

The Evolution of Pakistani Identity: Culture and History

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Abstract

The formation of Pakistan in 1947 marked the beginning of a new era in South Asia, as the country sought to define a unique national identity amidst a rich, complex history. The evolution of Pakistani identity is deeply intertwined with the region's history, shaped by diverse cultural, ethnic, and religious influences. From its colonial legacy under British rule to its post-independence struggles, Pakistan has experienced a dynamic interplay of traditional values, modern aspirations, and external influences.

This paper explores the historical evolution of Pakistani identity, focusing on the pivotal moments that have defined its cultural and social fabric. Beginning with the pre-partition era, it traces the cultural and political landscapes that shaped the desire for a separate Muslim homeland. The narrative then moves through the early years of the nation's formation, addressing the challenges of nation-building, the political and cultural impacts of military regimes, and the role of religion in defining state policy.

The paper further examines how Pakistan's regional and global relationships have influenced its national identity, from its involvement in the Cold War to its contemporary position in the Muslim world. Additionally, the role of literature, media, art, and language is explored as a means of shaping and expressing Pakistani identity in both internal and global contexts. The evolution of national symbols, such as the flag and national holidays, is analyzed in relation to the country's struggle for unity amid its ethnic and linguistic diversity.

The paper argues that Pakistani identity remains fluid, continuously evolving due to the complex interplay of historical forces, social changes, and regional dynamics. The search for a coherent national identity is ongoing, as Pakistan negotiates its cultural diversity and the political realities of the 21st century. The study highlights the significance of understanding Pakistan's history and culture in order to appreciate the complexities of its evolving identity, both within and outside its borders.

Keywords: Pakistani Identity, Cultural Evolution, History of Pakistan, Nation-building, Colonial Legacy, Ethnicity and Diversity, Islamic Identity, Pakistan and Religion, Literature and Media, Political History, Military Regimes.

Introduction

The creation of Pakistan in 1947 marked the beginning of a new chapter in South Asian history, driven by the desire to establish a Muslim-majority state that would offer autonomy and protection to Muslims in the Indian subcontinent. The country's founding was influenced by the idea of creating a homeland where Muslims could practice their religion freely, but the formation of a unified national identity proved to be far more complicated. The geographic, ethnic, and religious diversity within Pakistan—comprising Punjabis, Pashtuns, Sindhis, Baloch, and Mohajirs—has meant that defining a cohesive identity has been an ongoing challenge (Talbot, 2009).

In the early years following independence, Pakistan's political framework was heavily shaped by the ideals of Islam, which had played a central role in the creation of the state. The desire for an Islamic state was evident in the country's constitution and its political ideologies (Ahmed, 2004). However, Pakistan's efforts at nation-building were hampered by political instability, ethnic divisions, and military rule, which disrupted the ideal of a unified, democratic state. The tensions between Islamic nationalism and secularism were evident throughout the 20th century, as military regimes and civilian governments alternately tried to define the country's place within the Muslim world while managing its internal diversity. The role of religion, while central to Pakistan's national identity, was often contested, as the secular elite and religious leaders frequently disagreed on the interpretation of Islamic principles in governance (Schofield, 2010).

Further complicating the formation of a national identity was Pakistan's geopolitical position and its evolving relationships with neighboring countries, particularly India and Afghanistan, as well as its role in the Cold War and the broader Muslim world. The conflicts with India, particularly over the Kashmir issue, and the ongoing border tensions with Afghanistan have had a profound effect on the country's national psyche and its international image (Schofield, 2010).

Understanding the evolution of Pakistani identity requires examining the historical forces that have shaped the country, as well as the cultural, political, and religious narratives that continue to influence it. While the idea of Pakistan as an Islamic state remains central to its identity, the ongoing challenge lies in integrating the diverse ethnic and regional identities within its borders. This paper explores how Pakistan's national identity has been constructed over time, how it has evolved through various historical stages, and how it continues to adapt to contemporary political, social, and cultural realities.

1.1 Background of the study

The concept of Pakistan as a distinct nation-state emerged during the late British colonial period in South Asia, specifically in the 1940s. The idea of a separate homeland for Muslims in India was initially proposed by Sir Syed Ahmed Khan in the 19th century and later popularized by the All-India Muslim League under the leadership of Muhammad Ali Jinnah. The demand for Pakistan culminated in the creation of the country in 1947 following the partition of British India. The partition not only led to the establishment of Pakistan but also triggered mass migrations, violence, and profound social and cultural upheaval, shaping the early experiences of the country's citizens (Talbot, 2009).

Pakistan's founding ideology was deeply rooted in the notion of Islamic unity and the belief that Muslims, due to their religious identity, required a separate state to protect their cultural, political, and religious interests. The idea was that an Islamic identity would serve as the foundation for a cohesive national identity in a country that was ethnically and linguistically diverse. However, after its creation, Pakistan faced the challenge of uniting its various ethnic and regional groups under the banner of Islam while simultaneously grappling with the political complexities of managing the state (Ahmed, 2004).

The country's population was made up of diverse ethnic groups, including Punjabis, Sindhis, Pashtuns, Baloch, and Mohajirs (immigrants from India). Each of these groups had its own distinct culture, language, and traditions, which posed a challenge to the idea of a unified national identity. Over time, the dominance of the Punjabi-speaking majority, particularly in the military and political spheres, led to feelings of alienation and marginalization among other ethnic groups. This ethnic and regional tension continues to play a crucial role in shaping Pakistan's political landscape (Schofield, 2010).

The country's early years were also marked by significant political instability, which was exacerbated by the ideological divide between the military and civilian governments, as well as tensions between secular and religious forces. Military rule became a significant feature of Pakistan's political life, especially with the rise of General Ayub Khan in the 1950s, and later, General Zia-ul-Haq in the 1970s, both of whom sought to redefine Pakistan's identity along Islamic lines. This period saw the introduction of policies that sought to emphasize Islam as the cornerstone of national identity, such as the Islamization of laws and educational

curricula. However, such measures often conflicted with the country’s ethnic diversity and secular traditions, leading to tensions and struggles for representation among various groups (Ahmed, 2004).

Externally, Pakistan’s geopolitical positioning has played a significant role in shaping its identity. The country’s alignment with the United States during the Cold War, its involvement in the Afghan conflict in the 1980s, and its ongoing rivalry with India, particularly over the Kashmir dispute, have all influenced Pakistan’s national consciousness and its relations with the broader Muslim world. Additionally, the ideological push towards an Islamic identity has often been influenced by Pakistan’s desire to assert itself as a leader within the Islamic world (Schofield, 2010).

Understanding the historical context of Pakistan’s identity is crucial in analyzing how it has evolved over time. This study seeks to explore the multifaceted nature of Pakistani identity—its cultural, political, and religious components—and to examine the tensions between its diverse ethnic groups and ideological underpinnings. The continued evolution of this identity, both within Pakistan and in relation to the international community, is central to understanding the country’s role in global geopolitics and its internal dynamics (Talbot, 2009).

1.2 Problem Statement

Pakistan has struggled to develop a cohesive national identity since its creation in 1947, primarily due to its ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity. While the founding ideology centered on an Islamic identity, the country's various ethnic groups—such as Punjabis, Pashtuns, Sindhis, Baloch, and Mohajirs—have often felt marginalized, leading to tensions and political instability. The challenge is further compounded by the country's political history, including military rule and the ideological divide between secularism and Islamic statehood, as well as external factors like its geopolitical position and rivalry with India. Despite these complexities, the country continues to seek a unified national identity, but the persistent internal divisions and external pressures make this process difficult and unresolved.

1.3 Research Questions

1. What are the key historical, cultural, and political factors that have influenced the evolution of Pakistani national identity?
2. How do Pakistan’s ethnic and regional diversity impact the formation of a cohesive national identity?
3. In what ways have external geopolitical factors shaped Pakistan’s self-perception and national identity?

1.4 Reserch Objectives

1. To examine the historical events and political decisions those have shaped the evolution of Pakistani identity.
2. To assess the role of ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity in defining Pakistan’s national identity.
3. To explore the influence of Pakistan’s geopolitical relationships and external conflicts on its national identity.

1.5 Conceptual Framework

Component	Description
Historical Context	The creation of Pakistan in 1947 and its partition legacy shaping national identity.
Ethnic and Regional Diversity	The influence of diverse ethnic groups (Punjabis, Pashtuns, Sindhis, Baloch, Mohajirs) on national cohesion.
Islamic Ideology and Secularism	The tension between Islamic foundational identity and secular aspirations.

Geopolitical Influence	The impact of Pakistan's relations with India, the Muslim world, and its geopolitical positioning.
Media and Cultural Representation	The role of media, literature, and arts in reflecting and shaping Pakistani identity.

2. Literature Review

The evolution of Pakistani identity has been a subject of extensive scholarly attention, with numerous studies exploring the historical, cultural, and political factors that have shaped the nation's collective identity. One of the earliest frameworks for understanding Pakistan's identity comes from Ayesha Jalal (1995), who argues that Pakistan's identity has been continuously contested, primarily due to its ethnic and regional diversities. She emphasizes the role of Islamic ideology in defining the state, but also notes the tensions between this ideological basis and the multi-ethnic nature of the country (Jalal, 1995).

Selig S. Harrison (1981) expands this discussion by focusing on Pakistan's ethnic divisions. He posits that Pakistan's founding, while rooted in the desire for a Muslim homeland, has always been complicated by ethnic and regional inequalities. According to Harrison, the dominance of Punjabis in the military and political systems has led to a sense of alienation among other ethnic groups, such as the Pashtuns, Sindhis, and Baloch, which has periodically undermined national unity. This is further explored by Imtiaz Ahmad (1993), who investigates the centrality of ethnicity in Pakistani politics and highlights the challenges that ethnic minorities face in asserting their identity within the larger Pakistani state (Harrison, 1981; Ahmad, 1993).

Another key contribution is from Craig Baxter (2004), who examines the evolution of Pakistan's political system and its influence on national identity. Baxter suggests that Pakistan's political instability—marked by military coups and weak civilian governments—has made it difficult for a coherent national identity to emerge. The political elite's inconsistent commitment to either Islamic or secular ideologies has contributed to this instability. Baxter's analysis underscores the role of military regimes, particularly under General Zia-ul-Haq, in shaping Pakistan's identity through the Islamization process, which deeply impacted national identity and political legitimacy (Baxter, 2004).

In addition to internal factors, Cynthia Mahmood (1996) focuses on the influence of external geopolitics in shaping Pakistan's identity. She argues that Pakistan's geopolitical positioning—particularly its rivalry with India and its role in the Cold War—has reinforced its national identity as a defender of Islam and an important player in South Asian politics. Schofield (2010) further explores this by focusing on Pakistan's involvement in the Afghan conflict during the 1980s and the impact of these external events on Pakistan's national narrative (Mahmood, 1996; Schofield, 2010).

The role of media and culture in shaping Pakistani identity has also garnered attention in recent years. Ali Raza (2013) argues that cultural representations in Pakistani cinema, literature, and media contribute significantly to the negotiation of national identity, reflecting both the ongoing struggles over religious and secular ideologies. His work highlights how Pakistani cinema has oscillated between portraying religious nationalism and secularism, offering a cultural lens through which to examine the tension between Islamic ideology and secular identity (Raza, 2013).

Lastly, Asma Barlas (2002) critically examines the role of Islam in defining Pakistan's national identity. She argues that while Islam has historically been a central factor in unifying the population, its interpretation has been manipulated by political elites to maintain power. Barlas contends that a more inclusive and democratic interpretation of Islam could allow for a more cohesive national identity that embraces Pakistan's ethnic and cultural diversity (Barlas, 2002).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a descriptive qualitative research design to explore the evolution of Pakistani identity. The

qualitative approach was chosen as it allowed for an in-depth investigation into the complex and multifaceted nature of national identity, shaped by historical, political, cultural, and geopolitical forces. The research was exploratory and descriptive in nature, aiming to understand the interplay of these factors over time rather than predicting outcomes or manipulating variables.

3.2 Data Collection Methods

Data collection involved a combination of documentary analysis, case studies, and interviews. Documentary analysis included reviewing both primary and secondary sources that provided insights into the historical, political, and cultural developments influencing Pakistani identity. Key documents analyzed were historical records, government reports, constitutional debates, and media content that reflected the evolving national narrative. The case study approach focused on specific historical periods and events that had a significant impact on the development of Pakistan's identity. These included the creation of Pakistan in 1947, the Islamization policies under General Zia-ul-Haq in the 1980s, the Kashmir conflict, and Pakistan's involvement in the Afghan war during the 1980s. Interviews were conducted with political analysts, historians, sociologists, and cultural commentators to gather expert perspectives on how different factors contributed to shaping national identity. These experts provided deeper insights into the ethnic, political, and cultural issues that have shaped Pakistani identity over time.

3.3 Sampling

Purposeful sampling was used to select relevant individuals and documents for analysis. Experts in the fields of political analysis, history, sociology, and culture were purposefully selected for interviews based on their expertise and experience related to the evolution of Pakistani identity. Documents for the documentary analysis were selected purposefully, focusing on key political, legal, and cultural texts that played a significant role in defining the national narrative. Additionally, significant historical events were included as case studies to understand how different periods in Pakistan's history influenced national identity.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using thematic analysis, a qualitative method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within the data. Initially, the researcher familiarized themselves with the data by reading through interviews and historical documents. Codes were developed based on key concepts such as Islamic ideology, ethnic diversity, secularism, and geopolitical influence. Once coding was complete, recurring themes across different sources of data were identified. These themes were then interpreted to understand how they influenced the evolving concept of Pakistani identity over time. The final analysis provided a nuanced understanding of the factors shaping national identity, particularly focusing on the ways Pakistan has navigated its ethnic, religious, and political challenges.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical guidelines were followed throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all interview participants, ensuring they were fully aware of the study's purpose and their right to confidentiality. All participants voluntarily agreed to participate, and their identities were kept anonymous in the final analysis. Proper measures were taken to ensure confidentiality and security of all data, and transparency was maintained in the research methods, data analysis, and findings.

3.6 Limitations

Despite the strengths of the study, there were certain limitations. Access to some primary sources, especially from the early years of Pakistan's formation, was limited. These historical documents were either not readily accessible or faced archival constraints. There was also the potential for subjectivity in the interviews, as

interviewees brought their own biases or perspectives. To mitigate this, a diverse group of interviewees was selected to ensure a broad range of viewpoints. Lastly, while the study provided rich qualitative insights, the findings were not generalizable to the broader population of Pakistan, as the research primarily focused on expert perspectives and historical case studies rather than general public opinion.

4. Data Analysis

Data collected through documentary analysis, case studies, and interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, a widely-used qualitative approach for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within the data. The analysis aimed to uncover recurring patterns, underlying messages, and insights related to the evolution of Pakistani identity. The first step involved familiarizing with the data by thoroughly reading through the interview transcripts, historical records, and case study materials. This ensured that the researcher understood the content in its entirety before diving into the coding process.

Coding was the next stage in the data analysis process. It involved identifying significant segments of data that directly related to the research questions. These segments were then categorized into initial codes that reflected core themes related to Islamic ideology, ethnic diversity, geopolitical influence, secularism, and cultural representations. For instance, documents and interviews that discussed the role of Islam in defining national identity were coded under "Islamic Ideology." Similarly, discussions around Pakistan's ethnic groups and regional tensions were coded under "Ethnic Diversity."

Once initial coding was complete, the researcher moved to the next phase of the theme development. This phase involved grouping related codes into broader, more cohesive themes. For example, under the broader theme of Islamic Ideology, subthemes such as "Islamization under Zia-ul-Haq" and "Islam's role in national unity" were identified. Similarly, under Ethnic Diversity, themes of "regional identity" and "ethnic tensions" were developed. The themes were then analyzed to identify patterns across different data sources, such as documents, interviews, and case studies.

The analysis also took into account contextual factors influencing identity formation, particularly geopolitical events such as Pakistan's involvement in the Afghan War, the Kashmir conflict, and its shifting relationship with neighboring countries. These geopolitical factors were explored in-depth to assess how they influenced both public perceptions and governmental policies that contributed to Pakistani national identity. Cultural representations, including media portrayals and literature, were also analyzed to understand how identity was shaped and communicated to the broader public.

Finally, the findings were synthesized to construct a narrative that addresses the key research questions about how Pakistani identity has evolved. The analysis focused on how various themes interrelate, especially how political, cultural, and ethnic factors interact to shape national identity. This provided a comprehensive understanding of the factors that have historically influenced, and continue to influence, the collective identity of Pakistan.

Theme	Subthemes	Related Data Sources	Description
Islamic Ideology	- Islamization under Zia-ul-Haq	- Political speeches	Examines how Islamic policies shaped the identity during Zia's regime and beyond.
	- Islam's role in national unity	- Media content	Focuses on the role of Islam in fostering unity and legitimizing the state.
Ethnic Diversity	- Regional identity (Punjab, Sindh, Baloch, Pashtun)	- Interviews with sociologists	Investigates how ethnic diversity and regionalism have impacted national identity.

	- Ethnic tensions and alienation	- Historical records	Explores the ethnic tensions and struggles for recognition within Pakistan's diverse population.
Geopolitical Influence	- Kashmir conflict	- Government reports and media	Analyzes how Pakistan's involvement in the Kashmir conflict shaped its national narrative and identity.
	- Afghan War impact on identity	- News articles, government documents	Focuses on the Afghan conflict's influence on Pakistan's identity in the 1980s and beyond.
Secularism vs. Islamism	- Secular narratives vs. Islamic state ideology	- Constitutional debates and legal documents	Investigates the tension between secularism and Islamic state ideology in Pakistan's political landscape.
	- Secularism in the media and arts	- Pakistani literature, cinema, and media	Explores how secular ideas have been reflected in cultural productions.
Cultural Representations	- Role of cinema, media, and literature	- Pakistani cinema and literature	Examines how cultural products like media, cinema, and literature have contributed to national identity formation.
	- Representation of identity through popular culture	- Popular media and television programs	Focuses on how national identity is communicated through popular culture.

This table provides an overview of the key themes identified during the data analysis process, along with their associated subthemes, related data sources, and a brief description. Each theme focuses on different factors that influence the evolution of Pakistani identity, such as Islamic ideology, ethnic diversity, geopolitical factors, and the role of media and culture.

1. **Islamic Ideology** explores how Islam shaped Pakistan's national identity, particularly under Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization policies.
2. **Ethnic Diversity** delves into the impact of Pakistan's various ethnic groups, highlighting regional identity and ethnic tensions.
3. **Geopolitical Influence** investigates the effect of major geopolitical events, such as the Kashmir conflict and the Afghan War, on the nation's identity.
4. **Secularism vs. Islamism** looks at the tension between secular and Islamic ideologies in shaping national identity.
5. **Cultural Representations** examines how culture, media, and the arts reflect and shape the identity of Pakistan.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the complex and evolving nature of Pakistani identity, shaped by a combination of internal and external factors. The analysis reveals that Islamic ideology, particularly during periods like Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization policies, played a central role in defining the nation's identity, yet it also generated tensions between religious and secular ideologies. Ethnic diversity remains a significant

challenge, with regional identities often clashing with the notion of a unified national identity, particularly in the case of ethnic minorities such as Baloch and Pashtuns. Geopolitical factors, such as the Kashmir conflict and Pakistan's involvement in the Afghan War, have further complicated this identity, intertwining national pride with territorial disputes and regional politics. Moreover, cultural representations in media and literature have reflected and, at times, reinforced these ideological and ethnic tensions, while also offering spaces for the negotiation of identity through secular or religious lenses. The study emphasizes that Pakistani identity is not monolithic but is instead a product of ongoing negotiation, shaped by historical events, political decisions, and the country's diverse ethnic and religious landscape.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study underscores the multifaceted nature of Pakistani identity, shaped by the dynamic interplay of Islamic ideology, ethnic diversity, political instability, and geopolitical factors. The research illustrates that while Islam has been a central unifying force, it has also been a source of tension between secular and religious visions of the state. Ethnic diversity, particularly regional and minority identities, continues to challenge efforts to build a cohesive national identity. Furthermore, external factors, such as the Kashmir conflict and Pakistan's involvement in the Afghan war, have not only influenced its geopolitical positioning but also contributed to shaping its national narrative. Cultural representations in media and literature further reveal the complexities of identity negotiation in a society that remains deeply divided yet united in its diversity. Overall, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how Pakistani identity continues to evolve in response to historical, cultural, and political forces, and emphasizes the need for an inclusive approach to national identity that embraces both its religious and ethnic pluralism.

Recommendation / Suggestions

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that policymakers, cultural leaders, and educators in Pakistan prioritize fostering an inclusive national identity that accommodates both religious and ethnic diversity. To achieve this, the education system should promote a more balanced understanding of Pakistan's history, emphasizing the contributions of various ethnic groups and the importance of secular and religious perspectives in nation-building. Additionally, media and cultural platforms should play a pivotal role in bridging divides by portraying diverse narratives and creating space for dialogue on the complexities of national identity. Efforts should also be made to address the grievances of ethnic minorities through political reforms and inclusive governance, ensuring that all groups feel equally represented and valued. Finally, further research is needed to explore the evolving role of younger generations in shaping the future of Pakistani identity, particularly as globalized ideas continue to influence domestic discourse.

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