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Perception of National Identity: An Interview Study of Teachers in Gilgit Baltistan

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Abstract



This research aimed to explore the perception of teachers in Gilgit-Baltistan regarding national identity. A qualitative research approach was adopted. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with purposive sampling using a hermeneutic phenomenology research design to obtain the required data from ten Pakistan Studies teachers. The result of the study indicated that most of the teachers believed that Pakistan was born out of Islamic Ideology; hence Islamist approach to national identity remained dominant since independence. However, as Islam was managed as a political sensation by governing authorities, true Islamic ideals were not realized. Consequently, religious intolerance, sectarian violence, social injustice, and economic inequality remained a prominent feature in Gilgit Baltistan. The findings of the study reflect that to accommodate ethnic and religious diversity as a national asset pluralistic approach to national identity should be adopted.

Keywords: Social Studies, Pakistan Studies, Teacher Understanding, Pakistani National Identity, Qualitative Research, Islamist

Introduction

The education sector is widely acknowledged to inculcate a sense of national identity in the young generation to serve the purpose of nurturing a competitive, cohesive, and unified nation (Muhammad, 2015, 2019). Concerning Pakistan mostly, the surveillance of the education sector is done by the government. The government publishes textbooks that reflect the agenda and policies of constructing national identity, and teachers serve as a backbone to transmit these values to the students (Khokhar & Muhammad, 2020, 2022). It is important to know how teachers perceive national identity, especially in the region where the multifaceted interplay of social-political and ethnic factors has played conflicting roles (Muhammad & Brett, 2015a, 2017a). Keeping in view the above scenario, the present study was set to explore perceptions regarding the national identity of teachers working in Gilgit Baltistan, the region whose identity has remained controversial since independence.

Gilgit-Baltistan is situated in the north of Pakistan. Geographically this part is very important for Pakistan. It is situated at the borderline with India and China. And it's become more important because of CEPEC. Gilgit Baltistan remained of international significance because of its geo-political, geo-strategic, and economic implications (Bodla, 2014). The local community of Gilgit-Baltistan declared independence from the Dogras overcoming its militaries. Since their independence on November 1, 1947, the region had been under a state of constant constitutional limbo due to its connection with the Kashmir issue in the wake of the infamous Karachi agreement between Pakistan and the Azad Kashmir Government. The opinion about legal and constitutional rights is divided among the stakeholders, posing a grievous threat to constitutional abuse and human rights violations (Bodla, 2014). Several Constitutional developments have taken place since its inception. The people of Gilgit-Baltistan have started asserting themselves as stakeholders in the political arena and social space. With diverse viewpoints, the matter of full constitutional rights is both politically and legally challenging (Ali, 2022). The above situation led to the identity crises of people residing in Gilgit Baltistan.

National identity allows a nation to "imagines" itself and differentiates itself from "other" nations (Bekerman & Zembylas, 2016). National identity is self-recognition as a member of a state community. Pakistani national identity refers to an individual sense of belonging to Pakistan and their association with overall Pakistani society (Atta, Muhammad, & Mahmood, 2022; Khalid, Muhammad, & Siddiqui, 2022). More specifically, there have been many different factors that have

been used as a building block of national identity; these factors include regional association, cultural heritage, local languages, and religion (Muhammad & Brett, 2015c, 2019, 2020). In Pakistan, three notions of national identity are presently predominant that is the Islamist, pluralist, and nation-statist (Rauf, Muhammad, & Saleem, 2021; Shafqat, 2009). The advocates of the first groups assert that since Pakistan was born out of Islamic ideology, "Islam" should serve as a supreme binding force for national cohesion. They also assert that Islamic ideology should serve as a panacea for all socio-political ills of society, and even ethnic and religious diversities should be solved by raising the slogan of Islam. The pluralist agenda acknowledges Pakistan as a multicultural and multilingual state and demands decentralization and provincial autonomy to solve socio-political and ethnic issues. The last nation-statist conception of national identity illustrates the use of "common enemies" or anti-Indian sentiments to bind the state and protect it from internal conflicts. The nation is pictured as a homogenous community and covers the hierarchies that exist within the geographical boundaries (Durrani, Kaderi, & Anand, 2020).

The academic literature showed that through curriculum and textbooks, Islamist and nation-statist views were supported for the formation of national identity in Pakistan. The previous literature indicates the policies and agenda of the government of Pakistan to breed the culture of Islamic nationalism to mark the line between "self" and "others." Although the liberal-democratic stance on the curriculum has been suggested by Pervaiz Musharraf, little development has been noted (Rauf, Muhammad, & Saeed, 2021; Tariq, Dilawar, & Muhammad, 2019). Durrani et al. (2020) demonstrated that Islam has been widely used in the curriculum, specifically in the history syllabus, to construct National identity in Pakistan. Khokhar and Muhammad (2020) claimed that Islamic habitus remained the nucleus of English textbooks published by the state. Yaqian (2011) reported that Islam was used as a symbol of unity in textbooks, not only for Muslim students but also for non-Muslims living in Pakistan. Muhammad and Brett (2017b) explored teachers' perceptions regarding national identity and concluded that most of the teachers remained confined to the Islamic model of identity ignoring the pluralistic or liberal democratic approach. A study specifically conducted in the context of Gilgit Baltistan noted the marginalization of local culture, religion, language, and ceremonies to great extent (Zakir, 2015).

With diverse viewpoints regarding the status of Gilgit Baltistan and little accommodation of pluralistic voices in the picturization of national identity, the present research study was set to explore how the teachers of Gilgit Baltistan perceive national identity. Teachers play a significant role in providing effective learning experiences for students (Naseer & Muhammad, 2019; Pirzada, Muhammad, & Zaka, 2021; Zaka & Muhammad, 2021) and presenting the events that are a part of a government mandate (Anjum, Muhammad, & Rauf, 2021; Muhammad, Masood, & Anis, 2019). To the best of the researchers' information, inadequate academic literature is available concerning how teachers perceive national identity in the context of Gilgit Baltistan. The present study is an attempt to fill this gap.

Methodology

Research Design

The current study is a qualitative study using a hermeneutic phenomenology research design (Sharjeel, Muhammad, & Waqar, 2022). The researchers used semi-structured interviews to access the participants' interpretations of their lived experiences. The criterion sampling technique was used to select participants as it proved useful in previous research studies (Iqbal, Muhammad, & Waqar, 2022; Yasmin, Muhammad, & Siddiqui, 2021). The following criteria were used to decide the inclusion of participants in this study:

1. The participant was a Pakistan Studies teacher.
2. The participant had at least 3 years of experience teaching Pakistan Studies.
3. The participant was teaching in a school in Gilgit Baltistan.

Data were collected from 10 participants who have been teaching Pakistan Studies at the secondary level in public and private schools in Gilgit-Baltistan. Pakistan studies are one of the compulsory subjects to be taught till the Bachelors. The purpose of this subject is to introduce students to the history, geography, and culture of Pakistan. This subject is a symbol of the ideological shifts that can be witnessed in Pakistan's evolving political history. The historical content of this subject has been acknowledged to serve the political ideologies to form a cohesive and unified Pakistan. The Pakistan Studies subject was introduced in 1971. This subject aims to focus on creating

a sense of patriotism and good citizenship among students. However, during the General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq regime's Islamization era (July 5, 1977-August 17, 1988), Pakistan studies were used to promote a relatively singular and amalgamated vision of culture, history, and religion in Pakistan and Pakistani society with Islam and a proud nationalism. (Muhammad & Brett, 2017b). The historical content reflected in textbooks as inaccurate or politicized serves as the basis of cross-cultural knowledge amongst the inhabitants and has a massive impact on local insights of other societies (Tripathi, 2018).

Participants included five male and five females Pakistan Studies teachers originating from the city of Skardu in the Gilgit-Baltistan, the fifth province of Pakistan. Six participants represented the public sector, and 4 presented the private sector in Gilgit-Baltistan. Most participants had more than five years of working experience as Pakistan Studies teachers at the secondary level in Gilgit-Baltistan. The diversified experience ranged from 3 to 16 years of teaching in the secondary school at Skardu. Almost all participants enjoyed teaching as Pakistan Studies teachers at the secondary level in public and private sectors in Skardu. The details of the participants are presented in the table below:

Table 1: Demographic information of the participants

Participant	Gender	Age	Academic Qualification	Experience	School
Participant 1	Female	37	MA Education	16 years	Public
Participant 2	Male	25	MA IR	5 years	Private
Participant 3	Male	28	MA Pakistan Studies	3 Years	Private
Participant 4	Male	25	BA	5Years	Private
Participant 5	Female	27	MA Education	10 Years	Public
Participant 6	Female	40	MA, B.Ed.	9 Years	Public
Participant 7	Female	42	BA, B.Ed.	10 Years	Public
Participant 8	Male	40	MA Education	10 Years	Public
Participant 9	Female	30	MSc	4 Years	Public
Participant 10	Male	26	BA	6 Years	Public

In the current study, semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data. The researcher contacted the participants by phone to discuss the next steps in the research process. Because of the pandemic, all interviews were conducted online using the Zoom Application. Interviews were semi-structured in format, and participants were individually interviewed. To record the interviews, the built-in recording function of the Zoom Application was used. In addition, the interview guide was used to take notes whenever it was deemed necessary.

Reflexive thematic data analysis (Braun, Clarke, Hayfield, & Terry, 2019) was used to analyze interview data.

Findings

Most of the teachers believed that as Pakistan was created in the name of Islam, Islamic ideology or two nation theory served as its identity. One of the teachers expressed that "It becomes difficult for Muslims of the sub-continent to live according to Islam. So, after an immense struggle of Quaid-i-Azam, the great leader, Pakistan came into being. (Participant 3).

Most teachers were confined to the Islamist view of the national identity of Pakistan; however, some participants mentioned their reservations regarding their national identity by stating that they are confused about their status or identity given by the Pakistani government. One participant expressed that "When Pakistan did not give any status to GB, we never accepted any good identity. The world today does not know us as Pakistani; they know us as Gilgit-Baltistan. So, I don't have any concept of Pakistani national identity" (participant 4). One of the participants also mentioned that "Islamic extremists destroyed the image of Pakistan and foreign countries consider us extremists. Now extremism and corruption have become our national identity" (participant 6). Participants further claimed that there should be a check and balance by the government on the madrasah system because it encourages religious extremism.

When teachers were questioned regarding if they believed that Islam had served as a binding force among diverse cultural groups in Pakistan, different opinions were observed. Mostly believed that Islam has not served as a binding force between the provinces of Pakistan. One participant voiced that "It could be, but not yet. If we were practical Muslims, it was possible. If we can do that, it will be the easiest and strongest source to bind us into one nation. But, nowadays, Islam and Muslims are two separate things" (participant 4). Few participants were of the view that because people are divided

into different sects, it remained a “mere dream” (participant 8). Others stated, “We failed to do that because we are divided into different sects, like Shia and Sunni” (participant 5).

All the participants agreed on the existence of religious indolence in Pakistan. Teachers identified that the Madrasa system, lack of true knowledge about Islamic teachings, and religious extremism is the main cause of “this trending issue in Pakistan” (participant 3). One of the participants also stated that “It is damaging Pakistan’s identity in the world and Islam as well” (participant 8).

Many of the participants were of the view that centralization serves as a threat to the cultural and traditional values of local people. Participants added that “Centralization had not been in favor of Pakistan since day one. Decentralizing by making institutions and provinces autonomous must be encouraged” (Participant 3). However, one participant was of the view that centralization can play a role in progressive Pakistan. “Centralization as one nation, one language theory should be encouraged and promoted. When we come to centralization, we work as one nation for the development of the country” (Participant 5).

All participants agreed that social justice is not being observed anywhere in Pakistan, including Gilgit Baltistan. They were of the view that social justice runs parallel to economic justice. They also claimed that with the presence of Capitalism, economic justice could not be served. One participant added that “Pakistan needs to give us recognition and identity. We are the biggest source of income for Pakistan. The government must at least give us royalty and identity” (Participant 6).

Another issue raised by the teachers of Gilgit Baltistan was that social justice or equal opportunities are not provided to them. Rather, they are served only by the elite class or army officials of Pakistan. “Social justice means people from every school of thought should be given equal status and opportunity in every field of life, and this cannot be seen anywhere in Pakistan” (Participant 9). “Social justice and equality do not exist in Pakistan. This system is only for politicians, armies, and the elite class. The ruling class will never give social justice and equality. Only elite and superior people can get justice. For laymen and other people, justice is far from them. Inequality exists in every field. No one has equal rights in Pakistan” (Participant 10).

Most of the teachers were not satisfied with the status given to Gilgit Baltistan by the Pakistani authorities; they all considered that the issue of the identity of the people of Gilgit Baltistan is the most critical and should be solved on priority bases. “We have wanted to be an autonomous province of Pakistan for more than 70 years. We wanted to be part of Pakistan. Pakistan needs to give us recognition and identity. We are the biggest source of income for Pakistan. The government must at least give us royalty and identity” (Participant 6).

Few participants shared that due to the Kashmir issue, Pakistan will never give Gilgit Baltistan states of the autonomous province, and local people should accept this fact. They also mentioned the economic edge given to the people of Gilgit Baltistan.

“Because of its: Geo-political situation, the Jammu Kashmir disputes that if Pakistan accepts us as the fifth province, they must give up on the Jammu Kashmir stance. So Pakistan can’t accept us as the fifth province or give us equal rights as other provinces. So, we are not expecting this from Pakistan. In my opinion, I am happy with it that we are not a proper part of Pakistan, this is a fact, and we need to accept this. Along with this state, we have benefits as well. We are 60% Pakistani; being disputed, we have some benefits. It is a tax-free zone in Pakistan. We are happy for not being 100% Pakistani” (Participant 7).

Discussion

This research investigated the understanding of Pakistan Studies teachers in Gilgit Baltistan regarding the nature of Pakistani national identity. The findings reflected that teachers were of the view that Pakistan was born out of Islamic ideology. Hence it remained confined to the Islamist concept of national identity. However, the people of Gilgit-Baltistan remained confused regarding their own identity. Dinar (2020) also claimed that to create a homogenous society and secure national interest voices of indigenous people were left unheard.

Teachers were also of the view that although national identity remained confined to Islamist perception, true teachings of Islam were never followed in the country. Instead, Islamist conception gave rise to religious intolerance and religious extremism, which initiated the culture of sectarian violence, specifically in Gilgit Baltistan. (Mishra, 2019; Muhammad & Brett, 2015b, 2017b) also reported that religious intolerance and sectarian violence remained evident mainly because of the

underrepresentation of ethnic and religious diversity in mainstream education. Teachers also expressed their view that since Islam has been used in a political context by governing elites, it has failed to serve as a binding force between different cultures and traditions.

Teachers of Gilgit-Baltistan also expressed their concern regarding the poor condition of social justice, economic equality, and increase in corruption. They also claimed that the situation of Gilgit Baltistan created a bad image of Pakistan around the globe. These findings were kin to previous studies (Dinar, 2020; Mishra, 2019; Rizwan & Nasiruddin, 2018).

Issues of centralization, decentralization and provincial autonomy also remained the key concerns of the teachers of Gilgit Baltistan. Confined with the findings of (Aziz, 2010; Kharl, Abbass, & Oghai, 2018), few teachers were of the view that decentralization could help to solve issues in Gilgit Baltistan. The point was raised that decentralization can better help to engage people in civic and political participation, which directly benefits the local community. As opposed to decentralization, some teachers favored centralization, which encouraged people to work as one nation. The status of accountability, governance, and transparency remained unsatisfactory under local government in Gilgit Baltistan (Bekerman & Zembylas, 2016; Rafique, Rosilawati, & Habib, 2020).

Along with the need for recognition and identity, teachers also mentioned their graveness or reservations regarding the economic inequality they are facing. They claimed that social justice and economic opportunities are only for army officials and other elite classes of Pakistan. The people of Gilgit-Baltistan are badly deprived of such facilities. However, (Kreutzmann, 2015; Zain, 2010) claimed that because of its strategic position and geographic significance, Gilgit Baltistan has profited in terms of infrastructure, trade, and communication as compared to other mountainous reigns in Pakistan.

Participants concluded that the need of the hour is to solve the issue of identity and recognition of Gilgit Baltistan on priority bases as the people of Gilgit Baltistan are not happy with the status given to them by Pakistani authorities. Few demanded provincial autonomy, and some participants were concerned about economic royalties as they consider themselves the biggest source of income for Pakistan. Others were happy that they were not part of Pakistan. (Bouzas, 2017; Holden, 2019; Zain, 2010) claimed that the strategic position of Gilgit Baltistan, geo-political players within and across the borders, and internal and external power structures have created a complex situation that can be dealt with only by initiating government policies that aim to maximize collective decision-making between Gilgit Baltistan and federal units.

Conclusion

With the rising trend of globalization and the construction of CPEC, Pakistan cannot afford to neglect the identity issues of the local community of Gilgit Baltistan. For a progressive Pakistan, a unified, cohesive, and peaceful Gilgit Baltistan is a must that requires a change in the existing power equation. Their services and economic and political rights must be acknowledged to safeguard Pakistan from peripheral interference.

Teachers of the conflict-affected region of Gilgit Baltistan believed that the national identity of Pakistan had been dominated by the Islamist viewpoint. The findings also suggested that there is wide room to accommodate a pluralistic conception of national identity if we want to minimize external threats and maximize internal solidarity. There is a dire need to satisfy their sense of belongingness which in turn can foster their sense of responsibility to serve the interests of the state. Moreover, inculcation of religious tolerance and inclusive policies can help to curtail the “itself” versus “other” syndrome. The education sector and social justice should be improved to reduce events of sectarian violence and religious intolerance.

A strong sense of deprivation that exist within the local community of Gilgit Baltistan highly demands empowerment in decision-making and policy formation. A vantage point to facilitate both federal units and Gilgit Baltistan in terms of geo-political and socio-economic strategies must be devised.

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