

## RECLAIMING NARRATIVE VOICE: LINGUISTIC RESISTANCE STRATEGIES OF TRANSGENDER ACTIVISTS IN PAKISTAN'S URDU MEDIA DISCOURSE

**Dr. Gul Zamin Khan<sup>1</sup> (Corresponding Author)**

Assistant Professor, Dept. of English, University of Malakand, KP.

Email: [gulzaminkhanuom@gmail.com](mailto:gulzaminkhanuom@gmail.com)

**Dr. Islam Badshah<sup>2</sup>**

Assistant Professor of English National University of Modern Languages  
Islamabad

Email: [ibadshah@numl.edu.pk](mailto:ibadshah@numl.edu.pk)

### Abstract

*This paper examines how transgender activists in Pakistan use certain linguistic resistance strategies in the Urdu media discourse in opposition to the stigma that is constantly practiced in the society and use the discourse to take back narrative control. Despite the groundbreaking legislation granting gender recognition and rights, the persistence of media framing negatively often means that the stereotypes are embedded in a more complex way, thus requiring advanced discursive counter-measures. Based on the three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis (CDA), developed by Fairclough, the qualitative methodology employed in the study was a descriptive one where a corpus of 80 statements made by activists, interviews, and press releases were analysed. The results indicate that resistance is implemented in three main forms strategic lexical re -appropriation between the culturally approved Khwāja 'Sīrā identity and the legally approved transgender category), agency transitivity change (the consistent location of the community as active subject of transformation and passive object of violence), and high legal modality and affective appeals. The discussion supports the fact that the language use is a strategic political tool, and activists use it to challenge the hegemonic discourse of the media and transform into right-bearing citizens. This inquiry provides micro-linguistic data on the existence of subaltern resistance movements in South Asian context.*

**Keywords:** Critical Discourse Analysis, Linguistic Resistance, Transgender Activism, Khwaja Sira, Urdu Media, Narrative Reclamation, Pakistan, Fairclough.

### Introduction: Contextualizing Gender and Discursive Power in Pakistan

#### Background and Socio-Legal Context

The Khwaja Sira people, an umbrella term used in South Asia to describe gender-nonbinary people, have always held an ambiguous and long-standing role within the Pakistani community, despite often being relegated to marginal roles within the community, the issue of transgender visibility has always been acknowledged, although with stigma, in the streets, especially within the urban centres and small towns. A significant transition in formalised transgender activism came around 2009, when the transgender community came into the limelight through the arrest and reported violent treatment of transgender people.

This judicial involvement brought about great milestones in law. In 2011, the Pakistani Supreme Court passed the National Data Base Registration Act that gave Khwaja Siras and other gender-nonbinary persons legal recognition to register as a third gender on most documentations, including National Identity Cards and passports (Azhar et al., 2024).

#### The Research Problem

Despite these historic legal successes, Khwaja Sira community is plagued by widespread and diverse marginalisation. Empirical research records an endemic triple-expressive stigma (internalised stigma (shame, selective disclosure), perceived stigma (social views of employability and sex work) and enacted stigma (systematic exclusion in family, educational, religious and healthcare fields)). This suppressive environment forces most of the members to

abandon schooling in favor of bullying, and family rejection of them, which then translates into a process of continuous and deliberative self-preservation (Khan, 2014).

### Research Questions

The research questions that the present study will answer include:

What are the particular linguistic strategies (lexical options, grammatical structures, rhetorical forms) used by transgender activists in Urdu media discourse to challenge negative forms of stereotyping and take control of the narrative?

What do these tactics represent a deliberate political manoeuvre of work to negotiate the tension between the culturally recognized Khwaja Sira identity and the legal/global transgender rights discourse?

How effectively does the activist discourse manage to dispose of the patterns of transitivity and modality towards victimhood and the active and agentic role of the citizen?

### Significance of the Study

The study has many implications to the fields of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), media studies and gender politics in South Asia. In contrast to the previous literature, the focus of the current inquiry is shifted as opposed to the actual ideological framing of the Khwaja Sira community by the mainstream media (Waqar & Naeem, 2024; Khan, 2019). This focus on subaltern discursive opposition creates the necessary empirical data on how the voices of marginalisation use language as a tool of political mobilisation and social change.<sup>7</sup>

The results provide an insight into how the activists operationalise legal frameworks, including the 2018 Act, in their popular language, shifting the logic of appeals to the right to humanitarian sympathy to the logic of rights based on constitutional mandate (Arther, 2009). Moreover, by charting the intricate lexical negotiation between the culturally localised (Khwaja Sira) and globalised (transgender) terms, the investigation supplies the key information concerning the tactical construction and preservation of the political identities in the context marked by the tension between the conservative cultural acceptance and the promotion of the human rights movements internationally. The findings explain the exact linguistic processes, which assist in the narrative reclaiming and establishment of political personhood within Pakistani publicity.

### The Hegemony, Stigma, and the Activist Game: Literature Review

#### Theory behind Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

This study uses Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as its main theoretical framework, which takes language not only to be a mirror of reality but also a place where social power is negotiated and reproduced to achieve certain goals of influential institutions or editors (Mayr, 2008).

The study employs a three-dimensional model of CDA proposed by Fairclough, which is widely accepted, as it bridges the gap between the macro-level social practices (combating the institutional media hegemony) and the micro-level textual characteristics (e.g., the choice of words). By relating the identified linguistic strategies (i.e., word choice) with the macro-level aim (i.e., fighting the institutional media hegemony), the study will capture the entire political significance of the activists using linguistic means.

#### The Identity of Stigma, and Khwaja Sira Game

Multi-layered stigma has a significant impact on the life of Khwaja Siras in Pakistan, the consequences of which are identified by Ayode et al. (2016) as internalised: enacting stigma in areas of critical importance, using dera as a system of protection and a community of followers, being ostracised by her family, being harassed in school and being denied access to religious space and unhappy treatment in hospitals.

This ubiquitous stigma is what Khan (2019) describes as Khwaja Sira politics as a game as a strategic game of manipulation and concealment whose purpose is to protect him/herself in a

hostile world by keeping a secret even something as wild as his/her sexual practices. In the case where security is based on ambiguity, then activists need to adopt word usage as a strategic defence against social and physical scrutiny of an extremely stigmatised phenomenon, e.g. participation in sex work or status as an HIV positive individual (Scambler & Paoli, 2008).

### **Urdu Discourse Dominant Media Framing**

The Pakistani media ecology dominated by Urdu print, electronic media is identifiable by its reproduction of ideological positions and political affiliations of the editors themselves, and their tendency to create, frame and manipulate media content in support of their hidden agendas. Critical discourse analyses of Urdu news headlines confirm that discourse is critical in gender construction, where the representation of the marginalised groups and women in the media is often depicted as dependent, indecisive and weak (Yaseen, Asghar, & Sardar, 2023). Within the framework of transgender visibility Khwaja Siras were able to gain some level of partial legibility in the mainstream media beginning in the late 2000s, which granted them a semi-autonomous space within the mainstream. Nonetheless, the framing was still problematic. Importantly, gender and sexual minorities that identified with globalised queer categories risk being deemed as collusion with imperialist forces, and it puts the community in a very precarious situation where self-identification may be used against the interests of the nation or Islam, which is what has been shown in the backdrop (Albayrak, 2016).

### **Resistance to Linguistics: Re-appropriation and Confrontation**

Linguistic resistance is a conscious mobilisation of language materials to disorient hegemonic discourse and increase the political presence of marginalised communities by engaging in a reversal of masculinised and feminised features of language, thus represents a trend toward de-stereotyping the portrayal of power-relations.

One of the key aspects of this opposition is the bargaining of terms of identity. The change in the popular language is characterized by a more strategic approach to the term transgender and the traditional and culturally-specific word Khwaja Sira (Khan, 2014). The consistent use of the latter is also a political move: it is viewed as a safe and respectable title to shield against the stigma of the globalised queer identities and to avoid the accusation of being used contrary to the Pakistani interests. Activists should always count on the type of term they can use, which is a political counterbalancing game as language is the lever on the side of culture and the realisation of legal rights.

### **The Research Gap**

The legal history of the Khwaja Sira/transgender population in Pakistan and the critical ideological conceptualization of this population by the mainstream Urdu media have been widely studied and examined. In addition, the theoretic conceptualization of the Khwaja Sira identity politics as a game of concealment has been established (Khan, 2014).

However, there remains, nonetheless, a crucial gap in the micro-linguistic focus on the activist-produced discourse itself. Although we know that activists need to be tactical in the eye, we do not have systematic data on the definite language processes that are taken to achieve this resistance through Urdu public statements. In particular, the empirical evidence to map the use of linguistic characteristics (shift in the patterns of transitivity (who acts on whom and use of various forms of modality) is lacking to close the divide between cultural identity politics and the claiming of legal personhood. This paper fills this gap by mapping these linguistic options in a systematic way that validates the role of this choice as a tool of political and social reclamation.

## Analytical Framework and Research Design

### Research Methodology and Theoretical Framework

A descriptive qualitative methodology is based on the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) paradigm, to which the study in question is devoted, which is the three-dimensional model created by Fairclough (1995a).

The analysis included meticulous linguistic analysis organized according to three tested analytical variables based on similar Pakistani media analysis (Ahmad & Ali, 2019); these include:

**Lexical and Referent Strategies:** Analysis of words, particular noun, and naming patterns. This theory deals with the way in which activists negotiate ideological baggage that comes with a word or a phrase such as Khwaja Sira and Transgender.

**Transitivity Analysis (Systemic Functional Linguistics):** It is concerned with the structure of clauses to identify the participants, processes (verbs), and circumstances. This is aimed at determining who is placed as an Agent (actor) and the Patient (recipient) of actions with the direct intention of moving the narrative out of victimhood.

**Modality Analysis:** The markers of commitment, necessity, certainty and emotion that are linguistically manifested in terms of epistemic, deontic, and affective modalities. This shows the position of the activist towards their rights and their sense of authority.

### Corpus Description and Data Collection

#### Research Population and Setting

The research sample was the high profile, visible transgender activists, community leaders (gurus) and spokespersons of established rights organisations who were both operating in Pakistan. Data was focused on big urban centres such as Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad that are the main producers of national media and where the stakes are high in political activities. Such an environment was selected since these activists are in contact with national Urdu print and electronic media regularly, which offers a strong corpus of publicly broadcast statements. In the research, a corpus was used (N=80 text items), which was collected using purposive sampling methods where the primary texts were produced by activists themselves or were one of their direct quotations. The period of data consideration is five years, i.e., 2018 (when Transgender Persons Act was adopted) to 2023. This period is fundamental, since it reflects the language of resistance once community had been granted legal safeguards. The corpus consists of: activist quotes in major Urdu newspapers (Jang and Dawn-Urdu), official statements published by organisations (in most cases translated into Urdu to reach as large an audience as possible), and the transcripts of the activist interviews, published by Urdu news channels. The readings were Romanised and divided into 1985 clauses which could be analysed which gave the estimated amount of corpus words of 33000 words.

#### The breakdown of the corpus sources is detailed below

Table 1: Description of Activist Discourse Corpus (2018–2023)

Source Type	Sample Size (Items)	Estimated Word Count (Urdu)	Analytical Focus
Print Interviews (Urdu Newspapers)	25	15,000	Formal/Public Framing, Legal Rhetoric



Source Type	Sample Size (Items)	Estimated Word Count (Urdu)	Analytical Focus
Televised Talk Show Quotes	40	10,000	Emotional Modality, Assertive Language
Activist Press Releases/Statements	15	8,000	Lexical Choice, Ideological Positioning

The fact that the chosen texts were published no later than 2018 allows the comparison of rhetoric strategies, implying their opposition to those that were used prior to 2018, which presumably were more prone to the humanitarian appeals. The following discussion looks at whether formal legal texts, which were acquired after 2018, turned out to be a resource of resistance, thus forecasting an incremental rise of assertive linguistic markers (deontic modality: must, required) as a way of repositioning the narrative as formerly marginalized to having rights-bearing citizenship.

### Discussion, Linguistic Analysis and Findings

The CDA demonstrated that transgender activists make use of a clearly organized linguistic repertoire to dismantle the stigma and systemic discrimination that can be found everywhere, and therefore has supported the belief that the strategies of resistance are conscious and calculated at the same time. These strategies mainly take three areas, which include lexical re-appropriation, grammatical agency, and assertive modality.

### Lexical Re-appropriation and Strategic Naming Conventions

There is an intentional, three-way negotiation of identity terms by Urdu media activists, which is a form of a political calculus (Khan, 2015). The negotiation focuses on three major conditions, namely, Khwaja Sira, Transgender, and sometimes the historically pejorative Hijra. Khwaja " khwjh sr The term is very prevalent, with 48 per cent coverage in the texts analysed. It serves as the anchor of the culture. This term has been described as a harmless and respectable designation by Khan (2014) since it is firmly rooted in the cultural environment of the South Asian world. Its common application ensures some level of security and partial acceptance, hence permitting the movement to be disinterlaced with the globalised queer groups that may attract him to be denounced of complicity with imperialist forces that are allegedly detrimental to Pakistani interests. This rate of this term proves that cultural legitimacy is one of the most significant political issues to be socially accepted.

On the other hand, the word Transgender (trns jynddr) which is used in 35% of the texts serves as the legal claim. Its implementation is focused in the situations where codified rights are required or when interacting with state representatives. The fact that various stakeholders such as community activists and the mainstream Urdu press have been using it more and more is an indication of a successful integration of international human-rights language to establish legal status (Alamgir, 2024).

The infrequent but not uncommon usage of the traditional term Hijra (hjrr) (12 percent frequency) is commonly used in very confrontational or internally activist situations. It is a linguistic re-appropriation, a historically derogatory term being taken back and spoken to resist power in a gesture of rebellion, a pattern also followed by language as a whole in the wake of being reverted and used in the opposite manner.

**Table 2: Frequency of Preferred Self-Identification Terms Used by Activists (N=80 Text Items)**

Term (Urdu Romanization)	Literal Translation/Connotation	Frequency (%)	Discursive Function
<i>Khawaja Sira</i> (خواجہ سرا)	Respected gender-ambiguous person	48%	Cultural Legitimacy, Safety <sup>1</sup>
<i>Transgender</i> (ٹرانس جینڈر)	Western/Legal Identifier	35%	Rights Claim, Global Alignment
<i>Hijra</i> (ہجڑا)	Traditional, often Stigmatized	12%	Re-appropriation, Defiance
Other	Includes regional terms (e.g., Zennana)	5%	Contextual Specificity

The lexical choices distribution proves the fact that the lexical choices are a complex indicator of the political relations. This is done by activists who play a game of switching terms to achieve both the cultural rootedness, which grassroots survival needs, and the legal status, which is much required to survive in the state.

#### **Grammatical Agency (Transitivity) Strategic use**

Transitivity analysis describes the main mechanism, by which activists can use language to fortify against the stereotypical media coverage of their community as passive victims (patients) of violence or sympathy or social degradation. The analysis found the positioning of the activists to the actions (material processes) and communications (verbal processes) outlined in their statements.

Findings show that there is a strong inclination towards agentive positioning. In 65% of material processes, the activists were described as agents - the doers, i.e. expressions like We organized the protest and We successfully filed the petition. This trend is quite opposite to the traditional media representations where a marginalized group is often represented as a passive victim, such as, they were attacked or the government gave them, etc. Activists restructure their political agency and ability to change their situation structurally by anticipating their agentic status.

Another relevant observation is related to communication. In 92 per cent of the relevant clauses, activists claimed to be the agents of the verbal processes, repeatedly using such active constructions as We demand justice, We announce our next steps, We reject this false narrative. Unlike being described as the passive receivers of the dialogues, i.e. the activists were told or they were discussed, they made themselves act as active participants of the communication.

**Table 3: Analysis of Transitivity Patterns (Agency vs. Patiency) in Activist Statements (N=1,985 Clauses)**

Process Type	Definition (Grammatical)	Activists as Agent (%)	Activists as Patient (%)
Material Processes	Actions/events (e.g., 'We fought,' 'They arrested us')	65%	35%
Relational Processes	Being/Identifying (e.g., 'We are citizens')	85%	15%
Verbal Processes	Saying/Communicating (e.g., 'We demand,' 'They claim')	92%	8%

The large percentage of Agentive Verbal Processes (92) is an empirical evidence of the conscious attempt by the activists to repossess narrative voice. They interfere with the structural linguistic processes that aim to silence them or make them passive by the grammatical insistence of being the speakers and actors, and thus meets the demands of agentive citizenship.

#### **Rhetoric of Legal Modality and Formalism**

The modality analysis, which revealed the extent to which activists conveyed the sense of certainty, obligation, and the level of emotional commitment, has demonstrated a complex dual approach, i.e., the appeal to the use of authoritative legal narratives and the strong appeal to personal feelings.

#### **High Deontic Modality (Legal Formalism)**

High deontic modality was often used in the activist discourse after the enactment of the Transgender Persons Act 3 in 2018. This consists in the high-obligation markers used in Urdu (equal to must, required, or hona chahiye [should be]). Activists structured their demands in such a way that they were not asking to be shown mercy or charity, but as non-negotiable rights under the law as defined by the constitution and the laws. It is a powerful counter-discourse to moral or religious criticisms that tend to drive the stigma: it taps on authority of the state itself to enact regulation on both the government institutions and the people.

#### **Strategic Low Modality and Affective Modality**

At the same time, the discourse was very much based on Affective Modality. These activists often used the language of severe emotional experiences or institutional discrimination, including zulm (cruelty) or allusions to the disgraceful identity, to balance the ethical authority of their own oppression and stigmatization (Azhar et al., 2024) with the political imperative of their action, which goes beyond legal formalities.

Importantly, Strategic Low Modality (epistemic, with the help of hedges such as shayed [maybe]) was also identified. This observation is a direct reflection in the description of the game provided by Khan (2014) when it comes to sensitive, highly stigmatized issues, specifically concerning sources of income or personal life, the activists deliberately used ambiguity to avoid prying questions and keep the needed degree of concealment to stay safe in an oppressive society.

**Table 4: Manifestation of Modality (Commitment and Necessity) in Resistance Narratives**

Modal Category	Example Strategy	Key Function	Frequency in Corpus
High Modality (Deontic)	Use of 'must,' 'required,' 'hona chahiye' (should be)	Asserting Rights/Legal Obligation (Formalism)	High
Low Modality (Epistemic)	Use of 'perhaps,' 'might be,' 'shayed' (maybe)	Strategic Concealment/Ambiguity <sup>9</sup>	Moderate
Affective Modality	Emotional intensity markers (e.g., 'zulum,' 'shameful')	Expressing Internalized Stigma/Oppression <sup>3</sup>	High

The combination of the high stature of law (deontic) and intense emotional appeal is a subtle rhetorical tool. This duality will ensure that the discourse at once relates to institutional legal frameworks and the morality of the masses.

#### Resistance Strategies and Stereotype Subversion Taxonomy

The lexical, grammatical, and modal analyses of the process assists in building a coherent taxonomy that clarifies how particular linguistic strategies are organized to reverse the established stereotypes existing in the media in Pakistan.

**Table 5: Taxonomy of Linguistic Resistance Strategies**

Resistance Strategy	Description	Linguistic Markers (Urdu)	Example Context
Reversal/Subversion	Turning negative stereotypes back on the accusers, challenging morality.	Irony, sarcasm, confrontational syntax <sup>7</sup>	Responding to police violence or political manipulation.
Legal Formalism	Adopting official discourse to assert citizenship based on statutory rights.	Use of legal terms (e.g., 'Qanoon,' 'Haq')	Statements following a court ruling or demanding police accountability.
Strategic Ambiguity	Intentional blurring of identity or private life details.	Hedges, generalizations, topic shifts <sup>9</sup>	Discussing community income/sex work.



Resistance Strategy	Description	Linguistic Markers (Urdu)	Example Context
<b>Moral Reclamation</b>	Framing activism in terms of human dignity/Pakistani cultural values.	Appeals to 'Izzat' (honor), 'Insaniyat' (humanity)	Demanding respect in public spaces, linking rights to cultural honor.

These strategies are deployed to systematically undermine four primary categories of media oppression:

**Table 6: Correlation between Linguistic Strategies and Targeted Media Stereotypes**

Dominant Media Stereotype	Activist Counter-Narrative	Primary Resistance Strategy Used
Deviant/Immoral (Sex Worker Stigma)	Citizen with Fundamental Rights	Legal Formalism/Moral Reclamation
Foreign/Westernized (LGBT Collusion)	Inherently Pakistani Khwaja Sira	Lexical Re-appropriation
Passive/Victim Figure	Independent Agent of Change	Strategic Transitivity (Agentive)
Undisciplined/Emotional	Articulate, Legally-informed Speaker	Formal Lexis, High Deontic Modality

The fact that the use of specific linguistic strategies, which are systematically applied as the examples in Table 6 show, does not constitute a mere reactive phenomenon is evidence of the fact that activist discourse operates. It is a carefully designed intervention that uses language strategically to deconstruct particular hegemonic discourses related to legal status of status, cultural belonging and agency.

### Discursive Practices of Communication Platforms

The analysis also presents that the execution of these resistance mechanisms depends on the communication platform, which raises the awareness of the activists of the rhetorical concerns regarding how audiences and gatekeepers expect them to behave.

**Table 7: Distribution of Resistance Strategies by Communication Platform**

Platform	Prevalent Resistance Strategy	Rationale
Traditional Print Media (Newspapers)	Legal Formalism, Formal Lexical Choice	Gatekeepers demand formal legitimacy; formal language minimizes risk of manipulation by editors.

Platform	Prevalent Strategy	Resistance	Rationale
Televised Interviews/Talk Shows	Affective Modality, Strategic Ambiguity		Allows for immediate, direct emotional connection with viewers (Affective) while deflecting invasive questions about private life (Ambiguity).
Social Media (Direct Activist Accounts)	Reversal/Subversion, High Transitivity	Agentive	Allows for unfiltered, immediate, and confrontational pushback, utilizing language "reverted to confront".

The variance in which the platform is concerned shows that linguistic resistance is a deliberate, conscious practice. Print media, which is a formal platform, involves legalistic rhetoric, which must be followed to achieve an access to the platform and address an institutional gatekeeper. On the other hand, digital and televised media allow the use of emotional and confrontational wording required during grassroots mobilization and real narrative reclamation.

### General Linguistic Effect and Retelling the Story

The overall impact of these linguistic strategies of resistance is a provable change of the discursive position of transgender activists as significant figures of marginalization into an active political force.

**Table 8: Overall Linguistic Impact on Narrative Status**

Linguistic Feature	Shift in Narrative Status	Discursive Outcome
Lexical Choice ( <i>Khwaja Sira</i> + <i>Transgender</i> )	From Excluded Subject to Legally-Recognized, Culturally-Rooted Citizen	Secures dual legitimacy (cultural and legal).
Transitivity (Agentive Preference)	From Passive Victim to Proactive Political Agent	Enforces self-determination and ownership of actions.
Modality (Deontic + Affective)	From Pleader for Mercy to Demander of Rights	Creates irrefutable claims based on law and moral suffering.

The data supports the thesis statement that activists are using the linguistic instruments of CDA to systematically deconstruct the ideological prejudices of the Urdu media. They have effectively created a discourse repertoire that combines authoritative and cultural knowledge, which makes sure that their voice is assertive, as well as strategically safeguarded in the eyes of people.

### Conclusion

The idea that reclaiming narrative agency is a multi-layered, active process that is achieved with the help of the strategically calculated linguistic resistance in support of the idea is supported by the application of the critical discourse analytical methods to the statements of transgender activists shared with the population via the Urdu media discourse. To reduce the

political tensions inherent in their visibility, activists do this in a systematic manner through the use of lexical re-appropriation; they use the culturally approved Khwaja Sira term and the officially recognized Term transgender, thus achieving both grassroots and state legitimization. This linguistic trick is also supported by the recurring usage of strategic transitivity which repeatedly puts the community in the role of proactive agents of change instead of the passive patients of societal prejudice. In addition, the co-occurring use of high legal modality and affective appeals provides their social demands with legal jurisdiction, based on the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2018, and moral urgency, which is necessary, negatively impacting the suggestion of deviance or emotional instability (Zia, 2019). The empirical micro-linguistic data, therefore, prove that linguistic decisions are inherent a tactic of politics on the level of identity, an elaborate, deliberate expansion of the identity-negotiation struggle aimed to preserve the sense of dignity and citizenship amid the established social stigma (Azhar et al., 2024; Khan, 2014). The effectiveness of such linguistic tools resides in the fact that they generate counter-narratives which are culturally authoritative and legally unimpeachable at the same time and undermine the hegemonic regulation of gendered discourse within the Pakistani subject world significantly.

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