

Some Reflections on Identity

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In the 1998 Hong Kong action comedy “Who Am I?”, Jackie Chan played the role of a secret agent who, after a helicopter crash, suffered memory loss. The agent couldn’t understand why some unknown assailants were chasing him and kept asking, ‘Who am I?’.

The search for identity is not limited to amnesiac secret agents in action comedies. “Who am I?” is rather a philosophical question for mankind. In reality, ordinary individuals with fully intact memories often find themselves contemplating the very same question. We take on different identities depending on various aspects of our natural, personal, or social life.

As we journey through life, our identities undergo transitions from childhood to adolescence, middle age, and old age. Each stage carries unique characteristics that are both individual and universally shared.

The relationship between a man and a woman is determined by their identities in the relationship. A man is the son of his mother, the father of his daughter, and the husband of his wife. He may be a very good father but an unworthy son or husband. The three male identities involve different attitudes, feelings, and emotions toward females. The same goes for a woman.

We often identify ourselves based on what we do for a living. So, we may be an aircraft pilot, a taxi driver, or a rickshaw puller. Each identity corresponds to a different social status, standard of living, and often education level.

Identity may change with distance. Within a country, we may identify ourselves from that part of the country we are coming from. For example, in Bangladesh, we may say, “I am from Dhaka”. Outside the country, it would change to “I am from Bangladesh”. In Europe or America, a Bangladeshi would mostly be identified as Asian. The Apollo 11 “goodwill disc” left on the moon had an inscription around its rim: “From Planet Earth – July 1969”. If we ever make intergalactic travel, we would probably say, “We are from the Milky Way Galaxy.”

Eminent psychologist Erik Erikson coined the term “identity crisis” in his book “Identity: Youth and Conflict” published in 1968. It refers to the confusion about one’s sense of self and the struggle to establish an authentic identity.

Like individuals, a nation can also face an identity crisis. A national identity is a complex concept that encompasses a shared sense of belonging, common values, history, culture, and often a collective vision for the future. Politicians or national leaders, through their narratives and rhetoric, policy decisions, and promotion of specific historical legacies, symbols, and memory play important and substantial roles in defining a nation’s identity.

Hitler with his rhetoric, doctrine, and swastika symbol wanted to establish a new identity for the Germans which he proclaimed would last a thousand years. Although his third Reich didn’t last even 12 years, it made the German people go through a painful identity crisis for a considerable period.

While inaugurating the Ram Temple built on the site of the destroyed Babri mosque in Ayodhya, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi said on January 22, 2024, “This temple is not just a mere shrine; it is the manifestation of Bharat’s vision, philosophy, and insight. ... From today, from this sacred moment, we must lay the foundation for the next thousand years of Bharat.” He also urged people to extend their consciousness from “Dev se desh, Ram se rashtra” (from deity to country, from Ram to nation) blending religious devotion with national identity.

Thus, the national identity of India built over more than half a century from an extraordinary variety of religions and ethnicities is now put into a crisis.

People with shared or similar identities feel a kind of togetherness. When individuals discover commonalities in their identities, whether they be cultural, social, or religious, it fosters a deep sense of understanding and belonging. In religious pilgrimages like Hajj in Islam, Kumbh Mela in Hinduism, or Camino de Santiago in Christianity, people from different countries and cultures join together to perform various religious duties and rituals. They feel closeness beyond differences of language and ethnicity. The shared religious identity creates a bond among the pilgrims.

Identity not only creates cohesiveness but also divisiveness. It divides people between “us” and “them”. And, “them” are always considered the adversary. When “us” is the majority it’s easy for the political leaders to exploit people's emotions and sentiments toward majoritarianism - preferences or interests of the majority taking precedence over those of minority groups. However, in addition to our diverse identities of gender, language, religion, ethnicity, profession, and more, we are all humans, and no other identity should override that. We must therefore respect and uphold the human rights of both “us” and “them”.

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