



Securing Punjab's social & cultural diversity

Summary

- This policy brief summarizes the deliberations of the first of six provincial-level policy dialogues on counter-violent extremism in Punjab. The first policy dialogue focused on the cultural, religious and social diversity in Punjab with a view to explore how far that had been used or could be used to counter violent extremism.
- Some participants suggested that in terms of faith-based diversity, the attitude of the people of Punjab was generally formed by their ancient caste biases, and not necessarily by religious ones.
- In the counter-violent extremism perspective, the cultural aspect had weakened which had many reasons. The elements that protected diversity or acted as defense mechanism in society were in grave crisis.
- The policy dialogue participants said that although Punjab had linguistic diversity, those in authority in the province appeared hesitant to acknowledge that Punjab had its own language, which was worth promoting, teaching in educational institutions and used on a mass scale. Until that broader premise was not embraced, the immense diversity within the language will not be acknowledged or benefited from.
- In the social and political context, aspects of diversity had receded as politics of division had gained ground. Democratic continuity played a key role in improving attitudes of tolerance. Engagement with the people for elections at all tiers of governance and related activities had had a positive impact. Non-democratic periods had greatly eroded tolerance, inter-faith harmony and mutual relations.
- Things had particularly deteriorated since the late 1970s and '80s when the state had cultivated a specific narrative with support from other nations with a view to oust the Soviet Union from Afghanistan.
- Appreciation of diversity was difficult when curriculum contained statements that were insensitive or downright offensive towards members of religious minority communities.

- In areas deprived of basic necessities of life, the youth who felt frustrated because they thought they did not have a stake in the system were exploited by vested interests and fell prey to extremist and violent persuasions.
- A critical issue, the participants stated, was that all contemporary efforts aimed at reviving culture appeared to be essentially event-based, such as organizing fairs and occasional singing and music competitions for children. These might yield TV footage or make for good media coverage but it was unlikely that culture will be revived this way.
- Sports represented an aspect of culture which promoted tolerance and healthy competition. Youth in particular had great inclination towards physically competitive sports, where the opponents had to observe certain rules rather than violently eliminating each other. The state of sports, especially at the district level, was abysmal and there was virtual absence of infrastructure, funding and coaching, including at the school level.

Background

On May 12, 2017, Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) organized first of six provincial-level dialogues in Lahore, exploring how Punjab's diverse social and cultural scenarios could be channelized to tackle extremist tendencies.

The basic idea was to assess whether diversity in Punjab could be tapped to counter extremism, and how. The theme of the dialogue was "Securing diversity in Punjab".

This was the first in a series of provincial consultations built on earlier findings from a range of discussions organised by PIPS. In 2017, PIPS released a strategy document for countering violent extremism in Pakistan, based on the institute's experiences and ten expert-level consultations on key aspects of countering extremism. The following points from the national strategy document are particularly relevant in the context of the first Punjab-level dialogue:

- The road to a secure Pakistan lies in upholding its diversity. The endeavor to counter extremist violence must strive to acknowledge the "diversity within" and inclusion in all aspects of lives. With this benchmark in all policies, the space for militants can be greatly reduced.
- Faith-based radicalism has an inverse link with pluralistic openness. When one widens, the other shrinks. Securing pluralistic openness will mitigate radical avenues.

Key considerations

The deliberations at the first provincial-level dialogue yielded the following key points:

- Understanding the reasons for pressure on our expressions of diversity and how those could be cured was the first step. Without talking about solutions, the discussion will not go in a fruitful direction.
- Some participants stated that Punjab was the most tolerant out of all of Pakistan's provinces and was also the most predisposed to embracing diversity. They said that that was reflected in the integration and assimilation in society of the population that migrated from India when Pakistan came into being. It was stated by one speaker that behind faith-based riots or incidents of violence were personal vendettas or economic motives. Otherwise the society was tolerant in Punjab.
- Others, however, challenged that assertion and referred to the violent faith-based riots that had taken place in the Pakistani and India Punjab at the time of partition. Attention was also drawn to numerous faith-based attacks by mobs in various places in the province in recent years.
- The state had always treated cultural diversity as a threat to its ideological unity. It thought if citizens took pride in their culture they might part ways with Pakistan. The sort of challenges Pakistan was up against were faced by other nations in the world too. But it was now important to realize that our response had become a counter-productive strategy. Nation states all over the world had promoted nationalism through their curriculum. Creating order in the house was one thing and suppressing people another. Suppressing cultural nationalism did not unify people or bring them together. It irritated them.
- It was about time, if not too late already, to understand through introspection the factors that led to the ground shifting and how the narrative changed and how thoughts started changing in the cities and the villages of Punjab.
- Before 1947, Punjab was indeed a very rich and diverse land, which people from the pre-partition generation recalled very fondly. Things changed with the partition riots amid a great exodus of populations across the border of the new states of India and Pakistan. Punjab remained victim because of the violence and scars of that 'cleansing' were present on both sides.
- Many of the Pakistanis from Punjab who had gone abroad for work had brought back ideological baggage with them. For the ones who could not go abroad, those outside Pakistan had brought the goods to them, along with funding for madrassas and sectarian organisations.

- It was vital to look back to see how the media had provided a platform to individuals with exceptionally conservative and dangerous outlook and bestowed upon them the status of senior analysts, scholars and opinion builders.
- It was important to see where the slide started and why it could not be stopped. Diversity and appreciation of diversity as positive ingredients in society had suffered amid politicians' opportunism, and in some cases complicity in bringing about this destruction. Some elements made things worse by living in denial and others did not consider it important enough and believed that there were more pressing issues in society. A variety of reasons contributed to deal a huge setback to the pluralistic, democratic culture and thinking, and the disastrous consequences of the same confronted us now.
- No space was left for diversity when almost all the Hindus and Sikhs were pushed out or allowed to leave their homes. Our ideologues sowed such seeds in the name of nationalism and religion that grew exponentially in the 1970s and 1980s.
- The disconnect with culture did not begin with the state; it began with ordinary people's lives. The range of folk knowledge, from food to architecture, has been forgotten, cast aside or ridiculed as non-knowledge after the advent of colonial education. Using and valuing folk knowledge--not just festivals but the deeper epistemological knowledge-based formations of our own past--will contribute immensely to regenerating our culture. When cultural identities were suppressed and art and culture abandoned, religious identities and extremist ideologies filled that void. Regeneration of cultural activities held the potential to slacken that trend.
- Because of increasing globalization and the consequent homogenization process, cultural identities were being suppressed. For regenerating these identities, it was important to dig deeper into the sources of culture. It was customary to direct the rage towards the state but individuals could also make a difference. As with sports, food was also an integral part of culture. Traditional food that had medicinal properties as well had been abandoned in favour of foods borne of the globalization process.
- The mischief-makers had recognized the importance of culture in tackling extremism and the peaceful, balanced and humanistic narrative of the cultural expressions--through which people from different religions, castes or sects, jointly celebrated, enjoyed and expressed freedom--were attacked in a planned manner. First, the great institution of melas (fairs) was wound up. Melas were a manifestation of how the people of Punjab celebrated their work and way of life when they had some time and resources. Then secular festivals such as Basant were wound up. Basant had a classlessness about it

in the sense that everyone could participate and celebrate colours and spring. More recently, there have been consistent terrorist attacks on sufi shrines, where many people went irrespective of their belief because of a cultural and spiritual element. These attacks along with other factors, including intolerant material in the curriculum and promotion of a particular narrative in the media, had played a role where avenues for interaction among the people irrespective of their social or financial standing had been eroded.

- Religion and religious domain had extended into the knowledge domain to such an extent that pure intellectual, scholarly conversation had become impossible.
- Sports training were indispensable in our society where the inclination was to settle everything through violence. Our children had the thirst for sports but nowhere to play. That had played a substantial role in the present ailment of society. Even within sports, cricket had monopolized the sports sector to such an extent over the last two decades that all other sports had been pushed to the margins. There were neither sponsors nor any media attention for sports other than cricket. But at the grassroots, work had not even been done on cricket.

Recommendations

- Culture could not be brought back merely by talking about it or through organizing a few events. The traditional institutions that produced cultural products had been annihilated and needed to be revived.
- Urgent reform was needed to undo the distortion of the spirit of the constitution through various amendments and discriminatory laws introduced in the Zia era. All things in the law and the constitution that discriminate against people on the basis of faith should be done away with. The contradiction in the constitution, which declares all citizens equal but then makes faith-based distinctions, must be addressed.
- Appreciation of diversity was difficult when curriculum contained statements that were insensitive or downright offensive towards members of religious minority communities. Curriculum needed to be cleansed of insensitive and offensive material.
- In areas deprived of basic necessities of life, the youth who were frustrated because they thought they did not have a stake in the system were exploited by vested interest and fell prey to extremist and violent persuasions. Equal opportunity, an even pace of progress in all areas and addressing sentiments of deprivation and marginalization were key to challenging such issues.
- Education played a vital role in opening up spaces and pushing back against extremist attitudes. Not just any education would achieve that, but education

that engendered tolerance and propped up appreciation of all manners of diversity.

- Things had particularly deteriorated since the late 1970 and '80s when the state had cultivated a specific narrative with support from other nations with a view to oust the Soviet Union from Afghanistan. Establishment of a counter-narrative that challenged the erstwhile state-sponsored narrative of the 1970s and '80s and gave it the form of a dialogue was direly needed.
- Sports represented an aspect of culture which promoted tolerance and healthy competition. Youth in particular had great inclination towards physically competitive sports, where the opponents had to observe certain rules rather than violently eliminating each other. Promoting sports and expanding its infrastructure, especially at the grassroots could yield positive results.
- Civil society campaigns and smart use of the media to raise issues and appreciation of importance of diversity could also chip away at extremism.
- Cultural festivals should not be branded as religious festivals, so that they are not reduced to any one religion, sect or caste. The ban on celebration of Basant in Punjab should be lifted. Those making the kite string that kills people should be brought to justice to make the festival safe again.
- Even when the authorities agree to launch an initiative, such as announce to lift the ban on celebrating Basant, opportunism or notions of vulnerability can lead to the promises not being honored. It is important to push and encourage and persuade the government so that at least the positive things the authorities also agree should be done are done.
- It is important to make demands of the state. However, the people should not confine themselves merely to demanding their cultural rights from the authorities or influential circles. Community, intelligentsia and people have to get together to articulate and devise plans. Active engagement of youth is particularly important in that respect.
- Cultural events, products and resources need to be developed as an enterprise through innovation. Regeneration and recreation of culture would remain stunted until our cultural products appeal to our children and youth and until they own them.
- Civil society needs to discover new and imaginative ways to attract people to the cause, rather than repeating the same tactics and activities such as meetings, and blocking roads in protests.
- Children should be educated through all available means about tolerance and diversity. It could be done in a collective setting, not necessarily in schools, and in a manner that is entertaining. Easily understandable information about human rights should be made mandatory for children at school. Some things can be taught via small documentaries. Some things can be done at the individual school level or through the education department. Small activities should be held in schools for children where they learn about and explore

other cultures and religions with a view to enable them to appreciate diversity, focus on harmonious co-existence, and discuss commonalities rather than magnifying differences.

- It should be made mandatory for schools to train children in the use of social media, various applications and smart phones to ensure they get maximum benefit and are protected from harmful or damaging impact of these tools.
- Certain cultural interpretations and narratives need to be looked at critically, in view of treatment of women and certain cultural representation possibly being feudal in character. Regeneration of cultural products and ethos must not compromise on human rights, including gender rights.
- Promoting cultural festivals, events and creating monuments to honor cultural personalities can play an important role in educating the people, especially the youth, about cultural diversity and regenerating culture.
- Endeavors that demonstrate tolerant traditions from the past should be highlighted. A calendar from the year 1953 that listed among official holidays numerous cultural and religious occasions should be widely distributed to show to the young generation that this too once happened in Pakistan. Such calendar can also be displayed in schools.
- Small art activities should be encouraged and must not be confined to institutions imparting arts education. Performing art can bring change in people's behavior. The government can play an important role in reviving folk arts that have died out. Arts councils at the divisional level could be encouraged to engage some artists, traditional puppeteers, etc., to organize programmes for sustenance of the art and the artist.
- Display of violent images in the media brutalizes society. Publication and publicisation of all images that glorify violence, for whatever reason, must be avoided.
- Restoration and creation of archives of films from the past that promoted positive humanistic values must be tackled on priority. Rehabilitation of film studios and extending incentives for young filmmakers can contribute to revival of films with positive messages.
- Youth festivals should be encouraged and positive contributions of the young recognized and celebrated. This will be useful even at the level of one college or university, but would have a different impact with government patronage.

Participants *(arranged alphabetically by last name)*

	Name	Designation
1.	Ahsan Malik	Reporting Officer, EHD Multan
2.	Anjum Nadeem	Reporter, Dunya TV
3.	Anjum Paul	Professor, GPGC Samundri, Faisalabad
4.	Asif Aqeel	Analyst/journalist
5.	Atif Mehmood	Consultant PIPS
6.	Bushra Naqvi	Lawyer, Multan
7.	Dr Muhammad Asif Bajwa	MPA, Punjab Assembly
8.	Dr Najeeb Ali Shah	Educationist, Faisalabad
9.	Dr. Sadia Bashir	Professor, Lahore College University
10.	Hassan Sardar	Manager Admin, PIPS
11.	Joshua Dilawar	SDO Multan
12.	Kalyan Singh Kalyan	Prof., Government College University, Lahore
13.	Kamran Chaudhary	Journalist
14.	Maimoona Saeed	Correspondent, Geo News
15.	Malik Muhammad Ahmad	Punjab Chief Minister's Spokesperson
16.	Muhammad Amir Rana	Director, PIPS
17.	Muhammad Ismail Khan	Program Manager, PIPS
18.	Nadeem Umar Tarar	Former director, National College of Arts, Rawalpindi Campus
19.	Najam U Din	Director, HRCF
20.	Nawaf Khan	Communication & Reporting Officer, PIPS
21.	Nosheen Naqvi	Educationist
22.	Rabia Rehman	Writer/columnist
23.	Rahseed Misbah	Educationist
24.	Robeena Sehgal	Educationist/writer
25.	Sabookh Syed	Journalist
26.	Saeeda Deep	Director, Peace and Secular Studies
27.	Shahid Mehmood Nadeem	Director, Ajoka Theatre, Lahore
28.	Shahzada Irfan	Journalist, <i>The News</i>
29.	Siddiqui Farooq	Chairman, Evacuee Trust Property Board
30.	Tahir Mehdi	Researcher
31.	Zahoor Ahmad Darija	Chief Editor, Jhok Multan
32.	Zamran Rabeel	Higher Education Department Punjab
33.	Xari Samiyeh Jalil	Special Correspondent, <i>Dawn</i>