

Culture Diversity in Pakistan

Pakistan is a country of over 165 million people with diverse social, ethnic, linguistic and cultural circumstances. The country came into existence after division of British Indian colony in 1947 on the basis of Islamic identity of people living in this region but different social and ethnic groups have maintained their distinct character.

Mostly language is the basis of ethnicity in Pakistan. Punjabi is the predominant ethnic class which consists of 48% of Pakistan's population. Sindhis form about 12%, Siriki (a variant of Punjabi) forms 10%, Urdu speaking (Urdu speaking population usually refers itself as Mohajirs as they migrated from India in 1947) 8%, Balochis 3%, Hindko 2%, Brahui 1% and others 8%.

95% of Pakistan's population is Muslim (75% Sunni Muslims and 20% Shia Muslims). Amongst the remaining 5% Christians are the biggest religious minority who are around 3% of the total population. Other religious groups include Hindus, Sikhs, and Ahmadis.

Pakistan is predominantly a rural society where over 65.5% of population lives in the rural areas. Agriculture is the main employer of the labour force which employs over 43% of the work force. The culture and social norms of Pakistan are defined by the agrarian nature of society.

The relations between men and women are dominated by the demands of agricultural sector and practices. Women in rural areas are economically more active as compared to their urban counterparts. 16.5% rural women are economically active as compared to 7.3% of the urban womenfolk. Women almost entirely manage the dairy and livestock sector in the rural areas of Pakistan.

In rural Punjab the relations between men and women are more open as women play an important role in farming and without their help the farm productivity will drop significantly. Women go out of their homes to work as cotton pickers, fruit harvesters, and livestock farmers. Since men need women's help in agriculture sector therefore they have a greater liberty of movement.

The relations between men and women are undergoing a change in rural Punjab after the return of migrant workers from Middle East who now insist on enforcing strict Wahabi edicts on sex segregation. This change is fuelling extremism as the economic hardships are increasing due to decrease in household incomes.

Rural to urban migration, necessitated by growing poverty, has given rise to a number of female headed households which is a new phenomenon in rural areas of Punjab because traditionally women have always been treated as inferior to men and not involved in decision making.

Muslims of Punjab are either converts from Hinduism or descendants of migrants from Central Asia who have lived with Hindus for centuries therefore the Hindu edict that 'guest is incarnation of god' has a wide acceptability. Guest is treated with honour, respect and delight. Even strangers are offered food and shelter in times of need to please god with expectation that

god will reward with good harvest. Giving long term protection / shelter is generally not a part of culture in Punjab.

Customs relating to marriage, death and festivals are heavily influenced by Hindu traditions. A typical marriage, mourning or festival in Punjab is very similar to the corresponding Hindu occasion less the religious component, e.g. though a marriage ceremony has the same components but a Muslim marriage will have the Nikkah ceremony whereas Hindu marriage will have vows beside fire.

Punjab has a culture of tolerance and friendship which is manifest by its sufi saints and poetry with message of universal love towards mankind irrespective of cast, religion and colour. The leading Punjabi sufi poets, such as Sultan Bahoo, Bulley Shah, Waris Shah and Mian Muhammad are all against the strict religious interpretation of Islam as propagated by Mullah.

Punjab has historically been confronted with foreign invasions from North (Afghanistan and Central Asia) therefore they are quite open to foreigners and are very progressive in their cultural and social values.

Urban Punjab is not much different from rural areas as most of the city dwellers are migrants from villages.

Sindhis are the second biggest ethnic group in Pakistan after Punjabis. In terms of proximity to Hinduism they are even closer than Punjabis. A large number of Pakistani Hindus live in Sind province.

Sindi culture is quite similar to Punjabis where they have great respect towards fellow human beings. Sindh also is the land of great mystics such as Sachal Sarmast, Shah Abdul Latheef Bhitai and Lal Shahbaz Qalandar.

The predominant profession of rural Sindhi population is agriculture. However in contrast to Punjab Sindh has a large number of big landlords who own most of the cultivable land. Majority of people work as landless peasants on lands owned by big landlords. This has given rise to abuse of human rights at the hands of landlords and a culture of oppression of weaker segments of society.

Women in Sindh work in the fields and tender animals like their Punjabi counterparts but are subject to more control by men. They are an object of male and tribal honour. Marriage by choice is still not an option for women whose nuptial affairs are settled by male members of the family. Honour killing, where women are killed for illicit relations with men, is often resorted to restore family and tribal honour.

Sindhis are not as open to foreigners as Punjabis mainly due to limited interactions with foreign cultures. Despite being on the coastline of Arabian Sea, Sind has been invaded only once from the sea. (Arabs led by Muhammad Bin Qasim attacked Sindh in 712 AD).

Modern day Sindh has strong undercurrents of movement of emancipation from the clutches of landlords. The occasional violence seen in Sindh is against the existing distribution of resources. Sindh is safe from the ongoing wave of extremism in Pakistan mainly due to liberal religious views of majority population.

The tolerance and harmony that Muslims and Non Muslims enjoy in Sind is not seen elsewhere in Pakistan.

Major Urban centres in Sind are dominated by the Urdu speaking migrants from India. These are the people who migrated from areas presently in India at the time of partition in 1947. They were the most advanced segment of Pakistani society at the time. They made Karachi (the capital of Pakistan before it was shifted to Islamabad) as their new home. Due to their acumen in trade and business Karachi became the financial capital of Pakistan.

Mohajirs are the most liberal community in Pakistan. Their women folk are the most liberated women in Pakistan. They work in offices, hold executive positions in businesses and banks. Mohajir women are in front ranks of all walks of life including politics, senior management and community service. Mohajirs are represented by their own political party (MQM – Mohajir Qaumi Movement) which is a middle class based political party and has introduced new middle

Urdu – that is the language of Mohajirs – is the national language of Pakistan. The word Urdu literally means the camp language because it was developed in the military camps of Mughal kings of India. Urdu has long been associated with Muslims of India. Despite being the language of a small minority it was declared the National language of Pakistan. This decision caused the first language riots in Pakistan in 1948 in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). Despite this Urdu remains the National Language of Pakistan and is spoken in most households who are aspiring upward social mobility.

Mohajirs consider themselves culturally articulate and have business relations across the world. They are open, frank and friendly towards foreigners. Their social occasions such as marriages and deaths etc are similar to the practices followed elsewhere in Pakistan but are less showy in showing their wealth.

Pushtuns living in the Khyber Pukhtunkhwa (formerly known as the North Western Frontier Province) province trace their roots to Afghanistan. The Pushtuns are bound by their tribal code known as the Pushtun Wali (literally meaning the Pushtun way of life). Pushtun Wali has nine major components i.e. courage, taking revenge, giving shelter, generosity to defeated, self respect, justice, hospitality, tolerance and loyalty.

The capital of Pushtuns of Pakistan, Peshawar is the melting pot of many cultures and civilizations. Peshawar is a city that represents Indian, Afghan, Central Asian and British civilizations at the same time. Pushtuns have produced great poets and mystics like Rahman Baba, Khushaal Khan Khattak and Pir Baba, who have all propagated the message of eternal love and adherence to Pushtun ways of life. Pushtuns are most affected by the rise of extremism in recent years. Peshawar is the centre of global war on terrorism. Thousands of Pushtuns have lost their lives in the war on either side of the extremist divide.

Pushtun women observe the most extreme form of sex segregation. Women are often not allowed in public life and those who move outside their homes are covered from head to toe. Women have limited role in agricultural activities. Their role is limited to work inside their homes. However the export of labour to Middle Eastern countries in the 70s compelled men to move out of their villages and many functions previously performed exclusively by men are now being performed by women. Pushtun women become more influential and independent as they grow older.

Pushtun way of dispute resolution is through a consultative process known as Jirga. Influential people of the community sit in this jirga and decide on the disputes. Often people with wealth, education and experience are all represented in a jirga. One can qualify to sit in jirga either by virtue of age, wealth or education hence this aspect of Pushtun life is quite democratic.

Baluchs live in the Baluchistan province of Pakistan. They have a nomadic culture as barring a few places Baluchistan is a barren area. Water is scarce and the only means of sustenance is sheep and camel rearing. Women and men work alike with herds of sheep and goat.

The area of Baluchs is scarcely populated and they live in small settlements in primitive conditions. The Baluchs, like Pushtuns are proud people who guard their independence jealously. They fought valiantly against the expansion of British Empire however the British ruled Baluchistan through a series of treaties with local rulers.

Baluchs also resolve their disputes through the jirga mechanism but the Baluch jirga is less representative in its constitution as mostly people sit on these jirgas as representatives of their families.

The Baluch society is essentially tribal in nature and every tribe is headed by a Chief. The position of chiefs is hereditary. The tribal chief or Sardar as he is known has control over the resources of his tribe.

Women are economically active but their contribution is not recognized. They do not participate in decision making at the household level. Family and tribal honour is associated with women and any woman who violates the tribal code is punished with death.

Seraiki speaking people are scattered on the border areas of Punjab, Sindh and Kyber – Pukhtoonkwa provinces. They have a tradition of Sufism and are liberal in their social life. These areas are resource rich but most of the land is owned by big landlords in these areas. The southern parts of Punjab that are inhabited by the Seraiki people, produces Pakistan's best mangoes and cotton but the life of ordinary person is difficult.

Due to economic hardships that ordinary people face, the women are economically active and contribute to the household incomes through their work as farm labour and cattle farmers. However like other areas of Pakistan their contribution is hardly acknowledged and they do not have a place in decision making at the household level.