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Cultural Pluralism and National Identity in Pakistan: Harmony or Fragmentation

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Abstract

This article examines the relation between cultural pluralism and national identity in Pakistan, exploring whether the country's rich diversity fosters social harmony or fuels fragmentation. Through historical analysis and contemporary case studies, the study investigates how Pakistan's multi-ethnic, multilingual, and multi-religious composition shapes its national identity. The research highlights key challenges including language policies, regional autonomy movements, and the tension between Islamic unity and ethnic particularism, while also identifying opportunities for inclusive nation-building. Findings suggest that Pakistan's cultural pluralism presents both a source of national strength and a potential threat to cohesion, depending on policy approaches and institutional frameworks. The article concludes by proposing strategies for balancing regional identities with national unity, emphasizing the need for equitable representation, cultural recognition, and adaptive governance in managing diversity.

Keywords: Cultural Pluralism, National Identity, Pakistan, Ethnic Diversity, Multiculturalism, Nation-Building, Social Cohesion, Language Politics, Islamic Unity, Regional Autonomy

Introduction

This research explores the interplay between cultural pluralism and national identity, focusing on how cultural diversity may influence the formation of a unified concept of a "nation" in modern society. Cultural pluralism, primarily utilized as a meta-theoretical framework, refers to the increasing presence and interaction of diverse cultures within society. However, the existence of multiple cultures within a nation-state does not automatically result in a composite cultural pluralism, which is characterized by formal recognition and mutual respect among different groups. National identity is predominantly concerned with the understanding of the "nation" and its representation through state boundaries, cultural integration, and socio-political expression. It embodies a collective understanding of the significance of a "nation" amid cultural differences (Rosadi et al.2024). This intersection of identity politics highlights the convergence of nation and culture, leading to the development of a national culture shaped by historical nation-building, official narratives, and societal dynamics.

In Pakistan, the intricate question of cultural pluralism is administered in the complex presence of various ethno-cultural identities, along with caste-based distinctions and linguistic differences. Additionally, tribal affiliations and biraderi connections further complicate the scenario,

alongside migration backgrounds that bring diverse perspectives into the mix. The specific notion of Islamic tradition and its localisation within the Pakistani context also plays a significant role in shaping cultural interactions (Khan et al., 2021). Moreover, the state's concerted efforts aimed at promoting national integration challenge these identities and affiliations in various ways. Historical contingencies and the persistently intertwined power dynamics that shade these interactions make them open to numerous and often conflicting interpretations. Data analyses regarding cultural pluralism are firmly rooted in the ongoing and vigorous debates that surround the dynamics within this pressing issue, particularly in relation to national identity. Scholars and policymakers alike ponder whether these intricate interactions would ultimately lead to harmony or, conversely, foster fragmentation among the various groups that inhabit the complex societal landscape of Pakistan.

Historical Background

Cultural pluralism and national identity have been central issues in Pakistan's modern history. While the first refers to the coexistence and tolerance of different cultures and is seen as a genuine resource for national development, the latter embraces one or more identities that are shared by specific groups of people. Together, these two complementary yet competing aspects have contributed to a national narrative that has generally oscillated between and around them since the inception of the state of Pakistan. In the industrial city of Faisalabad, deindustrialization and the emergency of a without a potential social and identity, is contentious memory (Erum, 2023). For a sense of social cohesion, a concern for the future, or a less normative historical judgment, there is no doubt that in such politically formed or 'imagined' communities, history can be a question of the 'making' and not simply of the 'writing'. At least three different scales coincide for shaping the identities that are attributed to a territory. Regarding Pakistan as a case study, (post)colonial roots of conflicting imaginations onto the land have led to a blurred sense of identity. Conflicting cultural and/or national stances towards adjacent states, contested religious and/or political views, and/or prosaic interests find their respective supporters in 'histories,' geographies and toponymies that are likely to compete with each other (Levesque, 2015).

The political and economic stakes tied to Afghani-'Pakhtun' identity in the Frontier province hinder an objective case. Official maps and community interests reveal historical and cultural continuities beyond the colonial administrative division. The formation of Pakistan in 1947 marked a defining point for Pakhtun identity across the Durand line; however, the separatist sentiment known as 'Pakhtunistan' has colonial roots. The name 'Pakhtun' was transformed into 'Pathan' during colonial rule, facilitating its integration into the British military, yet this rebranding had divisive effects. Sir Olaf Caroe, a British agent in 1947, employed the Pathan assimilation theory to access vital resources, navigating geopolitics to counter Russia and maintain British dominance over India (Hoodbhoy, 2023). The UN assemblies took place under the influence of the USA, and the strategic positions of Pakistan and Afghanistan perpetuated British administrative lines established through the Afghan war and Indian partition. Calls for reunification or the erasure of colonial frontiers were pressing concerns for both nations. Disputes regarding the lack of recognition for the 'Durand Line' sparked ongoing conflict, with Afghan irredentism fueling sporadic separatist responses. The situation remains complex and manipulable, often utilized by competing authorities. In reaction, Pakistan could adopt Pushto as a second national language, reshaping the narrative to highlight the advantages of two distinct political entities amidst previously mixed perceptions (Khan et al.2025).

The notion of the cultural pluralism had contributed to the formation of that relatively contented populace; the idea of Pakistan was less the expression of an already existing nation in search of

its own boundaries, culture and language, and more the attempt to artificially forge one by creative acts of state, propounded by a select group of individuals, trained in the ideological vocation, most of them educated abroad. The consciousness of a common cultural and/or religious entity among a wide variety of historical predecessors, is transferred to the actual body politik, and is believed to have the potential to facilitate realisation either of already existing territorial aspirations, or claims over other territories (Tamanaha, 2021). There is no deliberate creation of a territory with a specific culture of identity, but rather an obviously politically motivated strategy to generate one-sided interpretation; a nation is interpreted as an existing entity with common language, religion, customs, land. Throughout subsequent political manipulations, this assumption is reinforced and propagandized to the level of an uncritically accepted common sense; eventually new generations are indoctrinated, shaping their mind in such a way, that everything contrary or contesting the official interpretation is reactionary, unpatriotic, potentially seditious. This reduced understanding might foster further conflict between the generations and/or various the competition of the interpretations, and realization of either of the potential imageries expressed throughout 'unhistorical maps' (Levesque, 2015). In the end, the quest for a better representation apparently helps neither to approach the understanding of a conflict nor to the possibility of its resolution, but in the contrary, merely shape an Objective vision according to the specified terms of a state and imposed doctrine.

Theoretical Framework

Cultural pluralism is deeply rooted in Cicero's inspiring vision of the Roman Empire as a 'theatre of the world', a concept that sparked the imagination of many and envisioned a grand cosmopolitan space in which diverse cultures can coexist harmoniously through dialogue and mutual respect. Almost two thousand years later, this timeless idea of cultural diversity and its cosmopolitan potential for fostering harmony and peace has been echoed and reaffirmed in numerous philosophical discussions across different eras (Taiba et al., 2023). This utopian cosmopolitan ideal, which emphasizes the significance of embracing cultural differences, is dedicated to building a peaceful world order that encourages understanding and collaboration among various peoples and traditions.

Cultural pluralism, as it was defined in the 'twenties, continues to reflect a more modest stance on the recognition of diverse cultural expressions. It represents the acknowledgment of cultural diversity as an essential and undeniable sociological fact of life. This principle asserts that citizens hailing from various backgrounds should have the right and opportunity to influence all facets of society while maintaining a profound respect for their cultural heritage. In a cultural pluralist society, the shared standards or norms that exist are merely the framework that helps ensure the tolerance of each individual's rights and freedoms. It can be characterized as an 'anything goes' government, where the only actions deemed unacceptable are those that lack respect for others and their beliefs. It is important to understand that a cultural pluralist society does not provide any particular emphasis on the co-existence of separate communities as isolated entities. Instead, it firmly insists that diversity is a crucial and enriching aspect of societal life (Reus-Smit, 2021). This view maintains that society can thrive with numerous traditions and values coexisting alongside one another. Each of these traditions and values has the potential to flourish and be developed within the boundaries of the law, contributing to the rich tapestry of a pluralistic society.

National unities are often the outcome of violent histories. Most of today's states have conquered or colonised someone else during their past. Avoiding or challenging the official state narrative of such histories has turned some individuals into social outcasts. Only their most natural and chosen allegiances make sense at all with their own understandings of history, of the

world, and of themselves, and these are the quintessential dimensions of cultural identity: its relationship to the private realm, to the macro context of the state, linguistic community and cultural affiliations, and to an intermediary meso level made of social groups-to family, peers, generation and gender. There is nothing unusual in this interest in national identity theories for a researcher of literary texts and their relations to political, historical and social contexts (Akaliyski et al.2021). On the contrary, it seems imperative to consider the existing body of work from a historical perspective.

- **Defining Cultural Pluralism**

Cultural pluralism is understood as a model of a society conceptualized not solely as one singular unit, but rather as a construct that not only acknowledges the cultural identity represented by the majority but also respects and values the differences inherent to minority cultures within the social fabric. This contemporary understanding of cultural pluralism comprises three core approaches: firstly, the protection of the rights inherent to minority cultures; secondly, the active promotion of minority cultural expressions and heritage; and thirdly, the cultivation of tolerance towards the differences that minority groups embody, alongside the negotiation of a shared or common identity that can unify rather than divide. In situations where a mono-cultural identity predominates within a nation, it can cultivate a form of civil religious agreement at the individual level, while simultaneously providing immunity against militaristic pressures or rising factions in the international arena (Kennedy, 2021).

However, the existence of a mono-cultural identity can stifle cultural tension and conflict within the nation, which may, in turn, lead to social chaos, and ultimately stifle or diminish the potential for artistic and scientific innovation in the long term. To mitigate the risks of cultural chaos in such a diverse society, it is essential to foster cultural pluralism characterized by mutual tolerance and understanding among the multitude of cultural groups present. Cultural pluralism is therefore assumed to include various types of groupings, ranging from individuals representing unique cultural backgrounds to the complex interplay among three or more distinct ethnic groups. This approach to understanding cultural dynamics offers a more realistic perspective, standing in contrast to the oversimplified classification of societies as strictly either multi-ethnic or mono-ethnic. A multi-ethnic nation can recognize the inherent freedom within its diverse cultural framework, thereby sustaining social cohesion (Hoyer et al.2023). This recognition supports the idea that balance exists within the natural world, manifesting in various forms, whether through the often-hostile synchronizations experienced in human cognition, or through interactions among organized entities that may seem disparate. Empirical evidence underscores the important role of preserving unique cultural identities among a diversity of adjacent cultural groups, advocating for resolutions to conflicts and preferences that arise from this diversity. The preservation of a rich and diverse balance through the synchronization of non-equivalent entities is a theme that is strongly emphasized in discussions concerning complex multi-particle interactions, illustrating the interconnectedness of cultural identities in a pluralistic society.

- **National Identity Theories**

National identity is a highly disputed concept within academic circles. Various theories have been posited to explain its nature and the process by which it emerges. The most foundational of these theories are primordialism and constructivism. The primordialist perspective on national identity posits that it is innate to human beings and is rooted in ties of ancestry, culture, and the land from which people emerge (Levesque, 2015). On the other hand, constructivist theories propose that national identity is a cultural formation constructed by the processes that place nations into imagined communities and how a sense of belonging to the nation is created. From a multidimensional approach, national identity can be composed of various dimensions including

territorial, psychological, spiritual, historical and biological. These posts on national identity are analyzed through their compatibility in the developing a pluralistic or integrative society. National identity theories rely on a particular heritage, common cultural practices and a common understanding of memory. Can national identity be achieved at the macro-level in such a multicultural and diverse society? Collective memory is defined as shared understandings of the past, occurring discursively through narratives and representations, and manifested in the various social and cultural forms that these discourses take. Cultural forms such as oral traditions, religious practices, historical events, folklore, and national heroes constitute the collective memory of a particular community. National identity is very significantly dependent upon a shared national collective memory. Countries around the world have illustrated how national identity has been shaped by the reconstitution, rewriting, and recreation of collective memory (Heersmink, 2023). These analyses lead to the question: How can national identity be reconciled in a 'globalized' world where people are more connected with their trans-national identity? As such, national identity theorists have recently focused on the spread of globalization and transnationalism and their boundaries with national identities. This juxtaposition of national identity theories provides a backdrop to the complexities of national identity in Pakistan. And informs the potential for cultural pluralism and social integration within Pakistani society. Ultimately, national identity theories offer valuable analytical perspectives of the multifaceted relationship between identity and culture.

Cultural Diversity in Pakistan

Ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity is one of the main characteristics of the multi-cultural and multi-ethnic society of Pakistan. There are more than twenty ethnic groups identified in Pakistan, including the Punjabi, Sindhi, Sindhi Baluch, Seraiki, and Urdu-speaking groups in Sindh. In Pakistan, as of 2019, 73 different languages were spoken and published in newspapers; however, more than 200 languages are also spoken within the nation. In terms of religion, it is true that Pakistan is 95% Muslim. Despite its dominant Islamic population, religious diversity is a salient feature of the country. The co-existence of multiple ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups in a single country raises both strengths and challenges. It is a big asset in the context of food, dances, songs, various dress codes, festivals, art, and tangible and intangible forms. On the contrary, in the Pakistani context, the unique characteristics of every ethnic, linguistic, and religious group signify the superiority of their cultural practices and traditions (Mehfooz, 2021). Though people are free to follow any religion or non-religions, the state, by offering various kinds of funds and resources, struggles to promote and preserve cultural, traditional music, dance and craftsmanship. However, the fast pace of modernization, globalization, the high influx of western and middle-eastern cultures, and new social media have all contributed to concern regarding the preservation of local culture. Pakistani cultures are being exported to other countries, and at the same time, Pakistani society is being exposed to the world culture through print and electronic media, film, and television. Cultural diversity is to be acceptable for the prevailing social coherence and national identity in the country. Conspicuously, cultural plurality has become a potential threat to social harmony and national identity (Ahmad et al.2023).

Linguistically, historically, geographically, and politically, Pakistan is comprised of five provinces, Sindh, Baluchistan, Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), and Gilgit Baltistan. Every province is demarcated by its cultural distinctions. Non-Punjabis, who are the resident of Punjab, are taken as the ethnic groups and vice versa. Each province is differentiated by its language. Ninety eight percent (98%) of the population's mother tongue is Punjabi in Punjab province, and 93.6% of the people of Sindh province speaks Sindhi as their first language. Likewise, the native language of every province has been preferred in others (Dikshit & Dikshit, 2025). National culture is evident

through the signs and guards' change ceremony, marking miners of Masjid-e-Babri, Samadhi of Bhit Shah, Shah Faisal mosque, and Tilla Jogian. Cultures of Pakistan demarcate the country through culture day manifestations, the marbles of the tomb of Shah Rukn-e-Alam, unity-through music concert, rakis, and bangles of poverty on the eve of the sacred thread, markhors in high hills, horses and jeeps on Cholistan desert rally, and every nook and corner's shops of song and CD. Modern popular trends of Pakistan are evident through the echoes of traditional crafts, faces of success, lights of the truck, and media talk, unity games, shows of Laal Qila, etc. It is apparent that the cultural upraising of Pakistani gloms more towards the modernity detecting and exporting outside to maintain the status of the globalized world, hill station, snow fall, and apple in Drat, sea-like waves of Thatta, sent to work breeds of Bahawalpur, rocks of Koh-e-Suleman, washing powder to clean out the water having place of beauty, clouds of Rohtas, the same echo of Khyber pass, and unique adobe of Multan (Knight, 2021). Tradition and culture are kept founding again it. Cultural convergence and intermingling culture are threatened by significance. National homogeneity and harmony are feared by big weapons. The conflict and challenge of cultural diversity are everywhere. It is not completely resolved.

Impact of Cultural Pluralism on National Identity

Two questions have been the centre of debate among theorists, practitioners and policy-makers since time immemorial: how cultural pluralism interacts with national identity; and what effects it has on it. In Pakistan, for better or worse, cultural pluralism still remains predominant. The societal mosaic, which was shaped thousands of years ago and has obstinately refused homogenization, makes Pakistan an ideal laboratory for studying this question. At the core of this awkward situation is the fact that the land was 'created' to give Muslims in British India a sense of nationhood and their own independent country, but without consideration for the diverse cultures and neighbouring nation(s) it would envelop (Ashraf, 2023). Cultural pluralism has a dual outcome. It can either foster unity for the inclusion in a wider territorial allegiance, or lead to conflicts to regain the lost exclusive allegiance to a narrower cultural entity at the cost of national unity. In the former case, without developing symbolic structures capable of linking the numerous distinct cultural components in one, it could result in a brittle national unity. In the latter case, especially if coupled with a perceived need for cultural defence (real or imaginary), it can provide breeding grounds for political philosophy which might easily result in the disintegration of territorial state.

Discussing the fine line between harmony and fragmentation, two sides of cultural pluralism – symbolization and balkanization – on national identity, a review of a recent volume on cultural pluralism, Hindu nationalism and identity politics in Ayodhya, focusing on fabrication, alignment and reversal of historical narratives and on social movements; and a discussion on contemporary understandings of national identity, focusing on how the people variously perceive reactions to cultural diversity, and how 'cultural defence' is addressed, as reflected in works by primarily public officers and NGOs, or by academics and intellectuals, as well as in literary works, elsewhere, a symptomatic situation is chronologically presented with the sequence of events leading to mainly ethno-linguistic break-up of a once 'multi-cultural' empire. At each instance, the position(s) taken by various stakeholders responsible for managing this diversity are outlined, and basic approaches applied to handle that diversity are observed (Saaida, 2023).

7. Government Policies and Cultural Identity

State policies play a highly significant role in shaping various cultural expressions, as they aim to create a unified national identity that resonates with all citizens. The historical context of these policies, which began as early as the year 1487, clearly demonstrates the concerted efforts by rulers throughout history to foster a standardized and cohesive form of cosmopolitanism. These

efforts were primarily designed to legitimize authority and bolster the sense of nationhood among the populace. In 1948, the introduction of the 'Legal Framework Order' further advanced a powerful nationalistic narrative by designating Urdu as the sole official language of the country. This strategic move significantly contributed to the eventual independence of Bangladesh in 1971, which followed a bitter civil war that highlighted the ongoing struggle for recognition of the Bengali language and its essential cultural importance. Since that pivotal moment, Pakistan has gradually shifted towards adopting a more pluralistic stance, although it continues to address identity issues within a sensitive and often complex framework. However, despite these efforts, persistent violence within the region reflects ongoing fears and deep-seated anxieties regarding the coexistence of diverse and often conflicting cultural groups within the broader society, indicating a continued need for dialogue and understanding.

The government has initiated various programs to encourage inclusivity and dialogue. Mass media outlets are employed to share cultural content from different ethnic regions, promoting mutual understanding. Cultural festivals are also organized to support this aim. Despite the multilingual reality where many students speak native languages, Urdu remains a primary language of instruction in schools, which is intended to promote national unity from an early age. Interpretations of these initiatives differ; for instance, a government representative suggested that cultural discussions strengthen societal resilience, while a local cultural organization member proposed that these efforts might stifle dissent against a homogeneous national identity. The research indicates that these varying interpretations may have differing impacts at both federal and provincial levels. Local traditions are likely more influenced by the state's hesitance to address their decline than by the overarching policies themselves. Ultimately, there appears to be a complex interplay between governmental policies and the diverse expressions of identity within society, carrying significant consequences for the future cohesion of the state.

Public Perception and Identity Politics

In a country like Pakistan where attention to identity politics can mean reassuring support in challenging times or inviting the rage of laymen and eulogizing the split of one's own support bases; understanding both identity crises, the topic under discussion needs the incorporation of the better part of socio-political, cultural and participatory dynamics. Depending on the point of view, national identity can be seen as a dynamic process that engages in negotiation between the different identity categories of a community, or as something stable and unchangeable, explicitly or implicitly defined by institutions. This duality of approaches appears in a society when there is lack of consensus on the national cultural model. It brings a polyphony of national stances that is received by societal groups in a cacophony of meanings. The understanding of what national identity means to different societal groups can only be accessible through their opposition to cultural diversity (Levesque, 2015). The objective of this study is thus to explore the public perception of national identity in its relation to cultural diversity in Pakistan, and analyse the implications of this perception for cultural dynamics. First, drawing upon theories of identity construction, a framework is developed to examine the perception of national identity in relation to cultural diversity. This framework is then applied to an analysis of the cultural dynamics of Pakistan based on discourse analysis and case study research.

The way media has a major influence on feelings around issues of global importance, such as identification card politics or national narrative. The media actively contribute in the construction of perceptions of identity. To this extent, discourse analysis of the media can provide an understanding of the factors at work in the fragmentation, unity or the reciprocity of plurality of cultural dynamics. Besides, an experimental analysis provides useful explanations of public attitudes regarding the effectiveness and justice of policies in light of cultural pluralism.

Finally, the implications for social cohesion and national unity in the case of the different perceptions of identity have been discussed in public civil society. Public construction, policy, in Pakistan on national identity in cultural pluralism with regards to an exploration of perceptions of cultural unity, fragmentation. In addition to clinical bonding, discourse analysis is utilized to examine how public actors construct the aspects of national narrative in relation to unity or diversity of cultural groups, and explore the intended formats of these counter-dominant narratives. It is argued that public discourse frames and shapes narratives leading to the unification or fragmentation of narratives on national identity.

Conclusion

The interplay between cultural pluralism and national identity in Pakistan remains a delicate balancing act. While the country's rich diversity of ethnicities, languages, and traditions is a source of strength, it also poses challenges to national cohesion when mismanaged. Historical grievances, such as the marginalization of regional identities, and ongoing tensions, like the Pashtunistan movement, reveal the risks of prioritizing uniformity over inclusivity. For Pakistan to harness its pluralism as an asset rather than a divisive force, it must adopt policies that celebrate regional distinctions while fostering a shared sense of belonging. This requires decentralizing cultural authority, promoting equitable representation, and crafting unifying narratives that resonate across diverse communities.

Globalization further complicates this dynamic, as generational shifts and digital influences reshape cultural identities. Rather than resisting these changes through rigid top-down measures, Pakistan should embrace organic cultural exchange, supporting initiatives that bridge tradition and modernity. By drawing on its historical legacy of pluralism exemplified by figures like Sufi poets the nation can cultivate a national identity that thrives on diversity rather than fearing it. Ultimately, Pakistan's future hinges on its ability to transform cultural pluralism into a foundation for harmony, ensuring that unity does not come at the expense of its vibrant multiplicity. The path forward lies in dialogue, compromise, and a commitment to an inclusive vision of nationhood.

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