

COMPARATIVE PROVINCIALISM IN PAKISTAN AND INDIA: CENTRALIZATION, ETHNIC PLURALITY, AND THE POLITICS OF REGIONAL GRIEVANCES

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Abstract

The multiethnic, multilingual, centralized, and devolved processes of multiethnicity and nationalism in states are shown by comparative provincialism in Pakistan and India. Centralization of power, unequal distribution of resources, ethnic conflicts, language conflicts, and poor political representation are some of the acute problems. The desire and assertion of regional grievances has been resent and reinforced in Pakistan because of the overwhelming dominance of federalism and the past-day discrimination of the smaller states such as Balochistan and Sindh. In India, there are institutionalized means of provincial participation in the form of linguistic federalism and fiscal devolution, yet the disparities in development persist, as well as some central intrusions intended to generate tensions. The provincial identities and the establishment of the outcomes of governance rely significantly on cultural, linguistic, and historical elements. In spite of the fact that both countries possess the legal and constitutional frameworks, the focus of which lies in the unity and diversity balance, in most cases, realism is absent, which depicts the disparity between the policy and the reality. Such forces will play a significant role in the harmonization of fair governance, disparity between regions, and national harmony in Pakistan and India.

Keywords: challenges, historical context, laws, opportunities, theoretical context

Introduction

Nationhood, federalism, and regional identity are the notions that have had a tremendous impact on the political transformation of postcolonial nations like Pakistan and India (Ayaz & Fahad, 2024). The two countries were both independent of British colonialists in 1947, and they

inherited a highly fragmented society with various ethnicities, speaking different languages, and regional allegiances (Ishfaq et al., 2022). These divisions and the need to create a cohesive national identity have been one of the main problems of the two states (Abadin et al., 2023). Pakistan has been facing a long-lasting challenge of provincialism that has been a barrier to political stability (Taj & Nouman, 2022). The political and administrative setup in the country is centralized, and it has been dominated by Punjab, which has resulted in the feeling of inequality among small provinces (Mumtaz & Nakray, 2025). Balochistan, Sindh, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have been complaining on a regular basis about the lack of political representation, unequal resource distribution, and narrow fiscal autonomy (Rajani, 2022). Such complaints have created a sense of alienation and distrust of the federal government in regions.

These tensions have been further worsened by the strong influence of the military establishment and poor execution of fiscal federalism, which made provincialism a recurrent threat to the national unity and democratic consolidation of India. In its turn, a more flexible and inclusive approach to linguistic federalism following the States Reorganization Act of 1956 (Taj & Nouman, 2022). India was able to reconcile the regional demands without compromising its federalism by redrawing state boundaries along linguistic lines. The development of regional political parties and the effective power-sharing institutions has enabled the possibility of being involved in the governance processes (Khan, 2022). Even though the presence of regional differences and movements, founded on identities, continues to be a problem, the federal system has managed to accomplish quite a lot in the area of diversity management and political stability in India (Butt, 2024).

Research Justification

The study is important because it addresses the comparative processes of provincialism in Pakistan and India, where there is a national border but a common colonial history and differing political and federal systems. The issue of provincialism needs to be comprehended since it has a direct effect on the unity of the nation, democratic growth, and social-political stability in multiethnic states. The issues of ethnonationalist movements, unequal distribution of resources, and centralized governance in Pakistan have generated political tension in the country over the decades and failed to bind the nation together cohesively. On the other hand, the comparatively decentralized system and linguistic restructuring of the states in India have enabled a greater scale of accommodating the regional identities. However, there are still challenges in regions like Kashmir and the Northeast, through the analysis of the impact of federal structures, decentralization, and institutional effectiveness on provincialism.

This paper has brought out the significance of political inclusion and fair governance in ensuring cohesion among diversity. The study is also beneficial to policymakers who want to enhance the relations between provinces and foster inclusive federalism in South Asia and other multiethnicities.

Research Objectives

1. To discuss the historical context of provincialism in Pakistan and India.
2. To highlight the theoretical context of provincialism in Pakistan and India.
3. To analyze the laws regarding provincialism in Pakistan and India.
4. To identify the key challenges regarding provincialism in Pakistan and India.
5. To explore the opportunities for provincialism in Pakistan and India.
6. To propose effective prevention and intervention strategies.

Research Methodology

This study employed a systematic review methodology, with research objectives established accordingly. A comprehensive literature review was conducted (Komba & Lwoga, 2020). Research findings were categorized based on their content (Hiver et al., 2021; Petticrew & Roberts, 2006), and classified information was incorporated into the study by organizing it into headings (Gan et al., 2021; Pawson et al., 2005). The evaluation of classified information and titles formed the basis of the study (Page, 2021; Rahi, 2017), ensuring the integrity of the research subject and its contents (Egger et al., 2022; Victor, 2008). The criteria for selection are listed.

- 1. Relevance:** Researches that directly addressed the questions posed by this study are included.
- 2. Quality:** Studies that meet a certain quality threshold (e.g., methodological rigour, bias risk) are included. Most of the research is from Scopus-indexed and Clarivate Analytics journals and reputed publishers.
- 3. Recency:** Consideration of the publication date to ensure that the review reflects the most current evidence. Most of the studies are from the last three years.
- 4. Language:** Only studies published in English are included.
- 5. Data Completeness:** Previous studies must provide sufficient data on outcomes of interest for practical synthesis; this is also ensured in this research.

This study did not use primary data from human participants; therefore, no ethics clearance letter from the ethics committee was required.

Literature Review

Provincialism is an essential source of articulating how the regional identities construct, contest, and reformulate national discourses in the postcolonial South Asia states. It is caused by imbalanced power and resource distributions and representation between the central government and the provinces or the peripheral areas (Ayaz & Fahad, 2024). Such differences are frequently enhanced by the language, culture, and history disparities. The necessity to preserve ethnic and linguistic minorities in the countries has created repetitive conflicts in both Pakistan and India between the need to maintain regional independence and the need to uphold centralized governmental control (Taj & Nouman, 2022). Although the idea of federalism is to strike a balance between the interests of the region and national unity, it tends to replicate the same inequalities it is aimed at eradicating. Therefore, provincialism is a political and cultural form of opposition to central authority and nationalizing national ideologies. In Pakistan, provincialism is a rich cultural and political base (Khan, 2022).

During the introduction of Urdu as the national language following independence, the local languages were sidelined, including Sindhi, Balochi, and Pashto, which led to the development of powerful linguistic and ethnic resentment. These policies, combined with the political superiority of Punjab and the lack of economic growth and evenness of the state, have strengthened a sense of exclusion among minor provinces (Chandio et al., 2024). Efforts to create a single Islamic national identity by means of centralization in education and centralization in governance have frequently neglected the fact that Pakistan is a diverse region socially. Consequently, provincialism in Pakistan is more than a political fight for autonomy and equitable distribution but a cultural movement asserting against centralization and defending regional traditions, languages, and identities (Butt, 2024). However, India did it differently as the regional diversity was institutionalized via linguistic federalism in the aftermath of the States Reorganization Act of 1956 (Ishfaq et al., 2022). This strategy restructured states based on linguistic principles, which gave formal recognition to the regional language and cultures under the federal system. In spite of this inclusive model, inequalities still exist because of the linguistic inequalities that give preference

to Hindi and English in all aspects of politics, education, and administration. However, India has a flexible federal system that has enabled regional parties and movements to be involved in the government, and there is a delicate balance between oneness and diversity (Khan, 2024). Both nations are still struggling to find their way out of the current dilemma of balancing regional interests and ambitions with the context of a modern nation-state.

Historical Context of Provincialism in Pakistan and India

The colonial administration and political organization of the British colonial rule is the source of provincialism in both countries. Gradual decentralization by the British policy, with the support of the Morley-Minto Reforms of 1909 and the Government of India Act of 1935, gave provinces a stronger power, and, at the same time, made divisions based on religion, language, and culture more permanent (Taj & Nouman, 2022). In 1909, the introduction of separate electorates turned the old social and cultural differences into official political classes, which increased the rivalry between people. It is what politicized the identities of regions, i.e., Punjabi, Bengali, Sindhi, long before independence, as provincial elites started to demand independence within the colonial structure (Khan, 2024). These reforms provided a platform on which regional awareness existed in an uneasy coexistence with new nationalistic trends, which led to future struggles over representation and authority (Ayaz & Fahad, 2024).

The actual outcome of such provincial and communal tensions was the Partition of India in 1947, and the establishment of Pakistan can be seen as the general political demand of the Muslim majority provinces to have their own way (Chandio et al., 2024). Pakistan and India received the same centralized colonial forms of governance after independence, and yet the paths taken by the two countries developed dramatically different. The federal democracy in India was enhanced by linguistic reorganization in 1956, providing regional diversity with the support of institutional reform (But, 2024). Contrary, the centralization and bureaucracy, as well as poor constitutional development in Pakistan, marginalized the voices of provincialism, thus creating resentment and culminating in the secession of East Pakistan in 1971, a historical event that revealed the incapacity of the state to achieve national unity and regional autonomy (Taj & Nouman, 2022).

Theoretical Context of Provincialism in Pakistan and India

Institutionalism and Federal Design: The central distinction lies in the Institutionalism that deals with the constitutional design and the practices of the states that either deal with diversity or mismanage it. India embraced linguistic federalism, which restructured states on the basis of language, which was flexible, accommodative, and minimized centrifugal tendencies. In comparison, institutional suppression was viewed through the early adoption of the One Unit policy in Pakistan, which united all the West Pakistani provinces and the inability to acknowledge the Bengali language and culture. It resulted in the break-up of Bangladesh and constant center-periphery crises, particularly in Balochistan.

Ethnofederalism is a branch of Institutionalism that considers the possibility of diminishing or promoting secession by forming provincial units defined in either ethnic or linguistic terms. The situation of India forming new, smaller states, splitting to conquer by consensus, is often given as a successful, co-opting style of Ethnofederalism. The battle that Pakistan is going through, however, serves as an example of the risk aspect of the theory, where a centralized, non-inclusive federal system has enabled politicized ethnic identities to form in unison against the center.

These theories describe the provincial identity. Besides, Primordialism views ethnic and linguistic affiliations as natural, ingrained, and unchangeable, and thus provincialism is necessary. Instrumentalism/ Constructivism claims that the political and economic elites/ state itself mobilize

ethnic identity to acquire resources and power. A synthesis is widely acknowledged in South Asia: primordial deep-rooted identities, language, and religion lend the ground, but rather, it is the instrumental action of the elite and state policies, such as resource distribution and political appointments, which cause or provoke provincial conflict.

Laws Regarding Provincialism in Pakistan and India

The legal and constitutional system of the two countries, i.e., Pakistan and India, determines the way the two nations deal with provincial autonomy and regional diversity. Significant legislation and provisions involve:

1. Constitution of India, 1950: A quasi-federal form whereby the powers are shared between the Union and states, with the language and cultural diversity being recognized.

2. Constitution of Pakistan, 1973: It is a constitution that defines Pakistan as a federal state, which separates the legislative, administrative, and financial powers between the federation and provinces.

3. Eighteenth Constitutional Amendment, 2010 (Pakistan): A significant amendment that decentralized power in the education, health, and local government to the provinces, encouraging devolution and increased autonomy.

4. Finance Commission of India: The revenue redistribution between the Union and states is maintained in fiscal balance through the strengthening of cooperative federalism, and periodically.

5. National Finance Commission (NFC) Award (Pakistan): This is a way to secure the fair financial allocation between the provinces, but there are still disagreements concerning the possibility of the federal government controlling the revenues.

Challenges for Provincialism in Pakistan and India

1. Power Centralization: In Pakistan, there is too much centralization of power in the federal government at the expense of provincial autonomy. Monopoly of financial resources, security agencies, and major decisions on policymaking usually alienates smaller provinces, a phenomenon that sparks anger and undermines the federal system. Likewise, although federalism is a flexible principle in India, the central government may occasionally deprive the states by using legislative or financial power, which puts strains between the two.

2. Ethnic and Linguistic Tensions: The cultural, ethnic, or linguistic differences tend to increase provincialism further. The domination of one province may result in repressed minority languages and identities in Pakistan. In India, language federalism alleviates a few conflicts; nevertheless, language policy conflicts, identity-related conflicts, and cultural representation continue to occur, jeopardizing national unity.

3. Political Representation: It is a limitation or unequal representation in the political affairs, which aggravates provincial resentment. Military influence and bureaucracy in Pakistan minimize the provincial contribution in the formulation of policies. In India, regional parties assist in resolving this, although political marginalization is still possible as the national government interferes with the priorities of the states in which the interests of both the state and the national government collide.

4. Distribution of resources: Inequalities in the distribution of economic resources are still a significant issue. Most provinces in Pakistan, like Balochistan and Sindh, have been seen to be disadvantaged in revenue sharing, and this has contributed to the feeling of being neglected and marginalized economically. In India, regional imbalances in development and fiscal transfers at times result in discontent in states, particularly the states with low industrialization or infrastructure standards.

Opportunities for Provincialism in Pakistan and India

- 1. Human Rights Advocacy:** Systematic abuses can be alleviated by building the capacity of human rights organizations and instituting a culture of human rights respect. Reforms, accountability of perpetrators, and strengthening of ethical practice in the law enforcement and judicial systems can be achieved through advocacy and oversight.
- 2. Judicial Training:** judicial training and ethical education of judges, prosecutors, and law enforcement officers can be used to increase transparency and fairness. Such training can reduce the impact of political interference and enhance the quality of justice by focusing on the ethics of professionals.
- 3. Legal Reforms:** The systemic problems that are addressed through complete legal reforms include corruption, inefficiency, and accountability. Ethical standards in the criminal justice system can be substantially enhanced by having more rigorous anti-corruption measures, more transparency in the investigation and prosecution process, and explicit accountability mechanisms.
- 4. Public Awareness:** Inequalities in access to justice can be minimized through increasing public awareness about legal rights and availing cheap legal services. The creation of awareness among the citizens on their rights and the available legal provisions enables them to demand just treatment, and this way, justice is made available to everyone, irrespective of their socioeconomic status.

Discussion

The concept of provincialism in Pakistan and India exemplifies the current conflict between the central power and the local power. Pakistan has experienced too much centralization, which has curtailed the powers of the provinces, especially the smaller provinces like Balochistan and Sindh. The domination of financial resources, security, and policymaking by the federal government has created resentment, and these conflicts are usually enhanced by such factors as ethnic, linguistic, and cultural distinctions. The lack of proper representation in the federal government in making national decisions is another problem that diminishes trust in the federal government and contributes to the regional feelings of grievance.

India, on the other hand, has institutionalized a mechanism of accommodating regional diversity by providing linguistic federalism and fiscal devolution through the Finance Commission. States have powers that are constitutionally recognized, and regional parties are involved in governance. Nevertheless, tensions still arise when there is central interferences that override state priorities or when there is development inequity that causes discontent. It is shown that both countries have strived to balance national unity and provincial autonomy, which is an ongoing process that needs the equal distribution of resources, inclusive politics, and cultural and lingual multiplicity to ensure stability and cohesion.

Conclusion

Pakistan and India's provincialism highlights the issue of fragility between national unity and regional autonomy in different societies. The centralized order has tended to discriminate against smaller provinces in Pakistan, creating resentment and ethnic, linguistic, and cultural tension. By contrast, the institutionalized mechanisms in India, such as linguistic federalism and fiscal devolution, have given more space to regional participation; however, there are still challenges. The two examples demonstrate that successful federalism entails equal distribution of resources, representation in politics, and regional identities. To maintain the integrity of the country, mitigate violence, and foster a stable and representative form of governance in multiethnic, multilingual states, these issues need to be addressed.

Recommendations

- 1. Appreciate linguistic and cultural diversity:** Save and ensure local linguistic and cultural identities and traditions are supported and provided in the provincial governance systems.
- 2. Encourage balanced allocation of resources:** There should be equity in the financial resources allocation to the provinces to diminish the economic inequalities and also to create regional confidence in the federal system.
- 3. Encourage participatory policymaking:** This would entail consulting provincial governments when national policies that impact local interests are being drafted.
- 4. Encourage regional representation:** Simply make sure that the provinces are proportionately represented in national policymaking organs, so that their voices can be heard in administration.
- 5. Enhance awareness:** Educate the citizens on provincial rights, governance systems, and participation mechanisms to promote citizens' participation and responsibility.
- 6. Enhance capacity building:** Invest in provincial administrative as well as technical capacity to effectively handle devolved powers.
- 7. Enhance conflict management systems:** This will be done by creating institutional avenues through which the center and provinces will resolve their disputes professionally and openly.
- 8. Improve provincial independence:** Empower provinces by strengthening their legal and administrative authority to make provincial decisions and resource allocation, and developmental decisions.
- 9. Promote ethical provincial leadership:** The Highest possible level of transparency, accountability, and responsiveness in provincial leadership should be encouraged to develop public trust and enhance federal cohesion.
- 10. Promote fiscal devolution:** Empower institutions such as finance commissions so that the provinces can have more power to make their own decisions on generating and spending revenue.

Research Limitations

Availability and reliability of data are also one of the major limitations to the research on provincialism in Pakistan and India. In Pakistan, the official documents of resource distribution, provincial rule, as well as intergovernmental conflict are usually unfinished or unavailable. Political sensitivity over provincial grievances, especially in such regions as Balochistan and Sindh, can lead to underreporting or biased information. On the same note, in India, although data availability is easier, there is a disparity in reporting standards, and variations in states may complicate comparative analysis.

The other constraint is that the historical, cultural, and linguistic factors that influence provincialism are complicated. These aspects are tightly connected with political processes and social interactions, and it is hard to guess the individual causes and quantify their effects. Also, most of the literature is focused on the provisions of the constitution and policy models, which tend to overlook the experiences of provincial people. The practical realities of provincial autonomy, representation, and regional discontent might not be fully reflected in research in the two countries.

Research Implications

The comparative provincialism study between Pakistan and India has a number of implications:

- 1. Capacity building:** The knowledge can inform investments in administrative and technical capacity at the provincial level that can support the management of devolved powers and governance roles.

- 2. Conflict resolution:** Awareness of intergovernmental tensions can be used to build institutional means to solve the dispute between central and provincial governments effectively and clearly.
- 3. Cultural and linguistic awareness:** The study of how ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity can be used to generate policies that safeguard the identities of the regions and promote inclusive governance can be used to enhance national cohesiveness as well as adhere to provincial ethnicity.
- 4. Policy reform:** The result can be used to influence policy changes to enhance provincial autonomy, equitable distribution of resources, and less centralization, which will lead to a more equalized federal system.
- 5. Public involvement:** The research has the potential to bring attention to the citizens on provincial rights, governance frameworks, and the participatory processes, which enhance accountability and active participation of civilians.

Future Research Directions

To be able to learn more about and resolve the issues that currently exist, future research about comparative provincialism in Pakistan and India can deflect attention into a variety of areas:

- 1. Capacity and effectiveness of governance:** How can the provincial governments manage their devolved powers effectively, and what can be done to increase the capacity of the institutions?
- 2. Conflict resolution systems:** Investigating the current situation with conflict resolution between central and provincial governments and suggesting the models of conflict resolution that would be more relevant and transparent.
- 3. Cultural and linguistic integration:** Evaluating the effectiveness of the ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity in provincial governance and determining ways to encourage the inclusion, representation, and sustaining national integration.
- 4. Fair distribution of resources:** An exploration of how the financial and developmental resources are distributed among the provinces, the effectiveness of the current mechanisms, and how reforms can be done to minimize disparities among the regions.
- 5. Legal and provincial autonomy:** The Analysis of how provincial powers in the constitution are implemented, any loopholes in provincial, legal, or policy changes that can be used to enhance federal balance.

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