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<b>Article:</b>	<b>The Rise of Sectarianism: An Ethnography of Religious Intolerance in Southern Punjab</b>
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### **Abstract**

Pakistan has been experiencing a sharp resurgence in sectarian violence. The upsurge of sectarian loathing can be traced to the emergence of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in the mid-2000s and their coalition with militant sectarian organizations. The consequence of sectarian schism has engendered horrific fallouts such as target killings, bomb blasts, accusations of heresy and misuse of blasphemy laws against the followers of other sects. The current multi-sited ethnographic study was conducted in Karor Lal Eason – a poverty stricken region of Southern Punjab which is considered as a hub of sectarian abhorrence. This article explores the grassroots structure of sectarianism while presenting the forms and expressions highlighting the sectarian repugnance. While employing the methodological triangulation, the participant observation was conducted in the community at numerous places such as homes, shrines, female madrasahs and schools. Also, 30 in-depth interviews were conducted to grasp the native perspectives. The sample was selected using purposive sampling including both genders with varied sectarian, socio-economic and educational backgrounds. The current research suggests that sectarian-based division, hate literature, hate speech and allegations of blasphemy laws are the prominent symbols of sectarian schism in Southern Punjab.

**Keywords:** Pakistan, Southern Punjab, Sectarianism, Intolerance, Blasphemy Law

## Introduction

Sectarianism is one of many competing religious identities in Pakistan. However, the answer to the question that whether religious sectarianism is exclusively a religious category remains elusive in Pakistan. In the wider global arena, religious sectarianism is generally used to refer to prejudice, discrimination and hostility towards individuals or groups of different faiths or religions. However, contemporary scholastic understandings acknowledge sectarianism as a political subject within various countries including Pakistan, Afghanistan, Syria, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arab and Yemen, rather than a theological concept alone (Isakhan, & Zaradona, 2017; Rabi & Muller, 2018). The sectarian schism in Pakistan is the outcome of state policies and the emphasis on the role of religion in state affairs engendering sect-based conflict, which has destabilized the country's political, social and religious landscape (Mishra, 2018; Saeed & Sayed, 2018). The present study aims to provide a grassroots analysis of the nature and structure of sectarianism focusing on Southern Punjab an underprivileged region of Punjab province which has been considered as the epicentre of sectarianism and a breeding ground for militancy in Pakistan (Shahid, 2019).

Sectarianism, intolerance and prejudice are not new phenomena for Pakistani society. Its pedigree traces back to the conception of Pakistan. The basic ambition of the Pakistan Movement was to create a Muslim-majority homeland for the Muslim of India. No significant attention was paid to the very nature of the aspiring state - would it be a religious, secular or a liberal state? Muslim League, which was a non-religious political party, struggled for the creation of a separate homeland employing that the Muslims and the Hindu cannot co-exist due to abiding differences of religious and cultural norms. The perceived differences with the Hindus created social solidarity among the Muslims, and Islam served as a force to motivate the Muslim community for the struggle of an independent state. Contrary to Muslim League, religious parties such as *Jamiat-e-Ulema Islam*, *Jamiat-i-Ulema-i-Hind*, *Jamaat-e-Islami* and *Majlis-i-Ahrarar* strongly opposed the creation of Pakistan. Maulana Maududi, the founder of *Jamaat-i-Islami*, publicly criticized the idea of Pakistan, viewing Muslim nationalism and democracy as secular concepts that are contrary to Islamic teachings (Akbar, 2015; Hamdani, 2016).

However, after the independence, several religious parties who opposed the creation of a separate homeland started to propose Sharia as a guiding principle of governing the newly formed state. According to various historians (Alavi, 2008; Cohen, 2003; Jalal, 1995), Jinnah's liberal vision was hijacked by religious segments who found the newly established country a golden opportunity to advance their orthodox religious philosophies. Objectives Resolution of 1949, which owns significant importance in the constitutional history of Pakistan, served as a lubricant to escalate the fire of religious intolerance and prejudice<sup>i</sup>. Objectives Resolution while emphasising the role of Islam in state affairs also raised religious insecurities for the minorities in Pakistan<sup>ii</sup>. The minorities considered this document as a danger against their free of expression as it may facilitate religious authoritarianism and clerical rule in the country (Mukhtar, 2017). The move towards transforming Pakistan into a true orthodox Islamic state begun during the era of General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq (1977-1988) with the concept of Islamic legislation which includes *Ushar* (Agricultural tax)<sup>iii</sup>, *Zakat* (an obligatory Islamic charity) Islamic banking and Blasphemy law (Haqqani, 2005). General Zia's notorious policies became a source to nurture sectarian hatred in society. In response to these policies, Tehreek-e-Nifaz-e-Fiqh-e-Jafriah (TNFJ)<sup>iv</sup> a Shia sectarian organization criticized and disapproved of Zia's certain measures by launching a countrywide protest against *Zakat* and *Ushar* ordinance<sup>v</sup>. To counter this Shia activism, Zia adopted a policy of promoting the Sunni (Deobandi) sect and their belief system that eventually create sectarian anxiety for other sects including the Shia and Barelvi school of thought. This was the time when mushrooming of sectarian-based militant groups started to emerge and the

prime examples are Sipah-e-Sahaba<sup>vi</sup> (Deobandi), Lashkar-e-Taiba<sup>vii</sup> (Ahl-hadith)<sup>viii</sup> and Tehreek-e-Nifaz-e-Fiqh-e-Jafriah. The situation became more intense when Pakistan embraced America's proxy war against the former Soviet Union during the Afghan War. These sectarian militant groups played an important role in the Afghan War and at the same time they were actively involved in the sectarian conflict on domestic grounds (Imran, 2016).

During the late 90s, the sectarian schism between Sunni and Shia sects intensified. As a consequence of this sectarian antagonism, from 1990 to 1997 almost 422 people were killed in 395 sectarian incidents in Punjab province (Riffat, 2015). Moreover, the catastrophe of September 11 has transformed the political and religious landscape of Pakistan. At that time, the presence of Osama Bin Laden (the prime suspect of September 11) became the principal reason for the US to attack Afghanistan putting an obligation on Pakistan to join them in 'War Against Terrorism' (Murphy, 2014). General Pervez Musharraf (2001-2008) who was struggling for the legitimization of his dictatorial rule took a policy U-turn and joined the United States providing the country's air and land spaces to attack Afghanistan. On the domestic front, General Musharraf started to announce measures against the hard-line religious outfits which were desired partners of the Pakistani state during the Afghan War (Abbas, 2007). He ordered a nationwide crackdown on the sectarian militants. The decision came in the wake of a series of attacks on Shia mosques and Christian churches. General Musharraf banned eight militant groups that included: Jaish-i-Muhammad (Deobandi) Sipah-e-Sahaba (Deobandi), Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (Deobandi) Tehrek-e-Nifaz-i-Shariat-e-Muhammadi (Deobandi), Tehrek-e-Taliban Pakistan (Deobandi), Lashkar-e-Taiba (Ahl-hadith) Tehrek-e-Jafriah (Shia) and Sipah Muhammad (Shia). As a result of the state's operations against militant organizations, Pakistan experienced an intense wave of militancy. The country as a whole was targeted by the militants. Attacks on innocent people in mosques, churches, shrines, schools, and markets are the most prominent tragedies that left a crucial impact on Pakistani society (Institute for Economics and Peace [IEP], 2018).

### **Southern Punjab: A Stair Case toward Extremism**

The region of Southern Punjab became the focus of the world's attention due to the strong presence of the Punjabi Taliban. These militant groups placed their pedigrees in this region during General Zia's government (1977-1988). During his regime, the bigwigs of the Punjabi Taliban fought throughout Afghanistan and Kashmir jihad. The region of Southern Punjab consists of ten districts: Vehari, Multan, Layyah, Bahawalpur, Bahawalnagar, Rahim Yar Khan, Rajanpur, Muzaffar Garh, Khanewal, and Dera Ghazi Khan. The areas included in this regional classification lie on the left side of the Sutlej, the right side of the Indus and some zones located in the areas in-between the Indus and Jehlum (Siddiq, 2013). There is an evolving concern that militant organizations such as Jaish-e-Muhammad, Sipah-i-Sahaba and Lashkar-e Jhangvi may have a strong presence in different parts of Southern Punjab including Dera Ghazi Khan, Rajan Pur and Layyah districts. A prevalent impression is that the increase in militancy across the country may be correlated with a growing number of religious seminaries in the various cities of Southern Punjab. South Punjab was once recognized as a tolerant society, but in the last two decades, it has undergone a serious transformation. Numerous factors such as the state's policy to allow Saudi Arabia and Iran to fight their sect based jihadi proxies on Pakistani soil nurtured the roots of militant culture and sectarian schism in the region (Mahsood, & Kamran, 2017). Furthermore, the absence of rule of law engendered the armed wings of militant organizations to worsening the state of law and order in the area (Mushtaq, Ahmed, Farooq, & Saeed, 2018).

In such circumstances, the competing sectarian identities remain a challenge in Southern Punjab for political, social and religious harmony. The current article employs the social identity theory proposed by two social psychologists Henri Tajfel and John Turner in 1979 as the theoretical framework of this study. Their theoretical underpinning focuses on

three mental processes; social categorization, social identification and intergroup comparison which are involved in creating the identities which eventually socially categorize people in “Us” and “Them” [in-group and out group] (Tajfel, 1982). In this process of social categorization, people classify individuals in various groups to understand the social world. Secondly, the process of social identification decides an individual’s association with a group. The third process, social comparison, is the process by which people compare their group with other groups in terms of prestige and social standing. Tajfel and Turner (1979) argue that an individual always endorses the status of his or her group while holding prejudicial beliefs about the membership of out-groups. Consequently, overstated differences between groups increase stereotypes and attribution biases and intergroup comparison. In the context of Pakistan, this intergroup comparison carries serious theoretical implications to understand the sectarianism in Pakistan. Members of a particular sect perceive other sects as an out-group and hold prejudice and negative beliefs against each other. In order to enhance the self-image and the status of the belonging group every sect endorse their religious practice while considering them as “true followers of Islam” and labelling other sets of practices as *bid’ah*<sup>ix</sup>. In the backdrop of this sectarian antagonism, the present article aims at exploring that what are the different forms and expression of sectarianism in Southern Punjab and how these expressions may lead people toward radicalization?

### **Doing Fieldwork: Ethnography as a Method for Studying Intolerance and Sectarianism**

This article is based on 4 months of ethnographic fieldwork carried out in Karor city, a union council of Tehsil Karor Lal Eason. Tehsil Karor Lal Eason is situated in Southern Punjab and has fourteen union councils comprises of small villages and towns. Tehsil Karor Lal Eason locale of the study is named after a Sufi saint, Hazrat Lal Eason; the grandfather of Hazrat Bahaudin Zakariya. The present study used methodological triangulation in order to achieve credibility and trustworthiness (reliability and validity) which validates the data through multiple sources. To understand the living Islam and the forms and expressions of sectarianism, participant observation was carried out in the different life zones of the community to grasp a holistic picture of living Islam. Everyday life was observed by participating in the activities of everyday life as well as in the marriages and funeral ceremonies to analyse religious expressions and social attitudes. Participant observation (PO) was also conducted in two public and two private schools as well as female madrasahs of various sects. Also, time was spend at the shrines of Hazrat Lal Eason and Shah Ali Rajan and participated in *urs* ceremony.

In the present study, 30 in-depth interviews were also conducted. Purposive sampling was used to select the sample based on characteristics of the population that relates to the study questions (Saumure, Kristie, & Given, 2008). The sample includes 14 females and 16 males belonging to diverse socio-economic and sectarian backgrounds. These individuals include religious leaders (local clerics), educationists, lawyers and politicians and local inhabitants of the area. Considering the sensitivity of the topic, all the participants were adults (eighteen or above eighteen years of age). The majority of the interviews were conducted in the native language (Saraiki) for the ease of interviewees, as they feel comfortable in communicating in their local language and then later these interviews were translated to English. Each interview lasted for about 60-90 minutes. Informed consent was taken both verbally and in written form and to maintain the privacy and ensure confidentiality of the participants, pseudo names are used. After the completion of fieldwork, a thematic analysis was conducted emphasising the identification of themes within data based on coding and labelling (Virginia & Victoria, 2008).

### **The Quandary of Sectarianism in Southern Punjab**

The classification of human beings into distinct groups is a fundamental feature of social perception. But the problem arises when this classification is made on the basis of

prejudice, discrimination and hatred. people perceive others as out groups based on differences in beliefs regarding religion, sect and ethnicity (Maclnnis, & Hodson, 2018). People usually overestimate these differences and show biases against out-groups.

The conflict in Karor Lal Eason is not only inter-sect in nature (between Shias and Sunnis) but also exhibits the intra-sect hatred between Deobandi and Barelvi - Sunni sects who follow the Hanafi school of thought. The fault line between Deobandi and Barelvi can be understood in the abiding differences in their perception of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as omnipotent (*hazir-o- nazir*) and helper (*madadgaar*), light (*noor*) and human (*basher*). The Barelvi Muslims have a strong sentimental attachment with shrines as well. They celebrate *urs*,<sup>x</sup> arrange social fairs, and decorate markets to pay tribute to the Saints to recognize their religious services (Bilal, 2018). People also make vows (*manatt*) and considers the Sufi Saints a source to convey their prayers and wishes to Allah. In Karor Lal Eason this veneration of saints is a vibrant part of religious culture. As Malik and Mirza (2015) argue that people keep deep love and respect for shrines because of the inclusive ideology and social services associated with Sufism. However, Deobandi and Ahl-e-Hadith inhabitants of the areas severely condemn the religious practices of Barelvi Muslims including *milaad* (the birth celebrations of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and *urs* of Saints considering these celebrations as *bid'ah* and polytheistic. On the other hand, both Deobandi and Ahl-e-Hadith do not encourage the religious practices of the Shia community, for example, *Matam* and *Majlis*<sup>xi</sup>. One of the respondents Qari Allah Nawaz belongs to the Deobandi sect who currently serves as a prayer leader at a local mosque argued that the Shia expect us to embrace Hazrat Ali (R.A) equal to Allah Almighty. Another prayer leader Mufti<sup>xii</sup> Kibriya of the Ahl-e-Hadith sect while endorsing the earlier perspective stated that *Matam* and *Majlis* are forbidden in Islam and such practices have no space in religion. The sectarian conflict between Sunni and Shia intensified during the regime of former Prime Minister of Pakistan Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto (1971-1977) and aggravated further during the era of General Zia-ul-Haq (1977-188) who took stern measure to enforce his version of Islamisation that changed both the social and religious landscape of Pakistan. It was during this time that the sectarian gulf became deeper and militant sectarian organization started bloodshed in the country.

### **Hate Speech: An Expression of Sectarian Detestation**

Hate speech is an important expression in Karor city exhibiting biased and negative discourses against other sects. Hate speech can be defined as provocative language, often insulting and contemptuous aims to target an individual or group, and that may or may not include a call to violence. (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2010). The hate speech through the mosques' loudspeakers is the prime source of spreading sectarian based hatred. Friday sermons in this regard are important sites of constructing such discourses when ulama declare beliefs of other sects as *biddah* and level allegations of religious disrespect against each other. However, this is not the only source of hate speech. The distribution of pamphlets, CDs and platforms of social media are other sources of dissemination of sectarian material.

Throughout Southern Punjab, local clerics and prayer leaders are usually considered the most appropriate source for religious education. Yet the fieldwork revealed that a significant number of local clerics and prayer leaders in Karor Lal Eason are actively involved in spreading hate against other sects. The misuse of pulpit and loudspeaker of mosques, shrines and congregation halls on occasions such as Friday and Eid sermons, Ashoora and Urs ceremonies are part of the religious culture of the area. At these event clerics and prayer leaders pass negative and prejudice remarks against other sects to propagate their particular version of Islam. In order to control the provocative religious discourses, one of the proposals suggests the government-sponsored contents to curb hateful substance in the local and national languages to promote of the dignity of the individual as a

natural practice, however, many oppose this considering it state oppression and against the very principles of religious freedom. Sectarian hate towards the Shia sect has been observed at the funeral ceremony of a local belonging to the Deobandi sect when the prayer leader did not allow the Shia Muslims to participate in the funeral prayer. The prayer leader announced, "I hereby declare that all those who belong to the Shia sect must leave the funeral prayer. They are not allowed to observe funeral rituals in any way." After the announcement, the Shia Muslim left the funeral ceremony but later on, they arranged a march to record their protest.

### **The Misuse of Blasphemy Law in Karor Lal Eason: An Expression of Sectarianism**

Another expression of sectarian hatred is the misuse of blasphemy laws. Historically, the Indian Penal Code of 1860 at first presented the concept of 'blasphemy' in the criminal regulations of the joint Indian Subcontinent. According to this law, negative expression against any religion would be regarded as a criminal offence. However, the legislative journey in Pakistan remained different. In 1980, the most sensitive blasphemy law was introduced in the country. According to that law, an individual or a group suspected by the state or any person to disrespect the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) or defiling the Holy Quran would be confined immediately, even prior to an initial investigation. The punishment for this law is death or life imprisonment. In 1992, the Nawaz Sharif government removed the condition of life imprisonment from blasphemy laws of Pakistan and the death sentence was made mandatory. In April 2002, former President of Pakistan General Musharraf decided to introduce reforms in blasphemy laws with slight changes in the procedure. But soon, he was backed down due to huge disapproval against the reform from the religious elite of the country (Abbas, 2007; Husain, 2014).

Numerous incidents regarding the misuse of Blasphemy law have been reported across the country, and especially in Punjab province. The most popular cases include Asia Bibi case - a Christian woman accused of committing blasphemy which eventually became the reason for the assassination of former Governor Punjab Salman Taseer by his bodyguard in 2011, Rimsha Masih case, another Christian woman who was arrested for allegedly burning pages from the Quran. However, a cleric was later arrested for planting pages from the Quran in her bag; another famous case is of a Christian couple (Shama and Shahzad) who was also alleged for blasphemy and burned to death in November 2014. The most surprising fact is that the majority of the victims do not belong to the minority but the Muslim communities. Such as Mishaal Khan murder- a student of journalism in Abdul-Wali Khan University, Mardan and was violently killed by an angry mob over the allegation of Blasphemy. The most recent example of misuse of Blasphemy law is the brutal murder of professor Khalid Hamid in Southern Punjab's city Bahawalpur. The teacher was killed by his student after accusing him of blasphemy and promoting un-Islamic culture. It is a predominant expression that blasphemy allegation is levelled against minorities, however, there are flagrant incidents where complaints were lodged against Muslims. The statistics of blasphemy cases composed through the period of 1986 to 2011 according to which 476 have been logged against Muslims, 479 against Ahmadi, while only 180 cases against Christians were filed (Faruqi, 2011). A police officer in Karor Lal Eason while explaining the misuse of blasphemy law told that a local cleric belonging to the Barelvi sect and a madrasah owner in Karor Lal Eason was accused by a local politician and feudal of Deobandi sect of committing blasphemy (*Toheen-e-Risalat*). The police had to arrest Hussain to save his life, as the feudal and his followers were about to attack Hussain's house. Meanwhile the feudal and his followers continuously harassed the other family members of Hussain and forced them to leave the city. Afterwards, police investigations proved that no evidence of blasphemy attempt was found and the real dispute was over the occupation of land where Hussein's madrasah was located.

## Conclusion

Sectarianism and religious intolerance remained significant concerns for Southern Punjab's society as it damaged the unity of its socio-cultural and religious landscape. Intense shades of religious indoctrinations to promote radicalization, violence and intolerance are the enactment of religious discourses of the local population. The analysis of numerous expressions of sectarian schism in Southern Punjab substantiates the argument that the unacceptability of diversity in religious as well as socio-cultural worldviews is the prime reason for the emergence of sectarian fault lines creating divisions among local inhabitants. There is a dire need to inculcate the culture of diversity and inclusion to address the issue of religious extremism at the community level.

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## Notes:

<sup>i</sup> The Objectives Resolution is a constitutional document that was first adopted by the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan on March 12, 1949 asserting that the future constitutions of Pakistan would not be based totally on a European model, but on the principles and democratic faith of Islam.

<sup>ii</sup> For detail of the impact of Objectives Resolution on Pakistani society see also (Parveen, 2010).

<sup>iii</sup> A 10% tax on the harvests of irrigated land and 10% tax on harvest from rain-watered land and 5% on Land dependent on well water.

<sup>iv</sup> Tehreek- e- Nifaz-e- Fiqh-e- Jafriah is a Shia political party formed in 1979 following the Islamic revolution in Iran. It intends to introduce the Shia legal system for Pakistani Shias as an alternative to resist the enforcement of Sunni school of thought.

<sup>v</sup> Contrary to Sunnis, Shias traditionally regarded zakat as a private and voluntary decision, and they oppose any government measures to collect Zakat.

<sup>vi</sup> Sipah-e-Sahaba is a Deobandi organization, now renamed Ahl-e-Sunnat Wal Jamaat, was officially banned by the Government of Pakistan in August, 2001 for the involvement in sectarian killing across the country.

<sup>vii</sup> Founded in 1987 by Hafiz Saeed, Lashkar-e- Taiba belonging to Ahl-e-hadith school of thought was an Islamist organization that was banned by the Pakistan government in 2002.

<sup>viii</sup> A sub-sect of Sunni school of thought who do not follow any specific *Fiqh*.

<sup>ix</sup> An Arabic term, which is used to describe innovations in Islamic teachings and practices.

<sup>x</sup> *Urs* is the death anniversary of a Sufi saint.

<sup>xi</sup> *Matam* is a term which is used for self-flagellation while mourning the killing of Hazrat Imam Hussain R.A (grandson of Prophet Muhammad PBUH) by Shia Muslims.

<sup>xii</sup> A Mufti is an Islamic scholar who is qualified to issue *fatwa* (a legal pronouncement in Islam)



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