From the Pulpit to Ak-47: Sectarian Conflict in Jhang, Pakistan

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Abstract

The paper employs a primordial perspective to present a fresh understanding of Shia Sunni conflict in Pakistan by focusing on the issue as it emerged in the Jhang district of Punjab. While acknowledging the role of rapid socio economic change in intensifying violence, the paper highlights the role of sectarian identities and the boundaries produced by these sectarian identities in giving birth to sectarian strife. In this regard, using Hayden's concept of 'Antagonistic Tolerance', the paper employs a historical and anthropological approach to understand the sectarian violence in a localized setting.

Introduction

The sectarian conflict in Pakistan has manifested itself in various forms since the country's inception in 1947. After the partition of the subcontinent, Pakistan emerged as a Muslim majority state with more than 90 percent of the population being the followers of Islam.[1] The Muslim population of the

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1 M.D. Ahmed, "The Shias of Pakistan" in *Shi'ism, Resistance and Revolution,* (ed.) Martin Kramer (London: Mansell Publishing Limited, 1987), pp. 275-88.

country is divided largely into the Sunni and Shia sects with Shias forming 15 to 20 percent of the total population.[2]

The Shias who form a minority sect in the country were concerned with religious discrimination even before Pakistan came into being. In fact, immediately after the Lahore resolution in 1940, which set the ground for a separate homeland for the Muslims of the subcontinent, Shia leaders asked Muhammad Ali Jinnah for the provision of safeguards for the protection of religious rights of their community in Pakistan.[3]

These political concerns took an overtly violent turn in the 1980s after the Iranian Revolution and Zia's Islamization campaign which was based on a narrow interpretation of the Sunni Islamic law.[4] Political violence between the Shias and Sunnis rose drastically during the next two decades whereby the two sectarian groups organized themselves in militant organizations which promised political and religious empowerment to their respective sects in light of the 'Islamic' way of life. This empowerment was to be achieved by marginalizing the followers of the opposing sect through political or militant action.[5]

Militant action, involving armed attacks on the members of the opposing sects has resulted in a heavy loss of life on both sides. It is estimated that between 1990 and 2002, 992 people lost their lives in sectarian conflicts around Pakistan;

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2   Mariam Abou-Zahab, "The Politicization of the Shia Community in Pakistan in the 1970s and 1980s" in *The Other Shiites: From the Mediterranean to Central Asia,* ed. Alessandro Monsutti, Silvia Naef and Farian Sabahi (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), pp. 97-114.

3   Andreas Rieck, "The Struggle for Equal Rights as a Minority: Shia Communal Organizations in Pakistan, 1948-1968" in *The Twelver Shia in Modern Times,* ed. Rainer Brunner and Werner Ende (Leiden: Brill, 2001), pp. 268-83.

4   See Juan Cole, *Sacred Space and Holy War: The Politics, Culture and History of Sh'ite Islam* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002) and Moonis Ahmar, "Sectarian Conflicts in Pakistan", *Pakistan Vision,* Vol.9, No.1 (2008). pp. 1-19.

5   Syed Vali Reza Nasr, "International Politics, Domestic Imperatives and Identity Mobilization: Sectarianism in Pakistan" *Comparative Politics,* Vol.32, No.2 (Jan 2000), pp. 171-90.

60% of them belonging to the minority Shia sect. Recent estimates claim that 1,149 people were killed in 461 incidents of sectarian violence throughout the country between 1997 and 2006. 773 of the total killed belonged to the Shia sect while 376 were Sunnis.[6] In 2012 so far, 84 incidents of sectarian violence have been reported in which 304 people were killed and 312 injured. Majority of the victims belonged to the minority Shia sect.[7] Hence, over the years sectarian violence has become an important medium through which the Shias and Sunnis in Pakistan try to assert their dominance on the 'other'. The struggle to dominate the other through control of the Islamist discourse and redefinition of state- society relations has brought about major changes in the practice of Islamist politics in Pakistan.[8] This shift towards violent Islamist politics in Pakistan can be understood by studying the root causes of sectarian militancy in the country.

The studies of sectarian conflict in Pakistan have focused extensively on macro level phenomena such as Zia's Islamization, the Iranian Revolution, the Iran Iraq war and the Afghan jihad as determining factors in the Shia Sunni conflict. Although extremely important in explaining the external influences fuelling the conflict, these analyses leave much to be desired towards understanding the local dynamics of the conflict.[9] It is here that an Anthropological approach, with its focus on the local dynamics of politics and

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6   Muhammad Waseem, Tahir Kamran, Mukhtar Ahmed Ali and Katja Riikonen, *Dilemmas or Pride and Pain: Sectarian Conflict and Conflict Transformation in Pakistan* (Religions and Development, Working Paper 48, 2010).

7   "Sectarian Violence in Pakistan 1989-2012", Source: http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/pakistan/database/sect-killing.htm

8   Syed Vali Reza Nasr, "The Rise of Sunni Militancy in Pakistan: The Changing Role of Islamism and the Ulama in Society and Politics" *Modern Asian Studies.* Vol.34, No.1 (2000), pp. 139-80.

9   Mariam Abou-Zahab, "The Shia Sunni Conflict in Jhang (Pakistan)" in *Lived Islam in South Asia: Adaptation, Accommodation and Conflict,* (ed.) Imtiaz Ahmed and Helmut Reifeld (New Delhi: Social Science Press, 2004). pp. 135-48.

power can be indispensible in understanding Shia Sunni conflict in its place of origin, the Jhang district in the Punjab province of Pakistan.

Theoretical Considerations

This essay will attempt to understand the Shia Sunni strife in Pakistan by focusing on the local dynamics of the conflict as it emerged in Jhang. The focus on the conflict at the local level will not neglect its larger dimensions as the sectarian conflict in Jhang cannot be studied in isolation from its national and regional dimensions.[10] Therefore, the theoretical considerations for understanding the sectarian conflict in Jhang will focus on the conflict at the local level between the members of the two opposing groups or sects, the role of state in mediating or addressing the conflict and the influence of external factors like international politics. At an ideological level, the sectarian conflict in Jhang will be explained through a combination of both 'primordial' and 'instrumental' approaches.[11]

The primordial approaches focus on the deep sense of belonging that characterize a particular group based on shared beliefs, values and historical memories which place them in opposition to other groups sharing a different outlook.[12] Frederick Barth's[13] work on boundaries between ethnic groups can be helpful in understanding sectarian identities from a primordial perspective. According to Barth, persistence of boundaries distinguishing two social groups remains, in spite of there being a flow of personnel across them. Interaction across boundaries in a social system based on ethnic or in this case sectarian identities does not result in the dissolution of these boundaries rather the distinctions separating the two social groups are built inside the social system. In this context, sectarian identities are neither a

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10 Muhammad Waseem, *et.al. Dilemmas or Pride and Pain*.

11 Nasr, "International Politics, Domestic Imperatives and Identity Mobilization", pp. 171-90.

12 *Ibid*.

13 Frederick Barth, "Introduction" in *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries,* (ed.) Frederick Barth (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1969), pp. 9-38.

'smoke screen behind which there is a clash of material interests' nor *just* a political trick through which leaders seek to advance their political goals. In fact, religious meaning and practice play an important role in the construction of sectarian identities.[14]

In the case of Shia Sunni conflict, the immediate causes of violence between the sects in particular cases can be identified as a clash of material interests but the roots of the conflict evade socio economic explanations. The prevailing socio economic scenario can exacerbate or contain violence between the members of the two sects in various contexts but the underlying antagonism remains. One of the most common manifestations of this fact is the use of religious interpretations to reveal schisms or boundaries by declaring the opposing sect as 'beyond the pale' of Islam. Thus by dehumanizing the opposing sect to the status of the 'other' or 'infidel', violence can be perpetrated against it.[15]

In the context of underlying ideological differences which can be exacerbated or contained in changing political and economic conditions, the existence of peaceful relations between Shias and Sunnis can be conceptualized in terms of what Robert Hayden has called 'Antagonistic Tolerance'. In other words the social relations between the two sects during peace are marked by 'a passive "tolerance" as non interference rather than an active "tolerance" as embrace of the other'.[16] Thus, Shia Sunni conflict in Jhang can be seen as a constant interplay of competing sectarian forces

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14   Peter Van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

15   Farida Shaheed, "The Pathan-Muhajir Conflicts, 1985-6: A National Perspective" in *Mirrors of Violence: communities, Riots and Survivors in South Asia,* ed. Veena Das (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 194-214.

16   Robert Hayden, "Antagonistic Tolerance: Competitive Sharing of Religious sites in South Asia and the Balkans" in *Current Anthropology,* Vol. 43, No.2 (April 2002), pp. 205-31.

appearing in the form of shifting patterns of power relationships between the two sects.[17]

The second aspect of the theoretical orientation adopted in the paper focuses on instrumental aspects whereby the role of political agents involved in the conflicts is highlighted. Mobilization of sectarian identities is always undertaken in view of certain political and economic goals. In this context the role of political agents who seek to benefit from such a mobilization cannot be overlooked.[18] However, the mobilization of difference between the clashing sects cannot simply be understood as an act of political agents, dissociated from the specific historical and political conditions in which the mobilization has occurred.[19] This assertion fits in with the context of Shia Sunni conflict in Pakistan. The mainstream assertion of sectarian identities in national politics by the Shias and Sunnis of Pakistan, resulting in a change in the scale and nature of disputes from 'arguments on doctrinal issues to full-fledged sectarian conflict'[20] needs to be seen in its specific historical context. The focus on historical context allows us to consider the role of macro analytical factors like the state in addressing the issue of sectarian conflict in the country.

The role of the state in responding to the sectarian conflict cannot be overlooked in an analysis of sectarian conflict in Pakistan. In this context, the conceptualization of the state as an overarching presence completely dissociated from the society needs to be revised. The classical conceptualization of the state as an independent entity pitted against the society overlooks the complexity in the interfaces between the state and social actors. For instance, various interactions between the states and the society do not end up

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17   See James Beckford, *Social Theory and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

18   Nasr, "International Politics, Domestic Imperatives and Identity Mobilization", pp. 171-90.

19   Veer, *Religious Nationalism*.

20   Nasr, "International Politics, Domestic Imperatives and Identity Mobilization", pp. 171-90.

with the state imposing its will on the social forces it seeks to control. In a complex arena of interactions the state may adopt various policies whereby it may end up supporting some social groups over others.[21] The role of the state as an impersonal actor involved in the formulation and implementation of policies focuses only on its formalized bureaucratic aspects. This overlooks the various negotiations that transform and re-interpret the state policies as it comes to interact with different social groups with varying interests.[22] In this scenario the role of the Pakistani state in addressing the issue of sectarian conflict makes an interesting case in point.

The Pakistani State, like many other post colonial states is based on the Westminster model. In this model, the state is considered to be the upholder of morality and justice, a neutral actor that seeks to control disputes and redress the grievances through rehabilitation of those affected by violence.[23] In the context of sectarian violence in the country, the Pakistani state strayed far from this ideal conceptualization as it engaged in the process of sectarian identity mobilization. In this way, the Pakistani state, unable to control the ensuing violence between the Shias and Sunnis followed a policy of divide and rule by manipulating the contending forces and supporting one group against the other.[24]

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21   Joel Midgal, Atul Kohli and Vivienne Shue, "Introduction: Developing a State in Society Perspective" in the *State Power and Social Forces: Domination and Transformation in the Third World,* ed. Joel Midgal, Atul Kohli and Vivienne Shue. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 1-4.

22   Joel Midgal, "The State in Society: An Approach to Struggles in Domination" in *State Power and Social Forces: Domination and Transformation in the Third World,* ed. Joel Midgal, Atul Kohli and Vivienne Shue (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 7-36.

23   Muhammad Waseem, *et.al. Dilemmas or Pride and Pain.*

24   Nasr, "International Politics, domestic Imperatives and Identity Mobilization", pp. 171-90.

The Birth of Shia-Sunni Conflict in Jhang

The Shias and Sunnis share the fundamental principles of Islam based on the belief in divine unity, the Prophet Muhammad and the Quran. The differences arise at the issue of the succession to the leadership of the community after the passing away of the Prophet. Immediately after the demise of the Prophet Muhammad, a small group of people designated Ali, the cousin and son in law of the Prophet as the leader of the Muslims. This designation was based on testament and appointment. These people became known as the partisans (Shias) of Ali. A large majority of the Muslims disagreed with this appointment and elected Abu Bakr as the successor to the leadership of the community after the Prophet. They claimed that the Prophet had left no clear injunction regarding his succession therefore the new leader of the community had to be chosen through consensus. These people became known as 'the people of prophetic tradition and consensus of opinion' (Ahl e Sunnah Wal Jamma).[25]

The disagreements over the succession to the prophet culminated in the Battle of Karbala in which Ali's son Hussain was killed by the Ummayad Army. Shias around the world mourn his killing by holding processions and liturgies in which they curse the rulers in Islamic history who were oppressive to the Shia cause. This results in conflicts with Sunnis who revere many of the personalities vilified by the Shias.[26] These deep rooted political and ideological differences divide the Islamic world largely into two schisms or sects.

The prevalence of Shia Islam in Jhang and adjoining areas can be traced back to the Abbasid period. Omar bin

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25   Mukhtar Ahmed Ali, *Sectarian Conflict in Pakistan: A Case Study of Jhang* (Colombo: Regional Centre for Strategic Studies, 1999).

26   See Suroosh Irfani, "Pakistan's Sectarian Violence: Between the Arabist Shift and Indo-Persian Culture" in *Religious Radicalism and Security in South Asia,* ed. Satu Limaye, Mohan Malik and Robert Wirsing (Honolulu: Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies, 2004), pp.147-69 and Kamran Scott Aghaie, *The Martyrs of Karbala: Shi'i Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran* (Washington: University of Washington Press, 2004).

Hafas, the governor of Jhang was a clandestine supporter of the Fatimide Shia dynasty in Persia. He was influential in spreading Shia influence in the areas of Sindh and Shorkot, the latter now a *Tehsil* (subdivision) of the Jhang District. After Hafas, an Ismaili Shia dynasty called the Carmathians set up their government in Multan. It was during this period that the Shia sectarian identity became strongly entrenched in major parts of Southern Punjab including Jhang. During this historical epoch, sectarian differences provided a rationale to conquer different territories. Hence, Mahmud of Ghazni a Sunni conqueror labeled the Carmathians as heretics and conquered Multan.[27]

After taking over Multan, Mahmud replaced the Shia Carmathian prince with a Sunni ruler. This was the earliest Shia Sunni conflict in the Southern Punjab region of the subcontinent now part of Pakistan. The Sunni government in Multan did not last long and had to be re-conquered by the Ghauri dynasty which reinstated a Sunni rule in the region. However, years of Carmathian rule in Multan and adjoining areas left a deep Shia impact on the region.[28]

The Local Dynamics of Sectarianism in Jhang

During the time of partition of the Indian subcontinent, Jhang was under the strong influence of landlords or *jagirdars*. Immediately after partition, the state of Pakistan, lacking effective state machinery relied heavily on the landed elites in establishing law and order in the rural areas. This was a continuation of the roles played by the landlords in the colonial context. These developments allowed the land owning class to evolve into a 'vigorous political force' in the newly independent state of Pakistan.[29]

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27   See Anne Marie Schimmel, *Islam in India and Pakistan* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1982) also Abou-Zahab, "The Shia Sunni Conflict in Jhang", pp. 135-48. and Ali, *Sectarian Conflict in Pakistan*.

28   Murray Titus, *Islam in India and Pakistan* (Calcutta, YMCA Publishing House, 1959)

29   See Youssef Choueiri, *Islamic Fundamentalism* (London: Pinter, 1990) and Syed Vali Reza Nasr, 'Pakistan: State, Agrarian Reform and Islamization' *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society,* Vol.10, No.2 (1996), pp. 249-72.

The District Jhang, like other canal colonies of Punjab inherited a patron client system of agrarian economy that shared many features of feudalism'. The power of the landlords extended beyond economic control as they had a personal capacity for sanctioned violence along with considerable influence on state agencies like the Police.[30] The sectarian balance of power in this context was especially in the favor of Shias as Jhang's predominantly agrarian economy was dominated by Shia landlords who were 'native' to the region.[31] The influence of Shia landlords had further been buttressed by the establishment of Lyallpur (Faisalabad) and Montgomery (Sahiwal) as towns of central importance in the region. This changed Jhang's importance as a central seat of government in Southern Punjab to a peripheral 'feudal' region in the colonial and post colonial scenario.[32]

The sharecroppers and tenants of the Shia landlords were largely Barelvi Sunnis who followed a syncretistic version of Islam, sharing features of both Shia and Sunni sects. It is reported that before the outbreak of sectarian violence between the two sects, both Shias and Sunnis participated in Muharram rituals which were considered a part of the local culture of Jhang. In this context, syncretism of religious practices of the two sects is often presented as a 'time of complete cultural and spiritual harmony.[33] However, this assumption overlooks the fact that syncretic religious practices are often a way of negotiating identities and hegemonies in various contexts which may include conquest or domination by a particular group as in the case of political domination by Shia landlords in Jhang. Syncretism therefore

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30   Ronald .J. Herring, "Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and the 'Eradication of Feudalism' in Pakistan" *Comparative Studies in Society and History,* Vol.21, No.4 (1979), pp. 519-57.

31   Muhammad Qasim Zaman, "Sectarianism in Pakistan: The Radicalization of Shi'i and Sunni Identities" *Modern Asian Studies.* Vol.32, No.3 (1988), pp. 689-716.

32   Ali, *Sectarian conflict in Pakistan.*

33   Abou-Zahab, "The Shia Sunni Conflict in Jhang", pp. 135-48. Also see Muhammad Waseem, *et.al. Dilemmas or Pride and Pain.*

may just be a strategic and morally justified political manoeuvre adopted to fit in different political or historical contexts. This means that synthesis or adaptations that take place in particular contexts can be changed or disassembled with changing circumstances. In case of syncretic religious practices, the role of agents concerned with the defence of religious boundaries cannot be overlooked. The anti syncretic discourse of these religious authorities stresses the authenticity and purity of certain religious traditions which are considered uncontaminated.[34]

In Pakistan, the discourse about religion in rural areas is largely influenced by two major conceptualizations. The first considers rural Muslims as illiterate, uncivilized or *jangli* whereby their practice of Islam is contaminated by superstitious beliefs in *pirs* (spiritual leaders), ignorance of Islamic law and inclination towards religious practices which may not have an 'Islamic' origin. The second conceptualization focuses on the simple and straightforward character of the rural people who follow the true tradition of Islam.[35] In the context of Jhang, the former conceptualization gained strength whereby the Sunni clerics accused the local population of indulging in heretical religious practices that were influenced by Shia rituals and had no place in the puritanical version of Sunni Islam.[36]

These calls for a return to a purist Sunni Islam were not met with enthusiasm initially because of the political strength of the Shia landlords. In fact influenced by the *tabarra* movement in the United Provinces in India, the Shia landlords of Jhang, following the tradition of Shias of Lucknow publically criticized the companions of the Prophet namely the first three Caliphs whom the Sunnis held in high

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34 Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw, "Introduction: Problematizing Syncretism" in *Syncretism/ Anti- Syncretism: The Politics of Religious Synthesis,* ed. Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 1-26.

35 Richard Kurin, "Islamization of Pakistan: A View from the Countryside", *Asian Survey,* Vol.25, No.8, pp. 852-62.

36 See Waseem *et.al., Dilemmas or Pride and Pain.*

regard.[37] This state of affairs was altered by certain demographic and political developments in Jhang.

The Shia hegemony in Jhang was disturbed by the influx of refugees from India, most of them coming from Indian provinces of Rohtak, Hisar, Gorgaon and Panipat. These migrants were highly charged by religious sentiments which had developed under the influence of Islamic revivalist movements like the Deobandi movement which was virulently anti Sufi[38] and anti Shia. Furthermore, participation in the Independence Movement had made them politically motivated. These migrants took over property in the urban areas left over by the Hindus who had migrated to India.[39] This change in the socio economic environment of Jhang carried immense potential to unleash sectarian violence by invoking sectarian boundaries or differences which had remained suppressed due to an established status quo.

Arrival of migrants in Jhang was followed by the introduction of electoral politics in Pakistan. The spread of democracy in pre-industrial societies undermines the established system of domination between superiors and inferiors in a particular context.[40] Hence, electoral politics which relies on the mobilization of the majority to form a government carries immense potential to marginalize or exclude the members of the minority even if it dominated previously.

The earliest manifestation of political mobilization to challenge the Shia hegemony came in the 1950s when Maulana Ghulam Hussain, a Deobandi cleric started his anti

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37   Arun Sinha, "Shia Sunni Conflict" *Economic and Political Weekly,* Vol.13, No.45 (1978), pp. 1841-42.

38   See Elizabeth Sirreyeh, *Sufis and Anti Sufis: The Defence, Rethinking and Rejection of Sufism in the Modern World* (Surrey: The Curzon Press, 1999).

39   Abou-Zahab, "The Shia Sunni Conflict in Jhang", pp. 135-48. Also see See Waseem *et.al., Dilemmas or Pride and Pain.*

40   Atul Kohli, "Centralization and Powerlessness: India's Democracy in a Comparative Perspective", *State Power and Social Forces: Domination and Transformation in the Third World,* ed. Joel Midgal, Atul Kohli and Vivienne Shue. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 89-107.

Shia crusade by openly criticising the political elite of Jhang of being feudals and Shias. This mobilization initiated the use of sectarian card in the politics of Jhang[41] but did not gain momentum of large scale sectarian movement up until the 1980s. This is largely because of the Anti Ahmediyya movement in Pakistan in which both Shias and Sunnis participated.

After partition, the religious authorities in Pakistan focused their hostilities on the Ahmediyya sect as its religious tenets did not confirm with mainstream Islam. The anti Ahmediyya movement took a violent turn in the 1950s as many clerics, largely from the Sunni sect called for the state declaration of Ahmedis as non Muslims.[42] Jhang became an important center of these protests as after partition the Ahmedis had relocated their religious headquarters from Qadian in Indian Punjab to Rabwa near Chiniot, a *Tehsil* (sub-division) of Jhang. This mobilization of the Sunnis in Jhang district culminated in the formation of *The Tehrik e Khatam e Nabuwat* (TKN), an anti Ahmediyya movement which became a forerunner of the Anti- Shia Sipahe Sahaba Pakistan (SSP). Many leaders of the SSP including its founder Haq Nawaz Jhangawi were members and supporters of TKN.[43]

The anti Ahmediyya campaign around Jhang played a significant role in mobilizing the Sunnis of Jhang in voting for Islamist political parties. During this period, the anti Shia discourse was largely utilized during elections whereby the Shia practice of criticising the Prophet's companions was used as a mobilizing factor against Shia politicians. The overwhelming success of this mobilization was observed in the 1970 elections which were contested in the aftermath of the 'Bab I Umar incident' in which a Shia procession desecrated the name of Umar the Second Rightly Guided

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41   Abou-Zahab, "The Shia Sunni Conflict in Jhang", pp. 135-48. Also see Ali, *Sectarian Conflict in Pakistan.*

42   Khalid Bin Sayeed, "Religion and Nation Building in Pakistan" *The Middle East Journal,* Vol. 17, No.3 (1963), pp. 279-91.

43   Zaman, "Sectarianism in Pakistan", pp. 689-716.

Caliph, who is deeply venerated by the Sunnis.[44] The result of the 1970 election was heavily in favor of Sunnis who won most of the seats for the National Legislature. During this stage of the conflict, the sectarian differences between Shias and Sunnis were forgotten after the elections as the main focus of Islamists was to get the Ahmedis declared as non-Muslims. Hence the boundaries between the two mainstream Islamic sects (Shias and Sunnis) were overwhelmed by the division between the mainstream and 'heterodox' (Ahmeddis) sects. However, a major shift in the dimensions of the sectarian conflict in Jhang was observed in the second half of the 1970s.

In 1974 the Ahmeddis were declared as non-Muslims by the government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. This allowed the majority Sunnis to shift their hostility to Shias, who were perceived as the new heterodox sect after the declaration of Ahmeddis as non Muslims. Furthermore, the introduction of the green revolution technology in the 1960s and 70s in rural Punjab including Jhang brought about a major change in the urban-rural composition of the district as mechanization of farms forced a large number of tenants of Shia landholders to migrate to urban or semi urban areas where they came under the influence of Sunni clerics who called for their support against the Shia ruling elite.[45] Another major factor in the increase in urban middle class in Punjab occurred after the influx of labor to the Middle East during the 1970s and 80s. This burgeoning of middle classes also contributed to a strong entrenchment of sectarian identities after the laborers returned to their home towns.

According to Arjomand[46] migration from rural to urban areas results in increased religious fervor among the migrants as religion provides the displaced with a sense of

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44   Tahir Kamran, "Contextualizing Sunni Militancy in Pakistan: A Case Study of Jhang" *Journal of Islamic Studies,* Vol.20, No.1 (2008), pp. 55-85.

45   Waseem, *et.al., Dilemmas or Pride and Pain.*

46   Sajid Arjomand, "Social Change and Movements of Revitalization in Contemporary Islam" in *New Religious Movements and Rapid Social Change,* ed. James Beckford (London: Sage Publications, 1986)

identity. Under favourable conditions these developments can produce revivalist movements. He gives credence to his point by giving the example of Iran where support of Khomeini's Islamic revolution came largely from the urban centres. In the case of Jhang, a 'revivalist' movement which greatly benefitted from this rural to urban migration was the SSP. This movement, born in a local context gained strength after developments in international and national politics namely the Iranian Revolution and Zia's Islamization radicalized Shia and Sunni identities in the region.

Impacts of National and Regional Political Developments

Although Pakistan after its formation was declared as an "Islamic" state, it was never meant to be a theocracy. In fact the concept of Islam as a guiding light in state activities was created by leaders who themselves were western educated seculars.[47] In this context, state activities like the Ayub regime's modernization or Bhutto's populism were all imbued with an Islamic rhetoric.[48] Zia ul Haq's Islamization however, was different as it aimed to impose a *Nizam e Mustafa* in which the country's political and economic systems were to be transformed in light of the principles of Islam.[49] However, the principles of Islam in this scenario were largely dictated by a narrow interpretation of *Hanafi* or Sunni law. This forced the Shias to take into account their 'doctrinal, social and political interests as distinct from those of the Sunni majority in a state claiming to be Islamic'.[50]

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47 Stephen P. Cohen, "State Building in Pakistan" in *The State, Religion and Ethnic Politics, Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan*, ed. Ali Banuazizi and Myron Weiner (Syracuse-USA: Syracuse University Press, 1986), pp.299-332.

48 Ian Talbot, *Inventing the Nation* (London: Arnold Publishers,2000)

49 John L. Esposito, "Islam: Ideology and Politics in Pakistan" in *The State, Religion and Ethnic Politics, Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan*, ed. Ali Banuazizi and Myron Weiner (Syracuse-USA: Syracuse University Press, 1986), pp. 333-71.

50 Saleem Qureishi, "The Politics of the Shia Minority in Pakistan: Context and Development" in *Religious and Ethnic Minority Politics in South Asia,* ed. Dhirendra Vajpayee and Yogendra Malik (London: Jaya Books, 1989).

The heightened sense of sectarian identity among the Shias of Pakistan was further fuelled by the Iranian Islamic Revolution in 1979 which emboldened them to stand up against the state. The Shias gathered under the political banner of *Tehrik e Nifaz e Fiqah e Jaafria* (TNFJ) (Movement for the Implementation of Shia Law) and demanded that their religious affairs be settled in light of the Shia doctrine. The Shia protest movement culminated in a three day siege of Islamabad where thousands of Shias gathered to protest against the Sunni version of Islamization. The success of this movement reinvigorated the Shia community of Pakistan as they began to reform their religion under the guidance of clerics educated in Iran and Iraq. The new politicized and puritanical version of Shia religion became highly critical of local Shiism which was influenced by South Asian traditions.[51]

The Sunni majority in Pakistan responded to the growing Shia 'threat' by establishing their own vehicle of religious and political mobilization. The Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) was established by Haq Nawaz Jhangawi in 1985 in district Jhang. In this way, the already contested territory of Jhang became the birthplace of sectarian violence in Pakistan.

The radical Islamic discourse professed by Jhangawi and his followers was both anti feudal and anti Shia. It is interesting to note that in this criticism, Shia religion became the 'root of evil' for the SSP as according to SSP stalwarts, Shiism provided the license to the feudals to indulge in a life of 'libertinism and pleasure' at the cost of rural poor. Furthermore, there was a renewed attack on the hybrid or syncretic religious practices of the rural Sunnis who were considered to be under the influence of Shiism. A complete

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51 See *Ibid.*, Mariam Abou Zahab, "The Politicization of the Shia Community in Pakistan in the 1970s and 1980s" in *The Other Shiites: From the Mediterranean to Central Asia,* (ed.) Alessandro Monsutti, Silvia Naef and Farian Sabahi (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), pp.97-114 and Naqvi, "The Controversy about Shaikhiyya Tendency among Shia Ulama in Pakistan" in *The Twelver Shia in Modern Times,* ed. Rainer Brunner and Werner Ende (Leiden: Brill, 2001), pp. 135-49.

abolition of these 'rites of ignorance' became a major agenda of SSP. Shia religion not only became the cause of exploitation of rural peasants but also a medium of the contamination of the true faith of Islam.[52] In this way, the old syncretic formations began to be challenged as the underlying boundaries between the two sects became more prominent.

The state policy of Islamization played a decisive role in revealing the underlying cleavages between the two sects. The state's backing of the Islamization campaign elevated Sunni Islam to the level of state religion. This development adversely affected the acceptance levels of the majority Sunnis to accept minority sects like the Shias as 'worthy partners or competitors in the public sphere'.[53] The new discourse of sectarianism focused on the Shias being presented as 'remote from the true teachings of Islam' thus becoming the new 'other' in the Sunni majority state of Pakistan.[54] In this context, a comparison can be drawn between SSP's Sunni Nationalism and BJP's agenda of *Hindutva* in India which does not consider religious minorities like Muslims and Christians as part of the Indian nation.[55]

The SSP started off by declaring their intention to protect the honour of the companions of the Prophet namely the first three caliphs who were vilified by the Shias. In this context, the SSP took a legislative route whereby a bill was presented in the National Assembly in which it was proposed that vilification of the Prophet's companions would be equivalent to blasphemy. These efforts were focused to lay ground for the declaration of Shias as non-Muslims as the Shias were actively involved in the vilification of some

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52   Zaman, "Sectarianism in Pakistan", pp. 689-716.

53   James Beckford, *Social Theory and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

54   Ahmed, "The Shias of Pakistan" in *Shi'ism, Resistance and Revolution,* ed. Martin Kramer (London: Mansell Publishing Limited, 1987), pp. 275-88.

55   Nasr, "The Rise of Sunni Militancy in Pakistan" pp. 130-80 and Veer, *Religious Nationalism.*

companions of the Prophet. The SSP did not solely rely on political means however, as violent riots were incited in Jhang and other parts of southern Punjab against the Shias.[56]

It is interesting to note that although highly critical of Shia rituals especially Muharram processions, the SSP itself relied heavily on a Shia influenced symbolism in its own campaigns. This was seen during SSP's rallies in which the virtues of the Prophet's companions were celebrated in ways similar to Shia veneration of Imams.[57] A cross border comparison can be made with the *Madhe Sahaba* campaign in Lucknow (India) in which the Sunnis of Lucknow countered the Shia liturgies by holding similar gatherings in which the Prophet's companions were praised.[58]

The rise of a Sunni extremist outfit in Jhang was seen as a strategic asset by the Government of Pakistan which aimed to control the influence of the Iranian Revolution in the country. The SSP sectarian outfit was thus covertly supported by the Pakistan government and its Sunni allies namely Saudi Arabia and Iraq. Saudi princes visiting Southern Punjab on hunting expeditions were instrumental in funding for the establishment of Sunni Seminaries in the region.[59] The involvement of Saudi Arabia and Iraq explains the SSP's attacks on Iranian diplomats and cultural attaches in Pakistan. Hence developments in the international political arena paved way for unleashing a proxy sectarian war on Pakistani soil in which Iran and Saudi Arabia were the major players.[60]

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56   *Ibid.*

57   Zaman, *Sectarianism in Pakistan*.

58   Mushirul Hasan, "Traditional Rites and Contested Meanings: Sectarian strife in Colonial Lucknow" *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.31, No.9 (March 1996), pp. 543-50.

59   Ayesha Siddiqa, "Sipahe Sahaba and Taliban: Brothers in Arms" (*http://criticalppp.com/archives/19450*) Retrieved on: 15th April 2011.

60   Mariam Abou-Zahab, "The Regional Dimensions of Sectarian conflict in Pakistan" in *Pakistan: Nationalism without a Nation,* ed. Christophe Jaffrelot (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 2002), pp. 115-30.

The restoration of democracy in Pakistan after eleven years of Zia's dictatorship (1977-1988) allowed the sectarian groups to contest elections and access the corridors of power at the provincial and national level. The first three democratic elections in Pakistan held in 1988, 1990 and 1993 failed to produce viable parliamentary majorities. This gave leverage to the sectarian groups in negotiating for a place in the coalition governments in the centre and provinces. This is evident from the fact that the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), a liberal left wing political party had to give ministerial positions to SSP candidates from Jhang in the Punjab government. In this way sectarianism became an important tool for the political leaders to serve their political ends and form governments.[61]

The reintroduction of democracy in Pakistan was followed by a dramatic increase in sectarian violence. Sectarian violence, under various democratic regimes claimed 581 lives between 1990 and 1997.[62] The dead included 75 Shia influentials including bureaucrats and community leaders. The assassination of state agents allowed the SSP to pave way for the appointment of Sunni officials in influential positions thereby strengthening its power base in the state bureaucracy.[63] In this way the role of the state changed from a neutral arbiter of conflicts under the colonial and secular regimes to a partial player in the sectarian conflict in Pakistan.[64]

The overt display of sectarianism receded during the Musharraf Era (1999-2008) during which all sectarian

61   Nasr, "International Politics, Domestic Imperatives and Identity Mobilization", pp. 171-90.

62   Irm Haleem, "Ethnicity and Sectarian Violence and the Propensity towards Praetorianism in Pakistan" *Third World Quarterly,* Vol.24, No.3 (June 2003), pp. 463-77.

63   Nasr, "International Politics, Domestic Imperatives and Identity Mobilization", pp. 171-90.

64   Ali, *Sectarian Conflict in Pakistan.* Also see Michael Boivin, "Representations and Symbols in Muharram and Other Rituals: Fragments of Shiite Worlds, from Bombay to Karachi" " in *The Other Shiites: From the Mediterranean to Central Asia,* ed. Alessandro Monsutti, Silvia Naef and Farian Sabahi (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), pp. 149-72.

outfits were banned from operating in the country. By this time both SSP and TJP had lost their charismatic leaderships mostly as a result of assassinations. The events of 11th September 2001 brought further pressure on the sectarian outfits as many of them especially Lashkar e Jhangawi, the militant wing of SSP had links with terrorist groups in Afghanistan.[65] These activities left the militant outfits in Jhang considerably weakened. However, the role of these organizations in revealing the underlying cleavages between sects through ideological mobilization is still effective. This is evident from the fact that in the 2009 by- elections, Rana Sanaullah the Punjab Law Minister held a meeting with the SSP leadership in Jhang to garner political support for a candidate from his political party, the Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N).[66]

Conclusion

The essay has used a combination of primordial and instrumental approaches to present a fresh outlook on the sectarian conflict in Jhang by focusing on the underlying ideological and political differences between the two major sects in Islam. It is important to mention that this essay does not negate the importance of class struggle or *'Biradari'* factors as important contributing factors to the sectarian conflict in Jhang. It only attempts to illuminate an oft-ignored factor, that of sectarian identities and the boundaries produced by these sectarian identities. In the modern state, these sectarian identities are vulnerable to mobilization in the form of sectarian religious ideologies. The mobilized sectarian identities can then be used by the members of the sect to 'develop new positions and patterns to organize activities that were not present previously' (in Barth's words). The sectarian movement in Jhang is a consequence of such identity mobilization.

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65   Mariam Abou-Zahab and Olivier Roy, *Islamist Networks: The Afghan Pakistan Connection* (London: C. Hurst and Co., 2004)

66   Khaled Ahmed, "A Most Dangerous Man", published in *Newsweek Pakistan,* July 29, 2011.

Accounts of sectarian violence focus on a peaceful pre-conflict phase before Zia's Islamization campaign. In this regard, the essay agrees with Waseem et.al's contention that an established status quo prevented the eruption of full scale sectarian violence during different phases of co-existence of the two sects. The essay provides a dynamic account of degrees of what Beckford has termed religious 'accommodation, recognition and tolerance' between the two sects as they changed over time.

A study of changing dynamics of conflict in Jhang reveals that the best political environment for the peaceful co-existence of Shias and Sunnis was under non-democratic conditions. The existence of a status quo under colonial conditions whereby the landlords held political sway over the population provided peaceful conditions of co-existence between the two sects. Introduction of democracy along with the influx of politically motivated immigrants allowed the contestation for political space which culminated in militant violence between Shias and Sunnis. This is also evident from the fact that a sudden eruption of killings and sectarian attacks was observed when democracy was re-introduced in Pakistan following Zia's rule. In this regard the essay agrees with Haydon's contention that 'diversity seems best to thrive under conditions that deny democracy (thus preventing the will of the majority group)'.

The essay attempts to provide a fresh outlook on the role of the state in addressing the issue of sectarian conflict in the country. In this regard, the role of the Pakistani state challenges the ideal conceptualization of state as a neutral entity that attempts to control conflicts by taking action in a non-partisan manner. In the context of the Shia Sunni conflict in Pakistan, the state's interaction with the conflicting sects allowed it to manipulate one against the other with the changing dynamics of local and international politics.