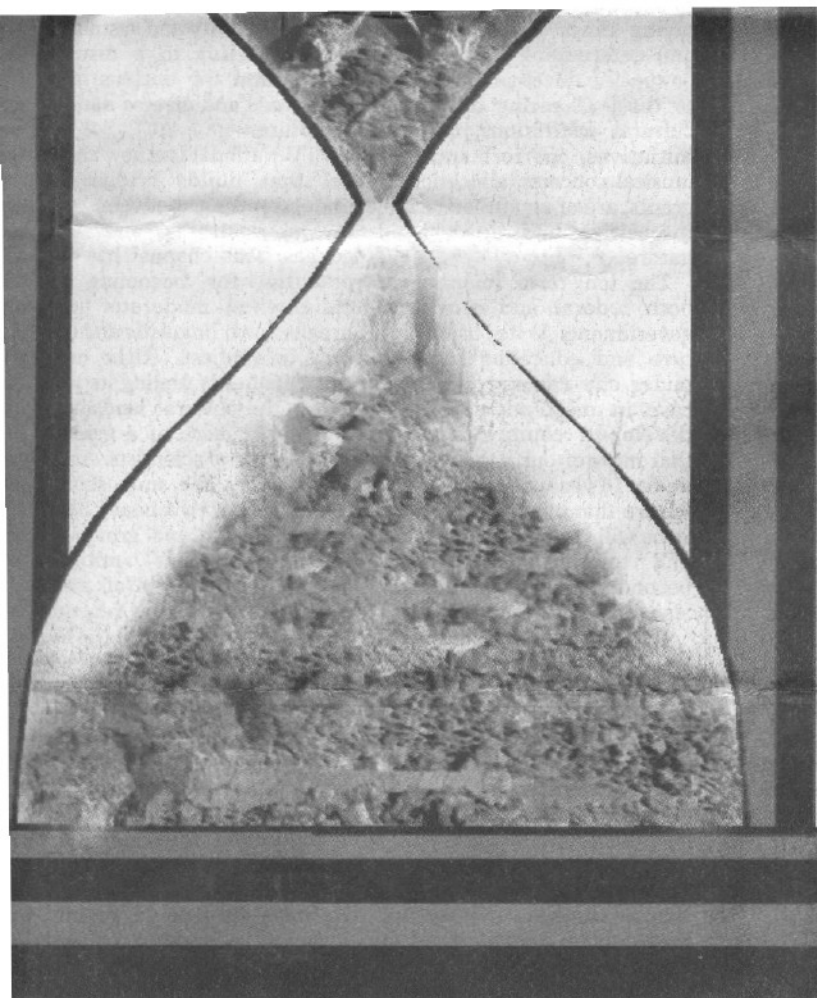


Illustration by Agha Riaz

pation of people and a pre-requisite for nation building, as well as being the most organic component of the country's image. It is ironic, that three-and-a-half decades later we are debating whether culture matters, rather than how it matters in the context of identity, image building and development.

While we are striving for a scientific, technological Pakistan, there is a parallel vision we need to pursue, and that is of a cultural Pakistan or

*Saqafati* Pakistan. As has been recognized by nations mindful of the double-edged sword of globalization, in a homogenized world of mass communications and emerging technologies, there will be an increasing global deficit of creative and cultural forces. If we in Pakistan, with our treasure-house of cultural resources, are able to safeguard and capitalize upon our traditions, heritage and creativity, we could be among the most sought-after nations in a century,

by providing us with cultural rights, mechanisms for social and cultural inclusion and creation of cultural spaces around the country. Each community and each locality must be enabled to hold heritage and art-festivals for the involvement of the general public.

Instead of trickling from the upper echelons of politicians, academia and public institutions for promotion of heritage and culture, let there be facilitation for involvement across the length and breadth of the

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Let us not fritter away our family silver and the fragrance of the incense stick, but safeguard them and utilize them for creation of a cultural Pakistan, for not only development and well being of our people, but also for social and economic advancement of our nation.

Let us strive and search for the Simurgh, the mythical bird of Faridud din Attar's ingenious poem *Mantiq-ut-tair*, that reached the farthest mountain. This search will provide the means to find ourselves. ■