

## India-Pakistan Cultural Homogeneity and Political Ties

*By Saira Banu,*

An individual's cultural identity is the amalgamation of the nurture and nature absorbed by him/her in the course of upbringing. States view and understand themselves on the basis of inter-subjectively formulated perceptions and identities. Despite being one nation prior to the partition and having a shared national and cultural identity, Pakistan and India continue to share a less than cordial relationship primarily due to the turbulent nature of the partition. While there are numerous dimensions to the India-Pakistan conflict and the resulting subcontinental security dynamics, this article will attempt to discuss the cultural homogeneity of the states.

The political relations between India and Pakistan have been molded by four wars – in 1947-48 at the event of the partition, in 1965 over Kashmir, in 1971 during the secession of Bangladesh and the Kargil war in 1999. Hostility between the states is thought to be a result of the partial ethnic cleansing that accompanied the partition in 1947 and the constant conflict over the State of Kashmir. Further conflict occurs due to disagreements surrounding the border, water sharing, terrorism, the Line of Control and subsequent issues. Terrorism remains an ever-present danger and there is a glaring lack of implementation of the proposed confidence building measures over the past decade. Both states accuse each other of directly and indirectly supporting extremist groups on the other side of the border.

Despite being nuclear powers as of 1998, India and Pakistan have to rely frequently on outside actors to mitigate their inter-state conflicts. The USA has been instrumental in alleviating the threat of what would have been a fully blown war between the two states in the immediate aftermath of the attacks in Mumbai on November 26, 2008.

India's political relations with Pakistan have a linear effect on its cultural and economic ties. Post the Pulwama attack in February 2019, India withdrew the Most Favored Nation status granted to Pakistan, further dwindling the already sparse bilateral formal trade between the two states. Cultural ties were also affected with India banning Pakistani artists from working in India and Pakistan reciprocating by prohibiting the screening of Indian movies in theatres in Pakistan.

The culture of a nation is representative of a country's ideas and values. Religion and culture has been used often as a measure to sustain regimes, and as a powerful tool in

politics, diplomacy and international relations. The term ‘Soft Power’ coined by Joseph Nye, is the ability to attract and co-opt, rather than coerce. The three pillars of soft power are political values, culture and foreign policy. Soft power uses a country’s economic and cultural influence to persuade countries to do something, rather than by using military influence. It emerged as a western notion and has not been utilised to its full potential by developing nations as they are still recovering from a supposed colonial hangover. For example, chicken tikka masala is the most enjoyed takeout in the United Kingdom but derogatory terms like ‘curry’ or ‘paki’ are still used, illustrating the lack of complete acceptance of a foreign culture.

Cultural forces have been studied in international politics to fully comprehend the stability or instability of the world order. A discourse on world politics, especially of one as tumultuous as India-Pakistan relations, is incomplete without a foray into the question of culture and identity, and how this has influenced the political understanding of multiple communities.

Despite rapid liberalisation and globalisation of economies, a common desire for the creation of a *Hindu Rashtra* or an *Islamic Nation* has become increasingly more urgent, especially in the current regimes. The Modi government that came to power in 2014 maintained a much more hardened stance towards Pakistan and also stuck with its approach to deal with the civilian government by refusing to involve the army. Culture does not pervert or malign politics, but rather the politicisation of cultural diversities creates animosities. Cultural diplomacy is a phenomenon where states utilise their culture to achieve their foreign policy goals.

The cultural homogeneity is evident in the languages spoken in Pakistan, predominantly English, Urdu and Punjabi. Thirty six million Indians have Punjabi as their first language and 63 million speakers converse in Urdu. Both India and Pakistan adopted English from their colonial ancestors and is their official language. This allows the two states to share, exchange and enjoy each other’s cultural pursuits. Bollywood, the predominant film industry in the Northern part of India, has a huge fan following in Pakistan, while Pakistani soap operas are preferred over Indian ones by the denizens of India. Eateries in Delhi often play songs from Coke studio Pakistan, an entertainment programme produced in Pakistan and eagerly viewed by Indian viewers, who reaffirm the quality of its content over the Indian version. Bollywood features many actors and actresses from Pakistan who are widely admired by Indian viewers, while Pakistan continues to savour Bollywood movies

and prefer them over movies released in their own industry, Lollywood. The recent ban of Indian movies, soap operas and advertisements in Pakistan after India conducted air strikes in Pakistani territory, are actually considered to be more detrimental to the Pakistani box office. Seventy percent of the Pakistani movie industry's revenue is said to be from Indian movies. Zindagi, a Zee entertainment Channel that aired soap operas, was very well received by the Indian tele-viewers who preferred the sober dramas of Pakistan over the exorbitant Indian serials.

The two states also share a common fervour for cricket, and citizens of the state enthusiastically participate in supporting their teams. Cricket diplomacy is the utilisation of cricket as a political tool to influence diplomatic relations between the two nations. Cricket diplomacy between India and Pakistan has a history as precarious as the political diplomacy between the two states. Conventionally, it has been able to establish at the very least, a reflection of peace that is often disturbed by the ripples of armed conflict. Former Pakistani President General Zia-ul-Haq established cricket diplomacy between the two states with this "cricket for peace initiative." When he came to India to watch a test match between the two sides in February 1987, it was not a trip free of worry. With the current Prime Minister of Pakistan being a former cricketer himself, it might be interesting to note if diplomatic matches can be played between the two teams in an attempt to strengthen the relationship. Even with the existing political conflicts that pit the two states against each other, there is a plethora of everyday cultural ties that is woven into the fabric of their everyday lives. The fashion industry in the two states too is blind to political differences and boundaries. Pakistani and Indian fashion choices are very similar and viewers in both nations are introduced to the other nation's fashion through serials and movies, and address this appeal through markets like Dubai. Popular Indian designers like Rohit Bal and Sabyasachi are highly sought after in Pakistan, while the Indian consumer enjoys donning a design by Sana Safinaz or Maria B.

Several individual groups exist to promote cordial relations between the two states in a fervent attempt to reclaim the shared cultural and historical identity.

- 1) Pakistan-India People's Forum for Democracy (PIPFD): Formed with a view to reduce hostility by increasing interactions between citizens of the two countries. PIPFD successfully stimulated dialogue and held conventions in both countries at a time when communication between both governments was virtually non-existent.  
Eg: 1995 Lahore convention.

- 2) The Pakistan Institute of Labor, Education, and Research (PILER): Founded by a Malayali, on self-imposed exile in Pakistan, Mr BM Kutty intended PILER to be dedicated to furthering the cause of peacebuilding.
- 3) Centre for Nuclear Disarmament and Peace (CNDP) and Pakistan Peace Coalition (PPC): Citizen disarmament groups arose in both countries post the nuclear tests conducted in 1999, campaigning vociferously against the nuclearisation of the subcontinent.
- 4) Aman Ki Asha: A campaign for peace between India and Pakistan, initiated by the Jang Group of Pakistan and The Times of India group. A three-phased strategy is used to promote peace: facilitating dispute resolution through dialogue, advocating economic collaboration as a vital component of the peace process and increased cultural exchange through mutual interaction.
- 5) Another initiative is the 'Peace Bus' organised by the Women's Initiative for Peace in South Asia (WIPSA), where activists from both nations travelled from Lahore to New Delhi and vice versa.

While making policy recommendations for states with a protracted history of conflict like India and Pakistan, it is important to remember that any policy changes made will have to align with the ideologies of current dispensations. The first half of 2019 saw multiple hostilities and a thorny relationship between the two nations. The second half of the year in which Narendra Modi was reelected seemed to be more fruitful in reviving the ties, as seen in the successful Kartarpur corridor, in which Islamabad stated that there was agreement on 80 per cent of the issues. Pakistan agreed to visa-free access for 5000 pilgrims to the Kartarpur Sahib Gurudwara, an important step in strengthening the pre-existing cultural bond between the two states by allowing Indian pilgrims access to a site of religious and cultural importance for them. However, the recent move by the Indian Government to bifurcate the State of Jammu and Kashmir was not well received by the Government of Pakistan, and evoked a response of condemnation.

Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan will have to follow policy precedents in decision making process, particularly with issues like Kashmir. The historical 'Back Stop' negotiated in 2007 between the then Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf and former Indian PM Manmohan Singh resulted in an almost conclusion on the Kashmir issue. The internal politics and subsequent removal of Pervez Musharraf from office put a permanent halt to these confidential talks. An attempt to revive these talks can be made in the current

scenario for the conflict resolution between India and Pakistan. Placating Kashmir issue in itself will automatically lead to policy changes in the economic and cultural spheres.

Better cultural diplomatic ties can be established through student exchange programmes. Youth are a critical demography to furthering relations between India and Pakistan, and student exchange programmes will help facilitate better understanding of the cultures and provide an opportunity of engagement with students from the other nation. Most policy initiatives and governmental processes have not been very effective in creating a stable and sustainable relationship as they occur mostly in the shadow of previous hostilities. Several economic policy reforms too need to be implemented to increase the amount of formal trade. These include easier visa processes, enhancing and strengthening communication among traders of both countries to bridge the information gap and asymmetries, lowering of transaction costs and increasing connectivity infrastructure.

**Saira Banu is a Research Intern at CPPR-Centre for Strategic Studies. She can be contacted at [sairabanu323@gmail.com](mailto:sairabanu323@gmail.com). Views expressed by the author are personal and need not reflect or represent the views of Centre for Public Policy Research.**

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