# Deaf Culture as Locus of Religious Identity:
# Ethnographic Study of a Residential School for DEAF in Pakistan

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## Abstract

This research paper builds upon ethnographic fieldwork carried out as doctoral research at Pakistan's largest public sector Special education premises for the Deaf at its capital Islamabad. Sign Languages at large defines the identity and representation for the Deaf communities round the globe, which makes them the largest minority of the world comprising 72 million people communicating through more than 300 sign languages. The relationship of Religion and language has gained repute in anthropological literature since the early developments in subject but with specific reference to signing communities or deaf people, the corpus of anthropology still remains scant. In this paper, the functional domain of religion within the deaf community is explored from emic perspective through 33 Deaf narratives. The findings are carried out as analysis of themes and sub themes thus emerged from the narratives which were recorded in sign language in the presence of an interpreter. Transcription of video recorded narratives in English was later revisited by the respondents to maximize their ownership in the written expression. The themes located were causes of one's deafness, oralism (Policy to teach deaf to do lip reading and learn to speak instead of signing), Audism (A belief that deaf are inferior to hearing ones), religion, education, community, conflict, authority, access, and continuity and change. The thick description of how abstraction of religion shifts to signed symbols and how these notions interplay in daily life of deaf residents at a deaf-space intends to add on into the existing scholarly pool on Deaf Culture.

**Keywords:** Deaf Culture, Deafhood, Identity, Religion, Personal Experience Narratives (PENs)

## Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO) mentions 5% of the total world's population or above 430 million people with a disabling hearing loss. Moreover, the concentration of deaf population is projected at 80% in the developing and under-developed world. Consequently, when the 5% statistical count is implied on Pakistan's population according to the latest Census done in 2017, we have a total population of 207.68 million and about 10 million people in the country currently have a disabling hearing loss. In sheer contrast, the census of 2017 counts the total numbers of persons with

disabilities at 0.48% of total population which has raised a big question on its credibility by the relevant International organizations, PWDs organizations and the civil society (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2017 Census).

It became disputed to the level that the official websites and portals of government ministries and departments linked to rehabilitation of PWDs did not acknowledged census figures. Thus, projections were quoted either as per World Health Organization or the Census of 1998 which mentioned 2.38% as persons with disabilities (PWDs) out of which 7.40 % comprises deaf population. Message by The President of Pakistan on International day for persons with disabilities 3rd December 2022 at Islamabad also quoted the WHO projected data of PWDs in Pakistan. By all means a significant deaf population exists in the country. However, this number transforms into a community only when their sense of belonging to one and other and the distinction from hearing world supersedes their feeling of loss and deprivation. Thus, a Deaf school consequently becomes an ideal space to study such community and its practices.

The term "deaf" denoted with small "d" is a medical terminology meaning any person who does not beholds hearing thresholds of 20 decibels or better in both ears. Such condition is referred as hearing loss which may be mild, moderate, severe and profound. However, throughout this paper, by the term deaf, only the last two categories are the reference which includes severe and profound deafness in bilateral ears. The severe hearing loss is calculated as loss of 61 to 80 decibels and from 81db onwards, it falls in the category of profound deafness. The rationale for opting only these two categories in the research is due to the criterion adopted by national Council for Rehabilitation of Persons with Disabilities (NCRDP) for issuance of disability certificate as deaf or Hearing impaired. NCRDP is the government institution working in the ambit of Ministry of Human Rights and is responsible for registration of PWDs in the country. The admission policy of a special education center where the present ethnographic study was carried out thus grants admission only to deaf students with severe and profound hearing loss.

Accordingly, children coming for admission when found with mild and moderate hearing loss through audiometric assessments done by a professional audiologist of the center, are not likely to be granted admission here and are encouraged to be main streamed along the use of hearing aids (sound amplifying devices worn inside an ear). Moreover, their parents are guided to discourage signed communication and proceed for speech therapy along mainstreaming. On the other hand, the children categorized as with severe and profound deafness are believed to require sign language as the major medium of their communication and thus get registered for admission.

Religion can be defined through multiple approaches like operational, analytical, essential or supernatural but all of these angles by large converge on its significance for mankind in their thoughts, actions, experiences and expectations. This pertinence of religion is equally relatable to the Deaf community in Pakistan. Deaf community in the present research signifies a group of Deaf people who do not have communication barrier between them and form a minority as Deaf World on basis of their shared language called Sign Language. This specific language is a route to Deaf Culture which is a distinctive way of life by deaf community and implies, "The customs, habits, ideas, beliefs, institutions, etc. which a particular group through a shared language, holds in common" (Padden, 1993).

## Significance and Limitations

The present study adds up to the corpus on deaf hood and has emphasized the anthropological angle to Deaf identity. Another strength of the study is the interplay of Social Identity theory and the Framework of Deafhood as conceptual framework. From Pakistan, no previous anthropological study of deaf community is carried out thus it is a first step to unleash the potential of deaf culture to the researchers in future (Ladd, 2003). A limitation of the study is absence of the gendered perspective of the deaf community on Religion as it was specifically carried out with deaf male students.

## Locale of Study

The Pakistan Sign Language (PSL) though is referred as the sign language of the country but a very scant corpus of standardized PSL is available. The wide variations of sign language do exist regionally and is also found at level of deaf education schools working in the same region in Pakistan, which is understandably prevalent due to lack of standardization.

Since 18th amendment in the constitution passed in 2010, the education sector is looked over by provinces, which was earlier a federal government business. Simultaneously, Special Education in Pakistan was also taken up by provinces post 18th amendment whereas in the Federal Capital of Islamabad, an exclusive directorate operates by name of Directorate General of Special Education. The directorate was established in 1985 as an attached department of the Ministry of Health, Social Welfare and Special Education through a Presidential Directive and was working throughout the country. At present, this Directorate is functioning under Ministry of Human Rights and is only limited to ambit of federal area. It has disability wise special education centres in Islamabad for education, rehabilitation and pre-vocational training (The Constitution of Pakistan Eighteenth Amendment Act, 2010).

Amongst the service delivery institutions, National Special Education Centre of Hearing-Impaired children in sector H-9/4 is the largest in area, student enrollment, staff strength and budget utility where at present 650 students both boys and girls are studying from kindergarten till graduation level with a staff capacity of 152 including 67 special education teachers. The centre stretches over 9 acres and the yearly budget allocation for the institution is about 120 million rupees. (six hundred fifty-nine thousand USD as per march 2022). The boarding facility upto 50 students enrolled in college wing is available for male students only. Students who seek admission to the centre after completion of maximum level of education available at their natal place, no accommodation available in federal area, age above 15 years and a character certificate from last attended educational institution are pre-requisites for the admission in hostel. A waiting list is also maintained and recorded as only few applicants gets the boarding facility.

Although separate hostel premises for deaf boys and girls are part of the building complex but the Girls hostel never became functional since construction in 1989. The ground floor of the two-story building of girl's hostel was utilized as Boys Hostel whereas its upper floor is in occupation of another department of the ministry of Human Rights namely Transgender Protection Unit, the first of its kind in country inaugurated in October 2021 to safeguard the rights of trans-genders in the country. The hostel building which is originally designated for boys remained in a decade old occupation of another department Pakistan Bait ul Mal but even after vacation of building, shifting was never materialized because of budget constraints in lieu of repair and renovation by the Directorate.

Hostel presently operates in 10 rooms each 20x22 ft in size with 6 beds. There are 6 wooden cupboards fixed in corners and study tables besides each bed. One room is in use of warden and one is used as a *Masjid*[1] where students offer 5 times obligatory prayers as per muslim faith. The *namaz*[2] ritual is headed by the warden who is basically recruited to teach enrolled students as a junior teacher for Islamic studies in the centre and has been assigned an additional duty of warden without any financial perks as the centre doesn't have any official vacancy of hostel warden or assistant hostel warden. His family stays in a village of district *Sukkur* in *Sindh* Province (1000 km apart) and the additional duty only allows him free stay and food.

The 48 boarders reside in 8 rooms which are without attached bathrooms. However, at the time of research only 33 students were residing in the hostel. The students take three times meals in the dining hall, watch TV in lounge, offer prayers in room designated as *masjid* and use the playground for their physical games and recreation. There are fixed timings for meals, prayers and study. Students are supposed to make rooms and do laundry by themselves. The services are free of cost except Parents Teachers Association Fund amounting roughly to eleven dollars a month.

## Theoretical Framework

In order to provide explanations for occurrences and to study stylized patterns of social phenomenon, social scientists look upon some underlying theories that could lead the direction of inquiry and analysis. The present research was carried out bridging Social Identity theory which has roots in social Psychology, and framework of Deafhood by Ladd which views the visual language as central to Deaf interaction (Ladd, 2003).

Tajfel and his colleagues built Social Identity Theory on the construction of self through group conformity. It implies that the "we" feeling guides an individual to think, act and react in a particular way. Social identities are most potent when group membership is considered as central to one's reflection of self and strong emotional ties are attached with the group. The process involves distinct stages. The first stage is of categorization in which a person is assigned a social group. In the second stage called identification the person adopts the identity and conforms to the norms of the group. Finally, in the stage of comparison, the person views his identity as unique and develops a sense of pride through comparison with other groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Identically Deafhood is a term coined by Paddy Ladd and introduced as a process which attempts to construct and convey an affirmative and positive position of being deaf.

## Research Design

The Maxwell's interactive Model of Research Design consists of five main components and was adopted for the present research wherein the goal was to study the relationship and interplay of deaf culture and religious identity. First component is the conceptual framework which relies upon Social identity theory and explains that identity is a social construction and involves stages of categorization, identification and comparison. The research approach of the present study is emergent research approach thus not strictly prescribing the research plan and has a roam for flexibility (Creswell, 2014). This was also important because the corpus of PSL and deaf culture is still meager. Component two is

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[1] A place designated for religious prayers of Muslims. It can be an independent building or a room within a building to offer five time prayers a day.

[2] Urdu term to denote the Arabic term *Salaat*, ritual prayers offered by Muslims

of research questions. What Deaf experiences relating to religion are embedded in personal narratives? How Deaf and religious identities interplay in a deaf community? These two major research questions were framed. Maxwell third component is of methods meaning the strategies and techniques of data collection and its analysis.
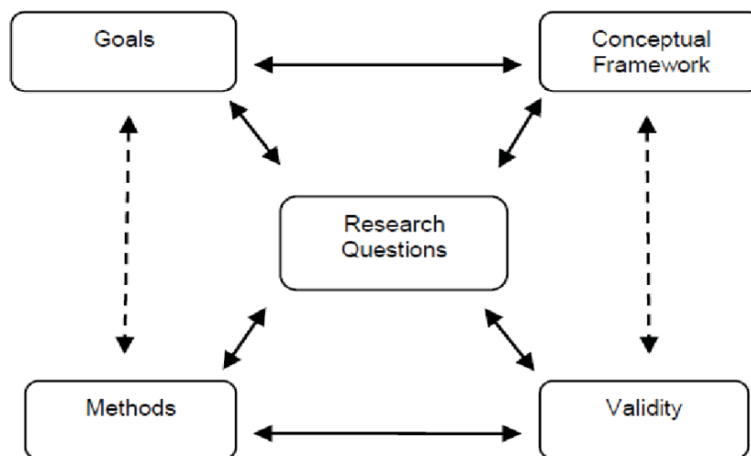


Figure 1. Maxwell Interactive Model of Research Design. (Maxwell, 2005)

The prime method adopted for the research is Personal experience Narrative (PEN) which is based on the narratives about our everyday lives. In PENs, whatever one tells about self, there are pertinent expressions and experiences central to a narrator. The narrations contain typicality; build up of knowledge based on already gained experiences. Our understanding of daily occurrences emerge from this typicality. (Schutz, 1966) Deaf and Hearing worlds are different from one and other though apparently they share the same world. This difference can be gauged well through personal experience narratives.

The 5th and last component of Maxwell's research design is validity which is about the credibility of the research. The present study responded to the validity part through steps including the recordings of the signed data in a routine setting of narrators, seeking expertise of a trained signing interpreter who is familiar to participants, revisiting the narrators along translated transcriptions of signed data to discuss and review.

## Ethical considerations

Research ethics kept in consideration included explaining the purpose of study, seeking consent, clarity on usage of data in future, confidentiality, protecting the wellbeing and autonomy of narrators, reciprocity and reflexivity particularly to the "Backyard Research" as coined by Creswell (2014) to mention research carried out in one's own community. It is important that deaf community doesn't only consist of deaf members nevertheless it also includes the persons who are given the right of membership by the deaf themselves like their signing teachers and associated staff, CODA3 and social advocates working along.

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3Acronym for Child of a Deaf Adult, the term coined by Millie Brother.

Nevertheless, researcher's background of working with Deaf for more than a decade in capacity of a social case worker and acquaintance with PSL was one strong factor to opt personal experiences narratives as master tool of data collection and, the absence of this bond could possibly yield controlled narrative. Besides this, communicating fluently in sign language with the narrators facilitates rapport building and was found to be positive attribute of insider research. Being from staff of the centre, it also facilitated access to the boarding complex.

## Methodology

All the 33 students availing the boarding facility at the time when research was conducted consented for participation. Each narrator was asked to narrate his experience being a deaf. The one-time narration was up to three minutes. This sharing of visual narratives took place in a consistent eye contact between the interlocutors as to avoid a feeling of signing for recording purpose in front of a camera only. The availability of fellow mate along a familiar interpreter and researcher also helped in avoiding a more restrict and formal research setting. PENs by deaf community are not only a composition of signs but these are rich capsules of emotions as gestures and symbols accompanied along the signing experiences. The endorsement of these gestures, flow of emotions as laughter or tears, and pauses were also made a part of transcription. In sign language, there is little possibility of Verbatim transcription and thus translated transcriptions are constructed. Qualities of hand and body movement and facial expression of a signer are visual characteristics equivalent to "voice" that don't transfer easily into writing. (McKee 2011)

A thematic analysis was carried out to document the deaf experiences in relation to religion. This allowed tracing the commonalities, frequency, differences and also explored meaningful contexts in which experiences are shared by the narrators. The data Analysis framework included sorting experience, typicality and designation of a theme to the experience. The data was initially segregated either as culturally specific which is exclusive to deaf world or interactional where deaf and hearing worlds meet each other. For instance, depending on visual clue for keeping silence in respect during Adhaan[4]  is a culturally specific experience of deaf world whereas visiting a mosque for Friday congregation is an interactional experience.

| Code | Narrative topic | Theme | Sub theme | Cultural content | Interactional content |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| HIC 1-A | Friday congregation at Jamia *Masjid* | Religion | Dependence on visuals, feeling ignored, | tap on shoulder as a physical clue | Deaf didn't know what the sermon was all about |

Figure 2: template of data coding and analysis.

Very few of research studies focused on the religious practices of the deaf among Muslim community. Furthermore, the existing studies found the deaf as falling low on religious obligations and also impassive in learning the topics and issues related to religion. Zalihah Isa deduced that the deaf are unsuccessful in developing their spirituality and religious practices. Further studies reveal the challenges in religious theory, teachings, interpretation of religious texts,

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[4] call for the ritual Prayers made from the minaret of Masjid by a *muezzin* on speaker

understanding of Friday sermons, and explanation on ways to perform the Hajj, all of which include the issues that have not been fully resolved for the deaf in the effort to increase religious understanding within the deaf community.

Three distinct studies carried out over a decade span by Hashim, Isa, Salleh and Huzairi converge on a conclusion that deaf students were interested in learning and considered the learning of religious rituals as significant but at the same time they considered the religious education sessions less useful and thus students did not pay attention to religious teaching sessions. Whereas another study by Ismail in 2009 emphasized evangelization to the deaf at Kualumpur Malaysia, which proposed that understanding the deaf from the angle of behaviour, character, taboos, and their interests is essential for religious preaching to the deaf. The present research conflicts with the inference that Deaf community is low at religious beliefs and practices, and finds the deaf community as very responsive to religious identities. It instead emphasizes that the way they perceive and experience religion needs to be understood in their emic perspective (Mohad, Mokhtar & Omar, 2018).

## Findings and Discussion

Themes of cause of deafness, religion, oralism, audism, community, religion, education, access, continuity and change, conflict and authority emerged from the data. The focused coding as suggested by Merten and Wilson (2012) lead to sub themes growing like lateral branches of a tap root which included dependence on visuals, missed information, finding peace, swear upon Allah and Prophet Muhammad SAWS, feeling ignored or taken for granted, deliberate isolation, religious functions and feasts, confidence in group, conflict resolution, sacred and profane, life after death, surveillance by the writing angels, need of written expression for explaining to others and physical clues like tapping were located.

Narrators have religious explanations for their deafness, most frequent of which is the will of *Allah* who is God, Creator of all as per muslim faith. Out of 33 only 2 narrated their deafness because of their parents being first cousins and only one mentioned high-grade fever and seizures in early years of life as his cause of deafness.

The transfer of religious knowledge and religious experiences in deaf is primarily carried out through the deaf space in contrast to their natal homes. This deaf space in present study implies to the Deaf school and their hostel. During religious festivals and sacred days, the religious identity suppresses the deaf identity and the group solidarity is somewhat shaken on sectarian lines; however, this suppression is very brief and momentary. It also operated in the sacred and profane realm of religion for deaf including their daily cuisine. For instance, there is only one Non-Muslim boarder who belongs to *Hindu*[5] faith. His religion prohibits slaughter of cow and thus consuming beef is against the faith, nevertheless beef is staple meal consumption of Muslim students residing at hostel. Whenever beef is cooked as per menu, a separate meal is given to the student belonging to *Hindu* faith. However, he takes his distinctive meal on the same table with rest without any situation of conflict. The *Hindu* deaf student shares the room with 3 Muslim students but the religious identity does not confront to their deaf identity as a community.

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[5] A person belonging to faith called Hinduism also known as Sanatana Dharma, one of the world's oldest living religion and a belief in many gods.

Three students of hostel belong to *Shia*[6] sect. They offer *nimaz* individually in the same room designated as Mosque 3 times a day. In the month of *Muharram*[7], they visit *Imam bargah*[8] for *maajlis e AZA*[9] and *nimaz* and are often accompanied by their deaf friends who are not *shia*. In the fasting month of *Ramazan*[10], the 3 *shia* deaf students observe *sehri*[11] and *aftar*[12] timings according to their sect although they dine in collectively. Their other deaf friends help the 3 to observe their fasting timings which are almost ten minutes earlier at *sehri* and ten minutes later at *aftar*.

The deaf narratives saw the establishment of trans-gender protection unit in the upper part of their building as a threat to their religious and deaf identity. They view the colorful and shimmery women's attire, heavy makeup, cat walk like gait and weird gestures of trans-genders as un-ethical and against their religious norms. Few narratives included visual mockery of trans-gender as well.

Religion enables to observe the fluidity of deaf identities in a group particularly in a kin-based society in Pakistan. Deaf understanding of religion is primarily performance based like ablution, standing for prayers, dressing up for Friday sermon, preparing for religious festivals, and explaining religion through Quranic stories mentioning actions. The narrators view deaf not as persons with disabilities in terms of religious obligations whereas their view of physically challenged, visually impaired and intellectually challenged persons is of the dependent ones who are not able to follow religious obligations. In comparison, they were appreciative in their narratives to the Creator for being deaf but not disabled like the others. The day to day life experiences by deaf floats between deaf and hearing worlds. This interaction deepens their sense of identity because in the hearing world, the deaf have individual experiences of isolation, missing information, alienation, oralism, audism, lack of understanding, lack of confidence and lack of authority and autonomy. Nevertheless, whenever deaf community interacts as majority with a member of hearing world, the frame is reversed and same feelings of isolation and alienation are reported by the hearing person.

Not a single deaf narrative was found without mentioning a religious experience. Prayer is a community experience and there is pressure of group conformity to offer prayer ritual collectively but on the same time sectarian difference is respected. The religious experiences of Deaf as narrative are accompanied by emotions apparent as gestures and upper torso movements. The religious identity also contributes to group solidarity as was narrated in case of the practices in the Islamic month of fasting. The conflict resolution in the deaf community is facilitated by religious notions of good and evil, reward and punishment, their constant surveillance by angels deputed to write down deeds, life after death, and the day of judgment.

The signs like Allah knows everything; Beginning in the name of Allah; expressing Last Prophet Muhammad (Peace be Upon him) as the most sacred being to swear upon by gestures and action of touching tips of fingers of both hands joined together to their lips and then to eyes and forehead as sign of extreme reverence; Satan as rival of humans and

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[6] One of the two branches of Islam. Shia sees Hazrat Ali (son in law of the Prophet Muhammad Peace be upon Him) and the Imams (Male progeny of Hazrat Ali) as the only rightful successors of the last Prophet of Islam.

[7] First month of the Islamic calendar in which grand son of last Prophet of Islam was martyred along his retinue.

[8] A Congregation hall or a complex for Shia Muslims.

[9] Congregations held in Muharram for mourning the Karbala incident, 680AD.

[10] The 9th month of Islamic calendar, in which muslims do fasting for whole month.

[11] Morning meal eaten by Muslims in Ramazan before sun rise to begin their fast.

[12] Meal held at sun set to break the fast by Muslims in Ramazan.

responsible for their anger, evil thoughts, actions and bad dreams; Promise of reward and punishment in the life     after ;and sorry are the most common practices recorded in narrations.

## Conclusion

Personal Experience Narratives offer a promising strategy to study the place of religion in a deaf world. Data gathered by deaf narrators and the repetitive religious signs employed by them was analyzed to find rich capsules of experiences revolving around the realm of religion by the deaf community. The pertinence and application of religion in the mundane life of deaf students at a deaf-space is extremely vivid and earlier accounts of deaf falling low on religion are sturdily divergent by the present research. To conclude, the significance of religion among the deaf needs to be studied and evaluated through their lens and their sign language instead of the evaluations offered by the hearing world.

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**Web Resources:**
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https://www.pbs.gov.pk/content/brief-census

https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/the-18th-amendment-historical-developments-and-debates-in-pakistan/