**Inventing cultural nostalgia**

BY P E R V E Z H O O D B H OY 2021-03-06

I HAVE just finished watching a short smartphone video of sevento 10-year-old kids playing in some dusty, Seraiki-speaking village of south Punjab. Each boy has fashioned for himself a crude wood and tin sword, ensconced in a scabbard tied to his shalwar`s narra. What`s it for, asks the off-camera interviewer, who seems to be enjoying himself. I`m a Muslim, says one proudly, pulling out his sword and waving it in the air. It`s for cutting off the heads of kafirs. Your name? Ertugrui, he replies.

These children are thoroughly excited. Dozens of amateur videos some with drama and mock sword fights leading to fallen cross-marked Christian soldiers are circulating on the internet. Until two years ago, Ertugrul was a name unknown in Pakistan but the Turkish documentary series, Dirilis: Ertugrul, has taken the country by storm. Statues of the new horse-mounted, sword-wielding hero abound in public places.

The rise to fame owes to full of ficial backing and promotion at the highest level. So much so that, in spite of being beseeched by the survivors and families of a dozen impoverished Hazara coal miners murdered by IS militants, Prime Minister Imran Khan chose to meet with the visiting Dirilis production team in Islamabad instead of flying to Balochistan.

Ertugrul bears comparison with another massively fictionalised character, King Richard I, who led the third crusade against the Muslim defenders of Jerusalem. One thousand years ago, every boy and man in England had dreamed of following their valiant king into battle and cutting off a Muslim`s head. Although Richard I ultimately failed in his crusade, he too was mythologised and earned the title Richard the Lionheart. Like Ertugrul, he was the perfect heroic leader brave, wise, and just.

Such fabrications of history are by no means limited to Pakistan. Wave after wave of collective narcissism is crashing across the globe, helped along by the machinery of nation states with populists at their helms. Across our borders, Indian nationalism is dying. Resurgent saffronised Hindu nation-alism claiming a mythical past is replacing it.

Shivaji sword replicas are now popular in India.

Hindutva`s founders, Golwalkar and Savarkar, have new mass followings. These admirers of Adolf Hitler were 20th-century ideologues who promoted the Hindu-first philosophy. As Indian historian Ramachandra Guha recently remarked, `the Hindutva agenda wants to put forth the notion that Hindus are the best, the Hindi language is the best, and the hatred of Pakistan is a must to be a true Indian citizen and a patriot` In America at least for now revivalism and revanchism are on the back foot with Trump`s defeat. But this may not last long. His black-hating, Muslim-hating, foreigner-hating Republican base is already rallying alongside him, urging him to fight the presidential election in 2024 and win back a `rigged election`. Like Trump, they want to make white America great again.

What in the human condition makes possible the conjoining of space-age science with stone-age politics? We can attribute the lionisation of Richard I to the general stupidity of Englishmen from a primitive age. But as country after country places its spacecraft on or around Mars, the question of why political cultures are regressing comes to every thinking person`s mind.

To me it seems that the core of the problem is cultural nostalgia. The word `nostalgia` originated from the medical literature and was first seen in the 17th century as a psychological condition found among certain Swiss soldiers who had become inordinately attached to past memories because of long absences from home. In modern times, psychologists have observed that individuals suffering from dementia and Alzheimer`s disease suddenly burst into tears, applause, or expressions of pleasure upon encountering some blast from the past a picture, song, or even a smell.

I would define cultural nostalgia as collective, societal nostalgia and, in excess, also a disease.

In her book, The Future of Nostalgia, Svetlana Boym lays out two main plots the return to origins,andconspiracy.So,onthe one hand,thereis deep longing for a pure unsullied past which liesin the twilight zone between history and memory. On the other, there are schemers and plotters who conspire to spoil the utopia for their own selfish motives.

Progress hasn`t cured nostalgia, it has exacerbated it. Boym says that nostalgia `inevitably reappears as a defence mechanism in a time of accelerated rhythms and historical upheavals`. So, even though it was initially understood as a longing for a lost place, she proposes that nostalgia should instead be seen as `a longing for a different time` that results from being unable to cope with progress.

Pakistan`s preoccupation with Ertugrul shares some similarities with what Boym has examined but has additional complexities. For one, its society is being actively goaded into inventing nostalgia for a culture that it never knew and which has never been its own. The language and manners of Arabs and Turks are alien to Pakistanis. So, is the present infatuation with Turkish culture temporary? Will the shift away from Arabism towards Turkism be long lasting or deep? Will we ever realise that Pakistan`s real cultures belong to our own soil? More worrying is the evident desire of our culture managers to form a self-image of Pakistan as a warrior nation besieged by hostile forces. Only war is admired not music, art or science. So, even though Arab or Turkish cultures are considered superior and worthy of emulation, nothing is being copied from their scholarly and intellectual traditions. This points to the poverty of thought in Pakistan. Some days ago, the current HEC chairman asked a gathering of university students and professors if they could name a single Pakistani philosopher. There was silence.

Creating a make-believe world can have beneficial consequences. We tell stories to children so that their imaginations may soar. But taking the creations of one`s own mind too seriously can be devastating,especiallyiftheyidolise violence and conquest. What will the little boys with little swords that I saw grow up to be? I don`t even want to think about it.  The writer is an Islamabad-based physicist and writer.