Sectarianism and Its Impacts on Social Tolerance: A Case Study of University Students of South Punjab

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Abstract: *1979 unveiled political events of the Iranian Revolution, the siege of Mecca, and the Afghan war that entirely shaped the political dynamics of the Muslim world, including the struggle for regional influence between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Issues like sectarianism, insurgency, humanitarian crisis, violation of women's rights, and uprisings in different parts of the Muslim world ensued. The paper is an attempt to understand the radical legacy of 1979: its impact on social tolerance and the sectarian rift between Shias and Sunnis in Pakistan. The data was collected through questionnaires from the students of public and private sector universities of South Punjab in Pakistan. A quantitative analysis of the data gauged the students' tolerance for the opposite sect and their perception of external influences on the sectarian divide in the country. The study revealed that students in the universities of Southern Punjab are not generally hostile to their out-of-sect social connections. It is recommended that students be made aware of issues like sectarianism in Pakistan and the role of regional politics to prevent them from falling prey to extremism.*

Introduction

"In their despair, there was nothing left to hold on to but guns and religion." — Kim Ghattas, *Black Wave* Change, be it positive or negative at social and cultural, and political level, is slow and inevitable. Different social, economic, and religious factors shape the lives and opinions of people living in a certain geographical space. The social structure of the Pakistani society is based upon diverse values (Hamid, 2011). Different religious sects have been living together for years. The thesis of this paper is that a sudden wave of sectarianism containing violence, bloodshed, and terrorist activities in Pakistan took place after the year 1979, responsible for the Afghan war and Iranian revolution.

Sectarianism is based on the idea of the sect, particularly an affiliation to any religious group. It works as a kind of barrier based on inherited beliefs against people of other beliefs or sects, hence diversity to conflict. In broader elucidation, the term is connected to politics of identity, including tribal, ethnic, and religious groups (Potter, 2015). Sectarianism has been a source of conflict in the Muslim and Arab world. The society of Pakistan has witnessed a surge in radicalization in its vulnerable youth (Akbar, 2021). As the Shia population in Pakistan is second only to Iran (Abbas, 2010). It is imperative that both the sects live harmoniously to avoid any serious dispute.

Historical Context

Although traces of sectarian conflict among Muslims could be found during the British Raj, Shias and Sunnis lived comparatively peacefully till the 1980s (Ahmed, 2011). Ahmed (ibid.) traces the genesis of this hatred to the separatist movements before the partition when the idea of Muslim particularism was popularised to set themselves apart from the Hindus. The glorious eras of Pakistani history are used as imitable ideals. In doing this, consciously or unconsciously, a narrative of Sunni Islam was propagated to the exclusion of the Shia Muslims. There are only two permissible identities in Pakistan, Muslim and non-Muslim.

Dedalus (2009), talking about the killings of the Hazara Shia community in Balochistan, says that in the early years after the genesis of Pakistan, the Shia-Sunni conflict was almost non-existent. For a long time, they lived in relative harmony. The secular attitude of a majority of Shias prevented their viewing the Sunni majority as opponents, while Sunnis, despite being in the majority, attended Shia religious festivals. He claims that during the Zia regime, the Deobandi Sunni group was fortified and promoted. The group held a rigid interpretation of the Saharia law, which was subsequently promulgated in Pakistan as the Islamisation drive, called the Sunnification of Pakistan by Misra (2015). The laws, for instance, the imposition of *the Zakat* Ordinance of 1980, were implemented indiscriminately on the people of all sects, which led to the alienation of the Shia population. The already estranged Shia population was further stirred by the 1979 Islamic Revolution of Iran and sought to become a better organized religious force by the formation of different groups, publically accepting the Ayatollah 'the source of emulation for Shia' (Abbas, 2010). The Sunni religious groups responded with a backlash to check the rising Iranian influence. Sipah e Sahaba Pakistan was formed in 1985, which demanded that Shias be apostatized. The conflict has not subsided since then and keeps surfacing every now and then. There has been a constant rise in the killings of Hazara Shias in Balochistan between the years 1998 to 2003, (Dedalus, 2009). Abbas, 2010 considers the Iranian Revolution of 1979 a major factor in the mobilization of the Pakistani Shia population. Irani revolutionary slogans were chanted and pictures of the Ayatollah were displayed. He quotes Muhammad Qasim

Zaman as saying that Saudi Arabia, feeling endangered by the threat of Iran's potential 'desire of exporting' the revolution, funded zealots and religious activities in Pakistan, including free hajj trips, establishing religious schools and madrassah, and building new mosques.

Ahmed, 2011 notes that the support of the Iranian government to the Shia population harmed their cause. Firstly, it helped them create a separate identity for themselves, a process initiated by the state, which the Sunnis had aimed at. This wafted them away from the mainstream Muslims in Pakistan. Secondly, the Shia student organizations working to counter Deobandi violence incited a more severe backlash. Many Shias fled Pakistan; notable personalities were killed only because of their belief.

Shiites are in a great majority all over the world, chiefly in Iran (Nasr, 2006). The Iraq War stirred the Shia population of Saudi Arabia, and they appeared as strong candidates in elections. The war has brought economic and cultural changes to the Shias of the region. Threatened by their rising strength, the Sunni population 'from Syria to Pakistan' retaliated, with the increased danger of a conflict between them in which both groups vie for power (ibid.). In Musharaf's regime, extremist religious groups were banned, which created comparative security for the Shias. However, after 2008, they feared a reemergence of the anti-Shia forces. Instances of violence mounted after Musharaf's regime in FATA, Kohat, Hangu, and Dera Ismail Khan (Abbas, 2010). This changing scene of the power struggle altered the situation in Pakistan. In the second decade of the twenty-first century, there was another bout of increased violence against the Hazara Shia community. The issues giving rise to the conflict during the last three decades had taken a dynamic shape after the 9/11 attacks. Basit (2013) analyzed the situation at four levels: (i) structural: on this level, the issue is related the place of Islam in people's lives, the majority of Muslims being from the Sunni sect, religious education with a tilt toward the Sunni sect, existence of political parties aligned towards certain religious ideologies, and deteriorating condition of law and order and judicial system, (ii) ideological: fueled by the formation of international religious militant organisations like Al Qaeda and Daesh, (iii) operational: caused because of the neighbouring

Afghan war, the easy access to weapons after the influx of illegal weapons after the Afghan jihad, and (iv) regional: Irans support in mobilising Shia organizations in Pakistan leading to Saudi Arabia in arming and supporting Sunni clerics and organisations to keep a check on Iranian influence. Basit (ibid.) says that it is imperative to counter sectarian violence in new ways as it is changing shape with passing the time. Similarly, Abbas, 2010 says that in 2009, Iran sought to strengthen its strategic ties with key players in international affairs. It also pursued its nuclear program relentlessly, despite threats of sanctions and international alienation. He acknowledges the role of neighboring Iran for peace in Pakistan. He considers Pakistan a hotbed for the Shia-Sunni conflict as both the groups in the country have a history of hostility after the Zia regime, turning Pakistan into 'the theater for a proxy Saudi-Iran war.

The conflict intensified in the coming decade. In 2016, Saudi authorities executed a dissident Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr, along with 46 other individuals under the charges of sedition and inciting unrest in the kingdom. The charges were mainly political in nature, but the move was lauded by the Sunnis of the country. There were protests in Shia-majority countries like Iraq and Iran, leading to attacks on the Saudi consulate in Mashhad and the Saudi embassy in Iran. It led to the termination of diplomatic relations between the two states (Gengler, 2016).

Pakistani Youth and Sectarianism

Nasr (2000) thinks that sectarianism in Pakistan means organized and militant religio-political activism, whose specific aim is to safeguard and promote the sociopolitical interests of the particular Muslim sectarian community. The promise of greater religious freedom and assertion of identity urges the people of one sect to marginalize those of the other sect through mobilisation of the sectarian identity. The rise of Deobandi extremist organisations and their demand of an Islamic state exclusively for the practice of their own ideology makes it tied to Islam and Islamism. According to Hashemi (2016), Muslim states are unable to control sectarian sentiment because of their internal weaknesses. He cites Joel Migdal's concept of weak states. As such, states are undergoing a 'crisis of legitimacy, they check the flow of information, unable to control many social, ethnic, and religious

organizations. The state and the ruling elites adopt strategies for survival, one of which is divide and rule. Hence, the state and the ruling elites themselves fan sectarian sentiment in the populace.

Ghattas (2020) says that the Saudi-Iran conflict was not a battle for geopolitical goals but 'for Islamic legitimacy through religious and cultural domination, changing societies from within—not only in Saudi Arabia and Iran but throughout the region.' Nasr (2007) has argued that the Shias are a rising force in the east, and the west must reconsider its attitude towards the Shia population. He claims that the future of the region will be built around the differences between Shias and Sunnis. The conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia has had formative influences in the shaping of Shia-Sunni relations in Pakistan. In recent years, extremism in Pakistani youth has assumed new dimensions. Grare (2007) notes that sectarian violence has multiple causes. However, recent phenomena like the war against terrorism are changing the relationship between different sects and communities, giving rise to changed sectarian politics.

Karim and Riaz (2021) conducted research on students of public sector universities in Karachi. Their study showed that extremism was more prevalent among young male students of a lower socioeconomic background. However, their religiosity had little to do with their extremist tendencies. Akbar (2021) in a study on university students and professionals of Southern Punjab, found that the students had confused attitudes regarding extremism due to a lack of pluralist narratives or misguidance. The professionals' responses were more positive and they emphasized the importance of community resilience as an approach to counter extremism.

Methods

The following research is qualitative and quantitative in nature. However, the tool for data collection was quantitative: a questionnaire. The study has developed a detailed background of the sectarian conflict raging in Pakistan. By the questionnaire, the researcher will try to establish the level of tolerance of Pakistani youth studying in the universities of Punjab.

Objectives of the Research

As the discussion in the literature review suggests, the issue of sectarianism is of great significance for establishing peace and security not only in Pakistan but the whole region. Moreover, the youth of a country is impressionable. Especially when it comes to matters of religion, the tide of emotion is always high in a developing country such as Pakistan. The research aims at studying how sectarianism has affected the social tolerance of the society, especially youth and students who have to contribute significantly in the near future of the state and society.

Research Questions

The following research questions will guide the study.

1. How does the Pakistani youth of today perceive Shia-Sunni relations?
2. What are the views of the Pakistani youth about the role of Saudi Arabia and Iran in causing and curbing the sectarian conflict in Pakistan?

By looking for an answer to this question, the study will highlight how Shia-Sunni rivalry has been stimulating social and political intolerance in Pakistan.

Data Collection Tool

Its four-tier questionnaire covered their views on personal, social, and political levels. The first three parts were adapted from Broer, et al. (2014). It was split into the following sections:

1. *Social connections*: related to participants' social connections with the people of the other sect,
2. *Family ties*: their views on family ties with people from the other sect,
3. *Personal beliefs:* their tolerance of beliefs of people from the other sect, and
4. *Iran-Saudi influence*: their perception of the influence of Iran and Saudi Arabia on sectarian conflict in Pakistan.

Sampling

Karim and Riaz (2021) opine that youth forms a

section of society who can be most prone to extremist tendencies in a society. Akbar (2021) has noted that South Punjab is a less privileged region of the province in terms of economic resources and opportunities. Many extremist organizations have strong support here. This causes the youth to be swayed by external radical influences. A report by the International Crisis Group (2016) called South Punjab the hotbed for local and regional extremist activities. Akbar (2021) has found that studies on the radicalization of youth in Southern Punjab have been few. Keeping this in mind, the data was collected from 300 students of 20-30 years of age belonging to public and private sector universities of South Punjab. Mainly, students of this age group are enrolled in masters, BS and MPhil. The researcher did not reach participants individually, rather, the questionnaire was conveyed to the participants through snowball sampling using Google Forms. The reason for the selection of this level was that these students are assumed to have familiarity with local and regional politics in the age of social media and globalization.

Significance of the Research

The research is significant because a review of previous literature revealed that there was no research using the students of universities of South Punjab as participants with reference to their perception of the Saudi-Iran conflict. Moreover, it will highlight the radicalising tendencies of the youth of Southern Punjab and any steps that could be taken to curb them.

Delimitations

The delimitations of the research are that the selected sample was from Punjab, Pakistan. As the researcher is a resident of Punjab, collecting data from universities was easy and convenient for him. Secondly, only university students of 20-30 years of age were selected. This delimitation was for the purpose of this study, as it focuses on the views of the youth of Punjab.

Display of Results

The results of questionnaires are displayed in the form of pie charts below.

## Section 1: Social Connections

Question 1:
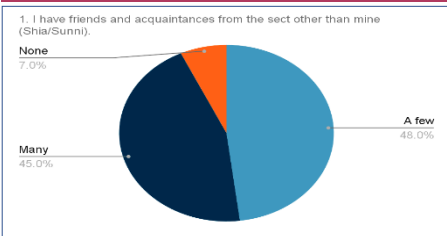
To the question 'I have friends and acquaintances from the sect other than mine,' 48% participants replied that they had a few, 45% of participants said that they had many, while 7% of them said that they had no friends from the other sect. The result shows that the students do not mind having acquaintances of different sects.

Question 2:
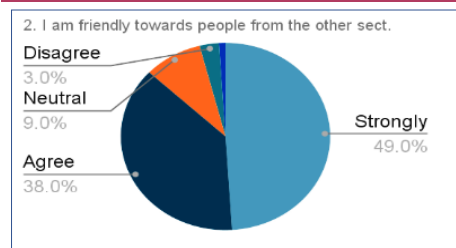
To the second statement 'I am friendly towards people from the other sect,' 49% strongly agreed, 38% agreed, 9% remained neutral, 3% disagreed, while 1% strongly disagreed. The study shows that the students are usually friendly to the people of opposite sects.
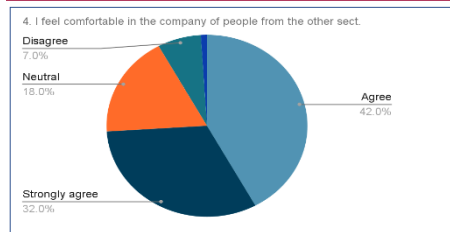
Question 3:
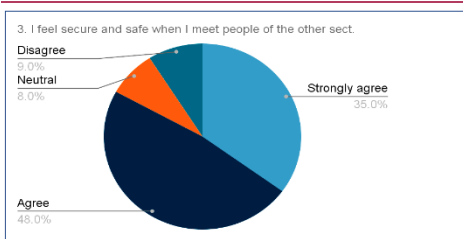
To the statement, 'I feel secure and safe when I meet people from the other sect, 35% strongly agreed, 48% expressed disagreement, 9% disagreed, while 8% remained neutral. The result depicts that the

students are paranoid about meeting people of other sects generally.
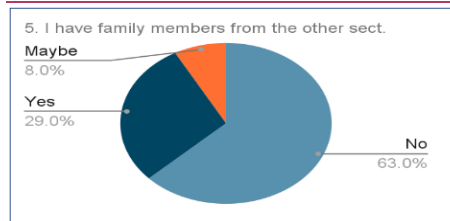
Question 4:

To the statement, 'I feel comfortable in the company of people from the other sect, 32% of the participants strongly agreed, 42% agreed, 18% remained neutral, 7% disagreed, while 1% of the participants strongly disagreed. The majority of the students agreed that they do not mind meeting people of other sects.
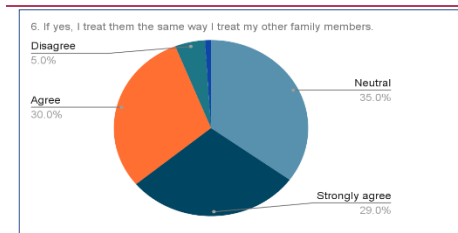
Section 2: Family Ties

Question 5:

To the statement whether they had any family members from the other sect, 63% replied in the negative, 29% in the affirmative, while 8% were not sure. The result manifests the lack of inter-sect marriages.

Question 6:

To the statement 'if I have family members from the other sect, I treat them the same way I treat my other family members,' 35% remained neutral, 30% agreed, 29% strongly agreed, 5% disagreed, and 1% strongly disagreed. A majority of the students agreed that they

encourage no boundaries on the basis of sectarian differences.

Question 7:

7. I feel that marrying a person of the other sect is acceptable.
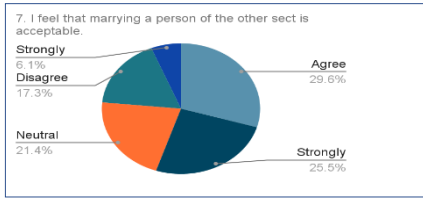
To the statement, 'I feel that marrying a person of the other sect is acceptable,' 2% participants chose not to respond, 25.5% strongly agreed, 29.6% agreed, 21.4% remained neutral, 17.3% disagreed, and 6.1% strongly disagreed. The majority of the students agreed that inter-sect marriages are acceptable, whereas there are also a number of people who are not aware of the fact and they chose to be neutral.

Section 3: Personal Beliefs

Question 8:

8. I read books of different sects to make my understanding of the other sect better.
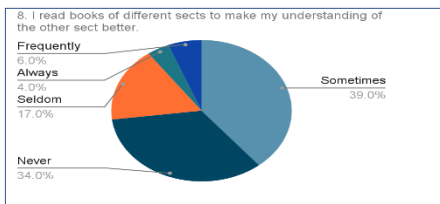
To the statement, 'I read books of different sects to make my understanding of the other sect better,' 39% replied sometimes, 34% said never, 17% said seldom, 4% said they always did, while 6% said they did so frequently. The result shows that students do not read books regarding opposite sects to have awareness. That shows that they are prone to any propaganda regarding sectarianism.

Question 9:

9. I believe that the belief system of my own sect is the only perfect system.
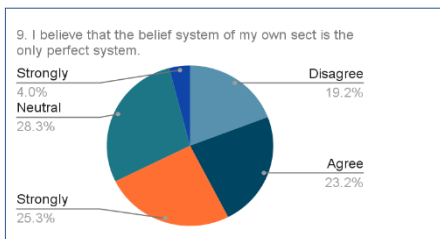
To the statement, I believe that the belief system of my own sect is the only perfect system, 25.3%

strongly agreed, 23.2% agreed, 19.2% disagreed. 28.3% remained neutral, while 4% strongly disagreed. 1% participants chose not to respond. A very large portion thrived in between strongly agreed and neutral. The result shows that they are prejudiced when it comes to their own sect.

Question 10:


10. I respect the beliefs of the other sect.
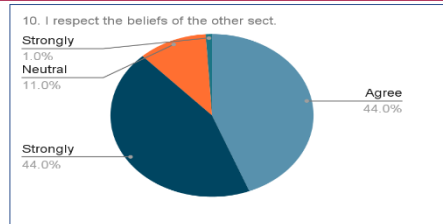
To the statement, I respect the beliefs of the other sect, 44% participants strongly agreed, 44% agreed, 11% remained neutral, while 1%% strongly disagreed. The students' answers suggest that they respect people affiliated to opposite sects and are very much in favour of harmony in the society.

Question 11:

11. Shia-Sunni rivalry has a negative impact on the peace of Pakistan.
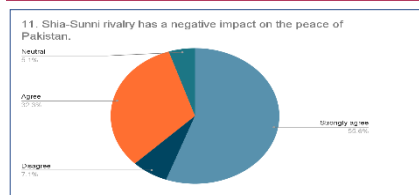
To the statement, Shia-Sunni rivalry has a negative impact on the peace of Pakistan, 1%% participants did not respond, 55.6% of them strongly agreed, 32.3% agreed, 7.1% disagreed, while 5.1% remained neutral. The result shows that students are aware of the fact that sectarianism in the society is harmful for the social peace and harmony.

Question 12:

12. I believe it is important for the peace of Pakistan to create harmony between Shias and Sunnis.
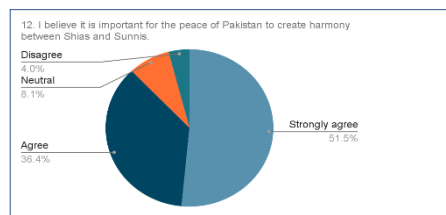
To the statement, I believe it is important for the peace of Pakistan to create harmony between Shias and Sunnis, 1% participants chose not to respond,

51.5% strongly agreed, 36.4% agreed, 8.1% remained neutral, while 4% disagreed. The result suggests that the students are in favour of mitigating sectarian differences to encourage peaceful coexistence and social welfare.

## Section 4: Iran-Saudi Influence

Question 13:
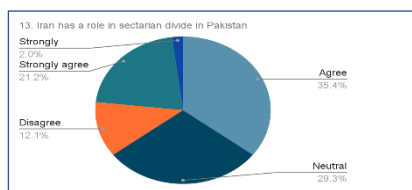
To the statement, Iran has a role in the sectarian divide in Pakistan, 35.4% agreed, 29.3% remained neutral, 21.2% strongly agreed, 12.1%% disagreed, while 2% strongly disagreed. 1% of respondents did not answer. The result shows that the students acknowledge the role of Iran in the sectarian divide in the Pakistani society.

Question 14:
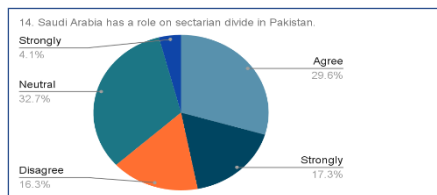
To the statement, Saudi Arabia has a role in sectarian divide in Pakistan, 2% respondents chose not to respond, 32.7% remained neutral, 29.6% agreed, 17.3% strongly agreed, 16.3% disagreed, and 4.1% strongly disagreed. 2% participants chose not to respond. The result renders that since the majority of the students are Sunni and they are religiously affiliated to Saudi Arabia for sacred places, they have decided to stay neutral. Also a majority of students recognized the importance of Saudi Arabia's influence in sectarianism.
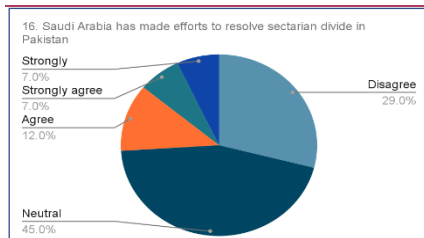
Question 15:
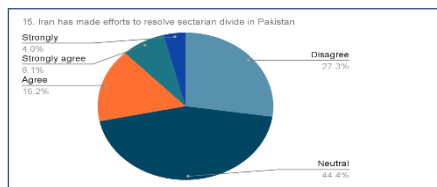
To the statement, Iran has made efforts to resolve

sectarian divide in Pakistan, 44.4% remained neutral, 27.3% disagreed, 16.2%5 agreed, 8.1 strongly agreed, 4%% strongly disagreed, while 1% participants chose not to respond. A majority of students answered neutral and also disagreed that Iran s efforts in eradication of sectarianism are not commendable.

Question 16:

To the statement, Saudi Arabia has made efforts to resolve sectarian divide in Pakistan, 45% remained neutral, 29% disagreed, 12% agreed, 7% strongly agreed and 7 strongly disagreed. The students of a large number disagreed that Saudi Arabia is playing its role in snuffing out the sectarian divide in the region.

Question 17:
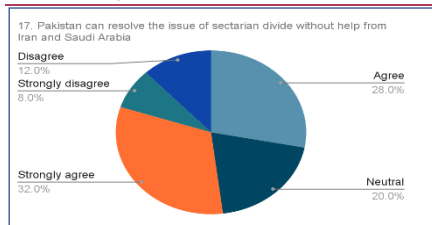
To the statement, 'Pakistan can resolve the issue of sectarian divide without help from Iran and Saudi Arabia,' 32%% strongly agreed, 28% agreed, 20% remained neutral, 12% disagreed, and 8% strongly disagreed. The majority of the students strongly disagreed to the role of Saudi Arabia and Iran showing that they are unacquainted with regional politics and how these countries have transformed the modern politics of the Muslim world majorly on a sectarian basis.

Discussion and Analysis

Section 1, Social Connections: The data from this section reveals that most university students have friends and acquaintances from the other sects. As university is a multicultural, multilingual and multi-

sect space, students are bound to have connections with people from the other sect. Also, because in Pakistan, there is no segregation between the Shia and Sunni population, and they come to the same educational institutions. The common people live together harmlessly until anti-Shia flames are stoked by different factions of the society. In terms of feeling comfortable and secure with people from the other sect, most of the participants were positive. In an environment of increased socialization, most of the students have shed their reserve and shyness. It may be a contributing factor to their feeling comfortable and secure with people from the other sect. It is also indicative of their level of tolerance and not making connections based on the person's religious beliefs.

Section 2, Family Ties: In family life, however, most of the participants denied having any relatives from the other sect. As religion is a major element in the life of a majority of Pakistanis, marrying someone from the other sect is frowned upon. It must be noted that the extended family system in Pakistan forms a structure in which the authority of the eldest family member, often a man, must be obeyed. This is quite different from connections with friends and acquaintances. Family and the elders have more hold and command in many people's lives than their social ties.

Section 3, Personal Beliefs: As has been mentioned above, religious beliefs and practices are inculcated into the minds of the young by families. Even later in their lives when they have met people from differing religious beliefs, they find it difficult to have a pluralistic view of religion. Hence, the majority of participants, though they respected the beliefs of other sects, held that theirs was the only true system of beliefs.

Section 4: Iran-Saudi Influence: A majority of participants remained neutral about the questions related to Saudi-Iran rivalry. It shows that the students are mainly ignorant of the role of external factors, especially the role of Iran pertinent to the Shia community and Saudi governments role regarding the Sunni community.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study has identified that a majority of students feel comfortable with students of different sects, but they also face a clash between old ideas inculcated in them by their families and new ideas that they get to learn and know at academic institutions causing mental distress in them leading to cognitive dissonance. The study also showcases that a majority of the students are unaware of the roles of Iran and Saudi governments, and they think that Pakistan can solve the issue on its own. Seminars and talks must be facilitated and encouraged at the university level to mitigate the threat of illiterate and unaware aggression alarming for social cohesion. University administrations should devise a proper plan for educational programmes and activities required to curb tendencies of intolerance in students. Teachers should also play their role by providing apt information and knowledge irrespective of their personal beliefs. It is imperative to change the attitudes and opinions before it is too late. As Nietzsche wrote, the minds which are prevented from changing their opinions, cease to be mind (Nietzsche, 1911).

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