



A STUDY OF POLITICS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY IN SOUTH ASIA: FROM PAKISTAN AND AFGHANISTAN

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Abstract

The concept of national identity in Pakistan and Afghanistan is of contested and evolving in nature. Both the countries of South Asia are highly fragmented and conflict-prone states. In this context, it is important to analyse the politics of national identity in these countries through comparative and theoretical lenses. This paper draws on constructivist, post-colonial, ethno-symbolist and instrumentalist frameworks to demonstrate that the national identity in both countries is not only historical inheritance but a continuously negotiated political project which is shaped by state narratives, ethnic pluralism, religious ideologies and external interventions. In Pakistan, the post-1947 state constructed Islam as a homogenizing national ideology intended to subsume linguistic and ethnic diversity. However, the persistent marginalization of non-Punjabi groups, tensions over linguistic imposition and the deepening of sectarian divides particularly after Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization policies have fractured the state's centralizing narratives which has culminated in separatist movements, internal insurgencies and crises of legitimacy. Afghanistan on the other hand, reveals a different but equally complex dynamics where Pashtun-centric state formation, multi-ethnic competition and recurring foreign interventions have impeded the consolidation of a cohesive Afghan identity. The attempt of Taliban to impose a unitary religious identity have further deepened ethnic cleavages and undermined inclusive nation-building. The comparative analysis highlights that in both the states, the identity formation is inseparable from colonial legacies, geopolitical pressures, elite manipulation and the structural weaknesses of post-colonial statecraft. The study argues that the exclusive and centralizing identity narratives have repeatedly produced cycles of violence, fragmentation and political instability. It concludes by asserting the necessity of pluralistic, inclusive and decentralized approaches to identity construction for any sustainable national cohesion in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Keywords: Pakistan, Afghanistan, National Identity, South Asia, Ethnic identity.



Introduction

The South Asian region is known for its rich cultural, ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity. In such a diverse region like South Asia, it is very difficult to build unified national identities in the face of many differences. Scholars argue that national identity is not an inherent or primordial phenomenon. Instead, it is a socially and politically constructed process which evolves through shared experiences, institutional practices and power relations (Anderson 1983; Gellner 1983). The process of building national identities has long been a very difficult task for this region especially on account of their history of colonial legacies, religious ideologies, ethnic plurality and geopolitical entanglements. In South Asia, the creation of national identity is influenced by geopolitical conflicts, cultural diversity, historical legacies, ethnicity, colonial partitioning and ongoing state building issues are characteristics of this region. Across the South Asia, national identity is both a source of unification and also a source of division.

Pakistan and Afghanistan provide interesting case studies for examining the politics of national identity among the nations of the South Asia. The national identity in Pakistan and Afghanistan is not just the result of past occurrences, but also a contentious political endeavour that is always being moulded and remoulded by external factors, religious narratives, governmental policies and ethnic aspirations. (Brass 1991; Rubin 2002)

Pakistan was created as a Muslim nation in South Asia in 1947. It has consistently struggled to balance its Islamic identity with regional nationalism and ethnic diversity. Islam was accepted by the state as a unifying philosophy from the very beginning in order to bring together various ethnic groupings including Mohajir's, Sindhis, Balochis and Pashtuns. However, Pakistan struggled to accommodate all the ethnic identities within its idea of nation. (Jalal 1990; Shaikh 2009). It has continuously faced the heat from Baloch and Sindhi nationalist movements. The linguistic conflicts has resulted in division of the country into East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). Furthermore, Pakistan's identity discourse has been greatly impacted by the emergence of Islamic extremism particularly since the Zia-ul-Haq era (1977–1988) with repercussions for both regional politics and internal cohesion.

On the other hand, the story of establishment of Afghanistan was also an uneasy process. Afghanistan has faced many foreign interventions, internal strife and conflicting ideas of statehood. There are more than forty ethnic groups in Afghanistan which includes Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks and others. Traditionally, Pashtun culture and leadership have been central to the country's national identity. However, warlords and ethnic minorities have challenged this paradigm quite often, particularly after 2001 when the Taliban administration fell. The rise of the Taliban have pushed a religious identity in opposition to the earlier notion of identity which was more inclusive, multiethnic and democratic. But the ethnic patronage have all hampered the state's efforts to forge a single Afghan identity. (Rubin 2002; Barfield 2010).



Pakistan and Afghanistan provide examples of how national identity is shaped by the dynamic interactions of religion, ethnicity and statecraft. The state has been crucial in creating national narratives in both nations which has frequently elevated some identities while excluded the others. Furthermore, identity politics have been impacted by external actors ranging from colonial powers to current regional and global parties. The regional and international parties through engagement in civil conflicts has backed for specific regimes which have further complicated the case of Pakistan.

National Identity and Its Significance in South Asia

The South Asian region has diverse range of languages, faiths and ethnicities. South Asia's national identities are by their very nature are pluralistic. In an effort to promote unity, the postcolonial state formation frequently stressed for homogenized narratives, ignored subnational identities and have always stood in favour of national ideology. While Afghanistan's identity was traditionally linked to Pashtun domination. Pakistan's founding narrative placed an emphasis on Islamic unity as a counter to the idea of India which is accommodative, secular and diverse. The colonial past has left long-lasting rifts in the region. The British Raj's "divide and rule" policy, the Durand Line's arbitrary boundary demarcation of Afghanistan has further exacerbated the issue of national identity formation.

Since Urdu was spoken by only 7% of the people in Pakistan at the time of independence. The language imposition has exacerbated tensions. It has caused linguistic recognition movements and alienated speakers of Bengali's and Sindhi's. After independence, colonial administrative methods persisted. The regional differences have been made worse through concentrated power held by elites who speaks Punjabi. The porous border between Afghanistan and Pashtun-majority areas of Pakistan is separated by the Durand Line which has hindered Pakistan's efforts to develop it as a nation and maintained cross-border ethnic solidarity.

Literature Review

There has been a great deal of scholarly interest in the politics of national identity in South Asia particularly in context of Pakistan and Afghanistan. The development of nationalism and the significance of religion and ethnicity involves in establishing states and the effects of both internal and external wars on the construction of national identity. However, the politics of national identity is an area which has great significance for these countries. The review of literature is classified on four broad themes.

1.The Creation of Pakistan and Colonial Legacies

The national identity of Pakistan was fundamentally rooted in the 1947 partition of British India. The intellectual basis for the creation of Pakistan rests upon the Two-Nation Theory which posits



that Muslims and Hindus are distinct entities and therefore two separate countries required to be created (Jalal, 1995). Iqbal was an intellectual precursor behind the creation of Pakistan. He believed that Muslims of India were not merely a religious group but a distinct nation with their own cultural, spiritual and political identity. He emphasized that the Islam is a complete code of life and that Muslims needed an environment where they could live according to their own principles. He quoted that “Islam is not merely a matter of private belief but it is an entire social order.” The most significant political statement of Iqbal came during his presidential address at the All India Muslim League’s session in Allahabad in 1930. In his address, Iqbal has proposed the idea of consolidation of a separate homeland for Muslims in north-western India which has become a groundwork for the eventual demand for a separate Muslim homeland.

“I would like to see the Punjab, North-West Frontier Province, Sind and Baluchistan amalgamated into a single state. Self-government within the British Empire, or without the British Empire, the formation of a consolidated North-West Indian Muslim State appears to me to be the final destiny of the Muslims, at least of North-West India.”

This is widely considered the earliest formal expression of the idea that later materialized as Pakistan. According to Ayesha Jalal, Pakistan's early leadership marginalized regional identities including those of the Bengalis, Balochis and Sindhis in an effort to keep the state's identity around Islam. Meanwhile, the language issue remained a contested concept in the creation of national identity. The secession of Bangladesh in 1971 was actually a result of alienation of non-Urdu speakers especially in East Pakistan which was caused by the imposition of Urdu as the national language. According to Farhan Hanif Sadiq (2018), Pakistan's identity politics is still influenced by the inability to accept linguistic and ethnic diversity. Due to the non-acceptance of the linguistic and ethnic diversity, the regions like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan often feels alienated and thus causes internal strife and conflict.

2. Religion and Identity Politics

Although the Objectives Resolution of 1949 established Pakistan as an Islamic state, there have been ongoing discussions about the extent of religious influence on governance (Jalal, 2008). Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization policies (1977-1988) institutionalized a conservative Islamic identity that has influenced laws and social structures of society. The Islamization policies of Zia-ul-Haq's sought to legitimize military rule by aligning state identity with Sunni orthodoxy. Islam has played a central role in Pakistan's national identity both as a unifying and a divisive force. Nasr, V. 2001). According to Ayesha Jalal, the "state of martial rule," in which Islam became an instrument of authoritarian consolidation rather than national unity has further intensified the sectarian bloodshed among the oppressed Shia and Ahmadi communities.

National cohesion has been impacted by sectarian differences brought about by ideological shift especially between the Sunni and Shia communities (Sadiq, 2018). On the other hand, a more



pluralistic and inclusive identity has been promoted by several civil society organizations and political figures by combining aspects of democracy, Sufi Islam and regional diversity. Initially, Benazir Bhutto and in the recent times Imran Khan sought to reshape Pakistan's national identity. Imran Khan has emphasised on the model of the **State of Madinah** which was established by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as the guiding vision for the state of Pakistan. Khan highlighted that the *“The principles of Riyasat-e-Madina are our model: justice, humanity, and self-respect. That is the identity I want to build for Pakistan.”*

Khan sees the national identity of Pakistan as rooted in the aspirations and thoughts of Iqbal and Jinnah not as a theocratic state but as a modern Islamic democracy that preserves Muslim identity and promotes justice. He often refers Iqbal’s philosophy of **Khudi (self-realization)** and Jinnah’s emphasis on **minority rights and rule of law**.

The literature shows a relationship between religion and Islamic identity. The literature on Pakistan and Afghanistan focuses heavily on this sort of relationship between the Islamic identity and religion. Nasr (2001) explores that how General Zia ul Haq used Islam to legitimate state authority in Pakistan. Rubin and Barfield (2010) offers a profound insights into the ways in which Islamic identity coexists with tribal and ethnic connections in Afghanistan. During the Taliban era religion has had a dual role in Afghan politics. It has served both as a unifying and a dividing factor.

3.Ethnicity, Regionalism and the State

The political landscape of national identity in Pakistan and Afghanistan is shaped by the complex tension between ethnicity, regionalism and the role of the state. Benedict Anderson and Ernest Gellner highlights that national identity is a modern construct rather than a natural phenomenon. Anderson states that nations are “imagined communities”. It is because of the reason that the members will never meet most of their fellow mates, yet they feel a bond created by consistent storytelling in schools and the media. He underscores that the role of the state is to actively enforce and reinforce a uniform culture and language to ensure the country functions efficiently. The state made efforts to forge a strong unified national identity which has often clashed with the realities of ethnic plurality and regional autonomy. Ayesha Jalal argues that Pakistan has historically utilized Islamic nationalism as a centralizing tool to bridge gaps between ethnic groups such as Punjabis, Pashtuns, Sindhis, Balochis and Muhajirs coexist within the larger framework of Islamic nationalism. However, this religious framework is often contested by the marginalized and distinct linguistic and cultural identities who seeks to protect their distinct linguistic and cultural heritage. The state institutions are dominated by Punjabis and more particularly the military and bureaucracy is over dominated which has led to feelings of exclusion among groups like the Baloch and Sindhis. These sentiments have given rise to ethno-nationalist movements which challenges the state authority and seek greater autonomy. Not only this, the Baloch insurgency seek secession from the state of Pakistan. In recent times, the Baloch Liberation Army became more aggressive and targeted the state on multiple fronts.



Regionalism is another big issue in Pakistan which further complicates the issue of national identity. The political landscape of national identity in Pakistan and Afghanistan is shaped by the division of the country into various provinces with distinct identities and unequal resource distribution. Although, the 18th Constitutional Amendment was enacted to grant greater autonomy to provinces. However, many critical issues like resource control, language rights and political representation still persist. The centralization and Islamic nationalism has often failed to accommodate regional aspirations and thereby weakened the sense of inclusive national identity.

In Afghanistan, the landscape of national identity is even more fragmented than the neighbouring regions. The country's political history is marked by a complex interplay where ethnic groups such as Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks and others have historically competed for power and recognition. The state has been unable to create a consensus on national identity which resonates across ethnic lines. Pashtun dominance in state structures including the Taliban regime has led to the marginalization of other groups particularly the Hazaras. In Afghanistan, the political alliances are frequently based on ethnic loyalties rather than on national interest. The regional warlords in Afghanistan have often exercised more authority and control than the state's machinery. It has resulted in a fragmented political landscape where the concept of a unified Afghan identity remains elusive.

In Pakistan, the state has actively pursued a top-down model of identity formation centred around Islamic ideology which often suppresses ethnic and regional pluralism. This approach has limited success and it has occasionally exacerbated ethnic tensions as seen in the breakup of East Pakistan in 1971. In Afghanistan, the state's failure to provide inclusive governance has resulted in persistent instability and ethnic conflict. The recent attempts of Taliban to define Afghan identity through a rigid Islamic framework while excluding ethnic diversity often risks deepening existing divides.

4. External Interventions and Identity Formation

Another important subject is how foreign interventions shape national identity in these countries. Pakistan's internal and outward identity projections have been impacted by the US engagement in the Cold War and the War on Terror. Recurrent American, British and Soviet occupations in Afghanistan have not only established political systems but also brought in conflicting ideas of national identity. Foreign intervention has affected the domestic identity politics and has frequently creating internal disputes more worse. Barnett Rubin highlights that Afghanistan has repeatedly witnessed the foreign intervention from the times of British to the Soviet invasion and later on the US-led intervention has prevented the consolidation of a stable national identity and anchored the state institutions ineffective. (Rubin 2002). Ayesha Jalal contends that Pakistan's partnership with Western nations especially the United States during the Cold War has fundamentally altered the country's development and entrenched a security state which has privileged military institutions



over representative politics. Consequently, Pakistan's national identity is defined more by external threat perception especially directed towards India than by internal pluralism (Jalal 1990).

Theoretical Framework

A multifaceted theoretical approach is required for the study of national identity, especially in post-colonial and conflict-prone cultures like Pakistan and Afghanistan.

1. Constructivism and Imagined Communities (Benedict Anderson)

The idea of "imagined communities" of Benedict Anderson's serves as a fundamental component of this research. According to Anderson, nations are socially manufactured groups that are imagined by the individuals who consider themselves to be a member of them rather than being natural or primordial things. According to this perspective, shared narratives, symbols, languages and historical memories often mediated by governmental institutions and elite discourses are the foundation of national identity.

To bring its various ethnic groups together, the government of Pakistan has fostered a pan Islamic identity. As far as Afghanistan is concerned, Afghanistan has traditionally built its national identity narrative around Pashtun cultural domination and Islamic identity. However, the other ethnic groups have disputed this sort of Pashtun's domination. The Anderson's paradigm throws light on how these ethnic identities are formed, constructed and maintained despite internal conflicts and diversity.

2. Post-Colonial Theory

The Post-colonial theory sheds the light on colonial legacies and their impact on identity politics. The writings of Homi K. Bhabha, Edward Said and Frantz Fanon offers important sources for analysing how colonial legacies still impact identity politics in post-independence nations. Colonial and imperial operations influences not only state borders but also the institutional and intellectual underpinnings of national identity in both Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The 1947 division of India and the heritage of the British Raj provided Pakistan with the groundwork for a state based on religious nationalism. The American, British and Soviet invasions of Afghanistan have all had an impact on national identity discourses and destabilized the state. It also provides an analysis of the ways and methods through which histories of external dominance fuels the conflicting claims to legitimacy. The resistance movements and fractured national identities is aided by post-colonial theory.



3. Ethno-symbolism (Anthony D. Smith)

The enduring influence of myths, symbols and memories in forming collective identity is highlighted by Anthony D. Smith's ethno-symbolism theory. Ethno-symbolism acknowledges the influence of pre-modern ethnic identities on contemporary national consciousness in contrast to solely modernist ideologies of nationalism.

Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara and Uzbek ethnic identities in Afghanistan predate the contemporary nation-state and still shape national narratives and political allegiances. Regional ethnic identities in Pakistan such as Pashtun, Sindhi's and Baloch have frequently opposed the state's centralized Islamic identity. Smith's methodology enables the study to investigate the ways in which ingrained cultural and ethnic markers impact the politics of inclusion and exclusion.

4. Instrumentalism

According to instrumentalism, national identity and ethnicity are not fundamental or unchangeable rather they are instruments employed by political actors or elites to accomplish particular objectives such as gaining economic advantage, legitimacy or power. It asserts that depending on the demands of the moment, ethnic or national identities can be created, mobilized and exploited.

The strategic use of identity narratives such as nationalism, religion or ethnicity is used by political and military elites for regime survival, state control or external legitimation. It is noticeable in Pakistan and Afghanistan. This approach is essential for analysing how intentional state and elite strategies in addition to historical events, create identity politics.

The study aims to reveal the complex and frequently conflicting processes involved in the creation and contestation of national identity in Pakistan and Afghanistan by utilizing these theoretical stances. A fuller comprehension of identity-driven politics in South Asia is made possible by this framework which offers the analytical instruments required to examine both state narratives and public reactions.

Significance of the Study

The study's importance stems from its current and critical analysis of how national identity is changing in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Pakistan and Afghanistan are the two most complicated and war prone nations of the South Asia. During a time when religious extremism, ethnic nationalism and geopolitical realignments are all on the rise. Understanding the politics of national identity becomes crucial not only for scholarly research but also for the creation of policies, peacekeeping and regional stability.

Secondly, the study is important for comprehending how race and religion play a part in statecraft. Islam in particular has been used as a weapon for national cohesion and political legitimacy in



both Pakistan and Afghanistan. But elevating one religious or ethnic story frequently means marginalizing other groups which feeds discontent and unrest. This study will examine the effects of identity politics and shows how they fuel cycles of authoritarianism, violence and sectarianism.

Thirdly, there are ongoing discussions in Afghanistan on whose identity among so many ethnic identities. Similarly, the Pakistan's approach to administration, development and discussions about provincial autonomy and civil-military relations are all influenced by the use of identity as a political tool. This approach has significant ramifications for regional democratic consolidation, governance reforms and peacebuilding.

Finally, it is important to understand the causes and dynamics of identity-based issues which might assist domestic policymakers to create governance frameworks which are more pluralistic and inclusive. The findings of the study provides crucial background for engagement tactics that upholds local identities while advancing peace and stability for foreign players and especially those engaged in regional development, diplomacy and conflict resolution.

Findings of the study

In brief, ethnicity and regionalism play a very critical role in shaping the politics of national identity in Pakistan and Afghanistan. While the both states have sought to construct cohesive identities through centralization and ideological narratives. But many times, these efforts have often clashed with ground realities of ethnic pluralism and regional diversity. This study finds that national identity in both the countries is not an organic phenomenon but rather a state driven construction which is shaped by elite interests, security imperatives and regime survival. It also finds that religion functions simultaneously as a unifying symbol and a source of fragmentation. Apart from this, ethnic pluralism remains the most persistent challenge to state led identity formation. A significant finding is that the colonial era boundaries and administrative practices continue to shape contemporary identity crises. The Durand Line has preserved trans-border Pashtun solidarity which has complicated both Pakistani and Afghan nation-building. The study highlights that frequent foreign interventions including Cold War alliances, the War on Terror and regional power struggles have securitized national identity in both countries. In the case of Pakistan, reliance on external powers has bolstered military dominance and ideological form of nationalism. In contrast, the protracted presence foreign powers in Afghanistan has fragmented the national identity narratives by empowering ethnic militias and warlords which has obstructed the development of any unified national project .

Conclusion

The “National Identity” of Pakistan and Afghanistan often comes into conflict with the other ethnic and linguistic identities which is present in these countries. The goal of creating a single Islamic national identity in Pakistan has consistently collided with the ethnic and linguistic diversity of the nation. (Jalal 1990; Shaikh 2009; Shah 2014). Pakistan has made Islam the cornerstone of its



national ideology since from the inception in 1947 in an effort to set itself apart from India and bring its varied populace together. On the other hand, India has remained successful in keeping the nation together by accommodating all the ethnic and linguistic identities within the broader “Idea of India”. However, in Pakistan non-Punjabi ethnic groups who have traditionally opposed centralized state rule such as Balochis, Sindhis, Mohajirs and particularly the Pashtuns were sidelined which resulted in conflict, chaos and tensions. The secession of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) in 1971 is one such clear example of the failure of imposed identity politics. Furthermore, sectarian violence has been exacerbated by the state's purposeful backing of religious organizations which has further weakened the inclusive aspects of Pakistani identity and shattered the social fabric.

The situation in Afghanistan is different but no less complicated. Without a unified national identity, it has long been a multi-ethnic state. Tajiks, Hazaras and Uzbeks are among the other main ethnic groups that have been alienated by the Pashtun ethnic group's dominance in Afghan governmental power structures. These groups have frequently opposed attempts to homogenize identity and consolidate authority which has led to cycles of civil war. Since the Taliban's ideological narrative aims to impose a limited religious and ethnic order on a very varied society, their return to power has once again raised concerns about identity. The delicate ethno-political balance is under danger due to this top-down imposition which also jeopardizes attempts at inclusive government and national unity. (Rubin 2002; Barfield 2010; Giustozzi 2009).

Pakistan and Afghanistan have also been influenced by outside forces in terms of their identity politics. Identity has been used during cold war and war on terror for geopolitical purposes. Instead of promoting unity, foreign initiatives have strengthened factionalism. In this situation, identity has been as a strategic tool by regional and international forces in addition to being a domestic issue. (Jalal 1990; Rubin 2002).

This comparative perspective makes it clear that national identity is still disputed, ambiguous and divided in both Pakistan and Afghanistan. Identity making and development has frequently been a state-imposed, ideologically inflexible and discriminatory process rather than inclusive one. Due to this ethnic divide, there is a weak state society ties, ethnic insurgencies and ongoing political instability are the results. These issues have frequently caused internal instability and impeded the development of a coherent national identities. (Brass 1991; Horowitz 1985).

To sum up, it can be said that the path to a peaceful and stable South Asia requires that the Pakistan and Afghanistan should move away from exclusionary politics. Both the countries should adopt diverse and inclusive frameworks based on inherent their diversity. Therefore, it is very important for both of these countries to view religious, linguistic and ethnic diversity as a strength rather than a threat. Hence, it becomes quite necessary for Pakistan and Afghanistan to dismantle the exclusionary politics and foster for inclusive citizenship, equitable governance and participatory nation-building.



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