

# **CASS Webinar on “National Narrative”**

**April 23, 2020**

Centre for Aerospace and Security Studies held a webinar on “National Narrative” on April 23, 2020. The panellists included Senator Mushahid Hussain Syed, Dr Salma Malik and PhD Scholar Fahd Humayun.

Following is a summary report of the event.

## **Senator Mushahid Hussain Syed**

Senator Mushahid appreciated CASS on initiating a discussion on an important topic and asserted that narratives were never permanent, they kept evolving. Citing the example of India, America and China, he said that their narratives had seen a substantive transition. He also remarked that in a narrative, it was us who define ourselves and then there were others, who try to define us.

Taking the discussion forward he talked about the vision of our founding fathers that laid the touchstone of the Pakistani state. Referring to the statements of the founding fathers of the nation, M. Ali Jinnah and Liaqat Ali Khan he stressed that they perceived Pakistan as the pivot of the world, placed on the frontier on which future geopolitics would revolve. Hence Pakistan initially saw itself in a larger role, as an Asian power, perhaps pan-Islamist and even globalist.

He segmented Pakistan’s narrative in two parts. Deliberating the first part, he said till the end of cold war Pakistan was insecure and in state of confusion tried to define its narrative. It was a narrative in which there was the role of religion, West and India hence it went toward the creation of an authoritarian and centralized state-controlled from the capital Islamabad.

Discussing the second part, i.e. the last 30 years, he said Pakistan had witnessed opening up of it as a society. It became more robust, dynamic and pluralist with strong institutions and hence set the course as to what it would look like.

Conversing about his efforts as the information minister, he and the government did try to craft a national narrative. He said that the focus was on two areas; resilience of the people of Pakistan and pluralism that is unity in diversity. We were making a transition from a national security state to the one which was focusing on human security. He added that the national security was no

longer defined by military component alone, but it also included education, rule of law, human rights, provincial and human security assistance. In his view, countries that influenced Pakistan's national narrative included India, the US, UK, Saudi Arabia and China. He briefly talked about coronavirus and asserted that it would have three positive impacts which would be good for the world as well as Pakistan. Firstly, the yardstick of leadership would become good governance and the ability to deliver. Secondly, the focus would be on human security, which was neglected for a long time ago, and thirdly, there would be a shift in the balance of economic-political power from the West to the East. About the crafting of the new narrative he said, it needs to be a people-driven exercise and with the multiple power centres. Finally, he remarked that we should look into what was happening in India as we always liked to compare ourselves with India. India was becoming more exclusive more bigoted and religious-oriented and we are on the country were opening up into a more pluralist inclusive and the freest Muslim democracy and should be hopeful and take pride in it.

**Dr Salma Malik- Assistant Professor Quaid-Azam University, Islamabad**

Dr Malik's remarks focused on the contemporary situation and she started by looking at the notion of national narrative with the fundamental questions of what a national narrative is and can or should the narrative be manufactured. Should the narrative building be a spontaneous exercise or narrative needs to be controlled? Given by the state or created by stakeholders?

She said, narrative came about spontaneously and were an exercise where many stakeholders consciously or unconsciously contributed to the national narrative building exercise. It included the faith-based characteristics of the state that represented the dominant stakeholders, and also the common man perceptions. The academia, think tanks, the media all contributed to the building of the national narrative.

Proceeding further she undertook the question of why we needed a narrative and said, the notion brought oneness and made people feel comfortable and related to something, especially in emergencies or crises situations such as of today. However, the oneness she maintained, came with both good and bad sides and was open for argument in international relations. This oneness made a narrative controllable, but it also provided a common platform in the face of threats.

She opined that in the traditional circuit of security against a common enemy, the question of the narrative building became easy to handle but in a situation such as today with the COVID-19 pandemic where we could not identify the enemy, the narrative building required a transformation. Earlier the people did not feel that there was a need for readjustment towards the alternate perspective. She said that no concrete work in regard to human security was done, and also lamented that Pakistanis like late doctor Mehboob-ul-Haq who was the guru of this new notion of human security was never given due credit for his work which the rest of the world recognized just now.

Talking about the culture and Covid-19 response scenario in Pakistan's case, she said despite government's attempt to make people sensitive to it, our very emotive society remained invulnerable to the fact that death and disease deteriorate the quality of life. This, she said, was a big deficit and needed to be factored in a narrative. Appreciating the government for their actions in tackling the pandemic, she expressed satisfaction in the fact that unlike India, Pakistan was not playing the blame game and getting into conspiracy theories.

she said we needed to be more logical and scientific besides the fate scenario in our national narrative. Concluding her talk, she said with the current government, which got elected on human governance and human security manifesto, had an excellent opportunity to take the lead in the human narrative. Without wishing away the realistic problems (the Indian aggressive actions and its habit of using Pakistan as diversionary tactic away from its domestic problems) Pakistan must craft out its response and must adopt a national narrative, which was more humane yet realistic about the realities around us which would lead to us becoming a moderate to high-level world leaders in the world.

### **Fahd Humayun- PhD scholar at Yale University**

Fahd Humayun discussed brief diagnostic points on why narratives were important and why they were integral to how we conceptualized our identity as Pakistanis. The first aspect he developed on was how we think about narratives? He believed that due to being in crosshairs of geopolitical conflict, we often fused layers of narratives with each other. The best way to break this down, he mentioned, is to think of two dimensions of narratives. On one hand, we have 'meta-narratives'

- it was a latent dimension and was key to the day to day functioning and the existence of a state. Do they answer existential questions such as who runs the state? Questions of citizenship and belonging? What is the fundamental end goal of state power? These are important questions that built into the rubric of meta-narratives. While on the other hand, the second tier was 'micro-narratives', which were very helpful in consolidating the metanarrative. These micronarratives evolve as countries evolve. Such as in case of Pakistan, he gave examples of micro-narratives as; Pakistan in the frontline of the war on terror, Pakistan as a geostrategic pivot, or Pakistan as the leading player of the Muslim world. These micro-narratives evolve and adapt to the circumstances Pakistan experiences.

Fahd Humayun framed the discussion on crafting a national narrative, which he proposed required, answering the fundamentals of metanarratives such as: was there a Pakistani ideology? What is Pakistaniat, is it unity in diversity? He was of the view that Pakistan has more political consensus on micro-narratives because there is a political currency to it. But if we try to substitute meta-narratives with day to day micro-narratives, that leads to confusion and it leads to a situation where it is untannable. Therefore, he suggested that there is a need to de-link meta and micro-narratives if we wish to create a wholesome national narrative.

The second point he raised was defining the national narrative. According to him, a national narrative had to be a function of growth, development and the challenges faced by the state. Ordinarily states develop a national narrative along two axes: a state's internal character and state's external character. He indicated Pakistan as a state that has experienced peculiar challenges at both ends which is why there has been an inherent tension between national narratives that have organically emerged from the bottom and those who have been inorganically or selectively deployed. The challenge thus when forging a national narrative, he implied, requires reconciling high degree of external stress, be it from India or the United States, with high degrees of internal social polarization. And because of this dichotomy, the state attempts to manufacture unity through uniformity rather than unity in diversity.

Lastly, his discussion turned towards the audience of the national narrative. According to him the pace at which Pakistan was modernization was asymmetrical which excluded a larger portion of the population out of this modernization. Which ultimately, he mentioned, relegated the other half of the population that was not experiencing education or sociopolitical reform. These were the processes that undergird wholesome national transformation. He alarmed that this gave room to fringe groups and rightwing organizations to hijack narratives of statehood. He concluded his remarks by stressing that answering some of the fundamental questions of the meta-narratives by the state was important to make sure that the legitimacy was not eroded by the non-state groups.

#### **Concluding remarks by Air Chief Marshal Kaleem Saadat (Retd), President CASS**

ACM Kaleem Saadat thanked the panellists and the participants for their enlightening remarks and concluded the discussion with a proposal that there was a need for moral rejuvenation of the country and advised that our citizens needed to respect and love their fellow citizens to foster unity. He stated that we needed to consider what the world or the region has done for us and what have we done for them before developing a national narrative. He further recommended key elements of the national narrative must educate the world that Pakistan wished to live in a rule-based world, to live in and work for peace, make due contribution to the world at large, non-interference in other's internal affairs and other's meddling in Pakistan's affairs, a level playing field in political and economic domains, fair treatment in disputed matters, to create a society based on justice and rule of law, a safe, secure and prosperous future for its citizens, to avoid discrimination of caste, creed, religion and ethnicity, and to respect human rights of minorities and all citizens. He stressed that we needed to synchronize our words and action in creating a credible national narrative.

## Key Takeaways

- Narratives are not permanent; they keep evolving and are defined not only by ourselves but by others as well.
- Till the end of the cold war, Pakistan remained in a state of confusion, where the role of religion, the West, and India loomed largely; that led to the creation of a centralized and authoritarian state. Past thirty years have witnessed the strengthening of institutions, and have led to a relatively robust, dynamic and pluralist outlook. Therefore, focus, to an extent, has shifted from national security to human security.
- Pakistan's narrative and policies have largely been influenced by external actors; mainly India, the US, UK, Saudi Arabia and now China.
- In the post Covid-19 order, the yardstick of leadership would become good governance and the ability to deliver, with more focus on human security. Balance of economic and political power is likely to shift from the West to the East.
- Pakistan is emerging as more pluralistic and inclusive state especially in comparison to India which has become more bigoted and extremist.
- There should be a uniformity in the narrative we present to the world and the to the domestic audience, sans a coherent approach, we will lose credibility.
- It is important not to blur the difference between the state and the government and the state and society. The government usually has a tactical approach, whereas the state should embody a strategic overarching objective, (outlook). Likewise, that strategic outlook should not be manufactured by the state, it should evolve and emerge over time within the society.
- Narratives (ideally) come about spontaneously; it is an exercise where many stakeholders consciously or unconsciously contribute to the national narrative building process.
- Pakistan has seen many transitions between civilian and military leadership, hence the question of who is controlling and/or manufacturing the narrative becomes controversial.
- The narrative is an outcome of strategic preferences; political, cultural, religious, and cognitive.

- Why do we need a narrative? They bring the notion of oneness and makes people feel comfortable and being able to relate to something. However, the oneness comes with both good and bad sides and is open for argument in international relations. This oneness makes a narrative controllable but also it provides a common platform in the face of threats.
- The narrative building is relatively easy against a traditional security threat and common enemy, but in a situation such as today with the COVID-19 pandemic where we can't identify the enemy, the narrative building requires transformation at multiple levels.
- Pakistan must take the lead and craft a national narrative, which is more humane yet realistic about the threats in the traditional security domain.
- It is important to avoid ad-hocism and arbitrary approach to create a cohesive national narrative.
- Narratives are integral to how we conceptualize our identity as Pakistanis. Being in crosshairs of geopolitical conflict often leads us to fuse layers of narratives with each other.
- Two dimensions of narratives: 1) Meta-narratives - a latent dimension which relates to day to day functioning and the existence of a state. 2) Micro-narratives - which are very helpful in consolidating the metanarrative. In the case of Pakistan, micro-narratives include; Pakistan in the frontline of the war on terror, Pakistan as a geostrategic pivot, or Pakistan as the leading player of the Muslim world.
- There is a need to de-link meta and micro-narratives if we wish to create a wholesome national narrative.
- States develop a national narrative along two axes: a state's internal character and state's external character.
- Pakistan has faced problems by attempting to manufacture unity through uniformity rather than unity in diversity.
- Asymmetrical social modernization opens up space for right-wing elements that can hijack narratives of statehood.

- To have a vibrant, robust, cohesive narrative that is purchased abroad Pakistan needs to invest in youth and strengthen democracy.
- Economic sovereignty is the key to a strong national outlook that can be translated into a strong national narrative.
- We need to synchronize our words and action in creating a credible national narrative. Key elements of our national narrative must include a vision to live in a rule-based world, work for peace, make due contribution to the world at large, non-interference in other's internal affairs and other's meddling in Pakistan's affairs, a levelled playing field in political and economic domains, fair treatment in disputed matters, to create a society based on justice and rule of law, a safe, secure and prosperous future for its citizens, to avoid discrimination of caste, creed, religion and ethnicity, and to respect human rights of minorities and all citizens.