



ADVANCE SOCIAL SCIENCE ARCHIVE JOURNAL

Available Online: <https://assajournal.com>

Vol. 04 No. 02. Oct-Dec 2025. Page#.2083-2088

Print ISSN: [3006-2497](#) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](#)Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17753609>

The Interconnection of Sectarianism and Violent Extremism: A Case Study of District Shikarpur

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ABSTRACT

The focus of the paper is to comprehend the menace of Sectarianism and Extremism. These are the two emerging threats leading to restriction on free movement of people of Shikarpur. . The issues of sectarianism and extremism are not new ones but the notorious global challenges. The intensity of these threats is so high that it has left the people at regional and local level live in fear of terror and panic. In addition, the paper emphasizes on explaining the poisonous impacts of these curses on the socio-economic development of society. The study is also focused to understand the growing impact of these menaces on the true image of Islam. It stresses on pointing out the complications arising out of threat of sectarian crisis and extremism. Moreover, the study not only deals with understanding the interconnection of sectarianism and extremism but also suggests the pragmatic measures to tackle the cancerous evils in order to foster social and economic growth of society. It recommends the multifaceted strategies including the role of judiciary, civil society, religious seminaries and educational institutes.

Keywords: Interconnection, Sectarianism, Violent Extremism, Case Study, District Shikarpur.

Introduction

Shikarpur has witnessed surge in sectarian and extremist activities in recent times (Sial, 2011). There has been several sectarian and extremist attacks in Shikarpur since 2013. There was a bomb exploded on Dargah Ghulam Shah Ghazi on February 25, 2013. This led to demise of three people along with Syed Hajan Shah who was the then Gaddi Nasheen. Moreover, a deadly suicide attack was carried on upon a Shia Imambargah at the time of Friday prayer at Lakhidar, Shikarpur on January 30, 2015. The incident resulted in the deaths of more than 50 people and caused several injuries. Lakhidar is thought to be the Centre of city Shikarpur. The suicide attack on that centric position caused the fear of insecurity and chaos among the citizen of the city. The people started to think to feel insecure in religious seminaries to worship. The movement of people has become limited due to growing sense of insecurity (Kaileh, 2014). The taking of responsibility of the suicide attack by The Jundallah Militant group confirmed the incident as purely a sectarian attack which highlights the intensity of the sectarian crisis in the city (Bukhari, 2015). Furthermore, there occurred another suicidal attack on Shia community during prayer of Eid-ul-Udha in Khanpur Tehsil, Shikarpur on September 12, 2016. There occurs more clashes between Sunni and Shia community during Muharam procession every year. The saga of sectarian divide does not end here. The divide has got dragged into education system as well. The names of private schools are designed with sect affiliations like Ahilbait Public School

Shikarpur. This outlines the factor of extremism among certain communities which leads to rise of sectarian divide in Shikarpur which leads to weakening of society (Studies, 2013).

Sectarianism

Sectarianism refers to discrimination or hatred against people on the basis of sect within the same religion. It simply is a feeling of conflict with people because of their differing ideology that contradicts one's own ideological perspective (B, 1982). It is an excessive attachment with a particular sect. The conflict mainly prevails between the Shia and Sunni community. The formation of sect base religious seminaries have led to division of the Muslim community. Sectarian crisis is one of the growing conflicts in Sindh especially in district Shikarpur. It has left the religious places, Sufi Shrines, religious gatherings, and Public spots insecure. It is observed that massive sectarian clashes take place in district Khairpur and district Shikarpur during the Muharam processions. The Shia community is widely targeted during these days. The issue of sectarianism is a threat to international peace as well (Haddad, 2017).

Extremism

Extremism refers to extreme belief of people that does not accept and respect the views and opinions of other people (Dr Peter T. Coleman). It simply is a rigidness of people towards the ideas of others. There are various definitions of Extremism and so are its types. (Abass, 2005). The forms of extremism include Class based extremism, Ethnic Extremism, Sect based extremism, Gender based extremism, and Religious extremism. These all types of extremism are dangerous for progress and peace of society (Rana, 2010). It's a threatening phenomenon which has widely destroyed the peace and stability of the global world especially Pakistan (Yaseen, 2007). Importantly, terrorist attacks in Pakistan since the episode of 9/11 reflect the presence of militant outfits in Pakistan which is an outcome of existence of extremist ideology in Pakistan. The problem of extremism has grown at a larger scale in district Shikarpur. The suicide attacks on religious places and Sufi shrines reflect the presence of extremist outfits in vicinity of Shikarpur. This mainly is due to proximity of Shikarpur with other provinces from where these terrorists enter and hit their targets (Bukhari, 2015). The prevalence of extremist attacks is also an outcome of poor law and order along with weak intelligence sharing (Mahesar, 2022).

Factors of rising Sectarian divide in District Shikarpur

The factors behind the rising sectarianism are manifold. Firstly, it was opined by renowned educationalist that the decline in literacy rate is the most significant factor behind sectarian crisis (Yaseen, 2007). The definition of literate is too complicated in Pakistan. A person who is eligible to write and read simple letter is considered to be a literate person in Pakistan. Unfortunately, the literacy rate of Pakistan is not above par leading to failure of understanding the difference between right and wrong. In addition, the lack of religious education has too contributed massively in the rise of sectarianism in Pakistan. Therefore, lack of true teachings of Islam has contributed to rise of intolerance, extremism, and radicalism which has given birth to sectarian conflicts. Moreover, it is a known fact that ignorance is mother of misperceptions. Hence, the absence of true knowledge creates misconceptions leading to various divisions (Ahmed, 2012). Secondly, the role of religious seminaries which are widely famous as Madrasas, is also considered to be somehow not up to the mark. There are hundreds of madrasas in Shikarpur which have no systematic approach to work on imparting true principles of Islam. There is no proper training of students of madrasas. However, hundreds of Talibs (Students) are found in the streets collecting meal and food for their teachers and fellows in the outskirts of the city. Thirdly, the role of economic misery is a driving factor towards growing sectarian crisis. The issues like poverty and joblessness become breeding grounds for extremist

outfits to get their vested interests done (Lynn Carter, 2009). Besides, the unemployed and economically unsound people remain in constant frustration which lead them to take inappropriate and illegal means to feed their stomach and complete their needs. The sectarian and extremist groups work on economically deprived people and recruit them for their extremist ideologies to be implemented in the society (III, 2014).

Sectarian conflict and Rising extremism

It was researched via conducting interviews from various notable personalities that it is sectarian strife that promotes extremism in Shikarpur. It was pointed out that the differences on the basis of sect in the field of education, health, police, and other services are observed in district Shikarpur. It is also observed that even transfers and postings in services are influenced on the sect closeness's. This manifests the level of existence of sectarian division in the district. Contrary, some of the notable scholars highlight that it is actually extremism that is leading to sectarian divide. They maintained that it is extremist thought that develops the mentality of self-righteousness which results in rigidity in temperaments of people which results in division of people and society. They argued that people hide their sect but they cannot hide their rigidity which is quite visible from their intolerant and inflexible temperaments.

Extremism and Public Support

There is about 96% Muslim population in Pakistan. Even with such a large Muslim population, the nation has faced religious violence for many decades. Political parties that focus on religion have not been able to form a government, even though Islam is the state religion. However, many people now fear that these religious parties might gain enough support in the future to form governments because extremist ideas are becoming more popular.

The 2018 general elections were surprising in this context. An extremist religious party, Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), received a significant number of votes. It became the third-largest religious-political party in terms of votes, especially in Punjab, the most populated province. This rise in support for extremist groups worried many people in Pakistan. Civil society and the media were shocked by how many people supported such militant groups. Another factor that increased public support for extremism was the rise in violence related to blasphemy laws. After the assassination of Salman Taseer, the Governor of Punjab, in 2011, these issues became even more serious. Salman Taseer had defended a Christian woman accused of blasphemy and had criticized the misuse of blasphemy laws. His own security guard killed him and was celebrated as a hero by extremist groups.

A similar incident happened when Shahbaz Bhatti, the Federal Minister for Minority Affairs, was also killed for speaking against blasphemy-related injustices. The government wanted to amend or improve the blasphemy law, but strong protests from religious parties prevented any change. Under pressure from extremist elements, the accused Christian woman was sentenced, and the assassin of Salman Taseer was eventually executed in 2016.

This execution angered TLP, which then called for unity among all religious parties to push their demands. The group continued to protest and pressure the government on various religious issues.

According to the Centre for Research and Security Studies, 89 people have been killed without due legal process in the name of blasphemy in Pakistan between 1947 and 2021 (Kazmi, 2022). In total, around 1,504 people have been accused of blasphemy, and 1,287 of these accusations were recorded between 2011 and 2021 (Nafees, 2022).

Implications of Sectarianism and Extremism on peace and tranquility of Society

Sectarianism breeds division which fosters intolerant and violent atmosphere in the society. The emergence of disunity and lack of integration generates the phenomenon of terrorism and

chaos which leads to loss of innocent lives and demolition of properties. The recent violent bomb blast attacks in Shikapur district reflect the greater division of the society. These incidents actually highlight that people do not have trust and cooperation within them and ultimately their fragmentation invites such terrible incidents. In addition, the prevalence of sectarianism and extremism generates the fear of insecurity, terror, and violence which restricts the free movement of citizens (Chandran, 2003). It also gives birth to hostilities among people which removes harmony among them. Moreover, the existence of extremist ideology among people erodes democratic principles. It threatens pluralism and diversity (Mahesar, 2022). The people remain in constant fear and avoid sharing their opinions and views in order to avoid any wrath from such rigid extremist people who can take away lives merely on having differing ideology of the fellow citizens. Furthermore, the anathema of sectarianism and extremism leads to economic crisis. The presence of insecurity detracts the investment and trading opportunities. The businessmen feel at risk while investing in places where there prevails chances of their economic loss via bomb blasts and war mongering atmosphere. They fear their major chunk of resources will get wasted in building security of their business. Besides, they assess that any violent incident can put their business in lockdown and lead to shortage of workers as the sense of insecurity pushes people to migrate towards safer areas. Importantly, sectarianism and extremism make state institutions weak and fragile which lead to poor law and order conditions.

Pragmatic ways forward:

Firstly, The menace of sectarianism and extremism can be eradicated through focusing on training of religious teachers. The teachers who impart religious education in madrasas must be well qualified and need to have relevant degrees in order to ensure true preaching of Islam. The funding of madrasas should also be monitored to make sure they stay away from extremist outfits. Besides, the merger of madrasas with the mainstream education system with proper regulatory curriculum can prove to be a productive way forward to tackling the menace of sectarian division and extremist ideology. The introduction of peace and tolerance in the education curriculum will also harmonize the society. On the other hand, stringent actions need to be taken against misuse of loudspeaker, intolerant sermons, and speeches which provoke hate and extremism in the society. In addition, Social media should also be made bound to enhance speeches and sermons of moderate religious scholars who propagate the message of peace and harmony.

Secondly, the government should take Stern actions to ensure good governance and rule of law (Mahesar, 2022). It should make sure that there prevails strict enforcement against banned outfits. It needs to ensure counter act against spread of hate speeches. It should also keep a bird's eye view on activities of major hotspots like madrasas, and conflict prone so called religious scholars. The state should also make smaller security units to build the nexus with local people. Moreover, the inter-faith harmony councils should be established at district level involving religious scholars from Shia, Sunni, and Sufi. The collective dialogues among such notable personalities should be held via social media on the core subjects of interfaith harmony and peace. Infact, the peace conferences should be arranged frequently to ensure tolerance and integration of the citizens. Furthermore, the local tribal feudals, Pir's, and influential clerics should also be encouraged to reject the violent actions blatantly.

Thirdly, the role of youth is pivotal in this regard. There should be encouragement of formation of youth clubs. The formation of youth clubs involves major chunk of youth in various programs which saves them from being exploited by militant outfits. The youth clubs provide safe environment to young minds where they develop critical thinking skills and groom their

personality traits. These clubs encourage unity and cohesion by recruiting youth from all different sects, tribes, and backgrounds. These clubs train youth through the mentorship of well-educated professionals, religious scholars, and famous social activist who coach unsafe and vulnerable youth. These mentors build confidence of youth and foster awareness among them regarding the essence of peace and inter-faith harmony. Besides, the youth comes out of isolation and remain engaged in collective projects which do not provide space to extremist outfits to find young minds for their violent activities.

Conclusion

The history of Pakistan is witness to the fact that the problem of sectarianism and extremism have always turned violent and destabilized its very existence. The problem has grown to the larger extent in district Shikarpur. There are a number of driving forces behind the menaces of sectarian crisis and extremism. Poverty, Illiteracy, Unemployment, and frustration are some of the major actors behind these curses. The lack of educational, literal, and cultural activities contribute to rising intolerance in the society. The ill-trained teachers preach sermons where they show rigidness and deliver hate speeches which spread division within society. This division further expands from religious intolerance to all different spheres of life. Ultimately, the society gets segmented giving space to militants to operate and complete their ill motives. Therefore, it is alarming for the society and the state of Pakistan to get serious to curb the existence of sectarianism and extremism. There is a strict need for registration and inspection of Madrasas, mosques, and Imambargahs in order to make sure that they exist with proper mechanisms and do not spread hate speeches against contrary ideologies. The government should ban hate literature to reduce the spread of extremism. The training of religious as well as academic teachers is quite essential in this regard. In addition, the state needs to take action against those who interpret Islam according to their sect affiliations. It should introduce economic avenues to divert the frustration of jobless people.

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