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Online Radicalization in Pakistan: A case study of Youth in South Punjab

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Abstract

The cyber technology has synchronized the world. The inventions of so many online tools have provided a veritable playground for Cyber terrorists to test their skills, to recruit, to propagate and to refund. They have changed their battle grounds from conventional to online. They are objectively targeting the youth by publishing romanticized videos of brotherhood, holy wars and likewise. These young individuals possess remarkable cyber capabilities, which can assist terrorists in not only radicalizing and recruiting new members but also in executing cyber-attacks against their adversaries. As Pakistan's 64% of total population comprises of youth hence Pakistan is more vulnerable. It has no proper legislative framework to counter the posing threats of online radicalization and cyber terrorism. On the other hand, Extremist and terrorist organizations are cognizant of the fact that in order to endure in the ever-evolving landscape of warfare, they must modify and evolve their strategies. Online Radicalization of youth particularly in South Punjab has been a growing concern for the government and society in recent years. South Punjab, which comprises of Bahawalpur, Multan, and Dera Ghazi Khan Divisions, has witnessed an increase in extremist activities in recent years. South Punjab has become a breeding ground for terrorism, extremism, and militancy due to various factors like socio-economic disparities, religious intolerance, poor education, and lack of opportunities. They will persist in utilizing the Internet to sustain their current approaches, while also endeavoring to surpass them with novel, more efficacious techniques. This paper aims to explore the phenomenon of online radicalization of youth in South Punjab, Pakistan. The paper will analyze the statistical data related to online radicalization, the factors responsible for it, and the measures that can be taken to curb it.

Key Words: On line radicalization, South Punjab, Youth, Socio-Cultural, Factors

Introduction

The cyber technology has revolutionized the world, rendering it into a global community. As per the statement by Bill Gates, "The internet is progressively evolving into the central hub of the future's worldwide society (EFSAS September 12, 2022). During the onset of 2019, the worldwide penetration of the internet escalated to 57%, signifying 4.4 billion individuals utilizing the service, while the total count of mobile social media users reached 42%, amounting to 3.2 billion individuals. Moreover, the number of internet users in Pakistan has been on an upward trajectory, experiencing a surge of 11 million users solely between the years 2020 and 2021 (Nizamani, 2022).

The escalation of radicalization in the Indian subcontinent is not an unexpected phenomenon, considering the region's long-standing issues of severe socio-economic and political problems, corruption, an ineffective criminal justice system, high unemployment rates, and curbs on freedom of expression. The youth in particular tend to express their frustration and discontent due to the government's failure to guarantee basic living standards, and the internet has become a convenient tool for voicing such grievances. Facebook is the most commonly used social networking platform for connecting people, which terrorist groups have identified as an appropriate channel for disseminating their extremist beliefs and technological skills via closed groups or pages.

Pakistan currently boasts the most substantial number of young individuals in its history, thereby qualifying as one of the world's most youthful nations and second youngest within South Asia. Of the overall population of 207 million, approximately 64 percent is below the age of 30 years, with 29 percent aged between 15-29 years. This youth bulge is projected to persist for at least the following three decades and could potentially either serve as an asset or a liability, contingent on how effectively this sector is integrated into society. As such, the youth population constitutes the most crucial demographic group in Pakistan and, simultaneously, the most impressionable (Basit, 2019).

Compared to the past, the younger generation is presently considerably more interconnected and expressive. Social media has become a ubiquitous phenomenon in Pakistan, with the nation hosting over 44 million social media accounts. Among the plethora of social networking platforms, Facebook stands as the most prominent, boasting nearly 30 million users throughout the country (Zaheer, 2018). Therefore, in a terrorism-afflicted nation like Pakistan, the youth, who are considered the future of the nation, become increasingly critical, particularly when vulnerable to radicalization. The most concerning element of this development is the connection of militancy with universities. The instances of educated militants from colleges and universities involved in ISIS-inspired militant cells, such as the Saad Aziz network, and Al-Qaeda (AQ)-affiliated Jamaat-ul-Ansar Al-Shariah (JAS), demonstrate the infiltration of global jihadist groups into the minds of Pakistan's youth (Iqbal K & Mehmood, 2022).

The internet and social media have emerged as highly effective tools in the promotion, incitement, intimidation, and radicalization of a much wider and previously unreachable audience. The reach of these platforms is immediate and global, and they are capable of developing rich content for the mass market while still protecting the privacy of individual users. Therefore, the task of preventing

online radicalization and recruitment has become increasingly challenging for the responsible actors.

Terrorist groups have taken advantage of modern communication platforms to communicate among themselves and recruit potential members. The Islamic State of Iraq and Al Sham (ISIS), for example, has effectively utilized social media platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, and Telegram to disseminate its propaganda and attract new recruits.

However, the government's efforts to combat hate speech and radicalization have been criticized for being uncoordinated and raising concerns about media censorship and surveillance. The government's internet regulations, including the Citizen Protection (Against Online Harm) Rules 2020 and the Removal and Blocking of Unlawful Online Content Rules 2020, have been challenged in court due to fears of censorship and limits on free speech, particularly from journalists and activists.

As the digital media landscape in Pakistan continues to expand, it is important for the country to adopt a collaborative and inclusive approach with social media companies. The Asia Internet Coalition, which represents social media companies, has expressed interest in following the "Christchurch Call" model used by New Zealand and the United Kingdom. This approach involves developing tools to prevent the uploading of extremist content, addressing the root causes of violent extremism, increasing transparency on content removal, and reviewing platform algorithms directing users to such content. This proactive approach differs from the policies being challenged in Pakistan and has the potential to effectively counter online extremism (Nizamani, 2022).

Socio-Cultural Environment of South Punjab

The social, cultural, and political situation in the South Punjab region is largely similar, with only minor variations. The primary distinguishing factor is religion. During the last few years, South Punjab is experiencing a shift from traditional Sufi Islam to more orthodox version of Islam, a quite radical. One organization that has been promoting the reorientation of religion in Punjab is the Jammāt ud Dawa (JuD). This group is highly active as a non-governmental organization that provides general services to those in need. They played a significant role in providing relief to individuals affected by the 2005 earthquakes and the 2010/11 floods. The JuD has also established over 150 "model schools", which are purported to serve as venues for extremist indoctrination.

Orthodox Islamists espouse a strict interpretation of Islam, commonly known as "hard Islam", which is considered to be a literal and pure version of the religion. This interpretation is viewed as being theologically unchallengeable by the traditional religious leaders, who in Punjab often hold the dual roles of political and spiritual leaders known as "pirs". Unfortunately, these spiritual institutions and pirs have not been able to provide viable alternatives to their followers, known as "murids", and have been perceived as failing to address their socio-economic struggles. Consequently, the rise of Deobandi- and Wahhabi-inspired movements, which challenge established religious practices and power structures, has gained traction.

For decades, Southern Punjab has been embroiled in a deep social crisis. Impoverished Sunni peasants have been engaged in an ongoing dispute with wealthy Shia landowners, yet the federal government has failed to intervene and resolve the conflict. In the 1980s, the government was still largely controlled by descendants of refugees who arrived in Pakistan in 1947, and they were not interested in curtailing any involvement by members of the establishment who aimed to protect their rural landlord brethren. Meanwhile, a growing number of newly affluent Sunni locals who had received remittances from family members working in the Middle East were unable to effectively challenge the entrenched power of the feudal elite. This elite group, often entrenched in the piri-muridi system, thus had to be challenged by orthodox religion. In this context, Deobandi movements began to provide support to marginalized groups with limited social mobility. They opened madrassas and contested the established feudal structures in society, with hardline organizations like the SSP (since 1984) and LeJ (since 1990) turning to violence as a means of fighting local injustices in Punjab. Orthodox movements present themselves as pure, free from any non-Islamic interference, and thus challenge the power of traditional Sufi-inspired Islam, which incorporates many pre-Islamic practices and rituals. This, in turn, has led to a greater emphasis on constructing orthodox madrassas and mosques, which serve as "social equalizers", reducing the role of traditional ruling elites (Hansen. 2012).

The delayed justice, corruption, instable economy and crucial role of police are adding fuels to violent extremism and terrorism in Pakistan, particularly South Punjab. The human security is worst among this region. The situations in Central Punjab are comparatively controlled, stable and secure due to high educational levels and strong human security indicators. At the same time, the banned terrorist organizations are gaining ground. The welfare services, which state fails to deliver, these banned jihadist outfits are providing them. The services are ranging from food, clothes on festive or ceremonial days to holding religious seminars in Madrassas. Thus these Islamists Jihadists are presenting themselves as non-state actors who are working as social change and have filling the vacuum which the state fails to fulfill. The banned outfits including Lashker e Jhangvi and Tehreek e Taliban are also involved in criminal activities including brutal robberies, kidnappings and assassinations to get finance for their working.

Religious Radicalization in South Punjab

Southern Punjab was previously recognized for its tolerant society, but in recent decades, a combination of political, socioeconomic, and geostrategic factors has allowed for the expansion of jihadist groups in the region. This expansion has been facilitated by state support for jihadist proxies, as well as financial support from foreign countries, particularly Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states. South Punjab has become suitable place for militant organizations to recruit, to plan and to train for terror attacks due to the proximity of borders with India as well as insurgency and lawless-hit area of Pakistan. Though a large population of this area follows Sufism and is renowned still jihadist group find gaps and are able to operate freely due to non-seriousness of the State. Political dysfunction, absence of rule of law and poor governance give them space to penetrate in the region, enlarge their size and exceed their social roots.

Like other regions of Pakistan, South Punjab is also facing religious extremism and terrorism over the years. The militant organizations are not only targeting religious minorities but also security forces and government officials. One of the major reasons of the rise of terrorism in South Punjab is the lack of job opportunities and poverty. Those are more susceptible to extremist ideologies that lack access to education and employment opportunities. The militant organizations offer financial incentives to such people to attract them to their cause. They provide them food, money and shelter. Their offers appeals particularly to youth of poor background who lack economic opportunities and suffers from poverty.

Another reason of religious extremism in South Punjab is the propagation of ideology through madrassas, mosques and other religious institutions. Some extremist groups even use violence and threats to choke other's voices. They also exploit social and cultural norms of the region to recruit young people. For example, they may target the young man of a family, offer him a handsome amount and certain incentives and later ask him to convince his family for radical and terror activities.

The Pakistani government takes steps to curb religious extremism in South Punjab. It has launched military operations against them and even implement policies to monitor and regulate religious institutions. It has also increased its efforts to promote economic and education development in the region particularly to address the root causes of religious radicalizations.

Factors Responsible for Online Radicalization of Youth in South Punjab

The factors which are responsible for online radicalization of youth in South Punjab, Pakistan are as follows:

- **Socio-Economic Disparities:**

The people of South Punjab face several socio-economic challenges as it is considered as the least developed region of Pakistan. They are facing challenges of poverty, unemployment and lack of education. Furthermore, South Punjab is declared to lower than the national average as per UNDP's Human Development Index (HDI) (Tahir 2017). The low HDI indicates the scarcity of education, healthcare and clean water in the region. Thus lack of economic opportunities further frustrates the youth and makes them hopeless about their future. The political instability and corruption in the region add fuel to the fire. Owing to this, the youth become more receptive to extremist ideologies

- **Religious Intolerance:**

Pakistan being an Islamic country, the majority of its residents is Muslims. As there are several sects and sub-sects within Islam, these sects have conflicting views on religious as well as on political issues. These conflicting views are cashed by radical groups to create insurgency in the State. They start spreading hatred speeches to spread violence and anarchy in the region.

- **Lack of Education:**

One of the most crucial factors is the lack of education. This region's literacy rate is at 12% which is one of the lowest literacy rates. The Pakistan Education Statistics shared the figures by which for every 7,500 villages there is only one school

(Waseeb.2010). The government of Punjab is trying to improve education standards through its Punjab Education Sector Reform Programme. This programs aims to increase student enrollment in institutions, teacher training, free education, special scholarships for girls, new recruitment of teachers, up gradation of schools and colleges, special ministry for literacy and also 250 centers under Parha Likha Punjab for enrollment and education. The government has also made plans to collaborate with NGOs. But despite of all such measures the graph of radicalization and extremism in going high. The rapid increase in population and consequent demands for education put all government efforts in vein. The youth becomes vulnerable due to lack of education.

- **Social Media:**

It has become a powerful but cheapest tool to promote their narratives and to recruit new members in their organization. The report of Digital Rights Foundation, Pakistan (DRFP), announced 43.55 million Facebook users in Pakistan (Kemp 2022). This report also declared the use of this platform by the radical and militant organizations. They do posts in the local languages as well to penetrate more and more among the people. They post such videos which would create sympathies for them among the public. They have established their proper teams or wings to update common people about their working on this platform.

Vulnerable Youth of Pakistan

Pakistan is considered to be a vulnerable state to cyber threats due to easy and cheap access of cyber technology to its public. They have less knowledge about its appropriate use. On the other hand radical and extremist groups find this technology as a cheap medium to radicalize the vulnerable youth. They disseminate the provocative videos, reels and posts. Numerous reported cases have emerged that confirm the use of online platforms by illicit groups to propagate radical ideologies.

One such example is the case of Noorul Ain Laghari, a student at Hyderabad's Liaquat University of Medical Sciences, who left her home to join the Islamic State (IS). However, she was recovered from the home of a hardcore IS militant who had allegedly engineered an attack on the Christian community. The militant was subsequently killed in April 2017 after a police encounter (UNDP January 3, 2022). In January 2018, a college principal was killed by a student who accused him of propagating blasphemous content online. The principal had earlier expressed his anger over students skipping college to attend the Faizabad sit-in. Later on the student revealed that he kept watching Islamic videos on internet and was follower of Tehrek e Labaik (Pakistan Today October 17, 2022).

In March 2018, a member of ISIS named Imran, also known as Saif-ul-Islam, hailing from the Baluchistan province of Pakistan, was apprehended in Karachi by the Pakistani Federal Investigation Authority (FIA). Investigations revealed that he was using social media platforms such as Telegram to radicalize young girls and encourage them to join the terrorist organization. Imran was identified as the administrator of an internet page that was being operated from a location on the border of Pakistan and Afghanistan (Tribune October 14, 2022).

It is important to note that ISIS and Al-Qaeda are not the only jihadist groups that have turned to cyber space to disseminate their ideology. A multitude of extremist groups exist that contribute to the genesis of a radicalized cyberspace.

These examples illustrate how sympathizers of jihadist ideologies can become radicalized remotely through the use of digital technologies without being in contact with terrorist organizations. They can then commit attacks without fully understanding the motives behind the terrorist organization in question.

In the underdeveloped region of the most populous province of Pakistan, where the local population is already burdened by economic hardships and often ravaged by natural disasters, jihadist groups have been able to gain a foothold, sometimes with the support of the state, which facilitates their entry into the bureaucracy. These groups are also able to establish charity organizations that help them gain the sympathy of the people. They complain through social media as well. Meanwhile, civil society organizations that could potentially help fill the gaps in the state's service delivery are often restricted and intimidated. Despite the rise of jihadist groups, the majority of the population in southern Punjab still adheres to more moderate and syncretic forms of Islam, such as Sufism and Barelvism, which Deobandis and Wahhabi/Salafis consider heretical. However, the prevailing environment of impunity is promoting extreme religious, sectarian, and gender-based discrimination and exclusion. If left unaddressed, the influence of these groups is likely to spread within and beyond the region.

Online Radicalization in Pakistan

Radicalization is a gradual process through which individuals, groups, or masses develop extremist beliefs, emotions, and behaviors. Some states and groups covertly and overtly support this process. The internet has significantly facilitated communication networks and processes, making it a powerful tool for radicalization. Digital technology has enabled extremist groups to spread their ideologies, gather funds, plan attacks, establish communication networks, and engage in recruitment, training, and propaganda.

Pakistan faces the threat of radicalization from both homegrown and cross-border groups, including those in India, Afghanistan, and global organizations such as IS. Domestic grievances have been exploited by radicalized Pakistani groups, who receive support from the Indian state and jihadist groups from India and Afghanistan. Additionally, the Gulf-employment boom has facilitated online radicalization among Pakistani Muslims.

Pakistan is already dealing with online jihadist radicalization from global organizations such as AQIS and IS, as well as from indigenous and regional groups like TTP, LeT, LeJ, and Jaish e Muhammad, among others. Terror groups in Pakistan prefer to manually select individuals and verify their background rather than relying on online correspondence. They require that a Muslim radical follow a revered religious cleric before communicating with them online. In contrast, IS operates its global movement entirely online, while al-Qaeda's online magazines and YouTube channels have been banned, and its Twitter and Telegram accounts have been blocked.

Members of ISIS follow strict security measures to maintain anonymity, such as turning off GPS locations and using VPNs. In the past, they downloaded Hola VPN or a similar program to select an IP address for a country outside the US to bypass email or phone verification.

Online Radicalization of Youth in South Punjab

In Pakistan, there exist three jihadi groups of Sunni Deobandi persuasion that operate predominantly in the provinces of Punjab and Sindh. These groups include Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), and Jaish-e Mohammad (JeM), and they have a significant presence in southern Punjab. They have been known to serve as a source of recruitment for jihadists who are dispatched to Afghanistan and the tribal areas. JeM, in particular, has a stronghold in the southern province of Sindh, specifically in the port city of Karachi. Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) is considered the only major Wahabi/Ahl-e-Hadith jihadi organization. The Punjab-based groups are considered more dangerous due to their religious ideology, which is a greater cause for concern than the groups that have ethnic links to the Pashtun tribal areas, whose violent actions are primarily driven by tribal traditions to avenge the death of their kin.

The Punjab-based groups are keen to showcase their deadly power. This is why Owais Ghani, the governor of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), maintains that the fighters from Punjab are more ferocious and harder to penetrate than those from the Pashtun region. Veteran Punjabi jihadists, according to Tariq Pervez, play a critical role as a link between Al-Qaeda and various terrorist organizations of Arab/Egyptian origin, who provide resources, ideas, and recruits for martyrdom, many of whom are from southern Punjab. According to sources from Pakistan's Federal Investigation Agency (FIA), all of these groups, including Al-Qaeda, Pashtun jihadists, and Afghan Taliban, are operationally intertwined and employ cyber technology to communicate with each other (Siddiqi, 2009).

Since 2018, there has been a discreet period of recruitment and fundraising for Islamist militancy in Pakistan. The arrests of approximately 22 Al-Qaeda members and 89 operatives of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), including 10 members of the TTP Ghazi group, eight operatives of the banned Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, and one belonging to the 313 Brigade, in south Punjab, suggest that these Islamist groups have been effective in attracting new members (NACTA March 25, 2023).

The extremist and militant groups have adapted their mode of operation to be physically silent but active online. They produce and disseminate high-quality propaganda through social media, which has become critical for their brand management and approach to radicalization. Social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have become modern-day tools to spread their messages. Militants operating in South Punjab use encrypted messaging apps such as Facebook, Telegram, YouTube, and ChirpWire to reach Pakistani youth. They also use multiple media outlets, including Telegram, Hoop, Element, the Internet Archive, Bcove.Video, Yandex.Com, the IPFS distributed web platform, File.Fm, Transfer.Sh, Tune.Pk, Vudeo.Net, File.Fm, Fromsmash.Com, Gofile.io, Tune.Pk, Wetransfer.com, and Mediafire.

Conclusion

The study highlights the significant presence of extremist groups on social media platforms, which they use to recruit and radicalize young people. They are working effectively in developed states. In the case of Pakistan and specially the South Punjab, it is the breeding ground for them. They are using religious card, raising the slogans of Jihad and propagating this ideology effectively via Social Media. So the

government of Pakistan needs to take sensible action to address these factors and promote a more inclusive and equitable society that provides opportunities for the youth to succeed and contribute to their communities in a positive way. Government should use anti-radicalization policies of Malaysia and Indonesia, i.e. Counter-Messaging Strategy. By this technique, the freedom of expression will be ensured as well as anti-radicalization can be done. Besides this, Government should also improve the education system, creating job opportunities, and implementing policies that promote economic and political stability. Moreover, the government needs to monitor and regulate extremist content on social media platforms to prevent its spread and radicalization of the youth.

In conclusion, the study emphasize the urgent need for the government, civil society, and international organizations to work together to address the root causes of online radicalization of youth in South Punjab and promote a culture of tolerance, pluralism, and respect for diversity. Only through a comprehensive and collaborative approach can we hope to address this growing threat and build a more peaceful and prosperous society in South Punjab. While certain analysts suggest that the connections between the ISI and the three Deobandi outfits have ceased, the existing evidence in south Punjab contradicts such a viewpoint. Reports indicate that training camps have been established by JeM in the desert region of south Punjab. However, it is impossible to sever the ties between one organization and another, as they rely on each other for assistance and are operationally linked.

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