



## Countering Extremism Through Sufi Practices in Sindh

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### Abstract

*This article is an analysis of Sufism and Sufi practices performed at Sufi shrines of Sindh. Moreover, the ways to counter the growing menace of extremism through Sufi practices is discussed in this paper. The approach adopted is from traditional to modern, in understanding the importance of Sufism. Sindh is considered the land of Sufis but unfortunately, it is badly affected by extremism. Although there is a huge number of Sufi shrines in Sindh, the data has been collected and analyzed from the shrines of Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai, Usman Marwandi (Lal Shahbaz Qalander) and Sachal Sarmast, particularly at Urs celebrations. The important Sufi practices include Sufi music, Sufi poetry, Lungar, Urs celebrations etc. The participants in Urs celebrations belong to a variety of groups from upper class to lower and middle class, irrespective of their caste, creed and religion.*

**Key Words:** Sufism, Sufi Practices, Extremism, Countering, Sindh.

### Introduction

Sindh is the land of Sufi saints and Sufism. It is an important province of Pakistan, located in the southeast of the country. Moen jo Daro the ancient city is also part of Sindh. The total area of Sindh is 140,914 km<sup>2</sup>. The estimated population of Sindh, according to the 2017 survey is 47.89 million. Sindhi is local language of its indigenous people.

There are thousands of Sufi shrines in Sindh. Sufism is a symbol of Sindh. As Hamida Khuhro in his book *Sindh Through Centuries* says “Sindh region is characterized by a religious eclecticism and strong Sufi tradition of mysticism and tolerance (Khuhro, H, 1981). The great Sufis Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai, Hazrat Sachal Sarmast, Hazrat Usman Marwandi, Shah Inayat Shaeed and others belong to Sindh. Sufism attracts people from all walks, irrespective of sect or religion. The beauty of Sufism is that it encourages a peaceful coexistence of the divergent population. This is reason that in the land of Sufis (Sindh), people belonging to different religions lived peacefully together for many centuries. Regrettably, this land of Sufis now presents a very gloomy picture. Day by day it is becoming a land of conflict, fanaticism and religious and ethnic tension. Chaos and disorder rules everywhere. Surprisingly only public places but also shrines and other religious places are not protected. In very recent time shrine of Hajan Shah in Shikarpur, the shrine of Usman Marwandi and many other sacred places, tombs and public places remained important targets of terrorists. In a nutshell, all this led us to say that extremism in Pakistan is growing and Sindh is also badly affected by it.

In such circumstances, we have to look for suitable solutions so that we can overcome it. Sufism provides the best solution; it asks for love and peaceful coexistence. It is close to nature; therefore, it talks about nature, that diversities must be accepted as the law of nature. The character of Sufis is one who gives not takes as now a days we witness. Sufism and Sufi practices are the only way and a spark of hope for destabilized, weakened and despairing individuals. Whereas extremist way is the imposition of their ideology either by hook or by crook. They have become a symbol of terror, fear and hatred. They destabilize governments, put the public on stake

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and create chaos and anarchy. Despite such huge and opposite ways of teaching and message, extremism is day by day emerging. How it can be countered, what strategy should we adopt is discussed in this paper.

## Literature Review

Sufism is a cultural heritage of Pakistani society in general and Sindh in particular. Scholars belonging to history, sociology and anthropology have discoursed Sufism, Sufi Shrines and Sufi practices with different approaches and from different viewpoints. Some of them are; Ansari(1992), Aziz (2001), Gilmartin (1988), Ahmed (1971), Pinto (1995), Talbot (1988), Ewing (1983), Eaton (1978), Qureshi(1972), Mayer(1967), Lyon(2001), Francis Robinson(1974) and Metcalf (2005). Most of them have endeavored to study the process, past, present and also seen it as a significant distinctive of Pakistani culture. This phenomenon is not only a matter of spirituality but also connected with the social and political development of Pakistani society and system. Likewise, on understanding Sufism Trimmingham (1971), Annmarie Schimmel 1975) and Chittick (2010) have discoursed different aspects of Sufism in detail.

## Sufism

Regarding the origin of the word ‘Tasouf’, there are different routes that are linked with it. Some scholar’s opinion is that it is derived from the Arabic word Safaa, which means cleanliness. Others opinion is that it enroots from Soof, which means wool. Likewise, some other links with Ahle Saffa. According to Greek, it is derived from Sophia, that means wisdom. So, it is the same thing with different meanings and interpretations.

In 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> initial books written on Sufism, which also includes “Kashaf al Mahjoub” says that Sufism is such a phenomenon to which different Scholars defines different way. Hajveeri says we were not united, there were six groups so it is so complex and so controversial. Among Muslims there is a difference of opinion. Some call it Ma’rifat, and others call it Taswouf/ Sufism. So, it is continued with different names but having the same nature and influence.

There are different perceptions regarding Sufism. One important perception is that it is mystical dimensions of Islam, whereas other opinion is that it has nothing to do with Islam. It is also considered as the wisdom of Indus Valley civilization. According to perennial philosophy, it is the heritage of human being that is continued and is as old as human being.

The word Sufism, for the first time, was used by a German Sophia Unano around 1850. European created words Hindumat, Budhmat and then converted them into Hinduism and Buddhism, like Communism, Socialism. To understand Sufism, we have to be clear first about that what is not Sufism? There is a difference between Sufi and Pir. Pirism (Piri-Muridi) is not Sufism. Some say Sufism is practical and not theoretical, whereas others believe it is theory as well as practical.

## Extremism

Literally, it means quality or state of being extreme. According to the Oxford Learner Dictionary “to hold extreme political or religious views, especially advocate illegal, violent, or other extreme action.” (“Extremism,” n.d.). Whereas according to the Cambridge Dictionary “Having beliefs that most people think are unreasonable and unacceptable.” Likewise, another definition is “Vocal or active opposition to our fundamental values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and respect and tolerance for different faiths and beliefs.” (“Extremism”, n.d).

This is the age of science and technology. Social innovation, artificial intelligence and robot technology are subjects of studies nowadays. Contrary to this, at same time ideological ambiguities, extremism, intolerance and injustice is growing which is widening the gap among human being in this age of globalization. On one hand, the world is just like a village and on the other hand in a village we are so far, that we even do not recognize the existence of others’ views. Because of not accepting others’ views today in world and particularly in Pakistan, we witness huge butchery, bomb blasting, suicide bombing even on sacred places and lethal shooting at school children and in other public places. The feeling of insecurity and fear is present everywhere.

So scientifically we are developing but socially we are indulging in unnecessary ideological clashes, due to which life is not at ease, which results in restlessness. This may lead us to another world war. It may break or not but certainly life is not easy, particularly in Pakistan religious radicalism has become a nonstop danger. Rising menace of religious radicalism, sectarianism and terrorism are important challenges to peace and tolerance in Pakistan. Growing extremism has become cancer for the backbone of a nation. Unfortunately it is increasing day by day. It has resulted in a deteriorating law and order situation in Pakistan. Likewise, patriarchy, feudalism, lack of democratic norms, inequality and injustice are other few key challenges that are hindrances in achieving peace and tolerance in society.

### **Relevance of Sufism with Extremism**

Peace and tolerance are those qualities that form the foundation of society. The world is a global village today. Globalisation has distorted boundaries throughout the world. More people from different countries, philosophies, faiths and lifestyles are working together and living in the same areas than ever earlier. Against the emerging trend, unfortunately, peace and tolerance in Pakistan have become a dream.

Today radicalism, violence, sectarian divide, corruption, misuse of power, target killing and extortion seem to be the crucial features of Pakistani social order. This has badly affected economy, law and order, development and is a great hindrance in peace, prosperity and progress. The message of Sufism is of love, respect and peaceful coexistence. Therefore, the need of the hour is to promote Sufi practices and teachings to counter extremism.

### **Analysis**

#### **Common Sufi Practices/ Ethnographical Data**

Sufism is not only a theory but a complete way of life. There are different views and perceptions available, therefore, it is hard to understand without in-depth approach. According to Werbber, P and Basu, H (2002) "The trouble, of course, in trying to comprehend Sufism and understand its orderly ritual and figurative logic and organization, is that in any specific locality, there is a wide range of Sufi saints, from main shrines of great ancient times, managed by offspring of the original saintly founder and guardians of his shrine, to small saints with a highly localized following" Similarly Sufi practices are also misperceived. *TAWAIZ*, *DHUN* are not Sufi practices. The role of Sufi is of Giver not Taker. Of course, extremism such practices will increase extremism rather than decreasing it. During my field-work and after going through lives and literature of great Sufis, I found following real Sufi practices through which we can counter extremism.

#### **Sufi Poetry/Music**

Sufi poetry is a gateway in understanding the message of Sufi saints. If we want to understand Shah, Sachal, Bulleh Shah, Rumi etc., we have to understand their poetry. Sufi poetry is the medium of their message, which is being expressed through Sufi Music. As it is said that music is the diet of soul, likewise through music many things are expressed that cannot be said in ordinary communication.

There is a great message in Sufi poetry to counter extremism. All great Sufi poets have emphasized respect for others' views. In this environment of growing extremism, one cannot say in ordinary talk but through Sufi music one can easily be influenced.

What I observed during my fieldwork that the influence of Sufi music is decreasing day by day. Although the number of listeners is increasing but the influence is reducing. There are many reasons for it. First and most important is that earlier time though Sufi singers and listeners were less they used to consider it as a virtue but nowadays it is commercialized. Secondly, in past there was fix time for Sufi Raag and they used to sing facing the shrine, on simple music instruments but nowadays no such traditions are continued; the focus is on sound system, which produces louder voice but less influence. Interestingly, in past Sufis used to sing themselves like we have examples of Sachal, Nank Yousaf, Mehdi Shah etc. but now Gadi-i-Nashin are sitting and singers sing.

Hence, we must note that Sufism is such a process/phenomenon which is expressed through arts. The real Sufism or stronger Sufism is that "It is some feeling which we express through arts" If it is expressed in another source it will have no life. Like, in poetry and then poetry in Sufi music, it will create interest. Therefore,

Mansoor ibn Hilaj, Ibn al Arabi, Rumi, Farid-u-din Attar, Chashti, Niazam-u-din, Bulleh Shah, Sachal and Shah Latif all great Sufi personalities had the power to express through art/poetry. It does not exist outside this.

### **Shrine Culture**

Shrine culture depicts the message of peaceful coexistence irrespective of gender, religion, caste and creed. Though different rumors and misconceptions exist regarding it. Its originality and impact were demolished by British rule in Sub-continent. Otherwise even today we witness a culture of tolerance and respect for everyone irrespective of any factor. When British came in Sub-continent extremist religious movements emerged like Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. On the other hand, modern enlighten leaders like Sir Sayad, Allama Musharqi focused on the adoption of western trends. Because of this original Sufism vanished. The Britishers developed feudalism by giving large lands to Gadi Nashin, which resulted in developing new shrine culture against the true spirit of Sufism. It was introduced as a commodity.

In the past, Sufis did not use one place but they use to wonder from one place to another. Moreover, in past there was the concept of *Ustad- Shagird* (Teacher-Student) but not Pir-Mureed (Saint-Devotee). So, when we talk about shrine culture as a Sufi practice that helps to counter extremism that means shrine culture before the British period. As we have mentioned above that no doubt through Sufi practices, we can counter extremism but Pirism rather countering extremism increases it.

### **Interfaith Harmony**

Interfaith harmony is one of the important Sufi practice. All Sufi saints believe, teach and promote interfaith harmony. It is because of this reason that, they have a vast number of followers from all sects and religions. They actually believe in humanity; therefore, they teach that respect every individual irrespective of any standard.

Sufis trace the originality and evolution of human being. Most of the time, they quote and refer to Quran as well. As Quran says that God never created bodies but spirit. Those spirits were neither Muslims nor Non-Muslims. God asked them, who is your Lord? All replied yes You are our Lord. This is point that is made and raised by Sufis. It supports the idea that Sufism is above religion. What we call Sufism, it's our limitation. Sufism name is given by The English, otherwise such practice is also present in other religions as well. Shiv Nathi, Guru Nanak, Shah Latif, Rumi, Shams Tabraiz, Farid Ganj Shahr have the same search. So, we can say all have same symbolic search, which is actually Sufism.

It is because of this reason that Sufis emphasize peaceful co-existence above the creed, caste, sect or religion. If this practice of Sufis is made common, it will help to counter extremism. The challenges to peace and tolerance in Pakistan can be dealt with through public mobilization and institutional strengthening. As the public is a key stakeholder, therefore its role is essential. In this regard, public participation and mobilization are very much important. Promotion of interfaith harmony will lead to achieve peace and tolerance in society. During public mobilization, the focus would be that all cultures are different but equal, likewise all religions are different but equal. Therefore, we should respect other cultures as well as religions.

Like public, the state is an equal stakeholder. Therefore, strengthening of state institutions is too important and will result in bringing peace and tolerance in Pakistan. In this regard, government should initiate different programs such as; changes in the syllabus, introducing interfaith harmony, peace and tolerance lessons. Moreover, Interfaith Harmony centers should be established in every university of Pakistan.

### **Tawakkal**

Tawakkal or trust in Allah is another important characteristic of Sufism. It is a quality that makes Sufi fearless and ends the materialistic approach. Sufi believes that we have come to contribute for the betterment of society and spread the message of love and respect for all irrespective of any worldly standard. Moreover, it is the responsibility of God/Creator for our livelihood, we are here for the sake of *Marfat* to seek closeness to God.

Love is not important in Sufism. The word that is used by Sufis is *Suhbat* (Friendship). Friendship is the supreme quality in Sufism. When Sufis claim friendship with God, there emerges element of Tawakkal. They owe everything to their friend (God). Schimmel (1975) defined "Tawakkal is an important reason for

contentment with the Will of God Almighty”. This does not affect happiness or grief, trouble, or in comfort, in nearness or distance, in contraction and expansion, union or separation, ascendance or descendance, life or death. On other hand, every trial from their friend and every wound of His sword should breathe fresh air into the soul and a fresh upward thrust in life.

Contrary to this approach and practice of Sufis, we are becoming materialistic day by day. Everyone is busy and at the same time seems confused in the race of gaining worldly comforts. This is another reason of growing extremism. If we adopt Sufis practice of Tawakkal, we can get rid of many problems including growing menace of extremism.

### **Shun Ego**

Selflessness is another practice that is being carried out by Sufis. Ego is the cause of all evils. To shun ego is the way of Sufis. War against ego(self) is considered the greatest war. When Mansoor Al-Hallaj was taken for hanging his servant, he was asked for an advice, he said, “Keep your ego (self/ Nafs) busy otherwise it will busy you in such activities which would be harmful for you”. During field work, what we observed that today’s so-called Saints lack this character. Their focus is more on the pomp and show. In this age of social media, they practice Sufism as fashion, to show off otherwise they are far away from the true spirit of Sufism.

If we really shun ego, not only can we counter extremism but today’s all problems would also be solved. As I have mentioned that extremism means imposing your own opinion, no matter opinion is correct or wrong. When we consider our self to be nothing, there would be no possibility of imposition. This selfless practice of Sufis admire people. If it is made common, we can make this piece of land as heaven. The roots of extremism lie in any group collective ego. Therefore, they want to impose on every individual, considering it the final and correct ideology.

Sufism teaches us how to liberate our self, no matter what we are i.e. worker, poor or where we live, in desert, mountains, is not an issue. The issue is to shun ego. This practice is carried by all Sufis around the world.

### **Conclusion**

Sufism is practical not theory. It can easily counter extremism if adopted with true spirit. We have been diverted from the essence and key teaching of Sufism and Sufi practices. Unfortunately, Sufism and Pirism(Piri-Muridi) have been mixed, which has weakened the influence and image of Sufism. It is only used as a policy<sup>i</sup>, which is against spirit of Sufism. Likewise, Sufi practices are also misunderstood. The real Sufi practices are Tawakul, Shun Egoism, interfaith harmony, patience and Ihsan. If these practices are made common and if we go back to the message of Great Sufis like Baba Bulleh Shah, Farid Ganj Shankar, Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai, Lal Shahbaz Qalander, Sachal Sarmast, the growing menace of extremism can be countered.

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