

The two largest communities of people of African descent in Pakistan live in the country's coastal regions – in the southwestern province of Balochistan, and the southeastern province of Sindh. They trace their origins to the eastern coast of Africa which have had extensive maritime trading links with the coasts of Balochistan and Sindh for centuries. Slave trade flourished between the east African coast and the coastline of what was to become Pakistan from the 18th century and African slaves were bought by the local nobility for work on farms, orchards and homes.

Most people of African origin in Balochistan and Sindh are thought to be descendants of slaves, or children of unions between people of African origin who were first brought here as slaves and locals. In parts of Balochistan the word 'Darzada' which was originally used to denote people of mixed African and local parentage, came to be adopted as a polite term for anyone of African origin. It replaced the harsher and more direct term 'Ghulam' which literally means slave for those of pure African descent. The Baloch of African origin have come to be recognized as simply Baloch – racial differences among the Baloch are not very much talked about 'outside' the community. In Sindh the term Sheedi came to be used for people of African descent and was adopted by the community itself, partly as a form of distinct identity within the broader Sindhi community. I belong to the Sheedi community of Sindh and I am the first member of my community to have become a member of the provincial legislature and a minister.

The question of identity is important not only for understanding how racism and discrimination against people of African descent operates, as well as the strategies adopted by individuals and collectives from these communities. Race has not been an officially recognized or sanctioned marker of identity – either for the purposes of discrimination or for affirmative action. But even if race is not codified in law or governance, racialized categories are used in constructing social hierarchies and in perpetuating social discrimination.

The commonly used identity marker in Pakistan is kinship group – with terms such as tribe and caste being used interchangeably. People of African descent often end up getting classified as distinct kinship groups. So, for example, the Sheedis of Sindh are sometimes thought of as being a tribe or caste. The situation in parts of Balochistan is somewhat distinct. Here people of African descent have even come to represent to Baloch identity itself. These two paths – one where the people of African origin are recognized, socially, as a distinct kinship group, and the other where African descent has become the marker for an entire ethnic group – are evolving. And both present their own challenges with respect to racism. These challenges define the context in which children of African descent will both confront racism and claim their rights as citizens.

Since race is not a formal category in Pakistan we have no official data either on the number of people of African descent, or their socio-economic conditions in comparison with other groups. But we do know that they are among the poorest communities.

Problems of poverty, economic inequality and social underdevelopment are acute across the country. Around a third of the children aged 5-16, the statutory age for schooling, are out of school. Although we do not have precise data, it is presumed that the historically marginalized communities such as people of African descent are disproportionately represented among the poorer families and those with no schooling. Tackling the problem of schooling in general and out of school children in particular would be one of the first steps for opening economic opportunities to these communities.

Race will continue to shape the social development and economic opportunities of these children. Though in comparison with the experience of other communities of African descent, particularly other communities where the history of Africans is intertwined with the history of slave trade, Pakistan does present one important lesson. The fact that people of African descent were relatively unhindered, after the ending of slavery, to live in their own communities, has meant that for good or bad, children of African descent are brought up in strong family systems. Perhaps also because of the state's relatively low level of intrusion into families, Pakistan's children of African descent do not face many of the challenges that their counterparts face in countries where racialized social policies have denied children their identity.

In the absence of hard data, I offer two examples that demonstrate quite vividly, in my opinion, how racism operates in my country. The first example is from my own life experience.

As I had mentioned earlier, the people of African descent in Sindh are identified as a distinct group within the Sindhi community. The word Sheedi is used both as a marker of identity and pride, but also continues to be deployed as a term of abuse and racial discrimination. It works in complex ways. The Sheedis are valorized for the courage and sacrifice of a historic figure – Hosh Mohammad Sheedi – in defending Sindh against colonial conquest in the 1840s. Ironically, that same colonial conquest led to the abolition of slavery. One of the earliest reforms within the Sheedi community, a man called Siddiq Musafir, got educated and became a teacher. He called upon the Sheedi community to gain education as the route out of poverty and subjugation. My family followed his path. My parents made great efforts to ensure that my siblings and I were educated. After years of working as a professional I entered politics and was given the opportunity to contest local government elections.

To my shock and surprise my candidature was opposed by members of my own party who belonged to the local landowning elite – families of former slave-owners. They ran a vicious campaign against me based on overt racism and sexism. Although I had always been aware of racism, the bitterness of this backlash was still a shock to me. I thought that Siddiq Musafir and my parent’s teaching, that education and a respectable profession would counter racial disadvantage, was only half true. Much more was needed. In my case I got another surprise, a pleasant one, when I found that the national

leadership of my party stood by me even at the cost of losing the local government elections.

I stood fast in the face of the racialized onslaught, and my party leadership stood with me. I am proud that my example is now cited in my community and encourages younger people, particularly girls, who say that we want to go further than Tanzeela. I will work hard to ensure that they do. But I do so now with the awareness that education and employment opportunities by themselves will not solve this particular problem.

The other example is from the old city neighbourhood of Lyari in Karachi, which is the country's largest city. Lyari has always been a working class neighbourhood in the city and has been home to cultural and political activities. It also has a large Baloch population, a big part of which consists of Baloch people of African descent. Like any other densely populated and deprived urban neighbourhood Lyari also has its share of urban problems such as drug abuse and crime. But in the wider context of Karachi, Lyari became associated only with crime. And by association, young men of African descent were labelled as suspected criminals or members of criminal gangs.

In fact, Lyari is a multi-ethnic neighbourhood, albeit with a large Baloch population. Also, as it happens, while the Baloch of African descent have become the 'face' of the Baloch community, there are many Baloch in Lyari who are not of African descent. And as it happens most of the known or alleged

heads of criminal gangs are not Baloch of African descent. The 'visibility' of the Baloch of African descent combined with unchallenged racism against people of African descent meant that the complex relationship of a poor deprived neighbourhood with crime got reduced to the labelling of young black men as criminals. This not only limits their economic opportunities, but also poses severe threats to their lives and security.

The children of African descent in Pakistan, therefore, face many of the same problems that children of other historically marginalized communities face. But they must navigate these challenges without clear pathways out of deprivation and marginality. The diverse strategies and political situations of communities of African descent in Pakistan and their different ways of managing their identity are partly a result of the fact that African slavery or race were not formally codified. Communities found their ways in their own local contexts. But they have done so thus far in the absence of a strong anti-racist narrative in the mainstream. The recognition of racism faced by people of African descent and open conversation about it will be an important turning point with respect to the life opportunities of children of African descent in Pakistan.