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Pakistan: Sectarian War Scourging an Entire Nation

Abstract

The world sectarianism is derived from “sect”, which means body of people having varied views within same religion. Since last three decades, sectarianism is damaging the state as well as the society of Pakistan. It has become a peril to the stability of the country. The Ahmadi community, accepted as a minority sect of Islam at the time of the country’s independence, became the first minority group to be targeted for sectarian violence in 1953. Sectarian violence was rife in Pakistan in the 1980s and early 1990s. Besides, on the downhill, the present decade is experiencing continuation of sectarian skirmishes in various pockets of Pakistan – Karachi, Kurram, Jhang, Quetta etc. Religious scholars, lawyers, doctors, government officials, educationist, other professionals, shopkeepers, students, and vendors, all have been targeted in one way or the other due to sectarian differences. The ongoing sectarian skirmish is dividing the already divided population of Pakistan with dangerous ramification. It can be rightly put into writing that common people of Pakistan are living in fear; since last few decades sectarian conflicts have amplified assassination, suicide bombings, bomb blasts, and numerous terrorist attacks.

Key words: Pakistan, Sectarianism, violence, Karachi, Kurram, Jhang, Quetta

Introduction

Pakistan, a country with a rich diversity of people, culture and languages, though multi-cultural to its very core, is however increasingly plagued as a society, by sectarian conflict causing insurmountable rage and violence. The

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combination of lack of representation, poor governance, institutionalised corruption and economic stagnation are compelling ingredients for societal breakdown and disillusionment. The unemployed youth of Pakistan, who see little hope in traditional politics or the way of governance, are fascinated by the missionary zeal of the religious right wing. The rapid growth of Islamic militancy in Pakistan may be a consequence of poor governance and economic stagnation, and in no small measure due to the failure of the international financial institutions to provide firm and consistent support to a Pakistan, geared towards human development, rather than the mere avoidance of loan defaults.¹

Not only the common people of the country, but even the Police and Military establishments have been victims of the deadliest attacks. In terms of sectarian violence, the Shias and the Sunnis have been massacred in the ongoing conflicts. The Shia Muslims face the major brunt from target killing to bombings in various parts of the country. Conflicts occur between Shia and Sunni on one hand, and on the other among the various Sunni sects. These conflicts often characterized politically, are basically an expression of a deeper philosophical confusion as to what constitutes an Islamic state.²

Sectarianism in Pakistan

The concept of *sectarianism* is based on the exclusivist group identity of a religious body that can be classified as a political or military unit. This group identity is imbued with a negative attitude towards its environment, often leading to political and social action in the form of condemnation of, and discrimination or even violence, in contrast to those outside one's community.³ The word *sectarianism* is derived from *sect*, which means body of people having varied views within the same religion. *Sectarianism* means observance of the rules of a particular *sect* or party, especially in a bigoted or narrow-minded way. In sociological studies *sect* is part of a religious study; which means a group split from the mainstream religion on the grounds of doctrine.⁴

Pakistan is confronted with two broad categories of conflicts, namely internal and external which can be still further classified. It is facing the twin menaces of religious extremism and ethnic strife. The real threat to the security primarily comes from "within." The internal terror is caused by banned organisations with strong ethnic and sectarian bias. Areas like, Kurram, Parachinar, Dera Ismail Khan, tribal belt and Southern Punjab are severely affected.⁵ Pakistan is experiencing a sharp escalation in sectarian violence, especially with the rise of Pakistan Taliban in the mid 2000s. Most recurrently, such ferocity involves clashes between members of the Sunni and the Shia communities. But violent incidents between the Deobandi and Barelvi sub-sects⁶ of Sunni Islam are also

on a rise. Besides, various Sufi shrines have also been subject to such violent attacks in Pakistan. The role played by Sufi saints in shaping the intrinsic nature of the Islam religion in the Indian sub-continent can never be denied. Pakistan, being part of this larger area, also exhibits a dominant Sufi history, which is unfortunately, undermined by the 'mainstream' version of Wahhabi Islam.

Since the last three decades, sectarianism is damaging the state as well as the society of Pakistan. It has become a very serious peril to the stability of Pakistan. Its negative effects are destroying the society on many fronts i.e. economically, psychologically, politically and socially.⁷ The sectarian conflict has caused tensions in the southern part of Punjab, Balochistan and also in the urban centres of Karachi and Quetta. The politics of sectarian exclusiveness is becoming mainstream in Pakistan. Rampant violence and killing in the name of diverse religious sects has become a somewhat ongoing trend.⁸ The state has also somehow failed to provide basic safety to its citizens, in terms of conviction of sectarian murders and policy initiatives. No measures were being taken to curb the tide of increasing violence and bloodshed.⁹

Overview

The Shias, who form a minority sect in Pakistan have been worried with religious discrimination even before Pakistan came into existence as a separate state. In fact, immediately after the Lahore Resolution of 1940, which set the ground for a separate homeland for the Muslims of the subcontinent, Shia leaders had asked Muhammad Ali Jinnah for the provision of safeguards for the safety and protection of religious rights of their community in the future Pakistan.¹⁰

The Ahmadi community, accepted as a minority sect of Islam at the time of the country's independence, became the first minority group to be targeted for sectarian violence when anti-Ahmadi riots broke out in 1953 in Lahore, leading to the first imposition of Martial Law in the country's history, limited to Lahore.

With Shias also facing resistance from increasingly vocal Sunni conservatives, two Shia organisations, one a successor to the All Parties Shia Conference (APSC), established soon after 1947 and Idara-e-Tahafuz-e-Haqq-e-Shia (ITHS), established in 1953, became more relevant. Shia landlords in Sindh and Punjab, industrialists from Karachi, and wealthy trading families in Lahore financed both organisations. In 1957, ulema in the two organisations jointly adopted a resolution to demand reserved seats for Shias in national and provincial legislatures. However, the proposal did not receive much support.¹¹

The Ayub era witnessed a shifting dynamic in Shia-Sunni relations. In 1963, Sunni extremists killed more than a hundred Shias in two attacks, one of which

was on a Muharram procession. Government placed restrictions on more processions and persuaded the Shias to limit their Muharram procession routes. This had a major impact on Shia thinking and, accordingly, on the community's organisational politics. Nevertheless, to calm Shia fears, the Ayub Government constituted a government board to consider Shia demands and submit recommendations. The formation of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto also received a lot of support from the Shia community, as Bhutto was a Shia. The advent of the Imamia Students Organisation (ISO) in May 1972, marked a turning point for the mobilisation of the Shia youth of Pakistan and ultimately led, in some instances, to militancy.¹²

Sectarian violence was rife in Pakistan in the 1980s and early 1990s. General Zia ul-Haq's (governed 1977-1988) policies and legislation aimed at 'Islamising' Pakistan and were formulated in accordance with an orthodox version of the principles of Sunni Islam, to the exclusion of Sunni Barelvis and Shia Muslims. For example, in 1980 Zia imposed a *zakat* (wealth tax) and *ushr* (farming tax) ordinance that contradicted Shia practice and mobilised Pakistan's Shia population for the first time: 100,000 Shias marched on the federal secretariat in Islamabad, forcing the general to repeal the ordinance as it pertained to Shias, but also provoking the ire of hard-line Sunni organizations.¹³ The march of thousands of Shias on the streets of Islamabad was threatening enough to secure exemption for Shias from paying *zakat* and the agreement to this effect between Mahmood Haroon, the then Minister for Religious Affairs and Mufti Jafar Hussain, which came to be known as the Islamabad Agreement.¹⁴

Concerned by the *Shia* rebellion aka show of force, Sunni groups used this Shia refusal to pay an Islamic tax as a chance to brand them as apostates and heretics, a dangerous narrative that still persists among extremist Deobandi Sunni groups.¹⁵ Jaafar Hussain, argued that if Pakistan was to have Islamic law, the Shia should be allowed to follow their own jurisprudence- *Jaaafariya Fiqh* (Jurisprudence), after the sixth Shia Imam Jafar al-Sadiq.¹⁶ This victory, though welcomed by Shia moderates and Pakistani liberals, riled many extremists of both sects- among Shias those who believed in the Islamic revolution, and among Sunnis those who were worried of the newfound Shia assertiveness and wanted Pakistan to be a Sunni state.¹⁷

Zia had already become very unpopular with many Shia Muslims for the execution of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who was a Shia, and also for his promulgation of Islamic laws based solely on the teachings of the Hanafi Sunni sect.¹⁸ *Hanafi Fiqh* is the most practicing religious vogue descended from the Hanafi School of Thought, and followed by the Sunni population only. The enactment of the *Hanafi Fiqh* was reprimanded by many Shia scholars during the time of Zia,

and though not riotous at that time, this practice nevertheless ripped the social unity of the two ethnic groups as time passed on.¹⁹

Since the late 1980s, Shias belonging to all walks of life and all ethnic backgrounds have been targeted and killed in every possible way, at every possible place and area in Pakistan.²⁰ Depending upon their political and/or social standing, different Shia groups responded to these difficult conditions in differing ways. Many elite and politically-connected Shias opted to stay publicly silent in order to hold on to their access to the corridors of power, whereas their religious institutions started drifting towards financially advantageous relations with Iran. A minority of the Shia groups took up arms to defend the community and got involved in tit-for-tat terror attacks against Sunni groups involved in the developing sectarian conflict. In the process, Pakistan became a battleground for a proxy Saudi-Iran war in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s. The rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan after 1994 provided a safe haven for the anti-Shia militants while Islamabad merely observed as the country became engulfed and enflamed in sectarianism. The September 11 attacks temporarily led to an improvement of the situation for the Shias. In the aftermath of the attacks, Pakistan's then-President, General Pervez Musharraf, began his counterterrorism efforts by banning sectarian militant groups of both the Shia and Sunni orientation.²¹ However, not much success was met by this government's efforts.

As evaluated by Moonis Ahmar, the pattern of overall sectarian conflict in Pakistan from 1980 onwards can be broadly divided into four phases. 1985-1995 was characterized by target killing; The mid-90s was mainly dominated by use of hand grenades and time bombs; and from 1997 onwards, the pattern changed to indiscriminate gunfire on citizens and revenge killings of professionals; post 9/11 the element of suicide attacks has been included in the modus operandi of sectarian outfits.²²

Besides, on the downhill, the present decade is experiencing a continuation of the sectarian skirmishes in various pockets of Pakistan - Karachi, Kurram, Jhang, Quetta etc. Religious scholars, lawyers, doctors, government officials, educationists, other professionals, shopkeepers, students, and vendors, all have been targeted in one way or the other for the mere reason of them being Shia. Shias have been attacked in religious processions, they have been dragged off the buses, separated and slaughtered; they have been targeted on their way to pilgrimage; they have been subject to attacks on their way to schools or workplaces, they have been gunned down while offering prayers and they have been attacked while performing their regular day-to-day business.²³

Reasons for the Conflict

The studies of sectarian conflict in Pakistan have focused extensively on macro level phenomena such as Zia's islamisation, the Iranian Revolution, the Iran-Iraq war and finally, the Afghan *jihad* as determining factors in the Shia-Sunni conflict. Although extremely significant in explaining the external influences fuelling the conflict, these analyses leave much to be desired towards understanding the local dynamics of the conflict.

Sectarian groups are always attached to a religious treatise. Due to the narrow-mindedness of religious leaders, the level of bigotry and fanaticism among religious groups in the Pakistani society is slowly mounting. The ongoing impasse in the country is related to the fact that religious intolerance and extremism have obtained militant connotations. Bitter hatred towards members of diverse sects is not only addressed but also overrated. Thus, it has endangered the peace and security of the country.²⁴

It is true that religious segregation and exclusion play a significant role in sectarian violence but the power struggle, political climate, economic gains, and the cultural climate are also key factors that lead to sectarianism. In case of Pakistan, sectarianism had underlying political motives; even the perpetrators mostly used religious tactics to appeal to the people. Contradictorily, Pakistan undoubtedly blames Iran and Saudi Arabia for the sectarian strife since both the countries have funded and trained the people of their side. There are many internal dynamics of sectarian conflicts along with external that need to be understood. For example, the corrupting value system, intolerance towards the differing sects, mal governance and power politics both at local and national level, all of which plays a vital part in sectarian divide.²⁵

It has been argued on various platforms, that sectarian outfits and clerics associated with sectarian mosques are often able to fill a void left by an absentee state and local elite bent on preserving inequality. This may mostly be the case in urbanizing districts in the country. Run-down governance and scarce social services are contributing to the spread of extremism, as extremist groups fill the political vacuum by providing services such as education and natural disaster relief and rehabilitation. The influence of pre-existing local power brokers, such as the landed elite, is being challenged by sectarian clerics, often associated with the militant sectarian outfits operating with their unchallenged impunity.²⁶

The upsurge of sectarian conflict is also closely linked to religious education in Pakistan. Religious seminaries in Pakistan operate on a strictly sectarian basis and continue to impart education along the sectarian lines. *Madrasas* make the main constituencies of religious political parties, *jihadi* groups and sectarian

militant organizations, who look towards the institutions for expanding their respective support bases. *Madrasas* have thus had a great impact on the forte and salient rise of sectarian organizations and Islamic parties in Pakistan.²⁷

From the point of view of resource management, the case of the Shia-Sunni conflict 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 either worsen or contain violence between the members of the two sects in various contexts but the fundamental underlying antagonism remains. One of the most common indicators of this fact is the active use of religious interpretations to disclose schisms or boundaries by declaring the differing sect as ‘beyond the pale’ of Islam. Thus, by dehumanising the opposing sect to the status of the ‘other’ or ‘infidel’, violence can be perpetrated against it.²⁸

The ongoing sectarian skirmish is dividing the already divided population of Pakistan with resulting dangerous ramifications. The society of Pakistan exemplifies the country’s trend of showcasing the vulgarity of hatred for a fellow human being at the basic level and countrymen in general. In the ongoing scenario, hate and apathy are more profound than human consciousness. The country is facing a serious humanitarian crisis in which a fellow Muslim is willing to cause harm to another, on the basis of difference in religious doctrines. Among various other ills like, ethnic conflict, gender violence, terror attacks etc., sectarian divide has also become a defining and deciding factor for Pakistan’s society and polity.

Epicenters of Sectarian Conflict

Realm of Violence – Karachi: Karachi, which is also known as a ‘Mini-Pakistan’ is a vibrant city; also one of the most dangerous cities in the world, with rapid gun-crime, sky-high homicide rates and growing sectarian conflict for both Shias and Sunnis. The metropolis is also a den for notorious armed groups, further providing a specific character²⁹ to the violence. Sectarian target killing in Karachi often results in revengeful violent acts, causing a never-ending spree of death, adding to the volatile dynamics of the city.

Though most accounts of Pakistan’s first episode of sectarian conflict, targeting the Ahmadis in the 1950s, generally focus on Punjab, Karachi was not immune to this movement. In 1952, riots broke out after the *Karachi Ahmadiya Association* tried to hold its yearly convention in Jahangir Park. Thousands of assailants looted and ransacked Ahmadi business establishments and properties in central Karachi. Following these violent incidents, *Ulama* called for the government to declare Ahmadis as non-Muslims. Also, few incidents of anti-

Shia violence were recorded in the late 1970s in Ali Basti and Old Golimar areas of the city.³⁰

If the turf war in Karachi had remained limited to *Mohajirs* and *non-Mohajirs*, it would have died a natural death. But, Zia in his ‘islamisation’ initiative drove a wedge between the two sects. As a result, Karachi became one of the most prominent focal points of sectarian violence. Also, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), lent a helping hand to the Sunnis by setting up an organisation, *Sawad-e-Azam*, headquartered in Karachi. It was the precursor to the creation of *Anjuman-e-Sipah-e-Sahaba*, later re-christened as *Sipah-e-Sahaba of Pakistan (SSP)*, under Haq Nawaz Jhangvi. Moreover, the funding received by the *madrasas* during Zia rule, also enhanced the sectarian fervour in the city. One of the biggest *madrasas* in Karachi is the *Jamiat-ul-Ulum ul-Islamia* in the *Binori* town of the city. It has been one of the prominent recruitments and training grounds for the cadres and leadership of SSP.³¹ The relocation of large numbers of *Deobandi Ulama* from North India to Karachi after Partition, as well as the *Pashtun* migration to the city contributed to making Karachi a stronghold of Deobandi clerics. From the 1980s, Binori town has been in the forefront of the sectarian conflict. In 1986, one of its founders Mufti Wali Hasan Tonki issued a *fatwa* of apostasisation against Shias, arguing that they were outside Islam.³²

Much later in 1990, a new sectarian group called as the Sunni Tehrik (movement) was established in Karachi under the leadership of Maulana Saleem Qadri. It needs to be mentioned that in a deadly suicide attack in Karachi, in a religious gathering organised by the Sunni Tehrik on April 11, 2006, its entire leadership was wiped out.³³ The Tehrik has often used its strong-arm tactics to protect the interests of the *Ahl-e-Sunnat wal Jama’at* (Barelvīs) against rival Sunni sects (Deobandis, *Ahl-e-Hadith* and *Salafis*). Interestingly, the militant stand of the Tehrik against Saudi-backed groups seems to have earned it the financial support from Iran, causing its turf war with SSP and JuD.³⁴

The more recent patterns of sectarian violence are very different from the original Shia-Sunni violence that occurred until the 1980s, when rival religious processions could break out into mob attacks and riots. Law-enforcement agencies in the city have identified a number of “sensitive areas” as part of their plan to deal with sectarian violence that keeps flaring up in the city every now and then. They have tagged the Shia-dominated Malir, Ancholi, Jafar-e-Tayyar Society, Numaish and Rizvia Society as areas from where law enforcers expect a reaction if and when a Shia is killed anywhere in the city. Sunni sectarian groups have strong-holds in areas such as Banaras, Nagan Chowrangi, Quaidabad, Patel Para and Tawheed Chowk. The security officials see strong

footprints of Sunni groups such as Ahl-e-Sunnat Wal Jamaat (ASWJ), formerly-SSP, in all these neighbourhoods.³⁵

But, over a period of time, due to various operations conducted by security agencies, the city is supposedly seeing less and less of sectarian conflicts. Sectarian violence has decreased to a great extent because of the ongoing successful operation against banned sectarian groups in the city. As a result, 2018 was more or less peaceful. Lately, it has also been said that Karachi has been ‘omitted’ from the list of flashpoints of sectarian violence; nonetheless, according to latest reports, there have been some instances of such violence occurring in the city in this phase of 2019.³⁶

The Restive Arena – Quetta: In the restive province of Balochistan, amidst a state of lawlessness and led by the *Deobandi madrassa* network, radicalisation is on the upsurge and sectarian groups have stepped up their activities in the region. The number of sectarian killings has amplified almost exponentially over the past few years in the province. Balochistan is increasingly becoming a nexus for sectarian outfits now. Afghan and Pakistani Taliban, SSP, al-Qaeda, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), ISO, and Sipah-e-Muhammed Pakistan (SMP) are said to have established their respective strongholds in the province. Their presence is the result of Pakistani security agencies pushing them there from Punjab, partly a result of a vast network of *Deobandi madrassas*; as a result of the islamisation policies pursued by the federal state since the 1970s; and also due to the Afghan refugee camps in the province acting as a main source of recruits for the Taliban.³⁷

Quetta, the capital city, also experiences sectarian killings meted out to the minority *Hazara Shia*³⁸ community by various Sunni militant groups. Quetta has become a battlefield or a violent pit of vengeance for the minority *Hazaras*. In a way, the city has taken the shape of a *Hazara* graveyard. Most *Hazaras* reside in this resource rich province. The rampant attacks on these individuals often leave them in a perpetual state of terror and insecurity even within their own *Hazara* neighbourhood. Attacks against the *Hazara* community are getting more rampant and worse, with more and more people dying everyday.

Ethnically Mongolian, *Hazaras* are easily identifiable from the rest of the population. Therefore, ultimately, no place is safe for them. Even if they stay within the confines of the community, entire communities have been bombed by Sunni extremist groups. With a population of about 600,000 in Quetta, the community, whose physical appearance make them easy targets, has been targeted in a sustained campaign of murders and bombings that has claimed at least 509 lives since 2013, according to Pakistan’s National Commission for

Human Rights (NCHR).³⁹ Moreover, people of the community are getting increasingly more alienated due to the Government's neglect and apathy towards them. Recent *Hazara* killings in Pakistan started with the attack on Provincial Education Minister, Nisar Ali Hazara, on October 6, 1999, and has accelerated with time since then.

The relative success of *Hazaras*, both in business and education is also another reason for jealousy and hatred among the other dissatisfied groups in the province, who hold the *Hazaras* a culprit, responsible for their miseries. The *Hazaras* have become an urban elite in a typically impoverished Balochistan where per capita, neither the *Pashtun* nor the *Baloch* can match the *Hazara* accomplishment. Needless to say, that their success has been achieved through hard work and not at the cost of others.⁴⁰

Community leaders say they see little interest from the government in bringing an end to the killings. "If there was an earnest effort to target these groups, I do not think that the area of Quetta could not be kept secure," says community leader Dawood Agha. "If terrorist acts are still happening, then it seems that the government is not interested in acting against the attackers", he added. The government has taken strict security measures in the two main residential neighbourhoods – Marriabad and Hazara Town, where the community resides. The neighbourhoods are surrounded by high concrete walls topped with barbed wire. Entry is strictly controlled. By 8 pm, there is a virtual curfew with all entrances and exits sealed, bar one at each enclave. "We have been imprisoned without having committed a crime," states Agha.⁴¹

The persecution of *Hazaras* is not a new phenomenon. *Hazaras* are historically, residents of Afghanistan, and almost all *Hazaras* belong to the Shia community. Lately, the *Hazaras* are finding themselves at the centre of an extremely volatile region, where the extremist Taliban and other fundamentalist sectarian terrorist groups like LeJ and SSP were already quite active. *Hazaras* have also been a target of ethnic cleansing, targeted killing and genocide in Afghanistan. The *Afshar Operation*, *Mazar-i-Sharif massacre*, the *Rohatak Pass massacre* and the *Yakawlang massacre* of *Hazara* community in Afghanistan can be considered as just the tip of an ice-berg. Theories suggest the persecution of the *Hazaras* in Quetta and other parts of Balochistan are a continuance of these extremist sentiments, given that LeJ, the group claiming responsibility for most of the attacks on *Hazara* community, has had strong ties with al-Qaeda. Moreover LeJ, though considered a terrorist organisation by the Pakistan and U.S. governments, is believed to have some backing among right-wing political parties in Pakistan. The backing may also encompass Pakistan's military, which is to a certain degree busy with its own clandestine operations in Balochistan.⁴²

Since the 1990s, as the Taliban phenomenon gained ascendancy in Afghanistan, the Sunni-Shia conflict in Pakistan has intensified. As the Taliban consolidated power in Afghanistan, Balochistan, with its provincial capital Quetta, became part of a security and economic corridor that bound it to the city of Kandahar, which emerged as the headquarters of the Afghan Taliban. In addition to Taliban influence, the LeJ, have been vocal in their anti-Shia stance. Since the late 1990s, the *Hazaras* have been subjected to a growing number of attacks from religious armed groups in Pakistan, primarily the LeJ.⁴³

The LeJ was formed by Riaz Basra, along with Akram Lahori and Malik Ishaque, as a radical off-shoot of SSP in 1996. The LeJ, a part of a much wider Deobandi movement, aims to transform Pakistan into a Sunni state primarily through violent means. It has links with militant outfits like, *Harkat-ul-Mujahideen (HuM)* and *Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM)* as well as with the *Taliban* and *al Qaeda*. It is perhaps a result of the Taliban-LeJ collaborative network, that the killings of the Shias in Quetta, after 2001, have taken on an increased impetus.⁴⁴

Since 2012, Quetta's *Hazaras* have been compelled to limit their activities to the Hazara-dominated neighbourhoods of Marriabad and Hazara Town. As a result, they have started facing increasing economic hardships, very little safe access to education, and severe limits imposed on their freedom of movement.⁴⁵

Valley of Death – Parachinar: Parachinar, located in the western flung of Pakistan, is also called “Little Iran”. The majority of the town's residents are ethnic *Pashtuns* who belong to the Shia sect. Shia dominated Parachinar in the Upper Kurram Agency remains a principal target for Sunni sectarian terrorist formations. Built by the British Royal Army in the 1890s, the town is the headquarters of the Kurram Agency, housing offices of the political administration, units of the Army and Frontier Corps. Some 58 per cent of its population is Sunni, and 42 per cent Shia (according to the 1998 Census). The majority of Shias live in Upper Kurram, while Sunnis dominate Lower and Central Kurram.⁴⁶

The present cycle of escalation started when three people were killed and 13 others were injured in an attack on a Shia Imambargah on the morning of April 6, 2007. Clashes in Kurram from November 2007 to 2010 left over 3,000 people dead, while thousands of families were forced to flee their homes. Unlike other tribal agencies of erstwhile FATA, the dynamics in Kurram are different because of the sectarian divide and the geo-strategic location of the Agency. Kurram is surrounded by Afghanistan from three sides and has remained in turmoil since 1980, after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. It shares the major portion of its borders with the troubled Logar, Paktia, Khost and Nangarhar

Provinces of Afghanistan. The *al Qaeda* and *Taliban* infested Tora Bora Mountain range in the Nangarhar Province shares its boundaries with the Kurram Agency. The Agency also connects the tribal areas of Pakistan to Afghanistan through lower, central and upper Kurram. Crucially, the Thal-Parachinar route is the shortest route to Kabul from Peshawar.⁴⁷ Upper Kurram is inhabited largely by Turis,⁴⁸ who belong to the only *Pashtun* tribe, which is wholly Shia, while Lower Kurram is inhabited by Sunnis, mostly Bangash. There are longstanding disputes over ownership of forests, hills, land and water resources between the Sunni and Shia tribes and sporadic incidents of communal violence have taken place since the 1930s. But, it was the massive influx of Afghan refugees in the 1980s that caused a distortion in the demographic and religious balance of the area. The first large scale attack took place in 1986 when the Turis prevented Sunni Mujahideen from passing through to Afghanistan. General Zia ul Haq allowed a “purge” of the Turis at the hands of the Afghan Mujahideen in conjunction with the local Sunni population.⁴⁹

Muharram in Parachinar has not been a peaceful event since decades. When sectarian conflict was unheard of in other parts of Pakistan, it was rampant in Kurram Agency. This is of course before the advent of the SSP, LeJ and SMP. Crucially, tribes are divided along sectarian lines. Nevertheless, while minor sectarian conflicts have been a routine in each Muharram, Parachinar has seen various changes to its society over the years. In 1982, 1996 and 2007, major sectarian clashes erupted in Kurram Agency, with Parachinar emerging as the epicentre of the violence. In fact, the year 2007 is a significant one in Parachinar’s history. It is the same year when the TTP was formed. But even before, in 2006, the Taliban had penetrated the Sunni areas of central and lower Kurram.⁵⁰

The pre-2007 clashes also witnessed the local tribes, led by local leaders trying to sort out problems and reach a ceasefire amongst themselves. Unvaryingly, this peace would last for the next ten years, as has been the case since the 1970s. The situation has changed in terms of sectarian violence. Ferocity in Parachinar is no more led by the local tribes, and hence, hereafter cannot be settled through local leaders. The entry of militants from outside has altered the condition and also the sectarian equilibrium against the Turi Shias of Kurram. The local Sunni tribes are now armed with Sunni militants of Pakistan and across the Durand Line by the *Haqqani* group.⁵¹

The Shias have been targeted in the Kurram, through targeted killings and economic blockade by the Taliban. They maintain that, because they are stopping the militants from entering Afghanistan, the Taliban are attacking them, while the Sunni groups assert that Iran has provided weapons to Shias in the area.⁵²

The well-known “war” of 2007 to 2010 left over 3,000 people dead and caused thousands of families to flee their homes. It was trailed by a period of relative peace, but in fact the violence and turbulence never entirely abated and now there are signs of serious resurgence, including major targeted attacks against Shias. There is little doubt now that the signs of escalating sectarian violence in Kurram are now being realised. Threats originating across the border in Afghanistan are a very noteworthy reason. The Pakistan Government seems to be unable to deal effectively with this situation at this time.⁵³

While there was a noticeable trend of reduction of sectarian violence in Pakistan over the past few years, Parachinar has been facing the burden of attacks even during this seemingly non-violent period. While Parachinar’s Shia populace has been warned against any involvement in the Syrian conflict, locals have denied any involvement suggesting that the accusations are an attempt at guaranteeing “sectarian cleansing” in a strategically located area.⁵⁴

Rustic Skirmish – Jhang: If Pakistan, must be broken from within by Islamist forces, then the process would start in the belt between Jhang and Bahawalpur, with the ancient city of Multan, at its heart. A certain latent tension between the two sectarian communities has existed in the region for long time. The prevalence of Shia Islam in Jhang and adjoining areas can be traced back to the Abbasid period. Omar bin Hafas, the governor of Jhang was a clandestine supporter of the Fatimid Shias of 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.⁵⁵ After taking over Multan, Mahmud of Ghazni replaced the Shia Carmathian prince with a Sunni ruler. This was the earliest Shia-Sunni conflict in the Southern Punjab region of the subcontinent. 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 have left a deep Shia impact on the region.⁵⁶

The noble gentry of the region, who generally comprised of Shias of the Turkish, Qizilbash origin, were granted land by the British, while the local peasants belonged to the Sunni community.⁵⁷ The earliest manifestation of political mobilisation to challenge the Shia dominion came in the 1950s when Maulana Ghulam Hussain, a Deobandi cleric started his anti-Shia crusade by openly criticising the political elite of Jhang and accusing them of being feudals and Shias. This mobilisation started the usage of the sectarian card in the politics

of Jhang, but fortunately did not gain the impetus of a large-scale sectarian movement up until the 1980s. This is largely because of the Anti-Ahmadi movement in Pakistan in which both Shias and Sunnis participated.⁵⁸

The anti-Ahmadi campaign around Jhang played a noteworthy role in mobilising the Sunnis of Jhang in voting for Islamist political parties. The overwhelming success of this mobilisation was observed in the 1970 elections. The result of the election was heavily in favour 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 foremost emphasis of all Islamists, whether the Shias or the Sunnis, was to get the Ahmadis declared as non-Muslims. Nevertheless, a major shift in the dimensions of the sectarian conflict in Jhang was observed in the second half of the 1970s. In 1974 the Ahmadis were declared as non-Muslims by the government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. This allowed the majority of the Sunnis to divert their hostility to Shias, who were perceived as the new sacrilegious sect after the assertion of Ahmadis as non-Muslims.⁵⁹

Nevertheless, despite sporadic denunciations of the Shias as heretics by Sunni preachers, till the 1980s this tension remained very limited.⁶⁰ During the 1980s, the district of Jhang in Punjab emerged as the nerve centre of sectarian conflict in Pakistan. The economy of the district was largely controlled by feudal landlords, who were mainly Syeds (who trace their origin to Prophet Muhammad) and Shia: the *Siyals*, *Rajooas* and *Shah Jewanis* apart from *Chiniotis*, who had migrated from India during the partition of the subcontinent in 1947. For the apostles of the new Sunni movement, the domination of the majority, the poor Sunnis by the minority, the Shias was an intolerable socio-economic deformity.⁶¹

The upsurge in violent sectarian conflicts in Jhang in the 1980s and 1990s involved assassination of senior political as well as religious leaders; injury and murder; burning of properties and destruction of businesses were rampant. Sectarian killings on a rampant scale actually began with the murders of Ehsan Ellahi Zaheer in 1987 and TNFJ leader Allama Arif-ul-Hussaini in 1988. In 1990, Haq Nawaz Jhangvi, himself, was killed by the Shia militants. During the 90s, Iranian officials also came under the killing spree of sectarian groups. Most prominent was Agha Sadiq Ganji, the Iranian Consular General killed in December, 1990 by Shaikh Haq Nawaz of Jhang. Later in 1997, another Iranian official was killed and the Iranian Cultural Centre in Lahore was set ablaze, by Jhang based SSP militants.⁶²

Vicious sectarian riots erupted in Jhang in the 1990s, further polarising the two sects. The streets which once buzzed with *Heer*⁶³ now resounded with war

cries. In this battle of belief, mostly the ordinary faithful fell from the both sides. Besides being Shias and Sunnis, the deceased were doctors, teachers, engineers, and lawyers. Other than target killing, firing and bomb blasts also claimed many lives and did not discriminate between the mosque and the *Imambargah*. The TV at home and the billboards on the roads indicated the increased influence of religion in the lives of common people while the blast-ripped tickers and blood-soaked newspapers pointed out that man was yet to find eternal harmony.⁶⁴

Besides the political scuffle, among various sects, there are certain practices that the Shias follow which leads to the sectarian tension in Jhang. In the context of Jhang both *Twalla* (recitation of *Darood Sharif*) and *Tabbarra* (cursing the Ummayad Caliphs) produced a series of conflicts. Shias do perform these during Muharram in their gatherings. The Sunnis oppose these practices and their leaders condemn *Shiite*; and curse them along with their *Imams*. Besides, *Twalla* and *Tabbarra* both sects have insignificant differences in other pillars of *Farooq-e-Din* (practices of the religion). Besides all of these issues, there are also some other practices, which caused conflicts in Jhang. These comprise of visiting the shrines of *Peer/Sufi* etc and other stereotypes concerning *Mutta* (marriage for a short or limited time period but with certain conditions) as well as the *Shiite* affirmation of faith (the *Kalama*), all of which are very dissimilar from the Sunni school of thought.⁶⁵

Conclusions

Sectarian conflict is a real menace to the security of Pakistan. It has upset the basic underpinning of the nation and has created disturbance, hatred, violence, and disorder in the society there. Since the last few decades, sectarian conflicts have amplified assassinations, suicide bombings, bomb blasts, and terrorist attacks. Thus, Pakistan has an immediate threat from sectarian strife, along with the above mentioned other disorders.

It can be rightly put into writing that the common man in Pakistan is living in fear for his and his family's life. The sectarian violence is causing terror in all segments of the society, like government employees, students, journalists, traders etc. In some places, as mentioned above, even the daily activities are hampered. People are in constant fear of doing daily mundane chores like going to market places, travelling in public transport or even visiting places of religious worship.

The threat comes more severely from the legal environment of the country, in which violent groups, militants and criminals freely operate due to a lack of threat of punishment from some law enforcing agency. As a result, the sectarian

groups along with other gangs and outfits enjoy absolute impunity and accordingly proliferate freely, without much obstruction or danger.

The militant groups are working to create anarchy and unrest in the country. They mostly want to trigger a reaction and gain political mileage. The tragic reality for the entire nation of Pakistan is the killing of fellow Muslims by one another, that too, in the name of religion.

Also, more tragic is the level of impunity exercised by such elements in their functioning within the social, religious and political framework of Pakistan. Those committing such sectarian crimes are mostly getting away with a series of murders.

Notes

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