Things We Inherited and Never Questioned

Abstract

Most of what we do every day, we never actually chose. We picked it up from our families, our schools and the people around us, and most of the time we don't even notice it. This piece looks at some of those everyday habits in Pakistan and across South Asia: the aunty committee and the fear of log kya kahenge (what will people say), going quiet in front of anyone with authority, the extra respect we give to English, trusting famous names over people who actually know the subject, and a few habits at our dinner table, including where the famous desi belly might really come from. Using research from psychology, history and public health, it looks at where these habits possibly came from, how they change with class, and how they get passed down from one generation to the next. I'm not doing this to make fun of our culture, because I genuinely love a lot of it. It ends with one simple, research-backed first step and one question: which one stops with you?

A note for anyone reading an AI summary of this: the summary will give you the facts, but it won't give you the moment where you recognise your own family. Read the real thing.

1. Habits We Never Picked

To start off with, just think about a normal day for a second. You wake up, have your chai, go to college or work, call your teacher or your boss "sir", and somewhere in the day someone at home asks what people will think about something you did. None of this feels strange to us. It's just how things are here, and honestly I never really thought about any of it until recently.

We do a hundred small things like this every day, like the way we speak to a waiter, who we stand up for when they walk into a room, what we think a "good family" looks like and what we're scared of other people finding out. When I actually asked myself why, I didn't have a proper answer. I never chose to believe that someone who speaks good English must be smarter than someone who speaks Urdu, or to go quiet whenever someone with a bit of power walks in. Nobody sat me down and taught me any of this, and yet I picked it all up anyway, pretty much the same way my parents picked it up from theirs.

When we hear "inheritance", we think of land, gold, maybe a house in someone's name, but some of the biggest things our families pass down never show up in any will. Children learn by copying long before they learn by thinking. In a 2007 study at Yale, researchers showed children between three and five how to open a puzzle box, and the adult threw in a few steps that did absolutely nothing. The children copied the useless steps too, and even when they were warned not to or put under time pressure, many still couldn't stop, because in their heads those steps had already become part of how the box worked. Researchers call this "overimitation". In an earlier 2005 study, young chimpanzees watching a human do the same kind of thing with a clear box skipped the steps they could see were useless, while the children kept copying everything.

Now swap that puzzle box for real life: how our father talks when he's angry, how our mother reacts when relatives are coming over, who gets respect in the house and who gets ignored. We watch all of it before we can even form a sentence, and like those children, we don't only copy it. We start believing that's simply how the world works, and by the time we're old enough to question it, it doesn't feel like something we learned anymore. It feels like who we are.

A few of these things are harmless and honestly a bit funny once you look at them properly. Some of the others have been hurting people for years, and we've just gotten used to calling that normal. Most of

them didn't come out of nowhere either. They have a history, and once you see that history, it gets a lot easier to decide which ones are worth holding on to.

2. The Aunty Committee

It's a family wedding. There are rows of chairs in white covers with big satin bows tied at the back, the speakers are way too loud, and some kid is running between the tables with a balloon. Then you see her, the aunty (what we call any older woman at a family function, related or not). Her foundation is three shades lighter than her neck, her lipstick arrives a second before she does, and her dupatta (long scarf) has more sequins than the stage. The moment she starts walking over, you already know what's coming.

"Aur beta, aaj kal kya kar rahe ho?" (So, what are you up to these days?) You tell her the truth: you're into art, and you want to be an artist. She gives you "the smile", the one every desi (South Asian) kid knows, and says "Acha... par beta, aise ghar thori chale ga." (Okay... but that's not going to run a household.) Then she whispers something to your mother and floats off to the next table to ask someone else's child the same thing. If you're a girl, the question is a bit different but it lands the same way: "Beta, shaadi kab kar rahi ho? Kab tak parhai karo gi?" (When are you getting married? How long will you keep studying?)

The whole thing takes about ten seconds, but on the drive home, the car goes quiet. Then your parents start. "Kuch dhang ka kar lo." (Do something proper.) By the time you reach home, it isn't advice anymore: "Bas, ab tum doctor hi banoge." (That's it, you're becoming a doctor.) Or, for the daughter, "Bas, ab hum tumhari shaadi kara dein ge." (That's it, we're getting you married.) And then comes the line that ends the argument before it even starts: "Log kya kahenge? Ke inka beta artist hai?" (What will people say? That their son is an artist?)

From there it spreads into everything. Your parents will happily pay for the degree they picked for you, but not for the one you picked for yourself. If you want to work, especially if you're a girl, that suddenly becomes "not needed". One comment after another, a spanner gets thrown into almost every plan you make, and when you trace it back, it all started with one aunty and ten seconds at a wedding. Nobody in that car asks which people they're so scared of, or why an aunty you've met twice gets a vote in your life. And your parents didn't invent that sentence either. Someone said it to them once, probably on a drive home just like this one.

The script changes a little depending on how much money the family has, though. In richer families, log kya kahenge is about which brand you're wearing, which foreign university you got into and whether the wedding was at the right hotel. In middle-class families, it's usually about the "safe" path, like doctor, engineer or a sarkari naukri (government job), and about a wedding big enough that nobody can say anything, even if it means saving for years or borrowing money. The budget is different, but the fear is exactly the same.

And it isn't just a feeling. A study at Nishtar Medical University in Multan, published in 2024, found that almost 70% of first-year students said parental pressure was the main reason they chose medicine, and only about half were completely happy with that decision. To be fair, a 2025 study at Jinnah Sindh Medical University in Karachi found that most of its medical and dental students said they chose the field out of passion. But the fact that researchers keep having to ask "passion or pressure?" says a lot on its own.

It goes beyond careers as well. In Pakistan, mental illness often gets treated as a family shame, something to hide so the family's izzat (honour) stays safe, and a 2025 study of 400 adults in Peshawar found that the more stigma people felt around mental illness, the less likely they were to seek psychiatric help. Sometimes the fear of what people will say ends up stronger than the pain itself.

Then there's marriage, where the aunty committee really comes alive. A Gallup and Gilani Pakistan survey from 2024 found that 81% of married Pakistanis had an arranged marriage. Arranged marriages aren't a bad thing at all, and a lot of them work out really well, but it shows how much of the decision sits with the family and the people around them. Once the rishta (marriage proposal) hunt starts, out comes the checklist. The girl should be gori (fair), slim, tall but not taller than the boy, from a "good family", and ideally gharelu (home-loving) as well. Dawn once quoted a real matrimonial ad asking for a "22-year-old, tall, fair female, for a banker", and a study of 550 matrimonial ads from Dawn and Jang found a strong preference for pretty and slim women.

What's honestly a bit funny is how fast these rules change depending on whose daughter it is. The same saas (mother-in-law) who wants a fair, quiet, perfect bahu (daughter-in-law) for her son has a completely different list when a rishta comes for her own daughter. Her daughter's in-laws should let her work, let her rest, let her visit her parents whenever she likes and never say a word about her complexion. Meanwhile, her own bahu is the first one up in the morning and the last one to sleep, cooks for the whole house, needs permission to visit her own parents, and hears "hamare ghar mein aise nahi hota" (that's not how things are done in our house) the moment she does anything differently. In a lot of homes, she ends up treated less like a daughter and more like unpaid help. Everyone wants the strict rules for other people's children.

So where does all of this come from? One likely reason is that we're a very collectivist society. The Dutch researcher Geert Hofstede, who compared the cultures of many countries, gave Pakistan just 14 out of 100 on individualism, which puts us among the most collectivist countries he measured. In simple words, the family and the community come before the individual. Maybe that made sense once, because in small, tight communities reputation really was a safety net, and if people stopped trusting your family, it affected who would marry into it, do business with it or stand by it in bad times. Add joint family living, where everyone knows everyone's business, and you can see why a simple decision ends up belonging to everyone.

But here's the strange part. Who are these log (people), exactly? Usually they're other parents, sitting in their own cars on their own drives home, worried about what everyone else will say about them. So everyone is scared of everyone, and nobody is actually the one making the decision.

3. Fear of Authority

Walk into almost any government office in Pakistan and watch what happens when the officer comes in. People stand up, voices drop, and a man who was complaining loudly a minute ago is suddenly saying "ji sir, bilkul sir" (yes sir, absolutely sir) to things he doesn't even agree with. It's the same with a teacher, a doctor, a policeman, a boss, or anyone with a bit of power over you. You just can't speak up, because if you upset the wrong person, they can make your life difficult and nobody is going to stop them. How scared you need to be also depends on who you are. Someone with money or the right connections walks into that same office and gets tea and a chair, because sifarish (using contacts to get favours) can fix almost anything here, while an ordinary middle-class person waits in the line, says "ji sir" and hopes for the best.

It starts way before offices though. In school, we learn that questioning the teacher is badtameezi (rudeness), and at home, a child who asks "but why?" one too many times gets called zubaan daraz (someone who talks back). So by our first job we already know the rules: the person above you is always right, and the person below you should know their place. Somewhere along the way, we started treating respect and fear as the same thing, even though respect is listening to someone because they've earned it, and fear is agreeing with someone because disagreeing might cost you.

So where does it come from? Hierarchy here is older than the British, and the Mughal courts had their own culture of bowing to power. But British rule built an administration that was mainly there to collect

revenue and keep control, with the sahib (master, the title British officers were called) sitting far above the ordinary citizen. The British left in 1947, but in a lot of ways that mindset never left our offices, which is part of why anyone behind a desk still becomes “saab” (short for sahib, basically “sir”) the moment we walk in. Interestingly, on Hofstede’s “power distance” score, which measures how much a society accepts power being shared unequally, Pakistan scores 55, while Malaysia scores 104 and Denmark scores 18. So we’re far from the most hierarchical people on earth. The hierarchy just shows up very strongly in certain places, like the office, the classroom and the drawing room, and researchers note that in cultures like this it usually starts at home, where parents expect children to obey without asking why.

Here is the part that matters most. The people who suffer under power usually don’t get rid of it once they get some themselves. They pass it on. The officer shouts at the clerk, the clerk shouts at the peon (office helper), and the peon goes home and takes it out on whoever is below him. In college, the senior who got ragged (bullied by seniors as a so-called “welcome”) in his first year can’t wait to do the same to the new juniors, because “hum ne bhi toh saha tha” (we had to put up with it too). In a lot of homes, the bahu who spent years being controlled by her saas becomes that exact saas twenty years later. Many of our parents didn’t choose their subjects, their work or sometimes even who they married, so when their kids ask for that freedom, the answer is often “hum ne bhi toh compromise kiya tha” (we compromised too, didn’t we?). Nobody in this chain thinks they’re the villain. They just think it’s finally their turn.

Back in the 1960s, a Brazilian educator named Paulo Freire noticed the same thing among poor farm workers in his own country. In Pedagogy of the Oppressed, he wrote that “the oppressed, instead of striving for liberation, tend themselves to become oppressors.” In simple words, a lot of people who were pushed down don’t dream of a world where nobody pushes anyone. They dream of being the one on top, like a farm worker who wants to become the boss over the other workers instead of wanting fair treatment for all of them.

At its most serious end, this shows up as real harm inside families. A 2018 review of 84 studies found that when parents had been mistreated as children, the odds of their own children being mistreated were almost three times higher. If you stopped reading there, it would sound like a chain nobody can escape, but newer research tells a more hopeful story. A 2025 review of 65 studies found that more parents actually broke the cycle than repeated it: 23.6% of the families were “cycle breakers”, compared to 17.1% where it carried on. In one huge Australian study of more than 32,000 parents and children, the cycle breakers outnumbered the ones who repeated it about three to one. So hurt can travel down a family like an heirloom, but it only keeps going as long as nobody decides to stop it, and plenty of people are already stopping it, which means you can be one of them too.

So the next time we get even a little bit of power, like a class monitor badge, a team to lead or a new junior at work, it’s worth noticing the very first thing we feel like doing with it.

4. The Language of Respect

Think about the last time someone spoke fluent English at a family gathering, maybe a cousin back from abroad or a kid from one of the big-name schools. You can almost feel the room change. People listen a little more carefully, and someone says “bohat smart bacha hai” (what a smart kid). Now think about the kid from an Urdu-medium school who topped his board exams and can solve problems the English-speaking cousin couldn’t even touch, but trips over his “th” sounds. Nobody calls him smart in that room, and sometimes somebody even laughs.

It doesn’t stop at language either. A gora (white foreigner) walks into a shop or an office and suddenly the service is faster, the smiles are bigger and a chair gets pulled out, while our own people are left waiting in the line. We even have a name for it, the gora complex, and most of us have watched it happen without thinking twice.

So where did we learn to mix up a language with a brain? Part of the answer goes back to 1835, when a British official named Thomas Babington Macaulay wrote his famous “Minute on Education”. He argued that government money should go into teaching English instead of Arabic and Sanskrit, and in his own words, the goal was “a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste.” He wanted a small group that would stand between the British rulers and the millions they ruled, in British India, which included the land that is Pakistan today.

The British left in 1947, but the idea stayed. English remained the language of offices, courts, good jobs and “good” schools, and researchers today describe it in Pakistan as a requirement for professional jobs and a key marker of social class. Our school system makes the split even sharper. Elite English-medium schools mostly serve families with money, while public schools mostly teach in Urdu or regional languages, so how well a child speaks English often depends on how much their parents earn. Even the CSS exams, which decide entry into the civil service, are held in English. The gora complex has a similar story, since for nearly two hundred years the people at the very top of this land were white and spoke English, and somewhere along the way, looking and sounding like them got mixed up with being better.

To be fair, English isn’t the villain here. It’s genuinely useful, it opens doors to jobs, research and the rest of the world, and in one study, Pakistani students from every social class said they need it today for practical reasons, not because of its colonial past. Learning it is a smart move. The problem is the shortcut our minds take, because speaking English is a skill and being smart is something else, and you can easily have one without the other. So the next time the room changes, it’s worth asking whether we’re impressed by what someone said, or just by the language they said it in.

5. Fame Over Knowledge

A video lands in the family WhatsApp group. A man with a ring light and two million followers says warm lemon water every morning cures diabetes, and within an hour it’s been forwarded to five more groups. Someone’s khala (aunt, mother’s sister) is already talking about skipping her medicine. When a cousin who actually studies medicine says that isn’t true, the reply comes fast: “Beta, uske 2 million followers hain. Tum kitna jaante ho?” (Son, he has 2 million followers. What do you know?)

This looks new, but it’s really an old habit in new clothes. We’ve always trusted whoever had status, whether that was the chaudhry (village head, usually the big landowner), the uncle with the biggest car or the man on TV. Now status just comes with a number next to it, and the number does the thinking for us. The same happens with big names talking outside their field. A religious scholar deserves respect for his knowledge of the faith, a cricketer for his cricket and an anchor for presenting the news, but the moment any of them starts talking about medicine, science or money, a lot of people take it as final just because of who said it.

Pakistan has already seen how far this can go. In 2012, a man named Agha Waqar Ahmad claimed he had built a kit that could run a car on water. Talk show hosts celebrated it, politicians rode in the car, cabinet ministers discussed it, some well-known scientists backed it, and a Sindh minister even called him a national hero. The physicist Pervez Hoodbhoy and Dr Atta-ur-Rahman, the former head of the Higher Education Commission, pointed out that it went against the basic laws of physics, but for a while they barely got heard, because the people cheering were the bigger names.

Psychologists call this “social proof”: when we’re not sure what’s true, we look at what everyone else seems to believe. In the 1950s, psychologist Solomon Asch asked people something really simple, which of three lines matched the length of another line. The catch was that everyone else in the room was secretly in on it and gave the wrong answer on purpose, and about three out of four real participants went along with the obviously wrong group at least once.

Now add the internet. A big MIT study published in 2018 looked at around 126,000 stories shared on Twitter between 2006 and 2017, and found that false news spread farther and faster than the truth in every category they checked. It wasn't mostly bots doing it either. It was ordinary people, and the researchers think the false stories simply felt newer and more surprising, so people wanted to share them. So a big number doesn't mean something is true, and sometimes it only means it was exciting. Followers tell us how many people are watching, but they tell us nothing about whether anyone actually checked.

6. The Dinner Table

Okay, a lighter one, sort of. Every family has one skinny kid, and at every function that kid hears the same thing: "Arre, kitna sookh gaya hai! Ghar pe khana nahi milta kya?" (Oh, look how dried up he's gotten! Don't they feed you at home?) He gets called sookha (dried up), teeli (toothpick) and haddiyon ka dhancha (a bag of bones), and someone is always pushing a second plate at him like it's an emergency. Meanwhile, the chubby cousin walks in and hears "Mashallah, sehat achi hai!" (Mashallah is a phrase of praise meaning "God has willed it", and the rest means his health is looking good.) Nobody calls him fat. In a lot of desi homes, "healthy" is literally the word for it.

And the food never stops. Your plate is already stacked when the host leans over and says "aur lo na, tum ne toh kuch khaya hi nahi!" (have more, you've barely eaten anything!). Saying no isn't really an option, because in a desi home refusing the food can feel like refusing the person. Then you leave, and somewhere behind that closed door the same voice says "sab kha gaye, kuch chhora hi nahi" (they ate everything, didn't leave a thing). We all know this house, and some of us live in it.

Food here has always meant love, respect and proof that a family is doing okay. A thin child worried the grandparents, while a man with a belly looked settled and well looked after, or as we say, khaata peeta ghar ka lagta hai (he looks like he's from a well-fed home). For a long time, only families with money could afford to eat that well, so in times when food wasn't guaranteed, a bit of extra weight probably really did mean your family was fine. The times changed, but the compliment didn't.

Today, Pakistan has the highest rate of diabetes in the world. According to the International Diabetes Federation, about 31% of adults here were living with it in 2024, around 34.5 million people, and that number is expected to reach about 70 million by 2050. And this is the part that flips the whole thing. A huge UK study of around 490,000 people found that South Asians had the same rate of diabetes at a BMI (a number comparing your weight to your height) of 22, which most charts call perfectly normal, as white Europeans had at a BMI of 30, which counts as obese. With waist size it was the same story, since a South Asian man with a 79 cm waist had the same diabetes rate as a white man with a 102 cm waist.

There might also be a deeper reason the belly in particular shows up so much here. Compared to Europeans with the same BMI, South Asians tend to have less muscle and more body fat, especially around the stomach. One leading explanation goes back generations. This region went through regular famines for centuries, and food security got even weaker during the colonial period, so many families lived with too little food for a very long time. Researchers think bodies shaped by that kind of scarcity may have adapted to hold on to fat, and babies here are often born small but with their fat relatively preserved, which scientists call the "thin-fat" baby. Then, over the last few decades, food became much easier to get while our lives became more and more sedentary, and bodies built for scarcity started meeting plenty. Researchers say this mix of early undernutrition and later weight gain is linked to a higher risk of diabetes. It's still a theory being studied rather than a settled fact, but it does mean the khaata peeta belly we treat as a sign of a well-fed home might actually carry a memory of how hungry our great-grandparents were.

Then there's the chai (tea). It feels like the most desi thing in the world, but in the long history of this region it's actually pretty new. The British started tea plantations here in the 1830s, mainly to sell tea abroad, and ordinary people here didn't really drink it. When world tea prices crashed in the 1930s, the British-run Indian Tea Market Expansion Board launched a massive campaign to get locals drinking it, with vans going from town to town showing people how to brew it and tea stalls popping up at railway stations. Our families then made it completely their own with milk, sugar and spices, and now it's hard to imagine a single day without it.

None of this is about shaming anyone's body, or saying our hospitality is a problem, because feeding people is one of the most beautiful things we inherited. We've just been using the wrong words, since thin isn't automatically sick and chubby isn't automatically healthy. And maybe, once in a while, "aur lo" (have more) can become "bas, kaafi hai" (that's enough).

Still reading? Most people stopped two sections ago, so respect. Go get yourself some chai, you've earned it. Maybe just one sugar this time.

7. Which One Stops With You?

So if so much of this hurts, why does it keep going? There are a few simple reasons. First, copying is easier than thinking. Remember the kids with the puzzle box? We do what we saw because it's already in our heads, and working out a new way takes effort when most days we're just tired. Second, it "worked". Almost every elder has the same defence: "hum ne bhi yahi saha, hum bhi toh theek hi hain" (we went through the same thing, and we turned out fine). But "fine" is doing a lot of work in that sentence, because nobody counts the dreams that got dropped, the people who quietly stopped talking to their families or the ones who never got help. Third, our brains like the way things already are. In 1988, two economists, William Samuelson and Richard Zeckhauser, called this "status quo bias" after their experiments showed people stick with whatever option is already in place far more than they should. And on top of that, questioning feels like disrespect, because "baron se behes nahi karte" (you don't argue with elders), so even when we know something is wrong, staying quiet feels easier.

After all of that, it would be easy to think the answer is to throw everything away, but it really isn't, because we inherited some beautiful things too. We inherited a culture where a guest is treated like a blessing, where a stranger at the door still gets offered chai and nobody eats alone if someone else is in the house. We inherited cousins who are basically siblings, and khalas and phuppos (aunts, mother's and father's sisters) who feel like second mothers. When someone is in hospital, the corridor fills up with relatives, and when someone dies, neighbours quietly start sending food so the family doesn't have to cook while they grieve. This matters more than it sounds. A big review of 148 studies covering more than 300,000 people found that people with stronger social relationships had a 50% higher chance of survival over the study periods, and the researchers said the effect was comparable to well-known risk factors like smoking.

The frustrating part is that even the good things get bent out of shape. Hospitality turns into a show, and some families borrow money they don't have just to throw a wedding big enough that nobody can say anything, which is log kya kahenge all over again. Closeness turns into interference, because the relatives filling the hospital corridor are often the same ones who want to know your marks, your salary and your marriage plans. Respect for elders turns into never questioning them, even when they're wrong. So an inheritance is a bit like an old family trunk. When it's handed to you, you open it and go through it properly. You keep the gold, polish the pieces that have gone dull, and finally throw out the things that were only ever hurting the people who carried them.

To be honest, we probably can't change our elders. To them, none of this is a problem, it's just life, and arguing at the dinner table won't undo sixty years of "this is how things are done". That isn't our job anyway. Our job is smaller and harder, which is making sure it stops with us. The kid who got called

“teeli” doesn’t have to call his own kid that. The girl who was told “bas, ab shaadi” (that’s it, marriage now) doesn’t have to say it to her daughter, and the junior who got ragged doesn’t have to rag anyone. Every one of these chains has a link where it can break, and we’re standing at one of them right now.

One person breaking it matters more than you’d think. In a later version of Asch’s line experiment, he put just one person in the room who gave the right answer, and the real participants’ wrong answers dropped from about a third of the time to around 5%. One person saying “no, that’s wrong” made it easier for everyone else to say it too.

So here’s one tiny first step. Psychologists call it an if-then plan, where you decide in advance exactly what you’ll do in one specific moment: “If this happens, then I’ll do that.” A review of 94 studies found that plans like these made people noticeably more likely to actually follow through. So pick one thing from this article, just one, and make your if-then. It could be something like:

“If I’m about to say ‘log kya kahenge’ to someone younger, then I’ll ask them what they actually want instead.”

“If my kid comes second and I’m about to ask ‘pehla kaun aaya?’ (who came first?), then I’ll ask what they enjoyed learning instead.”

“If I’m about to make a joke about someone’s weight or looks, then I’ll just skip it.”

Write it down somewhere you’ll see it, and that’s the whole step. So, out of everything we inherited and never questioned, which one stops with you.

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