



RESEARCH PAPER

Ethnic Identity, In-Group Cohesion, and Linguistic Resistance: The Baloch-Brahvi Coalition in Mastung and Kalat, Balochistan, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the processes of ethnic identity construction, in-group cohesion, and the symbolic use of language within the Baloch and Brahvi communities in Mastung and Kalat cities of Balochistan, Pakistan. This study looks into how the Baloch and Brahvi communities made up of people from different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds have come together as one group during the fifth insurgency and the political movement of Baloch nationalism. The study focuses on how language can be both a means of communication and a symbol of this unity. This paper draws on Volcan's (2006) Psycho-Dynamic Approach to Social Identity and components from Ashmore et al. (2004)'s Organising Framework for Collective Identity to analyse data from twenty semi-structured ethnographic interviews with both educated and uneducated respondents from two cities, further supported by participant and non-participant observations in schools, markets, and hospitals. The key findings establish that Brahvi's mainly identify as Baloch; that shared cultural practices, historical hardships, and a common perceived rival – the State and Punjabi settlers – constitute the driving force of this inter-group alliance; and that the Brahvi language is now recognised as the most significant marker of in-group affiliation and resistance. The paper argues that educated Baloch are more likely to discriminate against those who are not Baloch than uneducated Baloch, who are more tolerant. The significance of the study is that it looks at the union of both groups in the times of conflicts and how it affects the province's language policy and efforts to make peace.

KEYWORDS

Baloch Nationalism, Ethnic Identity, In-Group Solidarity, Brahvi, Language And Resistance, Balochistan, Collective Identity, Insurgency, Psychodynamic Theory, Pakistan

Introduction

What is Baloch identity and who is a Baloch? These questions are not as simple as they may sound. The province of Balochistan is home to many diverse groups who speak Balochi, Brahvi, Pashto, Persian, Sindhi, and myriad of other languages (Khosa et al., 2005). History exhibits that divisions between these groups have been fluctuating, contentious, and politically charged. The Brahvis, who make up the majority of Mastung and Kalat cities, proudly and assertively identify as Baloch despite speaking a Dravidian language which is completely different from the Balochi language. There have been five insurgencies in the province of Balochistan (Hashmi, 2015). The continuing struggle in Balochistan is the fifth insurgency which started in 1947 with the creation of Pakistan. Ismail (2014), Khan (2012), and Bansal (2008) assert that the primary objection of the community is economic hardship, since they argue that the state has historically neglected Balochistan while using its natural resources. The Baloch nationalists desire to be in charge of and get a bigger share

of the minerals and energy reserves. Rana (2022) and Muzaffar, et al., (2021) believe that the insurgency is majorly headed by the middle-class youngsters. And as per Grare (2013), majority of the population wants more freedom, not a separate state. Nonetheless, the separatist movement has gained momentum by the year 2023 (Shahzadi & Fazail 2023), which has contributed in the growth of culture and identity among Baloch youth (Mroczek, 2014; Muzaffar, et al., 2018). It has made Baloch people more proud of their culture, history, identity and language (Khosa et al., 2025). According to Riffat (2020), it is because of the ongoing conflict that Baloch and Brahvi coalition has gained impetus. This paper studies the reasons and dynamics behind this identification, the influence of the ongoing fifth insurgency in Balochistan in strengthening it, and the results of this identity consolidation for language use and attitudes, specifically in relation to Urdu, the national language of Pakistan, and Punjabi speakers connected to the federal state.

The argument has theoretical significance as it challenges central theories of ethnicity that reflect group identity in shared language, kinship, and culture, at the same time, demonstrating constructivist and instrumentalist viewpoints where identity is constructed strategically in response to political contexts (Brass, 1991; Joireman, 2007). The Baloch-Brahvi grouping analysed in this study illustrates a form of contingent, politically driven identity formation, wherein two linguistically and culturally distinct groups have formed a fused identity built on shared grievances, a mutual history, and a common adversary.

In the subsequent sections this paper brings to light different theories that help in understanding ethnic identity and the ways different groups interact with each other. The following sections discuss the results and give a comparative analyses of the attitudes of educated and uneducated people.

Literature Review

This section focuses on different theories that structure and support the argument relating to Baloch nationalism and the rationale of alliance with other communities due to turmoil in the region.

Theoretical Framework

Constructivist and Instrumentalist Theories of Ethnicity

There are three main groups of theories about ethnicity. Primordialists believe that ethnic identity is derived from bonds of language, culture and shared ancestry that were present before politics, which makes it central and hard to change (Geertz, 1973). On the other hand, Instrumentalist argued that the influential people construct and use ethnic identities for their own political and economic benefit (Brass, 1991; Horowitz, 1985). While, the social constructivists present a more dynamic outlook. According to them, identities are neither fixed nor only proactive; they are continuously created and restructured in relation to growing social, political, and economic settings (Joireman, 2007). The present study's findings, wherein Brahvis claim Baloch identity which is founded on common history, culture and political destiny instead of a shared language – most closely relate to the social constructivist perspective.

Volcan's Psycho-Dynamic Approach to Social Identity

This paper primarily employs Volcan's (2006) Psycho-Dynamic Approach to Social Identity as the theoretical framework for interpreting interview data. Volcan envisions the

ethnic group as a 'large tent' that provides refuge to individuals and fosters a sense of communal security. The tent stays up and individual identities are readily apparent under normal circumstances. When the group is under threat from the outside, nonetheless people put their own identities aside to protect the group's identity. Volcan delineates five essential components of this dynamic: Selected Traumas (collective defeats and humiliations); Chosen Glories (shared achievements and historical pride); Shared Reservoirs or Suitable Targets of Externalisation (cultural objects, symbols, and memories linked to group identity); the Emphasis on Minor differences to establish boundaries with out-groups; and Projection, wherein negative characteristics are attributed to out-groups.

In the Baloch-Brahvi community of Mastung and Kalat, each of these elements can be traced back to real events. The death of Nawab Akbar Bugti, the mysterious disappearances of young Baloch and Brahvi men, and the province's economic marginalisation are all things that have hurt the community. The ancient civilisation of Mehr Ghar, the independent State of Kalat, and the customs of Baloch hospitality come under the category of shared glories. Language, clothing, food, and cultural practices are categorized as shared reservoirs. In the category of maintaining group boundaries, differences from Punjabis and the federal government are emphasised. Lastly, the federal government and its allies are the objects of projection.

Ashmore et al. (2004)'s Organising Framework for Collective Identity

The Organising Framework for Collective Identity by Ashmore et al. (2004) adds to Volcan's work by giving a more detailed picture of how people connect with their ethnic group. The framework proposes self-categorization—the process of identifying oneself within a specific group—as the fundamental act of collective identity. It also stresses the importance of attachment and feeling interdependent, which includes feeling like you share a common fate, being emotionally committed to the group, and acting in ways that shows one as member of the group. As Giles (1997) and Gumperz (1982) point out, language is an important tool for this kind of behaviour: by choosing their words carefully, people show their loyalty to a group and gain acceptance in it.

Material and Methods

This paper employs the qualitative component of mixed-methods study. Twenty semi-structured ethnographic interviews were carried out with educated and uneducated participants from Mastung and Kalat—ten from each city, ensuring equal representation of educated and uneducated respondents and both genders. The interview questions included a main set of questions about ethnic identity, language use, feelings toward Punjabi and Urdu speakers, and opinions on the state of politics in Balochistan. It also had open-ended probing questions. Interviews were conducted in Brahvi and Urdu based on participant preference, and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participant observation was conducted in educational institutions, while non-participant observation took place in markets and a local hospital in Mastung city.

The researcher's belonging to the target community constituted a substantial methodological advantage, building trust and providing access to open and honest answers on politically sensitive issues. A significant methodological observation is that during first visits to schools, participants switched to Urdu, perceiving the researcher as an outsider; upon the establishment of the researcher's proficiency in Brahvi, participants promptly transitioned to Brahvi, demonstrating a language as a determinant of in-group boundaries. Thematic analysis was used on interview transcripts, informed by the frameworks of Volcan (2006) and Ashmore et al. (2004)

Results and Discussion

Self-Categorisation: The Brahvi as Baloch

The most consistent result from all the interviews was that Brahvi participants clearly identified themselves as Baloch. When asked about their ethnic identity, participants repeatedly identified as Baloch rather than Brahvi, often contesting the difference between the two communities as artificially constructed. As one person said:

No I don't think so. Baloch nation and Balochistan has a long history. People have tried to bring in differences by saying that Brahvi and Baloch are two different ethnic groups so to destroy the unity of Baloch nation. Baloch have always been there, have always been united. If we travel outside the province we never portray that somebody is a Shawani, Zehri or Lehri, we simply say that somebody is a Baloch. We prefer to have a Baloch identity.

The response demonstrates how Ashmore et al. (2004) elaborate the concept of self-categorization. According to them, people don't prefer to be part of a group based on language, but prefer a shared history and political cohesion. Some participants went on to say that the Brahvi-Baloch distinction itself was a division orchestrated by the state or colonial powers to weaken both the groups. This shows Volcan's "projection" dynamic, where distinctions within the group are negated and the out-group is held responsible for the division.

Chosen Traumas and Glories as Unifying Forces

The interview participants constantly mentioned both historical successes and present adverse events as the foundation for the Baloch-Brahvi relationship. The Brahvis from Kalat, which once was Brahvi-speaking princely state, discussed about the age-long practice of Baloch-Brahvi- joint rule. One of the participant explicitly mentioned a Brahvi ruler, Khan Mehrab Khan who was killed by the British, as a common hero:

Since the time of Khans this race of Brahvis have rendered sacrifices for Balochistan, they fought the British, Khan Mehrab Khan fought the British and received martyrdom, not all Khans were freedom fighters some worked for the British government as well.

In terms of traumas, the disappearances of youth Brahvi men during the insurgency were often mentioned as a common complaint that strengthens the alliance:

No I don't think it's the case. Baloch identity has always been there even before this; the Brahvis together with Baloch have suffered and are still suffering. The Brahvi youth has rendered sacrifices for the Baloch cause and today there are so many Brahvi young lads who have been taken away by security agencies.

Volcan calls the repeated call for shared sacrifice a "chosen trauma." This is a group memory of suffering that brings people together and at the same time points to the federal government and its security forces as the ones responsible.

Culture, Not Language, as the Primary Identity Marker

A significant and theoretically relevant discovery is that language does not serve as the principal identity marker for the Baloch of Mastung and Kalat. Even though the Baloch community speaks many different languages, such as Balochi, Brahvi, Persian, and Pashto, participants always said that culture, customs, clothes, and hospitality were the most

important parts of being Baloch. When asked if language was necessary to be Baloch, the people were clear:

No it's not only the language; Baloch nation has its customs, traditions and culture. By only speaking Balochi does not make someone a Baloch.

Yes we all have the same dress, be it any Baloch from Jahlawan, Makran or any other area, albeit they speak variety of languages Balochi, Brahvi and Seraiki.

This finding supports the social constructivist view that identity is based on shared cultural practices and political solidarity, not on primordialist linguistic meaning. It also explains why many participants said they wanted to learn Balochi: they knew that most people in the community speak Brahvi instead of Balochi, but they saw Balochi as a significant cultural asset that should be learned and kept alive, not as a requirement for joining the group.

The Out-Group and the Projection of Negative Images

Throughout the interviews, the Punjabi community and the federal government always appeared as out-groups subjected to negative stereotypes and animosities. The exit of Punjabi settlers after targeted killings was articulated without direct denunciation, yet distinctly portrayed these settlers as embodiments of an oppressive external authority. One participant expressed the prevalent sentiment regarding the Baloch as politically forsaken by their own representatives:

We have to see what kind of Baloch people have been there in the government – those who have been patronized by the Pakistani government. They have worked for their own interest, not for the interest of Baloch nation.

This depiction of deception and involvement onto Baloch political figures linked to the government illustrates the efficacy of in-group policing: individuals who cooperate with the out-group are figuratively ostracised from the community. By expressing loyalty as dissent and coexistence as treason, this mechanism strengthens group unity.

Educated vs. Uneducated: Differential Levels of Discrimination

One of the most important comparative results of the study is that educated people showed more bias toward their own group and less toward other groups than uneducated people. Respondents with less education were more likely to show tolerance for Urdu and its speakers, more likely to say they used Urdu in informal settings like with friends, and less likely to talk about the ethnic conflict in political terms. Some of the uneducated people who took part said they were sorry that Punjabi settlers had to leave because of the violence.

This finding conform with Volcan's framework. He believed, that higher learning introduces individuals to more nuanced ideological discourses involving ethnic disputes, history politics, and identity politics, which deepens in-group devotion and out-group bias. Participants without formal education, whose social relations are commonly localised and barely determined by national political debate, showed more practical and tolerant attitudes. The older generation in each group demonstrated greater tolerance, expressing regret for the acts of violence and dislocation of multi-ethnic coexistence that previously occurred.

Discussion

The findings of this research explicate the construction of ethnic identity as a politically influenced and a fluid phenomenon. The Baloch-Brahvi coalition in Mastung and Kalat does not indicate inherent cultural harmony; rather, it signifies an alliance created in response to a seeming common threat and preserved through shared cultural practices, historical events, and political discontent. The framework presented by Volcan, which emphasized on chosen traumas, projection, and the tent-like part of group identity when it is under threat, provides a solid understanding of this event.

Ashmore et al.'s emphasis on language as a component of behavioural engagement explains why Brahvi, rather than Balochi, has emerged as a daily language of in-group solidarity: it is the most widely language used, and its usage functions as an available and daily marker of belonging.

The finding that educated Baloch show greater discrimination as compared to their uneducated fellows challenge positive perspective on education as a driver of inter-ethnic tolerance. In the backdrop of a politically active nationalist campaign, education appears to function as an outlet for the propagation of ideological narratives that strengthen in-group boundaries rather than erode them. This has effects on educational policies: curricula and teaching methods that show a more encompassing and historically diverse view of Pakistani and Baloch culture may help people of different ethnicities understand each other better than those that either ignore Baloch complaints or push nationalist stories that are not true.

Conclusion

This paper studies the creation and strengthening of Baloch-Brahvi ethnic identity in Mastung and Kalat the conflict prone areas of the region, using social identity theory along with ethnographic data from interviews. The research demonstrates that the Baloch-Brahvi alliance is a politically constructed solidarity formed by means of shared traumas, cultural practices, and a mutual opponent, rather than a common language. Brahvi language has become the symbolical and practical medium of this camaraderie, taking over Urdu and working as a daily manifestation of identity and resistance.

The findings present a number of suggestions. In addition to its economic facets, cultural and identity-based aspects of the conflict must be addressed with Baloch nationalist groups. Schools should teach about the history of the region and the culture of the Baloch people in a way that doesn't damage the unique identity of the communities in the province. Confidence-building measures, including the promotion of native language media, the translation of literary texts, and the formal acknowledgement of Brahvi and Balochi in educational policy, could start the rebuilding of confidence between the Baloch population and the Pakistani state. Lastly, the finding that older individuals and less literate Baloch people are more accepting of persons from other ethnic groups shows that efforts to develop peace at the community level may work better than political talks that have not worked so far.

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