

Longing for home: conversations about the homeland from Pakistanis in Brunei Darussalam

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Abstract

Purpose – The paper aims to analyse the motives and significance of conversations amongst overseas Pakistanis in Brunei about their homeland. These conversations involve topics around politics, religion and entertainment, reflecting the sense of belonging and connection they maintain with Pakistan whilst living abroad.

Design/methodology/approach – This study employed a qualitative research approach, using open-ended interviews to gather narratives from overseas Pakistanis in Brunei. The interviews were designed to focus on their tendency to converse about their homeland and to identify recurring themes related to their sense of belonging and cultural identity.

Findings – The analysis revealed that conversations about Pakistan play a vital role in reinforcing the cultural identity of overseas Pakistanis in Brunei. These discussions operate as a mechanism for maintaining emotional connections to their homeland, especially when faced with the absence of Pakistani cultural elements in Brunei. Even though patterns vary across sub-groups, their nostalgic experiences and feelings of longing for Pakistan are a common thread. Political talk also featured, though less in the form of partisan debate and more as expressions of concern for relatives' safety and the broader situation back home during moments of crisis.

Research limitations/implications – The study is limited by its focus on a specific group of overseas Pakistanis in Brunei, which may not be generalisable to other diaspora communities. Additionally, the qualitative nature of the research relies on subjective narratives, which may introduce bias.

Practical implications – This study highlights the importance of cultural exchange platforms that allow overseas Pakistanis to reconnect with their homeland, which could serve to alleviate their sense of disconnection.

Social implications – The findings suggest that engaging in conversations about their homeland helps overseas Pakistanis maintain their cultural identity and manage the emotional challenges of living abroad.

Originality/value – This paper contributes to the understanding of Pakistani diaspora communities and their use of conversation as a means of cultural preservation and identity reinforcement. It highlights how lived experience acts as a tool for overseas Pakistanis in Brunei to stay connected to their homeland, offering new insights into the socio-cultural dynamics of skilled migrants' communities.

Keywords Overseas Pakistanis, Brunei, Conversations, Belonging, Acculturation

Paper type Research article

1. Introduction

The overseas community, in general, has been considered by social scholars as a vastly dynamic group that possesses a large set of unique and distinct patterns and behaviours for

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research to unveil (Qaisrani, 2022). Whilst a majority of studies in social sciences have closely examined and focused on much cruder elements of the overseas population, such as diasporic patterns relating to migrations or the aforementioned “myth of return”, much more subtle topics, such as the role and significance of the day-to-day conversations of the overseas people remain largely concealed to be researched about (Mahmood, Knerr, Khan, Shabbir, & Mahmood, 2022).

Furthermore, another important reason for the significance of this study is the scarcity of this demographic group. This is established by the fact that there has been only one other study on overseas Pakistanis in Brunei (Zaidi & David, 2015), which was, however, focused solely on the Punjabi sub-ethnicity of Pakistan solely. Hence, this study encompasses a broader focus by including all Pakistani sub-ethnicities (Khan, 2023a, b). The overseas Pakistani community is an enormous group, estimated to comprise comprising of approximately 9 million overseas Pakistanis settled worldwide (Overseas Pakistanis Foundation, Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis & Human Resource Development, Government of Pakistan, 2017). These include millions of fathers going abroad to provide for their families, brilliant children who have been able to go overseas to pursue their education, white-collar knowledge workers who provide their expertise and contributions in various fields across the world, and families who have migrated or settled temporarily or permanently for numerous reasons (Chaudhry & Bilal, 2021). Following Zaidi and David’s (2015) study, Brunei Darussalam was home to more than five hundred Pakistanis as of 2016. They often live with their families and sometimes even reside in Brunei for over a decade (Zaidi & David, 2015). Several of them are working, often as doctors or teachers and the rest manage their own micro-businesses.

One specific pattern that has been observed regularly regarding overseas Pakistanis is that no matter how long they live abroad, the homeland always remains a prominent subject of their conversations. This seems to be a part of their routine and daily conversations. When studying the literature on the acculturation of Pakistani-Punjabi people in Brunei, the previous study highlighted their tendency to converse about the homeland and established its reasoning and relationship with the idea or notion that the overseas Pakistani community considers its stay in Brunei to be temporary (Zaidi & David, 2015). This enables further engagement with discourse about the overseas Pakistani community and the reasons for their tendency to converse frequently about the homeland. Furthermore, the overseas Pakistani community exhibits certain patterns of love and longing for the homeland (Cakmak, 2021). One example of such patterns is the commonly observed “myth of return” (Cakmak, 2021). The desire to return as part of the “myth of return” refers to the idea that people settled overseas are often motivated strongly by the notion of being able to return to the homeland one day (Asghar, 1980).

Against the backdrop outlined above, this study aims to explore how overseas Pakistanis in Brunei converse about their homeland across three domains – religion, entertainment and conditional engagement with politics – to interpret how such conversations sustain belonging, cultural identity and social bonding in diaspora life, and to explore how migration motives and acculturation positions (integration and assimilation) shape these conversational practices. In more detail, this study explores these overarching questions: (1) What key topics and patterns characterise conversations about Pakistan among overseas Pakistanis in Brunei (with attention to religion, entertainment and conditional engagement with politics)? (2) In what ways do these conversations contribute to belonging, identity maintenance and intra-community bonding? (3) How do migration motives and acculturation positions influence the form and frequency of these conversations?

2. Literature review

The existing literature on this topic is seemingly scarce. Even though there are many studies discussing overseas or diasporic communities, many of which focus on their relations with home and host lands, there seems to be a scarcity of publications that focus primarily on the

day-to-day conversations of overseas communities (Samad, 2014). This gap is compounded even more in Brunei, where very few publications discuss the overseas Pakistani community, except for one study that examined its demographic patterns (Zaidi & David, 2015). This study therefore focusses on the conversations that overseas Pakistanis may engage in and considers the extent to which such conversations play a role in maintaining their connections with the homeland and with one another.

2.1 Migration and diaspora

Migration highlights how overseas communities remain actively connected and involved with the homeland, whether for economic, political, or affective reasons (Skrbis, 1997; Cakmak, 2021). People born and raised abroad still often refer to their parents' country of origin as their "homeland" and associate idealised or romanticised notions with it (Skrbis, 1997). This also helps put into perspective their motives for settling overseas. Economic migrants are often drawn abroad primarily for jobs, and their tenure is closely tied to employment (Chughtai, 2020). Others migrate for political reasons, often due to unrest or instability in their homelands, with host countries offering safety (Omar, Shah, & Pathan, 2020; Guell & Parella, 2024). Such motives indicate necessity rather than choice (Hossain, 2021), which helps explain why connections with the homeland remain strong.

Hall (1990) argues that diasporic identities are neither static nor distinct. They evolve with changes in both host and home countries. These identities are significantly shaped by surrounding factors, but they can only be preserved through maintaining ties with the homeland (Afzal, 2021). Furthermore, Zaidi and David's (2015) study on Punjabis in Brunei addressed "topics in social gatherings," "feelings of Punjabiness," and "ties with Pakistan." Although relevant, their treatment of conversation was descriptive rather than analytical. They limited "Punjabiness" to cultural practices and considered "ties with Pakistan" as a separate factor, rather than examining how talk itself sustains identity. By contrast, this study broadens the scope to all Pakistanis in Brunei and positions conversations as the central mechanism for connecting with the homeland and reinforcing identity.

2.2 Conversations and belonging

Beyond structural explanations of migration, attention must also be paid to the everyday practices through which belonging is sustained. Duranti (1997) and Malinowski (1923) stress that conversation is not simply reflection but a form of social action, reproducing norms and community. Conversations, therefore, can themselves be ethnographic material, indicating the direction of social values and shaping relationships (Hafeez & Khan, 2022). For overseas Pakistanis, conversations function as "identity work," sustaining a sense of community when cultural anchors such as food, language and festivals are absent (Durrani, 2022). In Brunei, conversations with fellow Pakistanis allow individuals to re-create familiarity in an unfamiliar environment (Khan, Ahmed, & Abbas, 2023).

2.3 Religion, media and entertainment as anchors

Religion and media have been shown to operate as recurring conversational anchors in diaspora contexts. Shared Islamic practices provide a moral and cultural framework for belonging, whilst popular culture such as television dramas and cricket becomes a touchpoint for everyday talk (Chaudhary, 2021; McMenamin, 2021; Qureshi, 2022). Cheema, Iqbal, and Qasim (2023) highlight how diaspora communities weave entertainment talk into collective memory and identity. Diasporic media are not passive backdrops but emotional infrastructures that sustain affiliations across distance, reinforcing how everyday conversations build transnational belonging (Ponzanesi, 2020). For overseas Pakistanis in Brunei, missing dramas, matches, or festivals is often compensated for by discussions with co-nationals, thereby re-enacting cultural connection through speech.

2.4 Civic and political talk at a distance

Although less frequent than cultural or religious talk, civic and political conversations also surface in diasporic life. Skrbis (1997) observes that migrants often “monitor” homeland politics as part of identity maintenance, even whilst abroad. Such talk is often pragmatic and safety-oriented, for example, checking on family during elections or advising relatives to avoid rallies. These episodic conversations demonstrate how political events trigger transnational talk, linking care, identity and distant citizenship (Sabata-Dalmau, 2021). Collectively, these strands of literature highlight conversations as more than casual talk. They are central to belonging, cultural continuity and the negotiation of identity in diaspora. This provides the conceptual foundation for examining how overseas Pakistanis in Brunei converse about politics, religion and entertainment as a means of keeping Pakistan “alive” abroad.

3. Research method

The aim of this study revolves centrally around the input of people, ranging from their experiences, memories, feelings, emotions, principles and ideologies. Hence, the most suitable methodology to understand and interpret the participants’ accounts was a qualitative, narrative inquiry approach, complemented by selective elements of thematic analysis to identify recurring conversational patterns across narratives. This hybrid approach ensured that the integrity of individual stories was preserved whilst also capturing shared themes that cut across the interviews. This study was conducted between 1 April 2022 and 31 May 2023.

We interviewed ten male members of the overseas Pakistani community in Brunei (see Table 1), a relatively small group of about 500 individuals living in the country. Participants were accessed through cultural events organised by the Pakistani High Commission. Their length of residence in Brunei varied, with some having lived there for as long as 30 years. For example, one individual pseudonymised as Taha had been in Brunei for four years, whilst another, Fahad, had been a resident for approximately three decades. The occupations of the informants were classified as skilled and included businessmen, teachers, doctors, students and office workers.

To reflect possible generational differences in conversational practices, participants were classified into two groups: younger (aged 18–35) and older (aged 36 and above) (Table 1). This distinction helped capture contrasts between those still establishing careers and those long settled with families, offering insight into how life stage shaped their engagement with homeland conversations.

Ethical consent was sought from all participants, who were informed about the study objectives, the duration of interviews and the researcher’s affiliation. Interviews were audio-

Table 1. Demographic details of the participants

No. of participants	Pseudonyms name	Age	Gender
1	Safwan	47	M
2	Zeeshan	46	M
3	Shahid	35	M
4	Taha	48	M
5	Akram	30	M
6	Sadiq	28	M
7	Fahad	49	M
8	Taimur	34	M
9	Ahmed	45	M
10	Usman	36	M

Source(s): Authors (2024)

recorded with permission. To protect confidentiality, all names used in this paper are pseudonyms. This study received approval from the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Universiti Brunei Darussalam (UBD/FASS/23.27/2022/Dec-28), of which the second author is the co-investigator. Each interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and followed a semi-structured format. Questions covered three main domains – politics, religion and entertainment – alongside broader reflections on belonging and identity. This flexible design allowed interlocutors to narrate their experiences in depth whilst also ensuring consistency across the dataset.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim. The analysis primarily followed a narrative orientation, focusing on how participants made sense of homeland, identity and belonging through their stories. Elements of Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework were adapted in a supportive manner to highlight patterns such as repeated phrases, metaphors and emotional cues across participants. The goal was not to reduce narratives to decontextualised codes, but to strengthen interpretation by recognising where common conversational anchors appeared. This combined strategy balanced narrative depth with thematic clarity, ensuring both methodological rigour and interpretive transparency.

4. Findings

The following themes emerged from the participants' narratives, analysed through a narrative inquiry approach supported by thematic pattern recognition. This ensured that whilst the individuality of each story was preserved, common threads across interviews were also identified and organised into three overarching themes.

4.1 Theme 1: the sense of belonging

The overseas Pakistanis residing in Brunei unveil a strong connection with their homeland. This bond is not only symbolic but enacted through everyday talk. Conversations about Pakistan frequently precede or accompany recreational practices such as preparing traditional food, wearing cultural attire, or reminiscing about festivals. In this way, speech itself becomes a vehicle for sustaining belonging and identity in diaspora life.

Belonging, however, is more than an abstract sentiment. Scholars remind us that it involves shared identity, belief and culture (Mahar, Cobigo, & Stuart, 2013) as well as emotional commitment and attachment (Madara, 2019). Communities, too, are not merely defined by proximity (Walton, Cohen, Cwir, & Spencer, 2012) but by interpersonal ties and the recognition of shared experience (Shams, 2021). For Brunei's Pakistanis, the community functions on two levels: an emotional tie to Pakistan and a solidarity forged with fellow migrants who recreate "home" through language, food and memory.

4.1.1 *Yearning for the culture.* Pakistani culture is a unique and vibrant blend of diverse regional cultures (Unal, 2022). This includes everything from the spicy sub-continental food to the bright and fancy attire. Other aspects like the cultural norms, religious practices and entertainment-related trends are included in this fascinating culture (Shams, 2021). One of the main aspects that prompt these overseas Pakistanis to remain engaged in conversations about Pakistan is the absence of these familiar cultural elements in Brunei. As Safwan explains

Let's talk about Brunei, we do not have the same language, although the religion is same, we are living in an Islamic country, so we have that things in common, but the culture is different, the food is different, and the language is totally different. So, we miss that. We were brought up into a particular culture, so we like to discuss that thing whenever we meet up with people from the same area or the same country

Safwan's words highlight how conversations work as a substitute for lived cultural practices a way of filling the gap left by differences in language, food and everyday customs. This yearning for culture is not limited to any one aspect of Pakistan. Among the most consistent

themes across interlocutors was the absence of familiar food, television dramas and sports. Zeeshan, for example, expressed his sadness at being cut off from Pakistani media:

Yes, but actually living abroad is not an easy job, we don't get Pakistani dramas and movies in our homes, we cannot understand the dramas and movies of the country we are living in because we do not understand their language and culture

Even though the Pakistani movie industry is relatively small, the television industry has a massive following and is deeply integrated into everyday routines. Zeeshan further explained how dramas had become a cultural custom in his family:

We regularly watch these dramas with our family during evening tea, it's like a custom by now. Like our elders they used to sit for tea and read the newspaper, similarly we sit for tea and watch television

Here, Zeeshan illustrates how dramas were more than entertainment: they were part of a daily family ritual. By talking about these missed routines, overseas Pakistanis re-enact the cultural memory of togetherness that is harder to replicate in Brunei. Similarly, cricket was described as another powerful cultural marker. The excitement of match days in Pakistan – especially India and Pakistan matches – was impossible to replicate abroad. Shahid, who has lived in Brunei for nearly two decades, explained his disappointment:

I feel devastated, to be honest with you I mean I feel really bad I mean me myself being a cricket fan I can imagine that how much activity and excitement we create in our country not only just watching cricket but also like the food and the drinks and the sounds the music and that hype and all at the same time so I am missing big time and I feel really bad about it

Shahid's narrative shows how cultural practices such as cricket go beyond sport; they embody collective celebration, food rituals and soundscapes that overseas Pakistanis try to keep alive in conversations.

Yeah, as I told you earlier, I'm also from the northern area of Pakistan. So, the places people come for travel is almost like my hometown. So, myself when I was young, I was roaming around the northern areas, the mountains, the Murre and all that with my friends so when I am out of Pakistan, I am missing that time it was like one of the most entertaining parts of being in Pakistan

This longing for places demonstrates how physical geographies are also conversational geographies. Even when participants cannot visit, memories of landscapes become part of shared talk, linking them emotionally to their homeland.

4.1.2 Yearning for friends and family. These patterns of immense yearning do not stop at cultural longing alone. Other factors contribute significantly to this sense of belonging, yearning and emotional attachment that the Pakistanis residing in Brunei feel. Hence, similar to missing an cultural elements back in Pakistan that they cannot recreate abroad, another essential element that most of them have had to leave behind is their families. Consequently, they remain connected to and concerned about Pakistan through their direct connections with their families back in home. One interlocutor, Taha, residing in Brunei for almost 4 years commented:

Actually, it is very difficult to live without your family, especially after you are married as you have children and wife and even your parents back home so sometimes, we feel guilty about being outside even and so that there is a responsibility of us physically being present there and helping our family that we are missing out on

Taha's comments reflect a recurring theme: men feel a responsibility that extends beyond financial remittances. As [Qureshi \(2022\)](#) and [Banerjee and Shah \(2021\)](#) note, family obligations within South Asian diasporas often include emotional presence and care – something that cannot be substituted by money alone. Taha's guilt about missing the “unrecoverable years” of his children's lives illustrates how absence is felt most strongly at key life stages. This pattern was echoed by most adults, particularly those with children, though it

was less acute for participants whose families had migrated with them to Brunei. For long-term residents, however, the sense of responsibility was sustained through constant communication.

Even those who had brought their nuclear families to Brunei continued to nurture ties with friends in Pakistan. For many, friendships provided an informal way of staying connected to cultural life. Akram, who had been in Brunei for five years, contrasted the formal tone of calls with his siblings with the playful, extended conversations he had with friends:

Actually, yeah for me yes I am talking to my siblings back in Pakistan also but it's mostly a very formal kind of conversation like you know how we talk to our siblings especially for me because all of them are elder than me so it's just hi hello how are you kind of conversation very formal and limited but on the other hand when I talk to my friends back in Pakistan we often end up talking for hours discussing childhood memories and so on and so forth actually even if we're not talking on a regular basis they are usually sending memes or anything like that funny videos so we are, we remain in contact like that and in a way I am also getting updated with the Pakistani culture as which is the latest meme what is trending nowadays in Pakistan

Akram's reflection demonstrates how digital communication extends cultural belonging: memes, jokes and casual exchanges keep him updated on "what is trending" in Pakistan. This highlights how friendships, just as much as family bonds, anchor diaspora identity in everyday talk.

4.1.3 Yearning and conversations. The participants' narratives highlight how the absence of cultural and familial life in Pakistan transforms conversation into a substitute space for belonging. Talking about Pakistan becomes a way to cope with what is "missed out" – whether food, festivals, or family responsibilities – and to reaffirm a shared identity. Usman, for instance, explained how conversations naturally gravitate towards current affairs and sports:

The thing about current affairs or sports or these current issues related to Pakistan is that all of us have the common perspective, all of us know about the context, and so that's like a common knowledge shared among people from Pakistan. So, for us it's almost a kickstart it's a very easy start as we all know and read about Pakistan and pretty much grew up talking about these things

Usman's reflection shows that conversational topics serve as "low barriers of entry" – familiar and accessible starting points that allow interlocutors to connect quickly. In this sense, talk is not incidental but actively constructs diaspora relationships by providing common ground.

This impression was echoed by Shahid, who noted that shared interests prolonged conversations and strengthened relationships:

So, in this way like if we have the common interest then we can discuss longer and we can make some good relationship

Shahid's view illustrates how cultural talk does not only express nostalgia but also functions as social glue, enabling acquaintanceship to develop into deeper community ties. This resonates with [Madara's \(2019\)](#) point that communities are sustained more by interpersonal connection than by physical proximity. In Brunei, Pakistanis rely on everyday conversations often about politics, sports, or popular culture – as a means of reinforcing belonging. As [Khan \(2023a, b\)](#) also argues, these communicative practices extend diasporic identity by making memory and culture present in day-to-day exchanges. In this way, speech itself becomes an "infrastructure of belonging," linking interlocutors both to their homeland and to each other.

4.1.4 Politics as homeland concern. Although the everyday conversations of overseas Pakistanis in Brunei often revolve around culture, family and community ties, politics is never far from the surface. Homeland political events particularly moments of instability, elections, or protests – become immediate concerns abroad. In these contexts, politics enters diaspora talk not in the form of abstract debate, but as urgent, personal conversation linked to family safety and collective responsibility.

Shahid, who has lived in Brunei for nearly two decades, described how he intensifies contact with siblings in Pakistan during election periods:

Definitely, when there is a big event like elections or otherwise back in Pakistan then obviously, we are contacting and talking to our family back in Pakistan a lot. Me personally I have my siblings back in Pakistan so even if there is not an event, I still call them quite often at least once a week to talk to them and stay in touch but especially when there is an event like elections or other big event so I'm usually calling them to tell them to be safe or to avoid such political rallies and such for their own safety you know

This illustrates how homeland politics is experienced in the diaspora as a matter of vigilance and protective talk. Overseas Pakistanis monitor news closely and interpret events in relation to the well-being of relatives back home. Politics thus acts as a conversational anchor, shaping how migrants negotiate responsibility at a distance.

As earlier scholarship suggests, political consciousness is a consistent feature of Pakistani diasporas. [Anwar \(1979\)](#) emphasises how migration narratives were tied to political as well as economic considerations, whilst [Samad \(2014\)](#) and [Ashutosh \(2021\)](#) reveal that even in contexts of apparent integration, political events in Pakistan retain a strong emotional and symbolic pull for overseas communities. More recently, [Cakmak \(2021\)](#) notes that return discourses often remain intertwined with political conditions in the homeland.

In this light, everyday talk about Pakistan among Brunei's Pakistanis cannot be understood solely in cultural or familial terms. Politics is a recurring backdrop, surfacing whenever homeland instability threatens family security or challenges the possibility of return. For these migrants, politics is less an abstract domain than a lived concern, woven into conversations that maintain belonging across borders.

4.2 Theme 2: the question of return

Understanding the conversations of overseas Pakistanis in Brunei requires looking closely at the personal aspects of their migration journeys. Everyday talk about "home" cannot be separated from the reasons they left, the circumstances of their settlement and their imagined futures. These factors shape how identity is understood both as Pakistanis abroad and as members of a smaller diaspora community in Brunei ([Khan, Jain, & Cameron, 2022](#)).

As discussed earlier, the overseas Pakistani community is highly diverse, with members varying in age, occupation, family situation and length of stay. These differences are reflected in their motives for settling abroad and in how they make sense of belonging. [Cakmak \(2021\)](#) notes that migration decisions are rarely singular; they combine socioeconomic needs, political contexts and personal aspirations. [Anwar \(1979\)](#) similarly observes that for many Pakistanis, migration was initially conceived as temporary – a means to earn abroad before eventually returning.

For most participants in this study, migration was described as a necessity rather than a choice. Better salaries, opportunities for children and the ability to send remittances were recurrent themes, aligning with [Habibullah and Xiguang's \(2022\)](#) argument that migration is often structurally compelled rather than purely voluntary. Yet, even within this necessity, the narratives diverged. Some saw migration as a short-term exploration, others as a long-term strategy and still others as a permanent resettlement. It is these diverging patterns that the following subsections explore in more detail.

4.3 The reason for temporarily exploring the world

Among the younger interlocutors, migration was often framed as an opportunity for exploration and exposure rather than simply financial necessity. Sadiq, who has been residing in Brunei for four years without family, explained his motivation in these terms:

We came here looking for better opportunities, to explore the world and be able to contribute whatever and howsoever we can to our country. Here we can get more exposure to the international community, the universities and better opportunities including the salary and wages, all in all, it is beneficial for us to go outside Pakistan and then be able to contribute anything back to

This perspective illustrates how younger migrants view their time abroad as an investment in personal growth and global experience. As [Sahoo and Shome \(2020\)](#) note, youth migration often aligns with aspirations of exploration and self-development. Many in this group also include students seeking higher education abroad, anticipating that this will translate into better career opportunities later ([Afridi, Asif, Qazi, & Afridi, 2020](#)).

In contrast, older interlocutors – particularly those married with families – emphasised financial security and providing for dependents. Ahmed, in his mid-forties, highlighted this motivation:

Actually, it is better if you are earning in a higher currency, for example, dollar. So automatically you get a better salary, and even if it might not be a lot according to the country we are living in when we send it back to Pakistan, it becomes a big amount. So, it makes it very easy for us to provide back to our families in Pakistan.

Within this older group, two distinct patterns emerged: some remit money home to support families in Pakistan, whilst others relocate their families abroad, seeking a more secure lifestyle. Yet, regardless of these variations, most framed their migration with a final goal in mind: eventual return. As Akram put it:

I have been living here for so many years now, similarly I have lived in many other countries for several years, but yes always the final goal is to go back to our home country at last

These narratives underscore how motives for migration shape conversations about Pakistan. For many, migration was a necessity rather than a choice, driven by economic disparities and limited opportunities at home. The high competition and comparatively low salaries in Pakistan reinforce this necessity ([Ashutosh, 2021](#)). Taha expressed this frustration clearly:

Yes, we are always looking back, looking at the news in Pakistan hoping that the situation will improve, that there will be better job opportunities so that we can return to Pakistan. If we can earn the same in Pakistan as we are earning outside, then we don't have to leave our home country

In this sense, the idea of return – whether real or aspirational – remains central to diaspora conversations, sustaining both nostalgia and critique of Pakistan's socio-economic realities.

4.4 *Keeping the homeland alive*

However, the decision to migrate is not simply about salary. According to most overseas Pakistanis, Pakistan continues to suffer from deeper crises: insecurity, threats to one's life or property and a standard of living that many described as fragile rather than comfortable ([Dancus, 2023](#)). Thus, the attraction of life abroad lies not only in higher wages but also in the promise of safety, peace and stability. As Sadiq remarked:

Here in Brunei, there is so much peace and security, you can walk anywhere at 2 am in the street and it is still safe, I wish to see this sense of security in Pakistan. If me and my family can enjoy this sense of security, there then we don't need to go live in another country

Such reflections reveal why many Pakistanis feel compelled to leave in the first place. Their motives intertwine economic necessity with a longing for dignity, safety and a more livable future.

From these emerging patterns, it becomes clearer why conversations about the homeland are so persistent among migrants. As shown in earlier sections, participants' narratives and demographic details point to a common thread: their love for Pakistan runs deep, marked by dedication, zeal and zest. Leaving was rarely their first choice. Most departed reluctantly driven not by desire but by necessity. And with departure came a constant sense of loss: of homeland, of family, of friends, of everything that had once been familiar.

As [Cakmak \(2021\)](#) reminds us, the homeland is not only a place of origin but also a symbolic anchor. For many migrants, it is never fully past. When a young man leaves his

homeland in search of bread, there is always hope in his eyes that one day he might return. Yet, for most overseas Pakistanis, that hope becomes what is often described as the “myth of return”: an ever-present dream, rarely fulfilled. Those who migrate with families may never return to Pakistan permanently.

Still, the love for the homeland endures. It resurfaces in every gathering where “uncles and aunties” fill living rooms with talk of Pakistan its politics, culture and memories. In these moments, conversation itself becomes an act of preservation: keeping the homeland alive not just in memory but in everyday speech. Thus, talk operates as both remembrance and resistance an everyday strategy for sustaining ties to Pakistan whilst living in Brunei.

4.5 Theme 3: *acculturation to the Bruneian culture*

Acculturation can be defined as a process of cultural exchange that occurs when two cultural groups come into contact. In such contexts, migrants and host societies alike adjust to each other’s norms, practices and expectations (Feldman, 2022). For immigrants, this often means familiarising themselves with the host culture in order to “get by,” gain acceptance, or achieve recognition as equal members of society (Ishaque, Bibi, Afzal Faheem, & Hussnain Rasheed, 2020). At the same time, members of the host society learn how to accommodate the customs of newcomers (Lindsay, 2022). Whilst this process may stretch across generations, its effects on daily life remain tangible and immediate.

Acculturation is a multidisciplinary concept explored across psychology, sociology and anthropology, with various frameworks attempting to capture its complexity (Farooq & Arif, 2023). This study adopts the widely used fourfold model of acculturation, which offers a practical way to situate the diverse patterns emerging among overseas Pakistanis in Brunei. Rather than generalising them into one broad category, this framework allows us to recognise important differences within the community itself.

The model classifies acculturation across two axes: (1) the extent to which migrants retain their native culture and (2) the extent to which they adopt the culture of the host society. From these, four strategies emerge. Assimilation describes a process in which minority groups gradually lose their original cultural identity as they adopt the dominant group’s norms and values (Berry, 1997). Separation refers to migrants’ active rejection of the host culture, often in an effort to protect their heritage by clustering into ethnic enclaves. Integration, by contrast, occurs when migrants maintain strong connections to their homeland culture whilst also celebrating and contributing to the host society (Anam, 2023). Finally, marginalisation reflects situations in which individuals feel excluded from both their native and host cultures, leaving them isolated (Kudo, 2023).

In this study, acculturation is examined not only in lifestyle and identity practices but also in the conversations migrants have about themselves, their families and their sense of belonging. Speech provides a valuable lens for observing how overseas Pakistanis position themselves between cultures, whether leaning towards assimilation, integration, or more resistant modes.

As the following narratives demonstrate, the overseas Pakistanis in Brunei most often described experiences that fell between two of these strategies: assimilation (Figure 1) and integration (Figure 2).

4.5.1 Go back for what? – assimilation. As highlighted earlier, the yearning to return to Pakistan is strong for some overseas Pakistanis. Yet, this desire is not universal. A distinct subgroup of interlocutors presented a different orientation: rather than longing to return, they expressed satisfaction with their lives in Brunei and envisioned their future there. For them, “home” has shifted and return is neither necessary nor desirable.

Figure 1 illustrates the assimilation pattern, in which overseas Pakistanis gradually adopt Bruneian culture whilst their ties to Pakistan recede. One such case is Fahad, who has lived in Brunei for almost thirty years. His parents migrated decades ago, and their family gradually considered Brunei as home. From his account, return is no longer part of the horizon.

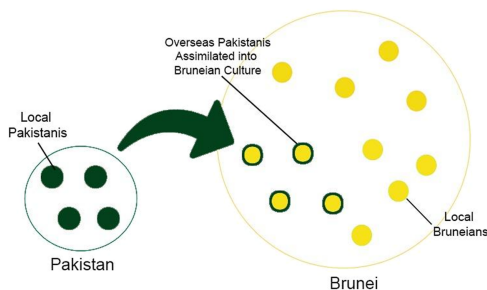


Figure 1. Assimilation of overseas Pakistanis into Bruneian culture. Source: Authors' own work (2023)

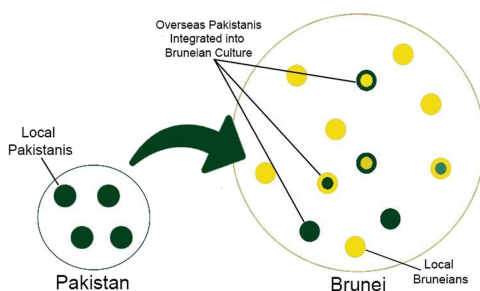


Figure 2. Integration of overseas Pakistanis into Bruneian culture. Source: Authors' own work (2023)

Yes, indeed we love Pakistan, but similarly Brunei has given us so much. My parents came here when no Pakistani had heard of it and settled here since then. Since then, we have worked with so many elites and royals here, and as you know that I am myself a businessman like my father so for us these contacts mean a lot. Thankfully we were able to set up a business here, and today we have recognition all over Brunei and that generates us profit. So, if we are provided all the sufficient things in Brunei, then what should we go back for?

Fahad's reflections illustrate how economic stability and social recognition anchor migrants to the host country. In his case, the continuation of livelihood combined with long-term settlement makes permanent residence in Brunei a logical choice.

This orientation aligns closely with assimilation within the fourfold model of acculturation. Fahad and his family speak Malay, wear Bruneian attire and consume local food, all markers of incorporation into the host society. At the same time, they retain a symbolic attachment to Pakistan, but not in a way that shapes their daily practices or future aspirations.

Such accounts contrast with nostalgic narratives, instead demonstrating how assimilationist and integrative strategies can blend over time. From the perspective of many Pakistanis abroad, their homeland's culture remains vibrant and distinctive. Yet, as interlocutors such as Zeeshan observed, the gap between cultural familiarity and host-country difference means adjustment often feels partial:

It is difficult for us to get used to this culture, at best, we can say that we are just getting by because there is a huge difference in culture here and back in Pakistan

Together, these voices show that whilst some migrants sustain their attachment through talk of return, others reshape belonging by embedding themselves in Brunei's social and cultural life. For the latter, return is no longer imagined as an endpoint; instead, conversations about Pakistan serve as memory and identity markers, rather than as plans for the future.

Figure 2 illustrates integration, in which migrants retain their heritage culture whilst also embracing the host society. On the other side, there are several families where a balance between Pakistani and Bruneian cultures is carefully maintained. One of our interlocutors, Taimur, and his family can be taken as an example of this integration. Having lived in Brunei for around 15 years, Taimur's household illustrates how cultural practices can be blended rather than replaced. His family speaks both Malay and Urdu, enjoys Bruneian as well as Pakistani cuisine and alternates between Malay and Pakistani attire depending on the occasion.

Such practices demonstrate cultural integration the ability to preserve one's heritage whilst also embracing aspects of the host society. Rather than viewing identity as a choice between Pakistan and Brunei, families like Taimur's illustrate that both can coexist. As Taimur himself reflects:

For us yes indeed Brunei the people of Brunei and the culture everything has provided us with great opportunities and benefits for almost two decades now. However, like we have a saying in Urdu that one should not forget their roots so similarly, we do not forget our roots we acknowledge that we are Pakistanis, and we are very proud of it, and we have no shame in practising our native culture alongside with the Bruneian culture.

Taimur's perspective highlights how overseas Pakistanis in Brunei can sustain a sense of pride in their heritage whilst at the same time embedding themselves meaningfully within the Bruneian context. This form of integration not only helps preserve identity across generations but also ensures smoother participation in the host society.

4.5.2 Acculturation and conversations. Whilst distinct patterns can be observed among the interlocutors, it would be inaccurate to categorise all overseas Pakistanis in Brunei as either fully assimilated or fully integrated. In practice, most individuals lie somewhere on a spectrum between the two. Assimilation appears to be relatively rare (Nizami, 2022), partly because many Pakistanis in Brunei have not been there for multiple generations. As earlier sections demonstrated, the unity among community members also strengthens connections back to the homeland, making integration more common than the erosion of native culture.

At the same time, integration is not uniform. It does not always reflect a perfect balance between Pakistani and Bruneian practices but rather exists at different levels depending on individuals' circumstances. Concepts like separation and marginalisation appear extreme and unlikely in this context, since they contradict the original motives for migration primarily to seek better livelihoods and stability (Ali, O'Cathain, & Croot, 2021). For most, integration is not only pragmatic but necessary.

These different strategies of acculturation also shape how conversations about Pakistan are valued. For those who have largely assimilated, talk of Pakistan loses relevance (Figure 1). As Fahad explained:

It is true that in the origin we are Pakistani but we have been living here for so long that like we rarely have any contact back with Pakistan all of our families are here and all of businesses here so yes even though sometimes we discuss about the general culture of Pakistan, yes maybe my father has some stories growing up in Pakistan but for me as since I grew up here and I have never been to Pakistan but yes I know that I'm a Pakistani I speak a little bit of the language not a lot but yeah overall I would not say that it is a part of our daily conversations to talk about Pakistan

By contrast, those who lean towards integration treat conversations as a crucial way to maintain identity (Figure 2) whilst adapting to life in Brunei. As Sadiq remarked:

I think it's especially crucial in a country like Brunei where the population of the overseas Pakistanis is not a lot and obviously there is a limit to how much you will catch up by watching news or talking to people back in Pakistan I mean we humans are social animals right so at the end of the day I think it comes down to the conversations we have amongst the community it helps us remember Pakistan and recreate the elements of culture that we miss here as well as you know it's a good topic to discuss it always feels warm to discuss about Pakistan with another fellow Pakistani

In this way, conversation becomes more than small talk. For integrators, it is a social practice that bridges distance, sustains a sense of cultural belonging and bonds the diaspora community together within the host land.

5. Conclusion

This study explored the unique and highly prominent tendency of the overseas Pakistanis in Brunei to converse extensively and routinely about their homeland. It achieved its aims of identifying the role and significance of these day-to-day conversations among overseas Pakistanis about the various topics relating to the homeland. The narratives of ten overseas Pakistanis in Brunei were collected through open-ended interviews. These interviews focused mainly on analysing their tendency to converse about the homeland whilst residing in the host country. The three main categories of conversations focused upon in these interviews were: politics, religion and entertainment. Politics emerged less as a partisan debate and more as a concern for family safety and stability back home. During election periods or political crises, participants frequently called relatives to check on their wellbeing, showing that politics is tied to responsibility and protective talk rather than formal activism. These themes have implications for the validity of diaspora theory, which is discussed in the literature review.

Each theme is built upon the different patterns relating to conversations about the homeland. The collected data were then further used to analyse and extrapolate the possible reasons why these conversations occur in the first place and how might other factors, such as the background, lifestyle and personal beliefs of the interlocutor may have impacted these trends. Lastly, the role and significance that these conversations have in the life of the overseas Pakistanis in Brunei were discussed. This was not only in terms of being connected to the homeland, culture and customs but also in terms of how these conversations might play a significant role in helping the overseas community build and maintain a bond amongst themselves whilst residing in the host country (Errichiello, 2023; Wu & Kilby, 2023; Hawkes, Evagora-Campbell, Zahidie, Rabbani, & Buse, 2023).

The first theme discussed the concept of belonging and its role in the tendency of the overseas Pakistanis to converse about the homeland. The chapter builds upon the collected narratives of the interlocutors, who passionately discussed how they felt a sense of belonging and yearning for their home country whilst residing in Brunei. This sense of belonging was fuelled by factors such as their family and friends residing back in Pakistan (Mahar, 2023; Alamgir, Gray, Kelly, & Brown, 2024; Kapilashrami & John, 2023), which not only facilitated the strengthening of overseas Pakistanis' connection to their homeland but also resulted in them staying up to date and involved with matters back home to a certain degree, whether political or personal matters. For instance, Shahid described how he phoned his siblings weekly, especially during election seasons, urging them to avoid rallies and remain safe. Such examples highlight how politics enters conversation not through abstract policy talk but as a lived concern for family security. This connection and active involvement with affairs in Pakistan result in both frequent conversations with people back home as well as conversations about the homeland whilst living in the host country (Lombard, 2023).

The second theme builds upon one of the most prominent burning desires that almost all overseas Pakistanis were observed to have, the desire to return to the homeland. It was observed through the interviews that almost all overseas Pakistanis yearned to return to Pakistan one day. The findings above suggested how one plausible explanation might be that all these overseas Pakistanis went overseas to earn a better livelihood for their families, as the overseas employment offers much better and more rewarding opportunities than in Pakistan. Hence, this temporary migration can be seen as something done out of necessity, rather than out of desire. Leaving their family behind to go live alone in an unknown land might not be a pleasant or easy experience for most (Khan & Taela, 2023). Hence, when forced to do so, they are bound to feel homesick, miss their family and friends and hope to return to their country. The chapter argued that all these factors, combined with these immense emotions, result in

overseas Pakistanis engaging in frequent conversations about the homeland. Lastly, the third theme discusses how the overseas Pakistanis might feel alienated in Brunei due to the considerable difference in the culture of both countries. Everything from the language to the food is drastically different. Hence, coming to Brunei would be an enormous cultural shock for any Pakistani. Here, the fourfold model of acculturation is utilised to highlight the various trends and levels of familiarity that the overseas Pakistanis might have with the Bruneian culture. The chapter then puts forth the idea that this alienation and unfamiliarity with the Bruneian culture might be a significant contributor to what motivates the overseas Pakistanis to converse frequently and passionately about the homeland, even after they have resided in Brunei for decades.

Overall, this study contributes to diaspora scholarship by demonstrating how everyday conversations operate as a form of cultural preservation. For overseas Pakistanis in Brunei, these dialogues are not simply reflections of nostalgia but active practices through which identity, belonging and transnational ties are continually reinforced. This work also brings together and analyses all the narratives shared by the interlocutors. This included several different factors from the residence of family and friends back in Pakistan, to the overseas Pakistanis hoping for a better Pakistan. Several other factors such as the interlocutors reminiscing about their memories of the time spent in Pakistan were also discussed. This is grounded in the fact that most of the interlocutors have spent their childhood as well as a great portion of their adult life in Pakistan. All these factors suggest that overseas Pakistanis might not be living their best life outside of Pakistan (Bolander, 2021; Chaudhary, 2019; Kapilashrami & John, 2023). Even though they might be earning more and enjoying a better lifestyle, the feeling of being alienated might be something they have to live with for the rest of their stay in Brunei. This alienation is also a barrier for them to access their native culture, the one they grew up with and are most comfortable with (Chacko & Price, 2021; Schierup & Jørgensen, 2017; Mahar, 2023; Raheja, 2022). There might not be that many authentic Pakistani restaurants for them to get the food similar to what they have been enjoying all their life, neither might there be any shops to tailor them authentic Pakistani *shalwar kameez*, nor might they get the chance to speak their native language in Brunei. Hence, all these factors move the overseas Pakistanis to remain connected with the homeland through conversations not only with their family and friends back home but also with their fellow overseas Pakistanis in Brunei. Equally, homeland politics remained a recurrent backdrop. Whilst not always at the forefront, moments of crisis, elections, protests, or security threats reverberated in diaspora conversations. Politics thus became another way in which overseas Pakistanis reaffirmed responsibility, care and belonging across distance.

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Further reading

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