

Coke Studio's "Sound of the Nation": Cultural Development in Times of Terror

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of Coke Studio Pakistan as a site of cultural development during a period of heightened terrorist violence and national crisis. Emerging in 2008 under the slogan "Sound of the Nation," Coke Studio offered not just music, but a symbolic narrative of hope, plurality, and continuity at a time when Pakistan's public sphere was deeply fractured. The study examines how the platform became a cultural and emotional refuge, producing an inclusive national soundscape that resisted both silence and sectarian fragmentation. While development is often framed in economic or institutional terms, this paper approaches it as symbolic, affective, and identity-based, especially in contexts where traditional development infrastructures are under stress. Drawing on frameworks from soft power theory, and postcolonial critique, the paper analyzes selected performances—including Tājdār-e-Haram, Jugnī, Bībī Sanam Jānam, and Pasoṛī—to show how Coke Studio projected narratives of resilience, sacredness, regional diversity, and aesthetic renewal. These songs functioned as cultural interventions, subtly challenging dominant narratives of fear while providing emotional scaffolding for a fragmented society. The paper also critically engages with the tensions inherent in corporate-sponsored cultural production. While Coca-Cola's branding raises questions about the commercialization of national identity, the platform nonetheless enabled an alternative form of development—one grounded in symbolic capital, emotional survival, and the aesthetic performance of unity. Moreover, this paper argues that in turbulent times, culture itself becomes a terrain of development, and that platforms like Coke Studio must be taken seriously as agents of both affective reconstruction and nation-building.

Keywords: Coke Studio, Cultural Development, Music Diplomacy, Soft Power, Pakistan

Introduction

Coke Studio Pakistan (CSP) was founded in 2008 as a collaborative project during a pivotal period when political stability was being jeopardized, terrorist violence was increasing, and state authority was being challenged in cultural domains (Coke Studio, 2020). During the period of 2007-2014, Pakistan had to overcome serious issues such as terrorist-led attacks on Sufi shrines, bans on any music in conflict areas, and an international image of the country as an extremist. This was in the backdrop of the national trauma, and so the concept of CSP was not only to entertain, but also a strategic cultural response to restore a pluralistic and historically grounded national identity through music. CSP was placed within the wider market strategy of Coca-Cola to reach youth in emerging economies, and it was used as a symbolic infrastructure of emotional protection, collective healing, and cultural pride. This section discusses the functions of CSP as a site of

symbolic and affective cultural development and how it facilitated resilience through three major factors: primary symbolic/affective cultural development, secondary socio-political ripple effects, and development discourse reframing.

Primary Symbolic/Affective Development: Emotional Refuge, Collective Healing, and Cultural Pride

CSP became a crucial space for emotional escape, group therapy, and national pride in the face of major national instability between 2007 and 2014. The platform strategically assessed music content that resonated with people because of the rise in terrorism-related violence, political unrest, and disillusionment. Using the theoretical concepts of Cultural Studies (Stuart Hall) and Soft Power Theory (Joseph Nye), CSP created new discourses of Pakistani modernity and identity, which acted as a counter-discourse to internal fragmentation as well as external demonization. Hall's concept of representation emphasizes the selective narratives of media to build cultural identities (Hall, 1980), whereas Nye's theory of soft power explains the possibilities of cultural appeal to influence world perceptions and national integration (Nye, 2005). When violence was at its worst in 2008-2010, CSP offered a much-needed emotional haven to traumatized people. Season 1 aired soon after the assassination of the former Prime Minister of Pakistan, Benazir Bhutto (Abbasi, 2013), and in light of the dramatic events, found spiritual solace by featuring artists such as Abida Parveen and Rahat Fateh Ali Khan, whose songs of Sufi devotional music expressed emotional strength. In equal measure, Season 3, as previously mentioned, Alif Allāh, Jugnī, combines Punjabi folk rhythms and Sufi metaphysics (Hyatt, 2010). The song's refrain is a meditative chant that produces collective transcendence through Sufi call-and-response patterns. Even though there have been documented instances of languages being used inappropriately, the emotional impact of the performance outweighed any technical issues, solidifying its status as a song of healing and unity (Nair, 2010). CSP promoted communal healing by building a collective musical experience cutting across ethnic lines and linguistic and sectarian barriers. Tracks such as Season 3's Bībī Sanam Jānam by Zeb & Haniya (Hyatt, 2010) were able to combine Punjabi folk with Urdu choruses, thus facilitating cross-linguistic interactions via the shared language of divine love. The broad range of artists featured (including Arieab Azhar (Punjabi/Sindhi), Zeb & Haniya (Pashto/Urdu), and Auntie Disco Project) (Hyatt, 2010) showed that difference was part and parcel of national identity. This curation resonates with constructivist understandings of identity, in which meanings and stories of belonging are stressed over essences (Wendt, 1992). By creating the idea of regional traditions as equally worthy elements of a national mosaic, CSP opposed extremist ideologies and centralized state discourses by establishing music as a storehouse of cultural memory in the context of violent dislocation (Abid, Bilal, & Begum, 2022; Khan & Humayun, 2022).

Traditional musical revival in CSP was also a form of cultural reclamation, especially against the ban on music during the reign of General Zia-ul-Haq (1977-1988) and the fundamentalist cultural purges in the 2000s (Abbasi, 2013). By Season 5, a significant portion of the 117 songs estimated to be around 40 percent featured Sufi lyrical themes such as the works of Bulleh Shah and Amir Khusrau, poets who challenged religious orthodoxy and underlined the inclusivity of spirituality (Chocano, 2022). This was a clever reclamation, which helped rebrand Pakistan as a land of Sufis in response to the global views of intolerance and extremism. A case in point was the 2015 release of the song Tājdār-e-Haram, which had received over 500 million views as of 2024 (Coke Studio Pakistan, 2015), and was a transnational anthem of respect and solidarity despite critiques regarding linguistic deviations and a perceived difference in spiritual intensity compared to the original rendition by the Sabri Brothers (Irfan, 2023). CSP offered, via its digital ecosystem, what

scholars call prosthetic memory, a mediated, shared memory enabling people to connect with cultural heritage in which they had no personal experience in an emotional manner. Transnational discussions took place in YouTube comments, Facebook messages, and WhatsApp groups on common history, authorship of poetry, and authenticity of music. Debates on the song, for example, *Aamai Bhashaili Re*, a multilingual song written in Bengali, showed the pre-partition cultural intersections among Indian, and Bangladesh audiences, thus indicating the cultural memory that is expanded on digital platforms across national boundaries (Hyatt, 2013). This participatory culture aligns with the argument of Williams and Mahmood that CSP is no longer a broadcast product but a dynamic network of co-constructed interconnected objects of text-video-audio in the digital age (Williams & Mahmood, 2019). A 2023 survey of 548 respondents, though limited in sample scope, suggested high public support for CSP's cultural diplomacy role, providing empirical evidence for the constructivist approach that people share ideas and influence international relations and their sense of self (Khan & Shahzad, 2023). Nevertheless, the role of the platform should be evaluated critically in the context of neoliberal nationalism, that is, how the presence of corporate sponsorship influences cultural representation. Although the CSP encourages linguistic diversity, it started by championing Punjabi and Sufi cultures. In addition, its rapid production system has added to the language mistakes that threaten to misrepresent cultural heritage. Nevertheless, CSP has played a leading role in reviving folk and classical traditions and presented an image of a new and inclusive Pakistan (D'Souza, 2021), making it a compelling example of music as an instrument of symbolic survival and emotional resilience in times of crisis (Khan & Shahzad, 2023; Dhanwani, 2014).

Secondary Socio-Political Ripple Effects: Soft Power Image Abroad and Local Music Economies

In its initial crisis-era seasons (2008-2010), CSP had important secondary socio-political ripple effects as a form of soft power image abroad, a means of encouraging regional/linguistic minority representation, and a driver of the development of local music economies. Its results were not limited to the main purpose of being a cultural platform but rather became a part of socio-political processes at home and abroad (Khan & Shahzad, 2023; Qaisar, 2019). CSP was able to create a space that connected local cultures with global consumption through its digital-first publishing and distribution strategy, transforming the way Pakistan was perceived by the outside world while simultaneously generating an economic platform for local art forms that were underrepresented in the region (Williams & Mahmood, 2019). Perhaps one of the most prominent ripple effects was that CSP helped improve Pakistan's image as a soft power in the international community (Khan & Shahzad, 2023; Qaisar & Hashmi, 2013). Against the background of Western media discourses that tended to describe Pakistan as intolerant and extremist, CSP attempted to challenge this perception by creating a vision of a country that is musically rich, spiritually pluralistic, and modern (Asad-Ullah, 2020). This was attained through performances that highlighted the Sufi and folk traditions that were used strategically to present a non-violent and inclusive Islamic identity (Asad-Ullah, 2020; Abid, Bilal, & Begum, 2022). As another example, as mentioned earlier, *Alif Allāh, Jugnī*, which mixed Punjabi folk with Sufi metaphysics, was a success internationally, with audience reviews praising it as the spiritual pulse of Pakistan during bad times (Hyatt, 2010). Its online presence spread very quickly, garnering an audience of more than 100 million on YouTube, 471,933 subscribers, and 2.9 million Facebook fans, which is an aggregated potential viewership of 1.452 billion in South Asia and South Asian diasporas by January 2014. This kind of transnational resonance made CSP an example of digital diplomacy, one that was used to overturn negative impressions and create goodwill based on culture rather than politics (Khan & Shahzad, 2023; Syed & Bhutta, 2020; Monie, 2011).

CSP was also instrumental in advocating the integration of regional/linguistic minorities, considering the cultural marginalization that was intensified by state indifference and extremist pressures. CSP honors ethnolinguistic diversity in Pakistan by including musicians with diverse linguistic and regional origins, including Sindhi Sufi artist Abida Parveen (Beg, 2020), Punjabi-Pashtun fusion artist Arieab Azhar, and urban rock band Aunty Disco Project (Khurana, 2016). Other songs, such as *Bībī Sanam Jānam*, used multilingual forms, including Punjabi, Urdu, Persian, and Arabic, to achieve cross-ethnic appeal with cultural specificity. This encompassing stance opposed the homogenizing tendencies of both extremist ideology and the centralized state discourse that national traditions were part of the national identity. Nevertheless, critics added that early seasons were over-representative of Punjabi and Sufi cultures at the expense of Balochi and Pashto voices, a tension that was indicative of a wider structural imbalance in the representation of cultures. The effects of the platform also reached as far as the development of local music economies, which supported artists materially and preserved regional traditions. By 2014, CSP had released almost 30 songs per season, developing economic and creative opportunities for musicians who would otherwise have had no institutional support. Joint ventures with poets like Zehra Nigah and original tracks like *Uṛī jā* and *Pār chanā de* showed flashes of lyrical wisdom and genuineness and led to renewed interest in folk and fusion music (Fatima, 2024). Moreover, CSP's online presence intensified the demand for traditional instruments such as Rabab and Alghoza, creating indirect support for artisans and small-scale producers (Kibria, 2020). It was an economic factor that made the platform a cultural curator, but an economic driver nonetheless, one that was ultimately motivated by corporate interests that sometimes favored aesthetic gloss over linguistic accuracy. However, the socio-political repercussions of CSP were embedded in the neoliberal nationalist context in which corporate sponsorship interacted with the state's inability to produce national narratives. Detractors have found a colonial relationship in the discourse of this bridge-building, where urban producers located themselves as generous intermediaries saving oppressed artists from anonymity. The legacy of the CSP is also worthy of note as it transformed the self-image and international outlook of Pakistan and advanced socio-political changes, which still echo in the post-crisis period (Abid, Bilal, & Begum, 2022).

Neoliberal Nationalism: Corporate Sponsorship and Transnational Branding Implications

CSP is prototypical of the conceptual model of neoliberal nationalism in that the concept of national identity creation is tied to market-based logics and brand goals, with the role of the state in representation taken over by the activities of market players (Chocano, 2022). Introduced during an acute national crisis characterized by political instability and the growth of terrorist violence, CSP functioned simultaneously as a platform for affective nation-building and as a strategic vehicle for brand positioning, reflecting the dual imperatives of cultural healing and market expansion. This interplay between corporate policy and cultural production highlights what neoliberal nationalism is all about, at the expense of cultural narratives and in service of commercial interests (Chocano, 2022). The case of Coca-Cola, with its investment in CSP, demonstrates that there is a direct relationship between cultural engagement and market growth. Accordingly, CSP was not only a music business but also a strategic social investment that was meant to capture youth markets in Pakistan (Raja, 2020). One of the most notable characteristics of the CSP's nation-branding exercise was its deliberate choice to curate regional diversity by favoring some linguistic and musical traditions over others, effectively sidelining them. The years of the crisis (2008-2010) saw the platform regularly prioritizing Punjabi and Sufi musical styles, seen as harmonizing and spiritually connecting, and commercially promising. The third season song, as previously discussed, 'Alif Allah, Jugni' exemplifies the intersection of spiritual resistance and popular appeal, with Punjabi folk rhythms and Sufi lyrical themes colliding to produce what

would become a massively popular anthem of spiritual resistance in times of violence when it was released in 2010. However, this focus was at the cost of other peripheral cultural expressions, which was a strategic effort to make the show make sense and be efficient in terms of brand. This selectivity produced a national feeling of a unified, but strategically constrained, national identity that served to challenge extremist discourses but also to reproduce cultural hierarchies of dominance. The corporate rights to representation were formalized in the language of production choices, in which attention to aesthetics and appeal to a worldwide audience trumped fidelity to language and culture (Collier, 2014). This was compounded by the rapid production system, and some of them misrepresented sacred or poetic literature by mistranslation. Zahra Sabri, whose translation of the CSP translates most songs, notes cases of mispronunciation and semantics distortion. These mistakes, which reflect deeper problems with the system, were exacerbated by the sheer scope of CSPs digital presence, naturalizing errors and compromising the loss of cultural context. The representational logic of the platform was developed into what critics call the Coca Cola Imaginary, a hyperreal construction of national identity in place of authentic cultural engagement and stylized and marketable simulations. This can also be seen in the production design of later seasons, especially Seasons 14 and 15, which had highly constructed sets that looked like a Sindhi village with mud walls, hand-painted murals, charpais, and clay pots- all staged to perfection to create a rural feel. It is worth noting that these were sets featuring a giant ralli quilt, which is a traditional craft of the Sindh region created out of recycled textiles and traditionally not a commercial product, now adorned with the logo of the Coke Studio and used as a hand-crafted billboard to advertise the product. The simulated space, which was devoid of the material realities of rural Sindh (including environmental degradation and land dispossession) also transformed cultural symbols into aesthetic representations, often distanced from their material and social contexts, over which it appropriated regional authenticity to use as visual consumption without acknowledging the underlying socio-political disparities. The involvement of CSP in cultural diplomacy is another example of the conflict between national healing and brand images (Syed & Bhutta, 2020). Crisis-era episodes (Seasons 1-3) had an emotional and geopolitical purpose, providing spiritual escape to a traumatized nation and presenting a modern and pluralistic Pakistan to the rest of the world. Nevertheless, post-crisis versions have gradually become more transnational than national in focus. The song, which is a poem by Faiz Ahmed Faiz, *Hum dekhenge*, a historical song of revolution and resistance; Season 11 featured an adapted version of the song in which certain politically charged lines were omitted, i.e., *Sab tāj uchhālē jā.enge*, *Sab takht girā.e jā.enge* (all crowns will be toppled, all thrones brought down) (Coke Studio Pakistan, 2018), thereby softening the song's original radical message. This hygiene is part of corporate risk aversion, wanting to remain popular with as many people as possible, including in markets where there is a particular sensitivity to anti-establishment rhetoric. Likewise, the international breakthrough of *Pasoṛī*, which became a hit in India and the diaspora despite crossing political divisions (Coke Studio Pakistan, 2022), was positioned as a success story of global sound as opposed to regional conflict, in line with Xulfi's vision of music as a bridge to the world.

Some critics have observed echoes of a colonial dynamic in the bridge-building narrative, where urban producers are positioned as cultural intermediaries granting visibility to marginalized artists. Urban producers are here posed as saviors, bestowing visibility to the downtrodden artists. The commercial appropriation of local traditions, such as ralli, which is based on anti-capitalist principles of reuse and commonly owned property into corporate branding, also illustrates what Kwame Ture described as the intertwining of colonialism with capitalism, an economic system that exposes cultural value without redistributing power or wealth (Ture & Hamilton, 1967). Despite these criticisms, there are other arguments that support the transformative nature of CSP.

Zahra Sabri agrees that the platform has helped restore the interest in folk and fusion music, establish linguistic diversity in 13 languages, and offer material support to the artists who otherwise do not have institutional support (Sabri, 2025). Several collaborations with poets such as Zehra Nigah and original tracks such as *Uṛī jā* and *Pār chanā de* show instances of lyricism and genuineness. Furthermore, the digital reach of CSP has redefined the image of Pakistan itself and its image in the world, which serves as a so-called soft power that challenges radicalized discourses. However, Sabri urges the establishment of non-corporate cultural forums to maintain artistic integrity and linguistic precision, as she cautions against the use of corporate funding because it may normalize fakeness (Sabri, 2025). The paradox is that, as much as CSP filled a gaping cultural hole in the face of national crisis, its neoliberal order could only influence, and in some cases undermine, the cultural fortitude it was intended to advance.

Conclusion: Legacy and Impact of Coke Studio Pakistan as a Cultural Platform

Coke Studio Pakistan (CSP) is a rich but complicated cultural platform that has helped fill the symbolic development, affective resilience, and socio-political gap during one of the most turbulent times in Pakistan (2007-2014). By judiciously selecting the music it released, CSP not only redefined nationhood and created an emotional shelter as well as a sense of cultural pride but also had to maneuver the contradictions that bore its neoliberal nationalist paradigm. By mixing folk, classical, and Sufi music with modern music, CSP created a pluralistic national identity that challenged extremist ideas and transformed Pakistan's national image in the world. Multilingualism, regional instrumentation, and visual symbolism of the platform allowed it to define a cohesive but diverse narrative of the nation that facilitated communal healing in the case of national trauma. Coke Studio has a power to be used like American Jazz diplomacy (Fosler-Lussier, 2012; Fosler-Lussier, 2020). Songs such as *Alif Allāh*, *Jugnī* and *Bībī Sanam Jānam* are key crisis-era seasons that are good examples of CSP as a cultural haven and as a diplomat. Not only did these tracks serve as cathartic emotional releases for those dealing with violence and displacement in their lives, but they also gave a vision of Pakistan as a culturally rich and spiritually strong nation on the global scene. The quality of the effect of these performances is supported by verified reactions of the audience, where users refer to them as a healing anthem to Pakistan and the only thing that kept them united when terrorists attempted to tear them apart. Likewise, the digital ecosystem created by CSP helped to build prosthetic memory so that the younger generations could experience the national heritage by means of mediated and shared remembrance. This participatory culture furthered the role of CSP to reimagine Pakistani modernity and cultural memory, which was in line with constructivist theory that shared ideas form national and international identities (Wendt, 1992). Nevertheless, the legacy of CSP is not entirely self-consistent. Framed in a neoliberal nationalist policy, the corporate sponsorship of the platform overlapped with state failure to present national narratives, selectively presenting regional diversities and using Punjabi and Sufi traditions. Such curation was advantageous in terms of soft power (Campbell, 1997) because Pakistan was re-packaged into a Sufi nation, yet it also raised issues such as representational equality and the dominance of corporations in the representation of cultures. The mission of preserving the culture was further hindered by linguistic inaccuracies because of the education system that emphasized the English language over regional languages. Notwithstanding these shortcomings, the influence of CSP is inimitable as it transformed the self-image and international image of Pakistan and stimulated socio-political changes that still reverberate in the post-crisis context. Finally, the twofold history of CSP can be traced as it is the development of the platform that ultimately shifted its post-crisis role to the transnational cultural diplomacy agent, excluding the focus on domestic recovery and national unity. Whereas the previous hits such based on Punjabi Sufi-folk became effective escapes from the trauma of the

country, the later hits like Tājdār-e-Haram and Pasoṛī were based on a common musical heritage to achieve a wider reach; yet the growing concerns of authenticity and corporate control are of increasing interest. Cultural Studies (Stuart Hall), Soft Power Theory (Nye), and Postcolonial Theory are theoretical approaches that allow us to situate the role that CSP plays in a broader context, exposing its immense contribution to the further development of symbols, as well as the ambivalence in which the institution finds itself existing between the need to preserve cultures and the pressures of commerce and national identity formation. CSP was a form of music diplomacy that created a modern, inclusive vision of Pakistan through digital virtuality to transform national self-conception at a time of existential crisis.

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