

## Minorities and Cultural Identity: Insights on Shia Women of Kashmir

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**Abstract:** Religion plays a vital role in the cultural life of different spaces. It is deeply rooted in people's experiences and influences the socio-economic and political direction of societies. However the flow of influence is not necessarily symmetrical and indeed religion forms both theoretically and empirically. The differences are due to cultural legacies, historical development, geographic location, and last but not least the religious norms which predominate in society. The Shia community has a common culture of mourning throughout the globe in the months of Muharram and Safer which has religious sanctity. In this way, the Shia community at large remains a distinct identity. In this context the present paper highlights the culture of mourning in the months of Muharram and Safer based on primary sources. Interview schedule and observation were the main tool and technique of data collection.

**Key words:** Minorities, culture, women, Shia and Kashmir

### Introduction:

The twenty first century embodies the era of globalization witnessing human movements, massive exchanges of economic activities and information flows across borders. The transnational flows of people, financial resources, goods, information and culture have been increasing in a drastic way and have profoundly transformed the world (Ritzer and Malone, 2000). Accordingly, globalization affects diverse dimensions on the life of people. The world seems to be shrinking because people know more about the differences and similarities between them and other people around the world (Storey, 2009). With this knowledge, attributes of foreign cultures are constantly being adopted or adapted by their counterparts throughout the globe. As a result, a great deal of debate and discussion, even controversy has taken place about globalization in various disciplines from different angles (Bird and Stevens, 2003). Globalization effects are addressed as a determinant that impacts societies and their cultures. More precisely, the interaction between globalization and culture still remains under-researched (Prasad and Prasad, 2007). In other words, globalization represents a significant shift in the spatial reach of social relations and organization towards the interregional or intercontinental scale. This does not mean that the global

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necessarily displaces or takes precedence over local, national or regional orders of social life. Rather, the point is that the local becomes embedded within more expansive sets of interregional relations and networks of power. Thus, the constraints of social time and geographical space, vital coordinates of modern social life, no longer appear to impose insuperable barriers to many forms of social interaction or organization, as the existence of the World Wide Web and round-the-clock trading in global financial markets attests. Globalization thereby engenders a cognitive shift expressed both in a growing public awareness of the ways in which distant events can affect local fortunes and vice versa as well as in public perceptions of shrinking time and geographical space (Held and McGrew, 2002). Despite its long history, globalization remains almost constant as its forces continually aim at transcending human differences around the world. The impact of this process on communities cultural diversity has not probably yet been completely understood. Its main characteristic and the strongest tool is that the majority of cultures are homogenized. Kashmir is predominately Muslim populated area constituting 95 percent of population (census of India, 2011) Muslims are further classified into two broader sects, Sunnis and Shias. Sunnis form the majority of population whereas Shias are in minority. Minority women usually are cut off from a full involvement in the workings of the society and from an equal share in the society's rewards. Shia Women are of triple minority: they are members of minority group being Muslims as minority in India and then being women and again then being women of minority group Shia Muslims in Kashmir.

The culture outbursts as a model and blue-print for understanding the patterns of meaning that human societies create. Culture is a macro-concept. It is definitive of human society in which many or all people think in the same ways (Marana, 2006). It refers to a human-made environment which includes all the material and nonmaterial products of group life that are transmitted from one generation to the next. It is common knowledge that culture outplays in practice. This practice is observed in all sub-cultures as frivolous and equated with community prestige. As the relationship between religion and culture is reciprocal, religious systems are locked in a circle of mutual influence with social norms and patterns of social organization (Sinclair, 1986).

Religion plays a vital role in the cultural life of different spaces. It is deeply rooted in people's experiences and influences the socio-economic and political direction of societies (Stump, 2008). Religion is an important variable than race or ethnicity (Peach, 2006). On the one hand all world religions maintain male social dominance within societal structures and on the other hand, women are more inclined to participate in religious life (Young, 1987). Religious norms and prejudices may reflect patriarchal values which are characteristic of all societies of the world religions (Seguino, 2011). The role of God, or a creator of a religion is always taken by a male and the woman is primarily valued as a mother, especially as a mother to a son. Her place is in the household, less so at religious ceremonies or in public positions. The real status of a woman in a religion is more complicated (Holm, 1994). The status of women in society is an outcome of

the interpretation of religious texts and of the cultural and institutional set-up of religious communities (Klingorova and Havlecik, 2015).

Within this inquiry, two categories of culture are particularly relevant social culture and individual culture. The borderlines of a culture will not necessarily be coextensive with the constitutional realm, different cultures may co-exist concurrently. At different levels there may be coexistence of different cultures. There may be a diversity of culture on the basis of ethnic or religious differences, hence within the constitutional realm there may be a dominant culture and minority subcultures or there may be a mosaic of subcultures. There may be diversity of institutional cultures within the constitutional framework even in religiously or an ethnically homogeneous society, the cultural norms may vary at the levels of family, workplace and state. Beyond the constitutional realm, there is a developing international or global culture. This global culture is on the one hand generated by states and on the other is increasingly determinative of the limits of state power and states constitutional culture. Culture and religion are frequently treated as different categories in some ways, Nevertheless in the context of the defence against human rights principles, they also have much in common, religion as a part of culture must both influence and be influenced by social and ideological culture. However the flow of influence is not necessary symmetrical and indeed religion forms both theoretically and empirically the core of cultural resistance to human rights (Raday, 2010). Religion is hence an institutionalized aspect of culture with bureaucratic institution that is focal point for economic and political power with the society. Within secular states, religious sects are often a haven against social and cultural change and acts as a barrier against rationalized and scientific explanation.

### Review of literature

Madan (1984) defines the socio-cultural identity of the Muslims and Hindus of rural Kashmir. His study reveals that both Hindus and Muslims recognize the notion of *zatas*, the crucial factor in identity specification and in determining an individual's natural and moral conduct. The identity of Muslims notwithstanding, in actual practice with the teachings of the Quran but attaches a crucial importance to the fact of birth in the determination of a person's nature and his legitimate socio-cultural identity. At the ideological level, he observes there is complete mutual exclusion that is fundamental opposition between Hindus and Muslims. Thus he concludes though the Muslims and Hindus are mutually dependent, there is no reciprocity of perspective however, an agreement and a synthesis between the two. Querishi (1989) highlights the context of politics of the Shia minority in Pakistan. He outlines that, in the political culture of Pakistan temporal political considerations have usually been downplayed in favour of the religious considerations. Appeasement of religious elements has led to the secession of East Pakistan and the minoritization of *Ahmadi/Qadiani* sect and the same end for the Shia. The Islamic penal laws threatened the Shia in terms of their interpretation of the Quran and the Islamic economic laws, enforcing *zakat* and *ushr*, imposed a disability on the Shia for being Shia. The first stone of Shia politics began by the military

regime General *Zia-ul-haq* who forced the Shias to take into account their doctrinal, social and political interests distinct and separate from the Islamic interest of Sunni majority. The politics of Shia in the sense of being the politics of this sect by its members for the advancement of its own causes and developments and with this, the *zakat* ordinance is passed which is universally applicable to all Muslims of Pakistan irrespective of their religious beliefs. The implementation of fiqh *jafariya* had become an article of faith that would establish a legal basis for the Shia to be recognized as a legitimate part of Islamic community and as full citizens of Pakistan. Pandey (1997) describes the minorities in the global context giving historical overview of development of minority phenomenon. The development of minority phenomenon accentuated only after emergence of nationalism in the post renaissance period particularly since French revolution. He presents a theoretical model for analyzing ethnic group relations consisting of four dimensions; demography, assimilation, power relation and value system dimension. The question of national identity was sifted along with the identity problem of major religious communities in India and emerging identity problem situations. The issue of minorities was then scrutinized in relation to nationalism and secessionism in terms of language, tribe and religion. Lastly he highlights the various perilous situations threatening Indian society like ethnicity and social stratification, renaissance of ethnic identity, emergence of ethnic conflict, balkanization of society, economic deprivation and exploitation, political powerlessness, educational deprivation and national integration and concludes that subordination of some groups is by no means confined to any particular society; it is too much to say that it occurs with varying intensity on every continent and is virtually in every country of any great size.

*Kareem* (2007) uses secondary source to provide data on employment of Minorities in government, public and private Sector. He highlights the employment levels of various religious minorities and their representation in government services and autonomous bodies like defense services, profession of medicine, whole sale business and observes that the representation of Muslims is extremely low compared to Christians, Jains, Sikhs, Buddhists and Parsees which are other religious minorities present in India. In addition the author suggests some measures to promote employment such as reservation, regional resource centers etc. *Ahmad* (2007) describes the governance of minorities in Indian society within the structure of democracy. Minorities are prone to feeling challenged in democratic governance founded on the principle of majority rule. It assumes that any elected majority has a legitimate right to rule over the minority, as majority opinion is considered to be right. But the government by majority is seldom fair. This is more so because minority has little share in political decision-making. This is what he calls '*majoritarianism*' by which nation hegemony is constructed thereby denying the minorities, representation and participation in governance. In a democratic polity, it is possible that those enjoying the support and confidence of minority group will act as representatives on its behalf. But this is based on the bonds of trust that exist between minority and majority groups. But the capacity to trust the majority to address minority concerns equitably has been seriously damaged in recent years. There would be a mutual obligation to locate modes of discourse, which will open-up the possibility of intercultural understanding and ensure participation

of minorities in governance. Khan (2012) understood how globalization has impacted the higher education of Muslims and Dalits in India in a comparative and historic perspective. His study shows how Dalits across India has utilized the process of globalization and achieved educational and social mobility higher than Muslims. This has put the double burden and deprivation imposed by the Globalization on the Indian Muslims because of lack of overall educational development among the community and alienation from the whole process. Thus Muslims in India as a homogeneous community is behind all other communities in higher educational attainment, and how scheduled castes in India have made progress in the higher educational attainment, higher than Muslims in the context of globalization and their social mobility through the higher educational mobility in the post-globalized India with the help of protective discrimination policy.

### **Objectives:**

1. To highlight the specific cultural attributes of Shia women of Kashmir;
2. To find out the cultural traditions and customs among Shia Muslim women of Kashmir;
3. To suggest some measures for reframing the culture in the phase of global culture.

### **Methodology:**

Keeping in view the above objectives of the study primary sources of data collection was utilized. The sample was selected by simple random sampling method. Interview schedule were the main tool of data collection comprising of both open ended as well as closed ended questions based on the different variables

### **Findings of Study:**

Culture is macro-concept. It is definitive of human society in which many or all people think in the same ways. Bourdieu pioneered the concept of cultural capital which consists of familiarity with particular types of culture or activities can act as powerful barrier to or facilitator of social mobility. The relationship to social mobility is that cultural knowledge, goods and experiences can help to bridge access to social groups and ownership of it can bring power and social advantage. Cultural knowledge and familiarity may thus act as a hidden barrier to social progress for those that do not possess it or for those that are associated with the wrong forms of cultural capital. The literature discusses religious faith as one form of cultural capital found that religious differences were linked to class, status power and prestige. It includes possession of particular skills, practices, characteristics and behaviors associated with a particular group. Thus the study aimed to explain the potential linkages between cultural capital and social mobility to provide a model for understanding the patterns of meaning that human societies create.

The study discloses that 100 percent of respondents are visiting Imambads and attending Marsiyas as well as Majlis. There is no variation regarding the specified variables of study. The variation is only regarding the days of visiting, a significant percentage (34.33 percent) of respondents visit Imambads regularly from first to fourteenth Muharam. Most of the respondents (59 percent) visit from seventh to tenth Muharram and

**Table 1: Visiting Imamabads/ Marsiyas/Majlis**

Visiting	Area of residence		Age (in years)			Income groups			Total
	Rural	Urban	15-30	31-50	above 50	Lower	Middle	Higher	
Total no of respondents	225	225	150	150	150	150	150	150	450
Imamabads	225 (100)	225 (100)	150 (100)	150 (100)	150 (100)	150 (100)	150 (100)	150 (100)	450 (100)
Marsiyas/ Majlis	225 (100)	225 (100)	150 (100)	150 (100)	150 (100)	150 (100)	150 (100)	150 (100)	450 (100)

**Source:** Field study

a minor percentage (6.67 percent) only on tenth Muharram. This signifies culture as stagnant and homogeneous system, bonded, isolated and stubbornly resistant.

**Table 2: Charities/Donations (in the form of edibles and money)**

Charities/Donations	Area of residence		Age (in years)			Income groups			Total
	Rural	Urban	15-30	31-50	above 50	Lower	Middle	Higher	
Total no of respondents	225	225	150	150	150	150	150	150	450
Yes	191 (84.88)	192 (85.33)	106 (70.66)	134 (89.33)	143 (95.33)	128 (85.33)	124 (82.66)	131 (87.33)	383 (85.11)
No	3 (1.33)	7 (3.11)	10 (6.66)	0 (0)	0 (0)	4 (2.66)	3 (2)	3 (2)	10 (2.22)
Occasionally	31 (13.77)	26 (11.55)	34 (22.66)	16 (10.66)	7 (4.66)	18 (12)	23 (15.33)	16 (10.66)	57 (12.66)

**Source:** Field study

The study reveals that 85.11 percent of respondents regularly pay charities and donations in the form of rice, variety of dishes, sweet dishes especially halwa tea, juice, fruits etc. in which above 50 age group constitutes the highest proportion and 15-30 age groups the lowest. There is little difference regarding the economic status and area of residence of respondents. Thus the identity of minority is anticipated rather than enforced and allotted. The minority represents the universal, while also reclaiming the specific.

In the dressing pattern 74.66 percent of respondents prefer black dress whereas only 25.33 percent respondents prefer any colour. The study indicates that the wearing black dress pattern is going up across generations while as preference of any colour goes down. This signifies culture as adaptive in a state of constant change and rife with internal conflicts and inconsistencies.

**Table 3: Dress pattern**

Dress pattern	Area of residence		Age (in years)			Income groups			Total
	Rural	Urban	15-30	31-50	above 50	Lower	Middle	Higher	
Total no of respondents	225	225	150	150	150	150	150	150	450
Black	175 (77.77)	161 (71.55)	139 (92.66)	103 (68.66)	94 (62.66)	103 (68.66)	119 (79.33)	114 (76)	336 (74.66)
Any colour	50 (22.22)	64 (28.44)	11 (7.33)	47 (31.33)	56 (37.33)	47 (31.33)	31 (20.66)	36 (24)	114 (25.33)

**Source:** Field study

**Table 4: Customs and traditions**

Customs and Traditions	Area of residence		Age (in years)			Income groups			Total
	Rural	Urban	15-30	31-50	above 50	Lower	Middle	Higher	
Total no of respondents	225	225	150	150	150	150	150	150	450
No marriage ceremonies	225 (100)	225 (100)	150 (100)	150 (100)	150 (100)	150 (100)	150 (100)	150 (100)	450 (100)
No new business establishments	225 (100)	225 (100)	150 (100)	150 (100)	150 (100)	150 (100)	150 (100)	150 (100)	450 (100)
No new construction	225 (100)	225 (100)	150 (100)	150 (100)	150 (100)	150 (100)	150 (100)	150 (100)	450 (100)

**Source:** Field study

The study illustrates depicts that the traditions and customs remain bastions of established social practices and the claim of religious freedom are employed in an attempt to stem the tide of established customs and traditions. The present study deconstructs the “homogenization” of cultures by the process of globalization and shows how minorities are resilient towards homogenization and repressible towards cultural identity. Thus the sign of global homogenization is at static pace in the community which hinders their social adjustment at large level of society. Thus there is need of alteration in norms and value system dimension so as to be a part of global system.

**Table 5: Norms and values**

Norms and values	Area of residence		Age (in years)			Income groups			Total
	Rural	Urban	15-30	31-50	above 50	Lower	Middle	Higher	
Total no of respondents	225	225	150	150	150	150	150	150	450
Uncombed hair	225 (100)	225 (100)	150 (100)	150 (100)	150 (100)	150 (100)	150 (100)	150 (100)	450 (100)
No jewellers	225 (100)	225 (100)	150 (100)	150 (100)	150 (100)	150 (100)	150 (100)	150 (100)	450 (100)

**Source:** Field study

### **Conclusion:**

Culture connotes as a relatively static and homogenous system, bounded isolated and stubbornly resistant. Attending the Majlis is the static feature of community. Many of the practices defended in the name of culture impinge on women rights. The patriarchal practices such as father's and brother's control and husband's right to obedience are widely prevalent in the community. The dress pattern of women in the community speaks intersection between traditional culture and religious norms. There seems minute amount of mobility among women of three generation in attending Majlis, praying, wearing Burqa and dress pattern. However, attitudinal differences are between the highly educated respondents and less educated respondents. The inferiority feeling is prevalent among some women which prevents their educational attainment and consequently contributed to their low rate of occupational and cultural mobility. It is only at the level of right of individual women to consent to living under patriarchal norms that autonomy must be respected, since it is only at the individual level that the systematic impact of patriarchal authority in the community can be avoided. Thus where there is clash between cultural practices or religious norms and the right to gender equality, it is the right to gender equality that must have normative hegemony but the practice is totally different in the community which proved that decline in their social mobility has become a source of alienation and an obstacle in the social adjustment at larger level of society. Hence there is need to rethink, reflect on and reshape our culture to make it a part of the global culture at large. The issue of

globalization is signified by the word “diversity” in approach there are also diverse impacts. The study agrees with the theoretical model of Pandey who gave four dimensions; demography, assimilation, power relation and value system dimension in studying majority-minority relations.

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