

Contesting Sectarian Identity in Pakistan: Narratives from the Three Cities

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Abstract

Pakistan is facing a new wave of sectarian divide thus literally making it difficult for minority religious groups such as Shi'as to practice their religious rituals with freedom and liberty. During the last decade, the sectarian killings have increased to a substantial level much to the worry of the government and general public. The present study explores the impact of the widening sectarian cleavage due to the Shi'a rituals during and after the sacred month of Muharram in Pakistan. Shi'a religious practices are being challenged and their rites held down by the extremist groups who are bent upon hurl unforgiving criticism, random killings, a plethora of hate speeches, and religious demonstrations throughout Pakistan. Such practices have made it more exacting for the Shi'as to commemorate their religious rituals during Muharram throughout Pakistan. The large cities like Quetta, Hyderabad, Rawalpindi, Lahore, and Jhang have faced multifaceted sectarian clashes which made Shi'as vulnerable in the performance of rituals.

Key Words: Ethnography, Pakistan, Rituals, Sectarian Conflict, Sectarian Identity.

Introduction

Over time, the Sectarian divide has further widened in the annals of Pakistan. The sectarian killings are increasing steadily. According to the [South Asian Terrorism Portal \(2017\)](#), the sectarian incidents have shown a marked increase in the last few years. Since 1989 about 3059 incidents have occurred in Pakistan and more than 5000 people lost their lives because of these sectarian incidents (Jun 2017). These incidents have persisted unabated in almost every part of the country. The main reasons behind such an increase in the sectarian divide could be attributed several factors; (a) General Zia ul Haq's regime and subsequent governments' policies ([Shah, 2005](#); [Khan, 2011](#)), (b) the mushrooming of the religious seminaries based on the sectarian identities and foreign funding for opening new seminaries ([Nasr, 2002](#)), (c) the proxy war (Nasr, 2000), and (d) the political campaigns based on the sectarian identities and hate speeches (1998). The role of war on terror (WOT) has somehow increased the sectarian incidents in Pakistan during Musharraf's regime. Since 2001 the region has witnessed an increase in the sectarian incidents which consequently resulted in more casualties in Pakistan.

The seeds of sectarian animosity were sown soon after the creation of Pakistan. In some cases, this sectarian based divide was already present in the Indian Subcontinent. During the 1980, when Pakistan played a vital part in the Soviet-Afghan war which consequently fueled the sectarian divide in Pakistan the then government also played their part in further igniting the sectarian divide. Most of the researchers have identified the role of Zia's regime is responsible for an increase in sectarian clashes in Pakistan. [Zaman \(1998\)](#) mentioned about the state-sponsored Islamization program initiated by Zia's government during 1978 ([International Crisis Group, 2005](#); [Kamran, 2009](#)). Some scholars have also identified the Iranian revolution as one of the main factors behind the increase in sectarian clashes in Pakistan ([Zaman, 1998](#); [International Crisis Group, 2005](#); [Irfani, 2004](#)).

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The sectarian incidents are on the rise in Quetta where the Hazara community has been targeted many-a-times in the recent past. Since the open letter by the extremist group to this community, these incidents have proliferated with the result that insecurity for the Shi'as has increased during the month of Muharram. The first 10 days of Muharram are commemorated by the Shi'as across the world in remembrance of the sacrifices made by Shuhda-e-Karbala (Martyrs of Karbala). In Pakistan the performance of the rituals during Muharram by the Shi'as has become a difficult task as most of the time they are targeted by the extremist groups. Keeping in view the gravity of the problem, the local administration in all the districts provides foolproof security to the sites where rituals are performed but despite that, the situation becomes uncontrollable in some of the cities. In 2015 a suicide attack ripped through a Muharram procession killing 22 people (The Daily Dawn, 25 October 2015). Another suicide attack outside Imambargah in Bolan district killed 10 people (The Daily Dawn, 25 October 2015). In 2012 more than 70 people were brutally murdered during the month of Muharram and more than 150 injured in about 30 attacks across Pakistan by the opposing factions (Tribune, 13 November 2013).

During Muharram in 2013, about 8 people were killed when armed men opened fire on the procession near Fawara Chowk of Raja Bazar in Rawalpindi. The local authorities imposed a curfew to control the situation. Subsequently, the army was called to control the situation as fierce clashes broke out and Police became mere spectators. It was total mayhem as the violent protesters set the oldest cloth market on fire, assaulted and massacred the innocent. This was not the first incident of its nature as many other cities too have faced a similar situation and occurrence of similar incidents. District Jhang stands out as the most prominent among the cities and remained one of the epicenters of the sectarian clashes during the 1980s and early 1990s. During this time sectarian organizations emerged as a powerful force to implement their form of Islam and openly declared opponents as infidels (*kafir*). But in the latter part of the 1990s, the situation slightly changed in Jhang. As a result, 123 sectarian clashes were reported in Jhang (from June 14, 1989 to February 4, 2002) where number of religious leaders and members were killed (Khan and Chaudhry, 2011).

Shi 'as belonging to the main areas mentioned above have gone through very tense moments when their very lives were endangered by the opposing religious groups because the latter tried to restrain their practices and daily life routine. Quetta alone has witnessed an unprecedented surge in the bloodshed of hundreds of innocent Hazara Shi 'a community, through cowardly suicide attacks and detonation of explosives in their processions. Although, both provincial and Federal Governments have committed many times to control the situation but these terrorists continued to target the Hazaras. The incident of Rawalpindi in 2013 took place during the Muharram and created tensions and anger among Sunnis and Shi 'as over the issue of practicing rituals in the month of Muharram.

This research paper addresses the major precursors behind the escalation of the sectarian divide and its repercussion followed by hardships faced by the Shi 'a population in Pakistan. Furthermore, ethnographic methods such as participant observation and in-depth interviews were very instrumental in understanding the impact of the insecurity and sectarian situation on the observance of Muharram rituals in the multisite. The data revealed that the current wave of the sectarian divide has directly influenced the observance of Muharram rituals in many ways.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The present research is based on the multisite anthropological fieldwork in which a mixed methodology was used to understand the people's perceptions about the ritual performance during Muharram in a widening sectarian situation in Pakistan. Focus group discussion, in-depth interviews, and participant observation methods were used for the research. In the first phase of the research six key informants (two from each district) from three districts (a. Jhang, b. Rawalpindi, and c. Quetta) were approached and the purpose of the research was explained to them. In the second phase, with the help of already selected key informants more relevant individuals (such as nine religious' leaders, thirty mourners, and nine *mutwalis*- caretakers of the Imambargahs) were approached for the focus group discussions and later on in-depth interviews of the selected individuals were also conducted.

Table 1. Respondents' Profile

Respondents	Key Informants (n=6)		Religious Leaders (n=10)		Mourners (n=30)		Mutwalis (n=9)	
	f	%	F	%	f	%	f	%
Gender								
Male	6	100	10	100	25	83.3	9	100
Female	0	000	0	000	05	16.7	0	000
Age								
20-25	1	16.7	2	20	5	16.6	0	000
26-30	2	33.2	2	20	4	13.4	0	000
31-35	1	16.7	2	20	5	16.6	0	000
36-40	1	16.7	2	20	6	20.0	2	22.2
41-45	1	16.7	1	10	7	23.4	4	44.5
46+	0	000	1	10	3	10.0	3	33.3
Income (per month)								
1-15,000	0	000	0	00	3	10.0	0	000
15,001-30,000	2	33.3	0	00	4	13.4	0	000
30,001-45,000	1	16.7	2	20	7	23.4	2	22.2
45,001-60,000	1	16.7	3	30	8	26.6	3	33.3
60,001+	2	33.3	5	50	8	26.6	4	44.5

For the focus group discussions, a semi-structured set of questions was prepared to seek information about; a) the sectarian situation, b) the threats they feel while performing rituals, c) do they hesitate to participate or this situation impels their participation, d) whom do they consider responsible for the sectarian clashes, e) what was their perception about the (in)tolerance, f) can interfaith harmony be used to control sectarian divide, and g) how the situation could be controlled to practice rituals in a peaceful environment. Some of the above-mentioned themes were also used to expand the questions for the in-depth interviews from the selected respondents.

In table 1, the results about the variety of respondents such as, key informants, religious leaders, mourners, and *mutwalis* are presented. They were asked about three major indicators of socio-economic situations. The majority of the respondents were male mourners while only 16.7% mourners were female. It is always very difficult to get information from female respondents regarding religious rituals' performance and in the case of Pakistan for the male researcher, it was very hard to get access. But in the current research scenario, it was asked to the male respondents to mediate for the interviews of female mourners. The age cohort of the respondents was the second variable which the researcher included for the current research. The results of the data showed that key informants were distributed between 20 to 46 years of age, only 20% religious leaders were aged 41 years and above while mourners were also representing almost all of the age cohorts between 20 to 46 and above years.

The majority (77.8 percent) of the *mutwalis* were beyond 41 years of age as it represents the real situation in the case of Pakistan where the majority of the mature aged people perform the responsibilities of caretakers. The income of the respondents was also variant, most of the key informants' income was between rupees 15,001 to 60,000 and above while the income of religious leaders was on the higher side as compared to the key informants and other respondents. The religious leaders are earning more money in Pakistan as their rate per sermon is increasing day-by-day. On average the *mutwalis* were also earning a reasonable amount of money and the majority of them were earning more rupees 45,000 per month.

Studying the ritual performance has remained an interesting research topic for a number of anthropologists, especially the structural functionalists. Their main emphasis focused on understanding the real causes behind the ritual performance by the individuals and what motivated them to do so. Prueitt (2003) mentioned about the structural-functionalist analysis of the rituals before [Turner's \(1968\)](#) while addition made through the following words: "The dominant thinking on the role of ritual in society before Turner, championed by scholars such as

Durkheim, Malinowski, and Radcliffe-Brown, was that ritual was a mechanism by which a society could maintain and reinforce the status quo. This school of thought is known as structural-functionalism. Adherents to the structural-functionalist school posit that ritual action is a social mechanism that reinforces the status quo by inundating the practitioner with a feeling of moral obligation to adhere to societal sentiments that stress the importance of maintaining social structure.”

Radcliffe-Brown (1965) wrote that ritual “regulates, maintains, and transmits from one generation to another the sentiments on which the constitution of the society depends.” Turner’s (1968) response to this school of thought is that it trivializes the role of ritual or symbolic action, by reducing it to a formulaic reiteration of already existing social norms.

Results and Discussion

Antecedents of Sectarian Divide: The selective districts

The Islamization program of General Zia-ul-Haq who came to power in Pakistan through a military coup (1978-1988) significantly contributed to the sectarian divide in Pakistan (Nasr, 2000). In the case of district Jhang- a majority of the middle-class Sunnis revolted against the Shi ‘a feudal lords and caretakers of shrines and decided to get united and contest the general elections under the platform provided by a local religious leader Maulana Haq Nawaz Jhangvi (1952-1990) during Zia’s regime. This change in the socio-political scenario was taken as a breakthrough by the local business community headed by the Sheikhs who put their weight behind Maulana Jhangvi by offering their open support thus contributing generously to the widening of the sectarian wedge. The sectarian organization, Sipah-i-Sahaba Pakistan (now renamed as *Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat*) was established in Jhang in 1985 (Kamran, 2009) which later on fueled the deadly clashes not only in this district but also across Pakistan. As a counter measure, the Shi ‘a religious groups too formed the same type of sectarian outfits to encounter the opponents.

During this highly volatile period performing Muharram rituals became one of the major challenges for the Shi ‘as of urban centers. As many as 464 processions and 1,624 Majalis (The News, October 3, 2016) were organized in Jhang during the Muharram in 2016 and it became a very arduous task for the district administration to provide foolproof security for such large events. In comparison to 1980s, the Muharram rituals are now much safer in Jhang as in most of the previous years the local administration had to impose curfew in some parts of the Jhang (especially in the Jhang City area, commonly known as *purana- old city*) where the Sial families with some Syed families regularly organize Muharram processions and *majaalis* (especially on 7th and 10th of Muharram). On these days Shi ‘a devotees assembled in the city to participate in the processions and listen to the *majaalis* in different Imambargahs. The city has witnessed many incidents of sectarian clashes that resulted in the loss of lives, damage to the property and businesses and exodus/dislocation of the vulnerable population. One of the respondents from the district explained the situation of sectarian clashes in the following words:

“We (Shi ‘as) had the privilege to take part in the ritual performance during the sectarian clashes (1980s-1990s) time when it was very risky to take part in such rituals. We were committed to the ceremonial events and considered it an obligatory to visit the city (Jhang) to perform rituals. Although some of the participants of these rituals lost their lives and others were injured during deadly the clashes, the procession and Majalis, however, continued for the greater cause.”

The history of the district Rawalpindi is not as violent as that of districts Jhang and Quetta. In the recent past (for instance the clash of 2013) was one of the unique cases of Rawalpindi when both opposing religious groups fought pitched battles with free use of arms and ammunition and it resulted in loss of precious lives and extensive damage to the private property while a large number of people were injured. One of the eye-witnesses of the clash explained the situation in the following words:

“I have never seen such incidents in my whole life. We live in the old city and it was a very common practice for both Sunnis and Shi ‘as to take part in the Muharram rituals. But the situation has substantially changed here since the ratio of the immigrants is increasing in the old city. Now, we have several residents from various parts of Pakistan especially from the potohari (upper) Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. These people have varied perceptions about Muharram rituals.”

The situation of Quetta is different from both cases discussed above. In the case of Quetta, the Hazara are known to have migrated from Afghanistan to the city of Quetta during the 19th century when they had some problems with the then rules in Afghanistan. Most of the Hazara people run small businesses in the urban center of Quetta and are settled in Hazara Town. They have witnessed some brutal attacks since extremists have declared unprovoked war against them through an open letter.

One of the Hazara community members mentioned about the sectarian incidents they have faced in the following words:

“We (Hazara people) have faced the worst forms of target killings in Quetta. Each year hundreds of Hazaras are killed by the terrorists just because they hate our belief and rituals’ performance. We have gone through the lethal forms of human executions through suicide bombing, kidnapping, target killing and victimization during the last two decades. In such circumstances, we never stopped performing rituals. We devotedly participate in every ritual either it is of Muharram or beyond it.”

Halting the Sectarian Hatred: A Way Forward

In most of the cases, the respondents were stated that currently, the sectarian divide has further widened since the prejudice has increased over time in Pakistan and even the minority religious groups are not allowed to openly perform their rituals. In this divide, the role of religious leaders is very influential as they declare each opponent’s faction as deviant from the true path and blame them for fabrication in the true practices of the religion. This could only be controlled if we extend interfaith harmony and allow each other’s sect to perform their rituals as per their understandings. Public spaces become more prone to sectarian victimization as the brutal extremist activities are planned to harm each other. One of the respondents from Rawalpindi remarked that:

“We should provide proper space for each religious group to practice their type of rituals. The interfaith harmony shall be ensured and the role of religious scholars is very important to control the sectarian divide in Pakistan. The current scenario is not good as we are openly challenging others without even properly understanding them or their practices.”

The Hazaras of Quetta have gone through a very torturous period since they are facing the latest wave of genocide. The group lives in close unison and practices their religious beliefs within their limited territory (Hazara Town). But sometime it becomes very hard for them to perform rituals since their movements are being watched and targeted by their opponents. One of the respondents from the Hazara community stressed on the need of tolerance towards others’ rituals in the following way:

“The sanctity of Muharram and performance of rituals is an obligatory part of our lives and one can’t forcibly exclude these rituals. If the other religious sects are performing their rituals, then why can’t we perform ours? There is a dire need for letting each one of the factions within Islam, and even people from other faiths who live in Pakistan, to perform their rituals as per their religious decrees.”

Jhang remained an epicenter in case of hatred towards others’ religious sects in their rituals’ performances. The religious sects, especially Shi’as and Doebandis, openly challenged the practices of each other throughout the last four decades. This conflict was not part of this region before the radical Islamization program of Zia-ul-Haq and the subsequent emergence of Sipah-i-Sahaba Pakistan in 1985 (Nasr, 2000).

One of the respondents from Jhang discussed the need for interfaith harmony in the following way:

“In my view, there is a need to control the sectarian clashes in Pakistan. We have lost many precious lives because of these brutal incidents. We can only get rid of this curse if we allow other factions to practice their rituals. The religious leaders could play their part in controlling this storm of fire by declaring boundaries that we should focus on only our religious performance rather than criticizing others and declaring them kafirs (Infidels).”

In the case of Jhang, the situation aggravated only because the religious leaders from both sides declared other faction’s rituals as un-Islamic and thus fueled the clashes by not an only spate of hate speeches but also declaring plans to punish such individuals. Religious obligations are always mandatory for individuals who adhere to that religion. There is a need to understand that such religious obligations are part of the status quo and the

individuals have to stick to such norms otherwise they might be considered being deviant from the line which has been defined by the religious institution for them.

Conclusion

Sectarian clashes show an upward trend in Pakistan as the country has failed to control such horrific incidents. The role of religious leaders is very controversial as in most of the cases they have added fuel to the fire and the incidents have often gone out of control. The gruesome incident of Raja Bazar of Rawalpindi could have been avoided easily, had both sides shown the much-needed tolerance and allowed the other party to perform their rituals. We, in most cases, declare others as sinners not even knowing about the obligations attached to their religious rituals. In the case of Hazaras of Quetta, it was very much clear that this religious minority group has been targeted by the various extremist groups starting from the time of their relocation from Afghanistan during the 19th century. The latest wave of genocide has engulfed them and placed them in a precarious situation where it has become almost impossible for them to perform their religious obligations with freedom and without fear. In the case of Jhang, the situation of the sectarian clashes is improving as the killing spree has come under some control but the wounds of the last four decades will take time to heal as these have a deep effect on the lives of inhabitants.

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