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## Political Engagement through *Otaq* and Voting Turnover: A Case Study

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**Abstract:** In the formation of an individual's political personality, the central role of the *Biraderi* (clan or community) lies in addressing all fundamental and natural needs. It serves as a central channel and, in a way, derives its role from the local context. Voters tend to identify with their *Biraderi* or family when considering the political system. The *Biraderi* Head (often known as *ChangoMurs*) becomes a proto-typical authority figure and initiates discussions within the community about political matters. The process of political engagement, particularly in interior Sindh, significantly influences every individual who is a member of the *Otaq* and regularly demonstrates their presence and participation in the daily *Kachahri* (informal gathering). Consequently, voters prioritize the interests of their family and clan. The voting for a specific person during conflicts, necessities, and for their well-being is often guided by familial norms. Therefore, *Otaq* acts as a cohesive force, facilitating social networking and serving as a means to increase their numbers for turnover.

**Key words:** *Biraderi*, *ChangoMurs*, *Otaq*, Political participation, Political engagement

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### 1. Introduction

Political socialization refers to the process through which individuals accept various political perspectives, attitudes, values, and actions from their surroundings. According to Shah, McLeod, and Yoon (2001), it is essential to consider how individuals' influences and political orientations shape their perceptions regarding governmental and political processes. Among young people, such influences typically arise from conversations with parents, peers, and school (Schwarzer, 2021). These are major factors and a way of political socialization among people because they are better positioned to exert their influence and incorporate the political values and attitudes among youth (Hong, 2017).

Brady, Shlozman, and Verba (2015) describe that socialization reflects the processes that transfer social and economic inequalities from one generation to the next. While political socialization captures the mechanisms that underlie the intergenerational transmission of political inequalities. Brady argues that political and socialization processes are intertwined; both social and economic disadvantages experienced by parents translate into political disadvantages. When discussing the transmission of political inequalities, a key facet often considered is the socioeconomic status (SES) of parents, which includes their educational background and social standing in a society. According to status transmission theory, education plays a crucial role as it serves as an engine for the intergenerational transmission of political engagement and participation (Gidengil, 2015). For Hyman (1959),

political socialization is the basic concept for "learning social patterns corresponding to his social status, as mediated by various agencies of society." It is largely an informal learning process experienced by nearly everyone during interactions with parents, family, friends, neighbors, colleagues, bosses, and others (Neundorf, 2015).

There are two mechanisms through which well-educated parents influence their children to become politically active adults. The first mechanism is more straightforward: children of well-educated parents are more likely to be exposed to politics in their home environment. As Verba and his colleagues (2003 and 2005) found, adults who recall their parents discussing politics and engaging in political activities are more likely to be politically active themselves. The second mechanism is indirect in nature: parents of higher social status tend to pass on their socioeconomic advantages to their children, and these advantages can be transformed into political benefits. From this advantageous perspective, parents' educational attainment is the most crucial component of their SES. It affects their children's education. A college degree opens doors to lucrative professions in fields that promote the development of civic skills and membership in politically engaged social networks. Education encourages a sense of political efficacy, political knowledge, and political interest. Consequently, children of parents with higher educational attainment are more likely to become politically engaged adults (Gidengil, 2016).

According to Ashforth & Mael (1989), the family has a great ability to influence and shape the perception of an individual from the very beginning. For example, regular conversations with family members on social and political aspects allow individuals to explore and adopt their elders' party affiliations or orientations. Therefore, it becomes clear how an individual, from a young age, argued on political issues by supporting or opposing. Similar discussions are often held among peers of the same age group. To establish social cognition, young people tend to engage in "herd behavior" and associate themselves with specific groups (Hong, 2017).

A study by Alwin and Krosnick (1991) argues that early experiences are important for building political attitudes (such as values and identities), engaging in politics (such as an interest in and efficacy in politics), and ultimately participating in politics (traditional and non-traditional ways). Young people are said to be more susceptible to outside influences later in life since they have not yet established their political views. On the other hand, opinions on how durable these early socialization experiences are now differ. Some argue for lifelong plasticity, based on the idea that citizens update their preferences and behaviors as they progress through life and experience significant life events (Neundorf, 2015).

The caste group (*Beraderi*) is an age-old social organization in the Indian subcontinent (Pakistan and India). *Beraderi* sets principles for every aspect of social life, from birth to death, including politics. It has become an integral part of politics and determines the fate of political decisions (Ahmed, 2020). *Beraderi* is not only a prominent feature of rural politics but is also very significant in urban areas (Rumi, 2009). Voters consider *Beraderi* important in all political behaviors and prefer only those political parties that represent their own *Beraderi* (Andrew, 1999). Caste-based kinship, family bonds, and *Beraderi* relations are also central in determining voting behavior (Mughees, 2006). *Beraderi* plays a more fundamental role in local level elections than in national elections (Rajesh, 1999).

The involvement of money in the electoral process is an essential component worldwide, particularly in developing and underdeveloped regions such as Africa and Asia. A large majority of the population in these areas lives in poverty and is largely attracted to money. Politicians buy votes with money and/or gifts (Akhtar and Sheikh, 2014). Money is also used in the form of providing scarce amenities, gifts, and lavish lunches and dinners for voters. Candidates employ tactics such as spreading conspiracies, rumors against opposing candidates or political parties, and sometimes fabricate fake, bizarre, and/or unethical scandals to disseminate through print and electronic media (Sheikh, 2015).

A study was conducted by Sheikh (2015) on factors contributing to voting turnover. The study identifies several potential factors that significantly influence voting behavior and values. The first one is socioeconomic factors, which include age, gender, religion, and economic status. Voters often align their preferences based on these demographic characteristics. The second one is social and economic context; local context, cultural norms, and economic conditions play a crucial role in shaping voting behavior. People tend to support candidates who address their immediate needs and concerns. The third one is emotional factors; emotions such as hope, responsibility, empathy, and patriotism strongly impact voting decisions. Trust in a candidate's ability to secure a better future is emotionally influential. The fourth aspect points toward the personality traits of the candidate. Voters consider qualities like leadership, integrity, and competence when making their choice, and the last one is previous actions and accountability. The voters assess the track record of incumbents or opposition parties. Consistency in actions and accountability matter (Sheikh, 2015).

The purpose of this research is to understand political socialization in interior Sindh, which poses various questions like the socio-cultural and political perceptions, beliefs, and behaviors of any masses and why, for rural masses, the political figures often remain relevant throughout their lives. This article provides a comprehensive review of traditional political socialization techniques, highlighting various issues that arise during their lives. The objectives of this study are to explore: What are the early experiences that give weight to their political inclusivity, beliefs, and attitudes? Additionally, to know what shapes the political preferences and behaviors of youth, who influences them, and how group dynamics change among different types of people as they grow older, Lastly, how do attitudes evolve after notable years, and how are political preferences established?

## 2. Research Methodology

The current study was part of PhD research; for the study, registered voters (N = 124) residing in the rural areas of Larkana district in Sindh province were selected through purposive sampling. This study used purposive sampling techniques to select participants who would be most capable of providing comprehensive and relevant data on village voting behavior. Moreover, it allows the study to consider the specific aspects of each subgroup within the village, such as the age, gender, socioeconomic status, or political affiliation of those subgroups. The respondents ranged in age from 18 to 73 years, of which 77 were married and 57 were unmarried. 71% (N = 88) of the voters were men, and 29% (N = 36) were women. At the community level, 34% (N = 42) were literate, while 66% (N = 82) were illiterate and lived in joint or extended family systems. Most participants had a political party affiliation, and 17% (N = 21) had different affiliations. Additionally, in-depth interviews (n = 12) were conducted with purposive sampling from various segments of the rural community.

## 3. The Role of *Otaq* in Political Socialization

The *Otaq* Institution is an important part of political socialization in interior Sindh, as it is a primary place for contact or meeting within the community members. *Otaq* is described as a "sitting spot or Guest Hall" (little constructed area and rest open) and is associated with prominent landlords of village or *ChangoMurs* and elders of *Biraderi*. The *Otaq* which also means "Drawing room", may be constructed along with home for private meetings and for guest as well. This kind of *Otaq* is usually used for guest and to settle dispute at family or individual level, therefore owning *Otaq* is a symbol of prestige and wealth in the research area. Hence, *Otaq* is a social place where male community members gather and discuss socio-cultural and political issues and gathering on *Otaq* symbolizes for solidarity.

According to a village elder, traditionally, *open and semi constructed space with a room namely Otaq* can serve several purposes but is more frequently used for sitting as well as waiting area for visitors who come to the village. It may also serve as accommodation for Guest – a public space whose doors are open for all. It is also vital to understand that the here the category of `others` is flexible and keeps the function of *Otaq* arbitrary for example, *Otaq* can be smaller or large in size, enclosed or with open spaces, owned by people of different social statuses. Any person with little influence can designate a place in his house for the purpose of *Otaq* which is used to serve visitors. For example, in times of group or *Biraderi* disputes of minor nature, any *Otaq* established by the Elder of the *Biraderi*/caste group can be used for conflict resolution. This is done when the matter addressed needs to be handled discreetly and among the family or *Biraderi* members. Although *Otaq* is critical to interaction within the community, it is important to remember that its boundaries in most cases are non-existent. As the study conducted by Hyman (1959), the political socialization has ability to shaped learning social patterns according to his social status and this learning is largely an informal learning process experienced by everyone during interactions with parents, family, friends, neighbors, etc. According to the study conducted by Hyman (1959), political socialization agency has the ability to shape the learning social patterns of people according to their social status, and this learning is largely an informal learning process experienced by every member during interactions with parents, family, friends, neighbors, etc. (Neundorf, 2015).

There are more two main *Otaqs* in a village for managing and addressing issues occurring in the community. Having more than one *Otaq* for public in community is a sign of political competition between more than one *ChangoMurs*, tribe or individual. It is this social structure of *Otaq* through which the *ChangoMurs* keeps an eyes and ears on the events of the village. Therefore, the *Otaq* established by *ChangoMurs* is more significant and vital as compared to all other *Otaqs* established in the village. All government agencies, Sardar and local media and NGOs visit village *Otaq* for discussion, as they are the most powerful individuals in the village

### 3.1 Functions of *Otaq*

#### 3.1.1 Familiarization

The *Otaq* play the roles of political socialization and political familiarization. The *Otaq* places an emphasis on social networking and solidarity by providing political orientation, with the ultimate goal of achieving harmony and peace. Therefore, *Otaq* provides an environment for discussion and familiarization with socio-cultural and political system, whereas the other caters to building social bonds, networks, and dependency among the social groups. It is A respondent told, “*Brother, Otaq is used for discussion of daily basis; this is a place where everyone comes because it is familiar to all, open at every time and for everybody from many centuries. Wider aim is to resolve dispute and familiarize the subsequent generations about system*”.

The sole purpose of social activity is to define boundaries, control, and manage social activity for family members and others. The social assembly is effective in constructing perceptions about right and wrong as philosophical constructs in the minds of the people. As a matter of routine, the mechanism aids in the restoration of the underlying principles upon which the social, economic, and political structures rely. Therefore, anyone who visits, he first gets familiarized with the information received, then process and comprehend it in the context of the prevailing socio-political context. Thus, first *Otaq* helps people to start analyzing the issues and understand the inside politics and familiarizes them with community perspective. This is vital for creating a certain type of political awareness where the opinion is shaped according to the information provided.

#### 3.1.2 Creating a Social Networks among Members

*Otaq* helps to reinforce the value of other social and cultural relationships by generating significant social activity on a daily basis; it connects and binds individuals through relationships and the principle of interdependence. Normally, it is a routine work matter where *ChangoMurs* and elders of different *Biraderis* of the village encourage the masses to participate as a symbol of unity, trust, ownership and for informational purposes.

In *Otaq*, everyone practically knows everyone and also forms their own smaller alliances to seek support when needed. Every person that attends the *Otaq* is a proclaimed representative of their household. Their attendance at the *ChangoMurs' Otaq* on a regular basis demonstrates the person's social allegiance, particularly with the *ChangoMurs* and the elders who visit the *Otaq* on occasion. *Otaq* reinstates the social hierarchies and status between different members of society. It creates an air of familiarity between the members who come regularly. The members who, if and when needed, can be potential guarantors of someone's character and deeds. Moreover, people use *Otaq* to get and grant favors. Farmers may discuss their challenges regarding agriculture to know what new can be tried to increase yield, youth come to know of employment opportunities, and the elderly visit festivities to communicate with the other castes of the village and to monitor if they need any help. Many trading opportunities also come out of the many sittings at *Otaq*.

#### 3.1.3 Political knowledge and their Interpretations

Since the rural elite also represents the political hierarchy of the village, power lies with those with wealth and traditional status, such as the Elders or *ChangoMurs*, *Sardars*, etc. The assumptions and narratives about the possible candidates, the performance of the sitting government, and the advantages of supporting one or another are also shaped and formed in *Otaq*. Though the perceptions are led by personal experiences, it is the communal perception that precedes all. Perceptions about the moral character and interests of the *ChangoMurs* may be explained both negatively and positively. People's satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the system does not impact their allegiance towards the *ChangoMurs*, as expectedly, he is the protector and provider for many.

As the *ChangoMurs* at the start of every election campaign will nominate their candidates. Locals use their past experiences to gauge their relationships with the particular political elite. Economic wealth and political strengths decide of one's hold over the area. The one with more wealth and numeric strength has more chances to be approached by the electoral candidates. Participation in *Otaq* decides who is more acceptable and trusted among the community.

The political campaign starts with the interactions between the community members and *ChangoMurs* and the elders of the village at the *Otaq*. The *ChangoMurs* and elders of the village monitor closely what is happening around them, who are our competitors and who are our well-wishers, who needs more persuasion or who is already in our support. Political narratives are generated during this time to gauge the masses' associations and concerns. Since *Otaq* is one platform that is used for holding events, campaigns as well as dispute resolution, it is therefore



considered a communal entity that works for the best interest of the village.

### 3.1.4 Developing Collective Behavior (Shape Collective Behavior)

Through *Otaq*, the *qoum* establish close contact within their ethno-linguistic groups in village settings. Each group is structured in such a way that its components and segments partake in joint actions because they are linguistically, geographically, and territorially the same *qoum* and rationalize internal ties for their social, cultural, and political gains. The community shares collective identities where one person's actions are perceived as group actions. The community also shares a consensus on what matters are charged as violations and offenses. Each social group, in light of the socio-cultural boundaries drawn, is responsible for managing and controlling the actions of their members, may it be family or others. Each member is responsible for maintaining the honor and prestige of the social/ethnic group. Each member is representative of every other member in the group. The feeling of collectivism is promoted so that in cases of serious disputes leading to loss of life or honor, offenders could be subjected to traditional mechanisms by generating pressure through their peer group. Moreover, collective behaviour also ensures that justice is served, and the verdict is executed to satisfaction. It is not deemed *ChangoMurs'* duty to see that verdicts are executed; it is the elders of the same group, the other members who became witnesses to the process, who may ensure that the given verdicts are implemented and followed by the members.

### 3.1.5 Developing Political Theme and Ensuring Participation

*Otaq'*s position is significant during electoral processes. In *Otaq*, people listen to *ChangoMurs* narratives and shape their opinions. It was also observed during the fieldwork that *Otaq* platform is actively used for politically mobilizing the masses and for shaping political narratives in the community. As exemplified by how the *Otaq* forms a kind of political community — one that is organized around a particular leader. The *ChangoMurs* calls community meetings for local people to meet with politicians or to discuss politics in general. The *ChangoMurs* already enjoy personal relationships with the politicians who are approaching him for support in election, such as sitting MNA or MPA. The *ChangoMurs* remains in-contact with the surrounding villages in general and specifically for political support.

The masses also get current political news either from *ChangoMurs* or from people who are close to *ChangoMurs*. Many people also read newspapers, meet with other people, visit various places outside of their village and have contact with key informant. In spite of all the sources, villagers do not trust the news coming from other sources and tend to rely on their own people, especially the *ChangoMurs* or elders of their *Biraderi*. So, *ChangoMurs* provides information and discusses various issues through the medium of *Otaq*, and from here the masses get *ChangoMurs'* narrative about any political matter. *ChangoMurs*, or elders, as political entities, have a legal or penal position in the dispute resolution process. The group or community as a whole develops a political narrative or consensus about any situation, so that an individual's action is not regarded as an individual's step or decision. That is why the voting culture in the village is also based on group consensus.

The collective consensus is also built-in times of solving disputes, finalizing political support and handling village crisis situations. A respondent shared that;

*“it is place where people know about each other’s matters such as the problem faced by community member, as everyone did not go to masjid but come here. Further, sitting with ChangoMurs, we explore opportunity to resolve issues such as medical, educational and ethnic issues, important issue. We dilute the political influence and find the best way to stop retaliation and to build consensuses”.*

### 3.2 Rural Social Structure Model for Voting Turnover (RSSMVT)

*Otaq* can be described as a foundational place in rural Sindh that is used for political socialization. It has been functioning as a popular mode of political discourse, and it has provided a platform for the rural masses for many centuries. It is a rural social structure that has important meanings within the rural social fabric. Almost every caste residing in interior Sindh accepts and visits at least once a day. The functionality and manifestations of *Otaq* are not limited to gathering; however, they consist of traditional governance, the power dynamics of family, *Biraderi*, and *ChangoMurs*, a mechanism to adhere to norms and values, a conflict resolution mechanism, a mode of integration, and a platform for political participation and political engagement that leads to voting turnover, known as the Rural Social Structure Model for Voting Turnover (RSSMVT).

During an interview with a key informant, it was shared that *“to preserve an organized system of social interaction,*

*cultural practices put people under a certain degree of compulsion where they cannot do exactly what they want all the time. Moreover, these practices encourage them to conform through rules and regulations for operating, norms, and values. Interest may lead to consequences that are incompatible with the good of the community.*" Therefore, traditional and cultural practices put some kinds of restrictions on members' conduct to which they adhered. It is the political organization that is responsible for the maintenance of orderly relations between groups.

Table 1: RSS Model

Types	Unit of analysis	Influence category	Concepts
Political engagement	Individual	<i>ChangoMurs</i>	Interest in politics Self-concept in politics Villagers Self-efficacy
Primary Institutions	Family	<i>Biraderi</i>	Political interest of Parents Political discussion with parents Possibility of political discussions
Secondary Institution	Social Media	Peer group and Social Media	Political discussion among peer groups People engagement on social media and media use
Political Participation	Individual	Community- <i>Otaq</i>	Participation in the community <i>Otaq</i> Participation in Faislo

Generally, the political organization of villagers is more extensive. There are trained political workers such as a) *ChangoMur*, the head of the *Biraderi* (clan) or the village elder; b) religious authorities like the Imam of the mosque; and c) political activists. An individual's political engagement can be observed through their conversations with political workers and *ChangoMur* in the *Otaq*, involving themselves in political matters. On another level, somewhat similarly or differently, they have learned from their parents or *Biraderi* due to the political interests of their family and clan. Similarly, in socialization, political discussions among peer groups and the context they share via WhatsApp groups reflect limited information and usage, and people involve them with communal support. Ultimately, it is all about what they have learned and discussed in the *Otaq*, and people participate in political matters for their candidate.

The model indicates that the use of *Otaq* is significant due to the influence of *ChangoMurs* and also because it ensures the involvement and participation of community members in matters of importance. It helps in creating consensus among members so that every decision made is collectively taken for the best benefit of the community. Resolving conflicts and spreading political consensus is the responsibility of *Otaq*, which demonstrates communal solidarity with the concept of leadership in a peaceful manner. People visiting *Otaq* signify that all social, political, and religious institutions display their trust, solidarity, and peace within the communities without the use of power or coercion.

#### 4. Discussion

During an interview, a question was asked: "How does *Otaq* function?" and what are the mechanisms of political socialization? A key informant revealed that the concept of socialization from the beginning forms relatively stable political preferences. Imagine a traditional society that is relatively closed, where each member has limited knowledge about the world and their mind, which contains cultural political values, language, ethnic group, identity, behaviors, etc., from birth. Since our childhood and youth, our largest and most valuable public circle has been *Otaq*. Every day, the people share various stories drawn from their personal experiences and the accounts of their ancestors. The elders of *Otaq* have imparted to the younger generation political biases and information about political parties, organizations, and their ideologies. Each meeting, discussion, and piece of knowledge provided at *Otaq* to villagers is recorded on the shelves of our mental bookshelves. Eventually, whatever prevails in the minds of the shelves is filled with what they have heard, and they begin to develop quite firm ideas and perceptions about politics. Ashforth & Mael (1989) mentioned that the family influences and shapes the perception of an individual from the very beginning while having regular conversations with them on social and political aspects. This conversation with young people establishes social cognition to make any judgment about certain political decisions and a supportive tendency (Hong, 2017).

Therefore, what is going on in the minds of villagers or what they are saying about political issues or how they

behave politically is simply a reflection and consultation on their mental bookshelves, and they pull out books containing information and relevant experiences on the subject. However, the problem is that as the shelves become full, it becomes difficult to consider new information, as this would mean disregarding the old books, especially in relatively closed societies. New information or patterns of behavior are difficult to accept or integrate into our collection of beliefs and values. It has been seen that these early life experiences and political socialization at *Otaq* generally serve as the foundation for the political attitudes of villagers toward value and identity, political affiliation and engagement for the best interest and efficacy, and ultimately, political behavior such as traditional and non-traditional forms of political participation, etc.

Another important aspect is that during political socialization, people adopt the idea of habit formation at a mechanical level of voter turnout to validate each villager's decision to vote. It is argued that villagers should vote for those supported by the community, or the *Otaq*, during the early stages of their lives. This habit works because past behaviors help individuals maintain consistency with their current behaviors.

In response to a question about the impact of political socialization on communities and individuals, specifically regarding the type of political knowledge, opinions, skills, behaviors, behavioral intentions, and behavioral patterns individuals in rural Sindh possess, it was found that people in rural areas have very limited knowledge about political structures and processes at the national level. Their knowledge about provincial and local politics is also limited. They are more aware of the dealings of local political leaders. Many of them tend to personalize politics and rely heavily on psychological explanations to understand political phenomena. This group shows very little interest in national parliamentary politics and is more interested in certain religious issues occurring worldwide.

However, some young people from the interior criticize society as it currently stands; they think more progressively about many issues compared to their elders. When asked which party they would vote for if elections were held, a third of the respondents replied that all parties are corrupt and ignorant. Half of the people blamed the current situation on feudal lords and landlords; a third blamed imperial powers; and the remaining held urban people responsible. Most of them do not read news on political topics or watch the media. Although some do watch social media and read newspapers, they usually start with local news, current affairs, dramas, movies, and sensational items like disasters, accidents, and crimes, with political news coming only afterwards.

During the study, it was found that the large turnout in rural areas of interior Sindh is due to various mechanisms. First, turnout is caused by a set of factors such as political interest or no confusion about whom to vote that are relatively stable over the life span. Second, the act of voting is a communicative and political exercise that forces males and females to cast their votes. Third, rural voters have gone to the polls because they face less information about other candidates during subsequent elections. These factors increase positive attitudes toward voting and alter one's self-image to the extent that voting contributes to that image. Force, *Biraderi* and gave vote to the from generation.

Previous studies (Sheikh, 2015; Ahmed, 2020; Rumi, 2009; Mughees, 2006) mentioned that the *Biraderi* system is a centuries-old social organization that sets principles for every aspect of social life, from birth to death, and determines the fate of political decisions. The members of the community consider *Biraderi* as a basic institution to determine political behaviors and prefer a supportive tendency towards a party that represents their own *Biraderi*. The *Biraderi* has an impact on every age, gender, religion, and demographic characteristic. It is supported by social and economic context; local context, cultural norms, and economic conditions play a crucial role in shaping the perception of the community member because they also attach emotional factors; emotions such as hope, responsibility, empathy, and patriotism strongly impact voting decisions, etc.

## 5. Conclusion

In rural areas, people prioritize their social and cultural relationships based on blood and lineage. The commonalities of language, caste, and lineage exert pressure on voters when deciding their vote. Furthermore, the personal qualities of competing candidates, peer suggestions for caste votes, the religious identity of these candidates, and political campaigns for elections were not very significant in explaining the differences in voting behavior in the study area. These findings clearly illustrate that in rural social organizations, the individual is less significant and important within their socio-cultural environment. *Otaq* played a crucial role in political engagement and participation during elections.

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