

Partition, Migration and a ‘New Class’ in Pakistan: 1947-1958

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Abstract

In 1947 Pakistan was carved out of India. The creation of Pakistan had a long invisible history and short and fast paced visible history. Both these historical forces helped the separatist Muslim leadership in India to realise Pakistan. After the creation of Pakistan the Muslim refugees went to their cherish homeland in large numbers. Most of them were socially forward and economically stable. This class helped the new state to have a strong foundational base in all the state controlled and private sectors including bureaucracy and military. But the Punjabi ethnicity native to Pakistan, which is also Muslim, started to develop a sense of despair and difference towards them, though in crucial military and bureaucracy they played an equally dominating role in tandem. This reality started to evolve since early 1950s and up to the first military takeover in 1958. It continued thereafter, but variegated regional and ethnic issues started to begin.

The ethnic fissures threatening the unity and integrity of Pakistan in the current times have deep-rooted origins in its formative years, meriting an in-depth analysis of its ethno-political history.

The aim of this paper is to analyse the course of first ten years of Pakistan in order to understand its ethno-political dynamics. By looking into its history with the help of secondary sources available on Pakistan, this paper attempts to facilitate greater understanding of Pakistan as a state and thereby indicating avenues to address its strife.

Keywords: Muslim, Mohajir, Karachi, Punjabi, Bengali, Democracy and Military

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“Each constructs a historical narrative that traces the unbroken lineage of a group – a nation – over time. Each endows the site of the nation’s birth or greatest cultural or political moment with special meaning.” - James L. Gelvin¹

Introduction

The Urdu speaking Muslims were at the forefront of the Muslim separatism in undivided India. They embraced the Two Nation Theory, the bedrock of the idea of Pakistan. When Pakistan was realised they provided the talent, human resource and other forms of social infrastructure to build up the nascent state from a scratch. Unfortunately their demographic weaknesses and as exclusivist existence coupled with tremendous failure to erect a democratic –constitutionalist political architecture in the country resulted in shrinking the prestigious and powerful space occupied by the Mohajir within a decade after the creation of Pakistan in 1947. The rise of this community, though highly diverse, is long but the process of isolation for them had started within few years and it took a definite shape with the demise of the veneer of parliamentary politics from the nascent state in 1950s.

In this article I will try to search and thereby draw the trajectory of the rise of Urdu speaking Mohajir in undivided India and their keynote association with the political course of Muslim separatism. After the harvesting of the ultimate product of Muslim separatism in India, the independent Pakistan, they in droves went to their ‘dreamland’ to build up a new state. In the newly created state, in the era of decolonization after the Second World War, the Mohajir played a very constructive role to lay the foundation of the state. This was possible due to their advancement in modern education and political training since the late 19th century. But steadily a reverse process started to unfold. Within a decade this reverse process of marginalization of the Mohajir had taken a definite shape. In this presentation a discussion will be undertaken to understand the evolution of this group identity in a historical perspective at the outset with special reference to the etymology of the very word – Mohajir.

The origin of the word ‘Mohajir’ is found in the Arabic ‘Hijrat’ which implies the plight of Prophet Mohammad and his band of followers from Mecca to Medina in 622 A.D (Talbot, 2008) to take refuge against the full-throated threat to their life and mission from the adverse forces. With the steady spread of Islam from the Arabian peninsula to east, west and north the word ‘Mohajir’ is

used to describe any popular migration for the greater cause of Islamic religion and community. In colonial India when a pose of rabidly anti-British Muslims went to Afghanistan to settle in the land of religion (Darul Islam) instead of the land of infidelity (Darul Harb) the migrants had been termed as the Mohajir.

Again as a direct consequence of the historic partition of the Indian subcontinent into two separate dominions, India and Pakistan, nearly seven million Muslims went to the latter dominion from the earlier to settle and live. They are called Mohajir.

More than two-third of these Muslim refugees were Punjabis by language and came from towns and villages of east Punjab and surrounding states and started to settle across the west Punjab. Due to common language and culture these Punjabi Muslim refugees got easily assimilated with the local population. The socio-political identity of this segment of the refugee population eventually became associated with the local Punjabis and they discontinued their claim as Mohajirs (Talbot, 2008). Though a tiny community of Urdu speaking immigrants settled in west Punjab. Instead of maintaining a separate Urdu based identity they assimilated themselves within the Punjabi society. The centuries old tradition of Lahore based Urdu literature and music played a major role in this aspect. But in the Sindh province the remaining chunk of the refugee population settled. They were completely distinct from the native Sindhis. The huge proportion of the immigrants who settled in major cities and towns of the province were the Urdu speaking Muslims (Cohen, 2004) from Delhi, United Provinces (present Uttar Pradesh), Central Provinces (present Madhya Pradesh), Bihar, Hyderabad and various princely states of Rajputana belt. Except them there were also Gujrati and Maharashtrian Muslims who came to settle in Sindh. Nearly the entire refugee population was concentrated in The effect of the immigration was so vast that the population of Karachi metropolis was doubled within few years in spite of exodus of lakhs of Hindus urban areas . The other major urban centres of Sindh like Hyderabad, Sukkur and Nawabshah also emerged as multi-cultural refugee dominated congregations and the Urdu speaking Muslims became substantial minority in those towns. In the first census (Ahmed, 1999) of Pakistan, held in 1951, it was revealed that the refugees became a dominant community in all the cities and towns. In Karachi alone they accounted for 55 per cent of the total population. This huge and intense settlement, dotting across the province, created a new environment in urban centres which led to the development of an exclusive identity separate from the rural Sindh where the local Sindhis dominated.

The isolated existence of the Mohajir in a new state for which they left their centuries old homestead and cultural roots in India created a sense of aggregate pride and they steadily continued to call themselves 'Mohajir' in Pakistan. The Mohajir in Pakistan were a conglomerate of different languages, cultures and even races. But within a couple of years their immigrant status and the adoption of the Urdu language became the two strong centripetal forces within the group to evolve a distinct Mohajir identity. Though more than sixty years have passed since the inception of Pakistan and nearly four successive generations of the original immigrants have lived in Pakistan, this group still insists on identifying themselves as Mohajir. This sort of continuation of artificial identity manifests not only an incomprehensible paradox but also a grave irony for both the Mohajir and the Pakistani state.

History Behind and Culmination

The Urdu speaking Muslims of north, central and south India were the descendents of the Turkic, Persian and Arabian settlers in significant numbers who came to India since the Arab-Islamic conquest of Sindh in 8th century and foundation of Muslim rule in India in 13th century. However there were also some Hindus who converted to Islam during the long Muslim rule. The common bond of religion across the Indian subcontinent, especially in north India and Deccan region where a distinct Indo-Persian language (i.e. Urdu) developed in those regions which heralded the genesis of the Indo-Persian culture based on Urdu language, literature and music. The feudal remnants and semi-feudal elements of the mentioned regions of pre-colonial India had always considered themselves as an exclusive community within the greater Indian society. Likewise the Hindus and Muslims developed themselves as separate communities in spite of close interaction between the two. Though there were several attempts at different points of late medieval and modern periods of Indian history for mutual assimilation and confluence. From the 18th century the weakening of the grand Mughal rule, spurt in inter-nobility and intra-nobility power conflicts, devastating invasions from neighbouring Persia and Afghan land and open rebellions by both Muslim and Hindu feudatories at the subah (province) levels attacked and shocked the prestige of the Urdu speaking/Hindustani Muslim nobility. In response the Islamic revivalism and consequential Muslim separatism became the religious-political shelter of the Muslims. The north India, where the Delhi-centered Sultans and Mughals, the Nawabs of Awadh, Oudh, etc. ruled for centuries, became the birthplace of the community-centric politics of the Muslims in the colonial period.

Successively the towering personalities like Shah Waliullah (c.1703-1762) in the 18th century and Shah Ahmed Barelvi (c. 1786-1831) in the next appeared in the scene. Shah Waliullah was the first exponent of the liberal intellectual movement with an aim to reform the Islamic religion in terms of the interpretation of its scriptures (Ahmed, 1987). Shah Ahmed Barelvi was radically different. He was an orthodox Muslim and raised an Islamic militia to occupy the Sikh –controlled areas of the traditional Pashtun territories.

The Mughal empire came to an end in 1857 and after that the Britishers had also weakened the power and prestige of the other Nawabs. For the next few decades the Muslim nobility in north India passed through a very critical phase. With the growth of modern cities and the emergence of class of absentee landlords the Muslim nobility started to become city dwellers.

Unlike the Hindu upper castes they followed an obscurantist policy regarding the acceptance of English education. Seemingly exceptional in midst of such a regressive environment Sir Syed Ahmed Khan (c.1817-1898) emerged as the pioneer of modern education among the Muslims (Panikkar, 1947). He established the Mohammedan Anglo-Oriental College (the Aligarh Muslim University) at Aligarh in 1875 to spread English education and modern ideas among the Muslims. The Aligarh institution became a fertile field in producing educated Muslim youths, eligible for government jobs. The Aligarh educated Muslims gave stiff competition to the Hindus in the employment sector. Most of the admitted students of this institution were Urdu speaking Muslims of north India. They initiated the modernization of the Muslims of the subcontinent. A piece of statistics could prove the advantageous position of the north Indian Muslims in early 20th century.

According to the 1911 census report (Ahmed, 1999), the Muslims formed 14.1 per cent of the total population of the United Provinces. But they hold 41.3 per cent of the higher executive jobs and 24.8 per cent in the judicial service. From the late 19th century the introduction of local self-government and the adoption of representative principle resulted in a grave apprehension among the UP Muslims. The minority Muslims became afraid of being drowned in the huge Hindu majority in the electoral politics. As a consequence the Muslim League was established by the Urdu speaking Muslim elite in 1906 at Dhaka (in undivided Bengal) and it put forward the demand of separate communal electorate for the Muslims. In this regard the Muslim League under the leadership of Aga Khan gave a memorandum to the then Viceroy Lord Curzon to press for the separate electorate demand. The Morley-Minto Reforms (1909) conceded this demand. The

Muslim elite, first apprehended and then realized an exclusivist order, emerged as a counter-weight to the incipient nationalist movement led by the educated Hindu elite. The Muslims of UP being gloriously armed with rich history, distinct assimilative culture, educational advancement and strong exclusivist assertion, emerged as the vanguard of pan-Indian Muslim movement. The Muslim politics became dominated by the Urdu speaking Muslims of north India. Due to their overwhelming control over the entire Muslim politics the Congress party gave 50 per cent of the UP assembly seats despite being only 14.1 per cent of the total population, in the Lucknow Pact (1916). Gradually the movement started to take roots in Muslim majority provinces like Bengal, Punjab, etc. and the League emerged as a national party in 1930s. At the same time the Muslims were also able to get job quotas in public services and electoral units.

The whole-hearted support of Muslim from all the provinces of British India played the highest contributory role to realize Pakistan as the separate homeland for themselves in 1947. But the essential ideology and leadership had been provided by the Urdu speaking Muslims. The leaders like Liaqat Ali Khan, Chaudhury Khaliqzaman, etc. played very striking roles beside Mohammad Ali Jinnah in the Pakistan movement. The nomination of Liaqat Ali Khan as the Finance member of the Interim National government in 1946-47 and as the first premier of the newly created Pakistan bore testimony of the importance of Urdu speaking Muslims in the Pakistan movement.

A New State and New Journey

When Pakistan was ultimately realized after long series of tripartite negotiations among the Britishers, Congress and Muslim League in August, 1947, the Urdu speaking Muslims decided to immigrate to the new state. Most of the emigrants were educated, urban and middle class. They took a deliberate decision to settle in the state for which they initiated an all-round movement and when they would live as respectful majority. They came to and settled in Sindh from different regions of India but most of them spoke Urdu and had significant degree of homogeneity regarding cultural trait and political belief. On the basis of these two important characteristics the Urdu speaking Mohajir community established itself as a single community within Pakistan. Their socio-occupational homogeneity also contributed to their communitarian consolidation. In the 1951 census of Pakistan it was revealed that the Mohajir community is largely engaged in

secondary and tertiary occupations. About 80 per cent of them were classified as managerial, clerical and other high skilled job holders (Ahmed, 1999). This community, as statistics manifests, is basically an educated middle class. Though there many sub-strata within the middle class. The non-managerial and semi-skilled job holders within the said community had to face greater hardship than others due to the partition. The industrial workers among the Mohajir also faced same kind of economic difficulty. Fortunately the ready availability of educational facilities, government, semi-government and private jobs helped the entire pyramid of the middle class dominated Mohajir community in Pakistan. The Mohajir community remained a typical salaried one. They did not produce any industrial tycoons or financial magnets in the opening years of Pakistan. They relied singularly on education and modern skill to sustain. Thereby they cultivated middle class values and nurtured the same aspirations in a post-colonial society.

The best educated Mohajir settled in and around the Karachi metropolis due to obvious facilities of being the national capital, only seaport and financial hub, offered by the city simultaneously. The lower middle class refugees settled in other towns of Sindh.

The exodus of Urdu speakers from India and the settlement in urban Sindh drastically altered the demographic scenario of not only Sindh but also of Pakistan. The numerical domination of the Sindhis had markedly receded due to them. In the highly rural Pakistan with a strong feudal structure and culture the Mohajir were distinct and matchless. They had an aggressive self-confidence for their skills and an assertive pride for heavy sacrifice for the cause of Pakistan. They had a disproportionate representation in the the civil bureaucracy and urban professional class. They produced powerful bureaucrats who knew the basics of administration and huge pool of teachers, doctors, writers, cultural activists, journalists, etc. to develop the new state. The continuance of colonial structure and values in the state and other sectors, the Mohajir with a good knowledge of English language and long experience in political struggle, came out as the builders of the new state. In the initial period they did not have to face any substantial competition from other ethnic groups in middle class jobs. The Sindhi Muslims were largely rural and less educated. They were in a poor position to throw any challenge to the urbanised and educated Mohajir. The Sindhi Muslims were engaged in primary and other unskilled activities.

Emergence of a ‘New Class

From the outset the Mohajir were very conscious about their group identity. They were proud Pakistanis for their glorious role and sacrifice for the birth of the state. They were also ‘Mohajir’ because of their immigrant and non-native status. They fiercely upheld this identity due to their distinct position as an urban and educated community vis-à-vis the Punjabis, Sindhis, Baloch, Pathans, Makranis, etc. From the post 1947 they equated their old Muslim identity with the broader Pakistani one because they were no more minority in the ‘Muslim homeland’ as they were in north India and Deccan. Thus, they were really a unique community in Pakistan with their immigration, education and urban character. They were highly politicized group. They possessed a long history of political struggle and democratic participation. Along with the Bengali Muslims they were most vocal segment of the Indian Muslims to demand for the separate Pakistan.

After the creation of Pakistan they offered the talent, skill, capital and other forms of social infrastructure to build up the nascent state. On the other hand, the Muslim League leadership and the government were extremely sympathetic for the loss of home and livelihood in India. The work of refugee rehabilitation was taken as a high priority and within few years the work had been made complete. The heavy representation of the Mohajir in party, political executive and civil bureaucracy had enabled the gargantuan task to be realised within a short span. The local population was also very sympathetic and affable toward them due to shared religious faith and common loyalty for the new state. With all positive factors being on their side the Mohajir developed a sense of superiority and speciality in multi-ethnic Pakistan. In the initial period this feature did not become a bone of contention between Mohajir and non-Mohajir due the prevalence of a national euphoria around the new state and its process of establishment. The euphoria got quickly transformed into a national concern due to several factors, viz, outbreak of war with India and death of M.A. Jinnah in 1948 and assassination of Liaqat Ali Khan in 1951. Both the deceased leaders were Mohajir though Jinnah was Gujrati speaking.

In the multi-ethnic Pakistan the Mohajir community reposed their group identity solely on their religious belief. The Urdu speaking Muslims played a pivotal role in the consolidation of Muslim rule in India and the realization of separate Pakistan bifurcating the Indian subcontinent. Their construction of group identity reflected their historical legacy and psychological traits. Their

ancestors came from Persia, Turan and Arabia and formed the Sultanic and Mughal aristocracies. They ruled the vast Indian Territory for nearly six centuries. They produced an influential Indo-Persian culture combining architectural wonders (Taj Mahal, Red Fort, etc.), classical and semi – classical music (khayal, ghazal, etc.), classical dance (kathak), calligraphy and a language (Urdu/Hindustani). Moreover, they established the ‘national monarchy’²¹⁰ in the Indian subcontinent from the sixteenth century which laid the foundation of immediate pre-colonial outline of the Indian subcontinent with sustainable military power, land relations and Hindu-Muslim cooperation. Above all they ruled for centuries such a vast country like India where they were minority, and the Hindus were an ancient majority with a deep-rooted civilization going back to the Indus Valley civilization. Due to all these legacies the Mohajir had inherited a kind of superiority complex for which they looked down upon the Muslims of other parts of the subcontinent. They always evaluated the Sindhi and Punjabi Muslims as inferior lesser Muslims due to their history of significant conversion from Hindu, Buddhist and other ancient faiths to Islam and adherence to the Sufi-generated syncretic and folkish kind of Islam which was more tolerant and pluralist than that of Islam followed by the Urdu speakers which was more influenced by puritanical teachings of Ulema belonging to different conservative schools like Deoband of UP. This was also an important factor for regarding themselves as a distinct community in Pakistan.

Again, their self-acclaimed group superiority also contributed in regarding Urdu as the national language of Pakistan without paying any heed to the sensitivities of other linguistic groups. They thought Urdu could be the only state language in Pakistan due to birth and development among the Muslim aristocratic and military classes of north India and Deccan. On the other hand their centuries old existence as a minority dominated by the Hindus in the colonial period created a superior mentality. Such a historical mixture had given the Mohajir a typical sense of exclusivist mentality which automatically provided the strength of concretising group solidarity and accentuating the scope for conflicts with other groups. Except these features the Mohajir also had a relatively developed sense of ‘electoral and agitational politics’ (Das, 2001) and cultural consciousness. It was due to their overwhelming urban, educated and middle class character which

² Note: I have derived this term from the chapter title “Towards A National Monarchy” from historian K.M. Panikkar’s ‘A Survey of Indian History’.

was largely absent among the other ethnic groups of Pakistan. With the lack of feudal structure in their society they were also more accommodative and open minded at all levels of social life.

In the 1950s the prevailing political, administrative, and economic conditions gave the Mohajir a fine opportunity to place themselves as a privileged group. Due to partition lakhs of Hindus left Sindh including Karachi and other urban centres. The Hindus left their houses, lands, business concerns and other establishments which had tremendous economic values. The immigrant Mohajir used those infrastructures to settle in and start new life. The Govt. also helped in many ways. The Karachi was expanded by establishing new housing projects in areas like Liaquatabad, Haryana Colony, etc. The Govt. also provided loans for housing and business on easy conditions for their proper rehabilitation.

Pakistan started from scratch – by organising entire administrative structure including bureaucracy, state radio, media, education, and many others, the educated Mohajir were at the forefront to provide ready human resource to develop the new state. The port city of Karachi had been made the capital of Pakistan. The educated Mohajir were readily absorbed in government jobs, educational services, and other middle-class jobs. The Federal Secretariat, Karachi Port Trust, State Bank of Pakistan, etc. offices were largely filled up by the Mohajir. The establishment of University of Karachi (1951), Institute of Business Administration (1955) and other higher academic institutions made a direct contribution in the strengthening the middle-class base of the Mohajir. The rapid expansion of industrial units in the Karachi conurbation provided jobs for the lower middle class and poor Mohajir. They were absorbed in fast growing private service sectors. They were also the highest beneficiaries of the liberal economic policy adopted by the Federal Government from late 1940s. On the basis of pro-market economics the national planning strategy was also designed to put an emphasis on the urban industrial sector. The observation of Prof. Burton Stein (Stein, 2001) is striking in this respect:

Five-year plans were instituted in 1954 with the aim of grafting an urban, industrial element upon an overwhelmingly agrarian society. The designated agents of planned development (and its first beneficiaries) were a commercial middle class, many of whom migrated to the country from India at the time of partition and gathered in the new capital, where they joined older Sindhi merchants and bankers.

From 1948 to 1961 Karachi was administered as a separate Federal Capital Territory outside Sindh. This separation developed an exclusivist pattern in the social life and thinking of the Mohajir. They formed a clear majority in that region. Availing the capital status of Karachi coupled with the higher educational attainments the Mohajir entered the bureaucracy in large numbers. In the powerful bureaucracy the Punjabis also had a dominant representation. So the Mohajir bureaucrats formed a needful nexus with their Punjabi counterparts.

Not only in the western wing of the country, in East Pakistan also had the Mohajir emerged as a dominant segment in the bureaucracy. It could be testified by the words of Prof. Burton Stein (Stein, 2001) who maintained:

Even as late 1956, no Bengali had reached the upper echelons of the central civil service and of the over 700 posts of the next tier of officials in East Pakistan, 90% were staffed by Punjabis or by muhajirs (literally ‘refugees’); that is, Urdu –speaking migrants from the United Provinces of India.

Till 1958 there was a formal parliamentary structure in Pakistan but the country lacked mass based political parties. The ruling Muslim League and Republican Party had little support base among the common people. In that milieu the bureaucracy became very powerful and manipulated the dynamics of the polity. The hegemonic landlords and the rising capitalists had to negotiate with the bureaucracy for their own interests. The Mohajir bureaucrats used the prevailing system for furthering their interests and started to marginalise the Sindhis, who had negligible representation in bureaucracy, in the Sindh province. The adoption of Urdu as the state language of Pakistan (from 1956 Bangla became another one) increased the power and prestige of the Mohajir community. The Karachi metro became a new field for the Urdu literature, music and media. The Urdu and English became two vehicles of social upliftment in Pakistan. The Mohajir had a good grasp over both the languages. The opening of Radio Pakistan and numerous English and Urdu dailies and periodicals provided the community not only to get jobs but also to express skills and thoughts. In midst of these realities the condition of the poor and unskilled Mohajir remained in a sad state. There were lack of jobs and other opportunities for them. Most of the Govt. aids and schemes were tapped by the dominant middle class due to their better contacts and higher accomplishments (Ahmed, 1999). In many areas of Karachi metropolis, the living conditions of

the poor refugees were deplorable. The stretches of Mohajir settlements were without adequate housing facilities, potable water supplies and sewerage systems. A larger proportion of them lived in slums. They had no ensured means of sustenance. The unemployment was rampant. But these were not unprecedented in any developing country. In neighbouring India also the refugees faced multiple problems, especially those who came from east Bengal. This was just a marginal part of the whole story.

Evolution of a new reality

In the so-called parliamentary period (1947-1958) of Pakistan the Mohajir were the most advanced group in the country. The ideologically motivated Mohajir fought for the Pakistan on the anvil of Two Nation Theory, and they realised it in a joint struggle with the Muslims of other parts of undivided India. In the course of the movement they were in the central leadership of the spearheading Muslim League. After the creation of Pakistan with their elevated position within the country with historic sacrifice and better education they claimed themselves as the most loyal Pakistanis. Their contribution in the fields of culture, media, politics and science was immense. They always uphold the national identity of being Pakistanis/Muslims in the nascent Muslim state. This behaviour was unlike the provincial propensities of the Bengalis, Sindhis and other groups. The state of Pakistan also relied on them.

For a newly created country like Pakistan having a common history and tradition with the bigger India, the main element of nation building process was complete national unity. It would have to be based on the sole Muslim identity. Any deviation from that was regarded as anti-state activity. The language movement (1952) and demand for provincial rights in East Bengal, for instance, was labelled as anti-Pakistani endeavours. Even the Muslim League regarded the formation of new political parties as contrary to the national interest. The Communist Party, the only organised party in early years of Pakistan, except Muslim League, was suppressed brutally. In that prevailing situation the Mohajir were entirely attached with the Muslim League. They remained adhered to the unidimensional Two Nation ideology which manifested the Muslim nationalist politics. But the early death of M.A. Jinnah in 1948 and the brutal assassination of Nawab Zada Liaqat Ali Khan in 1951 acted as the initiation of frustration among the Mohajir. But this development was checked through their hold over bureaucracy and other middle class institutions till 1958. Though

the gradual decline of Muslim League due to its failure to check corruption, manipulation of top executive posts and increasing power of the Punjabi dominated military created a rift between the grand old party and the Mohajir community. The Islamic parties like Jamaat-i-Islam started to fill the vacuum from mid 1950s. The community also started to support them. From this phenomenon it was revealed that the Mohajir had not deviated from their religion-centric politico-ideological framework. They remained devoted to their Muslim identity up to 1950s. Their vision of a strong Muslim state based on religious identity created an equally strong aversion toward any other form of identity assertion. Being exclusivist in terms of other groups and loyalist to state within the multi-ethnic Pakistan were the parts of duality existed in their socio-political consciousness.

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