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## Role of Punjab's literary and cultural institutions in countering extremism

### Summary

- This policy brief summarizes key deliberations of the last of six provincial-level policy dialogues on counter-violent extremism in Punjab organized by Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS). The policy dialogue series was part of the efforts by PIPS to analyze the security and conflict-related issues in Pakistan, with a view to identifying practical ways and means to counter violent extremism.
- The present policy brief focuses on the role of literacy and cultural institutions in countering violent extremism in Punjab.
- In no society could writers, poets, painters, singers and thinkers remain indifferent to any form of extremism, particularly its religious manifestations, not least because the consequences such extremism had directly on their ideals for the creation of a better society.
- A number of literary and cultural institutions established by the government and organizations of writers, poets and thinkers in the cities of Punjab could play a role in challenging the extremist narrative and promoting positive values in society. Their role could not have an overnight effect, but they could save more people from falling prey to an extremist mindset.
- Prevention of extremism needed to be prioritized because once people engaged in violence then weaning them off and rehabilitating them were much more difficult propositions.
- A strategy will need to be planned to control extremism by using the cultural avenues available today, instead of merely thinking of reviving what was there once.
- Punjab's tradition of holding big gatherings at popular events such as Urs (commemoration gatherings) celebrations at the shrines of Sufi saints and cultural fairs had almost died out. A conscious effort was needed to understand the trends explaining why that had happened.
- Social space for dialogue and cultural institutions had decreasing at a time when it should be growing. It is not merely the function of the state but also the people to recover that space.
- Creating narratives for or against was not the state's domain. It was for the thinkers and intellectuals in a society and a failure to create appropriate narratives was a shared failing that everyone needed to own up to and remedy.
- Educational institutions could be a significant starting point for cultural and literary activities and institutions. The educational system was geared towards the pursuit of the highest academic grades rather than balanced development of the individual's personality. Radicalization and intolerance had increased in society in conjunction with the literary and cultural focus diminishing in places of learning. Greater focus on cultural and literary activities was essential if balanced development of the individual was to be achieved.
- Education and curriculum reform should be focused on to achieve balanced development of students.
- The focus should be on cultural activism rather than the proliferation of institutions.
- Administrative measures did not offer solutions to intellectual problems. It appeared that the war on extremism was confined only to military options, administrative measures and intelligence-based operations and ideological or soft measures were being ignored.
- Institutions tasked with cultural activities were not given importance in the larger scheme of governance and giving these entities a more active role might not yield results if they were not given due importance.

## Background

On August 17, 2017, PIPS hosted the last of six Punjab-level dialogue forums aimed at curbing extremism. This final dialogue explored the role of Punjab's literacy and cultural institutions in countering extremism.

Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) considered it important to seek input from the province's 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, five 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, on July 20, 2017, discussed how to ensure that charity ends in safe hands, besides reviewing the role of social welfare organizations in Punjab in countering extremism.
- The fifth dialogue forum, held on August 16, 2017, discussed the intellectual/scholarly trends in Punjab to counter extremism in Punjab.

These dialogues were organized in continuation of the findings of PIPS recommendations on countering violent extremism. In 2017, PIPS unveiled their 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 strategy also called for reviving cultural spaces and including literary subjects in the academic curriculum, to enable students to think more openly about problems in the society.

## Key considerations

The following main points were raised during the deliberations:

- The literati in any society could not remain aloof from the spread of any manner of extremism, including extremism in the name of religion, aimed at shutting down or opposing cultural and intellectual activities and denying space to such activities. It was vital for all people, particularly the perceptive ones in a society, to strive for a tolerant and cohesive alternative.
- Counter-violent extremism which relied only on the use of the state's coercive force lost sight of the need for winning the battle of ideas, which was perhaps even more important.

- Any focus on a potential role for Punjab's literacy and cultural institutions in countering extremism must neither presuppose the existence of such institutions nor exaggerate or overestimate their influence or impact.
- There were a number of literary and cultural institutions established by the government, and several well-known ones comprising writers and intellectuals, in the provincial capital and in many districts of Punjab that could play a role in challenging the extremist narrative and promoting positive values in society. These institutions included Punjab Institute of Language, Art and Culture (PILAC), Iqbal Academy, Lahore Arts Council and similar institutions in many other districts of Punjab, Halqa Arbab-e-Zauq and Anjuman Taraqqi Pasand Musannifeen (Progressive Writers Association), and libraries, among others. Some of these institutions, comprising the literati and thinkers, regularly discussed ways to counter extremism and radicalization.
- The role of these institutions would not have an overnight effect, but it was vital to save more people from falling prey to an extremist mindset. Literary and cultural institutions and initiatives could create an environment where the pull towards extremism, which seemed to be present in at least some parts of Punjab, could be reduced and an alternative narrative created. The story *Arabian Nights* testified to the power of story-telling in countering extremism, where the protagonist dealt with one of the main character's hatred for women in this manner.
- One participant stated that violent extremists were conscious of the challenge the literary and cultural institutions could mount and, therefore, such organizations faced threats and were vulnerable to attacks. Dramatic clubs and music societies of renowned educational institutions in Lahore had faced threats. Threats had also been made against museums for storing and displaying ancient statues.
- It was important to distinguish among various shades of extremists and how they could be countered. The hard-core extremists who had embraced violence might not be swayed, no matter how persuasive an argument or narratives was put forth by the literary and cultural institutions.
- Social space for dialogue and cultural institutions was decreasing at a time when it should be growing. The cultural institution of copal (rural gathering place for leisure and discussion), where Sufi poetry used to be recited, had almost ended and the youth did not have avenues to express themselves. Urban commercialization had affected the social structure and deprived the populace of gathering places where positive cultural and literary interaction could take place. Hazoori Bagh, in front of Badshahi Mosque in Lahore, was one such place where poetry recitation events regularly took place. An administrative order put an end to such gatherings there, reducing the space for people to sit down and talk to each other.
- There was no longer any social or cultural activity in schools, which were coaching their students for marks. Educational institutions could be a significant starting point for cultural and literary activities and institutions. Unfortunately, the contemporary educational system was geared towards the pursuit of the highest academic grades rather than balanced development of the individual's personality. Radicalization and intolerance had increased in society in conjunction with the literary and cultural focus diminishing in places

of learning. Tolerance of the opposing view was no longer inculcated among the students in educational institutions.

- Literature and other cultural expressions spoke to human emotions and could be used both negatively or positively. The cathartic role of literature and cultural expressions in human emotions had long been recognized. Greater role of cultural and literary institutions was essential if balanced development of the individual was desired. That was not to say that everything will be fixed with the presence or more active role of these institutions. However, these could provide alternative and positive outlets to the youth and protect them from developing an extremist or radical outlook.
- Out of 34 public universities in Punjab, around half currently operate without vice-chancellors, demonstrating ambivalence towards the role and working in places of higher learning.
- The focus should be on cultural activism rather than the proliferation of institutions. Campaigns might not be so effective at the outset because cultural institutions in the public sector had generally lacked that initiative in recent years. Public sector institutions were known to narrow their scope too much, for example excluding music and dance, even though these had been part of the local cultural expression for hundreds of years.
- There was high likelihood that many of Punjab's youth, within educational institutions or outside, who interacted with positive literary and cultural expressions might not get weapons training or join the cadres of violent extremists. Prevention of extremism needed to be the focus because once people engaged in violence then weaning them off and rehabilitating them were much more difficult propositions.
- Engaging in cultural and literary activities could play a part in reducing radical thoughts and extremism among people on the basis of language, political thought, ethnic identity and religious or any other identity marker that could divide people into groups.
- The scope and importance of cultural institutions in the overall governance system needed to be clearly understood. The imbalance in governance and the prevailing lack of importance attached to such institutions in the public sector could make them less effective.
- The government and state institutions had often considered extremism a mere security issue and culture was seen in the security context. Allowing people space to operate might lead to the emergence of many forms of dialogue.
- The results that the literary movement and the cultural institutions could yield will be long term, in the form of putting forth an alternative narrative and promoting messages of social cohesion. Since the Punjab took great pride in its Sufi poetry, the same could be used to promote positive values in society.
- Revival of culture was easier said than done. Punjab's very strong tradition of cultural fairs, which was not confined to big cities, had receded greatly. Unique skills had been lost and artists had been uprooted, died or lost their livelihoods. Creating alternatives was far from straight forward. Platforms for

presenting artists' work were lacking, complicating the efforts on where that work would be presented.

- It was hoped that the revival of these institutions, whose role had been greatly reduced over time, could gradually push extremism back. The effort might take many years of hard work with the children in schools today to make sure that their attitude and outlook are more humanistic compared to that of today's youth.
- Culture was not a fixed thing; it was constantly evolving. In the changing circumstances, it would perhaps not be possible to revive the cultural fairs of the past in the same manner. Instead of dwelling on the past and being nostalgic, new avenues for engagement and cultural interaction could be considered. Technology applications like WhatsApp and Twitter were part the culture today and could be used to promote peace and tolerance. With the people's lives becoming busier, short stories, one-minute films and 140-odd character tweets could appeal to them.
- Media today was largely activity-based and showed only the events which took place. If there was no cultural activity it would not have that focus in its programmes. Media in Pakistan now was an industry which offered what it thought people wanted to see.
- The local language should be promoted and taught in schools so that the messages of tolerance from the Punjabi Sufi poetry became readily accessible to the youth. Unlike provinces such as Sindh, no local language newspapers or channels were available in Punjab.
- Punjab's tradition of holding Urs (commemoration gatherings) celebrations at the shrines of Sufi saints and popular events including big fairs had almost died out. A conscious effort was needed to understand the trends explaining why that had happened. Security concerns had led to many Urs being discontinued. Many people had distanced themselves from large public gatherings for security reasons, as well. For instance, since a May 2005 suicide bombing at the Imam Bari shrine in Islamabad, the Urs celebrations there had been discontinued.
- With security alerts of imminent terrorist attacks in big cities frequently being issued, parents did not want to risk sending their children to big open places. Students were growing up looking at violence and parents trying to protect them.
- Mere administrative measures could not offer solutions to intellectual problems. Their solutions were also to be found in the intellectual discourse. It appeared that the war on extremism was confined only to military options, administrative measures and intelligence-based operations and ideological or soft measures were being ignored.
- According to a famous saying if the government was doing something and it was not connected with the intelligentsia then it was either a failing state or the intellectuals were losing interest. If either scenario was true for Pakistan it was a worrying scenario.
- The fact should be recognized that creating the narrative was not the state's undertaking. It was for the thinkers and intellectuals in a society and a failure

to create appropriate narratives was a shared failing that everyone needed to own up to and take on as a challenge. The counter-narratives should rely on all available mediums.

- Alternative avenues vital to escape extremism, such as sports, drama and open theatre were on the retreat. The cultural festival of Basant had been wound up. Playgrounds were becoming a luxury. Efforts to improve those must be made on priority. In diverting resources to the counter extremism effort, reliance on fiction, literature, poetry and various artistic expressions could yield good results.
- The curriculum and courses in Punjab continued to include material that had been characterized as feeding biases and intolerance. Reform of curriculum was part of the National Action Plan (NAP) to counter terrorism but had not been given due consideration.
- In the last few years, a high number of book exhibitions had been held after a long time. Such events should not be confined to the cosmopolitan cities only.
- Extremism could not be rooted out until the people were given their rights and human dignity was given primacy.

### Recommendations

The participants were in agreement that cultural institutions and expressions and literary activities geared towards creation of a positive-thinking society could be of great value in challenging extremism. They expressed concern that the war on extremism seemed to be confined only to military options, and ideological or soft measures were being ignored. The main recommendations made by the participants included:

- Instead of making education merely grade-oriented, schools needed to serve as nurseries for the poets, writers and thinkers of tomorrow. Literary and cultural activities and focus should be reintroduced and emphasized on a policy level. Educational institutions should have a full environment of culture, that was once there. These institutions' focus should be on balanced growth of the individual. Extra-curricular activities, literary sessions, and arts and culture training arrangements should be present. Such work could only be done by the government, which was still the biggest service provider of education in Punjab.
- Revival of cultural activities that had been absent from schools and colleges should be an important part of the counter-extremism strategy along with the revival of fine arts and focus on literary activities. Children's education should be geared towards inculcating in them positive values and not merely making them proficient in English or have better grades. They must be taught that success at all cost might be undesirable. They should also be trained to appreciate and embrace diversity.
- The curriculum and courses developed by the Punjab Text Book Board should be minutely scrutinized to identify biases.
- The first target of extremists had been women. An antidote to that was women's empowerment in society and giving them space to progress and

express themselves. Extremists could not occupy or take over by force a society where women had an active role.

- Writers and poets should consistently use new tools in the battle of ideas to counter extremism. The drama and theatre should also utilize new tools, including short videos on social media. The growing number of young social media users in Punjab and across the country should be engaged and harnessed in the counter-extremism enterprise.
- While prioritizing what our cultural institutions should do, what their role had been so far must be kept in mind. Counter-extremism efforts should recognize the state's narrative over the last 40 years, when a particular discourse was cultivated through drama, other art forms and curriculum. In order to undo that damage, realistic and relevant short-, medium- and long-term goals should be developed and implemented in consultation with civil society and writers, thinkers, and intellectuals and a counter-narrative developed. A coherent strategy needed to be laid out in consultation with all stakeholders to check extremism through the use of the cultural avenues available today, instead of merely thinking of reviving what was there once.
- Poets and writers should use their literary prowess to emphasize the basic human values in their work and remind the authorities and the populace of the importance of ensuring human rights for all as a vital condition for social justice, equality and an anti-dote to violence and alienation in society.
- The role of physical infrastructure in providing avenues and platforms to the literati was vital. The provincial and local governments could and must provide that infrastructure in the districts and tehsils. If the governments merely changed their worldview and attitude and understood that human needs also included cultural activities it could lead to positive outcomes. Even if they did not provide the resources but only changed their attitudes—acknowledging that our dance and musical tradition was thousands of years old and should be treasured—many positive changes could come.
- The culture of reading and using libraries needed to be revived. Access to libraries should be furnished beyond the main cities as well and these institutions should stay open till late night. New libraries equipped with modern technology will enable readers to engross with facts, instead of relying on half-backed assumptions.
- Media should be persuaded to play its due social role in the battle against extremism, which was, as much as anything, a battle of ideas. There were nearly three dozen news channels in Pakistan. Not one aired any cultural or literary programmes. The authorities should compel them under the law to have a specific ratio of time allocated to such programmes. Media could play an important role by airing programmes for various age groups, including young children, which highlight the human values that were important for development of a good human being in society. They should focus on providing alternatives and ending despondency in thinking.

- Steps to promote the local language should be made so that the messages of tolerance from the Punjabi Sufi poetry became readily accessible to the youth.
- More importance should be attached to cultural and literary institutions in the governance scheme and must not be treated as less important elements of the state machinery.
- The government should encourage and facilitate the holding of book exhibitions and cultural and literary festivals in small cities and towns at least once a year, if not more frequently to revive interest in cultural expressions and book reading.

### Participants (arranged alphabetically by last name)

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Sr No	Name	Organization
1.	Jamil Ahmad	Deputy Director, Urdu Science Board Lahore
2.	Zulfiqar Ali	Official, Urdu Science Board Lahore
3.	Javed Altaf	Member, Progressive Writers Association, Lahore
4.	Chaudhary Anwar	Member, Pakistan Minorities Teachers Association, Lahore
5.	Munsif Awan	Lawyer and Chairman Justice Party Lahore
6.	Sajjad Bhatti	Lawyer, Lahore High Court
7.	Muhammad Bilal	Lecturer, University of Central Punjab, Lahore
8.	Muhammad Asim Butt	Resident Director , Pakistan Academy of Letter
9.	Iqbal Haider Butt	Youth & social development consultant Lahore
10.	Tahira Habib	Director, Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, Lahore
11.	Atif Hashmy	Researcher
12.	Muhammad Hussain	Assistant Fellow, Al-Mawrid Lahore
13.	Qazi Javed	Director, Institute of Islamic Culture Lahore
14.	Miusarrat Kalaunchi	Educationist, Lahore
15.	Tabassum Kashmiri	Professor, Government College Lahore
16.	Maria Kokab	Director, Home Net Pakistan, Lahore
17.	Ghulam Muhammad	Chairman, Punjab Quran Board Lahore
18.	Kifayat Pervaiz	Pakistan Minorities Teachers Association, Lahore
19.	Sadia Qureshi	Columnist, Lahore
20.	H.M. Junaid Raza	Official, Urdu Science Board, Lahore
21.	Jahangir G Sahotra	Member, Pakistan Minorities Teachers Association, Lahore
22.	Zafar Shaheen	Program Officer, SOJLA Multan
23.	Dur-e-Shahwar	Coordinator, All Pakistan Women Association (APWA) Punjab
24.	Fakhira Tehreem	Journalist, Daily Jhang Lahore
25.	Dr Amjad Tufail	Assistant Professor of Psychology, MAO College, Lahore
26.	Mueen Ul Hassan	Professor, Punjab College Lahore
27.	Farhan Khan	Journalist, HD 92 Lahore