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### **Modernity Misinterpreted in Pakistan**

#### **Abstract:**

This paper explores varied perceptions of being modern in Pakistan. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS), Pakistan, this study investigates the understanding of the concept of modernity in Pakistan and its close connection with westernization. The informants of my research show an aversion towards modernity based on western patterns and labelled it as misinterpreted modernity. Misinterpreted modernity refers to the westernized model of modernity adapted by many people in Pakistan. A few important markers of misinterpreted modernity, suggested by the informants, include adopting western dress, using the latest technological gadgets, buying food from international fast-food chains like McDonald's and Burger King, and speaking in English. Most of the people in Pakistan qualify as modern based on these markers. In this study, I propose that modernity in Pakistan is misinterpreted because as a postcolonial nation the institutions have been established in Pakistan whereas the critical engagement required for the development of these institutions is lacking. The informants, however, reflect on these processes and stress that "our modernity" should emerge from our own cultural roots. Drawing on Eisenstadt theory of multiple modernities and empirical findings of my research, this paper suggests an alternative form of modernity, perhaps a Pakistani modernity.

**Keywords:** Modernity, Westernization, Pakistan, Multiple Modernities.

#### **Introduction**

Modernity is a promising concept in the social sciences as it ensures a new world order with better living opportunities. Since its very inception, the word has implied a strong distinction from the past or tradition. The classical sociological thinkers Marx, Weber and Durkheim considered the advent of modernity as the beginning of a new epoch of human history ensuring progress and development. These theorists assumed that "...the cultural program of modernity as it developed in modern Europe and the basic institutional constellations that emerged there would ultimately ... prevail throughout the world."<sup>1</sup> Giddens also argues that modernity is inherently globalizing, however, there are discontinuities at various stages of historical developments.<sup>2</sup> Different societies have acquired modernity in relation to their specific histories and cultures, therefore, the modernizing process in various societies is not linear.<sup>3</sup> Keeping in consideration the cultural relevance of the concept of modernity in Pakistan, this study explores what it means to be modern in Pakistan? It discusses the theoretical and empirical implications of the concept of modernity in Pakistan from an anthropological perspective. How modernity is perceived by people in Pakistan and why it is often associated with westernization? This study highlights the underlying complexities regarding modernity in Pakistan. It also adds into the scholarship on modernity in Pakistan and modernization theory.

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Eickelman and Piscatori state that modernity is “the single most important social theory to influence both academics and policy approaches to the Third World from the 1950s to the late 1970s”.<sup>4</sup> Early theories of modernization can be broadly divided into two groups: evolutionary and structural functionalist. The evolutionary approach claims that the development of all societies proceeds from the primitive to the advanced or developed. The functionalist approach can be best viewed in the work of Parsons, according to whom human societies are like biological organisms. According to Parsons, institutions are interdependent and interrelated in any given society.<sup>5</sup> If change occurs in one part of the society, it eventually affects other parts of the society, as a result of which the whole society will change.

These theories have been criticized for their ethnocentrism and presumption of western superiority. These theories presumed modernity was a homogenizing and westernizing process. Since western civilization was the first to develop modernity, the proponents of classical theory suggested that, in order to develop and progress, under-developed societies should follow the footsteps of western societies, thus equating modernity with westernization.

Due to growing discontent and dissatisfaction with the concept of modernity, in the 1980s new theories of modernity came to the forefront. Most of these theories were focused on analyzing different facets of modernity and pluralizing it. There are now at least three different theoretical positions among social scientists regarding modernity: “high modernity”, a phase in which the last remnants of traditional social structures are eliminated; “postmodernization”, a mix between traditional, modern, and postmodern elements with a trend towards the latter; and “postmodernity”, an era that we have already entered.<sup>6</sup> According to Lyotard, postmodernity abandons the grand narratives of modernity and opens way to the little narratives and a plurality of power discourses. Delanty considers postmodernity as a bridge between the past and present, stating that “postmodernity does not involve the rejection of the past by a triumphant present, but is an expression of the creative appropriation of past and present”.<sup>7</sup> Expressions such as “reflexive modernity”, “ultra-modernity”, and “triumphant modernity” are used by scholars to express variations in modernity.<sup>8</sup>

In the last decade of the twentieth century, the notion of multiple modernities was coined by Eisenstadt to emphasize the ways in which modern societies differ from each other. Multiple modernities also addresses the issue how different societies acquire the modernization processes and reshape them according to the societies’ cultural frameworks. The concept of multiple modernities has gained much significance in anthropological discourses. Other plural modernities that have gained attention are alternative modernities, colonial modernities, possible modernities, enchanted modernities, gendered modernities, embodied modernities, reflexive modernities, and multiple fragile modernities.<sup>9</sup> The notion of multiple modernities has also been criticized by Schmidt. He argues that if everything is ‘differently modern’, the term is deprived of meaning.”<sup>10</sup> Anthropology, with its focus on understanding local meanings, has adopted a different path. Different societies acquire modernization processes and reshape them according to their local cultural frameworks.

In post-colonial societies aspiration for modernity are irrecoverably bound with colonialism and imperialism.<sup>11</sup> Postcolonial societies have become modern, but the way modernization is understood in these societies is intricate. Modernity is not readily accepted, and certain paths have been chosen by postcolonial states which are peculiar to their histories. In Pakistani context, the scholarship on modernity is largely discussed in relation to Islam, whereas, its theoretical relevance in Pakistani context is less informed.<sup>12</sup> Bhambra argues that in non-European societies modernity is constituted within specific histories of colonialism and unequal power relations.<sup>13</sup> Bhambra’s argument is relevant to explain the structural development of modernity in Pakistan.<sup>14</sup> The colonial institutions were copied in Pakistan and the colonizers were replaced by the colonial elites. The detachment from the colonial modernity, which happened in India with the advent of subaltern studies group is relatively a recent development in Pakistan. Subaltern studies group did not conceptualize modernity as a failed or incomplete project rather they viewed modernity as different modernity, ‘our modernity’.<sup>15</sup> Deshpande commented,

Modernity was the object of intense desire, at the very least because it promised resources with which the marks of colonial subjugation could be erased, and equality claimed erstwhile masters. It was also the source of extreme anxiety because it seemed to threaten any distinctive (non-Western) identity – which was the only proof of true equality with (rather than mere mimicry of) the West. Hence the desperate desire not just for modernity, but a distinctive modernity.<sup>16</sup>

Similarly, in Pakistan modernity is both desired as well as rejected as it not only assures development and progress but also threatens the westoxication of local culture and values. The academic literature on modernity in Pakistan has a huge gap as the theoretical understandings and implications of modernity are relatively understudied. Modernity is largely understood and studied in relation to Islam, whereas the cultural underpinnings of this concept in Pakistan have been ignored. This study fills this gap by providing an alternative view of modernity, which informs its applicability in Pakistan.

### **Methodology**

This research is inspired from my doctoral fieldwork conducted in Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS) for a period of ten months in 2012. Participant observation, Interviews and Focus group discussion are key methods which have been used to collect data. The participants of my research are young elite Pakistani men aged between 18-32 years.<sup>17</sup> I conducted 63 interviews and four focus group discussions with undergraduate and postgraduate students.

LUMS, in comparison to many other Pakistani universities, has a distinct identity of an elitist and modern educational institute. It is situated in Lahore's most affluent area, Defence Housing Authority (DHA). It is an expensive institute and only the wealthy can afford to send their children there. Unless they come on scholarship, LUMS students are the sons and daughters of industrialists, businessmen, politicians, and landlords or high-ranked public or private job holders in banking, telecommunication and other industries of the like. LUMS was initially started as a business school in 1985. With the passage of time, new schools and departments were incorporated and currently, LUMS offers a diverse range of undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in Humanities and Social Sciences, Engineering and Marketing and Management, Business, Economics and Computer Sciences. Today, its reputation has evolved into the approximate equivalent of the "Harvard University" of Pakistan.<sup>18</sup> The chance to study at LUMS is the dream of many Pakistani youth.

LUMS is referred as Pakistan's Europe or mini-America in Pakistan. These phrases are often used by the informants during informal discussions as they were discussing the modern and elite culture of LUMS. It is not surprising that they would associate LUMS to Europe or America especially when America and Europe are signifiers of modern, affluent and progressive nations. The debate about modernity in Pakistani context is incomplete without considering its association with western culture.

Despite the fact many informants well understood the difference between modernization and westernization, yet some people associated LUMS with Europe and America. This association shows that Europe and America are not only signifiers of modernity, but they also represent a standard to be achieved by developing countries. This highlights eurocentrism embedded in the minds of my informants and directs towards the inextricable bond between modernization and westernization. One of my informants even said that "LUMS is 10kms away from Pakistan" by which he meant that even though LUMS is part of Pakistan but people way of living there do not adhere to Pakistani culture. Rather, they seem foreign.

### **Modernity Misinterpreted**

Modernization is a complex process in Pakistani society as it involves several ambivalences. On one hand, Pakistani people have a cultural essentialist approach and consider modernity as westoxification as suggested by Gupta in the case of Indian modernity.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, several Pakistanis line up in embassies to get foreign visas for immigration, higher education, better lifestyle and job opportunities. There is a constant rejection and at the same time inculcation of modern ideas, values, educational standards.

The literal translation of the word "modern" in Urdu is "*jadid*". In daily interactions people do not use the word *jadid*; in common parlance people use the English word "modern". However, the word *jadid* is used in Urdu literary works on modernity and modernization. In Pakistan, different connotations are attached to the word "modern" depending on the context. Understandings of the word "modern" in Pakistan can vary from seeing it as progressive, enlightened, and rational to immoral and western. The most common understanding of "being modern" is foregoing of one's traditional, cultural, and religious values and the adoption of western values. Therefore, generally, the process of change is not seen as positive and

most people are apprehensive of the process of modernization. My informant Touqeer explained how modern as a concept is generally understood in Pakistani society as follows:

I would firstly say that the connotations attached to the word modern are very negative. For example, if you say that you know person x is modern – just this statement, “Touqeer is modern” – that automatically qualifies it as something bad and modern is not seen as progress. Because modern with us entails being liberal, secular, or western, which are all three very different things. But for most of the people in drawing room discussion western, secular, and liberal qualify as same thing and since everybody has such a negative view of it...

Touqeer has discussed two points why many people have a negative conception of the word modern in Pakistan? Firstly, there is a terminological issue as many Pakistani people tend to put modern, western, secular and liberal in same slot. The words liberal and western have more or less the same meaning in Pakistan: in general, the blind acceptance of western values and culture. Western culture and values are often seen as socially and morally detrimental and are therefore rejected on religious and cultural grounds. The word secular has a negative connotation in the Pakistani context – to be anti-Islamic. “Liberal”, “secular”, “western”, and “modern” are often used interchangeably in Pakistan and stand for many as outright opposition to Pakistani religious and cultural values.

Secondly, linking “modern” with western is a major reason why the process of modernization is perceived negatively by many in Pakistan. Modernization-westernization debate gets further complicated because there is a distorted view of western culture held by many Pakistanis. For many, “western culture” means open relationships, free sex, alcohol and drugs, etc. Therefore, anything that is western is seen as tainted, polluted and immoral. During the initial days of my fieldwork, at my first meeting with one of the informants, when he learned that I was doing my PhD at a New Zealand university, he asked, “Do girls and boys have an open relationship over there?” These stereotypes about western culture in the minds of Pakistani people often result in them rejecting modernization. Hassan has also presented similar views in the following words:

Muslims, in general, tend to think of “modernity” in two ways: (a) as a process of modernization which is associated with science, technology, and material progress; and (b) as Westernization which is associated with promiscuity and all kinds of social problems ranging from latch-key kids to drug and alcohol abuse. While “modernization” is considered highly desirable, conversely “Westernization” is considered equally undesirable.<sup>20</sup>

However, many of my research participants reckon the differences between modernization and westernization and they consider their versions of modernity to be different from western modernity. Almost all the informants show an aversion towards modernization based on westernization and label it as corrupted modernization, copied modernization, or misinterpreted modernization. The following comments highlight major aspects of this misinterpreted version of modernization prevalent in Pakistani society.

Ijaz: In Pakistan, modernization is basically misinterpreted. Boys and girls speak English, quite modern. Boys and girls are reading Marx and Weber, quite modern. This is not basically modernization. Basically copying someone’s ideas, copying and paste on you is not modernization. We have forgotten our norms, values, we forgot our tradition. This is a dilemma that most of the people do not know their native language. Basically, we are obsessed with the values of the west. We don’t have any problem with modernization, but we have misinterpreted it. We thought that modernization is that we should forget all our culture and values and start following the west, i.e. modernization.

Qadir: I think in Pakistani society modernization is more likely to be seen as westernization. People associate being modern with being western. For instance, fast-food chains such as McDonald’s opened in Pakistan; people went there not just because they like McDonald’s but because they wanted to be modern. They thought going to McDonald’s is something modern. So, people basically associate modernization with everything that happens in the west. That is what modernization is.

Hamid: It is basically just westernization which is considered as modernization. Like wearing good brands, having a better iPhone, laptop is modernization. Copying what the west is doing, others are doing and following them blindly. Eating burgers and following western movie stars, just adopting the whole lifestyle of west without questioning it and without realizing what we are doing.

The above comments show that these informants seek to draw a distinction between their understanding of modernization and general understandings of modernization in Pakistan. There is not only a rejection of western modernity but also a nostalgia of bygone traditions and implicit desire for an alternative modernity which assimilates Pakistani culture and values. In the following discussion, I have used the phrase “misinterpreted modernity” for the westernized model of modernity adapted by most people in Pakistan, as suggested by the informants. By misinterpreted modernity, I mean that adapting of modernity superficially without understanding its core values, such as equality, tolerance, humanity, and freedom. A few important markers of misinterpreted modernity, as proposed by the informants, include adopting western dress, using the latest technological gadgets, buying food from international fast-food chains like McDonald’s and Burger King, and speaking in English. Most of the people in Pakistan qualify as modern based on the above described criterions.

In general, adopting western dress and food habits are considered as markers of modernity in Pakistani society. The ever-increasing dominance of fast food chains like McDonalds has been discussed by Ritzer.<sup>21</sup> According to Barber, international fast-food chains like McDonald’s, Burger King, and Pizza Hut, which he refers to collectively as the “McWorld”, are in a clash with the forces of “*jihad*”.<sup>22</sup> Barber presented a simplistic view of religion and modernity as dichotomous. There are many international fast-food chains in Muslim countries, however, and there is apparently no opposition shown by the general population against them. Instead, international fast-food chains in Pakistan have become a marker of western modernity. In this regard, Watson’s argument is relevant: that “the seemingly identical McDonald’s restaurants that have spread throughout the world actually have different social meanings and fulfil different social functions in different cultural zones.”<sup>23</sup> For instance, in Pakistan these chains are associated with upper-middle- or upper-class people, whereas in western countries they are mostly associated with working-class people. Eating out at international fast-food outlets is a status symbol in Pakistan and only middle- and upper-middle class people can afford it. In several cases, I have observed that elite people go to these chains to demarcate the line between themselves and others.

Misinterpreted modernization is often associated with consumer goods and international brands of clothing, bags, shoes, and technological gadgets like mobile phones and iPads. Since the upper class is more exposed to western culture via media and travel, their adoption of western culture is comparatively easy. Similarly, Gupta discusses that upper middle class of India is westoxicated since they mistakenly relate modernity with “symbols of technological progress, such as cars, gadgets, frequent travels abroad, and so forth”.<sup>24</sup> He also suggests that many of these elitists superficially flaunt these symbols of mistaken modernity.<sup>25</sup> Mostly people of the middle class do not have first-hand experience of western culture; therefore, it is hard for them to adhere to western values. Besides, this type of modernity is considered by most of the informants as misinterpreted as it does not involve critically evaluating and adapting a culture – rather, it is seen as just copying the “dominant culture”. “Anthropologists invoke the notion of multiple modernities to account for cultural diversity in ‘complex societies’, where people have states, bureaucracies, factories, fast food, and technology, but consume and interpret these realities in different ways”.<sup>26</sup>

There is a close association between misinterpreted modernization and class because being modern relates to consumerism and thus costs money. For some people, to be modern is to follow the trends of the upper class. Maqsood has also argued that ideas on modernity in Pakistan link engage into local class politics.<sup>27</sup> It is noteworthy that most of the above-mentioned markers of misinterpreted modernization are symbolic of elite culture in Pakistan. Modernization is often considered as directly proportional to class in Pakistani society. The nexus between modernity, class, and western culture in Pakistani society was best elaborated by Bilal as, “In Pakistani society modernization is copied from the west. With these premises, so the upper class got more exposure to the western way of living in comparison to the middle or lower class. With greater exposure comes greater adjustment and greater ability to adopt”.

According to Chakrabarty modernity in the West refers to two processes which are symbiotically connected.<sup>28</sup> The first process refers to the establishment of institutions which range from legal institutions to development of factories and capitalistic businesses. The second process refers to the development of critical engagement and judgements about the establishment of institutions. Institutions in many developing countries like Pakistan are established during the colonial era and are still working on the same patterns. Talbot has also argued that “[t]he post-colonial Pakistan state has maintained the main features of the British administration ...”.<sup>29</sup> For instance, Pakistan’s legal institution and bureaucracy are working on same patterns which were established during the British rule in the Indian sub-continent. The *sahib* culture that was established by the British to rule people of the Indian sub-continent is still prevalent in Pakistani bureaucratic system. British *sahibs* have been replaced by the colonial elites in Pakistan and the power relations between colonizers and colonized have been shifted to colonial elites and the masses. Modernity in Pakistan is misinterpreted because the second aspect described by Chakrabarty about the process of modernization is missing, which involves critical engagement regarding the institutional development.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, I suggest that modernity in Pakistan is misinterpreted because there are institutions in the forms of legal system, parliament, capitalist businesses and factories but a critical discourse on these institutions is relatively less informed. Chakrabarty further elaborates that establishment of institutions are invoked when we talk about modernization whereas modernity refers the modernization process and “the ability to identify and render a discourse about modernization”.<sup>31</sup> The lack of critical engagement with processes of modernization is largely missing in discourses on modernity in Pakistan. Therefore, people adopt the markers of misinterpreted modernity without questioning. One of my informants, Ali, discusses the significance of understanding underlying philosophies of the development of institutions and critically engaging with those philosophies to comprehend their relevance in Pakistani culture in the following words.

A: we are becoming a consumer, that doesn’t show that we are producing them or manufacturing them. If you look at modern societies, they have a very solid structure-based foundations on which they have built their societies and primarily their values. Their cultural and societal values and on that basis, they have built their education and after that they have developed those cities and the life standard that we now see on our televisions or even if you go abroad. So, that base is lacking currently we are going for consumerism, we are trying to copy their lifestyle but not how they have achieved that lifestyle. So, if we go into the ethical values or if we go into the education level and their academic proficiencies only then we can compete with them.

## **Conclusion**

Foucault claimed that “rather than seeking to distinguish the ‘modern era’ from the ‘premodern’ or ‘postmodern’, ... it would be more useful to try to find out how the attitude of modernity, ever since its formation, has found itself struggling with attitudes of counter modernity”.<sup>32</sup> The point of contention in Pakistan, as is obvious from informants’ comments, is not essentially between modernity and counter modernity: rather, the debates are focused on modernity and western modernity. Due to the link between modernity and westernization, the informants are averse to western modernity and aspire to a Pakistani modernity. By Pakistani modernity the informants meant a form of modernity that takes into consideration Pakistani cultural and religious values with the values of modernity. Hussain remarked, “We should understand what modern trends take; we should choose the best of them and leave the worst of them”.

Eisenstadt’s idea of “multiple modernities” contends that although the West is the main reference point of modernity for others due to its historical precedence but that is not the only path towards modernity.<sup>33</sup> The idea of multiple modernities has been widely debated and criticized in the academic literature on modernity. This paper puts forward the idea of an alternative modernity as many informants were dissatisfied with the concept of modernity due to its association with westernization. Bellappa suggests that in search of modernity many postcolonial societies “tend to develop a heightened consciousness of tradition and attempt to preserve, revive or even create traditions that distinguish their modernity from European forms of modernity”.<sup>34</sup> As deduced from my field observations and participants responses this study proposes that the prevalent form of modernity is not viable in Pakistan. One of my informants, Asad, remarked that “Our modernity (Pakistani modernity) should emerge from our own

cultural roots". By "our modernity" he meant to indigenize modernity and then adopting it. This study concludes that a Pakistani modernity is what many people desired which is a blend of Pakistani, Islamic, and western culture and technologies.

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- <sup>13</sup> Gurminder Bhambra, *Rethinking Modernity: Postcolonialism and the Sociological Imagination* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>15</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *Our modernity* (Rotterdam: Sepsis, 1997); Gyan Prakash, *Another reason: Science and the imagination of modern India* (Princeton University Press, 1999).
- <sup>16</sup> Satish Deshpande, *Contemporary India: A sociological view* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2004), 47.
- <sup>17</sup> Studying at an elite institution like LUMS locates the participants of this research, by default, in the category of "elite" because getting a degree from LUMS ensures (for most of them, if not all) a bright future. Most of these students will be the future leaders of the country. By virtue of the fact that my informants are getting their education from Pakistan's most expensive university, I have used the word "elite" for them, irrespective of the social class of their parents.
- <sup>18</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/19/world/asia/19ali.html>.
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- <sup>22</sup> Benjamin Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld: How globalization and tribalism are reshaping the world* (New York: Ballantine, 1996).

According to Barber, *jihad* is "... a rabid response to colonialism and imperialism and their economic children, capitalism and modernity" (1996:11).

<sup>23</sup> Ronald Inglehart and Wayne E Baker, "Modernization's challenge to traditional values: who's afraid of Ronald McDonald?" *Futurist* 35, no. 2(2001): 16-26.

<sup>24</sup> Dipankar Gupta, *Mistaken Modernity: India between Worlds* (India: Harper Collins, 2000), 14.

<sup>25</sup> According to Gupta, there is a difference between westernization and westoxication. He describes westoxication (2000:21) as "the establishment of universalistic norms and the privileging of achievement over birth". However, while describing the difference between westernization and westoxication, Gupta somehow equates westernization and modernity.

<sup>26</sup> Bjorn Thomassen, "Anthropology and its many modernities: when concepts matter," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 18, no. 1(2012):160-178.

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<sup>28</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Muddle of Modernity," *The American Historical Review* 116, no. 3 (2011): 663-675.

<sup>29</sup> Ian Talbot, *Pakistan: A modern history* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 34.

<sup>30</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Muddle of Modernity," *The American Historical Review* 116, no. 3 (2011): 663-675.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader* (Pantheon, 1984).

<sup>33</sup> Shumel Noah Eisenstadt, *Comparative civilizations and multiple modernities* (Brill, 2003), 77.

<sup>34</sup> Jyothsna Belliappa, *Gender, class and reflexive modernity in India* (New York: Springer, 2013).