

Current Conflict and the Ensuing Debates about Identity among the Pakhtuns in Cultural and Virtual Spaces

Muhammad Ayub Jan*

Abstract

The participation of Pakhtuns¹ in debates of identity during the current conflict in Pakistan-Afghanistan borderland has received little attention from the scholars of conflict studies on the region. These debates (held in cultural and virtual spaces) represent a non-violent, dialogical and discursive resistance put up by people who are often painted by media as perpetrators of violence. This paper argues that, there is discernible change in Pakhtun region and that one way to understand such a change is to study the debates and deliberations that engage diverse people at inclusive and exclusive spaces of engagement such as cyberspace (internet) and cultural spaces such as hujras, jirgas, etc. The analysis in the paper are based on data collected from two internet discussion forums as 'Global Hujra' hosted by Khyberwatch and 'Pashtun Forums' between 2007-2010. Besides these forums, insights were taken from the fieldwork done by the author in district Malakand (Pakistan) to reflect on debates in cultural spaces such as hujra, etc. The findings of the paper suggest that the use of cyberspace among Pakhtuns itself is an evidence of change that highlights the acceptance and engagement of new means of communication (globalization agents) for the purpose to generate debate. The way issues are initiated, deliberated and articulated on these forums represents acumen, keenness, and dedication of the posters. The dialogical skills demonstrated by the educated Pakhtun through these internet forums represent a change from other wise traditional forums of deliberation such as jirgas or hujras. Moreover, the debates and interaction on internet relate to the dominant official discourse of Pakistani identity and the radical Islamic discourse. In the relating process the deliberations constitute a discourse, which manifest identity construction.

Key Words: Identity, Virtual Spaces, Pakhtuns, Conflict.

Introduction

Pakhtuns being the second most numerous ethnic group of Pakistan, have at times felt socio-economic and politically marginalized and therefore nurtured sporadic irredentism (Cohen, 2005; Jaffrelot, 2005; Weiss, 1999). Current unrest in their region, such as the North West of Pakistan, has also added to their disenchantment (Weiss, 1999; Cohen, 2005). Moreover, they have been historically sensitive

* Muhammad Ayub Jan, Department of Political Science, University of Peshawar, Peshawar.
Email: ayub@uop.edu.pk.

about their ethnic identity (see Jan, 2010). Therefore, the ensuing conflict and unrest provided an opportunity to the educated Pakhtuns to engage in a discursive process of identity making. The discourse is visible through interaction at cyberspace and other cultural spaces such as hujra, Jirga etc. The community which constitutes this discourse is debating and negotiating features of identity, particularly the relationship between religion and culture. This effort on the part of Pakhtuns indicates a non-violent dialogical and discursive resistance.

The literature on current conflict in the Pak-Afghan region, quite often emphasizes on impacts of conflict on security, local economy and politics and ignore the identity formation processes. This paper does not claim that the above mentioned identity formation processes are first such occurrences, particularly when the available literature does refer to debates on internet about identity among Pakhtuns (Edwards,1996). Nevertheless, the paper argues that the current unrest has multiplied the efforts in this direction; and a deliberate effort to deal with the crisis through a discourse is surely distinct. Secondly, the discourse also demonstrates how Pakhtuns link the crisis to ethnic identity and revisit its features. Thirdly, the study elaborates on the use of and interaction with new technology in the process of identity formation. Simultaneously, Pakhtun get influenced by the new technology and employs it as a tool. Therefore, making 'technological determinism' irrelevant.² Also, the non-violent, dialogical and discursive nature of resistance put up by the posters through these forums is emphasized by the study. All these factors dispel the conservative image of the Pakhtun very simply and naively constructed and projected by some national and international media and academia.

The first section of the paper focuses on theoretical discussion on Internet and Identity formation processes. The second section explains the methodological issues such as the research questions guiding this study, the site of the research and a brief introduction of the spaces. The following section focuses on Pakhtun identity, and the relationship between Islam and Pakhtun Identity. These discussions are followed by empirical evidence of how identity debates are carried out in cultural and virtual spaces, the

participants in these debates and the content of these debates. The paper is concluded with general remarks about the identity related processes among Pakhtuns.

Identity Formation Processes and Technological Change: Theoretical Debates

This study is guided by multidisciplinary theoretical debates on identity, technology, ethnicity, etc. It is guided by a social constructivist and interactional understanding of ethnicity and identity; emphasizing on activism of ethnic groups to create, negotiate and reshape their own identities (Cornell and Hartmann, 1998: 72-85) through interaction (Barth, 1969; Eriksen, 2002).

This study endorses the significance of technology for the process of identification. However, it avoids 'technological determinism' which refers to unidimensional impact of technology on society or humans (Comunello and Anzera, 2012). Internet is a recent technology that has attracted enormous attention from scholars. I shall argue below that the very activism of Pakhtuns on internet refer to the agency of Pakhtuns and technology as a tool harnessed to serve the purpose. Also the effort on the part of Pakhtuns to reshape the cyberspace into a space that not only symbolically connotes culture but reproduction of cultural institutions through cyberspace. However, due to limitations of the scope, this study could not see how the power relations are structured in such a space. Thus on conceptual level this study see internet not just a tool to organize but also as a space to articulate (Aourgh and Alexander, 2011).

An important aspect of this study is to understand that the cultural space and cyberspace (presented in this study) manifest a dichotomy of online and offline world. However, how important is this dichotomy needs to be investigated. This study supports the premises that these two are connected and it is difficult to disconnect one from another (Zhao et al., 2008, Comunello and Anzera, 2012) in a range of activities such as articulation, identity formation and mobilization. This is despite the fact that online and offline encounters are distinct at least in the way that online encounters can be anonymous and disembodied (from corporal, physical body) but offline encounters cannot (Zhao et al., 2008). It is

also difficult to disassociate online engagement and activism from offline activism. However, at times online space is utilized against the offline world because the offline world may be fraught with dangers. This is particularly important in challenging a dominant discourse (Warf and Grimes, 1997). To Pakhtuns who have been using these forums to debate their identity, the offline world is a source and subject at the same time for their online discussions. For them discussions are about the real world out there, out of the bounds of virtual world. However, they are also conscious that the site of the discussion is virtual and perhaps offer at least some kind of security vis a vis real world which perhaps is fraught with greater dangers. It is this context that explains the dichotomy of online and offline world.

There is plenty of empirical evidence suggesting the identity formation processes are carried out through online debates among ethnic groups, particularly those living as ethnic diaspora (Wenjing, 2005; Panagakos, 2003; Djuric, 2003; Stokes, 2007). Moreover, some scholars have also referred to engagement of Pakhtuns in online discussions that involve identity (Edwards, 1996). Therefore, this study is not the first one to elaborate on the virtual debate on identity among Pakhtuns. Edwards (1996) has added an excellent discussion on the internet messages posted on news associated websites in 1994 when the rise of TNSM alarmed internet users to debate the phenomenon of religious radicalism. In fact, what started as a commentary on the news report added by one of the participants the discussion became heated discourse from entrenched positions through which participants discussed the role of Islam in Pakhtuns society, the relationship of culture and religion in Pakhtun society, increasing radicalism in the region. Below is an effort to take that discussion further and see how Pakhtuns have been meaningfully engaged in a debate about their ethnic identity through cultural and virtual spaces.

Methodology

The broader research questions guiding this research work include; *is there a discernible debate about identity among the Pakhtuns? What means are adopted for such debates? What kinds of participants are involved in these debates? What is the subject of these debates?*

How these debates are related to the current conflict in the region? Do these debates represent continuity or change?

To answer these questions, the paper proposes that there is a significant, vibrant and lively debate about the Pakhtun identity. Such a debate is carried out at multiple spaces particularly at cultural spaces and virtual spaces. Just as these spaces (online and offline) are not very disconnected the content of the debate carried out at these spaces is also not dissimilar. It also claims that the subject of these debates is the features of Pakhtun identity and their relationship with other identities within the context of recent conflict. Most importantly, how Islam and cultural features are juxtaposed and how they represent continuity and disjunction.

To answer the above questions diverse data has been used. Primary data was collected through interviews conducted in the fieldwork in Malakand between 2008 and 2009 to investigate debates in cultural spaces such as hujras and jirgas. Primary data in form of views and analysis from internet forums was collected to see debates in virtual or cyberspace. Finally, secondary data in form of news reports and articles on Peace Jirgas held in Peshawar and Kabul to look into debates among the elites. The most substantive section of the paper includes analysis of data collected from internet forums though.

Although there are many forums, newsgroups, social networking sites that are engaged in the debate from their particular perspective however, I have included only two such forums such as Global Hujra hosted by Khyberwatch (<http://www.khyberwatch.com/forums/>) and Pashtun Forums (<http://www.pashtunforums.com/>). These two claim to have advantage over other forums through quality and quantity of posts and visitors. The post studied were initiated from 2007-2010. Moreover, pseudonyms are used for various posters who are quoted directly in this paper.

Besides, internet forum this study will explore identity processes in cultural spaces such as hujras and jirgas. These spaces although are functional since long but they are undergoing change that carries interesting implications for us to study. Although they have been identified as traditional spaces, the dichotomy between traditional versus modern is not very conspicuous. The

reconstituting hujra as Global Hujra on internet alludes to a conscious effort to blur the boundary between traditional and modern.

Pakhtun Identity

There is not dearth of literature on the Pakhtun identity maintenance. The classical anthropological work of Barth (Barth,1959, Barth,1969) and Ahmad (1980) focused on the basic features and maintenance of identity across ecological variations. The current literature (Anderson,1983, Edwards,1996, Edwards,1990, Banerjee,2000, Ahmed,2006) focuses on the dynamics of the ethnic features. More recently scholars have revisited the relation of religion and culture expressed through identity (Jan,2010: 160, Bartlotti,2000) This study sustains the tradition by exploring identity making processes employing multiple spaces in a conflict situation. However, it is necessary to briefly outline the repertoire of identity markers Pakhtun associate with their Pakhtunness. These include, the Pashto language, tribal organization and patrilineal lineage, cultural code (Pakhtunwali) which includes the features of hospitality (melmastia), council (jirga), seclusion of women (pardah), revenge (badal) and a range of other ideals, and finally the religion Islam. It is noteworthy here to suggest that features and notions of Pakhtunwali are not fixed and static (Bartlotti, 2000; Banarjee, 2000).

Although the literature on Pakhtun Identity highlights centrality of Islam to Pakhtun identity (Barth, 1969; Ahmed, 1980), it also refers to disjunctions between the Islam and Pakhtun identity (Bartalotti, 2000; Jan and Aman, 2015). Central to theme of the paper is the discussion on the relation between Islam and Pakhtun identity. The paper suggests that previously Islam was a tool to resist all foreign invasions particularly invasions into autonomy, but Islam or certain interpretation of Islam is currently perceived as a part of a problem. That is the reason the discourse engages the very identity of Pakhtuns and revisits the constituent features of identity. It is in this line that hujra as a cultural space is reconfigured as a virtual space. The very name of the forum as Global Hujra is evident.

Debates about Pakhtun identity

Identity Debates in Cultural Spaces

Hujra and Jirga as cultural spaces:

Hujra is a male guest house and the site of performing a very important Pakhtun cultural feature i.e Melmastia (hospitality). However, hujra is having wider cultural, social (Ahmed,1976: 65, Lindholm and Meeker,1981: 445-446, 448) and political functions (Barth,1959: 80). The function of hujra is also undergoing transformation in recent time. In Malakand where hujra has lost most of its previous political functions of 'gift distribution' (Barth,1959: 80), still retains some of its social and political role. Besides its function of distributing patronage, in very limited sense during elections, it has primarily become the site of hospitality to friends and guests. It has, thus, become a training institution for the younger generation where the ideal Pakhtun behavior is consummated. It guides and teaches the youth, how to behave in social interaction, mostly through the diverse friendship gatherings in hujra. These very peer or friendship circles in hujras would often involve formal and informal dialogue and discussion. These gathering provide useful insights into identity related discussions in Pakhtun society.

Jirga is an important institution of Pakhtun society which refers to the 'council of elders' (Ahmed,1980) or 'Public assemblies' (Barth,1959: 119) that solve disputes and its decisions are accepted by the parties in conflict.³ It involves dialogue and discussion which leads to consensus that is often translated into meaningful decisions. The multiplicity of forms and roles it performs is widely reported (Ahmed,1980: 90, Wardak,2002, Ali and Rahman,2001: 51). However, jirga is going under transformation over the years. The most recent example is of Aman Jirgas (Peace Jirgas). A number of Aman Jirgas (Peace Jirgas) were held since 2001. The first in the series of peace Jirga was Pakhtun Aman Jirga (Pakhtun Peace Jirga) convened by the Pakhtun nationalist political party of Pakistan known as Awami National Party (ANP) on 20th November 2006.⁴ A second one Qaumi Aman Jirga (National Peace Jirga) was convened by a nationalist leader associated with ANP known as Afzal Khan in May 2012. These jirgas invited Pakhtuns from different walks of life

and were both held in Pakistan. Similar kind of initiative were taken by the governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Two such jirgas invited considerable attention, i.e. Joint Pak-Afghan Peace Jirga 2007 (Bijlert,2010) and Consultative Peace Jirga in Kabul June 2010 (Saba, 2011).

These jirgas have been convened by the nationalist elite or governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan. These jirgas are quite different from traditional Jirgas as they appear more like 'conferences or workshops' (Bijlert,2010) where the conflict situation in the region is discussed and solutions are suggested. However, they do not end up with decisions of binding nature. This is mainly because they are not convened for such purpose. They are actually convened to find ways to change conflict situation through consultative process. Therefore, the gathering often ends up with a visionary/positive note of agreement that demonstrates the resolve of the political leadership to contribute to peace in the region. Although there is more rigorous research needed to explain the impact of these Jirgas on the conflict but the very process of conducting such gatherings has multiple implications. First, the Jirga ensures continuity of the spirit of dialogue which is so central to Pakhtun society, Secondly, they represent transformation and dynamism in cultural institutions that can be employed or reemployed for a variety of purpose. Finally, the membership, participation, conduct of business, the content of debates in these jirgas has potential to be studied by researchers. This phenomenon will also give valuable insights into social interaction among Pakhtuns and behavioural change over the years.

The Discourse in Cultural Spaces

Before we embark on the details of the debates in hujra and jirgas, it is important to reflect a bit on the participants of these debates and discourse. The hujras in general are visited and inhabited by Pakhtun men. This study uses research diaries from the field work done by author in Malakand (2009-2010). These diaries recorded observations of the debates and informal chat in hujras about the current conflict and Pakhtun identity. The participants in these discussion ranged from younger to elderly Pakhtuns of Batkhela, Malakand. The Peace Jirgas selected for this study are primarily

Pakhtun elite which is divided in the current conflict situation. Following is the detail of these polarized elite. In the background of Afghan Jihad, radicalisation of religious schools of thought (Nasr, 2000) and the emergence of “neo-Taliban” (White, 2008a), has not only created two hardened positions held by Pakhtun nationalists and religious radicals, but also generated discourse about the relationship between Pakhtunwali and Islam.⁵ Through these hardened positions the relationship between Pakhtunwali and Islam is interpreted in essentialized way. Moreover, electoral swing from religious parties to nationalist party has been under the influence of this discourse.

The first kind of elite is religious elite, they have deeper inroads into the State and society through their educational institutions, their recognized role of being the guardians of public morality, their regional influence and their stakes in State’s nationalist discourse. Religious elite has been very diverse. They include members from religious political parties such as JUI and Jamaat Islami and militant elements such as Taliban and TNSM. Ethno-nationalists have been less recognized and appreciated by the State, but their recent electoral victory and increasing public disappointment in face of unrest in the region at the hands of Islamist strengthen their position. These include political parties such as Awami National Party, Pakhtun Mili Awami Party and Pakhtun nationalist intellegencia.

These diverse Pakhtun elite represent different understanding and perspectives of the current conflict and Pakhtun identity. These different perspectives can be observed in the debates of these elite in Peace Jirgas.

“Much of the debate focused on defining the two traditional centres of Pashtun values - the masjid, or mosque, and the hujra, or the seat of the tribal chief. In other words, the power of religion and secular political power. While clerics defended the Taleban saying they had united the two, others insisted they must be kept separate if the Pashtuns were to survive as a nation. The debate on Pashtun identity has just begun...” (Rashid, 2006).

Pakhtun nationalists, both Awami National Party, Pakhtun Mili Awami Party and Pakhtun nationalist intellegencia have been overemphasising on non-religious credentials of Pakhtun culture and relegate secondary role to religion. Such thinking is reflected through their argument that religious sentiments and association of Pakhtun have long been exploited by the State of Pakistan to gain strategic victories in Afghanistan and promote its assimilation efforts. They often refer to the secular and non-violent credentials of Khudai Khidmatgar movement of Ghafar Khan.⁶ This nationalist discourse about the place of religion and the extent of its influence in Pakhtun culture and society is often ignored in the literature that see the intermeshing of Jihad and Pakhtunwali (Verkaaik, 2007). This discourse appears to be a discourse of resistance, which challenges the interpretation of Pakhtun code in religious terms. In fact, it refers to the destruction of the Pakhtun culture and values at the hands of the Taliban.

On the other hand, religious elite have a very different perspective of Pakhtun identity and the current crisis. They have been alluding to the centrality and pervasiveness of Islam in Pakhtun society. They have even interpreted Pakhtun cultural elements such as 'honour' by giving it religious connotations.⁷ They have also appealed to the traditions of religious millenarian movements of colonial era. The effort of the protagonists of these positions is to establish the dominance of one over the other. Consequently, they are creating two polarised positions and a space that highlights the disjunction between Islam and Pakhtunwali.

Edwards (1990) in an important study in Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan has observed the tension between the religious class and the tribal Pakhtuns. He reported that mullas prevented music and dancing in the camp which was resisted by the tribal Pakhtuns. The encounter between the two in the argument of Edwards refers to attempting boundaries between cultural performance (tribal identity) and religious identity by social actors. Therefore, the power wielded by religious authorities disturbed the "traditional balance of religion and tribe and has created a disjuncture between fundamental aspects of their identity" (1990: 95-96).

Edwards posit that in the refugee context, the dichotomisation between 'those who uphold tribal patterns and those who profess primary allegiance to Islam as practical code of social behaviour' is increasing (1990: 97). He reports that in the refugee environment the balance has swung in favour of religious groups which cherish a different ethical ideal than the tribal ideal of gheyrat (defined by him as 'self-determination'). This ideal is taqwa (piety) which is characterised by 'submission' (to both faith and the religious elite) rather than 'self-determination' (gheyrat). Therefore, 'both gheyrat and taqwa are ideals of personal conduct that express and help to enforce general notions of social propriety' (Edwards, 1990: 97).

Moreover, the above discussed discourse is also manifested in the electoral trends in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The electoral victory of the Pakhtun nationalists in 2008 is an important event as was the victory of an alliance of Islamic parties called MMA in 2002. It happened in such succession that it will not be inappropriate to see it as a possible consequence of each other. On the one hand it signified the presence of two very different electoral forces in the province on the other it referred to a trend (probably positive) that people's choice is not always based in clientelistic considerations.⁸ Most importantly, the vote negated some of the assumptions that radical elements represent popular sentiments of the region. I tend to avoid explaining popular support swing but insist that the pattern signifies the discourse which reevaluates the relationship between the constituent elements of Pakhtun identity, which in time may redefine Pakhtun identity. The dialectics of the discourse are in the positions taken by religious groups and ethno-nationalists.

The discourse is not just limited to political elite articulating in grand jirgas but in the local hujras also due to widespread access to media and other information sources, people in Malakand have been informed by the discourse, shared their concerns about the growing tension in the region and raised questions about the foreignness of the idea and method if not the membership of militant organizations. Most of the concerns were raised by the younger and educated Pakhtuns in Malakand. They also endorsed the nationalists elite criticism of the State's contribution to the unrest. State's involvement cannot be entirely discredited as reports

about secret agencies (ISI) plan to establish a "Talibanized belt" in FATA to pressure Afghan government (at least till 2004) is documented (Rashid, 2008: 269-270).

5.2 Debates in Virtual Space:

The discourse is not just limited to cultural spaces; it is equally visible in cyberspace. The educated and intellectual Pakhtuns (in Pakistan and the diasporas) are more actively involved at such spaces. Numerous organizations, peace forums, literary circles, websites are dedicated to contribute to this discourse. Such discourse has informed and engulfed lay man to an educated Diaspora. Due to widespread access to media and other information sources. Below is the discussion on the participants in these debates and the content of the debates conducted online.

The number of participants is not very high roughly 600 visitors every day. However, the frequent visits, quality of posts and commitments shown by the participants is significant. Participants claim to be from diverse background and their reflections give much credibility to their views. Internet forums facilitate linkage between the Pakhtuns living in Pakistan and Afghanistan and the larger Pakhtun diaspora. They engage across these national divisions through the medium of internet and the cyberspace created for the purpose of debate. Most of the posts are in English; however, occasionally posts are in Pashto with either Pashto text or English text.

After discussing the participants briefly, we need to explain the presentation of self by these participants on internet. The presentation of self on internet, the identification and credibility of the participants are issues related to internet forums but the way the emotional exchanges, community spirit and understanding is demonstrated reduces some of these issues to trivial.

"Man! If you ask me those contributing on KW (Khyber watch)...Pashtunforums... Believe me, half of them I know personally and even can write their names, locations and can tell you the name of their kids. They are not too many indeed, they are few in numbers. I am dealing with them for many years." (Shaheen, Global Hujra).

The element of strangeness in the encounters on internet is also significant. The participants are strangers but they have established an online rapport through their consistent interaction over time and their belonging to a certain mindset.

“We were able to make friends through Khyber Watch that we could not have made through other forum including our Universities. We cannot forget Khyberwatch” (Akbar, Global Hujra).⁹

This takes further the discussion started by Edwards about the strangeness of the posters. Also Anderson’s explanation of strangeness in non-tribal or urban situations is reconfigured through internet. Also the element of violence as posited by Edwards is also relevant. Although, there were exchanges that refer to violence, but I could also see a spirit and eagerness to accommodate each other on many occasions.

Internet forums facilitate linkage between the Pakhtuns living in Pakistan and Afghanistan and the larger Pakhtun diaspora. They engage across these national divisions through the medium of internet and the cyberspace created for the purpose of debate. The expression of a poster, claiming to be the supporter of Taliban, is meaningful in this context. He writes, all those people who are talking against Talibaan are generally living in kaafir countries (Darul-harb)” (Asim). Through such assertions the poster alludes to the strangeness of the non-compliant posters by describing them diasporas having lost their basis in the region and no sympathy with the people of the region. Although, the views condemning such assertions are overwhelming, the assertions possess insights into the division between Pakhtun diaspora and the rest of the Pakhtuns.

Through internet forums the very purpose of the exploiting virtual space to the benefits of the ethnic community is expressed. In an interesting discussion on one of the threads the participants expressed their desire to utilize the space for the benefit of Pakhtun community even with a spirit to shelf mutual rivalries between the forums.

Pakhtun voice needs to be heard. I do not care who and which forum it is. As long as there is a forum that shows the world that we are intellectual people and may have our difference but we can debate each other and learn from each other (Malang, Global Hujra).

The very existence of these forums is testament of the younger people's ordeal in-wake of current crisis and their non-violent dialogical resistance. They tend to provide a space to the internet users for the purpose to encourage dialogue. One such poster Amina asserts that he/she benefited from these posts and that she/he believes that all participants of these forums are well-wishers of Pakhtun. She has shown concern that "*we are on the verge of extinction!*". Moreover, she sought guidance through these forums.

After discussing the participants and their self-presentation, we now elaborate on the content of these debates. These debates provide valuable insights into the identity processes. Although the broader debate demonstrates the understanding of Islam as feature of Pakhtun identity; but since the discourse takes place in the context of current unrest it unfolds into arguments involving radical Islam and Pakhtun identity. Therefore, views expressed directly target the foreignness of Taliban, the role of non-local agents, the compatibility of Taliban ideology with culture, etc. Thus the Muslimness becomes radical Muslimness and Islam becomes radical Islam. This hotchpotch and juxtaposing has been contextual.

The question of the relationship of Islam with Pakhtun identity is taken as a gamut of questions rather than a single exclusive query. The spectrum or dimensions of this question include;

1. Whether culture (Pukhtunwali) predates religion (Islam, Judaism, Buddhism). Pakhtuns being Buddhist, Christians or Jews before Islam. Can Pakhtun be other than Muslims by religion.
2. Sectarian affiliations, transformation and identity. Taliban being 'Wahabi' and thus close to Arab culture and off from Pakhtun culture.
3. The radical religious elements involvement in the destruction or protection of Pakhtun cultural values and norms.
4. Sharia as a source of Islamic law, its interpretation and utility for Pakhtun region.
5. Islamic ideology of Pakistan promoted through Taliban brand of Islam and the issue whether they are 'actually' Punjabi or Pakhtun (ethnic identity).
6. Muslimness being identity feature and it comes before Pakhtunness.

7. The role and position of Mullah in Pakhtun society. Mullah versus Khan debate.
8. Are Taliban a cultural construct? Juxtaposing whether Western secularism or Taliban are detrimental to Pakhtun culture. Secularism is understood as 'material greed', 'quest for wealth' and western cultural invasion.
9. Mutually replacing self-perception of being pro-Taliban or pro-Taliban or the associated dichotomy of having one and losing the other.

In an interesting encounter among the participants on question of taliban's association with Pakhtun ethnicity and identity, a distinct rift can be witnessed. Although most of the posters would address this issue through their reference to disjunction between Pakhtun culture and Islam, some would emphasize the embeddedness of Pakhtun culture in Islam. Identifying various dimensions of talibanization in the region Asfandyar argues that a cure is needed for the aberration manifested in the rise of this phenomenon. He suggests that anti wahabi ideology in Punjab and 'scientific nationalism/socialism' in FATA will cure the menace. Another participant, Waseem suggests the roots of Taliban ideology in Pakistani ideology, "*in fact Talibanization is the decaying form of Pakistan ideology...*" and the same ideology, he argues, is the "real frankenstein monster".

The debate is turned lively by the entry of a participant who identifies himself with (Pakhtun Taliban) Taliban and mentions his madrasah education and Pakhtun credentials along with his sympathetic inclination towards Taliban. Surprisingly he argues that Pakhtun culture and faith can both be saved by Taliban. He does not see boundaries or disjunctions.

And how can we ban those women who have gotten rid of Pakhtun culture and running naked in the streets of some cities of Pakhtoon? I think we must follow talibaan to save our culture and eeman" (Asim)

Such a post not only shocks other posters but also invite charged diatribe. The idea that Taliban will protect Pakhtun culture is strongly resented such as Waseem. Waseem argues that Taliban ideology is against all cultures except Arab.

In one of the posts Asim the supporter of Taliban puts this query to the posters that why they do not demonstrate tolerance or accept the Pakhtun credentials of Taliban. He identifies himself a Pakhtun talib. Although, it is difficult to justify the credentials of the posters from these online anonymous environment, this probable 'avatar' of Talib is significant as it demonstrates that the cyberspace can provide opportunity to express sentiments and views in support of Taliban which in real world would borne risks. Asim in response to an allegation that he is the enemy of Pakhtuns replies that he is Pakhtun talib. In response the accuser argues that '*Taliban melgary da pukhtano dushmen de*' (The friends of Taliban are the enemy of Pakhtuns). The dichotomy is stressed to emphasize that pro Pashtun and pro-taliban cannot be accommodated. Another participant Gohar argues that Islam as religion is supported by everyone but the interpreted Islam through the agency of mullah is not acceptable in fact people are against mullah not Islam. Advocating the cause of Taliban Asim writes that they are in just cause. He also defines them as young, poor force which wants to implement the law of God. They are not Punjabis.

Referring to various posts on the forum Amina argues that although they are intelligent and beneficial but in their arrogance may hurt the religious feeling of others. Also '*Respecting the limits, people may also argue about those aspects of religion that are directly or indirectly hindrance to Pakhtun causes*' (Amina).

Another debate refers to sin/infedel and virtue/Islam. In a very interesting way the division between Islam and Pakhtunwali is reduced to the utilitarian concept of religion. Islam if serves as a tool to serve the interests of Pakhtuns. A poster argues that whatever detrimental to Pakhtun millat (nation) is kufar (infidel/sin) and whatever is for their progress is virtue and Islam (sawab ao Islam). Anwar argues that '*kum ceezuna chey da pukhtun millat lapaara muzir yee hagma kufar aw gunnah dee aw kum chey millat da parmakhtag lapaara kha yee hagma sawab aw islam dey*' (Whatever is beneficial to Pakhtun nation is virtuous and Islam and whatever is detrimental to it is kufar and sinful).

In the virtual discourse the participants emphasize the disjunction between religion and culture in two distinct ways. They

detach Islam from Pakhtun culture by referring to the non-religious/secular aspects of Pakhtunwali and emphasize that the current religiosity in the region has negative impact on Pakhtun society and culture therefore, being secular is best way to be a Pakhtun. Expressions that 'I am first a Pakhtun' or Pakhto as a 'mazhab' (religion), 'poor taking refuge in religion' etc. Secondly Pakhtun culture and religion are imagined to be coalescing in a way that Islam is necessary part of the identity. However, recent Talibanization need to be detached from Pakhtun culture as it is detrimental to Pakhtun culture, society and economy. Most of the posts adhere to the former view. Whichever, way is conceived to explain the relationship between culture and religion, the focus and emphasis remains on the rejection for the Talibanization as a cultural construct. The disownment of Taliban is pervasive yet there are dissidents to this view.

Conclusion

The debates on identity have significance from three dimensions. The means adopted for the debates, the composition of the participants and the content of the debates. The means refer to the involvement of cultural and virtual spaces, their transformation over the years, their inclusivity and exclusivity and the manifested efforts to blur the division between traditional and new. While the traditional means allude to continuity the new means refer to change and flux. Similarly, the composition of the participants has greater relevance. Where traditional means and institutions are utilized by the elite, the new means are adopted by the younger educated masses. The diversity within these two groups is intrusive, the traditional elite is divided on the basis of their political ideals and ideology into the nationalist leaders (political figures) and religious leaders. The contested positions taken by both refer to the increased polarization in Pakhtun society. More importantly the participants of internet debates represent greater diversity. They include Pakhtuns of different tribal, national and religious affiliations. However, the greater issue concerning these participants is the presentation of self on internet. When they connect to the virtual world they may adopt different identities then those they have in real physical world. Both these categories of

participants such as elite and educated young masses show enormous interest keenness and passion to negotiate contest and reframe/maneuver the features of identity.

Finally, the paper also demonstrate that content of the debate is significant. It involves the features of identity, particularly the relationship of Islam with Pakhtunwali. It highlights continuity and disjunctions in this relationship. The overall discussion in this paper substantiates how dynamism is an inherent feature and not an aberration of Pakhtun society. Pakhtun demonstrate stupendous acumen and sensitivity to their situation and convert such sensitivity and empathy into an opportunity to understand themselves and the extended world they are part of. Studying identity processes help revealing such propensity and peculiarities.

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¹ Pakhtuns, Pukhtun, Pashtuns or Pathans are different names of the (more than 40 million) people spread across the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

² 'Technological determinism' means a unidirectional influence of technology over humans or their society. see for example (Comunello and Anzera,2012)

³ These councils could be 'ad hoc meeting' or an 'instituted tribunal' (Barth,1969: 121).

⁴ Most of the discussion in this study is based on this jirga. Two renown experts on this region wrote about this jirga and I have taken most of the information from their reports. These include Ahmad Rashid (2006) and Rahimullah Yusafzai (2008).

⁵ A Pakhtun peace Jirga was held in Peshawar in November 2006, where these positions were openly demonstrated by the nationalist leaders of ANP and Pakhtunkhwa Mili Awami party and the religious parties such as JUI. See Rashid (2006a) and (2006b).

⁶ Ironically KK leadership did appeal Islam and Pakhtunwali (Banerjee, 2000) .

⁷ TNSM leader in Batkhela defined honor to be struggle in the way of Allah and Islam. This could be a very narrow interpretation of the term, if one look at the understanding of the term by anthropologists such as Ahmed (1980) and Barth (1969).

⁸ see Wilder (1999) for voting behavior in Pakistan.

⁹ Author's translation from original Pashto text.