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Pak Institute For Peace Studies (PIPS) ● www.pakpips.com ● pips@pakpips.com

Intellectual and scholarly trends on countering violent extremism in Punjab

Summary

- This policy brief summarizes key deliberations of the fifth of six provincial-level policy dialogues on counter-violent extremism in Punjab. The policy dialogue series is part of the efforts by PIPS to analyse the security and conflict-related issues in Pakistan, with a view to finding practical ways and means to counter violent extremism.
- The present policy brief focuses on the intellectual and scholarly trends that have challenged or have the potential to counter violent extremism in Punjab.
- The participants emphasized that it could be useful to look back at history for the way forward. It was important to understand things in their historical context. A lot had happened in Punjab over the last 900 years and that had a lot of impact on how the society had developed.
- Assessment of dominant intellectual trends in Punjab had been a neglected area. The tradition, expertise and resources needed for such an endeavor in an organized manner appeared to be lacking.
- The space for scholarly responses to counter violent extremism seemed to have shrunk in recent decades. Intellectuals, civil society, the media and political parties no longer acting as think tanks and violent actors taking over the space in educational institutions had contributed to the rot.
- Those speaking out against extremism had been demonized and some forced to leave Pakistan for speaking their mind.
- Things changed for the worse when the intellectual discourse moved out of the colleges and universities in Punjab, especially in Lahore. The state narrative became dominant and the universities internalized that.
- Public institutions of higher learning in Punjab today were controlled by student wings affiliated with religious political parties. Students and academia feared for their safety lest their words or actions upset these student wings. With the academia giving up on the narrative, the same had been hijacked.
- It was important to use and expand on whatever space was available, whether in the media or elsewhere, to effectively present counter-narratives to extremism.

Background

On August 16, 2017, PIPS hosted fifth of the six Punjab-level dialogue forums aimed at curbing extremism; this dialogue discussed scholarly and intellectual trends in Punjab to counter-extremism in Punjab.

Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) considered it important to seek input from the provinces in view of the challenges in the specific provincial context and problems which feed intolerant and extremist attitudes in each province. The recommendations proposed can be incorporated into a national level draft for a richer and more comprehensive counter-extremism policy. Earlier, four such Punjab-level dialogues were held:

- The first dialogue forum, on May 12, 2017, discussed Punjab's diverse social and cultural scenarios and how cultural diversity could be channelized to tackle extremist tendencies.
- The second dialogue forum, held on July 5, 2017, debated how to achieve a cohesive and equal Punjab.
- The third dialogue forum, held on July 6, 2017, trained the spotlight on the role and impact of social welfare organizations in Punjab; the need of dialogue for countering extremism.
- The fourth dialogue forum discussed how to ensure that charity ends in safe hands, besides reviewing the role of social welfare organizations in Punjab in countering extremism.

These dialogues were organized in continuation of the findings of PIPS recommendations on countering violent extremism. In 2017, PIPS unveiled National Strategy of Inclusive Pakistan, which was meant to furnish a policy framework to counter extremism and pave the way for a cohesive and secure Pakistan, based on the deliberations of 10 national-level consultations of experts.

The strategy concluded that the road to tackle violent extremism and restore peace lay in Pakistan's diversity and any policy aimed at countering extremism must be inclusive in spirit. The importance of the role of all institutions that were inclusive in character, foremost among them parliament and its standing committees, was emphasized.

The strategy called for engaging scholars in countering extremism too. It was argued that militants often resort to religious justification behind their action. Yet, scholarly responses are missing. At the same time, there is little interaction between scholars of different schools of thoughts.

Key considerations

- Participants underscored the rationale for exploring scholarly responses to counter extremism in Punjab. The narrative that sympathizes with extremists can be challenged by scholars, who tend to present facts and contexts; extremists on the other hand rely on distorted understanding of past and present.

Unfortunately, it was said scholarly realms have been offering little against extremism. Universities are the best places to counter radicalizing thoughts, but such places themselves are becoming hotbeds of extremism. Even the curriculum is laden with stereotypical content that end up producing minds unable to condemn militants.

Rather than longing for the past, a scientific orientation toward understanding the issue is required. Problems should first be diagnosed before a solution is proposed. Scholars can lead to this end.

- It was understood that not only in the context of countering extremism, but when it comes to intellectual pursuits in general, the trend has been one of complete neglect. An organized approach in that respect would require surveys and analysis, for which not only the tradition, but also the expertise and resources appeared to be lacking.
- Instead, a quick glance might suggest that over the last few decades, extremism or aggressive fundamentalism seemed to be the dominant narrative in Punjab. Many subjects are interpreted along a particular brand of religious line. Increasingly, a key facet of extremism in Punjab is its sectarian dimension.
- There is sufficient in the intellectual trends of the Punjabi Muslim tradition to nurture positive conditions. Many Punjabis today might seek to distance themselves from the long 'non-Muslim history and culture' of their land.
- Punjabi Sufi poetry is renowned for being humanistic and pluralistic. That discourse got affected when the Punjabi language was gradually abandoned as a medium of education or as a vehicle of expression. Some people have argued that the population of the Pakistani portion of Punjab had intentionally forgone its language in the 19th century and instead opted for a language that lagged behind in comparison in terms of historical and linguistic development, in terms of poetry or intellectual and cultural tradition. When Punjabis stepped away from their language, they separated from a rich tradition of humanism, pluralism and peaceful co-existence that dated back thousands of years. It was stated that that choice had deprived the region of intellectual and literary treasures and an inheritance which distinguished Punjab in the world.

- Sometimes it could be useful to look back at history for the way forward. The circumstances when things were better in Punjab need to be considered and the reasons for that understood. How Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs could once live in peace in this land and how now peace is elusive within the same religious community, was a pertinent question that must be answered.
- The benefits and disadvantages of our colonial past and whatever happened as a result of that must be discussed. It was important to remember that in the colonial past also, the Sufi literature was not taught in educational institutions. Some things did not change even after 1947.
- There is a sectarian dimension of extremism in Punjab today and historical context suggests that extraneous influence started creeping into the epistemic space a few hundred years ago. Some participants stressed that Punjab never was a land of milk and honey. There were complexities that should not be glossed over. None of the undesirable things happened overnight. Sectarian ideas were there earlier too but their dimensions gradually changed. Frequent agitation of political movements around religion have also left a mark in the province.
- One of the reasons for Lahore's prominence in undivided India was that its colleges and universities were the places where the main intellectual discourse took place. Things changed when the intellectual discourse moved out of the universities. There were suggestions that the state narrative became dominant and internalized by the universities.
- Institutions of higher learning all over the world were places where a range of narratives interacted with each other and where the students and their educators engaged in a frank discourse in a conducive environment. Today, not only in Punjab but across the country, a teacher or student could not remain in most public universities if they disagreed with the dominant notions there, which are usually controlled by student wings affiliated with religious political parties. There is now a more pronounced presence of sectarian organisations in universities. Students today are beaten up for speaking to fellow students of the opposite gender on campuses. The academia has given up on the whole narrative, which has been hijacked.
- Discourse analysis is vital and generalisations must be avoided in the analysis. No entire community could or should be painted as regressive or progressive.

No addition was possible to the knowledge base in the absence of empirical evidence or studies.

- The violence that accompanied the division of Punjab between India and Pakistan in 1947 had a brutalizing effect. The society in Punjab had been a pluralistic one for 700 years. The impact of the bloody partition chipped away at values which had been an integral part of that society. The brutality was couched in the fabric of sacrifice and gave rise to injustice and insecurity syndromes in the Pakistani part of Punjab.
- Active intervention of state institutions into politics, the judiciary and educational institutions, as well as the demonizing of intellectuals, blunted the possibility to mount a robust challenge to violent extremism.
- The impact of the indoctrination around the Afghan jihad must be acknowledged and not brushed under the carpet. When such an extended endeavor was systematically unveiled by the authorities and supported by a number of political parties, the intellectuals faced an uphill task and the alternative discourse was demonized. The environment had been made such that even those who were not jihadis had sympathies with jihad.
- It was important to look inward, rather than merely being content with blaming the absence of effective responses on colonial rulers, foreign intervention and the Afghan jihad or buying into conspiracy theories.
- The role of the mainstream electronic media in contributing to a counter-violent extremism narrative was conspicuous by its absence. Media had a bias toward entertainment programmes over serious discussion, which it believed did not translate into good ratings for media channels. The mainstream media operated on commercial basis and only showed programmes that they believed the audience wanted to see.

- There was an unequal battle of ideas going on. Some in the intelligentsia had been writing for decades and their ideas had been marginalized. Other attempts at counter-narratives by intellectuals had been responded to in such a manner by extremists that scholars such as Javed Ghamidi had to flee Pakistan because of the threats they faced for speaking their mind. It had been difficult to speak up when even a slightly open-minded view was not stomachable.
- Allowing militant extremist groups that were not supposed to exist in Pakistan and the consequent militancy in the country was a classic case of reaping the whirlwind. Such measures had radicalized society. Things needed to be put back on track.
- Political parties used to be think tanks and took active interest in the training of their cadre. Now political parties were largely operating only through slogans, with no thinking or action behind them. With manifestos becoming meaningless and reason and arguments ending, violence or rhetoric were all that remained.

Recommendations

The participants conceded that space had been lost to extremist elements and recovering that would not be easy. They agreed that while the task at hand might not be easy, the space must be recovered for counter-narratives to gain ground. The main recommendations of the participants included:

- Until the intellectuals in Punjab were engaged and the Sufi literature and Punjab's culture, including its art, music, and sports promoted, this epidemic could not be countered effectively.
- Rigorous and joint efforts were needed by the media, academia and civil society to challenge the narrative of violent extremism. The stakeholders across the board could benefit from being reminded that a rational approach rather than an emotional one would have more traction.
- The political parties had not adjusted their narrative to accommodate key challenges facing the people. These had not been made part of their political agenda. The political parties needed to revisit their manifestoes and focus on the ways to counter violent extremism.

- The role of media was critical because it formed opinions. In the print media, in Urdu and English newspapers, there was still plenty of space. Efforts should be made to identify and utilize wherever spaces were available. The alternative media, including publications and discourse of the civil society, the development sector and academic institutions were generating intellectual debate and discourse that could be benefited from.
- The social media had opened up new space which can and should be used by the scholars. Short and focused messages could be shared quickly and followed.
- An attempt should be made to gravitate towards the discourse emanating from the academia and progressive scholars, rather than being content with the mullah being placed at the centre of the whole epistemic scenario. Universities will have to play an important role and the state will have to revise its policies.
- Introducing study of comparative religions at the university level could address the deficiency of the analysis that was lacking. That analysis could be provided by the modern institutions and not madrassas.
- Academics, intellectuals and thinkers should be reassured that voicing their opinion will not have adverse consequences for their safety. If the reassurance is backed up by a coherent strategy, positive narratives could be encouraged.
- Education wings in the political parties should be actively promoted and used as think tanks to interact with students at the university level. Practical steps need be taken to end violence on campuses so that the discourse returned to the universities.
- Curriculum had a lot to do with developing a tolerant or extremist worldview. The formative years were important for the students but absorbing extremist notions was not age-specific. When the curriculum was affected, the educator also absorbed that the information. The efforts to reverse the narrative should begin with ridding the curriculum of biased and intolerant content.
- Legislation to counter hate speech was a major issue which should be prioritized. Many drafts had been prepared in Punjab but none had reached the floor of the legislature.
- Civilian authorities needed to take ownership of the discourse instead of considering extremism a security challenge to be dealt with by the security or intelligence agencies.

Participants (arranged alphabetically by last name)

Salman Abid	Media
Zameer Afaqi	Media
Sajjid Mehmood Awan	Research Fellow, National Institute of History, Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad
Yaqoob Bangash	Professor of History, Information Technology University Lahore
Iqbal Chawala	Dean, Faculty of Arts & Humanities & Chairman, Department of History, University of the Punjab, Lahore
Saeeda Deep	Executive Director, Peace and Secular Studies, Lahore
Najam u Din	Director, Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, Lahore
Dr Nousheen hamid	MPA PTI
Atif Hashmi	Notetaker, PIPS
Mueen Ul Hassan	Lecturer Punjab College Lahore
Dr Kiran Hassan	Independent Researcher Lahore
Dr. Mehboob Hussian	Assistant Professor, Department of History & Pakistan Studies Punjab University, Lahore
Dr Imdad Hussain	Assistant Professor, Center for Public Policy and Governance, Forman Christian College, Lahore
Shahzada Irfan	Journalist The News International Lahore
Xari Jalal	Special Correspondent Dawn Lahore
Sher Ali Kalti	Journalist, The News International, Lahore
Dr. Tahir Kamran	Professor, Government College University Lahore
Maria Kokab	Social Sector
Muhammad Nisar	Advocate, Lahore High Court
Iqbal Qaiser	Director, Punjab Kojh Garh, Kasur
Rasool Baksh Raees	Professor, Political Science, LUMS Lahore
Amir Riaz	Independent Researcher Lahore
Mudassir Sherazi	Reporter
Sabookh Syed	Journalist, Anchor Person PTV Islamabad
Dr Muhammad Waseem	Professor, Department of Political Science, LUMS Lahore