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Informal Bases of Formalisation in Pakistan: Recording the Lived Experiences of Female School Teachers

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Abstract: *This paper focuses on exploring the way ingrained cultural wisdom and mechanisms provide the base for actualising official roles in formal organisations. Most of the formal interactions and transactions are made through personalised dealings (Qadeer, 1999). Some senior scholars feel that such cultural wisdom/mechanisms (like VB) are not relevant anymore (Chaudhary, 1999), but the current research and existing practices are giving a different picture of reality (Saher & Mayrhofer, 2014; Saher et al., 2014; Qadeer, 1999). Considering this lacuna in literature and between literature and practice, this paper is going to unravel the process of informalization in formal organisations and will contribute to the ongoing debate on convergence divergence. This paper will also discuss the implications and extend guidance for future research in this field.*

Key Words: Convergence-divergence, Female Teachers, School, Vartan Bhanji, Indigenous Wisdom, Pakistan

Introduction

Pakistan, a South Asian country, is still in the process of strengthening its formal institutions, and the organisations that claim to be adhering to the formal system are primarily working on local models, as highlighted by Saher & Mayrhofer (2014). In this regard, Qadeer reveals that "Most urban organisations are hollow institutions, imbibing modern forms but functioning on the traditional norms. The underside of these organisations is structured like clans and patriarchal families" (1999, P. 1206). This phenomenon of running the

professional and occupational roles on local moralities and personalised ethos is a cutting theme in the context of Pakistan. [Qadeer \(1999\)](#) discusses this while stating,

"Most economic transactions and social interactions proceed in the medium of personalised dealings. 'Who knows whom' is the rule, and even if in a situation one cannot mobilise some personal ties, one immediately proceeds to forge such relations by appealing to primordial bonds of ethnicity, language, religion, sect or region.....the political parties, professional and occupational

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organisation, even the ranks and cadres of the civil services and the military develop sub-stratum of brotherhood ties..... The army, the trader associations and, even, trade unions operate as extended families and clans" (p. 1205).

[Khilji \(2003\)](#) also argued that family-like relationships are developed with non-kins for their social integration into the kin group in organisations (local as well as international) working in Pakistan. This phenomenon of network extension is institutionalised in the embedded assumptions of local moralities, and the family roles and reciprocal obligations are transposed onto non-kin relations ([Saher & Mayrhofer, 2014](#)). At all levels, formal and informal interactions and transactions are made through personalised dealings. To date, most political, professional and occupational institutions adhere to the familial model and operate as extended families ([Saher & Mayrhofer, 2014](#); [Saher et al., 2014](#); [Qadeer, 1999](#)). However, formal institutions are expected to be based on formal rules and practices. On the outside, organisations are claiming modern mechanisms but, on the inside, they operate on the rural ethos/system, i.e., Vartan Bhanji (VB) ([Saher & Mayrhofer, 2014](#); [Saher et al., 2014](#); [Qadeer, 1999](#)). This is similar to the situation in other countries like China (Guanxi), Russia (Blat), the whole middle east (Wasta) etc. ([Saher & Mayrhofer, 2014](#)). This is in line with what literature has highlighted: 'Pakistani appears to be modern if measured on the basis of their inclination to consumerism, but their social mores have not necessarily transformed. The more things change, the more they (Pakistanis) remain the same' (Subohi, 2009).

It is important to have a brief introduction of VB, as it will facilitate the development of the framework for the issue at hand. It is a framework of social organisation and an institutionalised custom of gift/service exchange, common in parts of Pakistan and India ([Cialdini, 2001](#)). This tradition of exchange is primarily maintained among relatives (familial network, *Bradri*), but it also applies to non-relatives in order to integrate them socially into the familial network. VB shapes the meaning and management of social networks in Pakistan, relying on the Daughters' role in her father's family, Neotta

or *Neondra* (a material or immaterial favour to relatives and friends), reciprocity and *Mang* (a request for help which must be satisfied). 'This family/social allegiance is binding and generally takes precedence over rules ... [M]embers of a group feel obliged to look after each other' ([Khilji, 2003](#), pp. 115 – 116). The tradition of VB, its characteristics and functions have changed due to the strong influence of industrialisation, migration and urbanisation (Chaudhry, 1999), but as a core cultural value, VB still influences individual and collective interaction in personal and professional settings. It permeates life throughout the country, though its intensity may vary from region to region ([Lyon, 2002](#)). [Khilji \(2003, p. 115\)](#) points out that familial relationships are considered more important than rules and regulations. It is quite interesting that on one side, the system and organisations uphold the claims of rules and regulation, whereas on the other side are working on mechanisms based on the informal and cultural mechanism of VB. This creates a complex situation for individuals (especially the young ones who are socialised on the formal school curriculum) to understand and align themselves with the ongoing practices. Some senior scholars feel that such cultural mechanisms (like VB) are not relevant anymore ([Chaudhary, 1998](#)) but the current research and existing practices are giving a different picture of reality ([Saher & Mayrhofer, 2014](#); [Saher et al., 2014](#); [Qadeer, 1999](#)). This reveals a gap between literature and practice, and our paper will find this missing clue to contribute to the intellectual discourse on this issue.

Research Methodology and Methods

Qualitative research has been conducted to acquire in-depth insiders' meaning to comprehensively understand the issue and to meet the requirements of the topic at hand. This study draws from interpretive-constructivist and constructivist-phenomenologist traditions valuing a person's 'lived experience' (Saunders et al., 2009). This methodological position, in fact, provides an appropriate framework for the development of an in-depth understanding of the topic under discussion (Cresswell, 2007) and enables the researcher to explore in-depth narratives of the

respondents' experiences. The data gathering techniques included in-depth interviews and mini-case studies. The interviewees were selected purposively. Middle-aged women working as teachers were considered the target group of this research; to further find more suitable respondents, female teachers were selected from a public sector higher secondary school. We used the purposive sampling technique to select these respondents, as it facilitated acquiring experiential and in-depth insight on the issue at hand. To acquire authentic and valid data, field research was conducted in a naturalistic setting.

The mentioned researcher carried out face-to-face, in-depth interviews with 15 married female teachers. Senior teachers were selected to fulfil the purpose of getting in-depth and authentic data as they have spent 10-15 years in the school and hence have many weak and strong relationships within the institute. On average, an interview lasted for approximately 40-50 minutes and was conducted in the Urdu language to maintain an informal and friendly environment. Mini case studies were collected to gain a deeper understanding of the topic. This flexible and adaptive way of data collection builds on the situational principle of case study research, emphasising 'contingencies and the emergence of surprising case data' (Pan & Tan, 2011). The mini-cases were selected on the basis of their relevance to our study and the availability of information. Data was analysed through Thematic Analysis Technique (TAT) after categorising it according to themes. Themes were generated with the help of an extensive literature review. In addition to secondary data, primary data from the field also helped in generating new themes. For the validity of the results, observations, respondents' dialogues and mini-case studies were used. Pseudonyms have been used to maintain the privacy of the respondents.

Field Data and Analysis

The respondents in the field were not only aware of VB but utilised it in the organisation to develop and maintain familial relationships with their colleagues for better adjustment. A respondent shared that this phenomenon is an old tradition passed to them from

their elders; it involves exchanges of food, gifts and services on various occasions to develop good relations and a friendly working environment. The school teachers were also aware of the proactive participation of women in the execution of exchange practices on the principles of daughters' rights, reciprocity and mang (explicit demand at time of need which cannot be turned down).

“Daughters are very crucial to this exchange. When you want to continue the relationship, you give a gift to their daughter calling her your own.”

Developing this relationship is very important as it is a means of achievement of *izzat* (honour and respect), as illustrated by [Eglar \(1960\)](#). In an in-depth interview, a teacher shared that the institution of VB facilitates them to develop and maintain strong relationships; a stronger relationship can be developed by investing more resources, time and care. The response matches the perspective of [Eglar \(1960\)](#) and [Nasir & Mielke \(2015\)](#). [Nasir and Mielke \(2015\)](#) declared VB as a glue for social bonding. The basic rule of continuing and developing VB is reciprocity. Another respondent revealed that,

“It is like a debt that you must pay. Otherwise, it will have adverse effects on the relationship if you don't return with added value. So, one has to have it in mind regarding paying back in better coins.”

Our field results further revealed that the notion of VB is also changing and adapting in an evolving Pakistani society. One of the two fundamental principles of VB is daughters' rights. Now, as Pakistani women have acquired education and economic empowerment, the shape of exchange has changed. While discussing this, a respondent pointed out that,

“I have become quite independent. Now, I don't have to ask for everything from my husband. Also, I don't depend on him for my expenses. I manage most things myself confidently.”

A similar claim was made by [Zaidi \(2010\)](#) that the daughter's role is in transition and the credit goes to her increased access to education; thus, she cherishes various opportunities. As a result, women are making their way into the marketplace and are harnessing their skills and abilities ([Zaidi, 2018](#)). Women are now skilful enough to acquire

professional positions. Thus, there is a transition in gender roles (Howell, 1999). Paid employment of women outside the home is increasing (Ullah, 2010).

Case 1

Ms Bisma is a senior teacher with teaching experience of almost one and a half decades. She started her career as a middle-wing teacher of Pakistan studies, and now she is teaching Pakistan studies to higher secondary students. Her job has earned confidence and independence for her. In the urgent situation of the death of her colleague's father, she decided everything on her own as her husband was not available. She went to the event of the funeral with other colleagues. She said that, "the thing is that those decisions for which other women depend on their husbands, I can take on my own."

The case highlights that although a lot has changed due to the economic viability of women, their social and traditional role has not changed. She plays her role outside the house, but her duties inside are still the same. Women are basically considered homemakers and care providers. A respondent revealed her stance in the following word, "We do support our families economically, but our duties as a daughter, mother and as wife are still there. Our duties have become multifaceted; economic role and homemaker/caretaker."

This is in line with the existing scholarship that although women are now taking an active part in contributing to the economy of the family, their traditional duties have remained the same, as highlighted by [Saher, Matloob, Tahreen, Ali, and Al Sulim \(2013\)](#).

Additionally, research data has unravelled the existence and further enhancement of kin-like relationships with colleague teachers on the basis of trust and loyalty. While talking about her colleague, a respondent teacher with a friendly smile reveals the positive nature of their relationship. She declares that "they are really close". Another teacher also points out that strong mutual relations are developed among female teachers based on trust, mutual support and loyalty. One of the respondents

highlights that,

"On the basis of mutual support, trust and close interaction, a strong relationship is developed among females. Sometimes you become so close that your colleague friend becomes more important than your real sister."

The following case study can further explain this notion.

Case 2

A senior teacher, Ms Saima, is working in the school for a decade. She has a very close, sister-like relationship with her friend, Tabassum. Tabassum is from the Northern areas of Pakistan and recently shifted to Islamabad with her family. She is living in the neighbourhood of Ms Saima. Coincidentally, she is also working in the same institution. They together arrange a pick-and-drop service for their organisation, and from here, a relation of mutual support begins. This makes them close in the institution as well, and they support each other during tough assignments and difficult days. Their friendly relationship is noticed in the school, and then they are given combined assignments like arranging events, parent-teacher meetings etc. As time passed, the formal relationship became quite personal and extended to their families. They get quite close, and both families transposed familial roles and statuses for each other. The parents in both families are declared combined parents, and the nomenclature of real mother and father, i.e. 'Ammi' and 'abbu' are respectively used on both sides. The food, service and gifts are mutually exchanged. On the death of Tabassum's father, Ms Saima and her family took the whole responsibility and provided great emotional and economic support during this hard time. Ms Saima's brothers took responsibility for all the matters related to sitting arrangement, food, and guest handling at that time. Now Ms Tabassum has shifted to another area and no longer lives in Ms Saima's neighbourhood, but she still visits. Their relationship is still strong, and they still behave like a family.

This case study uncovered the prevalence of fictive relationships in the institution among female teachers which are extended to families. These

relations are long-term and exist inside and outside the institution, among employees and their families. Hence, they create a social network of mutual help and support to effectively manage their lives inside as well as outside the organisation.

Another case study is a clear depiction of how informal relationships are developed and how strong the bonds become.

Case 3

Ms Aliya is a senior teacher. She has been teaching there for 15 years. She started her career as a teacher in the junior wing, and now she is a senior teacher in school. During a research discourse, another teacher came into the context. Ms Aliya asked her for a favour regarding the change of the seat of her daughter in her class (as seating arrangements are fixed for students in this school). The other teacher was not willing to do it because then she had to change the sitting arrangement for the whole class. Anyhow, Ms Aliya stood up, hugged her and asked her lovingly, 'my friend do it for me' ("chal yar ker de na mere liye kar"). By exhibiting this behaviour and friendly gesture, Ms Aliya changed the formal situation into an informal/familial one and used the informal mechanism of 'Mang' to achieve her goal. The other teacher enjoyed it and declared, "alright, now I have to do it for you". When the teacher left the room, Ms Aliya explained, "I have such good people around me. We have a relationship of so many years".

This case study is a clear revelation of the execution of 'Mang' (explicit request), an important principle of VB. Their informal chat highlights their closeness and strong familial relationship. Ms Aliya has been teaching in this institute for 15 years, which shows her strong bond with the school and the people who work there.

Another respondent shares her feeling about being in the school for more than a decade. She says that,

"It's been 14 years since I have been here. In these 14 years, I have given most of my time to this school. I've developed a home-like feeling for it. All my colleagues are like my family members. Even if I think of quitting my job, it is very difficult for me to just stay at home without all these people. Even

summer and winter vacation is very tough for me as I don't want to stay at home. When you come here you get relaxed; you share your problems. It is a place for catharsis for us. All this makes our relationship very strong."

She continued,

"I have three close friends. They are like sisters to me. Interestingly, one of them has become a section head and now there is an official gap between us. At first, I thought to restrict myself a bit but when I got a positive response from her; then I felt very good. So, we are still very close. It all depends on how strong your relationship is, how much you trust each other and how loyal you are to one another."

Another case will carry this debate further.

Case 4

Ms Khalida is a senior teacher with teaching experience thirteen years. She doesn't visit her colleagues at their homes. She has a friend, Ms Adeela, and she informs her about this habit. Ms Adeela understands this and never insisted on a visit to her home. This does not affect their relationship. Both support each other while acknowledging their limitations and problems of each other. But at the same time, Ms Khalida is aware of cultural expectations and norms. In line with this, when she heard about the death of Ms Adeela's father, she reached Adeela's home at once as she knew she needed me more than ever. In a long relationship of thirteen years, it was the first time she visited her. At that time, she knew the need for her relationship and situation, and that is why she made the decision immediately.

The nature of fictive relationships is evident from the above case study. As Ms Khalida and Ms Adeela are maintaining a close relationship, in the case of a critical situation (death in the family), it became the top priority of Ms Khalida to reach her to support and fulfil the cultural expectation of VB.

The research data shows that in this institution, teachers make informal relationships with colleagues and include non-kins in the kin category through the embedded but ingrained assumptions of Vartan Bhanji that influence their thinking,

behaviour, priorities, decision and life inside the organisation as well as outside. Literature states that this relationship is weak at the beginning with fewer expectations (i.e. termed as *Kachi Vartan Bhanji* as named by [Eglar \(1960\)](#)), but with time, it transforms into close relations with high expectations of mutual support (i.e. termed as *Pakki Vartan Bhanji*) (Anwar, 1977; [Eglar, 1960](#)). Today *Pakki VB* is not only maintained with family members but also with non-kins ([Alia, 2017](#)) as the field data has already depicted in the above paragraph.

Last but not least in any way, data highlights the nature of social circles that are developed through VB. According to one of the respondents,

“Our social circle has now become very much extended. In the past, relationships were limited. Now they are expanding day by day.”

While discussing the nature of social circle, one of the respondents replied spontaneously while laughing, the VB relations have not only grown but have grown a lot (*“Barh nai gya daftrom mai ye...mere khyal mai tou bohat barh gya hein.”*). Another teacher further explained that,

“Due to our job, our social circle has increased a lot compared to a housewife. A lot of relationships are made at the workplace. We visit other schools for different works. We attend workshops, go for paper checking, conduct practical exams, for invigilation etc. Without these relationships, you will neither get an invitation nor an opportunity to grow, therefore these relations are the primary source of social acceptance and mobility.”

A respondent highlighted that,

“Panji (VB) has also increased so much due to a vast social circle, or you can say vice versa. It has extended much more outside our family and biradari.”

The above responses justify that in the contemporary world social relations have increased, widening the circle developed through VB. Similar to what was stated by [Saher & Mayrhofer \(2014\)](#), [Saher, Marloob, Ali \(2014\)](#), and [Khilji \(2003\)](#), non-kins are also added to the familial circle, and family-like relations are maintained with them.

One of the respondents shared that,

“People around me are very supportive. We collectively help each other. We are socially as well as economically supportive. If there is any problem with my colleague, I'll help her.”

The field data mentioned in the above paragraphs clearly depicted how educated individuals working in formal institutions transform their formal institutional relationships into informal ones. This is in line with the perspective of [Qadeer \(1999\)](#) when he reveals formalisation on the basis of informalization.

Conclusion

One of the fundamental findings and insights from this research is those female school teachers were aware of the concept of VB and acknowledged its role in their professional life in school. The insiders' view acquired through in-depth field data has revealed that these teachers develop fictive relationships with their colleagues to formulate strong bonds and support each other in official assignments. The research results have also uncovered that these teachers invest and reciprocate their time, energy and resources to develop strategic relationships. In this process of developing relationships, trust, loyalty and gratitude are considered the essential attributes among the teachers, as pointed out by the data. It is also pointed out by the research data that the respondents were highly conscious of cultural expectations and their role towards their fictive kin during critical situations (inside and outside the institution) and prioritised response on an urgent basis. These relationships go beyond the institution to the family and homes, and familial roles are transposed on all the non-kin. For example, two teachers who developed a close relationship used to call each other's parents with the nomenclature used for real parents (*'ammi* and *'abbu*), as highlighted by the field data. The rare in-depth field data points out that *Mang* is also used by the respondents to resolve conflicts of interest and achieve targets which generally seem quite difficult. This research has established that VB and its institution, as ingrained cultural principles, influence the behaviours,

decisions and expectations of respondents and are pervasive in the organisational culture of the school, which is in line with the findings of [Saher and Mayrhofer \(2014\)](#). Last but most importantly, the data establish that informalization prevails in formal institutions and informalization is not decreasing, which is in line with the stance of [Qadeer \(1999\)](#). Finally, this research confirms that the actual functioning of employees in organisations is based on cultural wisdom rather than any other model; in this way, the results of this research confirm divergence and contribute to the debate on divergence convergence. Despite the knowledge contribution, this research has some limitations. The data was collected from a small-scale sample, though as per the requirement of the topic, fifteen in-depth interviews with case studies are quite

sufficient. The data was only acquired from a single public sector local organisation, but in a situation where no such research is available, data from one organisation is sufficient; further, contemporary research results have revealed that practices of foreign companies extend more similarities with local organisations rather than organisations of home countries ([Saher & Mayrhofer, 2014](#); [Khilji, 2003](#)). Future researchers can take a broader methodological model to extend it further, and a comparison can be developed between local and foreign organisations working in the context of Pakistan. Finally, this paper can be helpful in extending rare insight to national as well as international scholars and practitioners to comprehend the intricacies of the currently functioning system in Pakistan.

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