

# “Our Hujra is deserted”: Conflict, Violence, culture and ethnic identity among the Pukhtuns of Swat, Pakistan

Syed Wasif Azim<sup>1</sup>, Zarmina Baloch<sup>2</sup>, Asif Saleem<sup>3</sup>

## **Abstract**

*Theoretically, while critically extending constructivist position, this study proposes that conflict and violence, like other factors, impacts cultures and have repercussions for ethnic identity. Conflict and violence may lead to least or no practice of culture, a performing marker of ethnic identity, however, ethnic identity does not 'soften' or 'harden' nor is lost. In fact, the impacts for ethnic identity and culture are multiple and complex. Focusing on Hujra and Melmastya, Pukhtun society's essential and core institutions and codes, and ethnic identity symbols, we argue that the armed struggle in Swat, rebels, and the Pakistani state abused and transformed Pukhtun culture, an icon of ethnic identity and character in Pukhtun. We contend that the complete social and cultural code of Pukhtunwali and its essential elements, such as Hujra, Melmastya, was not followed in Swat Pukhtuns. Compared to the insurgents' and military impacts, our argument is that while they all had separate tactics, they all made a major contribution to Melmastya's "desertion of Hujra" and decline. In this situation, Swat's consequent interpretation is that 'the hujra community is now extinct in its ideal context.' Yet in Swat, Pukhtuns perceives these results as socially detrimental to the society and ethnic heritage of Pukhtun. This has consequences for Pukhtun's culture and ethnic origin. Methodologically, the thesis is based on a fieldwork, conducted in various parts of Swat between November 2016 and May 2017 for PHD research.*

**Keywords:** Conflict, Violence, Pukhtuns, Culture, Pakistan

## **I. Introduction: Themes and Methodology of the Study**

The ongoing confrontation and unrest in the Swat region of Pakistan is an armed struggle between the 'Swati Taliban' of Mullah Fazlullah and the Pakistani regime, which started in 2006-2007. Initially, the Government and

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<sup>1</sup>PHD from the Department of Political Science, University of Peshawar, Pakistan, [Wasifazim@uop.edu.pk](mailto:Wasifazim@uop.edu.pk). Research interests are Ethnic identity, Culture, National Identity, Conflict, Violence and Politics of Pakistan with a focus on Pukhtun region of Pakistan.

<sup>2</sup>Lecturer, department of Political Science, Islamia College University [Peshawar.zarminafaiq@gmail.com](mailto:Peshawar.zarminafaiq@gmail.com)

<sup>3</sup>PHD from the Department of Political Science, University of Peshawar, Pakistan. Research interests are religion, extremist politics and security of Pakistan [asifsalim60@gmail.com](mailto:asifsalim60@gmail.com).

the broken-up militants signed a peace agreement. The civilian government then called on the Pakistani military to launch at least three military operations, resulting in the internal displacement of some 2 million people, considered one of the largest domestic displacements in Pakistan's history. During the last decade, this conflict and violence has influenced different facets of Pukhtun society including the Pukhtun (Pukhtunwali / Pukhtu) population. This Pukhtunwali is a complex, non-conclusive collection of various social, political, and behavioral laws, values, systems, and practices including but not limited to relationships between Purdah, Jirga, Hujra, Melmastya, Gham-Khadi, Kashar-Mashar, Badal, and Honor-Shame. This present study focuses, with one restriction, on 'Hujra' and 'Melmastya' inside Swat's sense of confrontation and aggression.

The research, formulated logically and generally, indicates that conflict and violence impact societies that have effects on ethnic identity, as do other influences. Conflict and violence may result in the least or no practice of culture, an ethnic identity executing marker, but ethnic identity does not 'soften' or 'harden' or get lost. But the effect on the ethnic identity and community is numerous and nuanced. In the case of Pukhtuns in Swat, the present controversy abused and distorted the Pukhtun identification which is Pukhtunwali / Pukhtu, a sign of Pukhtun's cultural origin and character defining. In Swat, Pukhtuns also perceive these impacts as psychologically damaging to the society and racial origin of Pukhtuns. The analytical debate which follows on the cultural aspects of Hujra and Melmastya explains this theoretical premise.

Among the Pukhtuns, Hujra is an institution and a socio-cultural code of Pukhtu/Pukhtunwali and Pukhtun community that can be simply interpreted as a 'male guest room.' Although mainly and preferably it's about welcoming male visitors and offering them Melmastya (the socio-cultural custom of hosting guests), it can also serve as a training and educational place for Pukhtun Youth. (Some leaders and Khans used it for political purposes too. It may serve as a forum for any discussion about an individual, society or culture that has to do with different matters of concern. It also serves as a meeting place in times of sorrow and joy festivals (marae-jwandae or gham-khadi).

Equally, Melmastya is literally translated as hospitality, and is one of Pukhtun's most common socio-cultural words. It is accomplished in Hujra, where most men are served in Hujra and at home, while women are served at home. Melmastya has unique and distinct religious, economic, and socio-cultural histories. A Pukhtun is 'sweet to the visitor.' Rich and poor Pukhtuns view a traveler with much respect and consideration. Ideally, all are granted Melmastya, including guests, where food, boarding, and accommodation are often available as part of Melmastya.

In Swat the sense of the Hujra and Melmastya sociocultural and symbolic structure is very similar to that of the greater Pukhtun district. Before the Swat War the custom was still a traditional one. Here, Hujra and similar

Betak (small guest room) attended, both in rural and urban areas; in most sections of Swat, the typical Hujra, larger than Betak, still remains. However Betak's closer than Hujra is to their house. In comparison, Hujra has lots of rooms while Betak is a small area for travelers. Historically, Betak is primarily personal and used in urban settings, but also spreads to rural regions, while Hujra is mostly used by a family or group, or, if specific, Betak's khan / manager is more open to everyone, while Hujra isn't, and now Hujra is only restricted to members and khans. Melmastya is given in both Hujra and Betak, and in place of the Hujra-betak difference, the focus is on melmastya. My research participants determined that in certain rural areas and most urban areas of Swat, Hujra started turning itself into Betak around three decades ago. Nevertheless in most rural and some urban areas Khans and other 'better off' Pukhtuns also have both Hujra and Betak. At the field is the transition from Hujra to Betak.

The Swat dispute has attempted substantially to dominate the developmental and divisional dimension between Hujra and Betak. Ashraf Lala, an official in the Swat valley, told me "In times of pre-crisis Hujra was turned into Betak." Likewise, private shops in some areas often act as places where people meet at night to tackle the problems. Sadaqat Azeem told me that for some leaders, "Over three decades ago, Hujra changed to Betak. Nowadays, people still meet in stores. Some tend to use the store as Betak. His family also operate a small shop, and he (and his brother) use it as a betak though they have a bit of hujra and betak as well. Throughout my fieldwork in Swat I visited several of the shops along with Hujras and Betaks. However, this pattern is also affected by the rural-urban division of Swat in Hujra and Betak, where Hujra culture is more dominant in rural areas while Betak has substituted it in urban areas more. Similarly, Swatis compares rural-urban division with larger Pukhtun town. On the topic one professor from Mingora read,

"This cultural aspect of Hujra is affected by rural-urban divide. Rural and urban places are having difference in this respect. Urban areas have more *betaks* and rural areas have more hujras"<sup>4</sup>.

Except in urban centers or places near to urban centers such as Mingora bazar, Kabal, or Matta Bazar, Khans and Swat still have Hujras as their traditional members. Family and 'servants' bear some. Such hujras are seen as symbols of conservative society and have political support. Similarly, there are more Hujras to be found, since the bulk of Swat are more rural than urban. Additionally, both Hujra and Betak are the prime locations for Melmastya deals.

Significantly, the meaning and role of Melmastya in the rural-urban divide remained the same before the war and people were still proud to serve visitors. Some Swatis have called Swat 'guest friendly' because of the Melmastya community (da mela dost at Pukhtu). Ironically, before the conflict this visitor could be someone from anywhere but foreigners or visitors living in Hujra. This has / is spoken of as the true actions of Pukhtun. Yet the recent war and insurgency in Swat have affected some of those areas of Melmastya, Hujra and Betak.

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<sup>4</sup>Mudasir Swati, Personal Interview/Discussion, Mingora, January 26, 2017.

Different processes and phenomena, including the conflict and violence impacts Hujra and Melmastya in multiple ways. We elaborate these impacts below, but before that we write a brief note on the field site and collection of data for this study.

### **Data Collection in Swat**

From 45 in-depth open-ended interviews, five focus group discussions and ethnographic surveys, the methodological results were taken. The data was literally collected in Mingora, Nawae Kalae, Charbagh, Kabal, Khwaza Khela, Saidu Shareef, Matta and others. Among the participants were families, students, graduates of college, people, women, legislators, and others. Given the largely accessible and semi-structured interviews and conversations, it was natural to address wider issues of ethnic identity and culture. That's also why the same duration of interviews and focus groups for them, with four hours of interviews and 40 minutes of focus group sessions, was not set. Sometimes these activities involved breakfast, lunch or dinner breaks, and an overnight stay in the residences of the participants. One of the journalists arranged all of the participants' interviews and conversations, all in the native language of the participants, Pukhtu, except for one female research assistant interview in which a male scholar was considered inappropriate for a female interview. All interviews and discussions were recorded as field notes but, for many reasons, audio recordings were not appropriate. Throughout the study I have used pseudonyms. The naming structure used in this study is specific in the sense that any name ending with the word 'Khor' (sister in Pukhtu language) is a female participant, ending with 'dada' is a male participant with age above 50, considered as elder, ending with 'lala' is a male participant with age around 40 to 50 and the rest are younger than 40. We use this collected data to analyze the impacts of the conflict on Hujra and Melmastya.

### **Conflict, Violence, Hujra and Melmastya**

Conflict in Swat has several aspects that have impacted the cultural success of Hujra and Melmastya. In many cases Pukhtuns were unable to entertain guests in Swat because of the security, suspicion and fear environment. Many hujras and betake were physically locked down during the war. No one sat in many Hujras, especially during the night, which is their time of popularity. Today's repercussion is that if a tourist is present Hujra will be open and closed. Guests are now not allowed to visit the host in person until they have enrolled. No-one (he or his guest) faced being insulted by rebels and armed hands during the battle. Individuals also have the ability to think and there's no doubt that they take chances. Significant result is that in most cases today the elders do not stay in Hujra or betake, and do not come out to welcome any guests except their own. One of the key explanations for this being that during the War the rebels and troops refused to 'properly' recognize and communicate with the Elders. The community and sessions at Hujra among the Swat Pukhtuns and associated Melmastya explicitly affected the entire period. In socio-cultural jargon I postulate that the impacts are seen by most participants as negative and detrimental. There is a long list of historically derogatory, needless, and significant impacts of violence and harassment in Swat on the Hujra culture and related Melmastya.

### ***Militants impacts Hujra and Melmastya***

As activists spread violence in most of the Swat, Swatis, who should have been sitting in Hujra, had been 'd questioned,' so people could not sit in Hujra, Hujra's popular time, particularly at the late evening. During this time the tradition of Hujra rapidly declined. Though militants never shut down Hujra as such, their operations had been restricted in most parts of Swat, and people were afraid to sit back late. Militants were given 'spies' and 'sympathizers' to track the actions of Hujra which would warn them. Discussions have been halted over current issues (such as war and crisis). Militants also banned citizens from sitting in Hujra in a couple of cases at peak times after evening. This had (are) direct repercussions for Melmastya, the culture of serving guests.

Some Pukhtuns in Swat called the activists' acts and their violence, as well as preventing citizens from doing Hujra activities, a 'torture.' Misbah Ullah told me this in Nawae Kalae, Mingora, "Only one Hujra was open here in our district, even during the crisis; others were closed and left deserted, in comparison to the fact that Hujra was open every time before the war;

It was a common occurrence to restrict people from various activities the militants termed un-Islamic. Militants will come to Hujra to check people's leisure time in Hujra, which has destroyed the limited freedom people, particularly young people, have had. Along with Rock, my study partners in Swat and watching Tv often exemplified ciggering smoking. Shahid Ahmed, the driver of an organisation told me about this in Fizzagut, "Militants used to come to Hujra to dissuade citizens from consuming ciggers and so on and used to harass the shopkeeper who was going to sell it as well. Hujra had little security for us. Viewing or listening to music of some type and watching TV of any kind was at the top of the list of banned items in Hujr.

"Before the conflict there was peace, so gatherings were common in hujra, along with music, films, TV etc. There was freedom to do all these activities. In conflict, what was allowed in hujra was 'restricted talking'. Militants even entered Hujras to monitor its activities"<sup>5</sup>.

This concept of freedom can also be compared to one of Pukhtun identity's fundamental values, and to the underlying principle of sovereignty. Autonomy is only expressed in a small way as a core characteristic of Pukhtun's life and culture, and the militants see it as a detrimental trend to limit that autonomy. Similarly, this situation led to a decline in the number of entertaining guests, Melmastya, as individuals could not even keep Hujra open or keep it open. Nobody really should take the risk of insulting his partner, as insurgents saw it as a sign of worry. This shaping cycle is amplified everywhere as the Pakistani Army joins Swat during military operations.

### ***Military Impacts hujra and Melmastya***

Pakistani state army also forbade people to sit night after night in Hujra and betake, especially during the initial days of post-military action. The military stance towards Hujra or tourists was, however, later 'fair' (socially acceptable), as they joined the Swat group in some way. Military powers have contributed to the decline of Hujra culture and its particular functions and practices. Similarly, Melmastya had a commercially negative effect because

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<sup>5</sup>Shereen Lala, Personal Interview/Discussion, Mingora, February 5, 2017.

people could not market it to their guests, as is common. Especially when certain events such as a military attack or blast or a VDC (village defense committee) were still prevalent, fear. Targeting of member occurred. The military must search the whole village in these situations including the house and Hujra. Nonetheless, the question of interaction between Hujra people and civilians in the military was one concern in these search operations alongside others. Because many people in Swat villages can only speak and understand Pukhtu, or some may speak and understand another Urdu dialect, communication with and engaging with the army has not been easy. When anyone tried to know Urdu, it was always upsetting, as he was going to be stressed and not fluent. That had affected the past of Hujra and Melmastya. Muhammad Mudasir, Kabal by birth

“When military was here, it was not convenient to be in Hujras at late night. Military stopped us from Hujras, especially when some incident would occur. In such post incident stages in many Hujras it was a language problem too to interact with the military by local people”<sup>6</sup>.

In addition, declared and unannounced curfews were impacting this cultural dimension in a specific locality. In Asad Khan Lala 's terms, "Because of military curfews, the practice of Hujra and melmastya has been disturbed. Military constraints have been imposed for some time, particularly during the curfews. They 'run search operations and check hujras. Restrictions on and the quest for limited independence in Hujra are viewed as socially inappropriate activities impacting the number of citizens. People were compelled in their own village of Hujra to show National Identity Cards (NICs), which was extremely embarrassing and helped lower society of Hujra in Swat. Elder Laiq Dada of Nawae Kalae told me,

“When Pakistani Military came to Swat, during search operations they used to check Hujra too. They used to check cards (NICs). While we were required to show cards, I asked a Subedar sahib the reason behind such a demand. In return I was rebuked and insulted”<sup>7</sup>.

To come to Hujra to be mocked in such a way wasn't easy for humans. If an incident happens near Hujra or at the same site, holding Hujra will make it more difficult for people to hold. Military investigated the region, in particular the Hujras and incidents where people were either humiliated or not properly treated. That a military man was expected to demonstrate his existence in his village or his own Hujra was treated as 'other' (ethnically) was insensitive and the inhabitants always declined. The military could not complain as there was a chance of humiliation and dishonor could result in physical injury.

Somehow since, military habits are thought to have changed, and these are different today. It is believed that armed people supported Swat culture. However, this could be because the military now feels the danger to the Taliban has significantly subsided, and people can be trusted to some degree. Several participants mentioned this, like Shahid Ahmed, an NGO driver, "Army initially irritated Hujras because they didn't recognize the nature of the area. They'll come to tests that local people didn't want. It's necessary to remember that although the military activity has shifted as shown in Swat, the separatist to democratic conflict has significant implications.

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<sup>6</sup>Mudasir, University Student aged 30.

<sup>7</sup>Dada, Local Politician aged 50.

I propose that 'fear' has a central role to play. This anxiety has become (and is) a 'unlimited phenomenon' that involves terrorist terror, military fear, intimidation, questioning, etc. Misrespect can cause long-lasting damage in a society where dignity is so valuable. This discomfort can be in Hujra with a tourist, or also in Host and family members themselves. Militants or soldiers can come and question Hujra about their nationality, and citizens can be tested in Hujra too. That was (Is) frightening for the Pukhtuns of Swat. This apprehension didn't encourage people to come late in the evening at Hujra, or have a party with hujra. Tell me a Yusuf Khan Dherai, "Hujra is left behind. Few people are now sitting here. People are being hunted in the Hujra and the Hujra itself.

This knowledge became important as it developed, and because of the experience of being among them (insurgents or military men), the presence or absence of insurgents (and later of military) was comparable. This persistent uncertainty discouraged people from coming to Hujra and led to a decline in community. With the more vulnerable regions this was alarming. Charbagh's statement by Taimur Yusufzai was "At first terrorists used to be here on our streets, which was scary." Likewise, when people began moving back to Hujra after the military operations they already had 'fear' in mind. With frequent intervals these people are aware of the horror in Swat, even today when someone is killed as a target. A young local small business proprietor from a very rural area, Fazal Yusufzai, described this. "He just said now," he said,

"In crisis, due to fear we stopped going to Hujra. For the last two to three years we are back to that hujra again. No one stop us from going there but out of fear we did so. Some events occurred/occurs that increases our fear. For example, one of our friends, was killed while going home from Hujra. After that we had to be careful while going to Hujra" <sup>8</sup>.

These conditions forced people to live in households, and prevented them from attending Hujras. Elders were more alert compared with younger ones. They are not going to Hujra even today and they are trying to discourage young people too. Muhammad Rehman Dada, head of the Swat school, told me, "*Hujra has been deserted now. We do not sit there ourselves and do not let our own youngsters to stay late at night or after evening in Hujra now. Even at very early morning we do not go out from home, till dawn*" <sup>9</sup>.

Conclusively, the traditional culture of men attending Hujra was seriously affected, and the attendance decreased. Ironically, some men, mainly Khans and their younger generations, have started to use TV or 'dish cable' to draw men in post-conflict situations. We are now seeking to lure young people as the elders will never return to Hujra with the same passion as before.

" Here in our place, we had three Hujras, because one of my uncle had his. They used to be filled with kids, young adults, elders and so on. Discussions, tales of gossip, these are the topics of the day spent. Today people are not coming out to Hujra, after the fighting. We were bringing a TV and Dish cable to Hujra for tempting young men.

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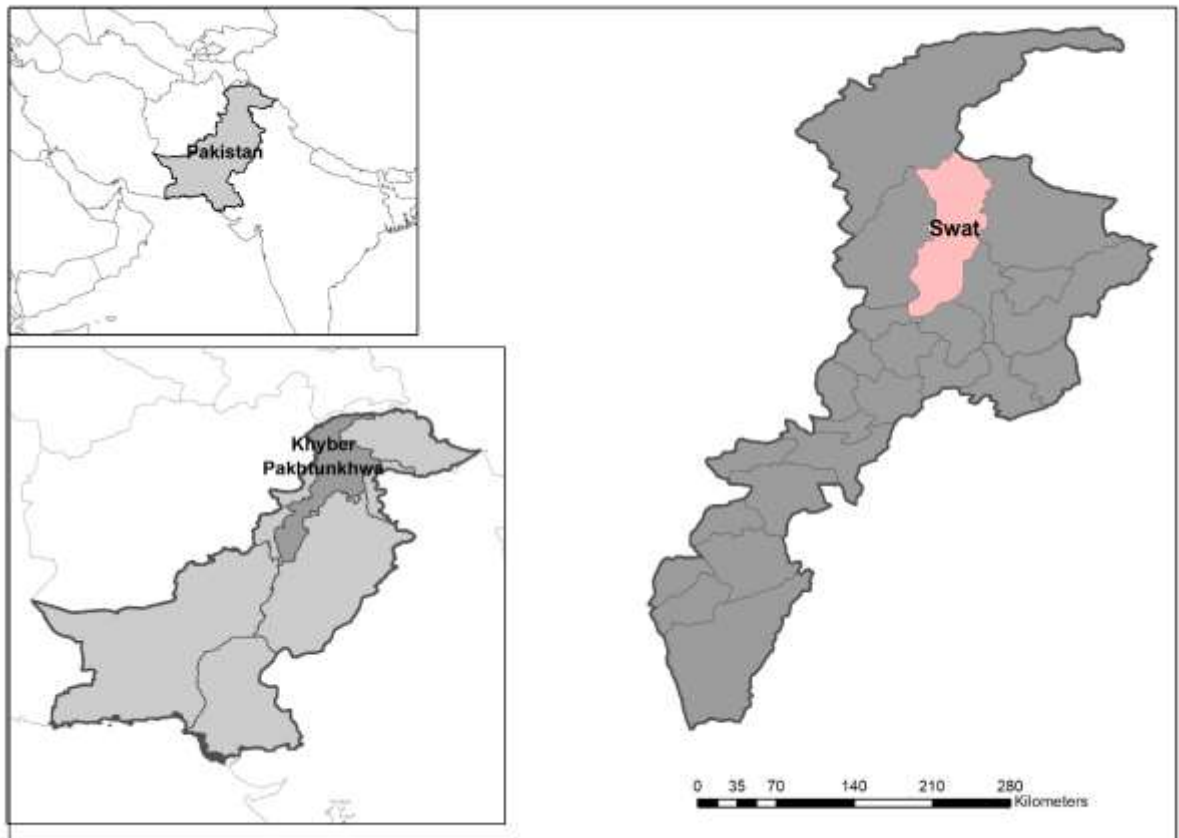
<sup>8</sup>Fazal Yusufzai, Personal Interview/Discussion, Kabal Swat, January 28, 2017.

<sup>9</sup>Muhamad Rehman Dada, Personal Interview/Discussion, Charbagh Swat, January 27, 2017.

"With the unexpected, there is now almost no Melmastya. Melmastya has been affected, even for those known to Melmastya. It's because there has been a decline of trust, so we're all frightened. After the conflict, we had to ask a guest to leave Hujra because of the security problem.

Confidence, misunderstanding and security problems emerge primarily as a result of the Swat war and violence. Inability to get Melmastya is thus regarded as a divergence from the Pukhtunwali / Pukhtu tradition. Like several other participants ishfaq Lala commented on this.

*"Due to security reasons even today, we cannot have a stranger (such as a traveler) as a guest. Before the crisis we would have anyone as a guest"*<sup>10</sup>.



**Figure 1: Map showing Pakistani state in a global context and KP (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) province in Pakistan. On the right side is Swat district in KP.**

<sup>10</sup>Ishfaq Lala, Personal Interview/Discussion, Mingora, February 4, 2017.



## II. Conclusion

We have shown through this post that hujra and Melmastya in Pukhtun are important, core facets of socio-cultural existence and markers of ethnic identity. We have also claimed that the modern violence and harassment in Swat has had particular impacts on the past in hujra and melmastya. They argued that melmastya and hujra had far-reaching consequences on their relationships, complexities and responsibilities. These diverse impacts significantly disturb and alter hujra and melmastya communities. Such consequences are common to both the uprising and the state, which are viewed as socio-cultural detrimental. To this day, the findings are still evident, and this has strong relations to Pukhtu (Pukhtun culture), as hujra and melmastya are considered to be fundamental to the Pukhtun community. Both influences are deemed highly harmful and (socially) refuting the Hujra and Melmastya community. These impacts are directly linked to the Pukhtun past conflict and abuse, known as Pukhtunwali or Pukhtu.

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