A Social Autopsy of Pakistan's Gendered Colonial Legacy

SYEDA TAYYABA MAHMOOD *analyses the issues faced by Pakistan's Khwajasira community and their barriers to equal treatment as citizens.*

Activists in Lahore stand outside the Press Club to protest against the violation of trans rights in Pakistan *Image: RedMiNote | WikiCommons*

Pakistan's familiarity with gender-based violence is reflected in the 2021 Gender Inequality Index, in which it is ranked 153rd out of 156 countries (Iqbal 2021). The frequency of these events undeniably affects Pakistani citizens' quality of life—especially those on the margins. Through the consideration of recent cases of gender-based violence and discrimination toward the Khwajasira community in Pakistan, this article explores the ways in which they negotiate and struggle for agency.

The word Khwajasira is a direct translation for 'the caretaker of the house' and encapsulates queer folk, transgender, intersex, non-binary, and gender-fluid people (Moiz and Gaewalla 2021, 59). In focusing on cases of discrimination and stereotypes, this article aims to highlight the lived experiences and complex negotiations for agency the Khwajasira community may face.

Women and non-binary people in Pakistani society have consistently been represented as highly sexualised and deviant (Dixit 2021). This understanding suggests that gender and sexuality must be controlled to protect these individuals and onlookers from their own undoing. Thus, the onus is on the object of society's lustful desires and stigma: women and non-binary people. As Dixit (2021) commented, 'they either praise them to high heaven or throw them in the mud'. This applies to women and Khwajasiras, who are sought after by men to fulfil their sexual desires while being targeted and brutalised by those same hands.

Meanwhile, the Khwajasira community strives

to prove their right to be part of society as equal citizens while facing backlash and violence. The situation is slowly improving through various grassroot movements and key pieces of legislation, but it is nonetheless vital to understand why and how such deeply problematic sentiments have developed into a treacherous situation for women and Khwajasiras.

The Impact of Colonialism on the Khwajasira Community

The Khwajasira community is rooted in the colonial legacy of South Asia that Pakistan inherited, and is faced with the constant threat of social erasure. Despite being a highly respected and revered community in pre-modern and pre-colonial South Asia, colonialism on the Indian subcontinent restructured the discourse on the Khwajasira body 'as the… gendered risk to national strength [to] be "extirpated"'(Moiz and Gaewalla 2021, 59). The British colonists considered the peculiar gender-fluid nature of the 'ungovernable' Indians to be 'criminal' as they represented an anomaly—to maintain power, the colonists withheld what was left of the Khwajasira community's agency (Moiz and Gaewalla 2021). The moral panic created by the sheer existence of this once highly revered community lingers in present-day Pakistan; the deeply rooted colonial mentalities have embedded themselves within Pakistan's social fabric even decades after independence.

Part of the colonial project was to take agency and power from natives to make them more submissive, docile, and easily governed. This meant imposing the bio-medical gender binary—backed by a eugenic model of supremacy—onto the queer community, leading to criminalisation (Moiz and Gaewalla 2021). During this process colonial doctors studied the Khwajasira bodies, deeming them 'abnormal' and pointing to them as evidence of 'Indian and Muslim society's sexual depravity' (Moiz and Gaewalla 2021, 61). During these medical examinations, the doctors labelled the Khwajasiras as 'eunuchs,' which further fueled discrimination and increased surveillance (Moiz and Gaewalla, 2021).

The colonial project's tools to discriminate against the Khwajasira community are further outlined in the British India 1871 Census, which relied on rigidly codified demarcations between genders. Appadurai (1993) compared the surveys conducted by pre-modern dynasties with that of the 1871 census of British India and noted that the latter was far more interested in the identification of population categories to fit rigidly defined British classifications. By 1907, the Northwest Province (NWP) in British India elaborated on the 1873 policy decreeing that: 'the eunuchs lead an immoral life…all eunuchs who dance and sing in public dressed in female attire should be registered under the Act' (Hinchy 2019, 165). We see the echo of such sentiments in present-day Pakistani society as well, as these mentalities were carried forward and exacerbated by stark social class divisions and extremist religious ideologies. Communities thus faced discrimination, violence, persecution, and harassment curated by the reverberance of colonialism (Moiz and Gaewalla 2021).

Navigating Queer Bodies and Religiosity in Pakistan

There have been repeated attempts to keep the Khwajasira community outside the confines of Islam and Mosques. A community which once held a respected station in Mughal courts can now be found begging on the streets. Often they are referred to with derogatory terms such as hijra, which is derived from the Arabic word Hijrah, or 'migration'(Britannica 2020). In the Islamic context, this word is used to refer to Prophet Muhammad's journey from Mecca to Medina to escape persecution in 622 CE (Ibid). In pre-colonial India, the term hijras referred to vocalists and performers who appeared in both Hindu and Muslim courts.

They were also regarded as 'agents of fertility' and were invited to make appearances in household birth celebrations and even weddings to bestow blessings in return for payment (Bearak 2016). Indigenous communities continue to hold the Khwajasira community in high regard and they remain a well-integrated part of society in more rural areas; this reflects how religion and religious beliefs vary in interpretation and practice in urban and rural areas.

A common argument used to demonise this community stems from an interpretation of the Quran and Bible story of Prophet Lot and the annihilation of a village of people who engaged in homosexuality (Hendricks 2010). Other more inclusive and critical interpretations of the parable infer that in actuality, the people in the village had been perpetrating mass rape, which alters the message altogether and alludes to the demonisation of the community as immoral and sexually deviant (Hendricks 2010). Within the branch of Islam, Sufism, there are examples of saints in Pakistan such as Shah Hussain who display a love outside of the heterosexual norm. Shah Hussain saw the love between him and his beloved, a Brahmin Hindu boy, as appreciation of the divine's creation which therefore strengthened his connection with the divine itself (Warraich 2016). Despite these and other examples of an inclusive Islam, extremist religious circles continue to portray Islam as a cisgender-heterosexual affair in Pakistan, with men mainly acting as the gatekeepers of religion.

The state has recognised Khwajasira as citizens; it is thus the inability to decolonise ideology that truly creates hurdles for the community to exercise this agency granted by the state in the form of legal citizenship.

The State's Involvement in Curating Agency

After years of petitioning and strife on the part of Khwajasira activists, Pakistan's parliament passed the landmark Transgender Persons Protection of Rights Act of 2018. Through this key piece of legislation, Khwajasira activists have been able to assert their status as citizens of the country—a notion that has historically been challenged due to colonial discourses.

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Khwajasira activists have maintained their positionality through the popularisation of Sufi Muslim queer philosophies and indigenous gender-sexuality orders, entrenched through the state's legislative system. Through their ongoing struggle, the community has been able to subvert the liberal account that 'the nation states require a de-Islamised and secularised discourse, devoid of subjectivity and spirituality, to further the cause of human rights (Moiz and Gaewalla 2021, 60). A part of their struggle has been to demystify the Khwajasira community's status as the 'Other' which exists outside of the norm of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and to refute the argument that their existence is grounded in a Western Liberal agenda. They have continued to exist as a part of Pakistani society despite living under constant threat and violence; their indigenous identities and observance of cultural practices that the British colonists tried to erase only reinforce their Pakistani identity.

As Shaikh (2018) detailed, the 2009 Supreme Court ruling which granted the Khwajasira community national identity cards was a step towards their acceptance and tolerance as citizens of the country. These individuals can now use their national identity cards to apply for jobs and passports. For members of the community who are practising Muslims, this milestone piece of legislation permits them to perform the obligatory practice of Hajj in Saudi Arabia, where approximately 40 to 50 members of the community are sent annually (Kanso 2018). Despite Saudi Arabia criminalising

homosexuality, the community is now able to perform their pilgrimage with the legal safety net given by the Pakistani state. Pakistan's 2009 ruling undoubtedly represented a step towards tolerance for the Khwajasira community, but even this victory was complex as it used colonial language in calling the community 'eunuchs' (Shaikh 2018).

Activism for Social Change

The Khwajasira identity as concretely Pakistani complicates the state's refusal to recognise the role that gender and sexuality has played in forming the social fabric of Pakistan. The state presents a highly romanticised image of effeminate bodies which enforces gender stereotypes as the norm, further propagating the notion that the refusal to adhere to this socially constructed norm is 'anti-Pakistani' and immoral. Moiz and Gaewalla (2021, 64) present a compelling social commentary regarding the feminisation of the Khwajasira community as 'dysfunctional men,' as such narratives posit a 'social map…that the state, whether colonial or nation, wants to assert its supremacy over because it obtains its legitimacy and security by controlling it.' A cookie-cutter model which forces people into certain boxes that are easier for the state to police, surveil, and control fails to recognise that this suppression, othering, and denial of identity further fuels resistance.

Some organisations, such as the Gender Interactive Alliance, help to promote the visibility of the community and fight for their rights. The organisation has planned and participated in various events such as Worlds AIDS day, public protests, and training programmes (Khan 2014). Most recently, the community's protests received a great deal of traction following a brutal gang-rape of prominent community members, perpetuated by a group of Beelas—a term used to describe an ethnic group of mostly Afghan immigrants who are violent to the Khwajasira community and other trans-feminine bodies ("Khwaja Siras" 2021). The protestors demanded that citizens be made aware of and reject colonial imperialist teaching which has deeply impacted how the Kwajasira community is treated in contemporary Pakistan ("Khwaja Siras" 2021). They also demanded that Beelas be recognised as a violent group, as well as asserting the right for the Khwajasira community to access education, affordable healthcare, inclusive and well-informed legislation, employment opportunities, and the right to dignity and protection (Ibid).

Conclusion

Religion, or rather the use of religion as a political tool, plays a pivotal role in Pakistani society. The ways in which private and public spheres have become interconnected exhasurbated divisions. This article is in no way meant to critique religion itself—rather, it is meant to raise questions regarding how divisions are deepened, oppression is inflicted, and harmful status quos are maintained. Activist and grassroots movements in Pakistan aim to subvert the nation-states' gender binary and patriarchal structure in the hopes of a more accepting and equitable social existence. The Khwajasira activists have time and again worked within the system and sought protection from the government, standing as a testament to how the community has honed its national identity.

The change Pakistan requires is ideological and systemic. The ongoing effort of communities on the ground must be highlighted, as they have proved to bring about fruitful outcomes. Much in the way of gender and identity equality must be actively sought, both legally and culturally.

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