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Career Conditions in Pakistan: Using Connections as Career Moves

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Abstract: *This paper examines the role of social connections on the career trajectory of Pakistani employees in local organisations. Scholarship (Syed, 2016; Saher & Mayrhofer, 2014; Mangi et al., 2012; Saher, 2010; Chatterjee, 2007; Khilji, 2003; Budhwar, 2001; Lyon, 2000; Sparrow & Budhwar, 1997; Mendonca & Kanungo, 1994) has already highlighted the significant impact of social connections on the professional growth of individuals in India and Pakistan. However, in response to the calls for contextualising HRM practices and research, this paper is developing a culturally specific framework to reveal pervasive practices of career progression in Pakistan. Qualitative research has been conducted to get in-depth data on the issue at hand. This paper will extend a rare insider's view and future research directions.*

Key Words: Career, Career Context, Connections, Loyalty, Indebtedness, Pakistan

Introduction

The concept of a career has great value and interest for both individuals and the management of the company. It is the management's responsibility to manage their employee's growth, while on the other hand, it is the employees' concern to direct his/her career. Hall (2002) highlights the important issues related to well-organised career choices, like handling clashes between job and personal life and how to approach career goals (Hall, 2002). Besides this, another important issue in pursuing a career in a cultural context. Cultural values and embedded institutions play a pivotal role in the progress of all

aspects of an organisation and an individual, including career. This is because all processes take place in a particular environment and its cultural context. Tayeb (1998) argues that organisations aligning themselves to the cultural aspirations of a country show more growth as compared to the ones not considering this notion.

The effect of country context and cultural aspirations is more significant in the context of developing countries, as informal-familial institutions are stronger than formal institutions. Moreover, human resource management and career (people-oriented aspects of organisation) are highly

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culture-specific issues; therefore, there are serious calls about contextualising research and practice in the mainstream intellectual discourse. Consistently, the current research in the area of human resource management, especially career, is focused on exploring unique cultural features related to this phenomenon. In a similar vein, this paper is focused on exploring culturally specific notions and gauging their influence on career growth. The mainstream research (Syed, [2016](#); Saher & Mayrhofer, [2014](#); Mangi et al., [2012](#); Saher, [2010](#); Chatterjee, [2007](#); Khilji, [2003](#); Budhwar, 2001; Lyon, [2000](#); Sparrow & Budhwar, [1997](#); Mendonca & Kanungo, [1994](#)) has already highlighted the significant impact of social connections on the professional growth of individuals in India and Pakistan. However, the concept of '*mera banda*' (which is, in fact, an extension of the notion of patron-portege) is not considered, though it is highly prevalent in all types and layers of organisations and determines the career trajectory of an individual. This paper focuses on this lacuna between practice and research and contributes to the exciting intellectual discourse on cultural progress. An in-depth and insider's view has been acquired through qualitative research and results derived through content analysis.

This paper comprises 4 upcoming sections; a literature review to develop our culturally specific framework, research methods, research results and discussion, and the last section consists of a conclusion, research limitation, research implication and future research directions.

Literature Review

Career is derived from the Latin word *carraria*, meaning a carriage road or road –it is a person's course or progress through his or her life. A career is a series of job-related positions that a person holds during their lifetime (London & Stampf, [1982](#)). The traditional definition of a career is that it is a series of a person's work-related skills and knowledge over time. This definition is more consistent with time rather than any fixed arrangement of work (Arthur, Khapova & Wilderom, 2005). With this definition, career progression will be explored in the context of Pakistan.

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

"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 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, 2004](#)) 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 to the non-kin relations (Saher & Mayrhofer, [2014](#)). To explain the nature and role of these relations in Pakistani society, Lyon ([2002](#)) suggests that "virtually in all activities one must not act on one's own behalf but rather on behalf of another... assuming that responsibilities for one's own problems in Pakistan mean arranging with someone from within one's human resource network to actually carry out the solution ... Not only the system of interdependence works, by satisfying interference needs and being perceived to be advantageous, but it offers some degree of cultural coherence in the absence of national, linguistic,

market and political coherence" (p. 226 –227). Khilji (2003) points out that familial relationships are considered more important than rules and regulations (p. 115). Likewise, Lyon (2002) reminds us that 'Pakistanis employ very fundamental role relationships which are learnt in the security of kin groups to deal with situations in which there is no market, political or other structural security' (p. 228).

The key point here is that the mechanism of the social system extends certainty to individuals and institutions in the larger politico-economic structure. These familial (and ethnic) based social networks formulate a network of power relationships in Pakistani society and influence private as well as public spheres; the use of both personal and professional contacts in the workplace is a culturally widespread and socially sanctioned practice (Chaudhary, 2012). Aycan (2002) highlights not only the importance of such harmonious interpersonal relationships but also points out that the phenomenon of self-sacrifice for the betterment and success of the in-group is pervasive in Pakistan. The networks of power relations are steered by some powerful-elite figures (Lyon, 2002; Saher, 2010). These basic features of the Pakistani social system are embedded in the colonial legacy of the civil-military and landed elite and are perceptible in workplace settings and even state-level affairs. Consistently with this general feature of Pakistani society, various groups of employees based on familial-ethnic networks (functioning on an in-group/out-group assumption) can be witnessed in the organisations. In this regard, scholarship sheds light on the existence of this kind of networking among the workers and between workers and management and its substantial impact on the human resource management practices of selection, promotion, better placement and compensation in Pakistan (Saher & Mayrhofer, 2014; Mangi et al., 2012; Saher, 2010; Khilji, 2003). A similar kind of situation is highlighted by Mendonca and Kanungo (1994) in Indian organisations, where a self-reinforcing circle prevails through which political and familial contacts influence selection, promotion and transfer practices. Sparrow and Budhwar (1997)

point toward the value of networking in obtaining work, securing promotion and advancing pay in Indian organisations. The deregulation of the Indian economy and global linkages has brought about visible changes in the organisational structure and attitudes of management towards HRM policies and practices (Budhwar, 2001; Saini & Budhwar, 2004); though the impact of the local socio-cultural phenomenon on managers is explicit when they are facing the complexities of global realities (Chatterjee, 2007). Saher (2010; 2011) and Saher & Mayrhofer (2014) confirmed the existence of this phenomenon in Pakistan. Khilji (2003) contends that social relationship with the higher authority and immediate manager is an essential tool for getting attractive compensation, job and advancement in a career in Pakistan. "If there are two people who are at the same level, but one of them has good relationships with the manager or knows someone in the top management. Then we know who will be promoted, don't we!" (Khilji, 2003; p.136). Consistently, her research reveals the importance of relations with the people at the higher and influencing position to open doors of success for individuals. In a similar vein, Mangi and associates (2012) point out that individuals who have strong networking, i.e. *sifarish* from top management or proprietor of the firm through sycophancy acquire more favours in HRM processes like promotion and move on the career ladder swiftly in Pakistan.

Local Cultural Framework

The employees having strong relations with their immediate boss, someone in the higher authority in the organisation or outside, are generally named as *mery bandy /apny bandy* (my men/persons). It can be understood with reference to the phenomenon of the 'patron-client/portege' relation. A loyal, indebted and respectful client/portege is considered highly important in the general social setting of society as well as the professional setting of an organisation. For such client/portege, the local language word *mera /apna banda* (my man/woman) is used, and this phenomenon prevails in public-private, formal-informal, socio-economic and political situations in Pakistan. And in fact, it's not

just a word but a 'mindset' as is highlighted by Syed (2016) in his article named, "who will be the next army chief?" He points out that the advisors of then prime minister, Muhammad Nawaz Sharif, advised him not to abide by the 'mindset' of *apna banda* and to select a successor for Gen. Raheel Sharif (Syed, 2016). This clearly reflects that the prodigy of *apna banda* is relevant even to the selection (promotion of a lieutenant general or a major general to the position of a general) of the army chief (head of the top profile institution in Pakistan) that the advisors were suggesting that the prime minister not adhere to it in the selection of the contemporary chief of army staff (General Qamar Javed Bajwa). Actually, *mera banda* behaves as a surrogate of the person (meaning so loyal and sincere) who appointed him/her. Lyon (2002) declares it a sign of honour and privilege if someone else takes action on one's behalf. Though, the person should be more loyal (than competent) so that the goal of the powerful figure/patron can be achieved. It infers that *mera banda* is, in fact, a means of the patron's power, his/her influence in the organisation and organisational politics (Saher & Mayrhofer, 2014). This gives a clear hunch about the role of seniors and powerful connections in career growth. To further actualise the aim of this research paper, we will focus on the following question:

How do (both external and internal) social connections influence the career trajectory of an employee in a local organisation?

In the Pakistani context, where 'who you are' is more important than 'what you are'. Connections and relationships play a significant role in career growth (Saher et al., 2014; Khilji, 2003). Consistently, more time and energy are invested in developing social relations for "getting ahead" in one's career. This is quite in line with the finding of scholarship highlighting the significant impact of the social relationship on career success (Forret & Dougherty, 2004; Langford, 2000; Michael & Yukl, 1993; Orpen, 1996; Luthans, Hodgetts, & Rosenkrantz, 1988)

Research Methodology and Methods

The data of this research has been taken from

qualitative research conducted in 2019 in the twin cities of Pakistan. The data gathering techniques included in-depth interviews and mini-case studies. The interviewees were selected purposely to ensure an equal number of managers and employees. Using an interview guideline, 15 in-depth interviews were conducted. Mini case studies were also collected to gain deeper insights into particular aspects of the way the phenomenon of embedded social networks influences the promotion process in organisations. When analysing data, we conducted the deductive qualitative content analysis as proposed by Leedy and Ormrod (2001). We derived the basic categories for the coding structure from the literature. Then, the existing text was coded, taking into account the context of the organisations. The coding of data and grouping of categories was done by the first author. To allow for inter-coder reliability, two other colleagues coded the data independently. Results are derived through comparison and consensus among researchers.

Results and Discussion

The field data has clearly revealed the pervasiveness of strong reciprocal relations on horizontal and vertical layers of organisations. These relationships revolve around a powerful figure in the system and develop into a closely knit group of people, and behaves like a faction. It has also been found that serious efforts are made to hire more people from their own circles and strategically push people from their own groups to reach higher posts in the diverse departments of the organisation. While doing so, loyalty is one of the fundamental characteristics, as highlighted by the research data. To further explain this notion, the stance of a strategic manager can help to gauge the value of loyalty in promotion leading to career progression;

If I have to promote a person to a senior position, his/her loyalty counts for 60 per cent, and the rest 40 per cent is for competency. A competent person with no loyalty and indebtedness is useless.

Consistent with this, the data has pointed out that whenever there is a new venue/opportunity, it is normal practice to place an *apna banda* there, and where there is a problem, to find an *apna banda* to

solve it. One of the respondents revealed this phenomenon while saying,

‘When *apna banda* is there, then there is no problem – all the solutions are created on the spot.’

The field data has uncovered that to maximise one's power to swiftly pursue individual as well as departmental goals, seniors cooperate and compete with each other to bring employees from their circle for new openings; every manager tries to take *apny bandy* (my men) in evaluation, align mechanisms to get *apny bandy* cleared, and in promotion elevate *apny bandy* since the elevation of the individual is an elevation of the whole group.

It has been found that employees in the organisation were aware of this phenomenon, and they openly talk about it and share their efforts to stay connected to some particular people (similarities due to caste, area, neighbourhood, family relations etc.) in the organisation and maintain the status of an in-group member (through extending services, loyalty and indebtedness). The respondents shared that maintaining connection is a challenging phenomenon (giving extra time, energy, performance etc.), but it is essential for survival and growth in the organisation. This is because the employees will grow with the growth of their group. So, the in-group will support each other in order to bring their group to power as the fruits of power trickle down to the bottom of a hierarchical group (Saher, 2010). Actually, 'the powerful figures within the organisation consciously guard their own position by strengthening the position of their followers' (Saher & Mayrhofer, 2014, p.1896). The field data has unravelled a situation that can help to understand the issue at hand. It states that a professional, when promoted to the senior most position in the organisation at that particular time, he shared his vision with his close friend in the following words:

“It's true that I finally got the most powerful position in my organisation, but to make it fully functional I have to place and promote my own sincere and loyal people (*meriy/apny bandy*) in key positions. It's only then we can effectively perform and make a difference”.

The seniors bring their people to make the system work effectively by bringing their reliable people (*apny bandy*) to key positions through new hiring and promotion. And the people who are placed in these positions are aware of the given preference, so they remain indebted and sincere to the person rather than the system and organisation. An employee encoded his priority while saying:

“My first priority is to serve my mentor who brought me to this position. He did not just help me, but he supported my whole family to survive in hard times. It will be an honour for me to serve him, his family and his people in a personal and professional capacity. For me, it is clear that everything is because of him. Even today, if he will not be in office, who knows what will happen to me”.

These employees (*apny bandy*), in general, have stronger relationships with their mentor and social circle than with the organisation. It is witnessed in Pakistan that a senior employee takes his whole team/close group (*apny bandy*) with him/her to a new posting at a higher level inside/outside the organisation. In this way, the career of junior employees grows with their senior official/ mentor. The following case can help to have an in-depth understanding of the process through which *apny bandy* swiftly ascends the career echelon.

Case Study

Mr Shakil Ahmad, 28, assistant professor, working as a special assistant to the dean of Humanities and Art in a public sector university in Pakistan. He is the most reliable person (*apna banda*) of the dean. He joined the university as an MPhil student. He was from a small town in Punjab. During his MPhil studies, he won the trust of one of his teachers and developed a close relationship with him. He helped the teachers in all the areas of class management and, in this way, got acknowledged in the department. After the completion of his degree, he secured the position of TRA in the department. Besides, he got admission to a PhD programme. Now he went the extra mile to take care of the assignments of the chair of his department and developed a close

relationship with him. The chair was working closely with the dean of faculty on various research projects, and in this way, he (Mr Ahmad) indirectly became part of that high-profile social circle where he further facilitated his patrons with extraordinary services in the shape of a resource person of the department who provided information about all the events and people in the department – a proxy of the chair and the dean in the department.

Mr Ahmad secured the position of assistant director of the campus when his chair/boss became the director. This position was created for him as the director felt unable to work without him, so on his request the position was created and he was placed on that seat...no competition, no interview and promoted to a sensitive position despite the availability of seasoned professionals. Interestingly, he (Mr Ahmad) was a Teaching Research Assistant, but as an assistant director dealt with professors and other senior officials. Consistently, he got an inner view and information regarding future openings and decisions; he was considered indispensable by his seniors. When positions of assistant professors were announced in the university, he was the strongest candidate who became assistant professor despite the fact that his PhD was still in progress, but his mentors satisfied the members of the selection board and ensured completion of all the official requirements during the probation period.

When his mentor was promoted to professor and assigned the responsibility of the dean's office, he supported the new dean informally in his assignment and provided him with all the required help to run that office effectively. The dean, in the meanwhile, had successfully created a position of assistant dean, and Mr Ahmad was transferred from the department to the dean's office. He sat in the dean's office and performed all the activities of the dean's office. In fact, he was a practising dean, and his boss was a symbolic dean.

This story reveals how an employee with a modest background goes the extra mile to serve and exhibit loyalty in order to win the confidence of a powerful figure for developing patron-client relationships and earning the title of *apna banda*.

This, in turn, opened the door for a swift progression on his career path.

This phenomenon of *apny bandy* (my men) is deeply embedded in the system, and everybody is unconsciously aware of this. So, individuals would get connected with resourceful and powerful people as they have connections in all layers of society, get entry into the organisation as *apna banda* (my man), become part of the already existing social circle and reciprocate with everyone in this group since everyone is a proxy of the patron. One of the respondents shared an interesting comment that he came across about such a situation,

‘(His patron said to him) Whenever you look at him, think about me. Remember he is not Ilyas, as he is here on my behalf, so take him as Ahsan (the patron himself)’.

Conclusion and Implication

One of the fundamental findings and insights from this research is that connections among people play a highly significant role in the career progression of employees. The insiders' view acquired through in-depth field data has revealed that employees gathered around powerful figures to formulate strong bonds and behave like factions. The research results have also uncovered that employees put conscious efforts to support their group members to take advantage of the various openings in the same and different departments, as this extends the reach and power of the people and group. In this process, priority goes to loyal and indebted employees. These employees are called *mera banda/merai bandy*, as referred by the field data. They are more loyal to their patron/facilitator than they are to the organisation and create patron-portege/client relations, as pointed out by Khilji (2003) and Lyon (2002). The rare in-depth field data points out that in this paternalistic management and organisational culture, employees' career path is directed and smoothed by their patron. Last but not most importantly, this research has established that connections with influential members are considered very important in the career mobility of employees, and this phenomenon is used by seniors to extend their power and influence, which is in line

with the findings of Saher and Mayrhofer (2014). Despite the knowledge contribution, this research has limitations. We could not extend our study to foreign organisations; however, it was beyond the framework of this research. Nonetheless, 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](#)). Further research can explore if and how connections (especially patron-portege/client phenomenon) influence upward career mobility in multinational companies working in Pakistan. Finally, this paper can be helpful in extending rare insight to national as well as international managers to comprehend secrets (tacit knowledge) regarding career growth in Pakistan.

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