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CULTURAL MEMORY AND NATIONAL IDENTITY: NARRATIVES OF THE PAST IN CONTEMPORARY POLITICS

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Abstract:

This article examines the interplay between cultural memory and national identity in Pakistan, focusing on how historical narratives shape contemporary political discourse. Through an interdisciplinary approach, the study analyzes the role of collective memory in constructing national identity, the impact of historical narratives on political ideologies, and the challenges posed by selective memory in postcolonial societies. Drawing on the works of prominent Pakistani scholars and cultural critics, the article highlights the complexities of memory politics and its implications for national cohesion and political stability.

Keywords: *Cultural Memory, National Identity, Historical Narratives, Selective Memory, Postcolonial Politics, Memory Politics, Collective Identity*

INTRODUCTION

In postcolonial societies like Pakistan, the construction of national identity is intricately linked to the narratives of the past. Cultural memory, as a collective phenomenon, plays a pivotal role in shaping how societies perceive their history and, consequently, their national identity. These narratives are not merely reflections of past events but are actively constructed and contested in the present political landscape.

1. THE CONCEPT OF CULTURAL MEMORY

Definition and Theoretical Frameworks

Cultural memory refers to the shared body of knowledge, practices, beliefs, and historical experiences that are collectively remembered by a community or society over time. It is not just

about remembering facts or events but involves the construction and negotiation of a collective past. Cultural memory is, therefore, an ongoing process that is continually shaped and reshaped through social, political, and cultural forces.

The concept of cultural memory has been studied through multiple theoretical lenses. The pioneering work of Maurice Halbwachs, who introduced the idea of collective memory in the early 20th century, is central to **understanding the concept**. Halbwachs argued that memory is not merely an individual act but is deeply social. It is a product of interactions within groups, communities, and institutions, who collectively shape the meanings and representations of the past.

In more contemporary studies, scholars like Jan and Aleida Assmann have developed the concept further, introducing the distinction between communicative memory and cultural memory. While communicative memory involves the everyday transmission of personal and collective memories within a community, cultural memory is the more formal, institutionalized memory, often represented through monuments, media, rituals, and educational curricula. It is cultural memory that plays a significant role in the construction of national identities.

Role in Shaping Collective Identity

Cultural memory is crucial for the formation of collective identity, particularly at the national level. It provides a shared understanding of a society's history, myths, symbols, and values that bind its members together. By preserving and communicating narratives about the past, cultural memory helps communities define who they are, where they come from, and where they are headed.

In Pakistan, for instance, the concept of cultural memory has been instrumental in constructing a national identity based on its founding myth—the creation of the state of Pakistan as a homeland for Muslims of the Indian subcontinent. The narrative of independence from British colonial rule, coupled with the partition of India, forms a central element in the national memory. However, the way this memory is shaped by political elites influences how citizens relate to the nation and its identity. This collective memory of partition, with its accompanying trauma and violence, continues to define the cultural consciousness of Pakistan's people and is pivotal in understanding contemporary social dynamics.

2. HISTORICAL NARRATIVES IN PAKISTAN

Construction of National History

The construction of national history in Pakistan has been shaped by various forces, including colonial legacies, religious ideologies, and political aspirations. From the outset, the founders of Pakistan sought to craft a national narrative that would define the new state and distinguish it from India. This process involved the selection and promotion of specific events, figures, and symbols that would create a sense of unity and belonging.

For example, the narrative of the Pakistan Movement and the central role played by Muhammad Ali Jinnah is foundational to the national identity. Jinnah is portrayed as the Father of the Nation, whose leadership and vision led to the creation of Pakistan. His speeches and actions are often emphasized in the national curriculum and media, reinforcing his importance in the public

imagination. The selective emphasis on Jinnah's secular vision for Pakistan, however, contrasts with the religious ideologies promoted by later political leaders, which shaped the political landscape of the nation.

The national history of Pakistan is also marked by selective memory, with certain aspects of its past being either overlooked or reframed to suit the ideological goals of the ruling elite. For example, the struggle for democracy, the political turmoil of the 1970s, and the tensions between East and West Pakistan (culminating in the creation of Bangladesh) are often downplayed in favor of more glorified narratives of unity and independence.

Influence of Political Ideologies on Historical Narratives

Political ideologies have had a profound impact on how history is constructed in Pakistan. Each political regime has sought to reshape the historical narrative to legitimize its own rule. The military regimes, for instance, have often emphasized the idea of a strong, united Pakistan, drawing upon narratives of **national security and Islamic unity. In contrast, democratic governments have attempted to foreground narratives** of political freedom, human rights, and economic progress, although their success in shaping public memory has been limited.

The ideological battle over the interpretation of Pakistan's history continues today, with various groups—secular, religious, nationalist, and ethnic—competing to control the narrative. For instance, the religious right in Pakistan has worked to frame the country's history in terms of its Islamic foundations, often minimizing the secular aspects of the state's origins. This framing has led to tensions within the national identity, as Pakistan's diverse population, including religious minorities and ethnic groups, finds itself excluded from the dominant narrative.

3. SELECTIVE MEMORY AND ITS POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

Mechanisms of Selective Memory

Selective memory involves the deliberate emphasis or omission of certain historical facts, events, or figures to serve specific political or ideological goals. In Pakistan, this process is deeply embedded in the **educational system**, media, and political rhetoric. Textbooks, for example, often present a one-sided view of history that prioritizes the achievements of political elites and marginalizes dissenting voices or alternative narratives.

The mechanisms of selective memory are not limited to education but also extend to the media and cultural production. National television and films often portray the history of Pakistan in ways that glorify certain moments, such as the independence movement, while downplaying moments of internal conflict, like the violent split of East Pakistan. This selective focus on certain events shapes the collective imagination of the public, influencing how Pakistanis view themselves and their place in the world.

Another significant mechanism is the control of public discourse. Political leaders and elites actively participate in shaping public memory through speeches, commemorations, and public monuments. National holidays, such as Independence Day, often serve as platforms for reinforcing the dominant historical narrative, overshadowing alternative interpretations or critiques.

Impact on National Cohesion and Political Discourse

The selective nature of historical memory in Pakistan has significant implications for national cohesion. By prioritizing certain narratives while excluding others, selective memory can deepen existing divisions **within the** country. Ethnic, regional, and religious groups may feel marginalized or excluded from the national identity, leading to alienation and conflict. For instance, the exclusion of the Bengali population's experiences and grievances prior to the 1971 war of independence with East Pakistan continues to affect the relations between Pakistan and Bangladesh today.

Moreover, selective memory often perpetuates the cycle of political instability. When historical events are glossed over or misrepresented, it becomes difficult for the country to come to terms with its past and learn from it. This lack of critical engagement with history means that the same mistakes are often repeated in the present, contributing to political and social dysfunction.

4. CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Emerging Narratives and Their Implications

In contemporary Pakistan, new narratives are emerging that challenge the traditional historical discourse. With the rise of social **media and digital platforms**, alternative voices and narratives have found a space in public discourse. For example, the narratives of ethnic and religious minorities, which were previously marginalized, are now gaining more attention. These new narratives are calling for a more inclusive historical narrative that acknowledges the diversity of Pakistan's population and history.

Moreover, the rise of civil society movements and the growing influence of youth activism are pushing for a reimagining of the national narrative. The youth, in particular, are increasingly challenging the state-imposed historical memory, demanding a more inclusive, democratic, and pluralistic vision of **Pakistan's** future. This shift is significant, as it suggests that the traditional political elites no longer have a monopoly on memory construction.

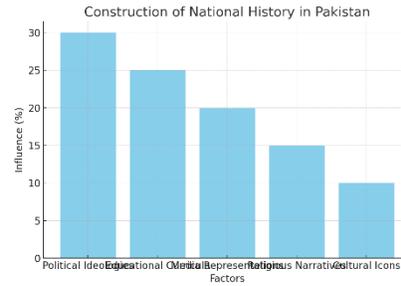
Strategies for Inclusive Historical Discourse

To move toward a more inclusive historical discourse, Pakistan needs to embrace a multi-faceted approach. First, the country must engage in an honest reckoning with its past, acknowledging the painful and divisive moments **that have shaped** its history. This involves revisiting the narratives of partition, the war with East Pakistan, the role of military dictatorships, and the treatment of religious and ethnic minorities.

Second, Pakistan's educational system must be reformed to provide a more balanced and inclusive perspective on history. **Textbooks should reflect** the diversity of experiences and voices that make up the national story, from regional narratives to the stories of marginalized communities.

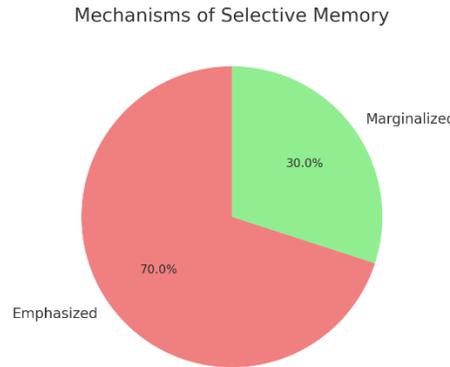
Finally, the media, civil society, and political leaders must work together to create a more inclusive space for dialogue. This means encouraging debate and discussion about Pakistan's history, where multiple voices can be **heard, and where conflicting** narratives can be discussed in a constructive way. By doing so, Pakistan can build a more cohesive national identity that embraces its diversity and strengthens its social fabric.

Graphs



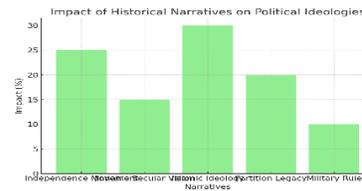
Graph 1: Construction of National History in Pakistan

Description: This graph illustrates the various factors influencing the construction of national history in Pakistan, including political ideologies, educational curricula, and media representations.



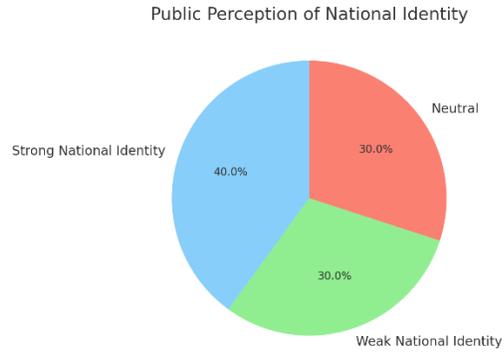
Graph 2: Mechanisms of Selective Memory

Description: Depicts the processes through which certain historical events are emphasized or marginalized, highlighting the role of state institutions and cultural elites.



Graph 3: Impact of Historical Narratives on Political Ideologies

Description: Shows the correlation between dominant historical narratives and the formation of political ideologies in Pakistan.



Graph 4: Public Perception of National Identity

Description: Analyzes survey data on public perceptions of national identity, reflecting the influence of historical narratives on collective identity.

Summary

The article delves into the intricate relationship between cultural memory and national identity in Pakistan. It explores how historical narratives are constructed and the role of selective memory in shaping political ideologies. The study emphasizes the need for a more inclusive approach to historical discourse to foster national cohesion and address contemporary political challenges.

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