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Grounding Sectarianism: The end of syncretic traditions

Abstract

This article sets out to explore the sectarian differentiation that beset Pakistan from the very outset. In this study the events taking place at the national level, had the resonance at the local level, particularly in the district Mianwali. In a bid to explain the heightened sectarian tension, the role of Maulana Allahyar¹ from Chakrala², has been underscored as a devout exponent of Sunni/ Deobandi ascendancy, with wider implication. He employed munazara as the main instrument of stemming Shia dissemination. He upheld the cause of Sunni/Deobandi version of Islam in the midst of rising proselytization of Shias in the region. Because of his endeavors to counter the Shia's creeping influence in Chakrala, came to be the epicenter of Islamic reformism. Hence along with the strivings of Allahyar, Chakrala too forms the main focus of study.

Introduction

Pakistan has faced a constant irritant regarding the status of the religious minorities vis a vis majority. The politics of religious exclusion therefore becomes extremely relevant while studying Pakistan's political history. Such exclusion has crystalized the sectarian fault lines which gave rise to fundamentalist ideologies. On sectarianism and religio-political activism of Ulema most scholars link the increased radicalization of sectarian identities with Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization, the Afghan War, the proliferation of Deobandi *madaris* and the 1979 Iranian Revolution.³ Qasim Zaman and Vali Nasr have delved deep into sectarianism, their work shows how in the last half of twentieth century, configuration of social, political and religious factors at national and transnational levels articulated religious identities⁴. Some of the aspects on the subject of sectarian have not been covered by these scholars.

The success of anti-Ahmadiyya movement in 1974 encouraged the Sunni Ulema to apply the same principle of exclusion to the Shia community.⁵ Farzana Sheikh maintains "when Ahmadis were constitutionally designated as non-Muslims and stripped off their rights as full citizens, it set a precedent that significantly enhanced the power of Sunni groups pressing for a sectarian construction of 'the Pakistani.' Since then radical Sunnis have repeatedly pressured the state to consider ever narrower definitions of 'the Muslim' that would exclude the country's Shia minority and reserve the constitutional rights of 'the Pakistani' to the country's Sunni Muslims."⁶ Despite unanimity of views among Shias and Sunnis from 1950s to 1970s over the issue of *Khatam-e-*

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Nabuwwat, Sunni Ulema notably *Tanzim-i-Ahl-e-Sunnat* affiliated with Deobandi denomination unleashed anti-Shia vitriol.⁷ Anti-Shia polemics orchestrated by Deobandis during anti-Ahmediyya movement exposed inanity of the Shia-Sunni common front.⁸ Once non-Muslims were relegated to the marginal status, the dissension created on the denominational differences crept into the other minority sects.⁹

Sectarianism emerged on the socio-political horizon of Pakistan during the years from 1940-1947.¹⁰ After Pakistan's birth, Shia campaign for constitutional safeguards, reservation of seats in the state institutions, freedom for *azadari* and other rituals specific to Shia religious life was once again launched.¹¹ The main menace that Shia were subjected to, came from Ulema notably TAS of Deobandis. Justin Jones maintains that a new form of Shiaism took shape with the development of organizations, public forum and doctrinal religious literature.¹² Maulana Allahyar Chakralwi's (1904-1984) strong opposition to Shias began in this highly charged atmosphere of sectarian animosity during 1950-1960 in Chakrala, a town in Mianwali district.

From *bida* to *sharia*: *manazara* as genre and contesting *Fitna-e-Shia Rawafiz*¹³

Steeped in Deobandi ideology Maulana Allahyar, stressing on exclusionary discourse, embarked on his campaign to exclude Shias from the pale of Islam. The Deobandi creed epitomized reaction to Shia dissemination in India¹⁴ particularly the areas constituting U.P. The anti-Shia *fatwa* issued by the leading Deobandi Ulema clearly placed them in the reformist tradition of the pre-mutiny reformers.¹⁵ In those days the *takfiri fatawa* appeared to have become quite a norm. Allahyar's focus was singularly riveted on Shias whom he denounced as the greatest enemy of Islam. When the focus is narrowed down to the district Mianwali, the Shias were settled in considerable number. According to Nur-ul-Hassan Bukhari, the leader of TAS, wrote in its organ *Dawat*, "Nowhere else in Pakistan the Shias were as strong as in some parts of Mianwali. It is the most backward region in the entire Punjab because it is the house of Shiaism. *Zakirs* as numerous as the grains of sand of the Thal desert, indulging day and night in the shameful *tabarra* (abusing companions of the Prophet (pbuh)). Not even one-tenth of the storm of abuse and insult being perpetrated here is witnessed anywhere else."¹⁶ The statement reflected the tenuous relationship between the Sunnis and Shias, articulated through polemics and *manazaras* as Shia *zakirs* were frequently operating in the district. They were well connected with the Shia *manazir* of Lucknow, who were occasionally invited for debates.¹⁷ The lack of trained and learned *zakirs* in Pakistan was the main reason. Thus the two nation-states namely India and Pakistan, were at odds with each other politically, had struck unanimity in religious matters. With this in view Shia *Majlis-e-Ulema* decided to establish Shia *dini madaris* in 1949 where *mubaligh* classes were organized initially at district Sargodha.¹⁸ The Shi'i tended to view rural Sunnis as their potential converts. Allahyar tried to check conversion as many of them had Shia agrarian magnates as their tribal leaders. At times Sunni members of tribe were coerced into conversion to Shiaism.¹⁹ In a society with the tribal structure, submission to the tribal chief is of cardinal importance. Thus the tribal chiefs use religion to exercise their control over the people.

The religious controversies between Sunnis and Shias were played out through theological disputation, the *manazras*. The *manazras* were arranged and funded by these local *zamindars* annually in which the Shia *zakirs* were invited from surrounding areas. The prominent among them were Maulvi Ismail Gojarvi (Toba Tek Singh) Jafar Shah (Chakrala), Khadim Bukhari, Tajudin Haidari, Mirza Ahmed Ali Amritsari and Faiz Mukhialwi.²⁰ *Manazras* were ostensibly polemical debates but they also involved the prestige of the contesting tribes. People from surrounding villages used to assemble in a large number to lend support to each other's tribe.²¹ Thus the religion was entwined with the tribal, social and political relations and their internecine conflicts.²² The interplay of tribal, social structures and regional economic imperatives helped in the development of Shiaism.²³

In that spatial context, Allahyar conducted debates in small towns like Khandway and Kot Miana and also in bigger cities like Multan, Jhelum, Sargodha, and even to the borders of Sindh and Kashmir. He contested Shias in *manazras* when "they sought to assert their authority by mis-representing tradition as well as the *Quranic* verses. He claimed that his aim was to reform beliefs and not to incite sectarian animosity." However, the *manazra* tradition stirred hostility which engulfed the whole district. On one occasion, in a *manazra* against Shia *zakir*, a serious argumentative exchange ended up in a brawl, when some armed men from Maulana Allahyar's tribe attacked the Shia and forced him to flee. On another such occasion when Shia *manazir* refuted his argument regarding a *hadith*, Allahyar hit him with the book in his head.²⁴ That anomalous behavior notwithstanding, he dominated his adversaries in various *manazaras* because of his profound knowledge of religious source-books.

Chakrala as the epicenter of religious reformism

Chakrala presented a mosaic, where ethnic, tribal and religious groups existed as independent cultural units. The sectarianism emerged as a manifestation of fractured identities, caused by coercion of Sunnis who tried to establish their authority over Shias through the tribal pressure or by using force.²⁵ Sunni bid to restrict Shia *azadari* processions (mourning processions) and the *tabarra* agitation had disrupted the peace in Mianwali. The sectarian antagonism manifested in violent clashes which had become more frequent, particularly when their freedom to observe their rituals was usurped. As David Thurfjell maintained, "Ritualisation constructs independent agents, but paradoxically, as individuals, they are subordinated in a collective system of thought and action through a process of authorisation."²⁶ Allahyar tried to thwart every attempt of conciliation and encouraged a clear differentiation. This was vividly demonstrated in a *manazara* held at Bagh (Azad Kashmir), where *Ahl-e-Sunnat Ulema* maintained a tradition of arranging joint Muharram procession and *majalis* with Shias. At the end *azadari* procession was taken out and despite Shia *zakir* recitation of *tabarra*, *Ahl-e-Sunnat Ulema* did not react. The reason was that both Shia and Sunni *muftis* were government employees and were following the government's policy of avoiding sectarian clash. Allahyar completely disapproved this tolerance of Sunni Ulema. He believed that Muharram procession should be completely separated and Shia and Sunni must hold their *majalis* separately.²⁷ He advised to contest *tabarra* with reciting *madh-e-sahaba*²⁸. The purpose was to give Sunni color to the procession. From such events resulting in the conflagration of the sectarian

sentiments, one may conclude that traditionally, the society had nurtured and nestled plural character where different sects co-existed without much fuss. However extraneous factors, tend to skew that plurality. While commenting on Sunni-Shia antagonism, Justin Jones maintained in his study of Lucknow that Shia-Sunni conflict should be seen in minority-majority axis, a result of numerical, cultural and political hegemony of Sunnis. The marginalized Shia community found a full throated expression through the *tabarra* agitation and Shiaism itself became means to personal and collective empowerment and identity.²⁹ On the other hand the public recitation of *tabarra* sparked conflict causing social estrangement between communities in the town.

In 1950s, the Shias made preaching more organized to reach to the remote areas. In 1955 the agitation against Shia *azadari* resurfaced again throughout the country. In *Muharram* (20 August-19September1955) *azadari* processions were either banned by the government or attacked at various places in Punjab.³⁰ Shias held number of conventions including All-Pakistan *azadari* convention in Lahore on 22-23October 1955 and *Idara Tahafuz-e-Haqq-e-Shia* on 23-25 March1956, demanded lifting of all bans on *azadari*. *Tahrik-e-Ahl-e-Sunnat mubalighin* reacted and called Shia practices as un-lawful (according to their interpretation of *sharia*).³¹ Seeing the rise in sectarian tensions, the Chief Minister of West Pakistan Muhammad Khan Sahib (October1955-March1957) formed a Shia-Sunni “Reconciliation Board” in November 1956. In a resolution, Shias gave declaration of not making any provocative pronouncements against the first three Caliphs and Sunnis will not condemn religious ceremonies of Shias.³² Despite these conciliatory overtures of the government the sectarian tension reached its climax during 1957-58. One factor which contributed to the estrangement in Mianwali was Khawaja Qamarud-din Sialwi’s (*sajjadanshin of Sial Sharif district Sargodha*) pronouncement of *takfiri fatwa* on Shias for not believing in *Quran* and *hadith*, in December 1957.³³

The discourse of Shia-Sunni difference

The sectarian conflict became violent during 1955-1958, the impact of that reached to Chakrala. Like *Tanzim-e-Ahl-e-Sunnat*, Allahyar established a training institution *Dar-ul-Mubalighin*³⁴ in 1956 on the pattern of Sunni school established for the training of *mubaligh* and *manazir* at Lucknow in 1931-32.³⁵ He sought to unite leading Deobandi Ulema including Maulana Ghulamullah Khan the patron of Deobandi *madrassa Talim-ul-Quran* in Rawalpindi, Syed Ahmed Shah Bukhari, Maulana Riaz Ashrafi and Mufti Ghulam Samdani to train students and Ulema for polemical debate against Shias. *Manazaras* were now organized on collective level Ulema came in the form of delegation for debate.³⁶ To develop public and social segregation between the two sects at a wider scale, a publishing house, was established at *madrassa Dar-ul-Huda* Chokeera (district Sargodha) in 1956 under the patronage of Syed Ahmed Shah Bukhari.³⁷ Since then, the Sunni-Shia polemical tracts and treatises were churned out on a wider scale. A Shia journal “*Sadaqat*” was published by a Shia *manazir* Muhammad Ismail who, Allahyar alleged to have distorted the details of *manazaras*. To counter the Shia journal, a fortnightly journal *Al-Farooq* was published on November, 01, 1956.³⁸ Both Shia and Sunni Ulema made wide use of print, dialectical tone and rhetorical flourish.

Sunnism was defined in terms of anti-Shiaism so the one who opposed Shias in categorical terms, should be Sunni. Hence Shia condemnation was a mean to anchor Sunni ascendancy. With the publishing of *Al-Farooq*, Allahyar's most prolific writings and books like '*Tasaneef Iman bil Quran*,' *Ijad Mazhab-e-Shi'i*, *Shikast Aida-e-Hussain*, *Al-Din-ul-Khalis*, *Tehzir-ul Muslimin* and *Hurmat-e-Matim*, written in response to Shia *manazir* Ismail Gojarvi's *Barahin-e-Matim*,³⁹ not only informed the readers but also the print culture made it possible to crystalize sectarian identities with vast quantities of polemics. These institutions became the flashpoint of agitation. In August 1957 his well-known and widely published treatise "*Daiaan-e-Hussain wa Qatilan-e-Hussain ki khana tilashi*" and "*Shikast-e-Aida-e-Hussain*"⁴⁰ were published in *Al-Farooq*. He blamed for the murder of Imam Husain on the community of Kufa, which triggered trenchant reaction from Shia, and Governor, West Pakistan, Akhtar Hussain imposed restriction on its publication in 1960.⁴¹ Hence the Sectarian institutions, *manazaras* and impact of print combined worsened the situation.⁴² With the marginalization of Shias, an aggressive Sunni identity was manifested in the countryside. Thus, sectarianism became an agent of religious change in Chakrala. One may conclude that the identity embedded in literalist version of *sharia* led to the crystallization of the sectarian exclusion. Qasim Zaman noted that urban text-based religious identity and "reforming styles of religious life" was introduced among people who thus far, followed the local form of religious beliefs and practices.⁴³

From 1960 onward Allahyar devoted himself to his reformist movement and left the anti-Shia *manazara* activities to *Darul-Mubalighin* as he claimed to have trained young Ulema for that purpose. However his abstention was due to the relative calm on the sectarian front from 1959 to 1962 under Ayub Khan's regime. Ayub's vision of rebuilding Pakistan on modern lines and to prevent obscurantist view of the mullah from prevailing checked the sectarian conflict.

Conclusion

In a newly founded Pakistan, the legitimacy of Shia as Muslim became suspect as they did not fit in the narrow paradigm of Muslim-ness defined by Objectives Resolution of 1949. The Ulema in Mianwali, in order to be part of the national narrative of Islamic identity, asserted their authority in exclusively political terms. Religious and sectarian differences embedded in society, precluded the possibility of any consensus on an Islamic vision. The different sects found articulation in rival organizations and parties. This politicization of religion bred intolerance. In Chakrala, Allahyar epitomized that trend. He resisted the Shia proselytization in a devout manner. His influence in the subsequent years spilled over to the entire country. His anti-shia polemical activities and emphasis on *sharia* and foundational text generated sectarian wedge in a plural social setting of Chakrala.

References

¹ Maulana Allah Yar was born in an affluent landowning Awan tribe, known as Sarjaal Awan, migrated into Chakrala from Kalabagh. At madrassa Ameeniah, he studied under the tutelage of Anwar Shah Kashmiri, Mufti Kifayat Ullah and Maulana Khalil Ahmed Anbethwi. In 1942 he entered on the path of saluk (spiritual training) in Naqshbandia Awaisia order.

² Chakrala is located 10 miles away from Mianwali- Talagang road. The area is mostly inhabited by Awan tribe.

³ Vali Reza Nasr, 'The Rise of Sunni Militancy in Pakistan: The Changing Role of Islamism and the Ulema in Society and Politics', *Modern Asian Studies*, 341 (2000): 139–80; Qasim Zaman, 'Sectarianism in Pakistan: the Radicalization of Shia and Sunni Identities', *Modern Asian Studies*, 323 (1998): 689–716; Mohammad Waseem, 'Political Sources of Islamic Militancy in Pakistan' in Ian Talbot (ed.), *The Deadly Embrace: Religion, Violence and Politics in India and Pakistan 1947–2002* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2007), 145–63. Mumtaz Ahmed, *Islamization and Sectarian Violence in Pakistan*, *Intellectual Discourse*, 1998, Vol 6, No 1, *Ashok K. Behuria*, *Sunni-Shia Relations in Pakistan: The Widening Divide*, *Strategic Analysis*, 28:1,

⁴ Vali Reza Nasr, 'The Rise of Sunni Militancy in Pakistan; also see Qasim Zaman, 'Sectarianism in Pakistan.

⁵ Ashok K. Behuria, *Shia-Sunni relations in Pakistan*, P.159

⁶ Farzana Sheikh, *Making Sense of Pakistan* (New York; Columbia University Press, 2009) P.60

⁷ Dawat the organ of Tanzim-i-Ahl-i-sunnat said only those who agreed on the definition of Quran and Sunna were Muslims, Shi'is must proclaim themselves as non-Muslims. See Andreas Rieck, *Shias of Pakistan* (London; Hurst & Company, 2015) P. 72

⁸ The antagonism between Deobandis, Barelwis, Ahl-e-hadith, and Shi'is demonstrated in the polemical debates and fatwa controversy exacerbated the inter-sectarian belligerence. See Usama Makdisi, *The culture of sectarianism: Community, history and violence in 19th Century Ottoman Lebanon* (Berkeley; University of California, 2000) P.53 Also see Rieck, *The Shias of Pakistan*, P.90. See, *The Shi'is of Pakistan: Mapping an altruistic Genocide* cited in Faith Based, P.299 Deobandi theology holds that all other Muslims have a corrupted interpretation of Islam and that non-Muslim religious minorities are kafir. See Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India*, pp 40-42, Nasr, *The Rise of Sunni Militancy in Pakistan*, P.162

⁹ Tahir Kamran, *The Genesis, Evolution and Impact of "Deobandi" Islam on the Punjab: An Overview in Faith-Based Violence and Deobandi Militancy in Pakistan* (London; Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) P.65

¹⁰ Shi'is felt need to form organizations to safeguard their rights. West Punjab Shi'is political conference, a Central Shi'is welfare committee was setup. All-Pakistan Shi'is political conference (APSC) was convened in Lahore on 20, March 1949 and later an organization Idara-e-Tahafuz-e-Haqq-i-Shi'is Pakistan was formed. These organizations became more relevant as radical Sunni Ulema demanded ban on azadari and Muharram processions. Agitation against Shi'is Azadari resurfaced more strongly in 1955, Azadari processions were attacked in at least 25 places in the Punjab in September 1955. See Rieck, *The Shias of Pakistan*, P.90 also see Hassan Abbas, *Shi'ism and sectarian conflict in Pakistan: identity, politics, Iranian influence and tit-for-tat violence*, 22 September 2010, P.25

¹¹ Their campaign met with considerable success until early 1956. The new federal cabinet in 1954 included I.I. Chundrigar and Iskandar Mirza among eighty members chosen by the provincial assemblies and electoral colleges for Karachi and Baluchistan. See Rieck, *Shias of Pakistan* P.73.

¹² Max Weiss, *In the shadow of Sectarianism, Law, Shi'ism, and the Making of Modern Lebanon* (Cambridge; Harvard University Press, 2010) P.73.

¹³ Rawafiz is the plural of Rafzi (from the root rafda) an Arabic word used for a person in the army who has deserted the leader. For details see, Edward William Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, iii (Beirut, 1968), p. 1121. According to Qamar-ud-din Sialvi, Zeyd was the son of Zain-ul 'Abideen. See Qamar-ud-din Sialvi, *Mazhab-i Shi'a* (Lahore, 2011), p. 39.

¹⁴ Tahir Kamran, *The Genesis, Evolution and Impact of "Deobandi" Islam on the Punjab*, P.72

¹⁵ See Barbara Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India*(Princeton; Princeton University Press,1982) P.58

¹⁶ *Ibid*, P.89

¹⁷ Abul-Ahmed-ud-Din, *Hayat-e-Tayaba* (Lahore; Awaisia Kutab Khana,2005) P.184

¹⁸ Number of other madaris were founded including, Sultanul-madaris in Khairpur(1950), Makhzanul-ulum in Multan(1951), Jamiat Imamiya in Lahore(1952),Jamiat ul-Muntazar in Lahore(1954) Dar ul-Ulum jafariya in khushab(1954), See Andreas Reick, *Shias of Pakistan*, P.81

¹⁹ Abul-Ahmed-ud-Din, *Hayat-e-Tayaba*, P. 156

²⁰ *Ibid*, P.140.

²¹ *Ibid*, P.219.

²² Ussama Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, history and violence in 19th Century Ottoman Lebanon* (Berkeley; University of California, 2000) P.52

²³ Juan Cole, *Sacred Space and Holy War: The Politics, Culture and History of Shi'ite Islam* (NewYork; I.B.Tauris, 2002) P.11

²⁴ Abul Ahmed-ud-Din, *Hayat-e-Tayaba*, P.67

²⁵ Maulana Allahyar belonged to the most dominant Sarjaal tribe of Awans. At times he used to win over his rival by threats and physical manhandling. When a shia manazir refused to accept a Quranic verse, Maulana, attacked him with kicks and punches, when his supporters tried to come to his rescue, maulana's body guard surkhru Khan fired in air to settle them. See Ahmed-ud-Din, *Hayat-e-Tayaba*.

²⁶ David Thurffell, *Living Shi'ism: Instances of Ritualization among Islamist men in contemporary Iran* (Boston; Bill Leiden,2006) P.242

²⁷ *Ibid*, P.161

²⁸ Sunni recitations of madh-i-sahaba had first been consolidated among Sunnis in Lucknow in the 1900s. Shi'a began to oppose them through counter-recitations of tabarra. Government put restrictions upon the recitation of these verses as well as the Shi'a tabarra cursing upon the same figures. While neither side had welcomed this decision, the Sunni side was especially aggrieved. Many Sunnis maintained that madh-i-sahaba, were incomparable to the tabarra. Also see Hardy, *The Muslims of British India*, p.245

²⁹ Justin Jones, *Shia Islam in colonial India: Religion, community and sectarianism* (NewYork;Cambrigde,2012) P.198

³⁰ *Razakar* 18/34:3 (8 September 1955)

³¹ *Razakar* 19/14:8 (8 April 1956)

³² Reick, *Shias of Pakistan*, P.90

³³ *Ibid*, P.96

³⁴ Justin Jones, *Shi'I islam in colonial India*, Madrasatul waizin was opened in Lucknow in 1919, later Dar-ul-Mublighin was setup in Lucknow in 1931-32 to train manazirs against Shi'is and sent for preaching tours. Abdul Shakoore Farooqi became principal of this school. Also see Rieck, *Shias of Pakistan*, pp.12-13

³⁵ Abul Ahmed-ud-Din, *Hayat-e-Tayaba*, P.134

³⁶ *Ibid*

³⁷ *Ibid*, P.129

³⁸ *Ibid*,

³⁹ *Ibid*, important articles published in *Al-Farooq* were *Masla-e-Imamat*, *Aiteqadat-e-Shi'I*, *Nas-e-Shura Al-Jamal Wal Kamal*, *Mah-e-Muharam* and *Musalman aur Qar-i-een*.

⁴⁰The treatise contained proofs from famous Shi'i books like 'khulasa Al-Maib' that Imam Hussain's army did not contain soldiers from Northern Arab or Syria, rather all were from Kufa.

⁴¹ Maulana Allahyar, Shikast-e-Aida-e-Hussain (Chakwal; Idara Naqshbandia Awaisia,1955) P.10

⁴² Qasim Zaman, Sectarianism in Pakistan, P.696

⁴³ See Mumtaz Ahmed, Islamization and Sectarian violence in Pakistan, Intellectual Discourse; 1998, Vol.6. No.1, p. 18.