



**PAKISTAN HERE AND NOW: INSIGHTS INTO  
SOCIETY, CULTURE, IDENTITY, AND DIASPORA**

**EDITED BY: HARRIS KHALIQUE  
AND  
IRFAN AHMAD KAHN**

*Book Review by Samar Quddus*

*Research Fellow, GIDS  
May 2023*

**Publication Year:** 2021

**Publisher:** Rivets Learning

In **Pakistan Here and Now: Insights into Society, culture, identity, and diaspora**, editors Harris Khalique, Honorary Fellow in Writing at University of Iowa and an essayist and Irfan Ahmad Khan, a researcher and development practitioner, bring together contributors from various disciplines to provide an insight into the country's historical and socio-political course in sculpting the predicaments and fault lines faced by contemporary Pakistani society.

Endorsed by Sherry Rehman, Nasir Abbas Nayyar and Tariq Rehman, the book is a collection of seven thoughtful essays that moves from an academic discourse of contemporary lived realities, personal anecdotes, musings on art, religion, culture, and politics to more specific issues such as gender relations, the education system in the country, as well as relationship between Pakistani diaspora and their home country. All the authors tend to challenge the conventional beliefs prevalent in today's Pakistani society and offer progressive perspectives in their domains. They go on to construct a more liberal, tolerant, inclusive, and pluralist notion of Pakistan, and critically address the dominant narratives and how they have continued to shape social public policies.

The book explores contradictory elements central to the notion of the state and identity that continue to bedevil the minds of an ordinary Pakistani. For instance, issues such as defining Pakistani culture, recognizing state either as a unitary identity or collection of diverse ethnicities, analysing the enduring effect of British subjugation on language and ideological values of the people, and reinforcement of gender hierarchies, sectarian and religious and economic divide through educational system. It is argued that these issues which revolve around the idea of nationhood has long been not addressed or misdirected in the attempt to define a homogenous identity of Pakistan.

The volume begins with an opening essay on cultural confusions in Pakistan by Hassan Zaidi, a journalist and filmmaker, who refers to a longstanding debate within Pakistan in defining the culture of the society. He provides anthropological evidence on the lack of clarity among people about the nature of the state and its cultural heritage. He mentions of roads around the country named after heroes most of them are not indigenous to this part of the world. This mainly reflects the obsession of certain elite groups to connect themselves with the glorious Muslim past rather than with the local and indigenous culture and people. Recognizing the multitude of ethnic, religious and regional identities in the country, Zaidi believes that such culturally diverse societies are far more complex than simply categorizing them into binary divisions such as “liberal vs. conservative” or “religious vs. secular”. Imposing binary divisions oversimplifies the rich tapestry of ideas, ideologies and lived experiences within our society. Similarly, Salman Asif’s piece of writing on representation of religious minorities in Pakistani cinema is another intriguing essay, highlighting the prevalent prejudice, exclusion, and bigotry in the society towards minorities that has been stereotyped by Pakistani cinema throughout history.

Third in the row is another insightful work remarkably written by renowned actress, academic and an avid writer, Navid Shehzad on how language relates to identity and the idea of nationhood. Her piece, titled “The Language of the Heart” highlights the idea of nationhood and sheds light on the profound impact of colonization on the way we view and perceive the world, particularly with regard to language, literature and cultural identities of various nations and people. Of all the essays, Shehzad exhibits perhaps a more academic style. For her, languages are the pedigree of nations as she refers to the partition of Bengali speaking East Pakistan from West Pakistan in 1971, which was the perfect articulation of the notion that language is a means towards creating an identity. She further talks about speech and discourse communities that are commonly used in linguistics. As she highlights the importance of discourse communities, group of people who share a common language to achieve their goals, and shows a concern on the absence of strong discourse communities (e.g., in case of Pakistan), Shahzad fails to recognize the vitality of speech communities, people who share common language and communicate with each other in a distinctive way, which provides a rich diversity of linguistic practices and cultural expression. A large part of her essay is devoted to comparing Faiz Ahmad Faiz and Nazim Hikmet, a Pakistani and Turkish poet respectively, and highlights their deep connection to their language and culture and how they missed the sound of their language while living in exile. This speaks to the power of language and its role in shaping our sense of identity and belonging.

One of the standout essays in the volume is “Discrimination and Exclusion in Educational System of Pakistan” by Dr. Naazir Mahmood, a prominent political and social policy analyst on Pakistan’s primetime television. The essay offers a compelling analysis of the ways in which marginalised groups have been systematically excluded from educational opportunities and provides some insightful policy recommendations for addressing these issues. The author talks about discrimination in the educational system that operates along multiple axes of identity such as gender, ethnicity, religion and socio-economic status of people. Many of the major factors he highlights, class stratification and socio-economic condition of people are considered as the primary cause for exclusion from quality education. The emergence of multi-tiered categorization of private schools that excludes children from low-income families to access quality education has been exacerbating inequalities. This reinforces social hierarchies and perpetuates a cycle of poverty and marginalization, thus limiting opportunities and social mobility. While he acknowledges the impact of broader social, cultural and economic factors that contribute to inequality in Pakistan, he does not provide a detailed analysis of the political and historical factors that have shaped the country’s educational system that could have provided the reader a comprehensive understanding of the issue.

The next essay in the book by Zahida Hina takes a different approach to build her argument exploring the historical context of the role of religion in statecraft and governance, as well as the contemporary challenges and opportunities for building a democratic and inclusive society. Hina in “Religion and Statecraft in a Muslim Society” argues that the use of religion for political purposes has been a significant factor in the formation and consolidation of the Pakistani state. She believes, however, it has created a tension between religion and democracy, as religious elites often resist democratic norms and institutions. She suggests that the solution to this problem lies in the re-evaluation of the role of religion in statecraft, which requires a greater emphasis on democratic values and principles.

Towards the end, Harris Khaliq’s insightful essay offers a nuanced and thoughtful analysis of the relationship between Pakistani diaspora communities and their home country. It is true that the Pakistani diaspora feels a strong sense of attachment to their native country, which is manifested in their interest and involvement in the politics of Pakistan. He identifies types of Pakistani diaspora across the world and highlights the issues surrounding their political rights in the home country. He further discusses the irony and contradiction in the behaviour of influential diaspora who enjoys the benefits of democracy and pluralism in their adopted countries but support authoritarianism and exclusion in their native country. This points to the hypocrisy of the influential diaspora, who claim to work for the betterment of their country but

Samar Quddus

fail to recognize the importance of democratic and inclusive values. However, it is important to note that not all emigrants hold these views and it would be unfair to make such sweeping generalization and paint all members of the diaspora with the same brush, especially when they contribute significantly to support country financially. Moreover, it is also important to consider the historical, social, and political context which influences diaspora behaviour.

As you read the book, it is evident that the views reflected therein are generally backed by substantial research and the essays are written in a clear and concise language that makes it comprehensible to a wide range of readers. Some of the strengths of the book are the diversity of the voices and opinions it presents, as well as a focus on the Pakistani diaspora which is often overlooked in discussions about Pakistan. However, while the book covers a range of topics, it could have delved more deeper into some of the issues to provide a greater critical analysis of the issues.