EDUCATIONAL ASSIMILATION STRATEGIES IN BUILDING AN INCLUSIVE CIVILIZATION IN THE MIDST OF PAKISTAN'S DIVIDED SOCIETY: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

Fauzan Addinul Jihad, Mutohharun Jinan

Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta, Indonesia

Abstract

This study aims to analyze the strategies of assimilation of education in Pakistan to build an inclusive civilization in a divided society while identifying knowledge gaps in the existing literature. The core problem lies in the fragmented education system, which creates "educational apartheid" and exacerbates social segregation based on ideology and socio-economic class. The method used is Systematic Literature Review (SLR) following the PRISMA guidelines, synthesizing 10 final articles drawn from the Scopus database between 2015 and 2025. The findings reveal that the assimilation strategy in Pakistan is dominated by a top-down approach through the instrumentalization of religion and the standardization of the Single National Curriculum (SNC). However, this strategy proved ineffective because it fueled ethno-nationalist resistance, deepened sectarian divisions, and perpetuated gender bias. This conclusion confirms that coercive assimilation fails to foster authentic social cohesion. Therefore, a paradigm shift towards an integrative model that accommodates the plurality of identities and deconstructs colonial legacies is essential to achieving a stable and inclusive civilization.

Keywords: Assimilation strategy; Pakistan; A divided society; A systematic literature review.

INTRODUCTION

Education has been universally recognized as the backbone of civilization and social cohesion. On the contrary, the situation in Pakistan is alarming due to its complex historical background. Harmony integrates the rational and spiritual knowledge that characterized the collapsed Mughal era of the colonial period. This resulted in a sharp polarization of Aligarh's scientific-rational modernism and Deoband's religious traditionalism. This dualism goes beyond the ideological debates of the past and has fractured the contemporary social structure of Pakistan. The consequences of the inability to unite the two poles are reflected in the Pakistan Social and Living Standard Measurement (PSLM) report 2018-2019. An ideologically fragmented heritage has also created a bias between modernists and traditionalists, culminating in access gaps. Modernity, because it has been concentrated in urban centers, has resulted in a literacy rate of 75% among urban residents while rural areas, after neglect, lag far behind 48% (Kashif, Nawaz, Waqar, & Bhutto, 2025). On the other hand, what is left of conservative traditionalism has also perpetuated the gender gap in education with the participation rate of girls reaching 45% while the rate of boys is 70% (Amir-ud-Din, Mahmood, Javed, & Usman, 2019; Durrani & Escape, 2018).

These figures are a reflection that the historical struggle between the two schools of thought continues to create formidable challenges. The national education system must be designed to melt differences capable of gluing back the social cracks that exist in society. However, the reality on the ground shows a contradictory phenomenon (Rao, 2025b, 2025a; Sain, Aziz, & Sain, 2025). Education in Pakistan on the one hand is expected to unify, but on the other hand it has the potential to become an indoctrination tool that exacerbates social segregation (Qazi & Javid, 2021). This can be seen from the striking gap between elite schools, public schools, and madrassas, each of which carries a curriculum with a different ideology (Bukhari, Khan, & Haider, 2025). So instead of

creating assimilation, the existing system reinforces a wall of separation between groups or "Divided Societies" that includes ethnic differences, religious sects, languages, and complex economic disparities (Duffy & Gallagher, 2017; Hayes & McAllister, 2009; Loader & Hughes, 2017).

A divided society is categorized not only because of ethnic diversity, but because of deep ideological and socio-economic fragmentation (Akkoyunlu & Sarfati, 2024; Ford & Jennings, 2020; Mukanda, Okoth, & Lusambili, 2024). This phenomenon can be explained through the lens of Social Identity Theory, where social categorization creates strict boundaries between inner and outer groups (Brown, 2000; Khadka, 2024; Nam & Chen, 2021; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019; Trepte & Loy, 2017). In the Pakistani context, this polarization is exacerbated by the segregation of educational institutions that separate secular elites, middle-class society, and conservative religious groups. As a result, this structural inequality perpetuates the so-called "educational apartheid", in which school backgrounds determine access to economic opportunities and form conflicting worldviews. So that this fragmentation can hinder the formation of a cohesive national identity (Khumalo, 2025; Mckeever, 2017).

Theoretically, education as a mechanism of assimilation and social cohesion functions as a vital agent of civic assimilation for a country with a pluralistic nation. Referring to the Intergroup Contact Theory, educational institutions ideally provide an equal space for interaction for individuals from different backgrounds to reduce prejudice (Alan, Baysan, Gumren, & Kubilay, 2021; Grimminger-Seidensticker & Möhwald, 2020; Smith et al., 2020). In Pakistan, this strategy is pursued through curriculum reforms aimed at instilling the values of peace and tolerance (Kausar, Younas, & Siddique, 2025). This highlights that the curriculum is not just a pedagogical document, but a political tool to build a narrative of unity. Educational assimilation strategies are not enough just to equalize textbooks, but require a social reconstruction approach that dismantles class biases. So without structural reforms that equalize the quality between rural and urban areas, between madrassas and elite schools, the assimilation strategy will only be symbolic and fail to touch the roots of social fragmentation (Bowskill, Lyons, & Coyle, 2007; Indri, 2024; Skubiak, 2021).

However, there are several studies that have examined educational assimilation strategies amid a divided society in Pakistan. Research conducted by Ullah et al. (2025) highlights the use of religion as a political instrument in assimilation strategies in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan provinces, suggesting that a religion-based top-down approach is less effective without regional identity recognition and economic justice(Ullah, Abbas, & Khan, 2025). Research by Aslam et al. (2021) explains that historical wounds influence assimilation patterns and maintain ethnic differences. This is categorized as the long-term impact of the India-Pakistan partition on educational outcomes and ethnic adaptation strategies (Aslam, Farvaque, & Hayat, 2021). In the context of practical education, Hanif (2023) criticized the implementation of the Single National Curriculum (SNC) which, although it aims to be inclusive, still fails substantially to integrate global citizenship education and tolerance values, and tends to emphasize patriotism and exclusive religious identity (Hanif, 2023).

The main limitation of the previous literature lies in its approach which tends to be partial and fragmented. So it has not been comprehensively mapping macro trends and inter-factor interactions. In response to this, this study offers novelty through the use of the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method to synthesize various findings and regions from articles collected in the last decade. Therefore, this research is focused on filling the knowledge gap by explaining trends and gaps from the collected literature, identifying dominant assimilation strategies, evaluating their effectiveness in reducing conflicts, and mapping obstacles and challenges to formulate policy recommendations.

However, this research itself has its own limitations in the form of its scope that is only fixated on the strategic assimilation of education that is closely related to history. This research has fundamental limitations because its scope is only fixed on the history of educational assimilation strategies in Pakistan. As a result, this analysis is completely limited to a review of past policy literature and does not include current field observations or hands-on practical trials. So this

research is only on the strategy of assimilation of education in building an inclusive civilization in the midst of a divided society in Pakistan.
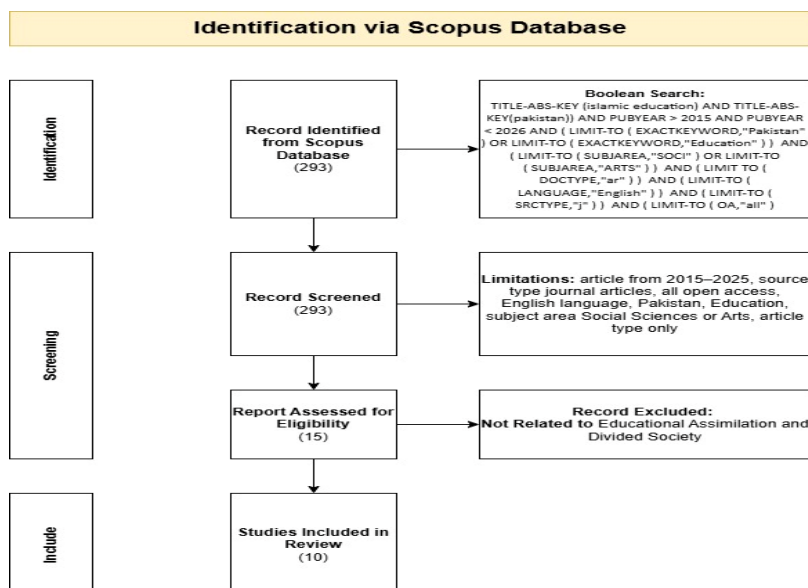
RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative paradigm with a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach. The SLR approach was chosen to synthesize fragmented findings from the existing literature on educational assimilation strategies in the face of a divided society in Pakistan. This method allows researchers to map macro trends, evaluate effectiveness, and identify knowledge gaps (research gaps) in a comprehensive and structured manner to formulate integrative policy recommendations (Aslam et al., 2021; Bowskill et al., 2007).

The literature search was conducted using the Scopus database, which was chosen because of its reputation for providing access to reputable scientific journals, particularly in the fields of social sciences and humanities. The search time span is limited to publications between 2015 and 2025 to capture the dynamics of the last decade. The search is performed using complex Boolean Operator techniques to ensure the accuracy of the results.

The search strings that are applied as filters to select the eligibility of articles to be used through Scopus are: *((TITLE-ABS-KEY(islamic education) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY(pakistan)) AND PUBYEAR > 2015 AND PUBYEAR < 2026 AND (LIMIT-TO (EXACTKEYWORD,"Pakistan") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTKEYWORD,"Education")) AND (LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA,"SOCI") OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA,"ARTS")) AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE,"ar"))) DAN (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE,"English")) AND (LIMIT-TO (SRCTYPE,"j")) AND (LIMIT-TO (OA,"all"))))*

The process of selecting and analyzing the data was carried out to strict standards to ensure the validity of the findings with reference to the PRISMA guidelines (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis). To ensure the quality of the literature, inclusion criteria are set specifically for English-language journal articles available in Open Access and published within a certain period of time. From the initial search results that identified 293 articles, a gradual screening of titles and abstracts was carried out which significantly reduced the amount of data to 15 potential articles. These articles then go through the stage of analysis through the reading of the text as a whole to verify their substantive relevance to the topic of educational assimilation strategies in a divided society, which ultimately resulted in the final 10 articles. Once the relevant articles are screened, each article is evaluated based on its methodological quality and contribution to the research topic. This evaluation covers aspects such as the validity of the research design, the measurement of the variables used, and the data analysis techniques applied (Andrade, 2018).

This methodology follows guidelines PRISMA, which is used to systematically report all the steps taken in the search, selection and analysis of articles. This process ensures that every step, from search to synthesis of results, is done with transparency and high precision. The PRISMA flowchart will be used to illustrate the article filtering process more clearly (Sohrabi et al., 2021).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Trends and Gaps in Article Findings

Education as a political and ideological instrument contained in a number of studies highlights how education is used as a tool to assimilate state politics. Ullah et al. (2025) specifically compared assimilation strategies in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, finding that religion is often politicized to dampen ethno-nationalism, which in turn complicates national integration (Ullah et al., 2025). This is in line with the findings of Ahmed and Karim (2024), which reveal the influence of Saudi Arabia's soft power in shaping the religious education landscape in Pakistan, which reinforces the narrative of Salafism and has the potential to erode more inclusive local traditions (Ahmed & Karim, 2024). On the other hand, Rohman et al. (2024) in their comparative study highlight the challenges of developing the Islamic education curriculum in Pakistan which are caught between orthodoxy and the need for relevance of the times, similar to the challenges faced by Indonesia and India (Rohman et al., 2024).

Gender tension and modernity are trends with topics that are central themes in evaluating inclusivity. Mursaleen and Taimur (2023) evaluated the alignment of the education system with religious ideology, finding that gender construction in the curriculum often hinders sustainable development for women (Mursaleen & Taimur, 2023). Awan (2022) reinforces this argument by reflecting on the women's rights movement in "Naya Pakistan", where Islamized narratives often clash with women's empowerment efforts, creating a paradox in national education policy (Awan, 2022).

The trend of global moral education and citizenship is an effort to build social cohesion. This is also reflected in the study of civic education. Ashraf et al. (2021) explored the perspectives of teachers from different sectors (religious, national, international) on Global Citizenship Education (GCE), finding that there is a sharp gap in understanding between these sectors (Ashraf & Tsegay, 2021). Meanwhile, Asif et al. (2020) compared the perceptions of moral education between university teachers in China and Pakistan, highlighting differences in pedagogical approaches in instilling moral values for sustainable development (Asif, Guangming, Haider, & Colomer, 2020).

The trend of radicalization and religious literacy has become a focus on security. This is evident in the study of Ahmed et al. (2020) who identified higher education institutions as fertile ground for violent extremism, driven by the lack of space for critical dialogue (Ahmed, Jafri, & Ahmed, 2020). As a solution, Ashraf (2019) proposes the potential of religious literacy to reduce sectarian violence, emphasizing the need for education that teaches cross-sectarian understanding (Ashraf, 2019).

However, the article's findings point to some limitations that hinder a holistic understanding of educational assimilation strategies. Dominance of Partial Qualitative Approaches: Most studies use a qualitative approach with a specific case study focus. For example, Ul-Haq (2021) uses a decolonial theoretical approach through the lens of Muhammad Iqbal's philosophy to criticize management education, but lacks empirical data on implementation in the field (Haq, 2021). Similarly, the studies of Ullah et al. (2025) and Awan (2022) are very rich in narrative analysis but are limited in generalizations of national statistics (Ullah et al., 2025).

Sectoral and geographical fragmentation is a gap in the article's findings. Many studies focus on one sector of education, such as higher education or teacher perceptions only (Ahmed et al., 2020; Ashraf & Tsegay, 2021; Asif et al., 2020). These findings do not highlight inclusive interactions

from the perspective of students or the wider community. In addition, although there are studies in conflict areas such as in the study of Ullah et al., (2025), much of the other literature tends to be biased towards urban centers or macro policy analysis without touching on the reality of rural schools. So much of the research fixated on teacher perceptions and higher education has obscured vital interactions with students and society at large, creating an analytical vacuum at the grassroots level.

On the other hand, the gap in the absence of an integrated assimilation strategy based on the existing literature tends to dissect issues such as extremism findings, curriculum, and gender gaps separately (Ahmed et al., 2020; Mursaleen & Taimur, 2023; Rohman et al., 2024). In each of these articles, there has been no research that synthesizes these variables to formulate a comprehensive model of assimilation strategies, which is able to bridge the gap between religious schools (madrasas), public schools, and private elite schools within the framework of an inclusive civilization. The absence of this synthesis leaves a fundamental gap for the formulation of a comprehensive assimilation model that is able to integrate various educational systems within the framework of an inclusive civilization based on the title of this study.

Finally, there is a gap in the form of a lack of evaluation of the effectiveness of interventions. Sharp policy criticisms, such as the analysis of gender bias in the Awan curriculum (2022) and the decolonial critique of Ul-Haq (2021), tend to stop at a philosophical level without presenting data on the real impact of behavioural change on the ground (Awan, 2022; Haq, 2021). Accordingly, proposed solutions such as religious literacy by Ashraf (2019) are still hypothetical without measurable trials, while existing evaluations, such as the studies of Ashraf et al. (2021) and Asif et al. (2020), are limited to measuring teachers' perceptions and fail to capture whether such readiness correlates with students' social cohesion (Ashraf, 2019; Ashraf & Tsegay, 2021; Asif et al., 2020). Even macro-political analyses by Ullah et al. (2025) and Ahmed and Karim (2024) only succeeded in dismantling the motives for state assimilation but failed to evaluate whether the strategy actually created integration at the grassroots or actually strengthened resistance, leaving a huge gap between the policy formulation offered and the evidence of its success in reducing conflict (Ahmed & Karim, 2024; Ullah et al., 2025).

The data show that these studies cover a very broad spectrum and are not limited to just one academic level. Its scope extends from the basic education system (formal schools and madrasas) to higher education, with analysis that crosses multiple dimensions. The focus of the study includes the perspectives of university students related to extremism, the views of teachers from various sectors (religious, national, and international), to the evaluation of macro policies such as the reform of the Single National Curriculum (SNC) and the influence of foreign soft powers. This diversity of subjects confirms that the issue of educational assimilation in Pakistan is being examined holistically, from classroom interactions to the political level of policy.

Author	Title	Year	Journal	Country	Author Affiliation	Sebject or level of Education
Zahid Shahab Ahmed & Umer Karim	Saudi Arabia's soft power in Pakistan	2024	Journal of Political Power	Pakistan	National Defense College (UAE); Deakin University (Australia); University of Birmingham (UK)	Political Science/ International Relations (Soft Power)
Shoaib Ul-Haq	Reversing the colonial warp in education: a decolonial	2021	Higher Education	Pakistan	Sejong University (South Korea)	Higher Education/ Management Education

	encounter with Muhammad Iqbal				
Huma Mursaleen & Sadaf Taimur	Gender Construction for Sustainable Development in Pakistan: Evaluating the Alignment of Education Systems with Religious Ideology	2023	Society	Pakistan (Lahore)	University of Tokyo (Japan)	Formal Education System (Elementary School to Senior High School)
Muhammad Azeem Ashraf, Samson Maekele Tsegay, & Jin Ning	Teaching Global Citizenship in Muslim-Majority Countries: Teachers' Perspectives from the Religious, National, and International Education Sectors in Pakistan	2021	Religion	Pakistan (Sahiwal, Punjab)	Hunan University (China); Anglia Ruskin University (UK)	School Teachers (Religious, National, & International Sectors)
Muhammad Azeem Ashraf	Exploring the Potential of Religious Literacy in Pakistani Education	2019	Religion	Pakistan (Punjab)	Hunan University (China)	Elementary Schools, High Schools, Colleges, Universities, & Religious Schools
Zahid Shahab Ahmed & Qamar Abbas Jafri	Drivers of violent extremism in Pakistan's higher education institutions	2020	Asymmetric Conflict Dynamics	Pakistan (Islamabad)	Deakin University (Australia); RMIT University (Australia)	Universities (Students)
Abdul Rohman, Alizar	Challenges in the Developme	2024	International Journal of	Indonesia, Pakistan, India	Soedirman General University;	Islamic Education Curriculum

Isna, Mulyani Mudis Taruna, Arnis Rachmadhani, Nugroho Eko Atmanto, & Nasikhin	nt of Islamic Education Curriculum: A Comparative Study of Indonesia, Pakistan, and India		Educational Learning, Teaching and Research		BRIN; UIN Walisongo (Indonesia)	(Doctoral Student Perspective)
Sonia Awan	Reflections on Islamization and the Future of the Women's Rights Movement in Pakistan's 'Naya'	2022	Angles (A New Perspective on the Anglophone World)	Pakistan	Sorbonne Nouvelle University (France)	Educational Reform (Single National Curriculum) / Sociology
Shakir Ullah, Ali Abbas, & Usman Khan	Religion as a Political Instrument: Comparing State Assimilation Strategies in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Balochistan	2025	Religion	Pakistan (KP & Balochistan)	Henan Normal University (China); NUST (Pakistan)	Political Science / Religious Education (Madrasah)
Tahseen Asif, Ouyang Guangming, Muhammad Asif Haider, Jordi Colomer, Sumaira Kayani, & Noor ul Amin	Moral Education for Sustainable Development: A Comparison of University Teachers' Perceptions in China and Pakistan	2020	Sustainability	China & Pakistan	Shanghai University (China); Beaconhouse School System (Pakistan); University of Girona (Spain); et al.	Higher Education (EFL University Teacher & Islamic Studies)

As presented in the table, the journal with the highest number of publications in this selection is Religion, featuring three different studies that explore the intersection of faith, citizenship, and political assimilation. This repetition highlights the centrality of religious discourse in analysing Pakistan's educational and socio-political landscape. The remaining articles are

distributed in diverse journals such as Higher Education, Journal of Political Power, Sustainability, and Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict, reflecting a multidisciplinary approach that includes political science, sociology, and educational theory. This diversity shows that educational and ideological issues in Pakistan are being examined through a variety of academic lenses, from soft power dynamics to sustainable development (Ahmed et al., 2020; Ahmed & Karim, 2024; Ashraf, 2019; Ashraf & Tsegay, 2021; Asif et al., 2020; Awan, 2022; Haq, 2021; Mursaleen & Taimur, 2023; Rohman et al., 2024; Ullah et al., 2025).

The authors contributed from a variety of international and local institutions, demonstrating strong transnational research collaborations. There was an important presence of researchers affiliated with universities in Australia (Deakin University, RMIT), China (Hunan University, Shanghai University, Henan Normal University), the United Kingdom (University of Birmingham), and the UAE (National Defence College)(Ahmed & Karim, 2024; Ashraf, 2019; Ashraf & Tsegay, 2021; Asif et al., 2020; Ullah et al., 2025). Certain authors, such as Zahid Shahab Ahmed and Muhammad Azeem Ashraf, appear in several entries, demonstrating a dedication to ongoing and focused research on the region (Ahmed & Karim, 2024; Ashraf, 2019; Ashraf & Tsegay, 2021). Collaborations between local Pakistani scholars and those from institutions in France and South Korea further enriched the discourse, bringing an emicical and ethical perspective into the study of Pakistan's education system (Awan, 2022; Haq, 2021).

The study covers a broad spectrum of education levels and thematic contexts, from primary and secondary schools to higher education and policy reform. For example, this research investigates specific curriculum issues such as the Single National Curriculum and Islamic Education, analyzing their impact on the construction of gender and women's rights (Ahmed et al., 2020; Ashraf, 2019; Ashraf & Tsegay, 2021; Asif et al., 2020; Awan, 2022; Haq, 2021; Mursaleen & Taimur, 2023; Rohman et al., 2024). Other studies focused on the university environment, examining the drivers of violent extremism among students and teachers' perceptions of moral education (Ahmed & Karim, 2024; Ashraf, 2019; Awan, 2022; Mursaleen & Taimur, 2023; Ullah et al., 2025). In addition, its scope extends to geopolitical influences, such as Saudi Arabia's soft power in Pakistan and comparative analysis of education strategies in Indonesia, Japan, India, and China, which illustrate how Pakistan's educational challenges are often viewed through a comparative and global lens (Ashraf, 2019; Ashraf & Tsegay, 2021; Asif et al., 2020; Mursaleen & Taimur, 2023; Rohman et al., 2024; Ullah et al., 2025).

In terms of publication trends, the article runs from 2019 to 2025, showing a steady and sustained academic interest in the topic over the past few years. The inclusion of the publication in 2025 shows that the examination of religion as a political instrument remains a cutting-edge and growing field of study (Ahmed et al., 2020; Ahmed & Karim, 2024; Ashraf, 2019; Ashraf & Tsegay, 2021; Asif et al., 2020; Awan, 2022; Haq, 2021; Mursaleen & Taimur, 2023; Rohman et al., 2024; Ullah et al., 2025). Geographically, while all research focuses on Pakistan as the main locus, many adopt a comparative approach, juxtaposing Pakistan's situation with China, Saudi Arabia, and India (Ahmed & Karim, 2024; Ashraf, 2019; Ashraf & Tsegay, 2021; Asif et al., 2020; Rohman et al., 2024; Ullah et al., 2025). This trend reflects the growing recognition of the interconnectedness of regional education policy and the global implications of ideological narratives in Pakistan's education system.

Country	Number of Publications
Pakistan	10
Indonesia	1
India	1
Chinese	1

Identifying Forms of Educational Assimilation Strategies for Divided Societies in Pakistan

The assimilation education strategy in Pakistan is dominated by a top-down approach of religious instrumentalization and standardization ideology. Ullah et al. (2025) note that the state

uses religion as a political tool in conflict areas such as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, where assimilation is used as a tool to rape ethnic identities into a single religious national identity (Ullah et al., 2025). This strategy is in line with Awan (2022's) analysis which underlines 'Islamization' as an attempt to instill an SNC (Single National Curriculum) narrative of socio-ideological control as a whole, ignoring the narrative of women's rights. This control is strictly applied in the establishment of social norms (Awan, 2022). Mursaleen and Taimur (2023) revealed that education in this country is deliberately integrated with certain religious ideologies to build the desired gender roles and responsibilities in accordance with the nation's identity. This assimilation is encouraged internally, but it is also influenced externally (Mursaleen & Taimur, 2023). Ahmed and Karim (2024) reveal the influence of Saudi Arabia's soft power in curriculum arrangements, funding of educational institutions that bring the mastery of Salafi ideas closer and complicate sectarian cohesion (Ahmed & Karim, 2024).

Alternatively, there are assimilative strategic efforts that focus on pedagogical reform and the expansion of a global outlook to reduce exclusion. Rohman et al. (2024) Modernizing the Islamic education curriculum to address the balance between orthodoxy and contemporary seems to be a difficult challenge in the Indonesian and Indian contexts (Rohman et al., 2024). Responding to the colonial legacy of fragmentation, Ul-Haq (2021) proposes a decolonial knowledge strategy based on the philosophy of Khudi Muhammad Iqbal, which seeks to achieve an authentic and inclusive identity for students (Haq, 2021). Efforts aimed at broadening learners' horizons have been complemented by global citizenship education, although Ashraf et al. (2021) have shown that its implementation is still fragmented between religious, national, and international schools (Ashraf & Tsegay, 2021). So far, Asif et al. (2020) emphasized the importance of moral education as a vital character building strategy to ensure social cohesion in a pluralistic society which is a point of development (Asif et al., 2020).

Finally, assimilation strategies have taken the form of counter-radicalization interventions aimed at securing social cohesion. Ashraf (2019) recommends religious literacy as a form of cross-educational strategy that aims at interreligious understanding and sectarian prejudices, and that goes beyond just religious indoctrination (Ashraf, 2019). The findings of Ahmed and Jafri (2020) further reinforce the urgency of this strategy, as it shows that higher education institutions have become incubators for violent extremism due to the lack of space for critical dialogue, thus calling for a curriculum framework that seeks to dismantle violent narratives (Ahmed et al., 2020).

Overall, the literature shows that the most dominant form of assimilation strategy is the standardization of a centralistic (top-down) religion-based curriculum, as seen in the Single National Curriculum discourse and the politics of assimilation in conflict areas. The strategy of educational assimilation in Pakistan seems to dynamically oscillate between uniformity of identity along political lines of religion and pedagogical efforts to foster tolerance and a global outlook. However, there are alternative strategies emerging from academia, namely the decolonial approach and religious literacy, which offer a more inclusive and dialogical path of integration than just uniformity of identity.

Effectiveness and Impact of Education Assimilation Strategies

Politically, Ullah et al. (2025) found that the strategy of assimilation of the state through religious instrumentalization in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan proved ineffective in reducing ethnic conflicts. Empirical evidence suggests that this top-down approach actually fuels strong resistance from ethnic minority groups, where religious homogenization fails to address their socio-economic grievances, so instead of creating integration, what happens is the strengthening of ethno-nationalist sentiments (Ullah et al., 2025). The ineffectiveness in building sectarian cohesion is also highlighted by Ahmed and Karim (2024), who evaluate the impact of Saudi Arabia's education soft power. Although madrasah funding strategies are effective in spreading Salafi ideology, their impact on national inclusivity is negative because it deepens the gap between sectarianism and marginalizes more tolerant local Islamic traditions (Ahmed & Karim, 2024).

In the context of gender and social inclusivity, the strategy of "Islamization" of the curriculum is also evaluated to have a counterproductive impact. Awan (2022) criticized that the Single National Curriculum (SNC) intended to eliminate the class gap is actually effective in perpetuating patriarchal bias. Her evaluation shows that the narrative of the new curriculum limits the space for the women's rights movement, so that the indicators of the success of inclusive civilization for women have regressed (Awan, 2022). These findings are supported by Mursaleen and Taimur (2023), who provide evidence that the alignment of the education system with rigid religious ideologies impacts the low participation of women in sustainable development, confirming the system's failure to empower half of Pakistan's population (Mursaleen & Taimur, 2023). Meanwhile, Rohman et al. (2024) evaluated the effectiveness of the Islamic education curriculum and concluded that the existing development strategy is still stagnant. An indicator of its ineffectiveness can be seen from the inability of graduates of Islamic educational institutions to integrate competitively in the modern job market and in multicultural dialogue (Rohman et al., 2024).

From the pedagogical and character building side, the literature shows that the strategy of instilling value is often stalled at the conceptual level without significant behavioral impacts. Ashraf et al. (2021) evaluated the teaching of Global Citizenship Education (GCE) and found low effectiveness due to system fragmentation. Teachers in religious schools reject the concept of global citizenship that is considered secular, leaving students compartmentalized in sectarian identities (Ashraf & Tsegay, 2021). In line with that, Asif et al. (2020) compared the perceptions of university teachers in Pakistan and China, concluding that moral education strategies in Pakistan are less effective due to weak institutional commitments, which have an impact on students' character deficits and social responsibility (Asif et al., 2020). The failure of educational institutions in creating safe spaces is also emphasized by Ahmed and Jafri (2020), who provide empirical evidence that campuses in Pakistan, instead of being agents of peaceful assimilation, instead become the forerunner of violent extremism due to the absence of effective dialogue strategies (Ahmed et al., 2020).

Amid this gloomy evaluation, several studies offer evaluations of potential alternative strategies that have not yet been fully tested. Ashraf (2019) argues that the current model of religious education fails because it creates "religious illiteracy", and evaluates that the shift towards a religious literacy model has greater potential to reduce conflict, although empirical evidence of its success is still prospective (Ashraf, 2019). Finally, Ul-Haq (2021) evaluated that existing management education is ineffective in building national identity because it is still colonial-oriented. He proposed that the effectiveness of assimilation can only be achieved if education returns to the philosophy of Khudi Muhammad Iqbal, which is theoretically believed to be able to restore students' self-agency and reduce cultural alienation (Haq, 2021).

Based on a literature review, the evaluation of the effectiveness of educational assimilation strategies in Pakistan shows results that tend to be paradoxical; Strategies designed for unification often fail to achieve social cohesion and, in some cases, exacerbate polarization. Overall, the literature concludes that current assimilation strategies are more effective in imposing ideological conformity than promoting true inclusive values.

Obstacles and Challenges

Ullah et al. (2025) identified that the main obstacles in conflict areas such as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan are ethno-nationalist resistance to centralistic state assimilation strategies; The use of religion as a political instrument by the state has actually triggered rejection from ethnic groups who feel that their cultural identity and economic grievances are being ignored (Ullah et al., 2025). This ideological challenge is exacerbated by external interventions, such as those discovered by Ahmed and Karim (2024), where the flow of funds and the influence of Saudi Arabia's soft forces promote Salafi ideology in educational institutions, which creates new sectarian barriers and complicates inter-sectarian integration at the local level. In the realm of domestic policy, Awan (2022) highlights that efforts to unify through Islamization in the Single National

Curriculum (SNC) backfire because they are contrary to human rights values, especially women's rights, thus creating polarization between conservative and progressive camps instead of assimilation (Awan, 2022). This is reinforced by Mursaleen and Taimur (2023) who find that rigid interpretations of religious ideology in the education system act as a structural barrier to gender equality, limiting women's participation in sustainable development and reinforcing social segregation (Mursaleen & Taimur, 2023).

In addition to political and ideological barriers, historical heritage and curriculum weaknesses are fundamental challenges. Ul-Haq (2021) argues that colonial legacies that are still rooted in the epistemology of management education create psychological barriers, where students are alienated from their own identity (Khudi), thus hindering the formation of an authentic national character (Haq, 2021). This epistemological constraint also occurs in religious education, where Rohman et al. (2024) noted that there is stagnation in the development of Islamic education curriculum that fails to respond to modernity, causing madrasah graduates to have difficulty integrating with contemporary socio-economic demands (Rohman et al., 2024). Furthermore, Ashraf (2019) identified low religious literacy, namely academic understanding of religious diversity as a cognitive obstacle that triggers intolerance. Education that focuses on sectarian indoctrination prevents students from accepting differences (Ashraf, 2019). In higher education, Ahmed et al. (2020) found that institutional barriers in the form of student union bans and a lack of spaces for critical dialogue have made campuses vulnerable to extremist narratives, instead of being spaces for intellectual assimilation (Ahmed et al., 2020).

Finally, the fragmentation of educator capacity and pedagogical gaps are technical obstacles in the field. Ashraf and Tsegay (2021) revealed that the perception gap among teachers is a serious obstacle. The study found that educators in madrassas oppose the concept of Global Citizenship Education because it is perceived as a secularization program that threatens Islamic identity. While educators in elite schools adopted it enthusiastically, they ignored Pakistan's local culture. The consequence is that carefully implemented national policies will be contradictory because of this dualism. It was considered a threat to the faith and the exclusive spirit of modernity. As a result, this hinders the government's efforts to create values that bind the community. (Ashraf & Tsegay, 2021). This pedagogical challenge is also noted by Asif et al. (2020), who compared Pakistan with China, finding that the ineffectiveness of moral teaching methods in Pakistani universities that are less supported by institutional commitment actually hinders the internalization of social cohesion values in students (Asif et al., 2020).

The implementation of education assimilation strategies in Pakistan faces interrelated multidimensional obstacles, ranging from political-ideological resistance to structural deficits in the education system itself. Thus, barriers to assimilation of education in Pakistan are not only political, but also rooted in curriculum structures, gender biases, colonial legacies, and separate human resource capacities.

The findings of the study show that there is a dominant trend in which education is used as a political instrument of the state to reduce ethno-nationalism through the instrumentalization of religion. Strategy From top to bottom applied in Khyber Paktunkhwa and Balochistan and the influence of Soft strength Saudi Arabia in the curriculum reflects the state's efforts to impose a homogeneous single identity (Ahmed & Karim, 2024; Ullah et al., 2025). However, if reviewed through Social Identity Theory, this strategy actually creates a paradox. Instead of blurring boundaries between groups, the imposition of rigid religious identities reinforces the demarcation lines between In a Group (national identity of the state-approved religion) and Outside Groups (ethnic minorities of different religions). Instead of creating cohesion, this politicization of education fueled ethno-nationalist resistance and deepened ideological fragmentation, asserting that assimilation that ignored socio-economic and cultural grievances would only exacerbate social segregation (Khadka, 2024; Nam & Chen, 2021).

In the context of the curriculum, the findings regarding the tension between modernity and orthodoxy and gender bias in the Islamized narrative indicate the failure of education as an agent

of social reconstruction (Awan, 2022; Mursaleen & Taimur, 2023; Rohman et al., 2024). Theoretically, the curriculum is supposed to serve as a tool to dismantle class and gender biases. However, empirical reality shows that aligning the education system with conservative religious ideologies perpetuates patriarchal structures and hinders sustainable development (Gavilán-Martín, Merma-Molina, Urrea-Solano, & Baena-Morales, 2025; Spear & Da Costa, 2018). This creates what is referred to in the study of theory as educational apartheid, in which the curriculum does not act as a bridge of inclusivity, but rather as a wall that separates students based on gender and ideological background. This gap confirms that curriculum reforms that are symbolic, such as Single National Curriculum, without fundamental structural change, fails to touch the root of societal fragmentation (Alan et al., 2021; Grimminger-Seidensticker & Möhwald, 2020).

The effectiveness of education assimilation strategies is highly dependent on implementing actors. However, the findings of Ashraf and Tsegay (2021) regarding the resistance of madrasah teachers to Global Citizenship Education (GCE) and the alienation of elite school teachers from the local culture indicate a failure of implementation The Theory of Intergroup Contact (Ashraf & Tsegay, 2021). This theory requires the same interaction to reduce prejudice, but polarizes the worldview (Worldview) among educators creates mentally separate classrooms despite being in a single national system. In addition, there are critical methodological gaps. The majority of effectiveness evaluations only stop at teacher perceptions or philosophical criticism, without touching on the real impact on students' social cohesion (Asif et al., 2020; Haq, 2021). Solutions such as religious literacy are still hypothetical and have not been empirically tested in reducing sectarian violence (Ashraf, 2019). This leaves a knowledge gap (Research Gap) that is, the current academic literature diagnoses the perception of the educational elite more than measuring the success of inclusive interactions at the grassroots level (students and the wider community).

The challenges of assimilation in Pakistan are not singular, but rather an accumulation of multidimensional obstacles that reflect a structural identity crisis. Colonial legacy is not just a historical residue, but a mechanism that continues to alienate student identities, creating a psychological hierarchy that inhibits the formation of an inclusive superordinate identity (Haq, 2021). On the other hand, the rigidity of ideology that triggers radicalization on campus indicates the failure of educational institutions to meet the prerequisites of the Inter-Group Contact Theory. Instead of being an equal space for interaction, the campus emphasizes sectarian boundaries (Ahmed et al., 2020). The absence of a synthesis between the variables of extremism, curriculum stagnation, and gender bias indicates the urgency of formulating a comprehensive model of assimilation strategies, capable of deconstructing the internal and external obstacles of this group to achieve sustainable social cohesion (Mursaleen & Taimur, 2023; Rohman et al., 2024).

Therefore, this discussion concluded that in order to build an Inclusive civilization, Pakistan can no longer rely on fragmented partial strategies. A paradigm shift is needed from a politically driven assimilation approach to an integrative approach that recognizes the diversity of identities (ethnic, gender, and sect) within the framework of equal citizenship. This model should be able to bridge the gap between madrasas, public schools, and elite schools, transforming the function of education from a tool of segregation to a true mechanism of social cohesion.

CONCLUSION

A synthesis of various studies confirms that the educational strategy in Pakistan has undergone a structural dysfunction due to its reduced function as a political instrument of forced assimilation. The state's efforts to suppress ethno-nationalism through religious instrumentalization and centralistic curriculum have given birth to the paradox of Social Identity Theory, in which the imposition of a single identity does not create cohesion, but rather hardens demarcation lines within and outside groups, fuels sectarian resistance, and perpetuates an educational apartheid' full of gender and class bias. This systemic failure is exacerbated by ideological polarization among educators that effectively sabotages the prerequisites of Intergroup Contact Theory, transforming educational institutions not as bridges of inclusivity, but rather as incubators of mental segregation. Therefore, symbolic curriculum reform proved inadequate; It

requires a total deconstruction of the colonial legacy and a radical paradigm shift from coercive assimilation to an integrative model that accommodates a plurality of identities in order to achieve authentic and sustainable social cohesion.

Based on the findings of the failure of the coercive assimilation strategy, this study recommends that policymakers in Pakistan immediately deconstruct the centralistic curriculum model (Single National Curriculum) which has proven counterproductive. The direction of education policy should shift from an identity-homogenizing approach to inclusive education federalism, which provides an autonomous space for local ethno-cultural narratives to coexist with national identities, thereby reducing resistance from outside groups. At the implementation level, reforms should not stop at textbooks, but should target the reconstruction of educator mentality through intensive critical pedagogical training to depolarize the sectarian and gender biases inherent in teachers .

For future research, it is recommended to abandon analytical trends that focus only on the perceptions of elites or teachers, and switch to real impact measurement at the grassroots level. Future researchers will need to apply longitudinal or experimental study designs to test the effectiveness of Intergroup Contact Theory interventions directly between students with different identities in the classroom. This research is urgently needed to prove empirically whether integrative education models are really capable of producing measurable social cohesion, or just new policy rhetoric that repeats old failures.

REFERENCES

Ahmed, Z. S., Jafri, Q. A., & Ahmed, Z. S. (2020). Drivers of violent extremism in higher education institutions of Pakistan Drivers of violent extremism in higher education institutions. *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict*, 00(00), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1080/17467586.2020.1821068

Ahmed, Z. S., & Karim, U. (2024). Saudi Arabia's soft power in Pakistan. *Journal of Political Power*, 17(1), 42–64. https://doi.org/10.1080/2158379X.2024.2341024

Akkoyunlu, K., & Sarfati, Y. (2024). Blood gambit: how autocratizing populists fuel ethnic conflict to reverse election setbacks – evidence from Turkey and Israel. *Democratization*, 32, 538–560. https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2024.2381686

Alan, S., Baysan, C., Gumren, M., & Kubilay, E. (2021). Building Social Cohesion in Ethnically Mixed Schools: An Intervention on Perspective Taking*. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*. https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjab009

Amir-Ud-Din, R., Mahmood, H., Javed, S., & Usman, M. (2019). *Divisive and inegalitarian? Economic and social outcomes of public, private and faith-based education in Pakistan*. 2, 11–35.

Andrade, C. (2018). Internal, External, and Ecological Validity in Research Design, Conduct, and Evaluation. *Indian Journal of Psychological Medicine*, 40, 498–499. https://doi.org/10.4103/ijpsym.ijpsym_334_18

Ashraf, M. A. (2019). *Exploring the Potential of Religious Literacy in Pakistani Education*.

Ashraf, M. A., & Tsegay, S. M. (2021). *Teaching Global Citizenship in a Muslim-Majority Country : Perspectives of Teachers from the Religious , National , and International Education Sectors in Pakistan*.

Asif, T., Guangming, O., Haider, M. A., & Colomer, J. (2020). Moral Education for Sustainable Development : Comparison of University Teachers' Perceptions in. *Sustainability*, 12, 1–20.

Aslam, M., Farvaque, E., & Hayat, M. A. (2021). One partition, many divisions? Ethnicities and education in Pakistan. *Cliometrica*, 16, 405–428. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11698-021-00226-5

Awan, S. (2022). *Women's Rights Movement in 'Naya' Pakistan Reflections on Islamisation and*

the Future of the Women ' s Rights Movement in ' Naya ' Pakistan. (May), 0–20. https://doi.org/10.4000/angles.5030

Bowskill, M., Lyons, E., & Coyle, A. (2007). The rhetoric of acculturation: when integration means assimilation. *The British Journal of Social Psychology, 46 Pt 4*, 793–813. https://doi.org/10.1348/014466607x182771

Brown, R. (2000). Social identity theory: past achievements, current problems and future challenges. *European Journal of Social Psychology, 30*, 745–778. https://doi.org/10.1002/1099-0992(200011/12)30:6<745::aid-ejsp24>3.0.co;2-0

Bukhari, S. R. H., Khan, E., & Haider, M. M. (2025). Education and Power in Pakistan: Comparative Analysis of Public, Private, and Madrasa Systems and Their Role in Shaping Political Awareness and Democratic Governance. *Qlantic Journal of Social Sciences*. https://doi.org/10.55737/qjss.vi-i.25334

Duffy, G., & Gallagher, T. (2017). Shared Education in contested spaces: How collaborative networks improve communities and schools. *Journal of Educational Change, 18*, 107–134. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-016-9279-3

Durrani, N., & Halai, A. (2018). Dynamics of gender justice, conflict and social cohesion: Analysing educational reforms in Pakistan. *International Journal of Educational Development*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2017.11.010

Ford, R., & Jennings, W. (2020). The Changing Cleavage Politics of Western Europe. *Annual Review of Political Science*. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-052217-104957

Gavilán-Martín, D., Merma-Molina, G., Urrea-Solano, M., & Baena-Morales, S. (2025). Feminist training future teachers to prevent gender-based violence and sexism. *Gender and Education, 37*, 506–523. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2025.2506363

Grimminger-Seidensticker, E., & Möhwald, A. (2020). Enhancing social cohesion in PE classes within an intercultural learning program: results of a quasi-experimental intervention study. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy, 25*, 316–329. https://doi.org/10.1080/17408989.2020.1741532

Hanif, S. (2023). Single national curriculum: promise of inclusion, global citizenship education and the empirical reality. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*. https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2023.2292632

Haq, S. U. (2021). Reversing the colonial warp in education : a decolonial encounter with Muhammad Iqbal. *Higher Education*, (0123456789). https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-021-00773-w

Hayes, B., & McAllister, I. (2009). Education as a mechanism for conflict resolution in Northern Ireland. *Oxford Review of Education, 35*, 437–450. https://doi.org/10.1080/03054980902957796

Indri, I. (2024). Social Reconstruction as an Effort to Restorate the Concept of Educational Management. *ULIL ALBAB : Jurnal Ilmiah Multidisiplin*. https://doi.org/10.56799/jim.v3i12.5984

Kashif, M., Nawaz, S., Waqar, M., & Bhutto, D. (2025). Econometric Analysis of Education-Based Individual Income Disparity in Pakistan. *Advance Social Science Archive Journal*. https://doi.org/10.55966/assaj.2025.4.1.074

Kausar, M., Younas, S., & Siddique, A. (2025). Synergistic Interplay between Religious Education and Peacebuilding: Navigating Societal Harmony Through Faith-Driven Learning. *Research Journal for Social Affairs*. https://doi.org/10.71317/rjsa.003.02.0160

Khadka, C. (2024). Social Identity Theory and Group Behavior. *TUTA Journal*. https://doi.org/10.3126/tutaj.v12i1.74063

Khumalo, S. (2025). From Apartheid to Democracy: Evolution and Inefficiencies of the South African Education System through Nancy Fraser's Social Justice Framework. *Acta Educationis Generalis*, *15*, 83–96. https://doi.org/10.2478/atd-2025-0023

Loader, R., & Hughes, J. (2017). Balancing Cultural Diversity and Social Cohesion in Education: The Potential of Shared Education in Divided Contexts. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, *65*, 25–33. https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2016.1254156

Mckeever, M. (2017). Educational Inequality in Apartheid South Africa. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *61*, 114–131. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764216682988

Mukanda, S. W., Okoth, P., & Lusambili, K. M. (2024). Ethnic Fragmentation & Economic Development. *Jumuga Journal of Education, Oral Studies, and Human Sciences (JJEOSHS)*. https://doi.org/10.35544/jjeoshs.v7i2.78

Mursaleen, H., & Taimur, S. (2023). *Gender Construct for Sustainable Development in Pakistan : Evaluating Alignment of Education System with the*. *13*, 224. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.3390/ soc13100224

Nam, Y., & Chen, J. (2021). Are you one of us: Investigating cultural differences in determining group membership. *European Journal of Social Psychology*. https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2797

Qazi, M., & Javid, C. (2021). Educational parlance of equity and inclusivity and students' gendered national identity constructions in public schools in Islamabad, Pakistan. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, *27*, 1319–1335. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2021.1889051

Rao, S. (2025a). The Challenges and Potential of Education Systems in Developing Countries: A Focus on Pakistan. *Innovapath*. https://doi.org/10.63501/9t169f88

Rao, S. (2025b). The State of K-12 Education in Pakistan: Challenges, Reforms, and a Way Forward. *Innovapath*. https://doi.org/10.63501/nahtf548

Rohman, A., Isna, A., Taruna, M. M., Rachmadhani, A., Atmanto, N. E., & Nasikhin. (2024). Challenges in Islamic Education Curriculum Development : A Comparative Study of. *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research*, *23*(6), 504–523. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.23.6.23

Sain, Z. H., Aziz, A. L., & Sain, S. H. (2025). Transforming Pakistan's Higher Education: Challenges, Opportunities, and Strategic Innovations. *EIKI Journal of Effective Teaching Methods*. https://doi.org/10.59652/jetm.v3i2.495

Scheepers, D., & Ellemers, N. (2019). Social Identity Theory. *Social Psychology in Action*. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446249222.n45

Skubiak, B. (2021). Revitalization Education in Problem Areas as a Tool for the Implementation of Social Welfare. *Sustainability*. https://doi.org/10.3390/su132011291

Smith, W., Philpot, R., Gerdin, G., Schenker, K., Linnér, S., Larsson, L., … Westlie, K. (2020). School HPE: its mandate, responsibility and role in educating for social cohesion. *Sport, Education and Society*, *26*, 500–513. https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2020.1742103

Sohrabi, C., Franchi, T., Mathew, G., Kerwan, A., Nicola, M., Griffin, M., … Agha, R. (2021). PRISMA 2020 statement: What's new and the importance of reporting guidelines. *International Journal of Surgery*, 105918. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijsu.2021.105918

Spear, A., & Da Costa, R. (2018). Potential for transformation? Two teacher training programs examined through a critical pedagogy framework. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *69*, 202–209. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2017.10.013

Trepte, S., & Loy, L. (2017). *Social Identity Theory and Self-Categorization Theory*. 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118783764.wbieme0088

Ullah, S., Abbas, A., & Khan, U. (2025). Religion as a Political Instrument: Comparing State

Assimilationist Strategies in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Balochistan. *Religions*. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16070864