**Identity crisis**

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Pakistan is a country with rich historical and cultural heritage. Numerous beautiful sites across the country not only remind us of our glorious past but also promote the golden principles of tolerance, harmony and co-existence. These places can also be operated as tourist spots to generate a huge amount of revenue.

However, many historical places are facing the challenge of maintaining their identity. After Independence, various parks, roads and cities have been renamed on the basis of the ruling elite’s religious and political affiliations. During my recent visit to rural Sindh, I found that many historical places have been renamed. Umerkot, a famous city of Tharparkar, was once known as Amarkot. The city, founded by Hindu Maharaja Amar Singh in the Amarkot fort, is also the birthplace of Mughal emperor Akbar-e-Azam.

After the fall of the Mughals, various regional powers including the Persians, Afghans, Kalhoras and Talpurs tried to gain control of the strategic area. The city was also annexed with the Jodhpur state of Rajasthan under the rule of Rathore Rajputs.

Similarly, the Nawabshah district of Sindh (official name: Shaheed Benazirabad) is also of historical significance. Although Syed Nawab Shah laid the city’s foundations, official documents attribute it to the name of former prime minister of Pakistan Benazir Bhutto Shaheed. However, it seems that this political decision has not been popular among the locals as they are still calling it by its original name.

Before Independence, Lahore was inhabited by a large number of Hindus and Sikhs. Sir Ganga Ram deserves to be called the architect of modern Lahore. At that time, Rehman Gali was known as Ram Gali. Today’s Jinnah Garden is the Lawrence Garden of the past. During the British rule, Sahiwal was called Montgomery, and Faisalabad was known as Lyallpur. Similarly, Campbellpur was later renamed as Attock. Similarly, several towns in Rawalpindi, such as Mohanpura and Bagh Sardaran, reflect that once Hindu and Sikh communities lived there.

Unfortunately, the list of rebranding historical places attributed to the British and non-Muslims is endless. The country’s historical sites continue to be deprived of their true identity. It is my personal experience that many times we need to tell the old name to the locals when asking for road directions and other details. Similarly, whenever a tourist visits these historical places, the locals mention the place’s original name to them. The reason is that while making decisions to change the names, we forget that such unnecessary orders can in no way change the identity of these places.

In response to the appeal of Quaid-e-Azam’s speech on August 11, many Hindus and non-Muslims, including my elders, declared Pakistan their beloved motherland. The constitution also guarantees equal rights to non-Muslims. However, when I see the unfamiliar names of historical places, it seems to me that these places are crying out for the restoration of their real identities.

In this regard, I would also like to pay tribute to the people of Abbottabad for taking a firm stand. After Independence, the intention to rename the city, which was founded by British commissioner Sir James Abbott, had to be postponed by the authorities due to strong protests by the locals.

In my view, it is the duty of the government to look after historical sites regardless of socio-political affiliations. However, the role of the media and civil society is also crucial to raise awareness about the significance of historical sites and the need for restoring their original identity.

I also consider it necessary to make clear that if the original names of ancient sites pose an ideological threat to the state, proper legislation should be enacted in parliament to establish an authority which has the power to decide the case after careful and in-depth consideration of historical circumstances and the present.

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