

# Sectarian ideological warfare through graffiti

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## 1. Introduction

Banned religious and sectarian organizations carry on transmitting extremist messages with the aim of fomenting violent behavior and gaining support for their actions in Pakistan. These organizations have long been using graffiti to achieve these objectives. Since 1990, the use of graffiti along with jihadi print media has grown spectacularly and become a primary force in breeding extremist religious and sectarian thought, raising funds for banned groups like Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, Lashkar-e-Taiba, Sipah-e-Muhammad, and enlisting news recruits for these groups.

Banned sectarian and religious organizations have been using their discursive power to preach radical ideologies in order to achieve their religio-political, socio-economic and ideological interests in Pakistan.

The religious and sectarian print media has also become a vital force in Pakistan over the past two decades and contributes significantly to the spread of extremism in the country. During the years of the Afghan jihad against the Soviet occupation, the government of Pakistan either supported the creation of the messages of hatred by religious and sectarian militant groups or ignored the growth of extremist religious and sectarian writings and messages.

This study was conducted with the following purposes related to the growing roadside graffiti across the country. It examines the content of the graffiti observed during the years 2011 to 2013.

- Analysis of the nature of graffiti
- Ideological objectives of graffiti
- Impact of graffiti in terms of ideologies

Previous studies also endorse that the media and propaganda wings of religious and sectarian organization have a considerable role in creating

religious extremism and radicalism. They consistently produce radical literature, including publications and other material, for propagation of their ideologies and agendas. Some analysts argue that the current sectarian terrorism has its roots in the sectarian ideological narratives prepared by sectarian militant groups and parties in mainland Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria (Rana, 2011).

Rabasa (2006) is among the scholars who have asserted that the messages and rhetoric of radical religious and sectarian organizations highlight their grievances and extol the effectiveness of their actions. A great deal of their communications focus on garnering religious and sectarian legitimacy. These clusters strive to spread their ideas along with the sectarian terrorist attacks that they conduct and inspire.

Mohanty and Mahanty (2010: 142) found that the Islamist radicals in Pakistan had emotional temptation towards the ideological appeals of extremism in the absence of competing ideologies and confused religiosity with religion. The militants have transformed the rhetorical messages of jihad into actual violence that they have sought to justify in the name of religion.

Puri (2010) has revisited the relationship between Pakistani religious seminaries and terrorism. His work strongly asserts that these seminaries are preaching an ideology of extremism on religious and sectarian basis.

A report by the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS, 2002) indicates that banned religious and sectarian organizations in Pakistan spread intolerance and vigorously denounce Jews, Christians, Hindus, other non-Muslims, secular Muslims and also other Muslim sects.

### **Material and methods**

This study analyzed the content of the Urdu-language roadside graffiti by banned sectarian organizations from January 1, 2011 to December 31, 2013. A sampling was done within the target population of five administrative units of Punjab; Lahore, Faisalabad, Sahiwal, Multan and Bahawalpur. Qualitative content analysis was then made based on the data collected. The strategy of overt observation was used for the collection of data by giving a written form in the shape of field notes regarding the facts observed during this process.

The author travelled on the main roads linking the five administrative units of the Punjab cited earlier in order to collect the data on graffiti by the banned sectarian organizations. This process took a total of two weeks of intermittent field work between 2011 and 2013.

The collected data was analyzed qualitatively and thematically in the narrative form rather than in terms of statistics through critical reading in view of the textual nature of messages. After analyzing the messages individually, a holistic summary of the analysis of graffiti messages was made.

## **2. Content analysis and findings**

The sectarian graffiti was categorized into four types, by Deobandi, Shia, Barelvi and Wahabi sects or organizations. A fifth type pronounced elimination of sectarianism.

### **2.1 Graffiti by Deobandis**

The graffiti by Deobandi Muslims and organizations had two sub-types, anti-Barelvi and anti-Shia graffiti. The latter was found to be of more extreme in nature.

The core emphasis of anti-Barelvi messages revolved around Barelvis' visits to shrines and graves and their love for saints and *pirs*. A message that was frequently written on the walls was: *qabron ka ehtram magar unko sujda haraam* (respect the graves but do not worship them because that is forbidden in Islam).

The ideological objectives behind anti-Barelvi graffiti are stated below.

- i. An expression of acknowledgement and respect for the saints' shrines and graves.
- ii. Condemnation of the act of bowing before the saints' tombs and graves by Barelvis as contrary to the principle of oneness of God in Islam.
- iii. Use of less severe tone against Barelvi Muslims as compared to Shia Muslims.

The anti-Shia graffiti by Deobandi organizations was found to be more diverse and intense. Examples include the following messages on the walls:

- *Shia kainaat ka badtreen kafir hay* ( A Shia is the worst infidel in all creations)
- *Kafir, kafir, Shia kafir* (Shias are infidels)
- *Mein naukar Sahaba da* (I am a servant of the companions of the Holy Prophet (PBUH))
- *Mein naukar Muawia da* (I am a servant of Muawia)
- *Zinda hay Jhangvi zinda hay* (Jhangvi<sup>1</sup> is alive)
- *Jhangvi teri azmat ko salaam* (Jhangvi! We salute your greatness)
- *Shioun ko Pakistan say nikala jayey* (Shias should be expelled from Pakistan)
- *Pakistan ko Sunni riasat declare kiya jayey* (Pakistan should be declared a Sunni state)
- *Pakistan ko Shioun kay najs wajood sey pak karein gay* (We will purify Pakistan of the filth that is Shia)
- *Madrassa Taleem-ul-Quran kay shohada ka khoon inqilab layey ga* (The blood of martyrs of Madrassa Taleem-ul-Quran will bring a revolution)

A review of these anti-Shia messages reveals the following ideological objectives:

- Negative presentation of Shia Muslims by calling them the worst of the infidels (anti-Shiaism).
- An attempt at instigating hatred, anger and animosity among Muslims of other sects against the Shias (anti-Shiaism).
- An expression of affection and love for Muawia and the *Sahaba*, or companions of the Holy Prophet (PBUH), (Muawiaism, Sahabaism).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Reference to Haq Nawaz Jhangvi, founder of Deobandi sectarian organization Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan. He was assassinated in 1990.

<sup>2</sup> Deobandi sectarian groups allege that Shias have disrespect for the companions of the Holy Prophet (PBUH).

- Glorification of late cleric Haq Nawaz Jhangvi, the founder of sectarian militant outfit Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan. Jhangvi had branded Shia Muslims as infidels or disbelievers.
- An effort to glorify the students of a Sunni madrassa in Rawalpindi who had died during a sectarian clash with Shias on the 10<sup>th</sup> of Moharram in 2013, and a pledge for bringing a revolution through the blood of the slain students.
- Pressing the government through graffiti to eliminate Shia Muslims from Pakistan and to make a formal declaration that Pakistan is a Sunni state (anti-Shiaism and Deobandism)
- An attempt to form the general public's opinion against Shia Muslims.
- An attempt to isolate Shia Muslims in the country.

## **2.2 Graffiti by Shias**

The Shia graffiti contained the following main messages:

- *Mein naukar Hussain da* (I am a servant of Hazrat Hussain)
- *Mein naukar Ali mushkal kusha da* (I am a servant of Hazrat Ali, the problem solver)
- *Salam ya Hussain* (Peace on you, O Hussain!)
- *Rab janey ya Hussain janey* (Only God or Hussain knows and takes care of one's situation)
- *Kafir kafir Sunni kafir* (Sunnis are infidels). However, this message was found written on the walls in very few instances.

It appeared from these messages that the possible ideological objectives behind Shia graffiti were: an expression of affection and love for the fourth caliph of Islam, Hazrat Ali, and his son, Hazrat Hussain; and positive presentation of Hazrat Ali and Hazrat Hussain in order to evoke sentiments of love and affection for them in the minds of the reader.

It was also noted that Deobandis' condemnation for the Shias was much more extensive than Shias' condemnation for Deobandis. Also, as suggested by the frequency of graffiti, Deobandi Muslims or organizations were more actively engaged in leaving their messages on the walls than Shias.

### **2.3 Graffiti by Barelvis**

Barelvi Muslims, mainly their religious scholars, madrassas and shrines of saints, have been targeted many times by Deobandi militant groups, including the Taliban, in Pakistan. Barelvi graffiti messages condemn the ‘terrorists’ without mentioning any particular group or sect. The following messages by Barelvi organizations were frequently found on the walls:

- *Dehshat gardon ka jo yaar hay, Pakistan ka ghaddar hay* (Whoever is a friend of terrorists is a traitor to Pakistan).
- *Dehshat gardon ka mulk say khatima kiya jayey* (Terrorists should be banished from the country).
- *Dehshat gardi kay khatmay kay liyay Shumali Waziristan mein operation naguzeer hay* (A military operation in North Waziristan is unavoidable for eradicating terrorism).

Although not explicit in their words, the messages by Barelvi organizations are implicitly targeted at Deobandi and Wahabi militants groups who are involved in militant activities in Pakistan and also occasionally target Barelvis. Therefore, these messages can be described as explicitly promoting an anti-terrorism narrative and implicitly criticizing the Deobandi and Wahabi sects, at least for being silent on terrorist activities being carried out by some groups from within their sects. Besides nationalism and anti-terrorism, the messages also carry the ideological narratives of anti-Deobandism and anti-Wahabism. Also, these messages can be seen as an attempt to form public opinion against the Deobandi and Wahabi sects for their perceived support to some violent Deobandi and Wahabi groups.

### **2.4 Graffiti for elimination of sectarianism**

At the same time, some members of both Deobandi and Shia sects try to remove the differences between the sects by playing a more positive and cohesive role. Examples of their messages on the walls include the following:

- *Allah ki rassi ko mazbooti say thaam lo or tafarqey mein na paro.*—The Holy Quran (And hold fast, all of you together, to the rope of Allah (i.e. this Quran), and be not divided among yourselves)

- *Mein naukar Sahaba tey ahl-e-bait da* (I am a servant of the companions of the Prophet and the Ahl-e-Bait<sup>3</sup>)
- *Ali, Muawia bhai bhai* (Ali and Muawia are brothers)

These messages attempt to bridge the sectarian divide by expressing affection and love for both the companions of the Holy Prophet and the Ahl-e-Bait. Secondly, there is an appeal of unity and cohesion among Muslims with reference to a verse from the Holy Quran that calls for avoiding internal divisions.

## **2.5 Graffiti by Wahabis**

Graffiti by Wahabi organizations had one primary message: *Ahl-e-hadith youth force ki awaaz, Quran-o-Sunnat ka nifaz* (Voice of Ahl-e-Hadith youth force, enforcement of the Quran and Sunnah, or Shariah). Other similar messages called for enforcement of Islamic law in Pakistan. Some messages by Wahabi organizations were anti-India, or against Jews and the United States.

That implied that the Wahabi graffiti was not against any Islamic sect but focused on the implementation of Shariah in Pakistan based on the Holy Quran and Sunnah. These messages also targeted and condemned some non-Muslim communities (Hindu, Christians and Jews) and countries (India, the US and Israel).

Thirdly, these messages focused more on the concept and promotion of jihad against non-Muslim communities and countries.

## **Conclusion**

Deobandi organizations are clearly leading in the ongoing ideological warfare in the form of graffiti, including in southern Punjab. Their prime focus seems to be anti-Shia and anti-Barelvi messages. Banned Deobandi militant organizations like Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (the militant wing of SSP) and Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan are also extensively involved in the ongoing wave of violence in the country. Bomb blasts by

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<sup>3</sup> “Ahl-e-Bait” literally means “the people of the house” and refers to the Holy Prophet (PBUH), his daughter, Fatima, his son-in-law Hazrat Ali, and their two sons, i.e., Hazrat Hassan and Hazrat Hussain.

Deobandi militants have targeted the shrines of Sufi saints of Barelvi order like Baba Fareed Ganj Shakkar (Pakpattan), Data Ganj Bukhsh (Lahore), Bari Imam (Islamabad), Sakhi Sarwar (D.G. Khan) and many others.

The graffiti messages can be summarised as follows:

- Graffiti by Deobandi organizations tends to promote anti-Shiaism, anti-Barelvisim and love and affection for Muawia, and the companions of the Holy Prophet (PBUH).
- The Shia graffiti preaches and promotes the ideologies of and respect for Hazrat Hussain, Hazrat Ali, and the *Ahl-e-Bait*.
- Barelvi organizations seek to promote the ideologies of anti-Deobandism, anti-Wahabism, anti-terrorism, and also nationalism.
- The ideologies propagated through Wahabi graffiti include calls for implementation of Shariah, jihad, and opposition to 'infidel' communities and countries, mainly India, the US and Israel.



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