Adaptation of VB (Vartan Bhanji) in Urban Centers: Tracking Signs of Cultural Lag in an Evolving Pakistan

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Abstract- The scholarship has depicted that *Vartan Bhanji (rural social institution of social exchange)* has shaped itself in the urban settings of Pakistan (Alia, 2017; Saher & Mayrhofer 2014; Saher, 2010; Chaudhry 1999). While VB has adapted according to the formal expectations of the urban system (by avoiding written records and resorting to less open exchange of gift/services), it has also influenced the formal processes of urban institutions; including political parties, professional organizations, civil services and the military, leading to the personalization of the impersonal. Qadeer (1999) highlights it as a reflection of inconsistency and a sign of cultural lag. To date, this issue has not been explored and no published material is available on it. Considering this gap in literature, this paper is going to unravel this phenomenon and will contribute to the discourse on cultural lag. To meet the objectives of this study, qualitative research with in-depth interviews have been conducted with the female teachers of a public sector school. The results show that the respondents were explicitly aware of VB, they accepted the existence of VB based relations among colleagues, and use the three items of VB (i.e., daughters' rights, reciprocity and *maang*-a request for help which must be satisfied) to develop fictive relation (of two types) and an informal support system in a formal organization.

Keywords: *Vartan Bhanji*, **cultural lag, urbanization, working women, Pakistan**

I. INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of urbanization is increasing at a great pace. As per the recent census, about one third of Pakistan's population is living in urban places and it is further increasing at the rate of 3.45% per year. This reflects an immense increase and it has encircled a majority of Pakistani population. Interestingly, the momentum of change this phenomenon is contributing to is not holistically noticed. It has changed the whole system and structure of the society; and the continuum of rural and urban has dissolved due to the cash economy, centralized state, transportation and communication technologies (Qadeer, 1999). Consistently, devising new mechanisms and realigning the existing mechanisms is the need of the hour.

The scholarship has highlighted cross play between the rural and urban institutions. 'Social organization and cultural norms are being ruralized as much as they are being urbanized' (Qadeer, 1999, p. 1205). It further points out that rural mechanisms of power structures embedded in the philosophy of clan, *Baradari* and family have hindered the process of social change. Even today, all formal and informal interactions and transactions are made through personalized dealings. All political, professional and occupational institutions adhere to the familial model and operate as extended families (Saher & Mayrhofer, 2014; Saher et al., 2014; Qadeer, 1999). Quite contrary to this, the urban system and urbanization is based on formalization at all levels. Publicly, organizations are claiming to operate on modern mechanisms but on the inside, they operate on the rural ethos/ system i.e., VB (Saher & Mayrhofer, 2014; Saher et al., 2014; Qadeer, 1999). This is in line

with what literature has highlighted, 'Pakistani appear 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 remain same' (Subohi, 2009).

At this juncture of discussion, it is important to have a brief introduction of VB to effectively handle the issue at hand. It is an institutionalized custom of gift and service exchange to develop social relations, pervasive in Pakistan and India (Cialdini 2001). This institution was developed in agrarian-rural societies to manage labour through *sype* system and later became framework to develop relationships (Eglar, 1960). This institution of exchange is primarily maintained among relatives (*Baradari/*brotherhood), but it also acts as a wayfor non-relatives to socially integrate into the family like relations. Different level of execution of VB generates two main type relationship; more-close (Pakki VB) and less-close (katchi VB). VB outlines the meaning and management of social networks in Pakistan, based on daughters' rights, reciprocity and maang (a request for help which must be satisfied). Khilji (2003) highlights, 'This family/social allegiance is binding and generally takes precedence over rules ... members of a group feel obliged to look after each other' (pp. 115-116). The rural institution of VB, its items and functions have transformed due to the strong influence of industrialization, migration and urbanization (Chaudhry 1999); a record of gifts are no longermaintained and gifts are not openly exchanged at the workplace. Despite all this, it works as a fundamental cultural value and influences individual and collective interaction in personal and professional settings (Saher & Mayrhofer, 2014). It permeates life throughout the country, though it's intensity may vary from region to region (Lyon 2002). Khilji (2003) argues that the family like relationships are valued more than rules and regulations in organizations in Pakistan. It is quite interesting that on one side the system and organizations (in urban set up) uphold the claims of rules and regulations, whereas on the other side their working mechanisms are based on the personalized mechanisms of VB. This shows a conflicting scenario and our paper will explore this phenomenon called 'cultural lag'.

The paper comprises of five sections; methodology and methods, field data and analysis, conclusion and future research directions.

II.   Research Methodology and Methods

Keeping in view the nature of study, qualitative research methodology was employed; an un-folding, open-ended and rather emerging research with acquired data in the form of words, phrases, gestures (Neuman, 2009). Middle-aged working women were considered as the target group of this research being the most suitable and informed respondents; to further find more suitable respondents, female teachers were selected from a public sector higher secondary school. To actualize this research, a case study of a public school located in Rawalpindi was conducted. The field work lasted for 30 days and was conducted by the 2nd author. Initial work was informal to gain trust and general views of teachers on the issue. Later on, official permission for the research was granted to start formal research. A purposive sampling technique was used to select these respondents, as it facilitated in gaining experiential and in-depth insight on the issue at hand. To acquire realistic, authentic and valid data, field research was conducted in a naturalistic setting. The mentioned researcher carried out face-to-face, in-depth interviews with 14 married female teachers. Senior teachers were selected, as they have spent 10-15 years in the college and hence have relationships within the institute. On average, an interview lasted for approximately 40-50 minutes and was conducted in Urdu language to maintain the informal friendly environment. Mini case studies were collected to gain deeper understanding on the topic. It simply refers to penning down what you saw, were told or reconstructing a case history of an individual, to comprehend various phenomena in more detail (Neuman, 2009).

Data was analyzed through Thematic Analysis Technique (TAT) after categorizing it according to the themes. Themes were generated with the help of 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 was used. The name of the institution and respondents have been changed to maintain privacy and research ethics.

The respondents in the field were not only aware of VB but exercised it in the organization to develop and maintain familial relationship with their colleagues for greater adjustment. They shared that the *panji*system (local Punjabi word for VB) was an old tradition passed to them from their elders. It involved exchange of gifts at various occasions and was extended towards exchange of favors when required. They were also aware of the proactive participation of women in the execution of exchange practices on the principles of daughters right, reciprocity and *maang* (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."

Respondents communicated that *panji*(VB)facilitated them to develop and maintain close personal relationships; they acknowledged that more you invested in a relationship the stronger the relationship had become; the result matches the perspective of Eglar (1960) and Nasir & Mielke (2015). Nasir and Mielke (2015) declared VB as a glue for social bonding. Basic rule of continuing VB is reciprocity. A respondent said that,

"It is like a debt that you must pay. Otherwise, it will have adverse effects on the relationship if non-reciprocation increases. You do have it in mind how the other person will reciprocate."

The data suggests that although a lot has changed due to the economic viability of women, her social and traditional role has not changed. She does play her role outside the house but her duties inside are still the same.

 Respondents shared that,

"We do support our families economically but side by side we also manage our duties as a daughter, mother and as a wife. These roles are the same. You can say that now we have to perform more than one role, economic role and role as a family's caretaker."

Literature suggests that although women are now taking an active part in the economy of family, their traditional duties have not changed, as highlighted by Saher, Matloob, Tahreen, Ali, and Al Sulim (2013). Research data reveals that these women are still in an unprivileged position due to the philosophy of VB; considered as "*prayadhan*" and institution of dowry existed as a compensation mechanism to strengthen the position of women. This clearly reflects that the 'mind set' regarding a daughter's role (one of the basic principles of VB) has not changed and influences the status of women in an urbanized setup; her economic role has transformed but her familial role and position has not been upgraded. To sum up the argument presented field data, VB is prevailing and its philosophy is putting more pressure on individuals in urbanized centers through creating conflicting situations causing cultural lag.

Moreover, the data shows that kin-like relationships are made with non-kins based on trust and loyalty. A teacher shared a case study in which she explains her close relationship with her colleague. Her smile emphasized the positive nature of their relationship.Other respondents also affirmed that strong relations are built upon trust and loyalty. A respondent said that,

"When a strong relationship is developed then you are sincere to each other. Sometimes you become so close that you are like sisters. You completely trust each other."

To further elucidate this phenomenon a case is presented here.

Case1

Ms. Amna is a senior teacher in college with working experience of 10 years. She has a very close relationship with her colleague, friend and neighborMehreen. She immigrated from India and was married here in Pakistan. With time, a very close relationship was developed not only with not just her neighbour, but also with the whole family. She said they take our parents as their own and she calls their parents as '*ami*' and '*abu*'. They exchange gifts on various occasions. A few years back their father died. On his death, we all were with them in their hard time. Her whole family fully supported them. Her brothers arranged all the food for everyone at that time. Now she has moved to another location but their relationship is still strong, and they are like a family.

This case study depicts the depth of a fictive relationship. It is quite clear that the respondents developedkin-like relationships with non-kin to develop their informal support system in a formal organization. Moreover, the next case study is a clear depiction of how informal such relationships are.

Case 2

Ms. Ifrah is a senior teacher. She has been teaching at the institution for 15 years. She started her career as a teacher in the junior wing and now she is a senior teacher of college. During a research discourse, the researcher was with her when another teacher came there. It was witnessed that she asked her for a favour: to change the seat of her daughter in her class (sitting arrangement is fixed for students in this school). The other teacher showed reluctance as she would have to change the sitting arrangement for the whole class to accommodate this request. But, Ms Ifrah stood up, hugged her and asked her lovingly, "Do it, do it for me" ("*Kar de na. Mere liyekar de*"). By doing this, she transformed the formal situation into an informal/familial one (actualized *maang*). The other teacher laughed and said "Okay, I will change her seat just for you". When the teacher left the room, Ms. Ifrah shared, "I have such good people around me. We bonded together for years".

This case study is a clear revelation of execution of *'maang'* (explicit request), an important principle of VB. Their informal chat shows their closeness and strong familial relationship.

Another respondent sharedher thoughts regarding her employment at this school for the last 14 years. She said that,

"It's been 14 years since I am 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. Summer and winter vacation time is very tough for me. I can't 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 Saman has become a section head. 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 it 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."

Case 3

Ms. Asma is a senior teacher with a teaching experience of thirteen years. She has a close friendship with Ms. Sadia, her colleague. Shedoesnot visit her colleagues, with the exception of Ms. Sadia. She also considers her colleague Ms. Wajiha as a friend but she has never visited her home. She said that,

"I don't go to her home and she doesn't mind'.A bit of a difference is OK. It does not affect our relationship. She is a trustworthy person and understands my problems. She invited me to her home but I couldn't go. It doesn't affect our relationship because she knows that I am busy with my family. Our personal terms are fine. But at the same time, I know when such excuses can work and when they can't. Recently, her father died. I didn't take a minute to decide and went to her. I knew I must. She needed me more than ever. Earlier, I never visited her. In thirteen long years, it was the first time I visited her. At that time, I didn't need to think. I knew I should be with her."

The two types of fictive relationships, more close and less close, as is evident from the above case study. It exhibits that respondents are aware of the logic and maintain more-close (Pakki VB) and less-close (Katchi VB) familial relationship withcolleagues in the studied organization.

The data highlights the effort of extension of familial social circles, developed through extending VB based exchange,to more colleagues. 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, that the VB relations are prevalent in urban centers but these relationships are extending at a great pace and

length ("*Barhnaigya -sehronmai ye...mere khyalmaitoubohatbarhgyahai.*"). Another teacher sitting beside her added that,

"*Due to our job, our social circle has increased a lot compared to a house wife. A lot of relationships are made at the workplace. We visit other schools for different works. We attend workshops, go for paper checking, for practical exam conduction, for invigilation etc. Doing a job matters a lot, relationships do extend.*"

She added 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.*"

Above responses justify that in urban centers and organization (expected to be more formal) informal social relations are getting more strong-widening its circle as it used to be in the rural areas.

Last but not least in any way, one stance that will support to conclude,

"*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 relationship into informal one. It is in line with the perspective of Qadeer (1999) when he reveals about ruralism in the urbanization and prevalence of cultural lag.

IV. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTION

In conclusion, research explores the interplay of VB in a public sector organization of Rawalpindi. We have uncovered that the core of social relations is still Vartan Bhanjiin urban areas. Although it has rounded off its explicit dimensions to align with organizational context but it is also creating impact on the life of the respondents in the institution (school) and urban life. The principles of VB(i.e., reciprocity, daughter's role and *maang*) are actualized among colleagues to develop familial in the formal institutions The field results and analysis also reveal that the economic situation of the target group has changed; but their social status and assumptions regarding them have remained embedded in rural ethos of VB. Consistently Pakistani women have to embody traditional gender perceptions (Safdar & Yasmin, 2020).

Interestingly, informal social relations are getting stronger: widening its circle in urban centers and organization (expected to be more formal) than it used to be in the rural areas. This is because of thehigh rate of social mobility and interaction among diverse people exercising the principles of VB todevelop personalized relationships and extending their social support network. This research thus concludes that informalization in urbanization is not decreasing;rather, it is increasing and contributing to the prevalence of cultural lag as in an explicit scenario, formalization is posed but on implicit deep-down level informalization is in practice.

This research is a valuable contribution to the discourse on VB and cultural lag. With the help of qualitative research, in-depth and experiential data is acquired and valid results are generated through analysis. It is a complete model; the results and its conclusions are authentic and pragmatic and also justified from the data and literature. However, there are still some limitations. First and foremost, is thatthe research has only been conducted in one public sector organization located in Rawalpindi; consistently, the issue of generalization may arise. Second, the results of the study are not pertinent for all readers as only working women are targeted. Despite these two issues, this research is highly significant in a situation where there is no research and published materialthat is available on this topic at hand.

A number of avenues for future research also emerge from the study. First, a larger sample of organizations can help in a more holistic understanding of the issue. Second, a more improved research methodology like triangulation and more extensive field work can be taken into account in the future for a better

generalization. Third, it will be very interesting if a research is planned focusing on the pressures cultural lag puts (increasing ruralization in urbanization) on the individuals, the institution and the system.

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